

## **ISRAEL'S AIR STRIKES INSIDE SYRIA: PLAYING WITH FIRE**

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On April 27 Israel bombed a military site inside Syria, near Damascus. It was a strike similar to those Israel carried out since 2013.

Israel and Syria have been enemies since 1948. They confronted each other in several high intensity wars and in numerous smaller clashes. The Israeli air strikes inside Syria in recent years are a war within a war, one of the many that have been going on in Syria. There is the major fight between those who support Assad and those who oppose him together with smaller confrontations such as between the Kurds and ISIS and Israel and Hezbollah.

Israel has its "red lines" in regard to Syria. One of them is stopping the delivery of sophisticated weapons to Hezbollah. Israel confronted Hezbollah in the 1980s and in the 1990s, when the IDF (Israeli Defense Forces) was deployed in Lebanon. In 2000 the IDF left Lebanon. In 2006 the two sides clashed again with each other. Since then they have been preparing for another round between them.

Israel wishes to disrupt the military buildup of Hezbollah i.e. to prevent the group from receiving advanced weapons such as anti-aircraft and anti-ship missiles. In a way it is too late since Hezbollah already has up to 150,000 rockets and missiles that cover all of Israel.

Since 2006 Israel restrained itself when Hezbollah got from Syria tens of thousands of rockets. Israel did dare to strike inside Syria in 2007, when Israeli planes destroyed Assad's nuclear reactor, after Israel suspected that facility could produce a nuclear weapon. It was a huge gamble that might have ignited a war, but it did not.

Since 2013 Israel attacked deliveries to Hezbollah, not the Assad regime itself, hoping to deter Assad from sending more weapons to Hezbollah, without deteriorating the situation. Israel failed in convincing Assad to stop giving weapons to Hezbollah but Israel managed to avoid a war with Hezbollah and / or Assad following the Israeli strikes.

Assad has been wining lately his six year war against the rebels but he is still too busy with the rebels so he does not want to confront Israel. Furthermore Israel has clear military superiority over Assad. The latter knows well that an Israeli offensive will destroy his best forces, like his planes, in a matter of days, leaving him vulnerable to his enemies within Syria, enabling them to topple him.

A war is certainly not an Israeli interest. Assad, with all its military weakness, could inflict some blows to Israel. Hezbollah might also join Assad. A war will be costly. In addition, following the Russian military intervention in Syria since late 2015, Israel has been aware that a war with Assad could create friction and in the worst case a violent one between Israel and Russian forces. Israel therefore has to be very careful.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu warned on October 1, 2015 that "Israel will continue to act to prevent the transfer of strategic weapons to Hezbollah from and through Syrian territory."<sup>1</sup> On April 11, 2016, he admitted that Israel had bombed deliveries of weapons that were on their way from Syria to Lebanon.<sup>2</sup> On April 27 2017, after the last strike, Israel's Intelligence Minister Israel Katz said that "The incident in Syria corresponds completely with Israel's policy to act to prevent Iran's smuggling of advanced weapons via Syria to Hezbollah."<sup>3</sup> Usually Israel did not admit taking those actions. This approach made it easier for Assad to avoid retribution against Israel, which could have caused an escalation. The Assad regime did declare they will retaliate. They never did, so far, but next time Israel bombs inside Syria it might be different.

Russia could try to prevent a crisis with Israel by putting pressure on Iran, Assad and Hezbollah to stop the deliveries to Hezbollah. The latter already poses quite a threat to Israel but Iran wants to make its Lebanese protégé even more dangerous, in order to deter Israel from attacking Iran's

nuclear sites. Yet for Iran let alone Assad the survival of the latter is also a top priority, and Iran invested heavily in this matter. A war with Israel could bring down Assad so Iran has to choose what is more important: upgrading Hezbollah's arsenal or jeopardizing Iran's ally in Damascus?

Israel, by launching its raids, reduces Hezbollah's ability to harm Israel in a time of war but each time Israeli strikes it increases the probability of an escalation that might lead to such a war. Assad, Iran and Hezbollah also don't seek war, yet by continuing with the deliveries they provoke Israel and raise the chances of a confrontation. Both sides are therefore playing with fire.

### **Endnotes:**

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<sup>1</sup> Algemeiner, October 1, 2015. <http://www.algemeiner.com/2015/10/01/full-transcript-prime-minister-netanyahus-speech-at-the-united-nations-general-assembly-2015-video/>

<sup>2</sup> Reuters, April 11, 2016. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-israel-idUSKCN0X81TO>

<sup>3</sup> Reuters, April 27, 2017 <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-air-strike-idUSKBN17TOGU>