

Israel's Objectives in Syria

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By Andrew Davidson

Bashar Assad's abrupt flight from Syria left behind a power vacuum. The rebels who overthrew him are hard at work reassuring the public and foreign leaders that the transition will be orderly and as peaceful as possible. But in the meantime, foreign powers are jockeying for position – none more dramatically than Israel, whose ground forces now occupy the formerly demilitarized Golan Heights and whose airstrikes in less than a week demolished the remnants of Syria's military capabilities. As a result, whatever government emerges next in Syria will be practically defenseless, operating at the whim of whichever foreign power can exert the most influence or force – which is just fine with Israel.

Shortly after Assad fled the country, Israeli forces moved into the U.N.-controlled buffer zone in the Golan Heights, an 1,800-square-kilometer (700-square-mile) plateau overlooking Israel, Syria, Jordan and Lebanon. Responding to allegations that the invasion violated the 1974 Agreement on Disengagement, which established the buffer zone and ended the Yom Kippur War, Israeli officials said that the fall of the Assad regime marked the end of the agreement and that Israeli control of the Golan Heights and Mount Hermon was vital for Israel's security. Israel's immediate concern, officials said, is that Syria's unrest could spill over into its territory – a threat it can better defend against if Israeli troops hold the high ground.

However, the Israeli occupation does not seem like it is intended to be temporary. On Sunday, Defense Minister Israel Katz said the military was preparing to spend the winter months on Syria's side of Mount Hermon, while urging the government to increase the defense budget. That same day, Israel's government approved a plan to double its population in the disputed region. Despite this, Ahmad al-Sharaa, the de facto new leader of Syria who is better known by his nom de guerre, Abu Mohammed al-Golani, said his "war-weary" country would not be drawn into another war – even as he accused Israel of perpetrating "unwarranted escalation" under false pretenses.

Not that Syria in its current condition could do much to resist. Since Assad's fall, Israel has conducted hundreds of airstrikes on military targets in Syria. It struck Syrian naval vessels at the ports of Al-Bayda and Latakia as well as airfields, military equipment, weapons caches, arms production facilities and chemical weapons sites. Israel also said it destroyed more than 90 percent

of Syria's air defense capabilities, meaning its aircraft can continue to operate freely in Syrian airspace. It is important for Israel to destroy potentially threatening "strategic capabilities" and ensure that extremists do not get their hands on dangerous weapons, according to Katz. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said he had also communicated to Syria's new leaders that Israel was prepared to use force to prevent Iran from reestablishing itself in the country. However, manpower constraints are likely to prevent Israel from advancing deeper into Syria or confronting the new Syrian government directly.

Despite the clear defensive element behind Israel's attacks, it appears intent on a long occupation of the buffer zone, particularly in light of the government's plans to move more Israeli civilians into the area. Control of strategic points in the Golan Heights will also enable Israel to conduct offensive operations later.

But Israel is not alone in considering how it can benefit from Syria's government transition. The list of major foreign powers interested in shaping Syria's future is long and includes Turkey, Iran, Russia and the United States. Israel's destruction of Syrian military capabilities has left its new leaders extremely weak and vulnerable to external influence. The greatest rewards may accrue to those who, like Israel, move the fastest.

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