

## Israel warily watches Syria

Israel has not intervened in the Syrian war, but the security establishment is watching it closely. Its biggest concerns: Iran's influence and a stronger Hezbollah. Miriam Dagan reports from Tel Aviv.

Miriam Dagan / 19.12.16

Israel's interest is a Syria without Bashar al-Assad and without Iran, Israeli Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman said at a conference on Thursday. But after government troops regained control of Aleppo, it's clear that the Syrian president is not about to leave. Israel is not intervening in the war in Syria and has felt the consequences much less than its neighboring countries Lebanon and Jordan.

[...]

Israel's greatest concerns - much greater than that of IS-affiliated militants in the Golan - are Iran's growing influence on its northern neighbor state and that Hezbollah, which is supported by Iran and Assad, is becoming increasingly stronger.

"IS is a tactical threat, while Iran and Hezbollah are larger, strategic threats," according to **Benedetta Berti**, a researcher at the independent **Institute for National Security Studies** in Tel Aviv: "In Israel, Hezbollah is seen as the number one threat among the non-state actors, more dangerous than Hamas." The Shiite Islamist group based in Syria is classified as a terrorist group by Israel, the US, Canada, the Arab League and other countries. It is believed to be fighting in the war in Syria with 3,000 to 4,000 soldiers. Iran, too, has sent soldiers to Syria.

Assad was already allied with Iran and Hezbollah before the war began in 2011. "But because of the war, there is also a physical presence now - troops. And the Assad regime has changed because it has become more dependent on outside supporters," **Berti** says of the situation today.

The threat to Israel is serious in the long run, **Berti** says, adding that the whole region will pay a price for instability caused by the war, including Israel. But there is no imminent threat, since at the moment the warring parties are embroiled in Syria.

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