

# The Israeli Buffer Zone on Syrian Territory Will Have to Wait

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*On May 18<sup>th</sup> 2017, 27 Syrian army vehicles drove within 18 miles of al-Tanf, which breached the U.S.-declared 34-mile radius of the army convoy's operations resulting in the U.S. forces striking the Syrian Army. It should be noted that al-Tanf (an American military base) operated by U.S. special forces trains a number of rebel groups referred to by the U.S. as Vetted Syrian Opposition (VSO) also known as the Southern front which includes over 50 militant groups such as the Revolutionary Commando Army (RCA). When the U.S struck the Syrian army, Wall Street Journal's Yaroslav Trofimov reported that "The U.S. attack at al Tanf is significant not because the U.S. has once again struck Assad's forces, but because it did so [in defense of Syrian rebels](#)". It is important to remember these past events because on June 24<sup>th</sup> 2018, the U.S. announced that it will not be backing its proxies on the ground with air force - in contrast to last year. This event highlights that the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) and its allies have made substantial geostrategic gains in the past year.*

While the Battle of Daraa is symbolically important - since it is the province where the Syrian (foreign) intervention by proxy first took place in 2011 with the help of Former U.S. ambassador to Syria Robert S. Ford - the Battle for southern Syria should not be analyzed as the "final" battle simply because the U.S. announced "that it will not back up its anti-government proxies in the south". The SAA and its allies still have a long way to go in liberating areas located in Northern and Eastern Syria which remain under the control of the SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces) and extremist rebel factions - funded and trained by American officers. This is by no means an overstatement considering Major General Igor Konashenkov saying that Russia has intelligence that the Free Syrian Army is going to stage a "chemical attack" in the village of Haql al-Jafara and [accuse the Syrian government of conducting it](#).



According to Syrian government military sources, almost a year ago in July 2017 a group of Israeli military and intelligence personnel travelled to Syria's West Daraa countryside with the objective of meeting rebel commanders from the Southern Front such as Liwa Jaydour, Jaysh al-Ababil, and the Revolutionary Commando Army (RAC) to discuss future [cooperation and collaboration in battles](#). Another meeting also took place on September 2017 in the Quneitra border town of Rafid between Israeli intelligence personnel and militia commanders concerning the establishment of a 50km buffer zone stretching east of Golan

Heights into Syrian (Southern) territory – absorbing Quneitara, As Suwayda and Daraa. The Times of Israel on July 6<sup>th</sup> 2017 notes “Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called Russian President Vladimir Putin on Thursday as part of ongoing Israeli efforts to convince Russia and the United States to establish a demilitarized buffer zone in southern Syria...Israel is pushing for an agreement that would prevent “Hezbollah or other Iranian-backed militias” from operating in the area, which would extend some 30 miles (48 kilometers) beyond the [Israeli-Syrian border on the Golan Heights](#)”.

On June 26<sup>th</sup> 2018 Russia declared the ceasefire it brokered on July 2017 between Jordan, Israel, and U.S in Southern Syria (de-confliction/de-escalation zone i.e No Fly Zone) as null since Israel targeted an Iranian weapon depot around Damascus Airport, and mercenaries also targeted a Syrian military command post in Suwayda (southernmost province in Syria). The Russian defense ministry took both of these events as clear action in violation of the agreement. With the ceasefire no longer in place, a Syrian-Russo offensive has begun regaining the southern geographical space of Syria. Recent reports reveal that some rebels are surrendering and that the SAA is making substantive gains in Izraa, Nahitah, Sama Al Hadeidat in Daraa and ongoing advancements are underway to take Busra al sham in East Daraa. Questions that remain unanswered concern how long will the IDF “turn a blind eye” to the SAA regaining southern provinces such as quneitara bordered with Israel and the Golan Heights?; and will the U.S. redraw from its base in Al Tanf base which Al Muallem and Al Assad have vehemently opposed and categorized as colonialism?.

It should be highlighted that with the U.S. abandoning its proxies in Southern Syria, we can deduce that Israel will have to “pause” its “Greater Israel” ambitions in wanting to absorb Southern Syrian territory, and la pièce de résistance – claim the Golan Heights as Sovereign Israeli territory. During a visit to Israel’s northern border according to the Jerusalem Post (JP) on July 4<sup>th</sup> 2018, General Eisenkot discussed the readiness of the Northern Command with its commander Maj. Gen. Yoel Strick and the 366<sup>th</sup> Division’s commander Brig. Gen. Amit Fisher. “The IDF is monitoring the situation in Syria and is prepared for a variety of scenarios to preserve the security on Israel’s border,” read a statement given by the IDF’s Spokesperson’s Unit. On July 1<sup>st</sup> 2018 the Israeli government reinforced its border with the Golan Heights by positioning armored and artillery forces near the border with Syria in light of a situational assessment by the Northern Command.



Benjamin Netanyahu is seen during a security tour in the Golan Heights, near Israel’s northern border with Syria

The SAA territorial advancements in the past year highlight that the SAA has the upper hand on the battle field. However, we should also remember that the southern battle is not the final battle, even though it is a vital battle since it includes an offensive that will be combating over 15000 mercenaries. Contrary to Mr. Robert Fisk’s article in the Independent on June 26<sup>th</sup> 2018, I think it is too early to state that the battle for southern Syria will go down in history as a moment where “the US has given up on the overthrow of Assad in Syria” because it “[abandoned its proxies in southern Syria](#)”. Another battle that should be increasing in intensity in the next few weeks and/or after the southern battle is concluded is the battle to reclaim Northern (East) Syria – a territory under the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and U.S. rebel factions.

The Syrian government including Liwa al-Baqir convened a major meeting of tribal notables from across Syria on June 2 in order to build support for operations against the U.S. in Eastern Syria. Syrian state media claimed the meeting included representatives from seventy clans from Aleppo, Ar-Raqqa, Hasakah, Daraa, and Deir ez-Zor Provinces. According to the Institute for the Study of War unconfirmed reports suggest that the SDF arrested dozens of additional tribal representatives traveling to the meeting from SDF-held Hasaka Province in Northern Syria. Tribal representatives at the meeting denounced the presence of the U.S., France, and Turkey in Syria and called for tribal mobilization to fight them on behalf of Assad. Multiple new pro-regime militia units of unclear size and capability reportedly formed subsequent to the meeting. These units may have joined Liwa al-Baqir with support from Russia and Iran. Not to mention reports released the week of July 15<sup>th</sup> 2018 highlighting that rebels in Southern Syria are being transported to the Northern part of Syria.

More recent news on July 29<sup>th</sup> 2018 highlights that the Syrian Democratic Council [the SDF political arm] held a two day meeting with the Syrian government headed by President Bashar Al Assad. Officials belonging to the SDF, which hold large swathes of land in northern Syria discussed the future of the autonomous regions it set up in northern and northeastern Syria. The SDF has made a series of deals with Damascus in recent years, notably in Aleppo when the SAA decimated Syrian Arab rebel groups making a final stand to hold the city. The SDF also came to an agreement with the Syrian government during the Turkish incursion into the then-Kurdish-held Afrin canton in Syria's north-west corner, allowing Kurdish fighters to cross regime-held territory in a doomed bid to repel Turkish troops and their allies. The SDF, whose military is largely funded by the US as a counter-IS initiative, holds more than 27 percent of the country's territory, according to the [Syrian Observatory for Human Rights](#). It is still not clear whether rebel troops in northern Syria will be in accord with the SDF and SAA in relinquishing land they have usurped in the past 7 years and have it under the control of Damascus headed by President Bashar Al Assad. Also, According to a [statement](#) by SDF spokesperson Leilwa al-Abdullah, SDF forces pushed IS fighters into retreat from an area of 3,100 square-kilometers to a small slither of territory close to the strategic border town of Abu Kamal. A local SDF commander, speaking to Syria Direct said that the "crackdown on the border area" had gone ahead in coordination with Iraqi forces and [international coalition airpower](#).

Still, recent territorial gains by the SDF may have little bearing on talks with the Syrian government, which could be unwilling to actually cede territorial control or administrative authority to Kurdish-majority forces. Sihanouk Dibo, from the majority-Kurdish leftist Democratic Union Party (PYD), acknowledged that any future talks could be "long and arduous because the Damascus regime is very centralized." Whether centralized or not, the Syrian Government has historically been committed to the modality of Greater Syria with Damascus being the locus in decision making and autonomous regions conducting provincial policies relating to their provincial preferences. As stated by President Al Assad "Despite the ethnic diversity within each nation, the social fabric of the region by and large is one". In other words, a region of the historical Bilad Al Sham/Greater Syria space will not be relinquished since the Levant possesses a unified social fabric and most importantly because the Barzani Clan in Iraq is a dangerous example of how U.S. imperialism with its allies can defend decentralization for the sake of geostrategic interest.

Therefore, in regards to the Syrian peace process, peace cannot be implemented when the UNSC resolution 2254 adopted in 2015 - including the P5 - continues to be violated. The

delegates meeting at the June 13<sup>th</sup> U.N-led peace process in Geneva reiterated the importance of the clauses in the resolution which included that a nationwide ceasefire can only occur when member states are serious in halting the funding and training of mercenary entities. The members also reiterated the basis for a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political transition in order to end the conflict in Syria. The meeting in Geneva did not highlight anything novel that the meetings in Astana or Sochi didn't already outline. The meeting laid out the so-called four "baskets of reform" for a political settlement of the crisis. They include the drafting of a new constitution, parliamentary elections, the creation of a non-sectarian transitional government and the fight against mercenaries and terrorists. But the talks have made little progress so far as opposition members have failed to find an agreement over the fate of President Bashar al-Assad - a condition that the opposition has long wanted to include in the draft.

It is quite ironic that the Syrian Opposition is adamant in wanting to include a clause that stipulates that the current Syrian president is not allowed to run for president after 2020 and/or practice politics in Syria...it is ironic because while some opposition members discuss the importance of democracy *being* the foundation for peace in Syria, it is precisely democracy which re-elected President Bashar Al Assad in 2014.

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