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ASSESSMENT REPORT

Motives for Israel's Intensified Military Strikes against Syria

Policy Analysis Unit | May 2017

Increased Israeli Aggression on Syria: What to Expect Next

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Introduction

In the early hours of Monday, 27 April, Israel launched an airstrike aimed at a Hezbollah weapons cache and an aviation fuel depot near Damascus International Airport. The strike coincided with a meeting in Moscow attended by Israeli National Security Minister Avigdor Lieberman, as was a delegation headed by Iranian Minister of Defense, Hussein Dahqan. News reports indicated that four cargo planes—three of them owned by Iran—had landed at Damascus International Airport only two hours before the Israeli strike .

Repeated Israeli military attacks and incursions against Syria over the past few months have generally been clustered around a few sites in Damascus and in the center and south of the country. The April 27 attack was preceded by an aerial strike on the “National Defense Forces”, a pro-regime militia based in the vicinity of Quneitra on April 22 which left three Syrians dead. On March 17, Israeli jets struck a site in Palmyra, in central Syria, that reportedly housed advanced missiles intended for transfer to Hezbollah in Lebanon. That earlier attack had precipitated an official protest from Moscow, with the Kremlin directly expressing its discontent to the Israeli Ambassador to Moscow. The fact that the Russians singled out that individual incident is likely due to the fact that the target was located near a Russian military base.

This paper will explore the reasons behind the accelerated pace of Israeli attacks on Syrian soil. Specifically, it will question if an upsurge in Israeli attacks against targets within Syria reflects a more decisive approach from the Israeli government towards the conflict within Syria. It also seeks to understand the extent of a reaction which can be expected from the Syrian regime and its allies.

Israeli Red Lines

Since the outbreak of the Syrian Revolution in 2011, Israel has attempted to prolong the subsequent conflict in an effort to weaken Syria. The Israeli government has always monitored the situation on the ground closely, declaring and seeking to impose a very strict set of “Red Lines” for the parties in the Syrian conflict to abide by. Specifically, the Israelis made it clear that they would not tolerate the Syrian regime supplying advanced weapons—including chemical weapons, air defense systems, long-distance missiles,

naval missiles and drones—to Hezbollah in Lebanon. Additionally, Israel has more recently (in the past two years) made clear that it would not tolerate the siting of pro-regime military forces—including Syrian, Iranian, Hezbollah, or other allied militia forces—in the vicinity of the Israeli occupied Golan Heights. Recently, the Israelis have added additional emphasis to these latter conditions, likely due to a combination of two factors.

The first would be that Iranian, Hezbollah and similar militia could try to encroach on the Golan Heights, even as official Syrian forces seem unable—or unwilling—to do so. Unlike the Syrian regime forces, there is no ceasefire agreement to govern the rules of engagement between Israeli forces and those from Iran or Lebanese Hezbollah along the Golan and in Quneitra. Israel’s future-minded approach means that Tel Aviv is likely to insist that any resolution to the conflict in Syria must ensure a permanent, de-facto demilitarized zone around the occupied Golan Heights, one which would effectively be an Israeli sphere of influence.

Israel has actively and aggressively enforced its “Red Lines” since January, 2012, with scores of air strikes across targets in Syria unleashed the moment it suspects they have been breached. The Syrian regime’s hesitancy and inability to act over the past five and a half years has only served to embolden Israel. The regime in Damascus appears distracted by its battles with opposition factions; although its forces and those of its allied militia waste no time unleashing lethal force against Syrian civilians, they appear incapable of confronting Israel.

Russian–Israeli Liaisons

Moscow has closely coordinated its military movements in Syria with the Israelis since its direct military involvement in the Syrian conflict began in September of 2015. The two countries cooperate through a bilateral coordination committee, chaired by the Israeli Chief of Staff and the Commander of Russian forces in Syria. The committee works to ensure that Russian air defense systems are not used against Israeli military jets flying over Syria, given that Moscow has accepted Israel’s right to strike at targets within Syria in order to enforce its previously declared conditions.

Despite its free rein to strike in Syria at will, and the constant coordination between the Israeli and Russian military commands, the Israeli government remains vigilant, deeply troubled by the conflict. Its anxiety is born of two main factors. This is due to the

potential influence to be exerted by Iran and her allied militia within the Golan Heights region, particularly after the Battle of Aleppo in December, 2016. The Israelis also worry that a potential peace settlement in the Syrian conflict, brought about by US-Russian conciliation, could preserve Syrian territorial integrity without offering any tangible results for Israel, which fears being deprived of the chance to get international, or at least US, recognition of its annexation of the Golan Heights.

The US Position

The election of Donald Trump heightened Russian expectations for wider collaboration between Moscow and Washington, particularly regarding Syria. These hopes were dashed, however, as Donald Trump's overtures to the Kremlin suffered repeated setbacks, such as the resignation of Russia friendly National Security Adviser General Michael Flynn, and a general reluctance within the US military and security establishments to work more closely with Moscow.

To date, the Trump Administration has yet to formulate a coherent strategy towards the Middle East, including Syria. A number of important features of what his foreign policy might include are becoming apparent, however. Most importantly, the US is likely to resume its warm relationship with Israel, and to restore some of its relations with what Trump sees as the "moderate" Arab states, including the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council and Egypt. Washington will likely adopt a more hawkish approach to Iran, becoming less tolerant of its regional expansionism and its intervention in the affairs of Arab states through, empowered through its proxies across the region and its nuclear muscle.

Trump has already demonstrated his ability to act swiftly on the Syrian stage: the US retaliated to the use of Sarin nerve agent by the Syrian regime against civilians living in Khan Sheikhoun on April 4 within four days. The US response took the form of a cruise missile strike against the Shuyarat airfield from which the planes that attacked Khan Sheikhoun took off. Russia was pre-warned of the attack but it was nevertheless a signal from the White House that it broke with the Obama doctrine—and was prepared to use force to achieve its political ends.

This single action does not necessarily indicate a fundamental shift in Washington's approach to the crisis in Syria, only that the US was committed to being involved in some way. The Trump Administration, which continues to prioritize the battle against

ISIL in the Middle East, has not made clear the extent to which it will be willing to cooperate with Russia to find a settlement in Syria.

Regardless of all of this uncertainty, it is clear that Israel will seek to further its own aims within Syria by leveraging its connections and influence in both the United States and Russia. The Israelis can also leverage their airstrikes against Syrian targets, which are likely to become more frequent, in order to achieve their goals. One very important Israeli aim in this regard will be the securing of international legitimacy for Israeli control over the Golan Heights, and opposition to the presence of either Iranian or pro-Iranian forces in the south of Syria.

On the Lebanese frontier, neither Israel nor Hezbollah have any interest in engaging in a direct conflict for the foreseeable future. A recent show of force by Hezbollah in the south of Lebanon could be viewed as merely another publicity stunt in a media and psychological war, and one intended to boost the morale of its domestic, Lebanese support base which has long been humiliated by repeated Israeli attacks on Hezbollah and Syrian sites. For Israel, the only meaningful reality will be the extent to which Hezbollah abides by its ceasefire along the Lebanese frontier, and imposes that ceasefire on other factions in Lebanon—regardless of the pounding it takes in Syria.