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A United States Attack on Syria: Implications for Israel

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On Wednesday, August 28, 2013, President Barack Obama and British Prime Minister David Cameron affirmed that a chemical weapons attack had taken place in Syria the previous week and "there was no doubt that the Assad regime was responsible." Despite the decision by the British Parliament not to take part in an attack on Syria, President Obama announced on Saturday, August 31, 2013 that he had decided to take limited military action in Syria and although not required to do so, was requesting Congressional approval. Washington continues to deliberate with its allies the strategic objectives of an attack and consider the military option that will achieve the most benefit at the lowest cost and with the fewest risks. Of several options for strategic objectives, it appears that the United States has chosen punishment for the sake of deterrence.

Israel is not directly involved in the civil war in Syria or in a potential US strike. However, the threats from Syria, Iran, and Hizbollah demand that an American attack be analyzed as to what it means for Israel's national security. This article will analyze two scenarios for an American attack and what they mean for Israel's short term and long term interests in the Syrian context. The first is the anticipated limited attack intended as punishment, and the second is a broader attack aimed at toppling the Assad regime.

Israel's Short Term Interests

- a. The most important Israeli interest in the context of an American attack is the unequivocal clarification that there is a high price to pay for the use of nonconventional weapons. This interest is important for deterring any Middle East leader considering the possible use of nonconventional weapons against Israel.
- b. From a broader perspective, it is important for Israel that the United States reestablish its strategic influence in the Middle East and improve its credibility and deterrence in the region, including against conventional behavior by its adversaries. US credibility and deterrence have eroded over the past three years during the Arab uprisings, and public statements by senior administration officials have called for a reduction in American involvement in the region and even a change of strategic focus in the direction of East Asia. Restoring American deterrent power would strengthen the

standing of the United States and that of its allies, including Israel, in the struggle between the region's moderates and radicals.

- c. Israel has a supreme interest in maintaining quiet on its borders and preserving a calm security situation with Lebanon and Syria. Maintaining a normal routine as much as possible is a moral, security, and economic interest. To the extent possible, Israel must avoid getting dragged into the Syrian civil war. If Israel is attacked, the decision on an Israeli response must not be automatic, and as long as there is no significant damage to Israel, the attack can be contained.
- a. A related Israeli interest has to do with the issue of Iran's military nuclear program. Iran is watching events in Syria closely and examining the American response. It is very important for Israel that when Tehran considers its policy toward President Obama's red lines on Iran, i.e., preventing Iran's military nuclearization, Iran sees that Washington is determined to uphold the President's promises. President Obama's actions and the cooperation he achieves with Western and regional allies will have implications for the Iranian nuclear issue.

Israel's Long Term Interests

- b. In the long term view, it is very important to Israel that the fighting in Syria not end in a victory for the Tehran-Damascus-Hizbollah alliance. A victory by Assad would strengthen Israel's enemies in the region, mainly Hizbollah, and would encourage Hamas, currently isolated, to minister once again to its Iranian patron. Israel has a clear interest in maintaining the trend toward weakening these terrorist organizations.
- c. When the civil war in Syria ends, it is important for Israel that a liberal, pro-Western state be established that abandons the Iranian patron and ceases its support for terrorist organizations. Israel has in the past considered returning parts of the Golan Heights in order to ensure the latter component. The civil war provides a strategic opportunity for a similar result without Israel's having to pay an immediate price in territory.
- d. If jihadi organizations such as al-Nusra grow stronger to the point where they have freedom of action in the Golan Heights, Israel's interest will be to ensure that the terrorist threat remains a local and not a strategic threat, even if it cannot ensure total success in preventing a terrorist attack.

Israel's Interests and US Strategic Options

These sets of interests can be assessed against the two alternate US strategic objectives and the military action required to realize them. An American attack that seeks to punish the Assad regime for using chemical weapons and demonstrate US determination to respond to a crossed red line would include a pinpoint strike on several military targets or regime assets. On Wednesday, August 28, 2013, the *New York Times* wrote that the American plan includes a two-day attack on fifty military targets connected to the units that took part in the chemical attack. Since this is symbolic punishment, success is critical for conveying the American message. A limited but successful attack that is backed up by US determination to prevent the use of nonconventional weapons would restore some

American deterrent power against the use of chemical weapons and to a certain extent would enhance American standing in the region. Such an attack could also influence decision making in Tehran. Thus, the expected scenario regarding an American attack would promote some of Israel's interests, especially those connected with US deterrent power in the region, albeit to a limited extent only.

On the other hand, an unsuccessful American attack, such as that in the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon in 1983, or the Tomahawk missile attacks in Afghanistan and Sudan in 1998, could weaken American deterrence against the use of nonconventional weapons and cause even further damage to US standing in the region. Assad will see that the price for using chemical weapons is small, even when the United States is pushed to act, and will have no reason to hesitate to continue using these weapons for local needs. An ineffective American strike could encourage jihadi rebel organizations to gain control of chemical weapons in order to improve the balance of power with Assad's army. Such weapons in the possession of terrorist organizations would be a direct threat to Israel. Other Middle East leaders too, including those in Iran, would understand that the strongest superpower in the world is fearful of using its power to promote its interests.

The danger to Israel from this scenario is minimal. Assad will be guided in his response by the issue of regime survival and his ambition to continue to keep the conflict with the opposition an internal conflict. By expanding the conflict to Israel, Assad would risk his regime, and therefore it is likely that he would not respond. Even with the attacks on Syria attributed to Israel in 2007 and 2013, Assad did not respond for the same reason: regime survival.

If in the punishment scenario Assad reasons that there is little danger to him or to his regime and that he can focus on a war against the rebels, in the event of a US attack intended to incapacitate the ruler, Assad's confidence would be shaken. In this scenario, the United States would attack regime assets and seek to destroy Syria's strategic military capabilities in order to leave Assad without forces to protect him. In such a scenario, the United States would restore its deterrent power and its status in the region. Such a move would also be a serious blow to the Tehran-Damascus-Beirut alliance and would convey a clear message of American determination to Tehran.

At the same time, such a move involves two main risks for Israel. The first and immediate risk is that Assad might decide to launch ground-to-ground missiles at Israel, and perhaps even arm them with chemical weapons. However, given Israel's deterrent power and the limited effectiveness of chemical weapons, there is little likelihood of this scenario taking place, although it is more likely here than in the punishment scenario described above. Moreover, despite the low probability, its severity requires that the Israeli government prevent such an attack, or if it fails, that it limit its consequences.

The second threat if the Assad regime is weakened or disappears is that the terrorist threat to Israel from Syria will intensify. Since the terrorist organizations in Syria, which are funded mainly by Qatar, are the strongest and most organized part of the rebel organizations, there is a high probability that they would exploit the damage to Assad in order to take control over areas in the country and strengthen their power in Syrian society. In such a situation, they could operate freely against Israel. If the United States fails to act in cooperation with its allies in order to create a strong, pragmatic alternative, Syria could become a failed state controlled by terrorist organizations, which would be a threat to Israel.

Conclusion

“What happened in Syria is a tragedy and a terrible crime,” declared Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at the opening of the August 25, 2013 cabinet meeting. Although the moral obligation of a state may sometimes not match its interests, this is not the case for Israel vis-à-vis Syria. Stopping the slaughter in Syria and the use of nonconventional weapons, reconstruction of the country, and establishment of a regime controlled by the people are basic moral demands that match Israeli interests. However, the major risk to Israel is that in an extreme scenario, Assad would use chemical weapons against Israel as well.

Israel has the power to cope with the potential challenges discussed above, and in particular, the nonconventional threat and the threat of terrorism from Syria. To this end, Israel should adhere to a policy in which it is not a party to the turmoil in Syria and does not plan to intervene in the civil war. The government of Israel has maintained this posture thus far, and it is very important that this continue, even if there is some provocation on the northern border. If Israel is required to respond to provocations, moderation, an emphasis on defense and prevention, and an attempt to avoid escalation into all-out war should dictate the nature of the response.

In addition, Israel should continue to declare that Assad must be punished for using chemical weapons in order to restore deterrence and strengthen the taboo on the use of such weapons. In addition, there is a critical need for Jerusalem and Washington to continue to coordinate their actions on Syria from an overall perspective of a joint strategy for stopping the Iranian nuclear program. Indeed, the recent developments in Syria may also be seen as an opportunity in regard to Iran.

