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Security Implications of the “Arab Spring”

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About the Author:

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Inbar was educated at the Hebrew University (B.A. in Political Science and English Literature) and at the University of Chicago (M.A. and Ph.D. in Political Science). He served as visiting professor at Johns Hopkins University (2004), at Georgetown University (1991-92), and visiting scholar at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars (1996). Prof. Inbar was appointed as a Manfred Warner NATO Fellow (1998), was a visiting fellow at the (London) International Institute for Strategic Studies (2000), and was the recipient of the Onassis Fellowship (2003). He often lectures at institutions such as RAND, Harvard, MIT, Columbia, Oxford, and Yale Universities.

Inbar's area of specialization is Middle Eastern strategic issues with a special interest in the politics and strategy of Israeli national security. He has written over 80 articles in professional journals and edited volumes. He has authored five books: *Outcast Countries in the World Community* (1985), *War and Peace in Israeli Politics. Labor Party Positions on National Security* (1991), *Rabin and Israel's National Security* (1999), *The Israeli-Turkish Entente* (2001), and *Israel's National Security: Issues and Challenges since the Yom Kippur War* (2008). He has also edited twelve collections of articles.

Prof. Inbar served in the Israel Defense Force (IDF) as a paratrooper. He was a member of the Political Strategic Committee of the National Planning Council and the Chair of the Committee for the National Security Curriculum at the Ministry of Education. He served on the Academic Committee of the History Department of the IDF and as the President of the Israel Association of International Studies. Prof. Inbar is widely quoted in the Israeli and international press.

Abstract:

This paper examines the political repercussions of the "Arab Spring", focusing on its security implications for Israel. It argues that the initial optimism in the West has proven to be unwarranted, and that Israel in particular needs to prepare for strategic surprise; greater potential for terrorism; greater chances for miscalculation and escalation; the emergence of the East Mediterranean as an Islamic lake; as well as stauncher Iranian determination to pursue military nuclear capability. In the absence of a rising liberalizing Arab elite, which is not on the horizon, we can expect a deterioration in the regional security situation.

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Introduction

This essay reviews the political repercussions of the events called the “Arab Spring” and focuses on the national security implications of these developments. The initial optimism in the West has been totally unwarranted and we have to prepare for strategic surprise; a greater potential for terror; more chances for miscalculation and escalation; the emergence of the East Mediterranean as an Islamic lake; for Iran determination to pursue its nuclear ambitions. In the absence of a rising modernizing Arab elite, which is hardly

expected, the deterioration in the national security predicament of this region will continue.

The Arab World after the "Spring"

The "Arab Spring" was a series of events that caused great political tremors in the Middle East. Mass demonstrations in many Arab states challenged the political status quo and the existing political and cultural system in the region. The uprisings were a collective expression of economic and social grievances with limited democratic vision. While it is too early to offer a definitive analysis of the impact of the widespread discontent in the Arab world, the trajectory of the events by the end of 2012 indicate regime change in several states, containment of political unrest in most states, increase in Islamic tendencies, centrifugal tendencies in a number of political units, and deterioration of economic conditions. In short, in terms of domestic politics the Arab world continues to face the challenge of modernization. The prospects for the emergence of progressive modernizing forces are quite bleak. From an international relations perspective, regional uncertainty has increased as a result of the Arab uprisings and a number of national security challenges that led to a deterioration of the strategic landscape. So far, much of the old dictatorial order has survived, but its stability has been undermined and the nature of any successor regimes is uncertain. The audacious demonstrations of the Arab masses against tyranny in a quest for more responsive governments challenge the current political order. The potential for further deterioration in the region and the risk of additional states being torn by turmoil and civil war and sliding into "failed state" status has increased significantly. Such political entities are characterized by the absence of a monopoly over the use of force; delivery of very limited justice; inability to sustain a

legal and regulatory climate conducive to private enterprise, open trade, and foreign investment; and difficulty in meeting the basic needs of the population in terms of health, education, and other social services. The harbingers of such a scenario are Libya and Yemen. The possible disintegration of Iraq and Syria, two very different cases, is also not a far-fetched scenario. Inevitably, the ruling governments in the Arab world will be busy parrying increased domestic challenges in the near future. The unrest in the Arab world, its growing Islamization, and the greater potential for its fragmentation testify to the socio-political crisis and decline in the region – a growing trend. At the same time, the foreign policy of these states has introduced much uncertainty, complicating the strategic calculus of policy makers. The national issues decision makers have to deal with are elaborated in the next sections

Strategic Surprises

Over the years Western states and particularly Israel have built large and sophisticated intelligence services. Nonetheless, the unrest in the Middle East came as a surprise to everybody. For example, Israeli officials had speculated in recent years that the forthcoming succession of an aging Mubarak could turn Egypt into an “Iran next door.” But this conjecture was quashed by the predictions of Israeli intelligence analysts and academic experts for a smooth transfer of power. Similarly, Israel failed to gauge the strength of the opposition in Syria. Western intelligence community was not different in its failure to warn the policy makers about the political discontinuities in various countries. This is a stark reminder of the potential for rapid change and political uncertainty in the Middle East. The new political environment enhances the potential for strategic surprises. Consequently, it is always necessary to prepare for a variety of

scenarios, particularly the worst-case ones. Furthermore, regardless of how improbable a scenario is, it is worthy of serious intelligence analysis if it can have grave consequences

Greater Potential for Terror

The domestic problems plaguing weakened Arab states make them more terror prone. As leaders lose their grip over state territory and borders become more porous, armed groups and terrorists gain greater freedom of action. Such problems plague post-Mubarak Egypt, where law and order have become more lax. For example, in the Sinai Peninsula on Israel's border, a pipeline supplying Israel (and Jordan) with Egyptian natural gas has been repeatedly sabotaged. Sinai has also turned into an unimpeded route for Iranian weapons supply to Hamas and a base for terrorist attacks against Israel. Hamas has even set up rocket production lines in Sinai in an effort to protect its assets, as the group believes that Israel won't strike targets inside Egypt due to the affect it would have on bilateral relations

Moreover, as weakened states lose control over their security apparatus, national arsenals of conventional (and non-conventional) arms become more vulnerable, which may result in the emergence of increasingly well-armed politically dissatisfied groups who seek to harm Israel. For example, following the fall of Gaddafi, Libyan SA-7 anti-air missiles and anti-tank RPGs seem to have reached Hamas in Gaza. Similarly, in the event that the Syrian regime collapses, Syria's advanced arsenal, including chemical weapons, shore-to-ship missiles, air defense systems, and ballistic missiles of all types could end up in the hands of Hizballah or other radical elements.

Greater Potential for Miscalculation and Escalation

The new emerging leaders are strongly motivated by hatred toward Israel and the West, are inexperienced in foreign policy, and might miscalculate their steps. For example, the demilitarization of the Sinai Peninsula could elicit undesired escalation. The demilitarization of the peninsula stabilized the strategic Egyptian-Israeli relation by denying the two sides the option of surprise attacks. The demilitarization arrangements, often seen in Egypt, particularly by the Islamists, as an infringement on its sovereignty, might now be violated, signaling a significant change in Egyptian foreign policy. Such violations would elicit a heightened threat perception in Israel and might be considered a *casus belli*.

The political vacuum in Sinai creates several new security challenges for Israel along the southwestern border. The area could become a haven for terrorists, as has occurred in parts of Lebanon, or a base for pirates, as in Somalia. It has already turned into a highway for weapons smuggling to Hamas. Managing the situation requires a larger military presence in the area facing Sinai. Under duress, Israel might even be forced to recapture parts of Sinai.

Moreover, neighboring Arab leaders may decide to divert the attention of their populace from domestic problems by starting a war of attrition with Israel or by initiating terror attacks. For example, in the past, Syria's Assad has organized civilian marches on Israel's borders in order to divert attention from domestic political tensions.

Finally, several of the emerging political entities are less deterrable. Unstable or failed states, characterized by their complex and decentralized decision making processes, are

less deterrable than states with strong, centralized political control. Moreover, brinkmanship is part of the political cultures in the Middle East. Consequently, the regional crisis augments potential military challenges for Western powers.

East Mediterranean as an Islamic Lake

The turmoil in the Arab world is changing the strategic landscape around Israel, particularly in the eastern Mediterranean basin, where elements of radical Islam could gain control. In this region, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Lebanon, Syria and Turkey display Islamist tendencies, threatening the current unrestricted access to this area by Israel and the West. About 90 percent of Israel's foreign trade is carried out via the Mediterranean, making freedom of navigation critical for Israel's economic well-being. Moreover, its chances of becoming energy independent and a significant exporter of gas are linked to Israel's ability to secure free passage for its maritime trade and to defend its newly discovered hydrocarbon fields in the Eastern Mediterranean.

In Tunisia, the Islamists won the November 2011 elections. Islamists were less successful in the June 2012 elections in Libya, but it is clear that radical Islamic elements will play a greater role in the future of the country than during the rule of Muammar Gaddafi. If the transition to a new regime descends into civil war, the ensuing chaos may allow greater freedom of action for Muslim extremists from the shores of this Mediterranean country.

Libya's eastern neighbor, Egypt, is currently ruled by an Islamist president, Muhammed Mursi, and the Islamist parties took a dominant position in the emerging Egyptian political system. Apart from having important ports on the Mediterranean,

Egypt also controls the Suez Canal, a critical passageway linking Europe to the Persian Gulf and the Far East that could fall into the hands of the Islamists. Significantly, Egypt has already opened the Suez Canal to Iranian military vessels since February 2011. Access to the waterway enhances the ability of radical Iran to supply its Mediterranean allies, Syria, Hizballah in Lebanon, and Hamas in Gaza. Moreover, it enhances Iran's access to Muslim Balkan states, namely Albania, Bosnia and Kosovo, increasing its influence in that part of the Mediterranean as well.

As noted, the tenuous control of Egypt over Sinai has further weakened since the fall of the Mubarak regime. This could lead to the “Somalization” of Sinai, negatively affecting the safety of naval trade along the Mediterranean, the approaches to the Suez Canal, and the Red Sea. At the same time, nearby Gaza is currently controlled by Hamas, a radical Islamist organization allied with Iran. Israel's enforced naval blockade on Gaza has increasingly been criticized by the international community. Considering the recent political changes in Egypt and their detrimental impact on Egyptian-Israeli relations, containment of the Islamist threat from Gaza will become even more challenging in the near future.

North of Israel, along the Mediterranean coast, sits Lebanon, a state dominated by radical Shiite Hizballah, whose ports are inhospitable from a Western perspective. Hizballah has already laid claim to some of the huge Israeli-found gas fields in the sea, which could diminish Europe's energy dependence on Russia and Turkey. Moreover, Syria, an enemy of Israel and current ally of Iran, exerts considerable influence in Lebanon. Its Mediterranean shores, north of Lebanon, are also hostile to the West and its ports even supply services to the Russian navy. While the Assad regime in Syria faces great

domestic opposition and may fall, any Syrian successor regime could be Islamist and anti-Western as well.

The next state on the eastern Mediterranean coastline is AKP-ruled Turkey. The country has, over the past few years, shifted away from a pro-Western foreign policy, adopting instead a radical foreign policy stance. The Turkish government supports Hamas and Hizballah, opposes sanctions on Iran, and holds a strident anti-Israel position, which reflects the AKP's Islamic coloration. Moreover, Turkey has displayed huge ambitions for leadership in the Middle East, Central Asia, the Caucasus, the Balkans, and the eastern Mediterranean. A combination of Turkish nationalism, neo-Ottoman nostalgia and Islamic-jihadist impulses has pushed Turkey into an aggressive posture on several regional issues. It has, for instance, flexed its naval muscles by threatening Israel that it will escort flotillas trying to break the blockade on Gaza.

Turkey has also threatened Cyprus regarding its desire to acquire a share of the potential energy riches south of the island. Turkey is interested in gaining control or partial ownership over the maritime gas fields in the eastern Mediterranean as this would help fulfill its ambitions to serve as an energy bridge to the West, thereby creating dependence on it. This puts Ankara at loggerheads with Nicosia and Jerusalem who share an interest in developing the hydrocarbon fields in their exclusive economic zones and exporting gas to energy-thirsty Europe. This conflict of interests with Nicosia, together with additional Turkish estrangement from the West, perceived Western weakness and improbable adventurism, might lead Turkish troops, stationed in the northern part of divided Cyprus, to complete the conquest of the island started in 1974. Such a Turkish takeover would not only hurt Western geo-economic interests, but would constitute a significant Western loss

of the strategically situated island. The Cypriot island served as a bone of contention in the past between Persia and the ancient Greeks and between the Ottomans and Venetians. In short, it represents the struggle between East and West.

West of Turkey is Greece, a democratic Western state with a stake in the protection of the Cypriots from Muslim domination. Its current economic crisis, however, might erode its limited military ability to parry the Turkish challenge alone. With the exception of Israel, all other eastern Mediterranean states would likely favor the return of Cyprus to Muslim rule and the ascendancy of Islam in the eastern Mediterranean.

Western influence in the eastern Mediterranean is being challenged by the growing radical Islamic influence in the region. The access of Iran to Mediterranean waters, the disruptive potential of failed states, and the competition between countries for energy resources is destabilizing the region. But it is not clear that Western powers, particularly the US, are aware of the possibility of losing the eastern part of the Mediterranean Sea to radical Islam or are preparing in any way to forestall such a scenario. Foolishly, they seem to believe that the so-called “Arab Spring” heralds an improved political environment and that Turkey represents “moderate Islam.” Such American naiveté and European gullibility could become extremely costly in strategic terms. Moreover, the American strategic decision to give precedence in its grand strategy to the Asia-Pacific arena and the weakness of the Eurozone states limits the ability of Western powers to respond adequately to the new challenges.

Iran Gets Closer to the Bomb

The upheaval in the Arab world has deflected attention from the realization of Israel's most feared scenario – a nuclear Iran. Moreover, the Middle East turmoil has played into the Iranian strategy to simply buy time in order to present the world a nuclear *fait accompli*. In the meantime, Iran assiduously continues to work on its nuclear project, hardly impressed by economic sanctions and diplomatic displeasure. Even the International Atomic Energy Agency published a report (November 2011) voicing its concern over Iranian activities that do not easily fit with those of a civilian program. Its more recent report of August 2012 raises even greater concerns.

Israel is very concerned about the ineffective international response to Iran's nuclear progress. This global passivity seems either to indicate an inadequate understanding of the far-reaching implications or a lack of political will to tackle a difficult strategic problem. A nuclear Iran would generate further efforts of nuclear proliferation in the region as states such as Turkey, Egypt and Saudi Arabia would hardly resist the rationale for adopting similar nuclear postures, thereby turning a multi-polar nuclear Middle East into a strategic nightmare. Iranian nuclear attainment would strengthen its hegemony in the strategic energy sector by its mere location along the oil-rich Arabian Gulf and the Caspian Basin – the "energy ellipse". A nuclear Iran would also result in the West's loss of the Central Asian states, which will either gravitate toward Iran or try to secure a nuclear umbrella with Russia or China, countries much closer to the region. An emboldened Tehran, after nuclearization, will also become more active in supporting radical Shiite elements in Iraq and agitating those communities in the Arabian Gulf states. Moreover, since Tehran is a central backer of terrorist organizations such as Hizballah,

Hamas and Islamic Jihad, it may be reckless enough to transfer several nuclear bombs to such proxy organizations, which will have no moral constraints on detonating a nuclear device in a European or American harbor. Iran's nuclear program – coupled with further improvements in Iranian missiles – would initially put most European capitals, and eventually North American, within range of a potential Iranian attack.

The Obama administration has displayed reluctance to use force in order to stop the Iranian nuclear project. Jerusalem realizes that diplomacy and/or economic sanctions have been ineffective and that the time to decide whether to preempt against key Iranian nuclear installations or live with a nuclear Iran is getting closer. Israel's inclination to remove unilaterally the threat of a potential nuclear enemy is going to be tested.

Conclusion

This paper has surveyed the main security challenges rising from the political upheavals in the Arab world. It is not clear that the political turmoil will not expand to additional states in the Middle East. Even if current Arab rulers are able to maintain a modicum of stability the security challenges to the region and beyond it are very serious. This happens when the strategic attention of the West is pointed to other directions, which leaves the regional Western allies exposed to the new security challenges.