



MAISON
DU FUTUR

POLICY PAPER

- N°14 -

NOVEMBER 2017

ISRAEL AND THE SYRIA CONFLICT - CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

GEOFFREY ARONSON



**Konrad
Adenauer
Stiftung**

N.B.: The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the official opinion of the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung or the Maison du Futur opinion. Responsibility for the information and views expressed in this publication lies entirely with the author.



ISRAEL AND THE SYRIA CONFLICT - CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

After more than six years, hundreds of thousands of casualties, and untold billions in economic costs, the endgame defining the future role of Hezbollah and Iran in Syria has begun. A Russian-Iranian-Turkish entente is establishing the diplomatic, territorial and operational infrastructure aimed at marginalizing and isolating irreconcilable elements militarily and expanding both the circle and effectiveness of intra-Syrian “reconciliation” efforts to enlarge and consolidate the reconstitution of state authority throughout the country.

In the last months of 2017, regime and allied forces controlled upwards of 80 per cent of Syrian territory.¹ “Assad has emerged victorious in the battle,” affirmed Israel’s

1 “US ‘simulates’ anti-ISIS fight in Iraq as terrorists cross into Syria – MoD”, *Russia Today*, October 10, 2017, available at <https://www.rt.com/news/406200-coalition-isis-fight-iraq/>

minister of security, Avigdore Lieberman, in October 2017. “Suddenly, everyone wants to get closer to Assad.”²

Assad’s still incomplete victory is not simply a personal triumph; more importantly, it represents a reaffirmation of the historical balance of forces within Syria, first established in the 1960s with the Ba’ath Party’s emergence as the preeminent arbiter of Syrian politics over a motley and historically ineffective collection of secular, nationalist and Islamic opponents.

This latest achievement has come at terrible cost to Syria and its long-suffering people. The wartime alliances forged by the regime have undermined Syria’s ability to determine its sovereign

2 “Israel’s defense minister says Syria’s Assad has won the civil war”, *Times of Israel*, October 3, 2017, available at <https://www.timesofisrael.com/defense-minister-says-syrias-assad-victorious-in-civil-war/>

destiny – the clarion call of nationalists for whom Syria’s modern history has been one long struggle to establish ‘Syria for the Syrians’.

The unfolding of this latest chapter in Syria’s struggle to be the master of its own fate has a particular importance to Syria’s neighbors, not least of which is Israel.

Israel and Syria: the Background to Today

Israel’s interest in maximizing the opportunities and minimizing the threats posed by this new stage in the Syrian crisis is best understood when measured against Syria’s longstanding policies towards Israel fashioned over recent decades.

Until war erupted in 2011, the Assads’ Syria had been a reliable, if recalcitrant and implacable, enemy of Israel. Hafez al-Assad and his son and successor, Bashar, stood at the apex of a state system of seemingly unchallenged authority. This enforced discipline established the

basis for the joint Syrian-Egyptian attack on Israel in October 1973. At the same time, however, it also enabled the 1974 Disengagement Agreement that created demilitarization zones along the line of confrontation in the Golan Heights and the deployment of internationally sanctioned UN forces to monitor compliance. Since then, this de facto border has been the quietest of Israel’s contested frontiers. These arrangements reinforced Israel’s military superiority and consolidated its hold on the Israeli-occupied sector of the Golan Heights through a program of economic development and civilian settlement. By the late 1980’s, Assad’s efforts to achieve “strategic parity” with Israel had failed. Israel maintained all but complete freedom of action in the skies above Syria (and Lebanon where Syria’s writ ran supreme) for intelligence as well as operational purposes.

This policy fortified an Israeli security doctrine that centered on well-understood,

if not formally agreed-upon, “rules of the game” meant to constrain, if not preempt, the development of Syria’s military capabilities and those of its allies in Lebanon. The most spectacular example of this doctrine was Israel’s September 2007 destruction of a budding nuclear facility near Deir-al-Zor. This action was a telling demonstration that highlighted not only Syria’s abiding, albeit ineffectual, dissatisfaction with its inferior military power in the enduring contest with Israel, but also Israel’s determination to prevent the creation of an effective Syrian conventional or strategic challenge that would enable Syria or its allies to unilaterally alter the rules of the game in their favor.³

During this period, Hafez al Assad also sought to offset Syria’s strategic inferiority by strengthening relations

with Iran and facilitating Iran’s growing military relationship with Hezbollah. The regime was determined to preserve “the independence of Syrian-decision-making,” notwithstanding the preferences of allies or foes. Iran and Hezbollah were Syria’s allies to be sure, but their joint agenda was largely fashioned by Assad and subject to Syria’s requirements as he understood them.

The value of a strong power in Damascus determined to keep Iran and Hezbollah on a short leash was appreciated in Israel. Its policy towards attempts by the Syrian regime to modify the security *status quo*, then as now, has been guided by the same doctrine of military suppression when the unspoken, but nevertheless articulate rules of the game are violated.

This system is inherently unstable and unable to stem an incremental increase in Hezbollah’s military capabilities. However, it has preserved Israel’s military superiority and enabled the

³ Judi Ahri Gross, “Israel destroys anti-aircraft battery in Syria after it fires at IDF jets”, *Times of Israel*, October 16, 2017, available at <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-destroys-anti-aircraft-battery-in-syria-after-it-fires-at-idf-jets/>

continuing contest between Israel on the one hand and Syria, Hezbollah and Iran on the other, to be carried out in a manner that has, for decades, produced calm across the Golan frontier and the continuation of an uneasy contest (far) short of outright war.

This ever-present military competition proceeded in tandem with a decades-long diplomatic effort to establish a formal peace between Syria and Israel that only ended with the outbreak of war in Syria in 2011. Neither party, nor the international community as a whole, was deterred from pursuing this objective by the enduring military subtext of their uneasy relationship or by the dictatorial power wielded by the Assads and the political/security establishment they headed.

In the era before the civil war, the Assad regime was strong but not strong enough to impose its will on Israel, to challenge it militarily, or to rule unchallenged domestically. Its weakness offered opportunities for

the expansion of Iran's and Hezbollah's influence; albeit not to the degree that undermined Syria's own sovereign autonomy or posed a challenge to the rules of the game beyond Israel's (or Syria's) capacity to address.

This system, though far from perfect, answered the essential needs of both Israel and Syria. This multi-faceted relationship characterized Israeli-Syrian relations during the first decade of the 21st century. Although each party found much to complain about, neither party – nor, it should be stressed, Syria's current wartime allies – has thus far considered it worthwhile to repudiate this system of relations, be it diplomatically or by force of arms.

In key respects, this *status quo ante* offered Israel the best of all attainable worlds despite its limitations. Today, it stands as a useful guide to assessing the advantages and shortcomings of the post-war environment.

The Challenges of the New Middle East for Israel

As Israel plans for the war's endgame, the Syrian environment is characterized by the emerging victory of a militarily inferior neighbor well aware of the "rules of the game." Postwar Syria is led by: an exhausted central government preoccupied with imposing its will against internal opponents; a regime that is not always capable of fending off the challenges to sovereign prerogatives by erstwhile friends like Iran and Hezbollah; and a battered leadership unhappily acquiescing in the territorial *status quo* on the Golan.

The strategic weakening of Syria because of the war has created a revised Israeli diplomatic agenda aimed at preserving the territorial conquests of the June 1967 war. In discussions with U.S. and Russian leaders, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has raised the prospect of their recognition of Israel's annexation of these areas.

In contrast to the past, there is no peace treaty context for this demand. The target audience for recognition of this demand, and, more broadly, for construction of a post-war security system that preserves Israel's interests, is not Damascus, but Moscow and Washington.

"The time has come," declared Netanyahu after a meeting with U.S. Secretary of State, John Kerry, in 2016, "for the international community to recognize reality, especially two basic facts. One, whatever is beyond the border, the boundary itself will not change. Two, after 50 years, the time has come for the international community to finally recognize that the Golan Heights will remain under Israel's sovereignty permanently."⁴

On the all-important battlefield, Syria has lost

4 Israeli Prime Minister's Office, "PM Netanyahu's Remarks at the Start of the Weekly Cabinet Meeting", April 17, 2016, available at <http://www.pmo.gov.il/English/MediaCenter/Spokesman/Pages/spokeStart170416.aspx>

whatever limited ability it once had to engage in a strategic battle with Israel for the foreseeable future. In that sense, Israel's strategic supremacy has been fortified, and the postwar reality, for all of its dangers, is a positive one for Israel. If it was not the case before the war, it is certainly the case today that Syria, like Egypt, Jordan, and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) before them (absent the peace agreements that made it possible), has ceded the option of making war against Israel or forcing it to surrender the remaining territorial gains of June 1967.

Israel's attitude to Syria's civil war recalls Menachem Begin's reaction when first informed of Iraq's attack against Iran: "I wish them both – in Syria's case the regime and the opposition – the best of luck," he reportedly said.⁵

⁵ Akiva Eldar, "Israel's Moral Responsibility in Syria", *Al-Monitor*, May 6, 2013, available at <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/fr/originals/2013/05/israel-is-too-silent-on-syrian-tragedies.html>

Key members of Israel's security establishment were not alone in writing Assad's obituary. Yet, as a whole, the Israeli security and intelligence communities have been much less sanguine about or interested in promoting the prospects of a successful challenge to the ruling system than their western allies. Unlike them, Israel did not romanticize the opposition and, fortified by its reading of Syrian history, had little faith in its ability to win the contest against its Islamic and jihadi elements, let alone against the regime itself. Israel was never a true believer in the failed effort to topple the Assad regime, preferring an opportunistic rather than a principled strategy that aimed at deterring the "resistance" front's deployment south of Der'aa and keeping Israel out of harm's way. ISIS, whose capabilities were viewed as a subset of the opposition, was considered far less of a concern.

Then as now, the power of Hezbollah and Iran, as well as ever-present Russian

air power and air defense systems covering Syria and environs, are the keystones of Israeli concerns in postwar Syria. The autonomous ability of Hezbollah and Iran to increase military power arrayed against Israel in the face of Damascus' weakness and Russian indifference or complicity draws a worst-case picture of a perilous post-war environment for Israel. Its realization threatens to undermine the system of deterrence that has so far limited hostilities and kept "operations between wars" on the lower end of the kinetic spectrum. Their hostile deployments define Israel's engagement in what it and its antagonists both see as a zero-sum contest and pose the most pressing post-war challenge to Israel's freedom of action, not only in Syria, but also across the entire northern front, from Naqura to the Yarmouk River.

The war and its aftermath have highlighted the degree to which Israel's relations towards Syria are conditioned by the "operations between

wars" doctrine against Hezbollah on the one hand, and the essential need for coordination with Russia on the other in order to maintain Israel's freedom of action to pursue violations of the rules of the game by Damascus and its allies.

"Operations between wars" – hundreds of which have been carried out by Israel against Hezbollah and Iranian targets in Syria in recent years – is considered by Israel to be a successful strategy for addressing contemporary military challenges by Syria, Iran, and Hezbollah. It nonetheless reflects the ambiguity of the strategic dilemma faced by Israel and its intimate connection to the policy of deterrence. It posits that there is no clean war/peace dichotomy with Israel's enemies, but, rather a spectrum of military operations aimed at enforcing "rules of the game", thus impeding, if not preventing, improvements in Hezbollah's military capabilities, particularly in missile production and accuracy,

and limiting Iran's strategic expansion.

"Our 'operations between wars' have not led to escalation because our enemies understand we're hitting the capabilities that need to be targeted. We carry out many types of operations, some of them violent, and only a small portion becomes known," explained the IDF's chief of staff, Lt. Gen. Gadi Eisenkot recently. "In hindsight, it led to many achievements. We have intelligence and aerial superiority that creates great deterrence for the IDF. It's a fact that we've carried out hundreds of attacks in several types of operations, and there hasn't been any retaliation. It shows the great deterrence the IDF has, while at the same time we understand 'deterrence' is a slippery concept."⁶

⁶ Yoav Zitun, Attila Somfalvi and Gido Ran, "Hundreds of strikes without retaliation – this shows extent of IDF's deterrence", *Ynet News*, October 6, 2017, available at <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-5025234,00.html>

Israel has adopted a two-pronged strategy to address the challenges in today's Syria. One element is aimed at preserving deterrence and constraining Hezbollah and Iran's presence in Syria through assiduous enforcement of well-understood "red lines", and spearheading an international campaign to highlight and sanction their suspect operations in Syria and Lebanon. The second, related element is to win Russian understanding and acquiescence, if not necessarily support, for military and intelligence actions taken in support of the first objective.

The United States, which has traditionally been Israel's foremost advocate and ally, has effectively dealt itself out of the Syria equation.⁷

This extraordinary

⁷ Geoffrey Aronson, "Washington Relegated to Bystander Status in Syria Talks", *The American Conservative*, November 14, 2017, available at <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/washington-relegated-to-bystander-status-in-syria-talks/>

development is, however, outside the scope of this paper.

An authoritative report on Israel's postwar interests explained that: "Israel will ask the Russians to prevent the establishment of Iranian bases in Syria and the renewed activity of a missile production facility in Syria that was hit in a mysterious bombing several weeks ago. Israel will also ask the Russians to ensure that the permanent agreement in Syria would include a return of the Golan Heights to the 1974 disengagement agreements, which require full demilitarization on a five-kilometer strip from the borderline and a dilution of forces inside Syria. Israel will even ask to set the Der'aa-Damascus road as the line which no Iranian would be allowed to cross toward the west."⁸

The satisfaction of these demands – rooted in the

system established before the war – would count as a real diplomatic achievement, and represent Israel's successful effort to reconstruct central elements of a system of relations and deployments that froze the Golan front for almost five decades to Israel's great and enduring advantage.

Notwithstanding the legitimacy of Israeli concerns about the consolidation of a leading Iranian and Hezbollah role in the expansion of an "eastern front" against it in Syria, four important caveats favorable to the restoration of an uneasy stabilization need to be noted.

First, implicit in Israel's demands to reconstitute central elements of the *status quo ante* is recognition of the desirability of the restoration of a strong center in Damascus, capable of limiting the appetite of Iran and Hezbollah, policing the peace across the Golan frontier, and enforcing its will throughout the country. This objective is also shared by the Assad regime and Russia,

⁸ Alex Fishman, "Israel-Iran conflict in Syria reaching point of no return", *Ynet News*, October 8, 2017, available at <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-5025800,00.html>

for whom the reconstitution of the Syrian state within its recognized borders and the reassertion of state power throughout the country are core interests.

Second, by undermining the decades-long effort to maintain Syria's sovereign independence, Assad has ceded considerable authority in the conduct of the war to erstwhile allies. Nevertheless, he shares with Israel a desire to curb their power within his country when the guns fall (relatively) silent. He has yet to miscalculate Israel's determination to maintain the rules of the game, foremost among which is to deter whatever interest Hezbollah/Iran have in establishing permanent bases in order to open another front on the Golan. His televised August 20, 2017 speech revealed that nothing on this score will change:

“Everything about the fate and future of Syria depends 100% on the Syrians, not 99% and some cents, 100%. Even our friends clearly adopt this

discourse. We accept the advice wherever they come from, but the final decision may only be Syrian” he explained.⁹ This view passes for a comforting reassurance in today's Middle East.

Third, Assad's loss of sovereignty has been considerable, but, in the wake of his victory, it is unlikely that he will easily surrender to any party the prerogative to engage Syria in a war against Israel, or even provocative deployments that have been studiously avoided for almost half a century. This includes enabling Hezbollah and Iran's creation of a fighting front across the Golan Heights or acquiescing in the creation of an arms-producing or transport infrastructure that critically violates the “rules of the game”.

9 “Speech by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad on August 20, 2017 to the Syrian Diplomatic Corps”, *Aletho News*, August 21, 2017, available at <https://alethonews.wordpress.com/2017/08/28/speech-by-the-president-of-the-syrian-arab-republic-bashar-al-assad-on-august-20th-2017-to-the-syrian-diplomatic-corps/>

Fourth, Russia has many reasons for leading the fight to preserve the regime in Syria, none of which include empowering Iran or Hezbollah to engage Damascus and Russia in a war of *their* choosing against Israel.

In both of these domains, Israel's opponents have been, as of yet, relatively restrained and circumspect in their deployments. The rules of the game are constantly being tested, notably in Hezbollah's quest for more powerful arms, but that is, after all, the entirely predictable feature of this system. Neither Hezbollah nor Iran has attempted to deploy forces along the Golan frontier in considerable or permanent numbers provocative enough to draw attention. Certainly, nothing like a permanent basing system housing combat brigades or even lesser numbers has been detected or even alleged. During the war, the Golan sector of Syria has been peripheral to every player's main concerns, in large part because of the deterrent value of Israel's

presence. On the whole, it has been the quietest front anywhere in the country, notwithstanding the failure and retreat of UNDOF. Israel's opposition to the expansion of the "resistance axis" along the Golan border in the postwar era has been telegraphed without ambiguity. It appears that the message has been received.

Southern Lebanon – Netanyahu's and Nasrallah's Useful Foil

As the endgame unfolds, both Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Hezbollah's Hassan Nasrallah are calling attention to southern Lebanon. These efforts are not motivated by a desire for another war across their shared border, but rather in order to improve their respective positions in postwar Syria.

In Lebanon, Hezbollah has increased its offensive missile capacity by several orders of magnitude since 2006, while Israel has continued to modernize

its arsenal and undertaken wide-ranging efforts to build border defenses. For all of its problems and mutual ill will, the system established by UNSCR 1701 accurately reflects the desire of all parties to keep the peace, however difficult it might be. Israel and Hezbollah share a hard-earned appreciation of the terrible costs of another war in this arena, understand the uncertain prospects of a definitive victory, and value the hard-won rules of the game.

“A status quo has been established following the Second Lebanon War [2006], in which [Israeli] attacks in Lebanon have only been done in response to incidents,” Eisenkot says. “And security calm has been established on both sides on the border. Our challenge is on the one hand to prevent the emergence of a severe strategic threat such as precision-guided munitions, while on the other hand maintain the security calm that has lasted for 11 years

now, benefiting residents on both sides.”¹⁰

The balance in the south, however, remains inherently fragile. Indeed, notwithstanding the post-2006 armistice, both parties are sure that a next war is inevitable. Today, however, the standoff in the south is being leveraged by each to achieve advantage in the new arena of confrontation in Syria. In postwar Syria, Hezbollah sees an opportunity to reap tangible gains out of what is otherwise a defensive engagement by extending the “resistance front” east of Sheba to the Jordanian border. It sees it both, as a deterrent and as a platform for confronting Israel in the next war. Still preoccupied with more urgent tasks elsewhere, a significant effort by Hezbollah to establish itself anywhere near the Golan

10 Yoav Zitun, Attila Somfalvi and Gido Ran, “Hundreds of strikes without retaliation – this shows extent of IDF’s deterrence”, *Ynet News*, October 6, 2017, available at <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-5025234,00.html>

frontier has yet to materialize. “Hezbollah is the enemy we’re concerned about right now, more than any other enemy around us,” explained Eisenkot, “but the strategic balance massively tips in the IDF’s favor.” Nevertheless, highlighting before the UN and other fora Hezbollah’s extensive deployment in Lebanon enables Israel to increase critical international attention in hopes of minimizing operational improvements by Hezbollah in nearby Syria.¹¹

Iran and Russia in Syria

The expansion of Iran’s military presence in Syria, together with the consolidation of Russian air and sea power there, represent the two strategic dangers Israel will face in the post-war era.

Iran does indeed have a demonstrated interest to test Israel’s opposition to the deployment of hostile forces allied to Teheran along the Golan border. This strategy is one facet of a postwar effort

by Iran to capitalize on its position in Syria as a whole to improve its assets arrayed against Israel. In March 2017, for example Harakat al Nujaba, an Iraqi Shia paramilitary with operational links with Hezbollah and Iran, announced the formation of its “Golan Liberation Brigade”. It was one of the first Iraqi paramilitaries to send fighters to Syria at Iran’s direction in 2013 and has been deployed principally in the Aleppo region.¹²

Netanyahu has warned that, “with or without Syria’s agreement, Iran will attempt to establish a permanent military presence in Syria, both on land and at sea.”¹³ He misses no opportunity to articulate the rules of the game as Israel understands them.

¹² Amir Toumaj, “IRGC-controlled Iraqi militia forms ‘Golan Liberation Brigade’”, *Long War Journal*, March 12, 2017, available at <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/03/ircg-controlled-iraqi-militia-forms-golan-liberation-brigade.php>

¹³ Geoffrey Aronson, “Russia, Israel and Iran braced for the endgame in Syria”, *Al Jazeera*, March 17, 2017, available at <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2017/03/russia-israel-iran-braced-endgame-syria-170316080152634.html>

¹¹ *ibid*

“Israel attacks whoever attacks it. We will not allow Iran to transfer deadly weapons to Hezbollah from Syrian territory, or at least we will do everything in our power to prevent it; and we will not allow Iran to open an additional terrorist front against us in the Golan.”¹⁴

For Israel, Iran and Hezbollah are collaborative elements of the same implacable foe. Yet while Israel’s concerns about Hezbollah center on strictly military concerns, Iran is considered a strategic threat and its interest in establishing maritime and military production facilities in Syria is viewed in that context. Eisenkot stresses that:

“Iran views itself as a regional power. There are 17,000 fighters in Syria today working under Iranian guidance, including 7,000 Hezbollah fighters, 9,000 Shiite militiamen, and 1,000-2,000

¹⁴ Geoffrey Aronson, “Netanyahu to Putin: Keep Iran Away from Golan”, *Middle East Institute*, March 14, 2017, available at <http://www.mei.edu/content/article/netanyahu-putin-keep-iran-away-golan>

Iranians, with Tehran seeking to increase those numbers. Only a few of them are close to our border; most of them are in northwestern, central or eastern Syria. We’re pursuing several different avenues to prevent Iranian entrenchment within 30-40km of the border, and we’re operating in quite a few avenues to minimize the missile accuracy capabilities Iran is trying to give our enemies, Hezbollah and Hamas. We want to get to a point where there is no Iranian influence in Syria, and this is being done in a combined military and diplomatic effort.”¹⁵

Is Russia ‘Doomed to Fail?’ Not! ... Necessarily

The entry of Russian air power and the associated creation of an effective air defense system after September 2015 are the biggest strategic changes produced by the

¹⁵ Yoav Zitun, Attila Somfalvi and Gido Ran, “Hundreds of strikes without retaliation – this shows extent of IDF’s deterrence”, *Ynet News*, October 6, 2017, available at <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-5025234,00.html>

war. They have confounded and marginalized American power and continue to pose the most immediate and wide-ranging threat to the effectiveness of Israel's efforts to constrain the power of its enemies in Syria. Not too long ago the deployment of Russian air power in Syria and the collateral installation of its S400 air defense system would have been seen by Israel as both a strategic threat and an unbearable constraint on its freedom of action. The Russian intervention created the possibility of a nightmare scenario for Israel, defined by a loss of freedom against robust and aggressive Russian air power and defenses offering protection to the full-bodied deployment of "resistance axis forces along the shared frontier. It comes as no surprise that an understanding with Moscow has been at the top of Netanyahu's agenda in the years since Russia entered the battlefield.

The challenge for Israel and Moscow has been to "synchronize watches"

by constructing a new architecture, both diplomatically and operationally, in a way that responds to the core interests of each party. This has been the challenge facing Netanyahu and Putin since the Russian intervention. Although their effort has not been without problems, the challenge has, until now at least, been met.

The potential for Russia to operationally constrain Israel's core policy of enforcing its "rules of the game" presents real dangers to the credibility of Israeli strategy. But Moscow's preeminent position in Syria today also offers Israel opportunities to win Russian support for these very same interests. The record since 2015 strongly suggests that Moscow has chosen not to materially impede continuing Israeli pursuit of this strategy in Syria, despite its capability to do so.

Russian, Syrian, and Israeli aircraft have learned to share a crowded airspace in a manner that enables each to

project power and defend its separate interests. Israel does not contest Russia's aerial campaign against Assad's varied opponents; Russia has not encouraged or contributed to so far muted efforts by its wartime allies to build military infrastructure against Israel along the Golan frontier; and Russia has watched benignly as Israel aggressively continues to act against Syrian infractions of the rules of the game and actively impedes the transfer of advanced weaponry from Syria or Iran to Hezbollah's control.

Russia has forged strong operational ties with Hezbollah and Iran. However, this policy does not extend to its endorsement of a militant regional strategy against Israel, in the Golan, or elsewhere. Neither Moscow nor Damascus, for that matter, has shown any interest in empowering its wartime allies to create a military infrastructure in the Golan with the capacity to independently engage Syria or

Russia in a war against Israel.¹⁶

Putin prefers to praise the "efficient mechanism of cooperation" established with Israel. Investing either Iran or Hezbollah with the power to conduct anti-Israeli policies in Syria, independent of Moscow or Damascus, would strike at the heart of the system Putin has so effectively constructed.

Despite the focus on cooperation, Netanyahu's efforts to win unambiguous Russian guarantees to limit Iran and its proxies are bound to be disappointed. Putin rejects Netanyahu's often-apocalyptic warnings about Iran. When for example Netanyahu warned Putin that "today, there is an attempt by Persia's heir, Iran, to destroy the state of the Jews,"¹⁷ Putin

16 Geoffrey Aronson, "Russia, Israel and Iran braced for the endgame in Syria", *Al Jazeera*, March 17, 2017, available at <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2017/03/russia-israel-iran-braced-endgame-syria-170316080152634.html>

17 "Rejecting Purim Spiel, Putin tells Netanyahu to stop dwelling on past", *Times of Israel*, March 10, 2017, available at <https://www.timesofisrael.com/rejecting-purim-spiel-putin-tells-netanyahu-to-stop-dwelling-on-past/>

remarked dryly that the events described by Netanyahu had taken place “in the fifth century BCE. We now live in a different world. Let us talk about that now.”¹⁸

For its part, Israel has little interest in formally binding itself to any detailed understanding with Moscow or to endorse whatever understandings are reached by Moscow and the “resistance axis”. It is far more advantageous for Israel to operate in the arena of ambiguity created by the absence of a comprehensive agreement. Netanyahu will be satisfied if Moscow simply stays out of Israel’s way.

Nevertheless, the competing interests that Russia is balancing in Syria may prove difficult to maintain. As the fighting winds down, Russia is increasingly expanding its role as an arbiter among enemies and erstwhile allies, a role that offers a compelling rationale for its continuing influence in Syria. Playing this role, however, will exact a price. If Putin has been able to contain

the contradictions of a policy that accommodates Israel as well as its enemies until now, this balancing act may not be so successful in the next phase of the struggle for Syria.

Geoffrey Aronson

Geoffrey Aronson is chairman and co-founder of The Mortons Group and a non-resident scholar at the Middle East Institute in Washington D.C. For more than four decades, he has been engaged as a commentator and participant in key political and security issues in the Middle East.

18 *ibid*