



Institute for Islamic Strategic Affairs

The Enemy of My Enemy is My Friend: Israel and the Syrian Conflict



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Abstract

As reports emerge of Israeli collusion with militant Islamist groups in southern Syria, many questions concerning the legitimacy of Israel's actions are thrown to light. Does Israel have the right to defy international norms in its own interests? Can external actors condemn aiding terrorists without experiencing the same conditions of terror? And what alternatives are Israeli frightened of that would necessitate such a course of action? IISA unpicks Israel's involvement in the Syrian conflict, assessing its motives and dynamics, as well as indicating possible future changes.

Introduction:

The opposition to Israel has long been such a fundamental facet of militant Islam that it is almost taken for granted and thus unworthy of exploration. From groups which take their antagonism to Israel as a *raison d'être*, such as Hamas, Hizb'ullah and Houthi, to groups which incorporate the destruction of Israel into their wider strategic vision, *à la* al-Nusra and al-Qaeda

in the early

2000s

(source),

Israel has

often been

viewed as an

arch-enemy to

militant

Islam, and

one which must be eliminated. While the reasons for this perception are too numerous and nuanced for satisfactory explanation in this work, suffice to bear in mind issues of historical territorial concerns, strong diplomatic ties with the 'Great Satan' America, and, of course, enduring memories of *al-Nakbah* ("the catastrophe" – referring to the period of forced Arab displacement by Jewish settlers around the 1948 Israeli Declaration of Independence) and prevailing images of apartheid.

What is therefore worthy of note and consideration is the seeming lack of discord between Islamic State (IS) and Israel. While Israel's recent admission of aid for militant groups in Syria, including fighters alongside Islamic State, is understandable, at least from a strategic and pragmatic, if not moral, standpoint, what is harder to explain is Islamic State's

apparent

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parts of the Arab world, and indeed in many Western communities, it is difficult to understand why the Islamic State propaganda machine, which has been so blisteringly effective in many areas, has neglected to draw upon this potentially rich seam of recruitment rhetoric. This paper aims to explore and understand the role of Israel in the Syrian conflict, and its relationship with the recently-formed caliphate across northern Syria and Iraq.

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and its many human rights violations and military engagements, an intriguing subsection of the Syrian conflict taking place in the south-west corner of the country has rather flown under the radar. Here, to the south of Damascus, as in many other areas, Assad's regime is pitted against several rebel groups including the Free Syrian Army, Islamic Front, as well as al-Qaeda's official representative in the conflict, al-Nusra, and Islamic State-affiliated Ansar Beit al-Maqdis. What is peculiar about this particular area of the Syrian civil war is its proximity to two hitherto under-represented actors, namely Lebanon and Israel. While Hizb'ullah has been active in the Syrian conflict since 2013 and in many central areas, its fiercest engagements have been along the Lebanese border and in the Damascus and Qalamoun areas. Israel, on the other hand, has ostensibly been refraining from involvement in the conflict, with only a bolstered border defence arrangement to protect itself from spill over.

Israel's Involvement

This relative silence and inactivity is intriguing, given Israel's preponderance for drawing upon its position as an isolated island surrounded by a sea of Arab hostility to justify military action. However, it's not entirely the whole truth.

Israel has in fact weighed in on the Syrian conflict, and has admitted to doing so, on numerous occasions. As far back as October 2013, Israel destroyed a Syrian air base in Snobar Jableh, on account of allegations of it containing threatening Russian-made surface-to-air missile batteries. ¹

However, this is not the first recorded engagement Israel had initiated in the Syrian conflict, with at least three known prior military actions against targets in Syria by this point.² Indeed, Israeli military activity in Syria has consisted of repeated fast-air strikes on Syrian and Hizb'ullah installations³, combined with multiple ground-level combat groups involved in skirmishes throughout the region of the Golan Heights. As recently as January 2015, an Israeli helicopter opened fire upon a Hizb'ullah convoy in the Quneitra region, killing an Iranian general and six Hizb'ullah fighters. ⁴

In addition to this military involvement, it has been made clear that Israel has been providing Syrian opposition fighters with medical and logistical support, in order to aid their fight against the Syrian regime and its allies. Wounded soldiers have on numerous occasions received medical treatment and services within Israeli borders, before

being transported back into the conflict zone⁵, while the UNDOF reported in May of IDF soldiers handing over ‘boxes to armed members of the opposition’, as well as continued medical shuttling.⁶

Understanding Israel

It is not difficult to understand Israel’s reasoning behind their support for al-Nusra and other Syrian opposition groups. Clearly, Israel views an increasing Iranian presence in the region as more distressing than the prevailing internecine Arab conflict. In fact, as former IDF Chief of Staff Brig. Gen. Michael Herzog argued, Israel sees al-Nusra as totally focused on the war in Syria and not on Israel, “But when Hizb’ullah and Iran and others are pushing south, they are very much focused on us [Israel]”⁷. It is therefore perceived to be in Israel’s self-interest to provide support for al-Nusra and thus create a buffer-zone of Sunni rebels between Damascus and the northern Israeli border. This support also distracts Hizb’ullah and Iran from using the Syrian conflict to unite forces against Israel. In the turbulence of the contemporary Middle

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East, Israel has clearly designated al-Nusra as the lesser of multiple *evils*.

It is perhaps more difficult to understand the Israeli claim that this support is merely humanitarian, and that Israel is treating all Syrian refugees without vetting or prejudice. Prevailing Israeli propaganda claims as much and Israel has taken great steps to cover up its links with al-Nusra and al-Qaeda.⁸ It has interred Sedqi al-Maqet, a Syrian activist known for reporting on IDF-Syrian opposition interactions, and imposed a gag-order restricting the coverage of his case, in the hope that Israeli involvement could be viewed as impartial and benevolent.

However, the recent admission of aid to al-Qaeda by an army spokesman⁹ combined with United Nations Disengagement Observer Force

(UNDOF) reports of collusion throw doubts on this claim. Israel’s military activity in Syria has exclusively targeted the Syrian regime or Hizb’ullah installations, while no “impartial” medical or logistical assistance has found its way to wounded or beleaguered governmental forces. Indeed it is beyond credible that

Israel could take charge of Hamas, Hizb'ullah or Iranian militants, treat and resupply them, and then let them on their way in the same fashion as they do for Syrian opposition fighters.

The Western media silence on these issues is illuminating, demonstrating the extent to which so-called independent institutions are reliant on their state's narrative. It would clearly be embarrassing for the US and UK to publicise that the only "democracy" in the region is aiding former public enemy Number One, and this could also strengthen the ever-widening gulf between Israel and its Western allies as Israel pursue their solo policies. Alternatively, the Western silence is a result of powerful lobbies within media organisations, which also recognise the damage to Israeli-Western relations that could result from increased public awareness of Israel's unilateral activities in the region. Either way, the Western media's reluctance to report on Israel's actions in southern Syria is undoubtedly facilitating the country's ability to maintain this campaign in their own interests.

IS and Israel

The mutual relationship between al-Nusra and Israel in the Golan Heights and Quneitra is also illuminating. This

alliance of convenience demonstrates two strategic decisions on the part of the Jewish nation. Primarily, it indicates that Israel remains willing, as it has throughout its 70-year history, to take steps to secure its interests, and secondly it shows that Israel is not averse to supporting even the most extreme Salafist ideology in the pursuit of weakening stronger geopolitical rivals. Whether this would remain the case if IS should extend their territorial expansion southwards remains to be seen. Simultaneously, should Iran prove worthy of the international community's trust in the wake of its rapprochement, would Israel reconsider its antagonism?

However, IS remains a secondary consideration for Israel. Certainly in relation to the consternation IS is causing in Israel's Arab neighbours, the group is a cause for little concern in Tel Aviv.¹⁰ This is largely due to the decidedly little attention Israel has received from the Islamic State itself. Unlike many Islamist organisations, IS has not sought to intervene in the Israel-Palestinian conflict, and has consequently not relied upon anti-Israeli rhetoric to draw support. Indeed, the existence of IS has ironically fostered closer links between Israel and its Arab neighbours than any major peace process in recent years, as demonstrated by the first ever public announcement

acknowledging a Saudi-Israeli cooperative discussion. Israel is no longer seen as the pre-eminent enemy of these Arab regions, and indeed even in Palestinian areas, IS is considered a more immediate and dangerous threat.¹¹

Indeed, while IS undoubtedly does not approve of Israel, it has no sympathy for the PA or Hamas either. Islamic State sees Hamas as a proponent of the democratic process, which it rejects, as well as being affiliated with apostates in the form of Iran and Hizb'ullah.¹² By

Salafist doctrine, IS is committed to purifying Islamic society as a priority, before turning to combat non-

Islamic societies. Incidentally, this is why IS was largely silent on antagonism against the West until the beginning of the US-led Coalition resistance to their spread across Iraq and Syria. In a similar fashion, IS has remained silent with regards to Israel, in fact aligning itself against their common enemy in Hamas.

Consequently, for as long as Islamic State remains in northern Syria and Iraq, Israel is content to continue degrading the capabilities of its opponents.

However, Israel may be worried by indications that IS has ambitions far beyond this geographical containment. Recently, IS has announced its intention to displace al-Nusra in the Syrian Golan, potentially coming into direct conflict with Israel's proxies.¹³ The IS missive cites Israeli aid and collusion as a key reason for its opposition to al-Nusra's continuing command over the region.

Simultaneously, IS has provided a banner for disaffected Arabs across the region to unite behind, including in

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Palestinian areas. This can be seen in the IS infiltration of Yarmouk refugee camp south

of Damascus. Even though this camp is hundreds of miles from IS-controlled regions, it was able to carry out a massacre in close proximity to Lebanon, Israel, and the Syrian capital. Additionally, while official Islamic State association is difficult to ascertain, a self-proclaimed affiliate group in Gaza has launched several rocket attacks in June 2015.¹⁴ Though these rockets landed near Ashdod and perpetrated minimal damage with no casualties, their presence indicates a

worrying vulnerability and susceptibility to Islamic State's contagious ideology even far from the group's territorial control.

Future

With IS denouncing al-Nusra and claiming intent to seize the Syrian Golan, while Hizb'ullah and Iranian troops patrol the area, it will be intriguing to see how Israel walks their tightrope of maintaining balanced insecurity. If they continue their policy of disrupting Iranian influences, they may find themselves *assisting* Islamic State, alienating their Western allies and Arab neighbours. Alternatively, opposition to IS could lead to Shia resurgence and

Hizb'ullah victory. As both of these options are unpalatable, Israel may seek to deny both easy operability by continuing their support of al-Nusra. However, this is merely a short-term solution. Eventually, Israel is going to have to decide whether to involve itself fully and forcefully, and many questions remain, not least of which, by what legitimacy they have to interfere in Arab/ Islamic affairs. In short, this small area of the troubled region, and this facet of the conflict, where Syrian, Israeli, Iranian, Hizb'ullah and al-Qaeda forces meet, is a complex affair and of vastly more interest than it is currently afforded in Western media.

ABOUT THE NEO-JIHADISM PROGRAMME:

Scope & Rationale:

Jihadists represent a fraction of the larger mainstream Islamist movement, which dominates the social space in most Muslim societies. Although Jihadism is 'lethal', it does not possess a viable broad social base like the Muslim Brotherhood. One silver lining for Al Qaeda, however, is its affiliate organizations. In Iraq, Syria, the Maghreb, Somalia, Yemen, and Egypt, Al Qaeda has won over formidable local allies to its cause, expanding its reach, power, and numbers in the process. This string of mergers is not over. In places as diverse as the Sinai Peninsula and Nigeria, Al Qaeda-linked organizations are emerging. In retrospect; the death of Osama bin Laden, the onslaught of global war on terror, the Arab revolution and post Arab-revolution crises etc. have seriously impacted on Jihadists landscape which is constantly changing. Jihadism today is neither transnational such as Al-Qaeda central, nor national i.e. Hezbollah, but regional. It is also increasingly more sectarian. As the Jihadists' landscape changes; the study and understanding of Jihadism must also adapt to address the developing movement of 'Neo-Jihadism'.

“Neo-Jihadism is a diverse, syncretic form of global organisation and interaction that emerged from within Islamic Jihadism, is unique to early-twenty-first-centuries, is increasingly sectarian and through its advocacy of violent form of war and selectively literal interpretations of sacred texts, radically differentiates itself from the traditional Jihadist forces, the faith’s mainstream and constitutes a new body of thought and actions”.

Methodology & Research areas/questions:

This programme aims to conduct fact-based analyses of actual and potential uses of militancy and Jihadism as a tactic and belief and the changing concept of ‘war’ in the Muslim world; so that we may provide policy guidance to government officials and private sector decision-makers with alternative policy analyses. The key research questions are:

- How has Neo-Jihadism developed?
- Is Neo-Jihadism a new concept of war or culture?
- How Jihadism is perceived within the Islamic world and does it still carry meanings of a ‘just war’?
- How do its adherents maintain and facilitate it to transcend borders?
- Why have neo jihadi leaders been struggling to advance a coherent and effective response to the events of the Arab Spring and what trends are emerging
- Why, despite strong rhetoric of militancy, have we witnessed little action on the part of Neo-Jihadi groups that have emerged in countries that underwent regime change as a result of the Arab Spring?

Programme Deliverables:

1. Mapping the interplay between militant groups, the states and other external actors
2. A conflict and forecast analysis on current and emerging threats that might change the Jihadist landscape
3. In depth situation analyses on above issues, regional positioning and global powers interests etc.
4. Alternative policy analyses that may serve in policy making on regional and global governance levels
5. Strategic foresight for business and stakeholders that might be involved in the crisis affected regions

ABOUT THE INSTITUTE FOR ISLAMIC STRATEGIC AFFAIRS (IISA)

IISA is a think-tank and an intellectual forum for addressing the current and future dynamics of the Islamic-world and its interaction with Western civilisation. Based in London, IISA will create trans-Islamic and global reach. IISA seeks to establish a platform where Islamic-world's dynamics, trends, issue, problems or crises are analysed within the Islamic-world and by working on local models and realities and not against any external standards or perceptions. We will be one of the leading think-tank on the Islamic-world and its role in the contemporary global system. In a short span of time we have attracted great academic support and a reputation for both open and track-II dialogues. IISA is the only think tank initiative that goes beyond national and regional inclinations and addresses strategic and socio-political issues/crises of the Islamic world in its totality. For more information i.e. our mission statement, current programmes and our academic and regional expertise please visit the following links:

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