



## Geopolitics and non-western intervention in Syria

# ISRAEL'S CONFLICTING INTERESTS IN THE SYRIAN WAR

**Israel's activities in Syria have not drawn much attention due to Israel's official policy of neutrality. Yet, over the last couple of years, Israel has stepped up its operations in Syria, targeting Iranian and Hezbollah assets and providing quiet assistance to the rebels.**

From the very start, Israeli policy-makers have been divided internally over how to approach the complex and multi-sided conflict on their doorstep, and they have struggled to find a coherent policy response which would balance Israel's multiple conflicting interests in Syria.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- Legitimacy problems and intense proxy warfare dynamics mean that Israel should only be minimally engaged in assisting rebel forces and local Syrians.
- While observing its red line policy in Syria, Israel should heed the lessons of its intervention in the Lebanese Civil War, in order to avoid escalation dynamics and "mission creep."
- Israel may be effective in influencing US policy on Syria in a more pro-active direction, and continue providing intelligence and some humanitarian relief in the south.

# Officially, the Israeli government maintains a policy of neutrality in Syria. However, in practice, Israel has drifted quite far from its “sitting-on-the-fence approach”.

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## From “sitting on the fence” to low-intensity warfare

In the first two to three years of the Syrian conflict, Israel adopted what can be described as a “wait and see-policy”. In contrast to Western powers, the government did not side with the opposition, neither did it call for Assad to step down. In fact, in some diplomatic circles, the Assad regime was perceived as “the devil Israel knows”, who had kept the Israeli-Syrian border quiet for almost four decades, and who had served as a bulwark against Islamist parties potentially taking over governing power in Syria.

Yet, since the regime in Damascus is also a close ally of Hezbollah and Iran, making up the so-called “Resistance Front”, the government in Jerusalem was clearly in a double-bind. On the one hand, it would like stability and predictability along its border with Syria, but on the other hand, it would clearly prefer to see the power of the Resistance Front hamstrung. If the Assad regime were toppled, Iran would lose its influence in Syria, and the transfer of weapons to Hezbollah through Syrian territory would likely be halted. Without being able to square this dilemma, or significantly shape the situation on the ground, the Israeli government initially seemed content with pursuing an official policy of neutrality, or what some commentators called “a sitting-on-the-fence approach”.

However, over the course of 2013, as Iran and Hezbollah established a direct military presence on the ground in Syria, Israel grew increasingly concerned and began adjusting its Syrian policy. The fear

was that so-called game-changing weapons would be transferred to Hezbollah bases in Lebanon via Syrian territory, and that Iran and Hezbollah would build a stronghold on the Syrian side of the Golan, in effect creating a second front or buffer zone there. In 2013, Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) started targeting Hezbollah and Iranian operatives in Syria, bombing Hezbollah convoys allegedly carrying arms to Lebanon, and responding to fire from the Syrian regime or Hezbollah across the Israeli-Syrian border, thereby enforcing the Israeli government’s new so-called red lines.

The red line policy in effect means that IDF are engaged in low-intensity and largely covert warfare in Syria. Officially, the government does not comment on, or take direct credit for, the attacks on Hezbollah or Iranian assets, but only discloses its retaliatory fire across the border.

In 2013, Israel also secretly started giving medical treatment to wounded rebel fighters from Syria. Fighters were picked up at the border by the IDF, transported to Israeli hospitals for surgery, and then sent back into Syria. Up to 3500 Syrians – including women and children – have now been treated inside Israel. The medical aid, which the government now officially recognizes it provides, is controversial and has drawn criticism and stark reactions from some sectors within Israeli society, in particular from the Arab Druze community in the Golan. Being primarily pro-Assad, the Druze are accusing the Israeli government of aiding the al-Sham fighters and other rebel groups, which they perceive as being terrorists.

In addition to giving medical treatment to Syrians, Israel is also sending a limited amount of food, water and medical supplies to Syria's south. This is also largely carried out under the radar by private Israeli foundations in collaboration with rebel groups. Furthermore, while some Syrians are clearly pleased with the humanitarian aid, especially after the border with Jordan has been closed, others perceive receiving any kind of aid from Israel as high treason, as Israel is still considered an enemy of Syria and the Arab world.

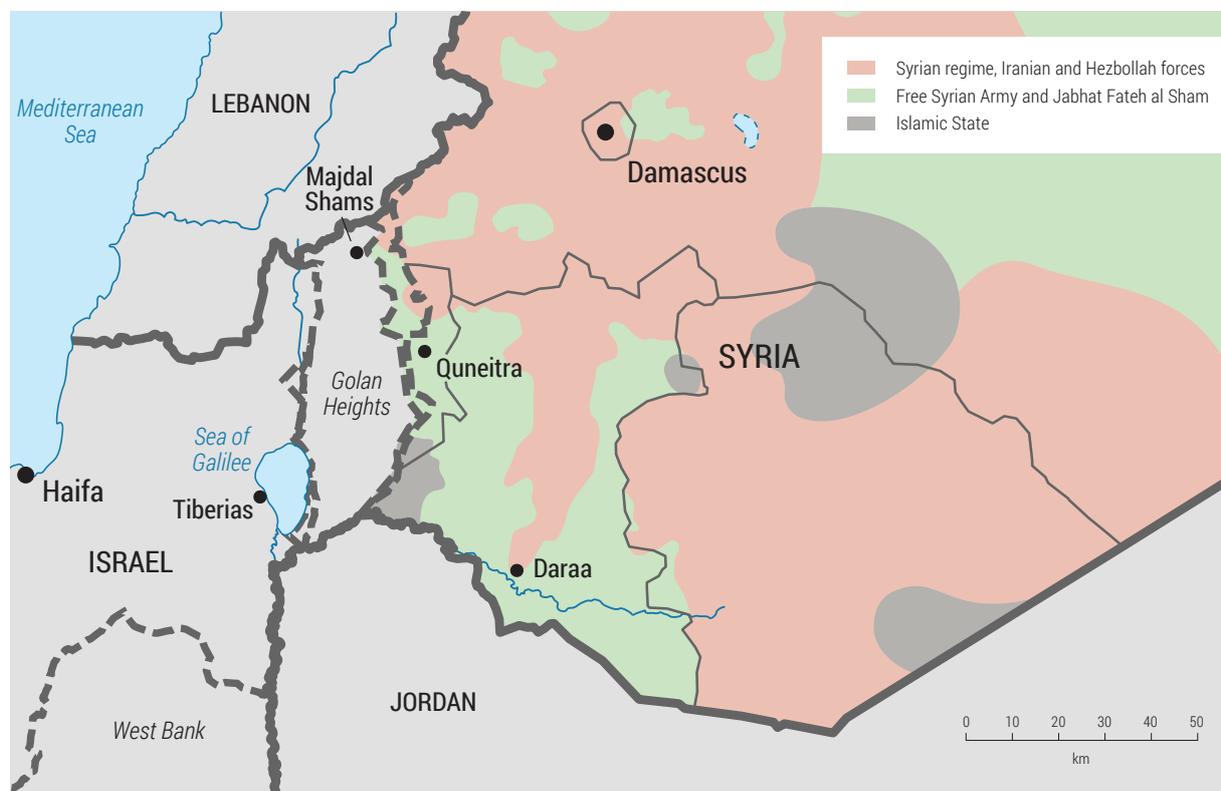
Finally, there are also unconfirmed reports that Israel provides some degree of military aid to rebel groups. Allegedly, Israel may be assisting with training vetted rebel forces inside Jordan, and Israel may be sharing intelligence with rebel groups and some Arab governments. For example, in 2014, the UNDOF mission stationed on the Israeli-Syrian ceasefire line in the Golan reported that it had observed boxes with unidentified content being exchanged between the IDF and rebel groups.

Although the assistance is controversial among Israelis and Syrians respectively, it may partly explain

why Israel has avoided attacks from rebel groups in the Golan area, even from more extremist jihadi groups affiliated with Islamic State and Fateh al Sham. Conversely, Israel has not attacked Islamic State-affiliated groups either. The understanding in Israeli defence circles is that Hezbollah and Iran constitute long-term strategic threats, while Islamic State groups are mere tactical threats that can be dealt with another day.

### The future: Into the brink or staying the course?

Officially, the Israeli government maintains a policy of neutrality in Syria. However, in practice, Israel has drifted quite far from its "sitting-on-the-fence approach". Some voices in Israel's security establishment even call for further involvement and direct military assistance to rebel forces. First and foremost in order to weaken Hezbollah and Iran's regional power and leverage, but humanitarian and moral arguments are used as well. The former director of IDF's intelligence branch and now director of the Israeli Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) recently suggested that Israel should help rebel groups to overthrow Assad in cooperation with the US, Turkey and Saudi-Arabia. Specifically, this should be by providing advanced weapons, for example, by



Numerous groups operate in the Israeli-Syrian border area. Some sources speak of up to 150 different groups. Three main parties are shown on this map: regime/Hiszbollah/Iranian forces in red, rebel forces (FSA southern Front) and Fateh al Sham (former Jabhat al Nusra) in green, and Islamic State-affiliated groups in grey.

helping to establish some form of humanitarian safe zone in southern Syria along Israel and Jordan's border, and by engaging in limited military operations, such as Israeli strikes against Syrian military helicopters dropping barrel bombs against civilians.

However, even limited military intervention and assistance by Israel carries serious risks or may have unintentional consequences in terms of 1) assisting the rebel forces, 2) ending the war and/or tilt the balance of power, 3) undermining Israel's own security. First, any direct Israeli military operations in favour of the rebel groups risk undermining these groups' legitimacy in the eyes of Syrians and the Arab world at large. In Arab politics, Israel is not a "normal actor" and Israel's capability to shape actors and outcomes in the Syrian war is therefore very limited. Secondly, we know from other civil wars with intense proxy-war dynamics that enhanced military engagement tends to lead to escalation by rivaling powers. In Lebanon's protracted civil war, which has many similarities with the Syrian war today, external interventions led to a prolonged and destructive war, without significantly altering the balance of power at the end of the war. Thirdly, once involved, Israel may risk being dragged into further conflict and involvement, without achieving its initial objective. Israel's intervention in the Lebanese civil war was also meant

to be limited in scope and time, but in effect lasted for 18 years. Israel became embroiled in Lebanese infighting, allying itself with a Maronite Christian militia, it engaged in asymmetrical warfare against a myriad of militia organizations and paramilitary forces that were increasingly supported by rivaling regional powers in Syria and Iran. Israel ended up exchanging one adversary on its northern border (PLO) with another (Hezbollah). Moreover, the war was highly unpopular in Israeli domestic society, in part because of the atrocities committed against civilians, and partly because the Lebanon War was seen as a war of choice, rather than one of necessity.

Caution and restraint is therefore needed. Israel may be effective in influencing US policy on Syria in a more pro-active direction, it may provide intelligence, and some humanitarian relief in the south. However, Israel should stay the course and remain only minimally involved on the side of the rebel forces and within the limits of the "red-line policy".

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Coverphoto: Israeli soldiers of the Golani brigade take position during training in the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights, on the border with Syria, Tuesday, Sept. 2016. ©Ariel Schalit, AP Photo

