ANALYSIS

ISPI

Analysis No. 277, November 2014

WEATHERING THE "SPRING" ISRAEL'S EVOLVING ASSESSMENTS AND POLICIES IN THE CHANGING MIDDLE EAST

Benedetta Berti

The processes set forth by the Arab Spring have brought a tremendous amount of change to the Middle East and North Africa region; affecting virtually all countries in the region. Israel is no exception. The country has been approaching the fast-paced wave of social and political change in the Middle East with an eye to its own stability and security. As such, it has largely focused on the short-term instability generated by the Arab Spring and it has to a great extent acted to minimize the security risks resulting from that situation. Israel has invested in boosting its domestic defence as well as in working to preserve its key regional alliances with Jordan and Egypt. This is the case although Israel's position in the region remains unique, both in socio-economic and political terms, as well as because of its own on-going conflict. The article explores Israeli 'post-Spring' assessments of threats and opportunities in the Middle East, focusing specifically on Israeli policies with respect to Syria—a major regional actor that has undergone deep internal transformations—and that serves as a case study to outline the main parameters of the current Israeli policy with respect to the MENA region.

Benedetta Berti *is Research Fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) at Tel Aviv University, Lecturer at Tel Aviv University, and Kreitman Fellow at Ben Gurion University*

©ISPI2014

The opinions expressed herein are strictly personal and do not necessarily reflect the position of ISPI.
The ISPI online papers are also published with the support of Cariplo

Introduction

The past four years have brought a tremendous amount of change to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The processes set forth by the Arab Spring have transformed the political, social, and security landscape of the Middle East, leading to both non-violent political revolutions as in the cases of Tunisia or Egypt, as well as to bloody internal conflicts, as in Syria. Virtually all countries in the region have been affected one way or another by these sweeping changes. Israel is no exception. Even though the evolving regional dynamics have, so far, not directly affected Israel's national security and internal stability – at least not at a strategic level – the altered political and security environment has impacted Israeli assessments and policies. What is more, Israel – as part of the Middle East – has also been investing in boosting its own security and preparing to better 'weather the spring'. This is the case although Israel's position in the region remains unique, both in socio-economic and political terms and because of its own ongoing conflict. The summer 2014 war between Hamas and Israel in this sense highlights how, even as new challenges emerge regionally, Israel's own security lens remains deeply connected to its immediate neighbourhood and to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The article explores Israeli responses to the fast-paced wave of regional changes, looking specifically at the country's general assessment of threats and opportunities in the Middle East in general, and in its immediate neighbourhood more specifically. In the second part of the study, the focus is on Israeli policies with respect to Syria – a major regional actor that has undergone deep internal transformations – and that serves as a case study to outline the main parameters of current Israeli policy with respect to the MENA region.

Even though the evolving regional dynamics have, so far, not directly affected Israel's national security and internal stability – at least not at a strategic level – the altered political and security environment has impacted Israeli assessments and policies

The View from Tel Aviv: an Israeli Assessment of the "Spring" and its Potential

When the Arab Spring began in late 2010, the Israeli political and security establishments viewed the revolutions with far greater scepticism and ambivalence than their European counterparts. The reasons behind this overall cooler attitude are varied and include Israel's different and far more complicated geo-strategic position, marked not only by overall tense relations with many of its neighbours, but also by great physical proximity to the unfolding mass-scale political mobilizations. In other words, seen from Tel Aviv, the revolutions in early 2011 carried significant risks, with any rapid and deep deterioration in regional security bound to directly affect Israel; and with changes in the status-quo threatening to impact the

©ISPI2014

fragile and complex state of its regional relations. Erring on the side of caution is also well in line with the Israeli strategic mentality, characterized by a perception of self-vulnerability, a view of its neighbourhood as inherently unstable and conflict-ridden, and overall relying on a realist national security paradigm assessing threats mostly in military terms and heavily focusing on state survival, military might, and self-reliance[1].

For example, the Israeli government initially reacted to the anti-government demonstrations taking place in Egypt, and to a lesser extent in Tunisia, with extreme uneasiness. Indeed, the relatively stable relations with the Mubarak government and its security apparatus, along with the strong interest in protecting the 1979 Peace Treaty, led Israel to assume a very risk-adverse and pro-status quo orientation[2].

In addition to this cautious attitude, mainstream Israeli decision-makers' views of the Arab Spring were overall also characterized by a certain dose of pessimism in assessing the evolving regional revolutions in general, and their democratic potential more specifically. For instance, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had already warned against the looming "Iranian Winter" in early April 2011[3]. Months later, in November of the same year, the PM went further by stating that "the chances are that an Islamist wave will wash over the Arab countries, an anti-West, anti-liberal, anti-Israel and ultimately an anti-democratic wave"[4]. In general, the mainstream security and political establishments tended to agree with these pessimistic statements and for the most part avoided referring to the ongoing revolutions as an 'Arab Spring', settling for more neutral terms – like revolution or upheaval – or sarcastically mentioning the 'Arab Winter'.

Mainstream Israeli decision-makers' views of the Arab Spring were overall also characterized by a certain dose of pessimism in assessing the evolving regional revolutions in general, and their democratic potential more specifically

[1] See for example C. FREILICH, *Zion's Dilemmas: How Israel Makes National Security Policy*, Ithaca NY, Cornell University Press, 2012.
[2] "Excerpts from PM Netanyahu's statement at the Knesset," *Israeli Prime Minister's Office website*, 2 February 2011. http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Government/Speeches+by+Israeli+leaders/2011/PM_Netanyahu_addresses_Knesset_situation_Egypt_2-Feb-2011.
[3] "Arab Spring May Turn Into Iranian Winter: Israel PM", *Agence France Presse,* 17 April 2011, http://www.jpost.com/Diplomacy-and-Politics/Netanyahu-Arab-Spring-could-turn-into-Iranian-Winter
[4] "Excerpts from PM Netanyahu's statement at the Knesset", *Israeli Prime Minister's Office website*, 23 November 2011, http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Government/Speeches+by+Israeli+leaders/2011/PM_Netanyahu_statement_Knesset_23-Nov-2011\.

©ISPI2014

Israeli concerns about rising regional instability were matched by the fear that forces antagonistic to Israel would gain from the regional revolutions and the shift in the balance of power. Indeed, and this was especially true until the summer 2013 ousting of Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi, Israel was far from enthusiastic about the seeming rise of Islamist parties to government, from Tunisia to Egypt, worrying that this political shift would result in the adoption of more aggressive policies with respect to Israel. With respect to Egypt, Israel also worried that a Muslim Brotherhood-led government would embolden and empower Hamas in Gaza. Scepticism with respect to the Arab Spring was in this sense fuelled by the perception that "The biggest winner of the past year is political Islam – in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and (perhaps soon) in Syria"[5].

Israeli concerns about rising regional instability were matched by the fear that forces antagonistic to Israel would gain from the regional revolutions and the shift in the balance of power

Of course, the internal debate over the significance and potential of the Arab Spring also saw prominent political and security figures go against this pessimistic assessment and urge Israel to 'bet on freedom'[6] while highlighting the potential benefits of the regional shifts. For instance, then Israeli President Shimon Peres stated: "Poverty and oppression in the region have fed resentment against Israel and the better our neighbours will have it, we shall have better neighbours"[7].

Another interesting domestic debate related to the Arab Spring has taken place with respect to the links between the ongoing regional transformations and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Here at least two main camps developed: the first argued that the ongoing instability and fast-paced regional changes meant that Israel would be well advised to adopt a minimalist policy and to refrain from making sweeping changes. Or, in the words of the PM: "The earth is shaking. We do not know who will take over any land that we give up, not tomorrow, not this very afternoon. We see this reality everywhere. Whoever does not see it is burying their head in the sand"[8]. Looking at the intense and prolonged regional instability, many decision-makers argued that Israel

[5] A. YADLIN, "The Arab Uprising One Year On", in *One Year of the Arab Spring: Global and Regional Implications,* in Y. GUZANSKY and M.A. HELLER, (eds.), INSS Memorandum No. 113, Tel Aviv, Institute for National Security Studies, March 2012, p. 15.
[6] N. SHARANSKY, "The West should bet on freedom in Egypt", *The Washington Post*, 17 December 2011, http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-west-should-bet-on-freedom-in-egypt/2011/12/15/gIQAMWWCzO_story.html.
[7] "Mideast revolutions could be good for Israel, says Peres", *The Associated Press*, 28 March 2011, http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/mideast-revolutions-could-be-good-for-israel-says-peres-1.352374.
[8] "Excerpts from PM Netanyahu's statement at the Knesset", 23 November…, op. cit.

©ISPI2014

should focus on boosting its own domestic preparedness and security and weather the storm. This same camp also stressed that the Arab Spring could be an occasion to emphasize that the Middle East's main problems have little, if anything, to do with the Arab-Israeli conflict. In the words of Foreign Ministry Avigdor Liberman: "Today, it is clear from what is happening in Syria and Egypt, that the problem is primarily internal and domestic. It is not the conflict, or the Jews – it is the radical Islamic wing in Arab society"[9].

The second camp held radically different views and stressed that precisely because of the rising instability and uncertainty Israel ought to settle its own conflict and act with the utmost urgency while it still has a clear political partner in the Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas[10]. This same camp also stressed how, even though the Arab-Israel conflict did not spark the regional revolutions, future improvements of Israel's relations with both regional states and civil societies were still inevitably connected to its changing the course of its policies with respect to Palestine.

Between Threats and Opportunities: How Israel Sees the "New" Middle East

In addition to looking at the connection between regional dynamics and its own conflict, Israel also focused on monitoring broader regional trends. On this front, Israel has been displaying uneasiness with respect to the ongoing regional instability and the increasing state weakness and break-down of central authority in the region, resulting in the empowerment of non-state armed groups, as well as in more porous borders and in the rise of weapons smuggling and trafficking.

Israel has been displaying uneasiness with respect to the ongoing regional instability and the increasing state weakness and break-down of central authority in the region, resulting in the empowerment of non-state armed groups, as well as in more porous borders and in the rise of weapons smuggling and trafficking

A case in point to illustrate the link between regional instability, state weakness and Israeli security is of course the Sinai – a region where the Egyptian government had traditionally been conspicuous by its absence – and where the post-revolutionary period saw a further breakdown of central control along with a proliferation of armed groups. In turn, this led to a number of terrorist attacks planned from within Sinai against Israel[11],

[9] Y. YAAKOV, "Liberman: Arab Spring proves Israel isn't to blame", *The Times of Israel*, 22 October 2013, http://www.timesofisrael.com/liberman-arab-spring-proves-israel-isnt-to-blame/#ixzz3DNqtoZld.
[10] See Tzipi Livni Speech at 2013 Herzeliyah Conference, http://www.herzliyaconference.org/eng/?CategoryID=490&ArticleID=2411.
[11] See R. SPENCER, "Chaos On Its Borders Could See Israel's Worst Fears Realized", *Telegraph*, 18 August 2011,

©ISPI2014

as well as in a surge of weapons being smuggled into Gaza from Egypt. Since the regime change in 2013 the new Egyptian government has invested substantial resources in tackling its security challenges in Sinai, resulting in campaigns both against Hamas's underground tunnels connecting Sinai to Gaza as well as in cracking down on armed groups and cells operating in the area. Still – to date – Sinai remains a security hotspot for Israel, and in the context of the post-2014 summer war between Hamas and Israel, Tel Aviv has continued to state its interest in seeing Egypt continue to tackle the issue of both underground tunnels and the smuggling of weapons to Hamas from Sinai.

In addition, Israel has far better tools and experience in dealing with state actors rather than non-state armed groups and, overall, favours the existence of clear political stances. Of course, Israel is far more concerned about unstable and failing states at its own borders, as in the case of Syria, and substantially less focused on more peripheral – from an Israeli perspective – countries like Libya. Similarly, changes in the status quo of key regional partners, like Jordan and Egypt, are seen as especially important to monitor, as they could potentially affect Israel's own regional position and security. The relatively rapid post-2010 boosting of the Islamic State of Iraq and its morphing into ISIS and then IS (Islamic State) has been an especially worrisome trend from an Israeli perspective, revealing the dangerous convergence between weak and dysfunctional political systems, failing states, and the potential for radicalization. Thus Israel has closely observed the IS phenomenon over the past few months. This is the case although at the moment the security establishment does not necessarily see the IS as a direct or immediate threat, as the group is presently occupied with consolidating power in Syria and Iraq. Yet, in the future, the IS threat could be multi-faceted for Israel, both by threatening to destabilize key regional actors like Jordan, as well as by raising the chances for occasional cross-border attacks from the Syrian Golan. What is more, Israel also worries about a new generation of newly trained jihadists – many of whom hold European or North American passports – that could return home and then plan to attack Israeli assets or personnel abroad. Finally, Israel is concerned about the potential for the establishment of ISIS-inspired cells in Palestine.

The relatively rapid post-2010 boosting of the Islamic State of Iraq and its morphing into ISIS and then IS (Islamic State) has been an especially worrisome trend from an Israeli perspective, revealing the dangerous convergence between weak and dysfunctional political systems, failing states, and the potential for radicalization

---

http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/israel/8709665/Chaos-on-its-borders-could-see-Israels-worst-fears-realised.html; B. BERTI - Z. GOLD, "Security Vacuum in the Sinai", *The National Interest,* 10 August 2012, http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/the-security-vacuum-the-sinai-7317?page=show.

©ISPI2014

The concern about growing instability and rising radicalization – for example through the worrisome expansion of ISIS – is, however, matched by the awareness that, overall, the Arab Spring has not made things easier for Israel's regional foes either. On the one hand, the Syrian regime, Hezbollah, and Iran – all members of a self-proclaimed "Axis of Resistance" – have been fighting a prolonged and bloody internal war and are all very much threatened by ISIS's advances. And even Hamas has been in a difficult predicament since the ousting of Morsi in 2013, with the group under increasing financial pressure and facing an overall more hostile region. Indeed numerous analysts saw the summer 2014 war between Israel and Hamas as a direct consequence of the group's relative weakness. In this context, with the recently entered unity deal with Fatah failing to quickly provide the economic relief the group sought and with an extensive Israeli campaign to hit Hamas in the West Bank following the kidnapping and killing of three young Israeli students, Hamas' gambit to resume rocket attacks was likely intended both to restore the group's reputation as well as to keep internal conflict under control. Just as importantly, Hamas likely counted on a short-term military escalation as a tool to obtain concessions from Israel and Egypt and to get a relaxation of restrictions on flows of goods and people. Yet, Hamas's post-war position remains extremely complex, with the group still struggling politically and economically.

Meanwhile, Israeli-Egyptian relations, after a relatively rocky period during the Morsi government, are now solid yet again, with the two states seeing eye-to-eye on a number of issues, including their mutual distaste for Hamas's dominance of Gaza and their direct interest in seeing it weakened.

As a result of this mixed assessment, marked however by a number of potential threats, Israel has in the past four years developed an overall risk-adverse and minimalist policy with respect to the Arab Spring. Shaped by the awareness that Israel lacks the political capital or popularity to become directly involved in the domestic processes of political change in post-revolutionary societies, the country has instead bet on boosting its own defence while investing in preserving its own relations with both Jordan and Egypt. This is the case although, as will be discussed in the next section, the country also developed country-specific approaches.

Israeli-Egyptian relations, after a relatively rocky period during the Morsi government, are now solid yet again, with the two states seeing eye-to-eye on a number of issues, including their mutual distaste for Hamas's dominance of Gaza and their direct interest in seeing it weakened

©ISPI2014

Israeli Policies in the Changing Middle East: The Case of Syria

A brief examination of Israeli assessments, adjustments, and policies with respect to Syria can serve as an interesting case to stress the consistently national-interests based nature of the Israeli approach with respect to the transitioning region.

Overall, whereas there was virtual consensus within the Israeli security and political establishments about the notion that regime change in Egypt was not in Israel's interests, the debate over Syria has from the beginning been far livelier. On the one hand, a sizeable group of security and defence officers and experts has been asserting that the status quo – namely the permanence of Bashar al-Assad in power – is to be preferred to any regime change. They indeed have argued that Bashar al-Assad, much like his father before him, has been a fairly predictable and risk-adverse neighbour and that the demise of his regime would lead, at best, to a complete collapse of any central authority and to the proliferation of lawlessness and armed groups (a 'Sinai scenario', only on a much bigger scale). Under such a scenario, Israel would have to worry about sporadic cross-border operations perpetrated by jihadist groups operating from within the Syrian Golan, thus seeing a deterioration – albeit not a dramatic one – of its security. At worst, Assad could be replaced by radical groups, which could in turn threaten Israeli security more directly.

Whereas there was virtual consensus within the Israeli security and political establishments about the notion that regime change in Egypt was not in Israel's interests, the debate over Syria has from the beginning been far livelier

On the other hand, many prominent figures within policy and defence circles have taken a completely different view of the current civil war in Syria. Firstly, looking at Damascus through the lens of Tehran, they have been arguing that the fall of the Assad regime would greatly benefit Israel by weakening its main regional foe, Iran, while also complicating the domestic situation of the Lebanese Hezbollah. Secondly, they have been refuting the notion of Assad being a 'decent neighbour' by pointing to Syria's direct involvement in supporting both Hamas as well as Hezbollah. Finally, the assessment that Syria would inevitably become an 'Islamic State' has also been contested on several occasions, pointing out different factions of the anti-Assad opposition and their collective interest in preventing an ISIS takeover. What is more, the brutal methods used by the Bashar al-Assad regime to repress the revolution and crush any political opposition to his regime have drawn extensive condemnation from Israeli politicians, strengthening the 'moral case' as to why supporting Assad is not a feasible option[12].

[12] D. HAMILTON, "Israel Urges Tougher Action against Assad", *Reuters*, 30 May 2012, http://www.inss.org.il/upload/%28FILE%291338453132.pdf.

©ISPI2014

Yet, despite the widely different opinions with respect to Israeli interests in Syria, there seems to be overall consensus about the fact that the Syrian civil war is not drawing to an end anytime soon, a stark change from the late 2011 assessment about the rapid downfall of Bashar al-Assad seen as 'inevitable'[13].

In turn, this raises a number of practical concerns for Israel, including the potential impact of the regional turmoil and of the tragic refugee crisis on Jordan, a country seen as a cornerstone of Israel's regional policy. What is more, as mentioned in the previous section, the ongoing civil war has in turn been a key driver of radicalization in the region: in this sense Israel looks very carefully at the recent ascent of ISIS.

This general assessment of the situation in Syria has led Israel to develop a policy based on beefing up its own security and control of the border with Syria. At the same time, Israel has been extremely wary of becoming directly involved in the civil war and, as such, it has overall refrained from openly or directly supporting one of the warring parties. In this same context, although the Israeli government does view favourably the ongoing military campaigns to downgrade and destroy the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, still it does not plan to be actively involved in any of the operations (aside from an intelligence-sharing dimension).

Although the Israeli government does view favourably the ongoing military campaigns to downgrade and destroy the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, still it does not plan to be actively involved in any of the operations (aside from an intelligence-sharing dimension)

Yet, at the same time, Israel's Syria policy also does have an active component: indeed, the country has invested in both retaliating against any cross-border attack perpetrated along the Golan demarcation border and, even more significantly, it has communicated a willingness to intervene in Syria to prevent the transfer of advanced weaponry to Hezbollah. On several occasions over the past years Israel has reportedly acted upon its own redline, with a series of attacks against such weapon transfers.

The assumption behind this policy has largely been that sporadic and limited use of force would not drag Israel into the Syrian civil war. This assessment is also shaped by the expectation that both Hezbollah as well as the Assad regime – already bogged down in their own domestic conflicts – would not risk an all-out war with Israel by responding to Israel's attacks. In other words, the calculation regarding Syria has been that Israel can continue to remain an external observer to the conflict, as

[13] I. KERSHNER, "Israel, Expecting Syrian Collapse, Braces for Refugees," *New York Times*, 11 January 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/11/world/middleeast/israel-braces-for-refugees-in-event-of-syria-collapse.html.

©ISPI2014

limited use of force will not trigger retaliation, nor will it lead to a significant escalation.

In the future, Israel will likely continue to strike a balance between enforcing its redline and staying out of the broader conflict; while at the same time preserving a focus on its northern front.

A Look at the Future: Challenges and Opportunities

Israel has been approaching the fast-paced wave of social and political change in the Middle East with an eye to its own stability and security. As such, it has largely focused on the short-term instability generated by the Arab Spring and it has to a great extent acted to minimize the security risks resulting from that situation. Accordingly, the country has invested in boosting its domestic defence as well as in working to preserve its key regional alliances with Jordan and Egypt.

While this approach is certainly well-justified, given the rising state of uncertainly in the Middle East, it would seem that the Israeli approach has to some extent neglected the long term potential opportunities arising from the shifting sand in MENA and, more significantly, the long term democratic potential of the ongoing transitions. Yet, looking forward, fully taking advantage of the opportunities offered by the shifts in the region, for example to improve Israel's position, status and alliances, will inevitably require the country to look inwards and invest in a serious and determined resumption of the peace process, ultimately leading to resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

It would seem that the Israeli approach has to some extent neglected the long term potential opportunities arising from the shifting sand in MENA and, more significantly, the long term democratic potential of the ongoing transitions

©ISPI2014