

Conclusion

Israel and the Regional Shockwaves

Shlomo Brom and Anat Kurz

In the coming years, when Israel confronts the need to make political and strategic decisions on central issues of national security, the situation will be immeasurably more complex than what Israel has been accustomed to in recent decades. This complexity is the result of the dramatic developments in the Middle East known as the Arab spring, which took place against the backdrop of two processes that have helped shape the past decade: the collapse of the Arab-Israeli political process and the weakening of the American superpower. The challenges that have resulted from these processes may augur a new crisis that will be difficult to solve, or at the very least, make it difficult to manage ongoing, familiar crises.

The popular uprisings against the authoritarian regimes in the Arab world that have swept across the Middle East since late 2010 have not subsided in full, and they continue to affect all states in the region to some extent, be it large or limited. The regimes in Tunisia and Egypt have been overthrown. In three states, Libya, Yemen, and Syria, the conflict between the protesters and the regime has intensified and is threatening to turn into a prolonged civil war. In Bahrain, the protest for now has been suppressed by force with the aid of neighboring Gulf states. In other countries, pressure on the regimes to implement reforms in the system of government continues. In Morocco, such pressure is apparently leading to comprehensive changes that will bring the system of government close to a constitutional monarchy. The momentum behind these regional events

perhaps even reached Israel as well in July 2011, when social grievances sparked mass public protests against the country's socioeconomic policies.

In places where the "revolution" has ostensibly succeeded, it is still not clear what government, and perhaps what form of government, will replace the former regime. Will it be a Western-style liberal democracy, according to the model demanded by those who instigated the revolutionary events, or will there be new "strong leaders," backed by the army? Perhaps what occurred in many previous revolutions will happen now as well, whereby an uprising enables forces that did not initiate the unrest to "hijack the revolution," having assessed these events as an opportunity to promote their own agenda. In the case of the Arab world, this agenda will presumably be Islamist. Perhaps the instability will produce a regime that is a combination of these various possibilities.

In any case, the Middle East can expect a long period of instability. Even in places where governmental changes have already occurred, such as Tunisia and Egypt, the transition from an authoritarian regime to democracy will be neither simple nor direct. Societies that have experienced these shockwaves are moving from a state of no cohesive political movements or parties, other than Islamic groups, to a state of multiple parties and movements. Under such conditions, the chances are great that if free elections do in fact take place, none of the parties will earn a decisive majority, and the parliaments that are established on the basis of the election results will be composed of small parties. Such coalition governments are naturally unstable.

What the new regimes share with the old regimes that have managed to hold on to the reins of power is the growing recognition, if they are to survive, of the need to pay attention to the voice of the people. This understanding can be seen as a positive outcome of the wave of demonstrations, raising awareness of one of the basic elements of democratic rule. At the same time, a danger inherent in the socioeconomic situation of the Arab countries is that the regime will be swept away by populist policies in an attempt to satisfy public desires through instant gratification methods. This approach would likely make it difficult to cope with the existing problems that set in motion the mass protests but sometimes require strict austerity measures. In turn, failure to cope with these problems is liable to increase

the motivation of the governments to divert public attention to external “enemies.”

Developments of this sort seem to be emerging at a time that the United States, the main superpower, is weakened and exhibits increased difficulty in coping with its domestic problems. The same is true of most of its Western allies. Other candidates for the role of superpower, such as China, are led by an egocentric worldview, and therefore they are not prepared to assume the role of the “world’s policeman” or the “global rehabilitator.” What this global dynamic means is that today there is no external actor that can stabilize the situation in the Middle East and help the states of the region overcome the serious socioeconomic crisis that is at the root of the Arab spring, whether by use of the military stick or the economic carrot. Therefore, the Arab states will be forced to contend with a process of transition by themselves, whose duration and direction are difficult to predict. The Western world can offer declarations of support, but it will be difficult to back them up with concrete aid.

Declarations of support could aid in stabilizing the government in Tunis, which is considered a relatively easy case because Tunisia has a small, rather educated population that is not on the brink of economic disaster. However, it is doubtful that encouragement without real aid would be useful in stabilizing the government and the internal situation in Egypt, which suffers from rooted socioeconomic problems. The ability of external military intervention to influence the fate of governments is also limited. The Qaddafi government was in fact overthrown, but only at the end of a long, casualty-ridden road, and Libya is still far from stable. The assumption that military intervention in Syria would be beneficial – and not in fact complicate the situation – cannot be tested because of the inability to mobilize an international coalition for military action with the goal of overthrowing the Bashar al-Asad government.

This complex state of affairs comes at a time when relations between Israel and the Arab world are at a low point, especially in the wake of what appears to be the collapse of the peace process, and when the reigning approach in the Arab world, and internationally as well, is that Israel’s policy of “recalcitrance” is to a decisive extent responsible for the deadlock.

Over the past two years Israel's relations with the Palestinians have deteriorated sharply, especially in comparison with the breakthrough of the early 1990s, when the sides began a direct dialogue and signed agreements, and it appeared that they would free themselves of the approach that the dynamic between them is a zero sum game. However, Israel and the Palestinians are currently not capable of holding a direct dialogue because of a deep mutual lack of trust. For both sides, the view of relations as a zero sum game reigns supreme, and thus Israel and the Palestinians are driven by the intention to forestall achievements on the opposing side, even if as a result they themselves ultimately will suffer. Neither of the parties shows the willingness or the ability to help the other side relax its tough positions, which in turn makes renewed dialogue impossible. Israel is not able to offer the Palestinian Authority the minimum concessions that would help it soften its preconditions for renewing the negotiations, namely, Israeli willingness, in principle, to accept a territorial settlement on the basis of the 1967 lines, with territorial swaps. The PA, for its part, is not capable of accepting the demand by the government of Israel to recognize Israel as the state of the Jewish people, a step that would help Israel approach negotiations on the basis of the 1967 lines. The result is a deadlock from which neither side benefits. The PA cannot advance toward the establishment of a Palestinian state, and Israel is progressing toward a situation that will make it increasingly difficult for it to realize fully the vision of a Jewish democratic state. Given this lack of trust, and without the two sides changing their agenda on the goal of the dialogue between them, it is highly doubtful that renewal of the negotiations as a result of massive international pressure will lead to a formulation of understandings and the signing of implementable agreements.

In light of the extended stagnation in the negotiations process, the Palestinians have changed their strategy and have decided to approach the international community for recognition of their independent state. The timetable for requesting recognition of a Palestinian state by the UN General Assembly, which is scheduled to convene in September 2011, marks the next crisis between the sides, while the means by which they seek to contend with this crisis may well exacerbate the long term consequences.

It is highly possible that the crisis likely to emerge against the background of the growing international support for recognition of a Palestinian state will be a good illustration of the synergy between three difficult processes in Israel's strategic environment: the collapse of the political process, the weakening of the United States, and the Arab spring. The internationalization of the Palestinian issue itself is a direct result of the stalled Israeli-Palestinian dialogue and the inability of the United States to impose its will and return the two sides to the negotiating table. The political and public discourse in Israel is concerned with the possible legal significance of recognition of a Palestinian state by the UN General Assembly. Fear that recognition of a Palestinian state will grant the Palestinians the right to sue Israel and Israeli citizens in the International Court of Justice in The Hague is allayed by the fact that only recognition by the Security Council will make this possible, and that the United States intends to veto this proposal if it is submitted for a vote. However, even if recognition of a Palestinian state in the General Assembly is only a formality, the sum total of its significance is an upgrade of the status of the Palestinian mission to the United Nations. This in turn would underscore the process whereby Israel is pushed into a political-diplomatic corner. Finally, the ramifications of the Arab spring for the regional policy of the Arab states, when added to the accelerating process of isolation of Israel in the international arena and the proven inability of the United States to revive the Israeli-Palestinian dialogue (in part because of its inability to mitigate Israel's insistence on certain basic conditions for negotiations), will confront Israel with more serious challenges than those with which it has contended in recent years.

The impact of the Arab spring has not bypassed Palestinian society. The percentage of young people in Palestinian society far exceeds the percentage of their counterparts in Western societies. The upheavals and their aftermaths have increased the faith among young Palestinians that by using the same means as those employed in neighboring countries, in particular, non-violent demonstrations, they can achieve their political goals. This sense of empowerment, together with the frustration that will result from the General Assembly vote once it is clear that even international recognition of a Palestinian state will not be enough to realize any vision of

sovereignty, is liable to be expressed in mass demonstrations, and inevitably, increased friction with Israel. Past Israeli-Palestinian experience, as well as the lessons of the uprisings in the Arab world – where in various places the uprising met tough opposition from the regime, and violent encounters developed between demonstrators and security forces – implies that the path to a clash between Israel and Palestinian demonstrators is short. The lack of communication between Israel and the PA, as well as the limited influence the United States has on either side, will make it difficult to contain any crises that arise against this background.

Proponents of a unilateral policy in Israel may well see the collapse of the diplomatic process as an opportunity to fulfill unilateral options, chiefly, determining Israel's borders with the Palestinian state without negotiations with the Palestinians. A proposal raised in Israel within the right wing to respond to a Palestinian request for recognition from the General Assembly by annexing territories may be an echo of this approach. However, it is very doubtful that Israel could realize any such intention in face of the international opposition and criticism this measure would unquestionably arouse.

The weakening of America's influence in the Middle East, as well as its limited influence on Israel, does not create opportunities for Israel; rather, the reverse is true. For Israel, improved relations with Russia, with South American countries, or with China will not compensate for what it will lose if relations with the United States deteriorate. Even if in the long term the rise of these international forces becomes significant for Israel, in the short and medium term none of them can provide Israel with the strategic support that the United States provides in every area. Furthermore, testing waters to seek potential alternative allies for Israel will only contribute to exacerbating a crisis in relations between the Israeli government and the Obama administration, which could well harm important Israeli interests, in particular if Obama is elected for a second term.

Nevertheless, in contrast to the stalemate in the Israeli-Palestinian dialogue and the differences between the government of Israel and the Obama administration, which are laden only with risks, the Arab spring has the potential not only for risks, but also for changes that Israel can turn into opportunities. The recent events in Arab countries and the particular

regime changes are likely to influence domestic policy in Arab states, as well as set in motion changes in their foreign policy and inter-state relations.

Thus, for example, a fall of the Asad regime in Syria and its replacement by a regime controlled by the Sunni majority, which begrudges Iran and Hizbollah for their support of the Asad regime, is likely to totally recast the political orientation of Syria and to shatter, to a large extent, the Iranian-led radical axis. The upheavals also provide Turkey with an opportunity to promote its regional standing and its system of government as a model for emulation – since the Turkish model of democratic change, with its focus on the public's socioeconomic needs, is better suited to the worldview of Arab demonstrators than the path of opposition and defiance represented by Iran. In spite of the current friction between Israel and Turkey, Israel would mainly benefit from the Arab world's embrace of the Turkish model.

The Arab states' emergence from the stagnation and decay that characterized them in recent decades is likely to contribute to the establishment of a Middle East that will balance the various political forces better while reducing the vacuum between the regime and the public, which radical elements aspire to exploit. The rapid and significant increase in Iranian influence in the region during these decades was a result of that same vacuum and was created by the decline of the Arab regimes and not by the strength of the Iranian state, which itself is not lacking for significant weaknesses. An Arab Middle East led more energetically by Egypt, which will also serve as a balance to Iran and Turkey, will be more comfortable for Israel than a Middle East in which the dominant power is Iran. An additional change taking shape as a result of the storm in the Arab world is the awakening of Saudi Arabia. After the rebellion in Bahrain illustrated that upheaval was approaching Saudi Arabia, the Saudis showed determination to adopt a proactive policy against elements that were threatening their interests, mainly Iran.

Israel's ability to maneuver in a rapidly changing Middle East and to cope with the expected crises depends to a decisive degree on its ability to make fundamental changes to basic policy principles on several central issues, chief among them the Iranian challenge and the Palestinian issue.

The events of the Arab spring demonstrated that in contrast to a common assumption in the Israeli political establishment – that Iran stands behind

a large portion of the significant developments that affect Israel in the Middle East, and once Iran achieves nuclear military capability its power to affect regional developments will increase dramatically – Iran's ability to influence the developments underway in the Arab Middle East is in fact rather limited. Iran too will be forced to contend with these developments and attempt to contain the risks to its own interests that they portend. Furthermore, Iran is only one actor of many in the region, and therefore even if Iran completes its nuclear program it is questionable whether nuclearization will in fact have a critical impact on the strategic situation in the Middle East. Instead, it is possible that the drive by Arab states, chief among them Egypt, to deny Israel its alleged nuclear capabilities will continue to play a major role in their policies towards Israel. The practical manifestation of this goal is the conference on a weapons of mass destruction free zone in the Middle East, scheduled, according to the final document of the 2010 NPT Review Conference, to convene in 2012. On the other hand, if Israel succeeds in recognizing the changes that have taken place in the Middle East and uses them to rethink its policy toward its immediate and more distant surroundings in the region, it is possible that it will be able to neutralize a not-insignificant part of the Iranian threat it faces. Among other measures, a determined action by Israel to revive the regional peace process will assist Arab rulers in removing the Israeli-Palestinian issue from the public agenda of their countries, and in improving relations with Israel.

The Palestinian challenge stems, *inter alia*, from Israel's pursuit of expanded borders based on the idea that this provides a response to a fundamental strategic interest. Yet even if there is military value to territories and to strategic depth, given Israel's geographic situation the element of strategic depth is in any case circumscribed. Rockets fired into Israeli territory by Hizbollah and Hamas demonstrate that in spite of their limited range, they reach almost every target in Israel. Rather, the main challenge facing Israel is in fact consolidating its position in the mostly Arab and Muslim Middle East while retaining the sympathy and support of the international community, which is an essential guarantor of Israel's existence and prosperity. However, as long as the conflict with the Palestinians threatens to escalate following the General Assembly vote

on recognition of a Palestinian state, Israel cannot make progress toward establishing stable and dependable relations with Arab states. In the current atmosphere, even Arab states that wish for strategic cooperation with Israel – be it political, military, and economic – find it difficult to achieve.

One school of thought in Israel holds that in light of the dramatic developments in the Arab world, Arab states in the coming years will be preoccupied with internal matters and will not be invested in the Arab-Israeli conflict. However, this assumption is highly questionable. The rebellions in the Arab world stemmed from the humiliation of the Arab masses over the years. In large measure this was of course a function of the regimes in power and the socioeconomic situations in the states that experienced the major shockwaves. At the same time, the relationship of the Arab world to the outside world played an important role in the protests. The attitude of the West to the Arab world nurtured the sense of humiliation, and in this sense, Israel's relations with the West have added to that feeling of injustice. A stronger need by Arab regimes to heed domestic popular opinion will heighten their motivation to engage in Arab-Israeli relations, especially the Israeli-Palestinian issue. No wonder, then, that one of the first actions taken by the new Egyptian government was the concerted effort to broker a reconciliation agreement between Fatah and Hamas. Similarly, it was precisely in 2011 that events marking the *naqba* (the “catastrophe” of 1948) and the *naqsa* (the 1967 defeat) in the Arab world assumed sharper tones, including attempts by demonstrators to cross over into Israel's borders.

Israel is liable to become a focus of the anger in the Arab street following developments such as Israeli-Palestinian escalation in the Gaza arena, and certainly if there are violent outbursts in the West Bank following the General Assembly vote on recognition of a Palestinian state. Against the background of Israel's increased international isolation, these developments might translate into intensified security risks along Israel's other borders. Israel will be hard pressed to stop this trend of deterioration in its relations with the Palestinians or with other regional and international countries, especially the United States, unless it takes the initiative to bring about a substantive breakthrough in the political process.