

Analysis Hezbollah Turning Syria Villages on Israel Border Into Fortresses

A year ago, Russia promised to keep Iran away from the border. We agreed on Iran, not on its proxies, Moscow tells a concerned Israel.



A United Nations observation post at the Quneitra crossing on the Israel-Syria border, July 18, 2019. Gil Eliahu

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- **Syria: Israeli missiles strike Quneitra, near the border**
- **In a major shift, Israel twice struck Iranian targets in Iraq 'using F-35'**

Compared to Gaza, the Iranian front – which to Israeli eyes stretches from the Persian Gulf through Iraq and into Syria and Lebanon – is bustling with action. Throughout July, reports attributed two attacks in Iraq to Israel and at least three other attacks in southern Syria, which were directed against the military apparatus Hezbollah is building on the Syrian side of the border on the Golan Heights – and in one case included the killing of a local activist.

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The “campaign between the wars” is continuing with relative momentum, even if most of it is being conducted under the radar and has not received almost any detailed coverage in real-time. What is going on in Iraq reached the headlines in Israel with a delay of almost two weeks, and only after Arab media outlets reported on two attacks by the Israel Air Force in western Iraq. One of the reports

even claimed that the attack was carried out by Israel's new F-35s.

Even if the information is correct in general, as usual, it is recommended to take the details with a grain of salt. Not every attack needs to be carried out using the most advanced technological means. The IDF's military intelligence directorate highlighted Iraq as the next arena for the military campaign back in 2018.

The Iranians are trying to translate their regional arc of influence into a real land corridor - along with the arms smuggling network they are operating, alongside their air and sea efforts, on the Tehran-Baghdad-Damascus-Beirut line on the ground.

In addition, it seems Tehran is making an effort to deploy some of its longer-range missiles in western Iraq with the help of the Shi'ite militias there, with the goal of distancing them from Israeli capabilities to attack them, which have been demonstrated in the past in northern and eastern Syria.

At the same time, Israel has continued to fight its holding action near the border on the Golan Heights. A series of attacks attributed to the IDF there illustrates again how ridiculous it was to rely on Russia's promise, about a year ago, to keep an Iranian presence away from the border in return for Israel not interfering in the operation by the Assad regime to retake control of southern Syria.

At the time, the Russians spoke about demilitarization of 70 or 80 kilometers between Iranian forces and the border with Israel - and Netanyahu supporters boasted about his "unprecedented diplomatic achievement." In reality, it was revealed very quickly that Hezbollah was actually more active in the region and the organization was reestablishing its terror networks in southern Syria.

The head of the IDF's Operations Directorate, Maj. Gen. Aharon Haliwa, was in Moscow in the middle of last month for a work meeting that the IDF described as excellent. Nonetheless, when Israel came to complain to the Russians about the Hezbollah presence on the Syrian side of the Golan Heights, they were told that the promises concerned only the Iranians themselves, and not their agents. Given these circumstances, it seems Moscow has made peace with Israel's limited military actions against the Iranians and Hezbollah in Syria, as long as it does not endanger the stability of the regime in Damascus.

As Haaretz reported in February, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards have

distanced themselves for now, under the pressure of the Israeli attacks, from the Damascus Airport to the T-4 airbase near Homs. But Hezbollah operations in the villages on the Golan have intensified. The Israeli actions may be only touching the tip of the iceberg, while Hezbollah worked very hard to turn these villages into fortified military compounds, as it has done since 2006 in the Shi'ite villages in southern Lebanon.



Amos Harel

Haaretz Correspondent

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