A delegation from the United Arab Emirates on a historic visit to Israel, October 20, 2020. Photo: Matty Stern/U.S Embassy in Jerusalem (CC BY 2.0)

Roundtable: Israel and the Middle East, One Decade after the Arab Upheaval

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This special issue of *Strategic Assessment* examines various aspects of the upheaval that erupted in the Middle East a decade ago. The roundtable summarized below sought to focus on the impact of the Arab upheaval on Israel, where Israel stands in the regional arena following the upheaval, and the effects on Israel's strategic, political, and social situation. Participants included scholars and experts from different disciplines, including Middle East studies, political science, security, sociology, and economics.

The roundtable addressed a number of fundamental questions, some of which figure elsewhere in the issue as well. Among these questions are whether Israel is part of the regional system, and if so, what can be learned about Israel from the regional system; to what extent does Israel play an active role in the regional system and the region's various camps;

how is Israel perceived by elements in the Middle East (publics and leaders); and what policy should Israel pursue in the region.

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The symposium was moderated by INSS Deputy Director for Research and Analysis and *Strategic Assessment* Editor-in-Chief Brig. Gen. (ret.) Itai Brun. Participants included Dr. Assaf David, co-founder and academic director of the Forum for Regional Thinking and teaching fellow in the Department of Political Science at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem; former Knesset Member Ksenia Svetlova, a senior

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research fellow at the Interdisciplinary Center Institute for Policy and Strategy and a senior policy researcher at Mitvim—The Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies; INSS Managing Director Brig. Gen. (res.) Udi Dekel; Prof. Tamar Hermann, Professor of Political Science at the Open University, senior fellow and director of the Viterbi Family Center for Public Opinion and Policy Research at the Israel Democracy Institute; Anwar Mahajna, Assistant Professor of Political Science at Stonehill College (Easton, MA) and expert in Middle East politics; Khader Sawaed, Neubauer research associate at INSS and a doctoral candidate in political science at the University of Haifa; Tali Zinger, entrepreneur, businesswoman, lawyer, and expert on the Gulf economy; Dr. Kobi Michael and Dr. Carmit Valensi, editors of *Strategic Assessment*; and Dr. Sarah Feuer, a research fellow at INSS and a guest editor of this issue.

Principal Insights

Most of the experts cited the gap between Israel's geographic location in the Middle East and its self-concept and identity as part of the regional system. To them, in the past decade, and even before, there has been a tendency to regard Israel as an actor outside the system, because Israelis do not want to identify themselves with the region's dubious and unsuccessful characteristics; they prefer to see themselves as in a "villa in the jungle." Some of the participants challenged this idea, and gave various explanations supporting the assertion that Israel is part of the regional system. They cited shared experiences and processes that spread to Israel from the region (as well as from the international theater in general, for example, growing demagogic and anti-democratic patterns).

Two of the issues discussed could theoretically help indicate that Israel is indeed part of the regional system, at least to some extent. The first concerns the affinity between the popular protests in the Middle East over the past decade and the wave of protests in Israel. The participants believe, however, that the coincidence of the protests does not show a causal relationship or identical regional characteristics; in their opinion, it results from broader global changes. The participants also found no connection or reference in the protests to suggest they were related to each other. Indeed, some argued that a comparison between the protests actually highlights the differences between them, and between Israel and other countries in the region.

The second issue concerns Israel's normalization agreements with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Sudan. Despite the widespread assumption that these are an important step in Israel's drawing closer to the region, the participants believe that they are insufficient for its full integration in the region, as long as there is no real progress on the Palestinian issue.

Is Israel taking an active role in the regional "camps" and the conflicts between them? How should Israeli strategy in the region be characterized? Some of the participants emphasized that Israel was wont to play a passive role in the region by mainly responding to events and in most cases refraining from taking an initiative. The normalization agreements were also described as the result of external initiatives by the Gulf states and the United States, not Israeli activism. At the same time, it was agreed that Israel could potentially be integrated in the region, primarily in the framework of what is emerging as an axis of stable and pragmatic countries eager for regional peace and prosperity.

On the approach of countries in the region toward Israel, participants noted that the upheaval in the Middle East in the past decade has caused countries to focus on their domestic

problems and internal affairs, with Israel in general and the Palestinian issue in particular playing a much less central role than before the Arab Spring. Israel was formerly perceived in public opinion surveys in the region as the main threat to security, and ranked high on political and public agendas. Since the Arab Spring, however, the main challenges on the regional agenda have been socioeconomic difficulties and unemployment rates, while Israel has ranked much lower. Nevertheless, and despite the relative improvement in Israel's status, it is clear that even now, and notwithstanding the normalization agreements, there is widespread opposition in Arab public opinion to normalization with Israel, recognition of Israel, and acceptance of Israel as part of the region. The recent agreements, however, are likely to improve Israel's regional status, provided that the Palestinian issue is not neglected.

Most of the participants are skeptical about the existence of a regional system in the sense of an association of countries with a common history, geographic borders, culture, language, and religion. They recognize—at the state level—the uniqueness of each country and its differences from its neighbors, as well as the existence of an international-global order that affects, and is affected by, the region. They are less convinced of the existence of a regional system with a shared logic and common characteristics.

Another issue that surfaced in the discussion concerns the boundaries of the Middle East space. Interestingly, Iran was almost never mentioned in the discussion, probably out of the belief that it was outside the framework of the discussion and the system, despite its figuring at the core of the regional agenda, and certainly that of Israel.

The discussion concluded with policy recommendations by the participants. Notwithstanding the increasing claim that the Palestinian issue has become less important in the discourse between Israel and other countries

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in the region, the issue was present throughout the discussion, with repeated assertions that breaking the stalemate is an imperative. It was therefore recommended that real progress be made in the political process. Until that happens, instability will continue to afflict the countries in the region, including Israel, which will be unable to significantly and substantially improve its relations with the Arab world. The second recommendation concerns Israel's need to improve its relations with the neighboring countries, above all Jordan and Egypt, and to undertake new political initiatives with countries such as Lebanon.

Israel: Part of the Middle East?

The participants were first asked to what extent they classified Israel as part of the Middle East system. What emerged was a clear gap between Israel's accepted geographical classification and its conceptual classification. Most argued that Israelis tend to regard themselves as external to the region, and do not identify themselves with its various elements. The results of a survey conducted by the Mitvim Institute and presented by Ksenia Svetlova bear out this contention: only 29 percent of Israelis responded that Israel belongs to the Middle East: 25 percent said that Israel is part of the Mediterranean Basin, 24 percent said that Israel belongs more to Europe, and 10 percent answered that they did not know where Israel belongs. Svetlova explained the results by saying, "It is convenient for us to identify ourselves more with Greece and Cyprus than with Syria and a Lebanon dominated by Hezbollah." On the other hand, according to Assaf David and Anwar Mahajna, Israel is

part of the region, and its image as a Western foreign seedling in the Middle East is wrong and unconvincing. The history and politics of the region have affected Israel, and have been affected by it.

Assaf David argued that Israel's regional classification results from demography, in part due to 20 percent of its citizens being Palestinian Arabs, and a considerable number of Israeli Jews coming from Muslim Arab countries. He stated, "Israel is also becoming part of the region from a governmental standpoint, as the autocratic order grows stronger in the post-Arab Spring era. This is connected to the prolonged occupation, but also to the growing strength of autocratic elements: the attack on the courts, the state, and public institutions, and even the military-security establishment and its recommendations and ideas."

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To Tamar Hermann, the discussion on whether Israel is part of the Middle East began long before the state was established. According to studies she conducted, many Israeli citizens tend to see themselves as part of the region from a cultural standpoint, but an absolute majority has no wish to be integrated in Middle East politics, or to be identified with it. This includes Arabs, Sephardic Jews, and Ashkenazi Jews in Israel. "The average Israeli wants to be somewhere between Vienna and Paris, but to sit on oriental rugs and eat hummus" (Benvenisti, quoted by Hermann).

To Anwar Mahajna, one measure that Israel can take in order to become closer to the region is to refrain from undermining the status of Arabic as a second language. She asserts that this measure will make it possible to grow closer culturally to the region's populations. Israel

should think constructively and actively about how it can be part of the region, beyond the circumstances of its geographical location.

Mahajna also addressed the question of whether Arab citizens of Israel feel that they are part of the region. She said that in the cultural sphere, many Arab artists from Israel have become popular in Arab countries, which has strengthened their regional identity. In addition, when Arab citizens of Israel visit Arab countries, they feel a common identity, language, religion, and history. On the other hand, national unity and Arab identity are in general weaker among Israel's Arab citizens than among Arabs in other countries in the region, due to the multiple identities of Arabs in Israel and the fact that they live with internal contradictions—civil identity versus religious and cultural identity. "As ostensibly equal citizens, we live in a democratic country (despite the Basic Law: Israel as the Nation State of the Jewish People, and so forth); but we do not identify with the symbols of the state and we are culturally repressed. Religiously, there has been disappointment with Islam in the past decade; its popularity has waned."

Between the Arab Spring and the Israeli Spring

As part of this discussion, the participants considered whether there is a connection between the Arab Spring protests and the protests in Israel and the rest of the world, and whether this indicates that Israel should be identified with the region. Most of the participants feel there is no real connection between the events, and that the changes are of a more global-universal nature than a question of the region's identity and special characteristics.

Tamar Hermann believes that there is no conscious link, and that the fact that protests coincided does not indicate any causal connection. She also argued that the protests taking place now in Israel are related to events in the Western world, not the Middle East.

Hermann likened the protests to the waves generated by a whale in water—large and intermittent. The protests appear in various places with local groups, and are linked to the spirit of the times, as seen in Japan, Spain, Serbia, Manhattan, and also Israel. In her opinion, the recent attempt to show pictures from Tahrir Square demonstrations in Egypt on a screen on Rothschild Boulevard in Tel Aviv in order to connect the events was marginal and unsuccessful. Hermann tied the question of coincidence to doubts about globalization capabilities, and said that the protests in the Middle East, Israel, and the rest of the world are part of a tectonic global process with simultaneous local effects.

Ksenia Svetlova also stated that there was no connection between the Arab Spring events and what happened in Israel. In her opinion, the protest in Israel is of a different type, familiar in democratic countries, including Poland and Hungary. It differs from an attempt to cast off a tyrannical autocratic regime, as occurred in the Middle East. Israel was also mentioned in the protests that took place in Egypt in the context of the peace agreements; the willingness to preserve these agreements was expressed, but Israel was not an integral part of this protest, and was not perceived as part of this issue. Her conclusion is that the Arab Spring events had the effect of alienating Israel from the region, and gave many people in the region the pessimistic sense that Middle East is immune to democracy.

Similarly, Tali Zinger argued that at the outset of the events, there was a feeling that the democratic movement in the region, which empowered and emphasized liberal democratic values, created a common basis for concepts and opinions prevailing in Western countries, and among potential allies like the US and Israel. There was hope that if Google and Facebook were platforms for organizing protests in the Arab world, they were likely to bring Israel and the Arab world closer to each other. In actuality, this did not occur, because this movement was silenced.

The Normalization Agreements
Are they changing the rules of the game? Can they affect the degree to which Israel is associated with the Middle East?

The participants generally agreed that it would be a misnomer to call these agreements peace agreements, because Israel was never at war with the countries with which it is now forging diplomatic relations, in contrast to the state of relations before the peace agreements signed with Egypt and Jordan.

According to Assaf David, previous peace agreements were based on the idea that there was a solution to the Palestinian issue, and that progress in these agreements was predicated on progress in a peace agreement, or at least on an arrangement, with the Palestinians. In his opinion, the new agreements are political-diplomatic agreements between states based on the tacit assumption that there will be no solution to the Palestinian issue. Willingness to sign normalization agreements constitutes recognition that the occupation is permanent. David said, "Israel has bypassed the Palestinians and the Jordanians on its way to the Persian Gulf, thereby creating a regional alliance that is pro-Zionist in the sense advocated by the political right in Israel. In this regard, Israel is integrating into the regional architecture, and mainly in the Gulf architecture—an architecture that sanctifies power, weapons, business, and capitalism."

Ksenia Svetlova explained that the Abraham Accords originated in the Arab Spring events, the rise of ISIS, and a series of events that shook the foundations of the old order. As a result, Arab countries like the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain (meanwhile with the tacit consent of Saudi Arabia) wanted to improve their regional status alongside Israel. These countries fully realize that the United States is withdrawing from the region, and is not expected to return

to it in the near future. She believes that the agreements do not bring Israel closer to the region; they strengthen the position of those who claim, "See, there are Arabs who do not demand territorial concessions from us, and this reinforces the right wing view that there is no need to compromise."

Udi Dekel linked the Abraham Accords to the Palestinian issue, and argued that the connection with some of the countries in the region makes it possible to deal with the Palestinian issue "from the outside in… First, we will create a regional agreement, and from the regional agreement, we will move on to the bilateral matter between us and the Palestinians, in which we do not know exactly what to do."

According to Tali Zinger, the normalization agreements are a result of a top-down process, a strategic vision of the leadership, the opposite of the process evident in the Arab Spring, which began as a bottom-up call by the people for freedom and a change in their socioeconomic situation. In effect, a leader's ability to cancel a basic and comprehensive boycott law enforced against Israel for decades was made possible by the centralized character of the regimes and the social contract in the Gulf states.

Israel: An Active Player in the Region?

Is Israel taking an active part in the existing "camps" in the region and in the conflicts between them, and how can Israeli strategy in the region be characterized?

In recent years, Israel has adopted a strategy of accommodation to changes, rather than proactively taking an initiative in which desired end states are defined. In the early stages of the Arab Spring, Israel's inclination was to "sit on the fence" and watch from the sidelines. Udi Dekel asserted that when immediate, concrete threats emerged, they were dealt with, but not as the result of an organized, well-formed, long-term strategy. Israel's activism and assertiveness in the past decade were expressed in its

determined position that a Palestinian state cannot be established.

Dekel explained this aloofness by saying that an outside perspective led to the formation of the "villa in the jungle" concept. He said, "Ehud Barak was the first to describe it, after which Netanyahu adopted it, arguing that we are surrounded by wild animals, and should therefore construct an iron wall, an iron dome, in order to defend ourselves against the surroundings. We should focus on the villa and develop the villa. What happened? Following the Arab upheaval, we suddenly discovered that the region does not always allow us the luxury of sitting on the fence and enjoying the view, as in the case of Syria."

According to Dekel, the normalization agreements show that the region has in effect decided to adopt Israel, more than Israel has chosen to adopt it. The agreements resulted from the sense of a shared threat created by the existence of hostile axes in the region: the Iranian-Shiite axis and a new axis led by Turkish President Erdogan, who has "neo-Ottoman" ambitions of regional domination, as well as the jihadi axis, which has been weakened but still exists. Arab countries, especially the Gulf states, have recognized the need to form another axis, composed of stable and pragmatic countries, that can bring prosperity to the region, and where Israel can play a key role. This approach became stronger with the region-wide realization that the United States does not intend to remain in the Middle East forever, and does not intend to fight other people's wars. Furthermore, the regional initiative was accompanied by a United States initiative, led by the Trump administration, which held that there was a need to construct an alliance of countries under the American umbrella and influence in order to cope with hostile parties (and, according to Kobi Michael, to preserve critical American interests, without the United States having to maintain a substantial military presence in the region). In Dekel's opinion, Israel also behaved passively in this case, and

became involved through the two initiatives mentioned above.

How is Israel Perceived in the Middle East?

The discussion of the extent to which Israel is part of the regional system and its actual role in the regional architecture led to a riveting debate on the question of how Israel is perceived by the inhabitants of the Middle East.

Khader Sawaed said that according to a public opinion survey in the Arab world conducted by Arab Barometer, until a decade ago, Israel was rated as the strongest threat to Arab security. The perception of the threat's gravity has since declined (51 percent rated Israel as the gravest threat in 2011, compared with 37 percent in 2020). In Saudi Arabia, for example, the percentage of Saudis who regard Israel as a threat fell from 30 percent to 4 percent. In Egypt, on the other hand, a quarter of the public (about 25 million people) still regard Israel as a threat.

At the same time, there is a consensus in the Arab world opposing recognition of Israel (84 percent a decade ago and 88 percent in 2020). According to Sawaed, the anti-Israel attitude is prevalent primarily in the Mashriq region—Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Jordan—and in the Maghreb region (North Africa). This attitude is mainly a result of the perception of Israel as an occupying country, a country with imperialist and revisionist ambitions. On the other hand, the Palestinian issue in particular and the religious explanation were rated very low as explanations of this perception.

Tali Zinger asserts that there has been a reversal and change in the discourse about Israel, from denial of its existence to the exact opposite—support for relations with Israel. Although the change came from above, from the leadership, it is gradually trickling down to the public. The change is a rapid one, but people regard it as authentic. In her frequent visits to the Gulf states over the past decade, Zinger gained the impression that politics and

the attitude toward Israel remained outside the discourse. "The very attempt to access a website with an address ending in co.il inside the United Arab Emirates would have caused a red light to appear on the screen, warning against breaking the rules. Direct telephone calls from Israel were not an option. Even mentioning Israel in the United Arab Emirates would have caused locals and foreigners to move uneasily in their chairs," she remarked. This assertion resulted mainly from political sensitivity and anti-Israel feelings prevalent among the Palestinian and Lebanese communities in the United Arab Emirates. This sensitivity has waned since the agreements, and one of the most prominent expressions of this is that it is now possible to enter these countries with an Israeli passport. Zinger says that products such as sweet potatoes marked with an Israeli flag can now be seen in the local markets.

Policy Recommendations for Israel

Against the backdrop of the changes in the regional system in the past decade, especially those involving the normalization agreements, the participants offered policy proposals and recommendations for Israel. Two recommendations stand out. The first is that the Palestinian issue cannot be ignored, and that as long as no significant change occurs, the countries in the region and Israel will continue to suffer from instability. The second recommendation is that Israel should improve its relations with the neighboring countries, above all Jordan and Egypt. Another recommendation concerns the need to rebuild the Israeli diplomatic corps in order to facilitate judicious and orderly foreign relations.

Tamar Hermann links the normalization agreements to a process that began in the 1950s in the framework of the periphery concept promoted by Ben Gurion, based on the idea of forming closer relations with Sudan, Ethiopia, Turkey, Iran, the Kurds, the Christians in Lebanon, and others. She believes that Israel should disengage from any affiliation

or preference for any particular political leader, and should realize that today, most people in Israel aspire toward regional calm. For example, in a recent survey conducted by Hermann, 75 percent of respondents believe that the three agreements signed—with Sudan, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates—have improved Israel's strategic situation. This figure reflects a general preference throughout the Israeli political spectrum.

Resolution of the Palestinian Issue

Anwar Mahajna pointed out the connection between domestic policy and Israel's foreign policy in the regional context. She asserted that a solution to the conflict with the Palestinians cannot be evaded, and its solution will lead to the substantial integration of Israel in the region and to regional stability because it will be dealing with people, not just governments. Furthermore, Israel should take a number of important measures concerning the Palestinians and its Arab citizens, including repealing the Nation State Law and changing the status of the Arabic language. Udi Dekel stressed that the belief in Israel that the Palestinian issue and the Arab Peace Initiative are no longer relevant is fundamentally mistaken, saying, "Decision makers in Israel must realize that even the regimes that are forming relations with us are unable to ignore the Palestinian problem or take it lightly. A promise should be made to them that this is not being done at the Palestinians' expense…. Anyone who thinks that we can announce annexation again tomorrow morning and these relations will endure is making a mistake, so we have to be very restrained in what we do, and take their interests [Kobi Michael: i.e., the interests of those countries] into account in order to build layers upon layers of cooperation."

Khader Sawaed also believes that peace with the United Arab Emirates is a positive measure, but "the people in Ramallah should likewise be addressed." He recommended a proactive policy on the Palestinian issue, and proposed an Israeli initiative involving the people and leaders in the Gulf states, especially the United Arab Emirates, in order to obtain their aid for reconstruction in the Gaza Strip and the Palestinian Authority, which is also on the verge of collapse.

On the other hand, Assaf David holds that the Israeli political order in its current state is not ready to deal with the Palestinian issue, and the opposition therefore bears responsibility for finding parties in the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain with whom the matter can be discussed. In his opinion, an overture should be made to Qatar, because Qatar is at a key juncture between cross-interests. It has contacts with Israel, Hamas, Iran, Turkey, and even with the United States. He says, "If official Israel is entering the Gulf, opposition Israel can enter Qatar."

Peace with the Neighbors

Ksenia Svetlova proposed a focus on improving relations with two neighbors with whom Israel shares a common border: Jordan and Egypt. She argued that while the Abraham Accords are important, our bilateral relations with these two countries are worsening. Perhaps in the new web of relations, it will be possible to step up economic cooperation, especially with Jordan, whose situation is deteriorating. There are too few people in Israel responsible for relations with Egypt, and the question is what will happen when they leave their positions. It is therefore imperative to widen this circle and expand these relations.

Tali Zinger and Udi Dekel contended that Israel should not act hastily; it should show restraint, moderation, and especially patience in order to integrate more deeply in the region in general, and in the Gulf in particular. Israel should avoid embarrassing the other side and appearing aggressive. A wise and judicious policy is likely to result in a peace that is slightly different from the peace Israel has with Egypt and Jordan, and to close relations between peoples.

According to Dekel, normalization should be regarded as a springboard for new initiatives, for example with Lebanon, inter alia in the context of the maritime border. In his opinion, Israel should act outside the established frameworks, and should consider all sorts of regional initiatives. As for Israel's strategy with Iran, Dekel believes that the Gulf states are hoping that their connection with Israel will deter Iran from acting against them, but do not want this to lead to a military conflict that they will be unable to avoid. Israel should take this into account. He holds that the effective way of dealing with Iran is by formulating a joint policy with the new administration in Washington.

Conclusion

The decade of the Arab upheaval has brought about a restructuring of the Middle East. The system, be it the regional system or a system with other characteristics, now features a kind of "stable instability"; processes continue to evolve, problems have not been solved, regimes in some of the countries are still in power (Syria), or even if they have been replaced, they resemble the ones that have disappeared (Egypt), and there are high levels of state failure and crumbling and ineffective sovereignty (Libya and Yemen). At the end of the decade since the upheaval, Israel's strategic situation is better as a result of the normalization processes, reflecting the widespread recognition of Israel's necessity and strategic contribution to some of the countries and the diminished importance of the Palestinian issue on the agenda of most of the Arab countries in the region.

However, the improvement in Israel's strategic positioning is not necessarily reflected in a profound change in the willingness of the Arab populations to accept Israel as a legitimate and integral part of the region. Despite the warmer relations emerging with the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, the peace with Egypt and Jordan remains cold, and the normalization agreements with Sudan appear closer to the peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan. Israel is deepening and consolidating its integration in the region, but is not yet an integral and legitimate component.

The Palestinian issue remains outstanding, and the room for maneuver is limited in this context, due to the expected changes with the new US administration and the need to take into account countries with which normalization agreements have not been signed. On the other hand, it is possible that owing to the new constraints and the realization by the Palestinians of the significance of the change, opportunities for improving the existing situation may develop through processes aimed at limited arrangements, rather than a permanent settlement, with participation and aid from the Gulf states, and possibly even Morocco. This could improve the existing situation and create conditions for further progress.

One shared insight from the roundtable is that Israel cannot remain inactive and adhere to a status quo policy. It must develop and improve its strategy in order to expand the framework of the normalization agreements, while demonstrating policy creativity on the Palestinian issue and integrating it wisely in the region's restructuring process.

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