

Written evidence from BICOM (ISI0028)

Executive Summary

1. Israelis share the concerns of the UK and other Western powers that ISIL is a major threat and support the goal of destroying it. ISIL and its proxies in both Syria and the Sinai Peninsula pose a direct threat to Israel, are a spur for Jihadists across the region and globally, and threaten the stability of Israel's neighbours.
2. Israelis are concerned that efforts to defeat ISIL should avoid further strengthening or empowering of Iran and its proxies, especially Hezbollah. Despite the grave threat ISIL constitutes to the region and the potential future threat it poses to Israel, there is a consensus in Israel that Iran and its proxies present the gravest threat to Israel, and that Iran continues to pose a major threat to regional stability as a whole.
3. Some in Israel's security establishment believe that successfully defeating ISIL rather than simply containing it will almost certainly require the need for greater NATO commitment and ground troops, including a multi-national military coalition based on local Kurdish and select Sunni forces who should be given military support.

About BICOM

4. BICOM is an independent British organisation dedicated to creating a more supportive environment for Israel in Britain. We believe in the right of the State of Israel to live in peace and security, and believe in the rights of the Palestinians to statehood. We support a close relationship between Britain and Israel, based on shared values and interests.
5. BICOM works to promote a more complete understanding of Israel and its situation. We provide expert analysis and news summary, as well as in-depth research on events in Israel and the region through our online publications. We take British opinion formers and policymakers to Israel and the Palestinian Territories to learn about the issues first-hand, and bring experts from the region to Britain. We promote a balanced discourse about Israel in the British media by creating opportunities for a wide range of voices to be heard from across the Israeli political spectrum.
6. BICOM has a research team in London and Jerusalem specialising in Israeli politics, the peace process, Israel's place in the region and the UK-Israel relationship.
7. This paper draws on previous publications from BICOM and our journal Fathom, which the committee may wish to consult, including:
 - a. [BICOM Expert View](#): Jihad on the Horizon: The ISIL Threat from an Israeli Perspective, by Brig. Gen. (res.) Michael Herzog (March 2015)
 - b. [BICOM Expert View](#): The Syrian Cauldron – A View from Israel, by Brig. Gen. (res.) Michael Herzog (November 2015)

- c. [BICOM analysis](#): What the UK can do to defeat ISIS, Maj. Gen. (ret) Giora Eiland (December 2015)
- d. [Fathom Journal](#): Making sense of ISIS: An Interview with Michael Weiss (Summer 2015)
- e. [Fathom Journal](#): Is it Iran's Middle East now? (Autumn 2015)

The scope of this submission

8. This document presents a broad based assessment of how the ISIL threat is perceived from the Israeli perspective. With the inquiry's terms of reference in mind, it focuses on how ISIL poses a direct threat to Israeli security; how ISIL's regional impact is perceived from Israel; Israel's place in the fight against ISIL as well as its perspective on the US-led air strikes against the organization; and Israel's concerns that the military effort not result in empowering Iran and its allies.

The implications of ISIL for Israel's security situation

9. Israel fully supports the goal of destroying ISIL and Israeli leaders and security experts have often been critical of the West, in particular the United States, for not being committed enough to meet this goal.¹
10. ISIL represents not only a radical anti-Western ideology but is also virulently and explicitly anti-Semitic. Conquering Israel numbers among ISIL's long term goals, with Jerusalem playing a significant role in the group's rhetoric, and Israel (referred to simply as "Jews") appearing on ISIL propaganda videos as one of its enemies. ISIL issued a series of threats against Israel in October 2015, no doubt seeking to capitalise on popular anti-Israel sentiment in the wider Arab and Islamic world. ISIL in Syria released a video showing one of its jihadi militants (presumably of Israeli-Arab origin) threatening (in Hebrew) to attack Israelis and promising that "soon there will not be one Jew left in Jerusalem." Moreover, in late December 2015 ISIL leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi released an audio recording warning that his forces will "soon meet [the Jews] in Palestine, and that "the leaders of the jihad fighters will surround you on a day you think is far, but we see it as close. We are coming closer to you day by day." Al-Baghdadi's specific mention of Israel is highly significant for the organization and may also serve as inspiration for jihadis to attack Israeli or Jewish targets around the world.
11. Israel is not currently ISIL's primary focus, and Israeli security officials assess the current direct threat from ISIL to be low. However ISIL has affiliates located on Israel's northern and southern borders that have carried out attacks against Israel and which demonstrate both the intention and potential to become a growing direct threat.
12. **Sinai Peninsula:** Across Israel's 200km border with Egypt's Sinai Peninsula lies the organisation 'Wilayat Sinai' (formerly Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis), which recently pledged allegiance to the ISIL 'caliphate'. This group numbers approximately 700 to 800 fighters

¹ Times of Israel, [Ya'alon: US is ceding leadership in Mideast to Russia, Iran](#), 5/12/15; Giora Eiland, Bicom Briefing, [What the UK can do to defeat ISIS](#), December 2015

and is primarily concerned with fighting Egyptian regime forces and local opponents. At the same time, it has periodically fired rockets at southern Israel including the port and tourist city of Eilat, most recently in July 2015, and security officials state that they fully expect ISIL affiliates in the Sinai to escalate attacks against Israel in the future.² Previous attacks by this Sinai based terrorist group killed eight Israelis in 2011, after which Israel built an extensive security fence. Additionally, in October 2014 joint Palestinian-Egyptian-Bedouin cells connected to this group detonated three car bombs in a scheduled and combined manner at tourist sites in Sinai which attract Israeli vacationers killing 43 people, including 21 Israelis, and wounding 171. The group is also seen as the most likely culprit behind the explosion of the Russian plane in Sinai in October 2015. Days before the crash saw a significant increase in the volume of written and spoken communication between senior members of the terror organisation and elements affiliated with ISIL's Security and Intelligence Council in Iraq and Syria, the body responsible for the group's special operations and aiding organizations outside Syria and Iraq. The ISIL terrorist connection behind the crash led to Britain temporarily suspending flights between the UK and Sharm el-Sheikh.

13. The situation in the Sinai possesses major significance for wider regional security and for global trade, given the threat posed to the rest of Egypt, to the Suez Canal, and to nearby Jordan and Saudi Arabia.
14. **Hamas and Gaza Strip:** Recent reports have substantiated Israeli claims of cooperation between ISIL affiliates in the Sinai and Hamas's armed wing (Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades) in the Gaza Strip, despite some ideological differences between the groups. Leading Israeli regional affairs analyst Ehud Yaari revealed that ISIL's Sinai leader Shadi al-Menai visited the Gaza Strip for talks in December 2015³ while Israeli security analyst Ronen Bregman quoted Western intelligence sources who relate how Hamas is helping the al-Qaeda organisation with money, weapons, military equipment and training.⁴ The groups are thought to be cooperating in smuggling weapons through the Sinai and preventing Egypt gaining control, with Hamas fighters also helping ISIL affiliates with training. Inside the Gaza Strip meanwhile, the actions of ISIL inspired groups pose a challenge to Hamas's authority. The Omar Hadid Brigade occasionally fires rockets at Israel, in defiance of the Hamas imposed ceasefire put in place following the August 2014 conflict.
15. **Syria:** Rebels loyal to ISIL have been operating close to Israel's borders in southern Syria, in particular the Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade, which controls a 15-kilometer stretch of land around the triangular point where the Syrian, Israeli and Jordanian borders meet and which is thought to possess tanks, armoured personnel carriers, mortars and other sophisticated weaponry seized from Syrian army troops. So far the group has prioritised

² [The Algemeiner](#), IDF Outlines Defense of Southern Airport, Braces for Islamic State-Linked Attack, 13/3/15

³ Ehud Yaari, Hamas and the Islamic State Growing cooperation in Sinai, [Washington Institute for Near East Policy](#), December 2015; Also, Alex Fishman, Hamas is funding Islamic State in Sinai, [Ynet](#), 14/12/2015.

⁴ Ronen Bregman, The battle over Sinai: ISIS's next strong force, [Ynet](#), 25/12/2015

battles with the regime and other rebel groups, including the rival Al Qaeda affiliated Al Nusra Front. However, Israel has concerns that a scenario in which these groups cement control on Israel's borders would increase the threat of attack considerably. Israeli military chiefs are also preparing for the possibility that Russian air strikes in Syria will ultimately push ISIL forces away from their current strongholds and closer to Israel's borders.

16. **ISIL in Palestinian public opinion:** According to a survey conducted in December 2015 by the Palestinian Center for Survey and Policy Research, just 7% of Palestinians think ISIL represents true Islam and 14% supported the attack on Paris.⁵ However, there is a concern that for a minority drawn to extremism, ISIL's propaganda may provide an additional source of inspiration and may be a factor fuelling the recent wave of stabbing, shooting and vehicle attacks which have claimed the lives of at least 27 Israelis since September.
17. **Israel's Arab Citizens:** The number of Arab Israeli citizens who identify with ISIL remains very small. It is estimated that approximately 40 to 50 have travelled to Syria to join the movement. However, Israeli officials have expressed concern about the spread of ISIL's ideology within Israel. The Director General of Israel's Intelligence Ministry Ram Ben-Barak recently told Army Radio that the group's influence is spreading and that "The ISIS scenario we worry about is ISIS cells arising in Israel to carry out terrorist attacks." The past year did see a significant increase in the number of Israeli Arabs involved in ISIL activities, with 34 arrests linked to the group. In October 2015, seven Arabs from Nazareth were accused of purchasing illegal weapons, and being in contact with two Israeli-Arabs who had joined the terrorist organisation in Syria, with plans to carry out a shooting attack at an IDF base.
18. **ISIL and world Jewry:** As the nation state of the Jewish people, Israel sees itself as having a responsibility for the rights and welfare of Jews everywhere. It is also therefore of deep concern for Israel that ISIL has also called for attacks on Jews worldwide, and that Jewish targets have been targeted in ISIL-affiliated terror attacks in Paris, Brussels and Copenhagen. This issue is of deep concern to the British Jewish community.⁶ It is worth noting that a series of terror attacks by Islamist extremists in France targeting Jews is one of the factors leading to a surge in Jewish emigration from France to Israel, with an all-time high in the number of French immigrants in 2015.⁷

The regional challenges arising from the growth of ISIL

19. Israel has much at stake when it comes to the stability of its Arab neighbours. In addition to the significance for Israel of ISIL's role in the Sinai, the mass flow of refugees as a result of the Syrian civil war has generated pressure on other countries in the region, most notably in Jordan and Lebanon.

⁵ [Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research \(PSR\)](#) public opinion poll 58, December 2015

⁶ Britain's Jewish community on high alert as it is revealed Bataclan held pro-Israel events, [Sunday Express](#), 17/11/2015

⁷ Aliya to Israel increased in 2015, [Ynet](#), 29/12/2015. The number of French immigrants in 2015 to Israel was more than double the number of those arriving in 2013, which in itself was over 60% higher than in 2012.

20. Of special concern to Israel is the stability of Jordan, which controls Israel's longest border and serves as a buffer to the east from potential enemies. Jordan engages in close security coordination with Israel both regarding threats from Jihadis and Palestinian terror. Israelis consider Jordan's security and stability to be directly linked to its own security,⁸ and it is of concern to Israel that Jordan has suffered under the burden of massive refugee influx, and that ISIL has some appeal in Jordanian urban centres.

Israel's role in the fight against ISIL

21. Whilst it is not politically feasible or desirable for Israel to play a direct role in the fight against ISIL, Israel's significance as a strategic asset in this fight should not be overlooked. Unlike many of its Arab neighbours, Israel's internal political cohesion and its long term support for UK and wider European and NATO interests in the Middle East are beyond doubt. Israel stands out in the region as a democracy with stable and well-functioning political institutions, a thriving economy, and formidable military and intelligence capability. Whilst the Palestinian conflict will continue to generate incidences of violence and periodic escalations within Israel, the West Bank and Gaza Strip, Israel's overall capability to secure its borders and maintain internal cohesion is assured, making it an important pillar of stability in the region.

22. Israel is an asset in particular in assisting Egypt and Jordan – its two Arab neighbours with which it has full diplomatic relations – in their respective efforts to confront ISIL and its regional affiliates. Israel actively supports Egyptian efforts to contain ISIL affiliated groups, including with intelligence and by allowing Egypt to deploy forces in the Sinai exceeding the quota allowed by the peace treaty between the two nations.⁹ Such assistance also includes facilitating Jordanian trade through Israel which once passed through Syria,¹⁰ and providing Jordan with an alternative gas supply after the repeated sabotaging of pipelines from Sinai.¹¹

23. Israelis continue to debate the policy implications of the ISIL phenomena in the Palestinian arena. Some argue that ISIL's rise underscores that, in a dangerous and turbulent region, Israel should be wary of any territorial redeployment which may open the door to Jihadists on its borders. Others argue that the lack of any political initiative increases the chances of escalation and radicalisation among the Palestinian population. Either way, it is clearly in no one's interests that a future Israeli withdrawal in the West Bank leave a weak state or vacuum in its place. As the FCO submission to this inquiry notes, "ISIL thrives in ungoverned spaces." Were the West Bank to become vulnerable to infiltration or takeover by Islamist extremists, as occurred in the Gaza Strip, it would pose a major security threat not only to Israel but to Jordan. Given that, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's demand that in any future two-state solution, Israel be able to

⁸ Perspective Papers, Jordanian Security and Prosperity: An Essential Aspect of Israeli Policy, [BESA](#), 27/12/2015

⁹ [Jerusalem Post](#), Report: Israel worried Egypt's Sisi might fall to jihadist insurgents 7/11/15; [Ha'aretz](#), Israel's Military Chief: Only Russian-American Alliance Can Defeat ISIS, 10/12/2005

¹⁰ Reuters, [Truck by truck Israel builds trade gateway to the Arab world](#), 1/7/14

¹¹ Times of Israel, [Israel signs \\$15 billion gas deal with Jordan](#), 3/9/14

maintain a security presence on the border between the West Bank and Jordan, should be considered seriously with respect to the significance of maintaining regional security.

The US-led coalition against ISIL

24. While Israel is supportive of the US-led coalition against ISIL of which the UK is a part, debate exists within the security establishment over the most effective way to defeat the group.
25. In recent months BICOM has organised several briefings on the threat of ISIL and the current Western strategy to counter it. In December 2015, former head of Israel's National Security Council Giora Eiland described the importance of integrating and translating visual, signal, human and internet intelligence into real-time actionable intelligence, something he believed had been lacking when ISIL capture the Iraqi city of Ramadi in May 2015. He also suggested that the coalition should consider bombing oil fields in ISIL territory which provide the group with 70 per cent of its income.
26. BICOM senior fellow Michael Herzog has argued that successfully defeating ISIL – rather than simply containing it – almost certainly requires the need for greater NATO commitment and ground troops. Herzog believes that the Western powers should build and participate in a multi-national military coalition based on local Kurdish and select Sunni forces, who should be backed and supported militarily, and offered autonomy in a future federal system within Syria.
27. Israel's experience in dealing with semi-state terror organisations that control territory and possess an independent military capability offers relevant lessons to the coalition's battle against ISIL. While no two conflicts are the same, the dilemma posed by groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah is how Israel can strategically defeat them without putting boots on the ground for a significant amount of time. Indeed during three separate military operations in Gaza, Israel has failed to deal a knockout blow to Hamas. Israel's experience suggests that without a capable alternative party willing to take control over and govern the 'liberated' territory or the desire by the military to occupy it, the coalition's ability to achieve decisive defeat will be severely limited if not impossible.

The potential for involving Iran in the fight against ISIL

28. Despite the grave threat ISIL constitutes to the region and the potential future threat it poses to Israel, a consensus exists in the Israeli security establishment that Iran and its proxies overwhelmingly present the gravest threat to the country, and that Iran continues to pose a major threat to regional stability as a whole.
29. Iran is a regional power deeply hostile to Israel, harbouring hegemonic and nuclear ambitions and commanding the region's most heavily armed sub-state actor, Hezbollah, with over 100,000 rockets aimed at Israel. Assad's remaining territory in Syria serves as a vital conduit for feeding, replenishing and upgrading Hezbollah's huge rocket arsenal. Iran also supports terror groups in Gaza, seeks to establish terror infrastructure in the West Bank, supports Hezbollah's international terror network and activities and launches

continuous cyber-attacks against Israel. That is why Israelis judge developments in Syria first and foremost in the broader context of the danger posed by this axis.

30. Israeli concerns were further exacerbated by the nuclear deal between Iran and the international community, which Israelis perceive as boosting Iran in the context of a region in meltdown. Indeed, hopes that the deal might improve the situation in Syria have proven unrealistic. It is highly likely that the Iranian nuclear deal reinforced the perception in Moscow of American weakness and cleared the way in Russia's mind to deploy militarily in Syria in order to save Assad and boost its own standing. Consequently, the emboldened Iran-Assad axis has escalated its military operations under Russia's air umbrella, focusing on anti-Assad elements rather than on ISIL. In response, Gulf states are ramping up their support to Sunni rebel groups.
31. The negative fallout of the nuclear deal goes further. Since the deal was finalised, Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, has publicly slammed the door on Western hopes to effectively expand cooperation and ordered a ban on imports from the US. Iran test-fired a new ballistic missile in contravention of a UN Security Council resolution and announced it will increase its defence budget by over 30%. Tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia have risen to new heights, including the Saudi interception of an Iranian ship laden with missiles allegedly bound for Iran's proxies in Yemen and the Saudi decision to behead Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr, which was followed by an attack on the Saudi Embassy in Teheran by an angry mob. For now, President's Obama's expressed hope that the nuclear deal will enable regional "equilibrium," seems a distant dream.
32. As the FCO's submission to this inquiry notes, "ISIL's growth in Iraq was, in part, a consequence of the inability of successive former Iraqi governments to build credible and inclusive political institutions." Iran's role as a supporter of Shia sectarian interests in Iraq should be seen as part of the problem when it comes to reconciliation between Shia and Sunnis within that country.
33. Furthermore, given the UK government's insistence that Assad is "part of the cause of, not the solution to, ISIL" it should be clear that the role of Iran and its proxy Hezbollah is contrary to this position, since their efforts, in concert with Russia, are directed at keeping Assad in power. Iran's interest is to maintain Assad as an Iranian client and keep open its land corridor to Hezbollah. Iran and its proxies have also tried to exploit Syria's disintegration to establish infrastructure to attack Israel from the Syrian side of the Golan Heights.

Recommendations

34. ISIL's ability to govern territory in Syria and Iraq affords it a launching pad for its destructive campaign in the region and the West and constitutes a magnet to young, radicalised Muslims from across the globe. Surviving attacks from major global powers and hitting back feeds a myth of invincibility, glorifies the 'Caliphate' and adds to its attraction and prestige. The continued existence of this territorial centre of extremism at the heart of the Middle East promises to further destabilise the region and spark a growing

wave of terror in the West. The UK, with its allies, should make the necessary commitments to destroy ISIL, consistent with the very considerable scale of the threat the organisation poses to its interests. Many Israeli officials believe this will require some Western ‘boots on the ground’ as well as assistance from local forces in order to take control over the territory currently controlled by ISIL.

35. At the same time, policy makers should take into account the importance of preventing the empowerment of the Iranian-led axis. These actors do not share the West’s vision for an inclusive system in Syria and Iraq and might exacerbate sectarian tensions in these countries to benefit the jihadi camp and further destabilise the region. Ultimately it is the job of Sunnis – rather than Iran and its Shiite proxies – to beat and eventually replace Sunni jihadists.
36. Meanwhile, it is highly important to prevent Iran and its proxies, as well as Sunni jihadists, from establishing a foothold in the south of Syria, which could threaten Israel and Jordan. Israel is alert to this danger and is likely to take independent action to protect its interests if necessary. However, ways should also be sought to enable the more moderate local rebel groups to consolidate and maintain control in that sector.
37. Urgent humanitarian solutions must also be provided, including enhanced assistance to neighbouring countries, especially Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, as well as the establishment of safe zones for the displaced in Syria in order to mitigate the human tragedy and its destabilising impact. Liberating Raqqa and other parts of northern Syria from ISIL could enable the creation of a safe zone in that region, since the liberating forces will be able to maintain it and protect it from attacks, but there is also potential for a safe zone in southern Syria.

January 2016