



NO GOOD OUTCOME

How Israel Could Be Drawn into the Syrian Conflict

ESSAYS BY WASHINGTON
INSTITUTE ANALYSTS

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Introduction and Conclusion

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Cover: An Israeli soldier looks across the border to Syria in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, August 2013. Israel had ordered a small-scale mobilization of reservists and strengthened its missile defenses as precautions against possible Syrian attack should Western powers carry out threatened strikes on Syria. (Reuters/Ronen Zvulun)

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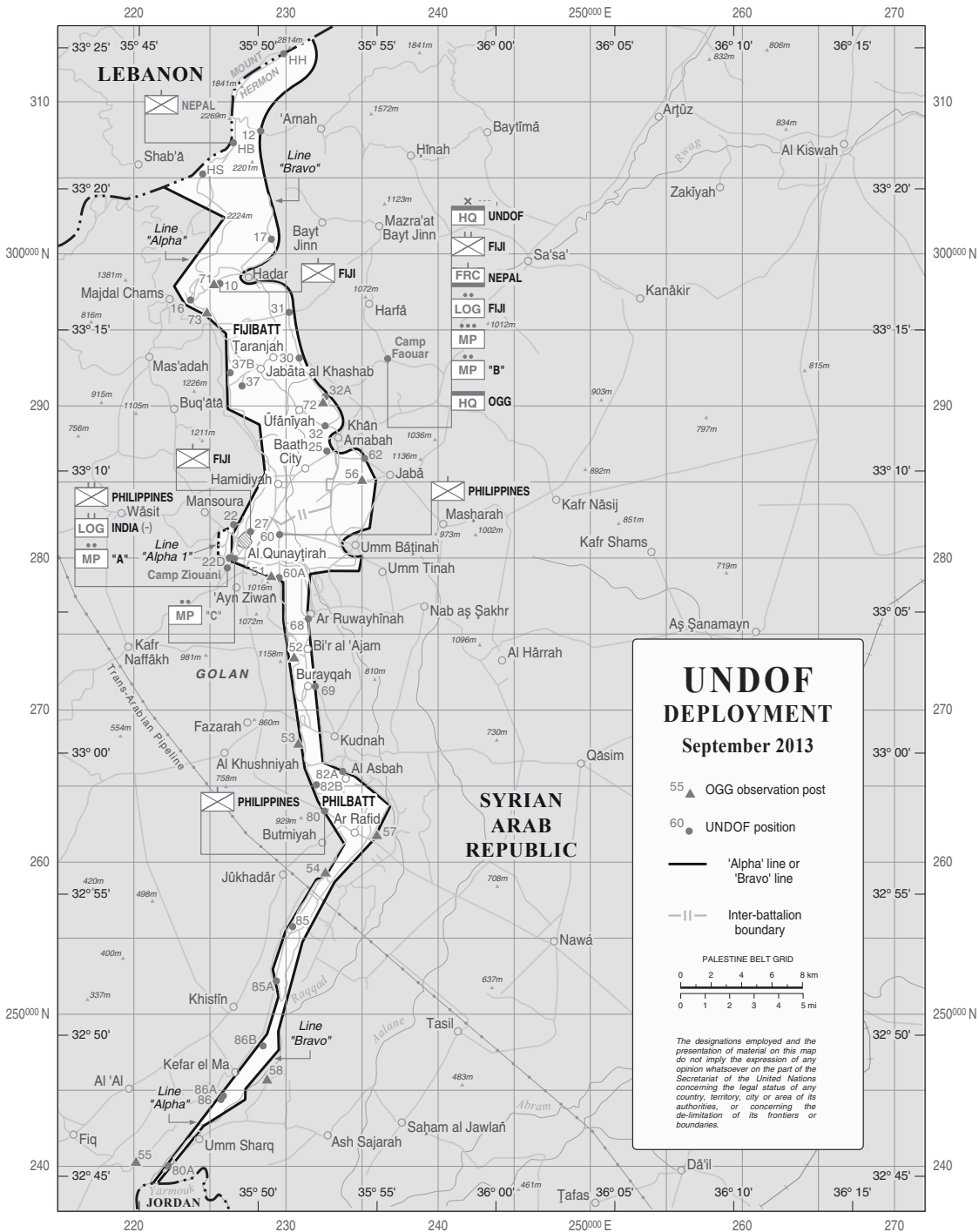
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Introduction

Patrick Clawson

THIS STUDY BEGINS WITH AN examination by Jeffrey White of six scenarios that could draw greater Israeli military involvement in the Syrian conflict. Demonstrating the complexities and uncertainties of the situation, these scenarios suggest that the longer the conflict goes on, the deeper Israeli military involvement in Syria could become. The scenarios range from Israeli strikes in Syria to prevent the transfer of weapons to Hezbollah (most likely) to direct Syrian strikes on Israel (least likely). The scenarios are interconnected in the sense that one could lead to another. For example, an Israeli attack on a weapons shipment bound for Hezbollah could lead to Hezbollah attacks on Israel from southern Lebanon. The scenarios, in sum, suggest how the Syrian conflict puts the entire regional security architecture at risk. What happens in Syria may not stay in Syria.

An important conclusion of this study is that if Israel actively intervenes in Syria, the regime and the Islamist rebels would compete to present themselves as the most active opponents of the Israeli presence. Aaron Zelin explains that the jihadists' ideological mindset would make them absolutely certain that any Israeli action indicated some kind of a plot to help Syrian president Bashar al-Assad and hurt them. Jabhat al-Nusra/ Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham would become all the more attractive for Sunni foreign fighters, and these groups could probably make effective use of the Israeli actions to win more support among Syrians. The possible reaction by the Syrian regime to Israeli involvement is explored by Andrew Tabler, who argues that while Damascus would ignore periodic tactical air or missile strikes, the regime would actively resist Israeli land operations even if aimed at the jihadists. Tabler also investigates perhaps the most likely scenario for Israel being drawn into the Syrian conflict—a

decaying security situation along the border in which groups affiliated with either the opposition or the regime launch attacks into Israel.

One of the key arguments proffered by Hezbollah in its propaganda aimed at justifying its operations in Syria is that they are part of its resistance (*muqawama*) against Israel. But as Matthew Levitt explains, outside Hezbollah's staunchest Shiite supporters, there are few takers for the contorted logic that the Syrian rebellion is an American or an Israeli scheme. To increase the credibility of Hezbollah's claim that its involvement in Syria is somehow part of its campaign of resistance, the group may try to draw Israel into sporadic and contained exchanges along the Lebanese or Syrian (Golan) borders.

With a focus on Lebanon's Sunnis and Shiites, David Schenker explains that while the two constituencies have shown remarkable restraint so far, it is by no means assured that some egregious incident will not reignite a full-scale civil conflagration. Israel would try to avoid being pulled into another bloody Lebanese civil war, but a single hit on a Jewish kindergarten would be all it took to draw Israeli military involvement. In the absence of any state authority in Lebanon, Israel's ability to establish deterrence along the frontier—as it has done with Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon—will also be limited.

Michael Eisenstadt explores how, over the years, Israel and Syria have avoided a larger conflict through “rules of the road.” But those rules have not worked as well in dealing with the expansion of the Israeli-Syrian conflict beyond its traditional bounds, whether in the nuclear arena or Syria's deepening involvement in the various shadow wars involving Israel. This record does not augur well for the two sides' handling of the growing conflict inside Syria, despite Israel's attempt to stay aloof from the Syrian civil war.

It is hard to see U.S. interests being well served by the sorts of conflicts outlined here, especially if the Syrian conflict drags on. Thus, the United States has strong reason to forestall such conflicts. Patrick Clawson offers a few remarks on this theme to conclude this study. While a variety of useful goals can be envisaged, none will be as certain and lasting as bringing the Syrian conflict to a close. For that reason if no other, the United States would do well to play a more active role in ensuring that Assad goes quickly.

1.

Potential for Israeli Military Involvement in the Syrian Conflict

Jeffrey White

ISRAEL HAS NO DIRECT INTEREST in becoming involved militarily in the internal Syrian conflict. For one thing, it can do little to shape the outcome. For another, the situation is not one of “the devil you know versus the devil you don’t know” but rather one of “two devils that you know”: the savage Assad regime and the Salafi jihadists. Probably the best outcome from Israel’s standpoint is a prolonged stalemate that keeps Syria divided and weak.¹

Nevertheless, Israel has been far from passive in the Syrian conflict. It does have interests at stake and already has taken measures to protect them, including reportedly through strikes on weapons shipments apparently bound for Hezbollah, by strengthening its military posture on the Golan Heights, and by sending clear messages aimed at deterring a variety of threats. These actions, backed by Israel’s strong military capabilities and willingness to use them, give it a measure of influence over the situation—but not control. Much can happen in Syria or in Lebanon that Israel cannot dictate or ward off. This combination of clearly identifiable threats and uncontrollable circumstances increases the chances of significant Israeli military involvement at some point in the Syrian conflict.

Israeli Interests in the Syrian Conflict

Israel’s major interests in Syria have been spelled out on several occasions by senior Israeli officials:

- Prevent the passage of strategic² weapons to Hezbollah.³
- Prevent the Syrian regime’s acquisition or operationalization of strategic weapons from Russia.⁴
- Maintain quiet on the Golan front.⁵
- Prevent the regime’s strategic weapons from falling into the hands of radical Islamic groups.⁶

These are all essentially *defensive* objectives, aimed at preventing deterioration in Israel's security situation in the north. Nevertheless, they imply the need for *offensive* action to secure them, and they are unlikely to be accomplished by a single act. This likely requirement for repeated offensive action raises the risk for retaliation and escalation even if Israeli goals are essentially defensive.

Israeli Involvement So Far

Israel, as noted, has not been passive in the Syrian conflict, and it has delineated its concerns both publicly and privately.⁷ Such expressions have included deterrence messaging to establish terms for unacceptable actions by the regime and its allies as well as Islamist groups. On the ground, Israel is providing medical assistance to injured Syrians crossing into Israeli territory and has established a military field hospital close to the Golan Heights.⁸

The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) has been active. It has increased intelligence collection against Syria, including through the possible penetration into Syrian territory for intelligence collection and contact development purposes.⁹ In Israel's north, Iron Dome counter-rocket batteries have been deployed,¹⁰ and IDF units in the Golan have responded to fire from Syrian forces, destroying the batteries and killing and wounding Syrian military personnel.¹¹ In some cases, the Tamuz precision missile system has been used in order to reduce the potential for errant rounds and collateral damage.¹² On the Syrian border, passive defenses (barriers, security fencing, sensors) have been upgraded,¹³ and the IDF is conducting exercises aimed at signaling its enhanced readiness on the northern front.¹⁴ The IDF has also announced plans to restructure its forces on the Golan to provide a more focused approach to intensifying border security issues. Reportedly, a territorial division, like those on other fronts, will be created with the mission of conducting border security operations.¹⁵

Most prominently, Israel has reportedly¹⁶ conducted four or more air-strikes inside Syria targeting apparent shipments of strategic weapons to Hezbollah. These include a purported attack in late January 2013 against SA-17 equipment near Damascus,¹⁷ followed by two reported strikes in early May against Fateh-110 surface-to-surface missiles (SSMs) at Damascus International Airport and a facility outside Damascus associated with the regime's Republican Guard.¹⁸ In July, according to reports, Israel struck

a storage facility for the Yakhont antiship cruise missile near Latakia.¹⁹ A fifth attack has been reported but seems less certain than the others.²⁰ These actions served both to eliminate immediate threats of a strategic arms transfer and to establish the credibility of Israel's deterrent messaging.

During the August–September 2013 period of heightened tensions over a potential U.S. strike against Syria, Israel took additional measures to prepare for a potential Syrian crisis. These measures included issuing protective masks to the civilian population and mobilizing selected Home Front Command and air-defense reservists.²¹

Israel's actions to date establish the groundwork for an improved political and military posture in the event that serious threats materialize, making it easier for Israel to act quickly if necessary. These actions also should not be seen as the limit of Israeli preparations. Other measures have undoubtedly been taken away from the public eye.²² While unexpected dangers can always emerge, Israel seems prepared to deal with a broad spectrum of threats emanating from the conflict in Syria.²³

Scenarios for Israeli Military Involvement

There are six major scenarios in which Israel could become more deeply involved in armed conflict arising from the internal war in Syria. The list goes from most to least likely; these scenarios are also interconnected, with one possibly leading to another.

1. HEZBOLLAH ARMS CRISIS

This scenario involves the transfer of strategic weapons from Syria, or Iran through Syria, to Hezbollah. Specific strategic weapons include

- SSMs, especially those with precision guidance such as the Fateh-110
- sophisticated anti-aircraft weapons that threaten Israel's control of Lebanese airspace, such as the SA-17 or S-300
- the Yakhont antiship missile system, and
- chemical weapons.

Continuing or potential transfers of missiles and anti-aircraft systems have already led to direct Israeli military operations aimed at preventing such transfers. Israel will likely act again to prevent such transfers. Notably, all such actions entail the risk of retaliation by Hezbollah, Syria, or their proxies, thereby raising the potential for a series of strikes and counterstrikes,

escalation to higher levels of military force, and the expansion of operations geographically across borders and deeper into the territory of those involved. This overall scenario holds major potential for miscalculation, mischief, or error that could aggravate the situation.

2. GOLAN HEIGHTS CRISIS

A crisis on the Golan Heights could come from the spillover of fighting between Syrian rebels and regime forces, infiltration of Israeli territory by Islamist groups operating from the Syrian side of the border, clashes between Israeli and Syrian army forces as a consequence of the kind of firing incidents that have already occurred, operations by Hezbollah elements or its proxies,²⁴ or operations by regime proxies. So far, both the IDF and the Syrian regime have worked to contain incidents along the Golan border: Israel has been careful to limit its response to cross-border fire, and Syria has not retaliated when Israel has responded. But there is no guarantee that this situation will continue.

In another scenario, radical Islamist elements, while now fully immersed in the fight against the Syrian regime, could at some point turn to operations against Israel. The potential that such a shift could come before the end of the war against the regime has been raised by Israeli officials.²⁵

Israel is relatively well postured to meet the threats posed in this scenario. It has the forces, means, and experience to deal with a broad range of threats on the Golan. But a clear potential for escalation exists, given the complexity of the situation.

3. REGIME LOSS OF CONTROL OVER STRATEGIC WEAPONS

In this scenario, the regime could lose control of strategic weapons due to military defeats, could be forced to withdraw from facilities holding strategic weapons, or could experience a breakdown in the command and control or discipline of forces. As a result, strategic weapons—initially acquired as part of Syria's long-term preparations for war with Israel—could be widely deployed or dispersed across Syria in the hands of both regime and opposition forces.

In the fighting to date, rebel forces have already come close to chemical weapons facilities near al-Safira in Aleppo province and SSM facilities north of Damascus. The rebels have also overrun a number of Syrian air-defense facilities, including some associated with the SA-5 long-range

surface-to-air missile (SAM) system and the SA-8 mobile SAM. The SA-8 system has been used by an Islamist faction in the Damascus area to down a regime aircraft. These cases demonstrate the potential for strategic systems to fall into the hands of radical Islamist elements.

Among those that could possibly capitalize on regime loss of control to seize strategic weapons is Hezbollah. Hezbollah could find such weapons in areas where its forces operate, or it could deploy forces to seize weapons in danger of falling into rebel hands. In either of these cases, such a seizure could occur with or without Syrian regime permission.

This general case does not depend on the total collapse of the regime. It could take place in areas where the regime has lost control but is still fighting, or even in areas where it is still broadly in control.

The loss of regime control of strategic weapons poses major challenges for Israel.²⁶ While Israel's response might be similar here to that in the first scenario, this scenario is more complex and demands more in terms of intelligence capabilities. Determining the risk for loss of control at a specific facility, the actors in position to seize weapons, and the situation on the ground will all be difficult. So too will be determining the "address" for a response and estimating the opponent's reaction to such a response. An effective handling of this type of situation will require close monitoring of the fighting by Israeli intelligence and quick responses by the Israeli government and IDF. In this case, as in others, the potential for miscalculation, mischief, and error is significant.

4. STRATEGIC ARMS CRISIS

The reported Russian agreement to sell Syria the S-300 advanced SAM system, and the Israeli reaction, suggested the potential for arms sales to the regime to spark direct Israeli military action in Syria. In such a case, the likeliest supplier is Russia, although Iran might also be a provider.

Israel has made clear that it will not tolerate Syria receiving and operationalizing a system like the S-300, which could either be used by Syria or transferred to Hezbollah. The Russians must consider this declaration of intent, but they may still go through with some form of a sale. This might come in the form of an attempted clandestine delivery and operationalization of a small but usable set of equipment, perhaps using Russian military personnel to quickly operationalize the system and thus achieve a technical surprise for Israel. They could

further expedite the system's initial operational capability by training Syrian personnel in Russia. While introducing this system, or other strategic systems, in Syria would be a gamble, the Russians might try it on the assumption that Israel, once it discovered the system, would be deterred by the potential involvement of Russian personnel and the operational risks of striking the system.

If Israel carried out its threat to prevent the introduction of strategic weapons, the risk of escalation would be great, including the potential involvement of Russian personnel or forces. On the one hand, Russia might write off any losses in Syria, but it also might not, creating the possibility of direct military engagements between Russian "advisors" and the Israeli Air Force.

5. HEZBOLLAH-INITIATED CRISIS

While it would be risky for Hezbollah to take any direct action against Israel from inside Lebanon, the group might consider it worthwhile to attempt some small-scale symbolic actions to signal its continued involvement in active resistance against Israel.²⁷ The calculations that could lead Hezbollah to such a decision are explored in Matthew Levitt's essay in this volume (see chapter 3). And Hezbollah or Hezbollah proxy activity in Lebanon, especially southern Lebanon, could lead to Israeli operations against Hezbollah forces. An alternative prompt for Israeli action in Lebanon could be Hezbollah activity on the Golan front. Whereas Israel might refrain from reacting strongly to minor provocations that did not seriously affect northern Israel, any attacks with serious consequences in terms of casualties or damage would likely draw a strong Israeli action, up to and including ground and air operations inside Lebanon.²⁸

Broadly speaking, Israel seems prepared to act if necessary. On August 23, 2013, the Israeli Air Force struck against an al-Qaeda-associated group in southern Lebanon after rockets were fired into northern Israel. Even in the case of symbolic attacks, Israel might react strongly, seeking both to prevent any larger-scale actions and perhaps take the opportunity to deal Hezbollah military forces a significant blow. There is also the possibility that a Hezbollah-initiated crisis could develop into an Israeli-Syrian crisis. Israel has hinted that it might not differentiate between a Hezbollah attack and a Syrian attack, given the close military relationship between the group and the Syrian regime.²⁹

6. SYRIAN STRIKE AGAINST ISRAEL

Despite the relatively low probability of an overt Syrian attack on Israel, the regime could decide to strike Israel either in retaliation for an Israeli action or out of desperation. The Syrians have several options for striking Israel directly, listed in escalating order of seriousness:

- a demonstration attack, perhaps with a few rockets or artillery rounds or by proxy forces, in response to an Israeli strike to signal the danger of further action or to show that the Syrian regime is confronting the Israeli enemy and not just making war on its own people
- an attack using conventional forces, most likely involving significant rocket, field artillery, and tank fire on Israeli positions in the Golan and perhaps elsewhere in northern Israel
- a missile or rocket attack on targets deep in Israeli territory
- a combination of a conventional attack on the Golan and missile and rocket strikes deep in Israel

A strike with chemical weapons seems a very remote possibility, given the ongoing program to eliminate Syria's chemical warfare program.

Any direct Syrian attack would draw an Israeli response, with the strength of the response influenced by the seriousness of the Syrian action. Past Israeli sensitivity to direct Syrian action in the Golan offers a guide: in each of the cases in which the Syrian army fired directly, if on a small scale, on Israeli forces, the Israelis responded forcefully, both striking the sources of the Syrian fire and warning the regime of the dangers tied to such incidents.³⁰ This kind of "negotiating by salvos" contains the potential for escalation and could lead to heavier military action by both sides.

As for a deliberate Syrian attack of any significant scale, Israel would see this as far more serious and would retaliate strongly and not necessarily proportionally. It would seek to inflict damage on at least the Syrian forces involved and to signal to the Syrian government the particular dangers of any additional action.

A large-scale Syrian attack on Israel would generate broad military operations by the Israelis. While perhaps not rising to the level of general war, an Israeli campaign could be expected to include major air and ground operations against Syrian forces and regime-associated targets, with the goal of inflicting a punishing blow. In this situation, the poten-

tial for miscalculation and error, as well as vertical and horizontal escalation, would be strong.

Hostilities between Israel and Syria could grow out of other kinds of incidents. On June 6, 2013, Syria sent a small armored force of seven vehicles into the Golan disengagement zone during heavy fighting with rebels near the town of Quneitra. Although Syria reportedly informed the IDF that this action was solely intended to support military operations against the rebels, Israel is said to have warned that it would take action if the armor remained.³¹ This incident suggests the potential for escalation on the Golan front arising from either miscalculation of the opponent's intentions or miscalculation of his response to an action.

Conclusions and Implications

The scenarios presented here are illustrative rather than exhaustive. They suggest several possible ways Israel could become more deeply involved militarily in the Syrian conflict, even though deep, direct involvement has been avoided so far. The scenarios also demonstrate the complexities and uncertainties of the Syrian situation: the dynamic nature of the conflict, the large number of actors involved, and the ambiguity surrounding the situation at all levels. The longer the conflict goes on, the more these complexities and uncertainties could lead to Israel's substantial military involvement in Syria. In short, what happens in Syria may well not stay in Syria.

Michael Eisenstadt's essay in this volume (see chapter 6) explores how the two sides have avoided a larger conflict to date but warns that this situation is not guaranteed to prevail in the future. Nor will a conflict involving Israel necessarily be short or simple. It is hard to see U.S. interests being well served by the sorts of conflicts outlined here, especially if the conflict drags on. Thus, the United States has strong reason to forestall such conflicts. While a variety of goals to that end can be envisaged, none will be as certain and lasting as bringing the Syrian conflict to a close. For that reason if no other, the United States would do well to play a more active role in ensuring that Assad goes quickly.

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2.

Jihadist Reactions in the Event of an Israeli War with Hezbollah or Assad

Aaron Y. Zelin

ONE OF THE KEY ARGUMENTS proffered by Hezbollah in its propaganda aimed at justifying its incursion into and occupation of parts of Syria is that this position is part of its resistance (muqawama) against Israel.¹ This line, however, has fallen flat with Sunni Arabs who had been enamored with the group during and after its 2006 war with Israel. This is a key difference between now and then, especially for jihadists. If Israel were to invade Syria to fight Hezbollah, this would be a boon to the most radical elements within the Syrian rebellion. It would allow fighters to fight the near and far enemy at the same time and continue the normalization and trickle-down of jihadist rhetoric both regionally and locally.

Background

The 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war put al-Qaeda and its like-minded followers in an awkward position. For years, Usama bin Laden had been calling for attacks on and the reconquest of Israel as well as the retaking of al-Aqsa Mosque. He once stated, “America will not be able to dream of security until we live in security in Palestine.” Yet while rhetorically making pleas for the Palestinian cause, his organization has never conducted an all-out campaign against Israel, nor have groups in Gaza with the same worldview achieved much success.² This disconnect has weakened the movement’s credibility on the Palestinian question, especially in contrast to Hezbollah, which has openly gone to war with Israel and, according to Hezbollah’s narrative, been able to coerce Israel into giving back land.

Therefore, in the summer of 2006, al-Qaeda and its followers struggled to explain the war and justify their lack of support in the fight against Israel. They argued that through a “Safavid” conspiracy Shiites were attempting to destroy (Sunni) Islam and expand Iran’s imperial reach. According to this argument, Hezbollah was trying to deceive Sunnis into thinking they

were actually assisting Palestinians. This narrative, of course, is part of a greater conspiracy theory according to which the Zionist-Crusaders are doomed to fail and be vanquished by the true Muslims.³ Needless to say, this argument fell on deaf ears, and within the Sunni Arab world Hezbollah's popularity rose.

The Syrian Conflict

Unlike seven years ago, jihadist groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra have unprecedented popularity within the current rebellion against the Assad regime. As a result of this and the increased sectarian tenor of the conflict over the past half-year, there has been a normalization within Syria and regionally⁴ of jihadist derogatory idioms as they relate to actors on the other side:

- Shiites: Rawafidh (rejectionists), in reference to those who do not recognize Abu Bakr and his successors as having been legitimate rulers after the death of Muhammad.
- Iran: Safavids, an allusion to the former Persian Shiite empire in the years 1501–1736.
- Hezbollah: Hezb al-Lat or Hezb al-Shaytan (the Party of al-Lat or the Party of Satan). The former is a play on words referring to one of the three main pre-Islamic goddesses of Mecca, and the latter indicates the clear opposite of the “Party of God.”
- Alawites: Nusayris, in reference to Alawite Islam's founder, Abu Shuayb Muhammad ibn Nusayr. The term frames the Alawite sect as following a man and not God.

The acceptance of this terminology has cleared a path for greater numbers to support groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra or their broader aims against rivals such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, further expanding the scope of the fight beyond Syria's borders.

In this context, jihadists' metanarratives about Hezbollah are more likely to stick. For example, a recent article published by the Ibn Taymiyyah Media Center from jihadist ideologue Abu Suleiman al-Filistini lays out talking points about Hezbollah's entrance into the Syrian conflict.⁵ Hezbollah's actions in Syria, Filistini argues, mark the culmination of policies enacted by the group and Hamas going back to 2005 with the main aim of protecting Israel and the Jews. Since the end of the al-Aqsa intifada in 2005 and Hamas's

election to power in Gaza, as well as after summer 2006, Hamas and Hezbollah have adhered to the ceasefire agreements with Israel and cracked down on jihadists. This is all to guard Israel, follow the machinations of the United States, and end the light of jihad. Therefore, Hezbollah joining the Assad regime to fight against the rebels is just another action in support of Zionist-Crusader aims to destroy Islam and assist Israel.

Although these ideas might appear irrational to Westerners and Israelis who view both Hezbollah and al-Qaeda independently as foes, jihadists have a different worldview centered on the perception of an existential crisis caused by the widespread targeting of Sunni Islam. According to their bunker mentality, they cast their opponents of any stripe as being conjoined in a conspiracy against them, even if these adversaries dislike one another and have differing reasons for opposing the jihadist movement. Such conspiratorial thinking could be applied to the prospective entrance of Israel into the Syrian conflict to fight Hezbollah or the Assad regime. This development would likely be viewed by jihadists as a trick ultimately aimed at taking the fight to them. Therefore, they would see no difference among this highly disparate set of actors.

An Israeli War in Syria

The jihadist belief in an alliance among Israel, the Syrian regime, and Hezbollah—and, thus, in the impossibility that Israel could go to war against either—was expressed by an anonymous jihadist sympathizer who noted that if the Israelis were to enter the war, they would team with Hezbollah to fight Jabhat al-Nusra/Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (JN/ISIS).⁶ Reflecting on the jihadists' stance in such a scenario, he responded, "Israel to keep quiet will be better for the long term of their existence...The earlier they join [against] the jihad in Syria, the earlier the coffin prices will rise." Returning to jihadist platitudes, he said, "It is not in the interest of Israel to fight Hezbollah in Syria or Lebanon. Rather, it's in their interest to help them fight JN/ISIS. Impossible."

Even if the jihadists conceded that Israel would enter Syria to fight Hezbollah or the Assad regime, they would not look at it in a "the enemy of my enemy is my friend" framework. The same jihadist sympathizer mentioned earlier explained,

Looking at the *fiqh* [Islamic jurisprudence] point of view, you are allowed to ask help from an infidel on one condition, which is that you

have to be stronger than the infidel—in other words, having the upper hand, which in our contemporary time makes this rule impossible.”⁷

Further,

JN/ISIS joining with Hezbollah to fight Israel will never happen. Since Shiites and Nusayris are classed as *mushrikin* (polytheists/idolaters), which is worse than Jews, it’s a no go.

As it turns out, Israel fighting Hezbollah—or the Syrian regime, for that matter—would be a golden opportunity: “It’s the biggest dream of any jihadist, killing two flies in one go.”⁸ He concluded, “As for the jihadists, their interest is simple and straightforward: fighting anyone who stands between them and the Caliphate.”

Implications

As the anti-Shiite rhetoric has heated up among Sunni Arabs both locally and regionally, the fringe outlook of groups like Jabhat al-Nusra has become more mainstream. Further, while the weapons might currently be pointed at the Assad regime, Hezbollah, and their allies, that does not imply a new-found love affair with Israel. Most Muslims still believe Israel is trampling on the Palestinians, and less extreme Islamist actors in Syria have no qualms about showing this enmity. In recent interviews with al-Jazeera Arabic, the leaders of Liwa al-Tawhid and Liwa al-Islam explained as much:

Abdel Qader Saleh, leader of Liwa al-Tawhid: “Israel is a country that occupies our land and is our enemy.”⁹

Zahrán Alloush, leader of Liwa al-Islam: “We consider Israel as our enemy, of course. It is a country that occupies Syrian and Palestinian territory. Its collaboration with the Assad regime is clear and it is complicit in its lies and crimes.”¹⁰

Such statements highlight the likelihood that Israel, if it invades Syria to fight Hezbollah or the regime, will be attacked by Syrian rebels, including JN/ISIS, as well. An Israeli entrance into the war would also likely further inflame the opposition and prompt additional waves of Sunni foreign fighters entering Syria. Jihadists would thus have a fresh opportunity to consolidate their grasp on local hearts and minds as well as control key narratives about the conflict. They would be stirred as well by the temptation of closing in on a long-held dream that has eluded their adversaries in Hezbollah: the retaking of al-Quds (Jerusalem). This, correspondingly,

would breathe life into the motivational jihadist slogan “Oh, al-Aqsa, we are coming [for you].”

While these prospects are worrisome, one should not necessarily conclude that the jihadists would act according to what they now proclaim. The jihadists are indeed powerfully shaped by their ideological perspective, but their actions have at times been guided by practical considerations that required them to set aside the dictates of ideology. For instance, in 2012, when the Yemeni military and local “popular committees” kicked al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) out of its safe haven in parts of southern Yemen, instead of waging a battle to the death, AQAP melted back into the mountains to bide time and fight another day. In 2013, a similar phenomenon occurred after the French intervention in Mali. Instead of partaking in an epic battle against a “Crusader” state, most of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb’s top personnel fled to Niger and Libya to regain strength for a future battle that would be more balanced in their favor. This highlights the possibility that jihadists could calculate that they are not strong enough to take on Israel and opt to focus their efforts on Assad and Hezbollah. That being said, Israel is a unique state in terms of the enmity it draws from jihadists and average Muslims alike. Therefore, the ideological and visceral feelings might win out in this context.

Still, past examples to predict their behavior in the event of an Israeli clash with the jihadists’ enemies, namely the Syrian regime and Hezbollah, are rare. The best, though an imperfect, example would be the jihadist reaction to the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war. And that reaction was, in a couple of words—not much. The current situation in Syria is different, though, with jihadists having fought in an active war over two years. Therefore, they are likely better placed to fight Israel as well as Hezbollah, which they have been fighting already in and around Damascus, al-Qusayr, and Homs over the past few months. If Israel went to war in Syria against Hezbollah and the Assad regime, it would end up having a fight with the jihadists too.

Notes

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3.

The Syrian War, Israel, and Hezbollah's Ideological Crisis

Matthew Levitt

SINCE THE END OF THE July 2006 war, Hezbollah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah has given nearly all his public speeches from the safety of a secure bunker.¹ But in early August 2013, Nasrallah made a rare appearance on al-Quds (Jerusalem) Day to rally supporters in the face of some of the most severe challenges Hezbollah has ever encountered. He had his work cut out for him on the day of the speech, and he still does today.

Hezbollah operatives have been indicted for the murder of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri at the UN Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) in The Hague, arrested on charges of plotting attacks in Nigeria, and convicted on similar charges in Thailand and Cyprus. The European Union has blacklisted the military wing of Hezbollah, and the Gulf Cooperation Council similarly banned any support for the group from GCC countries and started deporting suspected supporters.

But all this pales in comparison to the existential challenges Hezbollah faces over its active participation in the war in Syria. By siding with the Assad regime, the regime's Alawite supporters, and Iran, and taking up arms against Sunni rebels, Hezbollah has placed itself at the epicenter of a sectarian conflict that has nothing to do with the group's purported *raison d'être*: "resistance" to Israeli occupation. As one Shiite Lebanese satirist put it the day after Nasrallah's speech, "Either the fighters have lost Palestine on the map and think it is in Syria [or] they were informed that the road to Jerusalem runs through Qusayr and Homs," locations in Syria where Hezbollah has fought with Assad loyalists against Sunni rebels.²

The implication is clear: Lebanon's Party of God is no longer a pure "Islamic resistance" fighting Israel but a sectarian militia and Iranian proxy doing Bashar al-Assad and Ayatollah Ali Khamenei of Iran's bidding at the expense of fellow Muslims. And it therefore does not surprise that

the pokes come from extremist circles too. In June, the Abdullah Azzam Brigades, a Lebanon-based al-Qaeda-affiliated group, released a statement challenging Nasrallah and his Hezbollah fighters “to fire one bullet at occupied Palestine and claim responsibility” for it. They could fire at Israel from either Lebanon or Syria, the statement continued, seeing as Hezbollah “fired thousands of shells and bullets upon unarmed Sunnis and their women, elderly, and children, and destroyed their homes on top of them.”³

But while taunts might be expected from Sunni extremist groups, Hezbollah now faces challenges it never would have anticipated just a few years ago. For example, the day before Nasrallah’s August speech Lebanese president Michel Suleiman called, for the first time ever, for the state to curtail Hezbollah’s ability to operate as an independent militia outside the control of the government.⁴ By sending fighters to Syria, many Lebanese believe Hezbollah has put its interests as a group ahead of those of Lebanon as a state, something that blatantly contradicts Hezbollah’s longtime efforts to portray itself as a group that is first and foremost Lebanese. Now the group that describes itself as the vanguard standing up for the dispossessed in the face of injustice, and that has always tried to downplay its sectarian and pro-Iranian identities, finds those assertions challenged over its refusal to abide by the Lebanese government’s official position of noninterference in Syria. To the contrary, its proactive support of a brutal Alawite regime against the predominantly Sunni Syrian opposition undermines its long-cultivated image as a distinctly Lebanese “resistance” movement.

At one point, Nasrallah tried to paper over the fact that Lebanese Shiites and Lebanese Sunnis were now openly battling one another in Syria, and threatening to drag that sectarian fighting across the border into Lebanon, by proposing that Lebanese Shiites and Sunnis agree to disagree over Syria. Addressing Lebanese Sunnis, Nasrallah said in a speech this past May: “We disagree over Syria. You fight in Syria; we fight in Syria; then let’s fight there. Do you want me to be more frank? Keep Lebanon aside. Why should we fight in Lebanon?”⁵ But that pitch did not go over so well with Nasrallah’s fellow Lebanese, who wanted an end to Lebanese interference in the war in Syria, not a gentleman’s agreement that Lebanese citizens would only slaughter one another across the border.

In that same speech, Nasrallah addressed the “two grave dangers” facing Lebanon. The first, he argued, is “Israel and its intentions, greed, and

schemes.” The second danger, Nasrallah added, is “the changes taking place in Syria.” As for Israel, Nasrallah warned that it threatens Lebanon every day. And as for Syria, the regime there faces an “axis led by the United States which is for sure the decision maker.” The British, French, Italians, Germans, Arabs, and Turks are involved too, but “all of them work for the American [*sic*].” And the true force behind the “changes taking place in Syria”? “We also know that this axis is implicitly supported by Israel because the U.S. project in the region is Israeli *cum laude*.” Hezbollah is not fighting in Syria as part of a sectarian conflict, Nasrallah insisted, but combating a radical Sunni, Takfiri project with ties to al-Qaeda that “is funded and backed by America” out of an American interest to destroy the region. In other words, the war in Syria is no longer a popular revolution against a political regime, but a place where America is seeking to impose its own political project on the region. Nasrallah concluded: “Well, we all know that the U.S. project in the region is an absolutely Israeli project.” And so, by fighting in Syria, “today we consider ourselves defending Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria.”⁶

But there are few takers outside Hezbollah’s staunchest Shiite supporters for the contorted logic that the Syrian rebellion is an American or Israeli scheme. Only when Israeli airstrikes have targeted weapons stockpiles—either weapons being transferred from the Assad regime to Syria or stockpiles of strategic weapons such as Russian Yakhont antiship cruise missiles—have the Assad regime and Hezbollah been able to credibly point a finger at Israel. For example, in July 2013 an Israeli airstrike targeted a warehouse near Latakia housing sophisticated antiship missiles. Two months earlier, Israeli fighters targeted a shipment of mobile surface-to-surface Fateh-110 missiles, among other military equipment, which Israel feared were intended for Hezbollah. And in January 2013, Israel targeted a convoy transporting Russian SA-17 surface-to-air missiles, which Israel believed were being transferred to Hezbollah.⁷ But even when such strikes have occurred, Israeli officials have publicly and explicitly made clear that Israel has no interest in becoming a party to the war in Syria. Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu reiterated in June that “Israel is not getting involved in the civil war in Syria, as long as the fire is not directed at us.”⁸

Unfortunately for Hezbollah, Netanyahu’s statement is no mere propaganda. The Israelis have a longstanding policy of trying to prevent the delivery of weapons to terrorist groups like Hezbollah—from boarding

the *Karine-A* on the high seas in 2002, to sending warplanes to destroy a reported Iranian weapons factory operating in Sudan in October 2012, and more—and have not interfered in the Syrian war in any way other than through these few isolated strikes targeting weapons caches. Which is why, contrary to conventional wisdom, Hezbollah may try to draw Israel into the war.

In early August, such an incident occurred when four Israeli soldiers were wounded by two explosions while patrolling the border with Lebanon. According to *al-Akhbar*, a Lebanese daily considered to be a Hezbollah mouthpiece, these explosions were part of an organized “ambush” aimed at highlighting Hezbollah’s “intelligence structure” capabilities.⁹ Hezbollah may also seek a pretext for launching a limited number of rockets at Israel, perhaps as a response to an Israeli counterstrike after a cross-border raid. Hezbollah has already called for Palestinian groups to organize and carry out attacks on Israel from the Golan Heights, and Nasrallah has offered to aid any group that does so.¹⁰

Hezbollah took a similar posture later that month, when in the aftermath of the August 21 chemical weapons attack in Damascus, the United States (at first) seemed poised to issue a punitive strike on Syria for violating President Obama’s redline on the use of chemical weapons. Immediately, pro-Hezbollah sheikh Afif Nabulsi warned that “any [U.S.] strike against Syria would be met by harsh responses against U.S. interests in the region and against Israel directly.” A senior source close to Hezbollah clarified, telling the *Daily Star* that “if the Western attack is limited to certain targets in Syria, then Hezbollah will not intervene.” But, he continued, “in the event of a qualitative strike that aims to change the balance of power in Syria, Hezbollah will fight on various fronts,” including through “the inferno of a war with Israel.” The reference here was clearly to the possibility of Hezbollah firing rockets into Israel.¹¹ U.S. strikes may have provided Hezbollah with the alternative opportunity it is seeking to hit Israel—but, again, not so hard as to elicit a pounding in return.

Without an Israeli straw man to justify the maintenance of its arms as “legitimate resistance,” Hezbollah is left with precious little justification for its existence as an independent militia outside the control of the Lebanese government. Worse still, so long as Hezbollah continues to fight alongside Iran and the Assad regime against Sunni rebels, it will increasingly be seen as a sectarian fighting force undermining the security and politi-

cal interests of the Lebanese state. Hezbollah continues to hone its military capabilities along the border with Israel and, according to Maj. Gen. Yair Golan, head of Israel's Northern Command, in comparison to seven years ago, when the group last battled Israel, "Hezbollah is better armed, better trained and more cautious."¹² At some point, Hezbollah may feel the need to rejuvenate its "resistance" credentials. And when it does, Israel will be in the crosshairs of Lebanon's Party of God once more.

Notes

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4.

Syria Cannot Be Relied On to Keep the Peace with Israel

Andrew J. Tabler

SINCE THE BEGINNING OF THE Syrian uprising, Washington has repeatedly demanded that President Bashar al-Assad desist from employing the most brutal tactics against his own people—only to see the Syrian regime use them anyway. Assad has repeatedly ignored international ultimatums directed at him since the beginning of the revolt. The same pattern has held true with attempts to force Assad into a negotiated transition through the UN Security Council.

The only partial exception to this rule has been the regime's agreement to give up its chemical weapons (CW) after the international outcry following the deaths of hundreds from a CW attack on August 21, 2013. It is by no means clear why Assad agreed to give up his CW stocks, but presumably he was concerned about international reaction—reduced Russian support, increased political pressure (e.g., referral of those responsible for the CW use to the International Criminal Court), and potentially more active Western support for insurgents, if not U.S.-led military strikes. Arguably, however, he did not give up much: use of CW was becoming more difficult due to international reaction, and the regime appears in most situations to have ample methods to conduct the war without CW. Furthermore, Assad could have reason to conclude from the difficulties in mobilizing a forceful international reaction that he can violate even loudly and repeatedly declared redlines without paying much of a price.

Assad's August CW use was part of a well-established pattern of testing and pushing U.S. and NATO redlines. The Assad regime has increasingly deployed artillery and combat aircraft to suppress the Syrian opposition, despite Washington's warning not to do so. On June 22, 2012, Syria shot down a Turkish F-4 fighter jet, a provocation for which it received only verbal condemnation by NATO. The Syrian government's history of such

reckless moves stretches back years: in 2010, Assad reportedly transferred Scud-D missiles and M-600 rockets to Hezbollah, essentially handing strategic weapons to a third party and removing Assad's ability to restrain the self-proclaimed Party of God.

Against this background, it would be overly optimistic to assert that Assad would never contemplate engaging in practices that could precipitate an Israeli military action. Indeed, under a number of different scenarios, he could find it advantageous to widen the conflict. Jeffrey White's essay in this volume (chapter 1) considers several paths to a Syrian-initiated conflict.

This essay will consider how the regime would respond to open military confrontation with Israel, however such a confrontation started. Receiving particular attention will be what may be the most plausible scenario—one in which the regime tolerates if not abets the decay of the UN peacekeeping mission, which has helped prevent violent episodes along the border that might have escalated out of control. Such an escalation could occur not necessarily as a result of any conscious decision from the Damascus authorities but simply from inattention or the deprioritizing of maintaining the peace with Israel.

The Assad regime's calculations concerning Israel's deeper involvement depend largely on how Israel enters the conflict: through tactical air or missile strikes, support for proxies, open invasion, or deterioration of the UN peacekeeping mission.

Tactical Air or Missile Strikes

Although Israeli airstrikes on Damascus or other major cities have the potential to cause huge embarrassment for the Assad regime by exposing its military weakness and complete inability to carry out its rhetorical goal of liberating Palestine, multiple cases of such Israeli strikes over the past decade show that the regime has never responded directly. These include strikes in 2003 on a Palestinian camp at Ain Saheb, on regions of the Lebanon-Syria border during the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah, on the al-Kibar nuclear site in 2007, and, most recently, in and around Damascus and along the Syrian coast.

While the Assad regime has reportedly threatened Israel that future strikes would lead to a more immediate response, such a response is unlikely to occur for both domestic and tactical reasons. The Assad regime,

in shoring up its domestic standing, has historically relied on the old mantra of Egyptian president Gamal Adbul Nasser, “No voice louder than the cry of battle.” But such a call is unlikely to work in the face of airstrikes. Whereas in peacetime the regime would have used any Israeli strike to rally Syrians around the flag, an Israeli strike now would likely be perceived as less remarkable—simply the expression of another regional power fighting against the Assad regime and its Iranian allies. This is the case despite the continued absence of any sympathy for Israel among Syrians. In practical terms, limited strikes by Israel would likely only bolster the regime’s position among minorities in regime-controlled areas of Syria. But if such strikes were more frequent or severe, in conjunction with other pressures applied by the Syrian opposition, they could cause Sunnis and other fence-sitters in regime-controlled areas to see Assad as increasingly less viable.

Indirect Intervention: Support for a Proxy

Some have suggested that Israel support a Druze proxy within Syria to protect the Golan frontier. But if it were to follow this advice, it would be drawn into Syria’s sectarian morass, which in turn would increase its liabilities in a rapidly changing environment. The Assad regime knows of Israel’s desire for an “address,” or a responsible, functioning organization with command and control, on its border. Should the Assad regime prove unable to fill this role, and should Israel seek an alternative faction to serve as an address, Damascus will convert this decision into a liability, both for the faction in question and for Israel.

Beyond the Druze example, the effect of Israel adopting a proxy in Syria would depend much on the specifics. During Lebanon’s civil war, for instance, the Israelis backed the South Lebanon Army directly and massively despite the presence of UN peacekeepers. If that same model were used today in Syria—with open support for a force operating in the UN Disengagement Observer Force zone around Quneitra—Damascus would react vigorously. Part of that reaction would entail reaching out to broader Arab and international opinion with the aim of criticizing Israel’s actions. In addition, at home, the Assad regime could capitalize on hostility to the idea of Israeli occupation if the latter operated openly beyond the Golan frontier. With opposition groups—whether Islamist or nationalist—rushing to denounce the Israeli steps, a competition might emerge as to which opposed the Israeli presence most fiercely and effectively. The ensuing

dynamic would be profoundly destabilizing. In short, it is hard to see how Israel could accomplish its goals through open support for a border force.

A disguised Israeli role along the border may not accomplish much either. In such a scenario, the support would have to be carefully hidden, which itself would be a serious constraint on the Israeli position. Severely constrained Israeli support would be unlikely to result in many successes.

Open Invasion

Paradoxically, the Assad regime would be least unhappy with a form of Israeli intervention that it would also be least able to counter militarily—namely, a land invasion of rural areas. Such a move would saddle Israel with the necessity and responsibility of both administering Syrian territory and fighting local Sunni extremists. Politically, this scenario would allow Assad to argue that Syrian territory was under threat and to rally forces around his regime to help repel the attack. Israel's conventional advantage, to be sure, would make it hard for the regime to push Israeli forces out of these areas. The only way it could “win” such a fight—that is, force an Israeli withdrawal—would be to drag Israeli forces into protracted urban combat in cities of various sizes. Even in this case, the victory would probably come from the international political pressure applied on Israel to wrap up operations quickly.

As with the proxy option, a large-scale Israeli attack on either the Assad regime or extremist Sunni groups could prompt a competition over which groups were resisting Israel most actively. Indeed, it is possible that the adversaries could cooperate—at least locally or temporarily—against Israel. In other words, an Israeli land invasion could create a dynamic that is not in Israel's interest.

Deterioration of Border Security

Created after the 1973 October War to supervise implementation of the Israeli-Syrian disengagement agreement in the Golan, the thousand-person UN Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) has been conducting bimonthly inspections within fifteen miles on either side of the border ever since. Since 2011, however, the emergence of rebel combat formations in Quneitra province and the decline of Assad's forces in the area have created an increasingly precarious security environment for UNDOF personnel operating in Syria. In November 2012, for example,

two Austrian UNDOF soldiers on a bus en route to Damascus were wounded by unknown gunmen. The incident spurred Japan to end its troop deployments in the Golan a month later. In February 2013, a Canadian UNDOF staffer reportedly went missing in the Golan, prompting Canada to withdraw as well. On March 6, twenty-one Filipino soldiers deployed with UNDOF were abducted while on routine patrol in the Syrian demilitarized portion of the Golan and detained for several days. If the trend continues, the remaining contributors—the Philippines, along with Austria and India—are all but certain to curtail their commitments as well, ending the only effective international monitoring mechanism along the Israel-Syria border.

More particularly, in the area between the UNDOF line and the major regime garrisons southwest of Damascus, rebel combat units—including the Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade, which claimed responsibility for abducting the Filipino troops—are fighting Assad's decaying forces for dominance. Clashes are frequent as the two sides contest control of key points, including significant activity around the UNDOF zone, where rebels have seized villages and regime positions, ambushed regime forces, and conducted a major suicide attack against a regime intelligence post. While the rebel presence seems to be growing (including Islamist elements), the regime has thinned out its forces and abandoned some of its positions, redeploying to Damascus to reinforce positions there. Taken together, these factors increase the chance that UNDOF personnel will be drawn into the fighting, whether deliberately or inadvertently.

Further complicating matters, the Syrian opposition has become increasingly resentful toward the United Nations. In spring 2012, UN special representative Kofi Annan failed to bring about a ceasefire or a pullback of regime forces from population centers. When no further UN action was forthcoming, many in the opposition interpreted the inertia as deference to the regime and a betrayal of the Syrian people. Today, the UN continues to legitimize the regime: Assad retains the country's seat in the General Assembly, and the UN still deals with his regime as if it were the country's sovereign representative, meaning everything from aid provision to peacekeeping missions such as UNDOF must be vetted by Damascus. And the agreement requiring Syria to give up its chemical weapons may only reinforce the coordination between UN bodies and the regime, which could further increase opposition resentment against the UN.

Not surprisingly, this dynamic has fueled Syrian anger toward UNDOF as well as other UN organs. The peacekeepers are also seen as enforcing an unpopular ceasefire with Israel, a state viewed by many rebels as the enemy; in fact, as detailed in Aaron Zelin's contribution to this volume, some opposition members continue to circulate wild conspiracy theories about Israel supporting the regime. This general sense of hostility has at times taken more concrete form. In YouTube videos posted by the Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade after the March 2013 seizure of the UNDOF convoy in Jamlah—just two miles from the armistice line in the Golan—one of the group's leaders criticized the peacekeepers as “agents of the Assad regime and Israel.” In other videos, the group claimed it had captured the Filipino soldiers to protect them from planned regime attacks and would let them go once the regime could guarantee their safety—an unlikely story, but one well designed to deflect international criticism.

In short, since its deployment in 1974, UNDOF has helped Israel and Syria preserve a status quo that both sides were willing and able to maintain. The peacekeepers became a symbol of stability. UNDOF's dissolution or incapacitation would end that stability in psychological and practical terms, erasing the eighty-kilometer buffer zone and running the serious risk that the area could become a “hot border.”

Not Likely, but Not to Be Ruled Out

Open, protracted Israeli military action in Syria—as distinct from periodic tactical air or missile strikes—is not likely to occur but cannot be ruled out. Overall, the possibility of such Israeli involvement could be stirred by the transformation of the border area into an unsettled zone from which various parties attack Israel. For its part, the regime might let elements associated with it—Hezbollah, *shabbiha*, or informal groups—launch periodic attacks on Israel as a way of reinforcing to its own supporters its narrative that the opposition is in a devil's pact with Israel and the West, whereas the regime remains the beating heart of Arabism and resistance to Israel. And the Assad regime may not mind, either, if jihadists launch periodic attacks on Israel. These attacks would only reinforce the regime's narrative to the outside world that a victory by the opposition would be worse for stability, Israel, and the United States as compared to Assad's continued leadership.

The United States cannot do much to persuade Assad to give more priority to maintaining the de facto border peace with Israel. He does

not seem to pay much attention to U.S. warnings, and Washington has no inducements to offer Damascus. Perhaps the United States can, in the context of shared work on the chemical weapons threat, make the case to Moscow that upholding the border peace would reduce the potential for instability in the region, as well as reinforcing what are quite good Russian-Israeli relations. The most promising way for the United States to lower the risk for Israeli-Syrian border conflict, however, is to help the Israelis strengthen their border security. Present efforts include the Israeli military's quick erection of a sophisticated border fence in the Golan, along with the addition of more-seasoned troops and more-formidable weapons systems along the frontier, the enhancement of intelligence collection efforts, and the development of retaliatory plans in the event of cross-border attacks. The level of assistance needed by Israel from the United States on these initiatives is not clear, but Washington could begin the discussion by volunteering its support.

5.

Spillover from Strife in Lebanon

David Schenker

DESPITE SPIKING SECTARIAN TENSIONS AND VIOLENCE, Lebanon has proven surprisingly resilient so far, avoiding a resumption of the civil war that claimed nearly 120,000 lives between 1975 and 1990. While Sunnis and Shiites have shown remarkable restraint, an egregious incident could possibly reignite a full-scale civil conflagration. Should the situation in Lebanon degenerate, it is not difficult to imagine how Israel itself could be dragged into the conflict.

Lebanon Today

Today in Lebanon, the state exerts little control over broad swaths of the country. State security agencies are weak and afflicted with sectarianism, and the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), which is upheld as the sole “national” institution, has limited capabilities and purview. Indeed, the LAF’s domestic operations can basically target only Sunni militants and Palestinians; traditionally, Hezbollah has policed its own territories, which have been understood to lie outside the LAF’s jurisdiction. Security along the border with Syria has likewise been deficient, if not absent.

In recent years, sectarian violence has been prevalent in Lebanon. From 2005 to 2007, at least eight Western-oriented Sunni Muslim and Christian politicians and journalists were assassinated, some by Shiite Hezbollah. In 2008, Hezbollah militarily invaded Beirut, killing nearly a hundred Sunnis. Exacerbating matters, since 2011, nearly a million mostly Sunni refugees have streamed into Lebanon from war-torn Syria. Ever since, Sunnis and Shiites have been fighting one another in Sidon, Tripoli, and Hermel.

Then, in July 2013, a car bomb exploded in the Hezbollah stronghold of Dahiya, killing one Shiite and wounding dozens of others. A second car bomb attack in August 2013 killed more than twenty. Sunni Syrian opposition groups claimed credit for both incidents. Meanwhile, roadside

bombing attacks in Lebanon targeting Hezbollah convoys en route to the battle in Syria have become commonplace.

Since the summer war of 2006, a combination of Israeli deterrence and the wishes of Hezbollah's constituency seems to have persuaded the Shiite militia not to launch attacks or serious provocations against Israel. Aside from several flights of Hezbollah unmanned aerial vehicles over Israeli territory, and a roadside bomb that injured four Israeli soldiers along the frontier, the border has been relatively quiet over the past seven years. At the same time, the presence of the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), which with 11,000 soldiers monitors developments along the Israel-Lebanon border, has proven stabilizing.

Consequences of a New Civil War

A civil war in Lebanon would explode the present fragile setup. If 1975 is any precedent, the LAF could again split along religious lines. Should the security situation deteriorate, UNIFIL troops would almost certainly withdraw from the country as well. The collapse of even this modest security arrangement could create a vacuum, unleashing a broad range of terrorist actors who share an antipathy toward Israel.

Hezbollah has long proved an irritant for the Jewish state, launching missile attacks, kidnapping soldiers, and striking Israeli and Jewish targets abroad. If sectarian war resumes in Lebanon with the conflict still ongoing in Syria, Hezbollah's force of approximately 10,000 to 12,000 fighters could be stretched thin. To wit, in summer 2013, the militia reportedly deployed more than a thousand members of its special forces to participate in the battle for al-Qusayr.¹ Since 2011, several hundred of the organization's fighters have reportedly been killed in Syria.

Given Syria-related deployment pressures on Hezbollah, the group would have little incentive to goad Israel into joining the conflict. Yet it is possible that, in an effort to regain its credibility—and to reestablish its “resistance” bona fides—Hezbollah could attempt to transform a civil war in Lebanon into a Muslim fight against Israel.

In the context of a possible Lebanese civil war, a perhaps more significant threat to Israel than Hezbollah would be the state's Sunni radicals, with groups representing such extremists growing in Lebanon in recent years. To be sure, Sunni militants have long been present in Lebanon,² but these Sunni militants have been focused on local issues, not on a struggle against Israel.

The war in Syria has only further radicalized the Sunni community. In addition to the high numbers of Salafist adherents in the Sunni heartland in the north, militant Salafism has attracted growing numbers of indigenous residents in the largely Hezbollah-dominated south. In June, two to three hundred armed supporters of Sheikh Ahmed Assir fought against Hezbollah militiamen and the LAF in Sidon, killing eighteen Lebanese soldiers. Sunni fighters from Lebanon—many of whom apparently hail from the northern city of Tripoli—have also been streaming into Syria to participate in the jihad against the nominally Shiite Alawite regime of Bashar al-Assad and its Lebanese Hezbollah reinforcements.

Eventually, these battle-hardened Sunni jihadists, some of whom are affiliated with al-Qaeda, will return home. In Syria, some rebels have been talking about “liberating” the Golan Heights and Jerusalem after Assad is vanquished.³ There is little doubt that their Lebanese brothers-in-arms share this aspiration, though whether any of them would actually take any action against Israel is not clear. Talking tough against Israel is cheap; actually attacking Israel is an entirely different matter.

A chaotic Lebanon could also become a magnet for foreign jihadists, including Sunnis linked to al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups, looking not only to fight against Hezbollah but also for an opportunity to operate along Israel’s border. Clearly, Hezbollah would be concerned about Sunnis operating from militia-controlled areas in the south, but it is difficult to imagine the group expending great effort to prevent rocket launches against, or infiltrations into, Israel.

While Israel would likely try to exercise restraint rather than be pulled into another bloody Lebanese civil war, its response would depend on the number of casualties sustained. In this scenario, one hit on a kindergarten would be all it took to draw Israeli military involvement. In the absence of any state authority in Lebanon, Israel’s ability to establish deterrence along the frontier—as it has with Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon—will also be limited. Under these circumstances, for example, targeting Lebanese state assets to limit the actions of nihilistic foreign fighters would likely prove ineffective.

Even as sectarian violence and tensions increase in Lebanon, little evidence indicates that most Lebanese are itching to return to civil war. Even though the population is relatively young, memories of the war are still fresh, especially to the leaders of the country’s religious communities. For

the time being, civil war remains unlikely in Lebanon. Should it occur, however, the threats to Israel—and the risks of Israeli involvement—will quickly multiply.

Notes

1. Nicholas Blanford, “Hezbollah Marks Major Triumph as Qusayr Tips Back into Assad Camp,” *Christian Science Monitor*, June 5, 2013, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2013/0605/Hezbollah-marks-major-triumph-as-Qusayr-tips-back-into-Assad-camp>.
2. In June 2007, Lebanese internal security foiled a plot by the Syrian-backed al-Qaeda affiliate Fatah al-Islam to attack Beirut’s Phoenicia InterContinental Hotel, the airport, the Defense and Interior Ministries, and several tourist, diplomatic, commercial, and political targets, including the Maronite patriarch, the Chekka Tunnel, and a bridge on the main road linking Beirut to Tripoli and Nahr al-Bared in the north.
3. Middle East Media Research Institute, “Syrian Rebel Founding ‘Robin Hood Brigade’ Vows to Conquer Israel, Iran, and Europe,” Special Dispatch no. 5078 (December 5, 2012) <http://www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/0/6850.htm>.

6.

Syrian-Israeli Rules of the Road and Escalation Management

Michael Eisenstadt

DESPITE A FORTY-YEAR CEASEFIRE BETWEEN Israel and Syria in the Golan Heights, the two countries have occasionally clashed elsewhere, from major battles inside Lebanon to ongoing Syrian support for Lebanese and Palestinian “resistance” groups that target Israel, to periodic Israeli strikes against various targets in Syria. Nevertheless, the two sides have in effect established “rules of the road” that have prevented a major war until now. The Syrian civil war, however, has called into question the continued efficacy of these arrangements and whether a wider conflict between Israel and Syria can be averted in the future.

Syrian-Israeli Arrangements

Since the 1973 war, Syria and Israel have concluded a number of formal agreements and tacit understandings that have guided their interactions in the Golan and Lebanon and which, combined with Israel’s significant military advantage, have helped manage tensions there.

QUIET IN THE GOLAN

For nearly four decades, Syrian-Israeli relations in the Golan have been governed by the May 1974 Separation of Forces Agreement, which provides for an indefinite ceasefire and a separation and thinning out of forces on both sides of the disengagement line. Israel’s ratification of the agreement was predicated on an unwritten, unacknowledged commitment by Syria not to permit terrorist infiltration through the Golan, which Damascus has largely observed.

Since the signing of the agreement, the Syrian-Israeli frontier has largely been quiet. Occasionally, Palestinian terrorist organizations have succeeded in crossing the border to launch attacks, but the incidents were not believed to have been commissioned or orchestrated by Damascus.

More recently, Syria has periodically threatened to permit “resistance” organizations to operate against Israeli forces in the Golan. Thus, in June 2006, Damascus reportedly authorized the establishment of Popular Resistance Committees for the Liberation of the Golan Heights to wage a guerilla war to retake the Golan, though little has been heard of this organization since.

Following the onset of Arab Spring–related unrest in Syria in March 2011, the Assad regime attempted in June 2011 to stage a number of diversionary demonstrations along the disengagement line using based-in Palestinian refugees. Faced with a firm Israeli response, however, it soon halted these activities.

And in May 2013, in response to several Israeli strikes on shipments of advanced arms in Syria reportedly destined for Hezbollah, Assad warned that if the attacks continued, he would allow the resumption of resistance operations in the Golan; indeed, Hezbollah and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine–General Command (PFLP-GC) have expressed their readiness to undertake such operations. Rebel militias and Syrian forces have also opened fire on Israeli forces in the Golan on several occasions since the start of the Syrian civil war, drawing Israeli counterfire. The Syrian civil war thus threatens the status quo that has prevailed in the Golan since 1974, with the Golan now emerging as a potential flashpoint between Israel and Syria.

MANAGED CONFLICT IN LEBANON

Syria’s military intervention in Lebanon led to another set of tacit understandings between Syria and Israel. From the start of the intervention in June 1976 until the Syrian withdrawal in April 2005, Syrian-Israeli relations in Lebanon were governed by a series of loosely defined “redlines” concerning spheres of influence, deployments, and activities.

The original Israeli redlines specified that: (1) Syrian forces would not move into southern Lebanon; (2) Syria would not introduce surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) into Lebanon; (3) Syrian aircraft would not interfere with Israeli Air Force operations over Lebanon or support Syrian ground forces there; and (4) the Syrian navy would not operate off the Lebanese coast. While Syria denied observing any redlines, its actions indicated otherwise.

Syria also drew redlines in Lebanon and employed a variety of means to signal Israel regarding its intentions and interests. In January 1977, Syria

tested Israel's willingness to enforce its redlines by sending an army battalion into southern Lebanon, subsequently withdrawing it in response to Israeli warnings. In April 1981, during the Syrian siege of Christian forces in Zahle, the Syrians built several SAM dugouts in the Beqa Valley as a warning to Israel not to intervene in a conflict that affected its vital interests in Lebanon. Israel did so anyway, shooting down two Syrian transport helicopters supporting military operations there (thereby intervening in a conflict that did not affect its own vital interests in Lebanon); Syria responded by introducing SAMs into Lebanon.

During the subsequent 1981 Syrian-Israeli "missile crisis" and the June 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon (which led to the destruction of the Syrian SAM complex in Lebanon), Syria deployed Scud-B missiles north of Damascus as a warning to Israel not to expand the scope of the conflict beyond Lebanon. Likewise, following Israel's downing of two Syrian MiG-23 fighters in Syrian airspace in November 1985, Syria once again introduced SAMs into Lebanon, sparking a second missile crisis that ended as a result of U.S. pressure and Israeli threats with the withdrawal of the missiles in January 1986.

The emergence of Hezbollah in the wake of the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon and of Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) in the wake of the first Palestinian intifada (1987–1993) gave Syria the means to wage a proxy war on Israel while keeping the Golan quiet (though that did not prevent it from occasionally attempting to strike at Israeli interests directly—such as the 1986 attempt to bomb an El Al airliner in London). This approach, however, has not been without risk, as Israel periodically targeted Syrian troops and interests in response to attacks by Hezbollah and PIJ. Thus, during Operation Accountability in July 1993 and Operation Grapes of Wrath in April 1996, Israeli airstrikes in Lebanon claimed the lives of about a dozen Syrian troops, while Israel hit Syrian air-defense radars in Lebanon's Beqa Valley in April and July 2001 and bombed an abandoned Palestinian terrorist training camp near Damascus in October 2003 in response to Hezbollah and PIJ attacks, respectively.

Moreover, during the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah, Israel bombed vehicles in Lebanon believed to be transporting military supplies for Hezbollah from Syria, as well as roads and bridges at several Lebanon-Syria border crossings. Syria warned Israel that if its forces were to hit targets inside Syria, it would act, and Damascus put its army on a higher state of alert to underscore this point.

BEYOND THE GOLAN AND LEBANON

In the past decade, the Syrian-Israeli conflict has expanded into new arenas where the rules of the road are less clearly defined. This was a result of Syria's decision in the late 1990s to start a nuclear program, and its closer embrace of Hezbollah due to the latter's success in ousting Israeli forces from Lebanon in May 2000 (as well as the accession to the presidency in June of that year of Bashar al-Assad—a devoted follower of Hezbollah's charismatic leader, Hassan Nasrallah).

Israel responded to Syria's construction, with North Korean help, of a plutonium production reactor at al-Kibar by bombing it in September 2007. To avoid Syrian retaliation, Israel did not publicly claim responsibility for the attack; rather, U.S. officials subsequently exposed Israel's role. (This policy of not taking credit for attacks has been a hallmark of Israel's modus operandi vis-à-vis Syria ever since, though this policy has been jeopardized by leaks from U.S. officials.)

In February 2008, Israeli agents are believed to have assassinated Hezbollah operations chief Imad Mughniyah in Damascus, spurring a series of attempted revenge terror attacks by Hezbollah on Israeli interests. Furthermore, Israel is believed to have been behind the August 2008 killing on a beach near Tartus of a senior official in Syria's nuclear program, Brig. Gen. Muhammad Suleiman.

Syria is not known to have retaliated directly for any of these events. Its preferred means of responding has been to facilitate the actions of Hezbollah and radical Palestinian groups such as Hamas, PIJ, and the PFLP-GC. The instability that has accompanied the outbreak of the Syrian civil war has, however, posed additional challenges to the stability of the Syrian-Israeli relationship.

The Syrian Civil War and Israel

The rules of the road established by Israel and Syria in the 1970s have worked well at preventing a full-scale conflict, even as the two sides have clashed or been drawn into multiple crises in response to the violation of redlines or attempts to redefine the rules. The expansion of the Syrian-Israeli conflict beyond its traditional bounds, however, due to Syria's launch of its own nuclear program and its deepening involvement in the Hezbollah-Iran shadow war against Israel, has placed stress on these long-standing arrangements. The continuing violence inside Syria, moreover,

will make it increasingly difficult for Israel to stay aloof from the civil war there, despite its strong desire to do so.

ISRAELI ACTION?

For Israel, intervention in Syria would entail much risk for an outcome with benefits that would be uncertain at best, at a time when it is investing nearly all available resources in countering the looming threat of a nuclear Iran.

Nevertheless, Israel has vital interests in Syria that it has sought to safeguard by announcing a series of redlines whose violation would prompt military action: (1) violations of the 1974 disengagement and cease-fire accord, to include attacks on Israeli forces or personnel in the Golan (whether by Sunni oppositionists and jihadists, Hezbollah, or the Syrian army); (2) the transfer of “game changing” weapons to Hezbollah—such as advanced SAMs, surface-to-surface missiles (SSMs), and antiship cruise missiles (ASCMs); (3) the transfer of chemical weapons to terrorist groups; and (4) the deployment of advanced SAMs, such as the S-300, that would limit Israel’s aerial freedom of action over Syria and Lebanon.

Syria has crossed or menaced several of these redlines already. Rebel and Syrian forces have opened fire on Israeli forces in the Golan on several occasions since 2011, causing Israel to return fire. In addition, Israel has reportedly conducted at least five strikes in 2013 to prevent the impending transfer of game-changing weapons to Hezbollah: SA-17 SAMs in January, Fateh-110 SSMs in April and May, Yakhont ASCMs in July, and unidentified weapons systems in October.

Finally, Iran has blamed Israel for the death of Brig. Gen. Hassan Shateri, of the Qods Force of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, who was reportedly killed in an ambush in Syria in February 2013. Shateri supposedly played a key role in facilitating Iranian arms transfers to Hezbollah in Lebanon and to regime forces in Syria. It is not clear whether Israel really was behind his death.

Fighting for its life, its forces stretched to their limits, the Assad regime has not responded militarily to recent Israeli strikes, but it is not clear that the Assad regime would respond even under more favorable conditions. After all, it did not retaliate for the strike on the reactor at al-Kibar, long before the outbreak of the civil war, and it has generally shown a preference for responding to Israel via proxies.

THE 'AXIS OF RESISTANCE'

In the past decade, much of the tension between Israel and Syria derived from the greater willingness shown by members of the so-called resistance axis—Syria, Hezbollah, Iran, and until recently, Hamas—to push previous boundaries with Israel. Buoyed by the claimed successes of Hezbollah and Hamas in expelling Israeli forces from Lebanon in 2000 and Israeli forces and settlers from Gaza in 2005, respectively, the members of the axis believed they had discovered the key to defeating Israel: a relentless, low-level war of attrition to bleed, demoralize, and undermine the Jewish state. These precedents offer some cause for concern that the regime's recent battlefield success at al-Qusayr, if followed by successes elsewhere, could lead to the kind of rash exuberance that caused Hezbollah (and Hamas) to blunder into costly wars with Israel.

That said, Hezbollah—which is believed to have suffered hundreds killed in action in Syria to date—is facing an open-ended commitment there, and continues to attempt terrorist attacks against Israeli interests overseas. The group can ill afford to open a second front in Lebanon at this time, when several thousand of its fighters are engaged in combat in Syria and its ability to strike overseas has been shown to be quite limited. Hezbollah will thus think long and hard before it provokes Israel into a repeat of the 2006 war.

Syria, however, will likely continue to look for opportunities to covertly transfer advanced arms to Hezbollah. That is especially true for arms transfers that would serve Syrian interests. Thus, the deployment of advanced SAMs to Lebanon's Beqa Valley could prevent Israel from using Lebanese airspace for strikes on Syria, while the transfer of the Yakhont could provide the resistance axis with the ability to strike at Israeli offshore gas fields or the Hadera power plant. Were Syria to again attempt to transfer such weapons to Hezbollah, Israel would likely strike again, and efforts by Damascus to encourage proxy attacks against Israeli forces in the Golan could lead to further escalation.

As for Iran, in late January 2013, former foreign minister Ali Akbar Velayati, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's senior foreign policy advisor, warned Israel that an attack on Syria would be considered an attack on Iran. The Islamic Republic, however, has not followed through on this warning. That fits Iran's pattern. Tehran has repeatedly shown that it will avoid direct confrontations with other regional powers and potentially

costly foreign military adventures on behalf of its allies in Damascus. When it is in Iran's interest to respond, it will do so by indirect means, such as proxies. Nevertheless, it has also made numerous past threats that it has not carried out, and this most recent threat is likely to join the list.

Finally, Israel's adoption of the so-called Dahiya doctrine following the 2006 Lebanon war—with its emphasis on using standoff firepower against the enemy's critical infrastructure—and the continued adherence of Syria and Hezbollah to the so-called resistance doctrine—with its emphasis on rocket and missile attacks against Israel's civilian population—make deterrence failures less likely, though they may make such failures far more costly.

U.S. Policies to Reduce the Likelihood of Conflict

Without exaggerating how much influence Washington has over events, the United States can take several steps to reduce the likelihood that Israel will be drawn more deeply into the Syrian conflict:

- The more Syrian regime forces and their allies are tied down in dealing with the threat to the Assad regime, the less likely members of the resistance axis are to engage in adventurism. This argues for providing more effective military assistance to moderate members of the Syrian armed opposition. Conversely, regime forces are more likely to miscalculate or overreach vis-à-vis Israel if they believe that they are prevailing against the domestic opposition.
- The greater Iran's concern about the possibility of a conflict in the Persian Gulf, the less confident the Islamic Republic will feel about sending large numbers of advisors or combatants to Syria. This is another reason why a credible threat of force needs to backstop America's nuclear diplomacy with Iran.
- The fewer advanced Russian weapons systems that show up in Syria or Iran, the lower the risk they will be transferred to Hezbollah, and therefore the lower the risk for Israeli strikes. A major factor in Russian decisionmaking about such weapons transfers is their perceived effect on regional stability and U.S.-Russian relations.
- The less information that leaks out in real time about Israeli strikes on planned weapons transfers from Syria to Hezbollah, the more easily Damascus can shrug off any reports that do emerge, and therefore the less pressure it will feel to respond.

Finally, the proliferation of local and foreign Sunni jihadist groups in Syria will, in the end, greatly complicate efforts to keep Israel out of the fray. To the extent that the United States can work with regional partners to stem the flow of foreign fighters into Syria (which it should be doing anyhow for any number of reasons), such a step may be able to mitigate this risk as well.

CONCLUSION

Minimizing the Risks of Spillover from Syria to Israel

Patrick Clawson

GIVEN THE COMPLEXITIES AND DYNAMICS of the Syrian conflict, it is distinctly possible—though, mercifully, not likely—that Israel could become involved. Indeed, the risk of spillover involving Israel could extend years into the future. And however the conflict ends, the immediate aftermath will not include peace between Syria and Israel.

A lengthy conflict, in particular, could leave all sides exhausted and the central government—whatever its character—too weak and otherwise occupied to effectively control the Israel-Syria border. Alternatively, if a strong government emerges after a protracted and increasingly nasty conflict, it could move to intensify hostility toward Israel. An Islamist-run Syria would have strong ideological reasons to show it can act more forcefully against Israel than did the Assad regime. This risk, however, should not be exaggerated given Israel's strong track record of deterring Islamists over the last decade.

An arguably more likely conclusion to the conflict would be a victory by Assad and his allies in Hezbollah and Iran. Presumably, they would feel emboldened after having fought back from a desperate situation and defied the repeated statements by Western and Arab leaders that Assad must go. For its part, Israel would presumably feel a strategic imperative to reinforce its deterrence against adventurism. These two conflicting policy impulses—emboldened opponents of Israel and an Israel determined to reinforce its deterrent posture—would make for a dangerous mix.

While the risk for conflict with Israel would not disappear with the conclusion of Syria's internal fighting, a quicker end to the war would mean reduced chance for spillover. This reality argues for vigorous efforts to bring the war to an end, whether through diplomacy or support for the opposition. The case for well-informed and careful backing

of the opposition has been made in other Washington Institute studies, especially *Syria's Military Opposition: How Effective, United, or Extremist?*, by Jeffrey White, Andrew J. Tabler, and Aaron Y. Zelin. The scenarios described in the present study regarding Israel's potential ensnarement only add to those earlier cases made for increasing support to the non-Islamist opposition.

To summarize those cases: with the assistance they have received, the rebels have developed much more effective combat forces and are well positioned to absorb additional aid. Much of the debate about the risks of providing the rebels with lethal assistance has focused on what would happen to heavy armaments given to them. To a considerable extent, this debate has been overtaken by events. The rebels have been using—often proficiently—tanks, field artillery, and antiaircraft guns. And their present needs extend beyond access to additional weapons. Nor is greater access to such weapons the main explanation for the Salafi jihadists' influence. For the rebels, logistical support, cash to pay troops, intelligence, and training in weapons use, tactics, and war strategy are all areas of weakness, and the West has much to offer. Furthermore, such types of assistance can be targeted to vetted local units at least as easily as the supply of heavy weapons. That said, the cooperation of local fighting units on the battlefield with others fighting the same enemy is inevitable. The United States worked with Stalin against Hitler not because Stalin shared U.S. values but because Soviet and American forces were fighting the same enemy. Believing that the Syrian mainstream opposition will adopt a different stance is unrealistic.

In addition to helping bring the conflict in Syria to a quick end, Washington should do what it can to forestall the distinct possibility that the conflict could encompass Israel. One set of measures toward this end would be to shore up the UN Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF): to ensure it has the material resources and political backing it needs, to encourage countries to send personnel to participate, and to provide direct support such as intelligence and assurances that backup rescue will be available if needed. Particularly if the security situation in southern Lebanon were to deteriorate, similar steps should be taken to promote an active role for the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL). The collapse of the modest UNIFIL security arrangement could unleash a broad range of terrorist actors in Lebanon who all share an antipathy toward Israel.

Another set of steps for Washington is to reduce the risk posed by strategic weapons—chemical weapons, missiles, advanced air defenses, or other game-changers—to Israel. Syria's adhesion to the Chemical Weapons Convention under strong U.S.-Russian pressure is an encouraging sign, and reducing the risk that Syria's conflict will involve Israel is only one of many reasons to act quickly to disarm Syria's chemical weapons. Yet even if carried out fully and quickly, such a step would still leave Syria with a large inventory of missiles and rockets, some of them advanced. The United States has worked closely with Israel to develop defenses against such weapons, and that effort has been well worthwhile. Close intelligence cooperation on the disposition of these missiles and rockets will be of greater importance as the risk grows that the regime could seek to explain away their use by blaming uncontrolled junior officers, or that some advanced weapons could fall into rebel hands.

Finally, Washington needs to make clear to all and sundry that, in the event any party launches attacks against Israel or acquires game-changing weapons that threaten Israel, Israeli action to deter future attacks would draw strong U.S. support. In particular, Hezbollah should understand clearly that if it acts to widen the war to include Israel, the price would be steep.

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Given the complexities and dynamics of the Syrian conflict, it is distinctly possible—though, mercifully, not likely—that Israel could become involved. Indeed, the risk of spillover involving Israel could extend years into the future. And however the conflict ends, the immediate aftermath will not include peace between Syria and Israel.

