



## **How can Israel help the Syrian people?**

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The fact that Israel came into existence at the expense of a Palestinian state has been the cause of much hostility between Israel and its Arab neighbors and was the reason for many armed conflicts between them. However, the revolutions and armed struggles that have erupted across the Middle East in the last few years, including the Syrian civil war, have reshaped alliances across the region. These violent clashes have overshadowed the Palestinian refugee problem, which was created as a result of the establishment of the State of Israel.

While we do not welcome the outbreak of these violent upheavals, they have forced us to confront great difficulty but have also created an opportunity for us to overcome our hostility towards Israel and replace it with a commitment to strive for regional stability, peace and cooperation. The alignment of interests that has transpired as a result of this new reality has the capacity to gradually move us away from the hostility that defines our relationship. However, to achieve this, it is necessary that both sides possess an equal desire to contribute to the realization of that change.

Despite the fact that the Right of Return of both Palestinian refugees and those from the Golan Heights remains a problem which is difficult to solve, Israel should not be deterred from turning the page and promoting peace and stability with its neighbors. Over time, it will be possible to gradually smooth over many of the points of disagreement between us, even if they cannot be completely resolved.

The events that are unfolding in Syria today are premeditated and organized crimes against humanity perpetrated by regimes and countries that are competing between themselves over regional control and influence. Beyond stopping the killing, in the face of the tragedy of the Syrian people what is needed is the creation of security zones that will be able to house the refugees and allow them to remain in their homeland. This is far more preferable to granting political asylum to millions of refugees.

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Israel must denounce and condemn the crimes against humanity that are taking place in Syria. This is especially true in light of the fact that the Jewish people were the victims of such crimes and are well aware of the importance of international cooperation and humanitarian aid in such situations.

Israel does not have to open its borders to receive Syrian refugees. Such a move would only raise the public profile of the plight of the Palestinian refugees and their rights. What Israel should do is send humanitarian aid to the Syrian side of the border. Israel can also play an important diplomatic role in promoting a solution dictated by the international community that will end the war in Syria. Such an effort is especially necessary vis-à-vis the Russians, who are playing a central role in perpetuating the hostilities.

Israel could also help enforce a no-fly zone in southern Syria, similar to the situation in the north of the country. Such a development would be very important in light of the recent incidents in al-Suwayda in southern Syria. It would also help prevent the conflict from turning into a Sunni-Druze conflict, which could spill over into Israel. Additionally, Israel can help improve the living conditions of the Syrians who reside close to the Israeli-Syrian border. Such work can be done in partnership with neighboring Arab countries and has the added value of promoting cooperation between the Syrian and Israeli peoples without being dependent upon the positions of each country's government.

My message to the extremists in Israel is that they do not always have to focus on hostility and preparation for the next round of violence. Ideologies of war and hatred are gaining traction, but calls for peace, stability and cooperation can also be heard. If Israel conducts itself compassionately and with a sense of morality in the face of regional crises – even if these crises have no direct impact on Israel and its people – it will be able to emerge from the Arab world's "circle of conflict," even if only to a certain degree. The Jewish people have an interest to highlight their humane and humanitarian side, especially at this very sensitive time for the Syrian people. They should do so even if extremists try to counter them and argue otherwise.

Iran and Hezbollah are methodically and successfully working to create a substantial threat against Israel and its allies, to strengthen their hold on the Middle East, and to become the regional hegemons. They do so at the expense of the freedom of the various nations that live in the region, and at the expense of the ability of these nations to live alongside one another. Iran and Hezbollah manufacture lethal weapons, including at facilities in the Qalamoun Mountains (on the Syrian side of the Syria-Lebanon border). This is an area that they wish to turn into a Hezbollah sanctuary.

The Jewish and Arab peoples have a common security interest in confronting the aggressive and destructive behavior of the Iranian regime. This common denominator has the potential to help the parties overcome their previous disagreements. Cooperation on this issue, which must be based on shared values, norms and interests,

can contribute to solving many regional challenges, including the refugee crisis and the phenomenon of political and economic migration that we are now witnessing.

These issues have aggravated regional extremism and terror and are likely to only deteriorate further in light of the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East and as a result of the failure of three states in the region – Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. Under these conditions, there is a need for Israel to play a positive role in the region and to avoid hiding behind its standard hostility toward and suspicion of the Arab world. The perpetuation of hostility will not allow the creation of a better future for the generations that will follow. As the old saying goes: “If your neighbor is alright, you are alright”.

History is characterized by changes. Therefore, we must learn how to bury our disagreements in order to avoid bequeathing them to the generations that follow. We must prevent them from becoming everlasting. The Jewish people, which has had an historical presence in the Middle East, has the capacity to build relations of trust and cooperation with its neighbors. In so doing, it stands to reap benefits from the changing regional realities and the opportunities that have come about as a result of them.

The position of the Israeli Opposition, as represented first and foremost by MK Isaac Herzog, is very useful in my view. It encourages many on our side to view Israelis more positively. If the need to respect and uphold human rights and values were highlighted more often, many wars and conflicts could be avoided. If each side were to portray themselves more humanely, we could transition from hostility to cooperation and establish a new Middle East together.

At this terrible time, in the midst of the suffering and barbarism we are witnessing, we hope and yearn for messages of peace and humanity. This is the language that has the capacity to save our children who are being burned, strangled, drowned and starved, and to create hope for a better tomorrow.