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Report

Israel's Strategy in the Evolving Syrian Conflict

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Why does Israel keep attacking Syria? [Reuters]

Introduction

Israel's strategy of ambiguity and indecision regarding the Syrian conflict, while appearing prudent for several years, might now spell greater security challenge. With Russian support, Iranian and Hezbollah's presence in Syria is inching closer to the Israeli border, raising alarm among security analysts but also providing a pretext for alarmism among right-wing politicians.

Israel's Position on the Syrian Conflict

Over the bloody years of the Syrian conflict, Israel has been quite careful about publicly taking sides. Israeli intelligence and security bodies debated the relative risks and advantages entailed in various outcomes to the conflict from an Israeli perspective.⁽¹⁾ On the one hand, a stable Assad regime (first under Hafez al-Assad, and later under Bashar) had kept the Israeli-Syrian border quiet and safe for decades, since the ceasefire of 1974. For many years, there was little immediate threat that the Israeli military had to be concerned about on this portion of the country's northern border. On the other hand, Assad's ties to Iran and the transfer of military support to Hezbollah did place him in the circle of potential threats to Israeli security. The forces that rose up against his regime since 2011 could have possibly prove more favorable to Israeli security concerns, given their disdain for Iran and Hezbollah. Yet, to complicate matters, many of the opposition forces fighting the Syrian regime were affiliated with jihadi ideologies that are by definition antagonistic to Israel. The nature of a post-Assad regime composed of these groups remained completely uncertain, with the possibility that the

“devil you don’t know” – meaning a post-Assad Syria, could be worse than the “devil you know” – meaning Assad. For this reason, Israel refrained from making public pronouncements one way or the other. It limited itself to sporadic attacks against regime targets thought to produce or transfer weapons to Hezbollah and to providing limited humanitarian assistance to opposition populations and possibly to fighters along its border in the Golan Heights. Military analysts quipped cynically that like in the Iran-Iraq war, Israel “wishes success to both sides,” in the Syrian conflict; implying that the entanglement of Assad, Hezbollah, and jihadi organizations in a fight against each other weakens all sides and distracts their attention from Israel, with both of these factors affording Israel reduced threat to its north.⁽²⁾ Yet a fragile and fractured Syria with a serious power vacuum and raging chaos could also become a fertile ground for border instability. So it was likely that even with continuation of the fighting, it would have been increasingly difficult for Israel to maintain the calm it has experienced before the outbreak of the conflict and throughout most of its duration.

The New Reality

In this respect, Israel’s careful strategy of ambiguity and even indecision regarding the Syrian conflict, while appearing prudent for several years, might now spell greater security challenge, as many observers in the country have recently acknowledged. While the smoke has not yet settled, Russia, Iran, and the Syrian regime are slowly emerging as tentative victors in the Syrian quagmire. On November 22, 2017 the leaders of Russia, Iran and Turkey announced in Sochi their plan for new talks on the Syrian conflict resolution.⁽³⁾ This happened days after a meeting between Vladimir Putin and Assad, and following an agreement on de-escalation zones reached by the US, Russia and Jordan.⁽⁴⁾ A new reality seems to be shaping and Israeli intelligence and security commentators, alongside prominent politicians like Minister of Defense Avigdor Liberman and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, are raising alarm about its consequences for Israeli security. Many observers see the new situation that is emerging as strengthening Iran, Hezbollah, and Assad. Iran fortifies and expands its presence and influence in Syria, Hezbollah emerges as a stronger, more experienced, and better-equipped military force, and Assad’s army with support from Iran and Russia may be on the path to rebuilding and improving. As the US is losing interests and gradually abandoning the Syrian arena due to the diminishing threat of the Islamic State, which was the primary US concern in the conflict, Israel is left with very few diplomatic levers to influence the Syrian scene.

Israel’s Eroding Red Lines

Israel’s main concern, as can be gleaned from coverage by security analysts, is to safeguard the maintenance of the country’s so called “red lines” in Syria. Broadly speaking, the red lines denote objection to: Iranian or Iranian-backed militias and Hezbollah’s entrenched presence in Syria, and particularly within 40 kilometers of the

Israeli border; the production and transfer of advanced weapons to Hezbollah; and the creation of a land corridor from Iran to the Mediterranean.(5) But these red lines have been proving increasingly difficult to uphold. While the Russian-American-Jordanian de-escalation agreement called for the eventual withdrawal of foreign forces from Syria, on Nov. 14, 2017 Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov stated that Iranian-backed militias' presence in Syria is legitimate, given that they were invited by the Syrian regime.(6) The Russians agreed to keep militias at a distance of 5 kilometers from rebel areas. This means, according to some reporters, Iranian presence in the Golan Heights, at about 5-20km from the border with Israel.(7) These developments have been raising alarm in Israel. On Nov. 21, Netanyahu spoke with Vladimir Putin for half an hour about the Syrian situation and Israel's objection to Iranian and Hezbollah presence.(8) Earlier in November, Netanyahu publicly stated at a meeting of his party that he has "made it clear to our friends, first in Washington but also our friends in Moscow, that Israel will act in Syria, including southern Syria, according to our understanding and our security needs. This is what has been happening and will continue to happen...We are looking after Israel's security and we are doing it by combining firmness and responsibility."(9)

In a dramatic request, and facing opposition from the finance ministry, defense minister Liberman recently asked for an injection of additional 4.8 billion shekels to the Israeli military's budget, which stands on 31 billion shekels a year. Liberman cited the new strategic threat that is currently taking shape on the northern border with the latest development in the Syrian conflict.(10) Indeed, Israel seems to have increased its operations against Syrian and Hezbollah targets during 2017. The UN has further reported that Israeli incursions into Lebanese territories have also risen markedly. The United Nations Interim Force In Lebanon (UNIFIL), stationed in the south of that country, documented 758 such incursions from July 1 to October 30, 2017, which constitutes an increase of 80% in comparison to the same period in 2016.(11) A recent report by the Israeli Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) has put the developing situation in the north of Israel, and the country's possible response, in the starkest terms, concluding that, "It seems that the time is coming when Israel, if it wants to stop Iran's influence and consolidation in Syria, will have to become actively engaged in the Syrian quagmire. Israel has the power to destroy the Russian-Iranian "project" in Syria and severely damage the basis on which the Assad regime relies... Israel must demonstrate determination in its demand to remove Iranian forces and Iran-controlled Shiite militias from the Golan Heights and prevent the establishment of Iranian military infrastructures in Syria that would provide military means to Assad, the Shiite militias, and Hezbollah. These would imply greater potential for escalation in the northern arena and on the Syrian front, and possible spillover to the Lebanese front...Israel will have to be prepared to act, prepare for escalation, and correctly assess the ramifications of its actions."(12)

Israel's Old and New Regional Alliances

The new reality has also brought to the surface in greater clarity the warm relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia, as part of Israel's closeness to what it terms the "moderate" Arab countries, including Egypt and some of the Gulf states. Of course, these relations are not new. The need to balance Iran's growing influence in the region - from Iraq, to the Iranian nuclear deal that has allowed the country to divert more resources to conventional military purposes, as well as the possible disintegration of the deal due to new leadership in the US,(13) to the wars in Syria and Yemen - has led to an increasing willingness by Israel and Saudi Arabia to be more open about their joint interests. The current situation in Syria instigated some public speculations about Israeli-Saudi plans. Daniel Shapiro, the former US ambassador to Israel, recently published an article by the title "Is Saudi Arabia pushing Israel into a war with Hezbollah and Iran?" Other analysts speculated similarly. Dov Zakheim in an article in Foreign Policy, for example, observed: "Jared Kushner, Mohammed bin Salman, and Benjamin Netanyahu are up to something, and it looks a lot like a plan to squeeze Iran."(14)

The Israeli media as well as media in the Arab world has made much fanfare of an interview by the IDF chief of staff, Gadi Eizenkot, for the Saudi affiliated online paper "Ilaaf." Eizenkot stated clearly what are Israel's red lines in Syria. He said that, "Our demand is that Hezbollah will leave Syria, and that Iran and its militias will withdraw from Syria...We will not accept Iranian entrenchment in Syria in general, and especially West of the Damascus-Sweida Road...We will not allow any Iranian presence, we have warned them about building factories or military basis and we will not allow it." He also sent a clear message about Israel's attitude toward Saudi Arabia, saying that with regard to Iran "there is full agreement between us and Saudi Arabia, which was never our enemy." He said that Israel was "willing to exchange information with the moderate Arab countries, including intelligence information, to deal with Iran." However, he also indicated that there's no Israeli interest to initiate and engage in a wide scale military conflict with Hezbollah in Lebanon, even though the situation remains tense and flammable.(15)

The Impact on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

The clear alignment of interests between Saudi Arabia and Israel has also been cited as a potential booster for a US brokered deal between the Arab world and Israel regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and normalization of relations with Israel. Trump's son-in-law and adviser, Jared Kushner, has been reportedly working on the contours of some sort of a deal. Yet there's little place for optimism regarding genuine progress on the Israeli-Palestinian issue. In fact, the events in the region since the Arab uprisings of 2011 have so marginalized the cause of Palestinian statehood, that the Palestinians currently lack any real support from the Arab world, which is preoccupied with the Saudi-Iran conflict, or from the United States and Europe. The Iranian-Russian-Turkish axis

also has bigger concerns and has not shown much interest in really pressuring Israel on the Palestinian issue beyond rhetoric. Furthermore, Netanyahu's government relies on a coalition of far right parties and politicians that would object to any meaningful peace deal. At most, Netanyahu could use renewed peace negotiations with the Palestinians as a way to deflect attention from the numerous corruption investigations currently ongoing against him by the Israeli police. Iran's growing power in Syria, the strengthening of Hezbollah, and the potential nuclear ambition of Iran, similarly continue to serve as a rallying cry for Netanyahu against the leftist opposition in Israel, against those who point to his corruption investigation, and also against his challengers from the right.

Foreign Policy and Domestic Politics

There is a well-known saying that in Israel all politics, including foreign policy, is domestic politics. Its aim is always toward internal domestic audiences. This is true for the other actors in the region too. Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Iran all benefit domestically, or hope to benefit, from the maintenance of external strategic security threats. For Iran, the extension of support to militias abroad and the propping up of security threats and boogymen in the form of Sunni Jihadis, the "Zionist entity" and Wahabi Saudi Arabia, can serve as a justification for continued buildup of its security apparatuses and services. These services in turn would continue to participate in the suppression of political opposition at home, at the expense of real reform. In Saudi Arabia, ratcheting up the security threat that Iran poses justifies enormous military expenditures, the purchase of unimaginable quantities of weapons from the US, and the flaunting of close ties to the "West" as a credential of its so called "moderation." Such "moderation" bone-fides come without any real political reform or a genuine move toward greater democracy and real political freedom in the country. In Israel, existential security threat in the form of a rising Iran as a regional power is used by the right wing government to silence opposition at home and refuse meaningful concessions to the Palestinians, under the pretext of "security" considerations. So while the political actors themselves in Iran and the Saudi Arabia-Israel duo, as well as observers and commentators, stress the growing tension and rivalry between the two axes, it is also plainly clear that both sides benefit significantly from the perpetuation and escalation of threats and aggressive rhetoric. There are no good guys in this story, as each side tries to paint itself. There are only winners in the form of security establishments and non-democratic actors in all three countries, and losers in the form of true democratic progress in all three countries.

Conclusion

In conclusion, even considering the escalation of Israeli attacks in Syria, the request for military budget increases for the Israel Defense Force (IDF), the menacing rhetoric employed by Netanyahu and Liberman, and the heated exchanges and mutual threats issued by Hezbollah and Israel, we are still witnessing a maintenance of a certain status quo. Israel retains its freedom to act in Syria against targets it considers to be producing

or transferring advanced weapons that could be used by Hezbollah or by the Syrian army against Israel. So far, it has faced little retaliation from Syria, Hezbollah, or Russia. There is little reason that even a stronger Syrian military and a stronger battle weathered Hezbollah would be interested in opening a front against Israel as they consolidate their power and entrench their hegemony. Also, while talks of the cozy Saudi-Israeli relationship have suggested some plans by this alliance to take more drastic military measures against Hezbollah in Lebanon and even in Syria, at least in Israel there's very little appetite for a full blown conflict. The budget request by Liberman appears to be aimed at maintaining the IDF's strategic advantage in relations to Iran and other regional actors. For all interested parties in the regional conflict – Syria, Iran, Hezbollah, Turkey, Russia, Israel, and Saudi Arabia– escalation of fiery rhetoric, spiking of military and security spending, and the maintenance of a menacing external threat, serve the interests of authoritarians (in Saudi, Iran, Russia), and semi-authoritarian or illiberal-democrats (Hezbollah, Turkey, Israel). The question that remains is whether the media and political observers can resist falling into the dichotomies produced and entrenched by these actors, which require taking sides in the conflict, and focus instead on calling out those who continue to benefit and profit materially and politically from the perpetuation of various conflicts in the war-torn region.

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