

Syria and the Israel-Hamas War: Symbolic Support, Short of Escalation

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Since the outbreak of the war in Gaza, Israel has become engaged in a multi-front conflict with forces that have attacked from Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen. In contrast, apart from a few incidents executed mainly by Palestinian groups, it does not appear that an active front against Israel is forming in Syria. Although the mood in Syria is generally supportive of the Palestinians (alongside criticism of President Bashar al-Assad, the axis of resistance, and the international community), Assad is not interested in supporting Hamas, as the price is a possible threat to his survival. Iran may also prefer to keep Syria out of the conflict, in order to safeguard its “Syrian asset” and activate it when Tehran decides – and not the Palestinians. Israel, however, would be well advised to continue exacting a price from members of the “axis” located in Syria for their activity on other fronts, while continuing to take advantage of the opportunity to weaken their military capabilities, given that the risk of escalation on the Syrian front is likely lower than elsewhere.

Since the outbreak of the war in Gaza, Israel has confronted challenges on several fronts created by Iranian proxies across the Middle East – primarily Hezbollah, the Houthis in Yemen, and Shiite militias in Iraq that have attacked US military bases. Given their commitment to Hamas in the framework of the “axis of resistance,” it seems that the goal of these organizations is to engage in a limited conflict in order to apply direct and indirect pressure on Israel (via the United States) to end the war against Hamas – and primarily, to divert the attention of the IDF away from the Gaza Strip to other fronts. In Syria, in contrast, apart from a number of incidents of rocket fire that have been ascribed to Palestinian factions, and attacks by Shiite militias against US bases on Syrian soil, it currently does not appear that an active front is forming on the Israel-Syria border. Clearly President Bashar al-Assad is in no rush to contribute to the campaign and turn Syria into a significant arena of conflict, for three main considerations:

- a. Survival: At the start of the war, Israel relayed some threatening messages to Assad, warning him that engaging in the conflict would put

not only Damascus in danger, but his existence as well. Assad himself, who survived twelve years of the bloody Syrian civil war and is well aware of the capabilities of the Israeli military (which is now also benefiting from significant US assistance), is not eager to risk the future of his regime.

- b. Relations between Hamas and Syria: Hamas, whose ideological roots are in the Muslim Brotherhood, was not only highly critical of Assad during the Syrian civil war, but actively supported his opponents, especially rebel organizations affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood. Over the years there has been a slow but steady rapprochement between the Syria regime and Hamas, in part as a result of pressure exerted by Iran and Hezbollah, which sought to unify the “axis” forces in their resistance to Israel. In October 2022, the sides agreed to renew relations, but in August 2023, [Assad accused Hamas of hypocrisy and treachery](#). Assad insisted that relations would not return to what they were before the Syrian civil war.
- c. Axis considerations: It may well be that Syria’s non-involvement in the war reflects the directives of the axis and not just Assad’s own decision. Even though Iran aspires to challenge Israel on as many fronts as possible, it is not willing to sacrifice its Syrian asset for Hamas’s sake, since Syria is an important territorial and logistical hub for the Islamic Republic’s foothold in the region. Rather, it wants to guard this potential in case war breaks out with Israel or erupts between Hezbollah and Israel. From an Iranian perspective, it may be better at this time to exhaust its other proxies – such as the Houthis in Yemen and the militias in Iraq – and to make limited use of Hezbollah, due to its leading role in the axis of resistance.

Yet while an additional front has not developed with Syria, not all is quiet. Since the outbreak of the war in Gaza, there have been several incidents of rocket fire into Israel from the Syrian side of the border. These attacks were carried out by Palestinian factions, apparently without the approval of the Syrian regime. Other attacks, such as the drone that was launched from Syrian territory and hit a school in Eilat, have been blamed on Shiite militias operating in Syria. In the case of the Eilat drone, the attack was apparently carried out by the [Imam Hussein Division](#), an elite unit headed by a former Hezbollah commander [Dhu al-Faqar, under the command of the Iranian Quds Force](#). In response, the IDF attacked targets in Syria on several occasions, exacting a price from the sovereign state hosting the group

and [claiming the lives of several Hezbollah fighters](#) (and, according to foreign news reports, also members of the Quds Force). This is something that Israel usually avoids, given the “rules of the game” with Hezbollah.

In addition, since the onset of the war, pro-Iranian militias, led by the “Iraqi resistance,” have [attacked US military bases in Syria and Iraq](#) on dozens of occasions. The United States only responded to a few of these incidents by attacking militia positions in eastern Syria and Iraq, in order to avoid escalation.

As usual, the Syrian regime continues to struggle with a number of challenges that are not related to the war in the Gaza Strip. First and foremost is an additional round of fighting in the northwest of the country between the regime and rebel forces. In this framework, Russian and Syrian forces [have renewed their airstrikes](#) in the Homs and Idlib regions, and since early October, dozens of fatalities and hundreds of injuries have been reported. Clashes with local forces continue in eastern Syria, and there has been a marked increase in attacks by ISIS on Syrian military forces. In Suwayda, in the south of the country, the Druze population continues to protest against the regime over the severe economic crisis.

How Does Syria View the War in Gaza?

The prevalent view in Syria regarding the ongoing war in the Gaza Strip is one of general support for the Palestinians, while highlighting the similarity between “war crimes” and the extent of the destruction in Gaza to that seen in Syria during the civil war. The differences emerge vis-à-vis the regime, the “axis of resistance,” and Hamas.

The official discourse in Syria – like that of supporters of the regime – focuses on support for Hamas’s surprise attack and the Palestinian people, while highlighting Israeli aggression toward the Palestinians. At the same time, opponents of the regime have criticized the limited regional and international attention to the Syrian people during the civil war, compared to the attention showered on the Palestinians, including global mass demonstrations for the Palestinian cause. There has also been criticism of the international calls for a ceasefire and for an end to the war in the Gaza Strip, while such calls were noticeably weaker in the case of the Syrian civil war. Some opponents of the regime view Hamas as part of the “axis of resistance” that includes Iran, Hezbollah, and Syria, express support for Israel, and call for the elimination of Hamas, with the hope that this would weaken the axis. When at a joint summit of the Arab League and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation on November 11 [Assad accused](#) Israel of war crimes and condemned the West for its response to the war in Gaza, many people on social media noted the irony of his comments, given the atrocities that Assad himself

committed against the Palestinians in his country – as well as the rest of his citizens – during the Syrian civil war. In Idlib, an opposition stronghold, people took to the streets to express their solidarity with the people of Gaza, but [mocked](#) Damascus' statements condemning the Zionist occupation: "the same country that, along with Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah, committed war crimes against the Syrian people, including the use of chemical weapons at Ghuta near Damascus and in Khan Shaykhun – crimes that are many times more egregious and severe." [Similar criticism](#) has been sounded among the Druze: "Clean your teeth of the flesh of Palestinian children from Tel al-Zaatar [Lebanon, 1976] and the al-Yarmouk camp [south Damascus, 2012-2018] before complaining about Gaza." Some opposition forces in Syria and in exile have also called on Israel to use the opportunity to eliminate Assad.

The commander of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), [Mazlum Kobane](#), said that Hamas' attack in Israel was unacceptable, but so, too, was the "disproportionate" force that Israel uses against the Palestinians. Israel's tactics, he warned, would likely unleash a fresh spiral of extremist terrorism that could well engulf the entire region in flames and also spread to the West. Moreover, he argued, the war allows actors like Turkey to take advantage of the situation and intensify its operations against the Kurds, while the world's attention is focused on the Gaza Strip.

Syria, the "Campaign within the War" and the Significance for Israel

It appears that Assad and his supporters do not want to turn Syria into another high-intensity conflict zone with Israel, as part of the multi-front war waged by Iran and the "axis of resistance." At the same time, the regime's ability to rein in activity by Palestinian factions or members of the axis on Syrian soil is limited, and Damascus is susceptible to pressure from Iran and Hezbollah. Moreover, although the latter two are not necessarily interested in pressuring Assad at the current time, this might change the longer the fighting in Gaza goes on – depending on an escalation of the confrontation between Israel and Hezbollah and the extent to which Iran believes the organization is threatened.

Consequently, Israel should now formulate a clear strategy for each of the relevant actors on the Syrian front, so that it can also create opportunities. With regard to the Assad regime, Israel should find the balance between exacting a direct price for the activity of the "axis of resistance" on Syrian soil, in order to encourage Damascus to rein in the hostile activity and underscore the risk it incurs, while avoiding too much pressure, which could prompt Assad to give the axis members a free hand or even to respond by himself to Israeli attacks.

As for the “axis” elements on Syrian soil, Israel should use the momentum provided by the war by responding more forcefully against axis assets. Compared to Lebanon, Israel enjoys much greater freedom of operation in Syria; this should be used to expand operations against Hezbollah and the militias, in order to reduce their military capabilities and to distance them from the border with Israel. The frequency and scope of these attacks should be greater than in non-wartime periods or in the Campaign between Wars, underway in Syria for more than a decade. This would allow for new rules of the game, which would benefit Israel and could also help formulate a new security reality for the “day after” on the Syrian arena.

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