

Netanyahu To Meet With Putin Amid Concerns Over Iran's Syria Presence

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will hold talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Sochi on the Black Sea later this week. The meeting will be Netanyahu's fifth visit to the Russian capital since Moscow intervened in the Syrian civil war two years ago.

The Prime Minister's Office said in a statement that the two will discuss the latest developments in the region as part of ongoing regular talks held every few months in order to discuss bilateral and regional issues and in order to prevent friction between the Israeli and Russian air forces in Syria.

The meeting, which has yet to be confirmed by Russian sources, comes amid reports of growing concern in Israel over the Russian-United States brokered ceasefire in southern Syria, and especially over Iran's growing presence in Syria. Jerusalem is particularly concerned about Iranian attempts to gain a foothold on the Golan Heights border.

When the ceasefire was announced July 7, Israel stated that it was "utterly opposed" to the deal, which it believes allows Iran to gain a foothold in Syria to use as a launchpad for attacks against it.

Following the announcement of the ceasefire, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said: "I can guarantee that we have done everything and the US side has done everything to ensure that Israel's security interests within this framework are fully taken into account."

Amnon Sella, Professor Emeritus for Soviet and Russian studies at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, said ahead of the meeting that Israel's main concern was preventing the "influence of Iran coming closer and closer to Israel's borders."

"The closer Iran is coming to Israel's borders there will be more attempts to send advanced weapons systems to Hezbollah... this of course calls for a great deal of coordination between Israel and Russia so that they do not come to clash," Sella

said.

Mossad head Yossi Cohen visited Washington last week to meet with US security officials including National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster in talks that were believed to have focused on security matters of concern to Israel in Lebanon and Syria.

Prior to leaving for Washington, Cohen issued a warning in a briefing to government ministers that Iran is filling the vacuum left as ISIS's hold on territory in Syria and Iraq wanes.

Netanyahu followed up on Cohen's briefing by warning that Israel would not allow Iran to fill the vacuum on its borders.

"Today we received a review from the head of the Mossad about the security challenges we face. I will summarize it on one sentence - ISIS out, Iran in. We are talking mainly about Syria," Netanyahu said.

"Our policy is clear," he added. "We strongly oppose the military buildup of Iran and its proxies, first and foremost Hezbollah in Syria, and we will do everything necessary to maintain Israel's security."

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