The Arab Awakening and the Rise of Political Islam

Benedetta Berti

The past two years have seen much social and political unrest in the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA): some countries have undergone full blown revolutions, others are still in the midst of internal turmoil, and overall, no country has been completely immune to the sweeping regional change. Seen from the point of view of Israel, the Arab "awakening" raises a number of important questions regarding the stability of the region, as well the hope that in the long term, the rise of a more democratic and free Middle East will improve Israel's political and security environment.

Among the chief concerns expressed by the Israeli government is that when the dust of the revolutions settles, the sector most empowered by the political change within Middle East societies will be the Islamist camp. Israel sees this rise of political Islam as a potential problem, expecting increased ideological rigidity, reluctance to deal with Israel, and a rise in anti-Israel feelings across the region.

This chapter analyzes the concept of the rise of the Islamists, moving beyond a simplistic and monolithic assessment of these groups and their interests. Against this background, the study analyzes both the Israeli discourse and interpretation of the Arab awakening and the rise of political Islam, as well as the concrete political, diplomatic, economic, and security changes that have occurred since these groups became more prominent within their own societies. Finally, the chapter offers a preliminary balance sheet, looking at the threats and opportunities resulting from the regional rise of political Islamist movements.

Political Islam before and after the Arab Awakening

With roots in nineteenth and early twentieth century Islamic revivalism as well as reformism, since the late 1970s Sunni Islamist movements have been increasingly more active in the region, especially at the grassroots level.

Defining Islamism is difficult, as there has never been a unified and cohesive "Islamist movement" across the Middle East. Even though all groups share a common denominator, namely, the desire to see their societies adhere to the core fundamentals of Islam and the conviction that the political system should be shaped by Islamic precepts, Islamist groups in the region have different priorities and different means to achieve their purported goals.

The most influential Sunni Islamist group in the Middle East is the Muslim Brotherhood. However, Islamism in the MENA region is greater than the Brotherhood, and even within the organization itself, its different branches – from Jordan, to Syria, to Gaza – have over the past decades evolved in different directions, shaped by their respective local contexts. As such, it is highly simplistic to say there is a monolithic or centralized regional Islamist movement. This is the first major caveat when trying to understand how different Islamist movements have been able to thrive in the Arab awakening.

Due to their local differences, Islamist movements did not play the same role in promoting or participating in the local protests of the so-called "Arab Spring." For example, in the case of Tunisia, the main Islamist movement, Ennahda, had little power and organizational capacity until after the fall of the Bin Ali regime.[1] The group's leaders were largely in exile, with local supporters either in jail or underground due to the harsh persecution they faced under Bin Ali, especially since the early 1990s.[2] As such, the movement did not play a prominent role in organizing the anti-regime protests. Similarly, in Egypt the Muslim Brotherhood was not among the initial organizers of the protests.[3] The group did not participate in the January 25, 2011 Day of Rage mobilizations that effectively started the revolution. Still, its members joined the protests within a few days after the first mobilization, thus contributing to the overthrow of Mubarak.[4] Across the rest of the region, Islamist movements from Jordan to Syria to

Libya played a role in the anti-governmental protests, but they were by no means the only actors involved in such events, and their role and status varied from country to country.

Although the Arab awakening did not begin because of an Islamist regional mobilization, in the countries where regime change has occurred, these groups have generally been able to ride the revolutionary wave and improve their status and power. Several reasons account for this trend. First, Islamist parties – as illustrated clearly in Egypt – were better organized than their secular counterparts, largely because previous authoritarian regimes de facto prevented the development of a politically active civil society or the formation of a truly independent political opposition. At the same time, these Islamist movements, prompted by their Islamic values of social and civic action, were already active in community social work. As such, movements like the Brotherhood in Egypt had both a better presence on the ground and a more sophisticated organizational strategy at the community level**.** Previous involvement in the provision of social services and community empowerment programs also contributed in ensuring grassroots support.

Second, Islamist parties often enjoy a reputation of honesty and integrity, while being perceived as the political actors that compromised least with the previous regimes. In this sense, these groups were able to brand themselves as offering a truly clean break from the authoritarian regimes of yore. Finally, the rise of the Islamists is as much a product of their success, as well as a byproduct of the lack of unity and organization of their secular counterparts.

Accordingly, the past year has seen an important trend of power consolidation for Islamist movements across the region. In the case of Tunisia, the Ennahda party won the Constituent Assembly's elections in October 2011, and since then it has been the undisputed heavyweight of Tunisian politics.[5] In parallel with the rise of Ennahda, Tunisia has also seen the growth of the Salafist movement. Although this group is numerically marginal and politically dwarfed by Ennahda, its role and status has improved in the post-revolutionary period.

In Egypt, Islamist movements triumphed in the 2012 legislative elections, with the Muslim Brotherhood list winning roughly 47 percent

of the seats and the Salafist Islamist bloc, led by the al-Nour party, gaining approximately 25 percent of the parliamentary seats.[6] Even stronger results emerged from the February 2012 elections for the Shura Council.[7] A few months later, Muslim Brotherhood presidential candidate Mohamed Morsi won the presidential race by a fairly narrow margin against former Prime Minister Ahmed Shafik, a former Air Force marshal who was close to the Mubarak regime. Despite the victory, however, public support for the Brotherhood began to decline between February and June 2012.[8]

Nonetheless, the Brotherhood has dominated Egyptian political life, especially after newly-elected President Morsi wrested power away from the Egyptian military by replacing a number of senior military figures, including then-Defense Minister and head of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, and by annulling SCAF's constitutional declarations meant to restrict the president's legislative power.[9] After this August 2012 "countercoup," Morsi asserted his power over Egypt's political life, while taking substantial power away from the military elite that had de facto ruled Egypt after the popular ousting of Mubarak. Since the summer, the President's quest for increased centralized power and authority in Egyptian political life has increased, leading also to organized mass protests against the seizure of various powers by the new President and his party.

However, while overall these Islamist political organizations have boosted their power and status, it is still far from clear how this trend will change the domestic and foreign policies of the respective countries. In determining the substance of the Islamist impact, it remains to be seen whether Islamist groups across the region will be able to remain in power, as the permanence of the Islamist model is very much contingent upon these organizations' ability to deliver upon their initial electoral promises. Ideology without good governance is bound to fail. The Islamist parties know this all too well, which is why they have partnered with a broad range of political actors in the aftermath of the elections. Similarly, this is the reason why the new elected governments are overwhelmingly looking inwards, leaving foreign policy in general, and Israel specifically, on the back burner.

As the revolution institutionalizes, more internal divisions within the Islamist camp are bound to emerge, further challenging the oversimplified notion of the rise of one unified political Islam. At the same time, given that every Islamist political group is interested in power, popularity, and legitimacy, it will be especially significant to see how each party balances between ideology and pragmatism. Finally, it is important to note that the Arab awakening has not benefited all Islamist groups in the region. Hizbollah, for example, has been somewhat at the margins of the regional tidal change, with the group losing substantial political credibility and popularity because of its support of the Assad regime in Syria.

Israel's Reaction to the Rise of Political Islam

When Tunisia's civil society first took to the streets of Sidi Bouzaid to protest government corruption and police brutality, few could have imagined that these demonstrations would soon reverberate across the entire region. The impact and magnitude of the massive regional wave of social and political protests that followed the anti-Bin Ali demonstrations in Tunisia took the world by storm, challenging old paradigms and mindsets regarding the Middle East.

Israel followed the unfolding regional dynamics very closely, understanding that large scale regional political change was likely to affect the country's relations with its neighbors as well as the overall Middle Eastern balance of power. While the official Israeli policy on the Arab awakening focused on deliberately keeping a low profile and refraining from openly taking sides, the early assessment of the government was that rapid and uncontrolled political change was not necessarily something Israel should welcome with open arms. As such, when protests first broke out in Tunis and Cairo, Israel rooted quietly for the status quo. In the case of Tunisia, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated that he hoped stability would be restored.[10] Similar calls were also made, though with greater urgency, in the case of Egypt,[11] with former Chief of Staff and Defense Minister MK Shaul Mofaz asserting that the best case scenario for Israel would be for the Egyptian regime to restore the status quo and deflate the anti-government protests.[12] Moreover, although officially the government sided neither with the regime nor with the opposition, it was

reported that behind closed doors Israeli officials urged their US and European allies to curb their criticism of the Mubarak regime.[13]

From the beginning of the "Arab Spring," Israel looked at ongoing regional change through the prism of national interests, led by the concern for preserving stability in general, and the peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan in particular. This explains why the political shifts in Tunisia, a "peripheral" state whose policies have little impact on Israel and that since the second intifada had already frozen all bilateral ties, were treated as relatively marginal.[14] In contrast, regime change in Egypt was understood immediately as crucial to Israel's security and regional standing.[15]

Similar attention was also devoted to the ongoing political protests in Syria, particularly in light of the shared border and its important role in the Arab-Israeli conflict. In the case of Syria, policy analysts and decision makers seemed more divided regarding what the most favorable outcome to Israel would be. The more risk averse camp asserted that Assad's capacity to preserve quiet along the Golan Heights was worthy of support, especially considering that regime change might empower more radical elements within Syrian society.[16] On the other hand, early on a second camp began to support a change in the status quo, affirming that Assad's fall would deliver a blow to Iran, while improving Israel's immediate security environment.[17] While the former camp represented the mainstream assessment of the situation in the early months of the protests, as the conflict escalated and became more brutal, Israel gradually shifted to a more anti-status quo position.[18]

From the beginning of the regional awakening, Israel has also been deeply concerned over the potential rise of Islamist groups as a result of the regime changes. Prime Minister Netanyahu articulated this view on several occasions. Already in February 2011 he asserted: "Recent history shows us many cases in the Middle East when extreme Islamist elements abused the rules of the democratic game to gain power and impose anti-democratic regimes."[19] Netanyahu's concern was twofold: first, that Iran would attempt to use the revolution to increase its regional power and status. Referring to the Islamic Republic's aims in Egypt, he stated: "The Iranian regime is not interested in seeing an Egypt that protects the rights of individuals, women, and minorities. They are not interested in

an enlightened Egypt that embraces the 21ˢᵗ century…They want Egypt to become another Gaza, run by radical forces that oppose everything that the democratic world stands for."[20] Second, the Prime Minister worried about the growing role and influence of Islamist groups in the post-revolutionary Middle East. In a speech delivered in April 2011, Netanyahu explained this concern by stating that Israel would have liked to see a "European Spring of 1989" but was instead bracing for an "Iranian winter."[21] Accordingly, these groups would take advantage of the regional unrest to gradually assert political control over their societies.[22] By November 2011, the assessment of the Prime Minister was that "the chances are that an Islamist wave will wash over the Arab countries, an anti-West, anti-liberal, anti-Israel, and ultimately an anti-democratic wave."[23]

This pessimistic view of the period was fueled by the notion that Islamist groups successfully co-opted the "Arab Spring."[24] Conversely, numerous analysts have taken a different view, emphasizing both the non-monolithic nature of political Islam in the region as well as the incentive for Islamist groups to act in a pragmatic way. Especially given the deep economic problems currently besetting the MENA region, the theory is that these parties will focus overwhelmingly on fixing their own internal problems, temporarily shelving their "Israel file."

Overall, however, the skepticism toward the regional political change is reflected in the general anxiety among the Israeli population vis-à-vis the regional developments. For instance, 51 percent of Israelis affirmed that the "Arab Spring" would change matters for the worse for Israel (with 22 and 15 percent, respectively, affirming that matters would stay the same or improve).[25] At the same time, the poll reflected what a number of Israeli leaders have said since the beginning of the unrest, namely, that in the long term, democratization would improve Israel's standing in the region.[26]

The debate has thus focused on the dangers of instability versus the potential positive implications of the Arab awakening, which include the possible fall of Assad in Syria, the weakening of Iran's status and power in the region, the crisis of Hizbollah, the distancing of Hamas from Tehran, and the long term potential for regional democratization. Given the ambivalence, it is not surprising that Israel has by and large maintained a low profile, focusing on building up its own security while working to

preserve its peace treaty with Egypt and Jordan. The exception to this trend is with Syria, toward which Israel has taken a more anti-status quo stance.

The Impact of Political Islam on Israel

The post-revolutionary stabilization processes in both Tunisia and Egypt have shown that Israel's fears over the rise of political Islam as a dominant factor in shaping the transition have to some extent materialized. At the same time, local identity and context shape each situation individually.

Overall, Tunisia has embarked on a shaky democratization process, and Ennahda has demonstrated a capacity to work with different political actors and cooperate with the country's main secular and liberal parties while attempting to bridge Tunisia's secular and religious identities.[27] However, reports from Tunisia indicate that Ennahda's balancing act has not stopped the party from passing a number of controversial measures, including opening the political arena to the Salafists and cracking down on independent media.[28] The country has also seen the rise of a more radical Salafist Islamist current. Some of the more extremist groups gained international attention in September 2012 after their violent attacks against the US embassy in Tunis, in response to the release of a short video produced in the United States that mocked Islam and insulted the prophet Mohammed.

The frozen relationship between Israel and Tunisia has not been dramatically redefined by the electoral victory of Ennahda. However, this freeze might intensify if the Constituent Assembly ratifies a constitutional clause that would ban all ties with Israel and prohibit "normalization" with "Zionism."[29] The clause has been promoted chiefly by the leftist Arab nationalist parties, led by the Tunisian Communist Labor Party. Ennahda has also endorsed the proposal,[30] with the group already on record against upgrading ties with Israel.[31] However, since its initial discussion, Ennahda has taken a step back on this initiative, with Foreign Minister Rafik Abdessalem arguing against institutionalizing anti-normalization and stating that the provision is not needed, as Tunisia would never recognize or legitimize Israel.[32] Yet if the anti-normalization clause is ratified and becomes part of the constitution, this would be the first concrete sign of deterioration of an already frail relationship.

Even if the clause does not pass, it is unrealistic to expect an improvement of the official ties between Israel and Tunisia. In addition, Israel is concerned about the rising influence of radical Salafists within Tunisian society, in part out of the potential impact on the small Jewish community based in Tunisia. Since the fall of Bin Ali, Salafist groups have demonstrated against the Tunisian Jewish community. During a January 2012 visit of Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh, Salafists staged vehemently anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic protests that included chants of "kill the Jews" as a welcoming chorus for Mashal.[33] Ennahda has been unequivocal in its condemnation of these episodes,[34] while reiterating its commitment toward all citizens, irrespective of religion.[35] At the same time, the party has been accused of being too soft on the Salafists and of not taking the threat they pose to Tunisian society and its minorities seriously enough.[36]

Since the collapse of the Bin Ali regime, Tunisia has also been perceived as more involved in the Palestinian cause, as demonstrated by Ennahda's invitation to Haniyeh and by the country's role in organizing a major conference on the issue of Palestinian and Arab prisoners in Israeli jails.[37] However, Tunisia's role still remains fairly peripheral on this issue, and while the changes occurring in Tunisian-Israeli relations seem all in all marginal, it is still possible to see how the rise of new political actors such as the Islamist Ennahda has impacted on the country's discourse with respect to Israel.

However, it is equally important not to overemphasize this trend. For example, the only real concrete policy initiative that could negatively impact on the already next-to-nonexistent relations between the two countries, the anti-normalization clause, has been promoted chiefly by secular parties. This weakens the idea that the rise of political Islam alone will result in a worsening of Israel's position in the region, highlighting that there are other factors at play as well, including the Arab street's generally negative view of Israel and its polices.

The difficulties in Tunisian-Israeli relations in the aftermath of the awakening pale in comparison with the uneasiness that has characterized Israeli-Egyptian relations since the collapse of the Mubarak regime. As in the case of Tunisia, anti-Israel feelings are certainly not a monopoly of political Islam, nor do they represent a new, post-revolutionary trend. On

the contrary, even though former President Husni Mubarak was a reliable partner in upholding the 1979 peace treaty, he was never engaged in translating the written peace into a real one. Mubarak fueled and promoted anti-Israeli feelings within his own society, in part to deflate internal criticism to his regime. As a result, anti-Israel sentiments in Egypt did not arise following the Arab awakening; they were already solidly rooted in Egyptian society.

For example, in an April 2011 poll, 54 percent of Egyptians maintained their country would be well advised to annul the peace treaty.[38] Significantly, even Egyptians who disagree with the Islamists held a similar view, with 48 percent of them wishing to abrogate the treaty. However, while the majority of Egyptians seemed adamant in their rejection of maintaining ties with Israel, with a staggering 85 percent, according to a later poll, seeing Israel negatively,[39] Egyptians did not largely seem to perceive the issue of Egyptian-Israeli relations as a priority.[40] This indicates that while occupied with an internal political and economic crisis, the incentives to translate the anti-Israeli rhetoric into concrete policy are few.

Still, the deterioration in the Israeli-Egyptian relationship in the aftermath of the Tahrir Square revolution highlights that public opinion among Egyptians is openly antagonistic toward Israel, regardless of their political affiliation and view of political Islam. Therefore, it is not surprising that the Egyptian-Israeli relationship was strained at the political, diplomatic, and economic levels, even before the election of Muslim Brotherhood President Mohamed Morsi.

Moreover, since the fall of the Mubarak regime, Israel has been increasingly worried about Egypt's lack of control over the Sinai area, resulting in a direct security threat to Israel as well as to the peace treaty. The importance of this issue first became clear in August 2011, following a terrorist attack by Palestinian militants who infiltrated Israel from Sinai.[41] In addition to confirming the direct security threat represented by Egypt's inability to secure the area, this episode was important for another reason. Following the attack the IDF pursued the attackers, and as a result of a cross-border shooting, five Egyptian security officers were killed.[42] This in turn sparked a mini-diplomatic crisis between the two countries, with Egypt threatening to withdraw its ambassador and with massive anti-Israel

protests erupting all over the country.[43] Even after the diplomatic crisis between the two countries was settled by an Israeli quasi apology,[44] the Egyptian street continued to protest, eventually leading to an assault on the Israeli embassy in Cairo. Since then, the Israeli embassy in Cairo has not resumed its regular activities. This episode shows how the instability in Sinai has potentially dangerous consequences, not just for Israeli security but also for the overall bilateral relationship.

Since August 2011, Sinai has remained a security hot spot for Israel, with a second major terrorist attack taking place in August 2012. On that occasion, the militants attacked an Egyptian security outpost in Sinai, killed sixteen soldiers, and then attempted to cross the border into Israel on stolen Egyptian military vehicles.[45]

The security problems in Sinai expose the difficult reality faced by Israel in the past years. On the positive side, even after the collapse of the Mubarak regime, security cooperation between the IDF and the Egyptian military continued,[46] and military coordination remains high. Israel has also routinely agreed to Egypt's deployment of more troops in Sinai and more military operations to crack down on violent activism within its own borders.[47] However, despite the ongoing security cooperation, the Sinai area remains a threat and Israel has repeatedly voiced the concern that Egypt is not doing enough to tackle its security problems.[48]

Furthermore, Israel fears that in the future all Egyptian-Israeli cooperation may be additionally downgraded. Israel perceives the post-Mubarak Egypt as still divided between two important stakeholders: the military establishment and the new rising political stars, led by the Muslim Brotherhood. At the early stage of the post-revolutionary phase, SCAF basically called the shots, which was reassuring to Israel, due to SCAF's risk averse, pro-status quo attitude, as well as the relationship Israel maintained with the Egyptian military. However, the military's power has rapidly declined, especially since August 2012, and the new President has managed to increase his power and status. As such, Israel fears that the Egyptian-Israeli relationship may take a turn for the worse.

The main concern is the preservation of the peace treaty.[49] The Muslim Brotherhood was initially ambivalent on this matter, first making improbable "war declarations" and threats to end the treaty,[50] then asserting

it would hold a referendum on the matter, [51] and then gradually moderating its discourse. Currently, the group's position is to uphold the treaty, while not ruling out revising some of its terms (specifically the protocol that limits military deployment in the Sinai), an option Israel sees with great concern. The Brotherhood's view on the treaty is not dramatically different than the view espoused by Egypt's Salafist forces and their biggest political representative, the al-Nour party.[52] Looking ahead, while the possibility of these groups acting to revoke the treaty seems slim, the option that they will attempt to revise it seems a credible one for which Israel should prepare.

Even though the Brotherhood's posture on both security cooperation as well as the peace treaty is in line with the group's pragmatic attitude, concrete overtures from the Islamists are not expected. On the contrary, given the ideological background of the Brotherhood's deep anti-Zionism as well as the Egyptian public's general animosity toward Israel, one should expect the level of the diplomatic relationship to become much chillier. The past few months have offered a few indications of this trend, with President Morsi appearing reluctant to pronounce the word "Israel"[53] and shying away from engaging in direct communication with Israel,[54] and with the Muslim Brotherhood continuing with anti-Israeli rhetoric, for example by blaming the Mossad for the August 5, 2012 Sinai attack.[55]

In addition to the escalation of antagonistic rhetoric and the political, economic, and possible military downgrading of Egyptian-Israeli relations, the rise of political Islam in Egypt is seen as problematic if it augurs a potential rapprochement between Egypt and Tehran and a possible strengthening of Hamas' position in Gaza. On both these issues, however, reality should ease Israel's fears.

Israel expressed its concern regarding a future Egyptian-Iranian rapprochement on several occasions, starting with its February 2011 response to the news that two Iranian vessels were passing through the Suez Canal for the first time since the 1979 Iranian revolution. Prime Minister Netanyahu expressed grave concern on this matter and said, "We can see what an unstable region we live in when Iran tries to take advantage of the situation and increase its influence by sending two warships through the Suez Canal."[56]

However, despite the hype generated by the seeming upgrade in the bilateral relationship, Egypt seems uninterested in building a special partnership with Tehran. An important indication of the Egyptian attitude toward Iran was President Morsi's August 2012 visit to Tehran for the Non-Aligned Movement conference, where as part of the rotational system he was to symbolically transfer the presidency of the movement to Iran.[57] The visit was an historic occasion, since it was the first time since the 1979 revolution that an Egyptian president set foot in Tehran. However, far from speaking in conciliatory fashion and signaling a desire to partner solely with Iran, Morsi took advantage of the platform to criticize sharply Tehran's main regional ally, the Alawite regime in Syria under President Bashar al-Assad.[58] In turn, this generated much criticism within Iran, with Morsi accused of being inconsiderate and "lacking political maturity."[59] In fact, however, the speech was "mature" of Morsi, who both expressed his desire to see Egypt rise again to become a strong regional power and his intention to maintain a relationship with all the main regional players, including Iran and Saudi Arabia. Therefore, even though the Egyptians and the Iranians are now closer than they were two years ago, this hardly qualifies as Egypt joining the "axis of resistance."

Similarly, when looking at the Muslim Brotherhood's role in the Arab-Israel conflict and specifically its influence on Hamas, it is possible to see how the Egyptian party has so far not effected the feared radicalization. The Brotherhood clearly holds considerable influence over Hamas, and Egypt has grown closer to the Islamist group in Gaza, moving away from Mubarak's policy of openly siding with Fatah.[60] However, it would be a mistake to think this support will inevitably result in a free flow of weapons into Gaza or in encouragement of Hamas to step up its armed attacks against Israel. Especially after the terrorist attacks perpetrated by Palestinian militants from Gaza through Egypt, it is clear that Egyptian national security is threatened by these type of activities. As such, Egypt has an interest in engaging in a serious dialogue with Hamas and demanding that all Palestinian groups cease supporting radical cells operating within Egyptian territory.

Hamas has cooperated with Egypt in the aftermath of the Sinai attacks, for example by cracking down on Salafists in Gaza and by offering to help

secure the border and crack down on smuggling tunnels, in exchange for relaxing the border crossing with Gaza.[61] In the future, Egypt can play a role in having Hamas crack down harder on local jihadist cells. Also, due to the security problems in Sinai, Egypt has not substantially relaxed the border between Egypt and Gaza, while it has become more interested in cracking down on the tunnels. Clearly neither of these developments is particularly favorable to Hamas. Even in the aftermath of the November 2012 ceasefire between Hamas and Israel, Egypt will likely continue to strike a balance between its need to control and monitor what comes in and out of Gaza, and the political interest in gradually opening the border.

In addition, the Brotherhood has not seemed interested in adding fuel to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict: the group has repeatedly agreed with Hamas' de facto acceptance of coexistence of Israel "provided that this state within the '67 borders is completely sovereign in air and in sea and in land."[62] In the context of the renewed round of hostilities between Israel and Hamas in November 2012, Egypt did indeed play a key role in diffusing the hostilities and facilitating a ceasefire. While at the rhetorical level Morsi supported Hamas and its stance, the new President contributed to restoration of the shaky and unstable calm between the parties.

Still, when looking at the developments in Egyptian-Israeli relations, the balance sheet is overwhelmingly negative. There is little doubt that the empowerment of the Islamists, backed by a generally antagonistic public opinion, will reflect negatively on the bilateral relations, leading to an even colder peace and more strained cooperation, while in the background different political parties will continue to rely on anti-Israeli rhetoric to boost popularity and legitimacy.

Currently, the greatest threat to Israel-Egypt relations as well as to the peace between the two countries is the state of lawlessness and insecurity in Sinai, as repeated violent attacks originating from Sinai have the potential for unintended escalation between Egypt and Israel. While a full-fledged military confrontation seems a remote and unlikely scenario, not cracking down on armed groups could generate extremely high costs on both sides of the border.

The Rise of Political Islam: What Response from Israel?

The aftermath of the "Arab Spring" has seen the rise of Islamist parties across the region. However, since there is no homogenous and united Islamist movement in the Middle East, and local identities as well as political and organizational factors greatly shape the policies of each distinct group, Israel should refrain from any type of one-size-fits-all policy with respect to this trend, taking the time to understand the different actors and interests at play in the region. Similarly, the current rise of Islamist parties should not necessarily be seen as part of a long term trend. If these groups prove unable to govern effectively, their popularity and legitimacy may drop.

In the short term, the political changes in the region are not particularly positive for Israel. The first threat faced by Israel is an additional rise in anti-Israel feelings and rhetoric. There is of course no certitude that Islamist actors will refuse to maintain some type of relationship with Israel. In the past decades, Israel has indeed held informal relations and dialogues with countries generally considered as "Islamic," such as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. In shaping the relations with these third states, politics (and Israeli politics on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict more specifically) played a far greater role than ideology in determining the ebbs and flows of the relationship.

Moreover, the rise in anti-Israeli feelings is not only related to the rise of Islamist parties, but to the fact that the public opinion seems to agree on the negative assessment of Israel in general and its policies with respect to the Palestinians specifically. In the past decades, and this is certainly true in the case of Egypt, Israel dealt exclusively with the upper echelons of Egyptian society, completely disregarding general public opinion and the street. Now, following the awakening, this policy will have to change. Nonetheless, given the depth of the internal problems faced by virtually all post-revolutionary countries, it seems unlikely that the opposition to Israel will escalate to represent a truly strategic threat.

Second, Israel faces the possibility of a further downgrade in its relationships with Egypt, which are already basically frozen diplomatically, politically, and economically. So far Israel can still count on solid military cooperation, but it fears that with the rise of President Morsi, such relationships may also become colder. Even more significantly, the

increased tensions between Egypt and Israel, combined with the ongoing security problems in Sinai and with the Brotherhood's calls to amend the peace treaty, all spell significant trouble for Israel.

The ongoing regional change, however, carries new opportunities as well as threats. These stem primarily from the potential fall of the Assad regime in Syria, which would in turn weaken Iran as well as Hizbollah, while providing Hamas with an even stronger incentive to part ways with the "axis of resistance." Given this background, what is Israel's leverage to counter the current threats and direct the regional events in its favor?

Realistically, the options available to Israel are few, given that Israel's direct influence (not to mention popularity) on the MENA region is quite limited. Similarly, Israel has so far correctly refrained from taking an overly active role, fearing that its assistance would be criticized as interference, as well as promptly rejected.

Thus Israel has kept its head low, while investing in its own security arrangements. Looking ahead, Israel would do well to continue this policy, while investing even more in maintaining military cooperation and coordination with Egypt. Similarly, Israel, also relying on the assistance of the United States, should continue to emphasize the importance of Egypt's attention to the security vacuum in Sinai. On this matter, preventing escalation and coordinating with Egypt any military response to future attacks originating from the Sinai seems imperative.

At the same time, it appears both realistic and appropriate for Israel to consider the eventuality of revising some of the terms of the peace treaty. This should not be regarded as tantamount to its demise. Israel could use this opportunity both to renegotiate some of the treaty's terms in its favor, while making sure Egypt in general and the Brotherhood in particular reiterate their commitment to keeping the peace. Indeed, preserving the peace treaty needs to be identified as the core priority, especially in light of the potential political and strategic consequences of its abrogation, both regionally as well as in terms of the implications for the peace with Jordan.

In terms of Israel's regional standing and the chances to improve the country's relations with the different MENA players, Israel must address the major issue always looming in the background: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Even though the Arab awakening was not primarily about

Palestinian rights, it is clear that Israeli policies with respect to the Palestinian issue are highly unpopular in the region. As the role of public opinion becomes more important across the region, new Middle East governments will have to take this reality into consideration. As such, not addressing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, including the issues of settlements in the West Bank and the current refusal to deal with Hamas, lift the blockade on Gaza, and encourage intra-Palestinian reconciliation, will inevitably derail any effort to improve political and diplomatic relations in the region. In other words, Israel's position in the region remains deeply connected to its policies with respect to the Palestinians. The lack of a genuine peace process only hurts the country and contributes to strengthened negative feelings on the Arab street.

Thus, even as new issues and dynamics arise, it is the "known" familiar issues that will continue to influence Israel's regional position and standing.

Notes

1   Zine al-Abdin Bin Ali, Tunisia's second president, ruled from 1987 to 2011.

2   Bruce Maddy-Weitzman, "Tunisia's Morning After," *Middle East Quarterly* 17, no. 3 (2011): 11-17, http://www.meforum.org/2977/tunisia-after-revolution.

3   "Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (IV): Tunisia's Way," *International Crisis Group,* Middle East/North Africa Report 106, April 28, 2011, pp. 8-9.

4   Laurel E. Miller, Jeffrey Martini, F. Stephen Larrabee, Angel Rabasa, Stephanie Pezard, Julie E. Taylor, Tewodaj Mengistu, *Democratization in the Arab World Prospects and Lessons from Around the Globe* (RAND Corporation, August 2012), p. 95.

5   "Tunisia Coalition Agrees Top Government Posts," *BBC News,* November 21, 2011, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-15830583.

6   David D. Kirkpatrick, "Islamists Win 70% of Seats in the Egyptian Parliament," *New York Times,* January 21, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/22/world/middleeast/muslim-brotherhood-wins-47-of-egypt-assembly-seats.html.

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