



PERSPECTIVES

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Syria's Sunni Arabs and Israel: The War's Silver Lining?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The war in Syria has resulted in many changes to its society, including a perceptible shift in the Sunni Arab majority's attitude towards Israel. However, that shift remains very limited in scope. Much still needs to be done on both sides of the border to root out the Syrian culture of anti-Semitism.

When Syrian opposition figure Farid Ghadry appeared before Israel's Knesset in 2007, he provoked the ire of many of his compatriots. The move sparked controversy perhaps no less acrimonious than that witnessed when Bassam al-Adel escaped with his MiG-23 fighter jet and landed in Israel in 1989. However, when Syrian opposition figure Kamal Labwani visited Israel three years ago, his action did not cause a similar stir.

It may not be coincidence that all three belong to Syria's Sunni Arab majority and were born either in the governorate of Idlib (in the north) or the countryside of Damascus (in the south). Both were opposition strongholds to the ruling Alawite family of al-Assad. After more than six years of war, a period that has resulted in the killing and displacement of at least one-third of Syria's Sunni Arabs, the question arises: Does the major component of Syrian society still adhere to the regime's teachings, which dictate that Israel is their number one enemy?

Sunnis refuse to be called a sect, viewing themselves as the genuine representatives of Islam. As the majority, they never formed a united single bloc, so it was easy to penetrate them politically. The war has made their divisions more entrenched than ever.

Sunni Arabs in northern and eastern Syria were ruled by fundamentalist factions that applied religious rulings. These regions include the governorates of Raqqqa,

Deir ez-Zor, Idlib, and large portions of rural Aleppo. Terrorist militias such as ISIS, the al-Nusra Front, and even armed factions that adopted fundamentalism left a deep ideological impact on these Sunni Arab communities that will last for generations to come. Millions of Sunnis lived under the laws of these groups for nearly three years, dealt with them on a daily basis, and engaged with their governing structures. This constant contact resulted in somewhat normalized relations, a point that should not be overlooked.

It is hard to believe the claim that the terrorist militias – only a small proportion of whose members were foreign – did not find support from a considerable segment of the society. A new generation of what can be described as "phoenix jihadists" has formed in these regions – youth who gradually adopted an Islamic fundamentalist dogma. They cannot be expected to hold positive feelings towards the State of Israel and the Jewish people.

Sunni Arabs who live in al-Assad-controlled areas – "regime Sunnis" – maintain the regime's traditional anti-Israel approach and consider themselves its legitimate bearers. Moreover, the war has boosted their national chauvinistic spirit. This is a new development as they – particularly Sunnis from Damascus and Aleppo – had little sectarian awareness in the first place. This chauvinism causes them to regard Iran's and Hezbollah's activities in Syria as a positive. They are willing to support Shiite forces whom they see as attempting to restore Syrian national dignity.

In the central governorates of Homs and Hama, as well as Sunni Arab pockets in the western coastal region, the regime's suppression prompted a sectarian reaction. Many residents reverted to fundamentalism as a haven from the regime's sectarian tactics, especially after its militia targeted Sunnis in the rural regions of Homs and Hama. Those areas about the former Alawite state and are currently dominated by extremists. Homs governorate, the largest of Syria's 14 governorates, was emptied completely, but the religiously conservative city of Hama agreed to a truce to avoid destruction. Sunni Arabs in the coastal region are thus scattered in isolated pockets. There is little to suggest that they can be an effective part of any attempt to change the overall perception of Israel in Syria.

Still, Sunni Arabs in the south are more likely than others to abandon their hostility towards Israel thanks to their experience of the past few years, when Israel provided relief and even military assistance and hospitalized thousands of wounded civilians and opposition militants. Those Syrians who are in the most contact with Israel are the most willing to revise their position on it. And as Sunni Arab communities in southern Syria are characterized by tribalism, one might estimate that every wounded person treated by Israel has 10 to 15 close relatives to whom he can convey his positive impressions.

Israel's good neighbor policy was intended to encourage the striking of a "gentlemen's agreement" to maintain security in the north. In the process, it

affected the hearts and minds of Sunni Arabs in Syria's south who no longer see Israel as the devil. But Israel must recognize that its wartime aid strategy will not be enough on its own.

It is very much in Israel's interest that the population of southern Syria not be forced to choose between Assad and the extremists, and also that its animosity towards Iran and Hezbollah be kept alive. Israel needs the support of the Sunni Arabs in southern Syria to turn their territories into a *de facto* "South Syria Security Belt." Such a belt is necessary in the face of Iran's attempts to establish a foothold near the border and to prevent efforts by Sunni terrorist groups to carry out attacks against Israel.

Syrian migrants in Europe and neighboring countries, who are mostly Sunni Arabs, are also divided in their views based on the region they come from and their living conditions and level of integration into their new countries. Those in Turkey mostly come from northern and central Syria, while their peers in Lebanon and Jordan are primarily from Syria's central and southern regions. They fled areas controlled either by the regime, by the opposition, or by extremists, and therefore don't share a collective view on Israel. But many of those who live in Jordan and Lebanon have managed to evade Arab nationalist sentiments because of their living conditions in those two countries. As for those who sought asylum in Europe, quite a few either coexisted or fought alongside extremists, or are willing to adopt their ideology in the future. Considering the failure of integration policies in EU states, these sentiments are likely to lead to a relapse into religious identity. However, a small number will display a tendency to explore "the unknown Israel" and liberate themselves from the taboos dictated to them during their upbringing.

It should be noted that any shift in the attitudes of Syria's anti-regime Sunni Arabs towards the Palestinians and Hezbollah is most likely due to the fact that the Lebanese militia and Palestinian militant groups backed the regime. The shift can still be beneficial to Israel, however, as many Sunni Arab Syrians might be willing to understand Israel's position towards Palestinians from a nationalist pan-Arab point of view and towards Hezbollah from a religious-sectarian perspective.

A change has occurred in the attitude of Syria's Sunni Arabs towards Israel, but it is limited rather than comprehensive and largely incomplete. A change is required in a mentality that has prevailed for decades and perhaps centuries. Eradicating anti-Semitic culture will be a long and complex process, one that will require Israeli patience – and a strategy that should not be limited to sending diapers or even a few bullets. As for the other side, Syria's Sunni Arabs cannot befriend Israel solely by taking a stand against Israel's enemies.

Rauf Baker is a journalist and researcher with expertise on Europe and the Middle East.

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