

Syria's 'War Option':

Assessing the Lessons from West Bank/Gaza Riots

by [Kenneth Pollack \(/experts/kenneth-pollack\)](#)

Oct 8, 1996

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Kenneth Pollack \(/experts/kenneth-pollack\)](#)

Kenneth Pollack is a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute.



Brief Analysis

As Israelis and Palestinians meet at the Erez junction, Syrian President Hafiz al-Asad will be watching closely. Before the West Bank/Gaza rioting, Syrian troop movements reminded Israelis of the 1973 Yom Kippur surprise attack, prompting a war scare. In the wake of the riots, Prime Minister Netanyahu came to Washington and left without having made concessions that could be seen as rewarding the Palestinians' resort to violence, but there is now a new negotiating structure at Erez continuous talks with ongoing U.S. participation that has energized Israeli-Palestinian talks and improved Arafat's bargaining position. If this format leads to rapid progress on issues that Israel was unwilling to concede prior to last week's bloodshed, Syria may draw a lesson for its own moribund negotiating track and opt for violence as well.

September's War Scare: Beginning in early August, the Syrian army began redeploying several units in Lebanon, raising concerns in Israel about Asad's intentions. Damascus moved the 10th Mechanized Division's 51st Brigade from Beirut to the central Biq'a Valley, and redeployed the headquarters and one regiment of the 14th Special Forces Division to the Syria-Lebanon border along the northern slopes of Mount Hermon. IDF officers warned that these moves threatened Israel. The popular Israeli press then spun these statements into a full-blown war crisis. To attempt to allay Israeli fears, Syria passed messages through the U.S. explaining that its moves were a defensive response to Israeli statements hinting at possible Israeli military action against Syrian assets in Lebanon, should tensions rise along the Israel-Lebanon border. These Syrian reassurances apparently convinced the Israeli government that its fears had been misplaced, prompting official statements downplaying the threat of war.

Prior to last week's events, Israeli fears of a Syrian attack were almost certainly exaggerated. The Syrian military moves probably were defensive, as Damascus claimed. First, there were no other signs of the kind of large-scale military activity that almost certainly would precede a Syrian attack. Damascus would have to expect that even a limited assault on Israel would prompt heavy Israeli retaliation, and so would brace its forces to absorb such a blow. In addition, Syria almost certainly would ready additional forces both to deter Israel from escalating to a more ambitious effort, and to be able to respond if Israel did so anyway.

Second, the Syrian moves were unnecessary for an attack on Israel. Syrian mechanized units currently deployed

opposite the Golan are adequate for a quick "land-grab," while Special Forces could be flown in by helicopter from the Damascus area for an assault on the Israeli intelligence gathering site on Mt. Hermon or some other small, high-value target. Given the meager distances involved and demonstrated Syrian abilities, the movement of the 14th Division elements to the Mt. Hermon area would only marginally facilitate such operations. Likewise, consolidating the 10th Mechanized Division in the Biq'a improves Syria's ability to defend against an Israeli drive into Lebanon, but does not make the unit any more able to attack the Golan or Huleh valley because such an assault would entail driving over the western slopes of Mt. Hermon where Syrian armor would be hamstrung by the terrain and vulnerable to Israeli air power. Thus, at most, Damascus may have been signalling its frustration over the deadlock in negotiations by threatening an attack.

The Palestinian-Israeli Crisis and Syria's Role: In that context, Asad will be watching very closely the outcome of last week's summit in Washington and this week's negotiations at Erez. Asad reportedly shares Arafat's anger and frustration over the stalled peace process and is keenly assessing the impact of the rioting on the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. If Arafat is able to secure concessions from Israel that the Israeli government wasn't previously prepared to make whether it be Hebron redeployment or other topics Asad will consider Arafat's decision to sanction violence a success. Asad likely will conclude that Arafat fruitfully employed Anwar Sadat's October 1973 strategy of using conflict to break a diplomatic log jam, secure U.S. help to negotiate long-term problems, and receive immediate benefits in return for a ceasefire. Asad has always believed in the efficacy of this strategy witness his regular stirring of the pot in Lebanon as a means of pressuring Israel and Arafat's perceived success would almost certainly tempt him to indulge in the same approach.

> Moreover, Arafat's success will appear to Asad not only as an opportunity, but also a threat. If Arafat is able to restart negotiations, it will conjure Asad's greatest fear: that Israel will forge ahead on all of the other tracks of the peace process and ignore Syria, thereby undermining Asad's bargaining position and possibly precluding a peace agreement in which he regained the Golan. Such isolation has always been Asad's nightmare and he has never failed to act to prevent it in the past. Thus with the Syria track completely deadlocked, a resumption of productive Israeli-Palestinian negotiations could panic Asad. Indeed, Syrian spokesmen have loudly claimed that the Washington Summit was a failure, while the Arab press is reporting that Syria has called for an Arab summit to discuss "all political and military possibilities" regarding the current state of the peace process. Similarly, in his recent interview with CNN's Rowland Evans, Asad warned that if there is no progress on the Syrian track "the stability of the region will diminish," which "could lead to . . . war."

> Indeed, the Evans interview was littered with disturbing comments. For instance, Asad claimed that the new Likud government was reneging on "commitments" made by the Labor government (presumably the supposed willingness of Rabin to consider a withdrawal from the Golan in return for adequate security arrangements and bilateral relations) which he asserted were now Syria's "rights." Similarly, he asserted that Lebanon is "a land which is an extension of Syrian territory," and that Israel's motive in signing a defense cooperation agreement with Turkey was "to do harm to Syria." At the very least, these responses must be seen as reflecting Asad's tremendous frustration with the path the Syrian track has taken since the Israeli elections. In the worst case, they could be an attempt to justify beforehand a possible Syrian decision to resort to violence.

Asad's Likely Course: There is no reason to believe that Asad will rush immediately to conflict if there is progress on the Palestinian track, nor is there reason to believe that were he to do so he would begin by attacking Israeli positions on the Golan. Asad has demonstrated considerable wariness toward the new Israeli government, particularly given the presence of ultra-hawks like Ariel Sharon and Rafael Eitan, architects of the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Moreover, Asad no doubt realizes that any resort to violence has the potential to alienate the United States, whose continued tolerance, if not friendship, he clearly needs. For all of these reasons, Asad is likely to begin with

diplomatic and propaganda measures to try to force Israel to attend to the Syria track with seriousness on par with the Palestinian track. However, were negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians to pick up speed while the Syria track remained dormant, Assad would strongly consider escalating to a military move. In this case, encouragement for Hizballah operations against Israeli forces in south Lebanon will be his most likely course. Assad may have been trying to lay the groundwork for such a course of action in in the Evans interview, in which he repeated his argument that Hizballah and Palestinian Islamic Jihad are "freedom fighters" conducting a legitimate struggle against Israel.

A direct assault on Israel by Syrian military forces still seems remote because of the risks such an escalation would entail: prompting potentially severe Israeli retaliation, convincing moderate Israelis to abandon the Syria track, and alienating the United States. Nevertheless, even renewed fighting in Lebanon poses significant risks for the peace process. Likud was highly critical of the Peres government's Operation Grapes of Wrath last April and it probably will feel compelled to adopt different tactics - perhaps even directly striking Syrian forces in Lebanon if confronted with the same challenge. Once started on this path, it is difficult to predict an outcome.

Kenneth Pollock served until recently in the Near East/South Asia Directorate, National Security Council. He has just joined The Washington Institute as a research fellow specializing in Arab political and military issues.

Policy #107

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆
Farzin Nadimi

[\(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆
Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism\)](/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule](#)

Feb 9, 2022

◆
Matthew Levitt

[\(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule\)](/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule)

TOPICS

[Arab-Israeli Relations \(/policy-analysis/arab-israeli-relations\)](/policy-analysis/arab-israeli-relations)

[Peace Process \(/policy-analysis/peace-process\)](/policy-analysis/peace-process)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Lebanon \(/policy-analysis/lebanon\)](/policy-analysis/lebanon)

[Syria \(/policy-analysis/syria\)](/policy-analysis/syria)