

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical issues and contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email: RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg for feedback to the Editor RSIS Commentaries, Mr Yang Razali Kassim.

Druze Mount next flashpoint in Syrian conflict: Implications for Israel

By James M. Dorsey

Synopsis

This month's killing of 23 Druze clan members by Jabhat Al Nusra jihadists has made Syrian Druze a potential flashpoint in a proxy war between Saudi Arabia, Iran and Israel. As rebel forces advance towards the mountainous Druze stronghold in Idlib province, Israel has to decide whether it should intervene in the Syrian civil war by arming the Druze while Saudi Arabia makes the choice between realpolitik and its religious doctrine which views the Druze as heretics.

Commentary

SYRIAN DRUZE have become the next potential flashpoint in a proxy war between Saudi Arabia, Iran and Israel that is exacerbating the Middle East's multiple conflicts. With rebel forces advancing towards the mountainous Druze stronghold in north-western Syria, this month's killing by Jabhat al-Nusra jihadists of 23 members of a Druze clan in Idlib province set off alarm bells in Damascus, Jerusalem and Riyadh as well as in Druze communities in Israel, Syria and Lebanon. The killings occurred, according to the Syrian Observatory, a British-based monitoring group, after a Tunisian al-Nusra commander tried to confiscate a house belonging to a Druze who allegedly was loyal to the Syrian government. Jabhat al-Nusrat apologized for the incident, saying in a statement that the killings had not been authorized by the group.

As al Nusra-led forces advanced on Jebel Druze, home to 450,000 of Syria's 600,000 Druze, regional concern was fuelled by the political fallout of a potential massacre and the region's strategic position close to the Turkish border, 22 kilometres from embattled Aleppo, Syria's largest, war-ravaged city; 40 kilometres from Jordan; and some 80 kms from Israel. The Druze redoubt is also threatened on its eastern flank by forces of the Islamic State, an Al-Nusra rival.

Alarm in Druze communities outside Syria is further informed by military setbacks suffered by the Syrian military in recent months and the effective withdrawal of Syrian forces and government proxies, including Lebanon's Shiite Muslim Hezbollah militia, from areas deemed not strategic. The Syrian army's 52nd brigade withdrew to Damascus earlier this month from its base west of Jebel Druze.

A stark policy dilemma

The impending jihadi assault on Jebel Druze poses a stark policy dilemma for Israel, home to 130,000 Druze, the only non-Jewish group that serves in the Israeli military. With Israeli Druze, including senior officers in the military and border police, pressuring the government to go to the rescue of their Syrian brethren, Israeli President Reuven Rivlin told visiting Chairman of the Joint US Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Martin Dempsey last week that "what is going on just now is intimidation and threat to the very existence of half a million Druze on the Druze Mount, which is very close to the Israeli border." *Haaretz* reported that Israel had asked Dempsey to aid the Syrian Druze.

Israel has two choices: break with its policy of not intervening directly in the Syrian civil war by arming the Druze, a secretive offshoot of Islam widely viewed as heretics by orthodox Sunnis, to enable them to fend off a jihadi attack or brace itself for a stream of Syrian Druze refugees and moral culpability for the possible massacre of large numbers because of their religious beliefs.

No guarantee

Mitigating in favour of intervention is not just the Israeli government's need to cater to a key domestic community but also a desire to counter a Syrian government proposal to arm the Druze in exchange for a pledge that those weapons would not be used against government forces. Syrian Druze acceptance of the government's offer would, in Israeli and Saudi eyes, effectively expand Iranian influence.

There is no guarantee however that aiding the Druze militarily would prevent a jihadist conquest of their mountain redoubt and prevent a refugee exodus to neighbouring countries. Complicating the Israeli decision is a three-way split in the Syrian Druze leadership with some leaders inclined to accept the Syrian government's offer, others wanting to join non-jihadi rebel forces, and a third group arguing in favour of the Druze remaining neutral in the Syrian conflict.

A news website of the Progressive Socialist Party headed by Walid Jumblatt, who blames Syria for the 1977 assassination of his father, said that the Lebanese Druze leader had agreed with unidentified Syrian rebel groups on guarantees for the safety of Druze villages in Idlib province which had "stood by the revolution."

Jihadi pragmatism

Israeli reluctance to intervene on behalf of the Druze is reinforced by al-Nusra's recent pragmatism that has led it in recent months to cooperate with a host of rival and non-jihadi forces, persuaded it not to impose its puritan view of Islamic law in areas it controls in cooperation with the Army of Conquest, a rebel alliance, and prompted it to promise not to suppress religious minorities as long as they do not take up arms against it.

Israel moreover is hesitant to mount an operation that according to DEBKAF, a news website with close ties to the Israeli military, would entail establishing the infrastructure to train and arm up to 30,000 Druze fighters.

Al-Nusra leader Abu Mohammed al-Julani recently said on Al Jazeera that Druze would not be targeted despite the fact that he had sent envoys to Druze villages to "inform them of the doctrinal pitfalls they have fallen into." Activists in Idlib, however, told the BBC that hundreds of Druze in Idlib had been forced to convert to Sunni Islam and Druze graves and shrines had been desecrated.

Israel's debate about how to respond to Druze pressure appears nonetheless to be tending towards maintaining the policy of not intervening directly and persuading the United States and Jordan to provide military support to the Druze through channels existing as a result of Jordan-based support for non-jihadi forces in Syria.

No good alternatives

Israel's proposal would also take off the hook Saudi Arabia, which is part of the Jordanian operation and reportedly funds Al-Nusra, by allowing it to maintain arms' length from support of a group that its

Wahhabi ideologues view as beyond the Muslim pale, while seeking to curtail an expansion of Iranian influence.

Israel is also preparing to provide humanitarian aid to Khadr, a Druze village on the Golan Heights, and the only outpost on the line dividing Israel and Syria that is not controlled by rebels. Seven residents of Khadr were reportedly killed by rebels earlier this month.

With no good alternatives, Israeli leaders have so far refrained from commenting publicly on the impending Druze crisis. Time is however running out and likely to force an Israeli decision sooner rather than later.

James M. Dorsey is a senior fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, and co-director of the Institute of Fan Culture of the University of Würzburg.

Nanyang Technological University
Block S4, Level B4, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg