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Israel's Red Lines on Iran's Foothold in Syria

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The United States and Russia have finalized a deal regarding the ceasefire in Syria and the de-escalation zones established in the southern part of the state. Among the understandings between the powers is acceptance of Iranian forces and Iranian-controlled militias (proxies) deployed on the range from the Golan Heights border, where Israel had announced it would not tolerate an Iranian presence. This is the second time in the last six months in which an agreement between the two world powers about the future of southern Syria seems to have been reached behind Israel's back.

On the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit held earlier this month in Vietnam, the United States and Russia announced that with Jordan, they had reached understandings on de-escalation zones in southern Syria for six months, with an option to extend the period. A senior US official explained that the understandings include the decision to allow Iranian troops, Shiite militias, and Hezbollah to be stationed 7-20 kilometers from the Israeli border (7 km from Mount Hermon's slopes toward Damascus; 20 km in the central and southern Golan Heights). The understandings include mapping a 5 kilometer-wide demilitarized buffer zone between the Syrian rebel forces and Iranian forces and Hezbollah. Jordanian Minister of State for Media Affairs Mohammad al-Momani stressed that non-Syrian combatants, including members of Iranian and other Shiite militias fighting on behalf of Bashar al-Assad's regime will not be allowed to operate in southern Syrian and will, at a later stage, be forced to leave the country.

During the previous round of talks between United States and Russia held in Amman in July 2017, Israel worked behind the scenes to keep Iran's forces and proxies at a distance of up to 60 kilometers from the border, and create a buffer zone up to Suwayda in the east and Damascus in the north. That Israeli demand was partially met; talk was of keeping the Iranian forces and proxies 20-30 kilometers away from the Israeli border. In neither round of talks was the issue of Iran's consolidation in Syria – including the establishment of Iranian ground, naval, and aerial bases and infrastructures for the manufacturing and storage of advanced arms –discussed.

Senior Israeli officials expressed their dissatisfaction with the US-Russia understandings on southern Syria. They contend that the agreement was formulated in overly broad terms, and stressed that Israel is opposed to any Iranian military presence in Syria, regardless of location. In addition, Israeli spokespeople warned that although the agreement to some extent improves the previous understandings between Russia and the United States, it still does not provide a solution for Israel's security interests in Syria. Thus, Israel is not bound by it and will continue to maintain the red lines it drew in the past. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu summarized the position as follows: "I have also informed our friends, firstly in Washington and also our friends in Moscow, that Israel will act in Syria, including in southern Syria, according to our understanding and according to our security needs." He underscored that Israel's security policy combines toughness and responsibility.

Russia was quick to respond. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov declared that the agreement does not include a Russian promise of an Iranian or any pro-Iranian forces' withdrawal from Syria and that Iran's presence in Syria is legitimate, as it came in response to an invitation by Syria's official and legitimate regime. The Russian declaration was meant to reassure Iran that Russia is looking out for its ally's interests. Overall, the foundation for Russia's policy is the understanding that Assad's regime is on shaky ground and will not survive without military assistance from Iran, Hezbollah, and Iranian-led militias executing Assad's and Russia's involvement on the ground. From Iran's point of view, Syria's future role is obvious: Assad, or any Alawite leader who will succeed him, will rule Syria only with absolute dependence on Iran. The allies are divided on the identity of the next leader and the structure of the future regime. Iran is fighting to keep Assad in place, while Russia is willing to replace him with an alternative that serves Russian needs better. As for the structure of the regime, Moscow believes that a federation in Syria has the highest chance of success, while Iran is interested in a strong Alawite central government that is directly under its authority.

Russia's Middle East policy is also informed by the desire to enhance relations with other regional states, first and foremost Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, and Israel. Not surprisingly, none of these states are pleased with Lavrov's announcement that Russia has no intention of removing Iranian and Iranian proxies from Syria. Hence from Russia's perspective, the announcement was meant to serve an interest that outweighs its desire to assuage the fears aroused in several Middle East capitals. It may be that Russia is seeking to challenge the United States, using Iran's status in Syria to pressure Washington on other bilateral US-Russian issues. It may also be that Moscow, with its weakness for conspiracy theories, is interpreting the political upheavals in Saudi Arabia and Lebanon as a Washington-plot designed to damage Russia's status in the Middle East.

Unlike Russia and Iran, the United States under Trump has no clear strategy on the current situation in Syria and the future of the country. The major mission in Syria, as defined by President Trump and his predecessor, President Obama, is defeating the Islamic State. That mission is nearly accomplished, but no decision has been made on how to manage the territories liberated from the Islamic State or to whom to hand over control; likewise undecided is when the United States should withdraw its thousands of troops from the liberated areas. Despite the understanding in Washington (clearly reflected in October 2017 Trump's speech on the nuclear agreement with Iran) that Iran is the primary reason for regional instability, there is no defined American plan regarding Iran's presence in Syria. It is hard to believe that the United States would embark on a military escapade for the sake of ousting Iran's troops in Syria given the painful lessons of Iraq and Afghanistan.

While an end to the war and stability in Syria are still a long way off, it seems that Iran will emerge as the biggest winner. The United States and Russia handed Iran control and influence over Syria on a silver platter and at this point have no desire to confront it. Now Iran is busy tightening its long term grip on Syria by building bases and camps for its proxies and infrastructures for the manufacture and storage of advanced weapons. Lately, Iran has even started to call up Syrian, mostly Shiite citizens for a new militia it is building on the Hezbollah model. This force may be integrated into Syrian military forces subordinate to Assad, thereby blurring its identification with Iran, which will be able to preserve and nurture a fighting Shiite stronghold in Syria to be of use especially if, in a future scenario, the arrangement in Syria will include the evacuation of foreign forces. Iran's other purpose is to challenge Israel on the Golan Heights, far from the nuclear sites on home ground, using proxies rather than native Iranian troops.

Israel, which since 2011 made a point of sitting on the fence and not intervening in Syria's affairs, has taken action only when an imminent threat against it emerged. This has resulted in a lack of influence in the current campaign of shaping Syria's future and has left the door open to greater Iranian presence and influence. Only when Israel realized it had been overly passive did it draw red lines that if violated would lead to a military response.

Red lines do not only denote a specific geographical distance from the border but also a combination of physical conditions, advanced qualitative military capabilities, and circumstances of Iranian entrenchment, especially by its proxies, in southern Syria that together represent a threat to Israel requiring military action. Israel has not spelled out the capabilities, ORBAT, essence, or scope of the threat by Iran and/or its proxies that would

generate an attack. The vagueness of unspecified red lines is supposed to provide Israel with a certain amount of flexibility in its response.

Israel has two options. One is to present a clear position on what is included in its red lines, e.g., Iranian infrastructures for manufacturing, assembling, and storing advanced weapons anywhere in Syria, because these mean a clear and real threat to Israel and an Iranian entrenchment in Syria that will be difficult to uproot in the future. The other option is to maintain vagueness and draw red lines in action rather than in words, i.e., using military forces on the basis of threat assessments. In the latter option, Israel does not obligate itself to any course of action and creates a high degree of uncertainty for Iran. On the other hand, the vagueness is liable to encourage Iran to test Israel's limits by taking graduated, incremental steps amounting to a process with potential for an escalation that will be difficult to control.

It seems that the time is coming when Israel, if it wants to stop Iran's influence and consolidation in Syria, will have to become actively engaged in the Syrian quagmire. Israel has the power to destroy the Russian-Iranian "project" in Syria and severely damage the base on which the Assad regime relies. It can flash this card, but should play it only if complications arise or if Iran's tightening grip on Syria is not loosened. Israel must demonstrate determination in its demand to remove Iranian forces and Iran-controlled Shiite militias from the Golan Heights and prevent the establishment of Iranian military infrastructures in Syria that would provide military means to Assad, the Shiite militias, and Hezbollah. These would imply greater potential for escalation in the northern arena and on the Syrian front, and possible spillover to the Lebanese front. The United States, and certainly Russia, will not do the job for Israel. While President Trump would presumably allow Israel to act in any way it sees fit, he will not necessarily provide a safety net in case of unforeseen complications. Therefore, Israel will have to be prepared to act, prepare for escalation, and correctly assess the ramifications of its actions.