Countering Iran in the Gray Zone

What the United States Should Learn from Israel's Operations in Syria

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COUNTERING IRAN IN THE GRAY ZONE

Executive Summary

Since the Islamic Revolution in 1979 and especially since the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, Iran has become highly proficient in using its surrogates and proxies across the Middle East as a tool to achieve its interests while avoiding direct conflict with the United States. Successive U.S. presidents have sought options for pushing back against this Iranian strategy but have struggled to find approaches that could deter Iran's actions or degrade its capabilities. In most cases U.S. administrations have been hesitant to respond at all, for fear of starting a larger conflict. The recent killing of Qassim Soleimani represents the opposite problem, in which the United States and Iran came unnecessarily close to a much larger war.

In contrast, Israel's "campaign between the wars" (the Hebrew acronym is *mabam*) against Iran and Iranian-backed groups in Syria has been one of the most successful military efforts to push back against Iran in the "gray zone." Since the start of the Syrian civil war in 2011, and especially since early 2017, Israel has conducted more than 200 airstrikes inside Syria against more than 1,000 targets linked to Iran and it's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force (IRGC-QF), and against IRGC-QF backed groups such as the Lebanese Hezbollah. This campaign has slowed Iran's military buildup in Syria while avoiding a broader regional conflagration that would have been damaging to Israel's interests.[1]

This study examines Israel's mabam campaign and asks what lessons the United States can draw and how they may be applied to future U.S. actions in gray zone conflicts, both against Iran and more broadly. The lessons include:

- Instead of broad-based strategic objectives, focus on clearly defined and limited operational objectives that can be achieved through limited military force.

- Only pursue this type of campaign in theaters where it is possible to maintain intelligence superiority that enables in-depth analysis of the reactions of various actors, and to maintain the military superiority that will reduce the likelihood of effective retaliation.

- Be willing to take calculated risks, including recognizing the large space between taking no kinetic action and ending up in a full-scale war.

- Develop a subtle messaging campaign that can be deniable but still sends a clear deterrent signal to the target.

- Purposefully and carefully limit adversary and civilian casualties.

- Take a gradualist forward planning approach that permits iteration step-by-step, instead of the more traditional military planning that starts with identifying end-states and working backwards from there.

- Pursue complementary diplomacy with other actors in the theater to create space for military action.

- Be realistic about what a limited tactical campaign can achieve—and curtail it when it is no longer generating outcomes.

It is highly questionable whether the United States can replicate the Israeli approach, given U.S. institutional constraints. It is not clear whether there are many military theaters in which it would be in America's interest, as a superpower, to devote the kind of intelligence resources and detailed analysis necessary to conduct such operations. Equally unclear are the fol-

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lowing considerations: is the U.S. government too big and not nimble enough to support such operations; do the diverse views held on Iran strategy within the U.S. government make such a strategy more challenging to implement; can the U.S. government, without the use of a military censor (which Israel deploys), do enough to control the public messaging associated with such a campaign. Even so, mabam represents one of the few examples of a successful campaign to counter Iranian surrogates and proxies. Therefore, U.S. policymakers and military planners should examine it carefully.

Iran-U.S. Conflict in the Gray Zone

Before diving into the lessons the United States can learn from Israel's campaign against Iran in the Syrian gray zone, it is first essential to understand the definition of gray zone conflicts; how Iran has operated in the gray zone historically; and the challenges the United States has faced countering Iranian gray zone activities.

Defining Gray Zone Conflicts

What is known as the "gray zone" is a state between war and peace. Actors (state and non-state) who conduct gray zone activities seek to compel their opponents without requiring extensive or sustained military activity.[2] In a gray zone conflict, the objective is not to defeat an enemy and control the territory once possessed, but to advance one's own security interests at the expense of the rival. Often, control of the "human terrain" refers to the local population in the contested theater.[3] Oftentimes in gray zone conflicts, the overarching objective of the actors is to control the narrative that they are victorious (such as Hezbollah against Israel in the July War 2006), or to create new realities on the ground in a manner that subverts international law (such as Russia in Ukraine in 2014, or China's ongoing activities in the South China Sea).[4]

Actors often deploy gray zone activities in countries and regions where social and political vacuums have eroded the power of the state. Their aim is to completely control territory, and to hold the monopoly of violence. What has happened in Syria since 2011 exemplifies this. Armed conflict is not necessary for different actors to conduct gray zone activities, but the social and political deterioration that makes them an attractive option often results in armed conflict.[5] However, for a particular crisis or conflict to be categorized as part of the gray zone, typically there is a significant amount of social and political turmoil, along with active contestation that could require plausible deniability by multiple actors.[6]

A defining feature of gray zone conflicts is the participants' differing perspectives and resulting actions. With different perceptions regarding whether or not they are in a state of war, their interpretations also differ as to which tools are excessively escalatory, as does their willingness to escalate into armed conflict. As a result of these divergent perceptions of the nature of the conflict, there is significant ambiguity regarding the extent to which the clash will escalate into direct armed conflict—even though each actor seeks to avoid crossing this ambiguous threshold leading to open war.[7] The outcome of this situation is a type of "hybrid warfare," a popular phrase in the U.S. defense and national security policymaking establishment. Kinetic and non-kinetic activities are deployed, and the measure of victory is oftentimes more geo-political than military.[8] Gray zone activities tend to extend beyond those associated with routine statecraft, and below those associated with direct military conflict.[9] The toolkit includes information operations and disinformation, political coercion, economic coercion, cyber operations, space operations, proxy support, and provocation by state-controlled forces. Challengers in the gray zone often act across these categories in a multidimensional fashion.[10]

Gray zone activities are therefore considered successful when they deny opponents the space in which to operate, the ability to bring to bear superior force presence or firepower, the support of the local population in the contested area, and the ability to achieve objectives without over-investment and exposing vulnerabilities in other critical regions.[11]

Iranian Operations in the Gray Zone

Iran's most important gray zone tool is the Quds Force and its cultivation of surrogates and proxies throughout the Middle East. These surrogates and proxies are armed actors that not only support Iran's power projection across the region but have already possessed or developed significant local legitimacy in their communities, such as in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, allowing them to be political and social actors as well. The current study focuses on Iran's use of this approach in Syria. However, it is important to note that Syria is not a unique case, but rather part of a much broader Iranian strategy to apply strategic pressure on adversaries such as Israel and the Gulf States, as well as to spread the Islamic Revolutionary movement that took power in Iran in 1979. The following brief historical review illustrates this point.

Iran's approach began, notably, in the early 1980s with the establishment of Hezbollah in the midst of the Lebanese civil war. Lebanese Hezbollah was the first organization outside of Iran's borders that the nascent Islamic Republic could claim to be a direct proxy tasked with spreading the Islamic Revolution and confronting

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Hezbollah rockets launched from Lebanon strike the town of Nahariya, Israel, in July 2006. Lebanese Hezbollah serves as a direct proxy of Iran, and is tasked with spreading the Islamic Revolution and confronting Israel. (Roni Schutzer/Getty Images)

Iran's leading nemesis, Israel.[12] In its early years, Hezbollah was a useful tool for Iran to directly target U.S. and Israeli interests—to project power outside of Iran's borders, and to do so while reducing the risk of direct U.S. or Israeli military retaliation. The most salient examples of this approach include the bombings of the Marine barracks in Beirut and the American embassy, as well as the kidnapping of Americans—all without drawing any direct retaliation on Iran. Even as late as 2012, the IRGC-QF, through Lebanese Hezbollah, sponsored a terrorist attack on Israeli tourists in Bulgaria.[13] Beyond these types of attacks, which are designed to demonstrate the long reach of the IRGC-QF to its adversaries, Lebanese Hezbollah has also allowed Iran to dramatically increase its political influence in Lebanon. This allows Iran the potential to apply pressure on Israel.

Today, Hezbollah is the single most powerful political and military actor in Lebanon. It has transitioned from a nongovernment militia into a major political player that determines how Lebanese politics function, and it maintains Lebanon within Iran's orbit of influence.[14] As it has grown, Hezbollah has developed interests that are sometimes not aligned with those of Iran, and it can no longer be seen exclusively as a tool wielded by that country.[15] However, Hezbollah's leadership remains a partner of the IRGC-QF, and it continues to participate with the IRGC-QF and other Iranian-backed groups in conflicts throughout the Middle East. Hezbollah trainers support the IRGC-QF efforts to build up a broader "Hezbollah network" of mainly Shia militias that seek to institute the Islamic Republic's ruling system of *wilayat al-faqih* (governance of the jurist).[16]

The IRGC-QF has also been engaged in Iraq since the 1980s. Iraq, because of its border with Iran and its long-running socio-political and economic connections with it, is in many ways even more important to the IRGC-QF than is Lebanon, especially after 2003. IRGC-QF backed groups in Iraq served as the nucleus of the "Islamic Resistance" factions that sought to engage in an armed insurgency against Saddam Hussein's government throughout the 1980s and during the Shia Uprising following the Persian Gulf War in 1991.[17] Following the U.S.-led invasion and dismantling of Saddam Hussein's government in Iraq in 2003, the IRGC-QF used to great effect in Iraq its existing Islamic Resistance network, the lessons it learned from building and scaling up Lebanese Hezbollah, and the lack of a U.S. strategy to counter Iranian influence.

In the post-2003 period, Iran developed and trained numerous Iraqi Shia militia groups that targeted U.S. forces, and thousands of fighters from these groups became part of the IRGC-QF Hezbollah network. Iran

Iraqi protesters wave Hezbollah, Lebanese, and Iraqi flags while also holding pictures of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah. Iran has developed and trained numerous Iraqi Shia militia. Thousands of fighters from these groups became part of the IRGC-QF Hezbollah network. (Wathiq Khuzaie/Getty Images)

also combined this approach with a political strategy that made use of its relationships with numerous Shia politicians. IRGC-backed groups in Iraq were responsible for the deaths of roughly 600 Americans in that country between 2003 and 2011. This network of Shia militias was also embedded into Iraq's Hashd al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilization Units [PMU]) organization, which fought ISIS between 2014 and 2018 and is now an official security structure subordinate to the Iraqi prime minister's office.[18] The IRGC-QF backed PMU groups have entered into Iraqi politics, further expanding the social, political, and security power that Iran has over Iraqi affairs and the Iraqi state.[19]

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Importantly, Iran's gray zone strategy is not strictly limited to support for militia groups. It also involves deepening economic, political, and cultural ties with these groups and the local population to increase its influence—as it has certainly done in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. In these countries, the IRGC has sought two main lines of effort. The first is to engage beyond the Shia community and build networks of influence among other identity communities such as Sunni Muslims, and minority communities such as Christians

and others, primarily through financial support. This line of effort is generally aimed at creating a "resistance community" that is pro-Iran, pan-ethnic, pan-sectarian, and positioned in opposition to the United States and its partners in the Middle East, particularly Israel and Saudi Arabia.[20] The second line of effort is to proselytize among the local population—usually heterodox communities within Shia Islam such as Ismailis, Druze, Alevis, and Alawis, but also Sunni Muslims—by creating a *murtada* system of religious centers that provide financial support to members of these local communities.[21] Both lines of efforts allow the IRGC to compete against opponents that are trying to mobilize identity communities outside of the Shia community against Iran, its partners, and its proxies.

In Syria, Iran operates as a supporter of the Assad regime and uses gray zone actions to constrain the range of activities available to the United States. The Iranians actively use Syria as a theater to conduct gray zone operations, most of which, over the course of the Syrian conflict, are considered textbook examples of how to operate in the gray zone.[22] First, the IRGC-QF has developed a network of proxy militia, with some groups consisting of local Syrians and others of foreign Shia fighters from Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Their purpose is to exert control on the ground and influence the human terrain in regime-held areas of Syria. Lebanese Hezbollah has also used the Syrian civil war to expand its influence and on-the-ground control in certain strategic areas of western Syria, specifically along the Lebanese-Syrian border in the areas west of Damascus and on the Syrian side of the Golan Heights in southwestern Syria.

U.S. Struggles to Counter Iranian Gray Zone Actions

The U.S. track record in responding to Iranian gray zone activities—especially their use of surrogates and proxies—has consisted of more failure than success. Despite an overwhelming conventional military advantage, the United States has been unable to convert that into an approach that can successfully deter Iran's actions or degrade its gray zone capabilities.

The United States' first experience with Iranian militia groups came in Lebanon in 1982, when Hezbollah launched devastating attacks on the U.S. embassy and Marine barracks in Beirut. Initially, President Ronald Reagan publicly declared that the United States would keep its forces in Beirut following the attack. Behind the scenes, however, he planned to target a Hezbollah training camp in Baalbek, an operation the United States

eventually abandoned because of concerns about its relations with major Arab oil producers.[23] Ultimately, the result was a U.S. withdrawal from Lebanon and the global perception that it had been driven out by terrorist attacks. Osama bin Laden studied this lesson closely.[24] Iran was also responsible for the 1996 bombing of Khobar Towers, which killed 19 Americans. Again, this action came with no meaningful response from the United States. In 2001, the United States indicted 13 Saudis and one Lebanese individual, all of whom allegedly had played a role in those attacks and were backed by Iran. However, none of the suspects were charged in the United States or brought to justice. Moreover, the indictment did not charge any Iranians nor directly accuse the Iranian government of facilitating the attack.

America's most bitter and costly experience with Iranian militias came after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. The IRGC-QF led by Qassim Soleimani would

A U.S. Army 82nd Airborne Division mine resistant ambush protected vehicle (MRAP) traverses western Mosul in June 2017 as a part of the U.S. commitment to support Iraqi forces in the fight against ISIS. (Martyn Aim/Getty Images)

eventually launch an aggressive campaign to get the United States out of Iraq by supporting militia groups and smuggling weapons into Iraq—notably explosively formed penetrators that were responsible for more than 600 American deaths in Iraq. The United States endlessly debated how to respond to Iranian activities. It did strike out at Iranian-supported militia groups in Iraq with raids that targeted them. In 2007, it went so far as to raid the Iranian Liaison Office in Erbil and detain five Iranian "diplomats" whom the United States believed were Quds Force operatives.

More recently, the United States challenged Iran in the gray zone in Syria, where, under the Obama administration, it chose to briefly arm and support various Syrian opposition groups fighting to overthrow Bashar al-Assad. That mission ended in a victory for the regime, Iran, and Russia, all of which are still in the process of reconsolidating control over Syria. But even after Assad's victory in Aleppo in 2016, essentially marking the end of the danger to his regime from that particular U.S. line of effort, the United States and Iran continued to compete in the gray zone throughout the early years of the Trump administration. The United States continued its support for the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in eastern Syria. The Trump administration described the U.S. presence in this part of the country as representing, at least in part, an effort to control key lines of communication in Syria and prevent Iran from establishing a "land bridge" from Tehran to the Mediterranean. This approach was largely undercut when President Donald Trump chose to pull U.S. forces from parts of northern Syria in early October 2019.

Finally, in recent hostilities in Iraq, Iranian-supported militias had for months been launching rocket attacks at U.S. bases. When a U.S. contractor was killed on December 27, 2019, the United States responded with attacks on five Kata'ib Hezbollah bases in Iraq and Syria, killing 25 fighters. Less than two days later, members and supporters of Kata'ib Hezbollah stormed the U.S. embassy in Baghdad, setting fire to parts of the reception office. In response, the United States launched a drone strike that killed the leader of Iran's IRGC-GF, Qassim Soleimani, alongside Iraqi Popular Mobilization Units leader Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis. Four days later, Iran launched 22 ballistic missiles into Iraq, targeting U.S. personnel at two military installations, al-Asad air base and another base in Erbil. The Pentagon confirmed that the attack injured more than 100 U.S. troops stationed at the two bases. In this case the U.S. response was forceful, but it also led to the closest the United States and Iran have come to a highly escalated direct conventional conflict that ultimately would have been in neither's interest.

In all of these cases, the challenge the United States has faced has been how to respond to Iranian gray zone actions in a way that can deter Iran and degrade its capabilities without triggering a broader conflict. Even though the United States would ultimately win this conflict, it would come with significant unnecessary costs. In most of these cases, the U.S. choice was to take a cautious approach—which gave Iran the space to continue its operations and succeed in gray zone conflicts. In the Soleimani case, the verdict is still out on the long-term impact, but the risks were unacceptably high. The question is whether there are strategies or approaches the United States can use to effectively push back against Iran in the gray zone, while not escalating to the all-out war that nearly occurred in January 2020. The remainder of this paper considers Israel's campaign in Syria against Iran, and whether it can serve as a model for future U.S. operations against Iran in the gray zone.
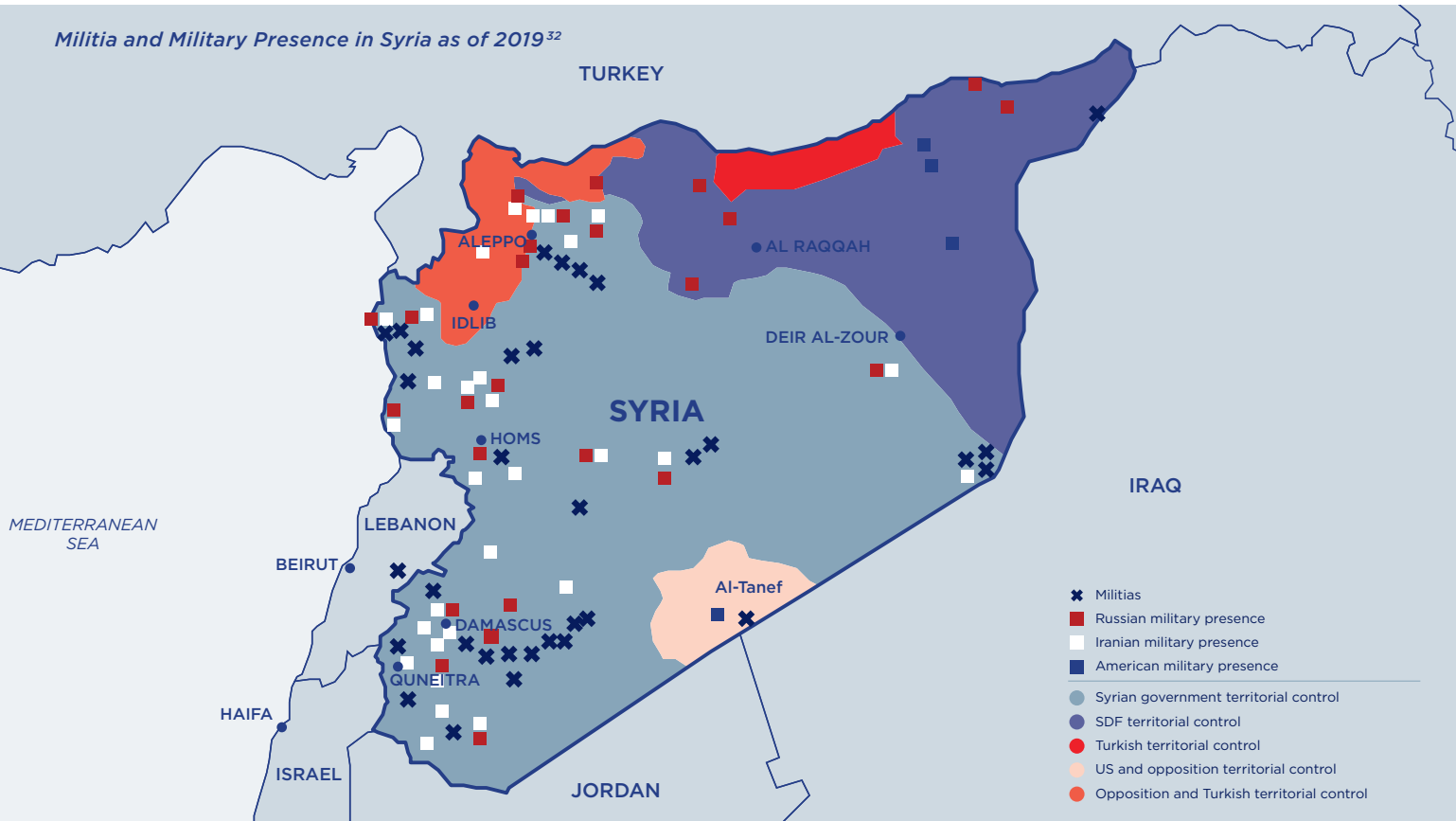
The Israeli Campaign between the Wars

Israel developed mabam—the campaign between the wars—to address a growing threat from Iran on its northern border. Mabam represents a shift in Israel's approach to countering Iran in order to address changing dynamics in Syria and a new IRGC-QF strategy.

Iran's Efforts to Pressure Israel from Syria

For Iran, Syria serves as a route to the Mediterranean, a bridge to Iran-backed Lebanese Hezbollah, and an additional front with Israel. As such, Syria is a major part of Iran's gray zone strategy to extend its influence in the Middle East and to apply pressure on Israel, one of its two major adversaries in the region. When the 2011 uprisings in Syria began, Iran saw the threat of the overthrow of a key ally. But over time it also came to see an opportunity to redefine its influence over a weakened Syrian government, and Iran's on-the-ground presence in Syria is part of its current strategy to establish itself as a dominant regional power.[25] Whereas before the uprisings the Assad regime functioned more as an ally, with occasional disagreements and sometimes differences in policy goals, later the IRGC-QF aimed to turn that regime into a client state. The civil war in Syria has allowed Iran to influence and shape the functioning of the deep state that supports Bashar al-Assad's rule, which includes the elite security and intelligence services that are primarily led

Israeli soldiers of the Golani Brigade participate in a May 2013 exercise in the Golan Heights. The heightened presence of Israeli soldiers at the Israeli-Syrian border came after Syria accused Israel of launching airstrikes near the Lebanese-Syrian border. (Uriel Sinai/Getty Images)

Militia and Military Presence in Syria as of 2019 [32]

Legend:
- **Militias** (✗)
- **Russian military presence** (red square)
- **Iranian military presence** (white square)
- **American military presence** (dark blue square)
- **Syrian government territorial control**
- **SDF territorial control**
- **Turkish territorial control**
- **US and opposition territorial control**
- **Opposition and Turkish territorial control**

by Assad's extended family, his tribe, and members of the Alawi community. Iran also continues to significantly influence Assad's regime to work to Tehran's benefit and support the regional activities of the IRGC-QF and its adjutant proxy network.[26]

Between 2013 and 2015, the IRGC leveraged the chaos in Syria vis-à-vis Israel by trying to establish, fund, and train militants in the Golan Heights. These efforts were mainly led by Hezbollah operatives but ultimately failed, in part due to Israeli strikes on key leaders of the effort.[27] The failures drove the IRGC to start deploying its own forces in Syria as part of its effort against Israel.

Events in late 2016 marked a turn in the Syrian civil war and in Iranian efforts in Syria. Notably, the retaking of Aleppo by the Syrian government and allied forces shifted the conflict's momentum toward an almost assured Assad victory. Accordingly, the IRGC-QF transitioned its strategy from simply using Syria as a key transit space for supplying Lebanese Hezbollah with weapons to turning Assad-held areas of the country into a permanent base. Its purpose was to store advanced weapon systems, such as precision guided missiles (PGMs), to coordinate and launch attacks against Israel from Syrian territory, and to prepare for a large-scale invasion of Israel from

Lebanese and Syrian territory.[28] These efforts would have supported the Iranian strategy to create a "three front dilemma" for the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) in the next war between Israel and the IRGC-QF Hezbollah network: on the Golan in Syria, in the Galilee in Lebanon, and in Gaza.[29]

In 2016, Iran began building a more permanent military presence in Syria while simultaneously pursuing its precision project of delivering to Hezbollah more advanced and accurate munitions. Included in this effort was establishing military bases, regional command-and-control centers, intelligence sites, battalions, runways, weapons depots, and logistics facilities.[30] Throughout 2017, Iran focused on establishing permanent military sites and converting Hezbollah's medium- to long-range rockets into high-precision missiles, with guidance systems and a circular error probable (CEP) of 10 meters.[31]

The Israeli Response

Israeli national security officials developed the mabam campaign concept as a means to respond to, without escalating into war, the steady buildup of IRGC-QF and proxy forces in Syria. Over the course of 2016, Israeli intelligence determined that the IRGC-QF had decided to build up its presence in Syria to the point where it could use the country as a springboard for a larger campaign against Israel. The particular feature of the IRGC-QF strategy that most concerned Israeli national security officials was the prospect that the Quds force could develop a precision guided missile arsenal on Israel's northern border that could overwhelm Israel's Iron Dome defense system and threaten the north. This was the basis by which senior IDF leaders sought and received the Israeli cabinet's approval for launching the mabam campaign.[33]

In addition to destroying weapon shipments, Israel now needed to calibrate its efforts against Iran to degrade its military capabilities; deter it from building the more permanent presence it desired; and deter Iranian and Iran-backed forces from launching attacks on Israel.[34] Israeli officials proceeded strategically, leveraging high quality intelligence to hit high value Iranian targets quietly, with limited casualties, in order to minimize the risk of escalation while degrading the threat. Israel struck Iranian weapons and rocket depots, Iran's command headquarters, and intelligence and logistics sites around Damascus.[35] As part of this effort, Israel also exposed and destroyed Hezbollah cross-border tunnels.[36] In 2018 alone, Israel dropped roughly 2,000 bombs in its strikes against Iranian targets in Syria.[37]

Israeli military engineers work to destroy Hezbollah tunnels in December of 2018. In addition to exposing and destroying Hezbollah cross-border tunnels, in 2018 Israel also dropped roughly 2,000 bombs in its strikes against Iranian targets in Syria. (Amir Levy/Getty Images)

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IDF operations at first were limited and slowly tested this strategic concept. But over the course of the mabam campaign, as initial strikes did not result in effective or significant Iranian retaliation, IDF operations became much more expansive. The Israelis struck targets throughout the country, even reportedly as far east as Deir Azzour province, in eastern Syria on its border with Iraq.[38] The IDF has also been able to respond to targets of opportunity presented by the IRGC and IRGC-backed groups in Syria, including senior Lebanese Hezbollah commanders and mobile, IRGC-operated command-and-control units located deep inside Syria that have tried to strike Israeli territory with armed drones.[39] The Israeli government for the most part has maintained a policy of silence and has not publicly acknowledged these operations. Its rationale for this lack of acknowledgement is not to force Iran to publicly acknowledge the strikes, and then to respond.[40]

Israel's Delicate Diplomatic Dance with Russia

Although the Israelis have hit more than 1,000 targets in Syria (most of them IRGC- or Iranian-backed groups), this operational tempo is constrained by the presence of Russian, and to a lesser extent Syrian Arab Army (SAA) air defenses and soldiers co-located in bases with IRGC and Iranian-backed group operatives. Iran has made what it can of this opportunity to apply maximum and indefinite strategic deterrence on Israel, while using Russia and the Assad regime's presence as a shield to deflect most of Israel's blows against it in Syria.

Thus, Israel's air campaign against the IRGC and IRGC-backed groups in Syria would not be possible without complementary and mitigating diplomacy, especially with Russia. The Israelis have made clear to the Russians through both their words and their actions that they are going to take action against Iran in Syria, and have claimed that they will not tolerate a permanent Iranian presence. The Russians want to avoid a major conflict between Israel and Iran that would undermine their broader interests in being seen as the great power that entered Syria, brought the civil war to an end, and returned stability.

This credible Israeli threat has been combined with vigorous diplomacy. Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Russian President Vladimir Putin have a pragmatic and tacit agreement that allows the Israelis to strike the IRGC and IRGC-backed groups—as long as this approach prevents the Israelis from having to take much more extreme actions that could lead to a hotter war instead.[41] Indeed, the Russians have gone as far as to refuse to co-locate with Iranian forces in certain locations, thus giving the Israelis greater flexibility to strike.[42] However, this top-level dialogue between Netanyahu and Putin still leaves in place much ambiguity, and the Israelis frequently operate in what is essentially Russian controlled airspace. The relationship between the leaders is not consistently reflected at lower levels between the IDF and the Russian military operating in Syria, which means that Israel's air operations in Syria are not always uncontested by the Russians, and also that the relationship has no effect, necessarily, on how the SAA chooses to defend Syrian territory.[43] The diplomacy does, however, lessen the risk of Israeli-Russian confrontations and increased tensions.

The Israelis do not have air dominance in Syria. As a result of this reality, every Israeli sortie conducted by the IDF in Syrian airspace is contested and, most important, is subject to potential Russian intervention that could result in the loss of Israeli planes and pilots.[44] Still, despite this risk, the Israelis have used advanced, fixed-wing aircraft to fly sorties into Syrian airspace, rather than relying solely on guided, stand-off munitions fired from outside of Syrian territory.[45] This operational decision places IDF pilots in harm's way, which means that they encounter active (if generally ineffective) resistance from SAA air defenses.[46] More threatening, they are subject to Russian electromagnetic warfare tools and radar jamming that could be lethally effective against the Israeli aircraft if the Russian military on the ground in Syria decided to use its more advanced air defense systems against IDF planes.[47]

Overall, the Israeli campaign in Syria still comes with real risks of potential escalation. In September 2018, Syrian air defenses inadvertently downed a Russian plane, killing 15 Russian troops. The incident, which came to be called the Illusion incident, occurred in the aftermath of an Israeli strike and was the result of a mistake by Syrian operators of these air defense systems. However, the Russians blamed Israel, and this incident significantly raised Russian-Israeli tensions and led to the curtailing of the Israeli air campaign for a number of months. Prior to that, in February 2018 an Israeli plane conducting operations in Syria was shot down by Syrian antiaircraft fire, but fortunately the plane's pilot and navigator managed to eject in Israeli territory. However, if the pilots had been forced to land in Syria or Lebanon, confrontations between Israel and Iranian forces likely would have escalated.

Israel's Assessment of the Mabam Campaign

The IDF developed the mabam concept to focus as an agile, adaptive, and enduring campaign that primarily relied on Israel's ability to collect and process superior intelligence resources so that it could direct airstrikes against Iranian and Iranian-backed targets in Syria. The key principles of the mabam campaign are to: (1) deny and degrade Iran's capabilities in Syria that could be used against Israel in a future war—or, more near term, limit the IDF freedom of action in Syria; (2) demonstrate to Iran and the international community its resolve, determination, and operational effectiveness; (3) delay or even divert a major confrontation between Israel and Iran; (4) ensure that the IDF dominates the escalation ladder with Iran in Syria.[48] As can be seen from these principles, the mabam campaign is predicated on the synchronization of two components: kinetic strikes that degrade Iran's capabilities in Syria, and accompanying minimal messaging and diplomatic campaigns that place Israel's efforts to push back Iran into a broader narrative, one that wins global support. Both are intended to send a strong signal to Iran to back off from its strategy in Syria. Israeli officials and politicians also emphasize a broader long-term strategic objective of removing all Iranian military presence from Syria, but this campaign stops short of achieving that objective, and it appears unlikely that Israel has the capability to achieve it.

Since the mabam campaign began in 2017, Iranian and Lebanese Hezbollah casualties in Syria have increased. Importantly, the mabam campaign has not resulted in any IDF casualties to date. However, it still comes with risk to Israeli personnel. Since the campaign began, the IRGC-QF has fired a surface-to-surface missile from Syria to the vicinity of the popular Israeli ski resort on Mt. Hermon and penetrated Israeli airspace with a drone launched from the T4 air base in Homs, central-western Syria.[49] As mentioned previously, an Israeli plane was also shot down, though fortunately the pilots were able to eject inside Israel. There are real risks to Israel's citizens

> **Overall, the Israeli campaign in Syria still comes with real risks of potential escalation.**

and industry as it confronts Iran in Syria, especially if the IRGC-QF and the groups it supports decide to escalate with PGMs, whether fired from Syria, Iraq, or Lebanon.[50]

Israeli national security analysts generally agree that the campaign has been tactically successful, but they are divided as to what comes next. Some experts who have served in senior positions in the IDF or the Israeli national security policymaking apparatus note that Israel may not be able to continue to have freedom of action in Syria (and beyond) while at the same time maintaining a careful hold on the escalation ladder with Iran.[51] Since Israeli operations began in Syria, the country's strategic objectives have evolved from degrading weapons that are being moved to Lebanon to destroying as much as possible of Iran's military presence in Syria.[52]

Further, while the Israelis have clearly inflicted significant damage on Iran's capabilities in Syria, it is not clear how strategically meaningful this approach will ultimately be. Israeli officials continue to insist that their long-term strategic objective is to remove the Iranian military presence from Syria, an unrealistic goal given how entrenched Iran is.[53] And there are already varying views inside the Israeli defense and political establishment about the level of success Israel has had in pushing back on Iran's presence and influence in Syria. Some in the government believe the operation has successfully rolled back Iran's influence in Syria, or at least its capabilities to strike at Israel. Others maintain that this is only a short-term victory as Iran continues to entrench itself in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen, and that Iran will quietly and doggedly continue to maintain and increase its presence.[54]

Meanwhile, there are also questions about how sustainable this campaign can be in Israel. Right now it is generally popular and seen as a success, but that is because Israel has avoided escalation and carefully controlled what gets into the press. Meanwhile, Israeli partners—especially the United States—have stood aside and been generally supportive of the campaign, but that could also change with one mishap that puts the region on the brink of war. Still, for the moment it appears that Israel can continue to sustain this approach for the foreseeable future.

Lessons for the United States from the Mabam Campaign

Israel learned a number of lessons from the mabam campaign regarding how to counter Iranian asymmetric warfare in the Middle East. Some of these may be unique to Israel, while others can potentially also be applied to American thinking. This chapter outlines the key lessons and addresses how transferable they may be to the U.S. case.

LESSON 1
Focus on clearly defined and limited objectives

The mabam campaign was designed to achieve a discrete purpose: roll back Iran's ability to directly threaten Israel through proxy networks and weapons transfers into and via Syrian territory. Israel is particularly focused on Iran's transfer of PGMs into Syria and Lebanon. If Iran and Hezbollah were able to establish a large enough arsenal for these weapons, they could overwhelm Israel's Iron Dome system and, in the process, threaten Israel's civilian population in northern Israel.[55]

Keeping this very sharp focus on a limited objective has allowed Israelis to zero in on a narrow set of targets while having the maximum effect and reducing the likelihood of escalation by not widening the lens. It has also helped the Israelis establish deterrence vis-à-vis the Iranians, because it has become clear to all the players

In May 2018 Israeli tanks were positioned in the Golan Heights near the Syrian border, after Iran-backed militias fired 20 rockets targeting Israeli military bases. If Iran and Hezbollah were able to establish a large enough arsenal of precision guided munitions, they could overwhelm Israel's Iron Dome system and, in the process, threaten Israel's civilian population in northern Israel. (Lior Mizrahi/ Getty Images)

in Syria, most notably Iran, Russia, and the Assad regime, that Israel's targeting will be highly limited and narrowly focused. This understanding has to some extent caused the Iranians to pull back their efforts to move PGMs through Syria, believing that when they do not transfer these weapons, they are much less likely to be targeted.[56]

> **Keeping this very sharp focus on a limited objective has allowed Israelis to zero in on a narrow set of targets while having the maximum effect and reducing the likelihood of escalation by not widening the lens.**

If in contrast Israel had used this campaign to pursue a much broader objective, such as the complete withdrawal of Iran from Syria (which remains its overall strategic and policy objective), its targeting would have been much more comprehensive, thus significantly increasing the risk of escalation.[57] Israel would have been less likely to achieve these larger objectives, because a limited air campaign simply cannot fundamentally change the situation on the ground unless it is paired with ground forces or other parallel measures. A broader campaign also would have been much more confusing for all of the different actors inside Syria—Russia, Assad, Iran, and Hezbollah—who would have had a far murkier understanding of Israeli objectives and red lines, thereby increasing the chances of escalation, miscalculation, or failed deterrence.

For the United States, the lesson is that when it chooses to fight Iran in the gray zone, it can and must have similarly limited and clear objectives that still align with longer-term strategic goals. American objectives to eliminate or at the very least to reduce Iranian influence in Iraq and Syria are too broad and will lead to the development of operations and a campaign that is highly escalatory and cannot be pursued without an unnecessarily high risk of ending up in a much bigger conventional war with Iran. And a campaign based on more abstract objectives such as seeking to push Iran back risks escalation without actually advancing clear and specific U.S. interests. However, a clear objective—for example deterring Shia militia attacks against U.S. forces in Iraq, or deterring mine attacks against international oil shipping, or deterring missile attacks against Saudi oil infrastructure—can drive concepts of operation that meet the need and send very clear signals without escalating.

LESSON 2
Intelligence and military superiority are key

Israeli officials interviewed for this report emphasized that the campaign would not have been possible without intelligence superiority. Israel has this superiority in the Syrian battlefield over Iran for a number of reasons. Israel's proximity as a bordering state to Syria gives it a significant advantage, while Iran is roughly 1,160 miles away, making it harder to deploy intelligence assets. Israel also maintains a significant technological advantage over Iran. Perhaps most important, ever since it has existed, Israel has been collecting intelligence in the Syrian arena and has fought multiple wars there. When the Syrian civil war began in 2012, Israel certainly had to prioritize Syria and put more emphasis into that front. But this is still a sharp contrast with Iran, which dramatically increased its military investment and posture in Syria after the start of the civil war.[58]

This advantage in intelligence for Israel has been critical in two ways. First is simply having more visibility of the battlefield to find potential targets and then the capabilities to deploy assets against them. Israel's ability to launch hundreds of strikes with sophisticated aircraft compares favorably with Iran's failed attempt in response to launch relatively low technology drones into Israel.[59]

The understanding of the battlefield has also been critical. Before every strike, Israeli offices and intelligence officials go through a rigorous process of gaming out the reactions of numerous different types of actors. They consider carefully the response that a particular target and strike is likely to elicit from various players, including militia groups, the Assad regime, Iran, Hezbollah, Russia, Turkey, the United States, the Kurds, and others.[60] This comprehensive assessment is not always correct, but it does allow the Israelis to analyze the potential political and military risks associated with each individual operation. To be sure, such an approach is not necessarily unique to the Israelis, and the United States also takes into account local political reactions when targeting and considering such strikes. But, in Syria at least, Israel has been able to operate with an especially high level of proficiency.

The United States should conduct these types of strikes only in situations where it can duplicate this Israeli intelligence advantage, but whether it can in many theaters is not clear. The mabam campaign relies on very specific detailed intelligence and a strong understanding of the political and military dynamics on the battlefield. Israel is capable of doing this because it is not a superpower and not required to spread its intelligence assets

across a wide range of theaters. It works in only a few arenas and can devote significant resources to the limited fronts that truly affect its security. In contrast, the United States is stretched all over the world. On the one hand this gives it greater capabilities than its adversaries. But it is unclear whether there are many theaters in which it has the capacity to have the type of fine grain understanding that Israel does in Syria, at least without making potentially painful tradeoffs. Equally unclear is whether it is even in the U.S. interest to expend the intelligence resources necessary to develop this type of advantage in a particular arena, given the U.S. global requirements.

A perfect example of these shortcomings was the American decision to strike five Kata'ib Hezbollah bases in Iraq on December 29, 2019, killing 25 Iraqis in retaliation for the strike that killed one U.S. contractor. The kind of fine-tooth intelligence assessment that the Israelis conduct in the mabam campaign would likely game out the significant risks such a disproportional strike would have on the U.S. position inside Iraq. They likely would highlight the possibility that the Iraqi government, PMU and even youth protestors would respond with anti-American sentiments, a call for the withdrawal of U.S. forces, and possibly threats to the U.S. embassy. Such an analysis might suggest a more limited and proportional strike—certainly with less casualties—to accomplish the objective of deterring future rocket attacks on U.S. forces.

LESSON 3
A willingness to take calculated risks

The Israelis have recognized that in a shadow war with Iran, where they are mostly countering asymmetric deniable actions, there needs to be some willingness to take risks.[61] Israel recognizes that Iran's capabilities limit its ability to retaliate, and also that it prefers to avoid a direct conventional conflict in which it is at a disadvantage.[62] This allows Israel to push the envelope in conducting military operations that are inherently risky, in order to roll back Iranian capabilities.

That being said, the fog of war and the danger of miscalculation or accident is quite real. In September 2018, for example, Syrian air defenses inadvertently shot down a Russian plane after an Israeli strike, leading to a major Israel-Russia crisis that temporarily halted Israeli operations in Syria and led to serious tensions with a global power.[63]

Still, the Israeli approach to dealing with risk has been nimbler than the U.S. approach when it comes to countering Iran. For years there were almost no

> **The first key lesson is that American policymakers should avoid falling into the trap of looking at the risks of potential military activities as binary. They should not view the risk of any military action as triggering either an all-out conflict or no conflict at all.**

serious U.S. responses to Iranian actions, even as it struck at Americans in Iraq, supported militias in Syria and Lebanon, and most recently after mining attacks on ships in the Gulf of Oman and the United Arab Emirates' port of Fujairah, along with the missile strikes on Saudi oil infrastructure in Abqaiq and Khurais. Instead, the Americans were deterred while overthinking their concerns that any attack might cause an Iranian response. When the United States finally did respond, it went over the top in a way that ultimately nearly caused a war.

The first key lesson is that American policymakers should avoid falling into the trap of looking at the risks of potential military activities as binary. They should not view the risk of any military action as triggering either an all-out conflict or no conflict at all. The tendency of playing out every worst-case scenario often leads to policy paralysis. In the case of Iran, U.S. policy has been hampered for years by this challenge. One president after another has argued that the United States will push back against Iranian activities in the Middle East that are counter to U.S. interests, but rarely have actually acted militarily, mostly because of the fear of triggering a war.[64] Other tools such as diplomacy and sanctions have been used to try to roll back Iran's influence, with mixed success. What the Israelis have demonstrated is that the military tool does not need to be taken entirely off the table, and the fear of escalation following even the most limited military action may be overblown. There are options available to U.S. policymakers to militarily counter Iran that do not necessarily eliminate the risk of escalation but can significantly reduce it.

This same lesson can also be applied to other theaters. For example, when the Obama administration debated intervening in Syria in 2013 and 2014, it ultimately concluded that the risk of military intervention was too high.[65] There was an insistence that the United States would have to take out all of Syria's air defenses and establish a no-fly zone before it could conduct even

Israel's Artillery Corps readies itself in the Golan Heights in September 2013. Israel has demonstrated that military options do not need to be taken entirely off the table when trying to counter Iran. (Ilia Yefimovich/Getty Images)

limited operations inside Syria. It may be possible that this assumption was correct, given the state of the Assad regime's air defenses in 2013 and the broader objectives that any U.S. intervention may have tried to achieve. However, the effectiveness of Israeli operations certainly calls into question this assumption by U.S. military planners and should provoke questions about whether the United States had more creative limited military options at its disposal that could have impacted the outcome of the Syrian civil war or at least done more to protect civilians.

There was also a belief that any such operation would risk a major war with the Russians. But again this seems questionable, given that Israel has managed to conduct operations over Russian airspace while using a combination of diplomacy and a credible threat of force to gain acquiescence from the Russians. Even when Israeli strikes led to an accident that downed a Russian plane and killed 15 Russians, it led only to a temporary chilling of relations and a pause in operations.[66] In Syria, Americans even killed a large number of Russian

irregulars without triggering a conflict.[67] And in early 2020, U.S. and Russian forces are coming into contact in northeast Syria without triggering a U.S.-Russia conflict that neither side wants.

Still, taking risks does not mean being reckless, which is precisely what the Trump administration did when it killed Qassim Soleimani and nearly triggered a direct military conflict. The risk of every operation needs to be evaluated, but there is certainly some space for maneuvering between doing nearly nothing and killing one of Iran's most important military leaders.

LESSON 4
Develop a messaging campaign based on deniability that still sends a deterrent signal

Messaging has been a central component of the Israeli campaign. Most notably, many of its strikes are unacknowledged and deniable.[68] By staying quiet and not taking credit, Israel makes it easier for Iran to save face and not respond—and thus escalate.

Importantly, the Israeli campaign is not just about deniability. Stories of Israeli strikes do find their way into the Israeli media, mysteriously appearing in Arab media as well—likely as part of a strategic leaks campaign by the Israeli government, intended to signal to Iran and other players in the region.[69] The purpose is to quietly send the message that Israel is conducting these strikes, is capable of doing so, and thus is drawing red lines and establishing some deterrence, without doing it in a way that could provoke a response.

Certain sites in Syria that Israeli national security officials have known to be tied to Iran's activities in Syria, but were not in the public eye, have also been leaked to Israel-based or Israeli-owned open source intelligence firms, especially ImageSat International.[70] These sites have then been identified in public analysis of Iran's activities in Syria, which could result in Iranian pullback from sites that Israel considered a threat. Or, if not, at least when Israel attacked, Iran would not be surprised.[71]

As the campaign went on, Israeli messaging slowly became more public. It started with Israeli security officials making some initial comments in summer 2017, and then public statements were made in the early months of 2018 in response to an Iranian effort to attack Israel with an unmanned aerial vehicle. Then in early 2019, Israel shifted to a less ambiguous message, with Israeli officials deciding to become more open about the country's kinetic activities against Iran inside Syria. General Gadi Eisenkot, the IDF chief of staff and first major proponent of the mabam campaign, gave a public interview to this effect.[72] It is unclear precisely why Israel's strategy shifted. Some have argued that with Eisenkot retiring and Netanyahu up for election, both had an incentive to take more credit for the successful campaign. However, Israel also used this messaging to more clearly signal to Iran and raise concerns internationally about the possibility of an Israel-Iran conflict. This could then motivate key players in the international community to try to restrain Iran in Syria.[73] Israeli officials and analysts, as well as analysts sympathetic to Israel's activities against Iran in Syria, also took

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the opportunity to lambast the personal failure of Qassim Soleimani, including statements that he had been beaten in Syria by Israel.[74]

Israel also has chosen different approaches to different military theaters. For example, there have been a series of strikes inside Iraq since summer 2019, and most analysts believe they were conducted by Israel.[75] However, given the sensitive nature, especially because of U.S. force deployments in Iraq, Israel has continued to deny these strikes, even as it acknowledges more actions in Syria.

The subtle Israeli messaging campaign stands in strong contrast to U.S. efforts under the Trump administration, in which most of these types of strikes have been highly publicized. In almost every instance of increasing tensions with Iran, President Trump tweeted provocative language that only increased the likelihood of escalation. He consistently took credit for any U.S. operation against Iran. For example, after the Iranian shootdown of a U.S. drone in June 2019, the president very publicly threatened a harsh response, saying Iran will "find out they made a very big mistake," thus escalating.[76] He then pulled it back, likely undermining U.S. deterrence by sending a confusing message to Iran regarding the U.S. commitment to push back on its activities.

After the strike on the five Kata'ib Hezbollah facilities in Iraq, the United States took a highly provocative public approach. It released press statements taking ownership for the strikes, and U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo put out public readouts of calls he held with regional partners, further shining a spotlight on the American response—thus making it harder for Iranian or Shia militia groups to deescalate while also putting the Iraqi government in the incredibly difficult position of being publicly stuck between the United States and Iran.[77] After the killing of Qassim Soleimani, President Trump's first tweet was just a picture of the American flag, a highly provocative taunt of Iran's leadership.

By comparison, the U.S. public messaging campaign in February 2018 was much more effective, after the United States killed a significant number of Russian private military contractors in northeast Syria. In that case, U.S. officials played down the incident in public areas. They referred to the contractors as "pro-Assad forces," thus giving the Russians a way out to deescalate.

One major difference between the United States and Israel is the ability to control potential messaging. The Israeli government and military are able to censor Israeli media. The U.S. government does not have such authorities, meaning these types of strikes are more likely to

be public. However, in a recent precedent, the United States conducted drone strikes in Pakistan and Yemen against al Qaeda that became publicly known but stayed at least partially quiet. Executed under covert authorities so as not to comment publicly, they also had associated with them an Authorization for Use of Military Force.[78] Going forward, for such a U.S. campaign to be realistically implemented, even though it cannot be silenced or censored, it can be carried out relatively quietly with congressional approval. This requires a combination of covert actions under CIA authorities as well as actions under Department of Defense authorities. Such a campaign also requires congressional approval, but not necessarily through a very public debate. Ultimately, it is unclear whether such an approach is feasible given U.S. institutions, which may be a reason to not pursue the type of campaign pursued by the Israelis.

LESSON 5
Purposefully limit adversary and civilian casualties

Israel has gone out of its way in some of its strikes to limit Quds Force and Iranian supported militia casualties. According to Israeli officials interviewed for this study, in some cases Israel has gone as far as purposefully missing with the first shot.[79] This tactic gives Iranians on the ground the time to scatter, after which Israel destroys the weaponry that it is targeting. The approach has the advantage of allowing Israel to target and destroy PGMs, which it views as the biggest strategic threat, while at the same time limiting the possibility of an escalatory response from Iran.[80] It also still allows the Israelis to send a strong deterrent message to Iran.

In contrast, during the December 29, 2019, strikes that the United States conducted on five Iran-backed militia bases in Iraq and Syria, it appears that the U.S. military did not follow this approach. Twenty-five Kata'ib Hezbollah fighters were killed in the strikes, which were seen by Iran and its allies in Iraq as a significant escalation in response to the death of one U.S. contractor the previous day. Thus, instead of sending a strong deterrent signal, this operation led to an escalation by Kata'ib Hezbollah in the form of an attack on the U.S. embassy, leading to the American response of killing Qassim Soleimani and nearly bringing the United States and Iran into a conflict.

Certainly the U.S. military has the capability to limit casualties when conducting strikes in the gray zone, so that it can send a message while still remaining proportional in its response and avoiding escalation. A

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number of recent studies have concluded that despite the strength of U.S. intelligence collection capabilities, the United States can reduce unintended casualties by basing its analysis in more accurate qualitative, contextual information on a given target.[81] U.S. military technology provides analysts with a plethora of quantitative data on a target, but relying on large datasets alone results in oversimplified versions of a battlefield and does not account for the economic, political, or social contexts.[82] Injecting such context into the intelligence cycle is key to successfully conducting more strategic targeting. Further, congressional and executive requirements that the Department of Defense track and report civilian casualties can also pressure military officials to further prioritize casualties when considering a strike.[83] Together these factors can allow the United States to limit casualties when conducting strikes in the gray zone so that it can send a message while still remaining proportional in its response and avoiding escalation.

LESSON 6
Take a gradualist forward-planning approach instead of the more traditional military planning that starts with identifying end-states and working backward

Israeli operations against Iran in Syria go back to the early 2010s when Israel would strike at Iranian convoys with sophisticated missiles that were heading from Syria into Lebanon to supply Hezbollah. In 2017, the IDF began escalating those strikes in response to Iran's efforts to expand its position in Syria.[84] According to interviews with IDF officials, from the start these strikes were not end-state focused, but simply aimed at dealing with the immediate problem that Israel faced. The IDF often deploys this military planning approach. The strikes at first were highly limited, and before conducting even a small strike in Syria, were analyzed by IDF officials for months. When those strikes proved successful and Iran did not retaliate, or retaliated only with weak symbolic actions, the IDF over time stepped up its pace and took on bolder missions. However, this intensification was highly incremental and proceeded carefully, step by step, so as not to miscalculate and go too far, thus triggering a

major response.[85] It also allowed the IDF to get Iran more acclimated to Israeli strikes, so that increasingly bolder efforts did not seem as escalatory as they would have had the IDF started with them.

This type of forward-planning approach compares in sharp contrast to most U.S. military planning, which traditionally starts by laying out its objectives and desired end-states, then plans an entire campaign. If the IDF had insisted on planning out the entire campaign from the start, it would have probably never pursued it at all, judging that the risks of action were too high and the possibility too low of having a meaningful effect on the ground. This is not to argue that when making a decision to pursue a major conventional war, such as a direct conflict with Iran, military planners should not start by identifying the desired end-states. However, when looking at more limited campaigns especially at the asymmetric level, there is a certain benefit in pursuing a forward-planning model as the Israelis used, instead of a backward-looking approach. Indeed, the United States has plenty of experience with this type of method. Most recently it conducted the counter-ISIS campaign, where it did not initially plan to use the SDF as its key local partner in Syria, but came into that opportunity through experimentation on the battlefield.

LESSON 7
Pursue complementary diplomacy to create space for military action

The Israelis did not simply conduct their operations in a vacuum, but instead had a permissible political environment and also pursued aggressive diplomacy to ensure they had the political space in which to conduct the campaign. The reality is that Iran's other allies in Syria—Russia, the Assad regime, and Hezbollah—were not nearly as interested in pursuing a strategic objective of applying military pressure on Israel. Hezbollah and Assad both believed their hands were full in Syria and did not want to provoke a conflict with Israel that could undermine Assad's hold on power or spill into Lebanon and become a new major Israel-Hezbollah conflict.[86] Similarly, the Russians were more interested in consolidating their victory in Syria and finding a diplomatic solution. This would allow them to argue that they belonged on the global stage

with the United States, and that they had the ability to end the region's most catastrophic civil war.[87] They also saw Iran as a potential competitor for spoils in post-conflict Syria, even as they were aligned on the same side in trying to preserve Assad's hold on power. All of this created a dynamic in which Iran's specific objective of building out a new theater from which to apply military pressure on Israel was not supported by its erstwhile partners in Syria—creating the potential space for an Israeli campaign.

However, this situation by itself was not enough. Israel also pursued aggressive diplomacy, especially with Russia, the most important player because of its control of the airspace in most of the territory Israel was striking, and because of its status as a global power that Israel did not want to provoke. Israel established a military-to-military deconfliction line with the Russians to avoid potential accidents.[88] But more important was the high-level diplomacy that Prime Minister Netanyahu personally conducted with President Putin—meeting with him roughly 12 times over the past three years.[89] This vigorous diplomacy was complemented with a credible threat from the Israelis that they viewed Iran's entrenchment of PGMs into Syria as an existential threat that they were willing to take military action to stop. The Russians, viewing the Israeli threat as credible, believed an Israeli-Iranian explosion on their territory would jeopardize their interests in trying to end the conflict and consolidate their position. This gave the Israelis greater leverage in diplomatic meetings.[90]

Still, even with all this careful work, the campaign did trigger a crisis in Israel-Russia relations around the September 2018 Illusion shootdown incident. The Israelis ceased operations for a number of months, and the Russians blamed Israel despite the fact that the culprit was user error on the Syrian side.[91] But after a few months as tensions cooled, Israel was able to resume its operations.

For the United States, the lesson is clear. If it wants to find ways to counter Iran in gray zone conflict, the United States must conduct rigorous diplomacy with the local players who would impact America's space of maneuver. For example, as illustrated by the case of the Iranian attacks on shipping in the Strait of Hormuz and on Saudi oil infrastructure over the summer and fall of 2019, a careful diplomatic strategy is necessary to

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16

successfully coordinate with America's Gulf partners. On the one hand, these partners want the United States to pursue a firm response against Iran. On the other, they are fearful of a potential military escalation that could threaten them. Indeed, even as the United States dramatically escalated its rhetoric toward Iran in the summer and fall of 2019, quickly blaming it for all of the attacks and threatening a harsh response, America's Gulf allies were more circumspect.[92] In the end, this was at least one factor that restrained the U.S. response. In the future, a smarter approach will be to consult with allies first, before making public statements about Iran's actions. This will ensure the messages are coordinated, as well as the possible military response options.

LESSON 8
Be realistic about what a limited tactical campaign can achieve—and curtail it when it is no longer generating outcomes

One final lesson from the Israeli campaign is to not fall in love with a limited tactical campaign that may or may not achieve long-term objectives. It is true that for the moment, the Israelis have significantly reduced the level of Iranian PGMs and weaponry that would be in Syria had they not intervened.[93] However, the Iranians have also begun to use countermeasures. First, they have started developing an indigenous PGM production capability inside Lebanon.[94] Lebanon is a more complicated theater for Israel to strike, because of Hezbollah's entrenched position and significant existing capabilities. This situation creates a more effective deterrent against Israeli action, because the Israeli leadership is wary of starting another all-out conflict with Hezbollah in Lebanon, especially given that both the 2006 and 1982 conflicts ended badly for Israel—notably with the failure and eventual ousting of the governments and prime ministers who prosecuted those wars. Iran has also begun putting PGMs into Iraq instead, where it is harder for the Israelis to get at them, especially since there are U.S. troops based in Iraq. As well, highly visible strikes could complicate the possibility of a long-term U.S. presence, or could lead Iraqi militias supported by Iran to respond to Israeli strikes by targeting American troops. This potentially would trigger a crisis in U.S.-Israeli relations.[95]

Iran has also begun to counter the Israeli campaign by playing a more patient game of increasing its influence inside Syrian society and continuing to fund militia groups loyal to Iran, while pulling back on the provision of advanced weaponry. If Iran plays this long game, it may find that in 10 to 20 years, it will be as entrenched in Syria as it has become in Lebanon with Hezbollah, and thus look for future opportunities to potentially build out a military capability for some of its surrogates and proxies.[96] It is unclear precisely how all of this will play out. The bottom line is that the mabam campaign has, for the moment, created an Iranian setback, but it has not achieved Israel's long-term strategic objective of trying to eject Iran out of Syria or at least limit its influence.

The key lesson here for both Israel and the United States is that limited military strikes targeting Iran in gray zone conflict can have a meaningful effect on the battlefield and help achieve certain objectives. However, policymakers and military planners must be realistic about what such a campaign can accomplish on its own, recognizing that the approach should be one tool in the toolkit of efforts to counter Iran's gray zone activities. A mabam approach cannot be the sum total of a broader strategy.

> **The bottom line is that the mabam campaign has, for the moment, created an Iranian setback, but it has not achieved Israel's long-term strategic objective of trying to eject Iran out of Syria or at least limit its influence.**

Applying Lessons Learned to the U.S. Strikes against Kata'ib Hezbollah and Qassim Soleimani

In early January 2020 tensions between the United States and Iran nearly exploded into a full-scale war after a series of escalatory steps culminated in the American killing of Qassim Soleimani and Iran's launching of ballistic missile at U.S. troops in Iraq. This incident is a perfect example of a moment where the United States could have learned from Israel's operations in Syria.

U.S.-Iran Tensions Culminate in the Killing of Qassim Soleimani

Until the end of 2019, the Trump administration's efforts to counter Iran in the gray zone had consisted of its maximum pressure campaign of economic sanctions and additional troop deployments to the Middle East in an effort to deter Iran with conventional forces. Recent tensions between Iran and the United States began escalating after the unilateral U.S. withdrawal in May 2018 from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. Iran responded with strategic patience, but abandoned that approach in April 2019, after the United States announced new measures to try to drive Iranian oil exports to zero.[97] In May and June 2019, Iran employed mine attacks on oil tankers in the Gulf of Oman.[98] Then, in late June, Iran shot down a U.S. Global Hawk drone, which nearly resulted in a retaliatory U.S. strike on Iranian soil that President Trump called off at the last minute, according to his public rhetoric on Twitter.[99] Instead, the United States responded with cyber-attacks on the facilities from which the missiles were launched.[100] On September 14, Iran launched drones and cruise missiles on Saudi Aramco's largest oil facility at Abqaiq, as well as one of its oil fields in Khurais. As a result, the United States deployed additional troops to Saudi Arabia—bringing to 14,000 the total number deployed to the region since May.[101] At the same time, throughout the summer, Iran-backed militias had been slowly escalating in Iraq by launching a series of rocket attacks targeting U.S. bases. The United States responded with public statements making clear that the death of an American was a U.S. red line.

Tensions increased dramatically when Kata'ib Hezbollah, an Iran-backed militia, launched a strike on a joint U.S.-Iraqi K-1 base near Kirkuk in eastern Iraq, killing a U.S. defense contractor and injuring several U.S. soldiers and Iraqi personnel.[102] In response, on December 29, the United States launched airstrikes in Iraq and Syria against five Kata'ib Hezbollah strongholds—including

their headquarters in al-Qaim—which killed 25 and injured 50 of their members.[103] Less than two days after that attack, supporters of Kata'ib Hezbollah, as well as those enraged by the casualties, stormed the U.S. embassy in Baghdad, where they broke in and set fire to the reception area.[104] Immediately President Trump announced the deployment of an additional 750 U.S. troops to the region to meet the increasing threat Iran was posing.[105]

In response, on January 3, the United States launched a drone strike that killed Qassim Soleimani, the leader of the IRGC-QF, and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, leader of the Iraqi PMU, in Baghdad. The Trump administration, most notably Secretary Pompeo, justified the attack by characterizing Soleimani as posing an "imminent" threat to American lives, without providing details.[106] But by most accounts, it was the storming of the U.S. embassy that caused President Trump to order the strike on Soleimani.

Four days later, Iran retaliated by sending 22 ballistic missiles into Iraq, hitting Iraq's al-Asad air base, where U.S. troops were co-located, and a U.S.-led coalition facility in Erbil.[107] The attacks did not kill any Americans, and both sides then deescalated. There is some disagreement on whether Iran purposefully chose to avoid U.S. casualties, but what is clear is that Iran was willing to at least risk killing Americans. As more details emerged, it became clear that the Iranian response injured more than 100 U.S. troops who were or are currently being treated for traumatic brain injuries.[108]

The strike also resulted in immediate fallout in Iraq, which viewed unilateral U.S. military actions against

Demonstrators protest the death of IRGC-QF leader Qassim Soleimani in front of the U.S. consulate in Istanbul, Turkey, on January 5, 2020. Outrage across the Middle East was sparked after the United States killed Soleimani. (Chris McGrath/Getty Images)

Iran on its territory as highly provocative and against its wishes. Iraq does not want to become a U.S.-Iran battle-field. Days later, Iraq held a parliamentary vote to expel U.S. troops from its country. Even now, the future of the U.S. presence is in question.[109]

Evaluating U.S. Actions in the Context of Lessons Learned from Mabam

The U.S. approach over the past year to counter Iran's actions in the gray zone could have been significantly improved if the U.S. government and military had applied lessons from the mabam campaign. First, from the beginning of Iran's decision to escalate, the United States was unable to find meaningful ways to respond because of the risk of provoking an all-out conflict. This was most notable after the Iranian missile strike on Abqaiq and Khurais, where an appropriate response may have been to conduct a covert strike on an Iranian oil facility and then find quiet ways to signal to the Iranians that the United States had taken action to reestablish a red line. The failure to respond demonstrated the hesitation that the United States has long shown to countering Iran, because of its unwillingness to take risks in the gray zone short of war.

Still, where the Trump administration could have learned much more carefully from the Israelis was in its actions at the end of December 2019 and early January 2020. These nearly brought the United States and Iran into a war and resulted in injuring more than 100 American troops. The misjudgment started with the

U.S. President Donald Trump addresses the Iranian missile attacks that hit two Iraqi air bases, al-Asad Air Base and a base in Erbil, both of which stationed U.S. troops. President Trump announced that the United States would not take any immediate action in response to the attack. (Win McNamee/Getty Images)

> **This public posture was clearly provocative toward the Iranians, thereby increasing the likelihood of a public Iranian response—which came in the form of the attack on the U.S. embassy.**

strike on the five Kata'ib Hezbollah bases on December 29 that killed 25. If the United States had studied Israel's approach of limiting causalities, it would not have killed that many Iranian-supported fighters in response to the killing of one American. Indeed, while the U.S. administration argued that the objective of this limited strike was to reestablish deterrence, the disproportionate level of casualties made it escalatory instead. Heeding lessons from the mabam campaign would have specifically argued against such a strike, in favor of greater care to avoid casualties.

The United States also did not take any steps to make this operation deniable—instead publicly taking ownership, with the Secretary of State going as far as to make calls to regional partners and then put out public readouts emphasizing that the discussion was about U.S. operations in Iraq. This public posture was clearly provocative toward the Iranians, thereby increasing the likelihood of a public Iranian response—which came in the form of the attack on the U.S. embassy. And after the United States killed Soleimani, the president chose to tweet an American flag with no comment. This highly nationalistic act was certain to provoke the Iranians, while taking public ownership for the strike.

U.S. policymakers also failed to take into account intelligence analysis of all the actors in Iraq—most importantly Kata'ib Hezbollah. Doing so would have indicated that a comprehensive disproportionate public response would likely trigger retaliation.

Moreover, studying the mabam campaign would have suggested starting small and only gradually escalating, thus acclimating Iran to increasingly aggressive action. But in the case of the Soleimani strike, in the span of one week, the United States went from barely responding at all to killing Iran's most important military commander. This dramatic and rapid escalation increased the likelihood of a military confrontation.

Finally, a key lesson from the mabam campaign has been to focus on clearly defined and limited objectives. But in the case of Soleimani, the U.S. government had a hard time clearly defining its justifications or its

objectives. Eventually the administration settled on claims of an imminent threat on four U.S. embassies. This could not be proven and was contradicted by multiple sources in the U.S. intelligence community.

If the United States had instead learned from mabam, it would have struck a number of Kata'ib Hezbollah targets on December 29 to reestablish deterrence, and would have ensured far fewer casualties. Instead of publicly announcing the strikes, it would have kept quiet but found ways to let Iran know they had been in retaliation for the death of the American contractor. Such an approach would have sent a clear message and reestablished deterrence without escalation. It would have much more likely not resulted in the attack on the U.S. embassy in Baghdad, or in a major rise in Iraq-U.S. tensions. Qassim Soleimani would not have been killed, and more than 100 Americans would not have suffered traumatic brain injuries. And today, instead of having a regional situation where U.S.-Iran tensions are near all-time highs and the likelihood of escalation is quite significant, such an approach could have actually reduced tensions while reestablishing deterrence.

Conclusion

For years U.S. policymakers have stated that it is imperative that the United States push back on Iran's destabilizing behavior in the Middle East. However, one administration after another has focused almost exclusively on sanctions—a relatively ineffective tool to counter what is ultimately a financially cheap strategy on the part of Iran. The concern always was that even highly limited and unattributed kinetic actions by the United States would lead to uncontrolled escalation. While these concerns are legitimate, the Israeli experience in Syria suggests that American freedom of action to strike Iranian targets in the gray zone may be greater than previously assessed. The United States may have more options than it has realized, providing it is willing to replicate the Israeli model, both against Iran and, possibly, against adversaries such as Russia or China in other gray zone conflicts. At the same time, U.S. policymakers will have to be careful to not "overlearn" some of the lessons of mabam. As analyzed in this report, certain conditions that have made the Israeli campaign successful may not apply, or may not be executable because of differences in how Israel and the United States fight wars.

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