

# Get Ready for the New Middle East Battlefield: The Golan

Last week's exchange of missiles on the Syrian-Israeli border forebodes the greatest danger of Mideast war in seven years.

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*Featured image: Israel's Merkava Tank in the Golan Heights. ([By ChameleonsEye /Shutterstock](#))*

*The exchange of missiles last week on the Syrian-Israeli border was anything but normal.*

*This firefight established new rules of engagement in the Levant, and made the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights an "operational theater" in the Syrian conflict overnight.*

The mainstream media's version of events began with Israel retaliating against Iranian missile strikes, and the IDF (Israeli Defense Forces) destroying Iran's military capabilities inside Syria. But that information is questionable: it comes almost exclusively from Israelis who rarely miss an opportunity to beat the "Iranian threat" war drum.

In the lead-up to the May 10 skirmish—just after the Trump administration exited the landmark 2015 Iran nuclear agreement—Israeli officials began warning of an impending Iranian attack from inside Syria. Then, within hours of the ensuing firefight, an Israeli army spokesman announced that the elite "Quds Force" of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) had fired 20 missiles into the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, after which Israeli Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman boasted that

"we hit nearly all Iranian infrastructures in Syria."

IDF spokesman Brigadier General Ronen Manilas [described Israel's actions](#) as "one of the greatest operations of the Israel Air Force in the past decade." But as the dust settled, an altogether different version of events began to take shape.

A check of the actual conflict chronology shows that Israel initiated the incident by striking Syrian military targets in Kisweh (the Damascus suburbs) and Baath city (Quneitra) over the two preceding days. Russia had warned both Syria and Iran of the impending Israeli strike with the result that neither Iranian military personnel nor weapons systems appear to have been hit. The Syrian military (and not the IRGC) retaliated by firing 55 rockets at Israeli military outposts and installations in the occupied part of the Golan. Local Arab media identified these targets as key Israeli surveillance centers that crippled Israel's "eyes and ears" along that vital demarcation line. Israel's vaunted "Iron Dome" defense system failed to intercept most of these rockets, while the Syrian military intercepted more than

half of Israel's missiles, according to [Russian military officials](#).

What is undisputed: the military back-and-forth was the first major firefight between Syria and Israel in the occupied Golan Heights since 1973—making the Golan an operational theater for the first time in over four decades. This is also the first time during the Syrian Civil War that the Syrian military has retaliated against Israeli strikes by hitting Israeli military installations—not just the incoming missiles and the Israeli warplanes firing them. And finally, Israel must contend for the first time with the fact that any battle it initiates can be waged in its own backyard.

Clearly, this is neither the result nor the response that Israel expected.

So how did we get here? The Israelis have been aiming to gain a [“buffer zone”](#) along their border with Syria, but that effort has faced serious setbacks since the the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) and its allied forces ejected militants from key Damascus suburbs this year.

Israel has [materially](#) backed many of these militant forces along its border with Syria for years, including medical and other forms of support for extremists, like al-Nusra fighters, and [moral support](#) for [ISIS](#), which maintains a small presence on Israel's border with Syria. Nusra and ISIS, after all, have been the most successful “opposition” forces combating the SAA in the Syrian crisis, and were therefore valuable assets for Israel—especially as neither group has shown any inclination to target the Israelis. ISIS once even [apologized](#) to Israel for a brief clash with IDF forces in late 2016.

A partitioned and weak Syria is what Israel wants, as it would thwart the strength of one of its main Arab states as well as Syria's vital Iranian ally. But now southern Syria is once more awash with the SAA and its allied troops, who have set their sights on continuing their southward trek into areas Israel considers its strategic depth.

In December, Beit Jinn—the last significant militant-held enclave southwest of Damascus—[was overrun by the SAA](#), reportedly with the assistance of Hezbollah and the IRGC. Beit Jinn is nestled in a mountain passageway linking Syria, Lebanon, and Israel—near the Golan demarcation line—and its loss threw the Israelis into a tizzy.

This move [brought Hezbollah, the Iranians, and the Syrians](#) into one of the most strategic points on the Golan border, a development Israel has frantically tried to reverse since the U.S.-Russian-Jordanian “de-escalation-zone” was established in southern Syria last year.

On April 9, Israel launched unprecedented strikes against Iranian targets at the T4 military base in Homs, killing seven IRGC troops, including a commander. This was just one of the 100 separate airstrikes that Israel has claimed since it first struck Syrian targets in 2013. But the T4 attack changed everything. For the “Resistance Axis”—whose core members are Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah—it was [time to deliver some “consequence”](#) and take control of the Israeli escalation.

Four days later, Hezbollah Secretary General Seyed Hassan Nasrallah [hit the airwaves](#) to make this shift clear to the Israelis:

“The Israelis should know that they have committed a historic mistake. It is not an ordinary mistake.... It is a pivotal incident in the status of the region. What preceded this incident is not the same as what comes after it.”

Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah have rarely responded directly to an Israeli military action, because, according to recent public statements from the deputy leader of Hezbollah in Lebanon, they [refused to allow Israel to “control the rules of conflict.”](#) It’s a difficult balance to strike, and Israel appears to have been emboldened by the hitherto measured response from its three antagonists. But this time, Israel’s quest to achieve more favorable rules of engagement through repeated missile attacks, even incrementally, may well have backfired. As Elijah Magnier, a Brussels-based veteran Mideast correspondent currently in Syria, notes:

“Any Israeli attack from now on, the battle will be taken to the Golan. The Israelis did not anticipate this. They have incorrectly believed that Assad would be busy in Yarmouk, al-Badiya, etc.—that at most he would react in the same way as before.”

In a speech on Monday, Nasrallah confirmed this:

“The message was delivered to the Israeli enemy. It said that the era when you hit Syria without response is over.”

The Hezbollah leader said his alliance had conveyed a message to Israel through third parties that if it “crosses the red lines in Syria more rockets will be launched and they will hit the Israeli depth.”

The Israelis expected the Syrian government, Iran, and Hezbollah to stay mired in their battles against militants elsewhere—and to be restrained by the Russians, who have openly resolved to stay out of Israel’s fights with Hezbollah and Iran. They did not expect this alliance to redirect the confrontation toward Israel’s military land targets inside the occupied Golan Heights, which remains legally Syrian. The international consensus that the “Golan is Syrian” is enshrined in countless UN resolutions, including a recent one [adopted](#) in December, creating a real source of [political vulnerability](#) for Israel, which cannot legally claim its northeastern border.

That vulnerability has deepened since 2011, as the primarily Druze population of occupied Golan watched in horror as their Syrian relatives across the border were occupied, harassed, and even killed at the hands of Islamist militants. Many Druze believe these militants [are supported by Israel](#). The “axis” is seeking to harness the anger by [backing anti-Israel resistance fighters in Golan](#). Put simply, the Golan is ripe for some stirring from inside and outside, and Israeli strikes in Syria last week just made it a target.

The Russians may not like this turn of events—they would rather focus on de-escalating and resolving the Syrian conflict. But while Moscow has tolerated small Israeli strikes against Syrian and allied military targets, they have the leverage to contain the size and frequency of these attacks. Israel is held in check by Russia’s ability to deliver fully loaded S-300 and S-400 air defense systems to the Syrians, which would be a regional game changer.

In turn, while it is unlikely that any of Israel’s three opponents (Syria, Iran, or Hezbollah) will choose to pick a fight with the Israelis right now, it’s also clear that all of them will retaliate if provoked. In the past seven years, the Middle East has never been so close to war as it is today, which is why there’s an urgent need for cooler heads to prevail—even if, as with

Syria, Iran, and Hezbollah—they need to retaliate in order to de-escalate conflict and establish deterrence.

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