Horizons

The Upheavals in the Middle East and Israel's Strategic Balance

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THE upheavals of the last four years in the Middle East have mitigated the Arab preoccupation with Israel and the regional attention—if not hostility—previously aimed at the Jewish state. Furthermore, many across the world have come to recognize the extent to which their preconception—namely, that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was at the root of the region's problems—was naive and ill-informed. Instead, the countries of the region concentrated on attempts to deal with their respective domestic troubles.

It seemed for a while that the relative calm in Israel's security situation would allow it some breathing room to enjoy what amounted to observer status in Middle Eastern affairs, so that those who preferred not to make decisions could continue their pattern of avoidance.
However, developments over the last year—and their potential implications for the future—might result in a reversal of such reprieves coming to affect Israel either directly, with violence steered squarely into its path, or indirectly. Israel is nearing the point at which it will have to face both familiar threats and new ones, and make important decisions on core issues in several areas: its relations with regional players and the international community, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Iran's nuclear program, and more.

This essay will, thus, examine the dramatic changes the Middle East has undergone in recent times, the central trends and vectors shaping regional developments at present and in the next several years, as well as Israel's strategic position and its balance of risks and opportunities.



Amos Yadlin - Photo: INSS

Three Stages

The wave of Arab protests that began in December 2010 generated dramatic changes. Things are still very much in flux, and it is far from clear when, or how, they will end. Nonetheless, it is possible to identify three key stages in recent regional developments: The first stage—"the revolution" (2010–2011)—denotes the Arab uprisings that ended with the fall of several regimes. A local uprising in Tunisia very quickly spread to other arenas in the Middle East, fueled by public activism and popular protests against dictatorial regimes in the Arab world. The public's demands focused on the quest to advance basic values, such as dignity, freedom, human rights, and especially economic and social justice. Unprecedentedly, the wave of protests led to the fall of four Arab regimes (Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen). A fifth regime—Syria—is under serious threat, while others (Iraq, Bahrain, Jordan, and Lebanon) are marked by extended instability.

The second stage—"transition and consolidation" (2011–2012)—indicates the initial attempts of the affected states to come to grips with the impetus for change (and resulting instability) by trying to fashion a new regional order. One of the immediate manifestations of this stage was the rise of political Islam-expressed in the Muslim Brotherhood's many political victories and achievements in the Middle East. In Tunisia, the Islamist political party, Al Nahada, won a plurality of the vote and parliamentary seats; in Egypt, Mohamed Morsi, the Muslim Brotherhood candidate, was elected president; and in Morocco, the Justice and Development Party (associated with the Muslim Brotherhood) won the general parliamentary election. This wave of victories strengthened the influence of Islamic regimes already in power in the Middle East (such as the Justice and Development Party, in power in Turkey since 2002, as

well as Gaza's Hamas government, in power since 2006). For a moment, it seemed as if the Arab Spring was concluding with political Islam's extensive takeover of the Arab world. But it soon became clear that these Islamic regimes—especially in Egypt, but also in Tunisia-were incapable of holding onto their political successes over time; and that the era of political Islam—as an alternative to the secular authoritarian order—had taken a serious hit, although it is still too early to eulogize.

The third stage—the one in which we currently find ourselves—is the most complex and difficult to summarize with a single label or comprehensive narrative-though some would say it marks the start of a counter-revolution. The primary feature of this stage is instability, manifested in the coexistence of several governance models in the Arab world. We have the model of the collapsing nation/failing state, such as Syria, Yemen, Libya and, to a certain extent, Iraq; other states manifest a return to the "old order," such as Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in Egypt; and, the least common model, a certain stabilization and the consolidation of a new path, as in Tunisia. Alongside the various state-based models, there is also an increase in activity of non-state actors and entities (both violent and non-violent) in the region.

Despite the present complexity, the rapid pace of events—a natural feature of transitional stages—and the inability to determine where the Middle East is headed, one can identify four major vectors affecting broad regional developments in general, and Israel's position in particular. Each will be considered in turn; taken as a whole, it seems they are likely to continue shaping the region in the years to come.

Religious Strife

The religious element is at the heart of events in the Middle East. The Shiite-Sunni conflict is, of course, not new: its beginnings lie in Islam's early days in the seventh century, in a struggle over the legacy of the prophet Muhammad. It has continued through violent confrontations in different arenas all over the Middle East ever since.

The ethnic dimension of this theological dispute is primarily represented by Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shiite Iran, respectively. Both are vying for hegemony in the Persian Gulf, specifically, and the Arab world, more generally. Therefore, beyond the ideological religious struggle over what is "true Islam," the current Shiite-Sunni conflict is also greatly affected by Realpolitik, (i.e., a contest over power and influence in various Middle East constellations).

In addition to the ancient Shiite-Sunni argument, it seems that intra-Sunni struggles have lately taken center stage. At present, three central groups are each claiming the exclusive crown of Sunni Islam. First is the Salafi branch, which believes in a return to the way of life that characterized the era of the prophet Muhammad and his followers. Mainstream Salafi activities occur primarily in the social sphere (through religious, educational, and charity institutions), but sometimes spillover into the political arena—as is the case in Tunisia and Egypt, where Salafi political parties are involved in the political system. Second is the Salafi jihadist stream, primarily represented by global jihad movements such Al Qaeda and the Islamic State. These factions believe that the way to restore the glory days of Islam is through a jihad played out through violent struggle. Finally, there is political Islam, which has suffered defeat and failed to bear the burden of governance. While the Muslim

Brotherhood in Egypt remains a force to be reckoned with outside the political system, its downfall has damaged political Islam not only within Egypt's borders, but also throughout the Arab world. It will take a long time for the movement to regroup. Still, these three streams are at the forefront of the struggle within Sunni Islam.

Undermining the State

In addition to the religious struggles, parts of the Middle East are also experiencing a process of fragmentation and dismantling of state-based frameworks. Most of the nation states in the region are relatively new phenomena. They are no more than a century old—the result of Anglo-French colonialism that carved up the remains of the Ottoman Empire into states with artificial borders based on the Sykes-Picot Agreement. These arbitrary divisions completely ignored the fragile ethno-religious fabric that typified the region. These shaky beginnings, coupled with the failing governance of the regimes in question in recent decades, have contributed to the undermining of the basic state construct in the Middle East.

Syria is in the midst of a blood-soaked civil war, and rule over its territory is split between the regime, rebels, and jihadist groups; Iraq has fragmented into three de facto entities: Sunni, Shiite, and Kurdish—the last of which is working to establish an independent Kurdish state; Libya has failed to stabilize itself since Gaddafi was toppled and is now ruled by various gangs, clans, and tribes; South Sudan "celebrated" three years of independence during which it experienced a violent, bloody civil war, and was recently listed as the world's most fragile state; and Yemen's central government was "hijacked" by the Houthis-a group belonging to the Zayidi sect of the Shia. States that have so far avoided collapse (Egypt, Lebanon, and Jordan) suffer from ongoing instability and acute domestic ailments.

The group that is most defiantly challenging the formal territorial boundaries forced on the region by the Sykes-Picot Agreement is the Islamic State (or, as it was formerly known, Al Qaeda in Iraq). In June 2014, the organization declared the establishment of an Islamic caliphate in western Iraq and eastern Syria, and has to all intents and purposes abolished the border between them. The group's stated objective is to unite all Muslims under an Islamic entity that crosses geographical borders—a-national and supra-national (one of the organization's most prominent public relations campaigns is called "The End of Sykes-Picot Agreement").

The rise of Non-State Entities

The activity of non-state entities in the Middle East is nothing new. What is new is the scope and impact of these actors, especially given the trend of collapsing states noted previously. These actors started playing significant roles in the region over the last couple of decades. Hamas has de facto controlled Gaza since 2007, and continues to occupy the seam between terrorism and political and social agency. Hizbollah has for three decades challenged Lebanon's sovereignty and leads the fighting that supports Assad's regime in the civil war ravaging Syria, while preserving its mission as a "Muqawama" movement to continue its war against Israel. Finally, several new jihadist outfits—some of which are formal branches of Al Qaeda—have been added to the region's violent landscape.

In Syria, many non-state opposition forces working to topple Assad's regime are in operation. These organizations are united in two central fronts: the secular Free Syrian Army and the Islamic Front.

The Islamic Front is comprised of Al Qaeda's Syrian extension—Jabhat Al Nusra. It is currently focused on fighting the Assad regime, while creating ad hoc collaborations with other Islamic groups, as well as Free Syrian Army factions.

However, since 2014 center stage has been taken by the Islamic State (ISIS), which has received extensive public attention and media coverage—especially in light of its military achievements and rapid territorial gains. Although it is a non-state actor, ISIS has become the organization responsible for daily life in the areas under its occupation, as well as for maintaining the education, health, and welfare infrastructure of millions of Syrians and Iraqis. Thus, ISIS has stabilized itself amid the civilian population and started to develop the hallmarks of state-like governance, in the context of which it provides services to residents and collects taxes from them.

In Egypt, the activity of Ansar Beit Al Muqqaddas, established at the end of 2011, is especially notable. Its activity is currently centered on the Sinai Peninsula and is aimed at the Egyptian military and security services. It uses many methods, including suicide bombings and sabotage of oil and gas pipelines, as well as ambushes and assassinations of soldiers, senior police officials, and army officers. At the end of 2014, the organization swore an oath of fealty to ISIS, and has in practice become the latter's Egyptian extension.

In the next few years, non-state organizations in the Middle East can be expected to continue to be a central force of unrest, fermenting and destabilizing the region's established regimes. The organizations identified with global jihad can be expected to continue to act to change the existing regional order. The campaign against ISIS, declared by an international coalition in the second half of 2014, can be expected to strengthen the survivability of the region's states—including Syria, Jordan, Libya, Iraq, and Lebanon—vis-à-vis these violent organizations. In any case, the success or failure of this endeavor will have a decisive effect on the shape of the Middle East for years to come.

In addition to violent non-state organizations, there are also non-violent non-state phenomena and actors in the Middle East with real influence on the emerging regional order. The Arab Spring's popular uprisings demonstrated the importance of Middle East publics.

Until the start of the Arab Spring, it seemed as if the region's most important players were political and military elites. The popular protests exposed the major role played by the public sphere—with the masses showing themselves to be powerful forces in moving and shaping both internal and external processes. Although we have seen fewer people taking to the streets and squares over the last year (most of the protest discourse is taking place in the new media), the barrier of fear fell and the potential for protests is alive and well in the public.

The demands of the street in the Middle East are not homogeneous, reflecting many disparate desires: safety and stability, improved socioeconomic conditions, dignity

and liberty, and different levels of preservation of religion. The traditional pact between rulers and the ruled in the Middle East has to a very large extent been abrogated; and at present, those regimes in the Middle East that want to preserve their political stability and survivability give much greater weight to the public's voice in their decision-making processes.

Another different type of non-state phenomenon is widespread refugeehood. In the last three years, more than 3.5 million Syrians have fled their country. Jordan has seen an influx of more than 1.5 million refugees from Iraq and Syria, with Lebanon absorbing an additional 1.1 million Syrian refugees (the country's entire population is only 4.5 million). This has created significant economic, social, demographic, and political pressure in two countries that were already suffering from instability. These pressures are liable to spread to other areas of the Middle East, weakening central governments in various nations as a result of their inability to cope with the stress.

The phenomenon of non-state players and all its aspects, no matter how accelerated, is not enough to eulogize the Sykes-Picot regional order. It seems that nation states will continue to serve as the basis of Middle Eastern governance in the period ahead—certainly in those countries where the national base is strong, such as Egypt and Tunisia. Nonetheless, it is important to understand that the familiar nation state model is no longer the only organizing principle of regional relations in the Middle East.

Reduced American Involvement

Along with a clearly-stated American policy to reduce its involvement in the Middle East, a number of other factors have damaged its status and ability to lead processes that would reduce the region's loci of instability and violence. These include the heavy cost the United States paid for its involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq, the difficulty it faces in coping with some of the region's central problems, such as the Iranian nuclear threat and the Palestinian issue, and various criticisms leveled against it by its Middle Eastern allies.

ISIS's takeover of parts of Iraq and Syria and the attempt to also expand its reach in states that have so far remained stable, especially Jordan and the monarchies of the Arabian Peninsula, have forced the United States and some of its allies to change the policy that sought to avoid military involvement in internal developments in the region's nations. Thus, at the beginning of 2015, the United States finds itself fighting against ISIS. So far, boots on the ground have been ruled out by the U.S. military and America's political leadership, but this might turn out to be critical if the regional elements fighting ISIS are unable to stop the organization's spread and reduce its sphere of activity.

Despite its policy, the United States is well aware that it cannot duck responsibility for handling the region's problems - and is liable to pay a cost for doing so: be it in the form of shocks to the global energy market—which would damage U.S. allies and therefore also the United States, despite its emerging energy independence, determined also by oil prices in the Middle East—or in the form of violence originating in the Middle East, or because of developments in the field of proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. One may therefore assume that the White House will continue to view the Middle East as an important region because of its strategic

significance.

Although the events associated with recent regional upheavals have neither directly nor immediately affected Israel, they are not unrelated: they certainly influence Israel's position and security in many ways. Israel's current strategic balance is rife with risks and challenges for which the country will have to prepare in the coming year and beyond, but also provides advantages and opportunities Israel will have to identify and put to good use.

Risks for Israel

The situation in Syria and the survivability of the Assad regime affects Israel's security and interests, even though Israel is not involved in the internal struggle in Syria and has no intention of becoming involved—other than preventing any faction in the civil war from crossing into Israel, as well as stopping the transfer of high-quality weapons from Syria to Hizbollah. Israel has managed to establish significant deterrence vis-à-vis all sources of power in Syria—at least as far as the Golan Heights border is concerned. For years, the Syrian state avoided provoking Israel from this border. Nonetheless, the current internal struggle in Syria does sometimes spill over into Israel territory, directly or indirectly. Israel makes sure to respond with fire to anyone shooting at it; for now, the border in the Golan, other than isolated incidents, is quiet. However, it is worth underlining that the proliferation of violent groups operating in Syria makes it difficult for Israel to identify one clear culprit against which it would bring its deterrent capabilities to bear.

Hizbollah's intense involvement in Syria has placed a drain on its power and resources; this has, to a great extent, neutralized any intention or ability on its part to open a front against Israel. Still, Hizbollah has hardly given up on its struggle against Israel—both rhetorically and practically. So far, Hizbollah has signaled this by means of pinpoint, small-scale attacks—mainly to preserve tension and rehabilitate its internal legitimacy. The relative calm is liable to change, however, the moment Hizbollah decides the time is right to shift the struggle's focus back to Israel. Therefore, incidents such as the Israeli military action against Hizbollah and Iranian military personnel in the Quneitra region at the end of January 2015—and Hizbollah's response a week later at Har Dov—might in the future serve to jump-start conflict escalation between Israel and Hizbollah.

At the same time, both the direct and the indirect threat to Israel from Salafi jihadist sources operating on and beyond its borders is liable to grow. While the jihadists operating in Syria are focused on fighting Assad's regime, Israel might—in case there is no outcome to the conflict inside Syria in the next couple of years—become the target for military action from Syria, and perhaps also Lebanon, in response to the international coalition's attacks against jihadist organizations. The reason is evident: Israel is still seen as both a historical enemy and key element in the coalition's war against them (as is plain, for example, from statements made by ISIS leader Al Baghdadi in the organization's journal Al Dabik). Moreover, ISIS's emerging supporters in the Sinai Peninsula, Gaza, and Jordan might grow bolder and translate their support for the Islamic State into anti-Israel activity.

Global jihadist organizations neither currently place the fight against Israel at the top

of their agenda, nor are they calling on their adherents to take direct, concrete action against it. Nonetheless, the Israel angle certainly serves as a source of inspiration both for individuals around the globe, sometimes referred to as "lone wolves" and more importantly, to the thousands of volunteers streaming into Syria in recent years from both the Middle East and the West, who are encouraged to carry out attacks against Israeli and Jewish targets in many countries.

In the Palestinian arena, Israel is facing three potential confrontations: another round of fighting in the Gaza Strip, another armed Intifada in the West Bank, and a political Intifada in the international arena.

Another military round is liable to start as a result of similar conditions which precipitated the last military confrontation in July 2014, known as Operation Protective Edge. These include the political and economic weakness of Hamas, a decision-making system split among its different factions (a military branch, a political branch, and geographic division), its regional isolation, and a dynamic of unintentional deterioration over which neither side has any control.

Although Hamas and other regional players see Israel as a power that relies on a top-notch, strong, and deterring army, Israeli military might—like that of other regular armies in democratic nations—finds it difficult to attain a decisive victory in asymmetrical conflicts. Israel's objectives in the last military operation took too long to attain, while Hamas scored certain gains. Since then, Hamas has invested great effort into reconstructing its military and offensive capabilities. The attempt to prevent Hamas from renewing its force construction and extend the period of relative calm until the next flare-up, requires Israel to develop military, doctrinal, and systemic tools that will ensure a shorter campaign and a clearer decision.

Another essential challenge relates to the West Bank. Given the current political deadlock and the lack of an improved situation in the Gaza Strip after Operation Protective Edge, can we expect an outbreak of a violent conflict in the West Bank—sometimes called "a third Intifada?" Tensions have risen over the past year. The number of spontaneous popular attacks in the West Bank and Jerusalem has grown-in part because of tensions between Jews and Muslims on the Temple Mount. But it so far seems that the Palestinian public is unwilling to disturb the current relative stability, and thus is reluctant to return to the days of severe violence.

Finally, political foot-dragging and intra-Palestinian splits are pushing Abu Mazen (also known as Mahmoud Abbas) to engage in a political Intifada—that is to say, to take a confrontational stance in the international arena so as to bypass the channel of direct agreements. In the meantime, a series of declarations by several EU Member States' parliaments and governments recognizing the Palestinian state have provided the Palestinian effort with a tailwind, whilst damaging the principle of negotiations. Israel must formulate a strategic alternative to failed negotiations that will allow it to shape its borders despite the lack of a Palestinian agreement, yet in coordination with the international community, headed by the United States.

The Iranian Threat*

Although this is not a new threat, the most significant potential risk to Israel emanates

from Iran—a radical regime with nuclear weapons ambitions. Generally speaking, for Iran the Arab Spring rebalance was mixed: Tehran failed to embrace the wave of Islamic revolutions and encourage an uprising in Bahrain, yet succeeded in strengthening its hold on four Arab capital cities: Damascus, Baghdad, Beirut, and Sana'a.

The painful sanctions imposed on Iran in 2012 brought Tehran to the negotiating table in 2013, which resulted in an interim agreement that froze its nuclear program. But Iran remains on the cusp of nuclear capabilities and materials—one that would allow it to break out towards a bomb in a matter of months, at a time of its own choosing.

Israel shares a strategic resolve with the United States to prevent Iran from gaining a nuclear bomb. Nonetheless, the two nations disagree on how to do so. The emerging agreement with Iran worries Israel for five primary reasons.

First, such an agreement confers legitimacy on Iran and other Middle Eastern states to enrich uranium. Second, it is liable to lead to the realization of the "North Korean scenario"—that is to say, a situation in which Iran breaks out to a bomb whenever it wants without a significant response on the part of world powers. Third, the agreement ignores and fails to provide a response to terrorist activity led by Iran—failing to deal with general Iranian subversiveness in the Middle East. Fourth, it does not address the Iranian arsenal of ballistic and cruise missiles. Fifth, the agreement lifts the sanctions against Iran; should they end, Iran would be able to expand and enhance its nuclear program and provide itself with much more advanced nuclear infrastructure, at a much more dangerous threshold-level than the one it is at today.

Aside from the nuclear issue, Iran's interference in various Middle Eastern arenas is becoming ever deeper—especially given the region's political and governmental instability. In addition to its involvement in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and the Gaza Strip, Iran also supports-economically and militarily-the Houthis in Yemen and encourages the Shiites in Bahrain. One possible ramification is increasing influence and both direct and indirect forging of closer relations (via proxies) with Iran through its grasp on failing arenas—reaching all the way to Israel's own borders.

U.S. - Israeli Relations

The strategic partnership with the United States is one of the pillars of Israel's strategic stance and power of deterrence. Therefore, any weakening of the United States' position in the Middle East has a direct negative impact on Israel's strategic position.

The problematic turn of the two countries' relations worsened in 2014, and the relationship—at least on the personal level—between the leaders of the two countries, as well as senior officials in the respective governments, involved some scathing exchanges. The Iranian nuclear issue also has significant potential to damage relations—given reports that less information between Israel and the United States is being exchanged than in the past.

Therefore, the Israeli government formed after the March 2015 elections—no matter its political composition—will have to reach new understandings with the current

American administration about the burning issues on the Middle East agenda. This will have to be done despite the expected areas of disagreement—in order to try to reduce negative ramifications whilst working to improve and retain the special relationship between the two countries.

Opportunities for Israel

Despite the traditional threats (headed by Hizbollah and Hamas) with which Israel is contending, as well as the new challenges arising out of the violent reality that is the Middle East, the present era is also producing some new opportunities and spheres for cooperation.

Iraq and Syria's weakness is good for Israel, because Iraq's military capabilities have largely disappeared—whatever is left does not threaten Israel—and the Syrian army, busy with the civil war, has also been dramatically weakened. Assad's military has lost a great deal of equipment—to the point that its ability to present a real threat (conventional and non-conventional) to Israel has been neutralized.

A wide congruence of interests has come into being for Israel and moderate Sunni Arab states, such as Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States, and Jordan. This represents an opportunity for regional cooperation based on similar outlooks to developments related to Iran, Syria, and, more recently, the threat coming from ISIS. Such cooperation could serve as the basis for improving relations and forging new bonds in other areas—such as the economy, water scarcity, and technology—alongside retaining relations with countries with which Israel has already signed peace treaties.

The revolutions in Egypt and instability in Jordan have aroused concern about the future of these treaties, but they seem to be surviving for now, and Israel and its neighbors have even enhanced their cooperation on security and economic matters. Indeed, it is clear that the Israeli-Egyptian relationship improved throughout 2014-especially in light of Operation Protective Edge. The Egyptian decision to create a security strip on the Rafah border, thereby blocking the smuggling tunnels in the area, has severed one of Hamas's major sources of financing and cut its growing stre-ngth. Israel and Egypt's congruent interests in fighting jihadist terrorism and Hamas—which Egypt recently declared a terrorist organization—create opportunities for intelligence, military, and counter-terrorism cooperation.

Beyond the potential for strengthening Israel's relations with some of the region's countries, there is also great importance in forging bonds with non-state actors representing moderate ethnic minorities that seek independence—whilst taking exception to radical Sunni and Shiite Islam.

One prominent example is the Kurdish minority. The model of Kurdish autonomy in northern Iraq could be expanded and shaped into a loose federation of states in which broader autonomy would be granted to regions populated by ethnic or religious groups, whilst remaining connected to the country's central government.

Such a structure could also serve as a possible model for Syria, Libya, Yemen, and, possibly, other states in areas where ethnic and religious minorities exist in defined geographic locations. The formation of federations of this type could open a new

space for Israel to seek opportunities for cooperation and integration into the region. Such a solution also allows new entities to make use of Israel's technological and other abilities to help thear own developments, whist establishing themselves as functioning state entities.

Concretely, an alliance with a moderate player in the region's hostile spheres would be advantageous to Israel. In Iraq and Syria, the Kurdish minority is emerging as a responsible player capable of both maintaining a stable civil administration and effectively fighting jihadist organizations. Despite the obvious complexity, especially in terms of image and public relations, the Kurds could gain greatly from a closer relationship with Israel—both on a strategic level (e.g. Israeli support for their vision of an independent Kurdish state in the region), and operational level (e.g. support, training, and other assistance to Kurdish groups in the region).

Israel's solid deterrence and its effectiveness are evident in neighboring states and hybrid terrorist organizations, such as Hamas and Hizbollah, characterized by an ability to govern and a certain level of accountability towards the population in the territories they control. At the same time, deterrence is not an absolute concept, as the ability to measure it is established after the fact and without any guarantee that it will hold in the future.

Extreme Disruption

An end to the extreme disruption that has characterized the Middle East in recent years is not yet on the horizon. It could take many years for that to happen. In Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Yemen, the situation has deteriorated in the past year and the conditions required for stability to emerge have not yet come into being. The chances for an early end to the crisis in the Middle East are low.

The reasons for this assessment are many. Amongst the most salient, we can mention the lack of foundation for an agreement leading to a political settlement among the various religious and ideological groups; the violence between Shiites, Sunnis, Kurds, and other ethnic groups striving for independence; the growing strength of jihadist terrorist organizations and armed militias operating not just in Iraq and Syria, but also in Egypt (and having the potential to seep into other areas); Iran's subversive activity in several states, such as Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Bahrain; and the lack of a central force—internal or external—capable of leading the Arab world towards stability.

Given this reality, Israel must reassess its regional strategy and identify where it should locate itself on the spectrum of policy options. One way forward would consist of observing events without any direct involvement. Another would entail formulating and implementing a proactive policy (e.g., the notion of potential cooperation with Sunni moderates, as mentioned above). This would invariably require focusing on foiling threats and improving Israel's political and strategic position, promoting the chance for attaining peace without conceding critical security issues, and taking advantage of opportunities for improved regional and international cooperation.

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