



# AFPC Delegation Explores Israeli Security

August 31, 2018

**Related Categories:** Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Intelligence and Counterintelligence; International Economics and Trade; Islamic Extremism; Military Innovation; Terrorism; Iran; Israel; Middle East

**Related Expert:** Ilan I. Berman, Richard M. Harrison

From August 31-September 8, an AFPC delegation headed by Senior Vice President Ilan Berman traveled to Israel on a week-long fact-finding mission. Delegation members visited Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, where they met with an array of government officials, experts and scholars to assess Israel's evolving strategic situation in the region. They also attended the ICT World Summit on Counter-Terrorism in Herzliya, the world's largest gathering of counterterrorism specialists, to learn about the evolving fight against Islamic extremism, both in Israel's immediate neighborhood and in the broader Middle East. What follows is an excerpt from the resulting trip report, which can be obtained in full by contacting AFPC.

While still fraught, Israel's security environment today is arguably more favorable than at any time in recent memory. Israeli contacts with the Arab states of the Gulf, although as-yet informal and clandestine in nature, are more robust than ever thanks to a shared concern over Iran's expanding strategic capabilities. Likewise, Israel's relationship with the regime of General Abdel Fatah al-Sisi in Egypt is generally favorable, and remains a significant improvement to the state of bilateral ties during the tenure of Mohammed Morsi and his Islamist government (2012-2013). As a result, Israel's government has given the Egyptian regime broad latitude to carry out security and counterterrorism operations in the Sinai Peninsula, resulting in an improvement in the overall security situation on Israel's southern border. Relations with neighboring Jordan also remain stable, with Amman and Jerusalem coordinating over Palestinian affairs and, to at least some extent, the larger fight against the Islamic State terrorist group.

Israel's northern border, by contrast, remains a topic of deep concern. The Syrian civil war, now more than seven years old, has been watched closely from Jerusalem, with Israeli officials opting to generally maintain a *laissez faire* attitude toward the conflict. (A notable exception, and one that has gone largely unreported in the international press, have been Israel's consistent efforts to alleviate the war's humanitarian suffering, including through the provision of medical assistance to dozens of civilians and fighters in southern Syria and in medical facilities on Israeli soil.) Nevertheless, the situation there has become increasingly inhospitable for Israeli interests, as Iran's involvement in the conflict in support of the Assad regime has allowed the Islamic Republic to entrench itself deeply in the country. Israel has publicly maintained that such a state of affairs is unacceptable, and has carried out numerous military operations (many of which have gone unreported) against Iranian interests and assets in southern Syria.

Officials in Jerusalem maintain that the Israeli government is prepared to continue such activities, and even to escalate them, because an Iranian presence in southern Syria is "totally unacceptable" to the country's long-term strategic interests. Nevertheless, they quietly acknowledge that Iran is likely to remain a political, economic and military player in Syria for the foreseeable future – and that Israel will need to accommodate itself to this new, and more adverse, reality. Multiple military experts told the delegation that this state of affairs, while not optimal, is tolerable provided the country continues to maintain "minimal deterrence" against Iranian forces through its targeted military activities on Syrian territory.

Of concern as well is the disposition of Lebanon's powerful Hezbollah militia. In deference to its chief sponsor, Iran, Shi'ite militant group has become deeply involved in the Syrian civil war over the last several years on the side of the Assad regime. The conflict has cost the movement dearly in terms of both blood and treasure, which previously led some analysts to speculate that Syria could turn out to be "Hezbollah's Vietnam." This, however, does not appear to be the case. While its involvement in Syria has doubtless taken a significant toll on the organization, Hezbollah's strategic capabilities – and its financial fortunes – have been significantly bolstered by the Iranian regime, with profound results. Israeli experts now estimate that the militia has upwards of 100,000 short-range missiles and rockets arrayed along Lebanon's southern border, and that its overall capabilities today exceed those displayed by the group prior to the 2006 Lebanon War.

As a result, Israelis are convinced that a future conflict along their northern border is only a matter of time. More than once, delegation members heard Israeli officials and experts refer to the current environment as the "war between wars" in Israel's relations with Hezbollah (and, by extension, Iran). The implicit understanding was that conflict would inevitably erupt anew – and may do so sooner rather than later.