

BICOM Briefing | The situation in southern Syria, by Michael Herzog

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Southern Syria high on the agenda

In recent weeks, as the Syrian regime prepared and launched a major military operation to regain control of southwest Syria, this area has become a significant issue in international and regional diplomacy. It was, among others, the focus of discussions between Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Jordanian King Abdullah in Amman (June 18), Jordanian and Russian foreign ministers in Moscow (July 4), Netanyahu and Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow (July 12) and recent phone calls between Netanyahu and US President Donald Trump. Finally, it made its way into the July 16 Helsinki summit between Putin and Trump.

In the last year and a half, the Syrian regime has regained control over nearly 2/3 of the country, apart from the southwest and southeast, the province of Idlib adjacent to the Turkish border, and the north-east, which is under the control of the Kurdish-dominated SDF. Having won the battle in the eastern suburbs on Damascus (Eastern Ghouta, the Yarmouk refugee camp and other areas east of Damascus), the Syrian regime decided to focus on the south, up to the borders with Jordan and Israel. This area includes the provinces of Daraa (with the city of Daraa, considered the “capital” of the south); Quneitra, which borders the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights; and Suweida’ further to the east, which is characterised by a large Druze community. In recent years, Daraa and Quneitra have been mostly controlled by rebel groups.

The regime’s assault in the south essentially put an end to the de-escalation agreement – established in the three southwest provinces in the summer of 2017 by a Russian-US-Jordanian agreement (and first announced by presidents Trump and Putin in July 2017). The agreement excluded the jihadi groups – ISIS, which controls the Yarmouk basin (on the border triangle between Syria, Jordan and Israel) and Hay’at Tahrir a-Sha’m (HTS, formerly Jabhat al-Nusra)¹

¹ See: [Michael Herzog, Amid de-escalation in southern Syria: How to stop the Iranian push for regional dominance; BICOM Strategic Assessment, September 2017](#)

The Syrian-Russian strategy and its implementation on the ground

The Syrian regime's move towards the south was decided upon and implemented in close coordination with Russia. It incorporated and synchronized military moves, Russian diplomatic efforts vis-à-vis Israel, Jordan and the US, and Syrian regime negotiations with rebel groups and villages on the ground. The Syrian regime first amassed troops in the area, sent warnings to rebels and started quiet negotiations with them about laying their arms. Then both Russia and Syria began airstrikes in the south followed by a Syrian ground offensive focused on the area of Daraa – occasionally halting to give a chance to translating the military pressure to deals with the rebels. Simultaneously, Russia was conducting talks with both Jordan and Israel to make sure neither (especially Israel) opposed the Syrian offensive and would not undermine it in any way (see below).

This strategy appears to have been by and large successful. At the time of publication, the Syrian regime has already taken over almost all of the province of Daraa, including the city (where the war in Syria was sparked in 2011), the border area with Jordan and the Nassib Crossing, the main border crossing with Jordan. This constitutes a practical and symbolic victory shutting the door to potential support for the rebels from Jordan. The regime is now fighting to take over the province of Quneitra, adjacent to Israel's border, and has already reconquered the strategic hilltop of Tel al-Harrah, some 10km from Israel's border.

In the process, Syria and Russia succeeded in convincing numerous groups and villages in the Daraa province to accept a ceasefire arrangement rather than fight the regime. The "settlement and reconciliation" arrangement includes cessation of hostilities, rebels handing over their heavy and medium weapons and being allowed to stay in their homes, and the return of refugees to their villages. It was also agreed that Russia will guarantee and monitor the agreement on the ground, including the safety of the returning refugees. Some rebel groups may be incorporated into the Syrian army. Those people who refuse to abide by the terms of the ceasefire deal have been allowed to leave the area for Idlib in the north, in an agreement similar those made in other areas of the country. This arrangement is in advanced stages of implementation.

In the course of this offensive, Syrian army units that reached the Jordanian border have already come into direct friction with the ISIS contingent in the Yarmouk basin (including an ISIS suicide attack that killed many Syrian soldiers and Syrian bombing of ISIS). The fighting between them is likely to expand.

The refugees

According to the UN the war affected a population of over 300,000 refugees in and from the south. The main refugee concentration has been on the Syrian side of the Syria-Jordan border – where tens of thousands concentrated in recent years after the Jordanians closed their border to Syrian refugees. Jordan already hosts around 1.4m Syrians, about half of them officially registered refugees, who put immense pressure on its economy, infrastructure and social fabric. Jordan now hopes that the opening of the Nassib border crossing coupled with the Syrian regime’s reassumed control over large parts of Syria, will facilitate the return of many refugees to their former homes. Jordan also hopes that the upcoming opening of the crossing will allow for the resumption of much needed trade between the two countries. The trade partnership was stopped during the civil war, constituting a significant loss for the Jordanian strained economy.

On the Syria-Israel border, several thousand refugees have been gathering in two tent camps. The stream towards that border is likely to increase as the Syrian army moves closer, because many Syrians believe that the regime will not dare carry out airstrikes in that area for fear of being shot down by Israel. For its part, Israel, which has been running a major humanitarian operation in support of the local Syrian population (Operation Good Neighbour), announced that while it will continue to provide humanitarian support for refugees and villagers close to its border and work to ensure their safety (Netanyahu publicly warned against them being “slaughtered”), it will not allow Syrian refugees to enter Israel save for severe medical cases. The safety of these refugees has probably come up in the Netanyahu-Putin meeting.

Israel’s engagement with Russia over its red lines

As noted, Russia has engaged in quiet talks with Israel to ensure the Israeli government would not undermine Syrian moves to recapture these areas. In principle, Israel is not opposed (and has hitherto refrained from interfering in the Syrian southern offensive) as long as certain conditions are attached. In fact, these conditions have been on the Israeli-Russian agenda since the establishment of the de-escalation zones in the summer of 2017. However, the new context of re-asserting Syrian sovereignty over the south while Israel confronts Iran across the Syrian theatre has lent them greater weight and urgency.

Iranian/proxy presence in southern Syria. The first of these conditions focuses on the immediate withdrawal of Iran’s military presence and other Shia proxies such as Hezbollah that are present in the south or might follow the regime. These elements have long aspired to establish their military and terror infrastructure in the south and turn it into a military front against Israel. It appears that Russia is willing to accept this Israeli demand and to commit to distance and keep Iranian and its proxy militia elements dozens of kilometres away from the border. While Israel has demanded a minimum of 60-80 kilometres (east of the Damascus-Sweida’ road) it is still unclear to what extent Russia subscribes to these specific terms.

In any case, it remains to be seen to what extent the Russians can actually deliver on this pledge, though their military police is supposed to monitor implementation on the ground. There are doubts (supported by at least one precedent in northern Syria) over the extent to which the Russians will go out of their way to confront Hezbollah and other Iranian proxies in a bid to enforce the above undertaking. And Russia is not exactly known for strict compliance with its undertakings. Moreover, there are several credible reports of some Iranian and non-Syrian proxy elements fighting alongside regime forces in the south – including information about Hezbollah combatants, photos of two Iraqi Shi’a militia brigades fighting in Daraa, and pictures of a Hezbollah activist and an Iranian IRGC officer killed in the south. Many of these elements have embedded themselves in government forces and have been wearing Syrian uniform. While representing only a relatively small part of the forces on the ground, it’s quite clear that Iran and its proxies would like to establish themselves in the south and ultimately build operational infrastructure there.

Iranian military presence in the rest of Syria. The second, broader element of Russian-Israeli discussions relates to Iranian military presence in the rest of Syria. Israel has publicly and consistently argued that it is not enough to distance Iranians forces from the south, but for them to be militarily excluded from Syria in its entirety. According to Israeli Intelligence, Iran aspires and is working towards turning the whole of Syria (not just the south) into yet another military front with Israel, including military air and naval elements, proxy Shiite “legions” and most significantly a huge arsenal of rockets – which would complement Hezbollah’s existing military capabilities in Lebanon (over 120,000 rockets). Israel considers such a development no less dangerous than Iranian-sponsored deployment in southern Syria, and therefore unacceptable. Accordingly, it has been pro-active in trying to thwart it, including directly targeting Iranian military capabilities that have been introduced into Syria.

On this issue, some divergences exist between Russia and Israel. While Russia has no illusions about the destabilising nature of the Iranian forces and has publicly agreed that the long-term political solution in Syria should exclude Iranian forces, it believes that it is unrealistic to see the complete departure of Iranian military presence in the foreseeable future.

There seems to be no Russian political will to fully push Iranian military presence out of Syria, or pay the price involved in such a move. With the war not yet over, Russia still needs Iranian forces. Moreover, Russia has other considerations regarding its relations with Iran. There is also a serious question mark as to Russia's ability to achieve such a goal. Therefore, Russia's implicit message to Israel is: "We'll take care of Iran in the south. As for the rest of Syria, we leave it to you to take action against the Iranians, if you so deem necessary." Indeed, in recent years and months Russia has usually turned a blind eye to Israeli initiatives targeting Iran and its proxies in Syria. Russia's only concern has been that Israeli actions do not endanger Russian troops or assets, do not bring about a major escalation that could undermine a political outcome and do not target or seek to undercut the Assad regime.

While Israel cannot extricate Russian agreement and commitment to drive Iran militarily out of Syria, the two countries can find agreement on blocking or curbing some of the Iranian plans in the country, such as creating a presence close to Israel's border or establishing naval and air bases (there is reason to believe that Russia has played a quiet role behind the scenes to prevent Iran from establishing a naval base on the Mediterranean, not far from their own). Russia also agrees to allowing Israel a free hand to enforce its red lines against Iran and its proxies in Syria. These "red lines" essentially include preventing Iran and its proxies from turning Syria into a dangerous military front with Israel (with an emphasis on the introduction of a major rocket arsenal, including highly accurate ones), the transfer of strategic weapons to the hands of Hezbollah in Lebanon and maintaining Israel's freedom of action against these threats.

Keeping the 1974 separation of forces agreement. Israel's third condition attached to the return of Assad's army to the south is the full implementation of the 1974 'Agreement on disengagement between Israeli and Syrian Forces', which was reached following the 1973 Yom Kippur war. This agreement established a buffer zone (Area of Separation) between Syrian and Israeli military forces (about 80km long and between 0.5 and 10km wide), as well as additional areas with limitations

on troops and weapons on both sides. Since 1974, a UN Disengagement Observer Forces (UNDOF) has monitored this agreement, but as a result of the war in southern Syria some governments withdrew their forces and UNDOF left posts in the buffer zone. Israel's message is that if the Syrian regime violates the terms of the agreement – whether by moving forces into the buffer zone or by introducing weapon systems or military infrastructure forbidden by the agreement – it will take action against them. Israel has also worked to bring about the re-deployment of UNDOF into all of its previous positions – while some positions have been re-manned it is unclear whether all of them will be).

The superpowers

This Israeli condition was publicly adopted by Russia and the US. In the joint Putin-Trump press conference immediately following their July 16 Helsinki summit, Putin noted that he and Trump agreed on the need to fully implement the 1974 agreement so as to ensure Israel's security in that area.

The other Israeli concerns and requirements have also fallen under the umbrella of the dialogue between the US and Russia and came up in Helsinki. Before the summit, National Security Advisor John Bolton made clear that the Trump administration would be willing to accept the Assad regime remaining in power and regaining control of Syria as long as the Iranian military presence is kicked out. This is essentially Israel's position. However, the US leverage had been weakened by Trump's stated desire to sooner or later pull US forces out of Syria and by its reluctance to use force against Iran or the Assad regime in Syria.

The US does have some cards at its disposal, primarily due to its military presence and its alliances in the Syria theatre. First, there are US (and UK) forces at the Tanf military base on the Syria-Iraqi-Jordan border – along one of the routes where Iran strives to build its corridor to connect to the Mediterranean. Russia, the Syrian regime and Iran have long been trying to get US forces out. Second, the US has troops fighting the remains of ISIS in north east Syria, in coalition with the SDF, whose forces control an area east of the Euphrates rich with oil and gas fields. Third, US support for Israel in its efforts to drive the Iranian military presence out of Syria is also considered an asset for the administration. The US probably played all of these cards in the summit, making clear it is in no rush to pull out its forces. Ahead of the summit, Bolton stated that US forces will not only remain in Syria until ISIS is completely defeated but also as long as “the Iranian menace continues throughout

the Middle East”, thereby implying that US military presence in Syria is tied to the Iranian military presence there.

Summing up the summit, Trump highlighted “a good conclusion for Israel”. Yet similar to the Israel-Russia dialogue, the US and Russia probably did not reach understandings on pushing Iran’s military presence out of Syria, but more likely on containing some of the Iranian plans in the country, including Israel’s freedom of action against them.

Conclusion

It seems that Israel opted to agree to imperfect understandings with Russia – which were probably subsequently enshrined in US-Russia summit – regarding the Syrian regime’s return to the south. These were likely based on the understanding that Israel will maintain a free hand to enforce its red lines against the military presence of Iran and its proxies in both the south and in the entirety of Syria. While Russia appears to have taken a step in Israel’s direction Iran is far from giving up its schemes for Syria and from having the final word. Therefore, the dangers of violent friction and escalation between Israel and Iran are still very much present in the Syrian theatre.

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