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Preventing a Spillover of the Iran-Israel Conflict in Syria

E3+Russia Should Lead the Way Out

Gil Murciano

Israel's containment policy vis-à-vis Iran in Syria has entered a new phase of direct confrontation aimed at achieving a decisive outcome on the ground. Israeli decision-makers now see a window of opportunity to remove Iran's long-term military presence in Syria through a combination of military and diplomatic means. Israel's approach is based on the assessment that this goal can be achieved while containing the fighting to the Syrian arena. Nevertheless, this new strategic attitude increases the likelihood of a spillover beyond the Syrian arena and into a regional conflict. Iran's military actions in Syria have demonstrated that its goals exceed the logic of defensive deterrence and are driven by an ambition to increase its offensive potential vis-à-vis Israel. Germany should take an active role in a coordinated effort by the E3 countries (Germany, France, and the United Kingdom) and Russia to pressure Iran to scale-down its military presence while providing it with a face-saving framework to protect its core political interests.

Since summer 2017, Iran has made efforts to turn Syria into a platform for military activity against Israel, prompting a new Israeli policy of "active containment" — concentrated military and diplomatic efforts to define red lines to Iran's military buildup. In this process, Israel has increased the level of risk it is willing to take in order to halt Iran's efforts. Israel's active containment campaign was not intended solely to deter Iran, but also to convince Russia — the main arbiter in Syria — to factor Israeli security concerns into the new order it was trying to create in Syria.

Since February 2018, with the scenario of direct confrontation between Israel and Iran becoming a reality, Israel's policy has been led by a new strategic concept. Israel's leadership now sees the removal of Iran's military presence in Syria as a feasible objective. Israel's formal demand since the start of Iran's involvement has been the removal of Iran and its proxies from Syria. Nevertheless, Israeli decision-makers have now identified a space for decisive action — a window of opportunity — to enter into a continuous campaign to eliminate Iran's military capabilities in Syria. This new approach and its strategic goals are being

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directed by Israel's security establishment, and they are strongly supported by the political leadership, as explained on May 10 by Israel's Minister of Intelligence, Yisrael Katz: "Israel is decisive … We are confronting Iran with a dilemma — leave Syria or get hurt and involved in a conflict … in the end it is about breaking the Iranian will to be in Syria."

The Israeli change of attitude is shaped by two main factors: first, specific international developments that Israel perceives as placing Iran in a state of strategic weakness; and second, in response to Iran's recent attempts (February 10, May 10) to directly attack Israel as well as the failure of Israel's previous "active containment" policy to deter Iran from building its forces in Syria.

The tipping point in Israel's strategic approach was Iran's recently attempted drone attack/infiltration into Israeli airspace in February. For Israel, this action was a catalyst for an operational reevaluation for two reasons. First, it demonstrated in practical terms Iran's willingness to use Syria as a base for offensive operations against Israel. In this context, Iran's decision to use a platform carrying a distinct Iranian "signature" — namely an Iranian-manufactured drone instead of using proxies to act directly against Israel — supported Israel's belief that Iran meant to emphasize its involvement. As a senior Israeli military officer stated: "This is the first time we saw Iran do something against Israel — not by proxy … this opened a new period." Second, it exposed Russia's inability — or perhaps its unwillingness — to prevent its military ally from executing direct infiltration attempts into Israeli airspace and challenged the Israeli perception of Russia serving as a containing factor for Iran's actions against Israel. The fact that the mission was launched from the T4 airbase, where Russian advisers are regularly present, was likely to enhance these doubts.

A new mode of operations

Israel's new approach is currently guided by three operational principles.

1. *Taking a toll from the Iranians directly* — Israel's new mindset is demonstrated by a change in the mode of military operations. Current military efforts are aimed almost exclusively at Iran's and Hezbollah's infrastructure and personnel in Syria. As explained on May 24 by a senior Israeli officer: "When we identify consolidation [of Iranian forces] or the introduction of weapons, we act." Prior to the February drone incident, Israel's military actions against Iran-affiliated targets were designed to deter Iran rather than harm its forces. Airstrikes such as the one launched against an empty base that was due to be populated by pro-Iranian militias in December 2017 could be seen as a warning shot across the bow. Israeli policy was to minimize Iranian casualties in order to avoid further escalation. In the aftermath of the drone incident, it seems that the prospect of casualties among Iranian personnel turned from a scenario to be avoided into a stated objective of Israeli operations. Consequently, Iran's Quds Force in Syria has suffered dozens of casualties since February due to Israeli airstrikes. If the policy of active containment was designed to signal Israeli resolve and set red lines vis-à-vis Iran, the new Israeli approach is focused on enforcing these lines through military means. Israel's new approach also appears in its willingness now to claim responsibility for some of the airstrikes. The new logic of decisive maneuver reduces the value of preserving operational and political ambiguity. Instead, it supports a public discourse that is meant to announce Israel's resolve to both domestic and international audiences. In this context, the relatively broad support that this new mode of operations in Syria is receiving from the Israeli public and across the domestic political map provides further backing to this policy of open confrontation with Iran.

2. *Distinguishing between Iran and the Bashar al-Assad regime* — Israeli airstrikes are focused solely on targets affiliated with the IRGC

Israel's military operations in Syria since February 2018 (according to media sources)

Feb. 10	Following the interception of an armed Iranian drone, which attempted to infiltrate Israeli airspace, Israel targeted the command unit controlling the drone at the T4 airbase. After Syrian anti-aircraft fire intercepted an Israeli F-16, the Israeli Air Force retaliated against Syrian air defense systems and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) targets. Casualties included IRGC personnel.
Apr. 9	An airstrike against the IRGC's drone unit at the T4 airbase resulted in the death of at least seven Iranian officers, including the commanding Colonel. Reports indicate that a Tor air defense system (SA-15) that Iran was planning to deploy was an additional target of the attack.
Apr. 30	Combined airstrikes against two underground missile depots of the Quds Force in the Hama and Aleppo districts reportedly destroyed hundreds of missiles. Reports indicate that one of the targets was an Iranian-manufactured anti-air defense system. Both attacks reportedly resulted in Iranian casualties.
May 8	Israel launched a preemptive strike against missile storage facilities and launchers shortly before their deployment for an attack against Israeli military installations in the Golan.
May 10	The peak of Israel's operations against Iran's military presence in Syria: Iran attempted to launch a rocket barrage against Israeli military posts in the Golan. In response, Israel launched a large-scale attack against the Quds Force's infrastructure in Syria ("Operation House of Cards"). Targets were military bases, intelligence-gathering posts, logistics centers, and weapon storage facilities. It is described as the largest military operation in the Israel-Syria conflict since the 1973 war. Israeli decision-makers describe the attack as a major setback for the Quds Force's capabilities in Syria.
May 24	Israel allegedly launched an airstrike against the al-Dabaa airbase, which is close to the Syria-Lebanon border. Targets were weapon depots belonging to Hezbollah.
Jul. 8	Israel allegedly launched an airstrike against the T4 airbase.

and have avoided, at this phase, hitting or threatening targets related to the Assad regime. This differs from Israel's pre—civil war strategy of flying sorties above the presidential palace as a means of putting pressure on Assad to contain Hezbollah. Syrian army units are targeted only when they get directly involved in the Israel-Iran clash — as in the case of Syrian air defense units, which have suffered heavy losses in their attempts to resist Israeli operations — or when Syrian army bases host Iranian troops.

There are three possible explanations for this operational policy. First, the drastic change in the balance of power between Iran and the Assad regime significantly reduces the latter's ability to influence Iran's activity in Syria. Second, an Israeli attack on Syria's political leadership and its symbols of sovereignty is likely to increase the friction with its main patron — Russia, the core goal of which is to strengthen the regime's capacity to rule. Third, this distinction might be designed to drive a wedge between the direct target, Iran, and the indirectly injured party, Syria.

3. *Synergic military and diplomatic efforts* — In coordination with the military efforts, Israel's decisive maneuver against Iran's presence is taking place also on the diplomatic level. The main objective of these efforts is to substantiate Israeli military

operations through diplomatic steps (and vice versa). This is apparent in the consistent diplomatic efforts being directed at the relevant extra-regional actors — Russia, the US, and the main European actors — to convince them to take concrete positions against Iran's continuing efforts in Syria. The effort to mobilize international support against Iran's military presence in Syria was a key motive behind Benjamin Netanyahu's visit to Europe in early June and a central topic of his meetings with the leaders of Germany, France, and the UK. Israel's policy is to present Iran's presence in Syria and its attempts to achieve military nuclear capability as two interlinked matters constituting Iran's destabilizing effect on the region — a focus on "Iran and Iran," as Netanyahu described it. Yet, among these two, the Syrian issue seems to have received priority, necessitating an immediate international response. Israel's diplomatic efforts vis-à-vis Russia corresponds directly with Israel's military activity.

Global factors contributing to Israel's direct confrontation approach

Israel's perception of a window of opportunity to act decisively against Iran seems to be based on two main developments in the Syria policies of the US and Russia. From the perspective of the Israeli leadership, these developments challenge Iran's ability to maintain its long-term military presence in Syria as well as enhance Israel's freedom of military maneuverability in Syria.

The first development is a readjustment in Russia's approach to Iran's and Israel's respective roles in Syria. Since May 2018, there has been a perceptible change in Russia's attitude toward Iran's long-term military presence in Syria and a greater tolerance for Israel's containment policy. The evolving escalation between Israel and Iran in Syria further exposes the gap between Iran's strategic interest to maintain Syria as a component in its deterrence strategy vis-à-vis Israel, and Russia's core interest of enhancing the effective sovereignty of the Assad regime. Even if Israel's actions against Iran are currently not being directed against the Assad regime, they are still causing damage to its military capacities and carry a potential risk to its political resilience. So far, these actions have cost the regime a substantial portion of its air defense capacities.

Taking a broader perspective, as the fighting dies down and the Assad regime regains its independent capacity to rule over most of Syria's territory, Russia's reliance on military support from Iran is expected to decline. Moreover, as Syria slowly shifts from chaos to partial order, Russia-Iran relations are gradually shifting from alliance to competition. Russia finds itself competing with Iran on the future political order in Syria as well as over the economic benefits of the massive reconstruction of the country. Although Iran remains a key military ally in Syria, the evolving reality is gradually transforming it into a liability for Russia.

The change in the Russia-Iran equilibrium is mainly being felt on the level of political discourse. Since May 2018, a distinct change in the Russian leadership's discourse regarding the legitimacy of Iran's and Hezbollah's long-term military presence in Syria can be observed, much to Iran's dismay. Russian leaders, who once described Iran's future presence as legitimate, are now asserting the need for the forces of Iran and Hezbollah to leave Syria following the end of the civil war. For Israel, this change in Russia's willingness to discuss not only the presence of Iranian forces near the 1974 Israel-Syria armistice line, but also Iran's long-term military presence in Syria is important. In accordance, in their recent meetings with Russian leadership in May, Israeli leaders reintroduced their demand that Iran must remove its forces from Syria.

Albeit general political statements, a basic difference in opinions still exists between Israel and Russia regarding the scope of Russia's current steps to limit Iran's military presence. Whereas Russia is focusing on reaching an understanding that will

keep Iranian forces away from the Israel-Syria armistice line, Israeli demands clearly assert that "Iran must leave Syria. All of Syria." In addition, intentions aside, Russia's practical ability to limit Iran's deployments remains in question. Russia has yet to display a commitment toward preventing pro-Iranian militias from participating in the Assad regime's recent July offensive in the southwest of Syria. In any case, preventing Iran from engaging in activities in other parts of Syria is not currently on Russia's agenda. On the practical level, Russia is still trying to maintain its balancing role between Israel and Iran while preserving effective working relations with its Iranian military ally on the ground.

Nevertheless, Russia's current readjustment seems to be influencing its operational attitude toward Israel's demands about — and military activity against — Iran in Syria. Since this past May, Russia has been making considerable diplomatic efforts to reengage in discussions regarding Israel's demand to keep Iran's and Hezbollah's forces away from the Israel-Syria armistice line. Some reports indicated Russia's willingness to commit to a buffer zone stretching 60—70 km from the armistice line. Russia's effort was designed to support the regime's successful offensive in the southwest of Syria by preventing Israel from acting against the maneuvering forces. The Russian support of this buffer-zone demand is hardly new — it served as the basis of the Russia-US brokered ceasefire deal in July 2017. Nevertheless, this move is meaningful for Israel for two reasons. First, it indicates a renewed Russian willingness to take active steps to enforce a future buffer zone in the Golan area. Second, if accepted, the new framework will substantially broaden the buffer zone defined by the July agreement and restrict Iran's ability to use the Golan region as a launching pad to attack Israel.

In the context of Israel's military campaign, Russia's critical response to Israel's February and April airstrikes against the T4 airbase raised initial concerns in Israel that Russia might consider suspending the coordination mechanism with Israel, or even take steps to limit Israel's freedom of operation in Syrian airspace. In this context, the relative silence with which Russia responded to Israel's large-scale operation against Iran's infrastructure in Syria on May 10 ("Operation House of Cards") could be seen as evidence of Russia's increasing tolerance of Israel's actions. Some reports even claimed that Russia gave Israel a green light to act against Iranian targets in Syria, just as long as the regime is not targeted. In some aspects, Russia could even be seen as a beneficiary of Israel's actions, since it shares Israel's ambition of curbing Iran's influence but lacks the capability to do so. Russia's recent decision in May to refrain from supplying Syria with upgraded S-300 air defense systems serves as an additional indication that Russia does not intend to limit Israel's freedom of operation in Syria. Israel therefore seems to at least be achieving its basic goal vis-à-vis Russia — ensuring that Russia will stay out of Israel's way.

The second development is Israel's perception of Iran's strategic weakness following the US decision to impose secondary sanctions on Iran — Israel's direct confrontation approach vis-à-vis Iran in Syria correlates with the confrontational Iran strategy recently adopted by the administration of Donald Trump. This relates to the administration's decision to withdraw from the nuclear deal with Iran (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action — JCPOA), and even more so to its decision to introduce a new set of comprehensive sanctions on Iran. Israel's assessment is that these sanctions will have a direct effect on Iran's strategic position as well as on its domestic resilience. In the Syrian context, Israeli leaders seem to believe that the sanctions' negative effects on Iran's economy will increase domestic criticism concerning the costly intervention in Syria, and therefore impede Iran's ability to preserve its military presence. In addition, the new emphasis by the Trump administration on Iran's actions beyond its borders raises Israeli hopes for an increase in US political and intelligence support for Israel's containment campaign. Recent reports indicate that Trump will

express support for Israel's demand to remove Iran's military presence from Syria during his July 16 meeting with Putin.

The risk of a regional spillover

In their actions against Iranian personnel and facilities, Israel has demonstrated its willingness to accept the risk of further escalation in order to roll back Iran's presence. Nevertheless, the events of the last two months have enhanced the Israeli perception that Iran's operational capabilities could be neutralized without the situation deteriorating into a regional war. Israel is therefore aiming to conduct a "deluxe war" against Iran in Syria — utilizing its firepower superiority to dismantle Iran's stronghold piece by piece without paying the human, political, and economic price of a full-out conflict. Specifically, the lack of Iranian reaction to the "House of Cards" operation is seen in Israel as affirmation of the "arena isolation" logic — the operational concept that Israel could engage in direct military conflict with Iran in Syria while preventing a spillover into other arenas.

Israel's current mindset relates to the perceived success of Israel's deterrence vis-à-vis Hezbollah in Lebanon. Keeping Hezbollah — and its vast stockpiles of more than 100,000 rockets targeted at Israel's home front — away from the fighting is considered a central goal by Israeli decision-makers.

Nevertheless, the continuation of the direct Iran-Israel conflict in Syria increases the chances for escalation, both within the Syrian arena and beyond. Hoping to use its perceived window of opportunity, Israel is likely to continue — and even increase — the rate and magnitude of its attacks against Iranian and Hezbollah targets in Syria, for example by targeting high-ranking Iranian officers. Iran, out of principle and especially in its current international position, is highly unlikely to cave in to Israeli demands and reduce its military activity under Israeli military pressure. With the JCPOA in serious jeopardy and an Israeli attack on Iranian nuclear installations becoming a valid possibility once more, the value of the Syrian outpost for Iran's deterrence policy vis-à-vis Israel is greater than ever. In addition, with Iran's international position being challenged by the US, a withdrawal from Syria under fire is hardly a loss Iran can afford. Its continued presence in Syria is therefore both a key strategic interest and a matter of national prestige. At the current stage, both Israel and Iran are displaying a lack of motivation to expand the scope of warfare beyond the Syrian context. Nevertheless, both parties' actions demonstrate their willingness to risk further escalation of the conflict to protect their core interests in Syria.

The key catalyst that could transform the Israel-Iran conflict in Syria into a regional one is the danger of a spillover into Lebanon. If Iran decides to involve Hezbollah and its massive stockpiles of rockets against Israel's home front, Israel will likely use unprecedented levels of military force, resulting in destructive outcomes for Lebanon. Considering Hezbollah's current capabilities to hit strategic targets in Israel; the growing Israeli tendency to categorize Hezbollah, the Lebanese Army, and the Lebanese political system as one entity; and Israeli leaders' threats to turn Lebanon "into a wasteland" in a future war, such a conflict is expected to be greater in magnitude than any of the preceding rounds of fighting between the parties. It could easily precipitate a further expansion of the warfare into a regional conflict. Echoing Israeli Defense, Minister Avigdor Liberman's warning that "if Iran attacks Tel Aviv — Israel will attack Tehran," an attack on Israel's home front by Iran or Hezbollah could instigate an Israeli response that will be felt not only in Lebanon and Syria but also in Iran.

On the immediate level, four potential developments could instigate a further escalation and a spillover of the Israel-Iran conflict beyond the Syrian scope:

1. *A continuation of Iran's current efforts to build its independent operational capabilities in Syria* — for example through the placement of new weapons systems, an assimilation of

its forces into the Syrian army as independent units, enhancement of Hezbollah's strategic capability to inflict damage on Israel, building new air and naval bases in Syria, and the deployment of Hezbollah and pro-Iranian militias near the 1974 armistice line. The incremental buildup of Iranian forces in Syria is likely to lead to an enhanced Israeli response and a dynamic of reciprocal escalation.

2. *A belated Iranian retaliation for "Operation House of Cards"* — aimed at seeking revenge for Iranian losses and deterring additional Israeli attacks. Such a retaliation could be launched from Syrian territory in the form of yet another rocket barrage against Israeli military installations in the Golan, a high-trajectory attack against strategic targets in Israel, or a tactical attack by pro-Iranian militias on Israeli forces in the line of skirmish. It could also duplicate previous IRGC tactics and be launched against Israeli targets abroad. An Iranian retaliation — and especially one that attempts to expand the fighting to other arenas or damage the Israeli home front — is likely to evoke a strong Israeli response, which is unlikely to stay limited to Syria alone.

3. *An Israeli ground engagement with Quds Force/pro-Iranian militias following Assad's campaign to regain control over the armistice-line area* – The inclusion of Hezbollah and pro-Iranian militias in the current campaign challenges Israel's core policy of opposing the presence of pro-Iranian forces near the armistice line. A Russian failure to prevent the future deployment of pro-Iranian troops in the area could lead Israel to attack these forces. These concerns gain relevance with Iran's public rejection of any limitations on its current activity in the south of Syria.

4. Aside from scenarios of unintended escalation, a spillover of the conflict could also result from *a premeditated decision by Iran's leadership*. Such a decision to escalate could be taken if Israeli military efforts put Iran's back to the wall in Syria. While Israel's policy is aimed at pushing Iran to a decision-making juncture where it has to choose between leaving Syria and escalating the fighting, Israel might find Iran choosing the second option and expanding the scope of conflict. Furthermore, an escalation by Iran could also occur as an outcome of broader international developments, which the regime in Iran might interpret as a threat to its stability: for example, the collapse of the JCPOA, an estimation that an imminent Israeli attack is about to be launched against Iran's nuclear facilities, or a direct regional conflict with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States. Any such development could create new incentives for Iranian decision-makers to challenge the status quo by utilizing its Syrian trump card, for what it is worth.

A Euro-Russian approach to de-escalation

Since early 2018, Iran has demonstrated an ambition to use its direct intervention in Syria as an opportunity to turn the country into a strategic platform for offensive action against Israel. In response, Israel has adopted an "all or nothing" approach to Iran's presence in Syria, culminating in a military effort to push back Iran. This approach sets a policy goal that can hardly be accomplished without sparking a regional war.

The main goal of the international community should be to stop the escalation by pressuring Iran to scale-down its military presence in Syria while convincing Israel to abstain from using military force in Syria. This goal necessitates two types of effort. First, it requires a firm international commitment against Iran's continuing efforts to enhance its operational capabilities in Syria. Second, it necessitates that the international community advance an understanding between Israel and Iran about the limitations of Iran's future military presence in Syria.

In this, it should follow a "dual-track" approach that combines a diplomatic dialogue with concrete measures to pressure Iran, as was done by the E3 countries in the early phases of the nuclear negotiations with Iran.

Considering the international actors' interests and capacities, the most effective framework with which to achieve a scale-

down is a combined effort led by the E3 countries in coordination with Russia.

A spillover of the conflict into Lebanon and beyond would have a destabilizing impact on Europe. With more than a million Syrian refugees in Lebanon alone, such a conflict would likely generate a new exodus of refugees toward Europe. The conflict would also create a new inflammatory context, leading to the intensification of terror activities and radicalization across the continent. In addition, it would most likely lead to the collapse of the JCPOA.

A crucial aspect in achieving a scale-down depends on providing Iran with a face-saving approach to make such a strategic compromise and to secure Israel's commitment to the compromise at the same time. This could be achieved by incorporating Iran in the process of defining accepted limitations on its presence in Syria and by implementing the scale-down in a gradual manner to avoid the appearance of a defeat. This effort should be designed to first deal with the urgent matters of reducing Iran's offensive capabilities and preventing the presence of pro-Iranian forces in the vicinity of the armistice line. Later, it could be expanded to deal with the strategic issues of Iran's long-term presence in Syria and Iran's advanced weapons supply to Hezbollah. The challenge is to find a formula that satisfies Israel's security needs while allowing Iran to preserve a certain level of political and economic influence in Syria as well as allowing its leaders to save face.

Beyond the immediate objective of preventing a regional escalation, a gradual scale-down of Iranian forces in Syria could create a positive dynamic in supporting the efforts to preserve the JCPOA. Iran's military activities beyond its borders serves as a distinct justification for both the Trump administration and the Israeli government to oppose the JCPOA. Addressing the topic could thus serve as a starting point for diplomatic reengagement by all parties involved with the framework of the JCPOA.

The E3 countries are already involved in a strategic dialogue with Iran on its regional policy through the framework of the "structured dialogue," which was initiated by Germany during the 2018 Munich Security Conference. In this context, Iran's military activity in Syria should become a core issue alongside the E3's key effort to preserve the JCPOA.

Germany has the potential to fulfill an important role in these efforts. In its special position as both a strategic partner of Israel and a party to an ongoing dialogue with Iran — with which it enjoys relative credibility and political access — Germany could lead the strategic dialogue with the two parties over a possible formula for de-escalation.

The inclusion of Russia in such a framework is vital, not just in terms of leverage, but also to provide an effective means for upholding the agreed-upon rules of engagement. Having boots on the ground and dominance in the Syrian airspace, Russia is the only international actor capable of monitoring — and potentially even enforcing — the terms of such an understanding. The gradual change in Russia's attitude toward Iran's long-term presence in Syria has led to a convergence of perceptions between Russia and the E3 regarding the combustible potential of Iran's current activities in Syria. This creates common ground for a combined behind-the-scene diplomatic effort (E3+Russia) to pressure Iran to accept limitations on its military activity in Syria.

Dr. Gil Murciano is an Associate in the research project "Israel and its regional and global conflicts: Domestic developments, security issues and foreign affairs". The project is located within SWP's Middle East and Africa Division and is funded by the German Foreign Office.

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