

ISRAEL'S CHANGING SECURITY UNDERSTANDING BEFORE AND AFTER THE ARAB UPRISINGS

AYŞE İ. A. ÖZER

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ABSTRACT

The analysis will offer an overview of Israel's historical threat perception and how it has changed since the inception of the Arab uprisings in 2010.

This analysis is about the change in Israel's security understanding. Israel is a country located in the Middle East surrounded by Arab regimes which were historically hostile to its very existence in the region. The unification of the Arab countries against Israel and the lack of an ally in the region created a constant fear in Israel. When it started having better relations with Egypt, Jordan, and Turkey, Israel ended its isolation and found partners in its immediate geography. Even when relations between Turkey and Israel took a turn for the worse, Israel continued to have Egypt and Jordan on its side.

However, with the Arab uprisings, Israel started to fear that it could lose its allies. The regime changes that were likely to take place in the region were alarming for Israel as it got along well with the existing regimes. Furthermore, it was unlikely that the incoming governments would abide by the peace agreements signed by the previous governments and Israel; these agreements helped Israel contain the Palestinian population and live relatively comfortably without any challenges from its two closest neighbors. Therefore, Israel started to see the Arab uprisings and potential regime changes as a security threat.

This analysis will offer an overview of Israel's historical threat perception and how it has changed since the inception of the Arab uprisings in 2010. Then, it will examine the kind of precautions Israel took in the face of increased threat perceptions by looking at the policies it adopted.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout its history, Israel has belonged in a region that is hostile to its very existence. In 1948, Arabs gathered their forces to fight against Israel. At the time, Israel had no ally in the region. Hence, from the Israeli perspective it is possible to see a state that is constantly living with the threat of war and conflict. When we go a little back in history, on the one hand, Palestinians were seen as a threat, while on the other, other Arab states were also perceived as a threat due to their support for Palestine. Later on, Iran joined this camp with its anti-Israeli discourse.

Israel strived to find allies it can count on in the course of time - these countries were Egypt, Jordan, and Turkey - and managed to end its regional isolation. Even though these allies were historically more closely connected to Muslim Palestinians, they preferred strategic cooperation with Israel. With the Mavi Marmara incident, Turkey fell out with its former ally, but Egypt and Jordan remained loyal to the agreements they had made. In conclusion, Israel managed to secure itself through agreements, commercial deals, and military cooperation in a region where hostile countries surround it.

A turning point occurred after the first decade of the 21st century. With the wind of change and the thought that Israel's conventional security understanding will not be enough as a result of the Arab uprisings, alarm bells started to ring. It

was first named the "Arab Spring" as people asked for democracy, justice, and an end to corruption. The wave of protests spread to Egypt, a close ally of Israel, and Prime Minister Netanyahu spoke of the so-called Spring suspiciously by saying that it is "Islamic, anti-Israeli, anti-Western, anti-liberal and undemocratic."¹ At the same time, the opposition in Israel had a different perception than the government believing it could be a sign of a liberal political order in Arab countries.²

During this term, Israel paid close attention to the developments at hand. Even though the authorities for the most part did not believe "in the prospects for rapid democratization," at the outset they remained silent.³ Setting up working groups supervised by Director General Rafael Barak, Israel became well acquainted with the events and dynamics in each and every country including Turkey.⁵ Different actors defended different policies. Some like Natan Sharansky, a former member of the Israeli cabinet, in his book *The Case for Democracy: The Power of Freedom to Overcome Tyranny and Terror* (coauthored with Ron Dermer) criticized the idea that Muslim states are unfit for democracy and asserted it was in Israel's interest to support the democratization of the region which would produce communicable regimes.⁴ Back in 1993, Netanyahu had written a book in which he claimed that the lack of peace in the Middle East is due to the absence of democratic

1. Clive Jones and Beverley Milton-Edwards, "Missing the 'Devils' We Knew? Israel and Political Islam Amid the Arab Awakening", *International Affairs*, Volume: 89, Issue: 2, (2013), pp. 400-401.

2. Jones and Edwards, "Missing the 'Devils' We Knew? Israel and Political Islam Amid the Arab Awakening", pp. 400.

3. Amichai Magen, "Comparative Assessment of Israel's Foreign Policy Response to the 'Arab Spring,'" *Journal of European Integration*, Volume: 37, No: 1, (2015), p. 129; Jones and Edwards, "Missing the 'Devils' We Knew? Israel and Political Islam Amid the Arab Awakening", p. 401.

4. Natan Sharansky and Ron Dermer, *The Case For Democracy: The Power of Freedom to Overcome Tyranny and Terror*. (Public Affairs, New York: 2009).

states.⁵ When the chance for democracy peeped out from the darkness of the Middle East, however, Netanyahu looked at it with suspicion. In 2010, he was not bold enough to appreciate the democratic claims because of the ambiguity regarding where things were headed, whereas Sharansky maintained his positive attitude.

On January 16, 2011, Netanyahu evaluated the Tunisian revolution without mentioning its democratic character, and said that it was an indicator of the unstable nature of the Middle East.⁶ In the case of Egypt, he underlined the danger of a radical Islamic government. His concern about the rise of the Islamists was shared by many in Israel's right wing.⁷ Even though there were such worries on the side of Israel, in the beginning, it "exercised a strategic silence"⁸ and preferred to sit back and watch how the events would unfold.

According to the Israeli calculations, the rise of Islamists in the Middle East would bring along many problems. First of all, Israel had been in better terms with autocratic regimes but had never contacted the people of those regimes.⁹ Israel's former defense minister Moshe Arens said, "The ugly facts are that the two peace treaties that Israel concluded so far - the one with Egypt and the other with Jordan - were both signed with dictators: Anwar Sadat and King Hussein."¹⁰ Knowing that the anti-Israeli sentiment is very high amongst the Arab people, what would happen if these people came into power always frightened Israel. As the Arab uprisings gave voice to these

concerns, Israel had to add another parameter to its security threat perception.

Secondly, the rise of Islamists would produce allies for Hamas, which Israel sees as a terrorist group, and strengthen its hand against Israel. On the other hand, the potential chaos that can emerge in the region would create a power vacuum, increasing the power of radical groups. Furthermore, Iran, Israel's biggest enemy, would extend its influence in such a chaotic environment and would become even more threatening. The rise of a Shi'a crescent would offer leverage to Iran and its allies, while Israel would find itself cornered.

For all these reasons, Israel approached the Arab uprisings with caution and pursued a wait-and-see policy. In other words, it chose to evaluate how the events would unfold before taking a stance. I will start by taking a look at Israel's classical security approach and how it evolved with the conjunctural changes that were precipitated by the Arab uprisings in 2010. Then, I will assess how these changes brought into being new threats and what kind of precautions Israel took in the face of increased threat perceptions. Whether these calculations are right or they are exaggerated will not be the topic of this analysis. Israel's policies have been adopted based on those calculations so regardless of their accuracy, they motivated the Israeli attitude and hence deserve attention.

ISRAEL'S SECURITY PRIOR TO THE UPRISINGS

When we look at the parameters determining Israeli security understanding, we see that the history of exclusion, migration, and war has deeply shaped the security considerations of both the Jewish society and its statesmen.¹¹ As these se-

5. Itamar Rabinovich, *Israel and the Arab Turmoil*. (Hoover Institution, Stanford, California: 2014), p. 8.

6. Rabinovich, *Israel and the Arab Turmoil*, pp. 9-10.

7. Rabinovich, *Israel and the Arab Turmoil*, pp. 14-15.

8. Magen, "Comparative Assessment of Israel's Foreign Policy Response to the 'Arab Spring'", p. 123.

9. Menachem Klein, "Is the Arab Spring Israel's Winter?", *Palestine-Israel Journal of Politics, Economics, and Culture*, Volume: 18, No: 1, (2012), p. 27.

10. Isabel Kershner, "Egypt's Upheaval Hardens Israel's Stance on Peace," *The New York Times*, February 2, 2011.

11. Zafer Balpınar, "İsrail'in Devlet Kurgusu. Güvenli Bir Yahudi Yurdu mu? Yoksa Güvenlikçi Bir Yahudi Devleti mi?", *Güvenlik Stratejileri Dergisi*, No: 26, (2017), p. 175.

curity concerns determine the national security strategies of a country in the long term, they are also ingrained in social life from people's everyday practices to the education system. After realizing its plan to establish a secure state for the Jews, Israelis moved to securitization policies by using force in order to ensure state survival.¹²

Leaving aside the far past, being surrounded by Arab states that are hostile to Israel's existence in the region has been the driving force behind Israel's security understanding.¹³ Israel's state of mind and security policies have also been deeply influenced by this geographical fact.¹⁴ The unification of Arab states against Israel and the lack of an ally before the peace treaty signed with Egypt in 1979 affected Israel's threat perception. Such threat perceptions resulted in harsh security measures, investment in the army and defensive/offensive tools, and compulsory military service for both men and women.

Apart from the feeling of entrapment brought about by being surrounded by Arab states, the Palestinian issue, which is seen as an internal problem, is another dimension of Israel's security understanding. On the one hand, the Palestinians' self-defense against Israel, which they see as having invaded their territory, poses a threat from the Israeli security perspective. On the other hand, there is an Israeli state that blocks off Palestinian territories in order to continuously control Palestinians via checkpoints and, thus, eliminate this threat. Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization coming to the table to resolve their issues was not enough to rule out

such threats. This time an organization known as Hamas came to the forefront as the representative of Palestinians which increased the fragility of Israel's security.¹⁵

Palestine, accepted as a domestic issue by Israel, is the fundamental problem determining Israel's defensive policies. The countries in the region that support the Palestinian cause aggravate this situation even more.¹⁶ Arab countries offered financial support to Hamas especially after the First Intifada in 1987.¹⁷ In order to break the movement's resistance, Israeli Security Forces started to incarcerate Hamas's leaders, speakers, and fighters.¹⁸ After the intifada, entry to Israel required special permission and Israel imposed a blockade and curfew on the occupied lands.¹⁹

Other than Arab states and Palestinians, another topic of concern for Israel is Iran. Until the Islamic Revolution in 1979, the two countries were on good terms. However, with the change of regime from the Shah's secular rule to an Islamic one, Israel began to be worried. Although Iran's major concern was never Israel, in practice, the fear of Iran derives from two sources. Firstly, Israel is concerned that the spread of radical ideologies might blur the minds of certain groups that are willing to negotiate with Israel and can undermine the peace processes.²⁰ In that respect, groups like Hezbollah gaining strength in the Middle East with the help of Iran creates a security threat to Israel.²¹ Moreover, Iran gives

12. Balpınar, "İsrail'in Devlet Kurgusu. Güvenli Bir Yahudi Yurdu mu? Yoksa Güvenlikçi Bir Yahudi Devleti mi?", p. 177.

13. Zafer Balpınar, *İsrail Güvenlik Politikasında Süreklilik ve Değişim (1948-2008)*, (Açılım Kitap, İstanbul: 2012), p. 497.

14. Shmuel Limone, "The Arab Threat: The Israeli Perspective", *National Threat Perceptions in the Middle East*, ed. UN, (Research Paper, United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research 37, United Nations, New York: 1995), p. 9.

15. Jonathan Schanzer, *Hamas vs. Fatah: The Struggle for Palestine*, (St. Martin's Press, New York: 2008), p. 33.

16. Limone, "The Arab Threat: The Israeli Perspective", p. 13.

17. Schanzer, *Hamas vs. Fatah: The Struggle for Palestine*, p. 35.

18. Schanzer, *Hamas vs. Fatah: The Struggle for Palestine*, p. 35.

19. Balpınar, *İsrail Güvenlik Politikasında Süreklilik ve Değişim (1948-2008)*, p. 273.

20. Limone, "The Arab Threat: The Israeli Perspective", pp. 11-14.

21. Bassel F. Salloukh, "The Arab Uprisings and the Geopolitics of the Middle East". *The International Spectator*, Volume: 48, No: 2 (June 2013), p. 35.

support and tries to keep alive Sunni groups like the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), which Israel wants to repress. This outside support makes Iran an unwanted actor in the eyes of Israel.²²

Secondly, the possibility of nuclear power in Iran creates another cause for concern for Israel.²³ Israel perceived the threat by former President of Iran Ahmedinejad to wipe Israel off the map as a sign of Iran's nuclear capacity.²⁴ And, in the face of this threat, Israel developed its own nuclear power. Even though it has not been proven that Iran has nuclear weapons at its disposal, Israel has secured itself by being one of the several countries in the world and the only one in the region with a nuclear capacity. Being comparatively a smaller country in the region with a small population, Israel sees nuclear weapons as a life insurance.²⁵

This security perspective shaped by the threats of an ever-changing conjuncture gave Israel leverage to justify its policies with the start of the global war on terror after 9/11. By likening its struggle against Arafat and Hamas to America's fight against Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda, it tried to sell its harsh policies against Palestine as a stance against terrorism.²⁶ By so doing, Israel chose to establish its own security problem on the basis of American strategic thinking and thus gain support in the international arena.²⁷ During this period, we see the continuation of the blockade of the occupied territories and the imprisonment of Palestinians as part of security

measures. After 2002, suicide attacks were adopted as the primary method against Israel. At that time, Ariel Sharon declared that "Palestinians should be shot... We must cause damage." This clearly lays bare the method and objective of the operations.²⁸

The history of exclusion, migration, and war has deeply shaped the security considerations of both the Jewish society and its statesmen.

Meanwhile, the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the demolition of the Iraqi army eliminated an existential threat to Israel.²⁹ However, after the invasion, the division of Iraq, which was a powerful state in the region, enabled Iran to come to the fore - a regional actor that was already distressing for Israel. With no other country to balance it, with the pacification of Iraq, Iran started to gain strength as an enemy and rival of Israel. An aggressive Iran in pursuit of influence in the region and its use of a belligerent language are sources of threat that Israel utilizes to legitimize its investment in the country's security.³⁰

Apart from terrorism and hostile countries, Israel also uses the argument of lack of democracy to justify its security policies. According to this reasoning, the absence of democratic regimes increases Israel's fragility in the region and poses threats to its security. The autocratic composition of the Arab states and the top-down decision-

22. Schanzer, *Hamas vs. Fatah: The Struggle for Palestine*, p. 34.

23. Limone, "The Arab Threat: The Israeli Perspective", p. 12.

24. Steven R. David, "Existential Threats to Israel: Learning from the Ancient Past", *Israel Affairs*, Volume: 18, No: 4 (October 2012), p. 504.

25. David, "Existential Threats to Israel: Learning from the Ancient Past", p. 515.

26. Cited by Zafer Balpınar, *İsrail Güvenlik Politikasında Süreklilik ve Değişim (1948-2008)*, p. 325; Jimmy Carter, *Palestinian Peace not Apartheid*. (Simon & Schuster, New York: 2006).

27. Balpınar, *İsrail Güvenlik Politikasında Süreklilik ve Değişim (1948-2008)*, p. 325.

28. Balpınar, *İsrail Güvenlik Politikasında Süreklilik ve Değişim (1948-2008)*, pp. 329-330.

29. Oren Barak and Gabriel Sheffer, "Israel's 'Security Network' and Its Impact: An Exploration of a New Approach". *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Volume: 38, No: 2, (2006): p. 252.

30. Salloukh. "The Arab Uprisings and the Geopolitics of the Middle East", p. 35.

making mechanisms are inconsistent with Israel's system.³¹ Israeli leaders have reiterated the necessity of a transition to democracy time and again as the condition of sustaining peace and stability in the Middle East.³² However, Israel came to understand quickly that the democracy claims in the region cannot soothe its security concerns which, in turn, led to the adoption of a cautious attitude towards these movements. In the next section, Israel's calculation of loss of strategic advantages due to regime changes will be evaluated in order to expose the rationale behind Israel's strategic choice to not support the Arab street.

LOSS OF STRATEGIC ADVANTAGES

Elections in Muslim Arab countries are generally rigged and they preserve the autocratic regimes which turn a blind eye on the demands of their own people. However, when these countries were given the chance of free elections, Islamists came into power - as in the case of Tunisia. So, with the increased protests on the Arab streets, Israel realized that it is not worth taking the risk of democracy. When revolutionary fervor spread to Egypt, the Egyptians' call for democracy was not enough to allay Israel's discomfort. Israel's concerns were twofold: The first is the possibility of the rise of anti-Israeli, radical Islamist regimes which will both internally and externally disempower Israel. The second is the possible loss of strategic advantages gained through peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan that had been taken for granted for decades.

Following the fall of Mubarak, alarm bells started to ring for Israel. The radical groups that

were settled in Sinai blew up the pipelines in the region that were supplying gas to Israel.³³ The attacks on Israeli buses on the border and five Egyptian soldiers ending up dead culminated in an attack on the Israeli Embassy in Cairo on September 9, 2011. Employees of the embassy were airlifted to Israel which is perceived as a safe haven in a hostile region.³⁴ Israel then put itself in self-defense mode. The Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) Chief of Staff asked for an increase in the military budget in the face of a "radical Islamic winter."³⁵

Later, Benjamin Ben-Eliezer, a Labor Party member of the Knesset, revealed that he and PM Netanyahu had offered political asylum to Mubarak which he had not accepted. According to Menachem Klein, this indicates "that Israel prefers the old order."³⁶ Whereas the old order and agreements protect Israel, changes and the new political environment seem to pose a serious threat as indicated by the rhetoric of the Muslim Brotherhood, the strongest and the most organized opposition group that challenged the regime in Egypt. Even before coming into power, the leader of the Muslim Brotherhood Mohammed Badie called for the next parliament to reassess the Camp David Accords signed with Israel and to put an end to normalized relations with Israel. Moreover, he pronounced the end of the protection of the Zionists' border and "permanently opening the Rafah crossing point with Gaza."³⁷ Apart from Badie, Rashad al-Bayoumi, another prominent figure of the Muslim Brothers, declared that "after President Mubarak steps down

31. Limone, "The Arab Threat: The Israeli Perspective", p. 11.

32. Peter Seeberg, "Analysing Security Subcomplexes in a Changing Middle East—The Role of Non-Arab State Actors and Non-State Actors", *Palgrave Communications*, Volume: 2, No: 1, (December 2016), p. 4.

33. Rabinovich, *Israel and the Arab Turmoil*, p. 19.

34. Klein, "Is the Arab Spring Israel's Winter?", p. 28.

35. Klein, "Is the Arab Spring Israel's Winter?",

36. Klein, "Is the Arab Spring Israel's Winter?", p. 26.

37. Nicos Panayiotides, "Is the 'Arab Spring' Israel's winter? Strategic Instability in the Middle East", *International Journal on World Peace*, Volume: 29, No: 1, (2012), p. 23.

and a provisional government is formed, there is a need to dissolve the peace treaty with Israel.”³⁸

Israeli officials were even more worried about losing their strategic advantages and an important ally. With the Camp David Accords, Egypt had recognized Israel and relations between the two countries commenced, putting an end to Israel's solitude. The agreement provided Israel leverage it could not afford to lose. The situation in Egypt and the January 2011 uprising in Tahrir Square worried Prime Minister Netanyahu. He pushed the panic button and asked his Western allies to “make it clear to any Egyptian regime that it must abide by the peace agreement (Camp David Accords) with Israel.”³⁹ Regardless of who came into power, he wanted to be on the safe side.

Since the peace agreement had been signed with Egypt, the border had been safe and Israel had felt no need to build a fence to secure the line. However, when the regime lost its full control of the region, the attacks on Israel increased especially from the Sinai Peninsula. Moreover, social problems started to emerge due to the increase in the number of African immigrants in Israel who used it as a passage route when the Egyptian domination over the Sinai decreased.⁴⁰ Israel realized that it was high time they built a fence. The construction of the fence turned Israel and the workers alongside the border into a target for radical groups – a topic that will be covered in the next section.

In June 2012, Morsi became the new president of Egypt. Even though the Israeli authorities were suspicious of the Muslim Brotherhood, they preferred retaining Egypt as “a

diplomatic partner.”⁴¹ The rise to power of the Muslim Brotherhood put a question mark in the minds of Israeli statesmen whether Morsi would stick to the conditions of the agreement which had been criticized by Islamic-oriented groups for a long time. Much to Israel's surprise, Morsi adopted a more pragmatic approach in his treatment towards Israel and did not attempt to tinker the 30-year-old peace treaty. Byman wrote that Israel's fear of the abrogation of the peace treaty was not real as Egypt could not turn down the 1 billion USD it annually receives from Washington.⁴² Even though foreign aid was cut during the time of the democratically elected Morsi government, the military elites never lost their primary role in Egypt and would never agree to the abrogation of the strategic agreement which would end the state of peace between the two countries.⁴³ Egypt had its plate full with its internal affairs and could not focus on an additional external conflict. Rather than trying to change the terms of the treaty or abolishing it entirely, when the tensions increased between Hamas and Israel in November 2012 with the Operation Pillar of Defense, Morsi played a crucial role in procuring a ceasefire.⁴⁴

Nonetheless, the Muslim Brotherhood was sympathetic towards the Palestinians cause. Nabil Elaraby, the post-revolutionary cabinet's foreign minister, declared, “Egyptian national security and Palestinian security are one.”⁴⁵ When he came into power, he opened the Rafah crossing with Gaza without consulting with Is-

38. Daniel Byman, “Israel's Pessimistic View of the Arab Spring”, *The Washington Quarterly*, Volume: 34, No: 3, (2011), p. 125.

39. Panayiotides, “Is the “Arab Spring” Israel's Winter? Strategic Instability in the Middle East”, p. 22.

40. Rabinovich, *Israel and the Arab Turmoil*, p. 20.

41. Jones and Edwards, “Missing the ‘Devils’ We Knew? Israel and Political Islam Amid the Arab Awakening”, p. 409.

42. Byman, “Israel's Pessimistic View of the Arab Spring”, p. 126.

43. Byman, “Israel's Pessimistic View of the Arab Spring”, p. 126.

44. Rabinovich, *Israel and the Arab Turmoil*, p. 21.

45. Levy Elior, “Egypt to Open Rafah Crossing”, Ynetnews, <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4062118,00.html>, (Access date: May 12, 2016).

rael.⁴⁶ Rami Khouri, an analyst at the American University of Beirut, remarked that Egyptians “see themselves as the jailers of Gaza on behalf of Israel and Washington.” Egyptian policy was contributing to the economic isolation of Gaza and worsening the Palestinians’ situation. This anomaly was fixed with the new government giving ear to public sentiment. It was welcomed by Hamas as it facilitated the connection of Gaza with the outside world through Egypt.⁴⁷

According to the Israeli calculations, the rise of Islamists in the Middle East would bring along many problems.

While the regime of the Muslim Brotherhood was received well on the Palestinian side, from the Israeli perspective the way that the process evolved was not that promising. The opening of the Rafah border offered humanitarian relief to the Palestinians, but for Israel the danger was the smuggling of weapons into Gaza.⁴⁸ Israel became anxious that the Arab Spring might become an inspiration for Palestinians to ask for reform which could trigger a third intifada.⁴⁹ Israel’s fears turned out to be right when Mahmood Abbas appealed to the UN in September 2012 for the establishment of a Palestinian state, which according to Israel was inspired by the Arab Spring.⁵⁰

When Morsi was toppled by the military in Egypt, Israel was careful not to show any signs of delight. Seeing that regional changes are not absolute in the long run, Israel preferred to remain distant.⁵¹ However, it is certain that the military intervention of Sisi took down what from the Israeli perspective seemed to be a radical Islamic government and brought a regime that is hostile to the Brotherhood and determined to have full control of the Sinai. This development set Israel’s mind at rest.⁵² Moreover, making deals with General Sisi was much easier as he stuck to the terms of the peace treaty and kept relations intact with Israel at all times through military channels.⁵³ With Sisi coming to power, closing the tunnels, and working for curtailing the smuggling industry that armed Hamas in Gaza Israel was relieved. Hamas lost the advantage it had gained with the Muslim Brothers, a development that was received very well by the Israeli camp.⁵⁴ The Rafah border crossing was closed when Sisi toppled the Morsi government, helping Israel to restrict the flow of goods and people in and out of Gaza.⁵⁵ However, Israel was also well aware of the danger of Hamas becoming more radicalized by the fall of the Morsi regime in Egypt and the failure of the opposition in Syria which the Gaza leaders had sided with.⁵⁶

The signing of a unity agreement between Hamas and Fatah in 2014 was perturbing for Is-

46. “Egypt and Hamas Reopen Rafah Crossing With Gaza”, Haaretz, <http://www.haaretz.com/israelnews/egypt-and-hamas-reopen-rafah-crossing-with-gaza-1.366617>, (Access date: March 29, 2018).

47. Rabinovich, *Israel and the Arab Turmoil*, p. 38.

48. Jones and Edwards, “Missing the ‘Devils’ We Knew? Israel and Political Islam Amid the Arab Awakening”, p. 400.

49. Rabinovich, *Israel and the Arab Turmoil*, p. 36.

50. Panayiotides, “Is the ‘Arab Spring’ Israel’s Winter? Strategic Instability in the Middle East”, p. 27.

51. Magen, “Comparative Assessment of Israel’s Foreign Policy Response to the ‘Arab Spring’”, p. 127.

52. Magen, “Comparative Assessment of Israel’s Foreign Policy Response to the ‘Arab Spring’”, p. 123.

53. Rabinovich, *Israel and the Arab Turmoil*, p. 22.

54. Jones and Edwards, “Missing the ‘Devils’ We Knew? Israel and Political Islam Amid the Arab Awakening”, p. 400; Rabinovich, *Israel and the Arab Turmoil*, p. 22.

55. Byman, , “Israel’s Pessimistic View of the Arab Spring”, p. 130.

56. William Booth and Griff Witte, “Thousands of Gazans Flee Homes as Israel Promises to Press the Fight”, *The Washington Post*, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/thousands-of-gazans-flee-homes-as-israel-promises-to-press-the-fight/2014/07/13/d37eed04-0ac6-11e4-b8e5-d0de80767fc2_story.html, (Access date: March 29, 2018).

rael as it saw the unification of its two enemies. Israel's fear that Egypt might set an example for the rest of the Arab world has come true. The reconciliation was brokered by Nabil Elaraby, the foreign minister of the post-Mubarak government.⁵⁷ To turn the tables, Netanyahu urged Abbas to reach a peace agreement with Israel rather than with Hamas⁵⁸ and invited him to cancel the unity pact.⁴⁰ On the other hand, for Abbas a pact with Hamas did not preclude peace talks with Israel, and he laid bare that his goal was the establishment of an independent state peacefully existing alongside Israel.⁵⁹ Upon these developments, Israel threatened to suspend the peace talks.⁶⁰ These bold attempts by the two Palestinian organizations were enabled and boosted by the chaotic environment created by the Arab uprisings.

Apart from the strategic advantages of retaining good relations with its longtime ally Egypt, which also restricted Palestinian action against Israel, Israel also benefited from the 1994 Israel-Jordan peace treaty.⁶¹ With the signing of the treaty, the diplomatic relations between the two states started alleviating Israel's isolation. Hence, when the riots spread from one Arab country to another, any possibility of a change of regime in Jordan intimidated its western neighbor.⁶² In the agreement, the two sides had agreed not to allow hostile propaganda against each other. The agreement provided economic profits

to the two small states of the Levant by establishing a free trade zone and the mutual opening of air travel and seaports. Moreover, it granted tourist visas, increasing the mobility of people between the two states. After the Arab rebellions, Israel facilitated the transfer of Jordanian exports through Israeli ports.⁴⁵ By doing so, it tried to ease the tensions on the Jordanian economy and compensate for the burden on its economy caused by the inflow of Syrian refugees.⁶³ Magen summarizes the importance of the agreement for Israel as follows:

As a small, consumer-driven, export- and investment- dependent economy, Israel is highly vulnerable to economic disruption stemming from internal, Palestinian or cross-border attacks. The national economy sustained severe losses during the 2001–2004 Intifada and, to a lesser but still significant extent, the 2006 Lebanon War and two major rounds of confrontation with HAMAS and PIJ in 2010 and 2012. Israeli leaders have therefore become highly sensitive to the need to safeguard economic normalcy in order to preserve consumption, trade, foreign investment and tourism.⁶⁴

Other than the economic advantages, the agreement also provided security and defense for both sides. Furthermore, the increased volume of trade and income generates a budget for the security expenses of both Israel and Jordan.

Israel and Jordan cooperated against terrorism which prevented Jordan from having relations with organizations like Hamas that are accepted as terrorist by Israel. The regime in Jordan had long been keeping foreign fighters and weapons at bay, preventing smuggling and border attacks. Equally important, Jordan is a buffer

57. Jeffrey Fleishman, "Egypt's New Foreign Policy Tests Old Alliances", *Latimes*, <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/may/08/world/la-fg-egypt-diplomacy-20110508>, (Access date: May 16, 2016).

58. Byman, "Israel's Pessimistic View of the Arab Spring", p. 128.

59. Ian Black and Peter Beaumont, "Israel Suspends Peace Talks with Palestinians after Fatah-Hamas Deal", *The Guardian*, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/apr/24/middle-east-israel-halts-peace-talks-palestinians>, (Access date: May 19, 2016)

60. Black and Beaumont, "Israel Suspends Peace Talks with Palestinians after Fatah-Hamas Deal".

61. "Treaty of Peace Between Jordan and Israel", The Library, <http://www.kinghusein.gov.jo/peacetreaty.html>, (Access date: May 22, 2016).

62. Oded Eran, "The End of Jordan as We Know It?", *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs*, Volume: 6, No: 3, (2012), pp. 15-20.

63. Magen, "Comparative Assessment of Israel's Foreign Policy Response to the 'Arab Spring'", p. 127.

64. Magen, "Comparative Assessment of Israel's Foreign Policy Response to the 'Arab Spring'", p. 128.

zone protecting Israel from the turmoil in Iraq.⁶⁵ Furthermore, in the agreement, Jordan was given a special status to administer the shrines in and around Jerusalem which left the city open to Israeli-Jordanian negotiations.⁶⁶ Rather than being challenged by any other state which would corner Israel over Jerusalem, Israel, of course, prefers a Jordan which cannot do so due to its own national interests and strategic advantages gained through the peace agreement. However, in the heydays of revolution, even King Abdullah called upon Israel to revive the peace process with the Palestinians.⁶⁷ A rather undesired scene for Israel would be if Jordan too were swept away by the tide of the Arab Spring.

Börzel et al. claim that Israel's attitude towards the Arab rebellions is justifiable. They claim, "Israel's collective self-understanding as a 'security state' which is surrounded mostly by enemies or by countries with which it holds a 'cold peace' (Egypt, Jordan), provides a strong explanation for its rather consistent prioritization of security over any other goal in its response to the Arabellions."⁶⁸ Its policy is consistent with realist foreign policy. Moreover, the reality of coalition governments in Israel and its internal political instability makes the non-engagement policy understandable.⁶⁹ While there are issues to deal with at the domestic level, Israel could have never taken the initiative to bring about a regime change in the region especially when it

runs counter to its own interests. Hence, it opts for giving precedence to its national security.

POWER VACUUM: RISE OF RADICAL GROUPS

The Sinai Peninsula lies in the east of Egypt and west of Israel and Gaza. Its population is predominantly composed of Bedouins and this tribal identity characteristically separates it from the inhabitants of mainland Egypt.⁷⁰ Sinai has a rocky and mountainous terrain, which is known to the local population but hard to control for the security forces. Being an ideal place to hide arms, when the state security networks broke down with the Arab rebellions, a great amount of sophisticated weaponry and arms were smuggled into the Sinai.⁷¹ And in 2011, when the police stations in Sinai fell, Bedouin militias plundered the weapons kept there, giving strength to the radical groups.

During the time of Mubarak, the social and economic development of the Sinai was ignored. When the Muslim Brotherhood first came to power, their agenda was to strengthen their power within the mainland, so they also neglected the Sinai. This prepared the ground for the activities of radical groups there.⁷² There were also threats from global radical groups that if Morsi acted against their affiliates in Sinai, they would attack Egypt's strategic and touristic sites. In August 2013, Shin Bet (Israel General Security Services) claimed that the radical operatives in

65. Magen, "Comparative Assessment of Israel's Foreign Policy Response to the 'Arab Spring'", p. 123.

66. For details see the agreement <http://www.kinghussein.gov.jo/peace-treaty.html>.

67. Jones and Edwards, "Missing the 'Devils' We Knew? Israel and Political Islam Amid the Arab Awakening", p. 408.

68. Tanja A. Börzel, Assem Dandashly and Thomas Risse, "Responses to the 'Arabellions': The EU in Comparative Perspective — Introduction", *Journal of European Integration*, Volume: 37, No: 1, (2015), p. 146.

69. Magen, "Comparative Assessment of Israel's Foreign Policy Response to the 'Arab Spring'", p. 128.

70. Yehudit Ronen, "The Effects of the 'Arab Spring' on Israel's Geostrategic and Security Environment: The Escalating Jihadist Terror in the Sinai Peninsula", *Israel Affairs*, Volume: 20, No: 3, (2014), p. 303.

71. Ronen, "The Effects of the 'Arab Spring' on Israel's Geostrategic and Security Environment: The Escalating Jihadist Terror in the Sinai Peninsula", p. 305.

72. Ronen, "The Effects of the 'Arab Spring' on Israel's Geostrategic and Security Environment: The Escalating Jihadist Terror in the Sinai Peninsula", p. 313.

the Sinai had increased dramatically (according to their estimation from a few hundred to a few thousand).⁷³ There are four groups out of some 15 radical groups located in the Sinai which are active against Israel.⁷⁴ The radical groups that were empowered in the context of Arab Spring increased the threats to Israel's security.

Before joining DAESH, Ansar Beit al-Maqdis was one of those groups composed in the majority by Bedouins living in the Sinai. Its rocket attack on Eilat in November 2011 was followed by another attack on a highway close to Eilat killing eight Israelis. They carried out another attack in September 2012 on the IDF and killed an Israeli soldier. They blew up Egypt's gas pipeline "to prevent the exploitation and depletion of the resources belonging to the Muslim nation by the enemies of Islam." The group's attacks were also related to the Bedouin resentment at their dire economic situation in contrast to Israel's wealth that increases at the expense of Egypt due to the cheap supply of gas.⁷⁵

Many other radical groups with connections to global radical elements carried out attacks on the construction of the separation fence, on the pipelines supplying natural gas to Israel, and disrupted shipping in the Suez Canal. They abducted Israeli and Egyptian soldiers who they see as complicit. With the opening of the Rafah border point during the Morsi government, the Palestinians' inflow into Sinai increased. This was evaluated by Israel as part of the plan to turn

the Sinai into a state for Palestinians.⁷⁶ Ronen mentions how Sinai was turned into an exercise zone by Hamas:

Aware that Israel was prohibited from taking any military action in Sinai, on the one hand, and of the weakness of the Egyptian military–security control of the peninsula, on the other, Hamas turned the area's huge desert expanses, with its numerous slopes and escarpments hidden from Egyptian and Israeli security eyes, into a logistical, strategic and military hinterland serving as a site for arms smuggling and storage and even military exercises.⁷⁷

Hence, the activities in Gaza, which were deeply connected to Sinai even before the increase of radical groups in the peninsula, became even more intertwined with the activities in Sinai because of the declined control and authority of the central government.

When Sisi seized power, he fought off the radical groups in Sinai which were threatening the security of Egypt and Israel.⁷⁸ Although Israel had done everything in its power to retain the 1979 peace treaty, when Sisi came into power the two states tinkered the agreement. Through the Agreed Activities Mechanism the restricted number of Egyptian forces and weapons in Sinai were increased to thousands of forces in order to fight off the common security threat there.⁷⁹ An unannounced version of the treaty is in function and the arrangements

73. Barak Ravid, "Shin Bet Forms New Unit to Thwart Attacks on Israel by Sinai Jihadists", Haaretz, <https://www.haaretz.com/.premium-israel-forms-unit-to-foil-sinai-attacks-1.5322960>, (Access date: March 27, 2016).

74. Ravid, "Shin Bet Forms New Unit to Thwart Attacks on Israel by Sinai Jihadists"

75. Ronen, "The Effects of the 'Arab Spring' on Israel's Geostategic and Security Environment: The Escalating Jihadist Terror in the Sinai Peninsula", p. 307.

76. "The Effects of the 'Arab Spring' on Israel's Geostategic and Security Environment: The Escalating Jihadist Terror in the Sinai Peninsula", p. 309.

77. "The Effects of the 'Arab Spring' on Israel's Geostategic and Security Environment: The Escalating Jihadist Terror in the Sinai Peninsula", p. 305.

78. Rabinovich, *Israel and the Arab Turmoil*, p. 22.

79. "After 35 Years, Israel-Egypt Treaty Marks Key Benchmark for Middle East Peace", AIPAC, <https://www.aipac.org/-/media/Publications/Policy%20and%20Politics/AIPAC%20Analyses/Issue%20Memos/2014/AIPAC%20Memo%20-%2035th%20Anniversary%20Israel-Egypt%20Peace%20Treaty.pdf>, (Access date: June 30, 2016).

are being renewed monthly.⁸⁰ Ehud Yaari, one of Israel's leading commentators on Arab affairs, says that "by sidestepping calls in Egypt for formal revision of the Military Annex, the parties avoid the risk involved in opening the treaty to a review process that could spur a multitude of politicians to tear it apart."⁸¹ The coordination and exchange of information between Israel and Egypt are at their peak, as they are dealing with the same problem that emerged within the jumbled environment of the Egyptian Arab uprisings.

Clearly, the global jihadist pressure on Israel's southern and northern borders has gained momentum, flourishing in the anarchies that spawned them – although each for its own reasons and in different circumstances. These developments involve not only ideological – religious changes but also strategic, military and security transformations that have far-reaching political and socioeconomic significance.⁸²

Those strategic, military and security transformations showed themselves in the increased securitization of both Israel and Egypt. The flexibility brought to Egyptian forces in terms of their activity in the Sinai has boosted the effectiveness of Egypt's military.⁸³ The short interim regime of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt changed the security understanding of Israel in relation to Egypt which took its "regular" course with the military regime in Egypt.

80. Ehud Yaari, "The New Triangle of Egypt, Israel, and Hamas", The Washington Institute, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-new-triangle-of-egypt-israel-and-hamas>, (Access date: February 28, 2016)

81. Yaari, "The New Triangle of Egypt, Israel, and Hamas"

82. Ronen, "The Effects of the 'Arab Spring' on Israel's Geostrategic and Security Environment: The Escalating Jihadist Terror in the Sinai Peninsula", p. 312.

83. Ronen, "The Effects of the 'Arab Spring' on Israel's Geostrategic and Security Environment: The Escalating Jihadist Terror in the Sinai Peninsula", p. 313.

SHI'A CRESCENT

The Arab uprisings created a shaky political and social environment by weakening the Sunni Arab countries at the beginning. In return, they gave Iran and its allies an upper hand in the regional sectarian balance. This would directly affect the threat to Israel as Iran is perceived as its biggest enemy.⁸⁴ The support of Iran, a decidedly anti-Israel regime at the discursive level, for Hamas and Hezbollah increases the threat perception of Israel. Starting in March 2011, Israel also focused on Syria because the impact of a Syrian uprising would be felt in Lebanon and Jordan, both of which are Israel's neighbors.⁸⁵ As of today Israel's calculations turned out to be right: the war in Syria more than any development in any country has changed the entire dynamic of the region.

When a Sunni opposition in Syria challenged the Assad regime, Iran did not want to lose its strategic partner to Sunnis and, therefore, did everything in its power to ensure the survival of its ally. The historic relations between the two countries goes back to the time of the Iranian Revolution and are summarized by Panayiotides as such:

After the overthrow of the Pahlavi dynasty in Iran, Damascus and Tehran formed an alliance because they faced common threats: Iraq was a revisionist state in the Gulf, and Syria provided valuable diplomatic and military aid to Iran during its bloody war with Iraq. At the same time, Iran supported Syria in Lebanon by mobilizing the Lebanese Shiites to drive Israel out of the country.⁸⁶

84. Magen, "Comparative Assessment of Israel's Foreign Policy Response to the 'Arab Spring'", p. 120.

85. Börzel et al., "Responses to the 'Arabellions': The EU in Comparative Perspective", p. 141.

86. Panayiotides, "Is the 'Arab Spring' Israel's Winter? Strategic Instability in the Middle East", p. 32.

In order to keep its strategic partner alive, Iran sent military advisors, money, and supplies to the Syrian regime from the start of the civil war - the fall of the Assad regime would also mean the weakening of Hezbollah in Lebanon, which would be a loss for Iran.⁸⁷ The Syrian case is like a two-edged sword: One edge is the fall of Assad which means a loss of an ally for Iran, cutting its supply network to Hezbollah in Lebanon. However, after Assad, there might emerge a Sunni regime which is hostile to Israel which would be a game changer. The other edge is Assad staying in power, however, weakening even more during the civil war which would lessen the central authority over Syrian territories creating a fertile ground for non-state radical groups. Meanwhile, Magen also argues that a militarily preoccupied Assad regime better serves Israeli interests.⁸⁸

So, for Israel, it is not about the Assad regime but the implications for Israel if he stays or goes. As mentioned earlier, Iran does not pose a direct threat to the security of Israel. The threat it poses is either through its support for certain Sunni groups in Palestine or through its support for other Shia groups in the Middle East which creates according to the West a “Shia Crescent” and according to Iran an “Axis of Resistance” stretching from Iran to the Mediterranean. A stronger Iran is hence worrisome for Israel. Besides, as mentioned in detail in the analysis, Israel has been on better terms with Sunni Arab states in the region. While its relations with them are back on track after being tested with the uprisings, Israel can never be sure about what Iran is going to do in the future. The lack of any peace agreement between the two countries, Iran’s ambitious foreign policy, and its aspiration to become a regional power along with its nuclear agenda contribute to this distrust.

87. Rabinovich, *Israel and the Arab Turmoil*, pp. 23-24.

88. Magen, “Comparative Assessment of Israel’s Foreign Policy Response to the ‘Arab Spring’”, p. 120.

CONCLUSION

This analysis started with an overview of Israel’s conventional security understanding deriving from its history and the regional conjuncture. It outlined the position of Israel in the Middle East and the factors that threaten Israel’s security. Traditionally, the Arab countries, Palestinians, radical groups, and Iran have always been seen as security threats by Israel. Hence, Israel tries its best to contain them by signing agreements, strengthening its own military, and adopting harsher security measures which will prevent any possible threat before it becomes impossible to restrain.

Israel approached the Arab uprisings with caution and pursued a wait-and-see policy.

Previously, Israel was using the lack of democracy in the region as an excuse for the lack of peace. However, the fact is that Israel had forged very good relations with two of its neighbors when they were ruled by dictators. This fact determined Israel’s approach to the Arab uprisings. Two decades ago the rhetoric of Prime Minister Netanyahu reflected something totally different than the policy adopted by Israel in the face of the wave of democratization that started in 2011. Seeing that the authoritarian Arab regimes will serve Israel’s interests better than the democratically elected governments, in the long run, Israel opted for old regimes instead of encouraging the democratization movements. The short-lived revolutionary government in Egypt convinced Israel even more of the necessity of the status quo.

The majority of Israeli statesmen did not believe in the opportunity of democratization for the Middle East. Even if they did, they feared

what might emerge as a result of the radical political transformation which would probably bring to power Islamic groups that are not fond of Israel. According to Israel's calculations, such a change and the power vacuum that would come along with it would also strengthen Iran, Israel's eternal enemy, and the radical groups in Sinai that pose a threat to Israel. All these predictions turned out to be true. In such an environment, Israel as a state that had secured itself through the peace agreements it had signed with Egypt and Jordan, adopted the most realist approach.

Israel carefully monitored the events, retained its diplomatic relations even with the Muslim Brothers in Egypt, and preferred non-involvement. All in all, Israel did not promote the democratization movements but opted for security over democracy – this better serves Is-

raeli national interests even when it meant siding with a military regime. Israel did so by securing its longtime allies, and ensuring that those in power abide by the rules of the decades-long peace agreements. Israel also wanted to be on the safe side by offering political asylum to its longtime ally Mubarak, who provided Israel cross-border security and in this way greatly contributed to its internal security through Egypt's control over Rafah and Sinai. Even though Israel prior to the uprisings claimed that its security is also dependent on the democratic transformation of the region, in a short while it saw that in practice this is not the case. Ever since the uprisings, Israel's attitude has proven that the region's autocratic regimes are less disturbing for Israel and more reassuring for its security. The realization has resulted in Israel's preference and when possible support of the status quo.

ISRAEL'S CHANGING SECURITY UNDERSTANDING BEFORE AND AFTER THE ARAB UPRISINGS

AYŞE İ. A. ÖZER

SETA | ANALYSIS

This analysis is about the change in Israel's security understanding. Israel is a country located in the Middle East surrounded by Arab regimes which were historically hostile to its very existence in the region. The unification of the Arab countries against Israel and the lack of an ally in the region created a constant fear in Israel. When it started having better relations with Egypt, Jordan, and Turkey, Israel ended its isolation and found partners in its immediate geography. Even when relations between Turkey and Israel took a turn for the worse, Israel continued to have Egypt and Jordan on its side.

However, with the Arab uprisings, Israel started to fear that it could lose its allies. The regime changes that were likely to take place in the region were alarming for Israel as it got along well with the existing regimes. Furthermore, it was unlikely that the incoming governments would abide by the peace agreements signed by the previous governments and Israel; these agreements helped Israel contain the Palestinian population and live relatively comfortably without any challenges from its two closest neighbors. Therefore, Israel started to see the Arab uprisings and potential regime changes as a security threat.

This analysis will offer an overview of Israel's historical threat perception and how it has changed since the inception of the Arab uprisings in 2010. Then, it will examine the kind of precautions Israel took in the face of increased threat perceptions by looking at the policies it adopted.

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