

Missing the 'devils' we knew? Israel and political Islam amid the Arab Awakening

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Few if any in Israel lamented the overthrow of Saddam Hussein and the Ba'athist regime in Iraq in March 2003. The benefits to the security of the Jewish state of an invasion led by the United States were self-evident: the total destruction of Iraq's armed forces and, in its wake, the overwhelming presence across the Gulf of American military power. Certainly in terms of interstate relations across the region at least, Israel now appeared set to reap the strategic dividends from the most benign political environment it had hitherto known. Israelis might be excused, however, if such benefits, even if recognized, were never fully appreciated, let alone realized at the time. For their country was engaged in its own 'war on terror', otherwise known as the Al-Aqsa intifada, which by the spring of 2003 had claimed the lives of over 800 Israelis and 2,000 Palestinians, and events in Iraq remained overshadowed by this more immediate bloodshed. The then Chief of Staff of the Israel Defence Forces (IDF), Moshe Ya'alon, summed up the dominant national mood when he opined: 'There has not been a more important confrontation since the War of Independence.' It was a view that captured a national feeling that the Israel-Palestine conflict had now gone beyond a clash between competing national movements over contested land. Rather, this was now an existential struggle against Islamist-inspired violence that would never be satiated by territorial compromise, however generous.¹

Such concern over the threat presented by the 'Islamist' other has endured through the decade that has since passed, and continues to shape Israeli attitudes towards more recent but equally profound events across the Middle East. In particular, the Arab Awakening has, in very short order, shaken the foundations of Israel's reliance upon a regional status quo that, even before the invasion of Iraq, had long served the interests of the Jewish state, the ties between Tel Aviv and Cairo being the most apposite example. Noted observers of Israel's political scene now regard the Arab Awakening as marking the biggest erosion of its strategic environment since the founding of the state. Ari Shavit, a columnist for the Israeli daily *Haaretz*, captured the sense of foreboding when he wrote: 'Now we see the Arab spring [*sic*] in all its glory. Democracy in Egypt? Not yet. Enlightenment in Egypt? Absolutely not. So far the Arab Spring has brought us the black hole

¹ Ari Shavit, 'The enemy within', *Haaretz Magazine* (in Hebrew), 30 Aug. 2002.

of the Sinai which sucks in all kinds of Islamic zealotry.² The overthrow of Ben Ali's regime in Tunisia, Mubarak's in Egypt and Gaddafi's in Libya, the departure of Saleh in Yemen, the challenge to Bashar al-Assad in Syria, the riots against the al-Khalifah in Bahrain, and growing protests in Jordan against the Hashemite order have, therefore, been framed by assumptions about the rise of Islam and Islamist movements across the Middle East that predate the events of 2010.

Having initially faced regional isolation following its establishment in 1948, the State of Israel struggled for decades to foster amicable relations with Egypt, Jordan and Turkey; once established, diplomatic ties did little to mitigate Israel's continued occupation of Palestinian territory. Israelis, rightly, can point to examples of territorial retrenchment, not least from parts of the West Bank, as well as Lebanon in 2000 and Gaza in 2005—withdrawals that for many exacerbated, rather than ameliorated, border security, with the attendant rise respectively of Hezbollah and Hamas. Even so, Israeli policy towards the Palestinians and the wider Arab world was conducted in the sure knowledge that in Washington it had an influential ally that held sway over the rest of the region.

Such certainties are no longer guaranteed. Tel Aviv is at odds with Cairo, alienated from Ankara and distanced from Amman, and remains uncertain as to whether the removal of Assad would be in its best interests. Israel also faces a Palestinian leadership which is characterized by a strengthened Hamas and a weakened President Abbas. In all this, against a background of acute regional tension with Iran over its nuclear programme and Tehran's continued support for Hezbollah and Hamas in south Lebanon and Gaza, Israel is facing a diplomatic, strategic and political upheaval across several fronts, with seemingly few diplomatic assets by which it can influence events.

Since the removal of former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, eight Israelis have been killed in a terrorist attack from the Sinai, weapons smuggling into the Gaza Strip has increased, and the pipeline bringing gas supplies to Israel has been subjected to acts of sabotage. Some Israeli commentators, notably on the right, have directed their ire at US President Barack Obama, believing his lukewarm support for the increasingly beleaguered Egyptian autocrat only served to allow a political vacuum to emerge across Egypt that Islamists now look set to fill.³ Whether Israel considered him a convenient friend or an awkward ally, the reality is that Mubarak was one of several dictators and autocrats in the region whose rule was deemed illegitimate by large swathes of their citizenry amid an unfolding, dynamic and region-wide protest movement that Washington and Tel Aviv could do little to inspire, let alone control.

Even so, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu's view that the Arab uprisings were becoming an 'Islamic, anti-Western, anti-liberal, anti-Israeli, undemocratic wave', a view shared during an address before the Knesset on 23 November 2011, has strong popular appeal in Israel. He chided those Israelis in the political opposition

² Ari Shavit, 'Arab Spring showed its real face in attack on Israeli embassy in Egypt', *Haaretz* (in English), 11 Sept. 2011, <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/arab-spring-showed-its-real-face-in-attack-on-israeli-embassy-in-egypt-1.383689>, accessed 8 Feb. 2013.

³ See Efraim Inbar, 'Israeli defense: the Arab uprising's impact', *Middle East Quarterly* 19: 1, Winter 2012, pp. 41–2.

who had regarded the Arab Awakening as the harbinger of a new, liberal political order across the region in which democratic affinity and shared normative values would determine new regional relationships between peoples and not just governments. For Netanyahu, the clear rise of Islamist parties from Morocco to Egypt and beyond vindicated his view that he has been right not to cede territory to the Palestinians without knowing 'who will end up with any piece of territory we might give'.⁴ Clearly, his perception of Islam remains fixed by definitions of the radical and violent rather than a more nuanced understanding of more moderate or reformist streams which have emerged across the region, as reflected in gains at the ballot box.⁵

Of course, it is true that Islamist conversion to more plural forms of government will not take place overnight and certainly not without the input of other actors. It is far too early, however, to view—as Netanyahu clearly does—such events and processes as a militant Islamist *fait accompli* around which all other decisions relating to Israel's relations with its Palestinian neighbours or the wider Middle East must now revolve. One thing is clear: Netanyahu's narrative overlooks the rejection of the jihadist Islamist trope and its methods in Libya and Egypt, for example.

What is there to understand?

Some Israelis do question the image of an Islamist behemoth sweeping all before it. For example, Amichai Magen has written of the Arab Awakening as being the 'simultaneous unfolding of three grand historic political processes: democratization, authoritarian adaptation/succession, and state failure', and with success and failure contingent upon an array of variables—religious, cultural and economic—as well as the relative political weight of a secular middle class or at least the semblance of a liberal constituency.⁶ Others, such as Mark Heller, have noted that 'the weakening or overthrow of regimes congenial to Israeli interests might be compensated ... by the weakening or overthrow of regimes unreservedly inimical to those same interests'.⁷ Within the Israeli government some senior civil servants have also tried to pursue a more nuanced understanding of the events across the Middle East and suggest how this should shape and guide Israeli policy.

Nevertheless, governmental pressure for such analysis appears to have been sluggish in relation to foreign policy towards the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) in the light of the unfolding events across the Arab and Muslim world. In a move more akin to locking the stable door after the horse has bolted, it was

⁴ Bruce Lynfield, 'With West focused on Iran, Netanyahu moves to expand Israeli settlements', *Christian Science Monitor*, 17 April 2012, http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2012/0412/With-West-focused-on-Iran-Netanyahu-moves-to-expand-Israeli-settlements?nav=479716-csm_blog_post-bottomRelated, accessed 17 April 2012.

⁵ Charles Kurzman, 'Liberal Islam: prospects and challenges', *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 3: 3, Sept. 1999, pp. 11–19; Beverley Milton-Edwards, 'Revolt and revolution: the place of Islamism', *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 5: 2, 2012, pp. 219–36.

⁶ Amichai Magen, 'On political order and the "Arab Spring"', *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs* 6: 1, 2012, pp. 10, 14–15.

⁷ Mark Heller, 'Israeli responses to the Arab Spring', in Yoel Guzansky and Mark A. Heller, eds, *One year of the Arab Spring: global and regional implications* (Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, 2012), p. 75.

not until the end of 2011, under the guidance of Director-General Rafael Barak, that the Israeli foreign ministry established several working groups to examine Israel's options across the MENA region. One group was tasked with looking at relations with Tunisia, Libya and Morocco, a second at events in Egypt, Jordan and Syria, while a third, interestingly, focused upon the role of minority groups across the region, including the Copts in Egypt and the Kurds in Syria, Iraq and Turkey.

It was reported, for example, that the former Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman was in favour of establishing contact with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in retaliation for Turkey's expulsion of Israel's ambassador to Ankara. Doubts concerning the veracity of such reports notwithstanding, a return to a form of 'periphery doctrine'—a series of informal alliances with non-Arab and non-Muslim actors across the Middle East—might be seen as an attempt to insure against Israel's fears of further regional isolation and the attendant consequences.⁸ The declaration by Israel's Ambassador to Washington, Michael Oren, that his country was the safest for the region's Christian minority can be viewed partly in the context of such a doctrine.⁹

But the electoral success of moderate Islamist parties in North Africa and Egypt has cast doubt on the claims made by Israeli politicians—most notably Natan Sharansky—that only with progress towards democratic governance across the region can any tangible peace process ever come to fruition.¹⁰ Failure by Israel to welcome the apparent reduction in the Arab democratic deficit suggests therefore that Israel continues to see the 'Arab and Muslim world as a monolithic danger', and that, accordingly, it can only embrace a Realist peace.¹¹ Moreover, without significant progress in talks with the Palestinians, the ability of Israel to engage, let alone build tangible relationships, with new political dispensations across the region is proving extremely limited; this was evidenced in terms of Egypt's role during Israel's Operation Pillar of Defence in November 2012 when the Egyptian Prime Minister made a visit of solidarity to Hamas-run Gaza and yet Egypt remained the key player in terms of mediating the Hamas–Israeli ceasefire agreement. In the current climate, preventing relations deteriorating still further with Cairo, Ankara and Amman would be achievement enough for the Jewish state.

⁸ Barak Ravid, 'The Arab Spring and Israel's winter hibernation', *Haaretz* (in English), 8 Dec. 2011, <http://www.haaretz.com/blogs/diplomania/the-arab-spring-and-israel-s-winter-hibernation-1.400345>, accessed 6 Feb. 2013; Amos Harel and Avi Issacharoff, 'Israel faces its most complex diplomatic challenges in years', *Haaretz* (in English), 16 Sept. 2011, <http://www.haaretz.com/weekend/week-s-end/israel-faces-its-most-complex-diplomatic-challenges-in-decades-1.384826>, accessed 6 Feb. 2013.

⁹ Rachel Hirshfeld, 'Oren: Israel only place in Mideast Christians aren't endangered', *Arutz Sheva*, 11 March 2012, <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/153630>, accessed 6 Feb. 2013.

¹⁰ See Natan Sharansky, *The case for democracy: the power of freedom to overcome tyranny and terror* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2006), p. 303.

¹¹ Zvi Bar'el, 'Israel suffers from political Alzheimer's disease', *Haaretz* (in English), 8 Jan. 2012, <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/opinion/israel-suffers-from-political-alzheimer-s-disease-1.407884>, accessed 6 Feb. 2013. Other analysts go further, arguing that Israel's failure to take seriously the Arab peace initiative launched in Beirut in the spring of 2002 is part of a pattern by Israeli governments anxious not to upset a status quo that seems favourable to their interests. See Elie Podeh, 'Israel never really wanted peace', *Haaretz* (in English), 18 Dec. 2010, <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/opinion/israel-never-really-wanted-peace-1.330881?localLinksEnabled=false>, accessed 6 Feb. 2013.

In this era of uncertainty, it is not surprising that Israelis cling to truths that are strategic in nature and conform to an understanding of the Arab Awakening orientated around hard core security concerns—and certainties. Thus, analysis of indigenous factors behind the uprisings in Syria and Bahrain and continued violence in Iraq is framed by reference to Islam as monolithic, and 'Islamists' and 'Islamism' are used by Israeli spokespersons as catch-all epithets to explain threats to regional stability.¹² As one Israeli official was reported to have remarked, 'when some people in the West see what's happening in Egypt, they see Europe 1989. We see it as Tehran 1979.'¹³

No one should doubt that Israel's external security concerns are real and enduring. To think otherwise would be churlish and indeed ignore ongoing regional animosity towards the Jewish state. Iran, as the comment quoted above illustrates, has preoccupied and concerned Israeli strategists ever since the establishment of a theocratic regime presided over by Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979. It is viewed as revolutionary, extremist and bent on the destruction of Israel. When this fear is combined with Tehran's sponsorship of both Hamas and Hezbollah and its attempts to forge closer ties with Cairo and Khartoum, it becomes all too easy for Israelis to view Islam in reductionist terms, and of a piece with those who deny the right of a Jewish sovereign entity—whatever its boundaries—to exist within and among a predominantly Muslim Middle East.¹⁴

This depiction overlooks not only the changes within Iran in the last five years, at both the elite and societal levels, but also—and more importantly—a more nuanced appreciation of Islamism across the region in the wake of the Arab Awakening, which can now be represented as easily by the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey and al-Nahda in Tunisia, in terms of how Islamist movements can engage with more plural forms of governance. As the Israeli academic and journalist Rachel Shabi wrote:

What stands out in so many of these [Israeli government] assessments is that, while the region is changing so profoundly, Israel's view of it remains rigidly fixed. While post-revolutionary Arab countries embark on the inevitably long battle to fully eject old, repressive, western-backed regimes and ensure democratic freedoms prevail, Israel seems to have little interest in the constant trials, the small gains or the larger goals of neighbouring people. The preference is for a blanket dismissal, in the style of Home Front Minister Avi Dichter ... who warned that the Muslim Brotherhood had co-opted the Arab Spring in a bid to create 'one Islamic Caliphate' across the Middle East.¹⁵

These differing components of Islamism do, however, represent elements of an emerging new Arab nationalism based on a popular sense of Arab–Islamic identity that (1) transcends sectarian difference and (2) is shaped by a common agenda regarding core Arab issues. For Morten Valbjørn and André Bank, evidence of

¹² Author's interview with Dr Ephraim Kam, Deputy Director, Institute for National Security Studies, Tel Aviv, 2 Nov. 2011.

¹³ Daniel Byman, 'Israel's pessimistic view of the Arab Spring', *Washington Quarterly* 34: 3, 2011, p. 123.

¹⁴ Yoav Zitun, 'Amos Gilad: Iran is a massive threat that must be dealt with', *Yediot Aharonot* (in Hebrew), 28 Oct. 2011.

¹⁵ Rachel Shabi, 'Israel: learn the power of words, not just might, in the New Middle East', *Haaretz* (in Hebrew), 13 Sept. 2012.

this commonality was already to be found in popular Arab reaction in support of Hezbollah during the 2006 war with Israel, support that denied sectarian difference and, indeed, the alleged preferences of state elites, most notably in Saudi Arabia, which had hoped that the IDF would cut Hezbollah down to size. They argue that 'a societal Political Arabism rising from an Arab-Islamic public rather than a state led Pan-Arabism constitutes the dominant frame of reference in Middle East politics during the first decade of the 21st century'.¹⁶ Jean-Pierre Filiu amplifies this point in relation to the enduring pull across the wider Middle East of the Palestinian issue in relation to Israel. 'Palestine is still the mantra,' he contends; 'the Palestinian ordeal is deeply embedded in the ethical dimension of this leaderless revolution that stands behind the Palestinians as a nation.'¹⁷ This was demonstrated in November 2012 by the high-profile visit by a delegation of Arab foreign ministers to the Gaza Strip in a show of solidarity with its people during Israel's recent military operation, Pillar of Defence, designed ostensibly to deter further missile attacks by Palestinian militants against southern Israel.

Interpreting the emerging new nationalist-Islamist discourse of the Middle East is a challenge for Israel. It demands that Israel rethink its common default position on Islamism and the attendant attachment of the region's people (rather than the rulers whom they have rejected) to the rights of the Palestinians, and in consequence rethink also Israel's own role and responsibilities. The protest movements and post-revolutionary political orders that have emerged in the Arab world have once more linked acceptance of Israel and its place in the region to the long-standing issue of Palestinian statehood and independence.

Such movements are far removed from the state-managed posturing which in essence allowed former leaders like Hosni Mubarak to maintain a dualist position on Israel and the Palestinians. Under President Mohammed Morsi, Egypt's new government, now dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood, has been forced to reassess and rebalance state positioning on Israel (and extant peace treaties and protocols), taking populist sentiment into account, in ways which preserve pre-existing regional and global dependencies yet mediate populist claims instead of ignoring them. This populist dimension was apparent in November 2012 when President Morsi supported Gazans and the Hamas government during Israel's Operation Pillar of Defence with public gestures such as keeping the Rafah border between Gaza and Egypt open and sending his prime minister to Gaza. Yet it was Egypt (as was the case under President Mubarak) which also served as mediator between Gaza and Tel Aviv to ensure negotiations which resulted in a significant mutual ceasefire between Israel and Hamas. As Zvi Bar'el noted of Arab demands in Egypt, if Tel Aviv wants to have anything like a warm peace, it will have to pay the price in Palestinian coin.¹⁸ But that begs the question: is the present government (or indeed any Israeli government) able or willing to pay in this currency?

¹⁶ Morten Valbjørn and André Bank, 'The new Arab Cold War: rediscovering the Arab dimension of Middle East regional politics', *Review of International Studies* 38: 1, Jan. 2012, p. 15.

¹⁷ Jean-Pierre Filiu, *The Arab revolution: ten lessons from the democratic uprising* (London: Hurst, 2011), p. 133.

¹⁸ Zvi Bar'el, 'Israel's take on Arab Spring may undo peace with Egypt', *Haaretz* (in English), 30 Nov. 2011, <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/opinion/israel-s-take-on-arab-spring-may-undo-peace-with-egypt-1.398578>, accessed 6 Feb. 2013.

Israeli Realism recast

The outlook is not promising. To begin with, the dominant Israeli narrative, as evidenced by speeches and statements of key Israeli decision-makers, politicians and academics at the influential Herzliya conference in January 2012, remains Realist in tone and content. The only nuance discernible is what might be termed Israel's 'defensive Realist' approach to the Arab Awakening, which contrasts with the more bellicose statements, amplified by well-placed leaks to the Israeli and international press, concerning the imminence or otherwise of military action against Tehran.¹⁹ This 'offensive Realism' might just for now be sabre-rattling. There is little apparent appetite among the Israeli public for such a confrontation against a background of such regional instability. In a poll published in February 2012 only 14 per cent of Israelis were in favour of a unilateral strike by Israel against Iran.²⁰

Commentary and analysis in the wake of the poll emphasized the extent to which Israel's political and military elite was out of step with widespread public opinion. Similarly, as Palestinians prepared a bid for statehood at the United Nations in September 2011, Israeli public opinion appeared to depart from the hardline position of the Netanyahu government on the move. The poll revealed that 70 per cent of Israelis thought that Israel should recognize Palestinian statehood if the bid was passed at the UN.²¹ Only 4 per cent of the Israelis polled believed that Israel should invade the West Bank and Gaza Strip and use force to prevent the establishment of a Palestinian state. Yet in November 2012, when President Abbas returned to the UN General Assembly and won 'non-member observer state' status in a historic vote, the Israeli government announced further settlement expansion and a decision to withhold Palestinian tax revenues.

If one subscribes to the argument of Valbjørn and Bank, there remains little, if anything, that Israel can do to influence the essential trajectory of the Arab Awakening. Indeed, comment regarding events in particular states (although not the broad spectrum of Islamist triumph across the region) has certainly been conspicuous by its absence among key decision-makers. It has been left to former defence officials and academics, many of whom are considered to be integral to Israel's informal if influential security network,²² to give voice to analysis of the Arab Awakening and to articulate the impact of both cause and effect upon Israel's regional position. Thus, in their opening comments before the 2012 Herzliya conference, former IDF Major General Danny Rothschild and Tommy Steiner argued that:

¹⁹ Perhaps the most notable example yet is a recent interview given by Defence Minister Ehud Barak to the Israeli journalist Ronen Bergman. The interview, published in the *New York Times Magazine*, was seen as putting direct pressure upon Washington to up the ante against Tehran in an effort to curb what many see as its nefarious nuclear ambitions. See Ronen Bergman, 'Will Israel attack Iran?', *New York Times Magazine*, 25 Jan. 2012.

²⁰ See Shibley Telhami, February 2012 Israel public opinion survey, at http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/reports/2012/2/29%20israel%20poll%20telhami/0229_israel_poll_report_telhami.pdf, accessed 7 Feb. 2013. The poll was carried out under the auspices of Professor Telhami.

²¹ 'Poll: 70% of Israelis say Israel should accept UN decision', *Jerusalem Post Online*, 21 Sept. 2011, <http://www.jpost.com/DiplomacyAndPolitics/Article.aspx?ID=238855&R=R1>, accessed 6 Feb. 2013.

²² For a discussion of the influence and power such networks have over Israel's collective security imagination, see Oren Barak and Gabriel Sheffer, 'Israel's "security network" and its impact: an exploration of a new approach', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 38: 2, 2006, pp. 235–61.

The advancement of radical Islam across the Middle East, evident not only in countries that have held elections, is a source of deep concern regarding the future of the Middle East ... and one should not take for granted the territorial integrity of Middle East countries, including Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen ... Thus a year after the beginning of the popular uprising across the region, not only is there no progress in addressing the two major Middle East challenges—under-development and radicalism—the region has regressed.²³

While accepting that this security network is not homogeneous in its views, the argument put forward by Rothschild and Steiner is indicative of a widely held understanding of the Arab Awakening as reflecting the growing power not just of political Islam to the exclusion of all other political elements, but of radical Islam in particular. Crucially for Israel, it remains beyond the state-based control of authoritarian pro-western Arab elites and therefore immune from moderation. Such views were voiced openly by another former IDF general and Ministry of Defence official, Amos Gilad, who opined that those Egyptians who might have entertained ‘democratic aspirations’ had seen such hopes dashed by a new Islamist regime he described as a ‘terrible dictatorship’.²⁴ Equally, Gilad’s assessment of the malign nature of the new dispensation in Egypt was a public rebuke to those in the United States and the European Union nurturing a hope that Islamist movements could embrace democracy and liberal politics, values seen as inimical to the very theological basis of such movements, in whose view sovereignty over a given polity is derived from God, rather than the people. A report written by Harold Brackman for the Simon Wiesenthal Centre in late 2011 addressed such transitions in Washington’s response to the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood and its impact upon a post-Mubarak Egypt, criticizing in the process the naive assumption that the demise of autocratic regimes would hasten the emergence of new, more plural political orders. As Brackman noted:

The need for realism and vigilance in Washington and European capitals ... [is] great while the margin for hope is, unfortunately, small ... The Obama Administration seems to have resigned itself to a Brotherhood victory in Egypt by putting the best face possible on negative developments that may include the imposition of Shariah Law, economic collapse, and the flight of capital and the upper class to Europe and the United States.²⁵

This perspective highlights a wider Israeli concern: namely, that western naivety over the Arab Awakening could place clear water between the interests of Israel on the one hand and those of European leaders and Washington on the other, precisely when unity is required notably over the issue of Iran.²⁶ Both Rothschild

²³ Maj.-Gen. (Res.) Danny Rothschild and Tommy Steiner, ‘The 2012 Herzliya assessment: Israel in the eye of the storms’, working paper for Twelfth Annual Herzliya Conference, 2012, <http://www.herzliyaconference.org/eng/?CategoryID=477&ArticleID=2358>, accessed 6 Feb. 2013.

²⁴ Quoted in Benny Ziffer, ‘Waking up from the Egyptian Arab Spring’, *Haaretz* (in English), 9 Nov. 2012, <http://www.haaretz.com/weekend/week-s-end/waking-up-from-the-egyptian-arab-spring.premium-1.476409>, accessed 6 Feb. 2013.

²⁵ Harold Brackman, ‘Storm warnings: the Muslim brotherhood and Egypt’s future’, a Simon Wiesenthal Center report, Dec. 2011, http://www.wiesenthal.com/atf/cf/%7B54d385e6-f1b9-4e9f-8e94-890c3e6dd277%7D/STORM_WARNINGS_MUSLIM-BROTHERHOOD_REPORT_12-2011.PDF, accessed 6 Feb. 2013.

²⁶ Barak Ravid and Jonathan Lis, ‘Israeli foreign ministry: U.S. ignored Arab radicalization’, *Haaretz* (in Hebrew), 16 Sept. 2012.

and Steiner point out that no causal link exists between the Awakening and the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Even so, progress on the latter has the potential to harvest political dividends across Europe and North America in these uncertain times for Israel.

However, suspicions of foot-dragging by the current Israeli government over settlements and the wider peace process have had an adverse impact upon Israel's image and indeed legitimacy among audiences—both political and popular—in the West, an image already tarnished by what many considered to be Israel's disproportionate use of force in Gaza in 2009 and highlighted again in the respective proportions of Palestinian and Israeli casualties in November 2012. Accordingly, the overwhelming vote in the United Nations at the end of that month in favour of upgrading the Palestinians' status to that of a non-member state—a vote that can be read as an international rebuke to Israel over settlement construction and its own lukewarm engagement with the peace process—was in a real sense preordained.²⁷

Israel already had to contend with a hardening of western public opinion against it in the wake of the 2006 Lebanon war, Operation Cast Lead against Gaza in 2008–2009, the Mavi Marmara incident of 2010 and the legality of Israel's blockade of Gaza in the same year. A BBC World Service poll in 2011 in which respondents were asked to give positive or negative feelings towards selected states revealed that as few as 14 per cent of those polled had a positive view of Israel, a total only marginally better than those holding similar opinions of Iran, North Korea and Pakistan. Even among governments noted for their pro-Israeli stance, favourable opinion towards Tel Aviv has evidentially declined.²⁸

However unfair or ill-informed such polls might appear to many Israelis—Rothschild and Steiner note, for example, that Netanyahu's is the first Likud-led government to unequivocally endorse a two-state solution, as well as issuing and implementing a ten-month freeze on settlement construction—perception is all. Moreover, as Daniel Levy has argued, 'Israel cannot have a strategy for managing its regional posture [i.e. response to the Arab Awakening] without having a Palestinian strategy, and today it no longer has one.'²⁹

The volatility of the Arab Awakening, however, has prompted Israeli commentators to cast doubt on the wisdom or otherwise of entering into negotiations with Palestinian interlocutors. Netanyahu's comments regarding the malign Islamist nature of the Arab Awakening are echoed by other Israeli observers who urge caution. Shmuel Bar argues that the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt has the potential to spur greater unrest, for example, in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan as Muslim Brothers there take heart from events in Cairo. Enjoying a significant following among the Palestinian constituency and deemed to be more

²⁷ Carlo Strenger, 'Netanyahu is leading Israel into an abyss', *Haaretz* (in English), 5 Dec. 2012.

²⁸ See http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/05_03_11_bbcws_country_poll.pdf, accessed 6 Feb. 2013. The Israeli government, however, could take comfort from a Gallup poll in February 2011 which demonstrated that a clear majority of Americans polled favoured Israel to a much greater extent than the Palestinians. See <http://www.gallup.com/poll/146408/americans-maintain-broad-support-israel.aspx>, accessed 6 Feb. 2013.

²⁹ Daniel Levy, 'Can Tahrir Square come to Tel Aviv?', New America Foundation, 25 Aug. 2011, http://newamerica.net/publications/articles/2011/can_tahrir_square_come_to_Tel_aviv, accessed 6 Feb. 2013.

hardline than their Egyptian counterparts, the East Bank tribes, the very edifice on which the Hashemite dynasty rests, are becoming uneasy at the growing power and influence of an Islamic movement that makes reference to the 'Jordanian entity' and seeks to exercise even greater influence upon Amman's dealings with Israel and the Palestinians.³⁰

Again, Israeli analysts return to the trope of Islamism—in this case manifest primarily in the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood movement and its political arm, the Islamic Action Front—to explain the political unrest in Jordan. The historical, ideological and contextual depth required in understanding the relationship between the Hashemite state, its Islamist opposition and the political framework—in terms of its unique place in the Middle East and differences with republican regimes such as those in Egypt and Tunisia or even monarchies such as Saudi Arabia or Morocco—are at best overlooked in such Israeli discourse. At worst they are deliberately ignored in pursuit of wider regional strategic goals which require the active assistance of nations such as the United States which must be convinced that any form of outreach to Islamists in the post-revolutionary phase must be resisted. Jordan is a remarkable case in point in this respect. Jordan remains the closest thing Israel now has to a regional ally; but, remarking on Israel's growing isolation in the wake of the Arab Awakening, King Abdullah called upon Israel to make peace with the Palestinians, the key, he argued, to resolving the wider regional standoff over Iran. As he declared:

We are all—Palestinians, Israelis, and the international community—running out of options ... Reviving the peace process is key to defusing any present or future standoff with Iran. We need to shift the focus back on resolving the Palestinian–Israeli conflict. This unresolved conflict offers a rallying point for any entity wishing to gain the emotional support of over one billion Muslims around the world ... The region does not need yet another crisis at this stage.³¹

Israel's limited view of the Islamists in Jordan tends to underplay, as do other explanations, the true nature of the socio-economic grievances and repressive, corrupt and authoritarian state measures which have given rise to discontent across the Hashemite Kingdom—a sense of grievance amplified still further by the impasse that now defines Israeli–Palestinian relations. More broadly, Israel too risks overlooking the true features of the Arab Awakening at a cost not only in terms of its regional defence position but more immediately in terms of how the state may come to redefine its relationship with its own Arab citizens as politics in Israel increasingly veered to the right. Viewed from this perspective, it is little wonder that the Arab Awakening has heightened Israel's security concerns, as the certainty associated with the *ancien régime* of Mubarak evaporates and the prospect of a fallen regime in Syria gives rise to transitional political processes that are

³⁰ Shmuel Bar, 'The Middle East in revolution: the "Arab Awakening"', working paper for Twelfth Annual Herzliya Conference, <http://www.herzliyaconference.org/eng/?CategoryID=477&ArticleID=2314>, accessed 6 Feb. 2013.

³¹ Interview with King Abdullah II, *Turkish Policy Quarterly* 10: 4, Feb. 2012, [http://www.turkishpolicy.com/dosyalar/files/interview_king_abdullah-10_4\(1\).pdf](http://www.turkishpolicy.com/dosyalar/files/interview_king_abdullah-10_4(1).pdf), accessed 6 Feb. 2013.

more plural and unstable. This concern was aired in September 2011 when Major-General Eyal Eisenberg of the IDF's Home Front Command argued that an 'Arab Winter' propelled the region ever closer to a future war or regional conflagration and even the possible deployment of weapons of mass destruction.³²

This concern amplifies, in turn, the Israeli fear that the Arab Awakening will take on an 'Iranian' flavour, leading not just to revolutionary ferment in the region but to actual revolutions, inspired and led by radical Islamists and dedicated to the imposition of regimes and the installation of Arab governments that prioritize policies founded on the call for the destruction of Israel. In Egypt it has already become apparent that the strategic relationship with Israel has changed to the detriment of Tel Aviv. Further, there are fears that the natural political affinity between Palestinian Hamas (which governs the Gaza Strip) and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood will radicalize rather than moderate attitudes towards Israel. In truth, it is more likely that the attitudes and position of Egypt and Hamas in terms of both their bilateral ties with each other and how they relate to Israel as independent actors will be determined by their own particular interests.

In relation to their bilateral ties for example, this is illustrated by comments made by Hamas leaders in Gaza, who declared that the Arab Spring is an 'opportunity, a great opportunity' and by their view that change in the relationship between Israel and Egypt on the part of those holding power in Cairo can only take place through 'consensus and popular referenda and not the arbitrary statements or actions of a new president or parliament'.³³ Despite the toppling of Mubarak, Israel has in fact retained Egypt as a diplomatic partner; yet it is also true that the peace it had maintained with the elite of the previous regime has now changed to one that is far more precarious.³⁴ This is seen most visibly in concern over the security vacuum that has now emerged in the Sinai, which has certainly coloured Israeli perspectives of President Morsi and his ability to exercise sovereign control over Egyptian territory. This in turn highlights a wider trend in Israeli thinking over any future territorial retrenchment.

The bloody events in Syria, as well as the machinations of intra-Palestinian politics, demonstrate to Israelis that the perceived failure to negotiate further withdrawals from the Golan Heights and the West Bank respectively have, with hindsight, worked in Israel's strategic favour.³⁵ After all, if Assad's very survival were at stake, would he not be tempted to lash out at Israel? Others see some strategic advantage to be had if events in Syria deny Hezbollah the support of a key ally and a crucial conduit for arms and supplies to its military wing. Still, this might be small recompense, given the wider threats to Israel's northern border of regime collapse in Syria; for, as Amos Gilad notes, the potential remains for the

³² Amos Harel, 'Israel not facing an all-out Middle East war', *Haaretz*, 7 Sept. 2011, <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/israel-not-facing-an-all-out-middle-east-war-1.382958>, accessed 6 Feb. 2013.

³³ Author's interview with Dr Mahmoud Zahar, Hamas leader and founder, Gaza City, 8 Dec. 2012.

³⁴ Alexander I. George, 'Democracy and peace', *Scandinavian Political Studies* 23: 3 (n.s.), 2000, pp. 273–9, http://etidsskrifter.dk/ojs/index.php/scandinavian_political_studies/article/view/13421/25587, accessed 6 Feb. 2013.

³⁵ We are grateful to Dr Ahron Bregman, Department of War Studies, King's College London, for this particular insight.

Muslim Brotherhood to fill the power vacuum in Damascus.³⁶ The implementation of intra-Palestinian reconciliation is viewed as inimical to Israel strategic interests as it heightens opportunities for further Arab (and Turkish) regional axis building over the issue of Palestine. The cost–benefit analysis from this perspective is seen as negative.

Back to the 'Iron Wall'

Israelis do of course recognize the longer-term benefits to be had from meaningful peace negotiations with the Palestinians; but the Netanyahu government appeared to have done little to foster and encourage the position of moderates within the Fatah-dominated Palestinian Authority (PA). Given the universal approbation heaped by the West upon the progressive policies of Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, from security sector reform to efforts to be seen to purge Palestinian institutions of corruption and encourage innovation and capacity building, the response of the Israeli government has been counter-intuitive if not downright obstructive. After a decade of pursuing peace negotiations with Israel, President Abbas has nothing to show for these talks, and in February 2012 agreed to a new Qatari-brokered *rapprochement* with Hamas leader Khaled Meshal. Netanyahu immediately saw the agreement in wider regional terms, and accused President Abbas of turning his back on Israel by openly siding with its enemies.³⁷

Israel has long insisted that negotiations with the PA should begin without preconditions, a position rejected by Palestinians who note that failure to halt settlement construction hardly provides the basis for reciprocity. Moreover, despite the almost mantra-like declarations in support of a two-state solution, the withholding by Israel of US\$100 million in tax revenues from the PA in retribution for their attempt to secure recognition of statehood at the UN disrupts the payment of salaries to those self-same security forces that have even impressed senior IDF officers. Instead of consolidating the Fayyadist approach, which exhibits elements of the kind of Arab authoritarianism regarding rule of law, security coordination and human rights which has served the interests of Tel Aviv in the past, the current political leadership in Israel seeks to quash and constrain it to the point of economic crisis and collapse across the West Bank.

These are the very same conditions that gave rise to the Arab Awakening in other parts of the Middle East. In Hamas-governed Gaza, however, economic resilience has been maintained and revived by the reopening of the route to Egypt (and by extension the rest of the Arab world), the economic support of states such as Qatar, and the concessions wrought in the wake of the November 2012

³⁶ See 'The Israeli position toward events in Syria', assessment report, Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies (Doha Institute), Feb. 2012, pp. 4–5, <http://english.dohainstitute.org/release/cbdbcfb5-d8dd-43c2-9c06-76eao044d4e7>, accessed 7 Feb. 2013; Amos Harel and Avi Issacharoff, 'Warning: more shake-ups ahead', *Haaretz* (in English), 16 Dec. 2011, <http://www.haaretz.com/weekend/week-s-end/harel-and-issacharoff-warning-more-shake-ups-ahead-1.401763>, accessed 6 Feb. 2013.

³⁷ David Barak, 'Netanyahu: PA President must choose between peace with Israel and peace with Hamas', *Haaretz* (in English), 6 Feb. 2012, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/netanyahu-pa-president-must-choose-between-peace-with-israel-and-peace-with-hamas-1.411414>, accessed 6 Feb. 2013.

ceasefire agreement between Hamas and Israel. Israel has considered the option of territorial reoccupation of both or either the West Bank and Gaza Strip, but the consequences in terms of boasting of its own democratic character and credentials at this historic juncture in the politics of the Middle East could prove fatal.

To many Israelis, especially on the religious right, continued settlement of the West Bank appears to be no more than a natural extension of the original Zionist strategy of settlement that led to Israel's establishment. With their belief in settlement as part of the redemptive process that cannot brook territorial compromise, few of them see the settlements as constituting the major obstacle to peace. There is a certain internal consistency to their argument that denying the right of Jews to settle in the West Bank delegitimizes the very basis of Zionism itself, irrespective of the view that such activities undermine Israel's proud claim to be *both* Jewish and democratic.³⁸

Given that Israel's attitudes towards the Arab Awakening are formed by a 'defensive' Realist perspective, the analysis in the present article is one of the few to draw parallels between the continued occupation of Palestinian land, the Arab Awakening and the increasingly right-wing (and indeed anti-democratic) drift of politics in Israel. Accordingly, the real impact of the Arab Awakening on Israel may reside less in determining its external posture and more in how analysis of the Arab Awakening feeds into the dynamics that now shape internal politics in the Jewish state. This is where context is all. As mentioned previously, memories remain raw in Israel over the Al-Aqsa intifada which by the end of 2005 had resulted in 1,330 Israeli deaths, a third of them through suicide bombings.³⁹ This conflict was certainly seen in existential terms and, taken in conjunction with the 2006 Lebanon war, was enough to persuade many Israelis—most notably, many secular, middle-class Israelis who had supported the Oslo peace process—of the atavistic nature of Islam and Islamism. Accordingly, political allegiances in Israel since 2000 have moved firmly to the centre-right.⁴⁰

Despite the myriad political parties across Israel's political spectrum, it is easier to conceive of political discourse in the Jewish state as a competition between the ethno-nationalist and state-liberal discourses (liberal here being defined in economic rather than political terms), with those parties and groups advocating a more inclusive form of citizenship for all Israelis—Arab and Jew alike—increasingly being pushed to the margins.⁴¹ The electoral success of Yisrael Beiteinu was a case in point. A key element of the Netanyahu coalition government, its hardline rhetoric towards Arabs in general and the Palestinians in particular has attracted support from, among others, Likud voters, those associated with the

³⁸ Mohammed Ayoob, 'Palestine, Israel and the United States: reframing the dominant narrative', Policy Brief 53, Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, Feb. 2012, p. 3; Clive Jones, 'Israel's insurgent citizens: contesting the state, demanding the land', in George Joffé, ed., *Islamist radicalism in Europe and the Middle East: reassessing the causes of terrorism* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2012), pp. 200–214.

³⁹ Nadav Morag, 'Measuring success in coping with terrorism: the Israeli case', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 28: 4, 2005, p. 310.

⁴⁰ Ami Pedahzur, *The triumph of Israel's radical right* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 174–5.

⁴¹ See Ronnie Olesker, 'Israel's societal security dilemma and the Israeli–Palestinian peace process', *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 17: 4, 2011, pp. 382–401.

settler movement, and large numbers of Russian immigrants to Israel, all of whom question the efficacy of withdrawal from the occupied territories.⁴² Given this rightward drift, popular sentiment is in no mood to support inclusive compromises. This popular mood, combined with a widely held perception that Netanyahu has steered the country through the worst of the global economic storm while ensuring the security of the state (despite the mass social protests over growing wealth disparities across the country in the summer of 2011), seems to assure his continued dominance over the Israeli political landscape.

An extended term of office for Netanyahu is likely to accelerate still further the right-wing drift of Israeli politics, a trend discernible in the rash of legislation brought before the current Knesset designed to circumscribe both criticism of and legal challenges to settlement in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. The Boycott Law—which allows any Israeli citizen claiming economic loss to sue other Israeli organizations, NGOs or indeed individuals that advocate a boycott of goods and services originating from the occupied territories—has been the most notable example, since the law itself makes no distinction between goods manufactured in Israel proper and those produced in West Bank settlements. In effect, it is a law that de facto annexes the occupied territories, at least in terms of legal jurisdiction.

Others include the Nakhba Law and the Acceptance Committee Law, designed respectively to deny the allocation of funds from the state education budget to what are termed cultural events hostile to the state, and to empower Israeli Jewish citizens in Galilee and the Negev with the right to decide who can and cannot live in communities containing fewer than 400 households. Further, a bill is due to be brought before the Knesset that would impose a levy of some 45 per cent on contributions made from overseas donors, including the European Union, to Israeli human rights organizations such as B'tselem and Physicians for Human Rights. If passed, such taxation would, according to Dimi Reider, 'effectively cripple their activities'.⁴³ These laws are being subjected to challenges in the Supreme Court, but the fact that they have enjoyed support from the main political parties, including Kadima, on the floor of the Knesset does not bode well for the future of civil liberties in Israel.⁴⁴ Such moves also tarnish Israel's continued claim that amid the concerns that the West should have over the success of Islamist parties, it still remains the only true civic-based democracy in the Middle East.

Israel's actions appear increasingly to conform to Ze'ev Jabotinsky's idea of the 'Iron Wall': that, faced with the implacable animus of a hostile Arab and Islamic Middle East, separation remains the best guarantor of Israeli security. Physical evidence certainly bears out this trend. The security barrier in the West Bank—built initially to prevent suicide bombers in particular visiting carnage upon Israel's densely populated coastal strip—is now being mirrored in new construction along

⁴² See Clive Jones, 'What's left of the left in Israel: the shadow of the February 2009 national election', *Asian Affairs* 41: 1, March 2010, pp. 20–34.

⁴³ See Dimi Reider, 'Israel: the Knesset vs. democracy', *New York Review of Books* blog, 15 March 2012, <http://www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2012/mar/15/israel-knesset-democracy/>, accessed 6 Feb. 2013.

⁴⁴ Daniel Blatman, 'Heading towards an Israeli apartheid state', *Haaretz* (in English), 4 April 2011, <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/opinion/heading-toward-an-israeli-apartheid-state-1.353942>, accessed 6 Feb. 2013.

the Egyptian border. After more than 30 years of peace between Cairo and Tel Aviv, the 'Hourglass Project'—the construction by the IDF of a security fence some 230 kilometres in length along the border with Egypt—is Israel's response to what it sees as a breakdown in governance in the Sinai.⁴⁵

With trade between Israel and its Arab neighbours accounting for less than 5 per cent of Israeli GDP, momentum towards greater economic as well as physical integration with and understanding of the Arab world is conspicuous by its absence. Certainly, this cuts both ways—Egyptians and Jordanians are hardly known for their desire to visit the Jewish state—but, as Daniel Levy argues, these physical barriers demonstrate a striking lack of 'intellectual, social and cultural curiosity', leading Israel to be ill-equipped to 'interpret its immediate surroundings'.⁴⁶ This view was reinforced in October 2011 by Washington, when Defense Secretary Leon Panetta warned Israel of the dangers of increasing isolation amid the regional upheaval inspired by the Arab Awakening, noting:

There's not much question in my mind that they [Israel] maintain that [military] edge, but the question you have to ask is: is it enough to maintain a military edge if you're isolating yourself in the diplomatic arena? Real security can only be achieved by both a strong diplomatic effort as well as a strong effort to project your military strength ... it is not a good situation for Israel to become increasingly isolated. And that's what's happening.⁴⁷

It is perhaps a harsh judgement, but an understandable one nonetheless; for, as noted earlier, much Israeli analysis is based upon an inherent assumption that Islamist parties remain incapable of embracing plural forms of political participation. Equally, there remains a marked reluctance on Israel's part to acknowledge, let alone deal with, that self-same contradiction in its own polity—the tension of being both Jewish and democratic in the context of, first, demographic projections that posit a Palestinian Arab majority between the Mediterranean and the River Jordan by 2035 and, second, the power and increasing militancy of Jewish settlers.⁴⁸ In particular, the activities of the Hardal, who, though often seen as a fringe group of young militants, nurture an extreme *Weltanschauung* deaf to any compromise over what they consider to be their holy dispensation, have come to challenge state-based law agencies, both in terms of establishing illegal settlements and in 'price tagging', the destruction of Palestinian property in what they see as 'revenge' for the occasional uprooting of their settlements by the IDF on orders from the Supreme Court.⁴⁹ That they enjoy the indulgence of more mainstream settlements and their inhabitants despite public disavowal of their activities by the

⁴⁵ Nicolas Pelham, 'In Sinai: the uprising of the Bedouin', *New York Review of Books*, 6 Dec. 2012, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2012/dec/06/sinai-uprising-bedouin/?pagination=false>, accessed 5 Feb. 2013.

⁴⁶ Levy, 'Can Tahrir Square come to Tel Aviv?'.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Elad Benari, 'U.S. Defense Secretary warns Israel is becoming isolated', *Artutze Sheva News*, 3 Oct. 2011, <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/148423>, accessed 7 Feb. 2013.

⁴⁸ Evgenia Bystrov and Arnon Soffer, *Israel: demography and density 2007–2020* (Haifa: University of Haifa, 2008), <http://geo.haifa.ac.il/~ch-strategy>, accessed 6 Feb. 2013.

⁴⁹ Gershom Gorenberg, 'Israel's other occupation', *New York Times*, 25 Nov. 2011; Chaim Levinson and Avi Issacharoff, 'Settlers set fire to West Bank mosque after Israel demolishes illegal structures in Migron', *Haaretz* (in English), 5 Sept. 2011, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/settlers-set-fire-to-west-bank-mosque-after-israel-demolishes-illegal-structures-in-migron-1.382617>, accessed 6 Feb. 2013.

Yesha Council and Israeli politicians does little to discourage a group of people who place the law of their God above that of the state. In this context, the Arab Awakening is as much a mirror in which Israel could examine its own emerging democratic deficit as an occasion to pass judgement on those of its immediate neighbours.

Israel's immediate horizons are, however, dominated by the spectre of an Iran bent on acquiring a nuclear weapons capability. In 2007, for example, Avi Dichter, then Minister for Homeland Security, told an audience of foreign diplomats in Jerusalem that the biggest threat Israel faced in the contemporary Middle East was Iran. 'Our Middle East', he said, 'begins and ends with Iran activating against us through its proxies in the northern arm of Hizballah ... and its southern arm in Hamas.'⁵⁰ This is not the place to discuss the relative merits of competing interpretations of Tehran's exact intentions—perhaps the clerics themselves do not know. The debate in Israel itself, however, is vociferous, with Prime Minister Netanyahu having led a caucus of opinion in favour of striking Iran, while retired security chiefs, including two former heads of Mossad, Efraim Halevy and Meir Dagan, remain outspoken in their criticism of any such action. Halevy, for example, recognizes the increased 'regional legitimacy' enjoyed in recent years by states such as Iran and its implications for Israel's own strategic position in the Middle East. He advocates a 'variety of means and ways', including regional diplomatic engagement 'that is in Israel's real interest', rather than a strike first approach.⁵¹ Allusion is often made to the tacit support of other Arab states—including Saudi Arabia—and, while it is never stated explicitly, the Gulf states may indeed favour an Israeli strike on Iran's nuclear facilities. That Riyadh has long financed and supported more radical Sunni groups across the Middle East—including in the past Hamas—is not without irony in the light of Israel's stated concerns over the regional Islamist ascendancy.

Questions should be asked, however, about Israel's view that Iran will constitute an existential threat if it does indeed achieve a threshold capability. The real concern, we believe, relates less to Iran's actual acquisition of such a capability and its potential use against Israel, and more to the changed perceptions of regional power and influence that will surround Iran and its ties to Hamas and Hezbollah in that eventuality. It would challenge the idea of Israel as the dominant regional power, a position that to date it has used to dictate the terms, scope and parameters of successive peace processes. In short, it could force the Jewish state to accept historical compromises with its neighbours on a multilateral basis in order to prevent Iran, as occurred with Hezbollah in 2006, exploiting continued Arab and Palestinian grievances against Tel Aviv for strategic gain. But these might be compromises which the State of Israel, given its internal contradictions, cannot accommodate without fragmenting.

⁵⁰ Author's interview with Avi Dichter, Israeli Minister for Homeland Security, Jerusalem, 12 March 2007.

⁵¹ Author's interview with Efraim Halevy, former head of Mossad, Jerusalem, 29 March 2007. See also David Remick, 'The vegetarian: a notorious spymaster becomes a dissident', *New Yorker*, 3 Sept 2012, pp. 22–8.

Conclusion

We do not deny that antipathy at best, and outright violence—sometimes fuelled by anti-Semitism—at worst, defines the attitude of a myriad Islamist actors across the region towards Israel, which has every right to take sensible defensive precautions. But as this article suggests, Israel cannot take a blanket approach towards movements whose primary focus remains internal and whose security dilemmas are as much societal as they are external. To do so risks wasting opportunities for engagement with Islamists who, while championing Palestinians' rights, eschew recourse to violence and extremism.

Some Israelis do recognize this and, while cautioning against what are seen as the recidivist tendencies of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, accept that Tel Aviv has to make more effort to engage with the Arab 'street'.⁵² Equally, however, such engagement comes at a price which will have to be paid in a Palestinian currency. It is likely that, if and when more plural forms of governance take root across the MENA region, it will be harder for western states, even those avowedly friendly towards Israel, to provide cover for its occupation of the West Bank and denial of fundamental rights to the Palestinians. If freedom and democracy form the 'stress test' for European and western engagement with the new governments across the Middle East, then surely the same criteria will eventually have to apply to the Palestinian case as well. Continuing to define Islam and Islamism in such subjective terms might be good *Hasbarah* (public relations) aimed at a western audience still chastened by the events of 9/11, but it reflects little in the way of longer-term political thinking towards the region in general and the Palestinians in particular. A return to the 'Iron Wall' might provide temporary respite, but it does not deal with the demographic realities facing Israel, nor does it provide any long-term resolution of the tension between being both 'Jewish and democratic' when a large and increasingly powerful constituency refuses to relinquish territory and now exercises such a powerful hold over Israel's own political direction.⁵³

These challenges existed before the Arab Awakening and, indeed, predate the March 2003 invasion of Iraq. But such events have only served to accentuate how increasingly acute such challenges have become as Israel seeks to readjust itself to the emerging realities of a new Middle East. The prescription, if Israel wishes to be both Jewish and democratic, remains what it has always been: meaningful embrace of the two-state solution. But with the old 'devils' gone or going, territorial entrenchment rather than retrenchment now seems set to determine Israel's approach to the Arab Awakening.

⁵² See the expert view of Brig.-Gen. (Ret.) Mike Herzog, 'The changing terrain: an interim assessment of the Arab Spring and its policy implications', Britain Israel Communications and Research Centre, London, Nov. 2012, pp. 2–9.

⁵³ Tobias Buck, 'A shadow is cast', *Financial Times*, 9 Dec. 2011.