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PolicyWatch 2929

Crossing Redlines: Escalation Dynamics in Syria

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Feb 13, 2018

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Brief Analysis

Tehran and its allies will test U.S. and Israeli limits again, requiring deterrent responses that are tough, consistent, and paired with political reassurances to allies.

The past week has witnessed two significant incidents involving lethal U.S. and Israeli airpower inside Syria. Each came in response to apparent tests by Syrian, Iranian, and Russian forces, and more such tests are probably in the offing.

PROBING ISRAEL

On February 10, an aircraft that appeared to be an Iranian Simorgh-type drone made a predawn incursion into northeastern Israel. According to Israeli military sources, the drone was piloted from an Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) mobile ground-control station located at Syria's Tiyas air base near Palmyra. After an incursion lasting about ninety seconds, the drone was downed by an Israel Defense Forces Apache helicopter over the Beit

Shean Valley. The IDF then scrambled eight F-16I jets to strike the Tiyas base.

In response, Syria fired surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) at the jets, including some that landed in northern Israel and triggered civil defense alarms. One of the F-16s was apparently downed by an SA-5 missile after failing to take proper evasive action while assessing damage to its targets; the two pilots ejected inside Israel.

The cycle of escalation soon continued when the IDF hit twelve target complexes inside Syria, including air defenses near Damascus and Deraa as well as three military sites where Iranian headquarters were present: Tal al-Mane, Dimas, and Tal Abu al-Thaalab. Altogether, Syria may have fired more than twenty SAMs, including SA-3s, SA-5s, SA-6s, and SA-17s. There is no evidence yet that Russian-operated missiles or radars assisted in the F-16 shootdown.

PRESSURING U.S. PARTNERS

On the night of February 7, a column of Iranian-led units fired artillery in the direction of the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) south of Deir al-Zour, eight kilometers east of the Euphrates River deconfliction line established by Washington and Moscow. The column then advanced on the SDF position and the adjacent Tabiyah Gazirah oil fields, led by T-72 and T-55 tanks. According to a variety of social media and news reports, the force of around 500 troops included Afghan fighters from the IRGC-led militia Liwa Fatemiyoun; local Arab tribal auxiliaries recently recruited to the militia Liwa al-Baqir, led by Iranian officers; fighters from the Assad regime's National Defense Forces (NDF); along with Russian-equipped "Daesh hunter" auxiliary troops and Russian private military contractors from the Wagner Group.

U.S. airpower and artillery destroyed the attacking force, killing around a hundred personnel, including an estimated thirty NDF troops, forty other Syrians, and thirty Russian contractors (though some media reports claim the latter number was much larger, probably because they are counting Russian-equipped Syrians). Around twenty vehicles were also destroyed, including nine tanks. The U.S. military used overwhelming firepower to send a strong message, including F-15 and F-22 fighters, an AC-130 gunship, Apache helicopters, and Marine Corps artillery.

THE IRGC'S CALCULUS

The IRGC appears to have spearheaded both of these recent provocations, in line with its long track record of conducting drone operations inside Syria and its leading role in coordinating the Assad regime's offensive operations south of Deir al-Zour. The question is how the two tests are related, if at all.

One thing is clear: both incidents occurred against a background of growing Iranian confidence that the Syria intervention has saved the Assad regime, limited the United States to a tenuous foothold in the northeast, and allowed Tehran to establish a forward base of operations against Israel. The IRGC is now able to collect intelligence on Israel directly, reinforce and resupply Hezbollah by land, and potentially transform the Golan Heights into an active military front.

Moreover, while Syrian and Hezbollah drones have flown over Israel in the past, this is the first known incursion by an Iranian drone. The craft apparently entered Israeli airspace via northwest Jordan, perhaps to achieve surprise, create ambiguity about its point of origin, complicate Israel's response, and test Israeli defenses there. The fact that it was downed so quickly indicates that it was probably tracked prior to entering Israel, and that it lacked many of the stealth features of the American drone on which it was supposedly based (i.e., an RQ-170 captured by Iran in 2011). Technical exploitation of the wreckage will presumably clear up certain questions about the drone's mission and whether it was armed. Whatever the case, the incident demonstrates that Iran is now willing and able to use Syria as a base for operations inside Israel, marking a new phase in tensions between the two adversaries.

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

Both of the recent confrontations raise pressing questions about Iran's next moves and Russia's potential role:

Why did Iran undertake the drone mission? If the goal was intelligence gathering, Tehran could have deployed smaller drones of the type Hezbollah has already used to penetrate Israeli airspace. Instead it apparently chose an untested system, the Simorgh. Perhaps Israel's failure to down an intruding Hezbollah drone in July 2016 led IRGC officials to believe that a "stealthy" Simorgh could operate unhindered, especially with the element of surprise. They may also have been motivated to try it as a way of scoring propaganda points after the Deir al-Zour setback. At any rate, the drone appeared to fly at an altitude that would be considered unusually low for either a reconnaissance or strike mission.

Is Iran showing an increased propensity for risk taking? Although Tehran may have believed that the drone would proceed undetected, the operation was quite risky and unusual given the well-worn IRGC strategy of relying on proxies. How will the IDF strikes—which reportedly killed a number of Iranian personnel—affect Iran's risk-taking behavior in the future? And why did Hezbollah not respond on behalf of its patron?

In the past, Iran has often backed down when countered robustly, only to renew the challenge at a different place and time, sometimes with different means. The loss of Iranian personnel has opened a new blood account that the IRGC may seek to settle at a later date—though Hezbollah likely prefers to avoid escalation on Lebanon's border right now in light of the country's forthcoming elections. Despite domestic criticism of foreign entanglements during Iran's recent protests, the IRGC does not appear any less willing to intervene abroad.

What is Moscow's calculus? The Kremlin likely understood that Russian contract fighters were being used in the Deir al-Zour operation. Yet the Israeli Air Force chief of staff has said that Moscow was not involved in the drone incident, and that Russian authorities were informed at some point about Israel's retaliatory operations. Even so, Iran may have (mis)calculated that the presence of Russians in the Deir al-Zour probe and at Tiyas would deter Washington and Israel from responding.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the likelihood that Iran will continue testing American and Israeli redlines in Syria, the Trump administration should pursue a more coherent approach that includes the following measures:

- **Build on the credibility gained at Deir al-Zour by policing U.S. redlines more consistently.** The United States might consider resuming strikes in response to future chemical weapons incidents; these could justifiably be broadened to include nearby Iranian or proxy elements supporting Assad regime forces. Moreover, strikes on high-value Iranian targets not directly connected to such provocations would further complicate Iran's calculations and make U.S. strikes less predictable.
- **Prepare for an indirect challenge to the U.S. presence in SDF areas.** This may include Iranian pressure on Iraq to close down the U.S. supply line across the Tigris River. Beyond supporting moderate forces in Baghdad, Washington needs to establish a Turkish option for sustaining its presence in Syria, assuring Ankara that it will restrain the Kurdish elements that lead the SDF and press them to break ties with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK).
- **Support the southwestern opposition enclave in Deraa province.** The IRGC and its allies may probe this area on the Jordanian border next, aiming to split it in two. The United States should therefore execute a limited, covert train-and-equip program for non-Salafist rebel groups there and elsewhere in Syria, as part of a wider effort to tie pro-regime elements down and limit their ability to make trouble for U.S. forces or neighboring states.
- **Reassure allies.** This means continuing to support vigorous Israeli responses when Iran or Hezbollah challenge its sovereignty or security, and helping Jordan secure its airspace against Iranian incursions.
- **Publicly lay out the consequences of escalation.** Washington should make clear that if Iranian forces or their proxies

open a wider conflict with Israel, they might emerge so weakened as to jeopardize their hard-won gains against rebel forces in Syria.

- **Signal Russia that the United States will actively defend its interests in Syria.** At the same time, Washington should work with Moscow on reenergizing diplomatic efforts to manage the Syria conflict and avoid embroiling the two countries in a dangerous confrontation of their own.

Michael Eisenstadt is the Kahn Fellow and director of the Military and Security Studies Program at The Washington Institute, and author of its recent report "[Regional Pushback, Nuclear Rollback: A Comprehensive Strategy for an Iran in Turmoil](#)." Michael Knights is a Lafer Fellow with the Institute. ❖



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