Israel's Missile Strike on Syria

What is the issue?

The missile strike at Syria's Latakia port by Israel is yet another reminder that the conflict in the Arab country is far from over.

How has the Israel - Syria hostility evolved over the years?

- **In 1967 war-** Israel captured the strategic "**Golan Heights**" on the Israeli-Syria border from Syria and continues to occupy the region even now**.**
- **In 1980s-** Syria intervened in Lebanon and helped militants like Hezbollah who were resisting Israeli occupation of Lebanon.
- **In 1991**- Middle East peace negotiations began and talks between Syria and Israel continued for five years with little resolution on the main issues of borders and water rights.
- **Syrian civil war-** When the crisis broke in Syria in 2011, Israel followed a wait and watch approach as it didn't want to displace the stable secular dictatorship of Assad.
- But as the Syrian civil war evolved into a regional conflict over the years, Israel got itself involved in the Syrian war in order to contain increasing Iranian influence in Syria.

What forced Israel's intervention into the Syrian war?

- Even before the conflict began, many Syrians were complaining about high unemployment, corruption and a lack of political freedom under President Bashar al-Assad.
- In March 2011, when pro-democracy demonstrations erupted in the city, the Syrian government used deadly force to crush the dissent.
- The violence rapidly escalated and the country descended into civil war. As hundreds of rebel groups sprung up which become more than a battle between Syrians for or against Mr Assad.
- Foreign powers began to take sides, sending money, weaponry and fighters, and the extremist jihadist organisations such as the Islamic State (IS) group and al-Qaeda came up with their own aims.
- The government's key supporters have been Russia, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan and Yemen with Iran pushing thousands of Shia Muslim militiamen from Lebanon's **Hezbollah** into Syria to fight against the opposition.

Hezbollah is a Shiite Muslim political party and militant group based in Lebanon. It opposes Israel and Western powers operating in the Middle East, and it functions as a proxy of Iran.

- President Bashar al-Assad's regime, with help from Russia and Iran, has defeated most of the rebel groups and recaptured almost all lost territories, except **Idlib**.
- Countries like Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Israel backed the opposition to counter the growing influence of Iran.
- The growing role of Hezbollah and Iran in Syria alarmed Israel, as Hezbollah and Israel have

had multiple direct confrontations in the past.
- Notably, it was Hezbollah's guerrilla resistance that forced the Israel withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000 after 18 years of occupation.

What is the present attack about?

- Israeli warplanes fired a number of missiles at the port of the coastal city of **Latakia** causing large explosions and fires and this is the second strike on Latakia.
- Russia, whose primary focus in Syria is on the survival of the Assad regime and the protection of its own troops and assets deployed there, has largely stayed away from the Iran-Israel cold war.
- This gives Israel a free hand in Syria to target the Iranian and Hezbollah shipments.

What are the key problems of the Israeli approach?

- **Violation of Syria's sovereignty**- Israel has hardly upheld international norms and laws when it comes to its security policies.
- The repeated strikes by Israel are obvious violation of Syria's sovereignty.
- **Syria as a new front in the Israel-Iran tussle**- In recent years, Israel has reportedly assassinated Iranian nuclear scientists and Iran, in return, has attacked Israel-linked vessels in the Gulf and Mediterranean waters.
- Weakened by the civil war and dependent on Iran and Russia for survival, Syria lacks the political will and resources to either check Iran's influence or deter Israel's attack.
- The Latakia strike has come at a time when international powers are trying to revive the Iran nuclear deal, post-2018.
- If these attempts collapse and Iran presses ahead with its nuclear programme, the chances of an Israel-Iran military conflict will rise.
- For Syria to see relative peace, the tensions between Israel and Iran has to reduce and this could be achieved by the revival of the nuclear deal.

References

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