

# Syria's New Map and New Actors: Challenges and Opportunities for Israel

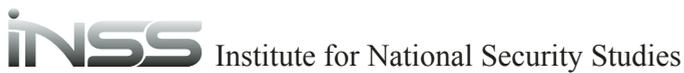
Udi Dekel, Nir Boms, and Ofir Winter

Memorandum  
156



# **Syria's New Map and New Actors: Challenges and Opportunities for Israel**

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# Syria's New Map and New Actors: Challenges and Opportunities for Israel

Udi Dekel, Nir Boms, and Ofir Winter

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**סוריה – מפה חדשה, שחקנים חדשים:  
אתגרים והזדמנויות לישראל**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The civil war underway in Syria since a few months after the onset of the so-called Arab Spring has changed the face of the Middle East in general and the Syrian Arab Republic in particular, which until then was characterized by approximately four decades of relative stability. The Syrian war, which has killed nearly half a million people, is the greatest catastrophe to hit the Levant since the Armenian genocide. The crisis that erupted in March 2011 expanded within a short time, resulting in political shockwaves and a refugee crisis throughout the region. While Israel succeeded in isolating itself from the immediate effects of this crisis, the events unfolding in Syria have created new dilemmas, and call for Israel's formulation of new policies in relation to the changing situation along its northern border. This memorandum aims to describe Israel's process of policymaking in the Syrian context, analyze its current effectiveness, and suggest some alternative thinking that addresses the changing realities in the southern part of Syria and the new opportunities for engagement.

The memorandum maps the diverse actors operating in Syria today, primarily the non-state actors, analyzing their respective positions toward Israel, surveying their interactions with Israel during the civil war, and urging a more proactive Israeli policy toward them. The study also proposes modes of action aimed at formulating a new Israeli strategy vis-à-vis the changing Syrian arena in general and southern Syria in particular. In doing so, it focuses on what we define as "positive" actors, including a number of Sunni groups and the Druze and Kurdish minorities, which are currently emerging as the candidates with the best potential for cooperation with Israel. The study devotes less attention to actors that espouse pro-Iranian or Salafi jihadist and Islamist views and therefore have a lower potential for cooperation with Israel, such as the Islamic State, the Nusra Front, Ahrar ash-Sham, Hezbollah, and the Alawite ruling minority.

According to the recommendations of this memorandum, Israel should strive to translate its policy of non-intervention in the war in Syria into one

of active promotion of relations and engagement with more “positive” Syrian actors, as well as with regional and international actors with whom it shares similar interests. These actors wield influence in the current reality in Syria, and can be expected to play a significant role in the shaping and stabilizing of the country in any post-war reality. These realities may include the fall of the Assad regime as well the establishment of new state entities such as a pro-Iranian Alawite enclave, a sovereign recognized Kurdish autonomy, or an autonomous region in southern Syria. Israel would do well to consider the possibility of adopting, in coordination and cooperation with these actors, a more proactive policy vis-à-vis the Syrian arena that will offer it viable short term and long term objectives. Such a policy should be part of a comprehensive strategy that enables Israel to build effective levers of influence in the Syrian arena, establish a degree of influence in southern Syria, and promote its own tactical and strategic interests – first and foremost, maintaining calm in the Golan Heights and preventing “negative” actors from establishing themselves in the Syrian-controlled part of this region.

## PREFACE

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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

## CHAPTER 1

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# **The Rise of the Non-State Actors in Syria: Regional and Global Perspectives**

In recent decades, the international arena has witnessed the increasing influence of non-state actors on the internal state, regional, and global levels.<sup>1</sup> This process peaked in the Middle East following the upheaval that began in late 2010. The borders of the Arab states, some of which were drawn in artificial fashion under the Sykes-Picot agreement based on Western colonial interests and not as part of a “natural” historical process, have for decades suffered from structural instability, manifested in internal and external conflicts.

The mechanical demarcation of the borders fueled the rise and strengthening of non-state actors in two ways. First, groups within the nation state cultivated and preserved allegiance to other identities (religious, ethnic, tribal, and family) that existed prior to the establishment of the state in question, or to comparable trans-border meta-state identities that encouraged positions of separatism vis-à-vis the state. Second, the arbitrary demarcation of state borders propelled non-state actors that produced an identity crisis within the Arab world. In turn, various ideologies attempted to overcome these crises. Arab nationalism sought to unite all Arabic speakers, regardless of their ethnicity or religion, while Islamism highlighted the common Islamic religious denominator as the basis for a long term vision for the revival of the Islamic nation as a concrete political entity. Both ideologies challenged the legitimacy of the state structures and presented themselves as meta-state remedies for internal and external division that challenged the imperialistic division imposed on the region.<sup>2</sup>

The reality of the Middle East in 2016 differs substantially from the face of the region prior to this decade’s regional upheaval. The state order that emerged after World War I has unraveled, with signs of plausible

disintegration of many Middle East nation states along sectarian, ethnic, and ideological lines. In addition to the structural weaknesses evidenced by these changes, two primary forces that were hitherto responsible for the stability of the Arab nation states have been undermined. One, the regional upheavals have challenged the authoritarian Arab regimes, highlighting the cumulative failure of governance and the expanding corruption in the state establishment. Two, the United States failed as a leading world power in its efforts to instill a culture of Western democratic governance in the region, and ultimately decided to reduce its military presence in the region following its traumatic experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>3</sup> US policy during the decade between the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and the Arab Spring weakened the legitimacy of the secular authoritarian regimes, sharpened historical divisions that cast shadows over the Arab nation states, and laid the foundation for challenging the old order.<sup>4</sup>

Non-state actors, from armed militias to human rights groups and local communities, have positioned themselves to fill the vacuum left by the weakened central regime, the weakened stabilizing forces, and the reduced involvement of the Western powers. This reality has opened a window of opportunity for new actors to compete for elements of control and influence that were once held by states, such as the provision of public services, the construction of infrastructure, and the preservation of security.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, in some cases, violent actors transform over time into hybrid actors that are not recognized as states but at the same time deviate from the attributes of non-state actors as they become responsible for the territory under their control and the population that recognizes their authority. For example, violent actors such as Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Islamic State integrate identities from both the state and non-state worlds and operate simultaneously in military, political, and social arenas.<sup>6</sup>

### **The Non-State Actors in Syria**

From 2011 to 2016, Syria has proven to be a distinct case study of the robustness of the traditional state system and the potential for entry of non-state actors into the arena. The mass demonstrations that commenced in Syria in March 2011 and began as a civil uprising against the injustices and failures of the Bashar al-Assad regime gradually escalated into a civil war with far reaching geopolitical, demographic, and social implications for Syria, the Middle East, and Europe. To date, the war has claimed over

400,000 lives from the different rival camps, with over 4.5 million refugees (most in neighboring countries) and over 10 million displaced people within Syria.<sup>7</sup> The struggle over the future of Syria, encompasses several different components and conflicts: a Sunni-Alawite sectarian conflict; a no-holds barred campaign in different parts of Syria between Sunni Salafi jihadist groups and moderate Sunni rivals, Kurds, Druze, Christians, Alawites, and Shiites; and an arena of struggle over regional hegemony between the Sunni axis states led by Saudi Arabia and the pro-Iranian Shiite axis. Political and military coalitions, ethnic and religious minorities, and local interest groups are also engaged, as they too attempt to influence the outcome of the revolution.

Thus far the international community's attempts at mediation between the Assad regime and the Syrian opposition forces have failed. Syria has gradually sunk into the reality of a failed state in the advanced stages of disintegration, and is subject to a war between religious and ethnic groups. The intensity of the events – from the damage to state infrastructure and state institutions, to the unending flow of displaced persons and refugees, to the rise and strengthening of non-state actors throughout the country – paints an overall picture of an irreversible process that continues to create a new reality in the region that differs greatly from the traditional, familiar reality that existed beforehand.

The Assad regime has been substantially weakened in the course of the civil war. Its army, which numbered some 300,000 at the eruption of hostilities, has lost more than 50 percent of its soldiers as a result of desertions, injuries, and deaths among the ranks during the fighting.<sup>8</sup> In a July 2015 speech, Assad acknowledged that his army was suffering from a shortage of manpower and inadequate infrastructure.<sup>9</sup> The Sunni-Alawite split has also contributed to the drop in the number of soldiers joining from non-Alawite communities who are willing to risk their lives for the regime. As the campaign dragged on and assumed the form of a war of attrition, exhaustion among supporters of the regime resulted in a rising level of absenteeism, and in turn, a need for a mandatory draft and an appeal for assistance from outside armies, militias, and mercenaries, which have also started to show signs of fatigue.<sup>10</sup> Signs of discontent were observed even among Assad's Alawite sect, along with a heated internal debate on the "day after" scenarios.<sup>11</sup>

The vacuum left by the weakened Syrian regime was penetrated by a multitude of actors that seized control of large areas, established territorial

enclaves, and redrew the borders of Syria. Sunni Salafi jihadist groups, most prominently the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra (the Nusra Front), have proven to be the most effective rivals of the regime, as they have seized extensive areas from northern Syria, northern Iraq, and eastern Syria to parts of southern Syria. A multitude of other armed non-state actors have also emerged in Syria, including less radical Islamists such as Ahrar ash-Sham and Jaysh al-Islam, and pragmatic opposition forces, led by the Free Syrian Army. Early in the summer 2014, some of the opposition groups operating throughout Syria succeeded in unifying their ranks, primarily under the flag of radical Islam that enabled them (to some extent) to tilt the balance of power in their favor. In contrast to the regime's shrinking army, rebel groups, led by the jihadists, have enjoyed a steady supply of rotating forces consisting of both local Syrians and hundreds of foreign volunteers who cross the border each month. The thousands of Hezbollah, Iraqi, and Afghan fighters who joined the fight in support of the Assad regime have found it difficult to maintain the same momentum.<sup>12</sup>

On November 16, 2011, the Arab League suspended Syria's membership in the organization. It imposed sanctions on the country, and began negotiating with the opposition forces. Nonetheless, the Assad regime has managed to survive, and by early 2016 even managed to regain some of the territory it lost and retain control of the Syrian heartland – the capital city of Damascus; the major cities of Homs, Hama, and Aleppo, and the roads connecting them; the ancient city of Palmyra; the Alawite coastal areas; and parts of southern Syria. The regime's success has been the product of three factors: the active support of Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia, and the relative allegiance of some of the country's minority groups, first and foremost the Druze; struggles between opposition elements and Salafi jihadist forces; and the failure of Syria's moderate opposition to overcome its internal divisions, build a unified, strong military force, and mobilize the political, financial, and military support of the international community in its struggle.

While fighting has continued without any decision, exiled Syrian opposition elements, which based their activity primarily in Turkey, Jordan, and Western countries, have attempted to influence the fate of Syria by drawing regional and international actors into the campaign. For their part, ethnic and religious minorities that over the years maintained a delicate system of functional interaction with the regime, such as the country's Kurdish, Druze, and Christian populations, can no longer rely on the central government to

protect their welfare. As such, they have assumed greater responsibility for contending with the threats of radical Islam and for the autonomous administration of their strongholds in northern and southern Syria. The Syrian arena has also witnessed the emergence of local communities that have come to understand that they themselves must now tend to the needs of their communities, including the security of their inhabitants, as well as maintain contact with outside actors, primarily humanitarian aid bodies and powerful forces in the surrounding area.

Overall, the dynamic among armed non-state actors is primarily one of fluctuation – converging within the framework of umbrella frameworks and splitting apart, according to circumstances, needs, and ideological orientations. For its part, the Islamic State’s increasing strength, geographical expansion, and conquest of vital natural resources has resulted in tensions with other actors that are at war with the regime, but has also caused weaker groups to join its ranks.

During the first years of the Syrian civil war, the United States refrained from substantial military intervention and focused instead on the provision of humanitarian aid. In September 2014, in light of the growing strength of the Islamic State, the United States established an international coalition under its leadership to curb the expansion of the organization. Careful, however, to avoid entanglement in a Syrian quagmire, it refused to place “boots on the ground” and did not profess any comprehensive solution to the crisis. Measures were instituted to limit the flow of fighters and funds to the Islamic State, and pinpoint air strikes were carried out against associated targets. In December 2014, the US Congress approved funding for a long term program to arm and train thousands of moderate Syrian opposition forces to prepare them to fight the Islamic State on their own and improve the conditions for promoting a political settlement for the crisis in Syria. Turkey, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar agreed to train the fighters within their borders, but as of the time of this writing, an effective force capable of having an impact on the balance of power in Syria has not emerged. The American strategy achieved only limited success in inflicting damage on the fighters, vehicles, and command and control capability of the Islamic State, which was forced to pull back from some of the areas it had occupied but continued to occupy others and expanded its control into a number of new regions. Although the US effort to reduce Islamic State activity has not translated into explicit cooperation with the Assad regime and its supporters,

the progress in the struggle against the Islamic State has created tension between the United States and some of the opposition forces in Syria. The opposition forces maintain that the key to any solution to the Syrian crisis lies in American involvement and increased pressure on the Assad regime.<sup>13</sup>

In contrast to America's hesitant involvement in the Syrian crisis, Russia has attempted to take advantage of the vacuum and displayed notable resolve in defending the Assad regime, to the point of active military involvement. In September 2015, Russia substantially reinforced its military aid, and Russian planes began carrying out airstrikes against rebel strongholds in an effort to help the Assad regime regain control over parts of western Syria and enable it to defend its strongholds in the coastal region. Russia implemented these measures in coordination with ground forces of the Assad regime, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, and Hezbollah within the framework of an international coalition, operating in parallel to the US-led coalition against the Islamic State and partly coordinating with the US, Israel, and Jordan. These Russian measures have challenged US policy, which does not view President Assad as part of the future Syrian order, as well as the interests of the West, the Gulf states, Turkey, and Israel in the Syrian arena.<sup>14</sup> The Russian airstrikes preferred concentrating on the targets of the rebel forces over Islamic State targets. Although Russia announced a withdrawal of some of its aircraft from Syria in March of 2016 after achieving its primary goal, i.e., enforcing a ceasefire among actors that do not belong to radical Islam and reinforcing the position of the Assad regime as the only viable non-jihadist alternative, it still remains a dominant player in the Syrian arena, and by its own admission, is ready to "scale up its military presence in Syria again within hours."<sup>15</sup>

Other late developments included the threats posed in early February 2016 by Turkey and Saudi Arabia to insert ground forces to counter the Russian-Iranian involvement, and the Russian-American agreement on a cessation of hostilities that came into effect on February 27, 2016. The agreement called for cessation of hostilities between all parties, excluding the Islamic State and the Nusra Front. The cessation of hostilities agreement further committed the parties to additional conditions: fully implementing UN Security Council Resolution 2254, including the readiness to participate in the UN-facilitated political negotiation process; ceasing attacks with any weapons; refraining from acquiring or seeking to acquire territory from other parties to the ceasefire; allowing humanitarian agencies, rapid, safe,

unhindered, and sustained access and allowing immediate humanitarian assistance to reach all people in need; proportionate use of force if and when responding in self-defense.<sup>16</sup> The cessation of hostilities agreement was largely observed within the first few weeks of its existence, but remained fragile at best against the background of official and unofficial reports of violations, leadings to daily casualties and a deadlock in the Geneva peace talks.<sup>17</sup>

### **Israel's Approach to the New Reality in Syria**

The disintegration of Syria and the weakening of the central government during the civil war has created a new chaotic reality on Israel's northern border. Israel's policy has consisted of monitoring developments, observing from the sidelines, and striving for the highest possible degree of non-intervention (or, at the very least, for minimum open, traceable involvement). In September 2013, Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon declared that Israel had decided not to intervene in the Syrian civil war except in the event of harm to its interests or the emergence of concrete threats, such as the transfer of chemical weapons to Hezbollah or the spillover of the conflict into Israel itself.<sup>18</sup> In a June 2015 interview, Ya'alon listed three red lines that, if crossed, would likely result in Israeli intervention: the transfer of advanced weapons to any terrorist group, whether by means of Iran or Syria; the transfer of chemical materials or weapons to any terrorist group; and violation of Israeli sovereignty, particularly in the Golan Heights.<sup>19</sup> According to foreign sources, as of April 2016 Israel had enforced these red lines with at least fifteen military strikes. Speaking at an IDF military exercise on the Golan Heights, Prime Minister Netanyahu further stated that Israel attacked in Syria, given the "dozens of weapons shipments that were on their way to Hezbollah in Lebanon."<sup>20</sup>

In addition, Israel's interest in the events in Syria has been guided by other strategic interests, such as curbing the military buildup of violent non-state actors in the region, preventing the spillover of the humanitarian plight and the flow of refugees from Syria into Israel, maintaining the stability of the Hashemite monarchy in Jordan, and establishing tactical cooperation with actors operating in Syria. The future of the Golan became another source of concern for Israel, particularly following the agreement reached by the United States and the Western-backed opposition, which stated that "no part of the national territory shall be ceded" and "the people of Syria remain committed to the restoration of the occupied Golan Heights by peaceful

means.”<sup>21</sup> In response, Prime Minister Netanyahu, in a special meeting on the Golan Heights, declared, “The time has come after 40 years for the international community to finally recognize that the Golan Heights will remain under Israeli sovereignty forever.”<sup>22</sup>

Whereas Israel initially attempted to treat the events in Syria as an internal domestic Syria issue, with no direct impact on itself,<sup>23</sup> the longer the war lasts, the clearer it becomes that Israel must reevaluate the traditional regional rules of the game.<sup>24</sup> Israel itself has been critical of the hesitant conduct of the international community, which has refrained from decisive intervention in the civil war in Syria. Moreover, Israel’s approach of non-intervention has repeatedly proven to be a complex challenge, as Israel is perceived by some actors in Syria as maintaining an adversarial position. One example was Israel’s decision to refrain from intervention despite the bombing of the Golan Heights by Assad’s army, and to overlook the crossing of the disengagement lines demarcated in the May 1974 agreements as a buffer zone. Although Israel chose to refrain from military intervention in the Syrian Golan Heights (in September 2014, Israel intercepted a Syrian Sukhoi warplane only after it entered Israeli airspace),<sup>25</sup> its minor response to the violations and reluctance to take diplomatic or practical action was understood in Syrian opposition circles as evidence of support for the regime.

Israel’s policy of non-intervention has also been notable in light of the active policy of other state and non-state actors attempting to promote competing interests in the Syrian arena, in order to improve their respective strategic standings. The policy has stemmed in part from the conviction that non-intervention will serve Israeli interests in the best possible manner by distancing Israel from the negative effects of the conflict, and from the confusion posed by a complicated, dynamic, and volatile arena in which central roles are played by new, unfamiliar actors, and which lacks an identifiable, responsible party with whom there are agreed upon rules of the game. Israel has refrained from choosing between two options, both of which are perceived as undesired alternatives: (a) the “devil that it knows,” i.e., the survival of the Assad regime (even if it is weaker than before), and (b) a possible jihadist seizure of Syria.

In the absence of a decision between these two alternatives, Israel has focused primarily on maintaining routine security and addressing threats posed by the war in Syria, but has invested little effort in exploring the opportunities presented by the more pragmatic actors in the region. However, the policy of

non-intervention failed to provide a satisfactory solution when the fighting in Syria began to approach Israel and spill over the border. It has also failed to address the deepening presence of Hezbollah and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard in the Syrian Golan Heights and the simultaneous construction of infrastructure by Salafi jihadist groups along the Israeli border.<sup>26</sup> In addition, it has resulted in confusion and speculation among Syrian actors regarding Israel's position vis-à-vis the civil war. Israel welcomed the removal of most of the chemical weapons from the Assad regime, the weakening of Hezbollah forces in the fighting, and the undermining of Hezbollah's status as a bastion of resistance against Israel.<sup>27</sup> The group has lost more than 2,000 fighters in the course of the war and has tried to justify to the Lebanese public its central role in the war and the heavy sacrifices it has made by presenting itself as "Lebanon's defender" against the threats of the Islamic State. Nonetheless, many opposition elements have estimated that Israel prefers the continuation of the Assad regime to all other options, and this assessment has had a detrimental impact on the possibility of cooperation between the parties. The confusion has also penetrated the Israeli military echelon, which feels as if it is groping its way through a dark reality in which the political echelon has issued no clear guidelines regarding Israel's direction and long term interests.<sup>28</sup>

At the same time, Israel's formal policy of non-intervention was accompanied by low signature action behind the scenes. In the military realm (according to foreign sources), Israel acted to thwart the shipment of strategic weapons to Hezbollah, to prevent the establishment of Iranian and Hezbollah bases in the Golan Heights, and to deter attempts by hostile elements to launch attacks into Israel. Between January 2013 and April 2016, some fifteen attacks against different targets throughout Syria were attributed to Israel, most notably the January 2015 attack in Quneitra, which killed senior Iranian IRGC Colonel Ali Reza Tabatabai and Jihad Mughniyeh, who was responsible for Hezbollah operations in the Golan Heights, and the December 2015 killing of Samir Kuntar who was in charge of Hezbollah's Quneitra Governorate.<sup>29</sup>

In addition, Israel conducted behind the scenes contacts with local Sunni actors in the Golan Heights based on the parties' shared interest in weakening the jihadist forces, as well as the Hezbollah and the Iranian al-Quds forces operating in the region.<sup>30</sup> Although Israel has operated in a number of ways in the humanitarian realm (described below), it has been careful to avoid

the risks of engaging in more significant and open cooperation that could be interpreted as clearly taking a side in the ongoing Syrian crisis. For example, in October 2015, it was reported that the Israeli security establishment had decided to prevent senior members of the Syrian opposition from attending a public conference on the situation in Syria scheduled to take place in Jerusalem in an effort to avoid what might be interpreted as a deviation from Israel's policy of non-intervention.<sup>31</sup> In May 2016 the IDF announced the establishment of a new liaison unit aimed to manage its growing contacts with Syrian civilians living across Israel's northeastern border. According to Israeli publications, the new unit is "likely to help facilitate easier access to Israeli medical facilities for wounded Syrians, as well as help the IDF keep a closer watch on developments across the border."<sup>32</sup>

The varied reasons for the policy of non-intervention include:

- a. Israel's desire to avoid entanglement with one of the participants in the civil war, as long as the damage to Israel is limited. Israel lacks a distinct interest in being drawn into the turmoil.
- b. Consideration that siding with the rebels would have a detrimental impact on the understandings between Israel and Russia.
- c. The preference for short term tactical measures over long term strategic measures, in light of the uncertainty regarding the possible endgame for the Syrian fighting.
- d. The limited means of influencing the events in Syria, while a threat of possible Israeli interference remained the most effective means of deterrence.
- e. The lack of reliable information regarding the diverse actors currently operating on the Syrian side of the border.
- f. Doubts regarding the ability of the new Syrian actors to serve as reliable partners for agreements and understandings.
- g. Painful memories of the outcome of Israel's intervention in the internal struggles in Lebanon in the 1980s and its attempts to crown new rulers in the region.
- h. The reluctance of non-state actors associated with the Syrian opposition to establish open and close relations with Israel, out of concern that doing so would have a detrimental impact on their legitimacy and their image in Syrian and broader Arab public opinion.<sup>33</sup>

In actuality, Syria is divided into areas of influence of four primary external forces: Russia, Turkey, Iran, and the United States. The only area that has not been

“claimed” is southern Syria, which includes the Golan Heights and in which Israel has enjoyed relative freedom of action throughout the course of the war. For this reason, Israel was alarmed in September 2015 when it became evident that Russia was sending forces and building military outposts in the Syrian coastal region. Accompanied by Chief of Staff Gadi Eisenkot, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu quickly paid a visit to Moscow with the aim of reaching understandings to prevent collisions – particularly aerial – between Israeli and Syrian and Russian forces. In addition the Prime Minister sought to prevent the arrival of advanced Russian weaponry such as surface-to-air missiles, which could hinder the operational freedom of the IDF in southern Syria. Israel may have also explored whether the Russian channel could be used to reach understandings regarding rules of the game vis-à-vis the Iran-Assad-Hezbollah axis, based on recognition of the common threat posed by the Islamic State.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, as clarified by Defense Minister Ya’alon in February 2016, Russia and the US recognize Israeli security needs and its freedom of action when these concerns are breached.<sup>35</sup>



## CHAPTER 2

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### **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.<sup>1</sup> 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**

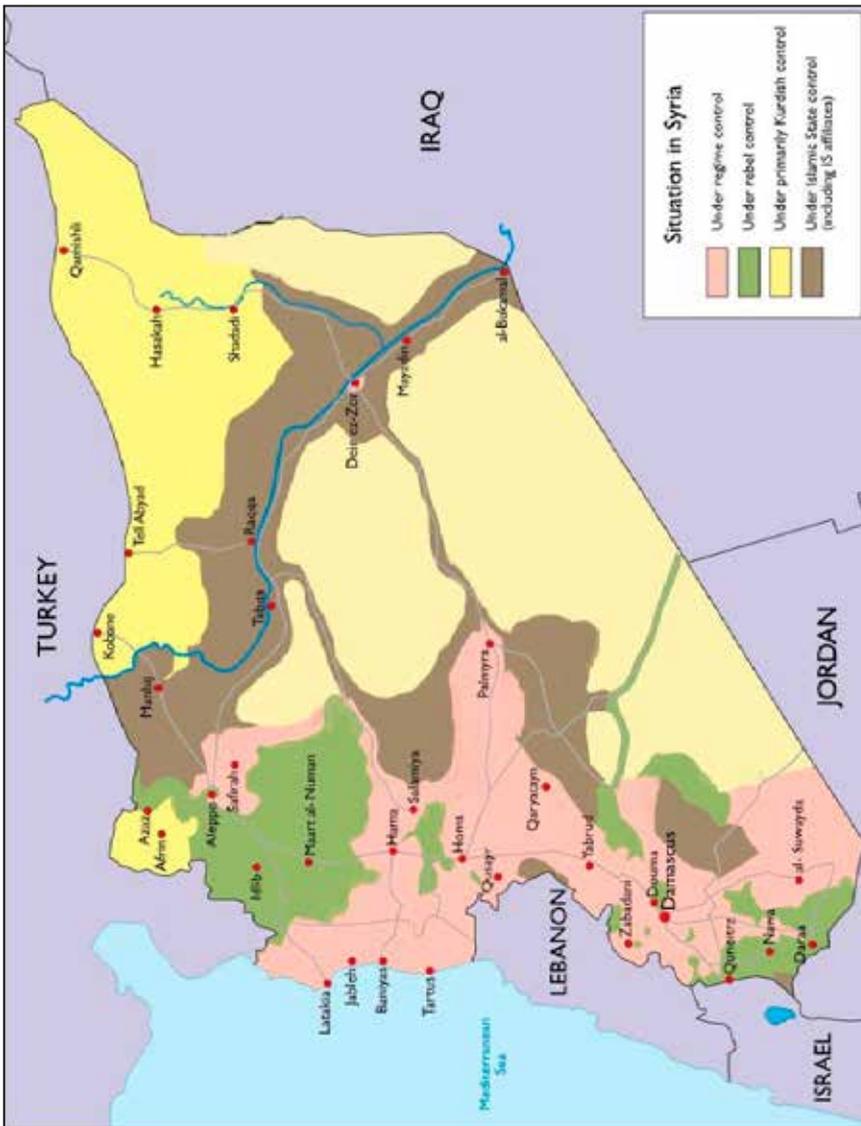
The operations of Salafi jihadist actors in Syria are driven by a long term religious vision that aims to do away with the political borders drawn at the end of World War I. In place of this political arrangement, these actors seek to impose Muslim rule, based on a radical-conservative interpretation 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-Raqqa, 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 Heights<sup>2</sup> (figure 1) and in the western Daraa countryside.<sup>3</sup> 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)<sup>4</sup>

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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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.”<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup>

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.<sup>10</sup>

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.<sup>11</sup>

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.”<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup>

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.<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup> 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 rhetoric<sup>17</sup>

and promoting its aspirations to destroy Syria and harm its citizens.<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup>

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.<sup>20</sup>

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.<sup>21</sup> Its aim, as formulated in its founding document, is to establish "a civil state based on foundations of democracy, justice, equality, and freedom."<sup>22</sup>

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.<sup>23</sup>

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).<sup>24</sup> 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.<sup>25</sup> 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.<sup>26</sup> 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.<sup>27</sup> 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.<sup>28</sup>

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.<sup>29</sup> 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).<sup>30</sup>

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.<sup>31</sup> 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."<sup>32</sup> 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.<sup>33</sup>

### **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.<sup>34</sup>

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.<sup>35</sup>

### **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.<sup>36</sup>

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.<sup>37</sup> 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.<sup>38</sup>

Israel has a decades-long relationship with the Kurdish minority in northern Iraq,<sup>39</sup> 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."<sup>40</sup> 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.<sup>41</sup>

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.<sup>42</sup> 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.<sup>43</sup>

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.<sup>44</sup> 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.<sup>45</sup> 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.<sup>46</sup> 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.<sup>47</sup> 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."<sup>48</sup>

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.<sup>49</sup> 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.<sup>50</sup>

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.<sup>51</sup> 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.<sup>52</sup> He has also suggested that Israel has conveyed clear warnings to the Islamic State and the Nusra Front to refrain from attacking the Druze.<sup>53</sup> 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.<sup>54</sup>

### **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.<sup>55</sup>
- 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.<sup>56</sup>
- 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.<sup>57</sup>

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.<sup>58</sup> 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.<sup>59</sup>

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.<sup>60</sup> 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.<sup>61</sup> 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.<sup>62</sup>

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.<sup>63</sup> 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.<sup>64</sup>

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 Syria<sup>65</sup> 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.<sup>66</sup> 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).<sup>67</sup>

In a vision statement formulated in mid-2015, Syrian political activist and media figure Thair 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.<sup>68</sup>

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.”<sup>69</sup>



## CHAPTER 3

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### **Israel and the Actors in Syria: The Toolbox and the Rules of the Game**

Israel's policy of non-intervention in the civil war in Syria granted Israel a number of advantages and staved off possible dangers. The policy was driven by Israel's desire to avoid entanglement in the fighting and remain above the regional upheaval, compounded by skepticism as to the existence of trustworthy partners and the intrinsic difficulties of effectively influencing events by means of Syrian actors. On the other hand, standing idly by as other countries increased their intervention, and actors, most of whom were hostile to Israel, grew stronger while undermining the stability along the border in the Golan Heights, posed intensifying risks. In light of the circumstances on the Syrian side of the border since the second half of 2014, non-intervention has in practice come to mean abandoning the field to radical elements representing the Shiite axis led by Iran and Hezbollah and Salafi jihadist forces, and a decision to refrain from possibly strengthening "pragmatic" actors.

This chapter examines the significance of a change in Israeli policy, from non-intervention in the Syrian crisis to formal or covert forms of active involvement aimed at influencing processes on a number of levels: military, diplomatic, economic, and humanitarian, including the furthering of reciprocal relations with "positive" actors in the field.

The toolbox at the disposal of Israeli policymakers for working with the prominent non-state and other actors in Syria is derived from the interface between Israeli interests and the set of variables discussed above, including the actors' long term and short term goals regarding the future of Syria; their ideological worldviews; their military and political power; the extent to which they rely on internal Syrian forces; their internal legitimacy; and the

external support they enjoy. An analysis of these criteria allows the definition of the risks, limitations, and obstacles that Israel faces when considering the possibility of cooperation with actors in Syria for the sake of pursuing mutual goals and interests on the one hand, and weakening common enemies on the other hand. Accordingly, the opportunities these actors present Israel will be mapped, and possible rules of the game for Israel in the changing Syrian arena will be outlined, including use of leverage, influence, means of deterrence, and channels of communication.

### **Limitations and Risks**

In its conduct and policy vis-à-vis non-state actors in Syria, Israel must be mindful of the limitations and the obstacles presented by the complex Syrian arena. The new reality on the Syrian side of the border requires Israel to adapt to this dynamic arena, which continues to evolve according to different rules of the game than those that existed formerly, as well as to the new actors operating within it. The old mechanisms of deterrence employed vis-à-vis the Assad regime are not necessarily effective against the new actors, which include militias that are not responsible for a specific territory or population. Israeli efforts to contend with the array of new actors and identify their unique attributes have also presented difficulties as a result of the partial intelligence coverage regarding their interests, intentions, and worldviews.<sup>1</sup> Another obstacle is the fact the actors are characterized by rapid changes, join with and split off from other groups, with the term “loyalty” losing its meaning.

The professional literature proposes a number of relevant criteria for characterizing non-state players:

- a. *Autonomy*: the degree of freedom of action enjoyed by the actor in pursuing its goals.
- b. *Representation*: The population groups that the actor seeks to represent, and its ability to garner legitimacy as a reliable and hegemonic representative of their values and goals.
- c. *Influence*: The actor's ability to bring about change in realms related to its areas of activity.<sup>2</sup>
- d. *Material base*: Non-state actors' sources of economic funding and their relationship with their patrons.
- e. *Geographical framework*: Some non-state actors rely on the local population of a specific state or region, while others regard themselves

as the representative of populations located in more than one state that share common ideological, ethnic, religious, or sectarian attributes.

- f. *Political objective*: Some non-state actors are subversive in character and challenge the very idea of the state and the legitimacy of a specific regime, while others support preservation of the state status quo.
- g. *Modes of Activity*: Some subversive non-state actors adopt methods of armed violence, whereas others are hybrid actors, making use of non-violent activity in civil, political, social, and economic realms.<sup>3</sup>

Use of these criteria to examine the various Syrian actors highlights primarily the limitations in acting in coordination with them (table 1):

*Autonomy*: Many of the actors, including more pragmatic groups, are subject to the interests of patron states, which provide them with external aid in the form of funding and weapons supply, and consequently, serve as proxies not only of states but also of other non-state actors.

*Representation*: Although most of the actors belong to the Sunni majority, there is no one dominant group commanding broad recognition and legitimacy within the internal Syrian, regional, and international arenas. In parallel to their struggles against the regime, the different actors clash with one another over territory, assets, resources, population groups under their authority, and hegemony in determining Syria's political and religious ideological agenda, in the present and the future.

*Influence*: Some of the actors, especially the "positive" ones, represent small to medium size organizational initiatives with limited military strength. Whereas exiled groups have difficulty mobilizing military aid and other kinds of assistance, and local groups are preoccupied by mutual wrangling, the external jihadist groups that have penetrated Syria under cover of the civil war benefit from ideological, military, and economic resources and a flow of foreign volunteer fighters from outside of Syria, and therefore enjoy widespread influence.

*Material base*: "Positive" actors are extremely dependent on external aid and donations, whereas the Islamic State, the Nusra Front, and other Islamist jihadist actors on the whole benefit from a wide variety of funding sources, some of which are independent and autonomous.

*Geographical framework*: "Positive" actors direct their efforts throughout all of Syria or in specific regions of the country, whereas "negative" Islamist and jihadist actors regard Syria as one link in a much broader Islamic State, which, in their vision, is destined to be established in the future.

*Political objective:* While all the groups fighting against the Assad regime challenge the old state order, some seek to introduce political and social reforms within Syria, and others are in favor of eradicating the Syrian state, whether through partition or by means of its incorporation into some larger entity. Ultimately, although many actors seek to promote a civil agenda, the institutionalization of the potential “positive” actors in the field lags far behind that of the Islamic State, the Nusra Front, and Hezbollah.

In light of the parameters charted in table 1, the primary limitation encumbering the ability of Israel (and the entire international community, for that matter) to formulate an active and constructive policy vis-à-vis the new actors, and primarily the “positive” actors in southern Syria, stems from their being a mix of actors lacking a mature and institutionalized organizational state logic, and their tendency to join together and split apart with great frequency. The actors are characterized by deep ideological and political divisions and opposing interests, both among themselves and among the patrons supporting them. These structural and ideological attributes weaken the groups as individual and collective actors and continue to complicate the delineation of an integrated policy that can be generally endorsed and implemented. Moreover, the tendency of the Syrian population and the fighting groups to shift their allegiances in accordance with the situation on the ground and their immediate economic and military needs makes it difficult for Israel and the international community to identify a dominant, credible actor with overriding responsibility that can influence other actors. It is also difficult to assess prospects of success and the value of support for any of the actors with a reliable and long term sense of commitment.

In addition, the international community itself, as well as the regional states, remains divided regarding the appropriate priorities for dealing with the crisis in Syria. Whereas Israel and Saudi Arabia tend to regard the takeover of Syria by the Iranian-led Shiite axis as the primary threat, other countries, most prominently Russia and the United States, regard stopping the Islamic State as its major concern.<sup>4</sup> For its part, Turkey is threatened by the establishment of an expanded autonomy for the Kurdish minority, and in June 2015 the Turkish president emphasized that his country would not allow the establishment of a Kurdish state in northern Syria.<sup>5</sup>

A major difficulty is Syria's transformation into a regional battleground for external forces and ideological and religious struggles. The primary battle in this arena is the battle between the two sectarian camps in the Muslim and

**Table 1. Actors with Relevance to Israel (with an emphasis on southern Syria)**

	Islamic State	Nusra Front	National Coalition	Free Syrian Army	Local Communities	Kurds	Druze
<b>Autonomy</b>	Full	Partial	Little	Partial	Partial	Partial	Little
<b>Representation</b>	All Sunni Salafi jihadist	Sunni Salafi jihadist in Syria	Syrian opposition in exile	Variety of Syrian militias	Local militias and civilian populations	Kurds in Syria	Druze in Syria
<b>Estimated influence on the future of Syria</b>	Substantial	Substantial	Little	Moderate	Moderate	Substantial	Little
<b>Material base</b>	Primarily independent	Independent and external	External	Primarily external	Partially independent	Partially independent	Partially independent
<b>Geographical framework</b>	Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere	Syria	International diplomatic arena	Syria	Southern Syria	Northern Syria	Primarily the Druze Mountain and southern Syria
<b>Objective</b>	Short term: establishment of control and governance. Long term: establishment of Islamic caliphate	Ousting of the Assad regime and imposition of Islamic law, beginning in Syria	Replacement of the Assad regime and establishment of a democratic regime	Replacement of the Assad regime and establishment of a democratic regime	Establishment of a stable and secure autonomy in southern Syria	Establishment of a recognized autonomy in Syrian Kurdistan	Protection of the Druze community and establishment of a religious and cultural autonomy on the Druze Mountain
<b>Modes of activity</b>	Hybrid	Primarily violent	Primarily diplomatic	Primarily violent	Hybrid	Hybrid	Hybrid

Arab world. On the one hand is the Shiite axis led by Iran, which will do all it can to prevent the conquest of Syria's essential territory – Damascus, the Damascus-Homs-Aleppo road, the strip bordering Lebanon, and the Syrian coastal area – by the rebel forces fighting the regime of President Assad and the Alawite minority. On the other hand is the Sunni camp, led by Saudi Arabia and Turkey, which seeks to topple the Assad regime and opposes Iranian Shiite dominance of any kind in Syria or Lebanon. In tandem, Syria has become a battleground in the struggle for hegemony within the Islamic Sunni camp, between Salafi jihadist Islam, political Islam, and moderate, reformist, and pragmatic streams. The regime vacuum in Syria was penetrated by the Islamic State, which seized control of large areas in eastern and northern Syria that have since been targeted by an American-led international coalition. The situation has been complicated even further by mounting US-Russian competition for influence in the region, which intensified following direct Russian involvement in the fighting against the Syrian opposition forces. In this context, any act of intervention in Syria is likely to generate a chain of unintended repercussions for the leading regional actors. This is the case not only for “negative” actors, such as Iran and Hezbollah, but also Israeli allies such as the United States and Jordan, potential partners such as Saudi Arabia, and countries that potentially pose challenges to Israel, such as Turkey and Russia.

In addition to the many difficulties impeding the ability of the international community to interact with non-state actors in Syria, Israel also faces ideological and cultural obstacles. Israel's image in Syrian public opinion is that of a threatening, occupying enemy; conventional belief was that it was neither appropriate nor recommended for Syria to have relations with it. These obstacles are aggravated by the lack of progress in the Israeli-Palestinian political process, and intensify with escalation in the Palestinian arena. Some opposition activists who responded to the INSS questionnaire maintained that jumpstarting and advancing the Israeli-Palestinian political process could be expected to remove these obstacles, encourage changes in the perception of Israel, and increase openness for ties with Israel. An Israeli-Palestinian political process would presumably help Israel coordinate and even build a mechanism for cooperation with the regional actors that are involved in Syria and enjoy influence in the country, particularly Saudi Arabia and Turkey. Nonetheless, one respondent to the questionnaire, who prior to the revolution was a member of the Baath Party, disagreed with

this assessment and asserted that contending with the opposition to peace with Israel would require an internal Syrian dialogue and formulation of a unified Syrian position on the matter.

Another obstacle to progress in Israeli relations with Syrian actors stems from their prevalent perception that Israel prefers the Assad regime – the “devil it knows” – which maintained calm and stability in the Golan Heights for 42 years. Although this obstacle may have been expected to erode following attacks attributed to Israel on Assad regime targets and violent clashes between Israel, Hezbollah, and Iran in the Golan Heights in January 2015, Syrian activists who responded to the INSS questionnaire maintained their perception of an alliance between Israel and the Assad regime. For example, E. A., a political activist in a liberal faction operating within the framework of the Free Syrian Army, claimed that from the onset of the civil war, Israel has favored the Assad regime in a manner that “widens the chasm between Syrians and the Israeli people.” M., a liberal Syrian activist, accused Israel of standing beside the tyrannical regime in opposition to the Syrian people’s demands for freedom, and asserted that most Syrians regard the Israeli lobby in Washington as responsible for Assad’s ability to remain in power and the absence of American support for the rebels. According to this critical and prevalent view, many Syrians believe in the conspiracy theories that Israel prefers dictatorial regimes in the region (Syria, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan) and is taking its time – thanks to its reliance on these countries – in resolving the Palestinian problem, and, in this way, helps to strengthen religious and nationalist ideologies and intensify expressions of extremism in the region.

Another complication in this context for Israel is bureaucratic in nature. Israel classifies Syrian citizens as citizens of an enemy state and prohibits their entry into the country, regardless of their political and organizational affiliation. Official Syrian laws also prohibit all contact with the “Zionist entity,” and as a result, the years of conflict between the two countries have witnessed the development of entrenched norms with lasting cultural impact, even in the current reality in which the regime is unable to enforce them completely. This legal-cultural obstacle makes it extremely difficult to initiate and maintain interactions that build trust between Israel and more pragmatic Syrian actors. Such interactions could help break the ice between the sides, eradicate deeply entrenched stereotypes, promote common interests, exchange intelligence information and ideas, and solve some of the controversial issues

currently hampering relations. Yet as a result of this two-way bureaucratic obstacle, many of the initiatives for Syrian-Israeli dialogue proposed by prominent Syrian opposition activists have not advanced.

In practice, as proven by the crisis in Syria, the most effective agent of cognitive change is reality itself. Conciliatory Syrian initiatives aimed at establishing ties with Israel have often been the outcome of internal Syrian actors' sense of despair with the international and regional systems, as well as extreme hardship, and have been advanced more in the spirit of "cast thy bread upon the waters" than as a choice based on a deep shift in perception. In addition, the situation in Syria has also provided extensive evidence of the ease with which local actors and the local population shift allegiances due to the situation on the ground and join actors that are strong and dominant. Therefore, actors change their mind, and they will continue to change their mind regarding the relations with Israel.

In addition to these limitations and obstacles, Israeli intervention in the Syrian crisis poses many risks. Public Israeli cooperation with non-state actors in Syria could cause more harm than good if used as ammunition by the Syrian regime to prove their "treachery" and tarnish their legitimacy in public opinion. Moreover, an active and open Israeli policy in Syria could serve to confirm Israel's prevalent image in many Syrian and Arab circles as a subversive entity and intensify the traditional animosity toward it.

Finally, taking clear sides in the civil war in Syria could somewhat diminish Israel's leverage based on the power of deterrence, which relies on its ability to threaten to intervene on behalf of one of the sides in Syria when it finds it prudent to do so – for example, if one of the sides targets Israel. The lack of clarity of Israel's policy regarding the crisis in Syria helps the information warfare it currently conducts against the actors in Syria and conveys a deterring message to all parties regarding the potential of its military intervention. In this context, Hezbollah's contained response to the killing of a senior official in Quneitra by Israeli forces appears in part to have stemmed from concern within the pro-Iranian axis of the possibility of significant Israeli intervention in the internal struggle in Syria.

### **Opportunities for Cooperation**

Despite the limitations and the obstacles discussed above, the reality that has taken shape in Syria since 2011 has presented and continues to present Israel with unique opportunities to initiate dialogues, relations, and cooperative

efforts with more “positive” actors with overlapping interests. The National Coalition, the Free Syrian Army, and most actors linked to local populations, specific minority groups, and independent influential actors are associated with states of the Sunni Arab camp, which pinned its hopes on Washington but was ultimately disappointed. Many also share common enemies with Israel, namely Iran, Hezbollah, the Assad regime, and the Islamic State, and therefore tend to support a pragmatic policy. Relations with these actors could serve Israel as a platform for ad hoc cooperation in pursuing immediate and focused tactical goals such as creating a stabilizing influence in the Golan Heights for the purposes of calm and security, intelligence cooperation, and the provision of civilian-humanitarian aid. Moreover, relations established on the ground could prepare for future relations between Israel and the entities that will reach a position of influence once the civil war comes to an end. In addition, the establishment of relations with non-state and other actors in Syria could also provide Israel with a unique opportunity to secure symbolic returns in terms of normalization.

Examining actors’ candidacy for cooperation with Israel requires adjusted calculation of their willingness to establish ties with Israel and the potential benefit offered by such ties. Willingness to cooperate with Israel in principle, and in some cases to do so in practice, crystallized and significantly intensified during 2014, primarily among groups associated with the Free Syrian Army, local fighting groups and communities in southern Syria, and independent activists in exile who possess political, public, and media influence. A number of factors contributed to the evolution of this conciliatory approach toward Israel among the actors in question:

- a. Close relations with Arab and Western countries sharing Israel’s strategic interest in curbing the expansion of Shiite-Iranian influence in the region.
- b. The experience of the war in southern Syria and an understanding of the benefits of access to humanitarian and other kinds of aid at the Israeli border, in light of the unique needs stemming from the day-to-day realities on the ground.
- c. Liberal pro-Western ideology, which regards the establishment of peace and normalization with Israel as an opportunity and an important condition for securing the support of the international community, led by the United States, in the struggle to topple the Assad regime and rebuild Syria as a democratic, advanced, and secure country.

- d. A particularistic approach that prioritizes singular group interests as a chief consideration in determining the immediate political agenda of actors, taking priority over pan-Arab and pan-Islamic considerations pertaining to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The willingness of actors in Syria to cooperate with Israel is neither automatic nor interminable and may change in accordance with changing circumstances, the needs of the actors in question, and Israel's reactions to their initiatives. Furthermore, radical actors harboring religious-ideological hostility toward Israel, such as the Nusra Front, have refrained from taking action to challenge Israel and have been willing to establish rules of the game based on an indirect mechanism of coordination.

Although the interest of Syrian actors in establishing tactical and/or strategic ties with Israel is a necessary precondition for their development, it is not, in itself, a sufficient criterion to determine the existence of a distinct Israeli interest in investing the resources and taking the risks necessary to do so. The Israeli response must therefore be based on a careful calculation of the potential for cooperation with the actors in question and the extent of their centrality in the present and future Syrian reality. Assessment of the potential for cooperation between Israel and these actors must take into consideration the following four variables:

- a. The actors' ability to contribute to the preservation of routine security and calm along the Israeli-Syrian border.
- b. Their capacity to represent broad, deeply rooted coalitions (regional, sectarian, ethnic, and political) that can be expected to play a role in shaping the future political map of Syria (or at least part of Syria) at the end state of the civil war.
- c. Their legitimacy in internal Syrian public opinion and in the regional and international arena.
- d. Their ability to influence other actors that in terms of ideology are far removed from Israel, including radical Salafi jihadist groups.

Actors with the ability to enhance routine security in the border region and represent broad-based, deeply rooted groups that enjoy popular legitimacy and are likely to play a role in Syria immediately following the war are by nature extremely attractive candidates for cooperation as far as Israel is concerned. For example, local communities in southern Syria, local units associated with the Free Syrian Army, and the Kurdish and Druze minorities are actors with strong representation and with well-established

geographical, ethnic, and sectarian interests that are not expected to vanish from the political map. In contrast, other actors, such as veteran exiles who are foreign to the Syrian experience and small transitory groups lacking tradition and duty are less attractive candidates for cooperation, primarily due to aspects of representation, influence, and concern regarding their potential disappearance the day after.

Between these two extremes are actors that enjoy broad support today but whose role after the civil war is currently difficult to determine (for example, the Nusra Front), or, alternatively, actors possessing less influence on the current reality in Syria but that may play a key role in the future. Examples include the National Coalition, which represents a broad common denominator among the Syrian people and enjoys international legitimacy but currently lacks a substantial military force; humanitarian organizations; and prominent independent activists. In addition, actors that appear weak today if they are united with a more powerful force may subsequently gain popular support, influence, and legitimacy and become more attractive candidates for cooperation, following the adoption of an active Israeli and international policy that could strengthen them militarily, economically, and in the humanitarian realm.

### **Tactical Partnerships versus Strategic Partnerships**

Discussion of the establishment of ties between Israel and non-state actors in Syria should distinguish between short term tactical partnerships and long term strategic partnerships. Short term partnerships that focus on the security-military realm, characterized by tactical attributes and focused objectives, are more available to Israel than broader and more ambitious strategic alliances. The conditions necessary for such cooperation are common enemies; overlapping interests; at times, the ability to maintain secrecy; and the existence of an agreed upon “negative” vision (for example, an anti-Iranian vision or an anti-jihadist vision) with a limited “positive” horizon. Such tactical relationships require both Israel and Syrian actors to invest relatively limited input at a specific point in time, without an excessive need for ideological, emotional, or ethical conditions, and can usually be advanced bilaterally, without the intensive involvement of a third regional or international party. Ad hoc actions meant to address specific security, civilian, or humanitarian needs directly on the ground may be undertaken by Israel in conjunction with any of the actors operating in southern Syria, from the

Free Syrian Army and local forces in the Syrian Golan Heights to violent jihadist groups that do not regard Israel as an immediate enemy. Some of the actors operating in southern Syria regard these common interests as a basis for initial tactical cooperation with Israel that has the potential to expand and to intensify in the future. In his response to the INSS questionnaire, Y. S., a senior figure in the Sayf ash-Sham Brigades in Quneitra, identified “preventing Iran, Hezbollah, and the extremists” from seizing control over southern Syria as a supreme Israeli interest, and called on Israel to provide assistance to the local groups on the ground in promoting it.

In contrast, long term strategic cooperation between Israel and non-state actors in Syria in the diplomatic, military, economic, and ethical realms requires a well formulated positive vision based on broad interests, clear goals, and developed worldviews, backed up by a reliable capacity for execution and recognition of the limitations of the actors in question. Israeli-Syrian partnership in a political platform of this sort – which goes beyond the overcoming of common enemies and requires the establishment of new ruling frameworks in Syria, the demarcation of territorial borders, and the reconstruction of national narratives – is a complex undertaking necessitating a supportive local, regional, and international atmosphere. Such initiatives, both those pursued covertly and those pursued in an open manner by regime opponents in southern Syria and abroad, are consistent with the Israeli interest of translating the overlapping interests between the sides into policy aimed at strengthening more pragmatic forces and curbing radical Islam. These initiatives are also consistent with the international interest of encouraging the evolution of an authentic local vision for Syria in aiding the construction of an operational ideological alternative to the competing vision for Syria and the region offered by the Islamic State.

Israel will only be able to consider such initiatives seriously if they enjoy the support of a significant, representative, and known force backed by broad public legitimacy within Syria. In addition, they must earn the broad backing of major actors in the regional and international arena, as part of an organized, comprehensive campaign to strengthen the moderate Syrian camp and fight Salafi jihadist forces and the pro-Iranian axis. In the splintered Syrian reality of 2011-2016, there appeared to be little likelihood of broad internal and international mobilization for the implementation of such a strategic master plan. Still, successful tactical cooperative efforts, which are initially easier to implement and less risky for those involved, can

serve as a platform for building trust, shaping a new reality in the country, and, when the time comes, perhaps also preparing the ground for strategic partnerships, including pursuit of the array of conditions required for their consolidation.

The opportunities for cooperation presented to Israel by the crisis in Syria, however, are not limited to non-state actors but also extend to the patron states backing them. Indeed, the key to a settlement in Syria may actually rest not with the non-state actors but with the states of the region, due to their influence on some of the actors operating in the Syrian arena – with the ability to damage and undermine a future settlement in Syria – and the ability of the international arena to place trust in and rely on them to guarantee their commitments. The common denominators between these states and Israel regarding the Syrian issue could open the door to the establishment and strengthening of existing low profile cooperative relationships, as in the case of Jordan and Saudi Arabia, or to the building, improvement, and expansion of problematic or inadequate relations, as in the case of Turkey and Qatar. Israel might also make its support of the Syrian actors who oppose the regime conditional on a broad package deal between it and the Arab Sunni states, including elements that extend beyond the Syrian arena itself. Weakening the Shiite-Iranian axis in Syria is a Saudi and Jordanian interest no less than an Israeli interest. For this reason, in exchange for taking a decisive stand in favor of one of the sides in Syria, which would involve risks, Israel can ask for recompense with regard to issues it views as of the utmost importance and that currently top its security and political agenda. Some possible examples include regional or international recognition of its right to defend its vital security interests in the Golan Heights; promotion of normalization; amendments to the Arab Peace Initiative; exertion of pressure on the Palestinian Authority to cease its efforts to delegitimize Israel and return to the negotiating table; and efforts to deal with the Iranian nuclear program.

### **Military Modes of Action**

An analysis of the interests of the actors in Syria points to the effectiveness of the military levers of deterrence possessed by Israel vis-à-vis violent groups under the existing circumstances. Also evident is the limited power of “soft power” that can influence and be used to strengthen more “positive” actors, as well as change the balance of power in Syria and the reality on the

ground. Israel's toolbox contains a number of military modes of action for deterring violent non-state actors, most prominently Salafi jihadist forces and Hezbollah, including:

- a. Direct military strikes against military targets associated with these actors, such as commanders, military bases, fighting units, and ammunition repositories, with the aim of reducing their ability to inflict damage on Israel and to fight moderate rivals within Syria.
- b. Direct military strikes against infrastructure and sources of economic income associated with these actors, with the aim of damaging their ability to mobilize the financial resources required to consolidate their control and provide for the local population so as to boost their legitimacy as preferred regime alternatives.
- c. Strikes against the channels of aid and support supplied by patron states to radical actors operating in Syria, which may ultimately turn their capabilities against Israel.
- d. Strikes against Syrian army strategic weapons repositories, should it become increasingly likely that these weapons will reach the hands of radical elements within the Salafi Sunni camp or the Shiite camp.
- e. Tipping the balance of power in the internal Syrian arena of fighting in favor of the rivals of those that are hostile to Israel, through the provision of arms, equipment, information, and resources (as strengthening one side is likely to weaken the opposing side, according to the zero-sum equation that is characteristic of the struggles of the civil war in Syria).
- f. Establishment and enforcement of a no-fly zone in the Syrian Golan Heights and southern Syria, and warnings that aircraft that violate it on behalf of the Assad regime will be intercepted. Such a zone could be enforced through cooperation with Jordan, similar to the influence zone of Turkey along the northern border of Turkey and Syria, an area of Russian influence in the west and the sector of the Syrian coast, and the US area of influence in eastern Syria.
- g. Cooperation with Jordan in marking a special security zone in southern Syria and the Golan Heights to deny entry of Salafi jihadist forces and pro-Iranian forces, and the willingness to use military air and special ground abilities (without remaining in the field) to enforce this restriction and deter regime forces and "negative" actors from violating it.
- h. Reformulation of Israel's red lines and creation of a direct threat against Assad's continued rule in Syria in the event of attempts by the Iranian and

Hezbollah-led Shiite axis to establish a presence of forces in the Golan Heights or activate terrorist infrastructures against Israel.

i. Cooperation in cyber warfare against the radical axis and its allies.

Despite powerful deterrence created by military levers vis-à-vis violent actors, their effectiveness in strengthening positive non-state actors and advancing their agendas will remain marginal as long as they are not accompanied by a broad, supportive international framework. There is little likelihood of Israel agreeing to enforce a no-fly zone in southern Syria on its own, as such a formative step – which, in the eyes of its Syrian proponents, would constitute a tie-breaker in the civil war and a possible first step in the reconstruction of Syria and the establishment of a new governing framework – can succeed only under conditions of broad internal Syrian, regional, and international cooperation backed up by manpower, resources, planning, and executive capacity.

An independent Israeli military initiative undertaken outside the framework of an international effort, on the other hand – from the establishment of a no-fly zone in the Syrian Golan Heights to the direct or indirect provision of Israeli military aid (e.g., providing arms or information, or training moderate opposition forces in southern Syria) – would involve significant risks. If such aid were to become public knowledge, it would reflect blatant deviation from Israeli neutrality in the Syrian civil war and could draw Israel into the heart of the fighting, against its own will. At the same time, the manifest provision (direct or indirect) of Israeli military aid to Syrian actors can be expected to have a detrimental impact on the reputation and legitimacy of those involved and to be used against them. Perhaps for this reason, many actors have refrained from pursuing such a course and have stressed their desire to avoid repeating the Lebanese model of cooperation between the IDF and the South Lebanese Army (SLA). Moreover, the experience of the war in Syria has demonstrated that military aid to Syrian non-state actors who are perceived to be more moderate and pro-Western has, on more than one occasion, strayed from their intended beneficiaries and ended up in the wrong hands.

It is recommended that Israel plan an American-backed joint strategy with Jordan to establish a cooperative regional influence in southern Syria and strive for coordination with “positive” (or “less negative”) actors such as Free Syrian Army forces, local communities, pragmatic Islamist groups, and minorities, especially the Druze. Israel and Jordan possess air and

advanced standoff capabilities with which they could establish a no-fly zone in defined areas and, at the same, provide a defensive standoff backup to actors that cooperate with it, without the use of ground forces. Such actions would strengthen the strategic alliance between Jordan and Israel, curb the expanding influence of Iran and Hezbollah on the one hand, and the Nusra Front and Salafi jihadist elements on the other hand, and prevent the creation of a vacuum that the Islamic State will try to fill. It is important to ensure that the Druze, both on the Druze Mountain and in the Syrian Golan Heights, are part of the array of actors identified as potential partners of Israel and Jordan. Throughout, Israel and Jordan can demarcate a protected area for Druze refugees, provide them with humanitarian aid, or alternatively, assist Druze forces in protecting the Druze Mountain region and al-Suwayda.<sup>6</sup>

The proposed strategy must take into consideration the tensions and distrust existing between the different Syrian actors, particularly between the Druze and the Sunnis, and the influence of interaction between Israel and the actors in Syria on relations with the Druze in Israel. Delay in implementing this strategy could ultimately present Israel and its partners with an arena of operation that is much more complex than the current reality in southern Syria where, as of mid 2016, no one “negative” actor, such as the Islamic State or Hezbollah, has thus far achieved dominance, due to its need to divide its resources among other arenas of combat.

### **Diplomatic Modes of Action**

Along with “hard” military power, Israel may take action to shape the processes in Syria and promote its own interests vis-à-vis the new actors in the country using elements of soft power. To this end, it can make use of political, diplomatic, media, economic, legal, and humanitarian tools.<sup>7</sup> In this context, an important place is reserved for tools of public diplomacy (as opposed to traditional diplomacy between state actors), which is conducted in part by means of both traditional and new media and recognizes the role of unofficial position holders in shaping reality. The large diplomatic toolbox at Israel’s disposal provides it with diverse possible means of action, albeit limited in scope, vis-à-vis the actors in Syria, that can likely serve three different goals.

The first goal is the restraint of “negative” actors. Although Israel possesses no direct diplomatic levers of influence vis-à-vis most of the violent and hostile non-state actors operating in Syria, deterrence and establishment

of red lines can be effected by means of third parties such as patron states and “positive” actors in the arena. In this way, through the United States, Israel can take advantage of Washington’s close relations with Riyadh and Doha to advance regional cooperation in Syria to curb actors belonging to the pro-Shiite axis and, at the same time, keep Salafi jihadist actors away from the Israeli border. Qatar and Turkey, for example, can be mobilized to use concerted efforts to restrain groups under their patronage, such as the Nusra Front and Ahrar ash-Sham. “Positive” non-state actors engaged in cooperation with jihadist actors in defined arenas of operation may also be able to serve Israel as a diplomatic channel for the conveyance of warnings and threats. For example, the Free Syrian Army and local actors in southern Syria could serve as mediating, regulating, and buffering forces between Israel and the Salafi jihadist forces.

The second goal is the strengthening of “positive” actors. The levers of diplomatic influence that Israel possesses vis-à-vis moderate Syrian actors are not well cultivated considering the faint relations currently existing between the sides. Still, the public statements of these actors and the responses to INSS questionnaires reflect repeatedly that in order to further ties with more moderate actors, Israel needs to endorse the demand of the Syrian rebels that Assad be replaced. Opponents of the regime – both those that support peace and cooperation with Israel and those skeptical of this possibility – have explained that Israel’s public support of the rebels’ resolute claim that Assad will not remain in power would be considered a confidence-building measure that would make it easier for them to be convinced, and for them to convince others, of the need to adopt a conciliatory approach toward Israel. For example, B. H., a liberal activist and member of the Revolutionary Union for the Future of Syria, explained that because of the prevalent perception of Israel throughout the Syrian public, its failure to adopt a position is interpreted as support for the Assad regime. Although this impression is already difficult to rectify, such a declaration – made at the appropriate time – is still welcome and would be viewed as coming better late than never.

Although an Israeli statement would constitute a formal embrace of one of the parties in the civil war in Syria (from which Israel has thus far abstained), it would not be considered a deviation from the international consensus as long as it is justified based on the defense of human rights and the advancement of freedom and democratization. Therefore, even if such a

declaration does not result in an immediate reversal in Syrian public opinion toward Israel, its benefit is likely to be greater than its expected damage to Israel's non-intervention policy. This will certainly prove true as long as such a declaration remains in the symbolic and moral diplomatic realms and does not find manifest operative military expression on the ground.

The third goal is action that benefits more moderate Syrian actors in the international arena. Although Israel does not enjoy the magical influence on global and regional politics that some Syrian actors believe it does, it would not be inappropriate for Israel to make use of the actual diplomatic connections at its disposal to help advance an international settlement that suits its needs. Such a settlement would enable the "positive" actors and the religious and ethnic minorities in southern Syria to play a central role in Syria after the revolution. Israeli diplomacy could encourage Western parties to provide "positive" actors with financial and humanitarian support. Such measures could help shape the future reality in Syria according to Israeli interests, and would strengthen the cooperation between Israel and the relevant actors. For example, T. M. N., a Syrian civil activist, urged Israel to help bring an end to the bloodbath in Syria by asking its allies around the world to support democratic Syrian elements calling for intellectual openness that are interested in a life of peace and welfare. S. Y., a Syrian Kurdish activist with close ties to the Yekiti party, recommended that Israel put greater effort into helping moderate Syrian actors in order to prevent the consolidation of extremist forces among them in the arena.

### **The Economic Toolbox**

Some of the most important levers of influence in the civil war in Syria have been economic. The dissolution of the Syrian economy in the course of the war resulted in material hardship and severe living conditions throughout Syria, with two thirds of the country's pre-war population in need of humanitarian aid. Consequently, economic considerations have become a supreme criterion in determining allegiances and organizational affiliations, alignment with certain actors and subsequent divergence from them, and transitions from one group to another. Over the course of the war, external political actors have played a central role in diverting funds to their proxies in Syria. The plummeting price of oil has made it difficult for Russia to provide economic support to the Assad regime, while the Gulf states have enjoyed deeper currency reserves. This situation has made it

difficult for the Syrian regime to retain its loyal population bases through economic benefits such as diversion of funds to compensate the families of those killed, import gasoline, and perform maintenance on the electricity infrastructure. In turn, this has had a detrimental impact on the political and social backing previously enjoyed by the regime among the local populations under its protection.<sup>8</sup>

The economic hardship has given rise to both a decline of the Syrian regime's material resilience and a vacuum that has been filled by the Salafi jihadist forces, which are financially dependent on external aid from the Gulf states and Turkey, as well as on the sale of oil, the sale of antiquities, tax revenues, and the collection of protection money.<sup>9</sup> For example, the Islamic State provides its population with food and water, clothing, fuel, electricity, and medical and sanitation services as part of its efforts to consolidate its rule.<sup>10</sup> Moderate pro-Western actors have thus far had difficulty offering the local population an attractive material alternative. The international community, including Israel, has an interest in working to turn the tide and help strengthen more moderate rebel groups economically, to enable them – rather than extremist groups such as the Islamic State – to fulfill the material functions of the state vis-à-vis the local population. Israel should also weigh favorably the initiatives of local communities in southern and northern Syria to establish safe zones that would enjoy international protection and a support umbrella in which it would be possible to rebuild Syria's infrastructure and economic and social services and establish an attractive moderate governing alternative. Such areas could serve as a safe haven for refugees and the displaced, prevent the continued growth of popular support for radical Islamic groups, and constitute a constructive positive model that would later be adopted elsewhere in Syria. At the same time, the international community must keep increasing its economic pressure on the Islamic State through damage to oil sales, which supply it with ready capital to fund its activities.

The international community must also adhere to its sanctions on the Syrian regime and its economic patrons. The goal of this measure is to take advantage of the regime's economic weakness as an additional lever for reaching an agreed upon political settlement that would bring an end to the bloodbath in Syria and enable political reforms, including substantial concessions by the regime. The sanctions on Iran lifted in accordance with the nuclear agreement will make it easier for Iran to allocate increased

funding to the Assad regime and Hezbollah for the purpose of strengthening its allies in Syria and reestablishing its regional influence. Such a scenario could affect the balance of power in the civil war in Syria and present the Western powers and the international community with the need to find new solutions for curbing Tehran's negative activities regarding regional issues not directly linked to the nuclear realm.

For its part, Israel would be wise to take action in the international community to advance a comprehensive plan to strengthen more moderate Syrian groups and set up security zones for them. It could contribute directly to such a plan in the short term through the provision of material aid on a larger scale to the point of creating a border economy, including supply routes from Israel to southern Syria.<sup>11</sup> Within such a framework, Israel could take advantage of border crossings to facilitate trade with the local Syrian civilian population, including the import and export of merchandise, consumer goods, agricultural produce, and services, as well as the entry to Israel of a Syrian workforce. This would help improve the economic and humanitarian situation in the Golan Heights and in southern Syria in general and expand the spectrum of mutual interests shared by Israel and local Syrian actors on the ground. In addition, in the long term Israel could benefit from a border economy – in the event that conditions conducive to such a development indeed emerge – through cooperative efforts with Syrian parties in fields such as infrastructure, economics, trade, agriculture, and technology.

### **Humanitarian Activities**

Against the background of Israel's current policy of non-intervention vis-à-vis the civil war in Syria, the provision of humanitarian aid has served as a notably effective tool giving Israel significant yield in exchange for controlled risks that can be taken without leaving its sovereign borders or explicitly siding with one of the warring parties. The civil war in Syria has created an ongoing humanitarian crisis that thus far has forced some 13 million people, representing approximately two-thirds of the population, into conditions of poverty both in Syria and abroad.<sup>12</sup> Humanitarian aid activities have had to address a variety of challenges, including the dangers facing civilians in the areas of fighting, severe living conditions, the collapse of the health systems, and the paralysis of the education systems. Harsh weather conditions in the winter; difficulties involved in conveying humanitarian aid to the combat areas; impartial distribution in accordance with humanitarian criteria, without

strengthening negative forces; the cynical, corrupt exploitation of humanitarian aid for financial gain by military militias; the insufficient cooperation of Syria's neighbors in transporting this aid; and shortages in the amount of aid available have all aggravated the crisis.<sup>13</sup> Significant humanitarian difficulties have also been faced by Syrian refugees in nations outside of Syria (most Syrian refugees are currently concentrated in Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon), including a shortage of resources, the heavy burden on infrastructure-based services and social, medical, occupational, and educational services, lack of knowledge of the local language, bureaucratic obstacles in securing refugee status and work permits, and the failure to mobilize the international aid required to address all the needs of the refugees.

The humanitarian aid required by the population in Syria and the refugees residing outside its borders includes: suitable shelter for changing weather conditions; water supply; proper sanitation and hygiene, and electricity. Among the medical services needed are a skilled workforce of physicians, surgeons, and pharmacists; buildings; delivery rooms and clinics for the performance of abortions of pregnancies resulting from rape; medical equipment; medicines and milk substitutes for infants; ambulances and fire trucks; a blood bank; sterile conditions; and means to prevent illnesses and epidemics through proper heating, cleanliness, sanitation, and suitable housing. There must be adequate physical protection of vulnerable populations in refugee and displaced persons camps in a manner that provides them with security, particularly in the case of women and children, and there must be adequate provision and distribution of food.

The refugees' extended stay in host countries means that they are also in need of legal aid, including the normalization of their legal status and their entitlement to shelter, basic services, free movement, and work permits; psychological support in contending with the crisis and the trauma of war; the integration of children into local education systems; the creation of places of employment for men and women; and the concurrent guarantee of suitable employment conditions and the prevention of poverty and unemployment among citizens of the host countries.

In light of the ongoing Syrian crisis, the majority of the burden of funding the humanitarian work has been borne by the United States, the European Union, relevant UN agencies, and international NGOs. Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq have thus far agreed to absorb most of the waves of Syrian refugees, despite the immense economic and social difficulties involved.

The burden on Israel has been immeasurably less than that borne by Syria's other neighbors, but Israeli officials and civilian parties have also lent a hand to the overall humanitarian effort since the early stages of the war, although only a small amount of the work done in this area has actually been made public. The justifications for the provision of Israeli aid have been moral, Jewish, humanitarian, and historical in nature. They have also been utilitarian, based on the hope that humanitarian aid would usher in a change, from the negative views of Israel prevalent in Syrian public opinion to the cultivation of neighborly relations and the transformation of Syrian beneficiaries into potential future "ambassadors" of Israel.

Israel's official provision of humanitarian aid began only in 2012 as a local initiative of an IDF officer who picked up a wounded Syrian from the border and continued with the establishment of a field hospital in the Golan Heights. Over time, this initiative has been institutionalized, with the admission of more than 2,000 wounded Syrians (including fighters, civilians, and children, some of whom had lost limbs) for medical treatment in Israeli hospitals; the provision of humanitarian aid to villages in the Syrian Golan Heights, including baby food, medicines, and blankets; and cooperation with Israeli civilian organizations. According to informal conversations with Arab aid workers, Israel has maintained a humanitarian channel of communication with groups operating in the villages near the border in the Golan Heights but has refrained from direct contact with most parties in southern Syria, such as the Free Syrian Army's Southern Front. Some of these parties are also interested in establishing direct contact with Israel regarding humanitarian issues, but not all of them were able to do so. In addition, with the support of the State of Israel but without its official participation, thousands of tons of humanitarian aid have been provided by means of independent civilian Israeli and Jewish non-government organizations, most of which have operated covertly in Jordan, Turkey, and even Syria itself.

What follows is a list of some of the prominent civilian initiatives connected with Israel (some of which involved the cooperative effort of multiple organizations):

- a. A humanitarian organization that provides lifesaving humanitarian aid to people in need (the full name of this organization and those behind it are on file with INSS): This organization extends lifesaving humanitarian aid in disaster and conflict-ridden areas where the entry of humanitarian organizations is prohibited. It also operates in countries that have no

- diplomatic relations with Israel without seeking the authorization of the central government. The group began operating in Syria in April 2011, at first secretly and later in cooperation with local Syrian groups. It is responsible for humanitarian initiatives that to date have touched the lives of hundreds of thousands of Syrian displaced persons (as opposed to refugees, whose situation is severe, but who enjoy the protection of host countries and organized international aid). The aid products provided by the organization are visually branded in a manner that will enable Syrians to identify them in the future, when the source of the humanitarian initiatives is made public, and to understand the connection between the aid and Israeli civil society. The group provides aid in Syria in a variety of areas: the construction of hospitals, clinics, and day care facilities for children, as a substitute for schools; the conveyance and distribution of dry food convoys; the provision of medical equipment, including operating room tents, protective kits, and three-dimensional printers for the printing of prostheses; means of protection against chemical weapons for medical teams treating the injured; the training of firefighting units and the provision of equipment; the training of units to engage in rescue, clearing of debris, and location of individuals trapped in wreckage; and the transfer of injured parties to central Israel via Ben Gurion airport for lifesaving operations, with the authorization of the relevant government ministries. In Operation Human Warmth, which included participation by the organization in November 2013, youth movements in Israel collected coats and sleeping bags for displaced Syrians. The group also helped Syrian refugees in Jordan and cooperated with Jordanian Prince Zeid bin-Ra'ad, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.<sup>14</sup>
- b. Tevel (or Tevel b'Tzedek): an Israeli NGO that aims to promote social and environmental justice based on the desire to create a community of Israelis and Jews to address world hunger, social disparities, and environmental destruction. The organization implemented a project for helping Syrian refugees in Jordan, led by Dr. Rony Berger, director of the Rehabilitation and Development Unit of Brit Olam.
  - c. Save A Child's Heart (SACH): Headed by Simon Fischer, this project provides assistance to children from developing countries with heart problems by bringing them to the Wolfson Medical Center in Holon to undergo lifesaving operations, and by training medical teams in developing countries. During the civil war in Syria, the organization undertook to

provide assistance for heart surgeries, including assistance in surgeries for a number of Syrian children.

- d. IsraAID – the Israel Forum for International Humanitarian Aid: This Israeli NGO, founded and directed by Shachar Zahavi, is an umbrella framework for Israeli humanitarian aid organizations. IsraAID undertakes projects that provide aid to Syrian refugees in Jordan, sometimes by means of Christian and Muslim organizations.
- e. Special Tasks Department of the Kibbutz Movement: In March 2012, under the leadership of Yoel Marshak, the Kibbutz Movement's Special Tasks Department collected blankets, food, and financial donations for the Syrian refugees in Jordan. Marshak explained the gesture as stemming from the lessons of the Holocaust, which precluded Israel from remaining an uninvolved bystander, even at the risk of "heating up" the Golan Heights.<sup>15</sup>
- f. Joint Distribution Committee: Beginning in July 2013, this American Jewish charitable organization brought together 14 Jewish organizations in the United States under its auspices to implement aid projects among refugees in Jordan, in coordination and cooperation with the Jordanian government and with international aid organizations operating on the ground.<sup>16</sup>
- g. Jewish-Arab Committee for Humanitarian Aid to the Syrian People: This committee, established in October 2014, collected donations in cooperation with Save the Children, an international organization that works to protect the rights of children in developing countries. Members of this public committee that took part in the initiative included Uri Avnery, Sami Michael, Prof. Yossi Yonah, Prof. Ron Barkai, Shlomzion Kenan, Mossi Raz, Liora Rivlin, Prof. Yehuda Bauer, MK Issawi Frej, Prof. Esther Herzog, and Prof. Arik Shapiro. The founding document of the committee states: "The indifference of the West thus far, and the inaction with regard to the war crimes of the regime, has resulted in the weakening of the secular opposition and the rise of extremist jihadist elements. This fact neither exonerates the regime for its crimes nor overshadows the fate of the refugees who have found themselves in this tragic situation. The Syrian people are entitled to freedom, democracy, and social justice, like all other peoples."<sup>17</sup>

- h. Hand in Hand with the Syrian Refugees: This Israeli initiative to provide assistance to the Syrian people sent clothing and sanitation accessories from Israel to Jordan in 2013 and conducted a campaign on Facebook.<sup>18</sup>
- i. Syrian Aid Committee: This initiative by Jewish and Arab Israeli activists took shape in early 2014 with the aim of collecting donations for children in the Syrian refugee camps administered and funded by Save the Children. The organization solicits donations via a designated website and the social networks.<sup>19</sup>
- j. Local initiatives: On a number of specific occasions, Israeli civilians and institutions have organized themselves to help wounded Syrians hospitalized in Israel through visits and the collection of items such as games, computers, and clothing.

Some of the non-state actors in Syria have regarded the Israeli and Jewish government and civilian humanitarian gestures – from the admission of wounded Syrians to Israel for treatment in Israeli hospitals, to the provision of medical equipment and food to Syrian refugees and displaced persons, to the solidarity protests held in Israel following the massacres in Syria – as actions that contribute to the reconstruction of the traditional attitude toward Israel and the shaping of a peace-seeking approach. Whereas the National Coalition has not viewed the humanitarian aid as a reason to change its official position toward Israel and has publicly characterized it as a cynical exploitation of the Syrian plight and a useless attempt to improve its image,<sup>20</sup> other actors have interpreted it as a formative political measure that goes beyond the humanitarian. The aid has significantly strengthened the belief – among the militias operating in southern Syria, Syrian civilian humanitarian organizations, and exiles operating independently – in the potential of cooperation between the Israeli and Syrian peoples in the present and the establishment of coexistence and peace in the future. The humanitarian measures have likewise served to develop unofficial channels and generate “humanitarian diplomacy,” which has helped break the ice between Israel and military and civilian Syrian actors inside Syria and abroad, most of whom are affiliated with the opposition. Israeli humanitarian aid has constituted a confidence-building measure with the ability to construct a civilian network of relationships for the day after the revolution.

A number of Syrian activists have expressed their admiration, both openly and in private conversations, at the decisiveness, consistency, and reliability of Israel’s provision of humanitarian aid. This aid has stood out in their

eyes as the antithesis of the acts of killing, destruction, and rape that are attributed to the Syrian regime. For example, during his visit to Ziv Medical Center in Safed, Kamal al-Labwani was impressed by the Israeli doctors' dedicated treatment of the Syrian wounded, and regarded the humanitarian gestures as evidence that non-government initiatives from both sides have the potential to advance an official policy and pave the way for a reality of social and economic peace that will impose itself on the leaderships. "The weapon of physicians" is Israel's most effective weapon, al-Labwani told Israeli security officials.<sup>21</sup>

From the perspective of a number of Syrian activists, the Israeli government's policy of humanitarian aid – manifested in the entry permits issued to wounded Syrians and further corroborated by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's February 2014 visit to a base where wounded Syrians were treated – has strengthened the integrative perception of Israel and Jewish Israelis as desired allies. For example, Abu 'Umar al-Hourani, the Free Syrian Army spokesman in Daraa, characterized Israel as a "friendly country" as a result of the successful medical treatment received by two members of his unit in Israel.<sup>22</sup> Other opposition members drew positive attention to Netanyahu's publicized visit of wounded Syrians as a gesture unmatched by the actions of Arab leaders. According to one opposition member, the Israeli humanitarian aid has enabled the Syrian people to refine its political consciousness formed by the hardships of oppression and pain, and learn which peoples and governments of the world stand by their side in times of hardship and which oppose them.<sup>23</sup> A Syrian activist in a humanitarian aid network who visited the Institute for National Security Studies characterized the Israeli aid as a first step in the long journey of bridging the mistrust between the sides, overcoming the gap between the traditional ingrained perceptions of Israel and the reality on the ground, and changing Israel's negative image in Syrian public opinion. According to the head of an Israeli humanitarian organization who requested anonymity, the humanitarian channel has enabled Syrians and Israelis "to discover one another," to overcome the stereotypes, and to find mutual humanity and a chance for partnership.<sup>24</sup>

Nonetheless, the impact of the Israeli measures on easing the deep humanitarian crisis in Syria remains minor, and its role in changing the Syrian public's attitude toward Israel has been limited. Evidence lies in the number of responses to the INSS questionnaire that reflect only superficial

knowledge of the Israeli aid and assign it no importance in the overall picture. The difficulty of taking full advantage of the benefits of the Israeli humanitarian measures in the informational realm stems in part from the contradiction between the need to convey the aid to beneficiaries in a discrete manner on the one hand, and the desire for substantial reverberations in the media that will give Israel credit and make it easier for Israeli organizations to mobilize significant resources for their future work, on the other. One possible escape from this dilemma lies in the visual branding of aid in a manner that would be ingrained in the consciousness of the beneficiary, to be revealed in the future, as well as use of unique channels of Israeli aid operating directly vis-à-vis beneficiaries in Syria that refrain from being assimilated into international channels of aid that are not associated with Israel.



## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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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.

## APPENDIX

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### **Syrian Activists on Israel's Role in the Crisis in Syria**

For the purpose of this study, the Institute for National Security Studies distributed a questionnaire in mid-2015 (directly and via intermediaries) to members of the Syrian opposition associated with different groups, most of whom operate outside of Syria, primarily in Turkey, and with some operating in Syria itself. The questionnaires included general questions on the crisis in Syria, the preferred ways to solve it, and the role that the individuals and their organizations seek to play, but they primarily addressed specific questions regarding Israel's role in the Syrian context. As agreed on with the respondents, full names are not disclosed, with identities given only through initials. The questionnaires do not constitute a representative sample of the Syrian activists. They do, however, offer a qualitative glimpse into individual perceptions, whose importance should be assessed in light of the personal profile, organizational affiliation, position, and influence of each respondent. By its very nature, the questionnaire suffers from significant limitations, as it presents the perceptions of only eleven activists who were willing to respond and whose answers were presumably influenced by the knowledge that they would be publicized. At the same time, the responses to the questionnaire are also suggestive of prevalent moods among Syrian activists – particularly those associated with moderate pragmatic groups – and demonstrate the points of agreement, the divisions, and the marked gaps in their approaches to relations with Israel.

#### **Personal Background**

Y. S., a 45 year-old Sunni who lives in Quneitra, is a military electrical engineer by training and a former officer in the Syrian army. He deserted

Assad's army in the course of the war and joined the Southern Front's Sayf ash-Sham Brigade, which has 4,700 fighters and is deployed in Damascus, Rif Dimashq, al-Zabadani, Quneitra, and Daraa. According to Y. S., the group espouses an Islamic ideology but operates on behalf of all Syrians, regardless of religious or sectarian affiliation. The group's goal is both to rebuild Syria as a unified state that accommodates all its ethnic groups, and to enable the Syrian people to elect its representatives democratically.

B. H. is a Sunni who was born in Aleppo in 1973, studied law at the University of Beirut, and before the war managed a company that specialized in planning events, exhibitions, and conventions. He holds a liberal worldview and is a member of the political committee of the Revolutionary Union for the Future of Syria, an organization that, by his account, has approximately 10,000 members and seeks to promote an ideology of openness and freedom among the Syrian people. During the revolution, he has been active in the military, social, political, and medical realms. He lives in Istanbul, where he is responsible for the foreign relations of the Istanbul office of the Revolutionary Union, which aims to increase coordination among the forces of the revolution.

E. A. A., born in 1976, is a Sunni from the city of al-Qamishli. One of the leaders of the Shammar tribe, he has a high school education and works independently. He believes that the liberal worldview holds the ideal solution for Syria. He is an active member of the Revolutionary Union for the Future of Syria in Amman, a founding member of the national association of Syria and the national bloc, and is currently serving as director of the political bureau of the Syrian Tribal Council. He aspires to help Syria find its place in the new world order as a democratic society that respects principles of human rights.

A. M. H., a Sunni from Rif Hama with a liberal worldview, was born in 1987, studied veterinary medicine in al-Latakia, and was one of the first people to take part in the anti-regime demonstrations in the city upon the outbreak of the revolution. After being involved in revolutionary activity in Sahel al-Ghab at the outset of the revolution, he left Syria for Turkey in late 2012 and now lives in Istanbul. In early 2013, he joined the Revolutionary Union for the Future of Syria, which, by his account, is a non-military political organization that seeks to play a positive role in the present Syrian reality and help build future Syrian security by maintaining relations with all the world powers.

T. M. N., a Sunni who was born in 1956, is a university graduate in civil engineering. Prior to the war, he worked in Syria and Saudi Arabia as a contractor for 34 years. He espouses a nationalist worldview and has been a member of the Arab Socialist Union for 45 years. During the war, he left his organization to work with a number of civil society political organizations that seek to play an influential role in advancing democracy in the present and influencing additional realms in the future. He currently lives in Cairo and, in the course of the revolution, has held a large number of positions, including representative of the local council of the city of Douma; founder of the Association of Freedom Fighters of Douma in Exile; founder of the coalition of the Freedom Fighters of the Syrian Governorates in Riyadh; founder of the Union of Syrian Engineers in Exile; general coordinator and founding member of the Syrian National Coalition; a founder of the Union of the Syrian Civilian National Committees for Preparation and Building; a member of the Supreme Council of the Syrian Revolution; and founder and leader of the Syrian Public Body for Refugees.

E. A. is a 47 year-old Sunni originally from Kafr Nabl in the Idlib Governorate who currently lives in Kuwait. E. A. has a university education and, prior to the revolution, worked as an English teacher. He was responsible for the strategic planning of the Syrian Rebels Front in the north and is currently responsible for the political activity of the Knights of Justice Brigade (Liwa Fursan al-Haqq), which operates under the auspices of the Free Syrian Army, and he is an active member of the Revolutionary Union for the Future of Syria. E. A. espouses a liberal worldview and is not an armed fighter but rather a publicist, responsible for planning the political vision of the organizations to which he belongs. This vision calls for a civil state and individual freedoms. By his account, his current organization seeks to help in the effort to overthrow Assad and, at the same time, survive against the terrorist factions. He intends to continue adhering to his principles and working for their realization in the future as well.

M., 56, is a university-educated independent journalist who believes in freedom and justice. He aspires to help build a free and humane media in the present and help rebuild Syrian society when the civil war comes to an end.

A. R. is a 34 year-old university graduate who worked as an information engineer before the war. Once a member of the Muslim Brotherhood with a senior military and organizational position in Rif Hamma, Syria, and in Istanbul, where he met with Western delegations, he subsequently left the

movement and, in his words, now holds a liberal worldview. He held a significant position in the revolution, primarily at its outset, and expects to hold a leading position in directing the political process once the fighting is over.

Prior to the revolution, M. N., a 43 year-old Sunni high school graduate majoring in literature, worked in real estate and served as a member of the Baath Party. After the onset of the revolution, he began to work from his home in Turkey to help topple the sectarian regime. In the future, he hopes to contribute to the Syrian economy and to the struggle against terrorism.

Prior to the war, Y. A., a 50 year-old Sunni with an academic education from the Syrian air force college, was a flight officer in the Syrian military and a member of the Baath Party. Today, he holds a liberal worldview and is active in the Free Syrian Army in Turkey. He is currently working to preserve the unity of Syria, including all the ethnic groups living in it, and in the future hopes to play a role in the reconstruction of the state based on principles of freedom and democracy.

S. Y. is a 28 year-old female Kurdish activist of Syrian origin living in Madrid who holds a liberal-nationalist worldview and describes herself as closely associated with the Syrian Kurdish Yekiti Party. Since 2006, she has lived primarily in Iraqi Kurdistan, where her family was forced to flee due to their opposition to the Assad regime. She holds a Bachelor's degree in architecture from the University of Sulaimaini in Kurdistan and a Master's degree in planning and urban design and planning from Cardiff University. She is currently a Ph.D. candidate in planning and urban design at the University of Alcalá in Madrid and engaged in research on city planning and economics. As a result of the crisis in Syria, she has taken part in activities that are humanitarian in character and has helped organize workshops and courses for Syrian activists. As long as the forces that are currently dominating the territory remain in place, however, she expects that neither she nor activists like her will play a more significant role in shaping the reality in Syria. With regard to the Yekiti Party, S. Y. has indicated that the party is working toward the establishment of a Kurdish autonomy either within the state or within a decentralized secular Syrian federation and may play a positive role in shaping Syria in accordance with its vision based on its broad influence on Kurdish public opinion. Still, she maintains that moderate forces such as the Yekiti Party, which represents the Kurdish public, find it difficult to contend with extremist forces – which seek to exclude them from the arena and rely

on broad external-regional support. The moderate forces thus call for more determined intervention by the international community on their behalf.

## Highlights of the Responses to the Questionnaire

### *1. What do you think should Syria look like the day after the revolution?*

- Y. S.: A unified state, of course, which accommodates all ethnic groups in Syria.
- B. H.: A unified state.
- E. A. A.: A small, unified state divided into governorates, each with an elected governing council that appoints the government. The major role of the council will be coordination and development of the governorate in accordance with the national policy determined by a democratic parliament working toward development of the economy, separation of the branches of government, development of society, and the provision of civil liberties.
- A. M. H.: A unified state.
- T. M. N.: A unified state.
- E. A.: A unified state.
- M.: A decentralized state (*dawla la markaziyya*), efficiently run as part of the geographical unit of the natural state of ash-Sham [the Levant, Greater Syria].
- A. R.: A unified state that ensures proportional representation and protects the rights and uniqueness of its minorities.
- M. N.: A unified state.
- Y. A.: A unified state.
- S. Y.: A state divided along sectarian, ethnic, and regional lines. In my opinion, the state should be divided according to sectarian or ethnic affiliation. The modern Syrian state was established as a result of international agreements signed after World War I and the defeat of the Ottoman Empire, which forcibly combined sects and ethnic groups that had waged bloody wars against one another under the Ottoman imperial regime, which, for its part, fomented disagreement and extremism among them. This policy created powerful enmity between these sects and ethnic

groups, and the modern Syrian state failed to accommodate all the groups in one homeland based on equal rights and obligations. Moreover, it also operated to a great extent to deepen the bitterness and create mistrust between them. Most of the groups harbored immense bitterness toward one another, but the dictatorship deterred them all from engaging in efforts against it. Now, due to the state of war and anarchy that currently exists in Syria, the initial manifestations of destructive civil war have started to emerge. For this reason, the attempt to reconnect these groups within one central state appears to be almost impossible, and if it is possible, it would be an undertaking that would last decades. Therefore, it would be best for each group to engage in the self-administration of its own region within a decentralized regime.

***2. What do you think of the role that Israel has played in the civil war in Syria thus far?***

- Y. S.: My opinion thus far is negative. We are hoping for broader involvement on the part of [Israel] to help the [Syrian] people, which is being eliminated on a daily basis, as a first step [toward the establishment of relations] between the states.
- B. H.: Positive. Israel helped treat our wounded in the southern region and provided humanitarian services within the framework of international and European organizations.
- E. A. A.: Extremely positive in the humanitarian realm, and in some instances, also in terms of political, moral, and military support.
- A. M. H.: Neutral.
- T. M. N.: Largely neutral.
- E. A.: Negative. It was clear from the outset that Israel supports the continued rule of the Assad regime, even at the expense of the establishment of an Alawite state. The green light [given to the Assad regime] was leaked during a conversation between a senior Israeli official and the Russian ambassador, ostensibly regarding the partition solution. This is extremely negative and widens the chasm between the Syrians and the Israeli people.<sup>1</sup>

- M.: Negative. The Israeli role has been negative in general, as Israel has stood beside the tyrannical regime against the Syrian revolution that has demanded freedom. Over the past four years, this position has had a severe impact on Israel's moral credit and has significantly decreased the chances of building peace in the future.
- A. R.: [The Israeli position has been] neutral, although as a revolutionary I do not like neutrality but rather prefer those who identify themselves with and support the revolution.
- M. N.: Negative, because it defends Bashar [al-Assad] in the international arena.
- Y. A.: Negative, because it keeps Bashar [al-Assad] in power.
- S. Y.: [The Israeli position has been] neutral. I believe that the position of the Israeli government is equidistant from the position of the opposition and the position of the regime. Although it has provided the moderate opposition with humanitarian aid, Israel's political role has remained neutral.

***3. In your assessment, what are Israel's interests in Syria, today and in the future?***

- Y. S.: Maintaining its security by preventing Iran, Hezbollah, and the extremists from achieving power and rule.
- B. H.: Full comprehensive peace in the region as a whole and change in the culture of the Syrian people, from the hatred toward Israel that was ingrained by the regime to cultivation of a generation that believes in the right of all people to live in security and tranquility in the region.
- E. A. A.: Peace and normalization based on mutual respect.
- A. M. H.: Peace, economics, and politics.
- T. M. N.: Lasting peace.
- E. A.: Peace, water, and oil.
- M.: Peace.

- A. R.: Israel's primary interest is to remove the spirit of hatred and enmity instilled in the hearts of Syrian citizens, and to build lasting peace with the Syrian people.
- M. N.: To maintain security vis-à-vis any new Syrian regime.
- Y. A.: To safeguard its borders and its security and to establish peace.
- S. Y.: I believe that Israel's most important interest is the establishment of a Syrian state that safeguards the security of its people and its neighbors, respects international laws and criteria, and conducts itself in accordance with them. Most important is that [the Syrian state] does not intervene in the affairs of its neighbors and prevents support of any terrorist groups.

***4. Have you heard about any Israeli military, civilian, or humanitarian activity during the war?***

- Y. S.: Yes, we noted Israeli attacks on posts of Assad's army, which pleased everyone.
- B. H.: Yes. It contributed to [humanitarian] aid operations in international organizations.
- E. A. A.: Yes. Israel and Israeli organizations took part in a number of military, civilian, and humanitarian operations in Syria, including the bombing of offensive and defensive positions of the Assad regime in a number of locations, and the provision of medical treatment and aid to wounded Syrians.
- A. M. H.: No, I have not heard of any.
- T. M. N.: Yes. Somewhat positive activity occurred in the provision of medical aid to wounded Syrians at the border between the countries.
- E. A.: Yes. Israel launched air attacks against army units belonging to the regime with ties to the terrorist [organization] Hezbollah. I hope this will continue until the liquidation of the terrorists, Assad and Hassan Nasrallah. I also know that Israel is treating wounded Syrians [that were injured] as a result of Assad's air attacks.

- M.: Yes, I have heard vague information, leaks of sorts, regarding an unofficial Israeli policy of the Israeli government regarding the revolution in Syria.
- A. R.: [Israel] carried out sporadic bombings of regime and Hezbollah positions and a number of humanitarian operations for the benefit of wounded Syrians. However, they were few and insufficient.
- M. N.: Yes. Bombings of Hezbollah positions, and in the humanitarian realm, the provision of medical treatment to wounded Syrians.
- Y. A.: Yes. The Israeli air force bombed positions of the Syrian regime and provided treatment to wounded Syrians at the Israeli border and in Israeli hospitals.
- S. Y.: Yes. I met a number of individuals working within Israeli civil society groups that extend elements of humanitarian aid to the opposition. As for military activity, Israel has carried out a number of significant air strikes against important military positions of the Syrian regime.

***5. Did you consider contacting or requesting aid from Israeli parties in the course of the war?***

- Y. S.: I did not consider requesting aid. The Israeli side should provide aid to the exiled Syrian people even in the absence of such a request and should open its gates to receive the wounded openly and unapologetically.
- B. H.: Yes. We are still considering it. We made contact [with Israeli parties] on behalf of the Revolutionary Union for the Future of Syria and Assembly Chairman Muhammad Adnan spoke with them.
- E. A. A.: Yes. [We considered requesting aid] to serve the Syrian people in the humanitarian realm, liberate it from the ideology inherited from the culture of the Assad regime, and prepare them for the next stage on a psychological and ideological level and in terms of morale.
- A. M. H.: Yes, humanitarian and military aid.
- T. M. N.: No, never.
- E. A.: No.

- M.: No.
- A. R.: Yes, but we are not familiar with channels of contact. The aim was to prevent clashes between the two countries in the future, and Israel will bear responsibility [for the failure] as a country preaching democracy and human freedom and protection. As for direct aid, as revolutionaries, we were and continue to be in need of all kinds of support, without exception.
- M. N.: Yes. Bombings of Hezbollah positions, and in the humanitarian realm, the provision of medical treatment to wounded Syrians.
- Y. A.: Yes. I call on Israel to clarify its position regarding the matter of the Syrian people.
- S. Y.: Yes, for humanitarian aid and for making contact with [Israel, which as] a neighboring country [must find] the situation in Syria relevant.

***6. Do you regard Israeli activity as supporting a specific side in the fighting in Syria?***

- Y. S.: [Israel's position] thus far is not clear.
- B. H.: No. Israel's open, sincere position regarding the revolution in Syria has not been clarified. We regard this as support of the regime. Therefore, we are calling on you to make an historic precedent by standing beside the Syrian revolution and helping it put an end to the regime.
- E. A. A.: Yes, the opposition.
- A. M. H.: No.
- T. M. N.: I don't think so.
- E. A.: Yes, the side of the regime.
- M.: Thus far, Israeli activity has reflected support of the regime.
- A. R.: No.
- M. N.: I am of the opinion that it serves the regime.
- Y. A.: It [Israel] tends toward the Syrian regime.
- S. Y.: No.

**7. Has the civil war in Syria influenced the prevalent view of Israel among your colleagues and acquaintances?**

- Y. S.: Every Israeli attack on Assad's positions results in a change in thinking among the members of the Syrian people who are longing for aid on a larger scale.
- B. H.: Thus far, my colleagues and acquaintances are waiting for a serious stand from Israel in support of political cooperation with us and with the world to topple the existing regime.
- E. A. A.: [The war] has had a positive impact, and they [the positions on Israel] continue to improve.
- A. M. H.: Most of my colleagues today regard Israel as a friendly state.
- T. M. N.: Israel fears the terrorism of [groups of] *takfir* [the jihadists], as do we.
- E. A.: Everyone believes that Israel is interested in preventing the fall of the Assad regime, which is behind the destruction underway in Syria.
- M.: At the outset of the revolution in Syria, most Syrians – even the extremists among them – tended to view Israel as a state that supports human rights. However, the Israeli government's position in favor of the continued rule of the dictatorial regime has stripped it of its reliability in this realm. Most Syrians regard Israel as bearing fundamental responsibility for maintaining Assad in power and protecting the vestiges of his regime by means of the Israeli lobby in Washington.
- A. R.: The war underway in Syria has served Israel by portraying it as an "innocent lamb" in comparison to the crimes of the regime and those behind it.
- M. N.: Many claim that Israel prefers the Syrian regime and does not want it to be overthrown.
- Y. A.: Israel is perceived as a party that possesses the ability to help the Syrian people in the war but is not doing so.
- S. Y.: The war has had an impact on the opinions of many Syrians. For the sake of its survival, the regime has attempted for decades to mislead people into thinking that Israel is lying in wait of them, conspiring against Syria, and attempting to harm the Syrian

people in a variety of ways. However, after the outbreak of the revolution and the regime's use of extremely harsh means to fight its opponents and work with all possible parties against its own people, many have come to recognize the hypocrisy of the regime and doubt the credibility of its propaganda against Israel. At the same time, some of the Islamist and radical Arab nationalist forces continue to mislead the people by telling them that Israel is protecting the Assad regime [and preventing its] fall.

***8. What kind of short term help could Israel provide to bring about an end to the war in Syria?***

- Y. S.: Political, social, humanitarian, and military.
- B. H.: Taking a clear stand beside the Syrian people and expressing political support for its just claims against the regime.
- E. A. A.: Providing assistance to the Syrian people through the creation of a no-fly zone and the provision of high quality weapons and anti-aircraft [weapons].
- A. M. H.: Extending political backing to the opposition and withdrawing legitimacy from the regime.
- T. M. N.: Calling on its allies to support democratic forces in Syria in light of their intellectual openness and desire to live in comfort and in peace.
- E. A.: If Israel were to destroy the Iranian nuclear project, then the Iranian regime, the Iraqi regime, and the Assad regime would all collapse overnight.
- M.: Israel can help end the war in Syria by adopting an effective policy supporting the building of peace in the state of ash-Sham in its natural borders, and by openly supporting the establishment of a system of justice and peace in the region; by withdrawing all suggested or manifest support for the continued rule of the dictatorial regimes that are passed down through inheritance in the region; and by using the Israeli lobby in Washington to support a policy of building just and democratic regimes that strive for peace and the welfare of the region.

- M. N.: Pressuring the American government and persuading it to topple the Assad regime.
- Y. A.: Using all military means, and political means via international forums.
- S. Y.: I believe that ending the war is not a simple undertaking. In light of the deep involvement of regional forces in the war, Israel alone cannot bring about an end to the war. Based on its international connections, it may be able to pressure the international community to find a solution to the crisis, which has started to impact on the entire region.

***9. Do you support peace between Syria and Israel after the war?***

- Y. S.: Yes, I support it. If and when Israel helps the Syrian people against Assad, I believe that extremely widespread support for peace with [Israel] would emerge. The Syrian people will not forget those who stood by its side and helped it.
- B. H.: Yes, we support it and aspire to fulfill all the obligations involved in peace.
- E. A. A.: Peace with Israel is an essential necessity for the sake of both peoples who dream of peace, liberty, and welfare.
- A. M. H.: Yes, I support peace between Syria and Israel after the war, as states can only be built by peace.
- T. M. N.: Yes, because our enmity has to do primarily with occupied land that will be returned through negotiation, [after which] peace will prevail.
- E. A.: Yes, I support the establishment of equal relations between the two countries, which will engage in economic relations and maintain deep friendship.
- M.: Yes. Peace in the region as a whole is an essential need for everyone and is what will protect everyone.
- A. R.: Yes, on the condition that it is based on mutual respect and shared interests.
- M. N.: Yes. We have had enough wars, which do nothing but destroy the state.

Y. A.: Yes – for regional stability, peace between the countries and the peoples, and an end to the conflicts and wars.

S. Y.: Yes, I support it. As I noted, the current enmity toward Israel is the product of [an industry] of illusions of the Syrian regime. Therefore, an important step that the Syrian state can implement in the future is to initiate a peace process with Israel and commit to agreements and treaties that will deepen the trust between it and its neighbors, including Israel.

***10. How do you view the possibility of normalization of relations with Israel in the future, at the end of the civil war?***

Y. S.: It is possible, depending on Israel's attitude toward the current Syrian problem.

B. H.: We are open to full and comprehensive normalization.

A. M. H.: Relations will be diplomatic and economic in nature.

T. M. N.: It will require [the birth of] a new generation, as we still remember the wars, but the thinking has been freed up and has turned toward the fulfillment of and devotion to common public interests.

E. A.: If Syria is divided, Israel will enjoy the friendship of the “Alawite state” and be subject to the enmity of all others.

M.: Reconstruction of the political system of the states of ash-Sham as a geographic regional federation will, in the future, contribute to the building of peace that ensures justice, security, and welfare for all.

A. R.: The ball is in Israel's court. No popular Syrian opposition is expected if the Israeli side conducts itself with sincerity.

M. N.: [This will be possible] by the demonstration of good intentions between the two peoples and two countries and the equal treatment of both sides.

Y. A.: [This will be possible] by recognizing the rights of the other – by returning the land of each side, the demarcation of borders, and normalization on the official and the popular level.

S. Y.: I believe that relations can definitely be normalized with Israel, on the condition that the future regime in Syria is secular and

democratic and removed from certain nationalist and religious ideologies. In such a situation, no party will be able to impose its opinion or shape foreign relations in an exclusive manner. However, if Islamists or nationalist extremists come into power, it will be much more difficult.

***11. Rank from 1-10 the impact of the following obstacles on progress in Syrian-Israeli relations: (a) Islamist ideologies that rule out the recognition of Israel (b) nationalist ideologies that rule out the recognition of Israel (c) absence of a solution to the Palestinian problem (d) another obstacle.***

- T. M. N.: The main obstacle is the restoration of Syrian land, followed by an acceptable solution to the Palestinian problem.
- E. A.: Islamist ideologies that rule out the recognition of Israel – 10  
Nationalist ideology that rules out recognition of Israel – 4  
Absence of a solution to the Palestinian problem – 5  
Other – The partition of Syria will make the establishment of relations with Israel impossible for all parties except Assad and the Kurds – 10
- M.: Another obstacle – Israel's overall policy remains a major obstacle to cooperation. By siding with the dictatorial regimes in the region, it plays a major role in creating obstacles to peace and helping generate extremism and the development of religious and nationalist counter-ideologies. The absence of a just solution to the Palestinian problem fuels most manifestations of extremism.
- A. R.: Islamist ideologies that rule out the recognition of Israel – 3  
Nationalist ideologies that rule out the recognition of Israel – 1  
Absence of a solution to the Palestinian problem – 5
- M. N.: Islamist ideologies that rule out the recognition of Israel – 10  
Nationalist ideologies that rule out the recognition of Israel – 4  
Absence of a settlement to the Palestinian problem – 2  
Other – Vestiges of the Assad regime are the most serious obstacle.

- Y. A.:        Islamist ideologies that rule out the recognition of Israel – 10  
               Nationalist ideologies that rule out the recognition of Israel – 5  
               Absence of a solution to the Palestinian problem – 1  
               Other – The Assad regime is the major obstacle.
- S. Y.:        Islamist ideologies that rule out the recognition of Israel – 8  
               Nationalist ideologies that rule out the recognition of Israel – 8  
               Absence of a solution to the Palestinian problem – 5

***12. How, in your opinion, can these obstacles be overcome?***

- Y. S.:        We must establish broad cooperation because we have a mutual enemy: Iran. We must open the doors wide for the provision of [Israeli] aid in the medical, humanitarian, and military realms.
- B. H.:        Through dialogue, as dialogue between the sides will lead to solution of the most difficult problems. Sitting down with any person or state for a dialogue means full recognition of the other side.
- A. M. H.:    Through joint action for peace among the Israeli and Syrian peoples, building good relations between the Israeli and Syrian peoples, the entry of Israeli companies into Syria, and resolution of the Palestinian problem.
- T. M. N.:    We are unable to understand how 21 years of negotiations have failed to yield a solution to the [the Syrian and Palestinian territorial] problem. The reason is that there is no sincere desire. Our fear is that the other side [Israel] is conducting negotiations for the sake of negotiations, and the problem is left pending. As for mutual interests and peace, it is also necessary to deal with the psychology and the general mood of the Syrian people. If we are convinced of the sincere intention of the other side, and if it helps put an end to our internal problems, we will be among those calling for peace between the peoples, in which we have a fundamental interest.
- E. A.:        First, Israel must officially declare that the Assad regime is a criminal and Nazi regime that must be genuinely and entirely done away with, and not simply for the sake of appearance.

Second, it must create a Palestinian state and divide Jerusalem in a just manner.

M.: The future of the Jews in the countries of ash-Sham involves strategies of true and lasting peace based on the integration of Jews into the societies of the countries of ash-Sham. Israeli society can serve as a pioneering model, as part of internalization of the reality in the coming century. The choice of peace for all those living in the states of ash-Sham is a choice that will ensure the secure future of the Jews, as well as Muslims, Christians, and other ethnic, racial, religious, and sectarian groups.

It will require the practical adoption of an open strategy of peace based on justice, security, prosperity, and welfare. Unfortunately, Israel still employs the strategy of an entity subordinate to Western economic power and claims a monopoly over representation of the Western political system of morals and principles in the countries of ash-Sham, without effectively fulfilling a pioneering role of a disseminator of enlightenment. This makes Israel an entity that is not working to integrate itself as a force that is here to stay but rather using power as a means to guarantee its survival among the lands of ash-Sham. This is a serious danger for the Jews, and more so for the other religious and ethnic elements in the lands of ash-Sham.

A. R.: [The obstacles can be overcome] by means of serious dialogue based on shared interests, concern for the future security of the two countries and their peoples, the honoring of international agreements, non-intervention in internal affairs, and action in accordance with the principle of good neighborly relations.

M. N.: This will require toppling the Assad regime and dialogue among all parts of the Syrian people with the aim of formulating a unified position regarding peace with Israel.

Y. A.: Initiating an open, official dialogue with Israel before and after the overthrow of the Assad regime.

S. Y.: I believe that Syrian forces will have difficulty cooperating with Israel as long as they remain vague in their proposals regarding the future regime in Syria and as long as most opposition frameworks (primarily the Arab ones) continue to espouse

Islamist or nationalist ideologies. This makes cooperation difficult not only with Israel but with the rest of the international community. Therefore, cooperation will [require the Syrian forces] to reassure Israel by stressing that they pose no threat to its security and declaring their commitment to international treaties and conventions.

In addition, the Syrian forces must understand that the Palestinian problem is a Palestinian-Israeli matter, and that only the two involved parties have the right to decide how to solve it. As for the Israeli side, I believe that Israel must invest greater efforts in supporting the moderate Syrian forces, which have been pushed to the sidelines as a result of the deep regional involvement in the war. This situation has helped, and continues to help extremist groups and elements impose themselves on the arena and persecute the moderate forces.

## NOTES

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### *Notes to Chapter 1, The Rise of the Non-State Actors in Syria: Regional and Global Perspectives*

- 1 For a definition of the concept of “non-state actors” see Gustaf Geeraerts, “Analyzing Non-State Actors in World Politics,” *Pole Paper Series* 1, no. 4 (October 1995), <http://poli.vub.ac.be/publi/pole-papers/pole0104.htm>. According to realists, actors in world politics possess three attributes: sovereignty, state recognition, and control of territory and population. From this perspective, all other entities within the international system cannot be autonomous and distinct actors because they do not possess these characteristics. Other definitions relate to non-state actors as all actors operating on the international level that are not states. A different definition casts non-state actors as actors that are independent of the central government and its sources of funding, that emerge from civil society and the economic market, and that are situated outside the sphere of state control or direction, and whose activities have political impact on either the state or international institutions, regardless of whether this is their direct goal or a byproduct of it. The United States National Intelligence Council (NIC) has defined non-state actors as “non-sovereign entities that exercise significant economic, political, or social power and influence at a national, and in some cases international, level,” and has distinguished among four major types of non-state actors:
  - (a) Multinational Corporations (MNCs) – Organizations engaged in the production and delivery of goods and services from one country to another. MNCs are typically private companies based in one country that maintain secondary offices in other countries.
  - (b) Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) – Independently run private organizations, volunteer organizations, non-profit organizations, and so on. The common denominator of NGOs is their lack of dependence on the government, on major corporations, and on other types of external sources of influence.
  - (c) Super-Powered Individuals – Persons with political, economic, intellectual, and cultural influence in the international arena. This category includes industrialists, wealthy individuals, media figures, celebrities, and religious and terrorist leaders.
  - (d) Inter-Government Organizations (IGOs) – Actors with formal state ties that are defined as inter-government entities, were established at the initiative of

two or more states, and conduct political interaction (such as the UN). On this subject, see Carmit Valensi, "Exceeding the State: The Emergence of Hybrid Actors – Hamas, Hezbollah, and FARC," Ph.D. dissertation, Tel Aviv University, 2015 (Hebrew).

- 2 Eugene L. Rogan, "The Emergence of the Middle East into the Modern State System," in *International Relations of the Middle East*, ed. Louise Fawcett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 18-19; and Raymond Hinnenusch, "The Politics of Identity in Middle East International Relation," in *International Relations of the Middle East*, pp. 153-55. Non-state actors raise doubts regarding the traditional concepts of international relations. By their very nature, they lack the traditional resources possessed by the state. For example, they lack recognized sovereignty over territory, including all the privileges this entails, such as state legitimacy and the ability to enact laws or sign agreements with international force. Most also lack a legitimate means of suppression such as an army or a police force. In addition, whereas most actors of this kind pursue their interests through persuasion within international state frameworks, others challenge these frameworks and attempt to impose a new order through force and coercion. Some non-state actors serve as proxies of states or of other non-state actors. In some instances, they disregard international standards and accepted rules of play, and in other instances they try to fit into the international state political system at some stage of their development in order to win legitimacy, as in the case of Hezbollah and Hamas. Another type of non-state actor includes agents of informal diplomacy that take part in interactions situated outside the realm of traditional international relations in a manner that may result in change to the concept of the "legitimate actor." Examples of this dynamic include the involvement of international and local organizations in Track II relations and dialogues with states and organizations at conventions and conferences in a manner that provides them with the ability to influence other actors in the international arena. See Shamima Ahmed and David Potter, *NGOs in International Politics* (Boulder and London: Kumarian Press, 2006), pp. 14-15, 67-70, 242-43.
- 3 Mark Doing, "The Twilight of Sykes-Picot," *National Interest*, January 16, 2014, <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/the-twilight-sykes-picot-9716>.
- 4 George Friedman, "A Net Assessment of the Middle East," *Geopolitical Weekly*, June 9, 2015, [www.stratfor.com/weekly/net-assessment-middle-east](http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/net-assessment-middle-east).
- 5 Iman Rajab, "The New Actors: The Types and Roles of non-State Actors in the Stages of Transition," *al Siyassa al-Dawliya*, April 1, 2013 (Arabic).
- 6 Violent non-state actors are defined as organizations that engage in illegal violence – i.e., the use of force in a manner that is not accepted by the state – in order to achieve its goals, and in doing so challenge the state's monopoly over the legitimate use of force. The research-based literature distinguishes between different types of violent actors, including: terrorist groups, crime organizations, militias, freedom fighters, pirates, and guerilla groups. The Federation of American Scientists (FAS) defines violent non-state actors, or in its terminology "para-state entities," as actors

that threaten the state's use of its monopoly over the means of force in a defined territory, and identifies different kinds of violent non-state actors, including the actors discussed in this study. Violent non-state actors can be distinguished from state actors by their lack of state legitimacy to use collective violence. They do not enjoy the authority of the state system, which possesses a monopoly over the means of coercion. These actors use collective force to achieve shared goals. The attitude toward state entities harbored by violent non-state actors and armed groups is contingent upon context and the arena in question. Although in many cases they threaten the state, they sometimes also integrate into state institutions or fight one another without state involvement or control. These actors threaten national and international security in that they challenge the state's monopoly on the use of means of force, usually in a defined territory. Armed groups typically operate in crisis-ridden states that have difficulty providing public services, including security within their territories, as demonstrated in Afghanistan, Colombia, Sudan, Lebanon, and Sri Lanka. In some cases, a government administration that provides basic public services in major cities is less effective in the periphery. In such regions, the regime may "share" its sovereignty with violent non-state actors. This phenomenon has been referred to as "fragile sovereignty," stemming from the friction and interface that is characteristic of the relationship between the state and the violent non-state actors in such contexts. The state's lack of complete control in such areas allows the penetration of such actors. See Valensi, "Exceeding the State: The Emergence of Hybrid Actors."

- 7 There are conflicting estimates regarding the number of Syrians killed since the beginning of the Syrian crisis. The United Nations announced that it ceased counting the dead in January 2014 due to its inability to follow the information. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights published an assessment in April 2015 that puts the number of Syrians killed since March 2011 at 310,000. For information on this subject, see [www.usaid.gov/crisis/syria](http://www.usaid.gov/crisis/syria).
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- 9 Agence France Presse, "Syrian Army Fatigued, Admits Bashar Assad," *Arab News*, July 27, 2015, [www.arabnews.com/middle-east/news/781981](http://www.arabnews.com/middle-east/news/781981).
- 10 Elizabeth Tsurkov, "Syrian Civil War: Waiting for a Tiebreaker," Molad: Center for the Renewal of Israeli Democracy, June 18, 2015, <http://www.molad.org/en/articles/Syria-Tiebreaker>.
- 11 For example, see Joyce Karam, "The Alawite Declaration: Assad's Firewall Showing Cracks," *al-Arabiya*, April 8, 2016, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/views/news/middle-east/2016/04/05/The-Alawite-Declaration-Assad-s-firewall-showing-cracks-.html>.

- 12 Eyal Zisser, "Still Nothing New in Syria," *Tel Aviv Notes* 9, no. 14, August 10, 2015, <http://www.dayan.org/tel-aviv-notes-vol-9-no-14-august-10-2015>.
- 13 Christopher M. Blanchard et al., "The 'Islamic State' Crisis and U.S. Policy," Congressional Research Service, May 2015, pp. 14-15, 21-22, 26, 31-33.
- 14 Udi Dekel, "Syria: Time to Reformulate the Rules of the Game," *INSS Insight* No. 750, September 30, 2015, <http://www.inss.org.il/index.aspx?id=4538&articleid=10695>; Udi Dekel and Zvi Magen, "Russian Involvement in Syria: What has Changed, and the Significance for Israel," *INSS Insight* No. 752, October 7, 2015, <http://www.inss.org.il/index.aspx?id=4538&articleid=10699>.
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### *Notes to Chapter 2, Mapping the Non-State Actors in Syria and their Attitudes toward Israel*

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*Notes to Chapter 3, Israel and the Actors in Syria: The Toolbox and the Rules of the Game*

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- 24 See note 14 of this chapter.

### *Notes to Appendix, Syrian Activists on Israel's Role in the Crisis in Syria*

- 1 This is apparently a reference to the meeting discussed in the following link, which makes reference to statements ostensibly made in a similar spirit during a conversation between the Russian ambassador in Tel Aviv and an Israeli colleague: "The Russian Ambassador in Tel Aviv in a Conversation Leaked on YouTube," *al-Mandasa al-Suriya*, February 28, 2012, <http://the-syrian.com/archives/69361> (Arabic).

## INSS Memoranda, September 2014–Present

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- No. 156, August 2016, Udi Dekel, Nir Boms, and Ofir Winter, *Syria's New Map and New Actors: Challenges and Opportunities for Israel*.
- No. 155, June 2016, Emily B. Landau and Anat Kurz, eds., *Arms Control and Strategic Stability in the Middle East and Europe*.
- No. 154, June 2016, Nizan Feldman, *In the Shadow of Delegitimization: Israel's Sensitivity to Economic Sanctions* [Hebrew].
- No. 153, March 2016, Gabi Siboni and Ofer Assaf, *Guidelines for a National Cyber Strategy*.
- No. 152, March 2016, Dan Weinstock and Meir Elran, *Securing the Electrical System in Israel: Proposing a Grand Strategy* [Hebrew].
- No. 151, December 2015, Udi Dekel, Nir Boms, and Ofir Winter, *Syria: New Map, New Actors – Challenges and Opportunities for Israel* [Hebrew].
- No. 150, October 2015, Arik Rudnitzky, *Arab Citizens of Israel Early in the Twenty-First Century*.
- No. 149, October 2015, Gabi Siboni and Ofer Assaf, *Guidelines for a National Cyber Strategy* [Hebrew].
- No. 148, September 2015, Meir Elran and Gabi Sheffer, eds., *Military Service in Israel: Challenges and Ramifications* [Hebrew].
- No. 147, June 2015, Zvi Magen and Tatyana Karasova, eds., *Russian and Israeli Outlooks on Current Developments in the Middle East*.
- No. 146, April 2015, Shmuel Even, *The Cost of Defense in Israel: Defense Expenditures and Recommendations for Drafting the Defense Budget* [Hebrew].
- No. 145, December 2014, Yoav Zacks and Liran Antebi, eds., *The Use of Unmanned Military Vehicles in 2033: National Policy Recommendations Based on Technology Forecasting Expert Assessments* [Hebrew].
- No. 144, November 2014, Oded Eran, Dan Vardi, and Itamar Cohen, *Political Feasibility of Israeli Natural Gas Exports to Turkey*.
- No. 143, November 2014, Azriel Bermant, *The Russian and Iranian Missile Threats: Implications for NATO Missile Defense*.
- No. 142, September 2014, Emily B. Landau and Anat Kurz, eds., *The Interim Deal on the Iranian Nuclear Program: Toward a Comprehensive Solution?*
- No. 141, September 2014, Emily B. Landau and Anat Kurz, eds., *The Interim Deal on the Iranian Nuclear Program: Toward a Comprehensive Solution?* [Hebrew].