



# Trump's Latest Moves Make Officials Jumpy In Jerusalem

January 6, 2019 **Ilan I. Berman** *The Hill*

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For Israel, a few weeks can make a world of difference. As recently as this past Fall, officials in Jerusalem were waxing optimistic over the new, more favorable regional environment confronting the Jewish state, and about America's reinvigorated approach to the Mideast under President Trump. But now, the Administration's unexpected December decision to withdraw U.S. forces from Syria has left Israeli policymakers on edge, and for good reason.

Since its start nearly eight years ago, the Syrian civil war has been watched closely from Jerusalem. On the whole, however, Israeli officials have opted to maintain a *laissez faire* attitude toward the conflict on their northern border — lest Israeli involvement alter the struggle between the regime of Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad and his assorted opponents. (A notable exception, and one that has gone largely unreported, have been Israel's consistent efforts to alleviate the war's humanitarian suffering, including by providing medical assistance to Syrian civilians and fighters alike, both in southern Syria and in medical facilities on Israeli soil.)

Nevertheless, over the past two years, the situation in Syria has become increasingly inhospitable for Israeli interests. Most worryingly, Iran's involvement in support of the Assad regime has allowed the Islamic Republic to entrench itself deeply on Syrian soil, in strategic as well as in political and economic terms. Israel has responded by carrying out numerous military operations (many of them unreported) against Iranian interests and assets in southern Syria, with the goal of establishing a level of "minimal deterrence" against Tehran.

Publicly, Israeli officials have maintained that they are prepared to continue such activities, and even to escalate them, because an Iranian presence in southern Syria is unacceptable to the country's long-term strategic interests. Privately, however, they have begun to 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.

All of that, however, is predicated on a stabilizing American presence in the Syrian theater, which the Israeli government sees as an insurance policy of sorts against potential aggression. So now that Washington appears to be eyeing the exits, Israel is drifting toward a more activist approach to the conflict.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said as much last month, at a ceremony commemorating the graduation of the most recent class of Israeli Air Force pilots. "We aren't prepared to accept the Iranian military entrenchment in Syria, which is directed against us," he publicly declared. "We will act against it vigorously and continuously, including during the current period."

The Israeli government has wasted no time translating these words into action. In late December, the Israeli Air Force carried out an air raid into southern Syria that targeted a key Iranian weapons depot and logistics hub. Israeli strikes have also targeted key officials of Iran's chief terrorist proxy, Hezbollah, which — like its patron — is now deeply enmeshed in Syria. And Israel's military has stepped up its efforts to find and destroy Hezbollah "terror tunnels" that give the Shi'ite militia potential avenues of attack into Israel from neighboring Lebanon.

These actions reflect a stark reality. Even before President Trump's decision to pull American troops out of Syria, Israeli officials had become convinced that a future conflict along their northern border was only a matter of time. Now, in light of President Trump's planned pullout from Syria (and his more recent remarks suggesting Iran can essentially have a free hand there), Israel's government is actively preparing for such a scenario.

That it is doing so despite reassurances from Washington speaks volumes about how much faith Israel has in America's steadfastness, and its regional strategy.