

## WAR IN SYRIA: NO GOOD NEWS FOR ISRAEL?

Agnieszka Bryc

Faculty of Political Sciences and International Studies  
The Nicolaus Copernicus University

**Abstract:** In the Middle East things are not always what they seem to be. It would appear that Israel and Syria are the odd couple in the Middle East. Although their relationship seems to be typical of sworn enemies, full of aggressive rhetoric, distrust and a hostile atmosphere, in fact, however, both countries were driven for decades by pragmatic security interests and they have managed to avoid a violent military clash. Yet the outbreak of the Syrian crisis in 2011 created an opportunity for Israel to change the regime in Damascus and made it rethink its policy towards Syria. Therefore, Jerusalem had to decide whether to take the historical chance or stay passive.

The goal of this paper is to answer a few questions – whether the war in Syria is a challenge or a threat for Israel? How Jerusalem has tried to balance the chance to get rid of its old enemy and the fundamental security concerns about getting involved into a massive regional conflict. The analysis finds that Israel has a limited impact on events in Syria, that it is able to react at most, and in no case to create facts on the Syrian battlefield. It is also remarkable that, paradoxically, the turmoil in the Middle East even along the Israeli borders has not directly undermined the Jewish state due to the complexity of a dynamic situation and the fact that the superpowers are embroiled into contradictory campaigns.

**Key words:** Israel, Syria, Russia, U.S., ISIS, the Middle East, Bashar Assad, war, conflict, security.

### INTRODUCTION

Israel belongs to a group of countries in which domestic policy and international behavior are determined by security matters. The need to survive in a hostile Arab neighborhood has always been the essence of its policy, and the idea of an existential threat has formed Israel's way of thinking and foreign policy decision-making. While Israel has had a greater or lesser impact on creating a regional balance of power for the last 40 years, the Arab revolts, known as the Arab Spring, have generated an earthquake in the Middle Eastern status quo, reshaping it from the grass-roots. Accordingly, the newly emergent unstable environment created security challenges for Israel. Firstly, Jerusalem authorities are afraid of increasing

Islamist influence in post-Arab Spring states, which may create not only anti-Jewish regimes led by revolutionary zealots, but also repeat the scenario of creating more failed states like in Libya and Yemen. Secondly, the rising non-Arab powers in the Middle East – first of all Iran and, despite the recent warming, also Turkey are hostile to Israel, openly in Teheran, and covertly in Ankara. Thirdly, the Arab Spring underlines the further erosion of the US position in the region, and consequently weakens Israel's deterrence capabilities.

The Arab Spring has touched Israel's neighbors, particularly Egypt, where president Hosni Mubarak was overthrown, and Syria, where the regime of Bashar al-Assad has been struggling to survive. Moreover, the Syrian war and the establishment of the so called Islamic State (ISIS) might destabilize other Israeli neighbors – Lebanon and Jordan, as well as weaken domestic security by fueling Palestinian resistance<sup>1</sup>.

Apart from the challenges created by the war, Syria has been the focus of Israeli attention for other reasons – firstly, geographic proximity; secondly, long-standing hostility between the two countries, thirdly, the absence of a peace treaty, in contrast to Egypt and Jordan a lacking peace treaty and finally, Syria's demands to recover the Golan Heights, taken by Israel in 1967. From a regional perspective the importance of Syria is definitely a function of its client relations with Iran and Russia as well as its role in the Arab world.

#### ISRAEL'S APPROACH TO THE SYRIA WAR

Since the very beginning, Israel's position on the Syrian conflict has been balanced between a chance to topple Assad's regime, believed to be Israel's most ferocious Arab enemy, and a fear of an Islamist or jihadist alternative on Israel's borders that might not only destabilize Israel's neighborhood but also fuel radicalization among Israeli Arabs. Its more or less passive approach has reflected the primary concern about Israel's fragile security and an awareness that however much Tzahal (Israel Defense Forces) is able to deter and fight every foreign enemy, in terms of politics and diplomacy the Jewish state does not have significant influence on the ongoing domestic war in Syria or its future conflict solution. In such circumstances the key question for Israeli decision-makers is how long to keep Israel out of the war and what would trigger its military response. As the then Defense Minister Moshe Yalon stated, Israel has three "red lines"<sup>2</sup> – the first is not to allow delivery of advanced weapon to terror organizations, whether by Iran or by Syria. The second is not to allow to delivery of chemical weapons to terror factions, and

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<sup>1</sup> A. Bryc, Israel in a new Middle East: How to respond? The Copernicus Journal of Political Studies, No. 1, 2013, pp. 101–102.

<sup>2</sup> M. Ginsburg, *Strongman's handcuffs: The futility of red lines*, "The Times of Israel", May 28, 2013.

the last red line is not to allow well-aimed, cross-border fire from Syria into Israel, especially in the Golan Heights<sup>3</sup>.

This is why, despite the risk of involvement in a larger military confrontation, the IDF has launched several strikes inside Syria. Israelis were primarily focused on preventing Hezbollah from operating in Syria and from changing the Golan Heights into a sphere of Islamist destabilization. In fact, various radical groups have intensified their activities in this area, including the Islamic State (IS) and al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra (JN). And while Druze villages in the area remain under the Assad regime's control, Hezbollah has repeatedly tried to establish its own foothold there. These developments have exacerbated concerns about a potential jihadist or Hezbollah attack on the western side of the Golan, since destroying Israel remains the mobilizing utopia of all these movements. This is also why one of the most spectacular Israeli actions in Syria, a December 2015 missile strike on an apartment building in a Damascus suburb, that killed Samir Kuntar and when along with several Hezbollah commanders. Kuntar was targeted not because of his past, but mostly because he was recruiting Syrian Druze living in the Golan region into an Iranian-controlled militia to fight the Jewish state<sup>4</sup>.

Along with the military's precise strikes on the Golan Heights, Israel has been treating injured Syrians in its hospitals, both for humanitarian reasons and to prevent escalation with the jihadists. On the one hand, according to reports more than two thousand Syrians have been treated in Israeli hospitals since 2013<sup>5</sup>, and most of them are part of the moderate opposition, but on the other hand there is further evidence that these groups sometimes collaborate with Islamists from Jabhat a-Nusra. Despite the fact that Israel denies any connection to the moderate opposition, it seems that aid still reaches them, and has kept the al-Qaida affiliated group from launching attacks against Israel. Such a complex situation and unclear biases are triggering domestic political fights in Israeli politics. For instance, Druze Member of Knesset Hasson of Kulanu said that Avidgor Liberman, the Minister of Defense, provided the Fateh al-Sham Front (formerly al-Nusra Front) with protection, logistical support and possibly with "advanced technology" during its attacks on the regime-controlled town of Hader<sup>6</sup>. According to Hasson, Israel recently targeted army positions belonging to the Syrian regime in order to boost the chances of the jihadist group.

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<sup>3</sup> L. Weymouth, *Israeli Defense Minister: Iranian Nuclear Agreement Is 'a Very Bad One*, "Washington Post", June 2 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Kuntar was a Lebanese Druze Muslim who joined Hezbollah while imprisoned in Israel for killing a Jewish family in a Palestinian raid in 1979. He was released in 2008 in an exchange with Hezbollah for the bodies of two Israeli soldiers whose capture triggered the 2006 war. He was welcomed as a hero in Beirut and he married a Lebanese Shi'ite woman from a Hezbollah family. He was believed to become a commander in Hezbollah, which has sent hundreds of its members to fight alongside forces loyal to President Bashar Assad.

<sup>5</sup> The Syrian Liaison Unit, [www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4810130,00.html](http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4810130,00.html) (12.09.2016).

<sup>6</sup> D. Lieber, *Druze MK accuses Liberman of backing al-Qaeda offshoot in Syria*, "The Times of Israel", September 12, 2016.

## IS BASHAR AL-ASSAD A BAD GUY, INDEED?

Syria has been regarded as Israel's most bitter since the establishment of the Jewish state. Still, despite decades of contentious relations, including three wars of 1948, 1967 and 1973, Syria giving refuge to Palestinian Fatah combatants in the 1960s, and continued failed peace negotiations, the Israeli-Syrian border has remained very stable for more than four decades. Although Hafez al-Assad – a “father” of Syrian political significance during the Cold War – died in 2000 and his successor Bashar al-Assad was perceived as much more moderate than his father, the Israeli-Syrian relationship has not changed so much. The change was in fact in Syria, itself, because while Hafez al-Assad was an Iranian ally and treated Hezbollah and its leader, Hassan Nasrallah, as clients, over time his son Bashar al-Assad and then Syria became a client rather than a peer of the senior Iranian partner and treated Nasrallah as an admired partner rather than a subordinate<sup>7</sup>. This is why – in the Israeli view – the war in Syria constitutes a chance as well as at the same time a challenge. On the one hand, ousting the president could lead to disintegration of the Syrian state and change Damascus into an Iranian protectorate. Consequently as Efraim Inbar, director of the Begin-Sadat (BESA) Center for Strategic Studies claims, “in the event that the Syrian regime collapses, Syria's advanced arsenal, including chemical weapons, shore-to-ship missiles, air defense systems, and ballistic missiles of all types could end up in the hands of... radical elements”<sup>8</sup>. On the other hand, the collapse of the Syrian regime would isolate Iran in the Middle East and squander its hegemonic ambitions in the region. As Syria has provided Iran with the capacity to transform Hezbollah into a force that the Israeli military cannot defeat, the loss of Syria may likely mean a weaker Hezbollah, thus decreasing Iran's ability to deter Israel from attacking its nuclear facilities. The then Defense Minister Ehud Barak, arguably the most important Israeli decision-maker on this question, said that the Assad regime's fall would “be a major blow to the radical axis, major blow to Iran... it's the only kind of outpost of the Iranian influence in the Arab world... and it will weaken dramatically both Hezbollah in Lebanon and Islamic Jihad in Gaza Strip”<sup>9</sup>.

Indeed, Assad's regime is not a threat to Israel; the severe danger for Jerusalem stems rather from growing importance of Teheran in the Middle East<sup>10</sup>. Israel is concerned primarily about the agreement between Iran and the major powers whereby Iran would be recognized as a nuclear threshold state and would

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<sup>7</sup> I. Rabinovich, “Israel's view of the Syrian crisis”, Number 28, November 2012, The Saban Center at Brookings, p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> E. Inbar, *The 2011 Arab Uprisings and Israel's National Security*, “Mideast Security and Policy Studies”, No. 95, p. 16.

<sup>9</sup> J. Rubin, The Real Reason to Intervene in Syria Cutting Iran's Link to the Mediterranean Sea Is a Strategic Prize Worth the Risk, “Foreign Policy” June 4, 2012.

<sup>10</sup> B. Bojarczyk, *Iran on the Crossroads*, “Copernicus Journal of Political Studies”, No. 1, 2013, pp. 45–57.

continue to make use of its proxies, which are capable of striking every point in Israel with high trajectory weapons from Lebanon, Syria, and the Gaza Strip, and of launching terrorist attacks into Israeli territory. This situation is unacceptable to Israel, and this explains Israel's desire to see the Iranian axis dismantled<sup>11</sup>. So, not surprisingly, amongst the three most probable scenarios for Syria – Iranian domination, Islamic domination, and ongoing anarchy, the first one is recognized as most undesirable by the Israelis<sup>12</sup>. The IDF is able more or less successfully to face the ongoing chaos in Syria and a growing influence of radical groups there, but coping with Iran is incomparably riskier and demands a much more sophisticated strategy from Jerusalem. This is why it has not been underestimated Hezbollah's military engagement in Syria, where it is reported to have significant numbers (an estimated five thousand fighters on the ground) and capabilities (experience in battlefield). For this reason Israeli security analysts are also highlighting the potential threat in the foreseeable future of a clash with Hezbollah along the Lebanese-Israeli border. In such assessments Israel's best option is to signal to Hezbollah and to its Iranian patrons that its response to escalation would not be local. The most acute problem is that Israel – which already has to worry about destabilization in Gaza, the West Bank, and southern Lebanon – does not want to face Iranian troops on a military front along the Israeli-Syrian border.

#### ...OR IS IT THE ISLAMIC STATE?

The war has developed into a divided Syria split into a few quasi-states, like Alawistan controlled by Assad's regime and Iran, Kurdistan, a moderate Sunni part, and the Islamic State (Daesh) part. Unlike Iran, Israelis do not perceive ISIS as an existential threat, but rather as an indirect challenge due to the possibility it might radicalize Sunni Arabs and ultimately destabilize in the end to destabilize Israel's Arab neighbors. Jerusalem is concerned first of all about Jordan – its most trustworthy Arab partner and one that shares a long border with Israel<sup>13</sup>. The worries result from the country's demographic characteristics, the massive number of Syrian refugees it has absorbed, and its precarious economic condition. Israel is deeply troubled by the potential of the King Abdullah II regime being undermined, which would harm the strategic partnership between the countries and might lead to Jordan becoming an operational base for jihadists against Israel<sup>14</sup>. The challenge for Israeli security agencies is not unfounded, because more than half of the Jor-

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<sup>11</sup> U. Dekel, O. Einav, *The Problematic Scenarios in Syria: The Choices Facing Israel*, "Insight" No. 714, July 5, 2015.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>13</sup> S. Brom, *Israel and the Islamic State, The Islamic State: How Viable Is It?*, Yoram Schweitzer and Omer Einav (ed.) Institute for National Security Studies, 2016, p. 188.

<sup>14</sup> A. Harel, *ISIS Threat Brings Jordan and Egypt Closer to Israel*, "Haaretz", February 09, 2015.

danian population is of Palestinian origin and combined with the fact that there are reports about the establishment of an underground movement supporting the Islamic State among the Jordanian populace, radicalization would likely spread quite smoothly to Palestinians in the West Bank, Israeli Arabs and Bedouin tribes, who feel politically and economically deprived by the Jewish State<sup>15</sup>.

#### A NEW REGIONAL FRAMEWORK – CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR ISRAEL

Nowadays Syria is the main battleground among the key regional players – Islamic Republic of Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia – for hegemony in the Middle East. Simultaneously, global powers like the United States and the Russian Federation, a minor power but desperate to improve its international status, make the Syrian conflict even more complex. Furthermore, most of them maintain a military presence on the ground or operate via proxies. So, in Syria there are Iranian and Iranian-proxy forces in support of the Assad regime; Turkish ground and air forces, allegedly as part of the anti-ISIS coalition but rather to support Turkmens or deter Kurds, as well as American, French, British, Jordanian, Russian, and Israeli air forces. Most of them fight against the Islamic State except the Russians, who act against anyone opposed to Assad, and Israel occasionally and usually against governmental forces<sup>16</sup>. To make it more complex, they have fights among themselves and with each other, leading to inconsistencies and contradictions, making a solution to the Syrian conflict impossible.

In practice, Syria is already split internally and divided into areas of foreign power influence. Hence the question for Israelis is who would be able to reshape the Middle East's embryonic balance of power, with whom should it cooperate or confront – Russians or Americans? Whereas it is without question that the U.S is a pillar of the Israeli sense of security, the problem is a weakening position of Americans in the Middle East and simultaneously a growth of Russian activity there. In Israeli assessments, it is Russia and its military involvement in September 2015 aimed at supporting Bashar al-Assad that has shaped significant new ramifications for the Middle East and especially for Israel by virtue of the risk of the Syrian turmoil spilling over into the Golan Heights<sup>17</sup>. Israelis are aware of the long history of Russian-Syrian cooperation and the Kremlin's strategic interests there – firstly, Tartus, a port on the Mediterranean Sea; secondly, a need to recover previously lost influence in the Arab world; thirdly, a market for arms

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<sup>15</sup> Brom, *op. cit.*, p. 189.

<sup>16</sup> M. A. Heller, *Regional Transformation in the Middle East 2015, The Strategic Survey 2015–2016*, Institute for National Security Studies, 2016, pp. 18–19.

<sup>17</sup> U. Dekel, Z. Magen, *Russian Involvement in Syria: What has Changed, and the Significance for Israel*, "INSS Insight" No. 752, October 7, 2015.

sales; and lastly, physical access to the borders of other key countries in the Middle East, including Turkey, Iraq, and Israel. What is more, in Israel's assessment Russia's decision to use force in Syria in September 2015 stemmed from several considerations. First of all, military support for Assad is challenging the United States, whose position and impact on the regional balance of power is believed to be reduced. Thus, it may help to restore Russia's proper standing in the world and its lost presence in the Arab Peninsula. At the same time Russia wishes to divert the focus from its conflict with the West from Ukraine to the Middle East and exploit its influence in Damascus to attempt to bargain its way out of the ruinous economic sanctions imposed on it due to its policy in Crimea and the East Ukraine since 2014.

Although Israel and Russia used to have quite pragmatic bilateral relations, mostly in terms of security, the deployment of Russian S-400 ground-to-air missiles in northern Syria is challenging Israel by virtue of limiting the Israeli Air Force's freedom of action and secrecy because these missiles cover extensive areas in Syria, Lebanon, and northern Israel. From their new position at Lakatia on the Syrian coast, their range encompasses half of Israel's airspace, including Ben Gurion International Airport<sup>18</sup>.

Regarding Russia, the key challenge for Jerusalem is not a military one but a political one. Undoubtedly the Israeli establishment is deeply disturbed by the assistance extended to the Iranian-led Shiite axis in Syria and by cooperation with Iran as well. Israelis suspect that Russians are training Hezbollah how a world-class army gathers intelligence, makes plans, and executes operations. Israelis are also warning that, by working side-by-side with Russian officers, Hezbollah is likely to refine a modern military strategy that would make Israeli military specialists reassess the capacities of Nasrallah's group. A newly offensive-minded Hezbollah capable of more complex operations could deal heavier blows to the Israeli army in a confrontation along the southern Lebanese border. It may even attempt to enter Israeli territory, as Hamas did in the 2014 conflict, albeit in a more capable manner<sup>19</sup>.

Although it is not difficult to see Russia's motivations for supplying Hezbollah with weapons, many specialists doubt this. According to Eyal Zisser, a professor at the University of Tel Aviv "The Russians are careful to not engage directly with Hezbollah. Russia's message to the Israelis is quite clear – as long as you do not sabotage our efforts in Syria you are free to do with Hezbollah whatever you want."<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, not all Israeli analysts dismiss the story. Yiftah Shapir, head of the Middle East Military Balance project at Israel's Institute of National Security Studies, does not believe that Russia would openly sell P-800 Yakhont

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<sup>18</sup> J. A. Gross, Israel's air superiority clouded by new Russian missiles in Syria, *The Times of Israel*, December 1, 2015.

<sup>19</sup> D. Allouche, How Russia is teaching Hezbollah some terrifying new warfare techniques, *The Jerusalem Post*, 23 March 2016.

<sup>20</sup> J. Cohen, Is Russia supporting Hezbollah? <http://intersectionproject.eu/article/russia-world/russia-supporting-hezbollah>, 8 February 2016.

cruise missiles and Buk surface-to-air missiles (SA-17) to Hezbollah – the main threats as far as Israel is concerned – however, he believes that Hezbollah is re-supplied with Soviet-origin weaponry – artillery shells for guns, artillery rockets for MRLs and anti-tank missiles<sup>21</sup>.

An ostensible support of Hezbollah and open backing of Iran and Syrian president al-Assad are presenting Russia as a reliable ally in the Middle East, which does not now change much in the region, but in the long term may allow Russia to rebuild its wider presence in the Arab Peninsula and successfully weaken American policy in the region. Thanks to Russia's loyalty and decisive operations in Syria, it sends a clear message to the Arabs that, unlike the United States, Russia indeed supports its allies and does not betray them. This has also ramifications for Israel, because the question is not only whether Russia is coming back to the region, but more importantly who will be the Kremlin's ally – Iran, Turkey, moderate Arabs or Israel? Looking back to Russian allies in the Middle East so far, the Jewish state has been challenged by Russian-Iranian cooperation, particularly Russia's role in developing Iran's nuclear program. Israelis are worried about Teheran's ongoing efforts to arm itself with nuclear weapon, develop its missile program and generate a military presence on Israel's borders with Syria and Lebanon. The final success would mean for Jerusalem the end of its strategic superiority in the region and neutralization of its defense and deterrence capabilities.

What Israel can do in this case is to count on the competing interests of Moscow and Teheran in the Middle East and the broader international scene and try to attract Russia in security matters. Such thinking does make sense, because even in Syria there is much room for Russian-Iranian rivalry. Their views on the future of Syria are the first but not last bone of contention. While, from Iran's perspective Assad's survival is of substantial importance--since any regime that took its place would be much less convenient for Iran--from Russia's perspective the Assad regime is important but not critical, and hence Moscow is likely to continue to have relations with Syria even under a different regime, mainly via its military relations. This means that the Kremlin is in fact ready to negotiate (with the U.S) the status of al-Assad in return for the lifting of economic sanctions that followed its annexation of Crimea in 2014 and a recognition of Russia as a significant global player. The next area of potential dispute between Russia and Iran is the future of Syrian Kurds. Iran is closely watching Russian and American military relations with the Syrian Kurdish nationalist Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG). While Iran has worked with the PYD and Russia to back Assad's forces, given its own increasingly volatile problems with Kurdish separatist groups, Tehran has rejected federalism in northern Syria<sup>22</sup>. The Kurdish card is played by Russia not only in front of Iran,

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>22</sup> E. Geranmayeh, K. Liik, *The New Power Couple: Russia and Iran in The Middle East*, "European Council on Foreign Relations", September 2016, p. 6.



but mainly in relations with Turkey. Nevertheless, today Russian-Turkish relations seem to have reconciled after the freeze caused by the downing of a Russian jet by the Turkish air force on November 24, 2015. The fact is, however, that there is more rivalry than cooperation between Russia and Turkey. Firstly, Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Vladimir Putin represent aggressive and ambitious leaders driven by the desire to transform their respective countries into the powers they once were. Not accidentally, their nicknames are “sultan” for Erdogan, and “tsar” for Putin. Even if current Russian-Turkish relations are pragmatically warm, there is not enough room in the Middle East and in the post-Soviet sphere for such ambitious leaders, and one day their interests are likely to clash once again. Secondly, regarding the Syrian crisis they occupy the opposite positions in terms of Assad’s removal from power and the role of Kurds in the Syrian conflict. Furthermore, while both countries formally oppose the Islamic State and seek to weaken it, they are actually making use of it to garner legitimacy for their activities in Syria, which are part of efforts of a much larger international strategy. From the Israeli perspective Russian-Turkish rapprochement would be beneficial first and foremost in terms of limiting instability in Syria and successfully contending with the Islamic State. However, a variety of future scenarios in the Turkish-Russian confrontation are still possible, and the fact is that stability in Syria is rather not possible without the mutual cooperation of Ankara and Moscow.

Apart from Iran, Turkey, and Russia, what next influences Israel’s capacities in the Middle East in America’s policy in the region. Not to mention that a rapprochement between the U.S and Iran has also touched primarily Israel, afraid of being abandoned by its strategic ally. Israel must cope with the widespread view of Iran as a stabilizing force in the chaos prevailing in Syria, Iraq, and throughout the Middle East as a whole. This view is based on the Iranian fight against the Islamic State and on the assessment that Iran is a responsible state with which it is possible to establish accepted rules of the game. In such new ramifications Israel cannot allow a loosening of the alliance with Washington and have the U.S focus more on Teheran than on Jerusalem. So far the Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has been counting the days until the presidential elections in the U.S. in the hope that the next head of the state would improve relations with Israel<sup>23</sup>. So somehow surprising, on the eve of elections and after months of negotiating, the United States and Israel signed a huge, \$38 billion deal for military aid to the Jewish state. The 10-year agreement is the largest in U.S. history, with a significant portion of the money expected to be used to upgrade Israel’s air force to Lockheed Martin’s F-35 fighter aircraft<sup>24</sup>. It is ironic that Barack Obama, whose relationship with

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<sup>23</sup> More about Barak Obama’s policy in the Middle East see: D. Jervis, *Change to the Past: The Obama Administration and the Middle East, The Middle East in a Process of Chance*, Nicolaus Copernicus University, 2016, pp. 19–36.

<sup>24</sup> W. Booth, R. Eglash, *Some Israelis see \$38 billion U.S. military aid offer as a failure*, “Washington Post”, September 19, 2016.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has been notoriously cold, turned out to be the American president who supported financially the much criticized Jewish country. There are quite straightforward explanations for why this particular deal got done. Politically, the spending package was partly a response to the nuclear deal that the United States and other world powers finalized with Iran in July 2015. Netanyahu was harshly critical of that agreement, which he called a “historic mistake” that would ease sanctions on Iran while leaving it with the ability to one day get the bomb, and the new money is an attempt to pacify Israeli concerns about continuing threats from Iran<sup>25</sup>.

#### IN LIEU OF A CONCLUSION – WHAT CAN ISRAEL DO?

Due to the fact that Israel has neither a clearly preferred outcome for Syria nor the ability to shape events there, it has been acting only occasionally by carrying out precise attacks on Syrian, Iranian, and Hezbollah targets that pose an immediate threat to it. As a result, all the actions Israel has taken have been mostly defensive or, occasionally, pre-emptive. In other words, the option left for Israel is to adapt to the situation being shaped by more influential participants in the Syrian war, or to bargain diplomatically with outside powers like the U.S or Russia and make them include Israeli interests in any future solution to the conflict.

So, undoubtedly the condition *sine qua non* for Israel in the Syrian war is to maintain control of the Golan Heights and not to harm its political status in any diplomatic and political negotiations on the terms of Syria’s future. So it is definitely in Israel’s strategic interest to cultivate strategic relations with the U.S and Russia, which may be helpful in recognizing Israel’s map of interests and red lines in the Syrian and Lebanese contexts. Israel must also emphasize that it will continue taking military action when its interests are threatened, mainly on the issues of the transfer of high quality weapons to Hezbollah, the deployment of hostile forces in the Golan Heights, and activities relating to unconventional weapons.

Then, Israel must build connections with moderate states like Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, as they may counterbalance the Iranian-led Shia camp and accept Israel’s existence and understand its important role in shaping and stabilizing the region.

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<sup>25</sup> E. Green, *Why Does the United States Give So Much Money to Israel?* “The Atlantic”, September 15, 2016.

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