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# Alleged Israeli strike in Syria hit Iranian weapons headed for Hezbollah

Analysis **Amos Harel**

Based on Arab media reports, the bombing of Syrian and Iranian targets outside the cities of Damascus and Homs late Sunday night was one of the largest attacks attributed to Israel in recent years. Its timing was intriguing, too – a few days af-

ter the summit in Jerusalem of national security advisers from the United States, Russia and Israel, and at a time when the United States and Iran are still facing off against each other in the Persian Gulf. On Monday there were reports that Iran

had carried out its threat, enriching its uranium stockpile past the 300-kilogram limit set under the international nuclear agreement, for the first time.

Journalists in Damascus relate that various sites associated with Iran in proximity to Beirut were also bombed overnight, as was a weapons depot near the Lebanese border, in Syria.

The distribution of the sites attacked could attest to the real goal – hitting what is apparently a logistical chain that supplies advanced weapons to Hezbollah, linking Iran to Lebanon via Syria.

The number of casualties reported so far is unusual: nine fighters, most of them foreign, and six Syrian civilians. Civilian deaths result-

ing from Israeli air raids on Syria are quite rare.

The official announcement published after the trilateral Jerusalem summit last week was very short on details. At the joint press conference, Russia's national security adviser, Nikolai Patrushev, even mentioned the alliance between Russia and Iran in Syria. But Russia is clearly taking no active steps to curtail Israel's assaults on Iranian targets in Syria.

The S-300 surface-to-air missile system, which the Russians say they delivered to the Syrian Army after their Ilyushin aircraft was accidentally shot down in September, didn't operate this time either. The Syrians fired a massive barrage of older S-200 missiles

in response to this latest aerial attack; one fell on the Turkish part of Cyprus by mistake. As in the Ilyushin incident, this time too, the Syrians seem to be firing weapons rather hysterically without considering possible ramifications.

Even though this is an election period in Israel, in contrast to previous attacks, this time local officials did not immediately begin to drop broad hints about Israel's possible involvement. Speaking at the Herzliya Conference on Monday, Mossad chief Yossi Cohen talked about the situation in the north, in general.

"We have no interest in fighting with Syria," Cohen said. "But we won't accept

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An image showing the hangar in Damascus before and after its destruction overnight Sunday.

ImageSat International

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Iran's entrenchment against us in Syria, or Syria's role as a logistical base for transporting weaponry to Lebanon."

He added that in his opinion, Israel's activity in Syria will ultimately prompt Iran to decide that it doesn't pay to operate there. Cohen, who devoted much of his speech to the Iranian threat to Israel, mentioned Tehran's intention of exceeding the permissible limit for enriched uranium under the 2015 agreement with the six world powers – from which the United States withdrew last May. And indeed, an hour later, it was reported that Iran had, for the first time, passed that mark.

In the background, tensions with the Americans in the Persian Gulf continue. Following recent attacks on oil tankers, rigs and airfields for which Tehran has been blamed, an expensive American surveillance drone was

shot down in the Gulf on June 20. Iran claimed the drone had penetrated its airspace. Trump reconsidered his initial response to the incident and canceled a punitive American attack which, he claimed, could have cost 150 lives – but also announced more economic sanctions against Tehran.

While no further incidents have been reported in the interim, the Iranians are exerting pressure by violating the nuclear accord. Their purpose seems to be to bring the Americans back to the negotiating table, perhaps in the hope of easing the sanctions. So far Trump hasn't taken the bait. On the contrary, he is signaling a crackdown.

Sooner or later the parties will have to resume their direct talks but right now they're at the stage of issuing threats. It's quite obvious that neither wants a direct military conflict, but as has been said before: The regional situation is so complex that one cannot be sure that the Americans and Iranians will have the good sense not to get to that point.