



INSS Insight No. 823, May 22, 2016

**Israel's Need to Take a Stand against the Assad Regime:
A Moral Imperative and Strategic Necessity**

Amos Yadlin

For the past five years, Israel has chosen not to take sides in the events underway in Syria. Yet while there were – and still are – some good reasons for this policy, the time has come for Israel to reassess its position on the civil war that rages across its border. On May 2, 2016, *Haaretz* military analyst Amos Harel wrote, “Syria's embattled Assad regime used chemical arms against ISIS east of Damascus...The regime apparently decided to use the lethal gas sarin after ISIS fighters attacked two Syrian air force bases considered vital military assets.” Since this recent incident, however, the international community has ignored Bashar al-Assad's blatant violation of his 2013 commitment to rid his regime of its chemical weapons and cease any use of them, and as such, his defiance of universal norms and international conventions. In addition, despite the ceasefire, the Assad regime and its allies have resumed their indiscriminate killing in Aleppo, Idlib, and the Damascus region. These developments underlie the conclusion that Israel must adopt a position opposing Bashar al-Assad and his regime.

First and foremost, Israel must adopt this position based on moral considerations. The renewed use of chemical weapons reminds us that the party bearing the most responsibility for the massacre underway in Syria has yet to be punished. It also highlights Israel's obligation to acknowledge that Assad is a murderer whose actions have led to a chilling human tragedy. Assad is responsible for 90 percent of the deaths during the war, which thus far total approximately 400,000. He is also accountable for the more than two million wounded and the 11 million refugees within Syria and neighboring countries. The outcome is a humanitarian disaster, the likes of which have not been seen since the genocide in Cambodia four decades ago and the genocide in Rwanda 22 years ago. In light of these occurrences, Israel cannot stand idly by.

In addition to this moral backdrop, which in its own right provides sufficient justification for Assad's ouster, the fall of the regime is a strategic Israeli interest. The radical axis led by Iran that runs through Assad-controlled Syria to Hezbollah in Lebanon, and embraces

the strategic goal of putting an end to Israel, is the most concrete threat the State of Israel faces today. The axis's current military capabilities, and the additional capabilities it can be expected to acquire, constitute the industrial and scientific potential resources of a regional power. Its recent strengthening vis-à-vis its rivals in Syria has made it clear that action must be taken to prevent this problematic strategic development, preferably in coordination with major countries in the region and the global superpowers.

Some argue that the threat posed by the Islamic State is no less serious and must be dealt with first, and indeed, the severity of the Islamic State threat, which has been debated in Israel over the past two years, must not be underestimated. However, contending with this issue should not prevent Israel from assigning a clear strategic preference to the Tehran-Baghdad-Damascus-Beirut challenge. After all, under US and Russian leadership, and regardless of the involvement of Israel, the international community has mobilized to contend with the Islamic State phenomenon and has thus far succeeded in halting its advance and reducing the area under its control. Furthermore, although the Islamic State attracts some Sunnis in Syria while Assad remains in power, it is extremely likely that an end to the Assad regime and the evolution of a moderate Sunni alternative will greatly weaken the Islamic State appeal. Moreover, recent reports confirm suspicions regarding cooperation between the Assad regime and the Islamic State and bolster the assumption that these two extremist parties share a common interest in weakening and eliminating any moderate alternative and helping safeguard the survival of one another. Israel, on the other hand, remains virtually alone against the pro-Iranian radical axis and can rely on no one but itself. For this reason, it must make action against strengthening the Russian-supported axis a high priority. The bottom line is that the Islamic Republic of Iran (and its allies) is exponentially more dangerous to Israel than the Islamic State.

To cease straddling the fence, Israel should formulate a multi-layered strategy. One fundamental condition is the establishment of a regional, and if necessary, covert alliance with forces in the Sunni world, most importantly Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states, Turkey, Jordan, and Egypt. The prominent Sunni states in the Middle East and Israel have overlapping interests and seek to advance similar aims: the weakening of Iran and Hezbollah and the ousting of Assad. For this reason, they should be mobilized to promote essential processes aimed at advancing these goals. All this should be implemented in partnership with the United States and perhaps also through quiet understandings with Russia, which, unlike Iran, does not regard Assad as a necessary component of a future Syrian order.

What follows are the main policy points of an overall strategy to oppose Assad and his regime and weaken the radical axis.

First, a clear political and legal process should be launched against the crimes committed by the Assad regime that will help hold it accountable for its role in the mass murder and its use of chemical weapons. Israel can help in the disclosure of most of the information regarding the killing perpetrated by Assad and Hezbollah in Syria and the use of chemical weapons.

Second, a dialogue with the United States must be launched regarding the formulation of a strategy to remove the Assad regime, Iranian forces, Hezbollah, and the Islamic State from Syria. Israel should stipulate – and in doing, it so would be in the same camp as Saudi Arabia and Turkey (both allies of the United States) – the following order: Assad first, and then the Islamic State. It is important both to discuss with the Americans the importance of not remaining silent in the face of the chemical weapons use and to take action against the central elements of power within the regime, including the security services headquarters, the chemical weapons units, and perhaps also elements within the air force and air defenses, all in accordance with demonstrating a credible international norm and President Obama's commitment to punish a regime that used chemical weapons and prevent any further use of such substances. At the same time, it is necessary to seek additional ways of strengthening moderate opposition groups, including by supplying greater quantities of advanced weapons to those that have proven their ability to fight the Assad regime.

Third, Israel must prove that it too has red lines and moral principles. Such elements should be considered when deliberating the implementation of limited military operations aimed at conveying an ethical message and saving human life, such as strikes against Syrian military helicopters dropping barrel bombs in densely populated areas. Such military actions can be carried out using stand-off capabilities and would require neither entering into a broad air campaign to achieve air superiority nor collisions with Russian forces in Syria.

Fourth, in parallel, and in a manner that does not run counter to strikes against elements of the Assad regime implicated in injuring innocent civilians, Israel can confront the threat posed by the Islamic State in the southern Golan Heights by the Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade. Such action would demonstrate that the struggle against Assad can be pursued along with fighting the Islamic State. Also important is the continued provision of intelligence and other assistance to the coalitions fighting the Sunni jihadist groups, most importantly the Islamic State.

Fifth, Israel, with regional and international backing, should encourage humanitarian stabilization in southern Syria along the borders with Israel and Jordan. The efforts to stabilize the situation in this region should also include adaptation of the capabilities of the UN forces operating in the region to ensure their suitability for the task. This will

involve closer cooperation with Jordan in southern Syria, for the sake of strengthening parties that share common interests with Israel and Jordan, and the concurrent expansion of Israeli humanitarian aid to refugees, besieged populations, and the wounded (elsewhere in Syria as well). The United States and Turkey can take part in such efforts in northern Syria within the framework of broad-based humanitarian activity.

Sixth, understandings must be hammered out with Russia to advance these efforts while preserving Russian interests in northern Syria. It is important to consult with Moscow regarding a replacement for the Assad regime that will be more oriented toward Russia and less oriented toward Iran.

Seventh, efforts should be made to encourage and support to the extent possible Arab measures against Hezbollah and Iran in the regional and international arenas.

The Middle East is being reshaped by an extended process that began over five years ago, and its end-point is currently impossible to predict. Still, it can be assumed that the parties involved with the conflicts in the region in general, and in Syria in particular, seek resolutions through an attempt to reshape the power relations between them and the state structures in the area. Against this background, Israel has a fundamental interest in ensuring that Iran and Hezbollah will not be the forces that are strengthened within the framework of a new order in the Middle East. When Assad is ultimately ousted, it is important that the Arab and Muslim world know that Israel was on the right side of the struggle and operated correctly from both a moral and a strategic perspective.

Gone are the days in which Israel could impartially observe the developments in Syria from the sidelines. If Israel wants to help shape the nature of the surrounding region in the years to come and improve its standing in the region, it must not hesitate, as doing so could mean missing this opportunity to undermine its most bitter enemies. An assertive, moral, proactive, and creative policy against the radical axis, revolving around the ousting of the pro-Iranian Assad regime, is the path Israel must follow. This insight was already applicable three years ago, after the Assad regime made use of chemical weapons, and its validity increased substantially when such weapons were used again.

