

Striking Syria: Lessons from the Israeli Experience

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Brief Analysis

Israel's lessons from numerous strikes in Syria show that Assad can be deterred, particularly if he loses significant assets in a strike marked by clear, realistic objectives, careful planning, and credible deterrent messages after the fact.

Israel is watching closely as the United States lays the ground for a potential strike in Syria. Despite assessing that a major Syrian military response against Israel is unlikely, officials are still preparing for any eventuality and issuing public statements intended to deter Bashar al-Assad. As Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu declared this week, "We are not part of the civil war in Syria, but if we detect any attempt whatsoever to harm us...we will respond fiercely."

While Israel is taking care not to appear involved in the crisis, it quietly expects Washington to take meaningful action. Beyond the humanitarian and normative dimensions, Israelis believe that U.S. credibility among local and international actors is at stake, especially in Iran. Erosion of American deterrence would be bad for Israel as well as Washington. Policymakers and military planners may therefore benefit from looking back at Israel's long experience with strikes against Syria, Hezbollah, Hamas, and other regional actors.

LESSONS LEARNED

Since Bashar assumed power in 2000, Israel has carried out several surgical airstrikes in Syria. From 2001 to 2005, when the Syrian military was still occupying Lebanon, Israeli strikes were designed to pressure the regime into restraining terrorist attacks by its proxies. In July 2001, for example, Israeli air forces destroyed a Syrian radar installation in eastern Lebanon in a (failed) bid to deter Hezbollah. And an October 2003 strike on a Palestinian terrorist training camp near Damascus was launched in response to a suicide bombing in Israel carried out under guidance from headquarters in Syria. More recent strikes have reportedly aimed to prevent Syria and its proxies from upgrading their strategic capabilities. In 2007, Israel reportedly destroyed a nuclear reactor in eastern Syria.

And on more than one occasion this year, it has reportedly targeted (in a standoff manner) convoys attempting to transfer strategic weapons to Hezbollah in Lebanon.

To be sure, there are obvious differences between Israel and the United States, among them the fact that Israel is not a superpower and must therefore respond to many situations alone and in a deniable manner. Nevertheless, Washington can glean several lessons -- some learned the hard way -- from Israel's previous confrontations in Syria.

Strike the right balance when timing a strike.

Although it is important to make proper military preparations and build the legal, political, and media cases for a strike, waiting too long can create problems. In addition to decontextualizing the attack from its original trigger, delay may give the targeted party and its allies valuable time to prepare defensive and counter-measures. This may already be happening in Syria.

Clearly define the objective.

When planning a strike, one must carefully define its objectives, reconciling desired goals with what is achievable and designing means to meet those ends. During the 2006 war in Lebanon, Israel initially set some unrealistic objectives (e.g., retrieving abducted soldiers) and was compelled to adjust them in the face of challenging realities. The result was an incoherent political-military strategy and an unsatisfactory outcome.

Given its overarching goal of enhancing U.S. credibility and deterrence, Washington could set either a limited objective or a broader strategic objective. The limited option would likely consist of deterring the Syrian regime from further use of chemical weapons by exacting a punitive price. This may include destroying some of Assad's abilities to use chemicals. A broader strategic approach could aim to alter the balance of power in Syria (thus weakening the Iranian-led radical axis), which would require higher-intensity strikes and additional measures to assist certain rebel groups or topple Assad entirely. Whichever objective is chosen, Washington should make it as clear as possible, thereby improving the chances that Assad will internalize it and the outside world will interpret it correctly.

As Israel's experience shows, in many cases it is impossible to achieve even a well-defined objective with a single strike. If Washington opts for a single, contained strike (President Obama's clear preference), then a limited objective would be in order. This does not necessarily mean a feeble, symbolic operation, however -- by choosing the right targets and conducting the attack in the right way, the United States could achieve significant objectives without further escalation.

Strike a balance between effectiveness and containment.

To be effective, even a limited strike must destroy some of Assad's significant assets, and Syria has plenty of chemical, military, command-and-control, and regime targets of this nature. Crippling Assad's slim air force, for example, could fit a limited option. Yet there is a certain point beyond which Assad may feel compelled to escalate, even against his own interest. In choosing targets, Washington would need to pay careful attention to the psychological and symbolic impact of any actions against leadership targets (unless it opts to decapitate Assad). In June 2006, Israeli planes produced a supersonic boom over Assad's palace near Latakia after Syrian-supported Palestinian factions in Gaza abducted an Israeli soldier. Yet beyond humiliating Assad, it is doubtful whether this show of force had any real impact on his policies.

Consider the consequences.

Thorough calculation of a strike's consequences is critical, particularly in terms of estimating Assad's response (and that of his allies), preparing a counter-response, and placing all of these actions in the context of an exit strategy. As in chess, the key is to plan a few steps ahead. Israel failed to do so in the 2006 Lebanon war -- what was originally intended as a single, decisive blow became a prolonged asymmetric war with an incoherent exit strategy. In Syria,

one must consider not only the direct regime response to a strike (including against Arab neighbors such as Jordan), but also the more likely scenario of an indirect response through Syrian and Iranian proxies.

Mitigate the risk of escalation.

Various deterrent actions can help prevent escalation, including clear messaging as well as visible military deployments and preparedness. Israel's reported 2007 strike on the Syrian nuclear reactor was followed by messages warning Assad against any retaliatory response. Public warnings have also followed this year's reported Israeli strikes against strategic arms transfers. Israel did not claim responsibility for any of these strikes, presumably to allow Assad to save face and exercise restraint. In the end, Damascus did not retaliate, despite blaming Israel and issuing threats against it. Sometimes quiet messages can be more effective than public ones, while exaggerated messages may prove counterproductive.

In Israel's experience, Assad has proven to be a rational (if ruthless) actor. He was deterred from responding to recent and past strikes because he did not want to invite the consequences of Israeli military might. Therefore, the United States has a good chance of deterring him as well. To do so, however, Washington should be prepared to revisit Syria militarily if Assad escalates following an initial U.S. strike. Assad must believe that he will pay a more painful price -- including wider U.S. measures that would endanger his rule -- if he does not heed deterrent messages. In other words, an effective, limited military strike requires one to play chicken, and in this case, there is a good chance Assad would blink first.

Expect the unexpected.

As with any use of force, one should always prepare for unintended consequences such as civilian casualties or miscalculation. For example, in April 1996, an Israeli artillery battery accidentally killed over 100 civilians in the southern Lebanese village of Qana during Operation Grapes of Wrath, a campaign intended to end Hezbollah rocket fire from Lebanon. In addition to making a tragic mistake, Israel was forced to halt the campaign earlier than planned.

When considering the use of military force, one must therefore acknowledge the risk of things developing the wrong way and getting out of hand. Yet Israel's experience with strikes in Syria shows that careful, comprehensive analysis and preparation can make these risks more navigable.

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