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**Future Israeli Strikes in Syria: Shifting Dynamics?
As Reflected in Syrian Discourse on the Social Media
Udi Dekel and Orit Perlov**

According to a report from official Syrian sources, on December 7, 2014, Israel once again attacked targets near the Damascus International Airport and the Syria-Lebanon border. After the attack, the Syrian army announced that the attack was designed to boost the rebels' morale, following important victories by the regime in Deir ez-Zor, Aleppo, and other areas. Reporters who visited the area of the attacked sites relayed that a shipment of ground-to-ground missiles and advanced unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) systems had been hit. Serious damage to the military section of the Damascus International Airport, which serves as the gateway for arms and military aid – mostly from Iran and Russia – was also reported.

Following the attack, Israel's alleged military operation sparked an extensive debate on the social networks in Syria; some 30 percent of the Syrian population are active social media users. A recurrent narrative was that from the beginning of the uprising against the Bashar al-Assad regime, Israel concluded that the regime, backed by Hizbollah and Iran, was focused on domestic challenges, and would therefore refrain from opening another front, i.e., against Israel. Furthermore, in the first stages of the civil war, the idea of retaliatory action against Israel seemingly had little legitimacy among the public. However, over time, the Syrian and Lebanese populations began to feel contempt toward the Assad regime and Hizbollah, due to their failure to respond to the attacks and their inability to translate the slogan "the right to respond" [in the right place at the right time] into action, leading Israel to believe that it enjoyed much freedom of action in attacking Syria.

At the same time, online discourse suggests that the window of opportunity that allegedly enabled Israel to act freely on Syrian territory against arms shipments and other targets without any response from the Assad regime and Hizbollah is closing. In February, an attack in the Beqaa Valley near the border between Syria and Lebanon was attributed to Israel. According to Voice of Lebanon radio, the attack targeted Hizbollah convoys transporting advanced rockets from Syria to Hizbollah stockpiles in the Beqaa Valley.

Though not claiming responsibility, Hizbollah responded with three attacks in the Golan Heights and Har Dov, and over the next 10 months Israel reportedly refrained from attacking targets in Syria. Presumably Israel prefers to attack in Syrian territory in order to avoid provoking Hizbollah, which has recently bolstered its status as “defender of Lebanon” and gained self-confidence, following its proven capability (superior to that of the Lebanese army) in combating Sunni radical jihadist groups, primarily the Islamic State organization (IS) and Jabhat al-Nusra.

Discussion on the social networks suggests that Iran, Syria, and Hizbollah understand that their deterrence against Israel has weakened and that they must therefore devise a new strategy that demonstrates that the price Israel will pay for aerial attacks in Syria will be greater than the benefit derived from them.

At the same time, the online discourse among the leadership of the rebel groups in Syria reflects a sense of resentment over the price that they have paid for the Israeli attacks. The assumption is that the regime has chosen to respond to Israeli attacks by targeting the rebel groups Free Syrian Army (FSA) and Islamic Front (IF) and their supporting constituencies with a decisive blow. Online discussions also suggested that given the need to coordinate with Iran against IS, the United States was focusing its attacks on IS targets while refraining from attacks against Assad regime targets. At the same time, in the framework of strategic coordination with Israel, the US allows Israel to strike targets of the Assad regime and Hizbollah in Syria.

Posited, therefore, is that Iran has formulated a new strategy, based on a forceful response by the Assad regime and Hizbollah to any Israeli attack against regime or Hizbollah targets in Syria. According to this strategy, the regime’s response will be reflected in attacks against the leaders and infrastructure of the rebel organizations that are among the allies of the Western and Arab coalition – the Islamic Front, the Free Syrian Army, and the supporting civilian infrastructure. A comment posted on the internet by Jaysh al-Islam (part of the Islamic Front) leader Zahran Alloush about an hour after the December 7 attack in the Damascus area supports this theory. Alloush blamed Israel for the fact that “every time [Israel]...strikes Assad and Hizbollah targets, it gives Assad legitimacy to take revenge against the rebels.” According to this suggested analysis, this will counter American interests, weaken the “moderate rebel groups,” and strengthen the extremist organizations – Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra.

Assessment

The analysis of the discourse on the social networks reflects public opinion among the groups opposing the Assad regime, and leads to : (1) An attack by Israel against the assets of Assad/Hizbollah (2) prompts an attack in response by the Assad regime against the rebel groups (FSA and IF) and the population; (3) consequently, the opposition is weakened and ISIS is strengthened, (4) which undermines the efforts of the US in the war

against the Islamic State, (5) and as a result, the US will demand that Israel now refrain from attacks in Syria.

The logic driving the Iranian strategy, as presented in the Syrian social media, is that damage to the US interest in Syria will lead to a conflict of interests between the US and Israel and an American red light regarding Israeli action against targets belonging to the Assad regime within Syria, as long as the war against the Islamic State continues. It is believed that this strategy, which urges a strong response against the rebel organizations in Syria in response to Israeli attacks in Syria, will restore deterrence against Israel, because even if Israel is not worried about a military response from Syria or Hizbollah, it will take the American interest into consideration and avoid a confrontation with the US administration. This logic, however, should be assessed critically, as the coordination and strategic understandings with the US give Israel some leeway. The American administration understands Israel's essential need to defend itself, and it is therefore difficult to believe that it would prevent Israel from taking action aimed at preventing a significant strategic arms buildup by Hizbollah.

To date, Israel's policy has been to avoid involvement in events in Syria and Lebanon while strengthening defense, mainly along the border and against high trajectory weapons. At the same time, Israel has reportedly taken action against immediate threats, including the transfer of weapons from Syria to Lebanon that threaten to detract from its military advantage. Israel has kept a low profile and has not confirmed reports about the attacks, in part in order not to harm Assad's dignity and force him to respond. In the past, it has been the US that has revealed that attacks were carried out by Israel; the administration may have been eager to disavow responsibility for the attacks. However, in contrast to previous incidents, the administration did not respond to the most recent attack and did not make any announcement, official or unofficial, that the attack had a negative impact on the US struggle against the Islamic State.

Since the formation of the Western and Arab coalition against IS, rumors have been circulating that some of the coalition members regard the Assad regime as a partner in the war against the Islamic State, and as part of the future solution in Syria. Iran's status in the region has also greatly improved, following its efforts against the Islamic State on the side of and in coordination with the coalition. Iran has made its contribution to the war against the Islamic State and the utilization of the its Quds force and Shiite militias conditional on the coalition not taking action against the Assad regime. Iran may therefore attempt to drive a wedge between Israel and the US by delivering a message that Israeli attacks damage the joint effort against the Islamic State. If no related development ensues, Iran may encourage action by Hizbollah and possibly also by Assad's forces in response to an Israeli attack, in order to illustrate that a change has occurred in the balance of power and the rules of the game in the region.