



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

The Upheaval in Syria Opens the Door for Iranian Attack

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BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,335, November 4, 2019

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The latest upheaval in northeastern Syria caused by Turkey's invasion, and the division of the Syrian plunder among Turkey, the Assad regime, and Russia, presents Iran with new avenues for building up attack capabilities and further destabilizing the region.

Turkey's invasion of northeastern Syria occurred at a time when Israel's defense establishment is dealing with increased concerns over Iranian attack plots. Recent Iranian activities have presented urgent, clear, and present dangers. They include, for example, an Iranian attack cell that was in the final stages of preparing an explosive drone attack in August when it was [struck by the Israeli Air Force](#).

From Israel's perspective, developments in Syria represent an unmistakable deterioration in the security situation due to an increase in both quality and quantity of Iranian offensive activities.

As the Assad regime, backed by Moscow and Tehran, wraps up the civil war and takes back more and more territory from what remains of rebel forces, Iran is exploiting the situation to try to set up bases for the [building and firing of missiles](#) and drones at Israel.

Tehran has pursued these efforts for more than two years, but has been effectively checked by Israeli preventative action. It is now threatening to respond to future Israeli strikes, raising tensions considerably. It is also trying to help Hezbollah build precision missiles, which would allow it to accurately target strategic Israeli sites — a capability Israel has marked as a clear red line.

Israel is on high alert across its northern front as it monitors and works to block the increased activities of the Iranian Quds Force, the shadowy overseas

operations unit under the command of Iranian Gen. Qassem Soleimani. The general answers directly to Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei.

That tension became even more pronounced on Monday, October 28, when, [according to Israel's Kan news program](#), a number of Israeli embassies went on high alert due to concerns about Iranian terror attacks.

One of Soleimani's efforts over the past few years has involved ongoing attempts to build [a land corridor](#) linking Iran to Syria. If the Iranians succeed in controlling border crossings, they will be able to send ground convoys of weapons, militia members, and equipment to Syria and Lebanon from Iran via Iraq.

While Tehran is [unhappy](#) about the invasion of Syria by its regional rival, Turkey, it will undoubtedly recognize new opportunities in the exit of US special forces from northeastern Syria, which borders Iraq. This area could become part of the Iranian axis's new land corridor.

The collapse of the moderate US-backed Kurdish autonomous zone in the area means the Iranians can move in and establish a new presence.

In a recent [article](#), Doron Itzchakov, an Iran specialist at the [Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies](#), notes that the Turkish invasion of Syria harms the Assad regime's sovereignty, thereby harming Iranian interests. Itzchakov also notes that a plethora of Sunni Salafi-jihadist groups, such as Jaish al-Islam, Ahrar al-Shab, and others, are taking an active role in the Turkish maneuver. These jihadist militias, some linked to al-Qaeda, are hostile to Shiite interests.

Itzchakov notes, however, that the Turkish invasion and occupation of a strip of northern Syria could serve as a significant boost to Iran's program to build a land corridor, since Tehran could dispatch Islamic Republican Guard Corps (IRGC) elements and Shiite militia personnel to the area under the excuse of needing to help the Syrian state defend itself against intrusion.

Iran's interests are further served by the fact that the Kurds, desperate to avoid a Turkish onslaught, [signed an agreement](#) with the Assad regime allowing it to deploy its forces in Kurdish areas. The Assad regime rarely deploys its forces alone. They are frequently accompanied by Iranian advisers and Shiite militias under Iranian command.

"It is possible to state with a high degree of certainty that the Iranian presence in northeast Syria will receive the approval of Assad and will be camouflaged in [a] Syrian army uniform — as has occurred in the past," Itzchakov argued.

Lt. Col. (ret.) [Orna Mizrahi](#), a senior research fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv and a former Israeli Deputy National Security

Adviser for Foreign Policy on behalf of the National Security Council, [stated](#), “Ultimately, the Iranians will welcome the US exit more than they will be upset about the Turkish entry. In the overall balance for Iran, they will view it as a plus.”

Brig. Gen. (res.) Yossi Kuperwasser, former head of the IDF Military Intelligence Directorate’s research division, [said](#) “Iran could fill in the vacuum left by the United States in northeast Syria, which would enable them to establish a land corridor from Iran to Lebanon.”

Israel will need to closely monitor Iranian activities in the region, as much of the international community will be focusing on the Turkish-Kurdish conflict. Jordan, too, is threatened by any further entrenchment of the Iranian axis, and by the growth of new ground corridors linking Iraq to Syria. Iran is hostile to the moderate Sunni Hashemite Kingdom, which presents a roadblock to Iran’s grand vision of becoming a radical Shiite hegemonic power. Jordanian media [describe the threat](#) as “an ever-increasing security challenge.”

In addition, Iran views Jordan as a hindrance to its strategy of surrounding Israel with missile bases and hybrid terror armies. Iran wishes to infiltrate Jordan in order to reach the West Bank and arm terror cells there with advanced weapons.

Iran has often been able to take advantage of regional conflicts and areas that lack state sovereignty in order to traffic advanced weapons and militias. Northeastern Syria may be the newest region to be exposed to this threatening activity.

Should it detect pressing threats coming its way, Israel can be expected to take action. The Iranians, who [in September damaged Saudi oil fields](#) with advanced cruise missiles and long-range unmanned aerial vehicles, could retaliate, creating a short pathway to escalation.

On October 28, PM Benjamin Netanyahu released new information about the threat taking shape, telling visiting US Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin that Iran is setting up missiles in Yemen with a view to launching them at Israel from there.

“Iran is seeking to develop now precision-guided munitions,” Netanyahu [said](#) – “missiles that can hit any target in the Middle East with a circumference of five to ten meters. They are developing this in Iran. They want to place them in Iraq and in Syria, and to convert Lebanon’s arsenal of 130,000 [imprecise] rockets to precision-guided munitions. They seek also to develop that, and have already begun to put that in Yemen, with the goal of reaching Israel from there too.”

This is an edited version of an article that [appeared](#) in The Algemeiner on November 1, 2019.

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