

Russia says Iranian forces pulled back from Golan in Syria; Israel unsatisfied

01/08/2018 09:11 by admin

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Druzes hold Syrian flags during a rally in Buqâ€™ata near the ceasefire line between Israel and Syria in the Israeli occupied Golan Heights July 27, 2018. (Source: REUTERS)

Iranian forces have withdrawn their heavy weapons in Syria to a distance of 85 km (53 miles) from the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, TASS quoted a Russian envoy as saying on Wednesday, but Israel deemed the pullback inadequate. Backed by Russia, Iran, and Lebanonâ€™s Hezbollah Shiâ€™ite militia, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has retaken territory in southern-western Syria from rebels, closing in on the Golan.

Moscow has sought to reassure Israel by saying it wants only Syrian forces to deploy on or near the Syrian-held Golan. Israel, however, insists that forces controlled by Iran, its arch-foe, exit Syria entirely now the civil war there is ending. â€™The Iranians withdrew and the Shiâ€™ite formations are not there,â€™ TASS news agency quoted Alexander Lavrentiev, President Vladimir Putinâ€™s special envoy to Syria, as saying.

Lavrentiev said Iranian service personnel whom he described as advisors could be among Syrian army forces who remain closer to the Israeli border. â€™But there are no units of heavy equipment and weapons that could pose a threat to Israel at a distance of 85 km from the line of demarcationâ€™, Lavrentiev said. An Israeli official deemed such a pullback insufficient.

â€™What we have laid down as a red line is military intervention and entrenchment by Iran in Syria, and not necessarily on our border,â€™ Regional Cooperation Minister Tzachi Hanegbi told Israel Radio, citing the longer-range threat posed by Iranian missiles or drones positioned in Syria.

â€™Thereâ€™ll be no compromises nor concessions on this matter.â€™ Last week an Israeli official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said Russia had offered to keep Iranian forces at least 100 km from the Golan Heights ceasefire line.

Israel rejected the offer, which was made during a meeting between Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and visiting Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. In an apparent riposte, Russiaâ€™s ambassador to Israel, Anatoly Viktorov, said on Monday that Moscow could not compel Iran to leave Syria. But Viktorov also signalled that Russia would continue to turn a blind eye to Israeli air strikes against suspected Iranian and Hezbollah arms transfers or emplacements in Syria.

Hanegbi said Israel wanted to prevent Iran and Hezbollah from effectively extending their Lebanese front against it. â€™We are not ready to see a new Hezbollah front on our northern border between Israel and Syria. This is something that is dangerous. This is something that, if we donâ€™t prevent it today, when still at its outset, will exact a heavy price of us down the line,â€™ he said.

- Reuters