

WITH SYRIA'S RECAPTURE OF SOUTHWEST, RUSSIA &  
HEZBOLLAH LOOK TO ESTABLISH PRESENCE ON ISRAEL'S  
BORDER

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[Hezbollah Likely to Replace ISIS North of Israel: Yoav Limor, JNS, Aug. 6, 2018](#) — The Syrian army is expected to complete its takeover of the country's southwest, near the border with Israel, in the coming days, according to the IDF.

[The Great British Foreign Office Fantasy: Douglas Murray, Gatestone Institute, July 24, 2018](#)— According to the British Foreign Office, the Golan Heights are 'occupied'.

[A Top Syrian Scientist Is Killed, and Fingers Point at Israel: David M. Halbfinger and Ronen Bergman, New York Times, Aug. 6, 2018](#)— Aziz Asbar was one of Syria's most important rocket scientists, bent on amassing an arsenal of precision-guided missiles that could be launched with pinpoint accuracy against Israeli cities hundreds of miles away.

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**MOSCOW ON THE GOLAN**

***Editorial***

[Jerusalem Post, Aug. 9, 2018](#)

Russia has deployed Military Police to eight observation points on the Golan. For

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the first time, Israeli and Russian forces are directly across from each other on the border. This has the makings of a new strategic alignment in Syria, potentially reducing Iran's presence and bringing stability, or the opposite - increasing tensions with Moscow and its rising power in the region.

Over the last five years as Russia deepened its involvement in support of its ally in Damascus, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has navigated a complex conflict through high-level bilateral discussions in Moscow. This involves a relationship with Russian President Vladimir Putin that is based on many visits and discussions - and respect between the two countries and their interests.

Although Israel and Russia do not always see eye to eye on Syria, and although Russia has tensions with Jerusalem's closest ally in Washington, a beneficial relationship has nevertheless been created. During the conflict, this was built on de-confliction and understandings about southern Syria. Potential conflict was reduced and Moscow emphasized that it understood Israel's concerns about Iran. But Iran is an ally of Bashar Assad and therefore a partner of Moscow in the Syrian war. It is also part of the Astana talks that have sought to advance some kind of an agreement in Syria between Russia, Turkey and Iran.

Israel is never part of these discussions; its dialogue about Syria is always one-on-one, either with Moscow or with Washington. Israel doesn't speak to Tehran or Damascus, but it can make its views known through third-party channels. Reports indicate that this has happened as Israel uses a variety of public statements - and sometimes threats, private channels and kinetic power, including air strikes - to make its policies clear.

Israel and Russia have now reached an understanding regarding the 1974 cease-fire lines on the Golan. Israeli Ambassador to Russia Gary Koren met Russian journalists recently in southern Russia. "We coordinated the arrangement under which Russia pledged to make sure, as it were, that the Syrian Army will not cross the cease-fire line established under the 1974 agreement," he said, according to the Russian news agency Tass. "It looks like everything is functioning for the time being."

Jerusalem still demands that all Iranian troops be withdrawn from Syria. Alexander Lavrentiev, Putin's special envoy to Syria, has indicated that Iranian forces and the militias linked to it have withdrawn 85 km. from the border. "There are no units of heavy equipment and weapons that could pose a threat to Israel at a

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distance of 85 km. from the line of demarcation," he was quoted as saying.

With Russian observers on the Golan, the chance of chaos and instability directly in the border area is reduced. This is because it is in Moscow's interest that Syria not be destabilized by Israeli retaliation for any sort of violation of the 1974 lines. In the first days after the Syrian regime returned to the border in July, there were scenes of jubilation. Assad's image and government flags were waved from Quneitra. In addition, Syrian media reports that residents are returning to the border area. The concern is that Iran or Hezbollah may try to exploit this return.

Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman was at the border area on Tuesday visiting with the Armored Corps on the Golan Heights and meeting with chief of staff Lt.-Gen. Gadi Eisenkot. He stressed that the Syrian Army is being strengthened and that the regime wants to fully control its territory. This was a way to indicate that the Assad regime is strong enough to control its own territory and therefore does not need Iran and Iranian-backed militias to help it control areas. The regime has leaned on Iran under the notion that it needed its ally to defeat the rebels and ISIS. But Liberman was asserting that now that the regime is strong enough, it's time for the Iranians and all their tentacles to go home.

At the Knesset on Wednesday, Eisenkot said the IDF was better prepared than it has been in the last 20 years. Israel has a military edge over its opponents and has developed the best weapons systems to defend against threats and strike the enemy. Nevertheless, Israel's enemies will always seek new ways to carry out attacks. To restrain them, Jerusalem can work judiciously with Moscow and also with Washington to prevent the next war.

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**HEZBOLLAH LIKELY TO REPLACE ISIS NORTH OF ISRAEL**

*Yoav Limor*

[JNS](#), Aug. 6, 2018

The Syrian army is expected to complete its takeover of the country's southwest,

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~~near the border with Israel, in the coming days, according to the IDF. This will allegedly restore a familiar situation, in which Syria's regime is once again stable, even if under the auspices of Russia.~~

On it's face, this would seem to be an ideal situation — especially if reality on the ground reverts to the one that existed before the war began in 2011, when Syria and Israel both adhered to the 1974 cease-fire agreement in full. This would restore peace and quiet to the Golan Heights, which could once again become Israel's most tranquil frontier.

The key word here is "if." Unfortunately, the chances of this becoming reality are slim. The Syrian army may regain control on the ground, but it will not be the only armed presence near the border. Russia will be there, too, and its presence is both a blessing and a curse. The Russian presence — ostensibly meant to inspire restraint on all sides — will only be effective if Russia agrees to act on Israeli intelligence and thwart anti-Israeli incidents. But if the Russians prove to be a modern version of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon — which sees no evil, hears no evil, and speaks no evil — then Israel will find itself in a terrible predicament, as its presence will make it difficult for Israel to act independently.

Russia, however, is the easy part. The bigger problems are Iran and its proxy, Hezbollah. Iranian forces are unlikely to be able to reach the Syria-Israel border, because Israel, Russia, and even Syria — which would prefer not to be dragged into a conflict with Israel — will work to prevent that from happening. Israel insists on the complete removal of Iranian forces from Syria, which is unlikely to happen. The last Russian offer on that issue was to keep Iran 100 kilometers (62 miles) from the border. This can be used as a starting point for negotiations, but those will be exhausted sooner rather than later.

Hezbollah is a different story. The Iranian-backed Shiite terrorist group is already in Syria. Its operatives are fighting alongside the Syrian army, and it has several hundred local villagers on its payroll. This was a strategic decision by Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, who wants to turn the Golan border into an active war zone with Israel.

Hezbollah is likely to employ its familiar methods: joining local militias, importing its tactical abilities — anti-tank missiles, explosives, and snipers — from Lebanon, and importing ground troops. The first stage has already been completed, the second stage is in full swing, and — unless Hezbollah is stopped — the third stage

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will become a reality in a few short years.

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Stopping Hezbollah in its tracks is Israel's main challenge, and doing so will become exponentially more difficult once the Syrian civil war officially ends. Until now, Israel has been able to use the chaos north of the border to eliminate any risk from that direction, but once the war ends, any Israeli use of force would have to be justified to other parties.

Legitimizing Israeli operations on this front is likely to become far more complex, and the risk for a security escalation will be greater. This will require Israel to use more carrots and sticks opposite everyone involved, as well as adamantly enforce its red lines.

Israel will also soon end the humanitarian-aid campaign that it has been carrying out on the border. The IDF hopes that the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force stationed in the buffer zone between Israel and Syria will be able to resume its operations in full, both lending a hand to the local Syrian population, and providing them with an incentive not to back the anti-Israeli elements in the area. But the situation for Israel looks to be extremely perilous.

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**THE GREAT BRITISH FOREIGN OFFICE FANTASY**

*Douglas Murray*

[Gatestone Institute](#), July 24, 2018

According to the British Foreign Office, the Golan Heights are 'occupied'. They have been 'occupied' — according to the logic of the UK Foreign Office — since 1967, when Israel took the land from the invading forces of Syria. Ever since then, the Israelis have had the benefit of this strategic position and the Syrian regime has not. This fact, half a century on, still strikes the British Foreign Office as regrettable, and a wrong to be righted in due course.

Of course, since the onset of the Syrian civil war in 2011, the official position of

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the UK government has become ever-harder to justify. For example, ~~Is the Israeli/~~ government were at some point over the last seven years suddenly to have listened to the wisdom of the Foreign Office in London and handed over the strategic prize of the Golan, to whom should it have handed it? Should Israel be persuaded to hand over the territory to the Assad regime in Damascus? It is true that, throughout the course of the Syrian civil war, the one bit of territory to which the Syrian regime has laid claim and which it has not been able to barrel-bomb and otherwise immiserate the people there has been the Golan Heights. Only in the Golan has anybody in this 'Greater Syria' been able to live free from the constant threat of massacre and ethnic, religious or political cleansing.

Other candidates for the territory naturally presented themselves across the same time-frame. The armies of ISIS came right up to the villages on the Syrian side along the borders of the Golan. There, they were able to bring that form of peace-through-barbarism which the world has come to know well. If ISIS had triumphed in the Syrian conflict rather than suffering repeated set-backs, would the UK Foreign Office have handed them the territory by way of reparational justice, or victor's prize? If not them, then perhaps the armies of Iran or Russia could have been the recipients of this feat of restorative diplomacy? Perhaps anyone who wished to lay claim to the Golan could have had it. So long as it was not the Israelis.

The ongoing madness of the British Foreign Office's position has been highlighted in recent days thanks to a request which came from the British government, as well as the governments in other European capitals and in Washington. A request which also involved the Golan.

Over the weekend, it emerged that the British government was among foreign governments to have made a dramatic request of the Israelis. As the war in Syria appears to be clarifying towards its end-point, a group of around 800 members of the 'White Helmets' and their families had reportedly become trapped near the southwestern border near the Golan Heights. The White Helmets only operate in 'rebel areas' and are despised by the Assad regime. With Syrian government forces moving in, a massacre may well have been about to occur.

At the request of these foreign governments, the Israelis just carried out an extraordinary and unprecedented mission. In recent days, a reported 422 of the intended evacuees and their family members were saved by the Israelis. The other — almost half — of the intended number appears already to have been cut off by

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other forces. Nevertheless, those who did make it out were transferred to Israel/ forces across the Golan and have now reportedly arrived safely in Jordan where their future status will be determined. Some may stay in Jordan; others will be moved abroad to Western countries.

The painful irony of this situation should be clear to all observers. If the Israelis did not lay claim to the Golan, there would have been no means to have got the White Helmets and their families out of Syria. Had Israel not made the Golan the peaceful and thriving area it is, it would simply be another part of Syria in which different sectarian groups were slaughtering other sectarian groups.

As it is, the area is in the control of Britain's most reliable ally in the region. An ally which — even as it is lectured by Britain — agrees to requests from the British government that takes advantage of a strategic reality, one which the British government still refuses to accept. The Israeli government has given the British government what it wanted. Perhaps now would be a good time for the British government to reciprocate in some way? There could be no better means of doing so than by admitting that the British policy of the last half a century has been a Foreign Office fantasy and a wholesale dud of 'realist' regional thinking. The Foreign Office will have to back out of its self-imposed corner regarding the Golan at some point and accept the reality on the ground. How much better it would be if it did so now in a spirit of goodwill and reciprocity, rather than later on in a spirit of inevitable and grudging defeat.

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**A TOP SYRIAN SCIENTIST IS KILLED, AND FINGERS POINT AT ISRAEL**

*David M. Halbfinger and Ronen Bergman*

[New York Times](#), Aug. 6, 2018

Aziz Asbar was one of Syria's most important rocket scientists, bent on amassing an arsenal of precision-guided missiles that could be launched with pinpoint accuracy against Israeli cities hundreds of miles away. He had free access to the highest levels of the Syrian and Iranian governments, and his own security detail.

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He led a top-secret weapons-development unit called Sector 4 and was ~~inhabited~~ work building an underground weapons factory to replace one destroyed by Israel last year. On Saturday, he was killed by a car bomb — apparently planted by Mossad, the Israeli spy agency.

It was at least the fourth assassination mission by Israel in three years against an enemy weapons engineer on foreign soil, a senior official from a Middle Eastern intelligence agency confirmed on Monday. The following account is based on information provided by the official, whose agency was informed about the operation. He spoke only on the condition of anonymity to discuss a highly classified operation.

The attack took place on Saturday night in Masyaf, where Syria's military research organization maintains one of its most important weapons-development facilities. It quickly prompted finger pointing at Israel by both Syria and Hezbollah, the Lebanon-based Islamic militant group whose fighters have played a major role in the Syrian civil war on the side of President Bashar al-Assad. In this case, the accusations were well founded: The Mossad had been tracking Mr. Asbar for a long time, according to the Middle Eastern intelligence official.

The Israelis believed that Mr. Asbar led the secret unit known as Sector 4 at the Syrian Scientific Studies and Research Center. He was said to have free access to the presidential palace in Damascus and had been collaborating with Maj. Gen. Qassim Suleimani, commander of Iran's Quds Force, and other Iranians to begin production of precision-guided missiles in Syria by retrofitting heavy Syrian SM600 Tishreen rockets. Mr. Asbar was also working on a solid-fuel plant for missiles and rockets, a safer alternative to liquid fuel.

An official from Syria and Iran's alliance, speaking on the condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to talk to Western journalists, said he believed Israel had wanted to kill Mr. Asbar because of the prominent role he played in Syria's missile program even before the current conflict broke out in 2011.

Under Israeli law, the prime minister alone is authorized to approve an assassination operation, euphemistically known as "negative treatment" within the Mossad. Spokesmen for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman did not respond to requests for comment on Monday. Mr. Lieberman, however, earlier in the day dismissed suggestions in the Syrian and Lebanese news media that Israel was behind the blast, which also killed Mr.



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Asbar's driver. "Every day in the Middle East there are hundreds of ~~explosions and~~ settling of scores," he told Israel's Channel 2 News. "Every time, they try to place the blame on us. So we won't take this too seriously."

As one of the directors of Syria's Scientific Studies and Research Center, Mr. Asbar had for years been active in the Assad regime's chemical-weapons production program, working mainly in Al Safir, outside of Aleppo, and in the city of Masyaf, west of Hama, farther to the south. He was also involved in coordinating Iranian and Hezbollah activities in Syria, according to the intelligence official. More recently, as leader of Sector 4, Mr. Asbar was primarily engaged in adapting Syria's arsenal of low-technology rockets to make them capable of striking long-range targets with far greater accuracy — a danger that Israel has devoted enormous energy and resources to countering.

Israel is making a broad effort against Iranian and Hezbollah forces, which it began after their forces entered Syria to help the Assad government battle rebel fighters. The fear in Jerusalem is that, after the civil war ends, those forces would turn their energies against Israel. Israeli officials also worry that Iran might seek to create a permanent presence inside Syria, effectively creating a second front along Israel's northern border.

The Iranian presence in Syria is deeply troubling to Israel. Israel's air force has repeatedly attacked targets in Syria that it sees as a strategic threat. Among them are weapons storehouses for Iran and Hezbollah; convoys carrying arms from Iran to Syria and Hezbollah; bases for Shiite militias from Iraq, Pakistan and Afghanistan, and for the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps; and Syrian air bases used to house Iranian aerial vehicles. The Israelis also discovered that weapons factories were being set up in facilities of the Scientific Studies and Research Center for the benefit of Mr. Assad's forces, Hezbollah and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps stationed in Syria. Last September, Israel attacked and destroyed most of the weapons factory in Masyaf where Mr. Asbar was a senior manager. This summer, though, the Iranians began to rebuild it, this time underground. In the meantime, production machines had been transferred elsewhere for storage. But Israel destroyed many of those in a missile strike on July 23.

Syria's Scientific Studies and Research Center has long been a focus of Western intelligence agencies and is subject to financial sanctions in the United States and France. Before the civil war, it operated Syria's main manufacturing and storage

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sites for chemical weapons, many of which have since been destroyed or  
abandoned. It employed around 10,000 people developing and producing missiles,  
chemical, biological and nuclear weapons...

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[Expert Warns of Negative Consequences for Israel From Assad's Takeover of Border Area](#): Benjamin Kerstein, *Algemeiner*, July 31, 2018 —Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad's successful takeover of the area adjacent to the border with Israel marks a "very painful strategic failure" for the Jewish state, an Israeli expert told *The Algemeiner* on Tuesday.

[Neutralized at the Last Minute](#): Yoav Limor, *Israel Hayom*, Aug. 9, 2018 —The final stage of the Syrian civil war offers an opportunity, maybe the last one, for any entity that wants to eliminate threats without paying too high a price. The moment the war officially ends, which will happen soon, everything will become more complicated, from airstrikes to assassinations.

[The Coming Battle for Idlib](#): Mona Alami, *Al-Monitor*, August 2, 2018—The fall of Daraa governorate, including the Golan Heights border region, to forces loyal to President Bashar al-Assad's regime on July 31 paves the way for the next battle, in Idlib.

[A Sliver of Good News for Israel from the Trump-Putin Summit](#): *Mosaic*, July 24, 2018—A week before the U.S.-Russia meeting in Helsinki, Benjamin Netanyahu traveled to Moscow to meet with Vladimir Putin in an attempt to secure some guarantees for Israel in southern Syria, and later reported the terms they had settled upon to Donald Trump.