

Israeli raids in Syria escalate the conflict with Iran, ripple effects likely in Lebanon

Simon Speakman Cordall

Tunis

Massive Israeli air strikes battered Syrian and Iranian positions in Syria after an unmanned Iranian aircraft was intercepted by Israel over its territory and an Israeli fighter jet was shot down by Syrian anti-aircraft fire.

This first direct confrontation between Iran and Israel since the beginning of the Syrian war in 2011 threatened to carry serious consequences in Syria and across the region, especially for Lebanon, where the pro-Iran Hezbollah could consider moves that would ratchet up already-high tensions with Israel.

The Israeli F-16 jet was downed early February 10, Israeli officials said. Both pilots escaped but one was said to be badly wounded.

An Israeli military statement said an Iranian unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) launched from within Syria was intercepted in Israeli airspace by a combat helicopter. The Israeli Air Force then "targeted the Iranian control systems in Syria that sent the UAV into Israeli airspace," a tweet from military spokesman Lieutenant-Colonel Jonathan Conricus stated. Israeli aircraft came under "massive" anti-aircraft fire from Syrian positions, which resulted in the downing of the jet.

Israel confirmed that it had attacked 12 other targets in Syria in response, including three air defence batteries and four installations "that are part of Iran's military establishment in Syria."

In an apparent recognition of the heightened risks of any escalation, Israel's military spokesmen said that, though Syria and Iran were "playing with fire," Israel was "not looking to escalate the situation."

"This is the most blatant and severe Iranian violation of Israeli sovereignty in the last years," Conricus said, referring to the reported UAV incursion into Israeli airspace.



Wider circle of fire. People stand next to a part of a missile in Quneitra in south-western Syria, on February 10.

(Reuters)

"That's why our response is as severe as it is."

With the battlefield defeat of the Islamic State (ISIS), Syria has become the theatre for a deadly escalation of rivalries between regional and world powers, with Israel joining the United States, Russia, Turkey, the Syrian regime, plus Iran and its principal Lebanese ally Hezbollah, in competing for prominence on an increasingly crowded stage.

Though this is the first direct confrontation between Israel and Iran, Israeli air strikes on positions in Syria have been a regular feature of the war. Israeli action had been restricted to what it claimed were advanced weapons stores or convoys taking materiel to Hezbollah in neighbouring Lebanon. However, it also sporadically struck at Syrian

government facilities suspected of developing weapons that could be used against the Jewish state.

Iran has yet to respond to the Israeli strikes but tensions between Tel Aviv and Tehran's Lebanese proxy, Hezbollah, have been escalating. Israeli accusations of Iran-sponsored and Hezbollah-operated weapons plants in Lebanon have been growing. Israeli military spokesman Brigadier-General Ronen Manelis in January accused Iran of turning Lebanon into "one big missile factory."

Further fuelling tensions between the two countries have been Israeli plans to construct a border wall on territory Beirut claims as its own and the public dispute over a gas field straddling the countries' maritime frontiers.

Israel and Hezbollah have yet to

directly engage since the ambiguous conclusion of their month-long confrontation in 2006. At that time, despite incurring heavy casualties, Hezbollah pushed Israeli forces back across the frontier.

However, since its involvement in the Syrian conflict, Hezbollah is regarded as having significantly improved its military capacity and battlefield experience, increasing the risks of a clash with Israel.

An escalation of violence in Syria would mark a serious setback for

Russian plans to impose some form of peace settlement on the war-ravaged country before its March 18 elections.

Turkish forces are engaged against Syria's Kurds in northern Syria and the United States carried out massive air strikes against Syrian forces, said to include Russian "contractors," in oil-rich Deir ez-Zor on February 7. Elsewhere, both Russian and Syrian jets were said to be waging a war of attrition across the north-western province of Idlib and the Assad regime was pounding the Damascus suburb of east Ghouta.

How Israel's entry into the fray may shape circumstances remains to be seen.

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Viewpoint



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US Syria goals built upon shaky foundations and uncertain alliances

Kurdish militia allies against the Iranian revolution.

The key portions of Tillerson's statement said the United States "desires five key end states" in Syria: an "enduring defeat" to ISIS and al-Qaeda; a political resolution to underlying armed struggle between Bashar Assad's regime and the population that rose against him, which sees the dictator depart; curtailing Iran's influence and making sure "Syria's neighbours are secure from all threats emanating from Syria;" allowing the return of refugees; and the removal of all weapons of mass destruction from Syria.

To avoid large-scale deployments and in a futile attempt to run a counterterrorism war, while avoiding entanglement in Syria's underlying conflict, the United States has worked "by, with and through" the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). This is a diplomatic construct designed to circumvent the political and legal problems of working with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), an organisation classified as terrorists by Turkey and the United States. Though there are many Arab and other units within the SDF, few deny that the PKK controls the group, politically, militarily and strategically.

A mandate over Rojava, as the PKK calls the region it occupies in northern Syria, might allow the United States to keep ISIS at a manageable level, at least as long as the United States stays. It is not clear, however, that a jointly held Kurdish-US

mandate in eastern Rojava would do much to resolve questions over al-Qaeda's former branch in the country's west. Questions among the Arab population over the extent of the SDF/PKK's legitimacy within Rojava might open space for jihadists to infiltrate within the east.

The United States' doubling down on its alliance with the PKK exacerbates rifts within NATO, distracting the Turks, who are best placed to tackle Syria's al-Qaeda-linked Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), and reinforcing Ankara's view that the United States' presence in Syria is contrary to its own interests. This incentivises Turkey to undermine the US mandate, risking anti-ISIS gains and, more seriously, keeping Turkey's view of Syria aligned with those of the Russia-Iran axis.

Elsewhere, there is little prospect of refugees returning. More Syrian refugees fled Assad than any other actor within the Syrian conflict. Even if their homes haven't been colonised by Iran's militias, they cannot return while Assad remains in power. Both Idlib, dominated by HTS, and the authoritarian regime of the PKK offer limited appeal to

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the displaced. Some refugees have returned to the Turkish-controlled areas of Syria and perhaps more will in the future.

Assad has used weapons of mass destruction at least once while US forces were in Syria. The April 2017 cruise missile strikes by the United States seem to have prevented a repeat but Assad still has weapons stockpiles and production infrastructure. It is not obvious how they can be dismantled from a remote protectorate.

The other US objectives – guarding against threats to Syria's neighbours and the goals of "reducing... malicious Iranian influence from Syria" and getting rid of Assad – are the most troubled. They are unlikely to be feasible if the intention is to use the PKK to achieve them. The PKK has used Syria as a logistics base to attack Turkish cities and SDF-flagged fighters have shown up inside Syria in the ranks of the PKK. There is significant reason to doubt the PKK's resolve in a confrontation with pro-Assad forces.

The PKK's connections to Assad, Iran and Russia are old and extensive. From the outset of the war, the PKK has been aligned with the pro-Assad coalition and past confrontations only seem to have drawn them closer. In Manbij, the PKK ceded US-won territory to Assad and Iran to hold off Turkey. In Afrin, the PKK called on the regime to come to its defence against the Turkish onslaught.

Significant parts of the Arab component within the SDF are pulled from pro-Assad formations that will not fight either Assad or Iran. The Rojava statelet is entirely reliant upon the Assad regime's toleration of its existence and Iran's financing of its public services.

US intelligence is aware of the PKK's coordination with Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the regime holds the key security nodes, including airports, throughout Rojava. Even in areas newly captured by the PKK, the Assad regime's secret police are back, able to carry off activists and rebels to dungeons in Damascus in exchange for paying the government salaries for the PKK.

The US air strikes February 7 against pro-regime forces in defence of the SDF-PKK provide a model of what might be to come. If US resolve holds and the PKK-held areas are guaranteed through force, it could freeze Iran's influence and perhaps reverse it within the areas currently held. Eradicating Iran's footprint within Rojava would take considerable effort and the notion of the PKK using Rojava as a base to attack the Iranian security architecture in western Syria is unrealistic.

This leaves Tehran triumphant in "useful Syria" and in possession of the initiative, able to harass the US zone in pursuit of its overarching strategic goal of reconsolidating all of Syria under Assad and his various militias and driving the United States out of the region.