

Sliding into the fray: Jordan and Israel in the Syrian conflict

By Nicolas Pelham

■ Executive summary

Fearful of the fallout from the rise of Islamism, global jihad and chemical weapons, Israel and Jordan have adopted a policy of containment and damage limitation towards Syria's two-year civil war, leaving the warring parties to spar with and weaken each other. The two countries have expressed hopes for the demise of the Assad regime, but unlike Syria's other neighbours – Turkey, Lebanon and Iraq – they have stopped short of allowing the rebels to open supply conduits through their territories. Unlike Syria's other crossings, official border crossings into Jordan have remained either closed or in government hands. The Syrian uprising began in the south, in Dara'a, on the Jordanian border, but bereft of supply lines to sustain itself, it quickly moved north, closer to borders where the rebels were better able to procure the fuel, arms, and men required to take and hold territory. However, Israel's and Jordan's hands-off posture could be changing. Israel has reportedly bombed a consignment of Syrian arms apparently bound for Lebanon. And such is Jordan's need to replenish its depleted coffers and so great its fear of popular discontent that in return for increased financial aid it is increasingly bowing to Saudi pressure to open its borders to rebel supplies, bolstering the performance of rebel forces in the south after a series of setbacks. Jordan hopes that Western reinforcements along its northern border will protect it against the chances of blowback. But the risks are manifold. Unlike Iraq's conflict, from which Jordan was cushioned by 700 kilometres of desert, the war in Syria rages on Jordan's populous northern border. Already 300,000 refugees have spilled into the kingdom, and both Jordan and Israel fear the conflict could increasingly travel with them.

In the Tel Hazaqa observation post perched on the occupied Golan Heights overlooking Syria's foothills of Quneitra, Israeli soldiers with military-spec binoculars have watched for almost two years as army defectors with Kalashnikovs took on Syrian government tanks just across the border. "We're trying to stay out of the battle", says a commander, whose sole intervention in the fighting was to target a jeep that fired an errant mortar over the post in November 2012.

Until Israel's reported strike on Syrian munitions apparently bound for the Lebanese Shia group Hizbullah on January 30th 2013, Syria's frontier with Israel had been the quietest of its borders with its five neighbours throughout almost two years of the uprising, and seemingly the most insulated against a spillover. To guard against an influx of refugees or rebel fighters, Israel accelerated construction of a five-metre-high steel-and-barbed-wire barrier set to stretch 70 kilometres along its Syrian armistice line and

reinforced its air defences in the north. Even after the aerial attack inside Syria, Israel insisted it was waging a covert war against the arms build-up of hostile Islamist forces on its border, not targeting a regime that has kept Israel's northern frontier quiet for 40 years.

Although Jordan is more exposed to Syria's civil war, with common tribes and transnational movements straddling the 400-kilometre-long border between the two countries, Jordan's Hashemite rulers have adopted a similar hands-off approach to the uprising. In a control room linked to hi-tech military electronic cameras positioned along the length of the border, its soldiers watch the fighting as Syria burns and the Assad regime's fighter jets strafe and bomb cities over the border. Often Israeli and Jordanian positions have seemed remarkably synchronised. (Convinced after repeated meetings that Binyamin Netanyahu has abandoned his youthful support for turning Jordan into Pales-

tine, King Abdullah has described their relationship as the best he has had with any Israeli prime minister.) Indeed, despite their common verbal declarations that Assad was doomed, in almost two years both Israel and Jordan have done nothing to hasten his demise and instead hampered the advance of Syria's southern rebels. Dara'a, a city just north of the Jordanian border, was the crucible for Syria's revolution in March 2011 when 15 boys were detained for daubing "the people want to topple the regime" on the wall of their school. The protests that followed earned Dara'a the title of "the Revolution's Cradle". But within months the north had overtaken the south as the uprising's epicentre. While the rebels have gained control of swathes of Syria's borders in the north, east and west, they have struggled to hold ground along the Israeli and Jordanian borders, and government forces retain control of the crossing to Israel at Quneitra and to Jordan at Nassib.

Even where the rebels have succeeded in establishing a foothold in southern Syria east of the Golan Heights, its utility as a bridgehead and safe haven has been limited. Unlike the Iraqi, Lebanese and especially Turkish borders, Jordan has intercepted supplies of fuel, arms and fighters destined for the rebels. Short of ammunition in the south, rebels complained that they count their bullets and fire only sparingly, and blamed repeated setbacks on the ability of government forces, secure in their southern garrisons, to outgun them. As the toll mounted, Jordan watched from the sidelines, advocating a political, not a military solution.

All this could be changing. The rapid escalation in the number of refugees fleeing to Jordan – up six-fold in the last two months from the average of the previous six – and the thud of shelling and fierce fighting heard by Jordanians on the border suggest the battle for southern Syria is intensifying. Rebel officers based in northern Jordan speak of a recent easing of the restrictions on smuggling into Syria, which has helped them muster the requisite supplies to relaunch a southern offensive. Critically, say Syrian opposition supporters in the kingdom, Jordan recently released much of an arms consignment that included advanced B7 RPGs shipped from Libya that had been impounded several weeks earlier. Jordan's intelligence forces, too, they say, recently released a number of fighters caught entering Syria from Jordan, on condition that they went straight to Syria. Improved weaponry and morale may yet account for the recent rebel capture of a military training ground near Dara'a and the rebel push into Damascus within two kilometres of the city centre. As the Free Syrian Army acquires greater staying power in the south, its forces have begun co-ordinating with Jordan's military on the handover of refugees.

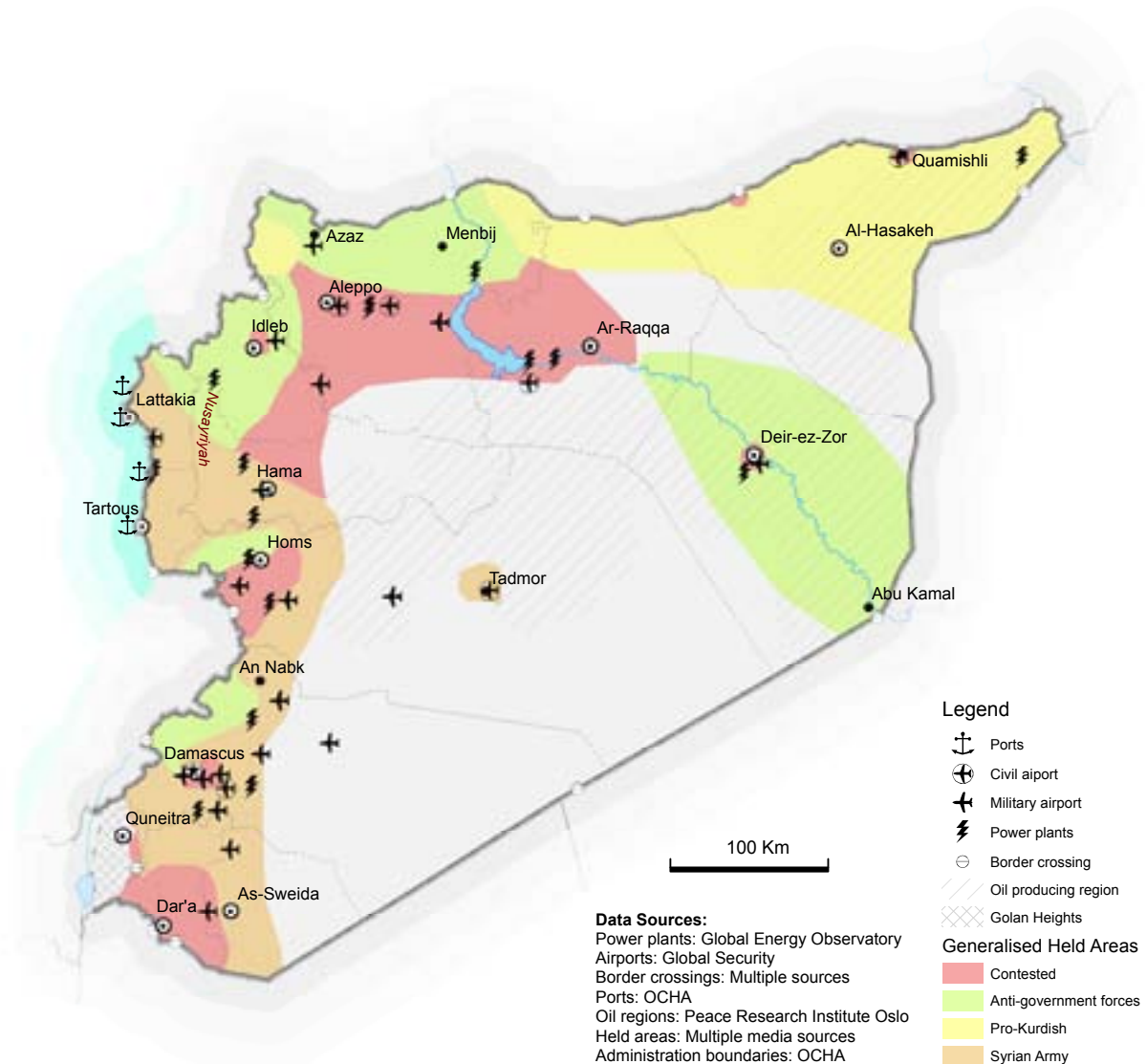
Coinciding with Israel's first strike on Syria, Jordan's intervention too could be intended to restore the equilibrium and ensure neither side can muster the strength to deliver a knockout blow. Tellingly, it comes just as observers opined that rebel forces in the south were flagging and Assad's forces had gained the upper hand. Both Jordan and

Israel have good reason to prefer that neither side score an outright victory, but rather debilitate the relative strengths of the other. Jordan fears that an Assad victory could prompt him to take revenge on neighbours perceived as conspiring against him. Assad is unlikely to have forgotten that King Abdullah was the first Arab leader to call for his departure a few months into the uprising, and Jordanians still tremble at the memory of the tank battalions Assad's father deployed against Jordan in 1970 (in support of a Palestinian uprising) and in 1980 (to deter Jordan from following Egypt into signing a peace treaty with Israel). The alternative – resurgent Sunni rule – is even less sanguine a prospect. A rebel victory would leave Jordan's anti-Islamist monarch uncomfortably sandwiched between two hostile Muslim Brotherhood-controlled powers, Egypt and Syria, and embolden Jordan's own branch of the Brotherhood, which is Abdullah's most powerful opposition. The kingdom's East Bankers – who staff the security forces – view Jordan's branch of the Brotherhood as a Palestinian front and fear that the boost a victory in Syria would give it could propel the kingdom ever closer towards becoming a Palestinian state. To obstruct such an outcome some East Bank tribesmen recently sent a delegation to Damascus to pay homage to Bashar al-Assad.

In tandem with the political challenge posed by the Brotherhood, Jordanian officials fear that if they are triumphant, hundreds of jihadi militants who have acquired experience, training and weaponry – including anti-tank and anti-aircraft systems, ballistic missiles, and perhaps even chemical warheads – fighting in Syria could train their sights south. While 700 kilometres of desert more or less insulated Jordan from the risks of blowback from Iraq a decade ago, Syria's topography affords no such protection. Leading Israeli analysts argue that a Sunni ascendancy in Syria would break Iran's alliance with the Assad regime and sever its supply routes to Hizbullah on the Mediterranean, but also note the adverse ramifications: if Islamist militants spilled into Jordan, they might seek to pursue their jihad not just from the relatively confined stretch of the Golan Heights, but from Jordan, the country with which Israel has its longest border.

Given the threats arising from the decisive victory of either side, analysts in both Israel and Jordan say their governments have preferred to let the two sides debilitate each other rather than encourage intervention to decisively resolve the conflict, comparing it to the stance of Western states during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s. Clearly, the king is hedging his bets. While rebels praise their increased co-operation with Jordan's security service, Abdullah travelled to Moscow on February 19th to discuss political options for ending Syria's civil war with Syria's principle international ally, Russian president Vladimir Putin. In addition to the rare sign of regional Sunni support for Syria's regime from the much-publicised visit of East Bank tribesmen to Damascus, *al-Sabil*, a Jordanian Islamist paper in Jordan, says the kingdom has also supplied stranded government forces fighting rebels on the

Map 1. Current areas of control and strategic infrastructure



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border with fuel and shared intelligence on rebel fighters with the Assad regime. "The policy seems to be let them wage a war of attrition so that no one should win", said Eyal Zisser, an expert on Syria at Tel Aviv University. In addition to weakening two potentially threatening forces, the civil war raging on the other side of the Jordanian border serves to deter domestic populations from heeding the calls for popular protests, articulated among others by Jordan's branch of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Mindful of the advantages of the status quo and the risks involved in regime change, Jordan and Israel have strongly advocated against Western intervention in the latest theatre of the Arab Spring. In their public diplomacy they have called on Western powers to recognise Syria's civil war as "the new normal", in the words of Christopher Dickey writing in *The Daily Beast* on January 25th 2012, and argued for a more nuanced view of the rebels. While Russia, the Assad regime's prime international backer, pulled its citizens out of Syria amid warnings that the regime was waning, King Abdullah, speaking at the World

Economic Forum, an annual gathering of policymakers in Davos, Switzerland, insisted that regime change was not imminent: "Anybody who's saying that Bashar's regime has got weeks to live really doesn't know the reality on the ground", he said. "They have still got capabilities; I give it a strong showing at least for the first half of 2013." Israeli officials have echoed the warning: "In Washington, officials predict regime change is three months off, here they talk of another year", said a U.S. strategist on a visit to Tel Aviv. "The tide can continue for a very, very long time", said Gen. Amos Yadlin, a former military intelligence chief who now heads Israel's premier security think tank, the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) in Tel Aviv. His military analysts estimate that Assad will survive to 2014. While the Syrian leader has lost control of half his country, diplomats, analysts and policymakers all opine that he has consolidated his hold on the half that matters to him most. He has lost ground in Damascus' south-western suburbs, they say, but tightened his hold on an inner ring in the capital, with checkpoints and copious personnel. Officials in both Jordan and Israel characterise the fighting as a stalemate.

Jordanian and Israeli officials have also argued for a more nuanced view of the rebels. They have continued to portray the Syrian rebels as akin to those who killed the U.S. ambassador in Libya and warn Western powers against propelling al-Qaeda fighters whom they are fighting elsewhere to power in Syria. King Abdullah has warned of the rise of "the Syrian Taliban", and in contrast to Jordan's stance on Libya's Transitional National Council, has only recognised the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces as the political arm of the rebellion, not as Syria's legitimate authority.

Alongside U.S. nervousness to embark on another Middle East venture following its failure in Iraq and the disorder that followed NATO's role in regime change in Libya, the messaging appears to have considerable success in restraining U.S. involvement. While publicly hand wringing, U.S. policy has changed little, despite the rising death toll. When the casualty figure stood at 5,000, the world had a choice, the then-U.S. secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, said: "stand with the people of Syria and the region or become complicit to the continuing violence there." A year later, when fatalities had surpassed 60,000, President Obama was still publicly articulating doubts: "In a situation like Syria, I have to ask, can we make a difference?" he told the American magazine *The New Republic* on January 27th 2013. "And how do I weigh tens of thousands who've been killed in Syria versus the tens of thousands who are currently being killed in the Congo? Those are not simple questions." The perpetration of a massacre had sometimes been viewed as a factor that could force Western intervention, but the international community has consistently revised upward its definition of what might constitute a massacre that justifies intervention. The discovery in late January of 80 bullet-ridden corpses in a dried-up ditch failed to make the lead of international news bulletins. Syrian civilian opposition leaders attending the meeting at Davos complained that world leaders passed them by. The doctrine of the responsibility to protect, which Obama and his National Security Council adviser on human rights, Samantha Power, repeatedly cited as the moral basis for first a no-fly zone and then NATO bombardment in Libya, appears to be in abeyance. Instead, U.S. indecision has become a policy. While continuing to condemn the regime, the U.S. has blacklisted Jubhat al-Nusra, the rebels' most effective militia, on the grounds that it is the Syrian arm of al-Qaeda in Iraq. U.S. officials insist that they cannot be seen to fight al-Qaeda in one theatre and support it in another, to the consternation of rebels who insist that the militant group is their most potent and least corrupt arm. "Syria is being destroyed bit by bit", said Lakhdar Brahimi, the joint UN-Arab League envoy to Syria, in January 2013, despairing of a mechanism to break the deadlock.

Rather than speed up a resolution of the conflict in Syria, the U.S. has invested instead in reinforcing the defences of its allies bordering Syria in an attempt to guard against a spillover. Together with Germany and the Netherlands, it has positioned six Patriot PAC-3 batteries in southern

Turkey and sent military advisers, special forces and hardware – alongside a redeployment of the kingdom's own forces – to reinforce Jordan's border.

But local strategists, as well as Russia and Syria, note that the build-up could clearly have offensive application. Although little reported, Patriot batteries are in essence anti-aircraft systems with dual-use capability against advanced fighter jets, says their manufacturer, Lockheed Martin, and could be used to impose a no-fly zone. With a 20-kilometre range against rockets and a 160-kilometre range against aircraft, their range extends across northern Syria, encompassing Aleppo, Idlib and Lattakia, and could be instrumental in carving out a rebel base safe from aerial bombardment, like the one NATO imposed on eastern Libya or the U.S. imposed earlier in neighbouring Iraq.

Western powers insist that their rules of engagement remain solely defensive and intended to protect neighbouring populations, not Syrians, but assessments that their deployment could result in a more activist stance by Syria's neighbours could yet prove valid. Certainly, the reinforcements appear to have given Jordan greater latitude to consider a more interventionist role inside Syria. Officials continue to fear that Syrian sleeper cells have entered the kingdom among the 350,000 Syrians Jordan says have fled to the kingdom since the crisis erupted and could yet spread mayhem. But U.S. plans to neutralise Syria's chemical weapons capability within hours have helped mitigate the fears of Syria's neighbours of a doomsday scenario in which Scud missiles tipped with chemical warheads land on their capitals.

In addition to the protection afforded by Western reinforcements and security guarantees, Gulf financial support appears to have played a critical role in shaping King Abdullah's calculations. For two years he opposed Gulf states who called for military support for the rebels to bring closure to the Assad dynasty's struggle for survival, but such is his need for aid to prop up his ailing economy that his powers of resistance have waned. Jordan is also conscious of the growing financial toll of Syria's civil war: Jordan's increasingly impoverished population has been hit by its loss of access to cheap Syrian goods, while imports from Turkey have also risen in price as hauliers opt to transport goods via more expensive routes through Iraq rather than insecure Syria. Added to financial imperatives to join Gulf states in resolving Syria's civil war, King Abdullah shares the antipathy all Gulf states bar Qatar harbour for the Muslim Brotherhood and their desire to keep the movement from dominating a post-Assad era. While rejecting Qatari intervention, which has found Syria's Turkish border a more conducive entry point, King Abdullah has been far more susceptible to Saudi, United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Kuwaiti pressure to assist a rebel push on Damascus before the northern Qatari-backed Islamist forces get there first. Western diplomats in Amman say senior Saudi officials have relocated part-time to Amman to co-ordinate the rebel advance, backing tribal and Salafi

forces alike in the race for Damascus. In return, after a year in which Saudi Arabia remained non-committal in the face of Jordanian pleas for budgetary support, the Saudis reportedly recently injected \$500 million, including \$200 million of budget support, into Jordan's creaking economy. Other Gulf states have provided similar levels of support. King Abdullah and Gen. Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Abu Dhabi's crown prince and deputy commander of the UAE's armed forces, have also recently exchanged visits. Assuming a rapid transfer, the funds should help Jordan stave off for now the need to further cut subsidies, which might have triggered a fresh round of public unrest.

The arrival of many military transport aircraft and copious Gulf finance in recent week has coincided with the return to the Syrian battlefield of many of the thousands of defecting army officers and rebel fighters who have entered Jordan. Held in a separate camp to civilians, Jordanian officials say that they have been vetted to exclude al-Qaeda sympathisers and have received limited training from U.S., British and French military advisers. The kingdom also appears to have taken steps to shape the opposition immediately across the border. Syrian refugees close to rebel officers in Jordan say the kingdom has sought to promote anti-Brotherhood tribal forces or even racketeers against Brotherhood rebels. Ten rebel commanders with Brotherhood sympathies have been killed in recent months, they say, including a Palestinian commander of a rebel unit who defected from the regime-controlled Palestine Liberation Army; he was found alive in the refrigerator of Dara'a Hospital morgue, where he was placed following a rebel ambush, and subsequently died of his wounds. In a sign of growing rivalry between rebel forces for control of the opposition, a southern commander whom Syrians in Jordan close to rebel forces say was known for his anti-Islamist stance and who co-ordinated closely with Jordan was also recently killed.

At the same time Jordan's intelligence services likely continue to monitor Islamist groups, particularly Jubhat al-Nusra. Although other countries may exercise greater influence today, some Jordanians regard al-Nusra as an extension of the wing of al-Qaeda in Iraq led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian who trained in Afghanistan. Al-Nusra's current leader is a Jordanian, as are many of its rank-and-file. Observers in Jordan claim that the organisation has received Saudi funding, perhaps to counter the influence of Muslim Brotherhood forces in Syria. Despite the U.S. ban, al-Nusra continues to strengthen its position, tripling its manpower to 15,000 men, after winning local kudos for its battlefield success and administration of rebel-held areas free of the racketeering that has characterised other rebel warlords.

Until recently Syria's outflow of refugees compounded the defensive posture of its southern neighbours and pushed them to batten down the hatches. With as many as 10,000 refugees entering Jordan each week, Prime Minister Abdullah Ensour has threatened to end its open-border

policy for Syrian nationals if donors fail to fund the costs of sheltering refugees, which after two years officials estimate at \$1 billion. Despite the bombardment of Syria's refugee camps and the flight of their populations, including most of the largest camp, Yarmouk, a southern Damascus suburb home to 150,000 Palestinians, Jordan has closed its borders to Palestinians. As Syria's half million Palestinians struggle with the collapse of 65 years of home building in Syria, Jordan's East Bankers – who control its security forces – have vigorously guarded against an influx that would bolster the kingdom's Palestinian majority, sometimes turning back young children without their mothers, say UN officials. Israel – which as Syria's richest neighbour is best placed to cope with the financial burden – has also rebuffed Palestinian appeals to enter, requiring that the Palestinian Authority first abandon its commitment to the right of return. Calls by Palestinian-Jordanians and UNRWA, the UN agency for Palestinian refugees, for Israel and Jordan to recognise the moral imperative to offer a haven have fallen on deaf ears. Fearing that a further influx of Palestinians might induce the kingdom to intensify the revocation of citizenship from Palestinian-Jordanians, even Palestinian ministers and courtiers back Jordan's limitations on accepting Palestinian refugees.

But some in Jordan have begun arguing that should the flow of refugees turn into a deluge – for instance, if the power plant supplying Damascus and southern Syria were disabled – Jordan might increase its co-ordination with the Syrian Free Army and back the establishment of a safe haven inside southern Syria protected by a no-fly zone enforced by the U.S. and its allies.

Although no longer inconceivable, such a scenario still appears distant. A no-fly zone would not protect refugees from ground fire and missiles, and could goad the Assad regime to retaliate on the grounds of an infringement of Syrian sovereignty. Just as threatening, a safe haven near Jordan's borders could be a magnet for jihadi fighters seeking a base, which could later rebound on the kingdom. The influx, too, could yet have financial benefits, if the outflow of Syria's mercantile elite, not just its destitute, grows. Already, Jordanians point to the Damascus licence plates of luxury vehicles that have begun appearing on Amman's streets. Although yet to reach the levels of Iraqis a decade ago, economists point to the parallels, when Iraqi merchants followed the exodus of hundreds of thousands of impoverished Iraqi refugees and invested billions in the kingdom's real estate. In the longer term, planners say Amman could yet serve as the gateway for multinationals rebuilding Syria, just as it has done for Iraq.

Israeli intervention will not be the product of either an influx of refugees or Saudi pressure, but rather of concern at the proliferation of chemical weapons among Islamist militants – either Sunni or Shia. Israeli officials have repeatedly called for U.S. action to protect Syria's stockpiles and publicly advocated bombing them. Israel's January 30th strike on Syrian installations may be no more

than the continuation of its covert war against weapons transfers, as mentioned above, but a Syrian or Hizbullah response could be the prelude to a broader Israeli engagement.

Ultimately, many in Israel and Jordan see Syria's weakening as strengthening their own projection of regional influence. The possible break-up of Syria into irredentist or sectarian enclaves – Kurds in the north-east, Alawites in the coastal plane, Druze in the mountains north of Jordan, and Sunnis in the Euphrates and Orontes valleys – would further diminish the threat Syria once posed. "Longer

term, the breakdown of Syria into mini-states is a good situation", says Shlomo Brom, a senior military analyst at the INSS. A country twice Jordan's size and nine times that of Israel could yet fracture into acrimonious sectarian statelets too preoccupied with their own positions to challenge their more stable and better armed neighbours. Israel and Jordan may yet have to contend with a free flow of arms, including chemical weapons stockpiles, refugees and fighters, and a general fear of a Somalia-like situation. But continuing bickering among Syria's composite parts could yet enhance the positions of Jordan and Israel as the Levant's pre-eminent players. ■

■ THE AUTHOR

Nicolas Pelham is *The Economist's* correspondent in Jerusalem and writes on Arab affairs for the *New York Review of Books*. From 2005 to 2010 he was the International Crisis Group's senior analyst on Israel/Palestine. He first worked as a journalist in Cairo in 1992 and then joined the BBC Arabic Service. From 2001 to 2004 he reported for *The Economist* and the *Financial Times* in Iraq and Jordan. He is the author of *A New Muslim Order* (2008) and co-author of *A History of the Middle East* (2010). He has worked as a UN consultant on the political economy of Gaza and serves on the advisory board of Tida, a Gaza-based research centre.



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