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## How Israel Plays Syria's Civil War

**After half a decade sitting out the conflagration across its border, is Israel about to pick a side?**

Signs of war are clearly evident when peering into Syria from the Israeli side of the Golan Heights: bombed-out villages, forests hastily chopped down for firewood, refugee encampments. But above all there is the desolation and quiet.

One village sitting almost on the border line seems to be deserted, save for an incongruous shepherd and his flock and, eventually, one or two trucks moving in the distance. This is a change from previous years, when “war tourists,” Israeli and foreign, flocked to this frontier for front-row seats to the worst show on Earth: plumes of gray smoke from mortar shells, sounds of gunfire, multi-vehicle offensives by one Syrian rebel group or another.

Especially at the start of the Syrian civil war, when such things were novel, Israeli military officers would sit at the Coffee Annan café on Mt. Bental, overlooking the vast Golan plain, and through binoculars observe what one officer termed “the laboratory of terror” below. The “experiments” in this laboratory sometimes crossed into the Israeli side, with rockets over villages, roadside bombs on the border fence, and small arms fire; several Israeli army personnel have been seriously injured and at least one civilian has been killed.

Until a few errant mortars and an unidentified drone caused some excitement last month, however, the frontier with Israel appeared to have gone almost wholly quiet—despite the fact that the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) and the al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra are known to be on the border.

As one senior Israel Defense Forces (IDF) officer from the Northern Command told me during a recent visit, “Lebanon might be the most explosive arena, and Gaza might be the most immediate, but the Golan Heights is the most dynamic.”

This “dynamism,” indeed, explains how it is that after years of anarchy and warfare inside Syria, the rebels – whether moderate, jihadist, or ISIS—have yet to fire at Israel in anger. It may also explain the relative quiet of recent months and Israel’s evolving strategy vis-à-vis its Golan front. After half a decade sitting out the civil war, is Israel about to pick a side?



**When it comes to the Golan Heights, dynamism for the IDF** takes many forms, but none perhaps so personal for many officers as the imposing mountain of Tel Hara which rises out of the Golan plain several kilometers inside Syria. Tel Hara was, for decades, a strategic command position for the Syrian army and a major focal point for Israeli war planners.

“I trained for years to take that hill, a lot of sweat went into it,” the senior IDF officer told me, pointing at it wistfully from the border line. “And the [Syrian] rebels took it with a few dozen people” in late 2014 after a protracted siege.

After Israel conquered the territory in the 1967 war, the Golan Heights remained for nearly 40 years Israel’s calmest border. Limited Syrian and Israeli forces eyed each other warily across a demilitarized zone presided over by a UN peacekeeping force (UNDOF, or UN Disengagement Observer Forces). Yet the Assad government in Damascus as well as successive Israeli governments in Jerusalem kept a tenuous quiet, if not peace, as proxy conflagrations raged in neighboring Lebanon and the Palestinian Territories.

On several occasions in the last two decades it seemed like an actual peace deal was in the offing, with Israel purportedly ready to trade the Golan for a full normalization of ties with Syria. The 40,000-or-so Israeli citizens and Druze residents living in the territory are thankful these efforts ran aground. Indeed, those days of peacemaking seem like a strange vestige of a bygone era, given the charnel house Syria has become.

The IDF forces responsible for the Golan were, prior to the Syrian civil war, made up of an armored division that mostly focused on training. With its live-fire zones, farmland, and old

fenced-in minefields, the Golan's wide open spaces were an ideal location for large scale maneuvers. "There are more mines than cows, and more cows than people," a local once quipped to me.

If rusty reservists were for decades responsible for securing the border, since 2014 a dedicated regional division (the "Bashan") was set up on the Golan, consisting of armored and artillery units, special intelligence-gathering elements, and elite combat infantry (most recently from the Paratroopers Brigade). The old rickety border fence was replaced with a formidable high-tech barrier, replete with advanced sensors and thick metal.

Standing close to the new border fence, the senior IDF officer remarked upon these changes—and more recent ones.

"You haven't seen one [IDF] patrol, have you?" he asked rhetorically. "Patrols are exposed and vulnerable. We're now 'off the fence.'

This was a shift in the IDF's force posture. On previous visits such patrols were clearly visible, driving up and down the dirt access roads adjacent to the fence. And they were vulnerable. According to official Israeli data, on at least six occasions since 2011 patrols were targeted by improvised explosive devices (IEDs); deliberate shooting and mortar attacks were also relatively common.

The IDF these days trusts its intelligence gathering capabilities and control of the high ground, yet more traditional measures are being taken against what Israel now sees as the most serious threat on the Golan: a strategic cross-border attack via a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED), similar to one undertaken by an ISIS-affiliate on the Israeli-Egyptian border in August 2012. Underlining this threat, in late June on the Syrian-Jordanian border, a van packed with explosives broke through the border fence at high-speed and detonated near a Jordanian military post, killing six soldiers.

To combat such an eventuality, the senior IDF officer pointed out the dirt anti-tank berms and metal swing barriers behind us, vestiges of a time – "the old days" – when the gravest concern was an advance by a Syrian armored column. Syrian government tanks have been replaced by the 4x4's, pick-up trucks and tractors of extremist rebel groups. The IDF's new vigilance aside, a rebel attack on Israel has yet to occur. And this isn't only because of the imposing desert-beige Merkava battle tank stationed a few dozen feet to our right, silently looking out onto Syria below.



**“If you have an ear infection over there you can die,”** the senior officer said, pointing out at the ruined Syrian village less than a kilometer in the distance—a border fence, and world, away. As has been widely reported, Israel provides medical aid to Syrian rebels; more than 2,000 injured have received care in Israeli hospitals. The stipulation has been that the IDF does not check IDs when evacuating the injured, and once in hospital they aren’t interrogated. Even fighters from Jabhat al-Nusra, which was at least until this week the Syrian branch of Al-Qaeda, reportedly have been taken in.

There was, according to the senior officer, a clear “moral and military logic” behind the medical assistance, as well as what he termed the “major humanitarian effort” underway on the Syrian Golan. According to recent reports, Israel has established a military liaison unit for outreach to local villages, and has sent in truckloads of civilian aid and basic food stuffs. As another IDF officer from the Northern Command told me earlier this year++, “The wishes of the local people are key—they want to maintain daily life, and we want to keep terror away from the Israeli border.” This effort to win hearts and minds seems to be succeeding.

The forces arrayed opposite the IDF on the Golan are for the most part, but not wholly, local—“sons of the place,” as the senior officer phrased it, with local concerns and by extension local motives for where they aimed their guns.

The multitude of armed groups in southern Syria can be classified on a spectrum, “50 shades of black” in IDF parlance, with the ISIS-affiliated Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade “the blackest” and the catch-all anti-Assad “rebels” the most moderate.

In the middle has been Jabhat al-Nusra, which has been engaged in a fierce competition with the Yarmouk Martyrs for the region’s extremist crown.

The Yarmouk commander, a local leader by the name Al-Khal (“the uncle”), was killed by an Al-Nusra car bomb. Israeli intelligence believes that this was the point wherein several leaders from the outside, “real ISIS,” came in to take command and do the bidding of external masters.

“They could easily make a U-turn south and hit Jordan or Israel,” the senior officer told me, just weeks before the border attack in Jordan.

Jabhat al-Nusra, for its part, is apparently more willing to build coalitions with other rebels groups in the region, even going so far as to divide conquered villages among various factions. (Indeed, the group is nominally decoupling from Al Qaeda, giving more credence to the notion that local concerns—as opposed to global jihad—are its fighters’ prime motivation.)

It’s a “Lord of the Flies” low-stakes competition for territory, influence, and resources, with the major losers the local moderate rebels who simply took up arms to overthrow Assad. But these are likely the greatest beneficiaries of Israeli aid and, indeed, physical protection. It’s not a coincidence that one such refugee tent encampment is located mere steps from the border fence with Israel.

“They know that they’re safe with Israel behind them,” the senior officer said. “But there is a fine line between non-intervention and defense – if you’re seen as taking sides that will have implications.” So official Israel continues with its policy of non-intervention in the Syrian quagmire, while bonds undoubtedly are being formed on the ground.

The best example is at the major border crossing at Quneitra, which even after the outbreak of the civil war remained open, allowing for the passage of Druze university students, apple harvests, and UN peacekeepers. In August 2014, a rebel coalition took the crossing from the Assad regime, after which both the IDF and UN removed their forces, shuttering it completely.

The senior officer explained that these days, a moderate local rebel clan holds the white stone hut just 100 meters from the massive blue border gate that separates Syrian chaos from Israeli controlled territory.

If a vehicle-borne suicide attack is truly the main threat, then the Quneitra crossing would be the easiest route across the border and into the Israeli civilian hinterland. For now, the moderate rebels—and not ISIS or regime-backed terrorists – hold the position, although according to the senior officer there is a plan in place for when this changes.

**For the pro-regime “axis”—Assad, Iran, and the Lebanese Hezbollah**—the fall of the Quneitra crossing was just one of many losses on the Golan front. Indeed, regime-allied forces are known to hold just two positions in the region: the Druze village of Khader and the city of New Quneitra. These redoubts were, until recently, launching points for rocket strikes and terror attacks against Israel. In 2014 alone, according to official IDF figures, there were 50 projectiles fired at Israel and 10 deliberate shootings across the border, all perpetrated by pro-Assad elements. Both figures have fallen dramatically, and not by coincidence.

As was the case last month with the mortars, Israel responds to any cross-border fire—errant or otherwise—with targeted strikes against Syrian regime positions. More than this, Israel is believed to have been behind at least two airstrikes inside Syria targeting Iranian and Hezbollah agents responsible for this Golan front.

A third strike earlier this year of unknown provenance killed Mustafa Badreddine, Hezbollah's notorious military commander for Syria. "Every time one of their [Hezbollah] guys gets killed, it helps," the senior officer stated, without taking credit, as if they were simply acts of God.

The village of Khader itself may, in addition, be a test case for how humanitarian aid is used to sway a local populace away from terror – although Israeli officials refuse to confirm what this relationship may entail.

Taken as a whole, the Golan Heights is indeed Israel's "most dynamic" front, with an ever-changing cast of militias. Such complexities are cause for concern; no one quite knows when ISIS will make the "U-turn" south and attack Israel (as it has already done with Jordan). Yet many prominent Israeli security figures do see opportunities within the complexity.

As the IDF's Military Intelligence chief Maj. Gen. Herzi Halevi said earlier this summer, in Syria "there are not good guys or bad guys anymore, where the white knight hits the black knight." Nevertheless, he added, for Israel the worst outcome would be a situation where the pro-regime axis emerges victorious at the end of the civil war.

In this he was joined by Amos Yadlin, a predecessor as Military Intelligence chief and one of the country's most respected strategic thinkers. In two major articles, Yadlin argued that Israel should ditch its policy of non-intervention in favor of a more active policy that leads to the defeat of the country's "most bitter enemies": Iran and its Syrian and Lebanese allies.

To achieve this end he called for direct military support to anti-Assad rebels, increased humanitarian assistance, and a parallel front against the Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade. "When Assad is ultimately ousted," Yadlin wrote, "it is important that the Arab and Muslim world know that Israel was on the right side of the struggle and operated correctly from both a moral and a strategic perspective."

The tide may be turning in the internal debate between the devil Israel has known for decades (the Assad regime) and the devil it has only come to know recently (extremists and jihadists of various persuasions). Such an alliance is not without its awkwardness. When pressed recently by an Al-Jazeera interviewer about the threat of blowback from those very same Jabhat al-Nusra fighters Israel has been treating, former Mossad head Efraim Halevy rejected the possibility, albeit in tortured fashion.

"I don't think there's going to be blowback," he said. "Unfortunately, the rules of the game in Syria are such, that you can do anything that is not possible to be done anywhere else."

On the Golan Heights Israel may have already begun to play by those rules of the game not possible anywhere else. The increased quiet of recent months is a testament to their effectiveness – for now.

Back on the border fence, looking out onto a shattered Syria, the senior IDF officer summed up the convoluted realities of the new Middle East. "If only they could be our allies," he said

reflectively, referring to the Syrian people just as much as the moderate rebels. “Maybe peace can be reached with a piece of land, instead of a state.”