

# Israel's Imagined Role in the Syrian Civil War

Tha'er al-Nashef and Ofir Winter

Since its establishment in 1948, Israel has often figured in Arab political discourse in the context of conspiracies, intrigues, and plots, along the lines of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Half a century ago, Yehoshafat Harkabi noted the popular sentiment that cast the Zionist movement as a satanic organization that, while exploiting its vast economic resources and global media domination, was intent on gradually seizing control of the Arab sphere and then of the rest of the world.<sup>1</sup> Over the years, these perceptions took deep root, and with the encouragement of various Arab regimes, became self-evident truths that were hardly questioned. The regional upheaval of recent years somewhat marginalized the conflict with Israel in Arab discourse, but paradoxically, this very fact stressed that the basic suspicion of Israel remained even when viewed apart from the Palestinian issue. As Esther Webman has pointed out, the Arab Spring gave new life to the conspiracy theorists who accused the Jews of all internal crises in the Arab sphere. Competing political forces in the countries that experienced revolutions accused their opponents of cooperating with Israel and labeled them “Jews,” a metaphor for villains hostile to Arab and Muslim societies. Ascribing responsibility for the disasters in the Arab world to Israel became a conceptual tool to explain the regional upheaval.<sup>2</sup>

The conspiracy theories involving Israel were especially prominent in the context of the civil war in Syria, even though from the outset Israel adopted the stance of a bystander, stressing publicly its policy of non-intervention beyond the scope of its predefined security red lines.<sup>3</sup> However, the intra-Syrian and the wider Arab discourse read Israel's neutral position

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very differently. Rival parties attributed to Israel key roles in the outbreak of the war, its development, and its extended duration, and by means of contradictory conspiracy theories presented Israeli policy as actively and intentionally serving their enemies. The Assad regime called the rebellion “a Zionist conspiracy to weaken the resistance axis” and dubbed the rebels “Israel’s servants”; opposition groups accused Israel of being responsible for the survival of the Assad regime; the Islamic State described the Assad regime as the bulwark protecting Israel from its onslaught; and rivals of the Islamic State said that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was actually a Jewish agent of the Mossad seeking to sow destruction and anarchy in Syria and other regional states so as to make it easier for Israel to dominate over them.

The conspiracy theories have contradictory ramifications for their composers and audience: for the Syrian actors, presenting the civil war as an Israeli plot serves political propaganda functions, but negatively affects their ability to examine the fundamental problems afflicting their country and identify genuine solutions that could help alleviate them; for Israel, its presentation as an all-powerful force reinforces its deterrence, but at the same time tarnishes its image in the region and becomes an obstacle that impedes productive and realistic relations with Syrian actors with whom it shares similar interests and common enemies.

### **The Assad Regime and the “Hebrew Spring” Theory**

For decades, the Syrian Bath regime cultivated, disseminated, and planted conspiracy theories and exploited official state propaganda mechanisms to link its political opponents with Israel. After the Hama revolt in the early 1980s, then-President Hafez al-Assad accused Israel of supplying money and arms to the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood so as to destabilize the “resistance regime.” Government propaganda publications, such as *The Muslim Brotherhood: Dubious Beginnings and Dark History*, claimed that the family roots of Hassan al-Banna, the founder of the movement, lay in the Jewish communities of Egypt and Morocco. The rebels were accused of receiving their operational plans from the Israeli intelligence services so that Israel could realize its vision of “greater Israel.” Every morning for years, millions of Syrian schoolchildren were made to chant, “We swear to battle imperialism, Zionism, and reactionism, and smash their vile tool – the traitorous gang of the Muslim Brotherhood.”<sup>4</sup>

As was the case during the elder Assad’s regime, so too in the time of his son: as soon as the unrest began in 2011, the Syrian regime began spreading

conspiracy theories that accused Israel of fomenting the protests and described the opposition as Zionist agents. Throughout the civil war, such theories have served the regime in five different ways: one, they justified the use of disproportionate force against non-violent demonstrators and the recourse to warfare methods that included chemical weapons, explosives-laden barrels against civilians, sieges, and starvation; two, claims about external Israeli conspiracies allowed the regime to explain its utter failure in containing the internal crisis; three, the conspiracy theories allowed the regime to blame Israel for the human disaster in Syria while denying its own responsibility for the hundreds of thousands of dead, the millions of refugees and displaced people, the ruin of cities, and the destruction of national infrastructures; four, the conspiracy theories helped the regime tarnish the reputation of its enemies by describing them as servants of “the Zionist enemy” and casting doubt on their loyalty to the hegemonic core values of the nation; and five, the conspiracy theories were meant to inspire the Syrian public to rally around the regime in its effort to foil “the Zionist plot” and defeat “its proxies” in Syria.

Already from the outset of the uprising in March 2011, the Syrian regime claimed that the revolt was a Zionist plot to sow anarchy, spark riots, and bring Syria to civil war, all in order to redraw the Syrian map and uproot the last stronghold of “Arab resistance.” Only one week after the popular demonstrations began in Daraa, the official Syrian news agency cited “an official source” as saying that external elements were trying to incite Syrian citizens against the regime by sending false telephone messages about massacres in the city. According to this source, “More than a million recorded messages were sent [to Daraa residents] from outside Syria, especially Israel, instructing rioters to use mosques as their bases of operations.”<sup>5</sup> Senior Syrian figures, including presidential political and media advisor Buthayna Shaban, have on multiple occasions described regime opponents as “vile terrorists” who made “a full organic alliance with global Zionism in order to destroy the region,” serve Israel’s interests, and take their orders from the Zionist state.<sup>6</sup> In August 2015, Bashar al-Assad himself declared that the terrorists are “the real tool of Israel [in Syria]” and that “if we want to stand against Israel, we must stop its tools inside Syria and defeat them.” When speaking of the occasional

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military attacks in Syria attributed to Israel, he pointed his finger at the rebels, saying that “Israel’s audacity in [attacking in] Syria stems, above all, from the fact that there are those willing to cooperate with Israel and accept medical care in its hospitals, and those who have the gall to openly praise Israel in the social media for bombing their own country.”<sup>7</sup>

The Syrian regime mouthpieces have placed full responsibility on Israel and the United States for the state of affairs in Arab countries following the non-violent protests that began in Tunisia in late 2010. In a play on words, the “Arab Spring” soon became the “Hebrew Spring,” activated by Israeli and US intelligence agencies with the backing of the global Jewish community. The institutional conspiracy theories were collected in a book published in 2015 by Muhammad al-Hurani, chairman of the Arab Writers’ Association in Damascus, called *The Role of Israel and Its Allies in Arab Rebellions: Syria as a Case Study*. The book claims that Arab revolts were meant to fulfill the Zionist vision of the new Middle East and extricate the region from Arab national control by fanning the flames of ethnic, national, tribal, and religious conflicts among Arabs in general and the citizens of Arab countries in particular. According to al-Hurani, the plot, formed in the shadow of a forum held in Doha in February 2006, was woven by former US President Bill Clinton, former National Security Advisor and then-Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, founder of the Albert Einstein Institution Gene Sharp, and French-Jewish intellectual Bernard-Henri Lévy. At the heart of the plot lies a secret three-way pact among Israel, Turkey, and the Islamic State, intent on destroying Syria, undermining the stability of the Arab world, dismantling Arab armies, and destabilizing Arab national security.<sup>8</sup>

### **The Syrian Opposition and the “Israeli-Iranian Alliance”**

Many Syrian opposition groups are also possessed by conspiracy theories involving Israel, though from the opposite perspective. The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood has for decades tried to plant the idea that the survival of the Assad regime is a direct consequence of a historic strategic alliance whereby the Bath regime agreed to cooperate with Israel colonialist policy. In this narrative, the elder Assad was selected to serve as commander of the Syrian air force by none other than Israeli spy Eli Cohen, and from there, rising through the ranks of the Defense Ministry, ultimately reached the republic’s presidency. He “sold” the Golan Heights to Israel in the Six Day War as part of secret understandings made under the auspices

of the British and US intelligence services, and committed Syria to keep the peace along Israel's northern borders. In exchange, he was rewarded with Syria's highest office as well as \$70 million. And in response to the institutional conspiracy theories about Hassan al-Bana's Jewish heritage, the Muslim Brotherhood countered with "the Jewish roots" of Michel Aflaq, the founder of the Bath party.<sup>9</sup>

Similar conspiracy theories were revived in recent years. A popular claim in Syrian opposition circles is that the Syrian president is the "loyal lapdog" of the State of Israel. According to this narrative, the Syrian regime and Israel are partners in a dirty deal: Assad will destroy Syria and strengthen Israeli security, and in return, Israel will provide an insurance policy for the unhindered continuation of his presidency. Theories about Israeli support for Assad and his regime serve the opposition in three ways: one, they cast the regime that parades its commitment to "resistance" to Israel as betraying the interests of the Syrian people and the Arab and Islamic *ummah*; two, "the evil, titanic intrigues" of Israel are an excuse for the Syrian opposition's inability to attain a decision on the battlefield and enlist the world in decisive action to replace the regime and its leader; and finally, they divert attention away from the charge that the revolution has failed to achieve its goals due to internal strife, corruption, and radicalization among the ranks of the Syrian opposition, placing the blame instead on the ultimate external object, Israel, which ostensibly bears definitive culpability for stopping any political arrangement in Syria and prolonging the humanitarian disaster there.

These conspiracy theories have been disseminated by a host of Syrian opposition elements, especially in the Islamist and left wing factions. The official line adopted by the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, the main umbrella organization of the rebels, has defined the Assad regime as Israel's covert ally, defending its border while spouting belligerent rhetoric, and serving Israel's desire to destroy Syria and harm the Syrian people.<sup>10</sup> This description is usually attended by the assertion that the international community's negligence in promoting a political settlement to the Syrian crisis is a direct consequence of Israeli pressure. For example, in a December 2015 interview, Zuhayr Salim, the official spokesman of the Muslim Brotherhood, said that

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“the world has not yet found an alternative [to the Assad regime] because it has protected the Golan Heights border for forty years and allowed the Zionists to enjoy its land and water without interference.”<sup>11</sup>

Syrian journalist Faysal al-Qasim, the moderator of al-Jazeera’s flagship program “The Opposite Direction,” reflected the prevalence of this conspiratorial line of thinking even within the liberal camp of the opposition. In one essay he spoke of a “close alliance” between Israel and the Arab regimes surrounding it, first and foremost Syria, which thwarted the democratic revolutions of the Arab Spring. According to al-Qasim, Israel for years prevented the ouster of the Arab dictators from power; in exchange, they protected Israel from the Arab people, left their own nations backwards politically, socially, economically, scientifically, and industrially, and ensured Israel’s continued total superiority over them. Similarly, given the regional upheavals, Israel gave its neighbors a choice between “accepting the authority of military dictatorship, such as the Assad regime” or “Israeli action to destroy its neighboring countries, expel their people, and set them back by decades – all of this, of course, by means of its agents, i.e., the Arab armies and their generals.”<sup>12</sup> In another essay, al-Qasim claimed that the key to understanding the weak stance of the United States and Russia toward the crimes committed by the Assad regime lies in Israeli interests. After all, “any child knows that Israel sets US policy in the Middle East, not the US

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State Department...Therefore, the United States is satisfied with Russia’s involvement in Syria as long as it gets the green light from Israel.” Furthermore, “it is well known that the Russian-Israeli alliance is ten times stronger than the strategic alliance with Russia flaunted by the ‘resistance’ front,” because of the influence immigrants from Russia wield in Israeli politics.<sup>13</sup>

Some of the originators of the conspiracy theories have let their imaginations roam even further afield, reading the suppression of the popular uprising in Syria as an Israeli-Iranian plot. Yihya al-Aridi, a Syrian journalist formerly associated with the Assad regime who defected to the opposition in the early months of the revolt, noted the “organic connection” and “strategic coordination” on Syria between Israel and Iran under the guise of extreme hostility. In his opinion, the basis for this hidden

cooperation is the similarity of religious foundations and a congruent interest to expand at the expense of the Arab states. Al-Aridi enumerated a long list of “evidence” for his thesis: the most important rabbis in Israel are Iranians from Isfahan; former Israeli President Moshe Katzav was born in Iran and has a close personal relationship with Khamenei; Jewish pilgrims visit the graves of Benjamin, Esther, Mordechai, Daniel, and Habakkuk in Iran; Iran is accorded holy status by Jews; more than 60 percent of those serving in the IDF are of Iranian descent; Israeli investments in Iran are worth over \$40 billion; more than 200 Jewish companies have commercial ties with Iran; Israel provided arms to Iran during its war with Iraq; and Israel has never known as much peace and quiet and stability as it has since Khomeini’s revolution.<sup>14</sup>

Statements by Israeli politicians and security personnel, most of them retired, have been used by Syrian oppositionists as clear evidence validating their various conspiracy theories, whereby Israel supports the Assad regime in spite of the Syrian people’s desire for change. Among those cited are: Shaul Mofaz who, while serving as chair of the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, said that “the more the final death of the Assad regime approaches, the more the threat to Israel rises”;<sup>15</sup> Dan Haloutz, former IDF chief of staff, who said that Israel prefers Assad’s rule to his replacement by radical Islamists;<sup>16</sup> former Mossad chief Efraim Halevy, who wrote an essay in which he called Assad “Israel’s man in Damascus,” and noted with approval the peace and quiet on the Golan for the past 40 years;<sup>17</sup> and Israel’s former Washington Ambassador Michael Oren, who testified that Israel was the first to suggest dismantling the chemical stockpiles in Assad’s army. According to one conspiracy theory, the suggestion of this idea was meant to help Israel’s Syrian ally escape the US military threat. According to a different version, it expressed Israel’s concern lest the chemical weapons fall into the hands of the new Syrian regime, which would not be loyal to it.<sup>18</sup>

### **The Islamic State and the Jewish Caliph**

The conspiracy theories surrounding Israel’s role in the Syrian civil war are often a double-edged sword, because those who plant them easily turn from accusers into accused. This was the fate of the Islamic State, which describes Syria as Israel’s “first line of defense,” its ally, and servant operating against the interests of believing Muslims. This narrative both sneers at the secular president who is lax in observing the commandment

of jihad against Israel, and heralds the greater glory of the Islamic State as a military force dedicated to this mission, framing Syria as the “entrance gate” to Palestine on the way to the liberation of Jerusalem. In its publications, the Islamic State lays down an orderly battle plan: it is first necessary to defeat the “close enemy,” i.e., the heretical Arab rulers in Syria and the other Arab states, topple their regimes, and destroy their armies; later, there will be a direct military confrontation with the “far enemy,” which includes the Jewish state.<sup>19</sup>

The Islamic State’s support for prioritizing the struggle for Syria over the struggle for Palestine has aroused the criticism of rival forces, which have accused the Islamic State of neglecting the Palestinian issue. It has also given rise to the development of anti-jihadist conspiracy theories, whereby Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the self-appointed caliph of the Islamic State, is a Jewish Mossad agent operating at Israel’s behest. This bizarre plot twist, spread by Islamic State enemies in Syria and elsewhere, serves two goals: one, it helps mitigate the extreme theological and moral dissonance between the barbaric acts of the Islamic State and its use of Islam as its rallying cry, saying that despite the Islamic symbols displayed by the Islamic State and the thousands of young Muslims streaming to its ranks, it in no way represents the spirit of Islam and in fact operates contrary to the tenets of the religion; and two, it reframes the perception of reality through the familiar lens of the regional order in which Israel is the demonic enemy and the Syrians and Arabs the victims of its intrigues.

The conspiracy theory about al-Baghdadi’s alleged Jewish origins has appeared in countless websites, social media, Syrian publications, and the Arab press. It began making the media rounds in August 2014 and cited dubious sources, some of which were Iranian, with accompanying “before” and “after” pictures ostensibly displaying the original identity of the Jewish caliph. According to the most popular version, documents leaked by Edward Snowden show that al-Baghdadi was nothing but a Mossad agent named Simon (or Shimon) Elliott who, in the name of the Islamic State, promoted a three-stage Zionist plot – first penetrating the countries threatening Israel, then destroying them, and finally seizing control of the Middle East – designed to fulfill the vision of “greater Israel.” Eventually, this conspiracy theory developed in different directions. Several articles pointed to the “similarities” and “common denominators” between the Islamic State and Israel: the use of foreign mercenaries, the commission of war crimes against innocent civilians, the promotion of a vision based



on religious zealotry, land seizure from the legal owners, the redrawing of the region's maps, and more.<sup>20</sup> As a Saudi columnist concluded: "Even if al-Baghdadi isn't personally from a Jewish family, there is no doubt that his actions and declarations are religiously and conceptually Jewish and Zionist."<sup>21</sup>

Moreover, the equation of al-Baghdadi with Jew and the Islamic State with Zionism is meant to damage the religious and political legitimacy of the calls for renewing the caliphate at the expense of the modern Arab nation states. For example, an article in a Lebanese newspaper closely associated with Hezbollah identified the parallels between the caliphate and the promised land, and between Jewish fundamentalism and Salafi jihadism.<sup>22</sup> An article in a Jordanian government newspaper noted that just as Israel relied on its Jewish religious nature to appeal to Jews to immigrate to Palestine, so the Islamic State borrows Islamic religious clothing to draw in Muslims.<sup>23</sup> Sheikh Abd al-Aziz b. Abdallah Aal al-Sheikh, the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, declared that the direct belligerent threats Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi explicitly made against Israel in December 2015 are "a lie, because he and his men are nothing but [Israel's] soldiers."<sup>24</sup>

## Conclusion and Recommendations

A close look at the Syrian, and sometimes also the wider Arab political discourse, shows the vast gulf between the policy of non-intervention Israel adopted on the Syrian civil war and the imagined roles ascribed to Israel by popular conspiracy theories since the war started. Competing forces have used these theories in order to vilify their opponents, shirk their own responsibility for their failures, and harmonize the dissonances that occurred following the shocking regional developments since late 2010. The political discourse described herein relies on a plot-oriented mindset that is part of the Arab cultural and political heritage that tends to read every Israeli utterance, move, and gesture in absurd conspiratorial contexts.

It is fed by a flawed, distorted interpretation of Israel's policy in the Syrian and Arab media, and by vague and contradictory messages put out by official Israel and unofficial Israeli spokespeople since the war broke out.

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The victims of conspiracy theories are first of all Syrians who, because of them, cannot see the political reality around them for what it is and adopt a rational, sober perspective that doesn't blame Israel for Syria's fundamental ills. Several Syrians have spoken out publicly against the conspiratorial discourse,<sup>25</sup> the most prominent of whom is Kamal al-Labwani, an independent opponent of the regime who called on his countrymen to view reality without the distorted lenses offered by conspiracy theories. He found a direct correlation between the revolution's success against the Assad regime and the undermining of the dogmatic, deceitful, ignorant mindset whose core is "the Zionist conspiracy" crediting magical power to Israel that "verges on idolatry and heresy." According to al-Labwani, accusing Israel of the crimes committed in Syria absolves the real criminals of liability and provides them with immunity. On the other hand, adopting a rational mindset would allow the Syrian people to advance critical processes of self-examination and soul-reckoning, and ultimately embark on the "real, practical" path toward pulling themselves out of the morass and rebuilding their country. If they do so, he argues, Syrians will realize that peaceful relations with Israel, which will in no way impinge on the national rights of the Palestinians or the Syrians, may help resuscitate Syria as a democratic, prosperous country and its boarding the train of civilization.<sup>26</sup>

Al-Labwani, who has forged relationships with civilian and political figures in Israel and openly visited the country on two occasions,<sup>27</sup> has through his own actions charted a possible course for eliminating suspicion, shattering preconceptions, and breaking the barriers of fear and ignorance rampant among Syrians when it comes to Israel. A dialogue and encounter between Syrians and Israelis, even if initially carried out at the popular and civil levels, may help free people from the shackles of conspiracy theories, first among individuals and then among groups. Such interactions could allow Syrians to understand Israel's essential interests better, learn its strengths, limitations, and fears, and prevent the formation of surreal conclusions about Israel's role in Syria in particular and the Middle East in general. In such encounters, participants would be able to examine the demonic perceptions in a critical manner, see the humane face of the other side of the border, and perhaps even develop some empathy for its concerns. The accusations of treason automatically hurled at Syrians who want to get to know Israel and its citizens in an unmediated fashion are an unfortunate product of conspiracy theories as they perpetuate this pathological mindset.

For its part, Israel's position vis-à-vis the conspiracy theories is a function of contradictory interests. On the one hand, Israel's deterrence in the Syrian sphere is strengthened with its enemies portraying it as a powerful, intrigue-oriented, omnipotent entity. This has even prompted some Syrian opposition members to approach Israel, whether openly or secretly, as they overestimate Israel's role in the Syrian crisis and its ability to manipulate Western powers in shaping the future of the Middle East to conform to its own agenda. On the other hand, deterrence based on conspiracy theories does not discriminate between obvious enemies and potential friends. This obstacle is particularly troubling given the presence of local Syrian actors in southern Syria who have interests similar to Israel's, sharing a fundamental desire to weaken Iranian and Salafist jihadist influences along the Golan Heights border, and might become suitable candidates for coordination and cooperation. However, the conspiracy theories make it difficult for Israel to forge realistic relations with these actors and take advantage of the opportunities to work with them toward the promotion of common goals.

A series of steps could help Israel lower the level of hostility toward it and replace its conspiratorial image in the eyes of its Syrian neighbors. These include expanding the channels of humanitarian aid; encouraging mutual interactions between Syrians and Israelis; publicly expressing support for the establishment of representative democracy in Syria; and taking a staunch – if only moral rather than practical – stance decrying the war crimes committed there. While such steps cannot be expected to generate an immediate reversal of Israel's image in Syrian public opinion and erase decades of institutional propaganda about its intrigues, and might even be interpreted as more “proof” of Israel's deceit, a credible and consistent Israeli policy in this direction could, with time, bear fruit and help Israel project a new, authentic, and more balanced image. Replacing the conspiratorial image of Israel with the image of a friendly state seeking good neighborly relations will serve Israel's broader long term strategic interests, which go much beyond deterrence of its enemies. This is the time for both Syrians and Israelis to quash existing conspiracy theories, which for too long have overshadowed any possible relationship and their ability to shape the future together.

## Notes

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