

## **Israel and the Arab Spring: Understanding Attitudes and Responses to the "New Middle East"**

**By Benedetta Berti**

From the outset, the Arab Spring has taken the world by storm. It both challenged the political status quo in the Middle East and attempted to write a new chapter in the history of the region. Israel—with its complex geostrategic position and its difficult relations with its neighbors—was equally astounded when protests initially broke out throughout the region. Since then, Israel has responded to the shifting regional realities with a mix of timid hope and strong hesitance.

On the one hand, the current paradigm within Israel is that, in the long term, the potential process of democratization of the region could represent an opportunity for the country to improve its relations with some of its immediate neighbors. However, in the shorter term, there is widespread skepticism regarding the Arab Spring.

To some observers within Israel, the ongoing social and political unrest in the Middle East spells trouble. The crumbling of pre-existing regimes is viewed as a potential threat to regional security and stability. There is also a general uneasiness toward the rise of Islamist political parties. These organizations are believed to have stronger and more antagonist feelings towards the Israel than the pre-existing authoritarian regional regimes. As such, there is widespread concern that they will translate their anti-Israeli attitude into the official foreign policy of the countries where they now control large shares of political power. Consequently, it is assumed that the current shift in the region's political arena and the rise of political Islam will benefit the “Resistance Camp” in general, and groups like Hamas and Hezbollah specifically, while negatively affecting Israel.

However, not all political observers within Israel share this negative assessment. Many analysts dismiss this type of analysis as overly simplistic, emphasizing instead the importance of taking a more case-by-case approach when assessing the overall impact of the ongoing social and political changes. Similarly, they assert that Islamist organizations in the region are far from monolithic, and that the rise of the “Muslim Brotherhood-brand” of political Islam actually negatively affects the popularity of armed groups like Hezbollah.

This chapter analyzes the main attitudes in Israel regarding both the Arab Spring, as well as the subsequent rise of Islamist political parties across the Middle East. In doing so, it emphasizes the distinct postures adopted in different regional cases. Finally, the chapter looks at post-Arab Spring shifts in Israel's geostrategic and political position, looking specifically at the emerging Islamist parties' impact in redefining existing relations.

## Israel's Response to the “Arab Awakening”: Hope and Hesitance

When protests first broke out in Tunisia in late 2010, Israel took a wait-and-see approach, refraining from making public statements in support of either Zine El Abidine Ben Ali’s regime or the opposition forces. This is hardly surprising, given the relations between the two countries. After a brief honeymoon during the 1990s—where both Tunisia and Israel opened interest offices in their respective counterparty—relations froze after the second intifada began in 2000. Since then, Tunisia has severed all official ties with the State of Israel, preserving, however, unofficial exchanges in sectors like trade and tourism.<sup>1</sup>

Over all, Ben Ali was not seen as a regional ally. Even so, the protests were not greeted with overwhelming enthusiasm.

First, when the autocratic regime fell, the Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu indirectly referred to Tunisia by expressing concern for the increased volatility of the Middle East and by wishing that “stability would be restored.”<sup>2</sup> He also stressed that the region’s instability further proved that Israel’s focus should remain on preserving its own national security.<sup>3</sup>

Beyond a concern for regional stability, several Israeli officials addressed the regime change in Tunisia more directly. They expressed apprehension about the future of unofficial ties between the two countries. These officials worried that Tunisia’s leadership change could sever the relationship it previously held with Israel.<sup>4</sup> Israeli vice Prime Minister Silvan Shalom—himself born in Tunisia—took these concerns one step further by voicing the fear that Tunisia would begin to drift toward the “extremist forces in the Arab world,”<sup>5</sup> referring to groups like Hamas or Hezbollah. From an Israeli perspective, the shift toward a political arena controlled or heavily influenced by political Islam is seen with inherent suspicion, as the common understanding is that such parties will display strong anti-Israeli attitudes, further complicating Israel's standing in the region.

Similar concerns were voiced by the media and think-tank world, where the regime change was also considered a potential source of regional instability, especially in light of the potential “demonstration effect” of the protests on Israel's neighbors, especially Jordan and Egypt.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Mahmoud Muhareb, "Why is Israel Worried about the Tunisian Revolution?" *Arab center for Research and Policy Studies*, February 7, 2011. <http://english.dohainstitute.org/Home/Details/5ea4b31b-155d-4a9f-8f4d-a5b428135cd5/2252aae6-511b-416f-b233-ae0027efbf19>

<sup>2</sup>Herb Keinon, “Monday Region's Events Show Why Ironclad Security Deal Is So Necessary, PM Says,” *Jerusalem Post*, January 17, 2011. <http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1P1-188587361.html>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> “Netanyahu: Tunisia—A Proof that We Must Retain Security,” *Israel Armed Forces Radio Website*, January 16, 2011. <http://glz.co.il/newsArticle.aspx?newsid=75755> (Hebrew)

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Shlomo Brom, “The Toppling of the Tunisian Regime: Ramifications for the Arab World,” *INSS Insight* No. 238, January 20, 2011. <http://www.inss.org.il/upload/%28FILE%291295508858.pdf>

In contrast to the relative understated reaction to the protests in Tunisia, Israel's response was unequivocal when the demonstrations sparked by the Arab Spring spread to Egypt. The relationship between Israel and the Mubarak regime was far from perfect, with the Egyptian government never fully investing in creating a *de facto* peace with Israel after the 1979 treaty. Also, Hosni Mubarak was known to cultivate, and even foment, anti-Israeli feelings among his population to deflect criticism of his regime. Yet, despite the problematic relationship, the Israeli government largely credited Mubarak with having preserved peace and stability for roughly three decades. Therefore, it is no surprise that at the beginning of the anti-government demonstrations Israeli officials largely hoped that the status quo would be restored. This was the case, even though the government refrained from making public statements about the crisis or supporting any of the warring parties.<sup>7</sup>

According to former chief of general staff MK Shaul Mofaz, the best scenario for Israel would have been for the regime to overcome the protests.<sup>8</sup> In addition, Israel went beyond mere statements in signaling its support of the Mubarak government. The government allegedly attempted to diffuse American and European criticism of the Egyptian regime, and also allowed Egyptian troops to deploy in the Sinai (Israel's agreement is needed according to the 1979 peace treaty).<sup>9</sup>

With the escalating protests, more Israeli officials went on record to express their concerns over the stability and security of the region. They stressed the importance Israel places upon preserving the peace treaty with Egypt. Israel, in fact, sees the agreement as one of the cornerstones of regional stability. For instance, former Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) chief of general staff Lt.-Gen. Gabi Ashkenazi stated that the unrest could represent a threat to Israel,<sup>10</sup> a concern seconded by PM Netanyahu, who also underscored the importance of investing in security arrangements, as well as on preserving the peace treaty.<sup>11</sup>

These concerns about Egypt largely coincided with those already expressed over regime change in Tunisia. However, regarding Egypt, the stakes were seen as substantially higher, not only because of the existing peace treaty between the two countries, but also because of Egypt's geostrategic position and its influence on the regional balance of power. This is why the Israeli PM openly expressed the fear that Iran would attempt to stir the Egyptian uprisings in its direction, trying to increase its

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<sup>7</sup> Ian Black, "Egypt Protests: Israel Fears Unrest May Threaten Peace Treaty," *The Guardian*, January 31, 2011. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/jan/31/israel-egypt-mubarak-peace-treaty-fears>

<sup>8</sup> Rebecca Anna Stoil, "Mofaz: It's Best For Israel If Mubarak Overcomes Protests," *Jerusalem Post*, February 1, 2011. <http://www.jpost.com/DiplomacyAndPolitics/Article.aspx?id=206131>

<sup>9</sup> Ian Black, "Egypt Protests: Israel Fears Unrest May Threaten Peace Treaty," *The Guardian*, January 31, 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Yaakov Katz, "Ashkenazi: Unrest Could Change Our Security Reality," *Jerusalem Post*, February 2, 2011. <http://www.jpost.com/Defense/Article.aspx?id=206263>

<sup>11</sup> "Excerpts from PM Netanyahu's statement at the Knesset," *Israeli Prime Minister's Office website*, February 2, 2011.

[http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Government/Speeches+by+Israeli+leaders/2011/PM\\_Netanyahu\\_addresses\\_Knesset\\_situation\\_Egypt\\_2-Feb-2011](http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Government/Speeches+by+Israeli+leaders/2011/PM_Netanyahu_addresses_Knesset_situation_Egypt_2-Feb-2011)

leverage in the post-Mubarak era. In Israel's view, an increase in Tehran's influence is clearly identified as a direct security threat.<sup>12</sup>

However, this growing anxiety over the state of the peace treaty, the calm along the Israeli-Egyptian border, and the rising influence of Iran gradually diminished in the days following Mubarak's resignation, with Israel Defense Minister Ehud Barak immediately seeking (and reportedly obtaining) reassurances on the peace treaty with chief of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi.<sup>13</sup>

Even so, a few months into the Arab Spring, the emerging consensus within the Israeli political establishment was still deeply pessimistic. In addition to the threat to regional stability, there was growing skepticism over the revolts' potential to lead to a true democratization process.

PM Netanyahu expressed this paradigm in April 2011, when he said “[w]hat we hope to see is the European Spring of 1989.” He added, however, that there was an increasing chance of encountering an “Iranian Winter.”<sup>14</sup> The PM was referring to the perception that the uprisings were being increasingly hijacked by Islamist groups, a notion commonly referred to in Israel as the “Islamic winter.”

A few months later, in November 2011, the PM went even further by stating that “the 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.”<sup>15</sup>

Of course, the increased skepticism regarding the Arab Spring has been going hand-in-hand with the rise of Islamist parties and the perception that “[t]he biggest winner of the past year is political Islam—in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and (perhaps soon) in Syria.”<sup>16</sup>

This is especially true when analyzing the reactions to the rising popularity of Islamist groups in Egypt—where the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafists first won over two thirds of seats in the

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Isabel Kershner, “As Egypt Begins to Calm Down, So Do Israeli Nerves,” *New York Times*, February 14, 2011. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/14/world/middleeast/14israel.html>

<sup>14</sup> “Arab Spring May Turn Into Iranian Winter: Israel PM,” *Agence France Presse*, April 17, 2011. <http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5j4sOmN0rkFs8yT2KSqtpiuGyrj5g?docId=CNG.eb63d08c46fc03277ee2b129a6b13866.c41>

<sup>15</sup> “Excerpts from PM Netanyahu's statement at the Knesset,” *Israeli Prime Minister's Office website*, November 23, 2011.

[http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Government/Speeches+by+Israeli+leaders/2011/PM\\_Netanyahu\\_statement\\_Knesset\\_23-Nov-2011](http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Government/Speeches+by+Israeli+leaders/2011/PM_Netanyahu_statement_Knesset_23-Nov-2011)

<sup>16</sup> Amos Yadlin, “The Arab Uprising One Year On,” in *One Year of the Arab Spring: Global and Regional Implications*, Guzansky, Yoel and Heller, Mark A., eds. (INSS Memorandum No. 113, Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, March 2012), p. 15.

Egyptian Parliament,<sup>17</sup> and with Muslim Brotherhood's candidate Mohamed Morsi winning the Presidency. Even though Israel's government officially congratulated Egypt on its newly elected legislative body,<sup>18</sup> the country is extremely troubled by this trend and it has not found a way to open a channel of communication with Egypt's Islamists.<sup>19</sup> As the next section consider, it is no surprise that Israel views the rise of the vehemently anti-Zionist Muslim Brotherhood as a troublesome trend, especially when combined with an extremely antagonist public opinion.

Therefore, when looking at the evolving Arab Spring and the subsequent regime changes occurring in both Tunisia and Egypt, the Tel Aviv's concerns include regional stability, an opening for Tehran to increase its influence, a potential challenge to the peace treaty with Egypt, and, last but not least, the rapid rise of political Islam in the Middle East. Furthermore, the possibility that the "troubles" could spread to Jordan—the second regional player to have signed an official peace treaty with Israel—has also been considered a threat resulting from the Arab awakenings.

However, not all political observers within Israel concur with this pessimistic assessment of reality. For instance, Lior Ben-Dor, the Foreign Ministry's Arabic media spokesman has asserted that, from Israel's perspective, "(...) by and large little has changed. They don't hate us any less than before. But not any more than before, either."<sup>20</sup>

In addition to diffusing fears stemming from the Arab uprisings, some Israeli political observers and politicians have also referred to the upheavals as a potential opportunity for Israel. Israeli President Shimon Peres stated: "Poverty and oppression in the region have fed resentment against Israel and the better our neighbors will have it, we shall have better neighbors," arguing that regional democratization is exactly what Israel needs to be more secure and prosperous.<sup>21</sup> Within the media and the think tank world, many analysts have argued along the same lines, stressing how none of the deposed regimes—including in Egypt—has ever been genuinely interested in building a positive relation with Israel. Furthermore, they have contended that the Arab Spring has so far not

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<sup>17</sup> David D. Kirkpatrick, "Islamists Win 70% of Seats in the Egyptian Parliament," *New York Times*, January 21, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/22/world/middleeast/muslim-brotherhood-wins-47-of-egypt-assembly-seats.html>

<sup>18</sup> "Egypt; Israel Foreign Ministry Congratulates Nation for People's Assembly," *Africa News*, January 26, 2012 (available from LexisNexis).

<sup>19</sup> "Israeli Foreign Ministry Denies Opening Dialogue With Egypt's Islamists," *Egypt Independent*, January 4, 2012. <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/israeli-foreign-ministry-denies-opening-dialogue-egypts-islamists>

<sup>20</sup> Juliane von Mittelstaedt, "In the Eye of the Storm Israel Wary of Changes in the Arab World," *Der Spiegel*, April 6, 2012. <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/israel-skeptical-of-the-regime-changes-in-the-arab-world-a-825510.html>

<sup>21</sup> "Mideast revolutions could be good for Israel, says Peres," *The Associated Press*, March 28, 2011. <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/mideast-revolutions-could-be-good-for-israel-says-peres-1.352374>

empowered Israel's regional foes, like Iran, and it has also negatively affected the popularity of other anti-Israeli groups like Hezbollah.<sup>22</sup>

Finally, political observers within Israel have been asserting that political Islam is not monolithic in attitude toward Israel, while also debating whether, once in a position of power, Islamist parties will be forced to “being rather more ambivalent about their hostility to Israel, or at least about the urgency with which they intend to act on it.”<sup>23</sup>

Syria is a clear case where Israel has been struggling between its fears and hopes. On the one hand, Israel sees Bashar al-Assad's demise and his regime as a strong blow against Iran, as well as an opening a new chapter with its northern neighbor. In addition, since the beginning of the conflict in Syria, the violence repeatedly spilled into Israel, with several episodes of errant Syrian mortars shells landing on the Israeli side of the disputed border.<sup>24</sup> Assad also sporadically sparked clashes with Israel along the Golan Heights as a tool to divert domestic attention from the anti-regime protests. The clashes between the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and Palestinian refugees in May and June 2011 were, in this sense, seen by Israel as part of Assad's attempts to shift the domestic attention away from local demonstrations.<sup>25</sup> Although few within Israel believe that Assad would ever risk entering a full-fledged military confrontation against Israel, his regime's demise would remove the threat of these renewed skirmishes at the border.

On the other hand, the Israeli government has been worried about the potential rise of yet another Islamist regime at its own border. Furthermore, though Israel never trusted the Alawite regime in Syria, the Assads had shown both restraint and predictability, avoiding direct confrontations with Israel and keeping the border quiet. Israel worries about the Syrian state's collapse and the potential creation of a power vacuum within Syria, and specifically next to the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights.

As such, especially in the early stage of the protests, Israel had a lively public debate regarding whether the country should support Assad or the anti-government opposition forces. For example, Druze MK and member of the ruling Likud Party Ayoub Kara openly stated, “I prefer the political extremism of Assad over religious extremism,” adding “[w]e don't want religious extremism on the

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<sup>22</sup> Benedetta Berti, “Can Hezbollah Cope With A Changing Middle East?” *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, November 2011. <http://www.fpri.org/enotes/2011/201111.berti.hezbollah.html>

<sup>23</sup> Mark A. Heller, “Israeli Responses to the Arab Spring,” in *One Year of the Arab Spring: Global and Regional Implications*, Guzansky, Yoel and Heller, Mark A., eds. (INSS Memorandum No. 113, Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, March 2012), p. 76.

<sup>24</sup> Benedetta Berti, “Is an Israeli-Syrian War Next?,” *FPRI*, November 18, 2012. <http://www.fpri.org/geopoliticus/2012/11/israeli-syrian-war-next>

<sup>25</sup> Joel Greenberg, “Netanyahu Accuses Syria Of Abetting Border Clash,” *Washington Post*, **June 6, 2011**. [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/netanyahu-accuses-syria-of-abetting-border-clash/2011/06/06/AGYCeaKH\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/netanyahu-accuses-syria-of-abetting-border-clash/2011/06/06/AGYCeaKH_story.html)

border.”<sup>26</sup> National infrastructure Minister Uzi Landau claimed the exact opposite by stating: “[t]he only thing I know is that if he [Assad] falls there will be big short-term advantages.”<sup>27</sup>

In the early months of the Syrian crisis, Israel kept a low profile, while denying any direct involvement with either Assad or the opposition.<sup>28</sup> For instance, in an April 2011 interview Israeli PM Netanyahu openly said that, on Syria, “Any answer I’ll give you wouldn’t be a good one,”<sup>29</sup> hinting at an awareness that openly endorsing the Syrian opposition forces would hinder their domestic stance and legitimacy, while strengthening Assad’s accusations that the opposition is a “puppet” of Israel and the United States.

While the general Israeli policy was to stay out of the Syrian crisis, still several Israeli politicians came out in support of the protests even in these relatively early stages. In March 2011, Israeli President Shimon Peres expressed solidarity with the protesters by stating: “[d]emocracy needs to be allowed into a country the moment the young generation opens its eyes. The young people have questions about why they are living in poverty. A family that cannot provide food for itself is tragic.”<sup>30</sup> Also, in May 2011, Israeli MK Shaul Mofaz reportedly urged Russia to stop supplying advanced weaponry to the Syrian regime in the context of a meeting between Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee members and their counterparty in Russia.<sup>31</sup>

In the following months, as the Syrian crisis escalated, Israel gradually switched from ambivalence to condemnation of the Syrian regime. This shift occurred together with the realization that Assad was not likely to survive the political storm ignited by the protests. By the end of 2011, the general assessment within Israel was that the Assad regime was doomed and that its fall was indeed “inevitable.”<sup>32</sup> In this context, Israel first offered humanitarian aid to Syria through the International Committee of the Red Cross in March 2012. Foreign Minister Avigdor Liberman stated: “[e]ven though Israel cannot intervene in events occurring in a country with which it does not have

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<sup>26</sup> Joshua Mitnick, “Amid Syria’s Turmoil, Israel Sees Assad As The Lesser Evil,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, May 6, 2011. <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2011/0506/Amid-Syria-s-turmoil-Israel-sees-Assad-as-the-lesser-evil>

<sup>27</sup> Herb Keinon: “If PNA Goes To UN, Declare All Agreements Null, Says Landau,” *Jerusalem Post*, August 30, 2011. <http://www.jpost.com/DiplomacyAndPolitics/Article.aspx?id=236068>

<sup>28</sup> “Israel “Closely Following” Events In Syria—Minister,” *Israel Defense Forces website*, March 27, 2011 (available from BBC Worldwide Monitoring).

<sup>29</sup> Joel Greenberg, “Israel Warily Reckons Possible Outcomes In Syria,” *The Washington Post*, April 23, 2011. <http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1P2-28514103.html>

<sup>30</sup> Yaakov Katz, “IDF: Assad May Create Tension At Border To Divert Attention From Troubles At Home,” *Jerusalem Post*, March 23, 2011. <http://www.jpost.com/Defense/Article.aspx?id=213369>

<sup>31</sup> “Israeli Knesset Members Ask Russia To Halt Supply Of Advanced Weaponry To Syria,” *Israeli Voice of Israel Network B*, May 13, 2011 (Available from BBC Monitoring Middle East).

<sup>32</sup> Isabel Kershner, “Israel, Expecting Syrian Collapse, Braces for Refugees,” *New York Times*, January 11, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/11/world/middleeast/israel-braces-for-refugees-in-event-of-syria-collapse.html>



diplomatic relations, it is nevertheless our moral duty to extend humanitarian aid and inspire the world to put an end to the slaughter.”<sup>33</sup>

Then a few weeks later, following the Syrian regime increased violence (and specifically after the massacre of civilians in Houla on May 25 2012), Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak went beyond mere condemnation and said: “[t]hese events in Syria compel the world to take action, not just talk, but action. These are crimes against humanity and the international community must not stand on the sidelines.”<sup>34</sup>

In this later stage of the Syrian crisis, Israel has taken a very different posture from that assumed during the protests in both Tunis and Cairo, assuming a more positive attitude toward a possible regime change.

This, of course, does not mean that Israel has resolved its extremely conflicted relation with the ongoing uprisings, with the country pondering whether the short term instability will be rewarded with a genuine democratization process, or whether new authoritarian and Islamist regimes will rise on the ashes of the previous ones, further complicating Israel’s position in the Middle East. Until this point is further clarified, Israel's attitude will continue to be a mix of timid hope, hesitance, and skepticism.

### **Israel and its Neighbors after the “Spring”**

With Israel perceiving the Arab Spring as both a potential threat as well as an opportunity, the Israeli government has been watching closely how the relationships of the country have evolved with the new “post-Arab Spring” governments, respectively in Tunisia and Egypt.

When regarding Tunisia, Israel does not perceive the situation as particularly worrisome, nor does it see a substantial deterioration in the (already weak) ties. Even after the Islamist *Ennahda* party won the Constituent Assembly's elections in October 2011,<sup>35</sup> Tunisia has still been perceived as a potential “model” for the Arab Spring. The country is viewed as embarking in a democratic transition, while attempting to strike a balance between secular and religion values, looking to emulate Turkey, rather than Iran.

Even so, the Israeli government considers a few issues problematic. First, the future of Tunisia’s ancient Jewish community is a growing worry. On this issue *Ennahda* and its government have been giving somewhat mixed signals. The government has been firm in reiterating its desire to protect all citizens, regardless of religion. For instance, Tunisian President Moncef Marzouki participated in the

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<sup>33</sup> Tova Lazaroff, “Israel Offers Humanitarian Aid to Syrian People,” *Jerusalem Post*, March 5, 2012. <http://www.jpost.com/MiddleEast/Article.aspx?id=260451>

<sup>34</sup> Douglas Hamilton, “Israel Urges Tougher Action Against Assad,” *Reuters*, May 30, 2012. <http://www.inss.org.il/upload/%28FILE%291338453132.pdf>

<sup>35</sup> “Tunisia Coalition Agrees Top Government Posts,” *BBC News*, November 21, 2011. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-15830583>



ceremony commemorating the ten year anniversary of the 2002 al Qaeda attack against the El Ghriba synagogue in Djerba and stated “any vandalism or violence against the Tunisian Jewish people, their property or their holy sites is totally unacceptable.”<sup>36</sup> Similar declarations have also come from *Ennahda* party leader and Prime Minister Hamadi Jebali, who has expressed Tunisia's desire to welcome Jewish pilgrims to visit the El Ghriba synagogue.<sup>37</sup> Yet, in the past year, Salafist groups have publically called to wage “war against the Jews.”<sup>38</sup> For example, during Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh's visit, organized by *Ennahda* in January 2012, a group of Salafists greeted him by chanting “[k]ill the Jews.” *Ennahda* responded to these chants by condemnations, adding that it believed that: “these slogans, which contradict the spirit of Islam, (...) were uttered by a fringe group aiming to undermine Ennahda's activities and tarnish its image.”<sup>39</sup> Even so, the party has been criticized as being “too soft” on the Salafists and as not doing enough to protect the country's Jewish community from this type of attacks.<sup>40</sup>

Of course, the Hamas's visit has been a reason for concern from an Israeli perspective, as the country fears that the rise of Islamist groups in the region will strengthen the standing of Hamas, while weakening Fatah and the secular-nationalist alternative within the Palestinian society. In this sense, *Ennahda's* invitation to Hamas was seen as a partial confirmation of this trend, although in reality the visit has not translated into any concrete political cooperation.

Secondly, Israel has been closely watching the ongoing debate over Tunisia's future constitution, focusing specifically on the dispute regarding inserting a clause that would ban all ties with Israel and prohibit “normalization.”<sup>41</sup> Adding the “anti-normalization” clause in the constitution has been supported by both Islamist parties, including *Ennahda*, as well as leftist Arab nationalist parties, led by the Tunisian Communist Labour Party.<sup>42</sup> In addition to enshrining this principle in the

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<sup>36</sup> Kouichi Shirayanagi, "President Moncef Marzouki Visits Djerba Synagogue on Ten Year Anniversary of Al-Qaeda Attack," *TunisiaLive*, April 11, 2012. <http://www.tunisia-live.net/2012/04/11/president-moncef-marzouki-visits-djerba-synagogue-on-ten-year-anniversary-of-al-qaeda-attack/>

<sup>37</sup> Kouichi Shirayanagi, "What future for Tunisia's Jews?" *The Guardian*, May 9, 2012. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/may/09/tunisia-jews-pilgrimage-el-ghriba>

<sup>38</sup> Kouichi Shirayanagi, "President Moncef Marzouki Visits Djerba Synagogue on Ten Year Anniversary of Al-Qaeda Attack," *TunisiaLive*, April 11, 2012; "Ennahdha a-t-il perdu le contrôle de ses troupes?" *Le Temps*, January 8, 2012 <http://www.letemps.com.tn/article-62335.html> [French]; Ahmed Ellali, "Several Thousand Salafists Demonstrate for Islamic Law, Attack Dramatists in Tunis," *TunisiaLive*, March 25, 2012. <http://www.tunisia-live.net/2012/03/25/several-thousand-salafists-demonstrate-for-islamic-law-attack-dramatists-in-tunis/>

<sup>39</sup> "Tunisia Islamist Leader Condemns Anti-Semitic Slogans," *Agence France Presse*, January 10, 2012. <http://www.ejpress.org/article/55488>

<sup>40</sup> "Ennahdha a-t-il perdu le contrôle de ses troupes?" *Le Temps*, January 8, 2012 <http://www.letemps.com.tn/article-62335.html> [French]

<sup>41</sup> "Tunisian Reform Council Split Over Future Relations With Israel," *al-Jazeera TV*, June 17, 2011 (Available through BBC Monitoring Middle East).

<sup>42</sup> "Tunisian Parties Call For Incriminating Normalization With Israel," BBC Monitoring Middle East, July 8 2011; Oren Kessler, "Tunisia's Draft Constitution Would Ban Ties With Israel. Some Officials Want Clause

constitution, talks have also mentioned inserting a clause in the penal code to sanction individuals and companies that hold any relations with Israel.<sup>43</sup> However, there is no consensus over these issues, with *Ennahdha* actually distancing itself from the early proposal, and with the Foreign Minister Rafik Abdesslem on record opposing inserting such a clause in the constitution, while reiterating that Tunisia would never recognize Israel anyway.<sup>44</sup> In this sense, *Ennahdha* has been unequivocal in its rejection of either recognizing or upgrading ties with Israel, while also falling short from making dramatic changes in the country's foreign policy.<sup>45</sup>

The constitutional debate can be seen as a sign of the increased antagonism toward Israel, itself a consequence of the rise of political Islam in Tunisia. This trend also reflects the internal political struggle between more mainstream Islamist parties, like *Ennahdha*, and the Salafist political forces within Tunisia. Specifically, *Ennahdha's* tough stance on Israel stems from its values and history, but also is a byproduct of the party's attempt to appease the Salafist groups.

Even so, the debate regarding banning all ties with Israel should not be analyzed as just a consequence of the rise of Islamist parties, since the main proponents of the clause have actually come from the ranks of the extreme left. What's more, the ongoing discussion also reflects the general negative attitude of the domestic public opinion towards Israel. As such, anti-Israeli feelings go deeper and extend beyond the Islamist ranks.

The concerns Israel faces when analyzing post-Arab Spring Tunisia do pale when compared to the progressive strains in the security, economic, and political relations between Israel and its neighbor, Egypt. From an Israeli perspective, post-Mubarak Egypt is presenting a whole new set of challenges that go well beyond the rise of political Islam in the country.

First, Israel sees Egypt as increasingly less stable and able to provide security within its borders, which in turn has raised fears over the proliferation of jihadists groups in the Sinai area, a direct security threat to Israel. Understandably, these fears were further heightened after August 2011, when a Palestinian militant cell entered Israel from the Sinai and perpetrated an attack in the south of country, near Eilat.<sup>46</sup> The attack also served as a powerful reminder of the frailty of Israeli-Egyptian relations. In fact, while pursuing the attackers, Israel engaged in cross-border shootings,

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Removed, But Face Opposition From Islamists And Their Allies," *Jerusalem Post*, July 18, 2011.

<http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1P1-194951355.html>

<sup>43</sup> "Tunisia: Move to Criminalize Normalization of Relations with Israel in the New Penal Code," *Global Legal Monitor*, the Law Library of Congress, March 27, 2012.

[http://www.loc.gov/lawweb/servlet/lloc\\_news?disp3\\_l205403054\\_text](http://www.loc.gov/lawweb/servlet/lloc_news?disp3_l205403054_text)

<sup>44</sup> "Criminalization of Normalization with Israel Divides the Political Arena of Tunisia," *Al Byan*, March 22, 2012. <http://www.albayan.ae/one-world/arabs/2012-03-22-1.1616260> [Arabic]

<sup>45</sup> "Tunisia's Ghannouchi rules out normal ties with Israel," *Press TV*, April 1, 2012.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/234200.html>

<sup>46</sup> Richard Spencer, "Chaos On Its Borders Could See Israel's Worst Fears Realized," *Telegraph*, August 18, 2011. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/israel/8709665/Chaos-on-its-borders-could-see-Israel's-worst-fears-realised.html>

killing five Egyptian security officers.<sup>47</sup> In turn, this led to massive anti-Israel protests within Egypt, culminating with the Egyptian government—pressured by the public outcry—threatening to withdraw its Ambassador from Tel Aviv.<sup>48</sup> While the bilateral diplomatic crisis was diffused after Israel expressed regret for the deaths and announced an investigation into the matter,<sup>49</sup> Israel remained largely unpopular on the Egyptian street. In turn, this led to a fully-fledged assault on the Israeli Embassy on September 9, 2011<sup>50</sup>—marking an all-time low in bilateral relations.

Following the August attack, Israel has allowed Egypt to deploy more troops in Sinai to conduct counterterrorism operations,<sup>51</sup> while the Israeli government has continued to coordinate with Egyptian security forces.<sup>52</sup> Even so, the Israeli government remains worried about the perceived power vacuum within Sinai, especially after the August 2012 attack, where a group of militants assaulted an Egyptian security outpost in Sinai, killing sixteen soldiers, and then attempting to cross the border into Israel.<sup>53</sup>

Secondly, in the months since the fall of the Mubarak regime, Israel has been increasingly concerned over the progressive deterioration of the economic ties with Egypt, especially regarding its willingness and capacity to export gas to Israel. In the past year, pipelines delivering Egyptian gas to Israel were periodically attacked<sup>54</sup> until Egypt decided to unilaterally suspend gas deliveries in April 2012.<sup>55</sup> Both Egyptian and Israeli authorities were quick to diffuse the crisis and assert that the suspension was not motivated by political reasons. Egyptian authorities referred to both the “unfair” deal Israel got under Mubarak, as well as to Israel’s alleged agreement violations as the causes of the

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<sup>47</sup> Dina Zayed And Marwa Awad, "Egypt To Create Border Buffer; Hundreds Protest Angrily At Israeli Embassy After Five Security Officers Killed Last Week," *The Gazette*, August 23, 2011. (Available from LexisNexis).

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Joel Greenberg, "Israel Mulls Ties With A Changed Egypt," *Washington Post*, August 28, 2011.

[http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/israel-mulls-ties-with-a-changed-egypt/2011/08/25/gIQA3Sc6iJ\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/israel-mulls-ties-with-a-changed-egypt/2011/08/25/gIQA3Sc6iJ_story.html); Yaakov Katz, “Barak Apologizes to Egypt over Security Officers’ Deaths,” *The Jerusalem Post*, August 20, 2011.

<http://www.jpost.com/DiplomacyAndPolitics/Article.aspx?id=234621>

<sup>50</sup> "Crowds Attack Israel Embassy In Cairo," *Al-Jazeera*, September 10, 2011.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2011/09/201199225334494935.html>

<sup>51</sup> "Israel Considers Egypt's Request To Deploy More Troops In Sinai," *BBC Monitoring Middle East*, August 31, 2011.

<sup>52</sup> Yaakov Katz "Israel, Egypt To Work Together Against Terror," *Jerusalem Post*, February 24, 2012.

<http://www.jpost.com/Defense/Article.aspx?id=259104>

<sup>53</sup> Benedetta Berti, Zack Gold, "Security Vacuum in the Sinai," *The National Interest*, August 10, 2012.

<http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/the-security-vacuum-the-sinai-7317?page=show>

<sup>54</sup> "Egypt; Gas Pipeline in El Arish Blown up for the Tenth Time" *Egypt State Information Service*, December 19, 2011 (available from LexisNexis).

<sup>55</sup> Oren Kessler and Herb Keinon: "Egypt Terminates Gas Flow To Israel" *Jerusalem Post*, April 23, 2012.

<http://www.jpost.com/DiplomacyAndPolitics/Article.aspx?id=267112>

suspension.<sup>56</sup> However, the interruption of the gas exports is indeed a sign of the ongoing deterioration of a bilateral relation that was never fully “normalized.”

In this sense, both the deteriorating security situation in Sinai and the downgrading of economic ties are related. Both reflect the main issue that Israel has faced since the collapse of the Mubarak regime, namely, the souring of the political and diplomatic relations with Egypt. This trend can be equally represented by both the arrest of an alleged Israeli “spy” in June 2011 (later release in a “face saving” prisoner swap in October 2011),<sup>57</sup> as well as by the already mentioned violent storming of the Israeli Embassy only a few months later.

The latter episode also showed the SCAF’s internal tensions, focused on diffusing internal unrest, as well as preserving calm with Israel and good ties with the United States, and growing anti-Israel public opinion.

These anti-Israel demonstrations can also serve to assess the impact that Islamist groups are having in shaping the foreign policy debate in the “new” Egypt. Again, even more than in Tunisia, anti-Israeli feelings within Egypt run very deep and go beyond the influence of Islamist parties. However, Islamist parties have been adding fuel to the anti-Israeli fire. For instance, in March 2012 the Islamist-dominated lower house of the Egyptian Parliament issued a declaration calling Israel the number one enemy of the country.<sup>58</sup>

From an Israeli perspective this type of rhetoric is certainly troublesome. At the same time, Israel is also aware that the inflammatory statement adopted by the lower house of the Parliament is only declaratory and has no concrete policy effect. As such, Israel has been attempting to understand the difference between the anti-Israeli discourse employed by Islamist parties for electoral gains, and the actual policies they intend to implement. Furthermore, Israel also seeks to understand the different postures of the main Islamist parties on this issue, assuming that political Islam is far from monolithic within Egypt. Both questions are seen as crucial to understanding the future of the Israeli-Egyptian relation, as well as the stability of the peace treaty—which is certainly seen by Israel as the number one issue in determining such future.

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<sup>56</sup> Shmuel Even, "Egypt's Revocation of the Natural Gas Agreement with Israel: Strategic Implications," *INSS Insight* No. 332, May 6, 2012. <http://www.inss.org.il/publications.php?cat=21&incat=&read=6488>

<sup>57</sup> Yaakov Katz; Hilary Leila Krieger, "Alleged Israeli 'Spy' Held In Cairo Is US Immigrant," *Reuters* and *Jerusalem Post*, June 14, 2011. <http://www.jpost.com/MiddleEast/Article.aspx?id=224873>; Kristen Chick, "Egypt Saves Face in Swap of Alleged Israeli Spy Ilan Grapel," *The Christian Science Monitor*, October 27, 2011. <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2011/1027/Egypt-saves-face-in-swap-of-alleged-Israeli-spy-Ilan-Grapel>

<sup>58</sup> Zvi Mazel, "Egypt Steers Uneasy Course In Dealings With Israel." *Jerusalem Post*, March 14, 2012. <http://www.pressdisplay.com/pressdisplay/viewer.aspx>

Since Mubarak's fall, in fact, the SCAF has clearly pledged to "honor previous commitments, including the peace treaty with Israel."<sup>59</sup> However, there had initially been a lot more ambiguity on the issue coming from Egypt's main Islamist political parties.

First, the Muslim Brotherhood expressed an ambivalent attitude regarding the peace treaty with Israel, alternating conciliatory remarks with "war declarations" and pledges to end the treaty.<sup>60</sup> This ambiguity is not surprising. Anti-Zionism has been a strong feature of the Muslim Brotherhood since the founding of the group in the late 1920s. In addition, over the last decades, the Brotherhood has proven a champion of the Palestinian cause, while preserving ties with the Palestinian Hamas, which itself started as the Gaza-based branch of the Brotherhood. Similarly, within Egypt, the group had opposed the peace treaty back in 1979 and has, in the past decades, been unequivocal in rejecting any normalization process. As such, acting to end the peace treaty with Israel would be in line with both the Brotherhood's history, as well as its ideology.

Yet, in practice, the Muslim Brotherhood has also shown a remarkable understanding of *realpolitik*, and specifically of the correlation between preserving the peace treaty and continuing to receive badly needed U.S. aid. On this matter, when an Egyptian-American crisis broke out in February 2012 over the investigations of several civil society groups and democracy activists (including a number of U.S. citizens) and the United States threatened to withhold aid, the Brotherhood message was clear: "We (Egypt) are a party (to the treaty) and we will be harmed, so it is our right to review the matter."<sup>61</sup>

As a result of this internal struggle between ideology and pragmatism, the group initially adopted an ambivalent position on the peace treaty. While it has not ruled out reviewing some terms of the treaty, the Brotherhood has largely reiterated that it will neither attempt to abrogate it nor put it to a national referendum (an option the group had initially raised).<sup>62</sup> However, from an Israeli perspective, even the prospect of "revisions" is seen as highly alarming and the country will likely use its influence, as well as rely on the United States—the guarantor of the agreement—to make sure this option is shelved. This is because Israel sees opening the treaty up for negotiation as tantamount to its collapse. At the same time, Israel has also been increasingly willing to let Egypt deploy more of its troops in the Sinai, opting for a *de facto*, rather than a *de jure*, revision of some the treaty terms. On the issue of preserving the peace treaty, Egypt's second main Islamist force, the

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<sup>59</sup>Michael Sharnoff, "Post-Mubarak Egyptian Attitudes Toward Israel," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, October 2011. <http://www.fpri.org/enotes/2011/201110.sharnoff.egyptandisrael.html>

<sup>60</sup>Yaakov Lappin, "Muslim Brotherhood Leader: 'Prepare Egyptians For War With Israel,'" *Jerusalem Post*, February 1, 2011. <http://www.jpost.com/Headlines/Article.aspx?id=206130>; Eli Lake, "Muslim Brotherhood Seeks End to Israel Treaty," *The Washington Times*, February 4, 2011.

<sup>61</sup>Tom Perry, "Aid Cuts Could Put Egypt-Israel Peace In Jeopardy," *Reuters*, February 17, 2012.

<http://www.montrealgazette.com/news/cuts+could+Egypt+Israel+peace+jeopardy/6167181/story.html>

<sup>62</sup>Zvi Bar'el, "Muslim Brotherhood: We Will Not Put Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty To Referendum," *HaAretz*, April 22, 2012.



Salafi al-Nour party, has also proven ambiguous, declaring this it would seek to alter some of its terms, while pledging not to revoke it.<sup>63</sup>

Israel considers the Muslim Brotherhood's ascent as a potential threat for two additional reasons: the possibility of an improvement in the Egyptian-Iranian relation, as well as the positive effect the Brotherhood's political power could have on Hamas. With respect to Iran, leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood have urged Egypt to upgrade its ties with the Islamic Republic,<sup>64</sup> even though the alleged *rapprochement* is far from significant at this stage. On the contrary, Egypt's foreign policy is aiming at preserving good ties with all main regional players, from Iran to Saudi Arabia.

Similarly, Israel fears that the pre-existing ties between the Brotherhood and Hamas will both boost Hamas politically, as well as allow the flow of weapons to and from Gaza. However, in reality, Egypt has continued—beyond its rhetoric—to hold a tight grip on Gaza, also to the detriment of Gaza's civilian population. Furthermore, when it comes to empowering Hamas and encouraging “radicalization,” it actually appears that the Muslim Brotherhood has instead at least partially used its influence on the group to pressure the Gaza-based Islamist organization to work toward true reconciliation with Fatah. The group has also said it agrees with Hamas's *de facto* acceptance of coexistence of Israel, while specifying the Muslim Brotherhood would not object to a two-states solution “provided that this state within the '67 borders is completely sovereign in air and in sea and in land.”<sup>65</sup>

These declarations are seen as encouraging by some political observers within Israel; others remain more skeptical and point out that accepting an *interim* two-state solution is very different from relinquishing all outstanding claims and recognizing the end of the conflict. Based on these contrasting assessments, there is an ongoing policy and scholarly debate within Israel on whether the political rise of the Muslim Brotherhood will help to moderate, rather than radicalize, Hamas. This second theory has been at least partially validated following the last outbreak of hostilities between Israel and Hamas in November 2012. On that occasion, Egypt played an important role in diffusing the conflict and bringing the parties to agree to a ceasefire.

In this context of deliberate ambiguity and Israeli anxiety over the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood, Israel has been preoccupied with the Egyptian Presidential elections and with the victory of Muslim

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<sup>63</sup> "Senior Egyptian Politician Rejects Peace Between Egypt, Israel," *Fars News Agency*, December 28, 2011. <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9007279262>

<sup>64</sup> "Politician: US, Israel, S. Arabia Trying to Block Resumption of Iran-Egypt Ties," *Fars News Agency*, July 13, 2011, <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9004221052>; "Egypt's Leading Political Party Stresses Improving Ties with Iran," *Fars News Agency*, December 18, 2011. <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9007277804>

<sup>65</sup> David D. Kirkpatrick; Mayy el Sheikh, "Islamist Victors In Egypt Seeking Shift By Hamas," *New York Times*, March 24, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/24/world/middleeast/egypts-election-victors-seek-shift-by-hamas-to-press-israel.html?pagewanted=all>

Brotherhood's Mohamed Morsi, who was largely perceived as far more antagonistic to Israel than its rival, Ahmed Shafik.<sup>66</sup>

But regardless of the rise of the Brotherhood in institutional politics, Israel's policy with respect to Egypt will have to adjust to a different political arena. Clearly, the new bilateral relationship will not be forged only with the new political establishment and the army, but—for the first time—public opinion will also have a say in how the relationship continues. At the moment, this represents more of a threat than an opportunity to Israel, given that over half of the Egyptian population appears to favor annulling the peace treaty with Israel, while 85 percent view Israel negatively.<sup>67</sup>

As a result, Israel's policy toward Egypt in the short-term likely will be “minimalist,” focusing on preserving the peace treaty while beefing up security at its own border. Other more ambitious goals, like improving ties and reopening the “normalization” chapter, appear less realistic and will likely be shelved.

And indeed, this is in line with Israel's policy so far with respect to the Arab Spring. The country first chose to keep a low profile when responding to the shifting regional dynamics. This choice was the result of two considerations. First, Israel—aware of its own unpopularity in the Middle East—wanted to stress that it would not interfere with local political processes. Secondly, the country truly lacked the political and diplomatic tools to have a direct impact, thus acting as an outsider.

In this sense the policies adopted have been largely passive, more focused on maintaining the peace treaties—both with Egypt as well as with Jordan—while postponing more ambitious political goals.

Within Israel, much debate has taken place on whether such a “passive” approach should be supplemented with a more active component. For instance, several Israeli political observers argue that to improve its regional standing in the “new” Middle East, Israel needs to revive the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Specifically, Israel needs to “to ease the burden on the residents of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and inter alia, to reach understandings with Hamas (...) and withdraw its objection in principle to a thaw in relations between Fatah and Hamas (...).”<sup>68</sup> Progress in the Israeli-Palestinian arena and committing to review the West Bank issue is then seen as crucial to help Israel's standing in the region. In other words, in addition to responding to the Arab Spring by investing in security and beefing up the borders, there is much debate within Israel on how to adopt a more proactive political stance.

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<sup>66</sup> David D. Kirkpatrick; Isabel Kershner, "Israel Is Anxiously Watching Egyptian Vote," *New York Times*, May 26, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/26/world/middleeast/israel-anxiously-watches-egyptian-election.html>

<sup>67</sup> Oren Kessler, "Analysis: Unrest Mars Egypt Army's Sterling Image," *Jerusalem Post*, November 24, 2011. <http://www.jpost.com/MiddleEast/Article.aspx?id=246767>; Oren Kessler, "Sleepless in Jerusalem," *Foreign Policy*, May 24, 2012. [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/05/24/the\\_view\\_from\\_jerusalem](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/05/24/the_view_from_jerusalem)

<sup>68</sup> Anat Kurz, "The Arab Spring and the Israeli-Palestinian Arena," in *One Year of the Arab Spring: Global and Regional Implications*, Guzansky, Yoel and Heller, Mark A., eds. (INSS Memorandum No. 113, Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, March 2012), p. 69.



The current policy on Syria faces the same debate, with the political arena divided. On the one hand, many affirm that Israel cannot do anything beyond providing humanitarian assistance. On the other, some political observers argue that the country should either provide safe haven to Syrian refugees, share intelligence on the Syrian regime with the world, or even covertly offer to help the opposition. However, at the moment, the policy on Syria has largely remained passive' fearing that direct involvement would backlash on Israel while also hurting the stand of the anti-Assad opposition.

### **Israel and the Arab Spring—Reactions and Policies**

Since the Arab Spring first began in Tunisia in December 2010, a process of rapid social and political transformation has been occurring within the Middle East. In the cases of Egypt and Tunisia, the initial protests led to a mostly nonviolent regime change and to the demise of old authoritarian regimes. In other cases, like in Libya, the collapse of the old government came as a result of a bloody internal war.

And still the turmoil is not over. There are several countries in the region—from Syria to Bahrain—where the anti-regime protests are still in full swing. And even in countries where the Arab Spring has not “arrived” full force—like Lebanon or Jordan—the impact of the ongoing regional transformations can be felt locally. In other words, since December 2010, the political ground has been shaking in the entire region.

In this context, Israel has been following the ongoing political dynamics with a mix of hope and fear. From an Israeli perspective, the Arab Spring can be seen as a potential threat: both the increased volatility of the region and the rise of political Islam are in fact perceived as worrisome trends. At the same time, however, the ongoing social and political transformations could represent an opportunity for the country to begin a new, more positive, chapter in its regional relations—especially if the democratization processes succeed and result in the creation of more open and pluralistic countries. However, although Israel believes that “democracies do not go at war with each other” and that a more free and democratic Middle East can indeed be an asset, still there is widespread skepticism toward the capacity of the Arab Spring to deliver such results.

Looking specifically at Egypt, the consensus seems to be that things will likely get worse before they get better. This impression is fueled by the souring of the diplomatic, economic, and political relations with Egypt since the collapse of the Mubarak regime, as well as by the unequivocal rise of Islamist parties—like the Muslim Brotherhood—who have adopted openly anti-Israel stances. In addition, the negative feelings the Egyptian public opinion holds against Israel further indicate that the state of the bilateral relations may continue to deteriorate in the coming months.

These mixed feelings have resulted in an ambivalent posture toward the ongoing regional transformation. Israel has largely attempted to weather the storm produced by the uprisings. At the moment, the priorities are preserving the existing peace treaties with both Jordan and Egypt, while focusing on investing on border security. In the longer term, there is a debate within the Israeli

society over what steps—starting with committing to deliver concrete progress in the Israeli-Palestinian arena—the country needs to take to adopt a more proactive attitude and improve its regional standing.