

Israel flexes muscles in Syria battleground

By Lauren Williams

BEIRUT: Israel's massive strike on Syrian military complexes in Damascus Sunday was designed to send a message to Damascus that it was prepared to act over increasing Iranian and Hezbollah engagement, experts say.

The message, political sources and analysts agreed, was also a sign that Israel was prepared to take matters into its own hands in the absence of clearly defined action by the U.S. and its allies.

After a strike targeting military facilities in Damascus and its countryside Sunday, Israel appeared to back away from escalation, claiming the strikes were merely aimed at stopping the transfer of Iranian weapons to archfoe Hezbollah, but stressed it was not on one side or the other in the conflict.

Israel aimed to avoid "an increase in tension with Syria by making clear that if there is activity, it is only against Hezbollah, not against the Syrian regime" veteran lawmaker Tzachi Hanegbi, a confidant of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, told Israel Radio.

But political sources and analysts say the symbolic value and sheer size of the strike, which targeted the military facility at Qasioun Mountain, overlooking the capital and housing the notorious elite 4th Division and the 105 Brigade, were designed as a clear message to Syrian President Bashar Assad.

"This is a highly symbolic site and deeply embarrassing to Assad. This is home to the elite soldiers responsible for defending Damascus. There are no Iranian weapons there," said a Syrian political source who asked not to be identified due to the sensitivity of the subject.

“It is acceptable to the West to say it is targeting Hezbollah. They are an acceptable target for the mainstream media,” he added.

The source said the Israeli strike was a response to more open engagement by Iran and Hezbollah amid signs Assad forces were gaining more ground in a concerted push against the rebels.

Assad forces, backed by loyalist militia, have been gaining territory against rebel forces in recent weeks, in an apparent push to secure a corridor linking the capital Damascus, Homs in the center, Qusair on the Lebanese border and northward to the coastal regions, home to the majority of Assad’s Alawite clan.

The regime appears to have shifted military tactics in recent weeks, dividing rebel lines and securing strategic highways. In a recent visit to Homs governorate, Syrian army generals told The Daily Star a new elite force trained in guerrilla tactics was ready to be deployed, but declined to say whether the unit was receiving technical support from Iran and Hezbollah.

The push from Assad forces also coincided with an admission from Hezbollah leader Hasan Nasrallah, shortly after a visit to Iran, that the group’s members were fighting in Syria. Nasrallah last week also vowed that Assad’s “true friends” would not allow his regime to fall.

“Syria and Israel had managed to coexist until then,” an Arab diplomatic source familiar with negotiations told The Daily Star.

“But Hezbollah is the red line. The Iranian camp appeared to be winning and that was unacceptable to everyone, including the Saudis and the Jordanians” the source said, adding that the Americans had been made aware of the strike.

“It’s not the first time the Israelis have done the dirty work.”

“This was a very loud message from the Israelis, that we are here, we have an interest here and the capability to strike hard. It also sends a message that Israel is prepared to do this if the West is not.”

Assad’s military gains have coincided with U.S.-Saudi-backed plans to develop a buffer zone along the Jordan border. The plan, to arm and train secular rebel brigades more palatable to the U.S. and regional allies Jordan and Saudi Arabia, has gained traction in recent weeks, yet

concerns about the unpredictability of arming rebel brigades have meant that so far no concrete decision has been made.

Syrian opposition figure and history professor at Ohio University, Amr al-Azm said U.S. inaction had prompted Israel to take matters into their own hands.

“I think the Israelis looked at the U.S. red line [on chemical weapons], saw that it was wobbly and decided to act,” he said, adding that it “embarrasses the U.S.”

“It shows that when [Israel] perceives a threat, they will act and when they say red lines, they mean red lines,” Azm said.

“It also exposes completely the narrative that the U.S. has been trading on, that they are unable to do anything, like set up buffer zones or because of Syria’s sophisticated air defenses ... because the Israelis were able to just go in and take them out.”

In the lead up to high-level talks between U.S. President Barack Obama and Russian President Vladimir Putin scheduled for June, Azm said the strikes could serve to accelerate political pressure on Russia to back away from their support for Assad, after U.S. efforts had failed.

“When the Israelis start to get involved, it must be a concern to Putin,” Azm said.

The Syrian political source said that while that was a possibility, the Syrian government is committed to a military win and is unlikely to change course.

“It’s typical for Israel to raise the stakes so high. It’s a brilliant tactic but strategically, it’s a disaster,” he added.