An Analysis of the Threat to Israel from the Growing Iranian Presence in Syria

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Introduction:

Throughout history, Israel has faced many threats from the various Arab nations. Some of

these relationships have progressed towards peace and even cooperation on many different

fronts. However, Iran declared it to be its mission to destroy Israel and the people living in it.

Iran is working on creating a multi-faceted plan of attack in order to wipe out the State of Israel.

As Charles Freilich writes:

> Iran has become one of the primary actors in the region, arguably the driving force, and
> the most sophisticated adversary Israel has ever faced. It poses the greatest threat to
> Israel's national security today, not just because of its nuclear program, massive support
> for Hezbollah and in the past Hamas, and active efforts to derail the peace process, but
> also due to its carefully calculated approach to its long-term objective of weakening and
> ultimately destroying Israel.[1]
>
> Iran wants to expand its influence and power in the region by creating a land bridge,

which means a continuous stretch of land from Iran across the Middle East. As Michael Herzog

wrote for the Washington Institute:

> Iran has since labored relentlessly to create a contiguous zone of direct influence and
> power projection, spanning historical Mesopotamia and the Levant and toward the
> Mediterranean, an area now commonly known as the land corridor or land bridge.[2]

According to the Center for Strategic and International Studies:

> Some Lebanese Hezbollah fighters have referred to this land bridge as Wilayat Imam Ali
> (the state or province of Imam Ali), in honor of Ali ibn Abi Talib, the cousin and son-in-
> law of the Prophet Muhammad. These routes, which remain partly aspirational, include: a
> northern route through Iran, Iraq's Kurdish region, the Iraqi city of Sinjar, northeastern
> Syria cities like Al-Hasakah, and into Lebanon; a central route through Iran, central Iraq,
> the Iraqi border town of Al-Qaim, Syria's Abu Kamal and Dayr az Zawr, and into
> Lebanon; and a southern route through Iran, the Iraqi border town of Al-Walid, Al-Tanf

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[1]Freilich, Charles David. *Israeli National Security: a New Strategy for an Era of Change*, page
    78, Oxford University Press, 2018.

[2]Herzog, Michael. "Iran Across the Border." *Iran Across the Border: Israel's Pushback in Syria -
    Israel's Pushback in Syria - The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, The
    Washington Institute, July 2019, www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iran-
    across-the-border-israels-pushback-in-syria.

in Syria, Damascus, and into Lebanon. These corridors resemble the Royal Road, the ancient land bridge built by Persian King Darius the Great in the fifth century BC.[3]

Iran wants both to be a major power in the area and to have the ability to destroy Israel, and it also wants the ease of shipping weapons and supplies through Iraq to Lebanon and Syria. These weapons which are being transported include "precise surface-to surface missiles; some of the most advanced surface-to-air missiles available, sold by Russia to Syria; modern Russian shore-to-sea missiles; and Syrian-made long-range rockets and missiles."[4]

Within Syria, Iran is working to cultivate a Shiite army and to create factories to upgrade crude weapons into more precise ones. Each of these is used as deterrence from attacking the other; no one can attack Hezbollah because of Iran's future nuclear arms and vice versa. The combination of Hezbollah and Syria creates a "Northern Front" which is a unified front in Israel's north. Iran, Syria and Hezbollah have come together to form the "Axis of Resistance." The threat to Israel from Hezbollah and Iran were already significant, but with the growing Iranian presence in Syria, the threat has grown more immediate as Syria has easy access to Israel's Golan Heights and ultimately into the whole country. As Herzog writes:

> Notwithstanding its military might, Israel is a small, vulnerable country, whose major population centers and critical national and military infrastructure are located within an area about 20 kilometers wide and 80-100 kilometers long. With a relatively low number of high-precision rockets, Hezbollah could exact a heavy price in a future war by targeting elements critical to Israel's national security and ability to effectively conduct the war.[5]

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[3] "War by Proxy: Iran's Growing Footprint in the Middle East." *War by Proxy: Iran's Growing Footprint in the Middle East | Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 11 Mar. 2019, www.csis.org/war-by-proxy.

[4] Amidror, Yakov. "The Strategic Framework for Israeli Operations in Syria." *JINSA*, 13 Mar. 2019, jinsa.org/idf-mg-ret-yaakov-amidror-distinguished-fellow-jinsas-gemunder-center-defense-strategy-israeli-strategy-syria-realclear-defense/.

[5] Herzog, Michael. "Iran Across the Border." *Iran Across the Border: Israel's Pushback in Syria - Israel's Pushback in Syria - The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, Washington

The oldest, and most established part of the Iranian plan is Hezbollah in Lebanon, which is a well-known proxy of Iran. Hassan Nasrallah, Secretary-General of Hezbollah, said "Israel is our enemy. This is an aggressive, illegal, and illegitimate entity, which has no future in our land. Its destiny is manifested in our motto: 'Death to Israel.'"[6] A more recent development of the threat from Hezbollah is the plan to take weapons and upgrade them to make them more precise and able to hit specific targets within Israel.

As the threat has increased, Israel has created strategies to try and limit Iran's actions and influence, while simultaneously attempting to deescalate the situation. One of these tactics is known as the "campaign between wars" or the "war between wars" (in Hebrew *Mabam* which stands for *m'aracha bein ha-milchamot*), which is a combined strategy of many small strikes on Iran and its proxies to destroy its progress as well as to create deterrence, in addition to a media campaign which includes leaking visuals and identifying Iranian bases and targets within Syria in order to threaten Iran and to gain international support.[7] This ensures that Israel is not seen as acting with more force than necessary, and when Israel acts it is seen as protecting its people. Deterrence is important because it prevents conflict from occurring by making the enemy feel that their losses would be so great that to strike would be foolish. Freilich writes in theory about deterrence that "Deterrence was to be achieved both through full-scale wars and ongoing limited

Institute, July 2019, www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iran-across-the-border-israels-pushback-in-syria.

[6] Goldberg, Jeffrey. "The Iranian Regime on Israel's Right to Exist." *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 9 Mar. 2015, www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/03/Iranian-View-of-Israel/387085/.

[7] Orion, Assaf. "The Response to the Iranian Proxy War: Jerusalem's Power vs. the Quds Force." *Inss.org.il*, July 2018, www.inss.org.il/publication/response-iranian-proxy-war-jerusalems-power-vs-quds-force/.

military confrontations, such as retaliation raids and special operations."[8] In this case, it is being enforced by specific targeted attacks. In general, this tactic has been used to limit Iran's reach, while ensuring that no strike is so extreme that Iran would feel the need to respond. This should be Israel's strategy rather than escalating the situation and causing a war or ignoring the situation and allowing it to build to a point that there will be a need for a war.

Methodology:

It is the hypothesis of this paper that the best strategy for Israel to pursue in dealing with the growing Iranian presence in Syria is to continue with its strategy of *Mabam*, or the "war between wars", in order to weaken the Iranian presence as well as deescalate the situation without resorting to outright warfare. Iranian presence in this case is the Shiite forces in Iran, the military capabilities which are being built, and the factories to produce weapons.

Because this issue is relatively recent, to support the hypothesis, this paper has relied primarily on papers and studies from think tanks such as the Institute for National Security Studies, the Washington Institute, The Atlantic Council, and the Jewish Institute for National Security of America. Additionally, Dr. Charles Freilich's book "Israeli National Security" was extremely helpful when looking at this issue in a larger context. Other sources include media sources such as Haaretz, the BBC, and the Guardian which range in how extensively they cover the Iran and Israel issue or whether they touch on aspects of the issue. Writers such as Michael Herzog, Udi Dekel, and Assaf Orion cover this topic in depth and I have relied heavily on their

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[8] Freilich, Charles David. *Israeli National Security: a New Strategy for an Era of Change*, page 41, Oxford University Press, 2018.

various articles for information. Where possible, I have relied on relevant books for background

or analysis.[9]

The Changing Relationship:

Iran was not always a threat to Israel. Before 1979, Iran and Israel had a positive

relationship and Iran was important to Israel foreign policy. From 1948 until 1979 Israel and Iran

had foreign relations, trade deals, and military ties.[10] These included oil transfers, construction

projects, and even secret military projects.[11] Iran and Israel even worked together on a project

called "Project Flower" which involved missiles and nuclear warheads. There were normal

flights between Israel and Iran and a school taught in Hebrew for Israelis in Tehran.[12] Iran never

officially recognized Israel, but Israel did have a permanent delegation in Iran, which acted as

the unofficial embassy.[13] As published in the International Journal for the Study of Modern

Islam:

> As early as July 1960, the Shah recognized the existence of the State of Israel—not de
> jure but de facto—and pushed for cooperation between the two nations. Iran bought
> Israeli weapons. Israeli capital was invested in both the private and public sector.
> Numerous Israel experts offered their expertise as military advisers or instructors for
> SVAK, the Sha's infamous intelligence service.[14]

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[9] Additionally, this thesis was written during the global pandemic relating to the novel
coronavirus (Covid-19) which hampered my ability to access some relevant materials.

[10] Simon, Steven. "Iran Primer: Iran and Israel." *PBS*, Public Broadcasting Service, 28 Oct.
2010, www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2010/10/iran-primer-iran-and-israel.html.

[11] Ynetnews. "The Islamic Republic of Iran." *Ynetnews*, Ynetnews, 23 Jan. 2007,
www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3284215,00.html.

[12] Green, David B. "From Friends to Foes: How Israel and Iran Turned into Arch-Enemies."
Haaretz.com, 8 May 2018, www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/iran/MAGAZINE-how-israel-and-iran-went-from-allies-to-enemies-1.6049884.

[13] Ynetnews. "The Islamic Republic of Iran." *Ynetnews*, Ynetnews, 23 Jan. 2007,
www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3284215,00.html.

[14] Amirpur, Katajun. "Iran's Policy towards Jewish Iranians and the State of Israel. Is the Present
Iranian State Islamofascist?" *Die Welt Des Islams*, vol. 52, no. 3/4, 2012.

The foundations for the souring of this relationship were laid early. In 1963 Ayatollah Khomeini, founder of the Islamic Republic and leader of the Iranian Revolution, bemoaned the relationship between Israel and Iran, calling the Shah "a Jew in disguise" and spreading anti-Israel rhetoric. Once exiled, Khomeini continued his anti-Israel tirade, blaming Israel, the West, and the Shah as the source for Iran's problems.[15] In 1979, Khomeini rose to power and broke relations with Israel three weeks later on February 18th, 1979.[16,17] This animosity was so extreme that when Egypt signed a peace treaty with Israel, Iran cut off diplomatic ties with Egypt.[18] This conflict became more intense as Iran created proxies to execute its goal of destroying the Jewish state. An added dimension of the conflict was the relationship between the Israel and the West. In 1958, the CIA led a revolution in Iran, setting aside the democratically elected leader for the secularized Shah. While Israel was not involved in this, the connection between Israel and the West condemns Israel. Iran is a theocracy and they push an anti-Western, anti-Israel, anti-secularism agenda.[19] The sharp turn in the relationship can be seen through former Israeli Prime Minister Yitzchak Rabin who called Iran "Israel's best friend" and only a few years later referred to Iran's "dark, murderous regime."[20]

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[15] Amirpur, Katajun. "Iran's Policy towards Jewish Iranians and the State of Israel. Is the Present Iranian State Islamofascist?" *Die Welt Des Islams*, vol. 52, no. 3/4, 2012.

[16] Green, David B. "From Friends to Foes: How Israel and Iran Turned into Arch-Enemies." *Haaretz.com*, 8 May 2018, www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/iran/MAGAZINE-how-israel-and-iran-went-from-allies-to-enemies-1.6049884.

[17] Nikou, Semira N. "Timeline of Iran's Foreign Relations." *The Iran Primer*, 11 Oct. 2010, iranprimer.usip.org/resource/timeline-irans-foreign-relations.

[18] Nikou, Semira N. "Timeline of Iran's Foreign Relations." *The Iran Primer*, 11 Oct. 2010, iranprimer.usip.org/resource/timeline-irans-foreign-relations.

[19] Bob, Yonah Jeremy. "Iran-US-Israel's 40 Years of Hostility with No End in Sight - Analysis." *The Jerusalem Post | JPost.com*, 4 Nov. 2019, www.jpost.com/israel-news/iran-us-israels-40-years-of-hostility-with-no-end-in-sight-analysis-606737.

[20] Green, David B. "From Friends to Foes: How Israel and Iran Turned into Arch-Enemies." *Haaretz.com*, 8 May 2018, www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/iran/MAGAZINE-how-israel-and-iran-went-from-allies-to-enemies-1.6049884.

Iran's multi-faceted plan:

Iran's plan for control of the Middle East was succinctly summarized in a policy note for the Washington Institute as:

> Iranian plans to entrench in Syria and consolidate an anti-Israel military front there include long-term military strongholds, a permanently deployed and legitimized proxy army—adding to existing ones in Iraq and Lebanon—and the creation of industrial military facilities for the production of accurate rockets in Syria and Lebanon.[21]

As the years have continued, Iran has built more bases and warehouses, sent more soldiers and supplies and is becoming more entrenched in Syria economically and politically. Israel has responded with military strikes which serve as messages that this growing presence will not be tolerated, as well as continued intelligence gathering.

Syria borders Israel and splits the Golan Heights. There was a separation between the Israeli and Syrian border in 1974 following the Yom Kippur war which created two areas of limited armament, a demilitarized zone and the establishment of the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) to maintain the ceasefire.[22] Iran wants the ability to hit Israel and is using Syria as its strategic location to build an army and bases from which rockets can be fired. In 2011, the United States, Russia and Jordan agreed to deescalate South Syria and agreed that all non-Syrian forces needed to be around three miles away from the buffer line between the rebels and the Syrian forces. It was agreed that Iran and its proxies would be between three to eighteen miles away. This agreement was made after Israel demanded that Iran

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[21] Herzog, Michael. "The Growing Risk of an Israel-Iran Confrontation in Syria." *The Growing Risk of an Israel-Iran Confrontation in Syria - The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, The Washington Institute, Dec. 2017, www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-growing-risk-of-an-israel-iran-confrontation-in-syria.

[22] "Israel-Syria Separation of Forces Agreement-1974." *Mfa.gov.il*, mfa.gov.il/mfa/foreignpolicy/peace/guide/pages/israel-syria%20separation%20of%20forces%20agreement%20-%201974.aspx.

and its proxies be 31 to 37 miles away, which was rejected. Israel made it clear again at this

point that it would respond to any threats coming out of Syria. The issue was tabled by the

United States for later debate.[23] The issue arose when the first Iranian base in Syria was revealed

to the world through the BBC in 2017, where they described an area eight miles south of

Damascus, near El-Kiswah. This was only thirty miles away from Israel's border, and it was

presumed to be housing soldiers. In response to this, Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu

tweeted, "Iran wants to establish itself militarily in Syria, right next to Israel. Israel will not let

this happen."[24] On December 1st, the base was destroyed in an air strike, which many have

speculated to have been led by Israel. Russia claimed that when they promised to keep Iran the

set distance away, it did not include Damascus.[25]

Another major threat to Israel is Hezbollah, which is financed through Iran. Israel fought

two wars in Lebanon in 1982 and 2006. The most recent manifestation of this threat is the

tunnels that were dug between Israel and Lebanon, with Hezbollah's goals of entering Israel

undetected and causing major damage and deaths. These tunnels were going to be paired with

rockets which would be launched into Israel. Israel destroyed these tunnels in Operation

Northern Shield.[26]

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[23] Herzog, Michael. "The Growing Risk of an Israel-Iran Confrontation in Syria." *The Growing Risk of an Israel-Iran Confrontation in Syria - The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, The Washington Institute, Dec. 2017, www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-growing-risk-of-an-israel-iran-confrontation-in-syria.
[24] Corera, Gordon. "Iran Building Permanent Military Base in Syria - Claim." *BBC News*, BBC, 10 Nov. 2017, www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-41945189.
[25] Harel, Amos. "Burned by Israel Strikes, Iran to Move Weapons Supply Center out of Damascus." *Haaretz.com*, 7 Feb. 2019, www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/syria/.premium-burned-by-israel-iran-to-move-weapons-supply-center-out-of-damascus-1.6914545.
[26] Schweitzer, Yoram, and Ofek Riemer. "Neutralizing Hezbollah's Tunnel Project: The Ongoing Campaign against Iranian Regional Influence." *Inss.org.il*, 12 Dec. 2018,

One of the biggest threats from Hezbollah is its ability to hit Israel with rockets,

Hezbollah is working with Iran to upgrade its weapons to reach further distances and to be more

accurate. In addition, Iran is working to get Hezbollah 1,000 medium and long-range rockets

which are more precise and have less error. This is on top of the short-range missiles Hezbollah

already has. The goal would be to not just transport weapons to Hezbollah, but to provide them

the tools and factories to upgrade and produce these weapons on its own. Iran has already proven

it has the technology to make accurate rockets because they made and used these precise rockets

to hit ISIS locations and Kurdish targets, and has given accurate drones to Hezbollah. This is on

top of the huge number of missiles that Hezbollah already has, according to Michael Knights and

Assaf Orion:

> By 2006 the group had built up an arsenal of around 12,000 munitions—mainly short-range rockets, along with a few hundred 75 km Fajr-5 artillery rockets, 300 km Zelzal-3 missiles, and 300 km Syrian M-600 missiles (which are copies of Iran's Fateh-110).[27]

There are different estimates about how many weapons Hezbollah has today, most of

them estimate around 130,000 with the range spanning between 100,000 and 150,000.[28] These

weapons include:

> the Fateh-110/M-600 short-range ballistic missile, Shahab-1 and Shahab-2 short-range ballistic missiles, Toophan anti-tank guided missiles, Kornet man-portable anti-tank guided missiles, M113 armored personnel carriers, T-72 main battle tanks, Karrar unmanned combat aerial vehicles, and Katyusha rocket launchers. Hezbollah's armed drone capabilities are among the most advanced of any terrorist group in the world, and it

www.inss.org.il/publication/neutralizing-hezbollahs-tunnel-project-ongoing-campaign-iranian-regional-influence/.

[27] Knights, Michael, and Assaf Orion. "If Iran Deploys Missiles in Iraq: U.S.-Israeli Response Options." *If Iran Deploys Missiles in Iraq: U.S.-Israeli Response Options - The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 13 May 2019, www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/if-iran-deploys-missiles-in-iraq-u.s.-israeli-response-options.

[28] "Missiles and Rockets of Hezbollah." *Missile Threat*, missilethreat.csis.org/country/hezbollahs-rocket-arsenal/.

has used Karrar armed drones to destroy Islamic State targets in Syria. In addition, Hezbollah may have stockpiled chemical weapons in Syria, including chlorine.[29]

Nasrallah has made prolific threats against Israel, including blowing up the ammonia plant in Haifa, in which he equated the damage to be equivalent of that of an atomic bomb.[30] Another major threat was a massive plan of terror attacks that Hezbollah would conduct if something happened between Israel and Lebanon, or if someone would attack Iran's nuclear weapons. Hezbollah had warehouses of explosives in places like London, Cyprus, and Thailand with the goal of hurting Israeli assets.[31] Nasrallah also threatened the United States recently, stating that if they went to war with Iran, Israel would be destroyed, and pointed to specific places on a map that Hezbollah could hit. He said "when the Americans understand that this war could wipe out Israel, they will reconsider."[32]

Hezbollah also has an offshoot in Syria known as the "Islamic Resistance in Syria" (in Arabic *al-Muqwm al-Islamiyah fi Suriya*), also known as the "Syrian Hezbollah". While this group is integrally connected to Hezbollah in Lebanon, they have their own leaders and banners. They recruit from across Syria and have been trained by Lebanese commanders. While the Syrian Hezbollah does not have much autonomy or independence, according to Philip Smith:

> For Lebanese Hezbollah, Syria provides additional strategic depth and manpower resources, including local forces to assist in securing Hezbollah's zones in Lebanon and

[29] "War by Proxy: Iran's Growing Footprint in the Middle East." *War by Proxy: Iran's Growing Footprint in the Middle East | Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 11 Mar. 2019, www.csis.org/war-by-proxy.

[30] Kais, Roi. "Nasrallah: Ammonia Plant in Haifa Is My Atomic Bomb." *Ynetnews*, Ynetnews, 17 Feb. 2016, www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4767144,00.html.

[31] Times of Israel Staff. "Report: Hezbollah Planned Huge, Game-Changing Attacks on Israel Targets Globally." *The Times of Israel*, 12 June 2019, www.timesofisrael.com/hezbollah-planned-immense-game-changing-terror-attacks-report/.

[32] Times of Israel Staff. "Nasrallah Warns Israel Could Be 'Wiped out' in War between US and Iran." *The Times of Israel*, 13 July 2019, www.timesofisrael.com/nasrallah-warns-israel-could-be-wiped-out-in-war-between-us-and-iran/.

added military strength to project against regional foes such as the United States, Israel, and Sunni Arab states.[33]

Iran's goal is to create a "Northern Front" which is where Syria and Lebanon melted into one entity controlled by Iran.[34] As Herzog writes:

> Iran has clear designs to turn war-torn Syria into a formidable military front against Israel, merging it with the front in Lebanon as part of a strategic plan to encircle Israel and establish a contiguous corridor of de factor Iranian control stretching to the Mediterranean Sea.[35]

In this Northern Front, Iran is placing an army of Shiite fighters.[36] This army is made up of the Quds force from Iran, which is its foreign branch of the military, as well as Syrian fighters, Syrian National Defense forces, Hezbollah fighters, Iraqi fighters, Afghani fighters, Iraqi fighters, and Pakistani fighters.[37,38] These fighters are being recruited under the idea of Pan-Shiism.[39] These proxies are being recruited under the concept of *muqawama*, which means

[33] Smith, Philip. "Lebanese Hezbollah's Islamic Resistance in Syria." *Lebanese Hezbollah's Islamic Resistance in Syria - The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 26 Apr. 2018, www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/lebanese-hezbollahs-islamic-resistance-in-syria.

[34] Bell, John. "The Blending of Lebanon and Syria." *Politics | Al Jazeera*, Al Jazeera, 23 Oct. 2016, www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2016/10/blending-lebanon-syria-161019090831535.html.

[35] Herzog, Michael. "Trump Departs Syria: An Israeli Perspective." *Trump Departs Syria: An Israeli Perspective - The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, The Washington Institute, 8 Jan. 2018, www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/trump-departs-syria-an-israeli-perspective.

[36] Ravid, Barak. "Netanyahu: I Told Putin Iranian Forces Must Be Removed from Syria." *Haaretz.com*, 24 Apr. 2018, www.haaretz.com/israel-news/netanyahu-i-told-putin-iranian-forces-must-be-removed-from-syria-1.5445228.

[37] Stephens, Bret. "The Man Who Humbled Qassim Suleimani." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 12 Jan. 2019, www.nytimes.com/2019/01/11/opinion/gadi-eisenkot-israel-iran-syria.html.

[38] Herzog, Michael. "The Growing Risk of an Israel-Iran Confrontation in Syria." *The Growing Risk of an Israel-Iran Confrontation in Syria - The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, The Washington Institute, Dec. 2017, www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-growing-risk-of-an-israel-iran-confrontation-in-syria.

[39] Smith, Philip. "The Shiite Jihad in Syria and Its Regional Effects." *The Shiite Jihad in Syria and Its Regional Effects - The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, Feb. 2015,

resistance.[40] They are given money, training, and equipment in order to develop groups of

fighters who will then hurt Israel. Because they use proxies, Iran is able to mitigate how many of

its own soldiers they lose.[41] They are building bases, such as the aforementioned one near El-

Kiswar, which housed soldiers and had garages which could hold six to eight vehicles.[42] As

former IDF Major General Yaakov Amidor writes:

> Iran has decided to build their own military structure within Syria, under direct Iranian
> command, which includes armed UAVs…long range missiles, and surface-to-air
> missiles. This effort is being backed up with intelligence-gathering facilities that are
> distributed through Syria and that have followed Israeli activity carefully.

Their goal is to control the entire area between Iran and the Mediterranean.[43]

By taking control of key areas in Syria Iran is able to make a supply corridor from Iraq to

Lebanon to Syria to send weapons and troops easily. As Herzog writes:

> Iran has since labored relentlessly to create a contiguous zone of direct influence and
> power projection, spanning historical Mesopotamia and the Levant and toward the
> Mediterranean, an area now commonly known as the land corridor or land bridge.[44]

www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-shiite-jihad-in-syria-and-its-regional-effects.

[40] Orion, Assaf. "The Response to the Iranian Proxy War: Jerusalem's Power vs. the Quds Force." *Inss.org.il*, July 2018, www.inss.org.il/publication/response-iranian-proxy-war-jerusalems-power-vs-quds-force/.

[41] Orion, Assaf. "The Response to the Iranian Proxy War: Jerusalem's Power vs. the Quds Force." *Inss.org.il*, July 2018, www.inss.org.il/publication/response-iranian-proxy-war-jerusalems-power-vs-quds-force/.

[42] Corera, Gordon. "Iran Building Permanent Military Base in Syria - Claim." *BBC News*, BBC, 10 Nov. 2017, www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-41945189.

[43] Corera, Gordon. "Iran Building Permanent Military Base in Syria - Claim." *BBC News*, BBC, 10 Nov. 2017, www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-41945189.

[44] Herzog, Michael. "Iran Across the Border." *Iran Across the Border: Israel's Pushback in Syria - Israel's Pushback in Syria - The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, Washington Institute, July 2019, www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iran-across-the-border-israels-pushback-in-syria.

In some cases, Hezbollah is giving orders to the Syrian army, which is dangerous as Hezbollah has an extremely large intelligence base regarding information about Israel, as well as lookouts into Israel and offensive capabilities in the Golan Heights.[45]

An additional prong of the Northern Front is focused on the creation, enhancement, and distribution of weapons with which to destroy Israel. The goal is to:

> "[construct] plans to upgrade rocket and missile arsenals of the Shia militia groups stationed in Syria, particularly those of Lebanese Hezbollah. This effort is part of a Quds Force campaign to extend the range and increase the accuracy of rockets and missiles used by the militias under its command."[46]

This campaign is called the "Precision Project". Iran's plan hinges on taking Russian GPS systems to make more accurate rockets and giving these to Syria and Lebanon. These weapons also include accurate surface to surface rockets and anti-ship and anti-aircraft missiles.[47,48] In Lebanon, they are working to make precise missiles and in Syria they are

[45] Issacharoff, Avi. "Hezbollah Is Now Giving Orders to Syria's Army – and Using It to Spy on Israel." *The Times of Israel*, 24 June 2019, www.timesofisrael.com/hezbollah-is-now-giving-orders-to-syrias-army-and-using-it-to-spy-on-israel/.
[46] Uskowi, Nader. "The Evolving Iranian Strategy in Syria: A Looming Conflict with Israel." *Atlantic Council: Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security*, Sept. 2018, doi:10.1163/2210-7975_hrd-0128-20180064.
[47] Herzog, Michael. "The Growing Risk of an Israel-Iran Confrontation in Syria." *The Growing Risk of an Israel-Iran Confrontation in Syria - The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, The Washington Institute, Dec. 2017, www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-growing-risk-of-an-israel-iran-confrontation-in-syria.
[48] Uskowi, Nader. "The Evolving Iranian Strategy in Syria: A Looming Conflict with Israel." *Atlantic Council: Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security*, Sept. 2018, doi:10.1163/2210-7975_hrd-0128-20180064.

working on other advanced weapons.[49] A major goal of these precision missiles is to

"overwhelm Israel's Iron Dome defense system and threaten the north."[50] As Freilich writes:

> The new precision missiles present a possible game changer. For the first time, one of Israel's enemies now has a concrete ability to disrupt the mobilization of the IDF's reserves and conduct of offensive operations, as well as the national-decision making process, both at the political and the military levels.[51]

Syria has some missiles and was given the technology by Iran to produce more. Iran

wants to obtain more short-range ballistic missiles and precision guidance systems.[52] Iran is

continuing to develop and advance its technology in order to create more precise and deadly

weapons.

Iran in Syria:

Iran and Syria have a long history going back to the Iranian Revolution in 1979, when

Syria aligned itself with the new leadership. This relationship continued when Syria was the only

Arab country which sided with Iran during the Iran-Iraq War which took place between 1980-

1988. Bashar al-Assad was guided by Iran and Hezbollah when he came to power, and Iran

became involved in Syria's defense affairs and territory to pass weapons on to Hezbollah.[53] Iran

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[49] Schweitzer, Yoram, and Ofek Riemer. "Neutralizing Hezbollah's Tunnel Project: The Ongoing Campaign against Iranian Regional Influence." *Inss.org.il*, 12 Dec. 2018, www.inss.org.il/publication/neutralizing-hezbollahs-tunnel-project-ongoing-campaign-iranian-regional-influence/.

[50] Goldenberg, Ilan, et al. "Countering Iran in the Gray Zone." *Center for a New American Security*, 14 Apr. 2020, www.cnas.org/publications/reports/countering-iran-gray-zone.

[51] Freilich, Charles David. *Israeli National Security: a New Strategy for an Era of Change*, page 101, Oxford University Press, 2018.

[52] Knights, Michael, and Assaf Orion. "If Iran Deploys Missiles in Iraq: U.S.-Israeli Response Options." *If Iran Deploys Missiles in Iraq: U.S.-Israeli Response Options - The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 13 May 2019, www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/if-iran-deploys-missiles-in-iraq-u.s.-israeli-response-options.

[53] "The History of Iran in Syria." *Idf.il*, www.idf.il/en/minisites/iran/iran-in-syria/the-history-of-iran-in-syria/.

became embroiled in Syria early in the Syrian war, supporting Assad. Ismail Gha'ani, the head of

the Iranian Qud's force, which is the Revolutionary Guard's overseas branch, said in 2012 that

"if the Islamic Republic was not present in Syria, the massacre of people would have happened

on a much larger scale."[54] Assad's victory in the civil war was largely aided by Iran. As Ephraim

Kam put it, "Assad owes his political survival to Iran (as well as to Russia)."[55] According to

Nader Uskowi:

> At the height of the civil war, the Quds Force deployed nearly 80,000 Shia militiamen
> into Syria to fight the opposition, including fighters from Hezbollah, major Iraqi Shia
> militant groups, and Afghan and Pakistani Shia militias, commanded by nearly 2,000
> Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and Quds Force officers.[56]

Iran recognized that several goals could be accomplished by aiding Assad. The first was

the removal of ISIS, which was a radical Sunni organization.[57] Iran also recognized Syria as an

important means to gain power and influence in the Middle East. To do this, they became

involved in 2012 by providing advisors and troops, coordinating with the Russians and taking

control of key areas in Syria.[58] Assad formally allied himself with Iran while visiting Iran and

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[54] Dehghan, Saeed Kamali. "Syrian Army Being Aided by Iranian Forces." *The Guardian*,
    Guardian News and Media, 28 May 2012,
    www.theguardian.com/world/2012/may/28/syria-army-iran-forces.

[55] Dehghan, Saeed Kamali. "Syrian Army Being Aided by Iranian Forces." *The Guardian*,
    Guardian News and Media, 28 May 2012,
    www.theguardian.com/world/2012/may/28/syria-army-iran-forces.

[56] Uskowi, Nader. "The Evolving Iranian Strategy in Syria: A Looming Conflict with Israel."
    Atlantic Council: Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security, Sept. 2018,
    doi:10.1163/2210-7975_hrd-0128-20180064.

[57] Herzog, Michael. "The Growing Risk of an Israel-Iran Confrontation in Syria." *The Growing
    Risk of an Israel-Iran Confrontation in Syria - The Washington Institute for Near East
    Policy*, The Washington Institute, Dec. 2017, www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-
    analysis/view/the-growing-risk-of-an-israel-iran-confrontation-in-syria.

[58] Perlov, Orit, and Udi Dekel. "The Model of Iranian Influence in Syria." *INSS*, 24 Feb. 2020,
    www.inss.org.il/publication/model-iranian-influence-syria/.

announced he was a member of the Axis of Resistance.[59] This was after Nasrallah announced in

2015 that any attack on Syria was an attack on the Axis or Resistance, which is made up of Iran,

Syria and Hezbollah.[60] It is mostly beneficial for Assad to have Iranian support as Iran helped

Assad win the war and now provides military support, infrastructure such as building a railroad,

border crossings, housing and banks, and is providing oil and other economic measures.[61,62] Iran

is even going so far as to bring Shiite families, often those of the men who make up the army

being built in Syria, and resettling them in Syria, providing them with money, free services and

schools. As Kam writes:

> This move was enabled by the confluence of several factors: a mutual Syrian-Iranian
> interest in changing Syria's demography in favor of Alawites and Shiites; the
> opportunities that emerged following the extensive damage caused by the civil war,
> including the displacement of millions of Sunnis from their homes; and the presence of
> Iranian and Shiite forces in Syria.[63]

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[59] "An Interview Granted by Hassan Nasrallah Intended to Reinforce the Deterrent Message
  towards Israel by Emphasizing Hezbollah's Military Capabilities, Especially High-
  Precision Missiles Enabling Hezbollah to Damage Essential Infrastructure Facilities in the
  next War." *The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center*, 23 Jan. 2018,
  www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/interview-granted-hassan-nasrallah-intended-reinforce-
  deterrent-message-towards-israel-emphasizing-hezbollahs-military-capabilities-especially-
  high-precision-missiles-enabli/.

[60] Javedanfar, Meir. "Why Attack Hezbollah Now?" *Meir Javedanfar | The Blogs*, 19 Jan. 2015,
  blogs.timesofisrael.com/why-attack-hezbollah-now/.

[61] Kam, Ephraim. "Iranian Stakes in Syria." *Inss.org.il*, 12 Nov. 2019,
  www.inss.org.il/publication/iranian-stakes-in-syria/.

[62] "An Interview Granted by Hassan Nasrallah Intended to Reinforce the Deterrent Message
  towards Israel by Emphasizing Hezbollah's Military Capabilities, Especially High-
  Precision Missiles Enabling Hezbollah to Damage Essential Infrastructure Facilities in the
  next War." *The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center*, 23 Jan. 2018,
  www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/interview-granted-hassan-nasrallah-intended-reinforce-
  deterrent-message-towards-israel-emphasizing-hezbollahs-military-capabilities-especially-
  high-precision-missiles-enabli

[63] Kam, Ephraim. "Iranian Stakes in Syria." *Inss.org.il*, 12 Nov. 2019,
  www.inss.org.il/publication/iranian-stakes-in-syria/.

Iran is pushing Sunnis out of their homes through Law Number 10, which was issued in April 2018. This gave those who owned property in Syria thirty days to file an ownership claim in person. This was clearly directed to remove Sunnis from their home as many of them are wartime refugees and were not able or did not want to return within the thirty days. Reports state that in the past three years more than 8,000 properties were given to Shiite owners. [64] Additionally, Sunni mosques are being switched into Shiite religious centers, and new Shiite mosques are being built.[65]

Seemingly, Assad is interested in the Iranian presence in Syria. The only factor which might jeopardize that alliance is if the tensions between Iran and Israel get too high and lead to trouble with the United States and Russia or to violence and instability, which is the opposite of what Syria needs as it recovers from a civil war. If this happens, Assad might be more likely to push Iran out.[66] As Michael Makovsky writes:

> The calculation is that Assad can force Iran out if he thinks its presence is no longer serving his interests. Assad, Israel is betting, ultimately wants to put this conflict behind him, normalize Syria, legitimize his own rule internally and internationally, and attract foreign economic support and investment. If Iranian entrenchment in Syria becomes an obstacle to his regime's stabilization and normalization, Assad might be willing, with Russian assistance, to push Iran out.

Because of this Israel has been making strikes focusing on Syrian targets, such as the weapon warehouse near the airport. This demonstrates to Assad how dangerous it is for him to keep the

[64] Ghaddar, Hanin, and Dana Stroul. "Pushing Back on Iran in Syria: Beyond the 'Boots'." *Pushing Back on Iran in Syria: Beyond the 'Boots' - The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 22 Jan. 2019, www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/pushing-back-on-iran-in-syria-part-1-beyond-the-boots.

[65] Ghaddar, Hanin, and Dana Stroul. "Pushing Back on Iran in Syria: Beyond the 'Boots'." *Pushing Back on Iran in Syria: Beyond the 'Boots' - The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 22 Jan. 2019, www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/pushing-back-on-iran-in-syria-part-1-beyond-the-boots.

[66] Kam, Ephraim. "Iranian Stakes in Syria." *Inss.org.il*, 12 Nov. 2019, www.inss.org.il/publication/iranian-stakes-in-syria/.

Iranian presence in Syria.[67] As an Israeli defense officer said, "Syria is paying a growing price for the Iranian presence in its territory for a war that isn't [Syria's]. Iran has turned from an asset to Syria into a burden."[68] It is possible that Assad is not pleased with Iran's involvement and influence, and is using the threats of Israeli strikes as a way to keep some autonomy and not totally give the country over to Iran.[69]

However, a stable Syria and the continued absence of ISIS are in Iran's favor as well. Should Assad be removed from power and a new government come to power, the new government might desire Iran removed from Syria. This is another reason why Iran has become so involved economically and militarily, so that it makes it extremely difficult to remove them.[70]

MABAM:

The "'campaign between the wars'" (termed *Mabam* in Hebrew), [is] designed to thwart the acquisition by enemies of strategic capabilities and to enhance Israel's deterrence without triggering escalation toward a major armed conflict."[71] Practically, this means that the goal of *Mabam* is to ensure that there will not be a war between Israel and the Northern Front by

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[67] Makovsky, Michael. "How the US Can Work with Israel in Syria Without Putting More Boots on the Ground." *JINSA*, 12 June 2019, jinsa.org/how-the-us-can-work-with-israel-in-syria-without-putting-more-boots-on-the-ground/.

[68] Gross, Judah Ari. "Defense Officials: Iran Pulling out of Syria as Israel Pummels Its Forces There." *The Times of Israel*, 5 May 2020, www.timesofisrael.com/defense-officials-iran-pulling-out-of-syria-as-israel-pummels-its-forces-there/.

[69] Herzog, Michael. "Iran Across the Border." *Iran Across the Border: Israel's Pushback in Syria - Israel's Pushback in Syria - The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, Washington Institute, July 2019, www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iran-across-the-border-israels-pushback-in-syria.

[70] Kam, Ephraim. "Iranian Stakes in Syria." *Inss.org.il*, 12 Nov. 2019, www.inss.org.il/publication/iranian-stakes-in-syria/.

[71] Herzog, Michael. "The Growing Risk of an Israel-Iran Confrontation in Syria." *The Growing Risk of an Israel-Iran Confrontation in Syria - The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, The Washington Institute, Dec. 2017, www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-growing-risk-of-an-israel-iran-confrontation-in-syria.

conducting targeted attacks, small enough that the enemy feels they do not need to respond, and

makes them more hesitant to respond because Iran knows that they could face great losses while

preventing Iran from being able to continue to promote its destructive plans against Israel. The

campaign also includes aspects such as releasing information to international media to warn the

enemy of Israel's intelligence as well as gaining international support when Israel does respond

by destroying a specific base or supply chain, or encouraging the global community to place

sanctions.[72] As Orion writes

> A successful ongoing campaign requires mutual support between political efforts and clandestine, covert, and military efforts, both offensive and defensive; continuous communication with the enemy in a variety of channels, mainly in order to control escalation and prevent miscalculation; synchronizing and cooperation between political, defense, and senior military echelons; and the recruitment of political, economic, intelligence, and operational support from partners in the region and in the international community, above all the United States.[73]

Living in a state of awareness of the possibility of destruction is not new to Israel. As Freilich

notes:

> Six wars, numerous major confrontations, and ongoing violence, from low-level terrorism to large-scale rocket attacks, as well as WMD threats, have been basic features of Israel's external environment. Facing multiple threats at any one time, Israel has long perceived its external environment as one of perpetual low-level tension, punctuated by brief outbreaks of larger-scale and major hostilities, necessitating a need for constant vigilance. [74]

And specific threats emanating from Iran are also not a new reality as Orion writes:

> In response to the combined Iranian challenge (nuclear and proxy war), over the years Israeli policy has been expressed in separate efforts: a clandestine and political campaign

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[72] Lappin, Yaakov. "Israel's Information Campaigns: An Alternative to Kinetic Strikes." *Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies*, 17 Apr. 2019, besacenter.org/perspectives-papers/israel-information-campaigns/.

[73] Orion, Assaf. "The Response to the Iranian Proxy War: Jerusalem's Power vs. the Quds Force." *Inss.org.il*, July 2018, www.inss.org.il/publication/response-iranian-proxy-war-jerusalems-power-vs-quds-force/.

[74] Freilich, Charles David. *Israeli National Security: a New Strategy for an Era of Change, page 33*. Oxford University Press, 2018.

against Iranian nuclear weapons, strikes on advanced weapons shipments to Hezbollah and Hamas; operations to foil terror attacks and target key personnel in the fields of nuclear weapons, terror, and buildup; and direct fighting against Iranian proxies, including major operations every few years.[75]

However, Israel's former chief of staff, Lt. Gen. Gadi Eisenkot understood when Iran started building in Syria that there needed to be a shift in Israel policy, which originally focused on stopping the weapons going to Hezbollah through strikes, and spearheaded the policy of the "war between wars". With the Iranian goal of a Shiite army in Syria, which created a significant threat to Israel on the border, Eisenkot received governmental approval to start bombing targets in Syria. "IDF operations at first were limited and slowly tested this strategic concept. But over the course of the *Mabam* campaign, as initial strikes did not result in effective or significant Iranian retaliation, IDF operations became much more expansive."[76] According to Eisenkot, in 2018, 2,000 bombs were dropped in Syria.[77] Eisenkot and the Israeli military were quick to realize that with the increasing threat there needed to be a new strategy.

Israel has had clear red-lines in terms of Syria, specifically during the Syrian civil war, which included responding to any fire which comes near the Israeli border, even accidental fire; preventing Hezbollah from obtaining major weapons; and ensuring the ability to run any operation, even if it required flying over enemy airspace. However, Israel's policy was to not intervene in the civil war as both sides were not friendly towards Israel and both sides were

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[75] Orion, Assaf. "The Response to the Iranian Proxy War: Jerusalem's Power vs. the Quds Force." *Inss.org.il*, July 2018, www.inss.org.il/publication/response-iranian-proxy-war-jerusalems-power-vs-quds-force/.

[76] Goldenberg, Ilan, et al. "Countering Iran in the Gray Zone." *Center for a New American Security,* 14 Apr. 2020, www.cnas.org/publications/reports/countering-iran-gray-zone.

[77] Stephens, Bret. "The Man Who Humbled Qassim Suleimani." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 12 Jan. 2019, www.nytimes.com/2019/01/11/opinion/gadi-eisenkot-israel-iran-syria.html.

acting harshly towards the other.[78] As Iran made it clear that they were interested in moving into

Syria, Israel made it clear that they would not be allow this.[79] As Netanyahu said:

> We hear the threats from Iran. IDF fighters and the security branches are ready for any development. We will fight anyone who tries to harm us…hands are on the trigger and missiles are ready and will be launched at any moment that the enemy tries to carry out its sinister plot against our lands…North and West of Israel are at the intersection of fire; you will not escape…you live in the dragons mouth.[80]

Mabam uses some components which can be seen in other Israeli strategic operations,

such as Operation Northern Shield, which also "combine[d] intelligence exposure, engineering-

based targeted action, and cognitive and diplomatic activity." A key component in Operation

Northern Shield was gaining international support for destroying the tunnels by showing that

Hezbollah was planning on using the tunnels to invade Israel and threaten the lives of all its

citizens.[81]

As Israel recognized the threat that was becoming increasingly greater in Syria, they

asked the United States and Russia to intervene and to ensure that Iran would stay far from the

Israeli border. As seen before, Russia did partially keep Iran from the border, but not fully. When

this intervention did not happen, two parts of the Israeli strategy went into place. Articles about

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[78] Amidror, Yakov. "The Strategic Framework for Israeli Operations in Syria." *JINSA*, 13 Mar. 2019, jinsa.org/idf-mg-ret-yaakov-amidror-distinguished-fellow-jinsas-gemunder-center-defense-strategy-israeli-strategy-syria-realclear-defense/.

[79] Herzog, Michael. "The Growing Risk of an Israel-Iran Confrontation in Syria." *The Growing Risk of an Israel-Iran Confrontation in Syria - The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, The Washington Institute, Dec. 2017, www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-growing-risk-of-an-israel-iran-confrontation-in-syria.

[80] Dehghan, Saeed Kamali. "Iran Warns Israeli Bases Are within Reach as Pair Lock Horns over Syria." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 20 Apr. 2018, www.theguardian.com/world/2018/apr/20/iran-israeli-bases-within-reach-syria.

[81] Schweitzer, Yoram, and Ofek Riemer. "Neutralizing Hezbollah's Tunnel Project: The Ongoing Campaign against Iranian Regional Influence." *Inss.org.il*, 12 Dec. 2018, www.inss.org.il/publication/neutralizing-hezbollahs-tunnel-project-ongoing-campaign-iranian-regional-influence/.

Iran's entrenchment in Syria showed up on international news sources, and Israel struck the Iranian bases and facilities in Syria. The key was that Israel not only attacked established threats in Syria, such as established bases, but also smaller components of the presence from becoming larger over time, such as the factories where Iran was working to develop superior weapons.[82,83] Not only does this ensure that the threat never grows so great that it would lead to war, it also manages to go mostly undetected by the media unless Israel publicly claims the attack, making it so that Iran does not feel the need to respond to protect their honor and prove their strength. These small attacks show Israel's strength and lead to deterrence, in that Iran does not respond strongly and with great force. Additionally, by revealing locations in Syria which are threats and then striking them, Israel is informing Iran that they are aware of its plans and can stop it should it choose to do so.[84] These are two key components of *Mabam*, and examples of how Israel is acting in a way which will prevent, or at least limit, future conflict. It is important to note that while these efforts have reduced the Iranian campaign, it has not halted it as Iran continues to build up a Shiite militia in Syria.

Since Iran has established a presence in Syria there have been several exchanges of strikes and fire between Israel and Syria. Below are some of these exchanges of fire. On March 17th, 2017, "An SA-5 missile with a 200kg warhead is fired from Homs at Israeli F-15s after Israeli airstrikes, it is intercepted by Israel's Arrow 3 defense system over Jordan." On February

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[82] Abrams, Elliot. "Israel's Bombing of a Weapons Factory in Syria: What Comes Next?" *Council on Foreign Relations*, Council on Foreign Relations, 8 Sept. 2017, www.cfr.org/blog/israels-bombing-weapons-factory-syria-what-comes-next-2.

[83] Orion, Assaf. "The Response to the Iranian Proxy War: Jerusalem's Power vs. the Quds Force." *Inss.org.il*, July 2018, www.inss.org.il/publication/response-iranian-proxy-war-jerusalems-power-vs-quds-force/.

[84] Kershner, Isabel. "Israel, in Rare Admission, Confirms Strike on Iranian Targets in Syria." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 13 Jan. 2019, www.nytimes.com/2019/01/13/world/middleeast/israel-iran-strike-syria-tunnels.html.

10th, 2018, an Iranian drone entered Israel near Beit Shean and is shot down. Israel destroyed a

Khordad system which was sent from Iran to Syria. In response Iran fires 30 rockets. Israel then

hits 50 targets in Syria. On July 23rd, 2018, Syria sends two OTR-21 Tochka missiles. Israel uses

the David's Sling air defense. By January 2019, Israel has claimed over 1,000 strikes. The Quds

forces fire rockets at Israel in January, which were intercepted. On November 12th, 2019, Israel

killed a senior commander and performed other airstrikes. In return, there were two days of

fighting and 450 rockets fired at Israel. On December 9th, 2019, five militiamen who were pro-

Iran were killed in an airstrike. Israel struck the base at the Damascus airport in January 2020,

killing seven fighters. On March 2nd, 2020, there was an attempted attack from Syria aimed at

IDF troops.[85,86,87,88] Most recently, on March 4th, 2020, Israel struck two military targets in Syria,

one of which was a Syrian military research center which was developing weapons for the

precision project.[89] What this volley of fire shows is the various ways Iran has attempted to hurt

Israel through Syria; these include warheads, drones, and rockets. Iran has fired both without

cause and in response to Israeli action. Israel has taken both preventative action and has

responded to strikes.

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[85] Mecra. "Timeline of Israel-Iran Tensions in Syria and the Region." *Mecra*, 19 Nov. 2019, www.mideastcenter.org/post/timeline-of-israel-iran-tensions-in-syria-and-the-region.

[86] Mecra. "US-Iran and Iran-Israel Tensions Daily Updates March 12 and Beyond." *Mecra*, 12 Mar. 2020, www.mideastcenter.org/post/us-iran-and-iran-israel-tensions-daily-updates-march-12-and-beyond.

[87] Mecra. "US-Iran and Israel-Iran Tensions Timeline 2020 January to March." *Mecra*, 6 Mar. 2020, www.mideastcenter.org/post/us-iran-and-israel-iran-tensions-timeline-2020.

[88] Frantzman, Seth J. "Two Years of Attacks from Syria, Escalation Show Iran's Entrenchment." *The Jerusalem Post | JPost.com*, 19 Nov. 2019, www.jpost.com/middle-east/two-years-of-attacks-from-syria-increasing-escalation-show-irans-entrenchment-608301.

[89] Gross, Judah Ari. "Defense Officials: Iran Pulling out of Syria as Israel Pummels Its Forces There." *The Times of Israel*, 5 May 2020, www.timesofisrael.com/defense-officials-iran-pulling-out-of-syria-as-israel-pummels-its-forces-there/.

When determining what targets to strike, Israel weighs the costs and risks. With every

attack comes the risk that Iran will respond and hit Israeli targets. However, as mentioned before,

allowing a buildup in Syria will lead to a much greater threat later, and potentially war, so it is

crucial to strategically choose which targets to eliminate and to eliminate them.[90] Destroying

facilities where precision weapons could be made, or large military bases might be good choices

in terms of preventing later, but they also might elicit more of a response from Iran, which would

negate *Mabam's* goal of delaying confrontation and to deescalating tensions. These two terms

might be contradictory, because sometime an attempt to deescalate the situation may lead to

confrontation. However, Iran also knows the risks of getting into conflict with Israel and might

choose not to engage should they feel the cost would be too high. If Iran responds and Israelis

are killed, Israel will feel they need to respond with even greater force to make a point.[91]

It appears that Israel's strategy of the "war between wars" is working. There has not been

escalated conflict, and Iran seems to be slowing down their military buildup. Herzog writes that:

> The campaign, moreover, is believed to have effectively rolled back much of Iran's development in the Syrian theater, all while averting an escalation to war. Deviating from its original script, Iran not only slowed its push into Syria but was forced to scale down the deployment of its own and Shia proxy forces there. It was also compelled to abandon its military hub at Damascus airport, lost significant military infrastructure and capabilities, including important components of its "precision project" in Syria…

In addition, on May 5, 2020, the Jerusalem Post published an article titled "Defense officials:

Iran pulling out of Syria as Israel pummels its forces there." In the article it discusses how

[90] Tira, Ron. "Israeli Strategy in Response to Changes in the Syrian Arena." *Inss.org.il*, 22 Jan. 2019, www.inss.org.il/publication/israeli-strategy-response-changes-syrian-arena/.
[91] Yadlin, Amos, and Assaf Orion. "The Campaign between Wars: Faster, Higher, Fiercer?" *Inss.org.il*, 30 Aug. 2019, www.inss.org.il/publication/the-campaign-between-wars-faster-higher-fiercer/?offset=14&posts=447&subject=242%3E.

transport flights between Iran and Syria have dropped in the past six months due to the Israeli strikes on the airports, limiting weapon transport. It also discusses how:

> Iranian forces have begun leaving the country, evacuating a small number of military bases previously under their control in the process. Independently, there has also been a drop in the number of Shiite militias operating in Syria, though this decrease is because of the natural progression of the civil war and not because of Israel's actions.[92]

Israeli military actions are achieving the goal of removing the Iranian presence in Syria.

However, it is important to note that while the buildup has been slowed down there is already a strong presence in Syria which still exists and Iran is involved in many different facets of the country such as politics and the economy. Iran is also using Hezbollah to continue to develop a threat on the border.[93] Within the past few weeks there have been new reports about Hezbollah's increasing presence in the Golan Heights, and in March there was a sniper attempt from Syria by Hezbollah from a Syrian military compound.[94] In addition, as mentioned before, Iran has a long term goal of affecting the demographics in Syria and to have a presence in Syria for a long time.

However, *Mabam* is not the only strategy Israel could utilize. If one analyzes the situation as Udi Dekel does, a different plan emerges, namely an all-out attack on Iranian forces in Syria. According to Dekel:

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[92] Gross, Judah Ari. "Defense Officials: Iran Pulling out of Syria as Israel Pummels Its Forces There." *The Times of Israel*, 5 May 2020, www.timesofisrael.com/defense-officials-iran-pulling-out-of-syria-as-israel-pummels-its-forces-there/.

[93] Herzog, Michael. "Iran Across the Border." *Iran Across the Border: Israel's Pushback in Syria - Israel's Pushback in Syria - The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, The Washington Institute, July 2019, www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iran-across-the-border-israels-pushback-in-syria.

[94] Joffre, Tzvi, and Anna Ahronheim. "Syria Allows Hezbollah to Gain Foothold in Golan Heights - IDF." *The Jerusalem Post | JPost.com*, 10 Apr. 2020, www.jpost.com/arab-israeli-conflict/syria-allowing-hezbollah-to-gain-foothold-in-golan-heights-idf-624263.

> Israel sees Syria as the weakest and most vulnerable link in the Shiite axis. However, the main threat to Israel emanates from Lebanon: Hezbollah's military capabilities (many thousands of missiles - including precision-guided, rockets, UAVs, and commando forces capable of penetrating the border)…Striking at Syria per se might well generate an exit strategy for a confrontation on the northern front, because Russia would then likely intervene in order to bring about a quick end to the fighting so as to preserve the Assad regime and minimize the damage to Syria.

Israel could do a massive strike at Syria and wipe out the Iranian presence totally with seemingly little casualties as Russia would prevent an all-out war.[95] Iran would be too far away to respond with ground troops, and Israel has been proven to have strong air-defense systems. According to Dekel:

> Hezbollah has no interest in war at this time. The organization's patron Iran is also interested in continuing to preserve the organization's capabilities for the critical day when there is a showdown over its nuclear capabilities.

It would be in both Hezbollah and Iran's interests to refrain from fighting a war with Israel at the moment in order to preserve resources for a bigger fight to come.[96] According to this view, Israel could destroy the Iranian presence in Syria with a large strike, win, and leave relatively unharmed, leaving it strength, resources, and confidence when the time comes to deal with the threat from Hezbollah.

It is clear that the policy of not engaging at all is not an option. In the 1990s and 2000s Israel decided not to adapt its strategy and failed to act as Hezbollah grew into a significant threat to Israel, and is dealing with the consequences until today.[97] In this case, Israel was careful

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[95] Dekel, Udi. "At the Opening of the New Decade, Regional Challenges Test Israel's Strength- Main Insights from the INSS 13th Annual International Conference ." *Inss.org.il*, 6 Feb. 2020, www.inss.org.il/publication/inss-conference-conclusions/.

[96] Dekel , Udi. "At the Opening of the New Decade, Regional Challenges Test Israel's Strength- Main Insights from the INSS 13th Annual International Conference ." *Inss.org.il*, 6 Feb. 2020, www.inss.org.il/publication/inss-conference-conclusions/.

[97] Herzog, Michael. "Iran Across the Border." *Iran Across the Border: Israel's Pushback in Syria - Israel's Pushback in Syria - The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, The

not to repeat that mistake, and was able to adapt their strategy with Iran as Iran continued to develop their threat against Israel.

International Responses:

The United States has long been concerned about the Iranian regime and the influence it has been gaining in the Middle East as well as the threats to Israel's safety. The United States has tried various strategies over the years to keep Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon, from the JCPOA, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, to leaving the JCPOA and implementing sanctions, all with the goal of slowing down and preventing Iran from obtaining nuclear capabilities. The United States also has various interests in the Middle East and allies including Israel, Saudi Arabia and the Kurds, all of whom Iran has threatened. Pentagon spokesman, Major Adrian J. Rankine-Galloway said that the United States agreed that Israel had the right to self-defense against Iran and that "we share the concerns of many throughout the region that Iran's destabilizing activities threaten international peace and security, and we seek greater international resolve in countering Iran's malign activities." Heather Nauert, a State Department spokeswoman, made a similar statement when she said that "Iran's calculated escalation of threat, and its ambition to project its power and dominance, places all the people of the region—from Yemen to Lebanon—at risk."[98]

According to Herzog the way that Israel and the United States handle the Iranian issue was with Israel acting militarily in Syria and Lebanon, while the United States focused on sanctions

Washington Institute, July 2019, www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iran-across-the-border-israels-pushback-in-syria.

[98] Kershner, Isabel, et al. "Israel Strikes Iran in Syria and Loses a Jet." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 10 Feb. 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/02/10/world/middleeast/israel-iran-syria.html.

and limiting the Iranian nuclear program.[99] According to this view, it was surprising when the United States decided to withdraw its troops from Syria, given that they served as a deterrent to Iran and prevented Iran from seizing specific areas which would help them establish its land bridge.[100] As Herzog stated:

> If these key roadblocks are removed, Iran and its proxies could quickly step up their efforts to complete the corridor and use it to move forces and weapons to and through Syria by land, lessening their heavy reliance on problematic air routes and further developing their military infrastructure inside Syria and Lebanon.[101]

Herzog believes that this will hasten Syria's entrenchment in Iran and Israel will be pressed to respond to this rapidly developing threat, which will ultimately lead to violence. This can also be understood not as a division of labor, but a de facto result of the United States abandoning Syria.

By leaving Syria, which is part of the United States' general plan to leave the Middle East, the United States is creating a difficult situation for its allies such as the Kurds and Israel who question whether they can fully rely on the United States. Specifically, in the case of Syria, the United States is leaving even when Iran has done nothing to show that they are going to change its plan to establish a greater Northern Front against Israel. This withdrawal will cause the United States to lose its power to negotiate with Iran as well as with Russia, another major player, in

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[99] Herzog, Michael. "Trump Departs Syria: An Israeli Perspective." *Trump Departs Syria: An Israeli Perspective - The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, The Washington Institute, 8 Jan. 2018, www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/trump-departs-syria-an-israeli-perspective.

[100] Herzog, Michael. "Trump Departs Syria: An Israeli Perspective." *Trump Departs Syria: An Israeli Perspective - The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, The Washington Institute, 8 Jan. 2018, www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/trump-departs-syria-an-israeli-perspective.

[101] Herzog, Michael. "Trump Departs Syria: An Israeli Perspective." *Trump Departs Syria: An Israeli Perspective - The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, The Washington Institute, 8 Jan. 2018, www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/trump-departs-syria-an-israeli-perspective.

terms of Syria. This means that Israel is losing not only the presence of the US troops, but also the power of the United States in the international scene when making decisions about Syria and Iran.[102]

While the United States may have lessened its military influence with its withdrawal from Syria, one thing which the United States is doing which had an impact hurting Iran are the sanctions which they placed on Iran. These sanctions are due to from Iran expansionism in the region, its human rights violations and its missiles. Additionally, there are sanctions placed on Iran which went into effect once the United States left the JCPOA. These sanctions make it difficult for Iran to continue investing in its multiple fronts as ordinary Iranians feel the financial blow of the sanctions and are protesting. As Uskowi writes regarding a lack of Iranian response to the Israeli strikes following the May 10th, 2018 Iranian attack:

> The reason the Iranians were uncharacteristically hesitant to engage the Israelis could have been the rapidly worsening economic and political situation back home, raising questions about the long-term financial and internal political viability of keeping a large expeditionary force in Syria only as a check against the Israeli presence in the area.[103]

In addition, Hezbollah, its Palestinian groups, and Syria are all suffering because of budget cuts which Iran is putting in place in response to these sanctions. It has been estimated that Hezbollah funding was cut by 40% in 2019. These sanctions are on top of other American sanctions which are already levied against Hezbollah.[104] These sanctions could limit the growth

[102] Shavit, Eldad, and Udi Dekel. "The United States Decision to Withdraw Forces from Syria: Significance for Israel." *Inss.org.il*, INSS, 24 Dec. 2018, www.inss.org.il/publication/united-states-decision-withdraw-forces-syria-significance-israel/.

[103] Uskowi, Nader. "The Evolving Iranian Strategy in Syria: A Looming Conflict with Israel." *Atlantic Council: Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security*, Sept. 2018, doi:10.1163/2210-7975_hrd-0128-20180064.

[104] Herzog, Michael. "Iran Across the Border." *Iran Across the Border: Israel's Pushback in Syria - Israel's Pushback in Syria - The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*,

that Iran intended for the region, and could prevent the prediction of rapid Iranian development

mentioned above. However, Hezbollah and Syria both have a large number of soldiers and

weapons already, and those presences continue to exist.

The other, perhaps the only, major player in dealing with Iran is Russia. Like Iran, Russia

became involved in the Syrian civil war early on. They provided advanced weaponry such as

SA-17 and SA-22 surface-to-air missiles, as well as smaller arms.[105] Russia's goal is to keep

Assad in power, and has maintained a presence in the region to support that goal. Because of this

interest, Russia needs to work with Iran on many issues, but sometimes has its viewpoints clash

with regard to what the best thing is for Syria. Some of these disagreements include which

country is going to get economic contracts, who is going to provide key people for the military

and have a higher level of influence, different viewpoints regarding how to deal with recovering

territory, and diverging ideas on Syria's future. "Russia sees a secular Syria that is somewhat

decentralized, and not necessarily territorially intact, while Iran sees something closer to the

Lebanese model." [106] Another difference is the way that Russia and Iran interact within Syria.

"Russia wants to achieve influence, enjoy a ground, air, and naval presence, and maintain bases,

while Iran wants to penetrate the Syrian society and political system."[107] Hossein Jaberi Ansari, a

senior advisor to Iran's Minister of Foreign Affairs, said that Russia and Iran disagree about

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Washington Institute, July 2019, www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iran-across-the-border-israels-pushback-in-syria.

[105] Amidror, Yakov. "Understanding Russia's Involvement in Syria." *JINSA*, 28 Sept. 2018, jinsa.org/understanding-russias-involvement-in-syria-2/.

[106] Duclos, Michel. "Russia and Iran in Syria—a Random Partnership or an Enduring Alliance?" *Atlantic Council: Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East*, June 2019.

[107] "The War in Syria in 2019: Winners, Losers, and Shifting Alliances." *Inss.org.il*, 18 Dec. 2019, www.inss.org.il/event/the-war-in-syria-of-2019-winners-losers-and-shifting-alliances/.

Israel, but what they do agree upon about is who is going to rule Syria.[108] Both sides need each

other in the short term: Russia wants Iran to provide the ground troops and to bear the brunt of

loss of men, and Iran needs Russia to provide air support, as they did in 2015 when they saved

Assad.[109,110] There have been conflicting reports about how Russia is balancing Iran and Israel.

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov said:

> I wouldn't use this type of words [allies] to describe where we are with Iran. We in no
> way underestimate the importance of security measures that would ensure very strong
> security of the State of Israel. The Israelis know this, the United States knows this,
> everyone else, including the Iranians, the Turks, the government in Damascus. This
> (Israel's security) is one of the top priorities of Russia.

Yet, Russia's ambassador in Iran said to Iran that the West is trying to show the Russian-Iranian

relationship as weak, and quoted Putin's advisor on the Syrian issue who called Iran its ally.[111]

For Russia, the goals are simple: Keep Assad in power and keep Russian soldiers in Syria

safe. For this reason, there might be tension between Russia and Iran. The Russian Foreign

Ministry released a statement after an exchange of fire between Iran and Israel saying "It is

absolutely unacceptable to create threats to the lives and security of Russian soldiers that are in

the Syrian Arab Republic on the invitation of the legal government to assist in the fight against

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[108] "An Interview Granted by Hassan Nasrallah Intended to Reinforce the Deterrent Message
towards Israel by Emphasizing Hezbollah's Military Capabilities, Especially High-
Precision Missiles Enabling Hezbollah to Damage Essential Infrastructure Facilities in the
next War." *The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center*, 23 Jan. 2018,
www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/interview-granted-hassan-nasrallah-intended-reinforce-
deterrent-message-towards-israel-emphasizing-hezbollahs-military-capabilities-especially-
high-precision-missiles-enabli/.
[109] Uskowi, Nader. "The Evolving Iranian Strategy in Syria: A Looming Conflict with Israel."
Atlantic Council: Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security, Sept. 2018,
doi:10.1163/2210-7975_hrd-0128-20180064.
[110] Duclos, Michel. "Russia and Iran in Syria—a Random Partnership or an Enduring Alliance?"
Atlantic Council: Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East, June 2019.
[111] Segall, Michael. "The Rocky Marriage of Convenience between Russia and Iran in Syria."
Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, 29 Jan. 2019, jcpa.org/the-rocky-marriage-of-
convenience-between-russia-and-iran-in-syria/.

terrorism."[112] Russia sees the increasing Iranian presence and its goal to create a permanent Shiite military force in Syria as slowing Syrian reconstruction, and believes that it is making the country more unstable.[113] With Iran in charge, Russian political and economic interests are hurt and if Iran pushes Syria into a war with Israel then all efforts for reconstruction and the investments made so far will be lost. On the other hand, Russia and Iran do have several interests in common, beyond the desire to continue Assad's rule over Syria, including Russia supplying arms to Iran and the mutual desire to limit the United States' influence in Central Asia. Russia did not stop Iranian proxies from seizing and operating in southern Syria, and in many ways has allowed the Iranian entrenchment to continue in Syria.[114] It is also possible that Russia sees Israeli attacks as potentially threatening to the stability of Syria and should their interests be threatened side more with Iran.

There is a very careful balancing act between Israel and Russia. As of July of 2019, Netanyahu and Putin have met twelve times, and their respective chiefs of staff have met as well.[115] While Russia looks after its own interests in terms of Syria, sometimes those interests align with Israeli interests. It seems as though that Russia will allow Israel to continue to target Iranian bases as long as it does not interfere with the Syrian regime or Russian soldiers. Russia

[112] Kershner, Isabel, et al. "Israel Strikes Iran in Syria and Loses a Jet." The New York Times, The New York Times, 10 Feb. 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/02/10/world/middleeast/israel-iran-syria.html

[113] Dekel, Udi, and Carmit Valensi. "Russia and Iran: Is the Syrian Honeymoon Over?" *Inss.org.il*, 27 May 2019, www.inss.org.il/publication/russia-iran-syrian-honeymoon/.

[114] Herzog, Michael. "Iran Across the Border." *Iran Across the Border: Israel's Pushback in Syria - Israel's Pushback in Syria - The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, The Washington Institute, July 2019, www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iran-across-the-border-israels-pushback-in-syria

[115] Herzog, Michael. "Iran Across the Border." *Iran Across the Border: Israel's Pushback in Syria - Israel's Pushback in Syria - The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, The Washington Institute, July 2019, www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iran-across-the-border-israels-pushback-in-syria

gave Syria a defense system called the S-400 system, but retains command of that system and according to Iran, Russia turned off this air defense system when Israel attacked and several Iranians were killed.[116] After an incident which led to conflict between Israel and Russia, increased communication lines were set up between the two countries.[117] Russia also has done a few actions to demonstrate to Israel its continued interest in the relationship, such as stopping Syria from giving Iran a wharf that they wanted, (which was located near a Russian naval base, making it seems possible that they also had its own interests at stake), as well as returning the body of Zechariah Baumel, an Israeli soldier who was killed in 1982 in the Lebanon War, whose body was found in Syria.

There are times that Russia and Israel's interests do not align and there is conflict. In 2017, Netanyahu spoke to Putin and warned him that if he did not want a war in Syria, Iran and Hezbollah needed to leave Syria.[118] Russia promised that they would keep the Iranians a safe distance from the Israeli border, however, while the Russians agreed to this, they said that this did not include Damascus. This is how the Iranians were able to have a huge base, which was a storage and shipping facility, in the Damascus airport.[119] When Syrian fire shot down a Russian plane, Russia blamed Israel and said that the Israeli planes used the Russian plane as a shield.

[116] Uskowi, Nader. "The Evolving Iranian Strategy in Syria: A Looming Conflict with Israel." *Atlantic Council: Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security*, Sept. 2018, doi:10.1163/2210-7975_hrd-0128-20180064.

[117] Segall, Michael. "The Rocky Marriage of Convenience between Russia and Iran in Syria." *Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs*, 29 Jan. 2019, jcpa.org/the-rocky-marriage-of-convenience-between-russia-and-iran-in-syria/.

[118] Ravid, Barak. "Netanyahu: I Told Putin Iranian Forces Must Be Removed from Syria." *Haaretz.com*, 24 Apr. 2018, www.haaretz.com/israel-news/netanyahu-i-told-putin-iranian-forces-must-be-removed-from-syria-1.5445228.

[119] Harel, Amos. "Burned by Israel Strikes, Iran to Move Weapons Supply Center out of Damascus." *Haaretz.com*, 7 Feb. 2019, www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/syria/.premium-burned-by-israel-iran-to-move-weapons-supply-center-out-of-damascus-1.6914545.

This became even more complicated when Russia then gave Assad an air defense system, which the United States and Israel had asked them not to transfer. According to Jonathan Ruhe and Ari Cicurel giving the S-300 air defense system was a "political move. It shows Moscow's commitment to the Assad regime and the permanence of its own Middle Eastern footprint."[120] However, this was less devastating for Israel than it could have been as Israel has trained against this system before.[121]

While Iran complains about the agreements between Israel and Russia, they also use it as an advantage. Iran has placed key strategic bases and items near Russian holdings to ensure that Israel will not attack them.[122] Thus, while the Russia-Israel alliance runs counter to Iran's interests in a number of cases, it also brings some advantage to Iran.

Russia has much to gain from its current standing in Syria. With the United States withdrawing its troops from Syria, Russia is the only internationally recognized and accepted player in the game, which means that they have a lot of influence in what happens in Syria. They are one of the main players in terms of reconstruction. One way in which Russia can ensure they have more influence over Assad is by ensuring the enforcement of UN Security Council Resolution 2254, which outlines a plan for a political settlement post the Syrian civil war. Assad cannot implement this on his own, and Russia will be a key player in ensuring it is put into place. Russians are also reaching higher places in the army, which weakens Iran's control.

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[120] Ruhe, Jonathan, and Ari Cicurel. "Syria's S-300 Gift From Russia." *JINSA*, 13 Mar. 2019, jinsa.org/syrias-s-300-gift-from-russia/.

[121] Ruhe, Jonathan, and Ari Cicurel. "Syria's S-300 Gift From Russia." *JINSA*, 13 Mar. 2019, jinsa.org/syrias-s-300-gift-from-russia/.

[122] Herzog, Michael. "Iran Across the Border." *Iran Across the Border: Israel's Pushback in Syria - Israel's Pushback in Syria - The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, The Washington Institute, July 2019, www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iran-across-the-border-israels-pushback-in-syria.

Additionally, unlike Iran, Russia is not currently being sanctioned, and has oil which Syria needs, which means they can provide financial support and resources.[123] Given Russia's advantageous position, it seems unlikely that they would want a war to break out between Syria and Israel, and they are in a powerful position to curb Iran's influence and to negotiate between parties, which is what they desire.

Israel's strategy of *Mabam* is directly impacted by Russia. Israel needs to be careful about where they strike, who they strike, and when they strike because they cannot hit Russian positions, soldiers, or interests. As seen from the incident with the Russian plane, Israel can be dramatically impacted when Russia is upset. However, if Israel continues the lines of open communication and informs Russia of their plans, they should be able to proceed with their plan of small, targeted strikes. The more there are relationships and open communication between Israel and Russia, the safer Israel is. Russia is also helpful in preventing the Iranians from obtaining some major strategic locations they require, such as the wharf, which slows Iran's buildup, thereby helping Israel. Should Russia feel Iran is threatening the stability of the Syrian regime, there might be conflict between the two. Israel could take advantage of this weakness in the relationship between Syria and Iran and make decisions which might cause conflict between Russia and Iran. However, it is imperative to keep in mind when considering Russia's role in the Middle East that Russia puts its own interests first and is an ally when it is convenient for them. Israel cannot rely on Russia to prevent Iran from building a Shiite army or building weapon factories, and must act in its own defense should it feel severely threatened.

Recent Developments:

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[123] Dekel, Udi, and Carmit Valensi. "Russia and Iran: Is the Syrian Honeymoon Over?" *Inss.org.il*, 27 May 2019, www.inss.org.il/publication/russia-iran-syrian-honeymoon/.

The world is currently dealing with a global pandemic and this has affected both Iran itself as well as the way Iran is threatening Israel. According to IDF Spokesperson Hidai Zilberman, there has been a decrease in threats and movement by Israel's enemies.[124] As of April 1, 2020 Iran has lost over 3,000 people and has over 47,000 confirmed cases of infection.[125] Covid-19 has infected all levels of society, including "cabinet ministers, members of Parliament, Revolutionary Guard members and Health Ministry officials."[126] Ayatollah Hashem Bathaei, an Iranian cleric who was a member of the Assembly of Experts, the committee that chooses who the supreme leader is, is one of the Iranian leaders who has died from Covid-19.[127] Covid-19 hit Iran at a time when it was already struggling economically because of an oil crisis, and the Iranian people are extremely unhappy with the regime, especially given the fact that it is believed that they have handled the pandemic extremely poorly. According to Itai Brun and Yael Gat, "It appears in the short term, [that] the coronavirus has a restraining effect and curtails Iran's policy of defiance-in the region and in the nuclear arena."[128] The Mossad has even shifted their focus

[124] Gross, Judah Ari. "IDF Indicates Iran Scaling Back Terror Activity in Light of Coronavirus." *The Times of Israel*, 16 Mar. 2020, www.timesofisrael.com/idf-indicates-iran-scaling-back-terror-activity-in-light-of-coronavirus/.

[125] "Coronavirus: Iran's Official Death Toll Passes 3,000." *BBC News*, BBC, 1 Apr. 2020, www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-52118809.

[126] Gross, Judah Ari. "IDF Indicates Iran Scaling Back Terror Activity in Light of Coronavirus." *The Times of Israel*, 16 Mar. 2020, www.timesofisrael.com/idf-indicates-iran-scaling-back-terror-activity-in-light-of-coronavirus/.

[127] Vahdat, Amir. "Member of Top Iranian Clerical Assembly Dies from Virus." *The Times of Israel*, 16 Mar. 2020, www.timesofisrael.com/member-of-top-iranian-clerical-assembly-dies-from-virus/.

[128] Brun, Itai, and Yael Gat. "The Corona Crisis and Israel's National Security." *Inss.org.il*, 17 Mar. 2020, www.inss.org.il/publication/coronavirus-discussion/.

away from Iran to procuring supplies to fight Covid-19, showing how it has shifted, although obviously not abandoned, its focus from Iran at the moment, deeming it less of a threat.[129]

While at the moment it seems as though Iran has turned its attention to more domestic issues, it is impossible to predict the effects Covid-19 will have on the Iranian threat. Iran could use this situation for its benefit or could be crippled because of the virus. Israel is also dealing with the virus and the military is balancing the immediate need of the health of its soldiers and the long-term safety of the people. Israel also cannot capitalize on the situation in any way, such as taking the time now to strike Iranian bases in Syria, which may be guarded less and would lead to less casualties, because of the negative attention it would receive globally.

Conclusions:

As stated in the beginning of the paper, this thesis follows the position that that the best plan for Israel to follow is to continue with its strategy of *Mabam*. According to the Center for a New American Security:

> Israel's "campaign between the wars" …has been one of the most successful military efforts to push back against Iran in the "gray zone" [a state between war and peace]…This campaign has slowed Iran's military buildup in Syria while avoiding a broader regional conflagration that would have been damaging to Israel's interests.[130]

For the reasons stated above, going to war is a last resort, and *Mabam* is the best strategy to prevent a full-blown war while still ensuring that Iran does not become too strong in Syria and is reducing Iran's ability to inflict major damage. Both Israel and Iran do not want a war at this

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[129] Bergman, Ronen. "Israel's Not-So-Secret Weapon in Coronavirus Fight: The Spies of Mossad." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 12 Apr. 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/04/12/world/middleeast/coronavirus-israel-mossad.html.

[130] Goldenberg, Ilan, et al. "Countering Iran in the Gray Zone." *Center for a New American Security*, 14 Apr. 2020, www.cnas.org/publications/reports/countering-iran-gray-zone.

point; Israel wants to minimize loss of life,[131] and Iran wants to wait until they have further developed its capabilities.

As previously mentioned, the strategy of not taking action is not a possibility. While Iran has been slowed down, should Israel stop trying to prevent and destroy the buildup in Syria it is clear that a Shiite military, weapon facilities, and bases will be established in Syria. Israel made that mistake once with regard to Hezbollah and they cannot afford to repeated it. The strategy proposed by Dekel of hitting Syria while the presence in Syria is still weak to completely eliminate the threat has validity, especially when coupled with the fact that Hezbollah and Iran do not want a war with Hezbollah quite yet, however, it is the opinion of this paper that a complete strike is not in the best interests of Israel. Iran is a risky adversary and there is no guarantee that a major strike to a key location would not cause Iran to save face and retaliate. This strategy puts Israel at a higher chance for a war, which is unwise given the many other threats Israel faces. *Mabam* is a tried and tested strategy, and it slows down Iran's progress without major retaliation, and without sending any ground troops in, which would most likely be necessary in a major strike against Syria. As of April 14th, 2020, the IDF has not suffered any casualties as a result of *Mabam*.[132] A complete strike has not been tested and could lead to a war which is to be avoided. Unlike earlier in Israel's history, Israel is not in a situation of a "war of no choice", where they need to fight and win the battle in order to survive.[133] Israel can survive should they continue with their strategy of *Mabam* and can prevent a war which they need to

[131] Freilich, Charles David. *Israeli National Security: a New Strategy for an Era of Change*. Oxford University Press, 2018.

[132] Goldenberg, Ilan, et al. "Countering Iran in the Gray Zone." *Center for a New American Security*, 14 Apr. 2020, www.cnas.org/publications/reports/countering-iran-gray-zone.

[133] Freilich, Charles David. *Israeli National Security: a New Strategy for an Era of Change*, Oxford University Press, 2018.

win. *Mabam* ensures that Israel is always fighting an offensive war, setting the stakes and the timing, as opposed to a defensive war should Iran attack from multiple fronts following a large strike on Syria.[134] Additionally, it is possible that this full out strike would not happen as it would put Russian interests in danger, and Russia either through diplomatic or military measures would prevent this attack, while it has tacitly allowed specific targeted strikes to happen.

The first factor to be taken into account when thinking of various actions Israel can take is the desire of Assad, Russia, and even Iran for the stability of the region. Should things become unstable due to Israeli strikes or should the presence of the Shiite militia negatively affect Assad's regime, it could lead to several different results. Assad could choose to remove Iran from Syria, however, as mentioned above, Iran has managed to become deeply entrenched in Syria's economy, military, and reconstruction. Iran also does not want Assad to lose power, and they need to decide what is more beneficial for them at the time, having Assad in power and running a successful country, which could lead to the ability to damage Israel later, or to hurt Israel at that moment. Russia could put pressure on Iran to limit its efforts in Syria, or demand that Iran leave Syria. According to Dekel:

> Striking at Syria per se might well generate an exit strategy for a confrontation on the northern front, because Russia would then likely intervene in order to bring about a quick end to the fighting so as to preserve the Assad regime and minimize the damage to Syria.[135]

Russia could just as likely turn to Israel and demand that they cease its strikes and lessen relations between Israel and Russia. Russia is more likely to turn to Iran and demand they leave

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[134] Freilich, Charles David. *Israeli National Security: a New Strategy for an Era of Change*. Oxford University Press, 2018.

[135] Dekel, Udi. "At the Opening of the New Decade, Regional Challenges Test Israel's Strength - Main Insights from the INSS 13th Annual International Conference." *Inss.org.il*, 6 Feb. 2020, www.inss.org.il/publication/inss-conference-conclusions/?offset=1&posts=447&subject=242.

Syria due to the instability they were causing in addition. This tension would break the already strained relationship which was weakened by the various disagreements the two countries had in terms of Syria's future.

It is also import to think about Iran's weaknesses at this juncture. Iran is being devastated by American sanctions, and even more so now because of the Covid-19.[136] But even before the current situation Iran had been hit hard economically. As David Peyman, the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Counter Threat Finance and Sanctions said:

> Iran is isolated and its economy has shrunk by more than nine percent. Consequently, the budget for Shiite militias in Iraq has been cut, there was a been a significant decline in the cash flow to terrorist groups all over the world, and groups like Hezbollah are forced to seek other sources of income.[137]

Iran is struggling to support its various pockets of terror. Because of this, it is possible that should Israel continue to attack on a small scale, targeting specific points, Iran would feel that it was not worthwhile to continue to invest so much in Syria when they have financial difficulties at home. On the other hand, it is possible that because Iran has invested so many resources in Syria until this point that they would not simply pull out, even if they are struggling domestically.

While Israel is militarily superior at the moment, at least according to Eisenkot who believes that "We have complete intelligence superiority in this area. We have complete aerial

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[136] Shine, Sima. "Iran's Efforts to Promote Its Interests in the Shadow of the Coronavirus." *Inss.org.il*, 26 Mar. 2020, www.inss.org.il/publication/iran-interests/.

[137] Dekel, Udi. "At the Opening of the New Decade, Regional Challenges Test Israel's Strength - Main Insights from the INSS 13th Annual International Conference." *Inss.org.il*, 6 Feb. 2020, www.inss.org.il/publication/inss-conference-conclusions/?offset=1&posts=447&subject=242.

superiority. We have strong deterrence and we have the justification to act,"[138] this superiority is specific to Syria. A war with Hezbollah and other Iranian proxies, as well as with the looming threat of the nuclear issue could be devastating to Israel. A war would still mean lives and resources spent. It is important for Israel to capitalize on its military strength and "dictate the terms of the battle by conducting short, sharp, and focused campaigns, designed to achieve maximal impact at the outset, not lengthy wars of attrition, which play to Hezbollah's and Hamas's strengths."[139]

There is a hope that one day in the future, Iran might not want to destroy Israel. Maybe there is even a chance that in the future Israel and Iran can again be allies.[140] But for the moment, Israel needs to act with every caution possible when dealing with Iran, and should be careful about pushing Iran to the point of war. Israel needs to do this while also recognizing the threat that Iran poses through each of its pockets of terrors which cannot be allowed to develop further. Israel should continue with its strategy which has been successful until this point.

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[138] Stephens, Bret. "The Man Who Humbled Qassim Suleimani." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 12 Jan. 2019, www.nytimes.com/2019/01/11/opinion/gadi-eisenkot-israel-iran-syria.html.

[139] Freilich, Charles David. *Israeli National Security: a New Strategy for an Era of Change*, page 460, Oxford University Press, 2018.

[140] Orion, Assaf. "The Response to the Iranian Proxy War: Jerusalem's Power vs. the Quds Force." *Inss.org.il*, July 2018, www.inss.org.il/publication/response-iranian-proxy-war-jerusalems-power-vs-quds-force/.

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