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## **The Problematic Scenarios in Syria: The Choices Facing Israel**

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The current balance of power in Syria is influenced by the three-pronged constellation in the Middle East, marked by the Iranian-led Shiite axis; the Saudi-led Sunni axis; and the Salafi jihadi elements, which constitute a third pole in the equation. Syria today is the primary battleground, and all the interested parties are represented there, including groups belonging to the Shiite axis; groups belonging to the Sunni camp – among them global jihadi elements such as the Islamic State; world powers such as Russia and the United States; minority groups fighting for their lives, such as the Kurds, the Druze, and the Alawites; and the countries sharing common borders with Syria. Given the difficulty in envisioning the final outcome of the campaign in Syria, and under the assumption that Syria will not return to the situation that existed there prior to the outbreak of the civil war, analysts tend to highlight three principal future scenarios: (a) Syria dominated by Iran, in cooperation with Hizbollah and the Alawite minority, which will retain control of the major urban centers and the area of the Mediterranean coast; (b) Syria toppled by Salafi forces and the domination of the Islamic State; and (c) ongoing chaos without a clear outcome, with a multitude of parties fighting one another.

### **The Israeli Policy of Non-intervention**

The Israeli government has singled out Iran as the major threat facing Israel today, whether directly or by means of its proxies, Hizbollah, the forces of Bashar al-Assad, and rogue elements. The struggle among regional forces manifested in the fighting in Syria – coupled with the inability to foresee the end state of Syria and the limited ability to influence the developments on the ground, as well as Israel's reluctance to become embroiled in the current regional turbulence and assume responsibility for its outcome – has prompted an Israeli policy of non-intervention. At the same time, Israel's strategic situation has ostensibly improved as a result of the weakened Syrian link in the Iranian axis, without any investment of additional resources or significant risk taking.

Another prevalent assessment holds that Israel's field of shared interests with the functioning Sunni states has expanded, yielding a basis of cooperation focused on striving to neutralize Iran's influence in the region and shaping the face of Syria

following the end of the Assad regime. Against this background, Israel has not jumped the gun and refrained from choosing a favored scenario from among the three bad options: Iranian domination, Islamic domination, and ongoing chaos in Syria. This policy has been based on the reasonable conclusion that in the present reality, it is pointless to rely on any one party, and that it would be impossible to influence the shaping of Syria without putting boots on the ground, i.e., without massive military intervention.

### **Updating the Strategic Assessment**

The spillover of events from Syria to Israel, as manifested in Druze pressure on Israel to come to the aid of their people; and the assessment that the Assad regime is nearing the point at which will lose its last strongholds – which would cause Iran to increase its involvement in the war in Syria and also possibly provoke an Islamic State seizure of additional territory abandoned by Assad's army – obligates Israel to conduct a strategic assessment, identify the aims that best serve its interests, and direct its actions accordingly.

Prior to and during the transformation of the Middle East underway since 2011, the premise of Israeli decision makers has been that Iran constitutes the major strategic threat facing Israel. Iran's ambitious nuclear program, which is currently addressed within an international framework, was and remains the focus of Israeli political and military efforts. Israel is concerned about an agreement between Iran and the major powers whereby Iran would be recognized as a nuclear threshold state and would continue to make use of its proxies, which are capable of striking every point in Israel with high trajectory weapons from Lebanon, Syria, and the Gaza Strip, and of launching terrorist attacks into Israeli territory. This situation is unacceptable to Israel, and this explains Israel's desire to see the Iranian axis dismantled.

Israel must grapple with the view of some Western countries (and perhaps even the US administration) that regards Iran as a stabilizing force in the chaos prevailing in Syria, Iraq, and throughout the Middle East as a whole. This view is based on the Iranian fight against the Islamic State and on the assessment that Iran is a responsible state with which it is possible to establish accepted rules of the game.

On the assumption that Israel must prepare for the future, and based on the understanding that its ability to sit on the fence is limited, Israel must update its strategic considerations, which underlie the current policy of non-intervention. As part of the strategic thinking, this demands proposing a competing approach to the existing conception, which claims that Iran is the main threat, and identifies the Islamic State as a threat that is more severe than the Iranian one. A scenario in which the Islamic State extends its control over southern Syria and the Golan Heights will bring Israel face to face with an element that does not operate in accordance with the international standard, i.e., without any rules of

the game between states, in contrast to Iran, Syria, and Hizbollah, which Israel confronts with a set of understandings and rules. If the Golan Heights and additional territories held by Assad and his allies fall to the Islamic State, the different types of weapons located in these areas will presumably be seized by the Islamic State. Experience proves that the Islamic State is capable of operating advanced weapon systems and inducting deserters formerly of the Iraqi army and Syrian military into its ranks. Strategic weapons possessed by the Islamic State will be more dangerous than the same weapons in the possession of Iran and Hizbollah, which are influenced by restraining considerations.

In addition to identifying the Islamic State as a major threat, Israel must consider the implications for its neighbors and allies. Although Iran and its proxies are common enemies of Israel and Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf states, their ability to harm these countries is limited due to the Sunni identity of a decisive majority of their respective populations. As a result, it is difficult for Iran to mobilize support among the majority of the population of these countries and thereby change the balance of power within them. Another difficulty facing Iran in this context is that its resources are currently stretched thin across a large number of arenas. As a result, Iran has found it difficult to create a critical mass of influence. The Islamic State, on the other hand, has the potential to pose a major threat to the countries bordering Israel due to its ability to influence frustrated Sunni populations; hence the stream of volunteers from Sunni countries express oaths of allegiance to the Islamic State and joining its ranks. For now, the threat has been contained through the major efforts of the ruling regimes but has intensified and expanded within the failing and crumbling states in the region. The Islamic State's seizure of Syria, or even part of its territory, could produce shockwaves in the form of chaos in Jordan, Lebanon, and the Sinai Peninsula, as well as in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf emirates.

From the Israeli perspective, it is difficult to imagine a more undesirable scenario than the flooding of Jordan with Islamic State activists serving to undermine both the monarchy and stability within the kingdom. Another consideration with importance for setting Israeli policy is Israel's relationship with the United States, which has made a decision to prioritize its fight against the Islamic State. Israeli injury to Iran, even if only indirect, could result in the strengthening of the Islamic State and constitute an additional unfavorable component in the already tense relationship between Israel and the United States. Such an injury could likewise clash with interests of Western countries at a time when Israel should be assisting the governments of these countries in their struggle against the Israel-focused boycotts and delegitimization campaigns.

### **Nonetheless, What Can Israel Do?**

Within this imbroglio, Israel has chosen to focus its efforts on the scenario of continued chaos and, to this end, has worked to create leverages of influence over rebel groups and

local leaderships and communities in southern Syria in general and the Golan Heights in particular. Israel's provision of humanitarian aid to elements that are identified as rebels fighting the Assad regime and the forces supporting it (Iran, Hizbollah, and the Shiite militias) creates the impression that Israel is lending humanitarian and military support for Salafi jihadist forces such as the al-Nusra Front, which are fighting the Assad regime. This impression is heightened by elements within the Shiite axis – Iran, the Assad regime, and Hizbollah – which are also conducting information warfare aimed at sowing rebellion among the Druze population in Israel against the Israeli government's policy and the humanitarian aid that it is providing them in the Golan Heights.

The only suitable way to address the variety of scenarios presented above is to strengthen and expand of leverages of Israeli influence in southern Syria and the Golan Heights. To this end, it is recommended to plan a joint strategy with Jordan, backed by the United States, to establish a common region of influence in southern Syria and, within this framework, strive toward coordination with “desirable” (that is, less “undesirable”) elements, such as Free Syrian Army forces, local communities, non-radical Salafi groups, and minority groups such as the Druze. Partnerships with such elements, even if only limited in time, should be based on military and humanitarian aid, provision of essential needs of the population, and establishment of a border economy regime that includes supply routes for the transfer of goods from Israel to southern Syria. Israel and Jordan possess air capabilities and advanced standoff capabilities which gives them the ability to establish a no-fly zone in certain areas and, at the same time, to establish a security perimeter to provide protection for isolated actors that cooperate with them, without the use of ground forces. Taking action in this direction would strengthen the strategic alliance between Jordan and Israel. It would also curb the expansion of Iranian and Hizbollah influence on the one hand, and of the al-Nusra Front and Salafi jihadist elements on the other hand, and prevent the creation of a vacuum that the Islamic State would seek to penetrate. It is essential that the Druze, both of the Jabal al-Druze area and the Golan Heights, be among the elements identified as partners of Israel and Jordan. In addition, Israel and Jordan would create a buffer zone along the southern border of Syria that could be used as a protected area for Druze or other refugees and provide them with the necessary humanitarian aid.

