Bracing for an Israel-Iran Confrontation in Syria

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Despite the recent escalation, the United States has options for preventing, or at least limiting the scope of, a regional showdown in Syria.

Israel and Iran are on course for a collision in the near future. Indeed, a military clash that could expand well beyond Syrian territory appears almost inevitable. In particular, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) is determined to transform Syria into a platform for a future war against Israel, whereas leaders of the Jewish state have sworn to prevent what they often describe as the tightening of a noose around Israel's neck.

The past five years have already seen a series of direct clashes between the two powers. These include more than 120 Israeli Air Force (IAF) strikes against weapons shipments to Hezbollah, Iranian attempts to instigate cross-border incidents along the Golan Heights, and Israeli targeting of arms-production facilities introduced by Iran. In early 2018, these exchanges have escalated to include Israeli airstrikes on Iranian UAV facilities established deep in the Syrian desert, at the T-4 Air Base, and a first Iranian attempt to stage an armed drone attack in Israel.

Iran has committed publicly to conducting a forceful retaliation for the Israeli strike in January that killed eight Iranian officers, including UAV unit commander Colonel Mehdi Dehghani. Meanwhile, Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu has threatened vaguely that a confrontation in Syria could prompt Israel to target Iranian territory. He has also presented an ultimatum of sorts to Bashar al-Assad, suggesting that continued acquiescence by the Syrian President to the establishment of Iranian military bases across his country would compel an end to the Israeli policy of noninterference in the Syrian war. This switch would entail direct military hits on the regime, the preservation of which has been Tehran's prime objective in the region. Such a shift in Israel's policy would of course carry the risk of drawing Russian intervention to prevent Assad's removal. Relatedly, Moscow has already hinted that it may supply Syria with the advanced S-300 air-defense system—probably manned with Russian personnel—which would complicate IAF sorties over the country. In recent weeks, neither Israel nor Iran has signaled an intention to reassess its position, and combative rhetoric from both sides has become an almost daily occurrence.

Outside powers, too, have yet to undertake serious efforts to stop the escalation. The United States is quietly backing Israeli preemptive operations against Iranian forces in Syria, while Russia has restricted itself to advising both parties to refrain from widening the scope of the clashes. President Vladimir Putin, although in close contact with both Netanyahu and President Hassan Rouhani, has never offered to mediate. Moreover, he has not directed his pilots, based mainly near Latakia, to interfere with Israeli strikes or to stop Iran from expanding its military infrastructure in Syria. Putin appears to believe he can still exploit the Israel-Iran rivalry to his own benefit.

Since the outbreak of the civil war in Syria in March 2011, Israel and Iran have been on opposing sides of the conflict. Despite harboring deep suspicions about the plethora of Sunni rebel groups conducting the uprising against Assad, Israel nevertheless yearned to see Assad's downfall. In this view, the removal of the Assad regime would deprive Iran of what Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has called "the golden ring in the chain of resistance" against Israel. The Iranian loss of Syria—following an investment of no less than $20 billion to prop up the regime—could reduce a mighty Hezbollah proxy force to an isolated actor in Lebanon, delinked from its Syria-based sources of support and equipment. Iran would thus be **blocked from implementing its regional plan (https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2017-05-01/irans-ambitions-levant)** , based on surrounding Israel with Iranian allies and forging land corridors from its borders all the way west to the Mediterranean. Still, the Israeli leadership—with consistent backing from IDF generals—has opted not to act to speed the collapse of the Assad regime, often on the strength of an implied "devil we know" argument.

Netanyahu has nevertheless articulated a set of red lines: the transfer via Syria to Hezbollah of game-changing weapons, specifically precision-guided missiles; and any attempt to open a new front in terrorist operations along the Golan Line of Separation, where Israel intends to maintain calm. Outside these red lines, however, Israel has taken no actions to degrade Assad's power or threaten regime assets separate from the Iran-Hezbollah deployment in Syria. Both the Israeli security cabinet and the IDF General Staff have repeatedly rejected suggestions to equip certain non-jihadist rebel factions with the weapons they desperately need to fight the remnants of the Syrian army and the Iran-sponsored militias, at some 40,000 strong. This is despite pleas by rebel commanders for anti-tank and anti-aircraft missiles, heavy mortars, and light artillery. In the minority, a handful of Israeli security officials felt early on that by extending modest military assistance to vetted rebel groups in the Quneitra and Deraa provinces, they could help these fighters overcome the depleted units of the Syrian army's First Corps, stationed at the nexus of Syria's borders with Israel and Jordan, with Damascus to the north. The five Syrian army divisions traditionally posted in this area had suffered substantial casualties, defections, and a collapse in recruitment. For those Israeli officials who favored arming the rebels, the idea was to encourage their capture of this space and holding of the line along the southern approaches to the Syrian capital, areas that include the Assad strongholds of al-Kiswah, Qatana, and Kanaker. A strong rebel line in this territory would relieve pressure from rebel brigades active in other sectors surrounding Damascus and force Assad to split his much-weakened forces. Capture of southern Syria by the rebels, some suggested, would create a wide buffer zone between Israel and Iran-sponsored forces. Such a plan, however, never materialized owing to Netanyahu's reluctance to get drawn into the Syrian quagmire and expose Israelis to retaliatory fire from across the border.

In retrospect, this hesitance by the Israeli security establishment can be traced all the way back to the first Lebanon war in 1982, when Israel failed to facilitate regime change in Beirut and later had to relinquish the security belt established along the border and abandon the local militia operating there—the South Lebanon Army (SLA). From that experience, most Israeli officials absorbed the lesson that adventures outside Israel's borders must be averted, as well as a skepticism of the effectiveness of investing in proxy foreign militias.

Whatever their resistance to actually funding the Syrian rebels, Israeli officers maintained a continuous dialogue with various such groups and mostly assessed that they were too fragmented and, to varying degrees, also inclined

toward jihadist ideology. The bottom line for Israel was that, even in cases where rebel groups from different towns joined together in coalitions such as the Southern Front, they did not warrant the investment.

Still, in an effort to keep the Golan front calm and avoid a flood of refugees, Israel has since 2013 gradually developed a humanitarian-aid program for rebel-held villages close to the border. The program has slowly been expanded so that today it reaches approximately 300,000 inhabitants of the Quneitra and, to a lesser extent, Deraa provinces. This program—clearly the most successful of all similar humanitarian efforts in Syria—consists of medical treatment of thousands in hospitals inside Israel and large cross-border deliveries of food, fuel, clothes, and other supplies. In June 2016, this program was consolidated under a special unit named "Good Neighborhood," which itself is part of Territorial Division 420, in charge of the border. Both the entry of Syrians seeking medical care and the aid deliveries across the border occur at night and are coordinated by Israeli intelligence officials with an array of rebel commanders and community leaders on the other side.

This effort has helped maintain quiet on the Israeli side of the border, even during periods of intense fighting very close to the front lines. But lacking significant military assistance, the rebels have proven unable to win any important battles against the Syrian army over the past four years, and control of southern Syria hasn't changed hands during that same period. The governorate capitals—Quneitra and Deraa—are in Assad's hands, whereas the rural areas are split. The western parts adjacent to the Israeli Golan have become a de facto Israeli zone of influence where the Syrian army and its allied militias avoid embarking upon major offensives and the Russian air force does not fly its planes. The small enclave held by the Islamic State in the southernmost sector of the Golan border, along the western section of the Yarmouk River, remains largely isolated and does not yet constitute a real threat for Israel or the neighboring rebel factions.

The cautious policy pursued by Israel also resulted, to a certain degree, from the understanding in Jerusalem that former U.S. President Barack Obama was adamant in his refusal to adopt recommendations by some of his top advisors to intensify support of rebel groups and adopt a firm anti-Assad stance. The Israelis felt at the time that without U.S. leadership, the objective of toppling the Assad regime was untenable. The Israelis were also aware of Jordan's halfhearted assistance to tribal rebels in the Hawran area, which has traditional ties to the Hashemite throne. On top of that, funding from the Gulf states to a string of rebel coalitions tended to prioritize those active in central and northern Syria, whereas the modest financing extended to rebel factions south of Damascus was badly coordinated and often had Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar backing rival factions.

Whatever the root causes, Israel has now suffered a major strategic failure with far-reaching implications. Instead of watching the demise of the Assad regime, Israel must cope with the presence of a formidable Russian air force contingent next door and a steady encroachment of Iran toward its border.

By mid-2012, the Iranian General Hossein Hamedani had managed to convince Assad, who was then contemplating going into exile, to stay in office and keep fighting. In the first phase, Iran helped Assad defend Damascus and some other parts of "useful Syria" by operating an air bridge that brought military equipment and munitions, by introducing Hezbollah units to the battlefield, and by deploying hastily recruited militias consisting both of local loyalists and foreign fighters from Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. At one point, IRGC Qods Force commander General Qasem Soleimani led 4,000 IRGC troops to the battle for eastern Aleppo, but he ultimately had to send them back to Iran at the insistence of Khamenei, who indicated a low tolerance for Iranian fatalities in Syria. Then, in 2015, came the masterstroke: Soleimani struck a deal with Putin, and the arrival of the Russian air force on the scene since September 2015 has slowly enabled Iran to secure Assad's control over 60 percent of the country.

Not only has Iran managed to stabilize the Assad regime and pacify much of his territory, it has also obtained a great degree of influence over decision-making in Damascus, become a dominant actor in the war, and begun to solidify its military presence in Syria. It has achieved the latter two ends by acquiring bases and deploying advanced

facilities, constructing myriad militias outside the framework of the Syrian Arab Army and its irregular auxiliary forces, and establishing plants for production of missiles, precision guidance systems, and ammunition.

Israel is faced not only with a preserved Assad regime—a vital ally to Iran and Hezbollah—but also with the emergence of Iranian military power next door. In short, Israeli caution has opened the door to future adventures, after all. Israeli inaction came face-to-face with Iranian proactivity, and Israel now finds itself counting its losses even as the Syrian war winds down. Particularly, the Golan Heights, kept calm for decades by father and son Assad, is now, in the view of the regime's Iranian patrons, a new front for resistance forces. Furthermore, at least five Syrian air bases already accommodate Iranian units, along with their UAVs, missiles, and intelligence facilities. The number of militiamen—Shi'a and others—at Iran's disposal in Syria is steadily growing, and their training and equipment are improving.

The future scheme envisaged by Soleimani involves at least one land bridge, and likely two, through Iraqi territory, over which reinforcements and supply convoys could be moved. Several leaders of major Iraqi Popular Mobilization Unit (PMU) militias have already announced their wish to join a battle against Israel on the Golan. Moreover, once the Iranians modernize their outdated army, they may consider deploying combat aircraft and navy units (for example, submarines) in Syria. This, of course, comes on top of Iran's impressive arsenal of long-range missiles capable of hitting Israel and its massive—currently dormant—global terrorist network, which can be activated on very short notice.

Iran is in no hurry to have a confrontation. Soleimani, his boss Khamenei, and his lieutenants seem to have abandoned for the moment their earlier plans to deploy Hezbollah and other militias close to the Golan frontier. Prompting this reassessment was a series of pinpoint Israeli strikes against Iran-sponsored groups that had prepared the grounds for terrorist attacks from Syrian-army-controlled areas near Quneitra, including by planting explosive charges and firing Katyusha rockets. In 2015, the commanders entrusted with these missions, including the Lebanese Samir Kuntar and Jihad Mughniyah, as well as Mohammad Ali Allahdadi, the IRGC general in charge, were killed by the IDF. Later that same year, the IDF killed an additional three operatives who were on their way to the border fence, prompting Iran to suspend such attempts. Iran and its proxies still hold a half-dozen or so positions between the slopes of Mount Hermon and the Damascus-Deraa highway, but they have refrained from further provoking Israel.

Since August 2015, Iran has instead focused on its long-term campaign to deepen its offensive capabilities within Syrian territory. From their headquarters at Damascus Airport, known as the "Glasshouse," Iranian forces, currently led by IRGC General Hussein Kaani, control, among other sites, the al-Kiswah camp, south of the capital, from which operations closer to the Israeli border are supervised. From this headquarters, the Iranians hope to direct, when the opportunity arises, an attack on the rebels in Deraa, with the goal of capturing the entire province and encircling the rebel factions in Quneitra province in a pocket adjacent to the Israeli border.

An Iran-directed offensive toward the south, however, would require Russian consent given Moscow's 2017 declaration—joined by Washington and Amman—of a de-escalation zone in this region. An offensive would constitute a violation of this agreement, and would likewise probably require Russian air support in order to uproot the rebels from their strongholds. Putin has not in the past hesitated to flout his deconfliction arrangements, but so far he has approved only sporadic strikes by Russian planes around Deraa, where both sides have for months been preparing for an eventual showdown.

Israel will face a difficult dilemma once an Iran-led assault toward Deraa begins. Sending the air force and employing land-based missiles to stop the advance may well compel Assad and his Iranian patrons to retaliate, thus increasing the danger of a general flare-up. On the other hand, clinging to the current Israeli policy of nonintervention in Syria would enable the Iranians to consolidate their dominance over hilltops along the border,

from which they could threaten the Israeli Golan with short-range rockets and mortars. Furthermore, the capture of Deraa province would position Iranian proxy forces on the border with Jordan. Israeli officials believe Soleimani may be planning an effort to subvert the Hashemite regime in Amman, in the expectation that one way or another Jordan will finally join the Axis of Resistance. It is important to remember that for many decades, Israeli governments have regarded foreign intervention with their neighbor to the east as a casus belli. Russian air force participation in such an attack on Deraa would, of course, further complicate Israel's calculations. The hotline between the IAF and the Russian-operated Hmeimim Air Base in Syria has so far successfully prevented any clash between Russian and Israeli pilots, and the top-of-the-line Russian air defense systems in Syria have not locked their radars on Israeli planes, even while the latter attacked Iranian depots located near Russian military units. Israel would certainly be extremely prudent if faced with the risk of dogfights with the Russians. Putin, as implied thus far, has proven disinclined to get involved in skirmishes with Israel over Syria, although at times he has expressed annoyance at Israeli strikes.

In view of the currently rising tension between Israel and Iran, what measures could be taken to prevent a confrontation, or at least limit its scope?

Contacts between Israel and Iran through a variety of Track II channels, quietly organized in past years, have failed to produce any prospect for near-term tacit understandings. Messages exchanged via European diplomats have likewise resulted once again in deadlock. The Iranian representatives simply refuse to consider any restriction on their activities in Syria or toning down of their calls for the destruction of the "Zionist regime."

The same goes for the few futile attempts by some Arab and European states to set up a communication channel between Israel and the Assad regime. Syria may be inclined at some future point to curtail Iran's entrenchment on its soil, but at present the government in Damascus does not feel at liberty to stop the construction of Iranian military infrastructure. Netanyahu's warning that Israel may be compelled to take direct action against Assad has not had the desired effect on Assad's conduct.

A more promising option would be a dialogue with Putin, who has privately told Western interlocutors that he does not want Syria to become a "Persian colony" and that he has no interest in watching a war erupt between Iran and Israel. However, the Kremlin still requires the Iran-sponsored militias to complete the destruction of the remaining rebel bastions, especially in Idlib province and some other smaller enclaves. Therefore, it may take time before Putin is willing to rein in his Iranian allies.

The most sensible way to address Iran's expansion into Syria would be to establish a comprehensive set of understandings between Moscow and Washington on how to shape Syria's future. Unfortunately, under the existing circumstances, such an agreement does not seem possible for the foreseeable future. Therefore, the 2017 de-escalation agreement reached by the two parties in relation to southern Syria can be further elaborated to consolidate a stable ceasefire in the areas lying between Damascus and the borders with Israel and Jordan. In turn, an upgraded de-escalation deal could prevent an offensive against the rebels in Deraa and then Quneitra provinces. And a ceasefire could potentially allow the rebels to bolster their defensive capabilities. Since both the United States and Russia prefer to avert an Israel-Iran clash and its associated risks, expanded understandings over the south could contain a prohibition on entry to the area of non-Syrian forces, such as Hezbollah, thus diminishing the danger of an eruption along the border. Curtailing IRGC acquisition of a network of bases in Syria also requires that Assad and his mentors be thwarted from capturing the areas east of the Euphrates River—roughly a quarter of Syria's territory—currently held by the U.S.-sponsored Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), aided by the presence of 2,000 U.S. soldiers. Control of this region has prevented Iran from activating their two planned land corridors into Syria. One corridor would run through Anbar province in western Iraq and the other through the Kirkuk-Sinjar roads. The IRGC aspires to gain the ability to direct more militiamen and supplies to Syria through friendly areas along these routes in

order to accelerate the military buildup inside the country. Experience has taught them that reliance on airlifts is quite vulnerable to Israeli strikes.

To keep districts east of the Euphrates outside the reach of Iran-sponsored forces, the United States must continue its role there so that the SDF, consisting mainly of fighters from the Kurdish People's Defense Units (YPG), remains confident of continuous U.S. air cover, assistance, and training. Such an arrangement, however, does not necessarily preclude a reduction in the U.S. force count on the ground.

Other elements of a strategy to disrupt Iran's attempted transformation of Syria into a military platform for a future campaign against Israel should include strengthening the Druze community—with its traditional ties to Jordan and Israel—to resist any Iranian attempt to penetrate Suwayda province, northeast of Deraa governorate. The complicated situation of the Druze during the civil war is beyond the scope of this article, but ambivalent Druze relations with the Assad regime do not in any way suggest an inclination to welcome an IRGC or other Shia presence in their midst. Depriving Iran of the temptation to deploy medium-range missile bases in Druze Mountain should be viewed as an indispensable component of a policy aimed at foiling the Iranian scheme.

Setting aside the United States and Israel, quite a few regional players have a stake in preventing Iran from effectively taking over Syria. Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, and Jordan share the same distaste for what has been termed the "Shia Crescent," with Syria as its center of gravity. Each of these countries can be induced to contribute in different ways to a "stop-Iran" effort. Whether by extending funds, military assistance, or aid for reconstruction, these states can help deter Assad from total surrender to Iran's wishes, and reinforce the rebels' hold in southern Syria and the regions east of the Euphrates.

But, above all, to prevent an all-out Israel-Iran war, which could easily expand to Lebanon and Gaza, the United States must lend its support to a sustained Israeli campaign to destroy—when necessary and possible—Iranian facilities in Syria and continuously raise the cost of the IRGC effort, to the point that both Tehran and Damascus will have to reconsider the viability of Soleimani's project.

Ehud Yaari is a Lafer Fellow with The Washington Institute and a commentator for Israel TV 12/13. This article was originally published on the ***American Interest website (https://www.the-american-interest.com/2018/04/30/bracing-israel-iran-confrontation-syria/)***. ❖

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