



The Institute for National Security Studies
Strategic, Innovative, Policy-Oriented Research

INSS Insight No. 967, August 23, 2017

The Iranian Threat in Syria: As Bad as It Seems?

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When the Syrian civil war broke out, Iran sided with President Bashar al-Assad. As time has passed and the threat to the stability of the Assad regime has grown, Iran's involvement in the fighting has become more pronounced. Shia militias made up of foreigners (from Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere) and Hezbollah—all under Iranian command—have been dispatched to the battlefield alongside units of the Revolutionary Guards and regular Iranian army troops. Iranian proxies are the mainstay ground forces of the pro-Assad coalition that has been led by Russia since the fall of 2015.

Today, the number of Shia militiamen fighting in Syria is estimated at 20,000. Although the number of Iranian troops in Syria is thought to be fewer than 1,000, Iran's political and military influence is broad and deep. Iran's interests in Syria are focused on preserving and stabilizing Assad's regime—Tehran's strategic ally—and fortifying the access and supply route to Hezbollah in Lebanon. Iran wants to make Syrian territory the heart of a "Shia Crescent" under its sway, stretching from Tehran through Baghdad and Damascus, and reaching Beirut and the shores of the Mediterranean. At the same time, Iran wants to leverage its successes and influence in Syria to project strength against Israel and to increase the area of friction and the threat towards Israel.

Israel views Iran's consolidation in Syria with concern. Based on its military involvement alongside Russia, Iran has seized a key spot in promoting a solution in Syria and has been accepted in the international arena as a legitimate party among the forces affecting Syria's future. Israel estimates that arrangements for ceasefires and de-escalation zones, especially in southern Syria, will give Iran and its proxies a foothold near Israel's border in the Golan Heights.

Jerusalem is not satisfied with Russia's promises to keep Shiite forces under Iranian command far from the Golan Heights, and Israel has announced that it will not tolerate any military presence of Iran and its proxies on Syrian territory. Prime Minister Benjamin

Netanyahu left for Sochi on August 23 for an urgent meeting with President Putin to express Israel's opposition to the ramifications of the ceasefire agreement. As a preliminary step, a senior Israeli security delegation was dispatched to the United States to meet with the directors of the National Security Council to persuade them to support Israel's stance, which rejects any Iranian military presence in Syria. The Israeli message is that if its concerns about an Iranian presence on Israel's border are realized, it is liable to change its policy of sitting on the fence, which it adopted in 2011, and intervene directly in events in southern Syria.

Iran's desire for greater regional influence concerns Israel in several ways, and first and foremost is the Iranian threat to the northern arena. In the first circle of southern Syria, Iran might deploy its proxies, primarily Hezbollah but also other Shiite militias, under the guise of cooperation with the Syrian army loyal to Assad, at a distance that allows quick access to the Golan Heights border zone. This would generate another front in a potential conflict between Hezbollah and Israel—in addition to the Lebanese front—a development Israel would like to prevent. In the second circle, Israel has been working continuously to stop Hezbollah's strengthening in Syria and Lebanon, as Iran has equipped the organization with thousands of rockets and missiles as well as UAVs capable of causing death and destruction to Israel's strategic and civilian rear. Iran's presence in Syria allows it direct and convenient access to support Hezbollah, thus magnifying the direct threat to Israel. Furthermore, when the situation in Syria stabilizes, Israel's freedom of action against arms shipments to Hezbollah through Syria might be severely curtailed.

The third and widest circles is the further establishment of Iranian dominance in all of Syria, liable to be realized at several levels of involvement. First, Syria could be turned into an Iranian logistical center by forming an access and supply corridor by land and air through Iraq, including building up infrastructures for the manufacturing of weapons, providing logistical support, and arming Iranian proxies throughout the region. Second, a Syrian Hezbollah, similar to the Lebanese model and the Shiite militias in Iraq, could be established by incorporating local Alawite units with foreign (Iraqi and Afghani) Shiite volunteer militias. The mission of this force would include defending the regime and Iranian assets in Syria and posing a threat to Israel. One possibility discussed recently is the establishment of volunteer units to "liberate" the Golan Heights; these would carry out military guerilla activities along the borders, destabilize Jordan, and open a Syrian front in the scenario of a war between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon. Third, Syria could be turned into a type of Iranian protectorate. In a slow, gradual process, Iran is acquiring far-reaching influence over the Syrian area and will strengthen its connection to the Shia crescent using political, economic, military, and social-demographic levers and assets. This will expand the sphere of friction with Israel and enable Iran to operate a range of threats that incorporate the capabilities noted in the first and second scenarios.

In an attempt to assess the probability that these scenarios will be realized, a series of considerations and constraints affecting the scope and manner of Iran's involvement in Syria must be taken into account. First, relations with Russia and competition with it over control of the Syrian area are of paramount importance. Iran will try not to confront Russia, because the potential harm from such a conflict is much greater than any direct harm that Iran would suffer from having a reduced influence in Syria. Second, Iran is worried about a direct conflict with the United States. Third, it is necessary to take into account Iran's desire to avoid a confrontation with Israel at this time as it does not serve its other interests, such as defending its nuclear infrastructures. Fourth, regional nations such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and even Iraq—whose Iranian influence in it could be undermined—can be expected to oppose Iranian dominance in Syria, and Iran would run the risk of confronting them. Fifth, one must consider the strength of the opposition among the Sunni population and the rebel groups in Syria to Iran's presence and its growing influence on the state. Sixth and last, from Iran's internal perspective, the Syrian issue is sensitive. The resources available to invest in the reconstruction of Syria are limited. Moreover, there is domestic criticism in Iran over its involvement in Syria, and it can be expected to grow if additional loss of life occurs and international sanctions are imposed. It is therefore improbable that Iran has a coherent plan to seize control of Syria and turn it into a protectorate in the full sense of the word; in practice and for now, it seems that Iran's interest is not to highlight the presence of its forces and capabilities in Syria but rather to assimilate them into the Syrian army and the country's existing security infrastructures.

The various scenarios and constraints also present Israel with certain opportunities that may be exploited by formulating a combined response of soft and hard power, independent action, and coordination with global, regional, and domestic Syrian actors:

- a. Militarily, the practical ability to damage Iranian assets in Syria is growing. In a broader context, this ability allows Israel to continue to project deterrence and damage capacity in the Syrian and Lebanese spheres, as a means of applying pressure to Iran and the Assad regime to prevent, or at least delay, activities in southern Syria and encourage Russia to acquiesce to Israel's demands to limit Iran's presence and influence in the region. Israel should consider breaching the expectations that the players in the region have, such as by a disproportional Israeli response to sporadic shooting at Israel, or attacking Iranian assets deep in Syrian territory.
- b. Focusing on southern Syria in an effort to create influence in this area as a buffer zone between Israel and pro-Assad forces and Iranian proxies. This can be done by strengthening ties with local actors and assisting in their organizing, as well as increasing

the humanitarian and civilian aid (infrastructures, medical, agricultural, and more) in the area as preventive measures against Iranian penetration.

c. *Vis-à-vis* Russia, it is necessary to make four main demands: Israeli participation (at least behind the scenes) in discussions about Syria's future; Russian supervision and control to prevent the presence of Iran and its proxies in southern Syria in a 40-kilometer-wide band along the border; preventing Iran from using strategic Russian assets (such as seaports and airfields); preventing the transfer of Russian arms to Hezbollah and the Shiite militias.

d. As for the United States, although the Trump administration has made toppling the Islamic State (IS) its number one priority, it is interested in reaching a deal in Syria with Russian cooperation while taking Israel's interests into account. It is therefore necessary to formulate a joint strategy with the United States on Syria and Iran while stressing the fact that the Salafist jihadi ideas will not disappear even after IS is vanquished, and that volunteers will continue to adhere to Salafi-jihadi causes given the Iranian dominance in the Iraqi-Syrian-Lebanese sphere. It is critical to persuade Washington of the need to create a rift in the Shiite crescent, by continuing to support Abadi's regime in Iraq in order to diminish Iran's influence and pose difficulties for Iranian access to Syria. At the same time, it is necessary to enlist the United States to participate in a supervisory mechanism of the ceasefire agreements in Syria and help enforce them, reconstruct the civilian sphere in southern Syria, and create local forces opposed to Iranian influence. All these steps can be promoted in cooperation with Jordan.

e. At the international level, it is necessary to point to Iran's image as a subversive and destabilizing party by demonstrating the damage it has caused to Syria's stability and its desire to increase friction with Israel and Syria's other neighbors. Action directed against Iranian subversion is a platform for establishing cooperation between Israel and the other regional actors who share the same interests, chiefly opposition to Iranian influence in the Levant.

f. *Vis-à-vis* internal Syrian parties, Israel's investment in strengthening support and reinforcing ties with Sunni, Druze, and Kurdish agents of power to challenge Iran's presence in every way—political, economic, and military—is important. At the same time, in cooperation with the United States, it is necessary to strengthen ties with the Kurds in northern Syria and enlist them to fight Iranian influence in northeast Syria, as well as to prevent the creation of a Shiite corridor from Iraq.

Finally, Israel must present a clear position on the question of Syria's future. This position must include support for a Russian initiative for a federative structure based on the internal

ratio of forces in Syria. This would curb Iran's efforts at dominance in Syria and prevent the establishment of a central government in Damascus whose strings are pulled in Tehran. The Israeli position must also include a demand that foreign forces leave Syria, with emphasis on Hezbollah and the Shiite militias, as these represent a destabilizing factor and the potential for long-lasting struggles within the country. Either way, at this time, the Iranian threat in Syria does not represent an intolerable security challenge to Israel, especially given the means at Israel's disposal with which it can reduce Iran's influence on the Syrian arena and the consequent threats.