How Israel Manipulates US Policy in the Middle East

On April 23, a senior Israeli officer, Brig Gen Utai Brun, head of research at army intelligence, made a serious accusation against Syria. In a lecture at Israel’s Institute for National Security Studies, he declared: ‘To the best of our professional understanding, the Syrian regime has used lethal chemical weapons against gunmen in a series of incidents in recent months...’ General Brun gave no evidence for his accusation and produced no physical proof, but he added that the Israel Defence Forces believed Syria had used the nerve agent Sarin on several occasions, including a specific attack on March 19.

As it happened, General Brun made his accusation against Syria during a three day visit to Israel by America’s new Defence Secretary, Chuck Hagel – a man whose appointment Israel’s supporters in the U.S. had sought to prevent. Some Jewish organisations had come close to calling him anti-Semitic. Only by eating humble pie did Hagel manage to have his appointment confirmed. He now clearly hopes to put an end to his quarrel with America’s pro-Israeli lobby.

On this his first visit to Israel as Defence Secretary, he announced that Israel was to receive a rich haul of advanced U.S. weapons -- air refuelling tankers, cutting-edge radar and the V-22 Osprey ‘tiltrotor’ aircraft, an advanced plane so far denied to all other US allies. But Hagel’s generous gesture was to no avail. Although Israel was evidently delighted with the weapons, this did not inhibit it from accusing Syria of using chemical weapons – clearly in the hope of provoking a U.S. attack on that country.

Unpleasantly surprised by General Brun’s claim that Syria had used chemical weapons, Hagel declared the very next day -- on April 23 -- that he had discussed Syria’s chemical weapons with Prime Minister Benyamin Netanyahu and Defence Minister Moshe Yaalon, but that neither of them had said that Syria had actually used such weapons. ‘They did not give me that assessment,’ he said. Clearly, Hagel was angry that Israel was putting pressure on the U.S. to intervene in Syria. The Israeli authorities may well have thought that Hagel, still recovering from the beating pro-Israelis had given him in Washington, would not dare dispute Israel’s assessment.

What was Israel trying to achieve by inciting the U.S. to attack Syria? It would undoubtedly like President Bashar al-Assad to be replaced by a more pliant figure. But Israel is also worried that Jabhat al-Nusra, a violent branch of Al-Qaeda, might come to power if Bashar were to fall. By accusing Syria of using chemical weapons, Israel’s goal seems to have been to trigger an early American armed intervention with the double objective of ousting Bashar from office, while preventing his replacement by the redoubtable Jabhat al-Nusra.

Israel is well aware that Obama -- having pulled American forces out of Iraq and planning to do much the same in Afghanistan by 2014 -- is most reluctant to commit US troops to yet another war. Nevertheless, by accusing Assad of using chemical weapons, Israel was clearly hoping to lure Obama into a Syrian campaign. Obama had, in fact, laid himself open to just such pressure by saying that any Syrian use of chemical weapons would cross a ‘red line.’

Moscow was quick to leap to Syria’s defence. On April 28, Fyodor Lukyanov, editor of the Russian journal Global Affairs, wrote: ‘Moscow does not believe that Assad may use chemical weapons: he is not a madman to ask for such trouble.’

In fact, Israel’s objectives may have been even wider than triggering an American attack on Syria. For the moment, it is greatly satisfied that most of its Arab neighbours are in deep trouble.

Syria is in the grip of a civil war, which has already claimed more than 70,000 lives.
Iraq seems to be on the verge of major Sunni-Shi’a clashes, while still struggling to recover from America’s long occupation.

Iran is under painful sanctions because the US suspects it – on little evidence -- of developing nuclear weapons.

Egypt is on its knees, wholly preoccupied with its own economic problems, and in no mood to endanger its peace treaty with Israel.

Saudi Arabia, Qatar and other Gulf States seem more worried by Iran than by Israel.

Israelis are also delighted that, thanks to President Obama’s mediation, the U.S.-Israel-Turkey coalition has been restored, and is set to be a powerful force in Middle East affairs.

All this is very good news for Israel. Nevertheless, its dominance is not total.

It still faces something of a challenge from the Iran-Syria-Hizballah axis. Iran may be facing severe sanctions, but it is far from defeated. Assad’s Syria may be in dire straits, but it is fighting back, and continues to enjoy strong Russian support. Hizballah, Lebanon’s Shi’a movement, may be under intense pressure from militant Sunni groups, but it remains the most powerful force in Lebanon.

Aware that their attempts have – for the moment -- failed to push the U.S. into an armed confrontation with Syria, Israeli spokesmen are already back-tracking. In New York, Yuval Steinitz, minister of strategic and intelligence affairs, was reported as saying on April 29: ‘We never asked, nor did we encourage, the United States to take military action against Syria.’ Iran, he declared, not Syria was the ‘problem No 1 of our generation.’

These exchanges demonstrate Israel’s efforts to incite the United States against Israel’s enemies - and also the speed with which it withdraws when its covert efforts fail to produce the hoped for results. Israel is well aware that the U.S. is at present extremely reluctant to attack either Iran or Syria. Israel may, therefore, have to content itself with continued U.S. pressure on these two countries - short of actual war. The truth is that Israel may well think that its most threatening enemy today is neither Iran nor Syria, but rather Hizballah in Lebanon. It was Hizballah that fought Israel to something like a draw in 2006 and which, to this day, represents its most dangerous neighbour.

It is interesting to note that Israel’s only armed intervention so far in the Syrian civil war occurred on Saturday, April 27, when it attacked a convoy making its way to Hizballah in Lebanon from Syria’s chemical weapons facility, the Scientific Studies and Research Center at Barzeh near Damascus. Israel’s evident fear is that any acquisition by Hizballah of Syrian chemical weapons would give the Lebanese Shi’a movement considerable immunity from attack.

By insisting that the Syrian government had used chemical weapons, General Brun’s aim seems to have been to persuade the U.S. to destroy both the Syrian regime and its Hizballah ally. Israel wants no limits on the extraordinary freedom it has long enjoyed to attack its neighbours at will and never be hit back. From Israel’s point of view, if America could be persuaded to do the job for it, so much the better. If not this time, another occasion will surely arise.

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