

Stopping Iranian Entrenchment in Syria: Time to Lower Expectations

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Israeli intelligence figures have presented optimistic assessments about stopping Iranian entrenchment in Syria and the ability to drive a wedge between President Bashar al-Assad and Tehran. However, Israel is still far from achieving its strategic objective of driving Iranian forces and proxies out of Syria and restricting Iran's influence in the country, and the expectation that Assad and Russia will do the work for it is mistaken. Assad does not have the power to force Iran to leave Syria, and there is no other entity that can earn the loyalty that Tehran has bought with blood and treasure. Therefore, Israel must persevere with its ongoing campaign against the military entrenchment of Iran and its proxies in Syria, while seeking cooperation with local groups opposed to Iranian influence and the Assad regime.

One example of mistaken over-optimism: as part of the United States Senate investigation of the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan, senior Pentagon officials – the Defense Secretary, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Commander of CENTCOM – admitted that they erred by relying on optimistic assessments of the consequences of withdrawal. Might this be instructive for Israel? According to the outgoing head of Military Intelligence, Maj. Gen. Tamir Heyman, speaking about the Syrian situation, “Iranian activity continues and is changing its form, but its entrenchment in Syria has stopped, and “Hezbollah is retreating from the Golan Heights.” Heyman described a situation in which there are currently a few hundred Iranian officers and about 20,000 Shiite militia fighters in Syria, operating under the command of the Iranian Quds Force. He also noted that “the IDF has achieved serious disruption of an Iranian attempt to build missile arrays and conceal them in Syrian civilian spaces, as they did in Lebanon,” and stressed that operations in Syria “have exacted a high price not only from the guest (Iran) but also from the host (Assad), and this has helped to curb Iranian entrenchment. *We have driven a wedge between Assad and the Iranians* – and he understood that he has been hit hard for hosting the Iranians.”

The Status of Iranian Entrenchment

However, the picture is more complex than Gen. Heyman's description. Iran's military and civilian entrenchment in Syria continues, albeit adjusting to changing circumstances and with more limited scope than was originally intended. The plan of Qasem Soleimani, commander of the Iranian Quds Force until his assassination by the United States in early 2020, was to create a friction zone with Israel along its northern borders, including the Golan Heights, in order to confine Israeli military efforts to defend its borders, while simultaneously preventing it from focusing on building capabilities to strike at the nuclear installations within Iran itself. In fact, Iran succeeded to a limited extent in setting up military deployment and facilities on the Golan front. Israel responded with determination and prevented Iran from gaining a military foothold close to its borders, while disrupting Hezbollah's "Golan File" to build terror cells in southern Syria.

Changes in the features of Iranian entrenchment – including reduced visibility of Iranian forces, buildup of local militias based on Syrian recruits, and infiltration on the fabric of civilian and religious life in the country – were influenced not only by IDF activity but also by changes in conditions after more than ten years of war in Syria. Tehran seeks to avoid conflict with Russia and is attentive to Moscow's concerns regarding the consequences of continued Israeli attacks, which are damaging to Assad's forces and the future of his regime. In order to create the appearance of a responsible ally that plays by Russia's rules, Iran responded to Moscow's demand to pull back its proxies – mainly the Shiite militias, but not Hezbollah – from southern Syria, and to limit its involvement in the Syrian army reconstruction plans and operations. Tehran has not abandoned its long-term strategic objectives: influence over Syria, construction of a land bridge from Iran through Iraq to Syria and Lebanon, which will thereby exert pressure on the United States to withdraw its forces from northeast Syria, and construction of bases for launching missiles and unmanned attack aircraft on Israel.

To promote these objectives, Iran focuses on several layers of activity: Reinforcing its foothold in eastern Syria: deploying its proxies and equipping them with advanced weapons, as a launchpad for seizing control of the area and the Iraq-Syria border once the US withdraws its forces. The purpose is to maintain the land bridge project, with access to sources of energy in Syria.

Continuing to build its military force, not based primarily on organic Iranian forces, but on Hezbollah, Shiite militias, and local militias that it establishes and maintains on dozens of military sites all over the country; improving local capabilities to manufacture and transfer weapons to Syria and Hezbollah in Lebanon. Its proxies are deployed in sites and army bases in central Syria, including the al-Qusayr and Shayrat airfields in Homs district, due to their easy access to the Syria-Lebanon border, to facilitate weapons supplies to Hezbollah. Recently Iran has worked on transferring and deploying air defense systems in Syria and the Lebanese Beqaa Valley in order to intercept Israeli air attacks; it also continues to smuggle attack unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV). Minister of Defense Benny Gantz estimates that “within a few years, the Iranian militias in Syria will have hundreds of UAVs,” most with attack capabilities.

Relying more on proxies, namely, Syrian recruits, in areas where Iran has been forced to lower its profile, particularly in southern Syria. The Iranians have recruited over 10,000 local residents and organized them into dozens of local militias operating under Iranian command and with Iranian training. The wages of local recruits are paid by Iran. The militias engage in a range of tasks, including acting as a deterrent vis-à-vis the local population and an advance military infrastructure for the absorption of reinforcement forces. They help recruit new operatives, set up civilian infrastructures, and smuggle weapons and drugs. Militia members are also sometimes used to collect information and attempt to carry out terror attacks against Israel on the Golan Heights.

Penetrating Syria's social fabric: Iran has set up dozens of influence centers in Syria, which organize economic, religious (Shiite missionary activity and support for Shiite pilgrimage sites), educational, and cultural activities and dispense humanitarian aid and medical services, and has established financial institutions – particularly the main commercial

centers in Damascus and Aleppo. Iran has also established a Shiite suburb in eastern Damascus, close to the Sayyidah Zaynab grave and pilgrimage site, which controls the road leading to the city's international airport.

Has Iran Lost its Charm in Assad's Eyes?

A common view in Israeli assessments is that Iran has lost its glamor in the eyes of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. This is based on reports of Assad's move to depose the Iranian commander of the Quds Force in Syria, Jawad Ghafari (although it appears that he finished his tour of duty as planned). Further support for this assumption is the idea that the ties with Iran cast Syria into the "axis of resistance," which obstructs Syria's return to the Arab League and relief of the sanctions imposed by the United States and Europe. To this are added reports of the opposition of the Syrian elite, which is pro-Assad, to shoulder the cost of Iranian activity in the country and Tehran's support of the regime. Moreover, the Syrian regime's supporters suspect that Iran is seeking to change the Arab identity and culture of Syria.

However, assessments of a rift in relations between Iran and Assad are exaggerated, and have two critical holes: first, it is hard to believe that Assad is ready to give up a secure strategic partnership of 40 years standing between Syria and Iran for the sake of potential benefits in the form of improved relations with the Gulf states that supported rebel groups that almost toppled his regime. Second, Iranian military advisers and Shiite militias still play a critical role in protecting the regime, as the country's war is far from over. The capabilities of the Syrian army ground forces are inferior, and the regime still depends on the Shiite militias organized and operated by the Quds Force. Iran's deep penetration into Syrian society makes any attempt to uproot it impractical. Assad still has many reasons to believe that his diplomatic rehabilitation will continue – even if he remains close to Tehran.

Conclusion

Optimistic assessments about stopping Iranian entrenchment in Syria should be avoided. Israel remains far from achieving its strategic objective

of driving Iranian forces and proxies out of Syria and limiting Iranian influence in the country, whether by means of an ongoing military campaign (the campaign between wars) or from an expectation that Russia and President Bashar al-Assad will do the work for it.

Influence in Syria is essential to the Iranian project of achieving regional hegemony, in particular in the Arab Levant, and challenging Israel on its borders on the Golan Heights and with Lebanon. In view of changing conditions, Iran has prepared alternatives for maintaining its political, military, economic, and religious influence in Syria. In the south of the country, it relies more on local militias and Hezbollah; in Damascus it uses the demographic changes caused by the flight of the Sunni population to build an Iranian-dominated Shiite suburb; in order to control the border area between Syria and Lebanon, it has occupied airfields in the Homs district and relied on Hezbollah forces; in eastern Syria Iran is building a force that will be ready for a rapid takeover once American troops leave the area.

The idea that it is possible to drive a wedge between Tehran and Assad and persuade him to remove the forces operated by Iran from his country is optimistic and unrealistic. Assad does not have the power to force Iran to leave Syria, he is still not in control of a third of its territory, and he knows that while Arab rulers may come with gifts, they cannot buy the loyalty that Tehran has earned at a high cost in blood and treasure.

Therefore, Israel cannot rely on Assad to remove Iran from Syria. It must continue its campaign against the military entrenchment of Iran and its proxies in Syria, and seek cooperation with local groups opposed to Iranian influence and the Assad regime. At the same time, it is essential to reinforce the trilateral discourse with Russia and the United States in order influence Syria's future contours.

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