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**The Netanyahu-Putin Meeting: What was Agreed, and What are
Russia's Intentions?**

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More than two weeks after Prime Minister Netanyahu's most recent visit to Moscow, the public lacks answers to the four most important questions that concern Israel's relations with Russia regarding Syria and the Iranian presence there: Has the deconfliction mechanism between Russia and Israel changed since the downing of the Russian plane and the decisive turning of the tide in the Syrian civil war? Has Netanyahu managed to persuade Putin not to give Syria control over the S-300 batteries deployed on Syrian soil? Is the reduction in Israeli air strikes in Syria a result of Iran's suspended efforts to entrench itself there, or a concession to Russia? What is the significance of the planned joint committee with Israel for the removal of "foreign forces" from Syria? In the absence of official information about the proposed committee, two possibilities can be posited to explain Russia's objectives. One is that there is a change underway in Russia, which is tired of its intervention in Syria. The second possibility is that Russia's interests in Syria are long term and do not take Israeli interests into account, and this poses a dangerous scenario for Israel. If the proposed committee does indeed address the removal of Iranian forces from Syria, it would be a landmark development indicating Russia's parting of ways with its main ally in Syria, and would spell highly positive ramifications for Israel in the Syrian and regional theaters. However, it is also possible that the proposal is a bureaucratic-diplomatic escape for Russia, given its inability or unwillingness to drive Iran out of Syria, and will drag Israel into a renewed discussion of the Golan Heights issue as a condition for removing the Iranian forces.

On February 27, 2019, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu met President Vladimir Putin in Moscow. It was the tenth meeting between the two leaders since September 2015, when Russia launched its military intervention in Syria, and their first working meeting since the downing of a Russian intelligence surveillance aircraft by Syria's air defense on September 17, 2018 and the ensuing Russian-initiated crisis between Jerusalem and Moscow. After the meeting, Israeli officials reported that the sides had reached understandings on two core issues: settling the bilateral crisis between Israel and Russia, and revitalizing the bilateral dialogue to achieve up-to-date understandings about foreign troops in Syria, first and foremost, the Iranian presence.

Regarding bilateral relations, the sides asserted that the crisis over the downed plane has been struck from the agenda and is no longer an issue. At the same time, there is resistance to improved ties with Israel on the part of the Russian defense establishment,

which voices a different and more hostile tone toward Israel than does President Putin. Regarding the presence of foreign troops in Syria, Israeli officials reported that the sides agreed to establish a joint Russian-Israeli committee that would work to coordinate "the departure of all foreign forces from Syria." Leaks from the Israeli side indicate that the planned committee includes other countries, and possible even Syrian participation. According to officials in the Russian Foreign Ministry (as quoted during Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Gulf visit in early March), Russia is endeavoring to include Gulf countries, specifically Saudi Arabia, in this committee, as well as in the process of achieving a political settlement and launching nationwide reconstruction to Syria.

Russia does not see itself as a foreign power in Syria. As far as it is concerned, the term "foreign forces" does not apply to the forces it has deployed in the country on the basis of a signed, multi-year bilateral contract (the naval and air bases in Syria were leased by Russia for 49 years, which in its view grants these forces full legitimacy to remain in Syria). Accordingly, the term applies to:

- a. Other "legitimate" forces previously invited by Syria that are now called upon to leave, once the civil war has been won. This refers to Iranian forces. Syria itself was "invited" to the committee so that it might curtail the Iranian welcome.
- b. "Illegitimate" forces that entered Syria after the civil war began in 2011: American, Turkish, and others.
- c. "Occupation forces" present on Syrian soil since 1967. This refers to the Israeli presence on the Golan Heights.

In the absence of official information about the format of the proposed joint committee, two possibilities can be posited to explain Russia's motivation. One is that there is a change underway in Russia, which is tired of its intervention in Syria and seeks to distance itself from Iran. The second possibility is that Russia's interests in Syria are long term and do not take Israeli interests into account, and this poses a dangerous scenario for Israel.

The first explanation is predicated on the assumption that Russia finds itself increasingly mired in Syria and is thus scrambling for solutions to the Syrian crisis, which would entail an element of international dialogue that can help extricate it from the political isolation engulfing it. The Russian proposal can also be interpreted as an attempt to change the current rules of the game in this theater. Russia is acting fervently to promote stability, reconstruction, and political accommodation in Syria, despite the growing friction with Turkey and Iran regarding the way forward in Idlib. In parallel, US forces are withdrawing from Syria, and Western powers are refusing to take part in funding reconstruction so long as there is no political settlement, leaving Russia to deal alone with the matter of a political settlement and reconstruction. In recent months, meanwhile,

ideas about changing the format and even disbanding the Astana Forum (which currently comprises Russia, Iran, Turkey, and in part, Syria) have arisen, while additional countries have been invited to join the political process. Bashar al-Assad's visit to Iran in early March, which was not coordinated with Russia, provoked anger in Moscow, where the Syrian-Iranian closeness was viewed as an affront and a signal that Assad is interested in Iran's continued presence on Syrian soil regardless of Russia's position on the matter.

Against this backdrop, it is possible that Russia has drafted an alternate approach to its policy on Syria, to serve its objectives in both the Middle East and the international sphere. Moscow could reasonably be interested in renewed cooperation with Israel, e.g., through the proposed committee, to facilitate a quick end to the Syria crisis. This could be pursued in parallel to a settlement process that gains Russia an added advantage in Syria and, by drafting Gulf states for the settlement process and reconstruction project, also enhances its regional status. Russia might even hope that a regional cooperation initiative, alongside joint activity with Israel on the Iranian presence in Syria, would positively influence Russian-US relations and enable the renewal of dialogue between Washington and Moscow.

The second explanation casts Russia's proposal as a "trap" that imperils Israel. In this framework, Moscow is not trying to grow closer to Israel and the West, but rather, to advance the Russian interest in Syria – mainly, stability and reconstruction – at Israel's expense, without any intention of pushing Iranian forces out of the country. This explanation matches American and Israeli assessments that Russia lacks the means and motivation to drive Iranian forces from Syria – or even to honor the explicit understandings and promises about distancing them from the Israeli border. Russia shares fundamental interests with Iran, chief among them a strengthened Assad regime and the United States departure from Syria. These are still presumably salient interests, and hence Russia would hope to limit Israel's activity in Syria. This limitation has in fact already taken place, though it is impossible to determine whether it is a function of reduced Iranian activity in Syria, or rather, Israeli prudence in the face of new air defense systems deployed in Syria and new rules that Russia would like to impose on its deconfliction mechanism with Israel. It is thus possible that Moscow would use renewed dialogue with Jerusalem - backed up by promises and perhaps threats as well - to thin out and limit Israeli activity.

Suspensions regarding the Russian interest seem borne out by what has thus far been made public regarding the proposed committee. In particular, certain key elements lack feasibility, lending support to the second explanation for Russia's motivations. First, the feasibility of Syria joining a committee that includes Israel to discuss the removal of foreign forces from Syria is tenuous, if at all existent. On Israel's part too, the possibility

of giving Russia an opening – no matter how small – to use the proposed committee to mediate between Israel and Syria and restore the Golan Heights (in the framework of removing "all foreign forces") to the agenda, would not be acceptable to Israel, certainly not during an election season where even "centrist" parties are currently urging the United States administration to recognize Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights. The possibility that forming the committee will have a positive effect on the dialogue between Russia and the West, in general, and the United States in particular is also extremely questionable. It would appear that Russia's Syria intervention has exhausted its potential as a channel of dialogue with the West aimed at easing pressure on Russia in the international sphere. European countries oppose funding the Assad regime, and for its part, the American administration is busy bracing for the findings of Special Counsel Robert Mueller on Russian interference in the US presidential elections. This being the case, it is possible that Moscow is trying to hoodwink Israel with the proposal to set up the committee while itself being uninterested in the removal of foreign forces from Syria - and specifically, Iran's. Alternatively, it may even be aware that there is no practical chance of this committee helping to bring about what it would deem positive movement on other fronts in the international sphere.

In conclusion, more than two weeks after the Prime Minister's Moscow visit, the Israeli public lacks credible answers to the four most important questions that concern Israel's relations with Russia regarding Syria and the Iranian presence there:

- a. Has the deconfliction mechanism between Russia and Israel changed following the downing of the Russian plane and the decisive turning of the tide in the Syrian civil war?
- b. Has Prime Minister Netanyahu managed to persuade Putin not to give Syria control over the S-300 batteries deployed on Syrian soil?
- c. Is the reduction in Israeli air strikes in Syria a result of Iran's suspended efforts to entrench itself there, or a concession to Russia?
- d. What is the significance of a joint committee with Israel for the removal of "foreign forces" from Syria? Is the focus mainly on removing Iranian forces, or other matters?

If the committee does indeed address the removal of Iranian forces from Syria, it would be a landmark development indicating Russia's parting of ways with its main ally in Syria, and would spell highly positive ramifications for Israel in the Syrian and regional theaters. However, it is also possible that the proposal is a bureaucratic-diplomatic escape for Russia, given its inability or unwillingness to drive Iran out of Syria, and will drag Israel into a renewed discussion of the Golan Heights issue as a condition for removing the Iranian forces. It is therefore important that the Israeli government clarify the terms of the framework agreed upon with Russia in the last Netanyahu-Putin meeting.