



IRAN ACROSS THE BORDER

MICHAEL
HERZOG

ISRAEL'S PUSHBACK IN SYRIA

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OF ALL THE THREATS in Israel's strategic landscape, Iran's ambitions and developing military capabilities in neighboring Syria and Lebanon have ranked highest in recent years in the attention of Israeli decisionmakers and strategic planners. These ambitions and capabilities, which carry serious strategic-military implications, have been relentlessly advanced by an Iranian regime deeply hostile to Israel and, if unchecked, could yield dangerous results in the foreseeable future. On the spectrum of threats, Iran's push to build a formidable military front against Israel in Syria and Lebanon, with a complementary envelope in Iraq, fits somewhere between the immediate yet modest (Hamas in Gaza) and the long term and extremely menacing (Iran with nuclear arms). This balance of its severity and relative immediacy explains why it has ranked so high for Israeli decisionmakers in recent years. In turn, the Iranian effort has driven Israel to push back militarily even at the risk of sparking a major confrontation, a policy that in Israel enjoys wide public and political consensus.



In the last few years, Israeli pushback has succeeded in thwarting significant parts of Iran's military plans in Syria specifically. But the larger dynamic of Iranian moves and Israeli countermoves has catapulted these two determined actors into a mode of direct military showdown, carrying the potential for a major collision in the not-too-distant future.¹ Escalation remains a real possibility, notwithstanding Israeli deterrence and Russian efforts to constrain the parties. It could also be heightened by the emerging tensions between the United States and Iran in both the regional and nuclear contexts. As the United States weighs its options to block and deter Iran, Israel's experience in confronting Iran in Syria may offer some valid lessons.

IRAN'S DESIGNS IN SYRIA

Seeking to exploit the turmoil that has swept across the Middle East since the Arab Spring, Iran has embarked on a long-term strategic project to fill resulting voids and establish itself as the dominant power in the heart of the region. Granted legitimacy and room to act by the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), as the nuclear deal is known, and emboldened by its success in helping turn the tide of war against the Islamic State in 2016 in Iraq and Syria, Iran has since labored relentlessly to create a contiguous zone of direct influence and power projection, spanning historical Mesopotamia and the Levant and toward the Mediterranean, an area now commonly known as the land corridor or land bridge. These Iranian efforts have been based primarily on an active on-the-ground presence, influence over weakened and dependent governments in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, military infrastructure and sizable "legions" of armed sectarian proxies serving as its muscle in regional wars, and initiatives to expand its economic leverage and extract economic benefits. Joining these ambitions to gather and project power in the region has been Iran's desire to create "strategic depth" against perceived U.S. schemes to undermine and ultimately topple the Islamic regime.²

War-torn Syria is a critical link in this strategic plan, providing as it does a conduit to the Mediterranean and to Hezbollah—Iran's most important and potent proxy—while also bordering Israel. Recognizing that the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad owes its survival to Tehran, the Iranian leadership has been pushing

hard to further integrate Syria into its regional fold as a subordinate partner: politically; economically, with an eye to potential benefits from postwar reconstruction and access to natural resources; and militarily.

The turning point in Iranian designs on Syria occurred in 2016, especially after Syrian-regime forces and their allies prevailed in the Battle of Aleppo. The plan, developed and launched by Iran's Qods Force, which is officially part of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) but in practice largely independent, was to transform Syria into a very strong military front with Israel. Israeli intelligence assessed that the Qods Force, under the command of Qasem Soleimani, sought to develop and permanently deploy in Syria significant military capabilities, including:

- ground forces
- planes and drones stationed within Syrian air bases
- naval wharves in each of Syria's two Mediterranean ports (Latakia and Tartus)
- tens of thousands of rockets and missiles
- massive amounts of munitions in storage facilities
- air-defense systems and defense industries, the latter partly integrated with those of Syria
- proxy militia forces of up to 100,000 combatants, including a new "Syrian Hezbollah" force³
- a series of intelligence facilities facing Israel
- operational infrastructure in southern Syria, close to the Israeli border

For Iran, this Syrian front would join the Lebanese one established over many years through Hezbollah, which it had provided with an enormous arsenal estimated by Israeli intelligence at around 130,000 missiles, rockets, and mortars. Iran had also helped its proxy dig cross-border offensive tunnels designed to infiltrate several thousands of combatants into Israel in wartime. As part of the Qods Force's plans for Syria, Hezbollah, a critical player in the war to save Assad, was also tasked with building the operational infrastructure in southern Syria noted earlier. Rather than limiting their discourse to a "third Lebanon war"—to follow the 1982 and 2006 armed conflicts—Israeli military planners also began to speak of a possible



AREAS OF CONTROL

- Rojava
- Syrian Opposition/Turkish
- Syrian Arab Republic

-  Russian naval base
-  Commercial airport
-  Highway
-  Russian air base
-  Military event/conflict
-  Primary road
-  Air base
-  Refugee camp
-  Province border

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“northern war” in which the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) would face an expanded front combining the Lebanese and Syrian theaters, saturated with arsenals of rockets and proxy forces. Such a front could present Israel with acute challenges. Israeli officials also pondered the undesirable prospect that Iranian entrenchment in Syria would present a serious threat to neighboring Jordan, whose regime had long been in Iran’s crosshairs and whose stability is critical to Israel.

It bears noting that the military front created in Lebanon, with a rocket arsenal surpassed by few militaries across the globe, was closely associated with Iran’s nuclear ambitions. The two initiatives were designed to be mutually reinforcing. Hezbollah’s rocket arsenal was amassed, inter alia, to deter Israel from striking the Iranian nuclear program—similar to the North Korean model of creating deterrence via thousands of rockets aimed at Seoul—while Iranian

nuclear capabilities, once they ripened, were meant to provide a strategic umbrella for proxies' conventional capabilities and subsume additional regional actors under Iranian hegemony.

THE 'PRECISION PROJECT'

An important part of the Iranian strategy outlined here has been upgrading Hezbollah's capabilities by implementing an ambitious "precision project." This effort is designed to convert significant numbers of Hezbollah's arsenal of "dumb" medium- to long-range rockets into high-precision ones equipped with guidance systems. (Excluded from this program are Hezbollah's more than 100,000 short-range mostly Katyusha and Grad rockets.) In the assessment of Israeli intelligence, the goal for this project is to provide Hezbollah with an arsenal of *at least* 1,000 medium- and longer-range precise rockets with a circular error probability (CEP) of up to ten meters.⁴ The project was designed to be carried out in hidden facilities in Syria and Lebanon, to avert the risks of shipping rockets in vulnerable convoys and to allow for local production on an industrial scale.

From a technical point of view, the project aims to equip Hezbollah with GPS-type guided versions of the Zelzal-2 unguided rocket (with an approximate range of 200 km and a payload of around 600 kg) and the Fateh-110 (developed from the Zelzal, with added inertial navigation systems that initially gave it a CEP of 500–1000 m).⁵ The rockets are fitted with kits, some reduced to suitcase size,⁶ that connect them to the Russian GLONASS GPS-type navigation system, as well as with command, guidance, and control systems. Iran is also known to have improved the accuracy of some Hezbollah rockets—including types outside the precision project, such as the M-302—by adding winglets. The converted precise rockets now fall within the Raad (thunder) family.

Since mid-2017, on three occasions, Iran has itself demonstrated its capabilities in this field by firing salvos of accurate rockets over several hundred kilometers at specific Islamic State and Iranian-Kurdish targets in Syria and Iraq. For these, it used the Zolfaqaar (a variant of the Fateh-110, with a 700 km range), Qiam (a variant of the Shahab, with a 750–800 km range), and Fateh 110B (with a 300 km range). The first attempt, in June 2017, fared poorly. The latter

two, in September and October 2018, saw some of the missiles land far afield of their targets, indicating potential quality-control problems, while others hit their targets, showing relatively high accuracy.⁷

In addition, Iran has provided long-range accurate attack drone capabilities to Hezbollah and Yemen's Houthi rebels, whom it backs. The Houthis' drone targeting has included oil facilities in Saudi Arabia, Abu Dhabi International Airport, and senior military officials in Yemen, killing the Yemeni head of military intelligence.⁸ Hezbollah, which also embeds some military advisors with the Houthis, is known to have used attack drones in the Syrian war.

From an Israeli perspective, the precision project is perhaps the most dangerous component of Iran's designs in Syria and Lebanon. Notwithstanding its military might, Israel is a small, vulnerable country, whose major population centers and critical national and military infrastructure are located within an area about 20 kilometers wide and 80–100 kilometers long. With a relatively low number of high-precision rockets, Hezbollah could exact a heavy price in a future war by targeting elements critical to Israel's national security and ability to effectively conduct the war. Hezbollah does not hide its intentions to target Israeli strategic assets with such rockets. In a series of speeches and interviews delivered by Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, as well as a video released in December 2018, the group has boasted of a "bank of [Israeli] targets," including air bases, the nuclear reactor near Dimona, the Ministry of Defense and IDF headquarters in central Tel Aviv, Ben Gurion International Airport, seaports, the Haifa oil refinery, offshore gas and desalination installations in the Mediterranean, petrochemical plants, and major power stations.⁹

ISRAEL'S PUSHBACK

The aggressive Iranian military push into Syria has forced Israel to expand its redlines in this theater.¹⁰ The initial redlines, defined early on in the war in Syria, included the transfer of strategic "game changing" weapons to Hezbollah in Lebanon through and from Syria, development of military threats along the Syria-Israel border, and obstruction of Israeli freedom of action to enforce its redlines, especially from the air. In the beginning, Israel's enforcement mostly amounted to Hezbollah targets. But as Iran devel-

oped its more ambitious military plans for Syria and moved to implement them in 2016, Israel's "zone of unacceptability" stretched to encompass the development and deployment of *Iranian* military capabilities *throughout* Syria that would, in Israel's view, seriously threaten its security. Iran's precision project has occupied an important part of this zone.

In early 2017, Lt. Gen. Gadi Eisenkot, then IDF chief of staff, sought and obtained the cabinet's approval to launch a concerted military campaign designed to block Iranian moves in Syria and roll back the Iranian military presence there. In pursuing this course, Eisenkot reasoned that Israel must use its intelligence and operational advantages to confront its strongest and most dangerous enemy head on and early on, or else Israel might ultimately be forced to confront it under very unfavorable conditions. This reasoning was informed by the consequences of Israel's passivity toward Hezbollah as it grew into a major military power in the 1990s and 2000s.

According to authoritative defense sources cited by the Israeli media, in 2017–18 the IDF carried out hundreds of strikes in Syria. Eisenkot himself is cited by journalist Bret Stephens in the *New York Times* saying that in 2018 alone, the Israeli Air Force dropped some two thousand bombs in such strikes.¹¹

This effort embodied a relatively new IDF operational concept termed the "campaign(s) between the wars," known by its Hebrew acronym *mabam*. The concept is premised on the idea of denying or at least degrading the enemy's lethal capabilities that could be applied in a future war and limit IDF freedom of action. But this denial and degradation should be enacted in a way likely to enhance Israel's deterrence—by demonstrating resolve, determination, and operational effectiveness—and thereby buy time and *delay* or even avert, rather than expedite, a major confrontation.¹² In applying *mabam* against the Iranian military entrenchment in Syria, Israel has essentially carried out escalation management in the gap between the enemy's ambitions and its reluctance to engage in a direct major armed conflict.

The effectiveness of the *mabam* approach against Iran in Syria has been based on the following elements:

- correct identification and prioritization of the various threats, which in the Syrian context means Iranian value targets, not merely proxies, even at the risk of casualties among Iranian personnel
- high-resolution, actionable intelligence
- the ability to carry out successful pinpoint strikes while limiting collateral damage to a minimum and avoiding IDF casualties
- political space and legitimacy for carrying out the campaign
- accurate assessment of the enemy, its rationale, and its moves, understanding that it conducts its own "campaign between the wars" (i.e., wants to avoid war), and accurate assessment of and readiness for enemy responses, as well as for undesired potential escalation
- continuity coupled with a built-in lesson-learning process
- repeated messaging to the enemy on Israeli psychological and technical readiness to go as far as needed to achieve the campaign's goals

The *mabam* approach in Syria has also included a well-calculated accompanying information campaign—e.g., occasionally exposing sites before targeting them or revealing their true nature after the fact—including generally avoiding the assumption of public responsibility for any individual strike, so as not to increase pressure on the other side to react.

DIRECT ISRAEL-IRAN MILITARY COLLISION

As Israel pushed back harder against Iran in Syria in 2017–18, the Qods Force prepared military responses designed to exact a price and create deterrence, and it hit Israeli targets on several occasions. For the first time, decades of indirect hostilities between Israel and Iran had been converted into direct military blows.

The first harbinger came in February 2018, when Iran sent an armed drone from the Tiyas (T-4) air base in central Syria into Israeli territory, where it was shot down.¹³ In further response, Israel destroyed the drone's command-and-control vehicle at T-4 and attacked dozens of IRGC targets in Syria, losing in the process an F-16 jet to Syrian air-defense fire. In May 2018, presumably in retaliation for earlier Israeli strikes that had also hit IRGC targets, the Guard launched thirty-two rockets from Syria toward

the Israel-controlled Golan Heights, four of which crossed the border and were intercepted. Israel responded with Operation House of Cards, attacking approximately a hundred Iranian targets and destroying significant parts of Iran's military infrastructure in Syria.

On January 21, 2019, the IRGC initiated the firing of a truck-mounted accurate medium-range rocket from a Syrian military base south of Damascus toward Mount Hermon in the northern Golan Heights¹⁴—in broad daylight and while thousands of Israeli citizens were visiting the area's ski resort. The incoming rocket was intercepted by an Israeli Iron Dome air-defense battery. The firing of the Iranian rocket followed a series of Israeli strikes in December 2018 and January 2019 against Iranian military targets around Damascus. It was answered by waves of IDF strikes, deemed Operation New Card, focused on the al-Kiswah Syrian military complex south of Damascus—where the Iranian rocket was fired from—and, most notably, against the central Iranian logistical complex located inside Damascus International Airport.¹⁵ Israeli strikes destroyed warehouses and storage facilities for weapons and ammunition, rocket depots, command headquarters, and intelligence and logistics sites.

In all these cases, Israel appears to have had advance knowledge of the Iranian plans, prepared defensive and offensive measures, and used each Iranian action as a legitimate springboard for destroying important parts of Iran's military infrastructure in Syria. In addition, during the operations, Israeli jets destroyed those elements of Syria's air defense that tried to interfere. General Eisenkot highlighted Israel's advantages in this showdown: "We have complete intelligence superiority in this area. We enjoy complete aerial superiority. We have strong deterrence and we have the justification to act."¹⁶

More recently still, on June 1, 2019, two rockets were fired from Syria toward Mount Hermon—one falling in Syrian territory and one in Israel-controlled territory without causing damage. Israel has not fingered a specific culprit but suspects Iranian proxies—possibly also in the context of mounting U.S.-Iran tensions—and used the incident as grounds for striking several Syrian and Iranian targets. Yet another major Israeli offensive against a series of targets belonging to Iran and Hezbollah was registered on July 1, 2019.

IMPACT OF ISRAEL'S MILITARY CAMPAIGN

Israeli officials believe strongly that Israel's assertive military campaign played *the* major role in thwarting Iranian plans to turn Syria into a strong anti-Israel military front. The campaign, moreover, is believed to have effectively rolled back much of Iran's deployment in the Syrian theater, all while averting an escalation to war. Deviating from its original script, Iran not only slowed its push into Syria but was forced to scale down the deployment of its own and Shia proxy forces there. It was also compelled to abandon its military hub at Damascus airport, lost significant military infrastructure and capabilities, including important components of its "precision project" in Syria—namely facilities and kits, although how much heavy equipment was destroyed is unclear—and remains far from achieving the project's goals. Finally, Iran refrained from deploying military planes in Syria, failed to acquire control of a Syrian wharf—thanks to Russia (as discussed in the next section)—and lost its intelligence facilities in southern Syria, where it is still a long way from establishing effective operational infrastructure.

Yet while Israel managed to achieve a measure of deterrence, Iran has by no means given up on its ambitions or decided to withdraw militarily from Syria, and it still commands considerable forces and capabilities in the country, not to mention its deep political, economic, and cultural infiltration.¹⁷ Rather, Iran is in the process of adjusting its deployment, mode of operation, and profile: focusing more on the immediate need to produce responses to Israeli strikes (with an eye to more advanced air-defense systems), distancing capabilities from Israel (to northern and eastern Syria),¹⁸ switching to a more decentralized deployment of capabilities and underground modes of operation, and hiding as much as possible under the cloak of legitimacy afforded by the Syrian regime while embedding some of its activities with the Syrian armed forces and defense industries.¹⁹

Important aspects of the Iranian adjustment effort have included locating critical elements of its precision project in underground or otherwise hidden facilities in Lebanon, trying to upgrade the project to run on an industrial scale, on occasion using Iranian

commercial flights and sea lanes to Lebanon, and building a supplemental military envelope in Iraq composed of missiles held by Shia militias.²⁰ Israel believes that Iran supplied its proxies in Iraq with dozens of accurate missiles with a range of 700–1,000 kilometers, which could enable them to hit Israel from western Iraq, and does not rule out Iranian moves to also produce and store missiles or rockets in Iraq. In December 2018, the IDF’s director of military intelligence stated that “Iraq is under growing influence of the Quds Force” and that Iran “could see Iraq as a convenient theater for entrenchment, like what they did in Syria, and use it as a platform for a force build-up that could also threaten the state of Israel.”²¹ From an Iranian perspective, deploying missiles in Iraq could also threaten U.S. forces there, as well as menace Saudi Arabia and under certain circumstances Jordan.

Nor has Iran given up on its ambition to establish operational military infrastructure in southern Syria facing Israel, continuing to pursue this goal through Hezbollah. The main component of this push has been the secret Iranian initiative known as the “Golan File.” Since the Assad regime regained control of the Syrian Golan Heights from rebel forces in summer 2018, Hezbollah has moved to implement this file by recruiting local activists, especially in villages like al-Khadr in the northern Golan, and by preparing the ground for the future deployment of weapons systems and making operational plans.²² The Golan File is commanded by Ali Musa Daqduq (aka Abu Hussein Sajid), a veteran Hezbollah military leader who operated under the IRGC in Iraq against the U.S.-led coalition and was a senior planner of a 2007 operation in Karbala in which five U.S. soldiers were abducted and executed.²³ The Golan File joined the previously established Hezbollah Southern Command, led by Munir Ali Naim Shati (aka Haj Hashem), which now operates overtly in close cooperation with the Syrian army and collects information on Israel from observation posts and by other means.²⁴ Both arms of Hezbollah’s activities in southern Syria were exposed by Israel to the media—Southern Command in October 2017, the Golan File in March 2019—in a deliberate information campaign.

Iran may also be considering using some of its economic initiatives—which are part of a broader

strategy of enmeshment in Syria and fighting U.S. sanctions—as additional avenues for its military plans. Take, for example, the recently revived Iranian initiative to connect Iran, Iraq, and Syria via rail.²⁵ This project would link Iran to the Syrian port of Latakia, where Iran is negotiating with the Syrian government to lease the container terminal and in whose vicinity the Iranian MAPNA Group recently received the license to build a power plant.²⁶ For Iran, suffering under severe U.S. sanctions, this project is of significant economic importance given that it could create a trade route for and through the country. Iran and Syria also hope to use this route to lure China to include it in its One Belt One Road initiative, which is aimed at establishing transportation, trade, and communication-infrastructure networks connecting it to markets, especially in Europe. At the same time, this project could also possibly contribute to Iran’s strategic land corridor to the Mediterranean.

Despite being the most dominant factor in restraining Iran in Syria, Israeli military pressure is not the only factor. Analyzing the Israel-Iran showdown cannot be divorced from the broader context of the central Russian role in Syria and of U.S. economic pressure on Iran. The former has forced both Iran and Israel to carefully calculate their moves. The latter has weighed heavily on Iran but also triggered some dangerous Iranian countermeasures.

DANCING WITH THE RUSSIAN BEAR

In grasping the complexity of a theater filled with various international, regional, and local actors with diverging or conflicting interests, Israel prioritized developing a productive dialogue at the highest levels with Russia, the principal external actor on the ground. Since Russia deployed militarily in Syria in September 2015, Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu has met with Russian president Vladimir Putin twelve times—more than with any other world leader. In addition, the two militaries established a “safety measures” (read: deconfliction) mechanism, operated daily by Russian officers in Syria and Israeli counterparts in Tel Aviv. For the first time ever, Israeli and Russian chiefs of staff exchanged visits.

To be sure, Israel and Russia hold differing positions on Iran and Syria as well as on U.S. policies toward Iran. Specifically:

- Russia, Iran, and Iranian proxies fought side by side to save Bashar al-Assad’s regime, and Iran maintains an important role in safeguarding its continued survival and ability to assert itself, a role valued by Russia.
- Both countries want to see the United States out of Syria and reduced American influence in the region.
- Russia objects to the U.S. policy of exiting the JCPOA and applying “maximum pressure” on Iran.
- Russia is a leading arms supplier to Iran, and the two countries share additional interests outside the Syrian context, such as seeking to limit the political influence of the United States in Central Asia and cooperating in Eurasian economic frameworks.

At the same time, Israel correctly identified diverging interests between Russia and Iran in Syria and has skillfully maneuvered within the gap. In particular, Moscow does not want to see Syria transformed into an Iranian protectorate where the Islamic Republic dictates the agenda, applies its Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces model on a large scale,²⁷ undercuts Russian political and commercial interests, and drags Syria into a war with Israel that could undermine Russian efforts to broker a political solution and draw Arab and international investment for Syria’s reconstruction. Both Israel and Iran noted the refusal by Russia’s deputy foreign minister, Sergei Ryabkov, to define Russia as Iran’s ally in Syria and his concomitant highlighting of the importance of Israeli security.²⁸

In the Russia-Israel dialogue that has played out since late 2015, several core understandings have essentially been developed along the way. To begin with, whereas Russia clarified that it would not act to fully drive the Iranian military presence from Syria—owing to lack of political will, capability, or both—it did recognize this presence as a long-term challenge to its own role and to a stable political outcome for the country. As a result, Russia demonstrated a will-

ingness to act behind the scenes to resist *some* Iranian plans. For example, quiet Russian intervention prevented the Syrian regime from handing over to Iran a Mediterranean wharf close to the Russian naval facility in Tartus.²⁹ Beyond what Russia was itself willing to do, Israel was essentially afforded freedom to target the Iran-led military presence as long as it did not endanger Russian forces, assets, or the very stability of the Syrian regime. Indeed, Russia has, by and large, kept quiet in the face of numerous Israeli anti-Iran strikes in Syria in the last few years, stirring Iranian irritation and criticism.³⁰

Israel-Russia understandings further evolved around the Syrian army’s move in July 2018 to regain control over southwest Syria from rebel hands. In return for Israeli noninterference, Moscow committed to distancing Iranian military elements and their proxies at least 53 miles (85 km) from the Israeli border,³¹ except around Damascus,³² and to restoring the 1974 Israel-Syria Separation of Forces Agreement, which set a buffer zone between the two national forces and established the UN Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF). Russia did get Iran to distance most of its military elements from the border, where Iran anyway stopped prioritizing military deployment once the fighting there subsided. Russia also deployed its own military police units near the buffer zone, and helped UNDOF restore some of its deployment and activities. At the same time, Russia has not prevented Iranian proxies from establishing themselves and operating in the south, in many cases wearing Syrian uniforms.

As the Israel-Iran military showdown intensified in 2017–18, the Israeli understandings with Russia came under increasing pressure, exposing the gaps between the two sides. Russia was particularly nervous about potential danger to its forces and capabilities. Realizing this fact, Iran more than once deliberately placed its military assets close to Russian units, calculating that this might deter Israeli strikes and grant them immunity. But it did not, ultimately leading in September 2018 to a Russia-Israel crisis, including the suspension of leadership meetings for several months. This crisis was filled with the ironies typical of Middle East escalation: Israel targeted Hezbollah military capabilities—probably associated with the earlier-discussed precision project—placed under Russia’s nose in northwest Syria, indiscriminate

Syrian counterfire downed a Russian Ilyushin IL-20 surveillance plane and killed fifteen Russian servicemen, and Russia ended up laying the entire blame on Israel's shoulders, spreading the false narrative that Israeli planes used the Russian aircraft as a shield. Russia also "rewarded" Assad with a more advanced air-defense system—the S-300—which had previously been withheld from the Syrian regime at the behest of the United States and Israel.

Several reasons may underlie this Russian attitude. To start with, some in Russian defense echelons, where unfavorable attitudes toward Israel still abound, likely harbored a desire to deflect responsibility away from their own failure to prevent the downing of a Russian plane by a Russian system operated by an ally.³³ Further, Russia had become somewhat nervous about the scope, nature, and growing public profile of Israel's activities in Syria, and used the incident to try to clip Israel's wings and dictate new terms of reference for the "safety measures" mechanism.

Israeli defense officials likewise believe Russia's direction of blame at Israel was a tactic to move toward possible understandings with Washington regarding U.S. withdrawal from Syria, among other issues. According to media reports based on authoritative Israeli sources,³⁴ Moscow approached Israel days before the downing of its plane, requesting help in opening a dialogue with the United States. In such a dialogue, Russia was willing to discuss pushing Iranian and proxy forces out of Syria in return for the United States freezing or relaxing economic sanctions on Iran and removing its forces from Syria. Israel turned down the proposal mainly because it did not want to encourage any relaxed sanctions on Iran, yet some Israeli officials believe the Trump administration could have leveraged Russia's interest to exact concessions before pulling out U.S. troops—which President Donald Trump announced free of charge in December 2018.

Following the Ilyushin incident, Russia put forward some new requirements relating to the guiding principles and procedures of its military deconfliction mechanism with Israel. These included the demand for more-advanced notice of Israeli airstrikes in Syria—which had been measured in minutes—clearer definitions of the areas in which Israel's air force intended to operate and where and when Israel should refrain from military action, exact channels of communi-

cation, and the placement of all such terms into a formal memorandum of understanding between the parties, along the lines of Russia's deconfliction MOUs with the United States and Turkey in Syria.³⁵ Notwithstanding these new required terms, it should be emphasized that Russia never demanded a full cessation of Israeli military activities in Syria, even at the height of bilateral tensions, and quietly pressured Iran to refrain from placing military capabilities close to Russian forces and to generally restrain its military activities in Syria.

Since the Ilyushin fallout, Israel has worked hard to restore its common ground with Russia on Syria, including in the coordination mechanism, and seems generally to have succeeded. During Netanyahu's last visit with Putin in Moscow, on April 4, 2019, he was greeted with an unusual gesture: the returning, in full military ceremony, of the remains of Israeli soldier Zechariah Baumel, who was killed in the 1982 Lebanon war and whose remains were recovered by Russian soldiers in Syria. In their recent meetings, the two leaders also agreed to launch a dialogue on the withdrawal of foreign forces from Syria,³⁶ although the practical meaning of such a dialogue is unclear. Trump's recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights, a move rejected by Russia, may not have helped advance this dialogue.

Evidently, since the crisis of September 2018, Israel has also scaled down its offensive military activities in Syria. This appears to be a response, in large part, to the slowing of Iran's push into Syria, under Israeli and Russian pressure. But Israel is also keen to avert further tensions with Russia, requiring a careful approach to operations.

The S-300 air-defense system, once Syrian forces begin to operate it, could very well pose dilemmas for Israel, such as whether to destroy an S-300 battery targeting its planes even if Russian personnel are present. In his recent meetings with Putin, Netanyahu asked that Russia delay as much as possible delivery of the system to the Syrian regime. Meanwhile, following Israel's heavy blows against Iranian targets in Syria in January 2019, mostly around Damascus, the head of the National Security and Foreign Policy Committee in the Iranian Majlis strongly criticized Russia for not activating the S-300 during the Israeli strikes, most probably reflecting feelings within the Iranian leadership.³⁷

Bashar al-Assad, who is beholden to both Russia and Iran, has been trying to maneuver between the two and open space for himself. This is evident, for example, in the quiet yet tense competition between Russia and Iran to gain licenses to Syrian ports, natural resources, and infrastructure projects.³⁸ It is also evident in the existing friction, sometimes violent, between Iran-controlled units and Russia-affiliated ones in the Syrian army.³⁹ While still very much dependent on Iranian military and economic support, Assad is probably unhappy about some aspects of the Iranian role in Syria,⁴⁰ and according to Israeli and Western intelligence sources has used Israeli strikes in his country as an excuse to evade certain Iranian demands.

For Israel, perhaps the best way to translate its operational campaign against Iranian military entrenchment in Syria into a political lever would be to advance U.S.-Russia understandings pertaining to this entrenchment. To this end, Israel initiated and hosted (June 24–25, 2019) an unprecedented gathering of Israeli, U.S., and Russian national security advisors. Impressed by the gaps between Russia and Iran, Israel and the United States saw an opportunity to encourage Russia to significantly limit Iran's military role in the Syrian (and possibly the Iraqi) theater, if not push Iran out militarily. It is questionable, however, if and to what extent Russia can deliver on such expectations; Russia, which adopted a public profile of defending Iran during the trilateral meeting, has repeatedly maintained that it cannot push Iran out of Syria without sufficient leverage, such as the possible easing of U.S. sanctions on the Islamic Republic. In addition, Russia expects such returns as the acceptance of Assad as the governing authority in Syria—now and for a protracted period during an internal political process—the pulling of all remaining U.S. forces out of Syria, and the relaxing of U.S. sanctions on Russia, at a minimum sanctions applied on Russian companies slated to participate in Syria's reconstruction. It is unlikely that Israel and the United States can meet all these expectations.

Whatever the outcome of such talks, Israel does not intend to stop acting on what it considers vital national security interests, and it is confident that common interests with Russia will continue to prevail and allow room for Israeli operations against Iranian military entrenchment in Syria.

ISRAELI ACTION IN THE CONTEXT OF U.S., REGIONAL, AND DOMESTIC PRESSURES ON IRAN

Israeli officials have come to view their campaign against Iranian military deployment in Syria as part of a broader international and regional effort to resist Iranian ambitions. Leading this push has been the U.S. administration since its May 2018 decision to leave the JCPOA and impose harsh economic sanctions on Tehran. Additionally, Gulf states led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have been fighting the Houthis in Yemen, albeit with no better than modest success, and some Arab states (e.g., Morocco and Bahrain) have been hitting back against Iranian subversion. Morocco specifically in 2018 severed diplomatic relations with Iran over the country's meddling in Western Sahara. For Israel and regional Sunni Arab actors, shared concerns about Iranian designs increasingly serve as a platform for dialogue and cooperation. These Sunni states are anxious about Iran, and they value Israel's actions to counter it.

Not insignificant in this context is domestic unrest in Iran over socioeconomic issues, with one target being heavy regime investment in Lebanon, Syria, Gaza, and Yemen at the expense of the Iranian people themselves. Yet persistent though this unrest has been, and even accepting the likelihood that it would increase under U.S. economic pressure, it still does not suggest imminent regime change, or allow for confident predictions about such a seismic shift in the foreseeable future.

Viewed from Jerusalem, these accumulated pressures on the Iranian leadership provide a significant tailwind for Israel's own efforts to deter and block Iran. Most important in Israeli eyes is the U.S. economic pressure campaign, which Jerusalem openly supports. While Tehran continues to seek ways to pursue its regional ambitions and to invest in them, the mounting economic costs are, as noted, feeding domestic criticism over the regime's investments in these ambitions. It is also compelling Iran to cut funding for its Syria program and for proxies such as Hezbollah and Palestinian factions in Gaza.⁴¹

The case of Hezbollah is striking. Israeli intelligence estimates that Iranian funding for the group

in 2019 was cut by at least 40 percent, with annual assistance having peaked in recent years at \$1 billion.⁴² U.S. sanctions on Iran have joined an existing set of American sanctions applied to companies, individuals, and banks that do business with Hezbollah. Parallel to increasing pressure on Hezbollah's finances are rising expenditures for the group, mainly linked to its role in the Syrian war—not least the need to heavily subsidize numerous families of “martyrs” and wounded fighters. The result is a financial crisis forcing Hezbollah to withdraw forces from Syria, trim its payroll, slash salaries, cut spending on certain social and media programs, and launch fundraising efforts.⁴³

To be sure, Hezbollah has not touched and can still sustain its core fighting capabilities, and the group enjoys independent income sources—including from drug trafficking and money counterfeiting and laundering, much of it in Latin America. One can still reasonably assess, however, that the group's economic crisis, set against an economic crisis plaguing Lebanon, will reduce its appetite for a major confrontation with Israel. But this situation correspondingly appears to increase its appetite for control of Lebanese national resources, for which it relies on its dominance in Lebanese politics. A specific instance involved the group's successful attempt to gain control over the Lebanese Ministry of Health in the government formed in early 2019.⁴⁴ The Health Ministry has one of the government's biggest budgets and an important role in treatment of the wounded. More recently, Hezbollah's motivations emerged in an apparent (though still shaky) easing of its veto on international mediation efforts between Lebanon and Israel over the two countries' maritime border dispute, which has prevented exploration and development of offshore gas fields in the Mediterranean, a potential source of Lebanese and Hezbollah revenue.

Against this general backdrop, President Trump's decision to withdraw U.S. troops from Syria was disappointing to Israel—viewed by it as a move in the wrong direction that could amplify a perceived U.S. retreat from the region, opening space for Iran and Russia.⁴⁵ In any case, Israeli officials appear to have accepted a *de facto* division of labor in containing Iran: the United States applies heavy pressure, but mainly in the nuclear context and limited to economic and political tools; while local actors, first among them Israel, carry the burden of counter-pressuring

Iran's regional ambitions on the ground, relying heavily, though not exclusively, on military tools, with U.S. backing. Furthermore, the Trump administration seems to have adjusted its Syrian withdrawal plans in the interest of disrupting Iran's land corridor, and framed its recognition of Israel's sovereignty over the Golan Heights in a broad anti-Iran context.

POTENTIAL FOR ESCALATION

In assessing Israel's “campaign between the wars” in Syria, some analysts highlight the possibility of a negative inflection point at which the needle moves away from achievement and toward risk. This heightened risk could take shape as a stronger Iran/Syria response, leading to unintended major escalation, a serious threat to Israeli combat planes, and a crisis between Israel and Russia. Such concerns sparked a doctrinal discussion in Israel over whether the so-called precision project was severe enough to justify expanding Israel's notion of military *prevention* of enemy capabilities, even at the risk of war, to cover strategic conventional capabilities on top of nuclear ones.⁴⁶

For now, Israeli political and military decisionmakers do not believe they have reached a point requiring a course change.⁴⁷ Their assessment is likely sound, but still the *potential* for escalation to an armed conflict involving Israel and Iran or Iranian proxies is high, even though if, when, and how it might materialize is difficult to predict. While both sides currently have no appetite for a major escalation, ample ground exists for miscalculation that could abruptly ignite armed conflict: in Syria, in Lebanon, or in the context of surging U.S.-Iran tensions following the U.S. abandonment of the JCPOA and the imposition of painful economic sanctions. These punishing measures have already led to some violent Iranian counterstrikes against American interests in spring 2019, culminating in the downing of a U.S. drone on June 20.

In Syria, the cycle of Iranian military entrenchment, Israeli efforts to stop it, and Iranian counter-responses aimed at deterring Israel could spiral out of control, especially if one party inflicted an especially painful blow on the other. One can only imagine the deteriorating sequence had the Iranian rocket fired at the northern Golan Heights in January 2019 hit Israeli civilians, who were abundantly present in the area. Also worth considering is a situation in

which new air-defense capabilities seriously threaten Israeli planes and Israel moves to eliminate them. Yet another possible scenario would see Iran—using a series of military “stings” along the Syria-Israel border delivered by Syrian or other proxies—striving to reestablish deterrence, possibly stir Israel-Russia tensions, or enhance its response to U.S. pressure. Once escalation exceeds a certain point, events could overwhelm Russia’s ability to restrain and contain these two determined actors. The law of unintended consequences has had much ground to express itself in the Syrian theater. Israel must be especially careful not to inadvertently incite another crisis with Russia.

Developments in Lebanon carry potential no less dangerous, mainly because critical components of the precision project are being implemented there. As part of the Iranian plan to establish a formidable military front on Israel’s borders, Iran has sought to equip Hezbollah with several strategic weapons: an enormous arsenal of ground-to-ground rockets with ranges covering the whole of Israel; a sizable arsenal of highly accurate rockets; sophisticated antiship and anti-aircraft missiles;⁴⁸ attack drones; cross-border offensive tunnels from Lebanon to Israel; and operational military infrastructure in southern Syria. From an Israeli perspective, Hezbollah is considered an army, not merely a militia or a terrorist group.⁴⁹ And though Hezbollah has suffered heavy casualties while fighting in Syria, it has also acquired valuable military experience, including in conducting urban warfare; operating battalion-size formations; incorporating field intelligence, artillery support, drones, and air support into its ground operations; and closely coordinating operations with other militaries, namely those of Russia, Iran, Syria, and even Lebanon.

So far, Israel has thwarted Hezbollah’s key efforts in southern Syria,⁵⁰ and in December 2018 launched within its own borders Operation Northern Shield, which exposed and destroyed six Hezbollah sophisticated cross-border tunnels.⁵¹ This operation dealt a serious blow to Hezbollah, denying the group a capability developed over some fifteen years, through heavy investment, that was meant to constitute a practical and psychological game-changing surprise in wartime. It was meant to allow thousands of Hezbollah combatants, mainly from the elite Radwan Unit, to infiltrate Israel and conquer towns, villages, and military installations.⁵² Notwithstanding

this Israeli success, Hezbollah’s rocket and missile arsenal, and possibly drones in the future, remains a significant challenge.

As for the Lebanese component of the precision project, according to Israeli assessments, Iran and Hezbollah have much work to do before achieving their objectives. They have, for example, not yet managed to establish industrial-scale production lines for accurate rockets, get near their desired quantities, or reach their desired accuracy. At this point, and contrary to public assertions by Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, the group still hasn’t mastered the ability to achieve the planned-for systemic impact of these rockets.⁵³ Nevertheless, the project keeps inching forward and is likely to reach maturity in the not-too-distant future. This poses a dilemma for Israel. If Israel allows development to continue as planned, it will face the severe threat of such an arsenal in a future confrontation, as already outlined. And if Israel strikes the arsenal’s facilities in Lebanon, the risk for escalation to war would be much higher than from its strikes in Syria. This reality issues from the nature of the Lebanese theater, where Israel and Hezbollah, backed by Iran, face each other directly, with the two actors determined to prevent erosion of their deterrence. As long as Hezbollah remains uninterested in war, the group will more likely choose a measured response to an Israeli strike that, in its view, does not cross such a threshold. Miscalculation on both sides, though, remains a possibility—as occurred from Hezbollah leading to the 2006 Lebanon war. And Israel must assume a potential war when deciding to strike, given the high risk that Hezbollah will respond violently in order to reestablish deterrence, possibly betting on Israel’s own reluctance to slide into war.

To address the threat posed by the precision project in Lebanon, Israel has already launched an information campaign, reflecting an earlier-noted component of its “campaign between the wars.”⁵⁴ This information campaign was designed to shed light on the precision project, signal the transparency of Iran and Hezbollah’s activities to Israel, sound a warning bell that the exposed facilities constitute legitimate targets, and trigger external as well as domestic political pressures on Hezbollah. In September 2018, Israeli prime minister Netanyahu used his speech at the United Nations General Assembly to expose three rocket-conversion facilities in Beirut, the Leba-

nese capital. Following his speech, the three facilities were removed. Israel later exposed the existence of other such facilities in Lebanon, as well as the identity of an IRGC engineer commanding this project.

Additionally, in spring 2019, Israel sent warning messages to Lebanon through the United States.⁵⁵ These drew an acknowledgment and response from Nasrallah in his speech on al-Quds Day, an annual Iranian designation marked this year on May 31. Nasrallah contended that while Hezbollah lacks Lebanon-based production factories for accurate rockets, it does possess enough accurate rockets to change the equation with Israel and that any Israeli strike would be met with a “quick, direct, and strong” response.⁵⁶

Israel, for its part, can employ effective measures beyond the offensive kinetic military realm. Such tools could include defensive laser-based rocket-interception capabilities, which it has been working diligently to develop but remain several years away from deployment,⁵⁷ jamming capabilities against GPS missile-guidance kits—assuming that in using them Israel does not disrupt Russia’s use of its own GPS system—and others. But if Israel concludes that Iran and Hezbollah are gaining the upper hand in the race between their developing capabilities and these Israeli countermeasures, it will seriously consider the military option even at the risk of escalation.

The deployment of Iranian missiles in Iraq likewise poses a challenge, although currently in numbers presumably much lower than in Lebanon or Syria. It stands to reason that striking these capabilities would not be Israel’s top choice,⁵⁸ especially given the U.S. presence in Iraq—which on the one hand affords political pressure on the Iraqi government but on the other could itself be vulnerable during a violent flare-up. An instance in which Israel decides to overtly hit Iranian or proxy capabilities in Iraq would likely involve preempting or responding to missile fire from Iraq—either in the context of deteriorating Israel-Iran conflict or of U.S.-Iran escalation.

Indeed, rising tensions between the United States and Iran could, under certain circumstances, contribute to an Israel-Iran collision. Hassan Nasrallah specifically made that linkage in his speech on May 31, 2019, when he stated that if the United States launches a war on Iran, then it would not remain limited to within Iran’s borders but would consume U.S. forces and interests elsewhere as well. “The entire

region would go up in flames,” he warned, and Israel and Saudi Arabia would be the first to pay the price.⁵⁹

In the estimation of Israeli officials, Iranian responses to U.S. pressure could include violent targeting of Israel—either directly or, more likely, by proxies—from locales such as Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Gaza, or others in the realm of global terrorism. Since May 2019, Tehran has been blamed by Washington for a series of aggressive acts in the Gulf and Iraq: sabotage at six tankers, on two separate occasions, south of the Strait of Hormuz; a drone attack on two pumping stations on Saudi Arabia’s major East-West Pipeline; and a series of rocket firings in the direction of the U.S. embassy in Baghdad and on bases where American forces and energy personnel are stationed. Thereafter, on June 20, Iran took responsibility for shooting down a U.S. drone that it claimed was in Iranian airspace and, on July 19, seized a British tanker (reciprocating a similar UK act), intensifying the crisis. All these events may prove a prologue to further Iran-initiated violent measures against U.S. interests and allies in the region, including Israel.

Iran could also opt to respond to pressure through plausibly deniable terrorist attacks against U.S. or Israeli targets globally. Iran and Hezbollah have a long track record as global terrorist actors, and media reports reveal Hezbollah’s extensive efforts in recent years to establish a network of enormous arms caches of advanced explosive materials in various countries, including in Europe, granting it the potential to launch massive terrorist attacks around the globe—likely in response to anti-Iran pressures in the regional or nuclear contexts. At least some of these plans have been thwarted in London, Cyprus, and Thailand.⁶⁰ Iranian cyberattacks against U.S. and regional targets, reportedly on the rise, constitute another route for Tehran.⁶¹

Furthermore, if Iran decides to accelerate its nuclear program and dangerously shorten the time needed to acquire a bomb’s worth of fissile material (i.e., breakout time), this would necessarily reintroduce the preemptive military option, which has been shelved by the IDF since the JCPOA went into effect. It may also force the Israeli military to redirect funds—diverted post-JCPOA to more-immediate priorities, especially on Israel’s northern front—back to the anti-nuclear military option.

In this context, some Israeli officials are quietly concerned about Washington's continued and explicit reluctance to apply military force in the region, especially against Iran, heavily basing its coercive policies on economic pressure. This did not start with the current administration but has not changed with it either, as demonstrated by the lack of any military response, even mild, to the earlier-noted recent series of aggressive Iranian acts against U.S. targets, interests, and allies in the region. If Iran feels U.S. economic strictures are becoming too tight, but without the political will to back it up with military force, the Islamic Republic might be pushed to raise the stakes of violent or nuclear brinkmanship to dangerous levels, which in turn might increase the chances of escalation to the very war the United States wants to avert.

As much as Israeli officials assume the possibility that Iranian nuclear activities will continuously advance beyond JCPOA limits, they also assume that U.S.-Iran negotiations, if indirect, will likely pick up again at some point. Should that happen, Israel would seek to achieve far beyond its limited influence over the JCPOA talks—during which Israel felt its positions were not sufficiently considered despite being a major stakeholder in the Iran file. Apart from its focus on curbing Iran's breakout time and lifting "sunsets" on the key Iranian limitations set by the deal, Israel would likely try to include in future negotiations Iranian regional activity, based on the leverage it has acquired in the Syria showdown. At a minimum, Israel would probably insist on introducing binding limitations on the development and regional proliferation of Iranian accurate missiles.

To be sure, this complex picture has restraining elements. Most important is U.S. economic pressure on Iran. Although that pressure might be pushing Iran into some violent acts, it also likely reduces the Iranian appetite for a major military confrontation requiring heavy investment from Tehran before, during, and after the clash. In addition, Hezbollah is still occupied militarily in Syria, albeit less than in past years. The group is licking its wounds from the war there—where it occupied about one-third of its core fighting force, lost about two thousand combatants, and suffered thousands of injured—and realizes that another war with Israel would be devastating to Lebanon and to Hezbollah's standing in it. Iran, for its part, would not

be eager to throw Hezbollah into this fray, given that it would need the group's capabilities to deter a military offensive on its nuclear program, around which tensions have now heightened. Hezbollah, one must remember, is Iran's major weapon against Israel.

If war between Hezbollah and Israel does erupt after all, no matter where and how, the terms will be different from anything Israel has so far experienced. The conflict would likely stretch to more than one theater of operation, involve quite a few actors, and be much more destructive than past engagements. In such a war, the IDF "threat reference" assumes that Hezbollah would fire about 1,500 rockets a day for weeks from Lebanon into Israel, covering all of Israel, with many capable of evading existing IDF capabilities—which would likely be overwhelmed—and that the group would focus heavily on strategic targets.⁶² Hezbollah would also initiate significant cross-border operations, with Iran bringing to bear whatever military capabilities it could from Syria, Iraq, and beyond, and doing its best to ignite the Gaza front through its proxies. This would mark an attempt to force Israel, for the first time in decades, to confront simultaneous military challenges on its northern and southern fronts.⁶³ Clashes between Gaza and Israel on May 4–6, 2019, were initiated by Palestinian Islamic Jihad—an organization funded by Iran and under strong Iranian influence—without the initial consent of Hamas, the ruling party in the territory. Some in Israel have therefore interpreted the May events as demonstrating Iran's desire to drag Israel into a war in Gaza, it would certainly wish to enfold the Strip in a future confrontation with Israel based in the north.

In such a war scenario, the IDF—which is undergoing a revolution in its interconnectivity, targeting capacity, and synergy between firepower and maneuverability—will heavily target Hezbollah, focusing on its centers of gravity. Israeli forces will also likely launch major ground operations in Lebanon and possibly in Syria, and go after national infrastructure serving the enemy's war efforts. In so doing, it will place responsibility on and exact a price from governments in Lebanon and Syria that embrace these war efforts. In Israeli eyes, the lines between the Lebanese state and Hezbollah and even between the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and Hezbollah have become blurred in recent years, as the Shia group has grown into the nation's strongest political actor. In this role, it enjoys

veto power over Lebanese policies, has drawn closer to the LAF, and holds official recognition of its unique status as a military power complementary to that of the Lebanese state. Israeli officials are determined to unequivocally win any war they are forced into, and they are confident they can do so; Israel, however, is also aware that victory will come at a much higher price than in past confrontations.

Against this backdrop, one hears more and more in Israeli policy circles that the IDF should not necessarily limit itself to the Lebanese and Syrian theaters in a future confrontation with Iran and its proxies. If the Islamic Republic targets Israel, directly or indirectly, the Iranian home front cannot enjoy impunity. Leaders in Tehran should recognize acutely that this is where the country's real Achilles' heel lies.

CONCLUSION

In directly taking on the Iranian military threat poised on its northern front, Israel has largely succeeded thus far. This success derives from Israel's intelligence and operational edge, along with its determination and willingness to raise the stakes of brinkmanship. Pressure on Iran from other directions has also aided in Israel's cause. But the game is by no means over.

As demonstrated in the Israel-Iran showdown, the Islamic Republic relies on the IRGC's Qods Force to carry out its broader designs outside its borders. This unit, as noted, has a great deal of independence. Commanding fewer than 10,000 personnel across the region and globally, the force resorts primarily to subversion, sustaining proxy armies—first among them Hezbollah—and amassing arsenals of relatively advanced missiles and drones. In Israel's view, the Qods Force fully dominates the Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq files, with Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's direct backing, and should be considered the main address—rather than other arms of the Iranian regime—for any pushback against Iranian policies in these theaters.

The Qods Force, moreover, represents a relative node of strength in contrast to the rather weak Iranian regular army and a country facing generally daunting strategic challenges. This is why a comprehensive, focused effort to target the Qods Force, along with Hezbollah and Iran's regional missile

and rocket program—carried out by like-minded international and regional actors under U.S. leadership—could go a long way toward disrupting the Iranian push for regional dominance. This effort should incorporate political, diplomatic, economic, military, cyber, and other types of pressure into a concerted, continuous campaign.

Israel would, of course, be pleased to contribute to such a campaign. Specifically, Israel would like to see:

- more efforts to disrupt the Qods Force, along with Hezbollah's supply lines and financing
- more European and international actors following the example of Britain—and, before it, the United States—which in February 2019 designated the whole of Hezbollah, not merely the military wing, as a terrorist organization
- reinvigorated diplomatic, military, and other efforts against Iran's missile and rocket programs and their proliferation in the region

Whether or not such an international effort gains steam, Israel will pursue its own measures against the Qods Force and proxies operating in its neighborhood. These efforts are driven by an acute threat perception and informed by a belief that by setting realistic goals and mastering escalation dominance Israel can continuously succeed in thwarting the Iranian strategic-military buildup in neighboring countries without resorting to war. This belief is reinforced not only by Israel's military superiority but also by a built-in asymmetry: Israel's vital need to protect its homeland, while Iran is acting on hegemonic ambitions far from home, even as it is plagued by serious strategic challenges and has no appetite for war.

War between Israel and Iran (or its proxies) or, for that matter, between the United States and Iran is highly conceivable. The risky game of brinkmanship, which encompasses several actors, numerous moving parts, and various unknowns amid a rough regional terrain, obviously carries the potential for miscalculation and escalation. In this game, Israel must constantly weigh the possibility that its "campaign between the wars" falls out of balance and escalates into war. Yet war is not inevitable. Perhaps the main lesson from Israel's thus far successful campaign in Syria is that by playing the game right, a skillful, determined actor might enhance deterrence of Iran and make the prospect of war more distant.

NOTES

1. See Michael Herzog, *The Growing Risk of an Israel-Iran Confrontation in Syria*, Policy Note 43 (Washington DC: Washington Institute, 2017), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-growing-risk-of-an-israel-iran-confrontation-in-syria>.
2. The term “strategic depth” was recently used in this very context by Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei. See “Iranian Supreme Leader Khamenei Hints at Enriching Uranium Beyond 20%, Adds: America Will Back Down, No War Is Expected,” Special Dispatch 8077, Middle East Media Research Institute, May 21, 2019, <https://www.memri.org/reports/iranian-supreme-leader-khamenei-hints-enriching-uranium-beyond-20-adds-america-will-back>.
3. At the height of the war in Syria (around 2015–16), Iran commanded more than 3,000 of its own troops in the country, along with tens of thousands of members of local militias, which it helped establish and arm, and more than 20,000 foreign Shia militiamen—with the latter figure comprising 5,000–8,000 Lebanese Hezbollah combatants, as well as units from Iraq (Haidariyoun), Afghanistan (Liwa Fatemiyoun), and Pakistan (Liwa Zainabiyoun).
4. CEP—circular error probability—is used to measure the accuracy of missiles. In this case, a CEP of up to ten meters means that if one hundred missiles are fired at a particular target, about fifty of those will fall within a ten-meter circle around this target.
5. For a more detailed technical description, see *Hezbollah’s Precision Missile Project*, BICOM Briefing (Britain Israel Communications and Research Centre, Feb. 2019), <http://www.bicom.org.uk/analysis/bicom-briefing-hezbollahs-precision-missile-project/>. Meanwhile, numerous variants exist of the Fateh-110, most with a range of 250–300 kilometers and a payload of 450–650 kilograms.
6. Neri Zilber, “To Target Israel, Iran’s ‘Suitcase’ GPS Kits Turn Hezbollah Rockets into Guided Missiles,” *Daily Beast*, Feb. 21, 2019, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/to-target-israel-irans-suitcase-gps-kits-turn-hezbollah-rockets-into-guided-missiles>.
7. Farzin Nadimi, “For a Second Time, Iran Fires Missiles at IS Targets in Syria,” *PolicyWatch 3022* (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Oct. 1, 2018), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/for-a-second-time-iran-fires-missiles-at-is-targets-in-syria>.
8. Dion Nissenbaum and Warren P. Strobel, “Mideast Insurgents Enter the Age of Drone Warfare,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 2, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/mideast-insurgents-enter-the-age-of-drone-warfare-11556814441?shareToken=stb4d012f88e2d444f8a056823ae80ffca>.
9. See, e.g., “Nasrallah Threatens to Bomb Israeli Power Stations,” *Ynetnews.com*, Feb. 16, 2013, <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4345586,00.html>; “An interview granted by Hassan Nasrallah Intended to Reinforce the Deterrent Message Towards Israel by Emphasizing Hezbollah’s Military Capabilities, Especially High-Precision Missiles Enabling Hezbollah to Damage Essential Infrastructure Facilities in the Next War,” Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, Jan. 18, 2018, <https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/interview-granted-hassan-nasrallah-intended-reinforce-deterrent-message-towards-israel-emphasizing-hezbollahs-military-capabilities-especially-high-precision-missiles-enabli/>; “Hezbollah threatens Israel’s gas rigs” (in Hebrew), YouTube video, 0:40, posted by “Tseva Adom,” Feb. 6, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IOAKKx6X6pg>; “Message préventif du Hezbollah à Israël,” YouTube video, 1:13, posted by “VoltaireNetTV,” Dec. 4, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PC7KoUa-WSQ>; and “Nasrallah Warns Israel Could Be ‘Wiped Out’ in War Between U.S. and Iran,” *Times of Israel*, July 13, 2019, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/nasrallah-warns-israel-could-be-wiped-out-in-war-between-us-and-iran/>.
10. Use of the term “redline” often fails to distinguish between rhetorical device and policy reality. According to the true (policy) definition, crossing redlines implies the undermining or endangering of essential national interests, therefore necessitating a forceful reaction. In this specific Israeli case, it implies Israeli willingness to risk war despite not desiring it.
11. Bret Stephens, “The Man Who Humbled Qassim Soleimani,” *New York Times*, Jan. 11, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/11/opinion/gadi-eisenkot-israel-iran-syria.html>.
12. The concept of *mabam* is elaborated in “The IDF Strategy,” whose unclassified public versions were released by Eisenkot in August 2015 and then again in April 2018: see Israel Defense Forces, “The IDF Strategy” (in Hebrew), Apr. 2018, <https://www.idf.il/media/34416/strategy.pdf>.
13. The precise goal of this Iranian initiative is not articulated in publicly available sources.
14. According to Israeli intelligence, the actual firing was carried out by a Shia proxy unit commanded by an Iranian officer.
15. According to Israeli media reports, the IRGC’s Qods Force operated its own independent military complex inside Damascus International Airport, including a command center (a seven-story building called the Glass House), a warehouse, weapons storage facilities (including two underground hangars), and a weapons distribution site. See Amos Harel, “Burned by Israel Strikes, Iran to Move Weapons Supply Center out of Damascus,” *Haaretz*, Feb. 7, 2019, <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/syria/.premium-burned-by-israel-iran-to-move-weapons-supply-center-out-of-damascus-1.6914545>.

16. Stephens, "The Man Who Humbled," <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/11/opinion/gadi-eisenkot-israel-iran-syria.html>.
17. Israeli intelligence believes that apart from Shia militia combatants from across the region, estimated in spring 2019 at around 10,000, the IRGC also commands several Syrian groups, especially military formations composed of Syrian nationals—altogether amounting to tens of thousands of combatants. For Syrians, serving in these Iran-affiliated units is considered the fulfillment of national service, and recruits get higher salaries than conscripts in the Syrian army.
18. For example, Iran deployed military capabilities near the Iraq-Syria border, assuming this would create a greater challenge to Israeli airstrikes. In June 2018, Israel was widely believed to be responsible for destroying the military complex of an Iraqi Shia militia under Iranian guidance near Abu Kamal.
19. When Iranian minister of defense Amir Hatami visited Damascus in late August 2018, the two governments signed an agreement for defense cooperation that included a rehabilitation program for Syria's defense industries.
20. John Irish and Ahmed Rasheed, "Exclusive: Iran Moves Missiles to Iraq in Warning to Enemies," Reuters, Aug. 31, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-iraq-missiles-exclusive/exclusive-iran-moves-missiles-to-iraq-in-warning-to-enemies-idUSKCN1LGOWB>.
21. Judah Ari Gross, "IDF Intel Chief: Iran Could Use Iraq as Springboard for Attacks on Israel," *Times of Israel*, Dec. 31, 2018, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-intel-chief-iran-could-use-iraq-as-springboard-for-attacks-on-israel/>.
22. See, e.g., *Israel Hayom* interview with Brig. Gen Amit Fisher, IDF commander of the Golan regional division, Yoav Limor, "After Trump's Recognition of the Golan, Iran Is Legitimizing Terror at That Level" (in Hebrew), *Israel Hayom*, Apr. 25, 2019 (updated Apr. 27), <https://www.israelhayom.co.il/article/652411>.
23. Ali Daqduq was captured by British forces in Basra, handed over to the U.S. Army, delivered to the Iraqi government in order to stand trial, and ultimately released without charges.
24. See, e.g., Avi Issacharoff, "Hezbollah Is Now Giving Orders to Syria's Army—and Using It to Spy on Israel," *Times of Israel*, June 24, 2019, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/hezbollah-is-now-giving-orders-to-syrias-army-and-using-it-to-spy-on-israel/>.
25. The three governments recently decided to revive the plan, and Iran is pushing hard for the implementation of the first link between Shalamcheh (Iran) and the Port of Basra (Iraq), which it has undertaken to fund. The two governments signed a memorandum of understanding to that effect during President Rouhani's visit to Baghdad in March 2019.
26. See Reuters, "Iran Reaches 400 Mln. Euro Deal with Syria to Build a Power Plant—ISNA," Oct. 3, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/iran-syria-economy/update-1-iran-reaches-400-mln-euro-deal-with-syria-to-build-a-power-plant-isna-idUSL8N1WI3A7>.
27. Russia appears unhappy about military units subordinate to the IRGC rather than to the Syrian government, whose assertiveness it has strived to strengthen by playing the key role in building the Syrian army's 5th Corps.
28. "Russia, Iran Not Allies in Syria, Says Senior Russian Diplomat," Radio Farda, Jan. 27, 2019, <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/russian-diplomat-ryabkov-says-iran-russis-not-allies-in-syria/29733774.html>.
29. As already noted, Iran has been negotiating with Syria over management of the container terminal at the Port of Latakia. Russia, evidently displeased with this prospective deal, wishes to block it, as it did when Assad granted Iran last year an operating license over a pier at Tartus. In the meantime, the Syrian government is preparing a forty-nine-year lease of the Tartus port to a Russian company, which would be tasked with expanding and managing it. An Israeli press report (*Yediot Aharonot*, June 4, 2019) noted that in recent weeks Russia, helped by Syrian army units, evicted from the Tartus port pro-Iran militias that had seized control of a civilian pier on the pretext of implementing the above-mentioned Syrian license to Iran. See Alex Fishman, "Russia Has Unexpected Message for Iran in Syria," *Ynetnews.com*, June, 4, 2019, <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-5520317,00.html>.
30. On negative Iranian feelings toward Russia against this backdrop, see Lt. Col. (Ret.) Michael Segall, "The Rocky Marriage of Convenience Between Russia and Iran in Syria," Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, Jan. 29, 2019, <http://jcpa.org/the-rocky-marriage-of-convenience-between-russia-and-iran-in-syria/>; see also Iranian reformist daily *Etemad* interview with Hossein Jaber Ansari, senior advisor to Iran's foreign minister, Mar. 6, 2019, covered in Raz Zimmt, "Spotlight on Iran: February 24, 2019–March 10, 2019," Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/app/uploads/2019/03/E_055_19.pdf.
31. This Russian undertaking followed a July 2017 U.S.-Russia-Jordan agreement on de-escalation in southern Syria. In that memorandum, Russia committed to distancing elements of non-Syrian origin from the borders of Jordan and Israel. Although not a direct party to the agreement, Israel played an important role behind the scenes.
32. Israel and Russia did not reach a full understanding regarding exclusion of the Damascus area, however. For example, when on January 20, 2019, the IRGC fired a rocket toward Israel from around al-Kiswah, south of Damascus, Israel publicly contended that Russia should have distanced Iran and its proxies from this area as part of its commitment regarding their presence near

- Israel's border. Likewise, when Israel targeted the Qods Force's logistical center at Damascus International Airport, Russia objected, publicly warning that Israel was endangering civilian air transportation.
33. Apparently, the Syrian air-defense system responsible for downing the Russian IL-20 did not possess an identification friend or foe (IFF) system, which could have saved the plane.
 34. Barak Ravid, "Scoop: Netanyahu Rejected Russian Plan to Work with U.S. on Syria, Iran," *Axios*, Dec. 20, 2018, <https://www.axios.com/russia-proposal-syria-israel-iran-united-states-c6d0bde9-583a-4dab-8a38-b2a212a16292.html>; and Barak Ravid, "Scoop: Russian Proposal Linked Iran Sanctions Relief with Syria Withdrawal," *Axios*, Nov. 20, 2018, <https://www.axios.com/iran-syria-withdrawal-for-sanctions-russia-netanyahu-419511bd-545f-484e-b813-9a919c72572d.html>.
 35. Lisa Ferdinando, "U.S., Russia Sign Memorandum on Air Safety in Syria," U.S. Department of Defense, Oct. 20, 2015, <https://dod.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/624964/us-russia-sign-memorandum-on-air-safety-in-syria/>; Xinhua, "Turkey, Russia Sign Agreement of Coordinating Air Operations in Syria," *Global Times*, Jan. 13, 2017, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1028593.shtml>.
 36. Russia does not consider itself a foreign force in Syria since it has a formal agreement with the Syrian government for forty-nine-year leases on certain military facilities.
 37. Islamic Republic News Agency, "Russia's S-300s Become Inactive During Attack on Syria" (in Persian), Jan. 24, 2019, <http://www.irma.ir/fa/News/83182672>.
 38. See Ibrahim Hamidi, "Iran's Presence on Syrian Coast Angers Russia," *Asharq al-Awsat*, Apr. 4, 2019, posted at Syrian Observer, <https://syrianobserver.com/EN/news/49557/irans-presence-on-syrian-coast-angers-russia.html>; Sinan Hatahet, *Russia and Iran: Economic Influence in Syria* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2019), <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2019-03-08RussiaAndIranEconomicInfluenceInSyria.pdf>.
 39. On April 1, 2019, Assad appointed Lt. Gen. Salim Harba, a figure regarded as pro-Russia, as Syrian army chief of staff. See "Assad Appoints a Pro-Russia General as Chief of Staff," *Zaman al-Wasl*, Apr. 17, 2019, <https://en.zamanalwsl.net/news/article/43300/>.
 40. Interestingly, on a deeper, cultural level, Syrian school textbooks reveal much closer affinity to Russia than to Iran. See Eldad J. Pardo and Maya Jacobi, *Syrian National Identity: Reformulating School Textbooks During the Civil War* (Jerusalem: IMPACT-se, 2018), http://www.impact-se.org/wp-content/uploads/Syrian-National-Identity_IMPACT-se_July-2018-.pdf.
 41. Liz Sly and Suzan Haidamous, "Trump's Sanctions on Iran Are Hitting Hezbollah, and It Hurts," *Washington Post*, May 18, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/trumps-sanctions-on-iran-are-hitting-hezbollah-hard/2019/05/18/970bc656-5d48-11e9-98d4-844088d135f2_story.html?utm_term=.14339c7d9b8f.
 42. See Lt. Gen. Gadi Eisenkot's interview at the INSS 12th Annual International Conference, Jan. 27, 2019 (in Hebrew), <https://www.inss.org.il/he/event/12th-annual-international-conference/>.
 43. *Ibid.*; Hanin Ghaddar, "U.S. Sanctions Are Hurting Hezbollah," *PolicyWatch* 3090, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Mar. 6, 2019, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/u.s.-sanctions-are-hurting-hezbollah>; "Hezbollah Launched a Campaign to Raise Money for Military Purposes Using the Islamic Resistance Support Association," Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, Feb. 12, 2019, <https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/hezbollah-launched-campaign-raise-money-military-purposes-using-islamic-resistance-support-association/>.
 44. Hanin Ghaddar, "Why Does Hezbollah Want Lebanon's Health Ministry?" *PolicyWatch* 3027, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Oct. 19, 2018, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/why-does-hezbollah-want-lebanons-health-ministry>.
 45. Michael Herzog, "Trump Departs Syria: An Israeli Perspective," *PolicyWatch* 3064, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Jan. 8, 2019, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/trump-departs-syria-an-israeli-perspective>.
 46. Itai Brun, "'The Culminating Point of Success': Risk Overload in the Campaign between Wars in Syria," *INSS Insight* 1124, Institute for National Security Studies, Jan. 6, 2019, <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/culminating-point-success-risk-overload-campaign-wars-syria/>. This debate is about *preventive* strikes against emerging enemy *capabilities*, rather than *preemptive* strikes in the face of an imminent enemy *offensive*, with the latter having long been part of Israel's national security doctrine.
 47. See, e.g., interview by the outgoing commanding officer of IDF Northern Command, Maj. Gen. Yoel Strick, to journalist Ron Ben-Yishai: "Outgoing Northern Commander: 'The Next War: Short for the Home Front, Longer for the Army'" (in Hebrew), *Ynet-news.com*, Apr. 19, 2019, <https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-5494159,00.html>.
 48. Armed with the Russian Yakhont antiship missile, Hezbollah could target Israeli ports and gas-production facilities in the Mediterranean. If prospective mediation fails to resolve the dispute between Lebanon and Israel over their maritime border within existing gas fields, Hezbollah could claim a context for such targeting in wartime.

49. The IDF chief of staff, Lt. Gen. Aviv Kochavi, is known to be framing the group as a “terror army.”
50. In January 2015, an Iranian general and several Hezbollah operatives were killed in southern Syria, close to Israel’s border, reportedly by an Israeli strike.
51. In late May 2019, the IDF documented and destroyed Hezbollah’s “flagship” tunnel, one of the six cross-border tunnels it discovered. This tunnel was dug at a depth of eighty meters and extended about a kilometer in length, crossing several dozen meters into Israel. It was high and wide enough to allow combatants to walk comfortably without bending and included electricity, ventilation, and intercoms. The IDF claims it detected at least four more tunnels on the Lebanese side that have yet to cross the border.
52. In August 2012, Hezbollah conducted a huge three-day military exercise in Lebanon, with one of the main aims being to simulate the “conquest of the Galilee.”
53. See Nasrallah’s interview on al-Mayadeen TV, January 26, 2019, analyzed in “Reinforcing the Deterrent Message to Israel and Various Other Issues Raised in Hassan Nasrallah’s Interview After Several Months of Media Silence,” Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, Jan. 28, 2019, <https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/reinforcing-deterrent-message-israel-various-issues-raised-hassan-nasrallahs-interview-several-months-media-silence/>.
54. Israel used an information campaign to expose suspicious missile and rocket sites in Syria and Lebanon, Hezbollah’s infrastructure in southern Syria, and other sites. See, e.g., Yaakov Lappin, “Israel’s Information Campaigns: An Alternative to Kinetic Strikes,” BESA Center Perspectives Paper 1144, Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, Apr. 17, 2019, <https://besacenter.org/perspectives-papers/israel-information-campaigns/>.
55. Barak Ravid, “Scoop: Pompeo Warned Lebanon About Covert Hezbollah Missile Factory,” Axios, Apr. 1, 2019, <https://www.axios.com/pompeo-israel-hezbollah-missile-factor-in-lebanon-195025d2-d1a0-41ba-954e-f39dc5c3d93c.html>.
56. “Sayed Hassan Nasrallah Quds day speech 2019,” YouTube video, 1:27:50, posted by “Wilayat TV,” June 30, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L9uN11kecwE>.
57. Yuval Azulai, “Israel Developing New Laser Missile Defense System,” *Globes*, Dec. 5, 2018, <https://en.globes.co.il/en/article-defense-ministry-speeds-up-laser-missile-defense-system-development-1001263646>.
58. Michael Knights and Assaf Orion, “If Iran Deploys Missiles in Iraq: U.S.-Israeli Response Options,” PolicyWatch 3119, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, May 13, 2019, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/if-iran-deploys-missiles-in-iraq-u.s.-israeli-response-options>.
59. “Hizbullah Leader Hassan Nasrallah: U.S. War with Iran Would Ignite the Region, U.S. Forces and Interests Would Be Annihilated; The Precision Missiles in Lebanon Can Change the Region’s Balance of Power,” Special Dispatch 8106, Middle East Media Research Institute, June 5, 2019, <https://www.memri.org/reports/hizbullah-leader-hassan-nasrallah-us-war-iran-would-ignite-region-us-forces-and-interests>.
60. See “Report: Hezbollah Planned Huge, Game-Changing Attacks on Israeli Targets Globally,” *Times of Israel*, June 12, 2019, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/hezbollah-planned-immense-game-changing-terror-attacks-report/>; Ronen Bergman, “Arms Caches in the Heart of Europe” (in Hebrew), *Yediot Aharonot*, June 12, 2019, p. 10.
61. See U.S. Department of Homeland Security, “CISA Statement on Iranian Cybersecurity Threats,” June 22, 2019, <https://www.dhs.gov/cisa/news/2019/06/22/cisa-statement-iranian-cybersecurity-threats>; Micah Loudermilk, “Iran Crisis Moves into Cyberspace,” PolicyWatch 3150, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 9, 2019, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iran-crisis-moves-into-cyberspace>.
62. The “threat reference” is a tool reflecting IDF assumptions that is used to plan buildup of capabilities over a given period.
63. See “Senior Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hamas Figures Praise Iran’s Military Support and Threaten That in the Next War the Rocket Fire from the Gaza Strip Will Reach All the Cities in Israel and the ‘Resistance Axis’ Will Coordinate Its Actions on All Fronts,” Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, Jan. 3, 2019, https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/app/uploads/2019/01/E_001_19.pdf.

THE AUTHOR



MICHAEL HERZOG, a retired brigadier general in the Israel Defense Forces, is the Israel-based Milton Fine International Fellow of The Washington Institute. He previously served as head of the IDF Strategic Planning Division and as senior military advisor and chief of staff to four Israeli ministers of defense.



THE WASHINGTON INSTITUTE FOR NEAR EAST POLICY
1111 19TH STREET NW • WASHINGTON, DC 20036
WWW.WASHINGTONINSTITUTE.ORG