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Report

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➤ Turmoil and Uncertainty: Israel and the New Middle East

Yaniv Voller

Many observers consider Israel the biggest loser of the recent political turmoil and dramatic changes in Arab states. With the overthrow of the Mubarak regime, Israel has now lost a leader who shared with it a desire for maintaining the 'stable' status quo, and who was willing to accept, if grudgingly, Israel's blockade of the Gaza Strip. Now Israel is facing the rise of Islamist parties-led governments across the region, not only in Egypt and Tunisia, but also in non-revolutionary states, such as Morocco and Kuwait. Although cautious in their rhetoric toward the Arab-Israeli conflict, these new governments could hardly be described as adhering to the Israeli-inspired regional status quo. These geopolitical changes in the Middle East have therefore forced Israel to reassess its current strategic arrangements amid its two immediate security threats: the Iranian nuclear programme and the emerging cold war in the region over that issue; and the risk of deterioration on the Palestinian front.

ISRAEL AND THE POLITICAL CHANGES IN THE ARAB WORLD

The popular commentary that argues that Israel was caught unprepared by the political turmoil in the Middle East is rather inaccurate. The lessons of the Iranian Revolution, which resulted in Israel losing one of its most important allies in the region, has been guiding the Israeli intelligence sector since 1979. As early as 2006, two senior Israeli Defence Forces officers publicly declared that the regimes in both Egypt and Jordan faced existential threats and might disappear from the regional political map. These statements elicited harsh responses from Cairo and Amman, and were quickly censured by the Israeli government. Yet they demonstrate Israel's constant concern about the stability of its allies. Based on both its past experience and its general perception of Middle Eastern politics, the Israeli intelligence community assumed that educated and internet-savvy middle class protests will soon give way to Islamist politicians. For this reason, the Likud government's immediate response involved a very thinly veiled appeal to Western governments to support the existing regimes. As a result, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his cabinet, already viewed as the most hawkish in Israel's history, now came to be portrayed as a reactionary force in the region, disengaged from reality and embroiled in conspiracy with regional despots.

The rise of Islamist parties in the elections in Egypt, Tunisia and other states was hence something of a relief for the Israeli government. These parties' antipathy toward the existence of the Jewish state and their hostility toward any signs of normalisation with it, buttressed by their leadership's ambiguity with regard to the future of existing cooperation agreements with Israel, allowed the Israeli government to rebuke the international community for its initial enthusiasm and to once again underline the fragility of prevailing peace agreements that involve territorial compromise. Instability in some of the post-revolutionary regimes, and images from the near-civil war in Bahrain, and what is evolving into a civil war in Syria, have further reinforced Israel's sense of isolation and underpinned its justifications for unilateralism in the region.

This sense of relief, however, was short-lived. Israel faces several major threats and the new reality necessitated a reconsideration of existing security arrangements. Israel has faced, or at least perceived itself to be facing, existential threats since its inception. Therefore, Israeli foreign policy and security arrangements have always been relatively flexible, oriented toward ad-hoc alliances against a major regional threat. Currently Israel is facing two major threats, sometimes overlapping and sometimes detached: the Iranian threat, which has dominated Israel's foreign policy-making since the 1990s; and the risk of new escalation on the Palestinian front.

ISRAEL'S OVERARCHING SECURITY CONCERN: IRAN

The debate taking place in Israel's public media demonstrates that the Iranian threat is perceived as the most immediate issue facing the Israeli state. This threat carries two particular elements: the first is the Islamic Republic's explicit and vocal objection to Israel's existence, which has been further enhanced by the anti-Semitic discourse of its incumbent president, Mahmud Ahmedinejad. Iranian hostility toward Israel has gone beyond mere rhetorical attacks against the 'Zionist entity,' taking the form of military and financial support for Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in the Gaza Strip. In addition, Iran is also held responsible by several security agencies for attacks against Jewish and Israeli targets across the globe, for example the recent attacks against Israeli diplomatic targets in New Delhi and Bangkok, as well as the attacks against Jewish and Israeli targets in Buenos Aires during the early 1990s. The second element that turns Iran into a major security threat is its ongoing nuclear programme and alleged aspiration for obtaining nuclear weapons technology. It is this second element that makes deterioration into a full scale war a tangible proposition.

Although the Iranian government has denied it aspires to nuclear weapons capability, the Israeli, American, British, German and French governments, among others, suspect that Iran's final goal is achieving such capability. This assessment is based on several indications.

First, Iran failed to report the construction of two nuclear sites to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), as required by the Non-Proliferation Treaty. Second, in a visit by IAEA inspectors to these sites after their discovery, they revealed a significant number of centrifuges, as well as heavy water facilities. Moreover, in 2011 the Iranian government declared the instalment of new sets of centrifuges, which would allow 20 percent uranium enrichment, the threshold level for military uses. Finally, several reports by the IAEA, as well as Israeli and other Western intelligence agencies, have indicated that Iran has conducted experiments in the use of nuclear technology for military purposes.

In addition to the evident Iranian enmity toward Israel, the government in Jerusalem, as well as Israeli security experts, have suggested several other justifications for viewing Iran not only as an Israeli, but also a regional and global threat. First, Iran is known to have ballistic missiles whose range reaches not only Tel Aviv, but various European capitals. Moreover, the Iranian government, some argue, is an irrational actor driven by religious zeal; therefore, deterrence cannot be reliably applied in the Iranian case. Even if Iran might not launch nuclear missiles at Israel, its agents still might plant 'dirty bombs' in Israel, causing mass casualties and spreading panic. Finally, Israeli and other analysts have underlined the danger of nuclearising the Middle East. Regardless of Iran's intentions, its nuclear ambitions would push other states in the region, and particularly the militarily vulnerable but financially capable Gulf monarchies, to acquire nuclear capabilities as well. And again, due to the unpredictability of the regional regimes, from the Israeli perspective, and the inability to coordinate relations between the different actors effectively, the logic of a multipolar Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) system of deterrence does not hold.

Given Israel's assumption that Iran is now seeking nuclear weapons capability, the questions that remain are: how far is Iran from obtaining such capabilities; can Iranian nuclear proliferation be stopped; and, how can it be stopped?

The Israeli government's preferred solution to the perceived Iranian threat is a direct Israeli attack on Iranian nuclear facilities, a tactic very much inspired by Israel's successful attack on the Iraqi Osirak Nuclear reactor in 1981. Such a plan encounters several difficulties, the most important of which is domestic opposition within Israel to such a move. Several senior Israeli security figures, including former heads of Mossad Ephraim Halevi and Meir Dagan, have come out publicly against such military adventurism, arguing that Israel does not have the capabilities to launch such an operation, and that any Iranian reprisal might be devastating. Rather, these individuals have suggested that Israel should continue the existing line of operation, which includes (allegedly) the assassination of Iranian nuclear scientists; sabotaging the Iranian nuclear facilities through cyber-attacks such as the Stuxnet worm; and sponsoring local proxies such as the opposition movement Mujahedin-e Khalq and Kurdish rebels. A further hindrance is American and European discomfort with regard to an Israeli attack on Iran. Rather than a direct conflict, which is bound to draw in the US and perhaps other Western states, the Obama administration and its European allies have advocated tightening economic sanctions, with the hope of crippling the government and instigating public unrest. Russian and Chinese objections to military intervention in Iran further deters the United States and the European Union from going down the military route, or alternatively, supporting Israel in the aftermath of such an attack.

Israel, however, is not the only regional actor to be worried about the implications of a nuclear Iran. Jordan, Egypt and the Gulf Cooperation Council states have all been following the Iranian nuclear programme with great anxiety. King Abdullah II of Jordan warned of the 'Shia Crescent' in the aftermath of the overthrow of the Ba'ath regime in Iraq in 2003, referring to attempts to increase Iranian influence both in Iraq and elsewhere in the region, namely Lebanon and the Gaza strip. This alleged sphere of influence often also includes Syria, Iran's traditional ally in the region. Much like Israel, the above states, often defined collectively as the 'moderate Arab states,' have pushed for an attack on Iran's nuclear facilities. Fearing domestic public opinion, however, such demands have

been made in secret, with no direct reference to Israel leading the attacks. Nevertheless, without American support, the prospects for a military rollback of Iran's nuclear programme remain low.

The current situation, therefore, is best characterised as a cold war between Iran and its allies, on one side, and Israel and the so-called moderate Arab states, backed by the US, on the other. The summer 2006 confrontation between Israel and Hezbollah was therefore perceived as a proxy-war within this wider strategic context, not only by Israel but also by Egypt, Jordan and the Gulf states, which not only avoided condemning Israel, but in fact pointed to Hezbollah as the main culprit. Similarly, the 2008-9 Gaza War, in which Israel invaded the Gaza Strip resulting in a relatively high number of civilian casualties, elicited only mild Arab condemnation of Israel, and in the case of Egypt even an unprecedented mutual condemnation of Hamas along-side Israel. This has served Israeli and foreign commentators to believe that this regional cold war could actually serve as a platform for Israeli-Arab reconciliation and as a catalyst for the continuation of the peace process.

THE UNDERLYING SORE: THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN DISPUTE

The second strategic threat facing Israel is that of the renewal of violence in the occupied territories. Negotiations with the Palestinian Authority (PA) have stagnated under the Likud government and levels of distrust and mutual hostility are unprecedented. The Israeli government has largely failed to comply with the international demands to freeze building in the settlements in Eastern Jerusalem and is not likely to do so. The Hamas government in the Gaza Strip is still under an IDF blockade, which whilst achieving some of Israel's main goals, namely a significant reduction in the number of rocket attacks from the Gaza Strip toward Israeli towns and settlements on the border line, has also further increased hostility and consequently enhanced the popularity of Hamas and its ideological objection to any recognition of Israel.

In an attempt to resolve this impasse, the PA decided to declare official Palestinian independence and seek recognition in the UN General Assembly and Security Council in September 2011. Eventually, the Palestinian leadership agreed to postpone its plan, following American pressure and guarantees from Israel to renew negotiations. Yet this can hardly be considered a diplomatic victory for Israel. International support for such unilateral Palestinian diplomacy, as well as domestic enthusiasm within the occupied territories, were a sharp reminder of the volatility of the situation. Moreover, Israeli objections to such moves might drive Hamas to conduct attacks against targets within Israel, as it chose to do in the past. The memories of the second intifada and its demoralising effects are still fresh in the minds of many Israelis and the fear of deterioration is still prevalent.

Since Iran is perceived as the preeminent security threat facing Israel, many within the Israeli security apparatus have actually come to see a peace agreement with the Palestinian Authority as a necessary step to further consolidate a regional coalition against Iran. Others, nonetheless, maintain that as long as Hamas, Iran's ally, is still in power in the Gaza Strip, such reconciliation cannot take place.

ISRAEL AND THE ARAB SPRING

Due to the proximity of events and the rapid political changes in surrounding countries, Israel has been careful in its statements to date on the events of the Arab Spring. Yet the turmoil in the Arab world has had a direct impact on Israeli foreign policy, in particular with regard to Israel's security concerns.

On the Palestinian front, notwithstanding its ambiguity about the prospects of the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty, both the SCAF and the FJP-led government have made it clear that Mubarak's tolerance of Israeli policies in the Gaza strip is to be revoked. The first, and at the moment the only major, sign for that has been the military's decision to ease the blockade and allow greater freedom of movement between the Gaza Strip and Egypt. So far, Egypt – whose influence over the Gaza strip has always been immense – is still playing the role of a mediator between Israel, Hamas and the Palestinian Authority.

Yet Egypt's willingness to play this role is sure to come under severe scrutiny in future cases of clashes between Hamas and Israel.

The events of the Arab Spring have also forced other Arab governments, in particular the so-called moderate axis, to reconsider their policies toward Israel, namely the secret but not so discreet *de facto* (and in some cases such as Qatar and Oman, *de jure*) recognition of Israel, and collaboration with the Israeli government in the fields of security and trade. More pressured than ever to pacify their public, the conservative regimes in the region are in dire need of political causes to demonstrate their attentiveness to public opinion. Since the Palestinian cause is a key theme in Arab political discourse, it would be safe to assume that in the case of an escalation, those Arab regimes will be less lenient toward Israel than in previous years. This means further pressure on Israel to reconsider attacks in the occupied territories in the near future. Such pressure may also have an impact on the moderate axis' willingness to cooperate with Israel vis-à-vis the Iranian threat. So far Israel has relied on silent Arab acquiescence for military strikes against Iran, under the assumption that such an attack would also serve Egyptian, Jordanian and GCC interests. Yet, in light of the current atmosphere in the Arab states and the fear of unrest sparking new attempts at regime change, it is doubtful that Arab regimes will want to be associated with an attack on another Muslim country, even if Shia.

Perhaps the most salient impact the recent turmoil in the Arab world will have on Israeli policy-making is the unfolding civil war in Syria. Still a major actor in the front against normalisation with Israel, Syria plays a key-role in the region, mainly as a channel of weapons and funds from Iran to Hezbollah. It is generally assumed that such policy is part of Syria's constant effort to put pressure on Israel to sign a peace agreement with Syria which would bring the Golan Heights, occupied by Israel in 1967 under Syrian control.

Since the situation remains in flux at the time of writing these lines it is impossible to predict the fate of Bashar al-Assad's regime. Yet, there are certain potential scenarios that can be discussed

with relation to Israel. If the Ba'ath regime survives (with or without Bashar al-Assad), one may assume that the alliance with Iran and the Hezbollah would not change dramatically. However, in the case of the collapse of the Assad regime, any new government may well abandon its support for Hezbollah, either on the basis of ideological resentment toward the radical Shia movement, the need to concentrate on Syrian internal affairs, or a desire to attract international aid.

Much to its frustration, there is not much Israel can actually do to affect the situation in Syria. Although it has often been argued that the Israeli government prefers the survival of the 'known evil' of the Assad regime, this is rather inaccurate. The constant description of the Syrian-Israeli border as Israel's most tranquil border region should be rejected based on Syria's alliance with Iran and its use of Hezbollah as a proxy against Israel. Even if its Ba'ath regime survives the current conflict, Syria has probably lost its legitimacy to make any concessions to Israel and sign a peace-agreement in the near future. A new regime, even if inherently hostile toward Israel, might at least be focused more on rebuilding Syria, rather than reasserting its nationalist credentials by means of a military adventure against Israel. Moreover, dependence on international aid from the Gulf States might drive any new regime to accept the ad-hoc arrangements between Israel and the other regional actors. Much to its frustration, there is not much Israel can do, since any direct Israeli intervention would necessarily delegitimise any incoming regime.

After nearly a decade of relative stability, then, Israel is once again facing a conundrum. The tendency in such situations is to further entrench in unilateralism. Yet, the price of such unilateralism can be higher than ever, a fact which Israeli government is becoming painfully aware of. Though no Israeli government has been prepared to publicly acknowledge it, Israel still relies heavily on American material, and even more so moral, support. Although Israel has acted unilaterally in the past, launching a war that could potentially destabilise the entire region, and the global economy, in a presidential election year, would put the special relationship between the two countries to an unprecedented test. ■