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Publication Date:
2012-11

Permanent Link:
https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-a-007580174

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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.

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 Palestin-
ian issue in particular prevented the open-
ing 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 sta-
ble in the sense that it was free from larger
inter-state wars. Such predictability was es-
sential 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 pre-
carious 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 neighbour-
hood, as most threats were predictable.

The Arab awakening has changed Israel’s
gopolitical 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 vari-
ous types of threats that would be highly
problematic for the country’s security.
These scenarios have to do with incom-
plete 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 sev-
eal ways. In societies with little experience
democracy, mass mobilisation tends to
be unpredictable and can lead to under-
democratic 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 Brother-
hood under Mohammed Morsi has
pledged to uphold
democratic princi-
plies and interna-
tional 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, possi-
bly threatening the Egyptian-Israeli peace
treaty. This peace treaty is already increas-
ingly challenged by the Egyptian popula-
tion, not least because the related annual

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 citi-
zens (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 insta-
bility 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 attack-
ing 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 chaot-
ic 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 hard-
ware 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 Mid-
dle East, such as in Libya, Sudan, Syria, and
Yemen, have become hubs for a renewed
effort by al-Qaeda to recruit and re-stock.

Some of this activity may reach Israel
through the Sinai Peninsula, which has be-
come a thoroughfare and smuggling hub
for weapons into the Gaza Strip. The ter-
rorist 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 penin-
sula will be necessary to control the border
zone, but may also lead to increased Egyp-
tian-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
are a sign of the decline of the US are perhaps
unfounded, the fall of the US-friendly dic-
tators in the region will certainly force the
US administration to be more varied in
its foreign policy. This might mean being
even-handed towards Israel in order not to anger the “Arab Street,” a concern
that was heightened as a result of the re-
cent anti-Western violence and the killing
of US Ambassador Christopher Stevens in
Libya. Thus, a decline in perceived US pow-
er 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 consider-
ably, 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 cri-
sis, 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 Syr-
ian 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 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.

Netanyahu seems to think that Israel can retreat into its cave and wait until the storm passes.

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 these 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...
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 was 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 “wintersising” 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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