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“You Cannot Step into the Same River Twice”:
The Disengagement of Forces Agreement on the Golan of 1974 and
UNDOF of 2018
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The control regained by Assad's army over southern Syria opens a new chapter on the Israel-Golan Heights border. The leaders of Israel and Russia see the 1974 Disengagement of Forces Agreement as the foundation of a future security arrangement. The mission environment of the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF), entrusted with ensuring the agreement's implementation, has utterly changed since it was first formed, and UNDOF must make significant adjustments to its modes of operation, considering the challenges it now faces. The scenario of a confrontation between the standing armies, which the agreement was designed to prevent in the wake of the Yom Kippur War, is replaced with the model of Hezbollah in Lebanon, along with the serious gaps in UNIFIL's response to its characteristics. Israel's policy is also challenged, and its preparedness for the new reality needs to contain proactive political-security involvement in shaping the environment. This includes influencing UNDOF's capabilities and activities for the purpose of making the most of its potential contribution to security at the border, to the humanitarian situation, and to improved communications between Jerusalem and Damascus.

On June 29, 2018, the Security Council passed Resolution 2426 (2018), which extended the mandate of the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force on the Golan Heights (UNDOF) until the end of this year, and called for UNDOF to return to its modes of operation as they were before the civil war in Syria. During his most recent visit to Russia (July 12, 2018), Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu demanded the preservation of the 1974 disengagement agreements, and at the Helsinki Summit (July 16, 2018), Russian President Putin stated that these agreements will provide the foundation for the stabilization efforts on the Golan Heights. Against the backdrop of the expected return of the Assad regime forces to southern Syria and to the Golan border within the scope of a Moscow-sponsored arrangement, a new operating environment is being shaped for UNDOF that differs significantly both from the circumstances of its formation in 1974 and from the reality that developed in its area of operations over the last four years as a result of the war in Syria. The degree of the UN's success in adapting UNDOF's activity

to the current challenges of its mission and in fully exploiting the new opportunities will determine the prospects of UNDOF’s success in particular, and the relevance of peacekeeping forces in Israel’s security environment in general. Potentially, Israel could play a key role in helping UNDOF adapt to the challenges it faces, and thereby promote its own security at the Golan border.

On October 22, 1973, the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 338 to end the fighting of the Yom Kippur War. On May 31, 1974, after about six months of ongoing exchanges of fire concurrent with the talks led by US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, the parties signed the Disengagement of Forces Agreement in Geneva. In tandem, the Security Council passed Resolution 350 to form the UN Disengagement Observer Force on the Golan Heights. According to the agreement between the parties, an Area of Separation (AoS) was defined between the armies in Syrian territory, demarcated on the west with Line A and on the east with Line B. Inside this demilitarized zone, only UNDOF could have a military presence. Areas of Limitation (AoL) were defined on both sides of this zone in equally deep strips: in the 10 km strip from the buffer zone, any army was allowed to hold up to 6,000 troops, 75 tanks, and 36 guns of up to 122 mm; in the 20 km strips, the forces were limited to 450 tanks and 162 guns with maximal ranges of 20 km; in all of the strips up to a depth of 25 km, the sides were prohibited from holding surface-to-air missiles. UNDOF, whose size was capped at 1,200 members, was entrusted with the mission of deploying in the area of separation and supervising the ceasefire and implementation of the agreement by the parties.

For close to forty years, UNDOF’s routine activities included maintaining posts and positions in the buffer zone, as well as observation posts and patrols to supervise the fulfillment of the agreement and reliable communications services between Israel and Syria. During the years of the civil war, and mainly since 2014, the regime in Damascus lost control over the border areas, which fell into the hands of the rebels. Concurrently, UNDOF, which relies on the host country’s protection, lost most of its posts. The majority of UNDOF forces moved to posts and bases on Israeli territory or close to its border, and its monitoring activities deep inside Syrian territory stopped almost entirely. Upon the regime’s return to the northern Golan Heights, and with the support of Israel and Damascus, UNDOF began implementing a phased plan to restore its deployment and activities of the past. In September 2017, it regained Camp Faouar in Syria, which was evacuated and completely looted in 2014. The camp was cleared by military engineers and was manned by a mechanized infantry company from Nepal, which was later joined by additional forces. From this base, the force began carefully resuming infrequent patrols in its environment. The next phases of the plan include a return to additional posts in the buffer zone, but the UN headquarters and the troop contributing countries are understandably giving top priority to force protection and safety over quick resumption of

the mission; consequently, progress in this regard is nearly imperceptible. In the spring, sources in Damascus recommended to UN officials to postpone returning UNDOF to the area, hinting that the regime is planning an offensive there, which is indeed now underway. Therefore, after the regime’s military forces take control over the border areas, presumably conditions will gradually be created for the safe return of UNDOF’s forces to its previous posts in the buffer zone, the re-opening of the Quneitra border crossing between Israel and Syria, and the resumption of its missions “of the old days.”

“You cannot step into the same river twice,” said Heraclites, and the return of UNDOF to the territory and to its mission will take place in an environment that has undergone profound change. The original purpose of the agreement was to distance the standing militaries of the two nation states one from another, and to prevent confrontations in a conventional war of maneuver. This threat, which materialized in 1973 in the Golan and in Sinai, is no longer on today’s agenda. The unique conditions in which the UN force’s foundation were cast no longer exist, and the agreement’s restrictions that were relevant at that time are not commensurate with the current and expected threat environment. A reasonable reference scenario for UNDOF’s future operating environment includes the kind of military activity employed by Hezbollah and monitoring challenges encountered by UNIFIL forces in southern Lebanon since the end of the Second Lebanon War. The nature of the expected environment will pose new challenges to the force and will require it to make significant adjustments to its *modus operandi*. Considering the current political complexities, it is difficult to introduce changes in the Security Council resolution, in the Disengagement of Forces Agreement, or even in the UNDOF mandate. The range of flexibility that is available for this purpose to the UN headquarters, the contributing countries, the UNDOF command, and the parties to the agreement, lies mainly in the force’s Rules of Engagement (RoE) and in the tools that will be made available to it to carry out its mission. Adjustments in these factors are the key to the resilience of the UN force on the Golan Heights during the challenges of adaptation awaiting it.

The first challenge is at the political level, where it is necessary to resolve the differences between the 1974 Disengagement of Forces Agreement and the broad lines of the political-security arrangement that Russia is promoting for its protege regime in Damascus, while taking Israel’s security needs into account. Possible agreements between the leaders of Russia, the United States, and Israel; the United States’ firm style in the United Nations; and the spheres of common interests among most of the players (except Iran and Hezbollah) may enable the security environment in the Golan Heights to be redesigned, while defining UNDOF’s updated, relevant role, and primarily, while refreshing the tools that are available to it.

The second challenge, which is at the core of UNDOF’s mission, relates to supervising the fulfillment of the agreement. Unlike in the past, the UN force will not encounter the standing, monochrome (red) Syrian army of the past, but rather, a “multi-color” spectrum comprising military forces, local and foreign militias, and armed civilians. As noted in the UN report, the prohibition against any military or armed presence in the AoS is violated blatantly today, both by the regime forces and by all of the rebel organizations, which are battling among themselves in the territory. The complete disarmament of the population will take a long time, if it is at all possible, and will affect UNDOF’s safety. The patient entrenchment efforts of Iran and its proxies can be expected to be demonstrated not by tanks and cannon, but rather by the assimilation of foreign forces among the ranks of the Syrian army; by the building of military infrastructure, particularly underground infrastructure, under the guise of civilian rehabilitation (“bomb shelters”) and embedding it in a populated environment; and by intelligence activity and military patrols, under the guise of civilian groups, such as “journalists,” “ornithologists,” “hunters,” “environmental activists,” and “angry civilians.” Shooting incidents, minelaying, and IED attacks from Syria into Israeli territory are also possible. As in Lebanon, the host Syrian army will provide explanations, excuses, and justifications for any UN findings attesting to violations, and will naturally impede UN forces from gaining access to prohibited military targets on the pretexts of maintaining law and order, privacy, or against disruption of the population’s fabric of life and local customs. UNDOF will have a hard time verifying or refuting these allegations by its own means, if the UN continues to refrain from collecting intelligence. At the same time, west of the buffer zone, Israel can be expected to continue to be the butt of criticism about its violations of the agreement, mainly response fire into Syrian territory, the deployment of Iron Dome missile defense systems on the Golan Heights and on Poriyya Heights (overlooking Tiberias), the deployment of prohibited cannon into the AoLs, clashes with forces on the other side of the border, and negligible delays in the opening of gates to UN forces that are crossing the security fence.

The third challenge, which is a precondition for the renewed expansion of UNDOF’s activities, is force security. When UNDOF was formed, its soldiers were allowed to bear personal arms for self-defense, while the Observer Group Golan (OGG) does not bear arms at all. Similar to other peacekeeping forces in the region, it is reasonable to assume that UNDOF will ask to reinforce its force protection abilities, including auxiliary weapons and the armoring of vehicles against IEDs. The Director-General’s last report noted that Damascus opposes UNDOF’s requests to equip itself for self-defense using systems for detecting and warning against high trajectory fire – a request to which Israel agreed. Once the battles on the Golan Heights cease, and given the sponsorship of the regime in Damascus, UNDOF’s security demands will presumably receive an adequate

response, and it will be allowed to return to its posts in the buffer zone and to activities within the scope of its mission.

The fourth challenge relates to communications between the parties to the agreement, because since the termination of the Israel-Syria Armistice Commission, which was active between 1949 and 1967, messages were mainly relayed orally, and sometimes in writing, between the commander of the IDF Military Liaison (today, the head of the Foreign Relations Division) and his Syrian counterpart (SSAD). Similar to the tripartite dialogue mechanism that UNIFIL leads with great success between the IDF and the Lebanese Armed Forces, the establishment of a similar mechanism between UNDOF, the IDF, and the Syrian Armed Forces should be considered, in order to help prevent friction and resolve security and civilian problems.

The fifth challenge is a logistics challenge and, within this framework, as intimated in the UN documents, the regime in Damascus, in its capacity as UNDOF's host government, is raising considerable obstacles in the supply lanes and UNDOF's force rotations. Although Israel excelled in providing UNDOF with creative logistical solutions, considering the operational challenges and the closure of the Quneitra crossing, the UNDOF Force Commander, who is headquartered in Syria, has until now been forced to cross into Israel through Lebanon. Supplies and forces, which had reached the Quneitra crossing through Haifa port and Israel, were forced by Syria to detour through Cyprus, Beirut, Damascus, and elsewhere. These abusive domination tactics were likely never tossed from Damascus's toolbox and will be used in the next act.

The sixth challenge, and perhaps the most urgent, concerns the civilian and humanitarian dimension in UNDOF's Area of Operations, where the infrastructure has been destroyed and where a large population is living in destroyed villages and IDP camps. The United Nations Director-General's reports on UNIFIL praise the importance of the civilian-military (CIMIC) efforts, which relies on the UN force's outreach to local communities, the extensive efforts to rehabilitate civilian infrastructure, and non-military services, which are helping to restore life to a normal track and stabilize the security situation in the region. Besides the humanitarian and moral dimensions, there is no doubt that UNDOF will be able to contribute significantly to civilian and humanitarian stabilization in its operating environment, and thus also improve the security conditions and accomplish its mission. However, the tools available to it for this purpose are currently very limited. In this regard, two courses of action are warranted: the transfer of budgets, civil engineering capabilities, medical care, and civilian assistance staff from UNIFIL to UNDOF; in other words, diverting them from southern Lebanon, which has been rehabilitated, to the destroyed southwestern region of Syria. This is to be coupled with civilian assistance activities by international aid organizations, including from the UN, in

the UNDOF’s mission area. In this way, the need for Israel’s assistance activities to cross border local populations, as reported faithfully by UNDOF observers and protested heatedly by Damascus will diminish.

The reality emerging in the Syrian Golan, with its looming threats and prospects, obligates Israel to revise its policy in order to sustain its security. The Israeli government and the IDF must play a proactive and creative role in promoting a better security reality on the reconsolidating border with Syria. This must be done with the help of its strategic partners and its international and regional interlocutors, and by using force wisely and employing a variety of civilian tools. Israel must safeguard the security of the displaced populations in the buffer zone and the cross-border communities that have survived, largely thanks to the assistance that Israel extended to them during the years of the civil war. UNDOF has a critical, albeit modest, role in stabilizing this reality. Should Israel succeed in contributing to UNDOF’s redesign and rising to the challenges before it, the force can return to the desiccated Golan “river,” well equipped to enter it successfully anew, for the benefit of all parties.