

## Israel's Dwindling Options in Syria

### What is the issue?

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- Israel got itself involved in the Syrian war in order to contain increasing Iranian influence in Syria.

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- But the tide seems to be against it and its option is limited at present.

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### How has the Israel - Syria hostility evolved over the years?

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- In the 1967 war, Israel captured the strategic "Golan Heights" on the Israeli-Syria border from Syria and continues to occupy the region even now.

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- In the 1980s, Syria intervened in Lebanon and helped militants like Hezbollah who were resisting Israeli occupation of Lebanon.

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- While Syria and Israel do not have formal diplomatic ties, they've not had a direct confrontation for more than 50 years now.

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- Additionally, despite the hostility towards the current longstanding Assad regime, Israel's border with Syria has been very calm for years.

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- When the crisis broke in Syria in 2011, Israel was a fence sitter as it didn't want to displace the stable secular dictatorship of Assad.

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- Notably, this was more because the possible replacement was an uncertain bunch of militant religionists.

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- But as the Syrian civil war evolved into a regional conflict over the years, and Israel's strategic calculations seem to have changed too.

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### What forced Israel's intervention into the Syrian war?

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- The Syrian war is very complex and multiple players have aligned with each-other for strategic reasons even if their end goals were non-compatible.

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- As the Syrian regime's position weakened, Iran sent in trained Shia militants from various counties to fight for saving the regime.

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- Notable among them is Hezbollah, which is a Lebanese Shia militia that is backed by Iran, which sent thousands of its troopers to fight in Syria.

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- Besides the government army, these militias fought the war on the ground on behalf of the regime, and also received technical support from Iran.

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- The growing role of Hezbollah and Iran in Syria alarmed Israel, as Hezbollah and Israel have had multiple direct confrontations in the past.

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- Notably, it was Hezbollah's guerrilla resistance that forced the Israel withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000 after 18 years of occupation.

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- Also, Israel's 2006 bombardment on Hezbollah's weapons infrastructure in Lebanon and the subsequent month offensive failed in its stated objectives.

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- Notably, Hezbollah now has a heavy military presence along southern Lebanon which is across Israel's northern border.

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### What was the Israeli strategy?

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- To counter the Iranian activities, Israel had adopted a two-pronged strategy.

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- **1<sup>st</sup> strategy** - The plan was to deter Hezbollah and other Iranian proxies from taking control of its Golan border region (Israel - Syria border).

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- Israel hence decided to strengthen anti-regime rebels in southern Syria, which is closer to the Golan border.

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- While initially, Israel offered mere medical aid and humanitarian assistance to the rebels, it has lately acquired military and logistical dimensions.

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- Tel Aviv is said to be offering support to seven different rebel groups in the region, that also includes a faction of the US-backed Free Syrian Army.

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- Besides providing money, weapons and intelligence, Israel also supported the advances by these groups on the ground with air cover.

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- Notably, one such aerial mission saw Israel bombing regime positions in as the local rebel groups backed by it came under heavy attacks from the regime.

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- **2<sup>nd</sup> strategy** - For its own strategic reasons, Russia intervened directly in the Syrian war in 2015 to support the regime.

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- As this seems to be pitting Israeli backed forces in conflict with Russian endeavours, Israel commenced active war diplomacy with Russia.

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- This ultimately helped Israel gain Russia's tacit acceptance to not interfere in Israeli offensive against Hezbollah positions within Syria.

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- Hence, despite Russia controlling most of Syria's airspace since 2015, Israel retained the freedom to aerially strike Hezbollah positions at will.

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- Notably, in 2017 alone Israel claims to have struck suspected weapons shipments to Hezbollah around 100 times.

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### How successful was the intervention?

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- It wasn't regime change but the growing Iranian influence in Syria that concerned Israel, for which it was supporting rebel elements.

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- Israel hoped that Russian intervention on the Syrian regime's behalf would reduce its dependence on Iran.

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- But Russia remained ambiguous, and neither stopped Israeli assault on Hezbollah nor stopped the expansion of Iranian footprint in Syria.

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- Hence, even as the government is recovering its control back, the regime-friendly Iranian presence is only growing in Syria.

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- The network of rebels, who are being backed by Israel are currently losing ground rapidly and international support is also correspondingly dwindling.

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- While the US was rock solid behind these rebel groups in the initial years, it has wanted to withdraw since Trump administration took over.

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- Late last year, the regime regained a foothold near the Israeli border by washing out the rebels in some areas, which has also spooked Israel.

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- Also, recently, Israel carried out an aerial assault in Syria against "Iranian targets", and an Israeli jet was subsequently downed by Syrian fire.

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- On the whole, the entire episode looks like a comprehensive failure.

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### How does the future look?

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- Israel has strengthened its bombing campaign in Syria this month and has also issued a sternly warned Iran of dire consequences.
- But beyond rhetoric, Israel's capacity to shape reality in Syria is limited, as Iran's clout has been established strongly over the war years.
- Hezbollah has also been emboldened and looks too strong to be eliminated by mere aerial strikes, at a time when full-scale intervention is not an option.
- As the regime gains further strength, it will begin its onslaught on the Israeli backed rebels in the south, which will make things murkier for Tel Aviv.

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**Source: The Hindu**

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