



The “Arab Spring” and Israel's Pending Threats

The consequences of the so called “Arab Spring,” which has begun in January 2011 in Northern Africa (Maghreb), reached some countries of the Persian Gulf before sending waves to Jordan and setting Syria on fire, are now in focus by politicians and military leaders in Tel Aviv alike. The primary source of Israeli concern is how the post-Mubarak Egypt will politically evolve. The demise of Mubarak, who was described as the modern day Egyptian “Pharaoh,” calls into question a number of issues of vital importance to the Jewish State. First and foremost is the fate of the 1979 Israeli-Egyptian Peace Treaty, which for over thirty years has ensured a delicate but remarkably lasting detente and peace on Israel's southern border. Another immediate concern is the possible increase of influence of the Muslim Brotherhood within the budding Egyptian government in the post revolutionary period. Such a worst-case outcome would have serious ramifications for Israel across the whole region, particularly in the Gaza Strip and nearby Jordan.

In the current issue of the Pulaski Policy Papers Richard Rousseau, Assistant Professor at the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy in Baku, tries to depict the new security concerns for Israel. “Although Israel is preparing to face a series of destabilizing uncertainties in the region, no evidence exist to suggest that conventional military action is anywhere on the horizon, at least in the short term. Tel Aviv continues to face threats from Gaza and the West Bank, and waits to see how future scenarios would unfold on the regional and international level.”

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The Casimir Pulaski Foundation is an independent, non-partisan think tank with a mission to promote freedom, equality and democracy, as well as to support actions of strengthening civil society. The foundation carries out such activities as conducting scientific research, preparing publications and analyses, organizing seminars and conferences, providing education and support for leaders in Poland and abroad. The Casimir Pulaski Foundation is one of only two Polish institutions that have a partnership status with the Council of Europe and is a member of the Group Abroad – an umbrella organization of top 40 Polish NGOs working outside of Poland.

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Tel Aviv is also closely watching developments in Syria, particularly whether or not President Assad has the ability to put down the on-going popular uprising against the regime. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu seems fixated on preventing the subversion of the Assad Alawi dynasty. The presence of Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party in power since 1963 in Damascus has always created a high level of tension on Israel's northern flank. Within the political climate of “no peace and no war”, which has endured between the two neighbors since 1982, a degree of stability has been created in an area that remains a hot bed for Hezbollah, the highly organized militant Shiite movement that is backed by Iran.

The changes taking place on the Middle East chessboard are making Israel less open to working towards any kind of lasting settlement with the Palestinians. Despite the recent unity agreement between Hamas and Fatah, Gaza and the West Bank have already proved sensitive to the events of the “Arab Spring.” Accordingly, a new round of open hostilities between Israel and the occupied territories should not be ruled out in the nearest future.

The “Post-Mubarak” Egypt: A Great Unknown

When Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin and Egyptian President Anwar El Sadat signed the Camp David Accords in 1978, which stipulated the return of the strategic Sinai to Egypt and sanctioned Israel's right to exist, it was the dawn of a new era in Israel-Arab world relations.

The normalization of relations with its massive southern neighbor translated into benefits for Tel Aviv that went well beyond those enshrined in the peace treaty. Egypt soon became a leading economic and energy partner for Israel and proved to be an indispensable ally in its foreign policy. Along with Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, Egypt served as one of the key pillars of the Sunni bloc that Israel and the United States relied on in their policy directed at deterring Iran. Moreover, Egypt contributed substantially to containing the threat of Hamas through the closure of border crossings with the Gaza Strip, thus denying the group a decisive state sponsor and market from which to secure a steady supply of arms. In addition, the authoritarian grip of Mubarak, who ruled between 1981 and 2011, helped keep in check a cohort of Islamist and nationalists groups (including radical splinter groups), most notably the Muslim Brotherhood.

Egypt, along with Jordan, has thus far proved to be an essential cornerstone of Israeli policy, specifically in terms of its own national security. Thus, concerns voiced by the

Netanyahu regime over the ongoing transition in Cairo should not be underestimated. While the situation remains uncertain, and multiple scenarios can play out, there are two issues that must be considered. The first is the inevitable increase in human and material resources that Israel will have to devote to its southern border. Although the Egyptian army, which is currently, some say, serving as a military junta entrusted with the delicate task of facilitating a democratic transition of power, has declared its intention to honor the peace agreements, this guarantee should not be taken for granted in the long term. The military apparatus, as well as the Egyptian society, is far from a monolithic block. Nationalist and/or Islamist pressures may influence officers and young conscripts, thereby threatening the successful implementation of the Camp David Accords.

Second, regardless of whether the Peace Accords are continued, an attack by Egyptian armed forces through the Sinai is unlikely, at least in the short term. Two factors – one strategic, the other geographical – should dissuade the Egyptians from working in the direction of such a scheme. The second is that the Sinai desert serves as a demilitarized buffer zone on Israel's eastern flank (Egyptian ground forces would have to travel about 320 kilometers before reaching the Israeli-Egyptian border), which makes it impractical for Egyptian forces to stage any military offensive, even with modern, well-organized armored units. Moreover, Cairo's almost complete dependence on the United States for military assistance reduces the risks of confrontations. Although Obama has declared the U.S. as a "friend of the Egyptian people," the willingness of Washington to fund the army of a future Egyptian government bent on demonizing Israel and, consequently, destabilizing the region seems highly improbable.

Rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt: Impact in Gaza and in Jordan

Anxiety within the Israeli government – and society – comes from the possibility of a take over of the Egyptian state by an Islamic organization. This concern is multidirectional, as the worry is aimed at the Egyptian front, as well as Palestinian and Jordanian frontiers.

Israel's fear of the Muslim Brotherhood, especially of its strong and deep link with Hamas, is easily understandable, if one pay heed to the Egyptian public opinion. In Egypt, not only Islamist and nationalist political parties support the Palestinian cause, but also the vast majority of the Egyptian population. In a poll conducted five years ago by the Egyptian government (that is, 27 years after the signing of the Peace Treaty), just over nine out of ten (92%) of those surveyed still viewed Israel as an enemy and the Peace Treaty a betrayal of the Palestinian people.

If the current transition leads to an Egyptian government that really permits popular expression in the framework of a transparent election, a right enjoyed in all democracies worthy of the name, Hamas' power will be strengthened, even more so with the May 28 opening of the Rafah border crossing by Egypt in a bid to ease the tight blockage imposed by Israel on the Gaza Strip in 2007. This decision will result in a significant improvement of living conditions of Palestinians living in Gaza and give Hamas more room to maneuver. The latter will be able to regain public support in the Gaza Strip. It will also, potentially, open the way for an uncontrolled influx of weapons and war materials into the Gaza Strip, boosting the already strong military capabilities of paramilitary groups on that territory as well as in Egypt. These cumulative effects will be much to the detriment of the already precarious Israeli security situation on its southern flank.

Tel Aviv's concerns do not end at the Mediterranean shore, but far beyond the Dead Sea, to the east, where the historical relationship between the Jordanian regime and the Muslim Brotherhood could lead to profound instability as well. Although there is a historically solid link between Israel and Jordan, serious points of friction still exist between the two countries. Some type of wrangling between Tel-Aviv and Amman would suffice to

deteriorate the stable but vulnerable situation. The Muslim Brotherhood has never hidden its disapproval of Jordan's opening up to the West, initiated under Abdullah II, nor its boisterous opposition to the normalization of relations with Israel at the expense of the Palestinian cause. The April 4, 2011, planned attack on the Amman headquarters of the Islamic Action Front (IAF), the political arm of the powerful Muslim Brotherhood, and the popular demonstrations in recent months are testament to an increase in existing tensions.

Tensions could rise under the influence of a long wave of unrest in the region. The IAF took to the streets across Jordan for the first three months of the year, pressing demands for change. Tensions could rise under the influence of a long wave of unrest in the region. The possible instability spanning the region from Amman to Tel-Aviv would create three major hazards for the state of Israel: 1) the loss of another bastion of its national security on the western border; 2) an extension of the "Hostile Crescent" (Syria, Iraq, Iran) with the inclusion of Jordan in this group of states; 3) a push toward even more radical positions among the population living in and around the West Bank.

Syria's Bashar al-Assad in the Balance

Although Damascus has always claimed an ingrained anti-Zionist tilt, Prime Minister Netanyahu strongly hopes to maintain the regime of Bashar al-Assad, if at all possible. Since the Ba'ath Party's seized power in 1963, as a result of a military coup, three wars have been fought against Israel (1967 Six Day War, 1973 Yom Kippur War and 1982 Lebanon War), interspersed with a host of crises of all sorts. Nevertheless, there are numerous motives for Israel and the Netanyahu government to maintain the status quo in its relations with Syria. Two potent motives stand out, though.

First, hamstrung politically under growing domestic criticism, Netanyahu may chose to cling to his policy of "no war, no peace" with Syria in order to duck exacerbating regional instability. Since 1982, when Israel and Syria signed a ceasefire in the aftermath of deadly clashes in the Bekaa Valley, during Operation Peace for Galilee, Syria has been effective over a period of more than twenty five years in avoiding direct confrontation with its southern neighbor. Because of its modest conventional military force, Syria has long preferred to maintain an indirect approach with Israel and work by more covert methods through third party operations. It has armed the "Party of God" (Hezbollah) in Lebanon and continues to fortify its cozy relationship with Ahmadinejad's Iran.

Second, since 2008, Damascus seems to have abandoned some aspects of its isolationism foreign policy stance, and has worked towards opening up to the West, albeit in small steps. The Assad Alawi dynasty has significantly accelerated efforts to improve relations with the international community, both economically and politically. The reopening of diplomatic relations with the United States, broken off in 2005, has been made possible with the appointment of Robert Ford as U.S. Ambassador to Damascus this last February.

Israel has benefited, in the short term, from this westward turn in Syria's external relations. Syrian participation in the Middle East Peace Conference at Annapolis, Maryland in November 2007 launched the opening of indirect peace talks between Damascus and Tel-Aviv with Turkish mediation. The scandals that marred Ehud Olmert government's image in May 2008 forced him from power three months later and threw Israel's fractious political system into turmoil. This turn in Israeli politics has stalled these indirect peace talks with Syria and they are since then in a state of diplomatic stagnation.

Despite the fact that an Israeli-Syrian peace deal is still far from becoming a reality, the overthrow of the Assad regime would, in all likelihood, not prove beneficial to many key stakeholders, and would greatly hamper the minimal gains achieved through the small step approach. In these circumstances, Netanyahu certainly prefers dealing with an old and

familiar enemy, however bitter and aggressive, rather than covertly aiming at "regime change" in Damascus that may result in the prospect of a quite uncertain geopolitical outcome.

Conclusions

The on-going transition in the Middle East has unquestionably many more twists and turns in store for Israel and other important political players. The uncertainty that dominates any future relations with Egypt, the unresolved issues with Erdogan's Turkey (following the deadly episode over the Gaza Freedom Flotilla), the ongoing upheaval in Syria, and to a lesser extent in Jordan, the persistent instability in Lebanon, and, additionally, the escalation of tensions with Hamas in the past three months are all factors that come together and contribute to the growing restlessness within the Israeli political class.

Although Israel is preparing to face a series of destabilizing uncertainties in the region, no evidence exist to suggest that conventional military action is anywhere on the horizon, at least in the short term. Tel Aviv continues to face threats from Gaza and the West Bank, and waits to see how future scenarios would unfold on the regional and international level.

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is an independent think tank which specializes in foreign policy, with a mission to promote freedom, equality and democracy, as well as to support actions of strengthening civil society. The foundation carries out activities both in Poland and abroad, among others in Central and Eastern Europe and in North America.

The Casimir Pulaski Foundation was founded due to political changes that took place in Poland after 1989. The principal values of Casimir Pulaski (freedom, justice and democracy) are an inspiration for every initiative undertaken by the Foundation. A few of the Foundations activities include: conducting scientific research, preparing publications and analyses, organizing seminars and conferences, providing education and support for leaders (www.instytutprzywodztwa.pl).

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