

Syria, Danger of Escalation. To Strike or Not to Strike, Israel's Electoral Calculus

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An Israeli air strike in southern Syria on Sunday that killed 12 commanders from the Lebanese militia Hizballah and Iran's Revolutionary Guard follows a long and ignoble tradition in Israeli politics.

Prime ministers facing poor ratings have often been tempted to launch a major military offensive in the middle of an election campaign.

That is certainly how some prominent Israeli observers have viewed the attack in the Quneitra region, close to the 1967 ceasefire line with the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights.

It is still unclear whether Israel's prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, who presumably approved the operation, knew precisely what he was getting into in hitting the convoy of vehicles.

Initial reports suggested the target was Jihad Mughniyeh, the son of Hizballah's former chief of staff, Imad Mughniyeh, who was assassinated by Israel in 2008. Jihad, it had been widely reported, was overseeing attacks against Israeli forces in the Golan area in retaliation for Israel's repeated strikes in Syria.

However, it soon emerged that far more senior figures than Jihad had been killed in the operation. They included Imad Mughniyeh's successor, Mohammed Issa, as well as Ali Reza al-Tabatabai, an Iranian adviser to Hizballah, and a Revolutionary Guard general, Mohammed Allahdadi, who was reportedly advising the Syrian army.

The strike was not only the biggest against Hizballah since the conflict with Israel in summer 2006, but – more significantly – Israel's first undisguised military clash with Iran.

Until now, Israel has struck against Iran from afar and through agents in operations it could deny. Its efforts have concentrated on assassinations, mainly of nuclear scientists, and infecting computers with viruses – all part of efforts to stop Tehran developing its nuclear energy programme, which Israel claims will be quickly transformed into a military programme.

Danger of escalation

Although Israel has not officially claimed responsibility, its role in this latest attack is not in doubt. As Israeli military analyst Amos Harel observed: "Israel is the only power in the area, apart from Syria, using air power."

The deaths of such senior figures in Hizballah and the Revolutionary Guard will increase the pressure on both groups to hit back, with the danger of a major military escalation.

Alex Fishman, an Israeli military analyst, accused Israel of committing an act of “pyromania”: “Someone threw a match into a powder keg and is now waiting to see whether it will explode or not.”

On Tuesday Israeli officials offered conflicting reports of the operation to the international media.

The London Times, often used by Israel to plant stories, reported that the air strike was carried out to thwart Iran and Hizballah’s efforts to build four missile bases close to the Golan Heights.

At the same time, an Israeli official told Reuters that Israel had intended only to hit a low-level target and had been unaware of the Iranian general’s presence.

“We did not expect the outcome in terms of the stature of those killed – certainly not the Iranian general,” the source said. “We thought we were hitting an enemy field unit that was on its way to carry out an attack on us at the frontier fence.”

It is possible that the latter report was intended to defuse Iranian anger.

The reports emerged as Israel’s security cabinet convened to discuss a potential escalation of violence on the northern border.

Others have questioned whether the air strike was really needed to stop an imminent threat. They argue that the timing may have been dictated by the Israeli election campaign, which is now in full swing.

The Haaretz newspaper noted that Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu had used the operation to “buttress [his] image” and send a message that his political rivals lacked “the courage to take such decisions.”

That impression was confirmed by Moshe Yaalon, the defence minister, who argued in the wake of Sunday’s air strike that Yitzhak Herzog and Tzipi Livni, Netanyahu’s main challengers, had contributed nothing to the country’s national security.

Netanyahu’s mouthpiece in the media, Israel Hayom, exploited the operation too to trumpet Netanyahu’s success: “Our forces attacked a cell of senior terrorists in the Syrian Golan.”

The advantage for Netanyahu is that it will be hard for the opposition to challenge him both on whether there was a pressing need for the attack and on whether he had accurate intelligence about the convoy. As usual with military matters in Israel, details of the operation are concealed by a thick fog of non-disclosure and ambiguity.

A Haaretz editorial noted that it would be easy for Netanyahu to cover his tracks. “There will always be the explanation that the enemy was the one to start it and that Israel was only responding to a provocation or heading off a greater danger.”

Gun-sight electioneering

Certainly, Netanyahu would not be the first prime minister to have turned to the gun sight to help win an election. Menachem Begin approved an attack on Iraq's nuclear reactor in 1981; Shimon Peres launched Operation Grapes of Wrath in Lebanon against Hizballah in 1996; Ehud Olmert waged an assault on Gaza, Operation Cast Lead, in winter 2008-09; and Netanyahu himself struck Gaza again in Operation Pillar of Defence in late 2012.

The suspicion of electioneering was highlighted by Yoav Galant, the general who led Operation Cast Lead. He admitted a strong likelihood that the attack in Syria was "not entirely unrelated to the elections".

Like many former military commanders, Galant now his own political career to pursue, in his case in Kulanu, a rightwing party challenging Netanyahu's Likud party. But whatever his motives for speaking out, Galant was refreshingly candid during an interview on Israel's Channel 2 TV.

He claimed Netanyahu had also sought to manipulate the previous election, in early 2013, by opening Operation Pillar of Defence two months earlier with the assassination of Hamas' military chief Ahmed Jabari.

Galant added that over the five years he led the southern command: "There were many, many opportunities in which it was possible and necessary to [assassinate Jabari], and I also recommended such action. For some reason, it didn't happen on those dates."

Galant immediately faced an onslaught of criticism from military commentators and politicians, and was forced to issue a retraction.

Netanyahu's decision to approve the strike is not without risk, especially when it is unclear what the consequences could be. Peres lost the election after his 1996 attack on Lebanon, as did Olmert's party following Operation Cast Lead in 2008-09. Both were caught out by an unforeseen escalation of hostilities.

Netanyahu, however, suffered no major electoral damage from the relatively minor operation he launched in Gaza in November 2012. He is probably hoping that the fallout from the latest attack will be limited – or sufficiently delayed that the price is paid after polling day – allowing him to bask in the glory during the campaign.

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