# Israel and Islamist Militias: A Strange and Recurring Alliance

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*The recent assertion made by* **Bashar al-Jaafri***, Syria's Permanent Representative to the United Nations, accusing Israel of supporting and assisting the so-called Islamic State in his country's civil war has raised eyebrows in certain sections of the global media.*

*The Jerusalem Post referred to his comments as a "startling accusation" while the British Daily Mail thought it an "extraordinary claim". A columnist for the International Business Times, an online publication, opined that Jaafri's comments were the latest of an "oft-repeated conspiracy theory around recent Middle Eastern conflicts" wherein Israel is posited as a "covert ally of Islamic militants."*

*The rebuttals and other responses expressing skepticism over accepting this allegation as fact appear to be sound. The Jewish state is after all in the words of the IBT columnist, "despised by ISIS" which he goes on write "has urged its followers to kill Jews around the world".*

Many detractors of the Islamic faith who ignore Koranic references which acknowledge Jews to be a legitimate community of believers in the God of Abraham consistently aver to several passages as evidence of its animus towards adherents of Judaism. Among these is that of 5.13 which accuses the Jews of having broken "their covenant" with God who has "cursed them and made hard their hearts." How, given this background, could Israel countenance ever giving support -whether direct or indirect- to those indoctrinated with the values of fundamentalist Islam and enamoured with the cause of jihadism?

The evidence surprisingly does point to a consistent pattern of Israeli state policy aims that has involved facilitating the emergence and the sustenance of militant Islamic organisations.  In order to understand this phenomenon, it is important to be aware of the historical policies pursued by the state of Israel which have been predicated on the idea of weakening its opponents in order to reduce external threats to its security. This feeds into an overarching goal of balkanizing Muslim Arab nations and the manipulation of tribal and sectarian rivalries within such polities as a means of achieving this end. It is while bearing this in mind that evidence of Israel's support of an Islamist militia during the Soviet-Afghan War, terror groups in Iran, a group of insurrectionists in Yemen and jihadist militias in the ongoing Syrian Civil War becomes a phenomenon that is more readily comprehended. It also explains why Israel supplied weapons to Iran during its war with Iraq and why Israel effectively aided the creation of the Palestinian Islamist organisation Hamas.

Those who dreamed of establishing a state of Israel were aware that a necessary

precondition of its coming into being would involve the fracturing and dismembering of the Ottoman Empire which controlled Palestine until the end of the First World War. And since its establishment, leaders of Israel have followed policies based on establishing both military and economic hegemony over other countries in the Middle East. Operating under what have been described as "strong survival instincts", this has included the overarching objective of weakening Arab states which were artificial constructs of the Sykes-Picot Agreement.

From the Maghreb to the Levant and beyond, the existence of large Arab nations have represented an existential threat to Israel and Israel has actively sought to undermine these states when the opportunity has arisen. This was central to the policies pursued by **David Ben Gurion** in the 1950s which were geared towards increasing tensions between Christian and Muslim communities in neighbouring Lebanon. The aim was to secure the dismemberment of the country as well as the possible acquisition of additional territory.

The diaries of **Moshe Sharett**, one of Israel's early prime ministers record **Moshe Dayan** as declaring that Israel needed a Christian military officer to carve out a Christian state in the region south of the River Litani which would then be ceded to Israel. Ben Gurion himself had advocated the Litani as the natural northern border of Israel. Thus, fomenting sectarian strife in order to forestal the development of a unified Arab nation which could threaten it and creating the circumstances in which land could be acquired was at the root of Israel's relationship with its northern neighbour. Dayan's plan would later be activated via the creation of the South Lebanon Army, which served as a proxy army for the Israelis in its battles with the Palestinian Liberation Organisation. Israel's policy also informed Ben Gurion's vehement objections to French **President Charles de Gaulle'**s decision to grant independence to Algeria.

The Israeli strategy of working towards the destabilising and balkanising of Arab Muslim nations is best illustrated by a paper drawn up in the early 1980s by **Oded Yinon**. The 'Yinon Plan' was predicated on the idea of exploiting the ethnic-sectarian rivalries and the economic maladies within those Arab states possessing strong, nationalist governments. Iraq, for instance, was earmarked as a suitable candidate that would ideally be divided into three mini-states: one Kurdish and the other two respectively Sunni and Shia. Egypt would ideally be splintered into a Coptic Christian state and numerous other Muslim states. Yinon's paper also assessed the vulnerabilities of the Syrian state which he felt was no different to that of Lebanon except that it was held together by the strong leadership of Hafez al Assad.

Another paper which gives an idea of Israel's enduring interest in engineering the fracturing of neighboring Arab states is one produced in 1996 by a team led by **Richard Perle**. 'A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm' proposed that Israel give up efforts towards achieving a comprehensive peace with the Arab world and instead should work together with Turkey and Jordan to "contain, destabilize and roll-back" those states which pose as threats to all three. It was a strategy which envisioned the "weakening, controlling and even rolling back" of Syria.

While Israeli state policy is officially 'neutral' so far as the activities of the anti-Shia Sunni militants who are enemies of Israel's foes who comprise the Shia Crescent extending from Iran through to Syria and Hezbollah in Lebanon, there is enough evidence to indicate that Israel has adopted a pragmatic attitude to the usefulness of groups such as Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra.

This is reflected in a paper entitled 'The Destruction of Islamic State is a Mistake' written by **Professor Efriam Inbar**, a director of the Begin-Sadat Centre for Strategic Studies, and published in August of 2016. In it, Inbar argues that while the West should seek to weaken the Islamic State, it should not go as far as destroying it. The Islamic State serves as a useful tool in undermining the strategic interests of Iran, Syria and Hezbollah. In other words, radical Islamic insurgents aid Israel's long-term strategy of survival using the divide and conquer philosophy.

The use of a divide and conquer strategy by aiding one enemy in its struggle with another enemy forms a common theme in Israel's decision to aid Islamist groups. Indeed, it is at the heart of the rise of Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiyya, or Hamas, the Palestinian Sunni-Islamic fundamentalist organisation and its associated paramilitary force, the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades.



Israel's support for Hamas was based on the rationale of using it as a counter-weight to Yasser Arafat's secular Fatah organisation, the largest component of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation. In the words of a former senior CIA official,

> this support "was a direct attempt to divide and dilute support for a strong, secular PLO by using a competing religious alternative".

Several officials from the Intelligence Community of the United States have claimed that Israel gave both direct and indirect financial aid to Hamas for a period of years commencing in the later part of the 1970s. These claims have been backed by the research of **Professor Anthony H. Cordesman** of the Washington DC-based Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). Arafat, who asserted that Hamas was the "creation of Israel", once claimed that **Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin** had admitted to him in the presence of Egyptian **President Hosni Mubarak** that Israel had supported Hamas.

For much of the 1980s, most of the Palestinian Islamist groups appear not to have supported resistance to the occupation and instead expended their energies and finances in combating the more Left-wing factions of the PLO on university campuses. Some time after the first Intafada of 1987, a pained Arafat accused Hamas and other Islamist organisations of effectively acting as collaborators with the Israeli occupiers.

US officials reported that **Brigadier-General Yitzhak Segev**, a military governor of Gaza in the 1980s had told them that he had helped fund "Islamic movements as a counterweight to the PLO and communists". **David Shipler**, a reporter for the New York Times, claimed that Segev had boasted of funding Islamic fundamentalists because of its utility in fomenting conflict between Islamists and secular supporters of the PLO.

> "The Israeli government gave me a budget", Segev claimed, "and the military government gives to the mosques".

The military administrators of the Gaza Strip which was conquered from Egypt after the Six Day War enabled Mujama al-Islamiya, a precursor of the group which was led by Sheik Ahmed Yassin, to register as a charity. This group continued a tradition of Muslim Brotherhood affiliated groups in providing Palestinian communities with Da'wah, an

infrastructure of social, religious, educational and cultural elements which served to ease the hardships of dispossessed peoples eking out an existence in refugee camps.

Supporting Hamas had aims that went further than creating a fractious political climate among the Palestinians. Israel hoped to benefit from disclosures of the organisations links with Ayatollah Khomeini's Iran. For those on the Israeli political Right, Hamas' aim to create a theocratic transnational Islamic state rather than a Palestinian nation state would make it less amenable to assenting to a peace agreement in contrast to the PLO which was in principle committed to a two-state solution.

In a 2003 article in Current History entitled "Hamas and the Transformation of Political Islam in Palestine", the American scholar **Sara Roy** wrote,

> "Some analysts maintain that while Hamas leaders are being targeted, Israel is simultaneously pursuing its old strategy of promoting Hamas over the secular nationalist factions as a way of ensuring the ultimate demise of the (Palestinian Authority), and as an effort to extinguish Palestinian nationalism once and for all."



Israel's support of Islamist groups has not been restricted to the Middle East. While most people are aware that the United States and allies such as Saudi Arabia and Pakistan were involved in aiding the Mujahideen during the occupation of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union, few are aware that one faction of the Mujahideen; one which was particularly hardline and anti-Western, was a beneficiary of Israeli support.

Israel's involvement in this anti-Soviet alliance was based on an animus towards the Soviet Union which it perceived as a bastion of anti-Semitism because of the policies followed in the post-War period. This began with the anti-cosmopolitical campaign in the twilight years of Stalin who became suspicious of the loyalties of Soviet Jews in the wake of the creation of the state of Israel.

A series of anti-Jewish purges followed. These included those aimed at the membership of the Anti-Fascist Committee of Soviet Jews, the shutting down of the Moscow State Jewish Theater and the infamous 'Doctors Plot'.

While the succeeding administrations of Nikita Khrushchev and Leonid Brezhnev officially denounced anti-Semitism, many in the Jewish Diaspora particularly, and importantly, those in the United States remained unconvinced and would claim that the Soviet Union administered a form of state-sponsored anti-Semitism. The undercurrent of anti-Semitism is said to have risen in the build up to the Six Day War of 1967 and Israel's subsequent victory led to an increase in Jewish ethnic consciousness which fed into the burgeoning Refusenik Movement. Soviet Jews formed a large segment of these dissidents who were denied permission to emigrate from the Soviet Union.

Although the Soviet Union was the first country to recognise the state of Israel, both countries found themselves effectively functioning as political and military adversaries because of the military aid and assistance given by the Soviets to Israel's major Arab enemies, Egypt and Syria. Soviet support for miscellaneous national liberation movements included several Palestinian militant groups, and in 1978, it recognised the PLO as the "sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people."

In Israel, the idea of the Soviet Union being a sponsor of Arab terrorism became widespread so much so that in 1986 **Binyamin Netanyahu** wrote about the "centrality of the Soviet Union and the PLO in fomenting and spreading (international terrorism)."

It was thus under the watch of **General Ehud Barak**, a future prime minister and the creator of the Special Forces unit Seyeret Matkal, that Agaf ha-Modi'in (Aman for short), Israel's Military Intelligence Directorate, began arming and training Islamist guerrillas of Hezb-i-Islami Mujahideen, which was led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.

**Charlie Wilson**, a pro-Israeli congressman acted as an arms broker for the sale of weapons captured from the PLO in Lebanon to Hekmatyar's group via Pakistan, then led by General Zia Ul-Haq. Wilson's liaison with Israeli intelligence was Zvi Rafiah, the Mossad station chief in Washington who had full access to Wilson's congressional office.

The connection between Israel and Islamist militias is one which has continued through to the era of the so-called 'war on terror'. The 'war on terror' is itself an Israeli construct with origins in the ideas promoted by the Jonathan Institute, a body founded in 1976 and run by members of the Netanyahu family. The Jerusalem Conference of 1979 which was held under the auspices of the institute and with the full support of the then incumbent Prime Minister of Israel, Menachem Begin, sought to fundamentally change perceptions of the Israel-Palestine conflict.

Netanyahu also wrote a series of books alongside the papers published by the institute which put forward the idea that acts of terror directed at Israel were based not on the precept of a legitimate struggle by a people dispossessed of their land and denied the right to self determination, but instead was predicated on a clash of values: the values of the Western world as supposedly represented by 'democratic' Israel and values antithetical to the West as represented by Arab 'authoritarianism' and 'fanaticism'.

The argument posited by the institute involved a war being fought on a global scale that would involve the United States taking a lead in ways which included sending its military to fight in the Middle East. The 'war on terror' called for by Ehud Barak from a BBC studio on September the 11th 2001, only a short time after the attack on the World Trade Center complex by soldiers of al-Qaeda, was heeded by **President George Bush**. It was a war which was declared from the outset to be one of unlimited scope and duration.

In 2002, a website called 'Mojahedoon dot net' was launched. It carried a statement purportedly from a newly established branch of al-Qaeda known as the 'Islamic al-Qaeda in Palestine' which pledged allegiance to **Osama Bin Laden**. It rejected any peace talks between the Palestinian Authority and Israel, adding that it would accept "nothing but the full liberation of the Palestinian land."

This development was not one that was out of the ordinary. Analysts of global jihadism were quick to understand that the body founded by Osama Bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri did not function globally as a centralised corporate body. Instead, it metamorphosed into a decentralized leadership of regional groups using the al-Qaeda brand. This phenomenon has meant that a terror group embracing the ideology of Sunni jihadism can create itself and act independently of an authoritative figure acting under the command of the original entity. This leaves open the possibility that intelligence services may be able to create counterfeit terror units claiming to be al-Qaeda.

The response of the Palestinian Authority to a similar development within its territories explicitly embraced this theory. Officials including Yasser Arafat accused Mossad of setting up a fake al-Qaeda terrorist cell in Gaza. According to **Colonel Rashid Abu-Shbak**, the head of preventative security, eight Palestinian residents of Gaza had been approached by figures who made offers of money and weapons to work for al-Qaeda. These communications were claimed to have been traced back to Israeli intelligence.

While Israel's position was that the Palestinian allegations were "sheer nonsense" and an attempt to cover up the PLO's 'collaboration' with extremists, Abu-Shbak's position was that while he could not guarantee a presence in the future, al-Qaeda was not operating in Gaza. Setting up a fake al-Qaeda terror cell was, Arafat insisted, an Israeli strategy aimed at justifying attacks on Palestinian areas.

A similar situation transpired in the Arabian Peninsula some years later. When security forces in Yemen arrested a cell of Islamist militants with alleged ties to Israeli intelligence in the later part of 2008, the reaction from around the world was one of incredulity. The Israeli foreign ministry issued a statement rejecting the accusation as "far-fetched".

The evidence put forward by the prosecution at a trial of three of its nationals before a state security court early the following year, was that **Bassam Abdullah al-Haideri** had established contact with the office of Israel's former **Prime Minister Ehud Olmert** via an email in which he offered to work for Mossad. The prosecutors claimed that al-Haideri received a reply from Israeli officials who responded positively to the offer.

According to the court documents, al-Haidari had written,

> "we are the Organisation of Islamic Jihad and you are Jews, but you are honest, and we are ready to do anything."

In reply, someone purporting to be from Olmert's office, but more likely to have been from Israeli intelligence wrote back informing al-Haidari,

> "we are ready to support you…as an agent."

Israel, the Yemeni prosecutor's claimed was prepared to assist a group of Islamist militants who had "prepared…car bombs to attack governmental buildings and embassies". The cell was arrested in the month following an attack on the US embassy in the capital city of Sana'a. An organisation referring to themselves as the Islamic Jihad in Yemen, had claimed responsibility for an attack on the embassy which had killed 18 people.

The US State Department had in December of 2007 released a communique describing describing Yemen as "an important partner in the global war on terrorism" and praised the efforts of **President Ali Abdullah Saleh** in his country's "counter-terrorism cooperation efforts with the United States, achieving significant results and improving overall security in Yemen."

What motive could Israel have for supporting an Islamic terror cell in a country where the 'war on terror' was supposedly being won? And why support an organisation which would target its preeminent ally, the United States, which was taking the lead in this war? The

answer can be found in the aforementioned strategy of weakening Arab and Muslim states which also formed the basis of its involvement in the Iran-Iraq War as well as the ongoing Syrian War. The position favoured by Israel in the former as well as the latter is that of a prolonged war of indefinite duration.

The motive for supporting an al-Qaeda affiliated terror cell in the Yemen was thus likely to be based on the rationale of prolonging the 'war on terror' by undermining what the State Department had described as an improving security situation in the Yemen.

For those who find the episode in Yemen unbelievable or, as the Israeli foreign ministry put it, derived from "the proponents of conspiracy theories", a recounting of 'Operation Susannah', an infamous episode in the annals of Israeli intelligence, is essential.

In 1954, Aman activated a sleeper cell composed of operatives who had been recruited from the Arab Jewish population of Egypt. They were tasked with planting a series of bombs in American and British establishments in the cities of Alexandria and Cairo.

On July 2nd, the unit detonated bombs at a post office in Alexandria. Twelve days later, it bombed the libraries of the US Information Agency in Alexandria and Cairo. The explosions caused little damage and there was no loss of life. On July 23rd, a bomb exploded prematurely while one of the agents was entering the British-owned Rio Theater in Alexandra. He survived the blast and was arrested. Most of the conspirators were rounded up by Egyptian intelligence and put on trial before an Egyptian military tribunal. After deliberations, two were executed by hanging (another two had committed suicide while in custody) while the others were handed lengthy terms of imprisonment.

The official position of the Israeli government at the time was that the government of Gamal Abdel Nasser had framed a group of innocent Jews and convicted them in a show trial after their confessions had been extracted by torture.

The truth was of course different.

The incident, which came to be known as the 'Lavon Affair', so-called because defence minister Pinhas Lavon had been held responsible for the conception and execution of the operation, had been carried out without the knowledge of Prime Minister Moshe Sharett. Sharett was despised by figures such as Ben Gurion and Moshe Dayan because of policies which they perceived as 'dovish'. He had established back channels of communication between himself and Nasser.

But the idea behind the operation went further than intentionally frustrating Sharett. 'Susannah' was conceived as a 'false flag' operation to be blamed on the Muslim Brotherhood, communists and malcontented Egyptian nationalists in order to discourage Western rapprochement with the Egyptian leader. It also had the objective of encouraging the British not to withdraw from the Suez Canal and may have also been designed to create the circumstances where the United States and Britain would be encouraged to take military action against Egypt.

It would be 51 years after the event before Israel officially admitted it had conducted this covert operation, and in a ceremony presided by Moshe Katzav, its then president, the surviving members of the cell were awarded certificates of appreciation for services rendered to the state.

While the aforementioned 'Yinon Plan' and 'Clean Break document' offer an underpinning geo-political rationale and explanation for Israel's present day interest in the fate of the Syrian state, some background as to how the conflict was stimulated is warranted.

The ongoing Syrian War is best understood as being a manufactured conflict. In other words, it is one which involved the pre-planned invasion of a sovereign state by other states seeking the overthrow of the de jure government.

Bashar al-Jaafri's recent comments before the United Nations Security Council about what he claimed to be Israel's direct support for jihadists made a pointed reference to the origins of the crisis.

> "This serious aggression," he said, "had been plotted long in advance inside the secret rooms of intelligence agencies of Tel Aviv, Riyadh, Doha, Ankara, Amman, Washington, London and Paris."

The phenomenon of social ferment in the Muslim Arab world frequently referred to as the 'Arab Spring' which paved the way for specific episodes of genuine communal demonstrations against the government of **Bashar al Assad** merely provided cover for the introduction of armed infiltrators from foreign lands indoctrinated with the cause of jihadism.

Al-Jaafri's reference to the external source of the Syrian tragedy is corroborated by the admission made by Roland Dumas, a former foreign minister of France, who claimed in 2013 that the insurrection was "prepared, conceived and organised" at least two years in advance of the insurgency. Dumas had been on a visit to London when he was approached by British officials who informed him about a project that involved infiltrating Syria with rebel fighters.

As to why the intelligence services of the nations mentioned by al-Jaafri would want to overthrow the Assad government, the reasons differ. There are economic reasons which relate to the Assad government's rejection of a gas pipeline running from the Gulf to Europe via Syria and Turkey. The advantages to the emirate states and Turkey are apparent, but a pipeline would also serve the strategic interests of the United States which wishes to remove the dependency of it European allies on Russian gas.

Yet, the argument that Israel's interests are paramount in this is not without foundation.

> "In the region (i.e. the Middle East)," Dumas related, "it is important to know that this Syrian regime has a very anti-Israeli stance…and I have this from the former Israeli prime minister who told me, "we'll try to get on with our neighbours, but those who don't agree with us will be destroyed."

Overseeing this policy of securing the position of Israel in the Middle East is the United States. Writing in the March 2007 edition of the New Yorker magazine, the Pulitzer Prize award-winning author **Seymour Hersh** related the following:

> The Saudi government, with Washington's approval, would provide funds and logistical aid to weaken the government of President Bashar Assad of Syria. The Israelis believe that putting such pressure on the Assad government will

make it more conciliatory and open to negotiations

The foreign policy objectives of the United States as well as its key allies such as France and Britain which all have powerful Israel lobbies are virtually in sync with that of Israel which has over the decades developed a what is in effect a symbiotic relationship with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the conservative Gulf emirates such as Qatar.

The "weakening, controlling and even rolling back" of Syria, alluded to in the aforementioned 'Clean Break' document has as its end game the destruction of the entities comprising the so-called 'Shia Crescent' of which Syria serves as an important conduit between the government of Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Israel's interest in destroying a country that has refused to sign a peace treaty and which helps sustain Hezbollah, the only military organisation in the Arab world to frustrate its armed forces in the field of combat, is clear. The destruction of Syria would make it easier for Israel to continue to rebuff the Syrian territorial claim for the occupied and illegally annexed Golan Heights. It would also go a large way in fulfilling the aims of the Yinon Plan given the neutralising of Egypt via a peace treaty, Jordan's continuing existence as a de facto Israeli protectorate, the effective partitioning of post-Baathist ruled Iraq and the destruction of Libya.

Syria's dismantling would certainly go a long way in achieving the Israeli interest-promoting neoconservative agendal of destroying Arab governments supposedly hostile to the "interests and values" of the United States. It is not by sheer coincidence that each of these countries were not compliant to Israel's military domination of the Middle East.

The goals of the neoconservative-authored 'Statement of Principles' by the Project for the New American Century were largely synonymous with the 'Clean Break' document and was put into action immediately after the September 11th attacks inaugurated the 'war on terror'. It is clear that while US administrations have changed since that time, the policy revealed by retired General Wesley Clark about how the United States intended to "take out seven countries", one of which was Syria, remains unchanged.

The attitude of Israel to the fate of the Assad government was neatly enunciated by its former ambassador to the United States. He was quoted by the Jerusalem Post in September of 2013 as saying the following:

> The greatest danger to Israel is by the strategic arc that extends from Tehran to Damascus to Beirut. And we saw the Assad regime as the keystone of that arc. That is a position we had well before the outbreak of hostilities in Syria. With the outbreak of hostilities we continued to want Assad to go.

How then has Israel provided help to Syrian Islamist groups? It is important to begin by noting that most of the locally sprung anti-Assad fighters -not including the imported global jihadists fighting for the Islamic State and al-Qaeda affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra- are Islamist in motivation. While making his presentation to the Herzliya Conference in 2014, Brigadier-General Itai Brun, the head of the IDF's Military Intelligence research and analysis division, declared that over 80 per cent had "a clear Islamist agenda".

Yet, given the virulently anti-Jewish and anti-Zionist posturing of many Islamist groups, some have been given to wonder aloud as to why Israel appeared to be immune from

attacks by groups such as Islamic State. Between Israel and the jihadists neither bomb nor bullet was exchanged.

For the conspiratorially-minded, it 'revealed' Israel's diabolical role in the creation and direction of Islamic State. For others, a more rational explanation prevailed: Israel's policy of forceful retribution offered enough deterrence to those who would dare raise their hands to strike at the Jewish state.

Still, some hardcore skeptics point out that the unfearing mind of the fanatic convinced of an awaiting martyrdom would not be deterred by the wrath of a powerful foe. If the alleged executors of the attacks on the United States in 2001 were hell bent on provoking a war with the most powerful nation on earth, why would those committed to an even more extreme strain of fundamentalism shirk from staging attacks?

The answer lies in the goal of Sunni adherents to militant Islamic creeds seeking to 'purify' Islam first before taking on the 'infidels'. Thus the primary aim for groups such as Islamic State is to destroy secular governments in the Muslim world such as that of Bashar Assad and those considered heretical such as the Shia.

They offer justification for this stance by referring to the precedent of the first caliph, Abu Bakr, whose reign was inaugurated by an onslaught against those professed followers of the faith who were nonetheless deemed to be apostates. Another example to which they refer is that of Saladin, who fought the Shiites in Egypt before embarking on his successful campaign to re-establish Islamic control of Jerusalem.

Israeli support for Islamist insurgents operating in Syria has been largely two-fold. One relates to the medical treatment given to Islamist guerillas fighting near Israel's Syrian border. Al-Qaeda-affiliated groups have dominated the "eight-square-kilometer separation zone on the Golan" since 2013. The other is realised through Israeli attacks on Syrian government forces.

In late 2014, United Nations observers located in the Golan Heights submitted a report to the United Nations Security Council stating that the IDF had been in regular contact with Syrian rebels including Islamic State militants for a period estimated at 18 months.

Members of the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force recorded specific instances where wounded members of the Syrian opposition were taken by armed rebels across the longstanding Israel-Syria ceasefire line and left at locations where they were transferred to a civilian ambulance which was escorted by an IDF vehicle. Those rebels who were mended after treatment at one of several "secret military hospitals" were sent back to Syria where they presumably returned to fighting.

Reports of such contact which had filtered through some news reports were initially denied by Israel which insisted that it was treating only civilians. However, this position was recanted when activists among Israel's minority Druze population protested in November of that year, complaining that fighters from the al-Nusra Front were among those being hospitalised. They accused the Israeli government of supporting radical Sunni factions such as the Islamic State.

In response, the Israeli military issued a statement saying that for two years, the IDF had been "engaged in humanitarian, life-saving aid to wounded Syrians, irrespective of their identity."

The report went further in noting that members of the Israeli army were observed to be interacting with armed rebels and that in one such incident, the IDF soldiers gave boxes to the Syrian armed rebels.

An article of the Jerusalem Post in April 2017 claimed that in "approximately four  years, Israel has provided medical care to some 3,000 Syrians." What the ratio is between fighters and civilians remains unknown. However, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu announced that Israel remained committed to treating war wounded. And while the official position is that treatment will be dispensed to anyone who makes it to the demarcation line, the reality is that it does not extend to members of the Syrian Arab Army.

The Syrian Army has been intermittently targeted by airstrikes since the beginning of the conflict. While such strikes have been explained as focusing on intercepting advanced weapon deliveries from the Iranian government to Hezbollah, information is often obscure. According to Al-Jaafri, the Israeli Air Force attack on Syrian Army sites in Palmyra on March 17th, 2017 was designed to give "direct  support to ISIL" and had "added fuel to the fire and made things worse." Israel's reason for this particular strike as with others was that it was targeting consignments bound for Hezbollah. The problem for the Syrian Army is that such strikes are interpreted as an attempt to degrade its capabilities in fighting the Islamist insurgents.

Israel has gone further than providing medical treatment and conducting anti-government airstrikes. It is clear that it has armed and trained rebels albeit those who are regarded to be part of the nominally secular Free Syrian Army. The Times of Israel revealed in August of 2014 that a Syrian rebel commander who was abducted and tried by a Sharia court set up by the al-Nusra Front in the Daraa region confessed to having collaborated with Israel. He admitted entering Israel five times to meet with officers of the IDF who provided him Soviet-made anti-tank weapons and light arms in return for protecting the Israeli border with Syria.

It is not unreasonable to speculate that for many in Israel, the best case scenario is for the Syrian war to endure for as long as possible without any side necessarily prevailing over the other. The destruction of military resources, the displacement and depopulation of the country and its de facto partitioning would go a long way towards realising the state's long-term objectives of weakening its neighbours.

When Islamic State made its initial conquests in Iraq and there was talk about the West intervening, Binyamin Netanyahu in an interview with the American public affairs program 'Meet the Press' advised:

"when your enemies are fighting each other, don't strengthen one of them; weaken both."

This idea of weakening both enemies was at the heart of Israeli involvement in the war between Iran and Iraq which began in 1980 and lasted for eight years. Iran has been an explicit enemy of the state of Israel since the Islamic revolution of 1979 overthrew the Shah and installed a Shia theocracy led by Ayatollah Khomeini.

Khomeini had often railed against the United States and Israel as the sources corruption and backwardness in Iran during the Shah's reign. His arrest by the Shah's security police after a particularly inflammatory sermon was followed by violent street protests whose participants held placards and chanted the slogan

"Death to the Shah, Death to America and Death to Israel."

The fall of the Shah with whose government Israel had a positive, even influential relationship, created a new enemy for Israel. With the coming of the revolution, Iran broke off diplomatic relations with the Jewish state. The new government proceeded to adopt a strongly pro-Palestinian policy and there were frequent denunciations calling for the destruction of Israel and Zionism. It is estimated that around a third of Iran's Jews emigrated from the country.

Yet, in separate in-depth researches conducted by writers Ronen Bergman and Trita Parsi, much information has been assembled indicating that Israel sold Iran a huge amount of armaments at various stages of Iran's war with Iraq. Codenamed 'Operation Seashell' by the Israelis, the Iranians are claimed to have received weapons from stockpiles of the IDF as well as from Israel Aircraft industries.

An arms dealer working for the Iranians named Ahmad Haidari claimed that around 80% of Iranian weapons purchased during the war emanated from Israel. Most of the payments were made by supplying Israel with oil. Allegations of transactions of this nature were made while the war was ongoing by media outlets such as the New York Times and Panorama, a Milan-based weekly. As was the case with Israeli supplies to Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hezb-i-Islami Mujahideen during the Islamist anti-Soviet insurgency in Afghanistan, Panorama claimed that a large part of some consignments came from weapons captured from the PLO during Israel's invasion of Lebanon the early 1980s.

It has also been a matter of public record for a long period of time that israel facilitated the transfer of arms from the United States to Iran as part of the so-called Iran-Contra Affair.

While it was acting in its own national security interests, Israel's destruction of Iraq's nuclear project at Osirak in 1981 indirectly aided the Iranians who had in fact bombed the establishment in 1980 but only with limited success.

Although Israel's involvement in the Iran-Iraq war was one-sided, the Israeli rationale of weakening both enemies still held true given the fact that Iraq, led at the time by Saddam Hussein, was supported by the United States and much of the Arab world. Saddam was of course no friend of Israel. He continually projected an anti-Israel stance and gave material support to various Palestinian organisations. Iraqi military capabilities meant that it possessed the strongest army in the Arab world and a victory over Iran, Israel feared would

embolden Saddam to challenge its undisputed hegemony in the region.

The neutering of Iraqi power that followed the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's government has left Iran as a formidable challenger to that hegemony. It is the reason why Israel welcomes the weakening of Syria – something confirmed by a leaked email written by **Hillary Clinton** while she was the serving as US Secretary of State under the administration of **Barack Obama**.

> "The best way to help Israel deal with Iran's growing nuclear capability," she wrote, "is to help the people of Syria overthrow the regime of Bashar Assad."

While Israel failed to persuade the Obama administration to attack and destroy Iran's nuclear facilities, it has sought out opportunities of using dissenting groups from among Iran's multi-ethnic population to destabilise the country. This has included groups of a Sunni fundamentalist disposition. For instance, in the late 2000s, agents of the Mossad posed as CIA agents to meet and recruit members of the virulently anti-Shia Jundullah, a terror group based in the Pakistani province of Balochistan, in Western European capital cities to carry out a campaign of bombings and assassinations in Iran.

Also in 2012, NBC television reported that Israeli intelligence had financed, trained and armed the Mojahedin-e Khalq (MEK), a terror group with origins in Marxism-Islamism, to carry out attacks on Iranian nuclear scientists. The sources for this information were "two senior officials in the Obama administration." Trita Parsi estimates that the relationship with Israel may have started as far back as the early 1990s. A multi-million dollar campaign by pro-Israel groups in North America calling for the MEK to be removed from the State Department's list of foreign terrorist organisations was successful. The group was delisted in 2012.

While Israel refuses to publicly acknowledge its ties with the MEK, Parsi revealed that a former US State Department official had confided that Israeli official privately tell the United states that the MEK is "useful".

The benefits accrued to Israel for episodic support for Islamist groups and even the Islamic government in Tehran are clear in terms of political and geo-strategic advantage as well as occasionally offering financial benefit.

But the costs are also clear.

**Larry Johnson**, a former State Department counter-terrorism official, once claimed that the Israelis "are their own worst enemies when it comes to fighting terrorism." In Johnson's view, the Israelis "do more to incite and sustain terrorism than curb it."

> "The thing wrong with so many Israeli operations," a former CIA official named **Vincent Cannistratro** once opined, "is that they try to be too sexy."

Cannistrato was referring to Israel's cultivation of Hamas as a rival organisation to the PLO and the implications of blowback.

Israeli support for Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Mujahideen group during the Afghan War of the 1980s contributed to the blowback often attributed to American support for anti-Soviet Islamists. 'Operation Cyclone', the longest and most expensive covert operation conducted by the CIA was designed to lure the Soviet military into Afghanistan where its military capabilities would be denuded. The losses suffered by the Soviet military which led to

withdrawal were lauded as a significant contributory factor in the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union. What the Americans failed to foresee was that they had paved the way for the creation of al-Qaeda and the development of global jihadism.

Among those participants trained and armed by Israeli military intelligence were thousands of non-Afghan fighters who included Arab jihadists, many of whom would form the germ of the global jihadist movement currently bedeviling the world. After losing support first from Saudi Arabia and later Pakistan, the remnants of Hezb-i-Islami Mujahideen merged into al-Qaeda and the Taliban.

There are of course critics who point out that the 'war on terror' declared in response to the growth of the global jihadist movement favours Israel. As mentioned earlier on, Binyamin Netanyahu spearheaded calls for such a war back in the 1970s. Weakening enemies and the military involvement of the United States in Middle Eastern affairs were goals of the Netanyahu-run Jonathan Institute. It was after all, Netanyahu himself who in 2008 suggested to an Israeli audience that Israel was "benefiting" from the "attack on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon, and the American struggle" in Iraq.

Nonetheless, Israel's specifically verifiable relationships with terror groups officially opens it up to the charge of being a state sponsor of terrorism. It undermines any moral high ground it claims to have when referring to enemies such as Iran as sponsors and perpetrators of terror.

What may appear to be the cunning and pragmatic exercise of realpolitik may also be viewed as hypocritical, a perversion of ethical values, and, ultimately will serve to further undermine the cause of Zionism.

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