

Challenges and Opportunities for Israel in the Coming Year

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In the five years since the start of the regional upheavals, the dramatic, the novel, the unexpected, and the unfamiliar have become the new normal. This significant period, which saw the collapse of states, the fall of regimes, and the continuation of wars, is not yet over, and clearly the volatility will continue into the near future. Three struggles underway may be likened to shifts in the tectonic plates of the Arab world. The first is the socioeconomic struggle touched off by the so-called “Arab Spring,” which was led by frustrated young people who believed that all roads in life were blocked to them, leading to a sense that they could never realize their hopes and dreams. However, the changes since they took to the streets and public squares have only put more distance between them and their ambitions. The second is the inter-ethnic struggle between Shiites and Sunnis for regional dominance: against the emerging Iranian-led hegemony of a Shiite axis has been the rise of an internally divided and unstable Sunni front consisting of actors from Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt, Jordan, and the Gulf states on the one hand, to al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, and likeminded Salafi jihadist groups on the other hand. The third struggle is the struggle within the Sunni camp against the ascendance of the Islamic State, the embodiment of the revived notion of a caliphate based on *sharia*. The Islamic State is spearheading the new effort to realize that ancient dream, which in turn has given rise to a long list of opponents: the Sunni states, political Islam, and Sunni Salafist movements that are not the Islamic State.

The dynamic and multilayered nature of these struggles poses serious challenges, but these same struggles also offer many opportunities to shape a strategic environment of a different kind. This dualism is true for all those involved in the Middle East, and especially so for Israel. Israel has adjusted its policy to the frequent changes by monitoring developments while sitting on the fence, and in particular by strengthening defensive elements and avoiding involvement as long as possible. At the same time, however, Israel has remained stagnant in its ability to construct new tools to leverage the situation, at least within its close strategic environment, and it continues to operate on the basis of rationales and rules of the game that are not effective. Therefore, the most important challenge as well as opportunity for Israel in the coming year is to adopt updated methods of thinking, internalize the fact that it is in the era of a major confrontation to reshape the Middle East as well as its own position and status in the region, and formulate an approach that looks for opportunities and develops a new mix of multidisciplinary tools and efforts.

The most important principle in shaping a regional agenda to promote Israel's interests is the understanding that there is a close linkage among processes and trends in different geographical spheres. Unlike the Middle East prior to 2011, today it is virtually impossible to engage in one arena without affecting another or without causing a chain of unintended consequences. Therefore, it is hard to act on an opportunity in a certain area, certainly independently, and it becomes necessary to enlist other actors, both state and non-state, as partners. The weakening of the state structure in large parts of the region has made social and cultural influences much more important than in the past. One's reference point must thus change accordingly, with close attention paid to the construction of supra-state strategic coalitions and the opportunity to reach out and cooperate with relevant sub-state elements.

Israeli decision makers must remember that now, more than ever before, the country's immediate surroundings comprise a complex, multi-faceted reality operating on the basis of various rationales, marked by mutual relations and influences. Israel must prepare for the possibility that the existing state order in the Middle East could collapse and that nations could dissolve into separate ethnic or religious sub-states, autonomies, enclaves, or other entities. It therefore behooves Israel to cultivate ties, both public and covert, with

ethnic groups, minorities, and other actors that are not hostile to Israel and that have the potential to play a constructive and stabilizing role in shaping the future Middle East.

In its new strategic surroundings, Israel has the opportunity to improve its regional position and cultivate cooperation with “pragmatic” elements in the Arab world on security, energy, technology, agriculture, and water infrastructure. To this end, Israel must present a genuine “entry ticket”: promoting the political process with the Palestinians by placing a political initiative on the table, accompanied by the genuine intention to establish a two-state reality, which as such maintains Israel’s uniqueness as a Jewish and democratic state.

The Palestinian Arena

To a certain extent, the outbreak of Palestinian violence in September 2015 took the Israeli public and its leadership by surprise because of the ongoing nature of the attacks, their frequency, and the choice of weapons – in most cases knives and automobiles. The combination of social, national, and religious motives, fueled further by Islamic State-inspired Salafi jihadist ideals, touched off the outbreak. The younger generation of Palestinians sees no way out of its plight, which generates among them an urgent drive to change the current situation. One of the expressions of this despair is the choice to attack Jews, which at least gives them some meaning and effects a changed reality, while also granting glory because of the resistance to Israel through their willingness for self-sacrifice.

However, a closer look at the situation shows that this eruption of violence was not a strategic surprise, but only another link in a chain of violent terrorist outbreaks. The pressure cooker would have blown sooner or later because of the cumulative economic, social, and national problems within the Palestinian public in the absence of any glimmer of political dialogue, and with the Gaza Strip in a shambles more than a year after Operation Protective Edge and all promises for reconstruction unfulfilled.

In tandem, Israel faces the ongoing delegitimization campaign waged against it by the Palestinian Authority in the international arena. The campaign focuses on delegitimizing Israel by ascribing responsibility to it for the political deadlock and attacking the construction in the West Bank Jewish

settlements, a policy that for the international community is proof that Israel is not interested in peace or compromise. An example of the consequence of the deadlock is the European Union's decision to label products made in the West Bank. Israel must understand that this is another warning sign as to the set of boycotts, sanctions, and limitations it will face if it adheres to the status quo and does not act to jumpstart the political process.¹ Moreover, Israel's own interests demand that the political process be promoted. This should not be viewed as necessary because of international pressure, but rather as necessary from the understanding that Israel is close to the tipping point, beyond which it will no longer be possible to implement a two-state solution. At that point, the supreme Israeli interest of being both a Jewish and democratic state will be very much in danger.

At the same time, Israel must urgently formulate a response to the problem of Palestinian terrorism, based on awareness that this response is not exclusively security and military related, as this is a complex problem of which terrorism is only one manifestation. Israel's response to the outbreak of violence must be based on the understanding that there is potential for seepage of the ideas that the Islamic State spouts much beyond the general inspiration it provides to young people seeking to overcome the cycles of despair in the possibility of improving their lot in nonviolent ways. Therefore Israel must offer alternatives to the Palestinian public. One, it must use integrated, parallel, and synchronized anti-terrorism efforts at the security, infrastructural, social, and cognitive levels, founded on a multidisciplinary approach in which the emphasis is on improving the economic and infrastructural situation of the Palestinians in East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip. Two, it must present a political plan to promote a series of arrangements between Israel and the Palestinians and display authentic, credible determination to move toward conflict resolution. It is necessary to engage in dialogue with the Palestinian leadership with the express intention of creating a political horizon. Three, from behind the scenes Israel must help the PA and other influential elements in Palestinian society present competing and more attractive ideals than Salafist jihadism, which tries to capture the hearts and minds of young people in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. In this regard Israel should make informed use of social media and pay particular attention to schools and curricula, employment initiatives, and job training for the young,

and instill in them a sense that they can affect their future through positive means. The younger Palestinians do not believe in the political process, especially not one that was carried out simply for show (the process for its own sake). Therefore, it is imperative to stress the positive changes to the Palestinian population – emphasizing the significant improvements in way of life and freedom of action, employment, and movement – as soon as the political process is resumed.

The Northern Arena

Developments in Syria and their ramifications for Lebanon command much international attention and present the most turbulent situation in Israel's environment. While it is difficult to envision the future endgame, there is a high potential for the sudden formation of a military threat that would in all likelihood be manifested in terrorism aimed at Israel. The further cohesion of the northern arena into a single bloc was made evident in the growing consolidation of the Iranian-led Shiite axis, which includes Assad's regime and Hezbollah. At present, the axis maintains a military coalition, together with Russian forces operating in Syria. Assad's dependence on Iran and Hezbollah has made the northern Golan Heights and southern Lebanon into a single unit, currently representing the most severe military reference threat to Israel's security. Furthermore, it seems that in the last few years, after the Second Lebanon War (2006) and since the onset of the crisis in Syria, there has been an inversion of roles between Hezbollah and the Syrian army. The Syrian military, which represented the most severe conventional military threat against Israel, is disintegrating because of the civil war and its failure to recruit new soldiers, whereas Hezbollah, with the backing of Iran's Quds Force and Shiite militias from other countries, has assumed a more prominent role. Hezbollah has highly developed military capabilities, especially missiles, rockets, UAVs, and aerial defenses. At the same time, southern Lebanon has supplanted the Golan Heights as Israel's most peaceful border, mostly because Hezbollah would like to avoid a confrontation on yet another front, while the Golan is becoming a crowded, and therefore combustible, playing field.

Israel ranks the Iranian-led Shiite axis at the top of the list of severe threats. This axis has grown in strength because of cooperation with Russia,

which provides extensive air cover to President Assad's supporters as they fight the rebels and supply advanced weapons to the regime. And indeed, the further growth of this axis must be stunted as much as possible, and scenarios involving escalation if/when the axis can turn its full attention to Israel must be prepared. But it is also unwise to ignore the overall landscape of the northern arena: the Islamic State is a key factor in the struggle over Syria's future, even if its presence in the Golan is limited (Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade, which has sworn allegiance to it, sits in the southern part of the Golan Heights), as is Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Qaeda's satellite, whose presence on the Israeli border is more extensive. Therefore, it is necessary to take into account the Salafi jihadist element, which relies on Sunni dominance and is liable to threaten Israel in the future, perhaps sooner than is commonly thought. Because neither option currently in place in the northern arena – dominance of the Iranian-backed axis versus dominance of the Salafist jihadist groups – is attractive, to say the least, the time has come for Israel to formulate a proactive policy in the arena together with players amenable to understandings and with shared interests to improve conditions and create tools of influence, especially in southern Syria, to prepare for the escalation that will inevitably arrive.

Beyond sharing the knowledge it has gained in fighting terrorism, Israel should weigh deeper involvement in the US-led coalition fighting the Islamic State. Such involvement could be manifested in: strategic agreements with Jordan to create a joint region of influence in southern Syria; intelligence sharing to foil attacks and launch attacks at the Islamic State's centers of gravity; a multidisciplinary method of action for Israel's political and security establishment that would integrate military, economic, infrastructural, social, and ideological efforts; joint efforts in cyberspace to fight Islamic State propaganda and its use of social media and the internet; and strategic dialogues designed to examine new ways to shape the Middle East without necessarily adhering to old models.

Egypt and Jordan

One positive byproduct of the regional instability is the spotlight on the shared interests of Israel and the states with which it has peace agreements, i.e., Egypt and Jordan. The fact that both of these states have a large Sunni

majority has made them susceptible to Salafi jihadist radicalization inspired by the Islamic State. This danger, especially given the long borders both states share with Israel, has made preservation of their stability and the resilience and integrity of their regimes into a supreme interest not only to them, but to Israel's national security as well.

Egypt is already taking vigorous action against the Islamic State's branch in the Sinai Peninsula, Wilayat Sinai (previously known as Ansar Bait al-Maqdis), which is involved in extensive domestic terrorism in Sinai and Egypt. So far, Jordan has remained stable, both in terms of the status of the royal household and in terms of the scope of terrorism on its soil. The kingdom has succeeded in protecting itself against the storms raging all around it, in Syria and Iraq, but Salafi jihadist cells already in place are liable to become active and undermine the existing order there. Israel must prepare for a scenario in which it will have to stand by Jordan's side to maintain the kingdom's stability and even existence.

Security cooperation between Israel and Egypt and Jordan has proven itself. For now, its fruits are evident in the very fact of these states' relative stability. The hidden challenge and opportunity is exploiting the security platform to promote other regional interests. Egypt and Jordan are both opposed to the main streams of anti-Israel enemies in the Middle East – the Iranian-Shiite axis and the Salafist jihadist brand of Islam – and on that basis, it is possible to promote broader understandings. In addition to the fight against terrorism in Sinai, it is critical to reach understandings with Egypt on reconstruction of the Gaza Strip, in order to reduce the pressure on the Gaza population before it boils over toward Israel. The goal is to try to affect President Sisi's policy: since Operation Protective Edge, Sisi has not allowed any relief for Gaza, as he seeks to deny Hamas an achievement of any sort.

Israel must expand its relationship with Jordan – likewise an anchor in the region's stability – beyond the security dimension, by starting economic, civilian, and infrastructure projects that will yield dividends of peace. In addition, Egypt and Jordan are platforms for expanding Israel's cooperation with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states. In order to further strategic relations with these nations, Israel must act – i.e., beyond rhetoric alone – to renew the political process with the Palestinians. Jordan needs the political process

in order to reduce the potential threat of its Palestinian majority to the regime, reduce the pressure of ominous scenarios such as the collapse of the PA, and be able to play its central role in the Palestinian context and use its position as a moderating influence, especially in terms of lowering the flames over al-Aqsa.

The Regional Powers

The Middle East is divided into ideological and political camps rooted in historical, religious, and cultural factors. At present, one can discern four major regional blocs: the Shiite axis led by Iran; the “pragmatic” Sunni camp led by Saudi Arabia; political Islam, led by Turkey, Qatar, and the Muslim Brotherhood; and Salafi jihadist Islam, led by the Islamic State and al-Qaeda. Given that Salafi jihadist Islam is at odds with all the other players and that political Islam is on the wane after the 2013 military coup in Egypt, it seems that Iran and Saudi Arabia emerge as the major powers in the Middle East. Both are fighting in different arenas: against one another and, it would seem, both against the Islamic State. The many competing interests mean that the two camps are incapable of converging to fight the Islamic State; the same is true for the other parties involved.

Both powers threaten Israel: the Iranian axis on the one hand and the Salafist jihadists on the other do not recognize Israel’s right to exist. Therefore, Israel must build connections with those entities that do accept its existence and understand its important role in shaping and stabilizing the region. To that end, Israel must pave the way for cooperation with the camp led by Saudi Arabia, the one considered closest to Israel in terms of congruent interests and common enemies. Israel’s ignoring the Saudi peace initiative is a mistake, and even if many of its sections are by now irrelevant, Israel would do well to recognize it as the basis for starting a dialogue with the Arab world, led by Saudi Arabia. The lack of an Israeli initiative to promote the political process with the Palestinians prevents the cultivation of official relations between the sides and leaves the objective unobtainable.

The organizing principle of the new geopolitical map and the many actors in the Middle East should – indeed, must – generate a new type of thinking in Israel. What is perceived as a multiplicity of threats could become a wealth of opportunities serving a regional strategy that promotes an integrated,

multilayered policy. So, for example, the crisis of trust between Israel and Turkey represents an extended deadlock that should perhaps be reexamined. The two countries have much in common and can benefit in many ways from coordination and cooperation, as was the case in the past. In addition, it is necessary not to limit the sphere of possibilities by trying to generate cooperation only with state players. Rather, Israel should seek out other, sub-state players that could serve as channels of influence for Israel in the region and give rise to positive forces critical to the stability and future of the entire Middle East.²

Implications for Israel

As a regional actor, Israel must shape its policy in light of the fundamental understanding that the future will be different from the past, and that right now, operating in the dark in the midst of regional chaos is a fact of life. This starting point must be translated into creating opportunities while remaining prepared to confront threats. Mapping the challenges and internalizing the idea that there are connections between events and trends in different places is the key to formulating policy. So, for example, realizing the connection between the ideological and cultural phenomenon of the inspiration of the Islamic State and the Palestinian stabbing terrorism could help generate strategic insights for Israel in all arenas. The first shock of the regional upheavals is far in the past and the risks are well-known. Now it is time to try to make the situation yield the positive strategic dividends inherent in it.

War is an extreme scenario serving as the foundation for military force buildup and preparedness. But the risk of escalation to war in the coming year is low. Therefore, security action should focus on the current confrontation between wars to improve Israel's strategic position not only by strengthening its image of deterrence but also by providing positive returns to its strategic environment in the fields of economy, energy, technology, water, and more. In addition to strengthening its components of defense, especially along the borders, it behooves Israel to create levers of influence beyond its borders by means of, e.g., cooperating with Israel's peace partners and the "pragmatic" players, and striving to create inherent strategic depth that would distance threats and save the costs of direct action.

When one examines the trends in Israel's regional environment and the challenges it faces, one must confront several essential questions about the present and its relationship to the future. The next chapters are devoted to a broader and more in-depth discussion of these questions, which are the critical ones facing both the government and the security establishment as they prepare to formulate policy and strategy for the coming year.

Notes

- 1 Jodi Rudoren and Sewel Chan, "E.U Move to Label Israeli Settlement Goods Strains Ties," *New York Times*, November 11, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/12/world/middleeast/eu-labels-israeli-settlements.html>.
- 2 For more on the topic of reshaping the Middle East, see Robin Wright, "Imagining a Remapped Middle East," *New York Times*, September 28, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/29/opinion/sunday/imagining-a-remapped-middle-east.html>; Jeffrey Goldberg, "The New Map of the Middle East," *The Atlantic*, June 19, 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/06/the-new-map-of-the-middle-east/373080/>; Mahdi Darius Nazemroaya, "Plans for Redrawing the Middle East: The Project for a 'New Middle East,'" *Global Research*, September 4, 2015, <http://www.globalresearch.ca/plans-for-redrawing-the-middle-east-the-project-for-a-new-middle-east/3882>.