ISSUE BRIEF

IRAN VERSUS ISRAEL: THE SHADOW WAR IN SYRIA

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)

What started out as the Syrian civil war has fast become the Syrian war and the Tiyas Military Airbase or T-4 as it's known seems to be at the heart of it. On April 30, 2018, Israel demonstrated an escalation in its shadow war in Syria against Iran, with an overnight airstrike against the military base that hosts Iranian-backed mercenaries, killing 26 pro-government fighters, mostly Iranians.[1] Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah said that the airstrike was a "historic mistake"[2] and puts Israel in a state of "direct confrontation"[3] with Iran. "This is unprecedented in seven years: that Israel directly targets Iran's Revolutionary Guards,"[4] he said.

The most recent attack on the Syrian air base near the desert town of Palmyra in central Syria drew new attention to a conflict between Iran and Israel that has been steadily increasing in intensity while mostly hidden in the shadows of Syria's civil war. T-4 is Syria's largest airbase complete with Soviet-era fortifications and is presently the focus of a possibly cataclysmic war, between Israel and Iran because it is where Iran has established a military foothold. "The chances of an escalation into a

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[1] "Iranians Killed in Alleged Israeli Strike on Military Site in Syria," *The Jerusalem Post | JPost.com*, May 01, 2018.

[2] Jack Khoury, "Hezbollah Chief: Israel Made 'stupid, Historic Mistake' with Syria Strike, Entered into Direct Conflict with Iran," *Haaretz.com*, April 13, 2018.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

full-scale military conflict in Syria are higher than ever before," Israel's former military intelligence chief, Amos Yadlin stated after the attack.[5]

Israeli officials have on several occasions said that one of their main objectives in Syria is to keep Iran in check, and hence, safeguard the border with Israel. This attack came in the thick of rising tensions between Iran and Israel after an airstrike earlier on April 9, on the same Syrian airbase. While Iran and Russia blamed Israel for that attack, which killed seven Iranian military personnel, Israel did not confirm or deny it.[6] The attack came a day after the US, France and UK vowed to respond to the alleged chemical weapons attack by Assad in Eastern Ghouta. On February 10, the airbase had already seen the largest strike to date, when an Iranian drone launched by Quds Force unit operating out of the T-4 airbase was shot down after it penetrated northern Israel airspace.[7]

Iran has long been a close affiliate of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Both countries see themselves as part of the "Axis of Resistance,"[8] a group opposed to growing American and Israeli power in the Middle East. Agitated that Iran is using the cover of the war to bolster its allies in Syria, Israel has carried out at least 100 cross-border strikes, although until the recent attack they have always targeted Iran's proxies, including weapon delivery convoys to Hezbollah. In August 2017, the outgoing commander of the Israeli Air Force, Maj. Gen. Amir Eshel, had also acknowledged as much.[9]

Israel's Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu has long desired to disrepute Tehran, which he brands a "terrorist regime". [10]In a presentation on April 30, he declared that Israeli intelligence had uncovered Iran lying about its nuclear weapons program.[11] The Mossad operation in Iran was revealed less than two weeks before Donald Trump decided on May 9 to opt out of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) deal and reinstate US sanctions on Iran.

There is no question that tension between Israel and Iran is at its climax, and for the first time in their histories, the two countries have recently clashed openly and directly. But Iran, for all its fist-shaking has not retaliated - yet. True, Iran doesn't want to upset the US and its allies right now since

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5   Oliver Holmes, "The Syrian Airbase at the Heart of a Potential Israel-Iran War," *The Guardian*, May 01, 2018.

6   "Syria Conflict: Israel Blamed for Attack on Airfield," *BBC News,* April 09, 2018.

7   Isabel Kershner, Anne Barnard, and Eric Schmitt, "Israel Strikes Iran in Syria and Loses a Jet," *The New York Times*, February 10, 2018.

8   Payam Mohseni and Hussein Kalout, "Iran's Axis of Resistance Rises," *Foreign Affairs*, January 25, 2017.

9   Amos Harel, "'We Prevented Israel from Going to War': Outgoing Air Force Chief on Iran, Gaza and the Conflicts Ahead," *Haaretz.com*, April 24, 2018.

10 Amos Harel15 et al., "Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Speech to the UN General Assembly," *Haaretz.com*, January 10, 2018.

11 Damien McElroy, "Mossad's Tehran Intelligence Trove was a Risky coup ," *The National*, May 02, 2018.

its priority at the moment is protecting its nuclear program. All the while, cashing in on this is Israel which is acting unreservedly in Syria's sky, thinking Iran would be afraid to react.

But what happens if it miscalculates?

What happens if Iran decides, contrary to everything to toss Hezbollah into the inferno that is Syria today. Hezbollah with its extensive operational experience and even more extensive arsenal could inflict real damage on the Israeli home front, and ground fighting in Lebanon would cost the Israeli army dearly. A war like that could also involve Hamas in Gaza. So far, Israel has managed to establish and maintain coordination with the Russian air force to prevent hostility in the Syrian skies. But what happens if Moscow decides to resist orders from Tel Aviv?

Is Israel merely antagonizing Iran to react before May 12 or is this just part of a very well executed plan to facilitate the greater Israel project which aims at weakening and eventually fracturing neighboring Arab states as part of a US-Israeli expansionist project.

The motive is irrelevant as long as the endgame is the same.

It remains to be seen whether Iran will take the bait.