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**Israel and its Strategic Environment:
Opportunities for Political Initiative**

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Although the upheavals gripping the Arab world are not directly related to Israel or its ongoing conflict with the Palestinians, they intensify existing crises between Israel and the Arab and Muslim worlds. In turn, the deterioration in relations between Israel and the Palestinians as a result of the deadlocked negotiations and the Palestinians' statehood bid to the UN are liable to further aggravate Israel's situation with regard to its Middle East environment. Israel's response to this situation has for the most part been passive and defensive, and there has been no attempt to identify opportunities for proactive policies that could have a positive impact on Israel's position.

Such opportunities, however, do in fact exist, and Israel should attempt to maximize them. This essay examines the likely regional reality following the Palestinians' move in the UN in the context of opportunities for an Israeli political initiative in the Palestinian, Egyptian, Turkish, and Saudi arenas.

The Palestinians' appeal to the international forum has created a new dynamic. According to a reasonable scenario, after the Palestinian request is turned down by the Security Council – whether because it has no majority or because of an American veto – a proposed resolution to grant the Palestinian state observer status in the UN will be presented to the General Assembly, where it will pass with a large majority. Such a resolution would allow the Palestinian state to join other international organizations and treaties. For example, joining the International Court of Justice would allow the Palestinian state to file claims against Israel for its behavior in the territories and file suits against politicians and military personnel for bearing personal responsibility for war crimes and violations of international law. Developments of this sort would expand what in Israel is seen as delegitimization of the state, and overall, the resolution, against the background of crises with Turkey and Egypt and the tension with Jordan, will increase Israel's isolation and the political pressure leveled against it.

There is a serious risk in the convergence of the deadlocked negotiations with the Palestinians, the bid in the UN, and the Arab spring. The day after the drama in the UN the Palestinian public along with the public in other Arab nations will understand that nothing on the ground has in fact changed and that reality in the West Bank and Gaza Strip continues as before. Thereafter the question arises, what then? How does one realize the idea of a Palestinian state that has been recognized by the UN? The Arab spring suggests that these aims are achievable via massive peaceful demonstrations. However, in the reality in the territories, where two hostile camps are pitted against one another, it is difficult to imagine that demonstrations would remain peaceful over time. The Jewish residents of the West Bank and the security forces guarding them will view oncoming demonstrators as a real threat, and it would be difficult to control ensuing demonstrations with anti-riot measures. The likely result is demonstrators being fired upon and a return thereby to the cycle of violence. Thus the concern is not of the decision by one side or another to provoke violence, rather a loss of control of the situation by the respective sides and the consequent slide into violence. It is not difficult to imagine the effect of such violent outbursts on the Arabs and Muslims, whose influence over governments has grown, and on Israel's image in the West, given its increasing isolation.

Thus it will become clear that the situation remains what it was, yet Israel will face a Palestinian state recognized by the UN. Herein lies an opportunity to propose to the Palestinian side to engage in dialogue about the meaning of their new status and what is required for Israel to recognize it and make it a reality. Such a dialogue would constitute the renewal of the negotiations in a somewhat different manner. In certain ways, Israel would be in a better position because it is more convenient for a state to conduct negotiations with another state rather than with an organization. In other ways, Israel's position would be less convenient because the Palestinians would be entering negotiations with wide international support (though there is little new about that). Yet in any event, Israel must suppress any notion of punishing the Palestinians by stopping to transfer the funds it collects for them or by annexing the settlement blocs. Such actions would only exacerbate the crisis and make a difficult political situation worse given the anticipated international response. The expected damage to the Palestinian Authority's stability would also have a devastating effect on Israeli interests.

Despite its problematic internal situation, Egypt is seeking to reposition itself as a central player in regional foreign policy, both because of the effect this would have on domestic public opinion and because it would symbolize a break with the Mubarak era, when Egypt was seen as a state that had lost its standing as leader of the Arab world. Today there is also greater willingness on the part of Arab publics to let Egypt play the leading role, evidenced in Egypt's successful mediation between Fatah and Hamas. All the while, public opinion in Egypt is greatly affected by developments in the Palestinian arena. Israel can take advantage of this situation in order to coordinate moves quietly in the Israeli-

Palestinian arena with Egypt. At the same time, the shared interest in restoring law and order to the Sinai Peninsula represents an opportunity to establish a strategic dialogue that would focus on the changes that are required in the military appendix to the Israeli-Egyptian peace agreement.

The bridges between Israel and Turkey have seemingly been burned, and common wisdom in Israel argues this is a result of Ankara's decision to turn its back on Europe and focus instead on the Middle East and expand Turkey's influence in the region. While there has indeed been a fundamental change in Turkey's foreign relations, Erdoğan's government initially tried to effect this change together with Israel – not against it – by positioning Turkey as an arbitrator and mediator between Israel and various Arab elements. The assumption that Turkey decided to adopt an anti-Israel policy without regard for Israel's conduct is highly questionable. Should Israel manage to find a solution to Turkey's demands for an apology, there would be a range of opportunities to improve relations with Turkey through Israeli willingness to cooperate with Turkey's desire to fulfill some key roles. Such steps are of great importance to Turkey, especially now as its "zero problems with neighbors" policy is collapsing vis-à-vis the Syrians, the Kurds, Cyprus, Greece, and Armenia. For example, it could be possible to enter into negotiations with Turkey about letting some boats sail to Gaza after a thorough security check in which the Turks would play a role in cooperation with Israel.

For its part, Saudi Arabia is very concerned by developments in the Arab world and by Iran's ability both to exploit the situation and promote its nuclear program. Consequently, Saudi Arabia has adopted a more assertive policy. On the face of it, there seems to be a foundation for extensive cooperation and strategic understandings between Israel and Saudi Arabia, but there is a limited possibility of realizing such intentions as long as the conflict between Israel and the Arab world, and especially the Palestinians, escalates. Israel has the ability to change this reality, first by adopting the Saudi-formulated Arab Peace Initiative as a foundation for negotiations between Israel and the Arab states, using the language of Prince Turki Bin Faisal's recent article, and also by extending an opportunity for the renewal of negotiations with the Palestinians. The repercussions of such actions would not be limited to the Saudi arena but would also be the foundation for an Israeli initiative that could have regional implications as well.

It is doubtful if the current passive Israeli policy, with regard both to developments in the region and to relations with the Palestinians, serves Israel's best interests. In any event, internal considerations (such as preserving the coalition) should not dictate the need to adopt a policy that is essentially reactive. Rather, Israel must take advantage of the windows of opportunity created by regional developments without compromising its security interests.