

# Iran and Israel on a collision course as Syria burns



**PHOTO:** Iran is “the biggest occupying power in the Arab world today”, writes The New York Times’ Thomas L. Friedman. (Reuters: Morteza Nikoubazl, file)

Syria was not the only target in the US-led military strike; there was a message here for another country: Iran.

Perhaps this is even more crucial.

Iran has used the cover of Russia’s support for the Syrian regime to strengthen its presence in the wider Middle East.

There are now real concerns that Iran and Israel are on a collision course.

We have already seen the first shots fired.

In February, Iran sent a drone into Israeli airspace, Jerusalem responded by hitting a Syrian air base used as an Iranian command and control centre.

Just last week, the same air base was struck, killing Iranian military advisers.

Israel is believed to have carried out the attack, but there has been no confirmation or denial.

Middle East analysts are fearing a full-blown war between the two.

## **Syria ‘starting to resemble a world war’**

Jonathan Schanzer from the Foundation for Defense of Democracies has warned of what he says, “could be the ugliest Middle East war of the 21st century”.

Last week, he told ABC News program Matter of Fact the Syrian conflict was beginning to resemble a world war.

Writing in The New York Times, columnist and longtime Middle East watcher Thomas L. Friedman is warning Syria, “is going to explode”.

He says the region is, “heading for a high noon shootout in Syria over Iran’s attempts to turn Syria into a forward air base against Israel, something Israel is vowing to never let happen”.

Friedman adds: “Israel and Iran are now a hair trigger away from going to the next level — and if that happens, the US and Russia may find it difficult to stay out.”



**PHOTO:** Israeli warplanes have already hit Iranian-linked targets inside neighbouring Syria (AP: Ariel Schalit, file)

Despite the bellicose rhetoric, Russia and the US have carefully managed the Syria tensions. Washington gave Moscow a heads-up about the weekend military strike to allow Russia to remove any sensitive targets and avoid an unnecessary accident or miscalculation that could escalate between the two powers.

*But a broader war against Iran would muddy the waters: it could dangerously and quickly escalate.*

## Iran ‘emboldened’ after nuclear deal

Friedman says Iran is, “the biggest ‘occupying power’ in the Arab world today”.

It is already fighting a war in Yemen, supporting rebels, that pits it against another of its declared foes, Saudi Arabia.

It supports militant group Hezbollah in Lebanon that has fought wars against Israel and continues to pose a threat.



**PHOTO:** The flags of Syria and the Iranian-backed Hezbollah militia fly from a military vehicle in Western Qalamoun, Syria. (Reuters: Omar Sanadiki)

And, of course, it is mired in the Syrian conflict.

Critics of Iran say it has been emboldened after striking a deal with the Obama administration and European powers to shelve its nuclear program in return for the West lifting economic sanctions.

US President Donald Trump has threatened to tear up the deal.



Donald J. Trump ✓@realDonaldTrump

*The people of Iran are finally acting against the brutal and corrupt Iranian regime. All of the money that President Obama so foolishly gave them went into terrorism and into their "pockets." The people have little food, big inflation and no human rights. The U.S. is watching!*

That position has strengthened with the appointment of America's former UN ambassador, John Bolton, as the new White House National Security Adviser.

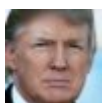
Mr Bolton has in the past advocated for pre-emptive action against Iran.

Before being appointed to his new role, Mr Bolton told Fox News Mr Trump should reinstate sanctions, back opposition forces in Iran, and work with Saudi Arabia and Israel to isolate Tehran.

He said simply: "Our goal should be regime change in Iran."

*The military strike over the weekend was aimed at Syria but its aftershock will be felt in Iran.*

Mr Trump declared "mission accomplished", but the real mission could already be underway.



Donald J. Trump ✓@realDonaldTrump

*A perfectly executed strike last night. Thank you to France and the United Kingdom for their wisdom and the power of their fine Military. Could not have had a better result. Mission Accomplished!*

**Matter of Fact with Stan Grant is on the ABC News Channel at 9 pm, Monday to Thursday.**

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