



DEBATE: How Might the Israeli-Iranian Face-Off in Syria Evolve?

Moderated by George N. Tzogopoulos

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Q: The recent infiltration of Israeli airspace by an Iranian drone launched from Syria was considered by Jerusalem a severe violation of its sovereignty. In response, Israel conducted a mission to strike the Iranian drone installation in Syria. During that mission, an Israeli F-16 jet crashed. In the aftermath of this incident, Israel – while not wishing to escalate – made clear that it is prepared to act with determination and exact a heavy price from anyone who attacks it. BESA joins the debate by posing the question: How might the Israeli-Iranian face-off in Syria evolve?

Respondents: Dror Michman, Danielle Pletla, Gary Samore, Raphael Ofek, Alex Vatanka, Eitan Shamir, Seth Frantzman



Dror Michman, Visiting Fellow, Brookings Institution, Washington DC

Iran has been heavily invested in Syria's future and is determined to not only preserve the Assad regime, but also to capitalize on its gains. Syria represents Iran's first significant military success abroad in recent years. The Iranians are intent on establishing military infrastructure – to include permanent bases, airfields, and naval

bases, manned mainly by proxies (militias) that are already established in Syria and receive IRGC support, such as Hezbollah. Tehran seeks to exert significant influence in the region – not only over Israel, but also over other Iranian rivals – and control a land corridor that weaves from Tehran to Iraq to northern Syria, ending in the Mediterranean port city of Latakia.

The Iranians have also concluded that since the convoys delivering military supplies to Hezbollah are vulnerable to constant Israeli attacks, they should establish military industry facilities in Syria and Lebanon, where they can manufacture their own components to build precision-guided missiles and rockets, greatly amplifying the strategic threat Israel faces.

Hence the Iranian determination to follow through with this strategy despite their clear understanding of Israel's red lines.

Israel has shown resolve in blocking Iran where possible, rather than allowing the situation to fester until it reaches the scale of other strategic threats facing the country – namely the over 100,000 rockets and missiles currently in Hezbollah's arsenal. Israel, which in most cases would support a policy of stability, finds itself in a peculiar position: Most of its leverage in Syria comes from its potential for disruption.

Russia is a major player in this conflict. While it has positioned itself as an indispensable mediator between the warring sides, it has not prevented the recent escalation, since a low-level conflict serves its goals. Moscow has no interest in a full-scale confrontation between Syria, Iran, and Israel, as such a conflict would endanger recent achievements in Syria. However, a simmering conflict between the parties keeps them distracted and in line, thereby securing Moscow's growing strategic role in Syria (which is why Moscow tacitly approves certain provocations). But whether Russia can really control the conflict moving forward remains to be seen, and surely serious discussions are underway in Moscow regarding the Iranian infiltration.

For now, at least, the US appears ready to leave Russia in the lead in Syria, but its political support of Israel's actions serves as a significant factor in Russian response.

While none of the parties involved has an interest in a full-scale military conflict, the conflict of interests is too fundamental to have been fully resolved. Iran will continue to challenge Israel's red lines, perhaps by using different means and arenas; Israel will be forced to react, raising the specter of military conflict between the two.



**Danielle Pletka, Senior Vice President, Foreign and Defense Policy Studies,
AEI, Washington DC**

Assessing the balance of power in the Middle East, it is hard to escape the conclusion that Iran is winning. On its low-priority nuisance exercises, whether in Yemen or Qatar, it has dragged the GCC into both internal and external conflict at little risk to itself, and with little cost. On its higher priorities, whether support for the Assad regime in Damascus or Hezbollah in Lebanon, or in the subjugation of Iraq, these efforts, while more costly, are also going well. Where does that leave Israel? Facing almost certain conflict, likely with Iran's proxy Hezbollah, in Lebanon, and perhaps also in Syria.

Israelis make clear publicly and privately that they will not tolerate the build-up and escalation of forces and weapons capability by Hezbollah. In reality, they have tolerated it for over a decade, but the tipping point is coming. The US seems neither to grasp the danger, nor to realize Tehran's reach and domination in Syria and Lebanon. A war will not be conclusive, but it will be costly in blood and treasure. Worse yet for Israel and for the US and its other allies in the region, it will not solve the threat Iran and its proxies pose, but merely postpone it for another day.



**Gary Samore, Executive Director for Research, Belfer Center for Science and
International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, Cambridge, MA**

Israel and Iran are likely to engage in periodic clashes over their opposing interests in Syria, but neither side seems eager to escalate to full-scale conflict at this time. Israel has a free hand to bomb Iranian installations in Syria and sophisticated weapons shipments to its allies such as Hezbollah. At the same time, Israeli bombing raids

cannot prevent Iran from achieving its essential objectives in Syria, including strong political influence in Damascus, secure lines of transit into Lebanon, and the enduring presence of Shiite militias in Syria.

One factor that could change this standoff is if Prime Minister Netanyahu succeeds in persuading President Trump to join the battle against Iran from the US-supported Kurdish enclave in northeastern Syria. In that scenario, Iran might retaliate by unleashing attacks on Israel from southern Lebanon and the Golan, precipitating a wider conflict.



**Raphael Ofek, Senior Analyst, Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies (BESA),
Bar-Ilan University**

ISIS lost all its ground in Syria in October 2017. Iran, as a result of its role in the rescue of Bashar Assad's regime, is now deeply embedded in Syria. Right now, Iran is trying to rewrite the rules of Israel's military involvement in Syria while Israel is standing as a barrier preventing Iran from establishing a land corridor via Syria to Hezbollah in Lebanon.

The lengthy war of words between Tehran and Jerusalem escalated recently into a border clash. Israel's immediate response to penetration of its airspace by an Iranian drone on February 10 – striking Iranian and Syrian targets in Syria – was a warning that Israel will not allow Tehran to control any Syrian base from which it can strike Israel. The Iranian drone penetration thus strengthened fears that a new war could break out.

It should be noted that the event occurred despite the widespread demonstrations in Iran in the end of December 2017, which challenged Tehran's regime. The people of Iran protested mainly to express their dissatisfaction with the sluggish economy, accusing the regime of spending Iran's resources on undermining the Middle East at the expense of its own citizens' welfare.

Russia is also highly implicated in the Syrian theater, and so far, it seems to be the biggest winner. It has increased its territorial seizures in Syria and holds now a naval base in Tartus and an air base in Khmeimim. Notably, despite its cooperation with

Iran during the Syrian civil war, Russia is maintaining good relations with Israel. For example, Moscow has not publicly denounced Israel for bombing Hezbollah's weapons convoys travelling to Lebanon via Syria.

The key to curbing a possible Israeli-Iranian military face-off in Syria is Moscow. Moscow will probably restrain Iran so as to avoid becoming involved in a new war in Syria that could damage Russian interests in the Middle East.



Alex Vatanka, Iranian-American Senior Fellow at the Middle East Institute in Washington DC. His book, *Personal Rivalries in Tehran and the Making of Iranian Foreign Policy*, is due out in early 2019

Listen closely to the debate in Tehran about Syria and you will detect great unease. There is an underlying fear – inside both the moderate and the hardline camps of the regime – that Iran won the war but is in danger of losing out in the post-war period that will follow. This apprehension has always been there. But it has become markedly more distinct as the principal foreign powers that intervened in Syria – Russia, Turkey and the US – set their sights on the long-term endgame.

With ISIS defeated, the Gulf Arab States distracted by the Yemeni civil war and intra-Arab Gulf rivalries, and a US that is still on the fence about Syria, the Iranians might want to pat themselves on the back (as some do) and declare victory in Syria.

Tehran came in early and heavy in support of the Assad regime. For it to declare itself among the geopolitical winners of this nastiest of wars is not unreasonable. For Tehran, losing Syria to the Gulf Arab-backed opposition was always the biggest nightmare. That scenario has been avoided.

How, then, do we then explain the enduring apprehension in Tehran? Put simply, the soon-to-be-settled Syrian war comes at a time when Iran as a nation is at an ideological crossroads. In the most recent popular protests in Iran that erupted on 28 December 2017, many of the angry slogans were aimed at Tehran's costly – and ideologically driven – foreign policy (for example, "My life for Iran, not Gaza, not Lebanon"). The Iranian regime's interventions in the Arab world have never been as popularly

contested inside Iran as they are today. Given this pushback from below, can the Iranian leadership up the ante in Syria? This is an unsettled question in Tehran.

In truth, the intervention in Syria was always a war of choice by Iran. The notion that the rise of ISIS posed an existential threat to Iranian domestic security was a narrative of convenience. When the rabidly anti-Shiite and anti-Iran Taliban, which is not dissimilar to ISIS, took control next door in Afghanistan in 1994 and ruled for seven years, Tehran never intervened militarily. Why was fighting ISIS in relatively distant Syria so paramount?

In mid-2011, Tehran did a cost-benefit analysis and determined it had a fighting chance to keep its ally, Assad, in power. In so doing, it could also protect Hezbollah, its Shiite Lebanese darling, from the turmoil set in motion by the so-called Arab Spring. Seven years later, can the Islamic Republic of Iran justify to its people – plagued as they are by deep socioeconomic troubles – its commitment to an open-ended presence in Syria? One thing is for sure: the cost of waging war in Syria will be dwarfed by the cost of the Syrian reconstruction.

No doubt, foreign pet projects have always been the Iranian regime's soft spot. But the need to maintain political stability on the home front supersedes all else, including the fate of Assad and Syria. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Hassan Rouhani, and the rest of the Iranian leadership know full well that at street level across Iran, the Syrian venture – as well as Iran's other Arab pursuits – are overwhelmingly viewed as nothing but a drain.

The kind of national introspection that Iran is undergoing at the moment also directly touches that most cherished of ideological causes of the Islamic Republic: the enmity towards Israel. At home, Iran's costly presence in the Levant is sold as necessary to keep alive the so-called Axis of Resistance against the Jewish State.

While the average Iranian tends not to fathom the reasons behind Tehran's opposition to Israel, Iran's economic troubles are making more and more Iranians ask if it is worth the price. Geopolitical maneuverings by on-and-off partners and rivals such as Russia and Turkey will largely shape Iran's Syrian calculations in the short term. What cannot be overlooked, however, is the rising anger within Iranian society that has begun to defy the policy preferences of the Islamic Republic like never before. As Iran's Syria policy evolves, the role of the Iranian people in shaping Tehran's calculus should not be underestimated.



Eitan Shamir, former head of the National Security Doctrine Department in the Israel Ministry of Strategic Affairs

Iran is a revisionist country with an ideology to expand the Shiite Muslim revolution and Iranian hegemony as a regional power. An important part of this ideology is the elimination of the Jewish state. The Iranian Supreme Leader has even announced the year when this goal will be fulfilled: 2040.

While Iranian ideological motivation represents the threat, Iranian structural weaknesses, both economic and societal, represent the opportunities. Another opportunity is the current phase in the conflict in Syria. Both the Russians and the Iranians were fighting for the survival of the Assad regime. As they believe they have secured this objective, both are now seeking to consolidate and capitalize their gains.

This is where the conflict of interests between Russia and Iran could arise. The Iranian objective is to create in Syria another launching pad from which to attack Israel. The Russians would like to see stability and minimize the chances of conflict in order to secure their troops and bases.

Israel should try to put a wedge between the Iranian and the Russians and work with the Russians to highlight these differences.

As for a military confrontation, Iran does not have the means to strategically harm Israel from home. The Iranian plan is therefore clear: a pincer threat from Syria and Lebanon, giving Israel two fronts to worry about.

It will take years for Iran to build the necessary military infrastructure in Syria. Until then Iran wants to avoid a full-scale escalation. For its part, Israel should keep "mowing the grass" and stand firmly on its red lines.

If the worst-case scenario comes to pass, Israel has at its disposal the means to defeat its enemies in the north, although not without a price. Meanwhile it should continue to weaken Iran and its proxies using both diplomatic and military means.

In the Middle East there is a geostrategic reshuffling every decade or so, and hopefully the next one will bring an end to the current Iranian regime. Until then Israel will have to prepare for the worst-case scenario.



Seth Frantzman, executive director of the Middle East Center for Reporting and Analysis and op-ed editor of *The Jerusalem Post*

Israel has said that there are serious red lines in Syria regarding Iranian encroachment towards its northern border. The most likely evolution of the existing low-intensity conflict is that it will continue in its current form. Israel has no interest in a massive conflict with Iran, nor does it have a way to execute such a conflict. Similarly, Iran wants to use its proxies, including Hezbollah and other forces in Syria and Iraq, to threaten Israel.

Israel's problems in targeting Iranian infrastructure in Syria will increase as the Syrian regime reasserts control near the Golan border and near Jordan. Russian air defenses and the presence of Syrian soldiers will complicate Israel's usual method of air strikes. The larger concern is that Iraqi Shiite militias will use Syria as a transit to Lebanon or to the Golan border.

However, Iran's regime carefully calculates its threats to Israel. It wants to drag Israel into a larger conflict that will harm Israel internationally. As long as Israel understands this it can avoid major conflict. With that said, the international community has not heeded Israel's warnings, and Iran's presence will grow as it feels empowered by Assad's victory and Hezbollah's growing influence in Lebanon.

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