



# Israel's World is Shrinking: How the Iran–Russia Axis is Gaining Ground

Kyle Orton

***Israeli opinion generally regards the country's efforts to contain Iran, especially in Syria, as having been successful. In fact, the trendline runs the other way: Iran is constraining Israel, entrenching all around the Jewish state.***

During the 2019 Israeli election, long-time Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu faced no challenge from his opponent, Benny Gantz, a former Israel Defense Force (IDF) Chief of the General Staff, about his record on containing Iran, and not only because it was a [highly personalised election](#) focused on Netanyahu. Gantz had [signalled continuity](#) on security policy, and sworn political foes of the prime minister [argued](#) that he had handled Syria, the most significant and immediate theatre where the Iranian threat presents itself, exactly correctly.

## Israel's Syria Policy

Since 2013, Israel has been carrying out [airstrikes in Syria](#) against targets linked to the [Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps](#) (IRGC), the wing of the Iranian armed forces charged with exporting the revolution. These attacks began largely to prevent the transfer of advanced weaponry, such as long-range missiles, to the IRGC's Lebanon-based ally [Hizbullah](#), and eventually moved on to attacking IRGC infrastructure in Syria.

The Israeli airstrikes against Iran in Syria in [February 2018](#), and even more so [those in May](#), were regarded to have achieved their political aim, while also impacting Iran militarily. 'We hit nearly all the Iranian infrastructure in Syria', stated then-Israeli Defence Minister [Avigdor Lieberman](#) after the May strikes. Lieberman [claimed](#) in late summer 2018 that Israel had detected a slow-down in Iranian deployments to Syria. There did [appear to be a transfer](#) of some Iranian resources to Iraq, and after [some signs of an increase](#) in activity in Lebanon,

Israel announced [Operation Northern Shield](#) on 4 December, designed to uproot Hizbullah's network of tunnels into northern Israel. The operation was wrapped up five weeks later, with a military spokesman [declaring](#) that 'all of the tunnels' had been dealt with.

In short, the messaging from Israel's government has been: 'it worked'. In mid-January, Israel formally switched to a policy of claiming credit for the attacks in Syria. Netanyahu [stated publicly](#) to Iran's leadership: 'I'm telling you, get out of [Syria] fast. We won't stop attacking'. And Gantz's successor as Chief of Staff, Lieutenant-General Gadi Eisenkot, announced his retirement and then gave an [extensive interview to](#) the *Sunday Times* detailing Israel's policy in Syria over the last few years.

The primary reason for Israel's past policy of strategic ambiguity was to avoid escalation, the idea being that if attacks in Syria go unclaimed, this could avoid internal political pressure on Tehran to respond against Israel, while also warning the Iranians where the 'red lines' are. But this policy has simply been overtaken by events. There have been occasional public statements from Israeli officials before this, and the sheer number of Israeli attacks meant denial was no longer tenable. With Iran [sending armed drones](#) into Israel, requiring a declared retaliation, diminishing returns had set in.

Moreover, as the Syrian war moves into the next phase, with resources no longer needed to put down a [defeated rebellion](#) and the Syrian regime consolidating, Iran's resources are freer to be turned against Israel. In these circumstances, deterrence and other security priorities are likely better met

by a public Israeli willingness to attack Iran in Syria.

The fact that Iran remains in Syria, with the capacity to attack Israel, is evidence in itself that the policy has not gone as well as many Israelis believe.

## Mistaken Premises in Countering Iran

For one thing, Eisenkot's claim in the *Sunday Times* interview that Israel 'carried out thousands of attacks' is distinctly dubious. In the Syrian conflict, little escapes public notice and the author's attempt to track these attacks suggests that the real tally is significantly below 100. Regardless, open-source data need not be relied upon. In August 2017, Major General Amir Eshel, the outgoing commander of the Israeli Air Force (IAF), gave the first indication of the scope of Israel's actions, claiming [nearly 100 attacks](#) had been carried out over five years, mostly at that time still focused on the Hizbullah convoys. In September 2018, the [IDF briefed the media](#) that over the prior 18 months, 200 Iranian targets had been struck in Syria. Even if the assumption is made that each 'target' was one attack and that there is no overlap in the attacks Eshel and the IDF are describing – both of which are very unlikely – then Israel has launched around 300 operations in Syria.

In Eisenkot's description to the *Sunday Times*, Israel moved quickly in 2016–17 to head off a danger that was building up and would become an issue over the longer term. The reality is, as laid out [extensively by Phillip Smyth](#), a fellow at The Washington Institute who tracks Iran's Shia militias, Iran began flooding Syria with its Shia militants in



2012, and it was these IRGC-controlled forces that turned the tide in early 2013, rescuing Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad's regime from likely collapse. By the time of the Iranian-led assault on Aleppo in late 2016, when Eisenkot noticed the threat faced by Israel, the Iranians had near-total control of Assad's security sector, and vast influence across other areas of the state and society.

Eisenkot explains that his strategy deliberately targeted infrastructure and avoided killing Iranians and their proxies – 'a few dozen' at most perished, he says – to give 'Tehran an 'area of deniability' so they would be more likely to absorb the attacks, rather than feel they had to retaliate against Israel. The problem with this is that destroying Iranian bases does little to diminish Iran's ability to spread its influence. Iranian agents have worked to restructure Syria socially. Alongside the IRGC-created National Defence Forces (NDF), a nationwide militia force that now outnumbers the regular army, Iran has worked through the tribes to construct more local variants of the NDF model. The result is a patchwork of militias, local in character and wholly Syrian, which are totally dependent on the IRGC. Other key influencers, the clergy above all, are being instrumentalised by the Assad–Iran system, often with money, and Iran's politico-religious proselytism and replacement of displaced Sunnis with

imported Shias, has established Iranian-run networks of deep, organic influence in Syria that would outlast the fall of the entire Assad regime.

The situation is no better on Israel's other borders. In Lebanon, Hizbullah dominates the state, being able to veto through force any policy it does not like, becoming increasingly visible in official institutions, and has used this position to build up a strategically dangerous weapons cache on behalf of Iran that is enmeshed in civilian areas. At a lower level is Gaza, where the Iranian-influenced Hamas retains power, although they are losing ground to Tehran's outright proxy Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ). Iraq does not border Israel, but it does concern the state. There was satisfaction in Jerusalem in the summer of 2018 when some of Iran's proxies seemed to fall back to Iraq from Syria. But the reality of the situation was better indicated by an episode on 7 February when a Shia militia leader – from a division that has fought in Syria for Iran – was arrested after he made a public comment critical of Iran. Any movement of Iran's militias from Syria to Iraq late last year was a demonstration of strategic depth, not retreat.

In concluding the *Sunday Times* interview, Eisenkot said, 'Bashar al-Assad needed [the Iranians] when he had his back against the wall and now he doesn't need them', suggesting that Assad is separable from Iran, at least if

he is strong enough. This idea is behind the attempt by some Gulf states to begin investing in Damascus: diversify Assad's revenue stream, and he will loosen Iran's hold on the country to keep this cash flowing. Putting aside the moral horror of working with Assad to curb Iran's influence, the reality is that after Assad's battered regime was rescued a second time in 2015–16 by a joint Russo-Iranian intervention, the dictator has very little autonomy. As if the fundamentals were not clear enough, Assad's foreign minister, Walid Al-Moualem, stated quite plainly: 'The Syrian government considers it to be its duty to keep Iranian security forces in Syrian territory'.

## Misreading Russian Intentions

Eisenkot's suggestion that Israel could find common cause with Assad to contain Iran is a variant on a more widespread belief, not only in Israel, that the Kremlin – despite ostensibly being part of the pro-Assad coalition – is available as a de facto partner to at least set some limits on Iranian behaviour and power in Syria.

The history of Israel's relationship with Moscow is complicated. After initially supporting Israel's creation – in part as a means of countering British influence in the area – the Soviet Union quickly changed course, waging an 'undeclared war' against the Jewish state



through its proxy regimes in Eastern Europe, the rejectionist states in the Middle East, and various terrorist groups. Since the end of the Cold War, Israel–Russia relations have been generally improving, despite Iran becoming an ever-more-salient dilemma.

It was once believed that the Russians could evict the Iranians from Syria, although there seems to have been an emancipation from that illusion. Nonetheless, the notion persists that the Russia–Iran axis is in some way unnatural, and Russia can be used to balance Iran. As Smyth recently noted, Moscow will even go through the motions of being helpful to Israel on certain matters to foster an appearance of moderation.

In truth, Russia has neither the capacity nor the will to hinder Iran's imperial project: the Russian position in Syria rests on Iran's ground forces and the strategic alignment with Tehran is far stronger than any minor differences the two sides have, or any commonalities of purpose the Russians have with the West.

Russia consistently and actively enables Iran's influence, to Israel's detriment. In Syria, the Russian S-300 air defences are placed in the exact zones, like Masyaf, where the IRGC is working on precision missiles. The Russians are trying to 'reconcile' the Palestinian factions on terms that would bring Iran's clients greater prominence and legitimacy internationally. In Lebanon, Moscow is supplying full-spectrum support to the Iranian-dominated order, from military cooperation to energy investment. Yet Israel persists in trying to engage Russia.

After the mishap on the Syrian coast in September 2018, when Assad's air defence systems shot down a Russian jet, for which Moscow blamed Israel and threatened all manner of retribution, it was Netanyahu who initiated the telephone call to Russian President Vladimir Putin, stressing the need for Israel–Russia cooperation in Syria. And it was Netanyahu who traipsed to Moscow on 27 February and again on 4 April, still talking about preventing Iranian entrenchment in Syria.

## Israel Cannot Rely on the US

In normal times, Israel's ultimate recourse is the US, but these are not

normal times. Israel still has (rhetorically) strong support from US President Donald Trump. Trump's decision to move the US Embassy to Jerusalem, withdraw from the Iran nuclear deal, restore sanctions on Iran, and add new ones against the IRGC were all very popular among Israelis and their supporters, seen as boosting Israel's security. The flaw in this conception is that these actions are mostly symbolic. Sanctions are the tool of the risk- and cost-averse.

Often considered mercurial, on Syria Trump has been consistent. He had to be talked down from a rapid withdrawal from Syria in early 2018, after his off-the-cuff statement in Ohio. He agreed to a months-long extension of the mission – but only to fight Daesh (also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, ISIS). Trump's officials have said, as recently as late 2018, that 'our fight is with ISIS ... our fight's not with Iran', and added in the same vein: 'We don't have a counter Iranian mission here. We have a defeat ISIS mission.' The December 2018 tweet abandoning the US commitment in Syria was only the rhetorical confirmation that the Trump administration was not serious about rolling back Iran where it counts: on the ground in the region. The actions of the US before that should have demonstrated to allies such as Israel that they were alone in the competition with Iran.

After some initial ambiguity, Trump resumed Obama's policy in the spring of 2017 by sending Assad/Iran-friendly Kurdish forces to liberate Raqqa from Daesh. The Zakaf base in southern Syria was ceded to Iran later that year, after Iran's 'land bridge' across Iraq and Syria to Lebanon had been completed with de facto US assistance. The April 2018 retaliatory strikes for the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons were – against Trump's instincts, it should be said, but on his orders – feeble.

The unmistakable signal of US policy was the July 2018 fall of Deraa, which brought Iran onto another Israeli border, even after the US had ostensibly taken responsibility for keeping this area as a 'de-escalation zone' staffed by rebel forces that were buffering Israel against Iran and Daesh.

Syria is not an isolated case. The US continues to pay for a state apparatus

in Lebanon that Hizbullah dominates. The US underwrites the Iraqi version of Hizbullah, Al-Hashd Al-Shabi, and in September scuttled from the consulate in Basra after two minor rocket attacks from Iran's militias. Iran is gaining ground in Afghanistan alongside the Taliban, which it supports, yet Trump is preparing a surrender in all but name. In Yemen, the US is pushing for a halt to fighting that would leave Iran's Houthi assets with the gains of their aggression. With the exception of a round of sanctions, whose impact will be minimal, Hamas and PIJ have been left alone by the US.

## Conclusion

Israel's leadership must see these dynamics: the US's un-seriousness; the Iranian entrenchment; and the Russian weakness. This suggests an unfortunate gap between Israeli rhetoric about Iran and their actual assessment of the danger. The recent claims that Israeli actions in Syria have contained Iran seem partly intended to reassure domestic opinion, yet also seem to reflect a deeper policy that is short-termist. Israel has a high degree of freedom of action right now, but it will not last, and the emerging trend is one that will constrain Israel.

Even if Israel ignores Russia's air defence systems – as it should – Hizbullah's and Hamas's rocket arsenals are building, and every day Iran's influence in Syria deepens and extends. Having abandoned even token efforts to depose Assad – the simplest and most effective way currently available to disrupt the Iranian project in the region – the Israelis will soon face a stark choice: a bloody and costly intervention, likely across multiple fronts, to eliminate missile arsenals that will soon be capable of targeting critical infrastructure and population centres; or having to act in accordance with Iran's interests to avoid triggering this war.

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