

Israel sees itself as regional superpower, but entering Syrian strife may be a step too far

● Intervention to protect Druze minority is a risky escalation for Netanyahu



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Israel's bombing of Damascus this week was highly unusual. In the past, its military action has come in response to direct attacks or threats to its existence.

This time the intervention was ostensibly on behalf of an ethnic group who are not Israeli citizens: the Syrian Druze.

An interesting part of the ethnic and religious mosaic that is the Middle East, the Druze live mainly in Syria (700,000), Lebanon (250,000) and Israel (150,000).

Israel gained a greater share of the minority during the 1967 Six-Day War when it entered Syria and captured the Golan Heights, a strategically important area that also neighbours Jordan and Lebanon.

Although normally a group that stays under the radar, in the past week the Druze have been central to events like seldom before.

The Druze have an Arab ethnicity and, although their religion was founded in 11th-century Egypt as a branch of Ismaili Islam, they are not considered Muslim. They are a tight-knit closed community who keep their religious texts secret and believe in reincarnation. Their faith does not allow converts.

Their Israeli contingent live principally in two areas of the north: Galilee and the Golan Heights. Un-

like Palestinian Israeli citizens, Druze Arabs are active volunteers in the Israeli army.

Like most other Middle Eastern countries, Syria is a complicated patchwork of ethnic, religious, and tribal groups with a long history of internecine violence. The brutal decade-long civil war was its most savage expression.

From their Suwayda province bastion in southern Syria, in recent months the Druze have looked on with growing apprehension as sectarian violence flared between Alawite supporters of the Assad government and extremist elements in the Syrian regime that replaced it.

Having also supported the now exiled Bashar al-Assad, the Druze knew it could be their turn next.

The dictator fell last December after Ahmed al-Sharaa, the former leader of the Syrian branch of al-Qaeda, set out from his stronghold in north-west Syria with a rag-tag of Islamist militias to consolidate his hold over more territory, principally around Idlib province.

Damascus was never the objective. Because of the brittleness and fundamental fragility of the murderous Assad regime, however, the rebels found themselves hurtling towards the Syrian capital, meeting little effective resistance.

There was widespread surprise in the West at the speed with which the 50-year-old Assad regime collapsed.

However, this was nothing in comparison with the disbelief that greeted al-Sharaa's emergence from the Syrian presidential palace a few weeks later, having undergone a radical wardrobe change.

Gone were the turban, the robes and military fatigues, replaced by a three-piece suit, shirt and tie, all topped off

with a neatly trimmed beard.

Not since St Paul 2,000 years ago had the road to Damascus witnessed a more spectacular transformation: from Islamist terrorist to head of state in just seven weeks.

Israel took no chances. In the immediate confusion following the rebel takeover, as Syrian soldiers deserted their positions in the Golan Heights, Israel seized the buffer zone to prevent Islamist gunmen from taking it.

The buffer zone was created after the Yom Kippur war in 1973 as a demilitarised zone to keep the sides apart after Syria had failed to take back the Golan Heights.

Previously, Israel had warned the al-Sharaa government not to interfere with the Druze minority.

After groups of Druze and Sunni Bedouins clashed violently over the previous days, on Tuesday Syrian government forces intervened.

The situation escalated rapidly as government forces joined the Bedouin in attacking the Druze. Then, up to a thousand Israeli Druze smashed through the Syrian border to go to the defence of their co-religionists.

With over 300 dead, Israel decided to act. On Wednesday morning, Israeli defence minister Israel Katz warned: "The signals to Damascus are over — now come the painful blows."

He added that Israel would "operate forcefully" in Syria "to eliminate the forces that attacked the Druze until their full withdrawal".

Later that day, the Israeli air force bombed the centre of Damascus, hitting the army headquarters near the presidential palace. Within hours, Syrian forces had withdrawn from Suwayda.

In another twist on Friday, however, as more violence erupted because of the security vacuum, Israel relented

and agreed to Syrian forces re-entering Suwayda temporarily. In effect, Israel's response had been a flexing of its military muscle as a way of advertising its newly-acquired status as a regional superpower.

In the wake of its comprehensive victory over Iran in the 12-Day War, Israel now likes to believe that this is the new normal.

In this regard, it is noteworthy that this is the fifth capital city in the region Israel has bombed since the Hamas invasion of October 7: Gaza City, Beirut, Tehran, Sanna in Yemen and now Damascus.

It is Damascus, however, that signals Israel's new demarche.

The bombing of the capital city of a country that had not attacked it or posed no immediate threat of doing so is a breach of international law.

Of greater geopolitical significance, however, is that Benjamin Netanyahu's actions in Syria may well be a type of strategic overreach that might cause it difficulties in the future.

In the short run, Donald Trump, Netanyahu's new best friend, has made it clear he wants the conflict in the region to end — sooner rather than later. And the last person the Israeli prime minister wants to antagonise is the US president.

In the medium term, Israel risks getting bogged down in a Syrian sectarian quagmire in which none of its strategic interests are threatened.

To put it more simply, Israel has no dog in this fight, so why get overly involved? Even if Damascus were to start helping its enemies, Israel can always, as it likes to say, "mow the grass" from the air any time it chooses.

The ancient Greeks were very familiar with the concept of hegemonic overreach that involved hubris, and believed it led inevitably to nemesis.