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Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

SITUATION ASSESSEMENT

# Israel and Iran Battle out over Syrian Skies

Policy Analysis Unit | February 2018

## Israeli Iranian Tensions over Syria

Series: Situation Assessment

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## Introduction

In a wide-ranging offensive, Israeli military jets violated Syrian airspace and attacked 12 military sites, some of which were Iranian-operated, across the governorates of Homs and Damascus in Syria on Saturday, 10 February. The attack was spurred by an Iranian plane crossing the 1949 armistice line in the northern Galilee. For the first time in three decades, Syria's air defenses were able to successfully counter the attack, bringing down a modified Israeli F-16, which eventually crashed in northern Palestine. This rare success for the Syrian military in protecting its borders was seen by many as ushering in a new phase of the conflict over Syria.

## The Run-up to Israeli Aggression

For several months leading up to the Israeli aggression, numerous Israeli officials decried Iranian military involvement in Syria, which itself has only intensified in the previous few weeks. Throughout 2017, the Israeli authorities had claimed that Tehran's involvement in the Syrian conflict was an existential menace to their society. Speaking at the opening of the Israeli legislature's winter session for 2017, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu described Iran's involvement in the Syrian conflict as one of the most pressing challenges to Israel's continued existence. This topped off a year of Israeli rhetorical acrobatics, as the country moved on from nearly two decades of focusing on the Iranian nuclear program as the single largest threat to its existence to positioning the Iranian presence in Syria in its stead<sup>1</sup>.

For the Israeli security and military establishments, the risk is that Iran's control of non-state militia in Syria will give Tehran long-term military power to wield just north of the Galilee. According to Israeli military commanders, Iran's mission in Syria is not only intended to preserve the present regime in Damascus, but also to further a number of other aims. These include the preservation of its non-state actors—Iranian, Syrian, Lebanese and Iraqi—which operate in Syrian territory. If maintained, such forces could give Iran the opportunity to fight Israel on a vastly expanded front along southern Lebanon and across southern Syria, as well. This significantly increases Iranian freedom of maneuver in the event of a US or Israeli attack.

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<sup>1</sup> See Ephraim Kam's "Iranian Military Intervention in Syria," Strategic Assessment from the Israeli National Security Studies Institute at Tel Aviv University, available in Arabic through the Palestinian Atlas of Israeli studies since January, 2018: <https://goo.gl/E9gmmT>

Another, related fear raised by Israeli military planners is Iranian utilization of its presence in Syria to enhance its transfer of weapons—and especially advanced weapons—to Lebanon’s Hezbollah. According to the same Israeli military experts, Iran already controls a number of military airfields in Syria and is about to acquire a port on the Syrian coast. Similarly, Israeli military planners have accused Tehran of building large depots for advanced weapons as well as factories for the fabrication of sophisticated, targeted and long-range munitions within the country. Iran also stands accused of helping Hezbollah to achieve the same.

Israel’s decision to act against Iranian military sites in Syria were precipitated by Tel Aviv’s failure thus far to influence the terms of a series of US and Russian sponsored de-escalation agreements in relation to the Syrian conflict. In particular, these include the July and November 2017, de-escalation agreements which covered southern Syria and which appeared to the Israelis to leave Iranian freedom of action intact. De-escalation efforts in Syria simply did not sit well with Israeli ambitions, driving the military authorities in Tel Aviv to adopt a more expansionist approach to events to the north.

Thus far, Israel has failed to create a de-militarized zone along the armistice line with Syria. It has failed, specifically, to force non-state militia loyal to Iran to be pushed back 60 kilometers—a constraint previously requested by Israel. It has been forced to watch as pro-Iranian militia are stationed between 20 to 30 kilometers from the Israeli occupied Syrian Golan Heights, in the southern part of the occupied region, and six kilometers in the northern part of the Golan. In sum, Moscow and Washington have both failed to accede to Israeli demands that Iranian military involvement in Syria be severely curtailed. This compounds Israel’s failure thus far to secure recognition of its annexation of the water rich Syrian mountain range, which it occupied in 1967.

## Israel Seeks to Influence Russia

Israel and Russia have closely coordinated their operations in the Syrian theatre at least since Russia’s direct involvement in the Eastern Mediterranean conflict in September 2015. Moscow has also conceded Israel’s “right” to strike at military targets within Syria in accordance with Israel’s “Red Lines”, which declare the right of Israel to retaliate “preemptively”. The Russian and Israeli military commands have also set up a hotline to prevent any unintended escalations resulting from their two air forces sharing Syrian airspace, given that Russian air defenses are stationed in Syria while the Israelis regularly violate Syrian airspace. This coordination has been reflected at the highest levels of Israeli-Russian bilateral cooperation, with Netanyahu meeting Russian President Vladimir Putin seven times since Russia first entered the Syrian fray over two

years ago. Open Israeli requests that Russia cooperate with Tel Aviv and the US to limit Iran's military presence in Syria date back at least to Netanyahu's August 2017 visit to Sochi<sup>2</sup>.

Israeli insistence that Iranian military involvement in Syria was a threat continued even after the November 2017 de-escalation agreement in Syria, guaranteed by Jordan, the United States and Russia. Netanyahu reaffirmed Israeli opposition to continued Iranian presence in Syria one week after that agreement was signed and urged Putin to help bring it to an end. Most recently, Netanyahu, accompanied by Israel's Chief of Military Intelligence, visited Putin on 29 January 2018. The Israeli premier stressed that the Israelis were willing to take action unilaterally if international powers could not rein in Iran directly. Netanyahu also raised the question of Lebanon, and Iran's seemingly ongoing commitment to help Lebanese Hezbollah with the technical assistance needed to develop precision-guided, long-range missiles. Commenting on the situation in Syria, Netanyahu offered that the presence of Russian military forces on the Syrian frontier did not impend Israeli military maneuverability<sup>3</sup>.

Despite proclamations from the Kremlin that it takes Israeli security concerns seriously, it is unlikely that Moscow will give its full attention to these Israeli demands before the conflict in Syria comes to a complete end. Although it claims to be supporting the maintenance of the Syrian regime's struggle to remain in power, and explicitly claims not to be seeking to empower Damascus against Israel, Russia views Iran as an important ally in the struggle against extremist groups in Syria which it is presently waging. Today, Russia relies on Iran not merely to help protect the Syrian regime in the capital but to help in its country-wide battle to re-establish the regime in regions it has been pushed out of otherwise. It is therefore unlikely that Moscow will try to push militias loyal to Iran out of Syria, especially as it would then find itself having to replace those non-state forces with its own forces.

## Conclusion

Israel followed the development of events in Syria very closely, all the while imposing its own "Red Lines" defining the limits of what it saw as acceptable behavior. Israel had sought to make use of the conflict in Syria to prevent the transfer of advanced weapons—including, for example, advanced air defense systems, long-range missiles, surface-to-air missiles and land-

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<sup>2</sup> Barak Ravid, "Iran's Mounting Involvement in Syria Threat to Entire World, Netanyahu Tells Putin," *Haaretz*, 23 August, 2017, available online: <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/netanyahu-iran-involvement-in-syria-threatens-whole-world-1.5445135>

<sup>3</sup> See "Netanyahu Presses Putin on Keeping Iran out of Syria," *The Times of Israel*, 22 November, 2017, available online: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-presses-putin-on-keeping-iran-out-of-syria/>

to-sea missiles as well as drones. Israel has also shown its readiness to act on these bombastic statements, launching 140 attacks on Syrian targets since 2012. Notably, the Israeli military has stopped short of entirely crippling the ability of the Syrian regime to respond to the civil war in which it is involved.

It seems likely that Israel will continue to act to enforce its “Red Lines” and to interfere in the Syrian conflict, and that Russia will continue to show its understanding of these policies. Barring a major transformation of the underlying parameters of the conflict in Syria, however, this will most likely not translate into a fully fledged Israeli onslaught on Iranian sites in Syria.