

Netanyahu says Israel won't allow Syria military forces south of Damascus



Netanyahu has demanded the 'full demilitarisation' of southern Syria, where Israel has illegally

expanded its forces.
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Tel Aviv, February 23 (RHC)-- Israel will not allow the new Syrian government's military forces to operate in territory south of Syria's capital Damascus, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has warned.

Addressing a military ceremony in Israel on Sunday, Netanyahu demanded the "full demilitarisation of southern Syria from troops of the new Syrian regime in the Quneitra, Daraa and Suweyda provinces".

"We will not allow forces from the HTS organisation or the new Syrian army to enter the area south of Damascus," Netanyahu said, referring to the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham group, which spearheaded the offensive that toppled longtime Syrian leader President Bashar al-Assad last December.

He also warned that Israel would not accept any threats to the Druze community in Syria, who live in the Golan Heights, a Syrian territory illegally occupied by Israel, and other parts of southwestern Syria.

Israel has taken advantage of al-Assad's fall to expand into a buffer zone between the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights and southern Syria, breaching a United Nations agreement brokered in 1974.

The Druze are a religious minority found across several countries in the region. In Syria, many have expressed their opposition to Israeli expansion into the southwest of the country, and thousands living in the occupied Golan Heights have refused to take Israeli citizenship.

However, in Israel, the majority of the Druze population supports the Israeli state and men are conscripted into the military.

Israel occupies approximately two-thirds of the Golan Heights, with the UN-administered buffer zone spanning a narrow, 400-square-kilometre (154-sq-mile) area. The rest has been controlled by Syria.

In 1974, Israel and Syria struck a ceasefire agreement that determined the Golan Heights would be a demilitarised buffer zone. But shortly after the fall of al-Assad last December, the Israeli military moved within the buffer zone and has carried out hundreds of air strikes on Syrian military assets.

Israel has justified its attacks on Syria for years by claiming it is eliminating Iranian military targets. However, Iran has said none of its forces are currently in Syria, and the new Syrian government has indicated it has no desire to fight Israel.

Israeli forces have currently established two posts on Syria's Mount Hermon and seven others in the buffer zone, Israeli Defence Minister Israel Katz said.

On Sunday, Netanyahu said that Israeli forces would remain on Mount Hermon and in a buffer zone in the occupied Golan Heights for "for an indefinite period to protect our communities and thwart any threat."

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