

# Israel's nightmare: a 5-front war

Courcy's Intelligence Service - Established in 1934

January 2012

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## Introduction

Every Middle East crisis without exception leads to increased pressure on Israel to reach a comprehensive settlement with the Palestinians and its Arab neighbours. The Arab revolutions that broke out in early 2011 are no exception. Although there is almost universal acceptance that the Arab uprisings have nothing to do with Israel, and are inspired by and aimed at the Arab world's undemocratic and corrupt leaders, the Western powers are piling pressure on Israel to reach a settlement with the Palestinians.

This paper will argue that as a consequence of the Arab revolutions, Israel is likely to face an increasingly serious strategic squeeze, leaving it with the prospect of a five-front war. In the meantime, there is a very high degree of uncertainty and instability throughout the Arab world which could last for years. As a consequence, Israel is less likely, not more likely, to move towards a comprehensive peace settlement with the Palestinians, let alone with the Syrians.

Far from being the panacea to all the Middle East's problems, as optimistic Western observers have argued, the Arab Spring is likely to usher in an enduring period of instability while at the same time failing to provide the impetus for an Arab-Israeli peace settlement.

## The fundamental problem

There is nothing new about the strategic and political forces faced by Israel today: they have been faced by the inhabitants of Israel/Palestine throughout history.

The fundamental problem is that Israel is a small state located in one of the most-tempestuous geographical locations imaginable. It occupies a thin slither of land, at the juncture of Asia and Africa, that has been buffeted throughout history by the ambitions of powerful neighbours. From the north, the Hyksos, Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Macedonians, Romans, and Ottoman Turks had to sweep through Palestine on their way to the conquest of Egypt and the extension of their empires into Africa.

From the east, it was the Arabs who first had to cross Palestine on their way to conquests in North Africa and Spain. And from the south, it was the Egyptians (many times), and, in the 20th century, the British to whom Palestine represented the first obstacle on the way from Africa to Asia.

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For a small territory squeezed between the desert and the sea this disadvantage of geography has been insurmountable except for a few relatively short periods of history. The inhabitants of Israel/Palestine have generally been able to establish their independence only when their neighbours have been weak. Even the great days of Israel under Saul, David, and Solomon came in the decades either side of 1000 BC when Egypt was in decline and Assyria and Babylon had yet to establish their ascendancy. In the absence of a strong imperial power, either to the north or south, Solomon was able to extend David's domain from Gaza, at the entrance of the Sinai, to Thapsacus on the Euphrates.

But then came the rise of Assyria, with its ambitions of conquest in Egypt. Faced with an Israel weakened by the post-Solomon split between the northern kingdom and Judah, the Assyrians had little difficulty in picking off the northern half of the Israelite kingdom.

Another instructive period in Jewish history is that between the fall of the northern kingdom in 722 BC and the carrying away of Judah to Babylon in 586 BC. It highlights the classic dilemmas faced by any Palestinian power right up to the modern age. The Jewish state constantly had to make the right political choices between support for a declining Assyria, an Egypt that was regaining some but not all of its old strength, and the thrusting neo-Babylonian empire.

In such circumstances a wrong political choice could have the direst consequences, and it was just such a wrong choice that led directly to the Babylonian exile. By 605 BC, with its defeat at the battle of Charchemish, it was clear that any realistic hope Egypt might have had of inheriting the Assyrian empire had ended, yet the pro-Egyptian party in Judah remained strong enough to provoke Nebuchadnezzar into carrying off the leading Jews to Babylon. Eleven years later the first Babylonian captivity was followed by the fall of Jerusalem the end of the Kingdom of Judah.

And so the pattern has been repeated down the ages, with the ups and downs of the Jews reflecting the ebbs and flows of surrounding empires.

### The friendly superpower

Not all periods of Jewish ascendancy have had to await the waning of neighbouring power, as another recurring theme has been the role of the friendly superpower. For instance, and in an early foretaste of the 20th century's British/American patronage of Zionism, one of the most-fruitful periods for Judah was the period of Persian hegemony following the defeat of the Babylonians in 539 BC.

Not only did the Persians permit the Jews to return to Jerusalem from Babylon in 536 BC, but they allowed them to restore the temple and to establish a national renaissance centred on Judaism that would carry the Jews through to the Roman expulsion and beyond.

But after the Persians, old patterns repeated themselves. In the 4th century, Alexander's advance towards Egypt took him by the time-honoured route

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through Palestine; then it was the Ptolemies of Egypt; then the Seleuccids; then a fight between the two for dominance; then another brief period of Jewish independence; and so on to the Romans, revolution, and exile – with the fall of Jerusalem (AD 70) and the crushing of the second Jewish rebellion in AD 135.

Nor were the strategic realities much different with the Jews scattered and the Romans gone. In the post-Roman period the territory fell prey successively to the Arabs, the Seljuk Turks, the Crusaders, Egyptian Mamelukes, and the Ottomans, none of whom were to support the establishment of a strong independent power in Palestine.

### A disputed land

So the principal problem throughout history is that Israel's territory has been 'in the way', presenting a barrier to any Asian or European power seeking to extend its influence into Africa and to any African power seeking to extend its influence into Asia and Europe.

In the modern period, Israel prevents Egypt extending its influence into the oil-rich Arabian peninsula, and it prevents the Arabs of Asia from linking up with the African half of the Arab world.

This problem of geography has been compounded by another decisive defect. When the Israelites were promised the land between the river of Egypt and the Euphrates, it was not an empty land they were promised, and the Jews have never been completely successful in driving out or absorbing their competitors. This fact provides another important reason why a power has seldom arisen in Palestine which has been capable of resisting the ambitions of strong neighbours to the north and south.

The position is no different today, as one of modern Israel's most-important strategic and political weaknesses is the presence of some 4m Palestinians west of the Jordan river.

The historical experience provides important pointers to the future. The whole modern history of the Middle East, following the defeat of the Ottoman empire in World War I and the subsequent return of the Jews to Palestine under British patronage, echoes the early defeat of Babylon by the Persians and the Persian-facilitated return of the Jews to Judah.

It is evident that the wheel continues to revolve on its old axis. Israel is once again facing an adverse combination of reducing imperial (American/Western protection); internal weaknesses (as a result of the increasing radicalism of Israeli Arabs and Jewish divisions over the peace process); and (as the next section of this paper will show) a shifting balance of power in favour of its neighbours.

### Israel's strategic squeeze

The Arab Spring of 2011, it is argued by many, demonstrates that for most Arabs the Palestinian cause is a red herring. What the Arabs most want is democracy and prosperity. There is some truth in this, but post-Mubarak

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Egypt is also demonstrating that the Palestinian cause is very far from dropping off the pan-Arab agenda.

Amongst the millions of words written about the slaying of Osama bin Laden and its significance, one comment that stood out above all others was made by Zakaria Mohammad on the Palestinian arabs48.com website. He said: "Bin Laden died notionally the day that Mubarak fell. The people in Tahrir Square pushed him aside before Obama announced his victory against him. Since January 25th he was no longer a necessity for ordinary Arabs. What he advocated was no longer a necessity."

Zakaria Mohammed's point was this: Bin Laden flourished because President Hosni Mubarak adhered to the Camp David treaty signed with Israel by his assassinated predecessor. Now, with the ouster of Mubarak, Egypt is reverting to its pre-Camp David anti-Israel orientation – and so the need for bin Laden has evaporated. It is not necessary to agree with Mohammed's implied assertion that al-Qaeda is finished to agree that Egypt's dramatic anti-Israel shift is of huge significance.

Almost from the first day of the post-Mubarak era, Cairo has moved strongly away from Israel and the moderate Palestinian tendency towards Hamas. For instance, in March the new government immediately allowed a Gaza delegation led by the senior Hamas figure Mahmoud al-Zahar to travel from Gaza on a trip to Khartoum, Damascus, and Ankara. This would not have been allowed by the Mubarak regime. In a statement posted on the Hamas Government website, Youssef Rizqa, political advisor to Hamas Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh, said: "For the first time in the history of the relationship, Palestinian and Egyptian ministers are communicating. This is a substantial development that did not take place in Mubarak's era."

At a meeting on 30 March between al-Zahar and secular opposition figures in Egypt, strong support was expressed for the Palestinian cause. Egypt's secular Al-Wafd Party leader Dr Al-Sayyid al-Badawi said that he was the first party leader to declare his party's stance on the Camp David treaty. According to the Palestinian Information Centre, he said that Israel was violating its terms and that "treaties do not last forever". The meeting was also attended by representatives of the 25th January Revolution movement who "affirmed that Egypt's youth support the people of Gaza and the whole of Palestine with their entire hearts and souls, until liberation".

Since then, the rapprochement has continued apace despite the strongly expressed concerns of Israel, and on 28 April Egypt's Foreign Minister Nabil Abdallah al-Arabi announced that the Rafah crossing between Egypt and Gaza would be reopened on a permanent basis.

Following that, Cairo engineered a rapprochement between Hamas and Fatah. Hamas represents the Islamist trend in Palestinian affairs, and it controls the Gaza Strip. Fatah is the mainstream secular faction of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and dominates the Palestinian Authority (PA) in the West Bank. Hamas is supported by Syria and Iran and is treated as a terrorist organization by the United States. It is, of course, totally anathema to Israel.

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Israel...*

In addition to the post-Mubarak reorientation of Egyptian policy, two other factors have been at work to bring about the Hamas-Fateh reconciliation. The first was the attempt in September 2011 to gain UN General Assembly recognition of a Palestinian state. The PA's President Mahmoud Abbas knew that this attempt would be undermined if opponents were able to say that the PA had no authority in the Gaza Strip. The second is that Hamas is feeling vulnerable because of events in Syria, where it is increasingly unlikely that President Assad will survive.

The immediate response of Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to Egyptian-brokered Hamas-Fateh reconciliation efforts was that the Palestinian Authority needed to choose between peace with Hamas or peace with Israel. Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman was even more forthright, saying: "This is the situation: Hundreds of armed terrorists will flood Judea and Samaria. I don't think we need to go into details of what this means...Hamas is a terror group."

The London-based pan-Arab *al-Quds al-Arabi* was in no doubt about the significance of Cairo's moves. Writing on 28 April, the paper's editor-in-chief Abdelbari Atwan argued: "Egypt has returned forcefully to playing its leading role in the Arab region in support of the central Arab cause [Palestine]...The inter-Palestinian reconciliation agreement will stand its ground. This is not only because it embodies the Palestinian people's aspirations; it is also because it relies on the solid ground provided by revolutionary Egypt, the new Egypt, the Egypt of dignity and honour, the Egypt of the youth of Tahrir Square for which we have waited for over 40 years. It is now returning to us, young and fit, rising like a giant from amidst the ruins of corruption and slavery to Israel and the US."

What Atwan didn't mention, but is equally significant to Israel, is that Egypt is matching this strong move back into the Palestinian arena with a rapprochement with Iran.

All of this means that Israel faces a strategic squeeze as a consequence of the Arab Spring. Broadly speaking, the danger is that Egypt is turning hostile (or, at the very least, unfriendly) while the Iranian regime looks certain to survive the Arab Spring unscathed but with increased influence in the Gulf, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. Jordan could also be forced into a less friendly orientation by popular demand, while further afield post-bin Laden al-Qaeda could find space to regroup in Yemen, Libya, and Afghanistan.

The old Middle East dictum is that the Arabs cannot make war without Egypt or peace without Syria. For the moment, whether Assad is ousted or not, it is a stretch of the imagination to see Damascus joining the peace camp. Egypt, on the other hand, is continuing to move away from its Camp David commitment to Israel.

Much has been written about the threat of Egypt coming under the sway of the Muslim Brotherhood, but the notable point about the present shift in Cairo's orientation is that it has taken place under an interim secular administration, before the transition from the Mubarak era is completed. It would seem that the peace treaty with Israel would be under threat with or without

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the Muslim Brotherhood. As it happens, of course, the Muslim Brotherhood does look likely to dominate post-Mubarak Egypt. Its Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) won the first round of the Egyptian elections, held in December 2011, with 36.6% of the vote. Just as significantly, the extreme Islamist al-Nour party came second with 24.4% while the centrist Islamist Wasat party gained 4.3% to give the Islamist tendency 65% of the vote.

On 2 January 2012, on the eve of the final round of voting, the deputy chairman of the Muslim Brotherhood, Rashad al-Bayumi, made clear the group's antipathy to the Camp David accords with Israel. He said: "The Muslim Brotherhood...claim[s] the right to revise, wholly or in part, treaties such as the one with Israel. One thing is for certain: parliament will have the last say, and, if necessary there will be a popular referendum."

### Israel's response

From the start of the Arab Spring, Western politicians (and editorial writers) have been calling on Israel to respond positively to the pro-democracy movements sweeping the Arab world by making a decisive move towards peace with the Palestinians. But they have underestimated the uncertainty that the unrest has created in the minds of Israel's policymaking elite.

There can be no Israeli compromise while there is such uncertainty about the orientation of its neighbours. Egypt is the most important of these, but there is uncertainty on almost all fronts including Jordan where there has been a distinct (popular-driven) hardening on the Palestinian question.

To the north, in Syria, there is no guarantee that any regime that would be likely to replace President Bashar al-Assad would be any more sympathetic to Israel. On the contrary, it would likely be a Muslim Brotherhood-dominated regime with strong ties to a re-oriented Egypt. In Lebanon, Hezbollah's position remains strong and undisturbed by the Arab Spring. It also continues to be armed by Iran.

Meanwhile, in the Palestinian territories themselves, the rapprochement between Hamas and Fateh continues to cause deep concern in Israel, and not without cause. Hamas is in talks with the Palestinian Authority and is hoping to form a unity government ahead of elections in May 2012. Yet Hamas's response to the reopening in January 2012 of exploratory talks between Israel and the PA has been entirely negative. Hamas spokesman Sami Abu Zuhri said: "We in the Hamas movement demand that the Palestinian authority stop and boycott all these kinds of meetings."

What we are seeing develop in the Middle East is something of a classic Catch-22. The Western leader writers are not wrong when they argue that lack of peace between Israel and the Palestinians has added danger in a Middle East where popular opinion has more influence. As the Jordanian newspaper *al-Rai* put it recently: "If peace is not established soon, Israel will find itself facing a new Arab generation far more determined than its predecessor. The democracy that is taking root in the Arab world will ensure that future Arab governments will be more determined to achieve an equitable settlement that restores Palestinian rights."

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But, on the other hand, how can Israel come down off the Golan Heights and retreat from the Jordan Valley if it has reasonable grounds for supposing that it could simultaneously face a hostile Egypt, Syria (whether under Assad or a Sunni successor), and Jordan, while Hamas increases its sway in the Palestinian territories and Iran-backed Hezbollah entrenches in Lebanon?

## Conclusion

The last time Israel was seriously threatened by its Arab neighbours was in 1973. At that time, there was no threat from Hezbollah, the Palestinians were disorganized and weak, and Jordan was only a belated and reluctant participant. Also, Iran was still under the rule of the pro-Western Shah.

Today Israel's strategic environment is very different indeed. It faces serious or developing hostility on five fronts: Egypt, Jordan, the Palestinians, Syria, and Lebanon (Hezbollah). These hostile neighbours are supported in their hostility by Iran, which is on the verge of acquiring nuclear weapons. And Turkey has shifted dramatically away from its previous pro-Israel stance.

On the question of Turkey, it is worth recalling the speech made by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan after his landslide 12 June general election victory. He said: "Sarajevo won today as much as Istanbul; Beirut won as much as Izmir; Damascus won as much as Ankara; Ramallah, Nablus, Jenin, the West Bank, Jerusalem won as much as Diyarbakir." The pledge to support downtrodden Muslims, particularly in the West Bank, was clear.

Israel knows that in any peace deal that it could conceivably agree with the Palestinians, serious causes for war would still persist. These would include some or all of the following: continuing Israeli control of Jerusalem, the rejection of the 'right of return' to Palestinian refugees, and continuing Israeli settlements in the West Bank.

In such circumstances, Israel would have to be extremely (and eternally) certain of its military superiority to contemplate a military retreat from the Golan Heights and Jordan Valley and the creation of an independent Palestinian state. But, as this paper has sought to demonstrate, there would be no such certainty. On the contrary, Israel is facing a potentially worse strategic environment than in 1973 – the Yom Kippur War.

So Israel will not compromise, and the great era-defining Arab-Israeli conflict will continue – but soon with the added complication of Iranian nuclear weapons to bolster the Arab cause and to counter the Arab fear that Israel might use its own nuclear weapons if faced with an overwhelming conventional attack. It is not an exaggeration to say that Israel is facing its worst strategic situation since 1948.

*Courcy's Intelligence Service, January 2012*

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