

# ANALYSIS: As Bolton and Netanyahu Discuss Syria, Iran Prepares for War Against Israel



President Donald Trump's national security adviser John Bolton was in Jerusalem for a three-day-visit this week.

The discussions between Prime Minister Netanyahu and Bolton mainly focused on Syria and on Iran's entrenchment in the war-torn country.

Bolton revealed that Russia's president Vladimir Putin had told president Trump he would be content if Iranian regular and irregular forces would be withdrawn from Syria but that he was not able "to do it himself."

Trump's envoy suggested the U.S. would work together with the Russian military to achieve the goal of a complete Iranian withdrawal from Syria and said he would bring up the issue with his Russian counterpart Nikolai Patrushev during a meeting in Geneva on Wednesday.

"So the point was that perhaps joint US-Russian efforts might be sufficient. Now I don't know if that is right either, but it is certainly one of the subjects I will be talking about with my Russian counterpart in Geneva tomorrow," said during a press conference in Jerusalem on Tuesday.

Bolton made clear that after the defeat of ISIS in Syria eliminating Iran's presence in Syria was now the cornerstone of Trump's Middle East policy.

The US military has thousands of Special Forces in areas controlled by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces in northeastern Syria and in the al-Tanf area in the vicinity of the Iraqi border in the eastern Syrian desert.

Those territories make up 30 percent of Syria's landmass and the fact that the Iranian-backed pro-Assad coalition hasn't tried to 'liberate' those areas up till now is due to the American presence there.

Maintaining control over the Kurdish canton's in north and north east Syria as well as keeping a foothold in eastern Syria is vital for the new US strategy for Syria and important for Israel which is very concerned about the Iranian activities in Syria.

At the beginning of August Iran finalized the creation of a land bridge which stretches from the Iranian border in the Nineve province, Iraq, via Syria all the way up to the Israeli border on the Golan Heights.

This happened after the pro-Assad coalition finished off the last pockets of mainly Islamist resistance along the Jordanian and Israeli border in southern Syria.

"Hezbollah and other Iranian-backed Shiite militias reportedly played a key role in re-capturing the region along the border despite Russian assurances they would be kept away from the Israeli border and denials by the Assad regime the Iranian trained and funded forces were taking part in the battle," we reported at the time.

This was later confirmed by Orit Perlov of the Institute for National Security Studies who wrote in a recent research paper how the Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps has transformed the Syrian military and is calling the shots in every major battle against rebels.

"Iran, not Russia, is the dominant actor in Syria," Perlov wrote, while adding that the Islamic Republic "controls the Syria- Iraq and Syria-Lebanon border crossings, and tailors the re-organization of areas and communities based on an ethnic element."

Iran has built the Syrian National Defense Forces which today have 90,000 Shiite and Alawite fighters at their disposal.

Qassem Soleimani, the shrewd commander of the IRGC's Quds Force who is in charge with expanding the Islamic revolution in the Middle East also brought Shiite militias from Pakistan, Iraq and Afghanistan into the Syrian fray while the Quds Force has approximately 5,000 fighters in Syria.

Perlov reported that Shiite militias in Syria - among them Hezbollah - simply changed uniforms after the Russians, Americans and Israel demanded they would stay out of the fighting along the Israeli border.

The INSS researcher thinks Israel currently prefers to ignore the Iranian built-up along its northern border and instead focuses on the prevention of "the consolidation of substantial Iranian military capabilities in Syria."

Bolton addressed the Israel military activity against Iran in Syria during the press conference in Jerusalem.

The Israeli air force acted "everytime Iran has brought missiles or other threatening weapons into Syria," Bolton said while adding he saw those strikes as "a legitimate act of self-defense."

After the return of Assad's forces to the area along the Israeli border became a fact Israel appears to have changed its strategy in Syria and is now apparently targeting commanders who are working with Soleimani on preparations for a future war against the Jewish state.

On August 18, the head of Ahmad Issa Habib, a high ranking Syrian officer who was in charge of Assad's 'Palestine Department' was assassinated in his car while driving in the Hama region in northwest Syria.

Unnamed Syrian sources told Israel's army radio 'Galatz' Habib was Assad's point man for the struggle against Israel.

Habib's assassination came two weeks after the Mossad reportedly killed Syria's top missile scientist Aziz Asbar who died when a bomb in his car exploded.

Asbar had "free access to the highest levels of the Syrian and Iranian governments, and his own security detail. He led a top-secret weapons-development unit called Sector 4 and was hard at work building an underground weapons factory," Ronen Bergman one of Israel's top investigative reporters wrote in the *New York Times* on August 6.

Iran, meanwhile, threatened to attack Israel again whenever the Trump Administration decides to embark on a military campaign against the Islamic Republic and continues building up forces which have to consolidate its foothold in both Iraq and Syria.

The Iranian-found Hashd al-Shaabi umbrella organization of predominantly Shiite militias in Iraq has now seized the west of the Anbar province in Iraq which borders on Syria and the main routes to Syria while purging the area of anti-

Iranian elements.

The new Hash al-Shaabi operation in Iraq is overseen by Suleimani who last week vowed Iran would crush the United States and was responsible for the founding of a new Syrian force dubbed the “Golan Liberation Brigade”.

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