

Israelis Find Themselves Between a 'Rock and a Hard Place'

In six months, Israel will commemorate the 40th anniversary of the Yom Kippur War, during which Israel suffered almost 3,000 casualties and another 9,000 were wounded in fierce battles that took place throughout Sinai and the Golan Heights.

Today, with winds of Islamic extremism blowing in from Egypt—plus more than two years of fighting between Syrians loyal to President Bashar Assad and rebels trying to overthrow Assad, leaving nearly 100,000 dead—Israelis look at current events with similar trepidation that preceded the Yom Kippur War. We find ourselves between a rock and a hard place.

Recent reports of the U.S. sending troops and equipment to Jordan, providing Israel with some new advanced weapons, and Jordan granting air rights for Israeli drones to pass through Jordanian air space (to Syria) all suggest that something is in the works. Add to the mix the recent restoration of ties between Israel and Turkey, another opponent of the Assad regime, and talks of renewed coordination between us lend one to wonder when, not if, there will be a military intervention in Syria.

Israelis do care about the humanitarian disaster that is taking place in Syria, with civilians being butchered along with rebel fighters and government troops. It's a paradox that the country that's been one of our most fierce enemies, steadfastly refusing to recognize Israel's right to exist much less make peace with us, is facing this situation. Yet there's a parallel outpouring of care for the well-being of the Syrian people and worry about what will be—and whether or not it will be good for Israel.

Israel largely has sat on the sidelines, watching and not interfering in developments in Syria. And while we also are concerned we may get pulled into the fighting by having to defend ourselves, there are several notable exceptions. Among these is the repeated evacuation of Syrians injured in domestic fighting, brought across the border to Israel and treated in Israeli hospitals. Yes, whether rebel fighters or government troops, because Israel sanctifies and celebrates life, we treat people who are wounded in a civil war in a country that is at war with us.

This leads to the concern that if the fighting were not bad enough already, things could get worse and that Syrians could attempt to flee over the Israeli border for their own safety. This could pose both a humanitarian problem as well as a security risk, and it is something for which Israel must be prepared.

Beyond the humanitarian crisis that has seen hundreds of thousands flee for their safety to Turkey and Jordan (where riots among refugees have been reported), the big and immediate fear in Israel is that Syria will use its vast stockpile of chemical and biological weapons (said to be more than 1,000 tons) against us, either as a way to draw us into the fighting and unite support for Syria against Israel or as a Hail Mary-type pass, as the falling government could launch these weapons against us with "nothing to lose."

The video *Can't Ignore the Risks* was produced to dramatize some of the threats Israel faces. As an Israeli and father of six, with gas masks in three different sizes stored in my home's bomb shelter, the fear of this scene actually coming to pass, with chemical or biological warheads attached, is terrifying. The support we get from overseas is a comfort, but the threats we face are still very real.

Just below the surface of fear and concern, Israelis also worry about what will come. The fighting in Syria is not just

a matter of Syrians fighting Syrians. Foreigners are on the ground, too, fighting with and/or “advising” either side.

It's clear that Syria's prime benefactor is Iran, a Shiite theocracy that has sustained and propped up the Syrian Alawite government for decades. As far as diplomacy or moderation goes, nothing good comes out of Iran, which today is the umbilical cord keeping the Assad regime (and Assad himself) alive.

With Iran being such a threat to Israel and the world, it would be logical for Israel to line up with the rebels to overthrow Assad, even with some tacit support. But logic here is not black and white. There are many factions of Syrian rebels fighting the government, and each gets support financially and materially by different countries and different terrorist groups. None of those supporting these factions are allies of Israel, to put it nicely.

There are really no good answers in Syria. If the Assad regime were to defeat the rebels and stay in place, the threats it poses on its own, as an agent of Iran and as a supplier of Hezbollah, are still grave. If the rebels win, there's likely to be no shortage of infighting among them to wrest power and control over each other.

Al-Qaeda-affiliated groups could come out strengthened, controlling the WMD arsenal and literally sitting on our border. In the “best case,” Syria could actually try to have elections and install a representative government. But if the Egyptian model is any example, what comes after may be worse than what was before.

There is a well-known saying that “the enemy of my enemy is still my enemy.” Sadly, it doesn't look like much good is going to come on the Syrian front—not for Israel, and not for the Syrian people.

The one good thing is that, although Israel has been pressured

to make peace with Syria and “return” the Golan Heights, thankfully that has not happened. Otherwise we’d see the Syrian civil war literally on our front door step, just across the Sea of Galilee from hundreds of thousands of Israelis.

The past two years’ developments in Egypt and Syria provide a clear lesson for us in any future peacemaking endeavors that, in our neighborhood, maybe we will never own peace, but just rent it until a new warlord comes to power.

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