UN reveals Israeli links with Syrian rebels

Reports by UN observers in the Golan Heights over the past 18 months reveal the type and extent of cooperation between Israel and Syrian opposition figures. The reports, submitted to the 15 members of the UN Security Council and available on the UN’s website, detail regular contacts held on the border between IDF officers and soldiers and Syrian rebels.

The observer force, UNDOF, was established in 1974 as part of the separation of forces agreement between Israel and Syria. The agreement set up a buffer zone several kilometers wide. About 1,000 UN observers supervised the implementation of the agreement until 2013, when the Syrian civil war severely reduced the force's ability to function.

While Croatia and Austria pulled out and Ireland, Fiji and India agreed to send troops, the increase of attacks on UN forces in recent months caused the force to abandon many of its positions along the front and to transfer its command to the Israeli side of the border.

The observers have continued to file reports to New York, which were relatively mundane; but their content changed in March 2014, when Israel started admitting
Israel at first asserted the injured were civilians reaching the border of their own initiative and without prior coordination because they could not obtain suitable treatment in Syria. Later, as the numbers increased, Israel said it was coordinating with civilians but not opposition groups. However, the reports reveal direct contact between the IDF and armed opposition members.

According to a report from December 3, 2013, a person wounded on September 15 “was taken by armed members of the opposition across the ceasefire line, where he was transferred to a civilian ambulance escorted by an IDF vehicle.” Moreover, from November 9 to 10 the “UNDOF observed at least 10 wounded persons being transferred by armed members of the opposition from the Bravo side across the ceasefire line to IDF.”

Further reports indicated similar incidents. However, cooperation between the IDF and Syrian rebels that was revealed in UN observer reports does not just include transferring the wounded. Observers remarked in the report distributed on June 10 that they identified IDF soldiers on the Israeli side handing over two boxes to armed Syrian opposition members on the Syrian side.

The last report distributed to Security Council members, on December 1, described another meeting between IDF soldiers and Syrian opposition members that two UN representatives witnessed on October 27 some three kilometers east of Moshav Yonatan. The observers said they saw two IDF soldiers on the eastern side of the border fence opening the gate and letting two people enter Israel. The report, contrary to previous ones, did not note that the two exiting Syria were injured or why they entered Israel.

This specific event is of particular interest in light of what happened on the Syrian side of the border in the exact same region. According to the report, UN observers stated that tents were set up about 500 meters from the Israeli position for some 70 families of Syrian deserters. The Syrian army sent a letter of complaint to UNDOF in September, claiming this tent camp was a base for “armed terrorists” crossing the border into Israel. The Syrians also warned that if the UN would not evacuate the tent camp, the Syrian army would view it as a legitimate target.

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