



The “Game” Israel and Iran Must Play in Syria

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Israel has neither the power nor the motivation to significantly influence the outcome of the war for control of all the pieces of Syria. Israel’s objective in Syria is to prevent Iran from building military facilities there that increase its ability to attack Israel. The only way Israel can achieve this is by destroying any such facilities that Iran builds, or by convincing Iran not to build any threatening facility out of fear that Israel will destroy it.

There is little Israel could do to affect the outcome of the struggle for control of Syria and its component parts. Jerusalem does not have any strong preferences among the likely alternative outcomes, all of which are bad for Israel. (For humanitarian reasons Israel would like the bloody attacks on civilians to stop, but Israel’s security benefits so long as its enemies are fighting with each other.¹)

Jerusalem’s main practical interests in Syria are to prevent construction of military facilities there that would increase Iran’s ability to attack Israel, and to prevent Iran from controlling territory near the Golan Heights.

Israel has made political efforts to protect its interests in Syria, but there is not much possibility that such efforts can succeed. Even if for some reason an outside party such as Russia induced Iran to agree not to build a base that threatened Israel, Iran cannot be counted on to keep such an agreement, and no one else would feel strongly enough to insist that Iran live up to it. Iran cares more about this issue than anyone else except Israel.

¹ Any democracy’s ability to influence the outcome is limited by what could be called “the Sabra and Shatilla problem”; that is, a lack of local allies who can be trusted to refrain from massacres and ethnic cleansing.

So Israel itself has to try to prevent Iran from gaining new abilities to threaten it from Syria. It can't do this through diplomatic demands or other forms of negotiation with Iran. But Israel can prevent Iran from having new military facilities in Syria – such as bases or factories – by bombing any such facilities that Iran builds so they become unusable.

This strategic “game” is understood by both Israel and Iran. For now, neither side wants a war, but each is willing to take action that might risk war. They will both be careful, but neither is likely to be passive. The “game” has more complexities and nuances than presented here.

The first level of complexity is that both sides make threats that are broader than what they are willing to carry out. Tehran threatens to attack Israel if it bombs Iranian bases in Syria, while Jerusalem says it will not “accept” Iranian assets that threaten Israel anywhere in Syria. Each side tries to get other parties to step in to stop its enemy in order to prevent a new war.

Each side understands that its enemy's threats are exaggerated, but neither is certain what the other will actually do. Iran started already by building a small base in southern Syria from which it launched a drone to deliver a small bomb to northern Israel. By destroying the Iranian facilities at that base, Israel demonstrated the will and ability to prevent Iran from basing forces so close to Israel. Iran learned it would have to keep a bigger distance or risk a humiliating military blow.

Both sides had to pay a price for this teaching/learning experience. Iran lost whatever it had invested in building the base. More importantly, it suffered the embarrassment of being attacked without the ability to make a sufficient response – that is, some of its threats were exposed as empty. While Israel achieved its immediate goal, it too had prices to pay. Any military attack involves costs and risks, even if the dangers that are risked don't happen. And while there are there political benefits to using military power successfully, there are also political costs.

Iran now needs to know if it can safely build a facility further from the border with Israel. How much further? Israel won't draw a precise line because a degree of uncertainty can work in its favor. Just exactly how far Israel will go in excluding Iranian facilities depends on all kinds of details and political considerations. The only way Iran can determine Jerusalem's limits is to build something and see whether Israel destroys it. But if it does cross an Israeli red line, Iran will suffer losses like those from the Israeli destruction of their drone-launching base last month.

Iranian leaders care much more about who controls Syria than about building

bases in Syria that threaten Israel, and they don't seem to want to have a war with Israel at this time. So for now, Israel can probably prevent Iran from building military facilities in Syria that it finds unacceptably threatening, contributing to the peace and security of the region. This capability hinges on Tehran's continuing to believe that Jerusalem can and will use military strikes to prevent Syria from becoming a base for Iranian attacks against Israel.

When the question of control over all the pieces of what was Syria is finally settled – which will probably take at least another several years – Iran may give more emphasis to their goal of being able to use Syria as another base for attacking Israel. It may be less concerned at that point with avoiding war with Israel, especially if it has nuclear weapons by then. If that happens, Israel will have less ability to limit Tehran's building of military facilities in Syria, though that will also depend to an extent on the nature of the new regime or regimes in Syria.

It is also entirely possible that by the time the war in Syria is settled, there will be a new regime ruling Iran. That would end the “game” described here and greatly reduce many other problems now troubling the region.

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