

Iran & Syria reconstruct military as Russia plans massive war game in mid Sept

Newsletter Tuesday August 28, 2018

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Iran, Syria seal military reconstruction agreement

Iranian Defense Minister Amir Hatami greenlights deal meant to send a message of increased military cooperation between Tehran and Damascus in wake of Israeli, American demand that Iran remove its forces from the war-torn country, Syrian official says.

Eli Leon, News Agencies and Israel Hayom Staff

Syrian Defense Minister Ali Abdullah Ayyoub and Iranian Defense Minister Amir Hatami in Damascus, Monday | Photo: AFP

Iran and Syria on Monday signed a deal for military cooperation as part of which the Islamic republic has pledged to rebuild the Syrian army, which has been severely drained by the seven-year civil war in the country, Iranian state media reported.

Iranian Defense Minister Amir Hatami traveled to Damascus on Sunday for a two-day visit, where he met Syrian President Bashar Assad, Syrian Defense Minister Ali Abdullah Ayyoub and other military officials.

The precise details of the agreement were not announced.

The Syrian government does not release casualty numbers, but monitoring groups say the Syrian army has suffered tens of thousands of casualties since

"We hope to have a productive role in the reconstruction of Syria," Hatami said on arrival in Syria, according to Fars News.

Iran has previously made commitments to help rebuild Syria, including the construction of some 20,000 housing units.

AFP

Iranian Defence Minister Amir Hatami and Syrian counterpart Ali Abdullah Ayyoub sign the military reconstruction deal in Damascus, Monday

The announcement comes as the U.S. is toughening its stance on Iran's support for Assad's government.

The White House has demanded that Iran extract itself from Syria as an essential precondition to lifting sanctions that went into effect earlier this month.

Israel has also been critical of Iran's expanding role in Syria, saying it will not tolerate a permanent Iranian military presence near its northern frontiers.

Iran has been an essential backer of Syria's government in the civil war now in its seventh year, providing advisers, military supplies, training and thousands of militiamen to fight alongside the Syrian army.

Hatami on Monday again dismissed the U.S. and Israel's criticism, saying Iran was in Syria at Assad's invitation.

Assad, who has ruled with an iron fist since inheriting the presidency from his father in 2000, now looks safe in his post but he rules over a shattered country.

Hatami said Syria's government is now in a stronger position and warned against any "foreign aggression" against Syria.

The Iranian defense minister told the Hezbollah-affiliated Al Mayadeen TV station that Tehran will work to rehabilitate Syria's military industries as well as the Syrian armed forces.

A senior Syrian official told Russian news agency Sputnik that Hatami's visit was not just about the reconstruction of Syria following the civil war, but also meant to send a message of increased military cooperation between Tehran and Damascus in response to Israel and American demands to remove Iranian forces from Syria.

Also on Monday, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and U.S. President Donald Trump shared concerns about developments in Syria, especially the humanitarian situation in the region around Idlib, their offices said on Monday after the leaders spoke by telephone.

"Both leaders called for international action to prevent a humanitarian crisis in Idlib Province," White House spokeswoman Sarah Sanders said in a statement.

"Russia is called upon to act in a moderating manner on the Syrian government and prevent a further escalation," Merkel's spokesman, Steffen Seibert, said in a statement.

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| Netanyahu says Likud party aiming for 40 Knesset seats in next election

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu meets with Likud-affiliated heads of local councils, promises support in municipal elections in October • Political insiders say PM sending a message to the coalition that he is not afraid to call for early elections.

Mati Tuchfeld

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu during the campaign for the 2015 Knesset election | Photo: Gideon Markowicz

The Likud party has set its sights on winning 40 seats in the next Knesset election, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Monday at a conference of Likud mayors and local council heads held in Ramat Gan, in central Israel.

"In the upcoming municipal elections [on Oct. 30] we'll bolster the Likud nationwide. We'll do it thanks to the enormous support of the Israeli public, which sees our great achievements in the general [Knesset] election," Netanyahu said.

When asked about the status of **the next Knesset election, currently scheduled to be held on Nov. 5, 2019**, the prime minister said, "I don't know exactly when it will take place. Thirty-five seats is a reasonable number, [but] our goal is 40 – that's where we're aiming.

"God willing and with your help, the Likud faction will go sky-high. Good luck in the upcoming elections – we'll support you and help you. Let's see a big victory!"

The Likud has been the clear frontrunner in recent polls, which predict the party winning 30 to 33 seats. Polls conducted by the Likud party show it winning a higher number of seats.

Some political insiders have claimed that Netanyahu made his remarks, which were the opposite of the line he took in the previous election, warning that the Likud could lose control of the government, to send a signal to the coalition partners that he is not worried at the prospect of an early election that an early election could be prevented through a consensus agreement on the volatile issue of haredi military conscription.

In recent weeks, Netanyahu has been letting heads of coalition parties know that while he wants the next Knesset election to be held as close as possible to its scheduled date next November, he will not go into an election having failed to pass the haredi conscription bill. Therefore, he is asking the coalition partners to reach agreements on the issue during the upcoming recess, before the Knesset's winter session launches after the High Holidays.

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Report: **US offers to pull out of Syria if Iran leaves country's south**

American team secretly visited Damascus in July, says Hezbollah-affiliated newspaper • The U.S. also wants its energy companies to have access to eastern Syria, and intelligence on possible terrorists • Assad regime reportedly rejects the proposal.

Israel Hayom Staff

A U.S soldier in the Syrian town of Darbasiya, near the Turkish border | Archives:
Reuters

The United States has reportedly told the Assad regime it will remove its forces from Syria if Iran removes its forces from the country's south, where it borders Israel and Jordan, Israeli public broadcaster Kan reported on Tuesday.

The report first appeared in the Beirut-based Hezbollah-affiliated Al-Akhbar daily newspaper.

The Americans, according to Al-Akhbar, also asked that American energy companies be allowed to pursue oil interests in eastern Syria, and asked the Assad regime for intelligence information on terror suspects who could act in Western countries.

The Syrian regime rejected the American proposal, Al-Akhbar reported.

In July, a delegation of American intelligence officers secretly visited Damascus, the report said. The delegation is said to have met with Ali Mamlouk, head of the country's national security bureau.

Mamlouk allegedly told **the Americans that their presence in the country equated to "occupation,"** and that if they entered the country uninvited they should leave it in the same fashion.

According to Al-Akhbar, Mamlouk also rejected the request to remove Iranian forces from southern Syria.

"The American proposal won't change our position toward our allies," Mamlouk reportedly said, referring to Iran.

As for American energy interests, Mamlouk said companies from countries that fought against Syria wouldn't receive any benefits; but that the matter could be revisited once Syria's rehabilitation was underway. He also rejected the request to share intelligence information, citing the current state of diplomatic relations between the two countries.

AFP August 28, 2018, 9:38 AM

Russia to hold its biggest war games since the Cold War

A multiple rocket launcher system fires during the Zapad-2017 war games, held by Russian and Belarusian servicemen, at an undisclosed location in Belarus, September 17, 2017. REUTERS

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MOSCOW -- Russia will next month hold its biggest war games since at least the 1980s, with around 300,000 troops and 1,000 aircraft, the defence minister said Tuesday. The Vostok-2018 exercises will be carried out from September 11 to 15 in the country's east with the participation of China and Mongolia.

"This will be something of a repeat of Zapad-81, but in some senses even bigger," Sergei Shoigu said of the 1981 war games in Eastern Europe, in comments reported by Russian news agencies.

He said "more than 1,000 aircraft, almost 300,000 troops and almost all the ranges of the Central and Eastern military districts" would be involved in the exercises.

"Imagine 36,000 pieces of military equipment moving together at the same time -- tanks, armoured personnel carriers, infantry fighting vehicles. And all of this, of course, in conditions as close to combat as possible."

Moscow said last year's Zapad-2017 military drills, conducted in ally Belarus and regions of Russia, saw the participation of roughly 12,700 troops. But NATO claimed Russia could have been massively underreporting the scale of those exercises, which some of the alliance's eastern members said involved more than 100,000 servicemen.

The head of NATO's military committee said those war games could have been seen as "a serious preparation for a big war," despite Russian assurances they posed no threat.

Just days after Russia ended the Zapad-2017 exercises, thousands of Polish and other NATO troops launched major defensive exercises in Poland's north.

The Dragon-17 exercise involved some 17,000 land, air force and navy troops and some 3,500 units of equipment and ran for about a week -- the first time the biannual drill was joined by Poland's new Territorial Defense Forces, which train civilian volunteers to support regular troops.

Polish Deputy Defense Minister Michal Dworczyk visited the main site of land drills for Poland's biggest military exercise last year, saying they were of a defensive nature and contrasting them with the Russian maneuvers.

Dworczyk said the joint Russian-Belarusian war games had a "very clear offensive trait."

He said the NATO drills tested defensive operation between Polish troops and those deployed in Poland by NATO and by the U.S. in response to the region's concerns over Russia's military activity..