

# Opinion How Israel Can Avoid War With Iran and Hezbollah - for Now

Israeli leaders should push for more military restraint, and to moderate their jingoistic rhetoric, to avoid further escalation. The situation on Israel's northern border isn't 'intolerable' - yet.

It's still not clear whether the current escalation to the north of Israel is a temporary uptick in hostilities, or a reflection of the growing self-confidence of the Assad regime and its Iranian allies, and as such a portent of coming events.

Either way, the Iranian and Hezbollah effort to strengthen their foothold in Syria has taken a turn for the worse lately.

Iran is reportedly interested in establishing air and naval bases in Syria, deploying ground forces, over and above Hezbollah's, in building rocket manufacturing facilities in both Syria and Lebanon, and to dock submarines in Syrian ports. It was recently reported that Iran and Syria also recently signed a military and strategic cooperation agreement. Lebanon's premier Saad Hariri resigned in protest over Hezbollah's and Iran's domination of his country.

The danger of the next conflict in the north becoming a confrontation between Israel and Iran is growing.

To deal effectively with the Iranian-Hezbollah-Syrian axis, now under Russia's aegis, Israel must formulate a comprehensive strategy, rather than the current policy of repeated tactical responses.

The first component of a strategy such as this would be the ongoing demonstration of military self-restraint and forbearance, based on a long-term approach of conflict management, not resolution.

Military action should be taken only when truly essential and after all other alternatives have been exhausted, not merely as a demonstration of strength or for purposes of "deterrence maintenance", as the IDF explains following almost every incident. Ongoing weak and ineffectual responses, coming on top of the repeated rounds with Hezbollah and Hamas which have ended without a clear

outcome, deplete Israel's power to no avail and only weaken its deterrence in the end, rather than strengthening it.

The second component, along with military restraint, is rhetorical moderation.

It is only natural to define difficult circumstances as being "intolerable" and to derive the measures to be taken from this determination. Israel undoubtedly does face a variety of "intolerable" situations, by any measure, but in our insane circumstances they often turn out to be quite tolerable. Not every cabinet meeting, or visit by governmental leaders in the field, has to end with jingoistic statements designed to prop up our national pride.

Russia and Iran also have public opinion and national pride of their own, not just us, and it is important to understand that the ongoing humiliation of their client state, Syria, by repeated public accentuations of our ability to fly anywhere in Syria's airspace, is not something they will long be able to tolerate.

Emphasizing similar capabilities in the past, for example, during the 1969-1971 War of Attrition, led to the deployment of Soviet anti-missile systems in Egypt and ultimately to the downing of 20% of Israel's Air Force in the horrible first days of the Yom Kippur War.

It is far better for Israel to operate quietly.

The third component of the proposed strategy consists of a diplomatic effort vis-à-vis the U.S. and Russia, designed to achieve some, limited, influence over the emerging new order in Syria.

The U.S., in the Trump era, cannot be a reliable strategic backer for Israel. Its stature in the world and region have diminished and it does not have a strategy for Syria beyond the defeat of ISIS.

President Donald Trump also does not have a coherent policy towards Iran, his hollow protestations, when presenting his recent "Iran strategy", notwithstanding. Secretary of Defense Mattis and other senior administration officials, conversely, do have more coherent approaches towards Iran, close to Israel's, and it is essential that we coordinate policy with them to the greatest extent possible.

America's abandonment of the Syrian theater leaves Russia in charge. Russian

interests in Syria are different from Israel's, but Putin does tend to take them into account. Russian and Iranian interests in Syria are also not identical, despite Putin's recent visit there, thereby creating some room for promoting space between them.

Israel should therefore continue talking with Putin, in order to try and ensure that the emerging cease-fire in Syria creates as broad a buffer as possible between Iranian and Hezbollah forces, and ourselves. A diplomatic effort, combined with low intensity military pressure, may yield some results. Putin, too, is aware of the dangers of escalation in Syria generally, and between Israel and Russia in particular.

The fourth component is preservation of the nuclear deal with Iran, as the most effective means available of preventing it from acquiring nuclear weapons. Israel should encourage the U.S. and its allies both to enforce the deal effectively and to begin creating the conditions for the future imposition of a follow-on deal on Iran, designed to ensure that the limitations on its nuclear capabilities never expire.

A fifth and final component is an international diplomatic campaign to pressure Iran into changing its aggressive regional behavior, especially in Syria and in regard to its missile program. Preservation of the nuclear deal is a prerequisite for this; in its absence, it is the U.S. (and with it Israel) that will be isolated, not Iran.

Israel can successfully deter Iran and defend itself against her, but Iran's decisive defeat is beyond our capabilities. Even global powers treat Iran carefully.

Lebanon's unique characteristics, as well as the changes that have taken place in modern warfare, mean that Israel has also been hard-pressed to achieve a decisive defeat of Hezbollah, except at a completely unjustified cost in lives and damage to the home front.

We can always go to war, and may have no alternative in the end, but the greater wisdom is in finding ways to avoid the need for that.

A comprehensive and coherent strategy towards the Iranian-Hezbollah-Syrian axis can and must be formulated. Iran is not going anywhere. Neither is Israel.

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