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## **Considering a New Strategic Course**

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In a television interview in late September 2014, US President Barack Obama essentially admitted that the United States had underestimated the Islamic State's ability to operate and recruit new members, and overestimated the Iraqi army's ability to fight the organization. Indeed, within a short period of time – almost overnight – ISIS embarked on a path to institute a new world order and managed to position and brand itself as the savior of the Muslim *ummah* from the chains of the oppressive West. Contrary to the assessment of the intelligence community in both the United States and Israel, the organization succeeded in quickly expanding the area under its influence and increasing its recruitment, and it seems to be on the brink of further successes. The source of its power is its radical Islamic, anti-Shia, and anti-Western message. Even calling this message “nonsense,” as Obama did, reflects a flawed understanding of the potency of the enmity between the Sunni and Shiite camps in the Middle East and the attraction the organization poses, which allows it – alongside its brutal military force – to seize large swaths of territory and makes any attempt to confront it difficult.

The fact that US intelligence agencies failed to properly assess ISIS's potential power until well into the changed reality in the Levant should sound a loud wake-up call in Israel. For now, Israel is not at the top of the ISIS agenda or the priorities of similar outfits, but the country cannot allow itself the luxury of waiting for the potential threat to be realized in the form of ISIS or allied operatives turning their organized or sporadic attention to direct action against it. Israel must therefore reexamine some traditional strategic conventions.

New strategic insights should form on the basis of the possibility that the risk inherent in radical Sunni jihadist organizations will sooner or later be turned against Israel. Israel is liable to find itself having to cope with ISIS and allied factions just across the country's borders, such as in the Sinai Peninsula, Jordan, and the Syrian Golan Heights. Early worrisome signs of the effect of ISIS's militant message have already been detected in the West Bank and even within Israel proper. Therefore, Israel must update its

conceptual, intelligence, military, and political thinking so as to map the threat and identify a suitable response to the developing regional reality.

At the same time that Israel prepares itself intelligence-wise and operationally, the country must rethink its relations with various regional parties. Shiites in Iraq are under ISIS attack, and in Syria the organization is fighting Assad's army. Likewise Nasrallah, leader of Hizbollah which is fighting alongside Assad's army, views ISIS as a serious threat to his own organization in particular and to Shiites in general. The dramatic change occurring in the map of regional threats and targets justifies – even demands – an examination of new possibilities and options.

A key question concerns Israel's policy toward Bashar al-Assad's regime. Since the start of the Syrian civil war, and in light of the uncompromising cruelty shown by the regime in its fight for survival against the rebel factions, many in Israel's security establishment thought Israel should help topple the regime in the war-torn country. Others claimed that Assad's loss of control would lead to chaos in Syria and the entrenchment of jihadists on Israel's border, liable to create a threat with the potential for military entanglement, a la the Gaza Strip and the Sinai Peninsula. However, even without Assad's regime toppled and his army scattered, insurgent Jabhat al-Nusra forces are seizing control of parts of the Syrian Golan Heights near the Israeli border. Should this trend continue, Israel is liable to find itself under attack, directly or incrementally, by ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra, and/or other armed factions entrenching themselves in the region and filling the vacuum created by the retreat of Assad's army.

The downing of the Syrian airplane by Israel's aerial defenses on September 23, 2014 demonstrated the need for a different type of thinking. The plane, which had accidentally penetrated the airspace over the Golan Heights, was on its way to attack Jabhat al-Nusra targets. The downing of the plane was certainly in keeping with instructions whose original rationale is self-evident. But given that fundamental changes in Syria's power structure have occurred, and that it is equally obvious that the Syrian army has neither the inclination nor the ability to develop a military front against Israel, it is necessary to ask whether that rationale is still sweepingly valid requiring automatic operative continuity. In fact, downing the plane was self-detrimental to Israel's best interests.

Refreshing one's security concept is not a simple task, but Israel must undertake it, given the particularly complex regional changes. Israel must reassess its attitude toward sworn enemies. There is more than a little historical irony in the fact that Israel, a veteran of bitter ongoing conflict with the radical Shiite bloc, including Hizbollah, Iran, and the Alawite regime in Syria, now shares an interest with this radical bloc, also known as the axis of evil. As to stopping ISIS, Israel finds itself on the same side of the equation as some of the elements of that bloc, though not with the same degree of prominence or importance, and also has common ground with the pragmatic Arab states fighting radical

elements, whether Sunni or Shiite. Given this sensitive state of affairs, Israel must make the effort to wipe the slate of earlier preconceptions that have characterized its security policy for many years. Circumstances have changed and Israel's thinking must change accordingly.

It may be possible to identify ways of covert, passive coordination with the Assad regime and even with Hizbollah in order to fight the Sunni jihad. The way to formulate understandings on active cooperation, such as intelligence sharing, needs to be considered. Hostility to Israel is too deeply ingrained in the thinking of the Syrian regime and Hizbollah; any cooperation with Israel liable to come to light is impossible from their perspective. But Israel could help the struggle against the radical Sunni force by not interfering.

Another complex challenge facing Israel is finding a way to help the fight against the radical Sunni forces, indirectly and clandestinely, while avoiding damage to the necessary ongoing intelligence and operational efforts against threats to its security coming from the Shiite bloc. The fight against Hizbollah will continue in every sense: pursuing efforts to slow down the organization's military buildup, maintaining military deterrence, foiling the organization's attempt to demonstrate its commitment to fighting Israel via terrorist attacks as a response to accusations that fighting alongside Assad's forces represents a deviation from its *raison d'être*, and especially continuing efforts to keep incidents such as the recent incident in the Shab'a Farms sector from snowballing into full escalation. The political and diplomatic battle to foil Iran's completion of its nuclear program is also an ongoing task that cannot and should not be conceded. And there is hardly any need to say that Israel will continue to foil Iran's support for Hamas and the consequent military buildup in the Gaza Strip.

The dilemmas Israel faces after the changes of the last few years in the map of Middle East threats and struggles are far from simple. A common enemy does not suddenly make Israel and other hostile elements into friends. Nonetheless, one cannot ignore the fact that given shared challenges to Israel and its enemies, Israel is impelled to find common ground and ways to cooperate despite the ongoing hostility and conflict in order to decrease the risk that a threat currently posed to others will in the future be posed against it too. Automatic, inert thinking and action are liable to place Israel in a very tough security position on its borders and enhance the danger that conflicts in these areas will spill over onto Israeli soil. Downing the Syrian aircraft must be viewed as a warning sign: Israel can no longer afford to be a spectator on the sideline and react automatically and instinctively; rather, it must act on the basis of the idea that it must help – actively or by refraining from action – anyone fighting radical Sunni jihadists.