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Iran and the New State of Play in Southwest Syria

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In the summer of 2018, the Asad regime reestablished its control over the Syrian side of the Golan Heights, restoring Syrian sovereignty and redeploying the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) to its pre-war positions. However, a deeper look at the developments across the Syrian-Israeli frontier reveals that the new reality is substantially different from pre-civil war Syria. The Syrian military bases today host a number of new actors, which include pro-Iranian militias, Russian military police, and reconfigured Syrian units under new command. The local leadership and elements identified with the opposition, who informally governed these areas before the Asad regime reestablished control, have fled or been killed. In its place is a new Syrian security architecture that is based, in part, on foreign actors (some with Syrian identity cards), who are playing the role that used to be reserved for the Syrian security apparatus.

Post war Syria and the changing border reality in south Syria

Eight years of war have dramatically changed the face of the Syrian state. The Syria of the past no longer exists. First, demographic and social changes have rearranged the country, which numbered 23 million people before the war.¹ The ruling Asad family comes from Syria's 'Alawi community, a religious minority (about 12 percent of the prewar population)² that is an offshoot of a heterodox Shi'i sect of Islam. Today, there are more than 5.6 million Syrian refugees living outside the country,³ the vast majority of whom are Sunni, but also include some minorities. The numbers of those killed is reported to be at least 511,000 (with opposition sources claiming a

¹ Sarah El Deeb, "[Home may be forever lost for displaced within Syria](#)," *Associated Press (AP)*, July 14, 2018.

² "[Syria's Alawites, a secretive and persecuted sect](#)," *Reuters*, January 31, 2012.

³ The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), <https://www.unhcr.org/syria-emergency.html>

much higher figure),⁴ of whom about 350,000 are known by name. The Syrian army, which numbered some 200,000 soldiers before the war,⁵ quickly eroded due to attrition and significant waves of desertions that resulted in the establishment of the opposition Free Syrian Army (FSA) and the diverse group of militias that fought under the opposition umbrella, albeit without success. Asad remained in power, supported by mobilized militias that filled the ranks of his army. At its peak, the number of militiamen fighting for Asad amounted to some 80,000,⁶ more than the depleted Syrian Arab Army at the time. Iran played an important role in providing Syria with conventional and unconventional military support as well as intelligence training to help suppress the popular uprising.⁷

Since last summer, Iran has deepened its presence on the Syrian Golan. Contrary to the reports of a Russian-brokered Iranian withdrawal to an imaginary line – approximately 85 kilometers from Israel’s border⁸ (with the exclusion of Damascus) – Iran has instead steadily entrenched itself in southwest Syria.

Prior to July 2018, southwest Syria was operating as a quasi-independent entity. The Syrian Golan region was able to function without the regime due to the presence of armed militias on the one hand, and civil organizations on the other, all of which were supported by external actors and stakeholders, including Israel. The common interest of most of the actors representing the Syrian opposition was to make sure that neither the Asad regime nor other radical actors in the area would be able to set up camp in the territory bordering Israel, where the opposition was already established. However, the gradual return of the Asad forces to the Golan Heights has already led to Iranian militias establishing a presence on the border, putting them in the crossfire between Iran and Israel.

For example, in 2015, six members of Hizballah and six Iranian military personnel, including an Iranian general, were killed by an alleged Israeli strike near the Druze village of Hader. Four years after the incident, Hezbollah commemorates the death of six of their fighters, including Jihad Mughniyeh. Jihad was the son of ‘Imad

⁴ Angus McDowall and Andrew Roche, [“Syrian Observatory says war has killed more than half a million,” Reuters](#), March 12, 2018.

⁵ [“The Syrian Army in the Civil War,” Global Security](#); [“Syrian army prepares for post-conflict Challenges,” Jane’s](#).

⁶ Seth Frantzman, [“Who are Iran's 80,000 Shi'ite fighters in Syria?,” Jerusalem Post](#), April 28, 2018.

⁷ Karim Sadjadpour, [“Iran’s Unwavering Support to Assad’s Syria,” CTC Sentinel](#) 6:8, Syria Special Issues, August 2013.

⁸ Polina Nikolskaya and Dan Williams, [“Russia says Iranian forces pulled back from Golan in Syria; Israel unsatisfied,” Reuters](#), August 1, 2018.

Mughniyeh, Hezbollah's External Security Organization (ESO) chief,⁹ responsible for the group's international operations and as the liaison to Iran's security and intelligence services. 'Imad was on the FBI and EU's most wanted lists and found his death in February 2008.¹⁰

The regime's victory - with Iran and Hizballah's support - has and created a number of changes:

To begin with, the Syrian military is no longer the sole authority on the ground. Six Russian Military Police positions were deployed on the Bravo Line (the eastern border line of the Demilitarized Zone between the SAA and the IDF, as part of the 1974 Disengagement Agreements following the Yom Kippur War), with the aim to enforce a series of "understandings," reached to restore stability in the region and to remove non-Syrian forces, as agreed upon in the Astana process.¹¹ Despite these diplomatic agreements, the reality on the ground is more complex.

The Syrian Arab Army, which has also returned to its positions, is no longer the same. In the south, the 61st Regional Brigade was completely wiped out. The 90th Regional Brigade returned, but it has been reinforced with various militias, such as the *Suqur al-Quneitra* and the NDF. The 112th Brigade (from 5th Syrian Division), was deployed forward in the southern Golan Heights, 10 kilometers from the Israeli border on Tall al Jabiyah to fill the vacuum left by the destroyed 61st Brigade: it is probable that a local Hizballah force may have been stationed under its auspices and a recent report claimed that there are over 10,000 men trained and led by the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) have been mobilized opposite the frontier with Israel.¹² As outgoing Israeli Army Chief of Staff Gabi Eisenkot detailed in an interview with the *New York Times*, Hizballah developed a three-pronged strategy to confront Israel: building factories in Lebanon to manufacture precision-guided missiles, digging attack tunnels under the Israeli border, and setting up a second front from Syria on the Golan Heights. Furthermore, a Hizballah intelligence position was reportedly struck by the IDF at the end of 2018. It was located on the Golan Heights, less than two kilometers from the border.¹³

⁹ "[Treasury Sanctions Hizballah Leadership](#)," *US Department of the Treasury*, August 22, 2013.

¹⁰ Matthew Levitt and David Schenker, "[Who Was Imad Mughniyeh?](#)," *Policy Watch* 1340, Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP), February 14, 2008.

¹¹ Lee Dimitry and Seitzhan Galiasjer "[Latest Astana process talks establish de-escalation zones in war-torn Syria](#)," *The Astana Times*, May 7, 2017.

¹² "[10,000 Iran-trained Syrian soldiers posted on Israel border](#)," *i24 News*, November 27, 2018.

¹³ Bret Stephens, "[The Man Who Humbled Qassim Suleimani](#)," *The New York Times*, January 11, 2019.

In the summer 2018, Hizballah did not wait for long before it resumed its activities on the Syrian Golan Heights. It has been busy setting up a Syrian branch, which replicates its Lebanese model. "Hizballah fi Suriya" (Hizballah in Syria) appeared already back in 2014.¹⁴ Mustafa Mughniyeh (eldest son of 'Imad Mughniyeh and Jihad's eldest brother) reportedly attempted to revive an Iranian cell in the Druze village of Hader.¹⁵ Reports of preferential payments are also surfacing: anyone joining a pro-Iranian militia receive a higher 'salary,' directly from Iran, versus those who join Asad's Syrian Arab Army. This has attracted many non-Shi'i Syrians seeking to join mostly Shi'i militias (such as "Hizballah fi Suriya").¹⁶

Despite the renewal of UNDOF's mandate for six additional months¹⁷ (UNSCR 2450), the UN forces are still far from being redeployed to their old positions, let alone renewing their patrols, and most of their positions are reportedly destroyed, or unmanned. Much work is required to bring back UNDOF to its previous capabilities and a question mark remains regarding the relevance of its 1974 mandate: to maintain the ceasefire between Israel and Syria, and to ensure the continued separation of Israeli and Syrian conventional military forces.¹⁸

Defying the understandings reached between Russia, Israel and Jordan, Iran continues to increase its presence in southern Syria. A number of opposition sources¹⁹ detail the military activities of pro-Iranian militias on the ground, which include the Shi'i Iraqi Al-Imam Al-Hussein, Abu Al-Fadl Al-'Abbas Brigades, and Hizballah's elite "Radwan" unit. To conceal their activities, these militias are using Syrian military bases, and some are embedded in regime forces, reportedly wearing Syrian army uniforms, and carrying Syrian IDs and flags.

Iran used the promotion of Shi'ism as a tool to buy loyalty among Syrians from poor areas. Its activities were visible in the 1980s and 1990s but intensified in post-2011 Syria. Public expressions of Shi'i practices, which were limited during the time of Hafez al-Asad, are now prevalent, including in the Sunni Omawi Mosque in

¹⁴ Phillip Smyth, "[How Iran Is Building Its Syrian Hezbollah](#)," *Policy Analysis*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP) March 6, 2016.

¹⁵ Yoav Limor, "[Revealed: Hezbollah establishes terror infrastructure in Druze Golan](#)," *Israel Hayom*, October 25, 2018.

¹⁶ Lina Khatib and Lina Sinjab, "Syria's Transactional State, How the Conflict Changed the Syrian State's Exercise of Power," October 2018, *Chatham House*, page 23.

¹⁷ "[Security Council Grants Six-Month Mandate Renewal for United Nations Disengagement Observer Force](#)," Adopting Resolution 2450 (2018).

¹⁸ "[UNDOF Mandate](#)," United Nations Peacekeeping, UNDOF official website.

¹⁹ N. Mozes, "[Websites Opposed To The Syrian Regime: Iran Continues To Consolidate Its Presence In Southern Syria, In Violation Of Understandings Between Russia, Israel, Jordan](#)," *Inquiry & Analysis Series No.1430*, Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), January 4, 2019.

Damascus. Regime opponents have documented the regime's efforts to promote Shi'ism, which manifests itself for example through 'Ashura ceremonies in Damascus and its surroundings.²⁰

On 11 October 2018, 150 teachers were reportedly fired from schools in the Golan Heights.²¹ Concurrently, religious preachers who used to operate during the war in mosques of the Golan Heights were relieved of their positions. Unlike before, the new Shaykhs are now required to obtain clearance from the Syrian military intelligence apparatus rather than from the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Many of the students in Dar'a who studied at the schools and universities of the opposition Syrian Interim Government are now suffering from the fact that the Syrian regime refuses to recognize the diplomas they earned during the civil war from the opposition's educational establishments. The students, therefore, cannot continue their education or obtain a postponement of their military service.²²

On October 25th, Abolfazl Tabatabai, the personal representative of Iran's Supreme Leader in Syria, visited Dar'a to congratulate the regime's forces on their victory in southern Syria.²³ The visit took place as reports indicated a growing presence of pro-Iranian militias and Hizballah in the region. The so-called reconciliation agreements have succeeded in preventing massacres in the Golan region, but during the past year former FSA commanders have been assassinated, others have been arrested and "disappeared," while at the same time civil society NGOs have been shut down and anyone suspected of disloyalty to the regime has been dismissed from his/her position.

The Asad regime's promises to restore pre-war stability seems to be a delusion. A weakened and exhausted population, a lack of leadership and basic services,²⁴ and the loss of Israel's rebel partners that had been working to stabilize the area over the past few years have resulted in a broken society. The IDF's "Operation Good Neighbor" which provided humanitarian assistance such as food, tents, generators, fuel, medical equipment and medicine, and clothing has ended leaving a significant

²⁰ N. Mozes, "[Shi'ization Of Syria: In Damascus, Unprecedentedly Extensive Observance Of The 'Ashura](#)," Inquiry & Analysis Series No.1131, Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), November 13, 2014.

²¹ "[Recent developments in south-west Syria as regime continues to target former-opposition figures in Daraa confiscating assets of former Daraa provincial council governor](#)," ETANA, October 12, 2018.

²² "[Daraa's Students Suffer as Syrian Regime Refuses Acknowledging Diplomas Issued by Opposition](#)," *Enab Baladi*, December 31, 2018.

²³ "[Khamenei's Personal Representative in Syria Visits Daraa City](#)," *Enab Baladi*, October 25, 2018.

²⁴ "[The other side of the border: In southern Syria, promise of Naseeb border rings hollow for civilians mired by rising prices](#)" *Syria Direct*, November 28, 2018.

vacuum of supplies and support in the Syrian south.²⁵ Despite the expectations of additional troops, UNDOF still lacks some 300 soldiers that were part of its mission prior to 2014.²⁶ There is still high tension between those opposition groups that reconciled with the regime and the regime's Syrian Arab Army in Dar'a.²⁷ Indeed, assassinations and explosions are still common in the Syrian government-controlled areas due to the lack of security. At the beginning of 2019, explosions and assassinations continue to kill and injure both Syrian officials and former militants.²⁸ Lack of services such as medical care and cooking gas, accumulation of waste (that already spread infectious diseases)²⁹ are among the challenges facing our Syrian neighbors just across the frontier and clearly indicate the lack and loss of stabilizing forces.

This week's escalation, where an Israeli attack on an Iranian base near Damascus triggered a rare missile attack from Syria targeting Israel³⁰ is just the latest indication that a return to the pre-war stability on our northern border with Syria is unlikely in the foreseeable future.

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²⁵ Anna Ahronheim, "[IDF ends 'Good Neighbor' Humanitarian Aid Program for Syrian Civilians](#)," *The Jerusalem Post*, September 13, 2018.

²⁶ Judah Ari Gross & Agencies, "[Border crossing between Israel and Syria opens for first time in 4 years](#)," *The Times of Israel*, October 15, 2018.

²⁷ "[WHO Syria. Week 52, 21 – 27 December 2018](#)", *WHO*, General developments & political & security situation, December 27, 2018.

²⁸ Ayham Nasif (ed.), "[Gunfire injures Syrian government forces member in northern Daraa](#)," *Smart News*, January 12, 2019.

²⁹ "[Health Concerns due to the accumulation of waste "\(Arabic\)](#), *Smart News*, December 28, 2018.

³⁰ Judah Ari Gross, "[Syria accuses Israel of rare daylight strike, as IDF downs missile over Golan](#)," *Times of Israel*, January 20, 2019.