



SYRIA: EMERGING US-RUSSIAN CONSENSUS

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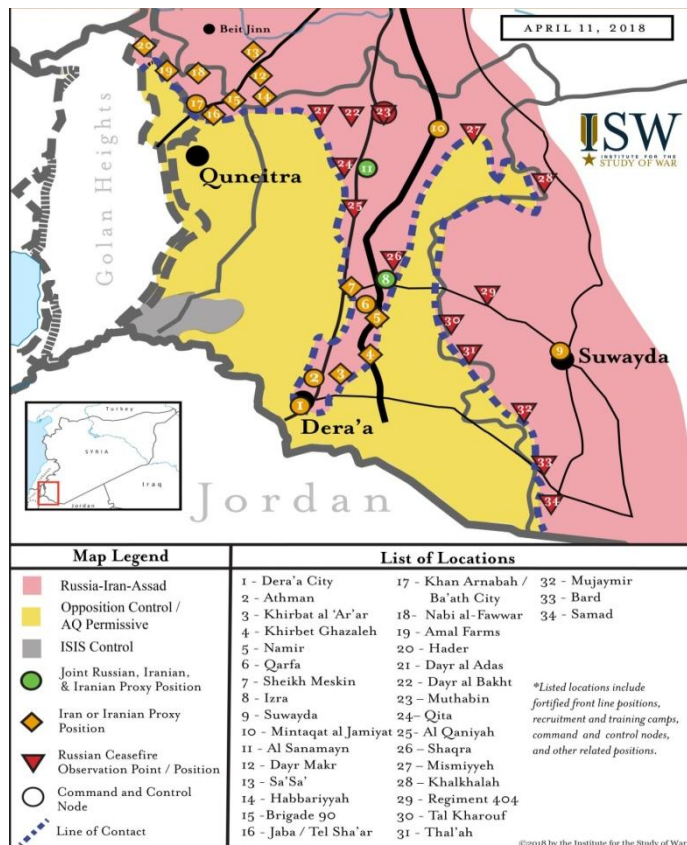
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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



Launch of a major military offensive by the Syrian Arab Army in June 2018 to regain control of Dara'a province has broken a year-long truce in the strategic southern part of Syria. Dara'a city was the birthplace of the sedition that began in March 2011 before morphing into a foreign-backed militancy that continues to this day.

On July 12, 2018, there were reports that a Russian military delegation had entered Dara'a's terrorist-controlled area and begun negotiations with commanders from the so-called Free Syrian Army (FSA) on implementing the terms of the surrender deal, and over the region's handover to the Syrian government.1



1 "Russian military enters rebel-held enclave in Syria's Deraa city," Reuters, July 12, 2018. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-deraa-russia/russian-military-enters-rebel-held-enclave-in-syrias-deraa-city-idUSKBN1K21WW

As the catastrophic seven years old civil war is drawing to a close, US, Israel and the Gulf States are determined to make Iranian presence untenable in the war-ravaged country and pushing to insist Iranian withdrawal as a prerequisite for resolving the conflict. A diplomatic endgame appears to be on the horizon where US, Russia and Israel would shape a deal allowing President Bashar al-Asad to continue on Russian pledges to restrain Iranian ambitions and presence in Syria.<sup>2</sup>

A simultaneous interesting development is the ongoing interaction and efforts for de-escalation between Russia and US on Syria. In talks held on June 27, American National Security Adviser, John Bolton met with senior Russian officials and President Vladimir Putin in Moscow. Despite mounting European pressure to be tough on Putin's Russia and dissenting voices within US, an agreement covering southwest Syria in the triangle of Dara'a-Quneitera-Al-Sweyda, near the Israeli-Syrian border was reached with US blessings.<sup>3</sup> After warning Syria of "firm and appropriate measures" in case of violation of the de-escalation agreement, US has practically backed down from its commitment to help the opposition.<sup>4</sup> This move has increased pressure on the opposition groups in Dara'a (like Free Syrian Army groups and Jaysh Khaled Ibn Al-Waleed, who pledge allegiance to Islamic State) to negotiate the terms of surrender with the Syrian regime, being facilitated through Russian and Jordanian mediation.<sup>5</sup>

A change in Israel's Syria policy can also be detected as Tel Aviv reverses its hands-off policy which up till now according to Israel, has favored Iran. Prospects of impending conclusion of the civil war spurred Israel to action as it believed that Iranian finale in Syria involves establishment of an independent paramilitary force on the lines of Hezbollah in Jordan. Such a militia would be loyal to Iran and independent of Syrian government control, thus posing direct threat to Israeli interests.

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<sup>2</sup> Marwan Kaban, "Iran's Syria Predicament," *Al Jazeera*, July 04, 2018.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/iran-syria-predicament-180703134308836.html>

<sup>3</sup> The agreement to set up a de-escalation zone in southwest Syria was reached between Jordan, US and Russia on July 07, 2017. The parameters were not publicized, as implementation lagged and ceasefire was broken a number of times. Then a Memorandum of Principles covering southwest Syria was agreed between Putin and Trump in November 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Press Statement issued by Heather Nauert, Spokesperson US Department of State on May 25, 2018.

<https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2018/05/282540.htm>

<sup>5</sup> Hussein Haridy, "Trump-Putin Summit," *Al-Ahram Weekly*, Issue 400 (5-11 July, 2008).

<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/News/24870.aspx>.



**Source:** Map published in a Report by *South Front* on January 26, 2018.<sup>6</sup>

However, according to a *Washington Post* report of June 28, the new agreement reached between US, Russia and Israel will keep Iranian-backed forces at least 80 kms away from the Israeli border on Golan Heights, with additional tacit Russian permission to strike Iranian targets in Syria. Thus, Assad's army, backed by Russian airpower, got a green signal to regain control of southwest Syria.<sup>7</sup>

Russia, on the other hand, has its own interests in Syria and the escalation of tensions between regional foes - Iran and Israel - provides Moscow with additional leverage and it can use Israeli pressure on Iran to fall in line with Russia's Syria policy. Turn of events in the Syrian conflict has bestowed an indispensable balancer role on Russia, once enjoyed by the US in the region. Apart from growing ties with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, Moscow is also talking to both Syrian Kurds and their bitter rivals, Turkey. The Syrian regime's onslaught on Dara'a points to growing identification of Russian interests with Israel at least in southwest Syria. It can also be interpreted as Israel's changing views on Putin and acceptance of his role as a reliable regional partner. It remains to be seen whether Russia is prepared to throw Iran under the proverbial bus as the details of the Helsinki Summit between Trump and Putin on July 16, 2018 are still not public. Russian news agency TASS quoting Valery Garbuzov, Director Institute for US and Canadian Studies at the Russian Academy of Sciences, stated: "the parties made the most progress in paving the way for cooperation in resolving

<sup>6</sup> The Report can be viewed at <https://southfront.org/israel-seeks-to-use-free-syrian-army-to-establish-40km-deep-safe-zone-in-southern-syria-report/>

<sup>7</sup> David Ignatius, "Is Trump handing Putin a victory in Syria?," *Washington Post*, June 28, 2018. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/is-trump-handing-putin-a-victory-in-syria/2018/06/28/a853657a-7b14-11e8-93cc-6d3becdd7a3\\_story.html?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.b1c4480581eb](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/is-trump-handing-putin-a-victory-in-syria/2018/06/28/a853657a-7b14-11e8-93cc-6d3becdd7a3_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.b1c4480581eb)

the Syrian issue" though the question of President Bashar al-Assad's political future "has not taken center stage yet".<sup>8</sup>

The emerging détente between US and Russia might not be a very welcoming news for Iran. Speculation that Russia might trade US military presence in Kurdish-held Syrian territories east of the Euphrates and al-Tanf base with that of Iran in the Helsinki Summit between Putin and Trump, has not been confirmed yet. Iran is expected to fiercely resist any move that forces it out of Syria, whose infamous regime has been propped up by \$6bn annually.<sup>9</sup> Iran would not want to lose this geopolitical advantage that helps it maintain its grip on Iraq and provides direct land access to key ally - Hezbollah - in Lebanon. However, emerging US-Russian-Arab-Israeli consensus is extremely constraining Iran's option. Once hailed as Iran's greatest regional victory, Tehran's Syrian gamble might turn out to be its greatest regional failure in the near future.

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<sup>8</sup> "Putin, Trump make most progress in talks on Syria, says Russian expert," *TASS* (Russian News Agency), July 17, 2018. <http://tass.com/politics/1013663>

<sup>9</sup> "Iran spending \$6 bln annually to support Assad regime: report," *Al-Arabiya*, June 10, 2015. <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2015/06/10/Iran-spending-6-bln-annually-to-support-Assad-regime-report.html>