

The Israel factor in Syria

The massive [air raids that Israel carried out in Syria earlier this month](#) against “Iranian targets” and the subsequent downing of an Israeli jet by Syrian fire showed how deeply and dangerously Israel is involved in the civil war in its neighbouring country. On the face of it, the whole story appears to be strange. In Syria, the civil war is complex. On the one hand, there is the regime of President Bashar al-Assad, backed by Hezbollah, Iran and Russia. On the other, a wide range of militias, from al-Qaeda and Islamic State jihadists to Free Syrian Army rebels, is fighting the regime. What has Israel got to do with a civil war between a hostile regime and a group of unpredictable dangerous militia groups?

The many conflicts in Syria

In the initial years of the civil war, Israel's policy choices seemed to have been driven by the same calculation. The Assad regime and Israel have never been friendly. In the 1967 war, Israel captured the Golan Heights from Syria and continues to occupy the region. More than a decade later, Syria intervened in Lebanon. It then provided help to militants, mainly Hezbollah, who were resisting an Israeli occupation of the country. Syria and Israel do not have formal diplomatic ties. Despite this, there was no direct military confrontation between the two countries. In fact, despite the hostility, Israel's border with Syria has been its calmest frontier for years. When the crisis broke in Syria in 2011, Israel was a fence sitter. It didn't want the stable secular dictatorship in its neighbourhood to be replaced by a bunch of militants. But as the Syrian civil war evolved into a regional conflict over the years, Israel's preferences and strategic calculations changed too.

When the Syrian regime's position got weakened in the conflict, Hezbollah, the Lebanese Shia militant group backed by Iran, sent thousands of its soldiers to the battlefield to defend the Assad government. Iran also sent Shia militants, who were recruited from different countries, to Syria. Besides the government army, these militias fought the war on the ground on behalf of the regime. Israel was alarmed by the growing role of Hezbollah and other Iran-sponsored militias in Syria. Since the early 1980s, Hezbollah has remained a thorn in Israel's regional strategy. In 2000, Israel withdrew from southern Lebanon, ending 18 years of occupation, mainly due to Hezbollah's guerrilla resistance. In 2006, Israel bombed Lebanon again to destroy Hezbollah's weapons infrastructure, but even after a month-long campaign, it failed to achieve its stated goals. Hezbollah has heavy military presence along southern Lebanon (or across Israel's northern border).

Syria stunned by Hezbollah murder: WikiLeaks

The Syrian war allowed Hezbollah to coordinate with its Iranian patrons directly in the battlefield. Iran has also reportedly transferred short-range missiles and other sophisticated weapons to Hezbollah via Syria. Israel responded to this through a two-pronged strategy. First, it established contact with anti-regime rebels in southern Syria, closer to the Golan. Initially Israel offered medical aid and other humanitarian assistance to the rebels, which later acquired military and logistical dimensions. The plan was to carve out a buffer between the Golan Heights that Israel controls and the Syrian Golan. Israel didn't want Hezbollah or other Iranian proxies to take control of the border region. According to analyst Elizabeth Tsurkov, who wrote a detailed report on Israel's activities in southern Syria, Tel Aviv now offers support to seven different rebel groups in the region, including Liwaa Forsan Jolan, Firqat Ahrar Nawa, and a section of the Free Syrian Army. Besides providing money, weapons and intelligence, Israel also supported the advances by these groups on the ground with air cover. One such incident was the Israeli bombing of regime positions in southern Syria in April 2017 after local rebel groups came under heavy attacks by regime-backed troops.

The second strategy was to retain the freedom to strike Hezbollah positions inside Syria. When Russia intervened in Syria, Israel negotiated for this freedom with Moscow. Since Russia's intervention in Syria in September 2015, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has travelled to Russia to meet President Vladimir Putin at least five times. Both nations developed a deconfliction mechanism that allowed Israeli planes to attack Hezbollah targets inside Syria without clashing with Russia, which is practically controlling most of the Syrian skies. This agreement worked perfectly for Israel. Last year alone, Israel said it struck suspected weapons shipments to Hezbollah around 100 times.

But despite these on-and-off interventions, Israel has failed to build any substantial leverage in Syria's conflict zones. True, it has built influence among rebel groups in southern Syria. But developments in Syria over the past two years have scuttled Israel's strategic plans. The Israelis may have initially thought that the Russian intervention could reduce the Syrian regime's dependence on Iran, which is Tel Aviv's primary concern. But the Russians played on both sides. Their only strategic target was to rescue the regime. They neither stopped the Israelis from attacking Hezbollah targets inside Syria nor did they stop the Iranians from expanding their footprint in the country. Later, when the regime stabilised its rule, thanks to the Russian intervention, Iran's influence also grew. Iran now has various military facilities across Syria's regime-held territories.

In southern Syria, Israel had built a network of rebels. But even in this area, its position has weakened over the past year. Jordan, which had offered support to the rebels in the early years of the civil war, changed its policy in the wake of heavy refugee flow. Last year, the Trump administration shut down the CIA's military operation command in Amman that was coordinating with Syrian rebels, leaving the rebels, particularly those in the south, entirely dependent on Israel. Besides, the regime forces are making advances towards the south. They have already established some posts near Quneitra in northern Golan. Late last year, the regime regained a foothold on the de facto border with Israel by capturing Beit Jinn from the rebels. In effect, Israel not only failed to contain the spread of Iranian influence in Syria, but is also under pressure to halt the advances of regime forces towards the south.

It was against this background that Israel strengthened its bombing campaign in Syria this month. Prime Minister Netanyahu has also warned Iran "not to test our resolve." But beyond rhetoric, as the past incidents suggest, Israel's capacity to shape reality in Syria is limited. In seven years, Iran has built a huge network in Syria and emboldened Hezbollah. This cannot be eliminated by occasional aerial raids. A full-scale intervention is risky as long as Russia directly backs the regime. And if the regime forces capture Idlib and the Damascus suburbs, which is only a matter of time, they will shift their focus to the Israel-backed rebels in the south, dragging Tel Aviv deeper into the conflict.

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