

**IN SYRIA, ISRAELI AIRSTRIKE SENDS MESSAGE TO ASSAD,
PUTIN, & IRAN, MEANWHILE, TEHRAN EXPANDS ITS CONTROL
OVER LEBANON**

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WITH REPORTED AIRSTRIKE, ISRAEL PUTS

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SYRIA, AND IRAN, ON NOTICE

Avi Issacharoff

[Times of Israel](#), Dec. 2, 2017

With Syrian and Lebanese media reporting Israel carried out a missile strike overnight on a military base near al-Qiswa, some 13 kilometers (8 miles) southwest of Damascus and 50 kilometers (31 miles) from the Israeli border, and in light of reports Iran is constructing a base in the area, Israel appears to have dramatically upped the ante regarding the Islamic republic's military presence in Syria, turning its threats into action.

Top Israeli officials have in recent months repeatedly warned Israel will not tolerate an Iranian military presence in Syria. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is said to have conveyed a warning to President Bashar Assad just days ago, via a third party, that Assad's regime will itself be targeted by Israel if he allows Iran a permanent presence. While until now it was not clear to what extent Israel was willing to enforce this red line, the latest reported airstrikes signal the line is brighter than ever and Israel is prepared to back up its warnings.

According to some of the foreign reports, widely quoted in Hebrew media, the base in al-Qiswa attacked overnight was indeed the installation photographed in satellite images published by the BBC three weeks ago. Those reports indicate the base was not operational and had yet to be manned by any Iranian soldiers, advisers or personnel from its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Expansion work was recently carried out at the site and it appears Israel was aware of the base's purpose.

The airstrike sent a message to Assad, Tehran and Hezbollah, as well, of course, as

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Russian President Vladimir Putin, that Israel will not stand idly by if Iran's overt/entrenchment in Syria continues. Messages to this effect have been relayed in recent months through diplomatic channels and appear to have made it to their intended audience to some extent, as Assad remains wary of allowing Iran to build a naval base on Syrian territory or permitting additional Iranian investment in the country. In the case of the al-Qiswa installation, however, the warnings were apparently not heeded and Israel needed to resort to more blatant means to get its point across.

At the start of last month, reports said a weapons depot was destroyed in an airstrike near the city of Homs. It is not clear if these strikes were connected; there have likely been additional Israeli strikes on targets tied to Iran since then. The latest airstrike would mark the first time an Iranian military facility in Syria, whose presence had been reported upon in the press only weeks before, was attacked. Official Syrian media asserted Saturday that the base was solely Syrian, but earlier reports on the site's purpose leave little room for doubt.

Still, it is unlikely anyone in Israel believes the reported airstrike, which was apparently carried out by Israeli jets in Lebanese airspace, will be sufficient to deter the Iranians or cause Assad to distance himself from Iran. Tehran remains firm in its desire to advance its plans in Syria, and the Syrian dictator has consented to some of its goals. It is safe to assume Israel will likely seek to send additional messages in the form of attacks in order to cause Assad to reconsider his open-door policy with Iran. With this, the potential for an escalation with Syria, Hezbollah and their allies will only continue to grow.

While Iran is often said to be capable of taking over areas of the Middle East with relative ease, that is not the case here, with Israel apparently poised to ensure Iran's effort to dominate Syria will not be a cakewalk. Furthermore, developments in Yemen would appear to constitute a major blow to Tehran's goal of controlling that country, with forces loyal to former Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh on Saturday launching a large offensive against the Iranian-backed Houthis and inflicting a series of defeats. While the collapse of the Houthis' alliance with Saleh

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may not signal the end of Iran's campaign in Yemen, there is little doubt it has not been received well in Tehran. The reported airstrike underlines that, in Syria too, Iran is not having everything its own way.

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IRAN COMPLETES ITS LAND BRIDGE TO THE GOLAN

Jonathan Spyer

[Jerusalem Post](#), Nov. 18, 2017

In the east of Syria, the so-called race to Abu Kamal between the US-supported Syrian Democratic Forces and the forces of Iran, the Assad regime and Russia appears to be close to conclusion - in the latter's favor. Regime forces moved into the town last Thursday. They were then expelled by an unexpected Islamic State counterattack this week, and have now retreated to positions about two kilometers outside of Abu Kamal.

The Islamic State move, however, has the flavor of a last roll of the dice. Clearly, the Sunni jihadis will lose the strategic border town in the days ahead. The US-supported SDF fighters are covering ground rapidly to the north. But the forward units of the mainly Kurdish force remain about 25 kilometers north of Abu Kamal, in the area of the Kishma oil field. Abu Kamal is the last link in the much-discussed Iranian "land bridge" from the Iraq-Iran border to the Mediterranean Sea and the border with Israel.

Control of the border crossing at al-Qaim/Abu Kamal and of the roads leading west

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from it will enable the Iran-led regional alliance to transport fighters ~~control over Lebanon/~~ in both directions, according to choice. It will mean that in a future confrontation with Hezbollah, Israel could see its enemies reinforced by supplies and volunteers from among other Iranian clients, in precisely the way that took place with such effect in the Syrian war. Hezbollah can now be reinforced by Iran's other regional clients in a future conflict with Israel.

Of course, such efforts would not be invulnerable to Israeli attentions from the air, and would not confer an irreversible advantage on the Iranian side. But given the Iranian weakness in aviation, the land bridge would vastly increase the options and abilities of the Iranian side. It is worth noting in this regard that in recent days Iraqi Shi'a militias crossed the border by land for the first time in the Syrian war, to join the battle against Islamic State in the Abu Kamal area. The land bridge would convey economic advantages as well as strategic ones. It would allow for the transport of Iraqi oil to regime-controlled Syria, bypassing the area currently controlled by the SDF. This will be important in the reconstruction period ahead, regardless of the precise lines of control within Syria.

The imminent conclusion of conventional operations against the last remnants of Islamic State in eastern Syria will in turn bring with it a moment of crucial decision for the United States. A central facet of events in recent months in Syria has been the absence of a clear US strategy. The de facto relationship between US air power and special forces and the Kurdish YPG has proved to be a successful military partnership. This force, not the Assad/Iran/Russia side, is responsible for the greater part of the victory against Islamic State in Syria. Indeed, the regime side's belated push east came precisely to limit the territorial gains of the US-backed SDF.

But throughout, there has been a clear discrepancy between the military support afforded to the SDF and the complete absence of recognition by the US or any other Western power of the broader Kurdish-led political project in northern Syria. The Federation of Northern Syria, declared by the Syrian Kurdish leadership on March 17, 2016, indeed lacks the recognition of any other country.

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Officially speaking, the reason for US involvement in eastern Syria has been the war against Islamic State. Neither more nor less. At the same time, there is evidence of extensive US military construction in Kurdish-controlled eastern Syria. Airstrips and bases have been built in Rumeilan, Manbij and Kobani. The powerful Saudi official Thamer al-Sabhan visited SDF-controlled eastern Syria in late October, accompanied by Brett McGurk, US special envoy to the coalition against Islamic State. The purpose of the visit, according to a Reuters report, was to discuss the reconstruction of Raqqa city. All these snippets might suggest that the US has longer-term intentions in eastern Syria and does not mean to merely abandon its erstwhile allies, once the task of destroying the Islamic State "caliphate" is done.

A statement by US Defense Secretary James Mattis this week supported this impression. He noted that the US does not intend to "walk away right now before the Geneva process has traction," and would fight Islamic State "for as long as they want to fight," in order to prevent the emergence of "ISIS 2.0." If the US does decide to stay in eastern Syria, it will need to consider the logistics of how to supply this area, against the wishes of all neighboring entities. The Assad regime has made clear that once Islamic State is defeated, it intends to reunify the entire area of Syria...

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**THE POLITICAL CRISIS IN LEBANON: AN OPPORTUNITY TO
STRENGTHEN ISRAELI-SAUDI COOPERATION AGAINST IRAN**

Omer Dostri

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BESA, Dec. 1, 2017

Two dramatic events occurred recently that have the potential to affect the balance of power in the Middle East, particularly in Lebanon. First, on November 4, Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri resigned while in Saudi Arabia, a move suspected to have been directed from the royal palace in Riyadh. A day later, it was reported that Saudi Arabia had intercepted a ballistic missile launched from Yemen by Houthi rebels who had intended to hit the Riyadh airport. On November 22, Hariri put his resignation on hold, but there is no sign of political stability in Lebanon for the foreseeable future.

Saudi Arabia backed Hariri's intention to resign and directly accused Iran and Hezbollah of smuggling missiles into Yemen and teaching the Houthis how to operate them. Riyadh went so far as to claim that launching the missile towards the airport could be considered a "declaration of war" by Lebanon. These statements and actions join the boycott imposed on Qatar by the Arab states, led by Saudi Arabia, over what they claim to be cooperation between Doha, Tehran, Hamas, and the Muslim Brotherhood.

Although Saudi Arabia and Iran have exchanged sharp words in the past, attempts have been made to bridge their differences. Last August, for example, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammed Javad Zarif announced that Tehran and Riyadh were planning reciprocal diplomatic visits. Now, it seems the hostility between Saudi Arabia and Iran has reached a new peak and threatens to become even more overt, raising fears of a direct military confrontation - especially in light of the worsening rhetoric of Saudi Arabia and the success of Iran's hegemonic ambitions in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen.

Riyadh is no longer satisfied with cautious statements against Iran. It now chooses to accuse Tehran directly of responsibility for actions carried out by Shiite militias in Syria and Yemen. Thus, the desert kingdom is moving towards a more

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aggressive, less diplomatic foreign policy as it deepens its involvement in the Middle East in general and Lebanon in particular.

These developments have an impact on Israel, which is also threatened by Iran's hegemonic ambitions. Tehran's attempts to entrench in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen; to expand its control over Lebanon; to create a "land bridge" from Tehran to the Mediterranean; to exploit the 2015 nuclear agreement to build military force and gain international legitimacy; and to develop its ballistic missile project menace Jerusalem as much as Riyadh.

Because they share a common threat, it is in the interests of both Israel and Saudi Arabia to deepen their secret cooperation, especially through diplomatic means - even if there are limits on such cooperation. Those limits include a lack of domestic legitimacy in Riyadh for cooperation with Israel; Saudi Arabia's focus on domestic affairs; and the involvement of superpowers in the region. These can be overcome by tightening covert cooperation; concentrating the foreign policy of both countries on the Iranian issue; and operating as one when dealing with the superpowers.

Hariri's intention to resign, and the consequent leaving of the Lebanese government to Hezbollah, constitutes an opportunity for Riyadh and Jerusalem to exert strong combined pressure on the US administration to change its position. So far, Washington has separated the Lebanese government from Hezbollah, and has even praised Hariri and his government for their purported fight against terrorism.

Changing the American position can strengthen Israel's deterrence vis-à-vis Hezbollah, which has exploited the cover it received from the legitimate Lebanese government with Hariri at its head. A declaration that all of Lebanon is now Hezbollah would be a resounding message to send to the Americans. It would legitimize a future Israeli attack on the entire Lebanese country and its

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[infrastructure as part of a military operation against Hezbollah. Another control-over-leb/opportunity for Saudi-Israeli cooperation concerns the nuclear agreement between Iran and the six powers. In both Jerusalem and Riyadh, the nuclear agreement is viewed as a bad deal with significant weaknesses that can ultimately whitewash Iran as a nuclear state.](https://www.isranet.org/daily-briefing/syria-israeli-airstrike-sends-message-assad-putin-iran-meanwhile-tehran-expands-its-)

US President Donald Trump's recent decision not to ratify the nuclear agreement gives the demands of Israel and Saudi Arabia a tailwind. The two countries, with the help of the US, should take advantage of the situation in Lebanon to embark on a "diplomatic attack" in Europe, Russia, and China, and increase the pressure to improve the terms of the agreement. This is especially true with regard to Moscow, as a complete Iranian takeover of Lebanon and Syria is not in Russia's interest. Moscow has hegemonic ambitions of its own in those areas.

Israel and Saudi Arabia can also take joint advantage of the political crisis in Lebanon to damage Iran's ballistic missile project. While Trump has declared a new US policy towards Iran, his administration has not yet formulated concrete steps to impede Tehran's military project. The two countries should leverage the opportunity and try to influence the agenda in Congress and particularly the Senate, which is responsible for planning and setting out the details of the overall policy as set out by the White House. Israel and Saudi Arabia have a better chance of influencing those details together than they do separately.

Saudi Arabia and Israel have a clear common interest in preventing an Iranian "land bridge" to the Mediterranean. In the past year, Riyadh has taken practical steps towards cooperating with and restoring relations with Baghdad - relations that had been wracked since the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 - in order to prevent this Iranian foothold. Israel is working towards the same goal by both military and diplomatic means.

The abandonment of Lebanon's political arena to Hezbollah would mean a de facto

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Iranian takeover of Lebanon. This has given renewed weight to the ~~concerns~~ expressed by Jerusalem and Riyadh about Tehran's hegemonic ambitions in the region. Riyadh and Jerusalem can use the situation to increase pressure on American policy in the Syrian arena and in Iraq. Until now, the US has focused on fighting ISIS and had abandoned the issue of Iranian-backed Shiite militias operating in both countries.

Israeli-Saudi cooperation in the Iraqi-Syrian arena can also be beneficial to the Russian government, which is currently working with Iran in Syria. Russian foreign policy in the Middle East is largely successful thanks to the "divide and rule" strategy. If Riyadh and Jerusalem join hands with Moscow, the combined pressure might bear fruit by reducing Tehran's presence in Syria and distancing the Iranians who remain there from the Iraqi border. Russia might also agree to distance the Iranian presence in Syria from the border with Israel...

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PALESTINIANS TRYING TO LEAVE LEBANON — BECAUSE OF ISRAEL?

Elder of Ziyon

[Algemeiner](#), Nov. 29, 2017

The number of "Palestinian refugees" in Lebanon has decreased significantly over the past few years and many are leaving for other countries to try to improve their situation. In an interview with the Hamas newspaper *Palestine* on Thursday, Hamas's representative in Lebanon Ali Baraka said that some 260,000 "Palestinian refugees" had left the refugee camps in Lebanon to various countries in recent years because of the difficult security and economic conditions. According to him, the figures he cited are based on a poll conducted by the Lebanese authorities and

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which indicates that there is a deliberate action to bring about the emigration of Palestinian refugees from countries bordering Israel.

“The Zionist enemy is working in this way to empty the refugee camps and to destroy the foundation for the right of return,” Baraka claimed. He further argued that this emigration should be dealt with through activities to improve the situation in the camps and through assistance from UNRWA to ensure stability in the camps prior to the return of the “refugees” to “Palestine.”

According to the data of the director of the Shahad Institution — Mahmoud Al-Hanafi — more than 45 percent of “Palestinian refugees” have emigrated from Lebanon, and only 280,000 remain in Lebanon today. According to another version of the data, only 200,000 Palestinians remain in Lebanon. Hanafi noted that poverty, denial of work and security instability contribute to an increase in the phenomenon. Remember that UNRWA claims there are 450,000 Palestinian “refugees” in Lebanon. We have noted for years that roughly half of those have fled — but UNRWA still keeps counting them. I couldn’t find the original Felesteen article, but I found one from a few months ago quoting the same Mr. Al-Hanafi about a study showing how Lebanese youth know that they have no future in Lebanon; 59% of them believe that Palestinian identity is their main obstacle to achieving their aspirations to build a family and actively contribute to the development of society.

The study also said that suffering is linked to the reality of “being a Palestinian,” and “the practice of successive Lebanese governments of the policy of deprivation and harassment of the Palestinian, so that his life has become intolerable.” According to the study, 70.3 percent of the 18- to 20-year-old Palestinians in Lebanon would migrate if given the opportunity. The funny part is that Lebanon is controlled by Iran, by proxy — but the Palestinians there that Iran pretends to love are in worse shape than they’ve ever been. It must be because Lebanese authorities — who undoubtedly practice apartheid against their Palestinian “guests” — are really partnering with Israel, not Iran.

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[Putin's Syria Play: Editorial, *Wall Street Journal*, Nov. 13, 2017](#) —The press corps spent the weekend obsessing about what Donald Trump thinks about what Vladimir Putin believes about Russian meddling in the U.S. election. #evergreentweets.

[Saudi Arabia's Lebanon Gamble Might Pay Off: Dr. James M. Dorsey, *BESA*, Dec. 2, 2017](#)—Broad international support for Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri following his speech from Riyadh in which he denounced Hezbollah as an Iranian proxy...

[Experts: Hezbollah Continues 'Absolute Dominance' of Lebanon Amid Domestic Political Crisis: Ariel Ben Solomon, *JNS*, Nov. 30, 2017](#)—The Iranian-backed terror group Hezbollah, which makes up part of Lebanon's government and has a strong military force that threatens Israel, has been largely unaffected by the status of embattled Prime Minister Saad Hariri. Amid Beirut's political squabbling, Hezbollah retains de facto control over much of the Lebanese state.