

As Russia Negotiates Separation of Forces in Syria, Netanyahu Threatens War Against Iran Over Yemeni Waterway

By [Richard Silverstein](#)

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[Tikun Olam](#)

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Featured image: Syrian government forces arrive at Quneitra crossing in Syrian Golan to resume control
(Source: Tikun Olam)

Just as Russia [doused a potential conflagration](#) over stationing of Iranian forces in the Syrian Golan, Bibi Netanyahu [lit sparks](#) in the south over a Houthi rocket attack on a Saudi oil tanker. For months, Israel has cajoled and threatened Russia into restraining Iran from stationing its forces in the Syrian Golan. As a result, the Russians have just successfully completed a meeting with Iran and Turkey, which guaranteed that Iranian forces and their Shiite militias will withdraw to 85 kilometers from the Golan armistice line. In exchange, Israel has been forced to accept the return of Syrian forces to this zone and the return of government control. Previously, the Golan had been controlled by Israeli Islamist allies, al-Nusra, which is affiliated with al Qaeda.

Israel had demanded that the Iranians withdraw completely from Syria, though this clearly was a non-starter. Later, it suggested the Iranians stay within 100 miles of the ceasefire line. It remains to be seen whether this will bring the desired quiet to this volatile front. Israel has mounted hundreds of air attacks on Iranian and Hezbollah positions inside the country. If it doesn't cease these assaults, then it could draw the Iranians back across the 85km line in response.

Netanyahu, whose premiership seems built upon the premise of constant war or threat of war, today turned to his southern flank. He told a military ceremony that if Iran's Houthi allies continued to threaten shipping in the Bab al Mandab waterway separating Yemen from the Horn of Africa, the IDF would join or lead a Sunni coalition which would break such a blockade and counter-attack against Iran. This is precisely the response Israel's Saudi allies expected when Houthi forces fired a missile at a Saudi oil tanker headed to Egypt.

It seems to me that we are now in a pre-WWI situation in the Middle East. There are primary enemies (Iran, Saudi Arabia and Israel) and there are secondary states allied with one side or the other: Yemen, Syria, Iraq vs. Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states, Egypt, Jordan and Israel. Not only can war break out due to a direct conflict between the primary parties; even an inadvertent provocation by one of the secondary allies could launch a major conflagration. This is precisely how WWI commenced with the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand by Serbian nationalists.

Imagine that Houthi missile actually blowing up the ship and its 2-million gallons of oil. Or imagine the assassination of a major figure in any of these countries. All it will take is a single spark to light this fuse. Unlike Donald Trump thus far, Netanyahu has shown himself ready and willing to take his country to war. At least twice earlier in his reign, he pressured his security cabinet to attack Iran. Both times, his military and security chiefs rose up and objected to such plans, and both times Netanyahu backed down. But clearly, he's itching to give Iran a bloody nose.

Of course the problem with this is that the result could be far worse than a bloody nose. In fact, the result could be rivers of blood: both Iranian and Israeli.

Today, The Intercept [revealed](#) that former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson nearly single-handedly talked the Saudi leadership out of invading Qatar shortly after it declared a blockade on the Gulf kingdom, which the Saudis saw as betraying their Sunni allegiance by sidling up to Iran over oil and gas deals. Until Tillerson intervened to prevent such an escalation, Pres. Trump seemed only too happy not just to side with the Saudis in the conflict, but to permit a major military invasion of Qatar. It was only after his secretary of state's efforts bore fruit and the Saudis stood down from launching their war plans that Trump switched gears and toned down his anti-Qatar rhetoric.

If there had been such a war, it's entirely possible that Iran would have sided with Qatar. Turkey too supported the Qataris in this episode. Would either or both of them have provided military support or even troops to support the Qataris? Even if the Saudis had succeeded initially in taking over Qatar, it's unlikely this would have been the end of things. The Qataris would have continued to resist foreign occupation. Their allies would provide logistical and military support. At that point, the Saudis would have had two huge headaches on their hands: Yemen, where they've killed over 50,000 Yemenis; and Qatar. These are just the sorts of misadventures which are likely to lead to full-scale region-wide military conflict.

Someone has to be the adult in this situation and hold up their hand and say: Stop! Luckily for us, Tillerson was that person. For his troubles, the Saudis and UAE ganged up on him and demanded that Trump fire him, which he later dutifully did. Given the largesse that these two states have thrown around Washington during the Trump administration, I have little doubt that a backroom deal involving consulting contracts and other forms of largesse greased the skids on the Tillerson firing. It remains for Bob Mueller and enterprising journalists to offer us further revelations on this score.

Speculate for a second what might have happened if, instead of Rex Tillerson and H.R. McMaster running the show, it had been Mike Pompeo and John Bolton. Given Pompeo and Bolton's hankering for regime change in Iran, there is no chance they would have pursued the path the fired secretary of state did. If anything, they would have piled fuel on the fire and given their blessings to yet another Saudi military adventure-intervention. God help us if it comes to this again. There will be war in the region and we will be partners in the slaughter.

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