

Mideast tensions get even worse

(CNN)As if the broken, angry, dysfunctional Middle East needed another conflict, along came an unprecedented escalation between Israel, Iran and Syria to make the region even more volatile and dangerous.

In the predawn hours of Saturday, an Iranian drone penetrated Israeli airspace and was shot down. Israel retaliated by attacking Iranian facilities in Syria, from where the drone had launched, which prompted an Israeli F-16 fighter jet to come under Syrian fire and crash. This is believed to be the first time in decades that an Israeli jet has been taken down in such a manner.

Much about these incidents, particularly why Iran sent a drone into Israeli airspace, isn't yet certain. And where these events will lead is equally hard to predict. But here are the key takeaways to consider.

Escalation was inevitable

A perfect storm of factors with the potential to prompt an attack like Saturday's have been brewing for some time. Capitalizing on Iran's support of the regime of Syria's Bashar al-Assad, Teheran has moved to expand its influence in Syria as a hedge against US and Saudi designs. And with Iran's help, Hezbollah has probed areas close to the Syrian Golan Heights to possibly create another front against the Israelis.

They planned to establish weapons factories and land routes that might facilitate supply to Hezbollah. Motivated partly by the ideological struggle against Israel and by a practical need to build up a stronger capability in the event of an Iranian-Israeli conflict, Iran apparently plans to expand the Israeli-Lebanese front to include Syria.



How to restore US credibility in the Middle East

For its part, Israel has drawn clear red lines that it warned Iran not to cross and has long complained about Iran's ambitions in Syria. These include Iran's desire to create a land bridge connecting Iran and Lebanon through Iraq and Syria, deploy 10,000 Shia militia in southern Syria, create maritime and air bases and weapons factories, and even to create a presence adjacent to the Golan Heights. On this last goal, steps have already been taken. In 2015, Israel killed an Iranian general and senior Hezbollah operatives near the Golan Heights.

Over the last several years, Israel has conducted at least a hundred attacks in Syria, aimed at preventing weapons shipments to Hezbollah, blowing up weapons depots and eliminating regime or jihadi activity too close to its borders. But Saturday's violation of Israeli airspace and sovereignty by an Iranian drone was considered a provocation that needed a clear answer on the tactical level and a strategic response.

Post ISIS, the conflict is changing

The other reality, which could result in external powers clashing in Syria, is the shifting focus of the conflict. As US-led coalition forces have whittled away ISIS control of its "Caliphate," the struggle for influence, oil and territory has intensified. Turkey is fighting Syrian Kurds while the United States supports the Kurds in their effort to hold territory liberated from ISIS. Meanwhile, Russia and Iran are supporting Assad's efforts to take territory back from jihadis in the Idlib province. All this further complicates Washington's relations with Turkey.

But as the commitment of these foreign external powers to the Syrian arena has grown, so have the costs. Within the past two weeks, a Syrian jihadi group shot down a Russian fighter jet, a Kurdish militia downed a Turkish helicopter, and Syrian air defenses disabled an Israeli F-16.

And as Iran and the Russians have helped the Assad regime take back territory, Assad's confidence and his willingness to challenge Israel have also grown. The downing of the Israeli fighter will hand Assad a propaganda victory and buck him up more.

This round may be contained

Despite the serious escalation, a sustained and massive confrontation is not necessarily around the corner. None of the major players is looking for a regional war.

Russia has no desire to undermine three years of investment in saving the Assad regime, only to see Israel become involved militarily in Syria, which could weaken the Syrian regime and strengthen the United States' hand against Iran. Iran isn't looking for war with Israel either, as it could jeopardize its own gains in Syria.



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And Israel has no interest in getting bogged down in Syria or triggering a conflict with Hezbollah, Iran's loyal ally. A war with Hezbollah would rain thousands of rockets and missiles down on Israel's cities, produce heavy civilian casualties, and force Israel to wage a costly war against Lebanon.

More than likely, this coincidence of interests in avoiding war will succeed in deferring a major escalation to some later date. Could this dangerous moment produce a moderating effect forcing all sides to consider more stable arrangements?

It's doubtful given Iran's commitment to Assad and Russia's inability and unwillingness to constrain Teheran. Quite predictably, Moscow has adopted a position supporting both Syria and Iran and urged Israel to respect Syria's territorial integrity. Moreover, given the history of Israeli-Lebanese conflicts -from 1978 to 2006 — it seems only a matter of time until the next round.

Where's Washington?

Faced with an unprecedented escalation between Israel, Iran and Syria, which

contain any number of dangerous, historic and unpredictable firsts, the Trump administration seems to have adopted a hands-off, low-key approach to the current crisis. It's clearly very early in this crisis, but Washington seems content for now in issuing strong statements defending Israel's actions and condemning Iran's provocations.

It may well turn out that in a battle of wills between the Trump administration's staunchest Middle East ally and its greatest adversary, the President wants to use Israel to hammer Iran in Syria. He may have no interest in getting involved in any diplomatic effort that might force him to put brakes on Israel or push his friend Putin to restrain Iran.

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As for the role of the secretary of state, it's more than a little awkward if not outright embarrassing that Rex Tillerson, who's traveling in the region, talked to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Saturday, yet seems to have no plans to stop in Israel. He should add Israel to his itinerary, if only to receive a personal briefing on Israeli thinking and coordinate with Jerusalem.

The fact that he's not going speaks volumes about Tillerson's own marginalized role and the administration's lack of a strategy in thinking through how to preempt further escalation in a dangerous crisis. And rest assured the Israeli-Iranian tangle in Syria isn't going away. Sooner or later it will return with a vengeance.

Source: <https://www.cnn.com/2018/02/11/opinions/israel-iran-syria-conflict-opinion-miller/index.html>

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