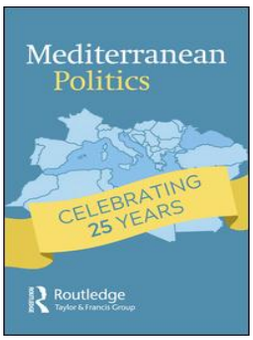

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ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/fmed20

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To cite this article: Beata Paragi (2021): Israeli cross-border assistance to Syrians: Creating bonds by giving?, Mediterranean Politics, DOI: 10.1080/13629395.2021.1935597

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2021.1935597

Published online: 06 Jun 2021.

MEDITERRANEAN POLITICS
https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2021.1935597

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Israeli cross-border assistance to Syrians: Creating bonds by giving?

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ABSTRACT

The relations between Israel and Syria are usually framed in the context of war and conflict. It is less known, however, that Israel provided humanitarian assistance to Syrians residing in the Al-Qunaytirah region from 2012/2013 to 2018. The purpose of this article is to explore if humanitarian goods and medical services from Israel and return gifts the Syrian side can be interpreted gift exchange in Maussan terms, the theoretical purpose of which is substituting war and establishing friendly relations between enemies. The argument is based on the content analysis of primary and secondary sources, a visual material, and interviews with key informants. Findings indicate that cross-border exchanges offered a way, even if temporarily, out of the reproduction of hostility in the direct vicinity of the border.

KEYWORDS Gift exchange; humanitarian assistance; Israel; operation good neighbour; Syrian war

Introduction

The international community is expected to assist countries and societies in need in strengthening their capacity in disaster prevention and mitigation. Humanitarian assistance, being of cardinal importance for the victims of disasters and other emergencies, must be provided in accordance with the principles of neutrality, impartiality, independence, and humanity on the premises of human rights law and international humanitarian law. Yet, humanitarian assistance is not free of controversies and ambiguities. A core question is if it can also be used as a political instrument assuring peace, stability and preventing violence.

The Syrian war and the related refugee crisis (Baczko et al., 2018; Beaujouan & Rasheed, 2019; Brown, 2018; Doocy et al., 2015; Harris, 2018; Hinnebusch & Saouli, 2019; Ma'oz, 1995; Moodrick-Even Khen & Boms, 2020; Sorenson, 2016; Van Dam, 2017) led to the massive inflow of humanitarian assistance from regional and international actors. Being a neighbouring country, even if officially in a state of war (GoI MFA, 1999; Ma'oz, 1995; Shalev, 1994/2019), Israel also provided assistance to Syrian civilians from 2013 to 2018. The operation,

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managed by the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF, Israeli army), was deemed unique on two counts. First, officially there is a state of war between Syria and Israel. Second, the endeavour would not have been possible without the coordinated solidarity demonstrated by various Israeli actors and Syrians' courage to accept Israeli gifts.

Medical staff was called upon to help Syrian civilians by Brundtland et al. (2013) and Israeli doctors responded positively. Exploring Israeli medical relief as 'a unique form of humanitarian assistance' that 'trumped politics,' Zarka et al. (2018, p. 2–4)[1] claimed that the four humanitarian principles were fulfiled. However, as a closer look at Operation Good Neighbour (OGN) reveals, the Israeli army played a major, that is, political role in a humanitarian operation that was widely portrayed as 'doctors' diplomacy' (Dekel et al., 2016). OGN was established with the aim of providing 'humanitarian aid to as many people as possible while maintaining Israel's policy of non-involvement in the [Syrian] conflict' (IDF, 2017; Zisser, 2021). Medical and humanitarian assistance obviously mitigated the suffering of Syrians, but did it also function as a 'Maussan gift'? Has it mitigated violence over the border, while simultaneously contributed to any Syrian dependence on Israel? Or, to put it in another way, did Israel engaged in a gift exchange by accepting favours from Syrians to ensure stability and prevent the escalation of violence over the border?

The primary purpose of humanitarian assistance is to save lives and mitigate suffering, not without ethical dilemmas though. Charity gift illustrates well that 'gifts are by no means neutral and not without danger' (Pyyhtinen, 2014, p. 101). The dilemmas and criticisms concerning aid, actors, activities, interventions, and non-intended consequences offered in conflict-related situations are diverse (Barnett & Weiss, 2008; Chatterjee, 2004; Duffield, 2001, 2007; Fox, 2002; Kennedy, 2004; Rieff, 2002). While humanitarian aid and 'securitized' development activities may contribute to prolonging conflicts, wars or other emergency situations, they may also foster stability and peace in other cases.

There is a rich set of literature comparing development aid to ancient gifts by applying Marcel Mauss ([1925] 2002) theory on gift exchange to contemporary aid relations emphasizing that unilateral gifts can also be included in the analysis. Even if the statistical definition of official development assistance includes emergency and humanitarian aid, the 'aid as gift' argument is usually limited to development or economic assistance and evolves around the notion of symbolic dominance (Hattori, 2001). Yet, although the analysis of humanitarian assistance is usually left out of 'gift as aid' literature, 'development cooperation' can be interpreted in different ways from various perspectives. In practice, the concept usually includes 'grants, loans, lines of credit, debt cancellation, studentships and technical training, resource-for-infrastructure swaps, the provision of doctors, nurses and other skilled professionals, *humanitarian relief* and so on' (Mawdsley, 2011, p. 257). The purpose of this article is

to explore if and how Mauss' theory on gift exchange can be applied to humanitarian goods and services transferred over the Israeli-Syrian border.[2]

Research materials, methods, and structure

There are themes inherently linked in gifts and giving, such as freedom and obligation, generosity and self-interest (Mauss, [1925] 2002, p. 87). To explore these phenomena in the contemporary context of the Israeli-Syrian interactions, IDF-communications, UNDOF-reports, articles in newspapers and academic journals and policy analyses (Al-Tamimi, 2017; Boms, 2017, 2020; Dekel et al., 2016, pp. 72–77; Hanauer, 2016; ICG, 2018b; Levy, 2019; Tsurkov, 2018a, 2018b; Zisser, 2021) were processed and complemented with interviews with key informants, some earlier field observations, a visual material (UVDA, 2019)[3] and an online webinar with Syrian guests (Hiwar Forum, 2020). Primary and secondary sources were combined by means of content analysis (Hermann, 2008).

Altogether 12 unstructured interviews, rather conversations, were conducted with 10 Israeli individuals that either participated in or witnessed the cross-border exchanges (Table 1). As a first step, two respondents were selected within my network and two informants were approached by simple email-inquiry. The other six interviewees were recommended by my initial informants (snowball-sampling with small *n*).

The interviews arranged online in August and September 2020, lasted about 30–60 minutes. As the interviews were not recorded, only notes were taken, the initial manuscript was shared by four key informants for further comments in October 2020. Their comments led to minor corrections in the initial manuscript. While some of the informants were employed by the State of Israel from 2013 to 2018, others acted at their own capacities (activists, managers representing NGOs). Their relation to the state of Israel varied and their room of manoeuvre was obviously regulated by Israel, which implies that the research was guided by two modalities of ethics: EU research ethics and citizenship loyalty. This latter can be illustrated by the following words: 'look, we, especially, if we serve(d) in the army are loyal to Israel, hence, we know what we can say to you or to anyone else publicly'.[4] While this understanding made any informed consent to be signed unnecessary, an info sheet elaborating on the research purpose and methods was shared before the interviews.

Table 1. Participant demographics.

gender (*n*)	female (2)	male (8)	
age, est. (*n*)	20–40 (2)	40–60 (7)	60+ (1)
ethnicity (*n*)	Israeli Jew (9)	Israeli Arab (1)	
employment and affiliation (*n*)	former officers, IDF (4)	medical staff, public hospital (3)	civil society and academic sector (3)

The Syrian opposition in the area disintegrated in 2018. Rebels, doctors, civilians were either killed or forced to flee from South-Western Syria; hence, arranging interviews with them was not ambitioned.[5] However, a Hiwar Forum (2020) hosting two Syrians that worked in the area and ICG-reports (2018a, 2018b) were used to fill this gap. In similar vein, an Israeli documentary (UVDA, 2019) was used to approximate the motives and concerns of the Israeli intelligence community and to reconstruct their cooperation with Syrian rebels before 2016.

The article unfolds by introducing the conceptual framework of gift exchange in the next section. The contemporary context, that is, the humanitarian situation in the Golan (Jawlan Height) and Al-Qunaytirah region and the essence of Operation Good Neighbour is summarized in a nutshell in the fourth part, which is followed by a discussion on the 'gifts' in the Discussion part. As argued in the Conclusion, Israeli humanitarian assistance, offered a way, even if temporarily and partially, out of the reproduction of violence on the Syrian side of the border.

Theoretical framework: Gift exchange in contemporary aid relations

Gift exchange conceptualized by Marcel Mauss ([1925] 2002) is understood as a special form of exchange entailing reciprocity obligations and regulating power dynamics between actors. According to Mauss' observations, gift exchange among archaic communities is composed of three elements: the obligation to give, to receive and to return (Mauss [1925] 2002, pp. 52–55). If all these three elements are present, not only mutual trust develops and relations are maintained between communities, but community leaders can also maintain their ranks and reputation over their 'tribe and village' (Mauss, [1925] 2002, p. 50).

Mauss' gift involves both the object and the relation established by the given thing: the bond between the donor and the donee is established by the movement or transfer of gift (Pyyhtinen, 2014, p. 60). It implies that the meaning of gift significantly depends on the nature of relations between the giver and the recipient (Pyyhtinen, 2014, p. 60). Unlike in monetary or barter transactions, neither prompt exchange is expected nor prices set are typical in gift relations. It is up to the receiver how the gift – the object and relation – is honoured as the essence of gift exchange is interaction. Reciprocal gift exchange provides a possibility of forming a lasting relation by allowing sides 'to oppose and to give to one another without sacrificing themselves to one another' (Mauss, [1925] 2002, p. 106). Citing Mauss ([1925] 2002, p. 106), it is a lesson to be learnt also 'in our so-called civilized world, [by] classes and nations and individuals . . . for it is one of the enduring secrets of [. . .] wisdom and solidarity.'

Indeed, Mauss' theory on gift exchange has also been applied to contemporary international relations (Dillion, 1968/2009; Heins et al., 2018). The understanding 'foreign aid as gift' also inspired a broad range of scholars to discuss development aid and global solidarity movements from critical perspectives (Eyben, 2006; Furia, 2015; Hattori, 2001, 2006; Kapoor, 2008, pp. -79–91; Mawdsley, 2011). Common in their approach is that the rationale of foreign (development) social and political relationships between the donor and recipient established by giving (Eyben, 2006; Furia, 2015, pp. 11–21).

Humanitarian aid is perhaps the purest disinterested, albeit non-Maussan gift – at least at normative level – as it is supposed to be a unilateral grant without reciprocity expectations. Although humanitarian activities should comply with the humanitarian principles, it has also long been acknowledged that they are immune neither to political influence nor to political analysis. Due to the security problems affecting many countries in the Global South, aid recipients are seen as potentially dangerous 'social bodies' and they are constructed as 'things to be reformed' or supported by foreign gifts (Duffield, 2001 as cited in Furia, 2015, pp. 59–60; Duffield, 2007). Various humanitarian organizations implementing aid policies are also political as long as 'they compete for annual aid budget . . . ; their policies are moulded by states; their actions can inadvertently fuel conflicts or sustain genocidal movements; they can provide a fig leaf for the inefficacy of politicians' (as cited in Benthall & Bellion-Jourdan, 2009, p. 6). As implied, humanitarian aid, interpreted as gift, may assure peace and protection from violence – but it may also spark violence depending on the nature of relations embodied in the gift. The Middle East is not an exception (Watenpaugh, 2015).

The context: The humanitarian situation and the establishment of OGN

From about 2012/2013 to summer 2018, the consequences of the Syrian civil war contributed to the development of an unusual alliance between Israel and Syrian opposition actors. Acknowledging that Israel has not been an official belligerent in the war (Al-nashef & Winter, 2016; Boms, 2017, 2020; Hanauer, 2016; Zisser, 2021) and the Syrian opposition pursued objectives that were distinct from any (covert) cooperation with Israel an in-depth discussion of the complex political interests is beyond the scope of this section. The purpose here is to provide only a brief account of the humanitarian situation on the Syrian side of the border, known as Golan in Israel and Al-Qunaytirah in Syria.

Al-Qunaytirah and al-Suwaydah provinces in Southern Syria witnessed lower levels of violence and conflict mortality from 2011 until 2013–2014 and hosted relatively small IDP populations. After the UNDOF, separating Israel and Syria since 1974, had to relocate to the Israeli side of the

demilitarized zone for security reasons in 2014,[6] Israel became directly bordered by a 'new' Syria, the concerned territory of which (Al-Qunaytirah) was controlled by various non-state actors from 2013/2014 to 2017–2018 (al-Koshak, 2015; Al-Tamimi, 2017). While Israel, officially, adopted a policy of non-intervention vis-à-vis the civil war in Syria[7] and consistently denied it was providing military aid to jihadist groups during the early years (Dekel et al., 2016, p. 19; ICG, 2018a, pp. 2–5; ACAPS, 2018, p. 4), it used various means to protect its interests in the area (Zisser, 2021). Demonstrating more complex interests and less biased thinking towards Israel than the Syrian regime Syrian rebels and opposition forces became partners in exchanges.

The area was never perfectly quiet and clashes between rebels and the Syrian army intensified in 2015 (Al-Qunaytirah offensive). It entailed a marked increase in civilian casualties[8] and lack of adequate services (Doocy et al., 2015). As the UN and international aid groups had limited access to the displaced populations in Golan (Al-Qunaytirah) accepting aid and medical services from Israel (Zisser, 2021, pp. 12–16) seemed to be the only option for these communities, members of rebel groups included, before the Syrian army took over the region again in summer 2018 (Marks & Lang, 2018).

The Israeli involvement in the area can be explained by various factors. First, residents of Northern Israel, NGOs and a handful of activists, however, collected in-kind assistance from Israeli individuals, companies, and overseas donors well before OGN commenced in 2016.[9] These items were transferred to Syria by using border-crossings alternative to the Golan as neither the Israeli army approved the direct delivery of products, nor Syrian civilians were ready to receive gifts from Israel fearing for the consequences. Second, cooperation with Syrians was initiated by intelligence officers that were joined by field commanders working in the area (Zisser, 2021, pp. 10–11). As a result, wounded Syrian rebels were transferred to Israeli hospitals (field hospital, public hospitals) for medical treatment from 2013 to 2016. This latter practice was slowly institutionalized by the army; as trust, however temporarily, developed between the parties, medical treatment was provided to thousands of wounded Syrians in Israeli hospitals (Zarka et al., 2018; Zisser, 2021). The details were not disclosed by the IDF in the first years,[10] but indirect evidence existed in form of articles published in medical journals, by newspaper outlets (Berman, 2013; Kershner, 2014) and by political analysts (Dekel et al., 2016).

The IDF opted for expanding the humanitarian activity in 2016 by making a strategic decision to separate the would-be humanitarian track (Operation Good Neighbour, OGN) from other activities (for example, intelligence work).[11] The sustainability of the IDF's initially tactical, then strategic-level involvement became contingent on a political decision made by the Ministry of Defence and the PM's office,[12] which was the result of various considerations: (i) the experiences gained by an Israeli humanitarian organization

providing aid in other parts of Syria[13]; (ii) the IDF's tactical participation in transferring wounded Syrian patients from the boarder the Israeli hospitals from 2013 to 2016; (iii) a strategic decision to separate humanitarian interactions from intelligence channels within IDF[14] and (iv) political concerns with security risks that prevented alternative solutions, for example, the establishment of refugee camps in Northern Israel. The Israeli government could not say 'yes' to a refugee camp as demanded by residents and civil society actors in Israel, but it could not just keep 'doing nothing.' While the political decision reflected a compromise between these two ends,[15] the first OGN-activities took place in August (Zisser, 2021, pp. 12–15). The humanitarian operation gained wider publicity only in July 2017 when the IDF's public diplomacy unit briefed the Israeli and international press on the establishment of OGN (Elgash, 2017; Gross, 2017; Kershner, 2017). However, the role played by the intelligence unit at the beginning remained classified by the end of OGN (Tsurkov, 2018a, 2018b; UVDA, 2019).

In 2017–2018, the region hosted a mixed presence of various opposition actors (militias backed by Iran, various groups with Islamist ideology, an Islamic State–held enclave bordering Jordan and the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights, the rebel alliance known as Southern Front) and the regime force (Syrian army). To stabilize the situation, Jordan, Russia, and the United States facilitated the establishment of a de-escalation zone inside southwest Syria aiming to prevent violence between the opposition forces and the Syrian government among others (ICG, 2018b; Marks & Lang, 2018). Rebels remained in control of the areas bordering Jordan and Israeli-occupied Golan Heights by Spring 2018, but fights intensified in Southern Syria that year.

According to UN-estimations about 176,000 people have been displaced into Golan/Al-Qunaytirah governorate in June-July 2018 with new arrivals being reported every day (OCHA, 2018a, 2018b). Many moved towards the Golan Heights to remain close to the Israeli border (ACAPS, 2018, p. 2). While the IDF reportedly delivered humanitarian aid to Syrian IDP camps over the border until the last minute and facilitated the evacuation of the White Helmets activists (Bar'el, 2018; Hubbard, 2018), Israel did not allow displaced Syrians to enter into Israeli-controlled territory. The failure of truce negotiations and the collapse of the de-escalation zone enabled the Syrian Army to regain control over Golan/Al-Qunaytirah (ACAPS, 2018, p. 2; Zisser, 2021, pp. 15–18). Since July 2018, the population has been living under the jurisdiction of the Syrian government again with the UNDOF-border between Israel and Syria restored.

Findings and discussion

'You prevent attacks against us and in return

> we will provide infrastructure and humanitarian aid
>
> when your people are attacked by al-Asad;
>
> it was not long before almost every village, every tribe, agreed.'
>
> (cited by Schrauger, 2020)

The purely altruistic dimension of Israel's assistance has been questioned from various perspectives over the years, but not the very fact of assistance provided. This section offers an analysis of the *objects or services* exchanged between the two communities and the *relations* established from 2013 to 2018. Even if my interviews with various Israeli actors clearly indicated that distinguishing individual-level motives from macro-level political interests is of utmost importance to understand the interactions, the Maussan exchange is to be interpreted not between individuals but between groups or communities. Due to the principle of reciprocity, described as a 'between' relation by Sahlins (1972, p. 170) the separate parties engaging in gift exchange do not resolve within any higher unity and '[t]he groups allied by exchange each retain their strength, if not the inclination to use it'. The sides are bound by a 'magical force' and a 'burden attached' embodied in or represented by the given thing (Mauss, [1925] 2002, pp. 48; 53). As Marcel Hénaff (2010, p. 126) argued, the implication the donor in the thing given involves 'a transfer of soul and of substantial presence':

> The entire network of gift exchange consists of the fact that everyone must place something of himself at risk *outside of his own place* and receive something from others *within its own space*.

Accepting the gift equals to accepting the challenge of risks as to refrain from giving, accepting and reciprocating is to lose rank both withing and across communities as it prompts that one is not equal (Mauss, [1925] 2002, p. 53). As discussed in the next sections, Syrian patients placed their own bodies outside their own (Syrian) space and also accepted Israeli gifts (objects) within Syrian space. Israel received Syrian patients within its own territory and established a security zone in Southern Syria (Zisser, 2021, pp. 5–15) by 'commissioning' rebels to prevent attacks against Israel from within Syria.

Communities involved

The Syrian government and the National Coalition have publicly characterized the Israeli assistance as a cynical exploitation of the Syrian plight and a useless attempt to improve its image (as cited in Dekel et al., 2016, p. 75). Therefore, actors in North-Eastern Israel could engage in exchanges only with the local population and rebels in South-Western Syria. While Israel gained rich experiences in distinguishing local communities from national

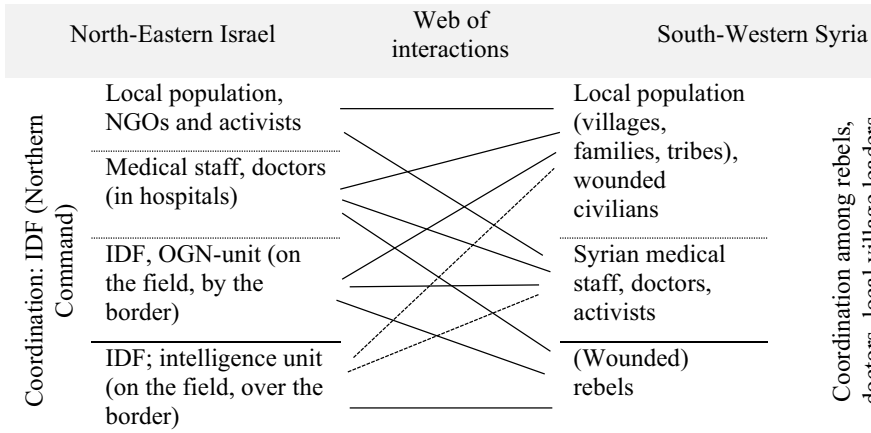

Figure 1. Web of interactions among Israelis and Syrians (2013–2018).

governments,[16] the rebel-held Syrian areas turned out to be 'minority' in political, not in ethnic or religious terms.

The exchanges of services, humanitarian aid included, was the result of direct and indirect cooperation between the Israeli side (composed of the IDF's Northern command, Israeli doctors, a few NGOs on the Israeli side) and various actors (rebels, local population and families, doctors, activists) residing rein South-Western Syria (Figure 1):

Not all interaction illustrated by a line in Figure 1 meant direct exchange and the sub-communities[17] interacting vertically with each other were not necessarily aware of others' involvement in the early years. Israel activists and volunteers collecting donations could not meet the population inside Syria, except for confidential cases. The Israeli medical staff treated Syrian patients without having been briefed on the actions of and role played by the intelligence unit. Wounded Syrians were mostly transferred from the border by medical ambulances, but the IDF occasionally also used special units and helicopters.[18] Whether they were rebels or civilians were not asked upon arrival by doctors treating them, but in the first years (2013–2015) only combatants with gun shots were treated.[19] In some cases, doctors received the medical records only to arrange special assistance ahead of their arrival and surgeries, but cooperation between Israeli and Syrian doctors was constrained by the circumstances[20]:

> [At Ziv] we hosted at least one 'training session' for [Syrian] surgeons. There was also a doctor who regularly accompanied the non-wounded children. He was the liaison person with the army and provided us with information about what illnesses the children might have (often inaccurate). [From 2016 to 2018] it became increasingly easy to arrange return visits to Israel by the wounded

> patients discharged back to Syria and also return visits for the non-wounded children to follow up on tests or treatment that we started. This suggests close cooperation and coordination between the army and the medical services in the rebel provinces adjacent to Israel.

As prompted by the quote above, the IDF played a major role in coordinating the humanitarian activities both within Israel and vis-à-vis the Syrian side. The cross-border relations, however, were by no means regulated by an overarching authority which is typical in gift exchange (Heins et al., 2018, p. 4). The interactions were not guided by any internationally binding bilateral agreement signed. The rules of the game developed gradually. As a former intelligence officer, Marco Moreno and the former head of the Northern Command, Yair Golan, explained to the UVDA-reporter (2019, p. 7:30, 22:17) in such conversations 'both sides understand what is happening, but don't say it loud . . . relationships were created here based on trust [by creating] a web of interactions and very brave communications' with various people Israeli officers met on the border. Relations expanded gradually as Syrian rebels passed the information further within their own networks (UVDA, 2019, p. 22:40).

Although mapping the perceptions of the rebel groups was not the objective of this research, indirect evidence demonstrates that not only Syrian rebels (UVDA, 2019, p. 22:30), but also political activists expressed their admiration as early as 2015 and 2016 (Jones, Raydan, & Ma'ayeh, 2017; Lake, 2016). The 'decisiveness, consistency, and reliability' of Israel's provision of humanitarian aid was acknowledged both openly and in private conversations by Syrians in hindsight too (Dekel et al., 2016, p. 75; Hiwar Forum, 2020). If humanitarian measures served to develop unofficial channels with the purpose of 'breaking the ice between Israel and military and civilian Syrian actors' (Dekel et al., 2016, pp. 75, see also UVDA, 2019), the establishment of these unofficial channels may be considered as bonds emerging between (former) enemies in Maussan terms.

Objects and services exchanged across the border

If Mauss demonstrated clearly how the bond emerges through passing of the gift in various communities (Mauss, ([1925] 2002; Pyyhtinen, 2014, p. 58), Israeli assistance transferred to the Syrian side and Syrian favours provided in exchange for it contributed to bonds emerging over the border (Hiwar Forum, 2020; Lake, 2016; UVDA, 2019). In other words, the exchanged objects played a major role in certain group-formation, however fluid and weak the bond proved to be in the longer run.

Israeli gifts

Various mobile hospital units, chief among them a military field hospital (Blue Purple) was set up on the border by the Israeli army in early 2013. Although it was closed in late 2014 or early 2015 (Zisser, 2021, p. 10), thousands of Syrians were treated at another field hospital Mazor Ladach (opened in September 2016, closed in Summer 2018) operated by IDF medical staff and volunteers from the US. (Friendship Unlimited) (IDF, 2017; ToI, 2018). Further medical treatment was provided to wounded Syrians rebels and civilians in Israeli hospitals. While before 2016 mostly wounded Syrian combatants and civilians were treated, patients with chronic illnesses were also offered medical assistance from 2016 to 2018.

Within the framework of OGN (2016–2018), the IDF facilitated the transfer of equipment and humanitarian items worth nearly 150 USD m (NIS500m) on the one hand and transported thousands of Syrians to Israeli hospitals on the other hand by 'opening the fence' about 700 times, 300 of which took place before July 2017[21] (Alt Miller, 2020). Roughly 7000 Syrians, 2000 of them children, were hosted in four Israeli public hospitals (Safed, Nahariya, Tiberias and Haifa). About two-thirds of the Syrians were taken to Nahariya for it had a neuro-surgery department and roughly one-third of the patients were combatants over the years.[22] From 2016 to 2018 about 25 children accompanied by their caretakers could cross the border on a weekly basis; they were transported to Israeli hospitals by the IDF.[23] Patients were selected by the Syrian side. The expenses, according to my sources, were covered by the State of Israel and private donations; rumours about funds from the Gulf states also prevailed.

As the capacities were limited and the primary beneficiaries, residents in southwestern Syria, could not have been reached by UN agencies or international aid organizations either (ACAPS, 2018, p. 5), Israel also transferred 'infrastructural' and 'civilian assistance to more than 200,000 Syrians living close to the Israeli border inside or outside camps (see Table 2).

Medical treatment in hospitals could be complemented only by a gradual provision of medicine and various kinds of medical supplies[24] collected mostly by Israeli NGOs and transferred to the border by the IDF from 2016 to 2018. As trust increased, a maternity ward with two surgery rooms, delivery rooms and incubators ('Breka hospital') could also be established in Syria (Al-Qunaytirah). While the infrastructure was provided by IDF, an Israeli NGO collected local and overseas donations to provide furniture and equipment, illustrating cooperation both within and between communities.[25]

As Dekel et al. (2016) argued, the provision of humanitarian aid has served as a notably effective tool giving Israel significant yield in exchange for controlled risks. Indeed, the altruistic and 'purely humanitarian' motives behind OGN came to be questioned gradually as rumours indicated that 'gifts' not only of humanitarian nature were shared.

Considering its initial humanitarian involvement as a 'tactical response',[26] the IDF also pursued an alternative, that is, intelligence-gathering logic at strategic level and it also provided other gifts to Syrians. UNDOF-observers as early as 2014 reported that 'armed members of the opposition interacting with IDF across the ceasefire line' (UNDOF, 2014, p. 11). Although it was not easy to reconstruct what really happened over the borders in the shadow of OGN, various sources indicated that material support to certain Syrian rebel groups took the form of light weapons, assault rifles, mortar launchers, transport vehicles and fuel, even cash support (Al-Tamimi, 2017; Boms, 2020, p. 195; Harel, 2018; Jones et al., 2017; Levy, 2019; Tsurkov, 2018a, 2018b; Zisser, 2021, p. 10). Following Tsurkov (2018a, 2018b) Israel's support for the rebels in Golan/Al-Qunaytirah and Dara'a region began in 2013. UNDOF-observations were also documented revealing how IDF personnel passed supplies over the Syrian border to unidentified armed individuals (UNDOF-reports, various). Other sources indicate that Israel provided a salary of some 75 USD a month to rebel fighters and providing groups with weapons and other material (Tsurkov, 2018a, 2018b; ICG, 2018a, pp. 16–18). Israel's direct military support to Syrian opposition groups were officially acknowledged *ex post* in 2019 (Gadi Eisenkot, the IDF's former chief of staff as cited in Levy, 2019). According to investigative articles, weapons were delivered 'through three gates connecting the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights to Syria – the same crossings Israel used to deliver humanitarian aid' (Tsurkov, 2018a, 2018b as cited in Levy, 2019).

Return gifts from the Syrian side

Although neither the Israeli intelligence community nor rebels could be interviewed, alternative sources (Al-Tamimi, 2017; ICG, 2018b; Tsurkov, 2018a, 2018b; UVDA, 2019) prompt that Syrians were by no means passive aid recipients. To honour the medical and humanitarian assistance, rebels receiving treatment secured the stability of the Israeli border from the Syrian side by preventing attacks against Israel from 2013 to 2018 and delivering intelligence information especially in the first years[27] (UVDA, 2019). This latter was obtained by Israel through a network of relations it established by means of giving aid.

Syrian return-gifts, however, were offered and obtained outside the framework of OGN (either before it commenced or in parallel to it) due to a military logic[28]:

> Operation Good Neighbour was purely humanitarian. If I had asked intelligence-like questions from a Syrian mother, the operation would have stopped in the very moment because upon returning to Syria she would have talked about it to the local community and then they would have refused to come.

Table 2. Humanitarian aid channelled by Israeli actors from 2013/2016 to 2018.

Forms and volume of aid	IDF, 2016–2018	IDF, 2013–2018	IFA, 2011–2018*
food aid (flour incl.), tons	1 524	1700	
• *food, blankets and temporary shelters, tons*			1255
• *dry meals, portion*			3.2 million
fuel, litres	947,520	1 100,000	
medical supplies and medicine, units	24,900	26,000	
more than $8 million USD worth of medical equipment			More than $8 million USD
first aid kits for wounded Syrians returning home from medical care in Israel			600
orthopaedic shoes given to alleviate lower limb injuries, pairs of			2000
medical equipment for a maternity ward with 20 beds and two gynaecological operating room Breka Hospital in Southern Syria (to allow safe births and treat rape victims), IFA's hospital			1
Computer equipment to hospitals			9 (hospitals)
generator, pieces	21	20	
diapers, packages	7 933	8200	
diapers, tons			3
tents, pieces	300	630	
baby food, units	54,000	49,000	
baby food, tons			25
clothes, tons	250	350	
• *school backpacks with stationery and school supplies*			600
coats, pieces	7 110		
hygienic products, pieces	13,920		
vehicles, pieces		40	
digital cameras			500
satellite transmitters			*2*
• *training for Syrian firefighters and search and rescue personnel*			300 (Syrians)
• *training for Syrian orthopaedists to use 3-D printers to make prosthetic limbs*			22 (Syrians)
Source of data	IDF PR Office(email, 2018. 07.16.)	Gross (2018)	Israeli Flying Aid (website)

** IFA: channelled through various borders; in cooperation with the IDF: only in case of the Golan/Quneitra*

Sources

Gross (2018).

IDF PR Office (2018).

IFA (2020).

Being a normal way of operation and the division of labour among various IDF units, compartmentalization was needed to maximize the benefits. Even if injured civilians were not used in this context, Israel resorted on alternative channels to interact with the Syrian rebels as confirmed by Yair Golan, the former head of Northern Command (2011–2014) and his intelligence officers (UDVA 2019, 26:30). Following the logic of '*the enemy* of *my enemy is my friend*' Syrian rebels delivered precious information to intelligence units within the IDF, among others, about attacks planned by Syrian fractions along the border fence; the whereabouts of Samir Kuntar, a member of both Hezbollah and the PFLP and even about chemical weapons used against civilians by the Syrian regime (UVDA, 2019; Zisser, 2021, p. 15). Obviously, this latter piece of information was useful not only to Israel but to the wider international community and the United States too (Schrauger, 2020; UVDA, 2019, p. 49:40). These interactions between the IDF and Syrian rebels confirm that relationship between (former) enemies can be maintained only if the principle of reciprocity is observed (see later).

The purposes of exchange

According to Mauss, the purpose of gift exchange between societies is the creation and maintenance of relationships; the redistribution of resources is secondary (Heins et al., 2018, p. 3). The objects circulating give rise to a network of relations (Mauss, ([1925] 2002; Pyyhtinen, 2014, p. 59), which secures stability and prevents violence. If Mauss' gift was deemed 'the primitive analogue of social contract' symbolizing 'alliance, solidarity, communion – in brief, peace' (Sahlins, 1972, p. 169), Israeli gifts confirm the contemporary merit of this logic.

Solidarity with Syrians can be illustrated not only by the civilian 'Just beyond our border' campaign in 2016 but also by uncoordinated and unregulated Israeli gestures. Military officers used their personal mobiles to search for Arabic-speaking cartoons or took toys from their own kids' room so that they could mitigate the fears of Syrian children.[29] In similar vein, hospitals provided Israeli Arab staff that felt as if they served 'family members' to the Syrians and brought copies of Quran to the patients to help them feel secure.[30] An NGO leader[31] described solidarity prevailing in those years in the following way:

> Providing aid to Syrians was not ordinary. Everybody [our staff, volunteers, activists] involved knew we had to do it. [The entire initiative] was somehow greater than us or above us [individuals] in the human sense of urgency and importance … because it was such a horrible situation, and it was our obligation to help.

The IDF tried to secure the goodwill of Syrians residing on the eastern side of the Golan (Dekel et al., 2016, p. 75) acknowledging that the nature and purpose of humanitarian assistance was not simply altruistic, but also utilitarian (Dekel et al., 2016, p. 72). Indeed, embedded in compassion and solidarity Israel's political interests in the Syrian civil war were multiple and ambiguous. It involved among others, the prevention of (i) advanced Syrian weapons, even non-conventional weapons of mass destruction being delivered to or falling into the hands of Hizballah or other terrorist groups, (ii) jihadi elements and terrorist groups (pre-2016 Jabhat al-Nusra; local branches of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) establishing themselves north of the Golan Heights, (iii) Iran using Syria to deflect attention from its nuclear program and (iv) Iran's growing influence in Syria (Caspit, 2014; Zisser, 2013 as cited in Kapusnak, 2015, p. 2).

The humanitarian assistance not only secured a safe zone over the border contributing to the realization of the listed national security interests (UVDA, 2019, p. 22:55; Zisser, 2021), but it also strengthened relations between Israeli and Syrian people (see Figure 1) that mutually considered the community over the border as enemy for decades[32]:

> The environment is rather claustrophobic in Israel in many regards … there is hostility over the borders … and then suddenly something opens up which releases an intense pressure. To meet Syrians, to treat them, to conform them before operation, to have breakfast with them after that … if it was possible than you start thinking about the future in a different way. Maybe he will not hate me, perhaps my son will grow up in a different world … we were privileged that we could do something [by contributing to the development of better relations].

This perception is echoed by those Syrians that could closely witness the cooperation. As a Syrian activist involved in delivering relief to Syrians assessed the significance of OGN in the Middle East in the context of the direct peace negotiations between Israel and Gulf states[33]:

> These are very bright spot in the future of the Middle East, because Israel can offer so much to our [Arab] population [as it was demonstrated in South-Western Syria]'.

Obviously, the Syrian side had its own interests in fighting the governmental forces and interactions with Israel served their goals too (Zisser, 2021, p. 6). Therefore, we may argue that the first (internal, narrow) purpose of exchange has been securing stability over the border: neither Israel wanted Syrian attacks on the border nor the concerned Syrian rebels could afford fighting on two fronts and they needed medical assistance. However, a second (external, broader) purpose can also be identified the extent to which the developing alliance, that is, a temporary emerging relation between 'two

enemies of the same enemy', challenged the common enemy embodied in the Asad-led Syrian regime, Iran and the Hezbollah.

Reciprocity, the separateness of the sides and the time dimension

In the absence of interviews with Syrian rebels, the UVDA-documentary (2019) and anthropological theories describing local habits and customs concerning reciprocity (Chatty, 2017) can be cited to analyse reciprocity. Discussing hospitality, asylum and the duty of *karam* within the context of the Syrian refugee crisis, Chatty (2017, pp. 190–191) leaned on Mauss to argue that 'as with *karam*, gifting creates a relationship and requires a return; [e]xcessive gifting or inappropriate return can result in hostility and insecurity (. . .) generosity and hospitality, of mutuality and solidarity are particularly redolent in the Middle East.' Syrian rebels, satisfied with the medical services received (Dekel et al., 2016; Jones et al., 2017; Lake, 2016; UVDA, 2019), could honour the gift various ways. A typical feature of reciprocal gift exchange is that gifts are offered and passed on without demanding any prompt and direct payment for it – yet, it is in the nature of a gift to impose an obligatory time limit (Mauss, ([1925] 2002, pp. 45–46; Pyyhtinen, 2014, p. 59).

The IDS's Northern Command was at least as cautious at the beginning as the Syrians asking for help. Constant monitoring of the border was part of their daily activities, but if they trusted Syrians they did so because they saw the developments promising and unprecedented (UVDA, 2019). The situation on the ground was complex involving rebel groups, the Free Syrian Army and commprounity leaders fighting Damascus and Iran being obviously interested in assisting Israel and IDF by providing access to intelligence information.[34] It was by no means obvious then, not even to the Northern Command of the IDF, how to harmonize assistance to Syrians with the Israeli security needs simultaneously in the longer run.[35] The time dimension was crucial in building trust even if only temporarily; IDF intelligence officers and Syrian rebels met with shorter or longer intervals, while alternative Syrian forces, potentially hostile towards Israel, were also present in the area (UVDA, 2019, p. 23:30). As one of my respondents[36] described the logic of tacit reciprocity from Israeli perspective:

> It was more like an unwritten agreement . . . a sort of promise to the rebels that Israel will not intervene militarily on the other side of the border . . . if they themselves secure order and stability [in exchange for medical assistance].

Syrian rebels over the border were more in need of medical assistance than of weapons, which was clear for the IDF from the very beginning. Therefore, medical treatment became somehow conditional on intelligence information provided by them – or the way around, intelligence information and secure

borders were exchanged for medical assistance. Even Moshe Ya'alon, defence minister from 2013 to 2016, met Syrian operatives during his tenure (Harel, 2018) indicating that it took time, months and years before the exchange institutionalized (on the Israeli side) by the establishment of OGN.

Discussing the beginning of the Israeli doctors' involvement Dekel et al. (2016, p. 72) referred to 'a local initiative of an IDF officer who picked up a wounded Syrian from the border.' Organized, but undercover medical assistance started in February 2013 in parallel to the intelligence thread when 'seven wounded Syrians arrived at the Israeli border asking for medical treatment … [which was followed by an official Israeli decision] to provide much needed humanitarian aid to those who made it to the border' (Zarka et al., 2014, pp. 71–72, 2018, pp. 1; Zisser, 2021). The first patients were transferred either to a field hospital in 2013–2014 or to Israeli public hospitals later. The operation of the former is a good example of making decision in uncertainty when coordination did not exist between the sides, that is, the medical staff was transported to the hospital only when Syrians showed up.

The developing trust[37] between separate sides can also be demonstrated by observations indicating Syrians arrived at Israeli hospitals with fear in their eyes in the first months. They were raised knowing that Israel was the enemy on the one hand; on the other hand, in many cases not even knowing how they ended up in an Israeli hospital room.[38] Gradually, however, Syrians came to trust Israel as perceptions illustrate[39]:

> The journey the patients and their parents made Israel was dangerous … returning to Syria was equally dangerous as they may have been looked upon as traitor … they arrived with fears in their eyes in the beginning. And when they experienced that they or their children were reasonably well treated … more and more people crossed because they were desperate, and they had no other choice.[40]

Patients' gratitude is well-documented (Dror, 2020; WJC, 2019; Zarka et al., 2018) and confirmed by my interviews with health care staff and former army officers too. And while Syrian patients were regularly visited by Red Cross officers accompanied by Israeli soldiers,[41] the intelligence unit worked on the field.

Cynical or paradox? Summary and conclusions

The solidarity bonds developing between Israelis and Syrians were unprecedented in the history of the Israeli-Arab relations. The purpose of this article has been to explore if Mauss' theory on gift exchange, wisdom and solidarity can be applied to the Israeli-Syrian relations from 2013 to 2018.[42] The developing relations between Israelis and Syrians confirm the argument that the gift can take any value depending on the relations in and by which it is constituted (Serres, 1991, p. 93 as cited in Pyyhtinen, 2014, p. 60). Seen as a means mitigating hostility towards Israel, humanitarian assistance was

meant to create bonds with Syrians that could have been easily recruited by terrorist groups in the absence of Israeli care and assistance.[43] From the rebels' assumed perspective, humanitarian gifts from Israel ensured their survival even if it could provide protection from the Syrian governmental forces only temporarily.

While the trade-off was considered cynical at the beginning even by those IDF-officers facilitating it (UVDA, 2019, p. 44:30), it is worthwhile to recall that gifts are not without paradoxes. The paradox of gift and rivalry embedded in it is indicated by the overlapping humanitarian and security motives behind Israeli assistance. Citing the words of a former senior officer at the Northern Command[44]:

> We understood well that these people [approaching the border] are not enemies now. They were enemies in the past and maybe they will enemies in the future. But in those years, they needed help from us.

Syrian rebels seem to have shared this understanding vis-à-vis their Israeli counterparts. As Bashar al-Zouabi, political bureau chief of a rebel group (Jaysh al-Thawra) explained their stance to ICG (2018b, p. 16):

> Israel isn't a friend; it's an enemy. But it doesn't represent a danger to us. And it's not the enemy that's killing me today.

As Israel engaged with and supported various rebel groups, some observers argued that the OGN was primarily a cover story complementing Israel's unconventional warfare efforts in Syria and facilitating Israel's 'victory' in Syria (Levy, 2019; Tsurkov, 2018a, 2018b). Others doubted the validity of this conclusion emphasizing that a sound study of Syrian attitudes towards Israel does not exists and arguing that equating '"the desperate and besieged Syrians" [gratitude and] accepting aid or medical treatment from Israel with a broader Syrian desire to normalise relations with Israel' is inaccurate and misleading' (Chabkoun, 2018). However, given, as Hattori (2001, pp. 637–640) argued following Mauss is characterized by 'strategic ambiguity and the power to transform a relation of domination into one of generosity and gratitude.' In other words, the practice of humanitarian aid offered as unreciprocated gift may be interpreted as a form of symbolic domination (Hattori, 2001).

Assuming solidarity and hostility simultaneously, any gift can be considered a two-edged sword as demonstrated in other contexts (Hattori, 2001; Pyyhtinen, 2014, p. 102; Sahlins, 1972, p. 169; Schwartz, 1967, others). Following Mauss, Pyyhtinen (2014, p. 63) also argued that the gift is not peace as opposed to war or alliance as opposed to animosity, but 'these mutually exclusive terms merge in the gift: the gift is at once both peace and war, both solidarity and strife, both alliance and animosity.' This inherent ambiguity was perceived by former IDF officers too. Recalling how Yair Golan

and one of his intelligence officers, Marco Moreno explained the paradox of Israeli gifts referring to the years before 2016 (UVDA, 2019, p. 44:00):

> there was no such dilemma here since the Israeli security interests and the humanitarian thing to do were *identical* . . . "this [was] *also* the right thing to do."

As observed by Mauss, gift-exchange between archaic communities provided a solution to primitive, uncontrolled violence. Contemporary humanitarian assistance apparently proved to be the most effective measure to secure Israeli borders from the perspective of the (initial) giver that responded to a call from unknown Syrians. Israeli gifts and return gifts from Syrians could be interpreted as a measure strengthening solidarity and building confidence between (former) enemies in the shadow of the uncontrolled violence (Schrauger, 2020):

> tangible expressions of compassion are every bit as important as conventional arms, nuclear warheads, cyber expertise, hi-tech missiles, drones and jets. Expressing genuine *compassion for the enemy*, especially in the face of murderous intent, *has become a primary weapon* of choice to protect the Jewish state.

The perceived gratitude of Syrians reflected not only positive feelings but also clear dependence on Israeli generosity. While the local population could not but accept the assistance from Israel,[45] rebels could not but honour it by providing priceless information in order to get gifts circulated. The entire initiative may be interpreted as inconsistent with rational choice theories (separating altruism from utilitarianism at conceptual levels), but it may also be seen as an adequate response provided in a complex reality.

Indeed, beyond providing cross-border assistance, Israel has never considered opening its borders and accepting Syrian refugees within its own space for political reasons; it even rejected a civilian initiative concerning the adoption of Syrian orphans.[46] The borders, in fact, remained closed over the years to prevent the influx of Syrian refugees into Israel territory. It has not changed since Summer 2018 when the OGN officially ended. The explanation is complex.

Alms or assistance given to the poor – humanitarian goods provided to Syrian people in need – may function as measures keeping them, as well as the threats they might represent, at distance both within the state (Simmel, 1965) and in international context (Duffield, 2001, 2007). Following the Israeli logic of mitigating risks and keeping in mind that Israel did not offer asylum to Syrian refugees, one may claim that Syrians were helped just enough to keep them from turning against Israel, but they were helped enough to prevent their fall in the years from 2013 to 2018.[47] When the governmental forces regained control over the area, Israel and the Syrian government agreed to return to the *status quo*, a decision that likely made Syrians, that could neither escape or nor were evacuated, wonder 'the double meaning of

the word Gift [detectable in German and Scandinavian languages] . . . on the one hand, a gift, on the other, poison' (Mauss, ([1925] 2002, p. 81).

Some questions call for further research. What has happened to the thousands of Syrians that had accepted the Israeli assistance? Could similar alliance be built vis-a-vis populations in Lebanon or elsewhere in the region? Can Israel's humanitarian conduct vis-à-vis Syrians be compared to the situation in the Palestinian territories? The broader and long-lasting implications may also deserve attention: how has the coordinated Israeli assistance provided to Sunni Muslims in Syria contributed to the signature of peace agreements between Israel and the Gulf states?

Notes

1. The bibliographical data of selected, but not cited articles are listed separately (online only) for page limits.
2. The Palestinian question or any comparison with the Israeli human rights conduct vis-a-vis the Palestinians is left out of this analysis for methodological reasons.
3. *The Syrian Connection: The True Story*, a documentary prepared by UVDA and presented at Channel 12, 23 May 2019. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BL6X_zZlEjY&feature=youtu.be.
4. Interview with a reservist lieutenant colonel at IDF, 14. September 2020.
5. This paper would have never been written if young Syrian refugees had not shown me photos on their mobiles in the Za'atari camp in Jordan in February 2014. Interpreting the image of the Israeli PM standing next to the bed of a Syrian patient in Israel, their message – *Look, look, even the Israelis treat us better than al-Asad!* – made me not only embarrassed then but also being interested in the story behind. A visit to Ziv Medical Center (Safed, Israel) in 2017 not simply confirmed the validity of the young Syrians' claims that was published by that time, but I could also realize how much this unprecedented story meant to the communities on both sides. Although Syrian rebels or patients benefiting from Israeli assistance could not be interviewed, secondary sources were used to illustrate their perspectives and concerns. Neither Jewish, nor Christian (mostly US-registered) civil society organizations donating money through Israeli NGOs or in cooperation with IDF were part of the sample (see for example, Ziri, 2017).
6. The UNDOF's mandate has always been narrow making it unable to police the 'no man's land' border by non-state actors on the Syrian side. It is best illustrated by the detention, attacking or kidnapping of peacekeepers in 2013 and 2014 by rebels (Yarmouk Martyrs' Brigade, Al Nusra Front), and the subsequent decision of states, Austria, Philippines and Japan, among others, to pull their soldiers from UNDOF. Interview with a former chief UNDOF-liaison officer in IDF, 22. September 2020.
7. Military intervention more deeply in southwest Syria was not considered by Israel during the OGN-years either unless Iranian-linked or Hezobollah forces would advance towards the Israeli border (ICG, 2018a; Marks & Lang, 2018; Zisser, 2021).
8. Interview with an Israeli doctor, Nahariya hospital, 23. September.

9. In January 2014 a pilot project was initiated by an Israeli humanitarian NGO, the purpose of which was raising awareness and solidarity among the Israeli youth, see Sella (2014).
10. Defence Minister Moshe Ya'alon confirmed for the first time in June 2013 that Israel was operating the field hospital on the Syrian border and transferring severely wounded Syrian nationals to Israeli hospitals for treatment (Berman, 2013).
11. The 210th Division was established in July 2013 with the goal of securing Israel's northern borders and to prepare for any escalated situation in the region.
12. Interview with a former senior officer, brigadier general, at IDF Northern Command, 22. September 2020.
13. Interview with a chief operative officer of an Israeli humanitarian NGO, 24. August 2020.
14. Interview with the former head of OGN, a reservist lieutenant colonel at IDF, 2 September 2020.
15. Interview with an Israeli doctor at Ziv Medical Center, 2. September 2020.
16. Hidden cooperation with minorities (Druze, Christians, Kurds) in the region started in the 1940s. Interview with a former senior officer, brigadier general, at IDF Northern Command, 22.
17. The article conceptualizes interactions at the level of communities, but it must be noted that the Israeli soldiers (who initially helped the Syrians) and the first Syrians (that was treated in Israeli hospitals) put themselves at tremendous personal risk by approaching, opening or crossing the border. The individual level is also in line with Mauss who 'managed to incorporate individuals acting in their own interests; … the gift complements market in so far as it operates where the latter is absent … and supplies each individual with personal incentives for collaborating in the pattern of exchange' (Douglas, 2002, xviii; see also Mauss, [1925] 2002, pp. 105–106).
18. Interview with a former senior officer, brigadier general, at IDF Northern Command, 22. September 2020.
19. Interview with a surgeon at Nahariya Hospital, 23. September 2020.
20. Interview with an Israeli doctor at Ziv Medical Center, 2. September 2020.
21. Interview with the former head of OGN, a reservist lieutenant colonel at IDF, 2 September 2020.
22. Interview with an Israeli doctor, Nahariya hospital, 23. September 2020.
23. Interview with an Israeli doctor at Ziv Medical Center, 2. September 2020; Dror (2020).
24. Syrians were afraid of accepting Israeli assistance beyond medical treatment in the first years. Interview with the former head of OGN, a reservist lieutenant colonel at IDF, 2 September 2020.
25. Women arriving even from Damascus gave birth at Breka hospital. Interview with a chief operative officer of an Israeli humanitarian NGO, 24. August 2020.
26. Interview with the former head of OGN, a reservist lieutenant colonel at IDF, 2 September 2020.
27. Bengio (2016) also claimed that Israel provided humanitarian assistance to Syrian Kurds for intelligence information in other parts of the country.
28. Interview with the former head of OGN, a reservist lieutenant colonel at IDF, 2 September 2020.

29. Interview with the former head of OGN, a reservist lieutenant colonel at IDF, 2 and 21. September 2020; and with a former senior officer, brigadier general, at IDF Northern Command, 22. September 2020.
30. Interview with a social worker at Ziv Medical Center, 8. September 2020.
31. Interview with the manager of an Israeli NGO providing humanitarian logistics; 3. September 2020.
32. Interview with an Israeli doctor at Ziv Medical Center, 2. September 2020.
33. Shadi Martini, executive director, Humanitarian Relief and Regional Relations Multifaith Alliance for Syrian Refugees; see Hiwar Forum (2020).
34. Follow-up correspondence (email) with a senior Israeli researcher, 29. September 2020.
35. Interview with a former senior officer, brigadier general, at IDF Northern Command, 22. September 2020.
36. Interview with a reservist lieutenant colonel at IDF, 14. September 2020.
37. One of the reviewers noted that '[s]uch a short period of gift exchange was not conducive to developing any "trust" . . . trust building takes time, and reciprocity allowed the time to develop something approaching less than trust'. Retrospectively, it may seem true, but during those years neither side could foresee if or how the relations can further develop (depending on the military context).
38. Seriously injured Syrians could not give their prior consent to be treated in Israel. Interview with an Israeli doctor, Nahariya hospital, 23. September 2020.
39. Interview with an Israeli doctor at Ziv Medical Center, 2. September 2020.
40. It is worthwhile to compare this perception with Mauss ([1925] 2002, p. 104): 'Over a considerable period of time and in a considerable number of societies, men approached one another in a curious frame of mind, one of fear and exaggerated hostility, and of generosity that was likewise exaggerated, but such traits only appear insane to our eyes. In all the societies that have immediately preceded our own, *and still exist around us*, and even in numerous customs extant in our popular morality, there is no middle way: one trusts completely, or one mistrusts completely; . . . It is in such a state of mind that men have abandoned their reserve and have been able to commit themselves to giving and giving in return. *This was because they had no choice*.' (italics by author).
41. Interview with a social worker at Ziv Medical Center, 8. September 2020.
42. Mauss was born in an Orthodox Jewish family in France in 1872, but his work was likely not known to Israeli intelligence officers. The conclusions drawn in this section are my sole responsibility especially in light of a comment I received from one of the interviewees who read the final manuscript: 'filter[ing the altruistic] sentiment through strategic considerations and benefits somehow makes it all seem more "dirty" than it actually seemed at the time,' email correspondence 5 May 2021.
43. Interview with the former head of OGN, a reservist lieutenant colonel at IDF, 2 September 2020.
44. Interview with a former senior officer, brigadier general, at IDF Northern Command, 22. September 2020. This perception (or strategic assessment) and the entire Operation Good Neighbour deserves further consideration in the otherwise unrelated manifestos of the Convivialism-movement, see http://convivialisme.org/worldwide/. Convivialism is a sort of political philosophy aspiring to master the art of 'cooperating in opposition' without killing each other. It has

its origins, among others, in Mauss' work and the French *La Revue du M.A.U.S.S. (Mouvement anti-utilitariste dans les sciences sociales)* initiative that doubted the relevance of rational choice theories outside their narrow theoretical realm (economic sciences) on the one hand and challenged their contemporary manifestation (in neoliberal ideas) on the other hand (https://www.revuedumauss.com.fr/Pages/ABOUT.html), see also S. Hanafi (2020) The Convivialist Manifesto: A New Political Ideology. An Interview with Alain Caillé. *Global Dialogue* 10(2), https://globaldialogue.isa-sociology.org/the-convivialist-manifesto-a-new-political-ideology-an-interview-with-alain-caille/.

45. While my respondents working in the NGO and health care sector emphasized how much in-kind Israeli assistance was needed, the former head of OGN held a slighly different position arguing that it "it took [the army] more than a year of hard work, until the [Syrians] agreed to receive humanitarian aid other than medical care. [The developing] trust created between the parties [enabled assistance] and not the a 'lack of choice'; follow-up correspondence (email) with the former head of OGN, 13. October 2020.
46. Interview with a chief operative officer of an Israeli humanitarian NGO, 24. August 2020.
47. As emphasized by various Israeli sources Israel had no capacity to change the war for and on behalf of Syrians.

Acknowledgments

I owe thanks to everyone, not listed here for reasons of anonymity, who could help me with information to contact key actors on the Israeli side. *Special thanks to all of you, participants of conversations, for having agreed to share your memories and discuss your experiences with me*. I am also grateful for the editorial trust and thorough reviews I received from the *Mediterranean Politics*.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The research received no specific grant, but the manuscript is partially based on sources and data collected for a research project. From Talent to Young Researcher project aimed at activities supporting the research career model in higher education" (identifier EFOP-3.6.3-VEKOP-16-2017-00007 co-supported by the European Union, Hungary and the European Social Fund) by my student, Lidia Papp. I am grateful for her work.

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