

# Israel's Geopolitical Agenda: Old Issues, New Urgency

By Mark A. Heller

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*Abstract: From Iranian nuclear issues to consequences of the Arab uprisings, the Israeli authorities do not have to look far to find serious concerns. The Palestinian issue, avoided for some time, could come back as the hot topic of 2013. In Israel, the cost of the status quo with respect to the Palestinian issue is considered negligible. This perception is erroneous for several reasons, including the fact that the prospect of a new Intifada is not improbable.*

In the last week of December 2012, one of Israel's largest mass-circulation daily newspapers published a front-page interview with a "high-ranking political figure" under the screaming headline, "Netanyahu is Leading Us to Disaster".<sup>1</sup> According to this unnamed personality, the policies pursued by Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu are so alienating Israel's traditional allies and friends throughout the world, and especially in Europe, that the country will eventually find itself completely isolated and unable to cope with a host of geopolitical threats to its security and perhaps its very existence.

Even allowing for the newspaper's antipathy to Netanyahu, the Israeli propensity for inordinate introspection, the normally heated rhetoric of Israeli discourse, and the particularly feverish tone of debate in the run-up to a national election, this outburst reflects a

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<sup>1</sup> *Yediot Ahronot*, 24 December 2012. The "political figure," never identified, was suspected to be outgoing Defense Minister Ehud Barak.

growing sense, at least in some circles, that the country is on an unusually dangerous trajectory. It is difficult to determine the extent to which this pessimism – which is apparently not shared by the general public – is objectively warranted. What is undeniable is that Israel in 2013 will face a variety of challenges that will impel its government to take decisions in an environment of huge uncertainty.

Uncertainty, of course, is a permanent condition of national security policymaking for Israel (and every other country). What will make the coming year qualitatively different is the likely need for wrenching decisions in an environment of huge flux in almost every dimension of regional politics. All of these decisions are important but the most urgent almost surely concerns the Iranian nuclear weapons program.

## **Iran**

For many months during 2012, the question of a possible military attack on Iranian nuclear facilities dominated the Israeli and international agenda. The issue was taken seriously because of the seriousness of the issue – the possible marriage of a nuclear weapon to Iran's declared intention to wipe Israel off the map – and the apparent failure of diplomacy, economic sanctions and covert action to persuade Iran to abandon its dedication to what all but the most incorrigible optimists acknowledge is a quest for nuclear military capability. However, towards the end of the year – in fact, immediately after Netanyahu's melodramatic appearance at the United Nations General Assembly – the issue suddenly dropped from the headlines. There is no unanimity of view on the reason for this turn of events. It may have been due to the insistence of the American administration that an attack at that point would be premature – not just because President Obama wanted to avoid the possible messy consequences before the US election, but also because of the estimation that there was still time to see whether the latest and most stringent round of economic sanctions might yet produce the desired result. And it may have been due to the belief that setbacks to the Iranian program attributed to technical lapses and cybernetic sabotage had caused delays that postponed a critical decision point. It is even possible that Iran had itself signaled a willingness to slow its progress toward acquisition of significant quantities of weapons-grade uranium by converting some of its stock of 20% enriched uranium into oxide powder for use in a medical research reactor, rendering the material unsuitable for military purposes.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> David E. Sanger and James Rissen, "Iran's Slowing of Enrichment Efforts May Show It Wants a Deal, Analysts Say," *The New York Times*, 27 December 2012.

However, Iranian centrifuges continue to spin, the unity of purpose needed to apply sanctions of sufficient severity to convince the Iranian regime to reverse course continues to elude the international community, and the Iranians could be forgiven for concluding that “the dogs bark but the caravan moves on.” Another round of negotiations between Iran and the P5+1 is scheduled for March. Of course, the possibility of a successful outcome – meaning a verifiable agreement that precludes the possibility of Iran continuing to move towards a usable weapon or even a “breakout” capacity – cannot be logically excluded. Iran’s own political calendar could even work in this direction, because the regime may well be eager to ease the impact of existing sanctions in order to reduce discontent so that activism associated with the presidential elections in June does not transmogrify into a popular anti-regime movement. Still, if the March negotiations do not prove more effective in coercing or seducing Iran into abandoning its nuclear ambitions than have previous negotiations over the years, it is entirely possible that a point will be reached sometime in 2013 when the “disastrous alternative” described by former French President Nicolas Sarkozy – “an Iranian bomb or the bombing of Iran”<sup>3</sup> – will need to be faced after having been predicted but averted for so many years.

For obvious reasons, Israel’s antennae are most sensitively attuned to the approach of that decision-point, and though it would clearly prefer that the alternative either be precluded or addressed by the United States, Israel may well conclude that autonomous action can no longer be prudently deferred until American and Israeli estimates are fully congruent. If/when that point arrives, the decision to act will be excruciatingly difficult. Even though Israeli leaders have information about the structure of Iran’s nuclear infrastructure and especially about Israel’s own capabilities unavailable to most of the commentators pronouncing on this issue, they will still inevitably be operating in an environment of uncertainty about critical variables: the technical success of any operation, the extent and severity of any Iranian response, the willingness and/or ability of Iran’s allies to join in any retaliation against Israel, and even the impact on Israeli-American relations. Nevertheless, the consequences of inaction are also impossible to predict with perfect confidence, and when risks of further delay are assessed to be unacceptably dangerous, incomplete knowledge about the consequences of acting is unlikely to paralyze the decisionmaking process.

## ***The Arab Upheavals***

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<sup>3</sup> Available at: <<http://www.ambafrance-uk.org/President-Sarkozy-s-speech.html>>.

Although the variables associated with such decisionmaking have been identified for many years, the context in which decisions are made has become even more fluid since the outbreak of what was initially termed the “Arab Spring.” Since the first heady days of the uprisings against authoritarian rulers in Tunisia and Egypt in early 2011, the prospects for democratic transformation have turned distinctly chilly. Rather than empowering the young, pro-democracy demonstrators who first challenged entrenched regimes, events have worked to favor the Islamist movements, which are best positioned to exploit the breakdown of central authority and the traditional/religious currents in Arab societies. How the dynamics of domestic political evolution play out will have immense consequences for the people of these countries, but for Israel, developments in more remote locations like Yemen or even North Africa are of little immediacy. Instead, the most critical question concerns the regional and global orientation of those in closest proximity – especially that of Egypt, the most populous and militarily powerful of these states undergoing political upheaval.<sup>4</sup>

Contrary to conventional usage among both admirers and detractors, Husni Mubarak was not a “friend of Israel.” He never visited Israel (except for a brief appearance at the funeral of Yitzhak Rabin), emptied the peace treaty between the two states of any content apart from the security provisions, and allowed Egyptian media to propagate the most virulent anti-Israel (and anti-Semitic) rants at a time when it was forbidden to speculate publicly about the President’s state of health or succession plans. Mubarak did, however, understand Egypt’s national interest to require reasonable working ties with the United States and a non-violent relationship with Israel. It is in Israel’s national interest that Mubarak’s successors continue to understand Egypt’s imperatives in the same way, or at least act as though they do, but whether that will be the case remains an open question.

Since the overthrow of Mubarak, Egypt’s material circumstances have deteriorated to a marked degree and signs of popular disappointment at the Muslim Brotherhood’s failure to deliver any palpable improvement in the quality of life are already evident. If anything, this would appear to reinforce the need for a stable security environment and the support of the United States and of the international financial institutions in which the United States has such an influential voice. On the other hand, the intense ideological hostility to Israel of political Islam might conceivably prevail over more considered calculations of state interest, even impairing the ability of Egyptian leaders to act according to a sober reading of the military balance between the two states. For example, prominent Muslim

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<sup>4</sup> For a broad overview of Israeli concerns and attitudes, see Yoel Guzansky and Mark A. Heller (eds.), *One Year of the Arab Spring: Global and Regional Implications*, Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, March 2012, Memorandum No. 113, pp. 67-77.

Brothers in Egypt (though not President Muhammad Mursi himself) have expressed themselves on Israel in ways that clearly recall the annihilationist declarations of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and other Iranian leaders.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the perception of Hamas as a hostile force – one of the very few issues on which Israeli and Egyptian views converged – has disappeared now that the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas' ideological and organization progenitor, has taken power in Cairo. As a result, there is now more volatility and a greater potential for strategic ambiguity or miscalculation in the Israeli-Egyptian relationship. There are several possible sparks that might set off an unwanted confrontation, including “leakage” across the border following clashes with Sinai-based infiltrators or weapons smugglers and horizontal escalation of another round of violent conflict between Israel and Hamas. It is even conceivable that an Islamist government in Egypt, under pressure due to its inability to satisfy the expectations of its own constituents, might intentionally aggravate tensions with Israel (perhaps by blaming Israel for its own failures) in order to divert domestic discontent.

Thus far, these risks have been averted. During the last major round of fighting in Gaza in November 2012, for example, the behavior of the Egyptian government under President Mursi was almost indistinguishable from that of governments under President Mubarak in previous such situations. And as long as the Egyptian Army retains its preeminent role in national security policy, that pattern may well continue. At a minimum, however, there is inevitably less predictability about the durability of the peace treaty with Egypt than in the period before the outbreak of “Arab spring.”

That is also the case with respect to Jordan. The Hashemite regime, though not totally immune to the currents of unrest sweeping the rest of the region, has thus far managed to stave off or defuse the most serious threats to its viability. However, Jordan has been beset by recurrent large-scale protests, mostly focused on economic concerns (particularly fuel and food price inflation) and corruption but also reflecting discontent at the system of governance. Particularly disconcerting are signs of disaffection among the southern tribes, the traditional mainstay of the Hashemite security establishment. Stability in Jordan is of vital concern to Israel, not only because Jordan provides a physical barrier between Israel and more threatening powers to the east, but also – given the continuing links between the East and West Banks (especially between the Palestinian populations) – because chaos in the East Bank could well spill across the Jordan River into Israeli-controlled areas. At a minimum, the

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<sup>5</sup> It is important to note that extreme ideological hostility to Israel is not confined to Islamists in Arab countries but also has been/is evident among Arab nationalists of a more secular persuasion, because of the prominence of Israel and the Palestinians in Arab identity. The rise of Islamists to power is therefore likely to make a less profound difference than it did when Islamists came to power in non-Arab countries, i.e., Turkey and especially Iran.

transformation of Jordan into an active confrontation front would pose serious challenges to Israeli security planners.

Perhaps even more momentous would be the uncertainties likely to ensue from regime change in Syria. Although the imminent overthrow of Bashar al-Assad has been forecast almost from the outbreak of the uprising against him in March 2011, developments in late 2012 suggest that the opposition campaign is rapidly gaining momentum. Inherent in the downfall of Assad's regime would be a shift in regional alignments that could potentially work to Israel's advantage. Given the history of Iranian support for the Alawite-dominated Ba'th regime, and given that the "politics of identity," especially Sunni-Shi'ite tensions, have increasingly set their stamp on developments in the Levant for at least a decade, it is highly probable that a post-Assad Syria would abandon its close links with Iran and its support (and facilitation of Iranian support) for Hizballah in Lebanon. The weakening of the Iranian-led "axis of resistance" would be a gain of major proportions in the Israeli strategic calculus.

At the same time, both the process and the aftermath of regime change might well mitigate the value of this gain. For example, the incremental disintegration of central authority could result in the proliferation of Syria's chemical weapons stocks, either because they were deliberately transferred to Hizballah or because they were captured by opposition militias whose identities and command-and-control systems are something of a mystery.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, Syria after Assad might suffer prolonged instability and chaos, allowing non-state actors to exploit a power vacuum in frontier regions to accumulate weapons and launch attacks against Israel, as has happened in Sinai. Finally, the growing prominence of radical Islamists in the ranks of the Syrian opposition – though perhaps exaggerated for propaganda purposes by the regime – raises the possibility that if such forces take power in whatever Syrian political order eventually emerges, they will be just as inclined as Assad to confront Israel (though in competition with Iran rather than in cooperation with), but perhaps with much less risk-aversion and sensitivity to costs. One might even note, for the sake of completeness, the more remote possibility that a stable, liberal regime committed to peace would quickly emerge in Syria, implying considerable pressure on Israel to renew the negotiations about the Golan Heights, an idea that some Israelis likely to be represented in Israel's next government will find distinctly unpalatable. None of these scenarios can be reasonably considered as foreordained, but neither

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<sup>6</sup> In Libya, Mu'ammar Qaddafi's residual chemical arsenal, much smaller and less lethal than Syria's, was at one point a source of similar concern, though that was soon allayed. However, parts of his conventional arsenal, especially large numbers of portable anti-aircraft missiles, remain unaccounted for. See, David Friedman and Benedetta Berti, "Regional Proliferation and the 'Arab Spring' – A Look at Biological and Chemical Weapons in Libya and Syria," *Strategic Assessment*, Vol. 15, no. 4, January 2013.



can they be categorically dismissed. That illustrates the complexity and uncertainty of the Syrian dimension of Israel's agenda, and especially the reality that just as possible risks may also imply opportunities, so, too, a potentially significant strategic advantage might be neutralized by counter-developments whose probability is not negligible.

## **Geo-Economics**

The same is true in the field of geo-economics. One of the few clear bright spots on Israel's horizon is the prospect that in 2013, production from off-shore natural gas fields will transform the country into a noteworthy producer of hydrocarbons and perhaps, further down the road, even into a significant exporter. As this development gains pace, the economic implications could be dramatic. More power generation based on domestic sources of natural gas will result in a larger, cheaper and more reliable supply of electricity' and that will ripple throughout the economy in the form of lower production and transportation costs, while also reducing the environmental damage caused by coal – and diesel fuel – powered generation.<sup>7</sup> And more gas-powered water desalinization will also relieve water stress.

The strategic implications are also potentially significant. Fuel security will improve because Israel will be less exposed to disruptions of supply from foreign sources, exemplified by repeated sabotage of the Egyptian natural-gas pipeline in Sinai. Moreover, if the most optimistic supply projections prove to be accurate, surpluses will be available that could be used as instruments of foreign policy, i.e., to build cooperative relationships with willing partners and help alleviate power and/or water shortages facing neighbors, especially Jordan, in whose stability Israel has an abiding interest.

Nevertheless, the prospect of abundant off-shore supplies is not an unmixed blessing. For one thing, the production and transportation infrastructure will constitute tempting targets for terrorists, and much thought and resources will have to be invested in the security of those facilities. Even more ominously, the exploitation of economic resources in areas whose maritime demarcation lines are contested is already a source of some tension. Hizballah has publicly challenged the line agreed upon between Israel and Cyprus, claiming that it violates Lebanon's legitimate rights. Turkey has raised similar protests on the grounds that the rights and interests of Northern Cyprus have been ignored. Thus, the benefits that Israel can expect to accrue from gas production in the Eastern

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<sup>7</sup> According to the Israel Electricity Corporation, only 31.9% of the electricity produced in 2011 was generated by natural gas, available at: <<http://www.iec.co.il/EN/IR/Pages/Fuels.aspx>>.

Mediterranean can easily become either a pretext to escalate existing tensions between Israel and some of its regional neighbors or a new source of conflict in its own right.

That is also true with respect to the undersea gas field that straddles the maritime border between Israel and Gaza – which brings us to the Palestinian issue.

## ***Israel and the Palestinians***

The passion that once animated Israeli debates about the Palestinian issue is gone. Apart from brief spikes caused by discrete and transitory events, discussions about the peace process, the disposition of the occupied territories, and the future of relations with the Palestinians have barely intruded into the Israeli public agenda in recent years.

There are several explanations for this rather counter-intuitive reality. The first is that the issue has been overshadowed by domestic socio-economic concerns, on the one hand, and presumably more weighty foreign- and security policy matters (Iran, Arab Spring), on the other. The second is the perception that the cost of stasis on this issue is, if not negligible, then at least not so high that it impels Israel to reappraise the basis for its policy. The third is an increasingly rooted conviction, grounded in the experience of previous negotiations with Yasser Arafat and Mahmoud Abbas and of unilateral actions such as the redeployment from Gaza in 2005 and the settlement construction moratorium in 2009, that even if Israel were to undertake some new material or even rhetorical initiative, the chances of any significant breakthrough would – for reasons inevitably attributed mostly to the Palestinian side – be far too low to justify the internally divisive conflicts such an initiative would entail.

Events in 2013 may well test at the least the first two of these premises, if not all three. It is, for example, likely to become increasingly clear that the Palestinian issue intrudes on almost all the other issues on Israel's foreign and security agenda and that the synergies, both negative and positive, will intensify. In other parts of the world, there is often a tendency to exaggerate the centrality of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict to the whole panoply of Middle Eastern matters of global concern: other inter- and intra-state conflicts, proliferation of WMD, governance and regime stability, economic and educational underperformance, radical Islamism, sectarian hatreds and repression of minorities, the prospects for democratization, illegal migration, and even the status of women. In most cases, connectivity of this sort is a kind of intellectual crutch deployed when outside powers are unwilling or unable to bring other responses to bear. In Israel, by contrast, there is strong inclination to minimize or deny any connectivity, often in a transparent effort to deflect foreign criticism of its policies. "Why," some ask, "does the world keep bothering us



about the Palestinians when there are so many bigger and more lethal problems in the region?" However valid that complaint may be, it ignores the reality that the ongoing conflict resonates throughout the Arab and Muslim worlds, sustains both popular hostility to Israel and the instrumental utility of anti-Israel rhetoric and policy, and therefore impinges directly or indirectly on Israel's security concerns. Thus, Iran's extreme anti-Israel posture virtually precludes overt cooperation against the Iranian nuclear program or against Hizballah assertiveness in Lebanon, even in the Gulf states and Jordan or among non-Shi'ite Lebanese where concerns about Iranian hegemonial aspirations are shared with Israel. Antipathy to Israel also raises the risk that contending forces in Arab states beset by internal upheavals will find in hostility to Israel a useful tool to enhance their domestic popularity and, where new forces take power, to entrench and consolidate their rule, especially in places where previous regimes had preferred to follow a non-confrontational path. Finally, Israel's pariah status in the region will complicate efforts to work out cooperative solutions to maritime boundary disputes in the eastern Mediterranean and may even multiply the risks of violent confrontation.

Secondly, the price of stalemate is likely to grow as the difficulties of conflict containment or management multiply. Episodic infiltration and cross-border firing from Sinai and the recurrent rocket and missile attacks launched from Gaza, culminating (temporarily) in "Operation Pillar of Defense" in November 2012, serve as vivid reminders of how volatile Israel's southern front remains. And there are growing signs of unrest in the West Bank (due in large part to an economic downturn), which work to Hamas' advantage, raise the prospect of another *intifada*, and perhaps threaten the very viability of the Palestinian Authority. In circumstances that are not altogether fanciful, the consequences for Israel could include, not only an upsurge in casualties, but also the costs of the counter-measures it would feel compelled to take, ranging from the burden of reassuming direct control of the area to greater international isolation (exemplified by the General Assembly resolution granting Palestine observer state status in the United Nations, which was supported by all but a handful of western countries). That could ultimately jeopardize economic and security ties with foreign countries. No less disconcerting, at least to some, are the longer-term threats to the country's democratic character if those bent on defending the status quo against foreign and domestic criticism increasingly believe that it is necessary to curtail judicial independence and the rule of law and to rail against a culture that they deem excessively tolerant of political dissent and social, religious or sexual heterodoxy (or at least to make common cause with those who do). Evidence of movement in any of these directions would almost certainly affect the estimation of how urgent and critical it is to reassess the ranking of the Palestinian issue on the list of Israeli priorities.

## **Near-Term Dynamics**

Even if these changes do materialize, the need for a policy reassessment might still not be self-evident absent an unambiguous challenge to the third premise – that Palestinian recalcitrance and/or incapacity would make that an exercise in futility. There is little to indicate that such a challenge is imminent. After all, the persistent split between Fatah and Hamas creates doubt about the existence of an authoritative Palestinian interlocutor, and even if the much-touted but elusive reconciliation between the two factions were to come about, it would almost certainly require some accommodation of each party's positions by the other, meaning, in practice, a Palestinian negotiating posture more reflective of Hamas' rejectionist ideology. Moreover, although the current Fatah leadership under Mahmoud Abbas is probably the most flexible and pragmatic Palestinian group that Israel is likely to encounter, it, too, has thus far refused to explicitly endorse the internationally-sanctioned principle of "two states for two peoples" that implies acceptance of the legitimate existence of a Jewish people and its right to a nation-state in the land of Palestine. As a result, many Israelis have concluded that even Abbas is not sincere in his commitment to a peaceful and definitive resolution of the conflict and that the political strategy he pursues is merely intended to increase international pressure for unilateral Israeli concessions.<sup>8</sup>

It could, of course, be argued that this hypothesis cannot be clarified by intellectual means and that the only way to do so is to test it in practice, by trying. Skeptical Israelis will probably respond that they have tried that before and nevertheless might be willing to try again, but not if it requires accepting Palestinian preconditions concerning the terms of reference and another moratorium on settlement construction. Since it is politically difficult if not altogether impossible for the Palestinians to back down on this matter, there is little prospect of a breakthrough to comprehensive negotiations, much less comprehensive agreement, in the foreseeable future.

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<sup>8</sup> In many ways, this perception is a mirror-image of the widespread Palestinian suspicion that Netanyahu's rhetorical endorsement of the two-state principle is nothing more than lip service and that Israel's real objective is to buy time in order to entrench itself even more deeply in Palestinian territory.

## **Conclusion**

Even if this diagnosis is accurate and the prognosis is valid, Israel will still find itself facing the need to limit the damage it risks from stasis on the Palestinian issue. It is therefore likely that its government will weigh certain actions that could create some movement, or some appearance of movement, or at least some credible evidence that it is not the only or even the main obstacle to progress. If such actions, however modest, can be coordinated with Palestinians on the basis of some ostensible reciprocity, that would make it easier to overcome party and coalition resistance and skepticism in public opinion. But if even partial or limited understandings prove unattainable, there will still be a strong rationale for trying to ensure that Israel's regional and international profile on the Palestinian remains as positive (and unobtrusive) as possible. At a minimum, there will be an argument in favor, perhaps not of new unilateral redeployments, but at least of refraining from provocative and sometimes self-defeating measures such as announcing new settlement construction projects and taking measures that undermine the financial functionality of the Palestinian Authority.

If even that proves beyond the capacity of its government, then Israel will – barring some “black swan” – still not immediately encounter the apocalyptic scenario predicted by Netanyahu's unnamed critic. There are, after all, also some potentially positive aspects to broader global and regional dynamics. But even if Israel remains relatively strong militarily and sound economically, the potential for longer-term gradual deterioration will remain – a source of hope, perhaps, for those who wish it ill, and of real concern for those who wish it well.



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