

A fragile cold peace: the impact of the Syrian conflict on Israeli-Syrian relations

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■ Executive summary

The unfolding Syrian crisis is threatening to end 40 years of cold peace between Syria and Israel. Exchanges of fire between Israeli and Syrian troops, coupled with fear of a new Islamist front, have led Israel to strengthen its military presence in the Golan Heights. Syria's alliance with Iran and Hizbullah and Israel's unilateral attacks on military facilities inside Syria have heightened tensions between the two countries. Through their actions and mutual politics of fear Israel and Syria are moving out of a cold peace situation. However, the pressured Syrian regime and its allies are too occupied by the civil war to open a new front. For Israel, a prolonged conflict in Syria could be advantageous because it will weaken its enemies and provide time to forge new strategic alliances with Sunni Arab states.

Insecurity along the Israeli-Syrian border

Syria and Israel have maintained a long-standing truce since 1974, when the separation-of-forces agreement was signed, with its implementation overseen by United Nations (UN) observers. The 40-year cold peace between the two countries could now be jeopardised by the threat and actuality of spillover from the Syrian civil war. In particular the stability of the Golan Heights, which was taken over by Israel from Syria during the 1967 Six-Day War, is in question.¹ Since November 2012 a series of cross-border exchanges of fire between the Israeli and Syrian armies have occurred across the cease-fire line in the Golan Heights. Israel is also confronted by the humanitarian crisis unfolding on its doorstep. In contrast to Syria's other neighbours, Israel, which is technically in a state of war with Syria, has no open-door policy regarding Syrian refugees. Nevertheless, since the Syrian uprisings broke out in March 2011, hundreds of Syrians have tried to enter the Golan Heights, most of whom have been turned away at border crossings. Still, a growing number of wounded Syrian citizens, both rebels and civilians, have been receiving medical care in Israel, challenging perceptions of "the other" and the impermeability of borders (Linder-Ganz, 2013).

The Golan Heights is of great strategic importance to Israel for security, economic and settlement reasons. It provides a "buffer zone" against Syria and secures access to water resources (Ram, 2013). Since the end of the 2006 Lebanon war Israeli-Syrian relations have alternated between peace initiatives and the prospect of military confrontation. Regional instability, coupled with tensions along the frontier, renders renewed peace talks or an Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights more unlikely than ever.

Israel fears that the Golan Heights could function as a launching pad for armed Islamist groups that dominate Syrian opposition forces. In response to heightened instability, Israel and Syria have strengthened their border security and military capacity in the Golan Heights. Israel has erected and reinforced a dividing wall over 5 meters tall and around 250 kilometers in length along the Israeli-Syrian border to prevent any attempt by Islamist groups to cross the border and attack Israel (Vick, 2013; Dukhan, 2013). This increased preparedness has functioned as a mutual deterrent while simultaneously raising tensions between the two countries.

¹ On December 14th 1981 Israel officially annexed the Golan Heights, extending its civil law and administration to all citizens who lived there, but the world did not recognise the annexation. UN Security Council Resolution 497 of December 17th 1981 declared this region to be Syrian territory occupied by Israel. In 2008 the UN General Assembly also condemned the annexation.

Israel's red lines

The major Israeli fear concerns the security of the Syrian regime's advanced missile systems and chemical and biological weapons. The Israeli government has enforced several red lines against Syrian facilities and weaponry. In September 2007 Israeli Air Force jets attacked a facility in northern Syria that the Israeli government claimed was a covert attempt to build a nuclear reactor based on a North Korean design (Cordesman, 2008: 8). The Syrian civil war has accelerated the fear that Hizbullah or al-Qaeda-affiliated Islamist groups would try to seize Syria's chemical weapons. The Lebanese Shia militia Hizbullah caught Israel by surprise in the 2006 Lebanon war by showing unexpected strength. Six years later Iran and its Hizbullah proxy are fighting in the Syrian civil war in support of their steadfast allies, the Syrian government and its embattled leader, Bashar al-Asad.

While the Israeli government has remained largely mute about its interest in the Syrian civil war, it has been doing a great deal to pressure the U.S. into direct involvement in Syria. In September 2013 the U.S. planned to lead a limited military action against the Syrian regime after it crossed a red line when it allegedly used chemical weapons in an attack in Ghouta, eastern Damascus, on August 21st. For Israel, the planned attack was seen as a test of international resolve to check Iran's nuclear ambitions, which according to Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu constitute the most significant existential threat facing Israel. Through Russian-initiated diplomatic efforts the U.S. and Russia reached an agreement to dismantle Syria's chemical weapons arsenal, thus avoiding external military intervention. For Israel, a fully chemically disarmed Syria, if the process proves to be successful, could remove Syria's non-conventional threat. However, this process could turn out to be lengthy and challenging in the context of a civil war. According to the Israeli government the transfer of weapons to Hizbullah is likely to continue. The Syrian regime could also hide chemical weapons sites from international inspectors (Shoham, 2013).

The Israeli perception that the U.S. is increasingly unlikely to undertake any new military involvement in the Middle East reinforces Netanyahu's much-preached doctrine that Israeli must look after itself (Alpher, 2013). The 2012 withdrawal by Austria, Japan, Croatia and Canada of their UN Disengagement Observer Force troops that have helped to stabilise the border territory between Israel and Syria has further enhanced Israel's perception of the necessity of self-reliance for national security (What's in Blue, 2013). Over the last year the Israeli government has authorised several air strikes inside Syria that officials have said were aimed at convoys carrying weapons for Hizbullah, thus extending Israel's decades-old conflict with the Lebanese militant group inside Syria. The latest Israeli attack involving the illegal use of Lebanese airspace was on a Syrian military facility in Sanawbar-Jableh, near Latakia, a stronghold of the current Syrian Alawite-led regime, on October 31st 2013.

That Israel was responsible for the attack was leaked by an official source in Washington in an act that according to several Israeli media outlets was fiercely protested by senior Israeli officials. This is the third U.S. leak of the past year, revealing a deep rift between the U.S. and Israel concerning tactical moves on the Syrian crisis. By leaking classified information, the U.S., although not having made any official complaints about the attacks, was sending a signal that Israel cannot operate beneath the radar of international scrutiny. Moreover, the U.S. was warning that Israel should respect the UN's chemical arms resolution and attempts to seek a political arrangement with the opposition in Syria. In turn, Israel's series of targeted unilateral attacks sent a message to Syria, Iran and the U.S. that Israel is ready to act alone if necessary.

A beneficial cold peace

So far Syria has not retaliated against Israeli attacks. The Syrian regime is unlikely to open a second front at this stage, because it is too concerned with the unfolding civil war to have the capacity to consider a conflict with Israel (Pollard, 2013). Hizbullah, which is perceived in Lebanon as having moved from a national resistance force to a defender of Shia interests, cannot risk military involvement with Israel without severe implications for itself (Ganor, 2013). Iran and its new leader, President Hassan Rouhani, has agreed to negotiate on its nuclear programme and must consider the dynamics set in motion by their direct talks with the U.S. Any act by the Iranian regime that will further upset the fragile stability of the region is likely to damage Iran's strategic interests.

For Israel, a prolonged conflict in Syria might prove the best way to ensure its security. A long-term conflict will strain the resources of the Syrian regime and its Shia allies Iran and Hizbullah, thus weakening Israel's foes. It will give Israel time to utilise anti-Shia sentiment in the region to forge new strategic alliances with Sunni Arab states and Iran's neighbouring countries. Israel and Saudi Arabia's recent talks about security cooperation have grown out of mutual dissatisfaction with the new U.S. approach to Iran. This previously implausible alliance may prove beneficial should relations between Israel and the U.S. become more strained.

The question remains how long Syria and its allies will pursue a policy of restraint and containment. A Syrian-launched military strike on Israel or a U.S. attack on Syria would cross both Israeli and Iranian red lines, respectively. Both would mark the end of a fragile cold peace and potentially ignite an all-out war in the Middle East.

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