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Israel's appetite for Syrian spoils

As Washington and Moscow are now working closely on drawing a plan for the endgame on Syria, regional powers are increasing their push for their own desired outcomes. This month Israel has raised its voice demanding international recognition of its sovereignty over the Golan Heights, a fertile area captured from Syria in the June 1967 war.

The demands were made public by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu during an extraordinary cabinet meeting conveyed on April 17th in the Golan Heights themselves when he declared that Israel will permanently remain in the Heights. It was the first meeting ever hold there, where, according to Prime Minister Netanyahu's, 50.000 Israeli settlers reside.

As Syria's sovereignty is at its weakest, Netanyahu is determined to advance his interests before the plans are drawn. This is an unprecedented opportunity for Israel as no Syrian government would be able to engage in negotiations over the Golan Heights' destiny in the foreseeable future. Not only, Israel is also able to play the security card since it is evident that no Syrian party is prepared to recognize Israeli sovereignty or right to security. Both the opposition leader Riyad Farid Hijab and Syria's UN Ambassador Bashar al-Jaafari found themselves in unusual agreement rejecting Netanyahu's claims. Hijab, there to

represent the Sunni Islamists, needs to stir clear of Netanyahu not to lose its wide and diversified support base. Al-Jaafari represents a regime that has made of its rejecting Israel's right to exist an element of pride for decades.

Unsurprisingly Netanyahu's assertions provoked a bitter response from the United Nations which recalled unanimously a 1981 resolution rejecting Israeli sovereignty over the disputed land. Aware of the UN positions, Netanyahu re-directed his words at the US and, in particular, at the Russians. Notwithstanding a steel alliance, frustration with the Israeli leader runs deep in Washington. There has been through the years a consistent divide between President Barack Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu's strategic visions. The Obama administration had put the Middle East Peace process high on the agenda, and was persuaded that pulling Netanyahu to compromising was possible. However, as it became clear with the spectacular failure of the Obama administration's initial demand for a complete settlement freeze, this was a miscalculation. Moreover, the Obama administration has chosen to be little involved in the Syrian war and this is perceived as a relative weakness in the ability to draw a post-war plan.

On the contrary Moscow, since the decisive Russian intervention on behalf of the Assad regime last year, is perceived in the region to retain a heavier diplomatic weight to play in the Syrian game. This is also why Netanyahu visited Moscow on April 21, meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin about protecting and advancing Israel's interests in Syria. Not only about the Golan Heights, but also on keeping, relatively, in check Iran's influence on the country - a goal shared also by Putin, an Iranian ally in the short term as much as a long-term competitor.

Finally, there might be an interesting supporter of Netanyahu's aspirations over the Golan Heights: France. There have been rumors that France and Egypt are in the process of submitting a resolution to the UN Security Council, that will propose a two-state solution based on the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative with a border along the 1967 lines and a one-year timeline leading to Palestinian statehood. Leaks have it that the French government will propose to put on the table the Golan Heights as an incentive for the Israelis to accept the resolution. At least at a public level, the proposition of placing the Golan Heights out of the territories-for-peace equation would render Israeli support for a two-state solution more plausible.

However this reasoning could hardly work out as planned. First of all, Prime Minister Netanyahu is persuaded that Moscow's intervention could get him sovereignty on the Heights without compromise. Secondly, the Obama presidency is in its final months, and whomever his successor would be, the next administration seems set to be a far more pro-Israeli one. To sum up, Netanyahu and his party are set to emerge from the Syrian war unscathed, winners and without firing a shot.