



Rocketing Toward War?

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Military skirmishes and escalating threats between Iran and Israel of late are raising the risks of a catastrophic regional war, prompting questions about what the United States should do to prevent it.

To date, President Donald Trump has focused more attention on defeating the Islamic State group in Syria than on preventing Iran from filling the resulting void with its own military and proxy forces and, in the process, further implanting itself in Syria as part of its quest for a land corridor all the way to the Mediterranean Sea.

Now, Iran's growing recklessness is attracting more high-level notice in Washington, and Trump's national security adviser, Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster, told a security conference in Munich over the weekend that with Iran arming its proxies with more firepower, "the time is now, we think, to act against Iran."

Notwithstanding the outsized global attention on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Israel has long viewed Iran as its biggest security threat. Iran's leaders continue to promise Israel's destruction while expanding their military capabilities. At rallies this month to mark the Islamic Revolution's 39th anniversary, the regime paraded new home-made ballistic missiles that can carry nuclear warheads and reach Israel, adding to what is already the region's largest arsenal of ballistic missiles.

Tit-for-tat Israeli-Iranian military exchanges in recent days, however, have brought longstanding tensions to a boiling point because they mark an escalation of attacks that cross previous red lines.

They began on February 10th, when Iran's Qods Force launched an armed stealth drone from Syrian territory into Israel. After intercepting the unmanned aerial vehicle, Israel destroyed the command center and mobile launch vehicle from which it came. Iranian forces then opened fire with advanced surface-to-air missiles, downing an Israeli F-16 fighter jet in Israeli airspace, after which Israel destroyed all 15 of the missile batteries it targeted in Syria. That Iran began this exchange by attacking Israel directly rather than through proxies is what made the exchange so noteworthy.

Iran's growing aggressiveness is a reflection of its expanding regional presence. As noted, the Islamic Republic is paving a land corridor from its own border to the Mediterranean Sea as a result of its increasing influence in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. That influence comes from its growing sway over the governments in Baghdad, Damascus and Beirut; the growing presence of its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corp and proxy forces like Hezbollah and the assorted Shia militias that it's arming; and its growing network of weapons facilities.

Israel, which has warned repeatedly that it won't accept a permanent Iranian military presence in Syria, fears a multi-front "northern war" in which Iranian-backed forces would attack from both southern Syria and southern Lebanon with hundreds of thousands of rockets, straining Israel's capacity to rebuff the onslaught. Hezbollah alone already has as many as 150,000 rockets of various range and sophistication, some of which could reach the entirety of the Jewish state, and Israel has repeatedly attacked military convoys that were carrying advanced weapons to Hezbollah.

When it comes to Iran, Trump continues to disparage the U.S.-led global nuclear agreement of 2015 and threatens to kill it in May, the next deadline for him to decide whether to continue waiving sanctions against Iran as the deal mandates.

European leaders, who remain committed to the agreement, have sought to convince Iran to curtail its regional activities in hopes of persuading Trump to leave the deal in place. The British, French, German and Italian diplomats who are meeting with their Iranian counterparts, however, won't likely make much real progress on that score.

But whether or not Trump kills the nuclear agreement, Washington faces the separate question of what to do about Iran's regional activities, especially with U.S. military forces engaged in Syria and with its closest regional ally, Israel, under growing threat.

For starters, the administration could make clear to Russia, which has worked closely with Iran to keep Syria's Bashar Assad in power and facilitated Iran's growing presence in that nation, that Tehran's recklessness raises the risks of a wider war that could pit U.S. and Russian forces against one another. Moscow surely understand those risks after a recent U.S. airstrike in Syria is believed to have killed a large number of Russian contractors.

Through the European diplomats who are meeting with Iranian officials, Washington also could make clear to Tehran that it fully supports Israeli efforts to rebuff Iranian plans for a permanent military presence in Syria. To make Tehran think twice about forcing Israel's hand, however, Washington may need to support Jerusalem more tangibly, including with additional military assistance aimed at helping the Israeli government better confront the challenge.

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