Will Iran Advance a Ground Invasion into Israel from Syria?

written by Dr. Yossi Mansharof | 24.11.2024

A month after the unprecedented Israeli attack on twenty different targets across Iran, the scope of which is slowly becoming clearer, Iran is still waiting to respond due to forced circumstances. Iran's air defense systems were significantly damaged in the attack and the US elections also contributed to the postponement of the attack, due to Tehran's desire not to promote Trump's chances of winning. Various senior Iranian officials are again declaring Tehran's desire to respond to Israel with a third direct attack after the attacks in April and October. As part of the media debate in Iran surrounding the issue, the daily *Khorasan*, affiliated with the Conservative camp, called on the Iranian regime in its Thursday, November 21 article to launch a ground invasion of Israel from the Syrian Golan Heights.

The daily explained that pro-Iranian Shiite militias have already been deployed in this area, and that Assad is expected to approve such an action since he has the right to take military action to liberate the Golan Heights. The daily estimated that such an attack is already in the planning stages; this is backed by the fact that this outline was discussed in recent meetings held in Damascus and Tehran, between Defense Minister Aziz Nasirzadeh and Iranian leader Ali Khamenei's aide, Ali Larijani, with Assad, and Syrian Foreign Minister and senior officials in Tehran. *Khorasan* also expressed concern for Syrian President Bashar Assad's life if the outline were to be implemented, and called on Tehran to devote significant attention to protecting him from Israel.

Iran's "toolbox" in Syria is rich and diverse, and includes the Imam Hussein Division, established back in 2016 under the command of the then-Quds Force commander, Qassem Soleimani. The division consists of thousands of operatives of various nationalities from across the Middle East. The pro-Iranian militias of the Afghan Fatemiyoun, the Pakistani Zainabiyoun, and, of course, Lebanese Hezbollah are also operating in Syria. Alongside these, in recent months, it was reported that dozens of Houthi operatives have taken the initiative to invade Israel by land via the Syrian border with the assistance of the Quds Force; Tehran may choose to use them if it does indeed wish to advance a ground invasion of

Israel.

It is worth noting that the *Khorasan* article also claimed that senior Hezbollah figures led by top commander Ibrahim Aqeel, killed by the IDF on September 20, had already been planning a ground invasion of Israel from the Syrian Golan Heights as a response to the July assassination of Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran.

However, according to the daily, the planned attack was thwarted by the preemptive strike carried out by Israel. The daily explained that the goal of the ground invasion could not be to "liberate" the Golan Heights, but rather to pressure Israel to end the war in accordance with Hamas and Hezbollah's terms. As Khorasan admitted, Iran's missile attacks against Israel have limited success in this regard and cannot serve this purpose of halting the war and forcing Israel to accept a cease fire under the term of the Axis of Resistance.

How should Israel respond?

As a lesson of the October 7 massacre, Israel cannot ignore that Tehran is again toying with the idea of planning a ground invasion of Israel. Alongside the continued IDF initiative on the Syrian side of the border, Israel must prepare diplomatically and militarily to make it clear to both Iran and Assad that they will bear all consequences if the plan is implemented. Despite the ongoing attack on senior members of the "Golan File" – the Hezbollah force responsible for establishing a terrorist infrastructure in the Syrian Golan – Iran's motivation to operate on the ground through Syria still exists. Therefore, alongside the continued fortifications on the border of the Golan Heights, Israel must make clear to Iranian leaders that Israel will continue to attack Iran directly, including sensitive targets throughout the country and senior members of the Quds Force operating in the area.

Israel must also make it clear to Assad that his regime will pay a heavy price for carrying out this potential attack, to pressure him into refusing the Iranian request to operate from his territory. Israel can also work with Russia to restrain Assad and make it difficult for him to allow Iran to advance a ground invasion plan and to explain that the consequences of such an attack would lead to chaos in Syria, resulting in its losing its grip on the country.

Another possible lever for Israel is the United Arab Emirates which maintains close ties with Assad. According to reports, the UAE has already conveyed to Assad, in coordination with the Biden administration, a message immediately after the outbreak of the Swords of Iron war: don't intervene in the war in Gaza. It seems that Israel has a lot of room to maneuver against Assad especially since the Syrian front is the least active of the seven arenas fighting Israel in the current war.

Published in I24, November 24, 2024.

The opinions expressed in Misgav publications are the authors' alone.