



U.S.-Israel Working Group on Russia in the Middle East Simulation Exercise

Wednesday, June 27, 2018 | 0900–1330

Exercise:

- Four teams comprising participants representing the **United States, Russia, Israel, and Iran** will engage in negotiations over a series of unforeseen incidents.
- The incidents will be revealed to the participants in real time.
- The exercise will run for about 3 hours, with 1.5 hours of discussion of outcomes.

The players:

- **Russia:** Since 2015, Russia has built a strong presence in Syria, becoming an active player in the region. It has succeeded in rescuing the Damascus regime, its difficult yet valuable client, from what seemed to be an unavoidable demise. While it is a delicate and potentially unstable equilibrium, Moscow is indispensable for both the avoidance and containment of hostilities between Israel and Iran on Syrian soil. The lack of response that characterized Russia during the numerous strikes against Iranian interests in Syria was a clear statement that Russia understands the Israeli interest, while signaling to Iran the boundaries to its aspirations to deepen and establish its presence in Syria. Recently, Russia has demanded that Hezbollah pull out from large parts of Syria, as part of an understanding with Israel regarding the withdrawal of non-Syrian forces from the vicinity of the Israel-Syria border. The bottom line – Russia is victorious in Syria. It gained recognition, presence, and a very good basis for expanding its ambitions in the region. Syria recognizes the debt owed to Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah, which enabled Assad's regime to restore power after years of fighting and assistance in its rehabilitation.
- **The U.S.:** The United States' rhetoric of withdrawal from the Middle East plays into Russia's interests. Other actors in the region are increasingly turning to Russia as the strongest player, discounting America's ability to influence events in the Middle East. Israel has a strong relationship with the United States, but faced with that country's marked turn inward, must invest more in building its relationship with Russia. The U.S. is in general opposed to any military action against the Syrian opposition forces it supports, whether in the north, east or south, or along Syria's borders with Iraq, Jordan and Israel. Leading the precision strikes against chemical weapons sites in Syria in April 2018 was an

exception that made clear that there was no change in U.S. policy towards Syria. Jordan is following with great concern the developments in southern Syria and is expecting the U.S. to provide protection for its interests and for its national security.

- **Iran and Hezbollah:** Iran sees strategic and political importance in shaping the future reality in Syria. This is in order to realize its strategic aspiration to maintain territorial contiguity and an area of influence extending from Iran to the Mediterranean and to support Hezbollah to increase the threat and deterrence against Israel. Hezbollah has largely operated behind the scenes as part of Iranian activity against Israeli targets. However, its weapons stockpiling has continued: since the Lebanese war, Hezbollah fighters have accumulated tens of thousands of rockets and so have the means to attack Israel. On June 2018, Syrian, Iranian and Shi'ite Muslim groups, including Hezbollah, were preparing to launch an offensive against rebel strongholds on Quneitra and the southern Golan areas. In response to Russia's request that Iranian and its subordinate Shi'ite militias withdraw, Assad declared that they could remain until "Hezbollah, Iran, or others believe that terrorism has been eliminated." He further added that Iran does not have any military bases in Syria, unlike Russia. However, if there is "a need for Iranian military bases, we will not hesitate."
- **Israel:** In recent years, Israel has vigorously expressed its position opposing the establishment of Iran in Syria and the transfer of advanced weapons from Iran to Hezbollah. Israel conducted dozens of air strikes against weapon convoys and weapons storage warehouses. The Russian presence in Syria in recent years has been a significant constraint on the use of Israel's air and naval power, which was balanced by tactical and strategic coordination and de-confliction mechanisms. Putin and Netanyahu have a strong relationship based on an intuitive understanding of each other's motives. Thus, Israel was given relative freedom to carry out its operations in Syria in a controlled framework of rules set between the two countries.

Background events:

As the United States watches Russia turn into the main power broker in the Middle East, concerns grow within the U.S. establishment that the United States is losing influence. At the same time, a growing lobby within the establishment and among voters believes that the United States made a strategic mistake by siding unilaterally with Israel in the embassy move and in unconditionally supporting Israel in the UN.

The escalation between Israel and Iran and Hezbollah in Syria and Lebanon leads to increasing exchanges of fire. After one of Israel's bombing campaigns, Russia called on Israel to refrain from taking action in Syria, calling the Israeli response a "very dangerous development." It imposes limitations on Israel's use of Syrian airspace to attack Iranian targets and warns Israel that if it strikes Syria's new air defense systems, it will suffer catastrophic consequences.

Assad's forces, together with Hezbollah, Shi'ite militias, and elements of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard have taken control over the Syrian Golan Heights – from Mount Hermon's lower parts to the area of Quneitra. These forces start building fortifications and transferring weapons to the area (rocket launchers and anti-tank missiles). Hezbollah's leader, Hassan

Nasrallah, announces that the liberation of Quneitra is an important step toward the liberation of the Golan Heights and threatens that Hezbollah will not stand by while Israel “slaughters the Palestinians.”

Russia provides the Syrian army with an unknown number of S-400 missiles. The systems are being operated by a joint Russian-Syrian team, until the Syrian army is capable of operating the systems on its own.

Escalation in Gaza and Israel’s increasing projection of force in the Golan Heights provoke Hezbollah to act.

Brink of Confrontation

Israel reiterates its policy of striking any targets it considers threatening to its security. It focuses on Iranian targets, fearing that Iran has set out to build “a war machine” in Syria.

Israel launched an unscheduled military exercise on the Golan Sunday, June 24. Thousands of army reservists were ordered to report for immediate duty with full gear and come directly from their homes and work places.

The sudden IDF exercise indicated that it was prompted by the Syrian military announcement on the same morning of a major army offensive impending this week in the Quneitra region opposite Israel’s Golan border. The announcement also referred to a twin offensive against the Daraa province on the Jordanian border. The units participating were named as the Syrian army’s 4th armored division for Quneitra and the “Tiger Force,” backed by 4th division elements, for the Daraa operation.

The conflict is now so complex that coordination between Russians and Syrians has begun to suffer, as Russia increasingly needs to deploy troops and resources on different fronts.

Coordination between Russians and Israelis also lapses.

The US Navy strike group entered the eastern Mediterranean over last weekend. In position off the Syrian coast is the nuclear-powered USS Harry S. Truman aircraft carrier – from which the US, UK and France launched their April 14 attack on the Syrian army for launching a chemical attack.

Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah’s leader, announces that the increased activity in the Golan Heights marks a new stage for those under his command. As Israel bombs Iranian positions in Syria in response to Iranian rocket launches, Hezbollah and Iran begin to plot a response.

An incident occurs, bringing the parties to the brink of a confrontation.