

# Israel carries out airstrikes against ISIS ally in Syria

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On Sunday, Israel Defence Forces (IDF) dropped 10 1-ton bombs on a compound belonging to a Syrian Islamist group, the Khalid ibn al-Walid Army, previously known as the Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade. The bombing took place in Syria's Quneitra Governorate in the southwest of the country, adjacent to its border with Israel.

The IDF said the group was linked to Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and that the purpose of the airstrikes was to “prevent the return of terrorists to a facility that constitutes a fundamental threat to the region.”

For more than three years, various local Islamist groups in ever shifting alliances have fought for control over the area. One of these is the Khalid ibn al-Walid Army/Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade, once affiliated to Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which is supposedly the main target of Washington's ongoing military intervention in Iraq and Syria.

The Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade's allies, Jaysh al-Islam (Army of Islam) and the Islamic Muthanna Movement, with whom it has merged to form the Khalid ibn al-Walid Army, are bitter opponents of the Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, formerly the Al Nusra Front, which is linked to Al Qaeda.

Syrian regime forces control only three areas near the border: the city of Quneitra, almost totally destroyed in the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, the Druze village of Khader, and the eastern slopes of Mount Hermon.

According to a report earlier this year in *Ha'aretz*, the main concern from an Israeli perspective is the Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade, which was responsible for seizing 21 Filipino soldiers serving with the United Nations peacekeeping force on the Syria/Israel border in 2013. In June, the US State Department designated the Brigade, which is composed of local clans in

southern Syria with few outsiders or foreign fighters in its ranks, as a “global terrorist entity.”

These warring Islamist groups have largely operated unhindered by Israel, and at least some of them—supposedly the more “moderate”—are widely believed to operate under cover from the IDF, which has provided them with food, medical aid and other assistance. Syrian pro-regime media frequently speak of an alliance between Israel and the Al Nusra Front. Tel Aviv has vehemently denied this even though in July 2015, the then Defence Minister Moshe Ya'alon admitted that Israel had been aiding Islamist groups, including Al Nusra.

Israel for its part views the fighting between different Islamist groups and the breakup of Syria as preferable to control by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's forces and his allies, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and the Lebanese militant group, Hezbollah.

According to the Israeli army, the militants were training at the site that served as the operational base for an attack earlier on Sunday by the Islamists on an IDF reconnaissance force operating along the Syrian border. The issue is whether the brigade spotted an opportunity, or deliberately planned the attack as a means of getting Israel directly involved in the war. Either way, it would serve to boost their credentials against their rivals to be seen as fighting the Palestinians' hated occupier.

Irrespective of the motivation, the incident led to an exchange of fire and an Israeli drone attack on the militants' vehicle that is believed to have killed four people.

The Israeli army has sought to present this as a response to an attack on its forces. However, its own words belie this and indicate that the IDF was preparing an operation on behalf of “its” rebels—Al Nusra/Al

Qaeda forces—against the Brigade. *Ha'aretz* cited a senior officer as saying, “The terrorists are from Shuhada [Martyrs] al-Yarmouk, with all the significance that organization’s name carries. The Israeli forces didn’t lie in ambush by chance.”

Nitzan Nuriel, former director of the counterterrorism bureau at the prime minister’s office, rejected the notion that this was an ISIS-directed offensive against Israel. He believed it to be a local decision, adding that Israel’s response was appropriate and reinforced the message, “Don’t mess with us.”

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu praised the IDF and promised that Israel “won’t allow Islamic State figures or other enemy actors, under the cover of the war in Syria, to set up next to our borders.”

All the regional powers have intervened in the more than five-year-long war in Syria overtly, or through proxies or covert action, in pursuit of their own often conflicting agendas. Israel has launched around 100 airstrikes against Syrian army artillery positions in response to largely errant shells or rockets launched by either Syrian regime forces or the insurgents that have fallen on its side of the Golan Heights. The Syrian regime has responded only twice, as far as is publicly known.

Israel has also launched dozens of airstrikes against Syrian government positions and Hezbollah since 2013, supposedly targeting arms shipments to Hezbollah, as well as targeted assassinations of senior Hezbollah figures. Hezbollah has played a key role in fighting the ever-shifting alliance of Islamist groups that includes Islamic State, Al Nusra, Jeish al-Fatah and Ahrar al-Sham.

At the same time, Israel has, according to a UN Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) report last year, been in regular contact with the Islamist proxy forces sponsored by Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey and the CIA since May 2013. UNDOF itself has come under repeated and lethal attacks from Al Nusra and other groups.

Last year, several Israeli officials acknowledged that Russia and Israel were coordinating their aircraft over Syria, an admission of what has long been suspected: that Israel has been intervening covertly in the Syrian conflict.

A few months ago, Netanyahu acknowledged that Israel’s air force had operated undisturbed in Syrian air

space in violation of Syria’s sovereignty and its 1974 agreement with Syria following the October 1973 war. Foreign media have frequently reported that the IDF have used both fighter jets and drones for reconnaissance missions.

The increasingly close relations between Israel and the Islamist forces coincided with the start of oil exploration by a US-Israeli corporation in Syria’s Golan Heights, seized by Israel in the June 1967 war and later illegally annexed to Israel.

In April this year, Israel held an unprecedented cabinet meeting in the Golan Heights. Netanyahu declared, “The Golan Heights will remain in the hands of Israel forever,” and “Israel will never withdraw from the Golan Heights.” He apparently planned the meeting to pre-empt any possibility of Israel returning the Golan as part of a future peace deal for Syria.

Sunday’s airstrikes were the first time that Israel has intervened in an open clash with forces linked to ISIS. It highlights the increasing danger of the regional powers, including a nuclear-armed Israel, intervening directly in the war. It comes in the wake of two other developments.

First, Israel is to take delivery next month of its first Lockheed Martin F-35s that can evade enemy radar while flying at supersonic speeds and can successfully target Iranian facilities. Second, a US-backed extremist militia, previously designated as a terrorist organisation, in southern Syria, in Quneitra province, is to be armed with portable surface-to-air missiles capable of shooting down Syrian aircraft as well as Russian warplanes that have played a key role in providing air cover for the Syrian army against the Al Qaeda-linked “rebels.”

These developments are part of a broader push by the US and Israel to create “facts on the ground,” under conditions where the Assad regime—with Russia and Iran’s backing—has been gaining the upper hand, before Donald Trump, who has indicated that he would seek to improve ties with Russia and reduce US involvement in the Middle East, assumes power in January.



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