

SYRIAN PERSPECTIVE ON  
ISRAEL – HAMAS WAR OF 2023  
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*Israel-Hamas war erupted on 7<sup>th</sup> of October in 2023 is of global significance and currently most of the historians and researchers recognize the overriding need to study this topic. Moreover, it is impossible to pay attention to military operations in only one front such as Gaza Strip. The magnitude and character of war if not contained regionally will be unknown in terms of global security. This study is aimed at revealing the possible involvement of Syria into Israel-Hamas war and to examine different aspects of Syrian position on Israel-Hamas war in light of Israeli airstrikes and in the context of Iran-Israel confrontation in Syria. There are two research questions: 1. What are the key determinants of Syrian position towards the Israel-Hamas ongoing war? 2. How does Syrian factor effect on the war and what are the main tendencies of Syria's possible involvement into the Israel-Hamas war? Analyzing the main reasons of the war and scrutinizing primary consequences for the Syrian side, discussing various perspectives and thoughts, we draw our own perspective on the subject and make conclusions.*

**Keywords:** *Gaza Strip, Israel Defense Forces (IDF), “Operation Al-Aqsa Flood” Bashar Al-Assad, Damascus International Airport.*

### **Introduction**

In light of the ongoing military conflict in Gaza between Israel and Hamas, it is vital to analyze the Syrian position towards this war which has the potential of morphing into a major Middle Eastern larger conflagration. In order to understand Syrian perspective, it is of paramount importance to conduct a research on revealing the main tendencies of different positions of Syrian society towards the war in Gaza Strip. The main battlefields and fronts of this war could potentially be the West Bank, Syria and South Lebanon. At

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the time of Syrian uprising in 2011, Hamas, which had been based in Damascus for almost 11 years, had to make a decision: either to stand with the opposition or the Syrian authorities. They chose the opposition, and subsequently left Syria in 2012 moving to Qatar. In 2013, Hamas, at the request of Syrian authorities, closed its representative office in the Syrian Arab Republic. As the years passed, it became evident that a regime change in Syria was not underway. Hamas found itself isolated. When Yahya Sinwar became the leader of Hamas in Gaza Strip in 2017, they initiated a new reconciliation process among Hamas, Iran and Hezbollah. Once it was clear that a regime change was not going to happen in Damascus, they felt like the rest of the Arab world, except for Qatar, had abandoned them, they went back to Iran and made up with Syrian government"<sup>2</sup>. After almost ten years of hostile relations with Syrian government, in October 2022, Hamas leaders, as part of the Palestinian delegation, met with Bashar Al-Assad in Damascus. After that meeting Hamas's Arab relations chief Khalil Al-Hayya speaking to reporters called that meeting was "glorious and important, in terms of resuming joint actions with Syrian Arab Republic"<sup>3</sup>. In January 2023, Hamas delegation headed by the deputy head of the representative office in Gaza, was in Damascus. During negotiations with the Syrian leadership, the problem of restoring the activities of the Hamas representative office in the Syrian Arab Republic was discussed. In April 2023, Hamas militants carried out airstrikes firing dozens of rockets at Israel from southern Lebanon. At the same time, rocket attacks were launched on Israeli territory from Gaza and the Golan Heights. These actions were taken in response to disproportionate use of force by Israeli security forces against Muslims at the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem and showed a strategic change in the rules of the Iranian-Israeli confrontation, taking into account the strengthening of Hamas's positions in Syria and Lebanon<sup>4</sup>. It is worth to

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<sup>2</sup> Hamadi G., Hamas and Hezbollah: From rivals in Syria to allies against Israel, L'Orient Today, November 1, 2023, <https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1354995/hamas-and-hezbollah-from-rivals-in-syria-to-allies-against-israel.html> (24.11.2023).

<sup>3</sup> Hamas Resumes Ties with Syria in Damascus Visit, Voice of America, October 19, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/hamas-resumes-ties-with-syria-in-damascus-visit-/6797583.html> (04.07.2023).

<sup>4</sup> Ахмедов В., К вопросу ирано-израильского противоборства в условиях сирийского кризиса и изменения ситуации на Ближнем Востоке, Институт Ближнего Востока, 17

underline that these moves of rapprochement with the Syrian authorities indicate that Syria and its strategic location is highly valued by Hamas operatives and was a result of thorough military calculations long before initiating October 7 attack on Israel. On October 7, Hamas launched a military “Operation Al-Aqsa Flood” against Israel. Israel went into a state of war and launched “Operation Iron Swords” in the Gaza Strip. Hamas’s assault killed 1400 Israelis and that day was called as the deadliest of the nation’s 75-year history. Airstrikes are being carried out across the region. On October 27, Israel announced an “expansion” of the scale of operations in the Gaza Strip, simultaneously clarifying that they are not yet talking about a ground operation. On October 28 Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu speaking at a press conference in Tel-Aviv said that Israeli forces had unleashed the second phase of the Gaza war and warned Israelis to expect a long and hard military campaign<sup>5</sup>. On October 10 the Israel Defense Forces said, that Syria and Israel exchanged shelling, after a number of mortars were launched toward northern Israel from Syria. Israel responded with artillery strikes. Mortar attacks from Syria are widely viewed as symbolic, since they rarely cause damage. Syria and Israel have been in conflict for more than half a century, and these routine attacks are a continuation of that conflict, rather than an escalation<sup>6</sup>. On October 12 parallel to preparing for ground invasion in Gaza Israeli Air Force conducted multiple airstrikes and hit two Syrian International airports in Damascus and Aleppo damaging runways and putting both hubs out of service. They were the first Israeli strikes on Syria since the militant Palestinian group Hamas carried out its deadly attacks in southern Israel. The attacks came as the Iranian Foreign Minister was expected to arrive in the country<sup>7</sup>. The United States carried out airstrikes against a facility used by

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октября, 2023, [http://www.iimes.ru/?p=102422&\\_login=f462c2e096](http://www.iimes.ru/?p=102422&_login=f462c2e096) (Accessed 24.11.2023).

<sup>5</sup> Mackenzie J., Lubell M., Israel launches Gaza war’s second phase with ground operation, Netanyahu says, Reuters, 28 October, 2023 <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/eu-calls-humanitarian-pauses-gaza-aid-israel-raids-enclave-2023-10-26/> (Accessed 24.11.2023).

<sup>6</sup> Dadouch S., The history and fighting between Israel and Syria, explained, The Washington Post, October 11, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/10/11/syria-israel-attacks-war-hezbollah/> (Accessed 25.11.2023).

<sup>7</sup> Aji A., Syria says Israeli airstrikes hit airports in Damascus and Aleppo, damaging their runways, Associated Press, October 12, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/syria-israel->

Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps and its proxies in eastern Syria on November 8, 2023, ratcheting up retaliation for unprecedented drone and rocket attacks against the US troops based in Syria and Iraq. The strikes by two Air Force F-15 jets against a weapons warehouse in Deir al Zour Province, came after U.S. airstrikes on October 27 against similar targets in eastern Syria failed to deter Iran or its proxies in Syria and Iraq<sup>8</sup>. On 2<sup>nd</sup> of November, Israeli army spokesman Avichai Adraee informed that Iranian Imam Hussein Brigade<sup>9</sup>, arrived in southern Lebanon to provide assistance to the Iranian axis<sup>10</sup>

### **Key objectives of the Warring sides**

Thorough study of the issue necessitates to observe the main end states of the warring sides. Hamas started this the war for three reasons: firstly, to activate a multi-front threat to Israel, secondly to fill a vacuum in Palestinian leadership and thirdly to stop the march toward regional peace, including the Saudi-Israeli peace agreement. It is difficult to disagree that disruption of Saudi-Israel normalization was the main strategic goal of Hamas attacking Israel on 7<sup>th</sup> of October. Israel aimed at firstly decapitate Hamas military leadership and to destroy military capability. Second, to instill confidence among the Israeli people once again that the government of Israel and the IDF are capable of providing their security properly. Third, to replace in the minds of regional actors, friends, foes, the perception of Israeli vulnerability and

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airstrikes-aleppo-damascus-airports-gaza-0fad08c8cad6ddcbaea20be7d8acf59e (Accessed 02.11.2023).

<sup>8</sup> Schmitt E., Cooper H., U.S. Strikes Iran-Linked Facility in Syria in Round of Retaliation, The New York Times, November 9, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/08/us-politics/us-iran-airstrikes.html> (24.11.2023).

<sup>9</sup> Liwa al-Imam al-Hussein (The Imam al-Hussein Brigade) is one of the Iraqi-led groups established in the Damascus area during the Syrian civil war, fighting on the side of the Syrian government. Currently affiliated with the Syrian army's 4th Division, it has a special Syrian wing called the Death Battalion. The overall commander of Liwa al-Imam al-Hussein is As'ad al-Bahadali. (Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, April 2, 2019, <https://www.aymennjawad.org/2019/04/liwa-al-imam-al-hussein-interview> (24.07.2023).

<sup>10</sup> Pacchiani G., IDF: Iran backed militia moves from Syria to south Lebanon to support Hezbollah, Times of Israel, November 2, 2023, [https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog\\_entry/idf-iran-backed-militia-moves-from-syria-to-south-lebanon-to-support-hezbollah/](https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/idf-iran-backed-militia-moves-from-syria-to-south-lebanon-to-support-hezbollah/) (15.11.2023).

weakness that was produced<sup>11</sup>. Hamas leaders may believe that fierce divides in Israeli society, caused by Benjamin Netanyahu's attempt to push through controversial judicial reform, badly weakened Israel. One of the obvious signs of that weakness was considered some reservists refusing to serve a government that they consider undemocratic. One of the goals of the attacks may have been to force Israeli collapse. Hamas's another goal may have been the disruption of the normalization process between the Arab states and Israel. Recently Saudi Arabia has hosted a number of Israeli officials, and most probably normalization between two states was being implemented<sup>12</sup>. When examining Hamas's strategy, we should accept that is a long-term theory of victory: they consider that such attacks, backed with strikes by Hezbollah and Iran, or the uprisings in the West Bank, will cause Israeli collapse. From Hamas's perspective Israeli counterattacks against Gaza Strip will inevitably cause massive civilian casualties, which will definitely serve its objectives because they jeopardize pro-Israel campaigns and support abroad. All of this was always the case. One of Israel's failures in facing this war was the strategic miscalculation of some Israeli decision makers and leaders to deeply perceive Hamas's worldview and its implications.

### **Main determinants of Syrian positions towards Israel-Hamas war**

A number of experts provide various perspectives on Syria's possible involvement into the war between Israel and Hamas. Most of them believe the Syrian government forces are highly unlikely to get involved in Hamas' ongoing operation against Israel. Official Damascus is a "passive actor" in this war since they know they lack military strength. However, the Golan front might actually be a better front for Iran than the Lebanese one, where most of its assets are. If Syria or major groups operating in there were to enter into direct conflict with Israel, Deir ez-Zor province will be target number one.

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<sup>11</sup> Satloff R., Yaari E., Levitt M., Neumann N., Al-Omari G., The New Middle East: Hamas Attack, Israel at War, and US Policy, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 10, 2023. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/new-middle-east-hamas-attack-israel-war-and-us-policy> (Accessed 24.10.2023).

<sup>12</sup> Byman D., Hamas's Strategy of Failure, Foreign Policy, October 12, 2023, [https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/10/12/hamas-goals-strategy-israel-attack-success-failure-war-gaza-palestinians/#cookie\\_message\\_anchor](https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/10/12/hamas-goals-strategy-israel-attack-success-failure-war-gaza-palestinians/#cookie_message_anchor) (14.10.2023).

Most probably Israeli forces would target Iranian positions, which are in the west bank of the Euphrates River. Iranian-backed militias roam freely in eastern Syria and across the border to Iraq<sup>13</sup>. Since Syria is considered as a hot spot of Israeli-Iranian confrontation, that may neutralize the prospects of opening a new front in Israel's struggle against Hamas, taking into consideration that ongoing military operations between Israel and Iran already occurs in Syria, which keeps the fight on the eastern side of Israel's border<sup>14</sup>

The movement of pro-government forces and pro-Iran militias from north and northeast Syria to the Golan regions has been happening since the war erupted. On 8<sup>th</sup> of October leaders and members of Hezbollah arrived military sites in Deraa and Quneitra, armed with drones and various specific and advanced armaments. Radwan unit, which is called as Hezbollah's special unit and specializes in designing and implementing special operations into Israel, was deployed near the border alongside Syrian army. On October 9, IRGC transported about fifty militia members from Abu Kamal near the Iraqi border to Damascus, each of them trained in using anti-aircraft missiles, Katyusha rockets and other shoulder-fired missiles. In April 2023, Liwa al-Quds fired rockets into the Golan Heights, leading Israel to respond with a strike on the headquarters of Maher Al-Assad, the president's brother and the commander of the Syrian Army's 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division, which operates alongside or in support of Iran backed groups in Syria. Iranian militias are trying different methods of transferring their members from Iraq to Syria without being targeted by Israeli airstrikes. On October 9, an Iran-backed convoy was targeted in Abu Kamal by unknown aircraft, most likely Israeli<sup>15</sup>. These incidents come amid a worsening security situation throughout western Syria,

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<sup>13</sup> Danon N., What could war between Israel and Hamas mean for Syria? Syria Direct, October 13, 2023, <https://syriadirect.org/what-could-war-between-israel-and-hamas-mean-for-syria/> (04.11.2023).

<sup>14</sup> Yacoubian M., Will the Israel-Hamas War Spiral into a Wider Conflict? United States Institute of Peace (USIP), October 26, 2023, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/10/will-israel-hamas-war-spiral-wider-conflict> (24.11.2023).

<sup>15</sup> Andrew J. Tabler, Syria and the Hamas attack: Another Potential Iran-Backed Front, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Analysis, October 11, 2023, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/syria-and-hamas-attack-another-potential-iran-backed-front>.

including Druze anti-regime protests in the southern Suwayda region. Two days before Hamas incursion into Israel, armed terrorist organizations targeted the graduation ceremony for officers of the military academy of Homs killing 100 people and wounding 240 according to Syrian Minister of Health Hassan Al-Ghabash<sup>16</sup>

When delving into the perceptions of various layers of Syrian society regarding Israel-Hamas War we should stress that Syrians' response to Hamas attack and subsequent Israeli airstrikes in the Gaza Strip have various layers such as regional, political and ideological. Operation "Al-Aqsa Flood" comes at a time when Syrians in government controlled areas face increasingly difficult living conditions. The Syrian opposition coalition has largely ignored what is happening in Gaza, refraining from issuing a formal statement on the matter: Instead, coalition is prioritizing internal affairs. Syrian Democratic Forces have issued a special statement regarding war in Gaza. They have likewise been focused on their own conflict with Turkey<sup>17</sup>. The leaders of Jabhat al-Nusra in northwest Syria issued a statement reiterating their firm and steadfast support for the people of Palestine. Free Syrian Army's official statements demonstrated a sense of common suffering showcasing parallels between the destruction of the Gaza Strip and the ongoing bombardment of Syria's Idlib Governorate by the Syrian government forces and Russia.

As for the position of the Syrian government, the office of the Syrian Presidency posted an image on its official Facebook page of a map of Palestine with Al-Aqsa Mosque in the background. Regime supporters saw this as an implicit show of support from the Syrian regime for Gaza<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> Suleiman A. H., At least 100 killed as Syrian military college hit in drone attack, Al Jazeera News, October 5, 2023, [https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/10/5/syrian-military-college-hit-in-drone-attack#:~:text=A%20drone%20attack%20on%20a%20military%20college%20in%20Syria's%20Homs,were%20killed%20and%20125%20injured.\(17.10.2023\).](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/10/5/syrian-military-college-hit-in-drone-attack#:~:text=A%20drone%20attack%20on%20a%20military%20college%20in%20Syria's%20Homs,were%20killed%20and%20125%20injured.(17.10.2023).)

<sup>17</sup> Musarea A., Syrians' Reactions to the First Weeks of Israel-Hamas War, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 24, 2023, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/syrians-reactions-first-weeks-israel-hamas-war> (24.11.2023).

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

## **International response to Syria's possible involvement into Israel-Hamas war**

When it comes to examining the international response to the Syrian perspective regarding Hamas-Israel war, it is important to scrutinize the UN Security Council 9459<sup>th</sup> meeting on the situation in the Middle East. On October 30, in his briefing before the UN Security Council 9459<sup>th</sup> meeting Geir O. Pedersen, Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria emphasized that the spillover into Syria of the violence in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory is not just a risk, it has already begun. Pederson pointed to airstrikes attributed to Israel hitting Syria's airports in Aleppo and Damascus several times, and retaliation by the United States against what it said were multiple attacks on its forces. Syria's representative Charge d'Affairs Dr. Alhakam Dandy, pointing to Israel's continued aggression in the region, reported that in only 10 days there have been four attacks against two civilian airports in Syria. Commenting on the United States full-scale support of Israel and its irresponsible actions in Syrian territory, he said: "It appears that the United States of America afford themselves of the right for their forces to exist anywhere at any time without any approval or consent in full violation of the law." The representative of the United States ambassador Linda Thomas Greenfield, countering that assertion, said terrorist groups, some backed by Damascus and Tehran, are threatening to expand the conflict between Israel and Hamas beyond Gaza by using Syrian territory to attack Israel, adding that the Government of Syria allows Hezbollah and Iran to use its airports. She stressed that the Government of Syria should stop using the victim card, prevent and cut the flow of fighters in its territory. The delegate of the Russian Federation ambassador Vassily Nebenzia accused Israeli forces of striking sites in Syria, including civilian airports and referred to air strikes by the United States, underlining that the illegitimate actions of the US is a gross violation of Syria's sovereignty. Iran's representative Amir Saeid Iravani condemned Israel's "continuous acts of terrorism" in Syria, which deliberately target civilians and vital infrastructure "while concurrently carrying out war crimes and crimes against humanity in the Gaza Strip". French representative Nathale Estival stressed that opening of a new front against Israel in Syria would further destabilize the country and the Syrian population would once again be



the primary victims<sup>19</sup>. On 11 November, 2023 Saudi Arabia hosted extraordinary joint Islamic-Arab summit in Riyadh to discuss the war in Gaza Strip. During the summit the President of Syrian Arab Republic Bashar Al-Assad emphasized that Gaza has never just been a cause... Palestine is the Cause, and Gaza is the embodiment of its essence and a blatant expression of the suffering of its people<sup>20</sup>.

### **Conclusion**

Summarizing our examination and completing our analysis of the topic we draw the following conclusions. It is obvious fact among scientific cycles and research communities that Iran-Israel confrontation in Syria has a long history, hence, Syrian front is strategically crucial for the both sides in terms of military calculations and strategic depth. Since Syrian Arab Army has been fighting civil war in Syrian soil since 2011 and is lacking serious combat-ability at this moment to directly involve in the Israel-Hamas war, President Al-Assad's speech at the Arab-Muslim summit sounded quite pragmatic in terms of real politics. Iran keeps maintaining supply chains of arms transferring from Iraq through Syria to Hezbollah as the end user in Lebanon. While Israel and the US will continue to carry out airstrikes against critical military infrastructure based mainly in Eastern Syria and used by Iranian military. This war will reshape the security architecture across the Middle East, two state solution as a base for the resolution of Israeli-Palestinian conflict is endangered greatly, since Israeli side considers that in case there is a proper state of Palestine, the threat to the State of Israel will become graver. Israeli government will recalibrate their security and foreign policy towards Palestinians and regional Arab States. The lesson that Israelis take from Hamas's attack might be that more security is needed and that West Bank Palestinians need to be kept under even tighter control. There is no end in sight to Israel-Hamas war in Gaza. Several open questions, which need rational answers, abound, for instance, what type of leadership will be needed to broker

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<sup>19</sup> 9459<sup>th</sup> Security Council Meetings Coverage, SC/15470, October 30, 2023. <https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15470.doc.htm> (10.11.2023).

<sup>20</sup> President al-Assad: Gaza was never the issue; it is all about the Palestinian Cause and Gaza is an embodiment of its essence. Syrian Arab News Agency, November 11, 2023, <https://sana.sy/en/?p=320077> (15.11.2023).

any type of lasting peace. At this historical moment, the task for Israel is not just addressing the security failures that preceded October 7, but offering a political future that both Israelis and Palestinians will support.

## 2023 ԹՎԱԿԱՆԻ ԻՍՐԱՅԵԼ-ՀԱՄԱՍ ՊԱՏԵՐԱԶՄԻ ՆԿԱՏՄԱՄԲ

### ՄԻՐԻԱԿԱՆ ՀԵՌԱՆԿԱՐԻ ՇՈՒՐՋ

*Գրիգոր Վարդանյան*<sup>21</sup>

Գազայում հակամարտող կողմերի համար սիրիական ճակատը ռազմավարական նշանակություն ունի ռազմական հաշվարկների և ռազմավարական խորության տեսանկյունից: Այս պատերազմը դեֆորմացնում է անվտանգության ճարտարապետությունը ողջ Մերձավոր Արևելքում, իսրայելապաղեստինյան հակամարտության լուծման «երկու պետություն» կարգավորման ձևը, թերևս, կորցնում է իր նշանակությունը: Այս ուսումնասիրությունը նպատակ ունի բացահայտելու Սիրիայի հնարավոր ներգրավվածությունը Իսրայել-Համաս պատերազմին: Անդրադարձ է կատարվում Իսրայել-Համաս պատերազմի վերաբերյալ սիրիական դիրքորոշման տարբեր ասպեկտներին: Հնարավորինս բացահայտվում են սիրիական հասարակության տարբեր դիրքորոշումների հիմնական միտումները Գազայի հատվածում պատերազմի նկատմամբ: Ներկայացնելով տարբեր փորձագետների և հետազոտողների վերլուծությունները՝ փորձ է արվում համապարփակ անդրադառնալ Սիրիայի հնարավոր ներգրավվածությանը Գազայի պատերազմին:

***Բանալի բառեր***՝ Գազայի հատված, Իսրայելի պաշտպանության ուժեր (IDF), «Ալ-Ակսայի ջրհեղեղ» օպերացիա, Բաշար ալ-Ասադ, Դամասկոսի միջազգային օդանավակայան:

<sup>21</sup> Գրիգոր Վարդանյանը ՀՀ ԳԱԱ Արևելագիտության ինստիտուտի ավագ գիտաշխատող է, պ.գ.թ.: Էլ. փոստի հասցե՝ vardanyangrigor3@gmail.com ORCID: 0009-0004-9828-7923:

## О СИРИЙСКИХ ПЕРСПЕКТИВАХ ВОЙНЫ ИЗРАИЛЬ-ХАМАС В 2023 ГОДУ

Григор Варданян<sup>22</sup>

Сирийский фронт имеет стратегическое значение с точки зрения военных расчетов и стратегической глубины для противоборствующих сторон в секторе Газа. Эта война деформирует архитектуру безопасности на Ближнем Востоке. Формат решения израильско-палестинского конфликта «два государства» постепенно теряет свое значение. Целью данного исследования является выявление возможного участия Сирии в войне между Хамас и Израилем, а также рассмотрение различных аспектов позиции Сирии по войне между Хамас и Израилем. Раскрыты основные тенденции различных позиций сирийского общества по отношению к войне в секторе Газа. Представлен анализ мнений различных экспертов и исследователей, сделана попытка комплексно рассмотреть возможное участие Сирии в войне в секторе Газа.

**Ключевые слова:** Сектор Газа, Армия обороны Израиля (ЦАХАЛ), Операция «Наводнение Аль-Акса», Башар Асад, Международный Аэропорт Дамаска

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