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When Parallel Red Lines Meet:
Recent Events in Syria in Various Contexts
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On April 7, 2018 the Syrian regime launched a chemical attack on rebel strongholds in Duma on the outskirts of Damascus, reportedly resulting in dozens of dead and wounded, including children. On the following day, US President Trump tweeted harsh condemnations of those responsible, including “Animal Assad” and his supporters, Iran and Russia, and declared that there will be a “big price” to pay. According to media reports, on the night of April 9, 2018, Israel struck Iranian targets and air capabilities, including unmanned aircraft, at the T4 military airbase deep inside Syria. At least 14 people were killed during the attack, including seven Iranians, four of whom were publicly identified by Iran as members of the Revolutionary Guard Corps, and among them a senior officer in the UAV unit. Iran accused Israel of the attack on its forces and promised retaliation. Russia also announced that it was Israel that had struck without informing Moscow; Israel itself refrained from direct comment. Russia also warned about the “dangerous development,” summoned the Israeli ambassador in Moscow to the Foreign Ministry, and further criticized Israel for its use of force against civilians in Gaza. On April 10, Russia used its veto power at the UN Security Council debate on Syria. Since then, the US administration has announced that an attack on its part can be expected soon, perhaps with the participation of Western and regional allies. President Trump’s postponement of his trip to Latin America has been linked to the planned response, and reports of deployments of US military and naval assets to the eastern part of the Mediterranean are indications of what is to come.

In operational terms, the region is now anticipating two developments, which ostensibly run separately along parallel axes: Iran’s response to the attack on its forces at the T4 airbase, attributed to Israel, and the American response to the regime’s chemical attack in Duma. Iran’s expected response will be an attack, not necessarily immediate, either with a clear Iranian signature or by proxy, Iran’s preferred *modus operandi*. The action will likely not be launched from Iranian territory, but rather from Syria or from other operational theaters, such as Yemen (which is adjacent to the navigation lanes in the Red Sea) or from Lebanon, although an attack from Lebanon would pose a risk of wide-scale escalation. There is also the possibility of attacks against Israeli and Jewish targets worldwide, as occurred in the past. The reasonable operational options for a retaliatory

attack by the United States are a limited attack combining air and missiles strikes, as performed against al-Shuayrat airbase a year ago, or – and perhaps more likely – a wider-scale attack. The targets may include facilities connected to chemical weapons, air force bases and CW delivery systems, air defense targets that provide Assad's regime with some sense of security, or even attacks of higher magnitude, such as those directed against regime's military and security support pillars and actual regime targets.

At the strategic level, although the events derive from different trends, their convergence in time and space portend a dramatic development with substantial potential impact in the context of Israel's security environment.

The attack on the T4 airbase falls within the context of the last red line that Israel drew, whereby it cannot accept Iran's military entrenchment in Syria. This is another stage in the accelerated clash between Iran's determination to entrench itself in the northern theater and Israel's declared determination to prevent it. The previous pivotal event in this context was the "battle day" on February 10, when an Iranian UAV and an Israeli F16 were downed, Iranian targets at the T4 airbase were attacked, Iranian soldiers were killed, and Syrian air defense systems were destroyed. The Iranian entrenchment, which accelerated following the achievements of the Assad regime and its allies in the civil war, recently earned recognition and support at the Russia-Iran-Turkey summit in Ankara and gained further tailwind from Trump's announcement that he intends to pull American troops out of Syria. During the last attack, Israel directly struck Iranian capabilities that threaten it in Syria, and made Iran pay quite a price for deploying them in the theater. Indirectly, the attack demonstrates for Iran Israel's staunch resolve to enforce its red line and to deter Iran from continuing to entrench itself in Syria – this through Israel's demonstrated willingness to incur costs of Iran's response, including the risk of escalation. At the same time, the attack carried a message to Russia about the ramifications of its continued policy that enables Iranian ongoing entrenchment in Syria.

The chemical attack in Duma reflects the Syrian regime's considerable self-confidence at this time. Convinced that his continued incumbency is guaranteed and that the United States has lost interest in Syria, (except as it relates to the Islamic State), Assad has once again allowed himself to launch chemical attacks and to provoke the American administration. As for Trump, who was spurred into action by photos of murdered children a year ago, this attack provides him with another opportunity to demonstrate his insistence on the red lines that he drew, distinguish himself from Obama, and take a determined stance opposite Putin.

The very timing of the events has triggered convergence between critical trends: the Israel-Iran confrontation axis in the Syrian context; the unfinished chapter of the Assad

regime's recurring use of chemical weapons; and the United States' enforcement of nonproliferation of weapons of mass destruction regimes. Thus, Israel's enforcement of its red line and the United States' enforcement of its red line have met, while Russia finds itself exerting efforts to deter both countries from taking further action that could undermine its achievements in Syria and its positioning as the dominant world power in the theater. This has created operational and perhaps even strategic convergence in Israel's and the United States' efforts in the Syrian theater, first, through a sharpening dialogue with Russia, where Israel would do better not to stand alone; second, by the resumed US engagement in Syria beyond the focused containment of the Islamic State; and third, through the possibility of combining the issues of chemical weapons and the future of the Assad regime with the issue of Iran's entrenchment in Syria.

However, the strategic convergence does not stop at Syria's borders, and is unfolding against the backdrop of the crisis emerging around the Trump administration's demands to improve the JCPOA, or run the risk of the re-imposition of sanctions and the US exiting the agreement on May 12. Indeed, the context is even wider, with preparations for Trump's meeting with North Korean President Kim on the nuclear issue in the far background. Therefore, the clash between Israel and Iran in Syria on the eve of deliberations on the nuclear deal could potentially lead to a change from separate approaches to distinct issues (nuclear capabilities in Iran, nuclear capabilities in North Korea, Iran's entrenchment in Syria in particular and its regional influence in general, terror, missile and weapons proliferation, unconventional weapons, and nuclear weapons by Iran and North Korea) to a broader and more comprehensive framework with interfaces and linkages between the issues. Thus, the discussion of the nuclear deal expands to additional issues of dangerous and malign Iranian policy, while military pressure on Iran and even on the Assad regime may serve as leverage for promoting achievements in the nuclear field, and might even motivate Russia to play a more constructive role and give greater weight to Israel's needs.

For Israel, there is growing potential for escalation in the northern theater and for tension with Russia, against the backdrop of the expected American attack and Russia's opposition to the move, and considering Iran's retaliation either in or outside the northern theater and Israel's subsequent responses to the retaliation, which might include many other Iranian targets in Syria. The exchanges of acrimonious tweets and warnings between the world powers reflect the tensions between them in this regard. Consequently, Israel needs to prepare itself, first at the military level in terms of intelligence and with defensive and offensive preparations, and the IDF has surely already taken action. Israel must prepare itself to strike extensively Iranian targets in Syria, air defense systems, and the Assad regime's fire and air capabilities, and prepare for the possibility of wide-scale escalation. At the military-political level - and as one can learn from the recent cabinet

meetings - in-depth joint discussions are needed about Israel's policy objectives in the current context, including the military's role in achieving these objectives, about possible scenarios, about strategic and operational alternatives, and about coordinating and preventing friction with the United States and Russian militaries operating in the theater. In relation to all these issues, Israel must strike the right balance between stopping Iran's steps and mitigating the risk of escalation, and between insisting on its security interests and observing the critical need to avoid friction with Russia.

In light of the considerable risk of military escalation, Israel's main center of gravity is in the political realm, where it should engage in an intensive, accelerated strategic dialogue with the United States about the overall picture, about the major issues on the agenda (the nuclear deal, Iran in Syria, Hezbollah, and proliferation of WMD by Iran and North Korea), and about their mutual interests. Israel should coordinate its political activity with the United States, with an emphasis on its conduct vis-à-vis Russia, and should maintain an open communication channel with Russia in order to minimize the potential friction and, to the extent possible, propose that Russia take a constructive role in restricting Iran's entrenchment in Syria. Israel and the United States should formulate ways to promote their shared and separate interests, while minimizing the risks of escalation. Finally, as in previous instances, the prudent use of military force, escalation control, and effective communication with enemies and with partners alike will be critical to manage the challenges successfully.