

# Strategic ASSESSMENT

Volume 17 | No. 3 | October 2014

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US Policy during Operation Protective Edge**

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# Strategic ASSESSMENT

The purpose of *Strategic Assessment* is to stimulate and enrich the public debate on issues that are, or should be, on Israel's national security agenda.

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# Abstracts

## **The “Special Relationship” in the Test of Time: US Policy during Operation Protective Edge**

Zaki Shalom

Throughout Operation Protective Edge, the Obama administration stressed that it recognized Israel’s right to defend itself against rocket and missile fire and the threat from the tunnels. However, it repeatedly demanded that Israel’s military campaign be proportionate and that it avoid escalation and harm to civilians as much as possible. In various incidents during the operation in which civilians were either killed or wounded, the administration criticized Israel’s military actions. Nevertheless, in the fifty days of fighting, it did not take meaningful steps to restrict Israel’s freedom of action. This US attitude demonstrates anew that the special relationship between the two countries, which has existed for many years, is stable and durable even in the face of serious disagreements that arise from time to time.

*Keywords:* Protective Edge, Hamas, Obama administration, IDF

## **Hizbollah and the Next War with Israel: Experience from Syria and Gaza**

Benedetta Berti and Yoram Schweitzer

The article assesses Hizbollah’s current domestic and regional status, examining how the organization has adapted to the challenge of fighting with the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria. After analyzing Hizbollah’s current position and strategy, it delves deeper into the question of the “potential next war” between the Lebanese Shiite organization and Israel, highlighting relevant lessons the organization might be drawing from Israel’s war against Hamas in the summer of 2014 as well as from its own current involvement in Syria. The war in Syria provides Hizbollah with the opportunity to enhance its military capabilities and hybrid warfare skills, which could lead to both improvement and increased reliance on more conventional standoff tactics in the next war with Israel. In addition, the lessons from the last Gaza war, including Israel’s political and psychological vulnerability to

attacks on its critical infrastructure and targeted cross-border operations, can assist Hizbollah in sharpening its operational concept and strategy.

*Keywords:* Syria, Hizbollah, Hamas, 2006 war, hybrid warfare

## **The Weight of the Demographic Factor in Israel's Strategic Considerations on the Palestinian Issue**

Kobi Michael

In the debate about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, demography often figures center stage. Many of the supporters of the two-state solution have concluded that the demographic reality is working against Israel, such that the country is liable to lose its Jewish majority in the western land of Israel and hence its Jewish democratic character, or have the one-state solution imposed on it, which would spell the end of the Zionist vision. Those who oppose the two-state solution and/or those who see no urgency in resolving the conflict cite a different demographic picture that points to a growing Jewish majority in the next few decades, even in the absence of a division of the land. This essay examines the importance of demography in Israel's overall strategic considerations. After reviewing the competing schools of thought, it concludes that despite the importance of the demographic factor, changes in demographics – in either direction – do not fundamentally change either Israel's essential strategic position or the motivation of those seeking to delegitimize it.

*Keywords:* demography, Israel, Israeli-Palestinian conflict, strategy, delegitimization

## **The Rise of the Islamic State Organization**

Ephraim Kam

The success of the Islamic State organization (IS) reflects an amalgam of strengths and weaknesses. Its forces are mobile, fast, and capable of surprise; they combine the capabilities of a small army with terror tactics and are not highly vulnerable. IS has also grown through the power of its success, obtaining more funds and arms, attracting more volunteers, and building a large stronghold in Iraq and Syria, where governments are not able to cope with the organization. Iraq and Syria depend, respectively, on aid from the United States and Iran, which have limited their operations against IS to airstrikes that are not sufficiently effective. A political approach to combat the group is likewise not forged easily. On the other hand,

the Islamic State is a small organization with limited ability to take over more territory. In Iraq, Sunni support for IS is limited, its adversaries are beginning to organize against it, and the scales will likely tip toward the organization's weaknesses. Most Muslims have reservations about its approach, and the potential to realize the vision of an Islamic caliphate is limited. However, the process of obstructing the group will take time, and the organization will not disappear quickly.

*Keywords:* Islamic State, ISIS, Iraq, Syria

## **The End of the Syrian Revolution: Between Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's Islamic Caliphate and Bashar al-Assad's Baath Regime**

Eyal Zisser

Following three and a half years of civil war in Syria, the end of the turmoil is not in sight. Bashar al-Assad has succeeded in surviving, but the establishment of an Islamic caliphate by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has helped maintain the bloody standoff, thereby in effect dividing Syria into small sub-states: an ISIS state in eastern Syria and western Iraq, a Baath stronghold under the Assad dynasty in central Syria, and autonomous enclaves of rebel groups fighting against both the Syrian regime and ISIS. Whether Assad manages to defeat his opponents, or whether the rebels are successful, the winner or winners in the struggle are liable to discover that very little is left of Syria – a country that only a few short years ago was regarded as a paragon of stability governed by a strong and invulnerable regime.

*Keywords:* Syria, Bashar al-Assad, ISIS

## **Between Ankara and Tehran: How the Scramble for Kurdistan Can Reshape Regional Relations**

Micha'el Tanchum

On June 30, 2014, Kurdistan Regional Government President Masoud Barzani announced that he would seek a referendum on Kurdish independence. In the wake of the subsequent political and military developments in Iraq, the article questions whether and to what extent Turkey and Iran can leverage their relations with the Kurdish rivals of Barzani's Kurdish Democratic Party to prevent independence or to constrain an independent Kurdish government from exercising autonomy in its foreign relations. Concluding that neither Turkey nor Iran will be able to prevent an independent Kurdistan,

the article suggests that an independent Kurdistan will find an enduring relationship with Israel to be vital to securing its national interests as Erbil seeks to preserve its autonomy between the respective demands of Ankara and Tehran.

*Keywords:* Independence, Kurdistan, Turkey, Iran, Rojava, KRG, PKK, PUK

## **Shifts in Israel-Africa Relations**

Herman Butime

In formulating ties with Africa, Israel has largely been motivated by altruism; the drive to circumvent boycotts that were designed to isolate it; efforts to combat external and internal threats to security; construction and consolidation of alliances that reinforce ideals and values; and the attempt to enhance its position as an important actor in the international system. For their part, Israel's African allies have sought to consolidate their cultural connections with the Jewish state and harness Israel's technical expertise in the spheres of development and security. To further strengthen these relations, Israel should focus on technical development assistance. The soft power approach to bilateral relations is the key to winning the hearts and minds of Africa.

*Keywords:* Israel, Africa, Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda

## **Changing Direction? Updating Israel's Nuclear Doctrine**

Louis René Beres

This paper examines Israel's evolving nuclear strategy, with particular reference to origins, core assumptions (still mostly implicit), and probable outcomes. Key questions considered are the longer term risks of continued nuclear ambiguity, prospects for further regional nuclear proliferation, expectations for rational and irrational behavior among pertinent regional decision makers, and the effects of a new Cold War between Russia and the United States. These questions point to the overarching complexity of strategic interactions in the Middle East, and to plausible synergies between Israel's strategic policies and anticipated enemy reactions. Emphasizing the need to advance beyond deliberate nuclear ambiguity, the article argues for a coherent and codified national strategic doctrine, a comprehensive master plan guided by analytic, rather than political, standards of judgment.

*Keywords:* Israeli nuclear doctrine, nuclear deterrence, missile defense, Samson option

# The “Special Relationship” in the Test of Time: US Policy during Operation Protective Edge

**Zaki Shalom**

Operation Protective Edge was the outcome of a series of violent incidents between Israel and the Palestinians after the failed effort of Secretary of State John Kerry from July 2013 to April 2014 to advance the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Among other challenges, the operation tested Israel’s military capability, its internal resilience, and its political position. This article reviews and analyzes the Obama administration’s positions and policy toward Israel during Operation Protective Edge.

## **Israel’s Military Operation**

From the first to the last day of the military conflict in the Gaza Strip, the Obama administration took an unequivocal position affirming Israel’s right to defend itself. Administration spokespeople repeatedly emphasized that no country could tolerate missile and rocket fire at its cities or tunnels that lead into its territory. Beyond this the administration generally avoided expressing support for Israeli military operations. On July 21, 2014, however, against the background of increasing criticism in the United States due to erosion in American support for Israel’s military actions against Hamas, the Secretary of State specifically called the IDF action in Gaza “appropriate and legitimate.”<sup>1</sup>

On a formal level, recognition of a state’s right to defend itself does not have much significance, since it is the natural and self-evident right of any state to defend itself. This right is also enshrined in Article 51 of

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the UN charter. However, on the political-public diplomacy level, this affirmation, and the fact that it was emphasized repeatedly by administration spokespeople, had great significance and was perceived as an expression of American support, even if qualified, for Israel's military moves. The administration's position was likely influenced by the broad support for Israel in the US Congress and in public opinion during the conflict.

In practice, throughout the operation the administration adhered to the concept that Israel's military actions in Gaza must be defensive, proportionate, and limited to removal of the concrete threats of the missiles and tunnels, and that Israel must ensure minimal harm to the civilian population.<sup>2</sup> This implied unequivocally that the administration disagreed with two of Israel's goals of the military action: a serious blow to the Hamas infrastructures and the restoration of deterrence. Achieving both these goals required intensive and comprehensive actions that exacted a heavy cost from Hamas. Hamas' extensive use of the civilian population as human shields in fact made it impossible for Israel to attain its goals without inflicting harm on the civilian population.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Israeli Leadership Acted Responsibly and with Restraint**

Throughout the operation, Israel agreed to every ceasefire proposal, and it was Hamas that torpedoed these agreements. This fact did not escape the administration's notice. Along with criticism of particular Israeli military actions, the administration expressed its appreciation to Israel's leaders for their efforts to restore calm even at the price of harsh domestic criticism and the appearance of humiliation by the terrorist organizations. On July 15, 2014, Kerry made clear that the escalation in Gaza entailed great risks: "We don't want to see that [escalation] – nobody does – *and nor does Israel.*"<sup>4</sup>

The appreciation of Israel's measured responses increased dramatically after the "outrageous violation"<sup>5</sup> of the ceasefire by Hamas on August 1, 2014. The President made it clear that he "unequivocally condemned" the attacks, and he lambasted "the incredibly irresponsible actions on the part of Hamas to oftentimes house these rocket launchers right in the middle of civilian neighborhoods."<sup>6</sup> The administration's stance was undoubtedly a key factor in the relatively broad legitimacy that in practice was granted to Israel's military actions throughout the operation. Prime Minister Netanyahu expressed this in one of his speeches: "We received international legitimacy from the global community...for very strong action against the terrorist organizations. This was substantial."<sup>7</sup>

## The Role of Turkey and Qatar in the Mediation Efforts

Throughout the operation, administration officials had a tendency to distinguish between blame for the outbreak of the conflict – an issue that it underplayed – and the agreement that would follow the conflict. At times, spokespeople took pains to note that Hamas had started the conflict, yet for the purposes of “balance,” there was sometimes an implied connection between the military confrontation and the failure of Kerry’s mission several months prior to it. These ideas were not stated explicitly, but the message seemed clear: even if Hamas was directly responsible for the outbreak of the warfare, Israel was not free of responsibility, since it had the opportunity to promote a settlement that would prevent conflict and failed to take advantage of it.<sup>8</sup>

The administration also refrained from accepting Israel’s position that a discussion on the substantive questions raised by Hamas would take place only after a stable ceasefire was reached. During Kerry’s visit to Cairo on July 21, 2014, he made it clear that nothing would be solved solely through a ceasefire, temporary or extended, if the fundamental problems were not addressed at some stage. The Secretary of State noted that the discussion on the substantive issues would begin “at some point,” but he gave no details.<sup>9</sup> The following day, Kerry stated that “just reaching a cease-fire clearly is not enough. It is imperative that there be a serious engagement, discussion, negotiation regarding the underlying issues and addressing all of the concerns that have brought us to where we are today.” When that would occur was not clear.<sup>10</sup> On another occasion, Kerry stated that the Palestinians can’t have a ceasefire in which they think the status quo is here to stay and they will not be able to begin to live and breathe more freely. In other words, the discussion on the substantive issues must take place during the fighting, just as Hamas demanded.<sup>11</sup>

On July 25, 2014, Kerry met in Paris with the Foreign Ministers of Turkey and Qatar, two countries that openly support Hamas and its struggle against Israel. The purpose of the meeting was to mobilize the two as key players in the efforts to achieve a ceasefire. It was clear that Israel would not be invited to the meeting. However, at the same time, the administration refrained from inviting Egypt and the Palestinian Authority, both of which have a critical interest in an arrangement with Hamas. “Many Arab leaders,” wrote Elliott Abrams, “were shocked to see Secretary of State Kerry in Paris with the foreign ministers of Qatar and Turkey, which were supporting Hamas, and without Egyptian or PA officials present.”<sup>12</sup> From Israel’s point of view,

this conduct by the administration could not but imply that it was seeking to push Israel into a corner and deny it the possibility of achieving the objectives for the operation that it had set for itself.

After his meetings with the Turkish and Qatari Foreign Ministers, Kerry, speaking in a firm, if not threatening, tone, stated that he wanted "everybody in Israel to understand: we clearly understand – I understand that Palestinians need to live with dignity, with some – freedom...and they need a life that is free from the current restraints that they feel on a daily basis, and obviously free from violence." Words in this vein suggest that the Secretary of State had adopted an approach more favorable to Hamas than to Israel. Later, he made pro forma remarks to the effect that "Israelis need to live free from rockets and from tunnels that threaten them." There was no reference to Hamas' culpability for the outbreak of the conflict, to Israel's demand to demilitarize Gaza, or to Israel's right to monitor materials entering Gaza. At the end of his remarks, Secretary Kerry presented the conflict as a clash of "competing interests that are real for both" the Palestinians and Israel. Thus, he once again placed Israel and Hamas on the same justification level, while making it clear that the confrontation does not reflect an unjustified aggression by Hamas, as Israel claims, but a struggle over the "competing interests" of the two sides. In such circumstances, it could come as no surprise that the proposal for a settlement submitted to Israel would reflect these positions presented. The expected crisis with the United States was not long in coming.<sup>13</sup>

According to several accounts, Kerry's settlement proposal shocked Israel's leaders. *Haaretz* correspondent Barak Ravid listed a number of elements of the proposal that, from Israel's point of view, ran highly counter to its national interests: (a) There was almost no reference in the proposal to Israel's security needs, i.e., demilitarizing the Gaza Strip by removing rockets and heavy weapons and destroying the terror tunnels leading from Gaza to Israel. The emphasis was almost exclusively on Hamas' needs: opening the border crossings, allowing entry of goods and people, and transferring funds to Hamas to enable it to pay salaries. (b) According to the draft, the agreement was between the two parties, Israel and the "Palestinian factions," or in other words, Hamas and the other factions operating in the Gaza Strip. The two sides were of equal status. (c) The proposal did not give any status to the PA under Mahmoud Abbas. Not surprisingly, Israel's cabinet rejected the proposal. Wide circles in Israel,

Egypt, and the United States harshly criticized the administration's conduct in the crisis, and in particular, the settlement proposal.<sup>14</sup>

To ease the criticism of the administration's positions on Israel, particularly by members of Congress,<sup>15</sup> State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki announced that the published proposal was not "a formal US proposal" but a "confidential draft."<sup>16</sup> Administration officials claimed that they had not expected the draft to be presented to the cabinet, and that Netanyahu's office had "breached protocol" by presenting it for a cabinet vote.<sup>17</sup> It is hard to believe that these claims were well received in Israel. There was no doubt that an important document such as this was carefully examined by the various government agencies and received the President's approval.

At the same time, and in order to display more sympathy toward Israel, the White House issued a memorandum on the main points of the conversation between President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu. The discussion included (a) a "serious accusation" by the President against Hamas concerning its rocket fire and its use of tunnels to attack Israel; (b) emphasis on the need to establish a humanitarian ceasefire, and then a permanent, *unconditional* ceasefire [emphasis added], as demanded by Israel; (c) support by the United States for the Egyptian initiative, meaning that Turkey and Qatar were being excluded as key mediators, although administration spokesmen continued to emphasize the need to include the countries involved in the conflict and the regional actors in actions to reach a settlement; (d) an emphasis on the need to ensure Israel's security and strengthen the standing of the PA; (e) the concept that any permanent settlement of the conflict must ensure the disarming of the terrorist groups in Gaza and the demilitarization of Gaza. However, the President made clear that the issue of Gaza's demilitarization was not a matter for the immediate term, as Israel demanded, but something to be included in a comprehensive settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.<sup>18</sup>

National Security Advisor Susan Rice was also mobilized for the effort to improve the administration's image. At a meeting with Jewish leaders in the United States, she reiterated the administration's support for Israel.<sup>19</sup> The Secretary of State likewise stressed his deep commitment to Israel's security and the fact that in his twenty-nine years in Congress, he had a 100 percent pro-Israel voting record.<sup>20</sup> At a press conference on August 1, 2014, President Obama completed the campaign to defend Kerry, rejecting

the "unfair criticism" of Secretary Kerry, who was working tirelessly to achieve quiet in the area.<sup>21</sup>

### **Harm to Civilians in Gaza**

From the start of the campaign, the US administration stressed its concern regarding the harm to civilians. Formally, administration spokesmen generally attempted to be minimally balanced between Israel and Gaza in their comments in this context. Nevertheless, all of their statements emphasized in no uncertain terms the serious suffering of Gaza's citizens, while references to the suffering of Israel's citizens were peripheral, leaving the impression that they were merely pro forma remarks.<sup>22</sup>

During the operation, the administration took the trouble to condemn Israel harshly and publicly for significant harm to civilians, particularly near or within UN welfare institutions in Gaza. This constituted a marginalization, if not near-total rejection of Israel's claims that Hamas was solely responsible for the deaths of innocents in Gaza. It seems that from the administration's point of view, the suffering of civilians in Gaza was a phenomenon in its own right that resulted from Israel's military operations there and should not be linked to a greater context of who should be blamed in the first place for the killing of innocent people. When harm to civilians in Gaza was on the agenda, the administration did not even seriously address the admission by UN personnel that Hamas places weapons in UN institutions or the firm demand by members of Congress to investigate the issue.<sup>23</sup>

The administration's response to the death of more than ten Palestinians near the UN school in Rafah was especially serious. Officials did not bother to wait for the results of the investigation to confirm whether the IDF was responsible for the event, as is the accepted practice among allies. Jen Psaki used harsh words in relaying the administration's response, stating that "the United States is appalled by today's disgraceful shelling." According to Psaki, "the coordinates of the school, like all UN facilities in Gaza, have been repeatedly communicated to the Israeli Defense Forces." She added that "Israel must do more to meet its own standards and avoid civilian casualties."<sup>24</sup>

The wording of the statement left no room for doubt: not only was the administration not prepared to await the IDF's investigation of the incident, table the matter with a discreet conversation with Israel about such incidents, or accept Israel's claim that it was a tragic error in the use of military force. The US attitude clearly reflected a tendency to see

the incident as a deliberate Israeli attack meant to make the residents of Gaza pay a heavy price for the continuation of the fighting. Against this background, the administration apparently sought to further limit Israel's military freedom of action. "The suspicion that militants are operating nearby [civilian sites]," noted the spokeswoman, "does not justify strikes that put at risk the lives of so many innocent civilians."<sup>25</sup>

### **Punitive Measures?**

On July 22, 2014, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) decided to stop flights to Israel by US airlines after a missile shot from Gaza hit Yehud, located near Ben Gurion Airport. In the wake of this decision, many airlines announced that they were suspending their flights to Israel. Beyond the damage to Israel's image, morale, and economy, Israel feared – in my opinion, justifiably – that closure of the airport would provide a very persuasive image of victory for Hamas.<sup>26</sup>

Administration spokespeople contended that this was a professional decision by an independent body and that the administration was not involved. Wide circles in Israel doubted this claim: "In Israel," wrote Amos Harel in *Haaretz*, "the American move was viewed as a knife in the back of the war effort...It is difficult to avoid the impression that the cessation of flights did not occur entirely by chance." After two days, the FAA decided to resume flights to Israel. "Prime Minister Netanyahu," wrote Harel, "hastened to announce that 'pressure we applied caused the flights to be resumed.'" Harel wondered why Netanyahu had to intervene "if the decision was strictly professional."<sup>27</sup>

On August 14, 2014, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that the administration was delaying a shipment of weapons to Israel after it found out that the weapons were being transferred solely on the basis of Pentagon approval.<sup>28</sup> Following harsh criticism of this unusual step – delaying weapons shipments to Israel during a military campaign – the State Department was quick to deny that this was a punitive measure against Israel. As proof, it referred to the fact that during the fighting, the administration had transferred \$225 million to Israel for the continued development of Iron Dome.<sup>29</sup> According to the State Department, this was a routine bureaucratic move that is always taken when weapons are shipped to areas of tension, and does not reflect any change in policy toward Israel.<sup>30</sup> However, here too there was a widespread feeling in Israel that if the administration so desired, it had the tools to circumvent bureaucratic obstacles. This American move

represented a departure from the position taken by the current and previous administrations, that the government will not allow disagreements on the political level to harm the military-defense relationship with Israel. In any case, after intensive discussions with the United States, it was made clear that the supply of weapons would continue as usual.<sup>31</sup>

## Conclusion

The conflict between Israel and Hamas in Operation Protective Edge began and took place under political conditions that were favorable, if not ideal, for Israel. The conflict involved an advanced, pro-Western democratic state – an unofficial US ally (major non-NATO ally) – and a terrorist organization, outlawed by Congressional legislation operating in contravention of international law.<sup>32</sup> There was no doubt that Hamas initiated the conflict, and throughout the operation, Israel, unlike Hamas, demonstrated willingness to bring about calm. Hamas engaged in deliberate, indiscriminate firing at civilian targets in Israel, action that according to administration spokesmen is “completely unacceptable.”<sup>33</sup> In addition, the public and brutal executions Hamas conducted during the operation damaged its image as a terrorist organization that focuses on social welfare and enjoys widespread public sympathy. Its identification with ISIS in global public opinion was inevitable, even though officially, the administration has not accepted the Prime Minister’s comparison between the two organizations.

Under these circumstances, it could be expected that during the conflict the administration would give Israel full backing for its military operation and strive to end the conflict with Israel undeniably having the upper hand. In fact, the situation was entirely different. When administration officials referred to the conflict, they projected the message that Israel and Hamas were two sides fighting each other as equals and that the administration was not favoring either of them. The overriding goal was to end the conflict, or in other words, bring about calm on the basis of the understandings that led to the end of Operation Pillar of Defense. Secretary Kerry expressed this poignantly when toward the end of Operation Protective Edge he was asked directly whether the United States gave its full support to Israel in the operation. He refrained from answering in the affirmative, making do with a routine statement to the effect that the United States supported Israel’s right to defend itself.<sup>34</sup>

The administration’s somewhat alienated stance toward Israel during the operation was likely dictated by the following main considerations:

- a. Responsibility for the conflict: The administration acknowledged that it was Hamas that initiated the latest conflict in Gaza, and was well aware of the fact that the Israeli government, unlike Hamas, demonstrated a sincere desire throughout the campaign to agree to a ceasefire and return to a state of calm. Nevertheless, in comments by administration officials, there was a tendency to make clear, albeit implicitly, that Israel was also responsible for the outbreak of the conflict.<sup>35</sup>
- b. Turkish and Qatari involvement: These two economically and politically powerful countries, which have a very close relationship with the United States, have openly declared their support for Hamas. This fact greatly limited the administration's ability to maneuver during the campaign. It likely estimated that if it were to express explicit support for Israel and Egypt, this could engender a harsh response from Turkey and Qatar that would harm the essential United States interests. The turbulence in today's Middle East, and particularly the violent actions of the Islamic State and the need to deploy the US military in operational tasks in the Middle East, make it necessary for the administration to avoid a crisis with these two important countries. This is presumably the reason the administration attempted to make Turkey and Qatar key actors in the mediation efforts; only after it had been harshly criticized did the administration renege on the move.
- c. The exclusion of the United States from the agreement process: During the campaign, the United States found itself in the rather embarrassing position of lacking a meaningful status in the process of achieving a ceasefire and regulating relations between Egypt, Israel, and Hamas. This was the first war since the establishment of the State of Israel in which the United States did not play a dominant role in the process of achieving a settlement. Its attempts to be part of the efforts at a settlement involved incidents embarrassing to it and to its representatives. Ultimately, the administration had no choice but to accept the fact that Egypt was leading the process of reaching an arrangement with Hamas. Among various circles in the administration, the prevailing assumption was that Netanyahu had pushed the United States aside.<sup>36</sup>
- d. The issue of image: The harrowing photographs from Gaza publicized by the global media aggravated Israel's image problem. For the administration, it was especially difficult to accept the sight of injured children and harm to civilians within or next to UN institutions. The administration was familiar with Israel's explanations and even voiced

them a number of times, but the pictures made it difficult for the administration to express full support for Israel.

However, and with a broad perspective, it is important to stress that in spite of the pitfalls, disagreements, arguments, and mutual insults between Israel and the United States during the operation, the picture that emerges is that the "special relationship" remained stable and successfully survived the severe turmoil surrounding the operation. Throughout the operation Israel and the United States conducted an ongoing, intensive, deep, and intimate dialogue, as befits countries with a broad strategic partnership. Furthermore, all during the operation, there was an effort by both sides to avoid a rupture, with a clear emphasis on continuing an intensive dialogue in spite of the disagreements.

Moreover, it is impossible to ignore the fact that even when the administration chose to publicly or discreetly emphasize its displeasure with Israel's conduct in the campaign, it avoided heavy pressure on Israel to change the nature of the military operation. This means that in practice, throughout the operation, i.e., a period just short of two months, the United States allowed Israel fairly large freedom of action even when Israel's military actions were unprecedented and very far from the parameters the United States saw as appropriate. Ultimately, this is the crucial point in evaluating US policy during the operation and its significance for relations between the two countries.

## Notes

- 1 Remarks, Secretary of State John Kerry and UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, Cairo, Egypt, July 21, 2014, <http://iipdigital.usembassy.gov/st/english/texttrans/2014/07/20140722304317.html#axzz3DZq8TDmp>; henceforth, "Kerry remarks, July 21, 2014."
- 2 Michael Gordon, "Obama Administration Defends Israeli Airstrikes," *New York Times*, July 9, 2014.
- 3 Statement of the President on Ukraine, the White House, July 18, 2014, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/photos-and-video/video/2014/07/18/president-makes-statement-ukraine#tran>.
- 4 Remarks, John Kerry, Secretary of State, Vienna, Austria, July 15, 2014, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2014/07/229275.htm>, emphasis added; henceforth, "Kerry remarks, July 15, 2014."
- 5 "The Situation in the Gaza Strip," Press Statement, John Kerry, Secretary of State, August 1, 2014, <http://embassies.gov.il/san-francisco/Newsandevents/Pages/The-Situation-in-the-Gaza-Strip.aspx>.

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# Hizbollah and the Next War with Israel: Experience from Syria and Gaza

**Benedetta Berti and Yoram Schweitzer**

Following the end of the hostilities in Gaza between Israel and Hamas in the summer of 2014, a debate arose over which of the parties was victorious and which was vanquished. Some argue that Hamas' military gains in the last war were greatly offset by significant losses to its arsenal, infrastructure, and military leadership and by the substantial damage inflicted on the population. At the same time, Hamas' political and financial position continues to be precarious, with the group facing growing regional isolation and ostensibly needing to allow Palestinian Authority security forces to be deployed at Gaza's borders in order to obtain any significant relaxation of the economic restrictions it has fought so vehemently. On the other hand, many have argued that despite these considerations, Hamas can still feel satisfied by its latest military performance: the group not only denied Israel a clear-cut victory, but de facto it was able to dictate the duration of the war by rejecting numerous ceasefire attempts, while demonstrating improved military and guerrilla skills over its performance in Operation Cast Lead. Hamas also managed to restore its position on the political map as a significant player and – at least according to a recent poll – enjoyed a short but significant popularity boost among the general Palestinian population.<sup>1</sup>

The question of Hamas' and Israel's respective gains and losses in the last round of hostilities is not only significant for determining both future political developments in the Gaza Strip and the evolution of the complex relationship between the two parties. Rather, both the war-fighting and the war-termination phases of the 2014 Gaza war will be watched closely by one of Israel's main regional foes, the Lebanese Hizbollah, seeking to draw relevant lessons to be applied in its "next war" with Israel.

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The article begins by assessing Hezbollah's current domestic and regional status and analyzing its overall strategy. It then delves deeper into the question of a possible "next war" between the Lebanese-Shiite organization and Israel, highlighting relevant lessons the organization might draw from Israel's last war against Hamas as well as how it is affected by its ongoing involvement in Syria.

### **The Looming War? Hezbollah's Preparations since the "Divine Victory"**

Over the past decades, the relationship and the patterns of confrontation between Israel and Hezbollah have evolved considerably. The first phase of hostilities occurred between 1982, when the group was initially formed, and 1990, in the context of the Lebanese civil war and following Israel's full scale military intervention in Lebanon. Hezbollah then relied on tactics that ranged from conventional attacks against the Israeli army to asymmetric warfare and classical terrorism in and out of Lebanon, including car bombings, suicide attacks, and kidnappings of Israelis and other foreigners. With the end of the civil war the rules of engagement between Israel and Hezbollah changed dramatically, with the battlefield restricted primarily to the "security zone," an area that constituted about 10 percent of Lebanon and was under the military control of both the IDF and the Southern Lebanese Army, a Christian militia that acted as an Israeli proxy. Despite two rounds of military escalations, in 1993 and 1996, the relationship became increasingly shaped by the logic of mutual restraint and reciprocity. The rules were even transcribed into a written, though unsigned, understanding that stipulated that the IDF would abstain from targeting civilians or civilian targets in exchange for Hezbollah's restraint from similar attacks in Israel proper.<sup>2</sup> Following Israel's unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon to the Blue Line in 2000, the direct confrontation between Israel and Hezbollah became even more restricted and was mostly confined to so-called disputed areas, such as Shab'a Farms, an area under Israeli control that Hezbollah and the Lebanese government claim as Lebanese (while the UN sees it as Syrian).

The rules of the game changed again dramatically in the summer of 2006, when a Hezbollah cross-border operation aimed at kidnapping IDF soldiers to exchange them for Lebanese prisoners in Israeli custody triggered the 34-day Second Lebanon War. Israel responded to what it perceived as an erosion of its deterrence (with respect to Hezbollah as well as more generally at the regional level) by raising the stakes and both increasing the level of the military response and extending the range of operations to

the north of the Litani River. The violent escalation was the direct result of Hezbollah's miscalculation of the Israeli reaction to its breaches of the rules of the games, as subsequently admitted by Hezbollah's Secretary General, Hassan Nasrallah.

The 2006 war was a watershed in Israel-Hezbollah relations, and since then, both parties have undertaken serious "soul-searching," investing in identifying key vulnerabilities and meeting the challenges posed by their adversaries.

In the case of Hezbollah, that preparation has resulted in a military buildup, with the organization significantly expanding its ranks, upgrading its arsenal and infrastructure, and investing in improving its combat capabilities, with the direct assistance of Iran (and Syria). In the next war with Israel, Hezbollah would more than likely pursue the trend, noted already in July 2006, of its transition from the non-conventional militia it was in the 1980s to a hybrid army (or "army without a state").<sup>3</sup> In 2006, this meant that Hezbollah effectively relied on a combination of sub-conventional and conventional tactics while also fortifying its small units engaged in guerrilla warfare tactics with standoff weapons normally associated with conventional military forces.<sup>4</sup>

Since then Hezbollah has invested in upgrading its conventional arsenal as well as in training and preparing for more conventional engagements, a process that has gone hand-in-hand with the group's efforts to rebuild and qualitatively and quantitatively improve its underground bunkers and tunnel infrastructure – to reduce its vulnerability to aerial strikes – while significantly upgrading its rocket and missiles arsenal.<sup>5</sup> Investments in improving intelligence collection as well as counter-intelligence capabilities have also been part of Hezbollah's post-2006 activity, for example with the group focusing on maintaining and upgrading its communication systems, including its own fiber optic network, sponsored by Iran.<sup>6</sup> In parallel, Hezbollah has focused on training for cross-border operations into Israel.

Military preparations have been matched by very clear political statements indicating Hezbollah's vision and strategy with respect to the next war with Israel. Indeed, while Nasrallah had referred to the July 2006 war as the "divine victory," he later described the next round of confrontation as the "decisive war,"<sup>7</sup> indicating clearly the group's ambitious goals with respect to its future engagement with Israel. Similarly, Hezbollah's post-2006 military doctrine has centered on the notion of strategic parity and proportional retaliation, a concept Nasrallah described by asserting that the new power

equation would be “Tel Aviv for Beirut, and Ben Gurion International Airport for Rafiq Hariri International Airport.”<sup>8</sup> The organization also stated that it would respond to any territorial invasion by the IDF with a territorial invasion of its own, sending its units to occupy the Galilee region.<sup>9</sup> Although this declaration was likely intended for psychological warfare purposes, it indicates a drive to take the war into Israel’s territory.

At the same time, it is a mistake to assume that the extensive war preparations since 2006 (on both sides) should serve as an indication of the parties’ eagerness to engage in another round of war. Quite the contrary: since 2006 both Israel and Hizbollah have shown a common interest in preventing another war, resulting in a generally restrained attitude, motivated in turn by the mutually shared assumption that the next round of hostilities will be far more severe and intense than any previous confrontation between the parties. The system, based on mutual deterrence, has de facto been in place since 2006, resulting in an uneasy yet almost undisturbed calm across the Blue Line.<sup>10</sup>

However, the mutual restraint in perpetrating direct attacks has not been matched in the other areas; for example several attacks have been attributed to Israel, including the targeted killings of Hizbollah senior commanders such as Imad Mughniyeh in February 2008 and Hassan Lakis in 2014. Similarly, in the past three years there have been a number of attacks against convoys of sophisticated arms shipments in Syria that were intended for Hizbollah (and on at least one instance the strikes took place in Lebanon). Hizbollah has also been blamed for some sporadic small scale attacks against the IDF along the Lebanese and Syrian borders; while its operatives have allegedly been active in the international arena, where the group has sent its operatives to attack Israeli and Jewish targets in Turkey, Azerbaijan, Cyprus, Bulgaria, and Thailand (among others).

In this context, it is especially important to assess if and how the Syrian civil war and its domestic impact in Lebanon has changed Hizbollah’s calculus with respect to the next war with Israel.

### **Enter Syria: Hizbollah’s Current Predicament and the Likelihood of Another War with Israel**

The Syrian civil war has forced Hizbollah to focus its attention toward supporting the regime of Bashar al-Assad, both politically and militarily. Hizbollah’s support for Assad is motivated by a number of strategic considerations, including Hizbollah’s interest in preserving its political

partnership with Syria as well as in maintaining the current domestic balance of power in Lebanon. Hizbollah's partnership with Iran and the role of Syria as both a member of Tehran's "axis of resistance" and the political and logistic link between Tehran and Hizbollah also contribute to understanding the depth of the Hizbollah commitment to Assad.

Hizbollah has therefore actively supported the Assad regime since the beginning of the Syrian civil war in early 2011, although its role has gradually evolved from offering political support and serving in an advisory capacity to providing both training as well as direct military support to conduct offensive and defensive operations.<sup>11</sup> Relying also on the post-2006 increased focus on conventional training, Hizbollah fighters have at times been able to provide key artillery support to the Syrian army, contributing substantively to a number of important victories; including the taking of al-Qusayr in the spring of 2013, a town in the west of Syria considered critical to securing a safe corridor between Syria and Lebanon and between Damascus and the Alawite areas in the northwestern coastal areas of the country. In March 2014, Hizbollah played an integral role in the taking of Yabroud, resulting in cutting a major rebel supply line as well as in ousting the opposition forces from their main remaining stronghold in the embattled Qalamoun region.

Not surprisingly, Hizbollah's campaign in Syria has forced the group to prioritize its "eastern front," resulting in another direct incentive for the group to avoid getting dragged into another war with Israel. This explains why Hizbollah's reactions to a series of unclaimed aerial strikes against Hizbollah assets in Syria over the past three years has not resulted in major retaliation from the group. Even following the February 24, 2014 reported attack on a Hizbollah target in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley,<sup>12</sup> Hizbollah's response (which likely included both a rocket attack along with explosive devices planted along the border with the Golan as well as in the Shab'a Farms area)<sup>13</sup> also seemed to signal an interest in preventing further escalation.

At the same time, since the beginning of the civil war, Hizbollah has paid increasing attention to its own domestic situation in Lebanon. First, the civil war in Syria has exacerbated preexisting political-cum-sectarian cleavages within Lebanon, in turn raising the tones and animosity of the political debate. To add to the complexity of the current situation, the ongoing Syrian conflict has put additional pressure on Lebanon through the steady influx of Syrian refugees, numbering roughly 1.2 million by

August 2014 – more than 20 percent of Lebanon’s total population – and the number is expected to rise to 1.5 million by the end of the year.<sup>14</sup>

Second, Hizbollah’s investment in Syria and its support of the Bashar al-Assad regime has made both the organization as well as the Shiite community in Lebanon a target of violence perpetrated by Lebanese Salafi-jihadist groups. Indeed, in the past twelve months there have been a number of violent attacks against Hizbollah, including a string of suicide attacks against Iranian targets, such as the embassy in Beirut, and Hizbollah’s strongholds, such as Beirut’s southern Dahiya suburb.

In turn, this rising “takfiri threat,” as described by Secretary General Nasrallah, has been taken extremely seriously by the organization, which has both invested in boosting its own surveillance and protection of assets, personnel, and communities, as well as in increasing its cooperation with the Lebanese armed forces. Such assistance is meaningful from an operational standpoint as well as from a political one, as it is important to Hizbollah to make sure the attacks against them and their community are treated as a national terrorism threat and not as exclusively a Hizbollah problem. Containing the takfiri threat is thus especially important to Hizbollah for a number of reasons, including the group’s interest in preventing internal strife in Lebanon and its need to be seen as an effective security provider to the Lebanese Shiite community, which constitutes the backbone of Hizbollah’s support in Lebanon.

In this context of internal polarization and the rising threat by radical Sunni jihadist groups, including Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIL, Hizbollah has turned its political capital and organizational resources inwards, while continuing its external campaign in Syria. Therefore, in the short term, this combination of domestic pressure and external involvement will likely help lower Hizbollah’s interest in confronting Israel even further. Of course, this does not exclude the possibility of a war breaking out, either as result of a gross miscalculation by Israel or by Hizbollah, or in response to a dramatic development on the Iranian-Israeli front.

In the long term, it is far from clear whether Hizbollah’s current involvement in Syria will help or hinder its future performance in a war with Israel. Hizbollah has been entangled in Syria, with an estimate of roughly 3,000-4,000 fighters involved in the hostilities,<sup>15</sup> a high number for an organization whose force is believed to comprise roughly 5,000 full time fighters and between 15,000 and 20,000 part time/reserve officers.<sup>16</sup> Also, the organization is suffering from significant losses in Syria, among

them important military commanders and an estimated number of at least 1000 fighters.<sup>17</sup> Still, the bulk of the group's military structure and arsenal that would be used in the next war with Israel largely remains intact. Significantly, Hizbollah has continued to invest in upgrading and expanding its arsenal and ranks since the war in Syria began, while also trying to keep militants trained especially to fight Israel – for example anti-tank units – away from the Syrian battlefield.<sup>18</sup> In addition, Syria is serving as an important learning opportunity for the group, and especially for its newer recruits, offering valuable lessons in both conventional fighting and complex offensive operations in unfamiliar terrain.

### **Looking Ahead: Lessons from the 2014 War in Gaza**

Even though Hizbollah's current predicament should not represent an incentive for the group to pursue an all-out confrontation with Israel, this does not mean that the Lebanese-Shiite group has not been paying close attention to the recent round of escalation between Hamas and Israel and analyzing the lessons of July-August 2014. Indeed, Hizbollah is an especially sophisticated organization with a keen interest in fully studying and understanding its adversary, and as such Hizbollah is always closely watching Israeli behavior and activity, both on the battlefield as well as in the political arena. Hizbollah followed the summer 2014 war closely, expressing its solidarity with Gaza on numerous occasions, denouncing Israeli actions, and going as far as mentioning its intention to support the "resistance." Given its current predicament, Hizbollah clearly did not intend to translate any of these political statements into actions.

Looking at the recent war in Gaza, Hizbollah is likely to have drawn a number of lessons regarding both Israel's war-fighting capabilities as well as will.

First, the recent engagement between Hamas and Israel confirmed a lesson Hizbollah had already learned in 2006, namely the effectiveness of relying on short range rockets – easy to store, move, and fire – launched in a concentrated barrage and able to frighten the civilian population and disrupt Israel's sense of normalcy. Concentrated barrages of rockets on border towns may lead to mass evacuations, which in turn can be marketed effectively as a military achievement – much like Hamas has been doing in the aftermath of Operation Protective Edge – while also serving as a tool of psychological warfare and wielding leverage on the Israeli government. In the case of Hizbollah, short range rockets can be

backed by a far more sophisticated, accurate, and long range arsenal of medium and long range rockets.

In disrupting civilian life in Israel, lowering morale, and creating political leverage, the recent war between Hamas and Israel also highlighted especially apt choices of targets, led by Israel's Ben Gurion International Airport. In a future war with Israel, Hizbollah would likely rely on its considerably more sophisticated and precise weapons to target Israel's main civilian airport. This is very well in line with Nasrallah's post-2006 declarations hinting at the group's interest in targeting Israel's critical infrastructure, including power plants, gas depots, airports, and naval ports.

In parallel, a Hizbollah reading of the Israeli public's reactions to the foiled Hamas attempts to perpetrate cross-border operations via its underground tunnel networks can confirm to Hizbollah the potential effectiveness of both its impressive underground system as well as of its recent focus on training units to conduct cross-border operations into Israel. While Hizbollah would not be able to hold ground in Israel, still, a number of targeted incursions into Israel via underground tunnels would be an extremely effective tool of psychological warfare.

Second, Hizbollah is also likely to have observed Israel's resolve to fight in Gaza and drawn the conclusion that now more than ever, the country is extremely casualty-averse and reluctant to engage in sustained ground maneuvers. Some may even infer that Israel's reluctance to engage in an extensive ground operation in Gaza despite the ongoing rocket fire suggests a far more restrained approach than that implied by Jerusalem's declarations with respect to the next war with Hizbollah. Third, the Gaza war also underscored a lesson that had emerged clearly from the July 2006 confrontation, namely, that when the guns fall silent, Hizbollah will be able to market not losing as a victory, no matter the cost that its military apparatus or Lebanon may end up paying.

Of course, none of these lessons are entirely new or surprising, but they may contribute to refine Hizbollah's strategy and approach to the next conflict with Israel. At the same time, relying too much on analogies between Gaza and Lebanon may prove risky for Hizbollah.

Indeed, due to the dramatic differences, both qualitative and quantitative, between Hamas' and Hizbollah's arsenals, and considering the latter's far more precise and sophisticated rockets and missiles, Israel may choose to react from the initial stage of the fighting in a more extensive way in the context of a confrontation with Hizbollah, leading thus to an all-out

war resulting in greater civilian casualties (on both sides) and extensive damages to infrastructure. Similarly, Israel would likely not tolerate the closing of its aerial or maritime space and would presumably react to break the “siege” at almost any cost. A wrong translation of Israel’s relatively limited offensive policy in Gaza could be especially risky for Hizbollah if it were to lead to yet another miscalculation, which, much like in 2006, would cost Lebanon dearly, only this time in a much more lethal scope.

### Looking Ahead at the Evolving Hizbollah-Israel Dynamic

Ever since the relatively abrupt ending to the July 2006 war between Hizbollah and Israel, the overall situation along the Blue Line has been calm. Indeed the parties’ mutual perception that the next round of war would be both extensive and incredibly damaging has led to a situation of uneasy calm regulated by de facto mutual deterrence. In this context, the beginning of the Syria civil war has further reinforced the status quo by focusing Hizbollah’s attention on its “eastern front.”

Looking ahead, and short of an unexpected development in the Syrian civil war, Hizbollah will continue its involvement in the fighting in order to secure the survival of the Assad regime. It will also continue to invest additional resources to defend its assets, infrastructure, and communities against takfiri threats within Lebanon. In this context, the group will likely try to avoid opening another front with Israel, while still remaining alert with respect to Israel’s plans and continuing to monitor Israeli activity and behavior. In this context, Hizbollah is also likely to have watched the last round of hostilities between Israel and Hamas closely, seeking to draw relevant lessons.

Thus while some insights can indeed be gained from the summer 2014 war, still the Israeli strategy in Gaza cannot serve as an exact model for future military campaigns in Lebanon.

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# The Weight of the Demographic Factor in Israel's Strategic Considerations on the Palestinian Issue

**Kobi Michael**

Demography is the discipline that deals with static and dynamic aspects of population growth and changes – and the interrelationships between them – in the composition of a population.<sup>1</sup> Demography affects economics, society, politics, security, and overall quality of life, and hence the importance of demography for national security.<sup>2</sup> When it comes to international politics, demography also reflects cultural processes showing weakening or strengthening fault lines between civilizations,<sup>3</sup> indicative of emerging conflicts rooted in differences between populations vying for resources and influence. Therefore, experts claim that demography is essential for understanding what happens in the world.

In the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the demographic question has become a source of profound disagreement in Israel. Many see the demographic processes as a threat to the future of Israel as a state that is both Jewish and democratic, thereby necessitating rapid disengagement from the Palestinians, whether by means of a negotiated settlement or unilateral steps. Others dispute the need for panic, pointing instead to data indicating much more moderate trends: the Jewish majority will continue and even grow, both in the State of Israel proper and in the whole of the western land of Israel, certainly if the Gaza Strip is excluded.

However, the State of Israel does not exist in a vacuum, and is influenced by regional and global demographic trends. Therefore, any discussion of demography as it relates to Israel requires the mapping and analysis of other demographic spheres (regional and global) and an analysis of their

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interrelations. It also requires a look at past experience (specifically the disengagement from the Gaza Strip and northern Samaria) and at trends and actors in Israel, the region, and the international community. Otherwise, the discussion is liable to be incomplete, biased, and inaccurate in terms of the broader strategic context.

## Two Approaches

Both demographic approaches regarding Israel deal with three spheres: the Muslim world, especially the region near Israel; western Israel, i.e., the Israeli-Palestinian sphere; and the State of Israel – the Jewish-Arab/Muslim sphere. The discussion mostly centers on the western land of Israel, i.e., the Israeli-Palestinian sphere, but experts in both camps relate to the other two spheres as well, though with varying attributions of import and alarm.

### *The Demographic Threat*

Prominent researchers representing the more ominous approach view current demographic trends as a threat reflecting the connection between two leading elements: one, the Muslim sphere, characterized by rapid population growth and rampant poverty, violence and dwindling resources, radicalized attitudes to Israel, and growth of militant Islam,<sup>4</sup> and two, the demographic changes rapidly taking place in a small, densely populated Israel that “have extensive impact on all aspects of life and their impacts are more significant than in Europe.”<sup>5</sup>

Evgenia Bystrov and Arnon Soffer focus on a rise in the influx of Arabs and Muslims into Israel from neighboring states (due to family unification, unlawful entry, migrant labor/infiltrators) and the concomitant deterioration in relations between Israel’s Jewish citizens and Arab citizens, who view themselves as Palestinian citizens of Israel. These join other demographic processes pointing to a weakening of Israeli sovereignty in the Galilee, the “Triangle” area, the Negev, and Jerusalem, and the convergence of the Jewish majority into a small urban sphere dubbed the “State of Tel Aviv.” At the same time, nations in the region, including the Palestinian Authority, are not keeping pace with globalization: their development is slow or even negative, which leads to exacerbated socioeconomic gaps in contrast to Israel and heightened tension and hostility, which in turn makes Israel even more threatened and vulnerable.

Thus, Bystrov and Soffer assert that what happens socially, economically, ecologically, and security-wise in Israel cannot be divorced from what

happens in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. Therefore a discussion of the demographics of the State of Israel must also entail a discussion of the demographics of the land of Israel. Furthermore, they stress, the demographic clock is ticking fast, and not in favor of Israeli Jews. They contend that while Israel can continue to exist only if it has a clear Zionist, Jewish majority living in a territory whose size and borders allow the realization of the state's sovereignty and its defense, and if it provides a quality of life befitting a "Western society,"<sup>6</sup> demographic data and trends threaten the prerequisites for Israel's existence as a state with a clear Jewish, Zionist majority. Referring to the huge gaps between the Palestinians living in western Israel and the Jewish population, Bystrov and Soffer conclude that attempts by impoverished Palestinians living close to Israel's borders and by Arabs from neighboring countries to cross into Israel will continue and even grow.<sup>7</sup>

A look at the demographic figures relating to West Bank Palestinians<sup>8</sup> and Arabs in Israel, who in 2030 are expected to number 2.2 million, shows that these gaps probably cannot be bridged in the near future. Given this state of affairs, there is a growing importance to the development and strengthening of national awareness among many of Israel's Arabs, as there is "a high probability that in the two parts of the Palestinian people there are forces strong enough to forge closer relations between them, and the day will come when they will cooperate with their brothers east of the Jordan River [i.e., exhibit irredentist behavior] to establish a large Palestinian state stretching from the Mediterranean to the desert."<sup>9</sup> Therefore, there is a true existential danger requiring total separation from the Palestinians and a reduction of more than 4 million Arabs from the State of Israel's demographic balance. According to these researchers, this is also justification for the separation barrier in the West Bank and the recently fortified fence along the Egyptian border.

To these problematic trends, Bystrov and Soffer add the growth in Muslim immigration to Europe and the rise in tensions resulting from the failure of multiculturalism,<sup>10</sup> which encourages European societies and governments to vent their anger and frustration at Israel. The demographers warn that tolerance of Israel in the West is ebbing rapidly, the result of old-fashioned anti-Semitism mixed with anti-Israel ideology.<sup>11</sup> Support for this position is provided by Leslie Lebl, who discusses the ramifications of Muslim immigration for European security and who identifies developing

demographic trends as a security risk to Europe and a challenge to European values and interests.<sup>12</sup>

Since the early 2000s, internationally renowned demographer Sergio DellaPergola has warned that the Jewish majority in western Israel is shrinking. At the 2002 Herzliya Conference,<sup>13</sup> DellaPergola presented a figure showing that for the first time, Jews represented less than half – 49.8 percent – of all residents of western Israel (including the Gaza Strip), and pointed to various demographic scenarios whereby the Jewish majority would grow dramatically – to more than 86 percent of the population – should Israel separate from the Palestinians and should there be land swaps, including the Triangle area. In June 2013, DellaPergola presented similar findings, saying that while Israel did not officially verify the PA population data, these were realistic figures. Basing his statement on data from Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics, he estimated the number of residents in western Israel, including migrant workers and refugees, at just over 12 million. Within the State of Israel proper, there are somewhat more than 8 million people, and in the PA approximately 3.5-3.8 million residents, split between the Gaza Strip (1.6 million) and the West Bank (2 million). Given that Israel is home to just over 6 million Jews (including those living in the West Bank) and some 350,000 non-Jews, the Jewish sector constitutes only some 52 percent, a small, shrinking, and possibly non-existent majority if one claims that 350,000 of the country's immigrants are not Jewish to begin with. According to DellaPergola, should Israel decide to maintain control over the West Bank, the Zionist dream is over; if the West Bank is annexed, the country remains Jewish but not democratic because of Arab disenfranchisement. Israel will find itself totally isolated internationally.<sup>14</sup>

Viewing the immigration from the Soviet Union as an atypical historical event resulting from the breakdown of the non-democratic USSR, DellaPergola does not consider additional Jewish immigration to Israel as the country's great white hope. He argues that the number of non-democratic places in the world have a relatively low number of Jews; thus, substantial immigration is feasible only from Western countries, such as the United States, Canada, France, and Great Britain. There is Jewish emigration from those states, but in small numbers only.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, concludes DellaPergola, Israel is now at the demographic boiling point and something must be done.

### *The Less Alarmist Perspective*

In 2013 the Institute for Zionist Strategies published an updated, comprehensive study<sup>16</sup> leading to conclusions differing from those presented above. The most significant differences indicate that the number of Palestinians in the PA (the Gaza Strip and the West Bank) is lower by 0.7-1.3 million than the number presented by the more alarmist approach and the data of the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics. Moreover, the data shows a Jewish majority in all of western Israel today, and a more significant majority in the coming two decades, especially if the Gaza Strip is excluded from the equation.

This study contends that despite the forecasts of a demographic disaster, the Jewish population of the land of Israel has grown significantly over the last 120 years. According to the report, in 2012 the population in western Israel reached 10,755,000 (differing from DellaPergola's 12 million), which included a greater Jewish population of 6,332,900 (i.e., those who are eligible for Israeli citizenship according to the Law of Return though not necessarily Jewish according to religious law, or individuals unaffiliated religiously who nonetheless align themselves with the Jewish people); 4,109,000 Muslims (2,726,000 in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank); 181,000 Christians (52,000 in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank); and some 132,000 Druze. The rate of the expanded Jewish population is 59.14 percent of the total population of the western land of Israel. The study is based on Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics data about the Gaza Strip from 1993 and the West Bank from 1994, but it takes a conservative approach and accepts the Palestinian data about birth rates and natural increase, even though it argues that the credibility is suspect.<sup>17</sup> These numbers do not take into account data on young Arabs from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip leaving for abroad, further decreasing natural growth.

The study indicates a decreasing trend in the annual growth of the Arab population of western Israel and a much more drastic decrease starting in 2030. It attributes the decrease in Arab annual growth and rates of reproduction to improved educational levels, the expansion of urbanization and modernization trends, the immigration of Arab youth abroad, and the aging of the Arab populations, leading to an increase of natural death rates. In fact, the continuation of the trend, alongside the natural growth rate of the Jews in Israel, leads to equal rates of natural growth of Arabs and Jews.

Based on calculated assessments of Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics data on the West Bank and Gaza Strip for 1993-1994, the researchers conclude

that the Arab population of the West Bank and Gaza Strip in 2017 is likely to reach 3,099,762, for a total of 4,950,000 in western Israel, including Israel's Arab citizens. This estimate ignores the negative immigration rates of the Arabs of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and assumes a conservative estimate of young Arabs leaving the State of Israel. Should the data on increased Jewish immigration to Israel (the result of rising anti-Semitism around the world) be factored in, the rate of Jewish growth will increase even further to a clear and absolute majority by 2030.

Similar assessments may be found in the work of Yoram Ettinger and Guy Bechor, who speak about erroneous demographic notions. According to Ettinger, the inflation of the number of Palestinians living in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip is a Palestinian reaction to waves of Jewish immigration to Israel meant to scare the Jewish population and Israel's leadership; it is nothing more than "a civil intifada."<sup>18</sup>

Ettinger also speaks of other false demographic estimates. In 1967, for example, the demographic establishment called on Prime Minister Levi Eshkol to withdraw from Judea and Samaria lest the Jews become a minority by 1987. In August 1988, Arnon Soffer warned of an Arab majority by 2008. Soffer and DellaPergola had ruled out further significant waves of Jewish immigration, but nonetheless more than one million immigrants arrived from the Commonwealth of Independent States. Ettinger sums it up as follows: "The claim that the Jews are doomed to become a minority west of the Jordan River and that geography must be conceded in order to save demographics is either a phenomenal blunder or a scandalous distortion."<sup>19</sup>

In December 2013, Ettinger presented the findings of a comprehensive demographic study carried out by a joint Israeli-US demographic research team headed by Bennett Zimmerman.<sup>20</sup> These findings support the trends he had previously identified and findings presented in a comprehensive study conducted by the Institute for Zionist Strategies.<sup>21</sup> The three key points of the study are:

- a. The number of Arabs in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip is 3.1 million, not 4.4 million as claimed by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics.
- b. The number of Arabs in the West Bank is 1.7 million, not 2.7 million as claimed by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics.
- c. In western Israel (excluding the Gaza Strip), there is a solid Jewish majority of 66 percent benefiting from emerging demographic trends.

## Explaining the Differing Demographic Estimates

The numerical difference between the two schools of thought – perhaps reaching 1.3 million – is highly significant. The gap between the two is also evident in the demographic trends they identify; hence the researchers' different estimates about the extent of the Jewish population in western Israel both with regard to the last few years and expectations for the future.

The main reasons for the differences between the data and trends of the two schools of thought are:

- a. Data provided by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics: Their credibility is the focus of intense debate not only among Israeli researchers. The World Bank, the CIA, and the Norwegian Fafo Institute for Applied International Studies have all expressed various reservations on the reliability of this data.<sup>22</sup>
- b. The Gaza Strip: The Gaza population is included in some demographic discussions, even though the disengagement from the Gaza Strip was completed and the Gaza Strip is now governed by Hamas as an independent entity.
- c. More than 300,000 Palestinians have lived outside the jurisdiction of the Palestinian Authority for more than a year yet are nonetheless counted as PA residents, contrary to what is common practice in demographic studies.<sup>23</sup>
- d. Abnormalities in demographic indexes in the Jewish sector: The waves of immigration Israel has experienced were not predicted, a phenomenon that may repeat itself should anti-Semitism in Europe spread and the standard of living in Israel rise. There are currently some 1.2 million Jews in Europe, with the largest communities located in France, Ukraine, Germany, and Britain.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, immigration itself affects birthrates in Israel – and Israel is already the only country in the developed world with a steady increase in the birth index.
- e. Palestinian emigration: For many years, the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics ignored data on negative immigration, instead noting thoroughly unrealistic positive immigration data (50,000 annually). In recent years, partly thanks to professional international criticism, the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics has adjusted its data and attributes zero effect to immigration. However, data actually indicates negative Palestinian immigration of some 20,000 annually,<sup>25</sup> in addition to a 15 percent annual rate of emigration from Israel by younger Arabs.

- f. Death reports: The data provided by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics on deaths is much lower than what is reasonable by any demographic standard. This is a familiar pattern, attributable in part to the Palestinians' desire to continue enjoying the support of international organizations provided on a per capita basis.
- g. East Jerusalem Arabs and family reunification: More than 300,000 Arabs carrying blue Israeli identity cards live in Jerusalem. They are sometimes counted twice – once by the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics and once by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics. This is also true of Palestinians who become Israeli citizens or residents as a result of family reunifications.

### **The Role of Demography in Israel's Overall Strategic Thinking**

Any discussion about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict requires a broad regional and systemic view, and an analysis of the interface between the Israeli-Palestinian sphere and other spheres. So too with demographics, which must be examined alongside other considerations: security, ethics and morality, politics, and economics. In addition, Israel is the nation state of the Jewish people – and as such bears a certain responsibility towards world Jewry – and this element must also figure in overall calculations. Subordinating strategic thinking to the demographic consideration alone might lead to conceptual distortions and biases and damage the quality of comprehensive considerations of national security.

The differences between the two demographic approaches reflect methodological disagreements and likely political ones as well when it comes to interpreting the data and responding to them. Yet in any event, focusing on the demographic dimension alone is artificial and detached from the broader context. It fails to take into account trends and processes that can be expected to occur after a separation from the Palestinians. If one relates to demography in its broader sense, and if one assumes that the common rules accepted in demographic studies and in the current global reality will also continue after a negotiated settlement or some other kind of separation between the populations, demographic pressures, threats, and risks will not disappear just because a new border has been drawn.

The conduct of the PA is that of a failing or failed entity.<sup>26</sup> It is poor, divided, and internally riddled with strife. On its own, it is incapable of providing for the needs of its population in a reasonable manner. A unilateral Israeli withdrawal unsupported by a negotiated settlement and

help in constructing the future Palestinian state will likely leave the PA a failing or failed entity of one degree or another. As such, the PA might experience a systemic collapse as a result of uncontrolled immigration by Palestinian refugees from Arab nations, especially Syria and Lebanon, both of which are in the throes of a longstanding crisis. A collapse of the PA might lead to rising demographic pressures on Israel, which could find itself under increased pressure by neighboring Arab states, Europe, and the international community to moderate its closed-doors policy towards Palestinians and show greater flexibility on freedom of movement, including immigration to Israel.

Regional demographics perforce affect the Israeli-Palestinian demographic sphere, influenced and shaped by tectonic shifts in regional trends: the development of frontiers on Israel's borders and alongside the PA as a result of the weakening of the Egyptian central government's hold on the Sinai Peninsula and the ongoing civil war in Syria, and the large influx of Syrian refugees liable to undermine the stability of Jordan and Lebanon. There are also new waves of migration from the regions conquered by the Islamic State, reflecting the spread of radical Sunni Islam of the most extreme kind. These trends are unaffected by the demographic balance in the State of Israel but do have an effect on it.

A strategic move involving an Israeli disengagement from Palestinian territories leading to a change in the demographic balance might have very limited effect on the legitimacy of the State of Israel, its security, and international support for it. Israel viewed the 2005 withdrawal from the Gaza Strip as the end of the occupation and responsibility for the Palestinian population there. Demographically, some 1.5 million Palestinians were suddenly subtracted from the balance, but international support for the Israeli move did not last despite ongoing and increasing terrorism from the Gaza Strip. In the eyes of the Palestinians, the Arab world, and some members of the international community, Israel is still an occupying power in the Gaza Strip because of its control of the land crossings and Gaza's maritime and air spaces. Therefore the Palestinians, with backing by part of the international community, continue to assign responsibility for the humanitarian needs of the Gaza Strip to Israel. Would a similar move with regard to the West Bank – prompted by the demographic threat – generate a different result?

Some 95 percent of the Palestinians in the West Bank are under the control of the PA, which is responsible for the Palestinians' personal and

communal welfare from birth to death. Why, then, are they counted in the demographic balance together with the Jews as if they were part of the same political entity? Some would say that Israel's control of Area C and the West Bank perimeter perpetuate a state of occupation and therefore Palestinian citizenship and PA responsibility are meaningless words, as the Palestinians' daily routine is affected and disrupted by Israel's presence and control. When discussing the demographic dimension, how does this claim differ from the claim on Israeli responsibility for the Gaza Strip? And why would this claim change the day after Israel separates from the Palestinians when it is clear (certainly after the lessons of Operation Protective Edge in the summer of 2014) that Israel will have to continue to control the Palestinian perimeter for a long time in order to ensure its security?

Clearly, Israel's overall strategic consideration – ensuring the secure existence of the Jewish nation state and its continued prosperity must take demographics into account. But it is highly doubtful that an Israeli withdrawal to borders it considers secure that will exclude a large Palestinian population leading to significant change in the demographic balance of Israel proper, will in fact change the position of the Palestinians, the Arab world, and the international community in the long term. The nature of Israel's secure control of the land, the Palestinian national minority on Israeli sovereign soil that identifies itself as part of the Palestinian people, the Palestinians' dissatisfaction with the new reality that will be created, and the low political functionality of the Palestinian entity or state to be created in the area Israel is to evacuate will all continue to feed the efforts to delegitimize Israel and the ethos of resistance and struggle.

The day may come when Israel will have no choice but to take a unilateral step as the least of the evils among bad alternatives. But such a move must be the direct result of a comprehensive strategy based first of all on security considerations, followed by ethical and moral, economic, and political – as well as demographic – considerations. However, the latter should not head the list and should certainly not be used as a scare tactic to frighten the public. Israel must conduct itself with appropriate strategic integrity, understand the broader contexts and developing trends, and use the historical perspective and experience amassed to date. Most important, Israel must remember that any reality formed on the basis of real changes in the demographic balance of the state will continue to be susceptible to influence by demographic trends in its own sphere and the surrounding spheres, as well as delegitimization forces of every nature.

## Notes

- 1 Sergio DellaPergola, "Demography and Jewish Peoplehood," Chapter 1 in *Part 2: Studies of the Jewish People*, <http://www.bh.org.il/wp-content/uploads/%D7%93%D7%9E%D7%95%D7%92%D7%A8%D7%A4%D7%99%D7%94-%D7%95%D7%A2%D7%9E%D7%99%D7%95%D7%AA-%D7%99%D7%94%D7%95%D7%93%D7%99%D7%AA.pdf>.
- 2 For the connection between demography and national security and the lack of knowledge of demography on the part of those dealing with national security issues, see Arnon Soffer, "Jurists, Demographics and the Existence of Israel," Reuven Chaikin Chair in Geostrategy, University of Haifa, 2008, pp. 30-47, <http://web.hevra.haifa.ac.il/~ch-strategy/index.php/2013-07-28-12-47-44/60-2013-10-22-12-00-04>.
- 3 Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*, synopsis of chapter 12, as cited in <http://www.kivunim.org.il/article.asp?id=8>.
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- 5 Evgenia Bystrov and Arnon Soffer, "Israeli Demographics 2010-2030: On the Road to a Religious State," Reuven Chaikin Chair in Geostrategy, University of Haifa, 2010, p. 9.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 15.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 19.
- 8 Soffer and Bystrov's estimates are very similar to those presented by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, i.e., some 4.4 million Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and West Bank.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 29.
- 10 On the failure of multiculturalism in Western Europe, see, for example, "The Well-Known Failure of Multiculturalism," *Ynet*, October 18, 2010, <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-3971177,00.html>.
- 11 Bystrov and Soffer, "Israeli Demographics 2010-2030," p. 54.
- 12 Leslie Lebl, "The Islamist Threat to European Security," *Middle East Quarterly* 21, no. 3 (2014), <http://www.meforum.org/3856/dangerous-and-false-palestinian-unity>.
- 13 Sergio DellaPergola, "Demographic Developments in the Jewish World: Forecast and Implications," 2002 Herzliya Conference, <http://www.herzliyaconference.org/?CategoryID=87&ArticleID=117>.
- 14 Sergio DellaPergola, "The Jewish Majority is Close to Non-existent; We are Close to a Bi-national State," <http://www.mako.co.il/world-now-israel/Article-8f1be8320475f31006.htm>.
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 Yaakov Feitelson, "Demographic Processes in the Land of Israel (1800-2013)," Institute for Zionist Strategies, Jerusalem, 2013.
- 17 "Since 2005, in seven short years, the Palestinians changed their forecast for when they would become a majority in the land of Israel no fewer than four times. At the same time, the size of the Arab population underwent bizarre

- changes," p. 29. The researchers base their reservations also on reports generated by the World Bank, the Fafo Institute for Applied International Studies in Norway, and internationally acclaimed demographers cited in the study.
- 18 Yoram Ettinger, "Testing the Demographic Concept of Doom," <http://bit.ly/GAw73M>; Yoram Ettinger, "Secretary Kerry – It's Not the Demography!" <http://bit.ly/1jj7PMN>; Guy Bechor, "The Wright Brothers Lift Off: Jewish Growth Despite What You've Been Told," *Gplanet*, August 21, 2013, [http://www.gplanet.co.il/prodetailsamewin.asp?pro\\_id=2222](http://www.gplanet.co.il/prodetailsamewin.asp?pro_id=2222).
  - 19 Ettinger, "Secretary Kerry – It's Not the Demography!"
  - 20 Bennett Zimmerman, Roberta Seid, and Michael L. Wise, *The Million Person Gap: A Critical Look at Palestinian Demography*, BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 15, May 2006, <http://besacenter.org/mideast-security-and-policy-studies/the-million-person-gap-2-2/>.
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  - 23 "The count includes 325,000 people living for more than a year outside Palestinian territory but still carrying Palestinian identity cards and who can therefore return at any time. The number is a minimal estimate and is not exact, because it is impossible to contact all the families living abroad." See Hassam Abu Libda, director of the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, at a press conference in al-Bireh, February 26, 1998.
  - 24 "13 Million Jews in the World: Where are the Largest Communities?" *Globes*, September 13, 2013, <http://www.globes.co.il/news/article.aspx?did=1000878980>.
  - 25 Zimmerman, Seid, and Wise, *The Million Person Gap*. Data of the Israeli Immigration Police for 1997-2003, overseeing the movement of Palestinians through the official crossings and the Allenby Bridge, indicates negative immigration of some 10,000-20,000 people a year. The Fafo Institute for Applied International Studies in Norway showed emigration of some 100,000 Palestinians between September 2000 and December 2002.
  - 26 Based on most criteria constituting the Fragile States Index (FSI) of the FFP, [www.fundforpeace.org](http://www.fundforpeace.org).

# The Rise of the Islamic State Organization

Ephraim Kam

## The Rise of the Islamic State: The Starting Point

The rise of the Islamic State organization (IS) in Iraq and Syria is an outgrowth of three main developments. One is the appearance of al-Qaeda in the global arena, which seeks to promote an Islamic jihadi approach around the world. While al-Qaeda was established in 1988, after the September 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States it was perceived as a threat to the stability of the international system and the security of many countries. Al-Qaeda's radical approach attracted many young Muslims to its ranks and contributed to the establishment of other organizations of its kind, which were grouped together into a broad movement called global jihad. The Islamic State organization is the most threatening outgrowth of this development.

The second development is the US military intervention in Iraq in 2003. The American occupation led to a complete change in Iraq's political and social characteristics and its strategic capabilities. The central government was greatly weakened, and the Shiites, who constitute some 60 percent of the country's population but for generations were suppressed by the Sunni minority, became the leading players in the Iraqi political system. The Sunnis, accustomed to ruling in Iraq, were pushed to the sidelines, though they were given representation in the government and Parliament. Their frustration prompted them to establish armed militias, some of which used terrorism against their adversaries, particularly the Shiites, who responded in kind. The result was a civil war, mainly between Sunni and Shiite militias, in which at least 130,000 to 150,000 people were killed, if not more.

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At the same time, the United States completely dismantled the Iraqi army, which in the early 1990s was the largest Arab army. In its stead, they established the Iraqi security forces, a large force that in 2014 numbered 650,000 troops – 280,000 in the army and the rest in the police. However, despite their size, these forces lack the ability to defend Iraq from an outside enemy: Iraq has no real air force, missiles, or nonconventional weapons, and has only a small armored corps. The main task of the security forces is to ensure domestic order and security. Yet even in this they have failed, evidenced by the bloody inter-ethnic violence, and in fact, the ethnic militias have assumed greater importance than the government security forces. In late 2011 US forces withdrew from Iraq, thus leaving it to internal struggles, and ultimately, to an IS takeover of key targets in northwest Iraq.

The third development is the ongoing and inconclusive war in Syria, which thus far has led to the deaths of over 200,000 people. The struggle between the Assad regime and domestic opposition forces has been infiltrated by jihadis, some of them connected to al-Qaeda, who threaten the regime and have contributed to the civil war in Syria and the growing power of IS. The governmental vacuum in Syria has allowed IS to establish an operational base there, which facilitates its successes in Iraq.

### **The Islamic State: Background**

The Islamic State, formerly known as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), broke off from al-Qaeda after a quarrel over the leadership of the global jihad movement between its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri. The organization sees itself as the true heir of al-Qaeda. It believes that today's al-Qaeda has deviated from the path of Osama bin Laden, and that Zawahiri's authority is therefore not legitimate. Suspicion and violence exist between IS and Jabhat al-Nusra, the al-Qaeda faction operating in Syria against the Assad regime. In April 2013, the hostility rose to the surface, when Baghdadi announced the expansion of the Islamic State of Iraq to Syria and also changed the organization's name to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. Zawahiri tried ordering the group to withdraw its operatives from Syria and return them to Iraq, but Baghdadi refused and in January 2014 announced that the organization was not part of al-Qaeda.

In the spring of 2013, the group began moving forces from Syria to western Iraq, and in early 2014, it took control of several cities in Anbar Province, including Fallujah, some forty kilometers west of Baghdad. Its

main successes occurred in June 2014, when it succeeded in capturing Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, and Tikrit, the birthplace of Saddam Hussein. It also attempted to take over Kurdish-controlled Kirkuk, which would have meant the control of an important part of the Iraqi oil infrastructure. In several battles it defeated the Peshmerga, the main Kurdish militia. While it did not succeed in pushing the Peshmerga out of Kirkuk, for several weeks it managed to control the Mosul dam on the Tigris River, which has strategic significance, and set as its main goal a takeover of Baghdad as part of its multi-stage plan to establish an Islamic state from Iraq to Lebanon.

In the wake of the achievements of June 2014, Baghdadi declared the establishment of an Islamic caliphate, appointing himself as caliph. He shortened the group's name to Islamic State in order to emphasize that he does not accept the division of the Muslim world into nation states separated by borders. IS urges Muslims around the world to change the existing order, rebel against existing governments, and extend the borders of the caliphates to the entire Muslim world. The idea of restoring the caliphate and establishing an Islamic political entity excited many young people, and the combination of the vision and the successes on the ground attracted them to the organization. At the same time, IS has challenged competing Islamic organizations, including al-Qaeda, beset by its own difficult situation, and it has heightened the conflict between Sunnis and Shiites.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Islamic State: Strengths and Weaknesses**

The rapid success of the Islamic State in Syria, and even more so in Iraq, surprised all parties concerned: the Iraqi government, the Shiite and Kurdish militias, the Assad regime, Iran, the other neighboring countries, the United States, Western governments, and Israel. The Islamic State's unexpected achievements; the collapse of the forces deployed against it; its extremism and cruelty; its unbridled and boundless pretensions and ambitions; its strengthening as a result of its achievements; and the grave threats inherent in its establishment of a large stronghold in Iraq and Syria have all aroused much concern among the countries that could be affected yet are hard pressed to provide an appropriate response. Some already believe that the large IS stronghold makes the group more dangerous and threatening than al-Qaeda.

Several factors have contributed to the strength and success of IS. First, the forces arrayed against it, particularly in Iraq, have shown blatant

weakness and helplessness. For about seven years the Iraqi security forces were built, equipped, and trained by US forces at great expense, and even after the US withdrawal from Iraq, American advisors continued to help build the forces. However, these forces comprise members of three ethnic groups, and exist alongside ethnic militias not dependent on the security forces. The security forces are not united and have not demonstrated resolve in the face of pressures from a small determined organization. As a result, once tested, they failed to fulfill their main task: in parallel to the fall of Mosul, almost five of the security forces' eighteen divisions collapsed within forty-eight hours.<sup>2</sup> In their current state, the security forces are not capable of coping with IS. Even the Shiite militias, some of which are armed and trained by Iran, have not demonstrated an ability to stand up to it. The Peshmerga, one of the largest militias in Iraq, which has operated from its bases in the Kurdish enclave, has shown weakness against IS for several reasons: it was armed by the United States mainly with light weapons, which are inadequate against the heavy weapons possessed by IS; it has experience with rural guerilla warfare and not with urban warfare and offensive operations; and many of its men are older.<sup>3</sup>

Second, IS is not a large organization. According to various estimates, when its string of successes started in Iraq it numbered some 10,000 members, about a third of them trained and experienced fighters, including "alumni" of the fighting in Syria, and some 1,000 foreign volunteers, some

Even though the US government and the Iranian regime take the jihadi threat projected by IS very seriously, both have already stressed their reluctance, if not refusal, to intervene militarily against the organization.

of whom gained experience in Chechnya and Bosnia. However, the organization receives aid from Sunni tribes, former Baathists, and armed Sunni militias, and according to a recent CIA estimate, its force now includes 20,000-31,000 members. Labeling IS a terrorist organization does not fully reflect its capabilities, which combine tactics in the realm of terrorism perfected in the years of combat against US forces with elements of a small regular army. Officers and soldiers from Saddam Hussein's army have joined the group, and the officers have experience in planning operations and deploying units of 200-300 fighters on the company and battalion level.

The military experience of some of the IS fighters has contributed to its success on the ground, particularly through rapid movement along the well paved roads in Iraq with armored vehicles captured from Iraqi security

forces and the Syrian army. This mobility enables IS fighters to achieve a local numerical advantage over their adversaries and surprise them. They have no bases, command and control centers, or fixed installations, which makes it difficult to attack them.<sup>4</sup>

Third, since June 2014, IS has demonstrated improved capabilities. As a result of its successes, it has gained control of modern heavy weapons of US manufacture seized from Iraqi security forces and arms captured from the Syrian army, which have given it an advantage over the Shiite and Kurdish militias. No less important, IS took over significant financial resources while advancing, primarily as a result of its success in seizing banks in cities under its control and taking over oil resources. It also has other important financial resources at its disposal: it extorts money from businesspeople and protection money from minorities in areas under its control and demands ransom in exchange for release of hostages.<sup>5</sup> Its acquisition of financial resources has turned IS into a wealthy organization, and its ability to pay salaries to its members has brought many volunteers into its ranks and expanded the pool of manpower at its disposal.

Fourth, today, the entire Iraqi-Syrian border is controlled by IS. Weapons and fighters move freely in both directions and strengthen the organization's combat capability in both countries, as needed. The group's successes in Iraq strengthen its outposts in Syria and vice versa. The total withdrawal of Iraqi security forces from the area of the border, and the fact that Iraq lacks aerial strike capability, enables IS to move troops and heavy weapons to areas in northwestern Iraq where it is fighting local tribes armed with light weapons.<sup>6</sup> Control of both sides of the border allows the organization to build a large territorial terrorist stronghold in the heart of the Middle East, attempt to realize its concept of eliminating borders between Muslim countries, and advance toward creation of a large Islamic caliphate. According to estimates, IS today controls about one third of the territory of Syria and about one quarter of the territory of Iraq, with at least 8 million people in areas under its control. Its takeover of the Rutbah area in western Iraq has given it direct access to the borders with Jordan and Saudi Arabia. IS does not necessarily have full control of these areas, although its hold on them is growing stronger. It has built a quasi-government and administrative mechanism to handle them, and its control over several important cities, mainly Mosul, and several traffic arteries, rivers, and dams gives it an advantage over its adversaries.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, the policy of Iraq's former prime minister, Nuri al-Maliki, played an important role in strengthening IS. Prime minister from May 2006 to July 2014, Maliki proved to be a tyrannical and corrupt ruler who prevented a genuine process of national reconciliation among Iraq's ethnic groups. He weakened and corrupted the Iraqi security forces with his efforts to build his personal power and his government almost exclusively on the basis of Shiite support, and destroyed all the good will and trust of the Sunnis. Maliki relied on Iran and forged strong ties with the Assad regime, thereby alienating the Sunnis even further. Most of the moderate Sunni tribal leaders, militias, and organizations are not sympathetic to the radical religious and cultural approach of IS. However, their hatred of Maliki and his government was so strong that they were prepared to support the organization, especially since many of the Sunni leaders belonged to the Saddam regime and were hoping that IS would restore control to the Sunnis.<sup>8</sup>

However, IS has several significant disadvantages and limitations. First, an organization on the scale of IS will find it difficult to control areas it has conquered and at the same time seize more territory, when it has responsibility for the lives and welfare of millions of people. It will be more successful in areas in which there is a significant Sunni population but will have difficulty in regions with high concentrations of Shiites and Kurds. The group will need to decide whether to concentrate its efforts on establishing its rule in areas it has conquered and building a stable economic

In their current state, the Iraqi security forces, the moderate Syrian opposition, and the Assad regime as well are not able to cope with IS by themselves, either in terms of their operational training or the weapons at their disposal.

infrastructure for the state it seeks to establish or expanding its attempts to take control over Shiite southern Iraq or central Syria, which is the base of the Assad regime's rule.<sup>9</sup> In particular, IS apparently lacks the power to take over Baghdad, which is a key target, because it is mainly Shiite and the Shiite militias and government security forces will do all they can to defend the city. Instead, IS is expected to increase its showcase attacks in the capital in order to sow fear and destruction there.

Second, IS cannot represent and unite all Sunnis over time. The coalition that supports it is far from monolithic, and includes tribal leaders, veterans of the Saddam regime, and jihadis with conflicting interests. Thus far, a large number of Sunni leaders have supported IS to some extent, not so much out of support, but because they oppose Maliki more. At least some

of them have reservations about the organization's religious extremism, including its establishment of the caliphate, erasure of borders, persecution of minorities, and cruelty. Nevertheless, they continue to support it out of hatred for Maliki and his policies and the hope that it will strengthen the position of the Sunnis in Iraq. It is not clear how long their support will last, especially since Maliki has been ousted and there is an expectation of change in the government's domestic policy. This also pertains to officers from Saddam's army who have joined IS, and there is a possibility that the Americans and the Iraqi government will attempt to transfer some of them to aid the government security forces.<sup>10</sup> This happened in 2006 and 2007 when the Americans succeeded in driving a wedge between the Sunni leaders and al-Qaeda, but after the disappointment and frustration among Sunnis in recent years, it will be much more difficult to repeat this success.

Third, thus far, IS has benefited from the fact that the international response and outside intervention against it in Iraq and Syria have been limited. However, its adversaries are beginning to organize. While implementation of what is necessarily a complicated response to the threat presented by IS will take time and its success is not guaranteed, if the US effort to build an effective coalition begins to bear fruit, IS is likely to find itself facing far stronger forces, and it could lose its momentum, and gradually, some of its gains as well.

### **Ways to Obstruct the Islamic State**

Although many countries are very worried about the rise of the Islamic State, only two are taking significant steps against it: the United States and Iran. Both view the organization as a genuine threat to their interests, and both have the ability to use military means against it. The US administration is worried by the possibility that a radical and violent stronghold in the Middle East will grow, export terror against American and Western targets around the world and against US allies in the Middle East, and undermine the stability of Muslim nations in the region and beyond. As for Iran, IS's current area of operation is found in the three countries most important to it: Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. IS threatens the leading position of the Shiites in Iraq, including the Shiite militias that are connected to Iran, the future of the Assad regime, and the Shiite community in Lebanon. The group threatens Iran's relationships and economic interests in Iraq and Syria. And if ultimately Iraq splits into two or three states, Iran, which is

also a country of minorities, is concerned that the split will spill over into its territory as well.

In early September 2014, the US administration presented the strategy it had formulated against IS. The administration seeks to stop the successful IS crusade in Iraq and Syria, gradually undermine its achievements, and first and foremost, liberate Mosul and Tikrit and remove the pressure on the Kurds. Later in the process, the goal is to eliminate the large stronghold built by the organization in Iraq and Syria, and finally, to destroy the group and remove the grave threat it presents. It is clear to the administration that a combination of military operations and political actions is needed to fight IS because recourse to only one channel will not be enough. It also realizes that it cannot achieve its goal without partners, and therefore seeks to build a broad coalition with Middle East countries as well as Western governments, which will contribute to the overall effort to stop IS and provide legitimacy for US actions. This contribution will include participation in airstrikes, provision of logistical services, training of units to operate against IS, and financial assistance.

In order to achieve these goals, the administration envisions three stages: (a) It plans to expand the airstrikes in Iraq and Syria and launch systematic attacks against IS targets with the goal of helping the Iraqi and Kurdish security forces retake areas seized by IS. (b) It intends to support the Iraqi

It is likely that in the future, the scales will tip toward the Islamic State's weaknesses, and not its strengths. It does not reflect a major force in the Muslim world, and its potential to fulfill its vision of a caliphate is not great.

security forces and moderate Syrian opposition by supplying weapons and equipment, sending some 1,600 advisers to Iraq, cooperating on intelligence, coordinating operations, and training 5,000 Syrian opposition members in Saudi Arabia. At the same time, the coalition will work to reduce the flow of volunteers to IS and block its sources of funding. (c) The longest and most difficult stage will be reducing the organization's strongholds until it is eliminated. At the same time, the United States will work to protect itself and its allies against IS attacks. The administration estimates that the entire operation could take about three years.<sup>11</sup>

However, there are serious shortcomings in these military and political courses of action. With the military approach, it is totally clear that the Iraqi security forces in their current state, the moderate Syrian opposition, and in fact, the Assad regime as well, are not able to cope with IS by themselves,

either in terms of their operational training or the weapons at their disposal. However, after the trauma of military intervention in Iraq, the US government is not prepared to launch extensive ground operations there – except perhaps limited operations by special forces – or in Syria.

There are at least two problems with this method of operation. One is that airstrikes, no matter how successful, are unlikely to erode IS gains sufficiently. While airstrikes will cause losses and damage to IS, the organization does not present clear targets for attack; its forces are mixed in with the local population and it is difficult to distinguish between them, particularly in densely populated cities; and effective strikes require establishment of a comprehensive intelligence system as a basis for planning.<sup>12</sup> The IDF learned in Gaza that airstrikes alone are not effective enough to destroy a terrorist organization whose base is in a large urban space. The airstrikes in Iraq and Syria that began in August 2014 were carried out by the air forces of the United States and Western and Arab countries. Thus far, they have helped restore the strategic dam near Mosul and several cities and villages on the edge of the Kurdish enclave to the Kurdish militia and prevented the city of Erbil from falling into the hands of the Islamic State. This is a significant achievement, but it does not change the general picture of IS control of large parts of Iraq and Syria, especially since during the same period, the group took over an important air base in Syria and later scored further gains in Syria near the border with Turkey.

The limitations on the effectiveness of the airstrikes prompted General Martin Dempsey, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to say that if they are not effective enough, he would not rule out the possibility of recommending sending troops into a ground operation, though this counters President Obama's policy. Dempsey added that the main challenge will come when the Iraqi army and the Kurds attempt to push IS out of densely populated areas such as Mosul. In such cases, he might recommend sending US forces for special operations to help the Iraqi army, but in a different manner than the US military intervention in Iraq in 2003.<sup>13</sup> Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel has noted that if there are US forces in Iraq, some of them may enter Syria.

The second problem is connected to the need to improve the capabilities of Iraqi security forces, as the United States has invested major efforts and financial resources in building forces that have not passed the test. It is clear that improving their capabilities would take many months, and more likely, years. The question is what the chances are that the Americans would

succeed now, when their troops are no longer in Iraq, where they failed in the past. Furthermore, the Iraqi army has not proven itself in defense, and it will have even more difficulty with offense.

The political approach is no less important, as the military moves, even if they are effective, will likely not be sufficient to undermine the Islamic State's strongholds. The main political direction is to drive a wedge between IS and the leaders of Sunni tribes and organizations in order to undermine their support and isolate the organization. However, this is currently not easy because of their hostility to the Shiite leadership. Even after the US government succeeded, apparently with Iran's agreement, in bringing about Maliki's ouster, the Sunnis will not rush to agree to return to the previous situation to fight IS. In exchange, they will likely demand the transfer of the central government's powers to the provinces and the redistribution of government powers, an agreement to distribute oil royalties, and perhaps even the establishment of an autonomous Sunni province like Kurdistan. To mobilize the Sunnis for the struggle against IS, the other armed ethnic militias will need to be weakened and the government security forces strengthened. However, this will be a formidable challenge because the ethnic groups do not trust the security forces and will refuse to disband the militias or subordinate them to the central government.<sup>14</sup> In other words, the key to confronting IS may be a significant political change in Iraq.

In addition, since the Islamic State operates in both Syria and Iraq and its activities in the two countries are linked, the US government believes that it must be dealt with in both states. However, a strike against IS power in Syria would strengthen the Assad regime, which the United States believes is illegitimate and should be ousted. Understanding this contradiction, the administration made it clear that it would not cooperate with the Assad regime and would examine ways to strengthen the moderate opposition until it can bring about the fall of the Assad regime.

Furthermore, in its search for allies to help it stop IS, the US government has not ruled out cooperation with Iran in Iraq as long as Iran takes a "constructive" approach, though in any case, it has rejected the possibility of military cooperation. In the meantime, Iran is already working to help the Iraqi government and the Shiite militias. It has transferred weapons, including fighter jets, to Iraq and sent officers from the Revolutionary Guards to assist in planning operations, organizing troops, and gathering intelligence. Iran's public position toward cooperation with the United States in Iraq was ambiguous, perhaps because of differences of opinion

among its top leaders, but it too has ruled out military cooperation. In practice, there may have been limited coordination between the United States and Iran in military activity against IS in northern Iraq. However, it was not direct and was done through the government of Iraq, and the US government has denied its existence.

The reluctance of both the United States and Iran to engage in significant cooperation on Iraq, in spite of their joint interest in stopping and eliminating the Islamic State, not only reflects the suspicion and hostility between them. It also stems from their contradictory strategic goals in both Iraq and Syria. The United States seeks to help shape the Iraqi regime as a moderate government connected to the United States and the West and free of Iranian influence, under which a real role will be given to Sunni and Kurdish representatives and in which the influence of the armed militias will be reduced. In addition, the United States continues to work toward the overthrow of the Assad regime. Iran, in contrast, seeks to increase its influence in Iraq and relies on the power of certain Shiite militias to ensure that the Shiites continue to be the leading element in the Iraqi leadership, eliminate US influence in Iraq, and ensure the survival of the Assad regime. In light of these contradictory objectives, and with Iran likely to be the party benefiting from restraint of IS – as this would increase its influence in Iraq and help stabilize the Assad regime – it is difficult to envision real cooperation between Iran and the United States.

## Conclusion

The Islamic State's success thus far reflects a combination of strengths and weaknesses. On the one hand, the group's fighting force is mobile, fast, and capable of surprise, combining the capabilities of a small army with the tactics of a terrorist organization, and is not highly vulnerable. Its successes on the ground have increased its power – in obtaining large financial resources, seizing weapons, attracting additional volunteers, and building a deterrent capability. It has succeeded in building a large base in both Iraq and Syria, two countries with weak governments that lack the ability to cope with IS by themselves. In this situation, their ability to curb the IS threat is largely dependent on outside aid, especially from the United States and Iran. However, even though the US government and the Iranian regime take the jihadi threat projected by IS very seriously, both have already stressed their reluctance, if not refusal, to intervene

militarily against the organization, and a political approach to isolate and eliminate IS is not simple.

On the other hand, IS is a small organization. Its ability to take over additional territories is limited, especially when they are strongholds of the Shiites and Kurds in Iraq or the Assad regime in Syria, and at the same time, establish its control over the territories it has conquered. Support for the organization by Sunni leaders in Iraq could also decline, especially if Shiite leaders succeed in cultivating true national reconciliation among themselves. And above all, the Islamic State's adversaries in Iraq, the Arab world, and especially the international arena are beginning to organize against it, and over time, they may provide an appropriate response.

During August 2014, the situation changed in a limited way on two fronts. One is that the United States and other countries began airstrikes in Iraq, which helped transfer control of the strategic Mosul dam from the Islamic State to the Kurds and reduce the pressure on the Kurdish enclave. The second was that Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki was ousted, under US pressure and with Iran's agreement, and the US government hopes that the new government in Iraq will be more willing to reconcile with the Sunnis. However, these are limited changes that do not materially alter the situation, and it is still too early to judge how much it will change.

Nevertheless, it is more likely that in the future, the scales will tip toward the Islamic State's weaknesses, and not its strengths. Not only is IS a small organization; it does not reflect a major force in the Muslim world, and presumably the large majority of Muslims have reservations about its approach and doctrine and thus its potential to fulfill its vision of an Islamic state is not great. Yet even so, it is likely that the process of restraining IS will be prolonged and that the organization will not disappear quickly.

What is the significance for Israel? In principle, the Islamic State sees Israel as a declared enemy of the highest order, but for now, Israel is low on the IS list of priorities, since it is busy with its battles in Iraq and Syria and establishing the caliphate. However, the threat to Israel could expand in the future once the organization is freer of its internal struggles, and this could translate into the export of terrorism against Israeli and Jewish targets; a military threat from the border with Syria; a threat to the regime in Jordan, whose stability is an important Israeli interest; an increased threat of terrorism from Sinai; or an attempt to infiltrate the Palestinian arena.

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# The End of the Syrian Revolution: Between Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's Islamic Caliphate and Bashar al-Assad's Baath Regime

Eyal Zisser

## Introduction

After more than three and a half years of protest and revolution that quickly escalated into a bloody civil war, the end of the upheaval in Syria is not in sight. Thus far the civilian population is paying the price, with daily fatalities in the dozens, if not the hundreds. In the summer of 2014, the total number of people killed rose to over 200,000; of the 4-6 million refugees who fled their homes to escape the battles, over 2 million have left Syria.<sup>1</sup>

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad chose the beginning of the fourth year of war to launch his reelection campaign for another seven-year term. In the elections themselves, held on June 3, 2014, he “won” the support of 88.7 percent of the vote.<sup>2</sup> Bashar found reason to celebrate, but it is difficult to avoid getting the impression that the cries of victory from Damascus were caused not necessarily by his ballot box performance, but by his achievements on the killing fields of Syria. Over a year ago, in the spring of 2013, Bashar's situation seemed hopeless. Since then, however, the threat to his rule has receded, at least for now; he has ensured his survival, certainly in the Presidential Palace, in the areas around the capital of Damascus and the main axis from Damascus to the Syrian coast, and in the cities of Hama and Homs in the center of the country.

As in the past, the chaos and rifts among the rebels are playing into the regime's hand, as is the trend towards religious extremism orchestrated by radical Islamic groups that have taken the leading role in the Syrian

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revolution. In addition, Bashar finds determined allies in Iran and Hizbollah, backed by Russia, which are fighting heavily to tip the scales in his favor. Nevertheless, no end to the war is yet in sight. Despite the momentum provided by the regime's victories on the battlefield, Bashar is hard pressed to advance from the stronghold he has established for himself in the Syrian heartland. For their part, the rebels are showing determination and devotion to their cause, with no signs of fatigue among their ranks. They continue to exact a toll from the Syrian regime, which is forced to rely increasingly on its shrinking base of support, mostly among the Alawite community.

This situation was further complicated in the summer of 2014 by the breakout of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) from the deserts of Syria and Iraq, and its achievements in the battles against the Iraqi army, the Syrian army, the Kurds, and against rival Syrian rebel groups. The rise of ISIS is capable of changing the balance of forces in Syria. For the first time since the rebellion broke out in Syria, a military and political alternative to the Syrian regime has been created, however abhorrent it is and however it threatens to shatter whatever remains of the Syrian state.

The Syrian regime is hurting, and is in a perilous and unsteady state. At the same time, Bashar al-Assad's rule is safe for the moment; for those Syrians who still adhere to the idea of the Syrian state, his remaining in power provides a glimmer of hope that the Syrian state system will survive and serve as a keystone when the time is propitious for reforming the Syrian state. Victories by ISIS pose a renewed threat to the Syrian regime, but they have also made Bashar al-Assad the default option for Syrians and those in the international community who fear the total dissolution of the Syrian state, and the rise of the ISIS Islamic caliphate on its ruins.

Either way, Bashar's survival in power, combined with the establishment of the Islamic caliphate by ISIS, are creating a de facto division of Syria into sub-states: ISIS in the eastern Syria and western Iraq; a Baath stronghold under the Assad dynasty in central Syria around the Daraa-Damascus-Hama-Homs axis and the Alawite coast; and autonomous enclaves of rebel groups on the margins of the regime's stronghold fighting against both the Syrian regime and ISIS.

### **A War with No Decision**

The rebels achieved dramatic successes in the first two years of the war that began in Syria in March 2011. Despite their structural weaknesses, mainly the division and strife in their ranks and the fact that they had no central

command or overall strategy, they progressed one step at a time – village by village, one town and city after another – on the way to their goal. In early 2013, they gained control of large rural areas to the east and west of Damascus, thereby surrounding the capital. They launched a campaign to gain control of the road leading to the Damascus international airport, and succeeded in shutting it down for several days. At the same time, the rebels consolidated their control of the rural areas around Homs and Hama, thereby threatening to divide Syria in two by cutting off the north of the country and the coastal region from Damascus. Their most important achievement, however, was in the spring of 2013, when they captured the city of ar-Raqqah, the first city to fall into their hands. This city is the capital of the ar-Raqqah district, the gateway to the al-Jazira region, which contains energy resources (oil and natural gas fields), water resources (the Assad dam and Lake Assad), and Syria's granaries, all of which are a major source of Syrian wealth.<sup>3</sup>

It appears that the fall of ar-Raqqah in March 2013 sparked a major change in the regime's strategy, which abandoned its former tactics of locally based fighting for each village and town in a doomed effort to maintain control of the entire country. The regime's new strategy was based on several elements. First, the regime declared a de facto war of total destruction against its opponents aimed not only against the armed groups fighting on the battlefield, but also against the civilian population living in the rebel-controlled areas. It appears that the regime concluded that it would be difficult to defeat the rebellion without "dealing with" the civilian population providing cover, support, and a source of manpower for the rebels. In contrast to the past, when the regime confined itself to terrorizing the population into submission, the new practical meaning of such "treatment" was the "purification and cleansing" of entire areas of their residents.

The regime employed all its available weapons in this war of destruction, above all chemical weapons, consisting mostly of sarin gas. After being caught in the act and narrowly escaping a confrontation with the United States in late 2013 over its use of chemical weapons, the regime switched to use of chemical materials not included in the Chemical Weapons Convention, such as chlorine and gasoline bombs. The regime also made extensive use of advanced ground-to-ground missiles, such as Scud and M-600 missiles, amounting to half of Syria's missile arsenal before the outbreak of war, as well as warplanes, helicopters, and artillery.<sup>4</sup> In addition to its use of

firepower to weaken large areas and their population, the regime imposed a total blockade of these areas, sometimes in preparation for a military offensive. It cut off supplies of water and electricity, and prevented the free movement of people and goods, including the denial of food and medical aid. This policy led to the Syrian government being accused of systematic starvation of the country's population.<sup>5</sup>

The second strategic element comprised the efforts to maintain the regime's control of the Syrian heartland, which is essential for control of the country, instead of dispersing its forces to maintain control throughout the country, as in the past. This area centers on Damascus, ranges northward toward Aleppo, westward to the Syrian coast (where the Alawite community is concentrated), and southward to Daraa, which controls the border crossing from Syria to Jordan. A critical artery in the center of this area is the city of Homs in central Syria, which links Damascus to northern and coastal Syria. Adoption of this strategy meant that the regime was conceding, at least temporarily, its control of most of the rest of the country, most importantly the al-Jazira and Kurdish areas, the rural areas north of Aleppo and Idlib, and even the Daraa rural area south of Damascus.

Events over the past year in Syria have reflected two prominent trends, characteristic of the fighting since the war began: the power and strength demonstrated by the Syrian governmental system, and the rebels' weakness, the divisions and strife within their ranks, and their growing tendency toward extremism.

The third element is the increased reliance on foreign volunteers, mainly Hizbollah soldiers, as well as volunteers from within Syria, primarily from the Alawite community who were recruited into new militia frameworks established by the regime, such as the Popular Committees, the National Defense Force (Jaysh al-Difaa al-Watni), and the Security Forces and Popular Assistance (Kadsh, Quwat al-Amn, and al-Da'm al-Sha'bi) of the Republic Guard Division,<sup>6</sup> in addition to its continued reliance on the regular Syrian army. The problem with relying on the regular Syrian army lay in the attrition affecting its units, which found themselves in a prolonged and relentless three-year struggle against the rebels, and in the fact that the regular army was based mainly on conscripts from all communities, which have shown a lack of motivation and willingness to fight since

the beginning of the civil war, especially among Sunni recruits.

No less significant was the arrival of thousands of trained and highly motivated soldiers sent by Hizbollah to fight in Syria alongside the regime.

These soldiers began to arrive in the spring of 2013, first in the area of Homs and the town of al-Qusayr, and later in other areas as well. These elite Hezbollah units, which fought for the Syrian regime as completely independent units, became more intensively involved in the fighting as the duration of their involvement turned into weeks and months.<sup>7</sup>

To be sure, Hezbollah sent its forces into Syria more for its own sake than to help Bashar al-Assad. Particularly after the battle for al-Qusayr began, the rebels and their allies in the radical Salafi camp in Lebanon sought to expand the war from Syria into Lebanese territory. Missiles were fired repeatedly at the Dahiya area in southern Beirut, and a series of terrorist attacks there caused dozens of fatalities. Hezbollah therefore regarded the Syrian-Lebanese border area as a breach that was liable to widen if not quickly taken care of, giving it a common interest with the Syrian regime and leading to cooperation between the two.<sup>8</sup>

Sending Shiite fighters to the battlefields in Syria was only one aspect of the support received by the Syrian regime from its allies. These allies, headed by Iran and Russia, increased their support for the regime in 2013 in the form of political support in the various international theaters, especially the UN Security Council, but primarily through economic and military support in the form of credit and oil and food supplies, as well as weapons and military equipment amounting to billions of dollars.<sup>9</sup>

The Syrian regime's war operations were based on a multi-stage plan consisting of concentrated efforts: first, in the Homs and surrounding area as a critical link between northern Syria, the coastal area inhabited primarily by Alawites, and Damascus; second, in the Damascus area, especially the regions surrounding the city; and third, on the Syrian-Lebanese border around the Qalamoun mountain range. The regime cleared these three areas of rebel forces, and controlled them almost completely. The town of al-Qusayr, located 35 kilometers southwest of Homs and 15 kilometers from the Syrian-Lebanese border, was selected as a starting point for an offensive by the forces loyal to the regime and Hezbollah. They captured the city in early May 2013, followed by the areas around Homs. A year later, in early June 2014, they captured the city itself, from which the rebels retreated under a local reconciliation agreement.

ISIS has succeeded in unifying under its banner a large part of the armed groups that have been operating in Syria until now. It has thereby succeeded where all the opposition groups that arose during the years since the revolution began have failed..

In addition to reconciliation agreements, the regime increased its pressure in the Damascus area, especially the rural areas surrounding the city to the east and west. On October 21, 2013, as part of this campaign, the regime used chemical weapons in the rural area east of Damascus, killing 1,400 people, many of whom were women and children. Finally, in the Qalamoun mountain range, the regime began an offensive in November 2013, and by April 2014 had regained control of most of this mountain range with the capture of Ma'loula, a Christian village 45 kilometers north of Damascus, which the rebels had captured a year earlier. At the same time, groups of rebels remained active in the Qalamoun mountain range, continued their attacks on Syrian army and Hizbollah soldiers, and even extended the range of fighting to Lebanon in the area of the town of `Arsal, where they fought against the Lebanese army.

Despite the regime's success in surviving and regaining the initiative, it is far from defeating those rebelling against it. The rebels have repeatedly demonstrated their ability to survive and rain unexpected and painful, albeit unfocused, blows on the regime. They have driven the regime out of eastern Syria, reappeared in the Qalamoun mountain range and the rural areas around Damascus, consolidated their grip in the Syrian Golan Heights up to the Syrian-Israeli border, and even conducted surprise raids deep within the Syrian coastal area and toward the city of Latakia. The Syrian regime has not been able to defeat them, nor has it been able to break out from its stronghold in central Syria (Damascus, Homs, Aleppo, and Latakia), where it has consolidated its control. Moreover, only an ever-shrinking section of the population, consisting mainly of the Alawite minority, which constitutes 12 percent of the population and perhaps even less, is willing to fight and die for it.

Events over the past year in Syria have reflected two prominent trends, characteristic of the fighting since the war began: the power and strength demonstrated by the Syrian governmental system, and the rebels' weakness, the divisions and strife within their ranks, and their growing tendency toward extremism. Reports from Syria say that hundreds of armed groups are operating on a local basis throughout the country, assuming various temporary formations, and joining and withdrawing from ad hoc umbrella groups created for the purpose of unifying the opposition to the regime.

## Disunity and Islamic Extremism

It is no wonder that the Islamic groups, including groups affiliated with al-Qaeda, have stood out among the rebels. They number about 50,000 soldiers, and are usually described as organized and disciplined groups, the strongest among the rebel forces. The principal groups are the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS; now called the Islamic State), led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and the Support Front for the People of al-Sham (Jahbat al-Nusra li-Ahali ash-Sham), led by Abu Mohammed al-Julani, who resigned from ISIS in April 2013. The Islamic State has succeeded in consolidating its grip in an area of eastern Syria extending from the border with Iraq in ar-Raqqah to the outskirts of Aleppo. Jabhat al-Nusra controls Aleppo and Idlib, on the northern border with Turkey, and the area in southern Syria in the Daraa region and in the Golan Heights.<sup>10</sup>

Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and even Turkey have tried, individually and sometimes together, to unite the groups affiliated with them. The most recent such attempt was the establishment of the Islamic front in November 2013 as a coalition of seven rebel groups with 50,000 soldiers. The driving force behind this front was apparently Jaysh al-Islam (the Army of Islam), under the leadership of Zahran Alloush, who is close to Saudi Arabia. Because of concern about an American veto, the al-Nusra Front was not included in the Islamic Front, but it was reported from Syria that Alloush was in regular contact with al-Nusra operatives. The Islamic front published its platform in late November, reflecting a radical Islamic philosophy. The platform stated, "The Front is an Islamic political and social body acting to overthrow the Assad regime and establish an Islamic state. The Front's principles are based on Islam, which opposes democratic secularism and the idea of a civil state as a violation of religion and Islamic law."<sup>11</sup> The effort to unite these relatively moderate Islamic groups did not last more than several months, as each group continued to operate by its own. But the immediate losers from the establishment of the Islamic Front were the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces and the Free Syrian Army, which until then were recognized by the West as the representatives of the Syrian revolution. Around the time when the Front was founded, Alloush already announced that he did not regard himself as part of the National

The appearance of ISIS and Hizbollah's increasing involvement in the fighting in Syria are two sides of the same coin, and highlight a new aspect of the war in Syria. This war has gradually turned into a war between armed gangs.

Coalition. Later, in December 2013, Islamic Front soldiers took control of the Free Syrian Army headquarters and its weapons stores near the Turkish border crossing at Bab al-Hawa. The decline of the Free Syrian Army led to the emergence of new moderate groups, such as Syria Rebel Front (Jabhat Thuwar Suriyya) and the Hazm Movement, operating mainly in northern Syria, in the Idlib and Aleppo provinces.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to the trend toward rifts and splits and an inability to unite and agree on a political and military leadership, the emerging trend toward radicalization is working against the rebels. This trend is particularly prominent among the Islamic groups, especially those affiliated with al-Qaeda, whose agenda has no affinity for the Syrian state as a political entity or the development of Syrian society. They have a record of persecuting members of minority groups, such as threats to kill Druze villagers in the Golan Heights if they do not convert to Islam; systematic destruction of Shiite mosques and Druze, Alawite, and Christian houses of prayer; revenge campaigns against non-Sunni soldiers and civilians; and mass executions of prisoners.<sup>13</sup>

The unexpected collapse of the Iraqi army in early June 2014 in northern Iraq, and the fall of the Syrian regime's strongholds and enclaves in eastern Syria in July-August 2014, the threat of a radical Islamic area stretching from the outskirts of Baghdad to the outskirts of Aleppo, and the declaration by al-Baghdadi in early July 2014 of the formation of a Muslim caliphate in this region under his leadership, followed by a declaration in early September 2014 by Abu Mohammed al-Julani of the establishment of an Islamic emirate in the territories under his control, have given the rebels a boost in their struggle against the Assad regime. ISIS's importance lies in the fact that it is the first organization fighting the regime to establish itself as a realistic alternative to Assad. ISIS has consolidated itself as a governing entity with government systems and economic, social, and legal services, however basic and primitive they may be. It has succeeded in unifying under its banner – admittedly through the use of threats and violence – a large part of the armed groups that have been operating in Syria until now. It has thereby succeeded where all the opposition groups that arose during the years since the revolution began in Syria have failed. At the same time, it has exacerbated the tensions between the various opposing groups in the rebel ranks, and more importantly, has generated renewed international legitimacy for the Assad regime.

In any case, the appearance of ISIS and Hizbollah's increasing involvement in the fighting in Syria are two sides of the same coin, and highlight a new aspect of the war in Syria. This war has gradually turned into a war between armed gangs. The gangs fighting on the regime's side (i.e., on the side of what remains of the regular Syrian army) consist mainly of groups of volunteers from the Alawite minority recruited by the regime to fight for it and Hizbollah soldiers. The rebel camp is composed of various armed groups, some of which are based on Arab and other Muslim volunteers streaming into the country from all over the Arab and Muslim world.

Furthermore, the revolution of the Syrian masses who went into the streets of rural towns and villages demanding justice and freedom has become a bloody civil war, and even worse, has been taken over by radical Islamic groups with no connection to the Syrian state and society. These groups seek an Islamic caliphate like that envisioned by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, or Muslim emirates like the one advocated by Mohammed al-Julani, and the Syrian masses are therefore no longer involved in the revolt. Consequently, revolutionary enthusiasm has faded, with feelings of revenge giving way to fatigue and exhaustion and, inevitably, a desire for an end to war at all costs, even renewed allegiance to the Syrian regime or, alternatively, acceptance of ISIS rule.

In view of this situation, a change in the international community's attitude to the crisis in Syria is emerging, even among the rebels' formerly most enthusiastic supporters. For example, in the summer of 2013, CIA Deputy Director Michael Morell stated on the occasion of his retirement that the civil war in Syria had become the greatest threat to the security of the US, while the Iranian nuclear question was at most a source of concern.<sup>14</sup> Later, when the US began to assemble an international coalition against ISIS, it refused to include Assad's Syria, and even asked moderate rebels for help in a two-sided struggle against both ISIS and Bashar al-Assad, but it was clear to everyone that such a policy was useless, given the absence of a moderate alternative to ISIS among the rebels. The favorable atmosphere, even if not originating directly from Washington, enabled Assad to ignore international pressure. While he took part in the peace conferences in Geneva in June

Victories by ISIS pose a renewed threat to the Syrian regime, but they have also made Bashar al-Assad the default option for Syrians and those in the international community who fear the total dissolution of the Syrian state, and the rise of the ISIS Islamic caliphate on its ruins.

2012 (Geneva 1) and January 2014 (Geneva 2) under Russian pressure, he made sure that the talks would be unsuccessful. Instead, he chose election to another term as president of Syria in defiance of those within and outside of Syria calling for his replacement.<sup>15</sup>

Thus over the past year Bashar al-Assad succeeded in ensuring the survival of his rule in the central region of Syria and its heartland (the Damascus-Aleppo axis and the Alawite coast). It also appears that many people inside and outside Syria believe that his victory, or at least his survival in power, is the only remaining hope and guarantee for the preservation of the unity of Syria as a country and its existence as a sovereign state. At the same time, the rebels are still exacting a toll from the regime, and during the summer of 2014, ISIS sprang from their ranks as a leading element among the rebels. It poses an alternative to the Syrian regime in the regions where it holds sway, and where it is difficult to envision any local party whatsoever being capable of uprooting it. As a result, Syria has been effectively bisected into the east of the country, which is currently part of the ISIS caliphate, and the center and west of the country, still held by the regime but also containing rebel enclaves, from the Kurdish enclave in the north and east of the country to enclaves of opposition soldiers in western Syria, some of these being large autonomous areas beyond the regime's control. Whether Assad manages to defeat his opponents, or whether the rebels are successful, the winner or winners in the struggle are liable to discover that very little is left of Syria – a country that only a few short years ago was regarded as a paragon of stability, with a strong and invulnerable regime.

## Notes

- 1 For estimates of the number of casualties in the war, see the March 18, 2013 statement by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, located in the UK. The organization's website is at <http://syriaahr.com>.
- 2 For the official announcement from Damascus about the election results, see Sana (the Syrian news agency in Damascus), June 4, 2014. Sana's website is at <http://www.sana.sy>.
- 3 For the achievements of the rebels and the course of the war in the early years, see Eyal Zisser, "The Deadlocked Syrian Crisis: The Fable of the Ants and the Elephant," *Strategic Assessment* 16, no. 2 (2013): 35-45.
- 4 For reports of the Syrian regime's use of chemical and other weapons, see Rick Gladstone, "Claims of Chlorine-Filled Bombs Overshadow Progress by Syria on Chemical Weapons," *New York Times*, April 22, 2014.

- 5 Fernande van Tets, "Hunger the Weapon of Choice for Syria's Assad Regime," *Independent*, October 30, 2013.
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- 7 For Hizbollah's involvement in the war in Syria, see Amos Harel, "Hizbollah is Changing the Rules of the Game on the Northern Border," *Haaretz*, April 26, 2014.
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- 9 In this context, see Ephraim Kam, "The Axis of Evil in Action: Iranian Support for Syria," *INSS Insight* No. 372, October 10, 2012; Shlomo Brom and Shimon Stein, "Hastening the End to the Civil War in Syria," *INSS Insight* No. 418, April 17, 2013.
- 10 For more about ISIS, see BBC, "Profile: Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIS)," June 16, 2014.
- 11 For more about the Islamic front and its platform, see the al-Jazeera television station on November 7, 23, and 26, 2013. See also *as-Safir* (Beirut), November 8 and 26, 2014, and *al-Monitor*, "The Rise of the Islamic Front is a Disaster for Syria," December 13, 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.comurity/2014/05/syria-dispute>.
- 12 Reuters, November 23, 2013, and December 7, 2013.
- 13 For radicalization in the rebel ranks in Syria, see the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI) article, "Radicalization in Syria," April 27, 2014, [www.memri.org.il](http://www.memri.org.il).
- 14 For Michael Morell's statement, see "CIA Official Calls Syria Top Threat to US Security," *Wall Street Journal*, August 6, 2013.
- 15 For the Geneva 1 and Geneva 2 Conferences, see Benedetta Berti, "Between Paralysis and Fatigue: The 'Geneva 2' Negotiations on the Syrian Civil War," *INSS Insight* No. 509, January 23, 2014.



# Between Ankara and Tehran: How the Scramble for Kurdistan Can Reshape Regional Relations

**Micha'el Tanchum**

On June 30, 2014, President Masoud Barzani of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) made the historic announcement that he would seek a formal referendum on Kurdish independence. Barzani's announcement came after the June 2014 advance into northern Iraq by the jihadist forces of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) had effectively eliminated Iraqi government control over the provinces bordering the KRG. As Iraq's army abandoned its positions north of Baghdad, the KRG's Peshmerga advanced into the "disputed territories" beyond the KRG's formal boundaries and took control of the oil-rich city of Kirkuk, the jewel in the crown of Iraqi Kurdish territorial ambitions. Thus, the Barzani-led KRG calculated it had attained the necessary political and economic conditions to contemplate outright independence. Asserting Iraq had been effectively "partitioned" and that "conditions are right," the KRG President declared, "From now on, we will not hide that the goal of Kurdistan is independence."<sup>1</sup>

The viability of an independent Kurdish state will ultimately depend on the Barzani government's ability to recalibrate its relations with its two powerful neighbors, Turkey and Iran. This, in turn, depends on the ability of Barzani's Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) to preserve its hegemony over Iraqi Kurdistan in the face of challenges posed by its Iraqi political rival, the PUK (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan), and the Turkish-based PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party). Barzani's objective to preserve the KDP's authority from these threats forms one of the main drivers behind his

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independence bid. Since Barzani's announcement, ISIS (renamed the Islamic State, or IS) launched a war against the Kurds in Iraq's disputed territories. After several Kurdish defeats in July 2014, Kurdish forces, with Western military support, recaptured some of the lost territory the following month. Although IS momentum has been halted, the KDP's political position has been complicated by the battlefield successes of PKK-affiliated forces fighting on Iraqi soil and Iranian military support for the PUK. These developments have created opportunities for the formation of an alternative Kurdish political authority over parts of Iraqi Kurdistan.

This article will assess the impact of these developments on the KRG's independence bid. It analyzes whether and to what extent Turkey and Iran can leverage their relations with the KDP's rivals to prevent Kurdish independence or to constrain an independent Kurdish government from exercising autonomy in its foreign relations.

### **KRG Independence and the Challenge of the PKK's Pan-Kurdish Agenda**

Through its management of the KRG's booming economy, the KDP has become Iraqi Kurdistan's predominant party. In the 2013 KRG parliamentary elections, President Barzani's KDP increased its plurality to 38 seats out of 100. The PUK managed to earn only 18 seats, placing third behind the KDP and the Movement for Change (Gorran), indicating the party's declining prospects in an independent KRG.<sup>2</sup> The PUK's poor electoral showing also reflected the fact that much of the PUK's Kurdish support lies in the disputed territories beyond the KRG's formal political boundaries: in Iraq's April 2014 parliamentary elections, the PUK earned the same number of seats as the KDP and twice as many as Gorran due to the PUK's electoral strength in the disputed territories, especially Kirkuk. Unless the PUK can ensure that its enclaves in the disputed territories are included in an independent Kurdistan, the PUK has little political incentive for independence. With the July 24, 2014 selection of PUK senior member Fouad Massoum to succeed PUK founder Jalal Talabani as Iraq's President, the PUK continues to hold the Iraqi presidency. Nonetheless, the PUK will find it difficult to oppose popular enthusiasm for independence. To avoid being outmaneuvered by a Barzani-sponsored referendum, the PUK may align more closely with the PKK to supplant the KDP through a pan-Kurdish agenda.

The PKK's pan-Kurdish strategy developed in response to Turkey's 1999 capture of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan and the KRG's reemergence

after Barzani and Talabani signed the 1998 Washington Agreement, which ended a four year KDP-PUK civil war. To outflank the KDP-led KRG, the PKK established affiliated parties in the three other regions of greater Kurdistan – the Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party in Iraq in 2002, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) in Syria in 2003, and the Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan (PJAK) in Iran in 2004. Öcalan then promulgated his 2005 “Declaration of a Democratic Confederalism,” envisioning a confederation of four autonomous Kurdish regions, each simultaneously in a federal relationship with the particular state in which it exists. While the PKK’s Iraqi affiliate has failed to generate any support, the PYD and PJAK have advanced the PKK’s greater Kurdistan agenda. PJAK is the only Kurdish organization with fighters operating in Iranian Kurdistan, while the PYD has established three autonomous cantons in Syrian Kurdistan. Reflecting the PKK’s confederalist agenda, the PYD refers to its cantons as Rojavayê Kurdistanê (“Western Kurdistan”) or more commonly Rojava (“the West”), undermining the KRG’s authority with the implication that Iraqi Kurdistan is simply Bashur (“the South”) and belongs in a pan-Kurdish confederation. In April 2014, the KRG dug a 17 km trench between the PYD’s cantons and Kurdish areas in Iraq, ostensibly to prevent ISIS fighters in Syria from crossing into Iraq. PKK-affiliated media denounced the trench as Barzani’s venal attempt to divide Rojava from Bashur, demonstrating the KRG’s betrayal of greater Kurdistan.<sup>3</sup> With checkpoints manned by armed Peshmerga, the KRG’s border trench successfully deterred the PYD from expanding its political authority to the adjacent Kurdish areas inside Iraq.

The Kurdish populations of Syria and Iraq, respectively, constitute approximately 10 and 15 percent of greater Kurdistan, while Turkey’s Kurdish population constitutes 55 percent. In late August, Öcalan and the Turkish government reportedly agreed on several key points for a political roadmap leading to a peace agreement.<sup>4</sup> If Öcalan’s negotiations with Turkey succeed in providing Turkish Kurdistan or Bakur (“the North”) with some semblance of autonomy, the PKK/PYD would dominate approximately two-thirds of the greater Kurdistan population. For Barzani, whose KDP holds a commanding electoral plurality in the KRG parliament, the prospect of PKK-governed Kurdish autonomous regions in Turkey and Syria allied with PUK-dominated Iraqi Kurdish enclaves would raise the unpalatable prospect that the KDP would be pressured to subsume the KRG under a greater Kurdistan confederation dominated by a PKK-PUK coalition.

Barzani faces a separate challenge from acting PKK leader Cemil Bayik, who remains hostile to Ankara and favors alignment with Tehran.<sup>5</sup> In April 2014, speaking before the PKK's pan-Kurdish organization the Kurdistan National Congress, Bayik underlined his position that the PKK's all-Kurdistan agenda is best served by aligning with Iran's support for the Shiite government in Baghdad and the Alawite government in Damascus.<sup>6</sup> Bayik's position enjoys widespread support, as PKK guerrillas and the PYD's People's Protection Units (YPG) have been defending Rojava from ISIS and al-Qaeda attacks abetted by Turkey. Bayik is now seeking to capitalize on the PKK/YPG battlefield successes in Iraq to extend PKK/PYD control to Kurdish areas in Iraq's disputed territories. With PKK and YPG fighters joining the Tehran-backed PUK in the key battle for Jalawla near the Iranian border, the KDP finds itself facing an additional Tehran-oriented, PKK pan-Kurdish threat to its hegemony in Iraqi Kurdistan.

### **The Impact of the Islamic State's War against the Kurds**

Kurdish exuberance over President Barzani's June 30 announcement dissipated when the KRG failed to defend its positions in the disputed territories from IS attacks. The IS militants overran Kurdish positions, using armored vehicles and heavy weapons abandoned by the Iraqi Army's 2<sup>nd</sup> Division, including 52 M198 howitzers and a number of American-made tanks.<sup>7</sup> The KRG's Peshmerga, traditionally a light infantry force, could not resist IS superior firepower. Kurdish forces were subsequently able to retake Makhmur, Gwer, and the Mosul Dam because US airstrikes destroyed IS artillery pieces and other assets.<sup>8</sup>

The Peshmerga's initial setbacks constituted both a political blessing and curse for the KRG. Western powers initiated direct military cooperation with the KRG and military aid began arriving from Europe on August 15, 2014. France, Italy, Denmark, Hungary, and Albania sent weapons and advisors, while other NATO member states have promised to send military support. On September 1, Germany began sending Erbil a \$91 million military aid package consisting of enough weapons and equipment for a 4,000 soldier brigade, including 200 Panzerfaust 3 shoulder-fired, anti-tank weapons and 30 Milan anti-tank weapons.<sup>9</sup> Western military aid to Erbil has been a political windfall for Barzani, who is now conducting his own defense relations with Western powers and is unlikely to relinquish this critical aspect of statehood to Baghdad.

To Barzani's political detriment, however, the Peshmerga's initial defeats against IS created the opportunity for PKK and YPG guerrillas to fight on Iraqi soil. The KDP-led KRG now faces a political threat from the expanded military presence of PKK/YPG forces in Iraq's disputed territories. The recapture of Makhmur is indicative of the KRG's dilemma. Strategically situated between Mosul and Kirkuk, Makhmur, home to over 10,000 Kurdish refugees who had fled Turkey in the 1990s as Turkish military operations attempted to clear Kurdish villages of PKK sympathizers, was under de facto Kurdish control until it was captured by IS. With the assistance of US airstrikes, a coalition of KDP and PUK special forces and PKK guerrillas retook the city. The PKK guerrillas' combat effectiveness played a significant role in the battle,<sup>10</sup> and Kurdish media heralded the PKK fighters as the heroes of Makhmur and genuine patriots of greater Kurdistan. Reading popular sentiment, President Barzani visited the PKK's Makhmur camp to thank the PKK fighters personally,<sup>11</sup> yet Barzani's bonhomie belies a deep-seated fear of a PKK attempt to expand its influence in Makhmur and other parts of Iraqi Kurdistan. This fear has already materialized in Sinjar following the Kurdish recapture of the region.

YPG fighters created a corridor from Rojava to Mount Sinjar in northwestern Iraq to rescue 10,000 besieged Kurdish Yezidis. Kurdish social media images of PKK and YPG fighters rescuing terrified Yezidis from IS militants intent on genocide earned the PKK widespread appreciation and enhanced its pan-Kurdistan status. Exploiting its newfound prestige, the PKK is attempting to establish a permanent presence on Mount Sinjar. Outside the KRG's formal boundaries, Sinjar is located near the border with PYD-controlled Rojava. The KRG has accused the PKK/YPG of obstructing aid deliveries to the Yezidis and preventing them from returning to their homes in order to create a PKK-affiliated Yezidi enclave on Mount Sinjar.<sup>12</sup> Regardless of whether the claims of coercion are accurate, the KRG is potentially confronted with a fourth PYD-controlled canton in Sinjar.

PKK fighters are also assisting PUK efforts against IS in Jalawla, strategically situated between the Hamrin Mountains and the Kurdish town of Khanaqin on the Iranian border.<sup>13</sup> PUK-PKK cooperation in Jalawla is a particularly worrisome development for the KDP-led KRG. By linking Khanaqin via Jalawla northwest to Makhmur and then further to the greater Sinjar region, the KDP's rivals could create a contiguous PUK-PKK controlled region in the disputed territories running parallel to the KRG's formal boundary. Such a de facto alternative Kurdish entity would extend from

the Iranian border to PYD-controlled Rojava, creating a corridor for PKK activity from Syria to Iran. The PUK-dominated Kirkuk would be at the center of this PUK-PKK corridor. Given Tehran's good relations with both the PUK and the PKK, Iranian support for a rival Kurdish entity in Iraq constitutes Tehran's only means of preventing the KDP-led KRG from creating a viable independent state.

### **Iran's Pan-Kurdish Power Play: A PKK-PUK Alliance**

Iran's initial response to President Barzani's announcement came in the form of excoriating denouncements by Ayatollah Ahmad Khatami, presiding board member of the Islamic Republic's Assembly of Experts, and a stern warning from Iran's deputy foreign minister, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, not to jeopardize the Tehran-oriented, Shiite-dominated government in Baghdad.<sup>14</sup> Yet when IS overran Kurdish positions in Iraq's disputed territories, Iran rushed weapons and advisors to the PUK to prevent IS militants from reaching the Iranian border. With Iran's initial attempt to position itself as the regional leader in the fight against IS obviated in mid-August by the arrival of Western military aid to Erbil, Tehran is supporting the PUK to meet three objectives: 1) preventing US airstrikes in the disputed territories along the Iranian border; 2) preventing combat participation by Iranian Kurdish fighters in those areas; and 3) preventing the KDP from supplanting the PUK.

While Iran's interior minister has acknowledged the presence of Iranian advisors, Kurdish and Turkish media reports repeatedly allege the presence of Iranian soldiers in eastern Iraq.<sup>15</sup> Whether advisors or a larger contingent of soldiers, the Iranian military presence may have deterred the expansion of US airstrikes near the Iranian border. When fighters from the Iranian Kurdish parties attempted to join frontline positions in Jalawla, Peshmerga commanders allegedly ordered the Iranian Kurdish fighters to return to their original positions to avoid encountering Iranian troops.<sup>16</sup> The earlier Kurdish efforts to expel IS from Makhmur and Gwer, both located further away from the Iranian border, benefited from US airstrikes and the participation of KDP-I fighters.<sup>17</sup> The participation of the KDP's Iranian affiliate alarmed Tehran, as the KDP-I's military wing had remained dormant ever since the KDP renounced military action in Iran to prevent reprisal attacks on the KRG. Unconfirmed Kurdish media reports describe armed clashes between KDP-I Peshmerga and Iranian soldiers in Iraqi locations near the Iranian border, with the Iranian army sustaining casualties from KDP-I fighters.<sup>18</sup>

Tehran, which has generally succeeded in containing the scale of PJAK operations, is eager to prevent PJAK – which claims to maintain approximately 3,000 militants<sup>19</sup> – from expanding its operations in Iran. In 2011, Tehran deployed 5,000 soldiers on its border with Iraqi Kurdistan to suppress PJAK operations.<sup>20</sup> On June 23, 2014 Iran claimed to have wounded or killed several PJAK members transporting munitions across the border into Iranian Kurdistan.<sup>21</sup> The PKK has publically directed PJAK to work through peaceful democratic means to secure Kurdish rights in Iran. This directive, issued by Öcalan and mirroring his engagement with Turkish authorities, is also congruent with Cemil Bayik's attempt to keep the PKK more aligned with Iran.

To offset Turkish influence over Iraqi Kurdistan through Ankara's close relationship with Barzani, Iran will support the PUK's deepening its relationship with Bayik's PKK and the PYD. Unless Barzani can mollify Tehran, Iran will accept pan-Kurdish cooperation from Khanaqin to Rojava to the extent that it undermines the KDP-led KRG and does not threaten the authority of Iraqi Prime Minister al-Abadi's new government. To this end, Iran may utilize its 81<sup>st</sup> Armored Division stationed directly across the border from Khanaqin.<sup>22</sup> Experienced in counter-insurgency operations against Iranian Kurds, this division possesses a significant number of M60-A1 tanks that would tilt the balance of forces in Jalawla in favor of the PUK.

Tehran has no viable military option against a self-declared independent KRG, especially now that Erbil is receiving Western military aid. In contrast to Iran's intervention in Syria, intervention in an independent KRG would result in attacks on Iranian soil. Tehran's termination of Iran's \$4 billion cross-border trade with the KRG would impact negatively on Iran's economy and stimulate even deeper economic ties between Ankara and Erbil. Iran's only means to disrupt KRG efforts to create a viable independent state would be to encourage internecine conflict between the Kurdish parties by supporting an alternative Kurdish entity under PUK-PKK authority.

### **Turkey's Almost Grand Strategy for Kurdistan**

Turkey's AKP government has cultivated its relationship with Barzani's KRG and prefers Erbil to remain closer to Ankara than to a Tehran-aligned government in Baghdad. The KRG's continued oil exports via Turkey's Mediterranean port of Ceyhan highlight the economic benefit to Turkey of an Iraqi Kurdish political entity sufficiently autonomous to market its energy independent of Iraqi central government control. Ankara's drive to

become an energy transportation hub incorporates plans for KRG oil and natural gas. Turkey's new \$5.6 billion STAR oil refinery is being constructed with the capability to refine Kirkuk grade crude oil. The manufacture of high value petroleum products at reduced cost using Kurdish oil is expected to help Turkey cut its dependence on imported diesel and jet fuel.<sup>23</sup> Most critically, the KRG has the potential to export 10 billion cubic meters (bcm) of natural gas to Turkey as early as 2020.<sup>24</sup> Since Turkey's domestic natural gas consumption has already more than tripled, jumping from 15 bcm in 2000 to 46 bcm in 2010, Kurdish natural gas is of considerable importance for Turkey's energy security.

Turkey-KRG energy relations have already altered Ankara's strategic posture toward the KRG. Kirkuk is home to a sizable Turkmen population and the expansion of Kurdish control over the city had been an important red line for Turkish foreign policy. To the dismay of Turkish nationalists, the AKP government has quietly acceded to KRG control of Kirkuk. On June 28, 2014, two days prior to President Barzani's referendum announcement, then-deputy chairman of Turkey's ruling AKP Hüseyin Çelik indicated to the *Financial Times* that Turkey would not oppose KRG independence. With then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in the midst of a campaign to become Turkey's first directly elected president, Deputy Prime Minister Bülent Arınç disavowed Çelik's remarks, assuaging right wing nationalist voters that Turkey supports Iraq's territorial integrity and expects the status of Kirkuk to remain unchanged.<sup>25</sup>

Prior to the elections, Erdoğan sought to expand his voter base among Turkey's Kurds, who account for approximately 20 percent of Turkey's population. The centerpiece of Erdoğan's "Kurdish opening" was the ongoing peace negotiations with the imprisoned Abdullah Öcalan. Halting a thirty year insurgency that has cost over 40,000 lives, the peace talks have enjoyed broad public support. Given Öcalan's confederalist agenda, the AKP government's negotiations with the PKK could result in a Turkish grand strategy for Kurdistan whereby the KRG remains sufficiently autonomous to continue energy exports to Turkey but is constrained from outright independence by being subsumed into a pan-Kurdish confederation. The KRG and Rojava would become part of a de facto greater Kurdistan client state serving as a buffer between Turkey's southern border and the remaining portions of Syria and Iraq. However, the AKP's top priority is gaining a sufficient majority in Turkey's June 2015 parliamentary elections to alter Turkey's constitution to transform Erdoğan's largely ceremonial office

into a presidential position with strong executive powers. Erdoğan secured his margin of victory in Turkey's August 10, 2014 presidential elections through a successful eleventh hour appeal to the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) voter base.<sup>26</sup> Given the presidential voting patterns, the AKP cannot meet Kurdish expectations for some form of local autonomy and full language rights without jeopardizing its support among nationalist voters.

Short of rehabilitating Öcalan as a rival to Barzani through an AKP-PKK peace agreement, Ankara's only genuine lever over Erbil is that Turkey constitutes the only export outlet for the KRG's oil. However Ankara's actual ability to use this lever is quite limited. Turkish companies have been profiting from Erbil's economic boom, with approximately 1,200 Turkish firms operating in Iraqi Kurdistan. After Germany, Iraq constitutes Turkey's largest export market, with a significant portion of the \$12 billion in Turkish exports sold to the KRG.<sup>27</sup> Turkey can ill afford to sacrifice its current economic relations with the KRG or future imports of KRG natural gas by closing its oil pipeline to Iraqi Kurdistan. Moreover, as Turkey's Islamist-oriented AKP government enjoys relations only with Barzani's conservative KDP and none of the other Kurdish parties, geopolitically it cannot afford pushing the KDP closer to Iran.

### **Conclusion: Kurdistan's Azerbaijani Outcome**

In late August 2014, President Barzani issued his terms for joining the Iraqi government. Refusing to return to the status quo ante, Barzani insisted on the KRG's right to sell its own oil and gas, to conduct its own arms purchases, and to organize referendums in the disputed territories on joining the Kurdistan Region.<sup>28</sup> The KRG is already exercising the first two powers. Baghdad's accession to Barzani's demands would enshrine the KRG's de facto semi-independence within the legal framework of an Iraqi confederation. The third demand on organizing referendums is designed to assist the KRG to retain control over Kirkuk and other sensitive areas. If the al-Abadi government refuses this demand, the PUK will find it difficult to remain in the Iraqi federal government without risking its support in the disputed territories.

Ultimately, the exact timing of a KRG referendum on independence is likely to be influenced by battlefield developments against the Islamic State. The Erbil government needs to use its present semi-independence to develop the necessary military doctrine, training, and leadership to transform the Peshmerga into a capable national army. The Western military

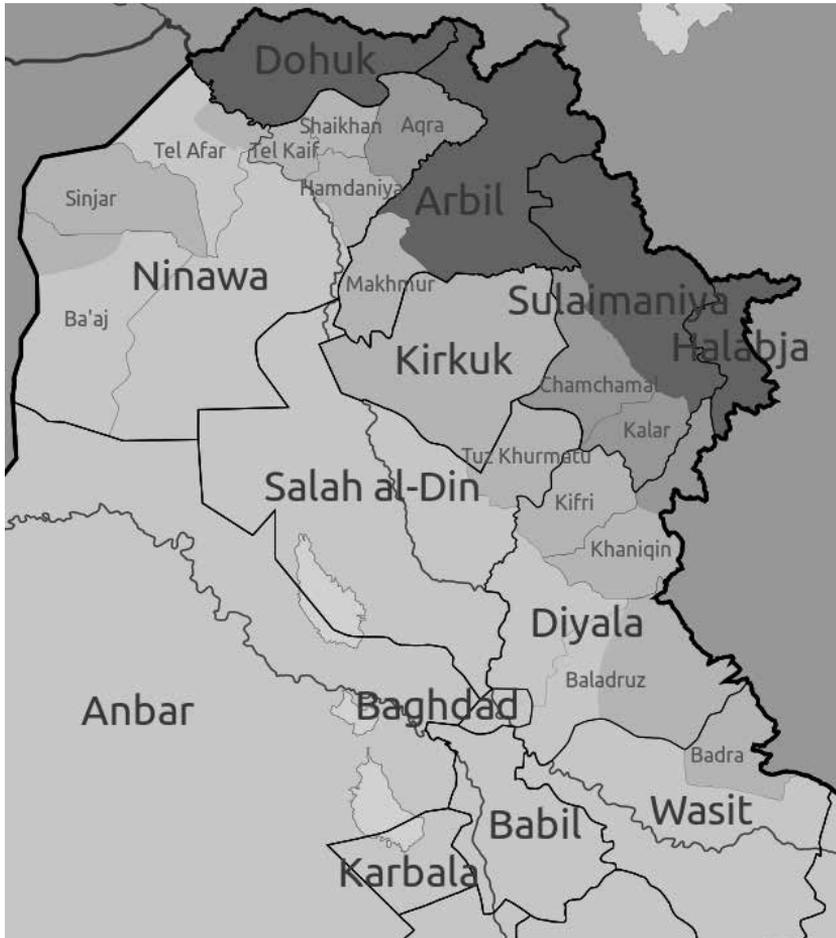
advisors sent to Erbil are already contributing to this task. Concurrent with his issuance of terms to the Iraqi government, President Barzani formally requested the KRG's Peshmerga minister to place all forces under a unified command structure.<sup>29</sup> Basing his request on a KRG parliamentary report on the Peshmerga's battlefield failures, President Barzani will also implement the report's recommendation to establish a security council under his supervision, thereby assuming the powers of commander-in-chief with KRG parliamentary authorization.<sup>30</sup> As commander-in-chief, Barzani can supervise the KRG's acquisition of heavy weapons and air defenses to counter Baghdad and Tehran. The anti-tank weapons Erbil is already receiving will also help the KRG defend itself from Iraq's M1-A1 tanks or Iran's 81<sup>st</sup> Armored Division's older M60-A1 tanks. The 96 US airstrikes conducted during August 8-26, 2014 that assisted Kurdish forces in halting IS advances required approximately 600 attack sorties.<sup>31</sup> If taken as the benchmark for the KRG's air combat requirements against IS, the KRG could meet its needs with 72 UAVs. To counter an Iraqi or Iranian air threat, the KRG would need to acquire a medium range surface-to-air missile system. Such systems could be acquired through the KRG's developing relations with Western powers, or from Israel, or from Russia. With fighter pilots requiring approximately four years of training and helicopter pilots two and a half years, the KRG needs to acquire an advanced capability immediately while developing pilots for a future Kurdish air force.

Under such circumstances both Baghdad and Tehran would find the cost of military intervention to prevent Kurdish independence too prohibitive. If Erbil can demonstrate a sufficient deterrent capability, Tehran would likely accept Kurdish independence in the manner it has come to accept Azerbaijan. Although hostile to the secular government in Baku and suspicious of Azerbaijan's intentions toward Iran's large Azeri population, Tehran has come to an accommodation with Azerbaijan as Baku has succeeded in resisting Tehran's earlier destabilization attempts. KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani's April 24, 2014 visit to Iran resulted in an agreement between Erbil and Tehran to construct twin oil and gas pipelines running from the KRG to Iran, indicating that Tehran may also be incentivized to accept a Kurdish state that does not threaten its immediate interests.

While continued battlefield successes of PKK/PYD forces and Iranian support for the PUK may drive the KDP-led KRG to hasten its independence bid, they will not deter the KRG from achieving independence. If the KRG succeeds in creating a unified military command structure, neither Turkey

nor Iran will be able to leverage other Kurdish actors to restrain Erbil's conduct of foreign policy. To avoid becoming a client state of Turkey while simultaneously ensuring its capabilities vis-à-vis Iran, an independent Kurdistan is likely to deepen its relations with Israel. Like Azerbaijan, an independent Kurdistan between Ankara and Tehran will find an enduring relationship with Israel to be vital to securing its national interests.

### Disputed Areas in Iraq Prior to the 2014 Northern Iraq Offensive



- Non-disputed and part of the KRG since 1991.
- Disputed and part of the KRG since 1991.
- Disputed and under the control of central government.

**Source:** Disputed Areas in Iraq CC. By-SA 3.0, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iraqi\\_Kurdistan#mediaviewer/File:Disputed\\_areas\\_in\\_Iraq.svg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iraqi_Kurdistan#mediaviewer/File:Disputed_areas_in_Iraq.svg).

## Glossary

- KRG** – Kurdish Regional Government  
**KDP** – Kurdish Democratic Party [Iraqi Kurdistan]  
**KDP-I** – Kurdish Democratic Party-Iran [KDP's Iranian affiliate]  
**PUK** – Patriotic Union of Kurdistan [Iraqi Kurdistan]  
**PKK** – Kurdistan Workers' Party [Turkish Kurdistan]  
**PYD** – Democratic Union Party [PKK's Syrian affiliate]  
**YPG** – People's Protection Units [PYD militia forces]  
**PJAK** – Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan [PKK's Iranian affiliate]

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# Shifts in Israel-Africa Relations

Herman Butime

Israel's reported involvement in the Westgate hostage rescue mission in Kenya in 2013 underscored Africa's significance in Israel's engagement with the globe.<sup>1</sup> Since the founding of the Jewish state, Africa has presented Israel with both opportunities and constraints for surviving and thriving in the international system. While the end of the colonial era accorded Israel the opportunity to establish relations with some African countries, the conflict between Israel and its Arab neighbors undermined these nascent ties.<sup>2</sup> In more recent times, the emergence of common security concerns has revived and strengthened Israel's relations with some African states.<sup>3</sup> This article examines the evolution of Israel-Africa relations. In formulating its ties with the African continent, the Jewish state has largely been motivated by altruism and the drive to circumvent boycotts designed at its isolation; efforts to combat external and internal threats to security; construction and consolidation of alliances that reinforce its ideals and values; and enhancement of its position as an important actor in the international system.

## Israel-Africa Relations

Three broad phases have defined Israel-Africa relations. The first phase was characterized by Israel's altruism and its drive to breach the boycott imposed by its Arab neighbors.<sup>4</sup> Africa welcomed Israel because both parties shared a history of anti-colonial struggles, and among the developed countries, Israel was quick to extend development assistance to the continent.<sup>5</sup> With the upsurge in conflict between Israel and its Arab neighbors, the second phase was marked by Africa (mainly in solidarity with the Afro-Arab

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countries) severing ties with the Jewish state.<sup>6</sup> Due to the emergence of common security concerns in more recent times, the third phase has seen Israel revive ties with its erstwhile African allies.<sup>7</sup>

In the immediate post-colonial era, Israel's engagement with Africa was driven by altruistic motivations and the drive to circumvent the Arab boycott of the Jewish state. Both Africa and Israel had suffered under the yoke of colonialism, and particularly following the Holocaust, the Jewish people acknowledged the importance of strengthening the capabilities of disadvantaged people in seeking to cope with threats that abound in a volatile world. To that end, during this phase Israel dispatched development experts to Africa.<sup>8</sup> This humanitarian assistance cultivated cooperation in the areas of technical assistance, joint enterprises, and exchange and training programs.<sup>9</sup> There was also a confluence of security interests that underpinned the evolution of these relations. With the proliferation of military regimes on the continent, Israel was an attractive partner to some African leaders, as it had the technical know-how to equip them with the coercive capability to stay in power. At the peak of defense cooperation during that phase, Israel was instrumental in training military personnel, establishing paramilitary organizations, and supplying arms to allies in Africa.<sup>10</sup> With these relations, Israel marshaled a measure of international goodwill to counteract the Arab boycott.

The Yom Kippur War of 1973 cast Israel in a foreign policy dilemma. Initially in establishing ties with some post-colonial African states, Israel had been critical of the apartheid regime in South Africa. Yet when the Afro-Arab members of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) pressured member states to sever relations with Israel (in solidarity with the Middle Eastern Arab states confronting Israel), Jerusalem established ties with the South African establishment (which ironically harbored Nazi sympathies) in order to maintain a foothold on the continent.<sup>11</sup> This shift not only punctured the altruistic component of Israel's foreign policy but also from the perspective of most African countries, portrayed the Jewish state as racist. The thorn in relations notwithstanding, Israel's engagement with Africa did not completely cease. Shared security concerns, ideals, and values presented a platform for continued ties between Israel and some African states.

## Israel-Horn of Africa Relations

Of all the regions of Africa, the Horn of Africa (HoA) is of paramount concern to Israel. According to Ely Karmon, “The Horn of Africa is important for Israel’s economic interests, including trade with Asia through the Red Sea.”<sup>12</sup> Given its geographical proximity, the region would also be of critical security concern to Israel. In this vein, Israel has cultivated relations with some HoA countries to combat internal and external threats to its security, muster regional influence, and reinforce basic ideals and values.

In the HoA, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Kenya are of critical interest to Israel. Given their proximity to Somalia, Israel has sought to group these countries into a buffer zone against Somali Islamist groups (in concert with other radical groups) potentially linking up with the Palestinian militant group Hamas. In trying to cut the ties between external and internal security threats, Israel has also tapped into relations with its HoA allies to undercut the influence of Iran. Tehran is suspected of working to destabilize Israel by arming Hamas. According to the Israeli Defense Forces, Iran has tried to establish an arms supply route for the Palestinian militant group that connects through Sudan, the Red Sea, and the Sinai Peninsula to the Gaza Strip.<sup>13</sup>

The frosty relations between Israel and Iran are not only restricted to the conflict with the Palestinians. The two states are also engaged in a bitter war of espionage in the HoA. Stratfor Global Intelligence, a think tank that monitors Iranian activities in the region, reported that Israel has established spy bases in Eritrea to counteract Iran’s surveillance posts in the area.<sup>14</sup>

Despite these interests, the above exposition does not pinpoint the glue that binds Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya, and Israel together. Given that these countries plus the newly created Republic of South Sudan are predominantly Judeo-Christian, as opposed to the predominantly Muslim Sudan, Somalia, and Iran, the configuration of the region reads like a clash of civilizations pitting two competing religious blocs. Reinforcing this notion, al-Shabab, the Somali Islamist group, has threatened retaliation for Israel’s claim over East Jerusalem, home to al-Aqsa, Islam’s third holiest shrine.<sup>15</sup> It could be argued that Israel’s engagement with the HoA is partly intended to reinforce the religious facets that underpin its ideals and values.

## Israel-Ethiopia Relations

The foregoing analysis provides a broad appreciation of the dynamics dictating Israel’s engagement with the HoA. For a more in-depth understanding of

this phenomenon, however, it is imperative to assess the actual nature of Jerusalem's relations with some of its key allies in the region.

Apart from Kenya, Ethiopia is Israel's other critically important ally in the HoA. Relations between the two states have been underpinned by the drive to strengthen mutual cultural connections and address shared security concerns. The ties between Israel and Ethiopia date back to Biblical times. During the reign of King Solomon, the Queen of Sheba of Ethiopia visited Israel.<sup>16</sup> The last Emperor of Ethiopia, Haile Selassie, considered himself to be of Jewish descent. Following an attempted coup in 1960, Israel provided a plane that relocated him to where he was able to crush the putsch. Yet relations between the two countries were challenged during the Yom Kippur War. As host of the OAU headquarters, Ethiopia could not break ranks with the rest of Africa when the Afro-Arab states pushed for a boycott of Israel in solidarity with the Arab states involved in the Middle East conflict.<sup>17</sup>

The above developments, however, did not put an end to Ethio-Israeli relations because aside from the cultural connections, the two states continued mutually beneficial ties underpinned by common security concerns. For example, Israel has been one of Ethiopia's major military suppliers. During the Eritrean War of Independence, Israel backed Addis Ababa, as apparently, in light of its difficult relations with its Arab neighbors, it wanted to prevent the "Red Sea from becoming the Arab Sea."<sup>18</sup> It was this drive to check Arab influence in the region and external threats to security that prompted Israel in 2009 to bomb a convoy of vehicles in Sudan ferrying Iranian missiles bound for the Gaza Strip.<sup>19</sup> Without the cooperation of Ethiopia, which enjoys geographical proximity to the Red Sea, it is difficult to imagine how the Jewish state could have successfully conducted this operation.

### **Israel-Uganda Relations**

Although Uganda is not in the HoA, Israel found it important to establish and maintain relations with it, and in the past, has had security connections with this East African country. In 1976, Palestinian and German terrorist operatives hijacked an Air France plane carrying primarily Israelis, and with the cooperation of Uganda's President Idi Amin diverted it to Uganda's Entebbe International Airport. Israeli security forces forcefully rescued the hostages through a carefully planned operation.<sup>20</sup>

Under normal circumstances, Uganda's role in the incident would have distanced it from Israel's web of allies in Africa. However, in the post-Cold War era, this was not the case because Kampala has emerged as a strategic ally of the United States. Given that at one time it shared a frontier with Sudan, Uganda was seen by the US as a bulwark against the southward exportation of Islamic fundamentalism emanating from Khartoum.<sup>21</sup> In assuming this role, Uganda was not only serving US interests but also addressing its own security concerns. At one time, the Khartoum establishment sponsored Ugandan rebel groups – the Lord's Resistance Army and the Allied Democratic Front – apparently in retaliation for Uganda's support for the South Sudan-based Sudan People's Liberation Army rebel group.<sup>22</sup> With the emergence of Sudan as a common threat to Uganda, the US, and Israel, there was sufficient ground for cooperation between Tel Aviv and Kampala.

In recent times as well relations between the two countries have been underpinned by security considerations. In 2013, Israel deported Sudanese and Eritrean illegal immigrants to Uganda with a plan of eventually having them sent back to their respective countries of origin. In return, *Haaretz* reported that Israel agreed to supply Uganda with artillery shells and mortars, and upgrade its jet fighters.<sup>23</sup> By accepting to temporarily host the deportees, Uganda assisted in relieving Israel of people who might impose a strain on the economy and in some cases potentially constitute a domestic security and demographic threat. Bolstering the military strength of Uganda was beneficial to both countries. Kampala would use its upgraded arsenal not only to maintain a balance of military capabilities in its interaction with Sudan but also bolster its interventionist efforts in Somalia, where it is battling al-Shabab. These considerations are central to Israel's confrontation of external and internal threats to its security.

### Israel-Kenya Relations

According to Galia Sabar, "To Israel, Kenya is one of the most important countries in Africa. Since 1963, the two countries have had a close, profound and, for the most part, a mutually beneficial relationship."<sup>24</sup> Israel-Kenya relations principally spring from two premises. First, apart from present day Israel, Kenya was the other prospective homeland for Jews who yearned to have a state of their own, a Zion. Second, in advance of the establishment of Israel, Kenya was a theater in the Jewish people's anti-colonial struggle.

Connections between the two countries began at the turn of the twentieth century. At the Sixth Zionist Congress in 1903, under what was known as the Uganda Scheme, British Colonial Secretary Joseph Chamberlain offered part of Kenyan territory for the creation of an autonomous Jewish state. Although at the Seventh Zionist Congress in 1905 this proposal was rejected, some Jewish families emigrated to Kenya. In 1913, a Jewish synagogue was built in Nairobi, the capital of Kenya. Since this initial influx of emigrants, hundreds of Jews have grown to consider the East African country their premier homeland.<sup>25</sup> In this sense, cordial Israel-Kenya relations can partly be traced back to Kenya at one time presenting as a prospective Zion for the Jewish people. Although it did not live up to this billing, the influx of Jewish immigrants into the country left a lasting historical connection between Kenya and Israel.

Anti-colonial struggles also generated a measure of shared history between the two countries. In 1947, the British authorities set up a colonial detention center at Gilgil in the Kenyan Rift Valley, which housed, among others, members of the Irgun and Lehi Jewish underground resistance organizations. These insurgents were taken care of by members of the Jewish community who had settled in Kenya. Some of the Irgun and Lehi operatives later died and were buried in this East African country.<sup>26</sup> With Kenya posting its indirect contribution to the history of the Jewish state, at the end of the colonial era, there was a sufficient basis upon which Israel-Kenya relations could be cultivated. This notion is further supported by the argument that in the evolution of bilateral relations, Kenyans themselves could favorably relate to the anti-colonial experiences of the Jews. In their struggle to end British rule, Kenyans staged a rebellion, the Mau Mau uprising, which like the Jewish resistance, saw the incarceration of leaders of the anti-colonial movement.<sup>27</sup> In this sense, both nations were united by a common historical struggle against colonial oppression.

The 1973 Yom Kippur War damaged Israel's relations with its allies in Africa. With regard to Kenya, people-to-people relations endured and the two countries also continued cooperating on security matters, albeit covertly. Notably during this era, Kenya purchased missile boats and Gabriel missiles from Israel and in 1976 assisted it in the operation to rescue Israeli hostages in Uganda.<sup>28</sup> Relations between the two states normalized in 1988. Six years later, after President Daniel Arap Moi of Kenya visited Israel, Kenya appointed its first ambassador to Israel.<sup>29</sup> Whereas the specific factors that shaped this normalization of ties are not clear, presumably

the enduring shared history, ideals, values, and concerns may have had a bearing on the rapprochement.

Israel-Kenya relations extend to almost all spheres of human interaction, and over the years have included people-to-people, political, trade, economic, technological, security, cultural and academic exchange.

### *Cooperation in Socio-Economic Development*

Like its relations with the rest of Africa, Israel's cooperation with Kenya in socio-economic development has largely been driven by altruistic motivations and the need to maintain the global competitiveness of the Israeli economy. According to Aliza Belman Inbal, "In the same way we are a high tech power, we can become a development tech power because our problems are their problems and our expertise fits their needs."<sup>30</sup> Inbal herein emphasizes the altruistic function of technology: it is not only meant to better the lives of those who own it but should also be shared with those who do not have it. This bolsters the theory that sharing a common history of anti-colonial struggles, Israel reached out to Africa in part because it harbored an empathetic obligation to do so.

Against the above rationale, Israel and Kenya have concluded numerous bilateral agreements and Memoranda of Understanding which include, among others, the Agreement on Technical and Scientific Cooperation (1989); the Agreement on Water Resource Management, Technologies, Irrigation and Capacity Building (2009); and the Memorandum of Understanding on Fisheries Cooperation (2011).<sup>31</sup> These protocols have paved the way for substantial trade between the two states. According to the Israel Export Institute, bilateral trade relations in 2012 amounted to some \$139 million, constituting 8 percent of Israel's trade with Africa.<sup>32</sup> Like Africa's interaction with the developed world, however, Israel-Kenya ties potentially yield an imbalance in trade relations between the two countries. Whereas Israel exports high value industrial goods like transport, security, medical, and electrical equipment, Kenya mainly sells primary resource products that include animal, plant, and wood products.<sup>33</sup>

While more recently Israel's relations with India, China, and Eastern Europe have to a large extent eclipsed those with Africa, ties with Africa help to keep the Israeli economy competitive.<sup>34</sup> According to the international consulting firm McKinsey, the key for the future survival of global firms is "innovation to win in low-cost, high-growth countries."<sup>35</sup> Despite the global financial meltdown, in 2012 about a quarter of the countries in

Africa registered an impressive economic growth rate of 7 percent or more.<sup>36</sup> Although Israel's trade with Africa compares unfavorably with that of trade with Asia and the US, excluding diamonds, Israel maintains substantial exports to Africa worth \$ 1.3 billion.<sup>37</sup>

### *Security Cooperation*

Partly due to the existence of shared values between Israel and Kenya in a world of competing civilizations, both countries have tended to attract common enemies. To address this problem, bilateral security cooperation has been characterized by Israel offering military capabilities and Kenya proving an attractive platform and market for Israel.

In the formative phase of this cooperation, Kenya was instrumental in offering Israel a platform for espionage and counterterrorism in Africa. The Mossad once operated a station in Kenya, and while the Israeli government was plotting the Entebbe rescue mission, it relied heavily on Kenya. The Scottish-born Bruce McKenzie, who was linked to the Mossad, convinced Jomo Kenyatta, then President of Kenya, to allow Israel to collect intelligence and refuel its military planes in Kenya while conducting the operation. For his role in the rescue mission, McKenzie was later assassinated by Amin's agents, who blew up a plane in which he was travelling. To acknowledge McKenzie's role in the rescue mission, Mossad head Meir Amit arranged the planting of a forest in Israel in his memory.<sup>38</sup>

Kenya's association with Israel and particularly its supportive role in the hostage crisis made it a "legitimate" target of pro-Palestinian groups. In 1980, an Arab group claimed responsibility for bombing the Norfolk Hotel, citing Kenya's role in the Entebbe rescue mission as a motivating factor.<sup>39</sup> Although the attack on Norfolk Hotel signaled the extension of the Jewish-Arab conflict to Kenya, it was not until two decades later that Israeli interests evolved into a direct target of pro-Palestinian groups. In 2002, al-Qaeda affiliated militants conducted a suicide bomb attack on the Israeli-owned Paradise Hotel in the Kenyan coastal city of Mombasa and attempted to shoot down an Arkia Airlines airplane carrying Israeli nationals.<sup>40</sup> The above developments, coupled with Kenya's evolving status as a battleground in East Africa's war on terror, pushed the two countries to strengthen security cooperation. In 2011, Israel and Kenya concluded the Agreement on Cooperation in Public Security Issues.<sup>41</sup>

While strengthening bilateral ties, the long history of Israel-Kenya cooperation has at the same time generated constraints on both countries'

ability to engage constructively with other actors in the international system. To this effect, Israel's designated enemies are expected to automatically translate into Kenya's and vice versa. In 2013, Tel Aviv was alarmed by a meeting between President Uhuru Kenyatta of Kenya and President Mahmoud Abbas of the Palestinian Authority in Kuwait. The two leaders met on the sidelines of the Africa Arab Summit to discuss prospects of re-opening the Palestinian Embassy in Nairobi and securing land for a Palestinian Chancery.<sup>42</sup> Whereas Israel may have had some cause to be apprehensive about the meeting, the zero-sum manner in which it conceptualized the Israel-Kenya alliance left no room for either country to constructively engage with actors hitherto designated as adversaries of the two states.

The zero-sum perception of Israel-Kenya cooperation is particularly reinforced by people-to-people exchanges. Reacting to the Kenyatta-Abbas meeting, Francis Ndegwa, the Head of the Shalom Club, a society of 3,000 Kenyans who over the years have studied in Israel, warned: "It should be approached with caution because it has political implications."<sup>43</sup> The existence and behavior of the Shalom Club points to the notion that whereas Israel-Kenya relations may mainly be shaped by cooperation on concrete economic and security issues, the influence of lobby groups originally rooted in "softer" connections between the two states should not be underestimated.

## Conclusion

Although there have been various downturns in their relations, Israel and its allies in Africa have continued cooperating over the past six decades. Israel's interests have centred on altruism; the drive to circumvent isolating boycotts; confrontation of external and internal security threats; shared ideals and values; and enhanced status in the international system. On the other hand, Israel's African allies have sought to consolidate cultural connections and harness Israel's technological expertise in the spheres of development and security.

Whereas security cooperation continues to be an enduring facet of Israel's engagement with Africa, in order to make the ties with the continent more durable, Israel would do well to place most of its emphasis on development assistance. In this direction, Israel should strengthen its technical assistance approach toward more development assistance. The kind of technical assistance that the Israeli Agency for International Development Cooperation (MASHAV) delivered in Africa in the 1960s is

potentially more transformative than the donor aid that African countries receive from most of the developed countries. In the long term, this soft power approach to bilateral relations is the key to winning the hearts and minds of Africa.

## Notes

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# Changing Direction? Updating Israel's Nuclear Doctrine

Louis René Beres

## Regional Balance and "Deliberate Ambiguity"

Operation Protective Edge invited the conclusion, yet again, that Israel's chief security issues involve Palestinian terrorism. Although such a view is not necessarily shortsighted or mistaken, the genuinely existential issues of nuclear strategy and nuclear war must remain at the very forefront of IDF planning attention.

Israel's leaders have always understood the need for a recognizable "security equalizer." Already in the late 1950s, then-Prime Minister David Ben Gurion fixed his hopes for national survival and self-defense on some apt form of Israeli nuclear weapons capability. More specifically, Ben Gurion calculated that just having "the bomb" would adequately assure the Jewish state's strategic deterrent, at least with regard to possible enemy attacks employing weapons of mass destruction, and/or large scale conventional arms. Clearly, all of Ben Gurion's successors have adhered, more or less openly, to this same line of strategic reasoning.<sup>1</sup>

And why not? From the start, the Israeli policy of a "bomb in the basement" seemed to make eminently good sense. Everyone essentially understood that Israel possessed nuclear weapons. Why, then, should Jerusalem be gratuitously more precise? Why, too, should an evidently fragile Israel reveal more, and needlessly alienate the United States?

A meaningful and convincing answer to this question, rooted in precise conceptual understanding, is that no automatic, necessary correlation can ever be made between general enemy perceptions of Israel's nuclear

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capacity and credible Israeli nuclear deterrence. In certain circumstances, moreover, any such adversarial perceptions could undermine Israeli nuclear deterrence. A pertinent case in point would concern those conditions in which Israel was believed to hold exclusively high yield/strategic nuclear forces. This plausible belief could elicit reasonable doubts about any still undeclared Israeli willingness to activate such nuclear forces in retaliation for any enemy first strike attack.

Nonetheless, “deliberate ambiguity” has managed to endure as the invariable and inviolable core of Israel’s nuclear doctrine. Somehow, ignoring the potentially lethal deterrence shortcomings of opacity, Jerusalem seemingly remains convinced that removing the bomb from Israel’s basement could prompt widespread and possibly insufferably corrosive global condemnation. Such Israeli political and public relations concerns are understandable. Still, they pale in significance beside the probable costs of any consequent security failure of the country’s nuclear deterrent.<sup>2</sup>

### **Rationale for New Policy Limitations on Deliberate Ambiguity**

In the arcane world of nuclear strategy, it can never be sufficient that enemy states merely acknowledge Israel’s nuclear status. In terms of Israel’s protection, it is not enough that these states merely believe that Israel *has* nuclear weapons. They must also be prepared to believe that Israel has eminently *usable* nuclear weapons, and that Israel would be prepared to employ these presumably usable weapons in very specific and readily identifiable threat situations.

Israel needs its nuclear weapons. This bold statement is not even remotely controversial. While US President Barack Obama seeks a “world free of nuclear weapons,” Israel could not survive without these weapons. Understood also in terms of Carl von Clausewitz’s famous adage in *On War* (1832), there can come a military tipping point when “mass counts.” For Israel, which is half the size of America’s Lake Michigan, this tipping point is always nearby; there is simply no formidable “mass.”

The security risks of any sort of denuclearization or nuclear weapons-free zone for Israel are both specific and tangible. They are not merely general, or simply generic. In part, this is because the country’s extant regional adversaries will presumably be joined at some point by: (a) a new enemy Arab Palestinian state;<sup>3</sup> or (b) a newly-nuclear enemy Iran. If this scenario includes both components, the result would be an even more challenging situation. Synergistically, this profoundly interactive development could

then devolve into conditions considerably more detrimental to Israel than the simple sum of its two separate parts. If deprived of its nuclear weapons, whether still-ambiguous or newly-disclosed, Israel would irremediably lose its residual capacity to deter major enemy aggressions. More precisely, without these weapons, Israel could no longer respond convincingly to existential hazards with any plausible threats of retaliation, and/or with any persuasive threats of counter-retaliation.

Yet merely possessing nuclear weapons, even when they are unhesitatingly acknowledged by enemy states, can never ensure successful Israeli deterrence. However, an appropriately selective and nuanced end to deliberate ambiguity could reliably improve and sustain Israel's otherwise-imperiled nuclear deterrent. In this connection, the probability of assorted enemy attacks in the future could likely be reduced by making available certain additional and limited information concerning Israel's nuclear weapons and its associated strategic postures.

To achieve Israel's relevant deterrent objectives, this crucial information would necessarily center upon the major intersecting issues of nuclear capability and decisional willingness. Would an Israeli move away from a policy of deliberate nuclear ambiguity be helpful with respect to certain prospective non-nuclear threats to Israel? To be sure, the plausibility/credibility of any appropriate Israeli threat of nuclear retaliation would be greatest wherever the particular aggression posed was also nuclear. Still, there are circumstances in which a determined enemy or coalition of enemies might contemplate "only" a devastating conventional first strike against Israel, and conclude that such a strike is worthwhile because it would not elicit any Israeli nuclear retaliation.

In such conceivable circumstances, the enemy state or coalition of states will have concluded that any non-nuclear first strike against a nuclear Israel, however massive, could in fact be rational and cost effective (because Israel's anticipated retaliation would necessarily stop short of crossing the nuclear threshold.) If, however, the prospective aggressor(s) had previously been made deliberately aware that Israel possessed a meaningfully wide array of capable nuclear retaliatory forces, both in terms of their range and yield, these enemies would more likely be deterred. Here, as a distinctly welcome consequence of certain incremental and previously nuanced "disclosures," Jerusalem will have signaled its relevant adversaries that it can and will cross the nuclear retaliatory threshold to punish any potentially existential national destruction. In narrow military parlance, Israel's actions here

would be correctly designed to ensure “escalation dominance.” In this scenario, moreover, the pertinent nuclear deterrence advantages to Israel of implementing certain moves away from “deliberate nuclear ambiguity” would lie in the compelling “signal” that it sends; that is, that Israel would not need to retaliate here with only massive and plainly disproportionate nuclear force.

Such advantages could extend beyond enhancing credible threats of Israeli nuclear retaliation, to enhancing credible threats of Israeli nuclear counter-retaliation. If, for example, Israel should initiate a non-nuclear defensive first strike against Iran before that enemy state becomes nuclear capable (an act of “anticipatory self-defense” under international law), the likelihood of any massive Iranian conventional retaliation could better be diminished if there were more openly disclosed and prior Israeli threats of an aptly measured nuclear counter-retaliation. In essence, by following an incremental path away from “deliberate nuclear ambiguity,” Israel would be less likely to replicate America’s initial nuclear posture error vis-à-vis the Soviet Union, that is, of “massive retaliation.”

Skeptics disagree. They argue that thus far, Israel’s nuclear ambiguity has succeeded in keeping the country’s enemies from mounting any sort of authentically existential aggressions. If so, why rock the boat?

### **170,000 Rockets Pointed at Israel**

Even if Israel’s enemies were all to remain non-nuclear, they could, at least in principle, still launch potentially lethal assaults against it. If these entirely conventional enemies were ever able to fashion a determined collaboration, they could, perhaps in concert with certain insurgent proxies, inflict especially grievous harm. That such a prospect is altogether real was expressed by Major General Aviv Kochavi. Speaking in late January 2014, Maj. Gen. Kochavi, who was then head of IDF Intelligence, indicated that 170,000 rockets were already “pointing at Israel.”

These are sobering numbers. Israel’s state and sub-state enemies, especially in any collaborative military undertakings, would have substantial and advantageous mass. In order to counter even certain non-nuclear threats, Israel could ultimately need to exploit the compensatory deterrence advantages of its indispensable nuclear forces.

Israel protects itself not only by implicit and explicit threats of reprisal, but also via critical and inter-penetrating elements of national defense. More precisely, as is obvious following Operation Protective Edge, an integral part

of Israel's multi-layered security system lies in active defenses, including Iron Dome against short range rockets and (in the future) the Arrow against Iranian weapons. Yet even the already well-regarded and successfully-tested Arrow could never achieve a sufficiently high probability of interception to adequately protect soft targets, that is, Israeli civilians. No system of ballistic missile defense can ever create a hermetic seal, and even a single incoming nuclear missile that somehow managed to penetrate Arrow defenses could kill tens or hundreds of thousands of Israelis. Significantly, these "leakage" limitations would likely be less consequential if Israel's traditional reliance on deliberate ambiguity were suitably diminished.

The historic Israeli policy of depending upon an undeclared nuclear capacity will not work indefinitely. Left unrevised, this policy will sometime fail. The most probable and fatal locus of such failure could be Iran.

In the next several years, Iran will almost certainly become a full member of the nuclear weapons club. To be deterred, a newly-nuclear Iran would need convincing assurance that Israel's own nuclear weapons were invulnerable and penetration-capable. Any Iranian judgments about Israel's capability and willingness to retaliate with nuclear weapons would depend largely upon some prior Iranian knowledge of these weapons, including their presumed degree of protection from Iranian surprise attack, and their presumed capacity to adequately breach any Iranian active and passive defenses. At the same time, the uniform appearance of Israeli nuclear weapons as being "too large" and "too powerful" could weaken Israel's nuclear posture. For example, Iranian perceptions of exclusively mega-destructive Israeli nuclear weapons could effectively undermine the credibility of Israel's core nuclear deterrent. Here, Israel's deterrent credibility could actually vary inversely with the perceived destructiveness of its nuclear arms.

Israel might learn here from another prominent adversarial dyad, this one in southwest Asia. It involves an already-nuclear India and an already-nuclear Pakistan. In this ongoing and still-bitter polarity of conflict (three open wars since independence in 1947), Pakistan is now increasingly leaning toward smaller, or tactical, nuclear weapons in its arsenals. Moreover, since Pakistan first announced its test of the 60-kilometer Nasr ballistic missile in 2011, its emphasis upon smaller nuclear weapons has been most conspicuously oriented toward the deterrence of a conventional war. In this connection, by threatening to use relatively low yield "battlefield" nuclear weapons in retaliation for an Indian aggression, Islamabad seeks to appear less provocative to Delhi, and therefore less apt to elicit any Indian nuclear

reprisals. To be sure, the IDF has already rejected any policy of expanded reliance on tactical nuclear forces, but the underlying concept of nuclear deterrence based upon less than altogether “massive retaliation” would still be worth pursuing.

### **Conceptualizing an Incremental End to “Deliberate Ambiguity”**

Once coexisting with an already-nuclear Iran, Israel would not benefit from any increase in nuclear secrecy, but rather from certain limited and residual forms of expanded nuclear disclosure. This would mean a deliberate incremental end to Israel’s bomb in the basement.

At some point, a newly nuclear Iran might decide to share some of its nuclear components and materials with Hizbollah, or perhaps with another kindred terrorist group. To prevent this, Jerusalem would need to convince Iran, *inter alia*, that Israel possesses a viable range of distinctly usable nuclear options. Israeli nuclear ambiguity could be loosened by releasing certain general information regarding the availability of appropriately lower yield weapons. A policy of continued nuclear ambiguity might no longer be sufficiently persuasive.

In Jerusalem (with the Prime Minister) and Tel Aviv (the Ministry of Defense), it is necessary to calculate *vis-à-vis* a soon-to-be nuclear Iran the exact extent to which Israel should communicate key aspects and portions of its nuclear positions, intentions, and capabilities. To ensure that its nuclear forces appear sufficiently usable, invulnerable, and penetration-capable to all prospective attackers, and not just to Iran, Israel will benefit from selectively releasing certain broad outlines of strategic information. This disclosed information, released solely to enhance Israeli nuclear deterrence, would in part include the hardening, dispersal, multiplication, basing, and yields of selected Israeli nuclear forces.

### **Enemy Rationality or Irrationality?**

Once it is faced with a recognizable nuclear adversary in Tehran, Israel will need to convince its recalcitrant Iranian enemy that it possesses both the will and the capacity to make any intended Iranian nuclear aggression more costly than gainful. No Israeli move from ambiguity to disclosure, however, would help in the case of an irrational nuclear enemy. For dealing with irrational enemies, those particular adversaries who would not value their own continued national survival more highly than any other preference<sup>4</sup> or combination of preferences, even preemption could be too late.<sup>5</sup> For

example, to the extent that an Iranian leadership might subscribe to certain visions of a Shiite apocalypse, Iran could cast aside all rational behavior. Were this to happen, Iran could effectively become a nuclear suicide bomber. Such a destabilizing prospect is highly improbable, but it is not inconceivable. Although rarely discussed, a similarly serious prospect may exist in already-nuclear and substantially coup-vulnerable, Pakistan.

Some of Israel's enemies might be irrational in the technical sense, but not entirely "crazy." For example, Iranian decision makers could act in conformance with a preference that values the destruction of the Jewish state more highly than any other preference or combination of preferences. In such improbable but not impossible circumstances, Iran would be irrational, yet remain subject to alternate Israeli threats of deterrence.

To protect itself against military strikes from rational enemies, particularly attacks that could potentially carry existential costs, Israel will need to better exploit every aspect and function of its nuclear arsenal and doctrine. The success of Israel's efforts here would depend not only upon its selected targeting doctrine (enemy cities and/or military forces), but also upon the extent to which this choice were made known in advance. Before any rational enemies could be deterred from launching first strikes against Israel, and before they could be deterred from launching retaliatory attacks following any Israeli non-nuclear preemption, it will not be enough for them merely to know that Israel has the bomb. These enemies would also need to detect that usable Israeli nuclear weapons were sufficiently invulnerable to first strike attacks, and that at least a determinable number were fully capable of penetrating high value population targets. More than likely, Israel has adopted a counter-city or "counter-value" nuclear targeting policy. That policy, in some controlled measure, replicating US targeting doctrine during the Cold War, must soon be made known in advance to all of Israel's identifiable enemies. Without such deliberate advance disclosures, the Israeli nuclear deterrent policy could eventually fail.

Removing the bomb from Israel's basement could enhance Israel's strategic deterrence to the extent that it would heighten rational enemy perceptions of both secure and capable Israeli nuclear forces. Such a calculated end to deliberate ambiguity could also underscore Israel's willingness to use these nuclear forces in reprisal for certain enemy first strike and retaliatory attacks. This brings to mind the so-called Samson option, which could allow various enemy decision makers to internalize that Israel is prepared to do whatever is needed to survive.

## The Samson Option

Only a selective end to its nuclear ambiguity could allow Israel to exploit the potentially considerable benefits of a Samson option. Should Israel choose to keep its bomb in the basement, therefore, it could never make any use of the residual Samson option.

Irrespective of its preferred level of ambiguity, Israel's nuclear strategy will remain oriented toward deterrence, not to war-fighting. The Samson option refers to a policy that would be based in part upon a more or less implicit threat of massive nuclear retaliation for certain specific enemy aggressions. Such a policy could be invoked credibly only in cases where such aggressions would threaten Israel's very existence, and could involve more destructive and high yield nuclear weapons than would otherwise be thought "usable." A Samson option could make strategic sense for Israel, but only in presumably last resort, or near last resort, circumstances. Where it is involved, an end to deliberate ambiguity could help Israel by emphasizing that particular portion of its nuclear arsenal that is less usable. This is not a contradiction of the prior argument that Israel will need to take the bomb out of the basement in order to enhance its deterrent credibility. Rather, it stipulates that the cumulative persuasiveness of Israel's nuclear deterrent will require prospective enemy perceptions of retaliatory destructiveness at both the low and high ends of the nuclear yield spectrum. Ending nuclear ambiguity at the proper time would best permit Israel to foster such perceptions.

The main objective of any Samson option would not be to communicate the availability of any graduated Israeli nuclear deterrent. Instead, it would intend to signal the more-or-less unstated promise of a counter-city reprisal. Made plausible by an end to absolute nuclear ambiguity,<sup>6</sup> the Samson option would be unlikely to deter any enemy aggressions short of "high end" nuclear and/or biological first strikes against Israel. Samson would "say" the following to all potential nuclear attackers: "We (Israel) may have to "die," but (this time) we won't die alone." The Samson option, made possible only after a calculated end to Israeli nuclear ambiguity, could serve Israel as an adjunct to deterrence, and to certain preemption options, but not as a core national nuclear strategy.

The Samson option should never be confused with Israel's absolutely overriding security objective: that is, to seek stable nuclear deterrence at the lowest conceivable levels of possible military conflict. In broad outline, Samson could support Israel's nuclear deterrent by best demonstrating

an Israeli willingness to take strategic risks, including even existential risks. Moshe Dayan famously embraced this particular and potentially counterintuitive logic: “Israel must be like a mad dog,” asserted Dayan, “too dangerous to bother.”

### **The Rationality of Pretended Irrationality, and a New Cold War**

In pertinent strategic calculations, it can be rational to pretend irrationality. The nuclear deterrence benefits of pretended irrationality must always depend, at least in part, upon an enemy state’s awareness of Israel’s disclosed counter-value targeting posture. There are specific and valuable security benefits that Israel would likely incur as the result of any intentionally selective and incremental end to deliberate nuclear ambiguity.

The time to begin such an “end” has not yet arrived. But at the precisely verifiable moment that Iran crosses the nuclear threshold, Israel should remove the bomb from its basement. By the time this moment arrives, Israel should already have configured its planned reallocation of nuclear weapons assets, and the measurable extent to which this configuration should now be disclosed. This form of advance planning could enhance the all-important credibility of its nuclear deterrence posture.

One last point warrants special mention. Israel, in the fashion of every other state in world politics, operates within a “system.”<sup>7</sup> Today, there is increasing evidence that this system is rapidly falling back into an earlier era of bipolarity, and that this regression may even begin to evolve into a new US-Russia Cold War.<sup>8</sup> Should this evolution in fact come to pass, much of Israel’s still-emergent nuclear forces and corollary nuclear doctrine would necessarily be affected.

Any forthcoming decision making in Jerusalem concerning nuclear ambiguity vs. nuclear disclosure, therefore, should take careful account of newly shifting superpower commitments and alignments. In the end, an anticipated era of hardening bipolarity could render the international system effectively less anarchic, but also more narrowly adversarial. It follows that Jerusalem and Washington may soon need to recalculate their overlapping nuclear options with a more intentionally conscious awareness of certain policy transformations already underway in Moscow.

In the final analysis, Israel’s enemies should be made to understand that there are circumstances in which Israel could rationally decide to use its nuclear weapons.<sup>9</sup> These circumstances would involve the prospect of suffering a total defeat, or, in more traditional Jewish-historical terms, a

destruction of the Third Temple Commonwealth. To be sure, Israel's leaders would always do whatever is needed to survive as a state, including, if need be, nuclear preemption; nuclear retaliation; nuclear counter-retaliation; or nuclear war fighting.<sup>10</sup>

Although it is difficult to imagine any circumstances wherein Israel could ever decide to launch a preemptive nuclear strike, there are conditions in which such an option could still be entirely rational, to wit: (a) Israel's enemy had verifiably acquired nuclear, and/or other nonconventional weapons authoritatively deemed capable of destroying the Jewish state; (b) Israel's enemy had already made explicit and clear that its destructive intentions fully paralleled its capabilities; (c) Israel's enemy was believed ready to begin an irremediable "countdown-to-launch"; and (d) Israel's leadership believed that non-nuclear preemptions were no longer able to achieve absolutely minimal levels of damage limitation, that is, levels consistent with Israel's national survival.

Plainly, Israel's overriding obligation must be to never allow any such end-of-the-line circumstances to arise.<sup>11</sup> In the best of all possible worlds, this existential obligation could be met through the good offices of imaginative diplomacy, and possibly even through more centralized world-authority processes. But this is not yet the best of all possible worlds, and Israel will quickly need to determine how best to coexist with one or more threatening "scorpions in a bottle," the grotesque but effective metaphor originated by physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer in the early days of the Cold War. In Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, this daunting obligation can be met only by fashioning and refashioning Israel's strategic doctrine in accordance with the highest standards of intellectual power.

### **Israeli Nuclear Strategy as an Intellectual Imperative**

Israel can prevail only if it conceptualizes the struggle for national survival as a relentless battle of mind over mind,<sup>12</sup> a fundamentally cerebral conflict that takes measured account of growing world system anarchy, re-emergent superpower bipolarity, and the ever shifting correlation of regional military forces. Israeli military planners must always understand that Israel should not attempt to face its perils as a set of wholly separate threats. Instead, they should begin to acknowledge a more general threat environment within which all of these discrete components have a precise and determinable position.

Even today, when the specific synergistic hazards created by impending Palestinian statehood and Iranian nuclearization are overriding and even

palpable, the core task for Israeli strategists must be to identify a broadly coherent and comprehensive framework that can accommodate the optimal understanding of all possible enemy threats. This means, *inter alia*, an obligation to fashion, in thoughtful increments, a strategic master plan, a body of generalized and interrelated propositions from which assorted and specific policy options could be suitably and reliably derived.

Israel's needed strategic master plan can never be constructed *ex nihilo*. Rather, it must become the determined outcome of an explicitly dialectical method of thinking. Plato, in the middle dialogues, describes the dialectician as the one who knows best how to ask, and then to answer, his own questions. This ancient method of seeking truth by correct reasoning remains best suited for the current and indispensable enhancement of Israeli strategic studies.

When Pericles delivered his funeral oration, it was to express confidence in ultimate victory for Athens. At the same time, as recalled by Thucydides, the authoritative Greek historian of the Peloponnesian War (431-404 BCE), Pericles had also expressed deep fears about self-imposed setbacks along the way. "What I fear more than the strategies of our enemies," lamented Pericles, "is our own mistakes." There is an urgently important lesson here for Israel: in observing diverse enemy preparations for war and terror, do not forget that the efficacy of these preparations will always depend upon Israel's calculated responses.

Long after Pericles, Yehoshafat Harkabi, a former head of Israeli Military Intelligence, drew this operational guidance from the Bar Kokhba rebellion, a well-planned insurrection in ancient Judea (132 CE), which pushed the Jewish people to the outer margins of history: "In choosing a style of fighting, be wary of warfare in which the reaction required of the enemy, from the enemy's point of view, may lead to an action detrimental for you.... This is an important lesson in nuclear circumstances; refrain from a provocation for which the adversary may have only one response, nuclear war."<sup>13</sup>

Applying Harkabi's historically informed insights to needed revisions in Israel's current strategic doctrine, two possible lessons present themselves: (a) do whatever is needed to prevent front line enemies from becoming nuclear in the first place; or (b) accept the inevitability of adversarial nuclear proliferation, together with its corollary limitations on preemption, and thereby focus instead on effectively ongoing mechanisms of national self-protection. Ideally, of course, Harkabi's wisdom would be better served

by the first option, but by now the chances for operational success of any defensive first strike are apt to be intolerably low.

So long as a fully nuclear Islamic Republic of Iran is not regarded in Jerusalem as being absolutely incapable of coexistence with a Jewish state, Israel's optimal doctrinal emphases should immediately be placed on implementing more suitable configurations of diplomacy, nuclear deterrence, and ballistic missile defense. In this connection, it will be especially important to reevaluate the longstanding Israeli policy of deliberate nuclear ambiguity, or the bomb in the basement.

## Notes

- 1 Nonetheless, on December 22, 1995, then-Prime Minister Shimon Peres declared freely to the press that Israel would be willing to "give up the atom" in exchange for "peace." Years later, on December 11, 2006, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, made much the same "slip of the tongue."
- 2 No state, including Israel, is under any legal obligation *per se* to renounce its own access to nuclear weapons, and in certain distinctly residual circumstances, even the actual resort to such weapons could be lawful. In this connection, on July 8, 1996, the International Court of Justice at The Hague handed down its Advisory Opinion on "The Legality of the Threat or Use of Force of Nuclear Weapons." The final paragraph of this Opinion, concludes, "The threat or use of nuclear weapons would generally be contrary to the rules of international law applicable in armed conflict, and in particular the principles and rules of humanitarian law. However, in view of the current state of international law, and of the elements of fact at its disposal, the Court cannot conclude definitively whether the threat or use of nuclear weapons would be lawful or unlawful in an extreme circumstance of self-defense, in which the very survival of a State would be at stake."
- 3 Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's steady insistence that any Palestinian state remain "demilitarized" is not merely unrealistic, but also potentially inconsistent with pertinent international law. On this point, see Louis René Beres and Zalman Shoval, "Why a Demilitarized Palestinian State Would Not Remain Demilitarized: A View Under International Law," *Temple International and Comparative Law Journal* 11, no. 2 (1997): 347-63.
- 4 An irrational and sovereign decision maker may value certain preferences, or combinations of preferences, more highly than even national survival. Nonetheless, the irrational and sovereign decision maker is not, by definition, either "mad," or "crazy." Rather, he may still choose among alternative options according to certain preference orderings that remain both consistent and transitive. It follows that an irrational Iran could still maintain a certain more-or-less fixed hierarchy of preferences, and that suitable threats to obstruct these particular preferences could remain a

- fully plausible and compelling source of Israel deterrence. Most apparent in this regard would be certain credible threats to the Iranian decision makers personally, including family, and/or to the safety and security of certain religious (Islamic) institutions.
- 5 In military assessments, there may sometimes be certain ascertainable variables that are stubbornly refractory to any precise measurement, but are nonetheless of considerable importance. A not so obvious example would be the religious promise of immortality, or power over death, an utterly primal form of power that carries overwhelming weight in the Islamic Middle East and Iran.
  - 6 Whether or not a shift from deliberate ambiguity to nuclear disclosure would actually enhance Israeli nuclear deterrence would depend on several complex and intersecting factors. These include the specific types of nuclear weapons involved, the reciprocal calculations of enemy leaders, the effects on rational decision making processes by these enemy leaders, and the effects on both Israeli and adversarial command/control/communications operations. Moreover, if bringing Israel's bomb out of the basement were to result in selected enemy pre-delegations of launch authority, and/or new and less stable launch-on-warning procedures, the likelihood of unauthorized and/or accidental nuclear wars could be substantially increased.
  - 7 For more on this point, see Louis René Beres, "Israel's Urgent Strategic Imperative," Oxford University Press blog, posted on May 12, 2013.
  - 8 As the White House threatened sanctions against Russia in the run up to the March 16, 2014 Crimean referendum on secession, a Kremlin-backed journalist issued a stark warning to the United States. "Russia is the only country in the world," said television personality Dmitry Kiselyov, "capable of turning the United States into radioactive ash." He spoke in front of a backdrop of an iconic mushroom cloud. Significantly, Kiselyov had recently been named by Russian President Vladimir Putin to head a new state news agency, whose function will be to portray Russia in a favorable light.
  - 9 More generally, the obligation to use force in a world of international anarchy forms the central argument of realpolitik, from the *Melian Dialogues* of Thucydides and the *Letters* of Cicero, to Machiavelli, Locke, Spykman, and Kissinger. "For what can be done against force with force?" inquires Cicero. Yet the kind of anarchy that we confront today is very different from earlier eras of decentralized global authority. In essence, it is more primal, more primordial, even self-propelled, and self-rewarding.
  - 10 By any measure of reasonableness, the nuclear war fighting option must always be considered the most residual and the least cost effective. It must always be borne in mind, nuclear weapons can truly succeed only via non-use, that is, only as a deterrent. Even prior to the nuclear age, ancient Chinese military theorist Sun-Tzu had argued generally in *The Art of War* that "subjugating the enemy's army without fighting is the true pinnacle of excellence" (chapter 3, "Planning Offensives").

- 11 Recall, in this connection, Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*: "Defensive warfare....does not consist of waiting idly for things to happen. We must wait only if it brings us visible and decisive advantages. That calm before the storm, when the aggressor is gathering new forces for a great blow, is most dangerous for the defender." See Carl von Clausewitz, *Principles of War* (New York: Dover Publications, 2003), p. 54. With regard to Iran, Israeli decision makers must now inquire, is this perhaps the "calm before the storm"? For one current and strongly affirmative answer, see Andrew Bostom, "Iran's Final Solution for Israel," *National Review Online*, February 10, 2012.
- 12 Rabbi Eleazar quoted Rabbi Hanina, who said: "Scholars build the structure of peace in the world." See *The Babylonian Talmud*, Order Zera'im, Tractate Berakoth, IX.
- 13 See: Yehoshafat Harkabi, *The Bar Kokhba Syndrome: Risk and Realism in International Politics* (Chappaqua, New York: Rossel Books, 1983). The Bar Kokhba rebellion, explains Professor Harkabi, "was the culmination of a period of uprisings, such as the Great Revolt of 66-70 CE, in which the Second Temple was destroyed, and the uprisings of 115-117 CE, during the reign of Trajan, when the Jewish communities in Cyrenaica, Egypt, and Cyprus were destroyed" (xi).



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