UNITED STATES INSTITUTE OF PEACE
PEACEBRIEF 111
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November 7, 2011

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Watching from the Sidelines: Israel and the Syrian Uprising

Summary

- Israel has been generally quiet regarding the recent turmoil in Syria, a reflection of the issue's relative low priority, as well as Israel's limited influence on internal Syrian matters.
- Israel's preferred outcome would be a stable Syrian regime that disassociates itself from the "axis of resistance," poses no bilateral threats, and controls the border area—though Israel sees no clear path for achieving these aims.
- The view in Israel is that the basic structure of deterrence still holds vis-à-vis Syria and the regime—even in its desperate circumstances—is unlikely to provoke Israel in dramatic ways.

Israel's Muted Response

Israel has been generally quiet regarding the current turmoil and a possible political transformation in Syria because turmoil in the country is a relatively low priority. The Israeli establishment has been preoccupied by the Palestinian statehood bid, tensions with Turkey and Egypt and Israel's own internal unrest over socio-economic issues.

Staying on the sidelines also reflects Israel's limited influence, and its blind-spots. Jerusalem feels it can exert direct influence in its relationship with Cairo, for example, particularly via Washington. This is not the case with Damascus. Although some analysis speculates that Israel's low profile reflects a quiet preference for the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad—i.e. "the devil we know"—the Israeli political and national security elite increasingly believe the regime's days are numbered.

The low-profile approach with Syria also reflects the fact that Israel's traditional focus has been on the Syrian political and military elite, rather than on Syrian society. Therefore, today Israel is playing catch-up to understand the dynamics of the uprising to judge how future political scenarios fit its own interests. A post-Assad Syria is not something for which Israelis are well prepared. Still, assessments about Syria are preliminary since Israel—like most other actors—does not have a clear sense about outcomes in Syria.

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Change in Syria: Israeli Perspectives of Threats and Opportunities

Broadly defined, Syria has posed two types of strategic-level threats to Israel: regional and bilateral. Over the six decades of Israeli-Syrian interactions, these threats have varied in significance. Syria's

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1948 invasion of Israel and ongoing tension along their armistice line was at the heart of Israel's early concerns, as was the issue of water. Syria's surprise attack in 1973 and the threat of a conventional war over the Golan was at the center of Israeli security concerns in the 1970s and 1980s. On the bilateral level, Syria also played a big role in Israel's interventions in Lebanon, most notably the major clashes following Israel's 1982 invasion.

However, since the 1990's, Israeli concerns have gravitated more toward Syria's regional role in the "axis of resistance" (Iran, Hezbollah and, to a lesser extent, Hamas). Much of this tension has played out in Lebanon, but the threat perception is much broader. Some Israelis see the end of the Assad regime as a potential strategic gain. Retired Gen. Amos Gilboa, a respected Syria expert, said that the "possibility that the [anti-Israel] axis will collapse is in front of our eyes, not because of an Israeli withdrawal in the Golan but because Bashar Assad…is about to fall."[1] Similarly, other analysts ascribed Hamas' willingness to compromise and enter into a unity deal with Fatah because it feared the upheaval in Syria would leave it much weaker.

On the bilateral level, Israelis are of two minds about more democratic and representative politics in Syria over the long-term. As an established democracy, many Israelis favor democratic expansion and a more liberal order, as President Peres said earlier this year in a speech at the U.S. Institute of Peace.[2] On the other hand, Israelis also fear that Islamist and radical actors could take advantage of any political opening and press a hard line toward Israel. Others are skeptical regarding the ability of Arab societies to produce genuine democracy.

The uprising in Syria, and a Syrian government with or without Assad, has also reactivated Israeli fears about the Golan frontier. It has been quiet since the signing of the 1974 U.S.-brokered disengagement agreement. But some worry this could change. Such hostilities could be low-scale threats like border marches and terrorism, or even large-scale conventional clashes. Retired Gen. Israel Ziv wrote in September that if "Assad will find himself with his back to the wall, he may use his last card and initiate hostilities with Israel in order to regain control."[3] The regime's role in encouraging Palestinians to breach the border in May and June 2011, as well as the public display of a Syrian citizen who confessed on Syrian TV in September that he was an "Israeli spy" provides evidence for such analysis.

Potential Effects on Israeli Policy

Israel's preferred outcome would be a stable Syrian regime that disassociates itself from the "axis of resistance," poses no bilateral threats, and controls the border area. Yet under present circumstances, Israel does not see a clear path to attain this outcome. However, unlike in the case of the 2007 attack on the Syrian reactor, or the assassination of Imad Mughniya, Israel is not likely to take any significant overt or covert military action designed to affect the outcome of the uprising. This reflects both Israeli hesitation to shape Arab political outcomes (for example, following its failed attempts in Lebanon in the 1980s) and Israel's limited understanding of the internal forces in Syria. Most of all, it reflects an appreciation in Israel that it has few tools to draw upon to effect the end-game. With few exceptions, it is likely that Israeli leaders and officials will continue to remain tight-lipped about the uprising and even about the responses of other third parties. "The less we say the better," was how one prominent Israeli expert put it.[4]

On the ground, Israel did buttress some of its physical barriers on the Golan frontier, including a renewed deployment of mines, a response to the Palestinian marches in May and June 2011. Other minor modifications could follow, but barring a major change in the threat perception, Israel's posture on the Golan will likely remain as it has for years. Indeed, despite the worrisome incursions in the spring of 2011, the view in Israel is that the basic structure of deterrence still holds

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Should the situation change for the worse and Israel feel a need to break out of the 1974 agreement, or seek to alter the terms of the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF), it will almost certainly do so in close consultation with Washington. Analogies could be drawn to the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon, or UNIFIL, the international deployment in Hebron, both of which have changed over time. Even still, Israeli confidence in such arrangements remains guarded, at best.

Internally, the events in Syria have the potential to diminish support in Israel for a "land for peace" deal. If a new regime were to move decisively toward a strategic reorientation, Israelis may feel they do not need to pay the price of a full withdrawal. Should the current regime hang on for some time, its brutal repression and its blatant diversion tactics could also prove to be the nail in the coffin for Israeli support for a peace deal. Under a third scenario, an unstable indefinite outcome, there will be little faith that a peace deal could stick.

Not only are traditional supporters of a Golan deal having second thoughts, but opponents have not missed the opportunity to say "I told you so." Former Defense and Foreign Minister Moshe Arens, a longtime conservative voice and a traditional opponent of "land-for-peace" formulas, has seized on the Arab awakening and the uprising in Syria to attack those who were previously willing to trade the Golan for a peace deal. "Diamonds may be forever, but treaties with dictators are not," wrote Arens in *Haaretz* in August. "Today we can consider ourselves fortunate that . . . a treaty was not signed. What is happening in the Sinai could have been happening now in the Golan Heights."[5]

Potential Regional Effects: Israel, Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan

Events in Syria could further affect Israeli policy regarding other regional actors. The 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war did not resolve the conflict between the parties, and both are preparing for more violence. The prospects for renewed conflict over the next three years are "very high," according to a senior Israeli Defense Forces official.[6] A spillover of a Syrian civil war into Lebanon may affect the Israeli-Hezbollah dynamic in a number of ways:[7] If Hezbollah feels threatened internally, it may choose to heighten tensions with Israel in order to buttress internal support, or, a change to Hezbollah's posture could expose its leader, Hassan Nasrallah, to an Israeli assassination attempt. But most likely, Israel will remain on the sidelines. Indeed, Israel's own experience suggests that internal Lebanese strife redirects, at least initially, its foes' attention from the Jewish state.

Some Israelis see at least one regional opportunity that may arise due to the Syrian uprising: a renewed dialogue with Turkey. For years a pillar of Israel's regional strategic posture, this important relationship has recently deteriorated into open hostility. Yet both countries have an interest in a stable and responsible Syrian government. Although few in Turkey apparently share this expectation, there are Israelis who continue to hope that the current turmoil in Syria might help to heal Jerusalem's rift with Ankara.

Finally, a spillover of the Syrian (and wider pan-Arab) political upheaval into Jordan would be of grave concern to Israel. The Jewish state has traditionally supported the Hashemites and has proven its willingness to use force to defend the status quo (e.g. Black September 1970). However, Israel's ability to support the monarchy is limited to external threats—yet even this arena presents few and highly constrained options for affecting a favorable outcome.[8]

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About This Brief

This brief is part of a series examining the regional dimensions of Syria's popular uprising. The Institute invited leading experts from the U.S. and the Middle East to identify the influence Syria's neighbors are bringing to bear on the conflict, to forecast how the situation there will affect the regional balance of power, and to examine how the opposition and the Syrian regime are responding to these regional dynamics. Through its work, the Institute aims to provide analysis and tools for on-the-ground conflict management in support of political transitions across the Arab world. The series was edited by USIP's Steven Heydemann, senior adviser for Middle East Initiatives, and Scott Lasensky, a senior program officer. This brief was written by Ehud Eiran, a post-doctoral fellow at the Department of International Relations at Haifa University, Israel, and Lasensky. Eiran has served as an assistant to former Prime Minister Ehud Barak's Foreign Policy Adviser and as a research fellow at the Belfer Center at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government. Lasensky travels regularly to Israel and Syria, directed "Track II" dialogues in the region and is a co-author of the forthcoming book, "Peace Puzzle: America's Quest for Arab-Israeli Peace."

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Endnotes

1. *Maariv*, August 22, 2011.
2. Peres spoke at an event sponsored by the S. Daniel Abraham Center for Middle East Peace at USIP headquarters in Washington, April 5, 2011.
3. *Maariv,* September 4, 2011
4. Conversation with author, Tel Aviv, July 2011.
5. *Haaretz,* August 23, 2011.
6. *Haaretz,* September 28, 2011
7. See Mona Yacoubian paper on Lebanon in this series.
8. See Edward Ghehm paper on Jordan in this series.

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