

The Superpowers and the Middle East: Walking a Fine Line

Oded Eran, Zvi Magen, and Shimon Stein

Over the course of 2011, the international community – and in particular the trans-Atlantic bloc and Russia – was challenged by the need to contend with major domestic political-economic issues on the one hand, and on the other hand, to confront the Arab spring and provide an appropriate political, economic, and at times military response. These challenges will continue to preoccupy the United States, the European Union, and Russia in 2012 and beyond, and will impel them to try to avoid further deterioration in their domestic economic situations, while they grapple to contain the crises that are liable to emerge from the turbulence that has gripped some of the major regimes in the Middle East.

Challenges for the United States

The next United States presidential race has already begun. Until it is over in November 2012, President Barack Obama's political resources will be invested mainly in efforts to win a second term. His political room to maneuver will be curbed not only by electoral considerations, but also by Republican control of the House of Representatives. Although Congress is limited in its ability to influence United States foreign policy, the President will likely attempt to avoid confrontations and preclude potential Republican achievements that might emerge from the administration's foreign policy failures. Thus, the administration's hesitation in its approach to the upheaval and instability in the Middle East is in part a function of the current domestic political situation in the United States. Therefore, the

dilemmas that confronted President Obama during 2011 regarding United States policy toward the Middle East will accompany him throughout the election campaign. Taking a broader perspective, a large question mark hangs over the ability of the United States, the members of the Quartet, and the G-8 to devise approaches, procedures, and responses that will contain the challenges presented by the Arab spring, the forecasted deterioration on the Israeli-Palestinian front, and the progress in the Iranian nuclear program.

The achievement scored by the administration in the elimination of al-Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden emphasizes the decline in the relationship between the United States and Pakistan, where Bin Laden took shelter, and this is not expected to improve significantly in the coming year. The United States will also continue to face the dilemma inherent in the need to maintain large military forces in neighboring Afghanistan in order to support the current regime, versus the previous decision to reduce the American military presence there.

A similar dilemma will face the administration in connection to Iraq. The withdrawal of US forces from the country has already begun, and is scheduled to be concluded by late 2011. Nevertheless, the administration has hinted that it would be interested in a continued military presence in order to maintain the level of relative stability that has been achieved. Thus far, the Iraqi regime has not responded to the administration's signal. The paradox, however, is that even if the Iraqi government explicitly or implicitly invites the US forces to remain, the number of casualties among the forces is liable to rise and tilt the American decision in favor of withdrawal. It is possible that Shiite elements, either with or without a directive from Iran, have thus far avoided attacking American troops in Iraq on the assumption that the United States will in fact withdraw its forces from Iraq. Shifts in the considerations of anti-American elements may change the rules of the game that apply to their actions against the American army and its coalition partners in Iraq. The economic burden involved in maintaining large numbers of troops overseas is likewise expected to affect the American decision on withdrawal.

The dilemmas faced by the US administration on the issue of the Arab-Israeli conflict may also become more serious. The UN General Assembly

session on recognition of a Palestinian state, scheduled to take place in September 2011, is liable to create shockwaves that will hurt the United States. An American vote against the resolution to recognize Palestinian independence, and especially an American veto of a Security Council resolution to accept the Palestinian state as a full-fledged member of the UN – if in fact the situation reaches that point – is likely to motivate anti-American elements to harm American interests and assets in the Middle East.

After more than two years of deep and well publicized disagreements between the administration and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, along with the administration's continued failure to jumpstart the negotiating process between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, and in light of the uncertainty regarding the political situation in the Middle East, it is more than likely that in the coming period the administration will invest in damage control and efforts to avoid escalation of the conflict. As for relations between the United States and the Palestinian Authority, last year Abu Mazen did not hide his disappointment with the Obama administration over the issue of negotiations. The Palestinian public has been highly critical of what it sees as American one-sidedness in favor of Israel, and in this atmosphere, Obama will find it difficult to influence President Mahmoud Abbas to relax his conditions for renewing negotiations. Furthermore, the attempts at a rapprochement between Hamas and Fatah will complicate coordination between the administration and the Palestinian Authority (and to a lesser extent, coordination between the European Union and the Palestinian Authority), especially if President Abbas resigns from his position. The removal of President Husni Mubarak from the Egyptian and Middle Eastern scene, as well as the undermined confidence of the Jordanian and Saudi regimes in the US administration due to its support for regime change in Egypt, will reduce the ability of the United States to manage crises in the region, including a Palestinian popular rebellion, or even more, a violent conflict between Israel and the Palestinians.

The European Union and the Middle East

The starting position that has guided and no doubt will continue to guide the European Union in its relations with the Middle East in general and the countries of the southern Mediterranean in particular is the reciprocal relationship between European security and stability and the situation in its environs. Middle East stability is deemed a key factor in European security, and in recent decades the region was considered by its European neighbors to be relatively stable. This view of the region was assisted by Arab rulers who aided EU states to realize their interests, including the regular flow of oil and gas, containment of the spread of radical Islam, and prevention – albeit only partial – of illegal immigration to Europe.

Over the years the European Union and countries in the region signed bilateral agreements and set up multilateral frameworks, starting with the Barcelona Process in 1995, through the European Neighborhood Policy in 2004 and the Union for the Mediterranean in 2008. The goal of the agreements was to promote European aid for social and political reforms, which focused on creating jobs and economic growth and encouraging democratization, political pluralism, and individual freedoms. Some of the goals agreed upon were not realized, such as the establishment in 2010 of a Mediterranean free trade zone for goods and services.

An examination of the agreements highlights commitments by the parties in the realm of human rights as well as in economics and finance. The European Union was granted the option of suspending the cooperation if the rules of the democratic game were violated. In retrospect, it is clear that the EU did not make use of this right in spite of blatant violations that ultimately brought the masses to the streets of the Arab capitals. Any attempt to draft a balance sheet for the Barcelona Process and the other processes based on the same guiding principle cannot but lead to the conclusion that the European vision of turning the southern Mediterranean into an area of prosperity and stability has not been realized. Beyond the European talk in favor of economic and political reforms, the EU has not achieved even a fraction of its ambitious objectives, in spite of the leverage it had. It allowed Arab rulers to dictate the agenda while ignoring the lofty principles it sought to promote in favor of preserving its interests. From

this point of view, the EU contributed to the deterioration that took place in the region and motivated the forces that brought about the Arab spring.

When the upheaval in Tunisia and Egypt began, European Union leaders sounded a refrain on the need to change policies toward the region. A number of officials even talked about the need for radical change beyond immediate humanitarian aid. Later, at an emergency meeting on March 3, 2011, EU leaders decided to conduct a comprehensive examination of existing programs for cooperation with states in the region. They also formulated an intention to build a new partnership with these states, with the goal of promoting democracy and shared prosperity and giving aid and incentives to states that act to promote political and economic reforms. However, economic difficulties in the European Union member countries themselves are limiting the EU's ability to grant aid to Mediterranean countries. The Greek government's April 2010 appeal to the EU and the International Monetary Fund for financial aid in order to allow it to pay off its debts presented the European Union with an unprecedented challenge. The alternatives it faced in its efforts to find a solution for Greece's debt, as well as the Ireland and Portugal debt problems, involved mainly political decisions that in the current state of affairs in Europe have aroused serious public criticism. European Union members in the Euro zone (seventeen of the twenty-seven members) are busy seeking solutions that are limited to putting out the current fires and attempting to avoid further conflagrations, which in fact appear inevitable. In exchange for agreement by the wealthy states to pour money into the financial rescue mechanisms that have been established, the states that are the aid recipients have committed to a series of steps that mandate significant belt tightening and institution of reforms that are supposed to lead to an improvement in their financial situation. If the crisis reaches more significant European countries, such as Italy or Spain, not only will the ability of the states to help others be significantly reduced, but the Euro bloc, which is one of the prominent achievements of the European Union, will sustain a fatal blow.

Along with the attempt to confront the changes taking place in the Middle East and the dilemma of aid to the countries on the southern side of the Mediterranean basin, the European Union will have to cope with increasingly nationalist trends in their own countries. These trends, which

are partially racist, can also be seen in Scandinavian countries, which had been considered the bastion of liberalism. The mass murder by an extreme right wing activist in Norway in July 2011, while an aberration, was a sign of the spread of this fascist-racist ideology. In a number of countries, extreme right wing parties have won seats in parliament. Against this backdrop, the intention to allocate aid to the new regimes in the Middle East is liable to encounter domestic opposition. At this stage, most of the right wing movements are not anti-Israel. Nevertheless, it is possible that the xenophobia that underwrites the ideology of some of these movements will in the future take on anti-Semitic tones that will be directed, inter alia, against Israel.

The response by European Union leaders to the political-military crises in Libya and Syria was additional evidence of the EU's inherent weakness in formulating a joint strategy, and especially in implementation of a common foreign and defense policy. Particularly noticeable in this context were the differences of opinion among three leading countries, with France and Britain on one side and Germany on another. It was President Nicolas Sarkozy, and later, British Prime Minister David Cameron who pushed for a forceful military approach to Qaddafi without prior inter-state coordination, not in the framework of the European Union, and not through NATO. In contrast, Germany was the sole Western country that abstained in the vote on Security Council Resolution 1973 to attack Qaddafi's forces.

Even as the European Union prepares to implement a change in its policy toward the southern Mediterranean (on both the multilateral and the regional levels), it is too early to assess the implications of the turmoil in the region on Israel's relations with the EU. The Arab-Israeli and Israeli-Palestinian conflict, one of the main sources of disagreement in the context of EU-Israel relations, has not infrequently cast a shadow over these relations. Since the start of the recent uprisings in the Middle East, European Union leaders have repeatedly emphasized the need to progress quickly on the peace process, which is deemed an important element in the attempt to promote regional stability. The differences of opinion between Israel and the European Union will likely grow sharper, particularly with EU members that do not accept Israel's policy on the Palestinian issue, for

example, vis-à-vis building in the settlements, or regarding European aid to the Palestinian economy.

The scheduled debate in the UN General Assembly on recognition of a Palestinian state finds the European Union divided on two levels. Independent initiatives, such as that of French Foreign Minister Alain Juppé, which defined several principles for renewing negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians, illustrate the inability of the organization to impose discipline on important members that seek to act independently on a particular issue. A divided vote by EU members on the resolution concerning a Palestinian state would provide additional proof of this. This is in fact the reason that the European Union is finding it difficult to achieve the status of a central player in the Quartet: in spite of the dissatisfaction of a large number of EU members with Israel's policy on the settlements, this is not manifested in a unified stand. For this reason too, the European Union will continue to leave the attempts to revive the Israeli-Palestinian political process in the hands of the United States. Although European states cannot prevent recognition of a Palestinian state by the UN General Assembly, even if they all vote against the resolution, their conduct on many issues will have a significant impact on the Palestinian struggle and Israel's standing with international organizations. The UN resolution is liable not only to split the European vote, but to bring about recognition of a Palestinian state by a number of European countries, members and non-members of the EU. Some of the countries are likely to grant Palestinian representatives the status of ambassador and even cooperate with Palestinian attempts to establish certain aspects of sovereignty, in spite of the potential for a clash with Israel inherent in such steps.

Along with differences of opinion between the European Union and Israel on the formal diplomatic level, a trend is developing in Europe of boycotting Israeli products even if they are not produced in the settlements. The precise extent of this phenomenon is not known, but the damage it is liable to cause not only to direct export but also to other economic issues, such as foreign investment in Israel, should not be underestimated. The struggle against this phenomenon has legal aspects as well: the recourse to legal measure in countries where there is an organized boycott of

significant dimensions will largely depend on the willingness of the European governments to act on the issue.

Two additional aspects of European conduct toward the Middle East are particularly important for Israel: the struggle against the Iranian nuclear program, and negotiations on Turkey's acceptance into the European Union. Europe is a major player in the international effort to stop the Iranian nuclear program, and this will likely continue in the future as well. On the other hand, the European Union is expected to continue to support freeing the Middle East of nuclear weapons. An international conference on this subject that is scheduled to take place in 2012 has the potential for friction between Israel and the EU. Regarding the latter issue, Turkish membership in another Western organization besides NATO may well exert moderating influences on Turkish foreign policy as it attempts to juggle Islamization and secularization tendencies. Finding a model for various Turkish-EU relations in multiple areas will be an attractive incentive for building effective democratic regimes in those Arab states seeking political and socioeconomic change. However, a failure of negotiations or a failure to find a substitute framework acceptable to both Turkey and the European Union is likely to exacerbate the tension in the Middle East.

Russia in the Middle East

Russia's policy in the Middle East is a function of its global competition with the United States. As such, Russia is not only attempting to be included in all the political processes in the Middle East; it also strives to form a bloc of states in the region that support it, and it maintains close relations with the region's radical bloc. The cooperation between Russia and Iran in a variety of fields is especially noteworthy. Russian military bases have been established in Syria, and Russia has supplied weapons to every purchaser, while careful not to upset the existing regional balance. In other areas as well Russia has been active internationally over the past decade, backed by improved economic capabilities resulting from the rise in the price of energy and Russia's becoming a leading supplier in this sector.

Against the backdrop of the worldwide economic crisis, Russia interpreted the US "reset" initiative, launched in autumn 2009, as an

opportunity, and it brought about a change in Russia's political conduct. Russia expanded its cooperation with the United States, the Quartet, and other international forums. In addition, it increased its involvement in the effort to revive the diplomatic process in the Middle East, even though these efforts were somewhat resisted by the US administration. It also joined the international sanctions regime imposed on Iran. This move harmed relations between Moscow and Tehran, although both sides expressed their intention to overcome the disagreements and the bad feelings between them.

Indeed, Russia has been forced to work to upgrade its relations with the West, even if it has no intention of abandoning its aspirations in the international arena. The turmoil in the Middle East has placed Russia at a crossroads once again, while it faces its own domestic difficulties that require economic changes, which in turn have ramifications for foreign policy. There appears to be a growing assessment in Russia that the turmoil in the region has further weakened the United States, which presents an opportunity for Russia. A possible development resulting from the upheaval in the Middle East, beneficial to Russia, would be a sharp rise in the price of oil.

The mass protests in the Arab capitals surprised Russia, and it found itself in a new situation with no plan of action, facing the danger of losing what it had achieved in the region in the past decade. The regimes in the Middle East that were the most severely challenged were favorable from Russia's standpoint. They acted to curb radicalism and cooperated with Russia economically and in the realm of policy. Nevertheless, Russia has responded flexibly to the recent events in the hope of developing positive relations with the various regimes in the region, including the new ones, and with the intention of recreating a bloc of states that are close to it. Russia has vacillated between turning its back on collapsing regimes such as Egypt and Libya and joining the sanctions against Libya on the one hand, and objecting to NATO's use of force against Qaddafi's army and defending the regime of Bashar al-Asad in Syria, on the other. These mixed messages reflected Russia's aspiration to preserve spheres of influence both internationally and domestically, where there is support for the authoritarian regimes in the Middle East.

At the same time, Russia fears that popular uprisings will spill over from the Middle East to Russian territory and to the former Soviet bloc. The possible rise to power of radical Islamic elements in the Middle East is troubling to the Russian leadership. Thus far, Russia's considerable attempt to neutralize the domestic radical threat, which is also nourished from abroad, has been successful. If radical regimes arise in the Middle East, however, they are liable to upset this balance. Furthermore, from Russia's point of view, democratization in the Middle East is not the preferred scenario, lest this dismantle the anti-Western camp in the region, including the "axis of evil," which is central in Russia's regional policy. No less serious is the scenario in which Russia is pushed out of the region by competing forces such as China. It appears that Russia's preference for states in the Middle East is the establishment of "moderate" authoritarian regimes that include non-radical Islamic elements that will not have a clear Western orientation.

Russia exhibits considerable friendliness towards Israel while emphasizing its affinity to Israel's population and expressing its commitment to Israel's security. In the past year, bilateral relations have become closer, perhaps in part out of Russia's pursuit of Israeli "approval" for an upgraded status in the peace process. At the same time, Russia supports Israel's adversaries in the region and remains scrupulously "balanced" in its relations with all sides. Among the radical elements in the Middle East cultivated by Russia is Hamas. Russia engaged in dialogue with Hamas and did not insist that Hamas meet the Quartet's demands as a precondition for dialogue. Russia encouraged internal Palestinian reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah, but the rapprochement between the sides, which was achieved without Russian mediation, was seen as a failure of Russian foreign policy in the Israeli-Palestinian context. As for the planned vote in the UN on recognition of a Palestinian state, a Russian vote in favor of the resolution will not only illustrate the gap between the positions of Russia and the United States on the question of the Middle East political process, but will also gain Russia points in the Arab world. However, it can be assumed that Russia will then seek to reduce the friction with Israel and the United States, and therefore, in the immediate stage

after the vote, it will not take practical steps that reflect recognition of the unilateral Palestinian declaration of independence.

Conclusion

The response by the major powers to the turmoil that has swept through the Middle East and the continuing stalemate in the Israeli-Palestinian political process has revealed the limitations of power of the United States, the European Union, and Russia in the face of crises. Yet while it is a major political constraint, the US presidential race is not expected to completely paralyze the administration's political capabilities. Various developments against the backdrop of a new regime in Egypt – which unlike the Mubarak regime is not inclined to pressure the Palestinian Authority to soften its positions – would likely force the administration to take an active response. These potential developments include the deterioration in relations between Israel and the Palestinians, and in particular, the outbreak of violence between the sides; a Palestinian attempt to demonstrate sovereignty and create political-territorial facts in the theater of conflict in the wake of a General Assembly recognition of a Palestinian state; and the intensification of the struggle over the Palestinian leadership. With this background, pressure on Israel to contribute to the revival of the political process can be expected.

Similarly, the European Union does not completely lack the ability to create a foreign and defense policy that may present a challenge to Israel. It is also possible that given the euro crisis and in spite of a vote against recognition of a Palestinian state by the General Assembly (or abstention on the vote), the EU will coordinate positions with the US administration with the goal of pressuring Israel to be more flexible in its positions. The backdrop to all this is the continuing erosion in the ability of states friendly to Israel to resist anti-Israel initiatives and the intensification of the campaign to delegitimize Israel. These trends are expected to gather momentum, especially if a violent conflict breaks out in the Israeli-Palestinian theater.

The Israeli government must consider these possibilities and prepare accordingly on the organizational, political, and public diplomacy levels, as it devises a strategy for the situation that will be created regionally and

Oded Eran, Zvi Magen, and Shimon Stein

internationally following the coming General Assembly session. The debate scheduled to take place at the UN on recognition of a Palestinian state is a new chapter in the ongoing political battle, and it involves fundamental challenges for Israel. The members of the Quartet, and in particular, the United States and the European Union, are supposed to serve as a moral-political counterweight to the numerical majority that the Arab states can mobilize to support any “Palestinian resolution” in the UN. Israel must help them to help it. Israel’s ability to successfully confront the phenomenon of delegitimization lies in its ability to find a creative response to two challenges: one stemming from the increasing assertiveness of the peoples of the Middle East, and the other from the willingness of civilians to scale both the dictatorial regimes and the security fences on Israel’s borders.