

Israel and the Southern De-escalation Zone: A Closer Look at the Israeli-Syrian Border

Nir Boms and Karolina Zielińska

In mid-June, Syrian and pro-regime forces began what they see as a decisive (and long overdue) campaign in southern Syria aimed at eliminating the rebel resistance within the southern “de-escalation” zone along the Israeli and Jordanian borders. The military campaign involved substantial Syria government forces advised and assisted by Russian military and air force personnel.

The regime and its allies have demonstrated superior military power, which has already “convinced” over 30 towns to return to regime control. Some rebel-controlled cities – Busra al-Sham, the surrounding villages to its south, and al-Jieza – agreed to comply with “reconciliation agreements,” requiring the surrender of arms and removal of key rebel leaders. In contrast to previous agreements, large scale evacuations of the area are to be avoided. However, rebels who contest the deal will be evacuated to the rebel stronghold around Idlib in northeastern Syria, which remains under Turkish supervision. Following the regime and its allies’ conquest of the majority of the northeastern part of the former “reconciliation zone” in Der’a Province, talks will focus on the remaining rebel territory in Der’a’s western countryside and the southern half of the city. In the meantime, according to UN estimates, the battles have pushed more than 320,000 people out of their homes, mainly towards the Israeli and Jordanian borders.¹

This new and dynamic situation in southern Syria will pose significant challenges for neighboring countries – Israel, Jordan, and Lebanon – as well as the international community. Demographic and humanitarian concerns resulting

¹ Bethan McKernan, “[Syria civil war: More than 320,000 people flee fighting in Deraa in 'largest displacement yet'](#),” *The Independent*, July 6, 2018.

from this recent operation are likely to receive regional and international attention in the weeks and months ahead.

The southern “de-escalation zone” originated from an agreement reached in May 2017 in Astana between Russia, Iran, and Turkey. The “de-escalation zones” were designed to maintain cease fires and “cessation of hostilities” partially by ensuring the removal of foreign fighters from the battlefield. The fate of “foreign fighters” is of serious concern to all parties involved in the talks, particularly in light of these fighters’ links to the Islamic State and other Jihadi-Salafi groups on the one hand and to Iran related proxies on the other hand.

The southern front can also be seen as a microcosm of the broader process of demographic change in Syria. The sectarian nature of the Syrian war has driven local populations from their homes and led the regime to repopulate certain areas with regime allies, altering the demographic composition of Syria at large.² Elsewhere in Syria, the regime, with crucial support from Iran, has displaced Sunnis and settled Shi’i foreign fighters and their families (in most cases, of Iraqi origin, but also fighters from Afghanistan and Pakistan) in these formerly Sunni areas. Reports have emerged claiming that large numbers of Shi’i foreign fighters have become naturalized citizens of Syria.³ Consequently, as Syrian citizens, these fighters will not be affected by efforts to evacuate all foreign (or non-Syrian) fighters from the country as part of a transition towards a post-war order. These “new Syrians” have been settled in strategic areas, stretching from Damascus, north and east, up to the Lebanese border and the Mediterranean coast.⁴ Shi’i foreign fighters, including Lebanese Hizballah, are also reported to be fighting on behalf of the regime in Syrian Arab Army uniforms, in attempt to further blur the distinction between the regime and its foreign backers.

In the face of the ongoing assault on the southern de-escalation zone, the potential for a new wave of refugees and sectarian resettlement presents challenges for Syria’s neighbors. For Israel, the indefinite presence of Shi’i foreign fighters along the Syrian-Israeli border is a clear violation of its declared red line. Moreover, Israel is also concerned with the fate of the Syrian Druze, whose villages are located exactly within the southern de-escalation zone. For Lebanon and Jordan, demographic shifts in southern Syria caused by a new influx of refugees, which adds to an already large refugee population, threatens to

² Martin Chulov, “[Iran repopulates Syria with Shia Muslims to help tighten regime's control](#),” *The Guardian*, January 14, 2017.

³ National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces, “[Assad Grants Citizenship to Two Million Shiites to Complete Demographic Change](#),” May 31, 2018.

⁴ Martin Chulov, “[Iran repopulates Syria with Shia Muslims to help tighten regime's control](#),” *The Guardian*, January 14, 2017.

exacerbate and perpetuate ongoing economic and political challenges related to their continuing efforts to provide a safe haven for refugees.

The process of return for refugees and those displaced by the war has already been undermined by the 2012 property laws (Syrian government Decrees no 63, 66) as well as an April 2018 decree, no. 10, allowing the state to confiscate land and buildings from Syrians who fail to produce evidence of ownership. The 2018 decree gives owners one year to make their property claims in person, and their petitions are required to be accompanied by ownership documents and a valid security clearance.⁵ This makes it nearly impossible for refugees who have fled the country to lay claim to their property. In light of the effective take-over of large parts of the southern “de-escalation zone” by government forces, instances of the local population refusing evacuation should be seen within this context.⁶ Therefore many residents of southern Syria living in opposition controlled areas are currently faced with the terrible choice of either trying to remain in their homes and survive the regime’s devastating air raids or fleeing the scene and potentially losing their property to the regime. This situation is a serious concern for all of the parties involved, not just Syria’s neighbors, which have absorbed large numbers of refugees, but also for Western countries and international humanitarian organizations active in the region.

The humanitarian crisis as a result of the Syrian offensive represents a more immediate concern for countries bordering the southern “de-escalation zone” under assault, namely, Jordan and Israel. At the Jordanian border, which has remained closed to new refugees, Russian warplanes bombarded the refugee camp near the border town of Nassib, with some missiles falling within Jordanian territory, until the area surrendered.⁷ The Jordanian military transferred humanitarian aid and provided emergency medical services to the population trapped in the no-man’s land between the two countries. In the most drastic cases, medical evacuations to Jordanian hospitals were carried out. Ordinary Jordanians attempted to provide humanitarian aid (mostly food and water), but experienced difficulties delivering it into Syria due to the discontinuation of UN convoys.⁸

⁵ Human Rights Watch, [Q&A: Syria’s New Property Law](#), May 29, 2018; [“Syrian foreign minister extends deadline for property confiscation law following international uproar,”](#) *The New Arab*, June 2, 2018.

⁶ See, for example: “Civilians on #Jordanian border reject “forced displacement,” <https://twitter.com/MGhorab3/status/1015562038804918272>.

⁷ Liveuamap, Syria, July 5, 2018, <https://syria.liveuamap.com/en/2018/5-july-russian-aviation-targeted-refugee-camp-near-the-town>.

⁸ Patryk Strzałkowski, [“Nie możemy spać od huku bomb” - Jordańczycy żyją obok miejsca, gdzie rozwija się katastrofa humanitarna](#) (“We can’t sleep from the boom of bombs’ - Jordanians live next to the place where the humanitarian catastrophe is developing”); Seth J. Frantzman,

Furthermore, tens of thousands of internally displaced Syrians have found refuge in the territories bordering Israel. Although there is no official number, there were reports of up to 11,000 IDPs in late June, according to the UNHCR. This number is likely to grow as the military operation expands throughout July. These displaced persons often head towards the immediate border area with Israel, which, under the 1974 armistice agreement, became a demilitarized zone under surveillance of the UN Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF). One large concentration of refugees remains around the town of Bariqa. While the town's small, original population largely fled due to earlier fighting, the influx of IDPs during the war increased the territory's population to thousands. Other large refugee camps are positioned near the town of al-Rafid, on the border, nearby Ghadir al-Bustan. The IDP population is concentrated around the UNDOF observation posts – these refugees likely assume that such proximity to UN posts will grant them both protection and humanitarian assistance.

While the Israeli army and non-governmental organizations continue to provide medical and humanitarian aid and the Israeli government continues to allow the flow of foreign aid through the border,⁹ the fate of the Syrians in the south remains in question. The situation on the ground is bound to deteriorate with the expected regime offensive on a small pocket of Islamic State-held territory (including the town of Tasil as well the land south and west of it, up to the Israeli and Jordanian borders). The area that is likely to be most profoundly affected is the larger rebel-held territory in the governorate of Quneitra, stretching along the Israeli border, where Israeli humanitarian activities are carried out and the presence of UNDOF has been restored after a brief discontinuation caused by earlier fighting.

Despite explicit statements by Prime Minister Netanyahu and Defense Minister Lieberman refusing to accept Syrian refugees inside Israeli borders, some Israelis have raised the issue of Israel's responsibility to protect and possibly offer temporary refuge to a population that Israel has actively assisted for the last several years. Some of the Syrians on the other side of the border, many of whom have developed positive relationships with Israel in recent years, have also publicly called for Israel to provide refuge.¹⁰ In the Israeli public discourse, it is often said that Israel's security dictates that it protect its borders and vital

⁹ ["Syrian rebel towns accept Assad rule following heavy bombardment,"](#) *Jerusalem Post*, July 1, 2018.

⁹ Elizabeth Turkov, ["The refugees on the border hope that the army will not reach them and urge Israel to help,"](#) *Haaretz* [Hebrew], July 1, 2018; Anshel Pfeffer, ["Israel Delivers Arab Humanitarian Aid to Syrian Refugees,"](#) *Haaretz*, July 1, 2018.

¹⁰ Seth J. Frantzman, ["Syrians Fleeing Fighting Call on Israel to Save Them,"](#) *Jerusalem Post*, June 29, 2018.

interests – in this case, removing the presence of Iranian forces and maintaining a line of communication with Russia. However, there are also those in Israel making the argument that the Syrian refugees's predicament calls for a reconsideration of established modes of operation. They say that Israel should consider innovative ways of providing protection for refugees, in order to avoid a scenario where Israel would be perceived as betraying the partners that it has worked with in Syria during recent years. Further, some argue that safeguarding Israel's security and offering some kind of refuge to Syrians should not be viewed as mutually exclusive. Accepting refugees (even if on a temporary basis, for example, before their relocation to an Arab country) would enhance Israel's image as a reliable partner that is ready to cooperate with pragmatic countries in the region and, in that way, contribute to its own long-term security.¹¹

The UNDOF's role as the guardian of the 1974 armistice agreement is also open to interpretation. On the one hand, the UN Force has a strict and limited mandate, focused on observation of the Syrian-Israeli cease-fire. Moreover, the UN has been ineffective in advancing conflict resolution initiatives throughout the Syrian war. Substantive amendments to the UN forces' mandate remains highly unlikely given the fact that permanent Security Council member Russia is on the frontline of the latest military campaign against the Syrian opposition.¹² The UN as an organization remains unable to act; and in the case of heavy fighting, it would probably evacuate its forces (as it did during the previous escalation in 2014) to the Israeli side of the border. On the other hand, it must be noted that UNDOF in Syria is comprised of forces primarily from Nepal, Fiji, India and Ireland. National public opinion in these countries may be affected by any potential humanitarian crisis in an area where their troops are stationed.

Still, existing legal arrangements securing the de-escalation zone could theoretically become a basis for a new humanitarian understanding between the parties. Israel has declared that it will not tolerate Syrian Arab Army activities within the de-escalation zone, as delineated in the 1974 agreement. Bearing in mind the presence of rebels and IDPs there, as well as the Syrian regime's ambition to retake control of the area, diplomatic consultations are already underway, with Russia expected to play a primary role in brokering a solution. In the meantime, a growing number of refugees will continue to gather along the

¹¹ Eran Lerman, Nir Boms, "[Will Israel Once Again Turn its Back on Those Who Have Been on its Side?](#)," The Jerusalem Institute for Strategic Studies, June 19, 2018; Mazal Mualem, "[Will Israel welcome Syrian refugees?](#)," *al-Monitor*, July 02, 2018.

¹² See for example: "[Russia blocks Security Council statement on Syria](#)," *AFP in The Times of Israel*, July 5, 2018. The UNDOF mandate, renewed on June 29, 2018 for the next six months, calls on withdrawal of all state- and non-state armed factions from the separation zone and states that the Force is empowered to fulfil its mandate, see: [United Nations Security Council Resolution 2426 \(2018\)](#).

Israeli border, waiting – like so many other Syrians – for others to determine their fate.

Nir Boms is a research fellow at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies (MDC), Tel Aviv University. Karolina Zielińska is a post-doctoral researcher and a graduate of the University of Warsaw, Poland.

To republish an article in its entirety or as a derivative work, you must attribute it to the author and the Moshe Dayan Center at Tel Aviv University, and include a reference and hyperlink to the original article on the Moshe Dayan Center's website, <http://www.dayan.org>.

Previous editions of TEL AVIV NOTES can be accessed at
<http://www.dayan.org/tel-aviv-notes>.

You are subscribed to the Moshe Dayan Center Electronic Mailing List. Should you wish to unsubscribe, please send an email to listserv@listserv.tau.ac.il, with the message "unsubscribe dayan-center."