ISRAEL HITS SYRIA, SENDS MESSAGE TO IRAN

Ben Caspit

Al-Monitor Israel Pulse, May 5, 2013

Whenever the situation in the Middle East looks like it can’t get any worse, it gets worse. Syria has been embroiled in a bloody civil war for two years now, and over the past year a significant number of global terror groups and ad hoc al-Qaeda cells have jumped into the fray. At the same time, Hezbollah was drawn into the struggle and is sending in hundreds of its troops into Syria. Iran is also sending in Islamic Revolution Guards Corps [IRGC] regiments. Turkey is involved, and the fire is spreading to all corners, while in Jordan they are trying to establish a buffer zone for refugees. The Golan Heights is catching ricochets, and the entire region is seething. And now, even Israel is joining the action.

So let’s set a few things straight: A few hints appeared in the previous article I published in Al-Monitor: the first, including an unequivocal statement by a high-ranking Israeli military official, according to which Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s regime still maintained full control over his chemical weapons. There is no threat to them. According to assessments, Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah does not want chemical weapons, as he knows they will only spell trouble for him because Israel would never tolerate weapons of mass destruction in the hands of Hezbollah’s leader. However, Israel’s highest ranking
defense officials have made it clear that Israel would also stop “game-changing” weapons from making their way to Hezbollah. And not only chemical weapons. The Israeli airstrikes, according to Western Intelligence sources, around Damascus over the weekend were proof that Israel means business.

As far as Israel is concerned, three types of Syrian weapons constitute casus belli, game changers, the types Israel will never allow to flow to Hezbollah. And that's without addressing the issue of chemical weapons. According to experienced military sources, these are high precision, lethal Yakhont missiles that are able to strike ships or marine platforms from a distance of 300 km or farther. Missiles such as these would put the gas excavations in Israel's economic waters within strike range. The second type are SA17 anti-aircraft missiles, which are considered game changers in terms of the Israeli air force's freedom of operation. The third are the weapons hit Damascus in recent days.

And that’s exactly what happened. According to Western intelligence sources, the targets that were bombed twice (during the night between last Thursday and Friday, May 2, and the night between Saturday and Sunday this week, May 4) were Fateh-110 missiles depots and their solid fuel depots. Why are they considered “game changers”? Because they are far more precise than the old Scuds and Nasrallah’s rockets, and because they are propelled by solid fuel and launched from mobile launchers. In other words: precision is the critical element here. If Nasrallah gets missiles with a dispersion range of only a few dozen meters, like the Fateh missiles, it means that he would be able to threaten the Israeli air forces’ airports and other strategic facilities.

Israel cannot allow itself to be in that position. Another, even more serious matter for the Israelis: the fact that launching Fateh missiles does not require a lengthy and complex launch process that can be seen by Israeli Unmanned Aerial Vehicles [UAVs]. Because it is equipped with solid fuel, the Fateh can be launched quickly, within a matter of minutes, from a relatively small vehicle, and strike its target with lethal precision, with a war head weighing half a ton. You can’t make predictions, you can’t shoot them down from the air. If there is such a thing as “game-changing” weapons in the match between Israel and Hezbollah, this is it.

It is believed that the operation was coordinated with the United States through a very long series of discussions between the parties, at all levels. The issue was also raised during US President Barack Obama’s visit to Jerusalem at the end of March this year. According to sources which were involved in privy to these talks, the Americans gave the nod of approval and suggested that Israel only do so when it is clear that said consignments were about to make their way to their destinations, while maintaining a “small footprint,” so that Assad is not tempted to respond or forced to respond.

The situation is quite reminiscent of the situation right before the bombing of the Syrian nuclear reactor in Deir al-Zour in the summer of 2007. According to foreign reports, Israel was responsible for the airstrike, which took place prior to the outbreak of the Syrian civil war. In operational terms, the destruction of the reactor was quick and simple. The question was how to prevent the situation from deteriorating into a full-scale war between Israel and Syria. A great deal of energy was spent then to keep a low profile, while at the same time signaling that the Israeli Defense Forces [IDF] were ready to go. Then, too, half the Israeli army was performing drills in the Golan Heights, just like last week at the end of April, when the IDF conducted a major division drill in the Golan. That said, however, there are major differences between the strategic situation then and now.

Assad today is not the stable and self-confident leader he was then. He is fighting for his life and the survival of his regime. Some people in Israel believe that Assad’s fall would be good news, while others, whose numbers have been growing, are convinced that Assad’s fall would be bad news and that we’ll miss him more than we ever dreamt we would. I tend to agree with the latter. In any event, Assad today doesn’t have the privilege of taking action because his honor was bruised, and he doesn’t really have to respond to every provocation. Israeli action against him could actually play into his hands, as someone who is trying
to persuade one and all that the uprising against him is actually a Zionist conspiracy. Assad’s military position is complex, and the last thing he needs now is to get entangled with Israel. That’s the reason that the probability of an all-out war between Syria and Israel, or between Hezbollah and Israel, due to the recent airstrike near Damascus is not very high.

What does Israel get out of all of this? First of all, it has reduced the risk of transfer of missiles or “game-changing” technologies into what it believes are dangerous hands. It is not a far stretch to believe that there will be other strikes, if and when. It is not unimaginable that Israel will take advantage of the chaos to drastically reduce the potential of such technology and equipment falling into the wrong hands. Second of all, Israel has once again put on a show of military, and especially intelligence, strength. The consignments that exploded with a thundering boom in Damascus in recent days are underground, protected by thick layers of concrete. While it’s true that this is still not the Fordow site, there are very few air forces in the world that know how to crack such caches, and with such ease.

And we still haven’t mentioned the excellent and precise intelligence. I believe that in Jerusalem they assume that Tehran is looking at bombed out and burning Damascus and understanding several things. The United States is supportive, the world is silent and the sides are ready in a face-off, closer than ever to conflict. If we think about it, we are actually right in the middle of the dress rehearsal.

*Ben Caspit is a contributing writer for Al-Monitor's Israel Pulse. He is also a senior columnist and political analyst for Israeli newspapers.*

---

**ANALYSIS: ISRAEL ENFORCING RED LINES ON SYRIA**

*Yaakov Lappin*

*Jerusalem Post, May 5, 2013*

The two aerial strikes on Damascus in the past 48 hours, carried out by the Israel Air Force according to foreign media reports, are likely the result of classified intelligence indicating an imminent attempt to transfer strategic weapons from Syria to Hezbollah.

With Hezbollah deploying up to half of its fighting force to Syria to help the regime of dictator Bashar Assad fight for its survival, the Lebanese Shi’ite organization will be seeking “rewards” for its actions. Hezbollah and its patron Iran may have asked Assad to make the advanced weapons available.

It would seem that Assad cannot have been in the dark over the likelihood of such proliferation triggering action to stop it. Back in January, Israel reportedly sent a very clear message to Syria, Hezbollah and Iran when an air strike targeted a Hezbollah-bound convoy carrying advanced surface-to-air missiles toward Lebanon. But that apparently didn’t stop Hezbollah from trying again this weekend.

Assad is in no position to decline “requests” for strategic arms from his only regional allies, on whom he depends for his survival. The weapons targeted may well have been Iranian Fatah-110 missiles, which run on solid fuel and have a range of 300 kilometers. It remains unclear how long those missiles had been stored on Syrian territory. In any case, Jerusalem seems prepared to take a calculated risk now, to avoid facing a significantly worse strategic situation later.

It is prepared to enforce its red lines on weapons proliferation with Hezbollah, and perhaps also send a message to Iran – which is continuing with its nuclear program – that Israel’s red lines are set in stone, come what may. Although such high-profile air strikes have the potential to escalate into a wider conflict, allowing Hezbollah to acquire advanced missiles would make a damaging conflict with it more likely in the future, and hence, doing nothing is a poor option, the logic behind such strikes suggests.
Hezbollah is already heavily armed, with at least 70,000 rockets in its possession, and allowing it to take possession of Iranian missiles that put all of Israel in range would make a future clash with it that much more painful for the Israeli home front. Syria may be in a state of chaos, but that doesn’t mean Israel has abandoned its red lines.

There may be additional big-picture factors at play behind the recent events. Dr. Ely Karmon, a senior scholar at the Herzliya-based Institute for Counter-Terrorism, pointed on Sunday to contingency planning by Iran, the Syrian regime, and Hezbollah, aimed at creating an Allawite ministate on the Syrian coast, and linking it to Lebanon’s Bekaa Valley, as well as with southern Lebanon – both of which are dominated by Hezbollah, if the Assad regime is toppled.

Such an Allawite-Shi’ite entity would be under direct Iranian patronage, meaning that Iran would create a new base for itself in Syria, Karmon argued. “The importance of these bombings may be… not only to prevent Iranian strategic weapons from being transferred, but to prevent this future entity from being armed and threatening to us,” he said.

An Allawite-Shi’ite entity might invite an Iranian task force to defend it directly, Karmon added. “In recent weeks, we’re seeing this strategy being realized. The intense battles of [the Syrian coastal city of] Al-Qussair resulted in the Syrian Army and Hezbollah almost retaking it. That leaves a corridor open from Damascus to the Allawite area…through which Assad can withdraw, together with his chemical weapons,” Karmon said.

Similarly, the slaughter of Sunni civilians in the coastal Syrian city of Baniyas appears to be a deliberate act of ethnic cleansing designed to pave the way for an Allawite-Shi’ite entity in the area. Assad has been able to secure the three major cities of Damascus, Aleppo and Homs, by retreating from other areas. He has also created a militia made up of “national committees,” tasked with fighting the rebels alongside the pro-regime and notorious Shabiha paramilitaries.

But that doesn’t mean he will be able to save his regime in the long run, fuelling the need for preparing a future Allawistan. Karmon doubted that Syria or Hezbollah would directly respond to this weekend’s air strikes. With Hezbollah’s fighters deployed in Syria, its forces will be “exposed to our attacks before the Iranians can help them. If the Syrians fire their last missiles against us, they endanger air strikes on their army divisions.” But Iran and Hezbollah could use their overseas terrorist infrastructure to engineer a vengeance attack, he warned.

Also on Sunday, the former military secretary to Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, Brig.-Gen. (res.) Dr. Shimon Shapira, published an article saying that Iran was poised to extend its control of Syria. Shapira, a senior research associate at the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, noted that Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah paid a rare, secret visit to Tehran last month, where he met with senior Iranian officials, including Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamanei, and the commander of the Quds Force of the Revolutionary Guard Corps, Gen. Qasem Suleimani, who is in charge of Iranian policy in Lebanon and Syria. “Suleimani’s involvement in the meeting with Nasrallah was significant.

He has been the spearhead of Iranian military activism in the Middle East. In January 2012, he declared that the Islamic Republic controlled, “one way or another,” Iraq and South Lebanon. He now appeared to be prepared to extend Iran’s control to all of Syria,” Shapira said. Shapira cited a trustworthy source as saying that “Iran has formulated an operational plan for assisting Syria.

The plan has been named for Gen. Suleimani. It includes three elements: 1. the establishment of a popular sectarian army made up of Shi’ites and Allawites, to be backed by forces from Iran, Iraq, Hezbollah and symbolic contingents from the Persian Gulf. 2. This force will reach 150,000 fighters. 3. The plan will give preference to importing forces from Iran, Iraq and, only afterwards, other Shi’ite elements.
This regional force will be integrated with the Syrian Army. Suleimani himself visited Syria in late February-early March to prepare the implementation of this plan.” Shapira labeled these preparations as a “Plan B,” for use in the event of Assad’s fall. “Iran already seems to be looking beyond the regime’s survivability and preparing for a reality where it will have to operate in Syria even if Assad falls. Even before recent events in Syria, observers in the Arab world have been warning for years about growing evidence of “Iranian expansionism,” Shapira said. And Hezbollah is expected to play a central role in this expansionism, he added.

A KEY SYRIAN PARTNER IS FRUSTRATED BY OBAMA’S CAUTION

David Ignatius
The Daily Star, May 03, 2013

Gen. Salim Idriss, the commander of rebel forces in Syria, complained late Tuesday that President Barack Obama’s desire “to wait and wait for more evidence” that the Syrian regime has used chemical weapons is encouraging their continued use – and that these attacks will only stop if the United States and its allies impose a no-fly zone. Idriss, who heads the moderate wing of the Free Syrian Army, has emerged as the key U.S. ally in the Syrian conflict. While he appreciates the recent increase in U.S. training and humanitarian support, and the talk in Washington of sending lethal aid, he was clearly frustrated by the comments that Obama had made to reporters a few hours earlier.

Obama said in the televised news conference that he wanted solid evidence of chemical weapons that could prompt international action against President Bashar Assad. “If we end up rushing to judgment without hard, effective evidence, then we can find ourselves in a position where we can’t mobilize the international community to support what we do,” Obama said.

But Idriss countered that his forces have enough information now to answer Obama’s questions of how, where and when the weapons were deployed on four separate occasions. He welcomed U.S. plans to train his forces but said this strategy will be useless if Assad continues the chemical attacks. Idriss claimed the regime could deliver the chemical weapons with planes and Scud missiles, which he said must be destroyed.

Idriss, a German-trained engineer who defected from Assad last summer, voices moderate, nonsectarian views. He opposes the extremist Nusra Front and said he has ordered his fighters to stop cooperating with them. He repeated a February statement to me that he’s ready to negotiate a political transition with Syrian army commanders who haven’t ordered the deaths of civilians. Idriss also offered to meet “right now” with Russian officials. “If they have some interests, we will discuss the Russian role in the future. We will be very positive,” he said.

The Obama administration sees Russia as a necessary participant in any negotiated political transition in Syria. Obama’s desire for Russian cooperation is one reason he has been cautious in responding to allegations that Assad has used chemical weapons. Obama talked by phone to President Vladimir Putin Monday, and an official said “we still do believe there’s a constructive role for Russia to play.”

Idriss was emphatic about his break from the Nusra Front, which is an offshoot of Al-Qaeda in Iraq. “We don’t work with Nusra. We don’t share anything with them.” He said fighters from the extremist group had fought alongside some of his battalions, “but they were not invited.” Building up Idriss’ Supreme Military Council is crucial given the administration’s expectation of a continuing struggle after Assad is toppled.

“There could be a second war after Assad falls ... as factions battle for control,” explained a senior administration official Tuesday. The official said the extremist threat had been discussed with Russia, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey and others.

The U.S. official agreed that there was “a growing reluctance” among Idriss’ mainstream umbrella group to work with the Nusra Front, especially after it formally pledged allegiance to Al-Qaeda in Iraq a few
weeks ago. “Nusra’s gains haven’t been arrested, but their progress has been decelerated,” said the U.S. official.

Whether Idriss and his moderate forces can expand their command-and-control network is the crucial issue for the U.S. – and also the most problematic. The Syrian opposition is almost entirely Sunni Muslim and has deep Islamist roots. The battalions nominally under Idriss’ command have been fighting alongside jihadi groups for more than a year, and it will take more than official statements to accomplish a separation.

Squeezing the extremists will be impossible without more help from Turkey, across whose border the Syrian jihadi fighters travel daily to receive money and supplies from wealthy Gulf Arabs. The United States is hoping that Turkey will crack down harder on this cross-border traffic, and this will be a key topic when Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan visits Washington in mid-May.

To underline his plea for help, Idriss is sending a letter to Obama. “Mr. President, I understand the reasons behind your cautious involvement in Syria,” a draft said. “We desperately need your support, as the Free Syrian Army under my command has neither the requisite training nor equipment to counter the effects of Assad’s chemical weapons or to destroy them.”

Perhaps most important, Idriss said in his letter that “our future Free Syria will not need weapons of mass destruction.” In other words, to get rid of “senseless” chemical weapons, dump Assad.

David Ignatius is published twice weekly by The Daily Star.