

The Next Mideast Explosion

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An all-out war between Iran and Israel is approaching, and the Trump administration has no strategy for preventing it.

The tinderbox that is the Middle East threatens to explode again. Consider what has happened in the last weeks: a direct military exchange in Syria between Israel and Iran; the president's walk away from the JCPOA, the Iran nuclear deal; the opening of the American embassy in Jerusalem; and the Hamas-driven demonstrations in Gaza that sought to breach the Israeli border but failed, resulting in dozens of Palestinian deaths.

None of these developments are likely to be limited in time or scope. If nothing else, they require a clear U.S. policy.

To date, what President Trump is offering is far more rhetorical than practical. It is too soon to know whether the arrival of a new secretary of state and national security adviser will change that. But unless we start trying constructively to shape events rather than reacting to them, and soon, the reality in the Middle East will surely worsen—and likely suck the United States in under worse circumstances.

Before we dive into the present conundrum, let's step back and assess the American approach to the region in recent years. For understandable reasons, both the Obama and Trump administrations have focused heavily on defeating ISIS. That fight was necessary, and, particularly over the past year, has paid dividends. But while our attention was riveted on ISIS, Iran has been expanding its reach. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei now refers to Syria and Lebanon as part of Iran's forward defense. Iran is not just entrenching itself in Syria, it is building a land bridge from Iran to the Mediterranean, going through Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. It is using Shia militia proxies from as far away as Afghanistan and Pakistan in Syria.

Of course, Hezbollah remains its preferred proxy, with a presence of 7,000 fighters in Syria, and a training, weapons assembly, and military support role in Yemen and Iraq. Hezbollah works closely with the Qods Forces, the action

arm of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, in all these areas. Iran's material support for Hezbollah has varied—when it was under heavy UN sanctions, it dropped to about \$200 million a year and after the JCPOA it has risen back to roughly \$800 million.

Trump likes to blame Obama's Iran deal for all this Iranian meddling, but that's a highly simplistic interpretation. The fact is, Iran has been getting more aggressive on Trump's watch, and his administration has done next to nothing to stop it. In fact, by ceding much of Syria to Russia, on at least one front, he has helped embolden the mullahs in Tehran.

Iran's preference for working through proxies and threatening others indirectly has been the norm. But in February of this year, the Qods Forces acted out of character: they sent an armed drone into Israeli airspace from Syria. By sending their own drone, the Qods Forces chose to challenge the Israelis directly.

Israel, recognizing that a threshold was being crossed, reacted by shooting down the drone and taking out the Iranian command-and-control vans that launched and guided drones from their T-4 base in central Syria. Upon losing one of its F-16s over Israeli airspace to a barrage of surface-to-air missiles, Israel then took out nearly half of Syria's air defenses without losing any other aircraft. The Israelis were trying to signal to the Iranians—and the Russians—that they would not tolerate Iran threatening them more directly.

But this was just a prelude to the more recent military exchange. On April 9, Israel hit a number of Iranian targets again—going after the Iranian capacity not simply to launch drones but missiles as well. Israel's practice has been never to acknowledge these strikes, understanding that to publicly take credit would put the Iranians in a position of having to respond or else lose face. But the Russians "outed" the Israelis—and this was significant because at least seven Qods Force officers were killed in the Israeli strike. Knowing the Iranians might have to respond, the Russians chose to expose the Israelis anyway—no doubt signaling that they were not happy that they had not been forewarned when Russians were co-located at that base. Not surprisingly, the exposure led Iran to declare that it would retaliate.

That retaliation would come one day after President Trump withdrew from the JCPOA. The timing was not an accident. The Iranians withheld their action, not wanting it to be used by the Trump administration as a reason to leave the JCPOA—but once freed of that concern, they launched missiles at Israel. Israel's Iron Dome intercepted four Iranian missiles that penetrated Israeli airspace, with the remainder hitting in Syria. To prove the Iranians would pay a high price, the Israelis hit several Iranian and Shia proxy bases throughout Syria, destroying, in the words of Israel's defense minister, Avigdor Liberman, much of the Iranian military infrastructure in Syria.

For now, it is clear the Iranians are not interested in escalating further with Israel. The character of their retaliation—firing only at Israeli positions in the Golan Heights and not civilian targets in the country—is an indication of that. They are too busy consolidating their position in Syria to want to take on Israel at this stage. But no one should be misled. Israel and Iran are on a collision course. Iran is determined to embed itself in Syria, and Israel is just as determined to ensure that Iran cannot create a presence in Syria similar to the one it has created in Lebanon, where Hezbollah now has over 120,000 rockets. Something has to give, and at this point, it seems only a matter of time before such a war starts.

Unfortunately, it is easy to see how it starts but not how it ends. I say that because Iran thinks it can threaten Israel from Syria and Lebanon and stand immune from the conflict. Israel, however, will not allow Iran to orchestrate a war where it is hit by 1,500-2,000 rockets a day and Iran is not touched by the conflict. Under such circumstances, Israel will strike Iran and in a way designed to inflict a high cost—perhaps hitting Iranian oil facilities. At that point, the Iranians may choose to hit back at Saudi Arabia or elsewhere in the Gulf. Rather than waiting for such a scenario to unfold, we should be acting to head it off.

Presently, however, the U.S. is decidedly on the sidelines. Yes, we made a big show of moving our embassy. But we

are leaving it to the Israelis to stop the Iranians in Syria. We have left the Israelis in a position where they must signal not with words but with the use of force to impress the Iranians and the Russians.

It is not by chance that Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu has now visited Vladimir Putin eight times in the last two years; yes, this is about de-confliction with Russian forces, but it is also about trying to get Putin to contain the Iranians in Syria. On the former, Netanyahu has largely succeeded; on the latter, he has not. The Russians have given the Israelis and the Iranians a free hand—a reality that makes the looming collision more likely.

Traditionally, the U.S. would have acted to convince the Russians that America could not sit back and allow such a conflict to take place, emphasizing that if the Russians did not act, we would—and not just by backing Israel but by making clear we would use our air power to stop the further expansion of the Iranians and their proxies in Syria. The last thing Putin wants is the appearance that U.S. power is determining events in the region; that is his role, and he seems to be succeeding.

President Trump does not appear troubled by that prospect. Much like President Obama, he wants little to do with the conflict in Syria, going so far in a widely reported letter as to call on the Saudis and Emirates to provide money and forces on the ground to prevent Iran from filling the vacuum after we defeat ISIS. It is an understandable desire, but neither the Saudis nor the Emirates will play that role and expose themselves if the U.S. is withdrawing—and Trump has made it clear that is what he intends to do.

Being on the sidelines seems to be the theme of the U.S. today in the Middle East. We can take a long-overdue step and open our embassy in Jerusalem. But we won't prepare the ground in advance with our putative Arab partners by figuring out what we could say to help give them room to support our steps—or at least not oppose them. As one Arab observer recently told me, "If the president had at least said he recognized that the Palestinians had claims in East Jerusalem that had to be negotiated, and that is why he was not recognizing the boundaries of Israeli sovereignty, that would have given us something to point to." Meaning that would have made it easier for the Arabs to play a role when the administration presents its peace plan—a plan that now will need to be more specific on Jerusalem as it relates to the Palestinians than might have been the case before. As for the timing of that plan, the current atmosphere will need to change before the administration can present it. Among other things, that means working to prevent an explosion in Gaza.

Hamas is acting in no small part to divert attention away from its failed governance in Gaza and to put pressure on Mahmoud Abbas, the president of the Palestinian Authority. Abbas stopped paying the Israelis to provide electricity to Gaza, cut salaries of former PA workers there and is threatening further economic penalties. The problem is the Palestinians in Gaza are paying the price—with only four hours of electricity a day, 96% of the water undrinkable, sewage treatment plants unable to run and 60% unemployment among Palestinians under 30. With conditions so bad, there is little to lose.

To be fair to the Trump administration, it did organize a donors conference for Gaza, but nothing has materialized. It is time, therefore, to work with the Europeans and the Arabs to issue a statement declaring that shovel-ready projects on water, sewage and electricity will be immediately implemented if there is calm in Gaza. Given the mood in Gaza, Hamas leaders know they cannot block what might be credible international steps to address immediately the terrible economic conditions there.

President Trump may prefer to distance us from Middle East conflicts. But they have a way of finding us, and withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal won't stop Iran's effort to expand in the region. To the contrary, sooner or later, that expansion will trigger a wider war. Engage now or engage later: that's the choice we face.

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