

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This memorandum has discussed Israel's posture vis-à-vis the new actors in Syria, most of whom are non-state actors whose influence has increased with the collapse of the Syrian state in the ongoing civil war. It defines two types of actors, "negative" and "positive," based on the degree to which their aims, values, and interests correspond with those of Israel and the Western world. The memorandum calls for an examination of the potential for cooperation between Israel with "positive" actors in Syria and elsewhere in the region and the international arena. In light of this examination, the memorandum also calls for a reassessment of the Israeli policy of non-intervention.

The dramatic changes in Syria on the one hand, and Israel's non-intervention on the other, have resulted in a growing dissonance between the dynamic Syrian arena and the relative stasis in Israeli policy, and the absence of a clear definition of long term aims, particularly with regard to shaping a reality of calm and stability in southern Syria. Israel has focused on monitoring developments and enforcing its defined red lines; it has not pursued and implemented a clear and consolidated strategy that will curb the threats posed by the "negative" actors and enable it to realize the potential for interaction with "positive" Syrian, regional, and international actors that have similar interests and common enemies. The responsible policy that Israel followed with the outbreak of the civil war in Syria was correct in order to prevent the spillover of the events toward Israel, but now it is time for Israel to reassess the implications of the changes in Syria and the danger of pro-Iranian or Salafi jihadist forces flowing into southern Syria, which is currently the only area in Syria free of their distinct influence. Israel has to explore the possibility of establishing an area of influence along its border, in cooperation with relevant Syrian, regional, and international actors. In this framework, Israel would do well to cultivate its relationship with actors that have influence over the current situation in Syria that can be expected to play a significant role in shaping and stabilizing Syria in the scenario that the Assad regime is ultimately overthrown, or alternatively, in the scenario

of the emergence of new political entities, such as a pro-Iranian Alawite enclave, a recognized sovereign Kurdish autonomy, or an autonomous region in southern Syria adjacent to the Israeli border.

The potential for interaction with Salafi jihadist groups such as the Nusra Front and the Islamic State, which are currently setting the tone of the war against the Syrian regime, is narrow and limited to no more than local, temporary understandings that are constrained by measures of pressure and deterrence. However, alongside the groups that regard the destruction of Israel as a long term strategic and ideological goal are more positive Syrian actors that share Israel's interest in weakening the pro-Iranian axis on the one hand and the Salafi jihadist movement on the other. The memorandum identifies these actors as more suitable candidates for cooperation with Israel. Some offer a civic-minded, moderate, and liberal vision of Syria, and others stress unique pragmatic interests, whether of local communities in southern Syria or of ethnic, sectarian, and religious minority groups such as the Kurds and the Druze. Despite their relative military weakness and limited influence in the present reality, the potential positive actors represent the silent majority of the Syrian people, which abhor both the Assad regime and the jihadist forces. When the war ends, these actors will be interested in the reconstruction of Syria and the creation of a new political reality that provides Syrian citizens with stability, security, and welfare after many long years of displacement, destruction, and pain. The significant presence of more moderate and relatively pragmatic actors in southern Syria in general, and along the Israeli border in particular, makes the question of cooperation with them concrete due to the immediate and future implications of Israeli action (or inaction) for the security situation in the Israeli Golan Heights.

In light of this reality, it is recommended that Israeli decision makers adopt a more active policy vis-à-vis the Syrian arena. This policy should aim to establish short term and long term cooperative efforts with pragmatic actors as part of an overall strategy that enables Israel to play a more meaningful role in Syria, construct more effective levers of influence, and promote its tactical and strategic interests in Syria – led by the interest of maintaining calm in the Golan Heights and northern arena. In this way, Israel and its partners will be able to establish a sturdy anchor of influence in the Syrian Golan Heights and change the existing reality, which now leaves a door open for the entry of “negative” actors and their establishment in the arena. The transition to a proactive and well defined policy of this nature requires the

fulfillment of a number of conditions: the existence of a supportive regional and international framework; the identification of “positive” partners that carry sufficient weight in the Syrian arena; and the achievement of tactical and strategic understandings between Israel and the partners in question regarding security and political issues. If these conditions are met, the development of mutual relations with Syrian actors has the potential to increase Israel’s influence in the Syrian arena, help strengthen strategic alliances with countries possessing interests that are similar to Israel, and strengthen and establish “positive” actors on the Syrian side of the border in the Golan Heights at the expense of jihadist and pro-Iranian forces. A series of concrete Israeli actions along the following lines could contribute to such a dynamic.

First, Israel could expand and institutionalize its ties to pragmatic actors in Syria in general and southern Syria in particular, led by the Free Syrian Army, its Southern Front, local communities, and the coalitions that unite them. The Druze, whose separatist tendencies vis-à-vis the regime have been bolstered by the weakening of the state structure, may also be part of the local moderate mosaic in southern Syria, and Israel is advised to engage in dialogue with them in an effort to cultivate mutual commitment for the future. Elements that share an interest in curbing the Islamic State can also be found among the Kurds. Weaving a tapestry of ties of this kind could position Israel as an influential actor and enable it to attempt to ensure Israeli interests in future settlements in Syria. At the same time, these ties must take shape as part of an all-encompassing political strategy requiring calculated risks, some of which may lead not only to changes and successes but also to disappointments and failures. To forge these connections, the Israeli government, including the Foreign Ministry – which thus far has played a marginal role in the contacts with Syrian opposition and civil society activists – must consider the possibility of expanding the scope of its activity to forums and meetings taking place outside the realm of traditional diplomatic circles vis-à-vis states and non-state actors.

Second, and particularly in southern Syria, Israel must examine ways to strengthen potential partners that share its principal interest in curbing the pro-Iranian axis and the Salafi jihadist rebels and preventing them from deployment along the border of the Golan Heights. This could be effected directly, by means of humanitarian and economic cooperation, or indirectly, through Israeli influence in the international arena to encourage

an increase in the military, economic, and humanitarian aid they receive. To this end, Israel must expand the non-military toolbox at its disposal and enhance soft power levers of influence that are diplomatic, economic, and humanitarian in nature. Israel has not cultivated instruments of soft power to the extent necessary and has not succeeded in making effective use of their full potential. At the same time, it is better for Israel to refrain from giving in to the temptation of designating rulers, encouraging processes of state disintegration, and independently establishing autonomous regions in parts of Syria. Intervention along these lines could harm Israel's image and draw it into unnecessary clashes with the regime and opponents of the regime calling for the unity of Syria.

Third, Israel must take action to institutionalize long term strategic partnerships with Syrian actors that go beyond the specific tactical level and function as part of operative regional and international plans that enjoy as broad a supportive framework as possible. The relations forged as part of such plans could reduce the risk taken by Israel stemming from a clear choice to support one of the sides in the war, and could provide the supportive military, political, financial, and administrative framework required to successfully implement a no-fly zone for the Syrian air force in the Golan Heights and the establishment of security and economic zones. Within the framework of such plans, actors that support cooperation with Israel can serve as a coordination bridge between Israel and other actors in Syria with overlapping interests with Israel.

Fourth, Israel would do well to take confidence-building measures aimed at improving its traditional image in the eyes of potential partners and thereby make it easier to deepen channels of cooperation with Syrian actors. Despite its neutrality regarding the events in Syria and the actions attributed to it against targets associated with the Assad regime and its allies, many Syrian actors still perceive Israel as preferring the Assad regime over the other options. The reasons for this perception are varied, ranging from longstanding cultural-psychological obstacles to the mistaken, distorted presentation of Israeli positions by the media, to the mixed and ambiguous messages that Israel itself has conveyed during the war. At the time of this writing, Israel has not yet assigned sufficient importance to the declarative dimension of building fresh relations with Syrian actors, and has also not yet decided how it wishes to be perceived by them: as a deterring enemy or as a peace-seeking neighbor acting in accordance with ethical and humanitarian

considerations; as a state that prioritizes stability even at the expense of supporting a dictator; or as a partner in advancing a democratic vision. Israel's relations with Syrian actors such as the Free Syrian Army, the National Coalition, local communities in southern Syria, and the Kurdish National Council could therefore benefit from replacing this vagueness with an expression of clear and determined Israeli support for transformation of the tyrannical pro-Iranian Syrian regime into a more democratic, liberal, and representational form of government. Such a declaration, even if it remains on a moral-ethical level and has no operative impact, could serve to improve trust between the sides.

In accordance with this approach, it is in Israel's interest to expand the direct humanitarian aid sent from within its borders to address the urgent needs of the civilian population in the Syrian Golan Heights and build relations of trust with them. Especially if taken in an open manner, such action could raise the awareness of the value of Israeli aid, expand the array of partners involved in Syrian-Israeli work in the humanitarian realm, contribute to the building of trust between the sides, make it easier to intensify the cooperation between them, and possibly even help it expand into new areas and develop new horizons.

Finally, the Israeli government should encourage, or at least allow, relations between Israeli official and civilian elements on the one hand, and interested positive Syrian actors on the other. Meetings and dialogues between the sides, some of which could be conducted in Israel, could play a critical role in preparing the ground for improved understanding and trust, establishing local tactical cooperative efforts, and providing hope that the future could witness the maturation of these relations into long term strategic partnerships. Easing the bureaucratic obstacles within the government ministries responsible for issuing entry permits to Syrian figures seeking to visit Israel (the Ministry of the Interior, the Defense Ministry, the Foreign Ministry, and the Ministry of Health) would make a substantial contribution in this context.

It appears that the Syrian tragedy will remain with the Middle East for many years to come. Its ramifications and offshoots become more complicated as the flow of refugees, both within the Middle East and beyond its borders, continues to intensify. The dimensions of the crisis appear to represent the painful zenith of the regional upheaval by any criteria – political, geographical, or demographic. This reality that continues to unfold poses

not only challenges but opportunities as well for building new relationships with moderate actors that, like others in the region, have already identified Israel as a potential ally against the two radical axes – the pro-Iranian axis on the one hand, and the Salafi jihadist axis on the other. Though Israel must certainly remain on guard regarding the dangers involved, it should refrain from remaining uninvolved when it comes to opportunities, for if it fails to do so, they may quickly turn into missed opportunities.