

# Israel's Role in Syrian Conflict Brought into the Open: Direct Support to Al Qaeda Terrorists

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*Overtly, the Israeli superpower of the Middle East has been keen to posture as having no role whatsoever in the four-year old devastating conflict in Syria, where all major regional and international powers are politically and militarily deeply involved and settling scores by Syrian blood.*

In his geopolitical weekly analysis, entitled "The Islamic State Reshapes the Middle East ," on November 25 *Stratfor's* George Friedman raised eyebrows when he reviewed the effects which the terrorist group had on all regional powers, but seemed unaware of the existence of the Israeli regional superpower.

It was an instructive omission that says a lot about the no more discreet role Israel is playing to maintain what the Israeli commentator Amos Harel described as the "stable instability" in Syria and the region, from the Israeli perspective of course.

Friedman in fact was reflecting a similar official omission by the US administration. When President Barak Obama appealed for a "broad international coalition" to fight the Islamic State (IS), Israel — the strongest military power in the region and the well - positioned logistically to fight it — was not asked to join. The Obama administration explained later that Israel 's contribution would reflect negatively on the Arab partners in the coalition.

"Highlighting Israel's contributions could be problematic in terms of complicating efforts to enlist Muslim allies" in the coalition, said Michael Eisenstadt, a senior fellow at AIPAC's arm, the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

Covertly however Israel is a key player in prolonging the depleting war on Syria and the major beneficiary of neutralizing the military of the only immediate Arab neighbor that has so far eluded yielding to the terms dictated by the U.S. - backed Israeli regional force majeure for making peace with the Hebrew state.

Several recent developments however have brought the Israeli role into the open.

First the latest bombing of Syrian targets near the Damascus international civilian airport on December 7 was the seventh major unprovoked air strike of its kind since 2011 and the fifth in the past 18 months on Syrian defenses. Syrian Scientific research centers, missile depots, air defense sites, radar and electronic monitoring stations and the Republican Guards were targeted by Israel .

Facilitating the Israeli mission and complementing it, the terrorist organizations operating in the country tried several times to hit the same targets. They succeeded in killing several

military pilots and experts whom Israeli intelligence services would have paid dearly to hunt down.

*Foreign Policy* on last June 14 quoted a report by the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon as saying that the “battle-hardened Syrian rebels ... once in Israel, they receive medical treatment in a field clinic before being sent back to Syria,” describing the arrangement as a “gentleman’s agreement.”

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in February this year visited this “military field hospital” and shook hands with some of the more than 1000 rebels treated in Israeli hospitals, according to Lt. Col. Peter Lerner, a spokesman for the Israeli Occupation Forces (IOF).

*Foreign Policy* quoted also Ehud Yaari, an Israeli fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, as saying that Israel was supplying the rebel-controlled Syrian villages with medicines, heaters, and other humanitarian supplies. The assistance, he said, has benefited civilians and “insurgents.” Yaari ignored the reports about the Israeli intelligence services to those “insurgents.”

### **Israel facilitates war on UNDOF**

Second, the latest quarterly report by the UN Disengagement Force (UNDOF) to the UN Security Council (UNSC) on December 1 confirmed what eight previous similar reports had stated about the “interaction ... across the (Syrian - Israeli) ceasefire line” between the IOF and the “armed members of the (Syrian) opposition,” in the words of Ki-moon’s report to the Council on December 4.

Third, Ki-moon in his report confirmed that the UNDOF “was forced to relocate its troops” to the Israeli side of the ceasefire line, leaving the Syrian side a safe haven zone for the al-Qaeda affiliate al-Nusra Front, which the UNSC had designated a “terrorist group.”

UNDOF’s commander Lieutenant General Iqbal Singh Singha told the UNSC on October 9 that his troops were “under fire, been abducted, hijacked, had weapons snatched and offices vandalized.” Australia was the latest among the troop contributing countries to pull out its forces from UNDOF.

UNDOF and the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO) operate in the buffer zone of about 80 km long and between 0.5 to 10 km wide, forming an area of 235 km<sup>2</sup>. The zone borders the Lebanon Blue Line to the north and forms a border of less than 1 km with Jordan to the south. It straddles the Purple Line which separates the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights from Syria. The west Israeli side of this line is known as “Alpha”, and the east Syrian side as “Bravo.”

Speaking at the U.S. military base Fort Dix on Monday, President Obama warned those who “threaten America” that they “will have no safe haven,” but that is exactly what Israel is providing them.

Israeli “interaction” has practically helped the UNDOF “to relocate” from Bravo to Alpha and to hand Bravo as a safe haven over to an al-Nusra Front-led coalition of terrorist groups.

Al-Nusra Front is officially the al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria. U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry told the Senate Committee on Foreign relations on this December 9 that his administration

considers the IS to be a branch of al - Qaeda operating under a different name. Both terrorist groups were one under the name of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and only recently separated. Whoever accommodates either one is in fact courting the other.

“The 1,200-strong UN force is now mostly huddled inside Camp Ziouani , a drab base just inside the Israeli - controlled side of the Golan Heights . Its patrols along the de facto border have all but ceased,” the *Associated Press (AP)* reported on last September 18.

Israeli air force and artillery intervened several times to protect the al-Nusra Front’s “safe haven” against fire power from Syria, which is still committed to its ceasefire agreement of 1974 with Israel. Last September for example, Israel shot down a Syrian fighter jet that was bombing the Front’s positions, only three weeks after shooting down a Syrian drone over the area.

Israel is not violating the Syrian sovereignty only, but violating also the UN - sponsored ceasefire agreement and the UNSC anti-terror resolutions. More important, Israel is in fact undermining the UNDOF mandate on the Israeli - occupied Syrian Golan Heights.

This situation could only be interpreted as an Israeli premeditated war by proxy on the UN presence on the Golan Heights .

“Israel is the most interested in having (UN) peacekeepers evacuated from the occupied Golan so as to be left without international monitoring,” Syria ’s permanent envoy to the UN, Bashar al- Jaafari, told reporters on September 17.

The UNSC seems helpless or uninterested in defending the UNDOF mandate on the Golan against Israeli violations, which risk the collapse of the 1974 ceasefire arrangements.

Syrian Foreign Ministry was on record to condemn these violations as a “declaration of war,” asserting that Syria reserves its right to retaliate “at the right moment and the right place.” Obviously a regional outbreak is at stake here without the UN presence as a buffer.

Upgrading unanimously Israel ’s status from a “major non - NATO ally” to a “major strategic partner” of the United States by the U.S. Congress on December 3 could explain the UNSC inaction.

The undeclared understanding between the Syrian government and the U.S. - led coalition against the self - declared “Islamic State” (IS) not to target the latter’s forces seems to have left this mission to Israel who could not join the coalition publicly for subjective as well as objective reasons.

The *AP* on September 18 did not hesitate to announce that the “collapse of UN peacekeeping mission on Golan Heights marks new era on Israel - Syria front.” Aron Heller, the writer of the *AP* report, quoted the former Israeli military liaison officer with UNDOF, Stephane Cohen, as saying: “Their mandate is just not relevant anymore.” Heller concluded that this situation “endangers” the “status quo,” which indeed has become a status quo ante.

### **Israeli strategic gains**

The emerging fait accompli seems very convenient to Israel , creating positive strategic benefits for the Hebrew state and arming it with a pretext not to withdraw the IOF from the

occupied Syrian Golan Heights and Palestinian territories.

In an analysis paper published by The Saban Center at Brookings in November 2012, Itamar Rabinovich wrote that, "Clearly, the uncertainty in Syria has put the question of the Golan Heights on hold indefinitely. It may be a long time until Israel can readdress the prospect of giving the Golan back to Damascus ."

Moreover, according to Rabinovich, "the Syrian conflict has the potential to bring the damaged Israeli - Turkish relationship closer to normalcy ... they can find common ground in seeking to foster a stable post - Assad government in Syria."

The hostile Turkish insistence on toppling the Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad, the concentration of the IS and other rebel forces in the north of the country and in central, eastern and southern Syria are diverting the potential and focus of the Syrian Arab Army northward and inward, away from the western front with the Israeli occupying power on the Golan Heights.

The protracted war on the Syrian government is depleting its army in manpower and materially. Rebuilding the Syrian army and the devastated Syrian infrastructure will preoccupy the country for a long time to come and defuse any military threat to Israel for an extended time span.

On the Palestinian front, the rise of the IS has made fighting it the top U.S. priority in the Middle East, which led Aaron David Miller, a former adviser to several U.S. administrations on Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, to warn in *Foreign Policy* early in September that the rise of the IS would pose "a serious setback to Palestinian hopes of statehood."

The expected fallback internally of the post - war Syria would "hopefully" relieve Israel of the Syrian historical support for the Palestinian anti - Israeli occupation movements, at least temporarily.

Netanyahu on Sunday opened a cabinet meeting by explicitly using the IS as a pretext to evade the prerequisites of making peace. Israel "stands ... as a solitary island against the waves of Islamic extremism washing over the entire Middle East," he said, adding: "To force upon us" a timeframe for a withdrawal from the Israeli - occupied Palestinian territories, as proposed by Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to the UN Security Council, "will bring the radical Islamic elements to the suburbs of Tel Aviv and to the heart of Jerusalem. We will not allow this."

Israel is also capitalising on the war on the IS to misleadingly portray it as identical with the Palestinian "Islamic" resistance movements because of their Islamic credentials. "When it comes to their ultimate goals, Hamas is ISIS and ISIS is Hamas," Netanyahu told the UN General Assembly on September 29.

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