



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 Israel to act. In September 2018, Israeli Intelligence Minister Israel Katz stated, “in the last two years Israel has taken military action more than 200 times within Syria itself.” During 2018, Israeli and Iranian forces have repeatedly targeted one another in and over Syrian- and Israeli-controlled areas. While Israel has conducted numerous air strikes inside Syria since 2012—mostly on targets linked to weapons shipments to Lebanese Hezbollah—the 2018 strikes appear for the first time to have directly targeted Iranian facilities and personnel in Syria.

The potential for conflict between Iran and Israel—not only in Syria but also in Lebanon—has significant implications for the U.S. military profile in the region, political dealings with key actors, and material support for Israel’s defense.

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 missiles and rockets in contravention of U.N. Security Council resolutions. Nevertheless, Iran and Israel have historically sought to avoid direct conventional war with one another.

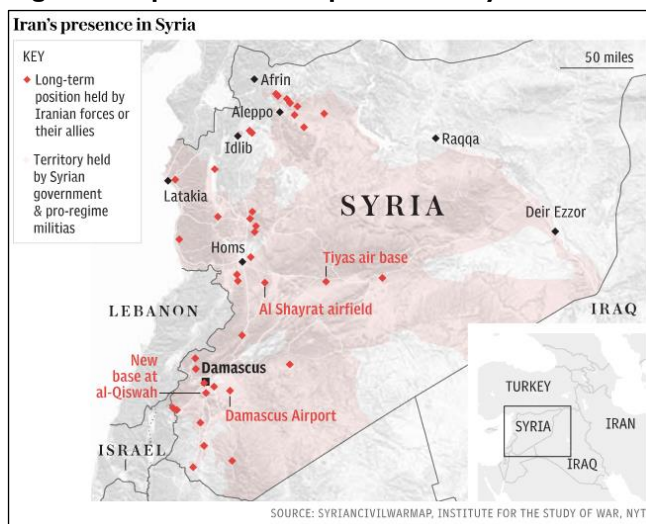
Israel and Syria have technically been at war since Israel’s founding in 1948, with subsequent military conflicts in 1967 and 1973. Israeli military forces have occupied strategically important areas of Syria’s Golan Heights since 1967. Israel has remained willing to strike Syrian targets it views as 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 ongoing civil war has further cemented ties between the two states.

Syria Civil War Triggers 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. In articulating their “redlines,” Israeli leaders have indicated that Israel will act in Syria to prevent Iran from establishing permanent military bases or weapons factories, and opening new “terror fronts” against Israel. They also have suggested that Israel might attack Iran directly if Iran-backed attacks target major Israeli cities.

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. For information on how the U.S. executive branch classifies the status of the Golan Heights, see <https://www.state.gov/p/nea/ci/is/>.

2018 Incidents

In 2018, tensions between Iran and Israel in Syria appeared to escalate, increasing the possibility of a wider conflict. In February 2018, an Iranian drone crossed into Israel from Syria, where it was shot down. Israel struck the T4 (Tiyas) military base in central Syria, from which it assessed the drone was launched. Syrian anti-aircraft fire downed an Israeli F-16 participating in the operation (the plane crashed in northern Israel after its two crew members safely ejected). Israel then struck eight Syrian and four Iranian military targets in Syria.

Since then Israel has periodically targeted Iranian positions in Syria—in response to perceived Iranian breaches of its redlines—and has reportedly killed dozens of Iranian personnel. Israeli Defense Minister Lieberman stated that Israeli strikes in May 2018 (in response to rocket fire into the Golan Heights by Iranian forces in Syria) had targeted “nearly all” of Iran’s military infrastructure in Syria.

Russia Loses a Plane and Delivers an S-300 System

In September 2018, Israel struck military targets in Syria’s coastal province of Lattakia. A Syrian anti-aircraft battery responding to the Israeli strikes mistakenly downed a Russian military surveillance plane, killing 15 Russian personnel. An IDF spokesperson stated that Israeli jets were targeting “a facility of the Syrian Armed Forces from which systems to manufacture accurate and lethal weapons were about to be transferred on behalf of Iran to Hezbollah in Lebanon.”

The IDF spokesperson added that Israel and the Russian military maintain a deconfliction system in Syria, stating that the Russian plane was not in the area of operation during the IDF’s Lattakia strike and blaming “extensive and inaccurate” Syrian anti-aircraft fire for the incident.

In response to the downing of their plane, Russian defense officials announced plans to provide an S-300 air defense system to Syria. Syria had reportedly entered into a contract with Russia in 2010 to acquire the S-300, but Russia had delayed implementing the deal. Since 2015, Russia has operated (without involvement by Syrian personnel) an S-400 system at Russia’s Khmeimim air base in Lattakia.

In October 2018, Russian officials stated that they had completed delivery of the S-300—comprising radars, control vehicles, and four launchers—to Khmeimim airbase. Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said that the system would be “integrated into Russia’s existing air-defense system” sometime in October and that “Syrian personnel would be trained on its use within three months.” Reportedly, the S-300 will have a longer range than Syria’s other air defense systems and can identify Russian aircraft. Shoigu also stated that Russia deployed new electronic warfare systems to Syria.

To date, Russia has not used the advanced air defenses it has deployed in Syria to challenge Israeli air superiority in the region. It remains unclear whether or when Moscow will transfer the S-300 to full Syrian military control, and

how this might affect future Israeli military action in Syria. When Russia delivered S-200 systems to Syria in the 1980s, Russian personnel reportedly operated the systems for years before Syrian personnel took over. An Israeli journalist has written 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].”

Potential Issues for Congress

Russia’s role. Russia’s delivery of the S-300 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. policy vis-à-vis Iran in Syria. As of late 2017, U.S. officials reported that approximately 2,000 U.S. military personnel were deployed in Syria in support of counter-IS operations. At times, Iranian proxies have directly attacked U.S. partner forces in Syria, prompting defensive U.S. airstrikes. In February 2018 testimony before the House Armed Services Committee, General Joseph Votel, Commander of U.S. Central Command, stated that while countering Iran in Syria was not a U.S. military objective, U.S. military personnel could “indirectly” impact Iranian objectives in the region by bolstering local border control forces. However, in September 2018, U.S. National Security Advisor John Bolton stated, “We’re not going to leave [Syria] as long as Iranian troops are outside Iranian borders and that includes Iranian proxies and militias.” Iran and Syria signed a new defense cooperation agreement in August, which reportedly provides 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 Asad government.

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 reportedly intercepted some of the rockets fired at Israeli targets by Iranian forces in Syria in May 2018.

Carla E. Humud, Analyst in Middle Eastern Affairs
Kenneth Katzman, Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs
Jim Zanotti, Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs

IF10858

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.