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Why Israel targets Syria:

The geopolitical stakes of Damascus's support for the resistance

According to Israel, Syria is the key weapons transportation hub for the Resistance – and has simultaneously withdrawn from the Axis to save itself. As Tel Aviv continues to strike Syrian soil with abandon, which of its claims are true?

Over the past decade, Syria has faced hundreds of Israeli air attacks claiming to primarily target weapons manufacturing, transport, and storage facilities. According to Tel Aviv, these strikes are intended to "cut off supply routes" from Iran to Lebanon's Hezbollah. Most recently, on ۳۱ October, the Israeli military announced it had struck weapons depots and headquarters used by Hezbollah in the Qusayr area, reportedly killing at least ۱۰ people, mostly civilians.

With the launch of Operation Al-Aqsa Flood more than a year ago, Israeli strikes on Syria intensified, reaching ۲۹ by the end of ۲۰۲۳. And since the start of this year, Syria has been subjected to ۶۹ air attacks targeting multiple geographical areas, in addition to ۱۷ attacks on Syrian–Lebanese crossings since mid-September.

The attacks coincided with the occupation state's rapid military escalation against Lebanon six weeks ago, beginning with the pager and walkie-talkie terror attacks on ۱۶-

17 September and culminating in the assassinations of high-ranking leaders of the Lebanese resistance, including Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah.

Supporting or stepping back from the resistance?

The accusations levied against Damascus by Israel and the US reveal contradictory narratives, suggesting on one hand that Syria remains the central supporter of the Lebanese resistance, while on the other hand implying that it has reined in support for both Lebanese and Palestinian factions.

After the Qusayr attack, the occupation army stated: "With the support of the Syrian regime, the Hezbollah terrorist organization endangers the security of Syrian and Lebanese civilians by embedding command centers and forces in civilian areas in both these countries."

On the flip side, amid speculation that Damascus has distanced itself from Hezbollah, Seth Frantzman, an adjunct fellow at the US-based Foundation of Defense of Democracies, claims the Syrian government's reluctance to take active measures against repeated violations by Israel "likely stems from the regime's sense that it has nothing to gain by escalation and much to lose."

In fact, there are several indicators that confirm Syria's firm support of the resistance against Israel's attempts to reshape West Asia, including efforts to "eradicate Hezbollah" in Lebanon—a goal often repeated by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Israel's long-term plans for Syria

Israeli leaders often accuse their foes of things that mirror their own ambitions. Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich called for expanding the Jewish state to include parts of Syria: "It is written that the future of Jerusalem is to expand to Damascus," he was quoted as saying in a French-language documentary.

This was followed by a statement by former Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman at the Hebrew University of Reichmann earlier this month, emphasizing the need to seize parts of Syrian territory in Mount Hermon to establish a new defense line for Israel:

"If Syria continues to serve as a logistical base for our enemies, we will seize the Syrian part of Mount Hermon and will not relinquish it until further notice."

Israeli Energy Minister Yuval Steinitz has directly threatened Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, vowing to change the Syrian political system due to its support for the resistance. It is a stance backed by ultra-nationalist minister Gideon Saar: "Israel must make clear to Assad that if he chooses to harm Israeli security in this manner – he places his regime in danger."

Since the launch of Al-Aqsa Flood, Israeli strikes have focused on repeatedly targeting Hezbollah positions at security groups like ١٣٣, the Golan Heights Unit, Unit ٤٤٠٠, and Unit ١٠٨, and have targeted units tasked with transporting drone components and other technology from Syria to Lebanon. Storage facilities, whether domestically produced or imported from Russia and Iran, have also been hit.

Tel Aviv has also increasingly targeted Syrian civilian infrastructure since October ٢٠٢٣ and the subsequent opening of multiple resistance support fronts in Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen. Israel has bombed Aleppo and Damascus international airports ١٢ times, alleging these civilian facilities are used to transport materials for producing and assembling missiles, either for use in Syria or for shipment to Lebanon.

Israeli targets have also expanded to elite Syrian army units, focusing on facilities allegedly involved in weapons storage, manufacturing, and training, such as the ٧٠th Brigade of the First Division in Jabal al-Mana near Damascus, the ١٠٦th Brigade of the Republican Guard, and the Fifth Division in Tal al-Jumu'.

Radar and air defense installations in southern Syria, particularly in Suwayda and the coastal areas of Tartus, have also come under fire, as well as repeated attacks on research centers Israel claims are focused on missile production and development—most notably in Masyaf, Hama, on ٩ September.

Targeting Hezbollah supplies

Netanyahu's allegations in his ١٦ October interview with *Le Figaro*, echoed by Israeli army spokesperson Daniel Hagari, have sought to entrench that Israeli narrative further: The ٦٤٦th Reserve Parachute Brigade reportedly discovered “state-of-the-art” Russian weapons during its inspection of Hezbollah's Radwan Unit bases in southern Lebanon.

Photos published by Israeli military correspondent Doron Kadosh showed weaponry in a wooden box marked with “English inscriptions” indicating Russian origin that were allegedly shipped to Syria via the Tartus port.

Additionally, Hezbollah's use of Fadi ١, ٢, and ٣ missiles—first showcased in a video from the Imad ٤ facility—was deployed against targets in Haifa in late September, drawing parallels to a ٢٠٢٠ interview with Nasrallah on *Al Mayadeen*, where he revealed that Kornet missiles used by Hezbollah were initially purchased by Syria from Russia and transferred to Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Gaza.

Strategic challenges facing Damascus

A report by the Indonesia-based Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) echoes the assessments of various Israeli military and security research centers:

“From Lebanon to Iran, militants have infinite hiding places and hundreds of miles of underground tunnels to transport supplies and personnel.”

Hezbollah's arsenal includes a diverse range of missile systems, such as the Khaybar ١, a non-guided artillery missile developed in Syria, and the M-٦٠٠, also known as the Tishreen missile, which is the Syrian version of the Fateh-١١٠. Other components of the arsenal include the B/C/D Scud missiles, Burkane missiles, several generations of the famed Russian Kornet anti-tank missiles, and Igla-S surface-to-air missile systems.

Additionally, Hezbollah has been reported to possess Yakhont anti-ship missiles since ٢٠٠٦, obtained from Syria, which have a range of up to ٣٠٠ kilometers. The capability to down Israeli drones has raised Israeli suspicions that the Pantsir air defense system, along with advanced Russian SA-٢٢ systems, has also been transferred from Syria to Hezbollah. These indicators, coupled with Israel's military mobilization along the Golan front, shifting lines of engagement, and capitulatory demands conveyed by US special envoy Amos Hochstein for deploying international forces to monitor the Syrian–Lebanese border, all reflect the predicaments facing Damascus - and make clear that Israel intends to expand its war to the Syrian front.

Israel's repeated accusations against Syria's support for the Lebanese resistance, even when it merely provides humanitarian assistance during Lebanon's crisis, reveal the motivations behind the occupation state's continued targeting and threats against the Syrian state.

But can a little country like Israel triumph against Syria's vast, complex geographical terrain, where, unlike Lebanon, there are thousands more miles, and thousands more hidden sites for weapons and supplies to proliferate?

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