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The ‘Arab Spring’: implications for US–Israeli relations

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This article argues that the ‘Arab Spring’ has ended the long-standing US–Israeli common strategy of supporting pro-Western and semi-secular autocracies in the Arab world. During these tumultuous events Washington chose to support the rebellions to varying degrees, thus exacerbating Israel’s concerns regarding the adverse regional implications attending this shift (notably the ascendance of Islamist regimes and the diversion of world attention from Iran’s nuclear quest). By way of ameliorating such threats, the US needs to pursue a policy of supporting pro-democracy groups in the region while formulating a clear policy to deal with the threats from Iran and radical Islamist groups. All in all, the ‘Arab Spring’ has created a highly volatile strategic environment thus making Israel an even more valuable strategic ally for the US

Keywords: ‘Arab Spring’; US–Israeli relations; Islamism; Egypt; Iran; al-Qaeda

Since its foundation Israel has had a special relationship with the US. Bilateral relations were deepened particularly since 1967 and continued in the post-Cold War period. The 9/11 terrorist attacks added a new strategic paradigm to the bilateral relationship: the war on Islamist terrorism. The special relationship between the US and Israel can be characterized by three factors: shared common strategic interests, shared values (i.e. commitment to Western-style democracy), and political influence of US Jewry.¹ Israel relies on the US for arms supplies and enjoys approximately \$3 billion annual military and economic assistance as well as political support. For the US, Israel is a strong and reliable ally in a strategically important, yet highly unstable region.² Despite differences of opinion regarding the Israeli–Palestinian peace talks and the means for dealing with Iran’s nuclear programme, US–Israeli defence ties have increased during the Obama administration³ and both allies continue to share common strategic interests in the Middle East such as containing Tehran’s regional influence and opposing its nuclear programme, supporting pro-Western regimes like Jordan, and countering the threat of Islamist terrorism.⁴ There is considerable US public support for Israel. A February 2013 Gallup poll, for example, indicated that 64% of Americans expressed sympathy with Israel – the highest figure that the Gallup

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recorded in 25 years.⁵ Yet the American response to the 'Arab Spring' revealed increasingly divergent strategic interests between the two allies.

Following the recent Arab upheavals the longstanding US and Israeli common strategy of supporting pro-Western and semi-secular autocracies in the Arab world has come to an end as Washington supported the rebellions to varying degrees. The deep economic crisis since 2008 and America's costly experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan led it to adopt a new strategy of 'multilateral retrenchment'.⁶ By pursuing this strategy, Washington aims at reducing the scope of its overseas commitments and shifting burdens onto global partners.⁷ The Obama administration, contrary to its predecessor, wanted to focus primarily on Chinese and Pacific Rim issues instead of the Middle East.⁸ The new US strategy, which required a less activist foreign policy, and the Obama administration's benign stance towards the rising Muslim Brotherhood (MB) in Egypt raised Israel's concerns.

It should be noted that the change in the traditional US foreign policy towards the region's semi-secular autocracies and secular orders started during the Bush administration. In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the Bush administration, in order to counter the threat of Islamist terrorism, pursued a policy known as the 'Freedom Agenda' or the 'Greater Middle East Initiative'. The policy consisted of exporting democracy and open market economics to the Muslim Middle East either by applying the US military force as in the case of Iraq⁹ or by advocating 'moderate Islam' as a state model, the latter which ranged from the US training and supporting liberal activists to promote democracy in Egypt against Hosni Mubarak's authoritarian rule¹⁰ to embracing Turkey's Islamist Justice and Development Party.¹¹

Yet the US policy resulted in unintentional consequences for Israeli national security. For example, Hamas won the 2006 Palestinian elections and violently seized control of Gaza the following year. Likewise, after the 2003 Iraqi war the regional balance of power shifted in favour of the Shiite axis led by Iran. In Iraq a democratically elected Shiite-led government was formed, enabling Tehran to extend its sphere of influence over the country. A strong Shiite axis emerged in the region comprising Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, and Iraq.¹²

By the end of the Bush administration, relations between the US and the Muslim world reached their lowest point in 60 years. A 2007 poll conducted by World Public Opinion Organization revealed that an average of 79% of respondents in Egypt, Morocco, Pakistan, and Indonesia argued that the US sought to 'weaken and divide the Islamic world', while a similar percentage maintained that the US wanted 'control over the oil resources of the Middle East'.¹³ The Obama administration emphasized re-establishing trust with the Muslim world, which it viewed as a strategic asset in the 'war on terror'.¹⁴ The new president addressed the Muslim publics in Ankara in April 2009, Cairo in June 2009, and at the State Department in May 2010. During his June 2009 Cairo speech, Obama promised a 'new beginning' for the US and the Muslim world, 'one based on mutual interest and mutual respect, and one based upon the truth

that America and Islam are not exclusive and need not be in competition'.¹⁵ The fact that Obama failed to visit Israel until March 2013 and the president's and a number of key US officials' public statements revealing some differences of opinion between Israel and the US regarding the region's problems raised Israeli concerns.¹⁶

Meanwhile, the administration abandoned the US policy of enforcing democracy by applying military force in favour of attempts to promote democracy in the Middle East via soft power. Within this framework, a number of liberal groups and individuals directly involved in the 2011 Arab uprisings such as the April 6 Youth Movement in Egypt, the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, and grass-roots activists like Entsar Qadhi (a youth leader in Yemen) received training and financing from organizations like the International Republican Institute, the National Democratic Institute, and Freedom House. The Republican and Democratic institutes, which are loosely affiliated with the Republican and Democratic parties, were created by the Congress and have been financed through the National Endowment for Democracy, an organization founded in 1983 to promote democracy in developing countries.¹⁷ Following the 'Arab Spring', a number of youth leaders from Egypt and Yemen, who played an active role in the uprisings, acknowledged the help of American training sessions to use social networking and mobile technologies with the goal of promoting democracy in triggering the revolts.¹⁸ Furthermore, the London paper *The Telegraph* published in January 2011 a secret document sent from the US Embassy in Cairo to Washington disclosing the extent of US support for the anti-Mubarak protesters prior to the Egyptian uprising.¹⁹

The reason for the US support for the liberal groups in the Arab world can be found in an August 2010 memorandum titled, 'Political Reform in the Middle East and North Africa', circulated by Obama to his top civilian and military advisers. This stated that Washington's regional and international credibility would be undermined if it were seen or perceived to be backing repressive regimes and ignoring the rights and aspirations of citizens.²⁰ And when the Arab uprisings started, the Obama administration, by being 'on the right side of history',²¹ aimed at winning popular support among Arabs, who were expected to be less anti-American in return for the US support for the uprisings.²² But Islamists, who had been the best organized political group in the predominantly Muslim Middle East, have successfully filled the vacuum left by the fall of semi-secular authoritarian leaders.

It should be noted that the US, while supporting the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Syria, pursued a cautious stance towards the revolts in the Gulf region, which might be dominated by Iran. For example, the US turned a blind eye to the Shiite majority's uprising against the Sunni minority regime in Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia's and the UAE's sending troops (in March 2011) to suppress the revolt there. Massive human rights abuses followed in Bahrain thereafter, which the US ignored. The Obama administration preferred stability over democracy in Bahrain, where the US Navy's Fifth Fleet is based.²³ The US

pursued a similar policy toward Riyadh by ignoring the kingdom's brutal repression of the Shiite majority's protests in the oil-rich eastern province.²⁴ Indeed, in Obama's May 2011 speech, which declared full US support for the uprisings in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Syria, and even in Bahrain (though as lip service), there was not a single line about Saudi Arabia.²⁵

The Obama administration regarded the rising Sunni Islamist axis, mainly Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey, following the 'Arab Spring' as a force to counterbalance Iran and its allies Syria and Hezbollah. In the meantime, the West would continue to impose economic sanctions on Iran and maintain talks on its nuclear programme. The US also expected that by transforming itself toward a moderate line the MB would contribute to the region's democratization process. On the one hand, Israel has regarded the new US policy as naïve and a sign of weakness, which might hamper Israeli security. Hence, Israelis started to question the long-term US commitment to Israel's security.²⁶ On the other hand, the US thought that Israel needed to acknowledge the unavoidable regional changes following the 'Arab Spring'.²⁷ Indeed, in the post-'Arab Spring' period, Sunni Islamism represented mainly by the MB has become a popular movement in the Arab world. Even in the most Westernized of all Arab countries, like Tunisia and Morocco, Sunni Islamist political parties became the parties of government by winning parliamentary elections. Among many unknowns, the 'Arab Spring' has one clear message for the Middle East: the era of semi-secular states, which were remnants of Arab nationalism, has finally come to an end. And Islamism is now the region's new political reality. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's November 2011 speech at the National Democratic Institute marked the shift in US foreign policy; she declared that the Obama administration would work with ascendant Islamist parties of the Muslim world in the post-'Arab Spring' era.²⁸

Yet US strategy seems to be problematic for Israeli security interests for a number of reasons. First, it was unclear whether the MB would be transformed into a moderate force or was merely pursuing a short-term pragmatic policy for accomplishing its long-term Islamist goals. In fact, the Egyptian experience clearly showed that after winning the elections the MB, along with the radical Salafists, tried to advance its undemocratic agenda. Second, it is unclear to what extent the Sunni Islamist axis will be able to counterbalance Iran, particularly if the latter achieves nuclear arms capability. Third, the question of al-Qaeda affiliated groups and other radical Islamist forces, which have become active in the region in the post-'Arab Spring' period, remains unresolved.

Thus, the Arab upheavals have created a more volatile and hostile strategic environment for both the US and Israel. But unlike Washington, given its geographic location and tiny size Israel's immediate security is affected by all regional changes. The country has been particularly concerned about the rise of anti-Israeli and even anti-Semitic governments in the region following the 'Arab Spring'.²⁹ Indeed, Jerusalem has already two Islamist regimes (Gaza and Southern Lebanon) on its borders, and following the 'Arab Spring' Egypt, which

signed the first peace treaty with Israel in 1979, joined the list. Even though the military ousted President Mohammed Morsi from power in July 2013, the MB declared its resistance, and Egypt's political future remains unclear.³⁰ In a post-Assad Syria, it is highly likely that a Sunni Islamist regime will be formed – the question is whether it will be ruled by the MB or al-Qaeda.

A number of pro-West Arab monarchies – that is, Jordan, Morocco, and Saudi Arabia – were not largely affected by the 'Arab Spring' mainly thanks to their religious credentials. Jordanian and Moroccan royal families benefited from being descendants of the Prophet Mohammed, while the Saudi monarchy both utilized its close ties to the Wahhabi religious establishment and its status as custodian of the holy city of Mecca and like Qatar the kingdom used its oil revenue to silence any emerging opposition to its rule.³¹ Israel has been particularly concerned about the future of Jordan, which signed a peace treaty with Israel in 1994, and the Palestinian Authority (PA), both of which face an uncertain future.³²

The Egyptian problem

It was the administration's quick abandonment of President Mubarak that raised Israel's concerns during the uprisings. Prior to the 'Arab Spring' the Obama administration, while rhetorically committed to the promotion of democracy in the Middle East, maintained America's longstanding policy of supporting pro-Western and semi-secular autocracies like Egypt. For example, prior to his 2009 trip to Cairo, when he was asked whether he considered Mubarak an authoritarian leader, Obama replied, 'No, I tend not to use such labels for folks. . . . He has been a stalwart ally in many respects, to the United States. He has sustained peace with Israel, which is a very difficult thing to do in that region'.³³ But shortly after the uprisings he quickly abandoned Mubarak, one of the most loyal and valuable US allies in the region.

The new US policy raised concerns not only in Israel but also among pro-US Arab leaders who feared sharing Mubarak's fate.³⁴ During the Egyptian uprising, which ended Mubarak's 30-year rule in just 18 days, the US and Israel found themselves on opposite sides. While Obama was calling on Mubarak to step down immediately, Israeli President Shimon Peres expressed his support for the beleaguered president. 'We always have had and still have great respect for President Mubarak', he stated, and expressed his appreciation for the Egyptian president upholding the peace treaty with Israel.³⁵

Having seen the Obama administration's quick abandonment of Mubarak, both Israel and pro-West Arab leaders started to question the reliability of the US as an ally.³⁶ Indeed, when the 'Arab Spring' arrived in Libya in February 2011, Washington also deserted Muammar Qaddafi, who had cooperated with the West by abandoning his arsenal of weapons of mass destruction in 2003.³⁷ Even though the US had no vital interest in the removal of Qaddafi from power, it pushed its NATO allies to conduct a military operation in Libya.³⁸ The US response to the

Arab uprisings weakened the country's credibility in the region. Jordan's King Abdullah II, for example, when asked whether the region's leaders could still depend on the US following Mubarak's fall, echoed Israel's concerns by saying that 'I think everybody is wary of dealing with the West. ... Looking at how quickly people turned their backs on Mubarak, I would say that most people are going to try and go their own way'.³⁹

Following Mubarak's fall, the MB's Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) won the parliamentary elections in January 2012, receiving 47.2% of the popular vote and 235 of 498 seats in the parliament. The radical Salafi Nur Party followed the FJP, getting 24.3% of the votes and 121 seats in the parliament. The liberal New Wafd Party and the secular Egyptian Bloc coalition received only 7.6% (38 seats) and 6.8% (34 seats), respectively. Thus, the first post-Mubarak parliamentary elections in Egypt marked a victory for the Islamists.⁴⁰

While the elections were being held, the Obama administration publicly embraced the FJP. Then Chair of the Foreign Relations Committee Senator John Kerry described the new US foreign policy toward Egypt by stating, 'The United States needs to deal with the new reality'.⁴¹ Given the MB's assurances that its politicians aimed at building a modern democracy that would respect individual freedoms, free markets, and international commitments, including Egypt's peace treaty with Israel, the Obama administration hoped that the US-MB relationship would set an example for other Islamist political parties which came to power in the Middle East following the 'Arab Spring'.⁴² Yet in post-Mubarak Egypt Islamist attacks against the country's Coptic Christian community, which represents around 10% of the country's 85 million population, have increased.⁴³

In the meantime, the MB further increased its political power in June 2012, when the FJP leader Mohamed Morsi was elected as president, winning 51.7% of the votes. Egypt's secular politicians accused the MB of 'hijacking' the revolution, and criticized the US for swaying the presidential race in Morsi's favour.⁴⁴ The Obama administration based its policy on the MB's pragmatism, which needed to maintain a working relationship with the US in order to assure around \$1.3 billion annual American financial assistance and US backing for receiving debt deals from the IMF. Yet the US policy was questionable in the long term given the fact that the MB's worldview, which rejects equal status for women and Copts, is inconsistent with America's values.⁴⁵ Indeed, the MB, along with the Salafists, started to suppress the liberal and secular segment of Egyptian society, the Copts, and the press.⁴⁶ In July 2012 a number of Coptic Christian political figures expressed their discontent with the US support for the MB by declining an invitation to meet with the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.⁴⁷ As a result of violent Islamist attacks, around 93,000 Copts migrated from Egypt to the US and EU countries between March and September 2011.⁴⁸ And the US State Department's 2012 annual report on human rights noted that under MB rule women and minorities have become the target of violent attacks.⁴⁹ According to one estimate, no fewer than 100,000 Copts had left Egypt since the MB came to power.⁵⁰

The US policy of controlling the MB's actions through financial assistance proved ineffective. Since the fall of the Mubarak regime there has been a drop in tourism and foreign investment, and Egypt's reserves of hard currency fell to about \$13 billion from \$36 billion.⁵¹ Yet, despite Egypt's economic turmoil and political unrest, Morsi issued an edict in November 2012 exempting his decrees from judicial review until the ratification of a new constitution.⁵² Tens of thousands of liberal and secular Egyptians took the streets to protest against Morsi, while Egypt's Supreme Council of the Judiciary condemned the president for 'assaulting' the judiciary's independence.⁵³ Yet the MB and the Salafis rushed through an undemocratic and Islamist new constitution by holding a referendum in December 2012. The new constitution, which Amnesty International criticized for limiting fundamental freedoms and ignoring the rights of women,⁵⁴ passed by 63.8% of the popular vote with a low electoral turnout of 32.9%.⁵⁵ The US Secretary of State John Kerry,⁵⁶ while expressing concerns about the suppression of Egypt's opposition, continued to provide financial assistance to revive the country's economy.⁵⁷ And in May 2013 Morsi further strengthened the MB's hold on power by forming a new cabinet.⁵⁸

The MB, while increasing the Islamist movement's power in Egypt, pursued a pragmatic policy of maintaining the status quo with Israel, which included maintaining the peace treaty with Israel and mediating a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas in November 2012. Yet there was also a shift in Egypt's foreign policy contrary to Israel's security interests. The MB formed close relations with Hamas, the MB in Syria, and Iran. Furthermore, under MB rule, Islamist militants have become active in the Sinai Peninsula. Indeed, Morsi halted the Egyptian military's planned November 2012 offensive against the jihadists, including Gazan militants, in Sinai.⁵⁹

A number of high-ranking MB officials' anti-Israeli statements also revealed their real intentions toward Israel. For example, Deputy Chief of the MB Rashad Bayoumi argued in January 2012 that Egypt might choose to revise its peace treaty with Israel by holding a referendum. Moreover, he also maintained that the MB was not required to recognize Israel by calling it 'an occupying entity' and declaring that 'we will not allow any one of our members to meet with an Israeli'.⁶⁰ Following the MB's strengthened political power in Egypt, some of its high-ranking officials increased their anti-Israeli stance. Deputy Chair of the FJP Essam Erian stated in January 2013 that Israel would cease to exist within a decade.⁶¹ It should be noted that in 2010 Morsi, then a MB politician, made an anti-Semitic remark, calling Israelis 'the descendants of apes and pigs'.⁶²

A 2011 Pew poll showed that an important segment of Egyptian society was already receptive to the MB's anti-Israeli rhetoric: 54% of the respondents stated that they wanted the 1979 peace treaty with Israel abolished, while only 36% wanted it to be maintained.⁶³ And a March 2013 Pew poll showed that under MB rule support among the Egyptian society to annul the treaty with Israel increased to 63%, while only 32% of the respondents wanted it to be maintained. The poll also revealed that an overwhelming majority of Egyptians (92%) expressed a

negative view of Israel, while only 7% of the respondents expressed a positive opinion. According to the poll, only 3% of Egyptians claimed that it was important to prioritize having a good relationship with Israel, while 88% disagreed.⁶⁴

However, despite the MB's anti-Israeli rhetoric and its authoritarian policies in Egypt, the Obama administration continued to view the MB as a valuable partner in the region.⁶⁵ This was even so when the US embassies in Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Tunisia were targeted by Islamists in September 2012.⁶⁶ During the September 2012 Cairo attack, Egyptian security forces were reluctant to restrain the violent protesters who invaded the embassy, tore down the American flag, and replaced it with a flag that resembled al-Qaeda's black banner. President Morsi did not immediately denounce the attack.⁶⁷ In the aftermath of the incident Obama stated that he would no longer call Egypt an 'ally', nor would he refer to the country as an enemy.⁶⁸ The series of Islamist attacks on the US embassies revealed not only the weakened position of the US in the Middle East in the post-'Arab Spring' era, but also showed the failure of the Obama administration's policy of winning the hearts and minds of the Arab publics in return for US support for the uprisings.⁶⁹

Contrary to US expectations, since the 'Arab Spring' anti-American violence in the Middle East has been on the rise. Authoritarian regimes like Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and Yemen, which restrained violent Islamist anti-American groups, were overthrown.⁷⁰ The September 2012 anti-American attacks in the Middle East revealed not only the persistence of anti-American and anti-Western sentiments in that region,⁷¹ but also Washington's weakened position despite its support for some of the region's popular uprisings as the country has become a vulnerable target since the 'Arab Spring'.⁷²

Polls show the persistence and rise of anti-Americanism in the Middle East. For example, a 2013 Pew poll showed that 81% of Egyptians expressed an unfavourable opinion of the US, compared to 79% in 2011 and 70% in 2009. Moreover, in 2013 only 16% of Egyptians expressed a positive opinion of the US, lower than the 27% registered in 2009 after President Obama took office, and lower than the 22% who expressed a favourable view of the US in 2008, President Bush's final year in office.⁷³ A 2012 Pew poll revealed similar trends in Jordan and Lebanon. In 2012, the number of Jordanians expressing a favourable opinion of the US dropped to 12% from 19% in 2008, while the number of Lebanese expressing a favourable opinion of the US dropped to 48% in 2012 from 51% in 2008. It is interesting to note that between 2008 and 2012 there was only a 3% increase in Turkey (from 12% to 15%) among those who expressed a favourable opinion of the US⁷⁴

In June 2013, the liberal and secular segment of the Egyptian society started to protest against Morsi's authoritarian policies favouring the Islamist movement. Yet the Obama administration continued to support the MB government. US Ambassador to Cairo Anne Patterson, for example, expressed the US opposition to the anti-Morsi protests in her public speech. 'Some say that street action will

produce better results than elections', she argued. 'To be honest, my government and I are deeply sceptical'.⁷⁵ By pursuing a pro-MB policy the Obama administration alienated the liberal and secular segment of Egyptian society,⁷⁶ which further weakened the US standing in Egypt. The demonstrators held up posters of Ambassador Patterson,⁷⁷ demanding that she leave Egypt, and banners stating for example: 'Obama and Patterson support terrorism' and 'Wake up America, Obama Backs Up a Fascist Regime in Egypt'.⁷⁸ When it was clear that the military would oust the MB government, then the Obama administration refrained from condemning the military intervention and did not call it a 'coup'.⁷⁹ This time, Islamists took to the streets accusing the Armed Forces Commander Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, who led the ouster, of being 'America's agent'. Thus, the administration simultaneously alienated all sides from the US and anti-Americanism has been on the rise in Egypt.⁸⁰ The weakened US position in the region negatively affects Israeli security.

The question of Iran

How to contain Iran's nuclear programme has formed another bone of contention between Washington and Jerusalem. For the US, a nuclear Iran will damage American credibility and interests in the Middle East. Iran is located alongside the Caspian Basin and Persian Gulf – both regions comprise nearly 70% of the world's oil and 40% of natural gas reserves, which are vital to US interests. The West fears that Iran's hegemonic aspirations in the region, particularly in the Gulf, Iraq, and the Levant, will be emboldened and the country will increase its support for Islamist terrorism if it were to achieve nuclear arms capability. A nuclear-armed Iran may also trigger an arms race in the Middle East as it is highly likely that other regional powers such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Turkey would seek to develop their own nuclear weapons. Furthermore, there would also be the danger of a nuclear weapon falling (or being passed) into the hands of terrorist organizations.⁸¹ Yet the US can still live with a nuclear-armed Iran by containing it as it did with the Soviet Union during the Cold War. But for Israel a nuclear-armed Iran is an existential threat since Tehran denies Israel's right to exist and calls for its destruction.⁸²

Given the deep economic crisis, which resulted in significant cuts even in the Pentagon's budget,⁸³ it is highly unlikely to see a US military attack against Iran's nuclear facilities. The costly US experience in Iraq and Afghanistan also made Americans weary of war. For example, a March 2013 Washington Post-ABC News poll suggested that 58% of Americans said Iraq was not worth the fight, while 56% stated the same about Afghanistan.⁸⁴ Yet a March 2013 Pew poll also suggested that 64% of Americans and 68% of Israelis favoured military action to prevent Iran developing a nuclear weapon.⁸⁵

The Obama administration expressed opposition to a possible Israeli unilateral military strike against Iran's nuclear facilities on the grounds that such an attack would draw the US into another military conflict since Tehran would

retaliate by attacking Israel and US forces in Afghanistan.⁸⁶ For example, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin Dempsey, stated in August 2012 that an Israeli attack on Iran would not stop its nuclear programme and argued that he did not want US forces to be complicit in any Israeli strike on Iran.⁸⁷

By imposing economic sanctions on Iran the Obama administration hopes to dissuade it from its nuclear programme. Israel, which believes that Iran has been utilizing the negotiations to gain time for developing its nuclear weapons, has been sceptical about the success of the US sanctions policy.⁸⁸ Indeed in February 2013, Iran, ahead of the new US sanctions, announced that it would speed up the pace of its uranium enrichment.⁸⁹ Furthermore, a February 2013 Gallup poll also revealed that the sanctions do not seem to be successful at turning Iranian public opinion against the nuclear programme and against national leaders for behaving in a way that has invited sanctions. A significant segment of Iranians (63%) argued that Iran should continue its nuclear programme, even if it leads to the imposition of economic sanctions. Only 17% stated the opposite, while 19% claimed that they did not know or refused to answer. The poll also showed that Iranians were almost five times as likely to blame the US for sanctions (47%) as they were to blame their own government (10%). The poll indicated that, contrary to US expectations, the sanctions, even though they are harming Iran's economy, did not seem to weaken the Iranian public's support for the nuclear programme, but rather reinforced popular antagonism toward the US. Thus, Iranian leaders did not need to worry about possible public discontent regarding the country's nuclear programme.⁹⁰

The impact of the Arab upheavals on Iran's regional power remains to be seen. Iran regarded the uprisings as an 'Islamist awakening' against Western-backed autocrats similar to its 1979 Islamic revolution.⁹¹ Yet the resurgence of the region's Sunni-Shiite divide mainly as a result of the Syrian civil war, in which Iran and its proxy Hezbollah support the Bashar Assad regime, while the Sunni axis – mainly Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, and Jordan – support the anti-Assad forces, limited Iran's appeal to the Arab world. Furthermore, Hamas, another proxy of Iran, fled from Damascus and moved toward the Sunni Islamist axis of Egypt, Qatar, and Turkey. Yet, with the fall of MB rule in Egypt, Hamas might seek to form an alignment with Iran again.

In the post-'Arab Spring' period the US has regarded the formation of alliances based on the region's Sunni-Shiite rivalry as an opportunity to counterbalance Iran. Yet both post-Mubarak Egypt and Iran, for all their sectarian differences in general, and their opposing positions on the Syrian civil war in particular, moved to improve their bilateral relations. For example, in February 2011 Egypt allowed the passage of Iranian warships through the Suez Canal.⁹² The bilateral relations deepened under MB rule. Unlike Mubarak, who perceived Iran as Egypt's foremost security threat, Morsi sought to form close relations with the Islamic republic. Egypt under the MB government also started to abandon its traditional foreign policy of maintaining close relations with the US and Israel

and instead aimed at pursuing a more independent stance guided by Islamism.⁹³ In line with this policy, Cairo welcomed thawing relations with Tehran, with Morsi visiting Iran in August 2012 for a meeting of the Non-Aligned Movement and Ahmadinejad reciprocating by visiting Cairo in February 2013 for the summit of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation.⁹⁴ In March 2013 Egypt agreed to allow \$5 billion worth of Iranian investments.⁹⁵ The rapprochement between Egypt and Iran referred to the weakening of the US-led alliance of Egypt, Jordan, the Persian Gulf monarchies, Turkey, and Israel to counterbalance Iran.⁹⁶ With respect to Hamas, the MB government opened the Rafah crossing to Gaza in May 2011.⁹⁷

It should be noted that a significant segment of Egyptians supported their country's policy towards Iran. A September 2012 poll conducted by the Washington-based research firm Greenberg-Quinlan-Rosner showed that 65% of Egyptian respondents expressed their support for the decision to renew the Egyptian–Iranian relations and 61% expressed support for the Iranian nuclear project versus 41% in August 2009. Sixty-two per cent of Egyptians argued that they regarded Iran and President Ahmadinejad as friends of Egypt, though 68% of the respondents held unfavourable views of Shiite Muslims. Likewise, 74% of Egyptians expressed their disapproval of Egypt having diplomatic relations with Israel, while 77% of the respondents argued that the peace treaty with Israel should be dissolved.⁹⁸

Thus, the Egyptian–Iranian cooperation proved that Obama's policy of exploiting the region's sectarian conflict to counterbalance Iran failed to bring the expected result. Under MB rule it was mainly the Salafis who vehemently opposed Egypt forming close relations with Iran given their fear of Shiite proselytizing.⁹⁹ For decades the MB harshly criticized Egypt's secular leaders for serving US and Israeli interests by shunning Iran, with MB relations with Iran's religious establishment dating way before the 1979 Islamic revolution. In fact, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei himself translated the MB's main ideologue Sayyid Qutb's works into Persian.¹⁰⁰ Small wonder that Iran, along with Turkey and Qatar, harshly criticized the Egyptian military for ousting Morsi from power in July 2013 – paradoxically, along the Obama administration.¹⁰¹ Another example of showing the limits of sectarian conflict in the region was the MB's staging an anti-Israel rally in Cairo in May 2013 to protest at Israeli airstrikes on Syria. The protesters chanted the slogans of 'the people want the destruction of Israel' and 'Israel is our enemy'. This incident clearly showed that enmity to Israel trumps the sectarian divide among the Islamists.¹⁰²

Iran's new president Hassan Rouhani, who won the June 2013 elections, portrays himself as a moderate, and is looked upon by the Obama administration as a true partner for resolving Iran's nuclear programme by diplomatic means. But Israel argues that the country's foreign policy, controlled by Supreme Leader Khamenei, is not likely to change. Indeed, in the August 2013 al-Quds Day celebration Rouhani called Israel 'a sore has been sitting on the body of the Islamic world for many years'.¹⁰³ Shortly before his visit to Israel in March 2013

Obama defined Iranian nuclear weapons as a 'red line' that threatened Israel and the US, while stressing the 'unbreakable' US commitment to Israel's security.¹⁰⁴ Yet Israel, given its doubts regarding the US military commitment to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, declared in August 2013 that it is capable of carrying out a unilateral military strike against Iran's nuclear facilities without American operational support.¹⁰⁵ But a February 2012 poll conducted by Shibley Telhami, a professor of political science at Maryland University, suggested that 81% of Israelis opposed a unilateral strike on Iran without the US support.¹⁰⁶ While it remains to be seen how the Iranian nuclear issue will be resolved, the US policy of conducting negotiations while imposing economic sanctions and utilizing the Sunni Islamist axis to weaken Iran has not slowed down the country's nuclear programme. In fact, Iran's new Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif stated in August 2013 that Western sanctions could not force Iran to change its policy on its nuclear programme.¹⁰⁷ And the Sunni Islamist axis will not be able to counterbalance a nuclear-armed Iran.

Al-Qaeda in the Middle East

In the post-'Arab Spring' period, al-Qaeda affiliates have become active in the Middle East and North Africa. The assassination of Osama Bin Laden as well as other al-Qaeda leaders and operatives by US Special Forces weakened the organization in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Somalia, and Yemen. But al-Qaeda quickly seized the 'Arab Spring' as an opportunity to increase its activities in the Middle East and North Africa. Autocratic governments, which were keeping Islamist extremist groups in check, were ousted by the uprisings.¹⁰⁸ During his September 2011 speech al-Qaeda's new leader Ayman Zawahiri asserted that the US was weakened following the Arab uprisings, and praised the revolts that toppled leaders in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya, while urging other Muslims to overthrow their rulers as well.¹⁰⁹

In North Africa, al-Qaeda of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) has benefited from fragmented politics and security vacuums created by the 'Arab Spring'. For example, Tunisia, which tried to reform its dysfunctional security services to counter the radical Islamist threat, has become a smuggling corridor for arm dealers between Libya and Mali. Furthermore, following the French intervention in Mali, several Moroccans have joined radical Islamist groups there.¹¹⁰ The Salafist-jihadist organization Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia, whose members were involved in the September 2012 attack on the US Embassy in Tunis, has been active since March 2011 in undertaking the *da'wa* (propagation of the faith) through a variety of social services.¹¹¹

Al-Qaeda has become an active force in Libya since the uprising began against Qaddafi's rule. And particularly since the fall of Qaddafi in October 2011, there has been the problem of an unchecked flood of weapons out of Libya, including thousands of shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles known as Manpads (man-portable air defence systems) to al-Qaeda affiliated jihadist groups across

North Africa such as Mali, Niger, and northern Nigeria.¹¹² Following the fall of Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh in February 2012 the al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) seized control of almost half of the country before being driven back by an offensive by the new Yemeni government and US drone strikes.¹¹³ It is important to note that several Yemenis belonging to the AQAP took part in the September 2012 terrorist attack on the US embassy in Benghazi, which left four American citizens dead including the ambassador to Libya.¹¹⁴ Al-Qaeda has also become active in Gaza. The Mujahideen Shura Council in the Environs of Jerusalem, an al-Qaeda affiliate group based in Gaza, fired missiles from Sinai and Gaza to Israel in March and April 2013.¹¹⁵

About a year after the Syrian uprising started against Assad's rule, Jabhat al-Nusra, which is backed by al-Qaeda's branch in Iraq, became increasingly active among the anti-Assad forces in Syria.¹¹⁶ Former US Secretary of State Clinton noted in February 2013 that rebels in Syria had been receiving messages from al-Qaeda's core leaders in Pakistan – a development that she called 'deeply distressing'.¹¹⁷ It is estimated that al-Nusra, which pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda's leader Zawahiri in April 2013,¹¹⁸ has about 10,000 fighters in Syria.¹¹⁹ The group has been receiving weapons and financial assistance from Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Northern Iraq.¹²⁰ And al-Nusra, which imposes a very strict form of the Sharia rule connected to al-Qaeda,¹²¹ has become the best-equipped rebel element in Syria.¹²² Furthermore, scenes of a radical Islamist Syrian rebel eating a Syrian soldier's heart in May 2013 shocked the world.¹²³ Despite all these facts, however, in May 2013 the US Senate voted overwhelmingly to arm and train elements of the Syrian rebels. Senator Rand Paul (R-KY) harshly criticized members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee by stating, 'This is an important moment. You will be funding, today, the allies of al-Qaeda. It's an irony you cannot overcome'.¹²⁴ Just a few days later, Obama announced that 'the al Qaeda threat is decimated and the scale of this threat closely resembled the types of attacks the US faced before 9/11'.¹²⁵ He also reiterated that the war in Afghanistan would come to an end by 2014,¹²⁶ and in order to make official the US non-war stance Obama needed to end the Authorization for the Use of Military Force passed by Congress in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks.¹²⁷ The al-Qaeda affiliated groups' increased activity in the Middle East and particularly in Syria¹²⁸ is a source of concern for Israel. However, some US officials argue that Obama's options are more constrained in the Middle East and North Africa, where the US has fewer intelligence resources and has seen staunch counter-terrorism allies, such as Egypt's Mubarak, ousted from power.¹²⁹

It seems that some Israeli officials share the US perception that the Assad regime, given its alliance with Iran and Hezbollah, is a more dangerous threat than al-Qaeda.¹³⁰ And Israel has toned down its opposition to Western arming of Syrian rebels given that the country has focused on weakening pro-Iran forces in the Syrian civil war.¹³¹ But the Taliban's Qatar branch, despite its sectarian competition with Iran, sent a diplomatic delegation to Iran in June 2013 for what a Taliban spokesman called 'a meeting of two governments'.¹³²

Moreover, shortly before the meeting Zawahiri, while urging rebel fighters to unite to bring down the Assad regime in Syria and build an anti-Western state, called a jihad against Israel.¹³³ Al-Nusra's short-term objective – Assad's ouster – put it in an uncomfortable alignment with the US and Israeli interests. Yet the question of what to do with the jihadist presence in the post-Assad era remains an important question particularly for Israel given that al-Nusra has become a force beyond US control.¹³⁴ Britain's security and intelligence chiefs argued in July 2013 that 'al-Qaeda elements and individual jihadists in Syria currently represent the most worrying emerging terrorist threat to the UK and the west'.¹³⁵

Conclusion

The 'Arab Spring' revealed increasingly divergent strategic interests between the US and Israel manifested, first and foremost, by the administration's (failed) attempts to court the surging Islamist forces, from Egypt's MB to the Syrian rebels. Based on the expectation of the MB's progressive moderation and Iran's weakening by the emergence of a Sunni Islamist axis, US strategy has been problematic for Israeli security interests for the following reasons:

- As shown by the Egyptian case, the MB's rise to power has hardly mellowed their Islamist goals. And while pursuing a pragmatic policy of maintaining the status quo with Israel, high-ranking MB officials did not fail to reveal their anti-Israeli animus. Despite the Obama administration's support for the Arab upheavals, hoping to win Arab hearts and minds, anti-Americanism has been on the rise throughout the post-'Arab Spring' Middle East. The weakened US regional position has negatively affected Israeli security.
- Washington's attempt to utilize the Sunni Islamist axis to counterbalance Iran failed to bear the expected result. Contrary to the Obama administration's expectations, Cairo moved to improve its relations with Tehran. A similar trend has been observed in the relations between Iran and Taliban's Qatar branch. Furthermore, the American sanctions policy, while damaging Iran's economy, failed to slow down its nuclear ambitions and diminish Iranian public support for the nuclear programme.
- Al-Qaeda affiliated groups and other radical Islamist forces have intensified their activities in the region. With the autocratic governments that had kept the Islamist extremist groups in check ousted by the uprisings, the surge of al-Qaeda affiliated groups in Syria, Gaza, and Egypt's Sinai Peninsula has been a great concern for Israel. And the question of increased activity of al-Qaeda affiliated groups throughout the Middle East remains unresolved.

All in all, the past three years have showed the abysmal failure of Washington's policy of using the Sunni Islamist axis to counterbalance Iran while hoping for

the MB's moderation as a means for the promotion of democracy in the Middle East. For liberal democracy to flourish in the Middle East the US needs to pursue a policy of supporting liberals, women, and non-Muslim minorities in the region and formulate a clear policy to deal with the threat from Iran and radical Islamist groups like al-Qaeda. The post-'Arab Spring' era has created a more volatile and hostile strategic environment for both the US and Israel. And this makes Israel an even more valuable ally for the US.

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