IMPACT OF RUSSIA'S WITHDRAWAL ON IRAN

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Yury Barmin, Russia Direct, 23 March 2016

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"The fact that Russia announced that they are withdrawing part of its forces indicates that they don't see an imminent need to resort to force in maintaining the ceasefire," Iran's Foreign Minister Javad Zarif was quoted as saying. Similarly, Bashar al-Assad's chief advisor, Bouthaina Shaaban, said that the decision did not surprise Damascus because it was made in coordination with President Assad.

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The decision of a partial pullback could in fact have been coordinated with Damascus and Tehran but the real question is whether either of the two, especially Iran, as the main sponsor of the Syrian government, was happy with it. Any show of discord could have done more damage than the withdrawal itself, so even if there was no unity over it, the allies could not demonstrate it to the public.

All facts considered, Russia's pullout is not going to visibly impact the status quo on the ground. The S-400 missile system will remain at the Hmeymim base, and both the air and naval bases will continue to operate as they did before. According to some estimates, the number of Russian fighter jets and bombers will go down from over 60 to around 20. The personnel will be sized down proportionately but most military advisors will stay in Damascus and other key towns.

Since the announcement of the ceasefire, Russia has started employing significantly less jets to bomb Islamic State of Iraq and the Greater Syria (ISIS) and Jabhat Al Nusra positions. So it appears that by withdrawing the forces that are no longer needed, Moscow achieved positive PR for a move that essentially does not undermine its strategic position in any way and costs it virtually zero.

There is no reason why Iran would not calculate this logic behind the withdrawal. However, there is a

big difference between the statements released by the government officials and what the forces behind the Iranian forces on the ground actually think.

Most Iranian soldiers fighting alongside the Syrian Arab Army were contributed by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), which is controlled directly by supreme leader Ali Khamenei. Following the nuclear deal in summer 2015 and parliamentary elections in February 2016, Iran's moderate president Hassan Rouhani has been increasingly viewed as being at odds with the hardline IRGC.

The IRGC has reportedly sustained a significant loss of life in Syria since Russia entered the conflict with 160 fatalities and over 300 injured. According to the Israeli media, this led the IRGC to start withdrawing forces from Syria in late February.

If these reports are accurate, Russia's pullout that was or was not coordinated with the Iranian government may not be welcomed by the IRGC because most of the responsibility for maintaining current territorial gains will fall on their shoulders. In fact, the Guards Corps may be forced to redeploy fighters to Syria, which, given the casualty rate among them, could put a strain on Russia-Iran coordination on the ground.

Russia's withdrawal is largely seen as a measure intended to give momentum to the peace talks between Assad and the opposition currently underway in Geneva. The peace process draws closer the moment when President Assad should step down; it will not happen within weeks but certainly within months. Russia and the U.S. have given a tentative timeframe of 18 months for the transitional period, at the end of which presidential elections have to take place in Syria. Assad's fate is exactly what Moscow and Tehran don't agree on.

While both are committed to supporting him militarily for the sake of maintaining the status quo, presently Iran does not see anyone but Assad as President of Syria. Russia has a slightly different approach to the matter: It advocates for a Shia-dominated regime in Syria and the current design of the political system over specific personalities, which refers to Assad.

Against this backdrop it became clear in March that there are noticeable disagreements between Russia and Iran when President Rouhani said that his country does not agree with Moscow on every move related to Syria.

Neither Moscow nor Tehran can publicize their growing differences, but Assad's recent comments about the war in Syria are indicative of this. In his interview with AFP in mid-February, Assad promised to "retake all of Syria." Later he also cast doubt on the effectiveness of the U.S.-Russia ceasefire agreement. "Who will speak to the terrorists if a terrorist organization refused to adhere to the ceasefire, who will make them accountable? Who, as they say, will bomb them?" he asked.

Assad, whose future in Syria is heavily dependent on Tehran and Moscow, could not have pronounced these statements without having a blessing for this either from Russia or Tehran.

Moscow would shoot itself in the foot by encouraging such comments, while they largely fall in line with Iran's current stance on Syria.

Russia also finds itself in hot water in the West over the fact that its alliance with Syria and Iran also includes Hezbollah. The government in Damascus has become very comfortable with Hezbollah essentially running Lebanon-adjacent areas of Syria, something Russia tries to ignore in its public comments on Syria, but with which it has to deal on the ground.

It is true that Iran-backed Hezbollah, which is recognized as a terrorist group in the West, is crucial to Assad's progress on the ground but Moscow is extremely concerned that some of the weapons that it provides to Iran and Syria will end up with the group.

To some extent, Russia is pulling off a very careful balancing act in the Middle East: It is acting in concert with Iran and Hezbollah to stabilize the Syrian government and at the same time it has received tacit consent for its involvement in Syria from Israel in exchange for containing Hezbollah.

Moscow is aware that if the terrorist group crosses Israel's red line, Tel Aviv is going to enter this war and Assad would no longer be guaranteed a safe transition from power. It is getting harder for Russia to balance between Iran and Israel and the withdrawal does not make it any easier to check Hezbollah's expanding presence and influence.

A remarkable falling out over Hezbollah happened between Moscow and Tehran in February. Back then, advisor to Iran's supreme leader Ali Akbar Velayati met with the Russian Security Council leadership after which he announced a creation of an alliance between Hezbollah, Iran, Russia and Syria.

Russian officials were angered by this speculative statement that essentially formalizes the relationship between Russia and Hezbollah and denied any such ties. It was one of the most vivid signs that there is a growing rift between Moscow and Tehran not only over Assad's future but also over the future role of Iran's proxy militant groups in Syria.