

The Ramifications of Russia's Short-Term Syria Strategy

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Mona Alami is a French Lebanese journalist focusing on political and economic issues in the Arab world. She has conducted extensive research on radical Islamist movements in Palestinian refugee camps, Salafi movements in Lebanon and Jordan, al-Qaeda's reach to the West, as well as Hezbollah. Alami is also a fellow at the Atlantic Council and senior associate at King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies and TRENDS Research and Advisory.



Brief Analysis

Israel's downing of a Syrian plane this week has demonstrated that the Syria conflict, while stabilizing in some ways, is far from reaching a clear conclusion. Even as regime forces retake the Southern regions of Quneitra and Daraa, the issue of how to manage the Syrian-Israeli borders has prompted a flurry of negotiations, from the recent Trump-Putin meeting in Helsinki to the Russian delegation's visit to Israel. However, the limits to Russia's willingness or even ability to curtail Iran's influence across Syria has been reflected in Israel's recent rejection of a Russian deal that Iranian forces remain 62 miles away from the Israeli border.

Russia's unannounced negotiations with Israel demonstrate a Russian interest in maintaining stability in Southern Syria, yet Putin may not prove up to the task of navigating a successful compromise between two deeply opposed regional interests. Ironically, the United States recently fielded a challenge of borders in its own sphere of influence in northern Syria, with more immediate results.

On June 4, Turkey and the United States endorsed a roadmap for the northern Syrian city of [Manbij](#) (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-turkey/turkey-u-s-agree-roadmap-to-avert-crisis-in-syrias-manbij-few-details-idUSKCN1J01ZC>), which included the withdrawal of the U.S. supported People's Protection Units (YPG) and partially alleviating months of tension between the two countries. Turkey had criticized American support for Syrian Kurdish rebels—a leading component of the U.S. backed Syrian Democratic Forces—as Turkey views the YPG as a component of the designated terrorist group PKK. According to this agreement, the YPG will pull out of the Manbij area, with joint U.S.-Turkish patrols providing security against jihadist insurgency afterwards.

The Manbij deal reflects larger attempts by the United States to maintain a careful balancing act throughout Syria. This is no easy feat given the amount of regional and international interests that have become entangled in the country. Kurdish expert Wladimir Van Wilgenburg has argued that in the north, the primary goal of the Manbij deal is to avoid an accidental clash between the U.S.-led coalition and the Turks, a mistake that could have serious policy implications for the already rocky U.S.-Turkish relationship.

The plan appears to be running its course in northern Syria. In the wake of the Manbij deal, U.S. officials [insisted](#) (<https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2018-06-05/syrian-kurds-to-pull-out-of-key-town-easing-us-turkey-rift#close-modal>) that the new city administration should be run by “locals...mutually agreeable” to the two

states and that the YPG will continue to maintain a presence East of the Euphrates. In the meantime, Turkey and the United States can be said to have successfully navigated the concerns of a regional power regarding the portion of Syria along its borders, a step towards ensuring a measure of stability in that area.

It appears that Russia seeks a similar style of agreement in the south. Moscow has managed in the last three years to prop up the regime of Bashar al-Assad from its potential collapse and reclaim a large section of its previously lost territory; the Assad regime is now in control of over 65 percent of the country. Russian objectives include maintaining a stable regime in Syria compliant to Russian interests while destroying remnants of Islamist and jihadist factions, which may present a threat to Assad's control down the line.

However, Russia must face the fact that escalation between Iran and Israel across Syria could return the country to chaos, placing Russian gains in danger. Initially, the Russian government appeared willing to work with its Israeli counterpart to prevent an escalation of clashes in the south between Iran and Syria's southern neighbor, declaring in June that all non-Syrian forces operating on the Syrian side of the Israel-Syria frontier should be removed. A few days later, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported that Iranian forces were **withdrawing** (<http://www.syriaahr.com/en/?p=93911>) from the Israeli border with southern Syria.

However, Russia's initial plan to contain Iran in Syria has clearly not proceeded smoothly, as unfolding events in the south reveal. Unlike the United States' relationship with the Syrian Democratic Forces, Russia has limited control over Iranian movement, and top Iranian military official Brigadier General Masoud Jazayeri has unequivocally **asserted** (<http://www.newsweek.com/iran-says-fighters-wont-leave-syria-despite-russias-deal-israel-956993>) that his country's troops will not withdraw from Syria.

Moreover, the Syrian regime's capture of the western and center areas of Daraa occurred with the help of pro-Iran forces such as Liwaa Al-Baqer and Liwaa Zulficar; sources close to Hezbollah informed the author that Hezbollah's elite forces were also deployed and that commanders manned the military operating rooms. Pro-Iran forces are also present in the eastern desert regions close to the demarcation line separating regime areas from those under the control of the U.S. backed Syrian Democratic Forces, suggesting a leak of Iran's influence into the East as well.

Given these realities, Moscow is aware that Assad forces are too weak to independently man the conflict's expansive front lines. The presence of over 34,000 pro-Iran foreign fighters are necessary to bolster regime forces in this latest phase of the war. On the other hand, the continued presence of these proxies after the Assad regime's stabilization will continue to influence Iranian integration into the area, ultimately at the expense of future Russian influence and control of events within Syria. In the long run, and despite its significant efforts in Syria, Russia may actually fail at maintaining its control of the country's directions even with its connections to the regime.

Unless Russia would be willing to push Iran out of Syria and replace the support provided by pro-Iran forces with its own loyal troops, the tension between Iran and Israel will only escalate and potentially draw in the regime. Thus, the Assad regime's consolidated control of the south suggests the closing of one chapter of Syria's prolonged conflict and the beginning of another. ❖

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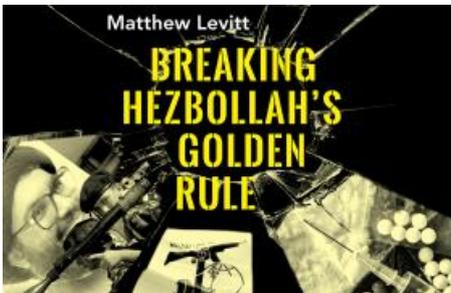
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