

Why Has Israel Embraced Al-Qaida's Branch in Syria?

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UN observers have documented dozens of interactions between Israeli forces in the occupied Golan Heights and Syria opposition fighters crossing the boundary fence, as far back as 2012. (Atef Safadi/EPA)

During his 2014 [address](#) to the UN General Assembly, [Benjamin Netanyahu](#) declared that “fighting militant Islam is indivisible.”

The Israeli prime minister's crude attempts to conflate [ISIS](#) with [Hamas](#) should not be allowed to conceal an important truth: Israel aids the forces of “militant Islam” when it is considered opportune to do so.

The most egregious example of such aid in recent times has been Israel's support for [Jabhat al-Nusra](#), [al-Qaida's](#) franchise in [Syria](#), as witnessed by UN peacekeeping forces stationed in the occupied [Golan Heights](#).

Israel's collusion with al-Qaida has been virtually ignored by the American media, with a few exceptions. For example, *The Wall Street Journal* [reported](#) in March that Israel has been treating wounded al-Nusra fighters and then sending them back into the Golan to battle [Hizballah](#) and the Syrian army.

Other media outlets have danced around the issue.

The Washington Post columnist David Ignatius, a frequent conduit for information from official sources, [mentioned](#), in passing, last month that “[Jordan](#) and Israel have developed secret contacts with members of the Jabhat al-Nusra group along their borders.” But he failed to elaborate.

In a video report released by Vice News in December — in which Israeli soldiers are shown transferring wounded Syrian opposition fighters to an Israeli hospital — the narrator [acknowledges](#) that the fighters could be affiliated with al-Nusra.

Israeli media has been slightly more open about Israel's embrace of al-Qaida. The news website *Ynet* has posted [footage](#) of Israeli army medics treating wounded Syrian opposition fighters, noting, “It is likely that most if not all of these nationals are rebels from the rival jihadist Islamic State and al-Nusra Front groups.”

This raises questions about the legality of sending members of one of the world's most notorious and active armed extremist groups back into battle, especially since this particular group has been the primary target of a global war for more than a decade led by Israel's

greatest benefactor, the United States. (To be fair, though, the US is no stranger to [backing](#) al-Qaida and ISIS to undermine its adversaries.)

A US Defense Department spokesperson declined to comment for The Electronic Intifada about Israel's apparent alliance with al-Qaida. The [US State Department](#) did not respond to a request for comment.

Material aid

As Israel's neighbors absorbed millions of displaced Syrians fleeing a war that, according to UN Secretary-General [Ban Ki-moon](#) has [killed](#) more than 220,000 people, the Israeli government has [painted](#) its medical care for those wounded in Syria as altruistic. But only a third of the 1,500 treated by Israel have been women and children, according to the March report in *The Wall Street Journal*.

The rest have been fighters who Israeli officials admit are not screened and likely belong to al-Nusra.

Once it became undeniable, Israel confessed it was treating fighters, but claimed that they were moderates.

But after al-Nusra captured and ejected UN peacekeepers in the Golan Heights last August, there was no longer any doubt that al-Nusra was the dominant force among opposition fighters in the area.

Since then, *Ynet* has resorted to whitewashing al-Nusra's connections to al-Qaida. Citing unnamed Israeli officials, the publication [claims](#) that al-Nusra's members are "simply local residents who joined the organization to benefit from the logistical and financial support it offers them."

Retired Brigadier General Michael Herzog, a former chief of staff for Israel's defense minister, told *The Wall Street Journal* that "Nusra is a unique version of al-Qaida. They manage to cooperate with non-Islamist and non-jihadi organizations in one coalition ... They are totally focused on the war in Syria and aren't focused on us. But when Hizballah and Iran and others are pushing south, they are very much focused on us."

Israeli soldiers have also been seen providing Syrian opposition fighters dominated by al-Nusra with material aid.

Dozens of interactions between Israel and opposition fighters, as far back as 2012, have been [documented](#) by the UN Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF), the peacekeeping mission responsible for monitoring the 1974 ceasefire line between Israeli and Syrian forces in the Golan Heights.

The UN has good reason to observe these interactions closely.

In August last year, al-Nusra [detained](#) 43 UN peacekeepers and seized their equipment, prompting the UN to evacuate many of its soldiers to the Israeli-occupied side of the ceasefire line.

Quarterly UNDOF reports since the pullback reveal an ongoing pattern of Israeli coordination

with those 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.

“During the evening of 20 January, in the area north of observation post 54, UNDOF observed two trucks crossing from the [Syrian] side to the [Israeli] side, where they were received by IDF [Israeli military] personnel,” the report states. “The trucks were loaded with sacks before returning to the [Syrian] side.”

The coordination between Israel and armed opposition groups continued into May, according to the [June UNDOF report](#).

Israel appears determined to keep the nature of these interactions as low key as possible, something Sidqi Maqt, a Druze resident of the Golan Heights, understands better than most.

In February, Maqt was [arrested](#) by Israeli intelligence for posting photos and videos to his Facebook page of Israeli army interactions with armed opposition groups. Maqt paid particular attention to documenting encounters he believed demonstrated the Israeli army’s alliance with al-Nusra.

Released in 2012 after serving 37 years in prison for engaging in armed resistance against Israel’s occupation of the Golan Heights, Maqt is once again behind bars. He has been charged with “espionage, assisting an enemy during wartime and contact with a foreign agent,” according to Al Jazeera.

On top of providing al-Nusra with material aid and punishing those who expose it, Israel has launched airstrikes almost exclusively against forces fighting al-Nusra.

On 18 January, for example, an Israeli air strike on a convoy near Quneitra [killed](#) six members of Hizballah and a general in the Iranian Revolutionary Guard.

Days later, rockets landed in the Golan Heights, according to UNDOF. The Israeli army retaliated by shelling a location it said was the source of the fire.

A Syrian army official, however, told the UN that “terrorists” had fired the rockets and that the Syrian army planned to target their positions. The UN relayed this message to the Israeli army, which responded with airstrikes against two Syrian army artillery positions.

[Bashar al-Assad](#), the Syrian president, has [said that some in Syria joke](#), “How can you say that al-Qaida doesn’t have an air force? They have the Israeli air force.”

While Assad’s policies, including the bombardments that have devastated cities and towns forcing millions to flee their homes, have contributed to the chaos and vacuum that has

enabled extremist groups to flourish in some areas, Israel's actions on behalf of those groups grant credence to his claim.

Cheering on ISIS

[Amos Yadlin](#), a retired Israeli general, has offered a candid explanation for Israel's partnership with al-Nusra.

"There is no doubt that Hizballah and [Iran](#) are the major threat to Israel, much more than the radical Sunni Islamists, who are also an enemy," he told *The Wall Street Journal*. "Those Sunni elements who control some two-thirds to 90 percent of the border on the Golan aren't attacking Israel. This gives you some basis to think that they understand who is their real enemy — maybe it isn't Israel," he reasoned.

Hizballah, which is aligned with Bashar al-Assad's regime, has been fighting al-Nusra in the Golan Heights with Iranian support. Given Hizballah's growing capacity and proven willingness to defend against Israeli aggression, Israel appears to favor al-Qaida on its northern front and to view the destruction of Syria as an opportunity to incapacitate Hizballah in southern [Lebanon](#) by draining its resources in Syria.

This does not mean Israel wants Assad to fall. On the contrary, [Israel prefers a region fractured into small sectarian enclaves](#) that are too busy fighting one another to unite against it. It is for this reason that Yair Golan, the Israeli army's deputy chief of staff, recently [celebrated](#) the conditions on Israel's northern border as "better than ever."

The Jerusalem Post's security correspondent, Yossi Melman, has echoed Golan, [depicting](#) Syria's descent into chaos and fragmentation as a strategic boost for Israel.

[Gilad Sharon](#), son of late Israeli prime minister [Ariel Sharon](#), has gone even further by arguing that an ISIS takeover in Syria would offer an opening for Israel to acquire the Golan Heights permanently.

In the event of an ISIS takeover, Sharon [wrote](#) last month, "There would be no international pressure for Israel to give back the Golan Heights either — and that's a very good thing. The Golan will remain an important part of Israel forever." He added that Israel could rely on the West's so-called anti-ISIS coalition to defeat a victorious ISIS next door, allowing Israel to bask in its newly annexed territory without lifting a finger.

Israel would not necessarily "welcome the presence of the Islamic State lunatics on our border," Sharon wrote, "but it's certainly no worse, and may even be better, than the presence there of Hizballah, which is the Lebanese proxy of the Iranian regime."

[Naftali Bennett](#), Israeli education minister and leader of the ultra-nationalist party [Habeyit Hayehudi](#) (Jewish Home), appears to be following Sharon's advice.

Speaking at the Herzliya conference, a key event in Israel's political calendar, this month, Bennett [called](#) on Israel to invoke the threat of ISIS expansion to compel governments around the world to legitimize its annexation of the Golan Heights.

"Who do they want us to give the Golan to? To Assad? Today, it's clear that if we listened to the world we would give up the Golan and ISIS would be swimming in the Sea of Galilee. Enough with the hypocrisy," said Bennett, agitating for expanding the number of [Israeli](#)

[settlers](#) in the Golan from 20,000 to 100,000 in the next five years.

Support for al-Qaida in Syria, then, serves at least two purposes from Israel's perspective: sapping the strength of the foe it fears most — Hizballah — and solidifying its occupation of the Golan Heights.

In addition to sowing chaos and bloodshed, Israel's machiavellian schemes — as its decades of meddling in Lebanon show — have a poor record of achieving their goals.

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