

With Claws unsheathed, Iran creeping up on Israel



Palestinian demonstrators let fly at Israeli troops at near the the West Bank city of Ramallah yesterday. Picture: AP

Louise Callaghan, The Australian, 12:00AM January 15, 2018

The Israeli officer leant forward in the seat of his patrol car and pointed across the desolate valley. A few kilometres away, the white houses dotted on the Syrian side of the border were just visible in the January gloom. “That’s where the Syrian regime is,” he barked. “Hand in hand with them is Iran, which wants to wipe Israel out, and Hezbollah, which exists to destroy the state of Israel.”

For decades, this area in the Golan Heights was Israel’s quietest border. Local members of the Druze minority sold apples to the Syrians and vineyards flourished in the hillside soil. Yet now it is at the forefront of escalating tensions that Israel fears could ignite a new conflict in the region just as ISIS crumbles. The area was captured from Syria during the Six-Day War in 1967, and formally annexed by Israel in 1981 in a move that is not internationally recognised.

In the ashes of the Syrian civil war, Israeli officials say, Iranian-backed forces are now entrenching themselves on Israel’s borders — particularly in this northern outpost. Iran and its proxies have used the war and the battle against the ISIS jihadists to exert their power throughout the Middle East, creating a land corridor of influence that stretches from Tehran to the Mediterranean.

On the ground in Syria, the balance of power is changing quickly. After nearly seven years of conflict, dictator Bashar al-Assad's regime and his Iranian and Lebanese backers are inching closer towards victory, taking back territory from rebels abutting the Israeli-held part of the Golan Heights.

Last month, the Syrian regime retook a village a mere 3km from the Israeli border.

Behind a veneer of official silence, Israel appears to be responding with force inside Syria and on its borders.

At the end of last year, Israel reportedly began to step up strikes on Iranian targets in Syria. An attack on a rumoured Iranian base near Damascus was attributed by several sources to Israel.

Last week, according to official and opposition media in Syria, Israeli jets and ground-to-ground missiles struck an arms depot belonging to the Damascus regime.

Concern is rising among Israeli officials that soon Hezbollah and its allies could have a significant presence both on the country's border with Lebanon — site of a short and brutal war in 2006 — and its border with Syria. A clash on one side, analysts say, could spark conflict on both.

“Iran is duplicating Hezbollah from Lebanon to the Golan Heights to create a second Hezbollah on Israel's border,” said Major-General Amos Yadlin, a retired chief of military intelligence in the Israel Defence Forces. “If one side is determined to build a force in Syria and the other side is determined not to let it happen, this is a recipe for escalation.”

Israel says the entrenchment of Hezbollah or Iran-backed Shi'ite militias on its border is a red line. Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel's increasingly troubled Prime Minister, has taken to likening Iran to a cat, stretching out its paws to bat at its enemy while keeping itself out of range. In November, Mr Netanyahu told the BBC that Iranians “want to bring their air force there, right next to Israel, they want to bring Shi'ite and Iranian divisions right next to Israel. They want to bring submarines. So we will not let that happen, we will resist it”.

Israeli officials say the threat also extends to Gaza, where they accuse Iran of funding the terror group Islamic Jihad and giving support to Hamas, the

militant organisation that runs the 40km coastal strip. "It's amazing how everything has to do with Iran," said Yisrael Katz, the Israeli intelligence and transport minister, this month. "In a short time we will see ourselves fighting a much more challenging threat on the operative and military levels if we don't change direction."

Analysts and diplomats in the region, however, cautioned that neither side wanted a war. "It's really not clear what Iran is actually doing in Syria," said one western diplomat formerly based in Israel. "It's in Israel's interests to play up the Iranian threat. They know it can get them sympathy in Washington."

Donald Trump's administration has vowed to destroy the 2015 nuclear agreement with Iran. Mr Netanyahu, analysts say, knows the value of staying close to the US president, who last year recognised Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. However, in the Golan Heights, soldiers say the threat is gaining ground. "We're not looking for a fight," the IDF officer said. "If they're looking for one, we will be there in full force."

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