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ISRAEL'S VIEW OF THE SYRIAN CRISIS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For decades, Israel viewed Syria as its most bitter Arab enemy. Syria's Arab nationalist ideology was fiercely anti-Israel, and border disputes left the two nations perpetually on the brink of conflict. After the June 1967 war, Israel's occupation of the Golan Heights became the most important issue separating the two countries, and when Syria joined the peace process launched in Madrid in October 1991, the future of the Golan Heights became the main bone of contention between the adversaries. The Israeli-Syrian negotiations came close to fruition but ultimately failed. During the early years of Bashar al-Assad's reign, relations with the United States became tense and Israeli-Syrian contacts were severed. The Ehud Olmert years in Israel saw renewed peace talks with Syria via the Turkish channel, again raising hopes of an end to hostilities but again ending in failure.

In early 2011, the outbreak of the Syrian crisis that has since descended into civil war sparked a rethink of Israel's policy toward its neighbor. While Israel may have once preferred the Assad regime to remain in power rather than take its chances with an unknown successor, this "the devil we know" approach is no longer valid. After Israel had found itself frustrated by developments beneficial to Iran and its "Resistance Axis" throughout the Arab Spring—most notably the fall of Zine el Abidine Ben Ali and Hosni Mubarak—the increasing pressure on the Syrian regime has represented a blow to Iran and its allies. Thus, while recognizing that Israel has little to no influence on the course of events in Syria, Israel's leaders have largely reached a consensus that Assad's departure from power is preferable.

As it rages on, Syria's civil war complicates a variety of Israel's foreign policy priorities. Clearly, the uncertainty in Syria has put the question of the Golan

Heights on hold indefinitely. It may be a long time until Israel can readdress the prospect of giving the Golan back to Damascus, as many hawkish (and in fact some dovish) Israelis have seen Bashar al-Assad's actions in his domestic crisis as proof that past efforts at a Golan-for-peace deal were misguided. Israel's efforts to challenge Iran over its nuclear program are also affected by the instability facing Tehran's ally in Damascus. If Israel or the U.S. were to launch a military strike against Iran's nuclear facilities, a desperate and beleaguered Assad could conceivably seek to transform his domestic war into another Arab-Israeli war by taking the opportunity to attack Israel on Iran's behalf. However, the Syrian conflict has the potential to bring the damaged Israeli-Turkish relationship closer to normalcy; if the two nations can resolve their dispute over the Mavi Marmara incident, they can find common ground in seeking to foster a stable post-Assad government in Syria.

Overall, Israel would prefer regime change in Syria, but has concerns about what type of government would succeed Bashar al-Assad. It hopes for a secular regime to emerge, but due to limited influence—and the likelihood that support for any faction would backfire due to Israel's toxic reputation in the Arab world—it is maintaining a passive stance. Without changing this greatly, however, Israel should build discreet channels to the emerging actors in Syria to prepare for future outcomes. And with several neighbors—such as Turkey, Jordan, and the Gulf states—sharing some common goals for the outcome of the Syrian crisis, Israel must seek to cooperate with them to advance its interests, which requires building trust with those actors. Thus, to avoid being a bystander in the Syrian crisis, it would serve Israel well to re-engage with Turkey and earn good will in the Arab world by seriously restarting the Palestinian peace process.

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ISRAEL'S VIEW OF THE SYRIAN CRISIS

INTRODUCTION

The Israeli dimension of the unfolding Syrian crisis has been one of its most curious aspects. Syria is surrounded by five neighbors: Turkey, Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan and Israel. The first four have all been significantly affected by the Syrian civil war or have played a significant role in it. Israel, Syria's enemy and intermittent partner in peace negotiations, has thus far been least affected by the storm raging north of its border and has had practically no impact on its course. But this could change swiftly. Israel's interests in Syria and in the Syrian crisis are manifold: Israel is interested first and foremost in peace and stability across its northern border, in preventing weapons of mass destruction from being delivered to or falling into the hands of Hezbollah or other terrorist organizations, and in preventing jihadi elements from establishing themselves north of the Golan Heights in a manner comparable to what happened in the Sinai. Israel is also interested in eliminating Iran's influence in Syria and weakening Hezbollah in Lebanon and in preventing Iran from using Syria to deflect attention from its nuclear program.

Despite the present calm, Israel could suddenly find itself involved in and affected by the Syrian

civil war and the war's future course and ultimate outcome. This analysis paper places Israel's view of the Syrian crisis in its bilateral, regional and international contexts, and examines the manner in which Israel's interests would be affected by possible outcomes of the current crisis.

THE BACKGROUND¹

From 1948 to 1991 and under successive regimes, Syria was regarded by Israel as its most bitter Arab enemy. While Egypt was its most formidable military foe, Syria's position as "the pulsating heart of Arab nationalism," its particular closeness to Palestine and to the Palestinian issue, and the complexity of Israeli-Syrian border issues accounted for the intensity of the bilateral conflict between the two countries.

Over the years, several changes in the nature of the conflict and its dynamics took place. In the 1967 war Israel's capture of the Golan Heights and Syria's determination to regain them became an important—eventually the most important—component of their conflict. The Syrian attempt to reoccupy the Golan Heights during the October 1973 war failed, but in the war's aftermath a disengagement

¹ See: Itamar Rabinovich, *The View From Damascus: State, Political Community and Foreign Relations in Modern and Contemporary Syria* (London and Portland: Valentine Mitchell, 2011).

agreement was brokered by Henry Kissinger that has since governed the relationship along the cease-fire line. Syria's president, Hafiz al-Assad, kept the agreement and consequently a quiet front, but he continued to wage the struggle against Israel indirectly through Lebanon and by supporting Palestinian groups and promoting terrorist activity.

Assad's ability to conduct this two-pronged policy was facilitated by his success in building the Syrian state and turning it into a powerful actor in Middle Eastern regional politics. Assad remained the close ally of the Soviet Union, but he kept channels open to the West and impressed a number of U.S. presidents and Secretaries of State as a gifted, intriguing leader, who it seemed could possibly be won over to Washington's side of the line.

When Anwar Sadat decided in 1977 to make peace with Israel, Assad led the campaign against what he viewed and denounced as a combination of treachery and stupidity. Fourteen years later, after the Soviet Union collapsed and in the aftermath of the first Gulf War, Assad joined the U.S.-led Madrid process. This launched a decade-long effort to resolve the Syrian-Israeli conflict.

During this decade, four Israeli prime ministers—Yitzhak Rabin, Shimon Peres, Benjamin Netanyahu and Ehud Barak—conveyed to Assad their willingness in principle to withdraw from the Golan in return for an acceptable package of peace and security. This policy reflected a belief that Syria was a better partner to predicate the peace process on than the Palestinians. Assad in turn agreed in principle to sign a peace treaty with Israel and to normalize relations. But for reasons that will not be detailed here, the Israeli-Syrian peace settlement that was—or at least appeared to be—tantalizingly close was not reached and the negotiations finally collapsed in March 2000. Hafiz al-Assad died three months later and a new chapter in Syria's history and its relationship with Israel was opened.

BASHAR AL-ASSAD AND ISRAEL

The death of the builder of the Syrian state and his dynastic-style replacement by an ill-suited son was but one of the developments that converged in 2000 to change the course of Syria's history (and in our context, its relationship with Israel). The U.S. presidential elections of November 2000 determined that Bill Clinton, a staunch believer in Syrian-Israeli peace and American-Syrian rapprochement, would be replaced by George W. Bush, who entered office unenthused by the beleaguered Arab-Israeli peace process and was soon to mount a collision course with Bashar al-Assad's Syria. In Israel, Ehud Barak's power was sapped by the failure of the Camp David conference and the outbreak of the second Palestinian Intifada, and he was finally defeated and replaced by Likud leader Ariel Sharon. Thus ended a decade of a quest for an Israeli-Syrian peace settlement and a Lebanese policy based on the assumption that an Israeli-Syrian deal would also provide the best solution to Israel's Lebanese dilemma.

Not much happened in the Israeli-Syrian relationship during the next six years. Bashar al-Assad's policy was three-pronged: he stated several times that he wanted to renew the negotiations with Israel, he reinforced his military capacity for war in case the diplomatic option failed, and he intensified the strategic collaboration with Iran and Hezbollah. While Hafiz al-Assad was an Iranian ally and treated Hezbollah and its leader, Hassan Nasrallah, as clients, over time Bashar became a client rather than a peer of the senior Iranian partner and treated Nasrallah as an admired partner rather than a subordinate. During the early 2000s, Hezbollah's arsenal of missiles and rockets was built up dramatically as a deterrent against potential American and Israel attacks against either Iran or Syria.

Ariel Sharon was absolutely uninterested in a Syrian diplomatic option or in dealing with the potential threat of Hezbollah's swelling arsenal. Sharon was fully focused on the Palestinian issue—first in

defeating the second Intifada and then in the withdrawal from Gaza—and refused to be diverted by dealing with a “Syrian option.” When Bashar al-Assad, in an effort to alleviate George W. Bush’s pressure, tried to establish contact, he was rebuffed by Sharon. But Sharon was careful not to be drawn into a serious military conflict with Assad’s Lebanese ally, Hezbollah.

When Hezbollah grew bolder, Sharon retaliated by air against minor targets in Syria. The message was clear: he held Syria accountable for Hezbollah’s actions and promised that, should they continue or escalate, he would retaliate more forcefully against Syria (it should be noted that Sharon chose not to act against the buildup of Hezbollah’s arsenal of missiles and rockets by Iran and Syria).

Significantly—and by now famously—when the U.S. president, irritated by the double games played by Assad in Iraq, spoke to Sharon about seeking to remove him, Sharon replied by saying that he preferred “the devil we know.” In other words, he too was not enamored of Assad and his policies, but preferred a Syrian ruler who kept the ceasefire line with Israel quiet and worried that the alternative to the Baath regime was the Muslim Brotherhood, the only organized opposition group known to the outside world.²

EHUD OLMERT’S SYRIAN POLICY

Ehud Olmert, who succeeded Sharon when he fell ill in early 2006, initially continued with his Syrian policy, or lack thereof. His close relationship with George W. Bush reinforced his reluctance to think of Bashar al-Assad as a potential peace partner. But in the course of 2006 and 2007, this plain and simple view and policy was transformed by two main developments: the 2006 war in Lebanon and the discovery of Syria’s joint efforts with North Korea to develop a nuclear weapon.

The 2006 war in Lebanon revealed the full extent of the threat posed to Israel’s national security by the trilateral cooperation between Iran, Syria and Hezbollah. The war moderated Hezbollah’s conduct, but its arsenal of missiles and rockets was augmented and the future threat was exacerbated. In the course of the war, President Bush made no secret of his hope that Olmert would take on Syria as well, but Olmert declined. At the war’s end, Olmert accepted the dominant view in Israel’s national security establishment that the best option for dealing with the threat would be renewed negotiations and an eventual settlement with Syria. This, so the argument went, would be the most effective way of beginning to dismantle the axis led by Iran and to weaken Hezbollah and its hold over Lebanon. Olmert cleared the issue with President Bush, who was not happy with the idea, but did not veto it either. Olmert chose to start the negotiations through Turkey and agreed to Assad’s insistence that they be conducted, as least initially, as a Turkish mediation. The mediation was held in Ankara and culminated in Olmert’s ill-fated visit to the Turkish capital in December 2008 on the eve of Operation Cast Lead in Gaza. Syria’s foreign minister, Walid Muallem, was to join Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Olmert but failed to show up. Given the fact that Olmert was at that time on his way out of office, it is difficult to assess the degree of real progress made in those negotiations.

When Israeli intelligence discovered the reactor being built by North Korea in northeastern Syria, and when Olmert found out that President Bush was not willing to destroy it, he undertook to do it himself in September 2007. Once the military operation was completed successfully, Israel’s main concern was to manage the political and media fallout in a manner that would minimize the pressure on Assad to respond militarily. Assad did indeed refrain from any such retaliation. The whole episode underlined for Israel the question marks regarding

² Itamar Rabinovich, *The Lingering Conflict: Israel, the Arabs and the Middle East, 1948-2011* (Washington: Brookings, 2011), chapter 5.

Bashar al-Assad's persona: he was willing to gamble on a far reaching, dangerous nuclear collaboration with North Korea, but displayed maturity and restraint once exposed and humiliated. After an appropriate hiatus, the Turkish mediation between Israel and Syria was resumed (to no avail, as we saw).³

ISRAEL AND THE SYRIAN REBELLION

The end of Ehud Olmert's tenure spelled the end of the fifth futile effort since 1991 to resolve the Israeli-Syrian conflict. His successor as Kadima leader, Tzipi Livni, failed to form a new government and in the ensuing general elections, the Israeli voters shifted to the right and gave power to Benjamin Netanyahu and a right-wing coalition. His own Syrian gambit in 1998 notwithstanding, Netanyahu the candidate and Netanyahu the prime minister in his second term was publically and adamantly opposed to the notion of Israeli withdrawal from the Golan. America's new president, Barack Obama, did advocate "engagement" with Syria, but in practice, during most of his first term, his investment in the effort to revive the Arab-Israeli peace process was channeled to the Palestinian issue.

The Obama administration appointed Fred Hof, a well-known Syria expert who had written extensively on issues of the Israeli-Syrian peace process, as George Mitchell's deputy with special responsibility for the Israeli-Syrian track. Given the emphasis placed by Barack Obama and his administration on the effort to restart an Israeli-Palestinian peace process, the "Syrian option" was relegated to a secondary place. Instead, Hof and his superiors tried to open an American-Syrian dialogue that would focus on improving the bilateral relationship. Senior State Department officials travelled to Damascus and Senator John Kerry was given—or took—a special responsibility for cultivating a relationship with Syria and its president. This suited Netanyahu, whose plate was filled by controversies over

the Palestinian issue. The attempt at building a new relationship between Washington and Damascus collapsed, but in 2010 the Obama administration launched a new effort to restart the Syrian-Israeli negotiations. This was a familiar pattern: when difficulties accumulated on one track of the peace process, the emphasis was shifted to the other. In late 2011, it was revealed to the Israeli press that the secret mediation between Netanyahu's government and Assad's regime was quite serious and lasted until the outbreak of the Syrian crisis in March 2011. It is not known what Netanyahu's ultimate intentions were when he engaged the Obama administration in this mediation effort. Was he willing to go the distance and make a deal with Bashar al-Assad based on full withdrawal from the Golan? Or was he primarily interested in creating an ongoing alternative to the Palestinian track? The leak to the Israeli press was probably intended to embarrass Netanyahu by exposing the discrepancy between his rhetoric and practice, but anyone who expected the revelation to have an impact on Israeli electoral politics was disappointed.

It was against this backdrop that the rebellion against Bashar al-Assad's regime broke out in March 2011. Several weeks later, when it became clear that this was not a passing episode but a deeply rooted popular rebellion that kept gaining support and strength, Israeli policymakers and analysts formed the first serious response to the Syrian crisis. At that point in time, around May 2011, it could still not be said with any certainty that the regime was doomed. One could still envisage a bloody suppression of the opposition or, less likely, a significant political reform in Syria. Israel's attitude at that time can be summarized along the following lines:

1. Contrary to a myth current in the Middle East and elsewhere, Israel did not seek to help keep Assad in power and did not seek to persuade the U.S. to follow the same

³ *Ibid*, chapter 6.

policy. Ariel Sharon's "the devil we know" response to George W. Bush in 2005 was no longer relevant in 2011. Ehud Olmert's conclusion from the events of 2006 was to seek an accommodation with Syria, but this policy led nowhere and vanished when Olmert left office. From that point on, there was not a single Israeli view of Syria and Bashar al-Assad, but Israeli perceptions of Syria and its president in the aftermath of Olmert's departure can best be described as ambivalent. The 2006 experience in Lebanon and the North Korean reactor affair had a negative effect, but the sense that the most effective way of toppling the "Iranian Wall" was to start by pulling the Syrian brick out of it did not vanish. This ambivalence was apparent in the spring of 2011 when Israeli decision-makers had to make up their minds on whether they preferred Assad to stay or go. The Israeli leadership saw Assad as more harmful than beneficial. It was clear that a diplomatic option was off the table in the short term. They were worried about the identity of his successors, but they saw the damage to Iran that would be caused by his fall, and on the whole preferred his departure.

2. The Israelis realized that their view of events in Syria, as long as they did not affect Israel directly, was rather academic. Israel had no influence inside Syria and realized that any support it would wish to extend to the Syrian opposition would be counter productive and play into the regime's hands. Bashar al-Assad's initial and persistent response to the rebellion was the claim that this was not a genuine domestic uprising, but a plot hatched from the outside, primarily by the U.S. and Israel. If Israel were to extend support to the rebels (or even offer humanitarian help), it

would play into Assad's hands by lending credence to this propaganda line. The expectation by some external observers that Israel could use its military might to affect the course of events in Syria through such measures as concentrating forces on the border was not and has not been considered seriously by the Israeli leadership.

3. Israel did note with satisfaction that not all events of the Arab Spring were necessarily beneficial to Iran and the "Resistance Axis." The fall of Ben Ali and Mubarak, and the pressure on the conservative monarchies in the Arab world were seen as Iranian gains, but the Syrian rebellion was a significant setback to Tehran. Syria was Iran's principal ally and increasingly its client in the region, its land bridge to Lebanon, and its partner in supporting Hamas in Gaza. The prospect of a regime change in Syria, and the emergence of a pro-American successor to Bashar al-Assad, was abhorrent to Tehran. The repercussions of the Syrian crisis were soon manifested among Iran's other clients: Hezbollah in Lebanon shifted to a defensive mode and Hamas moved its external headquarters away from Damascus. From a zero-sum game perspective, Iran's loss was Israel's gain.
4. The repercussions for Iran were clearly just part of a larger regional and international picture. As the rebellion continued and intensified, Syria became the arena of a regional conflict between Iran and its rivals as well as between Russia (and to a lesser extent, China) and the U.S. and its Western allies. Events in Syria also had specific effects on such neighbors as Turkey and Iraq (Israel's view on these effects will be discussed in some details below).
5. Israel drew a clear distinction between the immediate and longer term ramifications of

the Syrian crisis. Rebellion, civil war, and the prospect of regime change in a hostile neighboring country require watchfulness and close attention. Except for a single incident (that will be discussed below), eighteen months of rebellion in Syria had remarkably little impact on Israel. But this reality has been fragile and could change swiftly. The regime's collapse, if it materializes or seems to be imminent, could transform the present calm into a major Israeli-Syrian crisis and so could the launching of an Israeli or an American raid on Iran's nuclear facilities. The long-term ramifications for Israel of the Syrian crisis will naturally depend on the future course of events. They will be analyzed further below according to several scenarios.

THE MAY 2011 EVENTS AND THE ISSUE OF WMDs

In mid-May 2011, nearly two months after the outbreak of the rebellion, Rami Makhoul, Bashar al-Assad's cousin, gave an unusual interview to the *New York Times*. Makhoul is a businessman, charged with building and managing the ruling family's illicit fortune and a member of the regime's innermost circle. It is not known whether his statement was cleared or coordinated in advance with his cousin, but it was clearly significant and prescient. The main import of the interview was the message that the regime was determined to hold onto power and was willing to fight to the bitter end. But Makhoul chose also to include a specific warning directed at both Jerusalem and Washington: "If there is no stability here, there is no way there will be stability in Israel [...] and nobody can guarantee what will happen after, God forbid, anything happens to this regime [...] don't push Syria to do anything it is not happy to do."⁴

A few days later, on Nakba Day, thousands of Palestinians gathered along the fence separating the Golan Heights from Syria near the Druze village of Majdal Shams in the Golan Heights. Unlike the security fences along Israel's other borders, that fence was not a real barrier and several hundred Palestinians managed to break through it and cross into Majdal Shams. Four of them were killed and several dozens wounded by a small, surprised and ill-prepared Israeli military force.

The incident reflected a sense of Israeli complacency, a byproduct of decades of quiet along the ceasefire line with Syria. Israelis became used to a state of affairs whereby whatever the Baath regime was inflicting on Israel in other fronts, it implemented the terms of the 1974 disengagement agreements scrupulously and kept the Golan front quiet. The May incident in Majdal Shams was but one of several Palestinian efforts to mark Nakba Day along Israeli frontiers. In the Syrian case, it may not have been sponsored, just permitted, by the regime. Nonetheless, it was a wake up call for Israel that the Golan front might no longer remain quiet and that the unrest could quickly ignite the Syrian front whether as a deliberate policy (as threatened by Rami Makhoul) or as a byproduct of the Syrian rebellion.

Israel took the necessary precautions, beefing up the fence and boosting its military presence in the Golan. A second Palestinian attempt to cross the fence was nipped in the bud. The Golan front remained quiet but there was a reinforced sense in Israel that the Syrian civil war could spill into Israel or draw it in from one day to the next. In November 2012, a number of incidents occurred along the Syrian-Israeli ceasefire line and in the Golan Heights. They were probably an unintended consequence of the fighting between the Syrian army and the opposition and did not reflect a decision by either side to extend the fighting into the Golan Heights or try to draw Israel into the conflict.

⁴ *New York Times*, May 10, 2011.

During the next thirteen months, as the Syrian crisis deteriorated into a full-fledged civil war, the Israeli-Syrian front remained calm. It was stirred again in the late summer of 2012 by two issues. One was Syria's arsenal of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). As talks of the regime's final collapse intensified and became more relevant, the potential ramifications of Syria's possession of ballistic missiles and chemical and biological warheads and stockpiles came to the fore. The U.S. and its Western allies were alarmed by a confluence of intelligence material and published statements by the Syrian regime. Would Assad and his cohorts, their backs to the wall, use them against their own population? Would they transfer part of the stockpiles to such terrorist organizations as Hezbollah? Would they be tempted to exit the stage in a blaze of presumptive glory by firing their missiles at Israel and other detested neighbors?⁵

Israel responded by threatening to intercept any transfer of WMDs. Defense Minister Barak, Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, and Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) Chief of Staff Benny Gantz, all warned that this was in fact a "red line," and according to the foreign minister, "a *casus belli*." The professionals were more nuanced than the politicians. Reserve General Amos Gilad, Head of the Political-Military Division in the Ministry of Defense, explained in July 2012 that thus far the regime maintained control of its WMD arsenal. Chief of Staff Gantz warned that it might be difficult to pinpoint such Israeli action "and if you work broadly you may find yourself soon enough in a larger campaign than the one you had planned. We should take into account what would remain after the act and into what hands it might fall."⁶ What the IDF chief of staff probably wanted to say was that should Israel intercept the transfer of WMDs by the Assad regime to Hezbollah, or launch a raid

against Hezbollah, this could easily develop into a full-fledged conflict between Israel and Hezbollah.

The Obama administration issued a stern warning to the Assad regime lest it contemplate using chemical weapons against its own population. President Obama warned Assad that "there would be enormous consequences if we start to see a movement on the chemical weapons front [...] that could change my calculus."⁷

The second issue was the higher profile of Iran's direct participation in the Syrian civil war. In earlier phases of the Syrian crisis, Iran was openly supportive of its Syrian client, but it tried to conceal the active part played by Iranian troops in the fighting. This changed in the summer of 2012 as part of a larger Iranian effort to cast Iran as a proactive, powerful regional actor, rather than the passive target of a much discussed American or Israeli raid. Thus Mohammad Ali Aziz Ja'fari, Commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, admitted that members of the Quds Force were present in Syria.⁸

It was against this backdrop that Israel announced in early September 2012 that the IDF conducted a military exercise in the Golan Heights and that it had notified the Syrian government through "appropriate channels" in advance so as to avoid both alarm and misrepresentation. There may well have been other reasons for holding this exercise at this particular time, but it was bound to be interpreted as a message to both Iran and Syria.

THE ISRAELI PUBLIC DISCOURSE

For a country known for the loquaciousness of its political and policy elites, the Israeli public discourse regarding the Syrian crisis has been quite restrained. The Israeli policy community and

⁵ See interview with four former commanders of Israel's Northern Command: *Ma'ariv*, July 27, 2012 (in Hebrew).

⁶ *Ma'ariv*, July 24, 2012 (in Hebrew).

⁷ *New York Times*, August 20, 2012.

⁸ *The Guardian*, September 17, 2012.

media have followed the unfolding of the Syrian crisis closely and covered it extensively, but in the context of such a major event with major potential repercussions for Israel, Israeli politicians and policy makers have made relatively few, and on the whole, careful statements. The combined sense that Israel had little influence in the course of events, that that course was uncertain, and that the ultimate impact on Israel was unclear accounts for this reticence.

Two significant themes emerge most prominently from the Israeli discourse on Syria during this period. The first concerns the issue of an Israeli-Syrian peace settlement and the related issue of Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights. Needless to say, the two issues have been suspended for the time being. The civil war in Syria will have to end and a suitable regime will have to be formed before these issues are placed back on the agenda. But the Israeli opponents of these notions, and critics of the willingness of four Israeli prime ministers to withdraw from the Golan as part of a peace deal with Syria, wasted no time in trumpeting the wisdom of their position in view of the civil war in Syria.

It was not surprising to hear and read the articulation of this position from the right wing of the Israeli political spectrum, but the most eloquent retrospective denunciation of the deal that was not made with Syria was written by the influential centrist columnist, Ari Shavit. It merits quoting at some length:

No one likes to admit they were wrong. I don't, either. But sometimes you have no choice.

I recently went up north for Shabbat. I spent hours just looking at the mountains of the Golan Heights as they reddened toward evening. But slowly the pure pleasure I was getting out of their amazing beauty was replaced by a deep discomfort.

I couldn't help but think what would be happening today if the ideological position I had long held—peace in return for the Golan—had been accepted. I couldn't help but think what would be happening today if Ehud Barak had not frozen before Hafez Assad in 2000, or if Ehud Olmert had not been interrupted as he faced Bashar Assad in 2008. [...]

[...]Meretz wasn't the "peace with Syria" party - the Israel Defense Forces was.

On an individual scale, so was I. I wrote incessantly in the newspaper and spoke on television about the need to reach a peace-for-Golan deal. I pushed for peace-with-Syria-now with all my strength. The opposing view looked unreasonable and immoral. Those opposed looked like dangerous men. I expressed fury with Yitzhak Shamir and Ariel Sharon for blocking a dialogue with Syria and blocking Israel from peace. I was convinced that one day history would condemn them for their rejectionism and treat them as it treats Golda Meir, Moshe Dayan and Yisrael Galili.

And now, everything has been upended. It's all been reversed.

If we'd had peace in the 2000s, then today we'd already have bloodshed. If we had gone to bed with Assad a decade ago, today we'd be waking up with jihad. If we had given up Katzrin and Snir, we would have terror in Dan and Dafna. Strange substances would be flowing into the Jordan River tributaries. Frequent gun battles would be breaking out at Tel Katzir and Ha'on.

The Syrian Golan would be turned into a black hole far more dangerous than the

black hole of the Sinai desert. The idea of peace, which may have been correct in its time, would turn into a nightmare reality that would be difficult to tolerate. Sooner or later, Israel would have been forced to once again ascend to Tel Faher and Nafah and continue to Quneitra. But this time such an operation would bring ballistic missile barrages on Tel Aviv. The peace I had believed in and fought for would have turned into an enormous war in which it's possible thousands would have been killed. [...]⁹

The public mood reflected in Shavit's article was not shaped by the Syrian crisis alone. The impact of the Syrian civil war on the Israeli public's attitude on the notion of "Land for Peace" was magnified by the simultaneous turn of events in Egypt. The new regime in Egypt did not abrogate the peace treaty with Israel, as some of its supporters demanded, but it did introduce a measure of ambiguity with regard to its future. Furthermore, the Sinai Peninsula, originally an effective security barrier between Israel and Egypt, now hosted a Bedouin population out of Cairo's control and jihadi elements who carried out several terrorist attacks against Israel. As part of the larger trends generated by the Arab Spring these developments reinforced the preference of the Israeli government and a large part of the Israeli public to hold on to the territorial status quo.

On the margins of the Israeli public discourse the Syrian civil war revived a traditional interest in the "politics of minorities" that dates back to pre-state Zionist policy. Having despaired of finding an accommodation with the Sunni-Arab political establishment in the region, Zionist and subsequently Israeli policy makers tried to build partnerships with ethnic and religious minorities such as Kurds,

Druzes and Maronites. These efforts yielded meager results and the set of assumptions that underlined them seemed to have been obviated by the peace treaty with Egypt and the peace process of the 1990s. If Israel was becoming acceptable to the mainstream in the region, what was the point of reaching out to minority groups?

Such views are closely related to the sense that Syria is just one of the states in the Fertile Crescent that may be disintegrating under the weight of ethnic, religious and sectarian conflicts. Thus, one senior Israeli commentator said, after a briefing by "a senior IDF officer," who "described the situation in which Syria would be divided into a few areas under different control":

What is significant is the fact that Syria is becoming the most extreme example of the new world surrounding Israel. National states, some of which (Lebanon, for example) were artificial colonial creations while others had a long history, are weakening and some are disintegrating. The danger of "large-scale" war, involving capture of Israeli territory, disappears together with the dismantling of these countries. But new dangers are created instead: dangers that are, by nature, grey, decentralized, much harder to decipher. Yet the intensity of these [new] perils is just as great as the dangers we became accustomed to viewing as existential threats for many decades.¹⁰

But the stalling of the peace process and the impact of the Arab Spring as well as the apparent fragmentation of such states as Iraq and Lebanon raised the prospect of a fresh reshuffling of the geopolitics of the Fertile Crescent. Against this background, the talk of Alawi and Kurdish separatism in Syria led

⁹ Ari Shavit, "Soul-searching on Syria." *Ha'aretz*, September 8, 2012.

¹⁰ Ofer Shelah, "The limits of power." *M'ariv*, October 7, 2012 [in Hebrew]. The author's familiarity with Lebanon's history is another matter. Read more: Ofer Shelah, "A Question for Israel: What If Syria Becomes the Next Lebanon?" *Almonitor*, October 7, 2012. See: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2012/10/the-limits-of-power.html#ixzz28msAy7uq> (accessed on November 11, 2012).

Israeli and other analysts to ponder the prospect of a new regional order.¹¹ Such thinking is still marginal and it would take the breakup of the Syrian state to bring it into the mainstream of Israeli thinking and policy planning. Israeli military and policy planners may be preparing for the prospect of a fragmented Syria, but at this point there are no feasible indications of Israeli efforts to reach out to such minority groups as Kurds and Alawites in order to build options for such an eventuality.

ISRAEL, IRAN AND THE SYRIAN CRISIS

There are several levels to the linkage between Israel's most important national security challenge, Iran's quest for a nuclear arsenal, and the Syrian civil war.

As has been mentioned above, the Syrian civil war is among other things a war by proxy between Iran and its rivals. Iran makes a large (and, recently, self advertised) investment in shoring up Bashar al-Assad while such rivals and competitors as the U.S., its Western allies, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar support the opposition. Bashar al-Assad's fall would be a major blow for Iran and its Lebanese proxy, Hezbollah. But as long as Israel persists—correctly—in its determination to avoid direct involvement in the Syrian crisis, its impact on the outcome remains limited.

The calculus changes and becomes more complex when Israel contemplates the pros and cons of an attack by itself or by the U.S. on Iran's nuclear installations. One of the cons concerns the regional repercussions of such an attack. Iran, in addition to a direct retaliation, would be likely to get Hezbollah in Lebanon and possibly the Assad regime in Syria to launch their missiles against Israel. Of the two, Hezbollah, given the nature of its relationship with Iran, is the more likely to join the fray. Assad's

calculus may be more complex. The beleaguered Assad, hard put to cope with his own opposition, might well calculate that he need not and cannot meddle in a war with a powerful IDF that could inflict the *coup de grace* on his rule. It could also be the trigger for external military intervention in Syria that has thus far been avoided. But he might also calculate that this would be a golden opportunity to transform Syria's domestic civil war into another Arab-Israeli war.

The issue of a preemptive strike against Iran's nuclear installation was the subject of a fierce debate in Israel and between Netanyahu's government and the Obama administration during much of 2012, when it seemed that the former was keen to launch it prior to the U.S. presidential elections. The potential negative impact on the Syrian arena of such a raid was one argument—though not the most important one—used by the opponents of the raid. The issue has subsided now, but is likely to resurface as a major issue and bone of contention, and so will its Syrian dimension.

The Iranian leadership and the other parties to the conflict with Iran have been fully aware that the events in Syria benefited Tehran by diverting attention from the Iranian nuclear issue. This in itself has probably not been an important consideration for the Iranian leadership in supporting Assad and prolonging the civil war. As discussed, they had ample reasons to try to keep their principal ally in the region in power and have regarded the Syrian civil war as an arena in their conflict with a variety of rivals. The Iranian leadership must be aware of the animosity created in a large part of the Arab Sunni world against their support of Assad's regime and their active participation in the bloody repression of the opposition, but they must see the interest in the regime's survival as paramount. Be that as it may, there was not much Israel could do

¹¹ Ofra Bengio, "Kurdistan reaches toward the sea." *Ha'aretz*, August 3, 2012; Nikolas Gvosdev, "The Realist Prism: Syria Crisis Could Redraw Middle East Map." *World Politics Review*, September 21, 2012.

about this aspect of the linkage between the two crises.¹²

ISRAEL, TURKEY AND THE SYRIAN CRISIS

From Israel's perspective, the Turkish dimension of the Syrian crisis seems almost like the flip side of the Iranian one.

Turkey's rapprochement with Syria during the first decade of this century was an important component of Erdogan's new regional policies. The policy dubbed "Zero Problems" by Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu and "New Ottomanism" by others sought to compensate for Turkey's rejection by the European Union by building a position of influence in its immediate environment. Turkey's unique geopolitical position enables the country to operate in several arenas—the Balkans, Central Asia, the Caucasus and the Middle East—but it was the Middle East where the ambitions and potential of an ascendant Islamist Turkey could be pursued most effectively.

In a Middle Eastern context, the transformation of Turkey's relationship with Bashar al-Assad's Syria was the most dramatic. The previous hostility was replaced by friendship and cooperation. Syria finally gave up the irredentist claim to the province of Alexandretta. Large-scale investments were made in the Syrian economy and Erdogan acted as a mentor to the young Bashar al-Assad.

Israel was clearly concerned by the general drift of Turkey's new regional policy, by Erdogan's championing of the Palestinian cause (and more specifically of the Islamist Hamas), by the deliberate use of the distancing from Israel in order to gain influence and popularity in the Arab street, and by the impact of these policies on the Arab mood. Prime

Minister Olmert tried to stem this tide by using Turkey as the mediator between Israel and Syria, but the collapse of the mediation, Israel's Operation Cast Lead in Gaza, and subsequently the Mavi Marmara incident served to exacerbate the bilateral tension and turned it into a crisis.

It was against this backdrop that the Syrian rebellion broke out in March 2011 and resulted among other things in another reversal of Turkish-Syrian relations. As a would-be mentor, Erdogan tried to persuade Bashar al-Assad to respond to the challenge by offering real political reforms. Assad's rejection of his advice angered the famously irascible Turkish premier. The personal pique was aggravated by more substantive considerations and forces at work: genuine sympathy for a Sunni majority rebelling against the tyranny of a sectarian minority and concern with the potential impact on Turkey. The Turkish government was primarily worried by the repercussions on its own Kurdish population of the Syrian Kurdish minority's relationship with the Syrian state, and by the prospect of a large-scale flight of refugees across its border. The impact of these considerations was magnified by the developments in Iraq, the increased competition with Iran, and a sense that what seemed to be a very successful foreign policy investment in the Arab Middle East was turning sour.

With some twists and turns, the Turkish policy that emerged in mid-2011 turned Turkey into a major critic and opponent of Bashar al-Assad and his regime. Turkey objects to a direct military intervention, but it afforded a territorial base and facilities to the military and political opposition and supply routes for weapons and money provided to the Syrian opposition by such countries as Saudi Arabia and Qatar. A large number of Syrian refugees also found shelter in southern Turkey.

¹² Amos Yadlin, "'Iran First' or 'Syria First': What Lies between the Iranian and Syrian Crises." *Strategic Assessment*, vol. 15, no. 2 (July 2012), pp. 7-18.

All this could be the basis of significant Turkish-Israeli cooperation. A return to the intimate strategic alliance of the 1990s is not conceivable as long as Erdogan and the AKP are in power, but common interests in Syria and other parts of the region could be well served by modest coordination and collaboration. But even this level of cooperation cannot be achieved as long as the dispute over the after effects of the Mavi Marmara incident is not settled.

SCENARIOS, INTERESTS AND PREFERENCES

As Israel watches and reflects on the future course of the Syrian crisis and its ramifications on its own national security, it looks at a number of potential scenarios:¹³

1. A protracted continuation of the status quo under which the regime's control of the army and security apparatus and the major institutions of the central government is maintained, fighting with the opposition continues with ups and downs, and large parts of the country remain outside effective government control.
2. Regime change. This could come about as a result of the opposition's victory or Western success in persuading part of the regime's hard core and part of the opposition to join forces (it can be expected that after the U.S. presidential elections, and given the growing international pressure to end the carnage, a more vigorous Western policy would be pursued). In either case, transition is unlikely to be smooth.
3. Regime collapse followed by chaos—Alawi retreat to the mountains along the coast, Kurdish autonomy in the northeast, ongoing violence and external intervention.

4. Regime victory, which is least likely but cannot be ruled out.

There is not a single optimal and feasible scenario that could serve all its interests, but Israel's best option is for Assad's regime to be replaced by a pro-Western secular regime, though Israelis know full well that this option is not very likely. At the same time, Israeli opponents of the notion of an Israeli-Syrian settlement and withdrawal from the Golan should bear in mind that such a regime is likely to turn to Washington and ask to repeat the pattern established by Kissinger and Sadat in the 1970s. In other words, it would tell Washington that it would like to turn away from Iran and join Washington's orbit, but would also insist on regaining the Golan as part of the package.

It is difficult to see how Israel's current passive stance regarding the course of events in Syria will change, except in a context of a crisis produced by the transfer of WMDs to terrorist hands or by jihadi or other radical elements launching terrorist attacks against Israel. Needless to say, a sharp turn in the course of events in Syria will in all likelihood force Israel to make fresh decisions. But while avoiding open and direct intervention in the Syrian crisis, Israel should build discreet channels to the forces at work in Syria in preparation for the new reality that is most likely to emerge. Such Israeli policy with regard to Syria cannot be conducted in isolation from a larger shift in its regional policy. The changes in the region, the Arab Spring in particular, have confronted Israel, as we saw, with severe national security challenges, but they have also created new opportunities. Israel shares interests in the course of events in the Middle East with such countries as Turkey, Jordan and the Gulf states. Together with them, it does not have to accept the turbulence produced by the Arab Spring and the risks and opportunities created by the Syrian civil war as givens, but can formulate new

¹³ See: Udi Dekel, "Whither Syria? Recommendations for Israeli Policy," *INSS Insight*, No. 359 (August 6, 2012); Wikistrat, "Syria's Turmoil Explored"—Crowdsourcing Scenarios and Policy Options on Syria's Future." (September 10, 2012). See: <http://www.wikistrat.com/geopolitical-analysis/syrias-turmoil-explored-crowdsourcing-scenarios-and-policy-options-on-syrias-future/> (accessed October 3, 2012).

policies to deal with the unfolding situation. Israel can participate in the new diplomatic game in the Middle East, but in order to do that it has to buy a dual entry ticket: normalize its relations with Turkey and revive a peace process with the Palestinians. As has been noted above, settling the current crisis with Turkey will not restore the Israeli-Turkish alliance of the 1990s but will enable the two countries to collaborate on or coordinate policies, primarily with regard to the Syrian crisis. As for Arab countries, such as Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States, they cannot be expected to cooperate openly with Israel. But even tacit cooperation requires progress on the Israeli-Palestinian front and will clearly become harder should the current tenuous relationship with the Palestinian Authority deteriorate.

It has often been asked to what extent Israel's policy in the Syrian crisis has been affected by Washington's

position and conversely, what influence Israel has helped on U.S. policy. It seems that the mutual influence has been limited. Washington conducted its policy vis-à-vis the Syrian rebellion based on its own considerations and interests. The same is true of Israel's policy. It is quite likely that in the aftermath of the American elections of November 2012 a more vigorous U.S. policy will be adopted towards the Syrian civil war. No rush to military intervention is likely, but the anxiety that even limited steps could draw the U.S. into an involvement risky in political terms on the eve of the elections is off the agenda. As the U.S. becomes more active and a substantial change more likely, Israel's own outlook and Washington's expectations of Israel may very well change.

THE SABAN CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST POLICY

THE SABAN CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST POLICY was established on May 13, 2002 with an inaugural address by His Majesty King Abdullah II of Jordan. The creation of the Saban Center reflects the Brookings Institution's commitment to expand dramatically its research and analysis of Middle East policy issues at a time when the region has come to dominate the U.S. foreign policy agenda.

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