

RISK OF A NEW WAR IN THE GOLAN

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On Monday, November 12, an Israeli tank destroyed a Syrian mobile artillery unit in response to the fall of several mortar shells on the Golan Heights, less than 100 meters from a military post. The day before, the IDF had fired warning shots in the direction of Syria to halt attacks against its territory. On November 6, an Israeli vehicle was hit by a "stray bullet" from Syria. The military statement released following the clashes asserted that Israel "will not tolerate another shot against its territory" and that the IDF will "respond firmly against any attack from Syria". The text states that the incident "is part of the internal conflict in Syria", without indicating whether the target destroyed on Monday belonged to the rebellion or forces loyal to Bachar el-Assad. There has been no Syrian reaction yet to confirm the nature or the allegiance of the target.

According to journalists on the ground, firing into Israel began after bombing by loyalist forces against rebel positions in the villages of Bariqa and Beer Ajam. These villages are located in the buffer zone that has been under UN control since the signing of the truce called the "disengagement agreement" in 1974, and Israel has filed a complaint with the UN forces.

On Monday, Israeli Prime Minister Benyamin Netanyahu reiterated that he would order any response deemed appropriate to any violation of Israeli territory. The Defence Minister and former Prime Minister Ehud Barack, for his part said that the IDF had been instructed to prevent the Syrian conflict spilling over into Israel by any means. Informal diplomatic advisor to the Prime Minister, Dore Gold, president of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs (JCPA), finally described the Israeli response as "measured", adding that neither Syria nor Israel had an interest in military escalation.

Strategic importance of the Golan Heights

Before considering the security consequences of recent events, it is necessary to recall briefly the physical realities of Golan and the strategic implications of its control by Israel since the Six-Day War in 1967. The Golan Heights form the southern foothills of the Anti-Lebanon Mountains. It extends over an area of 1800 km² and has an upward slope of 700 meters along an axis from the south-west/north-east over Jordan to Mount Hermon (Djabl a-Sheikh). The geographical layout overlooking the

Jordan Valley and the Sea of Galilee has made Golan a major strategic location, as well from a military point of view as it has access to water resources.

However, no significant incidents have occurred in the region since the Arab-Israeli war of 1973 and the passage of the territory under Israeli civil administration in 1981, a de-facto annexation that was not recognized by Syria. Even at the height of tensions during the Lebanese civil war or the war against Hezbollah in the summer of 2006, the border remained calm. From 1992 to 2008, Israel has repeatedly expressed its willingness to negotiate a retrocession that would guarantee both its security and water supply. These efforts, supported by the mediation of Turkey, have failed due to blockages on both sides. Yet they testify to the Israeli will that will ensure the stability of its border with Syria in the long term.

In an extremely tight regional context, especially because of the presence of the pro-Iranian Hezbollah in the north, a peace agreement would have served Israeli interests, even at the price of renouncing a valuable military asset. Similarly, the Israeli authorities have shown great reluctance to condemn abuses by Bachar el-Assad's troops at the start of the uprising in the spring of 2011. This "wait and see position" also rises from a requirement of stability. Israel would prefer to deal with a known opponent rather than an Islamist power or unknown rebel militias.

New step in the strategy of the worst of Bachar el-Assad

Instead, Damascus has attempted to implicate Israel in the conflict since the outbreak of the first uprising in Deraa in March 2011. Aware that he was fighting for its survival in a hostile geopolitical environment, Bachar el-Assad is trying to use the Palestinian cause to restore its image among Arabs disgusted by the extent of the repression. In June 2011, the regime allowed thousands of Palestinian demonstrators to assemble in the demilitarized zone of Golan to celebrate the day of the "Naksa", which commemorates the exodus of Palestinian refugees after 1967". This resulted in the death of several protesters who tried to cross the cease-fire line despite Israeli warning shots. This regionalization strategy of the crisis has failed so far, while Syria has continued its inexorable drift towards civil war.

It is difficult to say whether the Syrian government has deliberately allowed the firing of these last days, or whether field commanders wanted to show they were not ready to give up any free zone to the rebels. It should be noted however that Damascus uses a similar strategy of tension along the border with Turkey. This week, Syrian gunfire was reported in the Turkish province of Sanliurfa, causing damage and the evacuation of civilians. Recall that five civilians were killed in the shelling of the border village of Açakale on October 3. In retaliation, Turkish artillery shelled several military positions on the other side of the border. Turkey also continues to host tens of thousands of refugees who are crammed into makeshift camps to escape the bombing of the increasingly deadly troops of Bachar el-Assad.

Real risk of escalation

As the ESISC previously mentioned, the risk of an overflow of the Syrian crisis to its neighbours, first Lebanon and Turkey, is real. Today, the exchanges of fire on the Golan Heights are raising the spectrum of a military confrontation not seen since 1973. In addition to the increasingly tense situation every day in Gaza, and threats of

Turkish military intervention in Syria, such a conflict could engulf the entire Middle East. On Sunday November 11, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon expressed his deep concern at the risk of escalation and urged the two countries to exercise "restraint" and to respect the line of cease-fire.

In the coming days, the nature of the Israeli response to the new fire in Golan could have a decisive impact on the course of events in Syria, where none of the actors involved seem capable to prevail in spite of the peremptory declarations of Bachar el-Assad and the gathering of the opposition under the umbrella of Qatar.

With a crucial election approaching in Israel on January 22, 2013, the government of Benjamin Netanyahu will certainly endeavour to send a strong message to Damascus, as well as to his potential successors of the new "Coalition of the Syrian opposition". It is doubtful, however, that Israel will be dragged into an escalation of a beleaguered regime at the risk of sacrificing long-term security of its borders directly. Uncertainties surrounding the evolution of the Iranian nuclear issue, in fact, require the Jewish state to mobilize all its resources in the event of military action against Iran.

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