Why Israel Is Giving Syrians Free Spaghetti (And Health Care)

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Articles & Testimony

As tensions escalate across the border, the IDF is trying to win over old enemies.

In the middle of the night in early 2013, seven injured Syrians dragged themselves to the border fence separating Syria from Israel, pleading for help. Israel, after deliberations that reached the highest levels of the military and government, decided to take in and treat the Syrians; they wouldn't have survived otherwise. What started with this one isolated event has, over four years later, expanded into a massive Israel Defense Forces operation providing thousands of Syrians across the border medical assistance, humanitarian aid, food and basic infrastructure. Israeli military officers are clear about the purpose of this largesse, dubbed the "Good Neighbor" policy: to assist desperate Syrians ravaged by years of civil war, and in the process stabilize the border region by showing this heretofore enemy population that Israel is not, in fact, the devil.

Since the Good Neighbor policy's creation in June 2016, the IDF has deepened and expanded its outreach to the Syrian side: According to official figures, more than 200 humanitarian operations have been conducted, 44 in the past month alone. On any given night, the IDF is active on multiple points on the Syrian frontier, interacting with locals on the other side. More recently, this has also come to include the establishment of a medical clinic beyond the heavily fortified border fence, in territory that while still legally (de facto) Israel, is for all practical purposes inside Syria. The IDF, however, doesn't operate the clinic; it only guarantees its security from afar. Rather, a little-known U.S. humanitarian NGO sent in volunteers to build and staff the place. U.S. citizens and devout Christians all, they believe they are doing God's work -- helping Israel by helping Syrians (and vice versa) -- on the very edge of the closest thing to a modern-day hell.

"Your neighbor could be closer to you than your brother," read the blue sign in Arabic taped to the pallet of dry spaghetti boxes. "Those closest to God treat their neighbors well," the sign went on, quoting from the hadith, or narrative of the Prophet Mohammed. The spaghetti filled most of one metal shipping container. On either side were

yet more containers brimming with boxes of baby formula and diapers, warm clothing and blankets, school supplies and fuel jerrycans. This was the operations hub of the Good Neighbor administration, located inside the IDF's regional division headquarters on the Golan Heights, a territory Israel conquered and later annexed from Syria after the 1967 war (the international community still considers it occupied territory). The aid would soon be trucked over to the border a few kilometers away for distribution.

The unit's insignia next to the Arabic writing made clear Israel isn't trying to hide its humanitarian involvement in Syria -- quite the opposite. The commander of the Good Neighbor administration, Lt. Col. E (as he is identified per Israeli military guidelines), was eager to point out the Hebrew writing on all the goods. "That's the point," he told me. "They should know where it's coming from." In the most expansive interview he's given, E, a fluent Arabic speaker and veteran of the IDF's civil-military operations in the Palestinian Territories, went into great detail about his unit's involvement in a war that, officially, Israel has refrained from entering.

The Syrian civil war upended nearly four decades of relative calm, if not peace, on the Golan Heights: The Assad regime in Damascus kept the frontier quiet, while United Nations peacekeepers verified the limited deployments of Israeli and Syrian forces across a demilitarized ceasefire line. "We understood that something was changing on the other side of the border" once the civil war started, E said. It wasn't only the chaos that would be unleashed by the potential fall of Bashar al-Assad as his army lost ground to rebel forces, but rather the encroachment of Iranian and Lebanese Hezbollah operatives up to the Israeli border that concerned the IDF. And indeed, in the early years of the Syrian war, cross-border rocket and small arms fire, as well as roadside bombs, were not uncommon, seriously injuring a number of Israeli soldiers and killing one civilian. Israel reportedly responded with a few targeted airstrikes, killing several senior Iranian and Hezbollah commanders attempting to set up a terrorist base on the Syrian side of the Golan.

Israel also responded in more subtle ways: with the Good Neighbor policy, a "hearts and minds" campaign meant to dissuade the local population from cooperating with such unsavory elements. In addition to the residue of the Syrian regime and its allies, Israel also faces a complicated array of other armed groups on this front -- "fifty shades of black," as one IDF officer described it last year, ranging from a local Islamic State franchise to al Qaeda-affiliated militants to more moderate Syrian rebels. "I'm not so noble or righteous," E said matter-of-factly. "There is a clear operational interest for Israel" to be doing all of this.

There was also, to be sure, a moral imperative. While not anything like the devastation in Aleppo or Idlib, the destruction visited upon southwest Syria and the Quneitra province bordering Israel has been significant in its own right. A third of the population of over 200,000 has been internally displaced; medicine, food, basic goods and electricity are scarce to nonexistent; and 70 percent of doctors in the region, Israel estimates, have either fled or been killed. As the daily sounds of gunfire and plumes of mortar smoke can attest, the fighting is still ongoing.

The trickle of injured Syrians seeking help in 2013 was the start of what is now a flood, formalized and growing. More than 4,000 have been admitted into Israeli hospitals. The vast majority of these, said Col. Noam Fink, a cardiologist and chief doctor in the IDF's Northern Command, have been male and relatively young, suffering from "multi-trauma injuries" consistent with warfighting. Israeli officers make clear they "do not check IDs" to see if these injured are rebel fighters; after a patdown at the border, everyone is admitted and given medical care (despite the fact that Sunni jihadists have also reportedly been among the injured).

E and his small team coordinate these evacuations to Israeli hospitals, as well as more routine day-long checkups, especially for children in need of specialists: eyes, ears, epilepsy, emotional care and the like. According to the IDF, two dozen children and their adult chaperones are bused in at a time, sometimes daily. "For a five year old who has only known war, that day in Israel might be the best of their lives," E said. "And no one can accuse me of helping terrorists. At the end a child is a child. They see that the Jews treat them with respect. They're my ambassadors." (E

denied a **recent *Wall Street Journal* report (https://www.wsj.com/articles/israel-gives-secret-aid-to-syrian-rebels-1497813430)** that Israel actually funds Syrian rebels. "I give them millions [in aid] but not one dollar or shekel," he said, repeating other similar Israeli denials.)

Flowing in the opposite direction, Israel has moved into Syria everything from the spaghetti and baby formula to fuel, generators and piping for water wells. The level of detail is in some cases astonishingly granular: flour in small bags for one village, snakebite antivenom delivered to another, with the Good Neighbor administration managing the medical files of several hundred Syrian children requiring follow-up care. While official numbers are classified, the scale of the operation appears extensive, reaching 14 kilometers into Syria and in some cases farther afield to Daraa province. Twelve heavy trucks a week move supplies from the division headquarters to the border. How is all this coordinated? E held up his phone.

"Abu Yakub," as E is known to the locals, was personally in contact with Syrians on the other side -- village elders, heads of local councils, professionals. "I can't say we're a consensus yet among the people there," E admitted, "but they see that the aid really helps their villages." The ultimate proof for this policy is that, other than one clash with the Islamic State late last year, the Syrian rebels -- moderate, jihadist, or other -- have yet to fire on Israel in anger.

There have, however, been instances where Israeli foodstuffs have been lit on fire and the video uploaded to social media; a play by regime elements, E claimed, to show that Israel was still the enemy. And to be sure, no one knows what will happen if Assad and his allies continue racking up victories in the war, possibly turning their attention back to the southern Golan front. "If we weren't doing this, someone else would be," E said, alluding to the yellow and green flag of Hezbollah. "There's no such thing as a vacuum in this region."

Though its future is as uncertain as the Syrian civil war, the Good Neighbor administration seems to be making more permanent plans. At a makeshift crossing on the border, the IDF recently erected a small white brick hut -- with blast walls and metal detectors -- to better vet the incoming Syrians (suicide bombings are a concern). There's also the new medical clinic. Built on the site of an abandoned IDF post, the clinic sits on the other side of the heavily fortified border fence: still technically Israeli territory since the fence was built at a relative remove from the official ceasefire line, yet inside Syria for all practical military purposes.

On a recent visit to the clinic, the first by a journalist, a small convoy of IDF vehicles drove down the access road that runs parallel to the fence until it reached a massive metal gate. Through that gate, and then another two smaller ones, lay Camp Mazor Ladach (biblical Hebrew for "assistance to the unfortunate"), run by a Louisiana-based Christian humanitarian NGO called Friend Ships Unlimited. As the name suggests, the group runs aid ships to various conflict zones around the world. This was, apparently, both its first land-borne mission as well as its first in Israel; the connection was made through long-standing personal relationships with Israeli officialdom. The money, equipment, and supplies for this elaborate operation reportedly came from the group's traditional donor channels (private and corporate, according to its website), the massive international NGO donor base that supports the Good Neighbor administration, as well as the Israeli government (including logistical support from the IDF and, of course, the physical location).

Opened this past August, the camp consists of several massive big-top tents joined together in a tight circle, with internal pathways leading from one room/tent to the other. A food tent teeming with crates of canned goods (with the ubiquitous Hebrew writing) disbursed to patients upon their release led into a common room with playpens, toys and stuffed animals, which led into a clinic tent with several partitioned examination rooms not unlike a normal doctor's office (examination table, desk, stethoscope). This was one of three planned clinics, and the only one so far operational. When I visit, the camp was still not yet finished: The largest tent intended as the reception hall was bare save for a few fold-out tables and one solitary wheelchair; the next room over, the real playroom, was empty, with staff pointing out where the inflatable bouncy house, ice cream and cotton candy stands, and a discreet nursing

station for mothers would be set up.

The idea of Syrian kids eating cotton candy less than a mile away from a war may seem incongruous, but the crew from Friend Ships Unlimited was, if anything, almost nonchalant about it all. Two doctors, older women from Mississippi and North Carolina, had seen nearly 80 patients earlier that day: ear infections, rashes, arthritis, fractures, hypertension. "Pretty much what you see back home," said Patty, a general practitioner from North Carolina. She, like the rest of the nearly 20-member crew, was a volunteer, and was staying for two weeks. The crew slept in the camp, in living quarters, venturing back to Israel with an IDF escort twice a week. (The patients, for their part, return home every evening after clinic visiting hours end at 6 p.m.)

Roma, an internal medicine specialist from Mississippi, told me it was "such a privilege to work with Israelis in whatever way we can." She added: "We feel very privileged, and very secure." This was a recurring theme among the volunteers I met: not just the idea of coming to a war zone to aid Syrians and to do God's work, but to also do good for Israel. "By doing one you're helping the other," said Sheray, a 66-year-old nurse's assistant and the lead crew member at the camp.

Yet this was still Syria. Only a week earlier, during a visit to the camp, a pastor from New York was hit by a bullet. This did not seem to ruffle anyone. It was a freak incident, the IDF maintained, a stray bullet from the nearby fighting that somehow found a mark. Fortunately for the pastor, he was wearing a flak jacket at the time and wasn't seriously injured. "Truly a higher power," Sheray said, "but it did reinforce caution and not to hang out by the fence at night." The pastor was apparently trying to catch a glimpse of some wild jackals who roam the Golan plains that sweep out in every direction, flat, craggy, and brown. The sounds of war are easily heard from the camp, breaking the usual desolate quiet. "Last night was a real 'boomy' night," Sheray observed.

Despite the caution and the darkness beginning to envelop the camp, the crew and visiting IDF officers stood around not too far from the fence, chatting; no one seemed concerned, least of all Tamir, an adopted black mutt, tail wagging, who jumped from one visitor to the next. The camp appeared, for all the world, lightly defended; it has a slight fence and some barbed wire defending its perimeter. On the camp's eastern flank, which opened out to the rest of Syria, a high stone berm and guard tower rose up from the ground, with an underground bunker system -- a relic of the old IDF position -- now serving as a safe room of sorts. The crew did have their own security team, American volunteers as well, who in addition to guard duty also made the incoming Syrians pass through a metal detector. Nevertheless, an IDF detail had swept the camp prior to our arrival, in case one of the patients "had left something" for the senior officers visiting. A handful of other IDF soldiers in full combat gear had escorted E and his team in, taking up positions on the perimeter.

Was all this enough, though, to ensure the security of the camp once the IDF left? "There are measures in place that you can't see," E said cryptically, and in general the Friend Ships Unlimited team was in constant radio contact with the IDF.

There was a clear humanitarian as well as operational reason for the clinic's location on the other side of the fence. At capacity, 12 doctors can live in the camp, each treating 20 to 30 patients a day—meaning that around a thousand Syrians could receive regular medical care every week without the stain of crossing into Israel and being tarred a collaborator. It is also more cost-effective than evacuating individual patients to Israeli hospitals. The camp is expecting a future shipment of X-ray machines, incubators and other equipment for minor surgeries.

There was, however, the nagging sense that nothing could stop a well-placed mortar round from changing such calculations. A few nights after my visit, Hezbollah is believed to have deliberately fired several rockets into Israel, drawing IDF strikes against Syrian army positions. This past week, the front pages of every Israeli daily were adorned with the picture and biography of Hezbollah's new commander in the area, a previously anonymous

operative. It was a not-too-subtle message by Israeli intelligence: We know who you are and what you're up to. Camp Mazor Ladach is the logical extension of Israel's Good Neighbor policy, which is itself an extension of the reality of a disintegrated Syria: a battle for hearts, minds and influence between Israel and its enemies -- Syria, Iran, and Hezbollah -- in a border region that may soon be an actual battlefront. In the event, the clinic would almost assuredly have to be evacuated.

Driving back from the camp on the two-lane country road that runs near the border, E looked to his left and then right, pointing out the difference between the lights emanating from Israeli hamlets and the pitch darkness on the Syrian side. "I'm not doing all this for a Nobel Prize," he said. "I'm an officer in the IDF, and my job is to protect the State [of Israel]. But I do believe there is such a thing as win-win situations -- even in the Middle East."

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