



The remaking of the Middle East

Israel needs to recognize that the old order no longer exists and it must prepare for a new and very different reality

AS THE “Arab Spring” descends further into wintry chaos, Israel finds itself at a significant strategic crossroads – perhaps the most complex since its establishment.

It is no exaggeration to say that the turbulent remaking of the region is affecting the entire world order. Europe is being deluged by huge waves of Muslim immigration threatening both its security and its character; Russia is exploiting the bloodletting in Syria in an effort to restore its great power status; and the US is tentatively feeling its way towards a relevant strategy to stabilize the region and retain its position as the world’s leading power.

In this stormy sea, Israel faces numerous new challenges. Over and above the deadlock in the political process with the Palestinians, the weakness of the Palestinian Authority and the current wave of terror, looms the threat of a resurgent Iran, breaking out of isolation and enhancing its potential for regional hegemony by deepening its involvement in the Syrian theater and strengthening its regional proxies, especially Hezbollah.

Israel’s strategic partners are also under pressure. Jordan, its partner to the east, finds itself threatened by the Islamic State (ISIS) and a massive wave of refugees; Egypt, the partner to the south, is fighting ISIS loyalists in Sinai and groaning under the weight of a struggling economy, political pressure and domestic instability.

In addition, new fronts are emerging. To the north, facing the Golan, Iran is directing an effort to establish an additional terrorist front against Israel. And inside Israel itself, the ISIS networking system and its jihadist ideology have made inroads. True, this is for now very much a marginal phenomenon. Still, it could affect the delicate fabric of relations between Israel’s Jewish majority and its Arab minority.

Moreover, the regional and international forces ranged against the Iranian-led Shi’ite axis and the radical ISIS jihadist axis are not as resolute as they could be. There are strains in the Sunni axis led by pragmatic Arab states like Saudi Arab and Egypt, mainly because of Turkey’s quarrel with the Kurds and the token nature of its actions against ISIS and Iran.

And although the American-led international axis, operating alongside the moderate Sunnis, has inflicted incremental damage on ISIS, it continues to function in a limited fashion, avoiding deeper military involvement. It is also fostering Iran’s regional power status as part of an effort to secure its adherence to the recently signed nuclear agreement. As a result, several key international players are beginning to see Iran as part of the solution, when in fact, given its hegemonic modus operandi, it is very much part of the problem.

The upshot is war of the scale and significance of a world war, in which the more powerful players are restricting themselves to the rules of limited warfare. That means no decisive outcome for some time – in other words, a relatively long period of instability and chaos, with major security and humanitarian ramifications for the inter-



Kurdish YPG fighters in Qamishli, Syria: Israel should encourage the formation of potentially friendly entities such as a Kurdish state

national community, the region and for Israel.

Israel needs to recognize that the old order no longer exists and that its shattered fragments are beyond repair. It must prepare for a new and very different reality.

Most analysts expect the region to be reshaped on the basis of alternative political structures to the current, often artificial, nation state. It is reasonable to assume that after a lengthy and bloody process more coherent political entities will emerge, based on ethnic, tribal, religious and regional affiliations. These new entities are likely to be free of the old, historic agendas, which could open up new strategic opportunities for Israel, in the way of mutual cooperation and even friendly ties.

A prime example is the large Kurdish minority.

Israel should therefore adopt a two-pronged policy: It should do all it can to nurture the strategic potential inherent in the Shi’ite-ISIS threat common to it and the pragmatic Sunni states; and it should encourage the formation of potentially more friendly alternative entities.

It should aim to reach understandings with the new American administration along these lines. This should include the building of appropriate coalitions, along with bold, creative strategic initiatives to enhance Israel’s cooperation with the pragmatic Sunni camp and to cultivate potential allies – for example on the Syrian front, where they could help limit the capacity of Iran’s proxies to harm Israel and Jordan, and with the Kurds.

A concerted effort of this kind could help deflect the large, threatening waves in the changing region’s stormy sea. ■

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