

Israeli Demands That Iran Exit Syria Not ‘Realistic,’ Russian Envoy Says



Ronen Zvulun (Reuters)

UN peacekeeping troops look over the border line between Syria and the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s repeated demands that Iranian forces and their allies leave Syria are not “realistic,” Russia’s ambassador to Israel has said.

“The Iranians are playing a very, very important role in our common efforts to eliminate the terrorists in Syria,” Anatoly Viktorov said in English on Israel’s Channel 10 broadcaster on July 30.

“That’s why, for this period of time, we see as nonrealistic demands to expel any foreign troops from the territory of the Syrian Arab Republic,” he said.

Viktorov said the presence of Iran’s military advisers and allied fighters in Syria is “fully legitimate, according to UN principles,” and Russia “cannot force them” to leave the country.

Syria, with help from Russia, Iran, and Tehran's ally, the Lebanese militia Hizballah, has swiftly regained control over large swathes of territory this year after seven years of a civil war that has killed more than 400,000 people.

On July 30, the Syrian Army was reported to be consolidating control of its border with Israel after having ousted a last remnant of the Islamic State extremist group in the area.

Russia, which has friendly relations with both Iran and Israel, recently has sought to play a mediating role between the two sworn enemies.

Both Tel Aviv and Washington have demanded that Iranian fighters leave Syria, and Israel has repeatedly carried out deadly air strikes against Iranian facilities and positions in Syria.

Viktorov told Channel 10 that Russia is "not OK" with such use of "force" by the Israeli government, which has reportedly killed dozens of Iran-allied fighters.

But the diplomat said Russia "cannot persuade Israel how to proceed" in Syria. "It is not up to Russia to give it freedom to do anything or to prohibit anything," he said.

The Israeli air raids have gone largely unimpeded by Russian defense systems deployed in Syria, and Israel set up a hotline with Russia in 2015 to ensure the two countries avoid accidentally clashing in the air over Syria.

While Viktorov's comments are the first to publicly state that Russia will not try to kick Iran out of Syria, last week Israeli officials reported that Russia offered to keep Iranian forces 100 kilometers from Syria's border with the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights during a Jerusalem meeting between Netanyahu and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.

Israel has been on high alert since June 19, when Syrian government forces launched an offensive to retake southern Daraa and Quneitra provinces, next to the occupied Golan Heights.

Israel seized 1,200 square kilometers of the Golan Heights from Syria in the 1967 Six-Day War, in a move never recognized internationally.

With reporting by AFP and Reuters

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