Israel and the Syrian Crisis: Ardent Desire and Restrain Risk

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ABSTRACT *This article addresses the strategic Israeli attitude concerning the Syrian crisis, linking the historical conceptualisation of Syria and its role in the Arab-Israeli conflict with Israel's current strategic considerations and the effect of the Lebanese syndrome upon Israel's historical collective memory. Syria has always been regarded as Israel's archenemy due to its organic ties with revolutionary pan-Arabism and support for the struggle against the Jewish State. While Israel thus hoped that the 'Arab Spring' uprisings would overthrow the Ba'ath regime or weaken it to the point of collapse, it has refrained from any military intervention, first and foremost because of what may be called the 'Lebanese syndrome' –namely, the fear of renewed entanglement and a repeat of its bitter experience in the First Lebanon War.*

Keywords: Syrian Uprising, Israel, Lebanese Syndrome, Arab Spring, First Lebanon War

Introduction

Examining the Israeli response to the uprisings in Syria, this article argues that Israel regarded the outbreak of the popular riots therein as a golden opportunity for the removal of the Ba'ath regime, a primary link in the Iranian 'axis of evil.' The strategies the Israeli government has adopted toward Syria have been heavily influenced by the view prevalent among ruling circles and academics alike –namely, that the country serves as a stronghold against Israel, buttressed by its alliance with Iran. Israel's readiness to intervene in Syria has nonetheless been mitigated by what is refered to herein as the 'Lebanese syndrome' –the fear of further entanglement à la the First Lebanese War. In order to evince the association between the Lebanese syndrome and the non-involvement strategy, the present contribution briefly reviews the Israeli perspective on the 'Arab Spring.' The following three sections then analyze the features of the Lebanese syndrome, Syria's conceptualization as a hostile entity and the Israeli plan for the country's dismantlement, and Israeli strategy with regard to the uprisings and the civil war in Syria in light of the link between the historical enmity between the two states and the ongoing effects of the Lebanese syndrome. Demonstrating that, despite the belief that Syria is a bastion of resistance to Israel and the Israeli commitment to dissolving the 'axis of evil,' Israel has chosen not to become involved, this article contends that this restraint derives first and foremost from the deterrent weight of the Lebanese syndrome.

Israel and the 'Arab Spring' Uprisings

The popular uprisings that erupted in Tunisia and Egypt took Israeli political, military, and academic bodies by surprise. Its first reaction was thus shock at the overthrow of regimes it had long regarded as moderate, anti-Islamist, pro-Western, and in favor of peace with Israel. Israeli officialdom, media, and intellectual circles focused primarily on the events in Egypt, a neighbor of particular political, security, and economic relevance. While many feared the Islamist alternative in light of its potential impact on the existing status quo, the outbreak of the uprising in Syria allayed Israel's concerns, giving rise to hopes for the collapse of the "axis of evil" stretching from Tehran to Beirut.

Before the Syrian uprising, the Israeli perception of the Arab popular uprisings had been melancholic, bleak, and pessimistic. Addressing the United Nations General Assembly in September 2011, then-Prime Minister Netanyahu extended his hand in peace to the Libyans and Tunisians in their attempt to establish democracy –as well as to the Syrians, Lebanese, and Iranians struggling against unjust, oppressive regimes. Conspicuous for its absence in this speech was Egypt, Israel's peace partner.[1]

Discussion of the outbreak of the uprisings in Syria and the ensuing civil war lies beyond our present brief, with numerous studies have already addressed this subject.[2] Still, to a large extent, the outbreak of the uprisings in Syria has been perceived as a form of "compensation" of sorts for the swift

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fall of the Mubarak regime –a supporter of stability in the region and promoter of peace. The longer the revolt has gone on, the more it has raised hopes in ruling Israeli circles that the regime's fall would weaken Iran's axis of evil. The two approaches are divided by an insurmountable fence –the bloody legacy of the Lebanese Israeli experience. The stamp this has imprinted on the Israeli historiographical discourse demonstrates the influence the Lebanese syndrome exerts. Unpacking the elements of the Lebanese syndrome reveals the force it exerts on Israeli public and national consciousness in diverse contexts, in particular –for our present purposes– the Israeli attitude toward the Syrian regime.

What Is the Lebanese Syndrome?

Known in the Israeli public and academic discourse as the First Lebanon War (1982), this campaign is both perceived and presented as forming part of Israel's traumatic history. While this view finds expression in diverse contexts beyond the scope of the present article, a number of historical details support the notion that the war constituted a national trauma. The titles of numerous books written in the first decade following its eruption –*A War of Deception, Another War, Snowball, The Lebanese Labyrinth,* etc.– reflect precisely such a reading. The syndrome can be summarized in four points.

Firstly, the First Lebanon War was undertaken at Israel's own will and whim. Unlike Israel's other campaigns –1948, 1967, and 1973– the military operation undertaken by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) was not supported by a national consensus. Its voluntary nature thus caused much frustration and resentment. The controversy over the Second Lebanese War stemmed directly from the first, its goal is to fulfill the Great Oranim Plan.[3] The fact that Israel initiated a war that did not, according to its critics, realize its aims exacerbated the bitterness over a large number of casualties, harm to Israel's reputation, and ongoing enmeshment to which it led. Arye Naor, Israeli secretary of state between 1977 and 1982, quotes a military officer close to Sharon as saying that, despite substantial reservations, Ariel Sharon's appointment as minister of defense was understood as indicating Begin's firm resolve to embrace the military option.[4]

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Secondly, it was a war of deception in two senses:

(i) Ariel Sharon's appointment as Minister of Defense constituted a watershed in internal Israeli politics, being viewed as a duping of the prime minister, government, and Israeli public into a grandiose plan that never had any chance of succeeding. As veteran Israeli journalists Ze'ev Schiff and Ehud Ya'ari observe:

> Born of the ambition of one willful, reckless man, Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon was anchored in delusion, propelled by deceit, and bound to end in calamity. It was a war for whose meager gains Israel has paid an enormous price that has yet to be altogether reckoned; a war whose defensive rationale belied far-reaching political aims and an unconscionably myopic policy … [that] drew Israel into a wasteful adventure that drained much of its inner strength and cost the IDF the lives of over 500 of its finest men in a vain effort to fulfill a role it was never meant to play.[5]

(ii) Israel was deceived and ultimately betrayed by its Maronite allies. The core argument is that the Maronites –specifically the Phalanges– deliberately duped Israel, drawing it into the Lebanese quagmire to strike a mortal blow against the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the Syrian army's military and organizational presence without any intention of keeping their word to join the fighting at some stage to remove the PLO from Beirut.

Israeli historiography of the Jewish State's relations with Lebanon has largely theorized that Israel was misled, in particular, by the Phalanges led by Bashir Gemayel. As Jacques Neriah, Rabin's political advisor and a great admirer of Gemayel, notes: "To a certain extent, Bachir was not honest about his real intentions, or at the very least was very unclear about his plans for peace."[6]

Ze'ev Schiff and Ehud Ya'ari sharpen the idea of Christian betrayal even further: "The Christian leaders misled Sharon into trusting in the [IDF's] power to impose sovereignty on the state, deceiving him with regard to their true intentions – even though today the party leaders claim that they explained the considerations and spoke clearly."[7]

Thirdly, in addition to the military and political failure, the historical discourse regarding the First Lebanon War is grounded in the belief that Israel was con-

vinced that the IDF could destroy the PLO and establish a pro-Israel regime that would lead to peace between Israel and other Arab states. These assumptions proved specious almost immediately after the IDF's entry into Lebanon. Israeli historiographical, media and academic discourse regarding the Lebanon War also propounds that the human sacrifice was completely avoidable. Many Israeli public figures thus maintain that its instigators set unrealistic goals that exceeded Israel's military and political capabilities –first and foremost, a new political order in Lebanon. As Schiffer observes:

> Israel's ability to influence the establishment of a strong Lebanese government was an illusion –a government formed under Israel's aegis that would last until the IDF left Lebanon. The Christians –of whatever denomination– only had a short-term interest in collaborating with Israel, nothing more. It is a mistake to think that Christians are united in their worldview regarding what happens in Lebanon. Different factions exist that while appearing to cooperate with one another the moment the IDF departs, and they have no one to depend on, will begin to argue among themselves. It is difficult to estimate the consequences.[8]

Israeli sociologist Gadi Yatziv, one of the founders of the Peace Now movement that emerged as part of the public protest against the First Lebanon War, espouses a closely corresponding line. In his view, while Israel set itself unachievable goals from the outset, the primary decision-maker sought to frame it in broad political and strategic terms, even promising that it would yield great benefits. The efforts to 'make order' –whether on a trivial or significant level– solely by force of

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arms, thereby imposing a 'new political order,' electing a president, 'cleansing territory,' defeating the PLO, and signing a peace agreement with Lebanon on the basis of one successful war were all considered great folly as early as the end of the 20th century and the end of colonialism.[9]

Gemayel's assassination in September 1982 opened up Pandora's box that compounded Israel's entanglement in Lebanon, damaging its international reputation, creating intolerable economic burdens, and deepening the internal split within Israeli society. The enmeshment derived from Israel's incapacity to free itself from the yoke of its ongoing military presence in Lebanon was devoid of any guiding strategic vision or direction.

Two years after the war, in light of Begin's deep disappointment that the war had not wiped out the PLO, established peace with Lebanon, and brought the idea of a Palestinian state to an end, Schiffer observed in a similar vein:

> At the end of the summer of 1983, Menahem Begin['s] … estimations and expectations of furthering Israel's interests and securing the country firmly within the historical borders of Eretz Israel had come to nothing. The pact with the Christians in Lebanon had proven to be a broken reed, the PLO had not been destroyed, the danger of a Palestinian State had not been averted, and above all the division and splits within the people in the wake of the number of casualties and fear of a potential civil war –the worst of all scenarios in Begin's mind– all guided him in light of his moral motives to face reality and say with his last remaining breathe: I can't go on.[10]

Lastly, the moral justification of the war has been deeply doubted. The fierce Israeli controversy that erupted over the morality of the First Lebanon War is predicated on the view that it was a voluntarily war that achieved none of its objectives –an ethical chimera and military and moral entanglement that led to human sacrifice and civilian massacres on a shocking scale.

The merging of these four dimensions accounts for the feelings of frustration and self-incrimination that have largely shaped Israeli public consciousness with respect to the Second Lebanon War. As Michael Walzer notes:

> In the spring of 1983, I came to the Hebrew University to give a seminar on war and ethics to a group of students, the majority of whom had served in Lebanon (many had had to stop studying in the third semester, traveling back and forth between Jerusalem and the North). We read this book in its English edition

and other very varied material, historical and political. I thought it was clear to all the students that according to the criteria laid out herein, the Lebanon war was unjustifiable. The theory of just wars inevitably places sharp restrictions on "wars of choice," its principal purpose, indeed, being give an ethical explanation of that moment– at the point at which national leaders and even ordinary citizens are choiceless: the moment of self-defense. June 1973 is a prime example; June 1983 the opposite.[11]

Since the launch of the Syrian uprising, Israeli strategy toward the crisis has been intertwined with Israeli collective memory concerning the Israeli intervention in the Lebanon civil war. The anxiety over the repetition of a military entanglement in Lebanon has subdued Israel from intervening in the Syrian chaos despite the strategic interest in bringing down the Ba'ath regime or alternatively weakening it greatly, especially following the Second Lebanon War; whereas more and more became totally persuaded that the regime has been heading to deepen the alliance with Iran and Hezbollah.

Syria in the Israeli Security Mindset: The Stronghold of Animosity Toward Israel

As Gil Eyal demonstrates, Israeli Orientalism plays a major role in shaping the consciousness and mindset of Israeli security and political establishment.[12] Specializing in the region's modern history, Israeli Orientalists analyze the Arab-Islamic milieu from a strict security perspective. This serves as a value criterion that determines the moral judgment of and political position toward the Arab milieu. As Eyal evinces, Israeli Middle Eastern experts have been preeminent since the establishment of the state, not only formulating the Israeli public's vision of the Arab world but also demarcating the cultural and political boundaries between Israel and its surroundings. Accordingly, experts and institutes of Middle Eastern studies play "a crucial role in shaping the dominant definition of reality through which Israelis perceive themselves and the Middle Eastern world around them."[13]

This logic is clearly reflected in academic studies on the modern history of Syria. These have long been the forte of scholars embedded in every level of the Israeli security establishment, exemplified by figures such as Eliezer Be'eri, Moshe Ma'oz, Itamar Rabinovich, and Eyal Zisser. Avraham Sela, who held senior positions in the army and security establishment, follows the same line. In an article published in *Maarachot*, the Israeli Ministry of Defense journal, he argues that since it gained independence, Syria has promoted the issue of Palestine more than any other Arab state. In line with the League of Arab States (LAS), the country has fulfilled all its financial obligations in this regard. It has also prominently supported the resolution calling for an economic boycott of

the Zionist settlement enterprise in Palestine, becoming the first Arab state to enact boycott laws and sentence anyone found guilty of engaging in economic relations with the Zionist settlement enterprise in Palestine to death.[14]

The Syrian state also backed Fawzi al-Qawuqji's efforts to form the Salvation Army, making Syrian army bases, particularly the Qatana encampment, available for training Palestinian fighters and volunteers.[15] After February 1948, when it became increasingly clear that the Arab states would not fulfill their commitment to support the irregular forces that had entered Palestine, Syria and Iraq were the only two countries that sought to keep their word on Palestine.

Syrian ideology is also predicated on the struggle against the Zionist settlement enterprise. While the newly independent country failed to win the support of any of the superpowers, it rushed to provide the Salvation Army with material and weapons from its modest arsenals. As Sela observes, these were sometimes taken from statutory units of the Syrian army –the first unit of the Salvation Army to arrive in Palestine being led by a Syrian, Col. Adib Shishakli, for example.[16] Despite the Syrian army's poor performance in the 1948-1949 war, Syria distinguished itself from other Arab states by its 'extremist' position both during it and afterward. Opposing the first truce and extension of the second, it was also the last Arab state to sign the armistice agreements with Israel in 1949.[17]

Sela's analysis closely parallels that of Moshe Ma'oz, who maintains that, despite its modest military capabilities, Syria took the lead in declaring an economic boycott of Israel and becoming the first Arab state to implement the LAS resolutions on the deployment of military forces on the border.[18] Following earlier scholars, Zisser points to Syria's ideological hostility as a hallmark of its attitude toward Israel and one of the central factors behind the eruption of the 1967 war. Deriving from Ba'ath principles, it is embodied in Damascus' refusal to recognize Israel's right of existence and engage in any negotiations to resolve the Israeli-Arab conflict. Even more important for our present purposes, it also forms part of the propaganda rhetoric that includes calls for wiping Israel off the map and a series of militant Syrian moves.[19] The idea that Syria serves as a stronghold of enmity toward Israel cannot be separated from the existing links between Syria and pan-Arabism, particularly in the wake of the establishment of the United Arab Republic. As Be'eri observes:

> Syrian unification with Egypt was an unprecedented event in modern history, two non-neighboring countries unifying at the behest of the smaller. Although due to current circumstances and short-lived, its roots lay deep in Syrian public consciousness, Damascus always being the prime object of any aspiration to create a great Arab or Muslim nation, constituting the active center and projector of unification.[20]

Itamar Rabinovich holds Syria primarily to blame for the collapse of the peace negotiations during the 1990s.[21] According to the latter, Assad rejected the Israeli scheme and its economic aspects as directed against Arab nationalism. Forcibly dragged into the peace process, he negotiated with Israel "resentfully

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and grudgingly because it was something he had been forced to do."[22] Rabinovich thus portrays him as a reluctant peacemaker who only agreed to what he could not avoid, displaying his dissatisfaction with the way the political process was proceeding. Although Arab nationalism, Arab unity, revolution, and Ba'athism have lost prestige in the Arab world, these principles are anchored in Syrian national identity and politics. Assad was thus expected to toe the line.[23] The antithesis of Anwar al-Sadat, who was characterized by his vision of peace and reconciliation, he was a cautious tactician, and his refusal to meet with his Israeli interlocutors and the severe restrictions he imposed on the negotiators obstructed the negotiations.[24]

These historical reviews of Syria's initial positions toward the conflict in Palestine give weight to the dominant Orientalist perspective regarding Syria and its leading role in the conflict with Zionism and Israel. This perception thus supports the claim made within Israeli Orientalist and decision-making circles that Syria is a tenacious foe. Creative security strategic thinking was required to remove the threat to Israel posed by Syria and everything for which it stands; as a result, projects for fragmenting Syria commenced.

Conceptualizing Syria as a stronghold of animosity and antagonism toward Israel led Israeli officials to suggest plans for the disintegration of the Syrian state, particularly during the peak years of the Arab-Israeli conflict. In an article published several years ago, Shlomo Nakdimon, an Israeli journalist specializing in security and military affairs, unveiled an Israeli plan developed in the 1950s –the so-called Lavi File designed to fragment Syria and Lebanon into sectarian and ethnic microstates.[25] Although Nakdimon maintains that Yuval Ne'eman, professor and military intelligence officer, was appointed to direct the project, Ne'eman had in fact long headed the Israeli Nuclear Energy Commission, also serving as security advisor to several Israeli governments. In 'National Goals,' published in 1983, Ne'eman argued that Israel should consider fragmenting Syria into small entities and microstates in the service of Israel's national-security goals.[26] In June 2000, I conducted a taped interview with Professor Ne'eman in his Tel Aviv office, during which he stated that Syria has always been Israel's implacable enemy, and the best way to deal with it is not to make peace and return the Golan Heights but to

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dismantle and fragment it into small units and microstates.[27]

Israeli policy concerning Syria revolved primarily around creating a Druze state in the Golan Heights and Hauran. In the aftermath of the 1967 War, Yigal Allon, for example, suggested establishing just such an entity extending from the Golan Heights to Hauran and South Lebanon.[28] Creating a security belt between Israel and Syria would offer Israel a natural ally.[29]

In practical terms, this project rested on two principal factors: (i) the perception of Syria as the bastion of hostility against Zionism and Israel in light of its modern historical ties with the Arab nationalist movement; and (ii) the minorities alliance, which viewed the Druze minority as constituting the potential and opportunity for a micro-state experiment modeled on the Zionist pattern. This policy had already successfully imposed compulsory conscription on the Druze.

The most important element of Ne'eman's strategic vision concerned Syria: should an all-out war erupt, Israel should take this as an opportunity to dissolve the country and create a Druze microstate based in Hauran. As part of this effort, Israel would also support the YPG's' aspirations for an independent state along the Northern Syrian border.[30]

According to Shimon Avivi, Israeli author and former army officer, the Yigal Allon Plan was only proposed to the Israeli leadership in the wake of the 1967 war, with some Israeli leaders seeking to take advantage of and translate the military victory into a political-strategic achievement that would further weaken the Arab front.[31] This claim is both erroneous and misleading. In the run-up to the war, intelligence officer Elisha Roei was commissioned to prepare a study on the possibility of creating a Druze state, concluding that the Druze had no interest in creating a private separatist political entity.[32]

Despite the foregoing, the collapse of the Syrian state's sovereignty didn't prompt Israel to implement the Lavi Plan or other fragmentation projects. It is due more to the resounding failure of previous schemes –in particular concerning the right-wing Phalanges Party in Lebanon, Kurds in Northern Iraq, and post-1967 Druze. These abortive attempts may well discourage Israel from any attempt to repeat the exercise.[33] Syria's Ba'ath ideology, the strengthening of the alliance between Iran and Hezbollah, and the nuclear project are reasons enough for many Israeli officials to desire the fall of the Ba'ath regime. Colliding with a historical legacy, this hope amplifies strategic considerations that

override current capabilities or the potential risks involved in dealing a death blow to the regime.

Dismantling the "Axis of Evil"

The Syrian crisis has preoccupied successive Israeli governments since the foundation of the state due to the hostile nature of the Ba'ath regime and its strategic alliance with Iran. While politicians, academics, and top-ranking officials have all espoused the policy of the overthrow or at least weakening of the Syrian regime, the State of Israel has also consistently sought to avoid being dragged into direct conflict with the Ba'ath regime, involvement in the Syrian civil war, or military force against its neighbor –despite the fact that its fall would serve Israeli interests. This self-restraint is fuelled by an old fear of entanglement à la the First Lebanese War (1982). The strength of the Israeli desire for the Syrian regime's downfall is thus matched by its reluctance to interven –an oxymoronic state due to the Lebanese syndrome. In September 2013, Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon laid out the non-involvement strategy: "Looking at the civil war in Syria, we spoke and acted from the outset as a party that is not involved and does not get involved unless our interests are harmed."[34]

Israel did not hide its glee over the uprising against the Assad regime –long regarded as the key link in the axis of evil extending from Tehran to Beirut. In December 2011, then-Minister of Defense Ehud Barak optimistically announced that the Assad regime was so precarious that it would fall within a few weeks, fatally undermining the Iran-Hezbollah axis.[35] From an Israeli perspective, he was convinced that it was better for the Ba'ath regime to collapse than survive, even if the price was Hezbollah gaining chemical weapons –the ultimate effect being a weak Iran.[36]

Amos Gilead, political and security head of the section at the Ministry of Defense, expressed a similar view. Underestimating the threat jihadist organizations might have posed if Islamists had taken power in Syria, he observed that "with due respect to such a danger, the threat posed by the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah axis is much greater to Israel."[37]

Israel obviously hopes that the current Syrian regime will be replaced by a moderate "Sunni" one close to Saudi Arabia that can spearhead the confrontation with Iran and Hezbollah.[38] Michael Hertzog, former military secretary to Minister of Security Shaul Mofaz and office director to former Minister of Defense Ehud Barak, for example, proposed that an international force intervene in support of regional elements, backing the opposition and expediting the Syrian regime's downfall.[39]

Former commander of military intelligence Amos Yadlin maintains that since the Arab Spring weakened the radical anti-Israel axis, Israel should intervene militarily in Syria to oust Assad and halt his killing spree against his own citizens.[40] Assad's fall not only serves Israeli interests but also constitutes a moral responsibility –even when not supported by any international consensus.[41]

Espoused by a high-profile Israeli military official, this perspective evinces that the primary factor determining Israel's position toward the Syrian crisis has been the strategic threat posed by Hezbollah. As long as Syria serves as a stronghold, arms supplier, and devoted ally of the terrorist organization, a simple calculation demonstrates that the downfall of the regime in Syria will strike a severe blow to Hezbollah. The fall of the Syrian regime would also inevitably remove the Syrian link from the "axis of evil," ultimately undermining and backing Iran in its own backyard – i.e., the Gulf region.

Moshe Ma'oz, an expert in Syria's modern history, biographer of Hafez al-Assad, former chairman of the Harry S. Truman Research Institute for the Advancement of Peace at the Hebrew University, and former advisor to the Israeli government, is unconcerned by the Islamist rise to power. Citing the "enemy of my enemy is my friend" principle, he argues that Israel can benefit from this state of affairs. If Israel responds to the Arab peace initiative and resolves the Palestinian conflict, it can develop a strategic coalition with the Sunni Arab states to counter the Iranian threat in the region. This will only work based on the two-state solution and Saudi peace initiative, however.[42]

With respect to Syria, Ma'oz argues that the assumption of power by the Muslim Brotherhood in the event of the fall of the Ba'ath regime would pose no threat to Israel, the movement being likely to join the forum of moderate Mus-

lim states –including Indonesia, Türkiye, and Tunisia– who side with the West. Most importantly, any regime it might form would undoubtedly be at odds with Hezbollah and Iran, both of which back the Ba'ath regime.[43]

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This security-military logic is not the only factor that explains the Israeli establishment's positive response to the outbreak of the Syrian revolution and Syria's slide toward civil war, the ideological element also plays a major role. As Minister of Foreign Affairs and Defense, Avigdor Lieberman repeatedly called on the international community to intervene in Syria and put an end to the bloodbath, further proposing that Israel provide a safe haven for Syrian refugees along the border.[44] In July 2017, he declared that Israel could not allow the regime to continue because "as long as Assad is in power, Iran and Hezbollah will remain in Syria."[45] Yuval Benziman of the Hebrew University holds that the 'Arab Spring' introduced the idea that the Middle East is divided between the axis of evil (Iran and its regional allies and radical Islamic organizations) and the axis of moderates (primarily the Sunni Gulf monarchies).[46]

This gloating over Syria's fate has not turned into holistic intervention, however. Contra frequent statements, this circumstance does not reflect the fact that Israelis favor the regime's survival over its overthrow. According to Elie Podeh and Moshe Ma'oz, the trend prevalent within the Israeli public and ruling circles reflects the belief that the uprisings serve Israeli strategic interests; thus it is better for the two sides –the regime and the opposition– to continue fighting. In their view, the ongoing revolt and war suggest that the significant weakening of the Syrian army, the erosion of Hezbollah's power, the chemical weapons disarmament, and the regime's cutting of ties with Hamas all favor Israeli strategic interests. Both the official echelons and the Israeli public hope that the regime will be replaced and the wish that it remains in a weakened state are predicated on the decision not to become directly involved in the war. The imprint of the Lebanese syndrome upon the Israeli consciousness functions as a real deterrent against any direct military intervention that might mirror the 1982 entanglement.[47]

Some Israeli analysts nevertheless take a different stance, maintaining that the question of whether the regime is overthrown or survives is a marginal issue, overridden by two other issues: (i) preventing *takfiri* jihadist organizations from gaining access to the Israeli border; and (ii) thwarting Iran and its allied militias from penetrating Syria, particularly along the border. This policy rested on the so-called "the devil we know" principle —namely, that the

survival of the Syrian regime is preferable to its removal. Then Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon articulated this vision in opposing then U.S. President George Bush's proposal to move from Iraq into Syria to oust the subsidiary Ba'ath regime in Syria. In his view, "the devil that we know" was better than any alternative or unknown future, particularly in light of Syria's incapacity to launch a military attack against Israel.[48]

This policy began showing cracks in the aftermath of the Second Lebanese War (2006), however to Israelis, this reflected the depth of the region's strategic alliance between the Iran-led axes. A central figure in the security and diplomatic establishment in Israel, Itamar Rabinovich, identified two schools of thought regarding the preferred Israeli outcome of the Syrian crisis: (i) The regime's downfall was the best option for Israel in the long term, implying a weakened Hezbollah and Iran in the region; and (ii) Although Rabinovich espoused the second view, he warned against the consequences of getting involved, arguing that Israel's security and strategic interests must be maintained without any Israeli presence in Syrian territory.[49] The cautionary approach promoted by Rabinovich regarding Syria undoubtedly reminds some of the circumspect strategy adopted by Yizhak Rabin toward the Lebanese crisis of the 1970s, based on the principle of non-military intervention in Lebanon and "helping the Christians to help themselves."[50]

Eyal Zisser's reading constitutes a continuation of that of his former. The regime's fall is perceived as undermining the axis of evil. In the words of Zisser: "In any case, those calling for shunning involvement in Syria or those hoping Bashar will stay in power have begun to be replaced by others urging that it would be best for Israel. Likewise, the U.S. and other Western countries, to let Bashar continue to bleed, and it may even be best if he falls, for that would weaken the radical axis in the Middle East, which would serve Israeli interests."[51]

This reading corresponds to Itamar Rabinovich, an expert in Syrian affairs, chief negotiator, and director of negotiations under the second Rabin government. Rabinovich posited that Israel had two options: not to intervene and preserve its critical interests or to aid armed opposition and expedite the regime's overthrow. While the Israeli leadership was expected to adopt the second, in particular in light of the growing Iranian presence, the weak opposition and fear of repeating the Lebanese spectacle overrode the temptation to intervene in the Syrian crisis and attempt to determine the Ba'ath regime's fate.[52]

Not everyone accepts Rabinovich's pessimistic outlook and focus on Iran's growing influence and Hezbollah's enhanced combat capacity. Some believe that developments in the Syrian uprising favor Israel's security and military in-

terests, the revolution not only destroyed the Syrian infrastructure and economy but also reduced Syria's human, military, and combat capacities. The Syrian armed forces have dropped in number from around 290,000 at the time the revolution erupted to some 90,000 soldiers and combatants, almost 2,000 tanks, and 60 percent of the air force capability was also lost. The Syrian revolution and descent into civil war have thus removed the last traditional threat to the security of the Jewish state, with no Arab army posing a threat to its security in the short or the medium term.[53]

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Israel adopted a proactive course of action, constructing a wall and opening up communications with the armed opposition groups in the Golan Heights to maintain the status quo in the border area and prevent the return of government forces. As Iranian military intervention and Hezbollah engagement in the fight against the Syrian opposition increased, Israel's concerns became more acute, its policy shifting from liaison to the extension of aid and assistance to opposition groups on the principle that "half a loaf is better than none:" all alternatives –namely, the return of the regime forces to the border area– are the lesser of two evils.

In spite of its apprehensions over being dragged into the simmering conflict in Syria, Israel eventually made its options clear, preferring any alternative to the continued existence of the Iran –and Hezbollah-allied Ba'ath regime– even if these involved Islamist jihadist organizations. The worst-case scenario was that the regime survived. In late 2017, the *BBC* and *Haaretz* released a detailed report regarding Operation Good Fence launched by the IDF in the Golan Heights in 2013. The special army unit created was tasked with liaising with the armed opposition groups and providing logistical and health assistance to these Syrian civilians in the Syrian Golan Heights. Between 2013 and 2017, Israeli hospitals admitted some 4,000 injured Syrians, mostly young men wounded in combat.[54] According to an IDF statement, it delivered 450,000 liters of fuel, 50,000 tons of clothes, and 113,000 tons of food supplies to these elements. In addition to erecting a field hospital, it also paid monthly wages to combatants –the Fursan al-Joulan (Knights of the Golan) commander acknowledging that he had been paid $5,000 per month.[55]

Israel took no pains to conceal that it was motivated by more than purely humanitarian concerns, openly claiming coordination with opposition groups, including Islamist and jihadist factions. Not only did it share the goal of overthrowing the Ba'ath regime with the Syrian opposition in all its forms,

Israel has regarded the outbreak of the popular uprisings in Syria as a favorable development, holding out the hope of the downfall of the Ba'ath regime

orientations, and rationales, but the Good Fence operation also sought to win over the local population and refugees fleeing undesirable elements, the Syrian government, and allied groups. Israel's interest explicitly lay in creating a buffer zone along the Israeli-Syrian border that would be empty of Syrian army personnel, pro-regime militias, Lebanese Hezbollah members, and other forces allied with Iran.

The complexity and interweaving of the deterrent effect of the Lebanese syndrome and conceptualization of Syria as a stronghold of hostility and hatred toward Israel with the view that the uprisings form a historic opportunity for bringing about strategic change in Israel's favor is clearly reflected in Eyal Zisser's analysis of the events:

> The reality that has engulfed Syria since the outbreak of the uprising against Bashar al-Assad's regime presents a host of complex dilemmas for Israel. Jerusalem may have seen the Syrian regime as hostile, if not dangerous, due to its membership in the axis of evil, along with Iran, Hizbollah, and Hamas ... True, the fall of Bashar's regime could deal a severe blow to Iran and Hizbollah, but at the same time, it could enable al-Qaeda-inspired terror elements to establish themselves along the Syria-Israel border.[56]

Conclusion

The outbreak of the Syrian uprising marked a paradigmatic shift in the Israeli perspective on the Arab uprisings, offering a real glimmer of hope of the collapse of the Tehran-led "axis of evil." In an attempt to explore the outcome of the Syrian crisis from an Israeli perspective, Ehud Yaari, an experienced Israeli journalist, argues that Israel emerged empty-handed from the crisis in Syria. Against all predictions, the regime has survived, the Iranian military presence continues, and Hezbollah combat cells and units have taken up positions within Syria and along the border. According to Yaari, Israel committed a strategic blunder in failing to intervene in the Syrian civil war and deal a death blow to the Ba'ath regime.[57] Zisser similarly implies that Israel has missed a historic opportunity in taking the strategic decision not to intervene militarily in the Syrian civil war, thereby averting Assad's overthrow:

> The imminent end of the civil war in Syria has prompted a sense amongst some Israelis of having missed an opportunity—the feeling that the country has refrained from intervening in a neighboring country in order to overthrow

Assad's regime and thereby strike a decisive blow against the axis of evil (Iran and Hezbollah), perhaps even shaping a new order in its image and according to its desires.[58] The reason for this, in his view, is the fact that "burned by the Lebanese experiment, Israeli leadership, both political and military is wary of interfering in any way in a neighboring country."[59]

Although Israel decided not to intervene, either directly or covertly, in surrounding events unless its security interests were threatened, Israel was aware of the effect of taking military action against the regime. Its reluctance derives from strategic constraints rather than constituting a strategic option. Not reconciling its elation over the collapse of Syrian state sovereignty with the regime's authority, it did not intervene to finish the regime out of fear of the Lebanese syndrome. Israel increasingly wished for the breakdown of the Ba'ath regime. Still, the anxiety from the recurrence of the Lebanese syndrome has bound Israel's hands and limited its strategic options. This decision of non-intervention was reinforced by the fact that Syria is now no longer its most potent adversary. The inevitable affiliation between Syria, "the stronghold of animosity" towards Israel, and the strategic alliances of the Ba'ath regime with Iran and Hezbollah, makes it so that the downfall of the regime is a strategic and even national aspiration for Israel. Israel's governmental and media circles had exhibited much sympathy toward the uprising; however, the state refrained from any active involvement against the regime. The fear of repeating "the Lebanon Syndrome," in which the military is dragged into the chaos of a civil war was the reason no ambition to get the Israeli military involved arose. Thus, Israel had abstained from taking military action that could have potentially weakened elements that are hostile to Israel.

Despite the trend prompted by numerous cautions, the attitude adopted by high-ranking officials and prominent positions in the Israeli public sphere, Israeli scholars contend that public and governmental circles in the country adopt one of two approaches: (i) a clear preference for replacing Assad's regime due to the weakening of the "axis of evil;" and (ii) the regime, even if injured and bloodied, still serves Israeli interests, the continued uprisings and war further undermining its status and thus preventing it from posing a conventional threat to Israel. In both cases, Israel refuses to become directly involved militarily in the conflict in Syria. This stance is an immediate consequence of Israel's longstanding entanglement in Lebanon. Israeli military invention in the Lebanese second civil war in an attempt to influence Lebanese politics has been an abject failure, the state has become very wary of any "adventures" that might drag it into the "Lebanese quagmire" a second time (the first being in 1982).

In a report published on the 10-year anniversary of the outbreak of the uprisings/war in Syria, the authors –members of the Institute for National Se-

From both a governmental and security perspective, Israel is very wary of repeating the 1982 Lebanese experience

curity Studies– recommended that Israel should take a dramatically new approach to Syria, abandoning the traditional attitude of sitting on the fence in favor of intervening in three strategically important regions –Southern Syria, North-Eastern Syria, and the Syrian-Lebanese border. The report recommends that the Israeli government encourage and promote a broad initiative for removing Assad from power in exchange for international restraint and the Gulf states' support for Syria's rehabilitation. On this view, Israel must take short-term risks to prevent Iran from taking control of Syria –namely, increasing its involvement in the three regions noted above.[60]

Israel has regarded the outbreak of the popular uprisings in Syria as a favorable development, holding out the hope of the downfall of the Ba'ath regime. The link between the Israeli view of Syria as a hostile stronghold that has established a strategic alliance with Iran explains the Israeli desire for the removal of the Ba'ath regime. This circumstance is also responsible for Israel's refusal to become directly involved, however, with the fear of becoming entangled in a new 'Lebanese trauma' once again tying its hands and blunting its readiness to actively seek the Ba'ath regime's overthrow. From both a governmental and security perspective, Israel is very wary of repeating the 1982 Lebanese experience. Thus, despite the decimation of the Syrian army, the political reality that has emerged in the decade following the eruption of the uprisings does not favor Israel. The augmented Iranian presence and influence on the one hand and Hezbollah's attempts to establish itself in the country on the other account for the claim arising from the report outlined above. During this period, Israel restrained itself and refrained from intervening in Syria due to the traumatic effect of the Lebanese syndrome. At the same time, the new reality created poses fresh security and strategic challenges and threats. Assuming that the Iranian and Hezbollah presence in Syria forms part of the "axis of evil" it is dedicated to fighting, present-day Israeli policy focuses primarily on halting Iranian efforts to turn Syria into a base for any future hostilities. ●
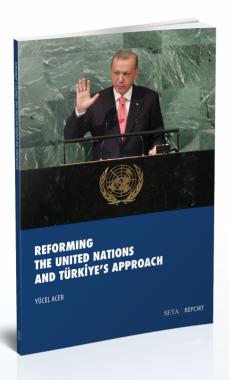
Endnotes

1. Lior Lehrs, "Egyptian Plague or Spring of Youth? The Israeli Discourse Regarding the Arab Spring," *MITVIM The Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies*, (January 2013), p. 4.

2. For further information on the popular uprising in Syria, please to see, David Lesch, *Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad*, (New Haven, 2013); Radwan Ziadeh, "Revolution in Syria: The Struggle for freedom in Regional Battle," in John Davis (ed.), *The Arab Spring and Arab Thaw: Unfinished Revolutions and the Quest for Democracy*, (London: 2013), pp. 93-111.

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6. Jacques Neriah, *The Rise and Fall of Bachir Gemayel: Israel and the Lebanon Quagmire*, (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, 2018), p. 263.

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8. Shimon Schiffer, *Snowball: The Story behind the Lebanese War,* (Tel Aviv: Idanim, 1984), p. 162.

9. Gadi Yatziv, "The War that Should not Have Broken Out," in Rubik Rosenthal (ed.), *Lebanon: The Other War*, (Tel Aviv: Sifriyat Poalim, 1983), pp. 93-94.

10. Schiffer, *Snowball*, pp. 164-165.

11. Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, translated by Yoram Bronowski, (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1984), (for obvious reasons, this passage does not exist in the original English version), pp. 8-9.

12. It is worthy to explain the use of the term "Orientalists" since in English it has become a derogatory term while in Hebrew the term "Mizrahan/im," which is roughly translated into "Orientalist/s," is still regarded positively in a way that is tied to the author's argument since the term denotes expert knowledge often connected to Israel's security needs in the Middle East. It would be worthy also to note that not all Mizrahanim in Israel fall into the security template.

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14. Avraham Sela, "Syria and the Question of Palestine: From the Establishment of the Arab League to the Armistice Agreement," *Maarchot,* (1984), pp. 46-51, 294-295. Although Syria stood out during the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s as the most hostile enemy to Israel, Col. Husni Zai'm offered in 1949 a peace treaty to Israel. By the same token, Col. Adib Shishakli (1951-1954), initiated and conducted in 1952 political negotiations with the Jewish state.

15. Sela, "Syria and the Question of Palestine," p. 48.

16. Sela, "Syria and the Question of Palestine," p. 49.

17. Sela, "Syria and the Question of Palestine," p. 51.

18. Moshe Ma'oz, *Syria: To Arabism and Back,* (Ra'anana: Open University Press, 2011), pp. 46-48.

19. Eyal Zisser, "Syria: From the Six-Day War to the Syrian Civil War," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies,* Vol. 44., No. 4 (2017), pp. 545-558.

20. Eliezer Be'eri, *The Officer Class in Politics and Society of the Arab East,* (Tel Aviv: Workers' Book-Guild, 1966), p. 100; Eliezer Beeri, *Army Officers in Arab Politics and Society*, (New York: Praeger, 1970), p. 100.

21. Itamar Rabinovich, *The Lingering Conflict: Israel, the Arabs, and the Middle East, 1948-2011*, (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2011), p. 264. Ur Sagie (who was the head of military intelligence and led the peace talks on Israel's behalf), blamed Ehud Barak (Israel's Prime Minister between 1999-2000), for the failure of the peace negotiations.

22. Rabinovich, *The Lingering Conflict.*

23. Rabinovich, *The Lingering Conflict*, pp. 264-265.

24. Itamar Rabinovich, *The Brink of Peace: Israel and Syrian Negotiation*, (Tel-Aviv: Miskal, 1998), pp. 323-334.

25. Shlomo Nakdimon, "Grandpa Ephraim and His Adventures in the Mossad," *Haaretz*, (August 25, 2011).

26. Yuval Ne'eman, "National Goals," in Aluf Hareven (ed.), *On the Difficulty of Being an Israeli*, (Jerusalem: Van Leer Institute, 1982), p. 268.

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28. Israel State Archives (Jerusalem), Prime Minister's Office, 6405/ 4219 II/C, Yigal Allon to Levi Eshkol, "The Druze Mountain, Syria," (August 20, 1967).

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30. Ne'eman, "National Goals," p. 268.

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45. "Israel Defense Minister to Syria: Don't Test Us," *Jerusalem Post*, (July 2, 2017).

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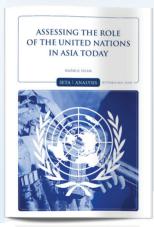
SETA

Reforming the United Nations and Türkiye's Approach

Yücel Acer

The ongoing reform efforts have made some modest achievements but have so far failed on major issues, such as reforming the Security Council in terms of membership and voting. Türkiye feels obliged to participate in discussions and contribute to reform efforts and proposals toward better global governance.
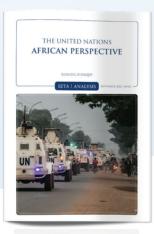
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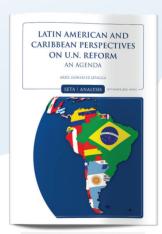
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