

# The Creation of a Regional Coalition Against Israel: Obstacles and Warning Signs

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In April 2018, the IDF Strategy document was published, which assessed that “in recent years and in looking to the coming years, Israel’s strategic standing is solid and has a ‘positive balance sheet’ that is better than all of its enemies in the region.” According to the document, the implication of such a balance sheet “diminishes the potential for war against a military-political coalition.”<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, an analysis of the overall regional situation, which includes Israel, and individual analyses of the states that could be a central threat reference show that Israel is unlikely to face a broad regional Arab-Islamic coalition in the foreseeable future that would pose an existential—not even serious—threat to its security. The reasons for this are varied, including the absence of a hegemonic, conventional ideology that champions this objective; Israel’s military advantage and the lack of sufficient military power and resources among its potential enemies; inherent and unbridgeable internal divisions and rifts within the Arab and Islamic camps; great support for Israel by the United States; the weakness of the Arab state framework and the inward focus of the states in the region; the view among some of the Arab states that Israel is an ally—albeit covertly—in addressing shared strategic threats, which they see as more important than the conflict with Israel; and the

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diminished effectiveness of using Israel (the so-called “Zionist entity”) as a scapegoat for domestic problems and for diverting public opinion toward an external enemy.

In theory, this situation could be reversed by intense regional changes—unlikely in the short term—such as the Arab states reducing their focus on their internal affairs, which has characterized them since the outset of the Arab Spring; mitigation of the Sunni-Shiite conflict; or the fall of pragmatic regimes friendlier to Israel. Without such processes, even extreme events that would arouse severe anti-Israel sentiment within the public opinion in countries throughout the region—such as intentional damage to the Al-Aqsa Mosque, killings of large numbers of Palestinians attributed to Israel or to Israelis, or the unilateral annexation of territories in Judea and Samaria—are unlikely to cause the regimes to shift their policy and create a broad regional coalition that would seek to pose an existential threat toward Israel, although they certainly would severely condemn Israel and undertake punitive steps, such as recalling ambassadors and downgrading peaceful relations.

### **Background: The Regional Situation in Historical Perspective**

During the years 1948–1979, from the War of Independence to the signing of the peace treaty with Egypt, there was a real possibility that the Arab states would establish military alliances aimed at posing an existential threat to Israel. During most of this period, pan-Arabism, led by Egypt’s president, Gamal Abdel Nasser, and the Ba’ath parties in Syria and Iraq, dominated the Arab world. According to this ideology, Israel is an artificial colonialist entity that was established in the heart of the Arab world with the West’s support to serve foreign interests. The Arab regimes that advocated this ideology saw Israel as a threat to its neighbors and its surroundings, and as an impediment to realizing the long-awaited Arab unity and the yearnings of the Arab nation. Despite the aversion expressed by the Arab monarchies, such as Saudi Arabia, Morocco, and Jordan, toward the revolutionary regimes that championed the pan-Arab ideology, Pan-Arabism had wide support among the Arab population, and the monarchies were forced to toe the line. The rifts that appeared within the pan-Arab ideological family, especially between Egypt and Syria following the break-up of the United Arab Republic (1967), only bolstered the struggle against Israel as the essential “unifying glue” that helped blur the differences between both states and leaders.

The Six-Day War was a milestone in the standing of pan-Arab ideology. It led to processes of ideological change that had a dual and contradictory effect on how the conflict with Israel was perceived. On one hand, the defeat of Egypt, Syria, and Jordan on the battlefield aroused self-criticism and accelerated the decline of the pan-Arab ideology that had reigned during the days of Nasser, following its total failure to realize its objectives and aspirations in the political and military sphere. This change led the Arab states to place greater emphasis on their own particular interests and to reassess uncompromising positions regarding the conflict with Israel, which harmed their own interests. On the other hand, and in parallel, the sense of humiliation that followed the Arab defeat in 1967 coupled with Israel's continued control of the territories that it had conquered strengthened anti-Israel sentiments and increased the interest in the conflict. It solidified the Arab world's personal connection with the conflict and strengthened religious aspects of the conflict; the Arab states' sense of self-righteousness was bolstered, as was their commitment to continue the struggle against Israel. They continued to deny Israel's existence, while they cultivated animosity and desire for revenge, and increased the demonization of Jews and of Zionism.<sup>2</sup> As a result, the Arab states increased the military cooperation between them in order to reconquer the territories that they had lost in the war and "to erase the traces of [Israeli] aggression." These factors contributed to the cooperation between Egypt and Syria in the Yom Kippur War in 1973 and to the willingness of additional Arab states—such as Jordan—to send forces, even if symbolic, to aid the war effort. In addition, the Palestinian guerrilla struggle against Israel, which intensified after the Six-Day War, especially from Jordanian territory, was popularly received by the Arab street, although it received limited support from the Arab governments.<sup>3</sup>

The partial achievements that Egypt attained in the Yom Kippur War—which in Egyptian public opinion, with government encouragement, erased the sense of humiliation following the 1967 defeat—contributed to the public's willingness to consider new courses of action in the conflict with Israel. In addition, despite the initial surprise, the IDF's recovery on the battlefield—with superpower support from the United States—strengthened the understanding, especially in Egypt, that continuing the military struggle against Israel was futile.<sup>4</sup> The combination of the declining status of pan-Arabism and these processes of change led to the gradual disintegration of

the unified Arab front against Israel and increasing Arab willingness to reach pragmatic diplomatic settlements with Israel. During the years 1974–1977, interim agreements were concluded between Israel and Egypt and Syria, and Jordan and Israel held talks on reaching a territorial settlement in the West Bank, but the understandings were limited. As a result, Jordan was pushed from the center of the peace process, and Egypt assumed its place.<sup>5</sup> As a result of negotiations that began following Sadat’s visit to Jerusalem in November 1977, Egypt signed a pioneering peace agreement with Israel in March 1979, despite broad Arab opposition. Although this led to Egypt’s temporary removal from the Arab League, it was the first crack in the Arab states’ united front against Israel and in their fundamental opposition to peace, recognition, and negotiations with it, as stated in the “Three No’s” at the Khartoum Summit in September 1967. During the 1980s, the Arab states’ categorical opposition to peace with Israel continued to gradually erode, culminating with implicitly recognizing Israel with the approval of the Fahd Plan at the Arab League Summit held in Fez in September 1982.<sup>6</sup>

Alongside the erosion of the united front against Israel, the cracks, fissures, and tensions in the Arab and Islamic world had become more pronounced. In 1980, Iraq, led by Saddam Hussein, began an eight-year war against Iran, and in 1990, it invaded Kuwait, a sister Arab state, out of economic considerations. In response, Arab states joined the international coalition against Iraq. Meanwhile, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the loss of its support, as well as the transition to a world dominated by one superpower—the United States—led the Arab states to abandon the idea that they could defeat Israel militarily and encouraged some states in the region to turn to the path of peace. In October 1991, these trends led to the Madrid Conference and later to negotiations between Israel and its neighbors, followed by the signing of the Oslo Accords in August 1993 and September 1995, and the peace agreement between Israel and Jordan in 1994.<sup>7</sup>

The ideological vacuum as a result of the decline of pan-Arabism was partly replaced with the Islamist alternative. The most prominent representative of this ideology among the Sunnis is the Muslim Brotherhood, which was established in Egypt in 1928 and spread to additional states under the slogan “Islam is the solution.” The Muslim Brotherhood called for perceiving Islam as the source of authority for conduct in all areas of life and as the cure for the political weakness of the Arab nation and the Islamic community

in the modern era. The refusal to recognize the existence of a Jewish state and the obligation of jihad to eliminate it are fundamental principles of the Islamist ideology, and it provides a basis for collective Arab-Islamic action against Israel. Although the Arab public has lent support to Islamist ideas, the Islamist parties have had difficulty assuming power. As a result, their influence has been expressed in the establishment and flourishing of radical non-state movements: Some are violent movements, such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (Daesh), which advocate the use of force to implement their ideology within the Arab states and do not limit their ambitions to a single state, and some are more social-political movements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, and Hezbollah, which see political measures, social instruments and religious preaching as the preferred means of achieving influence and ultimately coming to power. These two types of movements did not contribute to the unification of the Arab world against Israel; rather, on the contrary.

The Arab regimes most fully expressed their acceptance of the existence of Israel in the Arab League peace initiative of 2002, in contrast to the Islamist forces. At the same time, many Arab regimes have perceived Islamist forces as a threat and as their main enemy. Iran, which has been controlled by a Shiite Islamic regime since 1979, has served as a source of ideological, financial, and operative inspiration for the Islamist movements and has taken a militant stance toward Israel. Sunni regimes also have seen Iran as a challenging, threatening, and even hostile force. Iran's policies have deepened the Sunni-Shiite rift in the Arab world and have increased the significance of this schism to the point that it has become a central issue in Arab politics and has pushed the Arab-Israeli conflict to the margins.

The upheaval of the Arab Spring, which began at the end of 2010, further strengthened this regional trend. While the Muslim Brotherhood succeeded in assuming power through free elections in Egypt in June 2012, the dominant establishment forces quickly counter reacted with popular support, led to their overthrow and restored the army's hegemony. In other states, such as Syria, Libya, and Yemen, civil wars broke out in which Islamist and Salafi-jihadi organizations played a central role, resulting in the formation of opposing coalitions within those states—with regional and international support—that fought each other, thus reversing most of their achievements vis-à-vis the regimes. Hezbollah, Iran's ally and proxy in Lebanon, became popular on

the Arab street following the Second Lebanon War in 2006; however, the role that it played in the civil war in Syria and Yemen created cracks in its image as a “resistance” movement that sees the struggle against Israel as paramount.<sup>8</sup>

With the perspective of nearly a decade, the developments of the Arab Spring led mainly to the intensification of internal struggles within Arab states, to their focus on rehabilitation and stabilization of their internal situation, and to their involvement in regional issues in which Israel is not at the center, such as Iran, the forces of political Islam, and Salafi-jihadi organizations. At this stage, the trends described above seem to have created opportunities for cooperation between Israel and states in the region rather than having created a regional coalition against Israel. The domestic problems and regional struggles have highlighted the shared interests that the Arab states have with Israel, as an ally in the struggle against the Islamist movements and Iran, and have rendered the Palestinian problem a lower priority for the Arab states and their populations than in the past. In these circumstances, Israel has become a member of the regional “stability camp” along with pragmatic Sunni Arab states, including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates.<sup>9</sup>

Responses in the Arab world to important developments in the Israeli-Palestinian arena have remained weak, including the reactions to the ongoing deadlock in the Israeli-Palestinian diplomatic process; the Trump administration’s pressure on the Palestinians; the transfer of the US embassy to Jerusalem, and the expansion of the settlements. Saudi Arabia has pressured the Palestinians to accept some of Israel’s demands; Egypt has cooperated with Israel in dealing with the challenges in the Gaza Strip and the Sinai; and even the overt normalization of relations between Israel and the Gulf States has increased. In the past, assumingly when the Arab regimes had domestic problems, they employed animosity toward Israel to divert the public’s attention and to prevent any focus on the opposition to the government. This phenomenon has diminished considerably and seems to be partly the result of changes in how the populations of the Arab states see the sources of internal and external problems. Polls clearly show that changes are taking place among the younger Arab generation, which is exposed to new media and is not afraid to examine more critical approaches to traditional state narratives regarding Israel.<sup>10</sup> However, the pace of change among the

Arab population is still notably slow compared to that of the positions of the Arab governments.

In summary, in terms of the regional picture, there is no coalition of Arab and Islamic states on the horizon that would pose an existential threat to Israel. Firstly, among the states there is an absence of a hegemonic, conventional ideology that aims to destroy Israel. Secondly, there is a lack of resources that would enable preparing and implementing joint actions against Israel. Thirdly, Israel has strengthened its position among some of the Arab states as an ally in coping with domestic and external threats; in other words, today a significant group of Arab states sees the struggle against Israel as being far more costly than beneficial. Finally, the idea of the struggle against Israel as a convenient means of distracting public opinion in Arab states from domestic problems—such as the economic, health, education, and welfare situation, violations of human and civil rights, and deterioration of personal security—has diminished. Instead, the most likely military threats to Israel include a limited coalition of non-state actors, such as Hamas and Hezbollah, perhaps with the support of Iran and Syria.

### **The Situation in Prominent States in the Region**

The four states that could pose the most severe threat to Israel, given their military might, are Turkey, Egypt, Iran, and Saudi Arabia.<sup>11</sup> We can add Jordan to this list, as it shares the longest border with Israel. Even though Egypt and Jordan have stable peace agreements with Israel, their regimes are coping with forces that challenge their standing, mainly the Muslim Brotherhood, while they are also trying to stabilize the economic and military spheres. Jordan suffers from a relatively weak regime, which could enable internal and external groups that are hostile to Israel to take over. Saudi Arabia is armed with up-to-date American weapons, but it is largely preoccupied with its front in Yemen, where its army has performed poorly against the Houthi rebels. As for Iran and Turkey, they are both Islamist powers with strong armies and ideologies that are hostile to varying degrees toward Israel and are patrons at differing levels of violent non-state groups that are struggling against Israel. The danger posed by Iran to Israel is more severe than that of Turkey, as Iran is an enemy state that openly has declared its desire to destroy Israel; is advancing a program to develop long-term missiles that can reach Israel; is working to consolidate its military presence in Syria;

is providing weapons and training to Syria, Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Islamic Jihad; and—above all—has not given up on its strategic ambition of attaining nuclear weapons.

### *Egypt*

Examining Egypt's potential role in a regional coalition against Israel is necessary due to its proximity to Israel, its size, and the strength of its army; the fact that it sees itself as a regional leader; its close relations with Russia; and its history of having led joint Arab actions against Israel (namely the 1948, 1967, and 1973 wars). Egypt's joining of a military effort would therefore be a significant and even decisive factor in the ability of the regional states to form an effective regional military coalition against Israel and would pose a severe and even existential threat to Israel.

Moreover, even though Egypt has maintained a stable peace treaty with Israel for the past forty-one years—based on strong military, diplomatic, and economic foundations and on the basic notion that peace with Israel is a strategic interest for Egypt—it is a “lukewarm” peace, which lacks a strong civilian basis and does not include broad, multidisciplinary normalization and reconciliation between the nations. This issue—along with Egypt's continued military buildup, the gradual erosion (with Israel's consent) of the limitations on military deployments in the Sinai Peninsula included in the military appendix of the peace agreement, and the fundamental hostility among a significant segment of Egypt's population toward Israel and any attempts to normalize relations with it—do not completely negate the possibility of Egypt's joining a regional coalition against Israel in the long term. A poll of the Arab Barometer from June 2019 shows that 54 percent of Egyptians see Israel as the central threat to their country.<sup>12</sup> The two revolutions that Egypt has experienced since 2011—alongside the challenges that continue to threaten the stability of the regime in Cairo—serve as a warning sign that the current reality could change, and Egypt's policy toward Israel could be reversed.

In addition to the basic factors that increase the threat to Israel's peace with Egypt and create a risk that it will join a military coalition against Israel, Egypt has experienced a series of processes and trends in recent decades that indicate that the risk of such a scenario is very low, at least in the foreseeable future, and especially under the current regime. First, the political turbulence



that Egypt has experienced since the January 2011 revolution, as well as economic and demographic challenges, require that it focus on domestic, economic, and internal security issues and on stabilizing the state and the regime. Second, the status of supra-national ideologies (pan-Arabism, pan-Islamism) has declined in Egypt in particular and in the region in general.

Third, despite being lukewarm, the peace between Israel and Egypt has proven over the course of four decades a strategic value to both countries and is stable and resilient, given the wide range of intra-Egyptian and bilateral challenges and the rounds of serious violence between Israel and the Palestinians and between Israel and Hezbollah. The strategic value of peace currently includes unprecedented relations of trust and cooperation in dealing with the shared challenges in the struggle against the threat of Salafi-jihadi and Islamist terrorism in Sinai and the Gaza Strip. In the diplomatic sphere, the close relations between Israel and the administration in Washington have strengthened Egypt's perception of the value of peace with Israel. In the economic sphere, the long-term natural gas deal that Egypt and Israel signed in February 2018 increases the material value inherent in peace—beyond its basic importance in the guarantee of American financial aid to Egypt and the QIZ agreements (industrial areas in Egypt, which are exempt from taxes on exports to the United States).

Fourth, the peaceful relations between Egypt and Israel are backed by a supportive regional axis, which includes the pragmatic Sunni Arab states that see Israel as a partner in the struggle against Iran and the Salafi-jihadi movements and as an anchor for regional stability. Fifth, the deep rifts between Egypt and Turkey and Qatar, the states of the Islamist axis, and to a lesser extent with Iran make it very difficult for them to create a united front against Israel.

The joining of Egypt in a military coalition against Israel would require translating a supra-Egyptian (Arab nationalist or religious-Islamist) sense of identity into solidarity, commitment, and ultimately effective action. In practice, the identity discourse that Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's regime has constructed since the June 2013 revolution suggests an opposite trend: On one hand, an effort has been made to form an Egyptian identity that is a counter-image of the Islamist identity advocated by the Muslim Brotherhood. If during the Nasser era, the "West," "colonialism," or "Zionism" were the principle "other," opposite which Egyptian identity was constructed, today

the Muslim Brotherhood fulfills that function. At the same time, Egyptian national identity is at the center, and the idea that it is based on a diverse mosaic of seven pillars—pharaonic, Greco-Roman, Coptic, Islamic, Arab, Middle-Eastern, and African—is emphasized. This identity construction is new and contrasts with the Nasser era's emphasis on Egypt's Arab identity as well as with the significance placed on the Islamic element of Egypt's identity by the Muslim Brotherhood. The current identity discourse, if it is indeed incorporated, is likely to positively influence relations between Egypt and Israel, given the religious tolerance inherent in it, including toward Judaism, and thanks to the economic issues that this discourse emphasizes when the shared geographical spheres of the two states are discussed, mainly the significance of the eastern Mediterranean with its natural gas fields.<sup>13</sup>

### *Jordan*

Despite the twenty-five-year-long peace treaty between Israel and Jordan, geopolitically the latter can still pose a potential risk in a scenario of joining a coalition against Israel. The reasons include the long border between the states and its proximity to important areas in Israel; the Palestinian refugees who make up about half of the population of Jordan, who disapprove of recognizing Israel; and the traditional weakness of the Jordanian regime in the face of internal and external pressures. Historically, Jordan has repeatedly been dragged several times into serving as a platform for collective Arab action against Israel and has even actively participated in fighting, although generally against both the will of its leadership and the interest of the Hashemite Kingdom. The most dramatic example was in 1967, when King Hussein joined the Arab coalition led by Egypt and as a result lost the West Bank. Years later, in 1990, King Hussein supported the president of Iraq, Saddam Hussein, in the Gulf War. Because of Jordan's domestic and foreign weakness, King Hussein saw both cases of cooperation with the radical Arab leaderships as an inevitable necessity and as the best of the worst scenarios compared to other options.<sup>14</sup>

During 2018 and 2019, the Jordanian regime's policy toward Israel negatively shifted. This shift occurred as a result of Israel's policy toward Jordan and the Palestinians but also because of political instability and internal unrest. The internal unrest rose from economic hardship—caused partly by the pressure placed on resources by the flow of refugees mainly from

Syria—and from the public’s growing distress over the country’s corruption and growing distrust of the monarchy. These factors have aroused resentment even among the Bedouin tribes that over the years were considered the pillar of the Hashemite Kingdom. One of the consequences of this internal unrest was King Abdullah’s decision in October 2018 not to renew the “special regimes” that were established in border areas in the peace agreement with Israel—a step that should be seen as an attempt to satisfy the majority of the Jordanian public who disapprove of the peace treaty with Israel. King Abdullah took this step, even though it involved risking Jordan’s main interest in economic and strategic cooperation with Israel. Currently, most of this cooperation takes place out of the public eye.<sup>15</sup>

However, despite significant pockets of opposition to peace with Israel within the Jordanian public, and despite the weakness that Jordan has demonstrated recently in the face of pressure, the Jordanian royal kingdom does not have any strategic interest nor resources to actively participate in a military coalition against Israel. It rather cooperates with Israel against its perceived enemies. It will presumably continue to maintain cool relations with Israel at the public level while cultivating close and beneficial relations at the strategic levels and will refrain from entering an anti-Israel military coalition that could threaten its essential interests and even its very existence. Should the current reality continue, Jordan is likely to persist in playing the dual role of an intermediary state that connects all the adversaries on that side of the world while also serving as a buffer zone that separates them.

### ***Iran***

Although Iran is not part of the Arab world, it does strive to expand its influence in the Middle East and even to achieve hegemonic standing there. Iran poses a threat to Israel with its ideological approach that denies the existence of the state of Israel, its military nuclearization efforts, and its advanced capabilities in the field of long-range missiles. In addition, Iran has the ability to establish military infrastructure and advanced strategic systems (for example in the fields of missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles for the purposes of gathering intelligence and engaging ground targets) in states bordering Israel, namely Lebanon and Syria. In exceptional circumstances, Iran could even send limited military forces (usually led by the Revolutionary Guard) beyond its borders, as it has done in Syria in recent years.

Alongside the direct Iranian threat, Iran provides extensive military and economic aid to its proxies active in the region, namely Hezbollah in Lebanon, the pro-Iranian Shiite militias in Iraq, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and the Houthis in Yemen, who potentially endanger Israel's shipping in the Red Sea. As a rule, Iran prefers to use proxies to strengthen its regional influence in order to shroud its direct involvement in the region and to refrain from risking its fighters in the combat zones in which it is involved. Iran also strives to refrain as much as possible from direct conflict with Israel, which could lead to an Israeli attack on targets within its territory. As a result, this decreases the likelihood that Iran would be directly involved in an Arab coalition against Israel by launching surface-to-surface missiles from its territory toward Israel, and even more, by sending military forces into combat. However, we can assume that in any scenario of an Israeli-Arab conflict, Iran would aid the forces fighting against Israel as much as it could.

### *Turkey*

Turkey could pose a significant threat to Israel on its own—having the second largest army in NATO after the United States and consistently investing some two percent of its GDP in military spending, in accordance with NATO states commitments—and as part of a broader coalition. But despite these capabilities, it is doubtful that Turkey has active hostile intentions toward Israel, beyond the rhetorical level. From a rational perspective, Turkey has no interest in engaging in conflict with Israel, as it is a status-quo player that is interested in increasing stability in the Middle East in order to increase its trade with the region. NATO is also a factor, restricting Turkey from becoming an enemy state that would exercise military force against Israel. Although the Mavi Marmara incident in Gaza waters in 2010 demonstrated the possibility of a direct confrontation between Israel and Turkey, the fact that no similar events have occurred since then supports the supposition that even though Turkey and Israel have had adversarial relations, Turkey clearly has not allowed its relations to further deteriorate. Although the eastern Mediterranean has the potential for conflict between the two countries, following the discovery of energy resources there and the ongoing conflict with Cyprus, the nature of a conflict in the sub-region most likely would result in gunboat diplomacy and not reach outright conflict.

As for the internal Turkish arena, the regime believes that it is still in danger and that the struggle following the failed coup attempt in July 2016 is not yet over. The narrative promoted by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his supporters is that since Erdoğan's rise to power, Turkey has become too strong in the view of the West, and, therefore, the Western states (including Israel) are working together to weaken it. This narrative is based on anti-Israel views that already exist among the Turkish public, and the regime fosters them. Indeed, in public opinion polls conducted in Turkey during recent years, the vast majority of respondents have expressed a negative opinion of Israel<sup>16</sup> and have considered Israel "one of the central threats to Turkey."<sup>17</sup> Although anti-Israel sentiment is a convenient platform for adopting a militant policy—if Erdoğan were interested in such—so far it has only been channeled into a policy of non-violently challenging Israel.

A scenario in which Turkey becomes a revisionist force<sup>18</sup> like Iran would be exceptional, considering its history and Atatürk's legacy. Even though Erdoğan and his supporters are undermining Atatürk's legacy in many areas, when it comes to foreign policy toward the Middle East, they seem to have less leeway, as this is a system full of regional powers with opposing and restraining aspirations. Turkey's withdrawal from NATO would clearly reflect revisionist conceptions, but currently Turkey has made no signs of this. Furthermore, unlike declarations regarding the possibility of stopping the negotiations with Brussels over Turkey's joining the European Union, Ankara has not made any similar declarations regarding withdrawal from NATO.

### ***Saudi Arabia***

The likelihood of Saudi Arabia joining an Arab coalition against Israel is low due to a number of circumstances and conditions, mainly that the two states are both in the pro-American camp in the region and share concerns about Iran's intentions and activities. Despite this optimistic situation assessment and the strategic opportunities inherent in it for Israel, Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman's Saudi Arabia is characterized by risk-taking, and, thus, it is difficult to predict its future actions. While Saudi Arabia's unpredictable behavior has advantages for deterring Iran, as of 2019, the costs of this policy for the kingdom have outweighed its achievements and have increased its vulnerability. In addition, while Israel's cooperation with the

kingdom has borne some fruit, its strategic value should not be exaggerated nor should Israel be overly dependent upon it.

The Iranian threat is the main common denominator between Saudi Arabia and Israel. The struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia is mainly indirect, but the two states also engage in a direct struggle that includes mutual attempts at subversion using various means. Saudi Arabia has significant economic capabilities, a certain ability to do damage, and the means to prompt third parties to take action. In addition, Saudi Arabia (along with the United Arab Emirates and, to a lesser extent, Israel) sees the pro-Islamist axis, led by Turkey and Qatar, as a threat to its standing and stability and is working against it. Israel and Saudi Arabia are also active in other arenas of shared interest, such as the Syrian-Lebanese arena and that of the Red Sea.

However, several factors make Saudi Arabia a poor ally. In the regional domain, the kingdom's standing has been harmed by the failure of some of bin Salman's actions, such as his attempt to lead an effective Arab boycott of Qatar and his involvement in the civil war in Yemen. In the international sphere, Saudi Arabia's connection with Israel does not replace the strategic relationship that it has with the United States, upon which it is dependent to a certain extent. In the military realm, although the kingdom's military budget is among the largest in the world, its military power remains limited because its army is small and untrained and relies upon foreigners. Furthermore, it is very vulnerable due to its long and porous borders. Internally, bin Salman—the ruler in practice—has yet to stabilize his rule. This process will take time, and it is rife with dangers. Additional risks for Israel are posed by the Saudi buildup of modern conventional and unconventional weapons. In the conventional field, Saudi Arabia desires to acquire high-quality weapons, especially surface-to-surface missiles, attack UAVs, and precision-guided munitions; in the nuclear field, Saudi Arabia openly desires to acquire nuclear power reactors and insists on maintaining the option of enriching uranium. These capabilities might pose significant risks to Israel, if Saudi Arabia becomes a hostile state.

### **Possible Causes for the Emergence of Regional Threats**

An analysis of the regional situation in general and of the states that could potentially threaten Israel in particular shows that the formation of a regional military coalition against Israel in the foreseeable future is unlikely. Moreover,

significant changes to the existing regimes and their guiding agenda would have to occur for this assessment to change. However, when analyzing the security pillars that stave off the formation of a regional military coalition that seeks to destroy Israel, several possible turning points could be considered. These turning points could, in the future, lead to changes in the current trend and generate or accelerate processes that create threat scenarios or at least increase their likelihood. These turning points are as follows:

***The undermining of the stability of the pragmatic Arab regimes (Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia)***

One of the most significant anchors that prevent the formation of a regional coalition against Israel is its strategic relations with states in the region, based on a variety of shared interests: a pro-American orientation; the desire to reduce Iran's influence; the struggle against the Islamist and Salafi-jihadist movements; and the quest for stability and economic well-being. These common interests between Israel and the region's states could change following the fall of rulers and regimes and the rise of leaders or forces with an alternative agenda that is hostile to Israel, such as an Islamist agenda. In Egypt, for example, five years after the Muslim Brotherhood was outlawed, defined as "terrorists," and denounced, about a third of the public still has "somewhat positive" opinions about the Muslim Brotherhood, and it still serves as a prominent political alternative to the existing order.<sup>19</sup> In addition, the rise of Islamists in one state could affect other states in the region. Furthermore, the very existence of a real threat to the stability of the pragmatic Arab regimes—certainly if it is accompanied by a serious escalation of events in the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, the worsening of economic and social challenges, or a fundamental change in the web of shared interests with Israel—could also lead these regimes to renew the old practice of trying to channel internal public anger toward Israel, the external enemy, despite its limited effectiveness since the Arab Spring.

Israel's main concern of an upheaval in the Arab states focuses on its two neighboring partners in peace, Egypt and Jordan. The two countries could change their policy toward Israel should two developments occur: first, if they respond to internal political pressure to fulfill a role—even if symbolic—in a campaign against Israel, including one that is organized and led by others; second, if a regime change occurs, which leads to significant

redefining of the state's strategic interests. As for Jordan, in both possible scenarios, it could become a platform for action against Israel, if not an active participant. The likelihood of such developments is difficult to estimate. Since the 1940s, assessments about the instability of Jordan's regime and its impending collapse have been repeatedly unfounded. The regime even successfully avoided the wave of revolutions that other Arab states experienced after 2011 as part of the Arab Spring (in part by sacrificing prime ministers—a step that repeatedly has served as a replacement for painful reforms). Of course, a regime's ability to survive thus far does not guarantee that it will be successful in the future, but it does demand that predictions of the imminent demise of the royal house be more cautious. In addition, despite its challenges, the Hashemite Kingdom has succeeded in maintaining a cool but constructive relationship with Israel, based in part on Jordan's dependence upon Israel for water and energy. The cutting of all sources of foreign economic aid withstanding, it is difficult to imagine any event—except for an especially outrageous Israeli provocation—that would fundamentally change the dynamic of the relations between the two states.

Another concern is that regime changes could lead to the development of cooperation between the new regimes and more distant regional powers, especially Iran and Turkey. Without any change of government in Egypt and Saudi Arabia, it is difficult to imagine a scenario of Turkish-Arab military cooperation against Israel, beyond continued Turkish diplomatic support for Hamas. In addition, it is more likely that Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and even Greece and Cyprus would cooperate in order to block Turkey from expanding its influence in the Middle East and in the eastern Mediterranean. Even if another revolution occurs in Egypt and a leader from the Muslim Brotherhood assumes power, we can suppose that—as during the rule of President Mohamed Morsi—it would not necessarily lead to harmonious relations between Turkey and Egypt but rather to competition over regional leadership. Large-scale Iranian-Turkish military cooperation against Israel also appears unlikely given the competition between these two regional powers for influence in the region and given Iran's preference for operating via proxies. Revisionist conceptions would be evident if Turkey were to withdraw from NATO, which would enable it to more freely engage in activity against Israel.



### ***The erosion of Israel's military and technological advantage***

The Arabs' lack of motivation to engage in military action against Israel can be also contributed to Israel's military power and the Arab states' relative weakness. These two factors have greatly strengthened Israel's deterrence. Israel's qualitative military edge (QME) is based on its advanced weapons and trained high-quality personnel, in addition to the commitment of the United States to maintain Israel's QME. As for the weakness of the Arab armies, to some extent, this is a result of the events of the Arab Spring. In states that have experienced civil strife, such as Syria, Libya, and Yemen, the armies have collapsed or have focused on internal security and fighting rebels, thus neglecting classical military capabilities. States that have maintained their military establishment, such as Egypt, have prioritized their focus on internal security and fighting subversive elements over maintaining their military competence vis-à-vis other state militaries. However, we must not ignore the threat to Israel's qualitative edge as a result of the advanced weapon systems (American, European, Chinese, and Russian) that some Arab states have acquired.

Indeed, there are signs that some elements of Israel's qualitative edge are possibly eroding due to the buildup of different armed forces in the region, especially those of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Iran. These states all seek to obtain some sort of regional leadership, which can be achieved partly by building up an offensive military force. This buildup is possible because the United States has removed previous limitations on providing certain categories of weapons to states that it considers allies, such as Egypt and the Arab Gulf states, some of which have considerable financial resources and because Russia and China are developing weapon systems in innovative categories, such as missile defense, terminally guided munitions, and attack UAVs.

States in the region, US allies or foes, enjoy these technological developments in Russia and China, which compete with those of the United States and Israel. Neither Russia nor China are hesitant to provide advanced technologies to Arab states including Israel's adversaries; they are even willing to sell weapons systems to countries whose main source of procurement is the United States, but it refuses to sell them so that Israel can maintain its qualitative edge.<sup>20</sup> These processes do not pose an immediate threat to Israel, as a result of several factors, including the IDF's simultaneous buildup of its

own capabilities; the current preferences of most of the region's regimes to maintain strategic relations with Israel (Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia) or to challenge Israel mostly via proxies (Iran) or through non-military means (Turkey); the focus of these states on internal security problems; the lack of sufficient common denominators unifying the region's states, which are divided among themselves; and the international commitments of the states mentioned above (peace agreements with Israel in the case of Egypt and Jordan and Turkey's NATO membership).

Changes in the military balance and political shifts in the Arab states could alter their preferences and considerations in the future. For example, changes in the balance of capabilities between Israel and its neighbors—from improving the level of their human capital to significantly reducing the technological gaps—could, in theory, erode Israel's deterrence and also affect the balance of intentions. Factors that could accelerate such changes include a serious undermining of the US commitment to maintain Israel's qualitative edge over its neighbors; the end of US military aid to Israel; a brain drain from Israel and the dwindling of Israel's human capital due to socioeconomic reasons; a significant improvement in the human capital, military technology, and the force capabilities of militaries in the region; or an external military force from out of the region with advanced weapons (such as the Russian army) joining an anti-Israel regional coalition.

### ***Undermining international support for Israel***

Relations with the international community, and especially with the United States, are a significant component of Israel's security. They are manifested by the economic relations with the Western states, extensive international support for Israel, recognition of Israel's right to exist, and US diplomatic and military support. These relations assist Israel in building up its military and diplomatic power, strengthening the pragmatic regional trends of recognizing Israel as an undeniable fact, and as a mitigating element that reduces a regional coalition against Israel from developing, in part, due to the dependence of the regional states on the West in general and the United States in particular. Consequently, a shift in Israel's standing in Washington and a significant change in American aid to Egypt and Jordan could diminish the importance that regional leaders attribute to the peace agreements with Israel.

Processes of international isolation, erosion of Israel's legitimacy in the international community, and undermining its moral backing would weaken Israel's power in the diplomatic, military, and economic spheres; increase its vulnerability; and could encourage regional forces to act against Israel—whether motivated by ideology or specific interests. Israel's international standing is mainly influenced by its historic relationship with the United States—a relationship that is being challenged today because of a range of intra-American processes, including support for Israel's policies having become a topic of dispute rather than consensus between the Democratic and Republican parties; the rise of new forces that are threatening the historic alliance between Israel and the United States; the focus on “America first” at the expense of the US role in the Middle East; and the weakening of the connection between Israel and American Jewry.

Developments in the international system and in the balance of power between the world powers could also harm Israel's international support. The main threat lies in the weakening of the United States, the strengthening of Russia, and particularly in China's becoming the main competitor of the United States. In certain parameters, especially the economy, China is expected to surpass the United States in the not-too-distant future. The United States is a cornerstone of international support for Israel, and its weakening would immediately affect Israel, given the absence of another global power that is willing and able to take its place.

### ***Support of a global power for an Arab coalition against Israel***

Russia and China are the two main global powers besides the United States. Russia, unlike its precursor the Soviet Union, maintains a balanced relationship with both Israel and the regional states that are hostile to Israel. The most prominent example is Russia's policy in Syria, which demonstrates that Russia acts mainly according to its interests. Currently, it is extremely difficult to imagine a scenario in which Russia would have an interest in joining an Arab coalition aimed at harming Israel. Similarly, China maintains very good relations with Israel, even though it has interests—mainly energy related—requiring it to maintain good relations with both the Arab world and Iran. Moreover, China's foreign policy typically has refrained from aiding or joining forces against another state in regions outside of Southeast Asia, as it does not have any central strategic interest to do so. Consequently, the

probability that China would actively support a regional coalition against Israel is very low, even lower than that of Russia. Before such scenarios could be considered, immense changes would need to occur in the nature and mode of Russia's policies and activities—and certainly of China's.

### ***The disintegration of Israeli society***

Israel society is still considered a cohesive one, with a high level of social solidarity, especially in the face of external threats during times of war and crises. However, the growing societal and political rifts could negatively affect the way that Israel's enemies perceive it. A loss of solidarity involves two main dangers: First, the polarization in Israeli society could intensify and accelerate a brain drain and the transfer of resources outside of Israel, thus weakening its ability to cope with external threats; second, the undermining of Israel's internal cohesion could affect its deterrent reputation in the eyes of its neighbors and could lead to hostile actions against it. In this context, the aspirations of different states in the Middle East to attain the status of regional leadership should be noted, as these countries could see the perceived disintegration of Israeli society as an opportunity.

### ***Unexpected extreme events***

Extreme events could affect some Arab relations with Israel due to the gap between the regimes' pragmatic approach toward Israel and the hostility of significant segments of the public. Consequently, events that could stoke public rage in these states—such as damaging al-Aqsa Mosque or the mass killing of Palestinian civilians, which might be attributed to Israel—could cause friendly Arab regimes to adjust to the public mood and take a more forceful stance toward Israel. In addition, widespread demonstrations along the fence and attempts to penetrate into Israel from the Gaza Strip—if hundreds of thousands of people participate—could pose a serious challenge for Israel, although Israel has proven thus far that it has reasonable technological and military responses to such threats. Even though the toll of coping with these threats could be heavy in terms of both diplomacy and public morale, they do not pose an existential threat. The likelihood that these incidents would immediately lead to the establishment of a regional military coalition against Israel is very low, but they could turn volatile if they are accompanied by serious undermining of Israel's central security pillars (as previously

mentioned) or if they lead to such changes, accelerate them, or catalyze their development.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The situation in the region and in the different states indicates that the likelihood of a regional military coalition against Israel emerging in the foreseeable future is very low, especially without sweeping changes in the regimes and in Israel's relations with the United States. Potential turning points that could shift the current assessment include the possibility of erosion of Israel's qualitative military and technological edge; deterioration of the strategic relationship between Israel and the United States as well as with the pragmatic regimes in the region, and the break down of Israel's social solidarity. Therefore, the following steps should be taken to maintain and strengthen Israel's security pillars vis-à-vis the scenario of a regional coalition against it:

***1. Strengthening the region's pragmatic camp and weakening the radical camp.*** Israel must strive to enhance its strategic relations with Egypt, Jordan, and the Gulf states, and help strengthen the stability of their regimes. Israel has an interest in its neighbors having pragmatic, friendly, and stable regimes that enjoy domestic and international legitimacy. This interest relates mainly to the states that belong to the "stability" camp, mainly Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. In the short term and medium term, these states do not pose a concrete threat to Israel and sometimes even serve as overt or covert partners in struggles against regional forces that do threaten stability, such as Iran, Hamas, Hezbollah, branches of the Islamic State, and, to a lesser extent, Turkey and Qatar.

At the same time, Israel's influence on the processes of stabilization or destabilization in the Middle East is notably limited for several reasons. The main factors that influence the stability of the region's states are internal (economic, political, ethnic), and Israel's ability to affect them is slight, if not nonexistent. In addition, Israel tends, and justly so, to refrain from using military force in attempts to overthrow or install regimes, especially since its failed attempt in the First Lebanon War. Moreover, Israel has little influence on the relations between Arab regimes and the international community. Consequently, Israel must also continue to prepare for the unwanted and dangerous possibility that pragmatic leaders and regimes might fall, states

will become chaotic, and leaderships supportive of peace will be replaced by hostile ones.

Despite the understanding that Israel has little influence on the processes that endanger the stability of states in the region and its leverage is limited, it can employ several measures: provision of diplomatic support—preferably discreet—in strengthening the legitimacy of pragmatic regimes via its connections in Washington and other capitals around the world; military, security, and intelligence cooperation with the pragmatic regimes against destabilizing elements in their states; provision of material aid as well as knowledge and experts for coping with domestic, economic, and infrastructural challenges that could threaten the stability and public standing of the pragmatic regimes; advancement of an Israeli-Palestinian peace process that would strengthen regional stability, enable regional processes of integration between Israel and its neighbors, strengthen the foundations of peace, and undermine radical ideological and political forces, which are buttressed by the ethos of the struggle against Israel in order to castigate pragmatic regimes and undermine the stability of the region and its states.

Israel should focus on the arenas in which it has the greatest ability to influence; that is, mainly vis-à-vis Jordan and the Palestinian Authority—two relatively small entities that are close to Israel. It is recommended that emphasis should especially be placed on Jordan. The erosion of the standing of the Hashemite royal house in recent years; the economic, social, and demographic challenges that the kingdom faces; the long border shared with Israel; and a significant Palestinian population within Jordan could significantly threaten Israel, but these factors can also be seen as an opportunity. Unlike Egypt, given the relatively small size of Jordan and its problems, Israel can more effectively help improve its stability. As for the Palestinians, Israel's ability to influence that arena is even greater. Israel can affect their balance of motivations in the military, economic, and diplomatic spheres. It can also influence Palestinian political developments by strengthening “positive” (moderate) Palestinian elements while working against “negative” (extremist) ones.

As for Saudi Arabia, its regional and domestic difficulties should dampen Israel's enthusiasm for the regional perspectives that tout Riyadh as the backbone of the Sunni camp, which—alongside Israel—is taking on Iran and is seen also as being able to help advance a breakthrough in the diplomatic

process with the Palestinians. All scenarios that undermine the Saudi regime are negative for Israel. The possibility that the kingdom will become a failed state or be ruled by a hostile regime would endanger the US position in the Middle East and subsequently harm Israel. Furthermore, it is feared that Saudi Arabia's advanced weapons would reach hostile forces, which then would direct them against Israel. Beyond the possible harm to the limited cooperation between Israel and Saudi Arabia, the undermining of the kingdom's stability would send shockwaves that could affect stable regimes, mainly those of Jordan and Egypt, in which Israel has an interest in their preservation. In addition, the more vulnerable the Saudi kingdom is internally, the less capable it will be of publicly cooperating with Israel, if only because it will seek to appease the different groups that criticize its relations with Israel and could challenge its stability. In the scenario of an internal coup, assuming that the kingdom is still ruled by a regime that operates according to the rules of *realpolitik*, the objective interest of cooperation with Israel would likely be maintained. Therefore, Israel and the Western states must ask themselves what should be done to help the Saudi royal house survive, and how should they operate if Saudi Arabia is weakened and becomes a less significant actor in the pragmatic camp facing Iran.

In addition to strengthening the regimes in the pragmatic "stability" camp, Israel must continue its campaign to weaken the military buildup of the radical camp (Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, and Hamas) and work to reduce Turkey's influence in the region. It should be noted, however, that unequivocally stating that Turkey is an "enemy state" is not beneficial, and allocating resources to the struggle against it should be done with extreme caution so that the damage of such an action does not outweigh its benefit. As long as Turkey does not become an active enemy of Israel, the emphasis needs to be on preventing any escalating hostility between the two states. Israel can strengthen alliances with other states in the eastern Mediterranean basin, especially Greece and Cyprus, but not at the expense of relations with Turkey. Furthermore, Israel does not need to express hostile intentions toward Turkey; rather, Israel should create deterrence against Ankara and prepare the ground for coordination and cooperation should Turkey manifest aggression toward Israel.

**2. *Improving Israel's regional standing.*** Israel must work to strengthen its significance and utility as an ally to the regional states, improve its image

among the populations in the neighboring Arab states—especially Egypt and Jordan—and emphasize the fruits of peaceful relations with it. Israel can do this by improving its public diplomacy vis-à-vis the public opinion in the Arab states and by striving to enhance and expand normalization and cooperation in the military, economic, technological, infrastructural, and environmental spheres. Israel would do well in successfully changing its branding from being a regional “threat” to an “asset,” and it should allocate dedicated resources for this. Israel can help provide solutions to regional problems, thanks to its soft power on shared issues, such as water technologies, desert agriculture, renewable energy, employment, health, science, and innovation. A peace that is mainly conducted between leaderships and armies and does not have strong popular and civilian foundations will have eventually difficulty surviving crises, revolutions, and changes of regimes and rulers. Advancing a solution to the Palestinian problem, if possible, is likely to greatly contribute to reducing the traditional hostility in the Middle East toward Israel and to advancing normalization with greater legitimacy, while weakening popular and institutional motivations for engaging in military action against Israel.

**3. *Steps for preparing for extreme events.*** Israel should improve the protection of religious holy sites, especially the al-Aqsa Mosque and its compound; form a strategic diplomatic umbrella that includes regional elements; and create shared protection mechanisms between Israel and the Arab and Islamic states for these sites. Israel should prioritize the fight against terrorism, including Jewish terrorism; refine military procedures that help minimize killings of uninvolved citizens as part of the asymmetric fight against Palestinian terrorism and Hezbollah; and create permanent steering committees that are responsible for predicting extreme events, preparing for them, and preventing them.

**4. *Fostering the bipartisan relationship with the United States***—in accordance with the recommendations in chapter 4.

**5. *Fostering Israel’s internal resilience and fostering the social solidarity*** of its residents—in accordance with the recommendations in chapter 5.



## Notes

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