



Israel's Interests in Syria

by Prof. Efraim Inbar

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 205, May 20, 2013

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: It is a mistake for Israelis to express support for Bashar Assad's victory in Syria. Israel should stay out of the Syrian conflict altogether while hoping for the fall of Assad. Ultimately Israel would be better served by having a failed state next door than by having a strong, Iranian-backed entity there.

Several prominent Israelis have expressed their preference for a Bashar Assad victory in the civil war in Syria. This is a mistaken attitude for moral and strategic reasons.

First, siding with a dictator that butchers his own people, and even uses chemical weapons in order to stay in power, is morally disgusting. At the normative level, Assad's brutal dictatorship is not an acceptable preference for a democratic state like Israel, even if the alternatives to Assad are not very enticing. (The Syrian opposition includes radical Sunni elements – such as al-Qaeda – that have not displayed great sensitivity to human rights either.) In the real world there is sometimes a tacit necessity to tolerate a dictatorship for a variety of reasons, but explicit support for it is a moral embarrassment.

Second, Israeli statements that favor a side in the domestic struggles within Arab entities are always a mixed blessing. Nobody in the Arab world wants to be "tainted" by an association with the Jewish or Zionist state. While links with Israel could be very useful, explicit closeness to Israel has an undesirable delegitimizing effect. Therefore, even if Israel has its favorites, Israeli leaders should keep their mouths shut.

Third, the idea that Israel can help engineer a certain political outcome among its unruly neighbors displays incredible intellectual and historical ignorance.

Great Britain and France ruled the Middle East for decades and were not very successful in changing the ways the “natives” ran their affairs. In 1982, Israel was tempted to create a new political order in Lebanon and failed miserably. Additional grand failures include the twenty-first century efforts of the US to create an Iraq and an Afghanistan in its image. Change in this part of the world can come only from within by local leaders. Unfortunately, the Middle East has bred only despots of the worst kind, such as Saddam Hussein and the Assads, hardly leadership material that this region desperately needs to escape obscurantism, poverty, and oppression. The notable exception is Kemal Atatürk, whose accomplishments are currently being eroded by the AKP-led government in Turkey.

Fourth, and most importantly, support for Assad reflects flawed understanding of regional strategic realities. Syria under the Assad family has been the most stable ally of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the Middle East. Iran is the greatest strategic challenge to Israel’s national security, particularly because of its quest for nuclear weapons. The survival of the Assad regime is a paramount Iranian interest, in order to consolidate the Shiite crescent from the Gulf to the Mediterranean, which is precisely why Iran uses its influence in Iraq and Lebanon to send Shiite fighters to prop up the Alawite regime in Syria.

Iran is Israel’s arch-enemy and therefore weakening it should be Israel’s first priority in its foreign policy. The fall of Assad would be a great blow to Iran’s ambitions for Mideast dominance. It is in Israel’s interests that Iranian influence in the region be rolled back.

Ascribing moderation to the Assad family because it has kept the Golan Heights border quiet is somewhat misleading. During all those years, Syria did not hesitate to bleed Israel via its proxies in Lebanon, Hizballah and radical Palestinian groups. Moreover, the “moderate” Assad tried to develop a nuclear option with the aid of North Korea and Iran. If Assad stays in power he may try again. Moreover, open Israeli support for Assad puts Israel at loggerheads with much of the Sunni Arab world. At this stage, such posturing is not wise. Whatever the formal positions Sunni states display on Israel, they are Israel’s allies in the attempt to prevent Iran from going nuclear. Siding with Assad undermines cooperation in this endeavor. A Saudi corridor for attacking Iranian nuclear installations is not a far-fetched scenario if Israel plays it smart in the Middle East.

Finally, the understandable preference for having strong states, rather than failed states, on Israel’s borders – because such states are easier deterred – is not necessarily a good rule of thumb. Instability in Syria, the probable

outcome of the opposition's victory, seems more dangerous than an Assad regime that has internalized the rules of the game. Yet, a stable Syria can become a rogue state like North Korea. History tells us that states do not always behave rationally and in a responsible way. Moreover, the fundamental truth is that states have greater capabilities than non-state organizations to inflict pain on their neighbors. Therefore, by definition strong states are more dangerous than failed states. Only strong states can support a long-range missile program or develop nuclear weapons. For example, a strong Salafist regime in Egypt is potentially more dangerous than an Egypt that has problems enforcing its sovereignty over all its territory. Chaos among Israel's neighbors should not be altogether feared, as it weakens them. The most significant result of the Arab upheavals in recent years is the weakening of the Arab state, which has increased the power differential between Israel and its neighbors.

The Middle East must be approached with humility, particularly by small states such as Israel. Jerusalem cannot choose its neighbors and their regimes; it can only minimize their abilities to harm Israel. Therefore, Israel's interests are very clear: stay out of the domestic struggles in Syria, and destroy any enemy military capabilities there that have a significant potential for harming Israelis.

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BESA Center Perspectives Papers are published through the generosity
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