

CHAPTER 2

Mapping the Non-State Actors in Syria and their Attitudes toward Israel

The civil war in Syria has sparked the formation of countless civilian groups and armed militias with diverse political, ideological, sectarian, ethnic, and religious attributes.¹ Due to the local, spontaneous, and often temporary nature of the organizations, along with their tendency to converge and diverge in accordance with changing interests, it is difficult to classify them according to strict criteria based on ideology, aims, representation, influence, power, and ties to states and actors. Given these limitations and the difficulty of drawing clear lines of division with unequivocal and concrete expression, it was decided to focus on four subtypes of non-state hybrid actors currently operating in the Syrian sphere, according to a structural-organizational cross-section that may be divided along ideological lines:

- a. Radical actors espousing Salafi jihadist ideology, such as the Islamic State and the Nusra Front.
- b. Groups with liberal and pro-Western orientations, such as the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces and the Free Syrian Army.
- c. Local actors representing particular geographical, tribal, ethnic, religious, and sectarian interests, such as groups operating in southern Syria and the Kurdish, and Druze minorities.
- d. Opponents of the regime that operate independently, mostly in exile, and that enjoy a variable degree of influence on Syrian public opinion in general and Syrian opposition circles in particular.

This memorandum focuses primarily on the three latter types of actors, all of whom are “positive” actors that share a broad range of common interests, values, goals, and enemies with Israel, as opposed to the “negative” jihadist,

Islamist, and pro-Iranian actors whose common denominator with Israel is much smaller.

Salafi Jihadist Actors

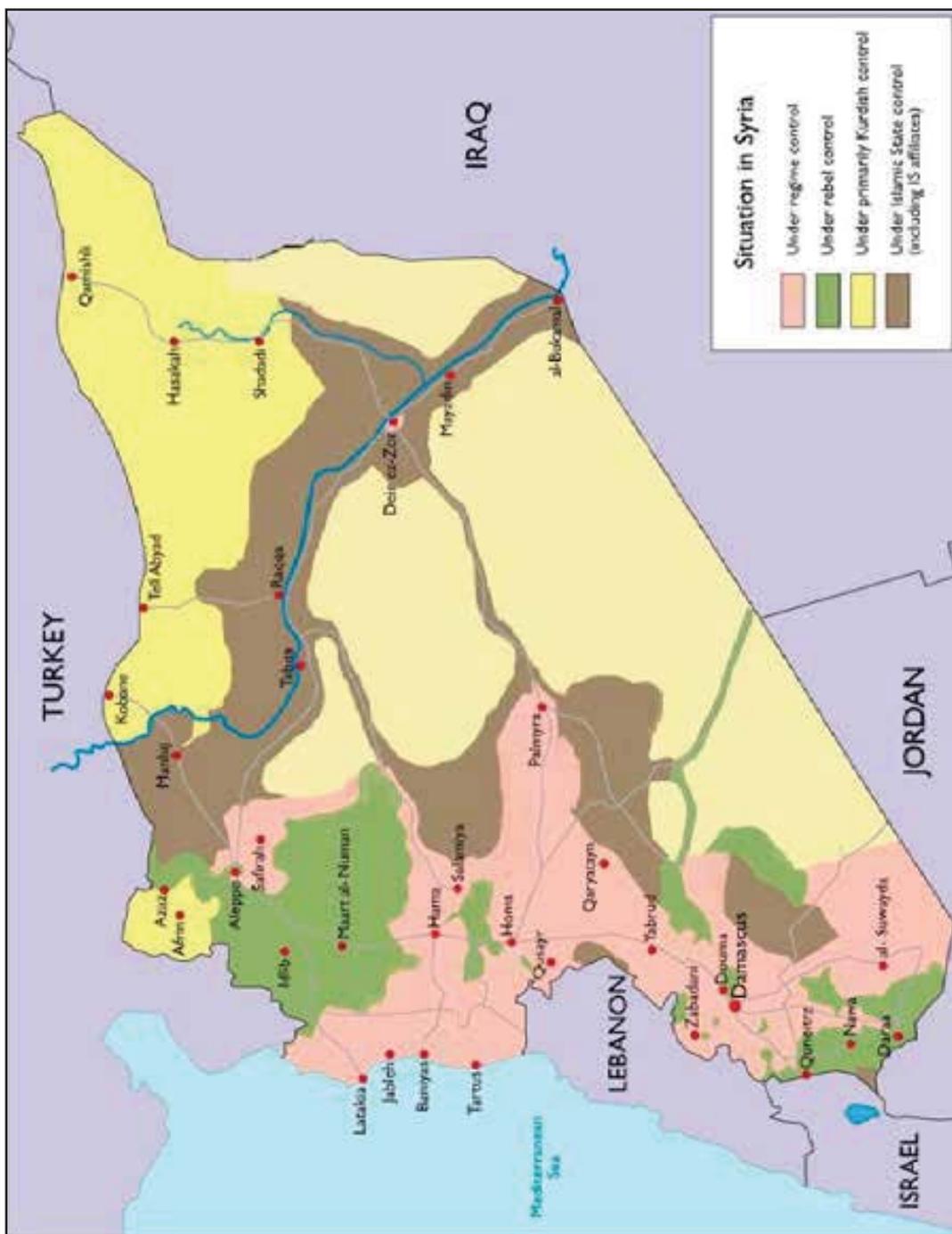
The operations of Salafi jihadist actors in Syria are driven by a long term religious vision that aims to do away with the political borders drawn at the end of World War I. In place of this political arrangement, these actors seek to impose Muslim rule, based on a radical-conservative interpretation of Islamic law (*sharia*), on Muslim and non-Muslim populations around the world, including religious and ethnic minorities. In June 2014, after splitting off from the main faction of al-Qaeda controlled by Ayman al-Zawahiri, the Islamic State, under the leadership of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, declared the establishment of a caliphate in Iraq and Syria.

The Islamic State has four aims. The first is the conquest of large areas of Iraq and Syria. The second is the subordination of Salafi jihadist groups operating in the region to Islamic State authority. Indeed, in quick succession, groups in the Sinai Peninsula, Libya, Algeria, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and Nigeria have sworn allegiance to the Islamic State and recognized al-Baghdadi as caliph. The third aim is to seize control of the Muslim states bordering Syria and Iraq (Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and the Gulf states). The fourth aim is long term in nature, and calls for the establishment of control over the entire Arab-Muslim world, a struggle against the West, and, ultimately, global conquest.

In the course of 2014-2015, the Islamic State scored several major military achievements with its conquest of major cities in Iraq and Syria, some of which constitute centers of commerce and resources (including Fallujah, Mosul, Tikrit, Ramadi, al-Raqqah, al-Bab, Deir ez-Zor, Palmyra, and the al-Yarmouk Palestinian refugee camp on the outskirts of Damascus). Militias allegedly affiliated with the Islamic State, Shuhada al-Yarmouk and Harakat al-Muthanna al-Islamiyya, secured a foothold in southern Syria, east of the Druze Mountain, near the border with the Golan Heights² (figure 1) and in the western Daraa countryside.³ These accomplishments (which unraveled somewhat in early 2016 due to the Russian involvement) sparked two trends. The first was the attraction of large numbers of foreign volunteers from countries in the region and from the West to its ranks, most arriving via Turkey, and weak local Syrian actors who were enticed into joining the Islamic State out of military and material (and not necessarily ideological)

considerations. The second trend, posed by the mounting threat, led to the formation of a broad US-led joint Western-Arab counter-coalition in September 2014. According to accepted estimates in Israel, in mid-2015 the Islamic State fighters numbered approximately 30,000, of whom 11,500 were primarily foreign fighters operating in Syria.

The Nusra Front, which was established in late 2011 as the official branch of al-Qaeda in Syria, refused to accept the authority of the Islamic State. Although the Islamic State and the Nusra Front both resolutely reject



Avigdor Orgad Maps

Figure 1: The Division of Regions of Control in Syria (October 2015)⁴

nationalist ideas and aspire to establish an Islamic nation as a viable state framework, the former is already focused on the aim of building the caliphate and establishing its rule through the imposition of *sharia*, providing for the needs of the loyal populations, and building governance mechanisms. In contrast, the Nusra Front is currently focused on toppling the Assad regime and ousting supporters of Iran and Hezbollah from the country, based on the belief that the caliphate vision can only be realized after the achievement of a concrete decision in the Syrian combat arena. According to its leader, Abu Muhammad al-Julani, the Nusra Front has approximately 10,000 fighters, 70 percent of whom are Syrian.⁵ It relies largely on external aid, primarily from Qatar and private donations from other Gulf states, and bases its power on weapons appropriated from Assad's army or brought into Syria from the West. For its part, the Islamic State has had greater success in developing diverse governance institutions and has declared its establishment of an economic, financial, and monetary system that aims to be independent. Throughout the war in Syria, the two groups have engaged in a bitter rivalry over the leadership of the Salafi jihadist camp, but have also sometimes managed to cooperate with one another in battles against Assad regime forces, Hezbollah, the Iranian al-Quds force, moderate opposition groups, and Kurdish rivals.

For Israel, the Nusra Front raises greater concrete concern than the Islamic State due to its extensive presence along the border in the Golan Heights, including in Quneitra and Daraa. Nonetheless, from an ideological perspective, the groups are of equal weight, as both the Islamic State and the Nusra Front view Israel (as well as the countries of the West) as an infidel country that constitutes a military and cultural threat endangering the security and religious values of the Islamic societies – and that therefore must be fought and defeated through jihad. From their perspective, Israel is also an occupying country whose very existence harms the sanctity of the land and the Islamic nation's religious right to it. At the same time, based on pragmatic considerations of limited strength and the initial emphasis on Syria and Iraq, Israel has thus far been considered a “distant enemy” that is not high on their list of immediate priorities and will become more central only in the future, after the ousting of Assad and the expansion of the caliphate. Israel's policy of refraining from action against Salafi jihadist elements has helped bolster their tactical approach, but has resulted in no cracks in the strategic goals of the two groups.

Despite its low priority on the Salafi jihadist list of immediate targets, however, Israel has frequently been cast on the rhetorical and symbolic level as a primary enemy. For that reason, although the Nusra Front and the Islamic State currently pose only a minor threat to Israel, their propaganda nonetheless makes reference to Palestine as an essential component of the Islamic entity they intend to establish. Because of its propaganda value, the Islamic State has used the ethos of the struggle for Jerusalem as a source of legitimacy for its rule, chosen the al-Aqsa mosque as a unifying symbol to enhance its messages, and suggested that it constitutes a target of future conquest. In illustration of this dynamic, the al-Aqsa icon was selected to appear on the first independent coins of the Islamic State, rather than two sites that are more sacred to Islam.⁶ Similarly, a news agency associated with the Islamic State has often exalted the group as a military force that in the future will serve the Muslims as a counterweight to the power of Israel. It has praised the struggle in Syria as the first stop on the road to the liberation of Jerusalem, and described the Levant (ash-Sham) as the “gateway” to the holy city.

In tandem, Islamic State rivals in Syria have been described as allies and defenders of Israel operating in its service against Muslim interests.⁷ Despite the status of Jews in Islam as “People of the Book,” ideological enmity toward Israel has often been appeal for a violent global struggle against Israelis and Jews. This anti-Semitic approach received concrete lethal expression in the January 2015 deadly attack on the kosher supermarket in Paris. Israel’s new role as “the enemy” strengthened toward the end of 2015, possibly against the background of the escalation in Israel (the “knives intifada”). The Islamic State published a number of statements and videos – including from al-Baghdadi himself – stressing its commitment to the Palestinian cause and threatening, “Jews, soon you shall hear from us in Palestine, which will become your grave.”⁸ A small number of Palestinian and Israeli Arabs have travelled to join the ranks of the Islamic State, and some of the “lone wolf” terrorist attacks in Israel Of 2015-2016 were inspired by the propaganda of the Islamic State.⁹

Along with its official hostile rhetoric, however, there have been widespread reports of understandings and coordination between Israel and al-Nusra elements in the Golan Heights, including the provision of humanitarian and perhaps other aid to its forces, which are engaged in fighting the Assad regime, Hezbollah, and the Iranian forces deployed in the Golan Heights.¹⁰

Israel claims it provides medical humanitarian aid to the Syrian civilian population and not to the Salafi jihadist forces. However, if there is any truth to these reports, they indicate that on a local level, Israel has been able to reach short term understandings with radical jihadist elements with regard to specific interests.

“Pragmatic” Actors

The main Syrian opposition body, the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (hereafter: the National Coalition), was established in November 2012 with the aim of bringing opponents of the Assad regime under one roof. It called for “an end to the tyrannical regime and the establishment of a civil, democratic, and pluralistic state of law that respects the civil rights of all citizens.” The National Coalition encompasses the Free Syrian Army (FSA), Syrian movements and parties operating in Syria and in exile, minority Kurdish, Assyrian, and Turkmen groups, and prominent influential independent opponents of the regime. In March 2013, it established a transitional government that in early 2014 served as the representative body of the rebels in the talks with the Syrian regime, held in Geneva under the auspices of the world powers. It also constitutes the most influential component of the High Negotiations Committee of the Syrian opposition that was established in late 2015. Many countries, including most Arab and Western countries under the leadership of the United States, recognized the National Coalition as the official representative of the Syrian people. However, while some of the Syrian forces operating on the ground have accepted the authority of the National Coalition and support its calls for reform within the traditional borders of Syria, the Salafi jihadist forces have challenged its political vision and its legitimacy as an authority. Moreover, a number of prominent leaders of the Syrian opposition and some of the Kurdish parties have distanced themselves from the National Coalition, based on charges of corruption, claims that its exiled leaders are detached from the realities facing the Syrian people, and allegations of subjection to the interests of foreign countries. All this has made it difficult for the National Coalition to serve as an effective unifying body for the rebels in Syria.¹¹

The National Coalition’s official position vis-à-vis Israel has stemmed from its need to represent the broadest common ideological denominator of its different elements, which are divided in any event. For this reason, it has refrained from deviating from the traditional Syrian-Arab consensus

surrounding fundamental hostility toward Israel, solidarity regarding the Palestinian issue, and the resolute demand for a full Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights. These positions authentically reflect the views of some of its members, but they are also meant to help the group cultivate a patriotic Syrian image, in response to counter efforts by the regime to portray the National Coalition as a tool of external “enemies of Syria” – first and foremost, the United States and Israel – and question its devotion to core national values. Thus in accordance with its conservative position, Section 13 of the National Coalition’s vision document declares: “Syria supports the legitimate historical rights of the Palestinian people to establish a nation state with Jerusalem as its capital.”¹² Following Operation Protective Edge, the National Coalition denounced Israel, expressed its support of Hamas, and portrayed the steadfastness of the Palestinians as a source of inspiration for the Syrian people, which was engaged in a similar struggle for its rights.¹³ As for the future of the Golan Heights, the National Coalition has emphasized its support of UN Security Council Resolution 242 – based on its expanded Arab interpretation of Israeli withdrawal from all Arab territories conquered in 1967 (including the Golan Heights) – and Resolution 497, which stipulates the illegality of Israel’s annexation of the Golan Heights.¹⁴

The National Coalition’s official response to attacks attributed to Israel against military targets of the regime and the shipment of weapons intended for Hezbollah reflect its considerations of public opinion. It refrained from celebrating the blow to its principal enemy as long as it was inflicted by Israel, and issued a response that combined a fundamental condemnation of Israel, a taunt to the Assad regime for its weakness, and an assurance that after the revolution, the Coalition would not allow the recurrence of hollow Syrian sovereignty.¹⁵ The customary Syrian ritual of empty threats of a military response to the Israeli attack was exploited by the National Coalition to expose the hypocrisy of the regime, which for decades has proclaimed slogans of “resistance” vis-à-vis the Zionist enemy while, on its watch, Syria actually was marked by helplessness and vulnerable to the attacks of its enemies. In a more severe charge, the regime was accused of destroying Syria’s infrastructure and turning the weapon of “resistance,” which had been meant to give the impression of a struggle against Israel, into a weapon against freedom-seeking inhabitants of Syria.¹⁶ According to the official National Coalition propaganda, the Syrian regime is a covert ally of Israel, defending it under the guise of bellicose anti-Israel rhetoric¹⁷

and promoting its aspirations to destroy Syria and harm its citizens.¹⁸ As a result, the National Coalition has portrayed Israel as having an interest in the survival of Assad's weak and declining regime, while opposing the strengthening of the rebels at the regime's expense, and ultimately preferring Baathist rule to that of its opponents.¹⁹

Yet alongside and despite the National Coalition's official line vis-à-vis Israel, there have been contacts reflecting a behind the scenes sympathetic attitude toward Israel, as well as unofficial meetings and contacts with Israeli elements. Informal frameworks, such as international conferences or specific meetings taking place on their sidelines, have provided a framework for the expression of more moderate views that regard Israel as a temperate regional force and a possible partner in an anti-Baathist and anti-jihadist agenda and the reconstruction of Syria in a post-Assad era.²⁰

Another more pragmatic Syrian opposition group is the Free Syrian Army, which operates in coordination with the National Coalition, is among its supporters, and serves informally as its military wing. Whereas the National Coalition operates outside Syria, the Free Syrian Army, since its establishment in July 2011, has espoused the goal of unifying a variety of militias operating on Syrian soil in order to overthrow Assad, even in the absence of a homogenous or agreed upon unifying ideological orientation. Compared to all the rebel groups in this organization, they are less subject to the influence of radical Islamic elements and the Muslim Brotherhood. The forces associated with the Free Syrian Army include commanders, soldiers, and units that have deserted the Syrian army, local interest groups, and Islamist and liberal groups.²¹ Its aim, as formulated in its founding document, is to establish "a civil state based on foundations of democracy, justice, equality, and freedom."²²

In the course of the war, the Free Syrian Army has enjoyed intermittent Turkish logistical support, Saudi funding, armaments appropriated from the Syrian army, and limited American and Western aid. It has used Turkey and Jordan as its bases of operation, and has served as a conduit for the supply of arms to rebels within Syria and the transfer of financial aid from Arab states, Turkey, and possibly even the United States and European countries. In contrast to the radical ideologies of the jihadist forces, the Free Syrian Army has sought to position itself as a pragmatic force looking to the West, and has adopted the goal of implementing democratization in Syria. At the same time, on a number of occasions in the course of the civil war, despite

the Syrian nationalist and liberal orientation of many of its commanders, it has engaged in cooperation with jihadist forces with a completely different agenda, although the profound ideological differences between the sides made it difficult to develop and enhance these relationships.

The Free Syrian Army reached the peak of its strength in 2012, when it controlled large areas within Syria (especially in the south) and numbered 40,000 fighters. However, for several reasons it lost momentum in the years that followed, including the counterattacks by the Assad regime and Hezbollah, the loss of its fighters in battle, and a shortage of equipment, weapons, and funding. It lost power and influence when it became clear that the United States – its sponsor – did not intend to be actively involved in the fight against the Assad regime, and US President Barack Obama did not keep his promise and refrained from attacking the Assad forces after they used chemical weapons against Syrian citizens. It also lost strength because of the intensifying splits and internal tensions among its factions (figure 2) and the loss of fighters to Islamist and jihadist groups, which have grown as a result of their material resilience and religious attraction. Some of these groups operate against the Free Syrian Army in parallel to their war against the regime.²³

Western policy has likewise played a significant role in lowering the profile of the Free Syrian Army. As long as the forces fighting the Assad regime anticipated US-led Western military intervention against the regime, they regarded the Free Syrian Army as an essential force that could serve as a channel for military coordination with the West. However, the failure of President Obama to realize his threat to respond militarily to the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime against its own citizens resulted in a gradual devaluation of the status of the Free Syrian Army. Many have left its ranks for other, Salafi jihadist militant groups. In a two-directional process that has fueled this trend, the hesitant external support provided by Western countries has resulted in the weakening of the Free Syrian Army. In turn, its declining standing has further deterred Western elements from continuing to provide it with military aid out of fear that sooner or later it would fall into the hands of radical forces.

The interaction between the Free Syrian Army and Israel has been influenced by a variety of geopolitical factors. In the course of the civil war, groups associated with the Free Syrian Army have operated in southern Syria not far from the armistice line with Israel. In early 2014, the Free Syrian

Army proclaimed the establishment of a Southern Front stretching from the Jordanian border, via Damascus, to the Golan Heights. The Southern Front consists of an alliance of approximately 50 insurgent groups operating in semi-hierarchical structure that, based on their own account, together form a core of about 30,000 fighters (the true numbers might be lower).²⁴ The Southern Front sought to unite the various military and civic groups in the Southern part of Syria. In June 2015 it established a joint command in order to coordinate their military operations.²⁵ This structure is aimed at creating a moderate government structure that could serve as a non-jihadist alternative to both the Islamic State and the Assad regime, offering the Syrian population in the south internal security as well as a civilian structure.

In August 2014, alongside the Nusra Front, the Southern Front took part in seizing control of most of the Israeli-Syrian border in the Golan Heights, and its forces advanced significantly in the first part of 2015, becoming a dominant force of control in southern Syria.²⁶ While the latter part of 2015, with the increasing Russian involvement, saw curtailed achievements, the status of the Southern Front as a political player nonetheless became more established during that period. Representatives of the Southern Front met UN Envoy de Mistura for the first time in June of 2015 and participated in selecting the opposition's delegation to the peace talks in Geneva, where they have expressed support for the cessation of hostilities agreement alongside doubts regarding its implementation and outcomes.

The Southern Front of the Free Syrian Army is supported by the US Military Operations Center (MOC) in Amman. It is largely considered a moderate actor with a foothold on the ground that should be strengthened in order to serve as a partner of the United States and its allies in its struggle against the Salafi jihadist forces.²⁷ In April 2015, in an effort to allay fears that international aid to the Southern Front would strengthen radical forces, a number of its members announced its severing of ties with the Nusra Front, to distinguish itself from the group. The announcement was a reflection of the rejection by groups such as the Yarmouk Army and the Sayf ash-Sham Brigades of the approach of the Nusra Front, and of the difficulties the ties with this group have caused the Southern Front in its efforts to more effectively mobilize the international community on its behalf and promote political processes aimed at solving the crisis in Syria.²⁸

In contrast to the National Coalition's hostile view of Israel from its place of exile in Turkey, the realities on the ground have generated a more



Figure 2: Groups and Units of the Southern Front of the Free Syrian Army

Source: Carter Center

pragmatic and conciliatory approach to Israel among commanders of the Free Syrian Army. On a number of occasions, spokesmen of the group have expressed fundamental support for making peace with Israel after the fall of the Assad regime, subject to an agreed upon territorial settlement in the Golan Heights, and have called for dialogue between the parties.²⁹ Some field commanders in southern Syria have even spoken in favor of tactical and strategic cooperation with Israel in the security and political realms and

have noted that the two parties share mutual interests and mutual enemies like the pro-Iranian axis. Indeed, according to various reports that were formally confirmed in a December 2014 report published by the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF), Israel and the Free Syrian Army in the Golan Heights maintained secret channels of coordination and communication (the exact nature of which is not revealed).³⁰

During the second half of 2014, officers of the Free Syrian Army in southern Syria sought to convince Israel to lend its support to the Syrian opposition's struggle against the regime and its allies. Group spokesmen made public statements to the effect that helping overthrow Assad was an Israeli interest, as it would provide Israel with an opportunity to change its negative image in the eyes of the Syrian people and ensure calm and security along the Golan Heights border. In September 2014, one commander called for Israel to realize its right to prevent Assad's planes from launching attacks in the buffer zone that was established by the Separation of Forces Agreement of 1974, and impose a no-fly zone that would allow the moderate opposition to expand its campaign against the regime toward Damascus. He promised that if Israel were to do so, it would win the heart of the Syrian people and secure its friendship. However, refusing to do so, he warned, would be considered cooperation with the acts of murder by "Assad's gangs." He also urged the Israeli authorities to authorize immediately the acceptance of a larger number of Free Syrian Army fighters for medical treatment in Israel, and maintained that such a gesture would turn public opinion in Syria in its favor.³¹ A January 2015 interview with an Israeli newspaper documented similar sentiments, contending that the increased threat to Israel posed by the Shiite forces in the Golan Heights reflected the urgent need for cooperation between Israel and the opposition. In this interview, a commander of the group stated: "We want to fight alongside you. The Shiites will not stop in Syria; they have a much larger project that endangers you as well as us."³² Similarly, following the incident at Quneitra in February 2015, a high ranking commander in the Free Syrian Army in southern Syria urged Israel to strike another powerful blow against Hezbollah and the Iranian forces operating in Syria.³³

Local Actors: Southern Syria

Among the actors operating in southern Syria, including the Golan Heights, are militias, local groups, and communities seeking to represent a population

that, according to some estimates numbers more than one million. These groups do not necessarily share one ideology and are wont to change organizational affiliations and allegiances based on local pragmatic considerations and shifting power relations.

Representatives of a number of local groups joined together during the second half of 2014 in an effort to encourage exiled Syrian opposition members to promote a plan to establish a regionally and internationally backed autonomous safe zone in southern Syria that would prevent hostile Shiite or Salafi jihadist seizure of territory. The international community, led by the UN, was urged to help protect security arrangements, including the closure of airspace over southern Syria and the creation of a 25-kilometer deep security strip that would run the length of Syria's borders with Israel, Lebanon, and Jordan. If imposed, such a safe buffer zone – the likes of which Turkey and the United States have considered establishing along part of Syria's northern border – would facilitate reconstruction of the administrative, economic, and social infrastructure of the southern area of the country. Another purpose of such a zone would be to transform the protected areas, where Assad's planes would be barred from flying, into a haven for civilians and refugees. The successful actualization of this vision is meant to prevent the continued spread of popular support to Salafi jihadist groups based on material or security interests, to help moderate local Syrian elements fill the governmental vacuum, and to bring about the gradual mitigation of the current humanitarian crisis facing the Syrian population. The plan acknowledges the de facto partition of Syria and the need to make due temporarily with partial, local solutions to the Syrian problem and not – at least at this point – strive for immediate holistic solutions that preserve the unity of Syria. In their view, the plan's success will turn the southern area into an initial step toward a new secure and thriving Syrian entity that would serve as a model for gradual emulation in other areas. Actualization of the proposed vision is divided into three stages: in the short term, it involves the mobilization of international financial and humanitarian aid that allows the population to equip itself with food, clothing, medicine, tents, and gasoline; in the medium term, it involves the establishment of field hospitals, courts, schools, and police forces; and in the long term, it involves the promotion of regional cooperative efforts, including Syrian-Israeli cooperation on matters of technology and water.³⁴

To promote the plan, local actors believe it will be necessary to coordinate with Israel and secure its backing. In accordance with this premise, militia commanders, civilians, and religious and tribal leaders from southern Syria (including western Rif Dimashq, Quneitra, and Horan) have attempted to initiate a dialogue with civilian, security, and political elements in Israel, with the aim of conveying that they and Israel have common enemies (the pro-Iranian axis and the jihadists) and mutual interests. The Syrian representatives initially sought to secure Israel's support for the plan in principle and later hoped to ensure assistance in its implementation. The importance assigned to Israel was threefold. On a military level, the creation of a security zone in the Syrian Golan Heights and the prevention of Syrian air force activity in the airspace in question would require Israel's agreement, support, and perhaps even participation. On a political level, Israeli support would make it easier to mobilize Jordanian backing for the plan and win over the international community. On an economic level, Israel is viewed as a country that represents a liberal and advanced political, cultural, and scientific model from which it will be possible to learn and derive material benefit in the future. As articulated by a number of the local groups in southern Syria, interaction with Israel from their perspective is not a temporary tactical choice, but rather is intended, over time, to evolve into a strategic alliance that could result in "warm peace" between the parties.

Earlier, in June 2014, representatives of militias consisting of thousands of fighters, some of whom operate within the framework of the Southern Front, advanced a limited local plan. These representatives sought to coordinate a plan with Israel whereby they would seize control of the Syrian Golan Heights zone, eject the forces of the Syrian regime and the Salafi jihadist movements from the region, and establish a local enclave that would establish peaceful relations and normalization with Israel. This enclave would remain detached from Syria as a whole in the near future but would serve as a model precedent when the appropriate time arrived. The plan, which received the support, among other elements, of a militia operating in Quneitra, is divided into two stages. The immediate range focuses on tactical military efforts, namely the unification of the groups fighting on the ground under a joint command, the training of local and exiled fighters in Jordan, the provision of weapons, and the formulation of a military strategy. The strategic long term involves the implementation of a civilian plan, including initiatives and reforms in the fields of education, religion, economics, law, society,

employment, culture, and the status of women. As a preliminary measure toward implementation, proponents of the plan on a number of occasions engaged in informal meetings through secondary channels and began a process of winning over the inhabitants to the idea of cooperation with Israel.³⁵

Local Actors: The Kurdish and Druze Minorities

For four decades, the alliance of interests between the Alawite minority and the Druze, Kurdish, Christian, and Ismaili minorities in Syria has served as one of the Assad regime's pillars of support, facilitating his survival at the head of the Syrian regime. The various minorities supported the political establishment that gave dominance to the Alawite minority, based on their belief that such an arrangement would guarantee them security, social advancement, and integration into military, government, and political positions of influence. Against this background, both the Druze and the Kurds were interested in preserving the status quo and attempted to remain detached from the civil war as long as possible. However, the spread of the war into their localities and the regime's failure to allocate forces for their protection resulted in a gradual erosion of the long term alliance of interests between the parties and their look to alternative policies to better protect their communities from the new threats. In July 2012, in coordination with the Assad regime, the Kurds took advantage of the Syrian army's withdrawal in order to establish an autonomy. For their part, the Druze began formulating an independent course of action distinct from that of Damascus.³⁶

With a population of approximately 2.2 million prior to the civil war, the Kurds constitute some 10 percent of the Syrian population. They live primarily in northern Syria and are concentrated in three cantons adjacent to the Turkish and Iraqi borders (Qamishli, Afrin, and Kubani) (figure 1). The ongoing weakening of the regime during the civil war has stripped the historic alliance among these parties of some of its elements. The Islamic State has regarded the Kurds as infidels and a target for attack, while Assad's dwindling army has preferred to refrain from allocating forces to the defense of territory that it does not regard as of strategic importance. The Syrian army's decision to withdraw from Kurdish regions in northern Syria for the sake of other combat arenas in June 2012 left a vacuum that was quickly filled by the Kurds. In January 2014, the Kurds unilaterally proclaimed their establishment of an autonomy in the three cantons of Western Kurdistan (despite the absence of territorial contiguity between them). Two year later,

in March 2016, the Democratic Union Party and allied groups announced the establishment of a “federal democratic system,” uniting the three cantons under a more central government structure – despite the opposition from Syrian opposition circles as well as from Turkey, Russia, and the Assad regime.³⁷ This entity has thus far remained relatively stable, and constitutes a political alternative to both the Assad regime and the Islamic State.

The Democratic Union Party (PYD), which is the strongest force among the Kurds in northern Syria and which led the process of establishing the Kurdish autonomy, was founded in 2003. It maintains close ties to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (the Turkish PKK) and operates in partial cooperation with the Assad regime. The party does not challenge the sovereignty of the Syrian state, but strives to establish a Kurdish autonomy within a democratic Syrian confederation – a position that is true to the ideological tradition of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan. Since 2013, the Kurds have fought effectively – sometimes in cooperation with the regime – to repel attempts to seize control of territory by Salafi jihadist elements, including the Nusra Front and Islamic State. The most significant campaigns involving the Kurds in the course of the war in Syria in which the People's Protection Units (YPG, which is under the control of the PYD and other parties) have had the upper hand were the battles for the city of Kobani and for the border crossing in the city of Tell Abyad.

Other Kurdish groups operate alongside the PYD in Syria. The primary opposition is the Kurdish National Council (KNC), an umbrella organization of Kurdish parties that aspires to transform Syria into a democratic federation and accuses its rival of authoritarian conduct. The KNC was established in 2011 by parties associated with Masoud Barzani, president of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq. It initially sought to work within the framework of the Syrian National Coalition but pursued different options after other elements in the Syrian opposition refused to recognize the Kurdish goal of autonomy. Its primary weakness is the low level of influence it exercises on the ground, given that its leaders and forces are for the most part located outside of Syrian Kurdistan. The Yekiti party is also viewed as a popular and relatively organized force, and plays a leading role in the Kurdish National Council. Even before the revolution, beginning in 2000, the party led non-violent protest demonstrations against the regime, bringing into its ranks fresh forces consisting of young educated Kurds from Syria.³⁸

Israel has a decades-long relationship with the Kurdish minority in northern Iraq,³⁹ but the Kurds in Syria have typically remained outside of this framework. The civil war in Syria has resulted in shared Israeli and Kurdish interests surrounding the struggle against jihadist forces, the desire to reestablish stability in Syria, and hope for the country's reconstruction as a democratic peace-seeking state. Indeed, liberal Kurdish forces, particularly those associated with the leadership of the Kurdish region in Iraq which is known for its ties to Israel, have sent positive signals to Israel and have taken part in meetings with individuals from Israeli civil society, with the aim of establishing ties and cooperative efforts. In an interview with an Israeli website, KNC Chairman Dr. Sherkoh 'Abbas called on Israel "to reach out to the Syrian people, to build relations with it, and to establish peace," rather than support a renewed Assad dictatorship. According to 'Abbas, the Kurds and the Jews have a common history and share common tragedies, as well as a common interest in achieving stability in Syria, stopping the Iranian expansion in the region, and establishing a friendly Kurdish entity to serve as a buffer between the radical Shiite and Sunni camps. "A policy of sitting by idly until one side wins," warned 'Abbas, "will not serve Israel in the long run, but rather strengthen Iran, which will control the entire region."⁴⁰ However, despite approaches made in this spirit, the reserved attitude toward Israel that is characteristic of the PYD and the Kurds' physical distance from the Israeli border have thus far made it difficult to foster progress via Kurdish-Israeli channels.⁴¹

The Druze in Syria account for approximately 4 percent (700,000) of the overall population of the country, and are concentrated primarily in the Druze Mountain region of southern Syria. The Druze minority is more loyal to the Assad regime than the Kurdish minority for two primary reasons: the first is the Druze's traditional adherence to allegiance to the country in which they live, as manifested in their service in the Syrian army; the second is the extent of their dependence on the Syrian army for protection against the mounting Salafi jihadist threats.⁴² During the civil war, despite their desire to remain outside the line of fire, the Druze have continued to rely on and cooperate with the regime, although an increasing number of Syrian Druze (primarily from the al-Suwayda Governorate) have chosen to desert Assad's army or, alternatively, have refused to serve with combat units outside their areas of residence. Druze have joined the militias that are loyal to the regime,

and four lost their lives in 2015 in a failed act of “popular resistance” that Hezbollah planned against Israel on the Golan Heights border.⁴³

Israel and the Druze of Syria have a long history of contacts that began in the 1930s with the intelligence cooperation following the Arab rebellion in Palestine, continued in the 1950s, and reached their height in the plan drawn up by Yigal Alon following the Six Day War (which was never implemented) to expand Israel’s control from the Druze villages in the Golan Heights to the Druze Mountain.⁴⁴ However, these contacts ebbed, and since the Israeli conquest of the Golan Heights, the Syrian Druze have overall espoused a hostile, pro-Syrian establishment position toward Israel. Most Druze living in the Israeli portion of the Golan Heights have also maintained their allegiance to the Assad regime.

Nonetheless, three factors have the potential to spark a new dynamic in the relationship between Israel and the Druze of Syria and make the Druze (even more than the Kurds) into natural candidates for cooperation.

First, Assad’s smaller military and the consequent fear of the regime’s imminent downfall has elicited Druze calls for a reevaluation of the community’s allegiance to the regime. In 2013, a small number of Druze already decided to assist the rebels and took part in Free Syrian Army attacks, including on Syrian army positions in the al-Suwayda Governorate.⁴⁵ Such voices intensified toward mid-2015 due to concerns that the Syrian regime would no longer be able to protect them from radical Islamist groups, which view them as infidels. One undertaking based on this assessment was Rijal al-Karama (“Men of Dignity”) led by Sheikh Wahid al-Bal’us (1965-2015), who until his assassination in September 2015 operated in the city of al-Suwayda, the capital of the governorate and the heart of the Druze Mountain.⁴⁶ Al-Bal’us represented a new Druze voice that called for disengagement from exclusive dependence on the Assad regime and for embarking on a new independent path. This approach was based on the assessment that the regime was no longer able to provide them with protection, had abandoned their security, and could potentially become a burden, given the community’s identification as a regime ally. In the al-Suwayda Governorate, al-Bal’us set up independent militias with the purpose of defending the Druze Mountain from both Salafi jihadist forces advancing toward their region and pro-Iranian forces affiliated with the regime. He also called for members of the Druze community to cease enlisting in Assad’s army and publically declared his willingness to coordinate security arrangements with moderate

opposition forces such as the Free Syrian Army, which enjoys significant influence in the Daraa Governorate.⁴⁷ The new alternatives that the Druze began examining included the establishment of autonomous militias to reduce Druze dependence on the regime's army. Al-Bal'us's assassination was perceived as an attempt by the Assad regime to silence and repress his views. Although al-Bal'us publically expressed reservations about the idea of relying on Israel, he did not regard Israel as an unacceptable partner when it came to repulsing hostile attempts to seize control of the Druze Mountain, based on the logic that "my enemy's enemy is my friend."⁴⁸

Second, the proximity of some Druze population centers to the Syrian-Israeli border have lent geographical support to the common interests between Israel and the Druze population in Syria, and have encouraged the opening of channels of communication between the parties to prepare for the possibility of the Assad regime losing its hold on the Golan Heights.

Third, the Druze in Israel, which have familial ties with the Druze in Syria, have expressed concern regarding the fate of their people across the border. They have also collected material and money and established a lobby on their behalf, highlighting their special status in Israel as a loyal minority whose sons serve in the IDF. In the course of the Syrian civil war, the Druze in Israel sought to influence the policy of the Israeli government in a manner that would serve their kinsmen on the other side of the border. Some have threatened to cross the border to fight the growing jihadist threat against the Druze in Syria.⁴⁹ They have also called on Israel to refrain from cooperation with radical Syrian actors and have demonstrated against admitting wounded Syrians from the radical Sunni camp for medical treatment in Israel. In June 2015, Druze attacked an ambulance carrying wounded Syrians to a hospital in Israel and lynched a wounded Syrian who was riding in it. Leaders of the Druze sect in Israel, however, denounced the murder and accused Samir Kuntar, the late Hezbollah operative in charge of the organization's infrastructure in the Golan Heights, of disseminating false propaganda aimed at inciting the Druze in Israel and perhaps even at drawing Israel into the conflict in Syria.⁵⁰

In September 2014 in the village of Julis, head of the Israeli Air Force Major General Amir Eshel met with the heads of the Druze community in Israel and assured them that Israel's alliance with the Druze does not end at Israel's borders.⁵¹ The declaration was meant to allay the fears of members of Israel's Druze community and keep them from taking independent measures

to help their brethren in Syria that would infringe upon IDF sovereignty. Ayoub Kara, the Druze deputy minister of Israel's Ministry of Regional Cooperation, has pledged that Israel will not sit idly by if the danger posed by the Islamic State to the Druze community in Syria intensifies, and will do everything in its power to rescue them.⁵² He has also suggested that Israel has conveyed clear warnings to the Islamic State and the Nusra Front to refrain from attacking the Druze.⁵³ In a press conference on June 29, 2015, Israeli Defense Minister Ya'alon clarified that Israel has made the continued provision of medical and humanitarian aid to the Syrian rebels in the Golan Heights region (led by members of the Free Syrian Army) conditional on adherence by jihadist terrorist groups to a policy of refraining from approaching the border fence and harming the Druze.⁵⁴

Independent Initiatives by Syrian Opposition Activists

While contacts with Israel by some parties have remained largely clandestine and informal, a number of opponents of the Syrian regime operating independently outside of Syria have dared to publicly call for peace with Israel as a central element of a comprehensive liberal vision for transforming Syria into a free and advanced democratic state. Although these individuals are not backed by military power, they enjoy support among the Syrian public, favorable reputations in the Arab media, and, in some cases, economic strength. Their independent initiatives have not been coordinated with the umbrella organizations of the Syrian opposition, and have sought, rather, to challenge the traditional approaches to Israel. Their calls for peaceful relations, normalization, and cooperation with Israel have been based on three types of considerations:

- a. Political considerations that attribute to Israel far reaching influence on the West's position regarding the crisis in Syria. According to these considerations, the willingness to establish "full and warm" peaceful relations with Israel will help the Syrian opposition mobilize Western support in its struggle and hasten a favorable decision in the civil war.⁵⁵
- b. Economic considerations pertaining to the material prosperity that the Syrian people could enjoy after the revolution as a result of the establishment of productive neighborly and commercial relations with Israel.⁵⁶
- c. Ethical considerations related to Israel's singular positive virtues as a model of a modern thriving democratic state in the Middle East. The

actors in question have also sometimes advanced innovative narratives containing elements of recognition of the historic right to the existence of a Jewish state in the land of Israel. In an effort to bridge the gap between the concept of Israel as an essential partner in the struggle against the Assad regime and Israel's traditional image as an enemy, a number of liberal Syrian spokesmen have praised the positive legacy of past ties between Jews and Muslims (particularly Sunnis) in the region in general and in Syria in particular. Illustrating the manner in which the realities resulting from the war have the potential to change and challenge traditional beliefs, some have pointed out that Abraham was the father of Jews and Muslims alike, cast the Jews as historical partners of Muslims to the land, portrayed Judaism as a deeply rooted religion with a status grounded in the Qur'an, and recognized the historical-geographic link between the land of Israel and the people of Israel.⁵⁷

During the first half of 2014, Dr. Kamal al-Labwani, a liberal Syrian human rights activist who was incarcerated in a Syrian prison for a decade and who is regarded as a prominent leader and symbol of the Syrian opposition, sought to initiate open cooperation with Israel with the aim of reaching a settlement in southern Syria. The initiative had two components: military and diplomatic. From a military perspective, al-Labwani called on Israel to play a central role alongside NATO in establishing a no-fly zone in southern Syria, envisioned as being implemented from within Israeli borders without sending ground troops into Syrian territory. In other words, al-Labwani was calling for the interception of all Syrian fighter planes that enter an arc that stretches more than 100 kilometers, from the Golan Heights to Damascus, and includes Daraa, al-Suwayda, southern Rif Dimashq, and the Syrian-Lebanese border. The initiative's political component was manifested in the call for Israel to supply moderate Syrian opposition forces with Western arms and withdraw its ostensible opposition to toppling the Assad regime.

According to al-Labwani, this initiative was based on a variety of considerations and circumstances, beginning with the conviction that Israel and the Syrian opposition share common tactical interests in thwarting Hezbollah's plan to construct a permanent terrorist infrastructure in the Syrian Golan Heights, and common strategic interests in transforming the Golan Heights into a "paradise" of stability, peace, and normalization. A second factor was the assumption that the old ways of thinking that traditionally informed the Syrian view of the centrality of its struggle with Israel have begun to erode

in light of the bloody civil war, in which the weapon of “resistance” intended for the struggle against Israel has been turned inward. This premise is also reflected in the responses to the questionnaire distributed by the Institute for National Security Studies (see Appendix). One respondent (A. R.) maintained that the war in Syria has made Israel look like an “innocent lamb” in comparison to the crimes against the Syrian people perpetrated by the Assad regime and its allies. In a different response, a Syrian-Kurdish activist (S. Y.) noted that the civil war has laid bare the hypocrisy of the regime and compromised the credibility of its traditional propaganda against Israel.⁵⁸ A third factor was the conviction that securing Israeli military backing for the campaign against the regime and taking advantage of Israel’s ties with the West could help the Syrian opposition tip the scales of power in the civil war in its favor, defeat the Assad regime, and ultimately make progress toward bringing an end to the crisis and bloodshed.⁵⁹

Al-Labwani promoted his initiative independently, even without the explicit or implicit backing of the Syrian opposition umbrella organizations. He believes that their official anti-Israel positions represent a missed opportunity vis-à-vis the shared interests of both parties and the resulting potential for cooperation. From his perspective, the opposition to his proposal is indicative of static, fixed ways of thinking that lack political wisdom and shirk responsibility.⁶⁰ In September 2014, al-Labwani made his first public trip to Israel to promote his initiative. In the course of his unprecedented visit, he presented his ideas to politicians, research institutes, the media, and specific civilian audiences. In his assessment, his visit played a role in breaking the ice between the sides, opening up Syrian-Israeli channels of communication, and undermining prevalent perceptions in the Israeli media regarding the civil war in Syria. He also expressed hope that his visit would lead indirectly to more active international involvement in the crisis in Syria; that in the future, other Syrian forces would follow the path he paved to dialogue with Israel; and that his private visit would evolve into a political plan that is both comprehensive and implementable.⁶¹ Half a year after his visit to Israel, the Syrian regime decided to try al-Labwani in absentia on the criminal charge of “incitement to plot and conspire with the enemy,” which is punishable by death.⁶²

Nevertheless, al-Labwani continued to promote his initiative publicly and privately and made a second visit to Israel in February of 2016 to advance this idea further.⁶³ His plan focused on the establishment of a Southern Safe

Zone in a designated area between the Israeli and Jordanian border that will enjoy the support of the latter countries as well as UNDOF and the Friends of Syria coalition. The designated area will be protected from the outside and controlled by Syrian civilian forces. It will enable both Israeli and Jordanian security concerns to be addressed by distancing Islamists forces such as Islamic State and Nusra Front from their borders, as well as establishment of a humanitarian zone for refugees where rehabilitation efforts could begin. If successful, this model could be expanded to additional territories in Syria and become a moderate alternative for both the Assad regime as well as for the territories currently controlled by the Islamic State. Al-Labwani argued that there is a cadre of moderate forces in the south that could assume this responsibility, assuming external military and civilian help is provided. He considered the Russian rejection of this idea as a major obstacle for this plan.⁶⁴

In September 2014, Syrian opposition figures in exile associated with a Syrian opposition forum working in Europe and representing groups, minorities, and different political camps in Syria⁶⁵ conducted a quiet dialogue in Vienna with Israeli civilian elements regarding Israel's possible role in advancing a liberal vision in Syria. The Syrian representatives, who included civilian political activists, academics, religious leaders, and businessmen, maintained that Israel had a vested interest in supporting the liberal Syrian opposition based on the following three premises: that a weakened Syrian regime would not provide Israel with security but rather transform Syria into a veritable Somalia – that is, a state that stimulates conflicts and instability that endanger its neighbors; that cooperation with the Syrian opposition would help change Israel's negative image in the Arab world; and that by continuing to sit on the fence with regard to the conflict in Syria, Israel may miss its opportunity to establish relations with the Syrian people the day after the civil war and the fall of Assad.

Members of this Syrian forum articulated a conciliatory message toward Israel, based on a yearning for peace that would bring about stability, a strong economy, and proper relations; an agreed upon territorial settlement in the Golan Heights; recognition of Israel's right to live in peace, stability, and integration in the region; and a view of Jews as the "cousins" of Muslims and an organic part of the region's historical and religious heritage. On a practical level, they called for Israel's implementation of three political measures: public support for the overthrow of the Assad regime; public support for the rights of the Syrian people; and Israeli influence in the West

to hasten action, not limited to the provision of humanitarian aid, to bring about an end to the bloodshed and the suffering of the Syrian people. In the long term, interlocutors in Vienna expressed hope that upon the conclusion of the civil war and the democratic revolution in Syria, Israel would provide technological support for the development of Syria and engage in economic relations. Such relations, they maintained, would result in cooperative efforts in a variety of areas and serve to break the ice between the two peoples.⁶⁶ A number of additional related meetings took place as a follow up to this channel.

Other exiled opponents of the regime have limited themselves to less ambitious proposals, the most important of which is the formulation of a conceptual and cultural framework for the establishment of future relations between the parties. In September 2015, a group of Syrian political activists in exile (primarily in Turkey and Jordan), including Muhammad Adnan Hussein, chairman of the Future Syrian Revolutionary Assembly, proclaimed the establishment of a Syrian peace movement that espoused the long term vision of promoting conciliatory approaches and the gradual warming of Syrian hearts toward Israel and the Jews (among other parties).⁶⁷

In a vision statement formulated in mid-2015, Syrian political activist and media figure Thaer al-Nashef proposed establishing “a standing partnership of coexistence based on true peace” between Syria and Israel after the revolution. The initiative was intended to prepare the ground for a formula for warm peaceful relations, including broad interaction between the Syrian and Israeli peoples, first in the Golan Heights and later throughout both countries; economic partnership, including joint projects beginning in the Golan Heights, followed by border cities such as Daraa and al-Suwayda, and ultimately throughout both countries; and joint cultural efforts aimed ultimately at breaking down the barriers in art, music, literature, and theater, based on the two-way translation of Arabic and Hebrew and encouragement of both populations to learn the other’s language. According to al-Nashef, preparing the ground for such warm relations in the distant future requires Israel to plant seeds in the present through its friends in Syria and initiate a dialogue with the many religious, sectarian, and ethnic layers of Syrian society, especially the Sunni majority.

Israeli measures, according to this proposal, would include the establishment of teams for dialogue between politicians, social activists, religious figures, and youth; the expression of Israeli political support, even if only moral

and symbolic in nature, for the struggle to overthrow the Syrian regime – a gesture that would strengthen the impression among the Syrian people that it enjoys Israel’s support; dissemination of a culture of peace between the Syrian and Israeli peoples based on various social means, such as the mass media and research institutes; the support of small peace plans between individuals and groups from both countries; and relaxation of the current bureaucratic obstacles to communication and meetings between the two sides, both inside and outside Israel.⁶⁸

In May 2016 Israeli Speaker of the Knesset Yuli Edelstein received a letter from a former Syrian brigadier general, Nabil al-Dandel, who defected from the ranks of the regime in 2012. Al-Dandel, who is also one of the heads of al-‘Aqidat tribe, said that “Israel has an opportunity to make peace with the Syrian people, who now, since the revolution against al-Assad, have made sense of many things including the lie that the regime is selling regarding its resistance to Israel.” Al-Dandel is the most senior military officer and tribal leader who agreed to engage directly with Israel. In the letter and subsequent interviews, al-Dandel stated that the “Syrian people want peace with Israel. But Israel needs to say that it stands beside it and not the regime.” Quoting from the Qur’an, al-Dandel added that “the Syrian people want to emphasize to the Israeli people that it wants to separate itself from wars and that it is ready to take the necessary steps to build the infrastructure for religious coexistence in the homeland of Moses and Jesus.”⁶⁹

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Notes to Chapter 2, Mapping the Non-State Actors in Syria and their Attitudes toward Israel

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