



THE GROWING RISK OF AN ISRAEL-IRAN CONFRONTATION IN SYRIA

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IN RECENT MONTHS, tensions have been building on Israel's northern fronts with Syria and Lebanon. As Iran works diligently to fill the void created by the defeat of the Islamic State—"ISIS out, Iran in," as Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu put it—Israel feels compelled to broaden its stated redlines in Syria and act on them. This feeling is also informed by the limited U.S. response to Iran's aggressive stance in Syria, tantamount to letting Israel deal with Iran and its proxies almost on its own, and the essential legitimization by Russia's political initiative of an enduring Iranian presence in the country. The result is a growing risk of confrontation between Israel and the Iran-led camp in this theater.



Iran's Schemes

In Israel, much attention has centered lately on Iranian plans for the post-Islamic State era, especially the establishment of a sphere of direct influence stretching from its borders to the Mediterranean, and the consolidation of a military front against Israel in Syria and Lebanon. According to Israeli intelligence publicly discussed by its leaders, Iranian plans to entrench in Syria and consolidate an anti-Israel military front there include long-term military strongholds, a permanently deployed and legitimized proxy army—adding to existing ones in Iraq and Lebanon—and the creation of industrial military facilities for the production of accurate rockets in Syria and Lebanon.

The first particular concern focuses on Iran's attempt to establish a "land corridor" in the heart of the Middle East—from Iran through Iraq and Syria to the Mediterranean—with one tentacle facing Israel in southern Syria and another stretching toward the Shia-populated parts of the Gulf. This corridor is a means toward establishing a contiguous sphere of direct Iranian influence in Mesopotamia and the Levant, based on and further consolidating Iran's significant sway over the governments of Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, sizable proxy forces, Iranian military anchors across the region, and demographic changes on the ground. Notwithstanding inherent vulnerabilities, this corridor could enable Iran to enhance its political, military, and economic power in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon and more effectively project it, including arming, empowering, and activating its proxies.

Second, the Islamic Republic seeks a long-term military and economic¹ presence in Syria with the formal approval of an ever more dependent Assad regime. Iranian military plans include a naval base/wharf on Mediterranean shores, not far from the Russian base in Tartus, an air base near Damascus, and a ground base for armed sectarian forces under Iranian command south of Damascus. On November 11, 2017, the BBC released satellite imagery of construction at an unused Syrian ground base, which is believed by Western intelligence to be managed by Iran for this purpose. The base is located near al-Kiswah, south of Damascus and some fifty kilometers away from the Israel-controlled Golan Heights. On the night of December 1–2, this base was targeted and partly destroyed by a strike widely attributed to Israel.

Third, Iran strives to build and permanently deploy in Syria a sizable armed contingent, or proxy army, as part of the so-called resistance axis. Throughout the Syrian war and as the Syrian army was wearing down, ultimately shrinking to one-third its original size, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps—Qods Force (IRGC-QF) built and increasingly leaned on semiregular militia forces. These include an estimated 100,000 Syrians who made up the pro-regime, locally based National Defense Forces (NDF), fashioned after the Iranian paramilitary Basij forces. No less important are the non-Syrian militias of about 20,000–25,000 Shia fighters belonging to Lebanese Hezbollah, Iraqi militias (Popular Mobilization Forces [PMF] elements now referred to as Haydariyoun), the Afghani Fatemiyoun brigade, and the Pakistani Zainabiyoun brigade—all deployed and commanded by an Iranian contingent of 1,000–2,000 military personnel. It is not clear if and to what extent these non-Syrian militias will stay in Syria over the long term. However, Iran is now working to establish a "Syrian Hezbollah," comprising tens of thousands of mostly Shia and Alawite members.

Iran is likewise encouraging the Syrian regime to institutionalize such a proxy force, probably as part of or alongside the NDF. Yet the Islamic Republic is driven by a rationale different from that of the Russians, who have been urging Assad to integrate NDF and other militia forces into the Syrian army through such instruments as the newly formed volunteer Fifth Assault Corps. While Russia seeks to revitalize the regime's tools of enforcement, Iran appears to want to replicate Iraq's PMF and maintain its own effective control over these forces, which it could also use during hostilities with Israel. These forces would provide Iran with an important postwar instrument of power, alternative to the regime's, while typically minimizing its own deployment of forces.

Finally, Iran has taken steps to establish military-industrial facilities in Syria and Lebanon, especially production lines for the development of high-accuracy rockets for Hezbollah, as part of a broader "precision project" for Iranian missiles and rockets.

Israel views all such moves as a major long-term strategic threat.² If realized, they would not only turn Syria into an Iranian protectorate but also entrench Iran—a regime sworn to Israel's destruction—in a neighboring country, thereby enabling it to transform Syria into a terrorist and military front against Israel, and increasing direct Israel-Iran friction.

Reflecting current thinking within Israel's security establishment, Minister of Defense Avigdor Liberman recently stated that in a possible future military confrontation in its north, Israel will face not only an active Lebanese front but a Syrian one as well, with these two combining into a unified northern front against Israel. In such a "northern war" (a term Israeli military planners now prefer to "third Lebanon war"), Israel expects to encounter battle-hardened Hezbollah—a militia turned military force—a "Syrian Hezbollah," other "Shia legions,"³ along with a rehabilitated Syrian army. These forces will all rely on the Iranian military presence, military infrastructure, and a substantial rocket arsenal, adding to Hezbollah's current arsenal of about 120,000 rockets in Lebanon. Israeli officials do not rule out support by the Lebanese Armed Forces for Lebanese Hezbollah in such a war, given increasingly close relations between the two entities.

It is against this background that in September, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) conducted its biggest military exercise in decades focusing on northern war scenarios. Moreover, Defense Minister Liberman recently demanded a significant increase in the defense budget to address these emerging threats, including the potential formation of a significant Israeli rocket and missile force to counter the Iranian one.

Where Are the United States and Russia?

Israel understands that countering the schemes of Iran and its proxies beyond Israel's immediate borders is a major challenge. Particular reasons include the determined Iranian push for regional hegemony, the volume of its plans and activities in Syria and Lebanon, an emboldened Syrian regime yoked to Iran, and the reluctance by the United States and Russia to take significant proactive steps to stop Iran from further entrenching itself in Syria.

The Trump administration appears to be clear-eyed about Iran's hegemonic ambitions in the region in general and in the Levant in particular and supports Israel's deterrent activities against them, yet some in Jerusalem are concerned over whether Washington will devise and implement serious, continuous action of its own as part of a comprehensive strategy to counter malign Iranian regional activities. Quite possibly, the inclination within the administration to settle for the defeat of the Islamic

State, prioritize other policy issues, and limit the U.S. role in Syria will prevail. Among policy circles in Israel, most hold the impression that the United States is basically resigned to Russia's leading role in Syria and will minimize its own role, maintaining a limited presence in the country and cosponsoring de-escalation efforts in southern Syria.

With Russia—since its military deployment in Syria in late 2015 in support of President Bashar al-Assad and his allies—Israel has managed to establish a close, productive leadership dialogue, including the first ever visit of a Russian defense minister to Israel, in mid-October, and an effective bilateral military deconfliction mechanism. Russia has accepted and respected Israel's redlines in Syria (discussed below), publicly remaining silent whenever Israel has acted on them, while protesting only privately in cases of perceived danger to Russian soldiers and assets. But whereas this and other Russian positions—e.g., openness to a more decentralized system in Syria—suggest divergences from Iran, Russia's interests are, by comparison, far less aligned with Israel's. Russia still needs Iran in Syria and beyond, and would not abandon its partnership with the Iranian regime, which could explain its public insistence on the legitimacy of Iran's presence in Syria. Russia may try to curb Iranian ambitions, but probably would opt to do so partially, shy away from the public eye and from direct confrontation, and only brandish Israel's deterrent activities when convenient to restrain Iran and the Assad regime. According to Israeli officials, Russia is unhappy with Iranian plans for a naval base close to its own or a ground base close to Israel, while Russia's position on an Iranian air base is less clear. It remains to be seen if and to what extent Russia is willing to actively intervene to block these and other Iranian designs.

In July 2017, the United States, Russia, and Jordan agreed to establish a de-escalation zone in the three governorates facing Israel and Jordan in southwest Syria.⁴ The November 8 Memorandum of Principles put forth by the three countries stipulated the "reduction and ultimate elimination of foreign forces and foreign fighters from the area"—at this phase distancing the non-Syrian forces such as Iran, Hezbollah, and other Shia militias to 5 kilometers from the existing buffer lines between the rebel forces and the Syrian army. This means that in most of the Golan Heights Iran and its non-Syrian proxies will be 15–30 kilometers away from Israel's border, depending on geography and deploy-

ment of forces, and in the northern Heights, where Hezbollah is present, about 5 kilometers—with both ranges falling far short of Israel’s demand for a 50–60 kilometer buffer. The United States promised Israel that it would work, in future phases, to widen the buffer zone and push Iranian forces and their proxies further back toward Damascus, but such an outcome is far from assured.

Moreover, the Memorandum of Principles does not address the potential of an incremental, below-the-radar increase in the presence and infrastructure of Iranian and affiliated Shia militias in the south, including Syrian elements affiliated with the IRGC.⁵ Such a development is likely to occur over time, shepherded by the Syrian regime as it strives to reassert its sovereignty in southern Syria against remaining pockets of jihadists and weakened rebel groups.⁶ This explains why Israel was quick to announce in both July and November that it is not bound by the de-escalation agreement and will maintain its freedom of action amid emerging threats.

With respect to Israel-Jordan ties, notwithstanding close bilateral security coordination on Syria and other regional challenges, the two countries diverge somewhat on the de-escalation agreement. Jordan is definitely concerned about Iran and its proxies deploying forces close to its border, as it is about the Islamic State. However, Jordan is ready to accept a return of the Syrian regime in southern Syria under U.S. and Russian assurances, with the aims of reopening its border with Syria for the flow of essential trade and mitigating the pressure from refugees along the joint border. For Israel, the Syrian regime is likely to come with an unacceptable Iranian package, posing a challenge to Israel.

Israel’s Evolving Redlines

Israel has been very careful not to be dragged into the Syrian war, and has succeeded thus far. At the same time, Israel has articulated a number of redlines whose crossing would trigger military action—and repeatedly acted on them. These redlines center specifically on the potential emergence of a reality in southern Syria, close to Israel’s border, threatening to Israel’s security; the acquisition of strategic weapons by Hezbollah; and threats to Israel’s freedom of operational action, especially overflights in Lebanon. In line with changes on the ground, Israel’s redlines have evolved, most notably in the past year as the tide of war turned in favor of Assad

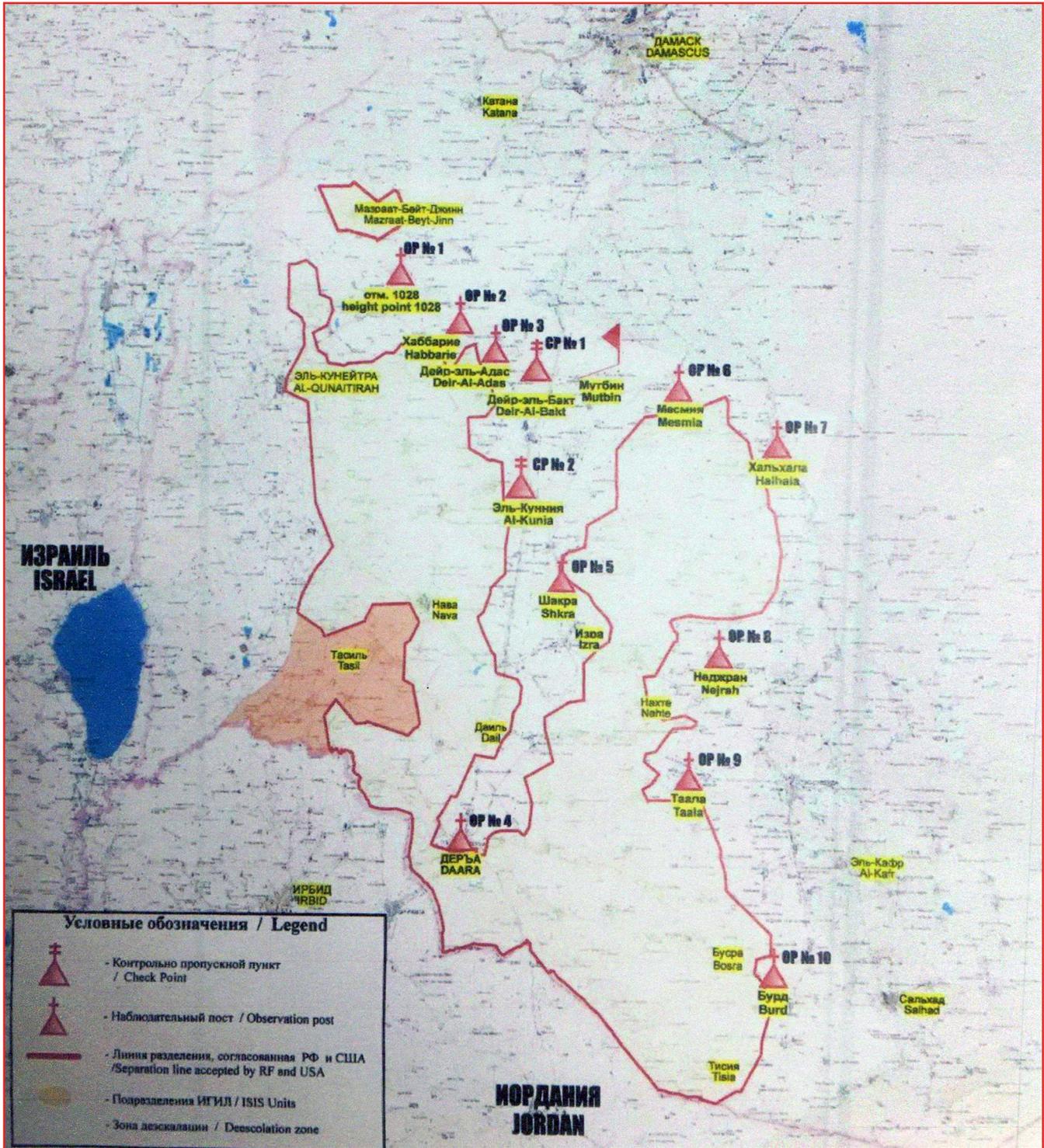
and his supporters, enabling Iran to advance its long-term plans.

In ***southern Syria***, Israel is bent on preventing cross-border threats, attacks, and firing into Israeli territory. To discourage any temptation to target it, Israel has made a point of responding to even unintended fire into its territory. When forces from the Iran-Syria axis pushed militarily toward its border in early 2015, Israel articulated and enforced another redline in this area—namely, preventing the establishment of an Iranian/Shia operational stronghold. According to media reports, in January 2015 Israel targeted a convoy carrying an Iranian general and Hezbollah operatives touring the south for this purpose and, on different occasions, other IRGC-affiliated elements active in this region. In late October 2017, the Israeli defense establishment exposed the identity of Hezbollah’s commander of southern Syria, Munir Ali Naim Sh’aito, thereby delivering a warning message to him and those he represents.

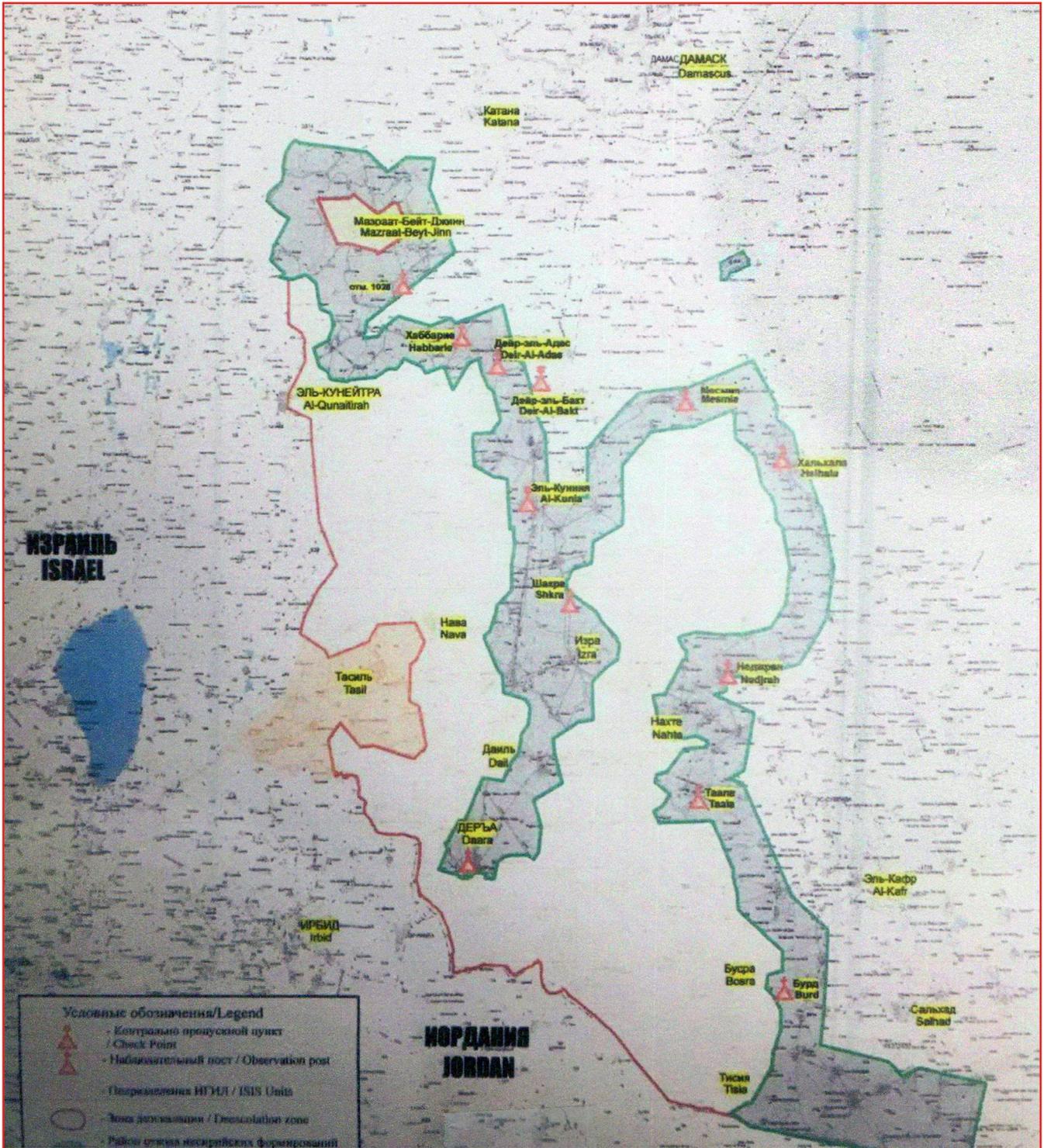
In recent months, as the Syrian regime resumed its interest in southern Syria, Israel has additionally insisted that the 1974 Agreement on Disengagement between Israel and Syria be upheld and serve as an integral part of any political solution. The agreement established a buffer zone (Area of Separation) between Israeli and Syrian military forces as well as zones with limitations on troops and weapons on both sides, to be monitored by the UN Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF). In line with this position, the IDF intercepted a Syrian drone flying over the Area of Separation and twice fired at Syrian forces working to establish military positions in violation of the agreement.

Regarding the ***armament of Hezbollah***, Israel defined as a redline the shipment of strategic “balance breaking” weapons systems—e.g., accurate surface-to-surface rockets, sophisticated antiship and anti-aircraft missiles, and nonconventional capabilities—from and through Syria to Hezbollah in Lebanon, which could significantly affect a future Israel-Hezbollah confrontation. While Israel has not assumed responsibility for any specific preventive strike, it did publicly acknowledge that it had taken such action on numerous occasions. The IDF’s outgoing Israeli Air Force commander, Maj. Gen. Amir Eshel, disclosed that in the last few years the air force had carried out close to a hundred attacks against arms convoys and caches, mostly related to Hezbollah. This was done based on the doctrinal concept developed by the IDF of a “campaign between the

RUSSIAN MAP OF SOUTHERN SYRIA DE-ESCALATION ZONE 1



RUSSIAN MAP OF SOUTHERN SYRIA DE-ESCALATION ZONE 2



wars” (termed *mabam* in Hebrew), designed to thwart the acquisition by enemies of strategic capabilities and to enhance Israel’s deterrence without triggering escalation toward a major armed conflict.

In the last year, this redline evolved to include the establishment of industrial production lines for such strategic capabilities in Syria and Lebanon. Israel is particularly focused on Iran’s “precision project,” designed to produce within a number of years thousands of high-accuracy missiles and rockets. This arsenal would put in Hezbollah’s hands thousands of accurate rockets with a range of 100–500 kilometers, backed by hundreds of accurate missiles in Iran itself with up to a 2,000-kilometer range.⁷ Iran has already mastered the knowledge to transform inaccurate rockets and missiles into accurate ones (e.g., turning the Fateh-110 into Raad rockets or the Shahab-3 into Imad missiles), employing the Russian GPS system known as GLONASS and other technical means. The Islamic Republic would now like to introduce such capabilities to the Syrian and Lebanese theaters and create indigenous lines of production where precision kits would be assembled and fitted to Hezbollah’s rockets, thereby granting them accuracy and skipping the current more complex, riskier course of shipping these capabilities from Iran.

Such an arsenal would enable Israel’s enemies to target, in times of war, extremely sensitive and strategically important sites, such as those associated with government, command-and-control, infrastructure, and the military, thereby exacting a heavy price and threatening Israel’s ability to conduct the war effectively and win it decisively. From an Israeli perspective, such a reality is intolerable, especially since Israel may not gain the capabilities to intercept the range of Hezbollah’s deadly incoming rockets before Iran’s “precision project” comes to fruition.

This may explain the September 7, 2017, strike, widely attributed to Israel, on a military facility known as Factory 4000 in Masyaf/Hama, in northwest Syria, belonging to the Syrian Scientific Studies and Research Center (CERS). This facility is believed by Israeli and Western intelligence services to have been dedicated, among other things, to the Iran-Hezbollah precision project, alongside producing chemical capabilities for military purposes. The strike deviated from the previous pattern of targeting arms convoys and caches by targeting a Syrian state development-and-production facility—and not far from the Russian military deployment.

On December 4, another CERS development-and-production facility was targeted, this time in the area of Jamraya, near Damascus.⁸

In light of the Iranian thrust, Israel has in recent months expanded its “zone of unacceptability” in Syria to include Iranian long-term military deployment and infrastructure as represented by the abovementioned Iranian plans. Israeli political and military leaders have been careful, however, not to elaborate specific redlines in this regard. Prime Minister Netanyahu, Defense Minister Liberman, and IDF chief of staff Lt. Gen. Gadi Eisenkot, in his exceptional interview with the Saudi-controlled media outlet Elaph, all warned in general terms that Israel will not “accept”/“allow”/“agree” to Iran entrenching itself militarily in Syria and turning it into a “forward operating base against Israel.” Netanyahu vowed on a number of occasions that Israel will “work to stop it,” “resist it,” and “not let that happen,” and he informed international colleagues that any Iranian military stronghold within the confines of this general definition would become a legitimate target. Still, he stopped short of explicitly drawing a redline defined in specific terms.

Presumably, this line of rhetoric is meant to serve deterrence while allowing Israel sufficient flexibility in deciding when and where to act. In essence, it reflects a likely future Israeli dilemma regarding where exactly to draw the line between required prevention and undesired escalation. Referring to this question in a BBC interview on November 5, Netanyahu explained that “the more we are prepared to stop it, the less likely we’ll have to resort to much greater things,” and that his guiding principle is “to nip bad things in their bud.” The earlier-discussed December 1–2 strike on the ground base near al-Kiswah attributed to Israel possibly offers a good example; first, it was marked by media exposure and then targeted while still under construction, before it was manned.

For Israel, the risk of escalation in Syria has remained low as long as the war raged and the relevant actors were heavily enough involved that they could not afford to open another front with Israel, a strong actor. But such risk of escalation is likely to increase as the war nears an end, de-escalation and political solutions dictate the agenda, an emboldened Syrian regime regains control over most of the country, and Iran entrenches itself more deeply in the area. In such a context, Israeli preventive measures are likely to incur bold responses

from the Iran-Syria camp, and possibly Russian pressure for Israeli restraint so as to avoid escalation and the undermining of a Russian-led political process.

Indeed, earlier in 2017, the Syrian regime began responding to perceived Israeli strikes by firing in the direction of Israeli planes. While not endangering the planes, these actions signaled growing boldness and inclination to respond, prompting an Israeli decision to retaliate to any such firing, with the aim of definitively protecting its freedom of operation—including against the introduction and use of sophisticated air-defense capabilities—another Israeli redline. For this reason, in October the IDF destroyed one of the radars of a Syrian air-defense battery that had fired at Israeli planes on a routine reconnaissance mission in Lebanon—all while Russia's defense minister was visiting Israel. Following that incident, the chief of staff of the Iranian armed forces, Maj. Gen. Mohammad Bagheri, then visiting Syria, warned that Israel could not be allowed to freely operate in Syria. One should thus assume that Iran and Syria are now seeking ways to create counter-deterrence vis-a-vis Israel, which in turn could add fuel to the sizzling fire.

To be sure, Israel's actions in Syria have sent a meaningful deterrent message to all relevant actors, especially Iran and the Assad regime, constituting a powerful tool against Iranian plans. For now, they allow the United States to "outsource" to Israel the bulk of kinetic efforts to confront Iran in Syria, and provide Russia with a restraining lever with respect to Iran and Hezbollah. Ironically, and inadvertently, some such measures could even serve Assad's basic postwar interest to curb the overwhelming Iranian influence in his shattered country.

But as the risks of friction with Iran grow in Syria, Israel will have to more carefully assess the delicate balance of deterrence in order to avert a major military escalation or turn Russia against it—both highly undesired outcomes from Israel's standpoint. A growing challenge to Israel's stated redlines will call for a more conscientious definition of what constitutes a *real*, not rhetorical, redline whose crossing would justify action

even at the risk of major military escalation, or tension with Russia. If Israel feels a certain Iranian move is likely to develop into an intolerable challenge in a future confrontation with Iran and Hezbollah, it would likely take action and risk confrontation now, on better terms, rather than later. Obviously, not all Iranian measures would justify such a response, but some would.

Israel faces no less of a dilemma in Lebanon, especially in its bid to prevent Iran's precision project from being implemented there. It is no coincidence that Israel has enforced its redlines against Hezbollah's strategic armament efforts—in Syria rather than in Lebanon. This is because, in Lebanon, Israel faces only an Iran-backed Hezbollah, rendering the risks of a response to an Israeli strike higher than in Syria.

Conclusion

The push by Iran to fill the void created by the defeat of the Islamic State looms large in Israel's strategic landscape. If the current trajectory persists, two determined actors—Israel and Iran—could increasingly face each other in Syria and eventually slide into brinkmanship, ultimately escalating to confrontation. Elevating the chances for miscalculation is a lack of clarity on Iran's redlines at this stage.

As the United States, Russia, and the international community work to foster a postwar calm and a stable political outcome in Syria, they must realize that an Iran deeply entrenched in Syria will act against such aims, while possibly leading to another violent eruption with regional consequences. In this context, a major policy challenge involves impelling Russia to take significant action on its divergent interests with Iran.

Ultimately, countering Iranian plans in Syria would be much better served if Israel's deterrent actions fit within a broader, proactive U.S. strategy to block Iran in the region, rather than Israel shouldering most of the burden alone. It is not too late to prevent further instability and escalation, calling for a coherent strategy and a U.S. leadership role.⁹ The writing is on the wall.

Notes

1. Iran is seeking a beneficial role for itself in Syria's postwar reconstruction efforts, eyeing among other opportunities Syria's rich phosphate mines.
2. Brig. Gen. (res.) Michael Herzog, *Amid De-Escalation in Southern Syria: How to Stop the Iranian Push for Regional Hegemony* (Britain Israel Communications and Research Centre, September 2017), <http://www.bicom.org.uk/analysis/strategic-assessment-southern-syria-stop-iranian-plan-regional-dominance/>.
3. In June 2017, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah publicly threatened that in a future war with Israel he would open Lebanon's borders to tens of thousands of fighters from Yemen, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, and Iraq. Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, deputy chief of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces, stated on record that should Nasrallah request PMF support for an armed conflict with Israel, he will get it. Earlier this year, PMF-affiliated Iraqi Shia militia Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba announced the creation of the Golan Liberation Army and then posted photos of it deploying in southeast Syria. And on December 9, 2017, Qais al-Khazali, leader of the Iraqi Shia militia Asaib Ahl al-Haqq, visited the Lebanon-Israel border accompanied by Hezbollah commanders.
4. Herzog, *Amid De-Escalation in Southern Syria*, <http://www.bicom.org.uk/analysis/strategic-assessment-southern-syria-stop-iranian-plan-regional-dominance/>.
5. According to Syrian opposition sources, an IRGC-affiliated "Battalion 313" is now being built in the southern province of Deraa.
6. There is a noticeable presence of an ISIS branch (Khalid ibn al-Walid Army) in the Yarmuk basin, in the border triangle between Syria, Jordan and Israel. There is a mixture of rebel groups in other parts of southern Syria facing Israel, including Hay'at al-Tahrir al-Sha'm (formerly Jabhat al-Nusra). Israel supports the non-jihadi groups mainly with humanitarian assistance.
7. Iran years ago extended the range of its missiles to 2,000 kilometers, with the aim of targeting Israel, in one case symbolically exhibiting a missile with the declared range of "1,948 kilometers," referencing the year of Israel's inception.
8. This facility was already targeted in early 2013, with the strike reportedly aimed at an arms cache or an arms convoy parked nearby.
9. For some policy recommendations to this end, see Herzog, *Amid De-Escalation in Southern Syria*, <http://www.bicom.org.uk/analysis/strategic-assessment-southern-syria-stop-iranian-plan-regional-dominance/>.

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