



Austrian National Defence Academy  
Vienna

IFK MONITOR  
International



## THE WAR IN SYRIA: AN ISRAELI PERSPECTIVE

*Maya Hadar*

While Israel and Syria have technically been in a state of war since the establishment of Israel in 1948, Israel's official position in the Syrian civil war is of non-interference. Yet, adherence to its national interests and the safety of its citizens indicates taking action, whenever needed, both militarily and diplomatically during the course of the war as well as once the dust settles.

The world is undoubtedly united by its concerns regarding the ramifications of the Syrian civil war on the well being of the Syrian people. We share our hope for a swift cessation of violence in the form of an agreement, which would enable the safe return of displaced refugees. However, different countries have different interests in the landscape of a post-war Syria: the main concern of the US and many European countries being the threat arising from the destabilizing influence of Sunni extremists such as ISIS and Al-Qaeda. As demonstrated by several attacks carried out on European territory in recent years (Barcelona, London, Manchester, Paris, Stockholm etc.), this is not merely a potential threat.

Though Israel certainly shares the humanitarian concerns in this regard (and have long provided humanitarian assistance to Syrian refugees), its' main concern is Iran and its proxy militant organization, most notably- Hezbollah. While anti-Israeli attacks by Sunni extremists constitute an-

other potential threat, to date, the former are engaged in Inner Arab world disputes. As such, Iran's growing influence in close proximity to Israel's' northern border forms a much greater threat to Israel's security.

### Israeli-Syrian historic relations

Not only that Israel and Syria have never established diplomatic relations, they were engaged in battle in four major wars (1948, 1967, 1973 & 1982). A further worsening of the relations between the two occurred following the *Six-Day War* in 1967, fought between Israel, Egypt, Syria, and Jordan. During the war, Israel has obtained control over the Gaza strip and the Sinai Peninsula (from Egypt), the West Bank and east Jerusalem (from Jordan) and the Golan Heights (from Syria). Whereas the Sinai Peninsula was returned to Egypt following the *Camp David accords* of 1978 and whereas Israel signed a peace treaty with Jordan in 1994, the formerly Syrian Golan Heights were annexed in 1981 and remained an "open

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wound” for Syria. The Golan Heights were and still are a perpetuation of Syrian defeat in the war and its’ meaning is both psychological and strategic. Despite the Syrian vindication achieved following the 1973 war’s early success, hostilities between the two countries never ceased to exist. At present time, a ceasefire line originating in the aftermath of the 1973 war is largely respected.

A few Israeli attempts to engage Syria in peace negotiation (by former prime minister Sharon in 2004 and as part of a land trade by former prime minister Olmert in 2007) were made under the Israeli prerequisite that Syria will halt support for “terrorist agents”, “guerrilla groups” and Iran. Indirect peace talks held in 2008 with Turkish mediation did not yield any result.

#### **Threats to Israel’s national security**

- Iranian military presence in Syria and its critical support in developing complementary infrastructure (e.g. missiles and chemical weapon manufacturing facilities) as well as its cooperation with local Hezbollah forces threatens Israel’s northern border and increases the risk of a combined military operations on Israeli territory. In addition, as the main supplier of arms to Hezbollah, Iran’s freedom of action in Syria means an increased capability of Hezbollah to target Israel’s larger cities using sophisticated weapons and mid to long range missiles fired from southern Lebanon.
- Although Israeli-Russian relationship has improved since the 1960-1970s: *“when the Soviet Union was the Arab world’s weapons supplier and the Arab-Israeli conflict was seen as just another front in the Cold War”* (Harel, foreignpolicy.com, Oct 6, 2015). As a key player, Russian influence in the Syrian war may pose a threat to Israel’s national security since Russia is militarily backing up the anti-Israeli Assad re-

gime and is allowing its Iranian partner to maintain a strong military presence in Syria. Moreover, there is an imminent danger that sophisticated weapons “made in Russia” would find their way from the Syrian army to the hands of Hezbollah. Lastly, Russian boots present on Syrian ground may limit Israel’s freedom of action in Syria when it wishes to tackle potential threats. This also holds the potential for Russian-Israel clashes, even unintentionally.

- Though Sunni militant groups operating in Syria do not pose an immediate threat to Israel’s national security, cementing themselves in the region and exporting extremist ideologies may potentially destabilize Egypt and Jordan and thus, endanger previously signed peace treaties. Furthermore, similarly to many other western high-profile destinations, Israel may be a target of future attacks by ISIS and their likes.
- The on-going Syrian civil war, combined with Assad’s reliance on Iran and Hezbollah which enabled him to regain control over most of the country’s territory (and made him the anticipated winner of the war), precludes any attempt to negotiate peace between Israel and Syria for the time being. Moreover, Assad’s dependence on Iran and the latter’s tightening grip in the region makes any future agreement between Syria and Israel improbable.

#### **Israel’s Actions in Syria since the beginning of the uprising**

Israel’s official position regarding the Syrian war is of non-interference. However, it has repeatedly stated that crossing its’ “red lines”; the shipment of anti-aircraft missiles, precision ground-to-ground missiles, and chemical weapons to Hezbollah will not go unanswered. Attacks against

specific targets on Syrian territories (as the recent attack on Syria's chemical weapons manufacturer in the Hama province) are often left unconfirmed by Jerusalem officials. In addition to the military response, Israel tends to diplomatically engage the US and Russia in such circumstances. While specific and independent of the conflict in Syria, these attacks are frequent (in a recent interview, Israel's former air force chief Amir Eshel stated that Israel had hit arms convoys of the Syrian military and its Hezbollah allies nearly 100 times in the past five years; Reuters, Sep 7, 2017).

Moreover, in the course of the war, Israel has provided medical care to Nusra Front fighters (the al-Qaida terrorist offshoot) who are actively fighting the Iranian backed axis of Assad and Hezbollah. Although the Nusra Front is certainly no ally of Israel, Amos Yadin, former military intelligence chief was quoted saying that Hezbollah and Iran "are the major threat to Israel, much more than the radical Sunni Islamists" (Jerusalem Post, March 13, 2015). Evidently, non-official Israeli support of rebel groups extent beyond a mere humanitarian assistance. Non-Israeli sources also point to an on-going supply of funds (used to pay for fighters' salaries and ammunition) food, fuel and medical provisions to Syrian rebels near the Israeli border and deeper on Syrian soil as early as 2013. The creation of a special army unit to oversee the aid operation was reported by the Wall Street Journal. This suggests that unlike its' official position, Israel is very much involved in the Syrian war.

### **Possible Israeli actions in Syria**

Israel's territorial proximity to Syria, military capabilities and special relationship with the US keeps its interests relevant in the discussion of post-war Syria. In order to protect its security interests and in light of current military developments in Syria, Israel could consider taking the following

steps in both the military and diplomatic levels:

#### **On the military level**

1. The prevention of "Game Changing" weapons provided by Iran (or Russia, for that matter) from reaching Hezbollah.
2. The prevention of the establishment of an Iranian operation-base in southern Syria, from which Hezbollah can carry out attacks against Israel on the one hand, and reinforce Iranian-backed military presence in the Golan Heights on the other hand.
3. Maintaining the "red lines" policy and providing a response when those are threatened. Such actions will send a clear message to Syria, Iran and Hezbollah, and demonstratively strengthen Israel's position in both the military and the diplomatic fronts.

#### **On the diplomatic level**

1. Attempting to obtain a Russian commitment regarding the whereabouts of Russian weapons transferred to the Syrian army and preventing those from reaching Hezbollah.
2. Strengthening the diplomatic relations with Turkey and work towards future cooperation, as both countries share a border with Syria and a common enemy (ISIS and Shia-domination).
3. Seeking continuing cooperation with the international community regarding the ISIS threat.
4. Although Russia has rejected Israel's request for a 60 km buffer zone between the Golan Heights and any Iranian backed militias, further Israeli-Russian cooperation would assist in ensuring Is-

**Imprint:**

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Publisher:

Republic of Austria / Federal  
Ministry of Defence and Sports  
Roßauer Lände 1  
1090 Vienna

Edited by:

National Defence Academy  
Vienna  
Institute for Peace Support and  
Conflict Management  
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Periodikum der

Landesverteidigungsakademie

October 2017

Printing:

ReproZ W 17-  
Stiftgasse 2a  
1070 Wien



[www.facebook.com/lvak.ifk](http://www.facebook.com/lvak.ifk)

IFK Monitor  
International  
October 2017

raeli security interests in the framework of the de-escalation zones, specifically on Syrian southwest. Moreover, since Russia serves as the only mediator between Syria & Israel and Iran & Israel, further cooperation with Russia (also concerning air and navel operations) is in Israel's best interest.

5. Attempting to convince the US that the Iranian threat is indeed immanent and collaborate a joint plan of action to address it.

### Conclusions

At this late stage of the war, as the Iranian backed Syrian army has regained territorial control over most of Syria, there is little doubt as for the way the war would end. This is certainly not Israel's preferred outcome. Such decisive victory of Assad would enable Hezbollah and Iran to continue to operate and further extend their operation too close to the Israeli border: a most probable scenario.

The disintegration of Syria into regions controlled by different groups (ISIS, Iranian militias, Sunni extremists, Alawites, and possibly US, Russia and Turkey as part of the newly established "de-escalation" zones), an outcome which is still likely, is also not Israel's "best scenario". In such a case, Israel would have to potentially fight many fronts, as neither of the local players is friendly. In addition, sharing a common enemy may unite Iran, Hezbollah and possibly pro-Iranian factions and strengthen them on the short term, where the latter might join forces in a coordinated attack against Israel - in the long term.

When both most likely outcomes are not in Israel's best interest, the dilemma between "the devil you know" and the "devil you don't know" rises. Judging by the history of Israeli-Syria relations under the Assad regime before the outbreak of the war, it

appears as though Israel would have preferred the "devil it knows" over the uncertainty following the emergence of a new leader, possibly among Sunni Islamist groups. A slightly better scenario for Israel, though not very realistic at this point, is the survival of a weak Assad who lacks full control over Syria and most notably, on its southern border. In such a situation, the regime would be stable enough to sustain itself without posing a threat to Israel. Israel's "best case" scenario, though not very likely at present time, is a secular Syrian government - strong enough to control its country and tackle local resistance while opposing Iranian interventions on the one hand, and weak enough to not threaten Israel on the other.

The further continuance of the war may benefit Israel on the short run; Entrenching all of the involving parties in violence and hostility towards each other in a prolonged battle for control over Syria would reduce the likelihood of them initiating a direct confrontation with Israel. To date, it is most probable that when the war drums will cease to hoist, Assad would emerge victorious. Thus, Israel should continue to simultaneously act on both the military and the diplomatic level in order to ensure its sustainability and the safety of its' citizens.

#### **Personal Data:**

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Note: This article represents exclusively the opinion of the author.