

Syria and the Israeli Interest

written by Dr. Jonathan Spyer | 03.08.2023

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 4th 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 4th 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 4th 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 4th 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.

This article was written in August 2023. A short version of this article was published in Israel Hayom 14.09.203