

The Iranian Military Intervention in Syria: A Look to the Future

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One of the major security issues occupying the Israeli security establishment is the possibility that Iran will exploit its current involvement in the fighting in Syria to maintain a long term presence in Syria in general and along the border with Israel in particular. This presence is liable to generate new threats against Israel, especially given the possibility of a military confrontation with Iran and/or its proxies.

In his October 23, 2017 speech at the opening of the Knesset's winter session, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated that the biggest challenge Israel faces "is the need to repel Iran's attempt to entrench itself militarily in Syria." This formulation suggests that from the Israeli government's perspective, confronting Iran's military intervention in Syria is, at present, no less a goal than stopping Iran's attempts to attain nuclear weapons, at least as long as the Iranian nuclear program is limited by the JCPOA.

Future Intervention in Syria: Iranian Considerations

Iran has never disclosed how long it intends to leave forces under its command in Syria. To date, it has explained its intervention by insisting on the need to confront threats to Syria stemming from the situation there, the importance of assisting the Assad regime in overcoming its enemies, and the Syrian regime's request for Iranian help. But presumably Tehran intends to leave a significant military presence in Syria for a long time, even once the Assad regime is stabilized, or at least as long as the Syrian regime

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needs and/or wants it. From Iran's perspective, a long term presence of its forces in Syria serves several objectives:

- a. Iran is very eager to help the Assad regime stabilize its minority rule and ensure its survival for the long term. Given that Assad does not yet control the whole country and that he has a long and bloody score to settle with some segments of his population, his survival is not guaranteed, even if his chances have improved. For Iran, it is important to keep forces in Syria to have a part in determining the arrangement over the future of the country and the regime, bind Syria to Tehran, and wield decisive influence on its decisions and conduct in case Assad's regime falls.
- b. Because Iran has no assurance that the Assad regime will survive over time, it seeks to construct independent means to wield influence over Syria. To this end, an important tool has emerged in the form of the two newly established Syrian militias Iran has assembled via the Quds Force and Hezbollah: the National Defense Forces militias, numbering tens of thousands of soldiers, mostly Alawites, and a Shiite militia called the Rida Force, whose members have been recruited from Shiite villages in Syria. The goal of the Quds Force is to turn the Syrian militias into a permanent military/political force it can deploy, much like Hezbollah in Lebanon.¹
- c. A long term military presence in Syria is important to Iran in order to embed a source of influence in the heart of the Arab world and ensure a Shiite crescent from Iran to Lebanon. The severe crises in Syria and Iraq and the emergence of the Islamic State demonstrated to Iran the major instability and volatility of its strategic environment. An indefinite military presence in Syria allows Iran to expand its influence in Iraq and Lebanon, both of which have a dominant Shiite population; prevent the establishment of an independent Kurdish state liable to foment unrest within Iran's own Kurdish minority; counterbalance its enemies in the Middle East, especially Saudi Arabia; and perhaps also enter the Palestinian arena. A presence in Syria will also help Iran prevent the reemergence of terrorists groups such as the Islamic State and offshoots of al-Qaeda threatening Iran's security and interests. No less important, expanded influence in the Middle East could help Iran reduce the influence of the United States in this expanse.
- d. An extended military presence in Syria will help Iran aggravate the threat against Israel posed by Hezbollah and other organizations, in

part by extending the front against Israel from southern Lebanon to the Golan Heights. Such a front would be useful in establishing a land corridor for weapons and troops transport from Iran and Iraq to Syria and Lebanon and in building factories for the manufacture and assembly of high quality arms – especially rockets and precision weapons – in Syria and Lebanon.

- e. Military activity in Syria, however long it may last, will help Iran improve the military capabilities of Iranian forces and their proxies. In particular, it will help Iran construct an Iranian Shiite intervention force that can enable it to promote and entrench its regional influence and, when the time comes, intervene in any country where Iran has important interests, first and foremost Iraq, Lebanon, and possibly Yemen. The continued presence of forces in Syria can, if Damascus agrees, provide Iran with naval and perhaps also aerial services and strongholds on the Mediterranean coast. This might serve as a base for future military cooperation with Russia and perhaps also military cooperation with Turkey. To strengthen its bases, Iran is already seeking to build bases for the Shiite forces associated with it in Syria.²

At the same time, Iran will have to consider that a long term presence in Syria entails dangers and that it may not be able to achieve its goals, fully or in part. Iran and its proxies are liable to be dragged into a military confrontation with US or Israeli forces, or with forces involved in the Syrian arena. A significant portion of the Syrian population is hostile to Assad's regime and Iran after the destruction and massacres they inflicted on Syria and will not be happy about an extended Iranian influence and presence in the country. For the Iranian regime, leaving military forces in Syria will not be easy and could turn into a heavy economic and military burden. Moreover, today, the Assad regime needs the Iranian presence to improve its position and ensure its future, but if Assad's rule stabilizes, will it be willing to be dependent on Iran over time?

The Nature of Iran's Future Involvement

Indeed, the nature of Iran's future involvement in Syria, should it last a long time, is not clear. Much will hinge on whether the crisis and fighting in Syria dwindle to a state of relative calm or continue in one form or another. The sooner the crisis ends, the more Iran will be able to divert fewer forces to active fighting and instead develop long term influence in Syria, including the construction of a united Lebanese-Syrian front against

Israel. However, will the Assad regime be interested in a long term Iranian military presence in Syria, or at a certain point will it prefer that it leave or significantly reduce its scope, so as not to overly constrain Damsacus?

Assuming an Iranian presence in Syria of indefinite length, the more probable scenario is that Iran will prefer to avoid sending large military forces of its own to Syria, and instead try to maintain the model of intervention that formed in Syria in 2014. That is, it will want to continue leading military forces stationed in Syria with commanders and elite units, especially the Revolutionary Guards and Quds Force, while the bulk of the fighting forces are drawn from the Shiite militias, especially the Lebanese Hezbollah and the Iraqi Shiite militias loyal to Iran, and at the last resort, the Afghan and Pakistani militias.

This model is more convenient for Iran in many ways than deployment of a large Iranian force. It allows Iran to deny its involvement in military operations in Syria. It reduces the risk of direct confrontation with Israel and perhaps also the United States, and leaves Iran more flexible in handling crises connected to Syria. It reduces the number of casualties Iran is liable to suffer in case of continued fighting in Syria. Maintaining a low profile of military intervention in Syria is also convenient for the Iranian regime, in face of the wave of protests in Iran in late December 2017, which included the demand to stop the Iranian fighting in Syria. This model helps create the image of a multinational Shiite force, strengthening the impact of the Shiite camp relative to the Sunni not only in Syria but elsewhere too, especially Iraq. In addition, it enables improvement of the Shiite militias' military capabilities, especially those of Hezbollah and the Iraqi militias.³

Nonetheless, the possibility that an Iranian force – alongside Hezbollah and perhaps other Shiite militias – will stay in Syria for the long haul is not assured. Since 2013, there have been sporadic reports that for several reasons Hezbollah intends to return its fighters to Lebanon, particularly since as part of an overall agreement, all foreign fighters may have to leave Syria. Indeed, the Turkish Foreign Minister stated explicitly in January 2017 that as part of a settlement, Hezbollah would have to withdraw forces it currently has stationed in Syria. Moreover, in Lebanon too there are those who oppose a long term Hezbollah presence in Syria, as Lebanese President Michel Aoun stated in late November 2017, adding that Hezbollah will bring its troops back to Lebanon after the fighting against the terrorists in Syria ends.⁴ Even certain circles within Hezbollah are likewise leery of operating its forces in Syria as dispensable mercenaries for Iran. Hezbollah is worried

about Israeli attacks on its forces in Syria, and as this concern grows, its desire to leave Syria will as well. Hezbollah spokesmen have denied any intention to withdraw troops to Lebanon, saying they will not be brought home before they have fulfilled their missions in Syria. Furthermore, at the end of November 2017, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah announced that the organization is prepared to withdraw its forces from Iraq following the defeat of the Islamic State, but he did not refer to any withdrawal from Syria.⁵ For his part, will Assad be interested in Hezbollah staying in Syria if his regime stabilizes and the fighting ceases? Above all, it will be Iran's decision whether or not to leave Hezbollah in Syria, much more than it will be the organization's own say in the matter.⁶

The placement of Iranian forces, Hezbollah fighters, and other Shiite militias in Syria came up in the three-way US-Russia-Jordan talks held in November 2017, which led to a ceasefire agreement in southern Syria. According to a US source, the agreement states that all foreign/non-Syrian forces, including Revolutionary Guards members, Hezbollah, and other militias, will be withdrawn from the buffer zones in southern Syria; by the end of the process, they will have to leave Syria altogether. This agreement was also reflected in the joint announcement issued by the United States and Russia after the agreement was signed, which speaks of the reduction of foreign forces in Syria and ultimately their full withdrawal from the region.⁷

However, the agreement is problematic. It does not include a timetable for the reductions/withdrawals, so that the process could take years. Moreover, several days after it was signed, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov announced that Russia did not commit itself to ensure that Iranian and Iranian-affiliated forces leave Syria and that their presence in Syria is legitimate, as they were invited there by Syria's recognized government.⁸ The announcement could strengthen the impression that Iran, with Russian backing, intends to leave affiliated forces in Syria indefinitely. Third, the distance between the area where these forces will be allowed to operate and the Israeli border in the Golan Heights remains problematic for Israel: Israel demanded a distance of 50-60 km, whereas the Russians initially agreed to 5 km from the border. Afterwards, a compromise was reached, whereby the distance in most areas will be up to 20 km, though in some parts only 5 km.⁹

The Iranian Involvement in Syria: Strengths and Weaknesses

If despite the difficulties and uncertainties Iran leaves a significant Iranian/Shiite force in Syria over the long term, this will worsen the threat posed to Israel: Iran will then have another large force near Israel's borders that comprises a new front against it, in addition to south Lebanon, to be manned by Hezbollah and/or Iraqi militias. This would provide Hezbollah with more opportunities to take action against Israeli targets and Israel's civilian front, and would let the organization disperse its assets and thereby reduce the risk to them. The corridor Iran is creating from Iraq to Syria and the arms factories it is building in Syria will make it possible to supply Hezbollah with large quantities of high quality weapons on a short timetable.¹⁰

This does not mean that Iran will rush to activate Hezbollah or any other forces it may station in Syria against Israel. For more than a decade, Hezbollah has, for many reasons, been deterred from significantly challenging Israel, despite its large rocket arsenal. In most cases it has not responded, even when Israel, on several occasions, attacked the organizations' arms convoys and facilities in Syria and Lebanon. Israel is suspected of having been responsible in January 2015 for an attack on a Hezbollah convoy in the Golan Heights that killed an Iranian general and member of the Revolutionary Guards, as well five other Guards and six Hezbollah members, including Jihad Mughniyeh, son of Imad Mughniyeh, who was the head of Hezbollah's military wing; they were examining the possibilities of creating a terrorist infrastructure to operate from the Golan Heights. Despite the severity of the attack, Iran did not respond. Hezbollah responded to the attack in a limited way by opening fire from Lebanon, and two IDF soldiers were killed.

Furthermore, Iran has never had a direct military confrontation with Israel, most probably due to awareness of its limitations: despite Iran's military might, centered on its large and improving missile system, it suffers from weaknesses in its military and strategic balance with Israel. Iran's conventional military capabilities rely on outdated equipment, especially its aerial power; its air force is based on 30- and 40-year-old US, Russian, and Chinese planes. Iran must also consider that a military conflict with Israel is liable to create an opportunity and pretext for Israel, perhaps with US backing, to attack its nuclear facilities.

While Iran builds capabilities that will allow it to operate militarily in Iraq, Syria, and perhaps also Lebanon, involvement in those countries entails facing enemies and difficulties hundreds of kilometers from home and, in Syria and Lebanon, in sites far from Iran's borders. Moreover,

while the proximity of Iranian forces and its Shiite militia allies creates an increased threat to Israel, it also provides Israel with advantages and opportunities. Israel can exploit the Iranian/Shiite deployment to attack weapons convoys advancing through the corridor from Iraq to Syria and Lebanon, disrupt passage, and harm Iran's ability to strengthen Hezbollah, including by damaging the weapons factories Iran is building for the organization. Israel has already demonstrated to Iran and Hezbollah that it has excellent intelligence that enables it to strike with great precision at targets in Syria and Lebanon. Operating the Shiite militias as the foundation for constructing an Iranian presence and influence also allows Israel to attack the militias that pose a threat while reducing the risks of a harsh response, given that Iran has to date avoided reacting to Israeli attacks on Hezbollah. Israel has also usually avoided attacking Iranian elements, except for some isolated incidents, but has learned it has relative freedom of action to attack Hezbollah without incurring a response.

In addition, there is US deterrence. Since the early 1990s, the United States has been perceived by Iran as a strategic threat of the highest order. The Iranians view the Trump administration as particularly dangerous, given the President's assessment of Iran's conduct and promise to stop it. While the Trump administration, at least for now, threatens more than it acts, Iran cannot ignore the possibility that at some point the United States will take steps against it – particularly in a scenario in which Iran tries to harm Israel – whether by imposing draconian sanctions or by taking military action. Clearly Iran would want to avoid a military conflict with the United States at all costs.

Nonetheless, despite Iran's perception of the US threat, it is hard to imagine the United States taking substantive action against Iran for its operations in Syria. The Trump administration may have explicitly defined Iran's intervention in other nations as an important part of the Iranian threat to the United States and its allies, but in practice it has so far not made the effort to stop Iranian involvement in Syria, other than perhaps the imposition of further sanctions, which would probably be without

European participation. The administration may also have begun to understand that it has no effective way to reduce Iran's presence and influence either in Syria or Iraq. The United States may take limited, local

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military steps against Iran, and even more so against the Shiite militias, such as limited fire or the downing of UAVs. But in all likelihood, only a particularly blatant Iranian move is likely to move the administration to act in a significant scope against Iranian forces.

Regarding the Russian factor, Russia is not an Iranian ally and has different interests, but it does cooperate with Iran in providing massive help to Assad's regime and its stabilization. Russia too apparently intends to keep limited forces in Syria, perhaps for an extended period, to ensure the stability of the Syrian regime and safeguard the naval and aerial services in Syria that benefit it. During his visit to Syria in December 2017 President Putin said that he ordered most of the Russian forces in Syria to withdraw after they, together with the Syrian army, defeat terrorism,¹¹ and the Russian chief of staff has said that he would greatly reduce the Russian forces in Syria beginning by late 2017.¹²

Yet it seems this step stems from tactical reasons alone: Russia does not maintain significant ground forces in Syria and, as the fighting there has diminished, it can afford to withdraw some of the forces, as it announced already in January 2017. Furthermore, the chief of staff announced that the Russian forces would continue to maintain two military bases in Syria and the units needed to safeguard the situation in Syria. Russia is thereby preserving the option of beefing up its forces in Syria as needed, and will continue to receive services at Hmeimim air base and Tartus naval base. Moreover, the Russian Defense Minister announced that Russia and Syria have started to build a permanent military presence in both bases. Another senior Russian official announced that Russia and Syria concluded an agreement for 49 years, whereby the services given to Russian ships in Tartus will be expanded, and the Russian air force will be allowed to use Hmeimim air base without limitations.¹³

Thus as long as the fighting in Syria persists, Russia will likely support the continued presence of Iranian forces, Hezbollah, and the other Shiite militias in the country, or will at least not oppose it, as the Russian Foreign Minister announced. But one must not discount the possibility that Russia will favor the withdrawal of at least some of these forces should a stable calm and/or a comprehensive settlement be achieved. Russia also has no interest in an Israeli-Iranian conflict and may serve as a moderating force and mediator to prevent such an occurrence.

Implications for Israel and the United States

The indefinite military presence of Iran and its proxies in Syria creates a significant future threat to Israel. This presence helps create territorial contiguity as a base for Iranian actions and influence from Iran to Syria and Lebanon, enabling Iran to move forces and weapons along this route. It forms a foundation for attacks on Israel in the future whenever Iran sees fit, especially via Hezbollah and Shiite militias, and along an even longer front, from Lebanon to the Golan Heights. The idea of a broad front is not new to Iran and Hezbollah, and for many years they have worked to set this infrastructure in place via the Quds Force. But in a situation in which Iranian-affiliated forces are stationed in Syria for the long term, and when Hezbollah can readily receive higher quality arms than ever before – through the territorial corridor and from weapons factories in Syria and Lebanon – Iran can heighten the severity of its threat against Israel.

At the same time, given the weaknesses inherent in Iran's involvement in Syria, it is more likely that at least for now, Iran does not want to provoke Israel and confront it on the battlefield. At this time, its main regional interest lies in stabilizing the Syrian and Iraqi regimes and expanding its influence over them. A conflict with Israel might harm Iran more than Israel, would divert its attention from its major regional objective, and might put it on a dangerous collision course with the United States. Therefore, at present, the main purpose of Iranian involvement in Syrian and Lebanon in the Israeli context is presumably to improve Iran's deterrence vis-à-vis Israel, especially by strengthening the Shiite militias in Syria, in particular Hezbollah, rather than reach a military confrontation with Israel. This assumption is supported by the fact that since 2015, Hezbollah has avoided provoking Israel.

There is no guarantee that Iran will succeed in leaving a significant presence in Syria indefinitely comprising the Revolutionary Guards forces and Shiite militias, especially on the Golan Heights. If the situation in Syria stabilizes, it may be that a settlement will demand that foreign forces evacuate Syria, and in a state approaching the end of fighting and relative calm, the Assad regime may want them to leave. But even then,

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the existence of a land corridor from Iraq to Syria and Lebanon will make it possible for Iran to transport forces and weapons to Hezbollah. On the other hand, if Iran succeeds in leaving forces in Syria, it is obvious that of all the Shiite militias – which will in all probability be the core among the foreign forces in Syria – Hezbollah will constitute the major threat against Israel: it is the best militia and the one most closely associated with Iran; it has much experience in fighting Israel; it knows the area better than the other militias; and, above all, it possesses a large rocket arsenal, allowing it to represent a real challenge to Israel.

The very fact of proximity between Israeli and Iranian military forces offers Israel new possibilities for attacking Iranian targets, should it become necessary, such as disrupting the use of the corridor. At the same time, this proximity of Iranian forces, or Hezbollah and the militias, increases the risk of a confrontation with Israel, either a proactive or unplanned clash resulting from deterioration on the ground. It is therefore necessary to consider that even if Iran and Hezbollah have usually avoided responding to IDF attacks, there is no guarantee they will be similarly restrained in the future. Iran and Hezbollah did not make a military move against Israel after the aerial attack on an Iranian military base near Damascus in early December 2017. The attack was attributed to Israel as a message to Iran not to cross the red line of placing Iranian/Shiite forces near the Israeli border. Yet the more the IDF engages in such attacks, the more Iran and Hezbollah will want to respond to deter Israel from continuing the practice. Therefore, at a certain point Hezbollah, with Iranian backing, might respond with countermoves.

Over the years, and especially after the Second Lebanon War, Israel managed to create fairly credible deterrence vis-à-vis Hezbollah. Now Israel will have to strengthen this deterrence, as several factors could tilt the balance in Hezbollah's favor: Hezbollah fighters in Syria; Iranian forces and other Shiite militias in Syria with important fighting experience, which might boost Hezbollah's self-confidence and prompt it to respond to Israeli attacks; and Iran's improving ability to transport rapidly high quality arms manufactured in the weapons factories it has built in Syria and in Iran via the land corridor from Iraq. Several steps beyond those taken to date may strengthen Israel's deterrence: an unambiguous clarification of Israel's red lines on activities by Hezbollah and the other forces associated with Iran; disruption of movement through the corridor; continued attacks on arms convoys and weapons factories without assuming responsibility

for them; and US military action against Shiite militia targets should the Trump administration conclude this is needed to strengthen its credibility.

The possibility that Iranian and Shiite forces will stay in Syria indefinitely, and move into or near the Golan Heights, requires discussion and cooperation with the US administration. The fact that Trump adopted harsh words and a threatening attitude toward Iran, both on the nuclear question and on Iran's regional conduct, but has not yet formulated ways to curb Iran's influence in other countries is a problem. The lack of a response by the administration to Russia's support for Iran's intervention in Syria – perhaps stemming from the administration's desire for a closer US-Russia partnership – does not help deter Iran. Under such conditions, the Trump administration is to a large extent abandoning the Syrian arena to Russia and Iran, and the passivity shown by the United States is not offset by any regional element willing or able to stop Iran's penetration into Syria.

For precisely this reason, a credible clarification from the administration that it will take harsher steps against Iran and Hezbollah if they continue to challenge the United States and its allies is needed. The Trump administration could take several steps to stop a long term Iranian penetration of Syria. In negotiations over Syria's future, the administration can hold talks with Russia and Turkey on withdrawing foreign forces from Syria according to a well defined timetable as part of a comprehensive settlement, as determined by the November 2017 agreement. Turkey has already expressed its support for such a step, and Russia too might favor it, perhaps in exchange for some US gesture. The administration can impose further sanctions on Iran for its military intervention in Syria, and can consider taking limited military action to impede Iran's use of the land corridor to transport troops and arms.

Notes

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