

Uncertain Realities: The Geopolitical Landscape

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The shockwaves that have rocked the Arab world over the past two years – compounded by the Iranian threat and turbulence in the international system – pose significant risks and challenges for Israel and the Jewish people. The uncertainty that traditionally characterizes the Middle East is exacerbated by the current anxiety and crisis atmosphere permeating the entire geopolitical arena. The number, diversity, and dynamic complexity of "moving parts" within the international system make orchestrating a sound foreign policy difficult.

The dramatic upheavals in the Arab world that have, so far, led to the overthrow of rulers in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, also threaten the stability of other regimes. The dust has not yet settled and any attempt to draw fast conclusions about the "new face" of the region would be presumptuous. Even the term "Arab Spring" used internationally to label the tumultuous and still un-folding events is more wishful thinking than an accurate portrayal of their possible consequences.

In such a volatile reality, being indecisive is as much a decision as any other and, therefore, decision makers in Israel and the Diaspora are not exempted from making difficult choices. Proactive decision-making is imperative in light of geopolitical developments in the following four complexes:

The Global Complex: The prevailing "world order" during the Cold War and the "American moment" that followed the Soviet Union's collapse have been supplanted by a "world dis-order" that has yet to coalesce into a stable and

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functioning system. Even though the United States is still the dominant force in the global arena, whose friendship and assistance are so critical to Israel and which is home to an exceptionally thriving nearly half of the Jewish people, it continues to face a steady diminution of power and international standing. The global economic crisis continues. Globalization creates mutual dependence and influence, not only in prosperous times but also in times of crisis, and has starkly revealed the serious failings of international institutions charged with maintaining global order. The European crisis, which has spiraled into a series of national crises and a collective EU identity crisis over the past year, has exposed a reality thrown out of balance by expecting a single currency to work across a continent that lacks fiscal or political uniformity. The gradual shift of the global economic center of gravity from West to East presents Israel and the Jewish people with a challenge: How to strengthen ties with peoples who have developmental momentum but lack – for better or worse – any real familiarity with the Jewish people, and to do so without damaging the essential anchor that relations with the United States represent.

The Middle-East Complex: Anchors that have long provided relative strategic stability in the region are tottering, and chances are slim that stabilization and a resulting semblance of calm will take hold anytime soon: President Mubarak's ouster placed a question mark on the future of the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty; uncertainty regarding Assad's regime and the future of Syria grows; the unrest in Jordan, with which peaceful relations is a strategic mooring for Israel; the ongoing crisis in Israel-Turkey relations; and – above all – the dramatic victories of political Islam. All this at a time when Iran continues to make progress in its quest for a nuclear weapon, a difficult challenge for both Israel and the United States that carries the dilemma of whether to take preemptive military action, and when.

The Israel-Palestinian Conflict Complex: The stalemate continues to pose a threat to Israel's security and (over time) its Jewish-democratic character, which in turn provides fuel to de-legitimization efforts against it in the international arena. The continued failure of the "direct talks with American mediation" model has encouraged the Palestinians to mount a unilateral initiative in the United Nations, and to prefer an alternative track—an enforced solution under UN diktat.

The Triangular Relationship of Jerusalem-Washington-American Jewry Complex: This constitutes a critical strategic asset for the Jewish people, which was exercised

in the last year mainly in preventing moves by the U.S. administration vis-à-vis the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that were in contradiction with the Israeli government's policies. In employing such assets, every effort should be made to avoid making Israel a partisan issue in internal American politics. This complex now faces a concrete and decisive test over the question of how to deal with the Iranian nuclear threat.

These complexes are, of course, intertwined and interdependent. Many of the trends within them are not amenable to intervention by Israel and the Jewish people, though in a limited number of cases, the policy taken could have significant impact. The year ahead could bring a maturation of significant processes that will require unequivocal decisions with potentially critical implications for the fate of Israel and the Jewish people.

From Israel's perspective, at the top of today's strategic agenda stands the issue of Iran. Iran's undeterred progress toward building a nuclear weapon sharpens the dilemma facing Israel: whether to risk a reality in which a state ruled by zealous fundamentalist clerics and which publically declares that Israel has no right to exist possesses a doomsday weapon. Or, alternatively, to attack Iran's nuclear installations and risk a sharp security deterioration as well as a strengthening of Iran's determination to achieve a nuclear capability and exact revenge on Israel (and perhaps on Jewish targets in the Diaspora). An Israeli attack would likely cause a crisis with the United States if it resulted in harm to Americans or American interests, or if it is interpreted as an Israeli attempt to undermine the coordinated strategy of negotiations and sanctions against Iran, or as an Israeli attempt to drag Washington into another war in the Middle East.

Even though the Middle-Eastern picture on the eve of the upheavals was clear – ineffective governments, poverty, difficult economic conditions, high unemployment rates, under-developed education systems, masses of young people who had lost hope of a decent future, rampant government corruption, denial of basic rights and other human rights violations – the best experts, intelligence agencies among them, failed to anticipate what was coming and could not imagine that the Arab masses would flood city squares risking death before live fire. It is important, therefore, to be skeptical of predictions; in fact, it would be truly surprising if there were no additional regional surprises.

In such an unpredictable, mutable reality, the initial human inclination is to circle the wagons, to react tactically and not initiate new strategic moves "until the dust settles."

Yet against the backdrop of the past year's developments, Israel faces a number of possible interlinked threatening scenarios that an Israeli initiative – notwithstanding the significant conditions of uncertainty – could actually help to block, or at least mitigate the potential damage:

- **A security deterioration** – that in the worst case results in a comprehensive war in which Israel is forced to withstand attacks on a number of fronts, including the civilian home front (for example: following an Israeli or American action against Iran, following a violent deterioration in the Gaza-Sinai situation or along the Lebanese-Syrian front, etc.).
- **Damage to Israel's diplomatic standing** – against the background of continuing efforts to portray Israel as the party responsible for the unresolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict and for its perpetuation; accusations of being the party that sparked a regional conflagration; an erosion in the standing of its ally, the United States; the collapse of strategic axes (Jerusalem-Cairo; Jerusalem-Ankara); and the rise of political Islam in the Middle East. Along with all of these, the de-legitimization campaign against Israel continues and is felt in a range of international spheres: political, economic, legal, media, cyber, cultural, etc.
- **Economic damage** – as a result of a significant security deterioration and/or as part of the de-legitimization campaign against Israel: boycotts and sanctions imposed (not necessarily by governments) against Israeli products, tourism, investment, and so on (obviously, the global economic crisis potentiates these scenarios).
- **Damage to Israel-U.S. relations** – against the backdrop of a perception in certain U.S. circles that the price of friendship with Israel is increasing steadily, that Israel is an ungrateful ally trying to drag the United States into a war with Iran at the wrong time and under sub-optimal conditions, that the U.S. image in the Muslim world is harmed by Israel's policies, and that Washington is being isolated in international forums and is the object of damaging criticism resulting from its support for Israel (it is reasonable to assume that the potential for this kind of damage will be pushed off until after the November 2012 elections).

Even though the upheavals in the Arab world are likely to continue for years, we can already point to a number of prognoses and dilemmas that should serve as background for proactive policy development in the Middle Eastern arena:

The flowering of political Islam: Political Islam is seen as the main victor of the Arab revolts. It remains an open question whether the Muslim Brotherhood's entry onto the political stage in Arab countries will moderate their positions, lead them into governing coalitions with secular parties, or engender dark theocracies. Will they work to abrogate the peace accords with Israel or – as some leaders now vaguely suggest – will they honor them thereby paradoxically conferring the popular and religious legitimacy the treaties lack and perhaps even pressuring Hamas to moderate its positions on relations with Israel. The Muslim Brotherhood's victory in two Egyptian elections, for parliament and the presidency, and the ouster of the defense minister and other senior officials sharpen the uncertain future of Israeli-Egyptian relations – a most critical pillar of Israel's strategic position. This is particularly so as any regional challenge will test Israeli-Egyptian relations. Can Israel, which is incapable of affecting the ascendancy of political Islam, implement policies to moderate the Islamist regimes' attitude toward Israel, create – as much as possible – constructive relations or at least prevent them from escalating?

The increased power of the “Arab Street”: Without drawing hard and fast conclusions regarding the final outcome of the Arab revolts, it is safe to assume that Arab rulers will have to be much better attuned to popular sentiment. To what extent will public opinion, which is saturated with hatred of Israel and gives priority to the Palestinian issue, be reflected in the foreign policy of Arab states and in their stances on Israel in particular? For example, to what extent is Israel's ability to respond to provocations by Hamas, or by Jihadi elements now taking shelter in Sinai, limited by the concern that Egypt might be drawn into the confrontation? Do Israel and the Jewish people have the capability to mitigate the animosity of the Arab street?

The worsening economic crisis: The deteriorated economic situation in the Middle East, which helped ignite the Arab uprisings, has worsened in their wake. In the immediate term, there is a significant decline in economic growth. Tourism and foreign investment have suffered and local investors are transferring their money out of the region due to a lack of economic certainty and the absence of basic security. The economic crisis could lead Arab governments to focus their efforts on economic recovery and other domestic issues, and lessen their appetite for a military confrontation, but it could also create the temptation to redirect internal frustrations outward, against the “Zionist enemy.” Will the economic crisis in the Arab world also present Israel and the Jewish people with an opportunity and a context for formulating proactive policy?

The outbreak of ethnic conflicts: The compromised power of central governments in Arab states, the economic crisis, against the background of a sense that the United States is weakening and providing less and less order in the region could combine to trigger serious outbreaks of ethnic, tribal, and religious conflict. In Iraq, for instance, pent-up tensions between the Shiite majority and Sunni minority threaten to erupt in the wake of the U.S. withdrawal (while the Kurds pursue their dream of independence). The Syrian insurrection has already been described as a civil war with an ethnic-religious component between Sunni, Alawite, Kurd, and Druze; while in Lebanon, the trauma of its own civil war (between Shiite, Sunni, Christian, and Druze) may return. Even the central government in Egypt is having difficulty asserting its authority over the Bedouin in Sinai who are exhibiting alienation from it. The phenomenon of failed or non-functioning states carries the risk of violent attacks by radical marginal elements against Israel and a sharp escalation of regional tensions. Is it possible to limit these risks through ad hoc regional alliances?

The perception of U.S. decline and disengagement: This perception is growing in the region, in part based on the American decision to withdraw from Iraq and Afghanistan; its failure, so far, to curb Iran's nuclear program; its lack of success in advancing an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement; the sense that its response to the Arab uprising was hesitant and inconsistent; and its continuing economic crisis. These factors combined paint a picture of a weakening American superpower unable to achieve its goals, increasingly preoccupied with its own internal predicaments, and progressively less willing to assume intervening roles in the Middle East. Talk of "the rise of Asia" and the gradual shift of U.S. strategic attention to the Asia-Pacific region only sharpens this perception.

It should be emphasized that, despite its difficulties, the United States is still the dominant global power – militarily, economically, and politically – and will remain so for the foreseeable future. Its competitors, especially China, are experiencing increasing economic and political difficulties of their own. Israel's power – both its actual strength and how it is perceived – is directly correlated to the perception of American power and the intensity of its friendship with Israel. Can Israel – for its own benefit – help the United States restore its standing in the Middle East? Can Israel develop ties with the rising powers, especially China, without damaging its vital connection to the United States?

The weakening of strategic anchors: The upheavals in the Arab world are toppling or eroding the strategic alignments that have characterized the Middle East in the past. The pro-American "moderate axis" has been shaken: Mubarak's ouster and the deterioration of relations with Turkey have intensified Israel's strategic isolation. At the same time, the "axis of resistance" hostile to Israel – Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, Hamas – is also weakening as a result of the threat to Assad's regime. Hezbollah's support of Assad, for example, is undermining its standing in the Arab world. Could the current strategic reality benefit from a rapid and creative Israeli response, particularly with respect to Egypt and Turkey?

The phenomenon of de-legitimization of Israel: Israel's legitimacy is under significant assault in the international arena, led by extremist Islamic elements in concert with far left elements in the West. The de-legitimization campaign is fed through anti-Semitic and cultural roots and by the continuation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which is exploited to create a dynamic of seemingly legitimate criticism but often crosses the line into demonization and de-legitimization of Israel. Even though some of its concrete manifestations have been blocked in the last two years, this assault is ongoing and is seeping into the mainstream Western public discourse, blackening Israel's image and creating a perceived legitimacy "deficit" in taking certain actions, including in self-defense. Certainly, this attack on the nation-state of the Jewish people carries implications for Diaspora Jews too. The fruition of some of the challenges outlined above will likely accelerate the de-legitimization trend and generate new dilemmas for Israel. This is something that Israel and the Jewish people need to take into account.

The dilemmas described above necessitate Israeli decision-making involving stark choices: one prefers to entrench and wait, while the other opts for proactively identifying and pursuing opportunities.

The first approach rests on the belief that threats to Israel have increased substantially as a result of the Arab upheavals and, thus, this is not the time to take risks based on wishful thinking and strategic naiveté. In the coming years, according to this view, political Islam, which is very hostile to Israel, is expected to dictate the conduct of Arab states. This uncertainty calls for extreme caution because every territory Israel concedes today is likely to fall into hostile hands tomorrow. Prime Minister Netanyahu articulated this approach in a speech to the Knesset on November 23, 2011:

“... Chances are that an Islamist wave will wash over the Arab countries, an anti-West, anti-liberal, anti-Israel and ultimately an anti-democratic wave... They are moving, but they are not moving forward towards progress, they are going backwards. ... I will not ignore reality, I will not ignore the dangers, I will not ignore history ... or give up on any of our security requirements that have increased because of the recent crises and not diminished. ... This is not the time to rush into things, it is the time to be cautious in our connections with the Palestinians.”

An alternative approach holds that advancing a bold initiative in order to make progress in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the broader Israeli-Arab conflict (within the framework of a comprehensive regional agreement) would be a move with the potential to bring paradigmatic change to Israel's strategic situation and might even provide an answer, albeit partial, to the new challenges born of the Arab revolt. The advantages of such a strategy are that it would:

Help remove the Israeli issue from the Arab street's agenda; reduce the incentive for Arab countries to alleviate internal tension by initiating a violent confrontation with Israel; dissolve many of the bonds holding the region's extreme axis together; pave the way for normalization of Israel's relationship with the entire Arab and Islamic world; improve the ability to restore damaged strategic axes (Egypt, Turkey) and consolidate a regional strategic alignment against Iran. Further, it would tighten Israel-U.S. relations by crediting Washington with a 'historic achievement,' as the sponsor of the agreement, which would, in turn, reestablish the U.S. position in the Middle East; improve Israel's political standing and image around the world, and substantially curb the de-legitimization trend; boost Israel's economic growth and ability to find new markets; alleviate the challenges of co-existence with the Arab minority in Israel; and secure Israel's future as a Jewish, democratic, and appealing state.

The disagreement between the two approaches will continue to resonate in the strategic and political discourse in Israel and the Diaspora during the year ahead: is this the time for strategic passivity or do we still possess the capacity (even if not entirely) to act? The changes, which began with the dramatic upheavals of the past two years, are still evolving beneath our feet, are shaping the future of the Middle East, and are posing difficult dilemmas for Israel that demand a response.