Israel and the Islamic State

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The Islamic State arose on the regional stage as a significant actor threatening the continued existence of state frameworks and the regional order established following World War I. For Israel's government, which has focused on the threat from Tehran and Iran's allies and proxies, the Islamic State's prominence came at a critical period. It coincided with the heavy involvement of Iran and Hezbollah in the Syrian civil war, and the negotiations, followed by an agreement, between Tehran and the world powers over the Iranian nuclear program.

Israel's focus on Iran has made it difficult to isolate its complex attitude toward the Islamic State phenomenon. This is due both to the actual impact that the focus on the Iranian threat has had on how Israel perceives the Islamic State, and the fact that Israel sometimes seemed intent on avoiding statements on the issue. This apparently deliberate restraint regarding the Islamic State stems from Israel's tactical considerations, namely, not to distract the world's attention from the Iranian threat, and not to imply that there may be greater threats in the Middle East. Therefore, any attempt to understand the Israeli view of the Islamic State phenomenon cannot be based only on statements from Israeli sources on the issue, but must attempt to understand the operational steps that Israel has taken regarding the Islamic State question.

The Islamic State is perceived in Israel as one result of the weakened nation-state framework in the Arab Middle East, a natural consequence of the internal and regional upheavals in the Middle East since 2011. The weakening of the states has created a vacuum that non-state actors – for the most part, Islamist organizations – have penetrated. True, the Islamic State developed out of al-Qaeda in Iraq, which was a central player in the fight

against American occupation of the country since 2003, with no connection to the Arab Spring phenomenon; but the organization's renewed awakening resulted from the transfer of its activities to Syria in the wake of the civil war there. Al-Qaeda in Iraq's involvement in the Syrian civil war was also a central device for recruitment of foreign volunteers from the region and beyond to the organization.

The uniqueness of the Islamic State phenomenon lies in the fact that it expanded beyond the borders of one Arab state, both in its ideology and its operations, and founded a cross-border state framework in Syria and Iraq. As in the case of al-Qaeda and its proxies, Islamic State proxies cropped up in other countries; in many cases, this was the result of local Islamist organizations deciding to affiliate themselves with the Islamic State. This process is what turned the Islamic State into more of a threatening power from Israel's perspective than other Islamist movements that were involved in the civil wars that developed in some Arab countries. Yet despite the fact that the discourse promoted by the Islamic State is unambiguously anti-Israel and anti-Jewish (as with other jihadist organizations), and despite the fact that the Islamic State casts Israel as a legitimate target for attack, the threat for now appears to be distant, given that the territories controlled by the Islamic State are in Iraq and eastern Syria, and its activities take place, at this point, far from Israel's border.

The concerns in Israel since the spread of the Islamic State have focused mainly on its potential impact in Jordan, which shares a long border with Israel. Jordan, in fact, has been a focus of Israeli concern since the onset of the Arab Spring – concern that stems from Jordan's demographic makeup, the massive number of Syrian refugees it has absorbed, and its precarious economic condition. Israel is troubled by the potential undermining of the Jordanian regime and destabilization of the kingdom, which would harm the strategic partnership between the countries and lead to Jordan becoming an operational base for jihadist elements against Israel. This fear on Israel's part is based, inter alia, on an assessment that conditions exist in Jordan that can turn significant portions of the population into Islamic State supporters.

Moreover, in Israel there are political elements that have an interest in emphasizing the danger in Jordan's destabilization, and even in overemphasizing it, for reasons connected to the Palestinian issue: according to these elements, the inherent lack of stability in Jordan does not allow Israel to agree to the establishment of a Palestinian state, or even more so, to concede an Israeli

presence in the West Bank that can cope with the security dangers expected from the direction of Jordan. This argument, however, lacks substance, given the stability the Jordanian regime has demonstrated since the outbreak of the Arab Spring, and contravenes the well-developed system of security ties between Jordan and Israel.

A scenario where columns of armed Islamic State SUVs invade Jordan and take control of Jordanian territory, as occurred in Syria and Iraq, has not been taken seriously in Israel. According to those who have related to such a scenario, Jordan's professional military will remain loyal to the regime and prevent any such invasion. These assessments are more concerned with the formation of an underground movement supporting the Islamic State among the Jordanian populace, which would be composed of elements estranged from the regime – disappointed supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood, Palestinians with Salafist leanings, and Bedouin tribes who feel economically deprived. However, even should such a scenario play out, most analysts are confident that the Jordanian security services would be able to handle such phenomena effectively.

Since the fall of the Mubarak regime in Egypt, there has been concern in Israel regarding the terror groups in the Sinai Peninsula. These groups operate mainly against the Egyptian government, but have already also acted against Israel from Sinai. These are organizations that are a mix of local Bedouins and Salafi jihadist elements, who share resentment of the Egyptian regime and Egypt as a state for abandoning and discriminating against the Sinai population. Added to this resentment is the religious motivation of Salafi jihadist elements to undermine the current regime of President el-Sisi, due to the deposing of his Muslim Brotherhood predecessor Mohamed Morsi.

The implications for Israel of the alliance of Wilayat Sinai – formerly Ansar Bait al-Maqdis, the largest organization in the Sinai Peninsula fighting Egyptian forces effectively – with the Islamic State are still unclear. According to the limited information available, the Islamic State apparently transfers financial aid of an unknown extent to the organization. One question is whether the Islamic State transfers to Ansar Bait al-Maqdis aid and resources that it did not previously possess, thus making it a greater threat. Indeed, Ansar Bait al-Maqdis has demonstrated improved capabilities in its war against the Egyptian military, although it is possible that such capabilities would have developed even without Islamic State aid, simply from the cumulative experience of years of fighting against the Egyptian regime. The relatively

small number of Ansar Bait al-Maqdis attacks in Israel since Morsi was deposed can be explained by the organization's current preference for the struggle against the el-Sisi regime, as well as its need to defend itself against Egyptian military actions, which are growing gradually more intense. Thus the concern in Israel relates to a future change of Wilayat Sinai's order of priorities, which would lead to a greater focus on Israel, especially in a situation where the Egyptian military experiences setbacks in its fight against this organization and others operating in Sinai. Such a change may be significant from Israel's perspective due to the many weak points on its long border with Egypt, although the topographical inferiority is balanced to a certain extent by the limited vulnerable Israeli civilian presence along this border.

The developments in the Sinai Peninsula have led to changes in IDF deployment along the border with Egypt. Initially a relatively simple fence was built with the goal of preventing the infiltration of illegal foreign workers, and the deployment of forces was based on this concept. Today the Egyptian border is viewed as a front that may become active with very little warning. This change has led to the reinforcement of the forces deployed along the Israel-Egypt border, and to improvements in the border fence.[1]

Further north, the involvement of Islamist organizations in fighting against the Syrian regime in the Golan Heights region has resulted in their taking control over most of the Syrian territory on the border with Israel (not including an enclave in the north of the Syrian Golan Heights, which includes, inter alia, the Quneitra region and the Druze village of Hader). This situation has sharpened the sense of threat to Israel from the Syrian front. While it is true that the most dominant organization currently operating in the area is the al-Nusra Front, and not the Islamic State, reports have already been received of a planned Islamic State attack against Jabal al-Druze in the south of Syria – a region, in which Israel has an interest because of the Druze lobby in Israel. Moreover, the Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade, which controls sections adjacent to the border with Israel in the southern Golan Heights, has declared its loyalty to the Islamic State. All of this has created a sense of fear of ensuing friction from the Islamic State advance toward Israeli territory. This joins the concern regarding Hezbollah aid to the forces of President al-Assad near the Golan Heights, which may be exploited as an opportunity to open an additional front with Israel.

The increased sense of threat on the Syrian border has led Israel toward better deployment in the Golan Heights. The threat that Israel had prepared for in the past on the Golan Heights was of a mechanized, armored attack by the Syrian military, and thus Israel's deployment was based mainly on armored forces. In the current reality, the asymmetrical threat from the direction of groups such as the al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State requires a different deployment. In this context, the border fence has been modernized, and forces suited to fighting the type of enemy that may be encountered there have been transferred to the region.[2]

These developments in Syria have led to the formation of two schools of thought in public and political discourse in Israel. The first holds that the main threat against Israel from the direction of Syria comes from the Iranian-led axis, and includes the Assad regime, Hezbollah, and Palestinian organizations – far different from the Islamic State threat, which can only create nuisances with limited damage potential, and with which Israel knows how to contend. The conclusion of the proponents of this school of thought is that Israel needs to be proactive against the al-Assad regime in Syria.[3] The second school of thought estimates that in the coming years Israel should expect to deal mainly with threats similar to the Islamic State and other non-state elements, while Iran and its proxies are effectively deterred by Israel and caught up in fighting for the survival of the al-Assad regime and the Shiite regime in Iraq. According to this approach, Israel must not underestimate the Islamic State threat, although the danger this threat poses to Israel itself should not be exaggerated.[4]

The Israeli government has thus far chosen not to embrace a specific school of thought: officials speak sparingly regarding all issues related to the Islamic State, while emphasizing the Iranian threat. The Israeli position regarding the Syrian civil war is that the State of Israel has no position: it supports no side and is not interested in being involved in what goes on in its northern neighbor. This lack of a position does not stop the two rival sides in Syria from accusing Israel of supporting the other side, in order to depict the "infidel" enemy as a collaborator with Israel. Israel's declarative policy is accompanied by steps to deal with the concrete threats facing it, in both the Egyptian and Golan Heights arenas. Statements regarding the need to construct a fence along Israel's eastern border – in the first phase along the southern section from Eilat and going northward – may reflect a

growing Israeli sense of concern regarding the spread of the Islamic State and its proxies toward Jordan.[5]

Israel is acting aggressively regarding another aspect, albeit of limited scale, related to the group – attempts on the part of Arab volunteers who are citizens of Israel to enter Syria to join the ranks of the Islamic State.[6] Intelligence and police efforts are assigned to identify such people, who are arrested and put on trial, whether prior to leaving Israel or upon their return. While the number of such volunteers is still small, the concern is of the establishment of a terror infrastructure within Israel inspired by the Islamic State, which would be promoted by those volunteers returning from Syria and Iraq. Such a fear is not baseless, as the ideology disseminated by the Islamic State has the potential to appeal to elements among the Israeli Arab populace, as indicated by the number of cases already uncovered.[7]

Another aspect of the Islamic State phenomenon from Israel's perspective involves Israel's view of itself as responsible for the security of Jews throughout the world in the face of threats stemming from their Jewish identity and closeness to Israel. Israel is presumably investing resources, at least intelligence, in an effort to cope with the growing threat to Europe's Jews posed by Islamic State volunteers returning from Iraq and Syria. This threat has already been realized in attacks carried out by Islamic State activists and admirers against various Jewish communities throughout Europe.

The answer to the question of how Israel's view of the Islamic State threat will develop in the future depends on the success or failure of the international coalition established against the Islamic State. As of September 2015, it appears that the Islamic State in Iraq has been halted and even rolled back to a certain extent, thanks to the operations of this coalition. In Syria, on the other hand, the volume of operations against the Islamic State was smaller in the first place, and consequently, the international coalition's achievements have been more limited.

The more the Islamic State approaches Israel's borders, the more concrete Israel's attitude must become regarding the threat it poses. There is potential for Israel becoming entangled in fighting the Islamic State, especially if the latter threatens Druze communities in Syria and due to domestic considerations Israel decides to become involved to prevent the realization of such threats. The more troubling question in the long term regards the impact of Islamic State ideology on the internal stability of the two Arab states that have signed peace agreements with Israel – Egypt and Jordan.

The strengthening of elements that support the Islamic State in both of these countries may present a substantive threat to Israel.

Notes

1 Amir Buhbut, "The IDF Beefs Up Forces in the South, Given Concerns of Terrorism along the Egyptian Border," *Walla*, March 12, 2015, http://news.walla.co.il/item/2837407.

2 Yoav Zeitun, "Attack Exercise in Syria: The IDF's New Policy in the Golan," *Ynet*, August 16, 2015, http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4691341,00.html.

3 Maj. Gen. (ret.) Amos Yadlin, Executive Director of the Institute for National Security Studies, is a prominent representative of this school. Thus, for example, he claimed at an INSS conference on the Islamic State that "ISIS are experts at media and intimidation, but there is nothing to fear from them."

4 See for example "Eyes on Jerusalem: The Islamic State and the Global Jihad vs. Israel and the Jews," *Online Jihad Exposed,* August 8, 2014, http://www.onlinejihadexposed.com/2014/08/blog-post_8.html.

5 Barak Ravid and Gili Cohen, "The Cabinet Approves: Construction of a Fence will Begin on the Eastern Border, with Jordan," *Haaretz*, June 29, 2015, http://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/.premium-1.2671344.

6 This issue is analyzed extensively elsewhere in this volume.

7 Ahiya Rabad and Hasan Shalan, "Israeli Cell Uncovered: Lawyer Wants to be ISIS Chief of Staff in Palestine," *Ynet*, January 18, 2015, http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4616056,00.html.