

**ISRAEL DISRUPTS TEHRAN'S ENTRENCHMENT IN SYRIA AND
GROWING REGIONAL AMBITIONS**

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met in Tehran in an attempt to reach understandings regarding Syria's future in general, and the imminent offensive in the Idlib district - the last bastion of anti-Assad regime rebels - in particular.

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[Iran's Attack on Kurds Is a Message to Washington, Riyadh and Jerusalem: Seth Frantzman, Jerusalem Post, Sept. 9, 2018](#) — The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in Iran claimed credit for a missile attack on Kurdish opposition groups in Koya in northern Iraq.

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THE TEHRAN SUMMIT AND IRAN'S REGIONAL AMBITIONS

Dr. Doron Itzchakov

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BESA, Sept. 20, 2018

On September 7, the presidents of Russia, Turkey, and Iran met in Tehran in an attempt to reach understandings regarding Syria's future in general, and the imminent offensive in the Idlib district - the last bastion of anti-Assad regime rebels - in particular. Despite the outward display of unity and the shared desire to exclude Washington from the decision-making process on Syria's future so as to make the Syrian agenda their exclusive domain, the differences between the three parties were inevitable. What dictated the tone was the attempt by each party to promote its own disparate interests.

Take, for example, the three leaders' use of the term "terrorist." While Putin and Rouhani referred to the entire Syrian opposition as terrorists, Erdoğan confined this term to the Kurds and the Sunni jihadist organizations such as Jabhat al-Nusra. Likewise, while Putin's speech focused on the normalization of the situation and the return of refugees under a UN umbrella, Erdoğan demanded an immediate ceasefire in Idlib to prevent a bloodbath by the Assad regime. For his part, Rouhani devoted his speech to attacking the US and Israel, criticizing the former as an illegal invader of Syria and decrying Israel as an illegitimate entity that inflamed regional tensions and demanding - tongue in cheek - the removal of Israeli forces from the Syrian hemisphere. No less important, the Iranian president expressed the Islamic Republic's strong desire to see Syria's reconstruction after the fighting ended.

Viewed from Tehran's vantage point, cooperation with Russia and Turkey, despite their substantial differences, is a necessary step for realizing its regional ambitions. Keenly aware of Moscow's centrality in determining Syria's political, economic, and military agenda, Iran invests considerable effort in persuading the Kremlin to acquiesce in its continued presence in the war-torn country. Furthermore, Russia is not only perceived as a lifeline for Iran's future presence in Syria but also as an essential component in preserving the 2015 nuclear agreement after the US withdrawal from the treaty. In addition, Tehran puts much effort into raising foreign investment and views China and Russia as important substitutes for the European markets, which are hesitant to challenge the Trump administration's re-imposed sanctions. It is true that economic factors often put Tehran and Moscow on opposite sides of the divide, such as competition over Syrian reconstruction contracts and in the Asian and Far Eastern energy markets. But Tehran seems well aware of Moscow's superior position and is unlikely to rock the boat in these respects.

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Cooperation with Turkey is similarly necessary for the realization of the Islamic Republic's regional ambitions. While Ankara and Tehran are at odds over the legitimacy of the Assad regime and compete for leadership of the Muslim world, Turkey offers a vital channel for circumventing the US sanctions. Moreover, Iran places great hopes on Turkey as a natural gas supply route to European markets via the Tabriz-Ankara pipeline. The two states have collaborated in the past over the Kurdish issue, most recently in their joint campaign against the September 2017 referendum on the independence of Iraqi Kurdistan.

As noted above, in his speech at the summit Rouhani stressed Iran's desire to take an active part in the Syrian reconstruction, something that had already been demonstrated at the late August signing of an agreement by Iranian Defense Minister Amir Khatami and his Syrian counterpart. Why is Tehran prepared to invest billions of dollars in reconstructing Syria at a time when it is undergoing a sharp economic upheaval? The answer has to do with both domestic and strategic considerations.

On the strategic level, Tehran strives to transform Syria into a protectorate, similar to the model it successfully implemented in post-Saddam Iraq and in Lebanon since late 2006. This model comprises four overlapping circles: Influence through "soft power"; The formation of proxy armed militias from among recruited volunteers both at home and abroad; Direct military intervention by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and, in the Syrian case, by the Iranian army as well; Civilian and military reconstruction that enables Tehran to position itself as a supportive factor and, in consequence, to influence the political agenda from within. Syria's reconstruction is at the top of Tehran's list of priorities for the simple reason that this will lead to the establishment of security and intelligence infrastructures that will enable the use of Syrian territory as a front base for Iranian operations.

On the domestic level, Tehran's interest in the Syrian reconstruction is a corollary of the internal power struggle within the Islamic regime, notably the desire of the IRGC commanders to consolidate their influence on the various aspects of the Iranian national agenda. Dating back to the country's recovery from the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88), the organization's penetration of the economic, energy, industry, and agricultural spheres has been deep and pervasive. This is illustrated inter alia by its control of the industrial conglomerate Khatim al-Anbiya ("Seal of the prophets"), which serves as the exclusive concessionaire for most of Iran's engineering projects - from paving roads, to developing oil and gas fields, to

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constructing dams. Its survival and expansion of influence are the top priorities of the IRGC, which seems to be (justifiably) looking forward to the day when the next Supreme Leader is chosen. It is clear that the wellbeing of ordinary Iranians is not at the top of the organization's agenda, which is also why large sums of money are diverted from Iran to regional adventures...

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ISRAEL'S SECRET WAR AGAINST IRAN IS WIDENING

Jonathan Spyer

[Foreign Policy](#), Sept. 07, 2018

It has recently become clear that Israel is engaged in a secret war against Iran in Syria. The war is conducted mainly by means of air power, presumably combined with the intelligence work necessary to provide the country's airmen with the relevant targets; there is also evidence that targeted killings are among Israel's tactics in Syria. The objective of this campaign, as plainly stated by senior officials such as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman, is the complete withdrawal of Iranian forces and their proxies from Syria. Given the government's strategy, this objective is unlikely to be achieved. But its lesser goal of disrupting Tehran's efforts to consolidate and entrench itself in Syria is within reach.

Israel has carried out periodic strikes against the Syrian regime and Hezbollah targets throughout the country's civil war. Starting this year, however, there has been a sharp increase in the frequency of such attacks and the commencement of the direct targeting of Iranian facilities and personnel. The imminent demise of the Syrian rebellion spurred this shift.

So long as the insurgency remained viable, Israel was content to observe from the sidelines. At most, the Israeli government maintained a limited relationship with rebels in the Quneitra area to ensure that the war did not reach the border with

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the Golan Heights while intervening sporadically to disrupt the supply of weaponry to Hezbollah in Lebanon. Beyond that, Israel was content to allow Bashar al-Assad's regime and Iran and the mainly Sunni Islamist rebels to subject one another to a process of mutual attrition.

This year, however, it became clear that the rebellion, thanks to Iranian and Russian intervention, was going to be defeated. Israel could no longer afford the luxury of relative inaction if it wished to prevent the consolidation of an independent infrastructure of military and political power by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) on Syrian soil, along the lines of its existing bases in Lebanon and Iraq. Israel's direct targeting of this nascent infrastructure began shortly thereafter. It's difficult to trace the precise contours of this campaign, given Israel's reticence about taking responsibility for attacks. It is also sometimes in the interest of both Tehran and the Assad regime to avoid publicizing Israel's strikes.

But it's clear that the largest-scale clashes so far took place on May 10, when in response to Iranian forces firing 20 Grad and Fajr-5 rockets toward Israeli positions on the Golan Heights, Israel launched an extensive air operation, targeting Iranian infrastructure throughout Syria. This operation involved 28 aircraft and the firing of 70 missiles, according to Russian Defense Ministry figures. The targets included a variety of facilities maintained by the IRGC in Syria: a military compound and logistics complex run by the Quds Force, an elite paramilitary unit of the IRGC, 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.

But Netanyahu recently 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," Netanyahu told an audience in the southern Israeli town of Dimona on Aug. 29. Israel seemed to express its determination to act in a series of explosions last weekend at the Mezzeh military airport near Damascus. Both the pro-regime Al Mayadeen website and the pro-rebel Syrian Observatory for Human Rights attributed the attack to Israel, but it was silent on the matter. Syrian state television and the official SANA news agency later denied that an Israeli attack had taken place.

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An aerial attack on an Iranian convoy near Tanf in southern Syria on Sept. 3 similarly passed without any official claim of responsibility. An Iranian citizen and seven Syrians were killed in the attack, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. The U.S.-led anti-Islamic State coalition maintains a base at Tanf, but the coalition denied any involvement in the incident. Tanf, of course, is far to the east of the Quneitra Crossing and the Golan Heights. But Israel's concerns are not solely, or mainly, with the border area. Israel also appears to be concerned not only with physical infrastructure but also with the passage of Iran-associated militia personnel across the border between Iraq and Syria.

In mid-June, an airstrike took place on Harra, southeast of Albu Kamal on the Syrian-Iraqi border. The target was a base of the Kataib Hezbollah militia, a leading Iran-supported irregular force. Twenty-two members of the organization were killed in the strike. No country claimed responsibility for the attack. An Iranian militia commander quoted by Reuters said the United States was probably responsible. Such an action, however, would be directly contrary to the generally observable U.S. approach regarding the Iraqi Shiite militias. Washington seeks the political defeat of the militias but also is concerned with avoiding military clashes among political elements in Iraq. Finally, the unattributed killings of Aziz Asber, the head of the Syrian Scientific Studies and Research Center in Masyaf, and Ahmad Issa Habib, the commander of the Palestine department of Syria's military intelligence, on Aug. 5 and Aug. 18, respectively, have led to some speculation as to possible Israeli responsibility.

What is taking place, then, is an ongoing, rolling campaign intended to disrupt Iran's attempt to consolidate and deepen its project in Syria. Will the Israeli campaign succeed? It is difficult to see how the country can achieve its maximal goal of complete Iranian withdrawal from Syria. The Iranian investment in Syria is very large, formally based, and long-standing. Tehran has spent upwards of \$30 billion in the country over the last seven years...

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IRAN'S ATTACK ON KURDS IS A MESSAGE

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TO WASHINGTON, RIYADH AND JERUSALEM

Seth Frantzman

[Jerusalem Post](#), Sept. 09, 2018

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in Iran claimed credit for a missile attack on Kurdish opposition groups in Koya in northern Iraq. The attack on Saturday killed a dozen and wounded numerous others. It was the first time Iranian forces had used this kind of precision missile attack deep inside Iraq.

The brazen daylight missile attack is a message from Tehran to the region that it can do what it wants, not only in neighboring Iraq but throughout the Middle East. In the last year, Iranian missiles and Iranian-supported groups using Tehran's technical advisors have targeted Saudi Arabia from Yemen and Israel from Syria. As Washington seeks to pressure Iran, the missile threat is a clear indication that Tehran is flexing its muscles in the face of sanctions.

The IRGC attempted a decapitation strike against the Kurdish KDP-I, an opposition group that has a headquarters in Koya. Numerous senior leaders were present, and a missile crashed into the building where they were meeting. This was a precise and unprecedented strike. Although Iran has targeted Kurdish groups before in Iraq and has fired missiles at other opposition groups, the missiles used in this attack were precise and showcased Iranian intelligence operations and know-how.

The missile attack on Koya should not be seen as an isolated Iran regime attack on an opposition group. Iran has been fighting Kurdish opposition for years, and in Iran, there have been increasing clashes. But the missile strike was an escalation and should be seen in the context of the Iranian-backed Houthis using ballistic missiles to target Riyadh, flying some 900 km from their launch point. Iranian forces from Syria have also targeted and tested Israel's defenses. They flew a drone into Israeli airspace in February and fired a salvo of missiles in May. Recent satellite images show missile production facilities in northern Syria. Reports also indicate that Iran has transferred missiles to the Hashd al-Shaabi, or Shia militias, in Iraq. Moreover, Iran has armed Hezbollah with missiles for years and also supplied Hamas with technical support.

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The big picture then is an Iranian missile threat throughout the region. The National Defense Authorization Act signed by US President Donald Trump in August included passages about Iran's ballistic missile threat. Congress had looked deeply into how Iran's missile program threatens the region. During a June speech at the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies US Under Secretary of the Treasury for terrorism and financial intelligence, Sigal Mandelker said that "Iran must end its proliferation of ballistic missiles." US allies in the region have missile defense technology to confront the Iranian threat. Israel has a layered system of missile defense included Iron Dome, David's Sling and the Arrow program, while Saudi Arabia has used Patriot missile batteries to stop the Houthi missiles. This has proven effective. It is also why the IRGC decided to test out its missiles by targeting defenseless Kurdish groups in northern Iraq.

The IRGC's strike on the Kurds is a message to Washington and to Israel. It shows how the IRGC operates across borders and across with the region, seeing Iran's policy in Yemen, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon as linked into one larger program. The IRGC is also the group responsible for working with various proxies and Shia militias across the region. The US administration's response to the missile attack in Iraq will reveal whether Washington takes this new front in northern Iraq seriously and whether the discussions about stopping Iran's activities see Iraq as a frontier to confront these missile threats, or whether Iraq will continue to be an area that Iran can operate freely in.

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JOHN KERRY'S FREELANCE DIPLOMACY IS AN INVITATION TO DISASTER

Michael Rubin

[New York Post](#), Sept. 14, 2018

Former Secretary of State John Kerry admitted to meeting Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif "three or four times" since leaving office. Seeking to preempt criticism that his talks violated US laws prohibiting private citizens from advising or negotiating with foreign states, he said he merely wanted to see "what Iran might be willing to do in order to change the dynamic in the Middle East." Even if Kerry violated no laws, a more self-aware statesman would recognize that

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such freelance diplomacy weakens the US, emboldens enemies and has a track record of failure.

Consider North Korea: Bill Clinton's presidency, like Trump's, began with a North Korea crisis. Clinton had been president barely a month when North Korea refused International Atomic Energy Agency inspections and, weeks later, announced that it would withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. After Clinton declared, "North Korea cannot be allowed to develop a nuclear bomb," former President Jimmy Carter traveled to Pyongyang on an ostensibly personal visit to try to right what he believed was Clinton's unnecessarily inflexible policy. He met with North Korea's absolute dictator Kim Il -sung and, without authorization, promised not only would the White House abandon its drive for UN sanctions, but also conceded North Korea the right to reprocess nuclear fuel rods — in effect giving Pyongyang enough plutonium to construct five nuclear bombs. Carter had pulled the carpet out from the international pressure campaign Clinton sought to build.

Then there was Syria: Bashar al-Assad's government was an unrepentant terror sponsor. It facilitated Hezbollah's rearmament in defiance of UN resolutions after, in July and August 2006, Hezbollah launched much of its missile arsenal at Israel. As insurgency raged in Iraq, evidence mounted as to Assad's culpability. In one raid on insurgents, US forces found a laptop that contained a database showing conclusively that most foreign fighters and suicide bombers entered Iraq via Syria, with the full complicity of the Syrian government. Meanwhile, Assad covertly worked with North Korea to build a plutonium processing plant.

Like Clinton with North Korea, President George W. Bush believed the best course of action was to isolate Syria. To partisans, however, "cowboy" Bush was the real problem. Enter Nancy Pelosi. Defying Bush, the then-majority leader decided to break the diplomatic embargo. Pelosi traveled to Damascus, posed diligently for photos and declared, "We came in friendship, hope, and determined that the road to Damascus is a road to peace." It wasn't. In the wake of her visit, Assad doubled down on defiance and repression and, eventually, the pressure cooker he created exploded. Pelosi today recognizes her mistake, as she no longer brags about cultivating a man subsequently responsible for a half million civilian deaths and the use of more chemical weaponry than any leader since World War I.

Kerry seems unwilling to learn such lessons. After all, Iran isn't his first freelance attempt: During the Vietnam War, his antics emboldened the enemy while

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Americans were still in harm's way. More recently, just weeks into Barack Obama's presidency, he became the first US lawmaker to visit Gaza in nearly a decade. Congressmembers had avoided the area for the simple reason that it was run by Hamas, an unrepentant terrorist group committed to genocide and responsible for the murder of Americans. Hamas was thrilled. "We believe Hamas' message is reaching its destination," Ahmed Yusuf, Hamas' chief political adviser, said. In effect, Kerry legitimized Hamas, reinvigorated it and made himself its postman.

Back to Iran: When, in 2015, Sen. Tom Cotton and 46 other senators sent an open letter to its leaders warning them that absent Senate ratification the nuclear deal would not survive the Obama administration, Kerry quipped that the senators' actions were an "unconstitutional, un-thought-out action." Of course, they were neither. Kerry's castigation of Cotton, however, simply makes Kerry's more covert and repeated outreach to Iranian officials more hypocritical. Even assuming Kerry is well-meaning, his naiveté is astounding. Zarif arose in a system where freelancing insures imprisonment if not death and so may project officialdom onto Kerry even when there is none.

Regardless, the basis of Trump's strategy — like that of Clinton and Bush before him — is to coerce concession through isolation. Every president has the right to craft his own strategy. For a former secretary of state to knowingly undercut that suggests antipathy toward democratic outcomes. Perhaps it is that tendency, however, that best explains Kerry's bizarre affinity toward Tehran.

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[Inside Israel's New Iran Strategy: Maysam Behravesh, Reuters, Sept. 17, 2018](#)—In a rare admission, Israel has broken its "no-comment" policy on air strikes to confirm that it has carried out over 200 attacks against Iranian targets in Syria over the last two years.

[How Team Trump is Making the UN Spotlight Iran's Evil: Benny Avni, New York Post, Sept. 6, 2018](#)—The United States has assumed the presidency of the UN

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Security Council – and that means the council is about to put Iran under the hot lights.

[The North Korean Foreign Minister Visits Tehran: Lt. Col. \(res.\) Dr. Dany Shoham, BESA, Sept. 12, 2018](#)—Not long after the US reimposed sanctions on Iran, North Korea's foreign minister, Ri Yong-ho, arrived in Tehran.

[IAEA Still Needs to Investigate Military Dimension of Iran's Nuclear Program: Olli Heinonen, FDD, Sept. 6, 2018](#)—The board of governors of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) will meet in Vienna beginning on September 10 and will receive briefings beforehand from the IAEA secretariat.