When fences erode, or nobody is at home, neighbours tend to take advantage. A nibble at a patch of land, a fence post pushed a yard away, a wall extended, a fact created on the ground.

After the dramatic collapse of the Assad regime, something similar is happening in the Golan Heights, militarily wrested from Syria by Israel in 1967. Part of the area was vacated by Israel after the 1973 Yom Kippur war and a Separation Zone created between the Syrian and Israeli held territories under the 1974 Disengagement Agreement. The arrangement was monitored by the UN Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) along with the UN Truce Supervision Organisation (UNTSO). India contributed significantly to this operation, even suffering two fatal casualties. The agreement worked remarkably well for 50 years, to the extent that Israel preferred the known devil of the father-son Assad regime to the unpredictable progeny of the Arab Spring.

Now all bets are off. With the Syrian army's collapse, Israel has set aside the 1974 Agreement, moved the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) quickly into the Separation Zone and occupied the dominating heights of Mount Hermon. IDF tanks are once again in Quneitra, just 40km short of Damascus; Israeli soldiers are even closer. Quneitra, incidentally, was bombed to a graveyard of concrete blocks by Israel before it withdrew in 1974. Syria has preserved it in that condition, a symbol of Israeli occupation; Rajiv Gandhi was conducted around the ruined town during his 1988 Syria visit.

Israel's ground offensive has been accompanied by over 600 air strikes that have devastated Syria's weapon systems, missile depots, air defence infrastructure, research facilities and Assad's navy. There has been no outcry except some criticism from Arab League members and, predictably, France. The hapless UNDOF, in a masterly understatement, has observed "a significant increase in IDF movements within the area of separation…."

Israel projects these moves as defensive measures: to prevent the border zone or Assad's weapon systems to fall in militant hands; control of Mount Hermon is essential for better surveillance deep into Syria and Lebanon. The move into the demilitarised separation zone is said to be a temporary exercise to create, in the

words of Israel’s defence minister, a “sterile defence zone”. This concept of a modern-day moat, if followed by other countries, could make a mockery of international borders.

A quick Israeli reversal appears unlikely. Benjamin Netanyahu sees Assad’s fall—for which he claimed substantial credit—as a great opportunity for Israel, a tectonic shift as important as the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement that divided up the Ottoman empire to create present-day States; in other words, an opportunity to redraw borders. Add to that his need to wipe out the ignominy of October 7 and his ambition to be remembered as the leader who changed the Middle East fundamentally to Israel’s advantage; a militarily maximalist and expansionist agenda is at the core of this vision. Domestic support will not be lacking, nor is there any fear of admonishment from Donald Trump.

Clearly, the IDF boys are not coming home soon. The possibility of any good-neighbourly gesture, always unlikely, that could have been the basis of peace with a new Syria has evaporated. If Syria resurrects, future conflict over occupied territories is assured. If Syria dissolves, then Gaddafi’s warning to Arab leaders may be worth revisiting: “Their plan is to remove Lebanon and Syria so that the borders of the so-called Israel are with Turkey rather than with Arab countries. You will see this achieved, if not in our era, then in our children’s era. Syria will become five small states.” Let’s watch this space.