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# Israel's Policy on the Syrian Civil War: Risks and Opportunities

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The war in Syria, which to date has taken hundreds of thousands of lives and displaced almost half the country's population, seems to be nearing an end. The Syrian tragedy, which drew in additional actors from throughout the Middle East and the world—paid militias, “volunteers,” and foreign armies—at unprecedented speed, seems to be stabilizing. This has created a new status quo, and will enable a smaller circle to wield control over the state still known as Syria when the smoke of battle finally clears. In August 2017, the UN Migration Agency (IOM) announced that over 600,000 displaced persons, some 10 percent of the total number of refugees, had already returned to their homes in Syria, many to the city of Aleppo, which, until several months earlier, had symbolized the battles between the weakened rebel camp and the regime forces.<sup>1</sup> Syrian tractors are already clearing the way for new roads, and Russian cranes are building a new port terminal, while the Iranians have started constructing a modern “medical city” near Damascus.<sup>2</sup> The year 2017 is also ending with Syria's conquest (aided by Hizbullah) of the village of Beit Jann, one of the more significant pockets of resistance supported by Israel.

These new developments, including the entrenchment of Russian and Iranian forces in Syria, are also important for Israel and its policy in Syria in general, and in southern Syria in particular. Israel's strategy may have to be significantly modified, given the magnitude of the changes on the other side of the border.

Israeli policy, which was initially based on the idea of Israel as a “passive onlooker” and then as a “good neighbor,” reflected in much more active intervention

near the Syrian border, requires some explanation. Its organizing principle combines humanitarian and military activity: building bridges on the one hand, and maximizing Israeli interests on the other. In addition, “humanitarian diplomacy”—the civilian and government assistance provided in the Syrian Golan Heights area—will be addressed and its role in the efforts to build a set of common interests between Israel and Syrian opposition groups will be explored. Finally, we need to understand the challenges and opportunities facing Israel, in light of the rapidly shifting situation across the border.<sup>3</sup>

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## **Israel and the War in Syria**

The civil war that has been raging in Syria for the last seven years has altered our neighborhood. Until 2011, Syria had experienced some four decades of relative stability.<sup>4</sup> Today, despite the renewed strength of the regime, Syria still looks less like a state and more like a domestic and regional battleground between non-state actors and other interested parties that have managed to exploit the comparative impotence of the central government and take control of parts of the failing state. The weakening of the central regime and the rise of other actors in its place have posed fresh dilemmas and challenges for Israel as well: For one, the collapse of Syria has led to the creation of vast areas without an effective central government, which have been infiltrated by radical, pro-Assad Islamic Sunni elements and militias, led by Iran. These entities, hostile to Israel, are subject to the influence of states whose relations with Israel are extremely strained, such as Turkey and Qatar, or antagonistic and volatile organizations, in the case of Iran and its satellites. With the advances in the Syrian campaign, radical jihadist actors have drawn closer and dug in their heels. Some of them are adjacent to the Israeli–Syrian border in the Golan Heights. Clashes in Syria have, intentionally or unintentionally, spilled over periodically into Israeli territory, forcing the IDF to respond, albeit without much enthusiasm. The last several months, which have been marked by significant bolstering of the pro-regime forces under Russian-Iranian auspices, have seen the beginnings of a new status quo in the region that presents new challenges for Israel, which will be analyzed below.

At the same time, the emergence of several more moderate opposition actors, and local players without a clear allegiance, has created new opportunities for ties and collaborations between Israel and Syrian groups, the objectives and interests of which coincide. In mid-2016, these developments led to highly significant changes on the Israeli side and to the establishment of the Good Neighbors Administration—a dedicated military unit handling civilian cooperation on the Syrian front, among other tasks.

## **Evolution of Israeli Policy**

Israel was inclined to view the unfolding civil war in Syria as a domestic issue. Jerusalem chose to look on from the sidelines and avoid taking a position on the events occurring across the border. This policy of being a passive onlooker was aimed at keeping a low profile so as not to involve Jerusalem directly in the conflict, based on the perception that events in northern and central Syria should not have a major influence on Israel's set of interests. But the continued fighting, and the fact that it "strayed" closer to the Israeli border<sup>5</sup> as well as to neighboring areas such as Lebanon, compelled Israel to rethink its course. Thus, then-Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon stated in 2013: "Looking at the civil war in Syria, we spoke and acted from the outset as a party that is not involved and does not get involved unless our interests are harmed. We therefore established 'red lines'—the transfer of chemical weapons to Hizbullah, or an encroachment upon our sovereignty."<sup>6</sup> In this context, Israel set three clear lines, which, if crossed, would necessitate a response: first, exploitation of the war to transfer arms, particularly advanced weaponry, to Hizbullah in Lebanon; second, spillover of the conflict in the direction of Israel; and third, consolidation of radical elements in the border region. Officially, Israel has avoided choosing between two principal alternatives. The first, "the devil we know" option, favors a weakened Assad regime over chaos and a potential jihadist takeover; the second option would be military action against the pro-Iranian "axis," aimed at weakening its influence in Syria and Lebanon and preventing it from establishing itself in southern Syria, just across from the Golan Heights. In the absence of a clear-cut decision between the two, Israel has focused primarily on maintaining security and repelling threats posed by the war in Syria. It has avoided pursuing whatever opportunities lie in linking up with relatively moderate actors.

This formal non-intervention policy has been coupled with low-profile Israeli activity behind the scenes. As stated, at the military level, Israel has taken steps to foil the smuggling of strategic weapons by Hizbullah and block the establishment of staging bases by Iran and Hizbullah in the Golan Heights. From 2011–13, as Israel officially continued to weigh the level of intervention required, a number of Israeli aid organizations in the civilian sphere began humanitarian efforts. They built channels of cooperation with civil society organizations both within Syria and beyond its borders.

## **The Civilian-Humanitarian Dimension**

Between 2011 and 2013, concurrent with the Israeli government's hesitation and its policy of acting as a passive onlooker, Israeli civil society, with several aid organizations at the forefront, spearheaded an effort to stake out a clearer position by taking humanitarian action that gradually received more formal, official

recognition. This activity was carried out in a number of places, including Jordan, Turkey, Europe, and, of course, Syria itself, especially on the Golan Heights. Gradually, in parallel with the IDF humanitarian effort that began in February 2013, civilian relief efforts became better synchronized with official ones. That was needed, for example, when it was necessary to open the border in the Golan Heights, or when coordination was required due to the sensitivity of the cooperation with Syrian bodies. "Official Israel," which was still at the deliberation stage, seems to have been more comfortable leaving some of the involvement in this area to civilian groups, while keeping an eye open for the hidden opportunities offered by these channels.

Israeli assistance to refugees or to the embattled population of Syria cannot be extended without coordination with the Syrian side. The scope of the relief work can itself indicate the depth of the relationships developed using these channels. As a witness to, and participant in, the creation of some of these partnerships, I can attest to their importance in gradually changing Israel's image and its potential role as a positive actor in the region. This policy of "humanitarian diplomacy" has helped overcome the element of fear and forge a path toward our neighbors across the border. A number of Israeli groups have taken part in this work, which has resulted in the transfer of over 50,000 tons of supplies to date.<sup>7</sup> On the whole, Israeli society seems to have enlisted in the "Syrian effort," with no less than ten different organizations taking part;<sup>8</sup> tens of thousands of Israelis have also participated in several public campaigns on behalf of this undertaking. These efforts included Israeli assistance to a team of professionals in refugee camps in Jordan; food distribution inside Syria itself in an unprecedented collaboration between Israeli and Syrian NGOs; Israeli involvement in the rescue of Syria refugees on the Greek coast; the establishment of an Israeli field hospital for treating Syrian refugees in Europe; mass mobilization to collect food and winter clothing, with the participation of the Council of Youth Movements in Israel; distribution of food and emergency equipment in refugee camps in Jordan;<sup>9</sup> and the treatment of Syrian wounded through an Israeli civilian channel. Beyond these efforts, Israelis engaged in humanitarian assistance focused on the Golan Heights sector, and quickly joined forces with the "official" Israeli effort to tend to the needs of the population on the other side of the border.

### **The Formulation of Israeli Policy in Syria, and the Good Neighbors Program**

Alongside the civilian channels, Israel operates an official humanitarian assistance program. This arrangement began on February 16, 2013<sup>10</sup> as a local initiative of an IDF officer, who gathered a group of seven injured individuals from the border zone and transferred them to the hospital in Safed. He later oversaw the

establishment of a field hospital in the Golan Heights that started to receive and treat wounded Syrians, transporting the more seriously injured to hospitals inside Israel. Over time, this initiative was institutionalized, with over 5,000 Syrian men, women, and children receiving medical treatment in Israeli hospitals and more than 200 humanitarian missions carried out. The IDF formed a unit dedicated to operating in the Syrian border zone through which collaboration with Israeli civilian organizations began. Here, too, it seems that two sets of interests came together: the humanitarian and the operational. Ongoing events in the southern Syrian sector have helped highlight these common interests.

In 2013, fighting in Syria continued to move closer to Israel's border. After Israeli soldiers were fired upon in March of that year, the IDF responded for the first time by launching a missile in the direction of a Syrian position in the Golan sector. Later that year, the Syrian army began to withdraw, leaving a vacuum that was quickly filled with various rebel forces. At the end of the year, IDF Division 210 was formed—a new regional unit charged with blocking incursions from the Syrian side of the 1974 disengagement line.<sup>11</sup> In 2014, the situation escalated, with an attack on UNDOF (the UN force stationed on the Golan Heights) soldiers by Jabhat al-Nusra [the Nusra Front], and forty-seven soldiers were taken hostage. In July of that year, the Quneitra border crossing was occupied by Jabhat al-Nusra forces, and in September 2014, Israel shot down a Syrian plane that had crossed into its airspace. In January 2015, Israel struck a convoy in Syria, killing General Mohammad Ali Allahdadi, a high-ranking commander in Iran's Revolutionary Guard, along with six other officers and fighters. And in June, Israel was forced to contend with the threat of a lynching, when an IDF ambulance carrying wounded Syrians was attacked by Druze residents of the town of Majdal Shams on the Israeli side of the border. In late 2015, an additional Israeli attack eliminated Samir Quntar, the notorious Fatah terrorist and senior Hizbullah commander in the Golan sector who had been swapped by Israel for the bodies of missing Israelis. As 2016 dawned, the IDF found itself continuing to respond to spillover attacks of mortar shells landing in the Golan Heights along with fighting between rival factions that continued to draw closer to Israel's border—this time, also under Russia's aegis. But Israel was now caught less off guard, in part as a result of the relationship developed with some of the actors on the other side of the border.

The contact with the Syrian side began to create channels of communication as well as greater familiarity with local actors operating in the Golan Heights, on the basis of a shared interest in weakening radical Islamic elements, Hizbullah fighters, and the Iranian al-Quds force in the area. A number of incidents, and the experience accumulated in this sector, began to lead to greater understanding of the importance of the relationship that had begun to develop with the Syrian civilian population and the rebel forces fighting in southern Syria.

The significance of these ties was also reflected in the creation of the Good Neighbors Administration, a military command that specializes in relations with the civilian population and in coordinating the various relief efforts, including the civilian ones.<sup>12</sup> The establishment of the unit in May 2016 can be seen as a further step in the recognition of the need to integrate the efforts on the northern border, to coordinate civilian and military actions, and to publicize at least some of the work in order to mobilize international support. This last channel began to develop in earnest over the course of 2017; collaborative partnerships were established with several international organizations, including Syrian groups that had begun to cooperate with Israel in transferring aid across the border. This aspect, which included cooperation with Christian, Muslim, and Syrian organizations, is particularly significant in terms of its diplomatic ramifications.

### **Across the Border: The Syrian Actors in the Southern Sector**

The actors operating in southern Syria include militias, local groups, and communities (including Druze) that seek to represent a population thought to number over one million, based on unofficial estimates. These groups have different ideologies, ethnic affiliations, and sources of financing and influence. At times, they also switch organizational affiliations and loyalties based on pragmatic, local considerations and shifting balances of power on the ground. These balances continued to shift as the fighting approached the southern front, and radical groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra—considered an offshoot of al-Qa'ida, but also a group with which Israel has maintained a certain degree of communication—became further entrenched (the group itself declared that it was cutting its ties with al-Qa'ida in July 2016).<sup>13</sup> Potential partners of Israel on the Syrian side share certain objectives and interests, at times even similar liberal values, and, above all, common enemies. On the southern border, the groups that fit this description are primarily those affiliated with the circle of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), along with a number of independent local groups, which take a more moderate and pragmatic line.

The interaction between the FSA and Israel has been influenced by diverse geopolitical factors. In early 2014, the FSA announced the establishment of the Southern Front, from the Jordanian border through Damascus to the Golan Heights, with some 20,000 fighters<sup>14</sup> deployed in fifty-four rebel groups operating with partial coordination (making it difficult to work with them due to the many different channels). In August of that year, the Southern Front of the FSA, alongside Jabhat al-Nusra, took over most of the Israeli–Syrian border in the Golan, though it lost some of this territory in 2016 as a result of increased Russian intervention.<sup>15</sup> The Southern Front (SF) was considered a moderate player and a partner of Washington and its allies in the fight against the Salafi jihadist forces such as the Khalid ibn-Walid Army.<sup>16</sup> That radical Muslim militia declared its allegiance

to the Islamic State (IS) in 2015, and conquered territory at the point where the borders of Syria, Jordan, and Israel meet on the banks of the Yarmuk River. This group struck primarily at the rear of the moderate militias of the FSA while they battled the regime, and constitutes a genuine threat to the Israeli border.<sup>17</sup>

To counter the fear that international aid to the Southern Front will bolster radical elements, and to elicit greater support from the international community and enlist its help in promoting political moves to solve the crisis in Syria, several of the groups that make up the Southern Front have announced the severing of all ties with Jabhat al-Nusra.<sup>18</sup>

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The Druze community numbers roughly 4 percent of the Syrian population, or 700,000 members. Israel and the Syrian Druze have a long history of contacts, beginning in the 1930s with intelligence cooperation following the Great Arab Revolt. It continued through the 1950s, reaching its peak in the program conceived by Yigal Allon following the Six-Day War to extend Israeli control from the Druze villages in the Golan Heights to Jabal al-Druze.<sup>19</sup> The Syrian Druze have maintained their loyalty to the Syrian establishment and have generally been hostile toward Israel. Throughout the civil war, the Druze have continued to depend on and cooperate with the regime, though increasing numbers (particularly in the al-Suwayda district) have chosen to avoid serving in Assad's army, or, alternatively, have refused to participate in the fighting units outside their areas of residence. Most of the Druze living on the Israeli side of the Golan Heights have also maintained loyalty to Assad's regime. Despite this, there is no consensus in the Druze community regarding their attitude toward the regime. The perception that Assad's government was unlikely to survive, and may well lose influence in Syria, has led some Druze in Syria (and the Israeli Golan Heights as well) to call for a reckoning and a change in approach; this has extended to the establishment of a militia opposed to the regime, known as Rijal al-Karama (men of honor). Taken together, these factors are likely to create a new dynamic in relations between the Syrian Druze and Israel.

An additional aspect of the relationship between Israel and southern Syria touches on one of the potential scenarios regarding the division of Syria.<sup>20</sup> Representatives of several local groups united in the latter half of 2014 in an attempt to promote a plan (with the help of members of the exiled Syrian opposition) to establish an autonomous "safe zone" in southern Syria with regional and international backing, which would prevent a takeover of the area by hostile groups, whether Shi'a or Salafi jihadist. The international community, led by the UN, was asked to guarantee security arrangements that would include enforcing a no-fly zone over southern Syria and the demarcation of a 25-kilometer-wide security zone that would extend along Syria's



borders with Israel, Lebanon, and Jordan. The plan, which received a partial boost from the Astana Initiative that included southern Syria as a “de-escalation zone,” called for turning Syria’s southern region into the first link in a secure and thriving new Syrian entity that would serve as a model to be gradually expanded to other areas. Implementation of the proposal would require three stages:

- Short term: mobilizing international financial and humanitarian assistance organizations, making it possible to provide, food, clothing, medicine, tents, and gas;
- Medium term: setting up field hospitals, courts, schools, and a police force; and
- Long term: promoting regional cooperative ventures, including Syrian–Israeli collaboration in the fields of technology and water.<sup>21</sup>

Among the initiatives proposed recently was the formation of a body called the “Sons of the Golan.” Led by Syrian exiles in Europe, it seeks international and Israeli assistance in establishing a refugee camp in the demilitarized zone on the Israeli–Syrian border to rehabilitate refugees in a particularly dire situation.<sup>22</sup>

### **A New Status Quo: Challenges for Israel**

Overall, 2017 was marked by a tipping of the scales in favor of the pro-regime axis, which succeeded in exploiting the exhaustion of Assad’s opponents, internal rivalries, and the international community’s focus on the battles against IS, which has begun to retreat in Syria and Iraq. The Syrian army, with Russian and Iranian support, developed a *Sulha* strategy of forced “reconciliation agreements” that helped further demilitarize rebel strongholds, and pushed the fighters—at times, under duress—to join pro-regime militias.

The ceasefire declared in southern Syria, which took effect in July 2017, is the result of political coordination achieved through direct talks between the US and Russia, and was finalized between Russian President Vladimir Putin and US President Donald Trump at their meeting earlier that month. This process took place concurrently with negotiations initiated by Russia in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan, with the active involvement of Iran and Turkey, with which Russia also reached agreements on their respective spheres of influence in Syria. “De-escalation zones” were proposed throughout Syria, including the southern region and the provinces of Daraa and Quneitra. According to the Russian plan, they will become safe zones for refugees from combat areas, and will serve as the basis for a political settlement in Syria that will bring the civil war to an end.<sup>23</sup>

The Astana process; the Russian–American–Jordanian negotiations; and, concurrently, the Russian–Iranian–Turkey talks have led to a series of agreements and

understandings, the bulk of which have not been revealed, which are intended to create a new status quo in Syria in general and its southern border in particular. Israel—as well as Jordan—has a clear interest in keeping hostile forces away from its border, including pro-Iranian militias, Hizbullah forces, and Salafi jihadist fighters. Various reports have claimed that the Russians and the Americans will support the creation of a zone of up to 40 kilometers from Israel's border in which Iranian activity will be prohibited.<sup>24</sup> Recently, the proposed zone was reduced to a depth of roughly 5–30 kilometers from the border, taking into account the location of rebel forces.<sup>25</sup> However, it is unclear what form these areas will take, especially since reports such as those published by the London-based *Asbarq al-Awsal*<sup>26</sup> claim that the American agreements are limited to eight kilometers from the border, after which the US will accept the presence of pro-Iranian forces and militias.<sup>27</sup>

Meanwhile, on the ground, it appears that the Iranians, like the regime forces, are choosing to ignore those agreements. The closing months of 2017 saw a stepping-up of attacks on the Quneitra and Hermon sector under the watchful eyes of the Russians, who deployed their troops and have also been seen in southern Syria and the Quneitra region.<sup>28</sup> Israel's concerns were also reflected in the widely covered meeting between Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and President Putin in late August 2017, at which Netanyahu stated that Iran “is spreading across the Middle East, in every place from which Daesh [IS] retreats,” and in his statement that Iranian weapons-manufacturing facilities, including a factory for medium-range missiles, are being established in Syria and Lebanon.<sup>29</sup>

Simultaneously but separately, the ties and cooperative efforts have intensified in the southern sector of the Golan Heights. On the one hand, Syrian and international organizations have begun taking advantage of the new opportunities unfolding in the Golan to transfer medical and humanitarian assistance across the border and to a number of clinics, small hospitals, and refugee camps located in the area. On the other, the consolidation of the regime and the weakening of the rebel camp have led rebel factions in the Golan to unite and operate in a more orderly fashion vis-à-vis Israel and as a political force.

### **Who Cares About a Bird? Opportunities in Southern Syria**

On September 5, 2017, one of the Israelis involved in the dialogue with the Syrian opposition received a text message. A rare vulture with Hebrew markings had been found injured in Syria and had been taken in by a local militia commander. Luckily for the bird, the officer was a wildlife enthusiast, and was apparently also aware of the trans-border relationship. A.M., the militia commander who reported the presence of the wounded bird, was quickly put through to Eldad Eitan, director of the Gamla Nature Reserve of the Israel Nature and Parks

Authority, to receive instructions on its care. The militants in Syria were told by the commander to “get two turkeys a day for the vulture, and bring them alive. [The fighters] ... had been eating bread and water for weeks, but the vulture got meat.”<sup>30</sup> The vulture returned home safely after the transfer route was coordinated with three other militias, and those involved recount that it was actually this large bird that managed to bring about a rare instance of cooperation between the warring sides.

Other such moving stories have also emerged in recent years. The partnership with friends across the border has enabled the departure of Jews from Syria to take place, as well as the return of Jewish artifacts and ritual objects to the Syrian Jewish communities outside the country. Perhaps of greater interest are the various pieces of information—not only about birds—that were passed to the other side in timely fashion. All of this tells us something about the trajectory of opportunities in southern Syria. On the one hand, there is a tactical-humanitarian opportunity that focuses on local needs; on the other, there is cooperation that has begun to signal a different discourse—one of acceptance and partnership, as well as a possible long-term alliance with groups unwilling to accept the regime and its supporters or the radical Islamic axis. These voices have found expression in articles and interviews, and in public calls for recognition of, and cooperation with, Israel. This sentiment has also been reflected in (overt and covert) visits by Syrians to Israel, aimed at creating additional channels of cooperation. The notion that Syrian organizations would, surprisingly, be significant partners in Israeli humanitarian efforts is not a given, and suggests a new depth in relations between the two sides. The problem is that not all the appeals have been answered; they are often met with a cold shoulder and lack of readiness for dialogue.<sup>31</sup>

### **Conclusion: Abandoning Ambiguity**

While the war in Syria continues to exact a devastating toll—already surpassing half a million dead—and an endless stream of refugees has inundated Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon, Israel’s northern border in the Golan Heights has remained relatively calm. Despite the presence of Hizbullah, Jabhat al-Nusra, Iran, Islamic State, and other hostile actors, there has been little spillover of the conflict into Israel, and it appears that the IDF has managed to defend the border and implement its red lines without major difficulties or a significant concentration of troops—at least to date. However, the rapidly changing reality on the other side of the border calls for a rethinking of Israeli policy. This is especially so in the face of the renewed deployment of troops—including Russian forces, UN soldiers returning to the positions they abandoned, and pro-regime militias—and the reorganization of the remaining rebels in the area. The emerging threat lies in the creation of a new status quo that cements a much broader and deeper Iranian presence in Syria, coupled with a

border that constitutes a new front, with Hizbullah forces and pro-Iranian militias, second-circle Iranian bases, and radical Sunni groups still deployed on the other side. The Russian foreign minister's declaration that "Iran and Hizbullah are allowed to operate in Syria,"<sup>32</sup> along with the breaching of the ceasefire; the continued fighting in the south; and the Syrian foreign minister's statement that the de-escalation zones are "temporary ... [and] must not violate Syria's territorial integrity" can be a sign of danger and may signal a new status quo that is unfavorable for Israel.<sup>33</sup>

Israel, which still asserts that it is not taking sides in the conflict and is focused solely on humanitarian aid, has found itself intensifying its activities to block the transfer of arms or facilities that could serve the Hizbullah–Iran axis. Israel's interest in keeping these elements at a distance is obvious—but less clear is its policy of ambiguity and non-intervention. Moreover, reports such as the series of articles claiming that Israel is supplying weapons to radical groups on the Golan Heights, accompanied by photos of ammunition crates with Hebrew markings,<sup>34</sup> do not help to clarify Jerusalem's position, nor does Israel's perceived lack of response as the Syrian army and Hizbullah draw closer to the Beit Jann area. Syrian regime forces, supported by pro-Iranian militias, have succeeded in occupying a sector under rebel control in the northern Golan Heights, known as the Beit Jann pocket. This region, which has been aided by Israel for years, posed the first major test for Jerusalem, which has elected not to cross the line of intervention and not to offer more significant operational assistance so as to halt the Syrian army and Iranian militias. Unfortunately, this episode began to shift the balance of power on the Golan Heights and posed a new dilemma for Israel's intervention strategy.

Israel appears to emerge a loser by virtue of its insistence on a policy of ambiguity and by turning a cold shoulder to Syrian groups interested in discussing cooperation on the basis of common interests. Israel has the capacity to maintain stronger covert (or overt) ties with interested Syrian parties (in Syria itself or in the Syrian diaspora) and to act more assertively toward creating a different regional reality that can advance Israeli, Syrian, and other regional players. To refrain from taking advantage of these opportunities—without neglecting the necessary precautions, of course—would be a loss for Israel. But the price of doing nothing is liable to be much higher.

Translated from the Hebrew by Karen Gold

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> UN Migration Agency, "Over 600,000 Displaced Syrians Returned Home in First 7 Months of 2017," August 11, 2017, [www.iom.int/news/over-600000-displaced-syrians-returned-home-first-7-months-2017](http://www.iom.int/news/over-600000-displaced-syrians-returned-home-first-7-months-2017).

- <sup>2</sup> “Establishing a Medical City in Syria as a New Proposal by the Syrian Regime to Iran,” *Al-Dorar al-Shamia* [Arabic], August 20, 2017, [www.aldorars.com/en/news/1196](http://www.aldorars.com/en/news/1196).
- <sup>3</sup> This article serves as an update to a lengthier monograph on this subject: Nir Boms, Udi Dekel, and Ofir Winter, “Syria’s New Map and New Actors: Challenges and Opportunities for Israel,” INSS Memorandum No. 156 (Tel Aviv, August 2016).
- <sup>4</sup> See, for example, Eyal Zisser, *The Face of Syria: Society, Regime, and State* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv, 2003).
- <sup>5</sup> In August 2012, Syrian rebels succeeded in driving out the Syrian army forces from Jubata al-Khashab in the Golan Heights, and declared the region’s independence. In February 2013, the first military council was established in the Golan sector, and in March of that year, the IDF found itself responding to the Syrian army after IDF soldiers were fired on at the Golan border.
- <sup>6</sup> Ahikam Moshe David, “Ya’alon: Inaction in Syria Also Has Ramifications for Us” [Hebrew], *NRG*, September 8, 2013, [www.nrg.co.il/online/1/ART2/505/424.html](http://www.nrg.co.il/online/1/ART2/505/424.html).
- <sup>7</sup> This is an estimate by the author based on numbers provided by the IDF and interviews with the organizations cited above.
- <sup>8</sup> Israeli organizations include Israel Flying Aid; Save a Child’s Heart; IsraAID—the Israel Forum for International Humanitarian Aid; the Task Division of the Kibbutz Movement; Multi-Faith Alliance for Syrian Refugees / Jewish Coalition for Syrian Refugees; Hand in Hand with the Syrian Refugees; Jewish–Arab Committee for Humanitarian Aid to the Syrian People; NATAN—International Humanitarian Aid; the Amaliah organization; Syrians on the Fence; and the Council of Youth Movements in Israel.
- <sup>9</sup> Hand in Hand with Syrian Refugees facebook page, [www.facebook.com/pages/Hand-in-Hand-with-the-Syrian-refugees/136844413170394?fref=photo](https://www.facebook.com/pages/Hand-in-Hand-with-the-Syrian-refugees/136844413170394?fref=photo).
- <sup>10</sup> See the testimony of Dr. Alejandro Rosenthal, treating physician, Médecins Sans Frontières [Hebrew], *Yisrael Hayom*, September 28, 2017, [www.israelhayom.co.il/article/506757](http://www.israelhayom.co.il/article/506757).
- <sup>11</sup> “Gantz Decided to Establish a New Regional Division in the Golan to Block Terrorist Incursions from Syria” [Hebrew], *Haaretz*, July 10, 2013, [www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/.premium-1.2068105](http://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/.premium-1.2068105).
- <sup>12</sup> “At Syrian Border, IDF Seeks Closer Contact with Civilians on Other Side,” *Times of Israel*, May 29, 2016, [www.timesofisrael.com/on-syrian-border-idf-sets-up-unit-that-will-work-with-syrian-civilians](http://www.timesofisrael.com/on-syrian-border-idf-sets-up-unit-that-will-work-with-syrian-civilians).
- <sup>13</sup> There have been numerous reports of Israeli contact with, and even aid to, Jabhat al-Nusra. Israel’s alleged cooperation with this group has been raised in several reports and, inter alia, in the public accusations by Israeli MK Akram Hasson, who claimed that “Israel is helping Jabhat al-Nusra to attack Druze in Syria” [Hebrew], *Haaretz*, September 11, 2016, [www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/.premium-1.3065151](http://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/.premium-1.3065151).
- <sup>14</sup> Estimates differ as to the number of fighters affiliated with the Southern Front. See [www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/09/syria-north-south-opposition-groups.html](http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/09/syria-north-south-opposition-groups.html).
- <sup>15</sup> “The Rebels Control the Entire Border Crossing to Occupied Golan” [Arabic], Syrian National Coalition, August 27, 2014.

- <sup>16</sup> “New Approach in Southern Syria,” Middle East and North Africa, Report No. 163 (September 2, 2015), International Crisis Group, [www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Syria/163-new-approach-in-southern-syria.pdf](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Syria/163-new-approach-in-southern-syria.pdf); Haid, “The Southern Front: Allies Without a Strategy,” Heinrich Böll Stiftung, August 21, 2015, [www.lb.boell.org/en/2015/08/21/southern-front-allies-without-strategy](http://www.lb.boell.org/en/2015/08/21/southern-front-allies-without-strategy).
- <sup>17</sup> See “The caliphate eyes the Holy Land,” *The Economist*, January 23, 2016, [www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21688778-israel-faces-caliphate-syria-and-sinaia-and-possibly-home-islamic](http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21688778-israel-faces-caliphate-syria-and-sinaia-and-possibly-home-islamic).
- <sup>18</sup> Maysara al-Zoubi, “The Free Army in Daraa: Ousting al-Nusra is a Patriotic Decision that Will Serve the Revolution” [Arabic], *Kuluna Shurakaa*, April 15, 2015, [www.all4syria.info/Archive/207246](http://www.all4syria.info/Archive/207246).
- <sup>19</sup> Yossi Alpher, *Periphery: Israel’s Search for Middle East Allies* (Lanham, 2015).
- <sup>20</sup> The notion of the partition-federalization of Syria is echoed in the Syrian Kurds’ identification with the independence referendum in Iraq’s Kurdish region, and the establishment of Kurdistan in northern Syria as well.
- <sup>21</sup> The documents are on file with the authors of the original article, “Project for a Safe Zone in Syria,” SAP (Safe Area Project).
- <sup>22</sup> See “Syrian Opposition Members Prepare a Peace Initiative with Israel” [Arabic], *Al Arab Al Yawm*, July 27, 2017, and the response at the conference of the Members of Free Golan (apparently financed by Azmi Bishara), who are opposed to the Golan Peace initiative, *Rabi’ al-Thawra* [Arabic], August 6, 2017.
- <sup>23</sup> Ron Ben-Yishai, “Concern in Light of Ceasefire: Iran Will Continue to Move Forward on a Land Corridor to Lebanon” [Hebrew], *Ynet*, July 9, 2017, [www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4986376,00.html](http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4986376,00.html).
- <sup>24</sup> “Tripartite Agreement to Support Ceasefire in Southern Syria” [Arabic], *Al Jazeera*, July 7, 2017.
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- <sup>29</sup> Itamar Eichner and Yael Freidson, “Netanyahu to UN Secretary-General: ‘We Will Not Allow a Noose; Iran is Building Precision-Guided Missile Sites Also in Syria’” [Hebrew], *Ynet*, August 28, 2017, [www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-5008625,00.html](http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-5008625,00.html).
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<sup>31</sup> The details are on file with the author.

<sup>32</sup> Leith Fadel, "Hezbollah, Iran are Allowed to Operate in Syria: Russian FM," *Al-Masdar News*, September 12, 2017, [www.almasdarnews.com/article/hezbollah-iran-allowed-operate-syria-russian-fm/](http://www.almasdarnews.com/article/hezbollah-iran-allowed-operate-syria-russian-fm/).

<sup>33</sup> Yara Bayoumy, "Syria's Moualem says Victory Within Reach, De-Escalation Zones Temporary," *Reuters*, September 23, 2017, [www.reuters.com/article/us-un-assembly-syria/syrias-moualem-says-victory-within-reach-de-escalation-zones-temporary-idUSKCN1BY0OT](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-un-assembly-syria/syrias-moualem-says-victory-within-reach-de-escalation-zones-temporary-idUSKCN1BY0OT).

<sup>34</sup> "Syria Shows Evidence that Western Weapons End Up in Terrorist Hands," *Al-Masdar News*, October 10, 2017, [www.almasdarnews.com/article/syria-shows-evidence-western-weapons-end-terrorist-hands](http://www.almasdarnews.com/article/syria-shows-evidence-western-weapons-end-terrorist-hands).