

Israel Launches Air Strikes on Syria and Assad's "Waiting Game"

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Immediately after Israel's latest unprovoked strike on Syria we posed the question, [did Benjamin Netanyahu just panic?](#) The answer is yes, Israel is now acting from a position of desperation as it has failed in its goal of regime change in Syria. Overnight (Wed. evening/Thursday early morning), Israel attacked a Syrian military base near the town of Masyaf at about 3:00 a.m. which Syria has now confirmed in a statement that warns of "serious repercussions". Syria reported two troop deaths in the attack. It appears to have been a massive strike – grainy photos show a large fireball lighting up the night sky outside of Masyaf.

Israel appears to have timed its attack to occur on the very night a controversial U.N. report was released earlier in the day (Wednesday) which blames the Assad government for using chemical weapons against civilians at Khan Sheikhoun in April. A number of Israeli analysts and media reports purport the Masyaf base to be a site for chemical and non-conventional weapons storage (such as "barrel bombs") while claiming the attack was motivated by "humanitarian" concern for Syrian civilians.



First image produced from Israeli strike on Al-Tala'i facility near Masyaf. Via Twitter.

But this is the reason for Israeli media and defense officials quickly claiming that the strike at Masyaf was on a chemical weapons facility: they know the "humanitarian" angle sells in the West, especially when coupled with allegations of civilians being gassed. Currently, this is putting the [dubious and contested claim](#) that the Syrian government attacked Khan Sheikhoun with sarin gas back in the spotlight at a time when Israel is eager to sell war for regime change while casting its actions in terms of protecting and defending civilians from a brutal dictator. In typical fashion the big newsrooms, which rarely report from inside Syria but instead opt for the comfort of Beirut, are uncritically echoing the "humanitarian airstrike" narrative. The New York Times, in a report filed from Jerusalem, [narrates the attack](#) as follows while relying on unnamed "former Israeli officials" and a single Syrian pro-opposition outlet:

Israeli officials did not comment on the strike, but a Syrian monitoring group and two former Israeli officials said it had targeted an installation of a government agency that produced chemical weapons and a military base that produced advanced missiles.

The strike came a day after a United Nations commission [accused the Syrian government](#) of using chemical weapons in [an attack in April](#) that killed dozens in the town of Khan Sheikhoun and flooded clinics with victims gasping for breath.

Initially some Syria observers questioned how the Israeli Air Force could strike so deep inside Syria with no response from the country's advanced Russian made S-400 anti-aircraft system. But it appears Syrian airspace was never violated as the Israeli jets reportedly fired from over Lebanon. Masyaf lies west of Hama and just north of the Lebanese border. While Israel's incursion into sovereign Lebanese airspace is illegal according to international law, Lebanon cannot respond as it has no air force nor does it possess adequate anti-aircraft missiles.



Close-up of the Israeli airstrike aftermath. Image source: Al-Masdar News

It is further significant that Israel chose to fire from over Lebanon (not for the first time) even though it has routinely violated Syrian air space in previous attacks. It appears that Israel calculated it's strike position to be in the vicinity of Russian military presence yet without forcing a Russian response by directly violating air space. The attack comes just over two weeks after Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu met with Vladimir Putin in Sochi. By many accounts the meeting was contentious as Netanyahu warned Putin that Israel would not tolerate Iranian presence in Syria. It was further revealed that a senior Israeli official accompanying Netanyahu on the trip threatened to assassinate Syrian President Assad [by bombing his palace in Damascus](#), while further adding that Israel will seek to derail the US-Russia brokered de-escalation deal reached in Astana, Kazakhstan earlier this summer.

Russia's *Pravda* [described](#) a frantic and upset Netanyahu at the Sochi talks with the following: "according to eyewitnesses of the open part of the talks, the Israeli prime minister was too emotional and at times even close to panic. He described a picture of the apocalypse to the Russian president that the world may see, if no efforts are taken to contain Iran, which, as Netanyahu believes, is determined to destroy Israel."

At first glance it does appear that Netanyahu is now making good on his threats, but is this latest flagrant aggression against Syria a sign of more attacks to come? Will Netanyahu pursue escalation in the hope of dragging the US and other allies into war? It's not likely. Realistically that possibility ended when Syria retook Aleppo and with the US-Russia Astana 'de-escalation' deal which tacitly legitimized Iranian presence in Syria. Even some within the pro-opposition regime change crowd took to social media after the strike to say "too little, too late". Simply put, Israel lost the covert war and is now left "holding the bag" while its more powerful allies [pull out of the full push](#) for regime change.

But what is clear is that Israel remains deeply uncomfortable with the Syrian Army's overwhelming momentum of late (just this week the army [initiated](#) the liberation of Deir Ezzor from ISIS) and seeks to keep the fires burning in Syria, at least enough to bog down Assad and Iran. Worse for Netanyahu, Hezbollah seems stronger than ever, along with the so-called 'resistance axis' that stretches from Tehran to South Lebanon.

Israeli officials have gone so far as to [declare their preference for Islamic State terrorists](#) on their border rather than allies of Iran. But as we've repeatedly pointed out, Israel is acting

from a position of weakness and desperation. All that Netanyahu can hope for now is that an Israeli provocation leads to a direct Syrian military response, but it appears that Assad is not taking the bait.

In 2013 when Israel launched a [massive missile attack](#) against a Syrian defense technology facility in Jamraya outside of Damascus, it claimed to be attacking a parked Hezbollah weapons convoy. Perhaps more brazen was the 2016 attack [targeting](#) Damascus International Airport, which killed a well-known Hezbollah commander. And in a significant admission earlier this month, the head of Israel's air force [acknowledged](#) nearly one hundred IDF attacks on convoys inside Syria over the course of the past 5 years.

Netanyahu himself was recently [caught on a hot mic](#) bragging that Israel had struck Syrian targets at least "a dozen times". And this is to say nothing of Israel's covert support to al-Qaeda linked groups in Syria's south, which has [reportedly involved](#) weapons transfers and treatment of wounded jihadists in Israeli hospitals, the latter which was widely [promoted](#) in photo ops involving Netanyahu himself. As even former Acting Director of the CIA Michael Morell once [directly told the Israeli public](#), Israel's "dangerous game" in Syria consists in getting in bed with al-Qaeda in order to fight Shia Iran.

Indeed Assad has not taken the bait for years now. While pro-government Syrians have themselves at times complained about Israel's seeming ability to strike inside sovereign Syrian territory with impunity, Assad has the [long-game in mind of "survival now, retaliation later"](#). It was clear from the start that Israel's attacks on largely non-strategic targets were more about provocation: should Damascus lob missiles back in Israel's direction Netanyahu would launch an all-out assault while Syria was at its weakest in the midst of a grinding and externally funded al-Qaeda insurgency.

Israel has also been careful to frame its actions in terms of counter-terror strikes on Hezbollah targets for the sake of maintaining an air of legitimacy to its aggression. But as the Astana agreement demonstrates (a strategic victory for Russia-Iran-Syria), Syria's ability to absorb Israel's repeat provocations seems to be part of a strategic "waiting game" born of an accurate self assessment of past and current vulnerabilities. As [The Century Foundation](#) concludes:

Syria's contemporary leaders seem to have adopted a simplified version of the "long breath strategy" of the former president—and father of Syria's current leader—Hafez al Assad. This strategy was named for Syria's ability to draw a deep breath and weather short-term pain and setbacks in pursuit of a better deal.

And this strategy seems to be working, resulting in a shift in perspective which is even beginning to permeate at least [part of the Israeli defense establishment](#):

A formerly very high-placed source in Israel's security system spoke to Al-Monitor last week. He said on condition of anonymity, "It's high time to admit that perhaps all our [assessments were erroneous](#). The prevailing consensus of the last five years was that Syria will never return to its former state. We thought that however this turns out, the Syrian state as we knew it had passed from the world. But evidently we were wrong."

Israel's top decision-makers have not changed course, but it is likely that such arguments are heard in private discussions, and top-secret intelligence assessments see it as a real possibility that Assad is capable of outsmarting those who prematurely eulogized him and Syria as we knew it.

["Syria is returning](#), that is clear now," said the source. "It's not about the quantity of territory, it's about central rule. If nothing unexpected happens, in the near future, Assad will be declared the final, unequivocal winner of this war. Following that, the path to Syria's rebuilding and reconstruction will be short."

Concerning Israel's adventurist military action this week, contrary to the claims of unnamed "Israeli officials" who say the latest attack was against a branch of Syria's *Scientific Studies and Research Center* (SSRC), it is likely that this week's air strike was yet another "routine" attack on a Hezbollah weapons depot.

Wrong: It was a Hezbollah/Iran warehouse. Russia won't take part of Israel-Hez struggle and the action is not new<https://t.co/f2w8LHiNIF>

— Elijah J. Magnier (@ejmalrai) [September 7, 2017](#)

According to Elijah Magnier – a veteran Kuwait-based Middle East journalist, fluent Arabic speaker, and one who reports from on the ground in Syria (and has done so for years) – Israel in truth hit another Hezbollah weapons storehouse (not a chemical weapons production facility). But with renewed claims that Syrian government possesses and has used sarin gas, Israel is seeking to maximize the propaganda value of the strike. After all, the world's attention now seems far away from Syria and the Israeli gloves are off. Israel will do and say whatever it can to get the wheels of internationally backed regime change in motion again.

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