

Syria's Role in the War in Lebanon

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Brief Analysis

Recent developments related to the war in Lebanon—a warning from Damascus that Israeli forces in Lebanon should keep away from the Syrian border, the placement of Syrian forces on a heightened state of alert, the explosion of a crude improvised explosive device (IED) on the Syrian side of the Golan, President Bashar al-Asad's bellicose August 1 Army Day speech, Syrian facilitation of Iranian efforts to resupply Hizballah, and Israeli attempts to interdict these supply lines through air strikes along the Lebanon-Syria border—have prompted concerns that the fighting in Lebanon could escalate to involve Syria. Warnings from Damascus that an international stabilization force for Lebanon would be seen as an army of occupation, and therefore a legitimate target of resistance, have likewise raised the possibility that Syria might sponsor or support attacks on such a force, as it sponsored attacks against the Multi-National Force (MNF) in Beirut in 1982-1984.

The 'Rules of the Game'

Since the 1973 war, Syria and Israel have established well-understood “rules of the game” consisting of a series of unwritten agreements that have limited the scope and duration of the clashes that have sometimes occurred between the two parties and prevented a full-scale war.

The Golan understanding. For more than three decades, Syrian-Israeli relations in the Golan have been governed by the May 1974 Separation of Forces Agreement, which provides for an indefinite ceasefire and a separation and thinning out of forces on both sides of the disengagement line. Israel's ratification of the agreement was predicated on an unwritten, unacknowledged commitment by Syria not to permit terrorist infiltration through the Golan, which Damascus largely observed.

Lebanon “red lines.” Syria's military intervention in Lebanon led to a new set of tacit arrangements between Syria and Israel. From March 1976 until the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon in April 2005, Syrian-Israeli relations in

Lebanon were governed by a series of tacit understandings, loosely defined “red lines” demarcating Israeli and Syrian spheres of influence, deployments, and activities.

The original Israeli red lines specified that Syrian forces in Lebanon would not move south of a line extending from south of Sidon toward Jazzin and Kafr Mishki; Syria would not introduce surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) into Lebanon; Syrian aircraft would not interfere with Israeli air force operations over Lebanon or support Syrian ground forces there; and the Syrian navy would not operate off the Lebanese coast. While Syria denied observing any red lines, its actions on the ground indicated otherwise.

Syria has defined its own red lines in Lebanon and employed a variety of means to send messages to Israel. In January 1977, Syria tested Israel’s willingness to enforce its red lines by sending an army battalion into southern Lebanon, subsequently withdrawing it in response to Israeli warnings. In April 1981, during the Syrian siege of Christian forces in Zahle, the Syrians built several SAM dugouts in the Bekaa Valley as a warning to Israel not to intervene; Israel did so, and Syria introduced the SAMs into Lebanon, leading to a crisis.

During the 1981 Syrian-Israeli missile crisis and the June 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, Syria deployed Scud-B missiles north of Damascus as a warning to Israel not to expand the scope of the conflict. Following Israel’s downing of two Syrian MiG-23 fighters in Syrian airspace in November 1985, Syria once again introduced SAMs into Lebanon, sparking a second missile crisis that ended as a result of U.S. pressure and Israeli threats with the eventual withdrawal of the missiles in January 1986.

Recent Developments

In the past decade, Israel has periodically targeted Syrian troops and interests in response to attacks by Hizballah, and more recently, by Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Thus, during Operation Accountability in July 1993 and Operation Grapes of Wrath in April 1996, Israeli air strikes in Lebanon claimed the lives of about a dozen Syrian troops, while Israel hit Syrian air defense radars in Lebanon’s Bekaa Valley in April and July 2001 and bombed an abandoned Palestinian terrorist training camp near Damascus in October 2003.

In the current round of fighting, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) have bombed vehicles in Lebanon believed to be transporting military supplies for Hizballah from Syria, as well as the road between the Lebanese and Syrian customs buildings at the main border crossing at Masnaa and roads and bridges leading to several other Lebanon-Syria border crossings. Syria has effectively warned Israel that if its forces were to cross the Syrian border, it would intervene, and Damascus subsequently put its army on a higher state of alert, presumably to underscore this point.

Reopening the Golan Front?

Another significant development has been the establishment of a “Popular Organization for Resistance to the Israeli Occupation” of the Golan. In the founding statement issued by this Syrian-authorized organization in June 2006, the group said, “Negotiations with the enemy do not bear fruit . . . and we see that the only means that the enemy understands is resistance that challenges the occupation.” The son of the former grand mufti of Syria echoed these sentiments on July 21, when he called for reopening the Golan front to “resistance forces.”

On July 31, a crude IED exploded on the Syrian side of the disengagement line. The Popular Organization for Resistance claimed credit for the attack, saying the explosion had killed one Israeli soldier; the IDF said no soldiers were killed or injured. This incident represents a new development. Since 1974, with few exceptions, the Syria-Israel frontier has essentially been quiet. Periodically, Palestinian terrorist organizations succeeded in crossing the border to launch attacks, but the incidents were not believed to have been commissioned or orchestrated by Damascus. In January 2003, two Syrian soldiers dressed in civilian clothes crossed into no man’s land; one was killed by Israeli forces and the other captured, but this too was considered an isolated incident.

Threats to a Stabilization Force

Of perhaps greater concern is Syria's veiled threat against a potential international stabilization force in Lebanon, particularly in light of Syria's role in facilitating Hizballah attacks against the MNF in the early 1980s. While Syria was ineffective in resisting Israeli military forces that invaded Lebanon in 1982, it proved quite adept at preventing Israel from translating its battlefield successes into political achievements by ordering the assassination of Lebanese president Bashir Gemayel, who had signed a draft peace treaty with Israel in May 1983, and then organizing attacks against Western peacekeeping and Israeli forces in Lebanon. This is a model that Damascus is likely to be tempted to follow as it enables the Asad regime to play to its strengths and minimize its risks by employing surrogates to deny Israel any lasting achievements from the current war in Lebanon, restore Syrian influence in Lebanon, and position Damascus as a power broker in the Levant.

Conclusion

Longstanding Syrian-Israeli understandings on Lebanon and the Golan will likely prevent an unintentional war between the two states, though there remains the potential for miscalculation and limited military conflict. In light of Damascus's ongoing activities in Lebanon, particularly its efforts to rearm Hizballah, it is also possible that Israel may eventually perceive some utility in hitting Syria. For now, however, it appears that the most significant challenge may be the Syrian threat to an international stabilization force in Lebanon. In the regard, Damascus retains its ability to support its allies, frustrate the international community, and reshuffle the deck in Lebanon in its own favor.

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