

# Israel's covert involvement in Syria conflict to escalate

Jean Shaoul

3 December 2015

A senior defence official has called on Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's right wing government to prepare to intervene in Syria and deal with the likely spillover of the nearly five-year long conflict into Israel itself.

Amos Gilad, the director of the political-security division in the Defence Ministry and a former senior Military Intelligence official, was reported on Israel's Army Radio on Saturday as saying, "Syria is a dead state, and Israel must understand this and prepare accordingly."

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's grip on his country was failing and it had become "a land without rule."

In his call to put Israel on a war footing, Gilad is ramping up the possibility of a much broader conflagration in the region. His remarks come in the wake of Russia's aerial bombardment of Islamist forces, many linked to AlQaeda and other militias backed by the US and its regional allies, to shore up the Assad regime, alongside support from Iran, and Lebanon's Hezbollah.

Netanyahu has claimed that Iran and Syria have been providing advanced weapons, many of which are directed at Israeli cities, to Hezbollah, against which it fought a murderous war in 2006 as part of a broader plan to push back Iran's regional allies.

Last September, during a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow, he warned that Israel would not tolerate Iran's arming of Tel Aviv's enemies, and would take action to prevent it. "At the same time, Iran, under the auspices of the Syrian army, is attempting to build a second terrorist front against us from the Golan Heights," he said.

Israel seized part of Syria's Golan Heights in the 1967 war, later annexing it and building settlements there in defiance of international law.

A senior Israeli military official was reported as saying that the Israeli Air Force would "continue" to operate as normal in Syria, as Tel Aviv and Moscow were in constant communication over coordinating their flight

paths. Putin, speaking on Monday on the sidelines of the COP 21 United Nations conference on climate change near Paris, confirmed that it was Netanyahu who had proposed the arrangement with Russia at the September meeting. Netanyahu said that senior Israel Defence Forces (IDF) and Russian military officers would meet Tuesday "in order to continue this policy."

At the weekend, several Israeli officials, including Gilad and Defence Minister Moshe Ya'alon, said Russian pilots had breached Israeli air space during their operations in Syria but that their co-ordination had so far prevented any major escalation or incidents. This is particularly crucial since Russia has just deployed its S-400 missile defence system that can detect and down aircraft up to 400 kilometres away from its base in Tartus, thereby covering all of Syria, Lebanon, Cyprus, south east Turkey, and nearly half of Israel.

Such co-ordination between Russia and Israel, a key US ally in the region, serves to confirm that Turkey's downing of the Russian fighter plane was a deliberate provocation that had Washington's fingerprints all over it.

But crucially, the statement was tantamount to an admission of what has long been suspected: that Israel has been intervening covertly in the Syrian conflict. Just last week, Syria reported that Israel had carried out four airstrikes on Syrian government and Hezbollah positions in Syria's Qalamoun mountains that straddle the border with Lebanon, killing 13 and injuring dozens more.

It was one of more than a dozen Israeli airstrikes against Syria since 2013, supposedly targeting arms shipments to Hezbollah. Hezbollah have played a key role in fighting the ever-shifting alliance of Islamist groups that includes Islamic State, al-Nusra, Jeish al-Fatah and Ahrar al-Sham.

Earlier in November, Israel's Channel 2 television cited Syrian media reports of an Israel Defense Forces raid near Damascus airport. In September 2014, Israel brought

down a Russian-made Syrian warplane over the Golan Heights in the first such incident in three decades.

In July, Defence Minister Ya'alon admitted that Israel had been aiding Islamist groups, something that Israeli officials had previously denied. Speaking about Israeli medical aid to the Islamists fighting with the al-Qaeda affiliated al-Nusra Front, he said, "We've assisted them under two conditions. That they don't get too close to the border, and that they don't touch the Druze."

The Druze are a religious and ethnic minority in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Israel that number around 140,000 in Israel, mostly in the north and on the Golan Heights. Loyal to the Zionist state, they serve in the IDF, and their leaders are integrated within several political parties.

Last February, a report by the UN Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) in the Golan Heights, submitted to the UN Security Council and buried by the Western media, showed that the IDF had been in regular contact with Syrian rebels, including Islamic State militants, since May 2013.

UNDOF has been subject to attacks by the al-Nusra Front, including kidnappings, killings, theft of UN weapons and ammunition, vehicles and other property, and the looting and destruction of its facilities, in a clear bid to drive it from the Golan border area. Only a small contingent is still stationed on the Syrian side of the border.

*Ha'aretz* noted that the report had detailed several instances that indicated close ties between the Syrian militant groups and the IDF, with at least 10 wounded people being stretchered across the ceasefire line [the post-1973 border between Syria and Israel] to the IDF. Israel's health ministry has acknowledged that four Israeli hospitals had treated some 1,000 Syrians.

Asked by i24News whether Israel had given medical treatment to members of ISIS and al-Nusra, a military spokesman replied, "In the past two years the Israel Defence Forces have been engaged in humanitarian, life-saving aid to wounded Syrians, irrespective of their identity."

The UN report detailed incidents where the IDF was seen interacting with armed rebels, and claimed that in one such incident, the IDF handed boxes to the Syrian armed rebels.

Last August, al-Nusra took control of the strategic Quneitra border crossing in the Golan, ejecting Syrian armed forces from the area and bringing the group to Israel's border.

In 2012, a secret Pentagon document, later de-classified

as a result of pressure from the US NGO Judicial Watch, reported that opposition groups supported by Qatar, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the US and—covertly—Israel sought the establishment of a Salafist Principality in Eastern Syria [Hasaka and Deir el-Zour], now part of Islamic State-held territory.

The increasingly close relations between the IDF, Islamic State and Al Qaeda along the Golan Heights coincided with the start of oil exploration by US oil company Genie Energy's Israeli subsidiary, Afek Oil & Gas. The IDF has replaced the 45-mile border fence with Syria with a steel barricade consisting of barbed wire, touch sensors, motion detectors, infrared cameras, and ground radar. In October, Yuval Bartov, Afek's chief geologist, told *Channel 2* the company had found significant quantities of oil in the Golan Heights.

Israel's preparation for a more overt involvement in Syria coincides with its brutal suppression of the Palestinian uprising, which it has sought to equate with Islamist terrorism.

It also coincides with the announcement that Tel Aviv is to open a diplomatic mission in Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates, following increasingly close cooperation with the Gulf States on foreign policy. The announcement follows the proposal by US Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham for the deployment of 100,000 foreign soldiers, mostly from Arab countries, supposedly to fight Islamic State in Syria.



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