

## ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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### ***Israel and the New Troika of Evil: Iran, Hezbollah and Russia***

As 2017 unfolds, Israel, the only functioning democracy in the Middle East, is doing well. Its economy is growing at 3.2% per year. The main opposition party to Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud Party is in disarray. (Netanyahu has ruled for nearly 11 years as Prime Minister.) In terms of its foreign affairs, Israel enjoys a positive relationship with Russia and its ties to both Africa and Asia are the best ever. Although absolutely no progress has been made in resolving the issues with the Palestinians (a major sticking point during the Obama years), Israel now enjoys a better relationship with the United States under Donald Trump. Because of the growing power of Iran in the region, Israel enjoys a covert friendship with Saudi Arabia and other Sunni Arab states. Israel and these various Arab states share an intense antipathy toward Iran, the leading Shiite nation. Further, they are all quite worried about the regional instability fostered by the Syrian civil war and all remain upset over the US nuclear deal with Iran negotiated during the Obama years. But Israel is increasingly anxious about two major developments in the Middle East. Each poses an existential threat to the state of Israel.

- First is the growing influence and power of Iran. The Syrian civil war has provided an opportunity for Iran to increase its influence in the eastern Mediterranean. When President Obama refused to intervene in Syria (e.g., the "red line" fiasco), a power vacuum was created. Iran and later Russia filled that vacuum. Both have now contributed to the survival of Bashar al-Assad as president of Syria. This strategic alliance between Iran and Russia has also resulted in the expanding influence of Iran as a serious threat to the state of Israel. Vladimir Putin has taken a much friendlier demeanor toward Israel than previous USSR leaders and it is uncertain at this time how far he is willing to go in supporting Israeli actions to prevent Iran from building a sphere of influence across the Mediterranean world. As Ruth English and David Filipov of the *Washington Post* demonstrate, "Ever since Putin entered Syrian territory two years ago, Israel has repeatedly emphasized to Putin its red lines regarding Iran and the groups it supports—Lebanon's Hezbollah and other Shiite militias involved in fighting in Syria. Netanyahu has visited Moscow four times over the past 1 ½ years, and the two sides have struck cooperation agreements aimed at preventing confrontations between their warplanes in Syrian airspace." But for Israel, it is now time to focus on the future. However, Iran has played a key role in Putin's goal to become a major player in the Middle East. Russia has expanded its naval base in Syria and established at least two airbases in Syria. Iran has provided a stable land corridor through which to send arms and cash to the Lebanese Hezbollah. Mohsen Milani, executive director of the Center for Strategic and Diplomatic Studies at the University of South Florida, argues that, "Not only is their cooperation on the ground, but the relationship between Iran and Russia is

much more comprehensive than the future of Assad or the future of Syria.” Therefore, it is rather impossible to see Putin abandon this alliance with Iran just to help Israel.

During the Syrian civil war, Iran has provided billions of dollars to shore up Assad’s regime and has contributed soldiers and other manpower needs to sustain the depleted manpower and resources of the Syrian government. It has also recruited Shiite militias (primarily Hezbollah) to fight alongside the Syrian army. Iran has also thought to have deployed missiles in Syria capable of reaching deep inside Israeli territory. There is simply no way Russia can exclude Iran from any part of the settlement of the civil war.

- Second is the existential threat posed by Hezbollah. Founded in the early 1980s, Hezbollah now has an estimated 6,000 to 8,000 fighters in Syria and is also quite active in the Golan Heights region, which Israel captured in the 1967 war and subsequently annexed for security reasons. When it was formed, Hezbollah was trained by Iran’s Quds Force, an arm of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, which manages and oversees Iranian clients throughout the region. After more than four years of fighting, its troops are battle-hardened and a significant threat to Israel. During the last war with Israel in 2006, Hezbollah was a terrorist militia with rockets. Today, Hezbollah poses a far greater threat to Israel than it did near 11 years ago. Maria Abi-Habib in the *Wall Street Journal* writes that, “Hezbollah is today stronger, more independent and in command of a new Syrian militia that its officials say is ready to be deployed to other conflicts in the region.” It was Hezbollah that constructed the plan for Aleppo that was used by Syria and Russia last year. Hezbollah “almost stands on a par with Iran as a protector of President Bashar al-Assad’s government and as a sponsor of Shiite fighting forces in Syria.” The following observations confirm that Hezbollah could very well be an existential threat to Israel in the next few years:
  1. Hezbollah has gained a certain level of international recognition. It was involved in the negotiations sponsored by Russia following the route of the rebels in Aleppo. When China’s special envoy to Syria visited nearby Lebanon, he spent time with Hezbollah’s foreign-relations chief. This is quite a leap for a militia once branded as an international terrorist pariah!
  2. Hezbollah could draw on its Syrian recruits to threaten Israel in the Golan Heights region. For example, in March it announced the formation of a Syria-based “Brigade for the Liberation of the Golan” devoted to re-gaining control of the Golan Heights from Israel.
  3. The Persian Gulf states, which are Sunni Muslims, see Hezbollah’s mounting clout as evidence of Iran’s growing Shiite power and influence in areas where it had few, if any, friends. Hezbollah’s presence in Syria stretches 250 miles from the northern tip to the south, “longer than the length of Lebanon.” That is why Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are much friendlier to Israel.

4. Hezbollah expanded its military arsenal by gaining access to Russian and Syrian weapons during the civil war. Cooperation with Russia on the battlefield further increased the flow of weapons to Hezbollah.
5. Hezbollah is seeking lasting political and social influence by broadening its mandate from countering Israel to fighting Sunni extremist groups across the region and “to protect[ing] religious minorities—not only Shiites but also Christians. It has begun replicating inside Syria the social programs that brought it loyalty and political success in [Lebanon].”
6. Hezbollah has created a Syrian branch of its Imam al-Mahdi youth movement, somewhat like a Muslim Boy Scouts organization. Its goal is to cultivate fierce dedication and commitment among young boys to its larger goals. It is building a new generation of future warriors for Shiite Islam.

In conclusion, the major beneficiaries of the Syrian civil war would seem to be Hezbollah, Russia and Iran. 1. Hezbollah—because it has gained legitimacy, power and prestige. It poses a genuine threat to Israel. 2. Russia—because it is now a major player in the Middle East and has established naval and air bases in the heart of the eastern Mediterranean—a long-sought dream of the Russian czars of the past. 3. Iran—because it now has successfully established the crescent of Shiite Islam from the Persian Gulf, through parts of Iraq, across Syria and into Lebanon. This new troika of power—Hezbollah, Russia and Iran—has successfully challenged the once dominant influence and power of the United States in this region and now poses a significant threat to the larger worldwide balance of power. It is an unintended consequence of the Syrian civil war.

See *The Economist* (3 December 2016), pp. 37-38; “Netanyahu urges Putin to block Iranian power . . .” in [www.theday.com](http://www.theday.com) (13 March 2017); Erin Cunningham, “Rouhani to visit Putin in Moscow . . .” in the *Washington Post* (26 March 2017); William Booth in the *Washington Post* (23 July 2016); and Maria Abi-Habib, “A Winner in Syria’s Civil War: Hezbollah” in the *Wall Street Journal* (3 April 2017).