

# The Enemy of My Friend Is My Friend: Israel Accepts Billions from the US, but Maintains Ties with Al-Nusra

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*Any other ally which depended so profoundly on Washington for its security and existence wouldn't dare risk endangering that relationship to forge an alliance with an enemy of the U.S. But not Israel.*

Late last month, Jabhat al-Nusra (the Nusra Front), al-Qaida's Syrian arm, announced that it was severing ties with al-Qaida and renaming itself Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (the Front for the Conquest of Syria).

In a video, the group's leader, Abu Mohamed al-Jolani, explained that the group's association with al-Qaida permitted the outside powers intervening in the Syrian conflict to label it as an Islamic terrorist group.

[The Guardian](#) quoted [al-Jolani](#) as saying that the name change is intended "to remove the excuse used by the international community - spearheaded by America and Russia - to bombard and displace Muslims in the Levant: that they are targeting al-Nusra Front, which is associated with al-Qaida."



Members of al Qaeda's Nusra Front carry their weapons as they sit in a trench near al-Zahra village, north of Aleppo city, November 25, 2014.

He further explained that the new policy was an attempt to have the group removed from international terror lists and to allow it to be perceived as a more acceptable alternative to its main competitor, Daesh (an Arabic acronym for the terrorist group known as ISIS or ISIL in the West).

Al-Nusra shares certain common goals with Daesh in seeking to overthrow the secular government of Syrian President Bashar Assad and replace it with a more traditional form of Islamic rule. It has also [expressed hatred for the United States](#) and other Western governments. Writing for the National Interest in November, geopolitical analyst Daniel R. DePetris explained:

Like its jihadist competitors in the Islamic State, al-Nusra is composed of highly motivated individuals and commanders who would like nothing more than to strike at the United States or at targets in Europe. Jabhat al-Nusra shares the same, minority-within-a-minority Salafi-Jihadist interpretation of Islam as ISIL, despises any and all sectarian groups outside of Syria's majority Sunni community and has engaged in the same kind of atrocities that have made ISIL's Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi the most wanted international terrorist alive.

Though it has focused its attacks more directly on Syrian government forces and their symbolic and physical centers of power, it maintains a similar ruthlessness to that of Daesh. In its [World Report 2016](#), Human Rights Watch noted that both groups were "were responsible for systematic and widespread violations, including targeting civilians, kidnappings, and executions" in Syria. Daesh and al-Nusra both impose strict and discriminatory rules on women and girls, and have actively recruited child soldiers, according to the report.

## Smokescreen or strategy?

In its recent rebranding, Al-Nusra also seems to be evaluating the political calculus of the Syrian civil war and acknowledging the recent gains by Syrian forces and their allies — Iran, Hezbollah and Russia. With Assad strengthening his position and the rebel forces in disarray, al-Jolani may be making a bid to unify the opposition by projecting a less militant image to the outside world.

Still, it's unclear what this apparent break with al-Qaida actually means. At the announcement of the group's new name, al-Jolani was joined by a high level associate of Ayman al-Zawahiri, the current leader of al-Qaida, creating the impression that the changes are more tactical than strategic.

Smadar Perry, an Israeli journalist known to have close ties to Israeli intelligence sources, even [hinted](#) that Israel's Mossad urged this new path on al-Nusra. In an opinion piece posted by YNet on Monday, Perry wrote:

It may be that this separation is just a smokescreen, and that al-Julani will keep in touch with al-Qaeda in secret. It may also be that Jabhat al-Nusra have received an intelligence analysis from a very certain organization that told it to prepare for the day after Assad leaves power.

The White House has a hard time buying this turnover. They're in a test period with us, said an official spokesperson, not dismissing outright the possibility of local fighters joining the American-led coalition against ISIS.

If they make a show of force in the field, and Jabhat al-Nusra's dissociation leads to al-Qaeda's further weakening in Afghanistan, and if Israel provides its supposed intelligence about al-Julani – Hezbollah and Assad swear he's a Mossad agent – al-Nusra may become another piece of the puzzle that is the new Syria.

In the original Hebrew version of the same analysis, Perry noted the likelihood that Syria will be divided in "three or four cantons." This has always been the goal for Tel Aviv, which sees Syria as one of the few remaining Arab states that can threaten its interests and security.

In Israel's view, peace on its northern border would be guaranteed if Syria can be splintered into warring factions. It's an approach [championed](#) at the onset of the civil war in 2012 by Daniel Pipes, a pro-Israel neocon who serves as president of Middle East Forum, a conservative think tank. Arguing that "the continuing Syrian conflict offers benefits to the West," he explained:

As [Sunni Islamists fight Shiite Islamists](#), both sides are weakened and their lethal rivalry lessens their capabilities to trouble the outside world. By inspiring restive minorities (Sunnis in Iran, Kurds and Shiites in Turkey), continued fighting in Syria could also weaken Islamist governments.

He further noted:

Nothing in the constitutions of Western states requires them to get involved in every foreign conflict; sitting this one out will prove to be a smart move. In addition to the moral benefit of not being accountable for horrors yet to come,

staying away permits the West eventually to help its only true friends in Syria, the country's liberals.

In [a 2012 email released by WikiLeaks](#), Hillary Clinton offered an Iran-focused variant of this approach:

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

### **The al-Nusra-Israel bond**

Ultimately, Israel doesn't care much about what happens in Syria as long as it can maintain a puppet protectorate along its Golan border. Israel began occupying and administering the region in the Six-Day War of 1967, and it officially annexing the Golan in 1981. Israel continues to refuse to return the territory to Syria despite near universal consensus that the occupation is illegal under international law. Further, the [discovery of potential gas deposits](#) there has coincided with a rise in Israeli settlement expansion in recent years.

Examining the al-Nusra-Israeli alliance in the region, it's clear that the bonds between the two parties have been exceedingly close. Israel [maintains a border camp](#) for the families of Syrian fighters. Reporters have [documented](#) Israeli Defense Forces commandos entering Syrian territory to rendezvous with Syrian rebels. Others have [photographed meetings](#) between Israeli military personnel and al-Nusra commanders at the Quneitra Crossing, the ceasefire line that separates the Syrian-controlled territory and the Israeli-occupied territory in the Golan Heights.



A photo from the Israel, Syrian border along the Golan Heights showing IDF soldiers conversing with Jabhat al Nusra fighters.

U.N. personnel also [documented](#) Syrian rebel vehicles picking up supplies from the Israeli side:

Quarterly UNDOF [United Nations Disengagement Observer Force] reports since the pullback reveal an ongoing pattern of Israeli coordination with those



[al-Nusra] armed groups.

According to the December 2014 [report](#), UNDOF observed two Israeli soldiers 'opening the technical fence gate and letting two individuals pass from the [Syrian] to the [Israeli] side' on 27 October. Unlike most fighters seen entering the Israeli side, these individuals were not wounded and the purpose of their visit remains a mystery.

UNDOF 'sporadically observed armed members of the opposition interacting' with the Israeli military across the ceasefire line, the report states.

The next UNDOF report, released in March, [notes](#) that UN forces witnessed Israeli soldiers delivering material aid to armed Syrian opposition groups.

These were presumably supplies and equipment designed either to help the rebels in their fight against Assad or to improve communications between Israeli and rebel forces.

### **Israel's divide-and-conquer approach**

Israel's support for radical terror groups is a long-term strategy it's exploited in multiple theaters. Its ultimate purpose is to weaken a strong foe.

In terms of Hezbollah, Israel hadn't anticipated that the Lebanese militant group would grow to become a much more powerful and dangerous foe than the PLO had ever been in Lebanon.



Israeli soldiers walk near the border with Syria near the site of a Sunday Israeli airstrike, in the Israeli controlled Golan Heights, Monday, April 27, 2015

The strategy worked better regarding Hamas because it has never been able to dominate Fatah. The two have maintained a wary and draining battle of wills over the decades, with neither being able to oust the other. This has created a rift that has substantially weakened the Palestinians and their cause. Still, Hamas has trained its sights on Israel as well and become an even more militant foe than Fatah ever was.

Thus, Israel's strategy of forging an alliance with al-Nusra and strengthening it so that it can

wage a formidable fight against Assad, is part and parcel of a longstanding goal of dividing the enemy. Israel hopes the militant extremist group will dominate the Golan region and maintain stability and security there. However, Israel neglects what almost always happens to these [golems](#): Once they are created they take on a life of their own. The creator loses control of his creation, which wreaks havoc and even turns against him.

Just as it happened to [Rabbi Judah Loew](#) of Prague, and Mary Shelley's Dr. Frankenstein, so it happened with the U.S. alliance with the Afghan mujahadeen, and the Israeli alliances with their own Arab proxies.

Israel's alliance with al-Nusra also points to the utter cynicism of its approach. While the rest of the world labels the group terrorists, and fights to prevent their terror attacks on Western soil, Israel looks only for its own advantage. There's the old saying that "The enemy of my enemy is my friend," but in Israel's playbook, the saying goes: "The enemy of my friend may certainly be my friend." This rings especially true when Israeli leaders warn the world about the threat of global jihad, while also cozying up to jihadis in their own corner of the world.



Benjamin Netanyahu looks at Syrian 'patient' being treated in an IDF field hospital. (photo credit:KOBİ GIDEON/GPO)

The U.S. and European countries seem to either not notice or deliberately ignore Israel's tactical embrace of the jihadi movement. The Obama administration is even preparing to ink a [new record-breaking military spending agreement](#) with Israel that will up U.S. aid from the current \$3 billion a year. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu demanded \$5 billion per year over the life of the 10-year deal, and the final amount will likely settle somewhere in the middle.

Only Israel gets away with such a level of cognitive dissonance in its alliance with the U.S. Any other ally which depended so profoundly on Washington for its security and existence wouldn't dare risk endangering that relationship to forge an alliance with an enemy of the U.S. But not Israel. It forges its own path without regard for the interests of others, even its best friends.

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