

Tel Aviv Pays Al Qaeda Fighters' Salaries: The Syrian War's Worst Kept Secret That Could Become Israel's Nightmare

Yes, Israel is supporting Syrian rebels, but this goes beyond cash and aid: Israel hopes the rebels will serve as a buffer against Hezbollah and a resurgent Assad, a strategy that could easily backfire

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Featured image: An Israeli soldier stands atop a tank on the Golan Heights (Source: [EIPA](#))

Earlier this month, the Wall Street Journal published an [interview](#) with a Syrian rebel commander and half a dozen fighters, who confirmed the worst kept secret of the Syrian conflict: Israel is directly aiding Syrian rebel factions with both humanitarian and financial aid.

Israel's involvement "is much deeper and more coordinated than previously known and entails direct funding of opposition fighters near its border for years," the report said.

"Israel stood by our side in a heroic way," Moatasem al-Golani, a spokesman for the rebel group Fursan al-Joulani, told the Wall Street Journal. "We wouldn't have survived without Israel's assistance."

According to the report, Israel provides \$5,000 each month to Fursan al-Joulani – or Knights of the Golan – which it uses to pay fighters' salaries and purchase weapons and ammunition for its campaigns against the government in the Syrian Golan.

I had never heard of Fursan al-Joulani before. An [online site dedicated to documenting the Syrian conflict](#) describes a "Fouj al Joulani" as a Golani militia allied with the Assad regime and dedicated to protecting Druze villages in the region. Though the names sound similar, they are unlikely to be the same group, especially considering Fouj al-Joulani's commander, Majd Himoud, is an implacable Israeli enemy, whom it has attempted to assassinate twice.

With approximately 400 fighters, Fursan al-Joulani would appear to be a local militia. It undoubtedly has an affiliation with a larger Islamist group like al-Nusra or al-Qaeda, but I haven't been able to determine that. The Journal makes clear that it isn't affiliated with the Free Syrian Army, which increases the likelihood that Fursan al-Joulani is an Islamist group. It's also quite possible there are other groups, perhaps numerous ones, which Israel is aiding in a similar fashion.

On 22 June, Yediot Achronot's chief military-security correspondent, Alex Fishman, [confirmed](#) the Journal's report and explored the motivation behind it:

"A not insignificant portion of the Syrian rebels in the Golan have adopted the extreme Salafist ideology of Jabhat al-Nusra, an offshoot of al-Qaeda...The Israeli view is that the religious extremist views of the Syrian rebels are less relevant [than their capacity to combat Israel's enemies - Iran and Hezbollah]. Israel believes that what interests them [the rebels] above all is survival; and that it's possible to buy their loyalty through material aid which helps guarantee their own security.

"The Journal article gives one the impression that Israel doesn't always examine closely the views of its allies as long as it gets from them a useful security exchange. According to Israel's perspective, the enemy of my enemy is my friend. And if Jabhat al-Nusra fights against IS in the southern Golan, and each of them in turn fights against Hezbollah and the Syrian army in the Deraa region - all the better."

This exchange-based mode of interaction may work for Israel in the short run, but the history of the region is replete with such temporary alliances which quickly devolved into outright hostility when circumstances changed. A former ally can easily and quickly become one's worst enemy.

And in fact the goods, experience and skills transmitted during the alliance permit the former ally to become an even more formidable foe (just think the Mujahadeen-Taliban in Afghanistan). Any number of actors inside Syria from IS to al-Nusra could at some future time decide that Israel is a riper target than their former enemies. This short-term alliance of convenience could easily become a nightmarish [Golem](#) of Israel's own making.

What Israel wants

These new reports confirm [several years](#) of [my own reporting](#) which have [documented extensive](#) Israeli [intervention](#) in the Syrian conflict, including numerous air strikes against Hezbollah and Iranian arms convoys, the shooting down of a Syrian jet which had strayed a few metres into Israeli-occupied Golan, assassinations of Hezbollah and Iranian commanders, equipment drops to al-Nusra units allied with al-Qaeda, and direct intelligence briefings between IDF officers and rebel commanders.



An Israeli Merkava tank maneuvers during a drill in the Israeli annexed Golan Heights near the border with Syria on April 24 2013. Israel's Brigadier General Itai Brun, head of research and analysis in the army's military intelligence division, said that the Damascus regime was guilty of using chemical weapons against rebel fighters. (Source: [MENAHEM KAHANA](#))

All this has belied the [repeated false claims](#) in the media (including in this WSJ article) that Israel is a neutral party to the conflict – which is what Israel would have the world believe. However, it is deeply involved in it and seeks to weaken or topple Bashar al-Assad, because Israel's arch enemies, Hezbollah and Iran, are his chief allies.

I expect that Israeli escalation will continue since Assad and his allies are in the ascendant. They are routing IS in eastern Syria and, once they finish, it's very possible Assad could turn his attention to the west, including the Golan, to consolidate his territorial gains. That is when the true test will come.

Israel wants a divided Syria. It wants a country riven by ethnic and religious disputes so that it can dominate the Golan and protect its northern border. How far is it willing to go to prevent Assad from reasserting full control there?

Israel has had numerous opportunities to negotiate a peace deal with Bashar al-Assad and, even earlier, with his father. It turned away from each of these efforts. It does not want an agreement with Assad.

To avoid an internal political fight with nationalist forces over returning the Golan, Israel's right-wing government prefers maintaining its illegal conquest of the Golan and the status quo. To do so, it must continue to sow discord and military adventures in the Golan.

Shot across the bows

Numerous ominous escalations in the Syria conflict have occurred in recent days. Iran [announced](#) that it had fired missiles from its territory to attack IS positions in eastern Syria. It would mean that Iranian forces had advanced technically in order to fire its weapons and hit targets hundreds of miles away. The last time it attacked an enemy beyond its borders in this way was during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s.

Anonymous Israeli military sources claimed that each of the seven missiles that were fired missed their target, with several not even landing in Syria. However, aside from unnamed sources, the Israelis didn't offer any proof of their claims either. It would be in Israel's interest to spread a spurious claim debunking the military prowess of its chief regional rival.

Iran explained that the missile attack was revenge for a recent terror attack [by Iranian Kurds](#) in Tehran for which IS has taken credit. Since Iran has also blamed Saudi Arabia for the attack, which killed 17, mostly civilians, the missile attack is a thinly veiled warning against the Saudis: "just as we can reach IS in Syria, we can reach you in Riyadh as well."

Or as Al Jazeera's correspondent said:

"And, of course, we need to see this in the wider geopolitical context: it will be very interesting what the reaction is going to be from countries such as Saudi Arabia, the United States and Israel, because Iran is saying it can retaliate and it will."

On 18 June, a US fighter jet [downed a Syrian war plane](#) in the Raqqa countryside which had bombed a target close to US-backed Syrian rebel forces. The US military claims these were Syrian Democratic Forces (whom Syrian regime troops had routed from the city), while the regime claims they were IS. US air power also [shot down at least two pro-regime drones](#).

Fear of Assad victory

All this comes on the heels of Assad's growing success in taking back territory that had been formerly held by IS. The US, in attacking Syrian war planes, is attempting to stymie Assad's efforts. This means, in effect, that US policy largely mirrors that of Israel. The Trump administration, as well, appears not to want a united Syria, rather a Syria divided up into ethnic cantons.

Assad's Russian ally reacted with fury to the US attack and [cancelled critical deconfliction efforts](#) meant to keep the various powers fighting in Syria from accidentally attacking each other (US officials have since [said](#) that a deconfliction hotline is still in operation). Further, Russia announced that any more US attacks on the Syrian air force might result in direct conflict with Russia.

All this is part of a US escalation of its own involvement which has included bombing a Syrian government military convoy, [a mosque](#), and now this. Clearly, the Trump administration is directing our military to flex its muscles in this arena.

The problem is that this is a very crowded field of battle and there are many parties involved, including Russia. The plane we shot down was a Russian Sukhoi bomber, for example. All it will take is one split-second mistake for this to turn into a major bloodbath which could suck the major parties in far deeper than they prefer to go.

The new alliance

Syria is only part of a wider playing field of conflict in the region where Sunni forces, financed by Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, are arrayed against Shia power under the auspices of Iran and Hezbollah.

As the Sunni coalition continues to lose sway in Syria, this rivalry has moved to newer and even more dangerous places. The ultimatum given to Qatar to end its relations with Iran and Hezbollah is an example of how the ripple effects of Syria could send a tsunami throughout the Middle East.

A growing alliance between Saudi Arabia and Israel adds yet another combustible element to the mix. They both appear to be itching for a fight with Iran. When they were separate parties, the danger of such a conflict was less.

With them uniting against a common foe, the fetters are considerably loosened, not to mention that the [ascension of a young, ambitious, hot-headed Saudi crown prince](#) who's shown himself only too willing to embroil his kingdom in foreign interventions adds even more danger to the scenario.

Richard Silverstein writes the Tikun Olam blog, devoted to exposing the excesses of the Israeli national security state. His work has appeared in Haaretz, the Forward, the Seattle Times and the Los Angeles Times. He contributed to the essay collection devoted to the 2006 Lebanon war, A Time to Speak Out (Verso) and has another essay in the upcoming

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