

# Why Trump's Syrian Ceasefire Makes Israel Nervous

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## The tepid response to the deal by Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu can be summed up in one word: Iran.

Israel has done all it could over the last six years to stay out of the maelstrom next door in Syria, where Bashar Assad's regime has struggled for six years to beat back a peaceful uprising that became a bloody civil war. So I was struck during a recent visit by how nervous so many senior Israeli officials were about what unfolding developments in eastern Syria mean for them in the months ahead -- as well as how concerned they were about the enforcement of President Trump's recent ceasefire deal in southern Syria with Russia and Jordan.

Though it doesn't say so publicly, Israel long ago wrote off western Syria as constituting a brutal triumph for Assad, who was assisted by Russia, Iran, Shia fighters and Hezbollah in defeating mostly Sunni insurgents. Israeli officials are scathing in viewing Assad as a butcher who murders and gasses his own people with virtual impunity. Yet they believe he is unlikely to be dislodged. And they see in Assad's survival a lesson rooted in the tragic history of the Jewish people: Israel must always have deterrent strength, since nobody came to the aid of the defenseless victims of the Syrian dictator just as nobody came to the aid of the victims of the Holocaust.

Israel's view of eastern and southern Syria is different. There, Israeli strategic thinkers see a growing Iranian threat that requires a much more robust response.

The most recent development is the ceasefire announced by President Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin on the sidelines of the G-20 summit, which Trump said "will save lives." For Israel, it's noteworthy that Jordan was a party to the deal -- the Israel-Jordan security relationship has deepened amid shared concerns about Iran and ISIS. However, Israeli security experts are skeptical that the ceasefire will hold -- they have seen too many similar agreements fall apart in Syria. But this ceasefire touches more directly on Israeli interests than past such deals, as it falls not far from the Syrian-Israel border and adjacent to the Golan Heights, approximately two thirds of which is controlled by Israel.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu offered a clear signal of Israel's disquiet about the ceasefire just after it was announced. His office released a public statement laying out Israel's "red lines" in Syria. Any deals, he said in remarks to his Cabinet: (1) Have to keep Iran and Hezbollah away from Israel's Golan border; (2) Must prevent "the establishment of an Iranian military presence in Syria as a whole"; and (3) Must block any attempt by Hezbollah to acquire "precision weapons." This statement has raised the stakes for Jerusalem, as Israeli leaders do not usually speak about red lines.

Netanyahu also referred to "deep conversations" he had apparently held on the phone with both Putin and U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, the architect of the ceasefire on the American side. "Both told me that they understand Israel's position and will take our demands into account," Netanyahu said. While saying Israel welcomes a genuine ceasefire in Syria, he said Israel will be "strongly upholding our red lines."

Israeli security analysts tend to be a non-ideological, sober bunch by nature, and they are anxiously awaiting one development in the coming months: the fall of ISIS. The collapse of the Islamic State's stronghold in Mosul has focused public attention on how the Middle East will look after the next domino falls -- Raqqa, in northeastern Syria. And while Israel has pointedly stayed out of the ISIS crisis for years, its strategists now worry that the post-Raqqa world could create a vacuum that would be filled by Iran. A common refrain in my conversations was that the U.S. was pulling out of Raqqa and making Syria safe for Iran and its proxies. Israel's fear is not that Iran will suddenly flood eastern Syria with troops, but rather will strategically deploy many of the estimated 25,000 Iran-backed Shia forces in the country to put down roots there. None of this should be misinterpreted to mean that Israeli officials want ISIS to stay -- they just fear the aftermath of its ouster.

The unifying thread between Netanyahu's three big concerns is his growing nervousness about Iran's role in countries neighboring Israel. In Syria, Israel believes, Iranian strategists are trying to create a land bridge or land corridor going from Iran all the way to Lebanon that could be used to supply Hezbollah with increasingly precise weaponry and other resources. The term "Iranian land bridge" seemed to be on virtually every Israeli speaker's lips at the annual Herzliya Conference on foreign policy and security, where I spoke.

Iranian officials are hardly shy about their aims. "Today, the resistance highway starts in Tehran and passes through Mosul and Beirut to the Mediterranean," Ali Akbar Velayati, a top Iranian advisor to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, said last week. Israel views Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps commander Gen. Qassem Soleimani in particular as a master chess player who sees the land bridge as part of a wider effort to entrench Iran more deeply in the Levant. Chagai Tzuriel, director-general of Israel's Intelligence Ministry, reportedly called such a land corridor a "strategic game-changer."

Israel has played the Syrian crisis very cautiously over the last six years, so its concern about northeastern and southern Syria marks a significant departure. Netanyahu is famously risk-averse, seeing how his predecessor, Ehud Olmert, was toppled in no small measure by a land war in nearby Lebanon in 2006 that ended in a standoff and caused his popularity to plummet and never fully recover. No less significant is that Israel knows that it could not be a decisive factor in the Syrian war, which has multiple fronts and a miasma of sectarian and extremist groups.

So Netanyahu has handled the Syrian crisis from a defensive crouch. Israel fires back if there are rockets fired at it, and returns fire for errant mortars amid firing in southern Syria. It also shoots at convoys and the like if it detects Hezbollah moving advanced weaponry from Syria into Lebanon. It has provided low-level assistance to Syrian border villages to maintain friendly ties and is proud of providing medical assistance to thousands of Syrians.

Yet Israel is very aware that the Syrian civil war is entering a new phase, perhaps the very beginning of the postwar period. It is one thing to stay out of the fighting, but quite another to see political arrangements unfold that may lock in a permanent Iranian presence in Syria. Israel therefore looks at Iran's role in Syria in a different light now.

From my talks with several Israeli security officials, I've learned that Israel makes a clear differentiation between Iran and Russia. In Israeli eyes, Iran's influence is completely nefarious, while Russia's is merely a fact of life. Several top Israeli officials even favor collaboration in Syria between the United States and Russia. Yet questions linger about Russia's sincerity about enforcing its end of the bargain on recalcitrant proxies like Iran and Assad.

As for the ceasefire in southern Syria, Israel's most immediate concern is anything that brings Iran or Hezbollah to the border of Israel's tacit ally Jordan or close to the border with Israel on the Golan Heights. In principle, a ceasefire deal that would keep Iran, Hezbollah, and Shiite forces away from these sensitive areas would be welcomed by Israel.

Yet for Israel, the potential gap between theory and practice looms large. Would the Russians actually enforce the ceasefire in southern Syria? Will Russian monitoring by satellites, drones and military police occur, and will it be sufficient? Does Russia really intend to keep Iran and Hezbollah in check? According to senior Israeli military officials, several hundred Hezbollah officials have joined the First Syrian Corps in southern Syria, where they provide intelligence and plant roadside bombs against Syrian rebels. The ceasefire does not formally include the Golan, but the strategic heights are of great concern to Israel, which wants to ensure that Hezbollah does not open a second front there, along with its stronghold in southern Lebanon. Israel is deadly serious about this, having shown that it will retaliate in the Golan by killing an Iranian general during a visit there two years ago. There is even unconfirmed speculation in southern Syria that if tensions rise, Israel will seek to empower local allies like the Druze to serve as a buffer.

No less significant for Israel are the anticipated developments in eastern Syria in the coming months. Israel's fears about the fall of Raqqa creating a vacuum that could empower Iran prompt a dilemma for Netanyahu, who knows that the United States has little appetite for creating some sort of stabilization force in Syria. On the one hand, he fears that Iran will gain a huge boost and solidify the land corridor by use of its Shiite forces. On the other, he's wary of being seen as urging the U.S. to stay in Syria in the post-Raqqa phase, as he knows that anything Israel does will be scrutinized in the American public debate and would thus be very politically sensitive. But what alternative does Israel have? One high-level Israeli cabinet minister told me just before Netanyahu's "red lines" statement that if the U.S. pulls out and enables Iran to fill the post-Raqqa vacuum, an Iranian-Israeli "collision is inevitable."

One early flashpoint could be a set of underground Iranian precision-guided missile-production facilities that are being constructed in Lebanon for Hezbollah's benefit. In an extraordinary statement at Herzliya, Israel's director of military intelligence Maj.-Gen. Herzl Halevy announced the existence of the facilities, which would undoubtedly benefit from an Iranian land bridge through Syria. Could this be what Netanyahu was referring to when he warned that Hezbollah's "acquisition of precision weapons" was one of his red lines? Was Halevy's announcement signaling that Israel was willing to preemptively strike, and that therefore a way must be found to stop the construction?

Whatever the case, Netanyahu's message for Trump and Putin was clear: Israel's interests in Syria -- and its rising alarm about Iran -- can't be ignored any longer.

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