

Israel Enters The Syrian Theater: Confronting Iran via the Third Option

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With its air strikes against targets inside Syria last week, Israel announced its formal entry into the Syrian crisis. The Israeli targeting of Iran has thus entered the Syrian theater.

According to McClatchy, the Israeli strikes on January 30 targeted anti-aircraft missiles at a military base outside of Damascus. The missiles, according to Israeli intelligence sources, were headed for Hezbollah in Lebanon.

“Israel relies heavily on the strength of our air force, and its strategic deterrence,” an Israeli official explained to McClatchy. “Weapons systems that make our air force vulnerable will not be allowed to fall into the hands of terrorist groups.”

Accordingly, Washington reacted to the Israeli assault by sternly warning Damascus. “Syria,” White House deputy national security adviser Ben Rhodes warned, “should not further destabilize the region by transferring weaponry to Hezbollah.”

Washington, in other words, views any effort to curb Israel’s freedom to fly sorties when and where it fancies as a threat to regional stability. Of course, “stability” in the Washington lexicon is used to connote unmatched Western military superiority. (Thus, NATO Patriot batteries deployed along the Turkey-Syria border are championed as a means to “deescalate tensions.”)

With such “stability” in mind, Time reports that Washington has given a “green light” to Israel to carry out yet further strikes. And blessed with such carte blanche, Israel is already planning an escalated level of intervention.

According to a report in the Times of London, “Israel is considering creating a buffer zone reaching up to 10 miles inside Syria.” And to this end, Israel has now reportedly dispatched its third Iron Dome anti-rocket battery to its northern border. As an Israeli military planner went on to tell the Times, “If the country [Syria] remains unstable we might have to stay there for years.”

Meanwhile, the right-wing Debkafile reports that “the Israeli Air Force has in recent days thrown a round-the-clock blanket over the [Syria-Lebanon] border area.”

“Without going through any formalities,” Debka continues, “Israel has thus effectively imposed a no-fly regime over a buffer zone straddling the Syrian-Lebanese border and placed it under the control of its air force.”

The Israeli strike inside Syria was thus clearly not an isolated affair, but a prelude to a deepening Israeli intervention long in the making.

Confronting Iran via the Third Option

In a February 2012 New York Times op-ed, former Mossad chief Efraim Halevy argued that beyond punitive sanctions and military confrontation, the crisis in Syria created a third option “to rid the world of the Iranian menace.”

“Ensuring that Iran is evicted from its regional hub in Damascus would cut off Iran’s access to its proxies (Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza) and visibly dent its domestic and international prestige, possibly forcing a hemorrhaging regime in Tehran to suspend its nuclear policies,” Halevy argued. “This would be a safer and more rewarding option than the military one.”

“Once this is achieved,” Halevy continued, “the entire balance of forces in the region would undergo a sea change. Iranian-sponsored terrorism would be visibly contained; Hezbollah would lose its vital Syrian conduit to Iran and Lebanon could revert to long-forgotten normalcy; Hamas fighters in Gaza would have to contemplate a future without Iranian weaponry and training; and the Iranian people might once again rise up against the regime that has brought them such pain and suffering.”

Such notions of a “new Middle East” amenable to the interests of Tel Aviv and Washington have long held an allure for Western planners. In fact, nearly seven years have now passed since Israel’s 2006 invasion of Lebanon was cheered by U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice as “the birth pangs of a new Middle East.”

It’s little surprise, then, that the dream of forging a new Middle East through the destruction of Syria has come to be championed by the U.S. neo-con crowd. But the hope of using the crisis in Syria to boot Iran from the Arab world more generally is widely shared. Indeed, the marginally more sober have begun to warm to the idea of intervention into Syria as a means to purge the “Iranian menace.”

“An inflection point has been reached,” the New York Times’ Roger Cohen argues in his latest column. “Inaction spurs the progressive radicalization of Syria, the further disintegration of the state, the intensification of Assad’s mass killings, and the chances of the conflict spilling out of Syria in sectarian mayhem. It squanders an opportunity to weaken Iran. This is not in the West’s interest.”

“It is time to alter the Syrian balance of power enough to give political compromise a chance and Assad no option but departure,” Cohen continues. “That means an aggressive program to train and arm the Free Syrian Army. It also means [Senator John] McCain’s call to use U.S. cruise missiles to destroy Assad’s aircraft on the runway is daily more persuasive.”

But it really doesn’t take much persuasion to convince U.S. elites it’s time to fire off another cruise missile. After all, “rocket and bomb diplomacy” has become American foreign policy orthodoxy.

Stoking the Inferno or Seeking an End Game?

American dreams of cruise missile justice notwithstanding, Israel's entry into Syria indeed appears as an inflection point. But why, we must ask, did Tel Aviv chose now to insert itself into the crisis?

As Nicola Nasser notes, the Israeli raid "coincided with hard to refute indications that the 'regime change' in Syria by force, both by foreign military intervention and by internal armed rebellion, has failed, driving the Syrian opposition in exile to opt unwillingly for "negotiations" with the ruling regime."

In fact, it was the very day the exiled Syrian opposition first hinted at an openness to dialogue that Israeli jets were sent to strafe the outskirts of Damascus. But then again, stoking the Syrian inferno is widely held in Tel Aviv as favorable to Israeli interests.

As former Israeli Military Intelligence chief Maj. Gen. Amos Yadlin explained on Monday, "The most significant army along our borders, the Syrian army, which is an advanced army with a very large arsenal of long-range missiles and rockets and with Russian-made air defenses that are among the most advanced in the world, is wearing itself down. Its operational capability to act against Israel declines every week that goes by."

"This is a positive development both from the military aspect, but also from the political aspect," Yadlin continued. "The radical anti-Israel axis that goes through Tehran, Damascus, Beirut, and Gaza is falling apart."

Alon Liel, the former director general of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, offered much the same analysis in a weekend appearance on Al Jazeera English.

"For Israel," Liel argued, "the weakening of Syria as a result of this war is of strategic importance because Syria is quite an enemy of Israel. And the internal battle is also removing the issue of withdrawing from the Golan Heights from the agenda."

Whether Israel's formal intervention into Syria is thus meant to fan the flames, or whether it is instead intended to hasten an end game, remains uncertain. At the moment, though, it certainly appears Tel Aviv is quite content with letting Syria burn.

But whatever the case may be, Israel's ultimate aim is quite clear. As Halevy argued, "if Mr. Assad goes, Iranian hegemony over Syria must go with him. Anything less would rob Mr. Assad's departure of any significance."

Yet as planners in Tel Aviv and Washington seek to impart such significance, a growing Iranian foothold in the Arab world continues outside the purview of imperial diktats.

A Resilient Menace

The arrival of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad in Cairo on Tuesday - the first Iranian leader to touch down in Cairo since the Islamic revolution in 1979 - offers just the latest evidence of Tehran's growing regional stature. Cause, of course, for great distress in Washington.

"While the Egypt's relations with Iran remains limited," the New York Times noted "the scene on the tarmac at the Cairo Airport on Tuesday — Egypt's new president, Mohamed Morsi, greeting Mr. Ahmedinejad warmly in a red-carpet ceremony — would have been unimaginable under Mr. Mubarak, and seemed likely to alarm the Obama administration."

Tuesday's historic meeting in Cairo follows on the heels of Morsi's visit to Tehran in August for the Sixteenth Summit of Non-Aligned Movement. At the time, Morsi was widely condemned in both Washington and Tel Aviv for, as Times columnist Thomas Friedman wrote, taking such a "wrong turn."

Morsi's continued "wrong turn," needless to say, bodes ill for those seeking to sever Tehran presence in Syria. For as Morsi declared Tuesday, "I believe that the Syrian problem could not be resolved without Iran and Iran's efforts in this regard are prioritized."

"We have no doubt that Iran is sincerely endeavoring to resolve the problems in Syria and other nations," Morsi added, "Hence, we stress cooperation with Iran in this field."

It appears expunging the "Iranian menace," then, will require more than an Israeli triumph on a Syrian battlefield. For rather than being crippled, the menace appears ever more resilient. Hence the purported danger is said to remain acute.

Speaking with the Wall Street Journal, outgoing U.S. Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta recently accused Iran of "an intensified campaign to destabilize the Middle East." And as a result, the Journal report continued, "the U.S. is stepping up efforts to counter the Iranian threat."

Such efforts will no doubt come to dominate the itinerary of President Obama's spring visit to Israel. As the New York Times reports, "on the agenda this trip will be Iran and the continuing strife in Syria that threatens to descend into a wider regional conflict."

The prime minister and president have much to discuss; for though a new Middle East may indeed be on offer, the imperial vise is loosening ever so slightly. "Stability" is clearly threatened.

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