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Israel vis-à-vis Iran in Syria: The Perils of Active Containment

Iran's Growing Influence in the Evolving Order in Syria Is Driving Israel to Change Its Mindset and Strategies

Gil Murciano

The perceived shift from chaos to an evolving order in Syria presents a challenge to Israel's policy of limited intervention. Iran's growing influence in Syria and its efforts to improve Hezbollah's strategic capacities presents Israeli decision-makers with a sense of urgency to act now while the future settlement in Syria is still being shaped in order to avoid a *fait accompli* of an Iranian stronghold on Israel's northern border. This notion is further enhanced by a perceived lack of a serious commitment from the main extra-regional powerbroker, Russia, as well as the US to Israel's national security needs. During the last few months, the first signs of a change became apparent in Israel's strategic approach as well as a new willingness to take active measures to contain Iran's strategic efforts in Syria. The combination of a new proactive Israeli policy and the lack of a security regime to regulate the situation increases the likelihood of an unintended escalation between the parties. Germany should use its relations and leverage vis-à-vis the two parties to promote a new security regime between Israel and Iran and help prevent a destructive escalation.

The civil war in Syria had refuted the informal security regime that had existed between Israel and Syria for more than four decades. Despite a continuous formal state of war between the countries and Syria's active role as an important link in the Iran-Hezbollah supply route, the border between the countries had remained silent since 1974 through changing political and military developments. In this context, although Israeli decision-makers considered the Bashar al-Assad regime to be an active

enemy, they nevertheless perceived it as a "devil they know" – a predictable adversary who follows pre-acknowledged conventions and incentive structures. In this framework, the pre-civil war Assad regime was perceived as a force of stability on the interstate level because of its ability and motivation to keep the Israel-Syria border quiet. This perception by Israel was based on two pillars: the basic notion of Assad as a stable ruler who exercised full control over his armed forces; and Israel's ability to deter

Assad from direct military confrontation with Israel in the Golan Heights.

The outbreak of the civil war in Syria rendered this strategic mindset irrelevant. Before the war, the Assad regime had enjoyed considerable control in defining the scope and operational policy of Hezbollah in coordination with Iran and in accordance with Syria's interests. However, Iran and Hezbollah's pivotal role in ensuring the Assad regime's survival has created a growing dependency by Syria on their support and severely limits Syria's ability and willingness to limit their freedom of action on its soil. The erosion in the regime's sovereign decision-making capacity as well as its loss of effective control over the border area rendered the long-held deterrence equation of Israel vis-à-vis the Assad regime obsolete.

Israel's Policy during the Civil War: Selective Response

Faced with ongoing chaos, the Israeli leadership's first strategic approach could be described as a policy of selective response – an attempt to protect vital Israeli national security interests while keeping Israel's involvement in the conflict in Syria to a necessary minimum.

Two basic patterns can be traced in Israel's actions and national security discourse during this phase. First, Israel's policy regarding Syria followed the lines of its wider "splendid isolation" approach towards the events of the "Arab Spring". This relates to Israel's ambition to preserve its separation from the chaotic political developments in the region by implementing a policy of non-intervention. Consequently, Israeli policy-makers exhibited general indifference regarding the political development of the Syrian civil war. Moreover, the changing circumstances in Syria – and specifically the rising dominance of jihadist militant groups near the Israel-Syria border – had quickly convinced Israeli decision-makers that Israel has little to gain from actively taking sides in this conflict between two forces potentially (or openly) hostile to Israel.

Nevertheless, the developments in the war raging across the border eventually touched upon Israel's national security interests. Although hoping to stay clear of the chaos, Israel was keen to contain immediate threats evolving from the Syrian conflictual "eco-system". These containment efforts defined two exceptional "friction spaces" within the chaos in which Israel operated in defiance of its general policy of limited intervention.

On the first tier, Israel had acted to prevent any attempts to turn the Israel-Syria border once again into a battlefield against Israel. The Israeli government had implemented a series of measures to enforce a policy of zero-tolerance to emerging threats in the border's vicinity. An illustrative example is the Israeli government's policy of automatic retaliation in response to any spillover of the fighting between the regime and local opposition forces. The importance Israel ascribed to confronting evolving threats in the border area was demonstrated by Israel's willingness to risk a direct confrontation with Iran to protect this imperative. In 2014, the Israeli government received indications that Iran had initiated the building of what a senior Revolutionary Guard official coined "a second Hezbollah in Syria", which would operate against Israel from the Golan Heights. In order to disrupt these efforts in January 2015, Israel launched an airstrike against a convoy of Hezbollah and Revolutionary Guards' personnel, killing at least one senior Iranian officer. This Israeli doctrine is also illustrated by Israel's efforts to increase its "soft power" in the border area by providing medical treatment to wounded civilians and opposition fighters. Some reports indicate that the scope of this support goes beyond the humanitarian level and includes financial and logistical support to local militias with the aim of creating a safe zone along Israel's border with Syria.

On the second, wider tier, the goal was to prevent an evolving threat to Israel's strategic position vis-à-vis one of its main enemies – Hezbollah. According to senior IDF officers, since the start of the civil war

Israel has conducted “hundreds” of air-strikes in Syria against convoys and storage facilities of advanced (“tie-breaking”) weapons that were designed to reach Hezbollah in Lebanon. This policy was aimed at hindering a substantial improvement in Hezbollah’s capacity to inflict damage on Israel in the framework of what is defined by Israel’s military planners as “the war between the wars”. Despite the show of force, these opportunity-based actions are, in their essence, a responsive measure meant to confront a gradually developing challenge to the strategic military imbalance between Israel and Hezbollah.

The Point of Change: International Efforts for Settlement Challenge Israel’s Policy

The last year of fighting in Syria has been characterised by a gradual shift from chaos to an evolving order that is based on the parties’ realisation that the endgame is near. The shift in the balance of power in favour of the Assad regime and its allies also signifies a new phase of conflict management. Current efforts led by Russia and the US to reach stabilising settlements have a direct impact on Israel’s strategic interests. In the Israeli mindset, these settlements reflect directly on a key security concern – the question of Iran’s growing military presence in Syria and its perceived attempts to transform Syria into a platform for future military activity against Israel.

A core element of Israel’s national security policy of the last two decades has been to contain Iran’s offensive capabilities vis-à-vis Israel. A key aspect has been the need to limit Iran and its proxies’ freedom of operation in neighbouring countries. Israel is currently facing the emergence of a new order in the Syrian arena, in which Iran’s growing military and political influence is becoming a *fait accompli*. For Israel, the worst-case scenario is the transformation of Syria into an Iranian stronghold on Israel’s northern border, as part of what Israeli Defence Minister Liebermann defined as a “Shi’ite corridor from Iran to Damascus”.

The Israeli mindset is clearly apparent in the connection made by Prime Minister Netanyahu between the shift to evolving order in Syria and the growing threat from Iran: “The current situation emanates from a welcome development – the defeat of ISIS (in Syria). However, the problem is that where ISIS exits, Iran enters.” Netanyahu was also clear about his perception of the ultimate goal of Iran’s Syria project, accusing Iran of establishing its military presence in order “to take over Syria, to ‘Lebanonize’ Syria”.

The evolving reality in Syria heightens Israel’s sense of urgency to act. Israeli decision-makers view the current phase in the Syrian civil war as a crucial time frame, during which the main terms and rules of engagement are being shaped. Israel’s concern is that a failure to challenge Iran’s growing presence in Syria could result in permanent developments that would later be hard to alter. Ironically, it is therefore the developing order, rather than the chaos, that is influencing Israel to change its scope of involvement in the Syrian arena in order to avoid a state of strategic inferiority.

The Israeli government’s concerns about the evolving reality of Iran’s presence in Syria are heightened by the perceived lack of commitment on behalf of Russia and the US to incorporate Israel’s security needs into the design of future agreements in Syria. Despite extensive diplomatic efforts, the Israeli leadership has so far been mostly unsuccessful in convincing Russia and the US to implement measures to limit Iran’s current presence and efforts. Israel also failed to convince them to act against the proliferation of advanced weapons being delivered to Hezbollah by Iran. American diplomatic support had been an important aspect in Israel’s pre-civil war containment efforts vis-à-vis Iran and Hezbollah. However, the perceived disregard by the Obama administration, followed by the ambivalent attitude of the Trump administration, towards the question of Iran’s presence in Syria has led the Israeli leadership to conclude that they can no longer rely on the US to represent their interests in future

settlements. A common perception in Israel is that, apart from the focus on ISIS, the US administration lacks concrete policy guidelines regarding the Syrian arena. The extensive diplomatic efforts made by the Israeli government during the last two years vis-à-vis Russia improved tactical military coordination between the nations in Syria and, to this point, provided Israel with relative freedom to operate in Syrian airspace. Nevertheless, the Israeli leadership had achieved little success in realising its strategic goal of convincing the Russians to actively limit Iran's influence in Syria or to act against Iran's efforts to arm Hezbollah. In this context, although Russia seems to have accepted Israel's demand for a buffer zone between Iran-backed militias and the Israel-Syria border, they seem less attentive to Israel's demands for long-term limitations on their military ally's presence in Syria.

In concrete terms, in the Israeli political and military leaderships' perception, the strategic reality of Iran's evolving dominance in Syria presents two main challenges to Israel's national security.

A Potential "Second" Iranian Front vis-à-vis Israel

The deployment of elite Iranian and Iran-backed forces in Syria provides Iran with a strategic advantage in future conflicts with Israel. The Iranian-backed forces in Syria currently number approximately 1,000 Iranian troops from the Revolutionary Guards' Quds Force, around 7,000 Hezbollah fighters, and 10,000 members of other Shia militias. In analysing the potential threat of Iran's future military activity in Syria, Israeli decision-makers focus on three main elements:

- ▶ the possibility that Iran would deploy advanced weapons systems, to be placed under Iran's direct control on Syrian soil. These include mainly surface-to-surface missiles, air defence systems, and anti-ship missiles;
- ▶ Iran's attempt to build or use existing military infrastructure in Syria – such as air and naval bases;

- ▶ Iran's build-up and redeployment of its forces in Syria to the Israel-Syria border.

The Upgrading of Hezbollah's Strategic Capabilities

In the Israeli leadership's perception, a leading threat is Hezbollah's consistent effort to acquire advanced offensive weapons systems, which would increase its ability to target Israel in future conflicts. One main example is the proliferation of high-precision missiles, such as the Iran-manufactured, GPS-guided Raad missiles, to Hezbollah. The acquirement of these systems would drastically improve Hezbollah's ability to attack key strategic civilian and military targets in Israel and, consequently, substantially increase the price Israel would have to pay in future conflicts. Another central aspect of Israel's threat perception focusses on Iran's reported attempts to provide Hezbollah with independent production capabilities of advanced weapons and munitions. Such capabilities would increase the organisation's operational resilience and flexibility in future conflicts.

Following its previous policy of limited intervention, Israel now finds itself left out of a crucial process of conflict management, which reflects directly on its core long-term national interests. Israel's discontent was clearly apparent in the Israeli leadership's public criticism of the Russia-US ceasefire deal in southern Syria (July 2017), which a senior Israeli official defined as a "very bad deal" that mostly benefits Iran. Despite distinct efforts by Israel, the first draft of the agreement did not include any mention of Iran or the question of its long-term presence in Syria.

In such diplomatic circumstances – Israeli decision-makers now concur – the protection of Israel's basic need to contain Iran could no longer be met by responsive means and a policy of limited intervention alone. In the new mindset of Israeli decision-makers, it is a long-term threat that Israel should prevent "at any cost", and one

that requires Israel's readiness to act independently, if necessary.

From Selective Response to Active Containment?

A combined analysis of Israel's diplomatic agenda, military operations, and strategic discourse of the last few months provides initial indications of a change in the basic attitudes of Israel's decision-makers towards the evolving order in Syria. These indications appear in both the discourse and actions of the Israeli government. The analysis emphasises the first signs of Israel's willingness to intervene both politically and militarily in order to avoid an erosion of its national security interests in Syria. In this framework, Israel's recent steps emphasise a willingness to take larger risks in challenging an undesired status quo evolving in Syria.

A Change in Strategic Discourse

During the last year, there has been a change in the strategic discourse of Israel's political-military leadership regarding the basic definition of the challenges developing on Israel's northern front. There is a new tendency to blur the line separating Iran's influence in Lebanon (through Hezbollah) and its influence in Syria, and instead to treat it as part of a unified theatre of operations. Whereas before the civil war Israeli military planners treated Lebanon and Syria as two (hostile) arenas dictating different restraints and rules of engagement, the new operational logic defines them as part of the same "operational ecosystem", the common denominator of which is Iran's influence. In current Israeli assessments, a spillover of direct confrontation in Syria to Lebanon, or vice versa, is a highly likely scenario. According to Israel's Minister of Defence, Israel no longer speaks of a Lebanese arena, but is instead dealing with a "single northern arena", consisting of Syria, Lebanon, Hezbollah, and the Assad regime and its supporters.

Enhanced Diplomatic Campaign

In the last few months, the matter of Iran's influence in Syria has constituted a first-priority issue in Israel's foreign policy agenda vis-à-vis the main extra-regional stakeholders. The topic has dominated the Israeli leadership's dialogue with Russia, including the recent Netanyahu-Putin meeting in Sochi (August 23) and the visit of Russia's Defence Minister to Israel (October 15). In parallel, despite growing disappointment in the Trump administration's attitude towards the topic, the Israeli leadership has recently invested considerable effort in alerting the US administration to the potential threats of Iran's growing influence in Syria. In this framework, a special delegation of senior security officials, led by the heads of Mossad and Israel's Military Intelligence, visited the US and met with Trump's strategic circle (August 18). In addition, the topic of Iran's influence in Syria has also dominated Israeli leadership meetings with European leaders: The topic was at the centre of Netanyahu's meeting with President Macron (July 16) and President Rivlin's meeting with Chancellor Merkel (September 7).

Signs of Change in Military Mode of Operations

Israel's first (known) military action in Syria since the conclusion of the July 2017 ceasefire has distinctively different features from the ones witnessed during the last five years of the civil war. According to media reports, Israel launched an airstrike on September 7 against a research and/or production facility near Masyaf, in the Hama Governorate, which belongs to Syria's Scientific Studies and Research Center (CERS) – a Syrian governmental agency in charge of the research and development of strategic and unconventional weapons. The exact function of the facility is still a matter of speculation, but most reports indicate it is the production site of high-precision missiles designed for use by the Syrian Army and Hezbollah; other reports speak of a production site for

chemical weapons. Regardless of the exact target of the attack, this airstrike constitutes an extraordinary operation in the ongoing portfolio of Israeli operations in Syria, not merely due to its unique operational nature, but also based on its diplomatic meaning.

During the last four years, most Israeli airstrikes had been directed against what could be defined as opportunity-based targets, such as convoys and storage facilities. However, the September 7 airstrike was directed against a strategic infrastructure target, and one of unique strategic importance – a central component of Syria’s manufacturing capacity of advanced missiles and/or chemical weapons. The choice of target demonstrates the importance the Israeli government ascribes to curtailing Syria and Hezbollah’s efforts to gain strategic capabilities. Moreover, this step also demonstrates Israel’s willingness to step up its efforts to achieve this goal, even at the risk of possible retaliation by Iran/Syria/Hezbollah and/or damage to their relations with Russia. In this context, the airstrike was launched during the largest IDF exercise in the last 20 years (“Or Hadagan”). This exact timing could indicate that special measures were taken to increase readiness in case of retaliation, and therefore reflects on the unique operational profile of this specific airstrike.

Furthermore, the airstrike was launched against a target in an area with a strong Russian military presence (less than 80 km from the Hmeimim airport, currently operated by the Russian Air Force). The choice to attack a target positioned deep within the Russian “sphere of control” can be interpreted as an attempt to convey a message of discontent to Russia that Israel will not sit by idly while Russia ignores Syria and Hezbollah’s efforts to upgrade their strategic capabilities. Amos Yadlin, the former head of Israel’s Military Intelligence who defined the airstrike as “not routine”, also referred to it as a statement directed at the extra-regional powers that Israel would not allow Syria to produce strategic weapons. He

connected the timing of the attack directly with Israeli leadership’s sentiment that Russia and the US are “ignoring the red lines defined by Israel on the matter”.

Israel’s unusual decision to attack (October 16) a Syrian anti-aircraft battery in response to a missile fired on Israeli Air Force planes (after it ignored similar incidents in the past) during the visit of Russia’s Defence Minister to Israel is yet another indication of the political message of recent military steps by Israel.

Reacting to Iran’s Growing Influence: Three Possible Approaches by Israel

Considering these developments in Israel’s *modus operandi*, three scenarios for future Israeli policy are conceivable, each of which reflects a different strategic approach.

Policy Choice 1: Israeli de facto Acceptance of Iran’s Presence

Israel’s response to the evolving situation in Syria will be limited to continuous diplomatic protests and technical adjustments in developing the IDF’s force structure. The Israeli leadership would basically come to terms with Iran’s presence in Syria and the increase in the strategic military capacities of Hezbollah and learn to accept Iran’s new strategic position in Syria as a given fact. “More of the same” could therefore be expected – the continuation of the Israeli policy of opportunity-based attacks on convoys and the first-tier containment of Iran’s attempts to “activate” the Golan Heights front. Israel will not make any fundamental efforts to change the “rules of the game” on the wider tier. In such a scenario, the recent airstrike on CERS should be seen as a one-time occurrence. The realisation of this scenario reduces the likelihood of an escalation of the situation into a violent conflict in the short term.

Nevertheless, the policy line the Israeli government has adopted since the July ceasefire, in both discourse and action, de-

creates the probability of Israel's acceptance of the situation and "regression" towards a responsive policy.

Policy Choice 2:

An Israeli Active Containment with the Risk of Unintended Escalation

Iran's growing influence in Syria, combined with Russia and the US's continued abstention from taking active measures to curb this influence, will lead Israeli decision-makers to apply an independent, proactive effort to contain it. In this framework, Israel will focus on enforcing a new set of "red lines" (in parallel to previous ones) regarding Iran's standing in the Syrian arena and its efforts to increase the strategic capacities of its allies. Such "red lines" may include the deployment of advanced weapons systems on Syrian soil, the proliferation/reconstruction of Syrian/Hezbollah production capabilities of advanced weapons systems and weapons of mass destruction, and the deployment of Iranian/Iranian-backed forces in naval/air bases. The recent airstrike could be indicative of a new Israeli operational logic.

In order to implement this policy of active containment, Israel is likely to utilise a combination of coordinated diplomatic and military measures. The usage of the latter is expected to increase the intensity of Israel's conflict with its enemies. First, it could place Israel in direct confrontation with Iran. If previous Israeli airstrikes were mostly directed at Iran's proxies (Hezbollah) and allies (Syria), the set of targets related to Israel's new "red lines" increase the chances of intentional or unintentional damage to Iranian forces and/or assets. Second, the new policy is likely to increase the level of confrontation with both Syria and Hezbollah. Continuous airstrikes against Syrian/Hezbollah/Iranian strategic infrastructure are likely to eventually provoke a response. Third, in the long run, an Israeli active containment policy is expected to damage the delicate framework of Israel-Russia relations. Further Israeli

airstrikes against Syria's strategic infrastructure might limit Russia's willingness to place restraints on Syrian retaliatory motivations in the future. Lastly, from a regional perspective, Israel's active containment could further disrupt current efforts to stabilise Syria and create frameworks for conflict management.

Policy Choice 3:

Israel's Acceptance of Iran's Presence under Pre-defined Terms

Israel will informally accept a limited military presence of Iran-backed forces in Syria under specific restrictions agreed upon with Russia and the international community. There have been recent unconfirmed reports on Russia's efforts to find a mutually agreeable formula that would allow for the continued presence of Iranian-backed forces in Syria while satisfying Israel's concerns about Syria becoming a platform for Iran's aggression.

If these reports are credible, they highlight Russia's ambitions to protect its core interest of preserving the Assad regime by preventing a destructive conflict between Israel and their client. Nevertheless, in this stage, it is hard to assess the depth of Russia's commitment, the length to which the Israeli government would be willing to entrust their core interests to Russia, or their ability to find a mutual compromise with Russia's positions.

Chances for Escalation

The current power play in Syria contains clear de-escalatory factors that decrease the risk of an all-out war between the parties. First, Russia's presence as a powerbroker in the arena significantly reduces the chances of intentional escalation by Israel or the Iran-backed camp. A violent confrontation in Syria would be detrimental to Russia's efforts to rebuild the Syrian regime's capacities. Russia's reported involvement in preventing Syria from reacting to the CERS airstrike and its reported efforts to discuss

Israel's concerns could be seen as testimony to its de-escalatory motivation. As a clash with Russia is highly undesired for all parties involved, Russia's involvement presents a disincentive for all parties to make escalatory moves. However, as noticed during the recent Israeli airstrike on CERS, Russia's presence does not serve as a decisive deterrent against Israeli military risk-taking in Syria. Second, at this stage, the lack of immediate motivation by Israel or Iran to escalate the situation into a high-intensity conflict reduces the short-term likelihood of intentional escalation by either party.

Nevertheless, an Israeli adoption of a proactive approach of active containment (Policy Choice 2) increases the likelihood of unintentional escalation. Such escalation is most likely to materialise if Israel continues its airstrikes against strategic infrastructure targets. If these attacks become a new Israeli operational policy, the need for Iran and Syria to retaliate is expected to increase – and Russia's willingness to stop such a retaliation to decrease. In response to Israel's recent airstrikes (October 18), Iran's Chief of Staff stated that Iran considers a situation allowing the "Zionist Regime" to attack Syria whenever it wants as unacceptable. Chances of such retaliation are also expected to increase as Syria slowly regains its independent military capabilities. Syrian and/or Iranian retaliation (carried from Syria or Lebanon) could then trigger a self-intensifying dynamic of escalatory actions and reactions, which could eventually lead to a systemic conflict, similar to the dynamic that precipitated the Second Lebanon War (2006).

From a structural point of view, Israel's attempt to actively oppose Iran's growing influence in Syria increases the potential friction between Israel and the Iran-backed camp. Israel and Iran appear in the Syrian arena as two regional actors that possess clashing interests while sharing a heightened sense of urgency to fulfil them. Simultaneously, following the collapse of recent understandings, the parties are operating in the absence of a security regime to pre-define their mutual expectations and regu-

late their interactional moves. In such a situation, miscalculations and misinterpretations and their potential of becoming generators of violent conflict increase significantly.

Options for Germany

Considering the dire implications on the regional and global levels resulting from a direct confrontation, Germany should take an active part in the efforts to formulate a security regime between Israel and Iran in Syria. In this context, Germany is in a unique position to support an international effort to create such an arrangement. First, it is both a strategic ally of Israel and party to an ongoing dialogue with Iran, with which it enjoys economic leverage, relative credibility, and political access. Second, Germany has practical experience in the delicate practice of mediating informal agreements between Israel, Iran, and Hezbollah. In concrete terms, Germany could fulfil two possible roles in this process. First, it could serve as a facilitator of the process, conducting separate dialogues with the two stakeholders in order to reach an informal arrangement. Second, it could take the role of an active mediator, applying pressure (alongside other members of the international community) on Iran to limit its military efforts in Syria. Such involvement would enable Germany to use its strategic capacities to foster regional stability and prevent underlying dynamics from escalating into a destructive conflict, the shockwaves of which are bound to impact across the Mediterranean and into Europe.

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