

**IN SYRIA, I.S. “REGROUPS & REORGANIZES,” HEZBOLLAH
REMAINS ACTIVE, AND IRAN’S ENTRENCHMENT CONTINUES**

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Isranet Daily Briefing, November 8, 2018

<https://www.isranet.org/daily-briefing/in-syria-i-s-regroups-reorganizes-hezbollah-remains-active-and-irans-entrenchment-continues/>

[The Return of ISIS: Jonathan Spyer, *Jerusalem Post*, Nov. 2, 2018](#)— Islamic State fighters operating in the Lower Euphrates river valley this week killed 68 fighters of the US-supported Syrian Democratic Forces.

[Israel Keeps a Wary Eye on Iranian Entrenchment as Syrian Border Crossing Reopens: Yaakov Lappin, *IPT News*, Oct. 24, 2018](#)— The recent reopening of a border crossing between Israel and Syria holds the hope of stability as the Syrian war draws to a close.

[The Israeli Campaign Against the Conversion of Rockets in Lebanon to Precision-Guided Missiles: Ofek Riemer, *INSS*, Oct. 23, 2018](#)— In his speech at the UN General Assembly, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu warned, “Iran is directing Hezbollah to build secret sites to convert inaccurate projectiles into precision-guided missiles.”

[Time to Get Tough on Hezbollah: Sheryl Saperia, *CJN*, Oct. 11, 2018](#)— Public Safety Canada releases an annual report on terrorist threats, which in recent years has highlighted ISIS and al-Qaida as posing the greatest risk to Canada, along with a general category of extremists who are inspired by violent Islamist ideology.

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THE RETURN OF ISIS

Jonathan Spyer

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[*Jerusalem Post*](#), Nov. 2, 2018

Islamic State fighters operating in the Lower Euphrates river valley this week killed 68 fighters of the US-supported Syrian Democratic Forces. Under cover of a sandstorm that severely reduced visibility, the Sunni jihadis of IS launched a wave of suicide bombings against SDF positions. The Coalition rushed 500 fighters from the Kurdish YPG to the area (the SDF in the area consisted mainly of Arab fighters from the Deir a Zur Military Council). Intense Coalition air and artillery strikes followed. For now the situation has returned to an uneasy stability. The SDF and coalition offensive against the last significant IS-controlled pocket of territory around the town of Hajin continues.

It would be mistaken to see the latest Hajin incidents as merely the last stand of a few IS bitter-enders, a final if gory footnote in the often horrifying trajectory of the Caliphate declared by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi at the al-Nuri Mosque in Mosul on June 29, 2014. Rather, the evidence shows that IS doesn't care for last stands under which a line can be drawn. It had the opportunities for such gestures in its main urban conquests of Mosul in Iraq and Raqqa in Syria. It avoided them - leaving a core of fighters to carry out the last battles, while key leaders and cadres escaped to reorganize for the next chapter.

The Hajin incidents should rather be seen as reflective of a larger reality: namely, that the Islamic State organization has not been destroyed. Reports of its demise have been much exaggerated. It is currently in a process of reorganization and regrouping. And it may well recommence major operations in the not too distant future. This process is itself part of a broad strategic picture. Two large and inter-related Sunni Arab insurgencies have arisen in the Levant and Iraq in the last decade - these are the 'Syrian rebellion' and the Caliphate of the Islamic State. Both have, in conventional terms, been defeated. The Syrian Sunni Arab rebel groups remain in existence only in a part of north west Syria, and only because of the protection of Turkey. The Caliphate, meanwhile, consists today only of the Hajin pocket and a few other isolated desert enclaves.

But the defeat of these armed campaigns has not resolved the issues that caused them to come into existence. A very large, discontented and disenfranchised Sunni Arab population remains in the area of Syria and Iraq. Its needs, to put it mildly, are not set to be addressed by either the Alawi-dominated Assad dictatorship in Damascus, or the Shia-led and Iran inclining Iraqi government in Baghdad. The language which can mobilise this population, meanwhile, as the

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events of recent years confirm, is Sunni political Islam.

All this creates a ripe atmosphere for ISIS 2.0 to grow - on condition that the organization can extricate from the ruins of the Caliphate something resembling a coherent organizational structure for the rebuilding of an insurgent network. The evidence suggest that IS has achieved this. It is therefore now regenerating itself. What form is this taking? A recent report by the Institute for the Study of War entitled 'ISIS' Second Resurgence' quotes a US State Department estimate of August 2018 which puts the number of fighters currently available to Islamic State in Iraq and Syria at 30,000. These fighters, the report suggests, are evenly divided between Iraq and Syria.

ISW notes that the Islamic State infrastructure does not lack for funding, the organization having smuggled \$400 million out of Iraq, where it has been invested in businesses across the region. IS also engages in kidnapping, extortion and drug smuggling within the area of Syria and Iraq itself. Embedded deep in the Sunni Arab communities from which it draws its strength, IS maintains networks of support and de facto control in a number of areas identified by the report. These include the Hamrin Mountains in Diyala Province, the Hawija area, eastern Salah al-Din Province, the area south of Mosul city and Daquq. Local government officials also in the Sinjar area have reported sharp increases in IS activities in the area to the south of Sinjar and in the Ninawah plains in the recent period.

In all these areas, IS relies on the fear of the local populace, their lack of trust in the Shia-dominated, often sectarian-minded Iraqi security forces, and in turn the unwillingness of those security forces to make a real effort to root out the IS presence. To do so would require determined and risky deployments of a type which the security forces lack the determination or motivation to undertake. Sheikh Ali Nawfil al-Hassan of the Al-Shammar Beduin tribe which has lands in eastern Syria and western Iraq, recently said in an interview with the Middle East Center for Reporting and Analysis (MECRA) that 'in these areas ISIS is coming and going as they want freely. They move about as they wish.'...

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ISRAEL KEEPS A WARY EYE ON IRANIAN

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ENTRENCHMENT AS SYRIAN BORDER CROSSING REOPENS

Yaakov Lappin

[*IPT News*](#), Oct. 24, 2018

The recent reopening of a border crossing between Israel and Syria holds the hope of stability as the Syrian war draws to a close. But if Iran, Hizballah, and allied radical Shi'ite militias have their way, Syria will be hijacked and turned into a radical Iranian power projection base. Any hopes for stability would then give way to destabilizing conflict, terrorism, and new threats to Israel and Jordan. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) announced last week that the Quneitra border crossing between Israel and Syria, shut down in 2014, is back in operation.

Before the Syrian civil war's outbreak, members of the Golan Heights Druze community - which identifies itself as Syrian, unlike the Israeli-Druze community - used the crossing to attend family celebrations in next-door Syria, export apples, and to study at Syrian universities. The border crossing also served as a key access point for the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF), tasked with trying to help keep the border region peaceful, and help Israel and Syria maintain their 40-year truce.

All of that fell apart during the bloody years of the Syrian war. The Assad regime's sovereignty in southern Syria, like many other areas of the country, collapsed, the UN fled, and armed groups overran the area. Some parts of southern Syria came under the control of extremist Islamic State-affiliated forces, while other areas were ruled by more moderate Sunni groups. Other pockets of land were held by the Assad regime, with the assistance of pro-regime militias that Iran helped to set up and arm.

Now, southern Syria is officially back under Assad's control, and the UN is returning to the border. The Syrian Arab Army (SAA) has retaken the area, and this has allowed Israel to reopen the Quneitra crossing. These developments suggest a new stability, but the reality isn't as simple as putting the chess pieces back in their original positions. The Syria of 2018 - or what is left of it - is not the country that it was before the war, for it has been thoroughly infiltrated by Iran and its

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proxies. Iran has played a major role in the war that led to an estimated 500,000 deaths, and which displaced half of all Syrians, most of them Sunnis. Now that Iran's client, the Assad regime, has emerged as the victor, Tehran is looking to 'cash in its chips,' and build itself a war machine in Syria.

One of Iran's goals is to set up a network of terrorist cells to attack Israel from southern Syria. Such cells would be able to attack with border bombs, shoulder-fired missiles, ballistic rockets, and cross-border raids. They could aim for both Israeli military and civilian targets. It is a goal that Iran has already tried to realize in the past, and failed. Iran has also tried to build missile bases, drone bases, weapons production sites, and other installations throughout Syria, an effort that was thwarted by Israel. Iran has flooded Syria with militant Shi'ite militias that it recruited from across the Middle East, trained, and armed, giving it access to its own army.

Throughout the war, Syria became an active Iranian military zone. Assad's role was essentially reduced to granting Tehran permission to further entrench itself. Assad had little choice in the matter, as the Iranian assistance he received on the ground, combined with Russia's air power, saved his regime from destruction.

Hizballah - Iran's forward division in Lebanon - remains active throughout Syria as well. Although Hizballah has begun withdrawing forces back to Lebanon, its chief, Hassan Nasrallah, recently signaled that some of his personnel will be remaining in Syria. "No one can force us out of Syria," Nasrallah said in September. "We will stay there until further notice."

Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), together with its international operations unit, the Quds Force, are also staying put. They have played a critical role in assisting the return of Assad's army to southern Syria. The IRGC has planned operations and injected Iranian-controlled militias into the SAA's offensive.

Israeli defense sources have confirmed the presence of embedded Shi'ite militias among the returning SAA forces. This year already provided a glimpse into Iran's future plans for the region. In May, the Quds Force used a truck-mounted rocket launcher to fire projectiles at Israel, following a string of reported air strikes against Iranian bases in Syria. "Numerous reports indicate that the Iranian forces, Hizballah, and the Shi'ite militias participated in the fighting in southern Syria dressed in Syrian army uniforms so as to disguise their presence there," the

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Middle East Media Research Institute said in a July report.

Russia's vow to keep Iranian forces 85 kilometers away from the Israeli border does not appear to be a long-term arrangement on which Israel can depend. Russian President Vladimir Putin said last Thursday that it was not up to Russia to convince Iran to pull out of Syria. U.S. lawmakers and security observers have expressed growing concern over Iran's plan of entrenchment in Syria. The dangers posed by Iran projecting its radical power onto Syria are becoming increasingly difficult to ignore.

The wider picture, then, is that Iran's takeover efforts continue to cast a dark shadow over Syria's future, as well as the security and stability of the wider region. Jordan is as threatened by the presence of Iranian-backed Shi'ite militias on its borders as Israel, due to Iran's hostile intentions toward this pragmatic Sunni kingdom, which maintains a peace treaty with Israel, and which wishes to have no part in Tehran's attempt to become a regional hegemon. Jordan has nothing to gain and much to lose if Iran succeeds in turning the region into a staging ground of extremist armed forces that answer to the Islamic Republic...

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**THE ISRAELI CAMPAIGN AGAINST THE CONVERSION
OF ROCKETS IN LEBANON TO PRECISION-GUIDED MISSILES**

Ofek Riemer

[INSS](#), Oct. 23, 2018

In his speech at the UN General Assembly, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu warned, "Iran is directing Hezbollah to build secret sites to convert inaccurate projectiles into precision-guided missiles." As evidence, he presented a map showing three sites in southern Beirut near the international airport, which Israeli intelligence claims are related to this project. The expose was accompanied by a

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video clip distributed by the IDF spokesperson to the media and on the social networks with more information about the project, and text messages were sent to residents of Beirut. The speech, including the disclosure of sensitive information about both the missile conversion sites in Lebanon and the warehouse of nuclear materials in Iran, met with a mixed reception. Some praised the political act designed to increase the pressure on Iran and Hezbollah. Conversely, some criticized the disclosure of the hard-earned intelligence material.

What is Israel's ultimate goal in the campaign against the production of missiles in Lebanon - prevention or delay? And, is the media policy, including the disclosure of intelligence, useful in attaining this goal? The information about the project to convert rockets into high-precision missiles on Lebanese territory was first revealed in a Kuwaiti newspaper in March 2017. Already then the Israeli press hinted that Israel was behind this report. Three months later, then-Israeli Military Intelligence Directorate Chief Maj. Gen. Herzl Halevi confirmed the information in a public lecture. The Prime Minister and senior military establishment leaders then declared that Israel regards "gravely" the construction of factories for production of advanced weapons in Lebanon, but refrained from threatening direct military action to attack the project.

The impression is that the Israeli leadership has refused to commit itself to take direct military action to remove the threat due to Hezbollah's success in consolidating a deterrence equation against Israel, whereby an attack in Lebanon is a red line for Hezbollah. As part of Israel's ongoing campaign since early 2013 against Hezbollah's arming itself with advanced weapons, in February 2014 IDF forces attacked an arms shipment on the western side of the Syrian-Lebanese border. In a counterattack against IDF forces on Mt. Dov (Shab'a Farms), Hezbollah acted for the first time since the beginning of the campaign to enforce the red line it had drawn. Since then, the IDF has refrained from attacks on Lebanese territory. In establishing weapons production plants in Lebanon, Iran and Hezbollah therefore presumably assume that Israel will not attack them out of concern about Hezbollah's response and the possibility of escalation in Lebanon.

In these circumstances, Israel has continued its operations against the project through air force attacks in Syrian territory - a conduit for delivery of advanced missiles and conversion equipment to Lebanon - and also probably through covert operations in Lebanon itself. In July 2017, IDF Chief of Staff Gadi Eisenkot claimed that Israel was "working all the time against it [missile conversion in Lebanon] with a set of tools that it is best to keep quiet about, and with the aim of not

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causing a deterioration [in the situation]." Two months later, he said that the IDF had successfully prevented Hezbollah from attaining capability to launch precision missiles into Israeli territory. It appears, however, that the Israeli efforts did not succeed in delaying the project for long, and Israel accordingly resumed its use of the media to reveal additional information about the project and deliver threats aimed mostly at the Lebanese side, such as in an article published by the IDF spokesperson early this year.

The repeated use of the media indicates that Israel has likely not achieved its goals in Lebanon through other means. Furthermore, in the absence of a credible threat of military action, its use of the media indicates that Israel is deterred from acting in Lebanon, thereby signaling implicitly that Iran and Hezbollah are free to continue to carry out their plans. It therefore appears that Israel's use of the media to expose Hezbollah's operations is not aimed at those directly responsible; rather, it is designed mainly to exert pressure on the international community and the authorities and public in Lebanon. This pressure is meant to increase concern about a war between Israel and Hezbollah that will "cause the destruction" of Lebanon, its infrastructure, and its army, and aggravate instability in the region, in the hope that the parties who are the subject of this pressure will intervene and halt the project.

Nevertheless, it appears that these efforts have not borne fruit. Even after the Prime Minister's speech at the UN, the international community is still indifferent to the issue, and refuses to use the means at its disposal to exert pressure on Lebanon. The US administration is preoccupied with internal affairs and other urgent foreign policy issues (the North Korean and Iranian nuclear programs, relations with NATO, and trade with China), and has left the Syrian-Lebanese theater to Russia. This is evident through Russia's expanding influence in Syria, as indicated inter alia by the orchestration of diplomatic measures aimed at reaching a political settlement of the crisis and bringing the refugees back to the country; the emerging economic and security agreements between Russia and Lebanon; and the withdrawal of American Patriot missile batteries from Jordan. The sanctions imposed on Hezbollah, including those recently approved by the US House of Representatives, are also proving unsuccessful in exerting pressure on the organization on this issue. Europe, for its part, regards Hezbollah as an element contributing to internal stability in Lebanon, and still supplies unconditional monetary and military aid to that country...

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TIME TO GET TOUGH ON HEZBOLLAH

Sheryl Saperia

[CJN](#), Oct. 11, 2018

Public Safety Canada releases an annual report on terrorist threats, which in recent years has highlighted ISIS and al-Qaida as posing the greatest risk to Canada, along with a general category of extremists who are inspired by violent Islamist ideology. But tucked away in these reports is a brief mention that Hezbollah also poses a clear risk to Canadian interests, with regard to its terrorist financing, recruitment and operations. Indeed, both the RCMP and the Ministry of Public Safety view the organization, whose objectives are to destroy Israel and establish a revolutionary Shia Islamic state in Lebanon that is modelled after Iran, as one of the most technically capable terrorist groups in the world. Yet Hezbollah generally does not receive much attention here.

Hezbollah was designated as a terrorist entity in Canada in 2002, with both the Liberal government and Conservative opposition at the time rightly rejecting the notion that the military and political wings of the organization could be distinguished in a way that would rationalize only banning the former. Aside from this crucial step, what other policy measures could be put in place to contain the threat posed by Hezbollah? First, given that Iran provides approximately \$800 million a year to Hezbollah, in addition to weapons, it is important that Canada continues to label Iran as a state sponsor of terror and ensure that Canadian money does not help enrich the regime.

One particularly tragic example of Hezbollah operating under Iran’s guidance is the 1994 terrorist bombing of the AMIA Jewish community centre in Buenos Aires, in which 85 people were killed and many more wounded. Mohsen Rabbani is said to have handled the logistics for the attack. Shortly before the bombing, Rabbani became the cultural attaché to the Iranian Embassy in Buenos Aires. This diplomatic appointment and its attendant passport allowed him to carry out the

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operation. This attack, and others like it, should heavily weigh against any consideration the Canadian government might give to allowing Iran to re-open its embassy in Ottawa. An Iranian embassy establishes a foothold inside Canada, from which serious terrorist groups like Hezbollah are positioned to spy, recruit, fundraise and carry out attacks.

Second, Canada must recognize the threat that Hezbollah poses, especially in Latin America, where it, and Iran, are particularly active. Alberto Nisman, an Argentine prosecutor who was murdered in 2015 while investigating his government’s cover-up of Iran’s role in the AMIA bombing, had previously released a report warning countries such as Chile, Brazil, Uruguay and Paraguay of Iranian infiltration. Canada should urge Latin American countries to list Hezbollah as a terrorist group and even contemplate utilizing the Justice for Victims of Corrupt Foreign Officials Act to impose sanctions. As my colleague Emanuele Ottolenghi has pointed out, “In Latin America, a major factor explaining Hezbollah’s success is its ability to buy the silence and complicity of local politicians, law enforcement, judges and prosecutors, airport security and other officials.” These foreign officials’ corrupt practices may render them worthy of sanctions under Canadian law.

Finally, Canada should recalibrate its foreign policy vis-à-vis Lebanon, whose sovereignty has been largely co-opted by this terrorist organization. Hezbollah is the key power broker in the Lebanese parliament and has influence inside the Lebanese Armed Forces. This explains why Iranian civilian airliners can fly weapons destined for Hezbollah straight into the Beirut airport. Canadian policy must include measures to isolate and defang those involved in perpetuating insecurity and slaughter throughout the region, through their support for Hezbollah. Hezbollah also runs a multi-billion dollar international network of illicit activities, such as drug trafficking and money laundering. There is nothing redeeming about this organization. It’s time for Canada to get tough on Hezbollah.

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[Play Nicely with Your New Toys: Jerusalem Online, Oct. 31, 2018](#)—Israeli forces have no plans to target Russian-made S-300 air defense systems in Syria if the Syrian army uses them in a way that poses no threat to Israel, former Israeli deputy chief of staff and ex-head of the National Security Council Gen. Uzi Dayan

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told Sputnik News Agency in an interview.

[US Hopes Russia will Continue to let Israel Hit Iran in Syria -Envoy: Ynet, Nov. 7, 2018](#)—The United States said on Wednesday it hoped Russia would continue to allow Israel to strike Iranian targets in Syria, despite Moscow’s supply of the S-300 air defence system to the Syrian government.

[Fight Against Last Vestige of ISIS in Syria Stalls, to Dismay of U.S.: Eric Schmitt, New York Times, Nov. 6, 2018](#)—An American-backed military offensive has stalled against the Islamic State’s last vestige in eastern Syria. Booby traps, land mines and a militant counterstrike during a fierce sandstorm after the campaign began in September have knocked the coalition back on its heels.

[A Luxury City Shows Blueprint for Syria’s Rebuilding Plans: New York Times, Nov. 5, 2018](#)—At a building site in Damascus, trucks and bulldozers zigzag back and forth ferrying sand and stones for a luxury development of residential high-rises and shopping centers.