

The Consequences of Israeli Intervention in Syria

Author: LCDR Stipe Skin, HRV Navy, CSAG CCJ5

The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of a number of international officers within the Combined Strategic Analysis Group (CSAG) and do not necessarily reflect the views of United States Central Command, nor of the nations represented within the CSAG or any other governmental agency.

Key Points

- Israel's deterrence of Iranian proxies aligns with the CENTCOM Command Priorities.
- Israel's "War between wars" is delivered through surgical airstrikes and is achieving its immediate objectives, but the same success in the future is becoming less likely.
- The recent influx of modern Russian and Iranian air defense systems makes it increasingly difficult for Israel to gain air supremacy.
- As the effectiveness of air strikes are to decrease and the risk of greater conflict grows, Israel is shifting towards the cyber domain as a means and ways for Iranian deterrence.

Introduction

Over the last five years, Israel has conducted surgical airstrikes against high value targets in Syria. This component of its "war between wars"¹ will soon be challenged by the fielding of Iranian and Russian air defense systems. The new air defense systems are likely to decrease Israel's ability to deter Iran's malicious activities in Syria and along Israel's borders. Israeli intervention has two objectives. The first is disrupting Iranian-backed proxy forces, and restricting the transfer of advanced weapons to Hezbollah. The Second objective is deterring Shia and Sunni militia from establishing infrastructure, or operational bases near the Israeli borders.² Israel believes that by achieving these strategic military objectives, they will prevent the establishment of new threats.

The deployed Russian air defense assets constitute a significant threat to Israeli territory as they offer protection to Iranian proxies.³ Beyond Russian weapon systems, Iran is providing proxies with their own air defense capabilities. This paper presents the situation in the context of these three main purposes for Israel's operational approach:

¹ Hanin Ghaddar, "Israel's war between wars against Iran escalates in Syria", Alarabiya News, July 24, 2020, <https://english.alarabiya.net/views/news/middle-east/2020/07/24/Israel-s-war-between-wars-against-Iran-escalates-inSyria>, (Accessed December 28, 2020)

² Sirwan Kajjo, "Iran Strengthens Military Presence in Eastern Syria", VOA News, November 23, 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/extremism-watch/iran-strengthens-military-presence-eastern-syria>, (Accessed January 07, 2021)

³ *Ibid.*

1. *"To diminish Iranian capabilities being shipped to Hezbollah and other Iranian militias working to open a low-intensity military front threatening Israel's northern border;*
2. *To maintain Israel's freedom of action and air supremacy in its neighborhood and the Middle East in general by minimizing Syrian military capabilities, more specifically anti-aircraft missile sites and their support systems; and*
3. *To send a message of deterrence to three main actors in the region: Assad's regime, Iran and its emissaries, and Russia."*⁴

Background information

Precise air raids used by Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) in Syrian territory are conducted with the goal of deterring Iranian efforts. These raids make Iranian intervention in Syria more costly. Israel's preferred tactic of undeclared air raids in Syria is known as the "war between wars."⁵ This tactic is designed to reduce the capacity of its rivals prior to open conflict. Its application was first tested during the 2007 airstrike on a suspected Syrian nuclear reactor. From this success, Israel adapted its use on a wider scale. The IDF has delivered 800 bombs against 200 targets across the country during the 2017-2018 period.⁵ The IDF focuses on attacks against forces that could pose a credible threat to Israeli territories.

Iran has increased its presence in Syria through its Quds Force, Hezbollah, and other proxies.⁷ The proxy forces support the Syrian regime and pose a constant threat to Israel. Examples of Iranian intervention include guided missile attacks⁶ and their support to Hezbollah.⁷ Iran uses an 'air-bridge' to facilitate the movement of weapons to rotate manpower. This air bridge is comprised of both military and civilian aircraft, used to transport personnel and materiel to Damascus International Airport, Qamishli, Latakia, and T-4 (Tiyas) Air Base.⁸ At the same time, Syrian flights return from Iran with weapons and ammunition for the regime and its militia forces.¹¹ The Iranian proxies are also using the logistic hubs to transfer weapons to violent extremist organizations (VEO) operating in the Iraqi region.⁹ To stop these transfers, Israeli forces are striking the Syrian units that are transferring weapons

⁴ Cohen, Eyal Tsar, and Kevin Huggard, "What Can We Learn from the Escalating Israeli Raids in Syria?" Brookings. December 06, 2019. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/12/06/what-can-we-learn-from-theescalating-israeli-raids-in-syria/>. (Accessed January 07, 2021) ⁵Ibid.

⁵ Global Security, "Operation House of Cards Syria-Israeli Intervention." <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/syria-israel.htm>, (Accessed January 03, 2021)

⁷ Ibid.

⁶ AP News, "Hezbollah says it has doubled its arsenal of guided missiles", December 28, 2020. <https://apnews.com/article/israel-middle-east-lebanon-production-facilities-hassan-nasrallah39b29aa0d44acc6ac6592e58ea2463d5>, (Accessed January 03, 2021)

⁷ Toi Staff, "Ashkenazi tells Russian FM Iranian entrenchment in Syria must be prevented", The Times of Israel, October 26, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/ashkenazi-tells-russian-fm-iranian-entrenchment-in-syria-must-be-prevented/>, (Accessed January 03, 2021)

⁸ Farzin Nadimi, "Iran-Syria Air Defense Pact Could Disrupt Allied Operations", The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, July 24, 2020, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iran-syria-air-defense-pact-could-disrupt-alliedoperations>, (Accessed January 07, 2021) ¹¹ Ibid.

⁹ Judah Ari Gross, "Intel firm: Strikes on Syrian airfields halted Iranian ability to transport arms", The Times of Israel, September 04, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/intel-firm-strikes-on-syrian-airfields-halted-irans-ability-to-transportarms/>, (Accessed January 03, 2021) ¹³ Ibid.

and technology to pro-Iranian militia.^{13 10} These attacks are putting tremendous stress upon already burdened Syrian forces. Israeli attacks on Syrian bases are being carried out with the aim of preventing the transfer of weapons to proxy forces used by Iran. During the attack, losses of the Syrian forces were recorded,¹¹ and as such they represent a new defensive effort towards the superior opponent.¹⁶

Israel's "war between wars" approach is under threat by an enhanced Syrian air defense capability. These enhancements are a result of a new bilateral agreement between Syria and Iran.¹² The upgraded air defense allows Iran to cover the transfer of weapon systems to Iran's proxy forces. Another threat to Israel is the presence of the Russian Air Force and its anti-aircraft systems. To avoid a possible conflict with Russia, the IDF established an alert center to provide early warning to Russian forces. The Russian naval base at Tartus¹³ is in a position to allow deterrence operations in the eastern Mediterranean Sea. Russia has invested heavily in upgrading the base's capabilities. The heavy presence of Russian Naval Forces could limit freedom of maneuver and endanger freedom of movement for Israeli Navy forces. This Russian Navy presence could endanger any operation planning for Allied forces, which includes deterring Russian Navy forces in Mediterranean Sea.

Israel applies the 'whole of government' approach to send a message to all state and non-state actors in Syria. An example of their messaging strategy is the use of diplomacy to develop relations and use Russia as a mediator in the area.¹⁴ In recent months the number of meetings between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has increased. These summits support the growth of Russian direct investment in Israel, the purchase of Israeli weapons systems, and the signing of a military cooperation pact. Even with the improvements in diplomatic and military relations between the two states, nothing changes their disagreement on major regional issues. These regional issues could be the basis for a conflict in the future.¹⁵

The Russian government claims it wants to ensure a permanent solution to secure Israeli interests in the region. This support for Israel can be seen in the statement by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, "So, our dear Israeli colleagues, if you have facts that your state is facing threats from the Syrian territory, report the facts urgently, and we will take every measure to neutralize the threat".¹⁶¹⁷ Lavrov's comments came after Israel

¹⁰ Jeffrey Heller, Suleiman Al-Khalidi, "Israel strikes Widley in Syria, sending signal of aggressive post-Trump posture", Reuters, November 17, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-attacks/israel-strikes-widely-in-syria-sending-signal-of-aggressive-post-trump-posture-idUSKBN27Y07Y>, (Accessed January 03, 2021).

¹¹ AlJazeera, "Dozens killed in Israeli air raids in Syria: War monitor" AlJazeera, January 13, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/1/13/israeli-raids-in-syria-kill-16-war-monitor>, (Accessed February, 9, 2021). ¹⁶

Judah Ari Agross, "Intel firm: Strikes on Syrian airfields halted Iran's ability to transport arms", Times of Israel, September 03, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/intel-firm-strikes-on-syrian-airfields-halted-irans-ability-to-transport-arms/>, (Accessed January 20, 2021).

¹² Ron Ben- Yishai, "A new phase for Iran's presence in Syria", Ynet news, November 18, 2020, <https://www.ynetnews.com/article/B1X9nOGqv>, (Accessed January 20, 2021)

¹³ Suleiman Al-Khalidi, "Syria's Assad says Russian bases in his country keep balance of power in region", Reuters, October 04, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-assad-russia/syrias-assad-says-russian-bases-in-his-country-keep-balance-of-power-in-region-idUSKBN26Q033>, (Accessed February 02, 2021)

¹⁴ Pritish Gupta, "Russia and Israel: Toward a pragmatic partnership", Observed Research Foundation, March 05, 2020. <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/russia-and-israel-towards-a-pragmatic-partnership-61949/>, (Accessed January 04, 2021)

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Rawad Taha, "Russia refuses Syria's use as an arena for an Iran-Israel confrontation: Lavrov", | Al Arabiya English, January 17, 2021, <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2021/01/20/Russia-refuses-Syria-s-use-as-an-arena-for-an-Iran->

launched the heaviest raids on Iranian and Syrian targets in northeastern Syria. Observers and international experts have monitored Russia's work as a mediator between Syria and Israel in recent weeks. Sources have confirmed that the IDF has been informing the Russians of airstrikes in Syria beforehand.¹⁸

Analysis

Israel's efforts to destroy Iranian proxy forces in Syria have been successful over the past five years. In 2020 Israel successfully struck more than 500 Iranian targets in Syria.¹⁹ The desired end state for Israel is to end Tehran's presence in Syria. There is a risk that Iran could change the way their operations are conducted, as they have now begun to rely on Syrian military logistics points. This reliance on Syrian logistics could lead to a conflict between Israel and the Syrian armed forces. The current use of Lebanon's airspace to carry out airstrikes in Syria by Israel has provoked a severe reaction from the Lebanese government. According to the Lebanese government, the movements are interpreted as provocations, and overflight is not being officially requested.²⁰ Many in the region believe the Abraham Accord is a platform to unite the region against Iran.²⁵ Such unity could also provide the IDF with access, base, and overflight of Gulf countries. Based on the IDF's increase in operations and their success, Iran has slowed its efforts to smuggle weapons into war-torn Syria.^{21,22} Along with the reduction of weapons, Iran has reduced the number of bases/camps and units in Syria. Military actions by Iranian proxy forces and Iranian forces have caused a significant loss of Iranian troops inside Syria.^{23,24} These losses have decreased the willingness of militias and terror organizations to attack Israel. Israel's 'war-between wars' campaign has prevented the transfer of advanced weapons to Hezbollah. Many in Israel believe these weapons would be used to create a new front towards Israel.²⁵

Taking into account the issues in the Golan region²⁶ and its close proximity (Figure 1.), Israel's long-term strategy is a peace deal with Syria. After the Israeli agreement was signed with the United Arab Emirates, the current Syrian

[Israel-confrontation-Lavrov](#), (Accessed, January 21, 2021)

¹⁸ Prithish Gupta, "Russia and Israel: Toward a pragmatic partnership", Observed Research Foundation, March 05, 2020. <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/russia-and-israel-towards-a-pragmatic-partnership-61949/>, (Accessed January 04, 2021).

¹⁹ Suleiman Al-Khalidi, "Israel launches major air strikes on Iran-linked targets in Syria", Reuters, January 13, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-attack-israel/israel-launches-major-air-strikes-on-iran-linked-targets-in-syriaidUSKBN29H32S>, (Accessed, January 14, 2021).

²⁰ AP News, "Israeli jets fly over Beirut, explosions reported in Syria", December 25, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/syria-israel-beirut-lebanon-a0716a771ba3c6d12c6a7a5da107a52d>, (Accessed, January 02, 2021) ²⁵ Christina Lin, "Iran and the Abraham Accord", The Times of Israel, September 17, 2020. <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/iran-and-the-abraham-accord/>, (Accessed, January 02, 2021)

²¹ Anna Ahronheim, "Rise in Israeli strikes in Syria has led to decrease of Iranian activity", The Jerusalem Post, December 22, 2020, <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/rise-in-israeli-strikes-in-syria-has-led-to-decrease-of-iranian-activity-651716>, (Accessed, January 02, 2021)

²³ Middle East online, "Israel strikes against Iran military targets in southern Syria", January 07, 2021, <https://middle-eastonline.com/en/israel-strikes-again-iran-military-targets-southern-syria>, (Accessed, January 08, 2021)

²⁴ Bas News, "Airstrike Kills Four Iraqi Militiamen in Syria", January 07, 2021, <https://www.basnews.com/en/babat/660704>, (Accessed, January 08, 2021)

²⁵ Suleiman Al-Khalidi, "Israel launches major air strikes on Iran-linked targets in Syria", Reuters, January 13, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-attack-israel/israel-launches-major-air-strikes-on-iran-linked-targets-in-syriaidUSKBN29H32S>, (Accessed, January 14, 2021)

²⁶ Jacey Fortin, "A Brief History of the Golan Heights, Claimed by Israel and Syria", the New York Times, March 21, 2019.

regime indicated negotiations in the future looks promising.²⁷²⁸ The weakness of Assad's regime, combined with support for the 'Abraham Accords' in the region, would provide a historic opportunity to build peace in the region. The current peace movement in the region opens doors for future arrangements.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/21/world/middleeast/golan-heights-israel.html>, (Accessed January 03, 2021)

²⁷ Ahmed Khatib, "How the Syrian Regime is Signaling its Openness to Peace Talks", Center for Global Policy, September 28, 2020. <https://cgpolicy.org/articles/how-the-syrian-regime-is-signaling-its-openness-to-peace-talks/>, (Accessed January, 02.

²⁸)



Figure 1. Syria and Israel boarder and dispute area
(Source: The New York Times)

Despite Israel's past success using airstrikes, the IDF has realized it must shift its tactics. The IDF chief has stated that Israel's military has begun to carry out offensive operations in the cyber domain.²⁹ This shift was done for many reasons, but the IDF Chief said that cyber was the most significant combat arena in the last year. In late June 2020, as part of the IDF's multi-year plan, the military opened the Strategy and Third-Circle Directorate.

This new position on the General Staff focuses on Israel's fight against Iran. The new directorate under the command of Brig.-Gen. Tal Kalman is expected to bolster the IDF's cyber-attack capabilities. Before the directorate became fully operational, Israel was accused of launching a significant cyber-attack on Iran's Shahid Rajaei Port. This cyber-attack caused chaos for days when the facility's computer system crashed on May 9th. The attack was followed by a series of mysterious accidents targeting Iran's missile and nuclear program over the summer of 2020. These attacks have led many to wonder if the IDF's war-between-wars campaign has expanded to targeting critical nuclear sites inside Iran.³³ A quote from inside the Israeli government said, "We conclude a year in which we successfully met the IDF's first mission: to provide protection and security."³⁰ With the use of the new cyber capabilities, Israel has now broadened its tactics to deter Iran.

Conclusion

Israel has come to the realization that they must keep open channels with Russia in Syria to avoid an unintentional conflict. The current Israeli leadership views Iranian proxies on its northern frontier as a red line. Over the past few years, Israel has struck Iranian linked facilities and weapons convoys destined for Lebanon's militant Hezbollah group. Some of those targets were located inside Syrian bases. For these reasons, Israel must find a tactic for

²⁹ Anna Ahronheim, "Rise in Israeli strikes in Syria has led to decrease of Iranian activity", The Jerusalem Post, December 10, 2020, www.jpost.com/middle-east/rise-in-israeli-strikes-in-syria-has-led-to-decrease-of-iranian-activity-651716, (Accessed, January 02, 2021) ³³ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

dealing with their Iranian issue that does not interfere with Russia. Israel will strive to keep Assad in power, which provides a possibility for negotiations that could solve Golan Height's issue. If Israel wants a plan to establish security and stability, they will need to find a solution with the neighboring countries.

The IDF must rethink its activities. Relying too heavily of airstrikes will decrease the likelihood of achieving national security objectives in the region. All this effort is supporting the main goal to deter Iran in the region. Airstrikes have proven to be tactically successful, but they alone will not fully deter Iran. A shift in tactics is needed, and Israel has developed cyber capabilities in order to close the gap in desired end state and current state. It is undeniable that there are similarities between Israeli objectives and CENTCOMs desired end state in Syria.

Recommendations for US/CENTCOM

- Provide support for Israeli effort by providing intel of high-value targets in Syria.
- Support Israel's multi-domain approach to deter Iran.
- Coordinate with EUCOM to increase naval forces presence in the Mediterranean Sea to maintain the security of Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) and freedom of navigation.
- Include IDF officers as observers in planned exercises in the region, and sequentially increase their participation in those exercises.
- Facilitate and set the conditions to welcome an Israeli SNR and/or LNO supported by Coalition and Partners countries representatives.
- Invite an Israeli officer to participate in the CSAG.