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Israel Enters the Syrian Quagmire

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Israel is increasingly drawn into the uncertain consequences of the Syrian civil war. For many, the beleaguered Bashar al-Assad is better than the jihadist alternative. An unnamed Israeli intelligence officer quoted in *The Times* of London, which was subsequently denied by the Israel Defence Force spokesperson, aptly sums up the general Israeli preference: “Better the devil we know than the demons we can only imagine if Syria falls into chaos and the extremist from across the Arab world gain a foothold there.”

This was in contrast to some of the hasty Israeli remarks in the dying days of the Hosni Mubarak regime in Egypt when it faced millions of protesters in Tahrir Square. Despite the long list of Israeli complaints, Anwar Sadat’s successor kept the core principles of the Camp David Accords and maintained the Cold Peace. For Israel, the Islamists who were in the forefront of anti-Israeli rhetoric were dangerous. Israeli sympathies not only compromised the beleaguered leader but also exhibited its misreading of the unfolding events in Egypt. Israel got it wrong on Egypt.

Partly because of this and partly because of the differing interests, Israel chose to remain on the margins ever since popular protests began in Syria in 2011. For once, Syria is not Egypt and Bashar al-Assad is not Mubarak. Of course, the Hafiz-Bashar the father-son duo, kept the Syrian-Israeli border quiet since 1973. Not a shot was fired and no one infiltrated into Israel-occupied Golan Heights as Syria had proxies to threaten its southern neighbour. For over three decades Hezbollah did that job and kept Israel busy. This eventually forced Israel to unilaterally pullout of Lebanon 18 years after its invasion. Moreover, since the Madrid conference of 1991, Damascus functioned as the headquarters of the Hamas leadership-in-exile. So, Assad is not Mubarak to be missed by Israel.

Yet, Israel and its usually sabre-rattling leaders were extremely cautious towards the ongoing violence in Syria to the point of being indifferent. Even the growing involvement of Iran—

Israel's obsession in recent years—has not changed this general posture. The devil-we-know attitude sums this approach.

There were three notable exceptions when Israel intervened, in a manner it is best known for: surgical strikes. On 31 January and again twice in early May, there were pointed attacks on specific military targets inside Syria. Though Israel never formally admitted its involvement, its signatures are clear and visible. The targets were either convoy of arms or storage depots of weapons supposed to be meant for Lebanese militant Islamic group: Hezbollah.

These strikes indicate certain pattern and picture. Supplying of sophisticated weapons to Hezbollah remains Israel's redline vis-à-vis Syria. So long as the conflict is confined to Syria, Israel could afford to maintain its indifference to the point of being apathetic. Democratization or regime-change is not part of its discourse vis-à-vis Syria. In its view either democracy is not possible or is not conducive for its interests.

Furthermore, the brutality with which the Assad regime has been dealing with popular protests reinforced its traditional complaint against the authoritarian and dictatorial nature of its neighbourhood. No matter who is to be blamed, over 80,000 deaths and 1.4 million refugees are not trivial and the Assad regime cannot wash away its responsibilities. Ultimately the buck stops with the ruler, more so in a dictatorial state like Syria. Thus, as some Israeli analysts are fond of saying, the Middle East is a tough neighbourhood to live and Assad is the latest proof!

The task of bringing about a popular change in Syria, ironically, is spearheaded by two non-democratic monarchies along the Persian Gulf: Qatar and Saudi Arabia. The latter forcefully prevented democratic yarning in the neighbouring Bahrain but has emerged as the key player in seeking a regime change in Syria. Riyadh's antagonism can largely be attributed to Bashar al-Assad undermining of Saudi-sponsored peace plan for the Arab-Israeli conflict and its interests in Lebanon.

For Israel, thus, alternative to Assad is an Islamist-led government with unpredictable consequences. Going by the examples of Afghanistan and Iraq where external involvement only brought havoc and chaos, things would not be any different in Syria if Assad were to be forcibly removed by Saudi-Qatari-funded opposition. Thus, Western support for an anti-Syrian opposition has a few takers in Israel. For the West, especially the US, Syria is a foreign policy interest; for Israel it is an immediate neighbour with little space for misadventures.

Israeli Redlines

At the same time, Israel has sought to establish certain redlines vis-à-vis Syria. While not prepared to intervene in the civil war, it was not prepared to accept Hezbollah to benefit from the Syrian civil war. At one level, the internal violence has left Assad with little friends in the region. His refusal for a meaningful dialogue has alienated a number of countries and even the

Palestinians who were the staunchest supporters have abandoned him. For years, Hamas functioned from Damascus and its leader Khalid Masha'al lived there following his expulsion from Jordan in 2001. Not to be caught between the two sides, Hamas and its leaders quietly moved to safer places. The recent conciliation between Hamas and the Hashemite Kingdom was partly due to growing internal opposition to King Abdullah but it was also a sign of alienation of Hamas from the Assad regime.

Not long ago, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan was eloquent about zero-problems with the neighbours. He was trying to overcome Turkey's problems with its Arab neighbours by adopting a belligerent position against the Israeli treatment of the Palestinians. He did manage to dampen the bilateral relations with Israel and bring it to its nadir in 2011 when he recalled the Turkish ambassador from Tel Aviv and expelled Israeli ambassador from Ankara. This deteriorating relation with Israel, however, did not dramatically improve Turkey's fortunes with its neighbours. On the contrary, it has exposed the naiveté of the AKP elite: relations cannot be improved unilaterally and devoid of geopolitical rationale.

The onset of the Arab Spring brought home the flip side of Turkey's Middle East policy and before long Syria became a major security concern for Erdogan. The flow of refugees, currently estimated at 300,000, was accompanied by tension and violence along the Turkish-Syrian border. Two blasts in Turkish border towns in May, for example, had killed over 100 persons. Like its western allies, Turkey lacks an effective strategy against Syria, especially in containing the negative fallout of the Syrian civil war.

As a result, regional support for Syria is limited to Iran and Hezbollah, who like Assad face international isolation and sanctions. There are clear indications that both are actively involved in the Syrian civil war and have been fighting along with the regime. The survival of the Assad regime is critical for their interests. Hezbollah which continues to portray itself as a resistance force has no qualms in fighting with the Assad regime.

The active involvement of Hezbollah and Iran have raised the Israeli concerns and forced it to abandon its prolonged indifference. As a quid pro quo for their support, Syria appears to be facilitating the flow of arms from Iran to Hezbollah. Within days after the second strike in May Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah told his supporters that Syria "will give the resistance special weapons it never had before." To dispel any ambiguity he went on to add: "We mean game-changing." This, he described as the Syrian strategic reaction and would be more important than firing a rocket or carrying out an airstrike against Israel. In a remarkably similar tone, while declining to acknowledge Israel's involvement, a spokesperson for the Israeli Embassy in Washington added: "Israel is determined to prevent the transfer of chemical weapons or other game-changing weaponry by the Syrian regime to terrorists, especially to Hezbollah in Lebanon."

Within these broader regional context how does one read the three military strikes against Syria which Israel never openly admitted of carrying out?

The Fallout

First, media reports indicate that while carrying out these attacks, especially the ones in May, Israel did not crossover into Syrian airspace. The bombs were believed to have been delivered from the air close to the Lebanese-Syrian border. This could be the lesson Israel learnt from the June 2002 Turkish fiasco. A Turkish F-4 Phantom fighter was shot down over the Mediterranean when it was flying too close to the Syrian border.

Second, the attacks expose the willingness of the Assad regime to part with sensitive weapons to Hezbollah. These weapons were supplied by Russia and Iran, thereby indicating the benefits accruing to Hezbollah for its support for Assad. The January attack targeted a convoy carrying SA-17 anti-aircraft missiles supplied by Russia and the May attacks believed to have targeted the Fatah 110 rockets supplied by Iran. Both would have strengthened Hezbollah's arsenal considerably. The anti-aircraft defence would have considerably limited any future Israeli operations over Lebanon.

The lethal nature of the surface-to-surface missiles became apparent during the Second Lebanon War in 2006. During the 32-day military campaign, as many as 4,228 missiles fired by Hezbollah were identified as having been Iranian made. The most spectacular moment for Hezbollah came on 15 July when a Chinese-made-Iranian-supplied C-802 anti-ship missile struck *INS Hanit* off the coast of Beirut, resulting in the death of four Israeli sailors and severe damage to the corvette. Some of these missiles fired by Hezbollah reached the town of Hadera, about 50 kilometres from the Israel-Lebanon border. Hezbollah leaders threatened that their missiles could even reach the coastal city of Tel Aviv. Fearing the strikes, half million Israeli residents in the north were forced to flee their homes and take temporary refuge among their friends and relations in central and southern Israel.

The Iranian-made Fatah 110 missiles which were supposed to be the target of the May attacks, for example, have an estimated range of 250 kms. Within the narrow Israel's territorial context, this would be a strategic asset or 'game-changing' as Nasrallah warned. Most of Israel's population, including the cities of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, would be within the striking distance of Fatah 110 missiles from southern Lebanon. It is essential to remember that the UN Security Council Resolution 1701 which brought an end to the Second Lebanon War explicitly bans "sales or supply of arms and related materiel to Lebanon except as authorized by its Government." Given its inherent weakness the Lebanese government could not proceed with its long-term aspiration of disarming all militant groups in the country, including Hezbollah. Thus as with human health, Israel's golden rule has been: prevention is better than cure!

Third, the attacks exposed the possibility of an Israeli confrontation with Russia, which has emerged as the principal backer of the status quo in Syria. With the passive support from Beijing, Moscow has prevented any international consensus on Syria, especially over the removal of Assad. With its naval base in Tartus on the Mediterranean, Russia has no desire to abandon Syria, perhaps its only dependable ally in the entire Middle East. Even an orderly transfer of power to a more widely acceptable figure within the regime remains anathema to Moscow.

This hard-line Russian position was accompanied by its desire to continue the flow of arms, something Israel has been trying to prevent. This concern forced Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for a meeting with President Vladimir Putin at Sochi on the Black Sea in May 2013. He appeared to be unsuccessful in securing an explicit Russia commitment against the delivery of S-300 missile defence systems. These batteries can shoot down planes or missiles at 200 km range. These defences become crucial not only for the survival of the regime but also to underscore the Russian commitments to Damascus.

The Russian support poses a severe military and political challenge to Israel. At one level, they would considerably reduce its freedom of operation vis-à-vis Syria as Israeli strikes would be difficult and costly in human terms. Moreover, striking Russian missile defence would also have a political cost for Israel. The last January attack destroyed a convoy of SA-17 missiles that were being sent to Hezbollah but destroying missile meant for the defence of Assad regime would undoubtedly provoke further Russian punitive measures against Israel.

Thus, having been on the sidelines over the Syrian civil war, Israel is increasingly forced to make some critical decisions. At one level, it would like to prevent Hezbollah from benefitting from the Syrian situation and to increase its arsenal for a future confrontation.

Towards limiting the power of the militant group, Israel would like to act against any possible shipment of weapons, especially the 'game-changing' ones from Syria. Russia is increasingly concerned and its rebuke of Israeli intervention is accompanied by its willingness to strengthen the Assad regime, especially through missile defence. The latter in turn makes possible Israeli intervention against Syrian arms supplies to Hezbollah costlier, both militarily and politically.

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