

# **Is War With Lebanon Imminent?**

written by Dr. Raphael BenLevi | 01.04.2024

As both sides escalate by the day and as the fighting in Gaza simmers down, many Israelis are growing convinced that full-scale war with Hizballah is unavoidable. Are they right?

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## **The Shiite Plan to Attack Israel from Jordan**

written by Meir Ben Shabbat | 01.04.2024

Israel must make clear to Tehran that it is determined to thwart the Axis of Resistance's planned terror schemes, and that it will not allow its citizens to be massacred again.

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## **No more 'business as usual' with Qatar mediation**

written by Noa Lazimi | 01.04.2024

Israel must be prepared to "lose" Qatar as a central player in negotiating a hostage deal while seeking alternatives.

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# Curbing Iran aggression is key to peace in the Middle East

written by Ruth Wasserman Lande | 01.04.2024

The Iranian regime acts quietly, patiently, and methodically in regions reigned by instability and chaos.

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## Reflecting on Israel-Egypt relations

written by Ruth Wasserman Lande | 01.04.2024

This strategic dialogue with Egypt must be institutionalized, with very senior representation on behalf of the Israeli government, accompanied with experts on Arab culture and language.

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## Rethinking the region

written by Ruth Wasserman Lande | 01.04.2024

Eighty days have passed since the horrific events of October 7 and we are now in the second month of the IDF's ground operation in Gaza which they are carrying out with significant achievements, while simultaneously maintaining a high ethical standard consistent with international law.

Nonetheless, it appears that the Hamas is nowhere near surrendering, nor even willing to negotiate the release of Israeli hostages still held in Gaza. It is hence our duty to closely examine why this is so and whether Israeli policies should be recalculated accordingly.

Recently, a delegation of senior Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) officials visited Egypt and met with President Abdel Fattah Sisi and his men, following a long period in which it had seemed that Qatar had the lead in everything concerning the negotiations for the abductees. Following the visit, Cairo announced a new, three phase road map regarding the hostages, the cessation of fighting, and the question of the continuity of Hamas rule.

It appears that for the two terrorist organizations in the Gaza Strip, as well as for Hamas's Qatari patron, it was important to honor Egypt. The important question is: Why? Is this an attempt to once again put Egypt center stage while promising that Gazan citizens will not be allowed to cross the border into Egyptian territory, in exchange for a certain degree of freedom of maneuver for the Hamas leaders through the Philadelphi Corridor?

October 7 obliges us to re-examine every aspect of our policies. We must toughen Israel's position somewhat – first, as far as the supervision of the Philadelphi Corridor is concerned. It is crucial to increase supervision of the Egyptian soldiers posted on the border and to put an end to the bribes they receive from Hamas.

No tunnels – whether for smuggling or for terror – should be allowed to remain, and there should be a clear Israeli military presence on the Gazan side of the border, to make sure that there is no future reconstruction.

The official Israeli position towards Egypt was and remains extremely respectful and cautious, as it should.

However, following more than four decades of peace between the countries, the time has come to demand a fundamental change in Egypt's educational curriculum and in the messages that are conveyed to the Egyptian public, most of whom still hate Israel. Although elementary schools in Egypt have already made significant changes, with blatantly antisemitic and anti-Israel material having been removed from textbooks, this is not enough. It is important to also speed up the process in middle and high schools, and to start monitoring antisemitism more closely in universities, as well as in the professional syndicates throughout Egypt, such as the lawyers and the teachers unions.

The time has come for the Egyptian regime to become proactive and systematic in this, even as the "street," which is highly hostile to Israel, exerts pressure to be "anti-Israel," an attitude which is often contrary to its best interest. Fair practice

and mutual tolerance in education must be demanded. Respect begets respect.

Jordan, for its part, is collapsing under the burden of the Syrian refugees who have settled within its borders in recent years. The Iranian militias have been trying, rather successfully, to make a name for themselves in Jordan for several years and are shamelessly encouraging the smuggling of drugs and munitions to and from Lebanon and Syria.

The regime in Jordan is weak, fears for its stability, and relies significantly on Israel and the US. The countries of the region that aspire to regional stability, including Israel, have every interest in supporting the Hashemite Kingdom, despite its frequent blatant accusations against Israel, yet perhaps a slightly different angle needs to be adopted by Jerusalem.

Perhaps it is time to support the leadership in Jordan, as well as its people, by helping to rehabilitate the hundreds of thousands of Palestinians in refugee camps on Jordanian territory. These serve as terrorist nests that threaten not only Israel but also the stability of the Jordanian regime itself.

Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, in Judea and Samaria, and in Jordan, have been held in a huge number of refugee camps for years by the United Nations and the international arena. Imagine what could be done with all the funding endlessly invested in maintaining those camps. How many sustainable sources of income could be derived from it? How many employment opportunities created? How many lives rehabilitated? How much terror activity diverted into productive action?

Moreover, in Jordan even more than in Egypt, the incitement and intolerance to Jews, Israel and the West apparent in educational material are appalling, disseminating hatred and vengeance. It is high time that the Israeli and the American continued support for the kingdom be linked to a fundamental change in the curriculum.

Another important anchor is Qatar. Evidently, it must be characterized as a terror-supporting country unless it obliges Hamas - immediately and without conditions - to return all the Israeli abductees. Sounds impossible? Quite the opposite! It requires the mobilization of all Israeli decision-makers, as well as all the Jewish influencers and the help of Israel's non-Jewish friends in the US, and just a little bit of courage. The US has the leverage.

One last thought: If humanitarian aid stops coming into the Gaza Strip, Hamas will surrender, as it will no longer have the food and the medicine which it steals from its own people nor the fuel with which to power its continue military resistance. As long as supplies continue to pour in, Hamas will continue to fight and will refrain from releasing the abductees until it may be too late.

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# **Deadly Illusions: Reassessing Israel's Military History in Lebanon**

written by Dr. Raphael BenLevi | 01.04.2024

As these lines are being written, the war of attrition on Israel's northern border continues, with the threat of further escalation growing each passing day. Unprecedented numbers of Israeli forces are stationed along the border and the military rhetoric talks about "striking Hezbollah," there is a widespread understanding that Israel must deliver a significant blow to Hezbollah in order to restore Israeli deterrence in the region and to enable the residents of the north who have been evacuated from their homes to return and live in security.

Yet when it comes to the practical question of what next steps Israel must take in order to reestablish its security in the north, our national conversation finds itself stuck in an awkward silence. This is because the very question automatically conjures up the scars of Israel's past experiences in Lebanon and the supposed universally acknowledged lessons learnt from Israel's many years of military presence leading up to the withdrawal in the year 2000. It is therefore vital that in our current moment, where it seems that the north could erupt into full scale war at any time, we re-examine some of these supposed 'lessons learned' from the IDF's past actions in Lebanon, and be prepared for the rapidly approaching moment of decision that Israel may face again soon.

## **Myth 1: The South Lebanon Security Zone (1985-2000) was militarily ineffective**

Following the First Lebanon War, Israel withdrew from Beirut and its surroundings, and the IDF, along with the South Lebanon Army (or the SLA, a mainly Christian Lebanese militia backed by Israel), repositioned itself along a 3 to 12 km wide zone inside Lebanon along Israel's northern border, known as the "security zone." The goal was to create a buffer zone between the Hezbollah terrorists and the residents of Northern Galilee, while continuing to fight them within Lebanon, rather than within Israel's borders.[1]

The IDF's presence in the zone was highly successful in preventing terrorist infiltrations into Israeli territory. However, it was less successful in preventing rocket fire from Lebanese territory north of the zone. Over these 15 years, Hezbollah fired about 4,000 rockets aimed at Israeli towns, killing seven civilians and greatly disrupting the lives of the residents of the north.[2] By the eve of the withdrawal in the year 2000, Hezbollah, with Iranian and Syrian assistance, had accumulated around 7,000 rockets, whose range covered most of Israel's north.[3]

In response to Hezbollah's attacks, the IDF conducted numerous small ground raids and aerial bombings, consistently targeting the terrorist group's forces and capabilities. Two major operations were conducted in 1992 and 1996, during which Israel extensively bombarded both Hezbollah forces and Lebanese civilian infrastructure. During the 15 years of the zone's existence, 256 IDF soldiers were killed, an average of about 17 per year.[4] However, Hezbollah's behavior was also influenced by the nature of Israeli actions: when Israel acted decisively against Hezbollah, as in the early years, Israel enjoyed periods of relative calm. But when Israel, starting in 1992 under Rabin's government, adopted a more accommodating policy with the aim of promoting peace initiatives with Syria and Lebanon, Hezbollah grew in confidence, and its attacks on IDF forces increased.

Throughout this entire period, there was a broad consensus among Israel's leadership, as well as within the public, that it had no choice but to maintain a presence in Southern Lebanon in order to protect the northern region of the country. Despite the difficulties involved, the zone was perceived as a necessary price for ensuring the security of the Galilee against terrorist invasion.

Accordingly, when the idea of withdrawing from the zone emerged in the late 1990s, it was strongly opposed by the IDF, led by then-Chief of Staff Shaul Mofaz, as well as by the broader security establishment. They maintained that the zone had proven itself to be operationally effective, and therefore necessary to continue for the foreseeable future.[5] In their view, the risks of withdrawal clearly outweighed the costs of continued presence in the zone. The IDF continued its opposition to any withdrawal even after two fatal incidents in 1997: the infamous “Helicopter Disaster,” in which 73 soldiers were killed in an accidental collision of two helicopters en route to Lebanon, and the “Ansariya Ambush,” which killed 12 soldiers from the Israeli Navy’s special forces operation unit, Shayetet 13.[6]

In 1999, the IDF submitted a report arguing that if it withdrew from Lebanon without first dismantling Hezbollah, the result would be disastrous.[7] The IDF claimed that Hezbollah would take over the entire area right up to Israel’s border, thereby increasing its capability to directly threaten Israel’s north; that withdrawal would be interpreted by Israel’s enemies as a sign of Israeli weakness and would damage Israeli deterrence across the entire region; and that it would be understood as an Israeli submission to terrorism, thus encouraging Palestinian and other terrorist organizations to reign fire on Israel’s civilians.[8]

## **Myth 2: Withdrawal from Southern Lebanon was Politically Inevitable**

In 1998, even Ehud Barak himself was still arguing that a unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon “would endanger Israel’s security, endanger the security of the residents of the north, and strengthen Hezbollah. To initiate this would demonstrate public irresponsibility.”[9] When, as Prime Minister in 2000, he eventually decided to push through a unilateral withdrawal, this constituted an abandonment of all the accumulated wisdom of Israeli strategic doctrine up to that point. The drastic decision contradicted the hitherto unchallenged strategic principle of maintaining an offensive posture and seeking to shift battlelines into enemy territory. So, what explains this radical shift in policy?

When Barak assumed the role of Prime Minister in 1999, he brought with him a vision of effecting a profound change in the regional order. Immediately upon starting his term as premier, he declared his intention to secure a peace agreement with Syria, sign a comprehensive and final agreement with the Palestinians, and to withdraw the IDF from Southern Lebanon, all within one

year.[10] His original intention was to withdraw from Southern Lebanon as part of the peace agreement with Syria. However, after his attempts to offer far-reaching concessions to Syria to broker a peace deal failed to yield tangible results, he pivoted and ordered the complete and unilateral withdrawal from the security zone.

He was also eager to carry out the withdrawal as soon as possible, with the aim of completing the move before the Camp David Summit in July 2000, where he hoped to reach a permanent agreement with the Palestinians.[11] To the public, he claimed that withdrawal would improve the daily security of residents of the north, and that any attack on Israel from Lebanese territory would be met with massive retaliation.[12]

Another contributing factor to the withdrawal decision emerged in 1997 with the formation of the “Four Mothers” protest movement. This movement, driven by bereaved mothers, initiated a public campaign advocating for a full withdrawal from the security zone, emphasizing the human cost and emotional toll of Israel’s continued presence in Lebanon. While highlighting these significant concerns, the movement did not address the strategic concerns that necessitated the IDF’s control of the area. Their push for withdrawal did not offer solutions for preventing terrorist attacks against border communities or for salvaging Israeli deterrence.[13] However, the campaign did receive substantial and sympathetic coverage from major Israeli media outlets,[14] who were deeply committed to the idea that the Oslo accords would lead to “peace in our time.”

The decision to pursue a unilateral withdrawal was not inevitable, but rather the product of the initiative of Ehud Barak, acting within a worldview according to which comprehensive peace deals with Syria and Yasser Arafat were just a matter of offering the right concessions, following which a new era of peace would be ushered in. The Israeli media aided in legitimizing this questionable move by focusing heavily on the costs associated with remaining, while downplaying the costs of leaving.

### **Myth 3: The General Public and Even the Likud Supported a Unilateral Withdrawal**

By the end of the 1990’s, voices in the Likud, including Netanyahu, supported the idea of withdrawing from Lebanon within the framework of a political agreement



that would see Hezbollah disarmed. In 1998, then-Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai proposed an Israeli withdrawal conditioned upon the prior disarmament of Hezbollah and ensuring security guarantees for the South Lebanon Army members. However, this proposal did not progress because Syria, which effectively controlled Lebanon at the time and whose consent was essential for any Hezbollah disarmament initiative, rejected it outright.[15]

There is an immense difference between a withdrawal within the framework of an agreement that would lead to Hezbollah's disarmament and a unilateral withdrawal that would abandon the territory to Hezbollah and lead to its inevitable empowerment. For this reason, even the leader of the far-left Meretz party, Minister Yossi Sarid, opposed the unilateral withdrawal on the eve of its execution.[16] Ahead of the May 1999 elections which brought Ehud Barak to power, a Gallup poll found that 61% of the public opposed a withdrawal without an agreement with Lebanon and Syria, while only 31% supported a unilateral withdrawal.[17]

Another factor that contributed to the decision to withdraw was the assessment among some political leaders that Israeli society was particularly sensitive to the loss of soldiers and would therefore be unwilling to bear the costs of a war of attrition. However, this was a misreading of public sentiment, perhaps even a projection of those leaders' own feelings onto the public. Israeli society has demonstrated great national resilience and a willingness to endure significant losses, provided that the purpose of the war was clear and the leadership was committed to a decisive victory over the enemy, even if it would take an extensive period of time.[18] This public patience and fortitude was evident in Operation Defensive Shield and the subsequent counter-terrorism activities in Judea and Samaria in the following years. A similar sentiment was also seen at the onset of the Second Lebanon War.[19] Anyone observing the public atmosphere in Israel today, amidst the threat of Hamas, can clearly see the resilience of Israeli society, and its willingness to accept losses when the goal is the pursuit of decisive victory over its enemies.

#### **Myth 4: The Withdrawal Led to a Period of Quiet for Israel's North**

The first years following Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon did indeed see a decrease in rocket attacks on Israel, with the exception of the areas of Mount Dov and the Shebaa Farms.[20] During this period, however, Hezbollah fortified its

presence along the entire Israel-Lebanon border, constructing numerous bunkers for the purpose of executing mortar attacks. Hezbollah persisted in assaulting IDF patrols on Israel's side of the border, to which Israel responded with targeted and restrained actions. The first significant incident occurred in October 2000, when Hezbollah killed and captured three Israeli soldiers, which eventually led Israel to release 400 prisoners in exchange for their bodies in 2004.[21]

After Barak's assurances, Israel was expected to respond vigorously to any post-withdrawal aggression. However, the withdrawal had, as predicted, emboldened Palestinian terrorist organizations, plunging Israel into a series of deadly terror attacks, known as the Second Intifada. The turmoil of this new wave of terror pre-occupied Israel, leaving it unprepared for a rapid response and unwilling to simultaneously engage in forceful retaliation against Hezbollah.[22] After Hezbollah's initial attack Israel's restrained reaction set a new precedent. Its hesitant responses, coupled with its willingness to exchange terrorists for hostages, further strengthened the position of Hezbollah, who went on to attempt additional hostage-taking operations that eventually erupted into the Second Lebanon War in 2006.

Following the withdrawal, Hezbollah additionally focused on expanding its missile arsenal and extending its range. By the outbreak of the Second Lebanon War, Hezbollah had amassed approximately 16,000 rockets and Katyushas, with some capable of reaching as far as Hadera.[23] As early as 2003, high-ranking security officials were raising alarms about Hezbollah's evolution from a tactical concern to a significant strategic threat, with the capability to unleash a barrage of rockets across the entire northern region of Israel and to target strategic Israeli infrastructure.

### **Myth 5: Israel's Military Responses after the Withdrawal Received Greater International Legitimacy**

Between the withdrawal and the Second Lebanon War, Israel's security establishment came to believe that the threat of conventional armies invading Israel had all but ceased to exist, particularly after the disbanding of the Iraqi army in 2003. A new doctrine was being formed, which focused on creating a "smaller and smarter army," focused on advanced technologies, virtual command and control systems, and a strong reliance on the Air Force and its use of precision-guided missiles, while de-emphasizing the need for a large,

maneuverable ground force.[24]

As the Second Lebanon War unfolded and the political leadership determined that a substantial response was required, the favored approach was to conduct air strikes targeting civilian infrastructure in Lebanon as well as Hezbollah positions. However, these air strikes proved ineffective against the small, dispersed rocket bunkers in southern Lebanon, primarily because their locations were unknown. The concession of territorial control had also brought a significant loss in essential elements of intelligence gathering.

At the outset of the Second Lebanon War, Israel initially received considerable international support. However, this support waned as it became evident that Israel's military efforts were mainly causing damage to Lebanese infrastructure, rather than effectively targeting Hezbollah — a goal that necessitated ground operations. In Washington, there were high expectations that Israel would critically weaken Hezbollah, a goal which aligned with the US' broader objectives in its War on Terror. However, the approach Israel pursued led to great disappointment in Washington. Instead of a decisive ground campaign to dismantle terrorist infrastructure — similar to Operation Defensive Shield in Judea and Samaria — Israel continued to prioritize air strikes. The element of ground invasion that eventually occurred was belated, ineffective and lacked clearly defined objectives.[25]

The Second Lebanon War ended with several strategic shortcomings for Israel. The most notable was its failure to effectively neutralize Hezbollah's rocket fire, which persisted until the ceasefire and was touted as a victory by Hezbollah. Israel also missed a vital opportunity to substantially dismantle Hezbollah's military infrastructure in Southern Lebanon. This oversight not only weakened Israel's military impact, but also spoiled the opportunity to bolster its reputation as a vital security ally of the United States. As the conflict progressed, international support dwindled, creating a new status quo, in which any future Israeli actions would come at a substantial diplomatic cost. Israel's withdrawal, rather than granting it greater international legitimacy to respond to attacks, instead resulted in raising the diplomatic price of future military action in that same territory.

### **Myth 6: International Institutions are Key to Any Effective Solution**

According to the UN Charter, decisions made by the Security Council are binding. However, in practice, these decisions are only implemented in circumstances where there are state actors who are willing to enforce them. Already in 1978, the Security Council decided (per Resolution 425) that Israel must make a full withdrawal from Lebanon, and that the UNIFIL force should assume security responsibility in the border area. This meant that for the entire 15 years of the security zone, Israel acted contrary to the Security Council's decision.[26] Israel's justification, it argued, was that in the absence of a peace agreement with Lebanon and in light of the threat to its territory, its military presence there was necessary, as UNIFIL was incapable of fulfilling its mission.[27]

In 2004, the Security Council also decided (Resolution 1559) that all militias in Lebanon must be disarmed.[28] This decision has not been implemented to this day, because it requires the Lebanese government to disband Hezbollah, which it does not have the power to do. In 2006, at the end of the Second Lebanon War, Security Council Resolution 1701 called for an immediate ceasefire, reiterating the call to disarm all militias, again planning to ensure peace through the deployment of UNIFIL forces south of the Litani River. This time, Israel decided to rely on the UNIFIL forces, who are supposed to prevent Hezbollah from accumulating weapons. In practice, the UNIFIL force has failed miserably in its mission, being itself under threat by Hezbollah not to act and thereby turning a blind eye to arms smuggling.[29] Foreign soldiers, it turns out, are not willing to risk their lives for the sake of Israel's security — nor for the sake of the implementation of Security Council resolutions.

### **Myth 7: Every Threat Has a Diplomatic Solution**

Will we forever “live by our sword?” Unfortunately, it seems that the answer is yes. We must abandon the ill-conceived dream that we are on the precipice of a fundamental change in reality, or that concessions will diminish our enemies' desire to destroy us. It is precisely our willingness to accept the truth of the matter that will bring about improved security, put our enemies on defense, and allow for a thriving and prosperous national existence.

Since the Second Lebanon War, Hezbollah has refrained from actions that would inevitably trigger a full-scale escalation, but this relative calm is misleading. Iran and Hezbollah share the ultimate objective of dismantling the State of Israel, and are gearing up for a direct confrontation. In 2006, Hezbollah possessed 16,000

rockets, with their farthest range reaching Hadera; in 2023, they have a stockpile of 150,000 missiles and rockets, with tens of thousands capable of striking central Israel. Their arsenal has expanded to include attack drones, advanced anti-aircraft and anti-ship missiles, and a commando unit equipped to conquer areas in the Galilee.[30] In the broader context, the past two decades have been utilized by Iran to create a land corridor under its dominance, extending from Iraq and Syria to Lebanon and the Mediterranean.

Prior to the withdrawal from Lebanon, the public debate surrounding withdrawal centered on the price of maintaining our presence there. Today, it's crucial to acknowledge the price of our absence from this territory. In the aftermath of the Six-Day War, it became clear that our northeastern border remained indefensible as long as the Golan Heights were under Syrian control. Similarly, we must now recognize that our northern border remains fully indefensible so long as whoever controls Southern Lebanon harbors hostility towards Israel. From a geographic standpoint, the Litani River represents the only logical boundary between Israel and Lebanon, not the arbitrary line that was set in the middle of a mountain range by the Sykes-Picot Agreement in 1916.

Looking back, it's clear that when Israel was active in Lebanon, Hezbollah posed only a tactical threat, primarily affecting the immediate northern Galilee; whereas following Israel's withdrawal, Hezbollah has evolved into a strategic threat to the entire State of Israel. This has allowed it to function as a tool of deterrence for Iran, thereby raising the price of any potential Israeli actions against Iran's nuclear capabilities or its regional military presence.

In 2000 we left the security buffer zone in Lebanon's territory; in 2023 we have effectively created a security buffer zone within Israeli territory, having evacuated some 60,000 Israelis from their homes along the border because we couldn't guarantee their safety there. This war must not end without Israel fully dismantling the threat from Hezbollah. A range of strategic options must be considered, beginning with the offer of a diplomatic solution by insisting on the implementation of UNSC 1701 — meaning Hezbollah's disbandment — through air operations, and potentially a ground occupation of Southern Lebanon. A complete analysis of the long-term alternatives is beyond the scope of this article, but what should be clear is that after dealing with the immediate threat from Hezbollah, decision-makers must not dismiss the possibility that Israel may need to control territory in Southern Lebanon for the foreseeable future in order to

prevent its re-emergence as a threat to Israel. From our experiences with withdrawals in Gaza and Lebanon, one lesson stands out: shying away from conflict by pursuing territorial withdrawal inevitably results in the emergence of greater and more severe threats.

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# The International Community Must Change its Approach to Qatar

written by Asher Fredman | 01.04.2024

Qatar can no longer be treated as a major Western ally, while also serving as a state sponsor of terror

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## Syria and the Israeli Interest

written by Dr. Jonathan Spyer | 01.04.2024

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** After twelve years of civil war, Syria is de facto partitioned into three areas of control, and is thoroughly penetrated by outside powers: Iran and Russia, the US and Turkey. Syria's international isolation, de facto partition, and frozen conflict is the optimal setting for the continued prosecution of the Israeli campaign in Syria against the entrenchment and consolidation of an Iranian forward base on Israel's northern border. But Israel will have to consider additional diplomatic and military means to undermine the Iranian project in Syria as Assad emerges from regional and international isolation. The continued involvement of US and Turkish forces is necessary too.

**Background:** The Current Situation in Syria and How this Developed



The Syrian crisis began 12 years ago, as part of the wave of unrest that swept the Arab world in the period 2010-13. Commencing with demonstrations in the Deraa province following the killing by the regime of a child, Hamza al-Khatib, the protests were subject in the summer months of 2011 to an attempt by the Assad regime to crush them using maximum force. As a result, elements among the demonstrators began to arm themselves, and by early 2012 a fully fledged armed insurgency against the Assad regime was under way.

In the subsequent three years, the Assad regime was on the retreat. At the lowest point of its fortunes, in 2015/16, the regime remained in control of only just over 20% of the territory of Syria (though, notably, it never lost control of the coastline, or the capital city). Three factors, however, underline the survival and eventual victory of the regime.

Firstly, Assad benefitted from the partial and piecemeal support afforded by the rebellion by its allies, and from the disparate and disunited nature of the insurgency itself. The Syrian rebellion never succeeded in achieving a single and united political or military leadership. It was subject to myriad and crisscrossing lines of support from a variety of actors, including at various times Qatar, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, the United States, a number of EU countries and (to a limited extent and in a geographically confined area), Israel.

More importantly, Assad benefitted from the failure of the west to enforce stated red lines. Then US President Barack Obama, in a statement in 2012 declared that the use by the Assad regime of chemical weapons would trigger US intervention. The US president reiterated this threat in a speech on September 10, 2013, when he said "If we fail to act, the Assad regime will see no reason to stop using chemical weapons. As the ban against these weapons erodes, other tyrants will have no reason to think twice about acquiring poison gas and using them. Over time, our troops would again face the prospect of chemical weapons on the battlefield. And it could be easier for terrorist organizations to obtain these weapons and use them to attack civilians."

This speech was made after Assad had used sarin gas on areas controlled by the rebels, killing some 1400 people. Obama's threat was not followed by action. The US failure to act at this point can be seen in retrospect to have sealed the fate of the rebellion, though fighting would continue for another five years.

The American failure to act left a vacuum, and this meant that Assad's allies could increase their own assistance to the regime, without fear of clashing with the US. The direct deployment by Russia of air power in Syria from September 2015 (in response to significant gains by the rebels in central Syria in the summer of that year) was the beginning of the end for the rebels. From that point until the fall of the final independent rebel enclaves in southwest Syria in the summer of 2018, the direction of events was clear. With Russian and Iranian support, regime forces either defeated the rebels, or received their surrender (or 'reconciliation.') By late summer, 2018, no independently controlled insurgent areas of control remained in Syria. The 10% of the country, in the north-west, where the remnant of the insurgency remained, was and is dependent on the presence and guarantee of Turkish forces in the area. But independent rebel power in Syria had disappeared by the end of 2018.

In a parallel process in the east of the country, an Iraqi jihadi organization, the Islamic State or ISIS, seized a large area of control in Syria and Iraq in the 2013-14 period. The Iraqi IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared this area as the Islamic Caliphate, in June 2014, after a lightning campaign had brought IS to the gates of Baghdad and Erbil, and secured their control of the city of Mosul, as well as Raqqa, Manbij and other significant towns in Syria. A US led coalition set about reducing this area of control, which was eclipsed in its entirety by mid-2019. The key US ally in the fight against Islamic State was the Kurdish YPG (Peoples' Protection Units). This organization had links to the PKK (Kurdish Workers' Party) and lacked appeal to the large Arab population in the Deir al Zur, Raqqa and Hasakeh Provinces which has been the IS area of control. In 2015, the US oversaw the establishment of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a force built around the core of the YPG but including several Arab tribal units (such as the Sanadid militia of the Al-Shamar tribe), Christian units and rebel groups who had become disillusioned with the increasingly Islamist and jihadi nature of the insurgency.

Following the destruction of the last territorial holdings of Islamic State by the SDF and the US-led coalition, the former Caliphate was held by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), the political iteration of the SDF.

From that time until today, three de facto authorities have held power in Syria. These are the Assad regime, which now administers just over 60% of the country,

including the major cities (Damascus, Homs, Hama, Aleppo) and the coastline, the AANES, which controls Syria east of the Euphrates River, including the cities of Qamishli and Hasakeh (though there is also a regime presence in both these cities), and the Turkish controlled zone, consisting of roughly 10% of the country including the provincial capital Idleb City, and containing the remnants of the rebellion, now for the most part organized under the auspices of the Syrian National Army (SNA).

To the south of the area under the control of the militias of the Syrian National Army and its political iteration, the Syrian Interim Government, is an area under the control of the Hayat Tahrir al Sham organization, formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra, and formerly the franchise of the Al-Qaeda network in Syria. HTS maintains this area under the administration of an entity known as the Syrian Salvation Government. But while Turkey officially has no contact with this structure, de facto the HTS area is able to survive and avoid Assad regime or Russian or Iranian incursion because of the presence of Turkish military positions around its borders.

Thus, at the present time, the years of civil war in Syria have produced a situation of frozen conflict and de facto partition of the country. Furthermore, the three areas of control (those of Assad, the SNA/HTS and the SDF) are all able to function and survive only because of the support of their international patrons. These are Iran and Russia, Turkey, and the United States, respectively.

## **Israel and the Syrian War**

Israeli leaders on a number of occasions in the course of the Syrian civil war predicted the imminent demise of the Assad regime and expressed verbal support for this goal. In practice, however, Israel never committed itself to this goal, or offered major support to the insurgency against the regime. Behind this stance are a number of factors: the Israeli system has a built-in reluctance to conduct major interventions into the internal politics of Arab states, because of an institutional memory concerning the close links developed with the Ktaeb/Falanges party of the Christian Maronites in Lebanon in the late 1970s and early 1980s. This involvement with an internal Arab player at a strategic level is perceived as a major failure and acts as a deterrent to future such arrangements.

This reluctance does not extend to limited or tactical associations and

cooperation. Connections of this kind notably took place in Syria and take place elsewhere in the region. Israel never, however, attempted to build a strategic relationship with any of the alliances of militias attempting to destroy the Assad regime.

### **Role of Lebanese Hizballah in the Syrian War**

From 2013, Hizballah began to play an active role in the war in Syria. The organization played a crucial role in the battle for Qusayr in that year, enabling the regime to keep open its links to Lebanon. While Hizballah suffered considerable casualties in Syria, the war there saw the organization operating as a conventional military force, for the first time conducting large scale offensive operations in an urban environment. The result of the involvement in Syria is that Hizballah now possesses a cadre of fighters and commanders experienced in conventional warfare. It remains to be seen, of course, how relevant the experience and lessons gained in Syria will prove in the very different context of a future war with Israel.

As an integral part of the Iran led regional alliance, Hizballah continues to play a crucial role in the process in which Teheran is building its permanent presence within Syria and within the structures of the Syrian regime. Hizballah's Unit 4400, in cooperation with Unit 190 of the IRGC's Qods Force is responsible for the transfer of weaponry from Syria to Lebanon, and the storage of Iranian armaments in Syria. Hizballah operatives played a key role in the process of recruitment of young Syrians into IRGC controlled militia groups such as the 313 Battalion. Movement operatives also cooperate with regime structures in the process of Captagon smuggling from Lebanon to Syria, and then into Jordan.

### **The "Campaign Between the Wars"**

Rather, from 2012, as the Iranian effort to preserve the Assad regime increased in depth and scope, and as hopes for a rapid replacement of the regime stalled, Israel began to focus narrowly on efforts against the Iranian attempt at consolidation and entrenchment in Syria.

The so-called "campaign between the wars" (or war between wars), i.e., the Israeli bombing campaign against Iranian targets in Syria with the intention of disrupting Iran's attempt at building a military infrastructure in the country, commenced in 2013. The beginning of the campaign coincided with a sharp

increase in the Iranian presence and the Iranian commitment in the country. This in turn was a response to Assad's increasingly dire situation vis a vis the insurgency, and specifically to the shortage of available, loyal manpower which was threatening his rule. The first significant act of the campaign took place on January 31, 2012, when a convoy carrying arms to the Lebanese Hizballah organization was attacked by Israeli aircraft in the Rif Dimashq governorate area. The convoy was located at the Syrian research center on biological and chemical weapons in the Jamraya area, northwest of the Syrian capital, Damascus.

Then-Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak, while not admitting responsibility for the raid, said that it represented "proof that when we say something we mean it - we say that we don't think that it should be allowable to bring advanced weapon systems into Lebanon."

The campaign between the wars has continued from early 2013 until the present time. The Israeli security establishment considers the campaign to have been a success, and to have very significantly disrupted the Iranian attempt to build a military infrastructure directed against Israel on Syrian soil. One former national security advisor in Israel who served during the period of the Syrian war estimates that the Israeli campaign has reduced the Iranian infrastructure in Syria by 80%.

In addition to the campaign between the wars, Israel has pursued several secondary initiatives in the context of the Syrian conflict. These were focused on ensuring that the Iranians and their proxies were not able to establish themselves facing the Israeli border in the Quneitra area.

In this regard, relationships were developed with a few rebel militias operating in this area. Support afforded these organizations included both humanitarian assistance and the provision of weaponry. It did not, however, include a guarantee of mutual defense, and these relationships appear to have ended after the recapture of southwest Syria by regime forces assisted by the Russians and Iranians in summer, 2018.

Similarly, while Israel maintains communication with the US-aligned Syrian Democratic Forces which control a large area of north-east Syria, there are no formal connections or obligations to this entity.

So Israel's strategy in Syria, as had emerged two years into the civil war by 2013, has been to remain agnostic on the question of the future of the Assad regime, while focusing on the urgent perceived need to prevent Teheran from turning Syria into a link in a contiguous area of de facto Iranian territorial control stretching from the Iraq-Iran border to the Mediterranean Sea and the borders of Israel, and taking in the territories of three partially collapsed/fragmented Arab states – Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. The 'campaign between the wars' continues to be prosecuted. The diplomatic situation in Syria, however, is rapidly changing.

In the next sections, the success of the Israeli campaign will be evaluated, along with implications of the changing diplomatic picture in Syria for Israeli strategy regarding the country.

### **Assessing the Success of the “Campaign Between the Wars”**

The campaign between the wars, as noted above, claims success in its own terms – namely that it has prevented the emergence of a powerful military infrastructure which, it is maintained, the Iranian and IRGC leadership had hoped to see in Syria by now. Supposedly, Israel's efforts also have severely disrupted the efforts by Iran to transfer precision guided munitions (PGMs) to its Hizballah franchise in Lebanon.

The truth of this is hard to measure, of course, since it is based on comparing an actual situation to a hypothetical one, and statistics and evidence are not publicly available. However, it is likely that there is much truth to it. Undoubtedly, Israel's intelligence coverage of Syria is deep and comprehensive. Undoubtedly, verifiably severe blows have struck the Iranian presence over the last ten years, continuously and repeatedly, and it is likely that the Iranian regime is not where it would like to have been in 2023 regarding its physical infrastructure in Syria.

It should be noted, however, that the Iranian perception of their project in Syria is somewhat different to the usual Israeli description of it. Israeli analysts routinely refer to a 'land corridor' which the Iranians are held to be attempting to construct in Syria. This is presented as a link in a chain of Iranian control extending across Iraq and into Lebanon. (Such analyses sometimes discuss also an 'air' and a 'sea' corridor, representing alternative modes for the transfer of materiel from Iran to Lebanon and Syria.) From this point of view, a verifiable reduction in Iranian weapons systems and physical infrastructure in Syria represents a significant

blow to the desired 'land corridor.'

Perusal of Iranian materials on this subject, however, suggests a slightly different picture. The Iranians do not discuss a 'land corridor' in Syria, or Iraq, or Lebanon. What they talk about is the building of the muqawama, or 'resistance' in these areas. This is a somewhat different concept, extending over a different timeline. What this term refers to is the slow build up of local political-military franchises by the IRGC, with the effort adjusted to local conditions. The prototype for this process is Lebanese Hizballah, the IRGC's first experiment in franchise building in the Arab world. In Lebanon, the process began with the IRGC's establishment of Hizballah in 1982, and culminated in 2008, with Hizballah's demonstration in the June events of that year that it had achieved a level of military and political prowess which made it the de facto governing force of the country, regardless of the formal political situation.

A parallel process, adjusted to local conditions, is what IRGC outlets are referring to when they discuss the growth of the muqawama in Syria. Unlike in Lebanon, in Syria even nominal electoral systems and representative government do not exist. Rather, the country is nominally a single party dictatorship, and in practice a regime controlled by a single family, who rule at least partly through the loyalty of the ethno-religious group to which they belong, the Alawi community.

Such a situation requires a different *modus operandi* for the IRGC, if it wishes to perform a similar process as that achieved in Lebanon, whereby its instruments emerge as an independent power within the country, able to operate according to imperatives devised in Iran, and not in the local capital. Prior to the civil war, the application of IRGC methods to Syria would have seemed inconceivable. Ba'athist Syria as developed by Hafez Assad was a centralized, deeply repressive state, with powerful security organs whose command led up through many circles to a core, Alawi group around the president.

The civil war offered Iran an opportunity. Specifically, the shortage of available manpower available to the regime at the opening of the insurgency, and the localized, fragmented nature of much pro-regime mobilization. These enabled Iran, from 2013 onwards, to come to the aid of its ally in Damascus, while at the same time initiating a Lebanon-style takeover. The Iranian project took and continues to take several forms. It is important to understand these in detail to accurately comprehend what is taking place and as a result the problematic

nature of calls for the Syrian president to be incentivized to 'order' the Iranians to leave. The extent and nature of the Iranian project in Syria is such that achieving any such a break from Iran would be highly problematic for the Syrian dictator to achieve, even assuming he wished to do so.

### **Main Elements of the Iranian Project in Syria Since 2013**

The presence of IRGC-aligned militias on Syrian soil. To fill the gap in loyal manpower faced by the regime, Iran from 2013 on began to deploy various of its franchise forces on Syrian soil. These included groups from immediately neighboring countries. Lebanese Hizballah was most important in this regard. The Abu Fadl al-Abbas brigade was the first of the Iraqi Shia militias to deploy fighters in Syria, to be followed by many other groups affiliated with the Popular Mobilization Units. These were officially sanctioned military groups raised following the fatwa by Ayatollah Sistani in response to the rise of ISIS. Iraqi groups eventually deployed in Syria included the Ktaeb Hizballah militia, Nujaba and the Asaib Ahl al Haq group, among others. The deployment also included forces from further afield, including the Fatemiyoun militia from Afghanistan and the Zeinabiyoun, from Pakistan.

### **Recruitment of local IRGC franchise militias from among Syrians.**

Throughout the war, the IRGC recruited militias from among local Syrians. These were sometimes referred to as Syrian 'Hizballahs,' though none has grown into a force resembling Lebanese Hizballah, or the stronger Iraqi Shia militias. Organizations with such names as Quwaat al-Ridha, which recruits among Syria's small Twelver Shia community, and Brigade 313, which recruits in the Damascus area and refers to itself as part of the Syrian 'Islamic Resistance.' Groups of this kind are not limited to Shia or Alawi Syrians. In southwest Syria, under the guidance of Lebanese Hizballah members, they have recruited among impoverished Sunni youth in communities close to the border. In eastern Syria, meanwhile, the IRGC has made inroads into and recruited among some traditionally pro-regime tribes, such as the Bagara.

**Establishment of new state structures under IRGC control.** This is perhaps the most significant element of the Iranian project in Syria. The National Defense Forces, established in 2012, were organized under the supervision of the Iranians, to provide a reliable auxiliary ground force for the regime. From 2016, Iran also began to organize youth in the framework of the Local Defense Forces. In this



framework, Iran supported militias such as the Nayrab brigades and the al-Baqir brigade became part of the Syrian state security forces.

Cooperation with existing state structures. In this regard, several pre-existing and powerful structures within the Syrian defense establishment are now working closely with the Iranian interest, and with other instruments of that interest such as Lebanese Hizballah. Among the most significant of these bodies, whose activities will be discussed in further detail below, are the 4<sup>th</sup> Division, a unit within the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) and the Air Force Intelligence, perhaps the most powerful of the four main intelligence bodies. The 4<sup>th</sup> Division, while officially under the command of General Mohammed Ali Durgham, is in practice the instrument of Maher Assad, the President's brother.

**Demographic change and propaganda efforts.** Iran is currently buying land and property at an extensive level in parts of Syria of strategic interest to it – namely, in Deir al-Zur in the east, close to the Iraqi border, in the Damascus area and its southern suburbs, and in the southwest, close to the border with Israel, in Suweida and Deraa provinces. There are also indications that Iran is engaged in efforts at demographic change, bringing in Shia population from outside to occupy properties left behind by departed Sunni population and then confiscated by the Syrian government under the infamous 'Law no. 10.' The intention here appears to be to create an area of de facto control, woven deep into civilian communities, resembling that maintained by Lebanese Hizballah in the area between Beirut and the Lebanese border with Israel.

Finally, Iran is engaged in propaganda and education efforts to induce non-Shia Syrians to convert to Shia Islam, and to spread the message of the Iranian Islamic revolution and system of government. In the eastern province of Deir al-Zur, Iran is engaged with the local tribes, and has constructed local religious centers, known as 'Husseiniyaat' at which a variety of services and assistance are provided to local people, alongside religious and ideological instruction. Similar facilities of this type have been established in Deraa province in the southwest.

Again, the combination of financial inducement and religious instruction may be observed. The areas in question suffer from extreme poverty, and the attraction of this combination may be imagined. It is also the case that Iran's efforts follow a clear and identifiable geographic and strategic pattern. These efforts are being

made in such areas as the Iraq-Syria border and the border with Israel which are of obvious strategic interest to Iran in its desire to transport weaponry and fighters and challenge Israel.

### **Practical Applications of Iran's Strategy**

From this outline in general terms of Iran's strategy and practices in Syria, it is clear that this represents a major and multi-faceted process of societal transformation. The intention is to produce a situation in the specific conditions of Syria analogous to that which pertains in Lebanon and to a lesser extent in Iraq, in which a firmly rooted, powerful, Iran controlled system exists within and alongside the formal state, in order to promote the interests of Teheran (and, notionally, the interests of the local Shia and Iran-aligned population.)

Emerging evidence shows that this system is already in operation. An extensive daily cooperation takes place in Syria, for example, between the heads of the National Defense Force, the IRGC-QF, Lebanese Hizballah and the Iraqi Shia militias, on the question of arms shipments.

Major-General Bassam al-Hasan, chief of staff of the NDF coordinates these matters on behalf of the Syrian regime while Yusuf Sharara and Hassan Ibrahim do so on behalf of Lebanese Hezbollah, Mohammad Qaidi and Ali Haji represent the IRGC, and Ali Hamdani (commander of the Iraqi Ali al-Akbar Brigade) and Abu Fadak al Mohammadawi (chief of staff of the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces) do so the same on behalf of the Iraqi element. These names are part of a single network in the context of securing arms and missile shipments from Iran to Iraq to Syria and Lebanon. Bassam al-Hassan is also close to Hossein Salami, commander of the IRGC, and to Mohsen Rezai, head of the Iranian regime's expediency council.

Similarly, in the economically crucial sector of drug production, smuggling and export, ample evidence has emerged to show that particular organs of the Syrian state/regime, work in seamless collusion with both Lebanese Hizballah and the IRGC to facilitate this. In this regard, the key Syrian state bodies engaged are the 4<sup>th</sup> Division of the Syrian Arab Army, and the Air Force Intelligence Directorate. These latter two agencies work in close cooperation with officers from other branches of the Syrian security forces, such as the Syrian Border Guard who are trusted by the IRGC and Hizballah, in order to process the efficient transfer of

drugs across the border from Lebanon into Syria, and from Syria into Jordan along smuggling routes jointly controlled by these forces.

An important role in southern Syria is also played by a number of Bedouin tribes who work in close cooperation with Hizballah. The al-Nuaimi tribe is one such. These mechanisms are responsible for drug smuggling by land into Jordan. But this network also transports drugs from Lebanon to Tartus for export by sea, and to Damascus and Aleppo for export by air. The centrality of this trade for the Syrian regime from an economic point of view is well known. Some rumors and reports have suggested that the southern route may also be used for the transport of weaponry and military materiel, to southern Syria and beyond. It is beyond the scope of this paper to deal with this matter in detail but given the deep concerns in Israel regarding the extent and nature of arms smuggling from Jordan into the West Bank, this issue is worthy of further investigation.

A recent report from the Alma research group, meanwhile, detailed the assimilation of an IRGC linked militia, the Imam Ali Brigade, into the 4<sup>th</sup> Division. The report notes that ‘the 4th Division has evolved into an Iranian proxy, reporting directly to the Quds Force, which conducts direct offensive operations against Israel and American soldiers in Syria.’

Another report from Alma detailed the extent to which CERS, the Syrian Scientific Studies and Research Center, has come under Iranian control. According to the report, CERS, which employs around 20,000 personnel, is engaged in production and development of advanced weapons systems, including chemical and biological weapons. According to the report, the center is currently under the control of IRGC-QF and Lebanese Hizballah personnel. The Alma report suggests that “the CERS Center operation shortens and saves the logistics of transferring weapons from Iran, which is more vulnerable to harm/disruption and obstruction.”

In the face of this welter of evidence, the question must be asked: In 2023, where exactly does the Syrian state end and the Iranian project in Syria begin? It is already difficult to answer this question. This is testimony to how far the IRGC’s project in Syria has advanced.

This project has not been harmed or impacted in a major way by Israel’s “war between the wars.” Thus, while Israel’s extensive air campaign has undoubtedly been successful in preventing the construction by Iran of a military and missile

infrastructure on Syrian soil, it has not affected the broader and potentially more harmful process of the melding by the IRGC using its known methods of the Syrian state with itself, and the turning of parts of the Syrian state and security infrastructure into instruments serving the Iranian interest.

### Syria's Return to International Legitimacy

Since 2019, the Assad regime has made extensive progress in its effort to regain diplomatic legitimacy in the Arab world. The United Arab Emirates was the pioneer in this regard. It reopened its embassy in Damascus in late 2018. Saudi Arabia and Bahrain have followed in a similar direction. The re-normalization of the Assad regime in the Arab world, even as it still only controls part of Syrian territory, and even as Iranian influence and power in Syria grow ever stronger, is continuing apace. In April of this year, Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal Bin-Farhan met with Assad in Damascus. Then, in May, Assad visited Saudi Arabia for an Arab League summit. The Syrian president met with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman on the sidelines of the summit. The visit represented the high-water mark to date of Assad's return to legitimacy.

So far, however, the normalization of Assad's international standing has not yet reached the United States or Europe. Both remain committed to UN Resolution 2254 and favor the continued isolation of the Assad regime until a process of political reform and transition begins in Syria. Yet the west is not actively seeking to push for change in Syria. Rather, western policy toward Syria seems to be in a kind of holding pattern, neither moving to normalize with Assad nor seeking to place real pressure on him.

### Israeli Policy Prescriptions

From an Israeli point of view, the current diplomatic situation in Syria – in which the regime remains isolated by the West, and without major reconstruction efforts under way from Western companies or states – is the ideal background for the continued prosecution of Israeli military efforts against Iranian entrenchment and consolidation on Syrian soil.

Thus, Israel should use all available diplomatic channels to encourage the West to maintain its firm stance on Resolution 2254 and the continued isolation of the Assad regime. If Assad succeeds in ending his isolation and normalizing relations with the West, it is a near inevitability that at a certain point US pressure on

Israel would begin to induce it to cease its military campaign on Syrian soil, on the grounds that the conflict has finished, Syria is now a normal actor on the international stage etc.

Given the central role that Hizballah has played and continues to play in Syria, and the crucial position of Syria from a geo-strategic point of view for Iran and its ambitions regarding supply of Hizballah, and the maintenance of an area of contiguous control reaching the Mediterranean and the borders of Israel, it is of crucial importance to continue and broaden the current military action against Hizballah on Syrian soil, and to maintain the political and diplomatic situation which enables this action.

Similarly, the continued de facto partition of Syria is a clear Israeli interest. The control by the US and its Kurdish allies in the Syrian Democratic Forces constitutes an incomplete but significant barrier to Iranian freedom of movement and action between Iraq and Syria. Because of the presence of this entity, which controls around 30% of Syria's territory, the Iranians have only one route between Iraq and Syria, namely the al-Qaim/Albukamal border crossing at Syria's southeastern tip. In the event of war, the limited maneuverability of Iranian forces and their proxies would offer an advantage to Israel, which could swiftly disable the border crossing and the roads leading westwards from it. Thus, Israel should use its diplomatic representations and capacities to seek to induce the US and its allies to remain in Syria.

Even the Sunni Islamist, Turkish dominated enclave in the northwest of the country offers an advantage to Israel in that its presence keeps the regime weakened, prevents it from focusing on the reconquest of the southeast and prevents the regime from extending its rule across the country and thus normalizing its situation. Thus, Israel should encourage Turkey in the direction of continued opposition to the Assad regime, and maintenance of its area of control in Syria.

At the same time, there is currently no realistic prospect for the fall of the regime or for a process of political transition. Nor is there an obvious alternative to the regime. Extensive contacts and representations to the Syrian opposition (other than the SDF, and possibly also elements in the southwest of the country with which Israel had close contact in the pre-2018 period) are thus without purpose.

Regarding the “war between wars,” while there have certainly been achievements, the available evidence suggests that the tactics employed have been insufficient to deal with the reality of the penetration of the Syrian state by Iran, and the extent to which large parts of the machinery and organs of the Syrian regime state are now either working in close cooperation with or are under the control of the Iranians.

The revelations detailed above regarding the close involvement of the Iranians in the vital drug production sector, in arms procurement and even as recently revealed in the area of chemical weapons production, as well as in the myriad other areas detailed above indicate the extent of this problem. To adequately develop responses, Israel must first internalize this reality.

Following this, the choice may well lie between an escalation and broadening of the target base for the air campaign, to include targets unambiguously associated with the Assad regime, or acceptance of a situation in which a large part of the Iranian project remains ‘out of bounds’ to Israel, enabling the Iranians to continue to consolidate and entrench themselves in Syria, as long as they do so while sheltering behind a regime flag of convenience.

It may also, unfortunately, be the case that Israeli air power alone will not be sufficient to address the issue of the full dimensions of Iranian ambitions in Syria, and hence cooperation with other forces in the country, most centrally the US and its local clients the SDF, but possibly also elements within regime controlled areas, such as the clients with whom Israel worked in the pre-2018 period, will prove necessary.

Syria, in 2023, remains a crucial and central arena in the contest between Israel and the Iran-led regional project. A renewed focus, and probably a broadening and deepening of the scope of Israeli activity in the country are required to adequately address this reality.

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