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Analysts: Israel doesn't fear change of regime in Syria

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Now, as another Arab neighbour - Syria - faces escalating bloodshed and turmoil, Israel appears more relaxed about regime change there.

The difference? Analysts say Israel doubts that Islamists will take over in Syria after the expected downfall of President Bashar Al Assad.

They add that Israel may also feel a new Syrian government may be friendlier towards the West and more distant from Iran and groups such as Lebanon's Hizbollah that are anti-Israel.

Some Syrian opposition leaders are already warning there will be payback for Hizbollah, which has used Damascus as a safe haven, if Mr Al Assad goes.

Mr Assad's fall would mean less military and political aid for Hizbollah, reducing its threat to Israel.

Last week, Moshe Yaalon, a vice Israeli prime minister, slammed accusations Israel was trying to sustain Mr Assad's rule because it feared a new regime would destabilise the relatively quiet border between Israel and Syria.

Mr Yaalon, in one of the few public statements by top Israeli officials about the violence in Syria, told a radio station Mr Assad's ouster could be good for Israel, spurring "a fissure in the Tehran-Damascus-Beirut-Hamas axis of evil".

Mr Yaalon also rejected the assessment by some analysts that Syria's Muslim Brotherhood, banned since 1963, may re-emerge as a major political force.

Mr Yaalon said the Islamist organisation is unlikely to gain power because it is too weak after years of state repression.

Israeli defence minister Ehud Barak in mid-December predicted - wrongly - that Mr Assad would lose power "within a few weeks", adding his downfall would be a "blessing for the Middle East".

The comments by Mr Yaalon and Mr Barak show Israel may welcome a takeover by Syrian opposition groups.

Indeed, in the interview, Mr Yaalon did not deny Israel has had contact with opposition members, saying "whether there is contact or not, you don't expect me to discuss these things in the media".

Analysts say Israeli officials have mostly kept mum about criticising events in Syria - which Israel considers an enemy - to avoid having Mr Al Assad try to win public support and sympathy by saying Israel is backing his rivals.

The Israeli government has long had a tense relationship with Syria.

While the frontier has been relatively calm since the two countries signed an armistice in 1974 after the Arab-Israeli war a year earlier, Israel has blamed its northern neighbour for co-operating with Iran, the Palestinian group, Hamas - that rules Gaza - and Hizbollah.

Indeed, the Israeli army says most of the rockets and anti-tank missiles in the arsenal of Hizbollah, which fought a 34-day war with Israel in 2006, are transferred across the border from Syria.

Damascus has also long hosted the leaders of Hamas, but the Islamist group has reduced its Syrian presence, partly because many of the Sunni Muslims killed in the violence were its supporters.

Meir Zamir, a professor at Israel's Ben-Gurion University, said unlike with Mr Mubarak, known for his close cooperation on security and diplomacy with Israel and the US, Mr Al Assad and Israeli officials have often traded insults.

"As the opposition in Syria gets stronger, there is an understanding in Israel that the collapse of the Assad family may be beneficial," said Mr Zamir.

"The general view is that Israel has nothing to lose from the collapse of this regime."

He added Israel has less at stake with Syria because, unlike Egypt and Jordan, there is no peace agreement.

Uncertainty still remains over Egypt.

The Muslim Brotherhood last month won by far the biggest share of seats reserved for party lists in the first freely-elected parliament in Egypt in decades.

While the Muslim Brotherhood has assured the US it would abide by the 1979 peace treaty with Israel, it has also cast doubt on the pact's future by denouncing it as "unfair" to Egypt and saying they want to renegotiate some provisions.

In Syria, if opposition groups friendlier to Israel take power in Syria, analysts say peace negotiations with Israel would be low on their agenda.

Instead, they are likely to focus on rehabilitating their shattered country.

Israel's predominantly right-wing government is also not expected to rush into any talks as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, facing possible elections this year, is unlikely to risk losing support from the Right by agreeing to Syria's demand for territorial concessions.

Israel conducted Turkish-mediated, indirect talks with Syria in 2008 but they yielded nothing tangible.

Negotiations have been deadlocked over Israel's refusal to surrender the Golan Heights, which it annexed after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, in a move not recognised by the international community.

Analysts say despite Israeli officials appearing to warm to the idea of a changed Syrian regime, Mr Assad is unlikely to give up power so easily.

"I wouldn't bury this regime too early," said Shlomo Brom, a former army general and now an analyst at the Institute for National Security Studies at Tel Aviv University.

"It still controls the instruments of violence - the military and security services - and the rebellion is too weak. Without foreign intervention, I don't see an end to the regime."