

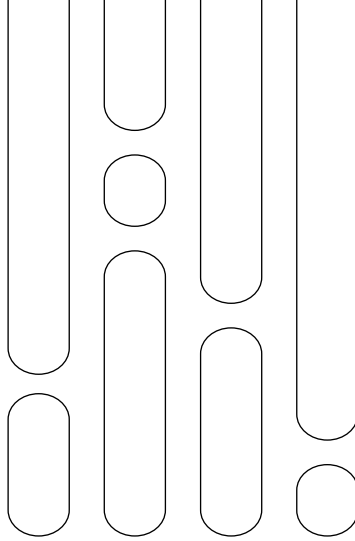
REPORT

# SYRIA IN LIGHT OF THE ONGOING ISRAELI ESCALATION: ASSAD'S OPTIONS AND POSITIONS OF KEY ACTORS

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Israel has been conducting continuous strikes in Syria, primarily targeting Iranian arms depots and missile bases, even before its recent operations in Gaza and Lebanon. These attacks, which occur almost weekly, have not seen a significant change in tactics but rather in the political strategy of the Israeli government. Since October 2023, Tel Aviv has expanded its focus beyond Palestine, aiming to broaden its military campaign to include other regional fronts. Hezbollah in Lebanon became the first target, and with the group suffering significant losses — both in manpower and leadership — many expect Syria to be the next battleground. The recent Israeli air force strikes on Iran-affiliated sites in Damascus, Masyaf and areas near the Russian Hmeimim base indicate an escalation beyond Lebanon. This intensification in southern Syria suggests that Israel may be extending its military campaign against Hezbollah into Syria, which has long been a critical hub for Iranian influence and Hezbollah's logistical support. This development raises several questions: How will Assad's government and other stakeholders in Syria respond if Israel ramps up its operations in the country? And how might this escalation affect the broader geopolitical landscape, especially as it relates to Iran and Hezbollah, two of Syria's key allies in the ongoing regional conflict?

### **Broadening the Scope of Military Operations: Israel's Motives and Objectives on the Gaza, Lebanon and Syria Fronts**

The events of October 7, 2023, and the subsequent declaration of war on the Gaza Strip, Israel opening a second front in Lebanon, and the potential for engagement in Syria as a third front, have significantly altered many longstanding assumptions regarding Israel's military strategy, objectives, and approach to its operations. In this context, the following points can be highlighted:

- Israeli strategy seems to have shifted beyond mere deterrence to creating a new security and political reality: Over the past few months, Israel's objectives in the conflict have evolved from restoring its deterrence to an attempt to impose a new political and security framework. This shift includes the goal of gaining full control over the Gaza Strip and depopulating the area, dismantling Hamas's capabilities, launching a large-scale military campaign in southern Lebanon against Hezbollah's leadership and infrastructure, and expanding operations in Syria, which have included deep strikes on military and civilian targets such as the Iranian consulate, Masyaf, Latakia, and an incursion into the Golan Heights.
- The intensity of Israeli strikes in Syria has increased in 2024 [compared to](#) previous years: The current year has seen a marked escalation in Israeli operations against Iranian targets in Syria, with 2024 becoming the most

active year, tallying approximately 185 strikes, compared to 154 in 2023. Notable among these were the strikes on Masyaf, where Israel targeted 15 Iranian military installations. In the Mezzeh neighborhood, which has faced at least 10 Israeli attacks since 2016, five of these occurred in 2024 alone, making October 2024 the month with the most concentrated strikes on the neighborhood, with three incidents recorded in just the first third of the month.

In general, Israel views the Syrian front as equally significant as its Lebanese counterpart in its strategic calculations. There has been a noticeable shift in Israeli actions within Syria, moving from remote bombing campaigns to on-the-ground operations, such as the Masyaf strikes and incursions into the Syrian Golan. In this context, southern Syria — stretching from the western and northern countryside of Dar'a, through Quneitra, to the western outskirts of Damascus — is likely to witness increased Israeli activity for several reasons. One key factor is the presence of a military infrastructure tied to Hezbollah, which forms part of Iran's broader military presence in Syria. Hezbollah can activate this network of fighters and weapons reserves when needed. In addition to its focus on southern Syria, Israel is expected to shift attention to northeastern Syria, a crucial transit point for Iranian arms and militias en route to Syrian territory and eventually to Lebanon. Expanding its operations from Lebanon into Syria aligns with Israel's objective of disrupting Hezbollah's supply chains, dismantling key military infrastructure, and weakening the group's operational capabilities. This approach aims to impose a new security reality, distinct from previous periods. A notable development in this context is Avigdor Lieberman's call for the occupation of the Syrian section of Mount Hermon, which offers a strategic vantage point over Lebanon's western Bekaa region. Additionally, Israeli forces have taken security measures near the village of Hadar, not far from Marjeyoun.

### **Assad's Strategy in the Ongoing Dispute — Between Striking Balances and Running Risks**

As Israeli operations have intensified and broadened in scope since October 2023, with daily changes in their objectives, the prolongation of strikes on Iranian militias and Hezbollah in Syria, and sharp escalations in southern Lebanon, the Syrian government under Bashar al-Assad has maintained a notably steady position. The escalation in southern Lebanon began with Israeli bombings of Hezbollah's wireless communication systems, followed by airstrikes targeting much of the group's political and military leadership. These actions triggered a mass exodus from southern Lebanon, with many fleeing either to the Lebanese interior or towards Syria. Despite these developments, the Assad regime has carefully distanced itself from direct involvement in the confrontation, both in terms of military and logistical sup-

port and in its official positions and statements. While Syria's reluctance to show greater alignment with Hamas since October 7 may be somewhat understandable —given the strained relations between Damascus and Hamas since the Syrian conflict began in 2011— the regime's position appears more puzzling regarding Hezbollah. As Israel's focus has shifted to Lebanon in recent months, resulting in devastating blows to Hezbollah's political and military infrastructure, its close ally, the Syrian regime, has remained conspicuously uninvolved, leaving some observers questioning the extent of Syrian support.

This neutrality raises important questions about Assad's reading of the ongoing regional conflict between his supposed allies (the Iranian axis) and his declared enemies (the Israeli axis), and how this shapes his future strategic thinking. Some commentators suggest that Assad's stance may reflect a division of labor among the members of the Iranian axis, with each contributing military, material or moral support according to their capacities, without directly engaging Israel. This was reflected in the exclusion of the Syrian regime in the rhetoric of the Iran-supported group amid the ongoing regional events. For example, Hamas initially acknowledged Syria at the start of the war but later made no reference to the Syrian regime. Similarly, Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah, who was recently killed in an Israeli strike, had only briefly mentioned the Syrian leadership once or twice in a broader, more general context during his speeches, implying Syria's limited role in the current conflict.

Many, however, interpret Assad's stance in the ongoing conflict as part of a new strategy, aligned with internal and regional realities that constrain Syria's ability to play a larger role within the Iranian axis. Direct involvement in the conflict with Israel would not align with Syria's strategic interests, given the country's ongoing internal challenges. Syria remains politically and security-wise unstable, with the state's authority still contested in its northern and southern regions. Additionally, entering a war with Israel on behalf of Iran could jeopardize the limited gains Syria has made in recent years. Moreover, Syria is still navigating reconstruction efforts and contending with international sanctions. Thus, maintaining silence or a neutral position may be seen as an attempt to avoid further destabilization or outright targeting by external forces.

Syria may have come to the realization that Iran is no longer capable of providing the same level of support as in the past. This is particularly evident with Iran's limited participation in the current conflict and its focus on backing its strategic ally, Hezbollah, in its war with Israel. Iran is also preoccupied with its own internal challenges and its broader conflicts with both Israel and the United States. In this context, Iran seems determined to

avoid any escalation that could threaten its political regime or result in further economic damage. Given these circumstances, it becomes clear why the Syrian regime is hesitant to engage in a direct confrontation with Israel.

Assad's neutral stance aligns with the evolving regional political landscape following the events of October 7, 2023. His approach appears aimed at reshaping the image of his regime, not only within Syria but also internationally. By pursuing a policy of disassociation from the ongoing conflict, Assad seeks to demonstrate that Syria has avoided a direct confrontation with Israel — a conflict that could have catastrophic consequences, worsening the already dire situation in the country. This strategy may also help restore confidence in his leadership among his domestic base, reinforcing his authority. Furthermore, this neutrality is a significant move towards reshaping how Assad's rule is perceived on the regional and international stage. By carefully balancing relationships with various conflicting parties, he presents Syria as a stabilizing force in the region.

Despite Assad's approach of disassociation from the ongoing regional conflict, this strategy comes with significant risks and challenges. The Middle East stands on the brink of a major shift in the balance of power, and the outcome of the current Iran-Israel conflict will undoubtedly impact Assad and his regime. Even with a neutral stance, wars tend to exert their influence on neighboring countries, affecting them either as participants, victims, or neutral observers. Whether neutrality is viewed positively or negatively, the conflict will leave its mark, with unavoidable consequences on Syria's social and economic fabric. Moreover, the political repercussions could be profound. The ongoing conflict may lead to shifts in regional alliances and could alter the internal balance of power within Syria.

The prevailing expectation is that the conflict is likely to escalate further rather than come to a halt. Netanyahu's government, along with the military and security establishment, is demonstrating a strong commitment to capitalize on the current opportunity to dismantle the Iranian axis and undermine its footholds. This strategy particularly targets the first ring of areas adjacent to Israel, primarily encompassing the fronts of southern Syria, as well as southern and eastern Lebanon, in addition to Gaza and the West Bank. The Israeli leadership seems determined to continue operations until a significant outcome is achieved that can be framed as a victory for the Israeli public.

Damascus' traditional regional policy, characterized by efforts to maintain open relations with all parties and avoid fully aligning with any one faction, has become less effective amid the escalating political and military conflict in the region.

This situation raises questions about the Syrian government's ability to withstand these challenges and remain unaffected by the ongoing war and its anticipated developments. Whether these doubts prove accurate or not will largely depend on the unfolding regional and international dynamics.

### **Implications of the Israeli Escalation for the Balance of Power in Syria**

The geography of Syria is influenced by the control of various regional and global powers, turning it into a battleground for internal conflicts. These conflicts have intensified due to the ongoing Israeli military escalation in Gaza, which has persisted for over a year and recently extended to Lebanon, with the potential to reach Syria next. Consequently, the prospect of this Israeli escalation spreading into Syria will not solely impact one party, as Iran will not be the only nation affected; it will also influence various other actors, including Russia and Turkey, reshaping their current balances within Syria. This concern has manifested in the actions, decisions, and [proactive statements](#) from these countries regarding the risks of escalation including Syria along with Lebanon. Russian Presidential Press Secretary Dmitry Peskov warned that a geographical expansion of military operations in the Middle East could lead to catastrophic consequences for the region, in response to reports that Israel might initiate a ground military operation in Syria. At the same time, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan cautioned against an Israeli incursion into Syrian territory following developments in Lebanon, asserting that "once Damascus is occupied, Israel will reach the Turkish border in northern Syria."

Iran is particularly affected by Syria's stance and the accompanying Israeli escalation. This raises questions about the sustainability of President Assad's stance of "no position," as he attempts to keep himself and Syria's borders neutral amidst the Israeli actions targeting Iran and its influence both within Syria and beyond. While Syria's neutrality may have been acceptable when the conflict between Tehran and Tel Aviv was limited, the Iranian leadership is now experiencing an unprecedented level of threat due to the recent attacks on Hezbollah and the destabilization of what is termed the forward defense strategy. As the Israeli escalation progresses and aims to weaken Iran and its influence near Israeli borders, Iran's strategic calculations may shift, potentially leading it to transform Syria into a new front against Israel.

Russia is also a key player closely monitoring the current Israeli escalation due to its significant role in the Syrian balance of power and its established relationships with Iran, Israel, and Syria. These relationships are characterized by a complex interplay of conflicting interests and delicate balances. Since its intervention in Syria in 2015, Russia has engaged in agreements

with both Iran and Israel, aiming to preserve the Assad regime as a cornerstone of Russian and Iranian influence, while Israel prioritizes maintaining the stability of its borders. However, contradictions in interests have emerged, particularly regarding the containment of Iranian influence. While both Moscow and Tel Aviv recognize the need to address this issue, they approach it from different perspectives. Despite sharing common interests with Iran, Russia has increasingly viewed its partnership with Iran as potentially detrimental to its own role in Syria. Nevertheless, Russia's strategic interests require it to maintain some level of cooperation with Iran, as this helps balance the forces of its opponents and facilitates negotiations with those opposing Iran. Consequently, Russia has exhibited a dual approach: cooperating with Iran in Syria while simultaneously overlooking Israel's repeated airstrikes on Iranian positions.

The situation following October 2023 presents a stark contrast to the dynamics that existed prior to that date. The escalation of Israeli military operations, characterized by an increase in strikes targeting Iranian and Hezbollah positions in Lebanon and Syria, has led Moscow to closely monitor the intensifying tensions between Iran and Israel. While this escalation could potentially benefit Moscow within the broader context of its influence in the Middle East, it also introduces a series of challenges and uncertainties regarding Russia's strategic position. As Israeli operations potentially expand from Lebanon into Syria, particularly if these operations evolve into an open conflict rather than the selective strikes previously observed, Moscow faces a complex dilemma. It must consider how to respond if Iranian targets within Syria continue to be attacked. This scenario could compel Russia to make difficult choices about its stance and actions. One possibility is for Russia to maintain its current course, which involves publicly criticizing Israeli operations while allowing them to proceed without actual opposition. Alternatively, Moscow could choose to increase support for Israel's adversaries, all while avoiding direct military involvement. Recent interactions between Syrian and Iranian officials and Russia underscore this tension. For instance, the recent invitation extended by Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov for a new meeting on Syria under the Astana format before the end of the year signals Russia's interest in engaging multiple regional actors. This move serves as a message to various parties, indicating that any efforts by Netanyahu to carry out significant military operations against Syria or Iran, potentially supported by Washington, would be viewed as unacceptable shifts in Russia's broader strategic calculus.

Turkey's response to the Israeli escalation in Lebanon, particularly regarding movements along the Lebanese-Syrian border, has been notably significant. President Erdogan's warning about a potential Israeli advance into Syrian territory, which he views as a precursor to an occupation of Damascus



and a possible move towards the Turkish border in northern Syria, reflects a deep concern over the implications of these developments. Additionally, Turkey's call for the Russian-Iranian-Syrian trio to take on greater responsibilities in light of this Israeli escalation underscores Ankara's desire to play a more active role in regional security dynamics. This stance serves multiple purposes: it sends a clear message to various local and regional actors that Turkey cannot remain insulated from the consequences of the ongoing conflicts and that it seeks to maintain influence in the evolving landscape. Moreover, Turkey appears to be maneuvering to place pressure on the Syrian government, leveraging the current situation to explore the potential benefits of improving its relationship with Damascus.

### **Conclusion**

Syria currently finds itself in a precarious transitional phase, characterized by volatility and uncertainty. The unfolding regional conflict and the strategies employed by external actors like Iran and Israel will significantly influence the trajectory of the country. In this intricate geopolitical landscape, the future of Syria hangs in the balance, shaped by the maneuvers of these powerful players. President Assad is navigating a complex web of challenges, including the competing interests of regional powers, the country's ongoing economic struggles, and the imperative to maintain his grip on power.



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