

# **The Northern Arena: Israel's Principal Security Challenge**

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The instability that has defined the Arab world in recent years continues. Arab regimes lack the motivation and/or the ability to deal with the fundamental problems that feed the actual or potential unrest, and above all the socio-economic situation. Joining the internal shocks are rifts and tensions between regional players, particularly between the Shiite camp led by Iran, and the Sunni camp led by Saudi Arabia, which is also at war with itself. However, state frameworks have survived and previous assessments regarding the disintegration of the state order and the collapse of the Sykes-Picot borders have proven premature. This assessment also applies to Syria, where in earlier phases of the civil war that has raged there for nearly seven years, it seemed that the borders were blurred and the national state structure had ceased to exist.

The fighting in Syria continues, albeit at a lower level of intensity, and the rival camps are worn down. The coalition around the Bashar al-Assad regime, which includes Russia and Iran and its proxies such as Hezbollah, has managed to stem the retreat and defeat of the regime's forces, which amounts to a strategic victory. However, the Assad regime cannot survive without this external support. In addition, a parallel campaign is taking place in the political field, with a process of talks led by Russia, to shape the future of Syria.

At the same time, there is a change in the balance of power between the superpowers in the Middle East. While the United States has reduced its role as the world's policeman and focused on more urgent problems, particularly

the crisis with North Korea, Russia has returned to the Middle East, established itself in Syria, apparently for the long term, and even received de facto responsibility for the “Syrian file” from the United States. It is Russia that leads the talks between the relevant parties in the Syrian war with the aim of formulating an arrangement to end the fighting. Concomitantly, Russia is trying to extend its influence in other Middle East contexts, including the political process between Israel and the Palestinians. As such, Moscow strives to improve its relations with all local elements: Shiites – the axis led by Iran; and Sunnis – Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt, and Jordan. China too is paying growing attention to the Middle East and trying to expand its regional influence through investment in economic projects, including in Syria.

Changes have likewise occurred in the regional balance of power in the wake of the war in Syria. The Islamic State of 2014-2017 appears in the last stages of defeat, particularly after the liberation of its Syrian “capital” Raqqa in October 2017 and most of the parts of eastern Syria in its control. The loss of territory by the Islamic State does not mean the end of the threat, however, since the Middle East is home to many scattered cells committed to the Salafi jihadist cause, and they are expected to continue to pose a challenge to the region (and beyond), including Israel. The attack in al-Rawda mosque in northern Sinai in late November 2017, which killed over 300 civilians, is clear evidence of this phenomenon. For its part, Iran, which is guided by long term strategic considerations, is the great winner emerging from the Middle East upheavals. In fact, the United States allowed Iran to strengthen its influence in Iraq; Russia enabled it to gain a foothold in Syria; the West has not interfered with its growing stature in Lebanon through Hezbollah; and the Houthi rebellion in Yemen has given it a stake in the Red Sea outlet to the Indian Ocean. Thus, Iran appears to have made significant gains in the Middle East, in accordance with its long term strategic goals – a land bridge to the Mediterranean; status as a regional power, and in this framework, undermined relationships between regional Sunni states; and the establishment of outposts for itself in Syria and in Lebanon on the border with Israel – partly by means of Hezbollah, whose status and military capabilities have benefited from the combat alongside Assad’s forces in Syria.

Against the background of these trends and developments, Israel’s strategic situation is highly complex. On the one hand, the military threat from regular

armies has declined considerably, and Israel's coordination with leading Arab countries is tighter. On the other hand, the instability in the region, especially in the extended "friction zone" between Israel and Iran and its proxies, reinforces the likelihood of escalation, particularly with regard to Hezbollah and the Syrian front – now that Iran has secured mutual ties between the Assad regime and the Shiite camp that it leads. Implicit in all these are threats to Israel. However, the regional instability also offers opportunities that Israel can exploit to improve its political and security situation on the basis of overlapping interests with the leading Sunni countries; a response that combines both soft and hard power elements; independent activity and cooperation with regional states; and coordination with the great powers, mainly the United States, but Russia as well.

### **Syria: Situation Assessment**

2017 was characterized by a decline in the fighting in Syria and by the defeat of Islamic State forces in Syria and Iraq. Since taking over Aleppo in late 2016, Russia and the pro-Assad coalition have displayed an image of victory. The ceasefires reached under Russia's sponsorship between the main warring elements (apart from the Islamic State) have endured, notwithstanding the continued fighting in a few pockets of resistance, mainly by Salafi jihadist groups. In the last months of 2017 Iran and Russia worked to restore the Assad regime's control of eastern Syria – an area of energy resources. Although its control of central Syria is not absolute, the regime's stretched forces are fighting on a number of fronts. Their ability to continue fighting depends on the backing from the Russian force active in Syria and from Iran and the Shiite militias it operates (some 20,000 fighters, as of November 2017) and Hezbollah. Assad's weakness is evident in regions that are allegedly under his control but are still marked by an absence of law and order. Here the local militias continue to operate independently of the regime. Syria does not function as a state, and can only provide partial services to its citizens (this is also the case in "Alawistan," whose population is loyal to the regime). In spite of the establishment of international economic committees engaged in planning in-depth and long term economic and infrastructure rehabilitation for Syria, implementation is not visible on the horizon. Approximately 11 million Syrians live in the area controlled by the Assad regime, six million

in opposition areas, and another six million have fled Syria and are not expected to return as long as the fighting continues.

In fact, Syria today is divided into a number of areas of control: the Assad regime, with the close assistance of its supporters, controls the Syrian backbone (the Aleppo–Hama–Homs–Damascus axis, the coastal sector, the area around Lebanon, and the energy resources in the east); the Kurds control northeast Syria; and there are Sunni enclaves in the north (mainly around Idlib) that Turkey has undertaken to stabilize, in the center (around Damascus), and in the south (the Daraa region and the Golan Heights). Those enclaves are where Russia, Iran, and Turkey have applied the de-escalation zones agreement reached in July 2017 under Russian leadership, taking into account the balance of power between the various factions and camps involved in the civil war, and in coordination with the United States and Jordan. This agreement is designed to remain in force until March 2018.

Russia's ability to spearhead the process that led to the ceasefire and in fact to dictate its conditions reflected its growing political and military influence in Syria against the background of the civil war, and its rising stature in the Middle East – to a large extent at the expense of the United States. In fact, the US played only a minor role in preparing the ceasefire and establishing the de-escalation zones. Its contribution was largely confined to the attempt to maintain the interests of its two allies – Israel and Jordan – in this context, by agreeing with Russia regarding the de-escalation zone in southern Syria and establishing an American-controlled security zone in the southeast. More moderate opposition forces were trained and equipped in this area, among them the Free Syrian Army, although toward the end of 2017 Washington announced the end of its support for these organizations. Israel was kept informed behind the scenes of the arrangements, and its concerns regarding the deployment of Iranian forces and its proxies and Hezbollah were noted, but taken into account only partially in defining a space ranging from 7 to 20 km from the line in the Golan Heights, where the forces of Iran and its proxies will not be deployed.

The main challenge on the agenda is to rebuild the Syrian state. In spite of the fall of Raqqa, the Islamic State's capital and last central stronghold in Syria, the Salafi jihadist idea itself will not disappear soon, and the organization's fighters who are spread throughout the territory are expected

to continue their attempts to undermine all efforts to restore the calm that will enable reconstruction.

## **Russian Involvement**

Russia became militarily involved in Syria first and foremost to ensure the survival of the Alawite regime (though not necessarily Assad personally). In the longer range, Russia seeks to maintain an ongoing military-operational presence in Syria, although not necessarily at the same level as its involvement in the war. In Moscow's eyes, Iran's involvement in the war is legitimate, just as the involvement of Russia itself is legitimate. The justification is the request by the Syrian regime, led by President Assad, who asked his strategic partners, Iran and Russia, to help him defeat his opponents and the terrorist elements in Syrian territory and keep him in power (unlike the United States, which was not asked by the regime to intervene). Iran's willingness to play a role in the ground fighting and help rehabilitate Assad's status makes it an asset to Russia. As such, in Moscow's view, Iran too should have a role in shaping the Syria of "the day after" the civil war. Moreover, Iran has been chosen by Russia, together with Turkey, as the element to secure the arrangement in Syria in the framework of the talks it has led in Astana and Sochi in the attempt to form a mechanism that will end the war. In the short term, Iran and Hezbollah are considered allies of Russia, as they help it further its interests in Syria. However, Russian and Iranian interests will not necessarily overlap in the long term, and disputes between them on the nature of the regime in Syria are expected to grow over time.

The political moves to achieve stability in Syria, led by Russia on the basis of Security Council Resolution 2254, comprise a number of stages: (a) a transitional period of ceasefire and stabilization; (b) formulation of a constitution (the warring Syrian parties must reach agreement on a number of weighty topics affecting the nature of the country – will Syria be secular or Islamic, will its identity be Arab, will there be a consolidated state or a federation, and more); (c) election of a president and the Parliament. Moscow does not wish to impose a settlement, and prefers to encourage the parties to achieve one themselves, involving players with influence and interests in Syria, mainly Iran and Turkey (who could also eventually develop differences of opinion over the future of Syria), and also involving others such as the

United States and Sunni Arab countries, particularly Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt. In late 2017, the main obstacle preventing the hawks in Syria from agreeing to a transitional period, i.e., moving from civil war to drafting a constitution and holding elections, is the opposition's demand for Assad to leave the presidential palace immediately. Moscow itself believes that the decision over legitimate government rests with the Syrians, but to open the way to elections, the first step is to overcome the chaos, that is, to end the fighting, to stabilize the country politically, and only then to discuss Assad's future.

### **Iranian Involvement**

Iran, which is guided by a long term strategic vision, labors to maximize opportunities to extend its regional influence. These opportunities include the vacuum created by the withdrawal of the United States from the Middle East and disrupting elements of instability in the civil wars in Iraq, Yemen, and Syria, which allowed Tehran to intervene and shape a comfortable environment. The suppression by the United States-led coalition of the Islamic State's territorial control enabled Iran to strengthen its involvement and influence in Iraq and Syria. In addition, the removal of sanctions following the nuclear agreement improved Iran's economic situation and allowed it to transfer attention and resources to intervention in conflict arenas and gain decisive influence in three Arab capitals – Baghdad, Damascus, and Beirut. At the same time, Tehran is strengthening its control of border areas, between Iran and Iraq, between Iraq and Syria, and between Syria and Lebanon, to create the land corridor that Iran wishes to establish to the Mediterranean. It operates power elements – popular Shiite militias in Iraq and Syria, the Syrian army, Hezbollah, and the Lebanese army. Establishing itself in Syria is highly important to Iran, as a basis for military deployment for its own forces and those of its proxies. Iran also thereby gains space to set up air and sea bases (giving it a presence in the eastern Mediterranean and enabling aid to Hezbollah and other proxies), installations to assemble and produce missiles, and the ability to tighten its control of Lebanon and expand the area of friction with Israel.

Coordination with Russia is important to Iran to stabilize the situation in Syria, reduce the American-Israeli influence in the arena, and maintain its

dominance in Syria for the long term. Referring to developments in Syria and to the cooperation between Iran and Russia, Mahmad Reza-Shibani, who served as Iran's ambassador to Syria until the end of 2016, said that Iran supported every Russian move that would help reduce the tension in Syria, although it was not directly involved in all the diplomatic moves led by Russia. He also stated that cooperation between Iran and Russia was a strategic imperative shared by both countries, to enable military and political achievements in the struggle against terror in Syria. Shibani stressed the need to preserve the Iran-Russia alliance despite efforts to undermine it by foreign elements, including Prime Minister of Israel Benjamin Netanyahu, who according to Shibani seeks to drive a wedge between Russia and Iran.<sup>1</sup> For its part, an official representative of the Moscow government stated (off the record) that the strategic alliance between Iran and Russia was based on the need to maintain the Assad regime and isolate the jihadi terror elements.

Iran poses a growing threat to Israel. Its objectives rest on religious extremism, and the regime demonstrates open and harsh hostility to Israel. Beyond the possible achievement of nuclear military capability in the next decade, Iran is already arming Hezbollah, whose forces are deployed in Lebanon and Syria with an arsenal of tens of thousands of missiles and rockets, including some with more precise warheads, and attack unmanned aerial vehicles. In addition to Hezbollah, Iran operates the Quds Force, the Syrian army loyal to Assad, and Shiite militias (including Iraqi and Afghan militias). Iran's proxies in the northern arena, being part of the pro-Assad coalition, enjoy a protective air umbrella provided by advanced Russian surface-to-air missile batteries (S-400) deployed over the territory. In addition, Iran supports and encourages Palestinian terror elements – Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad.

Threats against Israel by Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, including threats of pinpointed attacks on the ammonia container in Haifa and the nuclear research center in Dimona, are not always coordinated with the Iranian leadership, but it is likely that the use of force by Hezbollah will be coordinated with Tehran, if not actually proceeding under its instructions. It is also likely that the Iranian regime is building and maintaining the capability for attacks deep into Israel, as deterrence against an attack on Iran's nuclear

infrastructure and capability to launch a massive military response if Israel uses force against Iran itself.

The Iranian push for growing influence in the northern arena is worrisome for Israel, since Iran can challenge Israel on three separate and complementary layers. In southern Syria, Iran could deploy Hezbollah alongside Shiite militias, all protected by the cooperation between these elements and the Syrian army loyal to Assad and at a range allowing fast access to the Golan Heights border. This would create an additional front for any hostilities between Hezbollah and Iranian proxies on one side, and Israel on the other. Two, the land bridge (“freedom road” in the Shiite lexicon) that Iran has created through Iraq and Syria to Lebanon provides direct, convenient access for assisting Hezbollah and the Assad regime and increases the direct threat on Israel from Syria and Lebanon. A third layer could include long term Iranian consolidation in Syria in a number of ways: (a) turning Syria into an Iranian logistics center, with infrastructures for weapons production and assembly, logistical support, and armaments for Iran’s proxies in the region; (b) establishing “Hezbollah Syria,” based on the Hezbollah model in Lebanon and the popular Shiite militias in Iraq. This would involve recruiting Syrian elements and integrating them with the volunteer foreign Shiite militias (Iraqis, Afghans, and others). This force would be designed to protect the regime and Iranian assets in Syria over the long term, while creating a threat against Israel; (c) turning Syria into a kind of Iranian protectorate, in a slow and gradual process whereby Iran tightens the link between the Syrian space and the “Shiite crescent,” making use of political, economic, military, and socio-demographic levers, such as relocating entire populations, as happened on the Syria-Lebanon border.

## **United States Policy**

As the United States approaches the completion of its main mission to defeat the Islamic State, the administration should prepare for the following challenges: the future of the territories liberated from the Islamic State, including who will receive control and how to prevent the return of jihadist elements; Iran’s dominant status and role in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, and the future of the land and air bridge from Tehran to Damascus and Beirut; the future of Syria and the nature of the political order to be established there,



including the removal of Assad from the presidency; and the United States' obligations to its allies, with the emphasis on Jordan and Israel, but also the rebel forces it has supported, especially the Syrian Kurds. The administration is working on formulating the strategy to promote these objectives, and it is not clear what non-military leverage is at its disposal. Therefore, at this stage the US supports Russia's moves to stop the violence in Syria by means of a ceasefire and de-escalation zones, while introducing a political move that starts with a transitional period and is followed by free elections.<sup>2</sup>

The United States is concerned that the defeat of the Islamic State will not destroy the organization's ideology, and that young people will be motivated to continue the jihad and join its ranks. Transfers of money to terror cells will continue alongside preaching and incitement on social networks and in mosques. Jihadist groups will establish themselves in desert and rural areas of Syria and Iraq, and these trends will give Iran a pretext to remain in the region as a force for stability. This is apparently how it will be viewed by the regimes in Damascus and Baghdad, as well as other elements in the international community. Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi has been credited with a central role in stabilizing Iraq and limiting Iranian influence there. His closeness to the United States, compared to his predecessor Maliki, raises the possibility of his receiving American aid in this context.

As for strategic coordination with Israel, the main problem is the lack of American willingness to be drawn into the Syrian quagmire, and in particular to take military action against Iran there. In effect, all branches of the administration are still focused on fighting the Islamic State and are not available to deal with a more serious problem, namely, Iran's growing regional influence. Syria itself is not an American interest, but it is important as part of the campaign against Iran and for US relations with its allies Israel, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. However, lack of attention or motivation has prevented the US from exploiting the opportunity to set up a buffer from north to south, from Turkey to Saudi Arabia through Iraq and Jordan, to cut off the Iranian bridge from east to west. It may still be possible to do this. Israel will apparently have room for full operation in Syria and Lebanon, with no reservations from the Trump administration, but this does not mean it will have the full backing of a "safety net" if it becomes embroiled in fighting.

## **The Day after the Islamic State**

The defeat of the Islamic State is an additional milestone in the process of stabilizing and shaping Syria under the rule of Assad by his Russian-Iranian coalition and reinforcing the sovereignty of the regime, as there is no other significant source of power that can control the vacated territories. The elimination of the Islamic State will create a territorial vacuum, which will probably be filled by regime forces under Iranian sponsorship and with Russian help, deepening their control in the country. The future of the areas liberated by Syrian Kurdish forces (YPG and SDF) will be a test of US loyalty to its allies, and of Turkish influence on its border with Syria and the introduction of the new order in Syria. This is due to America's unwillingness to leave the forces in Syria required to challenge the Iranian presence and help local elements establish themselves in the liberated territories.

In addition, the collapse of the Islamic State could reposition al-Qaeda as the leader of global jihad, in Syria and elsewhere in the Middle East. Among the Syrian rebel forces, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (formerly Jabhat al-Nusra), an al-Qaeda creation, is the stronghold of almost the last force fighting the Assad regime. However, even if the Islamic State is isolated, it is expected to continue existing in other ways. The Islamic State may adopt the al-Qaeda model and move the core from Syria and Iraq to scattered branches throughout the Middle East (including North Africa and East Asia); in addition to its activity in the Middle East, it will export terror to the global arena. There is the possibility of a "return to roots," which includes linking Islamic State remnants to the parent al-Qaeda organization, led by al-Zawahiri, as a compromise to enable the continued struggle to realize the Salafi jihadist idea in spite of the organization's defeats and economic and image weaknesses. Another possibility is for the Islamic State to continue to exist independently, but with no concrete or hierarchical organizational base. It would exist mainly as an idea that would set up a global network as a source of inspiration for terror attacks all over the world, using online propaganda to increase motivation for terrorist attacks.

## **Syria's Future: A Hybrid Structure**

Discussions in various forums on a future settlement in Syria have talked about shaping a united country with a central government. Different elements

involved in the attempts to achieve a settlement, including Russia and the United States, as well as Iran, Turkey, and the Sunni Arab states, have invested efforts in restoring political order. The interests of all parties on Syria converge at this point, although on many other issues they diverge. Syria as a united country is also what most of the local population wants, so presumably any settlement that ends the war will retain the state envelope with a central government.

Nevertheless, the internal system in Syria stands to be complex and fragile, as a result of various factors that are expected to make it hard for the central government to claim broad-based legitimacy and demonstrate effective control of the whole territory. Evidence of the weak status of Assad personally and his regime as a whole is expected to intensify when the war ends, due to the destruction of the economy and the infrastructures and problems related to recovery, and also because of the intention of various internal and external power elements to maintain the strength and influence they accumulated during the war. The regime itself has been left hollow and vulnerable to Russian and Iranian influence, and therefore with hardly any political independence. Moreover, the bitter collective memories acquired by the Syrian population during the years of fighting, and particularly Assad's ongoing brutal conduct (the continued use of barrel bombs over population centers, for example), will interfere with the reestablishment of his rule. In part Assad will find it hard to persuade the masses that Syria's main problem is Israel, and not the fundamental ills of Syria and its society. Therefore, even if President Assad is declared the winner and Syria is officially under a central Alawite government, it will not be the same country as before the war. It is certainly possible that de facto, alongside the formal state framework, there will be a number of political sub-entities forming a kind of federation.

According to the map of late 2017 described above, the main stronghold of the Alawite central government will be along the coastal strip and the backbone of Syria – the central axis of Aleppo-Homs-Damascus south to Daraa – home to most of the population. The Syria-Lebanon border will remain under the influence and presence of Hezbollah. In the northeast of Syria there is expected to be an autonomous Kurdish entity; a number of enclaves particularly in the Idlib region up to the Syria-Turkey border will be Sunni areas (apparently under Turkish influence); in southern Syria and

other regions there will be jihadi enclaves, characterized by lawlessness, chaos, and continued fighting at various levels of intensity. There will likely be competition, expressed sometimes by hostility and sometimes by cooperation among the actors within the enclaves and with the formal government. In a situation of weak central government alongside separate entities, disputes will not be easily resolved and enmity between the elements in the arena will not readily ebb. The danger of a sudden conflagration will not disappear, as the various entities will seek to increase their autonomy or even expand their territory.

However, and over time, there may be a transition from this complex and “hybrid” situation, via a federated order, to a stronger central government (not necessarily under Assad), on condition that the population is allowed to participate in the political system. In order to stabilize Syria, there must be formal international recognition of the state, as well of the sub-entities that will be shaped by the balance of power on the ground and on ethnic and religious lines. Inter alia, there must be conditions for Kurdish autonomy, perhaps with ties to the Kurdish autonomy in Iraq, and there must be an attempt to establish a separate functioning Sunni entity not controlled by Salafi jihadist elements.

Although development according to this scenario – which requires a paradigm shift and use of new concepts regarding Syrian unity – is not preferred by some of the parties involved, it appears that its chances of success for stabilizing Syria are better than other options. After long years of war and the resulting economic erosion, it is not impossible that various elements active in the Syrian space will conclude that a federated structure is the best interim solution in terms of the potential to create the conditions for political, social, and economic recovery. As has happened often before, the temporary may eventually become permanent.

### **The Operational Aspect: Potential for Military Conflict**

The entrenchment of Iran and its proxies in Syria, and the expectation that Tehran will try to spread its influence to the Golan Heights, against the red lines defined by the government of Israel regarding Iran’s presence in southern Syria, raises the possibility of escalation even to a state of war between Israel and these forces. Therefore, the IDF must improve its readiness for

escalation and even war in the northern arena against Syria and Lebanon. Hostilities – whether low or high intensity confrontation – between Israel and Hezbollah with Iranian assistance (mainly by Shiite militias and the supply of advanced weapons) is the leading security challenge. During its involvement in the war in Syria, Hezbollah strengthened its status as a military organization with orderly fighting frameworks. It has acquired experience fighting in urban areas, plus experience in the operation of advanced weapons, including unmanned aerial vehicles and high trajectory and guided missiles. It has also tightened its hold on the border area between Syria and Lebanon after removing (using a process of ethnic cleansing) all hostile or competing elements, and its military and political status as the defender of Lebanon has grown stronger. All these reinforce the organization's sense of confidence and will enable it, when the fighting in Syria ends, to turn its attention to the next challenge: the struggle against Israel. A miscalculation of the other side's intentions – both by Israel and Hezbollah – could therefore develop into extensive escalation.

War with Hezbollah would cause heavy damage deep in Israel; thousands of rockets and missiles will be fired toward the north and the center of Israel, alongside attempts by bands of terrorists and guerrillas to penetrate into Israeli territory in order to attack places close to the border and essential infrastructures. In the current conditions, Syria and Lebanon should be considered one front, since escalation on one will most probably lead to escalation on the other, and some of the missiles will probably be fired from Syrian territory, while Shiite militias and Syrian army forces, under the authority of Assad, will likely attack Israel in the Golan Heights. At the same time Iran will encourage Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad to fire high trajectory missiles from the Gaza Strip toward Israel and launch terror attacks by penetrating the security fence and employing tunnels from Gaza, as well as encouraging terror groups in the West Bank.

Israel's response has three layers: (a) the layer of active and passive defense to limit damage to the home front; (b) the layer of massive, precise attack, to destroy thousands of targets in a day, using the air force and standoff attack capabilities; (c) ground maneuvers of IDF land forces deep into Lebanese territory (and the Syrian Golan Heights), in order to root out Hezbollah infrastructure and break up its operational capabilities. Since most

of Hezbollah's rockets and missiles are hidden in houses in urban and rural areas of Lebanon, the Israeli response is expected to cause heavy casualties and damage to populated areas and infrastructures in that country.

According to Maj. Gen. Tamir Heiman, Commander of the Northern Corps,<sup>3</sup> "Once the first house with missiles and rockets inside is attacked, the Lebanese population will realize that they must leave quickly... Our concept of decisive victory does not derive from chasing every rocket launcher." He stated that the deeper the IDF can penetrate into Lebanese territory, the more this will limit Hezbollah's ability to launch missiles. He added that with respect to the end state lines, the IDF must establish unequivocal facts on the ground, not subject to refutation or manipulation.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Israel is required to plan its policy and its moves in light of trends in the northern arena, taking into consideration three main constraints. First, it must not allow Iranian consolidation over time in Syria, turning Syria into an Iranian protectorate and expanding the area of friction with Israel. Second, relations with Russia are a strategic asset for Israel, and therefore Israel should maneuver between damaging threatening targets in Syria that are linked to vital Russian interests and the wish to continue effective strategic coordination with Moscow. Third, Israel should assume that the United States will not actively preserve Israeli interests in this arena, because Washington is not interested in sinking into the Syrian mud (also as a result of the failed attempts to impose a new order in Afghanistan and Iraq, as per the American vision). Moreover, the Trump administration sees the Syrian arena as a possible way to promote cooperation with Moscow, which it would like to expand to other arenas (above all North Korea).

Alongside the increasing threats and challenges, the emerging situation in the Syrian arena offers Israel opportunities to shape the strategic environment to its benefit. Such solutions combine soft and hard power elements, mixing independent activity with cooperation.

At the military level, Iran's presence in Syria increases the ability to actually damage Iranian assets. In the broader context, this ability enables Israel to continue sending out a message of deterrence in the Syrian and Lebanese space, as a means of exerting pressure on Iran and the Assad

regime to restrain their activities in southern Syria, and to encourage Russia to respond to Israel's requests to limit the Iranian presence and influence in the region. In response to Iranian challenging measures, Israel's operational steps must include surprise moves that overturn what is familiar to its enemies and send a message of its determination to prevent Iranian dominance and the long term establishment of Iranian forces and weapons production and storage facilities in Syria.

In early 2018, the Assad regime, with the help of Iran and its proxies, is liable to make a military effort to take control of southern Syria and the Golan Heights. Therefore, Israel must prepare for escalation in southern Syria and maintain its red lines, above all the prevention of Iranian and proxies deployment in and near the Golan Heights. According to unofficial reports, Israel asked Russia to remove forces controlled by Iran to a distance of 30-40 km from the border, but in the framework of the American-Russian-Jordanian agreement on principles that was signed in early November 2017, it was actually agreed to move them about 20 km from the border in the south and central Golan Heights, and only 7-8 km in the north of the Heights (due to the proximity to the Damascus area). A recommended option is to draw red lines in action rather than in words, using military forces on the basis of threat assessments. As such, Israel does not obligate itself to any course of action and creates a high degree of uncertainty for Iran. At the same time, it would be wise to focus on building influence in this area, as a barrier area between Israel on one side and pro-Assad forces and Iranian proxies on the other. This can be done by strengthening ties with local communities and power elements, and providing them with aid and weapons, particularly since the United States has stopped sending aid to the Free Syrian Army. This is beyond the civilian and humanitarian aid (including medical, food, and agricultural assistance) in the framework of Operation Good Neighbor that helps local residents. However, Good Neighbor relations and cooperation with local power elements will apparently compete with attempts on behalf of the Assad regime to lure them through and join his camp with far reaching benefits. Therefore, Israel will be obliged to invest more in this space while "fencing off" the stages of escalation, in order not to deteriorate into a situation in which the IDF will have to take over territories on the Syrian side of the Golan Heights.

In the framework of the dialogue with Russia, Israel must present a number of important demands: Israeli inclusion (at least behind the scenes) in discussions about the future of Syria; supervision and review by Russia to prevent the presence of Iran and its proxies in southern Syria, but also to prevent Iranian establishment north of Damascus by means of permanent deployment of their forces and their proxy forces; denial of the establishment of facilities for deployment, storage, production, and assembly of weapons; denial of Iranian use of strategic Russian assets in Syrian territory (seaports and airports); and prevention of Russian weapons reaching Hezbollah and the Shiite militias.

The government of Israel should make an effort to prepare a joint strategy with the US administration on the presence and influence of Iranian and Russian forces in Syria, emphasizing that Salafi jihadist ideas will not disappear after the defeat of the Islamic State, and that volunteers will continue enlisting in jihadist ranks partly because of Iranian dominance in the Iraqi-Syrian-Lebanese space. It is therefore vital to persuade the US administration of the need to create a barrier within the Shiite crescent, while continuing to support the Abadi government in Iraq, as a way of reducing Iranian influence and challenging its land bridge to Syria. At the same time, the United States should be brought into the mechanism of supervision and enforcement of the ceasefire agreements in Syria, as well as civilian rehabilitation in southern Syria and reinforcement of the local forces that are opposed to Iranian influence. These moves should also involve cooperation with Jordan.

Internal Syrian players will probably only agree to cooperate with Israel for a suitable and meaningful reward that exceeds what is offered to them by the pro-Assad coalition. Thus, in order to establish cooperation with them, Israel has to invest considerable logistical resources in a project to support Sunni, Druze, and Kurdish forces in Syria.

It is likewise advisable to identify and increase points of friction between Russia and Iran at the level of competition for dominance in Syria and the nature of any future regime.

Finally, it is better for Israel to present a clear position on the question of Syria's future. This position must include support for a process led by Russia, with the purpose of finding a solution based on a federative structure



that reflects the internal balance of power following the departure of foreign forces. The Israeli government's policy of "sitting on the fence" has run its course, particularly once the confrontation on shaping the future order in Syria began. Over the past year Israel has indeed been active in both direct and indirect channels in order to influence the process, mainly in southern Syria, but unless it shows serious intentions and stresses the potential damage it can cause, its influence will remain limited and its security situation will be challenged. The recommended strategic objective for Israel is therefore the establishment of a federated district in south Syria, which is not dependent on the Assad regime and will be less influenced by Iranian dominance in the country. In this way, it will be possible to limit Iran's dominance in Syria by limiting the powers of a central government guided by Tehran. The Israeli position should also include a demand for foreign forces to leave Syria, with an emphasis on Hezbollah and the Shiite militias, as they are a source of internal tension and rising extremism, as well as ongoing struggles that could escalate into war. Israel has to express its opposition to Assad remaining president, above all out of humanitarian and ethical considerations.

## Notes

- 1 In an interview to the *Khabar Online* news site on September 11, 2017, <http://www.khabaronline.ir/detail/704569/World/middle-east>.
- 2 From the speech by Ambassador David Satterfield at the Washington Institute on September 25, 2017.
- 3 Yoav Limor, "If Militias from Iran Interfere in Lebanon – They Will not Return Home," *Israel Hayom*, September 19, 2017, <http://www.israelhayom.co.il/article/505251>.