



Israel and the Emerging Trends in Syria

by Maj. Gen. (ret.) Gershon Hacohen

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The collapse of the Assad regime in Syria reveals the Middle East to be a dynamic ecosystem in which small changes can lead to big surprises. The IDF responded quickly to the collapse with three goals: strengthening defenses in the Golan Heights, destroying Syrian weapons, and projecting power in the regional space. The regional reality is shaped by historical memory and religious and national dreams, and does not operate according to a stable linear model. The countries in the region strive for active involvement beyond their borders, and Israel has no choice but to adopt a more flexible strategic approach of integration into the space rather than settling for internal convergence. The events in Syria proved once again that the “villa-in-the-jungle” approach, meaning isolation from the external environment, does not serve Israeli goals.

The collapse of the Assad regime in Syria shed new light on the broader trends of the Iron Swords War. Most Israelis still find it difficult to grasp that Yahya Sinwar expected that what happened to the Assad regime and its army, which faded away in about ten days, was going to happen to the State of Israel as a result of the October 7 strike. Israel still faces many difficult and unexpected challenges and its new reality is still rooted in unprecedented uncertainty, but there are distinct rays of hope on the horizon.

The unwillingness of Syrian soldiers to sacrifice their lives for the sake of the Assad family, which had become hostile and alienated from the majority of the Syrian people, was a significant factor in the rapid disintegration of the Syrian regime.

Israelis should internalize that this is what could have happened to us on the morning of October 7. Hamas's war planners had reasonable grounds to assume that the IDF, struck by a surprise blow in which all the other elements of the Iranian "ring of fire" axis in the foreign and domestic arenas would join, would lose its bearings to the point of collapse. The internal struggles that had intensified in Israeli society in the year preceding the war seemed to signal to Israel's enemies that their long-awaited hour had finally arrived.

Those enemies believed Israel to be unable to withstand the burden of a prolonged war and saw that vulnerability as a fatal weakness. They were thus astonished by the revelations of the power contained within both the IDF and Israeli society. At an Arab research institute, Egyptian and Syrian researchers wrote: "We need to reexamine the basic assumption that Israel cannot withstand a long-term war... Israel's steadfast stance over the past year is not what [its enemies] expected... They expected that Israel would not hold out, that pressures from home and abroad would overwhelm it".

Surprising outbreak in Syria

The main lesson of the surprise attack on the Syrian regime by the rebels in Syria begins with an overall view of the strategic logic that drives the Middle East region. The lesson that many in the West refuse to accept is that the region is a perpetually unstable ecosystem. An ecosystem is sensitive to any small change. An increase in cattle breeding, for example, directly affects the expansion of the ozone hole and the state of the climate on Earth.

The conceptual opposite of an ecosystem is a sophisticated railway system. In the railways, operational stability is planned and managed according to a linear engineering design. In an ecosystem, conversely, stability is the result of systemic equilibrium and is always both temporary and sensitive to changes.

The Middle East expresses the logic of an ecosystem, not a railway system. A change in the system of forces in one area of the region, such as a reduction of Hezbollah's power in Lebanon, creates a change in other areas within a dynamic that throws the entire system out of balance.

Western culture, which aspires to establish a reality of sustainable stability in the region, finds it difficult to accept that the Middle East – which contains clans, tribes, and radical terrorist organizations – is a system that operates according to the dynamics of an ecological system.

The achievements of the Israeli war against Hezbollah in Lebanon and against Hamas in the Gaza Strip created new conditions that marked an opportunity for the Sunni rebels in Syria. They took their chance and attacked the Assad army and the Iranian Shiite militias, toppling the Assad regime in less than two weeks.

The constant search by Middle East actors for new fighting opportunities lies in their fundamental perception of all situations of calm, even prolonged periods of apparent peace, as temporary. The parties view such phases not as peace but as truce periods during which they refrain from fighting. If regional circumstances change, everything is subject to reexamination. The Westerner, trying to bring his own outlook to Middle Eastern dynamics, clings to the belief that even if a truce starts out as temporary, the parties involved will lose their desire to return to the fighting once stability has been established. The Westerner simply does not understand, or chooses to ignore, that these are people of faith. One does not negotiate over one's religious dreams, and one does not forget them.

The Turks dream of returning to the expanses of the Ottoman Empire. Aleppo once played a central economic and symbolic role in connection with the cities of the Harran Valley in Turkey, including the city of Shelly-Orfa. After Napoleon's retreat from Egypt and the Land of Israel, Muhammad Ali, the ruler of Egypt, sought to extend his control from Israel to Aleppo. In the years 1839-1841, the Second Egyptian-Ottoman War took place in the region. With the help of a British expeditionary force, the Ottomans defeated the Egyptian army and pushed it from the Aleppo region to the outskirts of Sinai. Greater Syria, which extended to the Land of Israel, returned to Ottoman control. Turkey aspires to restore this regional order. From their perspective, the struggle began in Aleppo with the pursuit of Damascus, which contains important Sunni mosques.

There is much more involved here than a longing for the past. The past in this region drives religious and national struggles. I learned this during a visit to the Iranian pavilion at the Shanghai Expo. Opposite the visitors' entrance, a map of

the Persian Empire from the time of Darius was displayed across the entire wall. This was a kind of declaration that Iran aspires to return to that glorious past.

This kind of thinking is the driving force in the region – even for borders that have gained international validity, such as the Sykes-Picot borders. In the Middle East, nothing outweighs religious and national dreams. Those dreams never fade; they rather await the right opportunity.

For Americans who continue to seek a stable and sustainable regional order, it is worth suggesting that they treat the Middle East as if it were prone to hurricanes that erupt from the oceans and strike the region from a system of forces beyond human control.

This is not to say that no capabilities exist with which to restrain and delay conflicts in the regional chaos that characterizes the Middle East. But even arrangements that seem to promise a degree of stability and calm must be sensitive to the possibility of unexpected factors arising within the system.

Tactical note

The rebel offensive in Syria also teaches an important tactical lesson about the characteristics of the new war. As on October 7, we saw the outbreak of rapid battle movement involving civilian vehicles, including motorcycles, SUVs and vans, in mobile and agile groups.

No one who promises a demilitarized Palestinian state will be able to stop the Palestinians from purchasing motorcycles and SUVs. Israelis should give thought to the image of a raiding party on motorcycles and jeeps breaking into Israel by surprise from Tulkarem-Qalqilya to cut through the coastal strip. They must understand that the IDF, with all its strength, cannot guarantee overwhelming superiority in any possible context.

The IDF's operations in Syria

Even the best intelligence experts had difficulty predicting the tsunami of the rebel assault that so swiftly toppled the Syrian government and its army. There is a great lesson here in recognizing the limitations of human knowledge. We cannot pretend to know or be able to control events that occur suddenly and

unpredictably. Precisely for this reason, the speedy organization by the Israeli leadership and the IDF of a proper response to the Syrian rebel surprise deserves special appreciation.

The IDF's rapid operational response to developments in Syria was guided by three objectives:

- 1) **To strengthen the defense effort on the Golan Heights.** It is worth noting that preparations for strengthening and expanding Israel's defense systems in the Golan – through proactive operations east of the border fence – began in the Golan Division, with the support of the Northern Command, several months ago. These preparations enabled a rapid response to expand Israel's defensive hold on vital areas in the buffer zone defined in the 1974 Separation of Forces Agreement between Israel and Syria. The IDF also took control of the peaks of the Hermon Range in a location that allows for influence deep inside Syria and southern Lebanon.
- 2) **To destroy the numerous weapons left behind by the Syrian army in Syria.** In an unprecedented attack by the Israeli Air Force and Navy, weapons systems were destroyed that, had they remained operational, could have been used against the State of Israel. This effort was carried out with rapid momentum and precise management.
- 3) **To project power in the face of the chaos and make clear that the State of Israel has a security-strategic interest in the developing trends in Syria and will not be content to passively look on.** Prime Minister Netanyahu wisely emphasized that Israel will try not to interfere in the institutionalization of the new order being organized in Syria. However, Israel has an interest in influencing developments in southern Syria in the Yarmouk Basin, where, until recently, Shiite militias took part in efforts to smuggle weapons to the Palestinian Authority and towards the Kingdom of Jordan. Looking north from the Hermon area, Israel has a primary interest in preserving Hezbollah's isolation in Lebanon and preventing any possibility of reinforcements or new weapons arriving via Syria.

The first two objectives have been achieved in an astonishing manner. The third is complex and will require dynamic monitoring combined with an international effort emphasizing Israeli interests.

The situation in Syria continues to be unprecedented in its uncertainty.

Rabbi Jonathan Sachs referred in one of his articles to the book *Radical Uncertainty* by British economists John Kay and Mervin King. The book makes a distinction between risk and uncertainty. Risk can be calculated, but uncertainty cannot. Therefore, in situations of uncertainty, the authors recommend focusing on understanding the situation. This should be accomplished not by calculating probabilities but by observing what is actually happening on the ground with eyes that are open to new perspectives and new threats. This approach should apply to the current shake-up of the regional system.

The Turkish orientation towards the leadership of al-Julani, leader of the rebels, warrants great concern. President Erdoğan has never hid his ambition to renew the Ottoman Empire. The prospect of an occupation of Damascus by Sunni Muslim forces has an exciting power that could reunify radical Islamic forces to the point of reestablishing an al-Qaeda state in Syria. The third purpose of the IDF's operations in the region is to focus on these concerns.

Meanwhile, under Erdoğan's leadership, the Kurdish region east of the Euphrates River is under threat of a military attack meant to eliminate it. This will test the ability of the American administration to stand up for its Kurdish allies.

With the collapse of the state order built with the Sykes-Picot Agreements at the end of World War I, an opportunity has arisen to correct an injustice. US President Wilson then conditioned America's entry into the war on the dissolution of empires and the granting of self-determination to stateless nations. The international community's concern for the right to self-determination of minorities has focused over the past century mainly on the Palestinians – but some thirty million Kurds have been trapped for a century without any possibility of a state.

The United States, as a superpower, is facing an unprecedented challenge to its ability to influence emerging trends in the regional chaos that has arisen in Syria.

In all of Israel's past wars, including the War of Independence, the end of the war was determined by agreements with countries with a recognized identity that existed before the war and continued to exist after it. Now, for the first time, the State of Israel is facing an unknown reality. The horizon of emerging trends has

not yet been created, and Israel is entering a fateful and unprecedented testing period.

Israeli disillusionment in Syria

The collapse of the Assad regime and the trends emerging in Syria in recent weeks required the State of Israel to respond immediately, which entailed abandoning its longstanding security perception of the “villa in the jungle”. In addition to needing to defensively penetrate the expanses of the buffer zone between Israel and Syria, Israel had to assign a special strategic purpose to the effort to maintain Israeli control of the Syrian space in front of the border: to project Israeli military power onto the trends developing in Syria. This expressed the understanding that if Israel were to take a passive position of simple observation in defending the Golan Heights border line without daring to go beyond the “walls of the villa”, it would not have the appropriate levers to create a position of influence and bargaining to secure Israeli security interests in the emerging system in Syria and Lebanon. Miraculously, the developments in Syria forced Israeli security policy to shatter the barriers of the “villa” perception that had bound it.

A controversy from the beginning

From the beginning of the Zionist enterprise, the Jewish community both openly and covertly struggled with the tension between the two trends – convergence to the borders of the “villa” or integration into the Arab space. This tension was also expressed architecturally. While the settlements of the first aliyah were built along a main axis, such as Kfar Tavor and Yavne'al, in a way that allowed the movement of Arabs and Jews through the colony, the settlements built in the third aliyah and onwards were built off the main road in the form of a closed camp. As a result, with the confrontation of events (especially those of 1936-39, and the activity of Yitzhak Sadeh and Orde Wingate's field companies), a dispute arose over the question of exiting the fence into the space.

In her book *The Sword of the Dove*, Anita Shapira describes the way in which Wingate tried to lead his men into active defense activities outside the fence. Wingate's approach provoked resistance among the kibbutzim of the Jezreel Valley, stemming from this question: where is the line along which it is clear to everyone that they are defending their existence? Is it the fence line or is it beyond

it? This debate was not only conducted in the moral dimension. It began as an operational issue. Sadeh's and Wingate's concept of defense required engaging in friction in the space outside the fences of the settlements. This was the concept of the guards at the beginning of the formation of the Hebrew defense force. For them, free movement in the space outside the settlements was not only a necessity to fulfill the defense mission but an expression of their desire to integrate into the space in the cultural dimension as well.

Recognizing the need for active regional integration, the State of Israel, under Ben-Gurion's leadership, turned to proactive activity in areas outside the country's borders in its early years. While Israel was still under a regime of economic austerity, Israeli delegations operated in African countries in the fields of agriculture and security. In the 1960s, Israeli paratroopers assisted the Iraqi Kurds in fighting against the Iraqi army.

The essence of the perceptual gap

Between the approach that confines itself within the borders of the "villa" and the approach that requires active involvement in the space beyond the borders, there is a deep gap in the perception of reality. The aspiration for confinement is based on the assumption that a country's security situation can be stabilized by creating a status quo of borders, with each country limiting itself to activity within those borders. Switzerland, for example, succeeded in maintaining a status quo that is perceived as final and permanent within European historical circumstances.

The second approach does not hold with the assumption of the ability to preserve one's existence in a stable and final status quo. Human reality, certainly in terms of the system of ties between countries, is subject to change and unexpected upheaval. The strategic position of a country is examined in this approach not only by what it manages to stabilize within its sovereign territory, but also by the alliances it maintains with entities in the space and its ability to actively engage in spheres of influence that shape regional trends. This is how Turkey operates in Libya and the Horn of Africa and is the thinking behind its current moves to establish military bases in the heart of Syria. Egypt has recently been involved militarily in Somalia, and Qatar, through its financial capabilities, is operating both in the region and far across the ocean.

The Mossad and its agents have operated and continue to operate with distinction in both close and distant circles outside the State of Israel. However, an overt presence is also required. The trend of Israeli confinement within the borders of the “villa”, with its security and cultural implications, has been revealed as a failure. In this dimension as in others, the Israeli national security concept requires a fundamental update.

Maj. Gen. (res.) Gershon Hacoheh is a senior research fellow at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies. He served in the IDF for 42 years. He commanded troops in battles with Egypt and Syria. He was formerly a corps commander and commander of the IDF Military Colleges.