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# The Escalating Israeli Hostility towards Iran

Unit for Political Studies

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Series: **Situation Assessment**

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### Unit for Political Studies

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On 24 / 25 August 2019, Israel simultaneously targeted several positions associated with Iran in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon. This represents further escalation in the tension between the two parties which is spreading past the Iranian presence in Syria. Remarkably, Israel officially claimed responsibility for some of the recent attacks, as stated by the spokesman of the Israeli occupation army Avichai Adrai, and both Israeli Prime Minister and Security Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and Chief of Staff Aviv Kochavi made public threats. This indicates a departure from the usual Israeli ambiguity in targeting Iran and its allies in recent years.

## Israeli Goals

On the night of August 24, 2019, Israeli warplanes targeted a site near the town of Aqraba, southeast of Damascus, where Israel claimed to have destroyed a group of Iranian drones preparing to launch attacks in retaliation for the bombing of Iranian targets in Iraq in recent weeks. About two hours later, at dawn on 25 August, two drones attacked targets in the southern suburbs of Beirut, which Israeli media claimed were linked to the improved accuracy of Hezbollah's long-range rockets.<sup>(1)</sup> While Hezbollah's Secretary General, Hassan Nasrallah, was delivering a speech vowing to retaliate, Israeli aircraft attacked Iranian missile sites on the Iraqi side of the Iraq-Syria border, destroying them. A few hours later, Israeli aircraft attacked a military post in the Qusaya area in the Bekaa Valley belonging to the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC), which Israel claims is used as a passage to smuggle weapons from Syria to Hezbollah in Lebanon.

## Israeli Calculations

The most recent attacks on Lebanon are in breach of the rules of engagement implicitly agreed upon between Israel and Hezbollah since the July 2006 war. Hezbollah has threatened to retaliate with force, which could open the door for further escalation, especially if the attacks were intended as an Israeli attempt to launch a new relationship with Hezbollah. Israel is invading Lebanese and Syrian territory (and recently Iraq) under the pretext of preventing the Iranian military presence there.

Despite the escalation, and the risk of instigating a confrontation with Iran and its regional allies, Israel does not seem to be seeking a full military confrontation with Hezbollah at this stage. In taking this step, Israel seems to have realized that Hezbollah and Iran also do not want this confrontation, especially while they are under intense US pressure. Israel estimated that Hezbollah's response would be limited at worst, and that it can deal with it without necessarily leading to a full-scale confrontation. Hezbollah responded to Israel's assassination of Jihad Mughniyeh and another Iranian officer in southern Syria in 2015 by carrying out a military operation in the slopes of Mount Hermon that killed two Israeli soldiers. Israel did not respond at the time.

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<sup>1</sup> Amos Harel, "Target in Beirut Attack: An Iranian Facility Vital for the Establishment of an Accurate Missile Production Line for Hezbollah" (Hebrew), *Haaretz*, 27/8/2019, accessed 29/8/2019 at: <https://bit.ly/3OLKEmY>



Netanyahu is apparently seeking to put pressure on Hezbollah militarily, in addition to the political, economic and diplomatic pressure exerted by Washington, to block or stop the reinforcement of its missile arsenal and improvements of its target capacity. Netanyahu relies on Israel's surplus of power, the weakness of the so-called "axis of resistance", and the massive US support for Israel, at a time when Washington is pressing Iran to negotiate and abandon its missile program. The Trump administration is clearly following an Israeli agenda in this context.

In addition, Netanyahu has now adopted the Minister of Security role in addition to his role as prime minister, with broad powers over the decision to launch major military operations and even to decide on war, especially after making changes in the political security cabinet that leave little opposition to Netanyahu or the IDF chief of staff. Since the beginning of this year (2019), Aviv Kochavi, a particularly hawkish character in the military establishment, has held this position, taking steps to escalate hostilities with Iran and its allies. However, Netanyahu's military-security cabinet includes the Shin Bet chief, the Mossad chief, and the head of the National Security Agency, all of whom are close to Netanyahu. It is also clear that, for electoral reasons, Netanyahu deliberately appears to be the one who decides to launch such attacks against Iranian targets throughout the region and presents himself as Israel's strongman who does not hesitate to make major decisions to protect Israel's security.

## Stages of Israeli Escalation in Syria

Since the outbreak of the revolution in Syria, which the Syrian regime has turned into all-out civil war, Israeli assaults on targets linked to Iran and Hezbollah in Syria have passed through four main phases. The first phase, initiated by Israel in 2012, involved bombing targets associated with the transfer of sophisticated weapons from Syria to Hezbollah in Lebanon, such as long-range surface-to-surface missiles, surface-to-sea missiles, air defense systems, and drones. In the second phase, Israel expanded its circle of targets, targeting Iranian forces, Hezbollah forces, and Iranian-affiliated militias in southern Syria to distance them from the Syrian Israeli border. In the third phase, Israel added ending the permanent Iranian military presence in the whole of Syrian territory to its objectives, in late 2017, and placed it at the top of its priorities. Since July 2019, in the fourth phase, Israel expanded the scope of its assaults to include Iranian military targets in Iraq, particularly long-range Iranian missiles and military factories for re-installation and production, before expanding its targeting to Lebanon.

Despite intense Israeli attacks on the Iranian military presence in Syria, Israel has failed to dissuade Iran from continuing attempts to strengthen its presence in Syria thus far. Nor has Israel managed to prevent Iran from transferring sophisticated weapons to Hezbollah through Syria despite Iran transferring its military center from Damascus airport to the T-4 airbase near Homs, relatively distant from the Israeli border.

## Targeting Iraq

In recent months, press leaks from the Israeli security establishment have claimed that Iran, in mid-2018, has supplied pro-Iranian militias in Iraq with Zelzal and Fateh 110 surface-to-surface missiles, which range from 200 to 700 kilometers; able to reach any target in Israel from western Iraq. In 2016, Iran reportedly established factories in Iraq to reproduce and assemble these missiles, which are transported as parts from Iran,<sup>(2)</sup> and that these missiles are more sophisticated and accurate in hitting the target than the missiles owned by Lebanese Hezbollah. The Israeli military establishment estimates that the Iranian military presence in Iraq has become a major threat to Israel's security, and that Iran plans to establish a new front to use against it when needed, in addition to the existing fronts in Syria, Lebanon and the Gaza Strip. Various sources claim that in recent months, Iran has begun to strengthen the power of its pro-Iraqi militias following Israel's intensified attacks on the Iranian military presence in Syria.

In recent months, Israel appears to have made efforts with Trump and his administration to allow it to strike sophisticated Iranian missiles that have been transported to Iraq, as well as target factories that (allegedly) produce or reconstitute long-range missiles controlled by pro-Iranian Iraqi militias. On his visit to Baghdad in May 2019, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo showed Iraqi Prime Minister Adil Abdul Mahdi aerial photographs of Iranian missile stores and weapons factories operating for Iran in Iraq under the control of the Popular Mobilization Forces. He asked him to remove them from Iraq and explained that if they were not removed, they might be bombed.<sup>(3)</sup> Pompeo also called on the Iraqi prime minister to disband the pro-Iranian militias in Iraq, and to integrate them into the Iraqi army and security establishment, under the control of the Iraqi state.

Nearly two months ago, Israel likely received US approval to bomb Iranian missile stores and some missile factories that work for pro-Iranian militias in Iraq. It is unlikely that Israel would carry out these attacks without US approval, in light of Iraq's absolute submission to US air dominance.

In the past two months, Israel has launched at least five attacks on Iranian targets in Iraq, on July 19 and 28, and on August 12, 20 and 25, 2019. Although Israel has not formally claimed responsibility for these attacks, it has not denied it either. On the other hand, Netanyahu has hinted on more than one occasion, along with other Israeli officials and the Israeli media, that Israel is responsible for these attacks, and that it will continue to launch them as long as necessary. US officials also confirmed to the New York Times that Israel carried out the attacks in Iraq.<sup>(4)</sup>

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2 Zvi Barel, "A New Front or Hidden Partnership? Iraq Ignores Attack Attributed to Israel" (Hebrew), *Haaretz*, 1/8/2019, accessed 29/8/2019 at: <https://bit.ly/2LiU9mX>

3 Orit Berlov and Audi Dekel, "Israel Expands Front Confrontation with Iran to Iraq" (Hebrew), Situation Assessment, Institute for National Security Studies at Tel Aviv University, 25/8/2019, accessed 29/8/2019 at: <https://bit.ly/2zvE1YB>

4 Alissa J. Rubin & Ronen Bergman, "Israeli Airstrike Hits Weapons Depot in Iraq," *The New York Times*, 22/8/2019, accessed on 29/8/2019, at: <https://nyti.ms/2Mx2B5d>



## Conclusion

Israel has expanded its target circle of Iranian and Iranian-linked interests and objectives, no longer confining it to Syria, but also to Iraq and Lebanon. While the importance of internal political considerations in Israel, whose prime minister is facing a tough election on 17 September, should not be ignored, it is wrong to believe that this is entirely linked to these elections and that they will stop thereafter. Israel, irrespective of the outcome of the upcoming elections, will take advantage of favorable regional and international conditions (absolute US support, Russian collusion, normalization with some Arab states) to achieve long-term goals to weaken Iranian influence throughout the region, as well as to exploit the weak capacity of Iran and its allies after squandering their energy in sectarian conflicts, and turning some Arab revolutions into civil wars to suit Israel's interest.

Accordingly, the recent Israeli attacks in three Arab countries are not expected to lead to a major confrontation because of the unwillingness of all parties at least at this time. Hezbollah considers itself a reserve force to deter Israel from striking Iran, as well as protecting itself and Lebanon. Nor is Iran interested in a war with Israel at this stage. Any reaction by Hezbollah will be limited, and its goal is to prevent Israel from changing its rules of engagement and to take Lebanon as it does in Syria and Iraq. Israel is likely to continue its attacks on Iraq as long as it is in the form of US pressure on Iran, and as long as it has the US green light. However, it may be difficult for these attacks to continue for a long time. The situation in Iraq is different from that in Syria, and there is the possibility that these attacks could lead to reactions from some pro-Iranian militias against US targets and interests in Iraq; which could cause Washington to prevent Israel from continuing.