

UN Peacekeepers on the Golan at Risk

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Brief Analysis

If current international inaction on Syria continues, UNDOF will face increasing difficulties, and the long-quiet Israel-Syria border could easily revert to a battlefield.

On March 6, twenty-one Filipino soldiers deployed with the UN Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) were abducted while on routine patrol in the Syrian demilitarized portion of the Golan Heights. As of this writing, they are still detained, albeit reportedly unharmed. The incident is the latest in a series of assaults on the UN peacekeepers responsible for ensuring compliance with arms limits set in the 1974 disengagement agreement

between Israel and Syria. Already, the deterioration in security has prompted Japan, Canada, and Croatia to withdraw their longstanding personnel contributions from UNDOF. If the trend continues, the remaining contributors are all but certain to curtail their commitments as well, ending the only effective international monitoring mechanism along the Israel-Syria border.

BACKGROUND

UNDOF was created after the 1973 October War to supervise implementation of the Israeli-Syrian disengagement agreement in the Golan, and its 1,000-man force has been conducting bimonthly inspections within fifteen miles on either side of the border ever since. Over the past two years, however, the emergence of rebel combat formations in Quneitra province and the decline of Bashar al-Assad's forces in the area have created an increasingly precarious security environment for UNDOF personnel operating in Syria.

In November 2012, for example, two Austrian UNDOF soldiers on a bus en route to Damascus were wounded by unknown gunmen. The incident spurred Japan to end its troop deployments in the Golan a month later. In February, a Canadian UNDOF staffer reportedly went missing in the Golan, prompting Canada to withdraw as well. And just last week, Croatia announced it was bringing home its own 100-man contingent, leaving Austria, India, and the Philippines as the sole contributors ([view a PDF map of UNDOF's deployment as of January \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Maps/UNDOF-Deployment-Jan2013.pdf\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Maps/UNDOF-Deployment-Jan2013.pdf)).

HOSTILITY AND CHAOS IN SYRIA

The situation on Syria's side of the border is becoming increasingly dangerous for UNDOF. Rebel combat units -- including the Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade, which claimed responsibility for abducting the Filipino troops -- are fighting Assad's decaying forces for dominance of the area between the UNDOF line and the major regime garrisons southwest of Damascus. Clashes are frequent as the two sides contest control of key points. This includes significant activity around the UNDOF zone, where rebels have seized nearby villages and regime positions, ambushed regime forces, and conducted a major suicide attack against a regime intelligence post. While the rebel presence seems to be growing (including Islamist elements), the regime has thinned out its forces and abandoned some of its positions, redeploying to Damascus to reinforce positions there. Taken together, these factors increase the chance that UNDOF personnel will be drawn into the fighting, whether deliberately or inadvertently.

Further complicating matters, the Syrian opposition has become increasingly resentful toward the UN over the past year. In spring 2012, UN Special Representative Kofi Annan failed to bring about a ceasefire or a pullback of regime forces from population centers. When no further UN action was forthcoming, many in the opposition interpreted the inertia as deference to the regime and a betrayal of the Syrian people. Today, the UN continues to legitimize the regime: Assad retains the country's seat in the General Assembly, and the UN still deals with his regime as if it were the country's sovereign representative, meaning everything from aid provision to peacekeeping missions like UNDOF must be vetted by Damascus.

Not surprisingly, this dynamic has fueled Syrian anger toward UNDOF and other UN organs. The peacekeepers are also seen as enforcing an unpopular ceasefire with Israel, a state that many rebels view as the enemy; in fact, some opposition members continue to circulate wild conspiracy theories about Israel supporting the regime.

This general sense of hostility is now taking more concrete form. In [some of the YouTube videos \(http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8aiuWguJC_A\)](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8aiuWguJC_A) posted by the Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade during Wednesday's seizure of the UNDOF convoy in Jamlah -- just two miles from the armistice line in the Golan -- one of the group's leaders criticized the peacekeepers as "agents of the Assad regime and Israel". In other videos, the group claimed that it had captured the soldiers to protect them from planned regime attacks and would let them go once the regime could guarantee their safety -- an unlikely story, but one well designed to deflect international criticism.

THE VIEW FROM ISRAEL

For Israel, jihadist tactical gains on the Golan and the bleak outlook for UNDOF are fueling concerns that the days of longstanding quiet along the border are numbered. Since its deployment in 1974, UNDOF has helped Israel and Syria preserve a status quo that both sides were willing and able to maintain. In short, the peacekeepers became a symbol of stability. UNDOF's dissolution or incapacitation would end that stability in psychological and practical terms, erasing the eighty-kilometer buffer zone and turning the area into a "hot border" where jihadists could challenge Israel and provoke retaliation -- a dynamic not dissimilar to Lebanon.

To mitigate that threat, the Israeli military is fast-erecting a new, sophisticated border fence in the Golan. It has also added more-seasoned troops and more-formidable weapons systems along the frontier, enhanced its intelligence collection efforts in the area, and developed retaliatory plans in the event of cross-border attacks.

More broadly, Syria's disintegration raises Israeli concerns beyond the immediate border area, particularly given the possibility that some of the regime's strategic weapons could fall into the hands of Hezbollah in Lebanon or jihadists in Syria, who might then deploy them against Israel. Although the international community and regional actors have developed plans for dealing with Syria's chemical weapons stockpiles, the threat posed by proliferation of other strategic weapons -- such as sophisticated missiles and rockets -- has not yet been adequately addressed. Contrary to the chemical threat, Israel understands that it may have to take proactive unilateral military steps to deal with these other strategic weapons, including strikes against attempted arms transfers on Syrian soil. One recent strike -- a reported February attack on advanced anti-aircraft weapons being transferred to Hezbollah -- did not prompt a reprisal, but future operations could result in retaliation and escalation.

CONCLUSION

As Syria deteriorates, UNDOF will face increasing difficulty and danger in carrying out its Golan observation efforts, with attrition potentially making the mission unsustainable. Recent reports indicate that Austria, India, and the Philippines are already discussing the future of their deployments. Absent a concerted international effort to oust the Assad regime and stabilize war-torn Syria -- whether through direct military action or a serious initiative to better arm the rebels -- UNDOF may soon be dissolved.

Although the observer force could theoretically be reconstituted down the road, Syria's successor government -- presumably Islamist in orientation -- would probably not consent to such a move. UNDOF's absence could also diminish the chances for deploying some kind of postwar international stabilization force. In any event, with UNDOF gone and post-Assad Syria brimming with well-armed jihadists, the long-quiet Israel-Syria border could easily revert to a battlefield.

All of this points to the high stakes involved in the Syria conflict. With spillover already impacting Lebanon and Jordan, and with UNDOF on the brink, the current international approach of attempting to stem the bleeding in Syria is no longer tenable. Continued international inaction will only expand regional instability.

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