



Preventing an Israel-Iran Escalation in Syria via Diplomacy

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After an Iranian drone entered Israeli airspace 10 February 2018, Israel responded by striking Iranian and Syrian targets in southern Syria. Anti-aircraft fire led to the downing of an Israeli F-16 warplane. This was the first direct confrontation between Israel and Iran in Syria, and it has prompted concern over further military escalation along the Israeli-Syrian border. In order to prevent such an escalation, Israel cannot rely only on security means. It should also make effective use of diplomacy: to identify clear and feasible policy goals regarding Syria, to foster alliances with countries that can help advance these goals, and to mobilize these countries into constructive action. This document includes experts' perspectives on Israeli interests at stake, and diplomatic channels that can be promoted with Russia, the US, Turkey, and Germany in order to prevent further escalation. It is based on a policy workshop convened by the Mitvim Institute on 15 February 2018.

Israel's Interests and the Need for Diplomacy

**Ambassador (ret.) Michael Harari
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The infiltration of the Iranian drone into Israel's air space is an escalation in the exchange of messages between both sides. Nevertheless, we can safely assume that Israel anticipated that its military actions in Syria would sooner or later provoke a counter-reaction. After all, the Syrian regime reacted to attacks, presumably carried out by Israel, in a number of cases in the past. In this regard, Iran's recent move may be seen as a Syrian-Iranian attempt to draw some red lines, indicating that Israel's long-enjoyed military freedom of action in Syria should not be taken for granted.

In any case, Israel's main interests vis-à-vis the situation in Syria remain unchanged: (1) preventing Iran from establishing itself in Syria, or at least weakening its hold on the state, especially in the areas adjacent to the border with Israel and Jordan; and (2) preventing an escalation in Lebanon against Hezbollah. Such a confrontation is neither necessary nor inevitable, and should another round of violence take place, it would end with a renewed version of the current status quo.

Even after the recent escalation, Israel's strategic balance with Syria continues to be comfortable. Syria is still in the midst of difficult fighting between various forces, and Assad's takeover of the entire country is still far from complete. Moreover, the relationships and interests of the Russia-Iran-Turkey triangle are in no way smooth. It is imperative to acknowledge that the freedom of Israeli military action in Syria is not unlimited in view of the emerging reality, and that the situation in Syria is increasingly becoming a foreign policy issue – and not only a security one – that requires Israeli action through sensitive and complex diplomatic channels.

To read more on the topic from Amb. (ret.) Michael Harari, [click here](#)

Israel and Russia

Ofer Zalzburg

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Iranian efforts to establish a long-term military presence across Syria conflict with Israeli security interests. The parties are trying to establish new “rules of the game” through attack and response. But until those rules are clear, a wider war is only a miscalculation away. Russia is the only power in Syria in a position to broker understandings to reduce the risk of a larger confrontation.

Moscow should broker understandings that bolster the de-escalation agreement distancing Iran-backed forces from Syria’s armistice line with Israel. To do so, Moscow at the very least should not provide air cover for an Assad regime campaign that includes Hezbollah or militias to retake these areas. Israel would have to settle for a smaller exclusion zone than it has demanded, but this formula would offer a realistic way to keep its foes away and thus reduce the odds of a regional conflagration. Stability in the area could also facilitate a fuller return of the UN Disengagement Observer Force, an element of the 1974 Israeli-Syrian separation of forces agreement, which both Israel and Syria claim to want to restore.

Second, Moscow should seek to broker an Israeli-Iranian *modus vivendi* in Syria, one in which Iran waives construction of precision missile facilities and its military infrastructure in Syria, and Israel acquiesces to foreign forces remaining in the rest of Syria pending a deal on the country’s future. To some in Israel, this arrangement would be a concession too many. But Russia is not only a constraint on Israel, it also could be of use as the only actor with some leverage over Iran and its partners. Helping Israel avoid an all-out war that it does not want to fight would be no small service.

To read more on the topic from Ofer Zalzburg, [click here](#)

Israel and the US

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In the aftermath of the recent Israeli strike, the State Department and White House issued statements supporting Israel’s right to defend itself, but no administration official followed through with a trip to Israel, or a public call or substantive joint statement. In Washington, the readouts of the first US-Israeli Foreign Policy Dialogue (which occurred three days after the incident) and a call between Trump and Putin curiously omitted any reference to Iran or Syria. This initial response - a lack of clear diplomatic leadership - strengthens the perception that the US is disengaged, and that Russia will lead efforts to prevent further escalation in southern Syria.

But Russia’s power projection and military leverage do not make it the ultimate negotiator. Russian-led political processes in Astana and in Sochi have not gained widespread international legitimacy or brought peace to Syria (and Assad has systematically initiated military strikes in Russian-designated “de-escalation zones”). To be sure, Russia is a major player in Syria, and Israel will undoubtedly need to engage with Moscow to establish parameters on military action. But Russia has not established the successful diplomatic or

enforcement mechanisms that ensure it could prevent future escalation between Israel and Iran or Hezbollah.

Israel should request that the US engage in joint policy discussions on southern Syria, to follow up on the joint strategic plan on countering Iran that they reportedly developed in December. The US can also engage in multilateral diplomacy, perhaps including Russia, to stabilize the situation. France or Germany could also play a role in a multilateral diplomatic effort, as they both enjoy some diplomatic leverage with Iran in light of their shared interest in preserving the Iran nuclear deal. In any case, the US should increase its diplomatic efforts to limit Iran's growing influence in southern Syria. This requires a reinvestment in American diplomatic power, and the Trump administration can provide it by immediately staffing important unfilled roles in the State Department and opening new channels of communication in the region.

Israel and Turkey

Dr. Nimrod Goren
Head of the Mitvim Institute

Israel should launch a dialogue with Turkey regarding Iran's influence in Syria. Turkey is currently a key actor in Syria, due to its independent action and participation (with Russia and Iran) in the Astana Process. Turkey is also concerned by the growing Iranian influence in Syria, albeit to a different extent than Israel and due to other reasons. Turkey and Iran are trying not to step on each other's toes, however, they are not allies in the sense that Israeli officials often portray. Their normal neighborly relations are traditionally coupled with suspicion and rivalry on issues of hegemony and influence.

Iran's grip on Syria is not a security threat for Turkey as it is for Israel. Turkey's fear is mainly economic and political, and it may want to restrict the entry of Iranian products and companies into the Syrian market and weaken the political ties between Damascus and Tehran. This creates a certain alignment of interests between Israel and Turkey which should be leveraged, particularly at a time when the two countries have a limited common agenda and lack mutual trust. At the same time, Israel and Turkey remain loyal to their 2016 reconciliation agreement and continue to demonstrate that they can cooperate in certain areas despite fundamental disagreements over the Palestinian issue.

Given the differences in Israeli and Turkish interests in Syria, and in view of the existing security coordination between Turkey and Iran, an Israeli-Turkish dialogue regarding Iran's role in Syria should be diplomatic and economic in nature, and not military. As such, Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Economy, should take the leading role in this rather than the defense establishment. Even if such a dialogue can be carried out at first only with the assistance of a third party or through unofficial channels, and even if it eventually yields only limited results, it is a diplomatic channel that should not be ruled out and that Israel's Foreign Service should work to advance.

To read more on the topic from Dr. Nimrod Goren, [click here](#)

Israel and Germany

Dr. Gil Murciano

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During the last year, Israel has shown a new willingness to actively contain Iran's strategic efforts in Syria. The combination of this proactive Israeli policy and the lack of a security regime to regulate the situation increases the likelihood of an unintended escalation between the parties.

A direct confrontation between Israel and Iran in Syria would have dire implications on the regional and global levels. Therefore, Germany should use its relations and leverage vis-à-vis the two parties to promote a new security regime between Israel and Iran, whether on the level of facilitation of the negotiations, or in a more proactive role of an active mediator. As a strategic ally of Israel who also enjoys certain economic and political leverage vis-à-vis Iran, Germany is in a unique position to advance such an arrangement. The German foreign policy community also has practical experience in the delicate practice of mediating informal agreements between Israel, Iran, and Hezbollah.

In concrete terms, Germany could fill two possible roles in this process. First, it could serve as a facilitator of the process, conducting separate dialogues with the two stakeholders in order to reach an informal arrangement. Second, it could take the role of an active mediator, applying pressure (alongside other members of the international community) on Iran to limit its military efforts in Syria. Such involvement would allow Germany to fulfill its policy focus on global conflict prevention and help prevent a destructive escalation, the shockwaves of which are bound to be felt across the Mediterranean. Israel, on its end, should accommodate the German involvement and open a dialogue with Germany regarding its red-lines for Iranian involvement in Syria, as well as limitations it is willing to accept to its operational activity in Syria.

To read more on the topic from Dr. Gil Murciano, [click here](#)