



## Iran and Israel: Tension Over Syria

Iranian military operations in support of the Syrian government since 2011 have exacerbated longstanding tensions between Iran and Israel. These tensions have worsened considerably since late 2016 as Iran has helped Syria’s government regain key territory, and in turn has sought a more permanent military presence in Syria.

Israeli officials have described the deployment of Iran-backed forces in Syria—particularly in the southwest, near Israel’s northern border—as a significant security threat compelling Israeli action. In January 2019, Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu said that Israel had struck Iranian and Hezbollah targets in Syria “hundreds of times.” In 2018, Israeli and Iranian forces repeatedly targeted one another in and over Syrian- and Israeli-controlled areas. While Israel had conducted numerous air strikes inside Syria since 2012—mostly on targets linked to weapons shipments to Lebanese Hezbollah—the 2018 strikes appeared for the first time to have directly targeted Iranian infrastructure in Syria, and reportedly killed dozens of Iranian personnel. In articulating their “redlines,” Israeli leaders indicated that Israel would act in Syria to prevent Iran from establishing permanent military bases or weapons factories, and opening new “terror fronts” against Israel. They also suggested that Israel might attack Iran directly if Iran-backed attacks target major Israeli cities.

base at Al Tanf in southern Syria reportedly serves as “a critical element in the effort to prevent Iran from establishing a ground line of communications from Iran through Iraq through Syria to southern Lebanon in support of Lebanese Hezbollah,” according to a former U.S. military commander. Israeli officials favor continued U.S. involvement in Syria, while also preparing for the possibility that the U.S. role in countering Iran there might diminish. In mid-2019, U.S. officials stated that Israel is “under immediate threat by Iranian forces in Syria who, if they can be allowed to embed themselves in that country with long-range systems, would be able to open a third front on Israel, next to Lebanon and Gaza.”

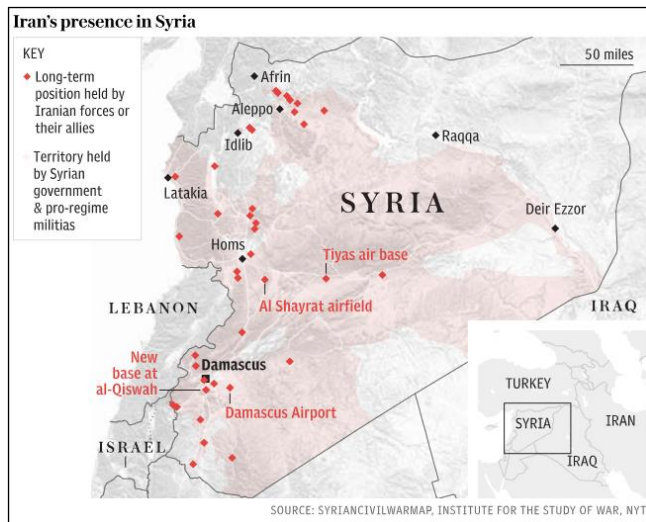
### Iran-Israel-Syria Dynamics: Rivalry and Partnership

**Iran and Israel** have been adversaries since Iran’s 1979 Islamic Revolution. In the early 1980s, Iran (a Shi’a Muslim-majority country) helped establish the Shi’a militia Hezbollah in southern Lebanon, which was occupied by Israeli military forces from 1982 to 2000. Until recently, the threat of direct conflict involving Iran-backed forces at Israel’s northern border came mainly from Hezbollah, which has used the remaining Israeli presence in disputed border areas to justify continued conflict with Israel. Israel and Hezbollah fought a 34-day conflict in 2006, and Iran has helped Hezbollah rebuild its arsenal of over 100,000 missiles and rockets in contravention of U.N. Security Council resolutions. Nevertheless, Iran and Israel have historically sought to avoid direct combat with one another.

**Israel and Syria** have technically been at war since Israel’s founding in 1948, with subsequent military conflicts in 1967 and 1973. Israeli military forces have occupied strategically important areas of the Golan Heights since capturing them from Syria in 1967. (In 2019, the United States recognized the Golan Heights as part of Israel. U.N. Security Council Resolution 497, adopted in 1981, held that the area of the Golan Heights controlled by Israel’s military is occupied territory belonging to Syria.) Israel has continued to strike Syrian targets it views as security threats, including Syrian air defenses in Lebanon in the 1980s and a nuclear reactor in eastern Syria in 2007.

**Iran and Syria** have grown closer under the rule of Syrian President Bashar al Asad, despite the Asad regime’s championing of secular Arab nationalism and Iran’s identity as an Islamic republic and majority Persian country at odds with most of the Arab world. Iran values Syria as a key transshipment point for the supply of weapons from Iran to Hezbollah, as well as Asad’s support for Iran in a region where most governments oppose Iran. In turn, Syria has seen a security imperative in allying with Iran and Hezbollah against Israel, which Syria views as its primary external threat. Asad’s heavy reliance on Iranian aid during the civil war has further cemented bilateral ties.

**Figure 1. Reported Iranian presence in Syria**



**Source:** *Telegraph* (UK), May 10, 2018.

**Notes:** CRS cannot independently verify reports about the parties that are present at or have control over specific facilities inside Syria.

In 2019, Israeli military forces reportedly have conducted additional strikes in Syria, targeting Iranian or Iranian-backed forces. According to these reports, some of the Israeli strikes precede or follow aircraft incursions or weapons fire coming from Syria.

The evolution of the U.S. military presence in Syria could be one factor in Israeli calculations on this issue. The U.S.

## Syrian Civil War Triggered Iran's Expansion

Syria's internal conflict, which began in 2011, brought an influx of Iranian, Hezbollah, and other Iran-backed militia fighters into Syria. These forces provided manpower, training, equipment, weapons, and funding to the Syrian government. By 2017, Iran had been widely observed to be developing entrenched military positions that could be used to project power beyond Syria.

Israel has accused Hezbollah of establishing a cell in Syrian-held areas of the Golan Heights, with the eventual goal of launching attacks into Israel. Some press reports indicate that U.S. sanctions have diminished Iran's ability to subsidize Hezbollah, contributing to an apparent decrease in Hezbollah forces in Syria.

In May 2019, U.S. Ambassador James Jeffrey, the Special Representative for Syrian Engagement and Special Envoy for the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, testified at a hearing before the House Foreign Affairs Committee that Iran maintains thousands of IRCG-QF advisors in Syria, which provide leadership for over 10,000 Iranian-backed proxies from third countries. However, Jeffrey noted,

...what really concerns us even more is Iranian power projection systems; long-range missiles, drones, radar systems, air defense capabilities; that you do not need to fight an internal civil war against a lightly-armed opposition force. That's not what those forces are there for. They're there to threaten Syria's neighbors, beginning with Israel.

Jeffrey added that the United States strongly supports "Israel's efforts [...] over Syria against Iranian targets."

### Russia's Role

Russia's advanced air defense systems in Syria could make it more difficult for Israel to operate there. Since 2015, Russia has operated an S-400 system at Russia's Khmeimim air base in Lattakia, a city on Syria's Mediterranean coast. To date, however, Russia does not appear to have acted militarily to thwart Israeli air strikes against Iranian or Syrian targets, and Israel and Russia maintain communications aimed at deconflicting their operations.

In addition to the S-400 that it owns and operates, Russia delivered an S-300 air defense system for Syria's military to Khmeimim airbase in October 2018. The delivery followed Syria's downing of a Russian military surveillance plane in September 2018 under disputed circumstances, shortly after an Israeli operation in the vicinity. According to an Israeli satellite imagery analysis company, three launchers appeared to be operational as of February 2019. It is unclear to what extent Russia has transferred the S-300 to Syrian military control, and how this might affect future Israeli military action in Syria. An Israeli journalist wrote that "Israel has the knowledge, experience and equipment to evade the S-300, but the fact that additional batteries, manned by Russian personnel, are on the ground, will necessitate greater care [when carrying out future operations against Iran-aligned targets in Syria]."

Since the September 2018 incident, Israeli air strikes appear to have decreased somewhat. According to some sources, Iran reportedly began directly transferring weapons to Hezbollah in Lebanon while reducing the use of Syria as a transshipment hub.

### Potential Issues for Congress

**Russia.** Russia's delivery of the S-300 to Syria raises broader questions about its role in Syria. Russia has told Israel and the Trump Administration that it would try to limit Iran's presence and influence in the country, though such limitations might not fully satisfy U.S. or Israeli expectations. Russia reportedly helped arrange for the pullback of Iranian heavy weapons 85 km from Israel's Golan positions, and has blocked some Iranian efforts to acquire land in and around Damascus. U.S. officials have stated that Russia and the United States share some common interests in Syria—such as ensuring a stable Syria that does not become a refuge for terrorism—but also have noted that Russia has "turned a blind eye" to long-range Iranian weapons systems in Syria that threaten Israel.

**U.S. policy vis-à-vis Iran in Syria.** In February 2019 testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, General Joseph Votel, Commander of U.S. Central Command, stated that while the U.S. military deployment in Syria was focused on countering the Islamic State, the presence of U.S. forces at the At Tanf base in eastern Syria has "...the derivative value of being along a principal line of access, line of communication that Iran and her proxies would like to exploit." Iran and Syria signed a new defense cooperation agreement in August 2018, which reportedly provided for the continued presence of Iranian advisors in Syria. Iranian officials have stated that their military presence in Syria is at the invitation of the Assad government. In May 2019, Ambassador Jeffrey stated that the United States would "press for the withdrawal of all Iranian forces from the entirety of Syria," adding that one of the main U.S. goals for Syria is that the country not "provide a base for Iran."

**Israeli policy and U.S. support.** If conflict between Iran and Israel escalates, the Administration and Congress could face urgent questions regarding situational or emergency support for Israel. The United States provides various forms of political, military, and material support to Israel, including co-development and co-production of missile defense systems (including Iron Dome, David's Sling, and Arrow) that were developed expressly to counter the missile and rocket threat from Iran and its regional allies. Iron Dome has reportedly intercepted some rockets fired at Israeli targets from Syria, and Israeli-owned, U.S.-origin Patriot systems have reportedly hit aircraft from Syria that have crossed into Israeli-controlled areas.

**Carla E. Humud**, [chumud@crs.loc.gov](mailto:chumud@crs.loc.gov), 7-7314

**Kenneth Katzman**, [kkatzman@crs.loc.gov](mailto:kkatzman@crs.loc.gov), 7-7612

**Jim Zanotti**, [jzanotti@crs.loc.gov](mailto:jzanotti@crs.loc.gov), 7-1441

IF10858