

## **ISRAEL: SECURITY ANALYSIS: THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE ARAB SPRING ON ISRAEL'S SECURITY**

***By ESISC TEAM***

Since the beginning of the uprising in the Arab World, Israel, the “sole democracy in the Middle East” has been rather cold in its support to the “Arab Spring”. Many condemned this attitude; however Israel’s apprehension must be examined through the implications of the movement on its own security. This analysis will first examine the outcomes of Mubarak’s fall; then discuss the ramification of the Syrian uprising with the intervention of the Hezbollah and Iran to finally open the discussion on the possibility of changes in the region with Turkey as a new geopolitical pivot.

### **The End of Mubarak: the Israeli “tragedy”**

Israel came to see the fall of President Hosni Mubarak, resulting from the popular uprising which first started in Tunisia, as a threat to its security. Egypt was indeed a valuable “partner” amongst Israel’s too scarce friendly neighbours. First, the peace treaty signed in 1979 guaranteed security and to a certain extent, economic cooperation between the two countries<sup>1</sup>. Besides, even though it is difficult to evaluate the support provided by Mubarak’s regime to Israel, it was significant. He offered economic cooperation, provided intelligence sources, played a role of moderator in the Arab World, imposed an embargo on Gaza and struggled against Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.

The end of this cooperation caused a significant damage to Israel’s security:

- The peace treaty has been maintained but questioned, rising fears that the unofficial diplomacy between Cairo and Jerusalem might come to an end. As put by *Los Angeles Times*’ journalist Edmund Sanders, “Now Israel is quietly dusting off shelved war scenarios and updating defense strategies to include prospects of renewed hostilities along a border it has not had to worry about for years. Intelligence sharing and border coordination with Egypt have helped Israel battle Islamic extremists in Gaza. Egypt is also

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<sup>1</sup> For further information please refer to the Israel-Egypt peace treaty of 1979 and especially to the article 2 “Economic and Trade Relations” of Annex III

crucial to stemming the flow of weapons into Gaza and of illegal immigrants into Israel.”<sup>2</sup>

- Economic cooperation has already been denounced, as showed the judicial pursuits initiated against Mubarak’s close friend Hussein Salem<sup>3</sup>. Among other things, he was charged for his participation in the most recent contract of gas sales to Israel. The country’s new leaders are indeed under intense popular pressure to stop any deals with Israel. In his respect, although no group or individuals could be clearly identified so far, it is worth while mentioning that the pipeline carrying gas to Israel and Jordan was targeted by three attacks since the beginning of the year, the last of which took place on July 4. Previous explosions occurred on February 5 and April 27, causing the closure of the pipeline for several weeks. The transportation of gas to Israel was restored only on June 10.
- Egypt has lost control over the Sinai Peninsula, which has become a hub for arms smuggling, human trafficking and illegal migration. Although most of these traffics are run by Bedouin tribes, these events also enabled Hamas to create more supply routes to get weapons. Moreover, it is worth mentioning that Jihadi groups also took advantage of the situation to multiply infiltration attempts<sup>4</sup>. In that respect, the Israeli port-city of Eilat might become an easier target for planned terrorist attacks.
- On February, Israeli media reported that Egypt allowed Iranian warships to enter the Suez Canal for the first time since 1979, the date of the peace treaty and the Iranian revolution. Reporting the fact, Israeli newspapers’ headlines pointed out that “Egypt is signalling that it is no longer committed to its strategic alliance with Israel against Iran and that Cairo is now willing to do business with Tehran”<sup>5</sup>. Indeed, Israeli journalist Aluf Benn reminded that not a long ago, Israel and Egypt were strategic allies, and that Israeli Navy submarines were crossing the Suez Canal instead of Iranian warships. This first Iran passing was more a provocation, but it highlighted the existence of an actual naval threat to Israel, as proved in mid-March the seizure by navy commandos of an arms’ shipment reportedly bound for Gaza militants. Israeli officials stated that Iran sent the German-owned, Liberian-flagged cargo ship MV Victoria in an attempt

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<sup>2</sup> Edmund Sanders (February 4, 2011) “Israel fears regional regime change” *Los Angeles Times* <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/feb/04/world/la-fg-israel-egypt-react-20110205> (last accessed July 4, 2011)

<sup>3</sup> Associated Press in Cairo (Friday 17 June 2011) “Mubarak associate arrested in Spain”, *The Guardian*. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/jun/17/mubarak-associate-arrested-spain> (last accessed July 4, 2011)

<sup>4</sup> Edmund Sanders (February 4, 2011) “Israel fears regional regime change” *Los Angeles Times* <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/feb/04/world/la-fg-israel-egypt-react-20110205> (last accessed July 4, 2011)

<sup>5</sup> Aluf Benn (February 20, 2011) “Egypt is signalling that it is no longer committed to its strategic alliance with Israel against Iran, and that Cairo is now willing to do business with Tehran”, *Haaretz*, <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/egypt-is-no-longer-committed-to-an-alliance-with-israel-against-iran-1.344482> (last accessed July 4, 2011); for further information please refer to Edmund Sanders and Batsheva Sobelman (February 22, 2011) “worries over the new Egypt grow in Israel” *Los Angeles Times* <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/feb/22/world/la-fg-israel-iran-warships-20110222> (last accessed July 4, 2011)

to take advantage of the upheaval in Egypt, hoping that it would be allowed to pass through unchecked.<sup>6</sup>

One must also examine the indirect damages on Israel's security caused by the fall of Mubarak. On the International realm, the image of Israel went down as its embargo on Gaza remains whereas it was lifted on the Egyptian side. Besides, while many in Europe were praising the process of democratisation taking place in the Middle East, many ignored that studies have demonstrated that power transitions also represents instability factors, and that dictatorships might in that sense be considered as more "peaceful", or less prone to go to war than democracies in transition. Neighbours of such countries might therefore be afraid of violence resulting from the transition.<sup>7</sup>

Most of all, popular uprising does not mean that former dictatorships will turn into liberal democracies; there is an important risk of Islamisation as illustrated by the Islamic Revolution in Iran. Israel fears of facing a Muslim Brotherhood government in the coming years in Egypt. The fall of Mubarak has enlightened the importance for Israel to invest after 30 years of peace in the defence of its southern border.<sup>8</sup> One can therefore understand that Israelis were not keen about the latest events in Egypt.

### **Assad's fighting for survival: Iran and Hezbollah get involved**

Israel's attitude towards the popular uprising in Syria should have been quite different than towards the one in Egypt. Syria has always been a threat to Israel, no peace treaty has been signed between the two countries and none was to be expected. At first, Israel, like other countries such as the United States has however been reluctant to express its support to the uprising. The reason was that Assad has been perceived as a strong leader, certainly the only one able to survive the revolt and that he was better than uncertainty and chaos after him. This attitude changed only after the crackdown intensifies and Assad's fighting for survival has come to be perceived as more dangerous than the chaos he will leave after his dismissal.

One can explain the change in Israel's stance by the international mood which has come to see Assad's repressive policy as unacceptable; but other elements much be stressed:

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<sup>6</sup> Janine Zacharia (March 15, 2011) "Israel intercepts ship it says carried Iranian weapons bound for Gaza", *The Washington Post*. [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/israel-intercepts-ship-it-says-carried-iranian-weapons-bound-for-gaza/2011/03/15/AByl6TX\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/israel-intercepts-ship-it-says-carried-iranian-weapons-bound-for-gaza/2011/03/15/AByl6TX_story.html) (last accessed July 4, 2011)

<sup>7</sup> Edward Mansfield and Jack Snyder (Summer 1995) "Democratization and the Danger of War", *International Security* Vol. 20, No. 1, pp. 5-38. <http://www.polsci.wvu.edu/faculty/hauser/PS368/MansfieldSnyderDemocDangerWarIS1995.pdf> (last accessed July 4, 2011)

<sup>8</sup> For further information please refer to Alex Fishman (March 10, 2011) "The new southern threat Special: After years of neglect, Israel must prepare for possible Egyptian threat" in ynetnews.com <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4040060,00.html> (last accessed July 4, 2011)

- First, for Israel, Assad has always been a major threat. To recall, in September 2007, Israeli Air Force (IAF) carried out an air strike on an undeclared nuclear reactor<sup>9</sup>.
- More recently, in the last weeks, in an attempt to divert the attention from the tension at home, Assad has been “targeting” Israel with the help of Iran. Indeed, senior Israeli source revealed that Revolutionary Guard organized the demonstrations against Israel on the Golan Heights as part of the events on Nakba Day on May 15 and Naksa Day on June 5.<sup>10</sup> To recall, during those demonstrations, Israel Defense Forces (IDF) was forced to fire on Palestinians infiltrating the territory.
- Violence in Syria might have critical repercussion on Israel security if Iran decides to be more involved in Syrian affairs by sponsoring Hezbollah in its war against Israel. The Syrian crisis is indeed a major destabilization factor for its Lebanese neighbour, therefore threatening Israel’s northern border. Hezbollah, the other major ally of Assad’s regime, might indeed attempt to launch a new attack against Israel. To recall, the 2006’s war with the Shiite militia was perceived by many in Israel as a defeat, due to the heavy toll in human life<sup>11</sup>.

Hezbollah has come to be considered as an adversary that cannot be ignored especially since it took control over the government in Beirut. In a recent article, the French newspapers *Le Figaro*, mentioning that Hezbollah was taking back to Lebanon weapons hidden in Syria. The United Nations confirmed the armed smuggling and talk about the transfer of long-range Iranian-produced Zilzal, Fajr-3 and Fajr-4 missiles. It is lastly worth reporting that Iran is trying to send as much as weaponry as possible to the Hezbollah via Syria before the fall of Assad.<sup>12</sup>

The uprising in Syria urges Israel to reevaluate its defence strategy. Indeed, it has to examine the possibility of another war with Hezbollah and mainly, the border with Syria which was quiet despite years of enmity is now on high alert as the IDF must be prepared for massive attempt to infiltrate the country.

### **Prospect for Improvement in the Israel-Turkish relationship:**

Uprisings in the Middle East are major sources of instability in the region. However, the recent collapses of the Egyptian and Tunisian regimes, and the challenges to dictatorships in Syria and in the Gulf monarchies, by comparison highlighted the

<sup>9</sup> David E. Sanger and Mark Mazzetti (October 14, 2007) “Israel Struck Syrian Nuclear Project, Analysts Say”, *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/14/washington/14weapons.html> (last accessed July 4, 2011)

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/senior-israeli-source-iran-actively-helping-syria-squash-demonstrations-1.368971> (last accessed July 4, 2011)

<sup>11</sup> For further information on the Second Lebanon War, please refer to Harel, Amos and Issacharoff, Avi (2008), *34 Days: Israel, Hezbollah and the War in Lebanon* (New York, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan).

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.lefigaro.fr/international/2011/06/24/01003-20110624ARTFIG00600-le-hezbollah-rapatrie-son-arsenal-de-syrie.php> (last accessed July 4, 2011)

stability of Turkey amidst the regional turmoil. Turkey appears to be a privileged ally in a region where nobody seems knowing anymore for how long leaders will remain in power. The balance of power in the Middle East is therefore shifting towards Ankara. Following the victory of his Justice and Development Party (AKP) party in June 12 parliamentary election, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is indeed expected to stay in power for the next four year. Moreover, the country possesses military might and benefits from a strong economic growth and from a relative prosperity compares to the regional standards.

Erdoğan's condemnation of Assad's repression and opening borders to more than 10,000 Syrian refugees signals that Ankara does not consider Bashar Al Assad as a sustainable leader, and therefore has no interest to keep the Ba'athist regime among its main partners. This intervention also signals that Turkey has full awareness of its role in the region. Since then, one could observe an improvement in the Turkish-Israeli relationships. To recall, from 1949 to Turkish Parliamentary elections of 2002, Israel benefited of a rather good relation with Turkey. However, the victory of the AKP conservative party saw a degradation of this relation. The Israeli raid on the Turkish flotilla to Gaza in May 2010 definitely confirmed the break-off with Turkey insisting on apology and compensation for the nine persons killed while Israel claimed having acting on self-defence. Israeli media however revealed that officials from both countries have been holding secret direct talks with US' support, to try to solve the diplomatic crisis between the two countries.<sup>13</sup>

This relation is essential for Israel, and an improvement will have a significant impact for its security. Earlier this year, in February, the Turkish newspaper, *Hürriyet Daily News*, interviewed a former Israeli Ambassador, Oded Eran who saw common interests in protect for the two countries. Indeed, "A destabilized Middle East is a very negative phenomenon for both Israel and Turkey. For different reasons they have an interest in bringing stability," he said. "The question in my view is whether, in the pursuit of these interests, they can come back to the mode of cooperation that existed between the two until three or four years ago."<sup>14</sup>

## Conclusion

As we have attempted to point out in these lines, the consequences of Mubarak's fall and of the Syrian uprising for its security can explain the timid reaction of Israel towards the Arab spring. The destabilisation along its borders with Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon; the growing involvement of Iran in the regional affairs and the increasing tensions with the Palestinian as the proclamation of a Palestinian state is expected for September could indeed become major threats in the near future.

As said MK Einat Wilf, member of the Kneset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee for the Independence Party "If the region becomes democratic then we will start sharing values and gain true respect for one another from a kinship of values," but "if the revolutions are hijacked by extremists, we may very well find ourselves in a

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<sup>13</sup> [Barak Ravid](http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/israel-and-turkey-holding-secret-direct-talks-to-mend-diplomatic-rift-1.368792) (June 21, 2011) "Israel and Turkey holding secret direct talks to mend diplomatic rift", *Haaretz*. <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/israel-and-turkey-holding-secret-direct-talks-to-mend-diplomatic-rift-1.368792> (last accessed July 4, 2011)

<sup>14</sup> Fulya Ozerkan (February 24, 2011) "Arab unrest could help Turk-Israel ties, says former Israeli diplomat", *Hürriyet Daily News* <http://web.hurriyetdailynews.com/n.php?n=arab-unrest-could-accelerate-turk-israel-normalization-2011-02-24> (last accessed July 4, 2011)

problematic Middle East.”<sup>15</sup> However, the changing balance of power in the Middle East, with Turkey getting a leading role, could be a significant asset for Israel if manoeuvres properly to renew the former partnership. In this respect, Israeli’s fears towards the outcomes of the Arab Spring could be eased by the recovery of a sustainable regional partner.

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<sup>15</sup>Samuel Doveri Vesterbye (March 9, 2011) “Israel expresses ‘fear and hope’ for a region in turmoil”. *Hürriyet Daily New*, <http://www.hurriyetaidailynews.com/n.php?n=israel-expresses-8216fear-and-hope8217-for-a-region-in-turmoil-2011-03-09> (last accessed July 4, 2011)