

# If Bombs Hit Damascus, Israel Looks to Tehran

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## Israelis are debating how potential Syria strikes would affect the prospects of U.S. action in Iran.

**A**mid the killing in Syria, Lebanon and Egypt -- three of Israel's four borders -- one senior security official recently likened Israel to a "coffee shop in the middle of a slaughterhouse."

The US has widely advertised its pending missile strikes on Syria. The scope of the strikes is not yet known. But Israelis are likely to judge the strike by whether it is painful enough -- and whether the action is put forward as a warning of further escalatory strikes, so that Syrian leader Bashar Assad is adequately deterred from gassing his own people again.

While the US debates whether strikes should be designed as a deterrent against further chemical attacks or more broadly, as decisive in shaping the contours of the Syrian conflict, Israel's government seems focused on the effects for US deterrence throughout the region. The daily diet of video on the nightly news showing the unfolding Syrian tragedy has raised concerns among Israelis that US non-intervention in the Syrian conflict reflects a superpower that is seeking to extricate itself from the Mideast.

In the public mind, the US reluctance to intervene in a crisis that has so far claimed more than 100,000 lives has raised questions about the reliability of American commitments going forward, despite the overwhelming support the US has provided Israel for decades. As the US becomes more involved in the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians -- including the possibility of US military involvement in security arrangements -- this is a dangerous perception.

As one of Israel's top officials told me last week, "when the US puts forward a red line, it has to mean it. The issue goes beyond Syria. It is a matter of credibility with reverberations for US policy towards Iran." Amid speculation and skepticism about the depth of American commitment in preventing a nuclear Iran, enforcing red lines in Syria would at least send out a broader message that words do have meaning.

Of course, Israel is taking precautions. Today, Israel Army Radio announced that it is putting its missile defenses on high alert, including the vaunted Iron Dome short-range interception system. At the same time, there seems to be rather little concern that Israel will be hit by retaliatory strikes, since Israel has not been prodding the US to act in Syria, and the chemical issue is not viewed anywhere as relating directly to Israel. Even as the whole world expects a strike soon on Syria, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu reiterated his usual public formulation yesterday that Israel will "stay out of the civil war in Syria." Moreover, Israel has superior capability, and Assad knows that any retaliation will not end there but rather with a more punishing Israeli counter-strike.

Indeed, this formulation captures Israel's own approach in general towards Syria. From Israel's perspective, the issue of chemical weapons and making good on declared red lines of President Obama should be seen as distinct from its own policy approach towards the broader situation in Syria. For its part, Israel seeks to define its own interests in this conflict narrowly. Since the Lebanon War of 1982, when Israel sought to crown Bashir Gemayal as leader of that country only to see him get assassinated, Israel has internalized an enduring lesson: it cannot social engineer another Middle Eastern country. Despite its sabra swagger, when it comes to own ability to reshape Arab domestic politics, Israel is more humble than it is given credit for among Arabs.

According to Tel Aviv University's Peace Index Poll of this past May, an overwhelming 86 percent of Israeli Jews want Israel to stay out of Syria. Israel knows it is the favored punching bag in the Arab world in the best of circumstances, so any of its preferred outcomes risk being delegitimized merely by association with Israel. Furthermore, it does not believe it will be decisive in Syria, and therefore wants to stay out. Instead, Israel has limited its interests to intercepting what it calls 'strategic weapons' that a weakened Damascus believes it must or should give to those who have joined them in the battle against the rebels: Hezbollah.

This narrow definition of interests in Syria has been successful. Syria did not hit back when, earlier this year, Israel struck Syrian weapons destined for Hezbollah. Israel has been concerned about unidentified, perhaps mid-level, American officials who confirmed Israel's strikes against the Yakhout anti-ship missiles or A-17 air to surface missiles. Israel did not seek to humiliate Assad by taking credit. The template for this was Israel's attack on the Syrian nuclear reactor in 2007. (Last year, [I wrote about the US-Israel dynamics in the run-up to that strike for the New Yorker. \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-silent-strike-how-israel-bombed-a-syrian-nuclear-installation-and-kept\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-silent-strike-how-israel-bombed-a-syrian-nuclear-installation-and-kept)) In its talks with the US leading up to the strike, Israel's chief insight was that if it did not claim credit for the attack, Assad could deny that the plutonium nuclear reactor even existed. Israel was vindicated. While Israel had planes scrambled over the Mediterranean in advance of the strike and imported extra ammunition from the US in case of a Syrian retaliation as precautionary measures in case of a Damascus counter-strike, Assad did not retaliate.

Yet, even if Israel defines its interests narrowly in Syria, on the elite level the policy debate eludes consensus about whether Israel should encourage broader American action in shaping the outcome of the war itself. Amos Yadlin, the former head of Israel's military intelligence and now head of Israel's Institute for National Security Studies, says that, as far as Israel is concerned, Assad is the "devil we know is the devil." He advocates that Israel should prefer any alternative to Assad, since any Sunni led-government would break up the Shiite axis linking Damascus with Tehran and Hezbollah.

There are also many security analysts who believe the US could do more, like no-fly zones or coordinating weapon flows to the rebels, without risking American troops. This view says that Syria has changed so irreversibly, one cannot think in terms of the old categories of Assad versus the rebels. Assad has lost most of the country anyway, and Assad's days are numbered, even with Russian, Iranian, and Hezbollah support.

However, the opposing school has won out since it is led by the prime minister and the bulk of the Israeli defense establishment. Known to be risk-averse on the Palestinian issue, in Syria Netanyahu fears the devil Israel does not

know. He seems concerned about the ascent of Sunni jihadi groups, like al-Qaeda affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra.

While the Yadlin school would say that a decisive defeat for Assad will deter Iran when it comes to its nuclear program, the Netanyahu school says something else. According to this view, Iran's connection to the nuclear program extends far beyond Syria. Iran will continue its nuclear effort, regardless. Moreover, the Syrian situation is so messy that it is not certain that decisive action will deal a body-blow to Iran, let alone in a timely enough fashion to affect the nuclear program in the short to intermediate term. According to this school, the net effect of an Assad defeat is a fragmented Syria, a collection of failed mini-states, which will not be capable of policing their borders with Israel.

Moreover, if Syrian instability does not end with the fall of Assad, the upshot will mean far more than the current estimated 540,000 Syrian refugees that have spilled over into Jordan, a country that Israel deems vital to its security.

Netanyahu is joined by elements of the security establishment who believe the US can only handle one foreign policy crisis at a time. Israel is convinced, due to the dynamics of crisis-management in Washington, the deeper the US engages in the Syrian war, the less likely the Obama Administration will have political bandwidth to handle the far bigger issue of Iran. In other words, in the event that current diplomacy with Iran fails, the prospect of a US or Israeli attack on Iran will be constrained by deepening US involvement in Syria. In other words, a subsidiary issue of Syria will end up crowding out the bigger regional threat of Iran. In Israel's mind, and this is very serious. "Now the whole world is watching. Iran is watching and it wants to see what would be the reaction on the use of chemical weapons," Netanyahu said Sunday following a meeting with French FM Laurent Fabius. "The most dangerous regimes in the world must not be allowed to possess the most dangerous weapons in the world."

The upshot is a dual conclusion for the Netanyahu-led school. On one hand, Israel is rooting for US action that will restore respect for US red lines on chemical weapons in Damascus, and hopes that this will likewise instill a sense in Tehran that the US is serious when it says it seeks to prevent an Iranian nuclear bomb. Yet, beyond the deterrence issue, when it comes to chemical weapons, the Netanyahu school fears the deepening US involvement in Syria carries various risks.

Needless to say, regardless of Israel's views, the US needs to make its own calculations of its regional interests, driven by a variety of factors as well as its values as it relates to the depth of the ongoing moral tragedy. Washington will make its own determination about whether to pursue deepening involvement in Syria. Yet, beyond Israel's interests in deterring Assad's use of chemical weapons, nobody can say it is Israel which is prodding American action.

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