


# Chapter 12

## Russian and Israeli Strategies in Syria Pre- /Post-Assad's Fall

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The Syrian war, which began in 2011, demonstrates how governments, as rational institutions, may deviate from established norms and principles in response to shifting geopolitical rivalries. Initially, Syria relied on its traditional ally, Iran, to counter its adversaries, however, as the conflict dragged on, Syria sought Russian military intervention, which further complicated the regional power dynamics. This study applies game theory to analyze the strategic objectives of Russia and Israel within this context, with a particular focus on Russia's dual strategy aimed at achieving a win-win outcome with both Iran and Israel. The collapse of the Assad regime in December 2024 marked a pivotal moment that reshaped the strategic calculus of all involved actors and raised new questions about Syria's future and the broader regional dynamics. The findings reveal that while Russia's approach appeased Israel, its ambiguous stance toward Iran generated significant tension.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Following the September 11, 2001 attacks and their aftermath, the Middle East entered a period of growing instability, a condition that was further exacerbated after 2011 with the dramatic shifts in the regional balance of power. Since the onset of the Syrian war in 2011, various fronts have repeatedly formed and dissolved (Alibabalu et al., 2020). Israel emerged as a particularly enigmatic actor, participating in the conflict primarily through covert means, in contrast to others that openly declared their involvement. Equally significant is Russia's complex role in this conflict. Moscow has maintained a delicate equilibrium between supporting Assad's allies and coordinating militarily with Israel, employing mechanisms such as deconfliction hotlines and diplomatic protocols to prevent direct confrontation between the parties (Magid, 2022; Divsallar, 2019). This raises a set of critical questions: How has Russia managed to avert direct clashes between its allies and Israel? What structural and strategic constraints has Russia encountered in its dealings with Israel? And how has Israel engaged its adversaries in a prolonged war of attrition?

The collapse of the Assad regime constituted a strategic rupture in the Syrian conflict, simultaneously reshaping the regional balance of power, reinforcing Israel's position, and recalibrating the strategic calculations of key actors. This development not only dismantled the entrenched foothold of Russia and Iran in Syria but also produced a profound power vacuum that immediately drew competing ambitions. For Moscow, Assad's overthrow signified a major geopolitical reversal, eroding its military and diplomatic investments while compelling a reassessment of its regional posture. Israel, though initially ambivalent toward Assad's rule, became increasingly apprehensive about a fragmented post-Assad order that could consolidate Iranian entrenchment or empower Turkish-aligned forces. Within this volatile context, a new strategic game emerged in which intensifying rivalries, shifting coalitions, and the necessity for all actors to redefine their policies unfolded under conditions of heightened uncertainty.

From a theoretical standpoint, game theory provides a valuable framework for interpreting these dynamics, as it underscores how Russia and Israel, operating under conditions of uncertainty and interdependence, pursue the maximization of interests while mitigating risks through deterrence, signaling, and selective cooperation. Particularly during and after Assad's fall, Russian-Israeli interactions may be conceived as strategic maneuvers within an iterative game, wherein each actor continuously recalibrates its policies to avert escalation while safeguarding long-term gains. This perspective highlights that their choices are not isolated acts, but interdependent strategies conditioned by anticipations of the other side's behavior.

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