

Two Israeli Air Strikes, and Two Syrian Mothers and Sons

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Articles & Testimony

The remarkable precision of Israeli attacks on Iranian and Hezbollah operatives in Syria has raised anxiety in Damascus and abroad.

On 1 April, Israel reportedly struck what Iran [claims \(https://apnews.com/article/israel-syria-airstrike-iranian-embassy-edca34c52d38c8bc57281e4ebf33b240\)](https://apnews.com/article/israel-syria-airstrike-iranian-embassy-edca34c52d38c8bc57281e4ebf33b240) was its consulate in Damascus, killing IRGC-QF Commander in Syria and Lebanon Mohammad Reza Zahedi, his deputy Mohammad-Hadi Haji-Rahimi, five other IRGC officers, and six unnamed Syrian civilians that the al-Assad regime thus far has [refused \(https://syrianobserver.com/features/88413/six-syrians-killed-in-iranian-consulate-bombing-regime-wont-say-who-they-are.html\)](https://syrianobserver.com/features/88413/six-syrians-killed-in-iranian-consulate-bombing-regime-wont-say-who-they-are.html) to identify. In response, Israel [claimed \(https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/02/middleeast/iran-response-israel-damascus-consulate-attack-intl-hnk/index.html\)](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/02/middleeast/iran-response-israel-damascus-consulate-attack-intl-hnk/index.html) the structure was a four-story “military building of Quds Forces disguised as a civilian building.”

As the world awaits Iran’s threatened response, a closer look at the funeral [announcement \(https://www.facebook.com/100081551815097/posts/413346588060398/?mibextid=ox5AEW&rdid=SIWA86FoNybmCGq\)](https://www.facebook.com/100081551815097/posts/413346588060398/?mibextid=ox5AEW&rdid=SIWA86FoNybmCGq) of a Syrian mother and son killed in the strike indicates that (at a minimum) the building itself was not formally part of the consulate or embassy grounds—the latest sign of the very subtle game between Iran and Israel in Syria that has helped keep al-Assad on the sidelines of the Gaza war. But a key similarity of the funeral announcement with that of another Syrian mother and son killed in a reported Israeli strike on 7 February in Homs is raising anxiety levels in Damascus and elsewhere surrounding the recent remarkable precision of Israeli assassination strikes against Iranians and Hezbollah operatives in Syria.

Spike in Israeli Attacks

In the six months since Hamas' October 7 attack on Israel, open-source reporting indicates Israel has carried out over 50 air strikes in Syria, including five on Aleppo airport, two on the adjacent Nairab military airport, four on Damascus airport, and one on the Mezzeh military airport. All reportedly targeted Iranian assets, including weapons warehouses. While Israeli air strikes on airfields and facilities in Syria are nothing new in the 13-year-and-counting Syrian war, the strike tempo remains nearly double that of pre-7 October levels.

The same reports show Israel's targeting has also changed. Since 7 October, there has been a sharp uptick of Israeli air strikes on Iranian Revolutionary Guard and Iran-aligned groups' leaderships operating in Syria, including 18 IRGC officers, approximately 32 from Lebanese Hezbollah, and one from Hamas. In comparison, between January and October 2023, only two IRGC officers and none from Lebanese Hezbollah or Hamas perished from Israeli strikes. But the largest number of deaths from reported Israeli strikes in Syria since 7 October have been Syrians. Approximately 75 Syrians have perished in reported Israeli air strikes—45 of whom (or 60%) occurred in the last two weeks alone following a massive March 29 [Israeli strike \(https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/civilians-military-killed-after-israeli-strikes-aleppo-syrian-army-says-2024-03-29/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/civilians-military-killed-after-israeli-strikes-aleppo-syrian-army-says-2024-03-29/) in Aleppo province.

Al-Assad's Passivity

A rise in Syrian casualties before the Syrian war probably would have enticed al-Assad to enter the Gaza conflict in support of Iran and Hamas by now. But since 7 October, al-Assad—despite tough talk and continued references to his regime's sovereignty over a country he has not controlled for a decade—has largely sat out the Gaza conflict, with only between 20 and 30 missile or rocket attacks from Syria on Israeli-controlled territory. Nearly all of these have reportedly “landed in open areas” and led to no Israeli casualties—which is read in Washington and elsewhere as a sort of code that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad wants to stay out of the Gaza conflict. Israel has responded with mostly artillery fire and some air strikes on the launch sites.

It is easy to understand why al-Assad remains on Gaza's sidelines. The al-Assad regime—beset with shortages, hyperinflation, and without military control of most of the country's agricultural and fossil fuels—is exhausted. Its military forces are spread thin and are increasingly coming [under attack \(https://www.nytimes.com/2024/03/24/world/europe/russia-extremism-isis-syria.html\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/03/24/world/europe/russia-extremism-isis-syria.html) from the Islamic State (IS) in central Syria and Hay'at Tahrir as-Sham (HTS) from the northwest.

While much media attention has focused on reports that Washington is developing plans to [withdraw \(https://en.majalla.com/node/309236/politics/dangers-us-withdrawal-syria\)](https://en.majalla.com/node/309236/politics/dangers-us-withdrawal-syria) from Syria at some point, the fact is that the al-Assad regime will be unlikely to take and hold resource-rich eastern Syria without striking a deal with the Kurdish PKK-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which until now Damascus has been unwilling to do on terms other than the SDF's total integration into the Syrian Arab Army.

This has reportedly led two of al-Assad's allies—Russia and the United Arab Emirates—to urge al-Assad to stay out of the Gaza conflict. Both do not want to jeopardise the regime's tenuous grip on the parts of the country it supposedly controls, as well as the regime's chances of obtaining much-needed reconstruction funds that are currently blocked by the U.S. “Caesar” sanctions and Jordanian and Arab Gulf bafflement over the large flows of Captagon that continue out of Syrian territory into Jordan and beyond.

Both Moscow and Abu Dhabi have close relations with Israel, which for nearly a decade has focused not only on the Syrian war but also on a settlement that has al-Assad remaining in control of the country, with Iran playing a subordinate role. Syria's continued de facto partition between the U.S., Turkey, Russia and Iran, and notably the latter's militias that spent months hitting U.S. forces in Eastern Syria (leading to the deaths of three [American soldiers \(https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/29/politics/us-soldiers-deaths-jordan/index.html\)](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/29/politics/us-soldiers-deaths-jordan/index.html) and multiple U.S. retaliatory strikes), shows good reason for Moscow and Abu Dhabi's advice.

Growing Anxiety

How much counsel may be related to Israel's recent strike effectiveness in Syria remains unknown. Cynics speculate that the al-Assad regime, desperate to retake its territory, is happy for Israel to degrade and destroy Iranian assets in Syria in favour of a Russia burdened by the Ukraine war. And that Moscow, in its conversations with Israel, is all too happy to pass on al-Assad's meagre intentions during the Gaza war and after. This has led to rumours that the same parties may be passing on human and other intelligence that would help Israel target Iranian and Hezbollah leaders in Syria.

Undermining this theory, however, is Moscow's deepening military relationship with Tehran during the Ukraine war, meaning such cynical behaviour by Moscow would come at the risk of losing access to much-needed Iranian drones and other munitions. Israel is famous for having its own methods for obtaining precise targeting information in Syria that long predate the Syrian war, however—most notably Israel's [2007 strike](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/21/israel-admits-it-carried-out-2007-airstrike-on-syrian-nuclear-reactor)

[\(<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/21/israel-admits-it-carried-out-2007-airstrike-on-syrian-nuclear-reactor>\)](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/21/israel-admits-it-carried-out-2007-airstrike-on-syrian-nuclear-reactor) on the al-Assad regime's reportedly North Korean-built Al-Kibar Nuclear reactor.

What is interesting about the details of the Syrian mother and son killed on 1 April is that it appears the family may have rented apartments in the now destroyed building to Iranians operating out of the Iranian embassy and consulate next door. Also interesting is the funeral announcement's [key detail](https://www.facebook.com/100081551815097/posts/413346588060398/?mibextid=ox5AEW&rdid=SIWA86FoNybmccGq)

[\(<https://www.facebook.com/100081551815097/posts/413346588060398/?mibextid=ox5AEW&rdid=SIWA86FoNybmccGq>\)](https://www.facebook.com/100081551815097/posts/413346588060398/?mibextid=ox5AEW&rdid=SIWA86FoNybmccGq): the latter studied engineering in the United States at Ohio's Franklin University. On the surface, this is not unusual, as Syrians tired of their country's broken politics have studied in the United States and performed exceptionally well for decades, leading Syria to be the second-largest source of foreign-born physicians in the United States.

What is now rumoured to be driving up anxiety in Damascus are the similarities of this family's situation to another Syrian mother and son, who died in a reported Israeli strike on 7 February in Homs that killed nine and injured 13, including three Hezbollah leaders. According to [reports](https://www.syria.tv/%D8%A8%D9%8A%D9%86%D9%87%D9%85-%D9%85%D8%AF%D9%86%D9%8A%D9%88%D9%86-%D9%88%D9%85%D9%82%D9%8A%D9%85-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%B1%D9%83%D8%A7-%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%AA%D9%83%D8%B4%D9%81-%D9%87%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%AA%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%BA%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%B3%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%8A%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A8%D8%AD%D9%85%D8%B5)

[\(<https://www.syria.tv/%D8%A8%D9%8A%D9%86%D9%87%D9%85-%D9%85%D8%AF%D9%86%D9%8A%D9%88%D9%86-%D9%88%D9%85%D9%82%D9%8A%D9%85-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%B1%D9%83%D8%A7-%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%AA%D9%83%D8%B4%D9%81-%D9%87%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%AA%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%BA%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%B3%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%8A%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A8%D8%AD%D9%85%D8%B5>\)](https://www.syria.tv/%D8%A8%D9%8A%D9%86%D9%87%D9%85-%D9%85%D8%AF%D9%86%D9%8A%D9%88%D9%86-%D9%88%D9%85%D9%82%D9%8A%D9%85-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%B1%D9%83%D8%A7-%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%AA%D9%83%D8%B4%D9%81-%D9%87%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%AA%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%BA%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%B3%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%8A%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A8%D8%AD%D9%85%D8%B5), the mother had rented an apartment in a three story building—located only 200 meters from the governor's palace and 500 meters from a Syrian State Security branch—to an Iranian or Hezbollah leader.

The lethality of the strike and those immediately preceding it led to [reports](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/irans-guards-pull-officers-syria-after-israeli-strikes-2024-02-01/#:~:text=%22The%20Iranians%20won't%20abandon,sources%2C%20an%20Iranian%2C%20said.)

[\(<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/irans-guards-pull-officers-syria-after-israeli-strikes-2024-02-01/#:~:text=%22The%20Iranians%20won't%20abandon,sources%2C%20an%20Iranian%2C%20said.>\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/irans-guards-pull-officers-syria-after-israeli-strikes-2024-02-01/#:~:text=%22The%20Iranians%20won't%20abandon,sources%2C%20an%20Iranian%2C%20said.) that Iran was supposedly withdrawing its leaders from Syria for fear of Israeli strikes—which now appear premature at best, given the details of the 1 April strike. Like the Syrian victims of last week's strike in Damascus, the mother's son also reportedly resided in the United States—and was about to return there via Beirut when the missile struck.

Few things in Syria are as they seem, but in the Syrian war and the age of social media, there remain even fewer true secrets.

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