

# Knesset Elections 2019 will end the Ayatollah

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Israel will go to elections for the Knesset and a new government on 9 April 2019. The topic of Israel's defense has never been a major election campaign issue because all parties in the past have agreed where and when it is necessary Israel will act to protect the State and Jews. Nevertheless this time will be unique in Israel's history. The election will come at a time of the entry into office of a new Chief of the Israel Defense Forces and a new Chief of Police. And there is no guarantee, Israel being a democracy, that the next Prime Minister and the next Minister of Defense will have any experience in handling Iran.

Yes, they will all be experts in one way or another about Israel's security and they will have hundreds if not thousands of experts who can help them about facts. The issue is experience about a decision for a preemptive or preventive war against Iran, and this so far has been lacking. Dithering is not an option because Iran is not. Iran is constantly working on its missile program, nuclear ambitions and gaining the upper hand in controlling all territories north of Israel. The newly elected leadership in Israel will have to decide with immediate effect on taking office what to do with Iran.

The facts are on the table, Israel's responses are not. The facts are that the situation in Israel's north has deteriorated. The tunnels of Hezbollah have been discovered. And the United States is withdrawing from Syria. The Americans were deployed in northeast Syria, collaborating with Kurdish-led forces to wipe the Islamic State from the area but also protecting them from Turkey. Turkey is threatening to invade Syria to eradicate Kurdish fighters. Thousands of Islamic State adherents are still in Syria scattered around the country.

The American presence in Syria was particularly vexing for Iran, preventing Iranian-backed militias from crossing into Syria from Iraq. A pullout has freed Tehran to treat the Iraqi border as fully porous, easing the movement of fighters and weapons and potentially of the advanced missiles and other weapons through Syria to Hezbollah, Iran's partner in Lebanon. Iran and Russia will be even freer to flex their power in Syria. Russia, Iran and Iran-backed militias, including the Lebanese Shiite group Hezbollah, are well-positioned to seize territory abandoned by the United States. Russia could move forces to crush the last vestige of the Syrian anti-government insurgency.

Israel, which hoped the American presence in Syria would block Iran from completing its corridor to the Mediterranean Sea, now has to reckon with a new reality. Now Iran can link Shiite partners in Iraq, Syria

and Lebanon in one long and large geographical front and menace Israel. In Syria, Iran and Hezbollah aim to strengthen a military presence near the Golan Heights.

The American withdrawal from Syria leaves Israel alone in the arena with the Russians. The Russians, who have good relations with Israel, have tacitly allowed it to conduct such operations in the past. Still, the Kremlin protested about Israel's airstrike around Damascus in December 2018 what it called Israel's 'gross violation' of Syrian sovereignty. So that leaves Israel not wanting to trust the Russians, but who else is there?

The most likely Syrian future in 2019 is a far more brittle version of what existed before and that means a more brittle Israeli northern border. Shiite Iran, which competes with Sunni powers led by Saudi Arabia for influence across the region, has sent tens of thousands of Iranian and proxy fighters to Syria. It is building Shiite shrines and strengthening Shiite militias that it hopes to use as leverage against Israel.

So in my opinion the American decision to withdraw from Syria has abruptly scrambled the geopolitics of the Middle East. Many countries will be forced to reassess their relationships. The result could be a series of new balancing acts: Israel trying to tilt Russia against Iran, Turkey playing Russia and the United States off one another, and Syria balancing the Kurds against Turkey, among others. It has also put onto the table the immediate necessity for Israel's leadership to decide about Iran.

In my opinion in the days immediately after the Knesset elections and a new government taking office Israel will decide and act about Iran, both in Syria and about Iran's missile projects and nuclear ambitions that are all a threat to Israel. President Trump's decision to withdraw from Syria shows that Israel can only rely on its own national-security credentials. And that may mean the end of the rule of the Ayatollah's for there is no other option that could ensure Israel's security.