

Israel and Iran on Path to War as Mideast Tinderbox Awaits Spark

- Iran vows revenge after airstrikes target its assets in Syria
- There's no broker: U.S. is sidelined, Russia not 'in control'

There have been coups and revolutions, external invasions and proxy conflicts, but the Middle East hasn't seen a head-to-head war between major regional powers since the 1980s.

There's a growing risk that one is about to break out in Syria, pitting Israel against Iran.

The Islamic Republic's forces are entrenching there, after joining the fight to prop up President Bashar al-Assad. The Jewish state, perceiving a direct threat on its border, is subjecting them to an escalating barrage of airstrikes. Nobody expects those strikes to go unanswered.



Israeli soldiers in the Golan Heights.

Photographer: Sameer Al-Doumy/AFP via Getty Images

The path to escalation is clear, and the rhetoric is apocalyptic. “We will demolish every site where we see an Iranian attempt to position itself,” Israel’s Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman told the London-based Saudi newspaper Elaph, adding that the Iranian regime is “living its final days.”

In Tehran, Hossein Salami, deputy commander of the Revolutionary Guards, said that “100,000 missiles are ready to fly” in Israel’s direction, and warned they could bring about its “annihilation and collapse.”

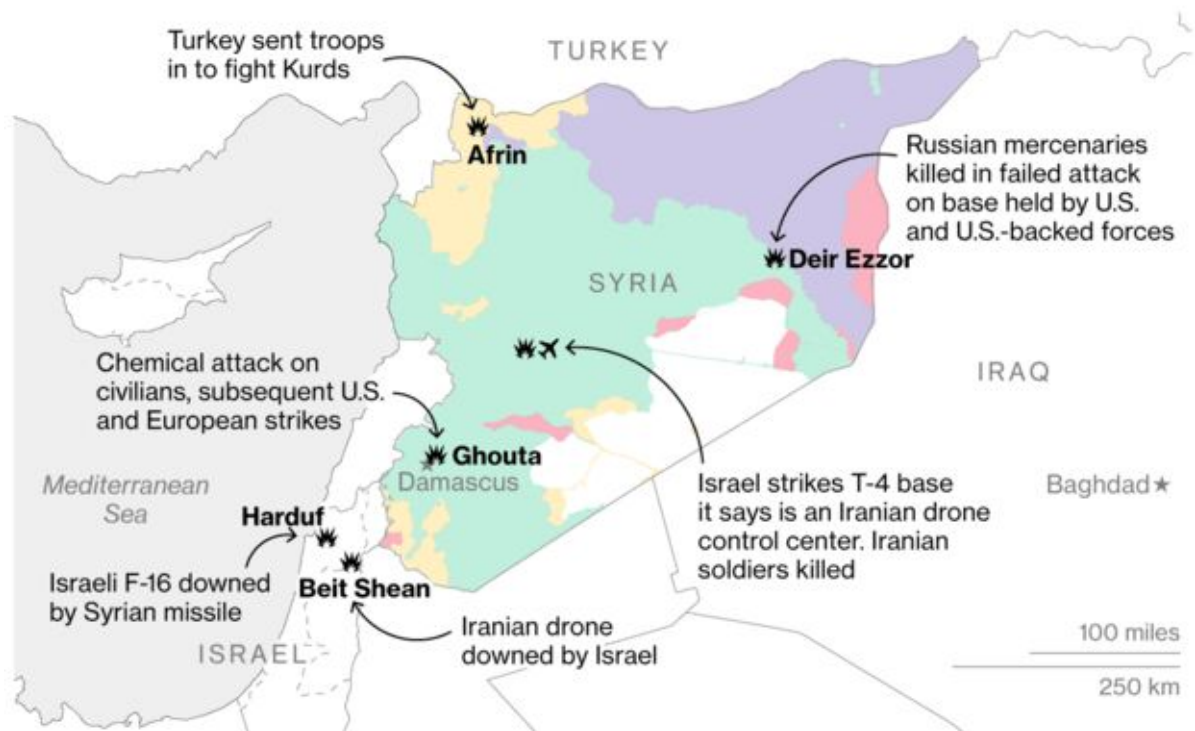
Light a Match

Iran and Israel have been exchanging threats for decades. What’s different now is that Syria’s civil war, which sucked in both countries, provides a potential battlespace — one that’s much closer to Jerusalem than to Tehran.

Middle East Tinderbox

Israel-Iran standoff shows how Syrian war is dragging in other powers

Areas of control ■ Assad regime ■ Syrian rebels ■ Kurds ■ Islamic State



Sources: April 30, 2018 Conflict Monitor by IHS Markit, Bloomberg reporting.

Bloomberg

Israeli officials say there are 80,000 fighters in Syria who take orders from Iran. As they help Assad recapture territory, militiamen from Hezbollah have deployed within a few kilometers of the Golan Heights on Israel’s border. Iran has vowed to avenge its citizens killed by the Israeli

airstrikes, and it has plenty of options for doing so.

It's a tinderbox, says Ofer Shelach, a member of the foreign affairs and defense committee in Israel's parliament. "I'm worried about the possibility that a match ignited in the Golan will light up a war going all the way to the sea."

Even more troubling is the absence of firefighters.

Israelis lament that Washington has become a bit-part player, unable to impose a Syrian settlement that would guarantee its ally's security. Absent that, "we can only represent our interests through force," Shelach says.

Able or Willing

Far from tamping down tensions, President Donald Trump -- egged on by Israel -- has been ramping them up. By threatening to withdraw next week from the international agreement to curb Iran's nuclear program, he's added another volatile element to the regional mix.

The only power with channels open to both sides, and the clout to play mediator, is Russia.

President Vladimir Putin's intervention in 2015 to shore up Assad has left Russia as the strongest actor in Syria. Putin is seeking to impose a peace that would lock in his political gains, so he has every interest in averting any spread of the war.



Syrians run for cover following Syrian government air strikes in Douma.

Photographer: Hamza Al-Ajweh/AFP via Getty Images

But that doesn't mean he's able or willing to rein in Iran. While Russia has cordial ties with Israel, they're likely outweighed by the confluence of interests with the Islamic Republic, whose ground forces were crucial to the success of Putin's Syrian gambit. Repeatedly threatened with attack or regime-change by its enemies, Iran sees the sympathetic governments in Damascus and Beirut as providing strategic depth.

'Unstable, Unmanaged'

Now, the Iranians in Syria have graduated from helping Assad to "building their strategic presence against Israel," said Paul Salem, senior vice president at the Middle East Institute in Washington. "It appears that neither the Russians nor the Assad regime are in control or can limit these things," he said. "The situation is highly unstable and highly unmanaged."

Iranians are so worried that they are piling their savings into gold.

One test of Russia's ability to manage it may come in southern Syria, where Islamic State and other jihadists and rebels still hold territory near Israel's border — enclaves that are among the likely next targets for

Assad's advancing army.

"Before they do that, the Russians need to have an arrangement with the Israelis," said Yuri Barmin, a Middle East expert at the Russian International Affairs Council, which advises the Kremlin. Russia is "willing to negotiate on the issue of Iran and Iran's presence" in those regions, he said.

'It's Shortsighted'

That may not be enough to meet Israeli concerns, which extend far beyond the border.



Israeli Iron Dome defence system at Golan Heights near the border with Syria.

Photographer: Ali Dia/AFP via Getty Images

Earlier in the Syrian conflict, Israel's airstrikes typically aimed to destroy weapons convoys bound for Hezbollah in Lebanon. There's been a significant change. Two strikes in the past month -- widely attributed to Israel, though the Jewish state doesn't comment on such matters -- targeted permanent infrastructure used by Iran's forces. Both took place deep inside Syrian territory.

“It’s shortsighted to look at it in terms of how many kilometers from the border Iran is sitting,” said Amos Gilad, who recently stepped down as director of political-military affairs at Israel’s Defense Ministry. “Iran cannot be allowed to base themselves militarily in Syria. And Israel is fully determined to prevent that.”

To be sure, the goal could be achieved without a full-blown war. Salem, at the Middle East Institute, says the likeliest outcome is that Israel and Iran will avoid a conflict that neither really wants — though he says the risk that they’ll end up fighting is higher than at any time since the Israel-Hezbollah war in 2006.

And although hostilities have effectively begun with the airstrikes, many analysts say that they can be contained to Syria -- where Israel and Iran can square off without their allies necessarily being drawn into the fight.

‘Never!’

“Never!” said Liberman, when asked if clashes with Iran could lead to clashes with Russia. “There will be no confrontation with them.”

In Beirut, Sami Nader of the Levant Institute for Strategic Studies said that Russia may not oppose an Israeli attack on Iranian positions in Syria, provided it doesn’t threaten to topple the Assad regime that is “the Russians’ main card at the negotiating table.” Barmin, the Kremlin adviser, said there’s plenty of daylight between the “diverging interests” of Russia and Iran.

So far, Russia’s response to Israeli airstrikes has been muted. But after the U.S. bombed Syrian targets last month, to punish Assad for an alleged chemical attack, Russian officials said they may deliver state-of-the-art S-300 missile defense systems to Syria. That would pose new risks for the Israeli air force -- and increase the chance of a flashpoint.

Half a century ago, Israel launched a surprise attack against its Arab enemies. A few years later, in 1973, the tables were turned. In both cases, one of the combatants consciously opted for war.

But that’s not how Israel’s more recent conflicts have started, says

Shelach. “It always happened because the situation escalated, deteriorated, without any of the sides making a decision.”

And that’s the risk he sees now, with no obvious off-ramp.

— *With assistance by Hayley Warren*

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