The Crisis in Syria: Threats and Opportunities for Israel

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In March 2011, the "Spring of Arab Nations" that in previous months had visited other states throughout the Middle East arrived in Syria. The demonstrations that began in the city of Daraa in the south and in several northern coastal cities soon spread to all parts of Syria, eventually reaching the large cities of Damascus and Aleppo.

The Syrian regime failed in its attempts to put down or even to contain the uprising, which continued to spread and take deeper root among large segments of Syrian society throughout the country. Nevertheless, over a long period the regime's opponents were hard pressed to close ranks and form a unified opposition movement with an agreed-upon, effective leadership that would present an alternative to the incumbent regime. Thus, despite the intensity of the fire that has swept through Syria, the regime thus far remains intact, and even continues to maintain its unity and hold among its traditional power bases within Syrian society (members of religious and ethnic minorities, and the middle and upper classes in the big cities).

The result was that Syria became mired in a violent, bloody struggle that has seen no resolution. In face of this conflict, the Syrian social fabric began to break up into its basic components: communal groups, tribes, and clans. Control by the regime, and especially by the security apparatuses that had restrained Syria with a tight fist for four decades, was replaced by chaos and anarchy that overcame broad regions of the country. Rather quickly, sectarian, regional, and social tensions – which until then were

contained and subdued – rose to the surface, and Syria found itself thrown into a civil war. Even more problematic, it turned into a hub for young jihadist volunteers converging from all over the Arab and Muslim world to fight the "heretical" Alawite regime in Damascus.

The uprising in Syria heralded the end of a long period where the country, under the leadership of the Assad dynasty, demonstrated stability and power, and thereby was able to play an active, even central role in its immediate environs – in Lebanon, vis-à-vis Israel, and in the Palestinian and Iraqi arenas. Syria suddenly found itself cast into a reality of instability and uncertainty, which translated into a renewed struggle for Syria – both an internal struggle for control over the country, and an effort by external regional forces to wield influence, led on the one hand by Iran and Hizbollah, and on the other hand by the Arab and Sunni axes that include moderate states such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey. Such a situation meant a return for Syria to its first decades, which were characterized by diplomatic weakness, political instability, frequent governmental upheavals, and most of all, foreign involvement in its affairs.

The reality that has engulfed Syria since the outbreak of the uprising against Bashar al-Assad's regime presents a host of complex dilemmas for Israel. Jerusalem may have seen the Syrian regime as hostile, if not dangerous, due to its membership in the axis of evil, along with Iran, Hizbollah, and Hamas. Nonetheless, the same regime made sure to maintain total quiet along the shared border in the Golan Heights, and even displayed restraint in refraining from any reaction to Israeli moves against it, e.g., the bombing of the Syrian nuclear reactor in September 2007 attributed to Israel. Such restraint prevented a reaction that could have led to deterioration between the countries ending in direct conflict, if not an all-out war. True, the fall of Bashar's regime could deal a severe blow to Iran and Hizbollah, but at the same time, it could enable al-Qaeda-inspired terror elements to establish themselves along the Syria-Israel border in the Golan Heights, turning the region into a mirror of the Sinai Peninsula, a region lacking centralized control that serves as a hotbed for terror organizations. In addition, Israel is concerned about the flow of advanced Syrian weapons, even nonconventional ones, into the hands of Hizbollah and other terror groups, should the governmental system in Syria collapse.

The purpose of this article is to present a picture of the Syrian uprising from its first year, as well as an examination of the risks and opportunities it presents for Israel.

Israel and the Struggle for Syria

The history of the Syrian state, from its earliest days and certainly since it gained independence in April 1946, has been marked by prolonged struggles regarding its identity, direction, control, and even the fact of its existence. The roots of this struggle, which academic literature has labeled the "struggle for Syria,"[1] were found in large measure in the sources of Syria's internal and external weakness, including the weakness of the institution of the state, which made it difficult for Syria's leaders to establish and maintain a central government capable of enforcing its authority over Syria's citizens; a deep divide in Syrian society along communal, religious, regional, socio-economic, and even ideological grounds; a growing gap between the urban centers and the rural and peripheral regions; and more.

This reality led all Syrian regimes to focus on domestic Syrian issues, thus denying them the ability to play a central role on the regional scene, including the conflict with Israel. However, the rise to power of the Baath party in March 1963 brought somewhat of a change in this situation, as Damascus' radical policy led to escalation on the Israel-Syria border that eventually deteriorated into a full regional conflict, the Six Day War of June 1967.[2] Nevertheless, both before and during the war, decision makers in Israel did not perceive Syria as a military threat – such as that presented by Egypt – and at most related to it, in the words of then-Defense Minister Moshe Dayan, as a "nuisance."[3]

The rise to power of Hafez al-Assad in Damascus in November 1970 effected a fundamental change in the Syrian reality, and ostensibly brought the "struggle for Syria" to its conclusion. Assad provided Syria with the political stability it had never known, and was able to turn Syria into a strong regional power, casting its shadow over its environs.[4] Under Assad, Syria turned from a passive, weak state into a central actor in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Nevertheless, except for the Yom Kippur war, which was a joint Egyptian-Syrian initiative to attack Israel, Damascus has made sure – perhaps as a lesson learned from the war of October 1973 – not

to initiate or even to be dragged into a direct military conflict with Israel, and to maintain absolute quiet along the Golan Heights front. Even the conflict between the two nations in Lebanon in June 1982 did not result from a Syrian initiative; rather, it was Israel that launched this conflict out of a desire to push Syria out of Lebanon. Syria at the time avoided any confrontation with Israel, and made use of proxies – Palestinian and Lebanese organizations – to further its interests with attacks against Israel in the Palestinian and Lebanese arenas.[5]

In the 1980s, in the wake of what became known as the First Lebanon War – in which the IDF attacked Syrian forces in Lebanon – Assad's Syria adopted a policy of strategic balance whose purpose was to turn the Syrian military, with Soviet aid, into a powerful adversary equal to the IDF.[6] However, the collapse of the Soviet Union beginning in the late 1980s led to the abandonment of this strategy. Moreover, Hafez al-Assad chose to join the Arab-Israeli peace process that was launched in the early 1990s, and began conducting direct negotiations with Israeli representatives with the goal of reaching a peace agreement. Nevertheless, Assad's readiness to reach an agreement with Israel was limited, as he, as well as Israel, presented red lines that ultimately failed the attempt to reach a peace agreement.[7]

Upon Hafez al-Assad's death in June 2000, his son Bashar rose to power, which raised doubts among many in Syria and abroad regarding his ability to fill the large shoes of his father. Over the years, however, it appears that Bashar has managed to consolidate his position and his regime, both within Syria and abroad.[8] Overall, Bashar continued to follow his father's policies regarding Israel, albeit with noticeably less caution and sans the good judgment evinced by his father. He continued to declare his commitment to the peace process with Israel, and was even willing to engage in contacts regarding peace, such as those with the Olmert government in early 2008.[9] He also made sure to avoid direct conflict with Israel, and continued to maintain quiet along the shared border in the Golan Heights. At the same time, he greatly expanded his ties with Iran as well as with Hizbollah, which he armed with advanced weapons, some of Syrian manufacture. His decision to construct a nuclear reactor in Dir al-Zur in northern Syria with North Korean assistance likewise did not suggest political maturity.

Nevertheless, after Israel's alleged destruction of the reactor in September 2007, Bashar refrained from retaliating against Israel.[10]

The Decade of Bashar (2000-2010)

In late 2010, Bashar's al-Assad's regime seemed stronger and more stable than ever. A decade after succeeding his father, Bashar was perceived as someone who was able to consolidate his power and assert his authority over the Syrian governmental system, especially over the party apparatuses, governing bodies, and the military and security services. In addition, he succeeded in advancing a series of economic moves, limited in scope but with a cumulative effect of slightly opening the Syrian economy to the broader world, and encouraging the activity of the private sector at the expense of the public sector controlled by the government and the Baath party. These moves enabled him to win the support of the middle class and the Sunni economic elite in the big cities, especially Damascus and Aleppo.[11]

Bashar recorded his greatest success, however, as had his father, in foreign policy. Since he rose to the helm, Bashar has consistently displayed stubbornness toward the US and has worked to upset Washington's moves and plans in the region. He positioned himself as the head of the radical camp in the Arab world, as a friend of Iran, and as a central and active partner with Hizbollah and Hamas in the anti-Israel and anti-American axis. At first this seemed a rash, dangerous, and even suicidal policy for Bashar and his regime, and indeed, the administration of George W. Bush hurried to wage an open campaign against Syria. The President forced Syria out of Lebanon, isolated it internationally, and made no secret of his hope for regime change in Damascus. These developments probably reinforced Bashar's faith, or more precisely his fear, that Syria under his leadership faced an existential threat to its stability and independence from the US administration.[12]

But Bashar is the one that emerged with the upper hand in this conflict, primarily because the US lacked determination, willpower, and perhaps even practical ability to act against Syria and bring about the downfall of the regime. Little wonder, then, that toward the end of the first decade of Bashar's rule Syria experienced a significant improvement in its regional

and international standing. Damascus succeeded in freeing itself of the isolation forced upon it by the Bush administration, and returned to play a regional role in the Lebanese, Palestinian, and even Iraqi arenas.

Under the leadership of Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, Israel – already by the beginning of 2008 – was the first to disobey Washington and renew the Israeli-Syrian peace talks, and following Israel's lead, the countries of Europe hurried to warm their relations with Damascus. Throughout that time, Turkey and Syria continued to work at nurturing and tightening their relations into an intimate alliance based on a deep personal friendship that formed between Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and President Assad. An improvement was also seen in Syria's relations with Saudi Arabia, as well as with other Arab states in the Gulf and in North Africa. With the inauguration of Barack Obama as US president in January 2009, the American campaign against the Syrian regime was in effect replaced by an American effort, though ultimately unsuccessful, to turn over a new leaf in US-Syria relations.[13]

Over a prolonged period, and certainly until the outbreak of the wave of Arab uprisings in early 2011, the prevalent view, even among Syrians who did not hide their distaste for Bashar's regime, was that for now there was no alternative. However, all of this was to change quite quickly.

The Arab Spring Comes to Syria: The Roots of the Protest

In December 2010, the "Arab Spring" broke out, first in Tunisia and afterward in Egypt, Libya, and Yemen. In the first months of the upheaval, Syria remained a bystander to events, and it appeared that the wave of Arab revolutions would pass it by.

And indeed, in late January 2011, a few days before the fall of Mubarak but when it was already clear that the Egyptian regime's days were numbered, the Syrian President gave an interview to the *Wall Street Journal* and related to the seminal events in Tunis and Egypt. With self-confidence bordering on arrogance (which soon proved baseless), Bashar calmed his concerned interviewers, insisting that Syria is not Egypt. He then explained why the earthquake that struck the Arab world would bypass Syria: "Egypt has been supported financially by the United States, while we are under embargo by most countries of the world…We do not have many of the

basic needs for the people. Despite all that, the people do not go into an uprising. So it is not only about the needs and not only about the reform. It is about the ideology, the beliefs and the cause that you have."[14]

Once the lot in Cairo was cast, the Syrian media, which during the crisis in Egypt exercised restraint and took a cautious line, hurried to echo their President, and went a step further in blaming the fall of Husni Mubarak's regime on its commitment to the peace agreement with Israel, as if what brought the masses to the streets was the question of ties with Israel. Thus, argued the Syrian media, Syria's commitment to the resistance camp would ensure Bashar al-Assad's power forever. For example, the regime mouthpiece *Tishrin* wrote on March 13, 2011 that "the Egyptian nation removed the 'Camp David Regime' from power, a regime that had stolen the bread from the people."[15]

However, Bashar al-Assad was to find out soon enough that the conflict with Israel had ceased occupying a central place among Arab public opinion, and that is was no longer what moved the Arab street as it had in the past or even during the first decade of the new millennium – in the shadow of the Palestinian intifada, the Second Lebanon War in 2006, and Operation Cast Lead in 2009. Upon the conclusion of Friday prayers in the mosques on March 18, 2011, demonstrations began in a number of cities in northern and central Syria, including Homs, Aleppo, and Banias. A large demonstration in Daraa in the south included several thousand people and grew quickly out of control, with the demonstrators attacking and setting fire to government and public buildings. In confrontations with the Syrian security forces, two demonstrators were killed, and during their funerals the following day three more people were killed.[16] Since then, Syria has known no quiet.

From Protest to Revolt

As opposed to other Arab countries such as Tunisia or Egypt, where the battle was decided immediately after the outbreak of the first demonstrations in the streets of Tunis and Cairo, and in contrast with Libya or Yemen, where the fire spread rapidly and took hold throughout the country, in Syria the process was slow and gradual, with ups and downs, immersing the country in a long, winding, blood-soaked struggle. Indeed, it is difficult to point to

any one dramatic event that heralded a turning point in the Syrian uprising, or even a shift from one phase to the next. This was a prolonged sinking of Syria into a quagmire whereby sporadic demonstrations, significant in their own right, turned into a broad popular protest, which in turn became a violent, uncompromising struggle between the regime and its opponents, until the Syrians eventually found themselves in the midst of a full-blown violent civil war.

From the outset the Syrian regime chose to employ force against those who demonstrated against it, with the hope that it would thus be able to contain and suppress the uprising. By mid April 2011, when the police and security forces were unsuccessful at putting down the protestors despite the dozens of fatalities each week, the Syrian army assumed the task. On April 22, 2011 army forces entered Daraa, and subsequently they were sent to all key conflict points, with assistance from the armored corps, artillery, and air force planes and helicopters. Sending in the army against the rebels, however, did not stop the conflagration. On the contrary, the military's violence was met with violence on the part of the rebels, and the protest in Syria evolved from largely quiet, weekend affairs into daily confrontations between army forces and armed groups. Under such circumstances, defections from among the ranks of the army began, gradually gaining momentum over time, and in July 2011 groups of defectors formed the Free Syrian Army, under the command of Riad al-Asaad. This was a sort of umbrella body whose commanders operated from Turkey and controlled, albeit loosely, some of the armed groups, mainly those not identified with radical Islam or al-Qaeda supporters who had infiltrated Syria. This body represents a conduit for weapons and money to the rebels in Syria from Arab states and Turkey, and perhaps even the US.

The difficulty in closing ranks among the rebels in Syria reflected the divides that have always characterized Syrian society. Indeed, the rebels failed in their attempt to found a unified movement, under an agreed-upon leadership. Thus, for example, the National Council, founded by opposition activists with Arab and Western backing in Istanbul in September 2011, became an empty entity unable to wield authority and unite the various opposition groups – those within Syria and those abroad – around it. In November 2012, with encouragement from the US and the Gulf states, the

establishment of a new opposition organization was announced in Qatar. The National Coalition was meant to replace the National Council as the organization that would coordinate the activities of the rebels against the Syrian regime.[17]

Although nearly two years have passed since the outbreak of the uprising against the regime of Bashar al-Assad, the bloody struggle that has beset the country since then and has taken the lives of more than forty thousand people does not appear to be close to conclusion. The regime failed in its attempts at suppressing the protest, which took deeper root. However, it has remained standing on its feet, though wounded and weakened, meeting the protest with part of its war machine, fighting for its life, and retaining the support of important power elements of Syrian society, led by members of religious minorities. The result was the sinking of Syria into a reality of chaos, anarchy, and ongoing bloodshed.

At the start of the unrest, the Syrian regime relied on the steadfast support of the coalition of minorities in Syria; the middle class and elites in the big cities; and the army, security apparatuses, and government bureaucracy. This constellation, however, has not proved entirely steadfast. True, the minority groups continued to stand at the regime's side (led by the Alawites, and joined by the Christians, Druze, and even the Kurdish population in the north, which has exercised restraint); in the big cities there was still relative quiet; and the army and government apparatuses continued to function and assist the regime in fighting its opponents. Nonetheless, it is clear that the army and security apparatuses have weakened gradually as a result of a growing trend of defections. The support of the silent majority among the middle and upper classes in Damascus and Aleppo has likewise gradually eroded. These sectors supported the regime because they feared its fall would cast Syria into chaos and anarchy, as in Iraq, but a change in attitude among the middle and upper classes began to take shape. To them, even chaos and anarchy began to seem preferable to the continued reality of ongoing bloodshed, economic deterioration, and lack of personal security. For them it became clear that if Bashar could not bring about a conclusion to the crisis, and if keeping him in power was precisely what was feeding the crisis, then it would be better if he left.[18]

One of the low points of the deterioration in Syria was an attack on July 18, 2012 at the Office of National Security, the inner sanctuary of the Syrian security establishment. In the attack, senior members of the military and security establishment of Syria were killed, people who had commanded the fight against the rebels. Among those killed were Minister of Defense Daud Rajaha; head of the crisis management unit Hasan Turkhmani; and Deputy Minister of Defense and brother-in-law of President Assad Asaf Shawkat. The attack also wounded the head of the Office of National Security, Hisham Akhthiar, who died two days later, and the Minister of the Interior, Muhammed Sha'aar, who alone survived the attack. The blow to the heads of the Syrian regime was accompanied by an attack on Damascus by armed groups, some belonging to the Free Syrian Army. The armed fighters succeeded in taking control of several of the city's neighborhoods, including the al-Midan quarter, and at first it seemed that Damascus would fall to the rebels in a matter of hours or days. A few days later, the rebels attacked Aleppo, the second most important city in the country, and even succeeded in taking control of large parts of it. At that time it was also reported that the rebels had managed to take over the border crossings between Syria and Turkey and Iraq. Eventually, it was reported that the Kurds in the north and east of Syria (roughly 10 percent of the Syrian population), who until that point had not allied themselves clearly for or against Assad, cut themselves off from the regime but without joining the ranks of the rebels.

These dramatic developments occurred against the background of a wave of defections from regime ranks – both from the military and other government branches. Thus, for example, it was reported in early July 2012 that Manaf Talas, son of the former Minister of Defense Mustafa Talas, who served as a brigade commander in a Republican Guard unit and who was known for his close personal relationship with Bashar al-Assad, had defected to Paris together with several family members. For the first time, there also appeared cracks in the Syrian diplomatic staff, when Syrian ambassadors in several countries, such as Iraq, Cyprus, and the United Arab Emirates, declared that they would no longer represent the regime in Damascus. Later, in early August 2012, Prime Minister Riad Hijab defected to Jordan. Thus, what appeared at the beginning of the

uprising as a thin, insignificant trickle of defections turned into a flood, with those involved trying to rescue themselves from the sinking ship.[19] In any case, there is no doubt that the uprising in Syria entered a new phase in July 2012, which may prove to be the deciding phase of the campaign for Syria underway since March 2011.

Syria as a Regional and International Playing Field

Under the rule of Hafez al-Assad, Syria became a regional power with standing in its environs and beyond. The ongoing uprising, however, has set it back decades to its beginnings as an independent state, when it was a theater for conflict between regional and international powers who sought to use it to achieve power and influence.

The reaction of the international community to the events in Syria was at first muted and muddled. Especially interesting was the reaction of Western countries, led by the US. Caught unprepared by the wave of protests that engulfed the Middle East, they quickly found themselves enmeshed in the crisis situations that formed in Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Bahrain. In light of the desire to shun involvement in yet another unpromising conflict, but also in light of the limited nature of the protests in Syria and the assessment that the Syrian regime could overcome them, intervention was not an option that was initially considered seriously. In addition, the fear that Bashar's regime would be replaced by chaos that would quickly spread – to Lebanon and the Israeli, Jordanian, Palestinian, and Iraqi arenas – joined the concern regarding the Islamic bent taken by the uprisings in Egypt, Tunis, Libya, and even Syria to deter many, even though in Syria the power of the Islamic movements has always been perceived as limited due to the composition of the country's population (minorities account for 40 percent), and the strong and deep-rooted secular tradition among the Sunni middle class in the big cities. Given all these factors, the international community preferred in the first months of he unrest to sit on the sidelines and observe events from afar, even giving Bashar al-Assad support in his efforts to stabilize and calm the stormy winds in Syria.[20]

However, as the weeks and months passed and the protest in Syria not only did not peter out but grew and intensified, a change – even a dramatic

change – was evident in the positions of the Arab street, the Arab countries, and the international community in relation to events in Syria and the regime. This change was rooted first of all in the growing assessment that the Syrian regime would fall, as in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, but also in the exposure of the world to the regime's brutality and the massacre of demonstrators by the dozens. The Arab street was especially affected by this, and it became an important consideration among many Arab countries.

The Arab opposition to Syria was led by Saudi Arabia, apparently out of the Saudi understanding that Syria was becoming an arena for struggle between Iran and the Sunni Arab world. To Riyadh, this called for firm moves to sway the campaign in Syria against Assad's regime, especially considering the weakness if not helplessness demonstrated by the US in its handling of regional problems. Saudi Arabia thus offered generous financial support to the rebels, mainly Islamic groups active within Syria. Turkey shared Saudi Arabia's concerns, although Ankara, and especially AKP leaders, had other interests in their southern neighbor, connected with Turkey's aspirations to play a leading role in the Arab and Sunni world. Thus, Turkey allied itself behind the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, while simultaneously providing shelter and logistical aid to the Free Syrian Army, which located its command posts on Turkish territory. Qatar acted similarly, enlisting the al-Jazeera television network in the struggle against Bashar's regime and providing financial aid and support to the various rebel groups, even though its appears that Qatar and Saudi Arabia have also sponsored particular groups within Syria.

Nevertheless, despite the Arab pressure, joined too by Egypt after the election of Mohamed Morsi as president in June 2012, the international community has had difficulty finding a remedy to the Syrian crisis. The US and Western countries did not conceal their hesitation at getting involved in events in Syria, not only because of Russian opposition but also out of fear that Syria would become a quagmire along the likes of Afghanistan or Iraq that would ensnare anyone who braved involvement. Moreover, the Syrian military retains air and missile defense capabilities that could turn any foreign intervention in Syria into a costly affair with many losses. Perhaps predictably, therefore, the US and European countries have sufficed with

logistical and other assistance to rebel groups, in the hope that they would do the work for the West.

In any case, Syria, which in recent decades was perceived as a regional power, has resumed its role as a theater for a regional and international struggle. Iran and Hizbollah on one side face Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the other moderate Arab countries. A second axis pits the US and European states against Russia. Iran and Hizbollah began to help the regime survive and may have even sent personnel to aid the regime, mainly in organizing militias among the Alawite community, which has Shiite origins. Russia continued to provide economic assistance and even arms to Syria as a counterweight to US opposition to the Syrian regime, and also because it views Bashar al-Assad's regime as the final Middle East outpost obstructing the spread of radical Islam, which potentially threatens Russia itself.[21]

Israel and Syria

Upon the outbreak of unrest in Syria in March 2011, many in Israel made no secret of their fear that the downfall of Bashar al-Assad's regime would undermine the stability along the Israeli-Syrian border, and perhaps in the entire region. After all, Bashar was the "devil that you know," a partner of convenience for Israeli governments in their efforts to maintain a no peace/no war reality, and thereby maintain the status quo between the countries. Indeed, maintenance of the status quo was the preferred policy of most Israeli governments, which feared the political risks involved in furthering the peace process but at the same time desired continued quiet along the Golan Heights. Indeed, Syrian businessman Raami Mahlouf, a confidante and relative of Bashar, said in a May 10, 2011 interview to the *New York Times* that if there is no stability in Syria, there will be no chance of stability in Israel. He asserted, "No one can guarantee what will be if something should happen to the Syrian regime. I am not saying a war will break out, but I am saying that no one should push Bashar against the wall."[22]

Some in Israel saw the events of the Nakba on May 15, 2011 and the Naksa on June 5, 2011 as a sign for the future. In the course of these two days, hundreds if not thousands of Palestinian refugees attempted to break through to the territory of the State of Israel in the Golan Heights region of Ein al-Thina in Majdal Shams, and on the Israel-Lebanon border in

the area of Shaar Fatma. The incidents along the border fence left dozens of dead and wounded. It was difficult to assess whether it was the Syrian regime that was behind these events, with a goal of letting off some steam and perhaps also of turning attention away from events within Syria, or of sending a message to Israel. It was also, perhaps, a loss of control, an expression of the weakness of this regime, and its inability to rule the border area.[23]

But Israel too ultimately reached the conclusion that Bashar al-Assad's fate was sealed. In his remarks to the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee on January 2, 2012, Defense Minister Ehud Barak stated that Assad's days were numbered. IDF Chief of Staff Benny Gantz issued a statement that Israel was preparing to deal with Alawite refugees who might flee to the Golan should the Syrian regime fall.[24] Indeed, there is no doubt that Israel is disturbed by the growing involvement of Iran and Hizbollah in events in Syria, in their efforts to aid Bashar's regime. This was affirmed by GOC Northern Command Yair Golan in April 2012:

> Iran is supplying weapons to Syria all the time. This is an ongoing, constant effort. The Iranians say to Assad, "Look, you are important to us," and they support him energetically. Some of the resilience of the Syrian regime stems from Assad's sense that he still enjoys support in his immediate environs, overseas, and among the superpowers. In other words, when Assad looks outside, he says, "I have Hizbollah, which helps. I have the Iranians; they support me." And in the background are China and Russia...Iran and Hizbollah are involved neck deep when we speak of the "axis of evil." We are talking about Hizbollah personnel fighting there – instructors, teachers, and in my assessment combatants as well."[25]

It seems that more than with the problem of refugees that might reach Israel, Jerusalem is occupied by the advanced weapons possessed by the Syrian regime that might fall into hostile hands, whether terror elements such as al-Qaeda or the rebels themselves, or in the worst case as far as Israel is concerned, Hizbollah. Hizbollah might exploit its ties with Bashar's regime to attempt to smuggle, under cover of future Syrian anarchy, these

advanced weapons to their bases in Lebanon. Certain figures in Israel, joined in July 2012 by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Ehud Barak, even warned explicitly that in such an event Israel would not hesitate to attack and destroy the Syrian chemical weapons installations, to prevent such weapons from falling into the hand of Hizbollah and its allies, or into the hands of other Islamic radicals. The American administration is a party to Israel's concern, and with forceful declarations warned the Syrian regime that it holds it responsible for the chemical weapons, and warned against its use of the weapons or their transfer to foreign hands. For its part, the Syrian regime has denied that it intends to make use of such weapons against its people. But in a statement delivered by Foreign Ministry spokesman Jihad al-Makdisi in Damascus, Syria admitted – for the first time – that it possesses such weapons, designated for use, according to the spokesman, against a foreign attack on its soil.[26]

In any case, those calling for shunning involvement in Syria or those hoping Bashar will stay in power have begun to be replaced by others urging that it would be best for Israel, and likewise the US and other Western countries, to let Bashar continue to bleed, and it may even be best if he falls, for that would weaken the radical axis in the Middle East, which would serve Israeli interests. In early March 2012 Israel's then-Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman even proposed that Israel stand at the vanguard of those calling for the removal of Bashar from power, and encourage its allies to work toward this goal. During a visit to Washington in April 2012 Defense Minister Barak called for the US to take a more active policy against Bashar, with the goal of bringing about his downfall.[27]

Off the record, many senior Israeli officials have expressed support for continuation of the current state of affairs in Syria, in which the Syrian regime continues to rule with enough power to maintain quiet along the border with Israel and prevent Syria's fall into radical Islamic hands. However, the continuation of the uprising forces the regime to focus on domestic issues while weakening it, and as such, the power of the Syrian state that still views Israel as an enemy is limited. Casting a shadow on such assessments is a series of shooting incidents along the border during November 2012, stemming from the Syrian regime's loss of control and

ability to govern in the border areas, as well as exchanges of fire between groups of rebels that in many cases spilled over into Israeli territory.[28]

In Israel there are even voices calling to use the regional rift to advance understandings with Turkey. Ankara has become the leading element in the international pressure against Syria, and its relations with Damascus reached crisis levels, even to the point of military confrontation. Turkey sharpened its anti-Syria rhetoric, began providing aid to the Free Syrian Army and to Syrian refugees, and in July 2012, following the downing of a Turkish fighter jet by the Syrians, and after Kurds in the north of Syria began acting to establish a Kurdish autonomy along the Turkish border, began amassing military forces along the Turkish-Syrian border. Concern about the future of Syria could theoretically bring Israel and Turkey closer together, but the two countries have not yet seen fit to take advantage of this concern to renew the strategic dialogue between them that was halted in the wake of the *Mavi Marmara* incident in May 2010.

Conclusion

Whatever the future holds for the Syrian regime – whether it survives by the sword or whether it falls to a new political order in Syria – it appears that Syria will not regain a central role in regional politics any time soon. Moreover, in the near future the regime in Damascus – any regime – will likely be hard pressed to impose its authority throughout the country, just as occurred during the first decades of Syria's independence. Syria of the future will also likely be a platform for action by radical Islamic terror groups such as al-Qaeda, while the Muslim Brotherhood will be one of the important power elements in the country.

In any case, nearly two years after the outbreak of the uprising in Syria, Israel is still cautiously following events in Damascus with concern, though no longer hoping for maintenance of the status quo along the border. Rather, the fall of the Syrian regime is expected, and with it is a hope that this will deal a severe blow to the regional standing of Iran and Hizbollah. Nevertheless, along with hope for a change in Syria, there exists a fear that the quiet in the Golan Heights will be replaced by chaos and terror, such as what prevails along the Sinai border. Israel also remains concerned about the advanced weaponry possessed by the Syrian military.

Nevertheless, Israel now has a window of opportunity that can be exploited with regional and international powers to shape the future face of Syria. Such an effort would require Israel to stop straddling the fence as a bystander, and become an active player and partner in the regional and international coalition interested in toppling Bashar al-Assad's regime and fostering stability in Syria in the period that follows.

This window of opportunity includes, first, promotion of a dialogue with Turkey and with the moderate Arab states – Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states, and even Egypt – regarding the future of Syria. Second is the promotion of an indirect dialogue, by way of Western states or perhaps regional players, with opposition elements in Syria, at least with those that lean toward Washington, European nations, and even Turkey and are not identified with radical Islam. Third is the promotion of a dialogue with the US, European states, and perhaps also Russia, with Israel positioning itself as an active player able to contribute to relevant decisions in these countries, if only due to a better understanding of events in Syria.

Simultaneously, Israel should prepare for the effects of events in Syria – including the possible collapse of the Syrian regime – on Jordan and Lebanon, two arenas of importance for Israel. In Jordan, the Hashemite regime continues to face a prolonged public protest that is likely to intensify should Bashar's regime fall. In Lebanon, Israel faces a status quo, especially on the Israel-Lebanon border, that has been in force since 2006. This status quo may show some cracks in the wake of upheavals in Syria, as the Syrian uprising can flow, and indeed has begun to flow, into Lebanon, and thus raise tensions between Lebanese Sunnis and Shiites, undermine Lebanon's stability, and diminish the ability and interest by Lebanon, as well as Hizbollah, in maintaining the quiet along the Lebanon-Israel border.

The question is whether Israel will manage to deal wisely with the challenges to its ongoing security that the fall of the Syrian regime will present, and whether it will successfully exploit such a scenario to advance its strategic interests with Turkey, the moderate Arab states, Saudi Arabia, and even a future Syria. This question depends on Israel's overall policy in the face of the events in its environs, especially its future relations with Egypt and the Palestinians. These elements will determine whether the

Syrian spring will be a short timeout in the continual winter of Damascus-Jerusalem relations, or a true political climate change for the two countries.

Notes

1 Patrick Seale, *The Struggle for Syria: A Study of Post-War Arab Politics, 1945-1958* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965). See also Eyal Zisser, *Faces of Syria: Regime, Society and* State (Tel Aviv: HaKibbutz Hameuhad, 2003), pp. 16-71.

2 See Eyal Zisser, "Between Israel and Syria: The Six Day War and its Aftermath," *Iyunim Bitkumat Israel*, Vol. 8 (1998), pp. 202-52.

3 Author's interview with Brig. Gen. (ret.) Aryeh Shalev, Tel Aviv, September 13, 1996. See also Moshe Dayan, *Milestones: An Autobiography* (Tel Aviv: Yediot Ahronot, 1976), p. 474.

4 See Patrick Seale, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East* (California: University of California Press, 1989); and Eyal Zisser, *Syria under Asad: At a Crossroads* (Tel Aviv: HaKibbutz Hameuhad, 1999).

5 See Avner Yaniv, Moshe Ma'oz, Avi Kober, eds., *Syria and Israel's Security* (Tel Aviv: Maarachot, 1990), pp. 13-34, 335-86.

6 See Moshe Ma'oz, *Asad: The Sphinx of Damascus: A Political Biography* (Grover Press, 1988).

7 For historical background concerning the Syria-Israel peace negotiations, see Itamar Rabinovich, *The Threshold of Peace* (Tel Aviv: Yediot Ahronot, 1998); Moshe Ma'oz, *Israel and Syria: The End of the Conflict* (Or Yehuda: Maariv, 1996); and Zisser, *Syria under Asad*, pp. 120-66.

8 For more on Bashar, see Eyal Zisser, *In the Name of the Father: Bashar al-Asad's First Years in Power* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 2004).

9 Eyal Zisser, "It's a Long Road to Peace with Syria: From the Second Lebanon War to Peace Overtures in Ankara," *Strategic Assessment* 11, no. 2 (2008): 107-22.

10 See Eyal Zisser, "An Israeli Watershed: Strike on Syria," *Middle East Quarterly* 15, no. 3 (2008): 57-62.

11 See for example Fred H. Lawson, ed., *Demystifying Syria* (London: Saqi, 2009); Carsten Wieland, *Syria at Bay, Secularism, Islamism and "Pax-Americana"* (London: Hurst, 2006).

12 See the testimony of former President George Bush in his memoir, *Decision Points* (New York: Crown, 2010), as well as the testimony of former British Prime Minister Tony Blair in his memoir, *A Journey* (London: Hutchinson, 2010).

13 Eyal Zisser, "Syria's Diplomatic Comeback: What Next?" *Mediterranean Politics* 14, no. 1 (2009): 107–13.

14 See Bashar al-Assad's interview in the *Wall Street Journal*, January 30, 2011.
15 See editorial in *Tishrin*, March 13, 2011. See also "What's behind the News," *al-Wattan*, February 14, 2011.
16 On the Syrian revolution, see Fouad Ajami, *The Syrian Rebellion* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012); Eyal Zisser, "The Renewal of the 'Struggle for Syria': The Rise and Fall of the Ba'th Party," *Sharqiyya* (fall 2011): 21-29.
17 For more on the rebels and their military strength, see David W. Lesch, *Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), pp. 87-122. See also Aaron Lund, "Holy Warriors: A Field Guide to Syria's Jihadi Groups," *Argument*, October 15, 2012.
18 For a discussion of the domestic reality within Syrian society, see the blog of Professor Josh Landis, *Syria Comment,* http://www.joshualandis.com/blog.
19 See Eyal Zisser, "Awaiting the Victory Portrait in Damascus," *Middle East Crossroads* (Tel Aviv: Mosh Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and North African Studies, August 5, 2012).
20 See, for example, the statement by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, according to which many members of Congress who visited Syria are of the opinion that Bashar is a reformer and that Syria has its own unique circumstances, and thus one should not draw conclusions regarding Syria from what happened in Egypt or Tunis. See "Remarks by Secretary Clinton," http://www.state.gov.
21 See Eyal Zisser, "The 'Struggle for Syria': Return to the Past?" *Mediterranean Politics* 17, no.1 (2012): 105-10. See also Lesch, *Syria*: *The Fall of the House of Assad*, pp. 123-59.
22 For Raami Mahlouf's remarks, see *Wall Street Journal*, July 13, 2012.
23 Regarding border incidents on the Nakba and Naksa days, see the reports in *Haaretz*, May 16 and June 11, 2011.
24 For a report of Barak's statement to the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, see *Haaretz*, January 3, 2012. For Chief of Staff Benny Gantz's remarks, see *Yediot Ahronot*, January 17, 2012.
25 For the interview with GOC Northern Command Yair Golan, see *Yisrael Hayom*, April 6, 2012.
26 For Netanyahu's and Barak's comments, see *Haaretz*, July 6, 2012. For statements by the US State Department Spokesman and White House Spokesman, see http://www.state.gov, July 11,13,18, 22, 2012. For the statement of the Syrian Foreign Ministry Spokesman, see the Syrian news agency Sana (Damascus) http://www.rtv.gov.sy, July 23, 2012.
27 See *Yisrael Hayom*, April 6, 2012, *Haaretz*, April 30 and July 6, 2012.
28 On the exchanges of fire along the Golan border, see *Haaretz*, July 12, 2012.