

IN SYRIA, IRAN PLAYS KEY ROLE IN EMERGING POWER
STRUCTURE AMID ONGOING RUSSIA-ISRAEL CRISIS

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ole-in-emerging-power-structure-amid-ongoing-russia-israel-](https://www.isranet.org/daily-briefing/in-syria-iran-plays-key-role-in-emerging-power-structure-amid-ongoing-russia-israel-crisis/)

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[A New Order Emerges in Southern Syria:](#) Jonathan Spyer, *Breaking Israel News*, Dec. 3, 2018— Syrian Regime closes accounts with west- and Israel-linked rebels, as Iran builds and expands its presence in the area.

[The Russian-Israeli Crisis over Syria Lacks an Exit Strategy:](#) Yaakov Lappin, *BESA*, Dec. 5, 2018— The crisis in Russian-Israeli relations that followed the downing of a Russian aircraft in September lacks an exit strategy, and has resulted in significantly higher tensions in the Syrian arena.

[In the Middle East, Russia is Back:](#) Liz Sly, *Washington Post*, Dec. 5, 2018 — Among the presidents, prime ministers, kings and princes who have visited Moscow over the past year to meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin are some of the United States' closest allies, who once might have been expected to devote their travel time to Washington.

[The Palestinians No One Talks About:](#) Bassam Tawil, *Gatestone Institute*, Nov. 27, 2018— Here's some "good" news: In October, only five Palestinians living in Syria were pronounced dead.

On Topic Links

[US Claims it Killed ISIS Commander, Syria Says US Hit its Forces:](#) Seth Frantzman, *Breaking Israel News*, Dec. 4, 2018

[Hundreds of Bodies Recovered From ISIS Mass Graves in Syria:](#) *New York Post*, Nov. 27, 2018

[While Confronting Iran in Syria, Israel May Have to Defy Russia:](#) Charles Bybelezer, *Media Line*, Dec. 4, 2018

[Expect Russia to Escalate Soon in Syria:](#) Tom Rogan, *Washington Examiner*, Dec. 3, 2018

A NEW ORDER EMERGES IN SOUTHERN SYRIA

Jonathan Spyer

[Breaking Israel News](#), Dec. 3, 2018

**IN SYRIA, IRAN PLAYS KEY ROLE IN EMERGING POWER
STRUCTURE AMID ONGOING RUSSIA-ISRAEL CRISIS**

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Syrian Regime closes accounts with west- and Israel-linked rebels, as Iran builds—and expands its presence in the area. Evidence emerging from south west Syria indicates that the Assad regime has begun to ‘close accounts’ with former rebels who worked with Israel and with western countries during the years that this area was outside of regime control. A number of prominent former rebel commanders in Deraa and Quneitra Provinces have recently disappeared after being apprehended by regime forces. Other former rebels have been prevented from leaving the area for opposition-controlled Idleb province in the country’s north east.

The regime’s measures against those it deems unfit for ‘reconciliation’ are continuing parallel to the integration of rank and file former rebels into the regime’s security structures. What is returning to Syria’s south, however, is not the status quo ante bellum. Iran and its allies have a central role in the emergent power structure. Indeed, the emergent reality is one in which it is difficult to discern where precisely the Syrian state ends and Iran and its allies begin. Syria’s south west, which was the cradle of the uprising against Assad, is now being transformed into the birthplace of a new Syria, in which Iran and its allies form a vital and inseparable component.

Deraa and Quneitra Provinces were among the first areas of Syria to break free of regime control. The demonstrations that launched the Syrian uprising began in Deraa city in mid-March, 2011. By the end of the year, the regime had lost control of the greater part of both provinces. In the subsequent six years, a flourishing post-regime reality came into being. International NGOs began to operate projects in the areas. A provisional local authority functioned. Unlike in northern Syria, militias aligned with Salafi or Muslim Brotherhood style political Islam did not swallow up all other elements. Rather, groups aligned with these streams existed alongside other less ideological formations.

Foreign governments also became involved. Israel, determined to prevent the arrival of Iran and its proxy militias to the border with the Golan Heights, developed relations with a number of non-jihadi local rebel groups, and assisted their control of the border area. Such organizations as Fursan al Jolan, and Ahrar al Nawa, among others, benefitted from the Israeli connection. Further east, western governments including the US and the UK offered assistance to the opposition in Deraa Province. Through such projects as the ‘Free Syrian Police’ force, the west sought to aid the development of rudimentary civil society

**IN SYRIA, IRAN PLAYS KEY ROLE IN EMERGING POWER
STRUCTURE AMID ONGOING RUSSIA-ISRAEL CRISIS**

isranet-publications

Isranet Daily Briefing, December 6, 2018

**[https://www.isranet.org/daily-briefing/in-syria-iran-plays-key-r
ole-in-emerging-power-structure-amid-ongoing-russia-israel-](https://www.isranet.org/daily-briefing/in-syria-iran-plays-key-role-in-emerging-power-structure-amid-ongoing-russia-israel-crisis/)**

crisis/

structures to replace those of the Assad regime.

All this came abruptly to an end in the course of summer, 2018. In June, the regime, having finished off the rebellion in Eastern Ghouta close to Damascus, turned its attentions to the south west. A massive aerial and ground assault began. The rebels collapsed with unexpected speed. By July, it was over. Once the regime had captured key strategic areas, rebel groups were forced to choose between a bloody last stand or a negotiated surrender. They chose the latter. Thousands then opted to board buses for rebel-controlled Idlib in the north west. Those who wishes to stay were given a six month period from August to visit a government controlled center and 'normalize their status' with the authorities. The implicit suggestion was that if this was done, they would face no further retribution.

This assumption now appears to have been misplaced. According to residents of the area interviewed by the Syria Direct website, a wave of arrests and disappearances of former rebel commanders and opposition activists is now taking place. On November 7, the body of Ghanim al-Jamous, former head of the Free Syrian Police in the town of Da'el, was found by a roadside on the outskirts of the town. Officers belonging to Assad's feared Air Force Intelligence prevented bystanders from approaching the body. Jamous is one of 23 former rebel commanders and opposition activists to have been detained or disappeared by the regime organs in recent weeks. Many more young Syrian residents of the area with less clear links to the opposition have also been detained.

Among others affected by the regime crackdown are individuals formerly directly linked to Israel. On September 7, Ayham al-Juhmani, former commander of the Ahrar Nawa group in the town of Nawa in Quneitra province was detained by regime forces. He has not been heard of since. Ahrar Nawa was among the groups to have cooperated most closely with Israel. Juhmani himself spent some time in a hospital in Israel during the civil war, undergoing treatment for wounds received in combat...

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[Contents](#)

**IN SYRIA, IRAN PLAYS KEY ROLE IN EMERGING POWER
STRUCTURE AMID ONGOING RUSSIA-ISRAEL CRISIS**

isranet-publications

Isranet Daily Briefing, December 6, 2018

<https://www.isranet.org/daily-briefing/in-syria-iran-plays-key-role-in-emerging-power-structure-amid-ongoing-russia-israel-crisis/>

THE RUSSIAN-ISRAELI CRISIS OVER SYRIA LACKS AN EXIT STRATEGY

Yaakov Lappin

[BESA](#), Dec. 5, 2018

The crisis in Russian-Israeli relations that followed the downing of a Russian aircraft in September lacks an exit strategy, and has resulted in significantly higher tensions in the Syrian arena. Russia is seeking to pressure Israel into rolling back its air strikes in Syria, fearing that they will jeopardize the stability of the Assad regime. Moscow has waged a three-year air campaign in support of the brutal Alawite Assad regime in Damascus, and in support of the regime's Iranian-led Shiite allies.

The Russians were able to project their power into the heart of the Middle East, secure a naval port, an airbase, and a center of regional influence, while challenging America's regional role. But the ongoing Israeli-Iranian conflict on Syrian soil could place those gains at risk by dragging the Syrian regime into the conflict. This means Russian and Israeli interests have begun to collide.

PM Netanyahu has made it clear that Israel will not permit Iran to set up attack bases on Syrian soil, despite Russia's new posture against Israel's 'War Between the Wars' campaign in Syria. A series of signals over recent weeks indicate that Jerusalem and Moscow have been unable to defuse the crisis, after Russia placed responsibility for the deadly September 17 plane downing incident on Israel.

Since the loss of the intelligence-gathering aircraft, Russia has rebuffed a succession of Israeli attempts to patch up relations, including the sending of a high-profile Israeli military delegation to Moscow on September 20, led by Air Force Chief Maj.-Gen. Amikam Norkin, to brief Russian air force officials on what occurred. Israel expressed sorrow for the deaths of the 15 Russian aircrew members, and explained that IAF jets had struck Iranian components for the manufacture of precision-guided missiles.

The Iranian weapons were stored at a Syrian Armed Forces facility in Latakia, on the Syrian coastline, 25 km north of Russia's Khmeimim Airbase, and were destined for Hezbollah in Lebanon. This appeared to have been an Iranian bid to use Russia

**IN SYRIA, IRAN PLAYS KEY ROLE IN EMERGING POWER
STRUCTURE AMID ONGOING RUSSIA-ISRAEL CRISIS**

isranet-publications

Isranet Daily Briefing, December 6, 2018

<https://www.isranet.org/daily-briefing/in-syria-iran-plays-key-role-in-emerging-power-structure-amid-ongoing-russia-israel-crisis/>

as a cover to proliferate arms. The gamble by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards—Corps (IRGC) was that Israel would not strike in this sensitive area. That assumption was proven false. Syria's anti-aircraft systems then released a volley of inaccurate fire, hitting the Russian plane, when Israel's jets were already approaching their bases for landing, according to Israel. Yet these explanations were rejected by Russia.

On October 8, media reports emerged saying that Netanyahu had been forced to cancel a planned meeting with President Putin in Paris. Still, they managed to meet on the sidelines of a WWI memorial event in the latest attempt to deal with the crisis. Other media reports said in recent weeks that former Defense Minister Lieberman had been unable to reestablish a communications channel with his Russian counterpart, Sergey Shoigu, who had released belligerent statements in Israel's direction in the aftermath of the plane incident. Lieberman and Shoigu had previously had a good channel for dialogue.

Russia translated its new policy in Syria into action by transferring four S-300 surface-to-air batteries to the Assad regime. Syrian air defense crews are now believed to be undergoing training to learn how to use the systems, which can detect and track air traffic - including civilian traffic - deep inside Israel. Moscow has, in recent weeks, stepped up its criticism of Israeli air strikes against Iranian targets in Syria. FM Sergey Lavrov claimed on November 5 that the attacks will not improve Israel's security situation, and criticized what he described as inadequate Israeli coordination efforts with Russian forces.

These steps amount to a new Russian policy of applying high pressure on Jerusalem to scale back its air strikes. Nevertheless, international media outlets have carried reports of continued Israeli strikes on threatening Iranian activities in Syria, meaning Russia's campaign has so far not achieved its goals.

It also remains unclear whether Russia is willing or able to apply effective pressure on Iran to scale back its military infrastructure construction in Syria, which can later be used to attack Israel. Until Iran stops trying to build a war machine in Syria, Israel will not be responsive to attempts to limit its preemptive campaign.

The outlook for the Syrian arena is therefore troubling. It is safe to assume that the Israel Air Force can overcome the S-300 systems, including through the use of the new Israeli stealth F-35 aircraft. These jets were specifically designed to penetrate and deal with advanced Russian-made air defenses. However, the apparent

**IN SYRIA, IRAN PLAYS KEY ROLE IN EMERGING POWER
STRUCTURE AMID ONGOING RUSSIA-ISRAEL CRISIS**

isranet-publications

Isranet Daily Briefing, December 6, 2018

[https://www.isranet.org/daily-briefing/in-syria-iran-plays-key-
ole-in-emerging-power-structure-amid-ongoing-russia-israel-](https://www.isranet.org/daily-briefing/in-syria-iran-plays-key-role-in-emerging-power-structure-amid-ongoing-russia-israel-crisis/)

[crisis/](https://www.isranet.org/daily-briefing/in-syria-iran-plays-key-role-in-emerging-power-structure-amid-ongoing-russia-israel-crisis/)

disconnect between the Israeli and Russian leaderships means an important part of the bilateral coordination mechanism for preventing mishaps in Syrian skies has been damaged...

[To Read the Full Article Click the Following [Link](#)—Ed.]

[Contents](#)

IN THE MIDDLE EAST, RUSSIA IS BACK

Liz Sly

[Washington Post](#), Dec. 5, 2018

Among the presidents, prime ministers, kings and princes who have visited Moscow over the past year to meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin are some of the United States' closest allies, who once might have been expected to devote their travel time to Washington. There's a new power rising in the Middle East, and it needs to be wooed.

Three decades after the Soviet Union collapsed and the United States emerged as the undisputed superpower in the Middle East and North Africa, a resurgent Russia is back. Under the personal direction of Putin, Russia is stepping into the vacuum left by the disengagement of the Obama administration and the unpredictability of the Trump one to challenge the United States' dominant role in the region.

Russian oilmen, arms dealers and financiers have been fanning out across the region, striking billions of dollars' worth of deals, reviving old relationships and forging new ones from Libya to the Persian Gulf. At the center of it all is Putin, whose strongman image resonates with the region's authoritarian rulers at a time when doubts are growing about Washington's commitment to the Middle East.

Russia's 2015 military intervention in Syria has given Putin perhaps the single biggest boost, burnishing his credentials as a decisive and effective leader who delivers what he set out to achieve: the survival of President Bashar al-Assad. It also positioned Putin at the nexus of the Middle East's overlapping conflicts, leveraging Russia's influence far beyond Syria's borders to include all the countries

**IN SYRIA, IRAN PLAYS KEY ROLE IN EMERGING POWER
STRUCTURE AMID ONGOING RUSSIA-ISRAEL CRISIS**

isranet-publications

Isranet Daily Briefing, December 6, 2018

**[https://www.isranet.org/daily-briefing/in-syria-iran-plays-key-r
ole-in-emerging-power-structure-amid-ongoing-russia-israel-](https://www.isranet.org/daily-briefing/in-syria-iran-plays-key-role-in-emerging-power-structure-amid-ongoing-russia-israel-crisis/)**

[crisis/](https://www.isranet.org/daily-briefing/in-syria-iran-plays-key-role-in-emerging-power-structure-amid-ongoing-russia-israel-crisis/)

with a stake in the outcome of the war — foes such as Israel and Iran, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, Syria and Turkey. As a result, he has frequently been on the phone with U.S. allies such as Turkey and Israel — nearly three dozen times with the leaders of those two countries just in the past year.

Apart from Syria, Russia has shown little inclination to wade into most of the region's myriad conflicts, such as the Yemen war, the Arab-Israeli peace process and the dispute between Qatar and its neighbors. But Putin has welcomed anyone who wants to visit, making Moscow a must-stop destination for leaders with a problem to solve. "Putin is effectively working as the psychoanalyst of the region," said Malik Dahlan, a Saudi who is a professor of international law and public policy at Queen Mary University of London. "The Russians are happy to hear all sides, and anyone who wants to speak, they're happy to listen."

The U.S.-allied leaders who have traveled to Moscow this year include Saudi Arabia's King Salman, who gave President Trump a lavish welcome in Riyadh last year but then chose Moscow over Washington for his first and so far only official overseas visit — the first visit ever by a Saudi monarch to Russia. The emir of Qatar unexpectedly flew to Moscow to meet with Putin on the eve of his visit to Washington in April, earning a rebuke from the Trump administration. The crown prince of Abu Dhabi, a close U.S. ally, declined an invitation to Washington this spring, diplomats say. But he traveled to Moscow in June, his seventh trip in five years, signing a "strategic partnership" agreement with Putin. Most recently, Egyptian President Abdel Fatah al-Sissi in October made his fourth visit to Moscow — compared with one to Washington — and also signed a strategic-partnership agreement with Putin in the Russian resort town of Sochi, marking a significant shift of a U.S. ally toward Russia.

The meetings are providing Putin with new levers of influence just when the United States is drawing down forces in the Middle East, in part to counter Russian and Chinese expansion elsewhere. His hearty greeting at the Group of 20 summit in Argentina with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman illustrated the personal rapport Putin is establishing with regional leaders. Those visits are also translating at times into substantive policy. An agreement between Russia and Saudi Arabia to cut oil production, resulting from King Salman's Moscow visit last year, has given Russia new weight in world energy markets. The joint announcement Monday that the two countries would further cut production reflects an emerging partnership that has the potential to rival the clout of the Organization of the Petroleum

**IN SYRIA, IRAN PLAYS KEY ROLE IN EMERGING POWER
STRUCTURE AMID ONGOING RUSSIA-ISRAEL CRISIS**

isranet-publications

Isranet Daily Briefing, December 6, 2018

**[https://www.isranet.org/daily-briefing/in-syria-iran-plays-key-r
ole-in-emerging-power-structure-amid-ongoing-russia-israel-](https://www.isranet.org/daily-briefing/in-syria-iran-plays-key-role-in-emerging-power-structure-amid-ongoing-russia-israel-crisis/)**

[crisis/](https://www.isranet.org/daily-briefing/in-syria-iran-plays-key-role-in-emerging-power-structure-amid-ongoing-russia-israel-crisis/)

Exporting Countries. _____

When not hosting visitors, Putin is often on the telephone, usually sorting out problems relating to Syria but, in the process, cultivating close relationships with some of the United States' dearest friends. Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who called Trump a "true friend" of Israel, has spoken 11 times on the phone with Putin over the past year and only three times with Trump, according to a tally of the calls reported on Putin's and Netanyahu's websites. Netanyahu has visited Moscow four times in the past year. He has visited Washington twice since Trump became president. It's unclear whether Putin and Netanyahu's rapport will survive building tensions between Israel and Iran in Syria and also Lebanon, where the Iranian-backed Hezbollah militia has expanded its influence. They have spoken only once since the downing of a Russian plane in Syria in September, which Moscow blamed on Israel. But phone calls between Putin and Netanyahu at the time played a part in tamping down the worst of the animosity, diplomats say.

Turkey, a longtime U.S. ally and NATO partner with a centuries-old history of rivalry with Russia, has been drifting deeper into Moscow's orbit of influence as their cooperation in Syria expands and relations with the United States have become strained. According to a count of their interactions, Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in the past year has spoken 20 times on the phone with Putin and seven times with Trump. Erdogan's decision to purchase Russia's advanced S-400 missile system, which Moscow says will be delivered next year, offers one example of how their burgeoning relationship could challenge the cohesion of NATO...

[To Read the Full Article Click the Following [Link](#)—Ed.]

[Contents](#)

THE PALESTINIANS NO ONE TALKS ABOUT

Bassam Tawil

[Gatestone Institute](#), Nov. 27, 2018

Here's some "good" news: In October, only five Palestinians living in Syria were

**IN SYRIA, IRAN PLAYS KEY ROLE IN EMERGING POWER
STRUCTURE AMID ONGOING RUSSIA-ISRAEL CRISIS**

isranet-publications

Isranet Daily Briefing, December 6, 2018

**[https://www.isranet.org/daily-briefing/in-syria-iran-plays-key-
ole-in-emerging-power-structure-amid-ongoing-russia-israel-](https://www.isranet.org/daily-briefing/in-syria-iran-plays-key-role-in-emerging-power-structure-amid-ongoing-russia-israel-crisis/)**

crisis/

pronounced dead. The London-based Action Group for Palestinians of Syria reports that in October 2017, 12 Palestinians were killed due to war-related incidents in that country. "The list of victims who died in October 2018 includes four Palestinians who were pronounced dead in Teloul Al-Safa, in Al-Sweida desert, south of Syria, and one Palestinian in Damascus," the group said.

According to the human rights watchdog that monitors the situation of Palestinians in Syria, the number of Palestinians killed in Syria since the beginning of the civil war there in 2011 now stands at 3,903. Another 1,712 Palestinians in that country have been arrested by the Syrian authorities, and 316 are listed as missing. The latest victim was identified as Ahmed Abdullah Balbisi who, according to the human rights group, died of torture in a Syrian prison eight years after his incarceration. The group said that Balbisi was arrested then for participating in peaceful demonstrations organized by the Syrian opposition. Balbisi is the latest victim added to the 3,903 Palestinians killed in Syria during the past seven years. His death was reported by the group on November 22.

A day earlier, the human rights group reported that two other Palestinians, Mohammed Khalil al-Kurdi and Wael Abu Hamdeh, died due to lack of proper medical treatment. On November 19, reports surfaced that a third, Mohammed Ahmed Farhat, was killed during an exchange of gunfire between the Syrian army and the Islamic State (ISIS) terrorist group. Last week, reports noted that a Palestinian man, Nael Abd Al-Raheem, was kidnapped and killed by ISIS in Aleppo's northeastern city of Al-Bab.

These stories concerning the atrocities committed against Palestinians in an Arab country do not come as a surprise. It is not as if anyone expected the Syrian regime or the opposition forces there to act differently. What is disturbing, however, is the attitude of the international media and community to the plight of the Palestinians in Syria in particular and the Arab world in general.

There are dozens of foreign Middle East correspondents in the Middle East, and many are based in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. These correspondents feel safe living and working out of Israel. They prefer to live and work in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv rather than in Ramallah, the Gaza Strip, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt and other Arab countries. Why? Because Israel is the only place these correspondents feel safe. A trip to Syria might result in being beheaded by Muslim terrorists. A trip to Iraq might result in being kidnapped by Muslim terrorists. A trip to Egypt or to

**IN SYRIA, IRAN PLAYS KEY ROLE IN EMERGING POWER
STRUCTURE AMID ONGOING RUSSIA-ISRAEL CRISIS**

isranet-publications

Isranet Daily Briefing, December 6, 2018

[https://www.isranet.org/daily-briefing/in-syria-iran-plays-key-r
ole-in-emerging-power-structure-amid-ongoing-russia-israel-](https://www.isranet.org/daily-briefing/in-syria-iran-plays-key-role-in-emerging-power-structure-amid-ongoing-russia-israel-crisis/)

[crisis/](https://www.isranet.org/daily-briefing/in-syria-iran-plays-key-role-in-emerging-power-structure-amid-ongoing-russia-israel-crisis/)

~~Jordan might result in being harassed by the authorities or anti-Western Muslim — extremists.~~

Perhaps this disparity helps to explain why the international community does not read about human rights violations in Arab and Islamic countries. There is, however, another reason, not related to the journalists' safety. The international community are not interested in what the Arabs and Muslims are doing to the Palestinians because the Western journalists are hell-bent on covering only stories that reflect negatively on Israel. Palestinian rioters killed by the Israel Defense Forces on the Israel-Gaza border attract the attention of scores of Western journalists and media outlets. By contrast, Palestinians tortured to death and otherwise killed in Syria receive zero coverage in Western media organizations.

The 3,903 Palestinians killed in Syria in the past seven years are of no interest to the Western correspondents or their editors. As far as these journalists are concerned, the reports of the human rights organization monitoring the condition of Palestinians in Syria are rubbish fit for the wastebasket. Unlike those living in the Arab countries, the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip are fortunate. Thanks to the Western media's continued obsession with Israel, the international community is aware of them...

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[Contents](#)

[On Topic Links](#)

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[Hundreds of Bodies Recovered From ISIS Mass Graves in Syria: New York Post,](#)

**IN SYRIA, IRAN PLAYS KEY ROLE IN EMERGING POWER
STRUCTURE AMID ONGOING RUSSIA-ISRAEL CRISIS**

isranet-publications

Isranet Daily Briefing, December 6, 2018

**[https://www.isranet.org/daily-briefing/in-syria-iran-plays-key-r
ole-in-emerging-power-structure-amid-ongoing-russia-israel-](https://www.isranet.org/daily-briefing/in-syria-iran-plays-key-role-in-emerging-power-structure-amid-ongoing-russia-israel-crisis/)**

[crisis/](https://www.isranet.org/daily-briefing/in-syria-iran-plays-key-role-in-emerging-power-structure-amid-ongoing-russia-israel-crisis/)

Nov. 27, 2018—Syrian workers have exhumed more than 500 bodies from one of the largest mass graves near the northern city of Raqqa, once the capital of the Islamic State group’s self-styled caliphate, and are still uncovering remains, a local official said Tuesday.

[While Confronting Iran in Syria, Israel May Have to Defy Russia](#): Charles Bybelezer, *Media Line*, Dec. 4, 2018—Russia has completed an elaborate air defense system in Syria that curbs the operational capabilities of both the United States and Israel, according to a report by the Washington- based Institute for the Study of War. The deployments throughout the conflict-ravaged country include variations of the advanced S-300 and S-400 systems in addition to other cutting-edge technologies.

[Expect Russia to Escalate Soon in Syria](#): Tom Rogan, *Washington Examiner*, Dec. 3, 2018—It often flies under the radar - until it flies into the Russian GRU’s face - but the U.S. military presence in Syria is a constant aggravation for Russian President Vladimir Putin’s government.