



## PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

# With Iran on Its Doorstep, Israel Quietly Readies Game-Changing Air Power

by Yaakov Lappin

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 649, November 21, 2017

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Israeli air power now has capabilities beyond any yet seen in military history. Its aerial strike capabilities are likely to prove decisive to the outcome of any military action taken against Iran in Syria.**

Iran has big plans to create a military outpost in Syria, right on Israel's doorstep. From there, the Islamic Republic could threaten and attack Israel in the future.

Israel is currently employing two tools to try and prevent this from happening: diplomacy and deterrence. Diplomatically, Jerusalem is reaching out to global powers and the international community, informing them of the consequences of Iran's actions in a bid to create pressure on Tehran. To achieve deterrence, Israel is making clear to Iran and its agents that it has no intention of allowing them to proceed with their plans.

But what can Israel do if these prevention efforts fail, as they might? In such a scenario, Israel would have to fall back on military action. Some of that action would likely involve Israel's new aerial strike capabilities.

These recently developed capabilities might well surpass any display of air power seen in military history thus far. They are based on an ability to use precise intelligence, combined with precision-guided weaponry, to destroy up to several thousand targets in just a matter of hours.

This is a tool that the Israel Air Force, together with the Military Intelligence Directorate of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), has been developing quietly over recent years. It is a game-changing capability that significantly boosts Israeli deterrence against its enemies. It also boosts actual war fighting capabilities, should these be called upon.

In recent weeks and months, there have been indications that Iran is testing the waters in Syria. It is seeing how far it can go, and how far it can push Israel's red lines.

In November, a Western intelligence source shared satellite imagery with the showing [a new Iranian base being built south of Damascus](#). The facility can house hundreds of personnel and vehicles. It is a mere 50 kilometers from Syria's border with Israel, and represents the tip of the iceberg of Iran's plans for Syria.

This month, during a visit to London, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told the BBC in an interview that the Iranians "want to bring their air force there, right next to Israel, they want to bring Shi'ite and Iranian divisions right next to Israel. They want to bring submarines. So we will not let that happen, we will resist it."

Israel's Kan News broadcaster also recently reported Iranian plans to set up a division in Syria made up of 5,000 soldiers, air force bases containing Iranian fighter jets, and Iranian naval bases on the Syrian coastline.

Iran has already deployed to Syria thousands of Shiite militia members recruited from across the Middle East. They have been armed and trained by the Iranian Republican Guards Corps and the elite overseas Iranian Quds Force.

The Iranians also run militia units made up of Syrian recruits. The Commander of the Quds Force, Qassem Solemani, was recently photographed in eastern Syria with members of one such militia, the al-Baqr Battalion. The Iranians also helped build up other Syrian military forces, like the 313 Battalion.

At the same time, Iran appears to have stepped up efforts to create missile factories on Syrian soil, which it can use to arm its chief Shiite proxy, Hezbollah. One of these factories was reportedly struck by Israel last month.

As ISIS crumbles and the remainder of the Syrian Sunni rebels face defeat in Syria, Iran, which runs Assad's ground war, will be free to shift the focus of its Syrian presence towards Israel.

Israel is prepared to deal with this threat militarily if necessary, though the intelligence challenge would be considerable. Many of the targets in question would not be clear-cut Iranian military entities, but rather proxies and militias attempting to disguise themselves or embedded into the local environment. Still, Israel's intelligence capabilities should be up to the job of detecting and monitoring the targets and passing them on to the air force.

So far, Israel has used its precision strike capabilities for pinpoint attacks on targets that are part of the Hezbollah–Iran weapons program. But these same strike capabilities can be activated on a grand scale. The same air power can

also be directed against the Assad regime, which the Iranian axis has fought for years to rescue and preserve.

In theory, Israel could inform Iran that its treasured Assad regime would be in jeopardy if Israel's red lines are crossed in Syria.

Needless to say, any major escalation in Syria would almost certainly draw in Hezbollah in Lebanon as well, as the two fronts are interlinked. The Syrian-Lebanese border has become more of an imaginary line on a map than a real international boundary, as Hezbollah moves weapons and fighters across it on a regular basis. Any escalation on the Syrian front could easily activate the Lebanese front.

The stakes in Syria are very high, and Israel remains committed to the objective of preventing conflict on its northern fronts. So far, it has succeeded in this goal.

Russia has thus far appeared to help restrain its radical allies in Syria, but its role in any potential escalation remains unclear.

But should Iran ignore all of Israel's warnings, Israel's new air power will likely prove decisive to the outcome of military action in this arena.

*This article was [published](#) by i24NEWS on November 14, 2017.*

*Yaakov Lappin is a Research Associate at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, where he recently published the study *The Low-Profile War Between Israel and Hezbollah*. He specializes in Israel's defense establishment, military affairs, and the Middle Eastern strategic environment.*

BESA Center Perspectives Papers are published through the generosity of the Greg Rosshandler Family