

Another Middle East War is Round the Corner. Israel Threatens Lebanon and Syria

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Israel has recently intensified air force flights over Lebanon. It gives rise to suspicions it may preparing for sizable offensive air operations against Hezbollah or Syria, or both, as Islamists advance into southern Syria close to the occupied zone in the Golan Heights. Israel is concerned that the situation could enable jihadists in Syria or Hezbollah in Lebanon to acquire weapons from the Syrian government inventory, whether chemical or conventional. The Jan. 30 airstrike was a message that Israel is watching closely and ready to deliver a blow.

On March 24 an Israeli vehicle was struck by gunfire across the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. Israeli army responded with a Tamuz guided missile hitting a Syrian military post. Technically Israel has been at war with Syria since 1967, the Golan Heights has been mostly quiet since then. Now Israel is carefully watching the violence from the sidelines. It has returned fire on several occasions. Most of the cases have apparently been accidental, but there has been a response.

By the end of March the fighting within Syria has reached all the way to Israel's borders. Syrian army and rebel forces fought for control over the village of Moshav Alonei Habashan, situated only half a mile from the border.

Rebel forces have recently kidnapped 21 U.N. peacekeepers, holding them for three days in the village to release them unharmed later. But the 40-year mission has hit a snag. Several countries have already withdrawn their troops and others may follow, leaving the area beyond the UN surveillance.

Israel is preoccupied with the possibility the government or, what is very more likely, the rebels would get hold of and use chemical weapons. There is a grave concern over the possibility that, one way or another, Hezbollah may get hold of them too. Israel has publicly warned that it would take military action to prevent the chemical weapons falling into the hands of Hezbollah in Lebanon or «global jihadists» fighting inside Syria. Israeli military intelligence satellites are reported to monitor the area for possible convoys delivering weapons.

On January 30 Israel mounted an airstrike. Reportedly the target was a weapons convoy leaving a Syrian army depot near the Lebanese border. Just a few hours earlier Israeli jets had attacked Syrian «scientific research center» north-west of Damascus.

Syria

Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and Jordan's King Abdullah II have held secret talks in Amman to discuss Syria's potential use of chemical weapons, Al Quds Al-Arabi reported on December 27, 2012. Israeli media quoted unnamed officials who confirmed the reports. Jordan and Egypt are the only countries in the region to have signed a peace agreement with Israel. The accord between the two nations means that they often discuss security issues affecting the region, although these are usually announced publicly. The United States has previously said that any use of such weapons by Syria's security forces against the civilian population would constitute a «red line» and could provoke an international military action. Somehow it never mentioned the possibility of provocation by rebels.

The U.S. has been arming rebel forces in Syria and may be helping train them in Jordan. Now some of those same groups are threatening to invade Israel. The powerful jihadist groups, particularly the al-Nusra Front, are pushing into southern Syria, where they face Israel across the 1973 war cease-fire line on the Golan.

In February Israel has deployed a third Iron Dome missile defense system near its northern borders with Syria and Lebanon. The Iron Dome systems have been deployed alongside a U.S. - supplied Patriot battery, which has been stationed in the north for years.

Lebanon

The Israeli military is gearing up for the next battle against a familiar foe: Hezbollah guerrillas in Lebanon. After battling Hezbollah to a stalemate in 2006, the Israeli military says it has learned key lessons and this time around is prepared to inflict heavy damage on the group. The Israel-Lebanon border has remained largely quiet since then. But while the truce has been largely observed, Israel says Hezbollah has added to its arsenal tens of thousands of rockets and missiles capable of striking virtually anywhere in the Jewish state. Israeli military officials frequently say it is only a matter of time before the combat actions erupt. The fall of the Syrian leader or an expected Israel strike against Iran, the Hezbollah's main patron, could spark another full-fledged war. A longtime ally of the Assad's government, Hezbollah is concerned about being cut off from Iran and its arms supply line if the Damascus regime falls. Iranian Revolutionary Guards play an important role in the decision-making body of the organization - the Shura Council. The terrorist group says it will never recognize Israel or make peace with it. A Jan. 30 airstrike, supposedly Against a Hezbollah arms convoy, indicated how jumpy the Israelis are getting about Iran's support for Syria or Hezbollah.

The overwhelmingly Sunni Free Syrian Army (FSA) threatens to strike at the Shiite Hezbollah in Lebanon after the Iranian-backed movement sought to extend its control of Syrian territory along the border. The Hezbollah's push on the border may have grave implications. Some sources say the organization had deployed 1,000 fighters, partly to relieve Syrian troops needed to block rebel advances in the north. Hezbollah has sought to expand the control over some 20 Shiite villages on the Syrian side of the border by seizing nearby Sunni villages where the FSA's formations are deployed. That would spark a sharp escalation of the Syrian conflict and ignite broader Sunni-Shiite violence in Lebanon. Hezbollah is widely believed to have substantial forces in Syria fighting alongside the Syria's military. To complicate matters further, Hezbollah today is a member of the Lebanese government, which has publicly backed its continued military buildup. This despite the fact that numerous UN Security Council resolutions and Lebanon's own Taif accord call for the radical Shiite

group and all other militias in the country to be disarmed.

True, Hezbollah is preoccupied with its own domestic problems and the precarious position of its Syrian ally; it may have no desire to reignite hostilities. But the Syrian civil war, as well as Israel's tensions with Iran, could easily upset the fragile balance. Today the Israeli military possesses sophisticated real-time intelligence and upgraded drones. For any potential land operation, it has fortified its Merkava armored personnel vehicles, activated a new tank-defense that can shoot down anti-tank rockets and recently deployed Iron Dome, a rocket defense system that shot down hundreds of rockets during a recent round of fighting against Hamas militants in the Gaza Strip.

Egypt

Meanwhile, Egypt's military caretaker government has already demonstrated less concern in monitoring terrorist activity in the Sinai, as well as along its porous border with Israel. Egyptian officials have slowed down progress on the completion of a wall to stop underground weapons smuggling from Egypt into Gaza. The vacuum in Egyptian security services has led to increased cooperation between the Moslem Brotherhood and Hamas.

Attacks against Egyptian police units by Palestinian groups and a local branch of al-Qaeda have been intensifying since Mubarak's overthrow. Most of the attacks have occurred in the mountains of central Sinai and have been carried out by Palestinian armed groups and al-Qaeda in the Sinai Peninsula. Sinai appears to be out of security control, some say Egypt is more dangerous to Israel than Iran. Israel's Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman confirmed this point of view on April 23, 2012 during a visit to Baku, Azerbaijan. Last year Egypt withdrew its ambassador to Tel Aviv as relations between the two governments grow increasingly strained. Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has called Egypt's Sinai Peninsula a «kind of Wild West». Netanyahu is accusing Iran of contributing to that increased unrest in the region. Israeli troops are not permitted to enter the Sinai Peninsula under a 1979 peace treaty with Egypt. If Egypt were to break the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty, Israel may move to take the Sinai because it was given to Egypt in return for peace. If the peace treaty is canceled by the Egyptians, there might be a justification for Israel to take the Sinai over to create a buffer zone.

Iran

It is entirely possible the June 2013 presidential election will provoke a repeat of the street battles and civil unrest that, for a moment in the summer of 2009, appeared to be close to toppling the revolutionary regime. The example of the Arab spring revolts may now inspire even greater internal resistance. This in turn could lead the regime to blame foreign meddling, as it has in the past, and lash out abroad. If Syria succumbs to the pressure from western-backed rebels, then Iran may feel that it is next on the regime-change agenda. Assad's departure would undermine Iranian influence in Lebanon, where it is closely allied with the dominant Shia Hezbollah. It would also have negative practical implications for Iran's alliance with Hamas in Gaza - where the Palestinians' stand-off with Israel is another potent war-trigger - and for its efforts to supersede Egypt and Turkey as the region's leading power. The fall of Assad in Syria could prove to be a very dangerous moment across the Middle East. Rather than wait for an inevitable Israeli-US strike, Tehran could decide to retaliate first once it has nothing to lose.

Russia's view of Middle East trends

Meeting top Russian diplomats in July 2012, Russia's President Vladimir Putin said that certain countries will do anything to retain the influence they have become accustomed to in the Arab world. He stressed that western nations often adopt a one-sided policy in Arab affairs that violates international law. *«We must do everything in our power to coerce the opposing forces in the Syrian conflict into coming to a peaceful solution»*, underlined the Russian President. Citing the importance of an active dialogue in Syria, he said *«this is, of course, a more complicated and delicate task than just barreling in with military intervention»*. Putin added that only a diplomatic solution could lead to long-term peace and stability in the region.

On December 2012 Russia's Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov delivered a speech at a foreign policy council meeting to outline the Russia's vision of the situation in the region, especially in Syria. He stressed Russia's opposition to *«advancing democracy through iron and blood just does not work»*. *According to the top diplomat «In most cases it produces the opposite reaction» and leads to «the strengthening of extremists and repressive forces, decreasing the chances of real democratic change»*, Lavrov said. *«This has been made clear in recent months – the past year-and-a-half»*, he added. Lavrov recalled the results of past attempts to use force by avoiding the UN Security Council, and expressed concern that some states are trying to make the *«Libyan model a precedent. «What is worrying is that at times of crises one is tempted to resort to military methods. Some of our partners find these methods suitable»*, Lavrov said. *«No-one knows in the end what will happen in the Middle East, including Syria»*, he said.

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Is it true that the only thing left to ponder is who is going to ignite the next war in the Middle East, and when? Will Israel resort to preemption? It is that by rendering support to rag-tag patchwork grouping of Syrian rebels, the West drives Israel to the wall. Israel had lived for many years outside of immediate danger from the Syrian border, the UN broken truce had been observed. There had been no talk of chemical weapons getting into wrong hands and used against Israel. It's the Syrian opposition who makes the situation so unstable. The West supported the opposition against pro-Western Mubarak. Now there is no more peace in Sinai like it used to be for so many years. By supporting opposition everywhere the Arab Spring spreads, the West has contributed into making Israel face threats from all sides again.

It's not that the actors strive for the scenario to become a reality, but it could be sparked against their will by the events in Syria or the dexterity of policy conducted by those who stubbornly support the Syrian opposition they know so little about. The spark may lead to a major trouble that would have a lot of adverse consequences, like aggravating the Middle East disarray, cause severe global economic turmoil and increased political volatility worldwide.

The [US Middle East policy](#) is acquiring the traits of a comprehensive plan aimed at destabilization of the geopolitically supersensitive region altering the borders of the states. The population of Israel may be sacrificed to implement it...

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