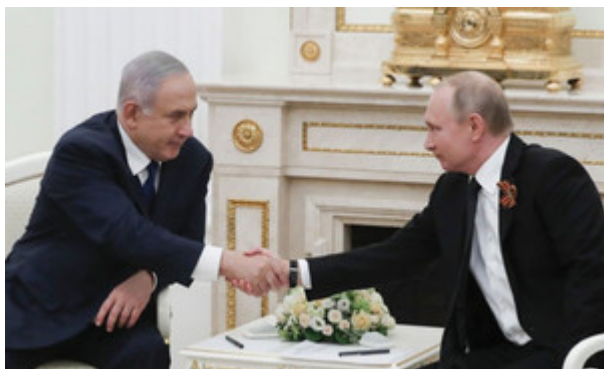


Syria Endgame: Crushing Daraa, the Russia-Israel deal & the Geopolitics of Counterrevolution

Tuesday 28 August 2018, by [KARADJIS Michael](#) (Date first published: 23 August 2018).



As the forces of Bashar al-Assad, backed by the Russian air force, reconquered Daraa city, the birthplace of the Syrian revolution, an aid worker reported to Kareem Shaheen in *The Guardian* that **“people have accepted the reality that [the entire world is fighting against the revolution](#), and therefore it cannot continue.”**

Shaheen is correct; the realisation however is late. The “the entire world” – all the major imperialist and regional reactionary powers – has been against the revolution since its outbreak in March 2011. Their differences have been entirely tactical.

The crushing of heroic Daraa involved an unwritten agreement between the Assad regime, Russia, the US and Israel. Four ‘heroes’ of today’s global ‘alt-right’ – Assad, Netanyahu, Trump and Putin – have emerged triumphant over the corpse of the Syrian revolution.

Much commentary proclaims that all global and regional powers are responsible for the catastrophe, backing “different sides” to pursue their “rival interests.” All these powers are indeed responsible, but the direct and massive Russian and Iranian intervention on the side of the regime contrasts sharply with the indirect role of the United States, the pretence of friendship to the anti-Assad opposition by neighbouring Arab regimes, and the cynical connivance of Israel, in bringing about *the same goal*. “Rivalry” and “different sides” had remarkably little to do with it.

The end game shows that inter-imperialist cooperation, rather than the much heralded “inter-imperialist rivalry,” was *the major dimension* of the foreign intervention in Syria. While it is understandable for beleaguered and outgunned revolutionary forces to take advantage of whatever tactical differences existed among the global and regional powers, there was never any real doubt that they were all ultimately on the same side, that of counterrevolution.

Conventional “geopolitics” emphasises rivalry between imperialist and sub-imperialist powers as the driving force of world politics. This leads to the conclusion that the US was “weak” or “hesitant” for allegedly “giving in” to Russia or “letting Assad off lightly” over his genocide. Repeated ad-nauseum

for seven years, this entirely misses the point.

Inter-imperialist rivalry is a major factor in world politics, but confronted with revolution – like the region-wide Arab Spring – states that otherwise hate each other quite easily join forces against their common enemy – the revolutionary populace.

The Linux Beach blog of writer Clay Claiborne ends each piece with the slogan: [**“Syria is the Paris Commune of the 21st Century!”**](#). This analogy is relevant here; the rival ruling classes of France and Germany, after their Franco-Prussian war, united to smash the insurgent working class of Paris. “Love of Nation” is good when the ruling class wants workers to kill each other, but its hollowness is revealed when their fundamental interests are challenged.

The geopolitics of counterrevolution trumps other issues that divide rival powers. Regardless of whether or not US imperialism is “in retreat” globally, this has been irrelevant to the Syria issue; there was never any US “weakness” or “hesitance” over Syria; rather, under both the Obama and Trump administrations, the alliance with Russia over Syria has been an alliance for counterrevolution; the US has acted consistently in its own interests. The differences have been over the tactical approach to counterrevolution.

Despite some early US rhetoric about taking “firm and appropriate measures” if Assad were to violate the US-Russian declared “de-escalation zone” in southern Syria, once the offensive got underway **the US made clear to the Free Syrian Army (FSA) that “[you should not base your decisions on the assumption or expectation of a military intervention by us.](#)”** The US also told the rebels [not to “be provoked”](#) by the regime’s barrel bombs into responding.

As for Israel, it has made clear all along that it is fine with Assad retaking the south as long as Iran and Hezbollah are not involved. Some anti-Assad Syrians and their supporters had developed illusions that the early US language, and Israel’s interest in keeping Iranian forces away from occupied Golan, *might for the one and only time in the war* restrain Assad’s hand. It is understandable to want to have hope; moreover, illusions were rarely expressed about any US or Israeli “humanitarian” motivation, but rather a belief that their pragmatic interests may intersect with the needs of Syrian people in the south.

As we will see, however, it was precisely strategic agreements between Israel and Russia, with US approval, that paved the way for this Assad offensive. A major part of this essay, therefore, is concerned with the evolution of Israeli policy on Syria. This is not because Israel can be assigned blame for the Syrian disaster; Assad, Russia and Iran are fully responsible for their actions, just as the US and Israel, not Russia or Iran, are primarily responsible for the Palestinian catastrophe. But the agreement between Israel and Russia – powers popularly thought to be in “different blocs” – will be the main case study through which the broader counterrevolutionary agreement will be demonstrated.

Israel has always preferred dictators to democracy in the Arab world; only a democratic Arab world can really challenge Israel’s anti-democratic rule over Palestine. And in the first few years, Israeli policy was resolutely pro-Assad and hostile to the Arab Spring generally.

Yet some Israeli interests did have the potential to bring about conflict with Assad: the desire to keep Iranian forces away from the Golan, to prevent any mass influx of refugees from Syria, or to build support on the Syrian side of the Golan among civilians terrified of Assad, in order to use them as a “border force” to protect the stolen Golan. Yet none of this ultimately led to any Israeli aid in preventing the fall of Daraa; on the contrary, *an even more open embrace of Assad* than previously manifested itself, highlighting again the tendency of revolution to push oppressive powers to line

upon the same side.

First, however, the essay will look at the centrality of Daraa to the Syrian revolution, and the loyalty which the revolutionary forces there maintained to the original goals of the revolution – as well as the starkness of their betrayal by alleged “supporters,” beginning several years before the final act.

The horrific toll in the south

Having completed its subjugation of rebel-held East Ghouta, at the cost of some [1700 lives in four-weeks](#), then having also expelled the people of smaller rebel-held enclaves in Homs, East Qalamoun and South Damascus, the Assad regime turned its attention south, to Daraa and Quneitra provinces, which straddle the border of Jordan and Syria’s Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. The new horrific attack on Daraa’s [750,000 people](#) began on June 19.

[Hundreds of air strikes](#), rockets, and barrel bombs launched into various population centres across the province; in June alone, [413 barrel bombs were dropped on Daraa](#). On June 25, [40 missiles were fired into Daraa city](#) itself.

Once again, the Assad regime and its Russian imperial backers made hospitals and schools special targets. [Three hospitals were hit overnight June 26-27](#), reportedly by Russian warplanes, [bringing to six the number hit](#) since the offensive began, killing medical and staff and patients. According to the Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS), [Al-Giza hospital’s emergency department](#), which was completely destroyed by six regime airstrikes, had been providing services to 200,000, treating on average 10,000 patients per month. [Syrian Civil Defence centers](#), field hospitals and paramedics were also put out of service in eastern Daraa. On June 28, the regime [bombed a kindergarten in the town of Nawa](#).

By early July, the UNHCR announced that the number of [displaced had risen to 330,000 people](#), pushed up against the Jordanian border and the Golan fence, while the Daraa Martyrs Documentation Office reported that by July 22, [492 people had been killed](#).



[Displaced civilians flee Daraa](#) province on June 26. Photo by AFP/Mohamad Abazeed.

Daraa: Birthplace of the Syrian revolution

Daraa is the birthplace of the Syrian revolution, which opened with high school students, influenced by the uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia, spray-painting walls with the slogan “you’re turn is next Doc”, referring to Bashar al-Assad, a medical doctor when not in the role of murderous tyrant. While 23 children detained were being tortured over the next month, demonstrations in Daraa and elsewhere broke out demanding their release.

On March 15, 2011, demonstrations hit Damascus and Aleppo, and three days later the 'Day of Rage' in Daraa was met by bullets. On March 23, [15 were shot dead in Daraa](#) – at protests around the Omari mosque, at funerals for the first victims, and people from surrounding towns marching towards Daraa to offer support. Here is more footage from Daraa showing [peaceful protest and massacre](#), and [here](#) is some great footage of the massive 'Friday of Steadfastness' demonstration on April 8, shouting "Get out! Get out!" at Assad.

As deaths from bullets and tanks around Syria rose from dozens to hundreds to thousands, events such as the return to his family of the horrifically mutilated body of 13-year old Hamza Ali Al-Khateeb – arrested at a peaceful protest on April 29 – made the savage blood line between the tyranny and the people of Daraa irreversible.

The Southern Front of the Free Syrian Army

Like elsewhere in Syria, after months of peaceful protests were continually met by massacre, people began to take up arms to defend themselves, and Syrian Arab Army (SAA) troops began defecting to protect the people rather than killing them; the Free Syrian Army (FSA) was born. The Southern Front (SF) of the FSA, based in Daraa and Quneitra, has remained the most trenchantly democratic-secular and anti-sectarian part of the rebellion.

Much anti-Syrian revolution propaganda focuses on reactionary Islamist groups such as Jaysh al-Islam in East Ghouta or HTS (formerly Jabhat al-Nusra) in Idlib. This ignores the continued existence of the FSA throughout the country (it was always [far more significant](#) than western media and its leftist echo made them out to be), the ongoing unarmed dimension of the uprising and the elected revolutionary councils, but also the fact that these reactionary forces have been unable to fully impose their will on the revolution, as I have shown [here regarding Ghouta](#), or has been [widely shown regarding Idlib](#). Nevertheless, they do exist, the FSA does have to share their space with them, and they are a major problem for the revolution. In the case of Daraa, however, the Southern Front was more or less completely dominant, reportedly containing [some 35,000 troops](#); describing Syrians fighting for freedom in the south with orientalist epithets such as 'jihadists' was an outright lie.


When over 50 FSA brigades in the south formed the Southern Front military alliance in February 2014, its founding statement declared:

*"We are the farmers, the teachers, and the workers that you see every day. Many of us were among the soldiers who defected from a corrupt regime that had turned its weapons around to fight its own countrymen. ... **[There is no room for sectarianism and extremism in our society, and they will find no room in Syria's future.](#)** The Syrian people deserve the freedom to express their opinions and to work toward a better future. We are striving to create in Syria a government that represents the people and works for their interest. We are the Southern Front."*

The Southern Front believed that the collapse of the Assad regime "will not be the end of the Syrian people's revolution" but "the start of a new and, hopefully, final phase of the people's struggle for freedom." During this 'Transitional Phase', the Front (which would transition into a civilian protection force) declared its first task would be **"the protection of all Syrian citizens, their property and their rights [without any distinction of religion, culture, ethnicity, or political affiliation](#) in accordance with International Humanitarian Law and the international standards of Human Rights."**

In 2015 the Southern Front declared that it [would no longer coordinate even on a simple military level with Jabhat al-Nusra](#), due to fundamental ideological differences (though it also stressed that

not a declaration of war, rejecting [the long-term US demand](#) that the FSA launch from al-Nusra rather than the regime). Like all revolutionary organisations in Syria, the Southern Front [vehemently condemned the massacre of 23 Druze villagers](#) in northern Idlib by a mafioso in 2015.



from the FSA Southern Front: [“Syria is for all](#): Druze, Kurds, Alawi, Assyrians, Sunnis and Christians,” 15 Apr 2016

“support” full of strings and red lines

In 2013 and 2015, the US and Saudi Arabia sent a certain amount of aid to the SF via the US Operations Centre (MOC) in Jordan, aiming to control the SF’s movements and co-opt it. This “support” was rather modest, compared to the need in confronting the massive advanced killing equipment used by the regime, continually re-supplied by Russia and Iran, and the actual Russian airforce and thousands of Iranian-allied foreign troops. At times, the US [refused to supply even “a single rifle or bullet to the FSA](#) in Daraa” and “actively prevented the flow” of Saudi arms and ammunition.


Even when it did get through, the political purpose of such “support” became apparent as the SF started winning. In May 2013, for example, MOC deliberately held back arms, preventing a strategic battle in the southern town Khirbet Ghazaleh, [leading to its capture](#) by the regime.

In 2014 and early 2015, Saudi Arabia delivered significant numbers of US-made TOW anti-tank missiles to the Southern Front from its stocks, allegedly as part of the CIA’s ‘Timber Sycamore’ operation. This may have aided the SF in its string of victories in the south in early 2015, taking the Iranian border crossing at Nasib, the Sheik Miskeen and Nawa regions, the historic town of al-Sham and the decisive regime base 52. This was widely viewed as a US shift to support the democratic-secular SF, after its attempt to co-opt northern factions with TOWs in 2013. This phase ended when the main FSA factions receiving TOWs, such as Harakat al-Nusra, [refused to bend to US demands “to leave the battle field against Assad and to focus forces to fight ISIS,”](#) because, according to a Hazm commander, although “we agreed to go to fight ISIS, [we] wouldn’t agree to stop fighting Assad.”

Thus, the reality of this “support” to the SF was of the same nature. Following this string of successes, [the US and MOC imposed a series of “red lines”](#): the SF was ordered not to advance into the al-Mahata area of Daraa city, into the neighbouring province Suweida, anywhere near the key city of Sasa, and not to advance on Damascus or attempt to link up with its northern suburbs (according to [some reports](#), violating this last “red line” would result in US intervention). The US-CIA attempt to co-opt the SF, in other words, *was aimed at bringing its fight to an end*, to push it to turn *all its guns* against ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra only.



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Thala airbase on the Suweida border, [were unsupported](#), or [even blocked](#), by the MOC, and [use of TOW missiles trickled off in late 2015](#) “and totally vanished in the first two weeks of 2016.” By early 2016, Jordan had [“forced the Southern Front to halt all military actions”](#); in January, MOC officials told the SF to stop attacking the regime and to [focus their efforts on the jihadists](#), both Nusra and ISIS, and *were promised new weaponry if they did so*. In May, the MOC warned it would [cut cash flows](#) until they started scoring victories over ISIS in the Yarmouk valley.

In March 2016, the SF took part in the US-Russia facilitated nation-wide ceasefire. In reality, however, while the regime continued bombing at lower intensity, “maintaining the ceasefire” became the new rationale for holding back the SF ever since.

Trump: “Assad fights ISIS”, the rebels “dangerous and wasteful”

The idea that the US supported the rebellion or pushed “regime change” have been trenchant myths with little base in reality. While the initial [declaration by Hilary Clinton that Assad was a “reformer”](#) as he gunned down the first protestors later gave way to Obama’s call on Assad to “step aside” (after months of mass killing), the US strategy was aimed at regime preservation, via cosmetic change at the top, and [the preservation of Assad’s military-security apparatus](#), via the “political solution” involving Russia and the Geneva process.

But the US never wanted to put any serious military pressure to bring about even these limited objectives, because a strengthened opposition would push beyond those limits. The first US intervention was to place CIA agents on the Turkish and Jordanian borders in mid-2012, tasked with [preventing anti-aircraft missiles](#) (and for the next two years, anti-tank weapons) from reaching the rebels; this has been [the most effective US intervention](#). By the last year of the Obama-Kerry administration, the US and Russia were signing agreements to jointly bomb Nusra, and even the previous US policy that Assad should stand down at the beginning of a negotiated regime-opposition “transition” government [was shelved](#).

Before his election, Donald Trump proclaimed that the US should be aligned with Assad and Putin because, in his opinion, [they “fight ISIS”](#); Trump has essentially lived up to this promise.

As the Pentagon armed some ex-FSA factions in the south-eastern desert to fight ISIS, the diktat that [US-backed forces fight ISIS only](#) became even clearer. [Statements continually released by the US Command](#) stressed that its only fight was with ISIS and that other forces fighting ISIS, including the Assad regime, were allies. When one ex-rebel faction “went rogue,” declaring it would [re-start fighting Assad](#), the [US threatened to bomb them](#); at one point, the [US Command even gave permission to Assad to bomb its own proxy ex-FSA forces inside a US-declared safe zone](#), because this *loyal* faction (ie, not the “rogue” one) had responded to pro-Assad forces which had attacked them inside the zone!

Moreover, [as he had promised](#) before his election, last July [Trump formally ended even the limited support](#) the US had been providing to “vetted” FSA groups (including the SF), which Trump described as “dangerous and wasteful.” As seen above, this “support” had long ceased to have any meaning; as I analysed [here](#), the difference between this CIA support to anti-Assad forces, and the Pentagon’s backing of strictly ‘fight-ISIS-only’ groups, was superficial, as the former aimed at co-opting the anti-Assad groups in the same direction. However, the continuation of some support had allowed survival in the face of Assad’s international backing from Russia and Iran. Trump’s government also [ended a \\$200 million program](#) funding civil programs in the opposition-controlled regions.

Former Secretary of States [Rex Tillerson's speech in January](#) focused on supporting the Geneva process for a "political solution," but now the US no longer expected Assad to stand down at the beginning of a transition phase as under early Obama, *or even at its end* as under late Obama; rather, Tillerson adopted the regime's program that Assad could be voted out in a "free election," which would presumably occur with him in power:

"The United States believes that free and transparent elections ... will result in the permanent departure of Assad and his family from power. This process will take time, and we urge patience in the departure of Assad and the establishment of new leadership."

Trump and Iran

While the Trump administration has pursued a seemingly opposite course in relation to Assad's ally Iran, throughout 2017 this rhetoric had little connection to policy. In Iraq, the US defeat of ISIS in Mosul was carried out in alliance with the pro-Iranian forces; in Syria, the US is allied to the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in its war on ISIS around Raqqa, but the unofficial alliance with Assad in this [war around Deir Ezzor](#) also involved Iranian forces. At times [the US and Assad-Iranian forces were directly involved in the same battles](#) against ISIS, for example in Assad's second reconquest of Palmyra, on the road to Deir Ezzor.

In 2017 and early 2018, securing Assad's counterrevolutionary victory throughout the country was the first priority of the US and regional reactionary powers. As long as Assad needed Iran-backed cannon-fodder to do much of his fighting on the ground (while Russia carried out the terror from the sky), the anti-Iran issue took back seat.

Only after Assad's throne was fully safe, following the crushing of Ghouta, was the stage set to deal with the Iranian issue; so May 2018 witnessed Trump's scrapping of the Iran nuclear deal and his new State Secretary [Pompeo's extraordinarily aggressive anti-Iran tirade](#) listing US demands to end the new sanctions on Iran.

Trump's promotion of right-wing extremists Pompeo and Bolton was widely seen as a step towards war with Iran. Whether this eventuates remains to be seen, but both distinguish between Assad and Iran. In July, Pompeo noted that "[the Assad regime has been enormously successful](#) ... but from America's perspective it seems to me that Iran is the greatest threat and we ought to focus on that." As for Bolton, this long-time apostle of regime-change war against Iran was always [opposed to "regime change" in Syria](#), which he thinks would bring "al-Qaida" to power.

Southern 'de-escalation zone'

These issues came to the fore with Assad's reconquest of the south, due to the specific issues raised by neighbouring Jordan and Israel, both traditional US allies. The outline of the final "solution" in the south had already been heralded in July 2017, with the US-Russia-Jordan agreement to make Daraa and Quneitra a "de-escalation zone."

This prevented both regime and the FSA from opening the front; but as the regime was busy elsewhere in Syria, the main impact was on the FSA. This cannot be underestimated: the distance between the FSA-controlled south and the eastern and southern 'Damascus suburbs' is not great, but separated by Assad-controlled territory, both are isolated. If the Southern Front had had support from across the Jordanian border, it could have pushed towards Damascus and linked up with the rebels in East Ghouta and South Damascus.

The US “red-line” against moving in that direction thus contributed to the regime’s 2016 [subjugation of the southern Damascus town of Darayya](#), an iconic revolutionary town in the best democratic traditions of the original uprising; the 2017 “de-escalation zone” converted this US red-line into international policy, helping seal the fate of Ghouta and the greater Damascus rebellion. As the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood put it, the de-escalation zone was “[the gate that brought the regime back to the south](#)” under international supervision and acceptance.”

The other side of the de-escalation agreement was to keep Iranian forces at least 10 kilometres away from the Israel’s Golan occupation line, a minimal Israeli demand; the outline of the “solution” in the south was thus already *a deal that aided Assad and Israel to the disadvantage of both the rebels and Iran.*



Iconic [Daraa city back under regime control](#). Assadist flag raised near the Al-Omari Mosque where first protests started in March 2011.

Israeli policy on Syria 2011-2013: Resolute support for Assad

In the early years of the Syrian conflict, [the majority of Israeli political, military and “security” spokespeople](#) pushed an essentially pro-Assad line, preferring “the devil we know,” especially as Assad had kept the occupied Golan line quiet for 40 years. Israel had less reason to trust the rebels to do the same; Netanyahu called them [among “the worst Islamist radicals in the world.”](#) **‘Israel’s Man in Damascus - Why Jerusalem Doesn’t Want the Assad Regime to Fall’ was the title of an article in *Foreign Affairs* (May 10, 2013), penned by Efraim Halevy, the head of Mossad from 1998 to 2002.** Whenever any Israeli leader discussed the possibility of intervention in Syria, they stressed that this would only happen should the Assad regime fall; defence minister Ehud Barak stated “[the moment Assad starts to fall](#) we will conduct intelligence monitoring and will liaise with other agencies” regarding intervention. As defence ministry strategist Amos Gilad explained, while

Israel would “resort to force to prevent advanced Syrian weapons reaching Hezbollah or jihadi rebels”, it was not at present interested in attacking Syria’s chemical weapons [because “the good news is that this is under full control \(of the Syrian government\).”](#) Yuval Steinitz, Israeli Minister of Intelligence and Strategic Affairs, also stressed that [Israel “was not urging the US to take any military action ‘whatsoever’ in Syria.”](#)

[This excellent study by the Doha Institute](#) weighs up the differing views within the Israeli security establishment, concluding that, on balance, Israel preferred Assad in power. More generally, Israel was hostile to the Arab Spring as a whole: it had always preferred Arab dictators that “it could do business with” over democratic revolution, as a revolutionary people may find themselves in natural solidarity with the oppressed Palestinians, as compared with a regime like Assad’s which offered rhetorical “anti-Zionism” alongside [decades of slaughter of the Palestinian people](#).

The election of Morsi’s Muslim Brotherhood (MB) government in Egypt in the first democratic elections after the revolution also influenced this early Israeli policy. Israel was reportedly [“dismayed” by Morsi’s election](#), with the MB allied regionally to both Hamas in Gaza and to many of the Syrian rebel groups and opposition politicians. With [Hamas breaking with Assad and declaring its solidarity with both the Egyptian and Syrian revolutions](#), Israeli leaders saw a region-wide coalition of hostile Sunni-based governments and movements surrounding them and directly connected to the Palestinian struggle, the only *fundamental* threat to the Zionist regime.

A [wikileaks cable from 2012](#) spells this out:

“... senior Israeli Intelligence and Military commanders state ... that they have long viewed the regime of Syrian President Bashar al Assad, while hostile, as a known quantity and a buffer between Israel and the more militant Muslim countries, a situation that is threatened by the growing success of the rebel forces of the Free Syria Army (FSA). ... these Israeli leaders are now drawing up contingency plans to deal with a regional structure where the new revolutionary regimes that take over the various countries will be controlled by the Muslim Brotherhood and possibly more problematic groups such as al Qa’ida, which doesn’t bode well for the Israelis.”

Israeli policy on Syria 2013-2015: Bomb Iran and Hezbollah, both sides bad

But events in late 2013 changed this dynamic. First, the MB government in Egypt was overthrown in a military coup, bringing to power the brutal dictator General Sisi. Sisi adopted a viciously anti-Hamas policy, stiffened the blockade of Gaza, and repaired relations with Israel. This removed the southern tier of the great Arab Spring/Sunni “threat” to Israel, though it did not in itself cause Israel to shift to an anti-Assad policy; after all, Israel’s friend Sisi declared [solidarity with fellow tyrant Assad](#) against “Islamic extremism.”

When in August 2013, Assad launched his sarin attack on East Ghouta, Israeli leader Netanyahu got together with Russian leader Putin to [help Assad escape from Obama’s threat to strike](#) the regime for violating the “red line” against the use of chemical weapons. They put forward the solution of Assad getting rid of his chemical weapons under international supervision. Obama’s backdown heralded a new more accommodating US policy towards the regime, partly due to the rise of the Islamic State (ISIS) in later 2013; western leaders and ideologues, [one](#) after [another](#), came out with the [view](#) that a collapse of the Assad regime would embolden ISIS, the main issue now was to defeat the latter.

The problem for Israel however was that this new western accommodation with the Assad regime

had a second track: a new US opening to Iran, sparked by the election of “moderate” president Rouhani. This is the opening that later led to the famous nuclear deal. This also corresponded to a sharp increase in Iranian, pro-Iranian and Hezbollah support to the Assad regime; thousands of Shiite sectarian troops poured into Syria, helping defeat the rebels in a number of important battles.

While this never led Israel to a “regime-change” or pro-rebel position, leaders now emphasised that Israeli interests were served by both sides killing and weakening each other; Israel, according to Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman, does not “want to interfere in Syria, [not for Assad or against Assad](#).”

At the same time, Israeli rhetoric more and more highlighted that Iran in Syria was the “main threat”, and the IDF noticeably stepped up the number of pinprick strikes on Iranian-backed targets, usually Iranian missiles destined for Hezbollah in Lebanon, or the buildings storing them. In early 2015 there was even a strike that killed half a dozen important Hezbollah cadres, leading to Hezbollah’s one and only response strike in the entire war. Such strikes had no impact on Assad’s ability to wage war on his people; Israel never struck pro-Iranian forces in battle with the rebels. However, given Assad’s increasing reliance on pro-Iranian forces to make up for the depleted ranks of the SAA, the potential for clashes with Assad’s forces emerged.

This was by no means straightforward, however. In contrast with the Netanyahu government’s shrill anti-Iran rhetoric, useful for public consumption, members of the military-security apparatus continued to push in the opposite direction. In January 2015, **Dan Halutz, former Chief of Staff of the IDF, claimed that Assad was the least harmful choice in Syria, so western powers and Israel “[should strengthen the Syrian regime’s steadfastness](#) in the face of its opponents.”** Allowing Assad to fall would be “the most egregious mistake.” Meanwhile, Israeli military analyst Roni Daniel claimed that Israel had demanded the US-led coalition against ISIS “[expand the list of targets to include all Sunni jihadist organizations](#)” in Syria.” Soon after, Brigadier General Itai Baron, head of the Military Intelligence and Research Division of the IDF, claimed “it is just a matter of time” before Syrian Islamist organisations “[begin to target us from the Golan](#) Plateau according to their radical ideology.”

Israeli policy on Syria 2015-2017: The Putin-Netanyahu love-fest & being a ‘Good Neighbour’

The onset of Russian intervention in support of Assad in September 2015 was an opportunity to resolve these contradictions in Israel’s Syria policy. The devastating Russian air war was more decisive in saving Assad’s regime than the Iran-backed ground troops, whose early successes stalled while the rebels scored major victories in early 2015; Assad’s victories in the last two years would have been impossible without this massive intervention by a global imperialist power.

But unlike Iran, this decisive Assad ally was on good terms with Israel. During Israel’s 2014 Operation Protective Edge massacre in Gaza, [Putin declared “I support the struggle of Israel”](#); for its part, Israel refused to take part in western sanctions on Russia in over its illegal annexation of Crimea. Israel and Russia are major trading partners, and are involved in dealing in everything from gas pipelines to [military drones](#) (some of which [have turned up in Assad’s hands](#) on the battlefield). In 2010, the two states signed a [5-year military agreement](#).

For Israel, this was an opportunity to support a Russian-led, rather than Iran-led, Assad-rescue operation. Putin and Netanyahu began a series of high-level, high-publicity meetings and summits, declaring their resolve [to jointly fight “terrorism.”](#) A [military coordination ‘hotline’ was established](#), as were [joint air exercises](#). Putin declared his understanding of Israel’s “security” concerns in Syria,

ie, recognised Israel's "right" to bomb pro-Iranian assets in Syria; [Israel shared its intelligence on Syrian rebel groups with Russia](#) to aid Russia's war for Assad. Russia and Israel [coordinated closely on the Golan front](#), even as Russia bombed Syrian rebels very close to the Israeli-occupation lines.

This apparently schizophrenic Israeli policy – warm embrace of Russia combined with anti-Iranian frenzy – was reflected in contradictory statements and actions regarding the Syrian side of the Golan Heights (Quneitra province). On the one hand, in March 2017, Israel's *Maariv* news site reported that Israeli leaders had indicated that [they would be agreeable to the return of Assad's forces to the Golan 'border'](#) as long as Iran, Hezbollah and their allies were kept away. More recently, *Haaretz* reported that "position papers drafted by the Israeli army and the Foreign Ministry *over the past two years* didn't actually voice support for the Syrian president, but their assessments show that [they viewed his continued rule as preferable or even vital for Israel's security](#)."

In May 2017, the 'Begin-Sadat Centre' think tank published an article that said that with Israel "surrounded by enemies," it "needs those enemies to be led by *strong, stable rulers who will control their armies* and prevent both the firing on, and infiltrations into, Israeli territory," noting that both Assads had always performed this role. **The fact that "Syria is no longer able to function as a sovereign state ... is bad for Israel" and therefore "[a strong Syrian president with firm control over the state is a vital interest for Israel](#)**. Given the Islamist alternatives to his rule, Syria's neighbors, including Israel, may well come to miss him as Syria is rapidly Lebanonized."

Its call for Assad's rule to be "strong" is significant, because most commentary that does recognise Israel's preference for Assad maintaining power usually adds the adjective "weakened" to the kind of Assad Israel prefers – based on faulty logic.

Yet this continuing fundamental undercurrent of Israeli policy appeared to contradict the increasing number of attacks on pro-Iranian assets. Despite the close coordination with Russia, the quantity of Israeli strikes on Iran-backed forces shot up markedly. Yet this merely underlined the fact that Israel saw Russia as a means of replacing Iran as the main booster of Assad, rather than it reflecting anti-Assad policy.

The myth of Israel arming "Syrian rebels" in the Golan

Israel's preference for the Assad regime retaking the Golan armistice line also appeared to contradict a new quiet track of Israeli policy, and one that led to some illusions that Israel may end up a saviour for the people in the south.

Around mid-2017 it was reported that Israel was sending non-military aid to Syrian villages in the vicinity of the Golan fence in Quneitra, and even providing [some \\$5000 a month to one Syrian ex-rebel brigade](#), Fursan al-Jawlan (the Golan Knights), which it uses to buy arms; research by Elizabeth Tsurkov claimed that [Israel was supporting seven rebel groups](#) in this region, but other than the Golan Knights, most wished to remain anonymous.

A closer look shows that the aim of this aid to several armed groups was not to help them fight Assad, but rather to use them as "border guards" on the Golan. Still less did this have any relation to "regime change"; on the contrary, it is the existence of the Assad regime's terrifying repression that has allowed Israel to gain influence among fearful villagers near the Golan fence. But carrying out this pragmatic policy *in itself resulted in a new, if temporary, pressure on Israeli policy*.

It is first important to understand the Syrian-controlled side of the Golan Heights adjoining the Israeli occupation. Most of the line adjoins the tiny Quneitra province, but the southeast corner of

the region, the Yarmouk valley, is in Daraa province. While most of Daraa was controlled by the FSA Southern Front, this small section along the Golan fence was held by an ISIS franchise, Jaysh Khalid ibn al-Walid (JKW), one of the few tiny spots of Syria still held by ISIS. North and west of this, most of the Golan line is held by a range of armed groups – the Israeli-backed groups, the mainstream FSA/SF, and Islamists like HTS. Then in the far northwest is the small pro-regime Druze enclave of Hader.

We will first look at Israel's military aid to several groups in the main mid-Golan region. The first thing to note is that the Golan Knights brigade is [not part of the FSA Southern Front](#), and it had also [withdrawn from the local rebel Military Council in Quneitra](#) in mid-2015, before beginning to receive Israeli support. Moreover, the Golan Knights are based in Jubatha al-Khashab, a Quneitra town [inside the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force](#) (UNDOF) zone; as such, it is a local force that has little chance of coming into conflict with the regime. Its arrangement with Israel was similar to the kinds of 'reconciliation' arrangements other ex-rebel brigades have made with the regime ie, based on survival, where the rebel brigade is converted into a local police force. According to a Southern Front spokesperson, the Knights are only in possession of light weaponry, "so they [act predominantly as border guards](#) and patrol the area they're in."

According to the Southern Front, "[there's nothing we can do about them](#), they are from the local population ... we've been having our own problems in the area, and *so we cannot clash with them.*" This hardly appears a ringing endorsement. Some rebels were even less favourable; [this video shows a rebel protest](#) in the south against ties between Israel and ex-rebel factions; while this [gathering of Golan refugees](#) in besieged rebel-held south Damascus, protesting statements by some non-representative, exile-based "oppositionists" who called for trading the Golan Heights for Israeli support, points to the political and ethical dilemmas involved: the Golan is occupied and dispossessed Syrian people, not mere real estate.



Golan is Syrian land according to UN resolutions: [No-one has the right to give it up](#) or offer proposals for its return, according to this gathering of dispossessed Golan people in besieged southern Damascus, rejecting the so-called peace initiative offered by Essam Zeiton and his group abroad.

The confusion around the regime siege of the rebel-held town of Beit Jinn, near the Golan fence, in late 2017, highlights apparent contradictions in Israeli policy. In November, the Syrian opposition announced that [Israeli forces had directly intervened on the side of pro-Assad militias](#) besieging the town, targeting the reinforcements the FSA had sent to relieve the siege. This action was connected to Beit Jinn's proximity to the Druze town of Hader, where Israel helped the regime fight off an FSA siege (see below). **It is significant that the only case of actual Israeli military intervention on the ground in the entire Syrian conflict was one to aid the regime against the rebels.**

However, according to Tsurkov, Israel also “provided cash to Iyad Moro, a former rebel commander and Israel’s contact person in Beit Jann,” and permitted “several dozen” rebels to cross through to aid besieged Beit Jinn in December. While this may appear to contradict what it had done the previous month, the outcome was the town’s surrender; some rebels were evacuated to elsewhere in southern Syria or to Idlib, while the main group “reconciled” with the Assad regime. According to Tsurkov, [Israel was involved in this “reconciliation”](#), and its man, Moro, now commands a regime-approved militia “tasked with keeping both rebels and Iranian proxies away from the border fence.”

Tsurkov explains that “**this agreement could possibly serve as a blueprint for future deals in southern Syria, which would aim to secure regime and Israeli interests, at the expense of both Iran and the rebels.**” Indeed, it is precisely this “blueprint” now being implemented throughout the south, putting a significantly different slant on the discourse of “Israel arming Syrian rebels” as the headlines exclaimed.

What then of the northwest and southeast corners of the Golan?

Israel intervenes against rebels in Hader

In Hader, a town in the northwest part of the Golan fence, Israel’s policy has been to [support the Druze enclave against the rebels](#), although the town is aligned not only with the regime but also with Hezbollah. This is partly connected to Israel’s policy of favouring Israeli Druze (many of whom serve in the military) over Palestinians and thus treating them as non-Arabs.

As rebels besieged Hader in November 2017, IDF spokesman Brigadier General Ronen Manelis declared Israel [ready to protect the regime-held town](#), “as part of our commitment to the Druze population.” Israel’s National Security Adviser, Meir Ben-Shabbat, [assured Israel’s Druze community](#) that “Israel would not allow “jihadists” to take over the village.”

According to the Syrian Opposition National Coalition, “[the Israeli occupation forces opened the border and supplied the pro-Assad militias](#) in Hader with arms and ammunition, thus enabling regime forces to regain control of the areas they lost to the FSA fighters.”

... and bombs ISIS in Yarmouk valley

In the southeast, Israel has launched “[drone strikes and shelling with high-precision missiles](#) on ISIL targets” over the last year. Israeli [strikes](#) “[killed multiple ISIL fighters](#) near al-Jabiliya” when ISIS struck against the Daraa rebels in January, and then the IDF [fired precision-guided anti-tank missiles](#) at ISIS targets on February 1, “helping the rebels with another failed offensive.” An [Israeli air strike](#) last July also killed a number of important leaders of JKW, and further Israeli strikes in October [killed at least 10 JKW cadres](#).

Thus in this region, Israel was cooperating with the actual FSA Southern Front (as opposed to the ex-FSA “reconciliation” brigades it has promoted), [which has continually been at war with JKW](#). But of course this is US policy: *no support for the FSA to fight Assad, only to fight ISIS*. With the SF battle lines with Assad frozen for two years, Israel supported it against ISIS only, while not giving it the decisive support needed to evict ISIS; Israel wanted to leave that to the regime.

Israel’s ‘Good Neighbour’ policy in the Syrian Golan

Israel’s non-military support to some Golan villages goes back some years. In 2014, Haaretz

reported that Israel had been [assisting villages near the Golan fence](#) in exchange for them keeping “extremist Islamist groups” away. This evolved into the ‘Good Neighbour’ policy which significantly expanded over the last two years.

Tsurkov’s research showed that this support – [“including fuel, generators, food, clothes, baby formula, medicine, diapers and hygiene products”](#) – along with the policy of providing hospitalisation to injured fighters and civilians, was allowing Israel to gain a level of acceptance within that region that was unusual elsewhere in the Arab world (including in Syria). This ranged from a warm embrace to a continuing suspicious but pragmatic acceptance.

While Assad’s slaughter and dispossession greatly amplifies Israel’s own actions towards the Palestinian people, especially in Gaza, it is Assad who is the immediate danger in the Syrian Golan. Therefore, it is logical both for local people to seek safety for their families from anyone who can protect them, and for Israel to gain influence by posing in the unusual role of protector; not so different to past Iranian backing for Palestinians in Gaza under Israeli slaughter. Alongside influence, Israel also gained a potential buffer for its Golan occupation, among local villagers and militias, against either Hezbollah or Iranian-backed forces, or Sunni jihadists.

While this began as a policy contingent on the ongoing crisis, it had the effect of giving Israel a new interest in the outcome of the war that seemed to contradict its more long-term interest in seeing the return of the Assad regime. While Israel’s own actions elsewhere highlight the absence of humanitarian motives, nevertheless, once a power has established influence via even opportunist humanitarian gestures, it has an interest in maintaining it; and in not being seen as abandoning those it has supported.

Writing in Haaretz, Amos Harel explained the “dilemma”:

“Some of Israel’s politicians and defense establishment figures regard the new developments with a cold analytical view. The return of the Assad regime to border areas [could ensure greater stability and block the flood of Sunni jihadists](#) into the area. According to one analysis, *the convergence of interests between Syria and its Iranian allies may be weakened the more the Assad regime is strengthened.*”

However, given the “respect” that Israel has gained in the region, if the regime “adopts its usual methods for retaking these villages,” Israeli credibility will be at stake “for not lifting a finger to stop the massacre taking place only a few miles from its border.”

As we will see, Israel decided strongly in favour of the first option, but with some concessions.

Israeli strikes on Iranian targets follow pattern

Meanwhile, Israeli Air Force chief Major General Amir Eshel revealed in August 2017 that [Israel had launched around 100 strikes](#) on Iranian and Hezbollah targets in Syria over several years. However, by 2018, these strikes revealed a clear pattern. On February 10, Israel struck an Iranian control center at the Tiyas (T4) airbase in Homs, in response to an Iranian drone allegedly straying across the Golan line. On February 18, Assad and Russia began their month-long ‘final solution’ in Ghouta. Officially, Iran was kept out of this campaign, while Russia took the lead role. In reality, [Iranian-backed forces played an active](#), if low-profile, role, but despite this there was no peep from Israel (or the US) during that month.

Yet on April 9 – the very day of the final capitulation of Douma, following Assad’s chemical attack – Israel again attacked the same base in Homs. Several days later, in response to the chemical attack,

the US, Britain and France carried out a theatrical strike on some warehouses and facilities connected to Assad's chemical weapons capabilities; since [Trump had reportedly warned Putin in advance](#), the facilities were likely emptied. Fortunately, there were zero casualties, either military or civilian. But the Israeli strike, while also following the chemical attack, was seemingly unrelated to it. A former Israeli security operative told *Middle East Eye* that "[This air strike has nothing to do with the chemical attack](#), but if it is interpreted as such, then fine. Israel will benefit and be seen as the good guy."

Israeli strikes, therefore, completely bracketed, at both ends, Assad's genocidal attack on Ghouta, were completely absent during that month, hit in Homs rather than Damascus/Ghouta, and hit Iranians, not Assad.

Israeli policy on Syria 2018: Go Assad Go!

The chronology of a number of events in May is interesting. On May 8, the Trump administration rescinded the Iran nuclear deal, despite furious objection from Europe. Israeli leaders had been demanding this for years, and coming soon after [the move of the US embassy to illegally occupied Jerusalem](#), in a public spectacle while [Israel was mercilessly gunning down](#) peaceful Palestinian protestors on the Gaza fence, this was a strong show of support for Israel's position. Within hours, [Israeli jets struck a number of depots and rocket launchers](#) belonging to Iran's Revolutionary Guards in Kisweh, south of Damascus.

The next day Netanyahu flew to Moscow for yet another high-level meeting with Putin (they have met three times this year and spoken by phone 10 times), as guest of honour at the anniversary of the defeat of the Nazis. Standing next to Putin, Netanyahu watched a [display of the latest Russian military equipment](#). That evening, Iranian forces, *for the first time ever*, retaliated for the Israeli strike by firing rockets at Israeli forces in Golan; the next day, Israel launched its [most massive attack ever on Iranian military assets](#) in Syria, hitting 50 "weapons storage, logistics sites and intelligence centers used by Iranian forces in Syria." Bottom of Form

Lieberman claimed that [Israel had hit "almost all of the Iranian infrastructure in Syria"](#) - in a couple of hours. Netanyahu had [tipped off Putin](#), ensuring that the Russian-controlled anti-aircraft system did nothing to protect the Iranians.



Russian President Vladimir Putin and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu [watch a military parade](#) celebrating 73 years of the victory the WWII in Red Square, Moscow, May 9, 2018.

The Russian-Israeli deal

News now began to appear about [a deal between Russia and Israel](#), whereby Russia would ensure that Iranian-backed forces distance themselves from the south, and Israel would give the go-ahead

for Assad's army to crush the Southern Front and return to its role as security-guard of the Israeli occupation; and Russia would not oppose Israel continuing to bomb pro-Iranian forces anywhere in Syria, as long as Israel didn't touch Assad's forces in the process. The deal was [reported by Israel's Channel 2 News](#).

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov announced that only regime troops should be on the southern borders, and [all "non-Syrian" forces must leave the region](#), clearly aimed at Iranian-backed forces. Russia reportedly asked Israel not to respond to any shells which might enter the Golan, as the regime "[does not want a war with you](#) and if a shell falls on your side of the border, this is by accident."

The deal was consecrated at a meeting between Israeli ultra-right Defense Minister Lieberman and his Russian counterpart Sergei Shoygu on May 31. According to *Yedioth Aharonot*, at the meeting the two [agreed to coordinate](#) the Assad regime's offensive on southern Syria.

Lieberman appears to be a particularly strong advocate of the new deal with Assad: on May 10, he addressed the Syrian tyrant: "[Assad, get rid of the Iranians ... they are not helping you](#) ... their presence will only cause problems and damages."

One casualty of the latest Putin-Netanyahu love-fest was [the S-300 anti-aircraft missile system](#) Russia was planning to provide Assad – the plan was shelved. The rebels do not have aircraft – so Assad does not need these missiles, except to down Israeli jets attacking Iranian targets. To kill Syrian people, Assad has his airforce, and Russia's. In any case, Russia has [deployed its own more advanced S-400 system](#) in Syria, which [Israel has no objection to](#).

One of the more intriguing stories was the report that [Israel and Iran themselves held indirect negotiations in Jordan](#). Iran reportedly agreed to not take part in Assad's southern offensive, while Israel agreed to not to intervene against Assad. The negotiations allegedly involved the Iranian ambassador and security officials in one room, and Israeli security officials in the next room. They "arrived at a quick agreement that even surprised the Israeli representatives." To facilitate the deal, [Iranian and Hezbollah forces began withdrawing from parts of Daraa](#), according to the opposition *Al Souria* site on May 24.

Israel: "no problem" with Assad regime "for 40 years"

Once the Assad-Putin offensive was underway, the US and Israeli facilitation of the operation became more blatant, while Israeli declarations of support for Assad moved from a wink to a stampede.

Israel's National Security Adviser, Meir Ben Shabat, declared in early June that [Israel has no problem with Assad](#) remaining in power as long as the Iranians leave; Knesset member Eyal Ben Reuven, of the Zionist Union, stressed that the stability of the Assad regime was "[pure Israeli interest](#)." Another Israeli politician told Al-Hurra TV that "[There's no animosity nor disagreement between us and Bashar al-Assad](#)... he protects Israel's interests ... We now will return to the situation as it was before the revolution."

Not to be outdone, Netanyahu declared "[We haven't had a problem with the Assad regime, for 40 years](#) not a single bullet was fired on the Golan Heights." Lieberman noted that "[we are not ruling anything out](#)" regarding the possibility of Israel and the Assad regime establishing "some kind of relationship." In case this was not yet clear enough, at a July meeting with his US counterpart, Israeli Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Gadi Eisenkot stressed that [Israel will allow "only" Assad regime forces to occupy the Golan "border"](#).

[At a July 1 Cabinet meeting, Netanyahu](#) even dropped the former pre-condition about no “non-Syrian” forces in Assad’s offensive. This was one of the more confusing developments, given the general understanding that Israel was backing Assad precisely to separate him from Iran, as if Israel was only backing Assad as some kind of bargain. As will be explained below, this is a mistaken view.

Despite the reports of Iranian forces moving out of Daraa, as the offensive got underway, evidence of involvement of Iran-backed forces grew. The Iranian-backed Iraqi Zulfiqar Brigade [officially announced it was taking part in the offensive](#). The civil society-linked *Etana* site published [this map](#) showing locations of Iranian-backed militias across south-west Syria. Yet [Lieberman explicitly rejected the claim](#) that Iranian and Hezbollah troops who left the region had now returned in Syrian army uniforms, claiming there were only several dozen Iranian “advisors” operating in the region.

Israeli’s propaganda war against Iran still needed to produce fireworks, however, so while ignoring the Iranian-backed forces in the vicinity, Israeli leaders started shouting that Iran must leave “all of Syria;” while Assad pulverised Daraa, Israel took shots at Iranian forces at the opposite ends of Syria – on the Iraqi border and in Aleppo!

What though of the influence Israel had gained in the Quneitra villages, and of the militias it had armed? Was it going to simply throw away the gains it had made in the region?

On the one hand, the region where Israel had gained this influence was tiny; Israel was not throwing away a great deal to get back the pre-2011 certainty of Assad as border-guard. So, as 160,000 refugees gathered at the Golan fence, holding demonstrations to beg for refuge, Lieberman declared that Israel [“will not accept any Syrian refugee into our territory”](#). On July 17, the Israeli army warned displaced Syrians moving towards the Golan fence to [“go back before something bad happens.”](#) Israel thus denied the right of Syrians fleeing Assad’s terror *to enter occupied Syria*. Jordan took the same stance, but at least it is already housing 700,000 Syrian refugees, compared to Israel’s zero.

On the other hand, the sheer viciousness of Assad’s attack still allowed Israel to come off as relatively “humanitarian”. [Israel sent humanitarian aid](#) to these refugees, including 300 tents, 13 tons of food, 15 tons of baby formula, three pallets of medical equipment and medicines, and 30 tons of clothing and shoes.

Moreover, Israel’s influence in Quneitra helped in bringing about a relatively “soft landing” for these villages; a Russian and Israeli negotiated “reconciliation” agreement with Assad rather than a massacre. This “reconciliation” of the Israeli-backed groups was uncomplicated; as explained above, a regime-Israel deal to exclude rebels and Iranians had already been negotiated over Beit Jinn. In the final agreement, the Golan Knights [are still able to operate in the UN zone](#), as long as they do not clash with Assad’s forces.

Subduing the real rebels of the Southern Front was more complex, but [the “reconciliation” road was also offered by Russia](#) as the carrot to Assad’s stick (ironically, given that Russia itself used the “stick” of terror-bombing to force these “reconciliations”). Russia [engaged in secret negotiations with the Southern Front](#) from the start; [it took several starts and stops](#), as the FSA rejected the most outrageous conditions, Russia went back to mass murder, then turned on its “friendly” face again, [until there was little choice but to capitulate](#).

Notably, in the final agreement [Russian military police will join the UN forces in the demilitarised zone](#), and on the Syrian side, they “will hold Tel al-Harra – at 1,200 meters above sea level the highest of the hills overlooking the Golan. From there they will be able to monitor implementation of the separation-of-forces agreement.”

Russia, in other words, is now stationed in Syria both to protect the Assad regime *and the Israeli occupation of the Syrian Golan!*

As Zvi Bar'el summarised the situation in *Haaretz* on July 22:

“Military coordination between Israel, Russia and Jordan, Israel’s involvement directly or indirectly in discussions on Russia’s plans for alleviating the Syrian crisis, and **Israel’s ability to influence tactical moves in the Golan [make it an indirect but significant partner of the Assad regime](#)**, which can now rest assured it’s in no danger from Israel.”

Why Israel never supported the FSA

We have discussed why Israel dropped its tiny proxy groups and came down hard in support of Assad re-taking the Golan. But it is interesting turning the question on its head – if Israel’s region of influence was tiny, yet seemingly successful within those limits, why didn’t Israel try to extend this influence, by arming the Southern Front against Assad, and becoming a “Good Neighbour” throughout Daraa?

As noted above, Israel prefers Arab dictators in power; they may use anti-Israel rhetoric, but their conservative interests are served by maintaining the oppressive status quo, which includes Israel. Moreover, when Israel’s own anti-democratic policies are highlighted, its leaders claim to be better to their Arab subjects than various Arab tyrants are to their own.

A democratic Syria would undermine Israel’s justifications for its oppression of the Palestinian people. While Israel and the US are more publicly hostile to the Islamist currents in Syria, in fact the most democratic and non-sectarian solution in Syria would have been the most antithetical to Israeli interests. **Imagine a victory of the vision in the image above from the Southern Front – “[Syria is for all: Druze, Kurds, Alawi, Assyrians, Sunni, Christians.](#)” What message would that have had for a sectarian state like Israel?**

However, as the length of the war eroded the possibilities of democratic change, forced liberated communities to fight for survival, and led to corruption and authoritarianism among many rebel groups, could not Israel have developed relations with armed groups motivated by survival and power, who had little potential to bring about democratic change anyway?

Perhaps; but if Israel was going to take the risk of supporting a real rebel group (as opposed to its pacified proxies) – not for “regime change”, but merely for a larger friendly ‘buffer’ to protect its existing Golan ‘buffer’ – then it would require the group to capitulate to Israeli terms. Since Assad had been the perfect “border-guard” for the Israeli occupation for 40 years, a rebel group would need to go beyond that, to officially accept the Golan as Israeli.

Yet, for all the slanders that have been heaped on the FSA and other rebels, there has never been any movement whatsoever by the Syrian rebels to accept the Israeli theft of the Golan. They are fighting a liberation war; it goes against everything they are fighting for to sell out to the state occupying their territory and oppressing their Palestinian brethren.

Following Netanyahu’s assertion last year that the Golan will remain forever Israeli, Riad Hijab, head of the Syrian opposition National Coalition, responded that **“we won’t give up on our territorial completeness or on the unification of our social fabric. We won’t concede a single grain of soil. [The Golan is Syrian land and it will be returned to Syria.](#)”**

This was in accord with opposition policy. The opposition Higher Negotiations Committee, in its

'Executive Framework for a Political Solution Based on the Geneva Communiqué' in September 2016, declares that **"Syria is an independent sovereign state. No part of its territories may be separated or conceded. Nor can its right to regain its occupied territories by all legitimate means guaranteed in the UN Charter be waived."**

The FSA has also constantly rejected giving up the Golan. When exile-based oppositionist, Issam Zeitoun, attended a 'security' conference in Israel, he was initially mistakenly billed as a representative of the Southern Front, causing a storm as [the Front furiously rejected having anything to do with the visit](#).

Similarly, when asked about their stance on Israel, **Ahmad Al-Sa'oud, head of FSA Division 13, answered ["we are for the return of all Syrian land occupied by Israel."](#)** This "caused concern among terrorism experts, who have long warned that US arms could fall into the hands of radical militant groups" according to the right-wing *Free Beacon*, quoting "terrorism analyst" Patrick Poole, who claimed ["This is precisely the problem we've faced in arming the Syrian opposition](#) ... there's no confidence that ... the US government has any idea who they're dealing with or what their agenda might be." Apparently, international law on the Golan is equivalent to "terrorism".

In similar vein, when Trump recognised Israeli-occupied Jerusalem as the "capital" of Israel last December, [demonstrations condemning this move](#) and in solidarity with the Palestinians [broke out all over opposition-controlled Syria](#), from Daraa through East Ghouta and south Damascus to Homs and Idlib and northern Aleppo. Here protesters in [camps for displaced Syrians in northern Idlib](#) hold signs stating "Sanaa, Baghdad, Beirut, Damascus are occupied by Iran, Jerusalem occupied by Israel"; and here [Syrians and Palestinians are demonstrating in besieged southern Damascus](#) against the Jerusalem decision, chanting "Oh shame, oh shame, We won't sacrifice the Golan" and "We'll sacrifice our blood & soul for Aqsa."



[Syrians and Palestinians are demonstrating in besieged southern Damascus](#) against Trump's Jerusalem decision.

And here are the Palestinian and the Syrian revolution flags painted on a wall in Kuftkharim in Idlib during May, to show solidarity with Gaza during recent Israeli attacks; the phrase ["From Syria to Gaza, we share the same wound"](#) is written on it.



Idlib: [“From Syria to Gaza, we share the same wound”](#). Photo by Abu al-Bara al-Shami.

Clearly, these are not the kinds of people Israel was ever going to form an alliance with.

Russian-Iranian rivalry and Iran’s growing dispensability

A number of issues emerge that are connected to these agreements to facilitate Assad’s victory. For one, while Russia’s close connections to Israel have been discussed, why was it so enthusiastic about moving against Iran, supposedly its ally in support of Assad?

Essentially, now that Assad has been saved, his two key allies now emerge as rivals to be the more dominant power over Assad’s blighted little satrapy in the post-war era.

According to the *Syrian Observer*, the regime and Russia signed a “roadmap” for 2018 and beyond, including “the stages of implementing strategic projects related to reconstruction and renewing Syrian energy facilities.” Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif’s statement that [“Russia’s presence in reconstruction does not mean Iran has no presence”](#) hinted at the rivalry.

Henry Rome, Iran researcher for the Eurasia Group in Washington, noted that “Iran fought a very difficult war ... and expects long-term concessions out of that in terms of energy contracts and so on,” claiming there was [“consternation in Tehran that Russian and Turkish firms are winning key contracts”](#) instead of them.”

This rivalry is also being expressed [in the cultural sphere](#), particularly in Russian and Iranian school building, with rival ideological overtones.

Some of this is now emerging more openly. In late June, advisor to the Iranian foreign minister, Ali Khorram, claimed [Russia “stabbed Iran from behind in Syria.”](#)

A related issue is that, the more Assad is victorious on the ground, the less the presence of global pro-Iranian Shiite cannon-fodder remains essential.

The current consensus – Russian-backed Assad and Israel win with US support, rebels and Iran both lose – seems too obvious. Why has it taken until now to bring it into operation? Essentially, Assad needed this Iranian-backed cannon fodder to help defeat the rebels, given the weakness of his own forces. Therefore, while Russia has actively courted Israel, it needed to give more time for the Iran-backed forces to do Assad’s dirty work. Even Israel essentially recognised this; it acted more impatiently, but none of its pinprick strikes on Iranian-backed assets were designed to put a dent on the ability of the regime to win its war.

The biggest Israeli strikes on Iranian targets, Trump’s scrapping of the Iran deal, Pompeo’s vicious

barking, and Putin's more open collusion against Iran all came in the period after Assad had subjugated East Ghouta, which established his regime as safe.

At some point, the "secular" Baathist tyrant will be just as bothered by these unruly troops loyal to a foreign theocracy. In early July, Iranian parliamentarian Behruz Bonyadi accused Assad of tilting in Russia's direction: "Today we see [Assad increasing his harmony with Putin with all brazenness](#). He not only demeans the importance of the role of the martyrs of *the* Maraked (Shia Imam Tombs) in Syria, but also denied this role sometimes."

The US: Bombastic irrelevance or new war-maker?

As a partner in this regional counterrevolutionary deal – even if taking a relative backseat while the Russian-Israeli gendarme regimes do the dirty work – the Trump administration has also drawn a firm distinction between the Assad regime and Iran. It is no coincidence that it began upping the ante with Iran – scrapping the nuclear agreement, [Pompeo's extraordinarily aggressive speech](#) – in the period following Assad's crushing of Ghouta, as Iran was becoming more dispensable to Assad. Whether the end-game is a catastrophic attack on Iran, or the symbolic victory of a slightly "better" nuclear accord achieved through "strength", remains to be seen.

But one reality not commonly noted is that this new rhetoric – for example Pompeo's demand that Iranian forces leave Syria, Iraq and Yemen (Iranian forces are not in Yemen) – is that these matters already had a life of their own: the Russia/Israel deal partially evicted Iran from southern Syria; Iraqis voted for a movement that opposes the Iranian presence in Iraq (and the US presence!), while the Iraqi masses protest in the streets against Iran; the Houthis in Yemen weakened themselves by going to war with their key ally, former dictator Saleh; the Arab minority in Iranian Ahvaaz has been in uprising; and Iranian people have also been in various forms of uprising throughout this year. Pompeo's bombast may have aimed at making it sound like the US had something to do with all this.

Is this more evidence of alleged US "weakness"? While the US was less directly involved, the Israel-Russia agreement was fully in accord with US interests; there is no evidence of US leaders seeing it otherwise.

On the other hand, despite rhetoric, the US is likely to be rather wary of the revolutionary ferment across Iran, Iraq and Ahvaaz, which have a life of their own and cannot be attributed to US pressure on the Iranian regime. The real US 'contribution' has only now begun with the re-imposition of harsh sanctions on Iran in early August. While much analysis sees this as part of a build-up towards a war, this is only possibility. More likely, this is a device for the US to attempt to exert some control over the situation in the increasingly unstable eastern end of the region.

Trump's call for the US to leave Syria, versus the Pentagon's demand that it stay, is an issue that is unrelated to that of Assad versus the rebellion, except that now that Assad has mostly won the counterrevolutionary war against the rebels, Trump sees no problem left in Syria. In February, he declared "We're there for one reason: [to get ISIS and get rid of ISIS and to go home](#). *We're not there for any other reason.*" In April he repeated that "We're knocking the hell out of ISIS, [we're coming out of Syria very soon](#)." However, this is [contradicted by the Pentagon](#), which is unwilling to give up the gains the US has made in northeastern Syria, where it has some [11 military bases](#) and is in a position to influence the outcome in Syria.

However, it goes against the history of the last seven years to imagine that 'influence on the outcome' means ousting Assad; the basis of the US alliance with the Kurdish-led SDF in the northeast is precisely that the latter *does not fight the regime*. A US withdrawal would sell out its Kurdish allies to Assad and Erdogan, but is irrelevant to the anti-Assad rebellion one way or the

other; and one line of discussion towards a possible outcome is allegedly a [“Kurds for Iranians”](#) swap: the US leaves Rojava for Assad, on condition Assad kicks out Iranian forces.

Apart from wanting to complete the defeat of ISIS, by remaining the Pentagon aims to be in a position to put a dent in the Iranian project of an unbroken Tehran to Beirut road. This is of largely symbolic value, however, since, despite the over-hyping of this “land-bridge,” Iran sends arms to Hezbollah via air or sea, it does not need a rickety 2000 kilometre “road” for that; and with allied governments in Baghdad, Damascus and Beirut regardless, the “taming” of Iran on behalf of rival regional interests should not be confused with outright defeat: unless defeated by the popular uprisings, Iran will still exert its hegemony over the northern tier of the Levant as its reward for its role in the Syrian counterrevolution.

... and the “reactionary Arab states”?

The popular discourse that “reactionary” Arab states supported the Syrian rebellion only ever really meant Saudi Arabia and Qatar, fierce rivals for the Sunni “vote”. With the US-backed Iraqi regime in Assad’s camp, alongside [al-Sisi’s brutal Egyptian tyranny](#), Sisi’s close allies Jordan and the UAE, while less blatant, were never onside with the revolution: their hostility to democratic revolution matched only by their hatred of the Muslim Brotherhood. The three states [welcomed the Russian intervention](#) in Syria as a chance to fight “terrorism”; [Jordan](#) and the [UAE both drew up lists](#) of “terrorist” organisations in the Syrian rebellion. Now the UAE has come out more clearly: on June 8, UAE Foreign Minister Dr. Anwar Gargash declared “The choice between *an Al-Qaeda based opposition* or Assad is a false choice ... I think it was [a mistake to kick Syria out of the Arab league](#).”

Saudi Arabia, while closely allied to these three states, was the exception, as its geopolitical-sectarian rivalry with Iran overshadowed the hatred of democracy and the MB it shared with them; and given Assad’s genocide against the Sunni Muslim population, it was more difficult for a regime seeing itself as leader of the Muslim world to separate Assad from Iran than it was for the US or Israel to do so. But that point eventually arrived, with Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman stating that “Bashar is staying. But I believe that [Bashar’s interests are not to let the Iranians](#) do whatever they want they want to do.”

Israel and Iran: War of rhetoric

Given the centrality, however, of making Iran the “fall guy” to the Trump-Netanyahu agreement with Putin to save Assad, the nature of this great Iran-Israel “conflict” is worth exploring. What is behind Israel’s campaign against pro-Iranian forces in Syria, and its wild anti-Iranian rhetoric in general?

Does nuclear-armed Israel really view Iran as a “threat”? This laughable proposition should have been put to rest when Israel claimed to have wiped out half the Iranian military capacity in Syria in one afternoon in May. So, instead, are Iranian and Hezbollah forces in Syria rather a “nuisance” to the Israeli occupation of the Golan, by firing rockets across the fence?

The problem with this assumption is that the Iranian and Hezbollah forces in Syria *never fire anything into the Golan*. Whatever rhetoric, their entire role in Syria has been to kill Syrians for Assad, not to be even a nuisance in the Golan, let alone to “liberate Jerusalem.” Of the one hundred times Israel claims to have struck pro-Iranian targets, Iran and Hezbollah *have only even responded once each*. So the pro-Iranian forces have not been one iota more “steadfast” against the Golan occupation than the Assad regime which kept the “border” quiet for forty years.

Unless one believes that Iran’s theocratic tyranny has any interest in “liberating Palestinians”

(assuming “liberation” were possible via the Iranian military conquest), or liberating anyone; or unless one thinks that conquering and subjugating Israel (if that were in the realms of possibility) were an imperial aim of Iran, then we need a better explanation for Iranian noise.

And given this reality, we also need an explanation for why Israel keeps hitting these Iran-backed forces which have no interest in hitting them.

The common answer would be that Iran and Israel are regional rivals, just as medium-sized powers Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey are rivals for regional hegemonic influence. However, there are also problems with this explanation.

Saudi Arabia, for example, wants to restrict Iran’s regional influence because the two countries *are actual rivals* for influence in the Arab and Muslim world; their geopolitical rivalry is often fought with sectarian overtones. In contrast, Israel is capable of gaining next to zero influence anywhere in the Arab or Muslim world (unless it came to some kind of just arrangement with Palestine). As we saw, even the influence it had begun to gain in the Syrian Golan was tiny and expendable.

Rather, Israel and Iran are engaged in a war of rhetoric. The racist, colonialist project of Zionism is ideologically invested in the existence of an alleged “Fourth Reich” in the region which supposedly aims to “drive Jews into the sea.” And Iran projects baseless “radical” bombast for the same reason: its own reactionary theocratic project, in a non-Arab and non-Sunni state, can be enhanced if it similarly has an evil “enemy” that it “leads resistance” to, even if this amounts to nothing. The “liberate Jerusalem” noise is a mobilisational device to hoodwink the masses as Iranian sub-imperialism attempts to project its power over the northern tier of the Levant.

This ideological war for preservation of the twin sectarian-theocratic projects can continue for decades without “accidents” due to the geographic distance between the two states. The Gaddafi regime in Libya similarly used to be the most furious “fighter against Zionism” from the middle of north Africa.

However, with Iranian-backed forces now all over Syria, the game cannot be played as before; rhetoric requires some kind of action, lest its hollowness be exposed. A bunch of unruly militia in its “backyard” shouting rhetoric about “destroying Israel”, however baseless, is something that Israel needs to show it can blast away. However, by doing nothing, Iran undermines its own ideological bluster; until now, it could claim this was because it first needed to defeat the “CIA-Mossad-Wahabbi-ISIS” conspiracy to overthrow Assad’s “resistance” regime, but this excuse is rapidly wearing thin.

As the only First World state in the region, Israel asserts its hegemony in a different way to the regional powers. One role for a small imperialist state is that of regional gendarme, which is also important for maintaining its position as most favoured nation by its US benefactor, and the billions in arms that come with it. Seeing that it is actually Saudi regional influence that is threatened by Iranian competition, Israel currently aims to demonstrate that it can defeat the “Iranian threat” and in exchange win Saudi-Gulf agreement for a more official betrayal of Palestine. This however is [more easily imagined than done](#).

What now for the Syrian revolution?

The military defeat of the Southern Front and Assad’s reconquest of the south, following the subjugation of the Damascus region, cannot be underestimated in terms of the blow it delivers against the revolution. While outright military victory by the opposition was never on the cards, holding territory where they had a base among the population was necessary to be able to build

semi-democratic institutions as an alternative to the regime, and to have something to bargain with.

The only area still under rebel control is 'Greater Idlib' (Idlib province, southern and western Aleppo and northern Hama and Latakia). Here ongoing contestation exists between the majority of rebels and town councils on the one hand, and the jihadist HTS on the other; while often depicted as HTS-run, the revolutionary situation is highlighted by [this resistance to HTS](#), and the latter's [inability to fully impose its program](#) in areas it does control.

However, pressure also comes from Turkey, which supports the anti-HTS rebels, but in doing so tries to keep the front quiet with the regime and use them as proxies as part of the Astana process, which Turkey is involved in alongside Russia and Iran. This may be more easily said than done; these rebels are unlikely to take orders to give up Idlib, if they were handed down. Russia has given conflicting messages, sometimes [indicating an attack on Idlib is imminent](#), other times, [denying it](#), but the Assad regime is already involved in significant bombing. More likely, Russia and Turkey will team up to "solve the HTS problem" by using the just opposition to HTS to push the rebels into a fratricidal war against HTS, for the wrong reasons at the wrong time, from which only the regime would gain.

In northern Aleppo, Turkey has already enlisted many rebel groups as proxies for its anti-Kurdish designs, when they jointly invaded Afrin and expelled the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF, led by the Peoples Protection Units, YPG) – and 170,000 Kurdish civilians. The Turkish occupation and their proxy militia are carrying out [extensive theft, looting and war crimes](#), further driving in the wedge between the Arab and Kurdish populations. The Afrin YPG played its own part in this, when two years earlier it attacked the rebels in the Arab-majority [Tal Rifaat region](#) of northern Aleppo, supported by Russian air strikes, and expelled the populations. The divisive handiwork of the imperial powers is evident from the current map: while Turkey and its proxies occupy Kurdish Afrin, the Arabic Tal Rifaat region is still under YPG control.

In the northern Aleppo borderlands, Turkey occupies the region between Azaz and Jarablus, via al-Bab, in an uneasy alliance with the local rebel forces, who jointly evicted ISIS in 2016. Given the largely Arab-Turkmen population, this is a different situation to that of Afrin. Nevertheless, there again exists an ongoing contestation between [Turkish hegemony](#) and local rebels asserting their own authority. Given the alternative of the regime's return, however, the population sees the current situation as vastly preferable.

The SDF rules over the northeast with the support of the US, with its own style revolutionary structures, while there is contestation between the SDF and local Arab populations in some places, [especially in Raqqqa](#). However, both the US and the SDF, each for their own reasons, are likely to try to do [some kind of deal with the Assad regime](#). Nevertheless, this again may turn out to not be so simple, if the Kurdish and Arab people there resist such an eventuality.

But aside from the military situation, the other question is whether the regime's military victories can be translated into a new counterrevolutionary stability, or the liberation of Syrians from fear results in ongoing protests, underground resistance, instances of guerrilla warfare and so on.

At this stage, there is not a great deal positive to be said. While it would be premature to declare it all "over," analysis needs to reckon with the reality of mass exhaustion and desire for some kind of stability, even one where people have to return to keeping their mouths shut. The option of being endlessly bombed and having everything around them destroyed is not an attractive one, especially now that the regime has turned the tide.

But even such stultifying "stability" may not be good enough for the regime, which is determined to

violently crush any sign of opposition, even if that means [millions of people](#); and it may also be much less stable for those in former rebel strongholds who were forcibly “reconciled” with the regime. It is good not to be bombed; but the uprising did not start with regime bombing, but out of revulsion against the regime’s practices of detaining, torturing, killing and “disappearing” people. The regime’s recent issuing of [thousands of death certificates](#) for those it has held in captivity for years (and the likelihood that we are looking at [tens of thousands](#)), highlights that being bombed is not the only life and death concern of Syrians: having your son or daughter “disappear” is not the “stability” that people long for.

This dilemma was played out in the south. While some criticised the Southern Front for surrendering too quickly, after fighting for “only” a few weeks, others suggested they should not have fought at all, since the certainty of defeat would mean more civilians being slaughtered by the regime for no reason. However logical this second view may seem from a distance, it is up to those on the ground to make such life and death decisions. In fact, when the SF did sign the surrender agreements, [many civilians condemned them for giving up](#), and even organised new civilian militia to keep regime forces out. Given that the regime has repaid the ‘reconciliation agreement’ in Daraa, [as with Ghouta](#) and elsewhere, with [betrayal, arrests, killings, detentions](#) and so on, this desire to resist was understandable; especially among those who already knew they were wanted: “[Everyone in the village is wanted](#). I don’t expect anyone to return,” reported a former resident of the Daraa village of Kheil, who had escaped with 22 relatives. Yet with their backs to the Israeli-Jordanian wall, the SF ultimately had little choice but to sign on.

It is a particularly dark day for the world when the survival of such a regime is seen as a mark of the new order in the region, a signifier of “peace.” There was never going to be a successful “democratic revolution in one country” once the rest of the Arab Spring was put down. But with continual outbreaks of popular resistance in Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Morocco, Palestine and elsewhere, a re-opening of resistance in Syria cannot be ruled out. Given this, holding on to whatever pieces of Syria remain outside Assad’s control – even in situations where other foreign powers and their proxies, or local reactionary forces such as HTS, or forces that have stood apart from the main theatre of revolution, such as the SDF, are playing important roles in contested environments – may be of great importance as future bases if the ferment returns to Syria.

Michael Karadjis

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