

PREFACE

The civil war underway in Syria since March 2011 has transformed beyond recognition a state that until recently was characterized by four decades of relative stability, and has sent shockwaves throughout the region and beyond. Today, Syria – if that name still applies to an entity divided into regions controlled by different elements with different allegiances – looks increasingly less like a state and more like a center of internal, regional, and international struggles between state and non-state actors that have succeeded in taking advantage of the relative weakness of the central regime to establish and boost their own standing.

The weakening of the central regime and the rise of different actors at its expense poses new dilemmas and challenges for the State of Israel. The disintegration of Syria has resulted in large areas without effective governance that have been penetrated by extremist Sunni elements and elements associated with the radical Shiite axis led by Iran. These forces are hostile toward Israel and subject to the influence of countries whose relations with Israel are tense and have deteriorated, as in the case of Turkey and Qatar, or hostile and volatile, as in the case of Iran and its Lebanese proxy, Hezbollah. In the course of the Syrian conflict, Sunni jihadist and pro-Iranian actors have expanded their activity in southern Syria, succeeded in establishing themselves along the Israeli border in the Golan Heights, and come to pose a threat to the relative calm that has prevailed in the region for years. Simultaneously, the emergence of a number of pragmatic opposition elements, some of whom represent liberal moderate national or local groups, have presented Israel with concrete opportunities for cooperation and perhaps a foundation for future relations with actors that share mutual aims and interests, similar values, and common enemies.

The Syrian process is not dissociated from the broader regional context, which has been characterized by similar processes of state disintegration (in Iraq, Libya, and Yemen) along with the formulation of two new centers of power – the Iranian-Shiite axis and the Sunni jihadist axis. These loci of

power pose a significant challenge to both Sunni states in the region and non-state actors not affiliated with Hezbollah, the Islamic State, and other such groups. The emergence of a Sunni regional coalition that includes Saudi Arabia and Jordan and operates to curb Iran and its proxies on the one hand and the Islamic State on the other hand is important for understanding the new regional dynamic and Israel's place within it. This dynamic has had an impact on the Syrian conflict arena, particularly southern Syria, and on the interaction between Israel and the local actors.

This memorandum maps the various actors operating in Syria today, primarily the non-state actors, analyzing their positions toward Israel, surveying their interactions with Israel during the civil war in Syria, and formulating recommendations for active Israeli policy toward them. The study proposes modes of action aimed at drafting a new Israeli strategy vis-à-vis the changing Syrian arena. For the purpose of this study, the Syrian actors are classified as “positive” or “negative,” based on the level of their correspondence with Israeli interests vis-à-vis a number of parameters indicative of the potential for cooperative efforts at a given point in time. These criteria include values, goals, mutual interests, and definition of adversaries.

From this perspective, the actors are positioned on a continuum, and do not represent a dichotomous equation. Actors with greater levels of correspondence with Israel vis-à-vis the said criteria are classified as “positive,” and those with lower levels of correspondence are considered “negative.” The memorandum focuses primarily on more “positive” actors such as the Free Syrian Army, local Sunni groups operating in southern Syria, and the Druze and Kurdish minorities, which have emerged as the candidates with the strongest potential for cooperation with Israel. Actors that espouse Salafi jihadist or Islamist ideology, such as the Islamic State, the Nusra Front, Ahrar ash-Sham, and Jaysh al-Fath, or that are pro-Iranian in orientation, such as Hezbollah, and the Alawite minority underpinning the Assad regime, reflect less potential for cooperation with Israel and are therefore discussed less comprehensively. However, the dynamics of the events in Syria and future Israeli actions have the potential to change the orientation of the actors in question, and as such, affect the applicability of the recommendations proposed in this memorandum regarding the potential for cooperation with Israel.

The memorandum is divided into three chapters. Chapter 1 deals with the rise of non-state actors as an influential force in the Middle East in general

and in Syria in particular as a result of the vicissitudes in the Arab world between 2010 and 2015; Israel's policy of non-intervention in the civil war in Syria; and the implications of this policy. Chapter 2 maps the main actors operating in the Syrian arena – including the Islamic State, the Nusra Front, the National Coalition for Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces, the Free Syrian Army, local actors in southern Syria, influential figures operating independently, and the Kurdish and Druze minorities – and their interaction thus far with Israel. Chapter 3 analyzes the risks and opportunities posed by cooperative efforts with “positive” actors, the conditions required for the success of such cooperation, and their possible manifestations. The chapter also proposes military, diplomatic, economic, and humanitarian modes of action for contending with the challenges posed by the new Syrian arena and recommends replacing Israel's policy of non-intervention with a more proactive policy that has defined long term aims.

The monograph closes with an appendix containing responses to a questionnaire authored by the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) and sent in mid-2015 to Syrian opposition activists, most of whom are currently residing outside Syria. Although the questionnaire is not a representative sample, it nonetheless offers insights into various aspects of the issues and opens a window for future study.

We would like to express our gratitude to the many people who helped us in preparing this memorandum, among them: Dr. Anat Kurz and Dr. Gallia Lindenstrauss, for their constructive comments and their professional and devoted editing; to Dr. Kobi Michael, Dr. Yoel Guzansky, Moshe Grundman, Dr. Judith Rosen, Dr. Carmit Valensi, Orit Perlov, and Omer Einav, who read earlier drafts of the monograph, took part in its preparation from its early stages, provided important insights, and suggested helpful references; to Yoel Kozak and Dafna Tadmor, who placed at our disposal the superb services of the INSS Information Center; to Elizabeth Tsurkov, who provided us with new perspectives; and to Gal Lusky, founder and CEO of Israel Flying Aid (IFA), who was an important resource for the study's discussion of humanitarian efforts. We would like to express special thanks to the Syrian activists and colleagues who agreed to assist in the memorandum's preparation by sharing their knowledge, experience, and connections with us and by shedding light on the complex reality in their country. Among many other sources, this study is also based on informal contacts between the authors and a number of Syrian activists. Throughout the memorandum,

activists are often referred to using only initials or are kept anonymous to prevent the exposure of their identity.

Although the recommendations proposed are applicable at the time this memorandum goes to press, the ongoing war in Syria and the developments that can still be expected in the complex arena may very well necessitate their reassessment and updating in accordance with the changing circumstances.

Udi Dekel, Nir Boms, and Ofir Winter
Tel Aviv, May 2016