

Israel's Dangerous Game with Syrian Al Nusra Islamists

By [Richard Silverstein](#)

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Recently, Israeli TV [aired an interview](#) (Hebrew, at the 2:00 mark) with a wounded Syrian fighter who was treated in Israel after being evacuated from the combat zone. As I, and many other journalists have reported, Israel, despite the false claim of neutrality in the civil war, has frequently intervened in the conflict on behalf of forces opposed to Bashar al-Assad. It does this less because it opposes Assad himself, than because its arch-enemies, Iran and Hezbollah, are the regime's strongest allies.

In the Golan, Israel has cultivated an alliance with Islamist forces it falsely claims to detest: the al-Nusra Front. It has built a camp to house fighters and their families on Israeli-held territory. It conducts regular meetings with Islamist commanders and provides military and other critical supplies to them. All of this is documented in written UN reports and images captured by journalists and activists on the armistice line (between Syria and Israel).

In my writing about this, I've not only criticized the hypocrisy of Israel joining forces with the very forces it claims are destroying the Middle East and the world; I've also noted the likelihood that [today's allies will turn into tomorrow's enemies](#). Maariv journalist Jacki Hugi [said it well](#):

...Jerusalem must ask itself some difficult questions: can its bet on the rebels pay off? Or does stability on the northern border depend on the continuation of the regime? Support for these sectarian groups carries many dangers. Their trustworthiness fluctuates, as do the figures who lead them. He who today will not act against Israel may change his spots [literally "shed his skin"] tomorrow.

...Israeli policy over the past few decades has been characterized by a series of bad bets. At the end of the 1980s, it enabled Hamas to rise from the midst of Gaza's Islamist groups. It did this out of the flawed assumption that this was the proper way to weaken Fatah...As a result [Israel] created its own Trojan Horse [within Palestine].

With the IDF's entrance [sic] into Lebanon in 1982, Israel disregarded the Shiites and rushed to ally itself with those it saw as the most powerful in the land: the Christians. So it paved the way for Tehran to offer protection to the disadvantaged and enable the rise of Hezbollah.

Something very similar happened in Afghanistan when the mujahedeen were first our friends, and then morphed into the Taliban and became our sworn enemies.

So far, the Syrian Islamists have deliberately not targeted Israel. This is no doubt due to the aid it offers them on the battlefield. Further, al-Nusra knows that Hezbollah is Israel's primary opponent. The Lebanese militia constantly probes in this sector and mounts attacks against Israeli forces. Al-Nusra doesn't seek or need to compete with Hezbollah in that regard. It would rather confine its efforts to the Syrian theater, than expand to attack Israel itself.

But lately, al-Nusra has mounted attacks in a new Syrian sector: the Druze-populated Golan. This new offensive, which has threatened several Druze villages, led to the death of 20 Druze villagers last week. The Syrian Druze are generally loyal to the Assad regime. Their religion, though an offshoot of Islam, is considered heretical by fundamentalist Islamists. The Druze under threat, rightly believe that they and their ancient religious traditions are in grave jeopardy.

This might not mean much to Israel, except for a single complicating factor: when it conquered the Golan in 1967, it began an occupation of former Syrian territory which contained tens of thousands of Syrian Druze. Though an armistice line now separates the Druze in Syrian and Israeli-occupied zones, both communities are deeply intertwined. It is no different than Diaspora Jews felt in 1967 before the war broke out. Millions rallied around the world concerned about Israel's fate. Now the Druze in Israeli-held Golan are fearful for the fates of their brothers and sisters.



TV interview: "What would you do if you captured a Druze?" "It depends."

In this context, the interview I mentioned above was a lightning bolt through the Druze community. The interviewer asked the fighter (who was affiliated with the FSA):

Interviewer: [What would u do] if you caught an Alawite?

A: I would kill him

I: And if you caught a Druze?

A: It depends

I: And if you caught a Shiite?

A: I would kill the Shiite

This answer didn't go down well among the Druze. Sandwiched between this vow of murder

directed at Syrian Alawites, the Druze normal ally, is a temporizing claim that he might or might not kill a captured Druze. This, with the backdrop of [20 Druze murdered](#) only a few days earlier. It was enough to mount a mini-revolt among Golan Druze.

Israel regularly evacuates Islamist fighters (and some civilians as well) wounded in the fighting against the regime in the region. Angry local Druze [intercepted an IDF ambulance](#) carrying two wounded fighters (the IDF claims they were civilians). They beat the army medics, who were forced to flee. They then beat one of the wounded Syrians to death and severely wounded the other, before the authorities intervened and rescued him.

The Israeli military is aghast at this infringement on its right to meddle in Syrian internal affairs unmolested. Defense minister Yaalon [called the killing a "lynch."](#) This is Israeli code for 'Arab savagery.' It is used to differentiate Israeli behavior, supposedly civilized and humane, from that of Palestinian militants.

In the case of the Golan killing, the IDF is attempting to paint the Golan Druze as uncivilized beasts when, in fact, they are legitimately angry at Israel's new alliance with their enemies, the al-Nusra Front. The Druze are now demanding that Israel intervene in the civil war to save their brethren under attack from al-Nusra. This is the sort of insanely complex strategic dilemma that comes from playing with fire. If Israel continues its "arrangement" with al-Nusra and the latter conquers Syrian Druze villages and imposes fundamentalist Islam replete with revenge killings and beheadings, then it risks igniting a tinderbox inside Israeli-occupied Golan. If it takes the side of the Druze against al-Nusra it risks the leverage it has with the only viable force opposing Israel's most dangerous enemies, Hezbollah and Iran.

When you play with matches, you'll get burned.

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