

Syria's Forgotten Front

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To keep yet another Syrian frontier from spiraling downward, Washington should urge Israel and the mainstream Syrian opposition to focus on keeping Hizballah and jihadist groups away from the border.

As the civil war in Syria rages on, the risk that Israel will be drawn into the fray is rising.

Just last Friday, shells fired from Syria again hit the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, and Israel fired back. It's not the first time tensions in the area have flared.

On Jan. 30, Israel staged an airstrike on a weapons convoy in Syria, reportedly destined for Hezbollah in Lebanon. On March 6, jihadist rebels kidnapped 21 Filipino peacekeepers in the Golan Heights. The risk that Israeli retaliation for cross-border fire could spiral into a major skirmish, or even a larger Israeli intervention to set up a buffer zone in Syria, is real. To prevent it, the United States should broker a tacit agreement between Israel and moderate elements of the Syrian opposition.

Israel and the Syrian opposition don't have much in common, but they do share some important mutual enemies, namely Hezbollah and Iran, both of which are fighting furiously to save Bashar al-Assad's government.

This convergence of interests provides an opening for America to quietly strike a deal between Israel and the leadership of the Syrian opposition: Israel should agree to refrain from arming proxies inside Syria to protect its border; and the Syrian opposition should work to keep extremist groups like Hezbollah and Jabhat al-Nusra and other affiliates of Al Qaeda far away from the Israeli frontier. This would demonstrate the Syrian opposition's bona fides to potential Western supporters and dissuade Israel from intervening or arming allies in Syria.

The Assad regime's army, increasingly pressed for manpower on other fronts, recently withdrew many troops from the Israeli border, leaving the field open to extremist groups like Jabhat al-Nusra.

The recent high-profile visit by Israel's defense minister, Moshe Yaalon, to the front line in the Golan Heights led to

rumors in Syria that Israel was planning to create and support a proxy army among the Syrian Druse population. Although these rumors are probably exaggerated, there is little doubt that Israel is trying to step up its contacts across this border.

But if Israel tries to establish proxy forces in a buffer zone along the border, it would almost certainly backfire. Such a move would invite Hezbollah, its allies and other extremists to join the conflict. That would be very much like what happened in Lebanon, with disastrous long-term consequences, beginning in the late 1970s when Israel invaded southern Lebanon and set up the South Lebanon Army to protect its border before staging a second, larger invasion in 1982. The result was the creation of Hezbollah, with Iranian support, to "liberate" south Lebanon -- a threat that remains today.

Over the past 18 months, my colleagues and I have traveled extensively in the region and conducted interviews with hundreds of armed and unarmed Syrian opposition leaders and activists. Three surveys we conducted for the firm Pechter Polls revealed intense animosity toward both Iran and Hezbollah. This disdain means that the Syrian opposition will most likely want to keep Hezbollah forces far from any rebel-held territory, something that would please Israel.

In addition to Israel's agreement not to deploy proxies in Syria, American and international Jewish charities could agree to step up the humanitarian assistance that they are already providing to Syrian civilians on a small scale. These efforts are generally being carried out quietly, for fear that too much publicity might provoke a public relations backlash.

Besides food and shelter, there is one medical donation that would have a huge symbolic impact: atropine, an antidote against the chemical weapons that many believe Mr. Assad is starting to use against his own population. This kind of aid would definitively refute the false but widely held conspiracy theory among Syrians that Israel, and its legendary lobby, still secretly support the Assad regime. It would chip away at Syrians' entrenched mistrust of Israel.

Finally, the United States could also restrict the aerial intelligence that it misguidedly still provides to the Syrian government under a 1974 agreement -- information that could be used by Mr. Assad to target rebel soldiers.

Any arrangement that distances the opposition from the jihadis, avoids Israeli intervention on Syrian soil and focuses all efforts squarely against Mr. Assad should appeal to Syrian opposition leaders. It would also accomplish multiple goals without any direct American intervention: stabilizing an increasingly precarious front line; preventing further regional conflict; helping alleviate a humanitarian crisis; and setting the stage for a better post-Assad future.

The key is to do it quickly, before the situation on another one of Syria's borders spirals even more dangerously downward.

David Pollock is the Kaufman fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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