

ISRAEL'S NEW POSITION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Marcin Szydzisz

The article presents an attempt to describe the new position of Israel during the changes in the Middle East. It outlines three political events which have taken place in the region: the Arab Spring, the war in Syria, and the development of the Iranian issue. Its main purpose is to show how these incidents have affected Israel.

The Arab Spring

The first factor is the Arab Spring. This is a phrase used to describe the revolutions that took place in five countries: Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Yemen and Syria. The author will focus on four countries first. Afterwards he will describe the situation in Syria.

The uprisings in Libya, Tunisia and Yemen had no impact on Israel. It is worth noting that there were Palestinian demonstrations of solidarity with protesters in Libya. There was also symbolic support from Tunisia. After the revolution, new authorities organised a conference devoted to supporting Palestinian prisoners. During the conference the president of Tunisia Moncef Maurzouki supported Palestinians and “has affirmed that the Arab nation and Tunisians are standing by the Palestinian issue now more than at any other time in the past (...). He added that

the Palestinian people “were the first to give the Tunisians lessons about revolution.” The president also stressed that his country: Tunisia - the state and the people – “is open to our Palestinian brothers and sisters more than ever”, and pointed out that Palestine is “in the hearts of all Tunisians”¹.

During the “Protective Edge” (July 2014) the President of Tunisia “has officially called for the Arab League to exceptionally convene so that all can bear their responsibility regarding lifting the siege and putting an end to the Israeli aggression in Gaza.” He also appealed to Tunisians for organising popular marches “to express solidarity with the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and to support them during the Israeli aggression”².

But in practice only the revolution in Egypt had a real impact on Israel. Egypt has a peace treaty with Israel. During the regime of Hosni Mubarak relations between Egypt and Israel were rather good.

President Mubarak helped Israel to reduce the influence of Hamas (Egyptian governments tried to blockade the Gaza Strip). Besides, Israeli policy on Iran brought Egypt and Israel closer to each other. Both Egypt and Israel treated Iran as possibly dangerous. Egypt allowed Israeli warships to sail through the Suez Canal. It was a demonstration of power. Egypt and Israel also cooperated on economic issues. With American support they created Qualifying Industrial Zones in the Sinai Peninsula (2004) and in 2006 signed a very important gas contract³.

After the collapse of the Mubarak regime, the Muslim Brotherhood took power. Muhammad Mursi was elected president. The approach to Israel changed. The new president said at the UN General Assembly: “I call upon all of you, just as you have supported the revolutions of the Arab peoples, to lend your support to the Palestinians in their endeavours to regain the full and legitimate rights of a people struggling to gain its freedom and establish its independent state”⁴.

The new Egyptian authorities suspended the gas contract. They opened the border crossing in Rafah in the Gaza Strip and began cooperation with Hamas. In that period the Egyptian government became more closely associated with Iran.

Egyptian society was becoming more anti-Israeli. They tried to put pressure on the government to break the peace treaty. According to the public opinion poll (May 2012), roughly six-in-ten (61%) respondents wanted to annul the treaty and only 32% wanted it to be maintained⁵.

On September 2011, crowds stormed the Israeli embassy in Cairo. As a result staff from the Israeli diplomatic mission was evacuated⁶. At that time the Israeli territory and gas installation were attacked by terrorists from the Sinai Peninsula.

In July 2013, president Sisi took power in Egypt. His reign is characterized by a return to the status quo ante. The same thing happened with Israel. The Jerusalem Post in April 2015 quoted a high-level Egyptian source, "Relation between Egypt and Israel are at their «best», perhaps the best they've ever been, because of ongoing security coordination." Prof. Hillel Frisch of Bar-Ilan University's Begin-Sadat Centre for Strategic Studies has the same opinion. He told the Jerusalem Post that relations with Egypt "are quickly modelling the traditional relationship between Israel and Jordan – excellent security cooperation, but as far from the public eye as possible"⁷.

In March 2015, the Egyptian President Abdel Fatah al-Sissi said during an interview for The Washington Post, "We have been honoring the peace treaty with Israel since the day it was signed and admitted that he speaks to Prime Minister Netanyahu a lot⁸.

Jeremy Sharp – a specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs from the Federation of American Scientists confirmed the above opinions. "Israeli-Egyptian relations have markedly improved since the 2013 ouster of former Egyptian

President Mohammed Morsi. Israel had been apprehensive about the long-term prospect of an Islamist-governed Egypt, and while its relationship with Egypt's military is not without challenges, both sides maintain regular dialogue on defense and intelligence issues. In June 2015, Egypt appointed an ambassador to Israel for the first time since 2012"⁹.

Indeed Egypt and Israel have the same enemy: Islamic terrorist groups. The biggest danger for both countries is the Sinai Province of the Islamic State (formerly known as Ansar Beit al Maqdis). This organisation acknowledges the authority of "the Islamic State". It is very important for the Jewish State to reduce the influence of these terrorist organisations. In addition, due to the impact on the Gaza Strip, Jeremy Sharp noticed, "Israel and Egypt share a common adversary in the Palestinian terrorist group Hamas, which Egypt accuses of aiding anti-government militants in the Sinai Peninsula. Since it deposed President Morsi in July 2013, Egypt's military has attempted to more dramatically curb weapons smuggling to Gaza-based militants"¹⁰.

Israel and Egypt have also the same attitude toward Iran. The growing importance of Iran in this region and potential nuclear threat makes these states anxious¹¹. Even the Egyptian president shares the Israeli concerns¹².

Jim Zanotti described current relations between Israel and Egypt, "Israel has actively sought continued U.S. and international support for Egypt since the July 2013 leadership change and Egypt continues to play a key role in political mediation involving Israel, Hamas, and other Palestinian militants"¹³.

Syria and ISIS issues

Since 2011 there has been a civil war in Syria. Israel and Syria never signed a peace treaty. One important detail is

that the Assads regime has made Israel an enemy. The conflict with Israel was a part of internal policy, thus the war in Syria is a very significant factor.

There are a few reasons why the war in Syria is a significant factor regarding Israeli security.

The Assads regime was hostile but there was an obvious enemy. Despite hostile declarations, the Syrian government did not do anything. The Israeli-Syrian border was safe. Now the situation is more unpredictable. Several military acts against Israel took place. There were rocket attacks from Syrian territory. The Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs reported incidents in August 2015, "four rockets were fired from Syrian territory and struck the Northern Galilee and the Golan Heights in Israel. This was an indiscriminate and premeditated terrorist attack against Israeli territory without any provocation from the Israeli side. It is important to emphasize that the launching of these rockets is not a spillover from the ongoing war in Syria, but a deliberate attack on Israel"¹⁴. The Israeli forces assumed that the attack had been carried out by the Palestinian Islamic Jihad organization.

A future possible scenario is that the same forces in Syria will believe an attack on Israel is the correct measure. At the beginning of the conflict the Assad regime tried to use anti-Israeli promotions in Syrian society¹⁵. This action was to encourage Syrian citizens to disengage from internal problems and focus on the external enemy. A similar situation took place in November 2012. Mortars from Syria landed in the Golan Heights. There was also some cross-border gunfire, and three Syrian army tanks briefly entered the demilitarised zone. Some Israeli observers believed the Assad regime sought confrontation with Israel as a way of rallying support for the government¹⁶.

Now the anti-Israeli rhetoric is used also by the so called Islamic State. In 2015, the ISIS magazine Dabiq (no. 11) reported: "The Jewish state is openly involved in the war against Wilāyat Saynā' in addition to being covertly

involved alongside the crusaders in most of the campaigns against the Islamic State wilāyāt”¹⁷.

In December 2015, ISIS Commander Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi decided to deliver a speech in which he threatened that the Islamic State militants would attack Israel. “With the help of Allah, We are getting closer to you every day”, he warned Israeli listeners. “The Israelis will soon see us in Palestine. This is no longer a war of the crusaders against us. The entire world is fighting us right now (...). The Israelis thought that we forgot Palestine and that they had distracted us from it. That is not the case. We have not forgotten Palestine for one moment”¹⁸.

Despite those declarations one may wonder whether the situation in Syria has directly influenced the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Radical Islam can bring about radicalism in Palestinian society. Although it is not certain that terrorist attacks are connected with radicalism in Syria, it is surprising that more Palestinians do not fight in Islamic State formations (some analysts speak about the third intifada). According to the estimates of the Global Terrorism Index, there are about 100 such persons¹⁹, and a similar number is estimated by the Gatestone Institute²⁰.

Some Palestinians identify themselves with the ISIS ideology (especially in the Gaza Strip). In these districts Salafi organisations were established, such as Jamaat Ansar Al-Dawla Al-Islamiya fi Bayt Al-Maqdis – Supporters of the Islamic State in Jerusalem. In May 2015, an open confrontation between Hamas and Salafis took place. Hamas militants arrested dozens of Salafi-jihadists and demolished a mosque frequented by Isis supporters in Deir el-Balah²¹. In June 2015, Salafi-jihadists issued a statement calling on Hamas to release all detained militants. Afterwards Salafi supporters attacked Hamas and Islamic Jihad (leaders, offices and vehicles)²².

A recent survey confirms a majority support against ISIS. The Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey (Oc-

tober 2015) claimed that an overwhelming majority (91%) believes that ISIS is a radical group that does not represent true Islam, while 6% believe it does represent true Islam. Three percent are not sure or do not know. In the Gaza Strip, 9% (compared to 4% in the West Bank) say ISIS represents true Islam. Eighty-three percent support and 13% oppose the war waged by Arab and Western countries against ISIS²³.

Some analysts forecast more problems. Yoram Schweitzer from the Institute of National Security Studies wrote in May 2015: "Israel clearly has much interest in the conflict between Hamas and the Salafi jihad groups in the Gaza Strip, especially given the possibility that an Islamic State infrastructure or a satellite of the group backed by al-Baghdadi could be established there. Any development in this direction is liable to translate into activity against Israel. Indeed, one of the complaints by the Salafi jihad organizations against Hamas concerns their demand that Hamas abandon its policy of military restraint and stop efforts to thwart rocket fire and terrorist operations against Israel. Moreover, despite Hamas's aggressive actions against its Salafi jihad opponents in the Gaza Strip, the head-on conflict between the camps is liable to nourish criticism against Hamas by the local Gaza population, due to the dire economic situation (...). The rising criticism and protests by opposition groups in the Gaza Strip is liable to add an element of pressure on the Hamas leadership to heat up the border area with Israel in order to signal that the economic and humanitarian situation in Gaza and absence of any sign of imminent change for the good cannot continue indefinitely, and that the option of renewed rocket fire by various groups operating in the Gaza Strip, including the Salafi jihad organizations, still exists"²⁴.

In this situation Israeli policy toward parties in Syria consists of three components. First Israel emphasizes its neutral attitude. Israel officially does not support any

parties in Syria. I have not found any Israeli official statement about the attitude toward the Syrian conflict and the fact that this information is absent is also significant. Israel did not join the anti-ISIS coalition.

The second component regards actions conducted directly against Israel. The Israeli government has always retaliated and responded to rocket attacks from Syrian territory. On November 12, 2012, the Israel Defence Forces fired across the ceasefire line between Syria and the Golan Heights for the first time since the Yom Kippur war²⁵.

The latest Israeli activities are minimizing support for Hezbollah. The Hezbollah Party has played an important role in the Syrian conflict. Militants from this party have been fighting hand in hand with the Syrian government. The Israeli government has been concerned about this cooperation and has been trying to destroy weapons dedicated to this Party.

Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon said (April 2015): "We will not allow the transfer of quality weaponry to terror organizations, primarily Hezbollah, and we will know how to reach them and those that send them at any time and any place. We will not allow Iran or Hezbollah to establish terror infrastructure at our border with Syria, and we will know how to put our hand on anyone who threatens Israeli citizens, whether [the threats] are along our border or far beyond it"²⁶.

Israel became militarily involved to a limited extent starting in early 2013. The first actions were strikes to retaliate against artillery fire in the Golan Heights. Besides, Israel allegedly carried out a series of air strikes. Their aim was to prevent transfer of advanced missiles or anti-aircraft weapons from the Assad regime to Hezbollah²⁷. Recently (December 2015) Israel has been suspected of killing one of the Hezbollah top commanders in Damascus, Samir Kuntar²⁸.

The tension between Israel and Hezbollah has been rising and this may lead to another Israel-Hezbollah war. Jim Zanotti, specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs wrote, "each

successive incident poses a challenge to maintaining deterrence while avoiding significant escalation”²⁹.

After numerous successes of ISIS in 2014, Israel took up diplomatic activity. Israeli politicians focused on the sources of danger. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu during his speech at the UN General Assembly (September 2014) said, “the people of Israel pray for peace. But our hopes and the world’s hope for peace are in danger. Because everywhere we look, militant Islam is on the march. It’s not militants. It’s not Islam. It’s militant Islam. Typically, its first victims are other Muslims, but it spares no one. Christians, Jews, Yazidis, Kurds – no creed, no faith, no ethnic group is beyond its sights. And it’s rapidly spreading in every part of the world”, he added.

“You know the famous American saying: «All politics is local»? For the militant Islamists, «All politics is global». Because their ultimate goal is to dominate the world.”

He compared militant Islam to a cancer “that attacks a particular part of the body. But left unchecked, the cancer grows, metastasizing over wider and wider areas. To protect the peace and security of the world, we must remove this cancer before it’s too late”³⁰.

In the same speech Israeli Prime Minister suggests that the ideologies of Hamas and ISIS are similar, “that ISIS and Hamas are branches of the same poisonous tree. ISIS and Hamas share a fanatical creed, which they both seek to impose well beyond the territory under their control.” He quoted ISIS’s self-declared caliph, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi. «A day will soon come when the Muslim will walk everywhere as a master... The Muslims will cause the world to hear and understand the meaning of terrorism... and destroy the idol of democracy»”.

According to Prime Minister Khaled Meshaal, the leader of Hamas, “proclaims a similar vision: «We say this to the West...By Allah you will be defeated. Tomorrow our nation will sit on the throne of the world»”³¹.

After the terrorist attacks in Paris (November 2015), Benjamin Netanyahu referred to the same conception. “There is a common thread connecting the horrific attacks in Paris to Israel’s fight against Islamic terrorism” and asserts “there can be no compromise with the likes of ISIS, Hamas or Hezbollah, because compromise means forfeiting the freedoms that make life worth living. The only choice is to fight”³².

Israeli authorities expose one more element, namely that Israel is the only real democracy in the region and they emphasize that their state defends European and western values. In March 2015, Israeli Prime Minister talked about Iran and ISIS during the speech in American Congress. “In this deadly game of thrones, there’s no place for America or for Israel, no peace for Christians, Jews or Muslims who don’t share the Islamist medieval creed, no rights for women, no freedom for anyone”³³.

In November 2015, Netanyahu addressed the Jewish Federations of North America saying: “Now, the demonstration of liberal democratic values would be impressive anywhere, anytime. But what is truly remarkable is that Israel upholds these values in the darkest and most oppressive region on earth and when facing unmatched security challenges. This is why when our detractors defame Israel, we must defend Israel. This is why when they tell us that we should be ashamed of Israel; we must tell them we are proud of Israel”. Later he added: “From my office in Jerusalem the dangers facing Israel can sometimes appear daunting. Israel is surrounded by many forces driven by fanaticism and hatred. Militant Islam is on the march - the Sunni extremists led by ISIS, the Shiite fanatics led by Iran”³⁴.

World attitude toward Iran

For Israel the biggest problems are caused by Iran. The Israeli government has always stressed that Iran is the

most serious threat to the region. Iran is considered the most important enemy because of the Iranian Nuclear Program. Israel has always been aware that Iran wants to build nuclear weapons. The former Iranian President Ahmadineżan sometimes threatened Israel and supported radical anti-Israeli movements (like Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad). The Israeli government has always stressed that international agreement with Iran is the worst of the possible solutions. Referring to the lifting of sanctions, the Israeli Prime Minister said that there was “a historic mistake”. “In the coming decade, the deal will reward Iran, the terrorist regime in Tehran, with hundreds of billions of dollars. This cash bonanza will fuel Iran’s terrorism worldwide, its aggression in the region and its efforts to destroy Israel, which are ongoing”³⁵.

The Israeli politicians noticed that Iranian police are linked to militant Islam. The Israeli Prime Minister warned Jewish society in the US. “Iran’s regime is as radical as ever, its cries of ‘Death to America,’ that same America that it calls the ‘Great Satan,’ as loud as ever. Now, this shouldn’t be surprising, because the ideology of Iran’s revolutionary regime is deeply rooted in militant Islam, and that’s why this regime will always be an enemy of America. Don’t be fooled. The battle between Iran and ISIS doesn’t turn Iran into a friend of America. Iran and ISIS are competing for the crown of militant Islam. One calls itself the Islamic Republic. The other calls itself the Islamic State. Both want to impose a militant Islamic empire first on the region and then on the entire world. They just disagree among themselves who will be the ruler of that empire. The difference is that ISIS is armed with butcher knives, captured weapons and YouTube, whereas Iran could soon be armed with intercontinental ballistic missiles and nuclear bombs. We must always remember – I’ll say it one more time – the greatest danger facing our world is the marriage of militant Islam with nuclear weapons. To defeat ISIS and let

Iran get nuclear weapons would be to win the battle, but lose the war. We can't let that happen"³⁶.

Not all Israeli politicians have the same point of view on the agreement with Iran. In August 2015, former Director of Mossad, Efraim Halevy, said, "I believe this agreement closes the roads and blocks the road to Iranian nuclear military capabilities for at least a decade. And I believe that the arrangements that have been agreed between the parties are such that give us a credible answer to the Iranian military threat, at least for a decade, if not longer"³⁷.

Israeli society is rather closer to the opinion of the Prime Minister. According to a public poll of July 2015, nearly three-quarters of respondents said they thought the agreement would accelerate Iran's development of nuclear weapons. Almost half Israelis (47 percent) wanted to support independent military action by Israel against Iran if such action is needed to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon, 35% took the opposite view and 18% expressed no opinion³⁸.

In July 2015, more than half of the Israeli population (53 percent) said they found Iran to be the biggest cause for concern. From that point of view, 44 percent of respondents are most concerned about the threat posed by the Islamic State³⁹.

Efraim Inbar, professor of political studies at Bar-Ilan University and director of the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, said, "suggestions that ISIS may constitute a bigger threat to Israel than Iran are ridiculous. The Israeli army and the ISIS militia are in different leagues"⁴⁰.

Israel and Saudi Arabia cooperation

The consequence of events in the Middle East is the rapprochement between Israel and Saudi Arabia. Dr. Michal Yaari, an expert on Saudi foreign policy from the Open University, noticed: "The biggest enemy for both countries

is Iran, and there are also the radical terrorist groups like ISIS that threaten the regional order in the Middle East, it is this overall framework that has created the conditions for cooperation between Jerusalem and Riyadh" (...). She added, "we need to remember that even if there are ties between Israel and Saudi Arabia, it's only behind the scenes, behind closed doors, since Saudi Arabia can never launch a bilateral peace process with Israel"⁴¹.

The strong relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia have had an impact on the lack of Israeli opposition to sale of American weaponry to the gulf states. According to Anthony Cordesman of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, "When you look at it, Israel's strategic calculation is a simple one. [The gulf countries] "do not represent a meaningful threat" [to Israel]. They do represent a meaningful counterbalance to Iran"⁴².

Looming threats

Experts tend to agree that the most important danger is connected with the possible acquirement of nuclear weapon by Iran and rising Iranian influences in the region. Major General (res.) Yaakov Amidror – former national security advisor to the Israeli Prime Minister claimed, "Iran's potential nuclear armament in the not-too-distant future" forced Israel to "develop the ability to counter this threat"⁴³.

The second problem is the rise of power of radical organisations like ISIS (also in Palestine). According to Yaakov Amidror, Hezbollah, Hamas and the other Gaza Strip-based terrorist groups "are all deterred and have clear interests in sustaining their cease-fires with Israel"⁴⁴. Hezbollah has been involved in the war in Syria and has been avoiding anti-Israeli actions. Hamas has a serious internal problem in ruling the Gaza Strip and now their leaders focused on maintaining their power. But Amidror added,

“Experience, however, has taught us that imprudent moves may lead to security escalations that spiral out of control within hours”⁴⁵.

Serious threats come from ISIS. Amidror expected two scenarios, “A direct attack on Israeli soil, or an attack on Jordan. Ensuring the Hashemite Kingdom remains a functioning state is a key Israeli interest, especially since Israel shares its longest border with Jordan”⁴⁶.

In the new situation, Israel might have another grave social problem – refugees from Syria and Iraq. The Israeli government decided to close the border and Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu rejected calls to host Syrian refugees. “Israel is not indifferent to the human tragedy of the refugees from Syria and Africa”, said Netanyahu. “But Israel is a small country, a very small country that lacks demographic and geographic depth; therefore, we must control our borders, against both illegal migrants and terrorism”⁴⁷. There are estimates that since 2011 over 1,000 Syrians have received medical treatment in Israel. The refugees problem could appear in the future.

Conclusion

Currently Israel faces new challenges. There was a time when Israel was under firmer pressure. Although current hazards are serious, they still don't create a direct threat to the Jewish State. It appears that Israeli society focuses on internal problems in the first of place. Palestinian terrorist attacks and social problems in Israel are in the centre of Israeli interests. The war taking place just next to the Israeli borders, still seems to be remote.

NOTES

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