

Israel and the Arab World: The Power of the People

Shlomo Brom

The storm that swept through the Arab world in early 2011 has the potential to spark significant changes in Israel's strategic environment in the Middle East and in its relations with the Arab world. This essay presents Israel's concept of the Middle East prior to the unrest, the changes brought about by the unrest, and impact of these changes on Israel and its relations with its Arab neighbors.

The Middle East before the Arab Spring

Until the outbreak of the so-called Arab spring, a commonly held view in Israel saw the Middle East as characterized by the struggle between two political and strategic axes. One axis, the axis of defiance or the resistance axis, comprised radical states and movements under Iranian leadership and included primarily Iran, Syria, Hizbollah, and Hamas. This axis was defined in part by its drive to undermine the status quo on several fronts: Israel's position in the Middle East; the status of the West in general and the United States in particular, and their involvement in the Middle East; and Arab states' relations with the Israel and the West. It fomented opposition to these actors and the regimes in the Arab world that "collaborate" with them, and it adopted the doctrine of resistance (*muqawama*) as the preferred means of changing the status quo. The second axis, which included most of the other Arab states in the Middle East, consisted of "moderate" states led by Egypt and Saudi Arabia. It sought to preserve the status quo and prevent the axis of defiance from growing stronger at the expense of the moderates. Israel

strove to maintain and strengthen the existing peace treaties with some of the moderate countries, and develop relations and strategic cooperation with the other states in the axis. This cooperation was supposed to focus on actions to weaken and neutralize the axis of defiance, especially Iran, which is considered to be the greatest threat to Israel, mainly because of its nuclear program.

In 2010-11, and to a certain extent even before that, it became clear that this picture was overly simplistic, and that quite a few players in the Middle East defy this easy categorization. As a strategic ally of Iran, Syria, for example, was ostensibly a full fledged member of the resistance axis. At the same time, however, Syria has consistently attempted to renew negotiations and reach an agreement with Israel; it has accepted the Arab Peace Initiative, which recognizes Israel; and it has attempted to improve its relations with the United States. It is clear that Syria has common interests with Iran that lead to extensive cooperation vis-à-vis Hizbollah in Lebanon; vis-à-vis Hamas and other rejectionist organizations in the Palestinian arena; and against Israel and the West, as long as Syria considers the latter to be acting against its interests. Nevertheless, the regime does not view itself as a pawn in Iran's hand, and in accordance with its objectives, it is interested in playing and cooperating – or in clashing, when necessary – with all parties.

Another principal actor in the Middle East in recent years, Turkey, likewise defies this dichotomy. Turkey is a member of NATO, and it has traditionally been considered part of the bloc of Western states. As such, it is fully integrated into the global economy, and it has diplomatic relations and well developed economic relations with Israel. On the other hand, Erdoğan's AKP government has a completely independent policy that seeks to accommodate all sides. It engineered a substantial improvement in its relations with members of the axis of defiance; it has good – and sometimes close – relations with Syria, Iran, and Hamas; and it does not cooperate, or sometimes, it cooperates with a visible lack of desire, with actions to curb and contain the axis of defiance, such as the Security Council's latest resolution (June 2010) on sanctions against Iran.

A much smaller player that has conducted a similar policy is Qatar. The tiny principality has attempted to play a role that is perhaps greater

than its size, namely, the role of an intermediary between the two axes that is not entrenched fully in either of them. It has, for example, made effective use of the al-Jazeera network, as its ownership of the network has allowed it to display support for players from the resistance camp and at the same time attempt to continue to maintain normal relations with the moderate states. In recent years, Qatar has had a difficult time playing this game successfully, because it has had serious clashes with major countries in the moderate camp – including Egypt and Saudi Arabia – that were not prepared to accept what they saw as the pretensions and the presumptuousness inherent in Qatar's policy.

In the view of the Netanyahu government, Israel's main goals in its relations with the Arab states, and the test of these relations, lay chiefly in two areas: the struggle against the axis of defiance and the political process with the Palestinians. In the wake of the collapse of the Oslo process and the general coldness in relations with the Arabs, Israeli thinking assigns very low priority to other aspects of bilateral relations with the Arab states. Thus, for example, economic relations with the Arab world are not considered of major potential value, and Israel is looking at markets outside the Middle East.

The government has made its first priority obstruction of the axis led by Iran, marked by its nuclear program and its hegemonic ambitions. Regarding the diplomatic process, however, Israel appears to have been dragged reluctantly into the dynamic and only as a result of pressure from international actors, especially the United States. In his initial discussions with the Obama administration, Prime Minister Netanyahu sought to persuade the administration that the solution to the conflict with the Palestinians lay with containing Iran, due to Iran's support for elements in the Palestinian arena and in the Arab world in general that oppose a solution to the conflict with Israel. The Obama administration took the opposite approach, that an effective diplomatic process with the Palestinians is needed so that it will be possible to achieve the necessary support in the Middle East for dealing with Iran. Netanyahu was forced to compromise on this issue and give some priority to the Palestinian track. That was reflected in his Bar-Ilan speech and in his agreement to a freeze on settlements for a limited time to enable renewal of negotiations with

the Palestinians. In practice, these steps were not enough to overcome the lack of mutual trust, and negotiations with the Palestinians have remained frozen.

At the same time, there was no movement on the Israeli-Syrian track in the past year, although there were media reports of messages sent between the two sides on whether it was possible to revitalize this track. In spite of some early speculations that the Israeli-Syrian track might be easier for the prime minister because it is less complex and because he is assured of the support of the defense community, which attributes great strategic benefit to an Israeli-Syrian agreement, no such reversal occurred. One reason for this standstill is Netanyahu's unwillingness to pay the price of an agreement with the Syrians, namely, a complete withdrawal from the Golan Heights. Uzi Arad, the first national security advisor in the prime minister's current term, who sees eye to eye with Netanyahu on many issues, brought up ideas for an agreement with Syria before he assumed the position, whereby Israel would withdraw from part of the Golan Heights and be prepared to swap territories in exchange for the territory that it would keep in its possession.¹ Later, ideas were raised about an interim agreement that would include a partial withdrawal from the Golan Heights, in exchange for which Israel would receive less than a full fledged peace.² If these ideas were conveyed to Syria it is reasonable to assume they were fully rejected; since these ideas completely contradict the Syrian approach, it does not appear possible to renew negotiations on this basis. Another plausible reason for the standstill is the nature of the current Israeli government, with its large representation of parties that oppose a withdrawal from the Golan Heights. Netanyahu perhaps assessed that serious negotiations with Syria were liable to lead to dissolution of the coalition and the fall of his government.

The result was that for the past year, there has been a total standstill in the diplomatic process on both tracks, with the deadlock having negative consequences for relations with the Arab world. In Israel, there is disagreement on how much impact the diplomatic process, especially with the Palestinians, actually has on bilateral relations with the various Arab states. One argument is that Arab regimes only pay lip service to the Palestinian cause, as it does not genuinely interest them and they are

focused on their respective regime and state interests. Wikileaks disclosures on talks between American diplomats with government officials in the Gulf region ostensibly prove these claims. In these talks, the Arabs focused on the Iranian threat to the Gulf states and on pressing the United States to do everything required, including military pressure, to stop the Iranian nuclear project.³ However, it is doubtful that these reports actually support the basic argument. Regimes and states certainly act to promote their interests, but the question in the context of relations with Israel is different, and twofold. First, to what extent can these regimes act to promote these interests in the current state of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and second, can they cooperate with Israel when there are joint interests. The behavior of the Arab governments in recent years has indicated that the deadlock in the diplomatic process with Israel, and the violent clashes in which Israel was involved, placed heavy constraints on the Arab governments when they attempted these two courses. Regime interests notwithstanding, they were hard pressed to act against those perceived as the forces of resistance, which enjoys extensive popular support as a force that can stand up to Israel and present it with difficult challenges. They certainly had a hard time cooperating with Israel in such an atmosphere.

The confrontation with Hamas in the Gaza Strip reflects these difficulties. The Mubarak regime considered Hamas a serious threat because Hamas is a branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, but public opinion prevented it from conducting an effective policy against Hamas and cooperating fully with Israel. Even when Mubarak embraced a policy that was deemed as cooperation with Israel, he adopted it because he perceived it a policy intended to serve an Egyptian interest that was opposed to the Israeli interest. Thus, the ostensible cooperation on the “blockade” of Gaza did not stem from a desire to cooperate with Israel, rather from a deep suspicion of Israel’s intentions and an assessment that Israel’s goal in implementing the blockade was to push Gaza into Egypt’s lap so that Egypt would take responsibility for it. Mubarak judged this as against Egypt’s interests, and therefore he closed the border crossing between Gaza and Egypt.

The atmosphere in the Arab street has made it difficult to sustain bilateral relations between Israel and the states with which it formally had peaceful relations, and those with which it had non-formal relations. This

was sharply expressed in relations with Jordan, which became strained and charged with expressions of hostility, and with Egypt, where the existing cold peace showed no signs of thawing.

The Significance of the Arab Spring

By narrowing the gap between the positions of the Arab regimes and the Arab street, the so-called Arab spring has brought to the surface the problematic nature of Israel's relationship with the Arab world. In Israel, it was claimed that the awakening of the Arab street, which threatens the existing regimes, is not connected to the Arab-Israeli conflict, rather stems from internal problems of the regimes and Arab societies. Indeed, pictures of Mubarak were burned at the Egyptian demonstrations, not Israeli and American flags. However, while these contentions are correct in principle, they ignore the nature of the protests in the Arab world. The basic complaint of the protesters is against the authoritarian nature of the regimes, which were not attuned to the public and instead served the interests of small corrupt elites. The wider public was essentially cut off from these governments and the ability to influence important public issues, be it the transfer of power (bequeathing power to Gamal Mubarak), or socio-economic issues and the distribution of resources, or foreign policy, including the attitude toward Israel. The new governments in the Arab world will be tested on the basis of their attention to public opinion on these various issues. However, public opinion has become quite hostile to Israel since the collapse of the diplomatic process, and after years in which the Arab street has been exposed to serious incitement in the Arab media and has seen disturbing pictures from the second intifada, the war in Lebanon, and the fighting in Gaza. After the demonstrations against Israel in the Arab states in connection with the *naqba* (the Palestinian "catastrophe") on May 15, 2011, it will be difficult to continue to claim that this Arab awakening is divorced from the Arab-Israeli issue. The demonstrators who were seen on television came from the same public as the demonstrators of the Arab awakening.

At this early stage it is still not clear which regimes will remain in place once the dust settles, and it is not clear what will succeed regimes that have fallen. Various scenarios are possible, from a takeover by

Islamist elements in countries such as Egypt and Syria, through weak and unstable governments of populist secular parties, to military regimes with differing degrees of military influence and involvement in the affairs of state. Nevertheless, it is almost certain that any new government will be more attentive to the public's wishes, since this is the obvious conclusion to be drawn from the nature of the public protest and its threat to the government's stability. It is also likely that in cases where existing regimes survive the storm, for example the Syrian regime, they will learn the lesson of attention to public opinion. In most places, the area in which it is easiest to implement this lesson is in an anti-Israel policy.

From this point of view, Egypt constitutes an interesting test case because such processes are already underway. At this stage Egypt is under the control of the military, which is supposed to transfer power to civilian authorities after parliamentary elections (in late 2011) and presidential elections (to be held sometime later). Neither the results of the parliamentary and presidential elections nor the nature of the government that is established afterwards is certain. A central question in this context is the strength of the Muslim Brotherhood versus the secular parties. Yet while these questions are pending, it is already possible to see which way the wind is blowing when it comes to Israel. The Prime Minister, Foreign Minister, and other ministers serving in a temporary civilian government functioning under military control are already making anti-Israel statements and promising to implement a tougher policy toward Israel, especially regarding the gas deal. In fact, the new Prime Minister has ordered that the gas deal be reexamined. The Egyptian Finance Minister said that while Egypt is committed to the peace treaty with Israel, it does not have to sell Israel gas, and the Egyptian Vice Prime Minister accused Israel of attacking Egypt and manipulating against it.

In addition, various statements by those who have already presented themselves as candidates for the presidency indicate their intention to conduct a tougher policy toward Israel. Thus in an interview with the *Washington Post*, when asked about Iran's nuclear program, Arab League Secretary General Amr Moussa, who is considered the candidate with the greatest chances of being elected, said: "The nuclear issue in the Middle East means Israel and then Iran." He also stated that "we have a lot to

gain by peaceful relations – or less tense relations – with Iran.”⁴ In other interviews, he claimed that President Mubarak erred in his decision to cooperate with Israel and impose a closure on the Gaza Strip. He also stated that during his tenure as foreign minister, he had differences of opinion with President Mubarak concerning Egypt’s approach to Israel, and he thought that it was necessary to take firm measures against Israel.⁵ Another candidate, Ayman Nour, leader of the liberal-democratic opposition, stated that in practice, “the Camp David accords are finished” because the treaty is an old one and it is necessary to improve the terms in a way that will suit Egypt’s interests.⁶ The third candidate, Mohamed ElBaradei, has said that if Israel attacks Gaza, Egypt will declare war against the Zionist regime.⁷

Assessments that the new as well as the veteran regimes will focus more on internal problems and less on foreign policy issues have little basis. Figures like Amr Moussa or Mohamed ElBaradei, with their rich background on matters of foreign policy, are not likely to shun foreign issues. In fact, the opposite is more likely. As president, for example, Amr Moussa would presumably devote a great deal of attention to the conference on creating a Middle East weapons of mass destruction free zone, which is planned for 2012, and would not shy away from clashes with Israel on this issue. Other Arab governments, coping with difficult domestic problems, especially the shaky economies of their countries, will also likely hope to score points in public opinion through diplomatic achievements.

Possible Harm to the Peace Accords

There can of course be different levels of anti-Israel policy, and from Israel’s point of view, the main question is the robustness of the peace treaty with Egypt. Thus far most officials in Egypt, including those who plan to run in the next elections, have made it clear that they intend to uphold the treaty, but other occasional statements suggest that at least some of the candidates think that speaking against the peace treaty can be useful in a populist campaign. Contradictory data from various public opinion polls adds to the uncertainty: a poll from April 2011 conducted by the Pew Research Center found that a majority of 54 percent of the Egyptian public supports annulment of the peace treaty,⁸ while a March 2011 poll by the International Peace Institute found that a majority of Egyptian voters

(63 percent) prefer a party that maintains the peace with Israel, and only a minority (37 percent) prefer a party that promises to annul the treaty.⁹

Although thus far the balance of statements by various officials in Egypt's emerging political system points to little likelihood that Egypt will decide to substantively renege on the peace treaty with Israel, the changes in Egypt have placed the issue on the agenda. In turn, the issue has become a subject for public discussion in Israel, because if the peace treaty with Egypt – and perhaps even in certain scenarios the peace treaty with Jordan – is harmed, this will have far reaching strategic significance for Israel. The signing of the peace treaty with Egypt in 1979 removed Egypt from the circle of countries that were likely to join in a war against Israel. To a large extent, this change reduced the likelihood that a coalition of Arab states would launch a war against Israel, and it made the scenario of a war on two fronts virtually non-existent. Over the past three decades Israel's strategic deployment, order of battle, and war plans were built on the basis of this assumption. This allowed military preparations to save resources and focus on other fronts.

Israel could permit itself to rely on a scenario of war on only one front because it assumed that even if a strategic change were to take place in Egypt and/or Jordan, it would take a relatively long time for the change to translate into new threats against it, since the other side would also need to change its strategic deployment. If Israel concludes that a military confrontation with Egypt is once again a serious possibility, it will need to make a dramatic change in its strategic deployment. However, even the change in Israel's strategic deployment requires a not insignificant amount of time because of the need to establish and train new divisions, stockpile inventories of weapons and munitions, and change war plans. This means that there is a great deal of importance to the point at which the strategic change on the Arab side is detected.

The current chaos in the Arab world presents Israel with a difficult problem of choosing a course of action under conditions of uncertainty. Military preparations are apt to become a self-fulfilling prophecy because the other side is liable to interpret the preparations as reflecting aggressive intentions. If Israel begins preparations too early for the possibility that the agreement with Egypt will be undermined, it will expose itself to this

danger. If it does this too late and the treaty is in fact weakened, it will not be prepared for this in time.

The collapse of the peace treaty with Jordan could also have difficult strategic implications because of Jordan's location across from Israel's soft underbelly and the lack of a geographical barrier between Jordan and Israel that plays the role of the Sinai Peninsula. Nevertheless, the Jordanian regime has thus far remained stable, and the possibility of its joining the Gulf Cooperation Council also contributes to its stability and its ability to weather the crisis successfully.

The Impact on the Diplomatic Process

An additional question concerns possible changes in the policies of the new regimes, as well as the old regimes fighting for their survival, vis-à-vis the political process with Israel. The current picture suggests that for now, the new regimes will continue to support the diplomatic process and the Arab Peace Initiative, but they will assume a more assertive stance towards what they see as Israel's rejectionist approach. They will also refuse to accept the dichotomous approach that divides the Palestinian political actors into "the good," those around Fatah and Mahmoud Abbas, and "the bad," the Islamists. They will adopt a policy similar to Turkey's, which aspires to cooperate with all the parties. This was first expressed in Egypt's success in brokering the Fatah and Hamas reconciliation agreement. The Mubarak regime saw Hamas as Egypt's enemy. The new regime, which considers the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt to be a legitimate political movement, sees Hamas as a legitimate political player that must be taken into account to the same extent that the current leadership of the PLO and the Palestinian Authority are taken into account. For this reason, the new regime also promised to stop the blockade of the Gaza Strip.

Consequently, it will likely be more difficult to recruit officials in the Arab world to help restrain and contain Palestinian and other elements that in Israel's view are sabotaging the diplomatic process. It will also be difficult to recruit them to exert pressure on the official Palestinian leadership to take steps that in Israel's view can help the negotiations. While these measures were difficult to attain even before the Arab spring, they were sometimes possible, as for example regarding the policy towards

Hamas in Gaza. Similar achievements will likely be much more difficult in the future.

It is hard to know how the events in the Arab world and in Syria in particular will impact on the Israeli-Syrian track. In Israel, opponents of negotiations and an agreement with Syria are already brandishing the claim that the developments of the past months should dissuade Israel from entering into negotiations and certainly an agreement with Syria, because the partner is liable to disappear. On the opposite – and less vocal – side, those who support negotiations claim that if Israel had an agreement with Syria, its ability to cope with any possible development in Syria would be greatly improved. The main question is how the developments in the Arab world will impact on the Syrian regime. If the Baath regime survives – not an insignificant question in light of the current situation – will the events reduce or increase Bashar al-Asad’s motivation to enter into negotiations with Israel, or will they not affect it at all. To a large extent this depends on Bashar’s assessment of how talks with Israel might affect the stability of his regime. If he feels that the majority of the Syrian public supports negotiations that gain the return of the Golan Heights to Syrian sovereignty, then it will be worth his while to maintain and perhaps strengthen his policy that aims for such negotiations. If, however, he feels that public opinion, which is hostile to Israel, is not enthusiastic about this measure, then it is likely he will forego this possibility. A clue to his way of thinking can be found in a widely publicized interview with the *Wall Street Journal* (on January 31, before the outbreak of the protests in Syria), where he stated that his regime is not threatened because it enjoys the support of the public on account of its opposition to Israel.¹⁰ The behavior of the Syrian regime in connection with the efforts by Palestinian refugees to march toward the border in the Golan Heights to mark the *naqba* (the “catastrophe” of 1948-49) and the *naksa* (the defeat in 1967) underscore that in the eyes of the regime, a certain amount of friction with Israel serves its purposes and contributes to its stability.

In any event, it is difficult for those observing from afar to know what public opinion is in a closed society like Syria’s and how it will play out on this issue. Moreover, in the short term, even if the two sides have a basic interest in renewing the negotiations, this does not appear possible before

the situation in Syria stabilizes. If the regime changes in Syria, it will be even more difficult to assess what its policy will be toward negotiations with Israel, particularly when it is not clear what role the Muslim Brotherhood will play in the new regime.

In Lebanon, on the other hand, little has changed. The predictions that after the fall of the Hariri government Hizbollah and its allies would succeed easily in establishing a new pro-Syrian government controlled by Hizbollah did not materialize. Rather, the establishment of the new pro-Syria coalition government took a longer time than the previous assumptions, and the weakening of Syria in the wake of the rebellion against the regime did not make the process easier. Thus, relations between Israel and Lebanon have not changed either for the better or for the worse following the recent events, and it appears that the various parties still have an interest in maintaining quiet on the border.

Conclusion

The cards in the Middle East are being reshuffled. The new, emerging Middle East will be more complex than in the past, and it will no longer be possible to categorize definitively many of the Arab actors as belonging to the axis supporting Iran or the axis of moderate states that oppose Iran. This presents Israel with many problems, but it also presents new opportunities stemming from the ability to maneuver between the various players. More Arab governments will conduct an independent policy while being less attentive to the United States and Western countries in general (and certainly less to Israel's needs), and more to their own public opinion. All of this does not bode well for relations between Israel and the Arab world when the diplomatic process is stagnant and there is an unfolding crisis around the Palestinian issue regarding September 2011, and it requires a more sophisticated policy on Israel's part that takes into account the complexity of the new situation.

Notes

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