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**“The Devil We Know” Revisited:
Israeli Thinking on the Future of the Assad Regime
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On May 17, 2013, *The Times* of London quoted “Israeli intelligence sources” who argued that “an intact, but weakened, Assad regime would be preferable for the country and for the whole troubled region.” The paper went on to quote “a senior Israeli intelligence officer” in the north of the country: “Better the devil we know than the demons we can only imagine if Syria falls into chaos and the extremists from across the Arab world gain a foothold there.” We do not know who the Israeli sources were, but the *Times* story provides a window into the deliberations and disagreements in Israel’s national security establishment as to the country’s priorities with regard to Syria.

The expression “the devil we know” was famously used by former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in 2005 when he explained to President George W. Bush why he opposed the US President’s desire to topple Bashar al-Assad. President Bush became hostile to the Syrian President who supported the rebellion in Iraq against the US occupation and opened his borders to jihadi infiltrators and military equipment in support of the rebellion. While not enamored of the Syrian President, Sharon thought that from Israel’s perspective it was preferable to have a familiar regime in Damascus rather than face an uncertain future and the prospect of the Muslim Brotherhood, the only organized opposition in Syria, taking over the country. Assad was Iran’s ally and provided it with a land bridge to Hizbollah in Lebanon and supported Hamas and Islamic Jihad. But he did maintain a quiet border in the Golan Heights and inherited his father’s reputation as a familiar, and on the whole, predictable enemy. Throughout his political career and his five years as prime minister, Sharon opposed the idea of a settlement with Syria and withdrawal from the Golan that was part and parcel of such a settlement.

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Israel's perspective changed in 2006 after the Second Lebanon War. For Prime Minister Olmert, who succeeded Sharon, the war demonstrated the severity of the threat posed to Israel by the Iran-Syria-Hizbollah axis. The conclusion he drew, with the support of the defense establishment, was that it was a high priority for Israel to dismantle this axis and to do it primarily by pulling the Syrian brick out of the Iranian dominated wall. To this end, in early 2007 he began a Turkish mediated effort to explore the prospect of an Israeli-Syrian settlement. The negotiation lasted until its collapse in December 2008, although it was temporarily suspended in September 2007 when according to foreign sources Israel destroyed the North Korean-built Syrian nuclear reactor in al-Kibar. It could be argued that there was no point in negotiating a settlement with a Syrian president capable of such radical action, but Olmert calculated that this was all the more reason to defuse the conflict with Syria. He and others were also impressed by the fact that Assad displayed maturity and self control when he refrained from retaliating after being humiliated by the attack.

Another Syrian-Israeli negotiation was conducted in 2010-2011, during the final two years of Benjamin Netanyahu's previous tenure, through mediators on behalf of the Obama administration. According to these mediators, this was a very serious negotiation, Netanyahu's public rejection of a withdrawal from the Golan Heights notwithstanding. The outbreak of the Syrian crisis in March 2011 put an end to this negotiation as well.

The Syrian crisis, which began as a series of demonstrations and developed into a brutal civil war and a sectarian conflict, transformed Israel's view of Assad and his regime. The Syrian civil war soon became a focal point of regional and international conflict. On the regional level, it became a conflict between Iran and its adversaries. Iran and its proxy, Hizbollah, have invested huge efforts to protect this strategic asset. Iran's rivals such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar, and Jordan have extended support to the opposition. Internationally, Russia, and to a lesser extent China, are providing the Assad regime with a defensive shield in the Security Council and other forums. Russia also continues to provide Assad's regime with sophisticated weapon systems. For Russia, protecting its investment in Syria and preventing it from falling into the US orbit is a high priority.

As a neighbor with a high stake in Syria's future, Israel must decide on its own preferences. Early on, Israel chose a passive stance. Whatever its preferences, it calculated, correctly, that its ability to affect the outcome of the civil war was limited. It has no influence on Syria's domestic politics and if it were to extend any support to the opposition it would play into the regime's hands. Assad and his spokesmen argued from the outset that this was not a genuine domestic rebellion but a conspiracy hatched from the outside, and the regime would seize the opportunity to embarrass the opposition by pointing to any Israeli link or support. At the same time, Israel made it clear that it had its own red lines vis-à-vis Syria. It announced that it would interrupt the transfer of

sophisticated, game changing weapon systems to the hands of terrorist groups, be they Hizbollah or the jihadi groups that have come to play an important role in the Syrian armed opposition. In January 2013, Israel reportedly destroyed a cache of missiles in the Damascus area en route to Lebanon. In order not to embarrass the regime and to minimize the risk of retaliation, Israel took no credit for this action. But in May 2013, Israel acted twice and in a manner that could not be secret. Clearly, Iran, Syria, and Hizbollah were upping the ante. So was Russia, which is about to provide Syria with sophisticated S-300 missiles whose entry into the Syrian-Lebanese arena is unacceptable to Israel. Israel may find itself in a cycle of violence in which it acts again and again against arms transfers via Syria to Hizbollah, eventually triggering a response, whether by Syria or by Hizbollah. It was in this context that an Israel official stated last week to the *New York Times* that should Assad retaliate, Israel will topple his regime, meaning that the destruction of Assad's air force and armor by Israel would lead to the opposition victory. Be that as it may, Israel finds itself deeply involved in the regional and international conflict over Syria's future as well as in the question of the regime's future.

Indeed, there is a debate within the Israeli defense establishment as to the desirable outcome of the Syrian civil war. Some argue, in line of what was said to the *London Times*, that at the end of the day it is better for Israel that Assad remain in power, probably as a weakened ruler over part of the country. Their argument is that given the strength of the jihadi and Islamist elements among the militias fighting against the regime, a jihadi or Islamist takeover or a state of anarchy with jihadi elements free to launch terrorist activities is the most severe threat to Israel's security. Against this backdrop, Assad once again becomes "the devil we know." Others argue that the continuation of Assad's regime in the service of Iran and in close partnership with Hizbollah presents a graver threat to Israel's national security. They further argue that it is of course not desirable that jihadi groups take over Syria or parts of Syria, but that Syria is not the Sinai and Israel would be able to act if confronted with terrorist threats from Syria.

This latter school of thought is the more convincing. Bashar al-Assad demonstrated his ability to take radical dangerous actions when he built a nuclear reactor in league with North Korea. He demonstrated his willingness to brutalize his own population and use missiles and chemical weapons against it. He is now purely a tool in the service of Iran. This, however, does not mean that Israel should come out openly against Assad and the future of his regime. Israel's recent entanglement in the Russian-American conflict over the future of Syria is a negative development. While protecting its vital security interests, it should seek to return to the policy it pursued during most of the civil war, i.e., refrain to the best of its ability from being drawn into the crisis and into Syrian politics, and protect its vital security interests firmly, but cautiously and discretely.