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Israel, the Syrian Crisis and the Unbreakable Lebanese Syndrome

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Yusri Hazran Khaizran

Abstract- This article addresses Israeli strategic attitude with respect to the Syrian crisis, linking the historical conceptualization 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 weakening 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.

I. Israel and the "Arab Spring" Uprisings

The popular uprisings that erupted in Tunisia and Egypt took Israeli political, military, and academic bodies by surprise. Long known for its intelligence capabilities, Israel had not anticipated their outbreak and the undermining of Western-backed dictatorships. Its first reaction was thus shock at the overthrow if regimes it had long regarded as moderate, anti-Islamic, pro-Western, and in favour of peace with Israel. Israeli scholarly institutions and figures promoted widely circulated arguments regarding the organic link between the Israeli military establishment and academics with a particular interest in Islamic and Middle Eastern studies.

Israeli officialdom, media, and intellectual circles focused primarily on the events in Egypt, a neighbour of particular political, security, and economic relevance. While many feared the Islamic alternative in light of its potential impact upon the existing status quo, the outbreak of the revolution in Syria allayed Israel's concerns, giving rise to hopes for the collapse of the "axis of evil" stretching from Tehran to Beirut. The Islamist rise to power in Syria, in contrast, was regarded as a form of compensation for the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak's regime.

Although Israel's official reaction to the popular revolution in Tunisia was rather tepid, it sent a worrying signal regarding the uncertain fate of the region. The Israeli media and leadership exhibited little interest in the Tunisian revolution that ousted President Zine el Abidine Ben Ali, Tunisia being both geographical remote and playing a marginal role in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Israel's fear that the tide of popular uprisings would sweep across the Arab world began to change after the revolution erupted in Syria, however. Many regimes in the pay of or open to the West having already been overthrown March 2011, decision-making bodies in Israel viewing this as a threat to stability and a strategic shift threatening Israeli interests over the long term.

Before the Syrian uprisings, 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, Israeli's peace partner.[1]

Discussion of the outbreak of the uprisings in Syria and the ensuing civil war lies beyond our present brief, numerous studies having 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 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 Israeli Lebanese experience. The stamp this has imprinted on the Israeli historiographical discourse demonstrates the influence the Lebanese syndrome exerts.

II. What is the Lebanese Syndrome?

Known in Israeli public and academic discourse as the First Lebanon War, this campaign is both perceived and presented as forming part of Israel's traumatic history. While this view finds expression in diverse contexts that lie beyond the scope of the present article, a number of historical details support the notion

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[1] Cited in Lior Lehrs, Egyptian Plague or Spring of Youth? The Israeli Discourse Regarding the Arab Spring (Tel Aviv: Metaphim Institute, 2013), 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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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 five points:

1) 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 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 that over the First, its goal being 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 the 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]

2) It was a war of deception in two senses:

a) 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]

b) Israel was deceived and ultimately betrayed by her Maronite allies. 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. In Israel, they were convinced—and apparently there was something to support his assurance—that Bachir would strive for a very special relationship with Israel … For this reason, from the very first day of the war, questions such as, "What are you doing? Why aren't they moving? Why aren't they liberating their capital city" bothered the Israeli prime minister.[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]

The motifs of betrayal and deception form the central axis of Israeli accounts of the First Lebanon War. The core argument is that the Maronites—specifically the Phalanges—deliberately duped Israel, drawing it into the Lebanese quagmire in order to strike a mortal blow against the 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.

1) The entrenchment of the view that the Jewish State was dragged into a war with which it had nothing to do. This is reflected in statements made by two high-ranking officers who formed part of the command of the military operation in its first year. The sense of moral betrayal and deception by its Christian allies led to the belief—which became prominent after the siege of Beirut—that the war was both unnecessary and futile. Per Rabin's well-known thesis that Israel should "help the Christians help themselves," it was purely a Christian affair. Within a year, many Israelis had thus concluded that the State was sacrificing its young men on the altar of freedom or for the complex/ conflictual reality of Lebanon, entangled by the Maronites in a non-Israeli campaign.[8]

4) In addition to the military and political failure, the historical discourse regarding the First Lebanon War is grounded in the belief that Israel was convinced 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

[3] Ronen Dangur, "The Third War of Choice," *Haaretz*, 14 September, 2019 (Hebrew).
[4] Arye Naor, Cabinet at War: The Functioning of the Israeli Government during the 1982 Lebanon War (Tel Aviv: Lahav, 1993) 25 (Hebrew).
[5] Ze'ev Schiff and Ehud Ya'ari, *War of Deception* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1984), 380 (Hebrew).
[6] Jacques Neriah, *The Rise and Fall of Bachir Gemayel: Israel and the Lebanon Quagmire* (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, 2018), 263 (Hebrew).
[7] Schiff and Ya'ari, *War of Deception*, 388.
[8] Yossi Alpher, *Periphery: Israel's Search for Middle East Allies* (Tel Aviv: Matar, 2015), 79. See also the interview with Amos Yaron, commander of the Beirut area, during the war.

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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 the 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 amongst themselves. It is difficult to estimate the consequences.[9]

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. While it is impossible to know whether this was a form of self-deception or a hoodwinking of the public, it heavily underestimated the limitations of the use of force—a misconception under which the government labored virtually from the day the IDF crossed the Lebanese border until the Sabra and Shatila massacres. The efforts to "make order"—whether on a trivial or significant level—solely by force of 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 twentieth century and the end of colonialism. Today, they lie completely beyond the pale—even with respect to the superpowers. With regard to Israel, they are axiomatic principles. The premise guiding the government being unfounded, the goals of the war were unattainable. The latter were multitudinous, changing in light of events on the ground. Beginning as a modest operation to preserve peace in the Galilee, the operation rapidly expanded into an attempt to resolve security and political issues (in some cases even succeeding in addressing global terror)—then reverting once again to a number of unclear aims formulated ambiguously and expressed half-heartedly.[10]

Gemayel's assassination in September 1982 opened up a 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 devoid of any guiding strategic vision or direction. As Schiff and Ya'ari conclude:

> A year after the war, Israel began the struggle to extract itself from the Lebanese quagmire. Such processes are often difficult and painful, proper assessment of the whole campaign only being possible right at the end. Israel sought to withdraw in stages, the goal being to halt the ongoing toll while gradually relinquishing a large part of the aims Sharon had set. The immediate test was of the government's ability to prevent this necessary step from becoming a total defeat, thereby weakening its position in future battles; to create a network and alliance in Lebanon going forward that would prevent Syrian patronage and a renewed terrorist base; and above all, to facilitate recovery and rehabilitation, both in the IDF and the political system, in order that such a war, in which Israel lost its way, its belief in its righteousness and confidence being shaken, would not recur.[11]

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 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.[12]

5) The moral justification of the war also played a role. According to Arye Naor, Sharon's plan focused on Maronite cooperation rather than the destruction of the PLO. Four months before he entered office, Sharon had asserted that Syria had taken over Lebanon and was committing genocide against the Christians. This constituting an Israeli red line, Israeli was morally-ideologically obligated to help the latter.[13]

The linkage in the Israeli public's mind between a war that was not theirs and the ethical illusion of saving the Christians from genocide helps to explain the frustration that underlies the historical Israeli reading of the Lebanon situation. Rather than needing to engage in a military campaign or react in self-defense, Israel initiated an offensive of its own free will—*inter alia*, in

[9] Shimon Schiffer, *Snowball: The Story Behind the Lebanese War* (Tel Aviv: Idanim, 1984), 162 (Hebrew).
[10] Gadi Yatziv, "The War that Should not Have Broken Out," in *Lebanon: The Other War*, ed. Rubik Rosenthal (Tel Aviv: Sifriyat Poalim, 1983), 93–94 (Hebrew).
[11] Schiff and Ya'ari, *War of Deception*, 388.
[12] Schiffer, *Snowball*, 164–65.
[13] Naor, Cabinet at War, 26.

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pursuit of a moral *ignis fatuus*. 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 three 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. We may posit that within a large war such as Israel's Lebanon war, there was a smaller one—the four-kilometer war—that could be justified. But the small war did not take place; the big one did.[14]

Since the launch of the Syrian uprising, Israeli strategy towards the crisis has been intertwined with Israeli collective memory concerning the Lebanon civil war. The anxiety over the repetition of a military entanglement in Lebanon has subdued Israel from getting intervened 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 Hizballah.

III. Syria in the Israeli Security Mind-Set: the Stronghold of Animosity Towards Israel

As Gil Eyal demonstrates, Israeli Orientalism plays a major role in shaping the consciousness and mind-set of the Israeli security and political establishment. Specializing in the modern history of the region, Israeli Orientalists analyze the Arab-Islamic milieu from a strictly security perspective. This serves as a value criterion that determines the moral judgement of and political position towards 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".[15]

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 Barry, 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 of States (LAS), the country has fulfilled all its financial obligations in this regard. It also has 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.[16]

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.[17] After February 1948, when it became increasingly clear that the Arab states would not fulfil 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, Colonel Adib Shishakli, for example.[18] 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 afterwards. Opposing the first truce

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

[15] Gil Eyal, The Disenchantment of Orient: Expertise in Arab Affairs and Israeli State (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), p. 185.

[16] Avraham Sela, "Syria and the Question of Palestine: From the Establishment of the Arab League to the Armistice Agreement," *Maarchot* 294–295 (1984): 46–51 (Hebrew).

[17] Ibid, 48.

[18] Ibid, 49.

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and extension of the second, it was also the last Arab State to sign the armistice agreements with Israel in 1949.[19]

Sela's analysis closely parallels that of Prof. 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.[20] Following earlier scholars, Zisser points to Syria's ideological hostility as a hallmark of its attitude towards 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.[21] The idea that Syria serves as a stronghold of enmity towards 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-neighbouring 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.[22]

Itamar Rabinovich holds Syria primarily to blame for the collapse of the peace negotiations during the 1990s.[23] According to the latter, Asad rejected the Israeli scheme and its economic aspects as directed against Arab nationalism. Forcibly dragged into the peace process, he negotiated with Israel "resentfully and grudgingly because it was something he had been forced to do."[24] 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. Asad was thus expected to toe the line.[25] The antithesis of Anwar al-Sadat, who was characterized by his vision of peace and reconciliation, he was a cautious tactician, his refusal to meet with his Israeli interlocutors and the severe restrictions he imposed on the negotiators obstructing the negotiations.[26]

These historical reviews of Syria's initial positions towards 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 being required to remove the threat to Israel posed by Syria and everything for which it stands, projects for fragmenting Syria commenced.[27]

IV. Dismantling the "Axis of Evil"

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 Defence Ehud Barak optimistically announced that the Assad regime was so precarious that it would fall within a few weeks, fatally undermining the Iran-Hizballah axis.[28] From an Israeli perspective, he was convinced that it was better for the Baath regime to collapse than survive, even if the price was Hizballah gaining chemical weapons—the ultimate effect being a weak Iran.[29]

Amos Gilead, political and security Head of Section at the Ministry of Defence, expressed a similar view. Underestimating the threat jihadist organisations 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-Hizballah axis is much greater to Israel."[30] In reality, Israel is well aware of the risks involved if the Syrian regime does fall, the northern front having been quiet for the past four decades. Such a scenario would also raise questions regarding the future of its arsenal of strategic weapons (including long range missiles), the disintegration of the Syrian state, and instability along Israel's northern border.

[19] Ibid, 51.
[20] Moshe Ma'oz, *Syria: To Arabism and Back* (Ra'anana: Open University Press, 2011), 46–48 (Hebrew).
[21] Eyal Zisser, "Syria – From the Six-Day War to the Syrian Civil War," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 44.4 (2017): 545–58.
[22] Eliezer Be'eri, *The Officer Class in Politics and Society of the Arab East* (Tel Aviv: Workers' Book-Guild, 1966), 100 (Hebrew). *Army Officers in Arab Politics and Society* (New York: Praeger, 1970), p. 100.
[23] Itamar Rabinovich, *The Lingering Conflict: Israel, the Arabs, and the Middle East, 1948–2011* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2011), 264.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid, 264–65.
[26] Itamar Rabinovich, The Brink of Peace: Israel and Syria, 1992-1996 (Tel-Aviv: Miskal, 1998), 323–34 (Hebrew).
[27] Conceptualizing Syria as stronghold of animosity and antagonism towards Israel; led Israeli officials to suggest plans for disintegration of the Syrian state; see: Yusri Hazran, "A people that shall dwell alone: is that so? Israel and the minorities alliance" Middle Eastern Studies, Vol. 56, Issue 3 (2020), pp. 396-411.
[28] Lahav Harkov, "Barak: Assad will be toppled within weeks," *Haaretz*, 2 January, 2012 (Hebrew).
[29] "Ehud Barak: "Better for Assad to fall even if Hizballah get chemical weapons," *Globes*, 22 August, 2011 (Hebrew).
[30] Amon Gilead, "Al-Qaeda activists waiting for the chance to take over Syria," *Walla News*, 2 April, 2013: http://news.walla.co.il/?w=/9/2629505 (Hebrew).

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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 Hizballah.[31] Michael Hertzog, former military secretary to Minister of Security Shaul Mofaz and office director to former Minister of Defence 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.[32]

Former commander of military intelligence and current political affairs Head of Section at the Ministry of Security, Amos Yadlin maintains that, the Arab Spring having weakened the radical anti-Israel axis, Israeli should intervene militarily in Syria in order to oust Assad and halt his killing spree against his own citizens.[33] Assad's fall not only serves Israeli interests but also constitutes a moral responsibility—even when not supported by any international consensus.[34]

Espoused by a high-profile Israeli military official, this perspective evinces that the primary factor determining Israel's position towards the Syrian crisis has been the strategic threat posed by Hizballah. As long as Syria serves as a stronghold, arms supplier, and devoted ally of the terror organization, a simple calculation demonstrates that the downfall of the regime in Syria will strike a severe blow at Hizballah. Israel would then find it easy to confront the latter, the balance of power between them having become completely disproportionate. When Israelis look at Syria, their focus lies on Lebanon, the Hizballah presence therein constituting a strategic threat to Israel's security and stability. The fall of the Syria 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.

Prof. Moshe Ma'oz, 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 turn this state of affairs to its benefit. If Israel responds to the Arab peace initiative and resolves the Palestinian conflict, it can develop a strategic coalition with the Sunnite Arab States to counter the Iranian threat in the region. This will only work on the basis of the two-state solution and Saudi peace initiative, however.[35]

With respect to Syria, Ma'oz argues that the assumption of power by the Muslim Brotherhood's 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 Islamic states—including Indonesia, Turkey, and Tunisia—who side with the West. Most importantly, any regime it might form would undoubtedly be at odds with Hizballah and Iran, both of which back the Ba'ath regime. If the Muslim Brotherhood took power in Syria, Syria could become part of a regional coalition consisting of Turkey and Saudi Arabia—and perhaps even Israel—dedicated to stemming the Shi'ite tide.[36]

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 towards civil war, the ideological element also playing a major role. As Minister of Foreign Affairs and Defence, 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.[37] In July 2017, he declared that Israel could not allow the regime to continue because "as long as Assad is in power, Iran and Hizballah will remain in Syria."[38] 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).[39]

This Israeli sense of schadenfreude and sympathy for the uprising, was manifested *par excellence* by former Director of General Intelligence Avi Dichter in a recorded TV appeal to the Syrian people: "I am distraught over the world's silence regarding the heinous crimes committed by the Syrian forces against innocent citizens." Rhetorically questioning Arab and Western power"Where is the Arab nation? Where is the Arab League? Where are the millions? Where is the United Nations?"—he also apologized to the Syrian people for Israel's failure to intervene in well-known regional causes.[40]

[31] In this context, see former military intelligence officer Eran Lerman's hypothesis regarding "states of stability" in Shlomo Prom and Ophir Winter, *Developing a Regional Alliance against Israel: Obstacles and Warning Signals* (Hebrew); p. 44. Ophir Winter, ed., *No One is Infallible* (Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies. 2019), 44 (Hebrew).

[32] Michael Hertzog, "Grabbing the opportunity in Syria," *Haaretz*, 18 June, 2012 (Hebrew).

[33] B. Feller, "Amos Yadlin: The Arab Spring is more opportunity than risk," *Ynet*, 28 August, 2011: http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4088468,00.html (Hebrew).

[34] Elhanan Miller, "Ex-intel chief: Israel should punish Assad for killing civilians," *Times of Israel*, 13 May, 2014.

[35] Moshe Ma'oz, Political Islam and the Arab Spring: The Israeli Discourse following the Arab Spring (Tel Aviv: Mitvim), 4 (Hebrew).

[36] Ibid, 5–6.

[37] Minister of Foreign Affairs, "The Massacre in Syria is Unbearable," 4 March, 2014: http://www.inn.co.il/News/News.aspx/234512 (Hebrew).

[38] *Jerusalem Post*, 2 July, 2017.

[39] Yuval Benziman, "Netanyahu's Attempt to Delink Arab-Israeli Relations from the Palestinian Issue," in *Israel's Relations with Arab Countries: The Unfulfilled Potential*, ed. Roee Kibrik, Nimrod Goren, and Merav Kahana-Dagan (Tel Aviv: Mitvim, 2020), 17: https://tinyurl.com/y79wcthm (Hebrew).

[40] Avi Dichter, "The Arab world is ignoring the Syrian people": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3rGhmcZu6Iw (Arabic).

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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 favour the regime's survival over its overthrow. According to Elie Podeh and Moshe Maoz, the trend prevalent within the Israeli public and ruling circles reflects the belief that the uprisings serve Israeli strategic interests, it thus being 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 favour Israeli strategic interests. Both the official echelons and 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 smack of the 1982 entanglement.[41]

Some Israeli analysts nevertheless take a different line, maintaining that the question of whether the regime is overthrown or survives is a marginal issue, overridden by two other issues: 1) preventing *takfiri* jihadist organisations from gaining access to the Israeli border; and 2) 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 US President George Bush's proposal to move from Iraq into Syria in order 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. [42]

This policy began showing cracks in the aftermath of the Second Lebanese War, however. To Israelis, this reflected the depth of the strategic alliance between the Iran-led axes in the region. 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: a) the regime's downfall was the best option for Israel in the long term, implying a weakened Hizballah and Iran in the region; and b) 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.[43] The cautionary approach promoted by Rabinovich regarding Syria, undoubtedly reminds of the circumspect strategy adopted by Yizhak Rabin towards the Lebanese crisis of the 1970s; based on the principle of non-military intervention in Lebanon and "helping the Christians to help themselves."[44]

Zisser's reading constitutes a continuation to that of his former. The regime's fall is perceived as undermining the axis of evil. In the words of Eyal 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, and likewise the US 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.[45]

This reading corresponds to that of Itamar Rabinovich, 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 overthrow of the regime. 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.[46]

Not everyone accepts Rabinovich's pessimistic outlook and focus on Iran's growing influence and Hizballah's enhanced combat capacity. Some believe that developments in the Syrian uprising favour Israel's security and military interests, the revolution not only destroying the Syrian infrastructure and economy but also reducing 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 also being lost. The Syrian revolution and descent into civil war have thus removed the last traditional threat to the security of the Jewish State, no

[41] Elie Podeh and Moshe Maoz, Bashir Against Bashar: The Failure of the Popular uprising in Syria and ite Implication" in: Elie Podeh and Onn Winckler (eds.), The Third Wave- Protest and Revolution in the Middle East (Jerusalem: Karmel, 2017), pp. 167–68 (Hebrew).

[42] Itamar Rabinovich. "The devil we know: The Israeli vision of the future of Assad's regime," *A View from Above* 427 (2019): 1–2 (Hebrew).

[43] Ibid.

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[45] Eyal Zisser, "The Crisis in Syria: Threats and Opportunities for Israel," in *Strategic Survey for Israel, 2012–2013*, ed. Anat Kurz and Shlomo Brom (Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, 2013), 181.

[46] Itamar Rabinovich. "The USA and Israel in the face of Syria of Bashar al-Assad: Challenges, Dilemmas, and Options," *Landscape of Policies* 23.4 (2020): 69–71: https://www.inss.org.il/publication/the-united-states-and-israel-vs-the-syria-of-bashar-al-assad-challenges-dilemmas-and-options/

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Arab army posing a threat to its security in either the short or the medium term.[47]

Israel adopted a proactive course of action, constructing a wall and opening up communications with the armed opposition groups in the Golan Heights with a view to maintaining the *status quo* in the border area and preventing the return of government forces. As Iranian military intervention and Hizballah 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, 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 Hizballah-allied Ba'ath regime—even if these involved Islamist jihadist organisations. 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 and 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.[48] According to an IDF statement, it delivered 450,000 litres of fuel, 50,000 tonnes of clothes, and 113,000 tonnes 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 US$5,000.[49]

Israel took no pains to conceal that it was motivated by more than purely humanitarian concerns, openly claiming coordination with opposition groups, including both Islamist and jihadist factions. Not only did it share the goal of overthrowing the Ba'ath regime with the Syrian opposition in all its form, 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 Hizballah 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 towards 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. This assumes even greater significance in light of the fact that Zisser embodies the link between academic Orientalism and the security establishment:

> 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. Nonetheless, the same regime made sure to maintain total quiet along the shared border in the Golan Heights ... 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 ...[50]

V. 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 Hizballah 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 deathblow to the Ba'ath regime.[51]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 neighbouring 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.[52] The

[47] Avi Jager, "Syria: The Decline of the Last Conventional Threat," BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,707 (2020): 1–4.

[48] See Sam McNeil, "Israel treating thousands of Syrians injured in war," *The Independent*, 8 April, 2017: https://www.independent.co.uk/author/sam-mcneil

[49] See BBC Arabic, "Israeli Good Fence operation in the Syrian Golan Heights," 15 November, 2017: https://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast-41975936 (Arabic); see also: Udi Dekel, Nir Boms and Ofir Winter, Syria: New Map, New Actor (Tel-Aviv: INSS, 2015), P. 28; Amos Haarel, "The aid which IDF provides to the inhabitants of villages in the Golan Heights- not altruism, still comandable" Haaretz, 19 July 2017.

[50] Eyal Zisser, "The Crisis in Syria: Threats and Opportunities for Israel," in *Strategic Survey for Israel, 2012–2013*, ed. Anat Kurz and Shlomo Brom (Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, 2013), 168.

[51] Ehud Yaari's lecture, given at The Shalem Academic College at Jerusalem, December, 4, 2019.

[52] Eyal Zisser, *Syria at War: The Rise and Fall of the Revolution in Syria* (Tel Aviv: Ma'arachot, 2020), 368 (Hebrew).

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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 neighbouring country."[53]

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 off 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 pound 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 towards 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 taken 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: a) a clear preference for replacing Assad's regime due to the weakening of the "axis of evil"; and b) 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 having 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 ten-year anniversary of the outbreak of the uprisings/war in Syria, the authors—members of the Institute for National Security Studies—recommended that Israel should take a dramatically new approach to Syria, abandoning the traditional attitude of sitting on the fence in favour of intervening in three strategically important regions—southern Syria, north-eastern Syria, and the Syrian-Lebanese border. According to this report, the present reality demands a reassessment of Israeli policy, non-involvement having become implausible on three grounds related to remaining of Assad in power and the increasing of Iranian involvement in Syria. [54]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.

Israel has benefited from the developments of the Syrian crisis; nonetheless the reluctance from land one last blow on the regime can't be disconnected from the bloody heritage of the Lebanese syndrome.

[53] Ibid.

[54] Udi Dekel & Carmit Valensi, "After a Decade of War in Syria, Israel Should Change ite Policy" INSS Insight, No. 1451 (April, 2021), pp. 5-6.

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