



## How Dangerous Is the Crisis Within the IAF?

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The ongoing turmoil in Israel has led to a crisis in the IAF that has affected the military readiness of the IDF at large. The degree to which the IDF is affected by the problems of the IAF depends on the nature and location of prospective confrontations. Whereas in the West Bank, the IDF does not rely on the IAF, the air force is obviously critical to the success of such missions as bombings in Syria – or in Iran, should Israel decide to strike the regime’s nuclear sites. And if war were to break out with Hezbollah while the IAF remains in crisis, the IDF would have to depend much more than it would otherwise on ground forces such as artillery, infantry, and armor.

The IDF (Israel Defense Forces) has acknowledged a steady decline [in its capabilities](#) resulting from the ongoing political crisis in Israel. The decline appears primarily to have afflicted the IAF (Israel Air Force). This is very worrying, as the IAF is critical to Israel’s ability to deter and defeat its foes. As the political quagmire is likely to continue for weeks if not months, the IDF’s strength will likely continue to be reduced, mostly within the IAF.

The IDF’s [new multi-year program, Ma’alot \(Ascent\)](#), was introduced on August 9, 2023. It is intended, among other things, to improve the IDF’s readiness to take on a multi-front threat, including Iran, by implementing cooperation among the branches and corps. This means the IAF and ground units have to fight together.

While this goal has appeared in previous multi-year plans, the IDF has, over the past two decades, relied more and more on the IAF rather than on ground forces. This was particularly evident during the most recent rounds in the Gaza Strip.

Furthermore, the “war between the wars” has been heavily reliant on air power since 2013, particularly in the case of strikes inside Syria.

As the crisis in Israel could go on for some time, the IDF has to be ready to confront its foes with a weaker IAF. Should war break out, many and possibly all those who have said they refuse to serve might in fact report for duty, but they might not all agree to go to their units. This could happen if the war is not an existential threat – for example, if there were another relatively minor round in the Gaza Strip, or in cases when the IAF is not essential like an outbreak on the West Bank. It is also possible that those in the IDF who oppose the government might declare that they do not trust the government to run the war. This is particularly likely if the government is accused of starting the war in the first place or at least failing to prevent it because of politics or radical ideology.

A decline in IAF readiness might make the strikes inside Syria a bit harder, but because the scale and pace of those sorties is not that taxing, the IAF shouldn't struggle to conduct them. A much bigger mission, however, like the potential bombing of Iran's nuclear sites, could require dozens of aircraft, possibly even 100. Furthermore, such a raid might ignite a war with Iran, and the burden of that fight would fall on the IAF.

If Iran continues to try to [produce nuclear weapons](#), Israel might bomb its nuclear sites as a last attempt to delay the regime from attaining such a devastating arsenal. Carrying this out would be a tall order for the IAF for a number of reasons. For one thing, the distance to the targets would require air refueling. The IAF is expecting new KC-46 aerial tankers, but they are not expected to [arrive in Israel until 2025](#).

It is possible that Iran, following its understanding with the US and other constraints, might slow down its efforts to produce nuclear weapons. However, the regime is well aware that a decline in IAF readiness would have an immediate negative impact on its ability to strike Iran's nuclear sites, and might therefore feel encouraged to proceed at full speed toward the nuclear goal. In addition, the crisis in Israel and its ramifications for the IAF are giving Iran more time to prepare for an Israeli strike by assimilating sophisticated air defense systems [like the S-400](#) and advanced fighters such as the SU-35.

In 1948-1982, Israel had a series of high-intensity wars with Arab states, primarily Egypt, Jordan, and Syria. In the wake of the Syrian civil war, the Syrian military has been at a low point, and the respective peace agreements between Israel, Egypt and Jordan continue to hold. But if there should be, for example, a drastic change

in Egypt against Israel, Jerusalem would have to be prepared to fight the Egyptian military.

For the time being, Israel has to focus on NSAs (non-state actors), mostly Hamas and Hezbollah. The main challenge is [Hezbollah, which has 150,000 rockets and missiles](#) that cover all of Israel. The IAF is supposed to play a substantial role in suppressing Hezbollah's fire. If it is not fully ready for combat, the IDF's plans would be disrupted. The IDF must therefore be prepared to confront Hezbollah with a diminished IAF.

The IAF might still have enough manpower to carry out its missions, but lack of readiness could be costly. Hezbollah has some air defenses, including [SA-8 and SA-17](#), which might be able to shoot down one or more Israeli aircraft – especially if the aircrews are not sufficiently trained to avoid such missiles. A crippled IAF could also miss targets, cause collateral damage, and so on.

Another problem could be providing air support to Israel's ground forces. This would depend on how long the current crisis in Israel continues and how much it affects the IAF. A meltdown of some of the IAF's capabilities could cause the IDF to rely more on artillery. Although the Israeli artillery has been upgraded, it might cause more collateral damage than would the IAF. Artillery also cannot assist airborne operations deep inside Arab territory, such as if the 89<sup>th</sup> commando brigade lands deep inside Lebanon. The IDF would have to rely much more on the infantry, armor, etc. In fact, the IDF needs [significant ground forces](#) whether or not the IAF is crippled. They would be required to carry out a large-scale offensive aimed at reducing fire toward Israel and inflicting a major blow upon the foe.

The bottom line is this: Israel must end the political crisis soon for multiple reasons, an important one of which is the negative implications for the readiness of the IDF.

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