

# The Arab Spring is not the whole story. Power in the Middle East has been shifting away from Israel for two decades.

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*Nearly 20 years after the Oslo Accords, Israel now finds itself in a strategically diminished position. But is this a result of the Arab Spring? As part of EUROPP's coverage of the European neighbourhood, [Amnon Aran](#) argues that the shift in power away from Israel in the Middle East follows two decades which have seen the rise of political Islam in the region, Iran's nuclear developments, and demographic changes in Israel itself.*



There is a power shift underway in the Middle East that is the outcome of trends over the past twenty years, rather than merely a result of the Arab uprisings. To understand this shift it is useful perhaps to reflect on the decision by the Israelis in September 1993, to officially launch the Oslo Process after several months of behind-the-scenes negotiations with the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). The initiation of Oslo entailed recognizing the PLO and placing political dialogue with it at the centre of Israeli policy towards the organization. Thus, it marked a departure from Israel's previous foreign policy stance of non-recognition and attempts to defeat the PLO – militarily and politically.

The Israeli decision to pursue this dramatic foreign policy shift was informed by the perceptions of the then Israeli Prime Minister, Yitzhak Rabin, and his Foreign Minister, Shimon Peres, that Israel was in an unprecedented strong strategic position. The Cold War ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union, which had backed several of Israel's foes such as Syria and to a lesser extent the PLO, and the emergence of the US, Israel's closest ally, as the world's sole super power. The expulsion of Iraqi forces from Kuwait by a US-led coalition in the 1990-1991 Gulf War, and the ensuing imposition of dual containment on Iran and Iraq, also significantly diminished the possibility of an invasion of Israel from the east, by a coalition of Arab armies. The positive effects of these international and regional trends, Rabin and Peres argued, were compounded by Israel's increasing state capacity. The successful process of economic restructuring in the mid 1980s, followed by an influx of Jews emigrating from the former USSR, buttressed the political, economic, social and military foundations of Israeli power.

However, Rabin and Peres were also aware of three counter-trends which were rendering Israel's strategic position rather tenuous. One was the emergence of political Islam as the most powerful stream in Arab politics, giving rise to political elites less disposed than their Arab secular counterpart to solve the Arab-Israeli conflict through political dialogue. Another was the prospect of the Middle East entering a nuclear race, ending the Israeli Defence Force's military supremacy in the region and potentially posing an existential threat to Israel—a country small enough to be wiped out by one nuclear device. The third trend was the potential long-term weakening of Israeli state capacity due to the increasingly adverse demographic imbalance between Israeli Jews and Palestinians. Were the Israeli occupation to remain in place, Palestinians eventually would outnumber Israeli Jews, ending the ability of Israel to exist as a Jewish *and* a democratic state. Rabin and Peres believed that the way to deal with these multiple challenges effectively was to end the Arab-Israeli conflict through a peace settlement with the PLO. The alternative would be dealing with conflict with the Arabs and a potentially nuclear Middle East, from a weakened position.

A provisional evaluation of the contemporary Middle East would suggest that Rabin and Peres were vindicated. Egypt, which under President Hosni Mubarak cooperated closely with Israel at an *intergovernmental* level – especially since 2004, elected a parliament controlled by the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and Salafi movements. The MB leaders had stated their commitment to the Israeli-Egyptian Camp David peace agreement. However, Egypt has refused to continue its former support of Israeli policies, e.g., imposition of the siege on the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip and Egyptian energy companies, citing a trade dispute, have recently terminated a deal to supply Israel with natural gas. Concurrently, the strategic position of Israel's most dangerous adversary in the region, Iran, is much stronger than twenty years earlier. Iran's

long-time foe in the Gulf, Sunni-led Arab Iraq, was dismantled by the US during the 2003 invasion. And, according to the International Atomic Energy Agency, Iran is making rapid progress towards nuclear weapons capability. These regional challenges are being intensified by domestic trends: demographic trends between Israeli Jews and Palestinians *and* within Israeli Jewish society are weakening the foundations of the Israeli state. In the not too distant future Palestinians living between the Mediterranean Sea and the River Jordan will outnumber the Jews. Simultaneously, due to high birth rates, the ultra-orthodox Jews (the least economically productive sector of Israeli society), are expanding much faster than secular Jews, who are the main contributors to the country's economy and security.

Are these regional and domestic trends reversible? Due to mounting pressure, Iran may ultimately decide not to cross the threshold necessary to develop nuclear weapons. However, given that it has not been deterred in its nuclear developments so far by international pressure, sabotage, and the risk (prior to 2003) of regime change, it is unlikely that it will decide to halt its nuclear programme. One result of this could be a military strike on Iran, although the prospects of such an attack eliminating its nuclear programme are questionable. In relation to the Arab uprisings, it is unlikely that the rise of political Islam will not continue, especially in countries where Islamists previously were banned from participating officially in national politics. However, those countries, most notably Egypt, are still heavily dependent on Western support which, in turn, is predicated on maintaining peaceful relations with Israel.

What about trends within Israel? The burden of the non-productive sectors of society has resulted in the most wide-spread protests on social issues ever witnessed in Israel. But whether these protests will translate into a political force able to transform the agenda of Israeli parliamentary politics remains to be seen.

Although changes may still be possible, Israel's position is weaker than when it embarked on the Oslo Process. Consequently, other things being equal, perhaps the best Israel can hope for is management of its ongoing conflicts in the region rather than the setting of an agenda from the enhanced strategic position Rabin and Peres hoped to maintain.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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