

# Rebuilding the Syrian Military: Significance for Israel

Anat Ben Haim | No. 1519 | September 15, 2021

**A decade of fighting in Syria showed that the primary potential threat to the Assad regime is internal, not a conflict with Israel. The Syrian military is therefore being rebuilt as a motorized infantry army, capable of moving combatants quickly to various areas around the country. At the same time, there is an operational need to improve defense against airstrikes, mainly by Israel. However, the deep ongoing economic crisis; the continued fighting inside Syria, which commands attention and resources; the competition between Russia and Iran over rebuilding the Syrian military; and the poor recruitment potential in Syria all have a negative impact on military buildup efforts. The Syrian army's helplessness, as shown in recent clashes in the Daraa district, highlights the regime's dependence on both Russia and Iran and its proxies. This dependence is likely to have a direct effect on Israel's security situation.**

## **Russian-Iranian Competition over Reconstruction**

Warfare in Syria ebbed in late 2017, and a stable balance of power emerged. In tandem, efforts to build a military force began under Russian auspices. The process accelerated in March 2020 when a ceasefire was reached with the rebels in Idlib, which facilitated the diversion of attention from combat to reconstruction. Since then, Iran and Russia have competed for influence in the rebuilding of the Syrian military and its operations. In practice, Russia has had a growing influence on the processes of building and operating the military at the strategic and operational level. With the beginning of its intervention in 2015, Russia established a joint multi-branch headquarters and operations center that has rendered the position of chief of staff of the Syrian military superfluous. It was also hinted that Russia is responsible for the fact that no chief of staff of the Syrian military has been appointed since 2018. The command and control structure that Russia has anchored in Syria ensures the involvement of Russian officers and advisers at almost every level of the fighting in the country, including improvement of the Syrian military's operational approach and the optimization of its weapon systems on the battlefield.

Despite Russia's leading position, Iran and Hezbollah have also taken steps to influence the reconstruction of the military, mainly in the deployment of offensive standoff

capabilities in Syria – ground-to-ground missiles and unmanned attack aircraft (drones); joint warfare by Shiite militias under Iranian command and Syrian army units; and Iranian involvement in building, training, and operating special forces in the Syrian army – among them Division 4 under the command of Maher al-Assad, the Syrian President's brother, internal security units, and local and national semi-military militias loyal to the regime. The Syrian army 1<sup>st</sup> Corps, which is responsible for southwestern Syria and the front against Israel, is a key focus of Iranian-Hezbollah involvement in the Syrian military, including the stationing of advisers and liaison officers in the Corps headquarters in a range of areas (operations, intelligence, logistics, engineering, observation posts, and artillery); training of soldiers and commanders in the Corps, including the development of intelligence gathering capabilities and firepower (artillery and mortars); and highlighting the miserable living conditions in southern Syria in order to recruit combat troops. In addition, the regime has permitted Hezbollah to build terrorist infrastructure and long-term projects in the area controlled by the Corps, and to operate a joint Hezbollah-Syrian war room.

Hints of the Russian-Iranian competition for influence emerge in the appointment of senior commanders in the Syrian military. The commander of the Syrian air force, regarded as close to the Iranians, was dismissed from his post in March 2021 at Russia's request, and the previous commander, who is close to the Russians, was reappointed in his place. Russia is dissatisfied with the influence of Iran and its proxies on the Syrian army in southern Syria. It appears that the Iranian influence is confined mainly to areas in which Tehran has a significant interest against Israel, and is of limited scope, given the lack of adequate resources and due to Russian counter measures.

### **Building Blocks of Reconstruction: Change in the Reference Threat and the Nature of Combat**

In what constitutes a precedent, the primary reference threat in building and reconstructing the Syrian military is internal, above all the need to defeat the rebel forces – which are defined as extremist Islamic terrorist groups – and prevent renewed growth of terrorist infrastructure. In the past, the primary reference threat was the Israeli military threat. Force buildup now focuses on forming and training combat units that maintain control over the country and highly mobile forces for suppressing rebellion and regaining control over territory in cooperation with independent and semi-military militias.

*Structure and organization:* Under Russian guidance, important resources are now directed toward expanding the command and control envelope of Syrian military units and of the various security agencies in order for the military to regain a monopoly on the use of force. The Syrian army has absorbed rebel militias and units that surrendered. Currently, pro-Iranian militias, not subject to the army's command, that have been involved in the civil war on the side of the Assad regime since 2012 are still operating.

There is sometimes a lack of operational coordination, with the Shiite militias operating independently with no regard for the battle plans and tactics of the Syrian army. This pattern has caused friction with the Assad forces on more than one occasion. Despite the Russian plan to integrate former rebel groups in the army ranks in order to consolidate the regime's control in the areas that it has conquered and reduce the future risk of a renewed rebellion, hostility between ex-rebels and army commanders surfaced on many occasions. At the same time, the question arises of loyalty and the balance of power between the military and the militias subject to Iranian influence – as reflected in the Iraqi model, in which the army is weak in comparison with the militias.

*Manpower:* Beginning in late 2018, there was renewed emphasis on army recruitment of combat troops and officers, so that every division would have at least 11,000 combat troops, with an emphasis on the number of troops, rather than their quality. Following his "victory" in the elections, Assad decided to institute manpower changes in the army, which included replacement of personnel and new appointments to 20 senior army positions, some of whom were officers appointed a few months previously. It is therefore believed that [Russia is behind](#) the new appointments in the military and the security agencies in order to promote Alawite officers whom it regards as trained well enough and loyal to Moscow, not to Tehran. Of the 152 senior officers currently in the Syrian military, 124 are Alawites – 82 percent of the total, compared with 22 Sunni officers, only 14 percent. The people chosen by Russia will likely lead the next military campaign, both within Syria and against external threats.

*Military exercises:* Another emphasis is on the renewal of regular military exercises in order to raise operational fitness. Russia, which also plays a leading role in this respect, has renewing the basic exercises at the platoon and battalion level. Through Hezbollah, Iran is also training combat commanders and forces, but on a more limited and less institutionalized scale, with a focus on southern Syria, close to the border with Israel.

*Air defense capabilities:* Russia is assisting the Syrian military in rebuilding its air defense system through the integration and operation of advanced weapon systems and ground-to-air missiles with the ability to intercept guided bombs launched at a distance. At the same time, Russia is not providing the Syrian air defense forces with advanced S-300 and S-400 ground-to-air missile batteries that would pose a threat to Israel Air Force aircraft, probably because of concern about escalation and exposure of these systems' weaknesses. For its part, Iran has also previously announced the transfer of advanced air defense systems to Syria: Bavar-373 ground-to-air missiles – a long-range (250 kilometers) ground-to-air missile system that is a replication of the Russian S-300 system, and the Khordad-3 medium range (50-75 kilometers) ground-to-air missile system.

*Offensive standoff capabilities:* The Syrian production and assembly of ground-to-ground missiles capabilities were damaged during the war, including as a result of Israeli attacks against production and assembly facilities – primarily those built and operated in cooperation with Iran. Today, the emphasis is on high-trajectory weapons. Iran and Syria cooperate in these efforts, while at the same time assembling ground-to-ground missiles with various ranges and improved precision, primarily in order to threaten Israel's strategic home front. Iran has deployed drone systems in Syria; it is not yet clear whether these have been given to the Syrian forces, or whether they will be operated by Iran's proxies in a future conflict.

*Offensive chemical weapons capabilities:* [Reports](#) by [the UN](#) and US administration sources over the past year indicate that Syria is working on the renewal of its chemical arsenal, consisting mainly of chlorine and sarin gas, with aid from Iran, and is also renewing its production capabilities in Syria itself, despite its commitment in 2013 to destroy the chemical weapons in its territory. These reports join statements by intelligence and arms control organizations that Syria still possesses chemical weapons, and used them in attacks on civilians during the war. As in the past, these strategic capabilities of the Syrian military are likely to be used inside Syria, and are designed to constitute a deterrent weapon against Israel.

*Combat doctrine:* Russia seeks to instill a combat doctrine in high-quality mobile infantry units as a rapid intervention force that will be highly mobile and capable of moving quickly and conquering territory. This is the most suitable strategy for conquering internal rebel territories, but it is less appropriate for offensive campaign against Israel.

### **Limited Operational Effectiveness**

Despite the efforts in recent years to rebuild the Syrian military and adapt it to the current challenges, the combat capability of the regime's forces has remained limited, as has its operational effectiveness against internal and external threats, due to the array of challenges that it faces. Among them:

- a. The large number of security/paramilitary power groups in Syria and the competition between them, headed by independently operating militias and units loyal to Russia or Iran, makes it difficult for the military to attain a monopoly on the use of force.
- b. A severe economic crisis has resulted in a lack of resources, bribery, and corruption in the military, as well as in all other state institutions.
- c. Lack of motivation detracts from the quality of personnel and recruitment potential.
- d. The continued internal warfare in Syria occupies the military's resources and attention.

- e. Israel is conducting an ongoing campaign against the Iranian entrenchment in Syria.

The current internal fighting in Syria provides evidence from the field of the military's functional difficulties. All of the efforts to conquer or reduce the area controlled by the rebels in Idlib have failed. In eastern Syria, which contains assets of strategic value to the regime – oil fields and the border with Iraq – the Syrian army is bogged down and hard pressed to exercise effective control of the area. In southern Syria, in the renewal of fighting in late July 2021 in Daraa al-Balad, the Syrian army's attempt to restore its control of the area and confiscate the weapons of the rebel organizations has failed.

### **Implications for Israel: Challenges in the Air, Opportunities on Land**

The Syrian military constitutes a mirror image of the regime: unstable in authority and power and dependent on Russia and Iran. The building of mechanized armored capabilities designed to conquer territory in face of regular armies, such as the IDF in the Golan Heights, has been assigned low priority. In the offensive sphere, the Syrian military is greatly dependent on Iran and Hezbollah, especially in aspects of the delivery and assembly of offensive weapons, such as high-trajectory weapons and offensive drones, which will improve Iran's ability to attack most of Israel's territory from Syrian territory. Israel should also be aware of the chemical weapons capabilities that the Assad regime is striving to restore with Iranian assistance, in the realization that this strategic weapon is liable to target it.

At the same time, the main military challenge that the Syrian military poses to the IDF lies in air defense capability, based on Russian capabilities and operated with help from Russia. For this reason, Israel should continue to exert political pressure on Russia to prevent the delivery of advanced ground-to-air missile batteries to the Syrian military, and if these are delivered for operation by Syrian air defense, to attack them before they constitute a threat to the IAF. Similarly, Israel should take action to destroy Iranian air defense batteries in order to prevent a situation in which Iran delivers them to the Syrian military or deploys them in Syria.

As of now, a variety of means should be employed against the consolidation of Iran and Hezbollah in southern Syria in combination and coordination with the Syrian military and regime. It is likely that this force will be used to attack Israel from Syrian territory when the time comes. In addition to the ongoing campaign against the military consolidation of Iran and its proxies in Syria, Israel should advance its cooperation with local population groups opposed to the Shiite presence in this area, who are likely to constitute a force for countering Iranian entrenchment.

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