



## The Assad Regime Returns to the Golan

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The Assad regime's recapture of the Syrian Golan Heights is advantageous to Israel, in light of the Israeli-Russian understanding to predicate the situation there on the May 1974 disengagement. Even if the new arrangement does not lead to a forty-year-long *de facto* peace like the one that prevailed prior to the eruption of the Syrian civil war, Assad will need to focus on rebuilding his regime, reconstituting Syria, and ensuring the continuation of Alawite rule. In these circumstances, not only does military confrontation with Israel not entail any conceivable gains but it would likely wreck the regime's fragile recovery.

The Syrian civil war seems to be nearing its end. The forces of Bashar Assad, [whose imminent collapse was predicted by then-defense minister Ehud Barak](#) after the outbreak of the Syrian revolt in spring 2011, are getting stronger and more confident by the day. With the help of Russian air support and the massive support of Iran's proxy militias, notably Hezbollah, the regime has succeeded in reasserting its authority on two-thirds of the country's territory, systematically destroying the rebel forces (and in the process slaughtering hundreds of thousands of innocent Syrian civilians).

Most recently, the regime has recaptured the entire Syrian Golan Heights, from the Damascus region to the Jordanian border in the south and to the Israeli border in the west. Thousands of local residents fled to the vicinity of the border with Israel, which in turn helped them with food and medical aid and even transported civilian refugees to Jordanian territory, thus saving them from assured death.

Interestingly enough, this latest development took place in tacit consultation with Israel. The Russian foreign minister and chief-of-staff, accompanied by a group of senior officers, visited Israel in mid-July to coordinate Russian and

Israeli military activities in Syria. This represents a step up in the ongoing Israeli-Russian dialogue over the Syrian conflict. Among other things, an understanding was reached on the redeployment of Iran's proxy militias and their future stay in Syria.

For years, Israel has been waging a largely covert campaign against the consolidation of Tehran's military presence in Syria, in the form of either proxy Shiite militias or the delivery of advanced weapons systems to Hezbollah. The feeble Iranian response to hundreds of (undeclared) Israeli air strikes during this period is almost certainly indicative of its inability to contend with Israel's overwhelming air superiority.

In recent months, this campaign has nevertheless escalated to direct confrontation between Jerusalem and Tehran in the form of sharp exchanges between the IDF and the Revolutionary Guards' Quds Force in Syria, in which scores of Iranian soldiers and officers were killed. And while the escalation indicates Israel's readiness to risk direct confrontation with Tehran by way of achieving its strategic goal of ending the Iranian military presence in Syria, Jerusalem seems content at the moment with the implementation of Moscow's pledge (made *inter alia* in Putin's talks with Netanyahu) to keep this presence at arm's length from the Israeli border.

At the same time, Washington's withdrawal from the 2015 Iran nuclear deal (the JCPOA) and the reintroduction of international sanctions may well restrain Tehran's regional expansionism and drive it to reconsider its continued military presence in Syria. It may also set in train a process of domestic restiveness that may culminate in the downfall of the Islamist regime, though this eventuality seems much less likely.

Similarly, Hezbollah has not yet overcome the full consequences of its Syria intervention, and the repeated gloating of its leader, Hassan Nasrallah, from his Beirut hideout – where he has been sheltering since the 2006 Lebanon war – can hardly disguise this reality. Due to increasing financial difficulties, exacerbated by the economic crisis in Iran, Hezbollah has been forced to slash the salaries it pays its operatives. As a result, and due to mounting opposition among the Lebanese Shiites to its Syria involvement, Hezbollah is having difficulty recruiting new fighters to fill its depleted ranks. (The organization still has more than 100,000 rockets and missiles capable of hitting targets throughout Israel, however.)

Under these circumstances, the Assad regime's recapture of the Syrian Golan is strategically advantageous to Israel, especially in light of its understanding with Moscow, with Damascus's tacit approval, that the situation on the Israeli-Syrian border will be predicated on the status quo established by the May 1974

Syrian-Israeli disengagement agreement. In the forty-year period from the signing of the agreement to the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, there was a state of *de facto* peace along the Israeli-Syrian border.

Given the decapitation of the Syrian armed forces during the civil war and the destruction and mayhem wrought on the Syrian population, nearly half of whom were either killed, wounded, or became refugees, Assad will need to focus on consolidating his renewed grip on power, reconstructing the country, and ensuring the continued rule of the tiny Alawite minority. Under these circumstances, not only does military confrontation with Israel not entail any conceivable gains, but it is likely to wreck the regime's fragile recovery.

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