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# **RUSSIAN INFLUENCE IN LEBANON AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR IRAN**

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**R**ussian moves in Lebanon are directly associated with the massive transformation in regional interactions in the Middle East over the past years. The Russian military presence in Syria has boosted its influence. Thus, Russia has become more interested in Syria's neighboring countries and their issues, particularly Lebanon.

Russia's victories in Syria have strengthened its position in the Middle East, which made it a reliable partner for many countries in the region, including Lebanon. Lebanon's political elite has become fully aware of the need to adapt to Moscow's emergence as a major power and mediator in the region. However, its anti-Washington policy was the fundamental reason for the relative improvement in relations with Russia, by Hezbollah and its allies. Also Sunni figures such as Prime Minister Saad Hariri, who has a successful long-term relationship with Washington and other Western countries improved his relations with Russia.

Although Russia's efforts to strengthen its influence in Lebanon are perceived as a natural extension of its military presence and its political role in Syria, it will not be as easy for Russia to exert its influence without pressure in Lebanon, the arena of competition for many regional and international powers, partially because of Iran's presence through its ally Hezbollah, the dominant political force in the country, and because of the crucial sectarian and political balance which is the main challenge to Russia's efforts to strengthen its influence in Lebanon.

Russia's role in Lebanon has been moving backwards and forwards over the course of time. It has been deeply rooted since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century; Moscow opened its first consulate in Beirut in 1839. The Soviet Union was one of the first countries to recognize Lebanon's independence in 1943 and used its veto to defend Syria's and Lebanon's right to independence in 1946. Russia also supported Lebanon in its 2006 war against Israel and provided military aid to Hezbollah supplying Kornet anti-tank missile systems, which succeeded in stopping the Israeli tanks. After the end of the war, Russian military advisors met with Hezbollah's officers in Southern Lebanon. Russia also contributed to the reconstruction process. However, its role dramatically shrunk, with tensions simmering since 2008 following Lebanon's rejection, complying with US pressure, of Russian military aid that included the Mikoyan MiG-29, a twin-engine jet fighter aircraft.<sup>(1)</sup>

Russia's role has dramatically increased in recent years. While Moscow was working to enhance its influence in Syria by providing Damascus with military and political support, it started to approach Beirut through soft and hard tools both economically and militarily. This not only reflected Moscow's active role in the Lebanese arena but also demonstrated its willingness to invest the time and resources required to achieve its goal of greater influence in Lebanon.

This research aims to review some indicators pointing to the changing role of Russia and its policies towards Lebanon, Russian motives for its rapprochement with Beirut at this time, the implications of Russian policies for Iran's role and its ally Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the scenarios for the future role of Russia and Iran in Lebanon.

### **First: The Features of Russia's Increasing Role in Lebanon**

In the past few years, the levels and patterns of Russian interest in Lebanon have changed. During the Soviet-era, coordination was only limited to the leftist and communist forces and movements in Lebanon.<sup>(2)</sup> Since then, the Russian role has taken on new dimensions based on the diversification of its relations with various political factions. This role has also expanded to other issues of the highest priority concerning Lebanese internal affairs, including managing the relationship with the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, the de-escalation with Israel, addressing the Syrian refugee issue, and Lebanon's participation in the Syrian reconstruction process. Accordingly, Russia has become more visible in Lebanon which is not necessarily based on the legacy of the former Soviet Union, but on different calculations and new tools. In general, the most prominent features of Russia's growing interest in enhancing its presence in Lebanon can be seen as follows:

#### **1- Intensifying Cultural Relations**

Russia has an important cultural presence in Lebanon dating back to the early 1950s, specifically when the Russian Embassy opened its first cultural center in Beirut in 1951. Over the past years, Moscow has sought to enhance its presence in Lebanon through its soft power sources, foremost among them being its cultural tools. As a result, nine cultural centers have been established since 2009 in most major Lebanese cities. These centers host political events and cultural and educational programs, by taking advantage of the numerous Russian-speaking graduates in Lebanon.<sup>(3)</sup>

Moscow has organized cultural events in Lebanon to improve its image in the Western media and to promote the Russian culture and language in Lebanese society. In the same context, Russia

has worked to strengthen ties between Russian universities and their Lebanese counterparts. The number of scholarships for Lebanese students to study in Moscow was increased to 60 in 2018.<sup>(4)</sup>

In addition to this cultural network, there are other institutions such as the Lebanese-Russian Friendship Association and the Lebanese-Russian Business Council playing an essential role in consolidating Russian relations with Lebanon. Along with the growing influence of this cultural network, the Russian Embassy's staff ratio in Beirut has increased over the past decade by including a relatively large military section.<sup>(5)</sup>

## **2- Supporting the Lebanese Churches**

Russia has worked to use religion in its effort to boost its influence in Lebanon through enhancing its relations with Lebanese churches of various denominations. In addition to the strong historical ties between the Lebanese Orthodox community and the Russian Orthodox Church, Moscow has been interested in improving its relations with the Maronite Church by calling for the protection of the Christians of the East since the beginning of the Syrian crisis, which was welcomed by the Maronite community after noticing a decline in French interest towards them in favor of the Sunni groups in Lebanon.<sup>(6)</sup> Accordingly, party officials and Christian currents, including the Free Patriotic Movement, the Kataeb Party and the Marda movement have regularly visited Moscow to discuss with Russian officials the developments in the Lebanese internal situation and the challenges facing Christians in the Middle East.<sup>(7)</sup>

## **3- Supporting the Lebanese National Army**

Moscow's attempt to provide military assistance to the Lebanese army had been fruitless until Lebanon accepted on November 26, 2018, Russian military aid worth \$5 million. Despite the reservations of many Western powers, the United States and Britain in particular, who opposed the Lebanese army's diversification of its weapons supplies, preferring its dependence to remain on Western weapons, the Lebanese Prime Minister-designate, Saad Hariri, managed to get Russian military aid to benefit the Ministry of Interior, instead of the Lebanese army. This demonstrates the real desire of the Lebanese government to enhance relations with Russia.<sup>(8)</sup> Regardless of the internal concerns regarding reinforcing military ties with Moscow, it would impliedly mean choosing to ally with Russia and its regional partners in Syria and Iran at the expense of Europe, the United States, and Lebanon's allies in the Arab Gulf, leaving Lebanon exposed to the threat of punitive US measures.<sup>(9)</sup>

Despite external pressure and internal concerns, it is clear that Russia is determined to strengthen its military presence in Lebanon, as illustrated by the visit of Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev to the Lebanese Defense Ministry on February 3, 2018, to work on signing a military cooperation agreement with Lebanon in which Lebanese ports would be available for Russian navy ships at any time and its airports would be transit points for Russian warplanes.<sup>(10)</sup> If the agreement is reached, it would represent a strategic shift in Russian interests. After establishing its military airbase in Hmeimim and guaranteeing a gateway to the Mediterranean, Russia started pursuing access for its military forces in Lebanon under the pretext of strengthening the Lebanese national army's capabilities, reaching an agreement will be a turning point for Lebanese military strategy because the Lebanese army has long relied on the West – as a supporter and its sole partner - in its armaments and training.<sup>(11)</sup>

## **4- Improving Lebanon's Stability and Playing an Important Mediating Role Between the Conflicting Parties**

Given that Russia is the only force with balanced relations in the region by maintaining regular and friendly contacts with Egypt, Lebanon, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria,

Turkey and other countries, it is also able to play a role in promoting stability and mediating between conflicting parties.<sup>(12)</sup> In this context, some indicators prove Russia's role in preventing an escalation of tensions between Lebanon and Israel which could lead to the outbreak of war between the two countries since Russia tends to play the role of guarantor of security and intermediary between Lebanon and its neighbors.<sup>(13)</sup>

Parallel to this, Moscow has worked to open channels of communication and dialogue with various Lebanese political forces, even with Sunni forces that have close ties to the United States and to the Lebanese factions opposing Bashar al-Assad's regime. This translated into official invitations for many Lebanese leaders of various ideological and political orientations to visit Moscow. Russia also seeks to be part of any political equation within Lebanon by representing itself as a friend of all Lebanese political factions.

In other words, the Russian role in the internal Lebanese scene is regarded as more supportive in addressing the crises without intervening in the successive political developments of the Lebanese arena, since it recognizes how sensitive and delicate the situation is. However, the effectiveness of the Russian role depends on the quality of the problems faced by the Lebanese and Russia's possible solutions in addressing them.<sup>(14)</sup>

#### **5- Facilitating the Return of Syrian Refugees**

The issue of the return of the Syrian refugees in Lebanon is an important step for strengthening the presence of Russia and gaining more political influence in Lebanon. Significantly, despite a decrease in the number of refugees to less than one million after they reached one million and a half, according to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, this issue still concerns the Lebanese government because it places a great burden on the economy.

Russia became the first motivator on the file of "reducing tension" areas to which the displaced are supposed to return. This initiative was launched in cooperation with Lebanon in July 2018 to facilitate the return of refugees to Syria, including the proposal to establish a committee in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey to coordinate and follow-up with the Russian side on the means of the return and its mechanisms. Any Russian role to resolve the Syrian refugee crisis would pave the way for regular security and military coordination between Russia and Lebanon where Russian military officials play a pivotal coordinating role since this initiative was originally launched by the Russian Ministry of Defense.

Moscow has proposed the deployment of a division of its military police within 20 kilometers inside Lebanese territory to facilitate the return of Syrian refugees. Although there are some reports indicating that the US National Security Adviser John Bolton rejects it, the Russian proposal highlights the extent of Moscow's aspiration for establishing a military presence within Lebanese territory.<sup>(15)</sup>

#### **6- The Formation of a Lebanese National Unity Government**

Russia's efforts to strengthen its position as a peacemaker between the conflicting political forces in Lebanon are evident given Moscow's call for these forces to overcome their differences and to move forward towards the formation of a Lebanese government. In this context, the Russian Ambassador in Lebanon Alexander Zasytkin urged Lebanese officials more than once to expedite the formation of the government in order to introduce the necessary reforms to obtain the pledged assistance at Cedar (CEDRE) Conference, an international conference held in April 2018 in France to support Lebanon's development and reforms.<sup>(16)</sup> After several months of Prime Minister Saad Hariri's attempts to form a government following the parliamentary elections held in May 2018, the Russian envoys called their Iranian and Syrian allies to pressure their political partners in Lebanon to assist in the current efforts to end the impasse over the formation of the Lebanese government. On January 31, 2019, a new government of national

unity was announced, revealing the extent to which Russia aims to expand its political role in Lebanon.

### **Second: The Motives of the Russian Role in Lebanon**

Russia's successive interventions in Lebanese affairs are an expression of Moscow's desire to expand its influence in the Middle East region, taking advantage of the victories in Syria. Russia's military intervention in Syria has created a strong motive for Moscow to maintain its strategic interests and military naval bases. On this basis, Russia's role is not only linked to its desire to limit Washington's influence in the Middle East, but also to its pattern of pragmatic interests in Lebanon. In this context, the motives behind the Russian rapprochement with Lebanon can be reviewed as follows:

#### **1- Challenging American Influence**

Over the past decades, Lebanon has been an arena of competition for many regional and international powers, notably the United States, France, Saudi Arabia, and Iran. The role of some of these forces has been in decline in light of regional and local transformations, thus prompting Moscow to move forward to fill this political and security vacuum and to gain an element of power against the United States and the Western powers.<sup>(17)</sup> In this context, Russia has worked to expand its relations with Lebanon within the framework of its comprehensive regional plan to enhance its presence in the region. This is because Moscow considers Lebanon as another arena to strengthen its influence and to compete with the West within its border.<sup>(18)</sup> In this regard, the relationship between the United States and the Lebanese army is an important tool of influence for Washington in Lebanon. Thus, the Russian attempts to support the Lebanese army are part of its efforts to end the traditional monopoly of the United States and the West in providing military assistance to the Lebanese army.<sup>(19)</sup>

Accordingly, US officials warned that if the United States stopped its support for the Lebanese army, it would reduce its influence in Lebanon, allowing other forces – first and foremost Russia – to fill this vacuum. Equally important, Beirut could use a military treaty with Russia as a pressure tool to urge the United States to provide additional support. It also reflects Lebanon's desire to expand its international partnerships.<sup>(20)</sup>

#### **2- Securing Military Presence in Syria**

Lebanon's geographical location on the Mediterranean Sea and its geographical proximity to Syria are of special strategic importance to the Russian strategy in the region.<sup>(21)</sup> Russia consolidated its influence by concentrating its forces in Syria and on its coastline, granting it access to the warm Mediterranean seaports through the port under its control in Tartus, northern Syria, which is considered Moscow's only seaport on the Mediterranean. However, Moscow has worked to find a second port and a foothold in Lebanon since it is a natural extension of its influence in Syria and a vital supporter in protecting its presence and interests there.<sup>(22)</sup>

For not giving Israel and the United States the justification to wage war against Lebanon, Moscow seeks to avoid its military presence from being implicated in any tension in Lebanon or on the southern border since the deterioration of the internal situation or on the Lebanese border would negatively affect Syria and the Russian presence respectively.<sup>(23)</sup> In the same context, Russia's efforts for providing military support to the Lebanese army aims to anticipate security threats to prevent ISIS from taking advantage of the fragile security situation in Lebanon by attacking Russian targets in Syria. Additionally, Russia sought to enhance Lebanon's counter-terrorism capabilities against ISIS which controls some areas in Lebanon, near the northeastern border with Syria.<sup>(24)</sup>

### 3- Supporting the Russian Economy

The Russian-Lebanese rapprochement in Lebanon and the Middle East is generally based on the economic dimension because it is a major motivator of its movements. Therefore, this would serve the dual purpose of alleviating the US and European sanctions imposed on Russia because of its military intervention in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea and enhancing its role as an influential economic player in the Middle East.<sup>(25)</sup>

To enhance its economic presence in Lebanon, Moscow has signed a number of agreements to boost cooperation between the two countries in several economic sectors, especially the energy sector given the important discoveries of natural gas and oil in the Lebanese territorial waters in the Mediterranean. In accordance with this approach, the Russian company *Novatek*, the French company *Total*, and the Italian company *Eni*, signed in early 2018 the first contract to explore and extract oil in two areas, where one of them includes a part falling within the disputed territorial waters with Israel.<sup>(26)</sup>

In January 2019, *Rosneft*, a Russian state oil company, signed a 20-year agreement to run and modernize an oil storage facility in Tripoli, given its crucial role in oil and gas exploration in Lebanon. To provide a security umbrella for this operation, Moscow is seeking to expand its military influence in Lebanon, promoting its military presence as a means to de-escalate tensions between Lebanon and Israel following the reemergence of disputes between the two countries over the maritime border following the discovery of natural gas in Lebanese territorial waters.<sup>(27)</sup> In the economic sphere, the volume of trade between the two countries increased from \$423 million in 2012 to about \$770 million in 2017, dominated by Russian energy exports.<sup>(28)</sup> In the next two or three years, there is also an expectation of increasing the trade volume between the two countries to \$1.5 billion.<sup>(29)</sup>

### 4- Providing an Economic and Political Umbrella to Support the Syrian Regime

Some indicators reveal Russia's tendency of using its presence in Lebanon, which shares a border with Syria, in the interests of its ally President Bashar al-Assad. In this context, the agreement of *Rosneft* to modernize a petroleum storage facility in Tripoli raised questions about whether Moscow will use it to transfer its fuel supplies to Syria. However, the US Department of the Treasury sought to hinder it by using economic sanctions, especially since Tripoli is located only 30 kilometers from the Syrian border through the land road and 60 kilometers from the port of Tartus which is under Russian control.<sup>(30)</sup>

Further to the above, Moscow seeks to restore relations between Beirut and Damascus, which of course provide channels of communication between some Lebanese parties opposing Bashar al-Assad's regime and Damascus without having to deal directly with the Syrian government.<sup>(31)</sup> The most obvious example of the latter is the statement of Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri in an interview with *Euronews*, the European channel that he prefers to deal with Russian President Vladimir Putin because "Russia now controls Syria, so we will deal with the Russians".<sup>(32)</sup>

### Third: The Repercussions of the Russian Role for Iran in Lebanon.

The growing role of Russia in Lebanon has been controversial over its implications for the role of Iran and its ally Hezbollah. The views of analysts and experts diverged over the nature of these implications. They were divided into two groups as follows:

#### 1- The First Team

It believes that the Russian role will inevitably be that of an opponent against the role of Iran and its ally Hezbollah in Lebanon, unlike the nature of the alliance between the two countries, which is based on supporting Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria, for the following reasons:

A- **Hezbollah's political and security supremacy:** Although Iran and Hezbollah welcomed

Russian military intervention in Syria in 2015 because they were in desperate need of assistance at that time and relied heavily on Russian air assistance and its diplomatic efforts in Syria,<sup>(33)</sup> the situation in Lebanon is different as Hezbollah has many power sources and means of exerting pressure inside Lebanese state institutions. In addition, the parliamentary elections of May 2018 contributed to the strengthening of the party's status since the March 8 alliances and forces, which are composed of Hezbollah and its allied forces, won 67 seats of the total 128 seats in the House of Representatives. Consequently, this was a serious setback for the March 14 alliance which represents some of the forces of Sunni, Druze and Christian parties, first and foremost the Future Movement.<sup>(34)</sup>

With the announcement of the formation of a national unity government and Hezbollah holding three ministerial portfolios in the new government on January 31, 2019 including health, which has the fourth largest budget in the state apparatus, the party has become entrenched and too powerful in Lebanon.<sup>(35)</sup> In other words, these developments mean that Hezbollah is not in need of Russian support in dealing with its rivals inside Lebanon. Given Iran's considerable success in gaining influence within Lebanon's political and security institutions, it would prefer never to abandon any of its sources of influence to the Russians.

**B- Russia's convergence with various Lebanese political forces:** Unlike Iran, which bets on Hezbollah to impose its military and political influence in the Lebanese arena, Russia prefers to diversify its relations with the various local political players in Lebanon which oppose from Iran's perspective the influence of its ally Hezbollah and could undermine its position in exchange for strengthening the positions and influence of its political opponents within Lebanon, particularly the Sunnis and the March 14 Forces.

Russia's strategy in Lebanon is based on establishing a balanced relationship between all political parties, without forming an alliance with a particular group because Russia's support of Hezbollah in Lebanon will only encourage Sunnis to depend continuously on the United States against Russia, as they believe that Russia has a strong alliance with Iran. For some in Lebanon, the rise of Russian influence may serve as a counterbalance to Hezbollah's influence and indirectly to Iran, its sponsor.<sup>(36)</sup> This issue has led some to argue that Hezbollah hinders Russia's access to Lebanon under the pretext of a political problem and internal divisions, because this may open the door to Moscow's intervention in the process of settling the internal situation and give it power among the different political forces that may disturb Hezbollah and Iran during the next phase, particularly in regard to the southern border of Lebanon and the Mediterranean oil and gas issue.<sup>(37)</sup>

**C- Moscow's quest to arm Hezbollah:** Over the past years, Hezbollah has grown as a parallel army to the Lebanese army. But its strength and arms have even surpassed that of the Lebanese National Army (SLA), with 130,000 rockets and missiles owned by the party.<sup>(38)</sup> The intervention of the party in the Syrian war contributed to the strengthening of its combat capabilities through receiving Russian supplies of a range of sophisticated weapons, including long-range tactical missiles, laser-guided missiles, and anti-tank weapons. Their fighters also learned how to work with the Russian air force, giving them the experience and ability to use tanks and carry out minor airborne operations.<sup>(39)</sup> Therefore, Iran believes that Moscow's quest for concluding a military cooperation agreement with Lebanon and providing military assistance will certainly benefit the Lebanese National Army and could enhance its military capabilities to confront Hezbollah, a goal which has been pursued by the United States for several years.<sup>(40)</sup>

**D- Russia's rapprochement with Israel:** Given the development and flourishing of Russian-Israeli relations in the economic and security areas, Iran believes that its interests will be affected by this relationship. Apparently, Russia will not support the retaliation of Hezbollah against Israel, nor will it prevent Israel carrying out military strikes against Iranian targets in



Syria, where recent reports indicated that Tel Aviv informs the Russians of expected Israeli strikes against Iran. After a few days of Israeli strikes against the Quds Force's headquarters in Damascus on January 21, 2019, Iran accused Russia for the first time with the Speaker of the National Security and Foreign Policy Committee of the Iranian Shura Council accusing Russia of complicity with Israel in deactivating the missile defense system S-300 coinciding with every Israeli attack against Syria.<sup>(41)</sup>

For its part, Moscow denied through its Deputy Foreign Minister that Russia and Iran were not allies in Syria, saying that, "Israel's security is one of the top priorities of Russia in the region." Instead of adopting a tough speech against Israeli strikes targeting the pro-Iranian forces, the Russian Foreign Ministry stated, "Tel Aviv should not carry out air strikes against a sovereign state."<sup>(42)</sup>

This can be interpreted as Russia seeking to avoid opening a new front in Syria between Iran and Israel, de-escalating tensions and reaching a political settlement with regard to the crisis. On one hand, Russia's interest is to expand its influence in the Middle East, assert its presence, and to seek commercial opportunities for Russian companies. On the other hand, Iran's main goal in Syria is to strengthen and expand its anti-Israel alliance.<sup>(43)</sup> If Russian and Iranian visions are divergent on Syria's future, Tehran and its ally Hezbollah may not welcome Moscow's growing influence in Lebanon. Iran is also concerned about Moscow's convergence with Washington on Iran which could prompt Russia to play an active role in curbing Iran's influence in Syria and Hezbollah's role in Lebanon for political gains; especially with Russian President Vladimir Putin's calling for all foreign forces to depart from Syria within the framework of a comprehensive political solution during his meeting with the Syrian President in Sochi on May 17, 2018. In response, this prompted the Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman to insist that "no one can force us to leave Syria," followed by the Russian messages asserting that there is no exception for any party. The Russian President's Special Envoy to Syria, Alexander Lavrentiev, also confirmed, "The call to depart Syria is for everyone, including Iran."<sup>(44)</sup>

## 2- The Second Team

Its supporters believe that the Russian presence in Lebanon will be supplemental to Iran's role there and will be a continuation of the Russian-Iranian coordination in other parts of the world, whether in Syria or Central Asia. They support their opinions with evidence, including:

**A- Russian support for the presence and legitimacy of Hezbollah:** Its support has been reflected on several occasions, either through the party's participation in the government, or US sanctions against the party, as well as the resignation of Prime Minister Saad Hariri on November 4, 2017.

The Russian Special Presidential Representative for the Middle East and Africa Mikhail Leonidovich Bogdanov stated, "Russia does not consider Hezbollah to be a terrorist organization. They have never committed any terrorist acts on Russian territory. Hezbollah was elected by the people to the Lebanese Parliament. There are cabinet members and ministers who are from Hezbollah in Lebanon. It's a legitimate socio-political force."<sup>(45)</sup> According to Alexander Zasyplin, "Hezbollah is not responsible for hampering the efforts for the formation of a government."<sup>(46)</sup> Russia also supported Hezbollah in the face of US sanctions. In this context, Alexander Zasyplin stated, "The Americans are using the sanctions and the exertion of pressure on Hezbollah to expand their influence in Lebanon," adding that, "US sanctions further complicate the problem and do not solve it. They punish all the Lebanese and Lebanon, not just Hezbollah or the Amal Movement."<sup>(47)</sup>

Further to the above, the Russian statements following the announcement of Saad Hariri's resignation, reflected the strong partnership between Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah. One of these statements expressed the rejection by the Russian Ambassador of Hezbollah's exclusion in

the formation of the next government. The Russian position on Hezbollah contradicts Saudi demands to limit the party and disarm it, which Riyadh considers as a threat to security and peace in the region.<sup>(48)</sup>

**B- The consensus between Russia and Hezbollah on some internal issues:** It includes Lebanon's full normalization with Assad's regime in Syria, in contrast to the position of the Future Movement, the Lebanese Forces Party, the Progressive Socialist Party, the West, and some anti-Iran regional forces. In addition, there is also a consensus between Russia and Iran's vision on the need to encourage the return of Syrian refugees to their land. Hezbollah and its allies in Lebanon attempt to use the pressure that the Syrian refugee conflict puts on the economic crisis that the country is going through in order to demand the return of refugees to their land. Hezbollah's concerns about Syrian refugees are based on the long-term demographic change that could occur, especially since most of the refugees are Sunni.<sup>(49)</sup> Hezbollah's desire for the Syrian refugees to return to their land is consistent with Russian efforts in this regard, through which it tries to convince the international community of the stable situation in Syria without linking these repatriations to a political solution to the crisis.

**C- The perception of the Russian role as a counterbalance to the American role:** For decades, the United States maintained a strong influence inside Lebanon and deployed the Marines on Lebanese shores in 1958 and 1982. Its presence in Lebanon has been consolidated through some of the most prestigious institutions of the United States, including the American University of Beirut, the Lebanese American University, and the American University Hospital. The United States is one of the largest donors of military assistance to the Lebanese security forces to counter and contain the strength and influence of Hezbollah, providing it with \$1.7 billion in military aid since 2007, thus making Lebanon a primary security partner of the United States.<sup>(50)</sup>

The Russian role can be a counterbalance to the US role. However, Russia's desire in supporting the Lebanese army militarily is likely welcomed by Hezbollah. In this regard, the Hezbollah member of parliament Nawaf al-Moussawi called for relying on Russian military support instead of the United States and advocated the use of Lebanese military bases and airports by the Russian Federation.<sup>(51)</sup> While the US administration is imposing sanctions on Hezbollah and threatening Lebanon to prevent it from obtaining Russian military aid, many Lebanese are looking to Russia as an important alternative that is willing to invest economically and militarily in Lebanon without preconditions.

**D- Relying on Russia to de-escalate tensions with Israel:** Hezbollah can count on Russia's desire to prevent a war between Iran and Lebanon on one hand and Israel on the other in order to de-escalate tensions with Tel Aviv, which becomes a necessity for Tehran given Hezbollah's extremely high number of human casualties with thousands of deaths and injuries from its participation in the Syrian war. Moreover, US economic sanctions on Iran have undoubtedly had a clear impact on limiting Iranian financial support to Hezbollah as well as the IRGC. The party is also affected by the ongoing US pressure on Lebanon in order to ensure its commitment in complying with the US financial sanctions on the party and to dry up the sources of its funding, especially since the administration of US President Donald Trump has classified Hezbollah as a criminal terrorist organization. In the same context, some Israeli military leaders believe that the Russian dialogue would limit the possibility of Hezbollah waging war against Israel in the foreseeable future and will likely control its reactions against Israeli air attacks.<sup>(52)</sup>

Russian efforts to de-escalate tensions between Hezbollah and Israel have clearly emerged after Tel Aviv announced the discovery of tunnels that Hezbollah dug across the border from Lebanon into Israel. Tel Aviv was keen to inform Russia of the details of Operation "Northern Shield," which began on December 4, 2018, to destroy Hezbollah's tunnels. In this context,

the Russian Embassy in Tel Aviv announced that President Putin “stressed the importance of ensuring stability along the Israeli-Lebanese border.” At the same time, Russia called on Lebanon to remove any tunnels that Hezbollah had dug across the border and to ensure security and stability in the border area with Israel.<sup>(53)</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The analysis of the most prominent features of the Russian role and its motives in Lebanon revealed that while some are in alignment with Iran, others conflict with Iranian ambitions. This matter raises questions about the future of Russian-Iranian moves in the Lebanese arena: Will Lebanon be the arena for Russian-Iranian competition or another arena for integration and coordination between the two parties, as in Syria and some parts of Central Asia?

It can be said that Iran will face important challenges in Lebanon during the next stage. This is confirmed by the continuous Russian moves to consolidate its political and military influence, which have been accepted by many Lebanese political forces, even opponents of the Syrian regime, to balance Iranian influence in Lebanon. US sanctions on Iran will also increase the pressure on Tehran to curb its ally Hezbollah and intensify Iran’s challenges in Lebanon.

Russia’s desire for achieving a political settlement and ending the foreign military presence in Syria, including the Iranian military, especially in light of Russian-Israeli military coordination against Iranian targets in Syria, is likely to motivate Tehran to hinder Russian efforts in enhancing its presence, especially since Iran still has means of exerting pressure that it may use to thwart the agreements Moscow is seeking to sign with the new Lebanese government. Russia’s moves in Lebanon are also likely to be a catalyst for political stability, given Moscow’s desire to establish a balance between the Lebanese political factions without one imposing control over the others, while Iran’s desire is to maintain Hezbollah’s dominance and supremacy which fuels the internal conflict in Lebanon. This, however, is likely to create competition between Russia and Iran in Lebanon during the next phase.

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