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Muddled Israeli-US policies on Assad set stage for Golan offensive against Israel

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Fox News: Israeli commandos returning from Syria.

Four days after a “senior Israeli official” warned Assad through *The New York Times* of Wednesday, May 15 that he risks forfeiting power if he retaliates for Israeli attacks on weapons supplies to terrorists, “Israeli officials” were telling the *London Times* of Saturday, May 18 something quite different: “An intact, but weakened, Assad regime would be preferable,” they said. “Better the devil we know than the demons we can only imagine if... extremists from across the Arab world gain a foothold there.”

The night before this report, *Fox News* aired footage appearing to show Israeli commandos inside Syria racing back on foot to Israeli territory.

Without going into whether the two sets of “Israeli officials” were one and the same, their utterances are clearly making Israel’s policy-makers and defense leaders look muddled and uncertain – or, worse, unable to think clearly – about how to cope with the menace building up on the Syrian Golan. This could take the form of a Syrian war of attrition and/or a Hizballah offensive against Upper and Western Galilee.

At all events, the Syrian civil conflict appears poised ready to spill over to one or more of its neighbors, starting with Israel as a result of six factors:

1. President Barack Obama’s inability to make up his mind on whether the US should intervene militarily in Syria – even in a limited way, such as the imposition of no-fly zones or finding a way to supply non-Islamist Syrian rebel groups with sorely needed weapons.
2. The US president’s refusal to recognize that chemical weapons have already been used in Syria. His reaction to the file put before him in the White House Friday, May 17, by Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan - with evidence from physicians treating wounded Syrians - remained dismissive. “The US has seen evidence of chemical weapons being used in Syria,” he said, adding however, “it is important to get more specific details about alleged chemical attacks.”

This comment was interpreted as the US president’s acceptance of the use of chemical weapons in the Syrian war so long as it was on a limited scale. Obama, like Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, has therefore waved away another red line for military intervention in the Syria conflict, by closing his eyes to the evidence.

Former Israeli defense minister Binyamin Ben-Eliezer was more realistic last week when he brusquely brushed aside a radio interviewer’s query by saying: Of course, Assad has used chemical weapons and isn’t it obvious that he has already transferred to Hizballah both chemical substances and other advanced weapons?

3. Following again in American footsteps, Israel failed to prevent Russia sending advanced S-300 anti-air and Yakhont anti-ship missiles to the Assad regime – both improved versions which were outfitted with sophisticated radar to improve their range and precision.

When Netanyahu was challenged with failing in this mission in his May 14 trip to

buttonhole Russian President Vladimir Putin in Sochi, he said only that he would “travel wherever is needed and talk to whoever is needed to keep Israel safe and secure.”

This was the closest he came to admitting that he had fallen down on his efforts for keeping advanced Russian weaponry out of Syrian hands.

4. Strategic errors, which may turn out to be irreversible, because they emanated from faulty assessments shared by Israel and the Obama administration of the strengths on the Syrian battlefield. To this day, the US, Israel and Turkey cling to the belief that Assad’s days are numbered and refuse to recognize the steady advances made by the Syrian army in its counter-offensive for dislodging the rebels from land they captured in more than two years of combat.

5. This misreading of the Syrian ruler’s survivability is part and parcel of the omission by Obama, Netanyahu and Erdogan to appreciate and counter two major strategic changes overtaking the region:

a) They stood aside as Moscow, Tehran and Hizballah deepened their military commitments to Assad’s fight for survival – starting with the arrival of Russian military personnel in Syria to man the sophisticated missiles supplied by Moscow until Syrian crews were instructed in their use.

They didn’t raise a finger to interfere with the almost daily Russian and Iranian air lifts to Syrian air bases of complete brigades of elite Hizballah fighters and thousands of Iranian Bassij militiamen who now control key war sectors.

Washington Jerusalem and even Jordan sat on their hands when 3,000 Iraqi members of the Asai’b al-Haq (League of the Righteous) and Kataib Hizballah poured across the border into Syria to support Assad’s war on the Syrian rebellion.

b) Because they kept their distance from all these strategic game-changers in and around Syria, the US and Israel lost their chance to break up the Tehran-Damascus-Hizballah alliance. This objective the Obama administration once offered as his priority and the pretext for avoiding military action against a nuclear Iran.

What Washington achieved by its hands-off stance on Syria was the very opposite: Instead of weakening the triple alliance, Obama has allowed it to be bolstered by Russian and Iraqi increments.

It is no wonder, therefore, that Moscow, Tehran, Damascus and Hizballah are behaving like winners and gearing up for the next stage of the Syrian war, which, if Tehran and Hizballah have their way, will evolve into a war of attrition against Israel waged from the Syrian Golan.

The opening shot was fired Wednesday, May 15 by a Palestinian terrorist front under Syrian, Iranian and Hizballah tutelage, which shelled an Israeli military observation post on Mt. Hermon. This attack drew no direct Israeli response - par for the course.

6. A war of attrition against Israel from the Golan would not be a new experience either for Damascus or Moscow. In 1974, from March to May, Syrian forces, refusing to accept the defeat of their 1973 offensive against Israel, launched a harsh war of attrition from the same enclave, on the advice of their Soviet patron. In what became known as “the little war,” Syrian forces kept Israeli Golan under heavy shelling barrages and tried repeatedly to capture Mt Hermon.

The big secret of that short-lived conflict was the deployment by the Soviet Union of two Cuban armored brigades on the Golan front against Israel, airlifted in from Angola. All the same, Damascus was forced to accept a ceasefire on Golan which was observed from that day on until the present.

This time, the big difference is that Moscow can leave the heavy-lifting for a limited war on Israel to Tehran and Hizballah.

Hizballah’s Hassan Nasrallah in one of his fiery speeches expressed eagerness to make the Golan his new front for war on Israel. And Friday, May 17, it was reported in Tehran that Iran’s

supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei had entrusted Al Qods Brigades commander Gen. Qassem Soleimani with the task of sending troops to the Golan to embark on hostilities against Israel.

Once they begin, it will be hard to stop the violence from spreading to Israel's borders with Lebanon, from Syria into Turkey and from Jordan into Syria and Iraq.

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