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The New 'Tri-Border' Region: Emerging Threats Along the Israel-Lebanon-Syria Frontier

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A detailed discussion of the various factors fueling or constraining chaos on Syria's borders, including Arab tribal politics, Israeli security calculations, Iranian-Hezbollah military strategy, and a seemingly hesitant U.S.-led air campaign.

On November 6, 2014, Boaz Ganor and Hussain Abdul-Hussain addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Ganor is the associate dean of the Lauder School of Government and executive director of the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism at the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya. Abdul-Hussain is the Washington correspondent for the Kuwaiti daily al-Rai *and a former editor at the Beirut* Daily Star*. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.*

BOAZ GANOR

Beginning in the early 1980s, the concept of exporting Ayatollah Khomeini's Shiite revolution became one of the main factors shaping Iran's foreign policy. The idea was to establish a Shiite crescent spanning Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. Tehran thus created Hezbollah, the state's long arm, supporting the group's military capabilities and making it one of the strongest nonstate actors in the region.

Today, Hezbollah holds approximately 100,000 rockets and missiles. From an Israeli perspective, this is an unprecedented challenge. Hezbollah's strategy for the next round of confrontation with Israel includes surprise attacks in which it would launch hundreds or thousands of missiles per day across the border. It believes this approach would neutralize Israeli technological and defensive capabilities. Yet this round might not take place anytime soon -- Iran sees Hezbollah as a strategic deterrent against Israeli military strikes on its nuclear facilities, so unleashing the group's capabilities now would be counterproductive.

Hezbollah has also been trying to take over Syrian cities and villages near the Lebanon border. Without the group's presence in Syria, Bashar al-Assad arguably would have lost the war by now, and the current situation could have been much different. When Hezbollah's intervention began, many Lebanese -- including Shiites -- criticized the group for putting Iran's interests first. But that has changed with the perception that jihadist groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) are threatening Lebanon. Hezbollah is now regaining political strength among its core constituency, many of whom believe the group is protecting them from Syrian spillover.

If Assad wins the war, his alliance with Iran and Hezbollah would be strengthened, posing a much bigger challenge to Israel. Hezbollah is also gaining military experience that will likely make the next ground fight with Israel much more difficult than past clashes.

If the rebels win the war, Syria would probably be divided, raising the potential threat of attacks on Israel's border. An ISIS victory would pose a growing threat as well. Tensions between al-Qaeda and ISIS led the two groups to split after the latter's leader, Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi, referred to himself as a higher religious authority. ISIS is now a stabilized, determined organization that has created civilian and military facilities and is attempting to gain more control in Syria and Iraq. Other al-Qaeda splinter groups are now joining it and accepting al-Baghdadi's authority. ISIS has also been effective at recruiting foreign fighters individually, attracting a large portion of the 10,000-15,000 jihadists currently in Syria.

On August 8, President Obama announced airstrikes against ISIS in Iraq, while Joint Chiefs Chairman Martin Dempsey and Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel said that the United States is at war with the group. If this is indeed a war, a certain level of activity and efficiency is expected. On average, however, only about five American-led airstrikes occur per day in Iraq. In comparison, the last round of clashes between Israel and Hamas in Gaza produced about 160 airstrikes per day. Obama also announced a systematic open-ended bombing campaign against ISIS militants in Syria on September 10, yet only thirty-three airstrikes had been conducted there two weeks after the announcement. This does not look like a war.

HUSSAIN ABDUL-HUSSAIN

In late August, a group of rebels, mainly Jabhat al-Nusra members, took over Syria's Quneitra border crossing. Since then, rebels have established control over some 80 percent of the region bordering the demilitarized zone guarded by UN observer forces, leaving Jabhat al-Nusra face-to-face with Israel. Despite this proximity, however, the group has largely refrained from attacking Israel. To understand the reasons behind that, one must understand the tribal nature of the Syrian war.

The revolution was started by intellectuals, NGOs, and civil society members aiming for democracy. As central government authority broke down -- not only in Syria, but also in Iraq -- many people fell back on the basic social element that could provide safety, namely, the tribes. Much of what has happened since has been based on tribal politics, not grand ideologies.

Tribal politics in this region are particularly complicated. Some tribes live on both sides of the Syria-Lebanon border, such as the Wadi Khaled, who trace their genealogy back to Khaled ibn al-Walid in the Syrian city of Homs. When the revolution began in 2011, they smuggled funds and arms to their fellow tribesmen on each side of the border. The Arsal clans straddle the Syria-Lebanon border as well, many residing in a Lebanese Sunni town that is surrounded by Shiite villages. They helped the rebels who fought Assad and Hezbollah in the battles for al-Qusayr in 2012-2013. Most of the Arsal hail from the Anaza tribal confederation and are similar to both the Wadi Khaled and the Saudi royal family's al-Saud tribe. Further south are Arab clans such as the Hrak and Faour.

For the most part, the northern Anaza tribal forces, the Hrak, and the Faour are sponsored by two prominent Syrian parliamentarians: Nouri al-Shaalan and Abdul Ilah Thamer al-Melhem, both Saudi nationals. Since the revolution began, these two sheikhs have been funding Free Syrian Army battalions in the area who use the money to procure black market arms.

Tribes in the southern part of the Syria-Lebanon frontier are different in genealogy. In the Deraa area of southwestern Syria are seven largely sedentary tribes that have resided there for over five centuries, including the Hariri, Rifai, and Miqdad. Separate Arab clans, Druze communities, and Bedouin clans (e.g., al-Fadl and al-Noeim) also live in the area.

Bashar al-Assad's father, Hafiz, was savvy in dealing with tribes, often giving government jobs to members of sedentary groups. When Bashar took over, his primary goal was to liberalize the economy. To do so, he cut the bureaucracy, which raised unemployment among these tribes. That is an important part of their discontent with his government.

Breakdowns in central authority have also spurred tribes to look for stable partners. This was the dynamic in Iraq a decade ago and in Syria more recently. In the past, tribes across the region saw the United States as a reliable partner because of its strong intervention in Iraq in 2006-2007, when American troops cleared towns and handed them over to U.S.-trained tribesmen. But after 2009, when the U.S. government initiated its policy of disengagement from Iraq, Sunni tribal forces were put under their Shiite rival Nouri al-Maliki, who cut their salaries and dissolved their leadership. These tribes began looking for other sponsors. Similarly, tribes in Syria looked for new sponsors when the revolution broke out.

This is the environment in which Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS thrive. The tribes that pledge allegiance to either of these groups raise their flags and implement sharia law not because of ideology, but in

return for arms and money. Apart from Jabhat al-Nusra's core members, much of its constituency is guided by local tribal politics.

This summary was prepared by Marina Shalabi.