

# Syrian Opposition Leader Wants To Normalize Relations With Israel

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Fahad Almasri, the leader of the National Salvation Front – an opposition group in Syria – who has lived in France for 24 years, in mid-May spoke openly to The Media Line about relations with Israel in a post-Assad Syria.

His story can [be found here](#):

*“Though most Syrians oppose normalizing relations with Israel and reject efforts toward establishing diplomatic ties, that has not stopped Syrian opposition leader Fahad Almasri from seeking an opportunity to open communication channels with Israel.*

*“Almasri, founder and leader of the National Salvation Front in Syria (NSF), told The Media Line that he would like the Syrian and Israeli people to live side-by-side in peace and to become business partners. He describes himself as a staunch opponent of Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad and an alternative leader to Assad’s rule.*

*“We have the courage and the open political vision. The reason is: the... change that has occurred in Syrian society. [This change] led to the reevaluation of all concepts and values and the fall of slogans,” Almasri says.*

Almasri is no doubt impressed with Israel’s tremendous economic success, especially as the “Start-Up Nation,” capable of competing in high tech as an equal to such nations as France, Germany, and the U.K. A Syrian patriot, Almasri sees Israel as a conceivable business partner.

*“Syria and Israel are technically in a state of war since 1948, and the two countries have never established diplomatic relations. Following Israel’s War of Independence, the two have faced off in two additional wars, the first in 1967 and the second in 1973.*

*“Almasri says the time has come for this to change.*

*“We must recognize that Israel is an important regional state, a fact that exists whether recognized by regional and Arab parties or not. Israel is an internationally recognized state and is supported by all the nations of the world,” he told The Media Line.*

It’s not quite true that Israel is “supported by all the nations of the world.” But it is true that Israel is recognized by almost all the non-Muslim nations, that it is supported –to the hilt – by the most important nation, the United States, that even several Muslim states, including Oman

and Chad, have reached out to Israel (with Chad re-establishing diplomatic relations that had ended in 1972), and that Israel, which has the most powerful military in the Middle East, already collaborates closely on intelligence with three of the most important Arab countries – Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates – – that share Israel's hostility to Hamas, the Islamic State, and Iran.

*“Syria has always championed the Palestinian cause and Damascus has consistently tied the Golan Heights – an area internationally recognized as occupied by Israel – with resolving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. But Almasri says a lot has changed since the eruption of the conflict in Syria in 2011.*

Note what Almasri does not say. He does not repeat the usual Syrian phrases about how the ‘Golan will forever be Syrian territory.’ He does not say anything to reaffirm Syria's commitment to the Palestinian cause. He does say, instead, that “a lot has changed” since 2011, when the civil war in Syria began.

*“After all the destruction that happened in Syria, is the problem of the Syrian people [really] the Palestinian issue, especially since the Palestinians themselves have entered into negotiations with the Israeli state? The Palestinian problem is at another turning point,” he said.*

*He sounds ready to give up altogether on the Palestinian issue,, which is not the “problem of the Syrian people , asking rhetorically if that should be of concern to the Syrian people, when so much of their country has been destroyed, and so much needs to be reconstructed.*

*“Consequently, the Syrian people paid more than 80 years of their livelihood, security, stability and political life, which was absent as a result of slogans and trafficking in the suffering of the Palestinian people.”*

The Syrian participation in every major war against Israel, in 1948-49, 1967, and 1973, has cost it men, money, and materiel. So has its support for various Palestinian terror groups. The Syrian people have sacrificed, during the past 80 years, in damage to their livelihoods, security, stability, and political life" in order to attend to the Palestinian issue. Almasri thinks that has been quite enough. As far as he is concerned, Syria need sacrifice no more; the Palestinians are on their own. Syria has paid heavily and what has it gotten in return from the Palestinians? Nothing. Almasri, the leader of an opposition group, must be inwardly enraged that most Palestinians have supported Assad in the civil war, no doubt because of Syria's support for the Palestinian cause, but that Palestinian support is regarded as a sign of colossal ingratitude to the Syrian people who fought for eight years against the Assad regime's dictatorship.

*"A Palestinian official who asked to remain anonymous due to the sensitivity of the matter told The Media Line that the Palestinian leadership had a good relationship with Damascus and don't want to spoil it. But he was critical of Almasri."*

*."These are groups created by Israel and the United States that have a relationship with them," the Palestinian official said. "These groups, which call themselves the opposition, are part of a project hostile to Arab causes and have reached the level of agents for the occupation. The Palestinians want a strong and united Syria, and Syria will emerge from its crisis as soon as possible."*

This conspiracy theorist, unwilling to concede that, as a Syrian nationalist, Almasri might indeed have good reason to have lost interest in the endless Palestinian problem, chooses to believe that he and his opposition group were created by "Israel and the United States." One more preposterous conspiracy theory; it's too painful for that Palestinian to recognize that Almasri, and many others in the Syrian

opposition, are fed up with the Palestinians and want to focus solely on rebuilding their nation. Israel and the United States have nothing to do with it.

*"Last month, Almasri's group launched the national initiative "Hope," calling on the Israeli government to ease travel restrictions on the Syrian Druze in the Golan Heights to visit relatives in Syria as part of a more comprehensive plan.*

*"In the first phase... the people of the Golan have to come to Syria. In the second stage of the initiative, the Jewish Syrians, whether they live in Israel and hold Israeli identity or live in the Diaspora, have the right to visit their country and take care of their property and their cultural, historical and humanitarian heritage in Syria," Almasri told The Media Line. "The ball is now in the Israeli court."*

What is of note here is that Almasri is not asking that Israel give up any part of the Golan; he merely wants the Druze on the Golan to be able to visit their relatives in Syria. And he would like Syrian Jews living in Israel and elsewhere in the West to be able to visit Syria, to "take care of their property and their cultural, historical, and humanitarian heritage." He is recognizing, it seems, that Jews left behind considerable property when they fled Syria, and it sounds as if he thinks they have a right to have it restored to them (else why would he write that they will be able to "take care of their property"?). He also recognizes that Syrian Jews left their mark on the country, with their "cultural, historical, and humanitarian heritage." While some Muslims would undoubtedly wish to deny any cultural or historical contributions by Jews to Syria, and would willingly destroy all remaining physical evidence of Syrian Jewry, Almasri is hoping that these former Syrian Jews and their descendants will return to "take care" – that is, to pay for the

restoration and upkeep of former Jewish buildings: synagogues, libraries, community centers, even houses of prominent Syrian Jews. He would like the history of Syria's Jews to be preserved, not destroyed, and he is making an appeal for support of this task to the Syrian Jews who left the country, and to their descendants.

*'The Syrian opposition figure says he is in touch with Sheikh Mowafaq Tarif, the spiritual leader of the Druze community in Israel.*

*"Tarif told The Media Line that he's a religious man and doesn't "interfere" in Syria's internal politics, but he did support the initiative put forth by the NSF.*

*"These are humanitarian requests to help the Syrians in the Golan Heights contact their families in Syria just like it was before the war. We are fully behind it," Tarif said.*

*"Almasri also claims that his group has been in direct communication with Israeli officials. In fact, he says that a delegation from his group was in Israel during the week of May 6, meeting with Israelis.*

*"We sent a message to the Israeli government and to [Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin] Netanyahu," he stated. "We hope that this initiative will receive the attention of Mr. Netanyahu because it will be an initial humanitarian initiative toward the rapprochement between Syria and Israel."*

*Almasri says he is also in close contact with Israel Katz, Israeli minister of transportation, minister of intelligence and acting foreign minister. The goal of the meeting was to establish close relations with the Israeli government, he said.*

*"We want to search for the strategic interests of the Syrian people, and the strategic interests of the Syrian people require [us] to enter into understandings with the Israeli*

*state for the benefit of the Syrian people. The Syrian people want peace, they want to live in safety, they want a broad horizon for development, they want to rebuild Syria," he stated.*

The Syrian people for 80 years sacrificed their wellbeing on the altar of the Palestinian cause. Now, according to Almasri, they want little to do with it. Emerging from a civil war, they want "peace" and to "live in safety" – which includes not just an end to the civil war, but also no more wars with Israel – and want a "broad horizon for development." This surely includes the possibility of economic development through cooperation with Israel, which has the most advanced economy in the entire region. All this is what the "strategic interests" of the Syrian people require.

*"Almasri also claims he met in Paris with Yuval Rabin, chairman of the Israeli Peace Initiative and son of assassinated prime minister Yitzhak Rabin. He says these meetings are just an example of many he regularly holds with Israeli officials, discussing numerous topics, among them Iran, the Palestinians and terrorism.*

*'Normalization between Arab states and Israel is a touchy subject. Egypt and Jordan are the only Arab states that have peace treaties and diplomatic ties with Israel, and Almasri knows his attempts at forging relations with a state that many Arabs still view as an enemy will not sit well with them.*

*"We do not care about the criticism of others; we are concerned about the strategic interest of the Syrian people," he told The Media Line. "The Syrian people have been left to kill and slaughter [each other] for more than eight years, and the Arab countries are all watching and investing in Syrian blood, and have contributed to the continuation of this tragedy and turned it into a war of attrition."*

*"The Media Line reached out to the Israeli Prime Minister's Office and the country's Foreign Ministry for a response. Both declined to speak on the matter, saying instead in a text message: "We are not making any comments on the issue to the media."*

*"Almasri says he won't stop till he meets with the Israeli prime minister, and he has a message for him.*

*"We say to Mr. Binyamin Netanyahu that we congratulate you on your victory once again with the confidence of the Israeli people. With the beginning of your mandate, we hope for your new government to have a new, courageous and constructive regional vision toward Syria and the Syrian people," Almasri said.*

*"Still, he admits he doesn't speak for all Syrians and that the idea of having contact with Israel is controversial for many. But Almasri says he has a vision for a future Syria. In order for that vision to become a reality, he said, the eight-year conflict must end and reconciliation needs to take place.*

And he foresees the possibility of turning Syria, a "confrontation" state against Israel since 1948, for 80 years implacable in its enmity, into a peaceful neighbor of the Jewish state, eager to collaborate with it in economic development.. And the first step would be inviting Syrian Jews and their descendants to take part in restoring their "cultural, historic, and humanitarian heritage"— a recognition that Jews have been an important part of Syria's history for two millennia.

Al Masri is a Syrian patriot, aghast at what has been done to his country during the civil war, and horrified, too, at what Syria has sacrificed for the Palestinian cause over the past 80 years. He keeps stressing that a "turning point" has been reached with the Palestinians, meaning that Syria will no



longer allow itself to be railroaded into further sacrificing for the Palestinian cause. As a Syrian patriot, Almasri sees Israel not as a permanent enemy, but as a potential business partner for Syria. He's aware that many Syrians, raised on a steady diet of anti-Israel propaganda their entire lives, may have difficulty accepting what he sees as a commonsensical approach to Syria's successful, powerful, dynamic, and potentially most helpful southern neighbor. Nonetheless, he remains sanguine about the future acceptance by Syrians of such a policy. The 80 years of sacrifice for the Palestinians have brought Syrians only expense, defeat, humiliation, and misery. Now it's time to try something new, Almasri suggests, a distancing from the Palestinian issue, and a rapprochement with Israel, for the sake of the Syrians themselves.

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