

ISRAELI PERSPECTIVES ON THE ARAB UPRISINGS

The reaction to the Arab revolts that began in 2011 was more sceptical in Israel than in other countries. This is because most Jewish Israelis agree that the net effect of the fundamental changes in the Arab world will be negative for Israel's security. What Israelis do not agree about, however, is how the country should best respond to these changes. While there are those who argue that Israel should engage with its neighbourhood in order to lessen its toxic image in the Arab world, many Israelis take the more hawkish view that the country should retreat and focus on enhancing its military capacity to counter future threats.



Israel's PM Netanyahu and Defence Minister Barak visit an Iron Dome rocket shield command centre, 24 October 2012. Reuters / Ronen Zvulun

Although equipped with one of the most sophisticated intelligence gathering apparatuses in the world, Israel was just as surprised as the rest of the world when the Arab Spring erupted in February 2011. However, while most countries reacted with guarded hope and anticipation, Israel's reaction was one of deep scepticism, laced with a certain fear and trepidation.

In one of his first public announcements in response to the Egyptian revolution, Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu warned that the Arab revolutions may turn out to mirror that of Iran in 1979, in other words, the end result would most

likely be Islamic, radical, anti-Western, and, most importantly, anti-Israel. In a major attempt to spread understanding about Israel's dilemma, Netanyahu called together his ambassadors to Western countries and instructed them to emphasise the importance of the stability of the existing Arab regimes. In November 2011, in a "told-you-so" manner, he reminded the Israeli Knesset and the world that his warnings and predictions had indeed been fulfilled. The Arab transitions were neither democratic nor peaceful, and increasingly hostile to the West in general and Israel in particular. The Arab Spring, he said, had become an Arab Winter.

While it is clear that Netanyahu represents a side of Israeli politics that has been especially sceptical towards the changes in the Middle East, early public opinion polls showed that a majority of Jewish Israelis shared this perspective. And indeed, it is hard to deny that Israel is now less secure in its neighbourhood than before. However, while most Israelis agree that the upheaval in the Middle East has had real negative security consequences for Israel, the understanding of those consequences and what should be done about them varies between two approaches that can be described as two schools of thought: the threat-dominated perspective and the opportunities perspective.

Common security concerns

From a purely military-strategic perspective, the old Middle East balance of power was actually advantageous to Israeli security. Most post-colonial Arab dictators had gradually come to balance their policies towards Israel with their need to maintain favourable ties to the West. This was perhaps nowhere more noticeable than in the case of Egypt, for whom the Camp David accord provided the benefits of US military assistance and Egyptian-Israeli cooperation without any emotional or societal strings attached, allowing the Mubarak regime to focus on suppressing its biggest opponents, the Muslim Brotherhood.

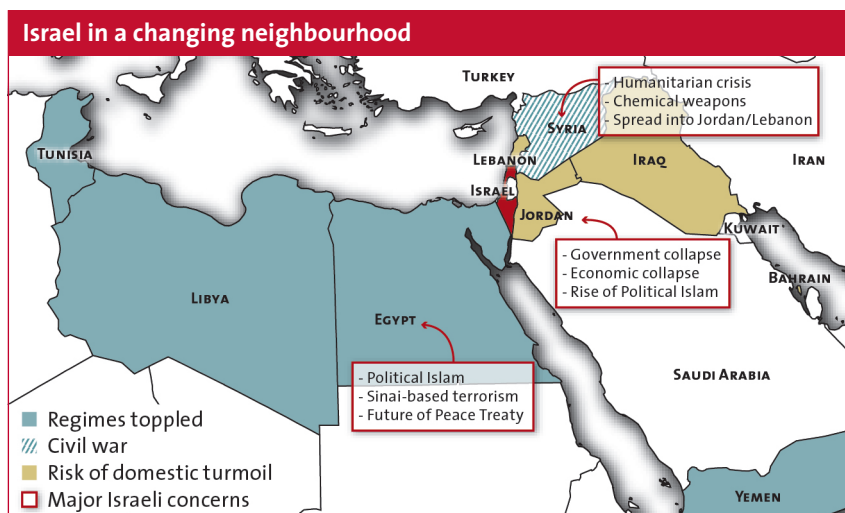
Having failed to overcome the Israeli Defense Forces in 1967 and 1973, the Arab re-

gimes had come to accept that the military option was off the table. Still, the Palestinian issue in particular prevented the opening of fully normalised bilateral inter-state relations. Thus, while Israel's immediate neighbourhood remained a region of cold peace and frozen conflicts for more than 30 years, geopolitically, it was remarkably stable in the sense that it was free from larger inter-state wars. Such predictability was essential for Israel's relationship with its two most powerful neighbours, Egypt and Syria. While the Mubarak regime largely upheld its commitment to the Israeli-Egyptian Peace Treaty of 1979, Syria, under both Assad regimes, was almost entirely respectful of the 1974 Israeli-Syrian disengagement agreement. In other words, despite its precarious geographic location, its conflict with the Palestinians, and the growing threat from non-state armed groups like Hamas and Hezbollah, Israel managed to live quite comfortably in its neighbourhood, as most threats were predictable.

The Arab awakening has changed Israel's geopolitical environment fundamentally and enveloped the region in uncertainty. When discussing the future, Israelis often express concern about several "nightmare" scenarios that may carry with them various types of threats that would be highly problematic for the country's security. These scenarios have to do with incomplete democratisation, terrorism, and the changing regional balance of power.

Democratisation is a lengthy process and transitional regimes are often unstable. Such instability can manifest itself in several ways. In societies with little experience of democracy, mass mobilisation tends to be unpredictable and can lead to undemocratic outcomes. As demonstrated most recently in Egypt, populist movements that are undemocratic at their core can win elections because of their anti-elitist appeal. Thus, even if the Muslim Brotherhood under Mohammed Morsi has pledged to uphold democratic principles and international commitments, there is widespread concern in Israel that it will become more fundamentalist in the long run. Such a shift would be highly problematic for the future of Israeli-Egyptian relations, possibly threatening the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty. This peace treaty is already increasingly challenged by the Egyptian population, not least because the related annual

The shifting regional balance of power and the changing role of the US are major concerns for Israel.



US\$1.56 billion aid package from the US to Egypt is heavily defence-oriented and does little to improve the lives of the regular citizens (in 2012, US\$1.31 billion of the package was allocated directly to Egyptian weapons purchases from US defence contractors).

There is also a fear in Israel that the instability created by democratisation will make the transitional states more warlike in the long term. In order to consolidate national power and unite their population, new Arab populist regimes might see attacking Israel as a diversion strategy in order to achieve a unifying "rally-around-the-flag" effect. Finally, Israelis are concerned that democratic transitions will become chaotic and lead to regime breakdown and state failure. Should governments like the one in Libya become weak and lose control over their territory, dangerous military hardware could end up in the hands of rebels and terrorists. The most worrying issue at the moment is the fate of the chemical weapons stockpiles in Syria, should they come into the hands of Hezbollah.

This leads us directly to the second threat scenario, which is terrorism. If a weak state loses control over remote regions of its territory, terrorist networks will be able to use such areas as their base. There are signs that particularly "lawless" regions in the Middle East, such as in Libya, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen, have become hubs for a renewed effort by al-Qaida to recruit and re-stock. Some of this activity may reach Israel through the Sinai Peninsula, which has become a thoroughfare and smuggling hub for weapons into the Gaza Strip. The terrorist attack against an Egyptian military

outpost in August 2012 showed that the violence there may get worse. A stepped up Egyptian military presence in the peninsula will be necessary to control the border zone, but may also lead to increased Egyptian-Israeli tensions.

The third major concern for Israelis is the change in the regional balance of power and the role of the US. While claims that the developments in the Middle East are a sign of the decline of the US are perhaps unfounded, the fall of the US-friendly dictators in the region will certainly force the US administration to be more varied in its foreign policy. This might mean being more even-handed towards Israel in order not to anger the "Arab Street," a concern that was heightened as a result of the recent anti-Western violence and the killing of US Ambassador Christopher Stevens in Libya. Thus, a decline in perceived US power over Arab politics could have a negative impact on Israel's deterrence.

The regional balance of power is also changing with the rise of Iran and Turkey. Although the unfolding events in Iran and Syria may still change the picture considerably, there is a worry from Israel's side that popular upheavals will continue into more stable Arab regimes such as Jordan and Saudi Arabia. With regard to the Syrian crisis, Israelis disagree about the effects that a fall of Assad would have on the country's security. While the collapse of the Syrian regime may have the positive side-effect of ending the Iranian-Syrian alliance and Syrian assistance to Hezbollah and Hamas, there is a real concern that a worsening Syrian civil war will spill into Jordan and, due to the Bedouin-Palestinian balance there, have repercussions for Israel and its relationship with the Palestinians on the West Bank.

Avoiding the threats – hibernation

Although most Israelis agree that the Arab revolts have far-reaching consequences for Israel's security, the understanding of those consequences and what should be done about them vary roughly along the Israeli left-right political spectrum. Those on the right, heavily represented in the current political establishment, focus almost exclusively on the "threat" coming from the rise in uncertainty in the region, and prescribe increased Israeli isolation and preparedness as a response. Those on the left, more commonly found in academic and intellectual circles, acknowledge the threats, but focus more on the opportunities that are brought by the change, and thus recommend engagement with the emerging regimes in order to increase Israel's chances that the new Middle East will be a friendlier place.

As the violence spread across the Middle East in the spring of 2011, the international community struggled to find the most appropriate way to react in order to reduce the bloodshed. When it became evident that the Mubarak regime was doomed, most Western leaders, including the US, called for him to step down. Representatives of the threat-dominated group in Israel criticised that move, saying that by supporting the opposition and "abandoning their friends", the US had lost credibility in the region. Furthermore, they claimed, by naively believing that democracy could take hold in the Middle East, the US had ushered in a new era of Islamic populist regimes that would encourage a new wave of global jihadism.

The threat-dominated group in Israel makes no distinction between moderate or extremist Islamic groups and their relative propensity to terrorism, and they often fail to emphasise the multiple sources of threat as well as its varying severity. By labelling all threats existential, the possibility of ameliorating the threat is automatically excluded, and only the most severe and most forceful measures are advocated. In Israel, such a foreign policy position is not new; it is mostly represented by those on the right of the political spectrum who advocate for a realist world view in which, at the end of the day, Israel alone is responsible for its security and survival. Distrustful of Israel's Arab neighbours and sceptical of their desire for "real" peace, these Israeli voices call for an assessment based on the worst-case scenario, a type of prisoner's dilemma situation where cooperation is not an option.

The rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt is thus seen as evidence that the introduction of democracy to the Middle East will lead to the rise of political Islam and global jihadism. It is pointed out that the initial assessment that al-Qaida was the loser of the Arab Spring was premature; although al-Qaida did not rise to power, the upheaval gave it the opportunity to regroup, especially in Yemen, Libya, and Egypt, where many Islamists were freed from prison. It is said that recent violence against Israeli targets and increased terrorist activities in the Sinai shows that the jihadists are trying to ignite a war between Israel and Egypt by driving a wedge between the Egyptian army and the IDF. A weakening Egyptian economy will also make it difficult for Egypt to counter further waves of unrest in the country. The best option for Israel under these circumstances, according to this view, is to retreat and focus on strengthening Israel's capacity to counter all threats coming from its neighbourhood.

Accordingly, Israel needs to boost its war-fighting capability and significantly increase its defence budget. It also needs to expand its missile defence system in order to withstand rocket attacks from Gaza, southern Lebanon, and potentially Iran. Although these measures are imperative in order to counter an Iran-level threat, it is doubtful that they will work to protect Israel against the threats coming from "stateless" groups. While the Netanyahu government is not blind to that fact, it still seems to think that Israel can retreat into its cave and wait until the storm passes.

But there is another aspect that has to be taken into consideration for understanding this viewpoint. By focusing on Israel's insecurity, this group – which includes Netanyahu – is choosing a strategy they believe will be most successful in winning US support. While increased levels of terrorism and a spread of the uprisings into some of the still stable regimes would be highly undesirable for Israel, what really worries this group is the changing balance of power and the subsequent decline in Israel's deterrence capabilities. It is therefore seen as imperative that a continued role of the US on the side of Israel is ensured, especially in the context of the US withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan.

Getting the US involved in a war with Iran would be one way of forcing it to have a continued vested interest in the power balance in the Middle East. Although the severity of the Iranian threat is not assessed in this analysis, it is important to understand that because the Israeli-Iranian relationship has the potential to affect the larger balance of power in the region, it cannot be entirely separated from Israel's discussion about the Arab Spring. Demonstrating that the US is still willing to intervene militarily on behalf of Israel is also the key to Israeli deterrence against emerging Arab populist regimes.

While the threat-dominated perspective focuses primarily on Israel's external threats, it could also be argued that those threats serve as a convenient diversion from the task of resolving the conflict with the Palestinians. Why, do they

ask, does the world pay so much attention to Israel's treatment of the Palestinians when Assad is murdering his population? Aren't the Arab dictators worse to their citizens than Israel is to the Palestinians? Netanyahu, who espouses this perspective, has repeatedly made clear that Israel cannot afford to make any concessions to the Palestinians during this time of uncertainty. His opponents consider such a position a convenient excuse for delaying the peace process while expanding Israeli settlements on the West Bank.

Seizing opportunities — making friends

The "opportunities" side of the Israeli debate about the Arab revolts may not be well represented in the current Israeli government, but it consists of a group of academics and intellectuals who are nevertheless important members of the Israeli elite and who are well respected by overseas leaders and foreign diplomats. While agreeing that the uncertainties created by the Arab Spring leave Israel in a precarious situation, this group tends to emphasise that Israel should proactively try to improve its situation in the neighbourhood by engaging rather than retreating. Such engagement, they argue, is only possible if Israelis realise that the revolutions across the Arab world are not monolithic, and therefore cannot be generalised. Rather, they point out, the issues that have rallied the Arab crowds go beyond anti-authoritarianism and include

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a mix of social, economic, political, and psychological elements that vary from country to country. Thus, even if the rise in people's power is not entirely democratic, not all changes that emanate from these developments are necessarily bad for Israel.

However, they admit that even if Israel were willing to engage, its actions would most likely not be welcomed. This dilemma is most profound in the case of Syria, where many Israelis would like to help, but where help is not appreciated. Some Israelis argue that while avoiding direct military aid to the rebels, their country should still get involved in humanitarian assistance in order to improve Israel's image and to foster relations with the next generation of Syrians who also may be its future leaders. This should be done sooner rather than later, they explain, as the longer the conflict goes on, the more likely it is that Islamist groups take control of the uprising.

While not discounting the rise of political Islam or the threat of increased terrorism, Israeli politicians and analysts representing this group tend to recommend countering each problem pragmatically, using every opportunity to lessen Israel's toxic image in the Arab world. Mark A. Heller suggests that just like we are used to "winterising" our houses or cars, Israel will need to "springerise" its relationship with the Arab states. A number of measures could be taken that, while they may not guarantee peace and security, would at least not worsen Arab-Israeli relations. First, Israel can reach out to Jordan to alleviate economic stress, especially with regard to water and fuel shortages. Such measures would stabilise the Jordanian regime and allow King Abdullah to institute the political reforms he has promised. Second, Israel should reach out to Turkey to reverse the deteriorating Israeli-Turkish relationship, an issue that is imperative given that Turkey has become the first line of defence with respect to the worsening crisis in Syria. Third, Israel should keep open lines of communications with more moderate Islamists in Egypt and beyond. Fourth, Israel needs to keep an open strategic and defence dialogue with Egypt with regard to Sinai, but also with Saudi Arabia regarding Iran. Finally, the "toxicity" in the Arab world against Israel could be significantly lowered if Israel engaged in genuine efforts to find peace with the Palestinians.

The need to focus on the relationship with the Palestinians as a means to improve Israel's relationship with its neighbours is commonly heard from Israeli moderates and peace activists. While they claim that the time for peace is quickly running out, some point out that the changing neighbourhood and the newly formed Egyptian government also present Israel with an opportunity. For example, former defence minister Amir Peretz argues that the Muslim Brotherhood has both the ability and the interest to force Hamas to accept a peace agreement signed by the Palestinian Authority. In addition, negotiating with Abbas he said, would take the "bite" out of

the Egyptian street. While such a position finds much support in Western capitals, it will yet have to convince the Israeli street.

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