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The Arab Spring and the Israeli Concerns

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One of this year's most remarkable events (and probably the most remarkable) is the Arab Spring, which began in the Maghreb and, in a perfect domino effect, has so far "infected" Libya, Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Bahrain in different ways. But what has not been sufficiently analysed is what Israel thinks of these recent events in the Arab world.

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The Arab unrest has started to dramatically change the balance of power in the Middle East, as well as the dynamics of the region. Right before the recent events, the situation in the region was practically that of the status quo gradually created after the Camp David Accords; Israel had managed to achieve peace and cooperation with Egypt, to obtain American (and, secondarily, European) support and later, during the 1990's, to engage in a strategic partnership with Turkey. Saudi Arabia eventually became neutralised, while Syria posed no real threat and Iraq has ceased to be a considerable regional power practically since the Gulf War in 1991.

Arguably the balance of power described above was in Israel's favour. Even though threats still exist (Hizballah, Palestinian extremism, Syria, Iran), Israel had successfully secured its existence in a predictable status quo. However, the Arab Spring has changed the political landscape in the Middle East. The prism of security and survival, which were always Tel-Aviv's top priorities, seems again to be the most decisive factor for Israel's perception of the Arab spring.

Israel's concerns

The biggest concern of Israel seems to be Egypt. There have always been worries about what is going to happen when Mubarak dies or retires. The fact that this regime-change took place as a result of an uprising has made Israel even more anxious. Until February 11th, when Hosni Mubarak resigned, Tel-Aviv thought of Egypt as an ally or, in any case, as a stable country, for which military confrontation with Israel was not an option. The 25th January Revolution has dramatically changed Egypt's domestic politics, creating an unstable situation in which a number of opposition groups (the Muslim Brotherhood [MB] being the strongest) have come to the fore. Israel's main fear is the possibility of a new regime, of any origin (the army, a newly elected president or the Muslim Brotherhood), abrogating the Peace Treaty.¹ Furthermore, the possibility of Egypt responding positively to Iranian efforts to renew diplomatic relations greatly disturbs Israeli officials. At the same time, Mubarak's fall has signalled the end of his regime's policy to suppress the MB, which had also led to the containment of Hamas. The latter was heavily targeted by Mubarak's regime, mainly for three reasons²: it is an offspring of the MB's ideology³; its actions in Gaza created problems for Egyptian-Israeli relations; finally, it had forged connections with the Sinai's Bedouins. The recent opening of the border between Egypt and the Gaza Strip⁴ has only heightened Israel's concern.⁵

Israel is also concerned about the events in Damascus and Amman, though for different reasons. Although King Abdallah of Jordan has managed to control the riots and to prevent their escalation, there is always the fear of a sudden and unexpected second wave. Like Egypt, Jordan is a close regional ally of Israel. The possibility (although small) of the MB taking over inspires fear in Israel. Tel Aviv is worried, especially after Jordan's head of the MB Hammam Saeed publicly stated that Egypt's unrest would spread quickly across the Middle East.⁶ In any case, the strengthening of the Islamist movement in Amman may lead King Abdallah to reconsider Jordan's stance towards Israel, thereby threatening the Jordanian – Israeli Peace Treaty signed in 1994. Though it is unlikely that the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood intends to cancel the Treaty, there are many other ways of making Israel's life difficult, mainly by providing economic, logistical, and political assistance to the Palestinian militant groups.

Syria's case is different; the possibility of a more radical (either Islamist or military) regime taking over in Syria can, presumably, strengthen the existing axis between Iran,

Syria and Hizballah. Israel's main concern is related to the possible removal of Assad, as "Assad's rule has been characterised mostly by non-violence for Israel".⁷ Therefore, Assad's removal could create serious problems for the Israelis. Given the close links between Hamas and Syria, a possible regime change in Damascus would adversely affect the relations between them. Even though a less radical successor or even a liberalisation of the existing regime cannot be excluded as an option, Israel fears any change in Syria, as the situation is complicated and cannot allow for any measure of predictability.

Palestine is also an important concern for Israel. Given the fact that the Palestinians have a tradition of confronting Israel, unrest in Palestine could, under certain circumstances, escalate to extended clashes between militant groups and the Israeli army, and potentially, though unlikely, to a third Intifada.⁸ Netanyahu seems to think that the agreement signed between Fatah and Hamas may easily turn against Israel.⁹ The Arab Spring has led many Israelis to consider making peace with the Palestinians in order to secure the status quo, let a worst-case scenario comes true.¹⁰ In any case, when so many fronts seem to be open, Tel-Aviv wants to secure the Palestinian one. The recent Israeli Peace Initiative initiated by ex-military men, business leaders, former security chiefs and diplomats demonstrates the growing belief that now is the time to sign a Peace Treaty with the Palestinians.

Many Israelis also worry about the US-Israel relationship and, more specifically, about the tense relations between Obama and Netanyahu, who tend to have "diverging views on the direction of the Arab world".¹¹ Even though the US-Israel special relationship is strong,¹² the speed with which Washington abandoned Mubarak to embrace the protesters and Egypt's new army-centred regime, together with the knowledge that the USA funded and trained the leading organisations in the Egyptian revolution¹³ has led Israel to express concern over a possible change in the American strategic doctrine in the region.

Notwithstanding the Arab Spring, there are additional factors that have strengthened Israel's fears for the ongoing changes in the Middle East, namely: Turkey's approach towards the Arab world and Iran, a possible stand-off between Tel-Aviv and Tehran over the Iranian nuclear programme, the possibility of Tehran taking advantage of the unrest in Shi'ite Bahrain and in Saudi Arabia's Shi'ite community; and finally, the threat posed by the Iran – Syria – Hizballah axis.

Are Israel's concerns well-founded?

Israel will probably weather the Arab Spring, even though it might not maintain its traditional superiority in the Middle East. Nonetheless it seems to exaggerate on the possible threats to its security. The actual political situation in Egypt allows Israel to be relatively optimistic; the army enjoys high popularity, it consistently chooses to cooperate with Israel and it has yet to rush and upgrade relations with Iran.¹⁴ The Egyptian Foreign Minister's public statement upholding Cairo's commitment to the Peace Treaty¹⁵ can only support this optimism. Therefore, it is most likely to see Egypt preserving its position as Israel's ally, or at least not hostile towards it, even though changes in its foreign policy must not be excluded.

As in Egypt's case, Jordan does not constitute a threat to Israel. Even though The MB has been strengthened, but there is only a small possibility that it can decisively influence Jordanian foreign policy. After all, the MB is not the only active opposition group, even though it is the strongest. Moreover, if the monarchy did fall and the MB was able to seize power on its own, it would have to consider the fact that "making Israel's life difficult" would seriously backfire on Jordan.

The situation in Syria can be truly worrying for Israel. A more radical successor could indeed take power, but there is also another possible scenario; under the pressure of the current unrest, Assad's regime, or even a more moderate successor, could initiate a programme of political, social and economic reforms. This may lead to a serious weakening of the Iran – Syria – Hizballah axis and to a window of opportunity for peace with Israel. Finally, another factor worth mentioning is that Syria's Islamists are quite disorganised, compared to their Egyptian and Jordanian counterparts.¹⁶

The agreement between Hamas and Fatah will not serve Tel-Aviv's policy of "divide and rule". However, if Israel reacts violently to this agreement, it risks sparking a united Palestinian uprising. Without American and European initiatives, the vicious circle of violence could go on for ever.

NOTES

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2. MEMRI, "Will Egypt Respond to Iranian Efforts to Renew Diplomatic Relations?", 25/4/2011 (Accessed on 28/4/2011), <http://www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/0/5223.htm>
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6. Ikhwanweb, "Senior MB leaders: Egypt's uprising a prelude to a radical change in the Arab world", 13/2/2011 (Accessed on 9/5/2011), <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=28014&ref=search.php>
7. IISS, op. cit. (endnote No. 3)
8. David Pollock, "Is a Palestinian Uprising next?", *The Washington Institute*, 23/3/2011 (Accessed on 20/4/2011), <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=3336>
9. Barak Ravid, "Netanyahu: PA must choose between peace with us, Hamas", *Haaretz*, 28/4/2011 (Accessed on 2/5/2011), <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/netanyahu-pa-must-choose-between-peace-with-us-hamas-1.358508>
10. *Washington Post*, "Will the Arab Spring bring a peace agreement with Israel?", 15/4/2011, (Accessed on 20/4/2011), http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/will-the-arab-spring-bring-a-peace-agreement-with-israel/2011/04/14/AFfm1KfD_story.html
11. IISS, op. cit. (endnote No. 3)
12. There have been many questions on where is this relationship going, after Obama's proposition of a Palestinian state with the 1967 borders. See *Al Jazeera*, "Obama seeks Palestine state on 1967 borders", 19/5/2011 (Accessed on 21/5/2011), <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/america-as/2011/05/2011519145837856559.html>
13. Ron Nixon, "US Groups Helped Nurture Arab Uprisings", *NY Times*, 14/4/2011 (Accessed on 20/4/2011), http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/15/world/15aid.html?_r=1&scp=1&sq=leaders%20Arab%20uprisings%20USA&st=cse
14. It is too soon to estimate whether or not will Egypt respond to Iran's diplomatic opening. So far, this is not the case, though Israel does fear this scenario coming true. After all, it represents one of the possibilities, even if some sources of the Egyptian Foreign Ministry clarified that "Egypt wished to raise the level of representation from interest offices to embassies, but that it had no intention of forging a strategic alliance with Iran". See MEMRI, "Will Egypt respond to Iranian efforts to renew diplomatic relations", 25/4/2011 (Accessed on 12/5/2011), <http://www.memritv.org/report/en/5223.htm>. See also Elizabeth Iskander, "Does Egypt's Iran open-

ing signal regional shift?", Iran Review, 11/4/2011 (Accessed on 13/5/2011), http://www.iranreview.org/content/Documents/Does_Egypt_s_Iran_Opening_Signal_Regional_Shift_.htm

15. Haaretz, "Egypt tells Israel it is committed to peace treaty", 24/3/2011 (Accessed on 19/4/2011), <http://www.haaretz.com/news/international/egypt-tells-israel-it-is-committed-to-peace-treaty-1.351643>
16. In Syria, as in Tunisia, the regime's tough repression against radical Islamists has weakened those forces. Mubarak's Egypt, on the other hand, was a relatively tolerant country; the MB was allowed to operate, spread its propaganda, build a large membership and control institutions. In Syria, there was a bloody suppression of the MB in 1982. Hence, Islamists are a lot less organised.