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What to Expect from the U.S.-Russia Meeting in Jerusalem

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Brief Analysis

Ultimately, no deal is better than a bad deal, and Moscow's track record in Syria suggests it is both unable and unwilling to keep Iran out.

This month, Jerusalem will host a meeting between U.S. national security advisor John Bolton, Russian Security Council secretary Nikolai Patrushev, and Israeli national security advisor Meir Ben-Shabbat. Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu reportedly suggested the idea when he visited President Vladimir Putin in Moscow this February, later noting, "I proposed to Trump and Putin to form a U.S.-Russia-Israel trilateral committee...to discuss the security situation in the Middle East and both of them agreed. This is unprecedented." Similarly, the White House stated that the meeting's purpose is "to discuss regional security issues."

Analysts expect the talks to focus on Syria and Iran. Kremlin-controlled press outlets such as RIA Novosti have made wild claims that Washington and Israel intend to recognize dictator Bashar al-Assad's legitimacy and lift sanctions in exchange for Moscow deterring Iranian influence in Syria. Although U.S. envoy James Jeffrey has reportedly denied that such concessions are on the table, Putin is likely looking for a deal along those lines. Even if that questionable goal falls through, he no doubt believes that his legitimacy—and therefore his regional leverage—will be enhanced simply by attending the meeting.

RUSSIA'S UNTRUSTWORTHY RECORD IN SYRIA

The string of broken ceasefires that have occurred on Russia's watch thus far instill little confidence that Moscow will honor new agreements in Syria. According to American officials involved in past discussions toward a cessation of hostilities, the Russians are unwilling and unable to make Assad comply on that front.

During a November 2015 meeting in New York, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Secretary of State John Kerry reached an agreement on principles previously put forth in Vienna, including a cessation of hostilities and a timetable for political transition in Syria. A month later, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 2254 based on the Vienna principles. The Assad regime promptly violated all terms. When Damascus and Moscow finally implemented a ceasefire in February 2016, it collapsed within four months.

Similarly, after Russia and rebel forces in south Syria agreed to a ceasefire in July 2018, Moscow promised that Iran would withdraw its forces and proxies at least eighty-five kilometers [away from Israel's border](#). Yet many Iran-allied militia elements remained near the frontier, reportedly switching into Syrian military uniforms in an apparent effort to avoid Israeli airstrikes. Moreover, the agreement was unclear on whether any Iranian “advisors” would be compelled to leave. The resultant withdrawal was superficial at best and ultimately failed to diminish Iran’s presence—though it succeeded in making Moscow look as if it had tried.

If American officials have sometimes been naive about Russia’s utility in getting Iran out of Syria, certain Israeli officials may have bought into the illusion completely. Some privately claim that Putin has a “soft spot” for Israel, noting that they felt reassured when Moscow gave Israeli forces freedom of action to strike Iran-linked targets inside Syria. Even after the southern ceasefire failed to meet any of Israel’s security interests, Netanyahu announced to his cabinet this March, “President Putin and I also agreed on a common goal—the withdrawal of foreign forces that arrived in Syria after the outbreak of the civil war.”

NO DECISIVE SWAY OVER IRAN

From the start, Russia’s Syria strategy has been predicated on partnership with Iran; indeed, Moscow avoided a quagmire there in part because it could rely on Tehran’s proxies to do the heavy lifting. Over time, the war brought the partnership to unprecedented heights, with chief Iranian proxy Hezbollah learning directly from the Russian military and allegedly receiving light arms from Moscow through Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps commander Qasem Soleimani. Hezbollah members also fought alongside Russian forces occasionally; other Shia militias did the same, as did IRGC personnel. Iran’s militias have even reportedly used Russian flags to avoid Israeli airstrikes, according to sources in Russia, Israel, and the Syrian opposition.

Since Moscow first launched its Syria intervention, Netanyahu has repeatedly and publicly told Putin that Israel has deep security concerns about Iranian expansion. Despite acknowledging these concerns, however, Putin has remained circumspect about actually doing anything to address them, at least in public. Russian media typically describe these conversations in neutral tones, though a 2017 column in the business daily *Kommersant* tellingly suggested that the most Putin could offer Netanyahu was “psychotherapeutic help”—that is, listening intently to his Syria concerns without taking action. Similarly, Lavrov and other officials have repeatedly emphasized that Iran is an independent actor, and that Russia alone cannot force it out of Syria.

Therefore, once the Jerusalem meeting was announced, it came as no surprise when Russian Middle East experts expressed doubts that Moscow could budge Iran. For example, Alexander Shumilin observed that Tehran will not accept any Russian attempts to roll back its influence because doing so would damage the Islamic Republic’s image, undermine its goals, and waste the copious blood and treasure it has spent in Syria. Vladimir Sazhin argued that Moscow lacked “any mechanisms that would force Tehran to change its policy in Syria.”

In short, even if Moscow wanted to push Iran out, it seems unable to do so. Diplomacy alone would not do the trick, and using military force is unfeasible. Russia may rule Syria’s skies, but Iran holds a stronger position on the ground. Putin has been careful about not getting too bogged down there, and it is difficult to imagine he would use his military to dismantle Iranian and Hezbollah weapons infrastructure.

Nor it is clear that Moscow can limit the forces Tehran deploys in Syria. A June 2018 incident is illustrative: Russia tried to get Hezbollah to leave a checkpoint in al-Qusayr and move closer to the Lebanon border, but Russian forces had to retreat instead, and Hezbollah soon fortified its presence. Likewise, the August 2018 deployment of Russian military police to the Golan Heights did not stop Hezbollah and other Iranian militias from encroaching there.

CONCLUSION

The Russia-Iran relationship has always been complex, and Tehran’s fear that Moscow might throw it under the bus remains in the background of their Syria partnership. These tensions have increased recently; in a speech earlier this month, for example, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah did not mention Russia at all, a departure from his usual practice of pronouncing Moscow an ally.

Yet it is important not to read too much into such reports or see them as signs of an upcoming split. Above all, Moscow does not want Iran to turn pro-Western, and Tehran shares the Kremlin’s broad strategic goal of reducing American influence in the region. Their specific objectives and tactics have differed at times, but they never fundamentally stood in opposition to each other.

This strategic alignment—coupled with the fact that the White House has been vague about its own goals for the Jerusalem meeting—makes it unclear what concrete results might emerge from the summit. Russia’s previous statements that it cannot get Iran out “alone” open the door for suggestions on how it could do so with outside help. Yet Moscow’s track record in Syria raises serious doubts about whether it genuinely wants to pressure Tehran and its proxies.

Accordingly, U.S. and Israeli officials should not simply take Moscow at its word in Jerusalem, nor have illusions about what it can realistically deliver. It is too early to tell what a “good deal” with Russia might look like, but any agreement reached must be based on verifiable assurances. Moreover, lifting sanctions against Russia and recognizing Assad as Syria’s legitimate leader should remain off the table. No agreement is better than a bad deal that boosts Moscow’s prestige at the expense of regional security—prestige that is already enhanced by holding this meeting in the first place.

Anna Borshchevskaya is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute and coauthor of its recent study “[Russia’s Arabic Propaganda: What It Is, Why It Matters](#).” ❖



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