Comparative Assessment of Israel's Foreign Policy Response to the 'Arab Spring'

Amichai Magen[abc]

[a] Lauder School of Government, Diplomacy and Strategy, IDC, Herzliya

[b] Governance and Political Violence Programme, ICT, IDC, Herzliya

[c] Hoover Institution, Stanford University
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Comparative Assessment of Israel's Foreign Policy Response to the 'Arab Spring'

AMICHAI MAGEN*,**,***

*Lauder School of Government, Diplomacy and Strategy, IDC, Herzliya;
**Governance and Political Violence Programme, ICT, IDC, Herzliya;
***Hoover Institution, Stanford University

ABSTRACT   This article analyses Israel's foreign policy response to the 'Arab Spring' in comparative perspective. Following the analytical framework shared by all contributions to this Special Issue, the article addresses four main dimensions in as many parts. Part I examines Israel's initial reactions to the advent of the popular upheavals and regime changes in the Arab world in 2011–2014 and explores how those reactions have evolved over time. Part II identifies Israel's main policy objectives in relation to events in the region and particularly its immediate neighbours: Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. Part III examines the instruments which Israel has used, and eschewed, in pursuit of its policy objectives. Finally, part IV undertakes a theoretically informed analysis with the aim of explaining Israel's distinctive strategic posture and policy responses to the events of the 'Arab Spring' thus far.

KEY WORDS: Israel, Arab Spring, Policy, Response

Introduction

Few states in the world not enduring the upheavals of the 'Arab Spring' themselves have a higher, more immediate stake in its causes, convulsions and consequences than Israel. This article analyses, in comparative perspective, Israel's response to the wave of anti-regime uprisings and popular revolts that erupted in parts of North Africa, the Levant and Arabian Peninsula since December 2010.

Correspondence Address: Amichai Magen, Lauder School of Government, Diplomacy and Strategy, IDC, P.O Box 167, 4610101 Herzliya, Israel. E-mail: amichaim@idc.ac.il

Based on original interviews with Israeli officials, documentary materials and media sources, it applies the analytical framework shared by all contributions to this Special Issue to address: Israel's assessment of the 'Arab Spring' and its self-perception vis-à-vis the regional tumult; its strategic objectives and goals; policy instruments used and avoided; and explanatory factors accounting for Israel's reactions. By doing so, the article sheds light on the variable responses of key regional and global actors, including the EU, to the unfolding events of the 'Arab Spring' and so, contributes to a finer grained, better-grounded understanding of EU international actorness. Moreover, the article adds to a nascent corpus of scholarship examining the EU and Israel comparatively (Magen 2012a; Tovias and Magen 2005).

Part I examines Israel's assessment and institutional reaction to the advent of the wave of anti-regime uprisings and popular revolts that erupted in parts of North Africa, the Levant and Arabian Peninsula in the period between December 2010 and mid-2011. Unlike the EU, US, Turkey and Russia, Israeli officials consciously avoided a regional approach to the upheavals, focusing attention on their most immediate neighbours, particularly Israel's most populous and important southern neighbour: Egypt. It then traces the evolution of Israeli assessments since the onset of civil war in Syria in mid-2011, identifying internal dilemmas about how best to handle the Syrian crisis and its spillovers into Lebanon and Jordan. It distinguishes between three main phases of Israeli assessments of cross-cutting trends affecting its national security, and identifying periods of heightened and reduced Israeli anxiety about regional dynamics.

Israel's initial interpretation and evolving evaluations produced a comparatively coherent set of policy objectives relatively early on. These are examined in Part II. Significantly, policy do's and don'ts were derived as part and parcel of the structured policy deliberations undertaken by the country's security and foreign policy establishment, under the aegis of the National Security Council in early to mid-2011, and adjusted incrementally since. The evidence gathered indicates policy chiefs conceive of the country's strategic objectives in terms of three broadly hierarchical policy priorities. These are meant to be mutually reinforcing but are, in reality, not free of internal tensions. In this context, Israel stands out in adopting overwhelmingly, but not exclusively, defensive, non-idealist goals designed to insulate its population and economy from the tumults in its vicinity.

Part III undertakes a theoretically informed analysis of the policy instruments Israel has deployed, considered deploying or avoided in its strategic posture vis-à-vis regional events. Here too, the evidence indicates that Israel constitutes a significant outlier, both in its use of military force and deliberate avoidance of policy instruments heavily relied upon by other external actors, especially the US, EU and Turkey.

Finally, Part IV draws upon the three main theoretical traditions pertaining to state action in international politics, in an effort to explain Israel's policy responses. To accurately capture the motivations and limitations of Israel's reaction, it argues, it is necessary to not only appreciate the country's defensive Realism, but also its self-understanding as an actor and the constraints imposed by domestic popular and elite preferences.

Taken together, Israel's posture is essentially designed to insulate itself from the regional upheaval and is driven primarily by lack of faith in its neighbour's ability to liberalize and its own capacity to influence them positively.

Israel's Assessment of the 'Arab Spring'

The burst of popular protests and anti-regime uprisings in Tunisia, Libya, Yemen and Egypt, which took place in the six-week period between late December 2010 and Hosni Mubarak's resignation on 11 February 2011, threw the Israeli national security and foreign policy system into a whirlwind of reflection and strategic assessments. Much like their American, European, Russian and Turkish counterparts (see respective articles in this special issue), Israeli analysts did not predict either the timing or ferocity of the eruptions, and were surprised both by the scale and seemingly contagious nature of the revolts, and the apparent ease with which protesters managed to dislodge from power two of the Arab world's most prominent and experienced dictators, presidents Ben-Ali and Mubarak.[1]

The Analytical Challenge and Initial Assessment

Senior Israeli officials describe what amounts to a three-phase initial assessment process that took place within the country's security and foreign policy establishment during the several tumultuous months following December 2010 — a process whose broad institutional and methodological legacy has endured.

While the anti-regime uprising in Tunisia did not instantly jolt Israeli officialdom, the spread of mass protests to Israel's immediate southern neighbour in January 2011 and the events leading to the fall of Mubarak in February, grabbed the attention of policy-makers' time at the highest echelons of the government — including the prime minister himself, his national security advisor and military secretary. This early involvement of the prime minister and his most intimate circle of advisors is indicative of the seriousness attributed by Israel to the events in Egypt and, from 15 February 2011, the advent of civil war in Libya.

According to Maj. Gen. (ret.) Yaakov Amidror,[2] the most immediate phase of official response involved an institutional recognition that a potentially monumental event was in motion, and deciding upon the appropriate governmental infrastructure and methodology needed for gathering and analysing the large amount of disparate information that was flowing from both open and clandestine sources.[3]

The institutional configuration selected to manage this epistemological and analytical challenge involved three main circles: first, the NSC was tasked with coordinating the gathering of information and intelligence estimates from Israel's various security and foreign policy agencies; with conducting independent analysis; and creating policy briefs for the prime minister which were then discussed by him and the national security advisor. A second, purposefully separate process of consultation directly

vis-à-vis the prime minister, occurs through the PM's military secretary (*Mazkir Tzva'i*), who funnels to the prime minister the estimates of the military and clandestine services, Mossad and the Israel Security Agency. Finally, a portion of the government cabinet, often referred to as the security political cabinet and composed of the PM, the minister of defence, minister of foreign affairs and two or three additional ministers, confers and guides binding government decisions.

The second phase of initial assessment entailed intensive discussions, organized under the aegis of the NSC, with the participation of the main national security and foreign affairs agencies, as well as external experts. Between February and June 2011, for example, Prime Minister Netanyahu met twice with ad hoc groups of some 20 prominent Israeli analysts and academics — regional experts, economists, historians, political scientists and lawyers. Collectively, these deliberations are described by Israeli officials who took part in the consultations as 'broad-ranging', 'rich' and 'unbounded' strategic assessment exercises.[4]

The third and final phase of initial assessment described by officials involved a conscious, structured initiative to define Israel's national interests vis-à-vis events in the region, and to distil a clear set of strategic principles that would help translate those interests into concrete 'policy do's and don'ts'.[5] Indeed, it was decided that, once defined and clearly articulated, the strategic principles would bind all relevant agencies in the country — from the military and clandestine security forces to the diplomatic service — in order to promote tight coherence in what were understood to be highly sensitive matters.[6] Inconsistency in official Israeli statements and signals (not ordinarily an unheard of phenomenon) was perceived to be unacceptable in this context, given the conditions of high volatility and the risk of unintended consequences leading to unwanted entanglements.[7]

It is noteworthy that unlike their American, European and perhaps Turkish counterparts (see Ayata 2014; Dandashly 2014; Huber 2014; Noutcheva 2014), Israeli policy-makers appear to have concluded early on that while the upheavals in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Bahrain, Yemen and Syria displayed some common features, treating the events of the 'Arab Spring' as a region-wide phenomenon was a mistake because the apparent similarities were superficial, likely to be ephemeral and risked distorting policy analysis. Accordingly, Israeli officials emphasize that as the Western media was speaking about the 'Arab Spring' in broad regional terms, they were warned 'to resist homogenizing events' and to examine each arena — especially Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Palestinian territories — separately.[8]

Israeli decision-makers drew several conceptual guidelines from their initial assessment process. The first was a keen sense that Israel's immediate geopolitical environment has in fact entered a profound transformative process, whose causes, dynamics and outcomes were poorly understood and needed to be carefully examined as a matter of national security priority. As protests and uprisings proliferated from Tunisia, Egypt and Libya to Oman, Bahrain, Yemen, Morocco and then Syria in the spring of 2011, Israeli analysts noted both the fluidity of the situation and the

possibility that the Middle East that would emerge from the tumult would be very different from the one that existed prior to January 2011. As one official put it: 'It was clear we were witnessing a singular, historic event and that new elements, new dynamics were entering [reality in the Middle East] that no one really understood, or even knew how to analyze'.[9] In this respect, at least, initial Israeli reactions were not dissimilar from those of their counterparts' in Europe and the US (Dandashly 2014; Huber 2014; Noutcheva 2014).

Among the new elements and dynamics identified by Israeli analysts as being novel and significant were the mobilizing forces of social media, particularly in Tunisia and Egypt, and questions about the nature and relative power of opposition groups challenging the Ghaddafi regime in Libya and Assad regime in Syria.[10]

More distinctively, official assessments emphasized the need for Israel to conduct itself with extreme caution. Unlike Turkey in particular (Ayata 2014), the Israeli establishment's reflexive posture was one of tense observation and circumspection, not open-handedness or readiness for engagement. The assumption undergirding this position was that the breaking of the regional status quo was essentially hazardous for Israel and that, since the dangers were still poorly understood, Israel must first avoid strategic blunders by adopting a 'wait and see' approach.

Where Israeli assessments diverged most sharply with American and European perceptions of the same events is in relation to prospects of democratization in the MENA region (Dandashly 2014; Huber 2014; Noutcheva 2014). As a general rule, Israeli policy chiefs did not perceive the revolts as harbingers of political liberalization and were alarmed by what they viewed as dangerously naïve American readings to the contrary. As early as 2 February 2011, for example, Israeli officials reportedly warned that the unfolding revolution in Egypt resembled 'Tehran 1979', rather than 'Berlin 1989' (Zacharia 2011). After conducting a specific consultation on the language to be used to refer to events in the region, the military intelligence branch of the IDF officially rejected the term 'Arab Spring', deeming it misleading and decreed that the military use the phrase 'the regional upheaval' (*Ha'Taltala Ha'Ezorit*), instead (Harel and Issacarov 2011). Many Israeli commentators referred to the events as the 'Arab Winter' or the 'Islamist Winter' (Lars 2013, 7).

Israel's interpretation of the regional upheavals was set most forcefully by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu himself. In his first comment on the anti-regime uprising in Tunisia, on 16 January 2011, Netanyahu eschewed any reference to democracy, emphasizing the dangers inherent in an unstable Middle East: 'the region we live in is unstable … we see that in several places in the geographical space where we live' (Hugi 2011). Netanyahu reiterated the danger of instability and the need for vigilance in a speech marking the opening of the Knesset winter session in October 2011 (Netanyahu 2011a).

Netanyahu's statements regarding the Arab Spring display significant variance, depending both on whether he addressed domestic or international audiences, and the nature of international audience addressed. For

example, Netanyahu did refer to the possibility of democratization in the MENA region and adopted more optimistic, conciliatory language in his September 2011 speech before the UN General Assembly, declaring:

> I extend [a hand in peace] to the people of Libya and Tunisia, with admiration for those trying to build a democratic future … I extend it to the people of Syria, Lebanon and Iran, with awe at the courage of those fighting brutal repression. Netanyahu 2011b)

In contrast, in a May 2013 joint press conference with Russian President Vladimir Putin, Netanyahu again made no reference to prospects of democratization, instead stating: 'the region around is us very stormy, unstable and explosive' (Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2013).

Other Israeli leaders expressed different interpretations. Former President Shimon Peres opined that Arab nations faced a profound choice: 'to join the new global age of democratic peace and liberal economy, or to stay clinging to its history of closed societies and autocracy' and stated that 'Israel welcomes the wind of change and sees a window of opportunity' (Peres 2011). In a similar vein, former Israeli Deputy Prime Minister Natan Sharansky challenged the idea that authoritarian stability was good for Israel and called upon Israel and the West to 'bet on freedom in Egypt' (Sharansky 2011). These more open-handed, risk-tolerant voices were a distinct minority already in 2011, and largely petered out as the initial hope of the 'Arab Spring' turned increasingly sour in 2012–2014.

Evolving Assessments: mid-2011 to mid-2014

Though hardly self-contained or neatly demarcated, Israel's evolving assessments of events in the region since mid-2011 can be broadly divided into three phases: a period of high-anxiety marked by the rise to power in Egypt of the Muslim Brotherhood and seeming strengthening of the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah-HAMAS axis; a phase of reduced anxiety resulting from the return of the old guard in Egypt, and the weakening of Hezbollah and HAMAS and, most recently, the emergence of new concerns focused on the proliferation of areas of limited statehood in the MENA region — especially Iraq and Syria — the growing presence of Global Jihad organizations on Israel's borders and resurgent HAMAS rocket fire, culminating in a third round of major HAMAS–Israel hostilities in July 2014.

In the 17-month period between the fall of Mubarak in February 2011 and the Egyptian military's ousting of the Muslim Brotherhood from power in July 2013, Israeli officials and analysts were generally rattled by regional dynamics, particularly by what they saw as three pernicious potential consequences of the Egyptian — and, to a lesser extent, Tunisian and Libyan — revolutions.

First, the Israeli establishment assumed — wrongly as it turned out — that the convincing electoral victories of the Muslim Brotherhood and *Salafist* Al-Nur party in Egypt in 2011/2012 meant that well-organized

Islamist political movements have 'hijacked the revolution' and would inspire other Islamist revolutions throughout the MENA region (Heller 2012). Ennahda's convincing October 2011 electoral victory in Tunisia strengthened this view. Once entrenched in power, Israeli officials feared the rule of the Islamists would become authoritarian, virulently anti-Israel and irreversible. Analysts warned that the wave of electoral victories for the Muslim Brotherhood — which they saw as having begun already with the election of the AKP in Turkey in 2002 and continued in the 2006 HAMAS electoral victory in Gaza — would prove that when Islamists win elections, MENA countries end up in a 'one man, one vote, one time' outcome (Brom 2012, 19).

Second, with the election of Mohamed Morsi to the presidency in Egypt in June 2012, Israeli strategists feared that the new rulers of Egypt — inexperienced, emboldened by their new electoral victories and eager to prove their anti-Zionist *bona fides* — would become daring, even reckless, in their anti-Israel policies. Some Israeli officials went as far as expressing concern that under Morsi, Egypt would renege upon the Egyptian–Israeli peace treaty and would support the HAMAS government in Gaza at the expense of the Palestinian authority — thus both energizing HAMAS's armed attacks and weakening those Palestinians factions willing to engage in peace negotiations with Israel (Brom 2012).

Throughout 2012 and early 2013, Israeli concerns were exacerbated by negative signals from Cairo. Unlike Mubarak, Morsi refused to deal directly with Israeli officials or even refer to Israel by name. In March 2012, HAMAS was permitted to open offices in Cairo and in October 2012, the Muslim Brotherhood's Supreme Guide, Sheik Mohammed Badie, called for 'Jihad to liberate Jerusalem from the Israeli occupation' (Karmon 2013, 113)

Finally, Israel saw the weakening of Cairo's central authority as enabling non-state armed groups to exploit power vacuums, particularly in the Sinai Peninsula, and increase weapon smuggling from Iran, Sudan and Libya to HAMAS and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) in Gaza. Lack of effective Egyptian control of Sinai, Israel feared, would create an even tenser regional environment in the Sinai–Gaza–Israel triangle, increase threats of cross-border terror attacks and rocket fire and, most dangerously, enhance the risk of confrontation between the Egyptian and Israeli militaries as a result of strategic miscalculation (Heller 2012; Inbar 2012).

Israel's anxiety reduced markedly in the latter half of 2013 and early 2014, as the result of three developments, none of which it foresaw or actively shaped. The demise of the Muslim Brotherhood and return of the Egyptian military to power in August 2013 produced a quiet but unmistakable sigh of relief in Israel. The stunning political defeat suffered by the Muslim Brotherhood in the Arab world's most populous and important nation — a defeat consolidated by the overwhelming victory in presidential elections of Mubarak's former Defence Minister Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, in May 2014 — stemmed what until then appeared like an uninterrupted wave of success for Islamist parties in the region.

El-Sisi's rise also spurred the Egyptian military to take determined action against what it saw as a growing threat to Egypt's own security and stability from radical Islamist groups based in Sinai (see Yaari 2012; Kirkpatrick 2013). Cooperative security ties between Israel and Egypt have been bolstered to unprecedented levels, the new–old Egyptian regime has placed unprecedented pressure on HAMAS and the risk of Egyptian–Israeli military confrontation has all but evaporated (Yaari 2014).

As mass protests spread from Tunisia and Egypt to Libya, Jordan, Bahrain and even Saudi Arabia in 2011, Israeli observers were alarmed by what they saw as the disproportionate, adverse impact of the Arab Spring on the more moderate, pragmatic Sunni Arab states of the region, and the parallel empowerment of the Shi'a dominated Iran–Syria–Hezbollah– HAMAS axis. Implicit in this analysis was the perception that the MENA was in the midst of a grand Sunni–Shi'a struggle; that it was overwhelmingly Sunni Arab states that were vulnerable to the regional tumult; and that the weakening of those states would greatly worsen Israel's security situation by strengthening the hand of Iran and its allies in their three-decade shadow war with Israel (Katz and Hendel 2012).

For Israel, the grim 'moderates down, extremists up' calculus altered considerably since early 2012. As Syria degenerated into violence and as its civil war metastasized into a regional conflict that increasingly sapped the energies of both Assad and his Iranian-backed Lebanese ally, Hezbollah, Israel saw the regional strategic balance shifting in its favour (Elliott 2014). Moreover, the elimination by June 2014 of the Assad regime's deadly arsenal of chemical weapons — under the auspices of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons — has reduced the danger of a future Syrian WMD attack on Israel.

Regarding the question of the desirability of the survival of the Assad regime itself, Israel faces a thorny dilemma. On the one hand, the fall of the Allawite regime would constitute a strategic blow to Iran and would effectively cut supply routes from Iran to Hezbollah in Lebanon — both, highly desirable outcomes from Israel's perspective. On the other hand, Israel has learned to live with 'the devil it knows' (Jones and Milton-Edwards 2013) and there are those in Israel who fear that what will emerge from the ashes of a post-Assad Syria will be either a powerful and hostile Sunni Islamist regime or a chaotic power vacuum that would favour radical Salafi Islamism (see Spyer 2013).

Like their American, European and Russian counterparts (Dandashly 2014; Dannreuther 2014; Huber 2014; Noutcheva 2014), Israeli analysts were initially split on the question of the effectiveness of the Syrian opposition and whether it will be able to topple the Assad regime, with or without external assistance.[11] However, the longer Assad remains in power, the stronger the assumption that his regime will ultimately survive. For hard-nosed Israeli strategists who do not see the possibility of a more liberal, peaceful regime emerging in Syria, a scenario in which the Assad regime clings on to power but is militarily weakened, serves Israel's security interests rather well.

In the meantime, Hezbollah's mobilization in support of the Assad regime has cost the Iran-sponsored Shi'a militia dearly, both in Syria and

increasingly, at home in Lebanon. To date, Hezbollah has committed some 5000 fighters to safeguard Assad's rule and as of late December 2013, between 650 and 700 Hezbollah fighters are estimated to have been killed in the Syrian war (*Ya Libnan* 2013). Moreover, since early 2014, Hezbollah strongholds in northern Lebanon and Beirut have come under increasing car and suicide bomb attacks from *al-Qaeda* rebel groups in Syria and Lebanon (see Kalin 2014).

Most recently, Israeli security chiefs are warning about the emergence of new threats in the rapidly changing geopolitical realities of the Levant. Indeed, Israeli observers are increasingly alarmed by the proliferation of areas of limited statehood in the MENA region (Gaub 2014; Magen 2012b) and the growing ambition and influence of Global Jihad organizations with links to *al-Qaeda*, notably in Iraq and Syria (Schweitzer 2012). In a region increasingly characterized by porous borders, unsupervised arms flow and weak or collapsed central governments, radical Salafist armed groups are becoming substantial power brokers. Since the withdrawal of US forces in Iraq, *al-Qaeda* in Iraq (AQI) has accelerated its insurgency against the Shi'a-led government of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki and has extended its reach into neighbouring Syria. In April 2013, AQI announced that it was changing its name to the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham — taking control of the strategic Idlib province town of Saraqe on the Aleppo–Damascus highway in December 2013 — and announcing the rebirth of an Islamic Caliphate in June 2014.

More ominous still for Israel is the emergence of indigenous Salafi jihadist groups, such as the Al-Nusra Front, Abdullah Azzam Brigades and Fatah al-Islam, in Syria, Lebanon and Jordan. Unlike AQI or *al-Qaeda* affiliates in Yemen, these groups demonstrate considerable sophistication in managing popular perceptions and gaining resonance with disrupted local communities by stepping in to provide essential public goods where the state recedes. With the approach of these organizations to Israel's borders, Israeli security chiefs are increasingly worried about the rise of a new 'Salafi Crescent' (Shay 2014) in Israel's vicinity that would seek to both perpetrate attacks against Israel from Lebanon, Syria, Sinai and Jordan, and penetrate Palestinian territories in the West Bank and Gaza (Karmon 2014).

Lastly, Israeli analysts worry that HAMAS's isolation in the aftermath of the fall of Muslim Brotherhood rule in Egypt, coupled with the success of extremist groups in Iraq and Syria, spurs HAMAS to exacerbate its rocket attacks from its Gaza stronghold, partly in an attempt to recapture its role as the vanguard of armed resistance against Israel. As of August 2014, Israel and HAMAS are embroiled in another round of large-scale armed hostilities, the third since 2009 (see Booth and Witte 2014).

Policy Objectives

The top-down mobilization of Israel's small security and foreign policy establishment in response to the outbreak of the 'Arab Spring', resulted in the articulation of a relatively coherent set of policy objectives relatively

quickly, especially when compared with the more cumbersome experiences of the EU (Dandashly 2014; Noutcheva 2014) and the US (Huber 2014). Documentary evidence and interview materials indicate Israeli policy-makers defining the country's overarching policy objectives in terms of three mutually reinforcing sets of goals. These are broadly hierarchical, with clear priority accorded to hard security and economic interests, reflecting survivalist values.

The Tricky Quest for Non-Entanglement: Avoiding Conflict Spillage and Conflict Distraction

According to former National Security Advisor Amidror, the primary guiding principle that emerged from the 2011 assessments is 'non-entanglement'. As he put it: 'Our first priority is not to allow chaos to spill [into Israel] or unacceptable security threats to endanger us … This means enforcing red lines when absolutely necessary but not becoming embroiled in confrontation if at all possible'.[12]

The goal of insulating Israel from the regional tumult contains a number of distinguishable components. First, Israeli policy-makers emphasize the objective of preventing the 'spillage' of negative externalities, particularly from the Syrian conflict, Lebanon and Sinai, into nearby Israeli territory. This was meant to safeguard not only domestic security and maintain the normalcy of the nation's economic and social life in the face of proximate arenas of instability, but also to reduce the risk of potential friction with neighbouring countries that could flow from unwanted cross-border movement of fighters or civilian refugees.

Second, insulating Israel's borders and population from proximate threats entails the delicate — not always successful — balancing of non-involvement with deterrence.[13] Security chiefs have attempted to achieve this balancing act by emphasizing Israel's reluctance to become embroiled in regional events, and at the same time, its determination to act defensively if compelled to do so. In September 2013, Defense Minister Ya'alon declared: 'We're not involved in the Syrian civil war unless our interests are harmed or the red lines we set [are crossed]' (Lappin 2013). Ya'alon and other senior Israeli officials have articulated three 'red lines' in this context: (1) attempts by Syria or Iran to transfer 'quality weapons' to terrorist organizations, with an emphasis on Hezbollah; (2) the transfer of chemical weapons; and (3) violation of Israeli sovereignty (Lappin 2013).

In marked contrast with the EU, US and Turkey (Ayata 2014; Dandashly 2014; Huber 2014; Noutcheva 2014), Israel's objective of non-entanglement also manifests itself in the deliberate avoidance of rhetoric. One of the earliest guidelines to emerge from the NSC-led deliberations on how to respond to the Arab revolts was an instruction that government ministers, diplomats and officers exercise 'strategic silence' vis-à-vis competing political forces in neighbouring Arab countries.[14] Official Israel was not to express its preferences for a given party, candidate or regime outcome, so as not to undermine moderates and avoid, as far as possible, being accused of meddling in the internal affairs of its Arab neighbours.

Finally here, Israeli policy chiefs view the objective of non-entanglement in neighbouring arenas as an essential component in Israel's struggle with Iran (Katz and Hendel 2012). Indeed, Israel is leery of allowing the upheavals of the 'Arab Spring' to obfuscate — for itself, as well as for the international community — what it views as an existential threat, namely the acquisition of military nuclear capabilities by the Islamic Republic of Iran.[15]

Preserving Positive and Negative Assets

Entwined with the goal of non-entanglement is Israel's overarching objective of preserving three main strategic assets in its immediate vicinity — two broadly positive, cooperative set of relations and a third set based on military deterrence.

The first, arguably most important, is peace with Egypt. From its independence in 1948 until the 1979 Egypt–Israel Peace Treaty, Egypt was Israel's most potent enemy, with the two countries fighting no fewer than five wars over this period (Quandt 1986). The American-brokered peace treaty never evolved into the warm people-to-people peace. Yet formal peace has held, and for over 30 years, Egypt and Israel cooperated reasonably well on counter-terrorism, relations with the Palestinians, energy and maritime issues. Israeli leaders were deeply alarmed by the prospect that the rise to power of the Muslim Brotherhood would deconstruct this central pillar of regional security arrangements and were enormously relieved by the return of the Egyptian military to power.

Similarly, Israel views the preservation of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and the endurance of the 1994 Israeli–Jordanian Peace Treaty as critical strategic objectives, and are deeply concerned about any signs of regime instability in Jordan (Eran 2012). Like his father and predecessor King Hussein, King Abdullah of Jordan has maintained discrete but intimate security and diplomatic relations with Israel, especially on managing relations with the Palestinians; mediating between Jerusalem, Cairo and Damascus; and preventing the infiltration of foreign fighters and weapons into the West Bank. Moreover, Israeli security chiefs emphasize the unique value of Jordan as a cooperative buffer zone insulating Israel from instability in Iraq and as an increasingly rare stabilizing agent in the region (Gilad 2012).

Lastly, Israel views its ability to effectively deter belligerent neighbours — especially the Syrian army, rebel groups in southern Syria, Hezbollah and HAMAS — as a vital 'negative' strategic asset, essential for non-entanglement and the insulation of its civilian population and economy. In this, it has been partially successful, with deterrence broadly maintained towards its northern neighbours in 2011–2014, but increasingly unsuccessful towards HAMAS and PIJ in Gaza and Sinai. In its tense signalling game with the embattled Assad regime, Israel has not only reportedly struck Syrian military assets repeatedly, but has also publicly warned Assad that if attacked, Israel will act to topple his regime (Ravid 2013a). Israel has also been able to maintain the delicate deterrence it has achieved vis-à-vis

Hezbollah since the 2006 Lebanon War. However, the opening of large-scale hostilities with HAMAS and PIJ in Gaza in July 2014 — the third such round since 2009 — has prompted a heated debate in Israel about the efficacy and sustainability of its deterrence posture vis-à-vis more radical Palestinian groups, with some analysts calling for an international campaign to disarm HAMAS, and others insisting that Israel must seek to topple HAMAS's rule.[16]

Searching for New Friends and Alliances

The regional upheaval has also prompted Israel to strengthen ties and seek new alliances with actors on the peripheries of the Middle East. Israeli diplomats speak of the emergence of a 'periphery strategy 2.0' — a twenty-first-century revival of David Ben-Gurion's influential 1950s stratagem designed to break the nascent state's regional isolation and improve its international standing by forming ties with non-Arab African and Middle Eastern states, notably Iran, Turkey and Ethiopia — and national minorities such as Kurds in Iraq and Christians in Sudan (Shlaim 1999).[17]

The impetus for Israel to reach out to actors beyond the Arab–Turkish–Iranian spheres is compelling and is fuelled by both 'push' and 'pull factors'; by the loss of traditional allies and the emergence of new opportunities for enhanced ties with alternative ones. From its independence in 1948 until the fall of the Mubarak regime in 2011, Israel could always count on at least one of the strong, pivotal states in the Middle East (Chase, Hill, and Kennedy 1996) — Egypt, Iran or Turkey — to act as its ally, at least tacitly. Between 1948 and the overthrow of the Pahlavi dynasty in the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Israel enjoyed close ties with Iran. The rise of the Iranian Mullocracy severed those ties, but the strategic loss of Iran was more than offset by the successful conclusion of the Camp David Peace Accords with Egypt and the largesse bestowed on both former foes by the Carter and Reagan administrations (Quandt 1986). Similarly, relations with Ankara, which had reached levels of intimate cooperation in the 1990s, declined precipitously following the election of the AKP in 2002, falling to an unprecedented nadir in May 2010 with the *Mavi Marmara* affair, in which Israeli commandos killed nine Turkish activists seeking to break the naval blockade placed by Israel on Gaza (Ayturk 2011). Security and intelligence cooperation between Turkey and Israel were suspended following the incident, and despite fence-mending steps taken by both sides, Israeli analysts do not expect full restoration of ties with an AKP-dominated Turkey; nor do they discount entirely the possibility of a dangerous rift re-emerging in the foreseeable future between the two erstwhile allies.[18]

The catalyst for the formation of new alliances between Israel and its non-Arab–Iranian–Turkish neighbours also stems from the realignment of those neighbours' interests in response to the regional tumult. Several countries in Southern Europe, the Mediterranean basin and Caucuses share Israel's concern about waning US presence and growing Iranian influence in the region; Turkey's turn away from the West; and the proliferation of

violent Jihadist networks, particularly in Libya, Sinai, Iraq and Syria. At the same time, neighbours such as Cyprus, Greece, Bulgaria, Romania and Azerbaijan recognize Israel's growing relative weight as an advanced, pro-Western actor in a region increasingly devoid of stable, functioning partners, and the potential for intelligence, technological and economic benefits in closer cooperation with it.[19]

Over the past four years, Israel found responsive partners to overtures of intensified ties in Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Croatia, Greece, Romania, Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia and the fledgling new state of South Sudan (Guzansky and Lindenstrauss 2012). These have been primarily, though not exclusively, security oriented. Despite both Iranian and Turkish pressure to distance itself from Israel, for example, Azerbaijan has intensified already convivial ties with Israel. A USD 1.6 billion arms deal was signed between the two countries in February 2012, in which Azerbaijan acquired advanced satellite and weapons systems from Israel (see Cohen 2012), and the Azeris have reportedly stepped up intelligence cooperation with Israel, including the arrest in October 2013 of an Iranian national, Hasan Faraji, suspected of planning an attack on Israeli diplomats in Baku (Ben Solomon 2013). Similarly, with Turkish airspace closed to the Israel Air Force (IAF) for training manoeuvres, Romania has become an alternative venue where the IAF routinely practices attacking targets at long distances and intercepting weapons-smuggling convoys (Ben-Yishai 2011; Katz 2011).

Beyond hard security ties *stricto sensu*, relations have intensified most prominently with Turkey's rivals, Greece and Cyprus. Greece was the last non-Arab Mediterranean country to normalize diplomatic ties with Israel and until recently, relations between Greece and Israel were lukewarm. In late 2010, George Papandreou became the first Greek premier to make an official visit to Israel and a first comprehensive government-to-government meeting took place between the two countries in September 2013. In the period between the two visits, 10 new Greek–Israeli agreements were concluded, ranging from intelligence sharing and public security to tourism and culture, and large-scale joint naval and aerial exercises have become routine (Keinon 2013; Ravid 2012). In August 2013, they signed a three-side agreement with Israel intended to interconnect their electricity grids, protect natural gas deposits in the eastern Mediterranean and cooperate on desalinizing of sea water. If fully implemented by 2016 as planned, the project would be one of the largest of its kind in the world and make Israel a significant energy player in Europe (*The Algemeiner* 2013).

Policy Instruments Used and Avoided

Looked at comparatively, Israel stands out most notably both in its willingness to deploy coercive means and in its avoidance of rhetorical action meant to influence the trajectory of political developments inside Arab societies. At the same time, like the EU, US, Turkey and Russia, Israel has made use of an array of diplomatic, economic and humanitarian-assistance tools, though it lacks the economic weight and linkages with its Arab neighbours necessary to engage in conditionality or state capacity-building (Levitsky and Way 2005).

The Obama Administration's threat to use military force against the Assad regime for use of chemical weapons on its own civilian population notwithstanding, Israel has so far been the only external actor to actually deploy coercive means to enforce 'red lines' in Syria. Though Israel has declared it would view the use of chemical weapons as a transgression of those red lines, in practice it has reportedly carried out military strikes against the Assad regime not as punishment for use of chemical weapons, but as a preventive measure meant to stymie the transfer of 'game-changing' weapons from Russia and Iran to Assad in Syria or Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Though official Israeli sources neither confirm nor deny such action, according to American officials and media reports both in Israel and internationally, since mid-2011, the Israeli Air Force (IAF) and Navy have carried out approximately a dozen covert strikes on weapon convoys or depots. On the night of 29 January 2013, for example, 12 IAF planes reportedly struck a convoy of trucks carrying Russian made SA-17 anti-air-craft missiles from Syria to Hezbollah in Lebanon (Ravid 2013b). In May, Israel reportedly took out a shipment of Iranian-made Fateh-110 missiles at a Damascus airport (*The Guardian* 1 November 2013). In late October, Israeli warplanes attacked a shipment of SA-125 anti-aircraft missiles inside a Syrian Government stronghold (*The Algemeiner* 2013). And on the morning of 5 July 2013, Israeli Dolphin submarines reportedly targeted an arms depot of Russian-made Yakhont P-800 anti-ship missiles that were recently transferred to the Assad regime and held in the Syrian Navy bar-racks at Safira, near the port of Latakia (Hartman 2013). The official silence surrounding these events is meant both to minimize the risk of Israeli entanglement in Syria and to help President Bashar Assad 'save face' in view of repeated Israeli strikes.

Israel's apparent willingness to use military force in Syria and Lebanon contrasts with its refusal to do so in Egypt. According to Yaakov Amidror, in the period between the demise of the Mubarak regime in February 2011 and the return of the army to power in Egypt in July–August 2013, there were those in the security establishment who urged Israeli leaders to carry out proactive military operations in Sinai in order to foil rocket attacks on the Israeli city of Eilat, and stymie the flow of sophisticated arms from Iran and Libya to the hands of HAMAS and the PIJ in Gaza. Conscious of the fact that any Israeli military action in Sinai would contravene, and possi-bly, undermine its peace treaty with Egypt, Israeli leaders consistently rejected the use of force in Sinai. Instead, Israel has quietly but sternly warned the Egyptian military that it expects it to take effective action against terrorist nests in Sinai; has stepped up intelligence sharing with Egyptian security forces; and has lobbied its American counterparts to pres-sure Cairo to fully exercise its sovereignty in Sinai.[20]

Israel has also turned to its own criminal justice system to discourage its own nationals from getting involved in the Syrian conflict. On 9 February 2014, an Israeli court in Lod sentenced 27-year-old Israeli Arab citizen, Abed Al-Kader Tallah, to 15 months imprisonment for entering Syria and joining the *al-Qaeda* affiliate, Al-Nusra Front, before changing his mind

and returning to Turkey, where he was arrested (Huri 2014). Fifteen Israeli Arab men are reportedly fighting on the side of the Syrian rebels, while a handful of Druz youth have apparently joined pro-Assad forces. The criminal prosecution of Tallah is meant to deter other young Israeli Arab men from entering Syria where Israeli police fear they will become further radicalized or may assist al-Qaeda in planning and implementing attacks on Israeli targets.

Elsewhere, Israel turned to economic instruments, albeit in a limited way. In line with its concern to preserve the stability of the Hashemite Kingdom, Israel has sought to ease the transport of Jordanian exports through its Mediterranean ports of Haifa and Ashdod, and has increased the amount of water it supplies to Jordan from the Sea of Galilee and its desalination plants on the Mediterranean coast.[21] These steps — which were undertaken discretely — are meant to help bolster the Jordanian economy and offset the pressures caused to Jordan's public utilities by the flood of refugees from Syria.

Israel has also engaged in extending limited humanitarian assistance to victims of the Syrian war. As of mid-2014, over a thousand Syrian citizens, most of them injured in the civil war, have received medical treatment in Israel. Figures published in late January 2014 record some 490 Syrian national inpatients at hospitals in northern Israel (Ashkenazi 2014; see also Connolly 2013). Since June 2013, IsraAID, an Israeli development and humanitarian assistance NGO, has worked in collaboration with Jordanian and international aid organizations to provide food and other essential needs to Syrian refugees in Jordan (Kamin 2013).

In comparison with other external actors, Israel stands out, on the softer edge of the spectrum of engagement instruments, in its avoidance of pro-democratization rhetoric or engagement in communicative action (Risse 2000) with its Arab neighbours. Unlike Turkey (Ayata 2014), Israel did not seek to position itself as a model to be emulated by those in the MENA region seeking a new path towards political liberalization and economic success.

Unlike the EU and US, Israeli officialdom has generally avoided expressing preferences for what kind of political regimes it would favour in the region, and has been highly reticent to be accused of meddling in the internal political choices facing its Arab neighbours than its American, European or Turkish counterparts. In line with its 'strategic silence' policy and in marked contrast with the positions of the EU, US and Turkey, Israel has avoided calling for President Bashar Assad to step down from power. Similarly, Israeli officialdom remained conspicuously silent both when the Muslim Brotherhood rose to power and when the Egyptian military ousted Mohamed Morsi from the country's presidency. Regarding the latter, former Israeli Ambassador to Egypt, Eli Shaked, explained in July 3013: 'Israel is trying to keep its distance from what is going on in Egypt and not say too much, because anything it says on this issue will be used as a weapon against one side or the other' (quoted in Eglash 2013).

Explaining Israel's Policy Response

Broadly speaking, the guiding assumptions, goals and instruments used (and avoided) by Israeli policy-makers in response to the Arab revolts and their aftermath sit comfortably with theoretical axioms advanced by the realist tradition (Morgentahu 1948; Snidal 2002; Waltz 1979). Yet the exegetical picture would be lacking without accounting for the self-understanding and collective-identity of key Israeli foreign policy and security actors — dimensions that resonate more strongly with a social-constructivist view of world politics (Adler 2002; Katzenstein 1996; Klotz and Lynch 2007; Wendt 1999) — and, to a lesser extent, liberal theory (Moravcsik 1997; Gourevitch 2002), pertaining to the peculiar nature of Israel's security establishment and coalition parliamentarianism.

The overarching posture shaped by Israeli decision-makers in response to the Arab revolts can be summarized as defensive, conservative, non-idealist and extensively reliant on purposefully discrete military and diplomatic instruments. To a considerable degree, this posture is explainable with reference to the high stakes involved for Israel and the generally hostile nature of its geostrategic environment. Israel's primary focus on physical security stems from its inherently narrow margin of survival; the geographical proximity and multiplicity of security threats in its immediate regional vicinity — notably rocket attacks from Lebanon, Syria, Gaza, Sinai — the seriousness of those threats; and their proven tendency to materialize.

Israel's 'defensive Realist' (Jones and Milton-Edwards 2013, 405) approach to the Arab revolts — its emphasis on caution, discrete prevention, non-entanglement and insulation — is undergirded by compelling economic interests. As a small, consumer-driven, export- and investment-dependent economy, Israel is highly vulnerable to economic disruption stemming from internal, Palestinian or cross-border attacks. The national economy sustained severe losses during the 2001–2004 Intifada and, to a lesser but still significant extent, the 2006 Lebanon War and two major rounds of confrontation with HAMAS and PIJ in 2010 and 2012. Israeli leaders have therefore become highly sensitive to the need to safeguard economic normalcy in order to preserve consumption, trade, foreign investment and tourism. This socio-economic imperative too helps explain the fine balancing act sought by Israel between active prevention of potential attacks, on the one hand, and discrete non-entanglement, on the other.

Another central facet of Israeli realism is its basic conservatism. In view of its military and economic superiority in the region; ongoing competition with revolutionary Iran; and generally comfortable symbiosis with the Sunni Arab dictatorships of Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, Israel is essentially a status quo actor in the MENA region — inclined towards preserving the old, not taking a bet on the new. This helps explain Israel's emphasis on safeguarding established strategic assets (positive and negative), offsetting erosion of old alliances with the strengthening of existing ties, but avoiding sharp breaks from conventional arrangements or the going-out-on-a-limb with some new initiative towards the Palestinians or the Arab League, for example.

Israel's posture is further explained by its distinct non-idealism regarding prospects of democratization in the Arab world. When pressed on the question of whether, at least at the advent of the Arab Spring in early 2011, there existed a school of thought within the Israeli establishment that saw democratization as a reasonable possibility, the answer is an overwhelming 'no'. As Amidror put it:

> There were elements [within the security and foreign policy community] that said this is a process that could lead to democracy in eighty or a hundred year's time … but there was no one who had the illusion that the Facebook kids [in Tahrir Square] would become a significant political actor. Not for one moment.[22]

Israel's strategic posture, policy objectives and choice of instruments are explainable in considerable part by its disbelief in prospects for rapid democratization and its assumption that the political openings created by the Arab revolts will quickly be seized by anti-democratic and anti-Israel Islamist forces, to the exclusion of Arab liberals.

Self-understanding also plays an important part in explaining Israel's posture. In marked contrast with Turkey, Israel's choice of exercising 'strategic silence', relying on covert military and diplomatic activity, and avoiding offering itself as a democratic model to be emulated by Arab reformists, is indicative of a self-image that is both keenly aware of being a regional misfit and lacks any confidence in its own ability to promote positive political and economic change among its Arab neighbours. This is reflected, for example, in the statements of Israeli diplomats that Israel must assiduously avoid expressing preferences about political currents in Arab countries because any Arab reformer saddled with Israeli sympathies — let alone support — would be branded a Zionist collaborator and undermined by alleged association.[23]

As a young, small, oil-poor, non-Arab League country that has only recently achieved a modicum of economic prosperity and trades primarily with the US, Europe and South East Asia (Magen 2012a), Israel lacks both the ethos and institutions necessary to engage its neighbours on issues of governance or economic development. Unlike the US and Europe (Magen, Risse, and McFaul 2009), Israel has never been in the business of promoting democracy abroad and is inclined to view such American and European efforts as at best Polianish, and at worst dangerously naïve (Byman 2011). This helps explain Israel's non-use of economic conditionality or state capacity-building instruments (Magen and McFaul 2009; Magen and Morlino 2009).

Lastly, Israel's policy response also needs to be read in light of domestic popular and elite preferences (Gourevitch 2002; Moravcsik 1997). Extensive media coverage of the suffering of Syrian civilians and an established tradition of providing medical assistance regardless of conditions of belligerency help explain Israel's official and NGO humanitarian activity vis-à-vis Syrian casualties and refugees. At the same time, Israel's focus on hard security and its choice of hard security instruments are perpetuated,

and perhaps exacerbated, by the special weight accorded to the security establishment in Israeli decision-making circles and the prevalence of former senior military officers in civilian institutions (Barak and Sheffer 2006). Moreover, Israel's peculiar brand of parliamentary democracy, which placed an unusually high premium on representation for different ideological and sectarian factions in the Knesset and produced perennially unstable coalition governments, helps explain Israel's tendency towards non-engagement. Indeed, some domestic analysts have criticized the Netanyahu Government's 'freeze instinct' as an excuse for inaction, even paralysis, at a time of great regional fluidity and, therefore, according to the critics, opportunities for peace (Ravid 2011).

Notes

1. Author's notes from the workshop 'Governance, Development and Security in the Contemporary Middle East: A Crisis of Sovereignty?' organized by the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) and The Lauder School of Government, Diplomacy and Strategy, IDC, Herzliya, 11–12 October 2012.
2. Maj. Gen. (ret.) Yaakov Amidror headed the Israeli National Security Council (NSC) and was Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's national security advisor from January 2011 until November 2013.
3. Author interview with Maj. Gen. (ret.) Yaakov Amidror, national security advisor (2011–2013), Ra'anana, Israel, 10 November 2013.
4. Author notes from a group discussion with members of the political research and policy planning departments of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Jerusalem, 27 November 2013.
5. Supra, note 2.
6. The policy objectives articulated by this process are discussed in Section II of this article.
7. Supra, note 3.
8. Supra, notes 1 and 3.
9. Supra, note 3.
10. Supra, note 1.
11. Supra, note 2.
12. Supra, note 2.
13. On the origins and evolution of Israel's deterrence strategy vis-à-vis non-state actors, see Rid (2012).
14. Supra, notes 1 and 3.
15. Supra, notes 1 and 2.
16. See, for example, former Israeli Cabinet Secretary's proposal to remove HAMAS's missile arsenal in Gaza: Zvi Hauser, 'Take care of missiles, not Hamas', ynet news, 7 July 2014 (http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/07340L-4541799,00.html); former Israeli Ambassador to the US, Michael Oren, 'A smart way out of the Gaza confrontation', CNN Opinion, 13 July 2014 (http://edition.cnn.com/2014/07/13/opinion/oren-mideast-crisis-solution/).
17. Supra, note 3.
18. Supra, note 1.
19. Supra, note 3.
20. Supra, note 2.
21. Supra, notes 2 and 3.
22. Supra, note 2.
23. Supra, note 2.

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