

Strategic Survey for Israel 2012-2013

Anat Kurz and Shlomo Brom, Editors



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Institute for National Security Studies

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Graphic design: Michal Semo-Kovetz and Yael Bieber
Cover design: Michal Semo-Kovetz
Printing: Elinir

Cover Photo: Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at the United Nations,
September 27, 2012
Courtesy: Avi Ohayon, Government Press Office

Institute for National Security Studies (a public benefit company)
40 Haim Levanon Street
POB 39950
Ramat Aviv
Tel Aviv 61398
Israel

Tel. +972-3-640-0400
Fax. +972-3-744-7590

E-mail: info@inss.org.il
[http:// www.inss.org.il](http://www.inss.org.il)

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ISBN: 978-965-7425-43-5

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Introduction

Strategic Survey for Israel 2012-2013 is the latest volume in the series published annually by the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS). The articles compiled here examine various aspects of the leading security and policy issues on Israel's national agenda, providing a comprehensive picture of the country's strategic situation and the challenges the nation currently faces and may be expected to face in the foreseeable future.

From Israel's perspective, a net assessment of developments in the Middle East and on the international scene in 2012 presents a mixed balance. While some negative trends intensified, threatening forecasts did not materialize, and regional changes afford some opportunities for Israel to improve its strategic position.

The most urgent challenge facing Israel is Iran's standing at the forefront of the anti-Israel bloc in the Middle East while progressing toward military nuclear capability. Nuclear capability will endow Iran with greater influence in the Gulf, including over the energy resources in the region and perhaps also over regimes in the region. For now, Tehran is showing much resilience in the face of current international pressure, manifested by economic sanctions that are much harsher than those leveled in prior years. At the same time, its steady march toward military nuclear capability incurs the danger of a regional response with its own set of shockwaves, such as a decision by other nations to embark on the nuclear route. In the broader picture, the international helplessness vis-à-vis Iran attests to the international community's limited ability to contain the dangers of escalation in the Middle East, and particularly to the United States' declining ability to influence regional developments.

The wave of sociopolitical tremors in the Middle East that began two years ago reflects the growing involvement by the civilian populations in

their respective national political theaters. The upheavals caused the fall of old dictatorships while threatening to undermine others, and brought radical Islamic powers to prominence. None of these factors created fundamentally new threats, but they have nevertheless sharpened the military challenges Israel faces in its immediate vicinity and therefore also the political challenges it tackles on the international arena, particularly an accelerated process of delegitimization.

Direct pressure on Israel to launch concrete negotiations with the Palestinians has waned, but the relative diplomatic calm is only evidence of skepticism that such negotiations can lead to a negotiated settlement. This sense, as well as international criticism of Israel because of the role attributed to it for the political deadlock, facilitated the Palestinian Authority's diplomatic accomplishment in the UN, which granted Palestine the status of non-member observer state. This implied the possibility that a Palestinian state could be established without Israeli agreement (and therefore on terms not compatible with Israel's security guidelines); at the same time, Hamas continued to consolidate its rule in the Gaza Strip. This process solidified Hamas' ability to generate a military confrontation with Israel and gain center stage on the Palestinian arena.

The military and political challenges that Hamas poses to Israel are interwoven with Israel's increasingly problematic relations with Egypt. While Egypt has not threatened to abrogate the peace treaty with Israel and is, like Israel, keenly interested in reining in Hamas' power and influence in the Gaza Strip and reinstituting law and order in the Sinai Peninsula, Hamas has the ability to set off a round of fighting that could force Egypt to side with it and thereby chill relations between Cairo and Jerusalem even further.

Concurrently, in Lebanon, Hizbollah's military strength continues to grow. This trend, combined with the threat to Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria posed by a destructive civil war and the entrenchment of radical Islamic elements there, signals the potential formation of an active front on Israel's northern border. Iraq too is a regional stronghold of radical Islamic forces. These circumstances, along with the potential continued weakening of the central government in Jordan due to expanding popular protests against the Hashemite royal household, present Israel with a significant

military and political challenge. While the overall evolving military threat is not conventional, the various sub-state factions involved, lacking inhibiting political restraints, could – separately or together – resort to use of the long range missiles at their disposal.

Israel's experience in asymmetrical conflicts and its efforts to establish deterrence vis-à-vis sub-state entities and push the fighting far from Israel's population centers have at times cost the state on the international diplomatic arena because of the inevitable casualties to civilians on enemy territory during the fighting. The link between extreme Islamic factions and Iran, whether Sunni (such as Hamas) or Shiite (such as Hizbollah), only compounds the related challenges that Israel may have to face in the coming years.

This mix of immediate and long term threats weakens the willingness of Israel's public and its leadership to take security risks: easing the limitations on movement in and out of the Gaza Strip in order to mitigate international criticism, and territorial redeployment in the West Bank (i.e., a military withdrawal and evacuation of settlements) in order to demonstrate commitment to the two-state solution as the means to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. At the same time, the political deadlock reduces the chances – few to begin with – of including Israel in a regional front alongside Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Egypt to support the efforts of the United States and the European Union to delay the nuclearization of Iran.

Against the background of the challenges emerging from the regional turmoil and associated international developments, the critical political and military decisions Israel will have to take in the coming year assume greater weight given the implications for the country's internal political arena. Thus – and as implied by the clear trend of recent years – any policy adopted by Israel's government designed to stabilize its regional and international status, especially if it entails steps to reduce tensions in the Palestinian arena, is likely to upset its domestic political stability as well as to amplify security threats. On the other hand, policies adopted to ease domestic tension will likely make it difficult to contain security threats and will incur heavy diplomatic costs.

These are among the fundamental dilemmas that the Israeli government, to be formed after the January 2013 parliamentary elections, will face. They constitute a backdrop for decisions the government will have to take in face of the escalation of regional instability, a process that began two years ago with the outbreak of the uprisings in the Middle East.

This book is divided into three sections. Part I, "Regional Developments, Global Implications," surveys five topics. In the first chapter, Oded Eran examines the United States involvement in the Middle East over the last year, particularly in the context of the Iranian nuclear program, the Israeli-Palestinian issue, and the regional changes generated by the "Arab Spring." The analysis suggests that during President Obama's second term in office, the United States will show increasing involvement in the Middle East in order to entrench its position, and that a shared US-Israel political agenda will help protect Israel's essential regional and international interests.

In the second chapter, Emily Landau and Shimon Stein debate whether there have been changes this past year in attitude and approach on the part of the principal actors in the Iranian nuclear crisis, namely, Iran and the international community. The authors conclude that the parties involved in the international effort to stop the nuclearization of Iran are more resolved than before, but that Iran still clings steadfastly to its intention to achieve its nuclear goals. If the US administration formulates a clear policy, Iran may compromise on its nuclear ambitions; such a move would also bolster American credibility in the Middle East. As for Israel, its postponement of the deadline for military action against Iran testified to its awareness of the need to defuse the tension with the American administration on the issue, and steer international attention away from the possibility of an Israeli attack to the threat inherent in the Iranian program. In the chapter dealing with nuclear proliferation in the Middle East that might result from the completion of the Iranian nuclear project, Yoel Guzansky and Gallia Lindenstrauss discuss the moves taken by Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey that might signal an intention to develop nuclear military infrastructures. The authors contend that Saudi Arabia is the most likely candidate to pursue the nuclear route and conclude that even if Saudi Arabia alone formulates a nuclear response to the Iranian threat, the Middle East will find itself in a new strategic balance, rife with serious implications for Israel.

Mark Heller's essay discusses the relationship between intra-national power shifts and changes in the strategic balance of power in the Middle East. An examination of the link between regime change in some of the regional states since the start of the "Arab Spring" and the regional matrix of forces shows that contrary to expectation early in the upheavals, the regional balance of power has remained virtually unchanged. Still, the potential for transformation is there, partly because of the increasing emphasis on identity politics in the Middle East and partly because of the danger of collapse of some states, especially Syria.

The lessons learned from external military intervention are discussed in Shlomo Brom's chapter. In deciding on external military intervention, which by its very definition runs counter to the principle of state sovereignty, the West weighs humanitarian and strategic concerns against the estimated cost of intervention. The civil war raging in Syria is a concrete example of a case in which the international community, led by NATO members, must decide between the principle of "Responsibility to Protect" on the one hand, and on the other, its reluctance to engage in such action due to the risks inherent in any intervention. A comparison of the military intervention in Libya with the Syrian case suggests that a decision to intervene in Syria in order to end the mass slaughter and topple the Assad regime will be made if there is a "coalition of willing NATO nations" in which the United States plays a leading role.

The second section of the volume, "Israel and the Middle East," covers six issues related to Israel's immediate surroundings. The essay by Anat Kurz and Udi Dekel examines the factors inhibiting Israel from resuming the dialogue with the Palestinians versus the factors that could prompt Israel to act toward implementation of the two-state solution. Outlining a new way of thinking about the political process between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, the analysis focuses on emerging trends in the Palestinian arena, the regional context, and Israel's international status, and concludes that Israel should formulate an initiative that will demonstrate a true intention to part from West Bank territories, if not in coordination with the PA as part of a process aimed at a consensual settlement, then unilaterally.

Assaf David's essay examines the weakening of the Hashemite kingdom in Jordan, a trend that began with King Abdullah's ascent to the throne and accelerated with the recent upheavals in the Arab world. The analysis focuses on the "Arab Spring's" effect on Jordan's relations with the United States, Israel, and the Gulf states, and discusses the regime's approach to the growing Islamic challenge and the increasing dissatisfaction of the Transjordanian population. The author contends that Israel, in coordination with the kingdom's liberal/reformist elite, could reinforce the regime's prospects to survive. Ephraim Kam's essay discusses the future relationship between Israel and Egypt in the post-Mubarak era of Muslim Brotherhood rule. While the bilateral relations and the foundations of the peace treaty, including the security arrangements, have so far remained intact, due largely to Egypt's economic dependence on the United States, Egypt is still in the midst of a process of change. The Muslim Brotherhood's ideological hostility to Israel and the deadlock in the Israeli-Palestinian political process, as well as security breaches in the Sinai Peninsula that may require Israeli military intervention, are liable to exacerbate tensions between the two countries.

Eyal Zisser examines the threats and opportunities for Israel inherent in the Syrian crisis, and argues that while the fall of the Assad regime would undermine the status of Iran and Hizbollah in the Middle East, the collapse of the central government in Syria is liable to allow jihadists, inspired by al-Qaeda, to establish themselves in the no man's land that would be created on the Israeli-Syrian border. Another threat is the possibility that advanced weaponry, currently controlled by the Syrian army, will fall into the hands of various hostile entities. Still, the crisis holds some opportunities for Israel, including the possibility of entering a dialogue with Turkey and pragmatic Arab states about Syria's future as well as the future of bilateral relations with Israel. The balance of threats and opportunities is also the focus of Benedetta Berti's essay, which discusses the rise of political Islam in the Middle East. The discussion centers on the economic, security, and foreign relations changes in various regional nations since the "Arab Spring" and the growth of the political influence of Islamic elements. The chapter demonstrates that the sharper tone and attitude toward Israel after the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood to power

in Egypt is not a direct or exclusive outcome of the “Arab Spring”; the escalating hostility was discernible even before the collapse of Mubarak’s regime. The essay also examines the Israeli discourse on these phenomena and suggests how Israel should respond to the changes in the political atmosphere in Egypt and elsewhere in the region. The essay recommends that Israel pay attention to public opinion in these countries and not focus exclusively on communicating with the upper echelons of government. The essay also includes an assessment, shared by other writers in this volume, that a breakthrough in the Israeli-Palestinian political process could help diffuse the tension with the region’s nations, especially Egypt.

Yoram Schweitzer’s essay discusses the effect of the upheaval in the Arab world on al-Qaeda and global jihad. The popular uprisings in the Middle East were fundamentally non-violent and expressed a desire to promote liberal, democratic norms, thereby challenging al-Qaeda both in terms of the struggle’s goals and their means of attainment. Al-Qaeda’s leadership, however, has managed to adapt the organization’s strategy to changing circumstances. Facing the regional turmoil, al-Qaeda embarked on an internal jihad in the rebelling societies in order to hasten the day when religious Islamic regimes might control the countries of the region. The growing influence of streams identified with al-Qaeda’s ideological directives and operative base represents a concrete danger to Israel, on top of the weakening of the central governments in these countries and the possibility that Islamic activists will establish themselves in lawless areas along Israel’s borders.

The third section of the volume, “Israel: The Domestic Arena,” includes two chapters. Yehuda Ben Meir’s essay surveys the Israeli public discourse on the Iranian nuclear issue and compares the nature of the debate with previous security-related debates, which tended to be held far from the public eye. Advances in technology and communications are a key factor making it difficult for decision makers to keep the fact of the related deliberations and their contents behind closed doors. The essay concludes with the assessment that the public discussion will resume at an even higher pitch should an Israeli military action against Iranian nuclear facilities begin to appear as an actual possibility, and public opinion on the

issue will be affected by the stances of the United States and Israel's senior military echelon.

Defense spending in context of the social challenges facing Israel is the subject of Shmuel Even's essay. The author contends that when the public debate focuses on the defense budget, it strays from fundamental issues of effective use of economic resources in the civilian sector. While security experts tend to demand increases in the defense budget without factoring in social needs, economists and societal experts demand cuts in the defense budget without understanding Israel's security challenges or having to bear responsibility for the cuts they demand. Therefore, the essay concludes, the discourse must be improved by including experts from respective disciplines and must focus on balancing the response to security threats with the response to the no less pressing needs to guarantee economic stability and address Israel's social needs.

The concluding essay of the volume, by Amos Yadlin, analyzes the significance of the challenges Israel currently faces, led by Iran's progress toward military nuclear capabilities and the deadlock in the Israeli-Palestinian political process, against the backdrop of the transformations taking place in the Middle East and the start of President Barack Obama's second term in office. The essay lists the considerations that ought to guide Israel as it formulates clear responses to immediate and long term threats, and concludes that adopting a proactive policy will help Israel turn threats into opportunities to improve its strategic position. The author contends that Israel coped well with the challenges posed by the 2011-2012 upheavals in the Middle East, but in order to preserve its status as an island of stability in a rapidly changing environment Israel will have to formulate a proactive policy. This policy should focus on expanding the dialogue with the United States and helping to promote a diplomatic solution to the Iranian nuclear crisis; renewing the political process with the Palestinians; constructing a stable relationship with the new Egyptian regime; broadening cooperation with Arab states; and rebuilding the relationship with Turkey. According to Yadlin, "a passive policy does not halt negative processes, and does not facilitate the creation of new opportunities or the realization of existing ones."

We would like to thank the researchers at the Institute for National Security Studies and guest writers who contributed to this volume. Our heartfelt thanks also go to Moshe Grundman, director of publications at INSS, and Judith Rosen, the editor of INSS English publications. As in years past, they have made a valuable contribution to the writing and publication of this volume.

Anat Kurz and Shlomo Brom
December 2012

Part I

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The United States in the Middle East: The Year in Review

Oded Eran

Introduction

At the dawn of President Obama's second term, the United States faces a new Middle East, with the old order shattered and no new clear configuration yet emerging. The paradoxes, conflicting forces, and alliances that have emerged in the context of the Arab uprisings and that engage the US are best described in the following passage:

Alliances are topsy-turvy, defy logic, are unfamiliar and shifting. Theocratic regimes back secularists; tyrannies promote democracy; the US forms partnerships with Islamists; Islamists support Western military intervention. Arab nationalists side with regimes they have long combated; liberals side with Islamists with whom they then come to blows. Saudi Arabia backs secularists against the Muslim Brothers and Salafis against secularists. The US is allied with Iraq, which is allied with Iran, which supports the Syrian regime, which the US hopes to help topple. The US is also allied with Qatar, which subsidizes Hamas, and with Saudi Arabia, which funds the Salafis who inspire jihadists who kill Americans wherever they can.¹

In his second term, the United States President will have to chart a compromise between two major courses of action in the Middle East. In his first term, he already steered the US away from Afghanistan and Iraq. In the

efforts to oust the previous Libyan regime, he responded to the initiative of the French President at the time and led the military effort “from behind.” As to Syria, the Russian-Chinese rejection of the United Nations Security Council for a mandate to use military force is a convenient fig leaf for the US, with Washington exploiting it to justify its military inaction against the Assad regime. As for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in the second half of his first term, the US President relieved himself of the attempt to reach a political solution.

There will be much temptation in the US administration to maintain this course, but it is highly likely that the US will be forced to become more deeply engaged and involved than some in Washington, and in the Middle East, would like.

The Iranian Nuclear Effort

The Iranian issue dominated US-Israeli discourse from 2009 to 2012, with the two sides trying and failing to reach a common strategy to deal with the Iranian effort to obtain military nuclear capability. While the area of US-Israeli agreement on this file is wide, there are several key issues on which disagreement prevailed in the past and may emerge in the near future.

In the presidential debate dedicated to foreign policy matters, President Obama asserted emphatically, “As long as I am President of the United States, Iran will not get a nuclear weapon.”² While reassuring, this statement does not provide clear answers to serious questions, such as what the US or Israel will do if Iran continues to enrich uranium at the current 20 percent level without going for a weapon, but approaching a breakout point. These and other questions sparked an open, shrill argument between the two candidates.

In the spring of 2012, Israel began sending signals that it could not afford to wait any longer and would strike unilaterally in order to set Iran’s program back.³ In response, the Obama administration sent its top military and diplomatic brass to Jerusalem to convince Israel that the United States could be counted on to end Iran’s program – even if that required the use of military force should all else fail. In order to make these promises more credible and reassure its allies, the US took a range of steps short of war to enhance its strike capabilities. Over June and July 2012, it moved a second

aircraft carrier into the Gulf region, added a ship (*USS Ponce*) in the Persian Gulf that acts as a platform for helicopters and Special Operations Forces, and augmented minesweeping capabilities including underwater drones that can find and destroy mines. It also began construction of a missile defense radar station in Qatar.⁴ Finally, in late September 2012, the United States and more than 25 other nations held the largest-ever minesweeping exercise along with other naval exercises in the Gulf to reinforce their ability to respond to any Iranian military action in the area.

Whether the President of the United States is willing to use military power against Iran should all other means fail is another point of potential friction and distrust between the US and Israel. Israel supports the use of sanctions and has not objected to diplomacy to reach a solution, and officials have recognized that the sanctions adopted by the international community, mostly the US and the European Union (EU), have left their mark on Iran. They have not publicly reacted to the reports that the US and Iran will have one-on-one negotiations after the US presidential elections.⁵ It is a fair assumption, though, that Israel will press for a limited and relatively short time frame for any attempt of this sort; and will request that the US prevent Iran from exercising its normal pattern of delay tactics, from removing existing sanctions (or adding new ones), and certainly from removing the military option from the table.

The very agenda of potential US-Iran talks and the terms of a potential agreement could also contain bones of contention. These matters should be discussed and agreed upon between the US and Israel in advance. Iran achieving nuclear weapons capability has long been seen as a major threat to American interests. With a nuclear arsenal, Iran could increase its support of terrorism, expand its regional influence at the expense of US allies, and increase its aid to organizations opposed to Israel – all with greater impunity. A nuclear Iran would also call into question the future of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), and could well lead to a deluge of new proliferators, especially in the Middle East. It is unlikely that the US will agree to conditions that relate directly to Israel, but the US agreement to support the 2010 NPT Review Conference's Final Document, heavily biased against Israel and calling for a conference to discuss a Middle East Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone without regard to Israel's

preconditions for such activities, did ignite much concern in Jerusalem.⁶ Particular issues that should be dealt with in advance of US-Iran talks include the uranium enrichment in Iran itself as well as the whole system of verification, supervision, violations, and prior understandings between Israel and the US in the event that the arrangements agreed on with Iran fail.

In spite of the already close cooperation between Israel and the US, there is a need for further work toward reaching an understanding concerning both the political and the military options. The two governments should avoid sliding again into the public, almost acrimonious discussion of the summer of 2012 and maintain a united front. This in turn will greatly help the efforts to prevent Iran from pursuing its goals.

The “Arab Spring”

Since the end of World War II, American foreign policy has been torn between promoting its democratic ideals and promoting its security and economic interests. The so-called “Arab Spring” made this dilemma particularly acute, as the free elections that followed the overthrow of regimes in America’s traditional allies in the Arab world resulted in Islamist-led governments. Despite these parties’ past records of harsh anti-Americanism and criticism of America’s role in the region, Washington felt it could not openly take issue with the results of these democratic elections. Against the backdrop of the Islamist victories, Washington’s relations with countries throughout the region are in a state of flux. This is perhaps most evident in Egypt, where the Muslim Brotherhood’s Mohamed Morsi won the presidency in June 2012. In Tunisia as well, Ennahda, a party that had been banned in the past, won a plurality of seats in elections last year, while Islamists gained support in Yemen. In Libya, the sole country where Islamists were defeated by moderates, the attack on the Benghazi consulate and assassination of the American ambassador gave the US cause for concern.

Of particular significance in this context are the triangular Cairo-Washington-Jerusalem relations. The rise to power of the Muslim Brotherhood, the oldest and most influential Islamist party in the region, posed the biggest challenge for American policy during 2012. As they have

elsewhere, US officials have cautiously engaged in diplomatic relations with the new Egyptian government, seeking to maintain Egypt's general pro-American orientation and commitment to peace with Israel. Before Morsi's purge of the military's leading generals, the Obama administration also sought to maintain close ties to the military, in the belief that the military would continue to hold sway over foreign policy.

Bilateral relations hit their first major crisis in early 2012, even before Morsi's election, when Egyptian security officials arrested 43 US citizens employed by several leading non-governmental organizations that worked to promote democracy in Egypt. Several months later, in September, when Egyptian protestors breached the embassy perimeter walls and met only with a weak Egyptian response while the Muslim Brotherhood called for more protests, President Obama reacted. He warned Morsi that relations would be jeopardized if Egyptian authorities failed to protect American diplomats and act more forcefully against anti-American attacks. In an interview with *Telemundo* the following day, Obama said of the evolving US-Egypt relationship:

I don't think that we would consider them [Egypt] an ally, but we don't consider them an enemy... I think it's still a work in progress, but certainly in this situation, what we're going to expect is that they are responsive to our insistence that our embassy is protected, our personnel is protected.⁷

But the major political issue between Egypt and the US will be the preservation of the 1979 Treaty of Peace between Egypt and Israel, reached and signed under US auspices. The Muslim Brotherhood has not officially threatened to abrogate the agreement with Israel, nor has it officially demanded to revise it. But the winds blowing from Cairo ever since the Muslim Brotherhood took power further lowered the temperature of the already cold peace that the government inherited from the Mubarak regime. Relations between Egypt and Gaza under the Hamas government, however, have warmed. Israel's Operation Pillar of Defense in Gaza demonstrated the fragile state of its relations with Egypt. The US and Egypt found themselves reacting in two distinctly different ways to the Israeli operation. While Egypt summoned its ambassador from Tel Aviv

“for consultations” and condemned Israel’s operation in harsh terms, under pressure from the Egyptian street President Morsi may feel the need for more visible and extreme reactions against Israel. This pressure would become especially acute with an Israeli land invasion of Gaza.

Conventional wisdom points to the dire state of Egypt’s economic situation since the uprising erupted in January 2011 and its need for US assistance as factors motivating Egypt to refrain from abrogating the 1979 Treaty of Peace entirely. Egypt’s official reserve assets, which amounted to \$145 billion at the close of 2010, dwindled to \$15.2 billion in September 2011.⁸ The tourism sector, one of Egypt’s most important sources of income, suffered a serious decline in the wake of the uprising, not least due to fears of terror, and uncertainty whether the Brotherhood would allow alcohol and freedom of dress on Egypt’s beaches. Meanwhile, exports fell by 20 percent in 2011 compared to 2010. With unemployment rising and exports falling, Egypt cannot afford to lose international – and especially US – assistance.⁹ The US Congress may also be less lenient than President Obama toward Egypt on issues relating to Israel, terror, or further attacks on US interests in Egypt. It may even react negatively to a call by Egypt to review the Treaty of Peace with Israel.

A rupture in US-Egyptian relations does not serve Israel’s interests, and may cause further instability in the region. Both Israel and the US share the hope that Egypt will regain full control of the Sinai Peninsula and prevent the area from being used by several terrorist organizations as a base for launching terror operations as well as a corridor for weapons being smuggled into Gaza. Given the Muslim Brotherhood’s influence over sister movements in other Arab countries, it is important for both the US and Israel to maintain open channels of communication with the new regime in Egypt. This will require a formidable effort and willingness on the part of the three governments involved. They may be called on for restraint when dealing with the Palestinian issue, including the possibility of further violent confrontations between Israel and Gaza, as well as the Palestinian (i.e., West Bank) moves in international organizations. Above all, the triangular relationship will be extremely strained in the wake of a military operation against Iran’s nuclear installations, if that occurs.

Nothing better exemplifies the shift in the US attitude to the “Arab Spring” and the recognition in Washington of the limitations on its power to influence events, as its involvement in the Syrian and Libyan uprisings, respectively. There are significant differences between the two cases. There was no international objection to using force in Libya, nor any foreseen ramification elsewhere to the use of force. The Libyan opposition seemed more united than the Syrian opposition, and the tribal differences do not amount to the ethnic, religious and political divisiveness of Syria.

Ostensibly, the main obstacle to military intervention in Syria has been the Russian and Chinese position at the UN. At times, however, American officials have also expressed concern about Syria's air defenses and its ballistic missile capability. In testimony before the Senate Armed Services committee on March 7, 2012, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin E. Dempsey explained the difficulties of military action:

The ability to do a single raid-like strike would be accessible to us. The ability to do a longer-term sustained campaign would be challenging and would have to be made in the context of other commitments around the globe. I'll just say this about their air defenses: They have approximately five times more sophisticated air defense systems than existed in Libya, covering one-fifth of the terrain. All of their air defenses are arrayed on their western border, which is their population center.¹⁰

Israel can only hope that such arguments will not be used against attacking Iran's nuclear facilities, should the need arise.

The shipment of munitions to unwanted terror groups is another reason for the US reluctance to aid the anti-Assad regime opposition. Following the experiences of post-Soviet Afghanistan and post-Qaddafi Libya, the US is concerned about the supply of advanced weapons that at some point can be used against allies such as Israel, or even US citizens. A classified US government report said arms shipments to Syrian rebels, organized and sent by Saudi Arabia and Qatar, are reaching Muslim extremists – including those linked to al-Qaeda – rather than the secular opposition groups for whom they are intended.¹¹ The findings from the report call

into question whether the White House strategy of indirect intervention is achieving its stated and intended purpose. The President reiterated in the third presidential debate that the United States will do “everything we can do to make sure that we are helping the opposition” in Syria, while also ensuring that “we’re not putting arms in the hands of folks who eventually could turn them against us or our allies in the region.”¹²

Pursuing a tougher US line of action against the Assad regime will not necessarily increase the support of the Arab street for the US. Even those Arab governments that openly call for the end of the regime in Damascus may criticize the United States for its intervention, if that occurs. In the absence of clearer and better options, the US will likely cling to its current pattern of action in the Syrian file, though it can further isolate the regime diplomatically by recognizing the opposition as Syria’s official representation.

Israel’s low profile approach to the situation in Syria suits the US interests. At the same time, the Israeli government and US administration must look at the possible consequences of regime change in Damascus. Beyond internal chaos, which may last for several years, other regional players may become involved as well as several terror organizations. The control of conventional types of armaments held by the regular Syrian army as well as stocks of nonconventional weapons is a serious cause for concern. Both the US and Israel should continue to discuss solutions for these thorny questions.

A sensitive question relates to Jordan’s ability to withstand the internal pressures and the ramifications of the failure of the Hashemite monarchy to handle them. Jordan has been a solid member of the informal pro-US camp in the Middle East (with the exception of its support of Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990). The weakening of the current regime could have a dramatic impact on the political configuration of the Middle East. The fact that the leading political opposition in Jordan is led by the Jordanian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood is cause for deep concern, both for the US and Israel. The Muslim Brotherhood belt, which includes Egypt, Gaza, and Jordan, could cause serious problems for Israel. Given the political instability in Iraq and Syria, the addition of Jordan to that zone of instability could be detrimental to the future of the region.

The US has rushed to help the Jordanian government financially. It should not only continue to do so, but also put pressure on the Arab oil producing states to stand by their commitments.

The Peace Process

Ever since Israel captured the West Bank and Gaza in 1967, the future of these territories has been a source of disagreement and contention between the US and Israel. The first Obama administration was no exception. Although to some these years constituted the worst period in the history of the bilateral relationship, this impression is not necessarily borne out by the history of the bilateral relations.

The political landscape of the Middle East has undergone dramatic changes since President Obama entered the White House. What seemed to be feasible in 2009 is no longer valid or achievable today. Previous attempts to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and certainly those in which the United States has been involved, were premised on the notion that the final outcome must comprise a comprehensive solution to all core issues, i.e. Jerusalem, borders, and refugees. This was the premise that guided efforts during the first Obama administration. No consideration was given to any methodological alternative. Following two years of strained personal relations between the United States and Israel political leaderships over the issue of a settlement freeze, the entire process was abandoned by all three principal actors – the US, Israel, and the Palestinians. This was prompted not only by the impasse between the involved parties, but even more critically by the new regional developments. In light of mounting concerns over the rise to power of modern fundamentalist regimes in several Arab countries, it was unlikely that the Prime Minister of Israel would adopt a decision concerning Israel's final borders with both Jordan and the West Bank, or admission of refugees into Israel, two decisions that will be hard to make even under the most stable and clear circumstances in the region.

Under these circumstances, the second term Obama administration can decide to continue to abandon the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians, hoping to resume the process if and when: the dust sweeping through the region settles; the question of the leadership in the Palestinian camp is settled amicably, closing the rift between Gaza and the West Bank;

and a new, stable government is formed in Israel after the January 22, 2013 elections that is willing and able to take decisions concerning long term relations with the Palestinians.

It is unlikely that the political dust in the region will settle in the next two years, and therefore the Israeli reluctance to make long term decisions will presumably continue. And yet, if the option of the two-state solution is to be maintained, a status quo is an unacceptable alternative, simply because the status quo is an illusion. Ongoing processes, such as the increased population in the settlements, especially in areas that are unlikely to remain under Israel's sovereignty in the context of an agreement, or the growing extremism among the Palestinians, will make the two-state solution an obsolete alternative.

The new Israeli government that emerges from the January 2013 elections would do well to develop an alternative approach and present an initiative to the US President, gain his support, and encourage him to pursue it. The main guiding principle of such an initiative on the Israeli side is the willingness to proceed toward the two-state solution in a gradual and incremental manner. This will include Israel's partial withdrawal from parts of Area C, and subsequent transfer of more power to the Palestinians in Area C, as well as Area B. In addition, Israel must be willing to halt settlement activities in certain areas, mostly east of the security fence. And finally, Israel must be willing to revise the economic and water agreements. For their part, the Palestinians could take steps, for example, toward a conditional recognition of Israel as the homeland of the Jewish people. Both sides will commit themselves to the final outcome of such a process, i.e., two states. Such an action plan, corresponding to the 2003 Roadmap, would be endorsed by the Quartet and the Security Council. If accepted, it could additionally contain an Israeli-US agreement not to block UN membership for the State of Palestine at a date agreed on by both Israel and the Palestinian government.

It is imperative that Israel submit this or a similar blueprint to the US President so as to preempt future haggling and misunderstandings resulting in new bilateral tensions. The most pressing matter in 2013 will almost certainly be the Iranian nuclear effort. For a successful effort on this matter, it is critical that the US and Israel reach the highest degree of coordination.

They cannot afford the sort of friction witnessed in 2012. An agenda for progress on the Israeli-Palestinian front will greatly facilitate this effort.

Conclusion

The process of change that engulfed the Middle East from late 2010 is probably in its early stages. Meanwhile, the international community, with its different actors, is still groping for answers how best to deal with the political and economic ramifications. Each Arab state poses a different set of challenges for the US and for Israel, respectively. The Arab uprising caught the US in the early stages of its gradual withdrawal from the Middle East and in the midst of recovery from the 2008-10 economic crisis. The major dilemma for the US has been the need to choose between upholding the values of democracy, the rule of law, the elimination of corruption, nepotism, and other problems that beset the Arab societies, and economic prospects; and the support for traditional allies, which in most cases were the pillars of the system that came under attack by the Arab masses.

In the most significant case, Egypt, the US very quickly chose to abandon President Mubarak, a long time ally and collaborator. However, the substitute regime in Egypt has joined the US string of disappointments and dilemmas in the Middle East. In Iraq, the forceful removal of Saddam Hussein by the US brought about a regime with a lukewarm attitude toward the US and a friendly stance toward Iran. In Libya, the US intervention helped to remove Qaddafi's regime, but it has yet to be seen how stable the new regime will be and to what extent it can hold the country together. In Syria, the US, though involved in the diplomatic efforts and logistical assistance to the Syrian opposition, is reluctant to become more deeply involved, especially militarily. The decision is predicated on lessons learned from the cases cited above, but also on the complexity of Syria's political, ethnic, and religious composition. This kaleidoscopic state was held together for decades by a brutal central minority-dominated regime that amassed all the tools of state control in its hands. The removal of this minority from absolute power almost guarantees several years of chaos before stability is restored. The US and Israel may prefer to concentrate more on containment of the Syrian crisis within its political borders rather than on trying to shape its future political structure and orientation.

A joint US and Israeli political agenda, especially if it contains a plan to advance the Israeli-Palestinian political process, will also help stabilize Israel's relations with Egypt and Jordan. This should be a key consideration in Israel's strategy in its attempt to weaken the fundamentalist ring emerging from the Arab uprising. The process that led to the ceasefire in Gaza in November 2012, following the escalation of rocket fire from Gaza and Israel's military operation to stop it, could be interpreted as an indication that a traditionally negative attitude toward Israel notwithstanding, the Muslim Brotherhood, once in power, can prioritize Egypt's needs and strategic interests. Israel and the US will have to find a way to live and perhaps expand this modus operandi, though expectations should not be inflated. Beyond leveraging the possibility for progress on the Israeli-Palestinian track, the Sinai Peninsula can serve as another platform for preventing deterioration in relations between Egypt and Israel. Egyptian willingness to take action against arms smuggling into Sinai, and thence to Gaza, translated into concrete performance, should in turn be matched by Israeli readiness to consider reasonable Egyptian proposals to modify certain articles in the military annex to the 1979 Treaty of Peace. The US, as a witness to the treaty, and being the leading actor in the multinational force deployed in the Sinai, could play an important role in mediating between Israel and Egypt if the latter requests changes to the annex.

The theme of the US shifting its major external affairs focus from Europe to the Middle East and to the Pacific and East Asia has received much attention in the public discourse in the US. It may be hasty, however, to conclude that the US is about to abandon the Middle East. In spite of repeated disappointments, a lack of prospects for success, and a rapidly declining dependence on the region's oil, the US has allies and commitments from which it cannot estrange itself. And yet Israel, to the extent that it deems a true US presence in the region strategically important, must consider the means of maintaining the US deployment and active engagement in the Middle East.

Notes

I wish to thank Rachel Beerman and Cameron Brown for their diligent work and assistance in preparing this chapter.

- 1 Hussein Agha and Robert Malley, "This Is Not a Revolution," *New York Review of Books*, November 8, 2012.
- 2 Third presidential debate, Boca Raton, Florida, October 22, 2012.
- 3 Defense Minister Ehud Barak and other Israeli officials warned that once the Fordow plant became operational, Iran would enter a "zone of immunity" where it could produce nuclear fuel without fear of an Israeli strike. See David E. Sanger and William J. Broad, "Iran Said to Nearly Finish Nuclear Enrichment Plant," *New York Times*, October 25, 2012; Jonathan Lis and Natasha Mozgobia, *Haaretz*, March 3, 2012, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/1.1659743>; Attila Somfalvi, *Ynet*, May 31, 2012, <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4236395,00.html>.
- 4 Adam Entous and Julian E. Barnes, "Pentagon Bulks Up Defenses in the Gulf," *Wall Street Journal*, July 17, 2012; David E. Sanger and Eric Schmitt, "To Calm Israel, U.S. Offers Ways to Restrain Iran," *New York Times*, September 2, 2012; Barak Ravid, *Haaretz*, September 2, 2012, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/1.1814612>.
- 5 Helene Cooper and Mark Landler, "U.S. Officials Say Iran Has Agreed to Nuclear Talks," *New York Times*, October 20, 2012. US officials denied such an agreement but expressed willingness to hold the talks.
- 6 See www.un.org/en/conf/npt/2010/. The US later explained its participation in the consensus by which the Final Document had been approved, trying to allay Israel's concerns.
- 7 President Obama's interview with José Díaz-Balart, *Telemundo*, September 12, 2012.
- 8 IMF, "Egypt - International Reserves and Foreign Currency Liquidity," November 8, 2012.
- 9 US annual direct assistance amounts to \$1.3 billion in military assistance and some \$250 million in different economic projects. The US is currently considering a \$1 billion debt forgiveness and more than \$400 million in loan guarantees to US businesses operating in Egypt. The US is supporting the IMF loan of \$4.8 billion to Egypt.
- 10 US Senate, Committee on Armed Services, Hearing to Receive Testimony on the Situation in Syria, Statement of General Martin E. Dempsey, Joint Chiefs of Staff, March 7, 2012.
- 11 David E. Sanger, "Jihadists Receiving Most Arms Sent to Syrian Rebels," *New York Times*, October 14, 2012.
- 12 Third presidential debate, Boca Raton, Florida, October 22, 2012.

Iran and the International Community, 2012: New Nuclear Game or More of the Same?

Emily B. Landau and Shimon Stein

Introduction

The latest round of nuclear negotiations with Iran in 2012 – with meetings held in Istanbul, Baghdad, and Moscow from April to June, and two lower level meetings in July that focused on technical issues – ended in failure. The unavoidable conclusion is that despite expectations to the contrary, there is as yet nothing concrete to indicate that this year’s attempt to achieve a breakthrough toward resolving the nuclear crisis was any more successful than all the previous failed attempts to negotiate with Iran over the past ten years. Indeed, the gulf between the international community (currently represented by the P5+1) and Iran in late 2012 looks as wide and unbridgeable as ever.

But while tangible results are lacking, the latest round of nuclear talks are embedded in the broader process of the “international community vs. Iran” that has been unfolding for close to a decade, and recent developments should be scrutinized in this light. In other words, an assessment of the talks should be sensitive to any shifts in approach that might indicate a departure from the course that became entrenched over the years since 2003, even if they have not yet borne the fruit of a successful agreement. This article will analyze whether there are any signs of a new game with Iran, or whether what we have witnessed over the past year is basically a

repeat of what we have seen so many times before, and as such is simply “more of the same.”

If the latter option is the case, the question is whether the international community and Iran are inevitably locked in a recurrent dynamic whereby all attempts to negotiate are basically doomed to failure. This assessment draws on what has been gleaned regarding Iran’s steadfast determination to acquire a military nuclear capability and its successful tactical use of negotiations as a means to gain precious time to push its program forward while avoiding any decisive compromises, as well as its ability to deter the international community as far as military action is concerned. The international community has proven incapable of bringing to bear its collective strengths in an effective manner when negotiating with Iran, and yet remains critically dependent on these (as yet ineffective) negotiations in order to achieve its goal. This dependence on diplomacy, due to an unwillingness to employ military force, explains why different groups of states (mainly the EU-3 and P5+1) kept coming back to the table with Iran even after repeated failures. The option of a new game – notwithstanding the reality of the basic dynamic outlined above – proposes that there may nevertheless be recent indications of a shift in the approach of the international community, which could potentially render a settlement of this crisis more achievable.

The article will present and analyze these alternative interpretations of international efforts to curb Iran’s nuclear ambitions over the past year, beginning with the release of the IAEA report on Iran in early November 2011.¹ The presentation of two alternative explanations for what has transpired over the course of 2012 indicates a difference of opinion among the two authors, but more importantly, it is a reflection of the fact that both authors question the true nature of the story that is unfolding and attribute importance to presenting alternative approaches. Moreover, the options are not inherently mutually exclusive, because any possible departure from the previous course nevertheless remains embedded in a problematic framework characterized both by a determined nuclear proliferator that has demonstrated that it will go to great lengths to avoid surrendering its development of nuclear weapons, and an international community that remains structurally hampered vis-à-vis its ability to act with unity of

purpose and determination, especially over time. Finally, the implications of the two interpretations will be assessed against the backdrop of Israel's new prominence in the debate, salient regional developments, and the United States elections.

Are We Seeing More of the Same?

Almost nine years have elapsed since the foreign ministers of Britain, Germany, and France visited Tehran with the aim of inducing Iran to suspend its enrichment program. Subsequent efforts to curb Iran's nuclear plans included a string of UN Security Council resolutions on sanctions, additional attempts on the part of the EU-3 to negotiate and bring the US into the diplomatic game, Obama's diplomatic outreach, and efforts on the part of the P5+1 to negotiate. Four reports released by the IAEA in the period under review here underscore the extent of the failure of all diplomatic efforts to date in stopping Iran from making significant progress on its way to building a military nuclear capability. The mid November 2012 report provides the status of uranium enrichment: the total amount of LEU enriched up to 5 percent stands at 7611 kg. This amount is enough, once enriched to weapons-grade material, to produce over five nuclear weapons. Since February 2010, Iran has produced approximately 232.8 kg of uranium enriched up to 20 percent at Natanz and Fordow.² The content of the annex contained in the November 2011 IAEA report, which detailed Iran's various activities related to nuclear weaponization, was clearly long overdue.

The main reason for the ongoing diplomatic failure lies in the asymmetrical interests and objectives of the negotiating parties – in particular regarding their respective commitments to actually reaching a deal. The Iranian objective is to become self-sufficient in mastering the nuclear fuel cycle process, and subsequently, to produce enough fissile material to be able to produce nuclear weapons when a political decision to that effect is taken. From the outset, the Iranian regime has left no doubt that it will not compromise on what it views as its “inalienable right” as a member of the NPT to enrich uranium for (allegedly) peaceful use.³ In order to achieve its objective, it needs time. As long as the regime has not achieved this objective, it will not seek to reach a compromise, although

afterwards it could well be interested in a deal. That, however, does not prevent Iran from engaging in talks in a not serious manner, especially when the price of this kind of engagement does not compel it to compromise on its plan, which continues unabated.

The objective of the EU-3, the US, and later the P5+1 has been to suspend Iran's enrichment and prevent it from acquiring a military nuclear capability. The P5+1 have repeatedly reiterated their position that they do not deny Iran's right to pursue a civil nuclear program. At the same time, they underscore the need to prove that Iran's program is exclusively for peaceful purposes. Unlike Iran, which is playing for time, the P5+1 reiterate the need for an urgent, swift solution in their statements, but at the same time, they have only gradually increased the pressure on the Iranians – so far, with no discernible success.

Against the backdrop of conflicting interests and timetables, as well as Iran's unwillingness to compromise, it should come as no surprise that the parties have so far been unable to reach an agreement. One area in which the conflicting parties seem to pursue a common objective is the need to stay engaged. Even though the US, for example, has stated that it does not want to engage in "talks for talks' sake," the US and its negotiating partners have found themselves doing just that – engaged in discussions that, given Iran's recalcitrant position, do not allow for a serious negotiation. And so, initially when the EU-3, and later the P5+1, presented proposals in order to sustain the process, the Iranians either rejected them – if not immediately, then after a while – or simply ignored them, but never went as far as to withdraw from the process altogether. Both parties understand that in terms of their interests, there is nothing to gain from a total breakdown of the process. Iran's interest in upholding a semblance of dialogue is obvious – it enables it to gain precious time to push its program forward. For international actors facing Iran, a recognized breakdown would compel them to move to new measures – such as military force – which they are loath to do.

In an effort to raise the stakes for Iran, a series of sanctions was put into effect. In addition to the four UN Security Council resolutions, the US and the EU have passed additional sanctions – characterized as "crippling" –

that have already had a significant impact on the Iranian economic and financial situation, but have not yet led to a political reassessment in Iran.

It is against this backdrop that the latest round of negotiations that began in mid April 2012 in Istanbul must be assessed. Some experts interpreted Iran's readiness to resume the discussions/negotiations, which were stalled for almost 15 months, as an encouraging sign that the sanctions and the discussion regarding a possible Israeli military strike were beginning to have an effect, prompting a willingness on the part of Iran to engage constructively. One cannot rule out that the impact of the sanctions will eventually change the Iranian calculation, and thereby create a symmetry of interests on the need to reach a deal that will in turn increase the chances for a diplomatic solution. However, what has transpired during the most recent meetings does not seem to suggest that a change in Iran's attitude is imminent.

True to its pattern of behavior – “when under pressure, do not overload the circuit more than is necessary” – the Iranian leadership demonstrated a positive attitude prior to the meeting in Istanbul, expressing the hope that the crisis would be resolved in a comprehensive manner. Unlike on some other occasions, no preconditions were set by Iran before the meeting. Citing the *fatwa* that describes the possession and use of nuclear weapons as a cardinal sin, Khamenei reiterated the peaceful nature of the Iranian nuclear program. The Supreme Leader also praised President Obama. The US in turn reiterated its preference for a negotiated solution and its willingness to accept a civilian nuclear program, provided the Supreme Leader proves his commitment not to make use of nuclear weapons.

United in their need to continue the discussion, both parties described the outcome of the meeting in Istanbul as constructive and useful, even though none of the contentious issues were dealt with in a serious fashion. Catherine Ashton's statement that “the NPT forms a key basis for what must be a serious engagement,”⁴ without referring to the UN and the IAEA resolutions, was seen by Iran as an encouraging sign. One could sum up the importance of this meeting in that it took place after a hiatus of nearly 15 months, and that the parties agreed to meet again in May in Baghdad.

Iran's expressed willingness to conduct discussions with the IAEA (May 14-15, 2012) in response to the agency's request for access to the

Parchin military site (following the November 2011 report), and to grant assurances that no obstacles would stand in the way of the inspectors, paved the way for IAEA Director General Amano's visit to Iran on May 21, 2012. However, an agreement that was slated for signature remained unsigned, due to "some differences."

Against the backdrop of the weeks preceding the Istanbul meeting and the efforts thereafter on both sides to display optimism, the next two meetings – in Baghdad (May 23-24, 2012) and Moscow (June 18-19, 2012) – were marked by a return to the familiar Iranian mode of behavior. In Baghdad, Iran chose to disregard the nuclear issue – not for the first time. It submitted a proposal, and as expected, reiterated its right to enrich uranium. The P5+1 underscored their determination to seek a swift diplomatic resolution based on the NPT and the full implementation of UN Security Council and IAEA Board of Governors resolutions on Iran. In summing up the two-day talks in Baghdad, a senior US administration official was quoted as stating that there was agreement to discuss "all aspects of 20 percent enrichment." Referring to this "common ground" without further elaboration, he also emphasized that there were "significant differences" between the parties.⁵ These differences continued, hindering the meeting that took place in Moscow the following month. The P5+1 reiterated what they described as a "balanced proposal," which was the "stop" (the enrichment of uranium to 20 percent), "shut" (the Fordow facility), and "ship" (the stockpiles of 20 percent enriched uranium outside of Iran) proposal that they offered in return for moves referred to as "first confidence building steps" that, not surprisingly, did not meet Iranian expectations. The only agreement reached was to continue the discussions at the experts' level, hoping that they would narrow the "significant gap" over time, thereby enabling the resumption of higher level talks.⁶

In conclusion, the mere resumption of the last round of talks was perceived by some as an encouraging sign that sanctions were beginning to take their toll. The expectation was that Iran would take a step toward backing down from its unrelenting positions, paving the way to a more meaningful diplomatic process that would help defuse the unfolding crisis. However, the outcome of the talks does not appear to suggest an imminent breakthrough. Declaring a breakdown of the negotiations at this point in

time would not serve any of the parties' interests, so one can assume that they will continue for a while. However, a successful diplomatic process can only be achieved by redressing the current asymmetry of interests, namely by creating circumstances that will diminish Iran's interest in continuing its current mode of operation. The latest round of EU sanctions, augmented by additional US sanctions and the looming threat of a military strike (by Israel and possibly the US) is meant to change Iran's calculation. Until that happens – if indeed it does – the current pattern of Iranian behavior will remain “more of the same.”

Or Perhaps Indications of a New Game?

Detecting a possible shift in the ongoing dynamic between the international community and Iran puts the focus on the approach of the international community. It takes two to tango, and the failure so far to resolve the nuclear crisis with Iran is not solely a function of Iran's strong and steadfast determination to achieve a military capability, and the skillful manner by which it has repeatedly “played” the international community and avoided engaging in serious negotiations. Equally problematic has been the demonstrated weakness of the international community in its efforts to have Iran back down.

However, there have been shifts in the positions and policies of some of the strong actors that are facing Iran, first and foremost the United States, and to a lesser extent its European allies in the period under review. The past year has been characterized by a more determined international stance against Iran, and while this approach has not yet achieved the desired results, the international community is currently somewhat better positioned to do so than in the past.

There are a number of reasons why international actors have had difficulty in projecting the necessary degree of resolve in their negotiations with Iran. Most significantly, the states that assumed the lead in facing Iran over the past decade were collectively weakened by the fact that they were not on the same page in their assessment of the dimensions of the crisis: namely, how close Iran was to developing a military nuclear capability; the implications of Iran becoming a nuclear state; and the best means of confronting it on this issue. Broadly speaking, Russia and China have

taken a much more lenient approach on these issues, while the US and its European allies viewed Iran's advances more seriously and generally displayed a tougher attitude. This lack of unity among the different actors facing Iran in the negotiations setting was coupled with an overall reluctance to pursue the harshest measures that could have been adopted, due to the expected negative consequences that they themselves would likely suffer from as a result of these measures. This became apparent over the past decade with regard to harsh and crippling sanctions, as well as possible US and Israeli threats of military action against Iran's nuclear facilities. Complicating matters further was the fact that Iran proved adept at playing on the weaknesses of the international community and further eroding its collective resolve, for example, by employing tactics of "divide and conquer."⁷

The contention that the strong international actors facing Iran have indeed evinced a different approach – which would justify pronouncing a change in the overall dynamic of the ongoing process – draws on changes that have occurred in these respects for the more concerned P5+1 actors (the US and its European allies), but first and foremost for the United States. Especially since the release of the IAEA report in early November 2011, there is broad acceptance that Iran is working on a military nuclear option. International actors fed up with Iran's delay tactics are finally willing to adopt much harsher measures, even at a cost to themselves, while at the same time working to secure alternative sources of oil to mitigate the adverse consequences they would suffer from an embargo. Finally, there seems to be a greater appreciation of the fact that the various players should at least not highlight their own differences in the negotiations setting. While the respective members of the P5+1 are still by no means a unified group, if they continue to negotiate in this framework, they must at least project a minimal degree of unity toward Iran around the table, in order to allow for a more effective negotiations strategy.

The most critical change involves a new appreciation of the essential role of pressure: biting sanctions and credible threats of military force. In other words, the United States and its European allies seem to have finally internalized the essential role that pressure plays in the framework of diplomatic efforts vis-à-vis Iran. For the United States, this has included

stepping up the rhetoric regarding possible military action, and backing it up with some significant changes on the ground.

The first indication of a change in approach is that in late 2011 the US and the EU finally took steps in the direction of the biting and crippling sanctions that had been threatened by the Obama administration since early 2010. Within weeks of the release of the severe IAEA report on Iran in early November 2011, the US adopted sanctions targeting Iran's energy sector and its petro-chemical industry. America identified Iran's entire financial sector as under the jurisdiction of the "primary money laundering concern" under the Patriot Act. Other states joined the US and some went further: very quickly both France and Britain decided on sanctions that targeted Iran's Central Bank.⁸

Sanctions became much harsher in early 2012 when on the eve of the New Year, the Obama administration – with considerable pressure from Congress – signed into law US sanctions that would target the Central Bank in Iran. The EU quickly followed with their own harsh measures: a full embargo on Iranian oil that went into immediate effect for new transactions; states were given until July 1 to phase out all ongoing transactions. Britain added an important sanction with regard to insurance for oil tankers. As a leader in maritime insurance services, the fact that Britain stopped providing insurance for Iranian tankers has had significant economic implications.

All of these sanctions are important first and foremost in terms of substance, but it is also noteworthy that the states that decided upon them did so very quickly and unilaterally, without even considering the option of going through the UN Security Council, knowing that Russia and China would attempt to obstruct them. On the one hand, this reflects the continued differences among the P5+1 states, but on the other hand, it indicates a shift in US and European thinking, underscoring their understanding of the need for swift and tough action. This stands in stark contrast to the six months Obama spent in 2010 to enlist Russian and Chinese support for the fourth UNSC resolution. Indeed, past experience proved that the Security Council route was a time consuming and cumbersome process that in the end resulted in significantly diluted sanctions, in line with the lowest

common denominator – set by Russia and China – among the permanent members of the Security Council.

These steps reflected a new appreciation of the essential role that pressure must play in order to set in motion a more effective bargaining dynamic with Iran. While many commentators had previously cautioned against applying too much pressure on Iran, lest it dangerously lash out and escalate the situation,⁹ the dire scenario did not transpire. Instead, Iran came to the negotiating table in April, crediting the new approach that if Tehran did not experience hardship and tremendous pressure, it had no rational interest to back down from its nuclear goals. The combined effect of the strategic gains that Iran expects to achieve with nuclear status, the amount of energy that it has already invested in the program, and the heavy price that it has paid to date, as well as the fact that Iran was so close to its goal, have all made backing down a very unattractive option for this determined proliferator – unless the cost becomes intolerably high. The international actors began to accept that their job was to generate a very high price, which entailed applying more pressure.

In addition to the economic sanctions, there were signs – albeit only in the United States – of greater appreciation of the need to present Iran with credible threats of military consequences. This was expressed in a discernible shift of tone in US official statements that emerged in late 2011.¹⁰

With the multitude of statements issued on a regular basis by US officials, any interpretation of the ongoing dynamic can find supporting evidence. Nevertheless, the overall trend tilted noticeably in the direction of increased US determination, which reached a climax in March 2012 with Obama's very precise statements on the issue at the annual AIPAC convention. Obama stated clearly that US policy is to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, not containment of a nuclear Iran. He added that this is a global concern and a US national security interest.

There were additional expressions of this determination. In late July, on the heels of the failure of the second attempt at lower level discussions of the technical aspects of the two sides' proposals (held between Helga Schmid and Ali Bagheri in Istanbul, July 24, 2012), *Haaretz* reported on a meeting held two weeks earlier between US National Security Advisor

Tom Donilon and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. While the US clarified at the time that it still saw room for diplomacy, Donilon said that the US had concrete contingency plans for when diplomacy is no longer viewed as a realistic option. In his detailed account of US plans, Donilon outlined to Netanyahu US military capabilities for dealing with Iran's nuclear facilities, including the underground facility at Fordow. In a parallel development, at an event in Washington DC in late July, United States Air Force Secretary Michael Donley announced that the largest "bunker buster" – the Massive Ordnance Penetrator (MOP) – was ready for use if needed. This huge bomb is considered capable of penetrating underground facilities of up to 60 meters, with an obvious implicit reference to the Fordow enrichment facility.¹¹

The US has also been steadily beefing up its military presence in the Gulf. In early January, in a preplanned move, the aircraft carrier *USS John C. Stennis* departed the Persian Gulf, passing through the Strait of Hormuz on its way to the West Pacific. Iran took the opportunity to issue a warning that the warship should not come back.¹² Nevertheless, several weeks later, the *USS Abraham Lincoln* – flanked by British and French warships – passed through the Strait into the Persian Gulf. US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta clarified that the US intends to maintain its military presence in the Gulf. Three months later, the *USS Enterprise* joined the *Abraham Lincoln*, with the US thereby deploying two aircraft carriers in the region. The commander of the fifth fleet, Amy Derrick-Frost, maintained that the deployment was routine and not directed against any specific threat, but also noted that it was only the fourth time in the past decade in which two aircraft carriers were deployed in the Persian Gulf region.¹³

Since that time, the US has continued to maintain two aircraft carriers in the region – the *USS Dwight D. Eisenhower* replaced the *USS Lincoln*, and in July it was reported that the *USS Stennis* would be redeployed to the Persian Gulf four months earlier than originally planned, and would later relieve the *Enterprise*. Significantly, the US Navy also began a process of upgrading its overall defensive and offensive capabilities in the Gulf, to counter Iranian threats to block passage through the Strait of Hormuz.¹⁴ In late August 2012, amid statements undermining Israel's military capability to destroy Iran's nuclear facilities, Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff

Martin Dempsey also hinted that one US concern regarding the support of a no-fly zone over Syria was lest it be asked to divert forces from their preparedness in the Gulf, in the context of efforts to deter Iran.¹⁵

The measures outlined above have clearly not been sufficient to bring about concrete results in negotiations with Iran, but their collective impact nevertheless constitutes a noticeable departure from previous approaches among the states that have taken the lead on Iran. Even the latest round of negotiations, while not successful, featured some new dynamics: Iran came into the talks noting that it will address the nuclear issue directly (although this disappeared in the second or third round); the US laid out its explicit expectations for success of the talks (“stop, shut, and ship” – a position thereafter adopted by the entire group); there was no visible split among the P5+1 at the talks; Catherine Ashton stood firm in refusing repeated Iranian entreaties to back down from the oil embargo; and the intervals between the meetings were relatively brief. International efforts have gotten better, although apparently are still not good enough.

Enter Israel

The period under review was also heavily influenced by a new and very vocal Israeli position on the Iran nuclear crisis, with strong hints regarding Israeli preparedness to take matters into its own hands and perhaps strike Iran’s nuclear facilities militarily, if left with no other choice for stopping Iran. In early 2012 it seemed to the United States that Israel might be planning an attack on Iran’s nuclear facilities for the spring,¹⁶ and later speculation was that Israel’s window of opportunity might be just prior to the US elections in November. Netanyahu’s speech to the UN General Assembly in late September was widely interpreted as a message that an Israeli attack would not take place before the US elections.

The new prominence of Israel’s position had its own effect on the overall dynamic. The changes that produced a more determined US and European negotiations strategy – up until the summer of 2012 – were no doubt also influenced by the new Israeli prominence, and in particular by a desire among the international actors to avoid a military confrontation in the wake of a possible Israeli attack on Iranian nuclear facilities. Adding fuel to the US fire over the course of 2012 was the combination of Israel’s

more vocal stance with the rapidly approaching presidential elections, which made the Obama administration more attentive to Israel's concerns. It is no coincidence that Obama's most determined statement rejecting containment as an option on Iran came in his address to AIPAC.

Until August, another striking feature of Israel's new high profile official stance was the intense debate within Israel over a possible decision to attack, which pitted Prime Minister Netanyahu and Minister of Defense Barak against a group of high level former security establishment officials who advised against unilateral Israeli action, especially in contravention of the US position. The debate was carried on obsessively for months, with arguments on both sides featured prominently in the media, though with most participants in the debate not having a clue as to what was actually in store regarding Israeli plans.¹⁷

In early September, the dynamic changed. The discourse shifted from exclusive focus on the question of "yes or no" regarding an Israeli attack, and became much more directed to the question of setting red lines and deadlines for Iran in the nuclear realm. The shift was a function of a change in Netanyahu's rhetoric, which began emphasizing that the United States must be clearer about its red lines for Iran, in order to deter it from progressing toward its goal. The emphasis in this debate not only shifted to the sphere of US-Israeli relations, but accentuated the differences in approach between the two parties. Netanyahu advocated that the US set a red line for military action; the US responded that the administration does not want to set red lines and limit its freedom of action. The vocal positions on both sides, which became inextricably tied to the United States election campaign, turned the debate into a political one, with political rather than strategic arguments regarding Iran assuming center stage.¹⁸

All of this caused a shift of emphasis in the overall dynamic of confronting Iran in the sense that possible indications of a more effective international approach – as set forth above – were no longer the central focus. While in the first half of 2012 a case could be made that Israel's position was helping to consolidate a more forceful US and European approach to Iran, by the second half this began to unravel, as attention turned increasingly to Israel as the problem. Indeed, even though no further negotiations were on the agenda in August and September, the US repeated the mantra that

“there is still time for diplomacy,” while Iran itself continued to move its program forward, as reflected in the IAEA report on Iran of late August.¹⁹

Regional Developments

Regional developments have also had an impact. While it is still too early to determine the winners and losers of the Arab turmoil that has swept through the Middle East since early 2011, it currently does not seem likely that Iran will end up on the side of the winners. After its initial satisfaction with the fall of US-aligned leaders in Tunisia and Egypt and the unrest in Bahrain and Yemen, Iran became concerned with the direction of the crisis in Syria, and the very real threat to its long-time strategic ally, the Assad regime, that could impact negatively on Iran’s regional interests. Iran was also concerned by events in Libya and the circumstances surrounding the fall of Qaddafi, especially in the face of NATO intervention.

What lessons is Iran likely to draw from events in Libya and Syria, as far as the nuclear issue is concerned? Iran’s decision to restart its military nuclear program in the 1980s was fueled specifically by the war it waged with Iraq, and by a more general desire to create a nonconventional counterweight to US power in the Gulf. Achieving a military nuclear capability would enable Iran to prevent another Iraqi invasion or an attempt to topple the Islamic regime. When Qaddafi relinquished his WMD capabilities in 2003, he did not expect that by forfeiting this deterrent capability he was actually determining his own destiny and that of his regime. His decision, rather, was most likely influenced by the effect of years of isolation and sanctions, and by the fear that his fate would be similar to that of Saddam Hussein. This would explain his decision to pay the price of surrendering WMD capabilities in order to forge more normal relations with the US and the West. But the fact that this enabled NATO to use force against Libya was a message that Iran heard loud and clear.

North Korea provides the competing model for determined proliferators – according to this model, defiance rather than accommodation is the preferred strategy. North Korea has long defied the international community and pushed its nuclear and missile programs forward, and the US is reluctant to employ military force against it. Syria too perhaps followed this line of thinking when it embarked on a North Korean assisted military

nuclear program. The Assad regime's threat over the summer of 2012 to use chemical weapons against external forces that attempt to intervene in the raging civil war underscores that even chemical weapons might be enough to deter the international community from coercive intervention. In sum, the North Korean model on the one hand, and the circumstances under which the Saddam Hussein and Qaddafi regimes collapsed (and certainly Iraq's defeat in the war) on the other, will play a critical role in Iran's decision making on the nuclear issue. These considerations will almost certainly make Iran only more determined to hold on to its nuclear aspirations.

Conclusion and a Post-US Election Postscript

On the question that we posed at the outset – whether there are indications of a new game with regard to Iran, or whether it is basically more of the same – our conclusion is that the answer is primarily a function of the focus of analysis. When assessing the international actors, there were definite indications of a new game that was emerging, primarily as far as the US and the Europeans were concerned. But when focused on Iran itself, what we saw was basically more of the same. Moreover, regional dynamics most likely further underscore for Iran the importance of clinging fast to its emerging nuclear capability as a means of warding off any coercive measures that the international community might contemplate. As a revisionist state determined to expand its hegemonic power, nuclear weapons are especially useful to Iran as an insurance policy against counterattack when it takes action in line with its regional ambitions.

Another facet of the new game that emerged over the course of 2012 is the new prominence of Israel. Although not involved in international efforts to stop Iran, Israel is a very nervous bystander. Its more vocal stance over the past year was a function of its growing fears that Iran is nearing its goal, as well as its frustration with the repeated failures of international efforts for almost a decade (up until 2012). Israel also fears that a policy of deterrence and containment of a nuclear Iran, while currently not US policy, might nevertheless be an acceptable fallback position for the superpower. Israel's attempts to convince the United States to take a firmer stance (red lines) over the summer were publicly deflected by the Obama

administration. This had the overall effect of making the Iranian nuclear challenge look like it was more about stopping Israel than Iran – a dynamic that was not helpful for US-Israeli relations, or for their common goal of stopping Iran's advance to nuclear weapons.

As such, if Israel had a role in bolstering international determination on Iran over the course of 2012, by August the new Israeli prominence was looking more like a liability as well as a burden on US-Israel relations. It became increasingly apparent that bilateral relations needed to be off the table in this regard, and attention refocused on Iran. This seems to have been the thrust of the message in Netanyahu's speech to the UN General Assembly in late September, when he put the red line for action against Iran's nuclear program at spring or summer of 2013, implicitly signaling to the prospective US President that Israel would not interfere for at least several months after the elections.

President Obama's reelection would seem to imply that continuity in the US approach to Iran can be expected in 2013. Prior to the election, there were assessments that the United States was poised to make another attempt at diplomacy with Iran – whether in the P5+1 format or bilaterally – by late November or at least in December, with some commentators asserting that this could be the last chance before a turn to harsher means. Following the elections, however, there was a dip in the projected sense of urgency. In mid November the quarterly IAEA report on Iran indicated that Iran was progressing with its program, including an increase in its stockpile of 20 percent enriched uranium from just over 90 kg in August, to about 135 kg in November.²⁰ Nevertheless, several days prior to the report's release Obama was quoted as saying that he hoped to restart a negotiation “in the coming months,”²¹ a statement that did not reflect the urgency warranted by the situation. Reports that Obama opposes additional sanctions on Iran's energy sector (approved by the Senate in late November) also do not bode well for a continued message of determination to Iran from the Obama administration.²²

At the end of the day, the hard work of trying to stop Iran through a bargaining process will be on the shoulders of the United States. Sustaining the new international determination in confronting Iran that emerged in 2012 will be crucial for following through in 2013. In light of Iran's continued

advances, Israel's pressure, and genuine US determination to resolve the nuclear crisis, 2013 augurs to be a decisive year. If lack of progress on the diplomatic front continues and Iran continues to push forward on the enrichment front as it is likely to do, President Obama will have to take a clear decision about the future course of the US administration on this crisis. In determining his course, the President will be influenced by a number of factors: the need to maintain – or rebuild – US credibility in the Middle East; his own firm presidential statements that a nuclear Iran is unacceptable and that containment is not US policy or an alternative for solving the crisis; and repeated assertions that the time for resolving this crisis is not unlimited.²³

A clearer message of the President's willingness to use force should the next round of negotiations fail would help project to Iran that its decade-long lack of seriousness will no longer be tolerated by the United States. A number of important voices in the US debate – if not the administration itself – have lately underscored their assessment that the President indeed means business.²⁴

Notes

- 1 For the report, see http://isis-online.org/uploads/isis-reports/documents/IAEA_Iran_8Nov2011.pdf.
- 2 The November 16, 2012 report can be found at <http://www.iaea.org/Publications/Documents/Board/2012/gov2012-55.pdf>.
- 3 This Iranian argument – repeated in almost every Iranian statement on the topic – is erroneous, and draws on a partial reading of Article IV of the NPT. What the continuation of the relevant sentence in Article IV clarifies is that the right to nuclear energy – including enrichment activities – is contingent on upholding Articles I and II of the treaty, namely not engaging in weapons-related activities. That is why Iran's case was reported to the UN Security Council, and according to international law, the six UNSC resolutions calling on Iran to cease uranium enrichment override any right noted in the NPT. See Amy Reed, "UN Resolution 1696 Moots Iranian Legal Claims," *Proliferation Analysis*, Carnegie Endowment, August 21, 2006; and a continuation of this debate in "Continued Analysis of 1696," Carnegie Endowment, August 24, 2006. For a recent comment, see David Albright and Andrea Stricker, "NAM Countries Hypocritical on Iran," *The Iran Primer*, USIP, September 7, 2012.

- 4 Quoted in Daniel Brumberg, “Despite Big Unresolved Issues, Progress in Iran Nuclear Negotiations,” USIP, April 19, 2012, <http://www.usip.org/publications/despite-big-unresolved-issues-progress-in-iran-nuclear-negotiations>.
- 5 See Laura Rozen, “Iran Nuclear Talks Wrap Up on Positive Note,” *The Back Channel*, May 24, 2012, <http://backchannel.al-monitor.com/index.php/2012/05/451/iran-nuclear-talks-wrap-up-on-positive-note/>.
- 6 See Kelsey Davenport, “Iran, P5+1 Move to Technical Talks,” *Arms Control Today*, July/August 2012, http://www.armscontrol.org/2012_07-08/Iran_P5_Plus_1_Move_to_Technical_Talks.
- 7 For a full analysis of the diplomatic dynamic from 2002 to 2011, see Emily B. Landau, *Decade of Diplomacy: Negotiations with Iran and North Korea and the Future of Nuclear Nonproliferation*, INSS Memorandum No. 115 (Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, 2012).
- 8 Landau, *Decade of Diplomacy*, p. 46.
- 9 For one formulation of this argument see Vali Nasr, “Sanctions May Backfire,” *Atlantic Times*, February 2012, http://www.the-atlantic-times.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=497%3Asanctions-may-backfire-&catid=62%3Afebruary-2012&Itemid=2.
- 10 Emily B. Landau, “A Toughened US Stance toward Iran,” *INSS Insight* No. 309, January 8, 2012.
- 11 Barak Ravid, “US Presented Netanyahu with Contingency Plan for Iran Strike,” *Haaretz*, July 29, 2012; on MOP, see Yaakov Katz, “After Delays, Massive US Bunker Buster Available,” *Jerusalem Post*, July 26, 2012.
- 12 C. J. Chivers, “Work as Usual for US Warship after Warning by Iran,” *New York Times*, January 4, 2012.
- 13 “US Navy Deploys 2nd Aircraft Carrier to Persian Gulf,” *Washington Times*, April 9, 2012. CentCom Commander General James Mattis reportedly made a request in early 2012 for a third aircraft carrier to be deployed in the region in order to deter Iran from further escalating tensions, but the request was denied. See Eli Lake, “As Obama Preaches Patience, Mattis Prepares for War with Iran,” *Daily Beast*, May 21, 2012.
- 14 Tony Perry, “Navy Says it will Add Ships to Persian Gulf amid Iran Threats,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 17, 2012; See also “US Accelerates Armed Forces Deployments Close to Iran,” *Global Security Newswire*, June 27, 2012, <http://www.nti.org/gsn/article/us-accelerates-armed-forces-deployments-near-iran/>.
- 15 “Dempsey: US Feels no Pressure from Israel to Back Strike,” *Ynet News*, August 20, 2012.

- 16 US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta reportedly stated early in the year that Israel was likely to strike in April, May, or June 2012. See David Ignatius, "Is Israel Preparing to Attack Iran?" *Washington Post*, February 2, 2012.
- 17 For an in-depth portrayal of the two camps that have emerged in Israel on the question of striking Iran's nuclear facilities, labeled the "don't-strike-now" and "better-strike-soon" camps, see David Horovitz, "The Most Fateful Decision of All," *Times of Israel*, August 28, 2012.
- 18 As the debate became political, the strategic issues also became confused, such as the difference between red lines and deadlines, and the role of red lines – an essential lever of pressure on Iran – in the overall dynamic of confronting its nuclear program. See Emily B. Landau, "Set Red Lines, not Deadlines, in Facing Iran," *Times of Israel*, September 14, 2012. For a different view on red lines, see Ephraim Asculai and Shimon Stein, "Red Lines are a Bad Idea for Dealing with Iran," *American Interest*, August 2, 2012.
- 19 This IAEA report on Iran was released August 30, 2012. See http://www.isis-online.org/uploads/isis-reports/documents/Iran_report_-_August_30_2012.pdf.
- 20 For the report, see <http://www.iaea.org/Publications/Documents/Board/2012/gov2012-55.pdf>.
- 21 "Obama Pledges Diplomatic Push on Iran," *Global Security Newswire*, November 15, 2012, <http://www.nti.org/gsn/article/obama-pledges-diplomatic-push-iran/>.
- 22 "Obama Opposes New Iran Sanctions," *Middle East Newswire* 14, no. 460, December 3, 2012.
- 23 At the Saban Forum in late November 2012, Secretary of State Clinton reaffirmed this message when she said that the "window for negotiation will not stay open forever." See "US Presses PA to Return to Talks after UN Bid," *Jerusalem Post*, December 1, 2012.
- 24 In this context see special interview by *Ynet* with former ambassador to Israel Martin Indyk, who maintained on the sidelines of the Saban Forum that if diplomacy does not produce significant results in resolving the Iranian nuclear crisis by next summer, the President could give the order to attack Iran militarily. The President would act not for Israel, but in support of his commitment to nonproliferation. Yitzhak Ben-Horin, "Will Attack Iran, and Wait until We Act for Peace. Obama and Us," *Ynet*, November 30, 2012, <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4313534,00.html>.

Toward a Nuclear Middle East?

Yoel Guzansky and Gallia Lindenstrauss

Many decision makers and analysts in Israel and around the world contend that Iran's attainment of a military nuclear capability will increase nuclear weapons proliferation in the Middle East and create a multi-polar nuclear system in the region.¹ Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Egypt are considered the main candidates to go nuclear in order to balance Iran's nuclear power. This article will test this argument primarily from the perspective of the motivations and capabilities that may spur these countries to develop a nuclear arms infrastructure in the long term (perhaps beginning with the development of a civilian nuclear program), or to attempt to obtain an off-the-shelf nuclear deterrent in the short term; other constraints and difficulties they would have to overcome will also be assessed. The analysis leads to the conclusion that Saudi Arabia is the regional power most likely to go nuclear. Yet even if "only" Iran and Saudi Arabia obtain nuclear capability, a new strategic situation will be created in the Middle East, with far reaching consequences for Israel.

The process of building an independent nuclear capability is prolonged and demanding, and countries pursuing this long term option will need to find a solution for the short and medium terms, once the Iranian nuclear program is completed. On the other hand, in addition to its exorbitant cost, attaining an off the shelf capability demands that certain conditions be met before a country will agree to sell the product, as well as be able to withstand the pressure not to do so. This process often entails forging stronger ties with countries that are considered as pariah states, which itself can incur political and defense costs. This solution to the problem of a nuclear Iran,

therefore, is far from ideal. Furthermore, if Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Egypt join the nuclear arms race, even if the process is ultimately not completed, other countries in the region will feel threatened, and this in turn will have a destabilizing effect on the Middle East.

Over the past decade, a number of Middle East countries have declared their interest in a civilian nuclear infrastructure, and this could subsequently constitute a basis for a military nuclear program. Iraq has expressed interest in civilian nuclear development under IAEA supervision. Jordan likewise wants to launch a nuclear program in order to meet its growing energy needs, despite the considerable economic and political difficulties involved, and thus far has refused to concede its right to enrich uranium on its territory. The Gulf states, led by the United Arab Emirates, have also in recent years begun to forge ties with outside actors aimed at developing a nuclear program on their territory, and have even started to set up the technical and scientific infrastructure necessary for this purpose.

Short to Medium Term

The Iranian nuclear program has not progressed at the rate at which Western intelligence organizations had previously believed.² Nonetheless, certainty that Iran is trying to achieve a breakthrough in its nuclear capability, whether through an Iranian declaration to this effect or an Iranian nuclear test, would enhance the sense of threat among Iran's neighbors. The threat, stemming from Iran's ambition to become the leading power in the region, would be perceived as particularly worrisome by Saudi Arabia, Iran's main ideological and geo-strategic rival in the region. Thus in face of such a development, Saudi Arabia would likely not remain indifferent. Saudi Arabia also possesses economic means that would enable it to respond relatively quickly to the looming threat.

Officials in Saudi Arabia, which in recent years has undertaken the largest conventional military rearmament program in its history, have declared more than once their opposition to nuclear weapons development. They assert they are concentrating on a civilian nuclear program aimed at meeting energy needs and reducing their dependence on oil, but Saudi Arabia has in fact also considered the nuclear arms route. To this end it has tightened its cooperation with a number of countries, headed by Pakistan,

with which Saudi Arabia has cooperated militarily for many years. Saudi Arabia also financed part of the Pakistani nuclear program.³ In a series of unprecedented statements on the nuclear question from Riyadh since 2011, Saudi Arabia has conveyed its willingness to consider the nuclear road if the international community is unsuccessful in halting the Iranian nuclear arms program,⁴ and this may indicate a watershed in Saudi Arabian nuclear policy. At the same time, given its lack of an independent knowledge infrastructure, Saudi Arabia would presumably prefer to purchase an off-the-shelf deterrent if it decides to pursue a nuclear option.

For Saudi Arabia, the American nuclear umbrella seemed preferable over the years to an independent effort to obtain a nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, the consequences of nuclear weapons in the hands of Iran for Saudi Arabia's security and the rising doubt in Riyadh regarding the willingness of the US to continue providing it with a defense guarantee are likely to tip the balance of Saudi considerations. If Riyadh feels that it may have to contend alone with a nuclear Iran, it may be the first to acquire nuclear capability. More than any other Middle East country, Saudi Arabia has an ideological and strategic motive for obtaining nuclear weapons, and also possesses the economic ability to do so. Former senior advisor to President Barack Obama on the Middle East Dennis Ross revealed that Saudi Arabian King Abdullah explicitly warned the US President that if Iran obtains nuclear weapons, Saudi Arabia would follow suit.⁵

It is possible that Saudi Arabia would allow Pakistan to station nuclear weapons on its territory. Riyadh would then be willing to claim that this measure did not constitute a violation of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), to which it is a signatory, particularly if the nuclear warheads themselves remained under Pakistani control. Commenting on military cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, Gary Samore, Special Assistant to President Obama and White House Coordinator for Arms Control and Weapons of Mass Destruction, Proliferation, and Terrorism, said, "What would be more likely is that Pakistan would [again] station troops on Saudi soil, and those could include nuclear-armed forces."⁶ Indeed, this scenario cannot be ruled out, even if its feasibility has been denied by Islamabad and Riyadh. It is possible that together with progress in Iran's nuclear program, Saudi Arabia would intensify its pressure on

Pakistan to provide it shortly thereafter, if not immediately, with nuclear guarantees. In any case, stationing Pakistani nuclear weapons on Saudi Arabian territory appears more practical than a direct transfer of nuclear warheads from Pakistan to Saudi Arabia.

Medium to Long Term

Despite having the world's largest proven oil reserves and being the world's largest oil exporter, Saudi Arabia has in recent years also begun to develop a civilian nuclear program. Together with the United Arab Emirates, which is now the most advanced Arab country in building a nuclear knowledge infrastructure,⁷ Saudi Arabia has expanded its efforts in this direction to reduce its dependence on oil and gas for internal consumption, while maintaining, and even increasing, its oil export capacity. This infrastructure will also widen the country's industrial base, and provide training and employment for many Saudi citizens. Accordingly, a series of ventures has been inaugurated and cooperation agreements have been signed with a number of countries, including South Korea, the US, France, Russia, and China. The process of site selection for the reactors has reportedly already begun, with construction of the first reactor scheduled for completion by 2020. Construction of 16 nuclear reactors for generating electricity and water desalinization – a project described as one of the largest in Saudi Arabia's history – will require over \$100 billion in investments over two decades.⁸

In the summer of 2011 it was reported that the US was negotiating an agreement with Riyadh, whereby Saudi Arabia would be allowed to engage in civilian nuclear development while the US would supply it with both know how, actual training, and nuclear materials. The contacts were based on a memorandum of understanding between Saudi Arabia and the US dating from 2008, which included a Saudi Arabian commitment to refrain from sensitive activity in the nuclear field. At the same time, Saudi Arabia has signaled on a number of occasions that it would not concede its right to uranium enrichment on its territory.⁹ These hints suggest that Saudi Arabia has other intentions beyond nuclear development for civilian needs. In addition, there is no guarantee that Saudi Arabia will agree to accept the same commitment as the United Arab Emirates in exchange

for international aid, including the signing of the Additional Protocol. Several members of the US Congress have raised doubts concerning Saudi Arabia's resistance to restrictions on plutonium separation and uranium enrichment, and have expressed concern about the regional implications of its opposition to these restrictions.¹⁰

In addition to Saudi Arabia, Turkey is also a rival of Iran for regional hegemony. The tension between Turkey and Iran has been aggravated by the civil war in Syria and Iran's support for the Bashar al-Assad regime.¹¹ From time to time, Iranian spokesmen have made explicit threats against Turkey, in part to deter Turkey from military intervention in Syria. This reinforces assessments by some analysts that Turkey would attempt to develop an independent nuclear capability as an answer to the Iranian challenge, particularly in view of Iran's progress toward attainment of a nuclear capability.¹²

The tension between Turkey and its NATO allies might spur Turkey to go nuclear. Tense relations between Turkey and the European allies are in part a function of the lack of sufficient progress in Turkey's European Union accession process. Turkey is embittered by the difficulties presented by some of its allies to station early warning systems and Patriot missile batteries in its territory in times of crisis, namely, the Gulf War of 1991 and the 2003 Iraq War. This trend has been somewhat reversed by the rather swiftly-processed NATO decision in December 2012 to deploy Patriot batteries on Turkey's soil in response to the Turkish request due to its fear stemming from Syria's chemical weapons. Ankara is also harshly critical of what it regards as the international community's inadequate response to events in Syria.¹³

Before the uprising that shook the Arab world began, the prevailing opinion in Turkey was that the threats it was facing were in decline. However, the events in Syria, the deterioration of relations with Iran, and the rise in violence in the struggle with the Kurds within Turkey – in particular, evidence that Iran and Syria are again aiding the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) – have made the Turkish public pessimistic about their country's future.¹⁴ At the same time, the percentage of the Turkish public believing that NATO is essential for Turkey's security rose from an estimated 30 percent in 2010 to an estimated 38 percent in 2012.¹⁵

In accordance with its growing threat perception, Turkey has made an effort to bolster its military capabilities. The emphasis in recent years has been on a comprehensive modernization of the armed forces and development of independent advanced capabilities in the arms industry. As part of this effort, Turkey is seeking to develop surface-to-surface missiles with a range of over 2,500 km.¹⁶ This development implies the need for potential options in the nuclear weapons sphere, because most of the countries developing missiles of this range seek them in part as a nuclear deterrent capability. At the same time, Turkey is not satisfied with its reliance only on NATO's missile defense systems, and is contemplating acquiring systems of its own.¹⁷

Furthermore, Turkey is developing a significant civilian nuclear program that could constitute a future basis for a nuclear weapons program. In the framework of "Vision 2023" marking the hundredth anniversary of the Turkish Republic, Turkey has declared its intention of constructing three nuclear reactors on its territory, to be built with the assistance of foreign companies. These reactors are part of a program to establish twenty reactors by 2030.¹⁸ In 2010, Turkey signed a deal with Rosatom, a Russian government company, for the construction of a four-unit, 1200-megawatt power station as a "turn-key project," at a cost of \$20 billion. The deal includes light water reactors scheduled to go into operation in 2018.¹⁹ Talks on construction of a second reactor are also making progress, and the possibility of a South Korean-United Arab Emirates joint bid for its construction is under consideration.²⁰ Turkey has no practical plans to develop fuel cycle capabilities within its borders, but Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan stated that Turkey was reserving the right to do so.²¹ Unlike in the past, Turkey now possesses the economic resources and political stability necessary to progress in a civilian nuclear project. Its large scale energy needs also provide ostensible justification for moving in this direction.

Egypt has no active nuclear program capable of becoming a nuclear weapons program in the short term, owing to a series of political and economic conditions. However, while former Presidents Anwar Sadat and Husni Mubarak decided against developing nuclear weapons, not all parties in Egypt agreed. In 1984, then-Egyptian Defense Minister Abu Ghazala

asked permission from President Mubarak to develop nuclear weapons, but Mubarak refused, and the Defense Minister was fired.²² In addition, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) discovered highly enriched uranium particles on one of its routine visits to Egypt, a discovery for which Egypt had no reasonable explanation.²³ Egypt has signed the NPT, and for years has been a vocal supporter of making the Middle East a nuclear-free zone – a call also repeated by President Mohamed Morsi. Egypt has been frustrated, however, that over the years this initiative has encountered significant obstacles,²⁴ and the upheaval in the Arab world has made this initiative less likely to succeed. Egypt is also dragging its feet about signing the NPT Additional Protocol, a step that would enable the IAEA to conduct more accurate tests on Egyptian territory.

The aspirations of Egypt's new leadership with regard to its regional role, as well as concern about Iran's increased power once it obtains nuclear weapons capability, make it more likely that Egypt will wish to acquire its own nuclear weapons capability, albeit through a long process of civilian development.²⁵ Despite its considerable pool of scientists and engineers, Egypt is currently many years away from the ability to create nuclear weapons by itself. On the other hand, the change in Egypt's leadership might be accompanied by a reversal in Egypt's strategic thinking in this area. Immediately after his election during a visit to China, Morsi declared that he was interested in a civilian nuclear program for his country in order to supply its growing energy needs. Morsi stressed that he was talking about a program to develop nuclear energy sources for peaceful purposes. "We are already studying the subject, and we intend to reopen the nuclear reactor plans that were abandoned and to reach a state of clean energy," he explained.²⁶ At the same time, Egypt's Ministry of Electricity and Energy announced a decision to adhere to a previous plan to complete construction of four nuclear power plants by 2025, with the first reactor to be hooked up to the electricity network in 2019. International corporations from France, the US, Russia, and South Korea have expressed interest in bidding on the project.²⁷

Even though Egypt is emphasizing its energy needs as the basis for its nuclear program, its regional weight and the fact that it traditionally regards itself as the leader of the Arab world are liable to make its leaders

embrace – albeit not immediately – the option of developing nuclear weapons. Egypt has the ability – both the technological infrastructure and the personnel – to push such a project forward, and its pursuit of the nuclear course depends mainly on a political decision and its willingness to allocate resources to it. In the Egyptian context, the nuclear question is also linked to relations with Israel. If the peace treaty between the two countries unravels, Egypt might gain an incentive to move toward nuclear weapons. It is notable that starting in 2005, senior Muslim Brotherhood officials called for development of “special national programs,” including a nuclear program.²⁸ Some of them stated, “We (the Egyptians) are ready to starve for this,” while others claimed that this was a more effective way to maintain Egypt’s security than through a nuclear free zone.²⁹ Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohammad Badie went further: “Zionists understand only force...It will be only through holy jihad and fighting by the forces of opposition. On the day when we adopt this policy, fly the flag of jihad, and go to the battlefield, Israel will be deterred and stop its arrogance.”³⁰ Such attitudes could encourage plans to develop a nuclear weapons program.

Obstacles to Nuclear Development

If Iran reveals its nuclear weapons capability, it is likely that Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Egypt will want to develop a similar capability, in part for reasons of prestige, and possibly also due to public pressure to respond with a rival program. At the same time, it is also possible that Iran, for various reasons, will choose to delay its nuclear weapons breakthrough, while preserving the quantities of low level enriched uranium that it has already accumulated. With its ability to adjust a nuclear warhead to the surface-to-surface missiles that it already possesses, Iran could remain a threshold state for a long time.³¹ In this case, the neighboring countries will be able to continue their denial of Iran’s threat to them, at least partially and publicly, and postpone the decision to embark on a nuclear project.

One factor in favor of postponement is the significant international opposition to nuclear weapons proliferation. The international community adheres to the NPT regime, even if it has been violated in certain cases. Therefore, the difficulties and political costs involved in developing nuclear weapons capabilities will likely continue to deter Saudi Arabia, Turkey,

and Egypt from choosing this option. If Iran crosses the nuclear threshold, the international community's ability to object to the nuclearization of other countries will drop significantly.³² It is likely, however, that just as North Korea's nuclear weapons capability did not cause the collapse of the NPT regime and spark nuclear proliferation in northeastern Asia, the regime would continue to exist even if Iran becomes nuclear, because most of the world's countries still wish to maintain it.

Furthermore, the assumption that a nuclear Iran presents the same significant degree of strategic threat to all these countries is questionable. Tension and disputes between Turkey and Iran constitute the background to the mutual threats voiced from time to time. Nevertheless, over the years both countries have been able to keep the border between them more or less quiet. In addition, to the extent that the international sanctions against Iran continue, Iran will remain dependent on economic relations with Turkey in order to evade some of the harmful consequences of the sanctions. Relations between Egypt and Iran became very tense after Egypt and Israel signed a peace treaty, and this tension continued throughout the Mubarak regime. After the Muslim Brotherhood gained power in Egypt, however, a certain potential for rapprochement between the two countries emerged. In any case, it is hard to imagine a situation in which Iran would choose to threaten Egypt with a nuclear attack.

Relations with the US are an additional constraint for Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Egypt. Turkey has been an official military ally of the US through its membership in NATO since 1952, and thereby benefits from the nuclear guarantee granted to all NATO members. While Turkey has occasionally questioned the extent of its allies' commitment to its security and has been dissatisfied with their degree of support,³³ it still attributes great importance to NATO membership. Similarly, strong defense relations exist between the US and Saudi Arabia, despite the lack of an official bilateral alliance. Given the difficulties encountered by the US in stopping Iran's nuclear program and the position taken by the US on the question of the regime change in Egypt, which appeared to be the abandonment of an historic ally, Saudi Arabia has become suspicious of whether it can rely on comprehensive American military support under all circumstances. Since the so-called "Arab Spring" began, senior Saudi officials have directed

unprecedented severe criticism at American policy toward the region, which the critics say is liable to lead Saudi Arabia to adopt an independent policy, even in opposition to US policy, and to consider an end to the “oil for security arrangement.”³⁴ Nevertheless, the US is still the only country capable of providing Saudi Arabia with an effective defense umbrella, and Riyadh understands this.

Egypt has also had significant ties with the US since 1979, and while the changes in Egypt since the mass protests led to the fall of Mubarak’s regime have presented new challenges to US-Egypt relations, it is still unlikely that Egypt will choose to oppose the American position on the nuclear question. This issue may be one of many in dispute between Egypt and the US, and it is almost certain that Egypt will push to the advancement of the initiative to declare the Middle East as a region free from weapons of mass destruction.

The question arises whether some of the largely unofficial statements by Middle East countries that a nuclear Iran cannot be accepted without an independent nuclear response were intended to exert pressure on the US to take action to stop Iran. If Iran openly declares that it possesses nuclear weapons capability, countries in the region, at least Turkey and Saudi Arabia, expect the US to make an explicit commitment to their security, or at least not to withdraw from previous commitments. If the United States demonstrates such a commitment and manages to do so while taking the specific sensitivities of each country into account (this is particularly true of the Arabian peninsula, which is especially sensitive to the stationing of non-Muslim forces), these countries will almost certainly settle for such a commitment. Beyond that, a comparative look at other regions in which countries had to deal with a nuclear-equipped regional rival shows that most of them eventually chose to rely on guarantees from a powerful country, without developing a nuclear weapons capability for themselves.³⁵ The US has succeeded in the past in at least partly soothing its Asian allies with respect to the threat posed by nuclear proliferation in their region.³⁶

Regarding the potential in the Middle East for a nuclear arms race, at issue is not only whether the parties intend to obtain nuclear weapons but also their ability to fulfill these intentions. Studies show that perhaps contrary to expectation, obtaining nuclear weapons capability has become a more

prolonged effort over the years.³⁷ Many obstacles will stand in the way of countries seeking to acquire an independent nuclear weapons capability. Egypt has the necessary knowledge infrastructure, but its economic problems reduce the likelihood that it will undertake such an expensive project. Saudi Arabia has a strategic motive for devising a nuclear answer to a nuclear Iran, and also possesses the economic resources needed to do so. At the same time, it suffers from a shortage of trained local personnel, and its ability to import manpower for such a project is questionable. Saudi Arabia might also be asked to what extent it would be willing to place its security solely in the hands of Pakistan. The US would presumably exert pressure on both Pakistan and Saudi Arabia in an effort to prevent tighter cooperation between them. As far as Turkey is concerned, it appears to possess the economic capability and human resources that could be trained for the task. On the other hand, the existing nuclear infrastructure in Turkey is negligible, and training the necessary personnel for a nuclear project would take a long time.

Assessment

A key argument guiding the international effort to prevent Iran from achieving nuclear weapons capability is concern about a nuclear arms race in the Middle East. It is reasonable to assume that of the regional candidates for going nuclear, Saudi Arabia is the most likely to join such a race, due to its special conditions: a perception of threat due to the belief that nuclear capability in the hands of Iran would have a negative influence on Saudi Arabia's security and stability, and its enormous economic capability that would enable it to formulate an answer to the threat even in the immediate-to-short term.

If a multi-polar nuclear system emerges in the Middle East – a region that has seen use of nonconventional weapons, and one that lacks adequate mechanisms for containing conflicts and halting uncontrolled escalation – it is doubtful whether a stable balance of deterrence could be devised. Such a system, in which both Iran and Saudi Arabia have nuclear weapons capability, would constitute an extremely difficult strategic environment for Israel.³⁸ Development in this direction would aggravate the challenges facing Israel in an already complex and problematic region: the Middle East

has many low level conflicts; the possibility exists that nonconventional capabilities and facilities could fall into sub-state elements acting as proxies on behalf of a country; the decision making process in countries and sub-state organizations involves uncompromising religious considerations and motives; some of the regional players lack advanced command and control systems; the main regional rivals are geographically adjacent to each other; some of them have undeveloped detection and suitable early warning systems; the region lacks effective security arrangements and free and reliable communications channels for managing crises. The risk of escalation resulting from all these factors is heightened by the possibility that a multi-polar nuclear system could emerge.

Furthermore, it is possible that countries with a small nuclear arsenal would be inclined to use it, because they fear that an external power will want to deprive them of this capability while it is new and vulnerable. The first years after obtaining nuclear capability are therefore liable to be extremely dangerous. There is great potential for crises in the region, and it cannot be ruled out that when such crises arise, they will be accompanied by threats of nuclear escalation and a rising tendency to consider use of nuclear weapons in the context of conventional conflicts. It is possible that Israel would be able to live with a nuclear Iran on the basis of a mutual deterrence, but the question arises whether Israel would retain adequate political, security, and economic freedom in a multi-polar nuclear Middle East.

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Domestic Upheavals and Changes in the Regional Strategic Balance

Mark A. Heller

Introduction

In seeking to explain the behavior of members of Congress on national and international issues, the legendary Speaker of the United States House of Representatives Thomas P. (“Tip”) O’Neill once famously remarked, “All politics is local.” What he meant, of course, was that the outcomes of political contests driven primarily by local concerns had important ramifications for the national agenda and the international system. The same can be said, *mutatis mutandis*, for the upheavals that have shaken the Arab world since the beginning of 2011. These upheavals are primarily domestic phenomena. Those involved in efforts to oust incumbent regimes have been driven largely by their accumulated resentment of material and moral deprivation due to the incompetence, corruption, and malfeasance of repressive regimes. Popular dissatisfaction was emboldened by the growing sense of empowerment stemming from modern communications technologies and the inspirational effect of the unexpectedly swift disintegration in Tunisia of the first brick in the authoritarian wall. Nevertheless, the outcomes of these upheavals also have important ramifications for strategic balances, since regional and international alignments of states may well change in the aftermath of regime change. And for that very reason, third parties likely to be positively or adversely affected by essentially domestic political developments in other states have a strong incentive to try to influence the outcomes of those developments.

As of late 2012, only four Arab governments had actually been overthrown, and the impact of those changes on regional balances remained fairly modest. However, because of the apparent vulnerability of regimes in many other parts of the region, and particularly because of the explosion of “identity politics” in recent years, the potential for far more dramatic change, though not yet realized, remains in place. Depending on the outcomes of ongoing and future challenges to regimes in other Arab states, especially Syria, and even to the integrity of some of those states, the Middle East state system might yet undergo a truly profound transformation.

External Involvement in Internal Changes

In the last great wave of domestic upheavals in the Arab world, in the 1950s and 1960s, radical Arab nationalist forces led by Gamal Abd al-Nasser waged a relentless struggle against conservative regimes – particularly pro-Western monarchies – whose main bulwark was Saudi Arabia. This struggle did not normally lead to direct military confrontation but instead focused on the character, policies, and alignments of regimes in regional states, and like the counterpart struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union, was largely waged by indirect means such as subversion, propaganda, money, espionage, and the use of proxy forces, along with occasional military intervention. Moreover, the competition had a significant ideological component, in the sense that arguments about the proper form and purpose of government played a dual role of both stakes and instrument of the competition. Indeed, the study that best captures the nature of this competition was entitled “The Arab Cold War” in a deliberate effort to echo at the regional level what was underway among the superpowers at the global level.¹ Of course, the notion that the Middle East then was a tight bipolar system was as much an oversimplification as was the characterization of the entire world as a tight Soviet-American rivalry. The boundaries of the region were ambiguous and neither camp was highly disciplined. Moreover, many states that Egypt and Saudi Arabia viewed primarily as arenas of competition saw themselves as full equals if not active competitors with the two leading Arab states. Still, those two states served as the effective poles of the regional strategic balance, and

the competition between them was comprehensive, multi-dimensional, and pervasive.²

In many important respects, the interplay between domestic developments and foreign involvement in the current wave of upheavals constitutes another round of regional cold war, though this time it extends to important non-Arab actors, namely, Turkey and especially Iran. In this round, however, the nature of the contest has become immensely more complicated because of strengthened sectarian and ethnic identities, i.e., sub-state and supra-state identities. In classical realist theory, the highest purpose of foreign policy was to maintain the state's independence and security by promoting a balance of power in whatever regional or global system impinged on it. Conceptualized this way, calculation of state (or "national") interest was a fairly mechanical operation, dictated by material realities of power – size, population, geography, topography, natural resources, military assets, and so on. The state itself was something of a black box; domestic politics, ideology, the nature of the regime, and other considerations were of secondary importance because the national interest was more or less objectively revealed and would ultimately determine a state's foreign policy orientation. In other words, definition of national interest could almost be reduced to the simplistic formula, "Where you stand depends on where you sit."

Realism was the hegemonic paradigm in the academic discipline of international relations of the twentieth century.³ However, its very parsimony – particularly through the reification of state and national interest – subjected it to constant criticism, amendment, and efforts to explain why states so often did not do what realist theory said they should do. For purposes of this analysis, perhaps the most glaring lacuna is the theory's inability to account for issues of primordial solidarity, that is, the tendency of regimes and publics to align or at least sympathize with other actors in the regional/international system with whom they feel the greatest affinity, rather than with those whose wellbeing best promotes their understanding of the requirements for regional/international balance. The current regional constellation is largely (though not exclusively) characterized by competition between a Shiite camp dominated by the Islamic Republic of Iran and a Sunni camp led by Saudi Arabia (though again, as in the 1950s

and 1960s, not without other pretenders to prominence, especially Turkey and, since the overthrow of Husni Mubarak, Egypt). In a competition framed in these terms, where governments and publics stand may still depend on where they sit, but where they sit often depends on who they are. And this dynamic is increasingly evident, not only in Syria, but also in Iraq, Lebanon, Bahrain, and other heterogeneous states, where the answer to the question of “who will rule?” seems to prefigure, if not predetermine, the answer to the question “in alignment with whom?”

It would be wrong to infer that this phenomenon is confined to the Middle East. In the domestic convulsions in the Balkans that led to the dismemberment of Yugoslavia, Muslims elsewhere generally tended to support Bosnians and Kosovars (notwithstanding the reservations of some authoritarian Arab rulers at what looked like a potentially dangerous precedent of foreign military intervention), but the sympathies of Orthodox Greeks and Orthodox Russians lay more with Orthodox Serbs. Nor is identity solely a factor in post-“Arab Spring” politics. It appeared to be an important factor in policy alignments during the Iraq-Iraq War, when almost all Sunni Arab states – and not just those in immediate jeopardy because of their proximity to Iran – supported Iraq; only Alawite-controlled Syria allied itself with Iran. It also seems to explain the support given by different Middle East states to the various parties in the hot and cold domestic war in Lebanon over the past four decades.

However, while sectarian and/or ethnic conflicts have afflicted the region for a long time, the salience of identity bipolarity has increased dramatically since the onset of the wave of upheavals in the Arab world. This has translated into the efforts of some states to influence the course of developments in other states in order promote outcomes expected to be congenial to their regional concerns or, alternatively, to forestall detrimental realignments, all based to a large degree on the identities of domestic belligerents.

Regime Change and Regional Balances

Identity politics were not immediately evident at the outset of the so-called “Arab Spring.” The lines of regional fracture were already in place, with an Iranian-led camp of “resistance” pitted against the so-called “moderate”

or “pragmatic” pro-Western camp, whose most prominent members were Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Tunisia, where the rule of Zine al-Abdin Bin Ali was the first to come under siege, is one of the most homogeneous societies in the region, and responses to the uprising against him therefore followed more familiar ideological/policy lines. Iran hailed any incipient threat to a member of the Saudi/Egyptian bloc and even claimed to be the Islamic inspiration behind the popular uprising. For their part, most other regimes were generally reticent about developments in Tunisia, though there was certainly some concern about the possibility of a demonstration effect if the opposition succeeded in ousting Bin Ali. In any event, the army’s decision to convince Bin Ali to leave meant that the uprising was over too quickly and involved too little bloodshed to enable or oblige outside parties to mount any serious effort to help shape events. Moreover, what followed was a relatively smooth transition to democratic elections that brought the seemingly “moderate” al-Nahda Islamists to power, and they, at least so far, have concentrated almost exclusively on domestic reconstruction. Although Salafists have become increasingly assertive and there are grounds for concern that democracy in Tunisia might ultimately produce an illiberal regime, Tunisia’s transformation has not had any perceptible impact on its regional and global orientation, and hence, on regional strategic alignments.⁴

Perhaps more surprisingly to many observers, the same can be said about the second Arab state to experience regime change: Egypt. As in Tunisia, the anti-regime demonstrations that erupted in Egypt were initially largely driven by modern, urban, middle class young people protesting against the stagnation and repression of government under Mubarak, though they went on longer and involved more bloodshed than in Tunisia. As in Tunisia, the uprising lacked any obvious religious, sectarian, or ethnic dimension, not because Egypt is equally homogenous – it has a very sizable Coptic Christian minority – but because the Copts, though constantly exposed to harassment and discrimination, did not feel systematically disenfranchised by the regime or threatened by the anti-regime movement until the Islamists, somewhat belatedly, jumped on the bandwagon. And likewise as in Tunisia, the ruler was ultimately ousted by a “soft coup” by the army that despite continuing instability, preserved

major components of the Mubarak system long enough for people to begin questioning whether regime change had actually taken place at all. Unlike Tunisia, however, Egypt, by virtue of its demographic weight, military strength, and historical and cultural centrality, had always been at the core of the Arab state system, and political transformation there fully engaged the attention of the entire region.

In particular, the camp of “resistance” rejoiced at Mubarak’s sudden vulnerability and ultimate overthrow. Bashar al-Assad in Syria exulted at the travails of his most prominent regional nemesis, which he interpreted as vindication of his own, quite different political path, and the Iranian leadership insisted that Mubarak was paying the price for Egypt’s 30-year rift with Iran and suppression of the dreams of Muslims there to embrace Iran’s model of Islamic revolution. However, Egypt is far too large and self-contained for outside actors to have any decisive influence on the course of domestic developments, and their rhetorical intervention appears not to have resonated much with either pro- or anti-regime forces. And when it ultimately transpired that Iranians were at least partially correct in their analysis, in the sense that Islamism is a much deeper current in Egyptian society than many others (especially in the West) had appreciated, the politics of Islamism in Egypt turned out not to work to Iranian advantage.

Encouraged by the overthrow of Mubarak and signs of growing Islamist strength in the Egyptian polity, Iranians seemed to believe that regional currents were flowing their way. Small changes, such as permission for an Iranian warship to transit the Suez Canal, were seen as portents of even greater change, including the possible renewal of Iranian-Egyptian relations severed in 1979 and even the forging of some kind of Iranian-Egyptian entente to fight the nefarious influences of the West and Israel.

However, it became clear that these hopes were at least premature and overblown, if not altogether groundless. After his election to the presidency, Muslim Brotherhood candidate Mohamed Morsi chose Saudi Arabia as the destination for his first official foreign visit, a clear sign of how he understood Egypt’s proper foreign priorities. Although Morsi did stop off in Tehran in early September 2012 to hand over the presidency of the Non-Aligned Movement, his visit lasted only a few hours, did not include a meeting with Iran’s Supreme Leader, and had virtually no bilateral

dimension (such as an invitation for a reciprocal visit to Egypt by Iranian leaders). In fact, Morsi's speech at the NAM meeting was highly critical of the Syrian regime and of those who support it, i.e., Iran (according to some reports, Morsi's reference to Syria was blocked by Iranian television). Even more to the point, Morsi deliberately stressed Sunni hagiography by invoking the names of the Prophet Muhammad's "close associates," Abu Bakr, Omar, Othman, and Ali; favorable mention of the first three is anathema to most Shiites.⁵

All in all, the potential for Iranian-Egyptian rapprochement that some had predicted has shown few signs of materializing. There are of course sound geopolitical explanations for this: Egypt's historical role as a Middle East power center and its self-ascribed importance are more consistent with the role of competitor of Iran for preeminence rather than partner (and junior partner, at that). But the significance of sectarian identity, as evidenced by Morsi's speech in Tehran, cannot easily be dismissed. In fact, this may well be an even more salient factor for Islamist Egypt than it was under an ostensibly secular government in Cairo. None of this means that Egypt cannot somehow reassert the Arab preeminence that it once enjoyed under Nasser or that it will not forge new kinds of links, stronger or weaker, with other Middle East (and extra-regional) actors, such as Turkey. But at least in terms of the admittedly simplified depiction of the Middle Eastern state system as a (loose) bipolar competition between the Iranian-led Shiite camp of "resistance" and the more amorphous Sunni Arab camp, Egypt's upheavals have had no real impact on regional strategic alignments.

That is also the case with respect to Libya, though the circumstances of the change there and the reasons for its consequences are different. The ouster of Muammar Qaddafi is the only instance of regime change in this round of Arab upheavals (i.e., since the invasion of Iraq) that can be clearly attributed to foreign intervention. Moreover, while the military aspect of that intervention was the province of Western powers (primarily France, Britain, and the United States), some of its financial and logistical elements came from Arab states, especially Qatar. More importantly, the political cover was provided by Arab and Muslim states, in the form of Arab League resolutions and support for a UN Security Council resolution to protect civilians. Apart from humanitarian considerations, there is still

some uncertainty about the motivation for this behavior on the part of Arab states. In some measure, it may be merely a function of the fact that over the years Qaddafi had managed through threats and insults to alienate almost all his counterparts in other Arab states. Whatever the case, there is no evidence that sectarian or ethnic factors played a role. Libya, though torn by tribal conflicts, is an overwhelmingly Sunni Arab society; there are very few non-Muslims in the country (apart from foreign workers) and very few Shiites. Nor was there much reason for others to think that Qaddafi's downfall would affect the geopolitical balance one way or another, since Libya was not clearly identified with any camp or even any other Arab state. If anything, Qaddafi in recent years had removed himself from Arab affairs and focused his attention on sub-Saharan Africa (though Libya did maintain an eclectic variety of economic ties with others, grounded in its ability to export large quantities of oil and its need to import almost everything else, including workers).

Thus, no other Arab or Muslim state vigorously sprang to Qaddafi's defense. With greater or lesser alacrity, all came to endorse the intervention and to support regime change, and thus the effect on regional strategic alignments was predictably modest. In the first election to replace the Transitional National Council that inherited power from Qaddafi, democratic reformers won an impressive victory (in contrast to the success of Islamists in other post-dictator states). In keeping with their priorities, they have focused on economic ties with the West and maintained a low regional profile. How persistent this pattern remains is largely a function of their ability to ward off the growing threat of radical Islamists. Should the latter eventually prevail, they may well make some kind of common cause with other Islamists in Sunni states, but regardless of the future course of domestic politics, there is little to suggest that Libyans will align themselves with the Iranian-led pole of regional politics.

In Yemen, prolonged and bloody protests also forced long-time President Ali Abdullah Saleh to give up office (though Saleh managed to escape with his life and was succeeded by his Vice President). However, in the confused aftermath of Saleh's departure, it is unclear how much of a regime transformation has actually taken place. Moreover, like Tunisia, Yemen is of decidedly secondary weight in regional affairs, and even if a

clearer political transformation were to take place, it would not decisively alter regional balances. Here, however, two caveats should be added. The first concerns the ethnic/sectarian element involved in Yemeni instability: the presence of a Houthi/Shiite population in the northwest of the country, which rebelled against central rule even before the outbreak of upheavals in the rest of the country and was the beneficiary, according to some, of Iranian support. The second is that central government had long been something of a legal fiction in many parts of the country, leaving considerable space for jihadi elements – al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula – to thrive. For both reasons, Saudi Arabia and other Sunni status quo forces in the regime were supportive of Saleh and will probably try to thwart future developments inimical to their interests in the peninsula, especially if they are seen to benefit Iran.

That was made evident from the one instance thus far of an upheaval with a clear sectarian element that was suppressed with the help of major foreign military intervention – Bahrain. Alone among the Arab principalities of the Gulf, Bahrain has a Shiite majority. When protests and demonstrations broke out in Bahrain in 2011, opposition spokespersons insisted that their demands focused on civil rights and greater political freedom and economic opportunity. Such demands were in any event unlikely to arouse the sympathies of ruling elites in other authoritarian regimes on the western side of the Gulf, but the fact that those Bahrainis who felt themselves at the core of the uprising and played the most prominent role were Shiites inevitably imparted a sectarian tone to the upheavals and, against the background of historical Iranian claims on Bahrain, further raised suspicions about Iranian subversion. Indeed, Iran was vocal in its moral support for the Bahraini opposition, though there is no evidence of any material involvement.

Apprehension about a “contagion” of democracy may well have played some part in the calculations of other Arab Gulf states, but it was undoubtedly the longstanding fear of Iranian hegemonic ambitions that drove them, and particularly Saudi Arabia (which has a large Shiite minority of its own), to throw their full weight behind the efforts of the Khalifas to suppress the revolt. That assistance took the form of direct military intervention by Saudi National Guard units, backed by token forces from the United Arab

Emirates and Kuwait. Arab intervention made it possible for the Khalifas to survive (just as Western intervention had made it possible for Libyan rebels to prevail) and guaranteed that the shift in strategic alignments in the Gulf, with repercussions throughout the rest of the region, which would quite probably have ensued from a political transformation in Bahrain, did not happen. The salience of sectarian identity and primordial attachments in all of this is manifested in the virtual certainty that Iranian and Saudi approaches to domestic upheaval would have been totally reversed had the Bahraini shoe been on the other foot, that is, if an authoritarian Shiite-dominated regime had been challenged by an uprising of a Sunni majority.

This is not just hypothetical conjecture. It describes precisely the situation in Syria.

Regional Strategic Realignment: The Transformation that Hasn't Happened (Yet)

Notwithstanding widespread expectations of transformations in regional alignments, almost two years of upheavals in the Arab world, including the forced replacement of four rulers, have left the Middle East state system virtually unchanged. However, the outpouring of mass unrest has not yet run its course and the potential for regime change to upset strategic balances has not yet been exhausted. The greatest potential for change is in Syria, where competing identities and power agendas collide most violently. In early 2011, shortly after Bin Ali and Mubarak were ousted from office, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad professed to be unconcerned that he would face the same sort of challenge because, he claimed, he was “very closely linked to the beliefs of the people.”⁶ Shortly thereafter, an incident involving the abuse of a boy caught painting anti-regime graffiti on a wall in the southern town of Daraa provided the spark for an ever-expanding wave of protests and demonstrations against the repression, corruption, and incompetence of Assad’s regime. Assad, it seemed, was no more loved by his people than were Bin Ali and Mubarak.

In contrast to Tunisia and Egypt, however, the army did not turn against the ruler, largely because of the particular socio-demographic character of the country. The uprising against Assad did not begin as an overtly sectarian or ethnic movement. Nevertheless, it quickly (and perhaps

inevitably) took on such dimensions. Baath Party ideology was always one of strictly secular and non-sectarian Arab nationalism, and the regime traditionally enjoyed some support in the Sunni community, as well as among the urban commercial elite. In practice, however, the Alawite base of the security organs had privileged the minorities, and especially the Alawites, in all dimensions of Syria's political economy, which in turn fostered a sense of relative deprivation among the Sunni Muslim majority and particular resentment by the Islamists among them of what they saw as rule by heretics. It is therefore not surprising that the opposition could be portrayed as a Sunni movement, and that other minorities, aware of both what happened to Christians in Iraq and the concerns of the Christians in Egypt, were apprehensive about their own fate in the event of an Islamist revival no longer constrained by an authoritarian government. These fears were not entirely unfounded, especially as the Salafi element in the opposition became more visible, but Assad also played on them in order to reduce the risk that the protest would spread to every other demographic component except Alawite. As a result, and notwithstanding protestations to the contrary by both the government and opposition, the conflict in Syria took on an increasingly sectarian character even as it became more violent. More to the point, the centrality of Syria in effect turned the internal conflict into the fulcrum of regional strategic alignments, because its course and outcome were liable to spill over into neighboring states with divided societies and to affect the overall balance between the competing Persian-Arab/Shiite-Sunni poles of power in the region.

The alliance between Iran and the Assad regime in Syria had its historical origins in their common antipathy to Saddam Hussein's Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War. Given the seeming contradictions between Persian Islamism and Arab secularism, that alliance could (and can) be seen as "unnatural" and explained only by the instrumentalism of conventional geopolitics. The same interpretive lens could also be applied to the further strengthening of the alliance following the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, when Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps emissaries helped build a militant Lebanese Shiite movement – Hizbollah – just as Syria itself was also confronting Israel in Lebanon and fighting to maintain its own hegemony in that country. However, it is impossible to dismiss the importance of

sectarian identity as a legitimizer of political power, and in the face of continuing Sunni doubts about the Islamic authenticity of Alawites, even Bashar's father, Hafez, needed to secure acceptable certification in order to forestall widespread protests that he did not meet the constitutional requirement that Syria's president be a Muslim. That certification came in 1973 from a recognized Shiite cleric, the Lebanese activist Imam Musa al-Sadr (long before the Islamic Revolution in Iran), and sealed the affinity between Shiites and Alawites in their own eyes as well as in the eyes of Sunnis.⁷

Since the outbreak of the uprising in Syria, Assad has defied endless predictions of his imminent demise. His ability to persist is due in no small part to Iran's financial, operational, technical, logistical, and intelligence support, support which, according to many reports, has even extended to the active combat involvement of Revolutionary Guard Corps troops (the al-Quds Brigade). The superficial explanation for Iran's commitment is that Assad's regime is a strategic asset. That is certainly true, but it begs the question why it is an asset, that is, why it is so widely (and almost certainly correctly) assumed that Assad's survival will keep Syria in the Iranian camp but that his fall – unless brought about by a coup of Alawite officers who succeed in holding on to power themselves – would result in Syria's reorientation away from Iran. And the most persuasive, indeed, obvious answer to that question is that the sectarian affinity between Iran and the holders of power in Syria would be ruptured.

Moreover, the repercussions of Assad's downfall and a Syrian-Iranian rift would (in fact, already do) extend far beyond the bilateral domain, precisely for the same reason. Iran's second major strategic ally/asset, Hizbollah, has also committed itself to supporting the Assad regime – the Syrian opposition even claims to have captured some of its fighters in Syria – and contesting attitudes toward events in Syria raise concerns about the re-ignition of sectarian tensions in Lebanon. On the other hand, the only other member of the "resistance" bloc, Hamas, was forced to distance itself from Assad because it could no longer justify its alignment with a "Shiite regime" killing Sunnis, notwithstanding its own links to Iran. By the same token, Sunni states have increasingly lined up behind the Syrian opposition, with Qatar and Saudi Arabia taking the lead in suspending

Syria's membership in the Arab League, advocating United Nations sanctions against Assad, and supplying funds and weapons (through Turkey) to Syrian rebel forces.⁸ They have recently received at least moral reinforcement from Egyptian President Morsi. Jordan, though careful not to commit itself openly, undoubtedly has little sympathy for Assad's (and Iran's) difficulties; after all, it was King Abdullah, long before the outbreak of the upheavals in the Arab world, who warned against the emergence of a "Shiite crescent" in the Levant. Even Turkey, which under the AKP had ostensibly sought to promote good relationships with all its neighbors in the region, including Syria and Iran (but excepting Israel), has become increasingly critical of what some Turks have labeled "the minority Nusayris [sic] regime" in Damascus and of its sectarian motivations, "which are the traits of the regime" in Iran.⁹ That stance has not immunized the AKP against accusations that it is itself guilty of "shouldering the Sunni cause to project power in its neighborhood."¹⁰

Of course, the external alignments of governments can always be explained by some abstract notion of "national interest." But those who still doubt the salience of social or regime identity in determining what constitutes national interest, despite the record of regional responses to the Syrian civil war, might find even more convincing evidence in the convoluted history of Iraq's regional orientation since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein by Western forces, the protracted civil strife that followed, and the eventual installation of a Shiite-dominated government in Baghdad. Nothing in the objective circumstances that ostensibly determine national interest in the realist perspective have changed; geography, topography, size of population, and natural resources all remain the same. What did change was the authoritarian shell that, coupled with the ideational hegemony of Arabism, had kept the Shiite majority under Sunni rule.

As a result, Iraq's regional orientation was turned completely on its head. Iran, traditionally the source of Iraqi fear and object of Iraqi loathing, become the magnetic lodestar, the strongest foreign influence in the country – at least in those parts of the country under central (Shiite) government control – and a major economic partner, to the point where an Iraqi Shiite government was helping to undermine economic sanctions against Iran spearheaded by the same United States of America that had

ended the repression of Shiites in Iraq and helped put them in power. And this realignment had a ripple effect. The Syrian regime, a focus of longstanding Iraqi contempt (especially, more recently, among Shiites who were the targets of the “foreign fighters” whose passage to Iraq during the American occupation had been facilitated by Assad), suddenly became the beneficiary of Iraqi diplomatic solicitude (in the Arab League and the United Nations), and gained tolerance for the use of Iraqi airspace for the transfer of Iranian men and materiel to Assad. Moreover, Iraqi Shiite volunteers became actively involved in the fighting in Syria on the side of the regime, while militant Iraqi Sunnis joined the battle against Assad.¹¹ For their part, Arab Gulf states, which had backed Iraqi President Saddam Hussein in his war against Iran because they saw him as a bulwark against the expansion of Iranian regional hegemony, now adopted a distinctly cool and suspicious attitude toward Iraqi President Nuri al-Maliki because they saw him variously as a stooge or active facilitator of Iranian hegemony.

Non-State Actors

Iraqi volunteers are not the only non-state actor potentially able to influence regional alignments, or even the most important. That distinction probably belongs to the Kurds, for some of whom the “Arab Spring” has presented new opportunities due to Turkish-Syrian and Turkish-Iranian tensions as well as the weakening of central governments in Syria (and in Iraq in the aftermath of American-initiated regime change). The Kurdish aspiration for collective self-expression has historically been repressed by Arab, Turks, and Persians of both the Shiite and Sunni persuasion, and though mostly Sunnis themselves, the Kurds show no instinctive affinity with any other population in the region. Consequently, they maneuver more easily between contending forces, choosing at any particular moment to base their alignments on instrumental considerations. Fluidities in regional alignments prompted by events in Syria have prompted the Assad regime and Iran to allow greater latitude to the PKK to prosecute its on-again, off-again campaign against Turkey, thereby shattering the consensus between those three states known as the “Pax Adana.”¹² But if the Kurds of PKK remain fixated on their confrontation with Turkey and therefore make temporary common cause with Syria and Iran, those in the Kurdish

Regional Government in northern Iraq are driven to maintain cooperative relations with Turkey, in order to guarantee the economic underpinnings of their autonomy from the central government in Baghdad. In short, the transitory interests of various Kurdish elements do not always converge, making it difficult for them to function as a unified strategic actor.

Nor are the Kurds not the only identity group plagued by competing/conflicting interests and approaches. For all their atavistic solidarity against other identity groups, both Sunnis and Shiites are divided on ethnic grounds as well as ideologically between Islamists and non-Islamists. This categorization also underestimates differences between “moderate” and Salafi Islamists and between liberal and radical nationalist non-Islamists, differences that sometimes blur in the ongoing struggle for political supremacy.

Conclusion

The fundamental variable in the prospective evolution of the strategic balance in the Middle East is the outcome of what has become a civil war in Syria. If Assad (or even the regime without Assad) manages to prevail, then near term changes in the balance are likely to be marginal, at most. But if the regime is ousted, then just as regime change shifted the domestic sectarian balance in Iraq and reoriented that country in ways that altered strategic alignments in the region, so such change in Syria would shift that country’s domestic sectarian balance and its orientation in ways that would have a no less momentous impact on the regional strategic alignments, especially with respect to the underlying competition between the Persian/Shiite and Arab/Sunni poles of regional Middle Eastern politics.

Of course, even if that dichotomy captures the essence of the strategic balance in the region, it hardly exhausts all scenarios, primarily because the question of identity is too complex to permit a simple one dimensional analysis. One complication is the existence of numerous sub-state and supra-state actors that do not fall clearly into either camp. Another is the fact that the major power centers are themselves not necessarily immutable fixtures. Regime change could still come to Iran, perhaps in ways that would leave Iran with its Shiite identity but prompt it to reorient itself and deprive the Iranian-led regional alignment of its ideological fervor. It is

even conceivable that Iran, with significant non-Persian and/or non-Shiite minorities, could be subjected to the separatist challenges to state viability experienced by Syria and Iraq. The same is true of Saudi Arabia, which has a large, disaffected Shiite population in its Eastern (oil-producing) Province. Were such scenarios of state weakening or state breaking to materialize, the implications for regional alignments would be profound. Weaker major power centers would result in an even less coherent regional system, with more opportunities for second tier actors to balance between them without the powerful impulse of identity to constrain their room for maneuver. Needless to say, that sort of situation would be more congenial both for extra-regional powers anxious to prevent the emergence of regional hegemonies and for a regional actor like Israel, which in terms of primordial attractions is an “odd man out.”

Even if major power centers do not weaken or dissolve, there is at least a theoretical possibility that political upheavals in the region will, over time, lead to the strengthening of liberal democratic trends that could gradually reduce the salience of sectarian/ethnic identity, or at least encourage it to be expressed in less belligerent and exclusivist ways. From Israel’s perspective, the ascendance of liberal democracy (in Iran as well) would be an even more promising (if less likely) development than the emergence of more but weaker power centers and the fragmentation of the state system in the region.

Still, the possibility of a far bleaker evolution cannot be excluded. Writing about Iran’s attitude in 2001 to the Taliban, Saddam Hussein, and al-Qaeda, Tony Blair argued that “the hostility was centered on the Shia/Sunni divide, not the methods or world view of either. The battle was about who would lead a reactionary movement within Islam, not who could construct a progressive movement.”¹³ These of course are not the only forces in the political field. As the “Arab Spring” continues to unfold, there are still liberal elements aspiring to forge a modernist vision of Islam in cooperation with the outside world as well as incumbent authoritarian regimes fighting a rear guard action in the name of no real vision at all. But the wave of upheavals in the Arab world has placed the last group on the defensive and produced only a potential opening for modernists that they have thus far shown little ability to exploit. Instead, it is the Islamists

who are prospering most in both the Sunni and Shiite worlds. It is not yet clear who among all the contenders for social and political power will prevail or even, if the Islamists continue their progress, which variety of Islamism will prevail. But it is not at all inconceivable that the essential dynamic of the Arab uprisings may ultimately result in Blair's depiction of the situation in 2001 applying across the entire Middle East. If it transpires that the eventual consequence of the "Arab Spring" is a clash between a Shiite crescent and Sunni/Salafi crescent, a merely cold war in the region could become a very fond memory.

Notes

- 1 Malcolm H. Kerr, *The Arab Cold War: Gamal 'Abd al-Nasir and his Rivals, 1958-1970*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971).
- 2 One of its major manifestations was the effort to sway public opinion in third states by establishing or subsidizing media outlets. The investment was so great that in Lebanon, perhaps the most thoroughly penetrated polity in the region, one cynic was prompted to contradict claims that Lebanon had a free press by insisting that everything said on Lebanese radio or written in Lebanese newspapers was paid for by someone.
- 3 The seminal realist text was Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948).
- 4 Sarah J. Feuer, "Islam and Democracy in Practice: Tunisia's Ennahdha Nine Months In," *Middle East Brief* No. 66 (Crown Center for Middle East Studies, Brandeis University, September 2012). For a skeptical view of the distinction between "moderate" and "radical" Islamists based on a leaked video of a meeting between Nahda leader Rachid Ghannouchi and Tunisian Salafists, see Daniel Pipes, "Islamism's Unity," *National Review Online* (October 30, 2012), <http://www.nationalreview.com/articles/331975/islamism-s-unity-daniel-pipes#>.
- 5 Dina Ezzat, "Mursi beyond Teheran," *al-Ahram Weekly Online*, Issue No. 1113 (September 6-12, 2012).
- 6 "Interview with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad," *Wall Street Journal, Europe Edition*, January 31, 2011, www.online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703833204576114712441122894.html.
- 7 Martin Kramer, "Syria's Alawis and Shi'ism: How Syria's Ruling Sect Found Islamic Legitimacy," <http://www.geocities.com/martinkramerorg/Alawis.htm>.
- 8 Uzi Rabi and Chelsi Mueller, "Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the Syrian Uprising," *Tel Aviv Notes* 6, no. 17 (September 12, 2012).

- 9 "Turkey, Iran Set to Clash Further before Reaching a New Understanding on Ties," *Todays Zaman*, August 12, 2012, www.todayzaman.com/newsDetail_openPrintPage.action?newsId=289265.
- 10 Halil Karaveli, "Turkey is no Partner for Peace," *Foreign Affairs Snapshot*, September 11, 2011, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/138104/halil-karaveli/turkey-is-no-partner-for-peace>.
- 11 Yasir Ghazi and Time Arango, "Iraqi Sects Join Battle in Syria on Both Sides," *New York Times*, October 27, 2012.
- 12 Soner Çağaptay and Tyler Evans, "The End of Pax Adana," *Hurriyet Daily News*, August 25, 2012, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/the-end-of-pax-adana-.aspx?pageID=238&nID=28556&NewsCatID=396>.
- 13 Tony Blair, *A Journey* (London: Arrow Books, 2011), p. 369.

The “Arab Spring” and External Military Intervention

Shlomo Brom

By early 2010, the entanglement of the US and its Western allies in Afghanistan and Iraq, most notably the costs incurred and the questionable achievements of the military involvement, suggested that the era of Western military intervention in Arab and Muslim countries had come to an end. Western countries sought to disengage from their existing commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan as soon as possible, and public opinion strongly opposed any new intervention. However, the upheaval in the Arab world that began in late 2010 (the so-called “Arab Spring”) affected this trend, and restored the question of external Western military involvement in the region to the international agenda.

In the context of the “Arab Spring,” the issue has generally arisen when an uprising against an existing dictatorial regime encounters military force by the regime to suppress the protest. In the next stage, the conflict escalates into a prolonged civil war between the various elements of the population. This development is characteristic mainly of societies divided along religious, ethnic, or tribal lines, or some combination thereof. In these cases, the military units still loyal to the regime join the sectors supporting the regime to fight against the opposition to the regime. Such a civil war is by nature especially ugly, as the rules of international law governing armed combat are not observed and the civilian population becomes a principal target of the warring parties. There is also a risk that the conflict will spill over into neighboring countries and jeopardize the interests of external players. In these cases, external military intervention, either by regional

parties or extra-regional actors, becomes necessary in order to halt the civil war and the attendant horrors. In cases where the conflict is decided quickly, whether the regime is successful in suppressing the uprising by force or whether the rebellion succeeds and the regime falls fairly quickly (Tunisia and Egypt), the question does not arise.

Since the “Arab Spring” began, there have been two completely different cases of direct external military intervention in the Middle East: in Libya, on behalf of the rebels, and in Bahrain, on behalf of the regime. At this stage, it appears that the goals of the respective interventions were achieved. Since then, pressure has risen for similar intervention to end the civil war in Syria, and has taken the initial form of indirect external military involvement through aid to both sides. Another theater in which demands for military intervention may surface is Yemen, where stability has thus far proved elusive since Ali Abdullah Saleh was ousted as President and where the crisis may further deteriorate.

Two types of considerations can cause external parties to contemplate military intervention. The first involves humanitarian considerations, with the drive to prevent atrocities and harm to innocent civilians. These considerations wield much influence among public opinion. The second type consists of strategic considerations by the parties contemplating intervention. Both sets of considerations, however, are always weighed against the cost of action for the intervening parties and the likelihood of realization of the goals of the intervention.

Humanitarian Considerations

Along with the establishment of the United Nations following the acts of genocide of World War II, the field of international law dealing with norms that sought to limit the harm to civilian populations in wartime evolved and expanded. Interest in this area grew further after the end of the Cold War, and the increased number of intra-state conflicts brought the clash between two norms – sovereignty versus humanitarian intervention – to the fore of the global agenda. In this framework, “Responsibility to Protect” (R2P) was formulated.

R2P is a UN initiative premised on a set of principles that hold that sovereignty is not merely a right but also a responsibility. The initiative,

which was accepted as a norm of behavior, focuses on preventing four types of crimes: genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and ethnic cleansing. It includes three basic principles:

- a. A country has a responsibility to protect its population from mass atrocities.
- b. The international community has a responsibility to assist a country in fulfilling this principal responsibility.
- c. If a country fails to protect its citizens from mass atrocities, and peaceful means of forcing it to do so are unsuccessful, the international community has a responsibility to intervene forcefully. Means of doing this include economic sanctions, with military force as a last resort. The method by which the international community decides on military intervention is usually through a decision by the UN Security Council, based on Article 7 of the UN Charter, which authorizes military force for the purpose of preventing aggression and acts against peace.

These principles were included in a summary document of a global summit convened by the UN in 2005 to discuss the prevention of mass atrocities. The summit was the culmination of work by an international committee on intervention and national sovereignty established by Canada in 2000, following a call by then-UN Secretary General Kofi Annan to formulate an agreement on the right to intervene for humanitarian purposes. This committee formulated the “right to protect” terminology, and these principles appeared already in the concluding report published in December 2001.¹ In 2006 the United Nations Security Council ratified the main articles of the committee’s summary report, and as such made the R2P norm binding on member states.

With the approval of these principles, the key question is under what circumstances the use of force is justified on behalf of the right to protect. The report of the 2001 international committee proposed the following six essential criteria for justifying military intervention:²

- a. Just cause
- b. Right intention
- c. Last resort
- d. Legitimate authority
- e. Proportional means

f. Reasonable prospect (of success for achieving the goal)

Within international forums there is still no agreement about these criteria, and even if there were, there is much room for interpretation. In any case, in recent decades and until the beginning of the “Arab Spring,” the only case of military intervention in the Middle East that could be characterized as humanitarian (even if it was joined by other considerations) was the decision to enforce no-fly zones in Iraq following the 1991 Gulf War. These zones were established by the US, the UK, and France, which asserted that they were authorized under UN Security Council Resolution 688, even though the resolution did not specifically mention this type of activity.

The Regional Strategic System

In many cases countries decide to intervene militarily in internal conflicts in other countries when it seems to them that this will serve their strategic interests. Like other regions around the world, the Middle East has seen many examples of this. For example, throughout its history Lebanon has been a battlefield for foreign countries and sub-state actors who used the country’s ethnic structure and conflicts between the various communities to promote their own strategic interests vis-à-vis their strategic rivals.

When the events of the “Arab Spring” began in late 2010, the main strategic conflict in the Middle East was waged between two axes. Led by Iran, “the resistance axis” included states and sub-state actors – among them Syria, Hizbollah, and Hamas – actively opposed to the West and Israel. Countering this bloc was the “axis of moderate or pragmatic states” in the Arab world, led by Egypt and Saudi Arabia and including most of the Arab states. This axis was supported by the US and the West, and it had shared interests and a tacit understanding with Israel, even if Israel’s political situation vis-à-vis the Arab states did not permit open Israeli membership in the axis.

The prevailing opinion in the Arab world was that the resistance axis was in ascent and its opponents were in decline. The weakening of America’s status in the Middle East as a result of its entanglement in Iraq and Afghanistan; its military withdrawal from these countries; and the perceived achievements of the resistance movements (e.g. Hizbollah and

Hamas) against Israel and other elements of the moderate axis, reflected in Israel's unilateral withdrawals from southern Lebanon and the Gaza Strip, the Hamas takeover in Gaza, and Hizbollah's achievements in the Second Lebanon War, contributed to this opinion. All these events strengthened the status and influence of Iran and its allies in the Arab world and boosted their popularity among Arabs, even in the moderate Sunni countries.

The insurrections against Arab regimes erupted for reasons that have nothing to do with competition between the two axes. Within a short time, however, the various parties in the regional struggle attempted to prevent a weakening of their positions by the ensuing regime changes, and if possible to benefit from these changes. As a result, the "Arab Spring," which initially seemed unconnected to the regional competition, aggravated it and gave this contest a new dimension.

In the first stage, with the fall of the regimes in Tunisia and Egypt – both members of the moderate axis tied to the West – the resistance actors believed that these developments were to their benefit, spelling a weakened moderate axis and a stronger resistance axis. They particularly rejoiced at the fall of Egyptian President Mubarak, whom they deemed a bitter enemy, and the subsequent strengthening of the Islamic political movements after the fall of these regimes also appeared to serve their interests. In tandem, the moderate axis states sought to prevent their own weakening by strengthening likeminded elements in countries where the regimes had fallen or were about to fall. The Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia and Qatar, played a key role in providing aid, mainly financial, to the political elements close to them, which paradoxically were in many cases the same Islamic political movements whose rise had been so welcomed by Iran. This intervention took its most extreme expression in the military intervention by Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies in Bahrain on behalf of the regime, which helped suppress the insurrection by the Shiite majority.

As a result of the increased hostility between the two camps with the evens of the "Arab Spring," the Arab world increasingly perceived the conflict between the axes as a religious conflict between Sunnis and Shiites – to the dismay of Iran, which consistently sought to gloss over this aspect of its rivalry with other forces in the Middle East. The developments in Bahrain, for example, played a key role in strengthening this Arab

perspective. The Arab Gulf countries, headed by Saudi Arabia, regarded the protests in Bahrain as a deliberate attempt by Iran to bring down the Sunni regime and replace it with a regime of the Shiite majority that would be subject to Iran's influence.

Another development regarding potential external intervention in countries embroiled in an internal crisis as a result of the "Arab Spring" was the escalating competition between Turkey and Iran. Before the "Arab Spring," Turkey embraced a "zero problems with neighbors" policy and took measures to improve its relations with resistance states Syria and Iran – notwithstanding Turkey's relations with the West, its membership in NATO, and its identity as a Sunni country. The "Arab Spring" forced Turkey to choose its allegiance, leading it to side with the camp that while essentially supporting the popular Arab rising against the dictatorial regimes, sought to deny Iran any achievements derived from the uprising. This rivalry between these two non-Arab regional powers for influence in the Arab world had existed previously, but it now rose to the surface.

One country playing a role disproportionate to its size is Qatar. In contrast to the past, when it tried to juggle between the two axes, it also positioned itself clearly in the camp opposing Iran. It demonstrated its willingness to actively intervene, including militarily, on the side of elements that it supports in the internal struggles within Arab countries. Its wealth, as well as ownership of the influential al-Jazeera television station, gives it the means for such intervention.

All these developments have created a mosaic of strategic considerations on the part of the various actors linked to potential military intervention in internal crises related to the upheavals of the "Arab Spring."

The Strategic System outside the Region

The key extra-regional players in potential military intervention in Arab countries are the permanent members of the UN Security Council, mainly because of their ability to grant or withhold legitimacy from external involvement in conflicts, resulting from their veto power in the Security Council. In addition, the US and NATO share a key role as actors willing and able to play an active role in military interventions. However, the events of the "Arab Spring" have questioned the leading status of the US

in interventions of this type. The American public is still recovering from the trauma of the interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, and therefore the US is not eager to assume the main role in military intervention in the Middle East. Within the administration itself, this lack of enthusiasm is fed by doubts concerning the prospective results of military intervention on behalf of the rebels, when the nature of the main players within the opposition forces is not sufficiently clear. These doubts were reinforced following the assassination of the US ambassador to Libya during his visit in Benghazi in September 2012 by a local militia. The US is mindful that its successful support of the mujahidin in the war against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s set the stage for the evolution of the local extremist Islamic elements into jihadist groups such as al-Qaeda and its affiliates. These groups have since made the US – and the West in general – the main targets of their attacks.

The solution devised by the US administration to resolve the tension between these reservations and the pressures to embark on military involvement, motivated mainly by humanitarian considerations, is the development of the concept reflected in the international military intervention in Libya, namely, "leading from behind." According to this concept, the US will not stand at the forefront of military intervention, and will refrain wherever possible from using its forces directly in the fighting. It will, however, assist in leading international military intervention and supplying an aid package composed of logistical means, electronic warfare, and air refueling capacity. In special cases, when the US possesses aerial warfare capabilities that its ally lacks, such as a capability to suppress the aerial defenses of the country in which the military intervention is underway, the US will also use direct attack means early in the air battle in order to pave the way for its European and Arab allies undertaking the principal attack effort. This direct attack involvement by the US will be of limited scope and duration.

An important element of the US and general Western concept is strong opposition to "boots on the ground" as part of these interventions, in order to prevent entanglements such as those in Iraq and Afghanistan. This prompts the question whether it is possible to win campaigns of this sort solely with airpower, without the use of ground troops. Those supporting

this concept point to Afghanistan, where the Taliban regime was defeated by local forces with the help of US and allied airpower, and the example of Iraq, where the campaign was ostensibly decided by airpower, with the ground forces providing only the finishing touch. Those who challenge this concept counter that toppling a regime with airpower with the help of local forces is only the first – and not decisive stage – in the campaign. In the second stage, it frequently becomes clear that in order to prevent chaos and maintain the initial achievements, “boots on the ground” are necessary, exactly as was proven by the cases of Afghanistan and Iraq.

It is premature to decide whether the idea of using airpower alone with the US “leading from behind” will be the main format for international intervention resulting from the “Arab Spring.” Additional support for this approach can be found from the experience accumulated in the Arab-Israeli theater in recent years, where there were several cases in which it was necessary to use international military and other security forces to manage problems between Israel and its neighbors. In all of these cases, the US led from behind, even if it did not use the term. Following Israel’s unilateral withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, for example, the US led an international effort that resulted in an agreement to place an international inspection element, EUBAM, at the Rafiah crossing between the Gaza Strip and Sinai. The actual inspection was performed by the European Union. A second example is the case of the US Security Coordinator (USSCO) with the Palestinian Authority. In this case, the command is American; the military personnel doing the actual work with the Palestinian security apparatus are British and Canadian. A third example is the new international force positioned in southern Lebanon, UNFIL 2, following the Second Lebanon War. The US led the initiative, but European forces do most of the actual work.

Humanitarian considerations and the desire to prevent mass atrocities play a key role in pressure from the international community to decide on international military intervention in countries like Libya and Syria, but strategic considerations are also involved. One such consideration is an assessment of whether the regime is expected to fall in any event. In that case it is assumed that military intervention on the side of the rebels will ensure good relations with the new regime for the countries involved,

especially the powerful ones, and either retain it or bring it into their sphere of influence. In cases in which a country is in the sphere of influence of an enemy country, or the country's regime is hostile to the West, the possibility of changing the strategic balance by overthrowing the hostile regime may be an important factor in the decision whether to intervene. During the US presidential election campaign, the Republicans attacked President Obama for refraining from military intervention in Syria. The reason was not that the basic philosophy of the Republican Party gives greater weight to humanitarian considerations in US foreign policy; on the contrary, historically the Democrats were the party that supported military intervention for humanitarian reasons. The Republicans were seeking to bring down a regime that they considered hostile, and to weaken the axis led by Iran.

The same reasons apply to countries seeking to prevent international military intervention, i.e., the desire to prevent the overthrow of friendly regimes, or to avoid bolstering the status of powerful rival countries through regime changes. Russia and China consistently strive to prevent international military intervention in order to obstruct any strengthening of US status and a corresponding deterioration in their own position. Another consideration, shared by many Third World countries, is opposition in principle to foreign involvement in internal conflicts, because these countries are mostly non-democratic and are concerned about precedents that could lead to pressure toward international military involvement within their own territory.

The principal weapon employed by countries in their attempts to thwart initiatives for international intervention is depriving such intervention of international legitimacy. In the approach accepted by international law, only resolutions by the UN Security Council, or in special cases in the UN General Assembly according to the principle "Uniting for Peace," can confer legitimacy on international military intervention. Russia and China are permanent members of the UN Security Council, and therefore have the ability to prevent such Security Council resolutions by exercising their veto power.

In such cases, the countries supporting international intervention can bypass the Security Council by acting in a framework called a "Coalition

of the Willing.” One of the first examples of this bypass was the stationing of the Multinational Force and Observers (MFO) in Sinai as a part of the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty. The peace treaty itself stipulated that a UN force would be stationed in Sinai, but the Security Council refused to pass such a resolution, and a Coalition of the Willing therefore provided the force. This was a simple and relatively easy case, because the force was founded in a situation in which it had been agreed to end the conflict and its stationing was acceptable to both sides. In situations arising as part of the “Arab Spring,” the situation is more complex, because an ongoing conflict is involved and the application of force is against the will of the regime in power. In such situations, therefore, the absence of international legitimacy constitutes a more difficult problem, and a decision to act in the framework of a Coalition of the Willing is therefore more difficult to attain.

Bahrain

The military intervention in Bahrain differs from other cases in the context of the “Arab Spring.” First, it was an intervention on the side of the regime, and second, only countries within the Persian Gulf sub-region took part in it. As in the other Arab countries, the uprising in Bahrain began as a popular non-violent protest against the autocratic monarchy. However, given that in Bahrain a Sunni royal house rules over a country with a Shiite majority, the uprising initially appeared to be a rebellion of the Shiite majority against a minority Sunni regime in the Persian Gulf – an area already fraught with tension between Shiite Iran, a regional power with expansionist ambitions, and the Sunni Persian Gulf countries defending themselves against these ambitions. Justifiably or not, Iran has been accused of inciting the Shiite majority to rebel and giving material assistance to the rebellion. Saudi Arabia, which stands at the forefront of the conflict with Iran, is very concerned that the unrest will also infect the Shiite minority in its eastern provinces. On March 15, 2012 Saudi Arabia sent military forces to Bahrain, joined by token forces from other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, to help the regime suppress the uprising by force.³ This scenario is unique to the Gulf region, and it is doubtful whether similar developments in other regions of the Arab world will follow. In the Persian Gulf itself, this Saudi Arabian intervention

followed Saudi military intervention against the Houthi rebels in Yemen even before the “Arab Spring,” and therefore reflects a consistent policy from Riyadh.

Libya

The uprising in Libya began in February 2011, in the wake of the successful uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. By early March, the regime had already lost control of various areas, especially in the Cyrenaica region in eastern Libya. Desertion of entire Libyan military units helped the rebels. The forces of Muammar Qaddafi repulsed the rebel attack in western Libya, however, and began a successful counterattack along the Mediterranean coast in the direction of Benghazi, the largest city in eastern Libya and the rebel center. The behavior of the regime’s forces toward the civilian population in rebel cities and threats voiced by Qaddafi and his associates strengthened concern that a conquest of Benghazi by the regime’s forces would lead to a massacre of the city’s population. The US, followed by Australia and Canada, imposed sanctions against Libya in what proved to be a futile attempt to exert pressure on the regime. A Security Council resolution to authorize the International Court of Justice to investigate the regime’s deeds also had no effect. On March 17, 2011, the Security Council passed Resolution 1973 ordering the establishment of no-fly zones and the adoption of all means necessary to defend civilians.

The resolution was enforced by NATO by a Coalition of the Willing that included several NATO countries, mainly France and the UK, along with warplanes from Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. In the initial stage, the US also participated by launching Tomahawk missiles to destroy the Libyan air defense system, but later confined its role to providing aid to its European allies, who carried out the actual attack. Germany was prominent among the NATO countries that chose not to participate. The aerial attacks enabled the rebel army to overcome Qaddafi’s forces, gaining control of Tripoli, the capital city, on August 16, 2011. This essentially decided the revolt, although fighting continued until October, when the rebels gained full control of Libya.

Russia and China were dissatisfied with the developments in Libya, and opposed intervention there for many of the reasons that generally inform

their opposition to intervention initiatives. They were the main parties who suffered from the fall of the regime, which deprived them of the ability to follow up on promising economic deals with Libya. They felt cheated by the West because they consented to Security Council Resolution 1973, which had provided a mandate for limited action designed to protect civilians. NATO interpreted this resolution broadly and began a major aerial offensive aimed at overthrowing the regime.

Those in the West who opposed military intervention expressed concern that the West was aiding rebels whose identity and goals were unknown, and there was particular concern about Islamic and jihadist elements among the rebels. There was also concern about a chaotic situation following the regime's fall, given the tribal character of Libyan society. These fears largely proved exaggerated. Even though the transition to a democratic regime is not complete and many problems remain, particularly the failure to disarm the militias (leading to the assassination of the US ambassador to Libya), the situation in Libya is relatively stable, the oil industry has resumed full activity, and free elections have been held, which were not won by the Islamic parties. These developments are important, because Western concern about intervention elsewhere is due in part to anxiety that external military intervention could cause extreme instability and unanticipated negative results. Many of these fears proved unfounded in Libya.

Syria

As of late 2012, the issue of military intervention continued to figure on the international agenda, this time regarding Syria. Local protests against the Syrian regime and demands for reform began on March 15, 2011, and in the course of 2012 turned into a full scale civil war. This civil war, which has featured mass atrocities by the regime as well as by some opposition elements, threatens to grow even uglier due to the ethnic composition of Syrian society, which has converted the struggle against the regime into a struggle between different communities. While an effort was made early in the uprising to portray the insurrection as a civilian uprising encompassing all the communal groups, the insurrection has since become a violent conflict between armed Sunni groups and the regime. The regime's use

of Alawite militias, "Shabbiha," to suppress protests has to a large extent contributed to the ethnic character of the civil war. The Sunni opposition is fighting against minorities who support the regime, especially the Alawites and Christians. The result is a sharp increase in civilian victims of atrocities among both sides, and a large increase in the number of refugees fleeing to Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon.

There are several reasons why the conflict may well continue for a while, with the regime not being overthrown soon, if at all. The ethnic nature of the conflict helps the regime because it compels the minorities to support it, even if some minorities object to the regime's corruption and dictatorial nature. They fear the consequences of a ruling Sunni majority, and realize that if the regime falls, they will fall with it. The loyalty of the regime's armed forces has strengthened for the same reason. The security forces and the military, the basis of the regime's power, are run mostly by the minorities, who recognize that they would fall together with the regime and face massive acts of revenge. While desertion by Sunni soldiers at various levels has affected the Syrian army's operational capacity, there are no signs that it has had a significant effect on those engaged in repressing of the uprising.

Another factor delaying a decision of the civil war is external intervention. There has been no direct military involvement, but external involvement in the form of aid to the two sides has increased over the past year. The escalation in the struggle between the resistance axis and its rivals in the Arab world has highlighted Syria's position as a key country in this contest. Opponents of the resistance axis, headed by the Gulf states and especially Saudi Arabia and Qatar, regard the uprising as a golden opportunity to weaken the Iranian-led axis, and are therefore supporting the rebels with money, weapons, training, and command posts. Turkey too has played an important role in this assistance, although it has preferred to portray its support for the insurgents as opposition in principle to an oppressive regime, rather than opposition to Iran. In any case, it has offered shelter to armed insurgents and their commanders, and has facilitated a flow of aid to them, easily undertaken given the long and porous border between the two countries. The rebels, who are aware of the importance of

their territorial connection with the Turkish rear, have lent priority to the conquest of areas along the border.

The third element in favor of the insurgents is the jihadi-Salafi movements in the neighboring countries, particularly Iraq. These movements have sent personnel and weapons to fight against the “Alawite heretics,” and to influence the nature of the state that would emerge after the fall of the regime. A fourth element is represented by Western countries, headed by the US. These countries are still ambivalent about supporting the armed opposition, which is largely perceived as an ill-defined entity; potentially problematic elements might inadvertently be bolstered, as occurred in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, aid on a limited scale has begun, principally in the form of the supply of auxiliary equipment, communications equipment, and other such supplies.

On the other side, the two main partners on the resistance axis, Iran and Hizbollah, who well realize the negative consequences for them should the Assad regime fall, are trying to help the regime to the best of their ability. Various reports on actual participation in the fighting by Iran (from the al-Quds force) and Hizbollah are still unconfirmed. Verification is difficult, because both sides are disseminating much disinformation. There is no doubt, however, that they have assisted the regime with equipment for suppressing uprisings, intelligence tools aimed at improving control in the internal theater (including on social networks), advice, and training. One of the regime’s weak points is its deteriorating economic situation, which restricts its available resources. Iran is also aiding the regime in this aspect by enabling it to evade the economic sanctions imposed on Syria, as well as most likely providing it with direct financial aid.

The external aid given to both sides has created a stalemate, in which the insurgent forces are capable of taking control of towns and regions, especially those further from the center, and occasionally dealing painful blows to the regime even in the heartland areas. One dramatic example of this capability was the attack in which a large proportion of the regime’s security leadership was eliminated. On the other hand, the army loyal to Assad is capable of operating wherever it decides and of defeating the insurgents in a direct battle. The blanket is too small, however; the army cannot be everywhere at once. The rebels have repeatedly exploited this

fact in places where they were defeated, once the army units leave the scene for other battlegrounds. The regime is careful at all times to maintain control of the main axis, i.e., Damascus, Homs, and Aleppo, the roads connecting them, and the coastal regions. This situation, along with the killing of civilians, could continue for some time. The prolonging of the situation also generates possibilities of instability spreading to neighboring countries; there are already signs of this in Lebanon and Jordan.

The situation in Syria typifies a situation requiring intervention under the Responsibility to Protect norm, and is the main factor putting pressure on the Western countries to intervene militarily. Various degrees of involvement are under discussion. One is the establishment of a safe zone in Syrian territory near the Turkish border where refugees can find a safe haven. Another level involves no-fly zones to prevent the regime from using airpower against civilians. A third possibility is the use of airpower to provide the insurgents with offensive aid against Assad's forces. The possibility of sending ground forces into Syria is almost never mentioned.

It appears that in contrast to the intervention in Libya, no decision has been made yet in favor of direct military intervention in the fighting in Syria, for the following reasons:

- a. There is no chance of obtaining international legitimacy for such action, i.e., a Security Council resolution, due to opposition by Russia and China. These countries feel that the West deceived them concerning the international intervention in Libya, and they are determined to prevent a similar occurrence in Syria. Russia and China's special interest in Syria, their sole foothold in the Arab world, only reinforces this determination.
- b. The Syrian opposition is divided and diffused, and contains jihadist elements. The international efforts and pressure to unite the opposition have been unsuccessful so far. This fact, as well as the ethnic character of Syrian society, strengthens concerns among the Western countries that overthrowing the regime would lead to chaos and a war of all against all. Such a situation would force the West to send ground forces to Syria in order to separate the combatants and prevent atrocities. This would be liable cause for a prolonged entanglement in Syria, as happened in Iraq and Afghanistan.

- c. Turkey, a key country in any form of external military intervention in Syria, objects at this stage to such intervention. Turkey also fears entanglement, and does not wish to aggravate its conflict with Iran.
- d. There is concern that any military operation would be more complicated and involve losses, due to the Syrian air defense capability, which is more advanced than Libya's, although the rebels have scored some tangible achievements in eroding the Syrian air defense system.
- e. Finally, there is concern that the conflict could spread outside Syria on a larger scale.

As a result of the inability to pass a suitable Security Council resolution, it seems that military intervention is possible only if a Coalition of Willing NATO countries makes a decision to intervene. The US would be a key player in such a decision, because without participation by the US, other countries lack the ability to conduct a sustained air campaign in a country with a developed air defense system. This is a difficult scenario but cannot be ruled out, because the expected development of a civil war, accompanied by more civilian massacres and refugees, will gradually increase international pressure for military intervention. Turkey, a key player, might also change its attitude out of concern that a prolonged crisis could result in the creation of a Kurdish mini-state in northeastern Syria and provide the PKK, the Kurdish insurgent organization fighting in Turkey, with another base for operations against Turkey. Another factor that could lead the international community to intervene in Syria is anxiety that Syria's large arsenal of chemical weapons could fall into the irresponsible hands of jihadist groups or Hizbollah.

Strategic considerations, i.e., the possibility of overthrowing a hostile regime and weakening the axis led by Iran, will likely form some part of the considerations of the US and other countries. It does not appear, however, that these considerations will prove decisive where direct military intervention by the West is concerned. NATO countries will be the main factor in any such intervention, but several Arab countries, especially from the Persian Gulf, are also likely to take part.

Conclusion

Developments regarding the question of external military intervention since the “Arab Spring” began indicate that Western public opinion still opposes further military intervention in the Middle East, particularly the involvement of ground forces. Nevertheless, difficult humanitarian crises following insurgencies in Arab countries are generating pressure likely to cause intervention in certain circumstances. The probability of intervention increases when the humanitarian crisis is accompanied by strategic consideration that support intervention, and when the level of risk is perceived as reasonable. This was the case in Libya, but is still not the case in Syria.

International legitimacy is an important element, but circumstances could arise in which the intervening partners would accept partial legitimacy in the framework of a Coalition of the Willing. NATO and the European countries are playing an increasing role in initiating and carrying out intervention, yet their limited military capabilities mean that participation by the US, even if only partial, is virtually essential. For its part, the US prefers to remain in the rear and engage in leading from behind, without any frontal involvement.

It is highly possible that the upheavals in the Arab world will continue to create scenarios in which external military intervention is a necessary element for preventing chaos or cruel oppression that would harm the civilian population on a large scale.

Notes

- 1 “2005 World Summit Outcome,” http://globalr2p.org/media/pdf/WSOD_2005.pdf.
- 2 “The Responsibility to Protect: Report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty,” December 2001, http://globalr2p.org/media/pdf/ICISS_R2P.pdf.
- 3 Yoel Guzansky, “Saudi Activism in a Changing Middle East,” *Strategic Assessment* 14, no. 3 (2011): 57-69.

Part II

Israel and the Middle East

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Israel and the Political Dead End: The Need for New Paradigms

Anat Kurz and Udi Dekel

The prevalent Israeli approach to the renewal of negotiations with the Palestinians, reflected in both official statements and in the public discourse, is that under current conditions in both the Israeli and Palestinian arenas, any attempt at a breakthrough toward a permanent settlement would be futile. After years of failure to advance a settlement, while the divides between the sides have only deepened and the mutual lack of trust has only grown, the political process has hit an obstacle in the form of rigid preconditions and firm disagreement regarding the basic agenda for discussions. The political freeze postpones the moment when Israel and the Palestinians, with their respective leaderships and publics, will have to take decisions with immediate social and electoral significance and long term security consequences. In tandem, however, the threats in Israel's immediate and more distant surroundings alike have intensified, and impede it from fashioning for itself a more comfortable strategic environment.

On a no less urgent level, the reality in the conflict arena distances Israel from realizing its vision of a Jewish and democratic state; hence the interest, if not the imperative, for an Israeli initiative that even in the absence of a dialogue toward a settlement will demonstrate commitment to the two-state solution, that is, the separation from most of the West Bank and its Palestinian population. Moves designed to improve management of the conflict in coordination with the Palestinian Authority, or alternatively, an initiative formulated and implemented unilaterally by Israel for redeployment in the West Bank could serve this purpose.

A Political Initiative: Not at this Time

Both Israel and the Palestinian Authority have a plethora of reasons and excuses to avoid returning to the negotiating table. The gaps in positions on the core issues – refugees, Jerusalem, mutual recognition, borders that will enable the implementation of the two-state solution and meet Israel's security needs, and Palestinian agreement to the end of claims – are fundamental. Added to these issues in recent years has been the question of the future of the Gaza Strip. Due to the basic lack of trust between Israel and the PA, neither party sees in the other a reliable partner for dialogue or a party capable of taking the difficult decisions that will be required to advance any permanent agreement. The lack of confidence in the ability of an Israeli government to force an evacuation of settlements, even if such a decision is taken, underlay the demand by PA President Mahmoud Abbas for a complete freeze on Israeli construction in the West Bank and in East Jerusalem. For its part, the Israeli government does not trust the PA to rein in the radical opposition, headed by Hamas, that rejects a permanent agreement, and similarly questions the PA's ability to prevent military and terror activities against Israel. It is likewise difficult to convince the leadership and public in Israel of the sincerity of the PA's declared intention to promote a permanent settlement, given both the PA's refusal to recognize Israel officially as the state of the Jewish people, and its absence of any response, let alone a positive one, to the settlement outline proposed by former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert.¹ The campaign conducted by the PA in the international arena, with the goal of delegitimizing the State of Israel and promoting Palestinian independence within the 1967 borders without negotiations with Israel achieved an historic victory in November 2012, when the United Nations General Assembly recognized Palestine as a non-member observer state. This Palestinian achievement eroded what remained of Israeli trust in the commitment by the PA and President Mahmoud Abbas to the political process.

The lack of both internal and external pressure to advance a settlement enabled the prolonged political standoff. The US administration, under President Barack Obama, has not labored to coerce the parties to renew the dialogue and rescue the political process. The transfer of power in Egypt to the Muslim Brotherhood following the June 2012 elections quashed

the possibility that Egypt would pressure the PA into retreating from the rigid preconditions it presented to Israel. And while public opinion among both Israelis and Palestinians appears to favor a two-state solution, many believe that an agreement is not achievable, and hence the lack of interest in renewing the political process, reflected in a lack of pressure on the leaderships to break the dead end.²

Situational factors with inherent potential risk further weaken Israel's already limited readiness to work toward thawing the political freeze. The balance of power on the Palestinian scene raises doubts as to the ability of implementing understandings that are reached in negotiations; lessons learned in the wake of the Israeli disengagement from the Gaza Strip in 2005 limit the attractiveness of a unilateral redeployment in the West Bank; developments in the Middle East, including Iran's progress toward a nuclear bomb and the shockwaves in the region caused by the so-called "Arab Spring" discourage any move toward renewal of the dialogue or toward unilateral measures.

The Split in the Palestinian Arena

The political-institutional-geographical split among the Palestinians discourages adoption of a more moderate policy toward the PA, as the assessment is that Hamas would not allow the implementation of a compromise, should it ever be reached. A unification of the rival Palestinian factions likewise arouses concern, lest PA policy veer toward a more radical direction and reflect the strategic principles that underlie the Hamas platform, foremost among them rejection of the idea of a permanent agreement.

Following the intra-Palestinian split during the second intifada, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict evolved to include three arenas: Fatah-Hamas; Israel-PA (led by Fatah); and Israel-Hamas. The struggle against Israel, which has always been an instrument of inter-organizational contest for power in the fundamentally divided Palestinian sphere, has since the day Hamas was founded become the ultimate vehicle for garnering popular support and winning the national leadership. In light of Hamas' rise to power and its takeover of the Gaza Strip, claims that the PA has the ability to achieve and implement an agreement have become far less credible.

Even in periods when there was an active political process, there were strong concerns in Israel lest Hamas take over the Palestinian state that would be established, and not see itself as obligated by the agreements between Israel and the PLO and PA.

Testimony to this was the dynamic that prompted the Annapolis initiative and the role played by Hamas' military activity in the halting of the dialogue that progressed within the Annapolis framework.³ The Hamas takeover of Gaza was considered an opportunity to renew talks, as there was now a clear line of distinction between the Palestinian camp committed to the political process – Mahmoud Abbas, PA, Fatah – and the opposition camp, led by Hamas. The US administration was determined to renew talks on the assumption that understandings on resolution of the conflict would be seen by the Palestinian public as an achievement for the PA, thereby strengthening its position and weakening Hamas' popular standing. For its part, the Israeli government saw the split as an opportunity to further a settlement with a PA no longer bound by commitment to Hamas policies.⁴

Even before the Hamas takeover of Gaza, after its victory in the PLC elections in January 2006, Israel endorsed a policy of differentiation between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The purpose of this distinction was to advance the West Bank economically and thus show the Palestinian public that calm holds more promise than resistance for everyday life of the individual. This approach, in the spirit of the "economic peace" policy promoted by Benjamin Netanyahu, suited the PA's desire to prove to West Bank and Gaza residents the advantages of life under its rule, and to demonstrate particularly to Gaza residents the price of their support of Hamas. In light of this, the Israeli effort to "strengthen Abu Mazen" expressed itself in massive support of the economic and security rehabilitation project in the West Bank.⁵ However, Hamas proved once again how the political process remains hostage to the intra-Palestinian dynamic. The escalation of fire toward Israel from the Gaza Strip, which led Israel in December 2008 to embark on an extensive military operation against the Hamas infrastructure in the area, served as background for the cessation of the talks in the framework of the Annapolis initiative, and apparently provided Mahmoud Abbas an excuse for suspending the talks at

the same time that he sought to avoid responding to the settlement proposal presented by Ehud Olmert.⁶

The understandings formulated between Fatah and Hamas when they attempted to join forces blunted the Fatah-led PA's commitment to the political option. The inter-organizational reconciliation agreement, signed in May 2011 in Cairo under the auspices of the provisional military council that succeeded the Mubarak regime, aimed to coordinate positions in advance of the PA elections. The question of negotiations with Israel was not mentioned at all in the agreement, nor was the issue of Hamas' military infrastructure.⁷ According to Mahmoud Abbas, he is the authority for political negotiations, while the government, including a unity government, was to be poised to focus on domestic issues. But this division of power, accepted also by Hamas, fails to explain by itself the absence of reference to Israel in the reconciliation agreement, which essentially pushed the negotiations with Israel to the margins of the Palestinian agenda. Rather, the political dead end prodded the PA, and enabled it, to attempt to heal the inter-factional rift without exerting itself over the dilemmas related to Israel, at the same time that it strove to bypass the bilateral track and draft international support for Palestinian independence within the 1967 borders. In the face of a public call to settle the inter-factional tensions, and out of concern that the unrest would slide into a widespread protest inspired by the unrest in neighboring countries, both the Hamas and PA leaderships chose to examine the reconciliation track. The promise by the Egyptian provisional military council that it would protect Hamas against an Israeli attack helped bring the organization's leaders to the agreement's signing ceremony (even if there was little to guarantee its implementation).⁸ Another reason for Hamas' responsiveness to the Egyptian pressure was the threat to Bashar al-Assad's regime, which hosted the organization's political offices, and the awareness of a need to ease tensions with Egypt, an alternative host, in order to survive.⁹

Any thought of renewing the dialogue to advance a settlement must take into account the need to settle the intra-Palestinian conflict. At the same time, establishing an authorized central power on the Palestinian scene will not be enough to cultivate renewed interest and confidence in Israel for a political process. In order for the government of Israel to risk public

criticism and attempt to advance toward a settlement, which will inevitably involve security risks and require the evacuation of settlements from the West Bank, the PA must embrace a platform that includes a commitment to a permanent settlement and dismantlement of the Hamas military infrastructure. As expressed in talks held in the Annapolis framework, the PA position was that any peace agreement would be put to a national referendum. The PA was unable, however, to guarantee that an agreement would earn the overwhelming support that would make Hamas irrelevant such that it could no longer disrupt progress toward a workable agreement. Apparently the ability of the PA to ensure even this diminished, for Hamas' solidified position in Gaza further distanced the possibility of applying the principle of "one authority, one law, one weapon" in the Palestinian arena.

True, the odds of a renewal of concrete negotiations would increase significantly if the Hamas leadership responded positively to the demands by the Quartet as a condition for dialogue – abandonment of violent struggle, recognition of Israel, and recognition of the agreements between Israel and the PLO. Such a development in itself would express a coming to terms with the need for dialogue. Hamas reveals no readiness, neither official nor public, to make such a step. However, the PA and Hamas are not even close to reaching understandings regarding institution and power sharing,¹⁰ nor a political consensus that would lay the groundwork for negotiations toward a true peace with Israel.

The Withdrawal from Gaza

The unilateral pullback and evacuation of settlements from the Gaza Strip represented a retreat from two principles that had traditionally governed Israeli decision makers and still represent guidelines that discourage a similar move in the West Bank, be it partial or comprehensive. In fact, the disengagement from Gaza lent greater support for these principles. The first is avoiding a withdrawal without a promise of security quiet; the second holds that a withdrawal would occur only with full coordination with the Palestinian side, which would guarantee quiet afterward. Against these traditional principles stood a complex Israeli interest, namely, the desire to be liberated from the burden entailed by a presence in Gaza – especially as this provided no security quiet, whether in Gaza itself or across its border,

in Israel proper – and from responsibility for what happens in Gaza. In addition, the Israeli government hoped to achieve political quiet – a relief from international pressure pushing it to take a step that would rescue the political process from a dead end, through a dramatic move enabling the PA to display governance in an area evacuated by Israel and implement plans for building the infrastructure for a state with functioning institutions within the territory under its control.

Among the Israeli public there is a noticeable feeling that the goals Israel sought to advance with the withdrawal from Gaza were not achieved.¹¹ While the evacuation of the settlements took place with relative ease, the event is seared in the national consciousness as a trauma, in part because the rehabilitation and resettlement of the evacuees met with delays and difficulties. The subsequent waves of escalation on the southern front added to the frustration. Not only was there no quiet on the Gaza border, but the challenge represented by the consolidation of the military infrastructure of Hamas and other factions in the Strip intensified and expanded geographically: the IDF no longer had to defend Israeli settlements within Gaza, but the burden entailed in defense of the communities in the Gaza Strip environs and beyond gradually grew heavier. In November 2012 Israel responded to the escalated rocket fire from Gaza with Operation Pillar of Defense; in the course of the operation, Tel Aviv and Jerusalem joined the urban areas targeted by the rocket fire. During the confrontation, the United States and European states exhibited much understanding for Israel's military response, mainly in light of the avoidance of a ground campaign. Yet restrictions leveled by Israel on the region remained an ongoing excuse for international criticism, despite the easing of civilian restrictions over the years. Moreover, sans a breakthrough toward an Israeli-Palestinian settlement, the international community continued to view Israel as responsible for the Strip, especially regarding the welfare of its residents.

Above all, the Gaza disengagement was helped by the ideological/emotional and strategic view that Gaza was fundamentally different from the West Bank – the region of Judea and Samaria to which Israeli citizens feel a much stronger connection. A unilateral decision to withdraw from the West Bank, and even more so, its implementation, would be difficult to

justify in light of the inevitable costs involved – security risks, international condemnation following military response to violent provocations, and the personal and collective cost involved with evacuation of settlements.¹² Furthermore the Hamas takeover of Gaza demonstrated the PA's weakness, and Hamas' aspiration for expanded influence in the West Bank would likely be accelerated following an Israeli military redeployment. Although even if Hamas becomes a leader of the PA it will likely not hurry to drag Israel into a full-fledged military confrontation, at the same time it would not be a partner for dialogue toward an end-state settlement. Thus the conflict is expected to remain a central article on the regional and international agenda, and to present Israel with continually renewed security and diplomatic challenges.

Ramifications of the Regional Situation

The assumption that regional circumstances are likely to deter Israel from advancing toward a political-territorial compromise focuses on two challenges. The first is immediate and specific, namely, the Iranian nuclear threat; the second is less specific but still holds significant threat potential, namely, undermined pro-Western regimes and the strengthened influence of the Islamic voice in the region's political systems.

The completion of Iran's nuclear program will expose Israel to military threats – if not immediate ones from Iran itself, then from the radical organizations supported by them, led by the Lebanese Hizbollah and Hamas, which have the wherewithal to reach the entire territorial area of Israel. Under the protection of an Iranian nuclear umbrella, these organizations will be able to challenge an Israel that enjoys significantly less deterrence. This concern increases in face of the possibility that a regional arms race will break out as a result of the Iranian nuclear program, led by Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. Israel's political isolation in the Middle East would be all the more emphasized upon the loss of its status as the only country in the region with a solid image of powerful deterrence and response capabilities.

Moreover, the events of the "Arab Spring" have weakened the power centers in Israel's neighboring countries and eroded their ability to control border regions, thus lowering the chances of preventing a sliding of terror,

smuggling, and infiltrations into Israel. Developments of this sort would expose Israel to security threats from the Sinai Peninsula, Lebanon, Syria, the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, and perhaps even Jordan. The social-political volatility experienced by neighboring countries has also eroded their commitment to existing security agreements with Israel.¹³

These structural shockwaves are tightly linked to the growing popular antagonism vis-à-vis Israel, which reflects in part the growing influence of Islamist ideology in the regional political expanse. The rise of political Islam also threatens the value of relations with Western countries as a central consideration in decision making, which served especially as a factor to offset ideological and strategic tension with Israel. Veteran Arab forces that seek to slow the weakening of their status will do so by raising the profile of the conflict, and even countries that share economic, political, and strategic interests with Israel will be wary of tightening ties. Israel will find it difficult to find among its neighbors an authoritative partner that will guarantee the fulfillment of commitments by the PA and aid in mitigating military conflicts with radical/extremist Palestinian factions, should such break out. The rise of political Islam in the region likewise provides a tailwind to the ideological and strategic message of Hamas. Thus, the PA will face an uphill battle – should it resume trying to bolster its domestic position by way of a political breakthrough – implementing negotiated understandings with Israel.

Nonetheless...

The arguments for waiting until it will be possible to assess with “a reasonable degree of certainty” (in itself an uncertain parameter) that conditions are “ripe” for a political initiative and the incurring of risks involved in such a step (what are the criteria for “ripe”?) hold much weight. Likewise the wide gaps between the Israeli government and the PA do not leave much hope for a political breakthrough. Nevertheless, arguments can be made to support an active Israeli approach with the purpose of attempting to make Israel’s environment more favorable. These arguments relate to: the gap between the current state of affairs in the conflict arena and Israel’s progress in realizing its essential national goals; the balance of power in the Palestinian arena as it has been institutionalized in recent years (mainly

the weakening of the PA, which is Israel's potential negotiating partner); the danger of escalation of the conflict; and the link between the political freeze and Israel's regional and international position.

Essential National Goals

An Israeli initiative to change the reality of the conflict arena is imperative in face of the growing gap between its national goals and the current situation. Although the political process is frozen, the status quo is not, and the dynamic taking shape is not auspicious for Israel. The demographic balance between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean is changing for the worse. With no progress toward separation from the Palestinians, the arena is transforming into a reality of one state, which defies the vision of a Jewish democratic state. The gap between Israel's self-image as bearing the banner of humanism and ethics, and its rule over another people, cannot be bridged. At the same time, on the Palestinian scene there are voices heard supporting a single bi-national state as a solution to the inability to progress to agreed-upon separation. It may be that the day is not far off when the international community will attempt to impose upon Israel and the Palestinians a solution reflecting the reality on the ground, notwithstanding the objections among both Israeli and Palestinian public opinion. In the meantime, the economic burden stemming from West Bank rule, and the military activity required to thwart security threats that emanate from the area, make it difficult for Israel to stop the deterioration of its international standing and deny it political and economic options in the region and beyond.

The Intra-Palestinian Balance of Power

The roots of the rivalry between Hamas and Fatah are inter-organizational and inter-party, and the question of Israel and the political process does not head the leaderships' concerns regarding the distribution of power and authority. Nevertheless, Israel's opposition to the very attempt at inter-organizational compromise, expressed through sanctions against the PA due to moves meant to lay a foundation for Palestinian "national reconciliation," does not strengthen the PA itself, and even contravenes Israel's clear and declared interest in forming a functional national Palestinian authority.

From here stems the need to reconsider the opposition to Hamas and the PA joining forces, and in this framework, the attitude toward Hamas as well.

The issue of recognition of Hamas is perhaps less problematic than it seems. Since the Hamas victory in elections for the Palestinian parliament in 2006, Israel's policy toward the organization has focused on a military struggle – meant to weaken its growing military capabilities – and a diplomatic struggle meant to isolate the organization as long as its leadership refuses to accept the Quartet's demands. In light of this refusal, and following the Hamas takeover of the Gaza Strip and the kidnapping of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit, Israel imposed a policy of strict restrictions on traffic of people and goods to and from Gaza. A political boycott was levied on Hamas in the international arena by Israel's allies that define Hamas as a terror organization. Egypt too was partner to the limitations on the Gaza Strip and kept the Rafiah crossing closed, to avoid a situation where it incurs responsibility for developments in the Strip.

In practice, however, Israel has taken steps that attest to an acceptance of the Hamas regime and its recognition as the element responsible for Gaza. This policy matches the approach that assigns "state responsibility" to elected governments or ruling powers in neighboring countries. Israel held negotiations with Hamas to bring about the release of Gilad Shalit, and was forced to engage in a dialogue with Hamas, albeit through Egyptian mediation, in order to calm the escalation when it reached a level that violated basic conditions for a *tahadiya*, a period of calm. Egyptian mediation was also essential in bringing an end to the larger conflicts in the Gaza arena, in December 2008-January 2009 and in November 2012. In addition, the transfer of goods and transit of individuals between Israel and the Gaza Strip is under Israel's administration, in conjunction with officials and personnel essentially connected with Hamas. All of this points to a de facto recognition of the organization and its rule. To be sure, official recognition (de jure) of Hamas need not perforce be the next phase, certainly not as long as there is no positive response by Hamas to the Quartet conditions. Nevertheless, Israel's reassessment of the profit and loss balance of its Gaza Strip policy and the balance of power on the

Palestinian scene may well encourage an attempt to come to understandings with the organization, at least on the level of security.

The cracks in the international boycott of Hamas have expanded over time, against the background of the political stalemate and the plight of the Gaza population. Members of the EU in particular have pressured Israel to modify its restrictions on the commercial traffic between Israel and the Strip. After the Turkish flotilla incident, Israel was forced to significantly soften the rules of the closure in order to mitigate the severe international criticism.¹⁴ In light of the prolonged freeze in the political process, it seems that the erosion of the Hamas boycott has intensified, and the demand that Israel lighten the burden of civilian distress in the Strip will not disappear from the agenda.

The PA itself is gradually losing its grip in its domestic arena. There is apparently little of substance behind the occasional threats by official Palestinian spokesman that in the absence of progress toward political independence and sovereignty the PA would be dismantled, and complete administrative, economic, and security responsibility for the West Bank would fall on Israel. However, in practice the PA is disintegrating in a process that may bring about its complete collapse.¹⁵ Prime Minister Salam Fayyad's plan to lay the administrative and economic infrastructure for a state, launched in the summer of 2009 with much fanfare, scored some notable achievements, but seems to have exhausted whatever potential it had held.¹⁶ The PA has difficulty raising the requisite financial support to pay salaries and provide employment, and thus its institutional authority and ability to govern have been impaired.¹⁷ The fall of the Mubarak regime and the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood to power in Egypt lent Hamas added support and weakened Egyptian political support for the PA, which for years had been a central pillar of its regional and international standing. Hamas stature in the Palestinian arena strengthened, in part due to its military engagement with Israel and recognition of its authority in the Strip, confirmed once again upon the end of the military confrontation with Israel in November 2012.

The concern that the PA might disintegrate, coupled with the criticism of Israel regarding the political stagnation, helped the PA earn overwhelming international support, including from West European states, in the UN

General Assembly vote on November 29, 2012 to recognize Palestine as a non-member observer state. This achievement will help the PA in its legal offensive against Israel and may even gain it some advantage in negotiations, once the political process resumes. However, the PA will be hard pressed to propel Israel to soften its stance regarding renewal of the negotiations, particularly in light of the PA's diplomatic maneuvers in the international arena. And in the absence of a political breakthrough, the PA will gradually grow more distant from fulfillment of the idea at the base of its existence: to progress through negotiations with Israel toward the establishment of a Palestinian state on the basis of the 1967 borders, with Jerusalem as its capital. Even following its achievement in the United Nations, the reality on the ground for the PA will not change essentially without coordination with Israel. Moreover, this reality will only worsen should Israel impose sanctions on the already unstable PA for taking such unilateral steps.

The Danger of Conflict Escalation

Even among sectors in Palestinian society not labeled as “radical,” including academicians and independent professionals, there is dissatisfaction regarding the economic situation and the lack of personal opportunities, as well as the lack of progress toward realization of national aspirations. Growing difficulties for both the PA and Hamas, mainly due to budget shortfalls and corruption, intensify the feeling of frustration in both the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The Palestinians did not experience their share of upheaval and demonstrations when the Middle East uprisings erupted, beginning in late 2010. But it is possible that a yen for civil liberalization, inspired by the events of the “Arab Spring,” will encourage the Palestinian public to yield on maximal demands and abandon the all-or-nothing approach to negotiations with Israel, in order to give a chance to independence. Mahmoud Abbas contends that a violent confrontation does not serve Palestinian interests, but he supports a popular struggle similar to the uprisings that shocked the region. A sign of things to come may have been the riots that broke out in the West Bank in September 2012, protesting the worsened economic situation.¹⁸ The line from here to an all-out, violent uprising that would lead to attacks on Israeli targets even across the Green

Line is short. Anti-democratic steps taken by the PA, including restricting freedom of the press, may also fan the flames of protest. And as always, the potential for escalation is high following any local incident that might quickly spiral out of both Palestinian and Israeli control.

The Regional Environment

The political stagnation, coupled with the Gaza border restrictions, has already soured Israel-Turkey relations, and the tension between Israel and the Arab states is also expected to rise due to the intensification of the Islamic voice in the Middle East. Israel's peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan are likely to be challenged by the local populations. Along with the ongoing objection to the occupation, military actions taken by Israel to ensure calm on its Gaza border will continue to be a focus of regional and international criticism. On the other hand, the pursuit of security understandings with Hamas may spare Israel at least some international criticism and pressure.

In August 2012, allegations that Hamas activists assisted Islamic Jihad forces in their attack on an Egyptian outpost in northern Sinai sparked sharp disagreement between Hamas and Egypt. Following the incident, the Rafiah border crossing was closed and Egypt even took steps to seal the tunnels between Sinai and the Gaza Strip.¹⁹ However, Israel cannot rely on tension between Egypt and Hamas as an insurance policy against a Gaza escalation. The increased rocket fire in November 2012 demonstrated Hamas' low threshold for control, particularly against the challenge posed by Islamic Jihad attacks to its stature and leadership of the struggle against Israel. Egypt's support for Hamas was limited to the political level. Nonetheless, the possibility that Hamas and other factions in the Strip will continue their attacks in order to drag Israel into a military response and thereby complicate any security coordination between Israel and Egypt emphasizes the importance of understandings regarding calm between Israel and Hamas.

Moreover, the connection drawn in Israel between the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Iranian challenge, and Israel's principle of "Iran first," is not acceptable to Israel's neighbors. As stated explicitly in the Arab Peace Initiative, progress toward a negotiated Israeli-Palestinian settlement is a

condition for normalization of ties with Israel. The joint interest they have with Israel in halting Iran's regional aspirations in general, and its nuclear ones in particular, is not enough of a reason for them to thaw relations with Israel. As for Israel, blocking Iran's path to a nuclear weapon will not soften the sting of the dilemmas presented by the Palestinian issue. Even a significant delay in the Iranian nuclear program will not exempt the Israeli leadership from finding a permanent solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, or at least to lightening its management. Rather, it will only underscore the vital nature of a breakthrough in the dead end – in order, *inter alia*, to stabilize Israel's regional standing.

Political Significance

The diminished stature of the PA on the one hand, and the strengthened position of Hamas on the other (in part due to the strengthening of political Islam in the Middle East); the recognition of Palestine as a non-member state in the United Nations; the danger of a flare up in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; and the threat that a violent escalation will sharpen the tension between Israel and its neighbors (mainly Egypt) and invite increased international pressure on Israel to move toward a settlement – all of these considerations intensify the urgency of the need by Israel's government to rethink how to break out of the impasse.

In order to reduce the chances of a renewed cycle of violence, Israel must re-examine its routine management of the conflict. This is an interest Israel shares with the PA, and therefore Israel should focus on gestures that it will make to the PA, even if unconditional. These can include the release of prisoners, removal of roadblocks, relaxed travel restrictions, expanded economic aid, encouragement of economic projects in Area C, and the transfer of additional territory to PA security control. All of these can assist in calming the situation in the West Bank, especially if they are accompanied by clear messages regarding Israel's commitment to a dialogue toward a negotiated settlement.²⁰ The estimated value of such gestures is not lost on the decision makers in Israel. The simmering atmosphere in the West Bank, registered in the September 2012 unrest, has already moved the Israeli government to form a plan to prevent the collapse of the PA. At the heart of this plan was the expansion of monetary

transfers, the number of permits for day laborers in Israel, and construction projects in the West Bank.²¹ The PA's acceptance as an observer state in the UN, notwithstanding the political and legal difficulties this is likely to present Israel, does not theoretically negate this underlying logic.

In parallel to efforts to strengthen the PA economically (and perhaps thereby to stabilize it politically), options to establish a long term calm with Hamas should also be examined. As opposed to the PA, which strongly rejects the idea that has arisen periodically on the Israeli public and political agenda of an interim agreement, the Hamas leadership has expressed a readiness for a long term ceasefire (*hudna*).²² True, a *hudna* was offered in return for an Israeli retreat to 1967 lines – a demand that would be unacceptable to Israel even in return for a permanent settlement with the PA. However, one can see in the offer a readiness not automatically dismissed by the Hamas leadership to reach an agreement, whose details would be worked out through negotiations.²³ In light of the danger of a renewed Gaza flare-up, and with continuing the understandings that enabled the ceasefire in November 2012, it would be possible to focus on the renewal of principles of the *tahadiya*.

An agreement on security quiet might prod the PA to seriously consider a return to the negotiating table as a possible way out of the dead end it has encountered on the bilateral track with Israel. Gestures by Israel toward the PA are likely to increase the chances this would occur. Moreover, it is not impossible that over time understandings between Hamas and Israel will be reached that will serve as a bridge between Israel and Islamic popular and governmental powers in the region. Security quiet on the Gaza front will help mainly in calming tensions between Israel and Egypt.

A softening of Israeli opposition to the formation of a Palestinian unity government should be part of an integrated policy aimed to further the calm both in Gaza and the West Bank, and halt the erosion of the status of the Palestinian camp that in principle is committed to negotiations, i.e., the PA. In order to orient processes in the Palestinian world toward unity, Israel can, in preparation for PA elections, already present graduated demands that would express an intention to lay the groundwork for the renewal of talks. First it would demand a joint, inter-organizational Palestinian commitment to cessation of the violent struggle and maintenance of existing agreements.

A demand for all-out Palestinian recognition of Israel as a Jewish state will be pushed off to a later stage of the negotiations, as a *sine qua non* of a permanent settlement. Until then, in order not to undermine the chances of the establishment of a unity government, and in order to maintain an opening for a future official acceptance by Hamas of Israel's existence, it will be enough to accept a *de facto* recognition of Israel by Hamas. Whether the Palestinian unity government will be involved in a political process, or whether the political freeze continues, it will serve as an address for Israel and the international community. If it opposes negotiations toward a permanent settlement, the accusations continually leveled against Israel that it alone is responsible for the freeze will prove untenable.

Efforts both to improve management of the conflict and to strengthen the Palestinian camp committed to negotiations will be left with limited meaning unless they are backed by steps that demonstrate Israeli intent to further Palestinian independence. In order to express faith in the two-state idea, Israel will need first and foremost to change its construction policy in the West Bank. The gap between principle and practice in this context is obvious. Such construction threatens to complicate political-territorial separation (which can be viewed as a derivative of the State of Israel's founding ethos), harms Israel's regional and international standing, and aids the PA in convincing the international community that Israel is responsible for the dead end. In order to translate the principle of separation into practical terms, Israel will need to significantly slow construction in West Bank settlements – even in the large settlement blocs, evacuate outposts defined as “illegal,” and prepare for the evacuation of residents who will voluntarily accept a compensation plan to be formulated.²⁴ It will need to do this even without resumption of the dialogue, or even in the absence of a breakthrough in negotiations, should they be renewed.

A change of policy regarding settlement in the West Bank should be part of an initiative comprising two alternatives, which can be presented to the PA and international community. One alternative will focus on the intent to further transitional agreements between Israel and the PA in preparation for the establishment of a Palestinian state. As opposed to the principle that guided previous rounds of talks, whereby “nothing is agreed until everything is agreed,” in this framework every understanding

reached will take effect and be implemented immediately. Together with the evacuation of isolated settlements and outposts in the West Bank, Israel will seek the declaration of a Palestinian state in temporary borders on the basis of an Israeli-Palestinian formula, and mutual commitment to advance to the joint goal through ongoing dialogue. The second alternative will be presented concomitantly, should the PA reject the option of negotiations. It will focus on unilateral Israeli action to determine Israel's borders based on the route of the security fence and evacuate settlements east of this line, while maintaining the IDF's freedom of action in the entire region – even in areas cleared of Israeli citizens.²⁵ This plan should be implemented independent of Palestinian consent, and as a response to Palestinian refusal to accept the principle of transitional agreements. In this framework Israel will advance toward political-territorial separation while examining the security consequences of each step before the next one is taken.²⁶

Thought on unilateral steps toward separation from the West Bank needs to take into account international opposition to such steps due to their contradiction of the principle of a negotiated settlement. On the other hand, it is possible that over time, Israeli determination to move in the direction of separation will allay the international opposition expected in the first phase of implementation of the plan. It is also possible that steps toward separation may prod the PA itself to return to the negotiating table, as it is aware of the need for coordination with Israel in order to offer the sought-after Palestinian state viability. Moreover, the advantage of the unilateral alternative lies precisely in its independence of the Palestinian side. Its formulation will be a result of intra-Israeli discussions about the future of the state and the country's master plan, in light of the principles that are the foundation of its existence and are supposed to form the basis for a national narrative.

Conclusion

The two-state vision has not lost its validity: the assessment that without separation from the Palestinian population in the West Bank Israel will be unable to ensure its future as a Jewish and democratic state has become stronger in recent years, leading even sectors in Israel that in the past did not attribute it much urgency, if any at all, to seek a solution in this spirit.

Likewise a large majority of the Palestinian public has not abandoned the idea of independence alongside the State of Israel. For its part, the PA is pursuing political independence, to be achieved, if not through negotiations, then through broad international recognition. The two-state solution that is to result from Israel-PA negotiations is at the heart of the American and European approach to the issue. However, the political conditions current on both the Israeli and Palestinian scenes have obstructed efforts in recent years to generate a breakthrough in the political process, and have brought it to a dead end.

A central component of the impasse is the fear among the Israeli leadership of regional changes and their negative ramifications for Israel, in particular the political and territorial reality in the West Bank that would be the setting for security risks and ideological-political domestic tensions. This fear has led Israel's government to consider this period an intermission, which explains its refusal to soften its threshold conditions such that it would leave the PA no choice but to return to the negotiating table, if it wanted to avoid being blamed for the political stagnation. While the waiting policy frees Israel of an immediate need to deal with historical decisions, developing trends in its immediate and regional environs are not to its advantage, and threaten to intensify over time the difficulty of advancing a negotiated settlement that would address Israel's fundamental strategic and ideological interests.

An Israeli proposal for graduated transitional agreements in preparation for the establishment of a Palestinian state will be rejected by the PA, mainly because there is no clear difference between such a proposal and the idea of an interim settlement, unless the parties agree on a formula that will determine in advance a framework for borders or the area of a Palestinian state that will be established through an end state agreement. It is also unlikely that in the current constellation in the Israeli political arena, the Israeli government will be able to act in a determined fashion to promote the idea of unilateral separation, even if such an initiative is officially adopted. An initiative to freeze construction in the West Bank will be the focus of an internal Israeli debate, whether as part of a unilateral move or as part of a process of transitional agreements. The difference between meeting the demand of the PA (and the US administration) for

a construction freeze, or to a gradual separation in the framework of unilateral evacuations, is not unequivocal. Leadership that presents one of these alternatives, or both, will be forced to deal with protests focusing on an interpretation of the moves as a concession to the Palestinian side with no return or security guarantees. Such opposition will emphasize the essential need for continued freedom of action for the IDF in the area, in order to limit security risks.

However, Israeli avoidance of formulating alternatives that will change the conflict's political-territorial reality, and especially a failure to form a unilateral alternative, will mean an acceptance of the dead end, which itself is fraught with risks. In other words, the story of expected threats that deter Israel from seriously pursuing a political breakthrough may well prove to be a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Notes

- 1 See for example Nahum Barnea, and Shimon Shiffer, "Interview with Ehud Olmert," *Yediot Ahronot*, September 29, 2008; "Olmert Proposes that Israel Annex 7 Percent of the West Bank, for which the Palestinians would Receive 5.5 Percent in Compensation," *Haaretz*, August 12, 2008.
- 2 According to a public opinion survey conducted in the West Bank and Gaza Strip on September 13-15, 2012 (*PSR Poll* No. 45, <http://www.pcpsr.org/suevey/polls/2012/p45efull.html>), 52 percent of respondents expressed support for a two-state solution, and 46 percent were opposed. Sixty-nine percent opposed resuming negotiations with Israel as long as Israeli construction in the settlements continued. Seventy-three percent supported an appeal to the United Nations to recognize an independent Palestinian state, and 44 percent said that the supreme national objective is the establishment of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, with Jerusalem as its capital (30 percent stated that the return of refugees is the most important national goal). Sixty-eight percent objected to a one-state solution, and only 30 percent favored the idea. Regarding Israeli public opinion, a survey conducted in February-March 2012 in the framework of the National Security and Public Opinion Project at the Institute for National Security Studies (results were presented at the INSS annual conference "Security Challenges of the 21st Century" in May 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=mfxm8LQOlKA), pointed to the continued support from the Jewish public in Israel for a two-state solution. Fifty-one percent of respondents said they would vote in favor of a permanent agreement with the Palestinians that would be based on "two states for two peoples," should it be put to a referendum. Fifty-

nine percent of respondents said that Israel should “definitely agree” or “agree” to the establishment of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip in the framework of a permanent agreement; forty-one percent of respondents said that Israel should “definitely not agree” or “not agree” to the establishment of a Palestinian state in these borders. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has also at various opportunities expressed explicit support for a two-state solution. See for example Barak Ravid, “Netanyahu: A Bi-national State would be a Disaster; I Will Present a Political Plan Soon,” *Haaretz*, April 3, 2011. Netanyahu expressed similar sentiments at a speech given at the INSS conference cited above (www.youtube.com/watch?v=lku7unqt.Iyq). However, the chances that it will indeed be possible to advance the idea of two states were perceived as weak. According to the *Peace Index* published in April 2012 by the Israel Democracy Institute/Gutman Survey Center, 58 percent of Jews interviewed and 61 percent of Arab respondents estimated that currently there is no chance to end the conflict along the lines of the “two states for two peoples” formula (www.idi.org.il/.../peace_index/Pages/Main.aspx).

- 3 Aluf Benn, “The Israeli-Palestinian Negotiations: What has and What has not yet Been Achieved,” *INSS Insight* No. 56, May 19, 2008; Michael Herzog, *Minding the Gaps: Territorial Issues in Israeli-Palestinian Peacemaking*, Policy Focus #116, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, December 2011.
- 4 Ehud Olmert: “Annapolis’ greatest strength lies in the fact that ... it is taking place without Hamas...the international community understands that Hamas cannot be part of the process.” *Ynet*, November 27, 2007.
- 5 “Good News from the Middle East (Really),” *New York Times*, January 25, 2011; “Measures Taken by Israel in Support of Developing the Palestinian Economy and Socio-Economic Structure,” Report of the Government of Israel to the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee (AHLC), Brussels, April 13, 2011.
- 6 After four years of a frozen political process, Abbas claimed that understandings had been reached on the core issues, and that the sides were close to an agreement. See Barak Ravid, “Abbas: Had Olmert Remained in Power Two More Months, we would have Reached an Agreement,” *Haaretz*, October 15, 2012.
- 7 See the text of the agreement at: <http://middleeast.about.com/od/palestine/palestinians/qt/Fatah-Hamas-Reconciliation-Agreement.htm>.
- 8 Alex Fishman, “A New Law,” *Yediot Ahronot*, May 5, 2011.
- 9 In light of this focus on both inter-organizational relations and the domestic front, one can also understand the PA’s non-insistence on including recognition of Israel among the articles of the agreement it signed with Hamas in Mecca in March 2007. On the basis of this agreement, a short-lived unity government was established. Rather than ideological-strategic divisions related to Israel and the

political process, a lack of agreement regarding the division of power is what led to its collapse.

- 10 A. el-Saleh, "Doha Agreement Valid despite al-Zahar's Statements – Hamas," *a-Sharq al-Awsat*, February 13, 2012; Jodi Rudoren and Fares Akram, "Palestinians Sign Deal to Set Up Elections," *New York Times*, July 5, 2012; " Hamas Gov[ernment] Urges Reform of Elections Commission," *Ma'an News Agency*, July 5, 2012; "Abbas: Reconciliation in Deadlock," *Ma'an News Agency*, July 30, 2012.
- 11 The continued Israeli control of the West Bank undermined the argument that a withdrawal from Gaza was meant to provide a solution to the closing demographic gap between Jews and Palestinians in the area between the Mediterranean and Jordan River. If the withdrawal was meant to be a sign of things to come in the image of implementation of a "convergence" plan in the West Bank, this option was sidelined due to the frustration caused by developments in Gaza following the disengagement.
- 12 For an approach holding that the Israeli settlements in the West Bank should remain intact no matter what, see Dani Dayan, "Israel's Settlers Are Here to Stay," *New York Times*, July 25, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/26/opinion/israels-settlers-are-here-to-stay.html>.
- 13 Regarding the worsening position of Israel, especially in relation to Egypt, see P. Salem, "The Regional Order," in S. Ulgen et al, "Emerging Order in the Middle East," *Carnegie Policy Outlook*, May 15, 2012, carnegieendowment.org/files/middle_east_order1.pdf.
- 14 A. Birdstein, "The Cabinet Authorized the Prime Minister to Ease Restrictions on the Gaza Blockade," *Maariv NRG*, June 20, 2010. See also: "History of Israeli Blockade on Gaza," al-Jazeera, November 2, 2011, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2011/10/20111030172356990380.html>.
- 15 According to Saeb Erekat, "the PA is in any case dismantled, so we may as well make it official." See Ravid, Abbas: Had Olmert Remained in Power Two More Months, we would have Reached an Agreement."
- 16 For a critical view of Prime Minister Fayyad's plan, see R. M. Danin, "A Third Way to Palestine: Fayyadism and its Discontent," *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 1 (2011): 94-111.
- 17 Bank Leumi Chairman David Brodet, "Under our Noses a Worrisome Economic Reality that Knows no Equal is Developing," Israel Business Conference, December 11, 2011, <http://www.leumi.co.il/articles/24475>; and "PA Fails to Pay Security Forces," *Middle East Newslite, Indepth Regional News Service* 14, no. 264, July 5, 2012. A report published by the World Bank in April 2012 determined that the economic infrastructure in the West Bank is not sufficient to support

- independent statehood. See *WBGrowthstudy.presentation.pdf*, July 25, 2012. The previous report on the West Bank issued by the World Bank concluded that the PA's economic activity justified regarding it as a state authority.
- 18 See for example Avi Issacharoff, "The Death of the Economic Peace," *Haaretz*, September 18, 2012.
- 19 Mohamed Morsi, the Muslim Brotherhood candidate who won the Egyptian presidential elections in June 2012, promised to open the border crossing between Egypt and the Gaza Strip. See "Haniyeh: Rafah to Open 12hrs Daily," *Ma'an News Agency*, July 28, 2012.
- 20 Anat Kurz, "Israel and the Palestinian Authority: When Parallel Lines might Converge," *Strategic Assessment* 14, no. 4 (2012): 71-85.
- 21 Amos Harel and Avi Issacharoff, "Israel Preparing a Plan to Prevent Collapse of the PA," *Haaretz*, September 24, 2012.
- 22 " Hamas Offers Truce in Return for 1967 Borders, No Israeli Response, but U.S. Rejects as 'No Change'"; *AP*, April 21, 2008, http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/24235665/ns/world_news-mideast_n_africa/t/hamas-offers-truce-return-borders/.
- 23 There is a debate within the ranks of Hamas over two conflicting approaches. The first approach, led by the Hamas leadership in Gaza headed by Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh and Mahmoud a-Zahar, holds that the time has not come to further a settlement with Israel, due to the strengthening of the Muslim Brotherhood in the region in the wake of the "Arab Spring." In this view, a regional pan-Arabic umbrella is forming, led by the Muslim Brotherhood, which will support Hamas and aid it in realizing its ideological-strategic goals. Therefore, there has also been little movement toward intra-Palestinian reconciliation. The second approach, represented by the head of the Hamas political wing, Khaled Mashal, holds that in light of the fact that Islamic factions that take positions of power and influence tend to stress their particular problems, and less the pan-Arabic vision, it can be expected that they will adopt pragmatic policies that will not necessarily focus on the maximal rights of the Palestinian people. This assessment prompted Mashal and his circle to express their readiness in principle to accept progress to a settlement with Israel should one be attained by President Abbas, without a requirement that Hamas recognize Israel and commit to an end-of-conflict and finality to end of Palestinian claims from Israel. Statements by Hamas spokesmen, which imply thinking in the direction of a permanent settlement (though on terms acceptable to the organization), have not aroused much interest in Israel, or have met with much skepticism. See for example "Hamas will Accept any Agreement that has a Majority [among the Palestinian Public]," *Ynet*, October 21, 2010. See also: "N. J. Brown, "Is Hamas Mellowing?" *Commentary*, Carnegie Endowment,

January 17, 2012, carnegieendowment.org/2012/01/17/is-hamas-mellowing.pdf. The pragmatic camp, led by Mashal, has lost some of its influence with the loss of its stronghold in Damascus, and in the wake of the strengthening of the leadership located in Gaza following the rise to power of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Khaled Meshaal announced his intention to resign. See ““Head of Hamas, Khaled Mashaal, to Step Down,” *The Guardian*, September 25, 2012, <http://guardian.co.uk/world/2012/sep/25/hamas-khaled-mashaal-step-down>. However, Mashal’s standing was strengthened anew when he represented Hamas in the contacts with Egypt, during the attempt to reach an agreement on ending the November 2012 confrontation with Israel. Against this backdrop, Mashal reiterated hard line positions, including an unequivocal refusal to recognize Israel and an emphasis on the goal of liberating Palestine from the Mediterranean Sea to the Jordan River.

- 24 Gilead Sher, “From Vision to Reality: Tangible Steps toward a Two-State Solution,” *Strategic Assessment* 15, no. 2 (2012): 53-65.
- 25 On a number of opportunities, Defense Minister Ehud Barak related to the option that in order to breach the political freeze, Israel would execute a unilateral withdrawal in the West Bank. See for example his lecture at the annual INSS conference “Security Challenges of the 21st Century,” May 2012. See also “Barak on the Political Process: A Unilateral Measure should be Considered,” news.walla.co.il/?w=/9/2537377; Shlomo Cesana and Yoav Limor, “Barak’s Disengagement,” *Yisrael Hayom Newsletter*, September 24, 2012, http://www.israelhayom.co.il/site/newsletter_article.php?id=21632&hp=1&newsletter=24.09.2012. These statements may reflect an intention to revive the disengagement plan in the West Bank that had been promoted by Ehud Olmert and was frozen due to developments in Gaza after the 2005 disengagement.
- 26 Shlomo Brom, “Israel and the Palestinians: Policy Option Given the Infeasibility of Reaching a Final Status Agreement,” *Strategic Assessment* 15, no. 2 (2012) 75-82.

Jordanian Spring, Hashemite Winter: The Weakening of the Regime and the Implications for Israel

Assaf David

Two years since the onset of the “Arab Spring,” it has become clear that although the Hashemite kingdom may have weathered the storm, the marks left on the regime by the upheaval are indelible. The string of revolutions in the Arab world deepened the process of the regime’s weakening already underway and further undermined its ability to govern, a process that commenced in 1999 with the ascent to power of King Abdullah II and the advent of his neo-liberal economic policies.

In effect, the “Jordanian Spring” began several months before the “Arab Spring,” when the divide between the regime and the Transjordanian (“tribal”) population, its long time bedrock, rose to the surface. This divide has been expressed through the systematic undercutting of the King’s political initiatives by the conservative elite; riots and armed violence in the rural periphery over the socio-economic situation; growing and more daring public protests – to the point of crossing red lines – against the power of the security services (Mukhabarat) and corruption among high echelons of the regime; and finally, the formation of a Transjordanian rebel movement with clear anti-monarchist tendencies. The common denominator of all these phenomena was that they took place concomitant with but independent of the criticism and familiar demands for political reform sounded by both the Muslim Brotherhood and liberal forces. The challenge emerged from the hard core of the Transjordanian population,

including the elite, and was a powerful test of the ability of the old order to save itself from the power that threatened to destroy it, namely, the monarchy.¹

Against the background of the domestic unrest, this article surveys the impact of the “Arab Spring” on Jordan’s relations with the United States and Israel on the one hand, and with the Gulf states on the other. It will also analyze the changes on the domestic scene during this period, and the regime’s response to the challenge posed by pressures from both the Islamist and the Transjordanian sectors, the latter being its veteran stronghold. The main conclusion of the essay is that even if the Hashemite regime does not currently face a tangible threat of collapse, its ability to govern and take decisions in the political, diplomatic, and socio-economic realms has significantly eroded since the end of King Hussein’s reign. As much as it can, Israel would do well to work to strengthen the pragmatic, liberal-reformist school within the monarchy’s elite, in order to ensure Jordan’s internal stability and thus the survivability of the Hashemite regime.

Shock and Loss of Faith in Allies

As a rentier state lacking in natural resources and economic resilience, where a significant portion of income relies on external sources rather than on local production, Jordan has always needed wealthy and generous allies. Except for some brief intervals, the United States and some Gulf states have faithfully filled this role.

Perhaps for the first time, the “Arab Spring” punctured Jordan’s belief that if it embraces domestic and foreign policies acceptable to the US, it will continue to enjoy American support. At least during the first months of the upheavals, it appeared that US policy was opposed to the interests of the Hashemite regime shaped over recent decades. Both supporters and opponents of the regime interpreted the push given by the US to the fall of Mubarak as a sign of the superpower’s infidelity, and the fears of the conservative elite in Jordan grew following what were perceived as hints that American aid would be conditioned on political reform. Moreover, the public discourse in Israel and the West regarding the advantages of democratization in the Arab world aroused anxiety in the Jordanian leadership that external and internal demands for equal rights

for Palestinians would intensify, ending with the “nightmare” of Jordan becoming the Palestinian state.

From the moment the Jordanian leadership began to lose faith in the US, its final line of defense became the Gulf states, led by Saudi Arabia. Indeed, since he rose to the throne King Abdullah II has cultivated closer relations with several Gulf rulers. Saudi Arabia’s opposition to Jordan’s joining the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in Abdullah’s first year as king did not deter him, and he later demonstrated an unusual readiness to employ military and security forces outside of Jordanian soil for the sake of Western and Gulf interests, when early in the “Arab Spring” Jordan rushed to aid Bahrain in thwarting the Shiite uprising. As with other issues, the central consideration was economic: the perception was that against the background of the vacuum formed in the old order of the Middle East and the change taking shape in the West toward the region’s authoritarian regimes, Jordan would desperately need the support of the Gulf states.

In the spring of 2011, the anxiety in Jordan ebbed somewhat following King Abdullah’s warm and encouraging reception in the US, in which an intensive economic aid package to the kingdom was announced. Although the sums mentioned lacked immediate economic significance, the visit conveyed the impression that the US had recovered from the shock of the “Arab Spring” and was ready to help stabilize regimes among its Middle East allies that survived the upheavals. Jordan even requested that the US lobby for it among the Gulf states.

Likewise in the spring, the GCC unexpectedly announced on May 9, 2011 that it was willing to accept Jordan and Morocco as full members. The initial impression was that this was an unprecedented and serious offer, with a final goal of full membership for Jordan in the Council, with no limitations or conditions. The process, intended to be gradual, was to start with Jordan’s joining the Gulf states’ regional security forces.

The US role in the creation of the new monarchist axis was a matter of debate. The prevalent response in Jordan and abroad was that even if the US supported and encouraged the move, Saudi Arabia and Jordan should themselves reap the maximum from it, in part as an insurance policy against uncertain US loyalties. To this end, Saudi Arabia would bring the Arab monarchies under its wing in face of the West’s developing support

of the Muslim Brotherhood as an acceptable alternative to the old Arab order.² In addition, among some segments of the Jordanian political elite, the primary concern was that the “Gulf move” would deal a death blow to reform efforts and the struggle against corruption. The Transjordanian population likewise feared a “security for money” deal: Jordan, such was claimed, would need to pay for the Gulf aid by joining the Gulf states’ political and security struggle against Iran. Even the familiar conspiracy theory about the West and Gulf states leveraging Jordanian aid in order to solve the Palestinian issue at Jordan’s expense gained additional support.

The progress of the “Gulf move” was slow and Jordanian concerns resonated among the public discourse,³ until the GCC summit meeting in December 2011 put the final nail in the idea’s coffin. The optimistic aid projections were not realized, as the Council decided to establish a fund for development projects from which Jordan and Morocco would be granted 2.5 billion dollars each. The political elite suspected that the US and Saudi Arabia worked together to thwart the “Gulf move,” each for its own reasons: the US out of a desire to pressure Jordan toward further democratization, and the Saudis with the goal of diminishing “Arab Spring” volatility in the Gulf states. In addition, the theory was that Jordan’s entry into the GCC was thwarted by the fear of the Syrian crisis spilling over into Jordan, which in turn could destabilize the kingdom in a manner that would endanger the Gulf states, or expose them to democratization pressures. According to this explanation, the Gulf states sought to avoid an agreement that would commit them to saving the Hashemite regime.

The Hashemite regime emerged from the year of the “Arab Spring” with the sense that it had been betrayed by its allies precisely when it needed support. The Transjordanian elite pointed to the fact that in the civil war (1970-71) the domestic arena was in a shambles while the West’s support stayed strong, whereas in the 1991 Gulf War external support collapsed as the domestic scene remained strong. In late 2011, however, there were noticeable cracks on both the external and domestic fronts. This was one of the explanations for Jordan’s acting to shore up its western flank: Israel on the one hand, and the Palestinian Authority and Hamas on the other.

The Western Border: The Thicket of Contradictory Interests

Shocked by the developments in the first months of the “Arab Spring,” the Jordanian elite believed that the new reality demanded a review of the kingdom’s foreign relations. Then-Prime Minister Marouf al-Bakhit connected this reassessment with Israel, defining Jordan’s relations with its western neighbor as “at their lowest point.” He emphasized that Jordan urgently needed Arab aid, as it was “the final stronghold standing before the Zionist project,” and due to its responsibility for its Palestinian “brothers,” whom he defined as an “internal Jordanian problem.” This sort of terminology and reasoning were common in Jordanian political discourse during the four decades preceding the peace agreement with Israel. Nevertheless, it gradually became clear that Jordan has no real alternative to its veteran allies within the region and globally. Thus the “Arab Spring” and the freeze in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process pulled Jordan in two opposite directions: toward a tightening of the strategic alliance with Israel, and at the same time, toward preparation for heavy pressure, both internal and external, to reconsider the peace agreement.

It is no wonder, then, that as opposed to previous years, King Abdullah moderated his criticism of Israel in general and of its government in particular, and made do with noting his frustration with Israel’s “wait and see” approach to the “Arab Spring.” Although public discourse in Jordan and Israel has grown more sensitive to statements from across the border, which reveal more than they conceal,⁴ the government agencies of both states in general have demonstrated responsibility and discretion. The unfolding crisis between the two countries over the Mughrabi ramp has still not been solved, from time to time sparking friction between them. It seems, however, that the two sides are aware of the danger inherent in the crisis and seek to manage it far from the eyes of the media. In the spring of 2012, there even were five visits of senior Jordanian officials, among them the King’s two brothers, to the al-Aqsa compound, together with senior Sunni and Sufi religious figures from the Arab world. Israel and the Hashemite regime had a common interest in these visits: for Jordan this emphasized the preferred position and status Israel grants it in the al-Aqsa compound at the expense of all other actors in the Arab and Muslim world;

and for Israel this was both an indication of “normalization” and de facto recognition of its sovereignty over the Temple Mount, as well as its own act of modest support for the Hashemite regime. Perhaps likewise in this vein Israel launched exploratory talks with the Palestinians in Amman in early 2012, in part – if not primarily – to help improve the King’s image and strengthen his position.

Although the establishment of a Palestinian state would underscore the separation between Jordan and Palestine, which is a leading strategic interest of the Transjordanian elite, the Jordanian leadership was very worried about the unilateralism embodied by the Palestinian UN bid for acceptance as a non-member observer state. Alongside weighty strategic considerations, led by the need to maintain functional relations with any element enjoying influence and popularity in the West Bank, this was a good reason to renew relations with Hamas, which King Abdullah had suspended in 1999. Recent years have seen a growing sense among the Transjordanian elite that closer relations with Hamas are essential for Jordan in order to deal with the danger of the establishment of a pseudo “Palestinian state” built on many concessions. The “Arab Spring” provided a suitable opportunity to initiate a rapprochement with Hamas, in particular given the weakened (if not withdrawn) objections by the US and Egypt to a renewal of relations between Jordan and Hamas, and new motivations to this end, led by Qatar’s positive stance toward the organization. This small Gulf state also served as an example among the Jordanian elite that good relations with Hamas do not necessarily mean bad relations with the US.

Although in late 2011 it seemed that Jordan was struggling between supporting the PA and thawing relations with Hamas, its moves on the Palestinian scene were an outgrowth of its support of intra-Palestinian reconciliation.⁵ The King’s rare visit to Ramallah in November 2011, arranged with great haste, was meant to provide moral support to the PA in general and to Abu Mazen in particular, against the backdrop of growing threats of dismantling the PA and the President’s resignation. The visit was also apparently intended to persuade Abu Mazen to support the EU initiative on renewal of talks with Israel in exchange for EU support of the 2012 UN bid, should the negotiations fail. In any case, the stances of the security establishments in Jordan and Saudi Arabia, which opposed

any reconciliation between Jordan and Hamas unless Hamas distanced itself from Iran, cooled the process of rapprochement between Jordan and Hamas. The visit by Qatar's crown prince to Amman in January 2012, accompanied by Khaled Mashal and several senior Hamas officials, was actually a polite yet meaningless visit.⁶

The election of Mohamed Morsi to the Egyptian presidency on June 30, 2012 required the regime to prepare for the arrival of the "Muslim era" at its doorstep. A delegation of Hamas senior figures, headed by Mashal, was well-received in Amman, with this time the visit including an official reception and warm meetings with the King, senior officials in Jordan's political and security elite, Muslim Brotherhood leaders, public figures, and journalists. Mashal stayed in the kingdom for almost two weeks, and his visit marked the opening of a new page in Hamas-Jordan relations. The Hamas leader demonstrated complete neutrality on internal Jordanian issues in general, and in particular on the conflict between the doves and hawks in the Muslim Brotherhood movement, even advising the Muslim Brotherhood to refrain from boycotting parliamentary elections. The Hamas delegation also reached a detailed agreement with the Jordanian security leadership, whereby it would refrain from all involvement in the sensitive issue of Jordanian-Palestinian relations in the kingdom, and from all activity that would harm Jordan's security. In return, the movement was promised periodic political consultations and freedom of movement in the kingdom, although not the opening of official offices in Amman. The two sides could also expect to reap political and public relations gains from the move: Jordan will lobby for the good of Hamas in the West, and Hamas will lobby for the good of the Hashemite regime among the Muslim Brotherhood throughout the Arab world, as well as in Jordan itself.

Syria: The Evil Comes from the North

The year 2012 marked a rehabilitation of Jordan's trust in its allies. The King's visit to the US in January, in which President Obama praised the progress of reforms in the kingdom, conveyed the message that for the US, internal stability in the kingdom was an important goal, and as long as the regime could maintain this stability, the US would support the way it ran its affairs. As the weeks passed, the sentiment in the Jordanian political

discourse grew that the US in effect had abandoned its expectation for democratization in the kingdom. In the summer of 2012 the US announced additional economic aid totaling 100 million dollars, some of which was designated to cover the expenses caused by the influx of Syrian refugees. The US also announced a significant easing of minimum conditions for the provision of economic aid to Jordan in the current year. For its part, the International Monetary Fund announced an unusual loan to Jordan of 2 billion dollars for three years, for the purpose of lowering the deficit in the state budget and supporting the economically weak sectors.

The Gulf Cooperation Council also ultimately mobilized to provide assistance. Although the possibility of Jordan joining the Council is no longer mentioned, the GCC began examining the option of raising the level of aid to Jordan to 5 billion dollars for the next five years for the purpose of infrastructure and development projects. The Gulf states have since budgeted many hundreds of millions of dollars for investment projects in Jordan, beginning in the next fiscal year. In mid-year, the king met with parliament members and informed them that Jordan is about to reach economic stability thanks to aid from the Gulf.

However, as the political elite feared, Gulf aid comes with a price tag. Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar leveled heavy pressure on Jordan to “get off the fence” regarding Syria and support the deposing of Bashar al-Assad. Carrots were mixed with sticks, threats, and “blackmail.” This played out, for example, in the slow transfer of the Gulf aid to Jordan and in the foot-dragging regarding investments in the kingdom. The military and security coordination between Jordan and the Gulf states, which before the summer of 2012 had noticeably tightened, focused on matters related to Syria and aid to Jordan. Reportedly, it included also a Gulf attempt to strengthen the resolve of Jordan’s conservatives against the Muslim Brotherhood.⁷ The “November uprising” that erupted in the kingdom in late 2012 due to a government decision to raise prices of oil products aroused the fear once again among the elite and the Transjordanian population regarding the depth of commitment of the Gulf states (and the West) to Jordan’s domestic stability.

Jordan’s desperate need for support from the Gulf states, along with the formation of a Western-Arab front against the Assad regime in late 2011,

complicated Jordan's position regarding events in Syria. From the outset, Jordan was worried both about the Assad regime's reaction should Jordan support the rebels, as well as the potential ethnicization of the conflict in Syria that would lead to a forced exodus to Jordan of hundreds of thousands of Syrians, mainly of Palestinian origin. The King's famous statement in a BBC interview in November 2011 that if he were in Assad's position he would step down, was taken out of context. In essence, he emphasized that the problem is not with the ruler but with the system, and actually expressed faith in Bashar al-Assad's ability to change the system from within, albeit at the price of his removal from power. At the end of that month, the Jordanian government laid down "three nos" regarding Syria: no to recalling the Jordanian ambassador from Damascus, no to expelling the Syrian ambassador from Amman, and no to joining international or Arab sanctions against Syria.

By the spring of 2012, the number of legal and illegal Syrian aliens in Jordan grew enough to make its mark by way of social unrest and tensions within the Jordanian opposition, between it and the Syrian refugees, among the Syrian refugee population, and between the refugees and the Jordanian residents of the rural periphery. Reports from international organizations even warned of destabilization in Jordan and Lebanon as a result of the flow of refugees from Syria into their territories. Salafi jihadist activists based in northern Jordan trickled into Syria with the goal of joining the rebels, arousing heightened concern among the authorities. It gradually became clear that the government also recoiled from dealing with the wealthy and strong tribes in the north, who cooperate with groups and gangs on the Syrian side in the systematic smuggling of arms and equipment to the rebels. Jordan attempted to prohibit entirely the entry of Syrian citizens to its territory, but the criteria it set were applied mainly to visitors and not to the refugees who escaped to its territory each night, to be rounded up by the security forces.

In the summer of 2012, the situation on the border deteriorated to the point of shooting incidents between Jordanian and Syrian forces, with the latter attempting to prevent the flight of citizens to Jordan. As the number of refugees fleeing daily to Jordan rose steadily, the tensions between them and the Jordanian population intensified, the burden on infrastructure and

educational and health systems increased, and the damage to Jordan's economy and commercial activity soared. By the end of the year, the estimated number of Syrians in Jordan – those who entered legally or illegally – was 250,000. Of these most settled in cities and towns, and only about 45,000 live in the a-Zatari refugee camp in the north. Most of the refugees were of the lower class, pushing locals out of the labor market and aggravating the unemployment problem. The great fear of the Jordanian leadership, expressed by the King as well, was that the situation in Syria would deteriorate into all-out civil war and lead to the establishment of an Alawite enclave led by Assad loyalists. The King is convinced that the Middle East would need decades to recover from such a nightmare scenario.⁸

The Domestic Arena: Liberal Rhetoric, Conservative Practice, and Royal Weakness

With the outbreak of the “Arab Spring,” most of the actors in the domestic arena, out of respective reasons, mobilized for initial stabilization of the system. Among the various regime opponents, and between them and the regime, there was in essence a balance of fear, reflecting the concern that domestic destabilization would end in a terrible civil war, in which each side would attempt to utterly defeat the other in a zero-sum game. As in the past, genuine concern was voiced that Israel would take advantage of the anarchy to turn Jordan into the alternative homeland for the Palestinians. Among these nightmare scenarios, the Hashemite regime was naturally considered the lesser evil. However, and despite the fact that at that stage open demands to depose the King were not in circulation, there was agreement among the regime, the establishment elite, and the opposition elite – both Transjordanian and Palestinian – regarding the essential need for dramatic change. The debate was about the goals of such change, its extent, and its pace.

The collapse of the regimes in the Middle East in the first months of the “Arab Spring” intensified the temerity and defiance of regime opponents, and new red lines were crossed weekly in demonstrations with thousands of participants in Amman, and even more so in the Transjordanian periphery. The growing demand for constitutional reforms, whose practical significance would mean a cut in the King's powers, was

discussed openly, and the regime and its supporters appeared helpless and bereft of any counterarguments. The principal players in the political realm, beyond the regime itself, were the conservative elite – mainly the security establishment (Mukhabarat); the long time opposition, led by the Muslim Brotherhood movement, most of whose demands focused on equal political representation for Islamists and Palestinians; and the new Transjordanian opposition, whose demands were mainly socio-economic, primarily the eradication of corruption and attention to the longstanding neglect and poverty in the periphery.⁹ As a rule, the demand to strengthen the separation of powers and rein in the tremendous power of the executive branch, mainly the palace and the Mukhabarat, was common to all opposition parties and acceptable to the broader public, both Palestinian and Transjordanian.

In that sensitive period, however, it was precisely the Muslim Brotherhood, mainly the hawkish wing identified with Hamas and the kingdom's Palestinian population, that showed restraint and refused to officially adopt the ideas of the constitutional monarchy and other demands that arose from the dovish ranks of the movement, and from the ranks of the broadening Transjordanian opposition.¹⁰ The latter blatantly exploited the King's weakness in order to demand resources and budgets, as well as a "return to the 1952 constitution," which would impinge on the ability of the King and his emissaries in the security establishment to shape the political scene according to their needs. For its part, the conservative elite attempted to stop the current driving toward cutting the King's powers, and to this end heightened the Jordanian-Palestinian divide by falsely connecting the demands for reform with an anti-monarchist Palestinian agenda. The immediate result was a worsening of domestic tension to the point of creating an atmosphere of civil war.

The regime worked to lower the flames by appointing national committees to examine changes in the constitution and elections and party laws, to strengthen the separation of powers, and to create an impression of an uncompromising fight against corruption. The encouraging news from the Gulf in the spring of 2011 enabled the regime to plan the pace of progress of political reforms carefully, but the news also reinforced the power of the conservatives, including their bargaining power in relation to

the King.¹¹ Several of the fundamental recommendations of the committees were abandoned, which was perceived as evidence that the King's liberal rhetoric and public criticism of the conservative elite were hollow, or worse, that his power could not stand up against the security apparatuses, making him essentially a pawn in their hands. The amended elections law, adopted in June 2011, brought meager tidings to the reformists, and reflected the country's great fear of Islamists and Palestinians. The recommendations of the committee for constitutional reform, which were submitted to the King two months afterward, were likewise in the category of too little, too late. Moreover, the problem was not in the ability to formulate liberal articles in the constitution, but in the will and ability to implement them.¹² The constitutional reforms laid the foundation for a tug of war between regime supporters and opponents regarding fundamental limitation of the King's powers, turning the people into the sovereign, and founding an actual constitutional monarchy. The regime has automatically rejected any demands of this sort, with the argument – raised continually in the government media – that they endanger the fragile domestic stability of the kingdom.

The strategy employed by the regime to manage the political crisis was shaped in part by its fear that the Muslim Brotherhood, whose “Arab Spring”-era political power is perceived by the West as an element it had better get used to, is not interested in a deal with the government, but rather seeks a serious crisis with the monarchy itself. The Brotherhood vehemently denied any connection with the US, and continued to emphasize that it does not seek the downfall of the regime, only reforming it. At the same time, however, the organization did not care much about providing the regime guarantees regarding the ultimate goal of its demand for change.

In the meantime, the anti-regime protests in the Transjordanian periphery intensified, embodying both criticism of the security apparatuses and socio-economic demands, first and foremost the eradication of corruption linked to the King, his family, and close associates. The radicalized discourse and the anti-monarchist demands sparked concerns in the security establishment regarding civil disobedience that would threaten the regime itself. However, the Jordanian-Palestinian divide blocked the unification of regime opponents and in the end worked to the regime's benefit. Many

of the Transjordanian opposition leaders and activists worried that the Brotherhood was not ready to join forces in the struggle against neo-liberalism and corruption, and that it seeks, with Western aid, to control the political sphere. Moreover, the Transjordanian opposition feared that the regime would sell out its interests in exchange for a comprehensive deal with the Muslim Brotherhood.¹³

Extensive unrest in the periphery in October 2011, following a government decision to slash the resources of the municipal authorities, led to a comprehensive changing of the guard in the decision making leadership – the Prime Minister, the head of the Mukhabarat, and the head of the royal court – and to the appointment of a new government. A sense of helplessness and a loss of confidence in the leadership, however, continued. The failure of the King to decide between contradictory interests and approaches among decision making circles deepened the social and political polarization, and led to incidents of armed violence in the streets. It seemed that the Transjordanian elite, recognizing the regime's weakness and strengthening of regional political Islam, would no longer rely on the King to guarantee its interests, and looking ahead might be ready to settle for a "Turkish model": a popular Islamic government and a state establishment – the security sector with or without the palace – functioning as the "supervising adult" in charge of foreign policy and security.¹⁴ For its part, the regime attempted to extricate itself from the dead end through a tough strategy of crushing the opposition, in its various incarnations, along with placating public opinion with a policy marketed as a courageous struggle against corruption.

The year 2012 has been marked primarily by stronger support on the part of the US and Gulf states for the Hashemite regime. Events in the region also had a cooling effect on regime opponents: the worsening of the Syria crisis, which deepens the polarization among the ranks of the Jordanian opposition,¹⁵ and the bleak political and economic news from most of the "Arab Spring" states, sharpened the popular fear of instability inherent in change. All of these factors have thus far worked to the benefit of the regime, if only partially and temporarily. In the meantime, the King has decided in favor of the conservatives on a number of additional occasions: he approved additional problematic amendments in the election

law, and decided to hold parliamentary elections by the end of the current year, even without the participation of the Muslim Brotherhood. He also broadcast the message that boosting the economy takes precedence over democratization, which justifies limiting the fight against corruption so as not to scare off investors from the Gulf states. Finally, the King retired Prime Minister Khasawneh, who was perceived by the conservatives as overly liberal and pro-Islamist, and appointed Fayez al-Tarawneh in his place, a rigid, conservative Transjordanian.

It has gradually become clear that the King believes that Jordan has successfully weathered the storm of the “Arab Spring,” thanks to the reformist yet cautious course that it plotted for itself, and its avoidance of a slide into the anarchy and elite power struggles experienced in other states. The King believes that the main challenge facing the regime is socio-economic and not political.¹⁶ But the renewal of violence and the socio-political protests in the Transjordanian periphery, and the growing gap between the Muslim Brotherhood and the regime against the backdrop of a boycott of parliamentary elections, involve a combined socio-economic and political challenge, and it is doubtful that the regime can handle these successfully as long as it continues with its conservative security thinking. The basic assumptions of the regime were indeed unexpectedly shattered with the outbreak of the mass uprising in November 2012

Implications for Israel-Jordan Relations

The conventional wisdom holds that the Hashemite regime will survive as long as it possesses the ability to fulfill the historical “social contract,” in other words, to finance patron-client relations with the Transjordanian population. But this survivability, which itself depends on Western and Gulf states to continue their economic maintenance of Jordan, as well as on the balance of fear between Transjordanians and Palestinians on the domestic front, is tenuous at best, as the King’s neo-liberal policy and the ensuing rifts with the elite and Transjordanian populace have eroded the traditional support of this sector for the regime, denying it of a major base. In the era of the “Arab Spring,” it is doubtful how long a conservative regime in a divided society lacking resources can continue to exist as the lesser of two evils. Moreover, the question is no longer the survivability of

the monarchy as a system, but its ability to take difficult decisions in the diplomatic, political, and socio-economic realms, which it will certainly need to do in the coming years. In other words, even if various causes and reasons seem to assure the survival of the Hashemite regime for now, its political power and ability to govern have declined in recent years, and the “Arab Spring” has only underscored and accelerated this process.

Under such circumstances, and as long as the regime continues to yield to conservative security thinking, three possible scenarios join the possible continuation of the status quo. The first involves a coalition between the strong power elements in the Islamic and Transjordanian oppositions and elements within the royal family, security sector, or even foreign elements, to challenge King Abdullah personally, while leaving the monarchy itself intact. The second is violent unrest, mainly on a socio-economic backdrop, that would breach the boundaries of logical considerations of the various players and bring about the downfall of the regime. The third scenario, which is perhaps most likely, is the maintenance of King Abdullah’s rule, with a noticeable and prolonged diminishing of his authority, power, and ability to govern. In each of these scenarios, it appears that the Transjordanian rural periphery will remain fundamentally a center of upheaval and anti-monarchist protest, and that violent, armed unrest among tribes, and between them and the security forces, will continue to erupt from time to time. Consequently, the possibility cannot be discounted of a sudden escalation that would spiral out of control, as occurred in November 2012.

The tight cooperation between Israel and the Jordanian military-security establishment is a source of power for both countries, especially for the Transjordanian elite. Nevertheless, it might blind Israel to developments in Jordan, as the elements of the Jordanian establishment in routine contact with Israeli colleagues would likely avoid describing the true depth of the regime’s distress: the image of “control” and “domestic stability” attributed to the Hashemite regime is a critical strategic asset for Jordan. Israel can, with US help, greatly strengthen Jordan’s military-security capabilities regarding foreign threats, but its influence over events on the domestic scene is limited, and the more it distances itself from its neighbor’s domestic issues, the better. Nevertheless, public policy – regional or bilateral – on the part of Israel, and direct or indirect messages communicated to Jordan,

can influence the decision making process in Jordan. Therefore, Israel may have a certain capability of bolstering the stability of the Hashemite regime in the domestic realm or, alternatively, undermining it.

Possible hints of change in Israel's strategic stance toward Jordan lie beyond the scope of this article.¹⁷ Suffice it to say that the most effective step that Israel can take to help stabilize the Hashemite regime is a determined and genuine pursuit of the establishment of a Palestinian state west of the Jordan River. However, as the window of opportunity for the two-state solution is in the process of closing, Israel and Jordan have entered – in the estimation of many in Jordan, including elements in its military-security establishment – a path that could end in strategic conflict. Nonetheless, Israel presumably remains anxious regarding the stability of the Hashemite regime and its ability to govern, and will do everything it can to stabilize it. Its deliberations, therefore, would concern the correct way to do this.

Anti-Islamic and anti-Palestinian conservative security thinking may lead Jordan toward the abyss. This assessment is accepted not only by the Islamist and Palestinian elite, but also by serious elements in the Transjordanian elite who discuss openly and publicly how to “save the Hashemite regime from itself.” Uncontrolled concession of the regime to the expectations and demands of its traditional pillar of support, the Transjordanian sector, will lead Jordan to economic collapse. It appears that the King understands this, as do his financiers in the West and the Gulf. In essence, since his rise to power, the King has tried tirelessly, though without success, to escape the choking grip of the Transjordanian population and the patron-client relations that have historically characterized the relationship of this sector with the regime. According to this logic, if Israel is truly and sincerely interested in stabilization of the Hashemite regime and its strengthened ability to govern, it must bolster its bargaining power versus conservative-hawkish elements among the Transjordanian elite. In other words, any Israeli action or message that will strengthen conservative-security thinking will work to the detriment of the Hashemite regime, and any action or message that will strengthen liberal-reformist thinking will work to its benefit.

An open and balanced approach by Israel to the “Arab Spring” might help strengthen the reformist school in Jordan and diminish conservative

opposition to the change demanded in order to stabilize the system. This is said, first and foremost, regarding Israel's position concerning the rise of political Islam in the Middle East. A change in Israel's policy in this area, if only rhetorical at first, is likely to strengthen the approach of the liberals in the regime leadership regarding relations with the Muslim Brotherhood on the domestic scene, and with Hamas and political Islam on the regional scene, and lead to political arrangements that would also be acceptable to elements within the kingdom's conservative security elite.

Regarding the Muslim Brotherhood, painful political concessions on the part of the regime are likely in the offing; there is already some consensus among various elements in the political elite for such measures, and some of these concessions were even approved by committees appointed by the King himself in recent years. As to Hamas, the crux is activating a political approach that in any case is accepted among circles of the Transjordanian elite, including the military-security establishment, whereby improved Jordan-Hamas relations is a strategic need for Jordan, due to considerations of West Bank stability and the future of the peace process. Indeed, the more Hamas is dependent upon Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Turkey, rather than Iran, the more this will benefit the political process between Israel and the Palestinians. This proposed adjustment of Israeli policy to the "Islamic Spring" will need to be coordinated, one way or another, with Saudi Arabia, which can thwart the effectiveness of any closer relations between Jordan and political Islam.

From a bilateral civilian perspective, it is doubtful whether Israel can provide Jordan aid that would specifically strengthen the approach of the liberals. In effect, under current circumstances a positive approach by Israel to Jordan will be insufficient to serve even the more modest purpose of displaying the two countries' relations as a role model for regional cooperation. This is not only because of the freeze in the peace process, but also due to the paralysis that has struck regime circles, and the regime's governance challenges, which limit its capability to promote unpopular policies. This state of affairs already constricts the political-diplomatic aspect of Israel-Jordan relations to more or less controlled spats over events in East Jerusalem, which, as opposed to economic cooperation with Israel, do not damage the regime's image at home.

Most of Israel's attempts at upgrading its relations with Jordan since the outbreak of the "Arab Spring" have been met with an indifferent response or have been ignored. This is due to the disappointment of the Jordanian leadership with the failures of previous agreements between the countries, as a result of Israel's suffocating bureaucracy; the unwillingness of officials in Jordan to commit to cooperation with Israel at the present time; and the inability, explicit or implicit, of the regime to back such cooperation. Nonetheless, Israel can rehabilitate the faith of the Jordanian leadership in civilian-economic cooperation between the two countries by filling the position of Head of Tracking and Oversight of Implementation of the Peace Agreement, a position that functioned in the Prime Minister's Office from 1994 to 1996. It appears that this is the only element that can accelerate inter-ministry cooperation in Israel, bypass bureaucratic obstacles quickly, and choose between the positions of various players. Israel can prove to the Jordanian government that it is giving high priority to bilateral civilian-economic cooperation. Tangible achievements for Jordan from such cooperation will not only aid the regime's stabilization; they can serve as a sorely lacking regional paradigm for how an Arab-Israeli peace accord can benefit the "common man."

In addition, the State of Israel can prepare for future events by reinforcing the efforts of the government apparatuses in charge of the Jordanian issue, both in military-security and civilian aspects. Israel needs an expert, experienced core that will be capable of providing comprehensive analyses and assessments on various topics connected with Jordan's foreign relations and domestic policies, including political economy, the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi jihadists, tribal politics, and center-periphery relations. In this framework, the erosion of the "social contract" between the regime and the Transjordanian population should be observed carefully, along with the various manifestations of the regime's lack of ability to govern. As these issues will determine the future of Jordan and the stability of the Hashemite regime, a deep familiarity with them in Israel will enable the various state apparatuses and its diplomatic and civilian arms to plan and implement a sound policy that will aid in stabilizing Israel's important neighbor to the east.

Notes

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- 3 Bassam a-Badarin, "Warnings in Jordan as to the Blurred Framework for Joining the GCC," *al-Quds al-Arabi*, November 16, 2011.
- 4 For a more extensive discussion see Assaf David, "Israel-Jordan Relations: At a Strategic Turning Point?" *Can Think*, October 27, 2011.
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- 9 For more on the cracks in support of the Transjordanian populace for the Hashemite regime as a result of the neo-liberalism led by King Abdullah, see Assaf David, "One Year since the Jordanian Spring," *Can Think*, April 2012.
- 10 See for example Nahed Hatar, "Institutionalizing the Reformist Stream in the Muslim Brotherhood," *al-Arab al-Yawm*, February 27, 2012; and Nahed Hatar, "Is Jordan a Homeland or a Theater?" *al-Akhbar*, July 10, 2012.
- 11 See for example Marwan Muasher, "A Decade of Struggling Reform Efforts in Jordan: The Resilience of the Rentier System," *Carnegie Paper* (May 2011), http://carnegieendowment.org/files/jordan_reform.pdf.
- 12 Mahmoud Abu Rumman, "Wherein Lies the Value of Changes in the Constitution?" *al-Ghadd*, August 16, 2011.
- 13 See in this context the interesting discussion on the regime-Brotherhood political duality, *al-Sabil*, November 14, 2012.
- 14 Conversation with a Jordanian researcher, November 2011.
- 15 See Assaf David, "A Syrian Bomb on the Jordanian Spring," *Can Think*, February 11, 2012.
- 16 King Abdullah's interview with Bloomberg network, August 8, 2012.
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The Future of the Peace between Israel and Egypt

Ephraim Kam

Since the signing of its peace treaty with Egypt, Israel's attitude toward the bilateral relations has always been twofold. On the one hand, peace with Egypt was seen as a strategic asset of the highest order for Israel, because it removed Egypt from the belligerent circle around Israel, thereby also removing the threat of war with other Arab nations. It had a positive effect on Israel's relations with the Arab and Muslim world, and granted Israel greater freedom of action in the region. On the other hand, Israel had expected Egypt to invest more in cultivating normalized relations, and was disappointed when that did not occur. The peace between the two nations has remained cold and the normalization of relations has remained limited, largely because Egypt did not want relations to develop further.

The transformation in Egypt since 2011, still underway and not yet fully defined, invites many questions about the future of Egypt's relationship with Israel. The rise to power in Egypt of an influential element whose basic attitude to Israel is hostile, both ideologically and in practice, raises serious doubts about the components of the peace that will be left in place between the two countries. This essay seeks to examine the variables likely to affect Israel-Egypt relations and the directions these relations could take.

Peaceful Relations in the Mubarak Era: A Firm but Narrow Base

Israel-Egypt relations were shaped during the Mubarak era, and over the years the relationship proved to be firm and stable. Both nations have made

a point of not violating the peace treaty since it was signed in 1979, even in periods of disagreement and tension, and have made it clear that they share a fundamental interest in maintaining the treaty. Egypt as well as Israel has defined peace between the two nations as a strategic asset. As a result, over time both sides developed a measure of confidence in the continuation of the treaty and its stability, and there did not appear to be elements in the offing threatening the treaty.

However, normalization of the relationship was never fully reached: there was limited contact between the respective leaderships and the respective embassies, transportation lines were opened that allowed civilian transit between the countries, though mostly from Israel to Egypt, and there were some cultural ties. Contact at the senior levels was in the hands of Mubarak and his close circle, and security cooperation was conducted by the two armies. Israeli representatives did not have access to Egypt's government ministries, parliament, or media, and the Egyptian public was not educated to understand the advantages of peace for Egypt or to recognize the right of Israel to exist.

In certain periods Egypt allowed an improvement in its relations with Israel. During the Rabin government – seen by the Egyptians as having a positive approach to the Palestinian issue – contact between the leaderships increased, Egyptian regulations on civilian and commercial traffic were relaxed, and there was a significant increase in agricultural cooperation. When the Gaza Strip was seized by Hamas, considered by the Mubarak regime a hostile and threatening entity and an Iranian proxy, security cooperation between Israel and Egypt expanded, with particular focus on the Gaza Strip and the Sinai Peninsula. However, these improvements did not affect relations as a whole between the countries, and the relationship remained limited and cool. Moreover, even the improvements in the economic realm were partly curtailed: Egyptian exports to Israel, which grew in the second half of the 1990s, dropped sharply since 2000. Egyptian imports from Israel never reached any significant scope.

Several factors led Mubarak to limit normalization ties with Israel,¹ the most important of which was the Arab-Israeli peace process, especially the Palestinian track. Egypt was committed to the establishment of a Palestinian state, and since the signing of the peace treaty it was required

to confront the allegation that, concerned only with its own interests, it had not made enough of an effort to reach agreements on the other Arab fronts. It therefore found it hard to expand the scope of its relationship with Israel as long as there was no real progress in the other channels of the peace process. The lack of a solution to the Palestinian problem weighed on Egypt because it felt that Israel had led it astray and failed to play the role it was obligated to by the Camp David accords, concluded before the peace treaty itself was signed. Therefore, Egypt used the Palestinian issue to pressure Israel on the peace process, emphasizing that full normalization would be possible only after the achievement of a comprehensive peace between Israel and the Arabs.

Another important consideration for Egypt had to do with internal constraints. Several key sectors in Egypt have a negative attitude toward peace and normalization with Israel. Among the more prominent of these sectors are the trade unions, influenced by Islamic organizations, left wing groups, and Nasserites; Islamic groups, headed by the Muslim Brotherhood; opposition parties; and many intellectuals and students, among whom both religious and left wing groups wield a great deal of influence. Various reasons account for the reservations about peace with Israel among these sectors. The Islamic groups, especially the Muslim Brotherhood and the religious establishment, were in principle opposed to the existence of Israel, seen as an alien entity planted by Western imperialists on Muslim land. Despite the peace treaty many Egyptians continued to have trouble accepting Israel as a legitimate state, while those who feared its military and technological superiority, which threaten Egypt's regional status, continued to view Israel as the enemy.² The Palestinian issue joined these domestic factors, and pictures of the intifada and confrontations between Israel and Palestinians in the media affected Egyptian attitudes to Israel and amplified the anger and hatred.

Another important consideration was the Arab stance. Egypt paid a steep price in the Arab arena for signing a peace treaty with Israel, and was shunned and semi-isolated for close to a decade. Since then, Egypt's isolation ended and the leaders of the Arab nations in principle accept the notion that the conflict with Israel must be resolved politically rather than militarily. However, the fact that the great majority of Arab states do not

have peaceful relations with Israel created a significant constraint in terms of Egypt's Israel policy. From the Egyptian perspective, Israel exploited the peace treaty to expand its freedom of action toward the Arabs, for example by taking military steps against Palestinian organizations, fighting in Lebanon, and expanding the Jewish settlements in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

On the other hand, there is the American factor. The American administration was a partner to the peace treaty; it provides an annual financial aid package to Egypt and maintains close relations, including military ties, with it. Clearly, the administration wanted and encouraged the expansion of normalization with Israel, and Egypt could not ignore America's wishes. But in the end, the American factor had only a limited effect on relations with Israel, and was more helpful in making sure these did not deteriorate, rather than prompting them to grow closer. In fact, many of Egypt's promises to the Americans during the Mubarak era to improve relations with Israel were never kept.³

Finally, Cairo's policy was affected by consideration of the Egyptian interest. The leadership understood that the country could benefit from economic cooperation with Israel, given the latter's technological capabilities. Because of this, normalization progressed in economic and trade matters rather than in other areas, and Egyptian businesspeople were those with the most positive attitude to Israel and the peace treaty. Egypt also made a point of being consistent in its supply of oil to Israel as stipulated by the peace treaty, and in 2005 signed a natural gas agreement with Israel. Likewise in this vein, Israel and Egypt signed an agreement on allocating recognized industrial zones in Israel and Egypt for the joint manufacture of goods to be exported to the United States under a preferred tax agreement.

The Changes in Egypt and the Peaceful Relations

In general, the factors that shaped the peaceful relations between Egypt and Israel during the Mubarak era – particularly Egypt's reservations on normalization versus economic and military considerations, as well as the role of the United States – will, for better and for worse, continue to affect the relationship under the new regime. But the changes that have taken

place in the character and composition of the Egyptian political system since 2011 are liable to have a negative effect on relations between Egypt and Israel. At the same time, the radical internal changes in Egypt are not over, and the alignment of forces and their interactions can be expected to evolve for quite some time with strong internal struggles. Consequently, final results and their ramifications for relations with Israel are not yet clear and may deviate from what seems likely at present.

Three changes at the heart of developments in Egypt stand to have the biggest effect on future Israeli-Egyptian relations:

- a. The Muslim Brotherhood has become the key political power in Egypt, controlling the government, parliament, and – above all – the presidency. That said, the long term power of the Muslim Brotherhood is not guaranteed, and it is confronted with strong elements that refuse to grant the President unlimited power and object to Egypt's transformation into an Islamist society.
- b. The army, until now an important political force in Egypt, lost much of its power because of public criticism, and even more so after President Mohamed Morsi, in a quick decisive move, ousted the top military brass that controlled Egypt in the interim era after the toppling of the Mubarak regime. Nonetheless, the army remains an important element in the Egyptian establishment, and the struggle between the Brotherhood and its rivals might bolster the military's influence.
- c. The Egyptian public, which under Mubarak was generally passive and silent, became an important and vocal political factor as it took to the streets at the outset of the revolution. The new regime considers itself obligated to attend to the prevalent mood and at times, cater to it as well. However, the power and influence of this public are still unclear, as the Muslim organizations have managed to sideline the younger guard of the revolution and keep it from building an organized political force.

The most important of these factors is the emergence of the Muslim Brotherhood as the central power in the Egyptian political system. The organization's basic attitude to Israel and to the peace treaty is negative, if not hostile. In 2011, the leader of the Brotherhood, Dr. Muhammad Badiya, labeled Israel and the United States Egypt's greatest enemies, and

attacked what he called the American plan to seize control of the region so as to establish a greater Israel in the new Middle East. He called the Camp David accords an agreement of surrender and demanded an end to normalization, abrogation of all economic agreements, and the permanent opening of the Rafiah crossing. Badiya made similar declarations on several subsequent occasions. Even more confrontational was an announcement issued in March 2012 by the Committee on Arab Affairs in the Egyptian parliament and endorsed by the parliament, denying Israel's right to exist and recommending that Egypt never be a friend, partner, or ally of "the Zionist entity," the number one enemy of Egypt and the greater Arab people. Thus, the parliament called on the government to reexamine its relations and agreements with the enemy and the threat it represents to Egypt's security; sever diplomatic relations; stand fully on the side of the armed struggle against Israel and view resistance as the strategy for liberating the occupied lands; and readopt the policy of total embargo on Israel.⁴

The current Egyptian government has never adopted such extreme recommendations, which would mean return to a belligerent policy – even if not necessarily a direct military conflict – with Israel. On the contrary, senior Egyptian figures, including President Morsi himself, have stressed that Egypt will respect the international treaties it has signed. However, the repeated demand to change the approach to Israel is cumulative and affects the relations. Moreover, many Egyptians, not only from Islamic organizations, have stressed the imperative of reexamining the peace treaty with Israel, be it to abrogate the treaty because Israel has violated it; to examine its permissibility according to *sharia* law; to allow the Egyptian people to vote on it via a referendum; or to amend certain components.

The two other changes that occurred during the revolution likewise have negative implications for peaceful relations with Israel. The Egyptian army command attributed special importance to maintaining Egypt's security interests, and as such was an important channel for promoting security cooperation with Israel, especially regarding the Gaza Strip and Sinai Peninsula. The weakening of its status resulting from the ouster of the veteran military leaders by Morsi in the summer of 2012, and the appointment of new leaders much more dependent on the President, is

liable to damage relations with Israel. The enhanced status of the Egyptian public as an important player in the political field is also liable to impact negatively. Relations with Israel and the peace treaty were not a key issue in the riots and demonstrations starting in 2011, though it did occasionally surface. But an important part of this public is influenced by Islamic and Nasserite elements, and was never educated to see peace with Israel as a positive value in and of itself or even accept Israel's right to exist. Israeli institutions have no way of reaching this public directly, and much of this public is openly hostile to Israel.

Possible Considerations of the Morsi Regime

The Egyptian regime's considerations about the future of peaceful relations with Israel are still in flux. It is doubtful that the regime has formulated its orientation and policy regarding Israel, as it is burdened with more pressing domestic and economic problems. The issue of Israel is fairly low on its list of priorities. Therefore, it seems that the regime has not demonstrated fundamental changes in its policy to Israel, including on the question of the peace treaty.

Several factors could motivate Egypt's leaders to preserve relations with Israel in more or less their current format. First, the basic factors that motivated Egypt to sign the peace treaty with Israel in the first place are still there: acknowledgment of the advantages of peace with Israel; awareness of Israel's military superiority and the desire to avoid a military confrontation; the need to invest resources domestically rather than militarily; and the close relations Egypt built with the United States starting in 1980.

Indeed, the position of the United States is critical to the Egyptian regime. The Egyptian economy – in difficult straits even in the Mubarak era – has deteriorated further because of the internal crisis, and the regime needs American aid more than ever before. In July 2012, the American administration made it clear it was committed to providing Egypt with all aid necessary to ensure its security on its way to democracy, and that it is in principle opposed to any Congress-sponsored linkage to military aid to Egypt. The Egyptian regime presumably understands that insofar as the American administration is tied to the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty, it will

exert pressure on Egypt not to undermine the treaty. An Egyptian move to undermine the treaty could lead to an undesirable confrontation with the United States.

Although the administration maintains a dialogue with the Egyptian regime, Egyptian-American tensions exist over certain domestic issues. The Egyptian regime does not want to be dependent on the United States, as it wants to rid itself of the image as a lackey of American interests. In September 2012, President Obama himself pointed out that while the United States and Egypt aren't enemies they aren't allies either. Thus, the following points remain unclear: the extent to which the Brotherhood wants to continue maintaining close relations with the United States; how much the American administration is willing to continue supplying Egypt with arms; and the extent to which the administration can or wants to intervene in Egypt's relations with Israel.

Egypt and Israel share interests that could help maintain peaceful relations: preventing deteriorating relations to deter terrorist attacks; preventing further armed conflict between Israel and Hamas in Gaza and attaining a stable arrangement between them; promoting an Israeli-Palestinian agreement; and preventing threats from the Syrian front.⁵ Egypt's position on the Iranian threat – an important component of Mubarak's policy – is still unclear, but thus far the current Egyptian regime has not charted a new course on the issue, and it may continue to share interests with Israel regarding the Iranian challenge.

The vacuum in the Sinai Peninsula is of great importance, and both sides would like to see Egypt enhance its control of the area. Egypt apparently understands that cooperating with Israel on Sinai could be the best way to confront the strongholds established by terrorists threatening Egyptian sovereignty there.

Finally, the Egyptian army is a positive force in maintaining cooperation with Israel because it is charged with maintaining Egypt's security interests. It has a history of contacts and security cooperation with Israel and understands very well the significance of Egypt's relations with the United States. For now, the Egyptian army continues to keep channels of communication and cooperation with Israel open, allowing problems to be resolved in a constructive atmosphere and without conflict. There is thus

a positive correlation between the extent of the army's political influence and continuing security relations between Egypt and Israel. The question remains, however, what the army's influence will be now that Morsi has curtailed it.

On the other hand, several regime concerns are liable to impinge on peaceful relations with Israel to some extent or another. The first is the religious-ideological aspect, which translates into hostility by the Muslim Brotherhood toward Israel. Many in the organization still see Israel as an enemy and a threat that lacks the right to exist as a political entity, and some have said so openly since the revolution in Egypt. Were it only up to Brotherhood ideology, it is highly possible that the peace treaty would already be a thing of the past. The key question is what kind of compromise the Brotherhood can devise to balance its ideology with existing constraints.

The second factor is the centrality of President Morsi: Mohamed Morsi quickly emerged as the strong man of the regime, and after ousting the top military brass, there is no element to balance his power. Unlike Mubarak and Sadat, Morsi has to date avoided conducting a meaningful, direct dialogue with Israel.

Third is the Palestinian problem. The lack of progress in the political process with the Palestinians casts a steady shadow over Israeli-Egyptian relations because of Egypt's basic commitment to an independent Palestinian state. As long as this goal remains unfulfilled, Egypt will continue limiting normalization with Israel. This was Mubarak's policy and will undoubtedly be Morsi's as well. The Brotherhood has explicitly accused Israel of violating the peace treaty because of the unresolved Palestinian issue, thereby opening – at least theoretically – a door to shirking Egypt's obligations should it so choose. On the other hand, the new regime too presumably understands the complexity of the issue, and that in order to promote a settlement it will have to engage with Israel and mediate among the Palestinian factions.

A related issue is the link with Hamas. The Muslim Brotherhood is the parent organization of Hamas and the two share an ideological basis, which is a potential source of friction between Israel and Egypt. Cairo is liable to increase its support of Hamas, unlike under Mubarak, who viewed Hamas as a threat to Egypt and Iran's vanguard. On the other hand, this

closeness generates its own constraints. The Hamas government in the Gaza Strip is liable to create security problems for Egypt, and the Egyptian army will not allow Hamas to damage the country's security or violate its sovereignty. The tunnels between Gaza and Sinai and traffic between the Gaza Strip and Egypt create tensions with the Egyptian government, and strengthening Hamas will come at the expense of the Palestinian Authority, an entity Egypt has no interest in weakening. Moreover, Egypt's political activity during Operation Pillar of Defense indicates that Egypt is willing to continue to take advantage of its ties with both sides to serve as mediator between Hamas and Israel in order to reduce the confrontations between them. In this sense, the links between the Brotherhood and Hamas have some positive meaning, given that as a mediator Egypt will have to take Israel's security needs and demands into account.

An additional issue concerns public pressure. The new Egyptian regime will be more sensitive than its predecessor to the public mood. Because many in the Egyptian street are hostile to Israel, the regime is liable to placate them by taking anti-Israel steps should it see the necessity to do so. And finally, Egypt's standing in the Arab world constitutes another challenge. More than the Mubarak regime, the Muslim Brotherhood desires to lead the Arab world actively, using the Islamic element while exploiting the weaknesses of key Arab nations, such as Iraq and Syria and the changing of the guard in Saudi Arabia. In this case, the regime might use hostility against Israel as a means to expand its influence.

Future Israel-Egypt Relations

The starting point for examining Israel-Egypt relations is the future of the peace treaty. While some in Egypt are calling for the treaty's abrogation, many Egyptian leaders, including President Morsi, stress that Egypt will remain committed to the international treaties it has signed. And while most of these leaders do not explicitly mention the peace treaty with Israel in this context, it is possible to understand that they have no intention of annulling it. One may therefore assume that as long as the regime's current considerations and constraints do not change, Egypt will not revoke the treaty, for several reasons. Morsi is not under any serious domestic pressure to do so, and in any event the issue is not at the top of Egypt's agenda. The

United States is pressuring him to maintain the treaty at a time when Egypt is more in need of American financial aid than ever before. Furthermore, the Egyptian regime must take into consideration the fact that Israel would react to the treaty's abrogation in a way that would hurt Egypt. Finally, as it is now trying to rehabilitate its international status, annulling an international treaty would place it in an uncomfortable position.

Even should Egypt decide not to abrogate the treaty, however, it is likely to take at least two steps on the matter. The first is the demand to amend the treaty, specifically the military appendix dealing with the deployment of troops in Sinai. This is of significant importance to Egypt. Fifteen years after the treaty was signed, the demand to amend it is legitimate. Egypt was never satisfied with the limitations on its sovereignty in Sinai and would like to see them relaxed. It is important to the new regime to show it can gain something from Israel that the previous regime did not achieve. And most important, increasing Egypt's military presence in Sinai is critical to strengthening the regime in its fight against the terrorists there, and it would like to formalize this in the agreement rather than depend on Israel's goodwill.

As for the second step, the Egyptian regime will presumably empty the treaty of at least some of its components even without abrogating the treaty as a whole. The regime has already taken steps in this vein. President Morsi does not speak directly with Israel's leaders; Israel has an ambassador in Egypt but the embassy is dormant, even if the reason is the difficulty in finding an appropriate solution for securing the embassy rather than a decision on the part of the Egyptian regime; the 2005 natural gas agreement, one of the few key manifestations of the normalization of relations, was cancelled by Egypt in April 2012. Should Morsi continue to avoid direct talks with Israel and leave these in the hands of the army, the security services, and the Foreign Affairs Ministry, it would be yet another devaluation of the level of relations with Egypt. In the meantime the talks between the respective armies are held at noticeably lower echelons than in the past. On the other hand, Morsi did dispatch a new ambassador to Israel, a clear signal that he intends to maintain the treaty. This move also encouraged Amman, after a two-year hiatus, to send a new Jordanian ambassador to Israel.

In any case, even if Egypt damages its relations with Israel, the probability that it will return to waging war seems low. While many people in Egypt have reservations about peace with Israel, there is not one serious leader or organization – nor has there been one since the signing of the treaty – proposing a return to armed conflict with Israel. Given Egypt's assessment about the balance of power and understanding the drawbacks of war, the probability is low that Egypt will seek to return to this path in the future.

Yet even if Egypt has no desire for a military conflict with Israel, the potential for local, unintentional deterioration is there, given developments in Sinai. Jihadist terrorist organizations have built strongholds in the Sinai Peninsula with the express intention of carrying out strategic attacks to puncture the peace treaty, as Israel would be forced to enter Sinai with force to prevent such attacks. In addition, Palestinian terrorists from Gaza are active in the eastern part of Sinai, which serves as a route for smuggling weapons to the Gaza Strip. Egypt did not have full control of Sinai in the Mubarak era either, but the situation has deteriorated further since the regime change. Following the deaths of 16 Egyptian soldiers in a terrorist attack in August 2012, Egyptian security forces have made great efforts to root out the terrorist nests, but this is not enough. Given the situation, a large scale attack that would force Israel to intervene in Sinai is liable to cause local deterioration between the two armies, which in an extreme situation could conceivably endanger the future of the peace treaty.

A possible confrontation between Israel and terrorists carries another dimension. The Mubarak regime's attitude to military confrontations between Israel and Palestinian organizations or Hizbollah was relatively reserved. The new Egyptian regime is liable to take a much more rigid stance toward Israel during such conflicts, especially with regard to Hamas in the Gaza Strip. Therefore, a large scale Israeli action in Gaza is liable to trigger a more severe Egyptian reaction than in the past, such as recalling the ambassador permanently and freezing relations with Israel, a response liable to cause Jordan to do the same. To be sure, the Egyptian response to Operation Pillar of Defense was fairly moderate, limited to summoning the Egyptian ambassador for consultations and dispatching the Egyptian Prime Minister to Gaza for a visit. However, this restraint was directly

linked to the operation's short duration, its limited scope that avoided a ground incursion, and the few civilian casualties in the Gaza Strip. A future broad operation, particularly if it includes a ground incursion, is likely to generate a harsher Egyptian reaction.

Conclusion

Relations between Egypt and Israel under the Muslim Brotherhood regime will differ from those during the Mubarak regime, but the extent of the difference is still unclear. Some changes have already occurred: references to Israel in the Egyptian public discourse are more hostile; President Morsi does not speak directly with Israel, and may never do so; many in Egypt are demanding the peace treaty be amended, if not revoked; and the few manifestations of normalization have become even fewer. On the other hand, there has so far been no radical transformation in Egypt's relations with Israel: continuity of the relationship is greater than any change in it; and so far the foundations of the treaty have been maintained. The treaty has not been violated; Egypt's security interests along the Sinai border and inside the Sinai Peninsula provide Egypt with motivation to continue security cooperation with Israel, and the existing dialogue offers a way to resolve problems. In addition, Egypt and Israel share other interests, the American administration is exerting pressure on Egypt not to damage peaceful relations with Israel, and Egypt's faltering economy has positive implications for relations with Israel, because it occupies most of the regime's attention and increases dependence on the United States.

The root of the problem lies in the religious ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood toward Israel, which denies Israel's right to exist and views it as a threat and an enemy. On the one hand, the regime must take into account constraints of the situation as well as security, economic, and political considerations. Egypt's policy in general and its attitude to Israel in particular derive from the tension between ideology and practice. So far, the regime has tended more to the pragmatic than the ideological side, mostly because it has almost no choice; in any case, Israel is not high on its priorities. Will the regime maintain its moderate line over time, or does it intend to bolster its political and ideological base and at some point, when it feels strong enough to deal with its obstacles and enemies, decide to

realize its ideology generally and toward Israel specifically? This remains an open question. Should the regime reach this point, its true attitude toward Israel will be tested.

The Palestinian issue will likely be pivotal to the future of Egypt-Israel relations. At some point in the foreseeable future the Egyptian regime will presumably turn its attention to it and try to promote a settlement, despite the problems and complexity, in part because this would be the most important way for Egypt to build its strength as a leader in the Arab world. The longer the freeze in the Israeli-Palestinian process lasts and the resolution of the problem seems more distant, the greater the shadow cast over Egypt-Israel relations, which would be especially tested during a violent confrontation between Israel and the Palestinians. Alternatively, real progress in the process, and certainly if Egypt is involved in achieving it, could help improve the relations between Israel and Egypt and enhance Israel's image in the Egyptian public. This would have particular significance for peaceful relations between Egypt and Israel because it would give the relationship the Muslim Brotherhood's seal of approval.

The Sinai Peninsula is becoming an important arena in Egypt-Israel relations, both for the terrorist activity there and as the route for smuggling arms and personnel into Gaza. Until now, Egypt and Israel had a common interest in curtailing this activity, and both are still interested in greater Egyptian control of the area and in preventing attacks against Israel. In the near future the Egyptians will likely raise the issue of amending the peace treaty so as to allow them better control of Sinai; this does not necessarily contradict Israel's interests, and may even have some positive aspects for it. Above all, since the purpose of the terrorists in Sinai is to undermine relations between Israel and Egypt by carrying out a large attack against Israel, Israel will have to demonstrate sensitivity, restraint, and caution to make sure these elements do not achieve their goal.

Finally, it will take some time until the outlook of the current Egyptian regime is fully fashioned. The change of regime has occurred in tandem with a struggle between the Muslim Brotherhood and its rivals, which includes the army as well. Therefore, Egypt's future policy toward Israel will be influenced by the greater process of change, and as such may ultimately present differently from the way it appears today.

Notes

- 1 See David Sultan, *Between Cairo and Jerusalem: Normalization Between Arab Nations and Israel – the Egyptian Example* (University Institute for Diplomacy and Regional Cooperation, Tel Aviv University, 2007), pp. 35-38.
- 2 Ibid., p. 70.
- 3 Ibid., p. 35.
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The Crisis in Syria: Threats and Opportunities for Israel

Eyal Zisser

In March 2011, the “Spring of Arab Nations” that in previous months had visited other states throughout the Middle East arrived in Syria. The demonstrations that began in the city of Daraa in the south and in several northern coastal cities soon spread to all parts of Syria, eventually reaching the large cities of Damascus and Aleppo.

The Syrian regime failed in its attempts to put down or even to contain the uprising, which continued to spread and take deeper root among large segments of Syrian society throughout the country. Nevertheless, over a long period the regime’s opponents were hard pressed to close ranks and form a unified opposition movement with an agreed-upon, effective leadership that would present an alternative to the incumbent regime. Thus, despite the intensity of the fire that has swept through Syria, the regime thus far remains intact, and even continues to maintain its unity and hold among its traditional power bases within Syrian society (members of religious and ethnic minorities, and the middle and upper classes in the big cities).

The result was that Syria became mired in a violent, bloody struggle that has seen no resolution. In face of this conflict, the Syrian social fabric began to break up into its basic components: communal groups, tribes, and clans. Control by the regime, and especially by the security apparatuses that had restrained Syria with a tight fist for four decades, was replaced by chaos and anarchy that overcame broad regions of the country. Rather quickly, sectarian, regional, and social tensions – which until then were

contained and subdued – rose to the surface, and Syria found itself thrown into a civil war. Even more problematic, it turned into a hub for young jihadist volunteers converging from all over the Arab and Muslim world to fight the “heretical” Alawite regime in Damascus.

The uprising in Syria heralded the end of a long period where the country, under the leadership of the Assad dynasty, demonstrated stability and power, and thereby was able to play an active, even central role in its immediate environs – in Lebanon, vis-à-vis Israel, and in the Palestinian and Iraqi arenas. Syria suddenly found itself cast into a reality of instability and uncertainty, which translated into a renewed struggle for Syria – both an internal struggle for control over the country, and an effort by external regional forces to wield influence, led on the one hand by Iran and Hizbollah, and on the other hand by the Arab and Sunni axes that include moderate states such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey. Such a situation meant a return for Syria to its first decades, which were characterized by diplomatic weakness, political instability, frequent governmental upheavals, and most of all, foreign involvement in its affairs.

The reality that has engulfed Syria since the outbreak of the uprising against Bashar al-Assad’s regime presents a host of complex dilemmas for Israel. Jerusalem may have seen the Syrian regime as hostile, if not dangerous, due to its membership in the axis of evil, along with Iran, Hizbollah, and Hamas. Nonetheless, the same regime made sure to maintain total quiet along the shared border in the Golan Heights, and even displayed restraint in refraining from any reaction to Israeli moves against it, e.g., the bombing of the Syrian nuclear reactor in September 2007 attributed to Israel. Such restraint prevented a reaction that could have led to deterioration between the countries ending in direct conflict, if not an all-out war. True, the fall of Bashar’s regime could deal a severe blow to Iran and Hizbollah, but at the same time, it could enable al-Qaeda-inspired terror elements to establish themselves along the Syria-Israel border in the Golan Heights, turning the region into a mirror of the Sinai Peninsula, a region lacking centralized control that serves as a hotbed for terror organizations. In addition, Israel is concerned about the flow of advanced Syrian weapons, even nonconventional ones, into the hands of Hizbollah and other terror groups, should the governmental system in Syria collapse.

The purpose of this article is to present a picture of the Syrian uprising from its first year, as well as an examination of the risks and opportunities it presents for Israel.

Israel and the Struggle for Syria

The history of the Syrian state, from its earliest days and certainly since it gained independence in April 1946, has been marked by prolonged struggles regarding its identity, direction, control, and even the fact of its existence. The roots of this struggle, which academic literature has labeled the “struggle for Syria,”¹ were found in large measure in the sources of Syria’s internal and external weakness, including the weakness of the institution of the state, which made it difficult for Syria’s leaders to establish and maintain a central government capable of enforcing its authority over Syria’s citizens; a deep divide in Syrian society along communal, religious, regional, socio-economic, and even ideological grounds; a growing gap between the urban centers and the rural and peripheral regions; and more.

This reality led all Syrian regimes to focus on domestic Syrian issues, thus denying them the ability to play a central role on the regional scene, including the conflict with Israel. However, the rise to power of the Baath party in March 1963 brought somewhat of a change in this situation, as Damascus’ radical policy led to escalation on the Israel-Syria border that eventually deteriorated into a full regional conflict, the Six Day War of June 1967.² Nevertheless, both before and during the war, decision makers in Israel did not perceive Syria as a military threat – such as that presented by Egypt – and at most related to it, in the words of then-Defense Minister Moshe Dayan, as a “nuisance.”³

The rise to power of Hafez al-Assad in Damascus in November 1970 effected a fundamental change in the Syrian reality, and ostensibly brought the “struggle for Syria” to its conclusion. Assad provided Syria with the political stability it had never known, and was able to turn Syria into a strong regional power, casting its shadow over its environs.⁴ Under Assad, Syria turned from a passive, weak state into a central actor in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Nevertheless, except for the Yom Kippur war, which was a joint Egyptian-Syrian initiative to attack Israel, Damascus has made sure – perhaps as a lesson learned from the war of October 1973 – not

to initiate or even to be dragged into a direct military conflict with Israel, and to maintain absolute quiet along the Golan Heights front. Even the conflict between the two nations in Lebanon in June 1982 did not result from a Syrian initiative; rather, it was Israel that launched this conflict out of a desire to push Syria out of Lebanon. Syria at the time avoided any confrontation with Israel, and made use of proxies – Palestinian and Lebanese organizations – to further its interests with attacks against Israel in the Palestinian and Lebanese arenas.⁵

In the 1980s, in the wake of what became known as the First Lebanon War – in which the IDF attacked Syrian forces in Lebanon – Assad's Syria adopted a policy of strategic balance whose purpose was to turn the Syrian military, with Soviet aid, into a powerful adversary equal to the IDF.⁶ However, the collapse of the Soviet Union beginning in the late 1980s led to the abandonment of this strategy. Moreover, Hafez al-Assad chose to join the Arab-Israeli peace process that was launched in the early 1990s, and began conducting direct negotiations with Israeli representatives with the goal of reaching a peace agreement. Nevertheless, Assad's readiness to reach an agreement with Israel was limited, as he, as well as Israel, presented red lines that ultimately failed the attempt to reach a peace agreement.⁷

Upon Hafez al-Assad's death in June 2000, his son Bashar rose to power, which raised doubts among many in Syria and abroad regarding his ability to fill the large shoes of his father. Over the years, however, it appears that Bashar has managed to consolidate his position and his regime, both within Syria and abroad.⁸ Overall, Bashar continued to follow his father's policies regarding Israel, albeit with noticeably less caution and sans the good judgment evinced by his father. He continued to declare his commitment to the peace process with Israel, and was even willing to engage in contacts regarding peace, such as those with the Olmert government in early 2008.⁹ He also made sure to avoid direct conflict with Israel, and continued to maintain quiet along the shared border in the Golan Heights. At the same time, he greatly expanded his ties with Iran as well as with Hizbollah, which he armed with advanced weapons, some of Syrian manufacture. His decision to construct a nuclear reactor in Dir al-Zur in northern Syria with North Korean assistance likewise did not suggest political maturity.

Nevertheless, after Israel's alleged destruction of the reactor in September 2007, Bashar refrained from retaliating against Israel.¹⁰

The Decade of Bashar (2000-2010)

In late 2010, Bashar's al-Assad's regime seemed stronger and more stable than ever. A decade after succeeding his father, Bashar was perceived as someone who was able to consolidate his power and assert his authority over the Syrian governmental system, especially over the party apparatuses, governing bodies, and the military and security services. In addition, he succeeded in advancing a series of economic moves, limited in scope but with a cumulative effect of slightly opening the Syrian economy to the broader world, and encouraging the activity of the private sector at the expense of the public sector controlled by the government and the Baath party. These moves enabled him to win the support of the middle class and the Sunni economic elite in the big cities, especially Damascus and Aleppo.¹¹

Bashar recorded his greatest success, however, as had his father, in foreign policy. Since he rose to the helm, Bashar has consistently displayed stubbornness toward the US and has worked to upset Washington's moves and plans in the region. He positioned himself as the head of the radical camp in the Arab world, as a friend of Iran, and as a central and active partner with Hizbollah and Hamas in the anti-Israel and anti-American axis. At first this seemed a rash, dangerous, and even suicidal policy for Bashar and his regime, and indeed, the administration of George W. Bush hurried to wage an open campaign against Syria. The President forced Syria out of Lebanon, isolated it internationally, and made no secret of his hope for regime change in Damascus. These developments probably reinforced Bashar's faith, or more precisely his fear, that Syria under his leadership faced an existential threat to its stability and independence from the US administration.¹²

But Bashar is the one that emerged with the upper hand in this conflict, primarily because the US lacked determination, willpower, and perhaps even practical ability to act against Syria and bring about the downfall of the regime. Little wonder, then, that toward the end of the first decade of Bashar's rule Syria experienced a significant improvement in its regional

and international standing. Damascus succeeded in freeing itself of the isolation forced upon it by the Bush administration, and returned to play a regional role in the Lebanese, Palestinian, and even Iraqi arenas.

Under the leadership of Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, Israel – already by the beginning of 2008 – was the first to disobey Washington and renew the Israeli-Syrian peace talks, and following Israel's lead, the countries of Europe hurried to warm their relations with Damascus. Throughout that time, Turkey and Syria continued to work at nurturing and tightening their relations into an intimate alliance based on a deep personal friendship that formed between Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and President Assad. An improvement was also seen in Syria's relations with Saudi Arabia, as well as with other Arab states in the Gulf and in North Africa. With the inauguration of Barack Obama as US president in January 2009, the American campaign against the Syrian regime was in effect replaced by an American effort, though ultimately unsuccessful, to turn over a new leaf in US-Syria relations.¹³

Over a prolonged period, and certainly until the outbreak of the wave of Arab uprisings in early 2011, the prevalent view, even among Syrians who did not hide their distaste for Bashar's regime, was that for now there was no alternative. However, all of this was to change quite quickly.

The Arab Spring Comes to Syria: The Roots of the Protest

In December 2010, the "Arab Spring" broke out, first in Tunisia and afterward in Egypt, Libya, and Yemen. In the first months of the upheaval, Syria remained a bystander to events, and it appeared that the wave of Arab revolutions would pass it by.

And indeed, in late January 2011, a few days before the fall of Mubarak but when it was already clear that the Egyptian regime's days were numbered, the Syrian President gave an interview to the *Wall Street Journal* and related to the seminal events in Tunis and Egypt. With self-confidence bordering on arrogance (which soon proved baseless), Bashar calmed his concerned interviewers, insisting that Syria is not Egypt. He then explained why the earthquake that struck the Arab world would bypass Syria: "Egypt has been supported financially by the United States, while we are under embargo by most countries of the world...We do not have many of the

basic needs for the people. Despite all that, the people do not go into an uprising. So it is not only about the needs and not only about the reform. It is about the ideology, the beliefs and the cause that you have.”¹⁴

Once the lot in Cairo was cast, the Syrian media, which during the crisis in Egypt exercised restraint and took a cautious line, hurried to echo their President, and went a step further in blaming the fall of Husni Mubarak’s regime on its commitment to the peace agreement with Israel, as if what brought the masses to the streets was the question of ties with Israel. Thus, argued the Syrian media, Syria’s commitment to the resistance camp would ensure Bashar al-Assad’s power forever. For example, the regime mouthpiece *Tishrin* wrote on March 13, 2011 that “the Egyptian nation removed the ‘Camp David Regime’ from power, a regime that had stolen the bread from the people.”¹⁵

However, Bashar al-Assad was to find out soon enough that the conflict with Israel had ceased occupying a central place among Arab public opinion, and that it was no longer what moved the Arab street as it had in the past or even during the first decade of the new millennium – in the shadow of the Palestinian intifada, the Second Lebanon War in 2006, and Operation Cast Lead in 2009. Upon the conclusion of Friday prayers in the mosques on March 18, 2011, demonstrations began in a number of cities in northern and central Syria, including Homs, Aleppo, and Banias. A large demonstration in Daraa in the south included several thousand people and grew quickly out of control, with the demonstrators attacking and setting fire to government and public buildings. In confrontations with the Syrian security forces, two demonstrators were killed, and during their funerals the following day three more people were killed.¹⁶ Since then, Syria has known no quiet.

From Protest to Revolt

As opposed to other Arab countries such as Tunisia or Egypt, where the battle was decided immediately after the outbreak of the first demonstrations in the streets of Tunis and Cairo, and in contrast with Libya or Yemen, where the fire spread rapidly and took hold throughout the country, in Syria the process was slow and gradual, with ups and downs, immersing the country in a long, winding, blood-soaked struggle. Indeed, it is difficult to point to

any one dramatic event that heralded a turning point in the Syrian uprising, or even a shift from one phase to the next. This was a prolonged sinking of Syria into a quagmire whereby sporadic demonstrations, significant in their own right, turned into a broad popular protest, which in turn became a violent, uncompromising struggle between the regime and its opponents, until the Syrians eventually found themselves in the midst of a full-blown violent civil war.

From the outset the Syrian regime chose to employ force against those who demonstrated against it, with the hope that it would thus be able to contain and suppress the uprising. By mid April 2011, when the police and security forces were unsuccessful at putting down the protestors despite the dozens of fatalities each week, the Syrian army assumed the task. On April 22, 2011 army forces entered Daraa, and subsequently they were sent to all key conflict points, with assistance from the armored corps, artillery, and air force planes and helicopters. Sending in the army against the rebels, however, did not stop the conflagration. On the contrary, the military's violence was met with violence on the part of the rebels, and the protest in Syria evolved from largely quiet, weekend affairs into daily confrontations between army forces and armed groups. Under such circumstances, defections from among the ranks of the army began, gradually gaining momentum over time, and in July 2011 groups of defectors formed the Free Syrian Army, under the command of Riad al-Asaad. This was a sort of umbrella body whose commanders operated from Turkey and controlled, albeit loosely, some of the armed groups, mainly those not identified with radical Islam or al-Qaeda supporters who had infiltrated Syria. This body represents a conduit for weapons and money to the rebels in Syria from Arab states and Turkey, and perhaps even the US.

The difficulty in closing ranks among the rebels in Syria reflected the divides that have always characterized Syrian society. Indeed, the rebels failed in their attempt to found a unified movement, under an agreed-upon leadership. Thus, for example, the National Council, founded by opposition activists with Arab and Western backing in Istanbul in September 2011, became an empty entity unable to wield authority and unite the various opposition groups – those within Syria and those abroad – around it. In November 2012, with encouragement from the US and the Gulf states, the

establishment of a new opposition organization was announced in Qatar. The National Coalition was meant to replace the National Council as the organization that would coordinate the activities of the rebels against the Syrian regime.¹⁷

Although nearly two years have passed since the outbreak of the uprising against the regime of Bashar al-Assad, the bloody struggle that has beset the country since then and has taken the lives of more than forty thousand people does not appear to be close to conclusion. The regime failed in its attempts at suppressing the protest, which took deeper root. However, it has remained standing on its feet, though wounded and weakened, meeting the protest with part of its war machine, fighting for its life, and retaining the support of important power elements of Syrian society, led by members of religious minorities. The result was the sinking of Syria into a reality of chaos, anarchy, and ongoing bloodshed.

At the start of the unrest, the Syrian regime relied on the steadfast support of the coalition of minorities in Syria; the middle class and elites in the big cities; and the army, security apparatuses, and government bureaucracy. This constellation, however, has not proved entirely steadfast. True, the minority groups continued to stand at the regime's side (led by the Alawites, and joined by the Christians, Druze, and even the Kurdish population in the north, which has exercised restraint); in the big cities there was still relative quiet; and the army and government apparatuses continued to function and assist the regime in fighting its opponents. Nonetheless, it is clear that the army and security apparatuses have weakened gradually as a result of a growing trend of defections. The support of the silent majority among the middle and upper classes in Damascus and Aleppo has likewise gradually eroded. These sectors supported the regime because they feared its fall would cast Syria into chaos and anarchy, as in Iraq, but a change in attitude among the middle and upper classes began to take shape. To them, even chaos and anarchy began to seem preferable to the continued reality of ongoing bloodshed, economic deterioration, and lack of personal security. For them it became clear that if Bashar could not bring about a conclusion to the crisis, and if keeping him in power was precisely what was feeding the crisis, then it would be better if he left.¹⁸

One of the low points of the deterioration in Syria was an attack on July 18, 2012 at the Office of National Security, the inner sanctuary of the Syrian security establishment. In the attack, senior members of the military and security establishment of Syria were killed, people who had commanded the fight against the rebels. Among those killed were Minister of Defense Daud Rajaha; head of the crisis management unit Hasan Turkhmani; and Deputy Minister of Defense and brother-in-law of President Assad Asaf Shawkat. The attack also wounded the head of the Office of National Security, Hisham Akhthiar, who died two days later, and the Minister of the Interior, Muhammed Sha'aar, who alone survived the attack. The blow to the heads of the Syrian regime was accompanied by an attack on Damascus by armed groups, some belonging to the Free Syrian Army. The armed fighters succeeded in taking control of several of the city's neighborhoods, including the al-Midan quarter, and at first it seemed that Damascus would fall to the rebels in a matter of hours or days. A few days later, the rebels attacked Aleppo, the second most important city in the country, and even succeeded in taking control of large parts of it. At that time it was also reported that the rebels had managed to take over the border crossings between Syria and Turkey and Iraq. Eventually, it was reported that the Kurds in the north and east of Syria (roughly 10 percent of the Syrian population), who until that point had not allied themselves clearly for or against Assad, cut themselves off from the regime but without joining the ranks of the rebels.

These dramatic developments occurred against the background of a wave of defections from regime ranks – both from the military and other government branches. Thus, for example, it was reported in early July 2012 that Manaf Talas, son of the former Minister of Defense Mustafa Talas, who served as a brigade commander in a Republican Guard unit and who was known for his close personal relationship with Bashar al-Assad, had defected to Paris together with several family members. For the first time, there also appeared cracks in the Syrian diplomatic staff, when Syrian ambassadors in several countries, such as Iraq, Cyprus, and the United Arab Emirates, declared that they would no longer represent the regime in Damascus. Later, in early August 2012, Prime Minister Riad Hijab defected to Jordan. Thus, what appeared at the beginning of the

uprising as a thin, insignificant trickle of defections turned into a flood, with those involved trying to rescue themselves from the sinking ship.¹⁹ In any case, there is no doubt that the uprising in Syria entered a new phase in July 2012, which may prove to be the deciding phase of the campaign for Syria underway since March 2011.

Syria as a Regional and International Playing Field

Under the rule of Hafez al-Assad, Syria became a regional power with standing in its environs and beyond. The ongoing uprising, however, has set it back decades to its beginnings as an independent state, when it was a theater for conflict between regional and international powers who sought to use it to achieve power and influence.

The reaction of the international community to the events in Syria was at first muted and muddled. Especially interesting was the reaction of Western countries, led by the US. Caught unprepared by the wave of protests that engulfed the Middle East, they quickly found themselves enmeshed in the crisis situations that formed in Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Bahrain. In light of the desire to shun involvement in yet another unpromising conflict, but also in light of the limited nature of the protests in Syria and the assessment that the Syrian regime could overcome them, intervention was not an option that was initially considered seriously. In addition, the fear that Bashar's regime would be replaced by chaos that would quickly spread – to Lebanon and the Israeli, Jordanian, Palestinian, and Iraqi arenas – joined the concern regarding the Islamic bent taken by the uprisings in Egypt, Tunis, Libya, and even Syria to deter many, even though in Syria the power of the Islamic movements has always been perceived as limited due to the composition of the country's population (minorities account for 40 percent), and the strong and deep-rooted secular tradition among the Sunni middle class in the big cities. Given all these factors, the international community preferred in the first months of the unrest to sit on the sidelines and observe events from afar, even giving Bashar al-Assad support in his efforts to stabilize and calm the stormy winds in Syria.²⁰

However, as the weeks and months passed and the protest in Syria not only did not peter out but grew and intensified, a change – even a dramatic

change – was evident in the positions of the Arab street, the Arab countries, and the international community in relation to events in Syria and the regime. This change was rooted first of all in the growing assessment that the Syrian regime would fall, as in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, but also in the exposure of the world to the regime's brutality and the massacre of demonstrators by the dozens. The Arab street was especially affected by this, and it became an important consideration among many Arab countries.

The Arab opposition to Syria was led by Saudi Arabia, apparently out of the Saudi understanding that Syria was becoming an arena for struggle between Iran and the Sunni Arab world. To Riyadh, this called for firm moves to sway the campaign in Syria against Assad's regime, especially considering the weakness if not helplessness demonstrated by the US in its handling of regional problems. Saudi Arabia thus offered generous financial support to the rebels, mainly Islamic groups active within Syria. Turkey shared Saudi Arabia's concerns, although Ankara, and especially AKP leaders, had other interests in their southern neighbor, connected with Turkey's aspirations to play a leading role in the Arab and Sunni world. Thus, Turkey allied itself behind the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, while simultaneously providing shelter and logistical aid to the Free Syrian Army, which located its command posts on Turkish territory. Qatar acted similarly, enlisting the al-Jazeera television network in the struggle against Bashar's regime and providing financial aid and support to the various rebel groups, even though it appears that Qatar and Saudi Arabia have also sponsored particular groups within Syria.

Nevertheless, despite the Arab pressure, joined too by Egypt after the election of Mohamed Morsi as president in June 2012, the international community has had difficulty finding a remedy to the Syrian crisis. The US and Western countries did not conceal their hesitation at getting involved in events in Syria, not only because of Russian opposition but also out of fear that Syria would become a quagmire along the likes of Afghanistan or Iraq that would ensnare anyone who braved involvement. Moreover, the Syrian military retains air and missile defense capabilities that could turn any foreign intervention in Syria into a costly affair with many losses. Perhaps predictably, therefore, the US and European countries have sufficed with

logistical and other assistance to rebel groups, in the hope that they would do the work for the West.

In any case, Syria, which in recent decades was perceived as a regional power, has resumed its role as a theater for a regional and international struggle. Iran and Hizbollah on one side face Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the other moderate Arab countries. A second axis pits the US and European states against Russia. Iran and Hizbollah began to help the regime survive and may have even sent personnel to aid the regime, mainly in organizing militias among the Alawite community, which has Shiite origins. Russia continued to provide economic assistance and even arms to Syria as a counterweight to US opposition to the Syrian regime, and also because it views Bashar al-Assad's regime as the final Middle East outpost obstructing the spread of radical Islam, which potentially threatens Russia itself.²¹

Israel and Syria

Upon the outbreak of unrest in Syria in March 2011, many in Israel made no secret of their fear that the downfall of Bashar al-Assad's regime would undermine the stability along the Israeli-Syrian border, and perhaps in the entire region. After all, Bashar was the "devil that you know," a partner of convenience for Israeli governments in their efforts to maintain a no peace/no war reality, and thereby maintain the status quo between the countries. Indeed, maintenance of the status quo was the preferred policy of most Israeli governments, which feared the political risks involved in furthering the peace process but at the same time desired continued quiet along the Golan Heights. Indeed, Syrian businessman Raami Mahloun, a confidante and relative of Bashar, said in a May 10, 2011 interview to the *New York Times* that if there is no stability in Syria, there will be no chance of stability in Israel. He asserted, "No one can guarantee what will be if something should happen to the Syrian regime. I am not saying a war will break out, but I am saying that no one should push Bashar against the wall."²²

Some in Israel saw the events of the Nakba on May 15, 2011 and the Naksa on June 5, 2011 as a sign for the future. In the course of these two days, hundreds if not thousands of Palestinian refugees attempted to break through to the territory of the State of Israel in the Golan Heights region of Ein al-Thina in Majdal Shams, and on the Israel-Lebanon border in

the area of Shaar Fatma. The incidents along the border fence left dozens of dead and wounded. It was difficult to assess whether it was the Syrian regime that was behind these events, with a goal of letting off some steam and perhaps also of turning attention away from events within Syria, or of sending a message to Israel. It was also, perhaps, a loss of control, an expression of the weakness of this regime, and its inability to rule the border area.²³

But Israel too ultimately reached the conclusion that Bashar al-Assad's fate was sealed. In his remarks to the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee on January 2, 2012, Defense Minister Ehud Barak stated that Assad's days were numbered. IDF Chief of Staff Benny Gantz issued a statement that Israel was preparing to deal with Alawite refugees who might flee to the Golan should the Syrian regime fall.²⁴ Indeed, there is no doubt that Israel is disturbed by the growing involvement of Iran and Hizbollah in events in Syria, in their efforts to aid Bashar's regime. This was affirmed by GOC Northern Command Yair Golan in April 2012:

Iran is supplying weapons to Syria all the time. This is an ongoing, constant effort. The Iranians say to Assad, "Look, you are important to us," and they support him energetically. Some of the resilience of the Syrian regime stems from Assad's sense that he still enjoys support in his immediate environs, overseas, and among the superpowers. In other words, when Assad looks outside, he says, "I have Hizbollah, which helps. I have the Iranians; they support me." And in the background are China and Russia...Iran and Hizbollah are involved neck deep when we speak of the "axis of evil." We are talking about Hizbollah personnel fighting there – instructors, teachers, and in my assessment combatants as well."²⁵

It seems that more than with the problem of refugees that might reach Israel, Jerusalem is occupied by the advanced weapons possessed by the Syrian regime that might fall into hostile hands, whether terror elements such as al-Qaeda or the rebels themselves, or in the worst case as far as Israel is concerned, Hizbollah. Hizbollah might exploit its ties with Bashar's regime to attempt to smuggle, under cover of future Syrian anarchy, these

advanced weapons to their bases in Lebanon. Certain figures in Israel, joined in July 2012 by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Ehud Barak, even warned explicitly that in such an event Israel would not hesitate to attack and destroy the Syrian chemical weapons installations, to prevent such weapons from falling into the hand of Hizbollah and its allies, or into the hands of other Islamic radicals. The American administration is a party to Israel's concern, and with forceful declarations warned the Syrian regime that it holds it responsible for the chemical weapons, and warned against its use of the weapons or their transfer to foreign hands. For its part, the Syrian regime has denied that it intends to make use of such weapons against its people. But in a statement delivered by Foreign Ministry spokesman Jihad al-Makdisi in Damascus, Syria admitted – for the first time – that it possesses such weapons, designated for use, according to the spokesman, against a foreign attack on its soil.²⁶

In any case, those calling for shunning involvement in Syria or those hoping Bashar will stay in power have begun to be replaced by others urging that it would be best for Israel, and likewise the US and other Western countries, to let Bashar continue to bleed, and it may even be best if he falls, for that would weaken the radical axis in the Middle East, which would serve Israeli interests. In early March 2012 Israel's then-Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman even proposed that Israel stand at the vanguard of those calling for the removal of Bashar from power, and encourage its allies to work toward this goal. During a visit to Washington in April 2012 Defense Minister Barak called for the US to take a more active policy against Bashar, with the goal of bringing about his downfall.²⁷

Off the record, many senior Israeli officials have expressed support for continuation of the current state of affairs in Syria, in which the Syrian regime continues to rule with enough power to maintain quiet along the border with Israel and prevent Syria's fall into radical Islamic hands. However, the continuation of the uprising forces the regime to focus on domestic issues while weakening it, and as such, the power of the Syrian state that still views Israel as an enemy is limited. Casting a shadow on such assessments is a series of shooting incidents along the border during November 2012, stemming from the Syrian regime's loss of control and

ability to govern in the border areas, as well as exchanges of fire between groups of rebels that in many cases spilled over into Israeli territory.²⁸

In Israel there are even voices calling to use the regional rift to advance understandings with Turkey. Ankara has become the leading element in the international pressure against Syria, and its relations with Damascus reached crisis levels, even to the point of military confrontation. Turkey sharpened its anti-Syria rhetoric, began providing aid to the Free Syrian Army and to Syrian refugees, and in July 2012, following the downing of a Turkish fighter jet by the Syrians, and after Kurds in the north of Syria began acting to establish a Kurdish autonomy along the Turkish border, began amassing military forces along the Turkish-Syrian border. Concern about the future of Syria could theoretically bring Israel and Turkey closer together, but the two countries have not yet seen fit to take advantage of this concern to renew the strategic dialogue between them that was halted in the wake of the *Mavi Marmara* incident in May 2010.

Conclusion

Whatever the future holds for the Syrian regime – whether it survives by the sword or whether it falls to a new political order in Syria – it appears that Syria will not regain a central role in regional politics any time soon. Moreover, in the near future the regime in Damascus – any regime – will likely be hard pressed to impose its authority throughout the country, just as occurred during the first decades of Syria's independence. Syria of the future will also likely be a platform for action by radical Islamic terror groups such as al-Qaeda, while the Muslim Brotherhood will be one of the important power elements in the country.

In any case, nearly two years after the outbreak of the uprising in Syria, Israel is still cautiously following events in Damascus with concern, though no longer hoping for maintenance of the status quo along the border. Rather, the fall of the Syrian regime is expected, and with it is a hope that this will deal a severe blow to the regional standing of Iran and Hizbollah. Nevertheless, along with hope for a change in Syria, there exists a fear that the quiet in the Golan Heights will be replaced by chaos and terror, such as what prevails along the Sinai border. Israel also remains concerned about the advanced weaponry possessed by the Syrian military.

Nevertheless, Israel now has a window of opportunity that can be exploited with regional and international powers to shape the future face of Syria. Such an effort would require Israel to stop straddling the fence as a bystander, and become an active player and partner in the regional and international coalition interested in toppling Bashar al-Assad's regime and fostering stability in Syria in the period that follows.

This window of opportunity includes, first, promotion of a dialogue with Turkey and with the moderate Arab states – Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states, and even Egypt – regarding the future of Syria. Second is the promotion of an indirect dialogue, by way of Western states or perhaps regional players, with opposition elements in Syria, at least with those that lean toward Washington, European nations, and even Turkey and are not identified with radical Islam. Third is the promotion of a dialogue with the US, European states, and perhaps also Russia, with Israel positioning itself as an active player able to contribute to relevant decisions in these countries, if only due to a better understanding of events in Syria.

Simultaneously, Israel should prepare for the effects of events in Syria – including the possible collapse of the Syrian regime – on Jordan and Lebanon, two arenas of importance for Israel. In Jordan, the Hashemite regime continues to face a prolonged public protest that is likely to intensify should Bashar's regime fall. In Lebanon, Israel faces a status quo, especially on the Israel-Lebanon border, that has been in force since 2006. This status quo may show some cracks in the wake of upheavals in Syria, as the Syrian uprising can flow, and indeed has begun to flow, into Lebanon, and thus raise tensions between Lebanese Sunnis and Shiites, undermine Lebanon's stability, and diminish the ability and interest by Lebanon, as well as Hizbollah, in maintaining the quiet along the Lebanon-Israel border.

The question is whether Israel will manage to deal wisely with the challenges to its ongoing security that the fall of the Syrian regime will present, and whether it will successfully exploit such a scenario to advance its strategic interests with Turkey, the moderate Arab states, Saudi Arabia, and even a future Syria. This question depends on Israel's overall policy in the face of the events in its environs, especially its future relations with Egypt and the Palestinians. These elements will determine whether the

Syrian spring will be a short timeout in the continual winter of Damascus-Jerusalem relations, or a true political climate change for the two countries.

Notes

- 1 Patrick Seale, *The Struggle for Syria: A Study of Post-War Arab Politics, 1945-1958* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965). See also Eyal Zisser, *Faces of Syria: Regime, Society and State* (Tel Aviv: HaKibbutz Hameuhad, 2003), pp. 16-71.
- 2 See Eyal Zisser, "Between Israel and Syria: The Six Day War and its Aftermath," *Iyunim Bitkumat Israel*, Vol. 8 (1998), pp. 202-52.
- 3 Author's interview with Brig. Gen. (ret.) Aryeh Shalev, Tel Aviv, September 13, 1996. See also Moshe Dayan, *Milestones: An Autobiography* (Tel Aviv: Yediot Ahronot, 1976), p. 474.
- 4 See Patrick Seale, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East* (California: University of California Press, 1989); and Eyal Zisser, *Syria under Asad: At a Crossroads* (Tel Aviv: HaKibbutz Hameuhad, 1999).
- 5 See Avner Yaniv, Moshe Ma'oz, Avi Kober, eds., *Syria and Israel's Security* (Tel Aviv: Maarachot, 1990), pp. 13-34, 335-86.
- 6 See Moshe Ma'oz, *Asad: The Sphinx of Damascus: A Political Biography* (Grove Press, 1988).
- 7 For historical background concerning the Syria-Israel peace negotiations, see Itamar Rabinovich, *The Threshold of Peace* (Tel Aviv: Yediot Ahronot, 1998); Moshe Ma'oz, *Israel and Syria: The End of the Conflict* (Or Yehuda: Maariv, 1996); and Zisser, *Syria under Asad*, pp. 120-66.
- 8 For more on Bashar, see Eyal Zisser, *In the Name of the Father: Bashar al-Asad's First Years in Power* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 2004).
- 9 Eyal Zisser, "It's a Long Road to Peace with Syria: From the Second Lebanon War to Peace Overtures in Ankara," *Strategic Assessment* 11, no. 2 (2008): 107-22.
- 10 See Eyal Zisser, "An Israeli Watershed: Strike on Syria," *Middle East Quarterly* 15, no. 3 (2008): 57-62.
- 11 See for example Fred H. Lawson, ed., *Demystifying Syria* (London: Saqi, 2009); Carsten Wieland, *Syria at Bay, Secularism, Islamism and "Pax-Americana"* (London: Hurst, 2006).
- 12 See the testimony of former President George Bush in his memoir, *Decision Points* (New York: Crown, 2010), as well as the testimony of former British Prime Minister Tony Blair in his memoir, *A Journey* (London: Hutchinson, 2010).
- 13 Eyal Zisser, "Syria's Diplomatic Comeback: What Next?" *Mediterranean Politics* 14, no. 1 (2009): 107-13.

- 14 See Bashar al-Assad's interview in the *Wall Street Journal*, January 30, 2011.
- 15 See editorial in *Tishrin*, March 13, 2011. See also "What's behind the News," *al-Wattan*, February 14, 2011.
- 16 On the Syrian revolution, see Fouad Ajami, *The Syrian Rebellion* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012); Eyal Zisser, "The Renewal of the 'Struggle for Syria': The Rise and Fall of the Ba'th Party," *Sharqiyya* (fall 2011): 21-29.
- 17 For more on the rebels and their military strength, see David W. Lesch, *Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), pp. 87-122. See also Aaron Lund, "Holy Warriors: A Field Guide to Syria's Jihadi Groups," *Argument*, October 15, 2012.
- 18 For a discussion of the domestic reality within Syrian society, see the blog of Professor Josh Landis, *Syria Comment*, <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog>.
- 19 See Eyal Zisser, "Awaiting the Victory Portrait in Damascus," *Middle East Crossroads* (Tel Aviv: Mosh Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and North African Studies, August 5, 2012).
- 20 See, for example, the statement by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, according to which many members of Congress who visited Syria are of the opinion that Bashar is a reformer and that Syria has its own unique circumstances, and thus one should not draw conclusions regarding Syria from what happened in Egypt or Tunis. See "Remarks by Secretary Clinton," <http://www.state.gov>.
- 21 See Eyal Zisser, "The 'Struggle for Syria': Return to the Past?" *Mediterranean Politics* 17, no.1 (2012): 105-10. See also Lesch, *Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad*, pp. 123-59.
- 22 For Raami Mahlouf's remarks, see *Wall Street Journal*, July 13, 2012.
- 23 Regarding border incidents on the Nakba and Naksa days, see the reports in *Haaretz*, May 16 and June 11, 2011.
- 24 For a report of Barak's statement to the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, see *Haaretz*, January 3, 2012. For Chief of Staff Benny Gantz's remarks, see *Yediot Ahronot*, January 17, 2012.
- 25 For the interview with GOC Northern Command Yair Golan, see *Yisrael Hayom*, April 6, 2012.
- 26 For Netanyahu's and Barak's comments, see *Haaretz*, July 6, 2012. For statements by the US State Department Spokesman and White House Spokesman, see <http://www.state.gov>, July 11, 13, 18, 22, 2012. For the statement of the Syrian Foreign Ministry Spokesman, see the Syrian news agency Sana (Damascus) <http://www.rtv.gov.sy>, July 23, 2012.
- 27 See *Yisrael Hayom*, April 6, 2012, *Haaretz*, April 30 and July 6, 2012.
- 28 On the exchanges of fire along the Golan border, see *Haaretz*, July 12, 2012.

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 policies.

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.

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Al-Qaeda and Global Jihad in Search of Direction

Yoram Schweitzer

The elimination of Osama Bin Laden, together with the killing of many of al-Qaeda's senior members, left the organization's new leader, Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, with a series of challenges and pivotal decisions. The first was the need to choose a path to help him establish his leadership in an organization that had lost its mythological commander, while consolidating his status as an authority for like-minded organizations. The second was ensuring the survival of the organization, which was in dire straits, and maintaining its special status among its supporters and affiliates. The third was promoting the global agenda that was at the core of the al-Qaeda vision when it was founded in the late 1980s and has driven its operations since: the establishment of an Islamic caliphate by way of global jihad.

Along with the organization's internal crisis, al-Zawahiri faced a more complex challenge. The upheaval in the Arab world, which included major uprisings in a number of Arab countries and deposed leaders who had ruled for decades, was mostly non-violent, and was based on liberal democratic values that stood in complete denial of the ideas preached by al-Qaeda. Many decision makers around the world believed that these events would deal an ideological and practical death blow to the organization. Al-Zawahiri, however, who was among those formulating and disseminating the organization's ideology, regarded the events in the Arab world as a life preserver and a way to solidify and strengthen his leadership. To this end, he focused on adapting the organization's strategy to the changing circumstances and promoting his preferred courses of action. Chief among

these was the encouragement of internal jihad to change the regimes in Middle East countries that experienced local uprisings to Islamic regimes governed by religious law.

This chapter will focus on the way al-Zawahiri guided al-Qaeda and its affiliates in negotiating the obstacles before them, given the changing reality in various locales and the upheaval in the Arab world and beyond. In the period since he was appointed to his post in June 2011, al-Zawahiri chose to tighten his management of the organization and its ties with affiliates and supporters around the basic organizational philosophy established by Bin Laden. According to this philosophy, the job of al-Qaeda is to serve as an operational vanguard and model for imitation by ideological affiliates, who are not under the control of al-Qaeda's leader but identify with its path, which serves as the locomotive of the armed resistance (*al-muqawama al-masalaha*) and global jihad train for achieving their fundamental goals. Indeed, from the late 1990s, when al-Qaeda carried out three dramatic suicide attacks – on the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania; on the *USS Cole* in Yemen; and the 9/11 attacks in the United States – the organization, which began as an organization to support and train terrorist groups, actually became an active player in the international terrorism theater.

Following the success of its attacks in the US, al-Qaeda redoubled its planning efforts to facilitate showcase terror attacks by its affiliates. It increased its training assistance to terror organizations, while also occasionally providing operational help for specific actions. The organization tightened its links with some organizations it regarded as select affiliates, and concluded a formal agreement with them for unifying their forces under the al-Qaeda name, followed by the name of the region in which they operated. These organizations, such as al-Qaeda Iraq, al-Qaeda Saudi Arabia (al-Qaeda Hejaz), and al-Qaeda Islamic Maghreb, are allies, and have served as a force multiplier operating according to al-Qaeda's operational strategy, while helping to spread its essential ideology and strategy. Furthermore, the organization focused on encouraging activity in border areas and areas beyond the control of sovereign nations – areas that could be taken over by affiliate organizations in global jihad, as a step on the way to seizure of the entire country.¹ To this end, they can establish

themselves in areas without a strong central government that resorts to military and police force to restrain them, and they can recruit, train, and use the area as a point of departure for global jihad operatives traveling to various fronts around the world. The ultimate goal is to form a regime that will act according to Islamic religious law. For al-Zawahiri, as commander of al-Qaeda, activity in ungoverned areas therefore became a key focus of al-Qaeda's chosen strategy for its affiliates.

Al-Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan

The importance of Afghanistan and Pakistan for al-Qaeda is clear from Bin Laden's letters that were seized in his hideout after he was killed, and from the location of the organization's headquarters in Waziristan in Pakistan. The organization fought in Pakistan at the side of the Pakistani Taliban and members of the Haqqani network in cooperation with local and foreign terrorist organizations engaged in the struggle against the Pakistani army in the tribal area in Waziristan province. Al-Qaeda's contribution to the fighting was in separate brigade frameworks operating as part of the Taliban forces under the designation of Lashkar al-Zil name and as part of Brigade 313, which is considered the military wing of al-Qaeda in Pakistan and was under the command of Ilyas Kashmiri until he (allegedly) was killed on June 3, 2011.²

At the same time, over the past two years al-Qaeda has been engaged in fighting with the Taliban against US and NATO forces operating in Afghanistan in large numbers on a major scale, especially following the surge ordered by President Obama in 2010. A large percentage of the important senior commanders in this area were killed by American UAVs; the most prominent of them were Mustafa Abu al-Yazid, considered one of al-Qaeda's three most important commanders and spokesmen, who previously commanded the organization's activity in Afghanistan and was responsible for its finances; Atiya Abd al-Rahman, one of Bin Laden's associates in the leadership, who served as his most senior liaison while Bin Laden remained in hiding in Abbottabad and was responsible for transmitting Bin Laden's instructions to the organization's operatives and ensuring their implementation; and Abu Yahya al-Libi, formerly a senior commander in the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, who was arrested in

Afghanistan by American forces in 2003, escaped from Bagram Prison in 2005, and became one of al-Qaeda's leading propagandists. There was a \$1 million reward offered for his capture. After Bin Laden was killed, he was appointed second in command to al-Zawahiri and chief of staff.³

Despite the ongoing offensive against it, however, al-Qaeda has continued to aid the Taliban and the Haqqani network in their struggle against the coalition forces, drawing on its vast experience in planning and executing suicide bombings and high level attacks. The organization also continues to promote its militant agenda by training foreign operatives to take part in jihad and prepare them for participation in the violent campaign against the Western forces in the region. In effect, the organization wants them to accumulate experience and operational know how that they will be able to use upon their return to their countries of origin to carry out terrorist attacks on behalf of al-Qaeda or some of the independent terrorist networks operating in the name of global jihad. At the same time, the organization's efforts to launch terrorist attacks abroad continue, even though for a long time these attempts have not been successful, due to thorough preventive activity by security services around the world. Nevertheless, Shukrijumah, the current commander of the organization's overseas terrorist apparatus and an experienced and well-known operative who was responsible for a series of unsuccessful attacks in the UK and Scandinavia, is still alive. With other experienced surviving terrorists and reinforcements of new battle hardened members filling the ranks, al-Zawahiri is thus able to make further attempts at showcase attacks in accordance with al-Qaeda's modus operandi.

Al-Qaeda Hejaz

The most senior and active partner of global al-Qaeda is al-Qaeda Hejaz. Founded in 2009 as a merger of the Saudi Arabian branch with its Yemeni counterpart, the organization is headed by Nasir al-Wuhayshi, who was Bin Laden's personal secretary for many years. Since the merger, al-Qaeda has carried out deadly terrorist attacks in Yemen and Saudi Arabia. By conducting an uncompromising anti-terrorist campaign, Saudi Arabia succeeded in killing most of the organization's members, while those who survived escaped to Yemen, a much more favorable environment for them.

Yemen's unstable government, dispersed tribal structure, and topography have enabled al-Qaeda to establish itself in the Hejaz and operate around the country relatively freely, particularly in the south, where control exercised by the central government, located in Sana'a, is weak.

When the upheaval in the Arab world reached Yemen, President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who ruled the country for 33 years, was forced out of office and fled the country. In February 2012 he was succeeded by Vice President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi. The new President encountered many difficulties in establishing his rule in Yemen, as a result of internal disputes between him and followers of the ousted leader. Adding to his leadership challenges were the bitterness among the Shiite Houthis in the north and activity by al-Qaeda and Ansar al-Sharia, an organization founded in 2012 as al-Qaeda's political front in order to create a more moderate image for joint activity. The goal of this activity was to take over Yemen or part of it in order to establish a state ruled by Islamic religious law.

Information seized with the death of Bin Laden reveals that Bin Laden warned the organization's commander in Yemen against attacks against the army and friction with tribesmen, and urged him to concentrate on attacks on American targets in order to win public sympathy and support. Yet despite this directive, over the past year the organization has focused its activity against the government and the army. Al-Qaeda conducted several attacks on Yemeni army bases, killing many soldiers, and carried out a dozen suicide attacks – one of the calling cards of al-Qaeda and its affiliates – against administration and security forces personnel. In one of these suicide attacks, a lone suicide attacker succeeded in killing approximately one hundred soldiers and wounding dozens more. In its operations, the organization exposed the central government's weakness and inability to control the country effectively, while forcing President Hadi to reorganize the armed forces in order to liberate and regain control in cities conquered by al-Qaeda in the southern part of the country. With the help of American aid in money, training, instruction, and direct operational assistance in the form of armed UAVs, the Yemeni army managed to deal the organization and its senior operational personnel a severe blow. Anwar al-Awlaki, one of the organization's leading propagandists, who was accused of direct involvement in terrorism, was killed in an air attack in September 2011,

together with Samir Khan, editor of the organization's online mouthpiece, *Inspire*. Fahd al-Quso, who escaped from prison in Yemen after taking part in the 2000 attack on the destroyer *Cole* in Aden Port, was killed in March 2012.⁴ Al-Quso headed a squad that planned to send a suicide terrorist in April 2012 to detonate a sophisticated bomb on an American plane while in American airspace, a continuation of previous terrorist attempts by the organization to blow up airplanes en route to the US.⁵

Full scale fighting in Yemen between the authorities and al-Qaeda and Ansar al-Sharia is ongoing. It appears that despite the success achieved by the Yemeni army and security forces in recent months in pushing al-Qaeda out of the cities they had taken, attacking their bases, and killing their personnel, the organization still enjoys much strength and can be expected to continue its activity in and outside of Yemen with the active support of al-Zawahiri. Furthermore, given the support from al-Zawahiri and al-Qaeda and the recruitment of foreign volunteers, which the organization trains to fight alongside its forces and in other jihad theaters, the organization remains a significant threat to the stability of the Yemeni government and poses a dangerous security risk for the US and its allies overseas.

Al-Qaeda Maghreb and Global Jihad Factions in North and West Africa

The al-Qaeda Maghreb organization, which merged with the central al-Qaeda in 2007, has also adopted the strategies and operating methods of the parent organization. The organization focuses its attacks on senior government officials, the military, and targets identified with the West. It has carried out a series of suicide missions and also developed expertise in kidnapping Western civilians, which reaped large sums that helped finance operations.⁶ During most of its existence, al-Qaeda has operated principally in Algeria, but it has also sent operatives to other countries, and maintains close connections with the Salafi jihad organizations in Morocco, Libya, Mauritania, and now Mali as well. Indeed, in recent years, as a result of Algeria's tough and effective policy against terrorism in active cooperation with other Maghreb countries, the organization's activity has declined in Algeria itself,⁷ forcing it to divert its efforts to other fields of operation, mainly in northern Mali, which has recently become its most

important center of activity. In addition, following the coup staged by the military junta in Mali last March, global jihad forces streamed into the region. Besides al-Qaeda Maghreb personnel who escaped from Algeria, these included fighters who escaped from Niger, Mauritania, Libya, and members of the Boko Haram organization in Nigeria seeking to take an active part in the fighting.

In Mali, al-Qaeda Maghreb cooperates with a number of terrorist organizations, including MOJWA⁸ and Ansar al-Din, which work together to establish a base for global jihad activity. For example, Ansar al-Din, backed by al-Qaeda Maghreb forces and other global jihad operatives, took control of a number of key cities in northern Mali, with their main goal being the founding of an Islamic state based on *sharia*.⁹ As part of this takeover, a meeting took place in April 2012 in Timbuktu, one of the largest cities in northern Mali, which fell to the jihadists. Al-Qaeda Maghreb leaders met with their counterparts from Ansar al-Din, supported by local religious figures, and the Ansar al-Din commander announced the appointment of al-Qaeda Maghreb commander Yahya Abou Al-Hammam as emir of Timbuktu.¹⁰ The region has since become the permanent residence of the leaders of this “coalition,” which controls two thirds of northern Mali. A systematic terror campaign against the civilian population is currently underway, which has damaged the ancient holy shrines there. Security has declined precipitously, due in part to a flow of armaments of various types from Qaddafi’s arsenal that fell into al-Qaeda hands.¹¹ In spite of this cooperation, internal power struggles have prevented the terrorist coalition from reaching agreement and acting jointly to achieve their goals through coordinated activity. At times sharp differences of opinion, originating in national and or ethnic differences, such as between the Algerian “elite,” which includes “Afghan alumni,”¹² and the Islamists in Mali and Nigeria, constitute an obstacle to coordinated joint activity aimed at achieving their Islamic vision in Africa.¹³

Following the fall of the Qaddafi regime in Libya, Libyan global jihad operatives, who formerly operated in the framework of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, stepped up their activity. Since the uprising they have adopted the name Ansar al-Sharia in order to camouflage their links to al-Qaeda.¹⁴ The most notorious operation by global jihad elements operating

in Libya since Qaddafi was deposed was the assassination of the US ambassador and three US consulate employees in Benghazi on September 11, 2012. According to the accumulated evidence, elements close to al-Qaeda in Ansar al-Sharia and former members of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group carried out the attack. This strike was apparently planned under the guidance of al-Zawahiri, and according to those who assumed responsibility for it, was designed to avenge the killing of Abu Yahya al-Libi in the UAV attack in Waziristan.¹⁵

The rising threat to regional stability posed by al-Qaeda Maghreb and the coalition of local terrorist organizations led to a major investment of resources and political, intelligence, and military cooperation between countries in the region to combat the growing danger of terrorism in the Sahel and Mali, and prevent its spread to other countries in the region. In December 2011, Algerian forces crossed the northern border with Mali in order to assist the local army in dealing with elements identified with al-Qaeda.¹⁶ In June 2012, the Organization of African Unity considered the possibility of military intervention in Mali.¹⁷ In August 2012, at the security conference on the Sahel that took place in Niger, representatives from Algeria, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger expressed concern about the terrorist threat from Islamist parties in northern Mali to the neighboring countries, and called for active intervention by the international community in northern Mali.¹⁸ In early October 2012, the UN Security Council decided that in order to eliminate the threat of terrorism, a comprehensive military operation by the member countries of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was needed. American security agencies, which reassessed the situation with regard to the danger of terrorism to Western targets in these countries and the region as a whole, stated that the US was likely to offer military assistance and even act independently to expel al-Qaeda operatives who found refuge in northern Mali.¹⁹

Al-Qaeda and Global Jihad Elements in the Arab Levant and the Middle East

The importance of the Arab Levant in Muslim history has given it a special status in the aspirations of al-Qaeda and its affiliates to establish the Islamic caliphate in one of the countries in the region.²⁰ Hence the supreme

importance that al-Qaeda attaches to the fighting that developed in Iraq following the American occupation. The organization invested much effort and extensive resources to take advantage of the upheaval to reinvigorate global jihad. Bin Laden, and especially al-Zawahiri, who was already the organization's chief spokesman when Bin Laden was alive, encouraged the operatives in Iraq to continue the struggle to inflict severe damage on the US and its allies, and supported the establishment of the Islamic country in Iraq declared by al-Qaeda Iraq in 2006.

A concrete expression of the importance attributed to Iraq by the organization appeared in a letter from al-Zawahiri to al-Zarqawi, who was the organization's first "emir" in this country, and who was known for his murderous actions against his opponents, including Muslims, especially Shiites. The letter emphasizes the importance of preserving the gains already scored by al-Qaeda in Iraq, and requested that al-Zarqawi refrain from alienating the local population in order to avoid losing their support.²¹ Over the years al-Qaeda leaders have continued to support the struggle in Iraq, and they appointed figures they trusted to replace Zarqawi when he was killed in an American attack. Since he assumed his chief role, al-Zawahiri has also made statements in support of the local organization's activity and stressed its great importance. In a speech celebrating the eleventh anniversary of the terrorist attacks in the US, he claimed that the US had been defeated and in effect "was running away for its life, leaving behind a government of puppets to rule in Iraq, a government that was now feeling the might of the mujahidin...Allah gave them the honor of leading the local struggle and defeating the American ambition of controlling the Middle East."²²

Iraq is no longer the main theater of jihad for al-Qaeda and its affiliates that it was when foreign forces, headed by the US, occupied the country in 2003. Even after the last American soldier left Iraq on December 18, 2011, however,²³ and despite President Obama's statement that the purpose for which the US had entered Iraq had been achieved – the overthrow of Saddam Hussein and the establishment of a stable democracy in Iraq – terrorism was not eliminated from the country.²⁴ In practice, al-Qaeda Iraq (operating under the title Islamic State of Iraq – ISI) and its affiliates continue their activity. They focus their attacks primarily on targets identified with the

current regime in Iraq, which is clearly under Shiite rule. Particularly in the second half of 2012, the organization carried out hundreds of attacks, principally in the cities of Baghdad, Nasiriyah, and Basra, where dozens of suicide bombings demonstrated the organization's ability to strike and disrupt the current regime's efforts to stabilize the country and control the level of inter-ethnic violence. The organization's attacks became even more frequent and daring in the final months of 2012. During several days of intense activity, simultaneous attacks were staged against army and police targets, combining multi-casualty suicide attacks with attacks aimed at freeing prisoners. For example, an armed squad broke into a prison in Tikrit on September 27, 2012 in a combined attack that included suicide terrorists and freed dozens of prisoners, some from al-Qaeda Iraq who had been sentenced to death.²⁵ Furthermore, many of the organization's attacks were aimed directly at the Shiite civilian population – on Shiite holidays and against local Shiite leaders and institutions – heightening anxiety about a renewal of the sectarian civil war in Iraq.

In tandem with its local activity, al-Qaeda Iraq has devoted resources and manpower to supporting the opposition forces in Syria. This new policy was adopted as an answer to a public appeal by al-Zawahiri, who declared that Syria was a key theater of jihad²⁶ and urged Muslims from around the world to go to Syria and help the local mujahidin in their fight to oust the “murderer of all murderers,” who will continue to slaughter Muslims until his regime is deposed. Al-Zawahiri called for the establishment of a regime that would free the Golan Heights and continue the jihad until the flag of victory flies over the hills of conquered Jerusalem. Following al-Zawahiri's call, al-Qaeda Iraq operatives, under the name Jabhat al-Nusra – a name designed to prevent the group from accepting support from Western and leading Arab countries acting to overthrow the Assad regime – arrived in Syria. These operatives are conducting organized activity, based on their military ability and experience acquired during their years of fighting in Iraq. It appears that they were responsible for most of the especially daring and deadly attacks in Syria in recent months, particularly suicide attacks. Sporadic and less organized activity by global jihad elements from Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Libya, Jordan, and Gaza, who came to Syria without belonging to any group and joined the Free Syrian Army, is also underway.

Estimates of the number of fighters identified with global jihad vary from several hundred to several thousand.²⁷

The third key front emphasized in particular by al-Zawahiri, reflecting his new policy of exploiting the upheaval in the Arab world to escalate the struggle of global jihad parties in general and in the Levant in particular, is Egypt, particularly in Sinai. Al-Zawahiri hailed the fall of Mubarak's regime and its replacement by a religious Islamic regime as a supreme strategic target and a personal ideal for him and his Egyptian cohorts in the al-Qaeda leadership, who were part of the Egyptian jihadist organization that formally merged with al-Qaeda in 2001. Following Mubarak's fall from power and the subsequent governmental vacuum in Egypt, global jihad elements took advantage of the situation to promote their goals. The escape and release of their operatives from prison, where they were serving lengthy sentences for past activity, enabled these organizations to bolster their ranks with loyal foot soldiers with operational experience. Many of them found their way to Sinai and joined the local terrorist organizations, while taking advantage of the Egyptian government's lack of control in the area to solidify their religious Islamic autonomy there.

A number of groups identified with al-Qaeda and global jihad appeared in Sinai over the past year, the most prominent being Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, al-Tawhid wal-Jihad, and Ansar al-Jihad. These organizations, and Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis in particular,²⁸ operate in some measure against Egyptian targets but mostly against Israel. The terrorist attacks for which they took responsibility reflect al-Qaeda's ideology and operating strategy. For example, following the rocket attacks on Eilat and the strikes against the pipeline for transporting natural gas from Egypt to Israel, Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis published a short film taking responsibility and listing the attacks designed to prevent the looting of the natural resources granted to Muslims by Allah through sale at a financial loss to the enemies of Islam, headed by Israel. This subject was frequently mentioned in the propaganda that described past activity by the central al-Qaeda organization that caused serious economic damage to the attacked countries. The organization also took care to include speeches by al-Zawahiri in which he praised the repeated strikes against the gas pipeline, and added a call to the new

Egyptian government to cancel the peace agreement with Israel and institute Islamic religious law in Egypt.²⁹

Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, considered the most active and dangerous of the Egyptian global jihad organizations in Sinai, was responsible for several of the deadliest attacks on the border between Egypt and Israel: the August 2011 attack on Highway 40 to Eilat, in which eight Israelis were murdered; the August 5, 2012 attack at the Egyptian-Israeli border, in which 16 Egyptian border guards were murdered; and the attack at Har Harif, on September 12, 2012, in which an IDF soldier was killed.³⁰ In these attacks, the organization proved that it does not hesitate to kill Muslims serving regimes that oppose its views, and does not recognize borders between countries, as these were not determined by Allah. For its part, Ansar al-Jihad (which is probably identical to the Salafi Sinai Front), founded in December 2011, declared “that it would follow Bin Laden’s example,” and swore loyalty to Sheikh Ayman al-Zawahiri, the new al-Qaeda leader. Its members also swore to Allah “to do all they could to fight the corrupt government of the Jews, the Americans, and their allies,” to fulfill Bin Laden’s promise that “America, and those living in America, will never be secure as long as Palestine does not exist, and until the armies of the unbelievers leave the land of Muhammed,”³¹ and swore to work for the vision they shared with al-Qaeda – the founding of an Islamic caliphate in Egypt.³²

In addition to the Egyptian organizations in Sinai, Salafi jihadist organizations from Gaza are also exploiting Sinai as a key region for terrorist activity against Israel, along with activity against Israel in Gaza. The use of Sinai as a theater for activity is a result of pressure exerted on them by Hamas to restrict their activity against Israel from Gaza, owing to the fear of a harsh Israeli military strike against Hamas in Gaza in a way that would escalate to an all-out war. The most prominent of the Gaza organizations active in Sinai over the past year is the Mujahidin Shura Council in Greater Jerusalem, which serves as an umbrella organization for a number of Salafi Palestinian organizations, the most active and prominent of which is the Palestinian al-Tawhid wal-Jihad.³³ The Mujahidin Shura Council in Greater Jerusalem claimed responsibility for the attack in the Be’er Milka area on June 18 that killed Said Fashfasha, an Israeli Arab

who worked on the security fence on the border with Egypt.³⁴ In a film about the attack, the organization noted that it had been prepared “as a gift to our brothers in al-Qaeda and Sheikh al-Zawahiri,” and in response to the assassination of Bin Laden. In the film, the terrorists who took part in the operation, who were of Egyptian and Saudi Arabian origin, expressed their commitment to al-Zawahiri that the organization would uphold its commitment to “the way of jihad,” and asserted that it “did not recognize the international border, but only the ‘border of Allah.’”³⁵

Alongside this prominent organization, older Salafi organizations in Gaza operate directly against Israel, while using Sinai for their activity in order to evade restrictions enforced by Israel and to avoid inviting Israeli retaliation against Hamas in Gaza. Among these organizations, Jaish al-Islam (Army of Islam) is particularly noteworthy.³⁶ Founded in 2006 by Mumtaz Dughmush, after he split off from the Popular Resistance Committees, the organization was very active in launching rockets and in attacks against Israel, and was involved in the Gilad Shalit kidnapping. Its activity extended beyond Sinai; it sent operatives to fight in Syria, a fact that became publicly known when one of its members was killed in battle. Another organization is the Popular Resistance Committees (PRC), which is active on both sides of the border, and enjoys close ties with global jihad groups in Sinai. The organization was linked directly to a number of attacks on the Egyptian border that were also attributed to Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, which may indicate close cooperation between the Gaza organizations and their Egyptian counterparts. There are currently over ten groups belonging to the jihadist Salafi movement in Gaza, which presents a challenge to Hamas hegemony in Gaza. Their growing ability to conduct attacks from Gaza and from Sinai is liable to earn them support from al-Zawahiri, win his official recognition, and give them the title of al-Qaeda Gaza or part of a unified al-Qaeda Gaza force in Sinai.

Conclusion

As a result of the international campaign waged against it for over a decade, which brought about the arrest and elimination of many of the older leaders of the central al-Qaeda organization as well as its mythological commander, al-Qaeda has confronted complex challenges to its survival,

its ability to undertake showcase terrorist attacks like the one in the US, and progress toward its goals. Furthermore, the organization's dire straits and the assessment voiced by administration sources and leading intelligence figures around the world that al-Qaeda stood on the brink of destruction has forced al-Zawahiri to decide how his organization will continue and what operational strategy it will employ. This choice, whose significance is also clear to al-Zawahiri, will to a great extent determine whether al-Qaeda can survive and continue leading its supporters and affiliates on the road to the global jihad it has proclaimed as its supreme goal. In order to achieve its goals, al-Zawahiri is also careful to maintain his links to powerful elements in Pakistan and Afghanistan, which enable him to solidify his status as an effective partner in their armed struggle, retain his ability to manage his organization from a base that is relatively secure from the long arm of the US and its allies, and at the same time continue to train al-Qaeda fighters.

Given the challenge posed by the upheaval in the Arab world, which erupted in the name of values and operational modes opposed to those of al-Qaeda, it appears that al-Zawahiri has chosen to carve his leadership and design al-Qaeda's path by grasping the opportunity presented to him and supporting the insurrectionists and their activity in the belief that they will serve al-Qaeda's long term goals. Indeed, the weakening of the regimes in a number of Arab countries and the governmental instability in others have generated opportunities for jihadist Salafi organizations to establish themselves in border regions where government is ineffective. These organizations have used these areas to set up infrastructures for training, weapons smuggling, and the transport of personnel to join a regional or global jihad, and some of them have even instituted *sharia* law. Al-Zawahiri, who is aware of the limitations and weaknesses of his organization, chose to do his best to turn the "Arab Spring" into an "Islamic Spring" by focusing on the role of guide and supporter, at least at this stage. This choice differs from the role outlined by Bin Laden for the organization – to serve as an operational vanguard inspiring its supporters by its actions, and not confining itself to declarations of support and provision of indirect aid. At the same time, this does not mean that al-Zawahiri has decided to completely abandon his efforts to carry out showcase attacks. Despite the damage suffered by the organization's forces

responsible for its international terrorism and the effective thwarting of its attempted attacks in Europe and the US in recent years, it still exists, and Shukrijumah, its chief of staff, is still its commander. Furthermore, based on the organization's tradition, past record, and dozens of Muslim volunteers from Western countries it has trained, al-Qaeda will presumably not dissolve in the face of these obstacles, particularly when it remains committed to its path and terrorist attacks, including revenge operations for the death of the movement's leader.

The results of the anti-terrorist campaigns against the global al-Qaeda organization and its local affiliates in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and against al-Qaeda's affiliates in the Hejaz, the Maghreb and North Africa, and the Levant will have an effect on the future of regional and international terrorism. If the countries bordering Israel become bases of operations for jihadist Salafi groups, Israel, which up until now has not been the target of focused and intensive by al-Qaeda and global jihad elements, is liable to find itself in a different security situation. The first signs of this were visible over the past year on Israel's southern border, following the attacks conducted there by Egyptian and Palestinian jihadist Salafi groups identified with al-Qaeda operating in Sinai. Global jihad operatives arriving from outside the region were also among those taking part in those attacks. There is likewise a risk that the chaotic situation in Syria could lead to such activity against Israel from Syrian territory. Whether Assad's regime survives or falls, an effect on activity against Israeli territory by similar groups from Lebanon, and in the future perhaps also from Jordan, is quite possible.

On a number of occasions al-Zawahiri has expressed his determination to take action against the existence of Israel, which he regards as a foreign imperialistic import into the region. He encourages terrorist activity in Sinai, and stresses in his statements the critical importance of fighting in Syria on the way to liberating the Golan Heights and Jerusalem, i.e., of destroying Israel. The development of events in the countries bordering Israel and the results of activity by al-Qaeda and its affiliates in more distant theaters will certainly influence al-Zawahiri's future decisions whether to focus on terrorist action against Israel, and perhaps even to declare it a preferred theater of jihad on the road to global jihad, or whether

to encourage this activity from a distance, while focusing his efforts on other areas of armed combat.

Notes

My thanks to thank Einav Yogev, research assistant and head of the internship project for the Terrorism and Low Intensity Conflict Program at INSS, and interns Shmuel Zatliff Tzur, Ziv Idov, Ami Nir, Gal Toren, Yaron Kivilis, Olga Bogorad, Aviad Mandelbaum, Diana Zhevlakov, and Adir Zangi, for their research assistance in the terrorism project on the subject of global jihad and for their important contribution to this article.

- 1 This strategy was suited to the fundamental concept “hahenya” bequeathed by Abdullah Azzam, one of al-Qaeda’s senior ideologues when the organization was first created, establishing the concept of the border region as an important focus in its method of fostering global jihad (“rabat” as one of the five necessary stages in the global struggle to realize the vision of the Islamic caliphate by defeating the enemies of Islam). See Assaf Maliah and Shaul Shay, *From Kabul to Jerusalem* (Tel Aviv: Matar, 2009), pp. 113-14.
- 2 The al-Qaeda operations officer commanded the Shadow Army, and was a member of the organization’s overseas operations council. The 47-year old Kashmiri, marked as a possible successor to Bin Laden, was one of the five most wanted terrorists in Pakistan, with a \$5 million reward for his capture. Among other crimes, he was accused of involvement in a series of terrorist attacks in Asia, including the 2008 attack in Mumbai, India, and of planning attacks in Western countries. He was allegedly killed in an air attack by American forces in southern Waziristan, although some have doubted his death.
- 3 Bill Roggio, “Abu Yahya al-Libi Killed in Latest Drone Strike, US officials Say,” *Long War Journal*, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/06/abu_yahya_al_libi_ru.php, June 5, 2012.
- 4 Bill Rogio, “USS Cole Bomber Killed in US Drone Strike in Yemen,” *Long War Journal*, May 6, 2012.
- 5 Pam Benson, “New Terrorist Plot to Attack Plane Foiled,” CNN, May 8, 2012, <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/05/07/world/meast/yemen-qaeda-plot/index.html>. Similar attempted acts of terrorism included dispatching a Nigerian suicide bomber to blow up a passenger jet above Detroit on Christmas 2009 and an attempt to blow up a cargo plane using printers containing explosives, foiled by security forces in Saudi Arabia and the UK in 2011.
- 6 For example, three Western civilians were kidnapped in a refugee camp in southern Algeria (they were released in the summer of 2012 for a ransom totaling €15 million). Seven Algerian diplomats were kidnapped in Gao, Mali, one of

- whom was killed following the refusal of the Algerian government to release members of the organization imprisoned in Algeria.
- 7 John R. Schindler, "The Ugly Truth about Algeria," *National Interest*, July 11, 2012.
 - 8 MOJWA – Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa – is a terrorist organization that announced its secession from al-Qaeda Maghreb in December 2011. The group's members are black African natives from Niger, Mali, Mauritania, and other West African countries. The split from al-Qaeda resulted from tension over control of al-Qaeda Maghreb, which consisted mainly of natives of Algeria occupying the important positions and directing the organization's activity.
 - 9 Ansar al-Din is a terrorist organization with an extremist Islamic ideology currently operating in northern Mali. After the fall of Qaddafi in Libya, the Tuareg people, who had fought for their homeland, founded a terrorist organization in November 2011 aimed at creating an Islamic state in northern Mali based on *sharia*. Members of the organization joined forces with al-Qaeda Maghreb, and are jointly striving to achieve their political and ideological goals in northern Mali.
 - 10 "AQIM leader Named Timbuktu Governor," *Magharebia*, April 16, 2012, http://www.magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml1/en_GB/features/awi/features/2012/04/16/feature-02.
 - 11 "Al Qaeda's Arab Comeback: Capitalizing on Chaos in Syria, Mali," *Daily Beast*, July 30, 2012, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/07/30/al-qaeda-s-arab-comeback-capitalizing-on-chaos-in-syria-mali.html>.
 - 12 They were trained in the training camp of the central al-Qaeda.
 - 13 "West Africa's MOJWA Militants – Competition for al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb?" Jamestown Foundation, April 6, 2012, [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=39234&tx_ttnews\[backPid\]=13&cHash=cb8a448ba39218f809895a9710590218](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=39234&tx_ttnews[backPid]=13&cHash=cb8a448ba39218f809895a9710590218); "Security Threats in the Sahel and Beyond: AQIM, Boko Haram and al Shabaab," April 2012, <https://www.cimicweb.org/cmo/medbasin/Holder/Documents/r013%20CFC%20Monthly%20Thematic%20Report%20%2818-APR-12%29.pdf>.
 - 14 A report published by the Research Division of the Library of Congress in August 2012, in cooperation with a US Defense Department team, indicates that the operating strategy determined by the main al-Qaeda leadership for its affiliates in Libya was to set up an operational network in Libya, while exploiting the governmental instability in order to organize bases that would eventually lead to Libya turning into an Islamic country in place of Qaddafi's heretical regime. According to this plan, al-Qaeda Libya (under the name Ansar al-Sharia) was intended to be of a network of the organization's branches, including al-Qaeda

- Maghreb and other organizations. This network was planned to operate in the Maghreb, North and West Africa, and the Middle East. Libya itself was assigned to serve as a base country that would provide logistics support and constitute a crossing point and a supply base for armaments and battle-tested fighters for other jihadist Salafi groups in various regions around the world. See Karen Hodgson, "2 Tunisians Detained in Turkey for Links to Killing of US Ambassador," *Long War Journal*, October 7, 2012, http://www.longwarjournal.org/threat-matrix/archives/2012/10/two_tunisians_detained_in_turk.php#ixzz28u2Kh6AY; Thomas Joscelyn, "Al Qaeda's plan for Libya Highlighted in Congressional Report," September 21, 2012, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/09/al_qaedas_plan_for_l.php#ixzz28w3zE7RQ; Bill Roggio, "Benghazi Consulate Assault a 'Terrorist Attack, DNI Says," *Long War Journal*, September 29, 2012, http://www.longwarjournal.org/threat-matrix/archives/2012/09/benghazi_consulate_assault_a_t.php?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+LongWarJournalSiteWide+%28The+Long+War+Journal+%28Site-Wide%29%29#ixzz28u3J6kgT. Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia is actually a continuation of the Tunisian Combatant Group (TCG). The leader of Ansar al-Sharia, Abu Iyad al-Tunisi, previously led the TCG, and was known for his widespread connections to al-Qaeda. It also appears that in this case, as in Yemen and what is emerging in Libya, the name Ansar al-Sharia is a front for al-Qaeda and a way of re-labeling itself. Thomas Joscelyn, "Al Qaeda Ally Orchestrated Assault on US Embassy in Tunisia," *Long War Journal*, October 2, 2012, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/10/al_qaeda_ally_orches.php#ixzz28w5AAYjO.
- 15 "Attack on US in Libya 'Revenge' for al-Libi Death: Al Qaeda," *Express Tribune*, September 15, 2012, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/437208/attack-on-us-in-libya-revenge-for-al-libi-death-al-qaeda>.
 - 16 "Algerian Troops 'in Mali to Combat Qaeda Groups,'" December 20, 2011, <http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5jhSUtgQ43HUoFm2OWiYwGbJ3uh1g?docId=CNG.1dcdf009c74210a2ec079517c86453b7.451>.
 - 17 "Africa Moves Towards Military Intervention in Mali," *Magharebia*, June 19, 2012, http://www.magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml1/en_GB/features/awi/features/2012/06/19/feature-01.
 - 18 "Mali Crisis Tops Sahel Security Meeting in Niger," *Magharebia*, August 8, 2012, http://www.magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml1/en_GB/sct_c/Country/Algeria.
 - 19 "US Official: US May Offer Military Assistance to Drive al Qaeda from Coup-Wracked Mali," *Washington Post*, July 27, 2012, http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/us-official-us-may-offer-military-assistance-to-drive-al-qaida-from-coup-wracked-mali/2012/07/26/gJQAGkXHCX_story.html.

- 20 In a letter sent in 2006 to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who was fighting in Iraq, al-Zawahiri compared the campaign for Islamic rule in the Arab Levant to a bird whose wings were in Egypt and Syria, and whose heart was in Palestine. See <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/CTC-Zawahiri-Letter-10-05.pdf>.
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Part III

Israel: The Domestic Arena

The Israeli Public Debate on Preventing a Nuclear Iran

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The Israeli Public Debate on Preventing a Nuclear Iran

Yehuda Ben Meir

Over the course of 2012, the public debate on the possibility of independent Israeli military action against Iranian nuclear installations intensified, reaching unprecedented proportions. During its sixty-four years of existence, Israel has gone to war several times and initiated quite a few military operations, some with the highest level of risk. Before a decision was made in certain cases involving wars and military operations, a difficult and incisive debate took place on whether in fact the operation should be undertaken. Sometimes, the discussion lasted for weeks, and in other cases, for many months. However, in all of these cases, the debate was conducted among a small group of senior political and military-security figures who maintained absolute secrecy, or at most, revealed minimal information to the public.

On the Iranian nuclear issue, however, the opposite is the case. On this issue a sharp public debate is underway in the media on all aspects of Israel's handling of the challenge, knowing no boundaries or limits. The participants in the discussion are the country's leaders, including the "decision makers," i.e., the Prime Minister and the Defense Minister, as well as those who formerly held senior positions in Israel's security-intelligence establishment. Commentators from a variety of fields are also participating, as well as intellectuals – including writers and academicians – and many others. The public debate is unmatched with regard to its sharpness of tone, with the exception of the discussion on the future of

the territories captured in the Six Day War and the solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

This article will describe how the public debate on a possible Israeli attack on Iran's nuclear facilities developed, and then analyze its impact on Israeli public opinion. It will also explain how this issue differs qualitatively from other issues in security/operational and political terms, and why this has prompted such a heated public discussion.

Public Debate in Israel on Security Issues

In the months preceding the Sinai campaign in 1956 or the planned operation in Lebanon ("Big Pines" and "Little Pines") before the outbreak of the war in 1982, the deliberations had only a faint echo in the media and among the Israeli public. There was no public discussion preceding the attack on the Osirak nuclear reactor in Iraq in June 1982 or the September 2007 attack on the nuclear reactor in Dir al-Azur in Syria, which according to foreign sources was carried out by Israel.

The existence of a nuclear reactor near Baghdad was known to many people. Israel protested vigorously to the French government over its agreement to build the reactor in Iraq and made it clear that the reactor would threaten Israel's security. The protest was made public. The public diplomacy campaign continued for a number of years, aimed at France, and later also at Italy, which had agreed to sell Iraq parts for a plutonium separation facility. The United States was also involved in efforts to prevent the deal from going through. Furthermore, published reports hinted that Israel had taken steps in several countries in order to delay construction of the reactor and to sabotage Iraqi attempts to activate it.¹

In tandem, a heated discussion took place in Israel that divided the political and security establishment with regard to a possible Israeli attack. The debate went on for some eighteen months. The issue was brought up for initial discussion in the Ministerial Committee on Defense about a year before the attack was carried out, and the Cabinet plenum, by majority vote, approved a proposal in favor of an attack seven months before it was actually carried out.² During these months, the Deputy Prime Minister threatened to resign, which led to a postponement of the operation (though he later changed his mind on an attack), while the head of Military Intelligence,

the head of the Mossad, and the Deputy Defense Minister were steadfast in their opposition. In the month preceding the attack, another decision was approved by majority vote (six to three) in the Ministerial Committee on Defense. The attack was postponed three times at the last minute. The head of the opposition was also vehemently opposed to a military attack, and even wrote a letter to the Prime Minister demanding that he refrain from such an attack.³ Despite all this activity, the possibility of an Israeli attack on the Iraqi nuclear reactor was not mentioned in the Israeli media. The debate was conducted far from the public eye, and thus, just as the attack came as a surprise to Iraq, the Israeli public too was surprised when it learned of the attack and the destruction of the reactor.

Unlike the case of the Osirak reactor, the existence of a nuclear reactor in Syria was completely unknown to the Israeli public, as it was to the Syrian public. According to foreign sources, a discussion in the senior political and military echelon also took place on the possibility of attacking the Syrian reactor. Such an attack carried a not-insignificant danger of causing an all-out war between Israel and Syria. While it was later reported that for a long time the Defense Minister opposed the timing of the attack and favored its postponement, no information was leaked, and the attack and all that was connected to it remained a state secret.⁴

The Public Discussion on the Iranian Nuclear Issue

Developments in technology and communications since the attack on the Iraqi reactor have broken the boundaries of secrecy. As a result, decision makers' ability to keep the discussion of many significant issues secret over time has also been reduced. Moreover, the Iranian nuclear issue has unique characteristics that could explain, at least partially, the nature and the depth of the public debate that has developed on the issue.

The possibility that the Iranian nuclear program will be completed and Iran will gain military nuclear capability is a threat to both the region and the entire world. Iran is aspiring to hegemony in the Middle East, and in particular, in the oil-rich Gulf area. The religious Islamic and extremist fundamentalist regime ignores basic international norms. Moreover, the Iranian regime espouses blatant anti-Semitism, including Holocaust denial.

Its spokesmen often make harsh anti-Israeli and anti-Jewish statements, the likes of which no large, strong state has made since the Six Day War.

The Iranian regime has demonstrated its determination to complete its nuclear program. Reports issued periodically by the International Atomic Energy Agency indicate that Iran's progress is continuing in spite of heavy political and economic pressures. Since the beginning of the first decade of the 21st century, Western states have attempted to create a front that will stop the program. On the basis of chapter 7 of the UN charter, the UN Security Council has passed four resolutions on economic sanctions against Iran that are among the strongest the international community has ever known. In spite of evidence of growing economic distress in Iran, the sanctions thus far have not succeeded in stopping the state's progress toward nuclearization.

The possibility of a military attack on Iran's nuclear facilities has been discussed openly by leaders and with detailed media coverage in Israel, the United States, and the international community, which was not the case with the Iraqi or Syrian reactors. The issue of the military option has revealed differences of opinion among the countries that have a common interest in stopping the Iranian nuclear program. In addition, public discussion of the issue has expanded, and includes assessments concerning a possible response by Iran and its allies in the Middle East to an attempt to sabotage the program by military means.

The heated discussion on Iran did not develop in a vacuum. One question, to which there is no definitive answer, is whether it is primarily the result of the willingness of those who oppose a military strike to give ongoing sharp public expression to their position, or that the source of the discussion is the firm stance displayed repeatedly by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Ehud Barak regarding the potential necessity of an attack and their willingness to order it. Of course, this is a chicken and egg type question, as to which influence preceded the other. Most likely, the influence was reciprocal: a statement by one side increased the willingness of the other side to step up its rhetoric.

Previous Israeli prime ministers did not hide the gravity with which they viewed the Iranian nuclear program, but they did not place the issue at the top of the agenda and rarely commented on it. Benjamin Netanyahu,

in contrast, defined the threat as existential even before his election as Prime Minister in late March 2009, and he believes that the subject heads Israel's agenda. Netanyahu even compared the current period to 1938, that is, the last minute at which the world could perhaps have stopped Hitler and thus been able to prevent the Holocaust. In 2012, on the evening of Holocaust Memorial Day, a major national event at which prime ministers traditionally speak in general terms about the horrors of the Holocaust and the dramatic, historical change in the situation of the Jewish people, which can now defend itself, Netanyahu devoted almost his entire speech to the Iranian issue, conducting a heated debate with those who minimize the gravity of the threat, emphasizing his obligation as Prime Minister to prevent the danger to the Jewish people of another Holocaust, and not leaving a great deal of doubt as to his willingness to act.⁵

During 2012, Ehud Barak joined those supporting a strike against Iran. His pronouncements on the subject became more frequent and more extreme, and in contrast to his position on other political-security issues, it appeared that on this he was in agreement with the Prime Minister. Barak developed the concept of an Iranian "zone of immunity," which was supposed to indicate the urgency of a military strike. At the annual "Security Challenges of the 21st Century" conference of the Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv in May 2012, Netanyahu and Barak spoke about the Iranian threat in a nearly identical style. Their comments had public resonance both in Israel and abroad. The Prime Minister emphasized that Israel is entitled to use the means necessary for ensuring its survival, and that he would act accordingly.⁶ Barak made clear why Israel must seriously consider the military option, while stressing that the sword is in fact at Israel's throat and that in contrast to the American position, time is quickly running out.⁷

The firm stance taken by these key security figures set off warning lights among opponents of an Israeli strike against Iranian nuclear facilities, both in Israel and abroad. The heads of the US defense establishment – the Secretary of Defense and the heads of the Joint Chiefs of Staff – were quick to respond, expressing publicly their firm opinion on the grave, almost apocalyptic consequences of an Israeli strike, and on Israel's limited

capacity to thwart the Iranian military nuclear program in the long term. Their statements poured oil on the fire of the public debate.

At the same time, it is not entirely clear whether the determination evinced by the Prime Minister and the Defense Minister reflected actual readiness to bring about an independent Israeli strike against Iran's nuclear facilities. Perhaps, rather, their primary goal was to spur the international community to act with firm resolve against the Iranian program. There is no unequivocal answer to this question, and it is possible that the answer lies in a combination of both options. Yet in any case, two facts are certain: one, as of the time of this writing, Israel has not attacked Iran, and two, the international community has indeed been prompted for more decisive action against Iran.

The increasingly heated public discussion is apparently linked to the escalating statements by Israeli leaders. While the trenchant debate on the issue began long before, the turning point was on Friday, May 6, 2011, when former Mossad head Meir Dagan, speaking at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, commented on the possibility of the Israeli Air Force acting against the Iranian nuclear project. "This is the stupidest thing that I've heard," he declared. Dagan did not hide the fact that he completely rejected an Israeli strike on Iran, and clarified that in his opinion, Israel's air force is not capable of carrying out the mission to its conclusion. He added that in his view, an Israeli attack would mean war with Iran, which is liable to last for many months and see missiles launched at Israel, with Hizbollah, Hamas, and perhaps even Syria taking part in this campaign.⁸

Dagan's comments, which were made about six months after he completed his tenure as head of the Mossad, a post he had held for eight years, shocked the Israeli public. With Dagan opposing Netanyahu's position, his comments were interpreted as a public challenge to the Prime Minister, if not an outright vote of no confidence in Netanyahu's judgment and discretion. The statements by Dagan, who led a revolution in Mossad operations and, according to foreign reports, presided over extraordinary Mossad successes in many areas and is generally considered one of the best heads of the Mossad, were a deviation from accepted rules. Following his comments, others began to speak freely, which launched a public debate that was sharper and more vigorous than before. Dagan himself repeated

his comments with slightly different wording in the subsequent months as well. On December 19, 2011, at a round table discussion that included former heads of the defense establishment, Dagan claimed that the military option must stay on the table, but that it should be used only “as a last resort.”⁹ He also stated that war should be waged only when a sharp sword is at your throat. In an interview with “Sixty Minutes” on CBS on March 9, 2012, Dagan repeated his call not to rush to take military action against Iran.¹⁰ In the same interview he also claimed that Israel can wait another three years before a military strike, because the Iranian response to a strike will have “a devastating impact on our ability to continue with our daily life,” and after such a strike, “I think that Israel will be in a very serious situation for quite a time.”¹¹

Dagan’s comments strengthened assessments published from time to time in the Israeli media, that the members of the leading troika among Israeli defense professionals – the IDF chief of staff, the head of the Mossad, and the head of the General Security Services (GSS) – oppose an Israeli strike against Iran. On April 27, 2012, former GSS head Yuval Diskin launched a personal attack, unprecedented in its severity, on the Prime Minister and the Minister of Defense. Calling Netanyahu and Barak “messianists from Caesarea and Akirov,” he made it clear that he has no confidence in them, claimed that they are misrepresenting the Iranian issue and making decisions based on “messianic feelings,” and added that they are unfit to lead the country, and certainly to lead a war against Iran. Essentially, said Diskin, in contrast to their opinion, an Israeli strike would not prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear bomb and would only accelerate the Iranian nuclear arms race.¹² Diskin’s brusque, personal tirade, as well as the fact that Iran was not within his essential purview as head of the GSS, somewhat blunted the impact of his comments. However, they did reflect an escalation in the public debate. In August 2012, former chief of staff Lt. Gen. (ret.) Amnon Lipkin-Shahak also spoke out against a hasty attack before all other options were exhausted. Lipkin-Shahak stressed that Israel must not act before the US elections in November 2012.¹³

Not all former defense establishment officials have spoken in this way. Former chief of staff Lt. Gen. (ret.) Gabi Ashkenazi has not addressed this issue often, and when he has, it has been in general terms only. Former head

of Military Intelligence Maj. Gen. (ret.) Amos Yadlin (a fighter pilot who served as deputy commander of the Israel Air Force and participated in the bombing of the Osirak reactor) has on many occasions publicly expressed his belief that if the choice is between bombing Iran and an Iranian bomb, then Israel must choose the former, because a nuclear Iran would be an intolerable threat to the State of Israel. However, Yadlin has stressed that there is also a third possibility, and that there are a number of essential conditions for an Israeli military action, including international legitimacy for the operation and ensuring continuous international activity to prevent the Iranian military nuclear program from being restarted.¹⁴

The public debate heated up further between July and September 2012.¹⁵ The Israeli and US media gave the impression that Netanyahu and Barak were seriously considering an independent Israeli military strike before the US presidential elections. The Prime Minister's political opponents even charged that his considerations included a desire to intervene in the US elections in favor of his longtime friend, Republican candidate Mitt Romney (this claim was not based on any evidence). The visits by several US administration officials, which were interpreted as part of an attempt to persuade decision makers not to attack Iran, reinforced this feeling.

On August 10, 2012, leading Israeli newspapers devoted extensive coverage to the issue of an attack on Iran. *Haaretz* published an interview with someone referred to as a "decision maker," though it was clear that it was Defense Minister Ehud Barak. In the interview, Barak was quoted as warning against living in the shadow of the Iranian bomb, against depending on an American strike, and against an Israel that would no longer be what it was if Iran had military nuclear capability.¹⁶ In the same issue, an article appeared that accused the Prime Minister and Defense Minister of warmongering against the advice of Washington and also of endangering Dimona, that is, the nuclear capabilities attributed to Israel.¹⁷ *Yediot Ahronot* published an article with an assessment that the Prime Minister and Defense Minister favored an Israeli attack before the US elections, while officials in the IDF and the intelligence community were uncompromisingly opposed to an Israeli military strike.¹⁸ *Maariv* published a public opinion poll that examined the positions of the Israeli public on the issue of a nuclear Iran (its findings will be discussed below). The same

day, a paid advertisement titled “a black flag” appeared on the front page of *Haaretz*. Signed by fifty individuals, among them professors, Israel Prize winners, and public figures, the announcement stated that the order to attack Iran would be manifestly illegal and must not be obeyed, and that waging war under existing conditions would be a “reckless gamble” that could “endanger [Israel’s] very existence.” The signatories maintained that “the blackest of flags flies over a war waged under these conditions.”¹⁹ Another ad explicitly called on air force pilots to refuse an order to attack Iran.²⁰

The public debate reached its peak on August 15, 2012, when President Shimon Peres broke with custom and, in an interview on Channel 2 news, took an unequivocal position in the discussion, stating explicitly that Israel should not act alone against the Iranian nuclear program. In essence he ruled out the Israeli military option when “it is clear to us that we cannot do this alone.” Peres expressed confidence in the seriousness of US President Barack Obama’s intentions to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons, and he stressed that “Obama does not say this only in order to put us at ease. There is no doubt of this.” President Peres’ firm self-positioning on the side of those who oppose a military operation was a turning point in the continuing debate. Aside from the fact that in recent years Shimon Peres has been the most popular public figure in Israel, he is considered the number one authority on the nuclear issue. The blunt criticism of Peres’ comments by the Prime Minister’s Office and the Likud immediately after the interview was broadcast showed their fear of the impact the comments would have on public opinion.²¹

Prime Minister Netanyahu sharpened the content and the style of his rhetoric. In a series of interviews in Israel and the United States in late August and September, Netanyahu demanded that the international community, especially the United States and President Obama, set red lines for Iran. If Iran crossed those lines, it would be a target for attack. For his part, President Obama firmly rejected the demand and stressed that he has no intention of setting red lines or escalating beyond an explicit statement that the United States will prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons. This created an open conflict between Israel and the United States. It has been posited that the Prime Minister saw in the sharpened

debate and criticism an opportunity for him to harden his rhetoric, in order to intensify the pressure on the international community in general, and the United States in particular.

Whether related or not, there was then, and particularly after his visit to the United States, a noticeable change in style – specifically, a muted tone – in the Defense Minister’s statements on the issue. It was suggested that Barak’s “new” moderation did not represent an essential change in stance on his part, rather a desire to ease the friction in US-Israel relations and prevent an attack on Iran from becoming a main issue in the US elections. Be it as it may be, on September 27, 2012, Netanyahu gave a speech at the UN General Assembly that dispelled the tension that had accompanied public discussion of the issue. The reason for this was Netanyahu’s statement that from Israel’s point of view, the moment of truth will take place in the summer of 2013, which implied that Israel does not intend to attack in the near future, and certainly not before the US elections.

The Debate and Public Opinion

It is difficult to point to direct, unequivocal influence that the public debate has had on Israeli public opinion, but the discourse has certainly contributed to the very charged environment. What is also clear is that the Israeli public, and especially the Jewish public, is divided on the issue of an independent Israeli military strike against Iran’s nuclear facilities. As part of the National Security and Public Opinion Project at the Institute for National Security Studies, a representative sampling of the adult Jewish population was presented in May-June 2009 with the following question: “If Israel discovers that Iran is in possession of nuclear weapons, should Israel: 1. Use all diplomatic means to disarm Iran but avoid a military attack? 2. Attack Iran’s nuclear facilities?” Fifty-nine percent of the respondents chose the second option, that is, they supported a military strike, while 41 percent preferred the first option, i.e., opposed a military strike.²² In February-March 2012, within the framework of the same public opinion project, the question was posed more precisely: “How, in your opinion, should Israel act in the face of the danger that Iran will develop nuclear weapons: 1. Use all diplomatic means to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons, to avoid a military strike? 2. Attack Iran’s

nuclear facilities?” Fifty-two percent of those questioned chose the first option, that is, they opposed a military strike, while 48 percent chose the second option, an attack on Iran’s nuclear facilities.²³

These findings showed a significant drop – 11 percent – in support of a military strike. The disparity should be weighed cautiously because of the amount of time that elapsed between the two polls: in 2009, an Israeli military strike was not seen as imminent, and therefore the question was considered hypothetical, whereas in 2012, the possibility of an attack on Iran was considered more realistic. In addition, the questions asked about this issue were not worded identically. However, this result, which indicates that public opinion is divided on a military strike, is supported by the findings of many public opinion polls conducted during 2012.

Why is there considerable reluctance on the part of more than half of the Israeli population to conduct an Israeli military action against Iran? There are two leading reasons for the reservations. One is the opposition of professional defense figures to an attack, as expressed in the public debate, while the other is an awareness of strong American opposition to an attack and the wish to avoid a confrontation with the United States on a security issue that is so fundamental to Israel. The findings of a poll that was conducted in early August 2012 by the Israel Democracy Institute as part of the Peace Index project showed more confidence in the judgment of the heads of the security establishment than in the judgment of the Prime Minister and Defense Minister: 57 percent for the former, vs. 28 percent for the latter. Sixty-one percent of respondents believed that Israel should not attack Iran’s nuclear facilities without cooperation from the United States. This position apparently reflects the assessment that the chances are slim that without US cooperation an Israeli attack would succeed in stopping Iran’s acquisition of nuclear weapons for a significant period of time (54 percent of those questioned). Seventy-six percent of respondents believed that the chances of success of an attack would be high if it were done with American cooperation. An interesting and surprising finding is that 60 percent of the respondents among Israel’s Jewish population believed that Israel must accept the fact that it is not possible to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons and should prepare accordingly.²⁴

Data from a poll published in *Maariv* on August 10, 2012 confirmed these findings.²⁵ Forty percent of the respondents stated that they trusted the judgment of the Prime Minister and Defense Minister on the Iranian issue, while 27 percent said that they did not, and 23 percent replied that they did somewhat. Forty-four percent of those surveyed believe that it would “not be legitimate from a public point of view” if the political echelon decided to attack Iran in the face of opposition by professional defense figures in Israel to an attack. Only 33 percent of respondents stated that such a decision would be legitimate, and 23 percent did not know how to answer or did not answer. As for reluctance to have Israel attack, those interviewed were asked whether, if the latest date on which Israel could inflict significant damage on the Iranian nuclear program by itself were close, it should attack by itself or “leave the work to the United States and the international community.” Thirty-five percent expressed support for an Israeli attack in such a situation, while 39 percent advocated leaving the task to the United States and the international community. Twenty-six percent of those polled did not know how to answer this question or did not answer. There were similar responses to a question that included an explicit possibility that an Israeli attack would lead to massive firing of missiles at the home front and to hundreds of people killed.

Conclusion

How will the public debate in Israel on the issue of confronting a nuclear Iran evolve? On this subject, what is unknown is greater than what is known. Elections in Israel are scheduled for January 2013. At the time of this writing, it appears that Benjamin Netanyahu has a good chance of forming and heading the new government. However, it is difficult to know which political parties and which individuals will comprise the government, and especially, who will be the Defense Minister and how will he approach the Iranian nuclear issue. In June 2013, presidential elections will be held in Iran, but it is not known what the results will be, whether they will be accompanied by civil unrest, and whether a popular protest will develop into an “Iranian spring.” President Obama has been elected for a second term, which indicates the high likelihood of continuity in the foreign policy of the US administration in the coming years, and

in particular, on the Iranian issue. Obama has made a public commitment that his policy is intended to prevent Iran from acquiring military nuclear capability and that containment is not on the agenda. However, it is not clear if the negotiations between the P5+1 and Iran will be resumed, and what their results would be

The nature and the directions of the public debate in Israel in the coming period will therefore be a function of developments in the regional and international arenas. If an Israeli strike does not return to the agenda, the discussion will remain relatively dormant. If, however, an Israeli strike seems to be a practical possibility, the debate will heat up again. The nature and the content of the debate will express, *inter alia*, the two factors that have a significant impact on public opinion: the position of the United States on a strike against Iran, and the position of senior Israeli security professionals on this issue.

Notes

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Defense Expenditure and Israel's Social Challenges

Shmuel Even

The social protests of the summer of 2011 on the one hand, and the security challenges facing Israel on the other, have intensified the Israeli debate on national expenditure priorities, pitting social welfare against defense needs. Those favoring moving resources from defense to welfare believe that “at the present moment, the threats stemming from our social challenges are no less important than the threats to our security, and demand a change in the relative emphasis reflected by the state budget” (Trajtenberg Committee).¹ Others are of the firm opinion that the defense budget is much lower than the actual need (Tishler Committee).²

This disagreement raises several questions: How are the nation's priorities determined? What are the nation's current priorities? How are these manifested in the allocation of resources between the military sector and the civilian sector? What is the scope for maneuver in terms of moving resources from the former to the latter?

This essay presents an analysis of Israel's national priorities as demonstrated in practice by the allocation of national resources between the military and civilian (public and private) sectors, based on the national accounting data published by the Central Bureau of Statistics. According to this data, the civilian sector is currently the recipient of 94 percent of the “economic sources” while the military is allotted close to 6 percent (“the defense burden”). Even though the latter is high when compared to that of other countries, Israel's defense burden has never been lower. This is the result of a long term trend – growing civilian consumption versus

decreasing military consumption – reflecting a fundamental change in apparent national priorities.

The debate about priorities at the national level resembles a tug of war between Finance Ministry representatives demanding that the defense budget be slashed, and defense establishment representatives seeking to increase it. For example, in the cabinet debate on August 15, 2012 about the 2013 defense budget, the gap between the sides was NIS 11.5 billion, with the government deciding not to decide. This conduct demonstrates the necessity of integrated staff work before the state budget is presented to the government for debate and approval.

The stormy debate about the defense budget, which recurs year after year, often diverts attention from other important matters concerning the economic effectiveness of national resources in the larger civilian sector, e.g., improving the effectiveness of expenditures in education and health, developing new municipal centers in Israel that would reduce the cost of housing; investing in future growth engines, and more. Obviously these are not instead of defense expenditure or monitoring the effectiveness of the expenditure; examination of the actual contribution of the expenditure and the different defense outputs to total national defense; and presentation of the alternative cost in terms of social needs and economic risks.

The Basket of National Uses

According to the data published by the Central Bureau of Statistics, the basket of national uses (some NIS 875 billion in 2011) includes three tracks: public consumption, private consumption, and investment. These are identical in value to the total economic sources (“the resources”) at the market’s disposal.³

Public consumption includes consumption by the governmental sector: the government, the National Insurance Institute, local governments, national institutions, and non-profit institutions financed mostly by national institutions. Public consumption can be divided into two main categories: one, individual consumption on services provided by the governmental sector, i.e., spending on services used individually by the members of Israeli society, such as education, healthcare, culture, and so on; two, collective consumption by the government, i.e., spending on defense, public order,

administration, research and development, the environment, and so on, or all the public goods serving all residents of the state collectively. To illustrate, in 2011, public consumption totaled NIS 207.7 billion, of which NIS 106.6 billion went toward individual consumption and NIS 101.1 billion toward collective consumption.

The difference between the two is that for individual spending, such as education and healthcare, the government can decide the level of funding: generous funding requiring extensive taxes (the welfare state) or basic funding, leaving the population to buy improved services out of pocket, i.e., buying complementary healthcare and education on the free market (the capitalistic approach). By contrast, when it comes to collective consumption, especially defense consumption, such a model is not possible, because the government is the only body permitted by law to establish and maintain an army.⁴

Private consumption is the total expenditure of households on finite goods and services, excluding residential housing. In 2011, private consumption totaled NIS 506.5 billion.

Investment is civilian public and private spending on infrastructures and means of production⁵ designed to allow future growth of the GDP. In 2011, investment in the Israeli market totaled NIS 161.4 billion. Defense sector investment is included in defense consumption.

Distribution among Defense Consumption, Civilian Consumption, and Investment

Another way of categorizing the basket of uses is to differentiate between defense consumption, civilian consumption, and investment for the future, whose value also equals the total economic sources available to the economy.

Defense consumption is part of the public consumption and reflects the country's total direct expenditures on defense.⁶ In spending on defense consumption, local defense consumption (in shekels) is distinguished from defense imports financed almost completely by US financial aid, which is therefore not a burden on the Israeli economy. Clearly, there is a direct link between the growth in defense consumption and the growth of external threats to security (by foreign armies, underground organizations, and so

on), but defense consumption also tends to grow as the result of growth in economic sources. This link appears in the 2007 Brodet Committee Report, which determined that defense consumption should grow by 1.3 percent annually, assuming the economy would grow at an annual rate of 4 percent.

Expenditures on defense consumption for 2011 totaled NIS 53.7 billion, some 26 percent of the public consumption and some 6.5 percent of the GDP. The local defense consumption (not counting acquisitions financed with US financial aid) totaled NIS 45.3 billion, i.e., 22 percent of the public consumption and about 5.4 percent of the GDP.

Civilian consumption consists of the total private and public civilian consumption. In general, a decrease in real terms in per capita civilian consumption leads to a lower standard of living and a higher threat to internal stability. This phenomenon is accompanied and/or is the result of a drop in real income, increased unemployment, increased taxes, higher prices, lower standards of services, and more. Alternatively, as long as per capita civilian consumption rises in real terms, the standard of living, as well as both public satisfaction with the leadership and internal stability, is supposed to increase. However, this connection is not necessarily borne out in practice, because growing income gaps between population segments or growing gaps in welfare expectations are liable to cause public resentment, even if civilian consumption increases overall.

Civilian consumption in Israel for 2011 totaled NIS 660.7 billion, of which NIS 506.5 billion was private consumption and NIS 154.2 billion was public consumption. The state could change the elements of civilian consumption by, for example, expanding public consumption at the expense of private consumption (by raising taxes and expanding civilian budget items), or change the breakdown of private consumption among population segments (e.g., by decreasing regressive taxes and increasing progressive taxes) without changing the state budget's expenditures. In other words, there are broad channels for improving welfare in Israel that do not require cutting the defense budget.

A comparison of the items of civilian consumption with national defense consumption in 2011 shows that national consumption on education totaled NIS 73.4 million (8.4 percent of the GDP)⁷ and national consumption on

healthcare totaled NIS 67.4 billion of the GDP.⁸ These expenditures are larger than national consumption on defense, and these areas appear to need streamlining at least as much as the defense sector. Thus, an analysis of the national uses presents more clearly the country's national priorities than the national budget, which does not include many of the expenditures the government does not assume fully but rather passes on to the citizens in other ways and are thus included in private consumption.

The government's challenge is to divide the total economic sources (NIS 875 billion in 2011) optimally among defense consumption, civilian consumption, and investment in order to bring about maximum utility to the state in the long run. Because these uses give the state different utilities at different times, the optimal division should be determined as a simultaneous solution of two dilemmas:

- a. How to divide the total economic sources between current needs versus future needs, i.e., how to divide the total economic sources between the current consumption (civilian consumption and defense consumption) and investments (future consumption). Deciding this dilemma is likely to be instructive about the state's view of the future. The more a state is future-oriented, the higher the proportion of its investments for the future. The more a state is mired in the problems of the moment, be they related to defense or to social issues, the more it will increase the proportion of current consumption at the expense of investment.
- b. How to divide the resources allocated for current consumption between defense consumption and civilian consumption to balance defense needs directed at external threats and social and economic needs directed internally and affecting the stability of the society and the economy.

The following discussion shows how Israeli governments resolved these dilemmas, that is, how over the years the national economic sources were divided among the different uses.

Change in National Priorities: Quantitative Analysis

Table 1 describes the division among the three national uses in 1995-2011: civilian consumption (public and private), defense consumption, and

investment, giving a sense of apparent national priorities and how these shifted over time.

Table 1. Division among Market Uses, 1995-2011 (in percentage of total economic sources)

Year	Investment	Civilian consumption	Defense consumption	Noteworthy events
1995	23.1	69.1	7.9	Oslo accord (II)
1996	22.8	69.1	8.1	Netanyahu government is sworn in; Western Wall tunnels incident
1997	22.2	69.6	8.1	
1998	20.9	70.9	8.1	
1999	21.2	70.8	8.1	Barak government is sworn in
2000	20.5	71.8	7.8	Withdrawal from Lebanon; outbreak of the second intifada
2001	19.5	72.7	7.9	Events of 9/11; start of the global economic crisis, Sharon government is sworn in
2002	17.7	73.5	8.9	Operation Defensive Shield
2003	17.2	74.3	8.5	
2004	17.4	74.8	7.8	End of the second intifada
2005	18.8	73.6	7.6	Disengagement from the Gaza Strip
2006	19.1	73.3	7.7	Olmert government is sworn in; Second Lebanon War
2007	19.9	73.1	7.1	
2008	18.5	74.7	6.8	Global economic crisis
2009	17.1	76.3	6.5	Operation Cast Lead; Netanyahu government is sworn in
2010	16.3	77.3	6.4	
2011	18.4	75.5	6.1	

Source: Based on Central Bureau of Statistics data (in current NIS), August 2012

The table demonstrates that since the mid 1990s, there has been a steady increase in civilian (public and private) consumption out of the total national consumption compared to a continuous decline in defense consumption. Between 1995 and 2011, defense consumption dropped from 7.9 percent of economic sources in 1995 to some 6.1 percent in 2011, whereas the part of civilian consumption grew from 69.1 percent in 1995 to 75.5 percent in 2011. This shift is not the result only of population growth, because in tandem there was also a significant growth in real per capita civilian consumption, as detailed in table 2. In other words, in current consumption a clearer preference was given to civilian consumption, i.e., standard of living, over defense consumption than in preceding years.

The increase in the relative proportion of civilian consumption also came at the expense of the portion set aside for (civilian) investment in the economy, which dropped from about 23.1 percent in 1995 to 18.4 percent in 2011. In other words, a clear preference was given to the needs of the present over the needs of the future. Among the apparent reasons for this trend was an increase in the economy's uncertainty, causing a preference for current consumption over investment, but another reason may be the difficulty of withstanding political pressure. This is clear when one compares the 1990s, the years of the political process, when the proportion of investment was bigger than its share in the basket of uses in the 2000s (years of the second intifada, the Second Lebanon War, the 2008 global economic crisis).

The quantitative analysis above indicates an apparent change in the national priorities since the mid 1990s: more resources to welfare and fewer to defense and investment for the future. It is hard to say whether in a long term national view this was a preferred trend, but one can certainly say that it is not a product of in-depth national staff work. Rather, it is a direct derivative of ad hoc decision making resulting from changing circumstances and political pressures. There is a link between the continuing deterioration of the defense situation and an increase in the defense burden, as exemplified in 2002 (the height of the second intifada). Nonetheless, there is no apparent link between the decrease of the defense burden and the ruling political party (Labor, Kadima, Likud). In other

words, it is hard to make distinctions among the political parties on the basis of their defense budgets.

Based on the data in table 1, the ratio between defense consumption and civilian consumption is steadily narrowing. In 2011, it reached 1:12, with the ratio between local defense consumption (NIS 45.3 billion), without American aid, and civilian consumption (NIS 660.7 billion) reaching close to 1:15. The significance of this ratio is that in order to increase the resources directed at standard of living by only 1 percent (NIS 6.6 billion), it is necessary to cut close to 15 percent of the local defense consumption (NIS 6.6 billion of NIS 45.3 billion). In other words, a minor improvement in the standard of living (welfare) would require significant cuts to defense. One should note that the ratio between local defense consumption and the total expenditures of the civilian sector (civilian consumption and civilian investments) reaches close to 1:19.

Table 2 shows the drop in the defense burden in terms of per capita consumption. Since 1995 per capita defense consumption has decreased by some 8 percent, whereas per capita civilian consumption has increased by 46 percent (in real terms).

Unlike the 1970s and early 1980s (when the defense burden reached 20-30 percent of the GDP), today's defense budget cannot be seen as a potential significant resource to generate an in-depth change in the socioeconomic realm. In other words, welfare for Israeli society cannot be found in the defense budget. By contrast, a critical deficiency in resources for defense needs is liable to increase the security threat to Israel's population and economy. Thus, the big money for social change in Israel is to be found in the civilian sector, where an in-depth overhaul is no less necessary than in the defense sector, if not more so. At the same time, local defense consumption remains a large component (22 percent) of public consumption in Israel, and therefore it is important to place it too under a microscope.

Qualitative Analysis

The global economic crises affecting the West since 2008 raised glaring questions about the nature of the socioeconomic order – with comparisons from predatory capitalism to naive socialism – that democratic nations ought

Table 2: Trends in Per Capita Civilian Consumption, 1995-2011
(thousands of NIS, in fixed prices – 2005)

Year	Per capita private consumption	Per capita civilian public consumption	Total per capita civilian consumption	Total per capita defense consumption
1995	41.0	9.9	50.9	6.85
1996	42.2	11.5	53.7	7.14
1997	42.5	12.5	55.0	7.04
1998	43.8	13.3	57.0	7.03
1999	44.3	14.0	58.3	7.01
2000	47.0	14.6	61.5	6.90
2001	47.5	15.3	62.8	7.03
2002	46.9	15.8	62.7	7.69
2003	46.0	15.3	61.3	7.09
2004	47.5	15.4	63.0	6.54
2005	48.2	15.7	63.8	6.54
2006	49.3	16.2	65.5	6.83
2007	51.4	16.7	68.1	6.73
2008	51.9	17.4	69.3	6.63
2009	51.8	18.0	69.8	6.32
2010	53.5	18.8	72.3	6.23
2011	54.5	19.9	74.3	6.32

Source: Central Bureau of Statistics, August 2012

to pursue. On the one hand, the crisis in the United States demonstrated the bitter effects of the capitalistic approach. On the other hand, the economic crisis in Europe manifested in the crisis of debt reduction, high unemployment, and more in countries such as Greece, Spain, and Italy, demonstrated the failure of states managing their economies without paying strict attention to rigid economic criteria.

The global economic reality of recent years increases the confusion: is the capitalistic approach the way to respect individuals' rights to control their property, working hours, and money and to fully realize their skills and talents in favor of their own interests, or is it simply an approach that views

the world in terms of financial profit and loss, increases social inequality, and is liable to empty the state of its social functions? Alternately, does the socialist approach support social equality and care for the weak and unfortunate, yet at the same time impinge on the rights and motivation of the talented and hardworking in society and encourage laziness, because the profit from work decreases as taxes rise, welfare services expand, and unilateral transfers are made by the government to the weaker elements in society?

Despite the deep debate about social justice, the different socioeconomic approaches in the West do not differ in essence regarding the debate about defense expenditures as a burden on the economy. In this sense, there is no essential difference between those who support a free market economy and those who support a centralized or welfare state economy where the state has a high degree of involvement in the economy. In the case of Israel, there are strong ties between the defense sector and the civilian sector that detract from the socioeconomic benefits likely to come from deep cuts to defense expenditures. In addition, Israel faces significant security threats compared to other countries, so a significant cut in defense expenditures is liable to be a fateful decision. These two factors make other countries less relevant for Israel as models for cuts in defense spending.

Regarding the link between defense expenditures and the economy: defense spending is likely to result in high economic yields, because it prevents economic damage and the costs of lack of security, i.e., spending or losses caused to the economy as the result of lack of security or defense damages that could have been prevented or minimized by strengthening the defense system. For example, the major investment in the Iron Dome system for interception of short range missiles has reduced the number of casualties and the damage to property, allowed most of the economy to function regularly during Operation Pillar of Defense in November 2012, and seemed at least for now to have prevented the need for a ground incursion by the IDF into Gaza. The system also represents a political economic asset for defense exports. A second example is the expenditure on the security fence on the Egyptian border, which is insignificant when compared to the benefit to the economy resulting from preventing people from entering Israel illegally. Third, Operation Defensive Shield of

March-April 2002 helped end the second intifada, which in turn allowed for the country's economic revival. In addition, defense expenditures yield indirect economic benefits: not only is security enhanced, but the IDF reaps indirect yields for society and the economy, such as proving a source for skilled workers, managers, and entrepreneurs for the economy (especially in the fields of technology and communications); contributing to technological development; contributing to the defense industry, and more. In many ways, the IDF is a school and training center of significant value for the civilian economy.

At the social level, one finds close mutual effects between the military and Israeli society in terms of social integration and support for the country's socioeconomically challenged geographical periphery. In terms of social integration, the IDF functions as a platform for social integration and mobility and equality of opportunity for the middle and lower classes. The IDF allows population segments from every part of the country to acquire professional knowledge, skills and know how, work habits, leadership abilities, the drive for excellence, and more. For those who enlist in the regular army beyond the compulsory service, the army offers a promotional track with many options, relatively high pay, and other perks. The IDF thereby breaks down social barriers stemming from the periphery's distance from the center and the entrance barriers to formal education at the beginning of the road. As for benefits for the periphery, IDF forces are deployed primarily in the periphery and provide employment for middle class NCOs, workers, and contractors. In addition, population centers in the periphery close to the border are more exposed to security threats than the country's center, and therefore these centers' ability to conduct normal social and economic lives and develop properly is more dependent on IDF capabilities. As a result, cutting defense expenditures is liable to damage these areas more, both security-wise and socioeconomically.

Thus, it appears that the decision to move resources from defense to social needs should also take into account the socioeconomic damage stemming from cuts to defense expenditures. In other words, it is necessary to consider the delta of the move, not only the contribution of the resources taken from defense in favor of the civilian sector.

The Incomplete Debate on the Defense Budget

In the wake of the social protests in Israel in the summer of 2011, the Prime Minister established a committee on socioeconomic change headed by Prof. Manuel Trajtenberg, the former head of the National Economic Council. Senior figures on Israel's economy and society were among its members. The committee recommended allocating budgets of NIS 30 billion over the next five years for civilian uses, especially education and welfare, primarily on the basis of cutting the defense budget.⁹ The committee proposed that even in the 2012 budget more than NIS 4 billion be allocated for these purposes, with the defense budget being the source for NIS 2.5 billion of that sum. The committee's report, called "Creating a More Just Israeli Society," explained the need for shifting resources from defense to welfare as follows: "In our case, the key meaning of changing priorities is a significant decrease of the defense budget to allow for parallel growth of social budgets. At the present moment, the threats stemming from our social challenges are no less important than the threats to our security, and demand a change in the relative emphasis reflected by the state budget."

Another change proposed by the committee was the reorganization of civilian consumption, especially the private portion, by means of canceling the plan to lower income tax and raising other taxes (some NIS 6 billion in 2012), while at the same time lowering indirect taxes and giving credit points (also for a total of NIS 6 billion), for a total of NIS 30 billion over half a decade. The committee expected these moves to "lower prices and ease the cost of living, allow greater accessibility to public services, ease payments for education, grow net income because of credit points, and more."¹⁰

A number of the Trajtenberg report recommendations were in fact implemented, but defense expenditures for 2012 not only did not fall but actually increased, despite the tremendous growth of the treasury deficit because of decreased tax collection, which was unanticipated and required deep cuts in other ministries as well. In other words, the government rejected the committee's assumption – or conclusion – that the threat to social stability was greater than the threat to Israel's security.

How can this be explained? The Trajtenberg committee, which included only prominent experts in socioeconomic fields, proposed that the government slash the defense budget, but did not provide an explanation about the meaning of the cut in terms of increased security risks, i.e., what security risks did the government have to take in order to move resources to the civilian sector in order to implement the recommendations of the Trajtenberg committee in the civilian realm? This is precisely the reason that it is hard for the government to accept the recommendation of the Finance Ministry to cut defense expenditures. As noted above, a mere 1 percent increase for civilian consumption would require cutting close to 15 percent of defense consumption.

The necessary conclusion, therefore, is that it would be better were civilian government ministries as well as committees dealing with social welfare not to point to the need for moving resources from the defense budget without presenting the security risk that would be incurred by such a move, but were rather to propose a change in the priorities within the civilian sector itself, already benefiting from 94 percent of the economy's resources.

The debate on the defense budget in the government: On August 15, 2012, the government debated the 2013 defense budget. At the beginning of the debate, Prime Minister Netanyahu made it clear that the government would have to decide "not only on the amount of money to invest in defense but also where in the security establishment to put that money." Predictably, the Finance and Defense Ministries presented opposing positions: the Finance Ministry demanded that the 2013 defense budget be cut to NIS 50.5 billion (compared to an original budget of NIS 55.8 billion for 2012), whereas the Defense Ministry demanded NIS 62 billion (compared to an updated budget of NIS 58 billion for 2012). The government failed to settle the issue.

This picture may indicate a certain improvement in the quality of the government debate about the defense budget (the willingness to discuss the contents of the defense budget, not only its size),¹¹ but it also shows that as yet there is no serious discussion at the professional level about the size and composition of the defense budget before it is presented to the government. Currently, Finance Ministry economists, demanding deep

cuts to the defense budget, bear no responsibility for the security of the state and are not experts in analyzing security threats or how to respond to them. By contrast, Defense Ministry personnel determine the size of the budget without being responsible for social needs or the economy's stability. Thus, both sides end up presenting the government with one-sided assessments rather than balanced integrated assessments necessary for sound decision making. Given such contradictory, one-sided positions, how can cabinet ministers make an informed decision on the dilemma and bridge enormous gaps presented by two groups of experts? The obvious conclusion is that the government needs professional assessments based on a comprehensive view of the country's security and social needs that would place the socioeconomic risks side by side with the security risks and the advantages of preferring to contribute resources to one side as opposed to the other.

To create such staff work for decision makers, a formal inter-ministerial dialogue should be held, e.g., in the context of the National Security Staff and with the participation of the National Economic Council, representatives from the defense establishment, the Bank of Israel, the relevant ministries, and advisors. The use of an inter-ministerial dialogue, as an integral part of staff work, is preferential to creating ad hoc committees, no matter how good, that would develop knowledge that would not be used in the long term. It could also institutionalize a way of thinking and organizational culture, and require senior personnel in government ministries to assume responsibility and accountability for the counsel they dispense. The product of such a dialogue would be the sketching of a number of scenarios on defense and social budgets. Each of the scenarios would make clear the level of security that would be attained (in terms of defense capabilities), the alternate social cost of the scenario, and the security risks the scenario does not cover. Thus, cabinet members would be able to decide on the nation's priorities in the context of security and assume risks in an informed manner.

The efficiency of security expenditures: The imperative to become more efficient is incumbent upon the defense establishment at all times, i.e., it must provide the most security per given budget, just as the Education Ministry is required to provide maximal education per its budget. To do

so, the defense establishment must present goals for increased efficiency and display maximal transparency toward the Finance Ministry and the National Security Council. At the same time, it would be best to separate the dialogue about the scope of spending on security, based on pricing the capabilities and actions required to confront the security threats, from the demand of the defense establishment to streamline. Making the transfer of resources to the defense establishment contingent upon increased efficiency is liable to risk the army's preparedness or even lead to a national disaster (a lesson learned from the State Comptroller's report on the devastating Mount Carmel fire).

Conclusion

The quantitative analysis of national resource allocation demonstrates that a change in national priorities – increasing the portion of civilian consumption and decreasing the portion of defense consumption – has in fact been a longstanding trend, dating back at least to the mid 1990s, if not before. The qualitative analysis demonstrates that defense consumption in Israel provides significant social and economic contributions in addition to producing security. Both analyses show that at present even a deep cut in the defense budget would not result in an essential change in Israel's standard of living, but would apparently result in fundamental damage to security. As such, it seems that improvements to Israel's standard of living first of all require deep changes in the civilian sector (civilian consumption and investments), representing 94 percent of national uses. In other words, while the debate about changing national priorities on the level of defense versus social needs is important, it is not the place to seek a solution to Israel's socioeconomic problems. Even more problematic, that debate shunts aside debates about efficiency in civilian uses, which are at least as important.

At present, the governmental and public debate about changing priorities on the level of defense versus social needs is itself inefficient. Defense experts claim the need for bigger budgets without consideration for social needs, while experts on the economy and social needs claim the need for cuts in defense without understanding the ramifications or having to be accountable for them. Improving the discourse and decision making

requires joint efforts by experts in all disciplines. This essay recommends that such discourse be developed formally and in an institutionalized manner through the National Defense Staff and the National Economic Council with the participation of the relevant government ministries. The focus of the discourse is the question how to balance the need to minimize security threats with the need to minimize threats to the stability of Israel's economy and society in the present and the future.

Given current data, the most significant consideration in determining defense expenditures must be the security threats and strategic challenges facing Israel and how these have changed in recent years. Assessing Israel's current strategic security challenges, it is hard to see how Israel can make significant cuts in defense spending; on the contrary, there seems to be reason to increase it. Even if there are those who think there has been no fundamental change in the cumulative security threat scenario, given the rise of certain threats and drop of others, a renewed defense assessment of the mix of threats forming in and of itself requires increased sums for defense spending.

Notes

- 1 The committee on socioeconomic change appointed by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in August 2011 following the social protests of the summer of 2011.
- 2 The committee appointed to investigate the erosion of the defense budget appointed by Defense Minister Ehud Barak in 2012. The committee was headed by Prof. Asher Tishler, Dean of the Management Faculty at Tel Aviv University, and an expert on defense. Among its members were CPA Dan Margalit, CPA Gad Somekh, Attorney David Tadmor, and others.
- 3 Total uses = total economic sources = GDP (the product) + import surplus. In 2011, the total economic sources at the economy's disposal totaled some NIS 875 billion: NIS 870 billion in GDP and some NIS 5 billion import surplus (imports totaling NIS 328.2 billion minus exports totaling NIS 322.8 billion).
- 4 Private defense consumption is relatively very small and consists mainly of the added cost involved in building a safe room in one's home compared to a regular room, and the expenditures on security firms in the private sector aimed against terrorist threats.
- 5 Gross investments (investments) are the total of expenditures (buying equipment and self-manufacturing) to increase capital reserves of fixed assets belonging to industrial plants, the government, and non-profit institutions. Expenditures

include acquisition of non-consumable assets (other than real estate) for civilian use, construction projects in progress, large scale renovations, road pavement, and other infrastructure work. Furthermore, investments in abstract assets are included (especially spending on acquisitions and self manufacturing of software and spending on oil and natural gas exploration). Not included are government expenditures on buildings and equipment for military use (Central Bureau of Statistics).

- 6 Expenditures for defense consumption include defense establishment payments for salaries, acquisition of goods and services, depreciation, and taxes on production (Central Bureau of Statistics). The expenditures of the IDF are the main component of defense consumption, but it also includes expenditures by civilian defense institutions, such as the General Security Service and the Mossad (source: "The Report of the Committee Investigating the Defense Budget," Brodet Commission, May 2007, p. 46). Defense consumption also includes defense establishment investments, not only current consumption (the civilian sector distinguishes between spending on consumption and investments). Defense consumption is not included in spending on pensions for defense establishment pensioners (these are included in the defense budget) but it does include the charge of spending on pensions for those serving in the regular army and civilian workers in the defense establishment. This addition to the cost of labor stems from the government's commitment to pay the pensions of the defense establishment's pensioners from the government budget as a substitute for deductions to pension funds (Central Bureau of Statistics). Defense consumption does not include spending on compensation and rehabilitation for bereaved families and service people who became handicapped in the course of their service; these are included in the defense budget. The definition of defense consumption matches accepted international definitions used to present national accounting data. Defense consumption is consistently noted and reported by the Central Bureau of Statistics based on expenditures in practice. For more information about the composition of defense consumption, see "Defense Expenditures in Israel 1950-2009," the Central Bureau of Statistics, Publication No. 1449, June 2011.
- 7 National expenditures on education: 87 percent of educational services were provided to the population by educational institutions of the central government, local government, or government NGOs most of whose funding is governmental (such as the universities, the ORT network, the Amal network); 4 percent of services were provided by NGOs whose funding is mostly private; and 9 percent of services were provided in for-profit settings, such as preschools, private tutoring, out-of-school courses for completing schoolwork, adult education, textbooks, and so on. Source: Central Bureau of Statistics, press release, August 28, 2012.

- 8 Expenditures on healthcare: 34 percent of services were provided by the HMOs; 55 percent were provided by general hospitals, dentists, and private doctors, private clinics, and the manufacturers of medications and medical devices; 6 percent were provided by government institutions (hospitals for the mentally and chronically ill, health clinics, and bureaus); and 5 percent were provided by other non-profit healthcare institutions (such as Magen David Adom). Source: Central Bureau of Statistics, press release, August 13, 2012.
- 9 Summary of the Trajtenberg committee report.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 See Giora Eiland, "A Model for Decision Making on the Defense Budget," presented at the INSS conference "Security Challenges of the 21st Century," May 2012.

Conclusion

Israel's National Security Challenges 2012-2013: The Need for Proactive Policy

Amos Yadlin

The five principal national security challenges that confronted Israel in 2012 were: Iran's nuclear weapons program; preservation of the peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan in the face of the changes in the Arab world; the civil war in Syria and the danger that it may ignite the northern border; relations with the Palestinians, and in particular, efforts to renew negotiations and the military challenge from Gaza; and finally, maintenance of Israel's international standing.

The 2012 Mixed Balance Sheet: Positive Aspects May Outweigh the Negative

Israel's government, which chose a passive stance in the form of a waiting game that minimized risks, survived the year without any dramatic security events altering Israel's geopolitical situation. Israeli national security decision makers chose to focus on the Iranian nuclear issue and present it as the chief priority over all other issues.

Israel's strong deterrence afforded another year of relative quiet on Israel's borders and against its potential enemies. This quiet enabled Israel to continue to stabilize its economy and deal with internal affairs, which

appeared to engage the public and the government more than external security issues.

Israel did not attack the Iranian nuclear program, even though to the Israeli public and the world as a whole the government insisted that there could be a need for such an attack as early as the fall of 2012. Israel argued that none of the strategies for stopping the Iranian nuclear program had succeeded in halting Iran's progress toward obtaining a nuclear bomb. Negotiations in Baghdad, Istanbul, and Moscow were unsuccessful; sanctions appeared ineffective; the covert campaign for which no one took responsibility was not sufficiently powerful; and the Iranian regime appears to be stable. For those who do not accept the idea of "deterrence and containment" of a nuclear Iran, the only remaining strategy seemed to be a military attack on the Iranian nuclear program.

A change in the Israeli strategy emerged in late 2012, when the Israeli red line moved from Iran's entry into the "zone of immunity," which the Iranians apparently already reached in the fall of 2012 when they stationed thousands of centrifuges in the protected site near Qom, to the red line presented by Prime Minister Netanyahu at the UN General Assembly – Iran's accumulation of enough 20 percent enriched material for one nuclear bomb. The international community, which at least in the first half of the year took the Israeli intention of attacking Iran seriously, tightened the sanctions. For the first time in a decade the sanctions targeted significant sectors in Iran, namely, the energy and finance sectors, and seemed to have a substantive impact on the Iranian economy.

The peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan remained in effect, despite the establishment of the new government in Egypt, led by the Muslim Brotherhood. The peace agreements even withstood Operation Pillar of Defense, the military operation launched by Israel against Hamas in Gaza in November 2012. The rhetoric from Cairo was not pleasant, the Egyptian President did not utter the word "Israel," and contacts with Israel were limited to intelligence and military channels. Nevertheless, Egypt played a constructive role in the conflict between Israel and Hamas, and it appears that it is well aware that a military confrontation with Israel is not in its interests.

Syria, the country with the strongest armed forces among all of Israel's enemies, is in the midst of a tiring civil war that is depleting its military's strength, readiness, and morale. The Syrian military has hundreds of long range missiles and thousands of rockets capable of reaching Israel's heartland, a modern air defense, high quality anti-tank weapons, a trained commando force, and chemical weapons. These military capabilities posed less of a threat to Israel at the end of 2012 than at the beginning, and concern that fighting in Syria would spill over into Israel has proved unfounded. Other than some isolated shells that strayed into Israel, the Golan Heights and Lebanon fronts remained quiet.

The impasse in the political process with the Palestinians continued. Facing a politically and economically weak Palestinian Authority (PA) that chose to challenge Israel by way of the international arena and reconciliation with Hamas, Israel, given international constraints and the desire to avoid overthrow of the PA, adopted a passive position of punishing the PA with moderate measures. Unquestionably the worst diplomatic setback for Israel was the crushing majority of nations in favor of upgrading the status of Palestine in the UN, and the inability to muster a "moral majority" (i.e., a majority of free, democratic states) against it.

In contrast with its satisfaction with the stable security situation and relative quiet on its borders (Operation Pillar of Defense restored tranquility to the only border that was not peaceful over the year) and the strengthened sanctions against Iran, Israel was conspicuously unsuccessful in making progress toward a resolution of the two main long term challenges to its security and its regional standing: Iran, particularly its nuclear program, and relations with the Palestinians. Iran continues to progress steadily toward a stage in which a breakout to military nuclear capability depends solely on its own decision. For this purpose, Iran is accumulating large quantities of low level and 20 percent enriched uranium. Even though the sanctions have become far more painful and socially and economically costly than in the past, it is still not clear whether they will prove effective enough to make the Iranian regime abandon its nuclear ambitions and consent to an arrangement that would deny it a military nuclear capability.

In tandem with the upheaval in the Arab world, the Israeli-Palestinian political stalemate is getting worse. Efforts to jumpstart effective

negotiations on a permanent settlement appear to be fruitless. In the absence of alternatives to a permanent settlement, signs of instability and uncertainty among the Palestinians are increasing. President Mahmoud Abbas' government in Ramallah has grown weaker, and his attempt to buttress his standing by obtaining UN observer status for a Palestinian state will yield a short lived impact only, because with time, the Palestinian public can be expected to realize that nothing of substance has changed. All that UN recognition has achieved for the PA is a limited ability to irritate Israel in international forums. The result will probably be more frustration among the Palestinian public. This development is liable to quash any future chance of implementing a two-state solution, especially if it leads to replacement of the current regime in Ramallah – Israel's recognized partner in dialogue, which advocates a political solution to the conflict and cooperates with Israel on security matters – by a regime that will be much less comfortable for Israel. A concomitant threat, of which there are already initial signs, is a renewed outbreak of violence between Israel and the Palestinians. In contrast, and somewhat paradoxically, it appears that some stability has been achieved on Israel's border with the Gaza Strip, as a result of Operation Pillar of Defense, the change in the Egyptian regime, and the restraining role Egypt plays in the Gaza-Sinai arena.

An extremely problematic parameter in the year's balance sheet is the continued erosion of both Israel's international status and legitimacy and international tolerance for its settlement policy. The United States, Israel's principal and most important ally, continued to provide Israel with impressive diplomatic support. The administration demonstrated its extremely strong commitment to Israel's security, and many countries backed Israel in its conflict with Hamas in Gaza by recognizing Israel's right to defend its citizens. The ongoing erosion in Israel's standing in Europe, and even among its traditional supporters in the US, however, cannot be ignored. The condemnations of Israel's construction in the West Bank and even in East Jerusalem have for the first time led to the possibility that concrete punishment measures will be taken against Israel as a result of settlement construction in the territories.

The Upheaval in the Arab World

Although two years have passed since the upheaval known as the “Arab Spring” began in the Arab world, it is still not clear what political directions the regimes in the main Arab countries will take, what regional and global postures they will assume, and what their policies toward Israel will be. Assessments that the Islamic movements could become the leading political element were borne out in most states that experienced a change of regime. Not only were these groups the only political parties in Arab countries with a solid organizational structure; they also enjoy a broad base of popular support given the conservative and religious character of Arab societies, particularly in the agricultural countryside, which still accounts for a large proportion of the population. This electoral development, however, is in itself not sufficient to provide a complete answer to questions about the character of the regimes that these movements will establish and the policies they will pursue.

Indeed, the world of Islamic movements comprises a broad spectrum, and whether in the long term an Islamic party in the Arab world can possibly govern in the framework of a democratic regime remains an open question. The Egyptian and Tunisian examples do not provide definitive answers. On the one hand, the Islamic parties have adopted democratic rhetoric for themselves; on the other hand, their tendency to use nondemocratic methods and measures designed to buttress their power, e.g., repressing freedom of expression, is also evident. In both these countries, the more secular and liberal public, which is usually urban, has demonstrated its ability to remain vigilant and respond with strong protests to the actions of the Islamic governments that appeared to undermine democratic norms. In more than a few cases, the protestors have succeeded in blocking dictatorial tendencies. Yet just how this unstable balance will affect the situation in the long term is unclear. In any case, it appears that as long as democratic rules of the game exist, the Islamic parties recognize that in order to retain their new-found power, they must fulfill the aspirations of the public that granted them that power. These aspirations are mostly socioeconomic, although they also concern foreign and defense policy, because popular opinion, which is mostly nationalistic, recoils from foreign influences.

In addition to the Islamic parties and their constituencies, a third factor plays an important role, namely, the existing governmental agencies and establishments, especially the military and the judiciary. Each has its own agenda, and like the public, also exerts a restraining effect on an Islamist-controlled government. Here, too, an unsteady balance prevails, together with power struggles between the various players. For this reason, it is unclear whether the existing institutions will lose their power vis-à-vis the Islamist-controlled governments gradually, or perhaps in a rapid revolutionary process – if at all. The main question is whether the struggle between these forces will result in a focus on socioeconomic policy or a proactive foreign policy. The key problems facing these governments are rooted in the social and economic spheres, but it is possible that the new regimes will think it easier to achieve success and win public support by presenting accomplishments in foreign policy. For example, Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, claimed some foreign policy achievements shortly after assuming the presidency, mainly benefits from Western countries – earned while he pursued an independent Egyptian policy and to some degree rehabilitated Egypt's status as the leader of the Arab world – and the ability to wield more influence in the Israeli-Palestinian arena than any other external player. On the other hand, when Morsi tried to institute changes in internal policy, he encountered huge obstacles, primarily from the Egyptian public.

The dilemmas posed by regional instability will continue in 2013, both because various regimes are still under threat and because the direction of events is unclear. A broadly-based mass protest in Syria has deteriorated into a bloody civil war that smacks of a sectarian power struggle. The Sunnis are fighting against the regime and the minorities that support it, principally the Alawites and Christians. For their part, the Kurds are hoping that the struggle in Syria will enable them to obtain autonomy similar to that enjoyed by the Kurds in Iraq. There is no way of knowing what scenario will prevail – a prolonged civil war, or the fall of the regime, possibly accompanied by the rise of an Islamic regime. Syria could become a failed state defined by ongoing instability, or it could split into political entities along ethnic lines. All of these scenarios would have significant consequences for the region as a whole, and for Israel in particular. A

destabilized regime in Jordan would also be highly significant, although as yet there is not a concrete threat to the survival of the Hashemite regime, despite the many difficulties and the rising pressure it has encountered.

In certain cases, first assessments of the effect of the upheaval on the regional balance of power have proven erroneous. For example, the Iranian regime initially assumed that the region-wide disturbances were in its interest. It posited that the regimes linked to the West and hostile to Iran would fall, to be replaced by Islamic parties that would upgrade their relations with the Islamic regime in Tehran. These assessments, however, were not realized. Rather, it became clear that the basic conflict of interests between Sunni Arab countries and Iran has not subsided, and may have even intensified. The Sunni Arab public perceived the Iran-supported revolt against the regime in Bahrain and Iran's support for Assad's beleaguered regime in Syria as an Iranian threat to Sunni dominance in the Arab world, and as an attempt to strengthen the Shiites in the region. Furthermore, its support for Assad's government exposed the hypocrisy of the Iranian regime, which for years had portrayed itself as allied with the Arab peoples in their struggles against corrupt and oppressive autocratic rulers. The civil war in Syria has become a contest between the proxies of Iran and the Sunni Arab countries.

This new regional fault line requires each sovereign and sub-sovereign player in the Arab world to choose sides. Neutrality is out of the question. Qatar, which maneuvered between Iran and its rivals for many years, has joined and taken a leading role in the camp hostile to Iran. Hamas, a Sunni organization and a branch of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, found itself in a difficult position. On the one hand, its leadership wished to distance itself from Iran and the Lebanese Hizbollah in order to avoid being perceived by Arab public opinion as allied with "the bad guys." On the other hand, it has found no alternative source of armaments, and has therefore been obliged to preserve its ties with Iran.

The Transition from 2012 to 2013

Six recent or forthcoming elections – in the US, Israel, the PA, Iran, Egypt, and perhaps even in Syria – are important by the very fact of their occurrence, and their results carry much weight. These elections determine

which decision makers and leaders Israel will encounter as it confronts the challenges of 2013. The US President has already been elected, and begins his second term on January 20, 2013. The Israeli Prime Minister will be sworn in at the Knesset in February or March 2013. No elections are on the horizon in the PA: to date, the reconciliation efforts between Hamas and Fatah have not progressed enough to facilitate such elections. While elections in Iran will see the replacement of the President, Supreme Leader Khamenei is the one who sets policy and makes decisions in Iran, and he will continue ruling, regardless of the elections results. Owing to the cumulative economic pressure, however, there is a chance that the elections and their aftermath could lead to renewed public protest and upheaval in the internal Iranian arena. While another round of parliamentary elections will be held in Egypt, President Morsi will remain in office and attend primarily to internal and economic challenges. Specifically, he will have to try to meet the aspirations of the Egyptian people and obtain large scale financial aid from the world, while being unable to satisfy the latter's demands to reduce subsidies and rein in the public sector. Elections in Syria appear a remote possibility, and even if the Assad regime does not survive and elections are held, Syria, like Egypt, will need substantial economic aid to rehabilitate and rebuild the country.

It therefore appears that the main players involved in Israel's two leading national security challenges, the Iranian nuclear program and the Palestinian issue/renewal of the political process, are the United States President and the Israeli Prime Minister. Mutual trust and the willingness of American and Israeli leaders to deal with these challenges, while continually evaluating the threats and opportunities and formulating a coordinated proactive policy – be it through joint explicit efforts or through mutual recognition by the two countries of each other's constraints and red lines – will make it possible to find a better solution to the threats, and to promote common interests.

Before any policy recommendations can be proposed, a broader perspective that includes the balance of the main threats and opportunities in 2013 is in order. It is also important to assess which principal challenges invite a proactive policy to change the course of development and provide a better solution for Israel's national security needs.

The Threats

1. ***An Iranian nuclear breakout or an Israeli/American decision to attack Iran.*** Although the election campaigns in the US and Israel removed talk about an attack against Iran from the public and media agendas, it is clear that Iran's progress toward nuclear weapons capability is the main challenge facing Israel in 2013. As a result of the severe sanctions, or as insurance against an attack, the Iranians can decide to abandon the Non-Proliferation Treaty and break out to a bomb. Even if they do not take this drastic step, however, between the spring and the summer of 2013 Iran will cross the new red line presented at the UN by Prime Minister Netanyahu, if it continues the current pace of enrichment to 20 percent. Clearly Iran could choose to slow the enrichment rate or convert its enriched uranium into fuel rods, as it did in late 2012. Nevertheless, a situation in which the Iranians stop short of the red line but greatly increase the number of centrifuges and the volume of enriched material facilitates a breakout to a bomb within a very short time, and is a highly dangerous situation for Israel.
2. ***A military conflict with Iran and its proxies Hizbollah and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and less likely, with Hamas, as a result of an attack against Iran.*** There are reasons to think that such a conflict will not necessarily be as broad, difficult, and extensive as is often projected. Iran's response capabilities are limited, it fears escalation, and action by Hizbollah and the Palestinian organizations is subject to the local considerations of these particular organizations, primarily concern regarding the political price and Israel's military response. Israel's deterrence, strengthened by Operation Pillar of Defense, heightens these constraints. Nevertheless, Israel must prepare for the possibility of a response against it on at least some of these fronts.
3. ***Erosion of the peace treaties.*** Thus far predictions that the peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan would be significantly affected by the shocks in the Arab world have not been borne out. Public opinion in these countries also shows an understanding that improving the economic situation runs counter to friction and direct confrontation with Israel. While in Egypt the need to change the military appendix to the peace treaty in order to strengthen Egyptian control in Sinai

has been discussed, no one seriously questions the agreement itself. The question is what will happen if the economic situation in Egypt does not improve, the Muslim Brotherhood government cannot deliver on its promises, and public frustration grows. Protest might then be channeled against Israel and Egypt-Israel bilateral relations. The peace treaty with Jordan also suffers from cold relations between the two countries and King Abdullah's dissatisfaction with Israeli policy on the peace process. Unrest in Jordan that undermines its stability and the stability of the regime would pose an extremely significant threat to the quiet on Israel's eastern border, and would require a significant change in the IDF's order of battle, security doctrine, and deployment along the border with Jordan.

4. ***Israel's diplomatic isolation.*** Israel's policy toward the Palestinians, combined with the perception that Israel is about to take action against Iran that may have dire consequences for the region and the global system, has had a harsh impact on Israel's international political standing. There is an emerging assessment that the Israeli government is trying to foil any chance of implementing a two-state solution, and is unwilling to contribute to Middle East stability or help prevent developments that would severely damage Western interests in the region. Joining this assessment is anxiety about escalation in regional instability and ensuing international implications following a unilateral Israeli attack against Iran or an attack that the US has been dragged into. Israel's diplomatic isolation was manifested in the General Assembly resolution recognizing Palestine's non-member observer status, which received broad support from Israel's traditional friends, and in the across-the-board condemnation of the Israeli government's response to the PA's unilateral measure, namely the decision on large scale construction in the West Bank, including in sensitive areas such as E-1. The impression is that the EU is on the verge of imposing concrete sanctions against Israel, principally by distinguishing between products originating in Israel proper and products from Jewish settlements in the West Bank. Particularly grave is the possibility of deteriorating relations between Israel and a second term Obama administration. Already in late 2012, after the US election, the fact that the administration refrained from

taking effective action to prevent the General Assembly resolution on the status of the Palestinian state and affect the European positions on the PA's UN initiative contrasted starkly with its policy of 2011, when the Palestinians requested recognition of Palestine in the Security Council vote; the American threat to cast a veto foiled that Palestinian venture. Considerable potential for confrontation in 2013 between Israel and the US administration over a renewal of the peace process is emerging. Another danger consists of the pressures in Europe for boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS), which are liable to damage Israel's economy.

5. ***Expansion of uncontrolled regions on Israel's borders.*** A weakening of the central government, as reflected in the governmental vacuum in Sinai, for example, attracts terrorist groups, Muslim extremists, and crime. This phenomenon is liable to spread to Syria along the Golan Heights border. Syria's stocks of nonconventional weapons and long range missiles and rockets are a source of concern, and require both close monitoring to prevent their falling into the hands of terrorist organizations and the formation of a balance of deterrence with the new players on the various fronts. If the regime in Jordan becomes unstable, the Jordan Valley, the Dead Sea, and the Arava area could also become an active security border.
6. ***The collapse of the PA and the rise of Hamas.*** It appears that concerns about a Hamas takeover on the West Bank, similar to what happened in Gaza, are exaggerated. The IDF controls the West Bank, and operations by the IDF and the PA have prevented Hamas from consolidating a military infrastructure built on its terrorist cells in the West Bank and from there constructing a military force such as the force it had in Gaza before the 2007 takeover. Hamas could theoretically take political control of the West Bank should there be a reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas and a renewed political union of the two geographical areas, but there is little likelihood that this will occur. A more likely scenario is the onset of chaos, followed by a collapse of the PA resulting from its loss of legitimacy, a difficult economic situation, and a renewed outbreak of violence.

7. ***Restrictions on Israel's freedom of action due to the power of the Arab street.*** The increasing sensitivity to public opinion on the part of Arab governments imposes severe restrictions on Israel's freedom of action. In any confrontation on the Sinai border and the Gaza front, Israel must weigh the effects of its actions on its relations with Egypt. It was clear at the time of Operation Pillar of Defense that public opinion in Arab countries, especially Egypt, constituted a heavy constraint in Israel's decision whether to use ground troops in the operation, or more accurately, to refrain from a ground incursion into the Gaza Strip. Indeed, this factor detracted from Israel's threat to expand its operation by sending ground forces into the Gaza Strip.
8. ***Restrictions on Israel's freedom of action due to concern about further delegitimization of Israel.*** The impasse on the Palestinian track, combined with severe international criticism of Israel following Operation Cast Lead (particularly the Goldstone Report), compounds the restrictions on Israel's military freedom of action. The effect of these restrictions was highlighted during Operation Pillar of Defense. A large number of targets, perhaps more than necessary, were ruled out because of concern about a flagrant international response and acceleration of the delegitimization process.
9. ***Heightened security problems.*** The result of many of these developments is liable to be more security problems along the various borders. Sinai continues to be a focus for potential terrorism: jihadist, Palestinian, and a combination of the two. The Egyptian government does not appear determined to take forceful action to address the problem of governmental weakness in Sinai, and initial signs of the development of a similar problem can be seen on Israel's border with Syria. Until now, projectiles fired into Israeli territory have been a byproduct of the fighting between the rebels and the regime, but jihadist elements among the rebels are liable to deliberately divert some of their attention to Israel, especially given the rising chaos in Syria. In addition, it is not clear to what extent the relative quiet prevailing on the Gaza front since the recent round of fighting ended will prove stable and sustainable. It is possible, rather, that the familiar pattern of erosion of restraining factors will prevail in 2013, with armed extremist groups resuming

their activity against Israel from beyond the border with Gaza, and with Hamas, choosing to avoid an all-out confrontation with these groups, either unable or unwilling to suppress them. The likelihood of a third intifada in the West Bank in early 2013 is low, due to both the PA's efforts to contain such belligerent tendencies and preserve calm in the area and because the Palestinian public mood does not favor another round of violence and chaos. Nonetheless the frustration in the West Bank is palpable, and is joined by a rise in violent Palestinian activity and a large number of "price tag" actions by Jewish extremist settlers. An increase in events of both types might evolve into more widespread violence. The mutual deterrence between Israel and Hizbollah on the border with Lebanon is still stable, although developments concerning Iran could undermine this stability.

The Opportunities

Together with the threats, the current situation also presents several opportunities.

1. ***A possible change of regime in Syria.*** The fall of the Assad regime in Syria would severely damage the resistance axis led by Iran. Although Iran would likely find partial substitutes for Syria as a channel to deliver logistical aid to Hizbollah and Palestinian groups, Tehran would find it difficult to maintain some of its ties with these organizations. Hizbollah would be particularly affected, because Syria has been its main source of materiel. Furthermore, the civil war in Syria has also had a strong negative impact on the Syrian army, and it is doubtful if it would be able to take part in a significant military conflict with Israel in the foreseeable future.
2. ***Aggravation of the conflict between Iran and the Sunni Arab countries.*** The two camps are essentially conducting a war on Syrian territory through proxies. The Sunni countries, especially Saudi Arabia and Qatar, are supplying military aid to the rebels, while Iran and Hizbollah are aiding the regime in its battle for survival. This division of roles reflects and reinforces the common interests of Israel and the Sunni countries, which could be reflected in their willingness to cooperate with Israel in an attack against the Iranian nuclear weapons

program. Some of the Sunni world has become more radical, with the strengthening of extremist Salafi Islamic and al-Qaeda elements, but parts are moderate and pro-Western. The challenge of cooperation with more moderate Sunni Islam, which is supported by the Western countries, should prompt the search for opportunities and the promotion of new alliances.

3. ***Common interests with Turkey.*** The Turkish government's "zero problems with neighbors" policy, under which it developed its relations with Syria and Iran, collapsed with the events of the "Arab Spring." As a result of Turkish support for the opposition to the Syrian regime, a conflict has developed between the Assad administration and Turkey, while the competition between Ankara and Tehran for regional dominance has also resurfaced. Turkey thus finds itself in a position in which it must revise its policy toward the regional balance of power and the individual states. The common interests of Turkey and Israel are therefore emerging once again, namely, the replacement of the Assad regime, the stabilization of Syria, and the obstruction of Iran's progress toward nuclear weapons capability.
4. ***Common interests with Egypt.*** The constraints felt by the Muslim Brotherhood regime in Egypt provide for several shared interests with Israel. First, President Morsi is driven by the vital need to improve Egypt's economic situation, and therefore he is in desperate need of Western aid. Cooperation with Israel in stabilizing the situation in the Palestinian arena will make it easier for Egypt to obtain the necessary assistance. On the other hand, the ideological affinity between the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas, combined with the need to rehabilitate Egypt's status in the Arab world, bolsters Egypt's ability to influence events in the Gaza Strip and restrain parties seeking to escalate the conflict with Israel. From Egypt's perspective, its ability to influence Israel through dialogue and cooperation is an asset that reinforces its status in the Arab world and the global arena. Furthermore, the two countries share an interest in strengthening Egyptian control of Sinai and preventing the activity of armed groups there. All these factors generate an array of considerations that can enable the Egyptian

leadership to overcome its ideological and religious objections to Israel, and engage in pragmatic bilateral relations.

5. ***International recognition and understanding for Israel's security problems.*** During Operations Cast Lead and Pillar of Defense in the Gaza Strip, it emerged that when Israel takes measured action against organizations like Hamas and Islamic Jihad, i.e., minimizes harm to civilians, keeps to a short timetable, and refrains from using ground forces, it receives significant support and freedom of action from Western governments. It also emerged that organizations like Hamas may win Arab public sympathy in such conflicts, but receive little practical support from Arab governments.
6. ***Potential for renewing the political process with the Palestinians.*** Some of the developments in the region may facilitate renewal of the political process with the Palestinians. Recognition of Palestine as an unofficial UN member state constitutes an achievement for the PA, which is likely to enable President Abbas to renew negotiations with Israel without preconditions, as demanded by Israel, or under less hard line terms than those presented and rejected by Israel. Egypt's stronger regional standing is likely to enable it to back the PA's return to the negotiating table. From Israel's standpoint, the mandate to pursue political initiatives earned by a new government following the January elections presents an opportunity to turn over a new leaf in relations with the Palestinians and renew the dialogue with the PA. A resumption of negotiations will also make it possible to improve relations with the US and Europe, and buttress Israel's international standing.
7. ***Energy independence.*** Israel will enjoy more energy independence in 2013. The discoveries of natural gas and its expedited production in 2013 will reduce dependence on unreliable energy sources, support economic growth, and provide the government and the public with additional financial resources. In addition, the gradual freeing of the US from its dependence on Middle East oil as a result of increased production of its own natural gas and oil through the use of new technologies will lessen its dependence on Middle East energy resources.

Engaging with the Threats, Opportunities, and Uncertainties

In a state of uncertainty like that which prevailed in 2011-2012, the tendency is to adopt a policy of entrenchment and passivity aimed at minimizing risks, because any initiative involves some degree of risk. Since the upheaval in the Arab world began, the Israeli government has elected to wait until the dust settles, respond to events when they arise, and upgrade its defense against the various potential threats. This policy has scored certain achievements, particularly because it dictated extreme caution in managing crises and in military responses to violent flare-ups that occurred over the past two years. The potential in the incidents on Israel's border with Sinai and on the Gaza front for a sharp deterioration in relations between Israel and Egypt was resisted. The only relatively large scale military conflict since the fall of Mubarak's government, Operation Pillar of Defense, was limited in scope and reflected this caution. Another factor behind the passivity and caution was that faced with the need to determine its strategy for dealing with the Iranian threat, it would not have been wise for Israel to adopt initiatives and open new political and military fronts in areas that would distract attention from the most important issue – Iran.

At the same time, given the dynamic and risky situation, a passive policy does not halt negative processes, and does not facilitate the creation of opportunities or the realization of existing ones. A passive policy does not counter the negative influence of the increased importance of Arab public opinion in relations between Israel and the Arab world. This policy is likewise of no help in dealing effectively with Israel's growing diplomatic isolation and the delegitimization of Israeli policy, and does not halt Israel's slide into a bi-national state. Nor does a passive stance make it possible to exploit the opportunities for cooperation with the Arab world and Turkey generated by the regional turbulence.

It is therefore necessary to introduce a strong proactive element into Israeli policy that will enable it to minimize risks and take advantage of the opportunities available in the regional and international theaters. The key issues in which initiatives would serve Israel's interests are as follows:

1. ***Broadening the strategic dialogue with the United States, in order to reach clear understandings concerning the Iranian challenge.*** It is vital for the two countries to clarify together the answer as to when the non-military alternatives will be considered exhausted, and when preventing Iran from achieving a military nuclear capability requires a military attack. Consideration should be given to how common intelligence information, similar strategic understandings, and an identical strategic purpose (to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons) can be turned into agreement regarding the appropriate way that serves the interests of both countries to stop the Iranian nuclear weapons program. Mutual trust between the leaders is essential in order to reach a plan of action that will be acceptable to both sides, and perhaps even coordinated between them.
2. ***Support for a diplomatic solution to the Iranian nuclear crisis.*** It is an Israeli interest that the US and/or the P5+1 reach an agreement with Iran that will define the terms for preventing a breakout by Iran to nuclear weapons capability. Israel should conduct an intensive dialogue with the US and the other countries negotiating with Iran that will include ideas about the various elements of an agreement with a positive attitude toward such an agreement, not in order to foil it. Israel must set criteria for a “reasonable agreement” with Iran – a solution that will both keep Iran several years away from a nuclear breakout and strengthen verification measures. Such a solution is preferable to a strategy with two exclusive alternatives of “an Iranian bomb” or “the bombing of Iran.”
3. ***Renewal of the Israeli-Palestinian diplomatic process.*** It will be difficult for Israel to improve relations with the Arab world and muster effective cooperation to deal with challenges such as Iran’s nuclear program without restarting the political process with the Palestinians. A renewal of the political dialogue is also important in order to block the weakening of the PA and the strengthening of Hamas at its expense, and to stop the slide toward a bi-national state, particularly if Israel develops a parallel interest in regulating its relations with the Hamas government in the Gaza Strip. Willingness to pay a price for restarting the political process with the Palestinians could change the current

dynamics in Israel's immediate and more remote environment. The purpose of jumpstarting the political process is to effect a genuine change in the situation in the Israeli-Palestinian arena. Given the current political reality on both sides, the likelihood of changing the situation through a focus on negotiations for a permanent settlement is low, and it is therefore important to also consider unilateral measures coordinated between Israel, the US, Europe, and even the PA, and partial arrangements in order to maintain the relevance of the political process and the two-state solution. Even Palestinian unwillingness to proceed in negotiations can be leveraged in a way that will serve Israel's goal of realizing the vision of a secure and legitimate Jewish democratic state.

4. ***Building a stable relationship with the new Egypt.*** Israel and Egypt have a common interest in maintaining quiet in Sinai and the Gaza Strip, which can constitute a basis for relations with room for initiatives concerning both new security arrangements in Sinai and the ceasefire with Hamas and the other Palestinian groups active in the Gaza Strip. Amending the military appendix to the peace agreement with Egypt can also constitute ratification of the peace agreement as a whole by the Muslim Brotherhood government – an extremely important issue. It will be difficult for Israel to continue to coordinate policy with the Egyptian military alone; it is important to expand contacts with the new Egyptian government and attempt to conduct a dialogue with the Egyptian public through social media networks.
5. ***Extending cooperation with the Sunni Arab countries.*** In addition to the focus on Egypt, it is worthwhile focusing on other important countries. In Israel's immediate vicinity, this means Jordan. Israel can help Jordan grapple with its economic problems, and obtain aid from Western countries. Agreeing to a Jordanian role in the Israeli-Palestinian arena in the context of the effort to renew the political process could expand cooperation between Israel and Jordan. Where more distant countries are concerned, cooperation with the Gulf countries should receive preference in order to facilitate the building of a coalition against Iran and its nuclear program. In this context, it is important to renew the dialogue on the Arab Peace Initiative. The initiative can

be promoted as a basis for negotiations, not as a document that will determine the parameters of peace before the negotiations themselves.

6. ***Improving relations with Turkey.*** Even if it is doubtful whether the warm relations that prevailed between Israel and Turkey before the rise of the Justice and Development Party can be recovered, better relations with Turkey will help Israel field the negative consequences of the upheaval in the Arab world and assist in the formation of a regional coalition against Iran that includes Israel. In order to promote this goal, the Israeli government should propose an initiative to end the crisis caused by the *Mavi Marmara* incident. The price that Israel will have to pay to settle the dispute was made clear in many contacts with Turkey, and there are reasons to pay it. It is important not to miss an opportunity to use negotiations for arrangements that will facilitate a lull on the Gaza Strip front – negotiations that would be held with Egyptian mediation – to promote understandings with the Turkish government, whose sensitivity to Israel's relations with Hamas is well known.

Conclusion

Israel successfully weathered the Arab upheavals in 2011-2012, and remained an island of stability in the stormy Middle East. Israel's military power, the care it took to avoid being dragged into unnecessary conflicts, and its strong defense and political alliance with the US prevented large scale military clashes. The threat of a third intifada or a wave of non-violent marches on its borders in the style of "Arab Spring" protests did not materialize. Israel displays strong deterrence against both nations and sub-national organizations that control neighboring territories.

At the same time, Israel has not eliminated the existential threat of a nuclear Iran, and has not found a comprehensive solution to the increasing power of terrorist organizations in Lebanon and the Gaza Strip. The erosion in Israel's international status and the challenge to its legitimacy have been the Achilles' heel of Israel's national security in recent years.

The concept of a "year of decision" has become a cliché, and should not be used to describe 2013. Nevertheless, a very challenging spring and summer await Israel in 2013: important and fateful processes have reached

a stage in which courageous decisions are needed to change negative trends. The Iranian nuclear weapons program, the stability of the peace treaties, the internal struggle in Syria, and renewal of the political process with the Palestinians require a precise and measured combination of a cautious policy that balances a degree of passivity and waiting for events to happen with a creative, proactive policy that will enable Israel to deal optimally with the challenges it confronts in the Middle East and the international sphere.

Contributors

Editors

Shlomo Brom is a senior research fellow and director of the Program on Israel-Palestinian Relations at INSS. A former director of strategic planning in the planning division of the IDF General Staff, he participated actively in peace negotiations with the Palestinians, Jordan, and Syria, and served as deputy to the national security advisor. His primary areas of research are Israeli-Palestinian relations and national security doctrine. Brig. Gen. (ret.) Brom is co-editor of *The Second Lebanon War: Strategic Perspectives* (2007) and *Strategic Survey for Israel* (2009, 2010, 2011), and editor of *In the Aftermath of Operation Pillar of Defense: The Gaza Strip, November 2012*.

Anat Kurz, director of research and a senior research fellow at INSS, has lectured and published widely on insurgency-related issues, sub-state political organizations, and conflict resolution. Her research focuses on the Palestinian national movement and radical Islamic organizations. She is the author of *Fatah and Politics of Violence: The Institutionalization of a Popular Struggle* (2005) and *The Palestinian Uprisings: War with Israel, War at Home* (2009), and co-editor of *Strategic Survey for Israel* (2009, 2010, 2011) and *Arms Control Dilemmas: Focus on the Middle East* (2012).

Authors

Yehuda Ben Meir, a senior research fellow at INSS, is the editor of *INSS Insight*, co-director of the Israeli Society and National Security Program, and director of the Public Opinion and National Security Project at INSS.

A psychologist and an attorney, Dr. Ben Meir was a member of the Knesset and deputy minister of foreign affairs in the Begin and Shamir governments. He is the author of *Civil Military Relations in Israel* (1995) and co-author of *The People Speak: Israeli Public Opinion on National Security 2005-2007* (2007) and *Vox Populi: Trends in Israeli Public Opinion on National Security 2004-2009* (2010).

Benedetta Berti, a research fellow at INSS, is an expert on terrorism and political violence in the Middle East, extremist Islamic organizations, and Palestinian and Lebanese politics. Dr. Berti holds an M.A. and Ph.D. in international relations and security studies from Tufts University. Before joining INSS, she worked for international organizations and research institutes in South America, the Middle East, and the United States. Dr. Berti teaches at Tel Aviv University and is a member of the Young Atlanticist Working Group at the Atlantic Council. Her publications include *The Ongoing Battle for Beirut: Old Dynamics and New Trends* (2011) and *Hamas and Hezbollah: A Comparative Study* (co-author, 2012).

Assaf David is a research fellow at the Harry S. Truman Research Institute for the Advancement of Peace at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He teaches in the Department of Political Science at Hebrew University and the Departments of Politics and Government and Middle Eastern History at Ben Gurion University of the Negev. Dr. David serves as a senior researcher on Jordanian affairs for the Economic Cooperation Foundation (ECF) and as an advisor on Jordan to the public and private sectors in Israel and abroad. He is also involved in promoting and assessing joint non-governmental ventures between Israel and Jordan. From 2003 to 2006, Dr. David served as secretary of the Israeli Oriental Society, today the Middle East and Islamic Studies Association of Israel. While serving in this position, he founded the association's online journal, *Ruah Mizrahit* (Eastern Wind) and was its first editor. He is co-editor of the *Efshar Lahshov* (Can Think) website, established in 2011 to encourage a public discussion in Israel on the Arab-Israeli conflict and Jewish-Arab relations.

Udi Dekel, a senior research fellow at INSS, served as head of the negotiating team with the Palestinians under Prime Minister Ehud Olmert during the Annapolis process. His last position in the IDF was head of the Strategic Division in the Planning Directorate of the General Staff. Brig. Gen. (ret.) Dekel headed the Israel-UN-Lebanon committee following the Second Lebanon War and was head of the military committees with Egypt and Jordan. He also served as head of the working groups on strategic-operational coordination with the United States; on developing a response to the threat of surface-to-surface missiles; and on international military cooperation. He was a member of a committee to update Israel's security concept in 2006 and coordinated the formulation of IDF strategy.

Oded Eran is a senior research fellow and the former director of INSS. In his most recent post before joining INSS, he served as the World Jewish Congress Representative in Israel and the Secretary General of the WJC Israel Branch. Dr. Eran has served as Israel's ambassador to the European Union (covering NATO as well); Israel's ambassador to Jordan; and head of Israel's negotiations team with the Palestinians (1999-2000). Other previous positions include deputy director general of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and deputy chief of the Israeli embassy in Washington. He also serves as a consultant to the Knesset Subcommittee on Foreign Affairs.

Shmuel Even, a senior research fellow at INSS, is an economist specializing in economics, strategy, and Israel's security issues. He is the owner of Multi Concept (Consultants) Ltd., which deals with financial and strategic consulting. Dr. Even retired from the IDF in 1999 with the rank of colonel, following a long career in the IDF's Intelligence Branch. His publications deal with Middle East economies, the Israeli economy, the defense budget, the world oil market, intelligence, and terrorism. He is co-author of *The Intelligence Community – Where To?* (2009) and *Cyber Warfare: Concepts and Strategic Trends* (2012).

Yoel Guzansky joined INSS as a research fellow in 2009. Prior to that, he was coordinator of the nuclear issue at the National Security Council

in the Prime Minister's Office. Mr. Guzansky, who is completing a doctorate in political science and international relations, is an expert on issues of Persian Gulf security and is a frequent contributor to Israeli and international newspapers. His publications include *The Gulf States in a Changing Strategic Environment* (2012) and *One Year of the Arab Spring: Global and Regional Implications* (co-editor, 2012).

Mark A. Heller is a principal research associate at INSS and the editor of the INSS quarterly, *Strategic Assessment*. He has taught international relations at Tel Aviv University and at leading universities in the United States, and has published widely on Middle East strategic and political issues. Dr. Heller's areas of expertise include Israeli-Palestinian relations and Euro-Mediterranean affairs. His publications include *A Palestinian State: The Implications for Israel* (1983); *Israel and the Palestinians: Israeli Policy Options* (co-editor, 2005); *The Middle East Strategic Balance 2007-2008* (editor, 2008); and *One Year of the Arab Spring: Global and Regional Implications* (co-editor, 2012).

Ephraim Kam, deputy director and a senior research fellow at INSS, served as assistant head of the research division of IDF Military Intelligence. His fields of expertise are the Iranian challenge, Arab states' security problems, the US entanglement in Iraq, strategic intelligence, and Israel's national security issues. Dr. Kam's most recent studies are *From Terror to Nuclear Bombs: The Significance of the Iranian Threat* (2004); *A Nuclear Iran: What Does it Mean, and What Can be Done* (2007); and *Israel and a Nuclear Iran: Implications for Arms Control, Deterrence, and Defense* (editor, 2008).

Emily B. Landau is a senior research fellow and director of the Arms Control and Regional Security Program at INSS. Her principal fields of research are new trends in arms control thinking, Middle East regional security, the Iranian threat, and the challenge from North Korea. Dr. Landau is active in Track II meetings and conferences, and she teaches a graduate seminar on arms control at Tel Aviv University and the University of Haifa. Dr. Landau is the author of *Arms Control in the Middle East:*

Cooperative Security Dialogue and Regional Constraints (2006) and *Decade of Diplomacy: Negotiations with Iran and North Korea and the Future of Nuclear Nonproliferation* (2012), and co-editor of *The Obama Vision and Nuclear Disarmament* (2011) and *Arms Control Dilemmas: Focus on the Middle East* (2012).

Gallia Lindenstrauss is a research fellow at INSS and lectures at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and the Interdisciplinary Center, Herzliya. Her areas of expertise include Turkish foreign policy, ethnic conflicts, ethno-national diasporas, and military interventions. As a post-doctoral fellow at the Leonard Davis Institute for International Relations at Hebrew University, Dr. Lindenstrauss studied the Armenian diaspora. She is the author of *Mediation and Engagement: A New Paradigm for Turkish Foreign Policy and its Implications for Israel* (2010).

Yoram Schweitzer is a senior research fellow and director of the Program on Terrorism and Low Intensity Conflict at INSS. In the IDF he served in the Intelligence community, and he was an advisor to the Prime Minister's Office and the Defense Ministry on strategies for combating terrorism. He also served as head of the International Counter-Terrorism Department in the IDF and as a member of a task force dealing with Israeli MIAs and POWs. Mr. Schweitzer lectures and publishes widely on issues connected to terrorism. He is editor of *Palestinian Female Suicide Bombers: Dying for Equality?* (2006) and co-author of *The Terrorism of Afghanistan "Alumni": Islam vs. the Rest of the World* (2000); *An Expected Surprise: The September 11th Attack and Its Ramifications* (2002); and *Al-Qaeda and the Globalization of Suicide Terrorism* (2005).

Shimon Stein, a senior research fellow at INSS, served as Israel's ambassador to Germany (2001-7). Prior to this appointment he served in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as deputy director general for the CIS, as well as Eastern and Central Europe. Ambassador Stein held additional MFA posts in Washington, Germany, and Israel, and was a member of Israel's delegation to multilateral negotiations on arms control.

Amos Yadlin was appointed Director of the Institute for National Security Studies in November 2011, following forty years of service in the IDF, ten of them as a member of the General Staff. From 2006 to 2010, Maj. Gen. (ret.) Yadlin served as head of Military Intelligence, following a term as IDF military attaché to the United States. In 2002 he earned the rank of major general, and was appointed commander of the IDF colleges and the National Defense College. Maj. Gen. (ret.) Yadlin served as deputy commander of the Israel Air Force. Prior to that, he was commander of two combat squadrons and two IAF bases, and he also headed the Planning Department of the IAF. He served as a fighter pilot in the Yom Kippur War, in Operation Peace for Galilee, and in Operation Tammuz, the attack on the Iraqi Osirak nuclear reactor. Maj. Gen. (ret.) Yadlin received a B.A. with honors in economics and business administration from Ben Gurion University of the Negev, and an M.A. in public administration from Harvard University.

Eyal Zisser has been dean of the Faculty of the Humanities at Tel Aviv University since 2010. Professor Zisser previously served as head of the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies (2007-2010) and as chairman of the Department of Middle Eastern and African History (2004-2008), both at Tel Aviv University. His expertise is the modern history of Syria and Lebanon. Professor Zisser has published several books and studies on Syria under Assad as well as the history of Lebanon, among them: *Lebanon: The Challenge of Independence* (2000); *Asad's Legacy: Syria in Transition* (2000); *Commanding Syria: Bashar al-Asad's First Years in Power* (2006); and *Lebanon: Blood in the Cedars – From the Civil War to the Second Lebanon War* (2009).

