



Iranian Responses to Growing Tensions with Israel and an Initial Assessment of Their Implications from an Iranian Standpoint

Dr. Raz Zimmt

February 11, 2018

Summary of Events

► The escalation along Israel's northern border began on Saturday morning (February 10, 2018), after an Iranian unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) **penetrated Israeli airspace. The UAV, launched from the T-4 airbase near the city of Palmyra in Syria, was downed by the IDF over Israeli territory.** In response to the breach by the UAV, IDF struck targets in Syria, **including the Iranian control center that had launched the drone.** During the retaliatory strikes by Israel, the Syrian military fired anti-aircraft missiles, which resulted in the **downing of an F-16 jet over Israeli territory.** In response to the downing of the jet, the IDF carried out an extensive air campaign against Syrian air defense bases and Iranian targets in Syria. According to the IDF's statement, the **Israeli military bombed 12 targets, including three Syrian air defense batteries and four Iranian targets.**



The remains of the downed Iranian UAV
(IDF Spokesperson, February 10, 2018)

Central Themes in Tehran's Response

The initial public statement from Iran with regards to these extraordinary security developments in Israel's northern front reflect an Iranian effort to play down its role in the events; display a united front between Iran, Syria and Hezbollah vis-à-vis Israel; present the downing of the Israeli jet as a success of the "Resistance Front" and as a

change of the rules of the game regarding the continuation of Israeli violations of Syrian sovereignty. This is will be expounded on below.

Denial of Israel's Claims and Downplaying of Iran's Presence in Syria

► **Iranian officials denied Israel's claims regarding Iranian involvement in the events in northern Israel and cast the blame on Israel for the escalation. Bahram Qasemi, the Spokesman of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs,** rejected Israel's claims regarding the breach by the Iranian UAV and reports about Iran's involvement in downing the Israeli jet, labeling these claims as "ridiculous." He mentioned that Iran assists Syria **only through military advisors** in accordance with the request of the legitimate government in Damascus. Qasemi insisted on Syria's right to protect its territorial integrity and respond to any foreign aggression against it. According to him, the "Zionist regime" can not hide its aggressiveness and its crimes against the people of the region through lies (ISNA, February 10, 2018).

► **Hossein Salami, the Deputy Commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC),** also rejected Israel's claims. During a press conference Salami held on the sidelines of a conference commemorating the 39th anniversary of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, Salami stated that Iran does not confirm a single report published by Israel, since Israelis "are liars." He added that if the Syrians confirm the matter, so will Iran. Salami too expressed Iran's official position that **its military presence in Iran is limited to that of military advisers alone.** In another statement during the conference Salami proclaimed that **Iran can "create hell" for the Zionists and hit all American bases in the region.** He reiterated the pronouncement of the Iranian Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, that **Israel will cease to exist within 25 years** (Tasnim, February 10, 2018).



Hossein Salami, the Deputy Commander of the IRGC. Iran can “create hell” for the Zionists. (Tasnim, February 10, 2018)

Changing the “Rules of the Game”

In parallel to denying Iranian involvement in the developments in Syria, senior Iranian officials and Iranian media outlets emphasized that the forceful reaction to the Israeli strikes in Syria, and in particular the downing of the Israeli jet, signal a change in the “rules of the game.” According to Tehran, Israel will no longer be allowed to violate Syrian sovereignty and attack targets in Syria without retaliation.

- ▶ Ali-Akbar Velayati, the Senior Adviser of the Iranian Supreme Leader on International Affairs, proclaimed in response to the events in Syria that the Syrian government and people have proven that they are ready to sacrifice their lives to defend the territorial integrity of their country, its security and independence. He asserted that the Syrian people and their government, which fought and won the war that had lasted for seven years, **will not continue to acquiesce to aggression from the “Zionist regime”** (ISNA, February 10, 2018).



Ali-Akbar Velayati. (Tasnim, February 10, 2018)

► **Iranian media** too, presented the developments in Syria as **a new stage in the campaign against Israel:**

- ◆ In a commentary published by the **Iranian Fars News Agency** (February 10, 2018), it was argued that Israel must understand that its recurring strikes on Syria and the assistance it is providing to ISIS **will not go unchallenged by Damascus and the “Resistance Axis.”**
- ◆ In another commentary, published on the **Mashregh News website** (February 10, 2018), the author stated that the downing of the Israeli jet signals **a new stage in the struggle of the “Resistance Axis” against the “Western-Zionist camp” in Syria.** According to the article, the downing of the jet will force Israel to redefine its positions in light of the developments in Syria. This action by Syria puts an end to Israeli air superiority in Syria **and will curtail Israeli military action in Syria** in a way that will harm the capabilities of the regime’s opponents and “terrorist groups” operating in southern Syria.
- ◆ **The article in Mashregh News** mentioned that if the downing of the Israeli jet was carried out with Russian consent, this indicates that **Israel’s political and military position has become more precarious** and that Prime Minister Netanyahu’s visit to Moscow has failed. **The coordination between Israel and Russia can not provide Israel with sufficient security and the “Resistance Axis” can shut Syria’s airspace to Israeli incursions,** the article argued.

Summary and Assessment

The launch of the Iranian unmanned aerial vehicle from Syria into Israeli territory signals another stage in Iran's efforts to entrench its influence in Syria and gain a central role in shaping reality in Syria in the post-Islamic State era. The current event is exceptional because the launch of the UAV **was carried out directly by Iran and not** (according to Tehran's normal practice) **through Shi'ite proxies**. This may, in our assessment, **indicate an increase in Iran's self-confidence in Syria**, in the post-Islamic state era.

- ▶ Through its actions in Syria, Iran strives to **achieve a number of central goals**:
 - ◆ **Stabilizing and shaping the Syrian regime** while enhancing Iran's political, economic, religious and cultural clout in Syria.¹ **The preservation of the Syrian regime is critical for Tehran** as it is a strategic partner for Iran in the Arab world. The downfall of the Assad regime may result in negative ramifications for Hezbollah, as a result of losing its logistic support base in Syria (which is crucial for transferring Iranian assistance to the organization).
 - ◆ **Establishing an Iranian-Shi'ite sphere of influence**, stretching from Iran through Iraq and Syria, all the way to Lebanon and the Mediterranean.
 - ◆ **Augmenting pressure levers and threats against Israel** so as to create deterrence vis-à-vis Jerusalem.
 - ◆ **Expelling the United States from Syria and the region as a whole**. The United States is perceived by Iran as a central threat to its national security and its vital interests.
- ▶ **The escalation in northern Israel following the breach by the Iranian UAV from Syria is taking place while Iran faces growing challenges in Syria**; those challenges include: the progress in negotiations concerning a political settlement in Syria, **which has accentuated the disagreements between Iran and Russia** regarding the aspects of the eventual political agreement and the future of Iran's military presence in Syria; **the intention of the U.S. administration to maintain an American military force in Syria** as part of the new strategy announced by Trump to curtail Iranian influence; **strikes in Syria, reportedly carried out by**

¹ For more, see a publication by the Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, "Iran in the Post-Islamic State Era: Aims, Opportunities and Challenges (Updated Review)", November 26, 2017. <http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/iran-post-isis-era-aims-opportunities-challenges-updated-review/>

Israel, including strikes on Iranian convoys attempting to transfer advanced weaponry to Hezbollah; **the strikes against Iranian targets in the current escalation**, which demonstrate **the limitations to Iran's freedom of action in Syria**; **Turkish military action in northern Syria**, a manifestation of Ankara's intention to play a central role in Syria, even if this entails ignoring Iranian interests; **and growing uncertainty regarding President Assad's commitment to allow Iran to establish a permanent military foothold in his country.**²

Precisely in light of these challenges, the Iranian UAV launch can be seen as another effort by Iran to position itself as a central player able to influence the new reality in Syria; to challenge Israel, which is attempting to block Iran's direct influence and that of its proxies in Israel's northern front; to change the rules of the game regarding IDF actions in Syria and the response such actions engender. However, in our assessment, Iran's effort to play down its role in the events may indicate that it is not interested, at least currently, in a direct confrontation with Israel, and it prefers to maintain a strategy of brinkmanship in its effort to achieve its goals.

² A special report on the significant challenges Iran faces in the Middle East will soon be published by the Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center.