

As Washington mulls bombing campaign

Syria fighting spills into Golan Heights

Patrick Martin
29 August 2014

A rebel force linked to Al Qaeda has taken control of a Syrian border post adjacent to the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, and at least one Israeli soldier was wounded during fighting between the rebel group, the al-Nusra Front, and troops loyal to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

United Nations officials said 43 UN peacekeeping troops have been detained by the al-Nusra Front and another 81 were trapped by the fighting. The soldiers are part of the 1,200-strong United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) which monitors compliance by the Syrian and Israeli armies of the ceasefire in effect on the Golan Heights since the 1973 war.

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon issued a statement confirming that the UNDOF soldiers were detained or isolated early Thursday in Syrian territory during a “period of increased fighting between armed elements and the Syrian Arab Armed Forces.”

Fighters from Al-Nusra and several other Syrian rebel groups took control of the UN-monitored Quneitra crossing point from Syria to the Golan Heights during clashes Wednesday, which were followed by Syrian government airstrikes at several targets, including the border crossing itself and the nearby village of Jaba.

Heavy fighting continued in the area on Thursday, with one press report of the killing of a commander of the Syrian Revolutionaries Front, a US-backed group that is the first to have received US-supplied TOW anti-tank missiles. It was not clear whether he was killed by Syrian government troops or rival “rebels,” either al-Nusra or the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which has recently gone on the offensive in southern Syria.

Israeli Officials said that one Israeli soldier and one civilian were wounded Wednesday by “errant fire”

from the conflict across the border. Following the policy pursued by the Netanyahu government since the civil war erupted in Syria, Israeli forces responded with an artillery barrage against the Syrian government forces rather than the rebels. Israeli officials said there would be no further military action from their side.

The clashes on the edge of the Golan Heights only underscore the potential for the Syrian conflict to touch off wider military action in the region, particularly with the US government openly discussing direct attacks on ISIS forces in eastern Syria, as an extension of the renewed US intervention in northern Iraq.

At a White House press conference Thursday afternoon, President Barack Obama downplayed press reports of imminent US airstrikes in Syria, saying that the National Security Council would be discussing action against ISIS later that evening, but was still awaiting presentation of military options by the Pentagon. “We don’t have a strategy yet,” he said.

Obama was responding to a barrage of press reports over the past several days, most of them citing comments by Secretary of State John Kerry, Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel, and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin Dempsey, all suggesting that it was impossible to defeat ISIS through military operations in Iraq alone, without crossing the border into Syria.

ISIS rules over a connected territory extending from central and eastern Syria into western and northern Iraq, inhabited by some eight million people – making its domain larger and more populous than several Arab states, including Lebanon, Jordan, or any of the small Persian Gulf sheikdoms.

The group controls Raqqa and Deir Ezzor provinces in Syria, and most of Anbar and much of Nineveh, Salahuddin and Diyala provinces in Iraq. ISIS overran

the last Syrian government position in Deir Ezzor province earlier this week, Taqba airbase, after a bloody battle in which hundreds of ISIS fighters and government soldiers were killed. Afterwards, ISIS slaughtered 150 prisoners, posting a grisly video of the massacre.

Press speculation over the imminence of US military action intensified after the Pentagon began surveillance flights over Syria to collect information on ISIS targets. The US flights, believed to be a combination of U-2 high-altitude spy planes and low-flying drones, were reported by ground observers inside Syria.

On Tuesday, Defense Secretary Hagel announced that seven countries, all NATO members, were joining the US in sending weapons and other equipment to Kurdish peshmerga troops fighting ISIS in northern Iraq. These included Albania, Britain, Canada, Croatia, Denmark, France and Italy.

The *New York Times* reported Thursday that no final decision on airstrikes inside Syria was expected until after Obama's visit to Europe next week, when he will attend a NATO summit in Cardiff, Wales on September 4-5.



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