

## Syria: Signaling Israel with Troop Movements

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By Stratfor. This Report Expresses the views of Stratfor

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Summary Unusual Syrian troop movements have been reported along the Syrian-Lebanese border, according to sources. The movements probably are part of a Syrian bid to dissuade the Israelis from moving into Lebanon by heightening Israeli concerns over the Syrian government's survival.

Analysis Sources have reported unusual troop movements along the Syrian-Lebanese border. The source specified that the three divisions sent to the Lebanese border near the western Bekaa Valley include two armored divisions and one mechanized division. Damascus previously denied an Al-Quds Al-Arabi report that multiple Syrian divisions have been deployed to the Lebanese border.

The troop movements also follow reports from sources that Syrian authorities have told a large number of Syrian laborers in Lebanon to join their army reserve units in Syria. Some Syrian laborers allegedly have told several Lebanese factory and farm owners for whom they work in the Bekaa Valley that they must report to their military units by the beginning of April.

Based on various estimates of Syrian divisional strength, one mechanized and two armored divisions amount to more than 25,000 Syrian troops, more than 500 main battle tanks and even more armored infantry fighting vehicles. Though the divisions' actual size, composition and distance from base have not been confirmed, sustaining them at a great distance would pose a logistical burden for which the Syrian military is unprepared. But while units of three divisions may indeed have deployed, it is highly unlikely the divisions were at full strength and readiness, suggesting that significantly fewer troops — and fewer tanks and armored vehicles — are on the border than tables of organization would suggest. That said, a notable shift in Syrian troop movements might be taking place and must be understood in the following context.

The Arab League summit hosted by Damascus in late March exposed Syria's regional isolation. Syria has been hitting walls left and right in its attempt to restore its sole powerbroker status in neighboring Lebanon. Left with few better options, Stratfor anticipates that Syria will revert to a more aggressive stance.

Syrian military posturing fits into this strategy, particularly at a time when the Israelis are building the case for a military confrontation with Hezbollah in Lebanon. Syria, as well as its allies in Iran, have no desire to see their militant proxy in Lebanon get trampled by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) in the Bekaa Valley, where Hezbollah, Syria and Iran have concentrated the bulk of Hezbollah's military armaments and derive a large chunk of their income from the rows of cannabis plants that grow in the valley.

Syria has no delusions about Israel's ability to overwhelm it militarily, and so traditionally has played it safe whenever war has broken out in the region. While the thought of IDF forces rolling into the West Bekaa greatly concerns Damascus, the Syrian government simply cannot afford to jump into a war and risk suffering a major defeat that could seriously threaten the stability of Syrian President Bashar al Assad's regime.

There are several further caveats to be made about Damascus's military power. Syria has continued to push for a conventional land army significantly larger than it has the resources for. Quantity reportedly has been emphasized over proper maintenance and training. Though a few select units are proficient (especially among special operations forces regiments and along the Golan Heights), the vast majority of Syrian divisions are sedentary and ill-suited to sustain operations away from supply depots, and are unschooled in expeditionary logistics and field maintenance. Recently, acquiring ballistic missiles, artillery rockets and man-portable anti-tank guided missiles — which can pose an asymmetric threat to Israel directly or be passed to Hezbollah and pose an indirect threat to Israel — appears to be Damascus's supply priority.

For these reasons, Israel is fairly confident the Syrians will stay out of the fray in the next Israeli confrontation with Hezbollah. Syria has seen two major Israeli operations on Syrian soil over the past year. In September 2007, the Israelis carried out an airstrike in Syria, while Israel is suspected of assassinating top Hezbollah commander Imad Mughniyahon Feb. 12. This has left Syrian confidence shot even as the impetus is on Damascus to inject some uncertainty into Israel's military calculus to stave off an Israeli struggle with Hezbollah.

Through these troop movements, Syria can signal to Israel that Damascus is indeed irrational enough to jump into an Israeli war against Hezbollah in Lebanon. The intent would not be to intimidate the Israelis with Syria's rather

weak military. Instead, the goal would be to demonstrate to Israel that the Syrian regime is much more vulnerable than Israel originally thought. This is because Israel is just as concerned about the stability of the al Assad government as the al Assads are.

Israel and Syria might not have a healthy relationship, but the Israelis see a strategic need in keeping the al Assads in power. The Syrian government is more or less predictable, pragmatic and stable in Israel's eyes. In short, Israel finds dealing with known evil preferable. A highly probable Israeli defeat of Syria in Lebanon would pose a serious threat to the al Assad government.

If the Israelis no longer can be confident that Syria would not make a suicidal move in Lebanon when Israeli forces move in against Hezbollah, the Israelis would have to think twice before making any big moves into Lebanon. How far the Syrians are willing to go with such a strategy will become clear as the extent of the reported troop movements becomes known, along with any other serious military preparations the government undertakes in the coming weeks.

[http://www.stratfor.com/analysis/syria\\_signaling\\_israel\\_troop\\_movements](http://www.stratfor.com/analysis/syria_signaling_israel_troop_movements)

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