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Russian Ambassador Defends Iran's Role in Syria on Israeli TV

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Anatoly Viktorov (Sergei Fadeichev / TASS)

Russia cannot compel Iranian forces to quit Syria, Moscow's ambassador to Tel Aviv said on Monday, rebuffing Israel's long-standing demand that it should work to ensure their total withdrawal from the country.

"They are playing a very, very important role in our common and joint effort to eliminate terrorists in Syria," Ambassador Anatoly Viktorov told Israel's Channel 10 television in an interview.

"That is why, for this period of time, we see as non-realistic any demands to expel any foreign troops from the entirety of the Syrian Arab Republic," he said.

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"We can talk with our Iranian partners very frankly and openly, trying to persuade them to do

or not to do something," he said. But asked whether Russia can force Iran out, he answered: "We cannot."

While formally neutral in the seven-year-old civil war next door, Israel has carried out scores of air strikes against suspected emplacements or arms transfers by Iranian or Lebanese Hezbollah guerrillas in Syria, apparently unimpeded by the Russian defence systems deployed there.

A military hotline Israel and Russia set up in 2015 has also helped to the countries avoid inadvertently clashing over Syria.

Viktorov expressed disapproval of the attacks on Syria, but added: "We cannot dictate to Israel how to proceed ... It is not up to Russia to give Israel freedom to do anything, or to prohibit Israel to do anything."

Reuters contributed reporting.

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