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Hezbollah's Role in the Present
Israeli-Iranian Confrontation

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Abstract:

Hezbollah is a key element in the current confrontation between Israel and the Iranian regime. It has been Tehran's main tool in its fight against the existence of Israel since 1982. There is a symbiotic relationship between Iran and Hezbollah, which is considered a proxy of the Iranian regime completely aligned with it, or more exactly, part and parcel of the theocratic regime. The organization was formed by the Iranian regime, militarily armed, trained and advised by the Islamic Republic's Revolutionary Guard (IRGC) Al Quds Force, ideologically and politically subservient to Ayatollah Khamenei and not to the Lebanese President, Parliament or government.

Keywords:

Israel, Iran, Hezbollah, Middle East, Syria, Lebanon.

* NOTE: The ideas contained in the Opinion Documents are the responsibility of their authors, without necessarily reflecting the thinking of the IEEE or the Ministry of Defense.

The Iranian factor

Hezbollah has been Tehran's main tool in its fight against the existence of Israel since 1982: first as a terrorist group, since the 1990s as a hybrid terror organization. There is a symbiotic relationship between Iran and Hezbollah, which is considered a proxy of the Iranian regime completely aligned with it, or more exactly, part and parcel of the theocratic regime. The organization was formed by the Iranian regime, militarily armed, trained and advised by the Islamic Republic's Revolutionary Guard (IRGC) Al Quds Force and, according to its acceptance of the vilayat-e faqih concept, is ideologically and politically subservient to Ayatollah Khamenei and not to the Lebanese President, Parliament or government.

The 2006 Second Lebanon war was in fact the first Iranian war against Israel. Between 1992 and 2005, Hezbollah received some 11,500 short to medium range missiles and rockets. 3,970 rockets landed in Israel during the war, at a rate of more than 100 per day, unprecedented since the Iran–Iraq War.

Since the 2006 war, Iran has provided Hezbollah a vast arsenal of 100,000 to 120,000 missiles, not meant to protect Lebanon but rather to deter Israel from attacking the Iranian nuclear infrastructure, and to allow Hezbollah to take control of Lebanon. In this sense, the leadership of Hezbollah is, ideologically and strategically, part and parcel of the Tehran regime, even when the organization's activities, such as its involvement in the Syrian civil war, endanger the lives and interests of the Lebanese people in general and the Shia community in particular.

Hezbollah also serves a critical role for Iranian strategic interests in Syria, not only due to its major military support to the survival of the allied Assad regime but also as the element in the Shi'ite Crescent that would permit Iran, through its influence on the Iraqi, Syrian and Lebanese territory, to reach the Mediterranean Sea.

More specifically in regards to Israel, Hezbollah is Iran's natural ally for the building of the strategic base in the northern Syrian Golan Heights, which brought the Iranian military, for the first time, directly on the border of the Jewish state in a very sensitive strategic area.

Hezbollah's intervention in the Syrian Civil War: The transition from a defensive to an aggressive approach (2012-2017)

Hezbollah found itself involved in the civil war in Syria on several fronts simultaneously, along the Lebanese border and in the Damascus area from 2012. The magnitude of the organization's forces increased from dozens of fighters, who were assigned to missions of consulting and coaching Syrian regime forces, to large frameworks of battalion size or larger. According to information provided by a senior IDF officer, some 8,000 Hezbollah fighters (nearly 30 percent of its forces) are deployed permanently in Syria. By April 2017, Hezbollah has seen more than 1,700 of its fighters killed and 7,000 wounded in the fighting in Syria.¹

Hezbollah forces are involved in offensive warfare in a complex urban environment alongside other forces, Syrians and Shi'ite militias from Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan, as well as Iranian and Russian troops.

In this context, it should be emphasized that since the second Lebanon War, and probably more so since the assassination of the top military commander, Imad Mughniyeh (February 2008), Hezbollah is increasingly dependent on the Iranian Al-Quds force. The latter controls decision-making processes in the organization more closely than ever before through coaches/commanders who are stationed in Hezbollah units, joint war rooms or direct instructions from General Qassem Soleimani, the commander of Al-Quds force and of Iranian regional military operations.

Until late 2015, Hezbollah forces on the ground were in a quite a difficult situation due to its large number of casualties, lack of funds, and lack of professional and skilled manpower for the battle in Syria. The change in the organization's status began in late 2015 with Russia's entry into the Assad regime's battle for survival and a series of successes on the battlefield in Syria, especially in 2016. The change could be seen in the organization's military parade in November 2016 in the Syrian town of Al-Qusayr, in which

¹ Amos Harel, "Hezbollah's PR Provocation on Border Comes at a Good Time for Israel," *Haaretz*, April 23, 2017.

new units and weapons were displayed including tanks, artillery, and motorized anti-tank units.²

In the political arena, Hezbollah's candidate, former Lebanon Army's Chief of Staff Gen. Michel Aoun, was elected as President of Lebanon following more than two years in which Hezbollah's Secretary general Hassan Nasrallah thwarted any attempt to appoint another candidate. A new government was established in which the organization took part.³

The most significant difference that can be discerned during Hezbollah's involvement in Syria, and as a direct continuation of Hezbollah's rehabilitation after the Second Lebanon War, was that over the past decade, the organization was built in the format of an army that acquired and employed advanced weaponry, acquired combat experience, established new units and managed large-scale offensive operations.⁴

According to 2015 estimates, Hezbollah had 80,000 - 100,000 missiles and rockets, all directed at Israel. Israeli intelligence estimates that Hezbollah now possesses an arsenal of some 150,000 missiles and rockets, including Scud missiles, Fateh-110 Iranian missiles, and M-600 missiles, a Syrian modified version of the Fateh-110, many of them covering the whole of Israel.⁵

Ibrahim al-Amin, editor of the newspaper *Al-Akhbar*, who is very close to Nasrallah, asserted that Israel's assessment that Hezbollah is capable of firing 1,500 missiles at Israel per day is an underestimation of the organization's real capabilities.⁶

As time goes on, and especially since the second half of 2016 and early 2017, Nasrallah's messages vis-à-vis Israel have become much more militant and include a new deterrence equation according to which Hezbollah intends to capture the Galilee in the next round of fighting..⁷ Nasrallah also threatened to operate in the maritime arena against merchant

² See below the chapter on Al-Qusayr.

³ "Hariri backs Michel Aoun as Lebanon's next president," *Al-Jazeera*, October 20, 2016.

⁴ Yiftah S. Shapir, "Hezbollah as an Army," *The Institute for National Security Studies Strategic Assessment*, Vol. 19, No.4, January 2017.

⁵ Manish Rai, "Hezbollah a Potent Threat for Israel," *The Times of Israel*, March 30, 2017.

⁶ *Al Akhbar*, January 24, 2017.

⁷ See Targets at

<http://media.alahednews.com.lb/video/details.php?fid=19408&cid=1075><http://media.alahednews.com.lb/video/details.php?fid=19408&cid=1075>

ships on their way to Israel stressing that there will be no red lines in the next battle. It appears that the goal of Nasrallah's media campaign at this stage was to deter Israel from waging war on Hezbollah while it is busy fighting in Syria.⁸

The military infrastructure and presence in Southern Lebanon, the Al-Qusayr area in Syria and the Syrian Golan

Southern Lebanon

After the 2006 war, Hezbollah renewed its military infrastructure (command posts, bases, launch sites, intelligence and communications facilities) and logistic sites (locations and tunnels in populated areas) in Lebanon. The rockets and long-range missiles were deployed in various hiding places and in various locations in southern Lebanon, Beirut and Bekaa.

Hezbollah has built a web of underground tunnels along the Lebanon-Israel border where tens of thousands of rockets are stored.⁹ Evidence also exists that Hezbollah is practicing for urban assaults against Israeli villages and towns.¹⁰ Hezbollah's goal is a ground invasion using the underground and aboveground areas near the border's wadis and the entry of many commando and Kornet antitank teams deep into the Upper and Western Galilee in order to survive as long as possible..¹¹

The Al-Qusayr area

A turning point in Hezbollah's military might and regional presence has been its crucial role in the recapture of the Qalamoun Mountains region and the highway linking Damascus with the Syrian coastal region in April 2013.

Hezbollah led the ground assault on al-Qusayr, a primarily Sunni town in the Qalamoun area about 15 km from the border with Lebanon, operating in much larger numbers than ever before, and planning and conducting the operation. Since then, Hezbollah has

⁸ "An analysis of threats against Israel made by Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah," *The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center (ITIC)*, March 2, 2017.

⁹ Nicholas Blanford, "Has Hezbollah built tunnels under the border with Israel?" *Daily Star*, September 15, 2014.

¹⁰ Magnus Ranstorp, "Hezbollah's Calculus after the Iran Nuclear Deal," *CTC Sentinel*, January 19, 2016.

¹¹ Ronen Bergman, "Hezbollah 3.0: How Israel's No. 1 enemy is preparing for the next Lebanon war," *Ynetnews*, July 26, 2015.

become a major player in the Syrian regime's successes in regaining territory in Homs, Aleppo, and Damascus..¹²

On November 13, 2016, Hezbollah held an exceptional first-of-its-kind military show near al-Qusayr, part of a series of events held to commemorate Hezbollah's Martyr's Day. At the event, Hezbollah exposed some of its elite units, including the Armor Regiment, the Artillery Regiment, the Radwan elite force (which took part in the campaign to capture Aleppo) and the off-road motorcycle unit. The military show of strength demonstrated Hezbollah's heavy weaponry, some of it for the first time. The military show of strength was intended to demonstrate that Hezbollah had evolved from a guerrilla organization into a semi-military, well-trained organization that had acquired rich combat experience in Syria and formed new units equipped with heavy weapons.¹³

Al-Qusayr has become an important military base for Hezbollah where the ruins of the town are used as an urban warfare training site in which company-sized Hezbollah units, armed with paintball guns, learn to attack and defend.¹⁴ Sources report that Hezbollah has dug tunnels from the base back to Lebanon.¹⁵

The base and other future installations are meant to maintain a permanent Hezbollah presence of fighters in Syria, even after it withdraws from the fighting there. At the same time, the bases will provide a location for Iranian involvement and military presence in Syria..¹⁶

Working side-by-side with Russian officers in Syria is sure to improve Hezbollah's offensive fighting capabilities and the organization will likely learn better surveillance and reconnaissance skills. Hezbollah has built a drone airstrip in the Bekaa Valley and has employed Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) over Syria. Drones have proven useful in the battle for the Qalamoun Mountains where the group has helped the Syrian army

¹² Marisa Sullivan, "Hezbollah in Syria," *Middle East Security Report*, No.19, Institute for the Study of War, April 2014.

¹³ "The military show of strength held by Hezbollah in the Syrian city of Al-Qusayr," *The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center (ITIC)*, December 6, 2016, URL: <http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/21104/>.

¹⁴ Nicholas Blanford, "Hezbollah unveils its military might in Syria," *The Arab Weekly*, Iss. 82, November 20, 2016.

¹⁵ "Hezbollah's Shot at Permanency in Syria," *Stratfor Analysis*, April 6, 2016, URL:

<https://www.stratfor.com/analysis/hezbollahs-shot-permanency-syria>. It should be noted that although Stratfor is a known analysis private firm it does not mention their sources.

¹⁶ Ibid.

surround Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State and could be employed in future conflict with Israel.¹⁷

In a 2015 statement, the IRGC's Aerospace Force commander, Brigadier General Amir Ali Hajizadeh, boasted that Tehran has provided "Syria, Iraq, Palestine and the Lebanese Hezbollah resistance group with the needed know-how to produce missiles." It is possible that these Hezbollah military factories are in the Qusayr area in Syria, and not in Lebanon.¹⁸

A report by the Kuwaiti daily, *Al-Jarida*, on March 11, 2017 cited an aid to Mohammad Ali Jafari, commander of the IRGC, who claimed that Iran had established facilities for manufacturing missiles and other weapons in Lebanon and recently handed them over to the management and oversight of Hezbollah. The facilities are more than 50 meters underground and heavily shielded against aerial attacks. He also clarified that various parts of the missiles are manufactured in different factories and then assembled together.¹⁹

The Syrian Golan area

Since spring of 2014, there has been a clear attempt by Iran and Hezbollah to build a new strategic base in the northern Syrian Golan Heights. This territorial base has three goals: to build a platform for terrorist and guerrilla attacks against Israel; to obstruct the IDF forces flanking the Hezbollah defenses in southern Lebanon in case of a new war against the Lebanese organization; to shield against a possible thrust by rebel forces from the southwest in a strategic approach towards the capital, Damascus.²⁰

Nasrallah tried to deal with the problem by founding a proxy organization called Hezbollah Syria, which would settle down near the Golan Heights and open another front against Israel. Nasrallah appointed Jihad Mughniyeh, to lead the unit.²¹

¹⁷ Alexander Corbeil, "Hezbollah is Learning Russian," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, February 26, 2016.

¹⁸ Yaakov Lappin, "In-House Hezbollah Missile Factories Could Add to Massive Arms Buildup," *The Algemeiner*, March 20, 2017.

¹⁹ Cited by MEMRI at <https://memri.org/reports/kuwaiti-daily-missile-arms-factories-built-irgc-lebanon-have-recently-been-handed-over>

²⁰ Ely Karmon, "The Strategic Imperative to Deny an Iranian/Hezbollah Basis on the Golan Border," *The Times of Israel Blog*, February 2, 2015.

²¹ Ronen Bergman, *Hezbollah 3.0*.

Following Israel's airstrike against Hezbollah commanders who were surveying the Golan front near Kuneitra on January 18, 2015, the military infrastructure built by Iran and Hezbollah has been exposed and dismantled. Jihad Mughniyeh was killed and replaced by Samir Kuntar, a Lebanese Druze.

On April 25, 2015 four terrorists attempted to infiltrate the northern Golan Heights to plant explosive devices, revealing Hezbollah's efforts to recruit fighters from Druze villages in the areas controlled by the Syrian army. Hezbollah activities among the Druze were led by Samir Kuntar. Kuntar was killed on December 20, 2015 in an air raid on a building in Jaramana, outside of Damascus.²²

Hezbollah's efforts are currently concentrated in three directions: first, to continue the fighting in Syria to consolidate its gains, then to carry out internal restructuring after the changes imposed by the war in Syria, and finally to remain ready for any new confrontation.²³

Until recently it seemed Iran had no interest in activating Hezbollah against Israel as long as the organization is involved in the fighting in Syria and Israel has warned Hezbollah of a harsh response.²⁴

Israel's strategy for confronting Hezbollah

The consensus in Israel is that Hezbollah was deterred in the Second Lebanon War because of the damage sustained by the group and its supporters. Subsequently, it refrained from fighting against Israel and quiet has reigned on the northern border."²⁵ The "Dahiya Doctrine," in the words of then-Commander of the Northern Command, Gabi Eisenkot, in 2008, the harm to the Lebanese population is the main restraint on Nasrallah

²² Shimon Shapira, Hizbullah's Golan Heights Front Loses its Leader, *Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs*, May 2015.

²³ Scarlett Haddad, « Le Hezbollah et la prochaine confrontation », *L'Orient-Le Jour*, January 6, 2017.

²⁴ Ephraim Kam and Sima Shine, "Iran after the Nuclear Agreement," in *Strategic Survey for Israel 2016-2017*, eds. Anat Kurz and Shlomo Brom, Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, 2016.

²⁵ Yagil Henkin, "And What If We Did Not Deter Hizbollah?" *INSS Military and Strategic Affairs*, Vol. 6, No. 3, December 2014.

and the reason for the quiet after the war and has become one of the pillars of Israel's strategy vis-à-vis Hezbollah and Lebanon."²⁶

On February 12, 2017 in an interview to the Egyptian newspaper, *al-Ahram*, Lebanese President Michel Aoun declared, "Hezbollah is a significant part of the Lebanese people... As long as Israel occupies land and covets Lebanon's natural treasures, and as long as the Lebanese military lacks the power to stand up to Israel, [Hezbollah's] weapons are essential. They complement, rather than contradict, the army's activity... and are, rather, a principal element of Lebanon's defense." Coming from a president who owes his appointment to Iran and Hezbollah, his declaration has strategic significance for Israel's national security.²⁷

President Aoun's declaration grants Hezbollah the legal authority to operate as a legitimate military force and will presumably intensify Hezbollah's special relations with the army and with Lebanon's security and intelligence agencies. Moreover, Aoun's declaration essentially removes Hezbollah from the restrictions of UN Security Council Resolution 1559 of September 2, 2004, which called for "all remaining foreign forces to withdraw from Lebanon" and for "the disbanding and disarmament of all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias."²⁸

At a March 6, 2017 meeting of the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, Defense Minister Liberman said that the distinction between the Lebanese army and Hezbollah forces has been blurred considerably over the past few years, as has the distinction between the Hezbollah party and the sovereign state in which it resides. The IDF's working assumption is that the Lebanese army will play an active role against Israel in the next war on Lebanon, operating under Hezbollah's command. Citing Lebanese President Aoun, Liberman said that even the Lebanese government regards Hezbollah as part of the armed infrastructure vital to defending the country.²⁹

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Assaf Orion, "Lebanese President Aoun's Public Embrace of Hezbollah," *IsraelDefense magazine*, February 28, 2017.

²⁸ Shimon Shapira, "Lebanon's Army and Hizbullah Join Ranks," *Institute for Contemporary Affairs*, Vol. 17, No. 6, March 2, 2017.

²⁹ Ben Caspit, *Israel Pulse, Al-Monitor*, March 15, 2017.

Opinions in Israel are divided. Some support attacking Lebanese state infrastructure in order to exact a heavy price, to enhance deterrence and to speed up international intervention in an effort to terminate the fighting. Others claim that sufficient damage will be done to Lebanon in any case during the course of attacks on Hezbollah targets, and that it is preferable to refrain from increasing the destruction, which would serve as fertile ground in Lebanon for a lack of governance, violence, and extremism. Between these two sides, there are still those who support attacking Lebanese infrastructure only as deterrent retribution for attempts to damage Israeli infrastructure.³⁰

The change in Israeli strategy

The strategy promoted by the Israeli political and military echelon in the confrontation with Iran and Hezbollah in the Lebanese arena was until lately to threaten “to return Lebanon to the Stone Age” by massive destruction of civilian infrastructure and causing many casualties among the Lebanese population.

Since the Assad victory in Syria with Iranian, Hezbollah ground and Russian air support, the Iranian strategy has included the transformation of Syria into a territorial platform and strategic threat on the Golan border, with the attempt to build missile, air and possibly also naval bases in Syria.

Last year, after the IRGC continued to intensively work on building the southern Syrian platform involving, besides Hezbollah, Iraqi and Afghan Shia militias, the Israeli-Iranian direct confrontation in Syria has escalated to new heights.

The Israel leadership decided that the Lebanese scenario cannot repeat itself and it had the obligation to destroy the new Iranian infrastructure and expel the Iranian forces and their proxies by attacking Iranian targets directly.

On February 10, 2018, Israel struck the T-4 base near Homs in Syria, after an Iranian explosives-laden drone based there flew into Israeli airspace, intended probably to attack an Israeli target. The operation quickly escalated when an Israeli F-16 was downed by heavy Syrian anti-aircraft fire, followed by Israeli retaliatory strikes on a dozen air defense

³⁰ Ibid.

targets in Syria, including four Iranian military positions. Israel was probably responsible for a second attack against the Iranian drone base at the same airport, on April 9, 2018.

Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman, in a rare interview with London-based *Elaf* news site, vowed to prevent Iranian military presence in Syria, “whatever the cost” and not to “sit idly by while [watching] Iran try to transfer advanced weapons close to the Golan Heights.” He warned that if Iran attacks Tel Aviv, Israel will attack Tehran: “If there is not silence in Tel Aviv and in Israel, there won’t be in Tehran.”³¹

President Trump's aggressive approach to Iran

On May 8, 2018, President Donald Trump announced that the United States would withdraw from the Iran nuclear accord, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, and impose new sanctions, two years after the accord's implementation and a campaign in favor of the accord by the European allies, the UK, France and Germany.³² Trump “advised very strongly” that Iran should not restart its nuclear weapons program. “If they do, there will be very severe consequence,” Trump said.³³

Events precipitated after President Trump's announcement. That same night, Syrian state media blamed Israel for an airstrike on a military base south of Damascus, an “arms depot belonging to Hezbollah and the Iranians,” according to AFP. This was a pre-emptive missile strike on the area of Al-Kiswa near Damascus, which killed 15 people, at least eight of them Iranians. One of the targets was a convoy of missiles taken out of storage and heading to a launching site.

The Iranian retaliation finally arrived on the night of May 10, when some 20 rockets were fired at Israeli military bases on the Golan Heights by IRGC forces in southern Syria.

The IDF responded almost immediately with the most extensive attack in Syria since the two nations signed a disengagement agreement after the October war of 1973. Dozens of Iranian targets were hit: weapons storage, logistics sites and intelligence centers used by elite Iranian forces in Syria. Twenty-three militants were killed in the attack, according to Syrian sources.

³¹ Liad Osmo, “‘If Iran hits Tel Aviv, we'll hit Tehran’ defense minister tells Saudi paper,” *Ynet News*, April 26, 2018.

³² *Reuters*, “Trump Warns Iran Will Negotiate Or ‘Something Will Happen’,” May 9, 2018.

³³ Tovah Lazaroff, Rina Bassist, “Trump Warns Iran: ‘Don’t Restart Your Nuclear Weapons Program’,” *The Jerusalem Post*, May 9, 2018.

White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders condemned Iran's "provocative rocket attacks from Syria against Israeli citizens". Moreover, the United Kingdom, Germany and France defended Israel's right to launch self-defensive strikes against Iranian targets in Syria. On the backdrop of the European efforts to salvage the Iran nuclear deal, the German, French and British statements in defense of Israel is particularly striking.

The Russian volte-face

The most astonishing change can be seen in Russia's behavior towards the Israeli strikes against Iranian military assets in Syria. Since the end of April 2018, the harsh anti-Israeli rhetoric has practically vanished, and Russia apparently did not activate its own sophisticated air defense systems inside Syria during the Israeli air strikes.³⁴

Prime Minister Netanyahu was invited to a highly symbolic Russian national event, the Immortal Regiment March, alongside President Putin and Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic, part of the May 9 Victory Day celebrations, the first time foreign leaders have joined the event in Moscow.³⁵

The night before the visit and the night after his return from Moscow the Israeli air force staged the most powerful attack against Iranian targets on Syrian territory. Russian reaction to the strikes was muted. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said that the Russians have "emphasized the need for avoiding any mutually provoking moves." Both Iran and Israel, Lavrov said, "have assured us that there are no such intentions. Nevertheless, such incidents do occur." Russia apparently did not activate its own sophisticated air defense systems inside Syria during the Israeli air strikes.³⁶

Certainly, Syria is Russia's most important ally in the region, where Russia has heavily invested militarily, financially and politically. From the beginning of the civil war in Syria, Russia has provided the Assad regime the political and military support for its survival, and more so since its direct military intervention in September 2015.

³⁴ Loveday Morris, Ruth Eglash and Louisa Loveluck, "Israel launches massive military strike against Iranian targets in Syria".

³⁵ Isabel Kershner, "Iran Fires Rockets into Golan Heights From Syria, Israelis Say," *The New York Times*, May 9, 2018.

³⁶ Loveday Morris, Ruth Eglash and Louisa Loveluck, "Israel launches massive military strike against Iranian targets in Syria".

However, Iran's hegemonic ambitions, its overwhelming military, economic and political presence in Syria and its aggressive strategy vis-à-vis Israel, go contrary to the Russian plan to find an international political solution, a *Pax Russia* in Syria.

According to the Gazeta.ru of May 11, 2018, Russia may have tried to warn Tehran about the risks of a new escalation, but for the Iranian leadership, the words of Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov were hardly more convincing than the picture of Putin and Netanyahu standing together on Red Square.

President Putin met with Syrian President Bashar Assad in the southern Russian city of Sochi on May 17. He told Assad that a political settlement in Syria should encourage foreign countries to withdraw their troops from Syria. Putin's envoy to Syria, Alexander Lavrentyev, said the Russian leader was referring to Iranian forces.

Tehran appeared to reject that idea, saying its forces will remain in Syria and continue fighting "terrorism" at the request of the Syrian government. Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesmen stated that "Our presence in Syria has been based on a request by the Syrian government and Iran will continue its support as long as the Syrian government wants".³⁷

The Iranian dilemma

Iran's Supreme Leader called President Trump's comments on withdrawing from the 2015 nuclear agreement "silly and superficial," and said that he did not trust the European countries that were sticking with the agreement and cast doubt on the future of the deal.³⁸

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, told French President Emmanuel Macron in a phone call that Europe had only a "limited opportunity" to preserve the pact. "(Europe)...must, as quickly as possible, clarify its position and specify and announce its intentions with regard to its obligations,".³⁹

On May 25, 2018, Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah said that "The United States and the Tel Aviv regime are gravely mistaken to think that by stopping financial funds from reaching Hezbollah, the resistance movement will abandon its activities."⁴⁰

³⁷ Bassem Mroue / AP, "Syrian Military Declares Victory Over Islamic State in Capital," *Time*, May 21, 2018.

³⁸ Reuters, "Iran Supreme Leader: Don't Trust America, Trump Speech Silly & Superficial," May 9, 2018.

³⁹ Tovah Lazaroff, "Iran Demands Guarantees from Europe To Stay In Deal," *Reuters*, May 9, 2018.

⁴⁰ *Press TV*, "US sanctions on Hezbollah will have no effect, Nasrallah says," May 25, 2018.

Significantly, Nasrallah said that Hezbollah is not seeking war but does not fear it and is of victory in any upcoming war.⁴¹

In a surprising statement, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called on Hezbollah to cease its military activities in Lebanon, Syria, and elsewhere in the region. "The maintenance by Hezbollah of sizable and sophisticated military capabilities outside the control of the government of Lebanon remains a matter of grave concern," Guterres said in a report sent to the United Nations Security Council on May 23, 2018. The Lebanese government must prevent Hezbollah from "building paramilitary capacity outside the authority of the state," he said. Hezbollah by some estimates has more fighters and weapons than Lebanon's own army. Guterres' call for disengagement from regional conflicts comes as the United States has stepped up its demands that Iran and Hezbollah withdraw from Syria and other regional conflicts.⁴²

Prospects for the near future

In an unpublished paper a year ago, the authors have evaluated two scenarios for a war against Israel initiated by Iran: a major direct threat to Iran's and Hezbollah's presence in Syria; and escalation of United States' pressure on the Iran nuclear deal. In the two scenarios the authors' assessment was that Iran will use Hezbollah forces in Lebanon and Hezbollah forces stationed in Syria, as contractors for a preemptive war against Israel.

At this juncture, the Tehran regime faces a huge dilemma. How to respond to the cancelation of the nuclear deal by the United States and Trump's pressure to renegotiate it, and at the same time how to react to the Israeli military pressure in Syria while Russia shows clear signs of being annoyed by Iran's hegemonic ambitions in the country which is the symbol of Russian renewed global power?

On the nuclear file Iran has to wait and see, at least for several months, if the European partners of the deal, the leaders of the UK, France and Germany are ready to stand alone

⁴¹ *Naharnet Newsdesk*, "Nasrallah: Hizbullah Not Seeking War, Doesn't Want Sovereign Ministerial Portfolio," May 25, 2018, URL: <http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/246634-nasrallah-in-televised-speech-marking-liberation-day>

⁴² *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL)*, "UN Chief Calls On Iran Ally Hizballah To Disarm, Cease Military Activities," May 24, 2018.

in the original agreement, and more importantly if the big European companies and banks are willing and able to withstand the American sanctions.

The Iranian options in Syria are quite daunting. There is no doubt now that Israel will continue to strike at Iran's and its proxies' military assets after most of them have been destroyed in the last attacks and will knockout any attempts to transfer new weapons systems from Iran to Syria. Moreover, it seems there is an Israeli – Russian agreement at least to expel and forbid the presence of Iranian and Hezbollah forces in southern Syria on the border with Israel and Jordan.

After months of diplomacy between Jerusalem and Moscow, the two sides reached an understanding that Iran should be kept away from Israel's northern border with Syria, according to the Israeli Channel 2 News. The Syrian army will be allowed to re-take control of southern Syria up to the border with Israel. Iran and Hezbollah, though, will not be permitted to take part in the takeover.⁴³ Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said that only Syrian government troops should have a presence on Syria's southern border, which is close to Jordan and Israel. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu backed Russia's assertion, though emphasized that Iran not only has no place in Syria's south, but in Syria in general.⁴⁴

Netanyahu said Israel is working against the Iranian regime on three fronts: preventing it from acquiring nuclear weapons; working against its military entrenchment in Syria; and working against the transfer of advanced weapons from Syria to Lebanon, or the manufacturer of that weaponry in Lebanon. "Those weapons are intended for use against Israel, and it is our right – by virtue of the right of self-defense – to prevent their manufacture or transfer," he said. Netanyahu's comments came a day after IDF spokesman Brig.-Gen. Ronen Manelis warned in a rare op-ed on a Lebanese opposition website that a war with Israel could break out if Iran develops precision missiles in the country.⁴⁵

⁴³ JPost.Com Staff, "Israel, Russia Agree to Keep Iran And Hezbollah From Border," *The Jerusalem Post*, May 28, 2018.

⁴⁴ Reuters, "Russia: Only Syrian army should be on country's southern border," *Ynet News*, May 28, 2018.

⁴⁵ Herb Keinon, "Netanyahu: We Won't Allow Iran To Manufacture Weapons in Lebanon," *The Jerusalem Post*, May 27, 2018.

On this backdrop, a war started from Lebanon could bring a catastrophe on the country's infrastructure and destroy the present "rosy" situation from the point of view of Hezbollah and Iran. It is of note that since the last attacks against the Iranian presence in Syria, Hezbollah leaders have been quiet and less threatening, although they have been involved in the Iranian operational activity against Israeli targets.

A scenario that many fear would be an unintended escalation by the two sides, as result of an incident with many civilian or even military casualties, which would compel one of the actors to go to full war.

Iran also has the option of retaliating by terrorist attacks carried out by Iranian or Hezbollah cells against senior Israeli targets or individuals abroad, such as diplomats, military attachés and Israeli embassies, as was done in the wave of terrorist attacks at the beginning of 2012.

The coming weeks and months will challenge all the actors in the region, the local, regional and global ones with repercussions in Turkey, Iraq, the Palestinian territories, or Yemen.

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