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Adding Flame to the Syrian Fire

Paul Pillar

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Israeli warplanes inflicted some kind of damage on the outskirts of Damascus on Wednesday, but there were different versions as to exactly what. The Syrian government says it was a scientific research facility that was attacked. American sources say the target was a convoy carrying anti-aircraft weapons into Lebanon for use by the militia of Hezbollah. Israel isn't saying anything.

Speculation about the actual target and about Israeli purposes doesn't have to end there. This is the Middle East, after all, where no analysis about someone's motives is complete without going further than this in the way of conspiratorial and convoluted explanations. As an editorial in Lebanon's *Daily Star* [4] points out, shipments of something like the anti-aircraft weapons into Lebanon are hardly new. Thus the "immediate question" is, "Why now?"

Surely, one might think, the Israelis must have considered the effects their strike would have on the course of the current civil war in Syria. By moving closer to realizing the oft-expressed fears about this war spreading across international borders, maybe Israel was hoping to spur Western governments into a more active intervention in Syria on behalf of the rebels. Or perhaps the motive was the opposite; Israel may have more to fear from a new Syrian regime dominated by some of those same rebel elements than it does from the devil-they-know Bashar Assad. An Israeli airstrike in Syrian territory may have been just the sort of thing to give at least a temporary boost to Assad—as suggested by how the Syrian regime played up the attack, whether or not its version of the target was accurate.

The less convoluted explanations are more plausible. The strike is part of a well-established pattern of Israel using its military might to beat down anything and anybody that could possibly challenge it, and of paying little regard in the process to larger consequences—to its neighbors, its friends, and even its own long-term interests. It is part of the pattern of seeking absolute security for Israel even if it means absolute insecurity for others. Beating down others in ways that facilitate more Israeli beating down in the future is part of the pattern. That lends credibility to the version of this week's airstrike that has as the target advanced anti-aircraft weapons bound for Lebanon. The more such weapons are kept out of Lebanon, the more easily Israel can continue to violate Lebanese airspace with impunity.

Even though Israelis may not consider larger consequences, such consequences nonetheless happen. The *Daily Star* points to a couple of them:

One of these losers is the Syrian people, who are decidedly unenthusiastic about seeing Israel enter into the uprising against the regime of President Bashar Assad in any way, shape or form. The other losers would be neighboring states such as Lebanon, if it is swept up into the violence because of the possible—and not yet proven—role of Hezbollah in the affair.

And for the United States, there also is the consequence—given the nature of the U.S.-Israeli relationship—it incurs from any Israeli action, of being closely associated with that action. Or as the Lebanese editorialists ask, “If the Israelis are actually responsible for Wednesday’s incident, is it likely that they took the step with the knowledge of their chief ally, the United States?”