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Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

ASSESSMENT REPORT

Israel Reacts to the US-Russian De-Escalation Agreement in Syria

Policy Analysis Unit | August 2017

Israeli Objections to the De-Escalation Agreement in Syria

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Introduction

Following their first ever face-to-face meeting on the sidelines of the G20 Summit in Hamburg last month, the US and Russian presidents signaled their approval of a “De-Escalation Agreement” covering areas of southwestern Syria, including parts of Quneitra and Deraa. The agreement, aimed at reducing armed conflict between the Russian-backed Syrian regime and the armed opposition backed by other powers, went into effect on July 9 while Israel was quick to condemn it. Details of the plan were agreed upon during months of strenuous negotiations between Russian and American officials, with input from both the Jordanian and Israeli governments¹. In accordance with the agreement, Russia deployed hundreds of its military police across Suweida, Deraa and Quneitra to patrol the frontlines between the opposing factions of the conflict. Moscow also erected a number of military bases, flying the Russian flag, at locations across these governorates. The Russians further created a buffer zone between Iranian forces and Iranian-backed militia and the Syrian borders with Jordan and the occupied Golan Heights.

Israel, in true form, opposed the agreement despite Russian guarantees that the deal provided for Iran-loyal armed forces from the border with Israel. Israeli premier Benjamin Netanyahu and other officials were quick to criticize the agreement for not meeting Israel’s security needs—needs which are inherently impossible to satisfy. This paper seeks to determine the factors that have influenced Israeli opposition to this latest deal.

The Israeli Stance on the De-Escalation Agreement

With the beginning of the Syrian revolution in 2011, Tel Aviv has sought to prolong the armed conflict and the eventual post-conflict division of the country along sectarian and communal lines. Despite repeated protestations denying direct involvement in the Syrian conflict, Israel has established communication channels with a number of the opposition factions along the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. Tel Aviv has also explicitly stated its “red lines” regarding the Syrian conflict, including the use of Syrian territory to carry sophisticated weapons to Hezbollah

¹ For more on details of how the topic was agreed, see “The US-Russian Agreement on Syria: Aims and Implications of the Hamburg Ceasefire”, Assessment Report Series, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, July 11, 2017, available online: <http://english.dohainstitute.org/release/2a0c8c3d-3383-4da4-8688-a62b1b4726e2>

in Lebanon as well as the presence of Iranian proxy forces in the corridor along the Golan Heights. Since January 2012, Israel has sought to enforce these restrictions on the combatants in the Syrian crisis through a number of air strikes on selected targets. The latest Israeli airstrike took place after the declaration of the “De-escalation Agreement” in Hamburg.

This is in line with Israeli behavior since the outbreak of the conflict, and throughout which it has sought to secure a set of fundamental strategic objectives. These include international acknowledgement for its annexation of the Golan Heights, which it has occupied since the June 1967 war; and the establishment of a de-militarized buffer zone extending tens of kilometers into Syrian territory. Since March this year, Netanyahu has communicated with the White House, the Kremlin, and other foreign leaders to repeatedly demand that any diplomatic efforts to end the Syrian crisis must entail the creation of such buffer zones. Israeli demands include the clear-out of any forces loyal to Iran, both along the Syrian side of the Golan Heights as well as the Syrian-Jordanian border². In a series of meetings with American officials, which took place in March, the Netanyahu government further demanded that discussions about the potential buffer zones, as part of a deal for wider de-escalation in Syria, should be held in isolation from ongoing peace negotiations in the Kazakh capital of Astana to which Turkey and Iran were party. Throughout their meetings with American officials, the Israelis further objected to Russian implementation of the ceasefire, suggesting instead that the US assume the role of overseer of the ceasefire³.

As a US-Russian agreement on Syrian de-escalation appeared imminent, Israeli officials held increasingly frequent consultations with their Russian and American counterparts. These included a number of secret meetings in Amman as well as in a number of European capitals, attended by prominent members of the Israeli diplomatic, defense and intelligence communities. American attendees at these meetings included Michael Ratney, the US Special Envoy for Syria, and Brett McGurk, the US Special Representative to the international coalition against ISIL. At another meeting, attended by Jordanian, Israeli and American officials, the Israelis again affirmed their opposition to the presence of Russian forces in southern Syria. The Israelis used the same meeting to introduce an entirely new demand- that Iranian and Iranian-backed forces be cleared from all Syrian territory, not only the south of the country.

² Barak Ravid, “Netanyahu Seeks Buffer Zones Against Iran and Hezbollah on Syria’s Borders With Israel and Jordan”, *Haaretz*, April 7, 2017, available online: <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.782143>

³ Barak Ravid, “Israel Tells U.S. It Doesn’t Want Russia Policing Safe Zones in Southern Syria”, *Haaretz*, July 9, 2017, available online: <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.800079>

Reasons for Israeli Opposition to the De-Escalation Agreement

Outspoken Israeli opposition to the De-Escalation Agreement intensified in mid-July, when the Israeli authorities were notified of its terms. The Israeli assessment of the agreement was extremely negative, with Israel suggesting that its terms failed to meet their security needs. The Israeli criticism became even sharper when Russia began to deploy its forces across the governorates of Quneitra, Deraa and Suwaida—despite the fact that Israel had been pre-notified of this deployment, and that Russian forces would keep a distance of at least 13 kilometers from the Israeli controlled Golan Heights.

Netanyahu, together with his National Security Minister Avigdor Liebermann, inspected the readiness of Israeli forces stationed in the occupied Golan Heights prior to a meeting of the Israeli Security Cabinet. At the time, Netanyahu had made clear that the rapidly changing situation on-the-ground in the south of Syria meant that Hezbollah was gaining ground at the expense of a weakened ISIL. The Israeli prime minister entirely neglected to mention that Hezbollah forces had been pushed back 40 kilometers from the front lines under the terms of the Russo-American De-escalation Agreement. When the Israeli Security Cabinet eventually convened for its four-hour meeting, including high-ranking members of the Israeli military, Defense Ministry, and diplomatic core, participants concluded that the De-Escalation Agreement reached by the US and Russia remained “preliminary”, and that the sponsoring countries were yet to confirm the details of the plan. It was apparent from these deliberations that the main Israeli objections were rooted in the singular Russian responsibility for policing the agreement⁴.

The anxieties were exacerbated by news of a possible division of Syria into distinct American and Russian “spheres of influence”, with Russia being able to place its forces in the south and southwest of the country while the US had responsibility for the security of Eastern Syria up to the point of the borders with Iraq. While such a deal, if verified, would serve to sever Syria and Lebanon from the supply lines to Iran, it would also serve to entrench Russian forces within southern Syria, which would represent a bone of contention for Israel. Indeed, Russian forces have already established a base and operations control center in Sanamayn and a further base in Mothbeen, in the Deraa Governorate, to help oversee the implementation of the agreement.

⁴ Barak Ravid, “Israeli Cabinet Convenes for First Time to Discuss Southern Syria Ceasefire”, *Haaretz*, July 31, 2017, available online: <http://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/syria/.premium-1.804400>

Israeli fears are centered on the idea that Russian oversight of the De-Escalation Agreement will eventually translate into a permanent Russian Air Force base to south of Deraa, adjoined to the Suweida Governorate. Such a base would give Russia the ability to station S-300 and S-400 missiles similar to those already placed at the large Syrian airbase at Hmeimim in northwestern Syria. In such an event, the Russian forces would likely be backed by ground forces, placed a mere 55 kilometers from the occupied Golan Heights. This would effectively end Israel's outright dominance of Syrian airspace, and its ability to enforce its "red lines".

Conclusion

Israeli opposition to the US and Russian sponsored De-Escalation Agreement for Southern Syria is rooted in what it sees as challenges to its strategic-military supremacy over Syria. Israel is opposed to a resolution of the conflict in Syria, which this agreement seems to presage. More importantly, the De-Escalation Agreement seems to forego any Israeli plans to create a demilitarized buffer zone deep within Syria which would be under Israeli control. Nonetheless, there is ample reason to doubt that the presence of Russian forces in southern Syria will constrict Israeli aerial maneuverability over Syrian skies, particularly as Israeli aerial strikes are usually coordinated with the Russian operations room.