

Israel and the Arab World: In the Shadow of Regional Upheaval—from the “Arab Spring” to the Summer of ISIS

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In the winter of 2010, the “Spring of the Arab Nations” suddenly erupted, leading to the collapse of the Arab old order and the fall of many Arab regimes that up until then were perceived as strong and solid. In many of the Arab states, the “Arab Spring”, which began as a popular protest degenerated into a bloody civil war, and in the case of Syria it led in the summer of 2014 to the emergence onto the regional stage of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The earthquake in the Arab world was perceived by many Israelis as presenting a possible threat, not only to the regional stability and quiet that had reigned along Israel’s borders with its Arab neighbors, but also to the very existence of the peace agreements that had been a most important element in Israel’s national security conception for four decades. In the face of this challenge, Israel chose a passive approach and to allow events to work themselves out and drag it along with them. In some of the arenas matters worked themselves out favorably, for example, in Egypt. In some of the arenas, like Syria and Lebanon, Israel remained a worried observer from the sidelines. In Syria chaos and Islamic extremism spread all over, and in Lebanon Hizballah continued to grow stronger. Meanwhile, the Palestinian arena with all its problems remained on ice, lingering in a state of waiting. Only time will tell whether Israel’s policy was prudent or simply evasive. Was Israel behaving like the ostrich, burying its head in the sand and avoiding like fire any policy initiative? Or was Israel’s policy prudent, sound, and necessary given the limitations on Israel’s power?

Keywords: Israel, the Arab Spring, Syria, Egypt, the Middle East, the Arab-Israeli conflict

Introduction

The Arab-Israeli conflict is one of the longest and bloodiest clashes the world has witnessed since the end of World War II. At the heart of the conflict, of course, lies the Israeli-Palestinian struggle over mandatory Palestine/Eretz Israel (the Land of Israel). However, it would be more precise to describe the conflict as a conglomerate or a cluster of a number of primary and secondary conflicts which originated as a dispute between Arabs and Jews, then in time became what is today’s struggle between the Palestinians and Israelis over Palestine/Israel. However, the localized conflict boiled over into disputes, mainly territorial, between Israel and its Arab neighbors. These clashes developed a dynamic of their own, with their own depths and complexities, thus making it difficult to find any solution. The original bases of the Palestinian-Israeli and Arab-Israeli conflicts were mainly nationalistic and territorial in character. However, over the years other issues surfaced, the main one being religion, and so the clash became one of Islam versus Judaism (Shamir, 1976).

Thus, several different conflicts accumulated around the State of Israel. The Palestinian-Israeli conflict

stood at the center, with the Egyptian-Israeli, Jordanian-Israeli, Syrian-Israeli, and others revolving around it. The fact that what cohered here was in actuality a cluster of conflicts found clear expression in the fact that several of the secondary conflicts—which were connected with the core conflict, but not necessarily or inescapably so—were able over the years to be resolved. Thus, a peace treaty between Israel and Egypt was signed in March 1979 and between Israel and Jordan in October 1994. Furthermore, Israel and Syria held lengthy negotiations, marked by numerous ups and downs, and they almost reached the stage where a peace agreement could be signed. Notably, all this took place without a solution to the core Palestinian-Israeli conflict having been found (Rabinovich, 2004).

Despite the fact that in theory the Arab-Israeli conflict encompassed all the Arabs, in most of Israel's wars it had to confront only one or two Arab states, while the others remained on the sidelines as onlookers. Thus, in 1967 Israel fought Egypt, Syria, and Jordan, while Lebanon and the other Arab states remained quiet. In 1973 Israel had to fight on the Egyptian and Syrian fronts, while the Jordanian and Lebanese arenas remained quiet. It may be noted in passing that the October 1973 war was the last conventional war in which the regular armies of Arab states were involved. Since then Israel's battles have had a limited character, with the fighting being carried out against organizations or militias, for example, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), and later, the Palestinian Hamas and the Lebanese Hizballah organizations (Elran & Brom, 2007).

The Middle East peace process that began in 1991 gave expression to the desire of the international community, led by the United States, to reach a comprehensive settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict and thus bring it to an end. Thus, the process was based upon the effort to bring about talks between Israel and all the Arab states, and if possible, even with a united Arab grouping in which all the states in conflict with Israel would take part. It was the Arab states, or at least some of them, who insisted upon appearing in the framework of a united front. In practice, the comprehensive peace process collapsed and disintegrated into subsidiary processes, some of which achieved complete success, for example, the Jordanian-Israeli peace agreement signed in October 1994. Other subsidiary processes achieved partial success. For example, partial agreements were reached with the Palestinians, beginning with the Oslo Agreements of September 1993 and the Hebron Agreement of 1998. The peace talks between Israel and Syria and Lebanon, however, failed to reach any agreements (Rabinovich, 1999).

In the year 2000, as the first decade of the peace process drew to an end, the Palestinian intifada broke out, and since then the peace process has been in a deep freeze. Various efforts were made to get the process moving again, vis-à-vis both the Palestinians and the Syrians, but these undertakings failed. The Arab side showed no determination or political will to advance toward peace with Israel, but it became evident that Israel was also hesitant to rush forward toward a peace agreement, due to its security concerns, but mainly, because of the political price being demanded domestically from Israel's leaders in return for such an agreement (a possible threat to the survival of the government). All that Israel's leaders could do in these circumstances was to try to manage the conflict on the various fronts and keep them stable. This management included: preserving the channels of negotiation insofar as possible; keeping the peace with Jordan and Egypt; conducting relations with the Palestinian Authority (PA) in such a way as to maintain relative stability on the West Bank and in the Gaza Strip; and finally, handling matters on the northern front, along the Israeli-Syrian and Israeli-Lebanese borders, in a way to ensure continued calm.

In the winter of 2010, the Arab world experienced that major upheaval, if not to say, severe earthquake, which came to be called, the "Arab Spring". Insofar as the Jewish state was concerned, the upheavals in the

Arab world made it necessary for Israel to reassess the way it looked at what was happening all around it. The nearby turmoil was changing the world order; consequently, the basic assumptions upon which Israel had acted in the region for many years needed to be revised. To make matters more acute, the “Arab Spring” quickly turned into an “Islamic Winter” as radical Islamic forces came to the fore. Thus, in June 2012 the Muslim Brotherhood’s Muhammad Mursi was elected president of Egypt. However, he survived in power for only about a year, until June 2013, when the Egyptian army overthrew him and returned the country to the path it had followed in the days of President Gamal Abd al-Nasir, Anwar al-Sadat, and Husni Mubarak. In other arenas the “Arab Spring” also dissipated, but in those places it was replaced by chaos and anarchy. These dangerous and devastating afflictions accompanied the disintegration of the Iraqi state, the revolution in Syria, which began as a popular protest but then degenerated into a bloody civil war, and the strident emergence onto the regional stage of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in the summer of 2014 (Haas & Lesch, 2013).

These developments greatly changed the facing Israeli policy dilemmas. During the peace process period the questions were: Which channel should Israel advance in order to achieve, if at all possible, a general regional peace? Or, alternatively, in which arena should Israel invest its efforts in order to preserve the regional stability it felt was so vital to it? Now the dilemmas were of a much different character. How were the threatening new fronts to be handled? Which challenge was of greater significance and demanded attention with greater urgency: the Islamic forces (like the Muslim Brotherhood for a while in Egypt and Hamas in the Gaza Strip), or Israel’s long-time enemies (like Bashar al-Asad in Syria, Hizballah in Lebanon, and the Islamic Republic of Iran), or the chaos and anarchy that enabled radical groups like ISIS to spread their control over large swaths of territory not far from Israel? In addition, there was the question of the Palestinian arena: Under the present circumstances, was it a good idea to try to keep it on ice, if possible, or perhaps this was the time to try to advance a political process that would possibly make the achievement of a solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, which would, in its turn, bring about a change having significant implications for Israel’s status in the Arab world.

Israel and the Arab Spring: An Involved Observer from the Sidelines

In the winter of 2010, a new “Spring of Nations”—the “Spring of the Arab Nations”, suddenly erupted without any warning all over the Middle East. The preceding decades had been marked by economic and social stagnation, together with a surprising degree of long-term political stability under the shadow of dictatorial regimes. The Arab Spring now brought changes such as the Middle East had not known since the 1950s. Waves of protest swept the region, led by the younger generation calling for change, liberty, and justice. In their wake, several dictatorial regimes collapsed unexpectedly, even though they had seemed to outside observers to be firmly in control and immune to any serious threat to their power.

Many in Israel and the whole region, and especially in the West, went out of their way to greet this “Spring of the Arab Nations”. Many wanted to believe that it would convert the backward Middle East into a Garden of Eden enjoying economic prosperity, liberty, and freedom. In particular, these observers hoped that the region would become a fertile breeding ground for democratic regimes, replacing the authoritarian governments that had collapsed so suddenly and dramatically. To anyone viewing the live broadcasts from Tahrir Square in the heart of Egypt’s capital, Cairo, it must have seemed as if the young and determined demonstrators—the espresso, Internet, Facebook, YouTube, and cell phone generation—would bring about in Egypt, and in their wake, in other Arab states as well, a revolution such as brought down the communist

regimes in Eastern Europe. After all, there the revolution had turned the former Soviet satellites into democratic states capable of becoming members of the European Union and, in certain cases, even members of NATO. However, the momentum of the uprisings was impeded rather quickly, and the hopes held out for the “Spring of the Arab Nations” turned into frustration and disappointment. Indeed, the Arab revolutions reached a dead end. In Egypt, for example, the wheel was turned back and an authoritarian military regime was reestablished. In other states, like Libya and Syria, the protests lurched out of control, and in both countries the state and society descended into chaos and anarchy, creating a bloody Hell of civil war. With this it became clear that the establishment of a new order, and certainly a Western-style democratic system, was a task beyond the power of the young protest generation in the Arab world (Lynch, 2012; Massad, 2012).

In Israel the outbreak of the Arab Spring in the winter of 2010 was met with complete surprise, and mainly, with deep shock. Just days before the outbreak of the rioting in Tunis and Egypt, official Israel’s assessment was that the political stability in the Arab world was destined to be preserved for many years. In this spirit, on 25 January 2011, the day before the outbreak of the revolution in Egypt, Israel’s Director of Military Intelligence, General Aviv Kochavi, stated in testimony before the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Security Committee that “at the moment there is no concern over the stability of the Egyptian regime” (Inbar, 2013)¹.

In the years preceding the outbreak of the Arab Spring—based upon the assessment noted above, and perhaps also on the belief, or even hope, that the Arab state system surrounding Israel was strong and solid and a “partner” with Israel in the effort to preserve regional stability—Jerusalem focused its attention on the Iranian threat. To be more precise, Israel focused on Iran’s race to achieve nuclear capability and, closely connected with this, the threat presented by Iran’s political allies positioned next door to Israel, Hizballah in Lebanon and Hamas in the Gaza Strip. Teheran had supplied these movements with tens of thousands of advanced rockets capable of reaching most of Israel’s territory. Israel’s answer to the Iranian threat was to promote cooperation and a kind of undeclared political and security alliance with the moderate Sunni Arab axis that included Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and even Egypt. This axis had already begun to take shape toward the end of the 1970s, following the sharp strategic change of direction in foreign policy brought about by Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat. However, its importance for Israel increased in the decade just passed in face of Iran’s rise to the status of a regional power casting its shadow over broad expanses in the areas adjacent to it, beginning with the Persian Gulf and Iraq, passing on to Syria, and ending in Lebanon and Gaza.

However, in the winter of 2010 the Middle East order, or to be more precise, the Arab order—the “good old” order to which Israel had become accustomed—suddenly collapsed. Arab regimes that up until then were perceived as strong and solid, and certainly immune to any domestic threat, fell like houses of cards. At their head was the regime of Husni Mubarak, Israel’s reliable partner in the effort to maintain regional stability and preserve the Israel-Egypt Peace Treaty. The latter had served as the cornerstone—even if generally forgotten and repressed—of Israel’s security policy during the previous four decades. Thus, the outbreak of the Arab Spring aroused serious concerns in Israel about where the “storm” accompanying the Spring would lead. The violence in the Arab streets was perceived as presenting a possible threat, not only to the regional stability and quiet that had reigned along Israel’s borders with its Arab neighbors, but also to the very existence of the peace agreements that had been a most important element in Israel’s national security conception for four decades. Israeli officials did not hide their worry that regimes led by radical Islamic movements would rise in place of

¹ Ha’aretz (Tel Aviv), January 26, 2011.

the regimes of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, Bin Ali in Tunisia, and even Muammar al-Qadhafi in Libya. The leading radical Islamic movement of concern was the Muslim Brotherhood, which harbored a deep hostility to Israel and in the past had not hidden its opposition to the Israel-Egypt Peace Agreement. In another scenario, Israelis expressed concern that the lack of stability, chaos, and anarchy prevailing all over the Arab world would lead to the emergence all along Israel's borders of radical jihadist movements acting under the inspiration of al-Qaida (Rosenberg, 2013; Goren & Podeh, 2013; Inbar, 2013).

Official Israel refused to view favorably the scenes in Tahrir Square or the declarations of support for the demonstrators being issued from all sides, and especially from the White House. As will be remembered, the latter hastened to welcome the change taking place in the Arab world, especially in Egypt. Later Washington even took the side of the Muslim Brothers in Egypt, after they came out victorious in the parliamentary and presidential elections. In the eyes of official Israel, the US's support for the Arab Spring was quite a clear indication of short-sightedness and basic lack of understanding of the reality prevailing in the region. After all, the outcome of the Arab Spring process was most likely to be the undermining of regional stability and damage to the interests of Washington itself, and to the interests of America's regional allies, including Israel. An earlier example of official Israel's assessment differing from that of Washington's can be seen in the events of 2006, when the US pressured Israel to allow Palestinian Authority elections to be held, and these led ultimately to Hamas gaining control of Gaza.

Following this, one can understand Israel's concern in 2011 that this time as well the collapse of the governing orders in the Arab states would ultimately lead to the victory of Islamic movements. This was especially so in light of the anarchy and chaos accompanying the collapse, and the circumstance that the Arab societies were not yet ripe for the import of Western-style democracy. The Islamic movements would exploit the democratic process, Israel argued, but not in the manner customary in the West. Rather, they would treat it as a matter of, "one man, one vote, one election—and that's it!". Once democratic elections would bring the representatives of the Islamic movements to power, they would change the rules of the game and establish "Islamic democracy" as the system of government. Iran is a good example of this. There is no similarity whatsoever between Iran's form of government and democracy as understood in the West.

Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu gave expression to this mood in a speech he gave on 23 November 2011 before the Knesset plenum. He stated that: "the Arab world is not advancing forward but marching backward", and added,

This past February I stood at this podium as millions of Egyptian citizens poured onto the streets of Cairo. Commentators and not a few of my colleagues here in the opposition explained to me that we were standing before a new era of liberalism and progress that would wash away the old order... They told me that I was trying to frighten the public, and that I didn't see that we were on the wrong side of history, and that I didn't understand in which direction matters were advancing. However, the time that has passed proves that I was right.²

Netanyahu went on to ask, "Who here did not understand the situation? Who here did not understand the history?" He concluded his speech by declaring:

Israel stands before a period of instability and uncertainty in the region. This is surely not the time to listen to those who tell us to follow wishful thinking. I remember that many of you called upon me to take the opportunity to make hasty concessions, to rush to an agreement, because this was precisely the time for it. But I do not base Israel's policy on illusions. There is here a tremendous shock... Whoever does not see it is simply hiding his head in the sand. But it didn't

² Voice of Israel, November 23, 2011.

stop people from coming and proposing, “give”, “concede”. I said that we want to reach an agreement with the Palestinians, that we do not want a bi-national state, but we insist that there be foundations of stability and security. We always want this, but now even more so³.

It should be mentioned that the factor that presented the Israeli government with its greatest difficulty in confronting the challenge posed by the Arab Spring was, of course, the government’s internal composition, which required maintaining a political status quo and preventing any real shift in the political arena, especially vis-à-vis the Palestinians.

Nevertheless, from the very beginning Israel was well aware of the order of priorities it must adopt regarding the concern it must show for what might happen from any particular direction, the attention it needed to pay to each arena, and the alertness it must show.

It was clear that the first focus of attention must be Egypt, the large and important Arab state that had served as a pioneer in the struggle to establish an Arab-Israeli peace. The second focus of attention was the arena represented by Lebanon and Syria. This region was perceived as constituting a significant threat mainly because of the strength of the Hizballah organization. Later the perception of pending danger was based upon the achievements of the radical Islamists, who had become a leading force in the camp of the Syrian rebels and were drawing closer and closer to the Syrian-Israeli border on the Golan Heights. The Palestinian issue came in as only the third focus of attention. From Israel’s point of view, this problem did not seem likely to be very explosive or prone to generate instability. This approach was reinforced by the circumstance that this issue required Israel to take decisions and make moves that the government was not interested in making, mainly on account of domestic political considerations.

All the factors mentioned above stood in the shadow of Iran, at least during the first years of the Arab upheavals when their outcome was not yet clear. Iran continued to be an arena of primary importance at least until the election of Hasan Rouhani as president of the country in June 2013 and the beginning of the Iranian-American negotiations aimed at stopping Iran’s race to develop nuclear weapons. Iran’s primacy in the calculations and attention of the Israeli leadership was based upon the extent of the threat it was perceived as presenting to Israel’s existence, which appeared to be of existential proportions. Nevertheless, as worrying as the Iranian danger was, it remained largely theoretical and potential at a time when the events unfolding along Israel’s borders were forcing their attention on both the Israeli public and its government.

Egypt First

The 1979 Egyptian-Israeli peace agreement served as the cornerstone of Israel’s security strategy for many years. It enabled Israel to lower its security expenditures drastically, and, notably, it gave the country a strong sense of security, since until that time Egypt was Israel’s main adversary. With the departure of Egypt, the biggest and strongest Arab state, from the circle of confrontation with Israel, the possibility of establishing a pan-Arab military coalition for initiating war with Israel, such as May 1948 and the October 1973 war happened in the Arab invasion which was in practice eliminated.

For many Israelis, and certainly for the government of Israel, the events in Egypt beginning with the fall of Hosni Mubarak’s regime and ending with the election of Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi as president a little over three years later served as proof of the severe damage done to Israel by the Arab Spring. On the one hand, an immediate threat arose, what some would call a tactical threat. It came in the shape of terrorist squads affiliated

³ Voice of Israel, November 23, 2011.

with al-Qaida and radical Islamic organizations inspired by al-Qaida, like *Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis* (Supporters of the Holy House”, also known as Ansar Jerusalem, “Supporters of Jerusalem”). The latter organization took root in the Sinai Peninsula and began to act against Israel when the Egyptian government lost control over Sinai. The radicals demonstrated their power by launching missiles toward the city of Eilat and attacks against Israeli patrols along the Israel-Egypt border.

On the other hand, Israel was troubled by a strategic threat, in the form of the Muslim Brotherhood, which became well-established after the fall of Husni Mubarak. The Brotherhood increased its power and became the leading force in the Egyptian state and society. The Brothers soon achieved dramatic successes in the elections to the People’s Council (*Majlis al-Shab*, and the Consultative Council (*Majlis al-Shura*), the upper house of the Egyptian Parliament) held during 2011, and their representative, Muhammad Mursi, was elected President of Egypt in June 2012. Mursi remained in office for about a year until he was ousted by the army in June 2013. (Rutherford, 2012).

It is interesting to note that Mursi himself, even though he was the Muslim Brothers’ representative, refrained from damaging relations between Egypt and Israel. During his presidency, he did indeed find it difficult to utter Israel’s name in his speeches. At the same time, he repeatedly expressed a general obligation to preserve all of the international agreements Egypt had signed over the years, including by implication the peace agreement with Israel. Also during the short term of his rule, contacts between the military and security apparatuses of the two countries continued, and diplomatic contacts, which in any case had been frozen for many years already, remained intact.

Meanwhile, the Egyptian political system—that “deep state” of political elites allied with the governmental, security, and, of course, military apparatuses—survived the earthquake that visited Egypt. It recovered and after two years returned the state to the days of Husni Mubarak, with some slight differences. General Abd al-Fattah al-SISI replaced President Mubarak. The overthrow of Muhammad Mursi on June 30, 2013, by the Egyptian army led by then Minister of Defense SISI, and later, in June 2014, the election of al-SISI as President of Egypt, returned calm to the country, and in turn, also to relations with Israel. Furthermore, the change of power in Egypt created a harmony of interests between Israel and the new Egyptian government led by SISI. This harmony revolved around the Hamas organization in Gaza, which had been the enemy of Israel for some time already and which SISI now perceived as part of the long arm of the Egyptian Muslim Brothers. Israel’s efforts to diminish Washington’s criticism of SISI and Israel’s readiness to help Egypt in its struggle with Islamic radicalism undoubtedly raised Israel’s prestige in SISI’s eyes and created the basis for deepening understanding and cooperation between the two countries (BBC, 2014; Stock, 2014).

After Egypt, Syria

As the situation on Israel’s southern front became stabilized, the country turned its attention to the north. Israel began following closely the disintegration of the Syrian state and its descent into bloody civil war.

Official Israel did not hide its view, even if it refrained from giving it expression authoritatively or in any outright manner, that Bashar al-Assad was “the devil you know”, to whom Israel had become accustomed over the years. Therefore, Israel had no interest in his downfall. Some senior Israeli officials even took the trouble to explain that Israel preferred a weakened and bloodied Bashar in power in Damascus, focused on what was happening inside his country, over a victory by the Islamic movements and their coming to power, such as what had happened, at least temporarily, in Tunis and Egypt. Indeed, many Israelis perceived the continuation of

Bashar's regime as the only guarantee that quiet and calm along the Syria-Israel border would be preserved and the only effective barrier to Islamic radical groups becoming established on the Golan Heights, such as had happened in the Sinai Peninsula. At the same time, Israel exploited Bashar's weakness and brought about a change in the rules of the game. For example, Israel undertook steps to prevent the transfer of advanced weapons from Syria to Hizballah, something it had previously refrained from doing. These steps passed without any response from Bashar, who was completely absorbed in the struggle against the rebels within Syria, and quite surprisingly, without any response from Hizballah, which preferred not to open a new front against Israel on Syrian soil (Ajami, 2012; Lesch, 2012; Zisser, 2013).

Israel became acutely aware of the complexity of the situation in Syria when ISIS advanced into the center of the regional stage in the summer of 2014. In a lightening attack, the organization's activists managed to take and maintain control of huge areas of the states of Iraq and Syria, areas amounting to the size of Great Britain or France. With ISIS's rise to prominence, and later, the declaration of the Islamic Caliphate by ISIS's leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the possibility, limited though it may be, first became evident that the organization might be able to overthrow Bashar al-Asad's regime, or, alternatively, to take control of great swaths of Syria, right up to the border with Israel. Meanwhile, however, rebel groups not affiliated with ISIS took control of the territory on the Syrian side of the Golan Heights front. The most prominent of these groups was "The Support Front" ("Jabhat al-Nusra"), which split off from ISIS some time ago because it refused to meet ISIS's demand that it end its affiliation with al-Qaida. The difference between ISIS and "The Support Front" is mainly tactical, relating to their disagreements over the order of priorities and the timetable for implementing their very similar ideologies and worldviews. They both want to establish a regime based strictly upon Islamic law in all the territory they conquer, and they both advocate pursuing relentless jihadist warfare against the enemies of Islam, which include Bashar al-Asad's Syria, the Shiites in Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon, and, finally, Israel as well (Harel, 2014; Zisser, 2014).

The Challenge of Hizballah

The Lebanese arena, which the "Arab Spring" skipped over, remained at the margins of the Syrian arena. Hizballah's mobilization on the side of Bashar al-Asad created a backlash among jihadist groups like the ones that moved their activity from Syria to Lebanon or arose on the margins of the Sunni community in Lebanon. However, insofar as can be determined, public opinion in Lebanon—Shiite, Christian, and even Sunni—prefers to maintain the quiet and the stability of the Lebanese state and to prevent the civil war being fought in Syria from seeping into Lebanon. Notwithstanding the price Hizballah paid for its participation in the war in Syria—hundreds of killed and wounded—it was careful to maintain its military power, especially its advanced missile arsenal, and it remained a major source of concern for Israel and a threat for which Israel had no answer. Still, the state of mutual deterrence prevailing between the two sides was preserved, since neither had any interest in escalation. This was so despite a series of incidents. Thus, for example, there was the January 2015 assassination of Hizballah's Golan Heights regional commander, Jihad Imad Mughniyeh, as he was participating in a patrol along the Syrian-Israeli border, and Hizballah's fierce but limited response to that incident. These events proved the volatility of the quiet prevailing along the Lebanese-Israeli border, but at the same time, the supreme interest of both sides in avoiding a flare up (Harel, 2015; Khatib, Matar, & Alshaer, 2014).

The Shadow of Iran

Toward the end of the first decade of the 21st century Iran was perceived as the main challenge confronting Israel. Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's belligerent rhetoric was accompanied by Iran's accelerated race to develop nuclear weapons and its efforts to strengthen Israel's nearby adversaries, Hizballah and Hamas. The latter, it is true, did not constitute an immediate existential threat to Israel, but Hizballah's amassing of an arsenal containing tens of thousands of advanced missiles and Hamas's amassing of thousands of missiles did present Israel with security threats of major proportions (Ahren, 2015).

Initially the "Arab Spring" seemed as if it would strengthen Iran, which tried to fill the vacuum created in the region and extend its influence over all the territory extending from Teheran to Baghdad to Damascus and finally to Beirut and Gaza. The international community's total lack of determination in dealing with the Iranian issue prompted Israel's leaders to contemplate the option of an Israeli military strike against Iran. However, as the years passed, Teheran joined the other states that had sunk into the treacherous quagmire of regional chaos. Thus, after the outbreak of the Syrian revolution and in the wake of ISIS's military conquests in Iraq and Syria, Iran's investments in those areas became threatened. It will be recalled that even Hizballah has paid a heavy price for being drawn into intervention in Syria. It has suffered hundreds of dead and extensive damage to its image, and the fact that the Syrian revolution overflowed into Lebanon itself has been especially detrimental.

The fear that Israel might take some action was definitely an important motive behind the West's decision to confront Iran and impose a regime of international sanctions against that country. The international sanctions severely damaged Iran's economy and undoubtedly contributed to the election of President Hasan Rouhani in June 2013. This, perhaps, heralded the beginning of change in Iran and a softening of its positions, which led to the opening of a dialogue between Washington and Teheran that produced an interim agreement between the sides (Keck, 2015; Kurz & Brom, 2015).

The Palestinian Issue

This Question in particular was pushed to the side over and over again, despite American and European efforts to promote a process that would bring about a breakthrough in the negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians, and contrariwise, despite the repeated rounds of violence that broke out between Hamas and Israel. At the same time, many Israelis remained stanchly convinced that the real challenge for Israel lay in this issue. However, the relative calm prevailing on the West Bank allowed Israel to avoid devoting real effort in confronting this issue. The most Israel would do was to accede to American pressures to conduct negotiations with the leadership of the Palestinian Authority led by Abu Mazin (Mahmud Abbas). However, neither of the two sides really trusted the other nor, most importantly, did they believe in the other's ability to advance the political process.

The rounds of violence between Israel and Hamas in Gaza—Operation "Cast Lead" in December 2008-January 2009, Operation "Pillar of Defense" in October 2012, and Operation "Protective Edge" in the summer of 2014—became a matter of routine and demonstrated the difficulty in preserving calm and stability in this arena when there was no progress toward a settlement and Hamas in Gaza and the Palestinian Authority on the West Bank had to deal with the internal pressures exerted by their populations. The rounds of violence left thousands of casualties and great destruction on the Palestinian side, while failing to solve Israel's security problems, as the danger of renewed outbreaks of violence was left in place. It seems that the government of

Israel was deterred from trying to advance negotiations with the Palestinians for reasons of domestic politics. That is, it knew the high political price it would have to pay for such progress, namely, withdrawal to lines based upon the situation as of June 4, 1967. Progress over this issue was also not helped by the absence of a Palestinian partner carrying weight and authority with the Palestinian public and the weakness manifested by the American mediator (Keinon, 2015).

Elusive Horizon

With the ending of Operation “Protective Edge” in the summer of 2014, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman predicted that a window of opportunity had opened before Israel presenting a new political horizon, whose direction was cooperation with the moderate states in the region, especially the states of the Persian Gulf. However, progress toward a political arrangement with the Palestinians and active American intervention were also needed in order to give content to any Israeli-Gulf State alliance. As long as these were lacking it would probably remain merely a paper alliance Netanyahu: Regional changes promise new diplomatic horizon (Haaretz, 2014).

In this connection we may recall that at the end of the 1950s, in face of the growing influence of Egyptian President Gamal Abd al-Nasir and the Arab nationalism he promoted, Israel established the Alliance of the Periphery. Its aim was to link Israel with Ethiopia, Turkey, and Iran, non-Arab Muslim states on the outskirts of the Middle East, so that it could stand up to Nasser.

Now, in 2014, Israel was seeking to establish a new alliance of moderates, based upon the moderate Sunni Arab states, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Jordan, along with the Gulf States. From Jerusalem’s point of view, the new alliance had several aims. One was to block Iran’s growing influence insofar as possible. Another was to deal with the chaos plaguing Syria and Iraq and the rising power of radical Islam. Furthermore, the coalition might even serve as a counterweight to the assertive policies of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who was seeking to increase Ankara’s regional influence at the expense, not only of Israel, but of President ‘Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi’s Egypt as well.

Summary

In recent years the Middle East has experienced a wave of radical transformations. Some of the latter involved much-needed generational changes. This is what happened in Egypt, for example, with President Husni Mubarak’s replacement by Abd al-Fattah al-SISI. Some of the changes resulted from the intensification of social and economic tensions, as well as tensions based upon community and religious affiliations, to the breaking point. Such dissension threatens to unravel the delicate social fabric holding the several communities and religions together, and perhaps even more, it threatens to bring about the disintegration or collapse of the state the communities inhabit in common. Indeed, the events in Syria and Iraq—which led to the appearance of the Islamic State and the declaration of the caliphate by the Islamic State’s leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi—represent a type of challenge to the whole state system that was formulated in the wake of the post-World War I Sykes–Picot Agreement.

This situation placed a challenge and a very difficult dilemma before Israel: How was Israel to act in face of the tsunami inundating the states of the region? After all, this turmoil led to the collapse of the Middle East order to which Israel had become accustomed and to the fall of Arab regimes, at their head, the Mubarak regime, Israel’s reliable partner in the effort to maintain regional stability and preserve the Israel-Egypt Peace

Treaty. Israeli officials did not hide their worry that regimes led by radical Islamic movements, hostile to Israel, would rise in place of the old Arab regimes.

Many Israelis thought their country should (and could) help advance the developments taking place all around it by undertaking a political initiative that would resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, or at least soften and take the sting out of it. Others, including Israel's leaders in particular, held that Israel must take a wait and see position, remaining on the sidelines, since in any case Israel could not control the unfolding events. However, it is clear that the developments in the Arab world in the years since the outbreak of the "Arab Spring" have pulled the rug out from under the claim that Israel can remain entrenched in its positions and do nothing.

As in the past, Israel faced several different fronts. In the end, however, it chose a passive approach and allowed events to work themselves out and drag it along with them. In some of the arenas matters worked themselves out favorably, for example, in Egypt. In some of the arenas, like Syria and Lebanon, Israel remained a worried observer from the sidelines. In Syria chaos spread all over, and in Lebanon Hizballah continued to grow stronger. Meanwhile, the Palestinian arena with all its problems remained on ice, lingering in a state of waiting.

Time will tell whether Israel's policy was prudent or simply evasive. Was Israel behaving like the ostrich, burying its head in the sand and avoiding like fire any policy initiative, mainly because it feared progress in the Palestinian arena? Or was Israel's policy prudent, sound, and necessary given the limitations on Israel's power? After all, the regional upheavals were toppling regimes and states that had been perceived for many long years as strong, stable, and immune to any serious threat to their power.

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