

Analysis Why Iran Is Risking a Major Escalation With Israel

Israel prevented the Iranians from building bases from which to launch attacks against it. But it failed to dislodge them from Syria — and Putin plans to keep it that way.



A demonstrator holds a representation of the Israeli flag which is set on fire during the annual Quds, or Jerusalem Day rally in Tehran, Iran, May 31, 2019. Vahid Salemi, AP

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 - **As Hezbollah leader blasts Israel, Iran-backed militias struck on Iraq-Syria border**
 - **Israel says Iran's Quds Force team arrived in Syria months ago to prepare for drone attack**
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The Iranian plan to launch a swarm of “killer drones” toward Israeli targets from Syria, which was foiled by the Israel Defense Forces on Saturday night, was not exactly unprecedented.

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In the last 19 months, there have been at least four attempts by Iran, or militias working on its behalf, to launch either attack drones or missiles toward Israel — starting with the UAV shot down by an Israeli Apache helicopter moments after it crossed the border in February 2018.

What is different in this latest escalation is that the level of preparation by the Iranians seems higher than previously. The decision taken by the high

command of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps to launch the attack can be directly linked to its desire to retaliate for reported airstrikes by Israel against Iranian-backed militias in Iraq.

What is also new is the swiftness of Israel's acknowledgment of these particular strikes, both in detailed briefings by the IDF spokesperson's unit and statements from Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. While most of the unclaimed Israeli attacks were targeted at future threats, the IDF said the latest strike prevented an immediate attack on Israel.

And of course, there is also the perhaps coincidental fact that Netanyahu is facing a crucial election in three weeks' time. (Before the April election, he displayed similar willingness to claim strikes in Syria.)

Despite its sworn enmity of the Jewish state for four decades, the Islamic revolutionary leadership of Iran avoided a direct military confrontation with Israel; instead, it used its various proxies.

The strategic shift from February 2018, toward active participation of the IRGC's Quds force in the attacks, is a result of several factors, some springing from internal Iranian politics and the desire to score propaganda victories. Had some of the drones succeeded in targeting Israel, the damage would have been relatively minor, as they can only carry a few kilograms of explosives. But the effect on both the Israeli and Iranian public consciousnesses would have been enormous.



Damage inside a media center of Hezbollah in the south of the capital Beirut, after two drones came down in the vicinity of its building earlier in the day, August 25, 2019. \ MOHAMED AZAKIR/ REUTERS

Another reason for the IRGC's willingness to take higher risks and commit to a major escalation with Israel is its frustration at Israel's successful interdiction of its plan to establish a permanent military presence in Syria, including the threat posed by such a presence to Israel's heartland.

Israel has achieved considerable success — both on an intelligence level

in detecting Iran's attempts, and operationally in attacking and destroying Iranian assets in Syria in hundreds of strikes, most of which have remained unacknowledged. But it should remain in perspective as well.

Israel has succeeded in foiling Iranian attack plans and preventing the establishment of long-term bases on Syrian soil. But it has fallen short on its overarching goal of ending all Iranian military presence in the country. This was to be achieved partly through pressure from Russia (and the United States), but as Russian President Vladimir Putin has shown, he is playing a much more complicated game in Syria.

Since Russia's deployment to Syria, it has partnered with Iran in propping up the regime of Bashar Assad. At the same time, it hasn't acted to block Israel from attacking Iranian assets there. The undeclared pact between Netanyahu and Putin is that Israel can go after Iran's offensive capacities when these threaten Israel.

But the forces amassed by Iran in Syria — mainly Hezbollah fighters and Shi'ite Afghan, Iraqi and Pakistani militia members, trained in Iran — have remained untouched. Russia wants Shi'ite boots on the ground so that it doesn't have to risk too many of its own soldiers. In other words, Iran has produced the cannon fodder.

At various points during the eight-year war in Syria, there have been those within the Israeli security establishment who called for attacks on the Assad regime forces who killed hundreds of thousands and uprooted millions of Syrian civilians. Netanyahu intentionally limited the scope of Israel's operations in Syria, striking only targets that could potentially pose a direct threat to Israel. This policy became even more rigid once Russian forces arrived in Syria.

Essentially, Israel and Iran are at a stalemate in Syria. Iran has kept Assad in power, but its plans to turn Syria into another base for its proxy operations — as it has done in Lebanon, Iraq and Yemen — have been foiled so far. And yet there are tens of thousands of Shi'ite fighters in Syria, under Iran's direct control. As proven by the events of Saturday night, they will continue trying to use Syria as a launchpad for attacks on Israel.



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