

## Putin's Golan Comments: Implications for Israeli Security

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Moscow has seemingly reaffirmed Israel's right to keep Iranian forces away from the Golan frontier, but it is unclear whether Assad's southern offensive will actually help or hinder that goal in the long term.

Lost in the controversy of this week's U.S.-Russian summit in Helsinki was President Vladimir Putin's reference to the May 1974 Syria-Israel disengagement agreement. "The south of Syria should be brought [into] full compliance with the treaty of 1974 about the separation of forces [between] Israel and Syria," he said, adding, "this will bring peace to [the] Golan Heights and bring a more peaceful relationship between Syria and Israel," while also ensuring the "security of the state of Israel." The day before, Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu told a cabinet meeting, "We will continue to defend our borders. We will extend humanitarian assistance to the extent of our abilities. We will not allow entry into our territory and we will demand that the 1974 Separation of Forces Agreement with the Syrian army be strictly upheld."

At first glance, these comments indicate that Russia is cognizant of Israeli concerns about the Assad regime's efforts to retake southern Syria, and that Moscow will help ensure the campaign does not threaten Israel's security. Yet the longer-term implications of having Moscow intimately involved in mediating the situation are unclear—including for the United States, Israel's original partner in establishing the Golan ceasefire.

### THE 1974 DISENGAGEMENT AGREEMENT

For four decades, Syrian-Israeli relations in the Golan have been governed by the 1974 "Agreement on Disengagement," which facilitated an open-ended ceasefire after the 1973 war and thinned out forces on both sides of the disengagement line. This accord was based on Syria's unwritten, unacknowledged commitment to prohibit terrorist infiltration through the Golan, which Damascus largely observed in subsequent decades.

Today, some 510 square kilometers of the Golan remain on the Syrian side of the ceasefire line, with the UN Disengagement Observer Force overseeing a buffer zone about eighty kilometers in length stretching from Lebanon to Jordan. After Syria's civil war broke out, Jabhat al-Nusra, the Syrian branch of al-Qaeda, repeatedly clashed with UNDOF troops, kidnapping and releasing a few dozen of them in 2013. Although an estimated 1,100 UNDOF monitors remain in the Golan despite these attacks, it is telling that they are now based entirely on Israel's side of the disengagement line.

The Syrian part of the Golan encompasses seventeen villages and over 200,000 residents. Israel continues to provide humanitarian assistance in this area, sending medicine and food to villagers in an effort to ensure their goodwill.

### NETANYAHU'S ASSURANCES FROM PUTIN

Reaffirmation of the 1974 agreement was reportedly one of Netanyahu's key objectives when he visited Putin in Moscow last week. To understand why, one must view the decades-old agreement in the context of current developments in Syria.

Since Russia first intervened in the war in 2015, Netanyahu has made nine trips to see Putin in order to reach understandings on Syria, particularly regarding Iran's role there. Now that Putin has achieved his objective of consolidating Bashar al-Assad's authority in Damascus, Israeli officials believe there is greater divergence between Moscow and Tehran. Russian forces have not used their S-400 rockets to intercept Israel's numerous airstrikes against Iranian military personnel and proxies inside Syria. Rather, Israeli officials believe that Moscow views Iran as a competitor for influence there and is not necessarily displeased by these attacks—even if it does not act to constrain Iran itself.

Russia is clearly proud that it has been able to maintain relations with both Israel and Iran. Although it does not want to be put on the horns of a dilemma in the event of full-scale escalation between the two enemies, it will continue to play both sides in Syria as much as it can. Therefore, it does not seem to be a reliable partner for either country.

### ISRAEL'S CONSISTENT CALCULUS IN SYRIA

For seven years now, Netanyahu has kept the Israel Defense Forces out of the Syria war, believing that there is no way to ensure a political outcome favorable to Israeli interests—a lesson the country’s defense establishment learned from the 1982 Lebanon war. As such, the IDF has confined itself to a more limited role, namely, hitting back when errant shells fly over the border and interdicting Hezbollah’s attempts to transfer advanced weaponry from Syria to Lebanon. According to public statements by IDF officials, this approach resulted in around 100 strikes inside Syria from 2011 to 2017.

Israel’s policy of conducting targeted strikes while staying out of the war itself did not change after Moscow’s intervention. Yet the immediate impact of Russian involvement was to secure the Assad regime’s reassertion of control. Thereafter, Israel decided to deal with the repercussions of this outcome, which seemed like a fait accompli given Washington’s continued reluctance to expand its own mission in Syria beyond defeating the Islamic State.

Most important, Israel assessed that Iran was using the war as a pretext for entrenching its military infrastructure in Syria to an unprecedented degree. Hezbollah’s steady takeover of Lebanon, where the group has amassed an arsenal of 100,000 rockets over the years, serves as a cautionary reminder that Israel cannot permit Syria to let Iran or its proxies amass comparable military infrastructure. The Trump administration made clear that it would not militarily confront Iran in Syria but would back Israel if it did so. The IDF therefore concluded that it must depart from its previous practice of avoiding direct clashes with the Iranians in order to nip their Syria presence in the bud, even at the risk of escalation. This dynamic reached a crescendo on May 10, when the IDF [struck sixty Iranian military sites](#) throughout Syria after a small number of Iranian rockets were fired at the Golan.

Despite its focus on Iran’s role, Israel has still kept an eye on Assad’s latest offensive. Having largely consolidated control in other key areas, he seems determined to reestablish his forces in the south. From Israel’s perspective, Assad understands that his military is no match for the IDF, so there is no need to impede him from retaking the south—so long as this reoccupation does not involve substantial numbers of Iranian, Hezbollah, or other Shia militia personnel. Israeli news reports on last week’s Putin-Netanyahu meeting suggest that Moscow will not object to IDF strikes on Iranian or proxy forces in the south; in return, it expects Israel to leave Assad’s forces largely untouched.

Yet critics point out that [Syria’s forces cannot be cleanly divorced from Tehran’s](#). Even before Assad’s southward deployment, Israeli officials in the Golan say that hundreds of Syrians near the frontier received stipends from Hezbollah to serve as observers on its behalf. Meanwhile, some have questioned the effectiveness of the southwest Syria ceasefire announced by the United States, Russia, and Jordan in July 2017, arguing that it has not kept Iran and Hezbollah out of the area.

## **SIGNIFICANCE OF 338 MENTION?**

Interestingly, Putin’s remarks in Helsinki included a brief reference to UN Security Council Resolution 338, a document typically invoked to revive past “land for peace” proposals and reaffirm the principles laid out in Resolution 242 after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. This mention could mean a number of things, though its ultimate importance is uncertain.

One interpretation is that Putin believes enforcement of the 1974 disengagement agreement should be followed up with peace talks between Israel and Syria over the Golan, but this seems infeasible given Assad’s status as an international pariah. Alternatively, and perhaps more likely, Putin may have mentioned 338 because it was adopted after Secretary of State Henry Kissinger’s emergency trip to Moscow during the 1973 war, a visit that ultimately presaged a ceasefire. Putin may have been reminding the world that Moscow was once a key player in reducing Middle East tensions, and that it intends to take center stage again.

Whatever the case, Netanyahu clearly favored Putin’s focus on the 1974 agreement in Helsinki. In doing so, he offered another sign that Israel is resigned to Russia serving as the main arbiter of events in southern Syria, and that Jerusalem will try to make the best of that reality by focusing on its main goal: keeping Iran out. Yet the focus on Iran has obscured longer-term questions about how Russia’s own presence will affect wider Israeli and U.S. interests.

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