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Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

SITUATION ASSESSEMENT

Israeli-Iranian Escalation: A Direct Confrontation on the Horizon?

Policy Analysis Unit | April 2018

Israeli-Iranian Escalation in Syria

Series: Situation Assessment

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Introduction

Israeli fighter jets bombed several Iranian military targets stationed in Syria's Taifor Airbase early Monday, 9 April 2018. The targets, located at an airfield to the east of the central Syrian city of Homs, included Iranian unmanned aerial vehicles (Drones) as well as military command and control systems. Tehran announced a total of 14 individuals killed in the strike, including seven members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard. One of the IRG officers who lost his life in the attack was responsible for Iranian drone activity in Syria.

Russia was quick to declare that the Israelis had not coordinated the strike on Taifor in advance, in line with the earlier protocol. The Israeli Ambassador to Moscow was summoned to the Russian Foreign Ministry as a result, where Moscow warned Israel off further aggression. In a telephone conversation with the Israeli Prime Minister, Russian President Vladimir Putin demanded that Israel refrain from actions which "destabilized" Syria or threatened its security. The Israeli prime minister that Tel Aviv would not allow Iran's military infrastructure in Syria to become permanent¹.

This latest strike followed three other Israeli strikes on Iranian military targets in Syria. The first, in September of 2017, was a strike on a joint Syrian-Iranian factory for the manufacture of long-range missiles located in the Governorate of Hama. In December of the same year, the Israelis bombed a missile silo located near the town of Kiswa in the Western Ghouta region. By February of 2018, Israel had again attacked an Iranian military site, this time what it claimed was a command and control center for Iranian drones, one of which had flown over the Galilee.

The Israeli Strike in Context

The April 2018 strike on the Taifor Airbase in Syria coincided with a broader escalation of violence in Syria. On 7 April, the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime had led to the deaths of 78 civilians living in the opposition-held town of Douma in the Eastern Ghouta. Following President Donald Trump effort to punish the Assad regime for these weapons, the US together with Great Britain and France did indeed strike out against targets in Syria on 14

¹ See Jack Khoury, Reuters and The Associated Press, "Russia Outs Israel, Says Two Israeli Fighter Jets Struck Iranian Base in Syria," *Haaretz*, 10 April, 2018, available online: <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/russia-outs-israel-two-israeli-fighter-jets-struck-iranian-base-in-syria-1.5979943> and other reports in the press;

April. The tripartite action was coordinated with Russia, to avoid any direct confrontation between the West and Moscow.

Effectively, the strike was somewhat a “stunt,” and did not go as far as Trump’s fiery rhetoric had given observers reason to expect. The strike did not effect a change in the balance of powers on the ground in Syria and was equally not a signal of a shift in Western strategy towards the conflict in the country. Most importantly, the 14 April missile strike was not enough of a show of force to persuade Russia and the Syrian regime to eventually accept a political settlement to the Syrian conflict. As for the Israelis, so long as Iran’s military presence in Syria remains unchanged, there is no substantive change to speak of.

In fact, Israel has remained committed to a policy of complete, principled opposition to an Iranian military presence in Syria, and of aiming to end that presence if possible. This is notable departure from Israeli policy of previous years of the Syrian conflict, during which the Israelis did not actively oppose the presence of Iranian forces in Syria². Israel’s previous indifference to the presence of Iranian forces and pro-Iranian Shia militia in Syria was possibly related to the fact that, at the time, their presence was aimed squarely at fighting off the armed Syrian opposition; the Israelis made due with merely asking that Iranian forces and pro-Iranian militia not be stationed close to the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights and the Upper Galilee.

There are two factors which drove the change in Israeli policy towards Iranian forces in Syria. The first is that the conflict in Syria appears to quickly coming to a decisive phase, with the regime seemingly bolstered by support from both Iran and Russia. Secondly, Iran is increasingly posturing as if its presence in Syria will be long-term and permanent, potentially giving Tehran a base from which it can threaten Israel well into the future. This would form a second plank of Iranian power to the north of Israel and give Tehran the chance to flex its muscle. A long-term Iranian presence in Syria would also mark a continuous land overpass connecting Iran’s western borders with the Mediterranean. It would give Tehran a corridor to supply its proxies in Lebanon without hindrance.

There is evidence that Iran, having already secured the use of a number of bases and military airfields in Syria, has also sought to possess naval bases in the country, and to develop its own drones there, too. The Israelis further claim that the Iranian military, having developed the means to build highly accurate, long-range missiles, is already seeking to transfer that technology to Hezbollah.

² For background reading, see “Israel and Iran Battle over Syrian Skies,” Situation Assessment Series, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 15 February, 2018, available online: <https://www.dohainstitute.org/en/PoliticalStudies/Pages/The-Israeli-Aggression-on-Syrian-Territory-and-the-Prospects-of-the-Israeli-Iranian-confrontation.aspx>

The Israeli Red Line

Over the previous few months, Israeli planners have heightened their attention to the Iranian military presence in Syria. Unlike the approach to the Iranian nuclear program, in which the differences in opinion between the Israeli military and political leaderships were clearly visible, there is a high-level consensus in Israel on the need to combat the Iranian military presence in Syria³.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has also repeatedly claimed that he was willing to deploy military force to prevent Iran from consolidating its military presence in Syria. This unease over Iran projecting its power in Syria was echoed by the Israeli Chief-of-Staff Gadi Eizenkot, who stressed that Syria was transitioning into a new phase of its history, and that the Israelis were prepared to use force to ensure that Iran's military presence in Syria would not be too entrenched. Today, it appears clear that Israel's ultimate aim is to push all Iranian forces out of Syria. Tel Aviv has its own red lines, placing limits both on the proximity of Iranian forces to the Syrian-Israeli frontline, as well as the types of weapons which Iranian soldiers would be allowed to deploy in Syria⁴.

Balances of Power and Obstacles

In its actions against Iranian targets in Syria, the Israeli military has sought to achieve two goals: ensuring that Iranian forces remain at a safe distance from the frontline with Israel; and seeking to destroy advanced Iranian weapons facilities in Syria. The Israeli approach to an Iranian military presence was based purely on power, with the Israeli military frequently resorting to violations of Lebanese and Syrian airspace. In doing so, the Israeli military aims to ensure that the balance of military power on the ground is always in its favor. Israeli source claim that there are an estimated 2,000 Iranian soldiers and military advisers on the ground in Syria. This is in addition to another 7,500 members of the Lebanese Hezbollah, 9,000 members of Shia militia from Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan as well a number of militia composed of Syrians and directly answerable to an Iranian command structure.

³ Amos Harel, "Israel is Now Directly Confronting Iran in Syria," *Haaretz*, April 9, 2018, available online: <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/syria/.premium-israel-is-no-longer-watching-syria-from-the-sidelines-and-is-directly-operating-against-iran-1.5980318>

⁴ Amos Harel and Yaniv Kubovich, "Israeli Military Chief Warns: Explosive, Sensitive Situation Developing, Especially Among Palestinians," *Haaretz*, 30 March, 2018, available online: <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-idf-chief-of-staff-warns-there-s-a-risk-of-an-escalation-this-year-1.5956331>

While the Israelis clearly have the upper hand in Syria, targeting Iranian sites has faced difficulties. The main challenges are not in the shape of a potential Iranian retaliation but because of the Russian military presence in Syria and the possibility that Russia will forcefully object to Israeli actions. Beyond the fact that Iranian and Russian forces deployed to Syria are now deeply enmeshed in Syria, making it difficult to strike at Iranian forces without running the risk of provoking a Russian response, there is a deep and fundamental contradiction in objectives between Tel Aviv and Moscow. While the Israelis see pushing out Iranian forces from Syria as their ultimate aim, Russia in fact would like to see Iranian forces stay put—viewing Tehran as an on-the-ground, reliable ally in the war in Syria. A continued Iranian presence in Syria is, in fact, necessary to ensuring the preservation of the Syrian regime, which continues to be Moscow’s ultimate objective.

Conclusion

Israeli military planners know that continued attacks against Iranian targets on Syrian soil may not be a sufficient deterrent to Tehran, which could continue to consolidate its military presence in the Eastern Mediterranean. In the meantime, Iranian patience for continuing attrition may run dry. Iran could in turn be driven to retaliate militarily from positions in southern Syria or from Lebanon, or, alternatively, by striking at out at Israeli targets further afield. Whatever shape an Iranian retaliation does or does not take, it appears that Israel will likely continue to strike at Iranian targets in Syria at will. The Israelis will continue to do so regardless of the possibility of a direct confrontation with Lebanese Hezbollah, but Israeli military planners are also convinced that, at this moment in time, a direct military confrontation is exactly what Iran and Hezbollah want to avoid. Indeed, Hezbollah and Iran have yet to succeed in their goal of protecting the continuity of the Syrian regime in the midst of wider regional competition. Likewise, Tehran views Hezbollah as a second line of defense in the event that its own borders are breached and not a tool with which to respond to Israeli military adventurism in Syrian territory.