

Threat of Israel's Regional Isolation and Imperatives for the Future

Rajeev Agarwal



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Introduction

Fruits of struggle of the Zionist movement launched in 1890s finally bore fruit after more than half a decade of struggle when the UN resolution 181 gave a go ahead to carve out a separate state for Jews from state of Palestine in 1947. The resolution was obviously treated with hostility and contempt by Palestine and the Arab nations, a hostility which meant that Israel was virtually fighting wars in first three decades of its nation hood. The 1978 Camp David Accord and the peace treaty with Egypt however facilitated a ceasefire that has continued till now. There have been military conflicts in the region thereafter; the Iran-Iraq war of 1980s, Iraq's invasion on Kuwait in 1991, the two gulf wars in Iraq but none have directly involved Israel. It does not however indicate in any manner that Israel has been free from military conflict after 1979 treaty. Israel fought a war in Lebanon in 1982, again in 2006, and has been involved in a continued military conflict against the Palestinians including military conflicts in Gaza in December 2008 and the last one in November 2012. The period of 1990s was however, exceptional in Israel's history as it was a phase of reconciliation and peace where Israel tried to give up its aggressive 'security oriented' approach and attempted to work towards peace in the region.

The advent of the 21st century witnessed an overall improvement in Israel's regional stature. Israel enjoyed continued US support as well as peace with Egypt continuing from the Camp David Accords. It even forged a very fruitful and a meaningful partnership with Turkey, at least for some time. Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) were no longer considered hostile and Syria posed no real threat. Iraq had been weakened by the two Gulf wars and was no longer a military power of any significance. The only persistent threat emanated from the Palestinian group

Hamas in the West Bank, Hezbollah in Lebanon and Iran over its threats to wipe off Israel from the map¹ and from Iran's suspected nuclear weapons programme. This too, in current circumstances did not threaten to blow over into a real crisis. Arab regimes feeling threatened by Iran, realised the need for security guarantees from the West and thus gradually balanced their policies with Israel against compulsions to seek support from the West, especially the US. Thus, from a security oriented perspective, the regional balance of power was in Israel's favour.

However, after its unilateral withdrawal from Gaza in 2005, the turn of events has not been exactly in Israel's favour. The strengthening of Hamas in Gaza post 2005, the Lebanon war in 2006 and other developments including the Second Gulf War resulting in increasing Iranian influence in Iraq, are again indicating towards the return of a 'security oriented approach' in Israel which could end up in losing whatever little peace and support it had achieved in the region in the past decade.

The 'Arab Spring' has especially threatened to change the entire political landscape in the region. Dictators have been overthrown in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and Yemen; uprisings have turned into civil war in Syria which threatens to blow over into a regional conflict, a wave of political Islam is taking roots in main stream political discourse of countries affected by 'Arab Spring' and others emerging from the uprising are seeking new regional alignments with major regional players. This has clearly upset the fine equilibrium that existed in the West Asian region and among other things, is threatening to adversely affect Israel's regional strategy in case Israel does not look for innovative solutions in its engagements with the region.

¹ Did Ahmadinejad really say Israel should be 'wiped off the map'? Washington Post, May 10, 2011, http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/post/did-ahmadinejad-really-say-israel-should-be-wiped-off-the-map/2011/10/04/IQABJIKML_blog.html, (Accessed November 11, 2013)

This paper thus attempts to examine past and current trends in Israel's policies in the West Asian region, new challenges being faced by Israel and the measures that Israel needs to take to remodel its regional strategy. While doing so, the paper seeks answers to some of the important issues as follows:-

- How has Israel reoriented its outlook towards the West Asian region in recent past and especially after the Gaza Withdrawal in 2005? How has it affected its regional strategy?
- How has Israel been affected by the 'Arab Spring'?
- How has Israel's relations with major global powers effected its regional engagements?
- How does Israel view the threat of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs) in its national security and regional strategy calculus?

The paper argues that Israel has for long held on to its stated positions on regional issues and has not reacted intelligently to the fast evolving developments in the region. Despite efforts in the 1990s to transform Israel's regional policies from a confrontational approach to an approach of reconciliation and peace, it seems that in past few years, Israel has once again started looking at region through the prism of "peace through security" which has resulted in Israel finding itself increasingly isolated in the region as well as threatened along its borders. It therefore needs to evolve a dynamic regional strategy in tune with the fast changing regional dynamics or else could end up being more isolated in the region.

Part 1

Israel and its Engagement with the Region

Israeli foreign policy in the region is mainly influenced by Israel's strategic situation, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the rejection of Israel by most of the Arab states. Foreign policy determinants of Israel highlight three important issues². Firstly, Israel sees itself as a Jewish state which is unique in the world, secondly is the Zionist ideology which aims at creating a sovereign Jewish state that would represent a safe haven for Jews from all over the world and thirdly is the security policy which focuses on enhancing security of the state, establishing and enhancing relations with the Arab states. Within the framework of its foreign policy and the prevailing regional dynamics, the discourse of Israel's policies in the West Asian region has been dominated by security issues. Throughout its brief history, national security has always dominated Israel's strategic thought in the region.

Taking on from the time of founding of Israel as a nation in 1948, the period of Israel's engagement in the region can be broadly classified into three distinct phases. The *first phase* could be bracketed from 1948 to 1990-91, a period when Israel was still fighting its regional adversaries and was considered as a critical Western outpost against the Soviet Union during the Cold War. This period was punctuated by frequent wars as well as the launch of the first Palestinian uprising in the form of Intifada I in 1987. The *second period* could be the period from 1991 to 2005 which witnessed significant developments with regards Israel's changed outlook towards the region which coaxed Israel to look at peaceful solutions to regional issues. This was the period when the Soviet Union

² Bernard Reich, "Israeli Foreign Policy", in *Diplomacy in the Middle East, The International Relations of Regional and Outside Powers*, edited, Carl L. Brown, pp. 121-125

disintegrated, Israel forged peace treaty with Jordan³, Oslo Accords⁴ happened and in general there was an acceptance of mutual co-existence and methods to find peace. The *third period* finds its origins in the failed attempt to find peace between Israel and Palestine during the Camp David Summit of 2000⁵ and the resultant Palestinian frustration manifesting itself in the launch of Intifada II⁶. But the real narrative of this third phase commences around 2005-06 when, after the unilateral Israeli withdrawal from Gaza, Israel, contrary to its expectations could not drive home the peace dividend and instead was confronted with a situation of increased conflicts in its neighbourhood which led it to once again reorient its regional strategy based on 'peace through security'. The return of security narrative in Israel's discourse in the region resulted in skirmishes and conflicts one after another leading to breaking up of alliances and partnerships in the region. The advent of 'Arab Spring' has only accelerated the isolationist trends of Israel. Each of these phases reflects on Israel's standing in the region and its increasing / decreasing levels of regional isolation.

The First Phase: 1948-91

The first phase was punctuated by frequent wars and was all about Israel' fight for survival. Commencing from 1948 and continuing through 1967 and 1973, it was a case of Israel fighting to survive and take on the Arab armies. In between the wars, especially in the lead up to the 1967 war, the Arab nations took on every opportunity to force isolation on Israel and refused to accept its legitimate existence. The Second Arab League Summit of September 1964

³ Text of the Treaty available at <http://www.kinghussein.gov.jo/peacetreaty.html>, (Accessed October 24, 2013)

⁴ Text of Oslo accords 1993 available at http://cis.uchicago.edu/sites/cis.uchicago.edu/files/resources/CIS-090213-israelpalestine_38-1993DeclarationofPrinciples_OsloAccords.pdf, (Accessed October 10, 2013)

⁵ Bill Clinton, "My Life." Vintage (2005). pp. 936-946, Camp David II, Middle East Research and Information Project

⁶ *Jeremy Pressman* The Second Intifada: Background and Causes of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, *The Journal of Conflict Studies*, Vol. XXIII, (2), 2003, The Gregg Centre University of New Brunswick Fredericton, NB Canada

held in Egypt is significant in this respect where the resolution declared the goal of eliminating Israel, and made concrete decisions regarding unification of army commands, increased size of armed forces and diversion of the waters of the Jordan before they reached the Sea of Galilee, in Syria and Lebanon. The goal was stated quite clearly: *“The Council has unanimously defined the national cause as that of liberating Palestine from Zionist imperialism and pursuing a plan of joint Arab action both during the present stage - for which plans have already been laid down - and at the next stage, for which it has already been decided to make preparations.”*⁷ The “next stage” emerged in 1967 as the six day war.

The 1973 Yom Kippur War⁸ which commenced as a big strategic surprise sprung upon Israel and initial gains by the Arab armies was finally a military defeat for the Arabs. The Arabs retaliated through the Arab-led Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) creating a global energy crisis. In October 1973 OPEC nations stopped exports to the US and other Western nations⁹. They meant to punish the Western nations that supported Israel in the Yom Kippur War, but they also realised the strong influence that they had on the world through oil. This placed enormous powers in the hands of the Arab world and created unprecedented isolation for Israel. A number of Asian and African states severed diplomatic relations with Israel thus joining the communist states (less Romania) that had already severed relations after the 1967 Six-Day War¹⁰. Later during the decade, the Arab

⁷ Arab Alexandria Summit of 1964, Mideast Web Historical Documents, available at <http://www.mideastweb.org/arabsummit1964.htm>, (Accessed October 29, 2013)

⁸ Uri Bar-Joseph, The 1973 Yom Kippur War, Jewish Virtual Library Publications, May 2009, <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/isdf/text/barjoseph.pdf>, (Accessed September 29, 2013)

⁹ Sarah Horton, The 1973 Oil Crisis, <http://www.envirothonpa.org/documents/The1973OilCrisis.pdf>, (Accessed November 01, 2013) Background: What caused the 1970s oil price shock?, *The Guardian News*, March 03, 2011, <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2011/mar/03/1970s-oil-price-shock>, (Accessed October 31, 2013)

¹⁰ Efraim Inbar, Jerusalem’s Decreasing Isolation Israel in the World, *Middle East Quarterly*, 2013, pp. 27-38

bloc regularly garnered the support of the Third World and the Soviet blocs to endorse anti-Israeli resolutions in the UN and other international organisations. The worst of the UN resolutions, from Israel's point of view, was the November 1975 General Assembly resolution¹¹ branding Zionism, the Jewish national movement, as racism. The resolution demonstrated the decreasing international legitimacy of the Jewish state even more profoundly than the severance of diplomatic ties. In December 1979, the UN General Assembly (UNGA) in its resolution 34/90 again denounced Israel for its policies in occupied territories¹². This time the deterioration in Israel's international status was strikingly evident. Only three countries, the US, Canada, and Australia, opposed the resolution. No Western European, Latin American, Asian, or African state voted with Israel. An overwhelming 111 nations supported the resolution; only 26 abstained¹³.

There was a brief pause when the Israel-Egypt Peace treaty was signed at Camp David in 1979¹⁴. Although, it ensured peace with the most potent Arab military power- Egypt, it was not acceptable to the Arab world at large which held the solidarity with the Palestinian cause as a more important factor for achieving peace. This phase also witnessed the Lebanon War of 1982 and the launch of Palestinian uprising, 'Intifada I' in 1987 which continued well into 1990s.

This period was thus a period of continued conflict with Israel and a period in which only thing that mattered to Israel was its national security. Israel during this period had little support within the region and remained largely isolated.

¹¹ UN General Assembly Resolution 3379, MidEast web, <http://www.mideastweb.org/3379.htm>, (Accessed October 29, 2013)

¹² UN General assembly Thirty Fourth Session, available at <http://www.un.org/documents/ga/res/34/a34res90.pdf>, (Accessed October 29, 2013)

¹³ Efraim Inbar, Jerusalem's Decreasing Isolation Israel in the World, *Middle East Quarterly*, 2013, pp. 27-38

¹⁴ Full Text available at <http://www.icsresources.org/content/primarysourcesdocs/IsraelEgyptPeaceTreaty.pdf>, (Accessed October 01, 2013)

The Second Phase: 1991-2005

The second period however witnessed significant changes from the previous period. Some of the changes were external but had profound influence on Israel's policies as well as policies in the region towards Israel. Prominent among them were two; firstly, the Iraq's invasion of Kuwait which led to the First Gulf War and secondly, the disintegration of Soviet Union which led to the end of Cold War and emergence of the US as the sole super power. The Iraq-Kuwait War also demonstrated the fragility of intra region security within the Arab world and the enormous threat that regional rivalry posed to the oil business which made them politically much more dependent on the US.

In context of Israel, the first Intifada was loosing steam by late 1990 and even in Israel the thought of seeking peace through security was loosing support and there was a search for a new approach based on peace and compromise led by Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. The coalition led by his Labour Party which won elections in June 1992, brought a new approach to the resolution of regional conflict on the basis of the land-for- peace principle, believing that only peace could strengthen the security of Israel and assure its existence¹⁵.

The Madrid Conference of 1991 laid the ground for future prospects of peace in the region. It marked the beginning of a new policy of open dialogue between Israel and its Arab neighbours, which had been elusive since the creation of Israel in 1948. More importantly, it allowed for open dialogue with the Palestinians, which up to this point in time had been non-existent¹⁶. *After forty-four years of bloody conflict, the ancient taboo against Arabs talking with Israelis had...been*

¹⁵ Daniel Bar-Tal, *Between Hope and Fear: A Dialogue on the Peace Process in the Middle East and the Polarized Israeli Society*, Political Psychology, 18(3), 1997, Blackwell Publishers, Malden, MA 02148, USA, p 670

¹⁶ Fernando Rodriguez, *The 1991 Madrid Peace Conference: U.S. Efforts Towards Lasting Peace in the Middle East Between Israel and its Neighbours*, University of New Orleans, available at <http://scholarworks.uno.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2327&context=td>, (Accessed October 29, 2013)

dramatically consigned to the back bench of history.” was how the US Secretary Of State James A. Baker described¹⁷ the importance of Madrid talks as.

The Oslo accords of 1993 called “Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements¹⁸” were the first significant agreement between the Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO). The Accord recognised the right to self rule of Palestinians and provided for the creation of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) which would have responsibility for the administration of the territory under its control. As per the accords, Israeli armed forces were to withdraw from Gaza Strip and Jericho areas. The arrangement set out by the accords was an interim one expected to last for a five-year interim period during which a permanent agreement was to be negotiated. The two sides also signed Letters of Mutual Recognition wherein Israel recognised PLO as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, while the PLO on its part recognised the right of the state of Israel to exist and renounced terrorism as well as other violence, and its desire for the destruction of the Israeli state.

Oslo process perhaps provided the impetus to Israel in exploring more regional engagement resulting in the peace treaty between Israel and Jordan in 1994¹⁹. Signed on October 26, at the southern border crossing of Arabah, it made Jordan only the second Arab country, after Egypt, to normalise relations with Israel and ended their state of war since 1948 which had resulted in Jordan loosing West Bank including East Jerusalem in the 1967 war. The process of mutual acceptance and peace received a rude though temporary jolt when the Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was

¹⁷ James A. Baker and Thomas M. DeFrank, *The Politics of Diplomacy: Revolution, War & Peace, 1989-1992*, G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1995, p. 512

¹⁸ Text of Oslo accords 1993 available at http://cis.uchicago.edu/sites/cis.uchicago.edu/files/resources/CIS-090213-israelpalestine_38-1993DeclarationofPrinciples_OsloAccords.pdf, (Accessed October 10, 2013)

¹⁹ Text of Israel-Jordan Treaty of Peace, October 26, 1994 available at <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Peace/isrjor.html>, (Accessed October 30, 2013)

assassinated by a right wing Jewish law student Yigal Amir who told the judge that assassination was meant to halt the Mideast peace process²⁰. The efforts towards peace and mutual recognition continued and fructified in Oslo II called as The Interim Agreement on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip signed on September 28, 1995²¹. The agreement, also known as the Taba Agreement, called for Israeli withdrawals from various Palestinian areas and expanded Palestinian self-rule. It divided the West Bank and Gaza into three areas, controlled by Israel, the Palestinians, or Palestinian civil authority with Israeli military control. Oslo II also allowed Palestinian election, which took place in 1996. Among other provisions, the Agreement also provided “safe passage” to Palestinians traveling between Gaza and the West Bank, although Israel was also allowed to legally close crossing points into Israel if deemed necessary. Israel’s withdrawal from South Lebanon in May 2000 was the next big initiative. As a part of declared election promise, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak ordered unilateral withdrawal from South Lebanon, a territory occupied by Israeli forces since the 1978 South Lebanon conflict²². It also fulfilled the UN Security Resolution 425 of March 19, 1978²³.

Following on from peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan, withdrawal from Lebanon was thought of as an instrument to give peace a chance. Israel and Syria too held peace talks in the US in 2000 but they collapsed after the two sides failed to reach an agreement on the fate of the Golan Heights. Differences over control of the shore of the Sea of Galilee, which the Golan Heights overlook was widely

²⁰ Rabin’s alleged killer appears in court, CNN news November 07, 1995, available at <http://edition.cnn.com/WORLD/9511/rabin/amir/11-06/index.html>, (Accessed October 30, 2013)

²¹ Oslo II Accords (Interim Agreement on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip), council of Foreign Relations, 28 September 1995, available at <http://www.cfr.org/israel/oslo-ii-accords-interim-agreement-west-bank-gaza-strip/p9676>

²² UNIFIL Background, available at <https://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/unifil/background.shtml>

²³ Text of the Resolution available at <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/RESOLUTION/GEN/NR0/368/70/IMG/NR036870.pdf?OpenElement>

seen as the main stumbling block. Efforts to find peace with Palestine continued until the failure of Camp David Summit of July 2000 to find any solution. This failure combined with Leader of Likud Party Ariel Sharon's visit to Temple Mount on September 28,²⁴ are said to be the two primary reasons for sparking off the second Palestinian uprising, 'Intefada II' which continued till 2005. Despite the uprisings, peace efforts continued. Significant among them were the Taba Talks in January 2001²⁵ followed by the 'Arab Peace Initiative 2002'²⁶ presented during the Arab summit in Beirut on March 27, 2002 and the 'Road Map' laid out by the Quartet of EU, UN, US and Russia known as the "Performance-based Roadmap to a Permanent Two-State Solution to the Israeli-Palestinian Crisis"²⁷ in April 2003. This period ended with the announcement of the unilateral disengagement plan from Gaza by Israel in 2005²⁸ which could be termed as the last significant reconciliatory effort towards peace by Israel in the region.

This phase was thus distinctly different from the first phase. Taking on from Prime Minister Rabin's vision, this phase witnessed a new approach by Israel towards the region, an approach based on peace and reconciliation. Although, the First Gulf war and the dissolution of Soviet Union had distinct impact on the region, but Israel's reconciliatory approach may not have possible had Israel not abandoned its security oriented approach towards the region. As

²⁴ Rioting as Sharon visits Islam holy site, *The Guardian News*, September 28, 2000, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2000/sep/29/israel>, (Accessed November 10, 2013)

²⁵ David Matz, Trying to Understand the Taba Talks, *Palestine-Israel Journal*, 10(3) 2003, available at <http://www.pij.org/details.php?id=32>, (Accessed October 30, 2013)

²⁶ Text Available at <http://www.al-bab.com/arab/docs/league/peace02.htm>, (Accessed October 30, 2013)

²⁷ Text available at <http://www.un.org/news/dh/mideast/roadmap122002.pdf>, (Accessed October 30, 2013)

²⁸ Gaza Disengagement Plan – General Outline, *Palestine-Israel Journal*, Vol. 13 No. 2, 2006, available at <http://www.pij.org/details.php?id=829>, (Accessed October 30, 2013), Israel's Disengagement Plan: Conception and Implementation, <http://www.iemed.org/anuari/2006/aarticles/aSpyer.pdf>, (Accessed October 30, 2013)

would be seen later, this was the only period where Israel experienced lesser regional isolation.

The Third Phase: 2005 Onwards

The third period was set off by the failure of Israel's unilateral withdrawal from Gaza²⁹ to bring about any forward movement in the peace with Palestine. Instead, it resulted in increased belligerence from Hamas and Hezbollah leading to conflicts. The Ariel Sharon plan of disengagement from Gaza failed to transform Israeli–Palestinian relations and could not trigger the revival of the peace process after the failed initiative of Camp David in 2000. Within months of the pullback, the optimism engendered by Israel's move quickly turned to despair for Palestinians and regret for Israel. Palestinians witnessed a sharp decline in their socio-economic and living conditions. For Israel, the security situation in the south continued to deteriorate with the number of missile attacks from Gaza increasing. This gave impetus to the hardliner thoughts in Israel and Israel once again started seeing the region through the spectrum of “peace through security” as was witnessed in the first phase. The result was increase in military conflicts and break in alliances. Hamas leaders hailed Israel's retreat as a great victory for the Palestinian resistance movement, as the “end of the Zionist dream,” and as a sign of the moral and psychological decline of the Jewish state³⁰. Hamas gained strength and support which was witnessed in their victory in the 2006 elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC)³¹. Hamas government in Gaza from 2007 thereafter has pursued a policy of conflict with Israel which has contributed to a large extent in change in Israel's policy towards peace with Palestine as also other regional issues.

²⁹ Joel Peters, The Gaza Disengagement: Five Years Later, *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs* 4(3) (2010)

³⁰ *ibid*

³¹ Hamas Sweeps Palestinian Elections, Complicating Peace Efforts in Mideast, *Washington Post* January 27, 2006, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/01/26/AR2006012600372.html>, (Accessed October 30, 2013)

2005 onwards, there were other significant changes in Israel's neighbourhood. In Iraq, after the fall of Saddam Hussein, elections in December 2005³² failed to throw up a government, insurgent attacks on Iraqi Army and US led forces increased and Al Qaeda soon made Iraq as one of its important bases. The swearing in of Nouri al-Maliki to form a new government in Iraq in April 2006 marked a significant landmark as it not only resulted in increase of Iranian influence in Iraq but also gave fuel to raging Sunni insurgency in Iraq. Iraq under Iranian sphere of influence presented an increased threat to Israel.

In Iran, the issue of its nuclear programme took a dramatic turn as the diplomatic efforts towards a resolution broke down on August 01, 2005, when Iran notified the *International Atomic Energy Agency* (IAEA) that it would resume uranium conversion activities at Esfahan. In February 2006, Tehran ended its voluntary implementation of the Additional Protocol and resumed enrichment at Natanz. Almost in similar time frame, in August 2005, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was sworn in as the President of Iran. His approach to the nuclear issue and Iran's regional policies made Israel as well as the GCC countries feel endangered. His emphasis on furthering ties with Syria and extending Iran's influence across the Levant through partnership with Syria and Hezbollah was seen as a threat to Israel. In January 2006, Ahmadinejad's trip to Damascus further underlined this developing relationship which included signing of "Memorandum of Understanding (MoU)" on February 26, 2004³³ which codified Iranian commitment to protect Syria in case of attack by either Israel or the US. In June 2006, the two countries signed a formal defence treaty too³⁴.

Iran's close support to the Hamas in Gaza strip was another area of concern for Israel. Iran has been its major financial support

³² Kenneth Katzman, Iraq: Elections, Government, and Constitution, CRS Report for the US Congress, June 15, 2006

³³ Bente Scheller, *The Wisdom of Syria's Waiting Game: Foreign Policy Under the Assads*, C Hursts & Co. 2013, p. 164

³⁴ Robert G. Rabil, *Has Hezbollah's Rise Come at Syria's Expense?*, Middle East Forum, *Middle East Quarterly*, Fall 2007, pp. 43-51

especially in past decade with estimates ranging up to US \$ 30 million per year of assistance to Hamas³⁵. Iran has also been known to supply rockets and munitions to Hamas in Gaza including the Fazr class of rockets which have been fired at Israel including the two Gaza conflicts in December 2008 and November 2012. Further, Ahmadinejad's often aggressive stance towards Israel including his purported reference to "wiping Israel off the map"³⁶ and the alleged Iran nuclear weapons programme added to the conflict between Iran and Israel often threatening to take the shape of a military flare up.

Israel Lebanon ties too saw a dramatic downturn during this period, attributed primarily to increased coordination between Hamas and Hezbollah. As mentioned earlier, Hamas took advantage of Gaza withdrawal in 2005 and became stronger. In conjunction with Hezbollah in Lebanon, it increased attacks on Israel. It led to the execution of Operation Truthful Promise³⁷ on July 12, 2006 by the Hezbollah which resulted in ambushing and killing of eight Israeli soldiers and launch of massive military retaliation by Israel called the Second Lebanon War³⁸ which continued up to August 14. The war not only soured the fragile peace between Lebanon and Israel but gave more impetus to Lebanon coming together with Iran to support the Hezbollah and Hamas in their campaign against Israel.

Elsewhere, Israel was able to maintain a state of 'Cold Peace' with Syria and Jordan owing more to the understanding with respective regimes in those countries than anything ideological. There were even reports in 2006 of the Bashar al Assad regime in Syria's acceptance of the status quo over the strategically vital Golan

³⁵ Hamas: Background and Issues for Congress, CRS Report, December 02, 2010, p. 22

³⁶ Did Ahmadinejad really say Israel should be 'wiped off' the map? *Washington Post*, May 10, 2011, http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/post/did-ahmadinejad-really-say-israel-should-be-wiped-off-the-map/2011/10/04/gIQABJIKML_blog.html, (Accessed November 11, 2013)

³⁷ Operation Truthful Promise, Human Rights Watch, <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2007/lebanon0907/7.htm>, (Accessed October 31, 2013)

³⁸ Jeremy M. Sharp, Lebanon: The Israel-Hamas-Hezbollah Conflict, CRS Report US Congress, September 15, 2006

Heights. However, Israel conducted a unilateral strike at a suspected nuclear facility in Syria in September 2007³⁹ which put back the peace process. Despite that, there were reports of Turkey mediated talks between Syria and Israel in 2008⁴⁰ but they fell through when Israel launched military operations in Gaza Strip in December 2008, 'Operation Cast Lead'⁴¹. At an Arab summit in Qatar in mid-January 2009, Bashar al Assad, the President of Syria, angrily declared that Israel's bombing of Gaza showed that the Israelis spoke only "the language of blood." He called on the Arab world to boycott Israel, close any Israeli embassies in the region, and sever all "direct or indirect ties with Israel."⁴² By 2009-10, Syria was becoming a critical lynchpin in Iran's increasing influence across the Levant and a crucial cog in the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah relationship.

With Turkey, Israel enjoyed good relations which included defence exchanges and the annual military exercise Anatolian Eagle. However, after retaining power in the 2007 elections, Turkey under Prime Minister Erdogan under its policy of "Zero Problems with neighbours", started leaning more towards the Muslim countries in the neighbourhood. Its support to Hamas in not recognising it as a terrorist organisation but a political party⁴³, support to Iranian nuclear programme and becoming a key interlocutor in 2010⁴⁴ in

³⁹ Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Joshua D. Goodman, The Attack on Syria's al-Kibar Nuclear Facility, in Focus Quarterly, Spring 2009, Jewish Policy Centre

⁴⁰ Israel, Syria confirm peace talks in Turkey, *Al Arabiya News*, May 21, 2008, <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2008/05/21/50192.html>, (Accessed November 10, 2013)

⁴¹ Operation Cast Lead: 22 Days of Death and Destruction, Amnesty International 2009, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/MDE15/015/2009/en/8f299083-9a74-4853-860f-0563725e633a/mde150152009en.pdf>. (Accessed October 31, 2013)

⁴² Seymour M. Hersh 'The Obama Administration's chance to engage in a Middle East peace, *The New Yorker*, April 06, 2009, http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2009/04/06/090406fa_fact_hersh, (Accessed October 31, 2013)

⁴³ Turkey's Erdogan: Hamas is a political party, not a terrorist group, *Haaretz News*, May 12, 2011, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/turkey-s-erdogan-hamas-is-a-political-party-not-a-terrorist-group-1.361230>, (Accessed November 10, 2013)

⁴⁴ Iran signs nuclear fuel swap deal with Turkey and Brazil, *The Telegraph News*, May 17, 2010, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iran/7732195/Iran-signs-nuclear-fuel-swap-deal-with-Turkey-and-Brazil.html>, (Accessed October 10, 2013)

attempting to break the deadlock were seen as adversarial by Israel. Israel's attack on Gaza in December 2008, Operation Cast Lead⁴⁵ was a turning point in Israel-Turkey relations. In January 2009, Prime Minister Erdogan famously walked out of an event at the Davos World Economic Forum (WEF) after starting a shouting match with Israeli president Shimon Peres⁴⁶. Relations worsened after the Gaza Flotilla incident of May 2010 when eight Turkish citizens were killed in fierce clashes with Israeli commandos. Turkey immediately downgraded diplomatic relations with Israel to the level of second secretary. On February 27, 2013, speaking in Vienna at a UN event devoted to dialogue between the West and Islam, Erdogan said "just like Zionism or anti-Semitism or fascism — Islamophobia as a crime against humanity"⁴⁷ which put any hope of rapprochement between the two nations beyond immediate repair. Israel's apology on March 22, 2013⁴⁸ on the Gaza Flotilla incident might restore ties to some level; however, it is unlikely that the strong bonds that the two countries shared earlier could be replicated in short or medium term.

Among all its neighbours, Egypt was the only country under President Mubarak which did not experience any significant downturn in ties with Israel during this period. As regards Palestine, peace talks remained virtually frozen during the period. After the 2006 PLC which Hamas won comfortably, there were no more elections in Palestine. The subsequent struggle for power resulted in split of

⁴⁵ Operation Cast Lead: 22 Days of Death and Destruction, Amnesty International 2009, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/MDE15/015/2009/en/8f299083-9a74-4853-860f-0563725e633a/mde150152009en.pdf>. (Accessed October 31, 2013)

⁴⁶ Turkey: PM Erdogan's Criticism of Israel Could Damage Ankara's Aspirations as Mid-East Peace Broker, Eurasianet, 04 February 2009, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insightb/articles/eav020509.shtml>, (Accessed October 31, 2013)

⁴⁷ Erdogan calls Zionism a 'crime against humanity', *Times of Israel*, February 28, 2013, <http://www.timesofisrael.com/erdogan-calls-zionism-a-crime-against-humanity/>, (Accessed October 31, 2013)

⁴⁸ Obama Brokers Apology From Netanyahu to Erdogan, *Al Monitor*, March 22, 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/03/netanyahu-apology-erdogan-gaza-flotilla-obama-trip.html>, (Accessed October 31, 2013)

2007 resulting in Fatah ruling the West Bank and Hamas ruling the Gaza Strip. Skirmishes and rocket attacks between Israel and Hamas continued intermittently. However in December 2008, Israel launched military offensive in Gaza, "Operation Cast Lead" which carried on for three weeks and put an end to any prospects of peace. It also resulted in wide spread condemnation of Israel including from the Arab League, Turkey and Iran further isolating Israel regionally. After coming to power, the US President Obama tried to revive peace talks in August 2010 but the talks were unsuccessful and resulted in a stalemate in December 2010⁴⁹. Israel refused to stop Israelis building settlements on the West Bank, the core of a Palestinian state and the Palestinians said that they will not return to the table as long as construction continued.

Thus, this phase witnessed the return of 'security oriented approach' in Israel's foreign policy in the region which led to diluting the gains of previous period and leading to its increased regional isolation, increased hostility in its neighbourhood and breaking off of alliances. Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon kept the threat of conflict lurking in Israel's neighbourhood resulting in two wars. Breaking off with Turkey was another setback for Israel. Iran-Hezbollah-Hamas close ties and anti-Israel stance became more threatening for Israel's security in the region while the US withdrawal from Iraq and subsequent developments in Iraq-Iran ties virtually brought Iran at Israel's borders. Meanwhile the Palestine peace talks remained in virtual cold storage during this entire period. The developments during this period meant that when 'Arab Spring' came, it only led to deteriorating situation for Israel in the region.

⁴⁹ Middle East peace talks stall as US fails to sway Israel over settlements, *The Guardian News*, December 08, 2010, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/dec/08/middle-east-talks-israel-palestine>, (Accessed October 31, 2013)

Part 2

Israel and Arab Spring

'Arab Spring' further contributed to Israel's isolation in the region. It was a series of events which took the region by total surprise. It engulfed the region in total chaos and uncertainty and threatened to alter Israel's geopolitical environment drastically. The continuing protests and overthrow of dictators brought in new threats to Israel's security, namely, the threats posed by incomplete and unsuccessful democratisations, the spread of terror and most importantly the change in regional balance of power. Israel's official policy however tried to stay clear of the Arab Spring which was reflected in its stance; it aims at maintaining the status quo; it refrains from expressing political or moral support to the protestors in the different Arab countries; it is passive in nature – preferring to wait and see how developments unfold before taking any significant action; it lacks belief in the possibility of promoting peace and regional integration; and it seeks new partnerships with countries in Israel's non-Middle Eastern periphery⁵⁰.

Arab spring not only toppled dictators but put the Arab Monarchies under serious threat. But most importantly, it disturbed the fragile equilibrium in balance of power which existed in the region till then. Amongst all countries, Israel was hit the hardest by the Arab Spring. In Mubarak, it lost a vital link who had ensured peace along Israel-Egypt borders. With Mubarak gone, the Israel-Egypt peace treaty hung in balance. Sinai Peninsula, the buffer between Egypt and Israel suddenly erupted with onset of Arab Spring⁵¹ with increase in terrorist activities. It slowly developed in to an area of

⁵⁰ Elie Podeh and Nimrod Goren, Israel in the Wake of the Arab Spring: Seizing Opportunities, Overcoming Challenges

⁵¹ Rajeev Agrawal, SINAI: The Middle East's New Hot Spot, IDSA Issue Brief, November 30, 2012

security concern and served as a conduit to supply of arms to Hamas in Gaza strip forcing Israel to construct a 240 kilometre steel fence across it. Egypt even attempted to reach out to Iran and permitted two Iranian warships to cross the Suez Canal in February 2011⁵², causing alarm in Israel. It was the first time since 1979 Iran revolution that such an event happened. Iranian warships across the Suez Canal placed Iran in the Eastern Mediterranean, a direct threat to Israel's coastline.

Syria under Assad regime had ensured peace along borders with Israel, but with Assad regime under threat, this frontier too threatened Israel. Jordan, itself under 'Arab Spring' threatened to erupt but the King of Jordan was successful in containing the situation for the time being. To add to Israeli woes, the Hamas was emboldened by the public protests during the Arab uprisings as well as the international support during the Gaza conflict in November 2012, named "Operation Pillar of Defence⁵³" by Israel.

Turkey had already broken off with Israel post the Gaza Flotilla incident of May 2010 and was seen to be back on the Arab side. Turkey took Arab Spring as an ideal opportunity to project it self as a regional leader and a model of Islamic Democracy. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan visited Egypt, Libya and Tunisia in September 2011 as a show of solidarity to the new emerging order. Turkey's support to Hamas during the conflict in November 2012 too was adversarial to their bilateral ties. Despite President Obama's effort towards rapprochement between Israel and Turkey in March 2013⁵⁴, both seem still miles apart from effective reconciliation.

⁵² Iranian warships sail through Suez Canal, *CNN News*, February 22, 2011, available at http://articles.cnn.com/2011-02-22/world/egypt.iran.warships_1_suez-canal-ships-egypt?_s=PM:WORLD, (Accessed October 01, 2013)

⁵³ Dr. Eitan Shamir, Operation Pillar of Defence: An Initial Strategic and Military Assessment, BESA Centre Perspectives Paper No. 189, December 04, 2012

⁵⁴ Rajeev Agarwal, Israel Offers To Reconcile With Turkey: Compulsions And Realities, IDSA Comment, March 25, 2013

Iran too tried to make the most of the revolution drawing parallels with its 1979 revolution and called it Islamic awakening⁵⁵ in the region. It tried to develop relations with Egypt as well as strengthen ties with Turkey. It stood by the Syrian regime when protests broke out in Syria and has been one of its major support till now. With Iraq and Syria already under Iranian sphere of influence, Iran's improving ties with Egypt and Turkey posed danger to Israel. Although, the ouster of Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt and strain in Iran Turkey ties over Syria may have provided a breather for Israel but the possibility of the three nations coming together again and presenting a collective front against Israel in the future can't be ruled out.

Syrian civil war threatened to violate the fragile peace across the Syrian borders. With US led group including Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar supporting Syrian rebels, Israel was caught in a tight spot. So far Israel has remained neutral on Syria but the civil war has threatened to cross into Israel several times till now. Assad's ouster in Syria could bring in an Islamist regime which could be adversarial to Israel. To add to the strain, Israel conducted an air strike near the Syrian coastal city of Latakia on November 01, 2013, which as per a US official targeted Russian-made missiles, was intended for the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah. Latakia is a stronghold of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, where his Alawite community is concentrated. As per reports, it was the sixth Israeli attack in Syria this year⁵⁶. Although, Israel claims that it has the right to destroy such weapon consignments before they reach those groups which could use them against it, such unilateral actions only add to condemnation of its actions in the region.

⁵⁵ Dr. Payam Mohseni, *The Islamic Awakening: Iran's Grand Narrative of the Arab Uprisings*, Middle East Brief, April 2013, No. 71, Crown Centre for Middle East Studies, Brandeis University

⁵⁶ Syria conflict: Israel 'carries out Latakia air strike', *BBC News*, November 01, 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-24767571>, (Accessed November 11, 2013)

Rise of Political Islam: A Concern

Another concern for Israel and one of the most significant take away from the Arab Spring has been the rise of Islamists on the political maps of the countries. For many a decades, these movements were brutally suppressed by the dictators. They, however, continued covertly consolidating their presence and public following and kept their philosophies alive despite adverse conditions, waiting for the opportune times. Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt set the trend which soon found resonance in Tunisia, Libya, Jordan, Morocco and even Kuwait. In each of these countries, an affiliate of Muslim Brotherhood or some other Islamist Party emerged as a serious contender in the elections. In Egypt, with the Muslim Brotherhood government, there were concerns in Israel whether Egypt would continue to honor the 1979 peace treaty. Egypt's efforts to align with Iran were seen as hostile by Israel. Even in the Gaza conflict of November 2012, Egypt not only denounced Israeli offensive but also brokered peace⁵⁷. Although, Muslim Brotherhood's ouster from power in Egypt in July 2013 may have come as a relief for Israel, the uncertain future of Egypt remains a concern. In Jordan, the Islamic Action Front (IAF), an affiliate of Muslim Brotherhood emerged as a serious political movement and pressed for political reform and even raised the idea of a constitutional monarchy. Although, no major changes have taken place in Jordan, but in future, the Islamists coming to power could threaten the fragile peace with Israel. There is also an expectation that as and when regime change comes to Syria, the Muslim Brotherhood or its affiliates could be a prominent part of the new system.

The Palestine Issue

As regards the Palestine issue, 'Arab Spring' gave the Palestinians hope and specifically in Gaza Strip that they too could stand up

⁵⁷ Israel-Gaza Conflict Reaches Cease-Fire After Egyptians, U.S. Broker Deal, *Huffington Post*, November 21, 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/11/21/israel-gaza-conflict-cease-fire_n_2171272.html, (Accessed November 12, 2013)

and fight for their cause. While dictators like Mubarak paid lip service to the Palestine cause, popular movements coming to power raised hopes of support for the Palestine cause. Supporting the same, the former Emir of Qatar Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani too said on May 20, 2013 at the Doha forum that the emergence of ‘people power’ had put Arabs in direct confrontation with Israel and made a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict more pressing. *“We heard in the past that reform (in the Arab world) must wait until a peaceful settlement with Israel is achieved, but everybody should realize that such belief is now unfounded after the Arab Spring revolts. The reason is that the Arab Spring has today put Israel in direct confrontation with the Arab people, not only with their rulers. These people will no longer accept that negotiations are the goal in themselves⁵⁸.”*

The Palestinians also got the Non Member Observer status in the UN in 2012⁵⁹. The widespread regional support to the Palestine during the Gaza conflict of November 2012, “Operation Pillar of Defence” added to Israel’s concerns. On June 30, 2013, the European Union (EU) too came down harshly on Israel’s continued push to build settlements. It adopted new guidelines and stated that future agreements between the EU and Israel must exclude settlements in the occupied West Bank. The directive covers all areas of cooperation between the EU and Israel, including economics, science, culture, sports, and academia. Though, the material effect may be insignificant, it is a serious blow to ties with EU. Perhaps realising that the Palestine peace process could backfire if not resumed soon, Israel (and Palestine) was finally convinced to resume peace talks in September 2013⁶⁰ through efforts of US

⁵⁸ Qatar: Arab Spring makes Israeli-Palestinian peace more pressing, *Reuters News*, May 20, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/05/20/us-qatar-arabs-israel-idUSBRE94J0NW20130520>, (Accessed November 12, 2013)

⁵⁹ Report available at <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2012/ga11317.doc.htm>, last (Accessed August 07, 2013).

⁶⁰ Israel-Palestinian peace talks resume in Jerusalem, *BBC News*, August 15, 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-23693094>, (Accessed November 12, 2013)
Col Rajeev Agarwal, Israel Palestine Talks: Joining Pieces to Attempt Peace, VIF Comment, September 06, 2013, <http://www.vifindia.org/article/2013/september/6/israel-palestine-talks-joining-pieces-to-attempt-peace>

Secretary of State John Kerry. The talks failed to bring about any consensus and faltered along till April 2014 when the 'Unity Agreement'⁶¹ between the Hamas and Fatah promising a unity government across all areas of Palestine prompted Israel to pull out of the talks with Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu denouncing Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas, of forming an alliance with Hamas, which he called "a terrorist organisation that calls for the destruction of Israel. *What has happened is a great reverse for peace, because we had hoped the Palestinian Authority [PA] president Abbas would embrace the Jewish state, the idea of two nation states, Palestinian one and a Jewish one,*" Netanyahu told NBC. *"But instead, he took a giant leap backward."*⁶²

Internal Dynamics

Internal situation in Israel too has not been encouraging. Up to 150,000 protesters took to the streets in cities across Israel in September 2011 in the biggest demonstrations the country had witnessed in decades to demand action on rising house prices and rents, low salaries, the high cost of raising children and other social issues. The demonstrations were held in 12 cities including Tel Aviv, Jerusalem and Haifa. Daphni Leef, one of the organisers of the original tent protest, said, *"the Israeli society has reached its red line, and has gotten up and said: 'No more.' This is the miracle of the summer of 2011."* The messages were spread through social networking sites and had a clear stamp of Arab spring on it. It forced the government to set up a task force. The distinctive feature was however that people were not looking for regime change as again echoed by Daphni Leef who said, *"We don't want to replace the government, but to*

⁶¹ Fatah and Hamas agree landmark pact after seven-year rift. *The Guardian News*, April 24, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/apr/23/plo-hamas-agree-unity-pact-form-government>, (Accessed May 20, 2014)

⁶² Israel suspends peace talks with Palestinians after Fatah-Hamas deal, *The Guardian News*, April 24, 2014, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/apr/24/middle-east-israel-halts-peace-talks-palestinians?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_term=%2AMideast%20Brief&utm_campaign=Mideast%20brief%204-25-14, (Accessed May 20, 2014).

*do more than that. We want to change the rules of the game*⁶³. It forced the political parties to look inwards resulting in the central issue for the 2013 parliamentary elections being domestic socio-economic policy, rather than the Palestinian conflict as was the case in earlier times. On issues of regional policies too, there is a clear divide domestically. While Prime Minister Netanyahu still propagates the confrontational strategy, the camp of President Peres recommends the strategy of reconciliation. With a fragile coalition at Centre, domestic politics could well dictate the future of Israel's regional policies.

'Arab Spring' thus resulted in continuation of the trend of increased hostility towards Israel in the region as was witnessed in the period before its onset. Domestically too, it has given chance for people to come together and question Israel's Government on key issues. Developments during Arab Spring brought about re alignments in the region which further isolated Israel and threatened its security. It also provided the impetus as well as regional support to the Palestine movement which would be difficult for Israel to ignore.

⁶³ Thousands protest in Israel over house prices and low salaries, *The Guardian News*, July 31, 2011, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jul/31/protest-israel-house-prices-salaries>, (Accessed December 23, 2013)

Part 3

Israel and its Engagement with Major Global Powers

The US

On May 24, 1948, when Israel declared its independence, the US was the first nation to grant recognition to it, mere 11 minutes after the proclamation with President Harry Truman stating “*I had faith in Israel before it was established, I have faith in it now*”. He added to it when he said on May 26, 1952. “*I believe it has a glorious future before it—not just another sovereign nation, but as an embodiment of the great ideals of our civilisation.*” Over the years, despite the occasional strain, relationship has remained strong.

The foundation of the US-Israel alliance has been built on two mutually reinforcing assumptions—one political, one geopolitical—first, that the US and Israel share an exceptionally deep and abiding commitment to the values of a Western-style democratic society and, second, that the US and Israel share a common strategic outlook that is based on a shared understanding of regional threats and challenges. Over three billion US dollars of annual military aid from the US has helped transform Israel’s armed forces into one of the most technologically sophisticated militaries in the world. This aid for Israel has been designed to maintain Israel’s “Qualitative Military Edge” (QME) over neighbouring militaries, since Israel must rely on better equipment and training to compensate for a manpower deficit in any potential regional conflict. The US has from time to time, reaffirmed its support to Israel’s security as one of its foremost foreign policy goals in the West Asian region. In 2008, the US Congress enacted legislation requiring that any proposed US arms sale to “any country in the Middle East other than Israel” must include a notification to Congress with a “determination that the sale or export of such would not adversely affect Israel’s qualitative military edge over military threats to Israel.”

There has however been a distinct strain in ties with the US, especially after President Obama coming to power in January 2009. The two most important reasons were Israel's reluctance to move forward on peace talks with Palestine and Israel's repeated calls for military action against Iran for its suspected nuclear weapons programme. While President Obama talked of restarting the Middle East Peace Process (MEPP) and forging a new partnership with the Arab World in his Cairo speech of 2009, Israel seemed to pay little attention to it. It announced construction of 1,600 homes on occupied Palestinian land in an East Jerusalem settlement in March 2010 just a day ahead of visit to the country by US Vice President Joe Biden. It continued during PM Netanyahu's visit to US in May 2011, wherein despite President Obama urging Israel to exercise restraint, Israel PM announced construction of further 1,500 houses in East Jerusalem. During the visit by Netanyahu in September 2012 to the UNGA, the US President refused to meet him. Even on the Iran nuclear issue, US supported dialogue and diplomacy while Israel continued its threat of military action. The interim deal on Iran nuclear issue reached on November 24, 2013 between the US led P5+1 and Iran too has evoked sharp criticism from Israel with the Israeli Prime Minister calling it a "historic mistake".

Irrespective of the current strain, good relations with the US remain primary to Israel's interests in the region. Israel's President aptly put the thought across in an interview published in the New York Times on January 09, 2013, where he stated, *"If there is no diplomatic decision, the Palestinians will go back to terror, knives, mines, suicide attacks. Most of the world will support the Palestinians, justify their actions, level the sharpest criticism at us, and falsely label us a racist state". "The problem is that Obama would like to reach peace in the Middle East and has to be convinced that Israel agrees with this...President Obama thinks that peace should be made with the Muslim world. We, the State of Israel, do not appear to be thinking along those lines."* He also added a word of caution: *"We must not lose the support of the US. What gives Israel bargaining power in the international arena is the support of the US.... If Israel were to stand alone, its enemies would swallow it up. Without US support ... we would be like a lone tree in the desert."*

Russia

Israel's relations with Russia stand in clear contrast with its steady relations with the US. Whereas the US has always considered Israel as a vital to its strategic interests in the region, Israel-Russia relations have been far from steady. The relationship has witnessed major swings in the past six decades since the birth of Israel. Commencing from support to the UN Resolution 181, instituting the plan for partition of Palestine and creation of a Jewish state in 1947, the USSR supported and even armed Israel in its initial years. However, the 1967 Arab-Israeli war led to a strategic realignment of interests by the USSR leading to breaking off of diplomatic ties with Israel.

In fact, Israel's links with Russia pre-date the establishment of the state; they extend from the origins of the Zionist settlement at the turn of the 20th century to the current role played by Russian-speakers in Israel's politics, arts, technology and sciences. Not only did most pioneer settlers originate within the confines of the Russian Empire, but the ethnic roots of all of Israel's prime-ministers, including the current one, Benjamin Netanyahu, can be found in that country as well⁶⁴. When the Zionist movement took shape in 1896, Russia hosted a major Jewish population which was estimated to be six million (including Poland), all of Ashkenazi origin. However, anti-Semitism affected Russia which led to the first wave of immigration to Palestine. The immigration movement expanded after the birth of the Zionist movement. However, Zionist ideas were very soon adopted by a group of Russian Jewish intellectuals, who advocated a return to the Promised Land and created a Jewish leadership of Russian origin in Palestine. During the World War II, anti-Semitism died down, and 450, 000 Soviet Jews fought in the Red Army. In spring 1945 the Soviet Army liberated most of the Nazi extermination camps, saving many Jews from certain death. When the war ended, Russia supported the founding of an

⁶⁴ Yakov Rabkin, Russia and Israel, http://www.cerium.ca/IMG/pdf/Yakov_200.pdf

independent Jewish state⁶⁵. The “Right to Return” law enacted in 1950 by Israel encouraged Jewish diaspora to emigrate to Israel and became a major pillar of Israel-Russia relations. Relations hit a low after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war and continued till the arrival of Mikhail Gorbachev in USSR. Israel and Israel and the USSR re-established consular relations in 1987. Shortly after, formal diplomatic relations resumed with the re-opening of the two embassies in 1991.

Israel’s relations with Russia have thereafter evolved over mutual interests in the region. While Israel is interested in access to Russia’s market and to her fossil fuels as well as in using her political influence to moderate the anti-Israel opinion in the region, Russia has expressed interest in harnessing Israeli technologies for industrial and defence modernisation. Growing trade relation between the two too is a marker of their mutual engagement, rising from a mere 867 million US dollars in 1995 to 2.769 billion US dollars in 2008⁶⁶. Israel hosts the largest Russian-speaking diaspora outside Russia and Russian tourists consider Israel one of the top tourist destinations and constitute the second largest segment of visitors to Israel. There is no visa required for travel between the two countries, a requirement which was waived off in September 2008, which has led over 560, 000 Russian tourists a year to Israel.

In recent times, the strain in relations with the US has led to Israel moving closer to Russia. Although, Russia maintains support to the Palestine issue, on a personal level President Putin seems to admire the way Israel has ruthlessly dealt with enemies in the region⁶⁷. Russian born Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman is said to be another reason for increasing closeness between the two countries. Israel considers Russia as a possible leverage in its

⁶⁵ Pierre Razoux, The keys to understanding the Israel-Russia relationship, Research Paper, Research Division - NATO Defence College, Rome - No. 42 – November 2008

⁶⁶ Mark N Katz, Russia’s Greater Middle East Policy: Securing Economic Interests, Courting Islam, April 2010, IFRI, p. 8

⁶⁷ Russia, Israel and the Middle East Vladimir Putin and the Holy Land, *The Economist*, March 16, 2013

regional strategy in case the US does not play up. The stance taken up by the US in the Syrian civil war and its ongoing diplomatic push to forge a deal with Iran on the nuclear issue are driving Israel to seek alternate options. During a visit to Moscow in November 2013, Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman said Israel should strengthen ties with other powers as a means of advancing critical security interests in the region. *“Israel’s foreign policy for decades has focused on one direction — toward Washington. But my policy is multi-directional. Our foreign policy needs to focus on finding allies and not just complaining and saying, come support us”* he added⁶⁸. Israel hopes that Russia will delay the delivery of S-300 Air Defence Systems to Iran and Syria and hopes that Russia along with Iran would ensure that a radical Islamist regime does not succeed President Assad in Syria which could complicate the security situation around Israel’s borders. Another example of Israel’s evolving relationship with Russia was recently highlighted in its decision not to vote on a March 27, 2014 UNGA resolution on the situation in Crimea. Earlier too, during Russia’s war with Georgia in 2008, Israel was deferential to Russia’s sensitivities halting its arms trade with Georgia.

Russia thus is vital to Israel’s strategy in the region. While it may be too much to ask from Russia to abandon its support to Iran, Israel hopes that Russia would be able to ensure at least a status quo in the region, at least on critical issues like Syria and Iran.

China

Over the past one decade China has emerged as a major global player in the West Asian region. However, unlike the US, Chinese inroads have been based predominantly on economic issues. Crude oil and natural gas have been the main focus of Chinese imports from the region. In 2013, the West Asian region supplied 2.9 million bbl/d (52 per cent) to China. Other major regions that exported to

⁶⁸ Israel Seeks Stronger Security Ties with Russia, *Defence News*, November 23, 2013, <http://www.defensenews.com/article/20131123/DEFREG04/311230009/Israel-Seeks-Stronger-Security-Ties-Russia>, last (Accessed March 20, 2014)

China include Africa with 1.3 million bbl/d (23 per cent) and the Americas with 562,000 bbl/d (10 per cent). Saudi Arabia and Angola are China's two largest sources of oil imports, together accounting for 33 per cent of China's total crude oil imports⁶⁹. Apart from energy imports, Chinese goods have found a good market in the region with China emerging as one of the largest exporter in the West Asian region. From 2005 to 2009, China's total trade volume with the region rose 87 per cent, to \$100 billion and reached approximately \$222 billion in 2012, according to China's official statistics⁷⁰.

As regards Israel, the countries established diplomatic relations in 1992 soon after Arab Israeli peace talks commenced in Madrid. The foundation of the relationship has been based on trade and economics. China values the huge technological developments in Israel and for Israel, China is a very important market. Commencing from a modest 50 million US dollars in 1992, the bilateral trade volume between Israel and China has increased almost 200 times to a little more than to 9.91 billion US dollars in 2012. A number of high level visits have been the highlight of this relationship commencing with the visit of the Israeli President Chaim Herzog in 1992 and the historic visit of Chinese President Jiang Zeming to Israel in 2000. In recent times, the visit of Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi to Israel in December 2013⁷¹, Meeting between Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu and the Wang Yi during the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos in January 2014⁷² and the most recent meeting between Prime Minister Netanyahu and the Chinese

⁶⁹ China Country Report, US Energy Information Administration, February 2014, p.11

⁷⁰ China and the Middle East: More Than Oil, *The European Financial Review*, February 21, 2014

⁷¹ Liberman with 'New Ally', China's Foreign Minister, *Israel National News*, December 19, 2013, <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/175341#.U3xRaz8aazU>, (Accessed May 20, 2014)

⁷² Netanyahu Advances China Alliance in Davos, *Israel National News*, January 24, 2014, <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/176687#.U3xBWT8aazU>, (Accessed May 20, 2014)

Vice Premier Liu Yandong in Jerusalem⁷³ on May 19, 2014 highlight the growing relationship. The meetings and the visits have focused on enhancing the political ties and further boosting trade ties and ease of doing business in respective countries including relaxation of visa rules.

However, China is important to Israel more due to its growing influence in the region than merely growing bilateral trade. China's relations with other countries in the region, especially Iran and Saudi Arabia hold an important link towards future stability in the region. China has long supported Iran on its nuclear programme and has been a key player in the ongoing P5+1 talks. Its increasing trade ties with Saudi Arabia too are well documented. With large stakes in the region, China would not like any instability or conflict in the region that could draw in major global powers. Another factor of concern for Israel is growing the friction in US-Israel ties over Iran nuclear issue. In this context, from an Israeli perspective, China is being seen as a suitable alternative to the US. China is thus emerging as a major factor in Israel's regional strategy.

A brief overview of three major global powers in their interfaced relations with Israel does lead to the conclusion that Israel's interests in the region are closely linked with not only how these three powers interact with Israel but also how these powers interface with the region at large. Israel would thus need to factor in the various convergent and divergent interests that these external influences bring to Israel and the region while evolving its regional strategy.

⁷³ Israel, China Sign Deal to Increase Cooperation, *Israel National News*, May 19, 2014, <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/180789#.U3xBOT8aazU>, (Accessed May 20, 2014)

Part 4

WMDs Threat in the Region and Israel

Chemical Weapons

The report of use of chemical weapons in the suburbs of Damascus, Syria on August 21, 2013 caused alarm and international concern. Although, the Syrian regime denied its use, the US led block was determined to teach the Syrian regime “a lesson”. The next few days were uncertain and tense as the US continued its preparations for punitive military strikes on Syria. While the military strike would have inflicted severe damage on the Syrian regime, it stood the danger of flaring up the civil war in Syria into a wider regional conflict. Israel faced the threat of immediate retribution from Iran supported Hamas and Hezbollah as an act of revenge of US led attack on Syria. The Framework agreement sponsored by Russia on September 14, and the UN Resolution later on defused the threat of military strike, brought Syria to accept the existence of its chemical weapons stockpile, forced it to join the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) under the Organisation for Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and agree for destruction of its chemical weapons by mid 2014. While it was a welcome step towards eliminating the WMD in the region, Israel stood uncertain amidst all the developments.

Israel along with Egypt and Syria were the only three nations in West Asian region who had not ratified the CWC. Although, Israel had signed it in January 1993⁷⁴, it refused to ratify it. “*The main pretext for Israel’s refusal to ratify the treaty was the Syrian arsenal,*” said Eitan Barak, a professor of international relations from Hebrew University. “*Israel says Syria is a neighbor country, hostile, with a large*

⁷⁴ Non Member States, OPCW, <http://www.opcw.org/about-opcw/non-member-states/> (Accessed October 31, 2013)

*arsenal of chemical weapons and we needed to be able to retaliate.*⁷⁵ Although, Israel is reported to possess chemical weapons, it has remained ambiguous on its status of chemical weapons. A secret *Central Intelligence Agency* (CIA) report however strongly indicates towards Israel possessing chemical weapons. According to the secret 1983 CIA intelligence estimate⁷⁶, American spy satellites uncovered in 1982 “a probable CW [chemical weapon] nerve agent production facility and a storage facility at the Dimona Sensitive Storage Area in the Negev Desert. Other Chemical Weapons (CW) production is believed to exist within a well-developed Israeli chemical industry”. “While we cannot confirm whether the Israelis possess lethal chemical agents,” the document adds, “several indicators lead us to believe that they have available to them at least persistent and non-persistent nerve agents, a mustard agent, and several riot-control agents, marched with suitable delivery systems.” According to the 1983 intelligence estimate, “Israel, finding itself surrounded by frontline Arab states with budding CW capabilities, became increasingly conscious of its vulnerability to chemical attack. Its sensitivities were galvanised by the capture of large quantities of Soviet CW-related equipment during both the 1967 Arab-Israeli and the 1973 Yom Kippur wars. As a result, Israel undertook a programme of chemical warfare preparations in both offensive and protective areas.”

If and when the Syrian chemical weapon stockpile is fully destroyed, Israel along with Egypt would remain the only two nations in the region who have not yet ratified the CWC. While Egypt undergoes an uncertain transition and future, the destruction of Syrian chemical weapons could place tremendous pressure on Israel to

⁷⁵ Linda Gradstein, Media Line, Israel under pressure to give up chemical, nuclear weapons, Published in Jerusalem Post, September 18, 2013 <http://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Israel-Under-Pressure-To-Give-Up-Chemical-Nuclear-Weapons-326452>, (Accessed November 12, 2013)

⁷⁶ Matthew M. Aid, Exclusive: Does Israel Have Chemical Weapons Too?, Foreign Policy, September 09, 2013, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/09/09/does_israel_have_chemical_weapons_too, (Accessed October 10, 2013)

join the CWC too. Israel's refusal to do so could place it under scrutiny and suspicion especially from the regional governments. Perhaps recognising it, Israel's President Shimon Peres has already indicated that The Israeli Government will seriously consider joining the international treaty banning chemical weapons after Syria said it would destroy its own toxic arsenal⁷⁷.

Nuclear Weapons

Like chemical weapons, Israel is known to possess an arsenal of nuclear weapons too. Again, like chemical weapons, Israel has been ambiguous on its status of nuclear weapons. It has been a member of the IAEA since 1957 but it has never signed the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). However, as per a recent report called Global Nuclear Weapons Inventories, published in the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, proliferation experts Hans M. Kristensen and Robert S. Norris write that Israel has 80 nuclear warheads and enough fissile material for an additional 115 to 190⁷⁸. The *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) Yearbook 2013: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security* also notes that Israel has approximately 80 intact nuclear weapons, of which 50 are for delivery by Jericho II Medium-Range Ballistic Missiles (MRBM) and 30 are gravity bombs for delivery by aircraft⁷⁹. Mordechai Vanunu, a former Israeli nuclear technician too had confirmed Israel's nuclear weapons programme when he defected from Israel and gave an interview to *The Sunday Times* on October 05, 1986 in which he gave details of Israel's nuclear weapons stockpile, with photographs of the research plant at Dimona in the

⁷⁷ Peres: Israel will consider joining chemical weapons ban treaty, *Reuters News*, September 30, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/09/30/us-israel-chemical-idUSBRE98T0CS20130930>, (Accessed October 30, 2013)

⁷⁸ Hans M. Kristensen and Robert S. Norris, Global nuclear weapons inventories, 1945-2013, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Sage Publications, New Delhi, p. 76-81, <http://bos.sagepub.com/content/69/5/75.full.pdf+html>, (Accessed November 12, 2013)

⁷⁹ World Nuclear Forces, <http://www.sipri.org/yearbook/2013/06>, (Accessed October 30, 2013)

Negev desert⁸⁰. With the talks on Iran nuclear programme showing promise of resolution after the election of Hassan Rouhani as the Iranian President, Israel could come under pressure to declare its nuclear weapon stockpile. Should there be a final resolution on the Iran nuclear issue and should Israel remain defiant on the status of its nuclear capabilities, it could face not only pressure but increased isolation. Also, with Iran nuclear issue out of the way, it would be difficult for the US too to defend or ignore the possession of nuclear weapons in Israel.

⁸⁰ 1986: Nuclear technician missing after secrets leak, BBC News Archives, http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/october/6/newsid_3752000/3752128.stm, (Accessed October 31, 2013)

Conclusion

Israel is thus discovering that not only is it getting isolated in the region, but it also runs the danger of being asked to answer difficult questions on issues like the possession of chemical and nuclear weapons. Even countries so far neutral or in a state of 'cold peace' are today questioning Israel's policies. An example of it could be the incident on May 08, 2013 when Jordan's lower house of parliament unanimously voted to banish the Israeli ambassador after Israel banned Muslim worshipers under the age of 50 from the Temple Mount and summoned Jerusalem Mufti Mohammed Hussein over his involvement in disturbances near the Al-Aqsa mosque that day⁸¹. Earlier, 110 Jordanian parliament members signed a petition calling for the release of Ahmad Daqamseh, a Jordanian soldier who gunned down a group of Israeli schoolgirls on a field trip to the "Isle of Peace" border area of Naharayim in 1997, killing seven. In another incident, a Jordanian MP, Muhammad Asha Dawaimah, was sacked from his party after attending Israeli Independence Day celebrations at the residence of Israel's President Shimon Peres in April 2013.

A broad overview of Israel's neighbourhood clearly points that is being confronted with muted hostility from Jordan in the East, threat of spillover of civil war from Syria further North, an uncertain and hostile relation with Hezbollah dominated Lebanon in the North, an equally hostile Hamas in Gaza Strip to the West and a very uncertain and often volatile situation across Sinai desert of Egypt in the South. Israel is thus fast losing the comfort of peaceful borders with some of its neighbors. The adversarial relations

⁸¹ Jordan mulling 'diplomatic and legal' measures against Israel, *The Times of Israel*, May 16, 2013, <http://www.timesofisrael.com/jordan-mulling-diplomatic-and-legal-measures-against-israel/>, (Accessed November 12, 2013)

with Turkey and Iran and the continued downturn in ties with the US over past few years complete the grim picture for Israel. This compounds Israel's security issues and threatens greater regional isolation. In such a scenario, Israel will have to think out of the box and perhaps undertake some reconciliatory measures like it did in the 1990s to revive its regional strategy. It will also have to strike a balance between its security requirements and the need to reach out in the neighbourhood and in the region for peace.

To commence such a process, Israel would need to undertake significant confidence building measures like announcing freeze in any future construction in disputed sites in the West Bank and Jerusalem to dispel the fears of Palestinians on future viability of a two state solution. After the destruction of Syrian chemical weapons, Israel could well serve its interests if it joins the CWC. Chemical weapons in any case have a very limited (or no use) in modern warfare which was also alluded to by the Syrian President Assad when he said that the chemical weapon stockpile would have been of no use to him now that Syria had advanced missile system to take on many military threats⁸². Turkey is fast emerging as a major player in the region. Israel would need to revive its ties with it. Although, Israel had apologized to Turkey in March 2013 over the Gaza Flotilla incident, it needs to address some of key Turkish concerns and move its ties forward. Egypt under Muslim Brotherhood government presented an uncertain future for Israel-Egypt ties. With Muslim Brotherhood now ousted and Egypt itself undergoing transition, Israel needs to remain vigilant to developments in Egypt and keep channels of interaction open. Also, it would auger well for Israel if it goes beyond the terms of peace treaty with Egypt and undertakes coordinated actions to suppress the increased militant activity in Sinai. And, of course, the future course of its ties with the US remains critical to Israel.

⁸² President al-Assad: "We no longer needs chemical weapons to deter Israel", *Syrian Free Press*, October 05, 2013, <http://syrianfreepress.wordpress.com/2013/10/05/president-al-assad-syria-could-blind-israel-immediately/>, (Accessed November 01, 2013)

With Prime Minister Netanyahu and the US President not the best of friends, would Israel attempt to wait out till the next Presidential elections in the US or seek greater convergence on regional issues with the US remains a crucial point of debate in Israel.

Israel's future discourse in the region will also be influenced by the rise of political Islam which could propagate a pan Islamic identity bonding the Muslim nations even closer together. Coupled with it, the gradual consolidation of ultra-orthodox Jewish identity in Israel could run counter to it and further complicate Israel's position in the region.

The key to Israel's regional strategy will however remain the Palestine issue and the Iran nuclear issue. While both the issues are on the table presently and being discussed, least Israel could do is to send out reconciliatory signals to the world and the region instead of the hard rhetoric and unflinching stand. On Iran nuclear issue, Israel needs to keep a close watch. It has called the November 24 Interim Deal⁸³ on Iran Nuclear Issue as a "historic mistake⁸⁴". However, if and when there is a final resolution on its nuclear issue with P5+1, Israel will have to recalibrate its stance on it. The issue is also likely to have a direct bearing on future Israel-US relations as well its own regional stature. The evolving geopolitics in light of diminishing US interest and engagement in the region could also have a profound effect on Israel as well as other major countries in the region like Saudi Arabia. While Saudi Arabia led GCC may not be presently pleased with the manner the Syrian crisis and the Iran nuclear issue is being handled, it is very unlikely that they would permanently align with Israel.

⁸³ Full Text of the Interim deal Available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/foreign/jointplanofaction24november2013thefinal.pdf>, (Accessed December 18, 2013)

⁸⁴ Israel calls Iran nuclear deal a 'historic mistake', USATODAY, November 24, 2013, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2013/11/24/iran-nuclear-deal-israel-reactions/3690161/>, (Accessed December 20, 2013)

Palestine issue will of course remain at the core of Israel's future regional engagement. Israel's pulling out of Palestine peace talks in April 2014 in the context of Hamas and Fatah coming together to form a unity government could well turn out to be a flawed decision. Israel has to realize that there cannot be any prospect of peace solution with Palestine if the Palestinians are divided into two separate disparate agencies. Yes, the Hamas rhetoric and its militant approach towards Israel would be a matter of concern, but that threat in no way diminishes if Israel boycotts further talks with the Palestine Authority. The solution perhaps lies in strengthening the Palestine Authority, forging areas of 'confidence building' and building prospects of a viable two state solution rather than just pulling out of talks. There is also the issue of non acceptance of Israel as a sovereign state by the Arab nations. This is however again closely linked to the Palestine issue and there have been some indications in the past from the Arab world on accepting Israel's status if the Palestine issue is resolved as per the Arab peace plan.

Israel thus stands at an important crossroad in its short history. In the changing paradigm in the West Asian region, it would find it hard to retain its policies based on a security oriented approach and an isolationist strategy. With its traditional ally, the US too displaying signs of fatigue and growing disinterest in supporting Israel's traditional approach to the region, Israel could find it difficult to retain the unwavering support from the US and even EU. It therefore has to undertake deep deliberations on how it sees itself in the region in the coming decades; an aggressive nation driven solely by its security concerns or a reconciliatory power which is ready to understand the evolving dynamics and accordingly adapt a more reconciliatory approach. Whatever steps it takes could dictate its future discourse in the region.

Surrounded by hostile neighbours, Israel has been overly conscious of its national security interests, a concern which has shaped its regional strategy right from its birth in 1948. Having fought three major wars in 1948, 1967 and 1973, the peace treaty with Egypt in 1979 was a welcome break from the hostilities. Israel, thereafter attempted reconciliation through the decade of 1990s through Oslo Accords, Peace treaty with Jordan and withdrawal from Lebanon in year 2000. Its unilateral withdrawal from the Gaza Strip in 2005, despite opposition at home, was a bold step. The results of the withdrawal were however, not what Israel would have wanted. A resurgent Hamas in Gaza, war with Lebanon in 2006 and breaking off with Turkey in 2010 were some of the events which set Israel back. The 'Arab Spring' too did no favours to Israel. Israel has therefore once again started looking at region through the prism of "peace through security". It needs to evolve a dynamic regional strategy in tune with the changing regional dynamics or else could end up being more isolated in the region.



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