

Wars Aren't Waged in the Summer?

How Israel and Syria Might Find Themselves at War

Dani Berkovich

Along with the peace feelers put out by Israel and Syria since the end of the Second Lebanon War, the fear of another war on the northern front against Syria has been part of the security and public discourse in Israel. The headline "War this Summer" became a regular feature in the media. Israel has anxiously followed the steps taken by Syria's army toward increased preparedness and Syria's tightened links with Iran (especially notable in the recent visit to Syria by Iranian president Ahmadinejad), and it is disturbed by the possibility that the last war harmed Israel's deterrence image in Syrian eyes. The Syrians are fueling the fears in Israel with belligerent statements, warning Israel that if it rejects the hand offered it in peace, Syria, as President Bashar Asad put it, has "other options" for recovering the Golan Heights. However, there are those who see these declarations – which are intertwined with remonstrations of peace – as an expression of Damascus's increasing distress and its desire to extricate itself at any price from the international isolation that is closing in on it.

At this stage it appears that the Syrian president has no intention of initiating either an attack against Israel to seize the Golan Heights in a snatch operation (the classic scenario attributed to Syria) or any other military move, and that the Syrian deployment is defensive. But while Israel conveys messages to Syria from time to time to assuage its anxiety, Damascus is not laboring to calm Israel. On the contrary, it appears that by using threats of "other options," it wants to force Israel to renew negotiations for the return of the Golan Heights.

It is evident that Syria and Israel share a security dilemma that raises the tension between them. Neither side wants war, but at the same time, neither side feels secure about the intentions of the other side. When one side improves its preparedness and attempts to increase its security, the other side cannot remain calm, fearing a preemptive strike. Thus the combination of heightened mutual suspicion, a potential failure to read the other side's moves correctly, an improvement in mutual preparedness, and an explosive regional situation requires an examination of various deterioration scenarios that might culminate in an undesired war between Israel and Syria.

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Deterioration Scenarios

Deterioration resulting from distorted perceptions and mistaken interpretation of the other side's moves. According to this scenario, Syria and Israel take various steps that could be interpreted as aggression, and the effort to establish a mutual balance of deterrence only increases each side's fear of an attack initiated by the other. While Syria is accelerating preparations and strengthening links – including military ties – with Iran as its strategic hinterland, IDF exercises connected to a confrontation with Syria receive much publicity, and the possibility of an impending war with Syria and preparations for war are accorded a high profile in the media. In these circumstances the level of suspicion is so high that any unusual move by Syria will convince Israel that Syria has belligerent intentions, and Israel will consider waging a preemptive strike. Israel in any case attributes aggressive intentions to Syria and a tendency to miscalculate, and the fact that Syria continues to aid Hizbollah and Palestinian terrorist organizations does not contribute to alleviating suspicion. Israel was in a similar situation in the summer of 1996, when Syrian Division 14 moved in the direction of Mount Hermon without satisfactory explanation, in a way that aroused suspicions that Syria intended to carry out a snatch operation on Mount Hermon – though eventually nothing happened.

Regional domino scenarios. In the regional system today there are at least three explosive focal points that under certain circumstances and against the existing backdrop of mutual suspicion could position Israel and Syria on a collision course:

■ The Palestinian scenario – a flare-up in the conflict between Israel and Hamas in the

wake of Hamas's takeover of the Gaza Strip, including the renewal of Qassam rocket attacks and terrorist actions in Israeli territory. Syria encourages continued escalation to increase the pressure on Israel and imprint its image as an influential player in the Palestinian realm, in other words, to boost the incentive for Israel (and the US) to sit down at the negotiating table. Under Syrian sponsorship the headquarters of the Palestinian organizations in Damascus, chiefly Hamas, continue to direct terrorism against Israel. Blaming Syria for fanning the flames, Israel warns Syria that its self-restraint is not open-ended. Later Israel sends concrete warning signals in the form of an operation on Syrian territory, which Damascus interprets as an attack requiring a response.

■ The Iranian scenario – an American or Israeli military move against Iranian nuclear installations leads to a wide scale retaliation against Israel by means of Hizbollah. Hizbollah, despite its lack of interest in a conflict with Israel given its sensitive status in Lebanon, is committed to blind obedience to the Iranian leadership. It makes use of the strategic weapons the Iranians have prepared for such eventualities and transferred to it through Syria, in a way that brings about escalation in the north. Syria backs Hizbollah, sending it massive quantities of weaponry, in spite of warnings from Israel and the international community. Israel, with international backing, attempts to foil the transfer of the weapons through attacks on convoys carrying the weapons in Syrian territory. In response, Syria attacks the Golan Heights.

■ The Lebanese scenario – Syria and Hizbollah's attempts at subversion bring about the fall of the Siniora government and strengthen Hizbollah politically in Lebanon. Hizbollah exploits the situation in order

to render Security Council resolution 1701 meaningless and to reestablish its standing as the “defender of Lebanon,” including strengthening its military presence south of the Litani and along the border with Israel. At the same time, Syrian and Iranian weapons continue to flow freely to Hizbollah. This situation increases the tension between Israel and Hizbollah and Syria and heightens the potential for escalation along the Lebanese border. As in the Palestinian scenario, here too Syria seeks to impress on Israel (and the US) the reason to engage it in dialogue, and labors to demonstrate its influence on events in Lebanon. Israel, in an attempt to deter Syria from continued intervention, signals a warning on Syrian territory, which leads to a Syrian response on the Golan Heights.

Deterioration resulting from direct or indirect Syrian challenges.

■ Indirect challenge: continued weapons smuggling. The smuggling of weapons from Syria to Hizbollah continues, though not in the context of a direct conflict between Israel and Hizbollah. Neither the Lebanese army nor UNIFIL manages to prevent it, and resolution 1701 is violated flagrantly. After Israel has despaired of effective international intervention, it conveys a warning to Syria that it will not remain oblivious to the ongoing smuggling. The response from Damascus is to deny the charges and warn Israel that any Israeli move against Syria will be seen as aggression and cause for a painful response. Later, Israel sends Syria warning signals (for example, an attack on trucks carrying weapons in Syrian territory). Syria, which has already sustained quite a few such warnings from Israel, is not prepared to suffer another, and responds by attacking the Golan Heights.



■ Direct challenge: opening a terror front on the Golan Heights. Against the backdrop of Syria’s failure to persuade Israel to renew political negotiations, it fulfills its threats to liberate the Golan Heights through “resistance.” It establishes a popular and “independent” terrorist organization that adopts Hizbollah’s methods of operation and operates along the border between Israel and Syria, which is generally considered quiet. The goal is to force Israel to renew negotiations for the return of the Golan Heights. Not only do these Syrian provocations not bring about the renewal of negotiations; they prompt Israeli responses on Syrian territory in a way that brings about a conflagration between the two countries.

Prime Minister Ehud Olmert on a visit to the Golan Heights

Provocation scenario. An organization or country wishing to entangle Syria in a conflict with Israel is behind terrorist actions against Israel from Syrian territory (terrorist infiltration, shooting attacks, and the like). This could be one of the worldwide jihad organizations that are already operating on Syrian territory and are seen as a threat to the regime’s stability, or in extreme circumstances, Syria’s friends from the “axis of evil” (Hizbollah, Iran), which aim to prevent Damascus’s defection from their alliance in

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the event of a political settlement with Israel. From Israel's point of view, Syria is responsible for every attack originating in its territory. Israel responds in a manner that leads to a direct Syrian response, and the situation deteriorates into conflict.

It would appear that given the regional atmosphere and the tension between Israel and Syria, most of the scenarios are possible. Less likely are the latter two scenarios: terrorism managed by Syria in the Golan Heights is a dangerous gamble, even by Syria's standards, and it is opposed to Syria's strategic approach, which prefers that its conflict with Israel be conducted through proxies (Palestinian or Lebanese) and not on Syrian soil. Thus if Syria does indeed resort to a direct challenge scenario, this is liable to be an indication of distress to the point of real despair, and a desire to start the peace process at any price. As for the provocation scenario, it is probable that the Syrian security apparatuses will be quite alert to an attempt of this sort and would labor to foil it.

Significance for Israel and Recommended Courses of Action

The high level of tension between Israel and Syria and the fear of deterioration into an unwanted war present Israel with a number of dilemmas in coping with this situation. These dilemmas entail steps that range between reassurance, restoring calm, and deterrence, and raise the following questions:

■ Will taking steps to calm Syria harm deterrence, since such an attempt is liable to be perceived as an expression of weakness and a fear of conflict? In other words, would Israeli attempts at calming Syria strengthen Syria's perception of its own deterrent image? Israel must not refrain from strengthen-

ing its deterrence vis-à-vis Syria, either in the tense uncertainty of today, or in a situation in which political negotiations are renewed.

■ As long as Syria and Israel are not involved in a peace process, let alone in a de facto peace agreement, is it not appropriate from Israel's point of view to preserve some vagueness concerning its intentions toward Syria and not completely allay Syrian fears, with an awareness of the risk that entails?

■ Should indirect Syrian aggression be treated like direct aggression? Would the transfer of weapons to Hizbollah merit the same response that a Syrian or Syrian-inspired attack on the Golan Heights would earn?

■ Is Israel taking into account that given the tension between the two countries, any type of warning signal (in words or actions) that it would seek to convey to Damascus because of Syria's involvement in indirect aggression is liable to be interpreted as an attempt to drag Syria into a violent confrontation?

Apparently, the most effective move by Israel to calm the situation is a clear declaration that cognizant of the price of peace, it is prepared to enter political negotiations with Syria. Yet until the conditions and atmosphere are ripe for a renewal of negotiations, Israel (like Syria) fears that a prophecy of imminent war will be self-fulfilling, and therefore a combined move vis-à-vis Damascus is warranted, which would include a number of elements:

■ Reassurance – a clear message to the Syrian leadership that Israel has no intention of initiating an attack on Syria. Here Israel must overcome the hurdle of Syria's suspicion and lack of trust toward Israel, and therefore an intermediary trusted by both sides must be engaged. Examples are Russia (which the United States is liable not to favor), Turkey, or one of Syria's friends in the

European Union (Spain?). It would appear that suspicion and lack of trust will be part of the interaction between Israel and Syria for a long time to come, even if negotiations are renewed. In this situation it is recommended that a permanent secret channel be established for relaying signals, particularly messages of calm. In this context the UNDOF force, stationed in the Golan Heights, can upgrade its role as the mechanism for solving problems on the tactical level (for example, terrorist attacks or incidents over which Syria has no control). However, this is not enough. A package of confidence building measures on the ground (thinning of forces, announcing exercises in advance) is also likely to be part of the process, with the hope that such measures would be reciprocated in kind.

■ Deterrence and clarification of the rules of the game – Along with messages of reassurance, Israel must convey a clear message that if Syria attempts a preemptive attack, Israel will respond against Bashar Asad's regime in a way that is disproportionately painful. This should be done while emphasizing Israel's capabilities of dealing Damascus a strong blow, and its readiness to wage a wide scale war against Syria, i.e., it would not make do with a limited move, as Syria would certainly want for the purpose of starting a political process. In addition, Israel must formulate a position on Syria's indirect aggression, from assistance to terrorist organizations – including Palestinian terrorist attacks directed by the leadership of the Damascus-based terrorist organizations or an attack by Hizbollah using Syrian weapons. Here it is appropriate to leave margins of vagueness: to make clear to the Syrians that such moves will be considered direct Syrian aggression against Israel and will therefore merit retaliation, but at the same time not to



Prime Minister Ehud Olmert with Nahal soldiers on the Golan Heights

make a commitment that Israel will respond to *any* such move. This should be done in order not to create expectations that Israel cannot always live up to and thereby harm its deterrent credibility, especially in situations of acute tension.

These messages – and especially the latter ones of deterrence and the rules of the game – must be acceptable to the key actors in the international community, particularly the US (without which effective political negotiations are not possible) and European Union nations, in order to establish the credibility of these moves and the legitimacy of Israel making them.

Ultimately, the desirable situation for Israel would be for Syria to seek to mollify Israel and the international community as to its intentions, and perhaps to make a concrete move, even a symbolic one, in order to show that it is prepared to sacrifice something for the peace process. Yet in any event, under the existing circumstances it is desirable for dealings with Syria to take place through quiet diplomacy and not through the media. The credibility of Israeli deterrence and messages of calm will be stronger if Israel speaks in one clear voice, since multiple voices and a great deal of background noise certainly do not contribute to building trust.