Cover Image: Al Quneitra by Ed Bramley
Introduction

The conflict in Syria has generated heated debate and controversy. As a result, it has also produced an enormous amount of analysis and opinion that has sought to describe the roots of the conflict, its moral and political significance, and to prescribe solutions to its amelioration.

One of the key dimensions of the war in Syria has been the role of outside actors. Much ink has been spilt in examining the intervention of the United States and Russia, along with the role of regional actors such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar, in shaping the contours and outcome of developments on the ground. There is one Middle East regional power, however, that has not received sufficient attention in terms of its role and policy orientation toward the war in Syria—the state of Israel.

In this paper, Elizabeth Tsurkov, a doctoral candidate at Princeton University, seeks to fill this void. Based on a close reading of internal Israeli politics, she examines the debate within Israel on Syria, and the national security concerns that inform this debate. She also documents, based on extensive research, the specifics of Israeli intervention from 2011 to 2019.

Our Center for Middle East Studies is proud to publish this paper. We have had a longstanding interest in Syria from the inception of the uprising in 2011 until today. Our mandate as a center is to promote new research and understanding on the societies and politics of the Middle East. This paper helps us achieve our goal. We hope readers will benefit from its publication.
Israeli policy toward Syria underwent changes throughout the Syrian uprising and subsequent civil war. This pertained to the extent of direct Israeli involvement in the war. The principles guiding the policy, however, remained fixed, focusing on deterring perceived threats to Israel’s security from the Syrian arena as well as exploiting developments in Syria to improve Israel’s international image and to legitimize its occupation and annexation of the Golan Heights.

Israel's leadership perceives its policy toward Syria as neutral, since Israel did not adopt a position on the outcome of the civil war and did not intervene in the war to ensure a preferred outcome. The warring sides in Syria, however, often perceive Israel as aligned against their interests, and both can point to Israeli decisions and policies to bolster their claims. This paper aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of Israeli government policies with regards to Syria from 2011 to 2019, the logic behind them, and their effect on the ground.

Israeli Policies Toward the Baath Regime Prior to the 2011 Uprising

Officially, Israel and Syria have been in a state of war since Israel's founding in 1948. Despite this, since the outbreak of the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Israel's border with Syria was its quietest. While avoiding direct confrontation with Israel, Hafez al-Assad's regime cultivated a relationship with Iran and allowed the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps to establish the militant Shi'a organization Hezbollah in Lebanon in 1982, and subsequently funneled weapons to it. The maintenance of a quiet border with Israel while indirectly supporting Hezbollah led Israeli policy-makers to view the Assad regime as “the devil we know,” a phrase famously coined by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.1

During the 1990s and 2000s, several Israeli prime ministers conducted futile rounds of peace negotiations with the Assad regime. The negotiations failed, in part, due to poor political timing, disagreements over the demarcation of the June 4, 1967 line--to which Israel was expected to withdraw in exchange for peace with Syria--and Syria's refusal to sever ties with Iran and Hezbollah.2 While conducting negotiations and between negotiation rounds, the indirect--and at times direct, but undeclared--conflict between Israel and Syria persisted. The Assad regime continued to transfer weapons to Hezbollah, and Israel occasionally carried out attacks in Syria, most notably the assassination of Imad Mughniyeh, a high-ranking Hezbollah commander, in Damascus in 2008, and the strike on the al-Kibar nuclear facility in Deir Ezzor in 2009.

Israel’s Policies Following the Outbreak of the Syrian Uprising

Fear of an “Islamist Winter”

Following the outbreak of the Arab uprisings, Israel's conservative political and military leadership adopted a cautious approach, driven by the instinct to preempt threats rather than identify opportunities. The IDF’s Home Front Commander, General Eyal Eisenberg, voiced this position in a September 2011 speech in which he presented the IDF’s assessment that a threat of a regional war has

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increased as a result of the destabilizing effects of the uprisings, stating, “they [the uprisings] are called the Arab Spring, but it may turn into a radical Islamic winter.” Brigadier General Itay Brun, head of the IDF’s Intelligence Directorate, the main Israeli body in charge of formulating intelligence assessments, stated in a speech the same month that “it is possible that the political systems that will be instituted in the Arab world will be more open and pluralistic, but there are still significant impediments to the emergence of Western-style democracy” in the Arab world. Brun added that while the protesters across the Arab world do not have a clear political ideology, “hostility toward Israel is already serving as a common denominator” among Arab Spring protesters. In March 2012, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu also voiced concerns about the rise of Islamists due to uprisings across the Arab world, similar to the events of the 1979 revolution in Iran.

Driven by this fearful and cautious approach, Israel avoided, throughout the entire Syrian civil war, adopting a position regarding the Assad regime. Netanyahu condemned the regime for its human rights atrocities but he did not call for Assad to step down or for international intervention to remove him from power. The Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs advocated for adopting such a position, but was overruled by the prime minister’s office, whichargued in internal deliberations that such a statement would serve Assad’s narrative that Israel was among the powers conspiring against the “resistance” regime in Damascus.

Chemical Weapons

Israel has long perceived Syrian chemical weapon stockpiles as a threat. After August 2012, when U.S. President Barack Obama stated that the use of chemical weapons in Syria would be a “red line,” Israel seized on the statement to push for U.S. action against the regime. In 2013, as the Assad regime began utilizing chemical weapons in low-casualty attacks that the Obama administration preferred to ignore, officials leaked intelligence concerning the movement of chemical weapons in Syria and attacks perpetrated by the regime.

In late August and September 2013, after the Assad regime carried out its deadliest chemical weapons attack, blatantly violating President Obama’s “red line,” Israel supported a limited American retaliation against the Assad regime, seeing the enforcement of American “red lines” as important for deterring Iran from developing nuclear weapons. As the Obama administration wavered in its commitment to enforce the red line, Israeli officials quickly sought to exploit the situation to achieve a different

3 Yoav Zeitun, “General Eisenberg: The Likelihood of an All-Out War has Increased,” Ynet, September 5, 2011. Accessible in Hebrew: https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-418266,00.html
2013: Israeli Red Lines and Aid

In the first two years of the uprising, Israel maintained a policy of non-intervention in events unfolding in Syria. This policy was predicated on the view that the uprising and subsequent civil war were a domestic affair, unlikely to have direct effects on Israel’s security.14 Israel’s intelligence community initially assessed that Assad would be toppled quickly.15 Past experience in Lebanon, where Israel intervened in an ongoing civil war and failed to shape its desired outcome, also influenced the thinking of Israeli leaders.16 In 2013, as fighting moved closer to the occupied Golan Heights, Israel publicly articulated a series of “red lines” that would lead it to intervene in Syria to protect its interests, namely: cross-fence fire on the Golan Heights or Israel; transfer of “game-changing” weaponry to Lebanese Hezbollah such as precision-guided missiles, anti-aircraft weapons and chemical weapons; and the establishment of offensive infrastructure by the Assad regime and its allies in areas abutting the Golan Heights fence.17

In late 2012, IDF human intelligence unit, known as Unit 504, established initial contact with rebels operating around Breiqa in Quneitra following the personal initiative of an IDF officer to converse with rebels he saw across the fence.18 On February 16, 2013, a rebel commander who had established a relationship with Israeli intelligence asked for the evacuation into Israel of seven of his fighters injured in fighting regime forces. This was the first such evacuation. Under the initial parameters of the deal, rebels provided Israel with intelligence and protected its border in exchange for medical care and limited humanitarian aid to rebel-held villages in Quneitra and limited military assistance to local rebels in southern Syria.19 The assistance was intended to engender goodwill among Syrian civilians and rebels and ensure stability along the border.20 This initial limited medical assistance for fighters only would later turn into a much larger humanitarian project through which almost 12,000 Syrian rebels

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15 Amos Harel and Avi Issacharoff, “Senior IDF Official: Assad’s Fall Will Take Longer than We Had Expected,” Haaretz, April 30, 2012. Accessible in Hebrew: https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/world/1.1696336
and civilians received medical care in Israeli hospitals and clinics in the Golan Heights.\textsuperscript{21} Shortly prior to this, in 2012, year, Israel began carrying out airstrikes to disrupt weapon shipments to Hezbollah through Syria.\textsuperscript{22}

**Hasbara**

Israeli media outlets immediately reported on the initial entry of Syrian patients to Israel and offered sporadic and lacunae coverage of additional medical evacuations into Israel.\textsuperscript{23} Initially, Israeli officials were hesitant about commenting on the operation, but apparently realizing the public relations potential, they began granting media outlets access to the Syrian patients, as long as their identity was concealed, to ensure their safety upon return to Syria.\textsuperscript{24} As Israel's aid operations expanded, so did the public relations campaign around them, with the IDF producing materials in multiple languages about the aid brought into Syria through the Golan and the patients treated in Israel.\textsuperscript{25}

**Solidifying Control of the Occupied Golan**

Another policy objective of Israel's throughout the war has been to increase international acceptance of the occupation and annexation of the Golan Heights, captured by Israel in 1967. Until 2019, no country has recognized Israeli annexation of the Golan. Since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, exploiting the tumult in Syria and international pariah status of the Assad regime, Israeli officials made public statements and symbolic steps, such as holding the first cabinet meeting in the occupied Golan, intended to signal that Israel will not relinquish control over the territory.\textsuperscript{26} Privately, Israel pushed the Obama and Trump administrations to recognize Israel's annexation.\textsuperscript{27} These efforts yielded the unprecedented recognition by the Trump administration of the Golan's annexation in March 2019.\textsuperscript{28} On the ground in the Golan, Israel increased efforts to integrate the Druze community into Israel by encouraging taking up Israeli citizenship and participating in local elections, held for the first time in Druze Golan communities in October 2018.\textsuperscript{29}
Pushing the U.S. to Intervene

In 2013-2015, as Islamist and jihadist groups gained prominence among Syria’s armed opposition and Iran increased its involvement in Syria, disagreements emerged among Israeli policy-makers regarding the preferred outcome of the war. Some inside the IDF and the political establishment saw the jihadist groups as the main threat to Israel and wished to see Assad regain control of Syria. Others saw the regime’s close ties to Iran and Hezbollah and their growing influence in Syria as the main threat. These disagreements manifested in contradictory leaks regarding Israel’s positions toward the Assad regime.

While Israeli officials were largely unified in their belief that it is not Israel’s role to intervene in Syria, some supported a U.S. intervention to back the Syrian rebels or punish the Assad regime for its excesses. When Israeli officials expected the Assad regime to be toppled by mid-2013, Israeli officials pushed the U.S. for greater engagement with the armed opposition to allow the Obama administration to shape the outcome of the war. With the radicalization of the opposition and growing Iranian involvement in Syria on behalf of the Assad regime, some Israeli officials preferred the war to continue, seeing the as and harmful to the two sides, both of which are antagonistic to Israel.

In mid-2013, a secret operations’ room comprised of several Western intelligence services including the CIA, Jordanian intelligence, and Arab Gulf intelligence services known as the Military Operations Command (MOC) began funneling aid to Free Syrian Army factions operating in southern Syria. In early 2014, the MOC significantly expanded the provision of aid and also began providing training to Free Syrian Army fighters. This qualitative and quantitative expansion in assistance was accompanied by the formation of the Southern Front, which unified dozens of Free Syrian Army factions operating in southern Syria. Through control of the disbursement of salaries and weapons, the MOC was able to institute a semblance of unified, but foreign, control over the Southern Front. The absence of Salafi or jihadist groups in the Southern Front ranks led Israeli officials to see the grouping as a positive force that should be supported. However, Israeli efforts to convince the Obama administration to increase support for the Southern Front were unsuccessful.

Protecting the Druze of Hader

From 2014 to mid-2018, only a small sliver of territory along the fence with the occupied Golan remained under the control of the Assad regime. This area included the Druze town of Hader (also written Hadir, Hadher). Unlike Druze in Sweidaa’ who largely evaded military service and chose a policy of neutrality in the civil war, the Druze of Hader joined pro-regime militias in large numbers.

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36 Ibid.
37 Thus, for example, the MOC was able to halt the Southern Front’s June 2015 offensive on the al-Tha’ala airbase in Sweida by cutting off the salaries of combatants. The MOC was also able to prevent most Daraa factions from participating in offensives in Daraa city after mid-2015. Interviews with Daraa rebels and rebel commanders, 2015-2017.
39 Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, “More On The Druze Militias in Southern Syria,” Syria Comment, November 15, 2013. Accessible online:
became a recruitment and staging ground for Hezbollah networks. Samir Kuntar, a Druze Lebanese militant convicted of killing an Israeli family and two Israeli policemen in northern Israel in 1979 and subsequently released in a swap between Israel and Hezbollah, led this network until Israel assassinated him in 2015. At least two attacks against Israeli forces originated from the town.

Despite the presence of Hezbollah networks in Hader and failed Israeli overtures to its residents, Israel warned the Sunni rebels against attacking the town, both in private and in public. This decision to protect a town with a Hezbollah presence demonstrates the influence of the Druze community on Israeli decision-making. This influence, to a large extent, stems from the political power of Israel’s Druze community, which includes in its ranks many voters of right-wing (ruling) parties, elected officials, and high-ranking IDF commanders.

Russia Intervenes

Russia’s decision to directly intervene in Syria’s war in September 2015 was initially welcomed by some among Israel’s leadership who hoped that Russia would be able to draw Assad away from Iran’s orbit. Assad, however, exploited the intervention to play Iran and Russia off one another to extract as much assistance to achieve his military objectives. Shortly before Russia’s intervention, Israel and Russia established a deconfliction mechanism to allow Israeli aircrafts to continue operating in Syria’s airspace. The details of the agreement were never disclosed. The Israeli newspaper Maariv published the most comprehensive outline of the deal, referring to S-300 and S-400 batteries operated by Russian personnel in Syria: “Israel will inform Russia ahead of time of its intention to operate in Syria’s skies. The notification will be general and will not include operational details. In exchange, Russia will not scramble its jets toward [Israeli] Air Force jets and will not operate its air defense systems in Syria, including the advanced S-300 and S-400 batteries.” Under this deal, Israel could carry out strikes against Iranian targets in Syria, including weapon shipments to Lebanese Hezbollah as they pass through Syria to Lebanon. However, the Kremlin, interested in stabilizing the rule of Bashar al-Assad, warned Israel against attacking Assad regime targets.

Recognizing Russia’s growing influence in Syria, Israeli officials strove to establish a close working relationship with Russia’s military and political leadership. Israel dispatched dozens of high-ranking delegations to Russia, including multiple meetings between Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu and

http://www.aymennjawad.org/14059/more-on-the-druze-militias-in-southern-syria


46 Maria Tsvetkova, “Israel, Russia to coordinate military action on Syria: Netanyahu,” Reuters, September 21, 2015.


Russian President Vladimir Putin. In these meetings, held in 2016 and 2017, Israeli officials pressed the Russians to protect what the Israeli government perceives as its vital interests in Syria—particularly, preventing the establishment of long-term Iranian presence in Syria and halting weapon transfers to Hezbollah. Israeli officials conducted similar meetings with Obama and Trump administration officials. Russia appeared disinterested or unable to limit Iranian influence in Syria, while the Obama and Trump administrations largely disengaged from Syria.49

**Regime Takeover of Southern Syria**

Bolstered by military support from Russia and Iran, the Assad regime was able to reverse the course of the war starting in 2016. Multiple rebel-held pockets and ISIS-held areas, including eastern Aleppo, northern Homs, the Qalamoun mountains, Deir Ezzor, eastern Ghouta, and the Wadi Barada region were reclaimed by the Assad regime from 2016 to 2018. In the summer of 2017, it became apparent that the regime would eventually set its sights on southern Syria. Ahead of the looming offensive, Israel attempted to secure its interests, chief among them preventing the presence of Iranian forces and Iranian-backed militias in southern Syria. Israel demanded a 60-kilometer buffer zone in which Iranian forces will not be allowed to operate.50

**Growing Involvement**

Initially, Russia and the Trump administration appeared unresponsive to Israeli demands to prevent the presence of Iranian forces in southern Syria.51 Sensing that Russia and the U.S. would not protect Israeli interests in Syria, in the summer of 2017, Israel shifted to a more interventionist policy, striking Iranian targets deeper inside Syria and with greater frequency. In addition, Israel increased the provision of humanitarian assistance to communities in southwestern Syria and rebel groups in control of these areas.52

While Israel publicized the humanitarian assistance, its military aid to rebel groups remained covert. The Israeli censor prevented the publication of reports on Israel’s military assistance in Israeli media, unless citing “foreign sources.”53 According to Syrian rebels, journalists, and civilians in southern Syria, Israeli military assistance to the rebels reached at least 12 different groups operating in Quneitra, western Daraa and the southwestern outskirts of the Damascus countryside, which comprised several thousands of fighters. The assistance included the provision of light weapons, vehicles, salaries, cash to purchase weapons on the black market, and medical treatment. Groups that were engaged in the fight against the local ISIS affiliate, Jaysh Khalid bin al-Walid, also received support in the form of Israeli missile and drone strikes against ISIS leaders, vehicles, and fortifications. Groups conducting offensive operations against the Assad regime did not receive similar support.54 At the same time, Israeli officials made it clear that they were not opposed to Assad staying in power, merely his connection to Iran.55

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Efforts by Syrian opposition activists inside and outside of the country, rebel commanders, and local councils in southern Syria to encourage Israel to expand its involvement in the war in a manner than would shift the balance of power in their favor were unsuccessful. Israeli military and humanitarian assistance, even at its height, was highly limited.62 Rebels in southern Syria described being unable to secure support from Israel. Israeli assistance was geographically limited to Quneitra, western Daraa, and the southwestern outskirts of Damascus. Proposals by locals in Quneitra and Syrian exiled activists to allow for the export of agricultural produce from southern Syria to Israel were rebuffed by the latter. Israel also refused to implement a No-Fly Zone in southern Syria, despite the pleas of Syrians based in Quneitra and Daraa as well as in exile.57

**Cutting a Deal**

Israel’s more interventionist policy apparently convinced Moscow to promise to prevent the presence of Iranian forces 85 kilometers from the Golan in exchange for Israeli acquiescence with the regime’s takeover of southern Syria.58 The agreement was still being negotiated as the regime, in June 2018, launched its offensive on southern Syria, focusing initially on eastern Daraa, the area most distant from Israel. Iranian-backed forces participated in the offensive, but the majority of forces were Syrian.59 Little fighting occurred on the ground, and the entire rebel-held south was retaken in a month, after rebels realized they would not receive U.S. assistance or Israeli protection.60 Rebels preferred to surrender to the regime to spare their towns, families, and their own lives.61 A minority among the rebels operating in the south preferred to be displaced to the last rebel-held pocket in northern Syria, rather than surrender.62

**Internal Debate and Abandoning the Rebels**

The decision to reach an agreement with Russia and allow the Assad regime to retake southern Syria was a controversial one inside the Israeli establishment. While all within the establishment shared the view that Assad was winning the war, some thought it would be possible to delay this takeover to achieve a greater concession from Russia and the Assad regime in the form of removing Iranian forces from all of Syria, not just the south.63 Others, and particularly the IDF’s top echelon and the Northern Command involved in the provision of aid to southern Syria, opposed the deal due to fear for the fate of the communities and rebels who relied on Israeli support.64 As part of the negotiations with the

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56 Western donors of humanitarian assistance provided much greater quantities of aid, while the MOC, when operational until the end of 2017, provided more materiel. Interviews with rebels in southern Syria, 2017-2018.


58 Yoav Zeitoun, “Despite the Proclamations - the Iranians are not Far from Israel’s Border,” Ynet News, August 3, 2018. Accessible in Hebrew: https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-5321273,00.html


61 Interviews with “reconciled” rebels, July 2018.

62 A little over 10,000 individuals were displaced from Daraa, including many civilians. The total fighting force of the Southern Front alone (which excluded jihadist groups) was estimated to be about 30,000. See: “Who are the rebels in southern Syria?”, AFP, June 29, 2016. Accessible online https://www.france24.com/en/20180629-who-are-rebels-southern-syria And “The 5th convoy of Daraa’s displaced people arrives in the outskirts of Idlib province few hours after its departure from Jasim area in the north of Daraa province,” Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, August 12, 2018. Accessible online: http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=100235


Kremlin, Israel requested that those who received its assistance not be punished. Israel also requested that rebels it supported, particularly Forsan al-Jolan, be allowed to remain in their homes and operate as a local force, similar to a deal reached for a rebel group previously supported by Israel in Beit Jinn, near the Hermon Mountain.65 Eventually, the elements within the Israeli establishment supportive of disengaging from southern Syria prevailed, to the disappointment and shock of Syrian rebels and civilians in the south who came to perceive Israel as an ally.66 Israel largely ignored pleas by commanders and fighters supported by Israel to be allowed to cross to safety in Israel, with the exception of eight rebel commanders and their families.67

Narrowing Space to Maneuver

On September 17, 2018, responding to yet another Israeli strike, this one near Lattakia, the regime's air defenses accidentally shot down a Russian jet, killing the 15 crew members onboard.68 The Kremlin, increasingly concerned about the destabilizing effect on the Assad regime by Israeli air strikes, seized the opportunity to impose new constraints on Israel's ability to operate in Syria's skies.69 After years of delay, Russia supplied the Syrian Army with batteries of the advanced S-300 missile defense system, which until September 2018, were only used by Russian forces in Syria. Those Russian forces, as part of the agreement with Israel, would switch off their radars when receiving notification from Israel about a planned Israeli attack. Since the shootdown incident, in a change in policy, Russian forces no longer switch off the radars, but also do not lock them on Israeli jets operating in Syria's air space.70 Russia has demanded that Israel provide longer notification times ahead of military actions and the general location of operation, a demand Israel fears will allow the Iranians to hide the targets.71

The S-300 systems were scheduled to be handed over to Syrian forces in March 2019, following the completion of training.72 Israeli fighter pilots have trained to evade S-300 systems in Cyprus,73 but thus far have not had to test those skills in the battlefield.

As Israel attempts to navigate the growing Russian-imposed constraints on its freedom to operate in Syria, Iran appears to be shifting its operation in Syria to increasingly rely on Syrian militiamen and fighters and their insertion into regime military structures. Russia's desire to bolster the Syrian state—at the expense of militias—has led to the dissolution of multiple militias or reductions in their ranks, including ones backed by Iran.74 However, Syrian opposition outlets continue to report about

67 Interviews with rebels supported by Israel, July 2018 and May 2019.
recruitment drives by IRGC-backed militias, such as Lebanese Hezbollah and Brigade 313.75 At least some of these forces are embedded in Syrian military units to avoid their detection by Russia, particularly in southern Syria, where Russia has promised to remove Iranian forces.76 This deepening Russian integration with Syrian forces makes it more challenging for Israel to identify and precisely target only Iranian forces in a way that avoids destabilizing the Assad regime and violating Russia’s red lines.

Following the December 2018 announcement by President Trump on the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Syria, which was widely interpreted as a boon for Iran,77 Israeli officials reiterated that Israel will continue to strike Iranian targets in Syria.78 Israeli jets continue to carry out strikes against transfers of weapons to Hezbollah, a policy that predates 2011.79

Conclusion

Throughout the Syrian uprising and civil war, Israel avoided intervening in Syria in a way that could alter the trajectory of the conflict. Even at the height of its intervention, in late 2017 to early 2018, Israeli air strikes on Iranian targets and assistance to various rebel groups did not aim to alter the balance of power in the war, but only to protect Israel’s core national security interests. Israel’s leadership, scarred by the failed attempt to affect the outcome of the Lebanese civil war and achieve a peace treaty with Lebanon, wished to limit its direct involvement in Syria. Efforts by Syrian opposition factions and activists to increase Israeli involvement in the war were repeatedly rebuffed by Israeli policy-makers.

Instead, Israel sought to influence the trajectory of the war indirectly, through dialogue with the United States and the Kremlin. The decision of the Obama and Trump administrations to gradually disengage from Syria limited Israel’s ability to affect the reality on the ground. At the same time, dialogue with Russia achieved only partial results--granting Israel the right to operate against Iranian targets only in Syria, but not in a way that would destabilize the Assad regime.

The main losers of the Syrian war are undoubtedly Syria’s civilians, who have lost their lives, limbs, homes, and sources of livelihood. Israel, however, is emerging as one of the war’s main losers, as the Assad regime reasserts itself, more reliant on Iran than ever, and protected by Russia, whose first priority is to stabilize the Assad regime, not counter Iranian influence in the country. The decision by President Trump to disengage from the Syrian conflict, manifested in the decision to withdraw American troops in late 2018, decreased Israel’s room to maneuver further. Looking ahead, Israel’s involvement in post-war Syria will likely be limited to strikes against Iran assets and diplomatic engagement with Russia. Through strikes on Iranian targets, which are carried out in an increasingly constrained operational environment, Israel is trying to dissuade Iran from investing in the construction of permanent bases in Syria and the maintenance of an active supply route running through Syria. In addition, Israel is engaging with Moscow in the hope that Russia will be interested and able to convince the Assad regime to reduce Iran’s foothold in Syria. Even if these efforts are successful, which appears unlikely, Israel in 2019 is facing a militarily empowered and politically emboldened Hezbollah.
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