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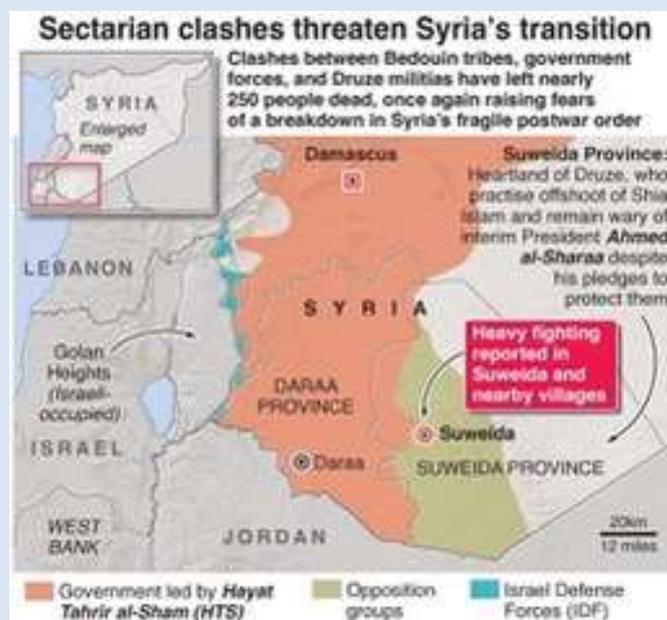
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Air Power Musings: Bombing Damascus

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After the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime on December 08, 2024, Israel has been upping-the-ante on Syria to prevent the new government from gaining power. Their aim includes stopping chemical weapons from being acquired by the new government, destroying all modern military equipment and maintaining control over the Golan Heights. Over the past six months, Israel has destroyed most of Syria's Air Defence (AD) assets, key missile infrastructure and networks, a so-called stockpile of chemical weapons, Scud weapon systems, Syrian military infrastructure and Syrian naval assets. The Israeli attacks aimed to establish a "sterile defence zone" in Southern Syria, which would be enforced without a permanent troop presence. The objectives included the destruction of strategic weapons and military infrastructure to prevent their use by rebel groups associated with Al Qaeda and the Islamic State. ¹ As a result, Israel had gradually managed to increase the amount of territory under its control in Syria and weaken the new government.

Since July 14, 2025, Israel has launched a series of fresh attacks on Syria, striking the Headquarters of the Syrian Army in Damascus, a compound that also houses the Ministry of Defence. They also struck the Presidential Palace and continued to demolish military infrastructure. This has primarily been in support of the Druze population inhabiting the Golan Heights and the city of Sweida.

The Druze are a religious sect that originated as a 10th century offshoot of Ismailism, a branch of Shia Islam, and comprise a minority community in Syria. ¹ Roughly half of its one million followers live in Syria, in a province called Sweida (Suwayda) and makeup about three per cent of the Syrian population. The Sweida province is located in south and south-west Syria, adjoining the Golan Heights and is considered loyal to Israel. According to the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics, around 1,52,000 Druze people live in Israel and the Israel-occupied Golan Heights and serve as an effective buffer between Israel and Syria. ² In response, Israel intensified its airstrikes and called for the complete withdrawal of Syrian forces from Druze areas.

What started as a skirmish between Bedouin tribes and the Druze population on July 13, 2025, soon escalated into a clash, killing over 200 Druze people. In response, Israel intensified its airstrikes and called for a complete withdrawal of Syrian forces from Druze areas. ³ After three days of relentless attacks, the Syrian government has unequivocally agreed to halt all military operations, commence withdrawal from Sweida and also agreed to form a committee comprising government representatives and Druze spiritual leaders to supervise the ceasefire agreement. ⁴

The Israeli attacks have brought out certain interesting observations that can be juxtaposed with other scenarios and lessons drawn. Whilst enjoying complete air superiority in Syria, the latest series of attacks have primarily been on Military Headquarters (HQ) and the Presidential Palace.

What does this show? What can be drawn from such attacks? What is the effectiveness of such attacks? Can such attacks be replicated across other war zones? These are only a few questions this paper seeks to analyse.

(a) **Strategic Targeting for Tactical Results:** While Israel has an underlying motive in ensuring a peaceful Southern Syria, a seemingly innocuous skirmish like the one in Sweida made Israel attack strategic targets to get tactical results. This is possible when one enjoys complete freedom of operations and unopposed air superiority. However, what is of interest here is that a tactical action may have strategic ramifications. In Israel's strategic calculus, Sweida is significant enough to warrant strategic targeting.

(b) **Urban Warfare and Escalation Control:** Urban warfare is here to stay, and therefore, there is a need for specialised weapons and aircraft for the same. Long-range, standoff precision munitions in large quantities will need to become a part of the conventional arsenal. The large-scale use of unguided area bombing may not yield the required results. However, high-value urban targets such as political and military leadership, critical infrastructure and strategic targets can have debilitating effects on the adversary when struck. The threat of targeting them can also demonstrate the capability to control the escalation matrix.

(c) **Importance of Continued Suppression/ Destruction of Enemy Air Defences (SEAD/DEAD):** The Israeli Air Force has repeatedly been hitting Syrian Air and Missile defences and has practically neutralised Syrian AD capability and gained air superiority over Syrian airspace. This has given the IDF multiple options for responding to situations and enabled freedom of operation for air, sea, and land forces. The practically non-existent AD also allowed Israel the use of Syrian airspace during its strikes on Iran in June 2025.

(d) **Political Signalling and Coercive Diplomacy:** Syrian strikes, as well as operations like *Op-Sindoor*, have increasingly demonstrated the efficacy of air power as a tool for Political Signalling. The Syrian air strikes were meant to force the Syrian government to withdraw from Southern Syria, demonstrating inherent coercive capability, forcing them to the negotiating table and restoring peace.

(e) **Air Superiority and the need for Constant Presence:** Israel has been systematically targeting Syrian AD for six months, but not continuously. With effective Electronic Warfare (EW), a well-planned SEAD plan, and good Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR), Counter Air Operations (CAO) can be carried out without relying on traditional methods. They could be parallel or simultaneous, need-based and carried out using

precision, long-range, standoff weapons, thereby not requiring constant presence and significantly reducing sortie generation rates.

(f) **Short and Swift Wars:** While the world is witnessing long-drawn conflicts in Russia and Israel, the world has also witnessed short, intense, and swift conflicts like the Indo-Pak skirmish and the Sweida imbroglio. Therefore, drawing templates would not be correct as the duration of the conflict would be decided by many interlinked factors. One factor that emerges is that a well-planned and graduated air campaign has the potential to shape adversarial behaviour without triggering escalation into a full-blown conventional conflict.

(g) **Importance of Information Dominance:** The timing, effects, and results of aerial attacks must be a part of the information dominance matrix. Building narratives and shaping perceptions are essential for success in all domains of warfighting. Therefore, air strikes must be leveraged to get the desired effect in the information domain. The latest live stream showing a Syrian newsreader shaken up by Israeli strikes on the Syrian Ministry of Defence sends an important message, also showcasing Israeli precision strike capability. Modern air operations must incorporate information dominance as part of their overall plan to achieve maximum effect.

A peaceful South Syria is beneficial to Israel in the long run, warranting strategic action in response to tactical issues. As Robert Kaplan has very succinctly said in his book 'The Revenge of Geography', "*This means that a small state in the midst of adversaries, such as Israel, has to be particularly passive, or particularly aggressive, in order to survive. It is primarily a matter of geography.*" Geography will ultimately determine the actions a nation takes to safeguard its interests; therefore, if a tactical action warrants a strategic response, it must be done. What does India's geography teach us, and what more needs to be done is food for thought because, as they say, "*Maps, in other words, can be dangerous tools. And yet they are crucial to any understanding of world politics.*"⁵ To take a leaf out of the book and adapt our strategy around it would help us understand the nuances of war fighting in the West and North of us, and also bring out instances or areas of interest where strategic actions would be called for in response to tactical actions.

NOTES:

¹ "Syria vs Druze: How did Israel get involved?" *Firstpost*, July 17, 2025, <https://www.firstpost.com/explainers/syria-druze-israel-bombings-ceasefire-explained-13907782.html>. Accessed on July 17, 2025.

² Tess Mallinder Heron, "Who are the Druze and Why is Israel Attacking Syria?," *BBC*, July 17, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c70xyv4z74go>. Accessed on July 19, 2025.

³ Ibid. Accessed on July 17, 2025.

⁴ Ibid. Accessed on July 18, 2025.

⁵ Robert D. Kaplan, *The Revenge of Geography: What the Map Tells us About Coming Conflicts and the Battle Against Fate* (New York: Random House, 2012), p 5.

