

Military Escalation? Sapping Assad's Strength. Israel "Stirs the Pot" in Syria

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For much of the past two years Israel stood sphinx-like on the sidelines of Syria's civil war. Did it want Bashar al-Assad's regime toppled? Did it favour military intervention to help opposition forces? And what did it think of the increasing visibility of Islamist groups in Syria? It was difficult to guess.

In recent weeks, however, Israel has moved from relative inaction to a deepening involvement in Syrian affairs. It launched two air strikes on Syrian positions last month, and at the same time fomented claims that Damascus had used chemical weapons, in what looked suspiciously like an attempt to corner Washington into direct intervention.

Last week, based on renewed accusations of the use of the nerve agent sarin by Syria, the US said it would start giving military aid directly to the opposition.

With suspicions of Israeli meddling growing, prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu was finally forced last week to deny as "nonsense" evidence that Israeli forces are operating secretly over the border.

Nonetheless, the aura of inscrutability has hardly lifted, stoked by a series of leaks from Israeli officials. Their statements have tacked wildly between threats to oust Assad one moment and denials that Israel has any interest in his departure the next.

Is Israel sending out contradictory signals to sow confusion, or is it simply confused itself?

The answer can be deduced in the unappealing outcomes before Israel whoever emerges triumphant. Israel stands to lose strategically if either Assad or the opposition wins decisively.

Assad, and before him his father, Hafez, ensured that for decades the so-called separation of forces line between Syria and Israel, after the latter occupied the Golan Heights in 1967, remained the quietest of all Israel's borders.

A taste of what might happen should the Syrian regime fall was provided in 2011 when more than 1,000 Palestinians massed in the no man's land next to the Golan, while Assad's attention was directed to repressing popular demonstrations elsewhere. At least 100 Palestinians crossed into the Heights, with one even reaching Tel Aviv.

Last week, following intensified fighting between the rebels and the Syrian army over Quneitra, a town next to the only crossing between Israel and Syria, UN peacekeepers from Austria started pulling out because of the dangers.

Briefly the opposition forces captured Quneitra, offering a reminder that any void there would likely suck in Palestinian militants and jihadists keen to settle scores with Israel. That point was underlined by one Israeli official, who told the Times of London: "Better the devil we know than the demons we can only imagine if Syria falls into chaos, and the extremists from across the Arab world gain a foothold there."

For that reason, the Israeli military is reported to considering two responses familiar from Lebanon: invading to establish a security zone on the other side of the demarcation line, or covertly training and arming Syrian proxies inside the same area.

Neither approach turned out well for Israel in Lebanon, but there are indications – despite Netanyahu's denial – that Israel is already pursuing the second track.

According to the New York Times, Israel is working with Syrian villagers not allied to Assad or the opposition and offering "humanitarian aid" and "maintaining intense intelligence activity". In an interview with the Argentinian media last month, Assad accused Israel of having gone further, "directly supporting" opposition groups inside Syria with "logistical support", intelligence on potential targets and plans for attacking them.

If the future looks bleak for Israel with Assad gone, it looks no brighter if he entrenches his rule.

A strong Assad means Syria will continue to play a pivotal role in maintaining a military front opposed to Israeli hegemony in the Middle East. That in turn means a strong Iran and a strong Hizbullah, the Shia militia in Lebanon.

Hizbullah's formidable record in guerrilla warfare is the main reason Israel no longer occupies south Lebanon. Similarly, Hizbullah's arsenal of rockets is a genuine restraint on greater Israeli aggression towards not only Lebanon but Syria and Iran too.

Israel's air strikes in early May appear to have targeted shipments through Syria of more sophisticated weaponry for Hizbullah, probably supplied by Iran. Longer range missiles and anti-aircraft systems are seen as "game-changing" by Israel precisely because they would further limit its room for offensive manoeuvres.

Israel will be equally stymied if Assad stays in power and upgrades his anti-aircraft defences with the S-300 system promised by Russia.

Either way, Israel's much vaunted ambition to engineer an attack on Iran to prevent what it claims is Tehran's goal of developing a nuclear bomb – joining Israel in the club of Middle Eastern nuclear-armed states – would probably come at too high a price to be feasible.

So what does Israel consider in its interests if neither Assad's survival nor his removal is appealing?

According to some well-placed Israeli commentators, the best Israel can hope for is that Assad holds on but only just. That would keep the regime in place, or boxed into its heartland, but sapped of the energy to concern itself with anything other than immediate matters of survival. It would be unable to offer help to Hizbullah, isolating the militia in Lebanon and cutting off its supply line to Iran.

In closed-door discussions, analyst Ben Caspit has noted, the Israeli army has put forward as its “optimal scenario” Syria breaking up into three separate states, with Assad confined to an Alawite canton in Damascus and along the coast.

A long war of attrition between Assad and the opposition has additional benefits for Israel following the decision by Hizbullah’s leader, Hassan Nasrallah, to draft thousands of fighters to assist the Syrian army. Protacted losses could deplete Hizbullah’s ranks and morale, while fighting is likely to spill over from Syria into Lebanon, tying up the militia on multiple fronts.

But there is a risk here too. If Hizbullah performs well, as it did in defeating the rebels this month at the town of Qusayr, its position in Lebanon could be strengthened rather than weakened. And in that situation Assad’s debt to Hizbullah would only deepen.

Such calculations are doubtless exercising Israeli military minds.

The greatest danger of all is that yet more parties get drawn in, turning the conflict into a regional one. That would be the likely outcome if Israel chooses to increase its interference, or if the US comes good with its recent threats to increase military aid to the opposition or impose a no-fly zone over parts or all of Syria.

Either way, Israel might see the transformation of Syria in to a new mini-cold war theatre as advantageous.

However, the Israeli sphinx isn’t offering any answers quite yet.

Jonathan Cook won the Martha Gellhorn Special Prize for Journalism. His latest books are “Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East” (Pluto Press) and “Disappearing Palestine: Israel’s Experiments in Human Despair” (Zed Books). His new website is www.jonathan-cook.net.

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