

Iran is using the war in Ukraine to strengthen its presence in Syria

As the war continues, the Iranians have begun a series of coordinated diplomatic and military moves with the Russian regime.

(March 14, 2022 / Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs) According to political sources in Jerusalem, during their meeting at the Kremlin on March 5, Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett and Russian President Vladimir Putin discussed the Iranian threat and the Islamic Republic's military entrenchment in Syria. Though the details of their conversation are unknown, senior Israeli security sources say Iran is exploiting the war in Ukraine to shore up its military presence in Syria.

The Syrian army now controls almost all of southern Syria. It closely coordinates with the Iranian militias, which significantly concerns Israel.

The anticipated nuclear deal between Iran and world powers is also no longer the focus of international interest, which naturally has shifted to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The signing of the deal may also be delayed by Russia's demand of the United States that sanctions on Russia be lifted in the context of the deal. In the absence of a new deal, Iran can keep violating the 2015 agreement by enriching uranium beyond the allowed threshold.

If the nuclear deal is not signed in the coming days, Iran will be able to race toward the bomb with no international monitoring.

Putin has a clear interest in undercutting the nuclear deal, which President Biden is keen on signing as soon as possible. Although the Iranians are expressing concern about the delay, they are also keeping an eye on the United States, which is under tremendous pressure, and rubbing their hands in glee as Putin, their ally, makes life difficult for Biden.

The Israeli military recently beefed up preparedness on the northern border after Iran announced the deaths of two Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps officers in an alleged Israeli strike near Damascus International Airport. According to Israeli security sources, the two officers were involved in Hezbollah's precision-guided

missile project.

Residents of southern Lebanon have expressed fear that the Iranian response would be carried out by Hezbollah from there. However, Israel Defense Force sources believe the response could also come from pro-Iran militias in Syria, Iraq or Yemen, using missiles or drones.

The Israeli assessment is that the Iranian response will come, but may be delayed by the Vienna nuclear talks. With the talks reportedly on the verge of an agreement (before Russia made its demand for its own sanctions relief), Israel believes that for now, Iran will not want to risk an escalation and the loss of the new status the agreement will grant it in terms of selling oil to Western countries.

The two Iranian colonels killed in the strikes were laid to rest in a large, official funeral in Tehran attended by former IRGC commander Brig.-Gen. Mohammad Ali Jafari and IRGC Aerospace Force Commander Brig.-Gen. Amir Ali Hajizadeh. Iran threatened to take revenge against Israel, and Israeli military intelligence believes the threat is serious and will be carried out.

In 2018, seven Iranians were killed in an Israeli strike on the Tiyas military airbase (aka the T-4 airbase) east of Homs in Syria, including Col. Mehdi Dehghan Yazdeli, a commander from the IRGC Aerospace Force's Shahid Karimi UAV base. In that case, the Iranians responded by firing dozens of rockets at Israeli targets in the Golan Heights.

While the cannons roar in Ukraine, Iran is active

As the war in Ukraine continues, the Iranians have begun a series of coordinated diplomatic and military moves with the Russian regime.

On Feb. 27, Gen. Ali Mamlouk, the head of Syria's National Security Bureau, visited Tehran for the first time in two years, meeting with Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi and Ali Shamkhani, secretary-general of Iran's National Security Council. They discussed tightening security coordination and preparations for any possible repercussions for Syria from the war in Ukraine.

In the meeting with Ali Mamlouk, the Iranians also asked for quicker implementation of the Iranian-Syrian economic memorandums of understanding regarding energy, agricultural produce and the transportation sector. Alongside

military activity, Iran is also deepening its economic involvement in Syria.

According to Israeli security sources, the Iranian militias in Syria have stepped up their activity in the south, in the Daraa and Suwayda regions, which worries Jordan's King Abdullah, especially in light of increased drug smuggling from Syria to Jordan and from there to the Gulf States.

Iran has also intensified its arms smuggling to Syria and Lebanon, including drones, precision-guided missiles and aerial-defense systems. According to Syrian sources, Israel is worried that Russia will help the Syrian army intercept its aircraft. Hence, it has preferred to attack Iranian targets in Syria with surface-to-surface missiles.

On March 2, Falih al-Fayyadh, one of the heads of the umbrella organization of the pro-Iranian militias in Iraq, Al-Hashd al-Shabi (the Popular Mobilization Forces), paid a visit to Damascus. There he met with Syrian President Bashar Assad and discussed the reinforcement of security on the Iraqi-Syrian border and the curtailing of the activity of the Kurds in Syria.

Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine and conquest of large swaths of territory may, in the Iranians' assessment, force Russia to transfer some of its military forces from Syria to Ukraine. As a result, Russia's military power in Syria could decline while Iran's military power and influence could grow.

Israel is concerned that Russia will give Syria its advanced S-300 anti-aircraft defense system. This system is already present in Syria, but Russian soldiers currently operate it. Its operation by the Syrian army's air-defense forces could hamper the Israeli Air Force's freedom of action in attacking Iranian targets in Syria.

A calming signal from Russia

A few days ago, the Russian embassy in Israel announced that the security coordination in Syria between the IDF and the Russian army would continue, affirming that "Our military officials discuss the practical issues of this substantively on a daily basis. This mechanism has proven to be useful and will continue to work."

The Russian embassy posted on Facebook: "We are maintaining close contacts

with our Israeli colleagues. We do not want Syrian territory to be used for actions against Israel or anyone else.”

As the war in Ukraine continues, however, things could change. In January 2022, Russian warplanes conducted a joint aerial patrol with Syrian planes along the Golan border to warn Israel about its attacks in Syria. The Russians are playing a carrot-and-stick game, and Israel does not want to find itself in a confrontation with them.

It is unclear how the Israeli attempt to mediate between Russia and Ukraine will turn out, or what will happen in Syria if Israel eventually has to side unequivocally with Ukraine and the United States. Israel cannot zigzag and “walk between the raindrops” indefinitely to maintain its freedom of action in Syria.

With Putin, there is no free lunch. At the moment, he is using Israel’s services to achieve his goals. However, ultimately what matters is interests, and in the course of the war in Ukraine, the picture could change rapidly, possibly to Israel’s detriment.

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