Iran's Growing Entrenchment in Syria and the Escalation on Israel's Northern Border

February 13, 2018

BACKGROUND

Early on Saturday morning, February 10, Iran breached Israeli airspace with a high-tech reconnaissance drone, launched from Syrian territory. This represents Iran's first open, direct military action against Israel.

The Iranian regime is led by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, who has called[i] for Israel's destruction and stated[ii] that he believes in a messianic figure[iii] who will conquer the world in an apocalyptic battle.

Iran is building permanent military bases[iv] (possibly including a Mediterranean naval base[v]) in Syria as part of a larger strategy to create a continuous land bridge from Teheran through Iraq and Syria and to Hezbollah, its Lebanese proxy. The goal is to gain a permanent naval presence in the Mediterranean Sea and to menace Israel directly on its northern border. This presents a direct, strategic threat to Israel and its neighbors, and it endangers the U.S. and Europe as well.

The Shi'ite terror group Hezbollah, which answers to the Iranian regime, has full political and military control over Lebanon. This includes a strong military presence in southern Lebanon right up to Israel's northern border and reportedly extensive coordination with the Lebanese army.

With Iranian and Russian assistance[vi], Hezbollah has become a full-fledged military force. It possesses an estimated arsenal of 125,000 to 150,000 Iranian-supplied rockets and GPS-guided missiles with ranges that put the entirety of Israel's population within range of these deadly weapons. Iran is reportedly building missile factories in Lebanon to provide Hezbollah with additional supplies directly. This assistance was made possible in part by the estimated $100 billion[vii] gained by Iran in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action—the nuclear deal signed by Iran, the U.S., the U.K., and others.

Hezbollah also has acquired[viii] anti-tank and anti-ship missiles, armored personnel carriers, tanks, self-propelled artillery, advanced anti-aircraft missiles, and unlimited small arms. Its experience fighting for the Assad regime in the Syrian civil war has taught Hezbollah how to operate logistically over vast areas, including how to conquer and hold territory.

 "Iran has built[ix] up a multinational network of tens of thousands of young men from across the Middle East, turning them into a well-drilled fighting machine … [that] can be found leading the defense of the Syrian president, Bashar al-Assad, recapturing land from ISIS in Iraq, and fighting for control of the Yemeni capital of Sanaa," reported BuzzFeed News. This week, an Iranian-backed militia in Iraq vowed to back Hezbollah in a war with Israel.

 "Since at least the early 1980s, Iran has operated an intelligence network in Latin America[x]—Hezbollah soon followed suit. Iran and Hezbollah leveraged support from these networks to carry out the 1994 bombing of the… Jewish community center in Buenos Aires. Despite the public exposure of Iranian and Hezbollah operatives in this deadly attack, both continue to develop intelligence and logistical support networks in the region without restraint."

Recent protests in Iran against government cuts in fuel and welfare subsidies included harsh criticism of the Iranian regime's investments in conflicts across the region. The protests were violently repressed, as the regime killed an estimated 80 people.

WHAT HAPPENED

An Iranian drone was launched from Syria into northern Israel early Saturday morning, February 10. The drone was the result of reverse engineering of a U.S. drone captured in 2011. The drone was shot down by an Israeli helicopter over Israeli territory, and Israel retaliated by launching an air strike on the military base from which the drone was launched.

Air raid sirens sounded in dozens of towns and villages in northern Israel, sending thousands of civilians into bomb shelters.

Syrian anti-aircraft missiles hit an Israeli jet, forcing its crew to eject. The jet crashed in Israel's Lower Galilee near Kibbutz Harduf. The two pilots were injured, one seriously the other moderately. Israel followed with additional air strikes, destroying a significant percentage of Syria's anti-aircraft missile systems.

In the aftermath, Israel reached out to the Russian government, which maintains a military presence in Syria, calling on it to prevent Syria, Iran, and Hezbollah from escalating the conflict.

KEY TALKING POINTS

Iran's breach of Israeli airspace and the quick escalation of events demonstrates why a permanent Iranian presence in Syria and a strengthened Hezbollah represent a major destabilizing factor on Israel's northern border.

The Assad regime is responsible for the deaths of an estimated 400,000 to 500,000 Syrian civilians[xi] in the civil war, including dozens of chemical attacks. Another 13.1 million Syrians are officially listed as refugees by the UN[xii]. Assad owes his survival to Iran and Russia. Iran sent Hezbollah forces to Syria to fight on Assad's behalf, while Russia provided air support and weapons to the regime.

As Iran builds its forces in Syria, it will be emboldened to continue testing Israel's resolve. Jerusalem's policy is to maintain deterrence by sending a clear message to Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah that attacks and violations of Israeli sovereignty will not be tolerated.

This aggression by the Iranian regime risks escalating the situation into a major regional war that will be devastating to all parties involved, particularly Lebanon. Hezbollah has turned the entirety of southern Lebanon and portions of Beirut into an armed camp. Its missiles, rockets, and arms depots are hidden within homes, villages, schools, hospitals, and apartment buildings.

Hezbollah's strategy is to use Lebanese civilians as hapless human shields to deter Israel from attacking these militarized targets. This is a deliberate policy of Hezbollah and other terror groups, including Hamas in Gaza. Israel will be faced with the dilemma of having to stop the launching of missiles from civilian areas in Lebanon in order to protect civilians in Israeli cities and towns.

Regardless of where one stands on the Iran Deal, it is crucial that the international community address Iran's missile program, support for global terrorism, and other acts of aggression. Efforts by Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah to threaten Israeli civilians risk drawing Israel into a war that will be devastating for everyone in the region, and international silence on this issue can only enable this violence.

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[i] https://www.timesofisrael.com/iranian-supreme-leader-calls-for-israels-annihilation/
[ii] http://www.leader.ir/en/content/8307/IR-Leader-receives-researchers-on-Mahdism

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iv http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-41945189

v http://www.arabnews.com/node/1131051

vi https://www.timesofisrael.com/thanks-in-no-small-part-to-russia-hezbollah-is-now-a-full-fledged-army/

vii https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/iran-claims-100-billion-now-freed-in-major-step-as-sanctions-roll-back/2016/02/01/edfc23ca-c8e5-11e5-a7b2-5a2f824b02c9_story.html?utm_term=.f9101f5a9254

viii https://ipfs.io/ipfs/QmXoypizjW3WknFiJnKLwHCnL72vedxjQkDDP1mXWo6uco/wiki/Hezbollah_armed_strength.html

ix https://www.buzzfeed.com/borzoudaragahi/irans-plan-to-run-the-middle-east?utm_term=.boxwv4Vym#.owDk70Q4

x https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/opeds/Levitt20151216-PRISM.pdf

xi https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-casualties/syrian-war-monitor-says-465000-killed-in-six-years-of-fighting-idUSKBN16K1Q1

xii http://www.unocha.org/syrian-arab-republic/syria-country-profile/about-crisis

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