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ISRAEL'S RESHUFFLED STRATEGIC DECK

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In 2012, amid the ongoing ferment of the so-called “Arab Spring,” officials throughout the Israeli government were expressing deep concern about their country's strategic position, and the potential for conflict on a multitude of fronts. Today, by contrast, Israel's security establishment can best be described as cautiously optimistic about its geopolitical situation, and with good reason.

The first is Egypt. The late June ouster of Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood-dominated government has restored a measure of normalcy on Israel's southwestern border, notwithstanding the country's current political spasms. Israeli officials pin Morsi's failure, above all, on the pronounced deterioration of the domestic economic situation on his watch, which in turn mobilized both local activists and the country's powerful military establishment. Whatever the reason, the outcome is a net benefit for Israel, since during its tenure Morsi's government had staked out a very public anti-Israeli and anti-Western position. With its collapse and subsequent replacement with a military-dominated caretaker regime, Israeli policymakers now see renewed possibilities for engagement and strategic dialogue with Cairo.

To be sure, the Sinai Peninsula remains a source of continuing concern. The desert area separating Israel from Egypt, which descended into lawlessness and criminality with the end of the Mubarak regime in 2011, remains a locus of instability today. To ameliorate this situation, Israel has permitted Egypt to reinsert forces into the previously-demilitarized territory over the past year, where they now are waging a pitched battle against criminal elements and radical irregulars. Overall, however, Israel's government appears comfortable with how the Egyptian military is handling the situation, and willing to allow Cairo to take the lead in reestablishing order in the Sinai.

Moreover, the effects of Egypt's transformation are being felt far beyond Israel's southwestern border. Just as a rising tide lifts all boats, there are clear signs that the failure of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt has diminished the appeal of Islamist forces throughout the region. The rule of King Abdullah in neighboring Jordan, for example, appears more stable than it was just a short time ago, as Islamist elements within the Hashemite Kingdom have been forced to limit and temper their political ambitions in light of the Brotherhood's collapse. In North Africa, too, salutary changes have taken place in the political outlook and ambitions of Islamist parties in places like Tunisia and Algeria.

The result has been a perceptible shift in the direction of the “Arab Spring.” The collapse of the Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt, Iran's loss of legitimacy (a function of its stubborn support for the Syrian regime), and the current domestic troubles prevailing in Turkey have left the countries of the region without a workable political and ideological model to follow. It is not clear what comes next, but there is a clear sense in Jerusalem of both expectancy and of opportunity for Israel to navigate a strategic environment that has gradually become more hospitable than it was previously.

The Syrian civil war likewise could turn out to be advantageous for Israel. On the surface, the two-and-a-half year-old conflict taking place between the Assad regime and its domestic opposition presents two tactical problems for its southern neighbor. The first is the potential for Syria's disorder to spread and penetrate Israel's northern border. The second is that Syria's arsenal of chemical and biological weapons could continue to be used by the regime, be disseminated to third parties (such as Hezbollah in Lebanon), or be captured by opposition forces. But Israeli steps—from the ongoing reinforcement of the Israeli Defense Forces' Northern Command to the strategic bombing of suspected arms depots on Syrian soil—have served to limit and contain destabilizing activity aimed specifically at Israel. Meanwhile, the hostilities taking place there have helped erode the strategic capabilities of two parties hostile to the Jewish state (the Assad regime itself, and Islamist elements of the Syrian opposition), bolstering the country's security in the process.

Meanwhile, renewed movement on the Palestinian front could provide Israel with greater mobility—and credibility—in the Muslim world. Restarting the moribund negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority has become a top priority of the Obama administration in its second term. And while this effort, a brainchild of Secretary of State John Kerry, has garnered significant criticism both in Washington and abroad, the beginnings of a new diplomatic track are now visible. Israel's motivations for participating in these talks are both simple and understandable. Policymakers in Jerusalem do not harbor any illusions about the chances for success, since the government of Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas now lacks both the relevance and the legitimacy to engage in such negotiations. However, it is nonetheless clear that the Palestinian issue still resonates in the region, and must be addressed in order for them to make progress on other fronts. As such, Israel's participation is designed to remove the appearance of intransigence, and facilitate dialogue with regional states on other issues (like Egypt, Syria and Iran).

One thing, however, has not changed. The nuclear program of the Islamic Republic of Iran remains the paramount strategic concern preoccupying policymakers in Jerusalem. Israeli officials are united in their assessment that, despite the widening economic sanctions that have been levied to date against the Iranian regime by the United States and Europe, Iran's nuclear development continues to both accelerate and mature. As a result, they say, Israel is likely to enter a zone of decision in late 2013 or early 2014 regarding next steps vis-à-vis the Islamic Republic—including, potentially, the use of force to neutralize its nuclear program.

Whether they do is very much a function of Western seriousness. The June election of Hassan Rouhani to the Iranian presidency has reconfigured the international political consensus over pressure on Iran, and made some sort of diplomatic engagement well-nigh inevitable. But the potential for progress on this front, Israeli officials believe, is limited, because Rouhani lacks the power necessary to affect real change on any of the three issues that could materially influence Iran's relationship with the West: 1) Iran's nuclear ambitions, 2) Iranian support for the Syrian regime, or 3) Iran's support for Lebanon's Hezbollah militia.

As a result, they insist, engagement with Iran, if and when it does occur, needs to be short, bounded, and conditioned upon real progress on the part of the Iranian regime. Otherwise, an open-ended negotiating process will provide additional time for the Islamic Republic to make progress on the nuclear front, with potentially devastating consequences.

Israel's improved position is, by its nature, anything but permanent. Destabilizing developments, such as a further intensification of the current confrontation between Egypt's government and Islamist forces, or increasingly widespread Syrian use of chemical weapons, could rapidly and adversely affect Israeli security. So could America's eroding position in the region, which has called into question U.S. strategy in the region—and by extension, the durability of its partnerships with regional allies, Israel included.

Nevertheless, for the moment, Israel's strategic situation is considerably better than at any time in the immediate past. That this is so is a testament to the combination of skill and luck with which Israel has managed to navigate the turmoil now wracking the region it inhabits, at least so far.