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Israel's Engagement in Syria: Causes and Significance

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The events on the northern border before dawn on February 10, 2018, beginning with the downing of an Iranian drone that penetrated Israeli airspace, illustrated the fragile dynamic between Iran and Israel in the Syrian arena. On the one hand is Iran's increasing entrenchment in Syria, a trend evident over the seven years of the Syrian civil war; on the other hand, Israel has expressed its operational determination to prevent such entrenchment, particularly any Iranian construction of military infrastructure, and demanded a full withdrawal from Syria of Iranian elements, Shiite militias, and Hezbollah.

The Iranians determined the timing of these hostilities, although it is doubtful whether they correctly assessed their scope. The dispatch of a drone into Israeli airspace at this point in time is surprising, given the ongoing intensive fighting on multiple fronts and involving multiple rivals in Syria; strong public criticism in Iran of the investment in Syria-Lebanon instead of in Iranian civilian welfare; the efforts of European countries to preserve the nuclear treaty, inter alia by responding to the demands of the Trump administration in the context of opposition to Iran's missile program and regional policy; and attempts by the Assad regime with Russian assistance to take control of large parts of the country and proceed to the stage of stabilization and reconstruction. These developments are part of the backdrop to the process of seeking a settlement in Syria, which is underway through a number of diplomatic channels and is the focus of attention of the international community, which in any case identifies the Islamic Republic as an element that threatens regional stability.

There are two possible explanations for the Iranian action. One is Iran's desire to conduct a covert move to examine its intelligence capability, similar to past actions without such an advanced drone. Sending a device with a low radar signature via Jordan could be evidence of the Iranian drive to hide the penetration into Israel. In fact, Israel's intelligence and operational capabilities frustrated the Iranian intelligence operation and made it possible to destroy the drone and attack the site from where it was launched, deep inside Syria. The profile of the aerial attack allowed Syria's air defense system to send several missiles, one of which hit and brought down Israeli F-16.

The second explanation is that Iran initiated a deliberate provocation in order to redefine the rules of the game against Israel. The shift in the Syrian civil war in favor of the Assad regime and the regime's ensuing sense of confidence led to an attempt to change the balance of forces that has enabled repeated attacks on Syria by the Israel Air Force in order to foil buildup efforts by Iran and Hezbollah.

The Israeli response was extensive, and included attacks on Syrian and Iranian targets, causing widespread damage to Syrian air defenses. The scope of the Israeli response reflects prior preparation for the possible need to carry out such an operation with little advance warning, and perhaps Israel was waiting for an opportunity to launch such a response. In any event, Israel felt compelled to respond and show once again the red lines that Iran had crossed, both physically by crossing the border and "qualitatively" by sending an advanced drone. The Israeli response indicates some change in the rules of the game, and sends a strong message about its willingness to maintain its red lines and threats. If the Iranians had planned an incursion that might not be identified, or if identified would be met with a localized response, they were shown clearly that they had underestimated Israeli's intelligence and operational capabilities and the intensity of the response. The conclusions from this incident could invite either greater caution and/or preparations for a more aggressive response in future.

Although it is tempting to assume that the incident has ended because both sides emerged with gains and can present it as a victory – for the first time in many years the Syrians managed to shoot down an Israeli plane, while Israel's response caused extensive damage to the Iranian presence and Syrian air defenses, and once again demonstrated Israel's ability to take action in Syria – it is important to remember that for Iran the incident is not over. Experience shows that Iran is careful to respond to Israeli actions against it, even if preparing the response takes time.

Beyond Israel-Iran: The Broader Context

In spite of the tendency to confine the event to the Israel-Iran equation, it is likely a mistake to isolate it from the wider context.

More specifically, this incident requires an examination of the role played by Russia in the Syrian arena. A central question is whether the Russians knew about the Iranian move or not. Prior knowledge, amounting to tacit acquiescence by Russia, could connote a crisis in its relations with Israel and a unilateral withdrawal by Russia from the existing set of understandings. This scenario implies a new equation, requiring a thorough, calculated examination of Israeli policy in view of its changing relations with Russia. However, if the Russians did not know about the action, which seems probable, it is

possible that the Iranian move will be perceived by Russia as a challenge, in view of Iran's recent concerns regarding Russia's possible intention to limit Iran's ability to maneuver in Syria, and perhaps even to consider a significant future reduction of the Iranian presence there.

In the Syrian arena there is a complex dispute regarding the nature of a future settlement. This dispute is also reflected in the fighting on the ground, which is currently characterized by escalation. For example, a Russian plane and a Turkish helicopter were also shot down in Syria last week. In the background is likewise the Russian initiative at the Sochi Congress (January 30), devoted to formulating a proposed new constitution. The document of 12 principles that was presented at the Congress was far from satisfying to all the parties, including the Iranians, where one of the principles defined calls for "the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Syria" (namely, the removal of the Iranians and their proxies). This move was coordinated with Washington, and included an agreement whereby the UN envoy to Syria, Staffan de Mistura, would head a committee to draw up the constitution in light of the understandings reached in Sochi. All this supports Russia's longstanding preferred solution, that Syria should become a loose federation, and reflects a problematic reality for Iran. Thus the latest Iranian move can also be seen as an attempt to change the rules vis-à-vis Russia as well as Israel, and to position Iran as a central actor whose interests must be considered when shaping any Syrian settlement.

Significance and Recommendations

It appears that neither Israel nor Iran is interested in wider escalation. The immediate incident was contained, in spite of widespread media attention. Israel, which does not accept Iranian entrenchment in Syria, has shown its determination to respond if its red lines – which are not precisely defined – are crossed. Even if it appears that without the loss of the Israeli plane the incident would have been more limited, it is also clear that Israel has marked a higher threshold of possible future reactions. In any event, Israel is dealing with a new reality, with a possible future dynamic of "walking on the edge" with the Iranians. It must therefore constantly examine its moves in order to avoid crossing the edge and becoming embroiled in wider fighting with Iran.

Israel's need to demonstrate its military determination to block Iranian entrenchment in Syria notwithstanding, military moves alone, whatever their immediate value, cannot be a long term solution. Israel must also operate through political channels, including deeper dialogue with the elements working on the Syrian settlement, above all Russia. Also critical is greater dialogue with the United States regarding its struggle against Iranian regional influence, its integration into the process of finding a settlement in Syria, and prevention of the emerging Iranian effort to remain in the arena for the long term. In this context, Israel has an interest in encouraging American-Russian cooperation on the Syrian settlement.

Israel must remember that the Syrian arena is an important Russian project for President Putin, who is deeply involved and is not prepared to allow it to fail. In these circumstances, Israel must examine the consequences of the incident from various angles: Russian sensitivity to attacks on its forces, shown in the Russian Foreign Ministry's announcement that it will not accept threats its forces, and the possibility that Syria's damaged air defense systems will be replaced by Russia with more advanced systems that will impede Israeli Air Force activity. This too underscores the importance of Israeli-Russian dialogue.

Finally, Israel must prepare for a possible delayed Iranian response to the blow it suffered in Syria.