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# Israel's Active Defense Campaign in Syria: The Next Phase

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Tehran's recent decision to attempt direct clashes with Israel resulted in a resounding defeat on May 10, when the IDF destroyed 50 Iranian military targets in Syrian territory. Iran is now shifting gears back to its traditional proxy approach. While it appears reluctant to mobilize Hezbollah against Israel right now and risk a full-scale regional war, it is continuing to work on securing a military position in Syria to use for future aggression. Israel must maintain its flexibility and responsiveness in order to prevent the creation of a second Iranian mass missile front on the border.

Judging from international media reports, Israel's campaign to keep Iran out of Syria has entered a new phase.

In the previous phase, Tehran had injected its own Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) forces into Syria, where they proceeded to build drone, missile, and infantry bases. Iran's grander ambition is to set up naval and air force bases on Syrian soil as well. In addition, it wants to flood the country with projectile launchers and terrorist cells that would assault Israel in the future.

The initial effort ran up against persistent and accurate Israeli defensive counter-measures. Israel relied on advanced intelligence, combined with precision firepower, to destroy Iran's budding military presence in Syria.

In an effort to deter Israel from continuing with its campaign and force it to accept Tehran's military presence in Syria, the IRGC's Quds Force began directly attacking Israel, using drones and truck-mounted mobile rocket

launchers. This represented a break from the older Iranian pattern of waging aggression via proxy.

The confrontation ended with a resounding defeat for Iran when, on May 10, the Israel Defense Forces destroyed more than 50 Iranian military targets scattered across Syria. Israeli air defenses also successfully dealt with an Iranian rocket barrage over the Golan Heights.

Iran's decision to use its own forces to directly attack Israel proved to be a strategic error: it exposed the Iranian assets to Israeli firepower and saved Israel the trouble of having to deal with Iran's proxies. It also underlined Israel's solid intelligence coverage of Syria. Israel used the event to send a firm message to Tehran about its willingness and ability to enforce its red lines in its own backyard.

A secondary message was sent to the Assad regime, which tried to shoot down Israeli fighter jets on May 10 using a combination of surface-to-air missile batteries (SA-5s, 17s, and 22s). Every battery that took part in an attack on Israeli aircraft was destroyed. In total, more than half of the Assad regime's air defenses have been knocked out by Israel in recent months.

Yet, as the latest international media reports indicate, Tehran has not given up. It has merely switched tactics. Iran is still seeking to establish a foothold in Syria but is now relying more on its militias, a development that marks a return to the older proxy model.

Iran may have switched gears, but Israel's defensive campaign appears to be responding to it in the same way. In mid-June, according to international media reports, Israel conducted a major airstrike on a military base housing the Iran-backed Kata'i'b Hezbollah, an Iraqi Shiite militia. The airstrike occurred in eastern Syria, near the Iraqi border. This is the area where Iran is trying to build a land bridge to link it directly to Syria and Lebanon via Iraq.

Dozens of militia members were reportedly killed in the attack. At the start of July, according to media reports, a blast rocked an arms depot belonging to an Iran-backed militia in Daraa, in southern Syria, where the Assad regime is involved in a major push to retake the area from Sunni rebel groups.

It is worth recalling that leaders of Iran-sponsored militias have, in recent months, visited Lebanon, where they were given tours of the Israeli border by Hezbollah and made threats that they would take part in future fighting against Israel.

Meanwhile, Israel still seems to be targeting Iranian heavy weapons trafficking across Syria.

An airstrike rocked the Damascus airport at the end of June, reportedly targeting an Iranian missile transfer.

Iran has for years been trying to use Syria to transit advanced weapons to Hezbollah in Lebanon.

More recently, it tried to assemble missile bases in Syria itself and build a new arsenal to point at Israel. Iran wants the new missiles in Syria to join the estimated 120,000 Hezbollah projectiles already stationed in Lebanon.

Israeli officials have stated that they will not let Iran turn Syria into a second Lebanon. Such statements appear to be backed with consistent action.

One initial conclusion that can be reached from the recent reports is that Iran is trying to change its modus operandi in Syria to avoid Israeli strikes, but that these efforts have not been successful.

A second conclusion is that Iran is reluctant to activate Hezbollah against Israel right now. Generally speaking, Tehran seems deterred at this time from taking a risk big enough to spark a regional war with Israel – but it still wishes to build up a military basis in Syria for future aggression.

Following the losses it incurred in May, Iran seems to be more aware of the risks involved in directly confronting Israel and is thus falling back on militias, as well as weapons trafficking, to lower the stakes. But it is continuing its efforts to take over Syria militarily, meaning the threat of a wider confrontation has not vanished by any means.

Iran's calculations cannot be divorced from other strategic developments, such as the cancellation of the nuclear deal by the Trump administration, internal unrest, and economic troubles.

Despite growing pressure, Iran has signaled that it refuses to be rolled back to its own borders, meaning the potential for escalation remains.

The Israel Air Force (IAF) is in charge of rapid responses to Iran's activities. The IAF has been able to keep up a very high operational tempo while displaying flexibility in its policing of Israel's security interests in Syria.

Russia, which is the senior partner in the pro-Assad coalition, appears to have reluctantly accepted Israel's activities despite protesting them, and despite concerns that the Iranian-Israeli conflict could spin out of control without warning. That scenario could bring down the Assad regime.

The IAF has had to learn how to fly in the region in a way that evades Russia's considerable intelligence-gathering abilities.

The growing Israeli F-35 squadron, now at 12 jets, and the IAF's ability to keep upgrading its older, legacy F-16 and F-15 aircraft, have meant that Israel's regional air superiority has been maintained so far in the face of increasing challenges.

The Syrian war appears to be winding down, and Hezbollah is reportedly beginning to withdraw some of its forces from Syria and deploy them back to its southern front against Israel. This means Hezbollah will soon be less stretched along two fronts.

That could free up resources and lead Hezbollah to feel more confident about both provoking Israel in the near to medium term and responding to Israel's low-profile campaign in Syria. Such a scenario, though not likely, must be taken into consideration, as it would represent a dangerous departure from the status quo.

Because of the inherent explosiveness and instability of the region, Israel takes a calculated risk every time it pursues its "active defense" campaign in the northern arena. But the risk of not acting, and allowing the Iranian axis to build up its force freely, is far greater.

For Israel, failure to act would mean facing two Iranian mass missile fronts, in Lebanon and Syria, which would represent an intolerable threat to Israel's home front.

Israel's campaign not only contains the threat from the north. It also serves to continually remind the Iranian axis of Israel's own evolving capabilities, thereby replenishing Israeli deterrence and keeping full-scale war at bay.

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