

There Goes the Neighborhood

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Articles & Testimony

Increased al-Qaeda activity on the Golan frontier has some Israelis nostalgic for the days of Assad.

While the world focuses on the Islamic State's advances in Iraq and Syria, the Syrian war is spilling over into the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights. On Aug. 28, Syrian rebel groups, led by al-Qaeda affiliate al-Nusra Front, captured the old border city of Quneitra from the Syrian army and Iranian-backed National Defense Forces. Al-Nusra Front took 45 Filipino U.N. peacekeepers hostage and then assaulted two other U.N. outposts -- only to be repulsed after the Filipino commander ignored U.N. orders to surrender. The hostage situation was only resolved Thursday, Sept. 11, as all the peacekeepers were released safely after what appears to be Qatari mediation.

But though the latest crisis on the Golan frontier may be over, the larger threats facing Israel still remain. Across the border, more and more black jihadi flags are popping up, mere feet from Israel's Star of David. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's forces and the Hezbollah-inspired resistance groups that continue to operate under the regime's umbrella have also launched attacks against Israeli-controlled areas in the Golan. This chaotic situation is creating considerable unease in Jerusalem policy circles -- and upending decades of Israeli strategy for dealing with Syria.

Syrian rebels, including al-Nusra Front, have been on the Golan frontier for about a year. Their largest presence has been in the middle of the "zone of separation" between Israeli and Syrian forces -- which has been monitored by peacekeepers from the U.N. Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) since 1974 -- near the frontier villages of Bir Ajam, ar-Ruwayhinah, and Buraykah. Over the past two weeks, however, al-Nusra Front and five other Syrian opposition groups have launched an offensive in the area, pushing back the regime and upsetting the status quo along the border that has persisted for four decades.

Israeli officials say the latest offensive has introduced two new and potentially game-changing aspects into Syria's southern front. First, al-Nusra Front has dramatically expanded its operations from the southern Syrian city of Deraa into the areas adjacent to the Golan frontier. Theories about the jihadi group's motivations vary: Israeli

sources say the Islamic State chased the group out of eastern Syria, causing it to shift its men and firepower south to use against the Assad regime.

The offensive makes it harder for the regime to use its weapons of choice -- including artillery, Scud missiles, and rockets -- against opposition positions without risk of hitting Israeli-controlled areas and drawing an Israel Defense Forces (IDF) response. On Aug. 27, for example, two regime mortars seemingly intended for rebel forces in Quneitra landed in the vineyards of the border kibbutz of Ein Zivan, drawing an Israeli counterstrike hours later against a Syrian government command facility. The rebels' overall goal seems to be relieving a number of regime-encircled rebel positions southwest of Damascus, including Beit Jinn, Khan al-Sheikh, and areas west of al-Kiswah.

The second game-changer is UNDOF's crumbling presence on the Golan. Hostage-taking is nothing new in the Syrian war, but al-Nusra Front's attempt to ransom the 45 Fijian U.N. peacekeepers ups the ante both with Israel and the international community. Before it backed down Thursday, the group issued three demands that show how detached the jihadists are from diplomatic and military realities: It wanted al-Nusra Front's removal from the U.N. terrorist list, humanitarian aid deliveries to besieged areas of Damascus, and compensation for three al-Nusra Front fighters recently killed during action against UNDOF forces.

Qatar, which recently negotiated the release of an American hostage held by al-Nusra Front and which is believed to have some contacts with the group, reportedly played a role in the negotiations to resolve the crisis. A U.N. Security Council statement called upon "countries with influence to strongly convey to those responsible to immediately release the peacekeepers," an indirect reference to Doha.

The hostage situation easily could have been much worse, as al-Nusra Front attempted to capture two UNDOF posts manned by Filipino peacekeepers on Aug. 30 and 31. Disobeying a direct order from their Indian UNDOF commander, the Filipino forces fired back when an al-Nusra Front truck attempted to ram the front of their outpost. In the hours that followed, intervention by a nearby Irish UNDOF battalion, as well as help from Israeli forces and Assad regime mortars, allowed the peacekeepers to escape to safety. While the Indian commander has since scolded his Filipino colleague for jeopardizing the lives of the Fijian and other UNDOF forces, the action is being referred to in Manila as the "greatest escape."

Officials in Jerusalem say al-Nusra Front's advance and UNDOF's increasingly "tattered umbrella" of security are causing a tactical shift in Israeli thinking. Israel never relied on UNDOF to protect Israel from cross-border action -- but its forces are a symbol of international legitimacy of the Golan frontier. The U.N. peacekeepers' reduction to three or four bases is a reflection of the increasing instability along the border.

Another factor behind the shift has been the creation of a responsibility vacuum on the Syrian-controlled side of the Golan. In other words, there is no longer one party that Israel or the United Nations can call to resolve disputes and deter from carrying out future attacks. Thus far, the party exploiting this vacuum has been the Assad regime and its allies. Following Assad's announcement this year that "resistance" along the Golan frontier would continue despite the war, a number of Hezbollah-inspired groups planted improvised explosive devices along the fence marking the Syrian side of the frontier that targeted Israeli patrols on the other side of the border. Israel has defused many of these devices but cannot find them all; so far, at least two have exploded. With these devices added to the regular dangers of cross-border shellfire from the war, Israelis are increasingly concerned about how to protect IDF soldiers and Golan residents from a war that seems set to escalate.

The biggest issue weighing on Israeli thinking on Syria is how to deter al-Nusra Front and jihadists in general. Israel's experience with moderate forces in southern Syria -- as demonstrated recently, when al-Nusra Front forced a captured Syrian rebel to divulge his Israeli contacts and meetings in a YouTube video -- indicate they are qualitatively weaker than the jihadists. While online sources provide a good amount of information on jihadi leaders

and their aspirations, far less is known about their military calculations. The constellation of military and Iranian-trained paramilitary groups that make up the Assad regime seem more predictable -- they at least have the trappings of a state, however crippled, that Israel has dealt with indirectly for decades. Or as Israeli officials always lament: "At least there's an address."

But Israeli officials recognize that dealing with Syria going forward will require having many more addresses than simply Assad's palace. While some Israelis still prefer to deal with Assad's forces in the areas adjacent to the Golan, Tehran's deep involvement in propping up the regime means his outright victory would hand a strategic victory to Israel's arch-foe.

For now, Israeli officials will continue to deal with challenges from two Syrias -- Assad's rump state in the west and the varied forces, including al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State, in the chaotic "Sunnistan" in the center -- while carefully looking for opportunities with Kurdish-controlled areas in the northeast that declared their autonomy earlier this year. As one Israeli official put it: "We have to watch each area village by village and keep our expectations low."

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