



Controlled Chaos

The Escalation of Conflict between Israel and Iran in War-Torn Syria

Tony Badran, Matthew RJ Brodsky & Jonathan Schanzer

July 2018



Controlled Chaos

The Escalation of Conflict between Israel and Iran in War-Torn Syria

Tony Badran
Matthew RJ Brodsky
Jonathan Schanzer

July 2018



FDD PRESS

A division of the
FOUNDATION FOR DEFENSE OF DEMOCRACIES
Washington, DC

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	6
ENFORCING ISRAEL'S RED LINES	7
DEGRADING IRANIAN CAPABILITIES IN SYRIA	9
ISRAELI DETERRENCE AND CONTAINED ESCALATION	10
THE DANCE WITH RUSSIA	11
AN AGREEMENT OVER SOUTHERN SYRIA?	13
WHAT WILL WASHINGTON DO?.....	15
THE PROBLEM PERSISTS	16
U.S. OPTIONS.....	17

Introduction

On the night of February 9, Iran dispatched an armed drone from Syria that penetrated Israeli airspace just south of the Golan Heights. Israel destroyed it with an Apache helicopter.¹ The following day, Israel sent eight F-16s across the border to strike the T-4 base in the Homs governorate, where the drone originated, as well as a handful of other Iranian targets. Although the mission was a success, Syrian anti-aircraft fire downed one F-16 – though the pilot made it back to Israel, where he and his navigator ejected successfully. Israel then launched a second wave of strikes, destroying a number of Syrian anti-air defense sites.

This was the most extensive clash to date between Israel and the so-called “Axis of Resistance” – Iran, Syria’s Assad regime, and Hezbollah – since Iran began deploying military assets, soldiers, and proxies to Syria six years ago. Israeli Air Force (IAF) Chief of Staff Tomer Bar described it as the “most significant attack the air force has conducted against Syrian air defenses since Operation Peace for the Galilee” in 1982.² At the same time, Israeli officials insisted that its response was limited and its intent was not to spark a wider conflagration.

But it was clear that the conflict would not be contained to this one incident. Iran was exploiting the chaos of the Syrian civil war to deploy military assets there, all with the intent of targeting Israel. All the while, Iran was sending advanced weaponry to Lebanon by way of Damascus under the fog of war. The Israelis

have destroyed some of this hardware – both systems destined for Lebanon and those slated to remain in Syria – with one-off strikes.

Complicating Israel’s limited operations was Russia’s entry into Syria. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu paid multiple visits to Moscow, hoping to convince Russian President Vladimir Putin to curb Iran and its proxies. Putin has been deploying military hardware, personnel, and Russian soldiers of fortune to Syria since 2015, ostensibly to combat the Islamic State but also to prop up his Arab client, the Assad regime. Putin partnered with the Iranians for his Syrian mission. He therefore has little interest, let alone ability, to reign in the Iranians who command Assad’s foot soldiers.

Iran thus continues to move assets into Syria to target Israel. On the night of May 9-10, Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Quds Force operatives reportedly fired at least 20 Grad and Fajr 5 rockets at Israeli forward military positions in the Golan Heights.³ According to the Israel Defense Force (IDF), none of the rockets resulted in any casualties or damages.⁴ Four of them were intercepted by the Iron Dome defense system.

To deter future incursions, the IDF then unleashed a large-scale response lasting several hours, during which it struck an array of Iranian targets in Syria. Operation House of Cards, as it was dubbed, included strikes on Quds Force intelligence outposts, logistical headquarters, military compounds north and south of Damascus, arms depots inside the Damascus airport, as well as positions in the demilitarized zone. During the operation, Syrian regime air defenses fired

1. Yoav Zitun, “Iranian drone that infiltrated Israel carried explosives, tasked to carry out attack,” *Ynet* (Israel), April 13, 2018. (<https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-5229466,00.html>)

2. “Israel caused serious harm to Syria’s air defenses, says IAF second-in-command,” *The Times of Israel*, February 10, 2018. (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-caused-serious-harm-to-syrias-air-defenses-says-iaf-second-in-command/>)

3. @AAhronheim, “BREAKING: #IDF says Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani directly behind the launching of 20 Grad and Fajr5 missiles towards #Israel. None of the rockets, which were launched from some 30-40km away, landed in Israeli territory and 4 were intercepted by the Iron Dome,” *Twitter*, May 9, 2018. (<https://twitter.com/AAhronheim/status/994419277536129026>); The commander of the IAF, Maj. Gen. Amikam Norkin, later claimed the Quds Force fired 32 rockets. Yoav Zitun, “IAF commander: Iran fired 32 rockets at Israel in May 10 attack,” *Ynet* (Israel), May 22, 2018. (<https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-5267545,00.html>)

4. Judah Ari Gross, “IDF: Iranian forces fire 20 rockets at Israel; Iron Dome intercepts some,” *The Times of Israel*, May 10, 2018. (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/sirens-sound-in-golan-heights-residents-urged-to-enter-shelters/>)

at IAF warplanes, which responded by taking out several batteries.⁵

The strikes were so comprehensive that Israeli Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman claimed “almost the entire Iranian infrastructure in Syria” was hit.⁶ While this may have been an exaggeration, Liberman’s statement underscored Israel’s determination to defend its three red lines in Syria: preventing Iranian entrenchment in Syria, the transfer of strategic weapons, and the establishment of an active front on the Golan Heights.

As Israel continues to strike sporadically at Iranian assets, it has become clear that its strategic imperatives have not changed. However, the execution of its policy requires increasingly risky operations, and the likelihood of further escalation grows. Prime Minister Netanyahu explicitly warned that Israel is determined to stop Iranian aggression in Syria, “even if this involves a conflict.”

Israeli strikes continue with the goal of preventing southern Syria from becoming an active front on its border. Israel also seeks to leverage these strikes to negotiate with Russia, and perhaps even the United States, for an Iranian exit from Syria. But this is by no means the likely outcome. The risks continue to mount, particularly in the wake of the regime camp’s offensive in late June to retake southern Syria, setting the stage for the next phase of the Syrian war.

Enforcing Israel’s Red Lines

Until recently, Israel’s policy in Syria effectively was “Lebanon plus,” geared toward postponing a third Lebanon war by preventing Hezbollah’s acquisition of what Israeli officials call “game-changing” systems, transferred under the fog of war from Iran via Syria. Such systems in the hands of Hezbollah would prevent the Israeli air force or navy from operating with impunity. They are longer-range, more precise missiles capable not only of reaching anywhere in Israel, but also of threatening strategic facilities and installations.⁷

The recent Israeli precision airstrikes against Iranian weapons in Syria destined for Lebanon are best understood as an extension of Jerusalem’s longstanding policy. Israel has conducted well over 100 one-off airstrikes in Syria by some estimates.⁸ In 2013 alone, Israel struck shipments of the Yakhont anti-ship missile system,⁹ advanced anti-aircraft missile systems,¹⁰ and surface-to-surface missiles.¹¹ Unattributed airstrikes on storage depots at Damascus International Airport have become routine over the past few years, as well.

More recently, the Israeli approach has widened. The IDF has targeted weapons systems destined to remain in Syria – to be used by Iran or its proxies, in an attempt to establish a new hostile front on Israel’s borders. In April, for example, Israel conducted an airstrike that killed seven members of the Quds Force,

5. Anna Ahronheim, “Israel Strikes Dozens of Iranian Targets in Syria,” *The Jerusalem Post* (Israel), May 10, 2018. (<https://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Israel-strikes-dozens-of-Iranian-targets-in-Syria-556034>)

6. Itay Blumental, “Liberman says Israel hit ‘almost the entire Iranian infrastructure in Syria,’” *Ynet* (Israel), May 10, 2018. (<https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-5256371,00.html>)

7. This includes the P-800 Yakhont anti-ship supersonic missile system, ballistic missiles like the newer generation of the Fateh-110, and the extended range Scud-D. In addition, Israel continues to target anti-aircraft systems intended for Hezbollah, including the SA-17 (Buk-M2E), SA-8 and SA-3 systems.

8. Amos Harel, “Israel Struck Syrian and Hezbollah Arms Convoys Nearly 100 Times in Five Years, Top General Say,” *Haaretz* (Israel), August 17, 2017. (<https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/israel-struck-syrian-hezbollah-convoys-nearly-100-times-in-5-years-1.5443378>)

9. David Barnett, “US officials confirm Israeli strike on Yakhont missiles in Syria,” *FDD’s Long War Journal*, July 12, 2013. (https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/07/us_officials_confirm_israeli_s.php)

10. Roi Kais, “Officials to AP: Israel hit SA-17 missiles shipment,” *Ynet* (Israel), January 30, 2013. (<https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4339181,00.html>)

11. David Barnett, “Satellite imagery of Israeli airstrike at Damascus airport released,” *FDD’s Long War Journal*, May 16, 2013. (https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/05/satellite_imagery_of_israeli_a.php); “IAF Strike in Syria Targeted Arms from Iran,” *Reuters*, May 4, 2013. (<https://www.jpost.com/Defense/Report-IAF-strike-in-Syria-targeted-arms-coming-from-Iran-312036>)

including a colonel in the IRGC Aerospace Force, who commanded the drone unit at the T-4 base.¹² However, the main target appears to have been an advanced anti-air missile system, which the Iranians brought into Syria following the February strike. Initially, it was reported that the system (which had not yet been deployed) was the short-range, Russian-made Tor (SA-15).¹³ Israeli reports later identified it as the Iranian “3rd Khordad” system, which they destroyed soon after it was unloaded off an Iranian transport plane.¹⁴

Later that same month, the IDF struck bases in Hama and Aleppo. Again, though the strikes killed a number of Iranian troops and officers, the targets were weapons systems. The strikes in Hama, for instance, also hit surface-to-air missiles, just delivered from Iran by air.¹⁵

Unlike in past strikes against Hezbollah-bound weapons, when Israeli officials have remained mum and refused to accept responsibility, the IDF is now openly claiming credit for strikes against Iranian assets.¹⁶ This alone has increased the potential for a wider conflagration.

For Israel, even as it widens the scope of its targets in Syria, interdicting weapons bound for Hezbollah remains a top priority. Over the past seven years, Israel also struck senior Hezbollah cadres and warehouses. For

example, in late May, the IAF reportedly hit the Dabaa military airbase, an installation near the Lebanese border used by Hezbollah and Iran, in what appeared to be a strike targeting Hezbollah arms warehouses.¹⁷

“The IDF is now openly claiming credit for strikes against Iranian assets. This alone has increased the potential for a wider conflagration.”

For now, Hezbollah appears willing, or perhaps forced, to absorb such blows. The Lebanese terror group understands that while Israel is stopping some weapons from getting through, it certainly is not stopping all. This has yielded an unspoken understanding between Israel and Hezbollah: that Israel can strike repeatedly in Syria so long as it does not hit targets inside Lebanon.¹⁸ These rules effectively extend the period of calm between major wars in Lebanon – a shared preference for both Hezbollah and Israel.

But the rules of engagement are not binding, and they may soon change. Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu noted in May that Israel’s activity extends not just to preventing the transfer of weapons to Hezbollah, but also their production in Lebanon – an issue Israel

12. Amir Toumaj, “Israel kills Iranian Guard Corps members in Syria,” *FDD’s Long War Journal*, April 9, 2018. (<https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2018/04/israel-kills-iranian-guard-corps-members-in-syria.php>)

13. Dion Nissenbaum and Rory Jones, “Israel Conferred With U.S. on Strike in Syria to Target Iranian War Gear,” *The Wall Street Journal*, April 17, 2018. (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/israel-conferred-with-u-s-on-strike-in-syria-to-target-iranian-war-gear-1524001066>)

14. Ron Ben-Yishai, “The real target of the T-4 attack: the 3rd Khordad system,” *Ynet* (Israel), May 13, 2018. (<https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-5258754,00.html>)

15. Courtney Kube, “Israel seems to be preparing for war with Iran, U.S. officials say,” *NBC News*, May 1, 2018. (<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/mideast/israel-seems-be-preparing-war-iran-say-u-s-officials-n870051>); Amos Harel, “Strike Likely Targeted Surface-to-surface Missiles Iran Seeks to Deploy in Syria,” *Haaretz* (Israel), April 30, 2018. (<https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/syria/.premium-strike-likely-targeted-surface-to-surface-missiles-iran-seeks-to-deploy-in-syria-1.6036265>)

16. Yoav Zitun, “Israel takes responsibility for missile strike on Hamas, Aleppo,” *Ynet* (Israel), May 11, 2018. (<https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-5257650,00.html>)

17. مقتل 9 إيرانيين في القصف الإسرائيلي لمطار الضبعة (Nine Iranians killed in Israeli bombing of al-Dab’a Airport), *Sky News Arabia* (UK), May 26, 2018. (<https://www.skynewsarabia.com/middle-east/1051006-مقتل-9-إيرانيين-القصف-الإسرائيلي-لمطار-الضبعة>)

18. For background on these rules of engagement, see: Jonathan Schanzer, Tony Badran, and David Daoud, “The Third Lebanon War: The Coming Clash Between Hezbollah and Israel in the Shadow of the Iran Nuclear Deal,” *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, July 2016, page 16. (http://www.defenddemocracy.org/content/uploads/documents/LebWar_Report_Design_091416.pdf)

raised last year.¹⁹ Reports about these factories in Lebanon vary. Some reports indicate that the suspected sites, allegedly in Hermel near the Syrian border in the north and between Sidon and Tyre in the south, are being prepared to produce Iran's Fateh-110 medium-range missile and other types of munitions.²⁰ Other reports assert that the factories are underground and are currently producing separate rocket components, which are then assembled elsewhere.²¹

Degrading Iranian Capabilities in Syria

In January 2015, Israel targeted a convoy of senior IRGC and Hezbollah cadres in Quneitra, killing a Quds Force brigadier general.²² The strike was intended to prevent Iran from establishing an operational presence on the Golan along Israel's border. Israel also took action later that year against Hezbollah cadres operating in Druze villages in the Golan. A prominent Hezbollah operative, Samir Kuntar, who was recruiting Syrian Druze, was assassinated in December 2015.

But the Golan front is a minor problem relative to the rapidly expanding military infrastructure that Iran has established throughout Syria. From rockets and

hardened positions to the semi-permanent basing of Shiite militias, Israel's concerns are mounting. As a result, Israel has had little choice but to expand the scope of its operations.

In March 2017, when Israel struck a shipment of advanced weapons at the T-4 base, it operated deeper in Syria than usual because the IDF had identified the base as an operational and logistical hub for the Iranians.²³ Then, in September 2017, Israel struck a Syrian military research compound in Masyaf in Hama province. It was the first time since the Russian intervention in 2015 that Israel struck that far north. The research center was used, *inter alia*, for the development of ballistic missiles. Some in Israel assessed that Iran and Hezbollah controlled the site.²⁴

Israel has since upped the tempo of its targeting campaign. In November, it reportedly bombed a weapons factory in Hisya, south of Homs near the Lebanese border – an area with a significant Hezbollah presence and Iranian industrial factories.²⁵ The Israeli Air Force then hit another research and development facility in Jamraya near Damascus in December.²⁶ That strike likely targeted what Israeli officials call Iran's "precision project" – an effort to position

19. Daniel Salami and Kobi Nachshoni, "Netanyahu: Israel working to prevent arms production in Lebanon," *Ynet* (Israel), May 27, 2018. (<https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-5272133,00.html>); Jeffrey Heller, "Netanyahu: Iran building missile production sites in Syria, Lebanon," *Reuters*, August 28, 2017. (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-netanyahu/netanyahu-iran-building-missile-production-sites-in-syria-lebanon-idUSKCN1B80TT>)

20. Judah Ari Gross, "Report sheds light on Iranian missile factories being built in Lebanon," *The Times of Israel* (Israel), July 9, 2017. (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/report-sheds-light-on-underground-iranian-missile-factories-being-built-in-lebanon/>)

21. Avi Issacharoff, "Iran sets up underground rocket factories in Lebanon – report," *The Times of Israel* (Israel), March 13, 2017. (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/iran-sets-up-underground-rocket-factories-in-lebanon-report/>)

22. Roi Kais and Ron Ben-Yishai, "Iran confirms general killed in Syria strike attributed to Israel," *Ynet* (Israel), January 19, 2015. (<https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4616784,00.html>)

23. Jeremy Binnie and Yaakov Lappin, "IDF highlights Iranian presence in Syria," *Jane's 360*, April 19, 2018. (<http://www.janes.com/article/79430/idf-highlights-iranian-presence-in-syria>)

24. Anna Ahronheim, "Israel may have Struck the Syrian Weapons Facility before Hezbollah could Take Over," *The Jerusalem Post* (Israel), September 7, 2017. (<https://www.jpost.com/Arab-Israeli-Conflict/Israel-may-have-struck-the-Syrian-weapons-facility-before-Hezbollah-could-take-over-504469>)

25. Roi Kais, "Alleged Israeli attack's target: A Syrian-Iranian industrial area," *Ynet* (Israel), November 2, 2017. (<https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-5037528,00.html>); Roi Kais and Yoav Zitun, "IAF strikes Syrian munitions factory, Syria retaliates," *Ynet* (Israel), November 1, 2017. (<https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-5037355,00.html>)

26. Ron Ben-Yishai, "3 possible reasons for the attack on Syria's Jamraya facility," *Ynet* (Israel), February 7, 2018. (<https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-5096766,00.html>)

accurate missiles on Israel's borders.²⁷ A report in the Kuwaiti *al-Jarida* newspaper, citing an apparent Israeli intelligence leak, claimed the sites were part of a diffused Iranian network in Syria to store and assemble parts for precision-guided missiles.²⁸

“All of these strikes targeted multiple aspects of the Iranian threat: weapons shipments, precision-guided missiles, advanced air defense systems, military bases, production facilities, storage facilities, and operational capacity on the Israeli border.”

In December, Israel hit an Iranian military complex in al-Kiswa, south of Damascus, not far from the Golan. The complex, among other things, served as a headquarters for IRGC-run Shiite militias operating in southern Syria.²⁹

All of these strikes targeted multiple aspects of the Iranian threat: weapons shipments, precision-guided missiles, advanced air defense systems, military bases, production facilities, storage facilities, and operational capacity on the Israeli border. It is nevertheless difficult to ascertain how meaningfully Israel has degraded Iran's infrastructure.

In 2018, Israeli strikes continued with increased intensity, and the Iranians had no answer. Iran attempted a response during the March 2017 strike near Palmyra, when Syrian air defenses fired a volley of S-200 missiles, one of which was intercepted over the Golan, but which otherwise caused no damage.³⁰ Israel hit back with a warning to Assad that it would target the regime's air defenses should it engage the IAF again.³¹

Israeli Deterrence and Contained Escalation

On the night of April 29, 2018, Israel struck the 47th Brigade base in Hama. The strike apparently hit a major arms cache – some reports claimed 200 missiles³² – causing a huge explosion that reportedly measured as a small earthquake. The Lebanese pro-Hezbollah *al-Akhbar* newspaper claimed the explosions may have happened underground and speculated about the possible use of bunker buster bombs.³³ The strike killed perhaps as many as 18 Iranians, increasing the pressure on Tehran to retaliate.³⁴

In the end, the Iranians did strike back. Their response was the May 9 firing of 20 or more rockets on the Golan Heights. According to the IDF, 16 of the rockets fell inside Syria and four were shot down by Israel's

27. Stuart Winer, “Israel engaged in wide effort against enemy rockets, says IDF chief,” *The Times of Israel* (Israel), July 5, 2017. (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-engaged-in-wide-effort-against-enemy-rockets-says-idf-chief/>)

28. “ماذا قصفت إسرائيل في الشهور الماضية بسورية؟” *Al-Jarida* (Kuwait), December 16, 2017. (<http://www.aljarida.com/articles/1513357819181455900/>)

29. Ron Ben-Yishai, “Strike on Iranian base in Syria: Dealing with problem while it's still small,” *Ynet* (Israel), December 2, 2017. (<https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-5050804,00.html>)

30. Steve Weizman, “Netanyahu: Syria raids targeted ‘advanced’ Hezbollah arms,” *Agence France-Presse* (France), March 17, 2017. (<https://www.yahoo.com/news/netanyahu-syria-raids-targeted-advanced-hezbollah-arms-202637725.html>)

31. “Lieberman threatens to ‘destroy’ Syrian air defense systems,” *Agence France-Presse* (France), March 19, 2017. (<http://www.timesofisrael.com/liberman-threatens-to-destroy-syrian-air-defense-systems/>)

32. Jack Khoury, Noa Landau, and Amir Tibon, “Syria Strike Destroyed 200 Missiles, Killed 11 Iranians, Source in pro-Assad Alliance Says,” *Haaretz* (Israel), April 30, 2018. (<https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/syria/explosions-reported-in-assad-army-base-north-of-homs-syria-1.6035801>)

33. “عدوان جديد يستهدف إيران في سوريا” (A new aggression targets Iran in Syria), *Al-Akhbar* (Lebanon), April 30, 2018. (<https://al-akhbar.com/Syria/249145>)

34. Amos Harel, “Strike Likely Targeted Surface-to-surface Missiles Iran Seeks to Deploy in Syria,” *Haaretz* (Israel), April 30, 2018. (<https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/syria/.premium-strike-likely-targeted-surface-to-surface-missiles-iran-seeks-to-deploy-in-syria-1.6036265>); Judah Ari Gross, “Iran to respond to ‘Israeli aggression’ in Syria, official says,” *The Times of Israel* (Israel), May 2, 2018. (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/iran-to-respond-to-israeli-aggression-in-syria-official-says/>)

Iron Dome defense system.³⁵ The Israeli response was overwhelming: extensive strikes on as many as 50 Iranian sites in Syria. The IAF destroyed all Syrian regime air defense batteries that tried to intercept them, including Russian-made Pantsir and Buk systems.³⁶

“Declaring open season on Iran in Syria is now, without question, the Israeli strategy. It marks an expansion of Jerusalem’s longstanding policy of interdicting weapons shipments to Hezbollah, with the aim of forestalling the next war in Lebanon.”³⁷

Declaring open season on Iran in Syria is now, without question, the Israeli strategy. It marks an expansion of Jerusalem’s longstanding policy of interdicting weapons shipments to Hezbollah, with the aim of forestalling the next war in Lebanon. This posture signals to the Iranians and Hezbollah that Israel is determined to destroy Iran’s significant military buildup in Syria. But more importantly, the Israeli leadership has signaled that, if it must, it is prepared to go to war. As Israel’s Transportation Minister Israel Katz stated, “Israel is determined and it has the intelligence abilities ... and the special operational abilities to act.” He thus warned Iran, “Either pull out of Syria or suffer the consequences and get dragged into a conflict.”³⁷

In short, Israel seeks to prevent Iran from turning Syria into an active front, similar to what it has faced with Hezbollah in Lebanon since the 1980s. Iran has

managed to cross this red line, but only marginally, on two occasions. Israel now seeks to ensure this does not develop into a pattern, where Iran is allowed to test Israel and simply absorb limited retribution. The Israelis have learned from Lebanon how this has worked to Iran’s long-term advantage, and why Iran’s designs in Syria must be stymied, even if it requires an all-out war.

The Dance with Russia

When Moscow intervened in Syria in late 2015, Iran and Hezbollah hoped the Russian deployment would restrict Israel’s ongoing campaign of one-off strikes against “game-changing weapons” destined for Lebanon. For almost two years, amidst a slow but steady drumbeat of airstrikes, and amidst an ongoing effort by Israeli military brass to de-conflict directly with Moscow, known Israeli actions appeared to be confined to the region south of Homs.

Israel’s areas of operation in Syria appeared far less restricted in 2017. The airstrike in March of that year on the T-4 base was the first clear indication of this. The Russians showed their displeasure by summoning the Israeli ambassador; the strike may have been dangerously close to Russian troops.³⁸

If the Iranians hoped their proximity to Russian positions and personnel would serve as a protective shield, the Israelis sent another message. The Israeli strike in Masyaf in September 2017 targeted a

35. IAF commander, Maj. Gen. Amikam Norikin, later claimed the Quds Force fired 32 rockets. Yaov Zitun, “IAF commander: Iran fired 32 rockets at Israel in May 10 attack,” *Ynet* (Israel), May 22, 2018. (<https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-5267545,00.html>)

36. Yaakov Lappin, “Half of Syria’s air defenses destroyed by IAF in recent months,” *Jewish News Syndicate*, May 24, 2018. (<https://www.jns.org/half-of-syrias-air-defenses-destroyed-by-iaf-in-recent-months/>); Judah Ari Gross, “In addition to Iranian targets, Israeli strike pummels Syrian air defenses,” *The Times of Israel*, May 10, 2018. (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/in-addition-to-iranian-targets-israeli-strike-pummels-syrian-air-defenses/>)

37. Itay Blumental, “Lieberman says Israel hit ‘almost the entire Iranian infrastructure in Syria,’” *Ynet* (Israel), May 10, 2018. (<https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-5256371,00.html>)

38. Peter Beaumont, “Russia summons Israeli ambassador to explain air raids in Syria,” *The Guardian* (UK), March 20, 2017. (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/20/russia-summons-israeli-ambassador-explain-air-raids-syria>)

compound near Russian air defense batteries.³⁹ The Russians absorbed it quietly. By the time Israel struck the T-4 base for the third time in April 2018, not only did Russia again summon the Israeli ambassador, but also aired its concerns publicly.⁴⁰

Moscow soon revived the possibility of selling the S-300 air defense system to Syria.⁴¹ It is unclear if the intent was to deter Israel.⁴² Israel, however, made it clear that the Russian presence in Syria was neither a constraint nor a defense for Iran. As Defense Minister Liberman stated, “If someone shoots at our planes, we will destroy them. It doesn’t matter if it’s an S-300 or an S-700.”⁴³

While Putin is seemingly unbothered by the escalating rhetoric from Israel, the increasing possibility of a larger conflagration between Iran and Israel in the territory that he nominally controls could prove problematic for him, especially if it undermines his effort to stabilize the Assad regime. When he entered Syria in 2015, his goals were to take advantage of the opening afforded him by then-U.S. President Barack Obama, who wanted to avoid entanglement in the Syrian civil war, and the region more broadly. Putin seized on the opportunity to assert Russia’s position as a power in the eastern Mediterranean, establish military bases, and pose a direct challenge to NATO’s southern flank. In the process, he sought to demonstrate to

prospective Middle Eastern arms clients how reliable an ally Moscow could be.

As Russian air power helped the Iranians and the Assad regime take territory from the opposition forces and the Islamic State, Moscow positioned itself as the true power in Syria. In the north of the country, it managed a process with Turkey and Iran centered around the contested Idlib province. In the south, it entered a parallel process with the U.S. and Jordan in July 2017 to create so-called “de-escalation zones” in Deraa and Quneitra provinces.⁴⁴

“Israeli officials indicate that Putin’s posture began to shift in the first half of 2018 with every significant Israeli operation against Iran’s assets in Syria. The hope, officials said, was for Israel to leverage the chaos it was creating to prompt the Russians to force Iran and its proxies out of all of Syria – not just the south.”

Israel publicly derided the end product of this process. Indeed, the de-escalation zone appeared to ensure that Iran could escalate its presence, while the other players de-escalated. The U.S.-Russia statement merely included a vague statement about the future reduction

39. Judah Ari Gross, “Israeli satellite images show damage to Syrian weapons facility,” *The Times of Israel* (Israel), September 10, 2017. (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/israeli-satellite-images-show-damage-to-syrian-weapons-facility/>); Jeremy Binnie and Sean O’Connor, “Second Russian S-400 in Syria confirmed,” *Jane’s 360*, September 29, 2017. (<http://www.janes.com/article/74500/second-russian-s-400-in-syria-confirmed>); Tom Cooper, “Russia’s Air Defenses In Syria Have Some Big Problems,” *War in Boring*, October 6, 2017. (<https://warisboring.com/russias-air-defenses-in-syria-have-some-big-problems/>)

40. Itamar Eichner, “Russian Foreign Ministry summons Israeli envoy over Syria base strike,” *Ynet* (Israel), April 10, 2018. (<https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-5226182,00.html>)

41. Richard Sisk, “Russia May Gift S-300 Anti-Air Missiles to Syria to Beef Up Defenses,” *Military.com*, April 25, 2018. (<https://www.military.com/defensetech/2018/04/25/russia-may-gift-s-300-anti-air-missiles-syria-beef-defenses.html>)

42. Ron Ben-Yishai, “Israel can deal with Russian supply of S-300 missiles to Syria,” *Ynet* (Israel), April 15, 2018. (<https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-5230806,00.html>)

43. Judah Ari Gross, “Liberman: Israel would destroy Syrian S-300 if it attacked our jets,” *The Times of Israel* (Israel), April 24, 2018. (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/liberman-israel-would-destroy-syrian-s-300-if-it-attacked-our-jets/>)

44. “US, Russia, Jordan Reach Ceasefire Deal for Southwest Syria,” *Reuters*, July 7, 2017. (<https://www.voanews.com/a/us-russia-syria-ceasefire-deal/3932835.html>)

and ultimate elimination of “foreign forces.”⁴⁵ There was no mention of Hezbollah by name, nor was there a direct reference to the Iranians, or even their local militias. To the chagrin of Jerusalem, the Russians deliberately brushed off any discussion surrounding the withdrawal of Iranian or pro-Iranian units.⁴⁶

With a clear understanding that it could not rely on Russia to safeguard its interests, and with threats mounting, Israel stepped up its military action against Iranian targets across Syria. Israeli officials also began to threaten Bashar al-Assad directly.⁴⁷ “If Assad allows Iran to turn Syria into a forward operating base against us,” Energy Minister Yuval Steinitz said in May, “to attack us from Syrian soil, he should know that will spell his end.”⁴⁸ Though aimed at Assad, this threat was likely intended for Russia’s ears.

The message to Putin was rather straightforward: Russia’s goal of maintaining a stable client state in Syria under Assad rule was in jeopardy. If Israel’s strategic needs were not satisfied, it could undermine the Russian enterprise in Syria.

Meetings between Jerusalem and the Kremlin continue with frequency. Israeli officials indicate that Putin’s posture began to shift in the first half of 2018 with every significant Israeli operation against Iran’s assets in Syria. The hope, officials said, was for Israel to leverage

the chaos it was creating to prompt the Russians to force Iran and its proxies out of all of Syria – not just the south.

While this position may seem maximalist, it is consistent with Israel’s stated policy from the start of the Syrian civil war. It is also best understood when one considers that Iran could easily deploy medium-range rockets from the country’s north, thereby posing virtually the same threat to Israel from a slightly farther distance. As Prime Minister Netanyahu stated: “An Iranian departure from southern Syria alone will not suffice.”⁴⁹ The mid-June airstrike on Iranian assets and supply routes in Syria’s far eastern border region with Iraq, which one U.S. official has attributed to Israel, only seemed to reinforce this message.⁵⁰

An Agreement over Southern Syria?

While the end game for Israel is to force a complete Iranian withdrawal, Russia is now moving to return southern Syria to Assad control. In late May, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov remarked that Russia’s vision is a “situation when representatives of the Syrian Arab Republic’s army stand at Syria’s border with Israel.”⁵¹ Russia appears to have obtained Jordanian buy-in for this, and is now seeking Israel’s, which

45. U.S. Department of State, Press Release, “Joint Statement by the President of the United States and the President of the Russian Federation,” November 11, 2017. (<https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2017/11/275459.htm>)

46. “Russia, US discuss de-escalation zone in Syria’s southwest — Lavrov,” *Tass* (Russia), November 14, 2017. (<http://tass.com/politics/975575>)

47. Gerb Keinon, “Steinitz: Assad in Danger if he Allows Iran to Attack Israel from Syria,” *The Jerusalem Post* (Israel), February 13, 2018. (<https://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Steinitz-Assad-in-danger-if-he-allows-Iran-to-attack-Israel-from-Syria-542453>); Nir Cohen, “Steinitz: Assad will suffer consequences of any attack on Israel,” *Ynet* (Israel), April 23, 2018. (<https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-5238405,00.html>)

48. Attila Somfalvi and Alexandra Lukash, “Steinitz: ‘If Assad continues allowing Iran to operate out of Syria, it will be his end,’” *Ynet* (Israel), May 7, 2018. (<https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-5253557,00.html>)

49. @IsraeliPM, “I would like to reiterate: We are acting against an Iranian military presence anywhere on Syrian territory. An Iranian departure from southern Syria alone will not suffice,” *Twitter*, May 29, 2018. (<https://twitter.com/IsraeliPM/status/1001429041839263745>)

50. Barbara Starr, Ryan Browne, and Oren Liebermann, “Israel behind airstrike in Syria, US official says,” *CNN*, June 18, 2018. (<https://www.cnn.com/2018/06/18/politics/israel-us-strike-syria/index.html>)

51. “Only Syrian army should be on country’s southern border: Russia,” *Reuters* (Israel), May 28, 2018. (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia/only-syrian-army-should-be-on-countrys-southern-border-russia-idUSKCN1IT0U1>)

would effectively secure its position as principal arbiter in Syria with two key U.S. allies.

Moscow faces a problem, however. The Assad regime's military is not up to the task. To retake the south, it would likely require the support of Hezbollah and Iranian-led militias, which are often embedded with, or coordinate closely with, regime units. And the presence of these Iranian-led actors would effectively guarantee continued Israeli airstrikes.

“Netanyahu identified four red lines for Israel: the establishment of an Iranian military presence in Syria, Iranian operations against Israel from Syria, the transfer of advanced weapons to Lebanon via Syria, and the production of such weapons in Lebanon. It seems unlikely that Israel would be willing to negotiate anything less.”

In recent months, stories have swirled of a purported agreement between Moscow and Jerusalem over the withdrawal of Iranian-led forces from southern Syria, leaving Assad in charge with Israeli promises of non-interference.⁵² The purported details of this hypothetical deal reached a fevered pitch, with Russian

sources claiming that Israel understood that an Iranian withdrawal had to be “gradual” and “in stages,” as a complete withdrawal was “not realistic.” According to the reports, the Russians considered Israel’s demand of an Iran-free zone of 60 kilometers as “not realistic,” but that the Israelis would be “allowed” to bomb Iranian targets, so long as they do not target Assad regime positions.⁵³

But no agreement materialized.⁵⁴ Nothing in the leaked Russian proposals addressed Israel’s concerns or offered anything the Israelis did not already have.⁵⁵ If anything, the likelihood of Israeli strikes against Assad’s forces increased as reports emerged of Iranian-led militias and Hezbollah operatives donning Syrian Arab Army uniforms and remaining in the area.⁵⁶ After the offensive in Deraa began, it became evident that Hezbollah and other Iranian-led Shiite militias were participating in the campaign.⁵⁷

In addition to its warnings against the presence of Iranian-led militias, as the Assad regime’s offensive in Deraa pressed ahead, Israel also warned the Assad regime not to enter the demilitarized zone and violate the 1974 Separation of Forces Agreement.⁵⁸

The Assad regime’s advance on Quneitra and western Deraa is now a matter of time. Regardless, as Prime

52. Anna Ahronheim and Herb Keinon, “Israel, Russia Agree to Boot Iran and Hezbollah from Northern Border,” *The Jerusalem Post* (Israel), May 28, 2018. (<https://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Russia-Israel-agree-to-keep-Iran-and-Hezbollah-from-border-558552>)

53. “تفاهمات روسية - إسرائيلية: إبعاد إيران عن الجنوب وعدم استهداف النظام (Russian-Israeli understandings: removing Iran from the south and no targeting of the regime),” *Asharq al-Awsat* (UK), June 1, 2018. (<https://aawsat.com/home/article/1286561/تفاهمات-روسية--إسرائيلية-إبعاد-إيران-عن-الجنوب-وعدم-استهداف-النظام>)

54. Ron Ben-Yishai, “Israel’s negotiations with Russia on Syria not yet concluded,” *Ynet* (Israel), June 1, 2018. (<https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-5276197,00.html>)

55. Jacob Nagel, “Iran, Syria, and Israel’s Red Line,” *RealClearDefense*, June 18, 2018. (https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2018/06/18/iran_syria_and_israels_red_line_113543.html)

56. Raja Abdulrahim, “Iran-Backed Fighters Switch to Syrian Uniforms to Avoid Israeli Strikes, Rebels Say,” *The Wall Street Journal*, June 8, 2018. (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/iran-backed-fighters-switch-to-syrian-uniforms-to-avoid-israeli-strikes-rebels-say-1528478351>)

57. Tom Perry, Laila Bassam, “Hezbollah role in Syrian south exposes limits of U.S. policy,” *Reuters*, July 5, 2018. (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-iran/hezbollah-role-in-syrian-south-exposes-limits-of-u-s-policy-idUSKBN1JV19U>); @ajaltamimi, “#Syria: No surprises here: Liwa Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas of the Republican Guard is participating in the Deraa campaign,” *Twitter*, June 29, 2018. (<https://twitter.com/ajaltamimi/status/1012708747821531138>); Caleb Weiss, “Leader of Iranian-backed Shia militia seen inside Syrian military ops room,” *FDD’s Long War Journal*, July 5, 2018. (<https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2018/07/leader-of-iranian-backed-shia-militia-seen-inside-syrian-military-ops-room.php>)

58. Josef Federman, “Israel lays down red lines for postwar relations with Syria,” *Associated Press*, July 5, 2018. (<https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/intense-airstrikes-reported-southwestern-syrias-daraa-56376839>)

Minister Netanyahu stated, Israel will continue to act, “with or without understandings.”⁵⁹ Netanyahu identified four red lines for Israel: the establishment of an Iranian military presence in Syria, Iranian operations against Israel from Syria, the transfer of advanced weapons to Lebanon via Syria, and the production of such weapons in Lebanon.⁶⁰ It seems unlikely that Israel would be willing to negotiate anything less.

What Will Washington Do?

Israel’s principal leverage remains its military power, and its threat to complicate, if not sabotage, Russia’s Syrian enterprise. By publicly signaling that Israel has U.S. backing to operate at will in Syria, Washington could use this leverage in talks with Russia to work towards an acceptable arrangement in Syria, should it wish to do so.

To be sure, the relationship between the United States and Russia is complicated. Washington continues to slap new sanctions on Russia for cyber activity and its aggression in the Ukraine. What this means for possible understandings in Syria, where their respective interests are also at odds, is completely unclear. Moreover, Russia has now unilaterally ended the one agreement it reached with the Trump administration last year – the “de-escalation” zone in southern Syria. Troublingly, there was no U.S. response to this violation. Moreover, after the State Department issued statements in May

and June threatening “firm and appropriate measures in response to Assad regime violations” of the ceasefire agreement, the administration did nothing when the Russians mounted its offensive in Deraa.⁶¹

In short, significant questions remain about U.S. policy in Syria. The Trump administration has been decidedly ambivalent about its involvement in Syria, whether through military intervention or even diplomacy. President Trump, meanwhile, has expressed his wish to see U.S. troops in Syria withdraw after the mission to defeat the Islamic State is completed.

Admittedly, there has been a change in the American posture toward Iran and its network of proxies since the arrival of National Security Advisor John Bolton and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. The most critical change came in May, when President Trump withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran. Pompeo subsequently laid out the Trump administration’s new Iran strategy and declared that the U.S. would “crush” Iranian operatives and Hezbollah proxies around the world.⁶² Presumably, this includes Syria. Right before he withdrew from the JCPOA, Trump also warned Iran that it was not “open season to the Mediterranean.”⁶³

Still, the current U.S. mission in Syria remains focused entirely on the Islamic State, and this has been a source of frustration for both Jerusalem and Amman.

59. @IsraeliPM, “The long-range missiles Iran is working to station in Syria will endanger us even beyond the range of several kilometers from southern Syria; therefore, Iran needs to leave Syria altogether. We’re not party to understandings to the effect that we have agreed to less than this,” *Twitter*, May 29, 2018. (<https://twitter.com/IsraeliPM/status/1001429043164647424>)

60. @IsraeliPM, “Regarding Syria, I made clear our red lines many times, and we will enforce them without compromise. We will not allow Iran to establish a military presence in Syria and operate against us from there, to transfer dangerous weapons from Syria to Lebanon, or produce them in Lebanon,” *Twitter*, May 29, 2018. (<https://twitter.com/IsraeliPM/status/1001429040371298305>)

61. U.S. Department of State, Press Release, “Assad Regime Intentions in the Southwest De-escalation Zone,” May 25, 2018. (<https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2018/05/282540.htm>); U.S. Department of State, “Preserving the Southwest De-escalation Zone in Syria,” June 14, 2018. (<https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2018/06/283252.htm>); U.S. Department of State, Press Release, “Reported Violations of the Southwest Ceasefire,” June 21, 2018. (<https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2018/06/283391.htm>); Matthew Lee and Josh Lederman, “US seen backing away from Syria de-escalation enforcement,” *Associated Press*, June 25, 2018. (<https://www.boston.com/news/politics/2018/06/25/trump-claims-a-lot-of-progress-made-in-the-middle-east>)

62. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, “After the Deal: A New Iran Strategy,” *Remarks at the Heritage Foundation*, May 21, 2018. (<https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2018/05/282301.htm>)

63. The White House, “Remarks by President Trump and President Macron of France in Joint Press Conference,” April 24, 2018. (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-president-macron-france-joint-press-conference/>)

Both would like nothing more than to see the U.S. counterbalance Russia. Indeed, without an assertive U.S. role, Jordan could do little to prevent an offensive on Deraa – which has brought the violence right to Jordan’s border, prompting a renewed refugee crisis.⁶⁴ Similarly, Israel may yet face the choice of intervening against Russian-backed operations on its border, or seeing a Russian-imposed reality, complete with an Iranian military presence, take shape on the Golan.

From Israel’s perspective, there are now two important issues to clarify for the future. The first is the posture the U.S. intends to adopt toward Iran in Syria. Most importantly, Israel requires clarity about the purpose and longevity of the U.S. deployment in Syria.⁶⁵ The very presence of U.S. troops is a deterrent to Iran and its proxies. The American base at al-Tanf, for example, denies the Iranians the best overland route to Damascus, and thus is an important piece in blocking the so-called Shiite Crescent, stretching from Iran to the Mediterranean. At a minimum, a continued U.S. presence, even in the current small deployment, conveys a sense that the U.S. is watching and can enforce order. To supplement this, the U.S. can always deploy the considerable military assets it maintains in the broader region.

The second question is whether the pressure of Israeli strikes in Syria, ideally backed by a resolute American posture, could ultimately prompt the Russians to enter into an arrangement with the United States in Syria – one that respects the red lines of Israel, as well as other U.S. allies impacted by the Syria conflict. This is a proposition that could be tested in July, when Trump

and Putin convene their summit. However, statements by Russian officials before the summit only signaled Moscow’s intransigence.⁶⁶ Following a meeting with his Jordanian counterpart on July 4, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said the U.S. approach to Iran was simplistic and that demands for Iran’s withdrawal from Syria were “absolutely unrealistic.”⁶⁷

The Problem Persists

After years of watching Iran exploit the Syrian civil war to move military assets closer to its borders, Israel has finally decided to widen the scope of its involvement across the border. Israel is now actively and methodically working to reverse Iran’s gains. And it is doing so, at least until now, with impunity.

As it destroys Iranian assets with wave after wave of punishing precision strikes and the occasional comprehensive operation, Israel is now putting a choice to Tehran: it can withdraw or face the destruction of its assets, infrastructure, and personnel. This amounts to not only the loss of significant investments in Syria, but also humiliation. Indeed, Iran has had no answer, and its capabilities are not likely to improve – unless Iran chooses to thrust Hezbollah into conflict with Israel, thereby turning Lebanon into a hot war zone.

Israel is also continuing to send a tough message to Moscow: its Syria investment could be in peril. So long as the Kremlin allows Iran, Hezbollah, and other Iranian proxies to operate in Syria, Israel is clearly prepared to escalate its strikes, and could even target Assad. And in the process, Israel will destroy Russian

64. Suleiman Al-Khalidi, “Syrian army steps up attacks in southwest, Jordan concerned,” *Reuters*, June 20, 2018. (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-southwest/syrian-army-steps-up-attacks-in-southwest-jordan-concerned-idUSKBN1JG1ET>)

65. Alex Fishman, “An invitation to an unquiet border,” *Ynet* (Israel), June 8, 2018. (<https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-5278364,00.html>)

66. “Russia Sees Threat of Iran-Israel Strife Escalating in Syria – Foreign Ministry,” *Sputnik* (Russia), June 30, 2018. (<https://sputniknews.com/world/201806301065918588-russia-israel-iran-escalation/>)

67. “Russia: Complete Iran pullout from Syria ‘unrealistic,’” *Associated Press*, July 4, 2018. (<http://www.foxnews.com/world/2018/07/04/latest-russia-iran-pullout-from-syria-unrealistic.html>); Russian Federation Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s remarks and answers to media questions at a joint news conference following talks with Minister of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan,” July 4, 2018. (http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3288008)

hardware operated by Iran and its allies – which is not the best way for Putin to market Russian arms to the Middle East.

The risk for Israel is if it settles into a prolonged low-intensity war with Iran in Syria. This possibility has led some analysts to posit that the Netanyahu government might yet acquiesce to a Russian “mediating and restraining” role “to control the escalating steps.”⁶⁸ But Russia is not a reliable guarantor of calm. The likely dynamic, one where Iran and its proxies merely pay lip service to Russian directives on force posture but continue to threaten Israel, could very easily morph into an extended tit-for-tat, low-intensity conflict – not dissimilar to what Israel faced in southern Lebanon in the 1990s.

Thus, the threat of escalation in Syria is essential to Israel’s evolving strategy. Indeed, the continuation of punishing strikes against Iranian assets may paradoxically be the only way to convince Russia, not to mention Iran and its proxies, that a redeployment of Iranian and Iranian-backed troops is the best way to prevent an all-out war.

Currently, Israeli military planners are forced to plan for a two-front war to its north that would include Iranian forces, its proxy militias, Assad’s army, Hezbollah, and perhaps even the Lebanese Armed Forces. The specter of this war only reinforces the importance for Israel of pushing Iran out of Syria, or at least weakening it significantly.

Of course, even if Israel accomplishes this, the prospect of a war to its north will not diminish. It would merely limit the battlefield to Lebanon, where Hezbollah, Iran’s most lethal proxy, has some 150,000 rockets pointing south, if the most alarming estimates are correct.⁶⁹ Still, for the Israelis, limiting the next fight to Lebanon would not be an inconsiderable achievement.

U.S. Options

American policy in Syria remains in flux. It is entirely unclear whether the United States is committed to limiting Iran’s designs on Syria. The warnings the State Department issued to deter the regime camp’s offensive to retake southern Syria have amounted to little. But the administration still has an opportunity to craft a constructive policy.

The most important task for the Trump administration is to clarify how Syria fits into its strategy to counter Iran. Any effective policy will derive from this essential starting point. With this in mind, Washington should consider the following recommendations:

Endorse Israel’s red line regarding Iran’s military entrenchment in Syria.

The Trump administration should make countering Iran its priority in the region. In practice, the U.S. should **officially back the Israeli campaign against Iran** and its assets in Syria. This can be done both through direct U.S. action, as well as indirectly by giving diplomatic and political support for Israeli action.

Both the administration and Congress, therefore, should **establish that it is U.S. policy to achieve an end-state in Syria that is free of IRGC forces and Iranian-sponsored militias**, bases, weapons, missile storage, and production facilities.

In tandem with political backing for its military campaign, the U.S. military should **provide Israel with real-time intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance support** to ensure maximum targeting effectiveness.

Perhaps most importantly, the U.S. should deny Iran an operational ground line of communication between Iraq and Syria. To that end, it should **maintain the American base at al-Tanf** on the Jordanian border,

68. Zvi Magen, Vera Michlin-Shapir, Udi Dekel, “Russia as Restraining Factor in the Iranian-Israeli Confrontation in Syria,” *Institute for National Security Studies* (Israel), May 29, 2018. (<http://www.inss.org.il/publication/russia-restraining-factor-iranian-israeli-confrontation-syria/>)

69. Avi Issacharoff, “Israel raises Hezbollah rocket estimate to 150,000,” *The Times of Israel*, November 12, 2015. (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-raises-hezbollah-rocket-estimate-to-150000/>)

which has been instrumental in frustrating the Iranian plans for a contiguous territory stretching from its Western border to the Mediterranean Sea. Al-Tanf should not be traded away for any concessions.

Maximize pressure on Iran and its allies.

Since withdrawing from the JCPOA, the Trump administration has upped the financial pressure on Iran, which has exacerbated domestic unrest and protests against the regime. Although the effect of sanctions has not yet fully kicked in, **the administration should continue and intensify its sanctions against Iran with a specific focus on sanctioning the IRGC and other Iranian proxies.**

Similarly, **the U.S. should impose maximum economic pressure against the Assad regime** in response to its war crimes as well as ongoing human rights abuses. While the regime is already under sanctions, there is still ample room for additional sanctions against the regime and its enablers. This includes Syrian banks abroad, front companies, and other financial entities. The U.S. Treasury should explicitly target Syrian assets with ties to Iran.

Although the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan may be tempted, **Washington must discourage Amman from reengaging in trade relations with Syria.** In addition, the U.S. should continue to **deny the Assad regime access to the natural resources, including oil and gas fields, in the areas of northern and eastern Syria** controlled by U.S.-backed groups, and to prevent the reintegration of these areas into Assad-controlled Syria.

The U.S. should **increase scrutiny of UN agencies and international NGOs operating in Syria.** Reports suggest that aid operations in Syria have helped finance the Assad regime.⁷⁰ At the very least, Congress or the administration should demand an audit of USAID policies.

Prioritizing America's Iran policies must be reflected in U.S. relations with countries in the region, especially those benefiting from American assistance. Lebanon, for example has been receiving American taxpayer money even as it serves Iranian interests. If the Lebanese Armed Forces cannot prevent the movement of Iranian and Hezbollah materiel and personnel on its borders, or the establishment of Iranian military infrastructure in its territory, then the U.S. should halt aid and consider taking other punitive measures.

Likewise, the U.S. should pressure the Iraqi government to **outlaw and take action against Iran-backed Shiite militias.** U.S. Treasury designations or State Department Foreign Terrorist Organization designations are obvious options in Syria, but diplomatic pressure to minimize their impact in Iraq is also important.

Chaos has been building in Syria for years. To date, it has remained largely controlled and confined. But Iran's efforts to change the equation represent a strategic threat. To prevent a war with Iran and its proxies, Israel has paradoxically had little choice but to escalate. The United States should unreservedly and publicly support Israel's position. In so doing, it will not only deter Russia and help to degrade Iranian power, but it will also advance its own interests.

70. Nick Hopkins and Emma Beals, "UN pays tens of millions to Assad regime under Syria aid programme," *The Guardian* (UK), August 29, 2016. (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/29/un-pays-tens-of-millions-to-assad-regime-syria-aid-programme-contracts>)

Acknowledgments

We wish to thank FDD's David Adesnik, Toby Dershowitz, Mark Dubowitz, Richard Goldberg, John Hannah, Tyler Stapleton, and Boris Zilberman for their feedback and edits, both substantive and stylistic. We also wish to thank FDD's Yakov Shaharabani and Jacob Nagel for their invaluable input. FDD's Nicole Salter was, as always, a reliable proofreader and master of footnotes. We are grateful to Daniel Ackerman and Erin Blumenthal for the design and production of this report.

Matthew Brodsky would like to thank retired naval intelligence officer, Commander J.E. (Jennifer) Dyer, and U.S. Air Force Lt. Col. (Ret.) Rick Francona for their input, and the following people in Israel for their time and assistance: Lt. Col. (res.) Sarit Zehavi of ALMA, Brig. Gen. (res.) Yossi Kuperwasser, Maj. Gen. (res.) Yaakov Amidror, Maj. Gen. (res.) Amos Yadlin, former Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon, Maj. Gen. (ret.) Amos Gilead, Brig. Gen. (res.) Assaf Orion, Maj. (res.) Stephane Cohen, Professor Eyal Zisser, and Ambassador Amir Weissbrod.

About The Authors

Tony Badran is a research fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, where he focuses on Lebanon, Hezbollah, Syria, and the geopolitics of the Levant. Born and raised in Lebanon, Tony has testified to the House of Representatives on several occasions regarding U.S. policy toward Iran, Syria, and Lebanon. His research currently focuses on the relationship between Iran's Hezbollah model and regional states, as well as the history of and future scenarios for Israel-Hezbollah wars. His writings have appeared in publications including *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The New York Post*, *The Atlantic*, *Foreign Policy*, *Foreign Affairs*, and *The Weekly Standard*. He is a columnist and Levant analyst for *Tablet* magazine.



Matthew RJ Brodsky is a Senior Fellow at the Security Studies Group, where he focuses on the Middle East. Previously, he was the Director of Policy for the Washington, DC-based think tank, the Jewish Policy Center (JPC) and the Editor of JPC's journal, *inFOCUS Quarterly*. Before joining the JPC, he was a Legacy Heritage Fellow at the American Foreign Policy Council (AFPC). He has briefed members of Congress, the Department of State, the Department of Defense, Special Operations Command, and the National Security Council. Matthew is frequently interviewed as a Middle East subject expert in newspapers internationally, on television news outlets, and nationally syndicated radio shows. He wrote the chapter on Syria in the AFPC's World Almanac of Islamism (2011 & 2014) and is a frequent contributor to the *National Review*, *The Weekly Standard*, *The Jerusalem Post*, *The National Interest*, *The Federalist*, and *The Hill*.



Dr. Jonathan Schanzer is senior vice president for research at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, where he oversees the work of the organization's experts and scholars. He is also on the leadership team of FDD's Center on Sanctions and Illicit Finance, a project on the use of financial and economic power as a tool of statecraft. Jonathan previously worked as a terrorism finance analyst at the U.S. Department of the Treasury, where he played an integral role in the designation of numerous terrorist financiers. He has held previous think tank research positions at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and the Middle East Forum. Jonathan has written hundreds of articles on the Middle East, along with more than a dozen monographs and chapters for edited volumes. He testifies often before Congress and publishes widely in the American and international media.



About the Foundation for Defense of Democracies

The Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD) is a Washington, DC-based non-partisan policy institute focusing on foreign policy and national security. For more information, please visit www.defenddemocracy.org.



P.O. Box 33249
Washington, DC 20033-3249
(202) 207-0190
www.defenddemocracy.org