



Who Is the “Staunch Wall” in the Changing Regional System?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The Arab proverb "we are with the staunch wall" outlines a path to survival, especially in periods of transition, recommending one to cleave faithfully to the rising force portrayed as a staunch wall. From this point of view, recent events connected with the regional turmoil are bound together, including the Kurdish failure in Kirkuk, the fighting in the Druze village of Khader, the Palestinian reconciliation, and the Saudi-led resignation of the Lebanese prime minister. At the same time, the Israeli "Villa in the Jungle" strategy of entrenchment within its borders disregards the need to find overt and covert routes of intervention that would enhance Israel's image as a "staunch wall" for its allies.

"We are with the staunch wall" (*nahna ma'a al-hait al-waqif*) is a well-known Arab proverb. It goes far towards explaining the dynamics of the considerations that guide the players in the Middle East as they navigate the newly emerging regional system. Identifying the staunch wall is the essence of survival, especially for minority groups for whom alliances are a necessity. Such groups must correctly identify the rising powers with which they should align.

The Fighting in Khader

From a Syrian perspective, the fighting that took place in early November in the northern Syrian Golan Heights around the Druze village of Khader was just another event in a long and tumultuous war – but for Israel, it was a significant event. The test for Israel was not of its handling of routine border security, but of its consistent strategy of avoiding active involvement in the civil war in Syria. An immediate intervention was required by Israel's prime minister (in the middle of a visit to London) in the form of an unprecedented declaration of Israel's obligation to protect Khader.

The situation has stabilized (until the next such event), but the tension that emerged should trigger an assessment of Israel's strategic approach at the tail end of the Syrian war. The key question challenging Israel is this: As a regional player, can it provide staunch support for its allies, both nearby and farther afield?

The "staunch wall test" is the logic behind the cooperation of recent years between the villagers of Khader and Hezbollah operatives, who have proven their strength over the course of the war.

The Israeli logic behind its policy of non-involvement brought the Druze citizens of Israel to demand the State's active intervention to protect their brethren across the border. The Khader battle thus acted as a kind of seismograph for the Israeli government. It highlighted its internal and external strategic dilemma, tested its functioning, and cast a light on its image as a staunch supporter of its allies.

The Kurdish Failure in Kirkuk

The Kurdish struggle for independence also tested the extent of Israel's strength as a staunch regional supporter in times of crisis. The determination of the Kurdish leader Barzani to hold a referendum on the independence of Kurdistan won public support from Israel, but the Kurds expected more. They could not withstand on their own an Iraqi-Iranian counterattack to their assault on Kirkuk. The Kurds' dream of political independence, which had been viewed as close to fulfillment, was postponed once again.

Sheer distance limited Israel's ability to provide military assistance, a point the Kurds understood. However, there were other dimensions of influence and support where Israel failed to meet Kurdish expectations. Israel's intimacy with the US largely underlies the image of its strength, and the Kurds expected Israel to endeavor to enlist American military support that could have served as a shield against the Iraqi-Iranian attack.

However, in open defiance, in a lightning operation, the Iraqi army, armed with modern American equipment, and under the direction of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, presented the US with a *fait accompli* that rendered moot its intention to pursue a mediator position. The Iranian chief of staff made a point of claiming after the attack that "The US and Israel had plotted to create a second Israel in the Kurdistan Region." With the successful attack, the Iranians succeeded not only in thwarting the realization of Kurdish independence, but in undermining the status of the US and Israel as staunch regional powers.

The need for active friction beyond the borders of the state

Against the background of Israel's trauma of "sinking into the Lebanese mud," and due to practical strategic considerations, Israel has largely refrained throughout the Syrian war from overt military intervention beyond its borders. When Israel has acted in Syria, secretly or openly, it was in the immediate interest of its own defense. As commander of the Northern Corps, I participated in discussions on this issue and concur with the overall policy that was developed.

However, in view of the emerging new order, one should examine how Israel will position its image of power not only as guardian of its own territory and borders, but as an influential force in shaping the regional system.

The discussion of state borders is separate from that of spheres of interest and the range of military action, open and clandestine, that is required for the protection of sovereignty. On this distinction, Major General Harkabi wrote in his book *War and Strategy*: "States have 'legal borders' of their national territory, but they also have 'strategic borders', for which they will be prepared to go to war ... For example, England argued that its strategic border was the Rhine ..." (p. 531). Almost a thousand years ago, England's wars were fought outside its borders, including the victory over Napoleon at Waterloo and the gamut of its activities in both World Wars.

Prime Ministers David Ben-Gurion and Levi Eshkol acted on this understanding by providing military support for the Kurds, which extended beyond the covert activity of the Mossad to the participation and guidance of the Kurds by Israeli paratroop officers. This support stemmed, of course, from Israel's need for regional alliances that would extricate it from the isolation imposed on it by the Arab states in those years.

But a meaningful alliance is put to the test in trying times. A readiness to act, even at risk, on behalf of an ally is what bolsters the image of the staunch wall. In view of Israel's self-perception as a "villa in the jungle," an effective military system for the defense of its borders was built out of accumulated, longstanding experience. But now, in the face of a reemerging regional system, the need to establish Israel's security as an influential regional player requires a security discourse that considers new dimensions of logic.

Who now serves as the staunch wall?

After the tumultuous upheavals in Syria, in Iraq, Libya, Yemen, and the Sinai, we are witnessing a tectonic movement in the yet-unsettled and volatile regional system.

The intensity of the upheaval is no less significant than that of the region at the end of WWI, with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the division of the area into states according to the Sykes-Picot outline. This is the framework according to which one should interpret the significance of unfolding events. They include the

Egyptian-led reconciliation between the Palestinian Authority and Hamas; the Kurdish defeat in Kirkuk; the fighting in Khader village; and the resignation of Lebanese Prime Minister Hariri, led by Saudi Arabia. In all of these, the key regional question comes into relief: Where is the staunch wall in this evolving system? Regional alliances, open and covert, will form only around those who prove themselves steadfast in the new regional order. This issue has great import for Israel's future.

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