

# Diplomatic Openings Amid Israel's Syria Strikes

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## Brief Analysis

Air strikes attributed to Israeli forces have increased since the beginning of the Syrian Civil War, with a particularly steep rise in the last two years. This increase in kinetic activity represents an Israeli attempt to impede Iran's military entrenchment in Syria and disrupt the arms shipment route between Syria and Lebanon, thereby delaying Hezbollah's efforts to build up its forces in Lebanon. Yet during this period, Iran and Hezbollah have tightened their hold in Syria, an effort manifested in the presence of Shia militiamen within the country. Iran and Hezbollah act in Syria as they would at home, without any hindrance from the Syrian authorities, even after so many years of military conflict.

Despite any operational achievements in Israel's Syria campaign, we can say now that Israel's 'campaign between the wars'—often referred to by its Hebrew acronym *mabam*—is suffering from a number of "comorbidities" hindering its strategic efficacy.

Even on a strictly operational level, the *mabam* does not appear to have accomplished all its goals. The continuation and intensity of strikes indicate that Iran has not given up its attempts to ship arms from Syria to Lebanon.

However intensive they may be, these strikes do not appear to have weakened Iran's desire to transfer weapon systems to Hezbollah, and Iran seems to remain steady in its will to establish its position in Syria. At most, the strikes have had a temporary tactical impact on Iran's conduct in Syria. Regardless of the strikes, Iran has still succeeded in establishing a foundation that enables it to launch missiles into Israel, as was evidenced by the rocket fire into Mt. Hermon in January 2019. Likewise, the development of the rocket-to-missile conversion project in Lebanon by Iran and Hezbollah indicates that Iran is trying to find solutions to Hezbollah's continued armament difficulties that might render the entire *mabam* offensive pointless as long as Israel continues to refrain from undertaking strikes in Lebanon.

Furthermore, the campaign exposes Israel to significant risks. From time to time, incidents related to strikes carried out by Israel have brought it to the cusp of open conflict with Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah. Meanwhile, the campaign has exposed Israeli tactics to its enemies. Current strikes give Iran and its allies chances to study Israeli operations, providing them with tactical information that could present a considerable obstacle in any potential future emergency.

On a broader level, these challenges point to another major concern: Israel has not managed to turn its potentially limited operational achievements into diplomatic gains, above all its goal of "removing Iran from Syria."

Unfortunately, Israel's kinetic operation has potentially failed during a time when it could have yielded great results. U.S. sanctions, economic troubles, and political disturbances have forced Hezbollah and the Iranian state to focus more of their attention and resources on domestic issues in Iran and Lebanon. And, at the moment, Israel and Turkey share a rare moment of common interest, both hoping to remove Assad from his throne. Furthermore, Russian officials have reportedly complained about Bashar al-Assad in recent days, though Russian distancing from the Assad regime is a remote possibility.

Given the limited successes of the campaign even within these favorable circumstances, the question arises as to whether this kinetic approach is able to deliver on its apparent strategic objective. It is clear that Israel is trying to create an "aggregate effect" that might lead to the Iranians leaving Syria, but is this at all possible by simply engaging in military strikes or operational activity alone? Israel's efforts to mold Syria "operationally" are not effecting the desired diplomatic and political development of Syria.

Moreover, the current situation is likely to deteriorate with time. Despite the strikes, Assad's commitment to his alliance with Iran-backed militias is likely to increase in the future. Consequently, Assad is likely to continue to assist these hostile elements **Q**, even if the military strikes continue with even greater intensity. Israel still appears uncertain on how to handle Assad's intentional support for the "radical Shia alliance."

Israel has not entered the diplomatic sphere enough to explore its options when handling this issue. While engaged in intensive operational activity in Syria, Israel appears completely absent from the diplomatic playing field. Russia, Turkey, and Iran are leading the Astana talks, the most serious diplomatic effort regarding Syria's political future, Q and Israel Q lacks any tangible influence over the process. Moreover, the practical absence **Q** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/u.s.-diplomacy-kurds-in-syria>) of the United States from the diplomatic process and its lack of influence over the state of affairs in Syria also has an adverse effect on Israel's capability to fully exploit operational or diplomatic actions there.

To accomplish its objective with regard to Syria, Israel must combine a substantive diplomatic component in its policy of *mabam* rather than relying on its military might alone. In order to uproot Iranian and Hezbollah-led activity in Syria, a political change in the Syrian leadership is a necessary step, and there is no kinetic **Q** strike on earth that will be able to meet this objective.

Powers unfriendly to Israel are thoroughly entrenched in this arena, and Israel will have to find ways of communicating with currently distant parties if it seeks to create a more lasting change to Syria's political situation. Even if Russia or Turkey would like to adjust the situation in Syria, they will only be able to do so in a shared effort. Though such cooperative efforts remain far from assured, there are several diplomatic steps available to create a better relational environment for Israel in this matter.

For example, Israel could engage in in-depth discussions with Russia on the "post-Assad era" while indicating its readiness for potential compromises with regard to Syria. If possible, Israel should also take part in the Astana talks behind the scenes together with joint work with Russia and the United States.

Israel could also hold covert discussions with Turkey in view of the rare shared interests between Jerusalem and Ankara regarding Syria, with a view to reshaping the situation there. Israel should likewise attempt to create a road map for political change in Syria in conjunction with the current—and perhaps the future—U.S. administration. It should also convey a series of messages to Iran via parties who will be perceived credibly by both sides, such as Oman, clearly delineating Israel's red lines in Syria in order to reduce the likelihood of an unwanted escalation on Israel's northern border.

It is likely that removing the Iranians from Syria will not be possible without the end of Bashar al-Assad's rule in Syria. As long as he remains in power, Hezbollah, Iran, and its proxies will enjoy unbridled access to Syria and the weapons at its disposal, representing a serious threat to Israeli national security. And while Assad's position appears to be secure for now, Israel should work to ensure that if the opportunity to influence the Syrian political scene does arise, it possesses an extant framework for communicating its concerns to involved parties in Syria.

Without a diplomatic component, Israel's military strikes will not open a permanent solution to the Syrian problem. With Hezbollah's and Iran's backs to the wall, continued aggression might lead to an undesired escalation not worth any operational achievement. ❖

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