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**A Russian Withdrawal from Syria,
or Merely a Change in the Form of Involvement?**

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On March 14, 2016, Vladimir Putin announced the withdrawal of the majority of Russian military units from Syria, after, he claimed, the Russian force had achieved the goals set for it when it entered Syria five and a half months earlier. Soon after this surprising announcement, at least some Russian air force units were seen leaving Syria. The decision regarding the withdrawal of forces raised many questions, including: why did Moscow decide to withdraw its forces from Syria just then, when it enjoys the upper hand, just two weeks after the ceasefire reached by Russia and the United States went into effect, and before achieving the goals declared by Russia itself at the outset of the operation (to defeat the jihadists) or as understood by the West (to defeat the anti-Assad opposition)?

In the absence of a definitive explanation for Russia's surprising actions, various ideas have been suggested. Perhaps the decision stemmed from Russian internal political considerations (and in light of preparations for the Russian parliamentary elections scheduled for September 2016) and economic considerations related to Russia's current difficult economic situation. Another explanation offered by some observers is that the decision is an expression of Russia's desire to pressure Assad and Iran to agree to a political solution in the civil war in Syria. An alternative explanation views the development as a message to the United States regarding increased Russian flexibility on the issue of Syria, in hopes that the sanctions imposed on Russia as a result of its policy in Ukraine will be relaxed. Still another explanation attributes the decision to the Russians' understanding that the aims of their involvement are unattainable and that therefore they must withdraw before becoming inextricably entangled in Syria, where the cost will outweigh the benefit. All of these explanations contain some degree of logic, and the decision might reflect a calculated consideration of the entire set of issues.

Whether the decision was the product of prior planning or a response to negative developments to Russian interests and Russia's relations with the West is not known.

However, that not long before the announcement of the withdrawal of Russian forces, the United States announced the extension and intensification of sanctions on Russia, in contrast to Moscow's expectations that the sanctions would be lifted following the agreement reached on a ceasefire in Syria. Immediately following the American announcement, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov issued a statement regarding Russian support for Syria's transformation into a federation. It is therefore possible that one goal of the maneuver was to start a process of the formal division of Syria and thereby challenge the West.

In any event, the initial Russian announcement regarding the withdrawal of its forces from Syria was not indicative of a complete withdrawal. In practice, Russia has withdrawn some of the aircraft that took part in the fighting in recent months (more than 50 attack aircraft, interceptors, and different types of helicopters) but has left its two naval bases and two air force bases intact, including the units responsible for operating and securing them; its command, control, and intelligence apparatus; the maintenance infrastructure deployed in Syria; and its cadre of Russian advisors to the Syrian army. These facts were relayed officially by Russia, along with a statement by President Putin emphasizing that the planes withdrawn from the country could be returned to Syria "within a matter of hours," and a declaration by Defense Minister Sergey Shoygu that Russia would continue to take action against terrorism in Syria.

It is apparent, therefore, that Russia has not concluded its involvement in Syria, but rather has changed its format in an effort to reduce related risks, cash in on negotiating cards, and convey messages, while at the same time maintaining its capacity to revert quickly to the previous format, if necessary. In practice, Russia has announced a limitation on its participation in the fighting in Syria, not the conclusion of its military involvement.

Russia's official explanation for the change in the deployment of its forces refers to the fulfilment of the goals of its intervention in Syria, although the declared goal of fighting Islamic terrorism, namely, the Islamic State and the al-Nusra Front, is far from complete. At the same time, Russia's second declared goal has been achieved: the Assad regime has been extricated from its state of military inferiority vis-à-vis the rebels, who until not long ago threatened to bring about its collapse. The Russian involvement – along with the support of Hezbollah forces, Iran, and the Shiite militias – has enabled the regime to stabilize its rule in a territory that stretches from the Damascus area, via the regions of Homs and Aleppo, to the coastal region. This effort was a top priority of the Russian military intervention, and the military success allowed Russia to put into action the second phase of its plan: securing the agreement of opposition groups to take part in negotiations, in which they accepted conditions they had previously refused and in which the Russian patron played a central role. The political process included signed

understandings of the ceasefire – which does not apply to the jihadist elements – and which thus far has held, despite numerous predictions of its collapse.

At this point, it is difficult to assess whether the strengthening of the Assad regime that resulted from the Russian intervention will ensure its survival. Moreover, in the absence of an agreement between the regime and the opposition forces, it is highly likely that the ceasefire will collapse. It is also doubtful whether the remaining Russian presence in Syria will enable Assad to contend successfully with the Islamic State and the al-Nusra Front, especially since Iran has also reduced the scope of its direct military involvement in Syria. For this reason, Moscow has retained the option of returning its forces to Syria.

Recent developments suggest that Russia is trying to promote the idea of the partition of Syria into a number of smaller political entities whose ability to be reunited in the future remains unclear. Although Russia has strengthened the political entity that will continue to be headed by Assad or some other Alawite figure (with the backing of Russia and the elements of the Shiite coalition headed by Iran) as a Russian region of influence, in practice, alongside this entity, an independent Kurdish entity has already come into existence on the Turkish border, and a third entity, which will be Sunni, will be located on the territory that is currently largely under the control of the Islamic State.

It remains unclear to what extent Russia will want to be involved in fighting the Islamic State alongside the other actors leading the struggle against it: the United States and the coalition under its leadership, Turkey, Iran, Hezbollah, the Kurds – who aspire to establish an entity of their own despite the intensive opposition of Turkey – and Saudi Arabia, which is working to curb Iranian expansion. These actors, who are eager to promote their own individual interests, all clearly have an interest in the elimination of the Islamic State. For now, Russia continues to operate in some regions (Palmyra, for example) and is signaling that it may provide assistance to future attacks by Assad's forces in the more eastern regions (al-Raqqah) that remain under the control of the Islamic State.

In this dynamic reality, the United States and the coalition under its leadership must continue to advance the fight against the Islamic State. At the same time, it must work to reach understandings among the involved parties, Russia included, regarding the campaign against the Islamic State and the political process in Syria, in a manner that serves its goals, which are not identical with those of Russia, both with regard to the future of the Assad regime and the preservation of Syria as a Russian region of influence.

For its part, Israel has thus far refrained from choosing a side and intervening directly in the Syrian crisis. Russia, which identifies Israel as a significant regional actor, prefers to see it adhering to its neutral policy regarding the conflict in Syria. Moscow will

presumably also prefer this scenario in the future, when Russia may be required to continue its involvement in the regional crisis. From Israel's perspective, alongside a general interest in weakening the Shiite axis led by Iran, Israel's concrete interests in Syria will continue to include distancing the threat posed by the activity of the Shiite axis and jihadist groups in border regions and preventing Hezbollah's acquisition of game-changing weaponry. Israel's freedom of action in these areas must continue to constitute a condition for its continued cooperation with Russia in the region. Overall, however, Israel has no reason to object to the Russian actions, which are aimed at partitioning Syria into a federation or some other political framework.

