

As Syria Crumbles, Israel Prepares for Instability

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

Although Assad's ouster would bring welcome disruption to the Iran-Hizballah axis, Israel's leaders are focusing on the potential security risks of Syria's deterioration, including chemical and missile proliferation and jihadist border violence.

This PolicyWatch is part of "[Syrian Spillover: Perspectives from Neighboring States](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/syrian-spillover-perspectives-from-neighboring-states) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/syrian-spillover-perspectives-from-neighboring-states>), "a series of articles on how the conflict is affecting Turkey, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, and Lebanon.

Compared to Syria's other neighbors, Israel has been the least affected by the storm raging to its north. The fighting between regime and opposition forces can be seen from the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights, but the border itself is quiet, and the few incidents of firing toward Israel in late 2012 were likely unintended. Yet Israel is far from complacent -- its airstrike near Damascus, reported yesterday, highlights its concerns about the explosiveness of the Syrian scene, particularly the proliferation of strategic weapons. More broadly, Israel expects the nearly forty years of calm along the Syrian border to end once Bashar al-Assad falls, or even before then.

WHO WILL FILL THE VOID?

Israeli officials are skeptical about whether Assad will be able to maintain his grip on power past this year. Yet they also realize that the civil war may continue consuming the country beyond his ouster. Although the turmoil diminishes the traditional risk of war with the Syrian army, it highlights the risk of confrontation with hostile nonstate actors.

Contrary to conventional wisdom in the region, Israel would not mourn Assad's departure. He is a linchpin of the radical Iran-Hizballah axis and a staunch rival of Israel. His fall would therefore deal a major blow to Tehran, significantly weaken Hizballah, and dismantle the trilateral axis -- the forces that may dominate Syria in the future are unlikely to seek an alliance with actors that helped Assad butcher his people.

At the same time, Israel is concerned about who might fill the post-Assad void. It is particularly troubled by the increasing weight of Islamists in the opposition, the growing number of foreign jihadists (who have become the most potent fighting force on the ground), and the West's continued passivity about supporting non-Islamist opposition forces. Ultimately, Israel could find itself confronted by hostile Islamists in its two most important Arab neighbors, Egypt and Syria -- a reality that could have a dangerous regional ripple effect.

PUBLICLY SILENT, PRIVATELY CONCERNED

Throughout the Syrian crisis, Israel has opted to keep a low public profile, realizing that it cannot significantly influence the course of events. Moreover, given the region's widespread anti-Israel sentiments, any expression of sympathy for the rebels could serve as a kiss of death that undermines them domestically and regionally.

In private, however (and occasionally in public), Israeli officials have criticized the West for playing a passive role in the crisis while Iran, Hizballah, and even Russia actively support the regime. In their view, such passivity has helped empower Islamists and jihadists, enabling them to radicalize the conflict. Some officials also use this argument to emphasize that Israel must rely solely on itself when addressing matters of critical national security importance; this includes maintaining an independent military option against Iran's nuclear program.

EYE ON THE REGION

Israel is closely following the conflict's impact on Syria's other neighbors. First, it is deeply concerned that the turmoil may breed serious instability in Jordan, a country of strategic importance to Israel and the West. In late December, an Arab newspaper reported that King Abdullah and Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu had met secretly in Amman to discuss the Syria situation, and Israeli government sources unofficially confirmed the report.

Regarding Lebanon, Israel is pleased at the pressure the crisis has put on Hizballah. Yet it also maintains a watchful eye, looking for signs of the group lashing out in response to this pressure or seeking to obtain strategic weapons from Syria.

The war has led Israel to rethink its strained relations with Turkey as well. The two countries have several converging interests in Syria -- this fact, set against a regional background fraught with risks, will likely spur a fresh Israeli attempt at normalization with Ankara.

PREPARING FOR CONTINGENCIES

Israel is currently focusing on contingencies that have a direct bearing on its security:

Strategic weapons. Of primary concern is the fate of Assad's huge arsenal of missiles, rockets, and chemical weapons, which could fall into the hands of jihadists in Syria or Hizballah in Lebanon. Both of these actors might use such weapons to threaten Israel.

While the international community focuses on the chemical stockpile, Israel is no less focused on the regime's abundance of other strategic weapons, including radars, ground-to-ground missiles and rockets, and sophisticated ground-to-air and ground-to-sea rockets. Israel's airstrike in Syria on the night of January 29-30 was apparently aimed at countering such threats -- according to some media reports, the operation targeted a convoy carrying weapons to Hizballah in Lebanon. The Israeli government has maintained silence on the incident, probably so that those targeted will not feel compelled to react violently. It may also have the need to strike again in the future.

As for chemical weapons, Israel has already joined Washington and other parties in an intensive intelligence and policy dialogue on the subject. It has also prepared its own military plans, focused on pinpoint airstrikes. In early December, columnist Jeffrey Goldberg reported in the Atlantic that Israel had quietly asked for Jordan's consent -- which was not given -- to a contingency plan for destroying Syrian chemical weapons sites. The reason cited for the

request was the possible repercussions that such a strike might have on Jordan.

Destabilization along the border. Israeli intelligence believes that once Assad falls, the security situation along the border will gradually deteriorate. This assessment is based on the growing number of jihadists in areas close to the border, as well as indications that they are accumulating weapons caches there. Fueled by a deep ideological enmity, these groups would likely target Israel once the regime collapses. In addition, the IDF has not ruled out the less likely scenario of Assad's forces launching a final cross-border act of desperation.

Whatever the case, the defense establishment is convinced that Israel is about to enter a new era of instability in which the existing jihadist challenge along the Sinai border is joined by a similar jihadist challenge from Syria -- perhaps even in coordination with each other down the road. If the situation does escalate, it is unclear what will happen with the UN Disengagement Observer Force stationed in the border area since 1974. Throughout the war, Israel has used UNDOF to convey mostly deterrent messages to the Syrian regime and military. Also unclear is the fate of the signals intelligence station that Iran operates in the Golan Heights to collect information on Israel.

In response to the border threat, Israel recently began erecting a sophisticated security fence in the Golan similar to the one just completed in the south. Moreover, additional forces and intelligence capabilities were deployed to the area, the level of alertness was raised, and operational plans were developed for a possible cross-border intervention.

The day after. In Israel's view, the most likely post-Assad scenario is the emergence of a fragmented, decentralized, and dysfunctional Syria, with Tehran remaining active in parts of the country. Although a renewed peace process between the two countries now seems unfathomable, some in Israeli government circles have raised the possibility of seeking to align with non-Muslim minority groups in Syria, especially in border areas. Such ideas are reminiscent of Israel's historical alignments with regional minorities.

Israelis also believe that the crumbling of Assad's regime could prove advantageous at a time when they face critical decisions regarding the Iranian nuclear program. As mentioned previously, losing a strategically important ally could be a major blow to Tehran -- if Israel or the United States later decided to strike Iran, Syria would be unable to make a serious contribution to Iran's response, and Hizballah would be denied a critical conduit of support and resupply during and after the confrontation.

CONCLUSION

More than at any other time since the uprising against Assad began, concerns about the growing chaos to the north are resonating among Israel's leaders. Accordingly, the United States, other Western powers, and major regional actors should maintain a very close dialogue with Israel regarding the risks and contingencies inherent in the demise of the Syrian system.

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