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Israel's wild cards in the Syrian game

In the fight against ISIS, there are many other battles entangled and many side-actors. A very interesting actor is Israel, with respect both to ISIS and to the wider strategic game in Syria. Israel has been noticeably quiet about ISIS and about the Syrian conflict as a whole, but quietly active when it mattered.

In Syria, despite declaring its neutrality, Israel clearly has some big strategic interests at stake. Israel shares with the anti-Assad coalition, including its most extremist members, a clear hostility towards Iran, Assad's chief backer but, at the same time, a Syria led by Sunni fundamentalist groups would constitute a clear-cut threat.

It has been reported that Israeli Air Force has been engaged in providing support to the Free Syrian Army - and even, indirectly, the Al Nusra Front - against Assad and Hezbollah, Israel's archenemy fighting on the side of the Syrian Army. Indeed since 2011, many observers believe Israel has been obstructing arms shipments from Iran en route to Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Further complicating the picture, there is the peculiar case of the Druze community that lives on both sides of the Israeli/Syrian border. As the war began, the Druze population (most of it still with Syrian

passports) across the border became divided between those who support Assad and those who back the rebels. All have apparently enjoyed Israeli protection: allegedly Israeli authorities vowed to protect Syrian Druze, encouraged by Israeli Druze who often held demonstrations in the Golan Heights, publicly demanding that Israel protect their Syrian relatives.

From the Israeli point of view therefore, the Syrian conflict is multi-fold: its enemies - both the Sunni Islamist/jihadi organizations and Assad/Iran/Hezbollah coalition - are busy fighting one another, and the Druze who support the Syrian government may soon become unlikely helpful allies of the Jewish state. But, of course ISIS plays the wild card in the game.

Regionally, Israel will probably exploit the threat posed by ISIS – and subsequently the November 13 Paris attacks - to play two parallel roles in strategic calculations: the potential victim of terror, but also a powerful actor in the fight against terrorism. On the one hand, Israel has requested more weapons and military aid from the United States administration to defend itself as a potential victim of terror; on the other hand, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu has offered his support to Russian President Putin on his Syrian campaign. At least one security arrangement was signed between Russia and Israel over Syria in order to facilitate the direct exchange of intelligence information and prevent the two armies from targeting each other's aircraft.

At local level, Israel is playing the ISIS-card to crack down on Palestinians with Islamist orientation or ideology. The Shin Bet, Israel's domestic intelligence service, revealed that seven residents of an Arab town in Israel planned to join ISIS in Syria, and that approximately 40 Israeli Arabs or East Jerusalem residents have joined it already.

These events have been used to justify the decision of the Israeli government to jail a handful of Israeli Arabs for allegedly trying to spread Islamic State ideology and to ban and outlaw the northern branch of the Islamic Movement (Janahat Shamaly al Harka al Islamiyya) in Israel. The risk is that a widespread and indiscriminate crackdown on Palestinians close to Islamist movements, including non-terrorist ones, could, conversely strengthen in a spectacular way the support for the same movements and put local tensions out of control.