

Can Israel Really Trust Russia to Remove Iranian Forces From Syria?

Fate of Iran's presence in Syria rests with Trump-Putin meeting ■ Israeli official to EU counterparts: Iran nuke deal is dead, and you insist on giving it Advil.



Iran's Army Chief of Staff Maj. Gen. Mohammad Bagheri and other senior officers on the front line in the northern province of Aleppo, Syria, October 2017/AP

- Israel fires at second drone approaching from Syria this week
- Russia-Israel deal is clear: Iran away from border, Assad's rule accepted
- Trump at NATO summit: Iran is in pain, they will call me and ask for a deal
- If Moscow's 'deal of the century' for Iran works, both Damascus and Jerusalem will smile

U.S. News and World Report this week ranked Israel as the world's eighth most powerful nation. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu made sure to mention this to Likud lawmakers at a party meeting. He also pointed out, rightly, that all the countries ranked ahead of Israel have much larger populations.

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But strong as it may be, Israel is still just another player on the international playing field – and the Middle East is far from the most important region on the world map at the moment. Strategic developments depend on relations between the world powers that Israel trailed in the rankings: The trade war declared by the Trump administration on China, and U.S. relations with Russia, which will be put to an important test at the Trump-Putin summit in Helsinki on Monday.

The critical arena in Netanyahu's mind remains, as always, the fight against Iran.

This battle expanded in the past year from efforts to halt Tehran's nuclear project to a direct clash with Iranian forces in Syria, with the aim of reducing their presence and influence there.

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But even with regard to Iran and Syria, Israel must take broader processes into account. Russia is currently pressing for the completion of the de-escalation plan in Syria. Netanyahu may have influenced its design during his meeting with Putin in Moscow on Wednesday. But what comes next depends on what happens when Putin exerts his nearly magical – perhaps blackmail is part of it? – influence on President Donald Trump.

Putin appears to be seeking a wider deal that, in addition to Syria, would include new understandings in Eastern Europe.

One point being raised by the Russians is their expectation that the West lift the sanctions it imposed following Russian involvement in the fighting in eastern Ukraine in 2014.

The Russian plan in Syria is clear: President Bashar Assad will get full control of most parts of the country, including the Syrian Golan Heights to which his forces will soon return, and Israel will pledge not to interfere. In return, Moscow promises to block Iranian forces and Shi'ite militias' proximity from the Golan Heights border: Various distances – 40, 60, even 80 kilometers (25, 37 and 50 miles, respectively) – have been mentioned. Netanyahu believes the Russians will keep their word. In a briefing with Israeli journalists in Moscow on Wednesday, he spoke of the process as if it were already underway.

The Israel Defense Forces has also been sounding cautiously optimistic. Distancing the Iranians from the border is seen as being a Russian interest – the war is about to end and Iran has exhausted the benefit it can bring to the Kremlin. Putin is not looking for partners with whom to share the dividends of success. Assad would also probably like to wriggle a little freer of the Iranian embrace.

This forecast minimizes the potential difficulties. Even in an international climate where keeping one's word is far from the norm, Moscow stands out for its cynicism, and Putin and his spokespeople have been lying for years without

batting an eyelid.

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Israel won't be able to easily rely on Russian insistence that the understandings are being upheld. Their enforcement will be especially complicated in the densely populated Damascus region - which is within the range Israel wants the Iranians to be kept out of. Already, there are signs that members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and Shi'ite militia fighters are shedding their uniforms to mix in with Syrian Army units in the battles taking place in the south.

Above all, even after the series of blows inflicted upon it in Syria, Iran has not relented in its drive for military entrenchment there. Per several of the attacks that have been attributed to Israel by foreign media in the past month - first at Abu Kamal in eastern Syria and then at the T4 airbase near the central Syrian city of Homs - Iran is once again trying to deploy advanced weapons systems in Syria, and Israel is again seemingly taking measures against this.

Most of the attempts to smuggle in weapons systems is done by air. However, the airstrike on the weapons convoy in eastern Syria shows that the Iranians are also often trying to make use of the ground corridor they established after the Americans rid the area of Islamic State forces. If the Russians don't keep their word, the airstrikes will likely continue.

It's interesting that since the exchange of blows on February 10 (in which an Iranian drone penetrated Israeli territory and an Israeli F-16 was shot down), no more condemnations have been heard from Moscow. Only a tiny fraction of the measures taken by Israel is made known to the Israeli public and the foreign media. One could cautiously venture that the amount of munitions dropped by the air force in unpublicized missions over the past several years is not far from the amount of munitions it used in Gaza in the summer war of 2014.

For the most part, this effort has proceeded without mishaps or complications. And this is the source of the Israeli satisfaction with the operative results: The Iranian penetration into Syria is limited and Hezbollah has so far not been able to achieve its objective of significantly improving the precision of its rockets in Lebanon.

In the longer term, as Netanyahu told Putin at their meeting, Israel still wants to see all the Iranian advisers and Shi'ite fighters entirely removed from Syria – since even weapons systems deployed 100 or 200 kilometers from Israel's border with Syria endanger Israel's security.

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Israel is not making a similar claim against Hezbollah's weapons arsenal – some of which is stored in southern Lebanon, in violation of UN Resolution 1701 – because it understands that this would be an impossible demand. But in fact, almost 12 years to the day after the outbreak of the Second Lebanon War, the top security risk is found in Lebanon, not Syria, where the Iranians are in a clearly inferior position from a security standpoint.

Iran is also engaged in a holding action on its other front. Right now, things appear to be going badly for its nuclear program. A senior Israeli official who recently met with visiting European Union representatives told them that European efforts to keep the nuclear accord with Iran alive following the Americans' withdrawal from it in May are doomed.

"There's a corpse in the room, the Vienna agreement, and you want to give it Advil and persist in believing it will come back to life," the Israeli said. The visitors pointed out that the European partners to the agreement – Great Britain, France and Germany – have all decided to stick to its framework. Their host argued that the market will dictate the outcome and the major corporations are already voting with their feet and fleeing Iran, for fear of being subjected to U.S. sanctions.

Israeli defense officials are reacting positively to the 12-point paper issued by U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, outlining the administration's policy against Iran. The shift in American strategy is also reflected in the understandings in Washington regarding Syria. In previous years, the Obama administration and then the Trump administration concentrated their efforts in Syria and Iraq on fighting ISIS and various Al-Qaida affiliates. This effort enabled the Assad regime and the Russians to free up forces and aircraft to attack the less extreme rebel groups, and later to step into part of the vacuum left behind when ISIS fled Syria.

Now the Americans are attempting to take a more balanced approach and to increase coordination with Israel.

Pompeo, who visited the United Arab Emirates on Tuesday, spoke in a television interview of his main objective: forming a regional coalition to counter Tehran. He accused Iran of using its embassies in Europe as terrorism bases, and said an Iranian attempt to plant a bomb at a convention of regime opponents in Paris had been foiled.

The U.S. secretary of state singled out Gen. Qassem Soleimani of the Revolutionary Guards' Quds force. The general is causing trouble in Syria and Iraq, and he and his organization must be made to pay a higher price for it, said Pompeo.

Asked about the possibility that the U.S. and Israeli efforts will ultimately help to bring about regime change in Iran, Israeli defense officials were wary of making any such predictions.

The protests in Iran in recent months are perceived as authentic and of significant magnitude. The complaint that the country is investing money it does not have abroad at the expense of its own citizens (\$12 to 14 billion alone to aid the Assad regime over the last seven years) is increasingly gaining public sympathy in Iran. But intelligence officials stress there is no real way to predict the outcome of a popular rebellion, and note that the Iranian authorities already showed great skill (and brutality) in suppressing the failed Green Movement of 2009.

Israeli politicians appear less skeptical. Netanyahu and Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman have been making direct appeals to the Iranian people in recent weeks via social media, denouncing the Iranian regime. And Energy Minister Yuval Steinitz, speaking at a conference of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs this week, asserted that "the economic pressure on Iran could lead the regime to collapse within a year.



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