



ISRAEL'S RESPONSIBLE DETERRENCE

HOW TO PREVENT THE PERFECT STORM IN THE
NASCENT MIDDLE EAST

MARCH 2019

**FRIENDS
OF ISRAEL
INITIATIVE**



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FOREWORD

Probably no other region in the world has experienced so many dramatic changes in recent years as the Middle East. Nonetheless, one thing has remained the same, stable and persistent as ever: the declared enemies of the State of Israel. From terrorist groups like Hamas and Hizballah, to the Islamic Republic of Iran, not to mention the myriad efforts to delegitimize the very existence of the State of Israel.

Despite the incessant denunciations by biased bodies in the UN and the EU, Israel has acted with wisdom and moderation during this time, successfully navigating troubled waters. Much of the strategic effectiveness must be credited to the clarity of vision and abilities of the political leadership, as well as to the resilience of the people who have stoically endured a lot of suffering. Add to this the ingenuity of the Israeli security establishment which had to confront an ever-evolving enemy, one who acts on unconventional thinking and tactics and disrespectful of any norms, including targeting civilians or using its own people as human shields.

The Friends of Israel Initiative was founded ten years ago as a group of eminent personalities that saw not only a clear injustice but also a strategic mistake in the unfair treatment of Israel, which runs against the Western world's interest. For us, Israel was - and still is - on the frontier between civilizations, the avant-garde between civility, democracy and freedom and the absence of all these, a modern barbarism. If Israel were to disappear under the threat of its many enemies, the West would follow soon. That's why we believe in a strong, vibrant, democratic and prosperous Israel.

But Israel is not alone in the region. Old actors have dissipated in many places to give birth to warlords, tribalism, and many terrorist organizations; traditional players, like the U.S. have been mutating in their role in the region; and new players have entered the arena, like Putin's Russia. Strategy is always changing, but the amount of change that can be absorbed is limited. Despite this, as stated, Israel is navigating this everchanging new Middle East with great ability, strengthening old relations, exploring new alliances, and responding responsibly to the emerging threats.

This report, which addresses the current and future strategic landscape around Israel, is based on many visits by Foll members to the region as well as on the professional judgement of the members of the High Level Military Group, an independent grouping of former Chiefs of Staff and Commanders from a dozen countries around the world that have been studying the behavior of the IDF and its enemies in recent conflicts. Thus, it is a fusion of political analysis and military assessment - what we consider to be a strategic study.

It is our conclusion that a perfect storm is gathering around Israel at a time when the domestic political situation of the country seems to be focused more on internal disputes than on countering external foes. But that is the essence of a democracy. We are convinced that the Israelis will find the right way to prevent this storm from affecting them, and we hope that the rest of the world will agree that is in our own interest to facilitate Israel's successful counter to these mounting threats.



Rafael L. Bardají
Director, Friends of Israel Initiative

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The nascent Middle East

A new strategic scenario has emerged across the Middle East, quite different from ten years ago. The trends that have provoked the current multi-front, ever-turbulent landscape are the following:

1. Russia's return to active engagement in the region.
2. The end of the active presence of the United States in the Middle East.
3. The end of the civil war in Syria, with the victory of Bashar al-Assad thanks to the paramount support of Russia and Iran support.
4. Iran's growing and successful expansionism.
5. The struggle for hegemony between the Shiite faction of Islam and the Sunni majority.
6. Hezbollah's upgrade.
7. The deterioration of the Palestinian Authority (PA) and its disengagement with the new policy applied by the Trump Administration.
8. The endless animosity between Hamas and the PA.
9. The decline of the importance of petroleum.
10. Turkey's new alignment.

The U.S. withdrawal from the Middle East

In line with the tendency initiated by the Obama Administration, the U.S. is pivoting its interests from the Middle East to Asia. This policy has left room for Russia to emerge as the new superpower and regional broker in the region. Despite the disengagement, the U.S. maintains its strong support for Israel and the Trump Administration has led an impressive pro-Israel agenda. These trends, however, are not guaranteed for the near future.

Bipartisan support to Israel in the U.S. is being challenged and Israel will have to rely on itself in order to maintain its Qualitative Military Edge over its neighbors without the U.S.'s help.

Russia emerges as the new superpower and regional broker in the region

Russia has come to the Middle East, a region that Moscow never really abandoned entirely. Due to its intervention in the Syrian Civil War and the U.S. withdrawal from the Middle East, Russia is now the superpower patron in the region. While Moscow is a close ally of Israel's fiercest enemies (Syria, Iran and Hezbollah), the Russians have also established high-level coordination with Israel for Syria.

Bilateral relations between the two countries have been subjected to important swings recently. Nevertheless, Israel never crossed red lines in Syria agreed with Russia, and its strategic needs require expanding its own freedom of action in that country. Due to the weapon transfers to Hezbollah and the establishment of Iran's strongholds and facilities in the Golan Heights, Israel has no other choice than to keep the high-level collaboration with Russia.

Implications of Russia's involvement in Syria

Russia's involvement in the Syrian Civil War has brought thousands of Iranian troops and Hezbollah fighters closer to Israel. The military and diplomatic implications of this new balance of power and new actors are highly sensitive. Iran is a Russian ally, but at the same time Russia allowed Israel to bomb Iran's facilities and convoys on Syria's soil. Russia does not want an Israel-Iran confrontation in Syria. Moscow wants to reconstruct Syria and bring stability and balance to the region. This reason has enabled Israel to operate in Syria, but with the limits of Moscow's permission.

The “Shiite Crescent” in the Middle East

Over the last ten years, the Islamic Republic of Iran has been able to successfully build a “Shiite Crescent” from Sanaa to Beirut via Baghdad and Damascus, a land corridor that targets Israel and threatens the security of the Sunni states such as Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries.

Iran intends to create a territorial sphere of influence and domination from the Western border of Iran, across Iraq and Syria, all the way to the Lebanese and Syrian Mediterranean seashores. This sphere of influence will allow Iran to:

- (a) create a formidable strategic land buffer zone (and possibly a forward staging ground) vis-à-vis its Sunni adversaries in the Gulf and Jordan;
- (b) operate a land corridor from Iran via Iraq to Syria and Lebanon to maintain the regular supply of arms, munitions, and men for Hezbollah and the Shiite militias in Syria; and
- (c) establish military infrastructure and assets inside Syria and Lebanon— ground, naval, and auxiliary – to support, supply and upgrade Hezbollah and the Shiite militias in Syria – and to turn Syria into an Iranian forward strategic outpost targeting Israel.

Israel’s struggle against the Iranian threat

The realization that Israel will have to allocate more of its own resources for defense appears to reflect the understanding that it can primarily rely only on itself to maintain its national security and its military advantage. Nevertheless, the future position of the U.S. in the region and the current U.S.-Russia adversity will directly affect the course of actions Israel will have to take to protect its vital interests vis-à-vis the threats posed by Iran and its proxies. Israel’s ability to maintain the status quo with the Palestinians and to avoid a violent escalation is essential for focusing on the Iranian threat.

Israel’s new alliances in the Middle East

Over the past few years, Israel has developed a growing strategic relationship with Sunni Arab countries. The most critical set of relationship are with its immediate neighbors, Egypt and Jordan. Despite the confidential nature of these respective strategic relations, their contribution to the national security of Israel, Egypt, and Jordan cannot be exaggerated.

The initial openings towards a more open and public warming of relations between Israel and the Gulf countries is a notable development. More importantly, the strategic coordination and partnership has delivered mixed results. Although intelligence sharing and strategic exchanges offer clear value to all parties, the Gulf countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, have not delivered clear strategic dividends. While Israel’s resolute diplomatic and military campaign against Iran in Syria has thwarted the realization of Iran’s ambitions, the Saudis and their Gulf partners have much less to show. Adding on the domestic challenges of most of the Arab Sunni regimes, and the possibility of adverse domestic upheaval, there are considerable limits to the reliability of Israel’s new partners. Nevertheless, and considering the unavailability of alternatives, Israel has a vested interest in preserving and enhancing the stability of Arab regimes in the Middle East.

Hamas’s eventual takeover of the West Bank

Hamas appears nowadays politically weak. However, if it could show an improving humanitarian situation in Gaza following the recent round of violence, Hamas might be able to demonstrate the attractiveness of its violent and non-compromising streak and enhance its power and broad Palestinian public support. Having Hamas extend its rule and control to the West Bank would embroil Israel and the Palestinians in a full-fledged and protracted violent confrontation with possibly dire regional spillover effects. From an Israeli perspective, this could pose a serious threat to its national security and imperil its evolving relations with the Sunni Arab world. The only other beneficiary of such a development, besides Hamas, is Iran.

Red lines and new approaches to the peace process with Palestinians

Although the Trump Administration Peace Proposal, named the “Deal of the Century”, has not yet been released, Israel must set red lines in a future agreement, and for now they include retaining security control over the West Bank, maintaining the blockade over the Gaza Strip as long as Hamas aims to annihilate Israel, and avoiding a massive influx of Palestinian so-called refugees within its borders. These are core blocs in the peace negotiations, and it remains unclear today how the Trump Administration will outline them in order to reach a lasting agreement between the two parties.

Also, since previous attempts to achieve peace have been rejected by the Palestinian leadership, it is time to apply new formulas. Adding Sunni and Arab countries as custodians of the Palestinian commitments might be a game changer, although it would not be a permanent solution.

Israel's strategic options for the new multi-front scenario

Given the current landscape, which threatens to create a perfect storm in the whole region, Israel needs to design a new strategic playbook to navigate alone in the new Middle East. This playbook should make perfectly clear the red lines and basic requirement of Israel's security and sovereignty.

- 1.** Israel must play and act in the new scenario without reliance on help from others.
- 2.** As long as the Iranian threat endures, Israel must retain the Golan Heights and the West Bank.
- 3.** Deterring and rolling back Iran's expansionism is an existential need and obligation for Israeli security.
- 4.** Israel must think long-term and find new ways to preserve its QME without the financial aid of the U.S. beyond 2028.
- 5.** Hezbollah must be a top security priority for Israel.

- 6.** Israel must keep implementing resilient capabilities over all levels, from borders and military capability to its home front and citizens.
- 7.** Israel must forge new alliances, which provide strategic autonomy.
- 8.** Israel must nurture a strategic consensus between the political leadership and military establishment.

The West's duty to support Israel in the ever-turbulent Middle East

Western countries are losing their interest in the Middle East and they have abandoned the region to anti-Western powers. What happens in the Middle East affects the West, as it has done over the last century. Considering that a perfect storm is forming in the Middle East, the West holds the responsibility to support and help Israel in its pursuit to deter and roll back its enemies. Backing Israel means de-escalating the current situation and also sending a clear message to Iran and its proxies, the main destabilizers of the Middle East. Thus, the provision of diplomatic cover, military means, and open room for maneuver, as well as the ending of delegitimization campaigns and one-sided efforts to harm Israel internationally will prevent a perfect storm erupting in the Middle East.

2

THE NASCENT MIDDLE EAST: A NEW REALITY

2. THE NASCENT MIDDLE EAST: A NEW REALITY

2.1 Volatile, disruptive, and uncertain times in the Middle East

The Middle East has dramatically changed over the last ten years. Since the outbreak of the Arab Spring, the region has been seething in turmoil and new trends have emerged, so a renewed examination of the fundamental assumptions upon which Western nations, and Israel, have based their perceptions of the Middle East for decades is required.

The Syrian Civil War, Iran's expansionism, the reformulation of U.S. policy and the consequent emergence of Russia as the major power in the region have created a more turbulent, wobbly landscape.

This tendency is not exclusive in the Middle East, however. The post-1945 global order is in crisis and the international community is experiencing a paradigm shift. The multilateral organizations and bodies that have been a structural part of this world order are at stake and globalization is going through its big first retreat; the U.S. is being challenged as the leading world power and nation-states are being vindicated again. These are volatile, uncertain times not only for the Middle East, but for the whole world, and the current multipolarity is a turning point whose unknown outcomes will also affect the region and the Israel's strategic position.

In the current strategic configuration that is shaping the Middle East, the following trends can be observed:

1. **Russia's return to active engagement in the region**, with its wide-ranging commitments in Syria and support for the Assad's regime. Russia is the new major power in the Middle East, in the increasing absence of the U.S., which began its disengagement from the region during the Obama administration. Russia's involvement is reorienting the power balance in the Middle East and is forcing states to adopt new positions and strategies. Russian realpolitik is replacing Pax Americana. This shift is one of the most important new characteristics of the Middle East.
2. **The end of the active presence of the United States in Syria**, which is clearing the way for Russian dominance as a major power in the Middle East. The U.S. interest is pivoting from the Middle East to Asia. The withdrawal of troops from Syria is the last of a set of actions aimed at abandoning the Middle East. However, in geopolitics, when there is a vacuum, someone fills it. Moscow has taken the opportunity to become the new superpower in the Middle East.
3. **The end of the civil war in Syria**, with the victory of Bashar al-Assad, who is entrenching his regime under Russian and Iranian patronage. The emergence of Russia as the new superpower in the Middle East and Iran's influence expansion over the region are a response to one reason: the Syrian Civil War. Both countries decided to involve themselves deeply in support of Bashar al-Assad and it worked out. Back in 2011, Russia did not have the position in the region that it does have today, and Iran did not have troops deployed in the Golan Heights, bordering Israel.
4. **Iran's growing and successful expansionism**. Iran is establishing its presence over the entirety of Assad's Syrian territory—from the strategic Abu Kamal area in Syria's eastern desert, building an Iranian corridor all the way to the shores of the Mediterranean. The Iranian presence is being implemented through the Quds Force unit of Iran's Revolutionary Guards, Hezbollah, and thousands of Shiite militia fighters. Iran is also making great effort to place its forces on the Syrian-Israeli border on the Golan Heights, with the aim of creating a new front and friction against Israel. The "Shiite Crescent" is becoming a reality, threatening not only Israel's security, but also the areas of influence of the Sunni states such as Saudi Arabia and Gulf countries as well as Egypt and Jordan.

5. **The struggle for hegemony between the Shiite faction of Islam and the Sunni majority.** This struggle, with its Cold War dynamic, is fueling new tensions and conflict throughout the Middle East. The Iranian threat to the stability of Sunni states, including Egypt and Saudi Arabia, which includes the potential of a nuclear threat, creates new conditions for open and covert strategic alliances between Israel and neighboring countries.
6. **Hezbollah's upgrade.** Hezbollah's forces operating in Syria throughout the long civil war have accumulated combat experience and continue their active involvement in the Syrian theater of war. Concurrently, with close Iranian cooperation, Hezbollah is conducting an ongoing campaign to arm itself with precision rockets in order to alter the balance of the threat equation it presents, not only against the Israeli military, but against Israel's home front as well.
7. **The deterioration of the Palestinian Authority (PA) and its disengagement from the new policy applied by the Trump Administration** in this issue. With the Trump Administration's recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, and the subsequent transfer of the American embassy to Jerusalem, divisions have deepened between the Palestinian Authority (PA) and the United States. The U.S. decision to end financial support for UNRWA has widened the gap between them even further. Also, the PA's political structure is progressively deteriorating, threatening to facilitate a Hamas takeover in the West Bank — which would trigger a game changing crisis for Israel's security.
8. **The endless animosity between Hamas and the PA.** The widening schism between the Hamas regime in Gaza and the PA in Ramallah lays bare the reality that a de facto Hamas state exists in Gaza, with control over territory, organized and well-formed police and military forces, and a government apparatus independent of the PA. This duality has been overlooked by foreign powers that advocate for peace between Israelis and Palestinians. In this Palestinian gridlock, conditions for peace are unrealistic. After a year of friction on the Gaza border, there appears to be some potential for a direct Egyptian mediation between Israel and Hamas, which the PA is actively trying to thwart. The dilemma is whether a resolution in Gaza should be realized through the PA in Ramallah, or rather, directly with Hamas in Gaza, thereby embracing the division that has emerged between Gaza and Ramallah.
9. **The declining importance of oil.** The demand for and price of oil in the West is declining. Newer means of transportation, combined with cleaner and cheaper energy sources, are revolutionizing people's mobility around the world. Moreover, the trend among decision makers in Europe is to restrict its use. It is very risky to affirm that the days of oil are numbered; however, all indicators show that demand for oil will diminish and will hardly ever reach 20th century levels. Middle Eastern oil producers will decline in hegemony, influence and power, which is inseparable from the changes that the region is undergoing.
10. **Turkey's new alignment.** Ankara has been a traditional and reliable ally of the West and Israel. It is a NATO member and a counterbalance to Russian hegemony in the Caucasus, but since Recep Tayyip Erdogan came to power, Turkish foreign policy has evolved to align with Russia and Iran. Erdogan's pro-Islamist government has also been hostile to Israel and the West, trying to stand up as the new top Sunni power in the region.

These are volatile, uncertain times not only for the Middle East, but for the whole world, and the current multipolarity is a turning point whose unknown outcomes will also affect the region and Israel's strategic position

All these trends will likely become turbulent spots sooner or later, and Israel will have a role to play.

From Israel's perspective, the emergence of this nascent Middle East has posed a new multi-front, uncertain scenario where a strategic doctrine, adapted to these changing and unexpected circumstances, turns out essential for survival.

Analysts and pundits used to envision any change in the region as the advent of a new era; however, we are already witnessing how the old order is dying and a new balance of power is rising in the Middle East. Israel has always been prepared to deal with multiple enemies — whether state or non-state actors— in a hostile environment with a remarkable success. However, today it is necessary to create a new paradigm for its security. The new alliances and the new balance of power require it.

Since it is impossible to predict the future, **foresight will be a vital skill to deal with this shifting and ambiguous scenario.** Israel must stay one step ahead from its enemies and must be open to adopting new approaches; having flourished in an adverse but stable environment, adaptability and anticipation will be the paramount strategic abilities to deal with — and overcome — all threats in the present and future. As the classic military strategist Sun Tzu pointed out thousands of years ago, “in the midst of chaos, there is also opportunity”.

This report will first analyze the main indicators and challenges in the new Middle East and how they affect and influence the Israel's security. Second, the report will explore and envision a new strategic doctrine for Israel, a guideline on how Israel can be able to navigate amid the ever-turbulent region.

2.2 Israel's Multi-Front Scenario

Today, Israel enjoy a positive strategic position, one of the best since its independence. None of its adversaries possess — so long as Iran does not develop nuclear bombs — the capability to threaten its existence. Its enemies, with the exception of Iran and Hezbollah, are weaker. However, as history shows, Israel must not take this for granted.

**Israel faces an evolving,
formidable and multilayered
threat from Iran and its proxies,
mainly Hezbollah in Lebanon**

Preponderance vs Evolving Threats

Israel's unprecedented military power, diplomatic outreach, international influence, and economic strength make it a formidable and reliable regional power. Several key components have contributed to establishing Israel's preponderance.



Members of the HLMG talking to residents affected by direct Hamas strikes in southern Israel



IDF official showing the remains of a Hamas-launched missile to Ashkelon

Israel possesses a robust military power with strong intelligence capabilities. Repeatedly demonstrating its qualitative military and intelligence edge, Israel has been able to maintain a solid deterrent posture against state and non-state adversaries. Second, Israel benefits from a close and strong relationship with the U.S. that has been critical in preserving Israel's military advantage. Since the 1970s, the U.S. and Israel have forged a special relationship, which has peaked under the Trump Administration. This link has facilitated a more recent, but increasingly important asset, namely the intensifying strategic relationships with the leading countries of the Sunni-Arab coalition. Finally, Israel boasts a strong economy with a high growth rate, and improved balance of payments and debt-to-GDP ratio, which have upgraded its international credit rating. Over the past decade and a half, Israel's economic resilience has allowed it to withstand wars and extended military operations with no economic repercussions.

However, Israel's highly positive strategic outlook is not immune to change, even fairly rapid change. Israel's power and deterrence are not unchallenged. **Israel faces an evolving, formidable and multilayered threat from Iran and its proxies, mainly Hezbollah in Lebanon.** The instability in the Palestinian arena could yield serious risks to national security, particularly if Hamas achieves its primary objective of taking over the PLO and the Palestinian Authority (PA). These risks, together with the internal Israeli debate on the future of Israeli-Palestinian relations, limit the maneuverability of all parties. Arguably, U.S. policy measures vis-à-vis the Palestinians have distanced the prospects of relaunching the peace process. Thus, the likelihood of a peaceful resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict barely exists.

Addressing these threats and challenges requires tackling daunting strategic dilemmas that are accentuated by shifting American and Russian projection of power and influence in the Middle East. During its first months in office, the Trump Administration appeared eager to decrease its footprint in the region and obligations to Middle East peace and security, except for punitive actions and rhetoric against Iran. **The declining influence of the U.S. in the Middle East, which started during the Obama Administration, offered Russia a strategic opportunity to position itself as the new regional broker.** In recent months, moreover, the U.S. has decided to abandon its engagement in Syria, leaving the region for Russian and Iranian influence. As Israel's relations with Russia sour, the

outcome of the U.S. withdrawal in Syria will directly affect Israel's security. In this challenge, both the U.S. and Israel will have to contend with the realization that there are limits to their ability to rely on their other regional allies, the Sunni-Arab countries.

Against this backdrop of threats and challenges, Israel's strategic goals prioritize preventing Iran's military entrenchment in Syria (if Iran does not resume its nuclear program), preventing Hezbollah's upgrade, and maintaining the status quo with the Palestinians. In concrete military terms, Israel has demonstrated proactive military operations against Iranian assets in Syria, in comparison with highly restrained military responses in Gaza. Israel has supported American and Arab interests in advancing the peace process and plays a critical role in the informal coalition with the U.S. and the Arab countries to contain Iran.

Another vital component in Israel's strategy has been the nurturing of a close relationship with Russia, facilitated Israel's military operations targeting the entrenchment of Iran and its proxies in Syria and the upgrading of Hezbollah's missile inventory. The September 17 2018 incident in which Syrian air defenses shot down a Russian Ilyushin-20 intelligence aircraft following an Israeli bombardment of an Iranian facility on the Syrian coast has demonstrated the limits of the Russian-Israeli relations. The lasting effects of this incident are yet to be determined, but the incident appears to have curtailed – at least to a certain extent – Israel's maneuverability in targeting Iranian assets in Syria. Clearly, the efforts of both Israeli and Arab countries to warm relations with Russia have not driven a wedge between Russia and its regional strategic ally, Iran.

The deterioration of the security situation in Gaza will likely lead to new breakouts of violence.

Hamas is constantly innovating its strategies to harass Israel: the indiscriminate launching of rockets, the raids of massive crowds on the border, and the firebomb kites and incendiary balloons are the daily actions that Hamas is carrying out against Israel. An eventual escalation of violence in the north, initiated by Hezbollah, will probably trigger a new wave of terrorist actions by Hamas, which will force Israel to fight on two fronts against two non-state actors sheltered among civilian populations in vast urban areas. In this scenario, media coverage and diplomatic pressure will prevent Israel from achieving its strategic goals against Hezbollah and

Hamas and, thus, these groups will be incentivized to strike again.

As a matter of fact, the **turbulent regional strategic landscape has initiated an official re-evaluation of Israel's national security doctrine.** Prime Minister

Netanyahu recently launched the debate in the cabinet with the unveiling his "National Security Doctrine 2030" plan. While most of the details remain classified, Netanyahu has announced that the defense budget will increase by more than 25% over the next decade and amount to 6% of GDP. Finally, in addressing ad-hoc and short term challenges, Israeli domestic politics are likely to play a role, particularly in the Israeli-Palestinian track. Israel is entering a period of political uncertainty. Elections will be held in April 2019.

Also, due to Hamas's ongoing actions from Gaza in 2018, and the political consequences that they have caused — the resignation of the Minister of Defense Avigdor Liberman — the military and political leadership are involved in an important debate on how to act against asymmetric threats such as Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Israel is facing now a multi-front scenario and it must apply a new strategic vision to navigate the current turbulences.

2.3 HLMG fact-finding mission

The High-Level Military Group

The High-Level Military Group (HLMG) was formed in early 2015 with a mandate to examine Israel's conduct of military and domestic security operations in the context of a larger project seeking to address the implications for Western warfare of fighting enemies who fight with a hybrid concept combining terrorism with more traditional military methods. Such adversaries show a total disregard for the Law of Armed Conflict (LOAC), while exploiting our own nations' adherence to LOAC and our respect for the preservation of life for their gain.

Concerned by the propagation of misapplied legal concepts in conjunction with narratives that are geared towards political outcomes in debates about the Middle East and Western military action, HLMG's aim is to make an informed contribution to these debates based on HLMG's collective professional experience. One of the HLMG's goals is to add a professional military and legal element to debates about warfare in the 21st Century, which at times have been ill-informed and politicized, and which are of vital importance to our own armies and alliance partners.



Delegation of the HLMG meeting General Herzi Halevi, Commander of the IDF Southern Command, November 2018



HLMG members in a field trip to the Northern front, 2018

HLMG's work covered an assessment of the 2014 Gaza Conflict, a comparative study examining the conduct of operations by democratic militaries against non-state enemies who do not abide by LOAC, and a final report setting out the challenges and policy prescriptions for the current era of warfare. In 2017, HLMG elaborated an assessment on Hezbollah's threat to Israel and how Israel is prepared to confront a new escalation of hostilities. In 2018, HLMG stressed special attention to Hamas's aggressions at Gaza's border.

Assessing Israel's current strategic situation

Following the exhaustive analysis that the High-Level Military Group (HLMG) has provided on the situation at Gaza, in November 2018, during the two days of massive rocket launches by Hamas towards Israeli cities, a **HLMG delegation led by General Klaus von Naumann (Germany), General**

Vincenzo Camporini (Italy), General Thomas James Lawson (Canada), Lieutenant General Michael D. Barbero (USA), and Colonel Richard Kemp (UK) visited the area to assess Israel's response on the ground.

The group was welcomed by General Ram Yavne, Head of Strategic Planning Division of the IDF. General Yavne briefed HLMG delegation about Israel's current strategic situation on all fronts, especially on the borders of Gaza, Lebanon and Syria.

The HLMG delegation visited the Gaza border zone with the IDF Southern Command. HLMG members **were the first non-combatant group to be at the hotspots of the crisis and to be able to interview some of the Israeli soldiers and commanders who actively participated in the operation.** The delegation monitored violent

activity from Erez crossing and from the Black Arrow vantage point, located near Sderot. The IDF informed the HLMG delegation about Hamas's demonstrations at the border every Friday, where children and other vulnerable people are brought to the rallies with the aim of provoking civilian deaths and later exploiting them for the international media.

The HLMG delegation then visited the devastation caused by Hamas's rockets. The group went to Ashkelon, where a Hamas rocket hit a residential building. HLMG members checked the daily difficulties of the citizens of Ashkelon to live under the threat of indiscriminate projectiles. After the visit on the ground, the group was able to discuss the subject with soldiers involved in Hamas's original attack on a bus at the border, as well as after the termination of hostilities with the Commander of Southern Command. The delegation met afterwards with Major General Herzi Halevi, Commander of the IDF Southern Command, to assess the strategy adopted by the IDF during the rain of missiles.

The HLMG delegation concluded that Hamas violates all human rights conventions by indiscriminately attacking Israeli citizens and using human shields against the Israeli military at the Gaza border

HLMG extended its interest to other sensitive points for Israel's security in this fact-finding mission. The delegation went to the **Golan Heights** and observed, guided by Commander of the IDF Brigade stationed there, **the developments at Syria's border** and the measures that Israel has adopted to prevent attacks from there. Following a

tour of the West Bank and a review of associated security challenges, the group had extensive briefings on the serious situation Israel now faces on its northern border in the wake of Assad's consolidation of power, Iran's presence, and Hezbollah activity in the area.

The declining influence of the U.S. in the Middle East, which started during the Obama Administration, offered Russia a strategic opportunity to position itself as the new regional broker

In order to obtain a full, comprehensive overview of Israel's military actions against all the threats that are facing, **the HLMG delegation also met with top officers of IDF divisions**, among them the Head of IDF Intelligence Branch, the head of Israel Air Force Intelligence Branch, and the Head of Operations Branch.

The fact-finding mission concluded with a day-long visit to the Headquarters of the Air Force, the Head of the Intelligence Branch, Brigadier General Amir Gat, and officers from the intelligence branch and from the Army and the Navy.

The HLMG delegation concluded that Hamas violates all human rights conventions by indiscriminately attacking Israeli citizens and using human shields against the Israeli military at the Gaza's border. The IDF's actions against Hamas infrastructure, according to the previous assessment elaborated by the HLMG delegation, complied with its rules of engagement and exceed the legal standards applied to Western armies.



The HLMG delegation being briefed near the Gaza border, and with the Commander of the IDF Strategic Branch



Members of the HLMG being briefed on the security situation on Israel's northern border

HLMG members were the first non-combatant group to be at the hotspots of the crisis and to be able to interview some of the Israeli soldiers and commanders who actively participated in the operation



After the fact-finding mission, **Colonel Richard Kemp presented a submission on behalf of the High-Level Military Group to the United Nations Commission of Inquiry on the 2018 Protests in the Occupied Palestinian Territory.** Kemp highlighted: "The IDF's Rules of Engagement were in-line both with international law and with military standards of other Western militaries. The IDF's institutional efforts to both prevent the violence as well as develop tactics and means for better contending with the violence indicate its commitment to reducing harm, to the extent possible, while ensuring it succeeds in its mission in protecting the Israeli population." The submission further exposed Hamas's strategy of sending massive crowds to border locations and using its fighters and groups of civilians to approach and penetrate the fence **in order to exploit the victims in the media and prevent Israel from achieving its strategic goals defending its borders.**

During the mission, the HLMG was able to understand the current challenges that Israel faces and the new scenario that have been shaped in the Middle East over the last years. The HLMG, provided with first-hand information from top Israeli military officials on the ground, and based on a comprehensive examination, elaborated a study. This report is based in its professional assessment about Israel's strategic future.



3

POWER SHIFT IN THE MIDDLE EAST

3. POWER SHIFT IN THE MIDDLE EAST

3.1 The U.S. Withdrawal from the Middle East

One of the most defining events of the new Middle East is the replacement of one major power, the United States, with another, Russia. The evolving threats posed by Iran and its proxies and the emerging risks in the Palestinian arena coincide with shifts in the projection of power and influence of the two primary global powers active in the Middle East, the United States and Russia. In broad and simplistic terms, the influence and interest of the United States in the region appears to be decreasing, while Russia's is on the rise. However, a more nuanced perspective would reveal that American and Russian interests and influence are not following a steady and linear path.

For instance, while the Trump administration has ratcheted up its punitive measures and rhetoric to compel Iran, it appeared eager to decrease its military footprint and obligations to Middle East peace and security. The U.S. has taken a step forward and has decided to withdraw its troops deployed in Syria — despite previously stating that U.S. military forces deployed in Syria will not leave the country until Iran pulls out its own forces and militias. Additionally, although President Trump has repeatedly reiterated his commitment to unveiling a new Israeli-Palestinian initiative, some of the related U.S. policy measures have reduced the probability of resuming the peace process. At the same time, Russia is keen to position itself as the new regional broker, but also admits that it wields limited influence on its main strategic partner in the region: Iran.

Against this backdrop, Israel has been forging closer relations with Sunni Arab countries, most of which run under the radar. Despite this, there are several issues that raise doubts regarding the reliability of Israel's new partners.

From an Israeli perspective, there is no doubt that the current Administration is perhaps one of the friendliest and most committed administrations to

Israel. The level of strategic coordination and cooperation at all levels of government and military are at their peak. America's military aid and cooperation and its guarantee to preserve Israel's Qualitative Military Edge (QME) are vital foundations of Israel's national security. However, **the United States is no longer interested in spread its hegemony and influence across the Middle East.** This policy was initiated by Barack Obama and has been continued by Donald Trump. For Israel, it has not been a surprise, however, the U.S. withdrawal favoring Russia's influence, is drawing a different landscape in the Middle East.

Chronicle of an announced withdrawal

U.S. policies and statements during the Trump Administration's first year in office reflected a declining regional influence and raised concerns in Israel. The recent withdrawal of the U.S. troops deployed in Syria is a confirmation, a next step of this trend.

The U.S. Administration is following the principles outlined on May 3, 2017, by the former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, the *America First Foreign Policy*: intervention will be limited to the national security and economic prosperity of the U.S.; beyond these two elements, the U.S. will remain isolationist.

**The U.S. withdrawal favoring
Russia's influence, is drawing a
different landscape in the Middle
East**

Since the financial crisis, American decision makers and the public have been less inclined to invest resources in the Middle East. The broadly-held

position is that U.S. military interventions across the region during the first decade of this century failed to produce the anticipated outcomes and claimed an unreasonable human and financial cost. President Trump himself echoed this position. When considering America's broad strategic objectives in the region – fighting terror and promoting regional peace, security, and development – and despite the enormous investment of time, blood, and treasure, U.S. policy has not achieved substantial positive results in the past decade. Furthermore, the level of direct threat posed by the Middle East to U.S. interests has decreased.

With America's Middle East scorecard leaving much to be desired, the prioritization of strategic threats and challenges emanating from the Asia-Pacific region has accelerated the American reluctance to commit resources to the Middle East. The Obama Administration focused on its "Pivot to Asia", while the Trump administration's priority is "great power competition" – a euphemism for the primary focus on China's rise, with Russia as secondary threat. The iconic moment during the Obama Administration for this transition occurred in August 2013 when President Obama chose not to act when the Assad regime crossed the "chemical redline".

President Trump has always expressed clearly his Jacksonian approach to foreign policy, especially in the Middle East. Regarding the U.S. military presence in Syria, on April 2018 he announced his intention to withdraw U.S. troops from Syria: "I want to get out, I want to bring the troops back home, I want to start rebuilding our nation." On August 20, 2018, Trump was even clearer: **"We never should have been in the Middle East. It was the single greatest mistake in the history of our country"**. On December 26 he stressed that: "Our presence in Syria is not open ended and was never intended to be permanent. Eight years ago, we went there for three months and we never left." And on Iran's role in Syria, he said: "They can do what they want there, frankly".

U.S. troops will finally leave Syria, and the U.S. Administration has slashed development aid to Syria, severed ties with some U.S.-supported rebel groups in Syria, and downsized the number of U.S. troops in Iraq. Trump's April statement and the eventual withdrawal from Syria only reinforced the prevalent assumption that the U.S. had accepted

Russia's dominant position in Syria and the whole region as a given.

For Israel, however, the U.S. steps in the Middle East toward disengagement were not unexpected events. Looking back at the past decade, challenges and threats in the Middle East did not top the strategic priorities of the United States. When it came to the Middle East, the American "level of ambition" to deal with regional challenges appeared to be decreasing. This was particularly notable in terms of committing resources to address challenges – be they financial or military. America's strategic priorities lie elsewhere – mainly in the Asia-Pacific. This tendency led to the conclusion that Israel's traditional sole reliance on the U.S. is insufficient. In addressing Israel's most acute and immediate threat to its national security – Iranian attempts to turn Syria into a forward garrison and front against Israel – Israeli leaders turned to Moscow, not to Washington.

With America's Middle East scorecard leaving much to be desired, the prioritization of strategic threats and challenges emanating from the Asia-Pacific region has accelerated the American reluctance to commit resources to the Middle East

Countering Iran is still on the White House Agenda

Still, the U.S. Administration has carried out significant steps in the Middle East, especially regarding Iran's expansionism and malign activities in the region.

The termination of the U.S. participation in the Iran Nuclear Deal (known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action or "JCPOA") on May 8 2018 could be considered a watershed moment for U.S. policy in the Middle East. Following the termination announcement, the U.S. Administration set in

motion a harsh sanctions regime against Iran coupled with a list of far-reaching demands requiring Iran to cease not only all nuclear activities and fully disclose previous activities but also end all its subversive and terrorist operations across the Middle East and around the world. Notably, the threat of sanctions targeted Iran, along with any entity that would conduct business with Iran. While the former international partners of the U.S. in the JCPOA objected to the U.S. decision and to the new sanctions' regime, most international corporations that considered investments and business ventures in Iran withdrew from the Iranian market.

Nevertheless, **the efficacy of the new U.S. position on Iran is yet to be determined.** Although the Israeli government hailed the new American position, Israel's defense establishment raised several concerns. The first primary concern was that despite the glaring shortcomings of the JCPOA, Israeli defense leaders and military experts questioned the rationale of cancelling the JCPOA after the Iranian regime has reaped most of the financial benefits of releasing frozen Iranian assets. With the JCPOA intact, the Iran's ability to pursue nuclear weapons was curtailed and allowed Israel's military to contend with other Iranian threats in the immediate term. Undermining the JCPOA without a viable alternative in place was considered among Israeli defense practitioners and experts a fairly reckless gambit.

The second concern was that economic sanctions – as harsh and debilitating as possible – would not affect a shift in Iran's policies and menacing activities. The previous round of sanctions brought Iran to the negotiating table, which eventually produced an agreement. However, considering the back-channel talks between the Obama Administration and Iran that preceded the formal negotiations, Iran came to the table knowing that the U.S. list of demands was limited. This is not the current case. From the Iranian regime's standing point, the long list of demands that Secretary Pompeo outlined on May 8 2018 are not a basis for negotiations. These demands undercut the Iranian regime's *raison d'être*: the strategic ambition and self-proclaimed religious duty to export the Islamic revolution and rule the Middle East, which means the construction of a Shiite Crescent, a land corridor from Afghanistan to Lebanon.

The implications of the withdrawal from Syria

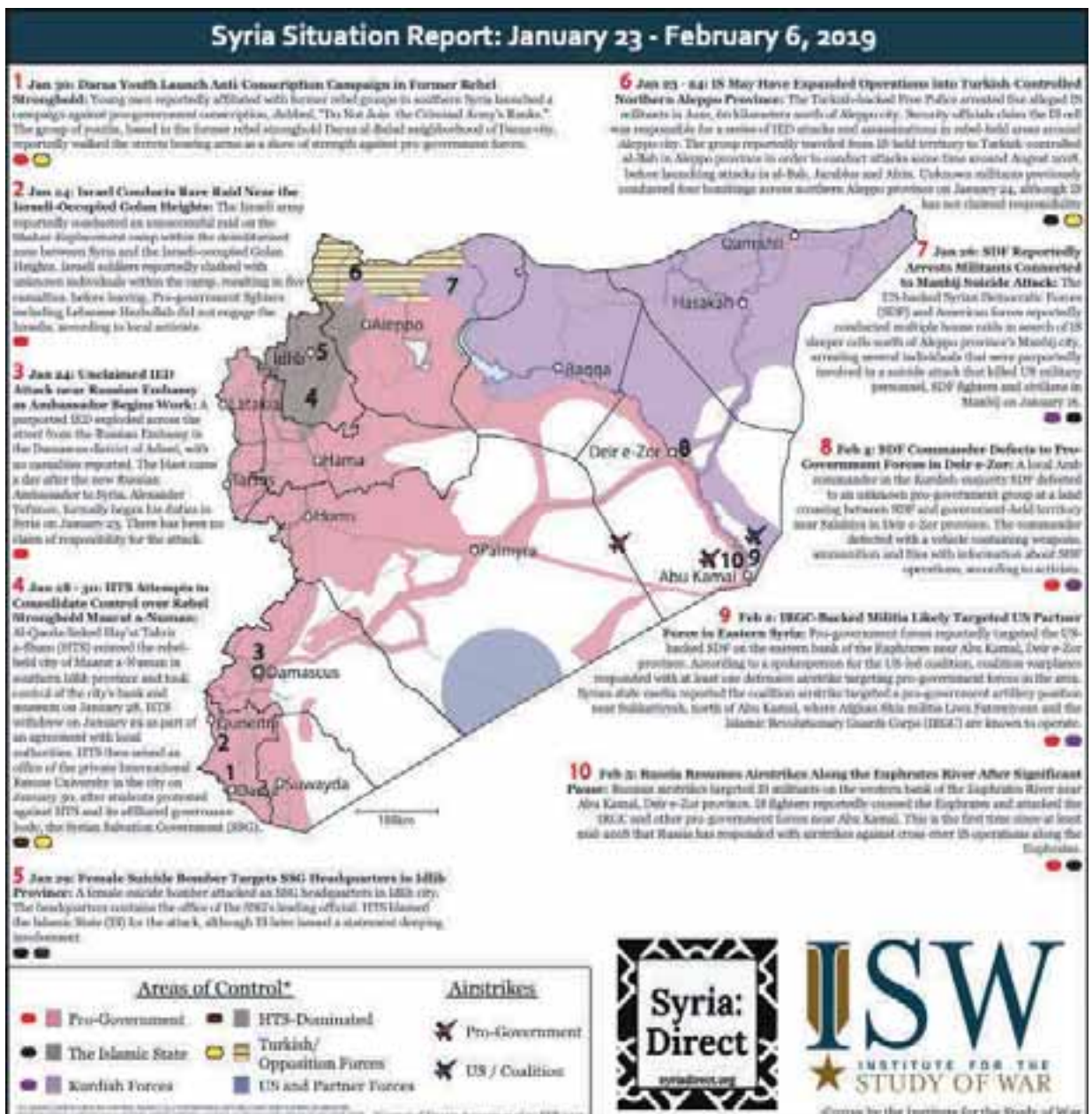
The withdrawal from Syria reflects a substantial change on the U.S. policy towards the Middle East. Although the permanent presence of U.S. troops in the Euphrates Valley would not have changed the current balance of power in the Middle East, the U.S. military presence in Syria provided additional resources to the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to reinforce their position in Northeast Syria and to launch a military offensive against the remaining ISIS enclave on the eastern bank of the Euphrates in late September 2018. The offensive was notably supported by air strikes carried out by the U.S.-led international coalition. Nevertheless, the ongoing campaign has not been successful in uprooting ISIS and after the withdrawal, **the U.S. Administration will have left the fight against ISIS in the hands of Turkey, Syria and Russia.** With this policy change, the U.S. has dropped out of the U.N. process for resolving the Syrian war and currently the door is open for the Russian efforts to reach a "peaceful" resolution through its own "Astana" process involving along its own side, Iran, and Turkey –which have formed a bloc in the Middle East.

The U.S. military presence in Syria had considerable strategic implications. Although the number of U.S. "boots on the ground" was modest (2,000 soldiers), together with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), they were a crucial obstacle to Iran's path to establish a broad and effective land road realizing the "Shiite Crescent". Thus far, the SDF have effectively prevented Iran from turning the liberation of Mosul into a march onto Syria. Moreover, U.S. forces maintained a garrison in al-Tanf – further south and near the closed Iraqi-Syrian border crossing on the old Baghdad-Damascus highway. This deployment forced Iran to open and attempt to clear the land route connecting the Syrian-Iraqi border at Albu Kamal northwest towards Deir Ezzor along the western bank of the Euphrates. Iran faces serious challenges in clearing the route for effective traffic due to the ISIS presence and attacks in surrounding areas. The U.S. and SDF forces that bordered this route – on the other side of the Euphrates – constrained the maneuverability of Iran and Assad forces. U.S. military presence guaranteed the de facto autonomy of the SDF-controlled territory north to this route. With the U.S. out of the ground, SDF

leaders, who had already considered the American withdrawal a plausible development, are seeking a settlement with the Assad regime: the political leadership of SDF negotiated with the Assad regime in Damascus in August.

Indeed, even with the U.S. withdrawal, accompanied by a \$230 million aid cut to stabilization assistance for northeastern Syria, Iran will face challenges in operating these land routes. Various sources have reported on armed clashes in mid-August between Assad regime forces and Iranian-commanded militia around Abu Kamal. ISIS

holds on to a sizeable territory in the heart of the Syrian desert east of the Deir Ezzor-Palmyra road in addition to a small, but formidable, enclave very close to Abu Kamal on the eastern banks of the Euphrates. Thus, the withdrawal of U.S. forces from northeastern and eastern Syria, resulting in a deal between the Assad regime and SDF, will clear the path for Iran to move ahead and establish multiple land routes connecting Iran with Syria and Lebanon via Iraq, tuning the Shiite Crescent into a geopolitical reality.



Syria situation report after the announcement of the withdrawal of the U.S. troops from the Euphrates Valley; Institute of Study of War



Russian forces in Syria

Nevertheless, Pentagon officials had stated in clear terms that U.S. military will not engage Iranian forces or militias unless facing a situation of self-defense. The authorization for the use of Military Force (UAMF) under which the U.S. military operated in Syria limits it to fighting against those responsible for the attacks on September 11, 2001 and any “associated forces”. Under the Obama Administration it was determined that the campaign to eradicate ISIS would fall under the 2001 UAMF, as ISIS was an offspring of al-Qaeda in Iraq.

Before his resignation (presumably due to the U.S. withdrawal from Syria) Secretary Mattis had reinforced the impression that current U.S. actions in the Middle East reflect a change in policy. Speaking in Bahrain at the end of October 2018, Secretary Mattis stated: “Today, I make clear: Russia’s presence in the region cannot replace the long-standing, enduring, and transparent U.S. commitment to the Middle East.”

The shift course of American policy in Syria represents the end of American challenges to Russian interests in the Middle East. If the U.S. declines to pressure Russia to contain and check Iranian influence, **Russia will consolidate its role as the new major power dominating the Middle East, controlling its closest allies, Syria and Iran.** fight against ISIS in the Euphrates Valley will continue, and Turkey, Russia, and Iran will lead it. The Kurds

will likely move closer to the Assad regime for fear of Ankara.

Russia will consolidate its role as the new major power dominating the Middle East, controlling its closest allies, Syria and Iran

Iran has seen this policy shift as a victory. The commander of the Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) ground forces, Brig. Gen. Mohammad Pakpour, stated that “the Americans have come to the conclusion that they can exercise power neither in Iraq and Syria nor in the entire region”. The commander-in-chief of the IRGC, General Mohammad Ali Jafari, said Iran will maintain its military presence in Syria and warned Israel that its territory is within reach of Iranian missiles. Yafari stated on January 18, “We will keep all the military advisers, as well as the weapons, that we have to train the warriors of the Islamic resistance and to support the oppressed people of Syria... Fear the day Iranian missiles guided with precision fall on your head roaring and avenge all the blood that (the Israelis) have spilled from the oppressed Muslims in the region.”

The shift in U.S. policy in the Syrian arena comes at a critical time for Israel – as relations with Russia are experiencing an unexpected low following the September 17 incident. In the aftermath of the downing of the Russian aircraft by Syrian air defense, Russia has demonstrated a harsh stance towards Israel's military operations in the Syrian arena. Beyond the Russian desire to put the blame on Israel and away from Russian and Syrian military air traffic control, the new negative position towards Israel could be also part of the Russian response to the U.S. attempts to counter its interests in Syria.

However, despite the drawbacks mentioned before, **the U.S. withdrawal from the Middle East can also be an opportunity for Israel.**

3.2 The U.S. commitments to Israel's security

The Trump Administration's unprecedented friendship with Israel is of immense value to Israel, but its direction and actions on issues of critical importance for Israel raise concerns. Some of these policy measures have unnecessarily accentuated risks to Israel's national security, even if unintentionally. The most recent shift in the U.S. posture and strategic ambitions in the Middle East is negatively viewed in Israel, particularly as relations with Russia sour and the strategic reliability of Israel's new regional partners – the Arab Sunni countries – is increasingly questionable.

The withdrawal is not the end of the U.S.'s support

On December 19, 2018, Yaakov Amidror, former Israeli national security advisor, stated that "with this withdrawal, the United States abandons Syria and leaves Israel alone".

Despite Amidror's lament, **the U.S. policy shift on the Middle East is not the end of the American support to Israel.** The U.S., besides placing pressure on Iran's behavior, maintains strong commitments to Israel's security that guarantee the Israel's military superiority in the region, but this support could as well evaporate in a short or mid-term. Also, the U.S. still considers Israel's security a national interests and establishment political parties traditionally claim that the Israel and American

peoples share core values such as freedom, democracy, and stability.

These **U.S. commitments have been reconfirmed and reinforced in the last decade.** There is no agreement or mutual defense treaty that provide formal U.S. security guarantees to Israel; however, the U.S. law requires the Administration to carry out actions to preserve Israel's Qualitative Military Edge (QME) in the Middle East. In 2016, the U.S. and Israel signed a 10-year bilateral military aid memorandum of understanding (MOU) in which the U.S. pledged to provide Israel \$3.3 billion in Foreign Military Financing (FMF) from 2019 to 2028. The MOU, however, is subjected to congressional appropriations.

The U.S., besides placing pressure on Iran's behavior, maintains strong commitments to Israel's security that guarantee Israel's military superiority in the region, but this support could as well evaporate in the short to mid-term

Along the line of isolationism, some voices are being heard in the U.S. House to cut foreign aid in general, and to Israel "in time and scope", as Senator Rand Paul suggested.

Be that as it may, although the framework can change in a volatile way in the near future, the U.S.'s current level of support to Israel is unprecedented.

Time for new non-exclusive alliances

While the provisions of the MOU cannot be taken for granted, the military aid agreement seems to be stable until its termination in 2028. In any case, Israel should think long-term. According to the political trend in the U.S., another MOU is unlikely to be repeated – at least in the same conditions as the current one. **Israel therefore should design a plan to keep the QME without U.S. financial aid beyond 2028.**



Iron Dome Air Defence Missile System

Signals about the U.S. general disengagement in foreign policy are clear and widespread. In his first speech at the United Nations General Assembly, President Trump pointed out his *Westphalian* approach on foreign policy:

In foreign affairs, we are renewing this founding principle of sovereignty. Our government's first duty is to its people, to our citizens — to serve their needs, to ensure their safety, to preserve their rights, and to defend their values.

As President of the United States, I will always put America first, just like you, as the leaders of your countries will always, and should always, put your countries first.

All responsible leaders have an obligation to serve their own citizens, and the nation-state remains the best vehicle for elevating the human condition.

But making a better life for our people also requires us to work together in close harmony

and unity to create a more safe and peaceful future for all people.

This approach, combined with the general foreign aid cuts, shows a new tendency in the U.S. decision-making that, sooner or later, will also affect Israel.

In this regard, support for Israel was one of the few issues that continues to arouse broad agreement among US politicians. Several very powerful ideas make US support for Israel “above politics” and “unbreakable” as Obama said in one of the lowest moments of the bilateral relationship in recent years. The shared values (democracy, rule of law, Judeo-Christian culture), the refuge from religious persecutions as a founding event, or the feeling of exceptionality are very powerful bounds between two nations that usually generated bipartisan consensus in the U.S.

However, this faith might be coming to an end. In January 2018, the Pew Research Center revealed that among voters support for Israel is not transverse. Republican voters who sympathized with Israel were 79%, while Democrats barely reached 30%.

**U.S.'s strong and real
commitments will not be enough
for Israel to maintain its
superiority over its neighbors**

The Democratic Party's slide into a broader anti-Israel sentiment among its rising leaders is worrisome. Newly elected Democratic Party's Representatives in U.S. Congress have initiated an earthquake in the party's position on Israel. Michigan Rep. Rashida Tlaib has openly supported BDS, condemned Israel, and is calling on her party to support such claims. Tlaib is not the only member of the **new generation of Democrats who are dramatically shifting the party's position on Israel:** Minnesota Democratic Rep. Ilhan Omar has also supported BDS and “hoped for Allah to awaken the people and help them see the evil doings of Israel”; New York Democratic Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez has adopted the anti-Israel rhetoric and has labeled Israel's defensive actions in Gaza a

massacre; and New York state senator Julia Salazar, a BDS supporter, has publicly rejected the two-state solution as a solution for the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians.

Previous politicians have been endorsed by the anti-Israel organization Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), whose ideas could turn out mainstream in the Democratic Party.

The times seem to be changing and, given the position adopted by the Trump Administration, the most favorable to Israel in memory, **the bipartisan and broad support to Israel will be challenged.**

Both countries have historically had shared values and concerns. Both nations' destinies have been guided by the same principles and goals. Nevertheless, although shared values and general principles remain, the U.S. exit from the Middle East and Russia's entry into the vacuum is applying a new constrained policy on foreign aid, and support for a bipartisan consensus on Israel can end sooner or later.

In sum, U.S.'s strong and real commitments will not be enough for Israel to maintain its superiority over its neighbors. Israel will have to be able to (1) keep the high-level channel of communication with Moscow —Netanyahu has visited Putin nine times since 2015— and (2) forge new alliances and partners: the mutual understandings with the Visegrad countries and Austria in Europe, and with India in Asia, are steps in the right direction.

The world will be multipolar, and so should Israel's foreign policy. The U.S. will keep its important help to Israel in the mid-term; its diplomatic support will

continue, but on the ground Israel is alone. Despite the U.S. strong alliance with Israel, the Jewish state can only rely on itself to thwart Iran and its proxies. **A new strategic multi-front scenario for Israel is open, a nascent landscape where Israel must solely maneuver.** It is time for Israel for assume it.

3.3 Russia's patronage in the region

Russia's re-entry into Middle East politics in recent years is a development of significant importance and serious consequences. Despite Russia's limitations in power and resources, through effective strategy, unconstrained by domestic opinion or moral imperatives, it has become the most dynamic, and in some significant ways the most consequential external actor in the Middle East. **The Russian presence in Syria is shaping the security environment of Israel and will pose a growing challenge for Israel's regional policy goals.**

As the U.S. deprioritized the Middle East in the beginning of this decade, Russia has sought to leverage the opportunity and to enhance its strategic position in the region. In retrospect, the watershed moment for Russia's newfound ambition in the Middle East transpired in response to the iconic moment that marked the declining U.S. interest in projecting power and influence in the Middle East – when President Obama chose not to retaliate when the Assad regime crossed the “chemical redline” in August 2013. President Putin then seized the opportunity and Russia negotiated the Assad regime's disarmament of chemical weapons.



President Putin with Russian troops

Two years later, in the summer of 2015, Russia intervened militarily in the Syrian war and salvaged its ally, the Assad regime, which was nearing defeat. The immediate purpose of the intervention was to turn the tide of the war and save an ally that held on to a valuable geopolitical position in the Eastern Mediterranean.

A new dominant power in the Middle East

From the outset of its military deployment in Syria, Russia invested considerable resources in the rapid build-up of military infrastructure including its very own Air Force base near Latakia. It was clear that Russia's military was there to stay.

The Russian intervention supported by the “boots” of Iranian proxies – Hezbollah and Iranian-commanded militias – turned the tide of war in Syria. Reinforced by its military achievements, Russia, in cooperation with Iran and Turkey, started its own diplomatic process to end the war on Russia's preferred terms. That is, the ruthless use of force would incrementally clear most of Syria's territory, allowing the Assad regime to regain its hold across growing parts of the war-torn country.

Russia's predominant position became evident and earned American acquiescence. First, Russia worked out the disarmament of Syria from chemical weapons. Later, the first of a series of local ceasefire or “de-escalation” agreements in Syria in July 2017 was announced by Presidents Putin and Trump in Hamburg. Russia dictated the terms for the de-escalation in southern Syria – that is the Syrian side of the Golan Heights – and the U.S. accepted.

Russia's posture and policies in the Middle East appear to have a well-defined mission – by projecting power and influence, Russia will position itself as a “balancer” to leverage opportunities that could enhance its global stature and standing and/or reap financial and commercial benefits. To that end, **Russia has established itself as the sole global power that maintains strategic coordination and cooperation – at varying levels – with all the main regional powers in the Middle East.** Taking advantage of declining U.S. influence in the region,

Russia, therefore, has tirelessly developed closer relations with the main U.S. allies in the region, namely Israel, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, although Iran was and remains its primary strategic ally in Syria and in the Middle East. **Unlike the American engagement, Russia's engagement in the Middle**

East is not benign in the sense of a commitment to regional peace and security, and its strategic relations do not rest on historical legacy or shared values. Rather, Russia demonstrates a hard-nosed “realpolitik” approach that does not guarantee the interests of its allies. Russia, first and foremost, is seeking stability in the Middle East and it has fostered relations with all players at stake.

Although Russia did not show an inclination to get involved deeply in the region's conflicts, Moscow has emerged as a must-stop destination for Middle Eastern leaders who seek to solve problems. Russia has been open to hearing all actors in the region; throughout the process, Putin is nowadays the rising patron of the Middle East.

Russia has established itself as the sole global power that maintains strategic coordination and cooperation – at varying levels – with all the main regional powers in the Middle East

Moscow has been placed under economic sanctions, imposed by the European Union and the United States, as a response to the annexation of Crimea in 2014. However, in order to compensate for the economic losses, Russia has become a major weapons, energy and infrastructure provider in the Middle East and North Africa. In the last five years, Russia has doubled weapon exports in the region, and has closed military cooperation deals with Egypt, Iraq, and Libya.

From Morocco to Iran, Russia's rising influence is evident; U.S. allies, especially, are looking in the other direction.

Russia's intervention in Syria

Underlying Russia's motivations in Syria is an attempt at retaliation against the humiliation that President Putin perceives following the breakup of the Soviet Union and Russia's view of the United States as an enfeebled rival, whose influence it should seek to curb further wherever possible.

Added to this is Russia's grave concern over the international community's approach to Libya, which Russia did not perceive as a humanitarian intervention, but as a power-play by the West and a manipulation of the international community. As such, Russia saw the intervention there and in Syria as dangerous precedents that also threatened its own security. Furthermore, **Russia is attempting to regain some of the Soviet Union's strongholds in the Middle East by investing in relations with important actors, such as Iran, and by providing large-scale support to traditional allies in difficulty, such as in Syria.** Finally, the question of radical Islam is real for Russia also, particularly as relates to Sunni Muslims in the northern Caucasus — Russia has not emphasized this issue in the context of Syria but has made plain it has no particular commitment to Assad, but is committed both to halting Sunni radicalism, and thus, the fight against Islamic State, and to the strong and long-term relations between Russia and Syria, going back to Soviet times.

Russia's intervention in Syria proceeded in three phases. The first was a result of the Syrian Army's overwhelming dependence on Russian weaponry. In order to expand its supply, Russia built up its stronghold at the port of Tartus. At first, it mainly supplied large quantities of ammunition, but this grew to encompass advanced weaponry, much of which had no direct application in the Assad regime's war against the rebels and some of which was transferred to Hezbollah. Russia denies any knowledge of this transfer of advanced weapons to Hezbollah, but there is no doubt that its operatives

are well aware of it and have taken no effective steps to prevent it.

This points to another imperative for Russia in this context, namely economic considerations - Russia requires foreign currency and has no hesitation to selling even the most advanced weapons so long as its price is met. As such, the fact that there is no connection between the war needs of its Syrian ally and the new weapons that Russia has sold them, and that a considerable share of these weapons made their way to Hezbollah, gave Russia no pause for thought. The extent of Iran's role in funding these arms transfer is unclear, but it must be assumed that Iran covered at least those elements that ended up with Hezbollah.

In the next phase, encouraged by its observation of the weak posture of the United States in the negotiations with Iran over the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (known as the JCPOA or Iran nuclear deal), Russia concluded that nobody in Washington would stop it and that it was not possible to blame Russia for cooperating with Iran when Iran itself was now a legitimate dialogue partner of the Americans. The Russians subtly expanded their involvement further. Moving from the supply of weapons to inserting military advisors and intelligence personnel was a fairly inconspicuous mode of upping its influence, yet it is likely that Russia's sophisticated intelligence capabilities turned the tide and halted the deterioration in the position of Assad's army, turning Russia into a decisive actor in the Middle East of today.



Russian navy firing missiles as a drill before launching them into Syria

The third phase saw a marked escalation of Russia's involvement with the deployment of ground troops, mainly to secure Russian strongholds as well as air and sea ports, and advanced warplanes. Russia then began openly using maximum force in Syria to save the Alawite regime to which it had a long-standing commitment — this was its top priority, with the fight against Islamic fundamentalists only a secondary priority. Since then, it has made the most of the opportunity presented to it and has turned the battlefield in Syria into an arena in which it can demonstrate its strategic capabilities, and a testing ground for new weapons systems to a degree far beyond that demanded by the situation on the ground. It fired cruise missiles from warships in the Caspian Sea, made use of strategic bombers and of firepower from ships in the Mediterranean as well as deploying the S-400 system against aerial threats. These acts have to be seen as demonstrations of Russian power rather than a response to operational needs. **Russia sought to demonstrate that it is a state that can rapidly deploy a sizable aerial force, support it with ground defense forces, give it a missile defense umbrella against any possible threat, and conduct an extended logistical operation, far from home and while taking part in constant fighting.** This is the most complex operation Russia has carried out since the end of the Cold War, and it goes far beyond the relatively low-level fighting in Georgia, or the more complex operation in Ukraine, both of which were on Russia's borders.

Russia sought to demonstrate that it is a state that can rapidly deploy a sizable aerial force, support it with ground defense forces, give it a missile defense umbrella against any possible threat, and conduct an extended logistical operation, far from home and while taking part in constant fighting

Russia's success in Syria is an extremely important component in its change of status in the region. It has shown that it can be relied upon as an ally, in contrast to perceptions of the United States, and that it has the capabilities and the willpower to follow through on its decisions to protect its interests and those of its allies. Further, in its success so far, Russia has demonstrated its revived superpower capabilities in Syria, not only to regional states and organizations, but to Europe and the United States. However, it should be understood clearly that this success comes in the context of not only siding with the enemies of the West, but also in discarding rules of warfare and moral considerations to a grave extent in picking its allies and methods. Thus, the absence of democratic checks and balances on Russian state power, and the lack of relevant legal and moral constraints has smoothed Russia's path to military success in the region.

Russia's entry into the Middle East arena in such a dominant way is of serious consequence to Israel, which understandably views the de facto alliance between Russia and Iran in Syria as an intensely alarming development. In addition to denying Iran an opportunity for entrenchment in Syria, Israel is also acutely focused on the issue of Hezbollah. Russia has not halted its supply of the most up-to-date weapons to Syria, despite full knowledge that some of them make their way into the hands of the Middle East's strongest terror organization, making them at the very least passive partners to the build-up of Hezbollah capabilities aimed at striking Israel in the future.

3.4 Complex Russia-Israel relations

The relations between Israel and Russia have historically been complex. Currently, is one of the most defining relationships in the nascent Middle East. A relationship that has led to a strong and high-level coordination in Syria that, for the Israel's interests, should be maintained despite recent setbacks.

Russia's permanent interest on the Middle East through the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians

Russia's desire to become a dominant superpower in the Middle East has always been present and was not interrupted by the collapse of the USSR. Due to Israel's current position, no superpower can influence in the region without interacting with Jerusalem at political and military levels. Also, **trying to mediate in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process is an unwritten requirement to obtain a leading position in the Middle East.** Russia-Israel bilateral relations has been marked by pragmatism and realpolitik, with the main aims of stability and areas of mutual interests.

Russia's mediation in the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians has been one of its most active policies. Russia is a member of the Quartet, and as such has played an important role. For example, it was the first country to recognize Hamas after the elections held in Gaza in 2006; Putin personally received Hamas officials in Moscow after their victory. This dialogue and relations with Hamas have not stopped, and some analysts point that Russia's goal is to get Hamas's support for the Arab Peace Initiative and to align it with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).

Nonetheless, Russia has also approached Israel over the same period of time to balance its position in the conflict. Since the meeting in 2001 between then-Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and President Putin, Moscow has been on Israel's side several times without relinquishing its support to the Palestinians. Sharon and Putin shared the same strategic vision of Chechnya and Lebanon and both showed their rejection of Western critics against their anti-Islamic terror measures. Actually, the fight against Jihadism has been an important attachment point between the two countries.

Moscow's position on the conflict has always sought a balance between two parties. For example, in April 2017, Russia recognized West Jerusalem as the official capital of the State of Israel — without conditioning it on the establishment of future Palestinian capital in East Jerusalem — and showed its desire to become a mediator in the conflict.

Today, **after Russia's direct engagement in the Syrian Civil War, which marks a turning point in the**

new Middle East, the Israeli and Russian armies have been maintaining constant coordination at the highest level. Both parties have avoided direct confrontation because both parties seek to stabilize the Middle East. Israel has been allowed to carry dozens of aerial attacks on Syria thanks to military coordination with Russia. In return, Israel has deployed diplomatic support to Russia in other areas. For example, Israel has refrained from condemning Russian actions in Ukraine and did not mention Russia in its condemnation of the poisoning of Sergei Skripal. Russia, for its part, set two conditions for Israel's attacks on Syria soil: not to kill Russian soldiers, and not to bring down the Assad regime.

With Russia, it seems that Israel is applying the same approach as Moscow's: pure realpolitik— an interest-based exchange of support and cooperation that benefits both parties.

After Russia's direct engagement in the Syrian Civil War, which marks a turning point in the new Middle East, the Israeli and Russian armies have been maintaining constant coordination at the highest level

From fluid understanding to a possible deterioration

Nevertheless, since the September 17 incident, Russia's relations with Israel have taken a downward spiral. That day, Israel sent the Russians an early warning before attacking an Iranian facility near Latakia. Twenty-five minutes after the attack, a Syrian air defense operator decided to shoot down a Russian aircraft — which was 150 km away from the place of the Israeli attack. The missile that brought down the aircraft was a Russian Il-20. Despite the evidence, Russia blamed Israel and announced that it would deploy the S-300 air defense system in Syria.

The bellicosity of Russian military officials' statements, using blatant lies and disinformation regarding the incident, echoed hostile Soviet narratives regarding Israeli "aggressions" in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Most notably, immediately after the incident, Prime Minister Netanyahu requested a meeting with President Putin — such meeting was supposed to be held on February 22, 2019, five months after the incident, but it was finally postponed by Netanyahu due to internal political tensions. According to the media reports, both leaders spoke by phone regarding the situation in Syria and the strengthening of the security coordination between two countries. Until the September 17 incident, Prime Minister Netanyahu was President Putin's most frequent visitor compared to any other head of government. In the past, whenever Prime Minister Netanyahu

requested a meeting, it was scheduled within 48 hours.

In principle, the S-300 deployment should not worry Israel. According to intelligence sources, it was the defense establishment, and not the President Putin, that pushed for this deployment after the incident. If this system remains under Russia's control and is not transferred to the Syrians, Israel would apparently be able to continue operating in Syria. The previous status quo (military coordination between two armies at the highest level) may be reestablished.

However, the deterioration of Russian-Israeli relations might not hinge entirely on the September 17 incident. The shooting down of the Il-20 aircraft is converging with the pronounced change in American policy towards Syria.

Russian Ministry of Defence map



Map and flight paths of the aircrafts involved in the September 17 incident

Russian officials presumably suspect that the new American policy in Syria, particularly the decision not to pull out U.S. military from Syria, was supported, if not advocated, by Israel. If this

assessment is correct — from a Russian perspective, Israel was not only harming the interests of Russian allies, something the Russians had no problem tolerating, but the Israeli support to the U.S. was a

blatant attempt to undermine Russian strategic interests in Syria and threatening Russia's position as the global power broker in Syria and an aspiring power in the broader Middle East.

Clearly, this supposed to be U.S. policy in Syria caught the Kremlin off guard. The mid-July summit in Helsinki did not reveal an imminent shift in U.S. policy, which crystalized six weeks later when top U.S. officials, led by President Trump, straightforwardly issued threats against Russia and the Assad regime to refrain from the assault on Idlib. Notably, the American threats caused the Russians to defer the assault. The U.S. also attempted to undermine the Russian-led Astana process and resurrect the U.N. process.

Russia's involvement in the Syrian Civil War has brought thousands of Iranian troops and Hezbollah fighters closer to Israel

For its part, Russia resorted to testing U.S. military presence in Syria, albeit unsuccessfully. In early September, as the U.S. was deterring Russia from taking Idlib, the Russian military communicated to its American counterparts that it intended to enter the U.S.-declared al-Tanf deconfliction zone "to pursue terrorists". Russia has long maintained that the U.S. and coalition forces harbor ISIS terrorists. The Russian communication notified American forces that it would use "precision strikes". The American response was twofold. First, the U.S. military informed the Russians that "the U.S. does not require any assistance in our efforts to destroy ISIS in the At Tanf deconfliction zone." Further, the Americans "advised" the Russians to "remain clear". To make sure that the American message was clear, the U.S. military staged and made public a live-fire aerial assault exercise involving a company-size unit of the U.S. Marines Corp in the vicinity of At-Tanf. A U.S. military spokesperson made it clear that the exercise was intended to warn the Russians against carrying out a military operation in the U.S. zone. Needless to say, Russia called off the counter-terrorist mission in the At Tanf zone.

Finally, before the summit between Presidents Putin and Trump on November 11, 2018 in Paris, a senior Russian defense official publicly accused (October 26) the U.S. military of attempting to perpetrate an aerial attack on Russia's air force base near Latakia, allegedly involving some 12 drones. The official stated that President Putin would raise the matter with President Trump. Curiously, the alleged attempted attack took place in January, according to the official. Moreover, the details the Russian official provided offered a rather odd and lacking account of events. The Russian decision to accuse the U.S. of attempting to strike Russian forces using a ten-month-old incident with lacking details and looming question marks might indicate a degree of Russian disarray in face of the posture and policy of the U.S. in Syria and the Middle East.

Nonetheless, **this Cold-War dynamic between Russia and the U.S. changed dramatically after the Trump's decision to withdraw the troops deployed in Euphrates Valley (Syria) which aimed to fight and defeat ISIS in collaboration with the SFD.** While Russia considered that Israel backed the U.S.'s involvement in Syria, in the new scenario Moscow has a free hand to lead the fight against ISIS in Syria, without any constraint or deterrence provoked by the U.S.'s presence. As mentioned above, the White House is no longer interested in Syria and has left the place to Russia's influence. Israel is obligated to deal with this new reality.

Despite collaboration and pragmatic relations, Russia maintains close ties with Israel's fiercest enemies: Iran and by extension with its proxy Hezbollah. Russia is a major provider of weaponry to Iran and it is interested in finding customer for the nuclear industry. Both countries have carried out a jointly effort to win the civil war in Syria and to keep Bashar al-Assad in power and Hezbollah has been transformed after its involvement in Syria. Russia also strongly support Iran's right to develop a civilian nuclear program.

Still, the direct consequence to Israel's security is worrisome. **Russia's involvement in the Syrian Civil War has brought thousands of Iranian troops and Hezbollah fighters accumulated closer to Israel.** The cycle of military and diplomatic implications of this new balance of power and of new actors is highly sensitive and fragile. Iran is a Russian ally, but at the same time Russia allowed Israel to bomb Iran's facilities and convoys on Syria's soil. Russia does not want an Israel-Iran confrontation in Syria.

Moscow wants to rebuild Syria and bring stability and balance to the region.

A delicate compromise is at stake every day in Syria and **Israel must be able to play all the cards in defense of its security and its interests.**

ISRAEL'S RED LINES IN SYRIA

- **Stop precision missile production in Lebanon and prevent Hezbollah from upgrading its firepower**
- **Stop Iran's weapon transfers to Hezbollah**
- **Prevent the establishment of Iranian missile factories, launch sites, weapons storage facilities, and a network of cross-border attack positions in Syria and in the Golan Heights**
- **Disrupt Iran's land corridor to the Mediterranean**

Recent developments in a pragmatic relation

In mid-January, the Israeli Air Force bombed an Iranian target near Damascus in response to a missile that landed in the Golan Heights; Syrian forces counteracted by launching dozens of surface-to-air missiles. Israel had not previously informed Russia of the attack, as it has traditionally done. This action could be interpreted by Russians as meaning that Israel is willing to take whatever action is necessary to prevent Iran's expansion and fortification in its neighborhood.

On January 29, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Vershinin, and the Kremlin's special envoy for Syria, Alexander Lavrentiev, agreed in Jerusalem to strengthen the security coordination in Syria to avoid "friction". The day before, Russian envoys held a meeting with Israeli Foreign Ministry Director General, Yuval Rotem, described by the Russians as "significant and detailed".

The main issues discussed were Iran and the situation in Syria. Russian envoys also highlighted "Russia's commitment to Israel's national security," according to the Prime Minister Office.

In addition, since Netanyahu also assumed the Defense portfolio on November 2018, Israel is openly recognizing these attacks in Syria contrary to the traditional "no-comments" policy.

Freedom to act above all

Israel has sought a pragmatic course in front of this serious new complication in its strategic environment. Prime Minister Netanyahu took steps to reach a practical agreement with Russia, as soon as the massive Russian deployment to Syria was announced, to prevent any military incidents that might have occurred if both sides were active in this arena without reliable communications between them and has since invested intense efforts in personal diplomacy with President Putin.

Israel understood that it cannot prevent cooperation between Russia and its allies Iran, Hezbollah, and Syria in fighting rebel forces, but it has been able to assert a set of interests and red lines in the Syrian theatre and pursue these. Recent Israeli statements made clear the intensity of its campaign to prevent Iran's entrenchment and the transfer of sophisticated weapons to Hezbollah, with Israeli leaders explicitly acknowledging a huge number of operations inside Syria over a period of years. Prime Minister Netanyahu has however been sensitive to the needs of Russia, and Israel has generally acted within parameters that increase trust between the two leaderships, despite the serious disagreements between them that still remain. Israel has been careful not to harm civilians or Russian troops in Syria when conducting its strikes and Russia's willingness to, at minimum, turn a blind eye to Israeli air activity over Syria reflects a limited form of understanding on its part for Israel acting independently to ensure its well founded and properly communicated security needs.

Yet these limitations on the part of Russia are very real and have an effect in degrading Israel's security environment. They are visible in the essence of the deconfliction mechanism that the two states have established. Short of an agreement for the coordination of forces or similar, the two nations have a mere technical arrangement designed to prevent accidents, consisting of a direct line

between the IDF and Russian commanders in Syria. The implementation of this agreement is of great operational importance, but its diplomatic meaning is of little consequence; it is limited to the narrow sphere of preventing mistakes in an airspace where both sides are active, each for its own purposes, and indicates nothing beyond this.



President Putin and Prime Minister Netanyahu, Moscow 2018

The limitations of the cooperation are visible most prominently in fabricated Russian claims that Israel was to blame for the loss of a reconnaissance plane over Syria and its subsequent transfer of the S-300 anti-aircraft system from its army to the Syrian army at the end of 2018. Israel has long sought to prevent Russia from transferring these sophisticated systems to Iran and its allies, and while it has taken steps to overcome this challenge, reportedly including training against a live similar system in Greece, as well as acquiring more sophisticated stealth fighter jets from the U.S., Israel has for some time been realistic that it will not achieve a reversal of Russia's decision to supply these weapons. Similarly, Russia had given Israel

assurances about Iranian activity inside Syria, which it has failed to adhere to.

Each side thus continues to adhere to a more or less carefully calibrated ambiguity seeking to act within parameters that both can accept. These are by nature detrimental to Israel, whose security needs are concrete and challenged by Russian actions in Syria. **There is no basis for hope that Russia might restrain Iran and Hezbollah from acting against Israel. For Israel, Russia's presence should not prevent it from acting in relation to the Syrian theater of operations.** Russia might not like some of these actions, but its leadership understands that Israel has certain vital interests that it must assert.

President Putin values good relations with Israel, not least because he sees the million Israelis who arrived from the former Soviet Union in the 1990s as a Russian diaspora of sorts, as well as ascribing emotional importance to Israel's recognition of the Soviet contribution to defeating Hitler's Germany. Yet Israel cannot be expected to cope alone with a challenge at the level of international superpowers. Israel will likely continue to live with the current situation, while making clear its own interests, and where necessary using force in order to protect them, albeit without entering into conflict with Russia.

Israel understood that it cannot prevent cooperation between Russia and its allies Iran, Hezbollah, and Syria in fighting rebel forces, but it has been able to assert a set of interests and red lines in the Syrian theatre and pursue these

In any case, the current landscape and balance of power in the Middle East requires having and maintaining good and fluid relations with Russia. Israel does have several assets to keep this relation up, despite the September 17 incident.

First of all, **Israel is a guarantee of stability in the region, a goal that Russia pursues every day in the Middle East.** Moscow should understand that Israel is the most reliable nation in the region and has more to lose than to gain from the severance or deterioration of bilateral relations.

Second, **there has been a fluid coordination with Russia at the highest level regarding operations in Syria** and, except for the September 17 incident, both parties have benefited from such coordination. Israel has complied with its part; no Russian soldiers have been killed and there have not been any attempts to topple Assad's regime. Also, Israel has provided reasonable diplomatic support to Russia on Ukraine and on Skripal poisoning.

Third, there are other reasons beyond military to strength the bilateral relation. There are fluid relations in economic, agricultural, touristic and scientific areas. Russia sees Israel as a bridge to the West. Also, Putin has named himself the protector of Christian minorities in the Middle East and has thanked President Rivlin for the growing number of Russian pilgrims visiting Israel. The fact that there are more than one million Israelis of Russian origin is another point of union.

Unlike the relationship with the U.S., Russo-Israeli relations are not based on shared values, but on shared interest of stabilization and security. Russia will always seek to fulfil its goals, whether or not they coincide with Israel's interests. Bilateral relations should keep flourishing, despite setbacks.

Above all, **Israel's top goal in its relations with Russia is to obtain freedom to act in Syria.** The establishment of Iranian strongholds in Syria is a national security threat for Israel, as well the Iran's weapons transfers to Hezbollah and Iranian assistance for the Shiite terrorist group to upgrade the firepower. Israel can only deter and roll back Iran's strategy in Syria by gaining more freedom to act in Syria and achieve its kinetic objectives.

In the new multi-front Middle East, both countries are destined to understand each other and cooperate.

3.5 The relative isolation of Israel in the new reality

Is Israel able to survive in a region dominated by a strong ally of its fiercest enemies? Can Israel trust Sunni neighbors and Gulf states to face this new balance of power? Is Israel completely alone in the Middle East? Can Israel handle the new strategic challenges that have arisen over the last five years?

Israel is a consolidated reality in the region and, as noted, none of its enemies can, for now, pose an existential threat. Israel's army is today the most powerful in the Middle East and is carrying out actions every day to guarantee the security of the country. Its economy and its democratic system of government are by far the best positioned in the region. Yet Israel has always counted on the support of Western allies, most notably the U.S.

Israel is not alone, since the U.S.'s support has not ended. Nonetheless, under the new framework Israel has to boost its international standing beyond the support of the U.S.; the Sunni bloc represents a window of opportunity for Israel, but also for Russia. Israel is able to emerge as a regional broker in the Middle East, although it has historically adopted a defensive, outsider position due to the hostility of its neighbors. This pathway is not going to be easy or fast, but for these relations Israeli decision-makers have to adopt a long-term approach.

New Reality, New Challenges, New Approaches

In order to tackle a problem, it is important to identify its exact nature. Despite the volatile stability of Israel's neighbors —whether friends, whether foes—the biggest and most important ally, the U.S., is pivoting its area of interest and influence on Asia. The U.S.'s involvement in the Middle East is going to keep decreasing — the withdrawal of the troops from Euphrates Valley in Syria and the subsequent Trump's statements are the main evidence—. **Israel will have the U.S.'s support, but from far away, not on the ground,** and yet this support is not guaranteed in a long-term. Israel's defense establishment and decision makers seem to realize such tectonic change in the Middle East. They should be prepared to navigate alone in a landscape of uncertain events. Israel has held a strong and existential dependence on the U.S.'s support, and this is no longer healthy and may not be even feasible.

Although the U.S. still maintains 40,000 troops in the Middle East, Israel cannot count in the future on the U.S. influence in the region, because it is going to decline in favor of another player. This vacuum is being filled by Russia, which is managing its new role as the main patron in the Middle East and is applying a *realpolitik*, pragmatic approach. Russia has relations with all the nation-states in the region and it appears to support their independence and

national sovereignty, in defiance of the offensive of non-state actors, such as ISIS or Al Qaeda.

Nonetheless, **Israel has foreseen this new realignment in the region and decided to act.** The underground alliance with Sunni and Gulf States, especially with Saudi Arabia, is a clear maneuver to form a growing alliance of interests against Iran's expansionism. Israel has also done its homework regarding Russia. The constant and fluid visits of Netanyahu to the Kremlin and the arrangement to act freely against weapons shipments to Hezbollah seems to have been productive, even though Russia is supporting and fighting along with Israel's fiercest enemies, Iran and Syria.

This new background, with the absence of the U.S., will also bring new windows of opportunity for Israel. Concretely, regarding Palestinians issue, Israel will be better positioned to retain the West Bank and the Golan Heights for national security reasons, inasmuch as a lasting solution is unachievable, since the U.S. will lessen its policy pushing Israel to make concessions to the Palestinians, especially considering that the future peace plan has not yet been released.

At 71, Israel is a robust Western democracy, which has developed an innovation-based economic hub that has emerged as an example for the world, with a vibrant civil society and an exemplary independent judiciary, protected by a strong army that stands today as the most powerful in the region. Israel is, in sum, a consolidated reality in the Middle East. But solitude for Israel is not a viable option.

In order to keep thriving, Israel has to build special and strong alliances beyond the U.S. Israel cannot face the future alone, although it has to rely primary on itself. In the near future, Israel has to reinforce relations with European nations, reformulate its relationship with the European Union, normalize its existence among its underground Sunni allies, improve its ties with Russia, expand its diplomatic relations in Africa, and deepen cooperation and collaboration with India.



4

A SHIITE CRESCENT TARGETS ISRAEL

4. A SHIITE CRESCENT TARGETS ISRAEL

4.1 Iran's successful regional expansion, from Sanaa to Beirut

Iran is determined to realize – on the ground – its strategic vision of becoming a regional hegemon ruling – de jure or de facto – a “Shiite Crescent”.

Sticking to its game-plan and while compelled to suspend its nuclear program, Iran is now focused on other aspects of bolstering its power and influence to achieve regional hegemony and to destroy Israel. To that end, Iran has been seeking to turn post-war Syria into its forward staging ground for attacking Israel, in addition to strengthening Hezbollah's forces in Lebanon. The Iranian regime hopes to exploit the anticipated U.S. withdrawal from Iraq and Syria, Iraq's domestic instability, and the Assad regime's indebtedness and dependence.

Iran intends to create a territorial sphere of influence and domination from the Western border of Iran, across Iraq and Syria, all the way to the Lebanese and Syrian Mediterranean seashores. This sphere of influence will allow Iran to:

- (a) create a formidable strategic land buffer-zone (and possibly a forward staging ground) vis-à-vis its Sunni adversaries in the Gulf and Jordan;
- (b) operate a land corridor from Iran via Iraq to Syria and Lebanon to maintain regular supply of arms, munitions, and men for Hezbollah and the Shiite militias in Syria; and
- (c) establish military infrastructure and assets inside Syria and Lebanon – ground, naval, and auxiliary – to support, supply, and upgrade Hezbollah and the Shiite militias in Syria – and to turn Syria into an Iranian forward strategic outpost targeting Israel.

Iran also seeks to establish **an additional “crescent” across the Persian Gulf, focusing on Yemen**. Iran is simultaneously supporting the Houthi insurgency in Yemen with the assistance of Hezbollah operatives.

The latter crescent would offer Iran a strategic foothold on the Bab al-Mandeb strait connecting the Mediterranean Sea and Red Sea with the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean. Iran would be in a position to threaten Saudi Arabia from sea and disrupt Europe's maritime lifeline to Asia and the Arabian Peninsula.

Iran intends to create a territorial sphere of influence and domination from the Western border of Iran, across Iraq and Syria, all the way to the Lebanese and Syrian Mediterranean seashores

The Iranian/Houthi position was demonstrated in an Iranian-backed Houthi attack on two Saudi tankers crossing the strait in July 2018. While this development is a strategic threat to Saudi Arabia, from an Israeli perspective, Iran's return to the Red Sea is a concerning development, not only in terms of Israel's reliance on this vital shipping route. Saudi Arabia's efforts to have the African Red Sea littoral nations downgrade relations with Iran effectively undermined Iran's supply route to Hamas and the Islamic Jihad in Gaza. **Iran's return to the Red Sea is part of its global ambition to rule the Middle East, and this return will be exploited to harm Israeli interests.** This assessment led Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to warn Iran that if it sabotages the shipping route, Israel will use military force to neutralize that threat.

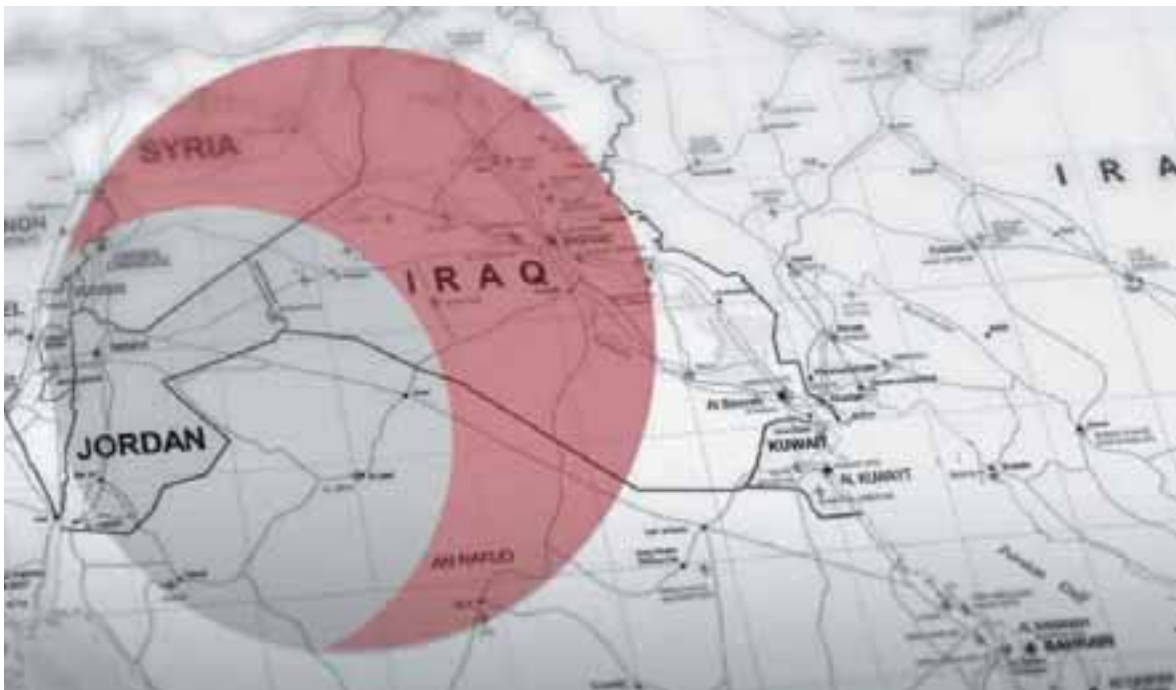
Iran's land route

Israel has shown its determination to thwart Iranian grand designs on establishing the Iran-Iraq-Syria-Lebanon land route. In recent months, the aspired ground route has come close to becoming a reality. Iranian-commanded Afghani and Iraqi militia forces have extended their control around Abu Kamal, adjacent to the only Syrian-Iraqi border crossing manned by the Assad regime. However, the crossing and the westbound route along the Euphrates towards Deir Ezzor and onwards to Damascus and the Syrian-Lebanese border can handle only limited traffic at this time.

That said, the very existence of this land route is a major achievement of the IRGC Quds Forces, which command Iran's extraterritorial operations. The western and eastern banks of the Euphrates are the main battlefield against ISIS. Iranian and Syrian regime forces hold the western bank and the Kurdish-led and U.S.-supported Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) are deployed beyond the eastern bank. ISIS holds on to a small enclave adjacent to the eastern bank.

The near realization of the coveted land route, however, has not gone unnoticed. In mid-June 2018, a massive airstrike targeted Iranian-commanded militia around Abu Kamal on Syrian territory killed 54 Iraqi militias and Assad regime soldiers. The Assad regime and the Iranians initially blamed the U.S. and the U.S.-led coalition for the strike, but the coalition formally denied any involvement. A senior U.S. official told CNN that Israel carried out the attack, but unlike recent Israeli military operations in Syria, Israel declined to comment. To date, aerial attacks attributed to Israel were in a radius of no more than 200 km (120 miles) from the Syrian-Israeli border on the Golan Heights.

Iran's return to the Red Sea is part of its global ambition to rule the Middle East, and this return will be exploited to harm Israeli interests



The Shiite Crescent today

If indeed Israel carried out the Abu Kamal strike – some 600 km (nearly 400 miles) from the border – it would have posed considerable operational

risks. Presumably, and considering the risks, Israeli decision-makers felt compelled to send a clear message that it would not tolerate the use of the

land route to facilitate the entrenchment of Iran in Syria and to supply Hezbollah. Despite this alleged show of Israeli power, Iran remains determined to expand and utilize this route.

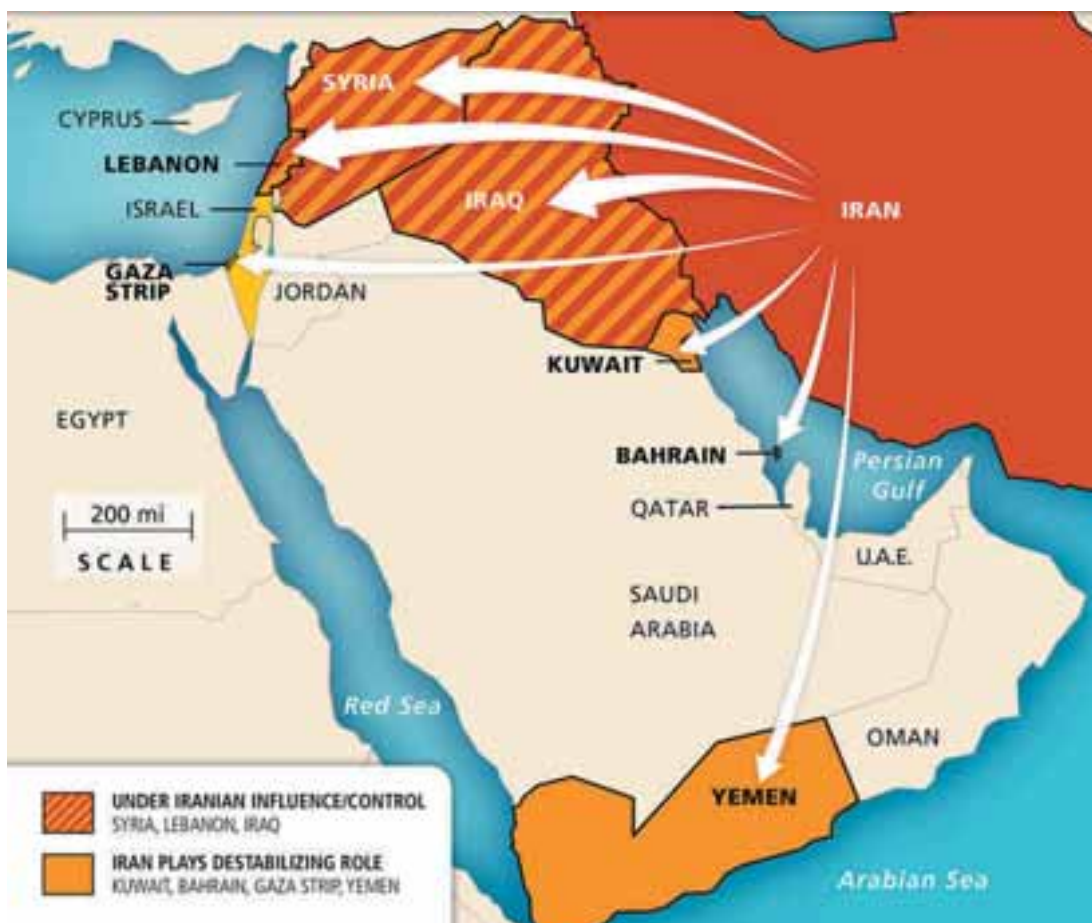
Despite recent developments and setbacks, Iran is building a “Shiite Crescent”, from Afghanistan to Lebanon, which is targeting Israel and creating spheres of influence against Western allies such as Saudi Arabia or the Gulf States.

Hezbollah: Iran’s main asset in the creation of the Shiite Crescent

The Lebanon based terror army Hezbollah is Iran’s most valuable strategic asset not only in its confrontation with Israel, but also in the other Iranian battle zones. **Hezbollah played a pivotal role in Syria leading several critical ground offensives during which it gained considerable battlefield experience under the guidance of Russian and Iranian military instructors.** In addition, several reports assert that some 250 Hezbollah operatives trained Iranian-commanded

militia forces in Iraq. A similar number of Hezbollah operatives support the Houthi insurgency in Yemen. Intelligence sources have reported that Hezbollah operatives were behind the missile attacks on Saudi Arabia from Houthi-held territories. Hezbollah also maintains relations with the Palestinian Hamas and Islamic Jihad organizations and reportedly trains operatives of both organizations.

In the Iranian game-plan against Israel, Hezbollah is a key element. The Iranians have concluded that although Hezbollah posed a significant challenge to Israel in the 2006 war, such a show of force would not suffice to deter Israel from attacking Iran if and when it resumes work on the nuclear program. In making of Hezbollah into a formidable deterrent, the war in Syria has turned Iran’s Lebanese proxy ground forces from a predominantly stationary force into a maneuvering infantry force with advanced night-vision devices and electronic combat weapons. Hezbollah’s operations in Syria have also resulted in significant casualties, but the overall balance remains positive from Hezbollah’s perspective.



The Iran’s expansion in the Middle East

Hezbollah emerges from the war in Syria as a significant military force, perhaps the most formidable and experienced infantry force in the Middle East except for Israel. Whatever concerns Hezbollah might have had in terms of intra-Lebanese discontent with its involvement in Syria, the elections in May demonstrated that Hezbollah continues to hold considerable internal power in Lebanon.

Despite recent developments and setbacks, Iran is building a “Shiite Crescent”, from Afghanistan to Lebanon, which is targeting Israel

The second main element in Hezbollah's force construction has been an ongoing investment in enlarging and upgrading its rocket and missile stockpile. On the eve of the 2006 war, Israeli estimates held that Hezbollah possessed 15,000 rockets and missiles, of which it fired some 4,000 during the five-week war. More than a decade later, the current Israeli estimates are that **Hezbollah possesses 120130-000 missiles and rockets.** While this is a huge stockpile, most of Hezbollah's arsenal of rockets and missiles are unguided and short-to-mid range. According to various reports, Hezbollah possesses several dozen to a few hundred unguided long-range missiles that can be fired from South Lebanon covering nearly all Israeli territory. In addition, **Hezbollah possesses an unknown number of surface-to-sea missiles that could target Israeli navy vessels and offshore gas exploration facilities in the Mediterranean.**

Apparently, however, Iran and Hezbollah are focusing efforts on establishing manufacturing sites in Syria and Lebanon for upgrading the missile inventory, converting a mid- and long-range stockpile into precision-guided missiles. Manufacturing advanced missiles in Syria and Lebanon significantly reduces the risks related to ground and air transportation. Furthermore, it

would allow Hezbollah to quickly build up an arsenal of advanced missiles that could cover the entire territory of Israel.

A precision-guided arsenal would allow Hezbollah – in the service of Iran – to strike effectively at all Israeli critical infrastructure and military sites. Israel's population centers are highly concentrated, and Israel has no territorial redundancy in terms of locating critical infrastructure. In a full-fledged exchange, Israel would most likely overcome Hezbollah and Iran, but at a staggering and devastating price for Israeli and Lebanese civilians.

An upgraded Hezbollah infantry and missile force does not qualify, perhaps, as an existential threat for Israel, but it comes very close to being one. From an Iranian perspective, an upgraded Hezbollah provides Iran with a credible threat of a massive retaliatory strike capability, possibly sufficient for deterring Israel from attempting to destroy Iranian sites related to its nuclear program – if and when it resumes work on the program.

From an Iranian perspective, Hezbollah and its Lebanese-based capabilities are Iran's most reliable asset, but Iran remains determined to expand the threat beyond the Israeli-Lebanon border to the Israeli-Syrian border

From an Iranian perspective, Hezbollah and its Lebanese-based capabilities are Iran's most reliable asset, but Iran remains determined to expand the threat beyond the Israeli-Lebanon border to the Israeli-Syrian border. Iran has already deployed, in addition to hundreds of its own IRGC operatives, some 10,000 Shiite militias from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq under its command in Syria. As the direct military exchanges between Iran and Israel in February and May 2018 demonstrate, Iran has already deployed its own military assets in Syria,

including armed UAVs and missiles. Iran has independently used these assets to attack Israel, although unsuccessfully.

With the planned expansion of the land route connecting Iran through Iraq to Syria and onto Lebanon, Iran presumably is after a variant of the Hezbollah in Lebanon model in Syria.

Considering the vast differences in makeup and characteristics of Hezbollah's grip on the Lebanese state, **Iran is attempting to establish a strong military force under its direct command that will operate autonomously within a weak Syrian state that will emerge as the war ends.** Iran is also counting on the collaboration of a dependent and indebted Assad, willingly or not.

Russia's role in Iran's strategy

According to various intelligence sources, a large number of the Iranian-commanded Shiite militia operate under the aegis of the Syrian army in southern Syria. As such, this would be a violation of the Russian commitment to Israel that foreign forces, including Iran and Hezbollah, would not be permitted access to southern Syria. It remains unclear at this point whether Russia is turning a blind eye or is rather incapable of enforcing its commitment. More recent reports suggest that Iran is expanding the enmeshment of its militias in the Syrian Army, not only in the country's south.

Meanwhile, Iran is exploiting Russia's deployment as a shield for its own assets. Iran dispatched the UAV in February from a base hosting both Russian and Iranian forces. The Iranians operated a facility for upgrading Hezbollah missiles in Latakia near Russian bases. In both cases, the Russian "shield" did not prevent Israeli attacks. However, the September 17 strike on the Iranian facility in Latakia strained Israel's relations with Russia, as noted before.

Although Russian officials maintain that Iran's presence in Syria is legitimate, there is considerable ambiguity regarding Russia's longer-term preferences. American and Israeli officials have come away from discussions with their Russian counterparts with the impression that Russia is opposed to Iran's military entrenchment in Syria. Recent reports from Syria indicate that Iranian forces left the T-4 base from which Iran launched the UAV. A sizeable Russian special forces

unit comprising dozens of soldiers and armored vehicles have also taken over Iranian militia posts along the Western banks of the Euphrates near Abu Kamall. It remains unclear how the Russian deployment of boots on the ground near the Iraqi-Syrian border will affect Iran's schemes to use the "Shiite Crescent" ground route.

Also, Western intelligence reports suggest that Iran has recently resorted to use civilian cargo aircrafts flying from Iran to Beirut for shipping components for upgrading Hezbollah's missiles. Along with reports of Iran's withdrawal from bases in East of Syria and expanding the enmeshment of Iranian militia into the Assad regime's army, Iran might be temporarily lowering its overt military footprint in the Syrian arena. Whether this is at the behest of Russia remains unclear.

The current situation in Syria and Russian-Iranian relations suggest that Iran is not certain that it will be able to accomplish its objectives in the Syrian arena. However, Iran is not expected to forsake its plot to turn Syria into a forward Iranian-directed garrison for attacking Israel.

Iran's support to radical Islamist Palestinian terror organizations

The last component in Iran's game-plan is the funding and support of the radical Islamist Palestinian terror groups against Israel. Before the war in Syria, Iran was the primary financial underwriter and arms-supplier of Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. The war in Syria drove a wedge between Hamas and Iran, but in 2018, Hamas and Iran reconciled. Although the current level of financial support is not publicly known, Hamas has openly celebrated this newfound relationship, expressing its gratitude to Iran for the financial support for the Palestinians participating in the violent demonstrations along the Gaza border with Israel. Hamas has not kept secret its resumed cooperation with Hezbollah either.

From an Iranian perspective, the wave of violence and terror produced by Hamas does not only fit well with the "holy duty" of harming the "Zionist regime", but also serves to divert Israeli defense and military attention away from the Syrian arena and the Iranian-led buildup of its proxy forces in Syria and Lebanon. **The Iranian regime is also supportive of Hamas's strategy to overtake the**

Palestinian Authority and the PLO. Iran well understands that this would be a momentous game changer that would embroil Israel in a protracted armed conflict within its own territory.

The Iranian regime is also supportive of Hamas's strategy to take over the Palestinian Authority and the PLO

Nevertheless, Iran's influence on the Palestinian arena is limited. **Hamas is not a proxy of Iran, at least not when compared to Hezbollah, but it benefits from it.** Events in Syria forced Hamas to limit its relations with Iran, and Hamas is far more dependent on Egypt than before. At this stage, Hamas appears to be seeking a ceasefire deal mediated by Egypt and implicitly supported by the U.S. Such a development would limit the influence of Iran, at least in the short term. In the longer term, however, Hamas and Iran share an ultimate goal – of destroying Israel. One way or the other, Iran and its proxies stand to benefit when Hamas engages in terror and violence.



Iranian long-range missile

Iran is being successful with its expansion plans. Today, a Shiite Crescent emerges from Sanaa to Beirut via Baghdad and Damascus. Ten years ago, such a crescent would have been inconceivable and far from achievable. However, Tehran's masterminds, through the IRGC and the exterior Quds Force, have implemented an ahead-of-the-

game masterplan that today represents the main security threat for Israel and for Sunni states in the Middle East.

4.2 The persistent nuclear threat of Iran

Since the implementation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (also known as JCPOA or Iran nuclear deal) Iran has not fully complied with its obligations under the JCPOA and under UN Security Council Resolution 2231, which adopted the nuclear deal. Iran has not curbed its nuclear ambitions, it has extended its influence and dominance across the Middle East, it has continued sponsoring terrorism — Iran is a State Sponsor of Terrorism since 1984— and has kept on violating the human rights of its own citizens.

Since the implementation of the JCPOA, Iran's activities breaching the agreement have been constant: testing ballistic missiles, clandestinely looking for nuclear material (as German intelligence reported in 2015 and 2016), blocking the inspectors' access to military sites, amassing more heavy water and centrifuges than the JCPOA allows, and harassing U.S. navy ships. These actions should have triggered alarm bells. But, sheltered by the European Union signatory members of the JCPOA, Russia, and China, which are not prepared to fix or repeal the nuclear deal, Iran is paving its way to building a bomb; an alarming fact about which we have been warning since the beginning of the nuclear negotiations.

Iran's calculations on staying in the JCPOA

After the Trump Administration's withdrawal from the JCPOA, on May 8, 2018, Iran's leaders threatened to retaliate against the U.S. decision, even to end Iran's obligations and compromises under the deal. However, Iran's leadership has decided to stay in the JCPOA and comply with it. After a cost-benefit analysis inside its decision-making levels, Tehran gets more economic, diplomatic and strategic benefits under the JCPOA than outside it.

First, since oil exports declined after U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA (Iran sells more than a

million fewer barrels per day since May 2018), breaching or leaving the nuclear deal will worsen this situation. The top importers of Iranian oil, such as Japan and South Korea, will surely jeopardize their purchases in case Iran violates the JCPOA.

Second, the European Union has set up a vehicle to bypass U.S. sanctions on Iran. Although that special vehicle is not designed for oil trading, any Iranian violation of the deal will surely erode its relationship with the EU and will collapse the EU's work on this bypass vehicle.



President Trump's withdrawal from the JCPOA. May 8, 2018

Third, international attention is focused on the JCPOA and remote from Iran's malign activities in the Middle East and beyond. **Iran is still developing its ballistic missile program, and the international community is not holding Tehran accountable for such violation of UN Security Council Resolution 2331.** In this regard, Iran's activities in Lebanon and the Golan Heights, aimed at harassing and targeting Israel, are far away from international scrutiny. Iran is for instance building rocket and missile facilities in the south of Lebanon in order to avoid weapons transfers from Syria to Hezbollah, which have traditionally been bombed by Israel.

In the same vein, there have not been a strong international response to Iran's attempts to kill dissidents in Europe. In 2017, Iranian agents tried to bomb an opposition conference in France and killed Arab separatists in Denmark, according to European

intelligence sources. The European Union responded by imposing sanctions, but they are not enough to deter Iran's activities in Europe.

In this regard, France is going to impose new sanctions on Iran (announced on January 27) due to the ongoing ballistic missile tests that Iran is carrying out. Another leading European country, Germany, has banned Mahan Air flights due to the airline's growing involvement with carrying weapons to Syria. European countries are applying a carrot and stick approach with Iran, with the aim of bringing Iran into line and keeping the JCPOA alive. However, **Europe-Iran relations are totally unpredictable, and they will mainly depend on Iran's behavior.** Nevertheless, at the very moment that the cost-benefit analysis of complying with the JCPOA becomes negative, Iran will breach or withdraw from the deal and will accelerate its

nuclear program and also will boost its malign activities abroad, among them, surrounding and harassing Israel.

Iran is focused on creating the strategic conditions that will allow it to restart its nuclear program once the JCPOA expires or any timing to be determined

by the Ayatollahs. That is, to create a sufficient threat to deter Israel and/or the United States from attacking Iran's nuclear sites. However, Iran's ability to establish such a deterrent threat will depend to a large extent on the policies and actions of the United States, Russia, and Israel.



Iranian missiles test

After a cost-benefit analysis by Iran's decision-making levels, Tehran gets more economic, diplomatic and strategic benefits under the JCPOA than outside it

From an Israeli perspective, thwarting Iran's schemes – turning Syria into a forward garrison for attacking Israel and upgrading Hezbollah's firepower – is a critical mission. If Iran fails to establish what it considers a sufficient deterrent

threat, it might affect Iranian decision-making on relaunching its nuclear program and racing towards nuclear breakout.

The need to stop the Iran's nuclear program

Iran's nuclear program was not halted after the signature of the JCPOA. Iran is allowed to enrich uranium and to keep its nuclear infrastructure intact. The inspections regime, characterised by a hands-off approach, cannot guarantee that Iranians are not carrying out the weaponization of the nuclear program in secret facilities. Also, by unfreezing assets and relieving sanctions, Iran has been empowered to boost its expansionism in the Middle East. In 15 years, at the end of the JCPOA, the breakout time for Iran to build a nuclear weapon will be down to zero, according to former U.S. President Barack Obama, the main promoter of

the nuclear deal. Iran is, in the best-case scenario, suspended its pursuit of nuclear weapons but retains all the resources to restart the nuclear program as soon as it abandons the JCPOA; on January 19, 2019, U.S. Director of National Intelligence, Dan Coats, presented the Annual Threat Assessment and remarked that the U.S. believes that Iran is not carrying out the key activities to develop nuclear weapons. The fact that Coats could not confirm this information and based it on beliefs reflects that Iran's nuclear activities are not properly monitored.

In the worst-case scenario, Iran is even able to conduct nuclear weaponization secretly, beyond the insufficient, ill-designed inspections regime.

The JCPOA was a bad deal that paved the way, sooner or later, for a nuclear, dominant Iran in the Middle East. The Trump Administration took the right decision by leaving the JCPOA and reimposing sanctions, and as noted, Iran's regime has decided to stay in the deal after a cost-benefit analysis. Currently, Iran's position is positive, since the Europeans are seeking alternative options to keep the JCPOA alive and to boost the so-expected "commercial honeymoon" with Iran.

Moreover, as noted, Iran has not abandoned its ballistic program, in defiance of UN Security Council

Resolution and sanctions from European countries. Certainly, after 40 years of the triumph of the Islamic Revolution, Iran has managed to survive and expand its malign activities despite the long list of imposed sanctions.

Preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons is a national strategic red line for Israel. Also, **Iran is the most sophisticated enemy that Israel has faced since its very existence.** The combination of asymmetric warfare, international delegitimization, financial aid to terrorist groups, soft power and territorial expansion means the most complicated threat to date for Israel. The nuclear program is the ultimate factor of the Iran's regional strategy against Israel and, besides the danger of annihilation— as Iranian leaders have constantly repeated and warned— nuclear weapons would guarantee a high level of deterrence which will prevent military actions against the regime.

Iran's nuclear program turned into a matter of national policy in Tehran and the regime is unlikely to discard it. This program is also part of Iran's greater strategy in the Middle East, a central element that will predetermine the final chapter in its successful expansionism.



Iran is still developing its ballistic missile program

4.3 Hezbollah's territory: the road to a third war in Lebanon

A new way of war against Israel

After the 1979 peace treaty between Israel and Egypt, and after the First Lebanon War in 1982, the Syrian regime found itself alone in the campaign against Israel. In response to this predicament, President Hafez al-Assad began to promote the idea of achieving strategic balance against Israel as a Syrian strategic goal. From that moment until the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War, the Syrian regime set about arming itself and refining a military doctrine that could achieve that goal. With the onset of civil war in 2011, the Syrian military suffered defeats that reduced its size and power, and so shifted its energies to meet these challenges.

On the other hand, during that same period, Hezbollah toiled to achieve a strategic balance with Israel and to a great extent, accomplished that. In order to explain how, in spite of the IDF's absolute military supremacy, Hezbollah was able to achieve this, it is worthwhile considering the operational logic and power-building plan that Hezbollah embarked upon during the years since Israel's withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 2000.

This review is also instructive for observing how, despite Israel's military supremacy over the armed forces in Gaza, Hamas is also striving towards a strategic balance with the State of Israel.

In both cases, the key to understanding this strategic trend involves learning the operational logic developed by Hezbollah and the way it is being adopted—with necessary adjustments—by Hamas in Gaza. It is undeniable that a breakthrough has occurred over the last decade towards the development of a new form of war.

In May 2000, with the departure of the IDF from southern Lebanon, Hezbollah underwent a comprehensive change in the logic of its preparations for fighting Israel. At this historic crossroads, Hezbollah adopted the new military doctrine of Syria, as developed in the late 1990s by the Syrian Chief of Staff, Ali Aslan. In Syria, the new doctrine was a relatively innovative shift away from the pattern of Soviet operational offensive doctrine that had been in place within the Syrian army until the early 1990s. Instead of a large-scale armored attack of significant magnitude in waves and across

a wide area, a new emphasis was placed on rocket fire and commando strikes with the support of a dense array of anti-tank weapons.

With great admiration, **the Syrian doctrine was adopted by Hezbollah in a systematic way, albeit in a manner that was unique to Hezbollah's needs and capabilities, including exploiting the advantages of the Lebanese fighting terrain: its mountainous topography, the multiplicity of villages, and the prevalence of winding roads passing through both built-up and wooded areas.**



Hezbollah fighters in Lebanon

After Israel's military confrontation with Hezbollah in the summer of 2006, this doctrine became a source of inspiration adopted by Hamas in the Gaza Strip as well. The two organizations have exchanged knowledge and learned many organizational and operational lessons from in-depth study of the three IDF operations in Gaza that have taken place over the past decade.

In the process, a change in the shape of war and the methodology of its execution have come about. In the classical conception of war as described by Carl von Clausewitz and which continues to be taught in

military academies around the world, there is a categorical distinction between defense and offense, as two operational-strategic states of being that exist in a binary fashion. The Syrian doctrine, as developed further by Hezbollah and Hamas, blurs the distinction between these two operative states, and brought about a conceptual revolution. By merging the basic “defensive” and “offensive” categories, a hybrid was born in the form of its operation, which is sometimes described as an “offensive-defensive” doctrine and places the IDF and government of Israel at the forefront of this conceptual challenge.

In this new mode of warfare, the opposing sides of a conflict can attack each other with large-scale bombardment, firing deep into enemy territory, without a single border crossing by a ground force. In this situation it is sometimes difficult to define which side is attacking and who is on the defensive. This issue has for several years been creating conceptual confusion within the Israeli armed forces regarding the relevance of the IDF's traditional approach to military action, and the relationship of firepower and maneuvering forces and the balance between them.

The HLMG has previously analyzed the challenge of hybrid warfare against terror-armies in the 21st century in several reports, such as *How Democracies Can Win against Terror-Armies* (October 2016) and *Hezbollah's Terror Army: How to prevent a Third Lebanon War* (October 2017).

Iran is the most sophisticated enemy that Israel has faced since its very founding

The HLMG's conclusions on this issue have been clear: this is a type of war where professional military forces face the prospect of becoming increasingly hamstrung, unable to achieve missions of vital national security interest despite possessing the capabilities to do so. Western political leaders should demonstrate leadership in the face of difficult television pictures. Western audiences, having been subjected to the threats from radical

Islam that Israelis have faced for decades themselves now, have become more astute in discerning the true moral balance in these conflicts. But it remains a consistent challenge to uphold both the legitimate faith in the systemic superiority of democratic values, and ensure that military action, in this new environment where the symbolism of victory has been replaced by fluid calculations of operations designed to degrade and deter, can lead to the necessary kinetic outcomes.

At what point does war begin?

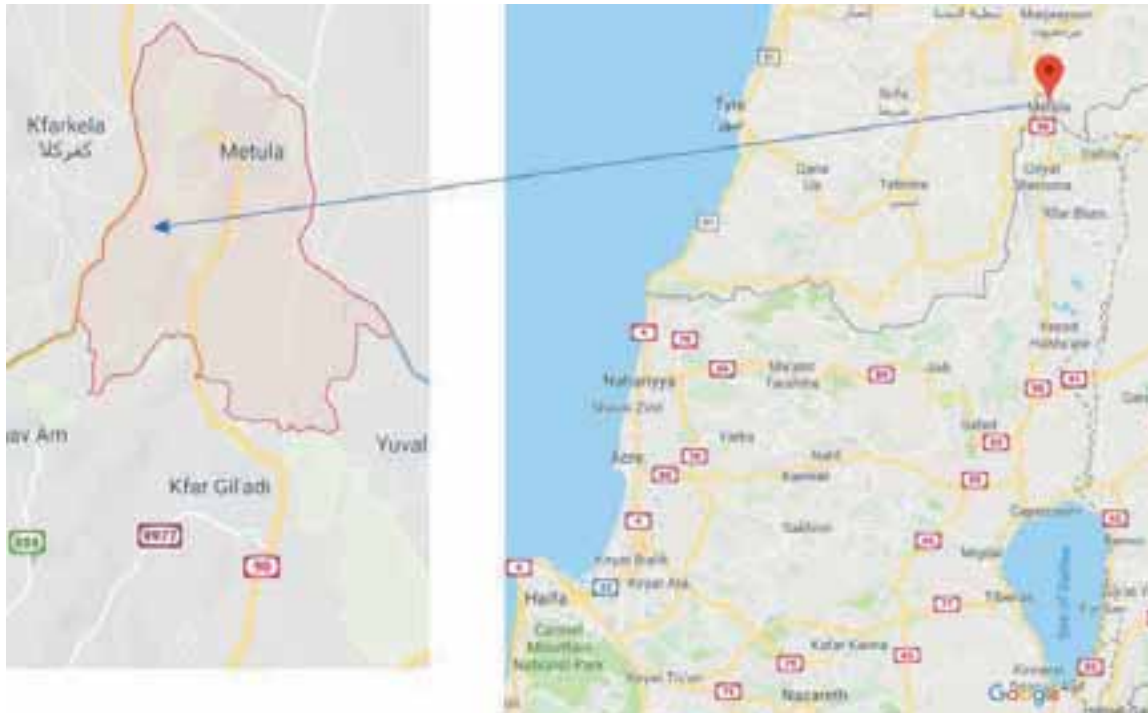
There is a fundamental difficulty in identifying precisely and clearly which operational-strategic situation will lead to war, from the complexity of a new situation, to the moment fire breaks out with an intensity that deviates from the routine, to violent events such as attacks on an IDF force near the border resulting in severe injury and abductions of soldiers. **In the new paradigm, it is indeed very difficult to decide whether to launch a broad campaign, to the point of escalating a skirmish into a war.**

Thus, for example, the large-scale Israeli response to the opening event of the Second Lebanon War on July 12, 2006—the unprovoked attack and abduction of two IDF soldiers on the northern border with Lebanon—leaves the question of whether escalating to war was necessary. Given the difficulty described above in identifying a developing strategic situation for what it actually is, it is also not clear whether it was truly inevitable that in the summer of 2014, the fifty-one-day Operation Protective Edge in Gaza was inevitable.

Western audiences, having been subjected to the threats from radical Islam that Israelis have faced for decades themselves now, have become more astute in discerning the true moral balance in these conflicts

At the same time, Israel's political and military leadership find themselves in a constant dilemma of weighing whether the country will find itself descending into war without being able to determine whether it was truly necessary and whether public support for a campaign will be assured. This is a quandary that preoccupied the

Israeli government last summer, as to whether proceeding in the direction of a full-fledged military campaign would be viewed by the public as a justified and necessary action in the context of a war of "no choice".



Left – blow-up of Metulla and its vicinity along the Israeli-Lebanese border Right – Map of Northern Israel and the Israeli-Lebanese border

Before us there is a change of central strategic importance that explains why this dilemma was easier in the past. In the 1973 Yom Kippur War, even in the opening hours of engagement it was possible to identify that the Syrians and Egyptians were on the offensive, and Israel was on the defensive—this was clear to the point of being obvious. Furthermore, it was also easy to recognize unequivocally that a war had broken out, with everything that might entail. So, too, in the Six-Day War of 1967, with the outbreak of fighting in Sinai on the morning of June 5, operationally, there was no doubt about who was on the offensive and who was on the defensive. It was entirely clear that in taking the initiative for a surprise preemptive strike, it was IDF forces that were conducting a major attack.

The Prelude: Operation Northern Shield

On December 4 2018, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) launched Operation Northern Shield to expose

and neutralize Hezbollah terrorist attack tunnels crossing the Israeli-Lebanese border. The Israeli Cabinet instructed IDF to detect and neutralize the tunnels while seeking to avoid an escalatory spiral that could lead to armed conflict. Hence, the operation was conducted entirely on the Israeli side of the border.

IDF launched Operation Northern Shield after having detected one terror tunnel that had already extended 40 meters into Israeli territory. The tunnel was discovered on the southwestern outskirts of Israel's most northern village, Metulla, which is surrounded by the border with Lebanon from the west, north, and east (see enclosed maps below). The 200-meter-long tunnel starts in a Shiite village across the border, Kfar Kela, and is two meters high, two meters wide, and 25 meters deep, embedded in chalk and dolomite rock. The tunnel's exit on the Israeli side was not completed. The small dimensions of the tunnel demonstrate the challenge of detecting the precise location of the

tunnels. The IDF produced a small breach of the tunnel to insert a robot probe with a camera and non-lethal explosives to study the tunnel and to

deter the return of Hezbollah operatives to the tunnel.



Source: IDF

The detection of the tunnel near Metulla is the result of more than four years of intensive intelligence monitoring of Hezbollah's efforts to dig several tunnels across the border. According to IDF reports, it had surveilled the covert digging of the detected tunnel on the Lebanese side of the border for more than three years. The IDF has surveilled several more digging sites along the border but has yet to detect the location of the tunnels on the Israeli side of the border. At a meeting with the commander of the UN peacekeeping force UNIFIL, General Del Col (December 6), the IDF's Northern Commander General Strick, provided a map of another Lebanese village on the Western side of the border in which IDF intelligence detected digging operations. The UNIFIL commander was invited by his Israeli counterpart to personally inspect the site of the tunnel near Metulla. The Israeli general asked his counterpart to investigate the new site and take measures to seal the tunnels from the Lebanese end.

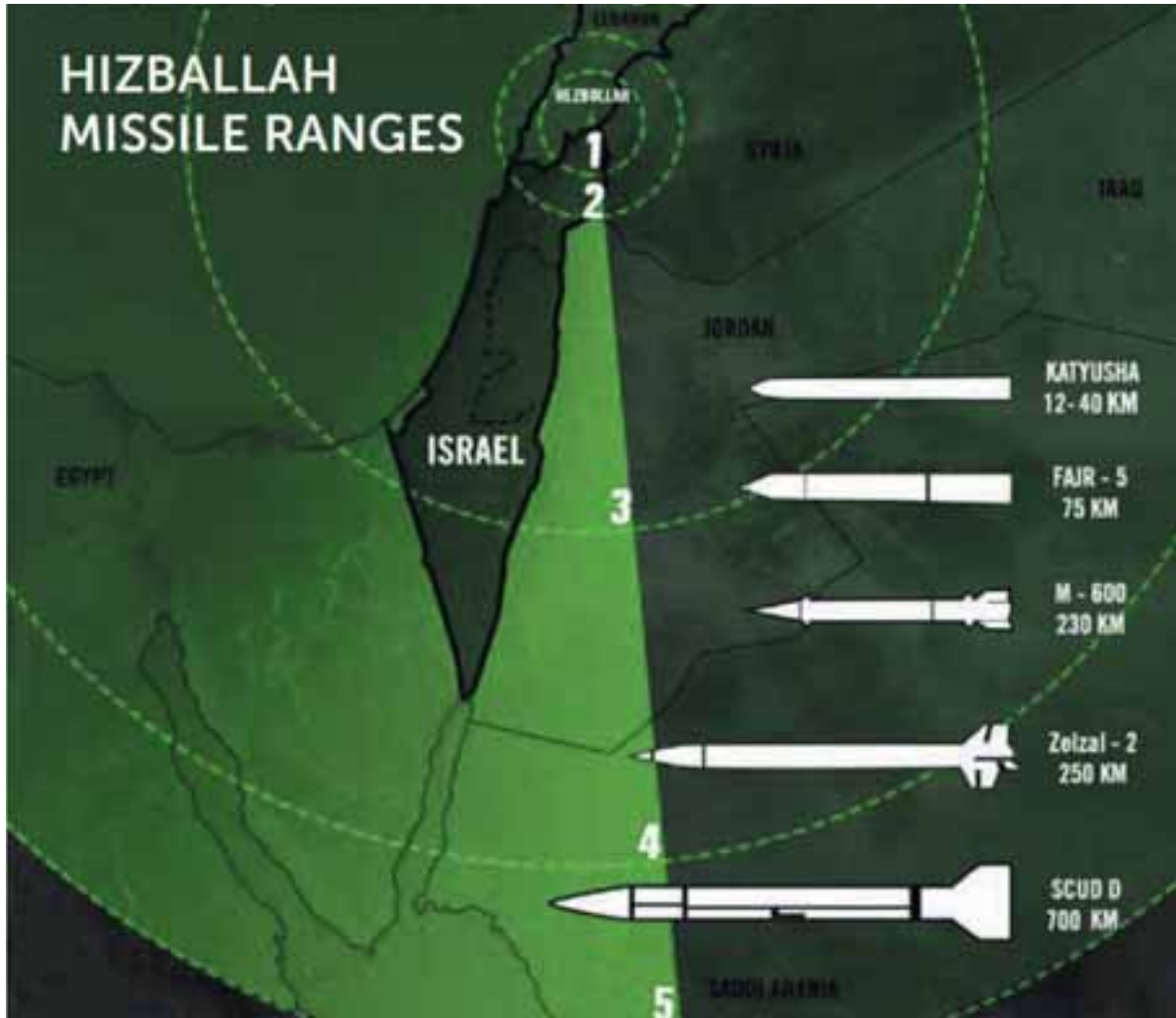
After four intensive working days, IDF worked in

several sites along the border to detect underground tunnels. The IDF announced that the Operation will last at least several weeks (if not months) aiming to detect and neutralize all the Hezbollah tunnels. Unlike the case of the underground tunnel network along the Gaza Strip that was dug into sand dunes, the geological terrain of northern Israel is far more forbidding in terms of digging tunnels and detecting their specific route. To illustrate the difficult challenge – after four years of extensive intelligence work prioritized by the Israeli Chief of Staff, the IDF uncovered the route of only one of several tunnels and identified the point of origin of another tunnel. For its part, Hezbollah failed to complete the detected tunnel after working on it for several years.

While IDF commanders have remained non-committal as to how they plan to neutralize the tunnels, they will probably try to avoid blowing-up the tunnels (as IDF did in most cases of tunnels in Gaza), and rather seal them with concrete. IDF is

expected to avoid any measure that could be construed as an unnecessary violation of Lebanese sovereignty, nominal as it may be. The IDF's prudence was showcased in its choice to use non-lethal explosive devices to protect the probing of the detected tunnel. So far, the reactions in the Lebanese arena have been reserved and

measured. Clearly, Lebanon and Hezbollah were caught red-handed in a blatant and undeniable violation of UN Security Council Resolution 1701 along with the flagrant trampling of Israel's territorial sovereignty. The Bahraini foreign minister felt confident enough to condemn Hezbollah's action in Arabic and in public.



Source: IDF Spokesperson

The silence of Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, is most notable; it probably reflects the extent to which Nasrallah was surprised despite the early anticipation that Israel would take measures against Hezbollah. Just a few days before the operation, Hezbollah released a new video clip threatening Israel with retaliation if it were to launch an attack on Hezbollah.

To an extent, the muted response in Lebanon surprised the Israeli military. As the operation was unveiled, the Israeli military raised the state of

alert on the northern front and beefed-up its presence with additional commando, armored, and artillery forces. Israel will probably maintain this expanded military deployment for weeks, even for months. However, the working assumption on the Israeli side is that Nasrallah – a shrewd political and communications operator – will seek to undermine Israel's military-operational coup and diplomatic achievements. While both Israel and Hezbollah have no apparent interest in an armed confrontation at this point in time, one cannot rule out an unintended escalation



The head of the IDF's Northern Command, Maj. Gen. Yoel Strick (right), met with UNIFIL Cmdr. Gen. Stefano Del Col (second-from-right) from Italy and toured the area of the cross-border attack tunnel that was exposed after being dug from Lebanon into Israel; Source: IDF Spokesperson



Outgoing IDF Chief of the General Staff Lt. Gen. Gadi Eisenkot accompanies soldiers to a Hezbollah tunnel on the first day of Operation Northern Shield, an operation launched to neutralize attack tunnels dug by the Lebanese terror group into Israeli territory- Source:IDF



IDF engineers working to neutralize the tunnel that was dug from the Shiite village of Ayta al-Shab and crossed into Israeli territory. The tunnel was neutralized by an explosion; Source: IDF Spokesperson

Hezbollah's Tunnel Network

The precise location of the first tunnel to be detected suggests that Hezbollah did not choose

it randomly. Upon completing the tunnel, Hezbollah could have launched an attack that might have cut off access to the village and disconnected it from the rest of Israel.

According to IDF assessments, the tunnel detected in Metulla is one of several tunnels scattered across the Israeli-Lebanese border. Hezbollah planned to dig a series of tunnels through which its Radwan commando force could infiltrate the border undetected and seize high ground positions on the Israeli side that would support large ground force incursions into Israeli territory. The objective of Hezbollah's war plan was to "conquer" an Israeli village and fly Hezbollah's flag even for a short time frame of hours and produce an iconic image of "victory", dealing a major morale blow to Israel. Hezbollah made no secret of this objective and several years ago it released a video clip boasting of its plans to seize and conquer the Galilee.

Hezbollah's previous battleground experience in Syria has transformed its war plans vis-à-vis Israel. If in 2006, Hezbollah was a stationary guerilla force holding its ground in southern Lebanon, in the next war, Hezbollah will

command an experienced infantry force of several thousand militias. Most likely, Hezbollah will be joined by several thousand Iraqi Shiite militias operating under Iranian command; Hezbollah's huge rocket and missile inventory will support its ground operations. **In other words, the Third Lebanon War will be an entirely different confrontation compared to the 2006 war.**

The objective of Hezbollah's war plan was to "conquer" an Israeli village and fly Hezbollah's flag even for a short time frame of hours and produce an iconic image of "victory", dealing a major morale blow to Israel.

Hezbollah made no secret of this objective and several years ago it released a video clip boasting of its plans to seize and conquer the Galilee

In that respect, the destruction of Hezbollah's attack tunnels is a significant operational setback for Hezbollah. The tunnels were supposed to grant a surprise advantage to Hezbollah's reputed commando forces. As such, the tunnels were a crucial element in Hezbollah's war plans.

Hezbollah is not an independent military force, but rather a crucial piece enabling Iran's strategic ambitions

However, from a broader perspective, **Hezbollah is not an independent military force, but rather a crucial piece enabling Iran's strategic ambitions.** In Iran's anti-Israel game plan, Iran seeks to build-up Hezbollah to create plausible, sufficient deterrence against Israel. To that end, the current thrust of Hezbollah's force construction effort is upgrading its missile stockpile by adding mid- and long-range precision-guided missiles, as noted above. A secretly-kept tunnel network could provide a significant operational advantage in the event of a full-fledged confrontation. Yet, a heavily-guarded secret does not add to a sufficient deterrence.

Hezbollah's "precision project"

Israeli officials have been clear in stating that the main threat is Hezbollah's "precision project", and not the tunnels. But with new Israeli technologies to detect tunnels, originally developed vis-à-vis Hamas in Gaza, Israel had an opportunity to deal an unanticipated intelligence blow that undermines a central element in Hezbollah's war plan against Israel.

A key, and yet-to-be answered question is the extent to which Operation Northern Shield is another step in an Israeli preemptive/preventive strategy against Iran and Hezbollah. Since the end of the 2006 war in Lebanon, Israel has refrained from preventive military action against the military build-up of Hezbollah on Lebanese soil. In the past three years, Israeli preventive military action against Hezbollah's military build-up was territorially confined to Syria. From that perspective, Operation Northern Shield is the first Israeli significant preventive effort to negate

Hezbollah's capabilities in Lebanon.

Considering that Iran/Hezbollah's missile "precision project" has moved from Syria and is mostly taking place on Lebanese soil, Israel might shift its focus of operation to the Lebanese arena as well. According to a statement made by Prime Minister Netanyahu (December 6, 2018), thanks to Israeli operations in Syria, Hezbollah possesses only a few dozen long-range precision-guided missiles.

This statement is yet an additional indication of the operational success of Israel's preventive operations in Syria against Hezbollah's build-up. On the Lebanese front, Israel opted for international public diplomacy as Prime Minister Netanyahu exposed sites in Beirut carrying out the "precision project". Hezbollah was quick to clear those locations and move its operations elsewhere, but international public diplomacy alone will not effectively undermine the "precision project".

The IRGC mobilised and deployed paramilitary proxies from across the region (along with IRGC personnel themselves). These included Lebanese Hezbollah, Iraqi Shia militias, the Afghan Fatemiyoun group, the Pakistani Zeinabiyun and other groups

However, an overt preventive campaign against Hezbollah's "precision project" on Lebanese soil would be a different ballgame. **Free from the limits imposed by Russia in Syria on all parties, Israeli strikes against key assets related to the "precision project" on Lebanese soil would most likely result in an all-out armed confrontation.**

In considering its options, Israel might conclude that the implementation of the "precision project" is a strategic redline and opt for a preventive armed campaign in Lebanon despite the risks involved. An armed conflict once the "precision project" is more advanced could yield an

unbearable cost. Furthermore, forcefully preventing and negating the “precision project” would undermine Iran’s aspiration to create a sufficient deterrence against Israel and thwart its strategic game plan.

4.4 Syria and the Golan Heights: The creation of Iranian strongholds in Syria bordering Israel

Iran’s project in Syria

The alliance between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Ba’athist regime in Syria is longstanding. It dates back to the first years following the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, and the support afforded Iran by Syria in the subsequent Iran-Iraq War. **In the course of the Syrian Civil War over the last seven years, Iran has more than repaid any debt owed for Syria’s earlier support.** Indeed, the support of Tehran, and specifically the mobilization by the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) of its proxy militias and use of its methods of paramilitary organization have proven crucial for the regime’s survival and its eventual victory over the rebellion against it.

A central dilemma facing the Assad regime from the outset of the war was the absence of loyal manpower in enough quantities for its defense. This derived from the narrow sectarian base of the regime (the Alawi community, to which the Assad family belong, numbered only 12% of the Syrian population. The rebellion, meanwhile, emerged from the Sunni Arab community, numbering 60%.)

Iran, and more specifically the IRGC, was the force that stepped into the breach and addressed this problem. The IRGC did this in three specific ways: first, the Guards mobilized and deployed paramilitary proxies from across the region (along with IRGC personnel themselves). These included Lebanese Hezbollah, Iraqi Shia militias, the Afghan Fatemiyoun group, the Pakistani Zeinabiyun and other groups.

Second, the IRGC established a number of local, ‘Syrian Hezbollah’ type groups. Directly recruited by

the IRGC, sometimes with the cooperation of Lebanese Hezbollah, these groups included Quwat al-Ridha from the Homs area, al-Ghalibun from the Sayida Zeinab area in Damascus Governorate, and the 313 Brigade from the Deraa area.

Third, the Iranians established structures within the official ranks of the Syrian state security forces. These – such as the National Defense Forces and the Local Defense Forces – were organized along the lines of the Iranian paramilitary Basij.

All these forces, in their different ways, have played an indispensable role in Assad’s survival and resurgence.

With the war now reaching its conclusion, the proper dimensions and nature of the Iranian project in Syria are becoming apparent. As may be seen from previous examples of Iranian intervention into other countries’ civil wars, Iran’s assistance is not of a purely altruistic nature, and the structures created by the IRGC for participation in a conflict are not then disbanded when that conflict ends. Rather, they are maintained as forces to advance Iranian long-term aims. Thus, Hezbollah in Lebanon (the prototypical IRGC proxy) was supposedly created to fight Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon, but today is the primary military and political force in Lebanon, nearly twenty years after Israel’s withdrawal.

The Iranians are attempting to establish a similar situation, in which a weak, hollowed out Assad regime remains in place, while Tehran operates an independent structure of political and military power on the ground.

IRAN'S PROXIES IN THE MIDDLE EAST		
GROUP	AREA OF OPERATIONS	FORCES
Lebanese Hezbollah	Lebanon and Syria	≈65.000
Hashd-Al Shaabi (Popular Mobilization Units)	Iraq and Syria	≈120.000
Liwa Assad Allah al-Ghalib fi al-Iraq wa al-Sham	Iraq and Syria	Unknown
Promised Day Brigade	Iraq and Syria	≈5.000
Liwa Abu al-Fadhal al-Abbas	Syria	≈10.000
Saraya al-Jihad	Iraq	Unknown
Liwa Fatemiyoun	Syria and Yemen	≈20.000
Liwa Zainebiyoun	Syria	≈1.000

Similarly, the Shia militias in Iraq were mobilized in the summer of 2014 to fight the imminent danger of ISIS, but have remained as a political and military force, following the defeat of the Sunni jihadis in 2017.

In Syria, it is clear that the Iranians are attempting to establish a similar situation, in which a weak, hollowed out Assad regime remains in place, while Tehran operates an independent structure of political and military power on the ground.

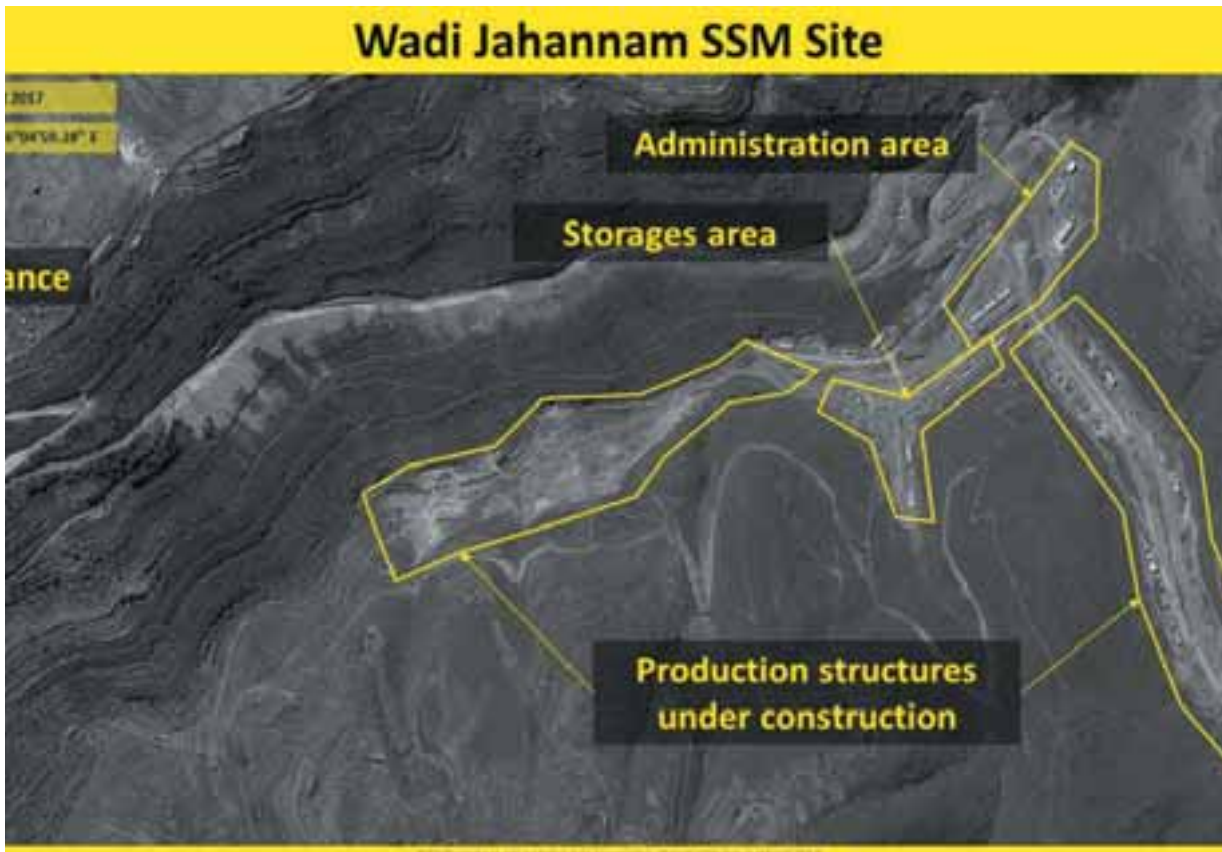
Iran intends to maintain control of a passageway from Iraq into Syria, and thence to Lebanon, the Mediterranean Sea and the border with Israel. In this area, Tehran is engaged in the deployment of personnel, and ongoing efforts to develop missiles and build a physical infrastructure inside Syria.

According to a report in the *Al Quds Al-Arabi* newspaper on April 28th, 2018, Iran currently possesses fully 19 facilities on Syrian soil. These include air bases, such as T4 located near Palmyra, and logistical facilities and command centers, such as the 'Glasshouse' near the Damascus International Airport. The latest information available suggests that Iran is in the process of constructing a surface-to-surface missile factory outside Wadi Jahannam in northwest Syria. Pictures released by ImageSat International suggest that the facility resembles the Parchin complex in Iran itself,

a key element of the Iranian ballistic missile program, which has been linked also to its nuclear ambitions.

This Iranian project is part of the larger regional picture in which the IRGC utilizes combined political and paramilitary methods in order to achieve Iranian domination within areas of the Middle East wrecked in recent years by conflict and fragmentation.

There are in Syria presently two Western-led projects, which stand in the way of the Iranian achievement of their goal in that country (now that the Sunni Arab rebellion has been defeated). These are Israel's determination to degrade Iranian capabilities, with the ultimate stated intention of securing the departure of Iran in its entirety from Syrian soil. The U.S. troop withdrawal of the Euphrates Valley put an end to the U.S.-led Syrian Democratic Forces project, which was in possession of an area consisting of around 30% of the soil of Syria. This area contains around 80% of Syria's oil and gas resources. In addition, the U.S. maintained a base at At Tanf close to the Syrian-Jordanian border. Both the SDF area and the area around the At Tanf base constituted physical barriers to the completion of the Iranian 'land corridor' to the sea, the border with Israel and with Lebanon, as noted before.



Satellite image showing the development and production of surface-to-surface missiles (SSM) in the area of Wadi Jahannam . Source: IMAGESAT INTERNATIONAL (ISI)

However, Israel can no longer count on this deterrence to Iranian project in Syria. **The ongoing IDF campaign against the Iranian infrastructure-building process constitutes an additional obstacle in the way of Tehran's plans.**

Israel's 'secret war' against Iran in Syria

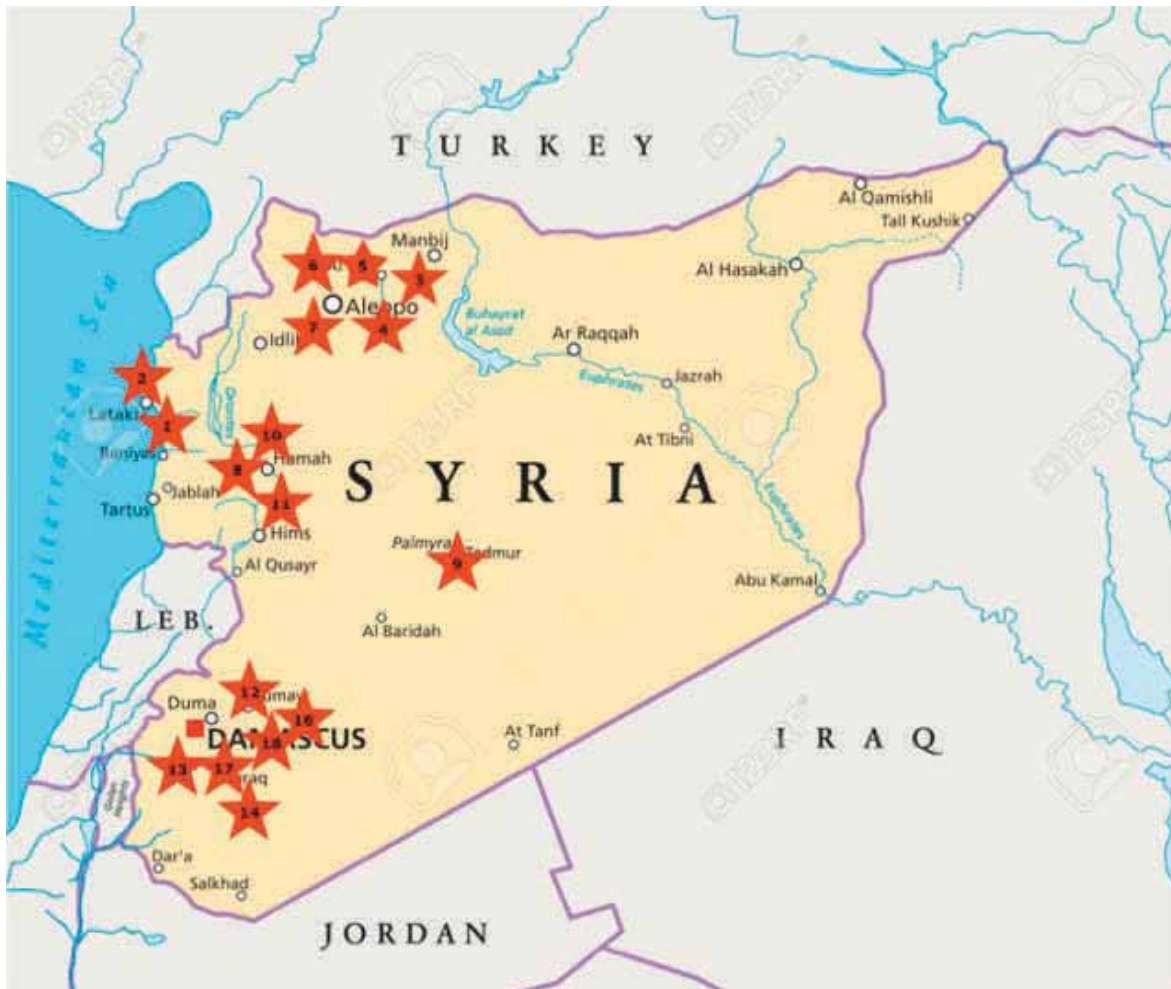
Senior Israeli defense officials described Israel as currently being engaged in a 'secret war' against Iran on the soil of Syria. The record would appear to suggest that this effort has three elements:

Firstly, Israel is conducting periodic airstrikes against Iranian targets on Syrian soil. This is clearly intended to frustrate and degrade the Iranian attempt to build up its infrastructure and to turn Syria into an additional front against Israel.

Israeli aircraft have carried out periodic strikes against the Syrian regime and Hezbollah targets throughout the period of civil war in Syria. However, beginning in February 2018, Israel began to directly target Iranian facilities personnel on Syrian soil. **The largest scale clashes so far took place on May 10,**

2018, when in response to the firing 20 Fajr-5 missiles by Iranian forces toward Israeli positions on the Golan Heights, Israel launched an extensive air operation, targeting Iranian infrastructure throughout Syria. Operation 'House of Cards' involved 28 warplanes and the firing of 70 missiles, according to Russian Defense Ministry figures. Targets hit included a variety of facilities maintained by the IRGC in Syria, including a military compound and logistics complex of the Quds Force in Kiswah, an Iranian military camp north of Damascus, weapons storage sites belonging to the Quds Force at Damascus International Airport, and intelligence systems and installations associated with the Quds Force.

To date the actions of May 10, 2018 have constituted the most intense moment of the ongoing Israeli campaign. A recent statement by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu indicated that the campaign was not over: "The Israel Defense Forces will continue to act with full determination and strength against Iran's attempts to station forces and advanced weapons systems in Syria."



Map of Iran's facilities in Syria

The ongoing IDF campaign against the Iranian infrastructure-building process constitutes an additional obstacle in the way of Tehran's plans

But Israeli strikes appear to not only be targeting infrastructure targets. In mid-June, 2018, as analyzed before, an airstrike took place on al-Harra, south east of Albukamal on the Syrian-Iraqi border. The target was a base of the Ktaeb Hezbollah militia, a leading Iran-supported irregular force. 22

members of the organization were killed in the strike. No country claimed responsibility for the attack. An Iranian militia commander quoted by Reuters said that the U.S. was probably responsible for the attack.

A direct attack by the U.S. on a force associated with the Iranians would represent a major shift in U.S. strategy, however. It seems far more likely that the attack was carried out by Israel. If so, it indicates that for Israel, the Iranian land corridor from Iraq to Syria, and the passage of militia units through this, are issues of no lesser importance than the matter of Iranian infrastructure further west.

Lastly, there are indications that Israel may well be carrying out targeted assassinations against selected targets associated with the Iranians in Syria. This information is not confirmed by Israel's

officials. On August 5, 2018, Dr. Aziz Asber, head of the Syrian Scientific Studies and Research Center in Masyaf, was killed by a car bomb in the city of Hama. Asber was involved, among other things, in a project to convert SM600 rockets into precision-

guided missiles. A veteran official involved with Syria's chemical weapons program and working directly alongside General Qasem Soleimani, the IRGC Quds Force commander, he had long been sought by Israel.



Iran's targets of the Operation House of Cards. Source: IDF Spokesperson



Source: IDF Spokesperson

On August 18, 2018, Ahmad Assa Habib, commander of the 'Palestine Branch' of Syrian Military Intelligence, was shot in the head in the village of Baarin, west of Hama city. Israel Army Radio, quoting Syrian opposition sources, noted that Habib was responsible for the 'struggle against Israel'.

Israel has not, of course, taken responsibility for either of these actions, and it cannot be said with certainty that Jerusalem was responsible. But given the pattern of Israeli activities in the past, it is certainly distinctly possible that these actions form an additional part of the secret war underway against Iran in Syria.

While other Israel's actions have undoubtedly proven effective on the tactical level, it is questionable as to how they can in the short term at least secure the departure of Iran in its entirety

from Syria. Tehran has invested over 30 billion dollars in its efforts in the country in recent years. The level of disruption currently taking place is unlikely to persuade it to order a complete change of direction. As such, it is likely that Israel's reiteration of this goal is intended to signal that Israeli actions against Iran in Syria are set to continue. **Israel's secret war against Iran in Syria is thus one of the major tools of pressure available in a comprehensive Western strategy to contain and rollback Iranian advances.**

As mentioned before, Israel's campaign against Iran in Syria has been complicated by the September 17, 2018 incident in which a Russian Il-20 aircraft was accidentally downed by Syrian anti-aircraft fire after an Israel Air Forces raid on an Iranian facility in Latakia province. Moscow's subsequent decision to reject Israel's account of the event, to supply the S-

300 system to Syria, and to improve its own electronic warfare and radar capacities in Syria will create additional challenges for Israeli pilots operating over Syrian skies. But the operation of the S-300 system by Syrian personnel will not be an insurmountable barrier to continued Israeli actions, and considering the strategic importance attached by Israeli decision-makers to the imperative of preventing Iranian entrenchment and consolidation, it may be expected that the Israeli campaign will continue, despite the Russian moves.

While other Israel's actions have undoubtedly proven effective on the tactical level, it is questionable as to how they can in the short term at least secure the departure of Iran in its entirety from Syria

On January, the secretary of the Supreme National Security Council of Iran, Ali Shamjani warned Israel that Hezbollah and Hamas are prepared to respond to an eventual attack by Israel causing "a hell", and he added that "precision missiles are in the hands of the Resistance forces in the Gaza Strip and Lebanon."

Shamjani also boasted of the "hundreds of kilometers of tunnels dug under his feet", in reference to the underground tunnels existing on the border between Lebanon and Israel.

Along this vein, Hasan Nasrallah acknowledged the existence of these tunnels on January 26, and celebrated that Israel took 13 years to find them.

The need to deter Iran's expansionism

With the downing of a Russian military plane over the skies of Latakia on the night of September 18, 2018, Israel's policy of launching airstrikes in Syria reached the threshold of strategic crisis. Israel has stood resolutely behind its air operations over Syria, with two declared interests: preventing the

smuggling of precision rockets to Hezbollah and preventing the establishment of Iranian forces in Syrian territory.

Israel's policy can be explained by the necessity of preventing the transfer of game-changing weaponry from Syria to Hezbollah in Lebanon. This logic alone, however, cannot provide a complete strategic rationale to explain Israel's readiness for frequent operational engagement on the brink of a deterioration into a military crisis, and even war. Beyond the "preventative" justification apparent in these actions, a logic which is in its essence tactical, Israel's behavior is grounded in a less apparent strategic logic that is worthy of observation and discussion.

In his book *War and Strategy*, Professor and Major-General Yehoshafat Harkabi makes the following case: "States have legal borders demarcating their national territory, but they also have 'strategic borders' or 'critical borders' which they would be willing to go to war to defend." England throughout the 20th century, for example, claimed that its eastern strategic border is on the Rhine River in the heart of Germany. This is not a claim of sovereignty over the territory, but an emphasis of the importance of what takes place in the space between the Rhine and the shores of England—defining it not only as an area of interest, but of direct significance to the defensibility of Britain. The special attention required for such a territory of vital strategic interest is also expressed in the definition of the need to use force in this space, if required. Similarly, **Israeli concerns about what is taking shape on the Syrian Golan is a well-known issue in contemporary efforts to map the vital interests of countries bordering Syria.**

Israel's foreign policy can be explained by the necessity of preventing the transfer of game-changing weaponry from Syria to Hezbollah in Lebanon

Indeed, over the seven years of civil war that have raged in Syria, Israel has acted on its strategic interest to minimize its military involvement to the crossing of certain red lines, and it has succeeded in gathering admirable intelligence toward the management of this interest in order to avoid the necessity for greater involvement. However, this is not enough. Even a prolonged sitting on the fence has a price. The Israeli interest in what transpires in Syria goes beyond merely maintaining quiet for its border communities. Israel, for example, is interested in preventing Syria from becoming an Iranian military proxy, and it is of absolute importance to Israel to prevent the entrenchment of radical Iranian or Hezbollah forces on its Golan Heights border. To this end, it is crucial that Israel establish itself as a key stakeholder whose interests must be considered within the new constellations of power emerging in Syria.

Israel is not alone in this necessity. From the outset of the Syrian Civil War, all of Syria's other immediate neighbors – Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq, and Jordan – have found themselves required to act militarily, both overtly and covertly, in Syrian territory near their borders. In their activities within Syria, these countries have demonstrably marked out their critical interests—those elements which they consider non-negotiable for determining the new order which is taking shape in Syria.

So too, this is the framework that guides Israeli decision-making. What is understood by neighboring countries such as Jordan applies as well to Israel: if a nation does not shape the direction of friction, its vital interests for the new configuration in Syria will not come about.

Indeed, the degree of a country's stature within the partnership of vested nations is itself acquired by the demonstrated boldness to intervene, given that such action takes place despite the dangers of operating on the edge of unpredictable outcomes, and the potential chaos of war. A nation can expect its interests to be viewed with greater stature in this system of assigning importance to the interests of key parties only if it takes an active role and does so in a manner that is convincing in both its decisiveness and significance.

In keeping with this logic, the achievements of Israeli intervention in Syria are intended to bring all parties involved—first and foremost Russia and the United States—to the realization that not only does

Israel have an interest in the emerging order, but it can also influence and even interfere with the materialization of the desired equilibrium. In short, Israel has the ability to inform the direction and nature of the outcome in Syria. **Israel needs a convincing platform to make clear that there is no option to ignore Israel's critical interests, which must be included in the overall equation of national considerations being weighed for the emerging balance of power.**

Israel's importance to both the U.S. and Russia as a key regional actor stems from this principle, as well as the potential for instability which Israel can introduce. In fact, possessing the resolve to use military force, even when it carries the potential to deteriorate unpredictably into chaos, has both the potential for deterioration as well as for stabilization, a principle which underpins the use of force. Israel's policy toward Syria is formulated in this manner, within the framework of preserving the desired balance between the risks of deterioration and the advancement of vital interests.

Israel cannot afford to be harassed from different fronts at the same time by different forces with different weaponry and capabilities

Nowadays, as mentioned before, none of Israel's enemies pose an existential threat except Iran if some circumstances arise. The "Shiite Crescent" and the establishment of Iran's strongholds and proxies surrounding Israel, as well as the aid to Palestinian terrorist groups pose a critical framework for Israel's security. **Israel must rollback Iran's expansionism and deter Hezbollah's upgrading;** Israel cannot afford to be harassed from different fronts at the same time by different forces with different weaponry and capabilities.

4.5 The Turkey Appendix: Ankara's alignment with Tehran and Moscow.

Turkey's deteriorating relations with Israel and the West and its emerging alignment with Iran and Russia are, along with the U.S. disengagement, key defining shifts of the new Middle East. The correlation of forces in the region has deeply changed, and Turkey is one of the main characters of such change.

Not long ago, before the era of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Turkey was a credible partner of the West and Israel. A gatekeeper between Europe, Asia and the Middle East, a NATO member since 1951, Ankara held a unique geopolitical position and used to look westwards in foreign policy. Turkey's anti-Islamist ethos kept the country from falling into a radical revolution and was therefore a guarantee of stability in the region. Also, Turkey had been proving that a nation with a strong Muslim cultural background may live under democratic standards.

Erdogan's foreign actions have undergone a dramatic change, probably in pursuit of Turkey's emergence as the new actor leading the Sunni world

Currently, Turkey's position is far different. Erdogan has taken an autocratic turn; his government has oppressed political opposition and has eroded free speech. Hostility to Israel and the degradation of its relationship with the U.S. have increased over these years. Erdogan's foreign actions have undergone a dramatic change, probably in pursuit of Turkey's emergence as the new actor leading the Sunni world. Due to the Syrian Civil War, Ankara, Moscow and Tehran have forged an alliance, a power bloc in the Middle East, though not 100% cemented, which aspires to gain hegemony at the expense of Israel,

Egypt and Arab Gulf states —which are forming their own bloc.

The Astana Three: Russia, Iran and Turkey

Iran, Turkey and Russia have a long history of rivalry. They have been competing powers in the Middle East throughout their history. But in recent years, their governments' interests and perspectives have converged.

Turkey's transformation has arisen for the following reasons.

First, **Recep Tayyip Erdogan's leadership**. Since his accession to the Presidency in 2014, pro-Islamist, anti-Western and anti-Israel rhetoric and ideology have commanded his agenda. He then began to boost religious groups and erode the country's traditional secularism. Inclined to Tehran and Moscow's vision and strategy in the Middle East, Erdogan has also seen the opportunity to held up as a new Sunni-Muslim leader for the post-Arab Spring times in the Middle East.

Second, **Syria's civil war**. Turkey has considered that Russia and Iran are better positioned than NATO, the U.S. and Saudi Arabia to defend its interests in Syria. Ankara's goal in this conflict is the stability of Syria, on one hand, and the prevention of Kurdish independence from Syria on the other. For Turkey, any empowerment of the Kurds in Syria could create a threat to its own territorial integrity. The engagement of Russia's and Iran's proxies have stabilized the civil war and saved the Assad regime, which has worked out for Turkey's goals. Turkey has thus pivoted from NATO to Russia and Iran, and it is apparently obtaining benefits from this move.

Turkey's total involvement in Syria and the confirmation of the emerging alliance with Russia and Iran has been seen through the Astana process. Since September 2017, these three states are known as the "Astana Three", and they have been widely considered as the winners of the U.S. withdrawal from Syria. **One way to become a hegemon in a region is to forge alliances, to guarantee stability and to end conflicts.** Russia is leading the Astana talks, and it will get more credit than Iran and Turkey, but they are evolving, along with Syria, towards a coherent bloc, a new axis of power in the Middle East.



Hassan Rouhani, Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, 2017

Turkey's role in Syria is growing. In September 2018, Russia and Turkey reached an agreement to create a demilitarized zone in the Syrian rebel stronghold north of Idlib, avoiding an assault by Syrian government forces.

They are bounded by the pursuit
of stability and the avoidance of
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But the Astana Three alliance
cannot be taken for granted for
the long term.

On January 23, Erdogan and Putin met to discuss the situation in Idlib, which was progressively deteriorating. The bilateral meeting is significant because it came after the announcement of the

withdrawal of American troops from Syria. The meeting is a clear evidence that Russia is leading Syria's future with the help of Turkey and Iran.

This alignment, however is not natural, as noted before. In the past there was great enmity between them; however, a new time — and a new opportunity— has come after the U.S.'s disengagement. They are bounded by the pursuit of stability and the avoidance of secessionist and radical movements in the Middle East. But the Astana Three alliance cannot be taken for granted for the long term.

The relations with U.S., Israel and Saudi Arabia

This historical turn of Turkey has truly been fueled by **anti-U.S. gestures**. Turkey has preferred the Russian S-400 missile system over the U.S.-made Patriot, as the recent purchases have confirmed. Turkey has detained an American citizen to bargain with Washington, and the U.S. has issued sanctions on Erdogan's ministers. However, at the end of 2018, due to the U.S. disengagement from the Middle East, the hostility has been reduced. The release of U.S. cleric Andrew Brunson has lessened

the tensions between the U.S. and Turkey; the U.S. withdrawal from Euphrates Valley in Syria and the conversation between Trump and Erdogan on December 14 on this issue seems to have improved the bilateral relation. Strong allies in the past, Israel and Turkey are now close to be open enemies.

Despite the reconciliation agreement between Israel and Turkey in December 2017, hostility from Ankara has not ceased. After the U.S.s recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, Ankara expelled the Israeli ambassador and withdrew the Turkish ambassador from Tel Aviv. Public and open enmity between Primer Minister Netanyahu and President Erdogan have carried on. Turkish government is constantly calling and financing delegitimization campaigns against Israel and is truly supportive of anti-Israel terror organizations, such as Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood.

In any case, **Israel has not been the only change in Turkey's relation with Middle Eastern countries.** Erdogan's widely publicized denunciation of the murder of the Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi has not been the only snub to Saudi Arabia. Turkey for instance supported Qatar, jointly with Tehran, before the Saudi-led blockade on the Emirate in 2017.

This support is not ad hoc: in 2015 Turkey signed a military protocol with Qatar to open a military base there for up to 5,000 soldiers—the first Turkish military base in the area— and currently there are 3,000 troops deployed in addition to military advisors. Turkey is to build a naval base in Qatar as well. Saudi Arabia imposed sanctions on Turkey for its support to Qatar.

In March 2018, Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman placed Turkey in the “triangle of evil” alongside Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood; back in 2014, the Saudis opposed Turkey's candidature for a non-permanent seat at the United Nations Security Council due to Ankara's position on Muslim Brotherhood.

As of today, Turkey seems to have repaired its relationship with the U.S. in regard to Syria; however, it has continued to be a fierce anti-Israel and anti-Saudi actor and it has formed an alliance with the dominant power in the region, Russia, and with the leader of the Shiite bloc, Iran.

Gas: another Turkey's sticking point

Besides their collaboration in Syria, Moscow and Ankara maintaining an important economic relationship. Regarding energy resources, both countries are carrying out disruptive plans. A Russian nuclear power plant is going to be built in Turkey and both countries are building the TurkStream pipeline, which will be able to carry Russian gas to Europe via Bulgaria this year.



U.S. Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan

Due to its constant hostility against Israel, Greece, Cyprus and Egypt— also because of the newly-discovered gas resources in the eastern Mediterranean— Ankara has bet on for new partners to guarantee its area of influence.

Turkey seems to have repaired its relationship with the U.S. in regard to Syria; however, it has continued to be a fierce anti-Israel and anti-Saudi actor and it has formed an alliance with the dominant power in the region, Russia, and with the leader of the Shiite bloc, Iran

Israel, Greece and Cyprus, for their part, are advancing their own gas pipeline project. Israel considers Turkey a “dangerous and unstable actor” and no longer consider export gas via Turkey, according to a leaked classified report from the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Erdogan could place Turkey in a prominent strategic position in the Mediterranean along with Israel, Egypt, Cyprus and Greece, however, he has taken another direction.

Turkey will not abandon its ties with Europe and the West, although it will probably abandon ties with Israel, according to current trends; but from now on it will use its current alliances to leverage in the geopolitical game. Ankara is also well positioned, as a bypass from the Middle East to Europe, regarding issues like the massive influx of refugees. With the U.S., both are normalizing their relations, but with Egypt, Greece, Cyprus and Israel, a long influence and resources battle is to be expected.

Democracy is dying in Turkey; the authoritarian Erdogan has adopted an anti-Western, anti-Israel position and Ankara is internationally aligned with Russia and Iran

What to do, or what to expect, with Turkey

The realities of the nascent Middle East should be internalized as soon as possible. One of them is the Erdogan-led Turkey’s new drive. As U.S. Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats pointed out on January 19, “Turkey is in the midst of a transformation of its political and national identity”. Fifteen years back, Turkey was a reliable ally of the West, a democratic country, NATO’s member that restrained Russian ambitions in the Caucasus and served as a buffer zone between Europe and the Middle East. **Today, democracy is dying in Turkey; the authoritarian Erdogan has adopted an anti-Western, anti-Israel position and Ankara is internationally aligned with Russia and Iran.**

At this point, it seems that Turkey’s enmity and hostility will endure so long as Erdogan is in office. The trend is not likely to be reversed in the short term, so it is necessary to adapt to it. Israel and the West, taking into account the Turkey’s geopolitical position, should apply new policies in order to tackle the Islamist, authoritarian and pro-Iran shift in Ankara’s agenda. In this regard, Western nations should put pressure on Ankara’s democratic standards compliance, they should back the political opposition and warn Ankara that it has much to lose in the Astana Three Axis. **Western nations should also condemn the Ankara’s help to Hamas and the Erdogan’s constant anti-Israel rhetoric.**

However, as the West is disengaging from what is happening in the Middle East, Turkey is gaining strength. Western nations, with their own political and social crises, have chosen to left Middle Eastern issues — always complicated to solve — to a balance of power between Sunnis and Shiites, with Russia as a the regional broker, and they are not eager to annoy Turkey since it has intelligently used its buffer position to absorb thousands of refugees whom Europe and the West did not want to receive. Silence on Erdogan’s hostility against Israel is an evidence that demonstrates the level of interest of Western nations, especially Europeans, on this issue.

Turkey’s drive must be held accountable, and its anti-Israel actions should be countered — including support for Hamas and other Palestinian terror organizations.

Underground Alliances: Sunni States and Israel

Israel’s strategic relations and partnerships with the Sunni Arab Middle East is breaking new ground in a steady development over the past decade. Each set of Israel’s bilateral relations with the Sunni Arab countries differ, but they all share a fundamental common denominator – the Sunni Arab countries share strategic interests with Israel and all the parties engaged in these relations benefit considerably. In that regard, the confluence of the growing power and hegemonic ambitions of the Iranian regime and the perceived declining influence of the U.S. have aligned the strategic outlook and interests of Israel and most Sunni Arab countries. Nevertheless, **the reliability of Israel’s**

newfound partnership has its limits and risks, most evidently in the cautious attitude of Arab officials to any public display of the relationship. This cautiousness reflects the deeply-rooted animosity of Arab public opinion to Israel, limits the span of relations, and constrains their potential durability.

**The reliability of Israel's
newfound partnership has its
limits and risks**

These sets of relations could be roughly divided into two principal groups: Israel's relations with its neighboring Arab countries, Jordan and Egypt; and its relations with the kingdoms of the Arabian Peninsula.

Jordan and Egypt

The notable difference is that Israel has concluded peace agreements and maintains diplomatic relations with both Jordan and Egypt. However, the primary aspect of Israel's relations with Egypt and Jordan – the close security and strategic cooperation – remain mostly under the radar. While most of the details of Israeli-Jordanian and Israeli-Egyptian relations are held confidential, periodic media references suggest a close and intimate relationship on security issues. This understanding is best captured by the prevalent Israeli strategic perspective that Israel's "real" eastern security border is not in the Jordan Valley (that is the nominal Israeli-Jordanian border), but rather Jordan's eastern border with Iraq. In other words, strategic cooperation with Jordan offers a vital territorial strategic depth that Israel's nominal territory cannot provide.

With Egypt, Israel maintains close coordination and cooperation regarding the situation in Gaza. Although Egypt and Israel do not always see eye-to-eye on certain aspects of the Israeli-Palestinian issue, when it comes to Gaza, both countries are close partners. The challenge posed to Egypt from the growing and menacing presence of ISIS in the Sinai Peninsula cemented the strategic partnership.

The revelation of close contacts between ISIS in Sinai and Hamas in Gaza led the Egyptians in 2013 to destroy the tunnel network between the Gaza Strip and Sinai. With the tunnel network effectively erased, Hamas lost a major source of revenue and the primary route for shipment of arms mainly from Iran. According to foreign media reports, Israel has provided critical intelligence and military cooperation in Egypt's campaign to eradicate ISIS's presence in the Sinai Peninsula.

Notably, and despite the overt diplomatic relations of Israel with Jordan and Egypt, relations with Israel were subject to a strong opposition in the public opinion of both countries. For that reason, the extent of official publicity to the breadth and depth of relations with Israel is limited. Both Egypt and Jordan practise a reserved approach to public displays of normal relations with Israel. The domestic opposition to peace with Israel is particularly pronounced in Jordan that has a large share of Palestinians and a strong following of radical Islamists. Domestic unrest compelled the Jordanian king to recently announce that Jordan would not extend the leasing of two land parcels along the joint border cultivated by Israeli farmers. Nonetheless, and despite calls for cancelling the peace agreement with Israel, the Jordanian king remains committed to peace with Israel.

From an Israeli perspective, the strategic relations with its close and immediate neighbors is a vital strategic interest, as is supporting the domestic stability of both regimes. The short episode of the Muslim Brotherhood reign in Egypt underscored the understanding that Israel should do all in its power to support its neighbors' stability.

The Gulf

Although Israel's relations with the Gulf countries are not as critical as its relations with Egypt and Jordan, Israel's dealings with the Gulf countries in addition to Egypt and Jordan is shifting the regional balance of power vis-à-vis Iran and its proxies. The decreasing strategic ambition of the U.S. in the Middle East starting during the Obama administration and signs that this trend continues under the Trump administration have brought U.S. allies closer. The Gulf countries recognize that Israel is their most credible and effective partner in containing Iran. Israel's resolute diplomatic and military campaign against Iran in Syria has raised

Israel's strategic value. **Israeli strategic coordination and intelligence sharing with the Gulf countries, as international media reports, is of immense value for both Israel and the Gulf as well as Jordan and Egypt.**

Israeli strategic coordination and intelligence sharing with the Gulf countries, as international media reports, is of immense value for both Israel and the Gulf as well as Jordan and Egypt

The mutual appreciation of this budding relationship is best reflected at what was probably the first regional meeting of chiefs of intelligence in the Jordanian resort town of Aqaba in June 2018. According to media reports, the meeting was attended by Israeli Mossad chief Yossi Cohen, Saudi intelligence director Khalid bin Ali al-Humeidan, Egyptian intelligence chief Abbas Kamal, Jordanian intelligence chief Adnan Essam al-Jundi, and Majed Faraj, the head of the Palestinian General Intelligence Service (GIS). Notably, all the intelligence chiefs are among the closest confidants of their respective leaders.

In this respect, Israeli-Saudi covert exchanges have drawn considerable attention and interest. Although there have been very limited details on the substance of Israeli-Saudi relations, there are growing indications of close coordination and cooperation. Saudi officials, when on-record, traditionally deny exchanges with Israel. Whenever asked, Adel al-Jubeir, the Saudi foreign minister, quips that "Saudi Arabia has no relations with Israel".

Traditionally, Saudi Arabia has maintained the most cautious attitude towards Israel. Even during the heydays of the Oslo Process in the mid-1990s as Israeli officials visited most Gulf capitals, Saudi Arabia remained on the sidelines. This attitude has somewhat changed with the rise of the new Crown Prince, Mohammad bin Salman (MBS). In meetings with Western opinion shapers and Jewish leaders and in media interviews, MBS portrays a rosy vision of Israel's engagement with the Arab world once it concludes a peace agreement with the Palestinians. He has repeatedly recognized the entitlement of Jews to their own state in their ancestral homeland.

Over the past two years, there have been growing public displays of Israeli-Saudi and broader Israeli-Gulf engagement. Without Saudi consent, these displays of engagement would not have occurred. In the summer of 2016, a retired Saudi general who heads a Saudi think-tank visited Israeli and met Israeli lawmakers, officials, and experts in the open. The visit of a Saudi delegation to Israel on July 22, 2016 is the verification of the discreet and covert cooperation that the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), comprising Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates, has maintained with Jerusalem in recent years. This collaboration has led, among other things, to the purchase of agrarian, sanitary and military technology to Israel by the GCC countries, as well as the establishment of underground alliances in security and intelligence in order to curb shared threats. In this regard, even in January 2016, the former Israeli ambassador to Egypt, Zvi Mazel, was clear when asked about the convergence between Israel and the Gulf countries:

"During the talks on the nuclear agreement with Iran, the Israeli intelligence community began to have more effective ties with the Gulf countries ... The emirates have relations with us because of our common interests in security against Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood ... "

In 2017, the King of Bahrain lifted the ban of visits of Bahraini citizens to Israel.



Former Saudi general Dr. Anwar Eshki (center) and his delegation, meet with Israeli Knesset members during a visit to Israel in 2016

The road to the normalization of Israel

More recently, Israel is experiencing initial openings in the Gulf countries' willingness to engage Israel in a more open manner. October 2018 showcased a number of unprecedented advances. On October 28, 2018, a 26-year-old Israeli judoka won a gold medal in an official international judo tournament held in Abu Dhabi.

For the first time, Israel's national anthem, Hatikva, was played at an official event in the Arabian Peninsula. The Israeli delegation to the tournament was headed by Israel's Minister of Culture & Sports and she was invited to stand beside the podium next to the President of the UAE's Wrestling and Judo Association as the national anthem was played. The minister's host even took the minister to an official visit to the Grand Mosque of Abu Dhabi, during which she was invited to sign the official visitors' book.

The day before, October 27, Yousef bin Alawi, the Minister Responsible for Foreign Affairs of Oman, addressed the annual Manama Dialogue in Bahrain. In the Q&A session, Minister bin Alawi was questioned about the surprise visit of Prime Minister Netanyahu to Muscat for a meeting with Sultan Qaboos the day before, on October 26. This was not the first ever visit of an Israeli Prime

Minister to Oman, but the first and last till this one took place more than 20 years ago.

This collaboration has led, among other things, to the sale of agrarian, sanitary and military technology to Israel by the GCC countries, as well as the establishment of underground alliances in security and intelligence in order to curb shared threats

In response questions from the floor, the minister delivered a statement that no senior official from the Arab Peninsula had ever stated on record and in public. Minister bin Alawi admitted that he was breaking new ground: "I am going to say something that I say for the first time. Israel is a state that is

present in this region. And we all understand this, we know this. The world is also aware of this fact. But despite that, Israel is not being treated by the other countries as it is treating the other countries. Maybe it is time for Israel to be treated the same as others and it should also bear the obligations as other countries. ... History says that the Torah [the Jewish sacred scripture] saw the light in the Middle East and that the prophets of Israel were born in the Middle East and that the Jews used to live in this area of the world. We are in the world that is developing, and Israel has the capabilities to benefit and to be beneficial to others. ... We cannot exclude anyone.”

For Israel, the main priority was the Syrian front where it sought to establish red lines regarding the presence and deployment of Iranian forces and its proxies for the “day after”

Jordan’s Foreign Minister, Ayman Safadi echoed a similar message, but in a more reserved fashion. Having delivered a speech on behalf of King Abdullah, he responded to a question from the audience noting that “Israel is in the Middle East, but it is yet to be of the Middle East.”

At the very same venue, Sheikh Khalid bin Ahmed Al Khalifa, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Bahrain commented on the visit and noted that Bahrain has full confidence in the wisdom of Sultan Qaboos. When asked about the possible inclusion of Israel into the proposed new regional alliance led by the

U.S., the Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA), Sheikh Khalid said: “It is not a closed club And it definitely would send the right message to other states that do not fit the criteria but in the future could be active members in the future MESA. I heard a lot of names of countries from the floor. None of them are excluded and that could send the right message that we have a future together.”

Since the heydays of the Oslo peace process in the mid-1990s, one cannot recall such a series of public statements regarding the interest of Arab countries, notably those from the Arabian Peninsula, to develop normal relations with Israel and accept it as a legitimate partner in the Arab Middle East. There have been other signs of normalization, such as the Saudi consent that non-Israeli airlines flying between Israel and Asia are permitted to use Saudi airspace. However, a series of public statements welcoming Israel to be part of the Arab Middle East is not an insignificant development. Not less important, there was hardly any domestic criticism in the Gulf countries to the initial openings towards Israel. Even Palestinian responses were muted.

The nascent and cautious public openings notwithstanding, there appears to be a strategic dimension to this evolving relationship led by three key parties – Saudi Arabia, the U.S., and Israel.

Against the Shiite Axis

With the election of President Trump and the ascent of MBS, the three countries have collaborated to disrupt and deny Iran’s ambitions of regional hegemony by driving a wedge between Russia and Iran. Apparently, the three powers sought to lure Russia away from Iran with the implicit offer that they can more reliably and effectively facilitate Russia’s regional ambitions than the Shiite axis.



Saudi force during a visit by Yemeni Prime Minister Khaled Bahan at the Saudi-led coalition military base in Yemen

This objective was a tall order considering the strong alignment between Russia and the Iranian-led Shiite axis. In any case, the three partners seem to have concluded that weakening the Russian-Shiite alignment – effectively isolating Iran – is the key for disrupting Iran’s hegemonic ambitions. To that end, the partners worked collectively and separately along the following basic parameters:

- Consent to the primary position of Russia in the Syrian arena and avoid direct confrontation with Russia;
- Undermine and assertively push back the influence of Iran and its proxies in all other arenas (mainly Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, and Gaza), which, in turn, will expose the limits and vulnerabilities of Iran;
- Demonstrate the robustness of the three partners’ linchpin – Saudi Arabia – which has consolidated the Royal Court’s domestic power against potential contenders and concretely advanced domestic reforms and the economic development of the Kingdom.
- Enhance the collective power and influence of the three partners by advancing the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, which will legitimize more overt strategic coordination among them and demonstrate their strategic impact and enhanced regional posture. In this arrangement, the U.S. would formulate an initiative more acceptable to Israel (that would still require Israeli concessions) and the Saudi’s would compel the Palestinians to accept.

Notably, while the partners agreed to the basic parameters, each member had different priorities. **For Israel, the main priority was the Syrian front where it sought to establish redlines regarding the presence and deployment of Iranian forces and its proxies in the “day after”.** Saudi Arabia focused its attention on its southeastern backyard. However, and in addition to the Yemeni front, the Saudi playbook run by the Crown Prince consisted of a vast range of actions ranging from internal “housekeeping”, to consolidating (and cajoling) the Syrian opposition groups for the negotiations on the final settlement of Syria, through bringing in line the Sunni front with special attention to quarantined Qatar, onto resetting relations with Iraq to weaken Iranian influence, and expecting the advancement of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

The domestic challenges of most of the Arab Sunni regimes also limits the ability of Israel to strategically rely on its new partners

The U.S. administration appeared to have placed its bets on Saudi Crown Prince's playbook facilitating and backing its ambitious agenda that exacts a modest cost from the U.S. and might yield substantial strategic gains along with lucrative business deals that create jobs in the America. One of the main tasks assumed by the United States was taking the lead in relaunching the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

As the below-surface strategic coordination increased, it became evident that the partner held certain reservations and doubts regarding the others. Israelis (and some U.S. officials) appeared concerned that the Saudi Crown Prince was juggling too many balls simultaneously. One major concern was of the possible "domino effect" should the Saudis drop one of the balls. Furthermore, so far the Saudis have not too much to show for – particularly vis-à-vis Qatar and the Houthis in Yemen. Put mildly, the Israeli defense establishment was not impressed by the Saudi military operation in Yemen. Notably, the Saudis and Israelis were not certain that they will be able to maintain the ongoing engagement of the Trump administration.

Over the past year, this partnership has yielded mixed results. First and foremost, Israel and Saudi Arabia forged closer relations with Russia, at least till the emergence of the new U.S. policy in Syria and the September 17 incident. This relationship enabled Israel to destroy numerous Iranian military assets in Syria and facilitated close Russian-Saudi cooperation in managing the oil markets, at the expense of Russia's prime ally, Iran.

Iran may have not accomplished all its objectives in Syria, and it has been forced to compromise and seek alternatives. Iran's resorting to shipments utilizing civilian cargo flights may suggest that establishing an effective ground route across the

"Shiite Crescent" was effectively frustrated. Although the enmeshment of Iranian-commanded militias into the Assad regime's military creates new risks for Israel, it also means that Iran cannot overtly operate an independent military formation in Syria. Simply put, for the time being, Iran cannot have a "Hezbollah" in Syria.

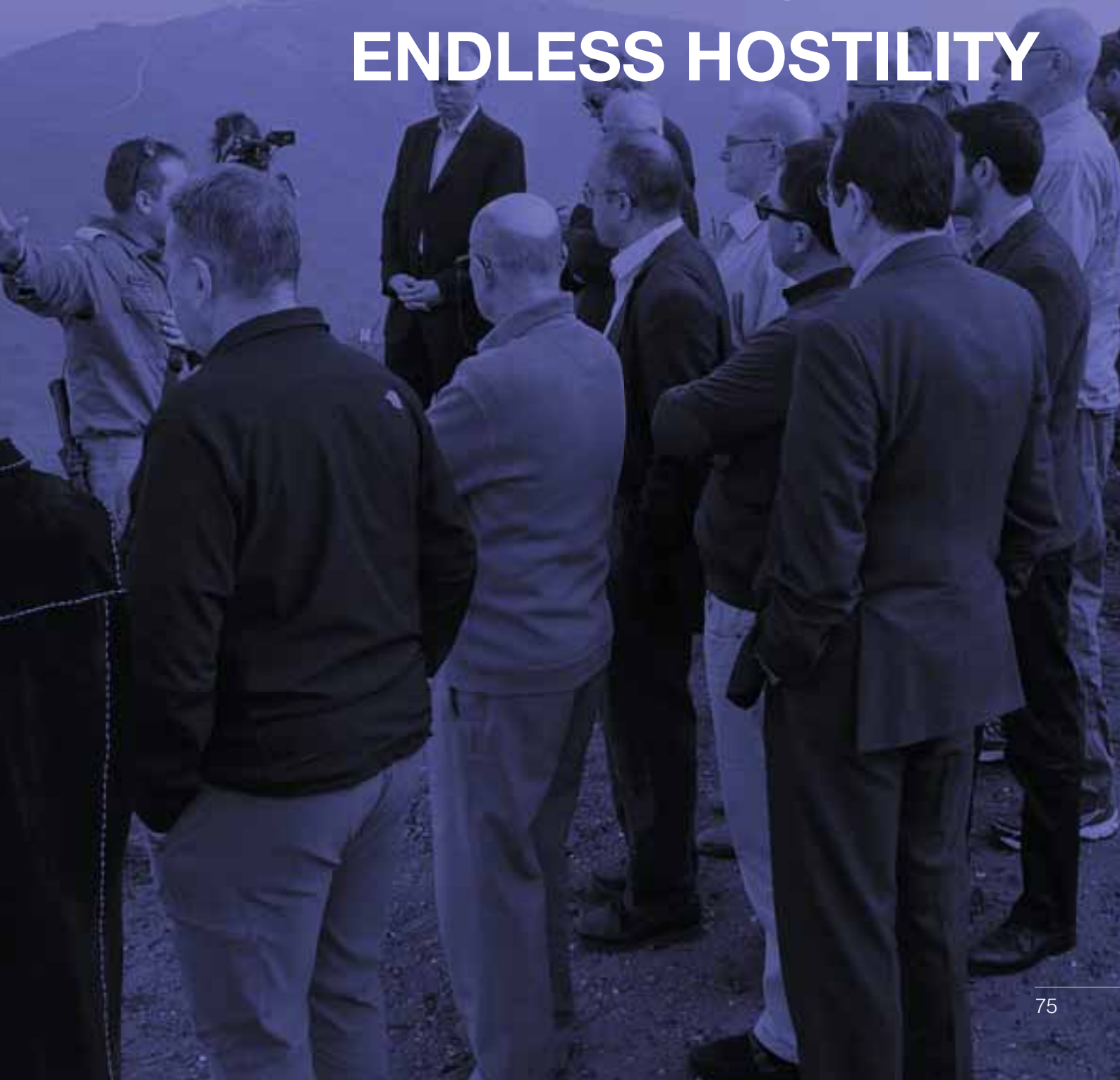
Despite Saudi promises to "deliver" the Palestinians, the Palestinian pushback led King Salman in July to host President Abbas and reaffirm Saudi support for the positions of President Abbas. Most Israeli observers realized from the outset that the Saudis would not be able to coerce and compel the Palestinians. Perhaps more importantly, the Saudis have failed to both bring the Qataris back in line despite the blockade and to reach a decisive outcome in Yemen. By the summer of this year it was clear that the Saudis were dropping the balls they were trying to juggle.

Clearly, the U.S.'s withdrawal from Syria, the setback in Israeli-Russian relations, and doubts regarding Saudi's position and influence in the region, renders the future strategic role of the U.S.-Saudi-Israeli strategic triangle unknown, but it would be highly premature to dismiss its relevance. However, this does show the limits of Israel's ability to rely on its new partners in the region.

The domestic challenges of most of the Arab Sunni regimes also limits the ability of Israel to strategically rely on its new partners. Furthermore, the massive build-up of Arab Sunni militaries could become a threat to Israel if their domestic circumstances change. As Israel does not have the luxury of choosing its neighbors, one can understand why regime stability in Sunni Arab world is a critical interest of Israel.

5

THE PALESTINIAN ENDLESS HOSTILITY



5. THE PALESTINIANS' ENDLESS HOSTILITY

When it comes to the study of critical strategic matters, it is important to clarify which trends influence or can alter existing perceptions and policy. The conflict between Israelis and Palestinians is one of the eternal unresolved issues in the Middle East; the conflict has been Israel's Arab neighbors' excuse for harassment, boycott and diplomatic isolation.

Nevertheless, **even though the conflict is still unsolved, it has evolved over the last twenty-five years; and Israel's position has evolved along with it.**

Since the Rabin government's undertaking of the Oslo process in 1993, significant changes have taken place in Israel and throughout the Middle East. Understanding the nature and significance of these trends is essential for an accurate analysis of both the old and new threats facing the State of Israel in all spheres of its struggle.

When Israel embarked on the Oslo process, Israel's strategic situation was starkly different from what it is today. Now, the landscape is quite different.

The intensity of the United States' involvement in the Middle East has weakened, and Russia has returned to play an active and influential role, especially in Syria. Small wars have broken out throughout the world, which are threatening the stability of the world. Europe finds itself threatened by the fighting in Ukraine and the Middle East. Radical Islamic forces from Afghanistan to Yemen, Syria, and Libya have learned how, despite their weaknesses—and even turning this disadvantage into an asset—they can fight in a manner that can impact the global stability which the West needs so much. The turmoil in the Middle East has created a wave of emigration that is flooding European countries, threatening their economies, their cultural identity, and the tenability of open borders.

Along with this evolution, since Oslo, the conflict has also undergone a deep transformation.

Palestinians, although united back in Oslo, are today divided. They have gained autonomy and

sovereignty, and they have formed institutions, armed corps and diplomatic missions; but they have not been able to reach unity. The Palestinian Authority (PA), which rules the West Bank, and Hamas, which rules Gaza, have different goals and both claim to be the real representatives of the Palestinian people. The PA's ruling party, Al-Fatah, is experiencing political deterioration, its governance is threatened with collapse, and its president, the octogenarian Mahmoud Abbas refuses to call for elections due to the fear of an eventual Hamas victory. Hamas, for its part, is not handling the humanitarian crisis in Gaza and its efforts are directly aimed to launch massive campaigns of violence against Israel time after time.

The PA's ruling party, Al-Fatah, is experiencing political deterioration, its governance is threatened with collapse, and its president, the octogenarian Mahmoud Abbas refuses to call for elections due to the fear of an eventual Hamas victory

Since Oslo, the international community has constantly tried to advance in the peace negotiations. Several peace plans were adopted but never implemented and a Quartet for Peace (formed by the U.S., the E.U., the U.N. and Russia) took the leading role of the international mediation.

Today there has held up a new wave of optimism for peacemakers. The Trump Administration intends to release its peace proposal, which supposedly will involve other Middle Eastern countries. The plan is still a secret, but some

analysts suggest that an Israel's withdrawal from the West Bank would be one of the central parts of the proposal.

Israel's withdrawal from Judea and Samaria will not end the conflict, but in all reasonable likelihood, it may even encourage those who wish to pursue conflict with Israel.

Regardless of good intentions and new approaches, currently the conflict with the Palestinians is another front for Israel, another focus of instability that could undermine the Israel's strategic position and the security of its citizens.

5.1 The assault on Israel: Hamas's new hybrid warfare strategy

HLMG's eye on Hamas's actions

Hamas has undoubtedly been the most determined of Israel's enemies in the last twenty years. Israel's home front strategy has been designed to stop Hamas's reiterative attempts to kill Israeli citizens and soldiers and undermine the Israeli society. Effective, novel and cutting-edge measures combined with an exemplary resilience and full compliance of rules of engagement in hybrid conflicts have raised Israel as an example to the West. The HLMG assessed this in its report, published in 2016, *Fighting Terror Effectively: An Assessment of Israel's Experience on The Home Front*

Nevertheless, despite Israel's progress in this struggle, Hamas has not been defeated and has been constantly designing new ways and strategies to harm Israel, whether indiscriminately bombing its cities or exploiting civilians' deaths for the international media.

In this regard, the HLMG has closely followed the last breakout of violence in Gaza and at the Gaza border during 2018. After an interrupted period of Hamas violence at the Gaza border, on May 11, the HLMG published the report *Smoke & Mirrors: Six Weeks of Violence on The Gaza Border*. The report is based on Colonel Richard Kemp's observations and a review of material produced by both sides and the international community. It also included discussions with Israeli government ministers, IDF commanders, and lawyers.



Colonel Richard Kemp presented his testimony in the Special United Nations Human Rights Council session on events at the border of Israel and Gaza in May 2018. He also testified to the UN Commission of Inquiry on the 2018 Protests in the "Occupied Territory" in Geneva in December 2018

On May 18 2018, Colonel Kemp presented his testimony at the Special United Nations Human Rights Council session on events at the Israel-Gaza border. Among other things, Col. Kemp pointed out, "The truth is that Hamas, a terrorist organization that seeks the destruction of Israel and murder of Jews everywhere, deliberately caused over 60 of its own people to get killed." Col. Kemp alerted the Council that it was wrong to blame Israel for Hamas's bloody campaign at Gaza's border.

"The truth is that Hamas, a terrorist organization that seeks the destruction of Israel and murder of Jews everywhere, deliberately caused over 60 of its own people to get killed."

Hamas Leadership: between a rock and a hard place

The Palestinian Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas), a widely designated terror organization, is a multi-faceted entity. The following analysis portrays some of Hamas's choices and policy trends, as well as their logic and underlying currents.

Hamas's trajectory

Hamas was established in 1987 as a movement seeking to promote socio-religious-political reform among the Palestinians, mostly through religious and social welfare activism (da'wa).

Following its mother movement, the Muslim Brotherhood, it envisions a Shari'a (Muslim Law) ruled Palestinian state as part of a reinstated Muslim regional order, which will emerge bottom up through patient cultivation. Hamas's 1988 charter seeks to establish an Islamic state in the all of Palestine, supplanting the destroyed the state of Israel, whose right to exist it negates.

Hamas today

Through the struggle against Israel and competing with the Palestinian Liberation Movement (Fatah) and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), Hamas sought new relevance by transforming into a Jihadist terror movement, well exemplified by its military terror arm, the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, and its wide terror activity. Since the Oslo years Hamas more evidently combined Jihadist

armed terror ("resistance"), social welfare activities and political activity. Hamas's "Change and Reform Party" won a majority election to the Palestinian Legislative Council in January 2006. Amid Fatah's refusal to recognize this achievement, in June 2007 Hamas forcefully took over the Gaza Strip, vanquishing the Fatah elements there and establishing itself as one of the first and surviving Muslim Brothers governments in the Arab world.

Hamas's structure and leadership are constantly seeking to balance several axes: ideologically, between its political religious principles and the constraints of reality; organizationally, between its military wing and its political wing; geographically, between its Gaza-centered cadres and its regional diaspora. Naturally, the military wing stresses the Jihadist element in Hamas identity and policy seeking continuous military buildup and active friction with Israel, while the political wing tends to show more pragmatism, prioritizing the governance project and the advance of politically establishing Hamas's regional and global legitimacy. Both wings are united in their view that Israel is illegitimate and their commitment to destroy it, but differ on the means to do so, priorities, pace and in sequence.



January 25 2019: 10,000 Gazans rioted & threw grenades along the border fence with Israel.



Gaza fire kites devastated a nature reserve inside Israel in the last few months

After the last decade saw Hamas's power structure dispersed between Gaza, the Israeli prisons, the West Bank and abroad, currently almost all political power is concentrated in Gaza, dominating the top of Hamas priorities. In February 2017, two young military wing leaders, Yahya Sinwar and Salah al-Aruri were elected to Hamas political bureau. Before that, Sinwar spent 22 years in Israeli prison for his part in multiple terror attacks. After his release in 2011 as part of the Shalit prisoner exchange deal, he took charge of the military wing, overtaking Muhammad Deif and Marwan Issa, two prominent Hamas military figures, and gained important experience communicating between the military and political wings. As Hamas leader in Gaza, Sinwar projects the military wing's power towards the other armed factions in the Strip, while demonstrating the wing's subordination to the Hamas political leadership. His background and authority allow Sinwar stronger sway on military affairs and greater latitude in striking political-military balance in Hamas policy. As long as Sinwar can present success and progress, his position in Gaza leadership is stable. Aruri and Sinwar stand together on Gaza-led policy, but Aruri's focus is on West Bank operations and on contacts with Iran. Alongside Sinwar stands Ismail Haniya, Hamas former leader and currently its political bureau chief, responsible for the movement's foreign relations. Haniya replaced Khaled Mash'al, who now aims to replace Abbas at the head of the PA,

and perhaps also to compose a new Palestinian charter, replacing the current PLO text.

On the regional level, Hamas's choices are a loyal reflection of the regional power struggles and architecture. As a "resistance" movement Hamas historically aligned itself with the "Axis of Resistance" led by Iran and incorporating Hezbollah and Syria. The regional turmoil ("Arab Spring") brought forth the axis's Shiite color and put Hamas in a fierce political-identity conflict, as their "resistance" partners supported Bashar al-Assad's widespread massacres of Sunni Arabs in Syria's civil war. Hamas leadership in exile then chose to break up with Iran's camp and moved to Egypt, which in 2012 was led by a Muslim Brotherhood government, closely allied with Turkey and Qatar, where Khaled Mash'al had long been staying.

2013 saw Muhammad Mursi's government overthrown by Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi, the MB under crackdown and its Hamas affiliate designated as an enemy of the Egyptian state. Some of the Hamas leadership accordingly moved to Turkey and Qatar, as president Erdogan is portraying himself as a bulwark for Gaza, Hamas and al-Aqsa, while Qatar is the only regional player materially supporting the Gaza strip. In June 2017, under Saudi and Egyptian pressures, Qatar requested Hamas military operatives to leave its territory. As Syria's war was drawing to its end, Hamas openly re-established its ties with Iran (and Syria), manifesting its military

wing's strong leaning towards IRGC Quds Forces and its commander, general Qasem Soleimani, as a main source of military funding and support. Reports and open Hamas declarations from the last two years about Hamas delegations to Tehran, and even Soleimani's portraits in Gaza all teach of growing Iranian support to Hamas, mostly on the military dimension.

Regardless of good intentions and new approaches, currently the conflict with the Palestinians is another front for Israel, another focus of instability that could undermine Israel's strategic position and the security of its citizens

At the same time, Hamas political wing was making efforts to mend fences with Saudi Arabia, Iran's nemesis, and with the other Sunni Arab states, who in general see both Iran and the MB as a threat. Egypt, in that context, enjoys a special status, as geography makes it Gaza's only exit to the outside world, except through Israel. While in Mubarak's years Egypt had turned a blind eye to the burgeoning tunnel industry between the Strip and Sinai, the Mursi MB government (2012-2013) was fully supportive to its sister Hamas movement. However, al-Sissi's Egypt made a sharp policy turn, and thoroughly destroyed the illicit underground economy which was run at Egypt's expense, razing almost two kilometers of houses and orchards along Egypt's border with Gaza. Throughout all those years and different Cairo governments and policies, Egypt remained an indispensable interlocutor, mediator and power broker for Gaza, enjoying critical rapport with Israel, the PA and inescapably, Hamas.

Hamas's current policy dilemmas are combined, spanning from short term to long term. Since the 2014 fighting with Israel, the Strip is still in debris with no reconstruction or serious donations in sight. The already dire economic distress, with wide

unemployment, electricity and water shortages, was further deepened when Abbas chose to cut the PA funding to Gaza. Public discontent was growing and threatening to turn against the Hamas government in Gaza. Internally, the military wing is frustrated since the post 2014 deterrence constrained its active fighting against Israel, while one of its main military enterprises, the networked attack tunnels into Israel, is continuously detected, countered and destroyed by IDF.

Under this pressure system, and seeking to avoid a futile war with Israel, Hamas chose a combined strategy to break out of its deadlock. Spontaneous demonstrations initially organized by civil organizations were seen a competition for Hamas leadership, potential threat to its own rule, and a great opportunity to divert public unrest turning it against Israel. Since the end of March 2018, the "Great Marches of Return" serve Hamas as a multi-purpose tool to deflect internal pressures, to push Israel into concessions, to reap political capital at Fatah's and Abbas's expense, to vent military wing motivations and to maintain Gaza on Israeli, regional and world agendas. A hybrid warfare combining "peaceful protests" and "popular resistance" thinly veiling terror and military violence, heavily covered by media and widely used as part of an information campaigning, has been waged for the last ten months, with no sign of stopping.

Closely controlled and regulated by Hamas, the low burning campaign combining border friction, arson balloons and kites and occasional mortar and rocket launching, successfully averted wide scale escalation with Israel, but helped Hamas leadership as fire-support for its negotiations. The Cairo channel, mediated by Egyptian General Intelligence Directorate, allows both Israel and Hamas to indirectly communicate and negotiate with each other about security conduct, financial arrangements and movement through the crossings, while formally denying this contact.

While Hamas indeed managed to gain Israel's consent to allow Qatari cash infusion and electricity improvements to the Strip, one should seriously doubt whether Hamas succeeded to extort enough resources to offset even its losses of Abbas' financial warfare on Gaza, let alone extract Israel's concessions on substantial and irreversible subjects. The cost of this strategy was rather high though, as the limited political gains were bought by

almost 200 deaths and thousands of injuries in the border clashes, whereas Hamas finds it important to deny that restraining them was in return for Qatari cash. Hamas proudly states that it stood fast and persisted that the prisoner deal, exchanging

Israeli civilian captives in Gaza and bodies of IDF soldiers for Palestinian prisoners in Israel, is separate from the security/resources negotiations.



Hamas's leader in the Gaza Strip Yahya Sinwar (1st-R) waves upon his arrival at a rally marking the 31st anniversary of Hamas' founding, in Gaza City December 16, 2018

However, it has little to show as progress on this issue, which is a high and long held banner for the Palestinians in general, Hamas's military wing in particular, and Sinwar in person.

While it appears that the current security situation provides relative stability, future developments in the Palestinian arena could create considerable risks to Israel's national security

For the time being, Sinwar is seeking a formula to allow Hamas to preserve its rule on Gaza, diffuse popular protests against it and weather the pressures until the opportunity for Palestinian succession after Abbas will present itself. Despite successfully carving a "bellow threshold of war" challenging space against Israel, it is far from advancing towards long lasting achievements and stability.

Hamas observes with concern the regional trend of "normalization" between Arab states and Israel, the Palestinian disunity, the PASF security coordination with Israel, the popular criticism and Israel's pressures. While somehow muddling through its multiple hardships, Hamas falls short of presenting long term and sustainable model for survival, let alone to deliver on its promises for change and reform, bringing Gaza forward and competing over the Palestinian leadership as a whole.

5.2 The progressive dysfunction of the Palestinian Authority and the next breakout of violence in the West Bank

The Volatile Palestinian Arena – Evolving Risks to Israel's National Security

The dual-headed Palestinian system is facing a double deadlock. The PA, seemingly calling for a political settlement of the conflict, is actually neither able nor willing to engage in meaningful bilateral negotiations or in real statesmanship, preferring declarative blame games and internationalization. President Abbas is nearing the end of his term, and succession already paralyzes and will possibly destabilize the PA for the next several years. Hamas, rallying behind the armed resistance flag, is deterred from military conflict with Israel, isolated from external backing, and under immense pressures due to its failure to provide the needs of its populace. With the "peace process" path blocked by a paralyzed PA leadership's longevity and succession struggles for the coming years, and the "armed resistance" path blocked by the glorious failure of Hamas's Gaza project in strategy, military and economy, the bifurcated Palestinian system is facing dead ends on both paths of the fork junction.

While it appears that the current security situation provides relative stability, future developments in the Palestinian arena could create considerable risks to Israel's national security. The main challenge stems from the strategic ambition of Hamas to overtake the PLO and the Palestinian Authority (PA).

While it might appear that it has limited holding in the West Bank, Hamas has attempted to launch hundreds of major terrorist attacks against Israel from the West Bank, all of which Israeli security services foiled in cooperation with the Palestinian Authority's security forces. Hamas leadership has political following in the West Bank and Hamas has several strongholds, particularly in Hebron and its vicinity and in Jenin. In 2014, the Israeli Security Agency (Shin-Beit) revealed a Hamas plot to orchestrate a coup in the West Bank against the PA. Hamas was planning to launch some 40

simultaneous terror attacks on PA institutions across the West Bank.

A Tale of Two Entities with Leaderships Under Pressure

Hamas and Fatah are interlocked in a struggle for survival. With the Fatah dominated Palestinian Authority (PA) in the West Bank and Hamas government ruling in Gaza, each movement faces daunting challenges, from the relevance of their political agendas, through governance and all the way to the legitimacy of their rule among the respective publics. As it stands, the publics under both governments are each discontent with their own, seeing both them as disconnected, corrupt and failing to deliver on the public's needs and aspirations. Since the 2006 split, numerous attempts to reach reconciliation have all failed. Despite the public expectations and Hamas's view of the Gaza-West Bank split as detrimental to the national cause, both movements prioritize their own political goals over an unachievable national unity.

Geographically, Hamas's policy spans across several distinct areas. The Gaza Strip is where Hamas has established first direct military and political control, and hence it serves as a bridgehead to establish itself as a legitimate government and as a springboard to the West Bank. In Gaza Hamas maintains tight control through its military, security and police forces, keeping the various armed and terror factions there on a short leash, combining coordination and aggressive suppression to buttress its rule. The West Bank is the contest ground with the Fatah over Palestinian leadership, which will be heating up when Abbas's succession becomes an immediate issue. With strong popular support to Hamas throughout the West Bank, it also seeks to use that territory for active terror against Israel, both upholding its Jihadist doctrine and reaping political gains, as the blowback to its attacks further undermines Abbas and the PA.

Hamas also operates across the Middle East, with leadership, sympathizers, supporters and operational capabilities in Lebanon, Turkey, Qatar, Jordan and Egypt, among others.



Salafi-Jihadi Groups surrounding Israel

Over the past year, Hamas has renewed relations with Iran and Hezbollah, but the level of current arms transfers and financial support from Iran to Hamas is not publicly known

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) clearly sees Hamas as an existential threat to the PA, to Fatah and to himself personally. The

Fatah movement is divided and lacking legitimacy due to corruption, unemployment and its security coordination with Israel. A large majority of the West Bank public favors Abbas's resignation. Abbas and the Fatah leadership understand that Gaza is lost to Hamas and are well aware that Hamas has its eyes on the Palestinian leadership and the PA in both Gaza and the West Bank. They are determined to block this threat from Hamas to their movement, to their families and to themselves, and they are seeking to uphold stability in the West Bank, as Abbas' term in power is setting into its final stage. The PA stability is maintained through Abbas' tight control over the Palestinian Security Forces (PASF) and the Tanzim cadres. At the same time, Abbas is resolved to undermine Hamas in Gaza and weaken it, mostly through cutting the funding to the Strip's

wages and electricity, probably also seeking to drive Hamas and Israel into a direct military conflict, which will serve Abbas both by hurting Hamas and by vilifying Israel. Under Egypt's pressures, the PA is considering a gradual return of some of its officials to Gaza and its border crossings, but these steps are often rolled back in the fluctuating power struggles. Abbas mostly insists on subordinating all armed forces in Gaza to the PA ("one rule, one law, one weapon"), which actually mean disarming Hamas or depriving it from its most capable tool. While Hamas has been considering some transfer of administrative powers in the strip to the PA, it has in fact resisted that continuously, the insisting on maintaining its armed terror forces independent of the PA government control.

Several factors shape the current situation in the Palestinian territories which is creating serious dilemmas for the Israeli government. First and foremost, the Palestinian territories are de facto divided between two entities since 2007: (a) the Palestinian Authority (PA) governing in parts of the West Bank under the rule of the PLO and Fatah; and (b) the Gaza Strip ruled by Hamas. Civilian services in Gaza are provided through the government authorities set up by the PA and now run by Hamas. The PA transfers nearly \$100 million every month to the Gaza Strip – a relatively small share of international funds and tax revenues that it is required to provide. However, the PA has refused to pay salaries of civil servants working for the Hamas government. Since the Hamas revenues from tunnel smuggling from Egypt ceased in 2013, there is an ongoing financial crisis in Gaza and civil servants' salaries were slashed and disbursed irregularly.

The de facto division into two Palestinian entities runs deeper than questions of governing and finance. There is very little "spillover" effect between the two entities. Just as the "Marches of Return" along the Gaza border fence with Israel had little traction in the West Bank, rounds of violence in East Jerusalem in the summer of 2016 had no effect in Gaza. Even during the rounds of armed violence between Israel and Hamas (December 2008- January 2009, November 2012, July-August 2014), the streets of East Jerusalem and the West Bank remained relatively peaceful and calm.

This division reflects a deep divide between the PA and PLO leadership, on one hand, and the Hamas, on the other. The latter is an extremist Islamist

terror organization committed to Jihad (holy war) against Israel and to replace it with an Islamist Emirate. The PLO is essentially a secular national movement. The PLO has engaged in terror, and under Arafat, as recent as the Second Intifada (2000-2002). However, President Abbas is committed to nonviolence and to security cooperation with Israel and he has enforced this position. Although he has revealed his deeply held anti-Semitic convictions, maintains financial support to families of terrorists, and in several cases encouraged violent demonstrations, Abbas has been adamant in rejecting terror. Despite internal allegations of "collaborating" with Israel, he has maintained security cooperation with Israel. In that sense, Hamas and PLO are bitter enemies.

The second main factor shaping the Palestinian arena is that the leaderships of both the PA and Hamas face intense internal and external pressure in their respective areas of control.

The PA's security apparatus has been effective in quashing public protests, but the vast majority of Palestinians consider the PA a corrupt institution

Hamas is governing over a brewing humanitarian crisis with near world-record rates of unemployment. Diverting the limited resources at its disposal to terror and arms, Hamas has no resources to address the dire situation in Gaza. Furthermore, Hamas is regionally more isolated than ever. The Syrian Civil War led Hamas to suspend ties with Iran and the Assad regime. Over the past year, Hamas has renewed relations with Iran and Hezbollah, but the level of current arms transfers and financial support from Iran to Hamas is not publicly known. Hamas's relations with Turkey have also been unstable, particularly following Turkey's limited rapprochement with Israel. However, the Turkish government still allows Hamas to manage terror operations from its soil.

With limited external backing, Hamas has become more dependent on Egypt for even the basic supply

of oil for electricity. Although Egyptian intelligence apparatus is working with Hamas, the mutual disdain the two parties is evident. Hamas is an offspring of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and has previously collaborated with Islamic State operatives in Sinai – the two arch enemies of the Egyptian regime. Due to Hamas's collaboration with the Islamic State, Egypt started in 2013 to cut off the tunnel network connecting the Gaza Strip with Sinai. This, in turn, led to the elimination of Hamas's main source of revenue – "taxation" of smuggled goods – along with the disruption of the smuggling of arms and other resources from Iran.



Locations of mass protests along Gaza border

While the socio-economic situation in the West Bank is far better, President Abbas and the PA are domestically weak. The PA's security apparatus has been effective in quashing public protests, but the vast majority of Palestinians consider the PA a corrupt institution. Some 49% of the Palestinian public consider the PA as a burden on Palestinians. Although President Abbas's personal approval rates have improved recently, more than 60% of the Palestinian public demand his immediate resignation. With regards to Hamas and Gaza, nearly 80% of the Palestinian public demand that President Abbas and the PA lift the sanctions imposed on Gaza. Notwithstanding, Abbas is politically weak in the public arena, but not in the PA or in the PLO. He has uprooted real or imagined opposition within the institutions and withstood heavy regional Arab pressure to reconcile with his

arch internal rival, Mohammed Dahlan, who was forced into exile.

Nevertheless, Abbas is, to some extent at least, isolated among regional Arab leaders and there is high level of distrust between them. The Trump administration attempts to come up with a new peace initiative in coordination with Israel and the Sunni Arab countries has led the PA leadership to believe that the Arab countries are about to "sell out" the Palestinian cause. The reports of growing strategic relations between Israel and the Arab countries only serves to reinforce this perception, as was the rather mild Arab response to the American decision to move the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem. While the European Union was traditionally the friend of last resort of the PA, the European role in the peace process has become increasingly negligible. The PA's decision to effectively cut off relations with the U.S. administration has not only reduced the already low prospects for renewing the peace process but has also decreased the PA's influence on other initiatives, such as the rehabilitation of the Gaza Strip.

The third factor, closely related to the former, is the uncertainty concerning the future of the PA and the PLO following Abbas's eventual departure. Over the past few years, the recurrent reference to the question of the "day after" has reflected Abbas's political weakness, along with his ailing health, and the absence of an heir apparent. According to media reports, some of the unofficially contending successors have recently started to collect weapons.

Several contenders are setting their very-own quasi-militia groups that will support them if the leadership struggle becomes violent. Formally, should Abbas resign or pass away, Palestinian law stipulates that the Speaker of the Palestinian parliament will become an interim president for 60 days. It is hard to imagine that the Fatah leaders of the PA and PLO will allow the incumbent Speaker, Aziz al Duwaik from Hamas, to assume that position. This is a recipe for internal violence and terror that will have most likely spillover effects on Israel. The uncertainty regarding the near future of the Palestinian Authority is a major risk to Israeli security interests.

The fourth factor is that Israel's relations with the PA are at one of the lowest points since the end of the Second Intifada in 2002.



Gaza protests led by Hamas deliberately mix terrorist operatives and civilians, including women and children



Drone footage captures “Great March of Return” protests at Israel-Gaza border

The level of mutual distrust is at its highest possible, and this is not confined only to the personal misgivings between the two leaders. Both sides simply do not believe that the other party is interested in reaching and abiding by a final peace agreement that will end all outstanding disputes. The Palestinians believe that the two-state solution is no longer viable because of the Israeli settlements in the West Bank. They would point out that most of the current members of the Israeli government –

including members from Prime Minister Netanyahu’s party – reject the two-state solution and actively seek to undermine its relevance. The Israelis, on their part, do not believe that the Palestinians have reconciled to living alongside a Jewish state. Palestinian leaders might aspire for “two-states”, but they no longer subscribe to the once popular slogan of “two states for two people”.



IDF soldiers at the Gaza border fence

Source: Israel Defence Force

On top of all that, Israelis are concerned about repeating the Gaza experience – withdrawing only to see the Hamas take over.

Under these circumstances, the probability of renewing the peace process and holding serious negotiations between the parties on a final status agreement, let alone reaching one, is remote. Nevertheless, and despite the acrimonious relations between the Israeli and PA leaderships, Israeli and Palestinian security forces cooperate on regular basis. Palestinian security forces have foiled several terror attacks, while Israeli security services uncovered Hamas' 2014 attempted coup against the PA. This cooperation is approved and supported by the leaderships and reflects the basic understanding between the parties that they have shared interests.

However, the shared interests are coming under pressure because of the deteriorating situation in Gaza and the PA-Hamas impasse. On this point, the interests of Israel and the PA are diverging. Ever since the PA and Hamas touted reconciliation agreements – dating back more than a decade –

Israel's position was fierce opposition. Israel threatened repeatedly that a PLO/Hamas unity government would not be recognized by Israel. Israeli threats were never put to serious test because previous agreements were short-lived. Simply, the divide between the PLO and Hamas was – and remains – unbridgeable and both sides view the relationship as a “zero-sum game”.

The Gaza Crisis – A Game-Changer?

Gaza continues to face a multidimensional crisis (unemployment, power, water, sewage) exacerbating the security volatility. The World Bank and others report further deterioration of its economy, with 0.5% growth in 2017 against 8% in 2016, donations dropping from \$400 million to \$55 million and youth unemployment nearing 60%. Economic, social, and political pressure is certainly on the rise. According to studies released by OCHA1 and the INSS2, available drinking water is declining and increasing health risk.

The PA-Hamas rivalry only exacerbates the resource scarcity and puts additional obstacles in the way of the shortening line of donors, the latter paradoxically encouraged by Israel to support the Gaza stabilization efforts.

The Israelis do not believe that the Palestinians have reconciled to living alongside a Jewish state. Palestinian leaders might aspire for “two-states”, but they no longer subscribe to the once popular slogan of “two states for two people”. On top of all that, Israelis are concerned about repeating the Gaza experience – withdrawing only to see the Hamas take over

Accelerating the crisis, PA had cut much of its funding and salaries previously paid to the Strip, and thus cornered Hamas, its main rival faction. This took place against the backdrop of ongoing “reconciliation” efforts, mediated by Egyptian General Intelligence seniors, probably in concert with Israel. The efforts hit a hard rock as the PA Prime Minister’s and Chief of Intelligence’s convoy was attacked by IEDs upon entering Gaza on March 13th, 2018. Later that day, representatives from 19 countries, including most GCC members, the EU and Israel took part in a White House session about the crisis in Gaza, which the PA chose not to join, in protest of Trump’s recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital, and his declared plan to move the US embassy there in mid-May. The discussions between President Sisi from Egypt and the Saudi crown prince on Sinai development projects may signal “out of the sand box” approaches to stabilizing both Sinai and Gaza.

Thus, **the escalating humanitarian crisis in Gaza has become the most recent factor that might become a “game-changer”**. The brewing humanitarian crisis

has escalated because of the sanctions imposed by the PA and its handling of the most recent attempt to reach PLO/Hamas reconciliation. The point here is that the punitive actions of the PA against Hamas and Gaza – under Abbas’s direct orders – created security risks for Israel and triggered the last round of violence in Gaza against Israel. A humanitarian crisis in Gaza also puts Egypt at risk. Thus, Egypt and Israel found themselves in an odd position – Abbas’s sanctions on Hamas were against their interests and putting both countries at risk.

The growing humanitarian crisis in Gaza led Hamas in last year’s summer to decide it must give up the civilian administration of the Gaza Strip and hand it over to the PA. Hamas and PA signed an agreement in October 2017 under which the PA would assume civil government responsibilities in the Gaza Strip and the PA security forces would take over the border crossings with Israel and Egypt. The implementation of this agreement was slow and erratic as President Abbas demanded that Hamas would surrender its weapons under the rubric of “one government – one weapon”. Hamas adamantly refused to disarm, while Abbas was unwilling to allow Hamas to create in Gaza a situation akin to Hezbollah in Lebanon. In March 2018, an attempted assassination of the PA’s Prime Minister Hamdallah in the Gaza Strip abruptly ended the reconciliation agreement.



An Israeli soldier next to an entrance to a cross-border attack tunnel dug from Gaza to Israel

The failure of the 2017 reconciliation agreement reflects a deep impasse between the PA and Hamas. On one hand, Hamas would be happy to absolve itself of civilian government responsibilities.

The escalating humanitarian crisis in Gaza has become the most recent factor that might become a “game-changer”

Politically weak as it may be, however, it will not willingly surrender the foundation of its power and influence – its arsenal of weapons and its arm manufacturing assets. Abbas, on the other hand, was encouraged by the effectiveness of severe economic pressure that forced Hamas to surrender governing to the PA. Abbas understands that assuming governing responsibilities in Gaza while allowing Hamas to operate an autonomous heavily-armed terror faction is a recipe for disaster that would undermine the PA internally.

Under these circumstances, there is low probability that the Egyptian effort to establish a new and long-term ceasefire arrangement in Gaza based on a PLO/Hamas reconciliation will succeed. Hamas and PLO – out of respect or fear of Egypt – might sign yet another reconciliation agreement, but given the impasse, it will be short lived.



Palestinian protesters at the border

Therefore, Egypt might try to reach an arrangement excluding the PLO and the PA that will alleviate the humanitarian crisis. The U.S. envoys support the Egyptian initiative and have apparently secured Qatari commitment to underwrite the investment in Gaza's rehabilitation. The arrangement however, will probably be limited. Israel demands in return

for a substantial lifting of restrictions on Gaza the release of the remains of the two Israeli soldiers and the two Israeli citizens Hamas holds. At this point however, Hamas demands the release of Palestinian terrorists from Israeli prisons in return – and Israel is unlikely to accept this demand.

While alleviating the humanitarian condition is a shared and urgent Israeli and Egyptian interest, there is considerable concern that the arrangement will embolden Hamas and increase its political power, placing it on track to realize its ultimate objective – take over the PLO and the PA. **Hamas leaders view the dwindling political power of the Palestinian old-guard leadership, the uncertainties regarding the post-Abbas Palestinian Authority, and the perceived demise of the “two-state” solution as a golden opportunity to realize their ambitions.**

5.3 The role of Gulf countries in the peace process: from Oman to Qatar

Qatar's involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

In August 2014, Israeli Ambassador Ron Prosor named Qatar “The Club Med for Terrorists”. Prosor's allegations were focused on the double-standard showed by Qatar, which allowed the flow of terror financing within its territory and, at the same time, invested huge amounts of money to improve its image in the world: the 2022 World Cup is a clear example.

Certainly, **entities and individuals from Qatar have traditionally been a source of financial support to terror groups such as Al-Qaeda or Al Nusra Front. Also, Qatar has been the biggest donor of the Gaza Strip and the top financer of Hamas.** Qatar's support and permission to terror financing led to a diplomatic crisis with its neighbors in May, 2017: Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen cut diplomatic ties with Qatar due to the support of terrorist groups across the region. The Saudis concretely accused Qatar of embracing terrorist and sectarian groups that destabilize the region, such as al-Qaeda, Muslim Brotherhood and Iranian-backed groups in Qatif.

At the beginning of the crisis, President Trump supported the coalition against Qatar led by Saudis, however Qatar began to restore its credibility in Washington. Afterwards, the U.S. and Qatar signed a Memorandum of Understanding on fighting terror financing on July 17. In October then-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson criticized the Saudi-led coalition for blocking the dialogue with Qatar, and then Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin praised Qatar efforts to fight terror financing.

Qatar's role in terror financing is still an open question. However, its role in the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians has been central over the last decade. The Emirate's relations with Israel has been ambiguous during the same period of time.

In 1996, Qatar and Israel opened business offices in their respective capitals (closed due to the Second Intifada). In the 1990s and 2000s, Israeli leaders, such as Shimon Peres, Ehud Barak and Tzipi Livni held high-level meetings with Qatari leaders; in 2015, Qatar hosted secret talks between Hamas and Israel to negotiate a ceasefire of five years. In October and December 2018, Israeli athletes and gymnasts attended World Tournaments celebrated in Doha. The bilateral commerce shed small figures, but it exists, and it has not ended despite complex relations. On the other hand, Israel backed the Saudi-led coalition in the diplomatic crisis against Qatar and blamed Al Jazeera journalists for manipulating information on Operation Protective Edge (2014).

Qatar's role in terror financing is still an open question. However, its role in the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians has been central over the last decade. The Emirate's relations with Israel has been ambiguous during the same period of time

As noted, Qatar is the biggest donor of the Gaza Strip, its help accounts to billions of dollars, and it

has also financed Hamas. In the aftermath of each breakout of violence between Israel and Hamas over the last years (2009, 2012 and 2014) Qatar not only has provided financial help to Gaza, but also it has offered to act as a mediator between two parties via Egypt.

Qatar can be one of the custodians of the "regional peace agreement" that the Trump Administration aspires to present in order to achieve the ultimate deal

The 2018 developments in the Gaza Strip led to the Qatar's most direct engagement in the conflict. Since March 30 2018, Hamas sent thousands of protesters to Gaza's border, and combined it with arson kites, rockets and mortars to Israeli southern cities. The HLMG assessed this Hamas' offensive in its report *"Smoke and Mirrors: Six Weeks of Violence on the Gaza's Border"*. The protest lasted until October and in mid-November Hamas carried out a two-day massive launch of rockets and missiles, an offensive that the HLMG had the occasion to assess and analyze on the ground as well.

A truce was finally reached — negotiations started in October — and it includes a massive financial aid from Qatar to Gaza in exchange for the end of protests, arson kites and rockets attacks. Basically, Qatar would pay fuel and civil servants' salaries and Hamas would stop the hostility against Israel; the amount of money would be consisting of 15 million dollar every month for six months. These monthly grants are supposed to be under strict supervision in order to avoid them going to Hamas's terror infrastructure.

Nevertheless, Israeli society harshly criticized the truce, and these Qatar's grants resulted in the resignation of Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman. On this subject, Israel has delayed some installments from Qatar for public pressure and for monitoring reasons, which has led Hamas to launch

rockets towards Israeli cities, as it did in the night of January 6-7, 2019. Israel's government faces a complicated dilemma over Qatar's grants: Hamas is pushing for the money using its terrorist blackmail and, on the other hand, Israel is not interested in the collapse of the Gaza Strip — salaries are overdue by months and the unemployment rate is rampant, almost 50%, one of the highest in the world.

Qatar, by this initiative, has emerged as a broker in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, despite its open support to Hamas, could Qatar become a reliable mediator to avoid new waves of violence from the Gaza Strip? Could Qatar play a role in the reconciliation between al-Fatah and Hamas? Could Qatar's actions lead to an improvement of the security situation in Israel?



The dilemma: could Qatar become a reliable mediator to avoid new waves of Palestinian violence?

Qatar has showed its will to engage in the conflict, whether as a donor, whether as a financier, or a truce mediator. Nevertheless, whatever drive Qatar could take in the near future on this issue, it will be conditioned by the relations with the Saudi-led coalition that blocked diplomatic ties with it. Given its good relations with the U.S., **Qatar can be one of the custodians of the “regional peace agreement”** that Trump Administration aspires to present in order to achieve the ultimate deal. On the contrary, a worst-case scenario could be an emboldened Qatar disarrayed from the Saudi coalition and closer to Iran and terror groups.

Oman, a friend in the periphery

The first Gulf state to openly approach Israel was Oman, taking advantage of the wake of understanding provoked by the Oslo Accords and the peace agreement between Israel and Jordan. In

1994, then Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin visited Salalah, and in 1996 both countries opened business offices in their respective capitals. Qatar also allowed an Israeli office in Doha and opened its own in Tel Aviv. However, with the outbreak of the Second Intifada, Qatar and Oman decided to end the commercial relationship with Israel.

On October 16 2018, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu visited Oman's Sultan Qaboos bin Said in Muscat. The joint statement of the two leaders highlighted that they delved into “ways to advance the peace process in the Middle East as well as several matters of joint interest regarding the achievement of peace and stability in the Middle East.” As noted, the day after the Foreign Minister of Oman stated that Israel should be equally treated in the Middle East -and called to all nations across the region to do so.

On February 13 2019, Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu met with the Foreign Minister of Oman Yusuf bin Alawi bin Abdullah at the “Peace and Security in the Middle East” Summit in Warsaw. Both leaders promised to “seize the future” and they pointed out that their relations are “changing the world.”

Oman has been historically inclined to accept the existence of Israel. After the Israel-Egypt Peace Treaty Oman refused the initiative of the Arab League to isolate Cairo. Sultan Qaboos has always supported the peace process and recent statements, mentioned before, are a clear evidence that **Oman has been a bridge between Israel and the Arab World**. All reports indicate that Oman is a reliable friend of Israel in the Gulf, most certainly the most eager to openly declare Israel’s right to exist and be treated normally in the Middle East.



Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Omani Foreign Minister Yusuf bin Alawi bin Abdullah. Warsaw, February 13, 2018. Source: Amos Ben Gershon/GPO

Regarding the peace process, and unlike Qatar, Oman supports Palestinian Authority and its President Mahmoud Abbas, who visited Sultan Qaboos a day before Netanyahu did it. On December 2018, bin Alawi visited Washington and sought to be obtain a central role in the Middle East peace process, aligned with the Trump Administration’s thinking. Some analysts pointed out that Oman tried to remove doubts about Muscat’s ties with Tehran by adopting this pro-Israel, pro-peace position before the Iran hardliners at the White House.

Oman is holding an important position in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, more moderated and accepted by the U.S. than Qatar. Therefore, while Qatar still generates doubts, Oman is clearing the way to be a reliable mediator for both parts, and for international actors, such as the U.S. and the Peace Quartet.

All reports indicate that Oman is a reliable friend of Israel in the Gulf, most certainly the most eager to openly declare Israel’s right to exist and be treated normally in the Middle East

5.4 Prospects for peace: Israel and the new Trump Administration peace proposal

The peace process after the displacement of the major power in the Middle East

The Israeli-Palestinian peace process has gained considerable attention in the Trump Administration. President Trump designated early a special envoy to deal with the peace process and took as a policy goal to prepare a new peace initiative.

Nonetheless, during the process of meeting and listening to all players the White House seems to have reached the conclusion that the current PA leadership is not a real peace partner. Some decision taken by the US Administration can only be understood within this main set: the most notable example is the U.S. recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital and the subsequent move of the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. While the vast majority of Israelis wholeheartedly welcomed President Trump’s decision, holding the inauguration ceremony of the new embassy on May 14 was interpreted by Abbas as a snub in his back.

Since the Palestinian leadership has boycotted U.S. Administration officials following the recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital, the Administration has taken a harsh stance against the Palestinian Authority. Some of the measures include slashing U.S. aid to the Palestinian Authority, closing the PLO office in Washington, cancelling the separate status of the U.S. Consulate in Jerusalem that was tasked

with liaising with the Palestinian Authority appear to be counterproductive. The U.S. has also

withdrawn its financial support to the U.N. agency UNRWA.



Col. Richard Kemp and Rafael Bardají with Jason Greenblatt, Assistant to the 45th President of the USA & Special Representative for International Negotiations

Nonetheless, after more than two years, the contours of the much-promised peace plan remain unclear. It appears that the administration team leading the development of the peace initiative was under the impression that they would be able to table a proposal more favorable to Israel and that Saudi Arabia and the Sunni Arab states would “deliver” the Palestinians. This paradigm however, evaporated in July, when Saudi King Salman promised Palestinian President Abbas – “we will not abandon you” and added “we accept what you accept, and we reject what you reject.” Considering the respective domestic political considerations on both the Israeli and Palestinian sides, the deep mutual mistrust, the very notion of attempting to put forward the parameters for the final resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict seems unrealistic. Coupled with the deep mistrust the Palestinian leadership displays toward the current U.S. Administration, the whole idea of advancing an American peace initiative is currently in doubt.

The need to rethink the peace process with the Palestinians

The principal factor guiding the Israeli approach is the prevalent perception that the current Palestinian leadership is incapable of reaching an agreement with Israel.

Therefore, **the Israeli preference is to maintain the status-quo and to prevent an escalation of violence in Gaza and in the West Bank.** A violent escalation would divert Israel’s military from the main threat and could possibly harm relations with the Arab countries. Furthermore, and as a “source close to the Prime Minister” recently stated, previous rounds of violence have not changed the situation on the ground. Thus, Israel has low expectations also regarding the possibility of a considerable improvement in the humanitarian situation in Gaza. The longer-term threat is posed by Hamas and its strategic goal to take over the PLO and the Palestinian Authority. While Israel has been

able to contain Hamas in Gaza to a certain degree, the scenario of Hamas controlling the West Bank would harm Israel's national security considerably. **Hamas's control of the West Bank would end the security cooperation between Israel and the Palestinian security forces and place Israel and the Palestinians into a violent armed protracted conflict.**

Hamas's control of the West Bank would end the security cooperation between Israel and the Palestinian security forces and place Israel and the Palestinians in a violent armed protracted conflict

The threat of Hamas is accentuated due to the uncertain future of the traditional Palestinian

leadership. President Abbas has no heir and his departure could embroil the Palestinian arena into a violent power struggle that would threaten Israelis as well. Notably, Israel's ability to influence internal dynamics of the Palestinian arena is extremely limited. Against the backdrop of a potential violent power struggle and the possibility of Hamas controlling the West Bank, one can appreciate Israel's strategic preference to maintain the status-quo. Furthermore, under these circumstances, Israel will be risk-averse in its approach to the peace process with the Palestinians. Israeli domestic politics are likely to play a notable role in the Israeli-Palestinian track. On most strategic issues, there is no daylight between the mainstream Israeli political parties, unlike the Palestinian issue. Although most of the Israeli public has low expectations of reaching a peace agreement with the Palestinians and do not trust the Palestinian leadership, closing the door on the "two-state solution" is not the consensus among the Israeli public, nor is the idea to annex the West Bank.



Israeli soldiers with the HLMG delegation

All in all, although the Trump Administration peace plan has not been released yet, Israel should rethink the peace process with the Palestinians. Peace requires time, remove the current and historic obstacles and maybe, apply new solutions.

First of all, with Hamas in control of the Gaza Strip, the prospects for a peace deal are simply impossible.

Peace is hard to achieve, but a reformulation of the bilateral negotiations can be one of the keys that would unlock the long and stagnated peace process

In addition to Israel's red lines aforementioned, peace is also hard to achieve because the Palestinian leadership has not internalized the idea of coexistence with Israel and what it takes to manage a regular nation. The Palestinian leadership has rejected all peace proposals on the table, even the boldest ones presented by Ehud Barak in 2000 and by Ehud Olmert in 2008. They never presented their own plan, which is a clear sign of their traditional negative attitude towards peace negotiations.

Despite the Israeli--Palestinian conflict, which is not the epicenter of the problems in the Middle East, the regional alliance formed by Sunni--Arab countries and Israel due to the rise of Iran could enable the understanding between Israelis and their historical enemies and it could also propitiate the formation of a pro-Western block in the Middle East.

However, prior to establishing official ties with Israel, the involvement of the Arab countries—especially the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council led by Saudi Arabia—for the ultimate deal should be focused on

1. accepting and absorbing Palestinians that are living in those countries as citizens,
2. serving as custodians and guarantors of an eventual peace deal between Israelis and Palestinians
3. giving up the isolation and delegitimization of Israel in international forums,
4. fighting seriously against Sunni extremism, and
5. ending the commercial boycott against Israel.
6. None of these actions will be easy to accomplish, but the relationship between Sunni countries and Israel cannot only be built on confronting Iran. Israel should become a normal and accepted reality in the Middle East, as Sultan Qaboos stated, otherwise no regional deal will have a chance to succeed.

Peace is hard to achieve, but a reformulation of the bilateral negotiations can be one of the keys that would unlock the long and stagnated peace process.

6

CONCLUSIONS: OPTIONS FOR THE COMING FUTURE

6. CONCLUSIONS: OPTIONS FOR THE NEAR FUTURE

6.1 Israel's options

The need to adapt to the nascent Middle East

Although Israel's current strategic position is perhaps the most positive in its short 70-year history, the top echelons of the Israeli political leadership of the defense establishment are not complacent. There is a deeply embedded understanding that the potential threat posed by Iran and its proxies, if materialized, could come very close to posing an existential threat. Furthermore, although the Israeli establishment values the alliance and support of the U.S. as a critical pillar of its national security along with the evolving strategic partnerships with the Sunni Arab countries, it also understands **that Israel can only rely on itself to thwart the threat posed by Iran and its proxies**. These two understandings underlie Israel's strategic playbook.

Israel will, therefore, do all in its power to ensure that Iran's potential threat never materialize and become an existential threat. Western observers may contend that Israel is overstating the threat Iran poses, but Israel does not have the luxury to risk understating the threat.

Therefore, and as long as the nuclear program remains suspended, **Israel's immediate and primary objective is to prevent Iranian force construction in Syria and to deny Hezbollah the upgrading of its missile inventory**. To that end, Israel is engaged in a formidable, but delicate, military and diplomatic campaign taking into account the shifting regional power and influence of two global powers – the United States and Russia. At this juncture, Israel appears determined to do all in its power to undermine Iran's ambitions. Israel's show of military and political power has frustrated Iran's plans, but Iran has not given up. In addition, and to avoid any destruction from the main threat,

Israel will seek to maintain the status-quo with the Palestinians.

In concrete military terms, Israel has demonstrated proactive military operations against Iranian assets in Syria, as opposed to restrained military responses in Gaza. Up until the September 17 incident, Israel has carried out hundreds of air strikes against Iranian assets in Syria and has denied Iran from retaliating against Israel. To a large extent, Israel's military operations in Syria have been effective in "lawnmowing" Iranian attempts to establish assets that could threaten Israel from Syria. But as grass, the Iranian threat grows back. Thus, the resolute show of force has not affected the determination of the Iranian regime to reap the benefits of its involvement in the Syrian war to up the threat it poses to Israel. Furthermore, Israel's military campaign has obstructed and delayed the upgrading of Hezbollah's missile stockpile but has not been able to thwart it.

Western observers may contend that Israel is overstating the threat Iran poses, but Israel does not have the luxury to risk understating the threat.

In Israel's diplomatic and military campaign against Iran in Syria, the nurturing of a close relationship with Russia became a key component. This relationship has enabled Israel's military operations in Syria. Israel has paid a price for this relationship – as mentioned before regarding the Israel's diplomatic position on Ukraine and Skripal poisoning.

Two recent developments have adversely affected the continuation of Israel's military campaign against Iran in Syria. The September 17 incident during which Syrian air defense shot down a Russian Ilyushin-20 intelligence aircraft following an Israeli bombardment of an Iranian facility on the Syrian coast has demonstrated the limits of the Russian-Israeli relations. Israeli officials were taken aback by the Russian military's misinformation campaign

attempting to place the blame for the incident on Israel. The second development is the new U.S. policy in Syria that clearly boosts Russia's interests and position in Syria. While the new policy is part of an American progressive disengagement in the Middle East, **the efforts of both Israeli and Arab countries to warm relations with Russia have not driven a wedge between Russia and its regional strategic ally, Iran.**



HLMG members

Israel's immediate and primary objective is to prevent Iranian force construction in Syria and to deny Hezbollah the upgrading of its missile inventory

The lasting effects of the September 17 incident are yet to be determined. There is considerable uncertainty regarding the durability and outcomes of the new American policy. Nonetheless, one can make a few observations. First, the September 17 incident appears to have curtailed – at least to a certain extent – Israel's maneuverability in targeting Iranian assets in Syria.

Secondly, the U.S. disengagement from the Middle East might seem a serious strategic dilemma for Israel. Israel basically must forge and strength new alliances in the region. From an Israeli perspective, its budding relations with the Arab world are of high strategic interest. While relations with Egypt and

Jordan are essential for thwarting terror threats and managing Israeli-Palestinian relations, Israel has no illusions that relations with the Arab world will be a critical element in thwarting Iran's ambitions. The relationships are important as they enhance Israel's regional robust posture. Bluntly put – if Saudi Arabia has so far failed to reach a decisive victory in Yemen and to bring Qatar into fold, what can one expect from Saudi Arabia vis-à-vis Iran? Having said that, the positive outlook of the Arab regimes towards Israel reinforces the understanding in Israel that it has a vested interest in preserving the stability of the Arab regimes – no matter what.

The turbulent regional strategic landscape has initiated an official re-evaluation of Israel's national security doctrine. Prime Minister Netanyahu recently launched the debate in the cabinet with unveiling his plan titled "National Security Doctrine 2030". While most of the details remain classified, Netanyahu has announced that the defense budget will increase by more than 25% over the next decade and amount to 6% of the GDP. The lion's share of the additional resources is expected to be allocated to Israel's defensive capabilities – its multi-layered missile defense systems, cyber defense, and to upgrading the civilian defense infrastructure. In addition, the defense establishment is currently debating the possibility of expanding its surface-to-surface missile inventory to reduce the reliance on manned-aircrafts.

The guidelines of the new strategic playbook

Israel needs to design a new strategic playbook to navigate alone in the new Middle East. This playbook should be drawn regarding red lines and basic needs for the Israel security and sovereignty.

1. From now on, **Israel must play and interact in the new scenario without reliance on help from others.** The U.S. is leaving from the Middle East and the new major power to patronage the region is Russia. Israel has already built intense relations with Russia, although they are undergoing a rare impasse, stable and win-win bilateral relations are preferable than open hostility with Russia. Notwithstanding, Israel will not be able to find allies in the regions as strong and reliable as the U.S. Israel can find in this shift an opportunity and cast pressures off regarding conflict with the Palestinians.

The turbulent regional strategic landscape has initiated an official re-evaluation of Israel's national security doctrine



Foll's Board members in a working session



Fol's Board meeting

2. As long as the Iranian threat endures, **Israel must retain the Golan Heights and the West Bank.** Israel cannot allow to leave these territories that can be seized by Iranian proxies (Golan Heights) and Hamas (West Bank). Facts on the ground and current developments indicate how dangerous would be for Israel rash decision on these territories.
3. **Deterring and rolling back Iran's expansionism is a basic need and obligation for Israel security.** Considering the relative solitude of Israel in the Middle East, it must acquire political and diplomatic support to denounce and fight back the Shia Crescent in the Middle East, which targets directly to Israel. In this regard, Sunni and Gulf states should be aligned with Israel although this underground alliance is not precisely stable or guaranteed. Along this vein, Israel should intensify its relationship with Sunni states and speed up diplomatic relations with them as fast as possible.
4. **Israel must think long-term and find new ways to preserve its Qualitative Military Edge without the financial aid of the U.S. beyond 2028.** The U.S.'s current foreign policy is not a temporary tendency created by Trump Administration; on the contrary, it seems the U.S. is going to progressively decrease its foreign aid worldwide. Considering the changing trends of the political arena in the U.S. and taking into account the possible end of the bipartisan support to Israel, Israeli strategists and leaders must design a long-term alternative plan to maintain the QME over its neighbors without U.S.help.
5. **Hezbollah must be a top security priority for Israel.** The IDF has to carry out whatever measures as necessary to stop the construction of tunnels from Lebanon into Israel's territory, and of rocket factories facilities in the south of Lebanon. Since the UNIFIL has obviously failed to prevent Hizballah for amassing more than 150,000 rockets and missiles, the Israeli government should demand international community to Iran and Hezbollah that they will support Israel's response in case of massive indiscriminate attacks against Israeli cities.

Israel must obtain as much as international support as possible against Iran's strategy in the Middle East. The Visegrad group and the Sunni Arab states should express openly that Iran's malign activities to harass Israel from Syria and from Lebanon are not allowed and will be contested.
6. While a proactive approach to maneuvering in the new landscape is needed, **Israel also must keep implementing resilient capabilities over all levels, from borders and military capability to home front and citizens.** A new skill than

nations must improve in this sense is the resilience before disruptive changes such as regime changes, the breakout of violence from unconventional forces, the failure of surrounding states or the proliferation of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction. Israel must preserve its system in an environment where every dramatic change is possible and feasible.

7. **New alliances with strategic autonomy.** Given the nascent scenario in the Middle East, Israel is obliged—and it is doing so—to forge new alliances in the region. These new alliances, namely with Sunni and Gulf countries, should not constrain Israel's capability to deter its enemies, nor should constrain Israel's strategic autonomy. This poses certainly a hard balance when approaching to former enemies.
8. **Strategic consensus between the political leadership and military establishment.** Political and military leaders are forced to find a new consensus of decision-making on national security issues. The alignment between the two most important establishments of Israel turns out necessary for the challenges posed by the nascent, multi-front and asymmetric Middle East



FoII members: Lord Trimble, President Aznar and Robert Agostinelli

Israel's responsible deterrence

Israeli society has deeply changed in the last 20 years. Its rampant market economy, its active civil society and expanded aversion to casualties, and its highly independent judiciary are obtaining a progressive pressure on decision-makers, especially when military is needed to solve a crisis such as breakout of violence in Gaza or Lebanon. Israel's

defense establishment is still applying Begin-era doctrine to fight and deter asymmetric conflicts and the alignment with political leadership tend to stick in these kinds of low intensity conflicts.

Decision-makers, pressured by the public opinion, or vulnerable to international pressures, have halted military operations before reaching operative goals. Despite this being a problem of any Western army involved in non-conventional and asymmetric warfare, in Israel it has caused strategic setbacks, casualties, damages and political crises.

There is no plausible legitimate explanation for Hezbollah's efforts to arm itself and threaten Israel other than the explicit religiously motivated Iranian drive to destroy Israel

Israel has shown significant restraint in the face of persistent lethal threats from terrorist movements on its borders. It has sought to avoid confrontation by deterring both Hezbollah and Hamas. Setting clear red lines, Israel has acted to enforce these, all the while seeking to avoid imperiling the civilian population of Gaza and Lebanon that these terrorist organizations place at the heart of their strategic concept and put in grave danger.

Unquestionably, Israel's leaders continue to favour a course of de-escalation. However, their first duty is to Israel's citizens and ensuring their security, and clamours are getting louder about the danger facing Israel turning into an intolerable reality. The stockpiles of weapons that Hezbollah has amassed in Lebanon since the 2006 war, under the eye of the international community, the stockpiles Hamas has amassed in Gaza since the 2014 conflict, and Iran's support for terrorism in both locales and entrenchment in Syria has created a shifting dynamic that raises questions about the traditional model of deterrence Israel's strategic concept relied upon.

Vocal critics, including the Defense Minister whose resignation was partially based on these concerns, make plain the intolerable situation created by a

terrorist organisation such as Hamas, on the border of a democratic state it seeks to destroy, being left to conduct periodic attacks, in a cycle of deterioration followed by equilibrium and uneasy truce. Israeli military planners refer to these periods as 'the war between the wars', where low-level activity to suppress Hamas' military build-up and operations continues. Nonetheless, there is an increasing view within the security establishment about the long-term effectiveness of this approach.

These arguments can also be seen in the wider strategic discussion about the nature of deterrence against terrorist movements. Rather than the concept, as traditionally understood, a greater emphasis is placed here on direct threats to organisational leadership and command and control nodes in the terror network to be effective, since by their nature, terrorist organisations, in particular when religiously motivated, are immune to some considerations and consequences other actors would seek to avoid.

The international community must ensure not only that Israel has the diplomatic cover, but rather also the military means and room for maneuver

Conceptually, this is highly relevant on Israel's northern border. There is no plausible legitimate explanation for Hezbollah's efforts to arm itself and threaten Israel other than the explicit religiously motivated Iranian drive to destroy Israel. The established Israeli view formed in the wake of the 2006 war with Lebanon was that it was a missed opportunity in terms of destroying Hizballah but a very effective war in terms of establishing deterrence. Hassan Nasrallah expressed misgivings about inviting the scale of retaliation that Israel brought to bear on Lebanon in that war, reflecting in part Hezbollah's more precarious situation during this period, necessitating not least a level of buy-in from Lebanon's population and body politic. Today, Hezbollah's control over Lebanon is near absolute, certainly in terms of the use of force and questions of war and peace. Iran's steadfast backing and expansion of Hezbollah capabilities, its entrenchment in Syria and the combined experience of Hizballah and Iranian force, as well as

the 'precision project' which has upgraded the accuracy, and thus strategic threat, of a portion of the over 100,000 projectiles Hizballah now stockpiles all combine into a picture that could arguably mean that Iran and its allies will miscalculate due to an erosion of deterrence.

From now on, as repeatedly noted, Israel is going to feel more alone in the Middle East; that means it must forge new alliances while maintaining strategic autonomy, but this also means Israeli leaders — whether political, whether military — should internalize the growing responsibility they hold. A reformulation of the decision-making process in military actions should be adopted, because Israel's deterrence accounts more important than international headlines or internal lobbying groups. This basically means that politics and military must reach a consensus to set national security strategic goals that should be above temporary pressures, whether internal, whether external.



FOII's Chairman, Stephen Harper, in Israel

6.2 The West's Options

Friends of Israel Initiative, based on the HLMG conclusions, strongly believes that Israel is going to be trapped in a perfect storm in the Middle East. Despite Israel now enjoys its best security position ever, Iran, its proxies, and Palestinian terror groups led by Hamas are placing themselves to inflict damage to Israel and, ultimately, try to destroy it. The plan has begun, and so far, has been implementing successfully. Israel is preparing itself for a new massive, coordinated and multi-front offensive. New alliances and military actions are leading the Israel's response, however, in addition

to the U.S. disengagement from the Middle East, Israel needs the support of the international community, especially from the like-minded Western countries.

The Responsibility of the International Community

This picture puts a renewed onus on the international community, and particularly Europe, since it places a particular burden on it to reinforce Israel's deterrent posture and thus avoid renewed and serious conflict. The international community must ensure not only that Israel has the diplomatic cover, but rather also the military means and room for maneuver, so as to send a clear message to Iran and Hezbollah that it will be confronted by a superior military force with the full support of its allies were, they to seek an escalation. Such a display of strength and unity is the best hope of preventing a conflagration that the majority of Lebanese citizens do not wish to be dragged into by Hizballah - and which Israel's leaders and citizens do not want to see happen either. Israel's responsible deterrence will be strengthened, and war be made less likely.

**Israel needs the support of the
international community,
especially from the like-minded
Western countries**

Similarly, an area in which Israel's friends and allies can assist in preventing escalation by Hamas is in countering the anti-Israel propaganda that Hamas seeks to generate, including pressuring political leaders, human rights groups, international organizations and the media to avoid false condemnation of Israel by misrepresentation of events. **By firmly rejecting demands for international action, such as one-sided UN investigations and resolutions, and strongly condemn Hamas tactics, will help to discourage further detrimental behaviour by Hamas.** Here too, far from the established slanders about events in the region, Israel has acted responsibly in deterring a sworn enemy. Israel has shown again and again that it is willing to accommodate a Palestinian

leadership that does not seek its destruction. No matter how much wishful thinking or worse the international community engages in, the reality is simple. Israel is deterring an Islamist terrorist organisation in Gaza that seeks to eradicate it.

In both Gaza and the northern theatre Israel faces threats that other nations would not tolerate, and many would deal with in significantly less restrained forms than Israel has. If the West strongly supports Israel in its efforts to de-escalate the tensions by making plain to Iran and its terrorist proxies including Hezbollah and Hamas what the cost of attacking Israel will be, the chances of war recede. Having chosen a path of responsible deterrence, the least Israel should expect is the full support of its allies in the democratic world.

Thus, Friends of Israel Initiative members consider that Western nations, which face common threats and challenges with Israel, should deploy a broad support to Israel in the following areas:

Diplomatic cover is not enough. Despite diplomatic cover for Israel's actions to deter its enemies — an avoid a major war — is highly necessary to assure the strategic autonomy to operate, Western countries should also guarantee that Israel is able to obtain military means and room to carry out actions against Iran, Hezbollah and Hamas. This support will emerge as a clear message to Israel's enemies —which also suppose a threat to Western countries— and will certainly roll back their malign actions and intentions.

This dimension should also be taken to international organizations such as the UN or the so-called Human Rights organizations, that are more worried to attack Israel than to watch Human Rights violations in countries like Iran, Syria or North Korea, to name a few top human rights violators. The one-side inquiries and investigations against Israel, allowed by Western countries, are eroding Israel's ability to maneuver in a inhospitable environment.

At the end, a clear diplomatic and military support to Israel will provoke a decline on the probabilities of a major regional war in the Middle East.

The international assault on Israel's legitimacy must be rolled back in Western countries. No democratic country in the Western world have faced an international campaign of delegitimization than Israel in history. Western countries have accepted and hosted a myriad of anti-Israel

organizations that, besides of making hate towards Israel a way of life, are constantly attacking a promoting condemnation and isolation of the only democracy in the Middle East that is also the last frontier of the West against the Islamist expansionism. The damage to Israel's image and reputation has distorted the Western minds regarding the Israel's positions and difficulties and has obviously eroded political and diplomatic support. Israel should be treated in the international community with fairness, equal to any other nation.

Worryingly, the delegitimization against the State of Israel has also been the main source of new Anti-Semitism in Western countries.

If the West strongly supports Israel in its efforts to de-escalate the tensions by making plain to Iran and its terrorist proxies including Hezbollah and Hamas what the cost of attacking Israel will be, the chances of war recede

Anti-Israel speech uses the same narrative that ancient Anti-Semitism, with certain upgrading

elements; Israel replaced Jewish People and Israelis replaced Jews, but the same old myths have remained. The problem has been recalled by world leaders, for instance, in 2017, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres stated that Anti-Zionism is a new

form of Anti-Semitism. This new phobia has driven the attacks on Jews in Europe over the last years in Paris, Toulouse, Copenhagen or Brussels. Democracies are supposed to fight against any kind of discrimination, including anti-Semitism, however they are allowing the hate to Jews to grow within its societies though anti-Israel campaigns. Stopping delegitimization against Israel means curbing Anti-Semitism, which in turn makes better, freer societies.

An active Western role in the Middle East. A perfect storm in the Middle East is highly probable in the short term. It would affect Israel, but it will also affect the West deeply. Despite the interest on the Middle East is decreasing in decision-making levels and general opinion across the Western countries, the developments in the regions have implications for global security and economic prosperity. The West should not abandon to region to so-called revisionist powers, such as Russia, Iran, Syria and Turkey, which are not aligned with Western interests. The most reliable country in the Middle East, aligned with Western values, interests and challenges, is Israel, but Israel should not be alone containing threats that would metastasize to the West sooner than later.

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ISRAEL'S RESPONSIBLE DETERRENCE

**HOW TO PREVENT THE PERFECT STORM IN THE NASCENT
MIDDLE EAST**

MARCH 2019