

Israel and the Syrian Crisis – Between Keeping the Status Quo and Demanding Change

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the debate in Israel about the Arab Uprisings in general and the Syrian crisis in particular. It argues that towards the Arab Uprisings in general, the Israeli position was stuck between the concerns for rising instability and new threats and as a democracy the need to support democratic movements and change. Regarding the developments in Syria, while initially the call for status quo, the continuation of the Asad regime, was dominant, in time the call for change supporting the opposition grew stronger. Yet, as concern over the scenarios as to what kind of a regime could be formed after the Asad rule grew in Israel, a call for change with caution was observed. The possible delivery or acquisition of Syrian weapons arsenal to Israel's enemies as well as a takeover by radical Islamist groups lead to concern in Israel. Trying to avoid any confrontation in its home front, Israel has been cautious to involve in the crisis. The article also argues that Israel's options and capability to affect the events are also limited in the Syrian crisis as this could lead to unintended consequences like a more unified anti-Israeli stance by the rather divided Islamist groups or de-legitimization of the secular opposition in case of an assistance by Israel.

Keywords: *Israel, Arab Spring, Syrian Crisis, Foreign Policy, Asad Regime, Netanyahu*

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Özet

Bu makale İsrail’de genel olarak Arap Baharı özel olarak da Suriye Krizi ile ilgili tartışmaları incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Arap Baharı ile ilgili olarak İsrail’deki tartışmanın bir taraftan ortaya çıkan artan istikrarsızlık ve yeni tehditler diğer taraftan da demokratik bir ülke olarak demokratik hareketlerin ve değişimin desteklenmesi arasında sıkıştığı gözlemlenmektedir. Suriye’deki gelişmelerle ilgili olarak da, olayların başlamasının ardından mevcut düzenin devam etmesini, yani Esad yönetiminin devamının İsrail için daha iyi olacağı fikri baskınken zamanla muhalefeti ve değişimi destekleyen fikir güç kazanmıştır. Ancak Esad sonrası nasıl bir rejimin iktidara geleceği endişesiyle ihtiyatlı bir değişim savunulmaya başlanmıştır. Ani bir değişimde Suriye’nin silahlarının İsrail’in düşmanlarının eline geçmesi ihtimali ya da radikal grupların yönetimi ele geçirme olasılığı İsrail’in endişelerini arttırmıştır. İsrail, bu gelişmeler ışığında kendi topraklarına sıçrayabilecek bir çatışmayı engellemeye çalışmaktadır. Makalede ayrıca İsrail’in Suriye’deki krizi etkileme imkanının sınırlılıkları da vurgulanmaktadır. Suriye’de kendi siyaseti doğrultusunda müdahalede bulunduğu takdirde İsrail hiç beklenmeyen sonuçlarla karşılaşabilir – bu durum muhalefeti güçlendirmektense böylecek, İsrail’in destekleyebileceği gruplar meşruiyetlerini kaybedeceklerdir. Bu durumda tüm endişelere, kaygılara, ihtiyatlı değişimi savunan fikrilere rağmen İsrail’in Suriye krizindeki rolü, elindeki değişim ve müdahale araçları son derece sınırlıdır.

Anahtar Kelimeler : *İsrail, Arap Baharı, Suriye Krizi, Dış Politika, Esad Rejimi, Netanyahu*

Introduction

As the tumultuous events began in the Arab world by the end of 2010, threatening the authoritarian regimes of the Middle East, Israel was caught by surprise like many other regional and international players. The changes that were taking place especially in Egypt, with which Israel had a peace agreement since 1979, led to new security challenges for Israel. The toppling of the Mubarak regime, with whom Israel had coordinated and relied on especially in issues relating to Gaza, the subsequent collapse of order and security in the Sinai and the coming to power of the Muslim Brotherhood shook the roots of Israeli policy towards its southern border for the past three decades. Whether the peace agreement would survive such a change and the new instability that could affect Israeli politics began to be discussed with concern. When the events started in Syria, it only added onto the already existing threat perceptions. Yet, despite all the changes happening around it, Israel tried to pursue a rather low profile in regional developments, leading many to claim that Israel did not have a strategy to pursue during this critical period and to criticize the Netanyahu government for not being able to pursue an active policy at a time when everything else was changing in Israel's surrounding region. This article will look at Israel's policy towards the developments of the "Arab Spring", with a specific focus on the Syrian crisis. It will argue that although many dynamics have been unfolding in the region, Israel pursued a low-profile in the regional politics at this time, not only because it was rather undecided as to which road to follow but also because its options for an active engagement were very limited. It was not only out of choice but also out of necessity that Israel adopted a low-profile during the developments of the Uprisings and despite the deepening of the crisis in Syria, as it is in its fifth year, it is still not clear what Israel's capabilities and options are, that could affect the course of events in Syria.

Israel and the Arab Uprisings

As the events began in Tunisia and Egypt, the Israeli Prime Minister seemed to be stuck between two ideas. Netanyahu on the one hand put Israel as the only democracy in the Middle East and linked the lack of peace in the region to the lack of democratic regimes in the Arab world. Therefore, Netanyahu was compelled to respond positively to the democratic aspect of the Uprisings – as the number of democracies in the region as a result of the Uprisings would increase, so could the possibility of peace. But on the other hand, he continued to read the developments from a realist perspective of emerging security threats and with the idea that Israel was surrounded by hostile Arab regimes, Netanyahu underlined the security

dimension and threats with the new developments. The message he gave on these two aspects at times contradicted each other and presented a duality in Netanyahu's speeches regarding the Uprisings. While he was talking domestically, to the domestic constituency and in the Knesset he would be adopting the second approach, underlining the new threats and security requirements for Israel yet while talking to the international audiences, the Prime Minister often underlined the 'hope' for democracy in the region and underlined the democratic aspect of the Uprisings which he often ignored domestically.

As an example to this duality, in October 2011, at the opening session of the Knesset, Netanyahu said: "Friends, if I had to summarize what we can expect in the region I would use two terms: instability and uncertainty [...] In the face of the uncertainty and the instability before us we need two things: power and responsibility". He continued: "if religious fanaticism does not modify its worldview, it is doubtful that the grand hopes that blossomed with the Arab Spring will come true. Realization of those hopes might even be delayed by a generation."² In another speech in the Knesset a month later, Netanyahu said:

"The Middle East is no place for the naïve. Last February I stood on this stage while millions of citizens of Egypt streamed into the streets of Cairo. At the time commentators and many of my friends here in the opposition explained to me that we were facing a new era of liberalism and progress that would wash away the old order... I said that we wish those things would come true but despite all of our hopes chances are that an Islamic wave will wash through the Arab countries, an anti-Western wave, an anti-liberal wave, an anti-Israeli wave and ultimately an anti-democratic wave. They said I was trying to scare the public and I didn't see, I didn't understand which way things were moving. They are moving but they are not moving forward towards progress they are moving backwards. I chose to adjust our policy to reality and not to our dreams. I ask you today: who did not understand the reality? Who does not understand history?"³.

2 Quoted in Lior Lehrs, "Egyptian Plague or Spring of Youth The Israeli Discourse regarding the Arab Spring" in Nimrod Goren and Jenia Yudkevich (eds.), *Israel and the Arab Spring: Opportunities in Change*, MITVIM, 2013, p. 9

3 *ibid*

The pessimistic perspective about the Uprisings could also be seen in the speeches of Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman. Lieberman, in a letter he wrote to Netanyahu in April 2012 and which was leaked to the press talked about a 'nightmare scenario' of the consequences of the Arab Spring in Egypt for Israel. Lieberman portrayed the developments in Egypt "much more disturbing than the Iranian issue" and warned that there was no guarantee that after the elections and the new president, Egypt would not cancel the Camp David Accords and prepare for an attack on Israel from Sinai. Lieberman was calling to take all necessary measures to be prepared for such a scenario.

Yet, supporting the argument of duality of speeches mentioned above, Netanyahu in a speech in February 2011 told a group of foreign diplomats that "Israel is a democracy that encourages the promotion of free and democratic values in the Middle East and the promotion of such values will benefit peace".⁴ Similarly, he adopted a positive discourse during his speech at the UN in September 2011, underlining that he was reaching a hand in peace to "the people of Libya and Tunisia, with appreciation for those who are trying to build a democratic future... (and) to the people of Syria Lebanon and Iran, with awe for the bravery of those fighting brutal oppression".⁵

Netanyahu repeated the virtues of democracy and the link between democracy and peace again in an interview with the al-Arabiya network:

"If there is true democracy in the Arab world... Then there will be true peace. Because true democracy reflects the will of the people, and most peoples - Arabs, Jews, everyone - do not want to see their sons and daughters dying in the battlefield. They want peace. That is why the spread of democracy is good for peace. It might be hard. There might be a period of vibrations, of turmoil, but ultimately it will lead in a good direction". When Netanyahu was asked about the fear of the rise of Islamists in the wake of the Arab Spring he replied that he believed the Arab people "want a world of progress...(and) a world of real reform. They do not want to return to the dark ages, they want a different world".⁶

These statements are very different from the assessments Netanyahu presented at the Knesset, where he claimed that "in most of the countries

4 ibid

5 "Full transcript of Netanyahu speech at UN General Assembly", Haaretz, 24 September 2011, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/full-transcript-of-netanyahu-speech-at-un-general-assembly-1.386464>

6 Quoted in Lior Lehrs, "Egyptian Plague or Spring of Youth The Israeli Discourse regarding the Arab Spring".

around us the Islamist movements are the most organized and strongest force whereas the liberal forces, who strive for freedom and progress, as we understand those concepts, those forces are divided and weak".⁷

As the idea that the region was witnessing immense instability in general had dominated the discussions, two more important issues seem to have come up in the debate on the Arab Spring. First of these debates revolved around the idea that located Israel's role in the larger picture of the Middle East. For decades, one of the main reasons for instability and the dominance of wars in the Middle East was shown to be Israel. The Palestinian issue had taken a central role in regional developments and Israel was seen as the major source of 'trouble' and 'instability'. Although the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 changed that picture to some extent – pushing the Palestinian issue further down in the agenda of regional politics – the Arab Uprisings have shown that Israel and the Palestinian issue were not at the center of each development in the region and the ensuing unpredictability of events had very little to do with Israel. This was perceived as a positive development, saving Israel to be at the center of the discussion on the issue. Related with this argument has been, as mentioned, the declining importance of the Palestinian issue. At a time when the talk of social movements, 'street politics', democracy, elections and constitutions dominated the Arab politics, there was little discussion on the Palestinian issue and the Peace Process. As mentioned above, there was already an uninterest towards the Palestinian issue and peace talks. The decades long talk between the parties without any progress has led to a loss of heart by the domestic and regional actors. The growing power of right-wing political parties in Israel and the division of Palestinian politics between Hamas and al-Fatah since the 2006 elections had already made peace negotiations difficult.⁸ The regional developments with the Arab Uprisings and the dominant idea of growing instability further underlined the thinking in Israel that it could not take the risk of entering into any negotiations with the Palestiniand in such shaky regional dynamics. A second issue which was emphasized and gained further prominence was related to the role of Iran in the changing regional order. As it is widely observed, Iran has constituted a significant place in Israeli foreign and security policy since the Iranian revolution of 1979, but more so in the 2000s. Walt and Meirshemer have underlined how after September 11, the Israeli lobby in the US had pushed for a regime change in Iran, rather than

7 *ibid*

8 For a discussion regarding the future of the Peace Process see Özlem Tür, "Resumption of the Peace Process and Negotiations on the Palestinian Issue – Is There Any Hope for Peace?", *Ortadoğu Analiz*, October 2013, Vol.5, No. 58, pp. 51-57.

supporting the toppling of Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq, as this became Israel's top priority in the regional security map.⁹ As these efforts did not materialize and the Iraq War of 2003 increased rather than decreased the role of Iran in the Middle East by opening the 'gates of the region' to Iranian influence with the collapse of the Iraqi regime,¹⁰ Israel's threat perception from Iran has grown further. With the coming to power in Iran of Mahmoud Ahmedinejad in 2005 and his aggressive rhetorics on the Holocaust, threats against Israel, often repeating the wish of "wiping Israel out of the region" and the developments in the nuclear issue have underlined Israel's threat from Iran further. When the Uprisings began in Tunisia and Egypt, Iran generally perceived the developments positively, underlining that they were the continuation of the Iranian Revolution,¹¹ which adding further concerns for Israel that was already regarding every regional development having a potential for Iran to manipulate for its favour. As the events began in Syria, this issue will be discussed more. Israel that began to read every development from the lenses of their impact on the Iranian power will be increasingly critical of the role that Iran was playing in Syria. The following section will look at the developments in Syria and Israeli-Syrian relations during the 2000s – which can be characterized with stability and continuity (considering the lack of any direct confrontation) on the one hand and struggle via proxies (like Hizballah) on the other.

Syria in the Regional Order and Israeli-Syrian Relations

Hafez Asad, coming to power in Syria in 1970 was the first Syrian leader to "systematically bridge the gap between Syrian goals and means"¹² was able to scale down policies based on his country's power and to use different instruments to achieve these policies. Asad, who was considered to be a real strategist, based his country's strategy on two important long-term interests: 1) to prevent the strengthening of Israel in the region; 2) to increase Syria's power in the region and prevent its diplomatic isolation. Regarding the first interest, in addition to the general aim of keeping Israel weak, there was also a tactical side. Asad held the idea that in the event of peace

9 John Mearsheimer and Stephan Walt, *Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy*, (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, September 2, 2008).

10 Anoush Ehteshami, "Middle East's New Power Dynamics," *Current History*, Vol. 108, no. 722, 2009, p. 398.

11 Bayram Sinkaya, "Implications of the Arab Spring for Iran's Policy Towards the Middle East", *Ortadoğu Etütleri*, Vol. Volume 6, No 2, January 2015, pp.54-78.

12 Raymond Hinnebusch, "Syrian Foreign Policy Under Bashar al-Asad," *Ortadoğu Etütleri*, Vol. 1, Issue 1, July 2009, p. 9.

negotiations with Israel, it should negotiate from a point of strength. He believed "successful negotiations depended on a sufficient balance of power; if it was too unfavorable, Syria had to be patient and wait until it shifted, while taking advantage of every opportunity to contribute to such a shift."¹³ To acquire its bargaining cards, Syria supported proxies, mainly in Lebanese territories, that would pursue asymmetric warfare with Israel, effectively keep Israel weak, in addition to preventing a direct Israeli retaliation on Syrian soil. As Fouad Ajami argues, Syria became an important player in the Middle East because of "its capacity for mischief".¹⁴ The Syrian intervention in Lebanon in 1976, after the Lebanese civil war began and its control of the country for almost three decades as well as its support for Hizballah will place Syria in a key position vis-à-vis Israel. Israeli invasion of Lebanon twice, in 1978 and later in a larger operation in 1982, which will lead it to create a security zone in the south of the country until 2000 will make Lebanon an important arena on which the struggle with Israel would take place. The Syrian-Iranian alliance which will be formed during the 1980s and Iran's close relations, its support ideologically, logistically and politically to the Lebanese Hizballah will create further threats for Israel, bringing Iran to its closer neighbourhood as well. In this context, Syria's "capacity for mischief" included cooperation and partnership for almost all groups opposing Israel in the region.

For the second interest – to increase Syria's power in the region and prevent its diplomatic isolation - Syria tried to cultivate close relations with regional powers. The worst case scenario for Syrian foreign policy during this period was to be left alone in the war with Israel, in the case that Lebanon and Jordan signed separate peace treaties with Israel; the strengthening of US power in the region through Turkey, Jordan and possibly Iraq; and Palestine left on its own. Hafez Asad's foreign policy was in general designed to prevent the realization of such a scenario. Anchoring itself deeper in the security map of the region, Syria wanted to show that if no Arab-Israeli war could be fought without Egypt (as it was often referred to), no regional peace could be made without Syria. As mentioned above, the emergence of the Syrian-Iranian alliance in the course of the Iran-Iraq War became important in this context.¹⁵ With the end of the 1980s, Syrian foreign policy began to signal change as its position in the region was in decline. Iraq was the victor of the Iran-Iraq War after Iran was forced to accept the ceasefire in 1988. This

13 Ibid.

14 Fouad Ajami, "Arab Road", *Foreign Policy*, No. 47, Summer 1982, p. 16.

15 Jubin M. Goodarzi, "Syria and Iran: Alliance Cooperation in a Changing Regional Environment", *Ortadoğu Etütleri*, Vol. 4, No. 2, pp. 31-54.

did not work very well for Syria, which was Iran's ally in the war. In order to avoid isolation, Syria will make a strategic choice to participate in the coalition against the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait by the end of the Cold War.

As part of this strategic move to act with the US, Syria participated in the 1991 Madrid Peace Conference. This was the first time that Syrian officials came to the negotiating table with their Israeli counterparts to discuss peace. Asad thought that through its participation in the conference, Syria could get the Golan Heights back as well as boost its position in the region, both economically and politically. However, when the Oslo process began and Declaration of Principles was announced in 1993 separate from the Madrid process, and when, in 1994, Jordan and Israel signed a peace agreement, Asad's position vis-à-vis Israel declined. Asad had been thinking that a unified Arab stance against Israel was necessary, but his principle of preventing separate peace agreements with Israel failed as a policy. Although this situation frustrated Asad, he pragmatically decided to use the opportunity to separate Syria's interests from the overall Palestinian interests, and continued to negotiate with Israel mainly to get Golan Heights back. The negotiations finally collapsed in 2000 and no agreement was reached. By the end of the 1990s, the Oslo Peace Process had also largely failed.

Bashar Asad and the Syrian Foreign Policy in the 2000s

When Hafez Asad died in 2000, his son Bashar came to power. Although Bashar's ability, experience and characteristics as a statesman were questioned, there was also an initial optimism, as it was thought that Bashar's Western education and experience could open up a reform process that the country was most hopeful for. Economic as well as political reforms were needed during this time. Bashar came to power with two questions looming over him: would he be able to make the reforms expected from him in both the political and the economic realms or will he be so concerned with the consolidation of his own rule that he would forget about the opening and reform processes. The dominant debate of the time argued that Bashar, despite being reform-oriented, was haunted by his father's legacy, and that this fact, coupled with his inexperience, would force him to give up on reforms to be more security-oriented for the sake of regime survival. Bashar, upon coming to power, underscored a similar theme: 'I will balance change and continuity; I will preserve my father's legacy but at the same time I will develop it further and more deeply.'¹⁶ Despite an initial wave of reform, the

16 Ibid, p. 82

opening was rather short-lived, and Bashar continued more along the lines of his father, prioritizing regime survival and security over all other issues.

On the foreign policy scene, there are important continuities from the period of Hafez Asad to Bashar, as the main pillars of foreign policy remained, while many important changes around Syria, like in Lebanon and in Iraq, challenged Bashar's administration. In May 2000, Israel decided to unilaterally withdraw from Lebanon, opening up the question of the Syrian presence in Lebanon and Hizballah's arms. It was also in 2000 that the Palestinian issue became strained due to the failure of the peace process and the beginning of the al-Aqsa intifada. With the coming to power of Ariel Sharon in Israel, Barak's more dovish approach gave way to a hawkish approach to regional politics, and Syria was affected by the escalation of tension in the region. The coming to power of the Bush government had a great impact on Syrian-US relations. As the Bush administration had close links with the neocons, who saw Syria as a threat to Israel rather than as a partner in the peace process, and who had been arguing for regime change in Syria, US policy towards Syria also shifted to a tougher, more hawkish stance.¹⁷ The September 11 attacks brought the Middle East to a new period when war on terror was launched and states sponsoring terror were put at the center of attention with the adoption of a regime change strategy. The Iraqi invasion in 2003 unleashed new forces in the region, and Syria began to be touted as the next target after Iraq. The Syrian regime was faced with growing insecurity due to these regional and international developments in the 2000s, as well as to important domestic challenges of regime consolidation.

9/11, Iraq War and Syria

After the 9/11 attacks, Bashar sent his condolences to President Bush and said he condemned the terrorist attacks that targeted innocent civilians and vital centers in the United States. Reports also showed that Syria cooperated by sharing intelligence with the US against al-Qaida. However, as plans for war against Iraq came to the table, Syria began to emerge as a troublemaker in the Middle East. Syria had already been on the US list of countries supporting terrorism since 1979. In the post-September 11 context, at a time when the US was evaluating which countries it believed were for and which were against terrorism, Syria increasingly found itself at the opposite sides with the US. According to testimony before the House Committee in September 2002, regarding the Syrian Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act, there were strong voices arguing

¹⁷ Raymond Hinnebusch, "Syrian Foreign Policy Under Bashar al-Asad," p. 17.

that Syria should be sanctioned because it harbored terrorists, attempted to acquire nuclear weapons and its transfer of weapons in return for oil with Iraq. Questions regarding Syria's position in Lebanon were also heard during this period, which had not been questioned before. On the eve of the war with Iraq, Secretary of State Colin Powell "did indeed declare that the United States was keeping an eye on Syria's interest in weapons of mass destruction and the support it granted to Hizballah."¹⁸ There was a consensus among those that testified that Bashar Asad's support for terrorism was stronger than that of his father, and that there was a need to impose measures against Syria. Despite Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon, it continued to exert its influence via Hizballah. The 2006 war between Lebanon and Israel that resulted from Hizballah's kidnapping of Israeli soldiers on the Lebanese-Israeli border, and which lasted for 33 days, also indirectly involved Syria, considering its links with Hizballah.¹⁹ When the war ended, many authors pointed out that the Middle East had become a new place; in Rubin's words "the Middle East has clearly and probably irreversibly entered a new era."²⁰ Looking at the regional dynamics, the War increased the debate on the deepening sectarian divisions within the Middle East and in Vali Nasr's words, the "rise of the Shia".²¹ In this new picture, Shi'a groups in Syria, Iran, Iraq and Lebanon (mainly Hizballah) were pitted against a Sunni Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. Some authors have asked the question of whether the Middle East was going through a new Arab Cold War, making reference to Malcolm Kerr's terminology in analyzing the region's politics during 1950s and 1960s.²² Although a careful analysis reveals that the picture is much more complicated than a simple Sunni-Shi'a divide in the region,²³ it is not an exaggeration to underline that since 2006, the strengthening of the Syria-Iran- Hizballah alliance has been a constant theme. This camp was no doubt perceived as being against Israeli and US interests, and Syria went through a process of isolation in the second half of the 2000s. Growing relations with

18 Eyal Zisser, "Syria and the War in Iraq," *MERIA Journal*, Vol. 7. No. 2, June 2003.

19 Özlem Tür, "2006 Lebanese War: Reasons and Consequences", *Perceptions*, Spring 2007, pp. 109-122.

20 Barry Rubin, "Why Syria Matters", *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 10, No. 4, December 2006, p. 25.

21 Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts in Islam will Shape the Future*, (New York: W. Norton, 2006).

22 Malcolm Kerr, *The Arab Cold War, 1958-1964: A Study of Ideology in Politics* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965).

23 Morten Valbjorn and André Bank, "Signs of a New Arab Cold War – The 2006 Lebanon War and the Sunni-Shi'i Divide", *Middle East Report*, No. 242, Spring 2007, p. 7.

Turkey during this period became a lifeline for Damascus.²⁴ Although by the end of the decade, there were signs of some normalization in Syria's regional standing and relations with the US, the Arab Spring came to Syria in March 2011 under the shadow of these developments.

The Syrian Uprising, Post-2011 Developments and Israeli Foreign Policy

In a long interview with the Wall Street Journal in January 2011, before the Uprising began in Syria, President Bashar Asad answered the question why there were Uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. He said: "I think it is about desperation. Whenever you have an Uprising, it is self-evident that to say that you have anger, but this anger feeds on desperation. Desperation has two factors: internal and external. The internal is that we are to blame, as states and as officials, and the external is that you are to blame, [...] as the 'greatest powers' that have been involved in this region for decades." He continued to say: "We have more difficult circumstances than most of the Arab countries but in spite of that Syria is stable. Why? Because you have to be very closely linked to the beliefs of the people."²⁵ The events that broke out in Dera'a and then spilled over to the rest of Syria, bringing it to a civil war situation, showed the "anger" and "desperation" of the Syrian people and that the regime was not closely linked to its people.

Yet unlike Tunisia and Egypt the regime was not ousted as a result of the protests, unlike the Libyan case international intervention for regime change did not take place and unlike the Yemen case where Saleh left as a result of a negotiated process, Asad refuses to leave office, claiming he sees no reason why not to run for Presidential elections of June 2014. There is a deep division in the country where fighting continues between the regime forces and the opposition, where the opposition is deeply divided and is also fighting each other. Regional actors play an important role where Iran, Hizballah, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey are involved in the conflict either directly as active fighting forces alongside the regime, as in the case of Iran and Hizballah or indirectly as giving diplomatic and military support to the opposition as in the case of others. International actors are also at odds with each other in the crisis as US and the Western countries in general are supporting the opposition while Russia is supporting the Asad

24 For a discussion regarding the extent of the Turkish-Syrian relations see Raymond Hinnebusch and Özlem Tür (eds.), *Turkey-Syria Relations: Between Enmity and Amity*, (London: Ashgate, 2013).

25 "Interview With Syrian President Bashar al-Asad", Wall Street Journal, January 31, 2011, <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052748703833204576114712441122894>

regime, coupled with China vetoing UN Security Council resolutions for an intervention. It seems that what Patrick Seale has written in 1964 – that there is a “two way interaction between the internal power struggle in Syria and conflicts on the wider stage of Arab politics together with, on a still higher plane, Great Power policies in the area”²⁶ is still valid in Syria in the 2010s.

It is important to note at this point though, that although the Syrian conflict has become a significant arena that brings regional and international actors into play, Israel has been watching the developments from the sidelines especially in the first three years of the Uprising. It was concerned about the developments, the instability and the role of Iran and Hizballah in the conflict, as well as the uncertainty regarding the future of the conflict. Despite these concerns, it was not involved, until the recent and rather limited involvements into the developments in Syria.

As the events unfolded in Syria, the dominant position in Israel was one of caution. We can categorize the arguments regarding what kind of a development in Syria would serve Israel’s interests most, in three categories: 1. The pro- status-quo stance - those who argued that the continuation of the Asad regime would serve Israel’s interests best. 2. The change with caution stance. This group on the one hand wanted the asad regime gone but on the other hand was concerned about what laid ahead afterwards. They argued that the Asad regime should be over as it will bring down the influence of Iran and Hizballah in the region and will therefore cripple the power of Israel’s regional arch enemy – Iran. But while making this call, and emphasizing the benefits of such a change the concern for what kind of a regime would be formed after the fall of the Asad rule made them call for caution in demanding this change. 3. Support for change based on democracy stance. This group argued the virtues of Israel as a democracy and its stance against authoritarianism and called therefore a strong support for the Syrian opposition against the Asad regime. Going back to the debate presented in the beginning of the paper, the linkage between democracy and peace is underlined and the change of the regime in Syria is seen as a positive one, especially in the medium to long run.

The first argument – what I called as the pro-status quo approach above argues that although Syria and Israel has been in a state of war, since the 1973 war, there was no bullet fired between the two countries in the border – the Golan – and they refrained from directly attacking each other since then. At the same time the Asads – both the father and the son – has managed to

26 Patrick Seale, *The Struggle for Syria*, (London: Oxford University Press, Second ed. 1986), p. 164

keep Syria stable and as a partner to talk to when needed as well as having a strict control over the weapons, especially the chemical ones, preventing their use by non-state actors so far. As Eyal Zisser argues, Asad regime was a hostile one to Syria but “made sure to maintain total quiet along the border on Golan and showed restraint from displaying any reaction (for example even when the Israeli jets have bombed the Syrian nuclear reactor in 2007).²⁷ In that sense, Asad regime represented stability, or as commonly referred by the Israeli policy-makers, “a devil we know”. Besides, the Asad regime demonstrated stability and power that effectively controlled the state, could make rational decisions and play the diplomatic game. The series of peace talks between Israel and Syria demonstrated this point. However, Syria that would be in an instability and uncertainty would mean a constant source of trouble and an unpredictable neighbour. The first signs of this instability and its reflections in the Israeli border were seen in November 2012 when Syria and Israel exchanged fire over the Golan and Israel was confronted with a refugee problem. As the conflict in Syria deepened many Syrians have tried to cross over into Golan, from which they were returned. Although Israel has been giving medical help to the wounded Syrians, it does not maintain an open door policy to the Syrian refugees. More important than the refugee problem, the Israelis are especially wary that Golan Heights, as a strategic location for Israeli security, could be used as “a launching pad for armed Islamist groups that dominate the Syrian opposition”.²⁸ Adding onto these fears, the possibility of transfer of Syria’s Weapons of Mass Destruction to non-state actors – to Islamist groups and also to Hizballah – that could be used against Israel in case the Asad regime leaves rings alarm bells for Israeli policy-makers. Despite its close alliance with Hizballah, the Asad regime has refrained from letting the Lebanese group use these weapons so far. In case of a fall of the regime, there can be the possibility of the regime giving the weapons to Hizballah, which it can in turn use against Israel or even if it does not deliver them to any group, the regime could weaken to an extent that it might be unable to control its arsenal, thereby leading radical Islamist groups in the country to acquire them, which they can use against Israel and will change the regional dynamics altogether. In case these weapons will be acquired by non-state actors, the conflict can spill-over to include Israel, will threaten its deterrence strategy and it could make Israel more aggressive in trying to stop attacks against itself. In short, such a possibility could make

27 Eyal Zisser, “The Crisis in Syria: Threats and Opportunities for Israel”, Strategic Survey for Israel, 2012, p. 168

28 Cathrine Moe Thorleifsson, “A Fragile Cold Peace: the Impact of the Syrian Conflict on Israeli-Syrian Relations”, NOREF, December 2013, p. 1.

Israel more proactive in initiating preventive attacks. This could add to the environment of insecurity in the region in general and can lead to new wars and conflicts. So, for this line of thought, it is better to keep Asad as long as he manages to keep Syria intact and manages to control the WMDs. Yet, as Syria began to weaken, with the control of the Asad regime over whole of Syria also weakening, it is difficult to argue that this group presents the strongest position currently among Israeli policy-makers.

Looking at the second position, what I call as those calling change with caution, the focus has mainly been on Iran and the need for change in Syria because the current developments in Syria is strengthening Iran and Hizballah – Israel’s arch enemies. It is known that Iran has been supporting the Asad regime and sending its own forces to fight along the regime. Although the Asad regime represented a known enemy and kept the stability in Syria and the quiet at the border, one of the main concerns of the Israeli regime has been Syria’s links with Iran and Hizballah. As it is argued above, one of the most enduring alliances in the Middle East has been the one between Syria and Iran, with extension into Lebanon through the Hizballah. The argument in Israel was that the fall of the Asad regime could lead to a serious blow for Iran and therefore could be supported because of its benefits in the regional balance of power for Israel. This argument seems to have strengthened in time, yet its supporters are constrained with scenarios as to what will come after the Asad’s fall. Considering the benefits of a declining Iranian role and the possible termination of Iranian links via Syria over to Lebanon (Hizballah), the costs of a radical Islamist regime coming to power in Syria does not seem a better option. Although so far, there has not been a direct confrontation between Israel and the radical groups in Syria, two scenarios – contraction of the regime and its withdrawal to the West of the country, which will leave most of the central control to the radical opposition or its total collapse, deepening of the civil war and radical groups neighbouring Israel could create further problems for the country. Therefore, a controlled change would be preferable at this point, yet what kind of tools Israel could employ for a controlled change in Syria is also debatable at this point. The more Israel would support a part of the opposition – the secular, democratic movements – the more this could discredit that movement in Syria. Israeli support would delegitimize these movements, rather than making them stronger opposition alternatives in Syria. Therefore, although we see this group getting stronger since the beginning of the Uprising in Syria, their capabilities to achieve their desired change seem very limited.

Thirdly, we can talk about the group which argue Israel's responsibility to support democratic movements in the region, as a democracy itself. Linking with the arguments in the beginning of the article that sees the reason of wars and conflict in the region based on the lack of democracy, this group argues that the more democratic regimes we have in the region, the more peaceful it will be and that Israel will find it easier to co-exist with democratic regimes – based on the arguments of Democratic Peace Theory, democracies would not fight with each other. Yet, these groups are also haunted with the unclear alternatives for the future of the regime in Syria as well as the limitations it has with supporting the democratic movements in the country. Although the argument could be that democracy must be supported, the instruments that Israel has to support the opposition is also limited. Being supported by Israel would immediately discredit any movement within Syria, in the Arab nationalist context and would lead to delegitimize the movement rather than strengthen it. Therefore, although democratic change could be the best option, still how and through which means Israel can support option also remain questionable and limited.

Conclusion

This article argued that Israel has been pursuing a cautious approach vis-a-vis the Syrian crisis. There has not been one unified approach or a policy towards the developments. Although the debate on how to respond to the crisis have evolved from a more pro-status-quo stance – that the existence of Assad is better than other options - to a more change promoting one – supporting ousting of the regime and supporting the opposition, there does not seem to be a consensus on any of these positions especially due to the fear of what would follow next. The opportunity that a change of regime in Syria could provide for Israel is mostly about Iran and Hizballah. In case the Assad regime is toppled, the influence of Iran in the region, which is Israel's main concern, will decline. Yet, two issues regarding how such a toppling will take place creates new challenges. First, in case Syria's weapons are overtaken by radical groups, which might be ready to use them against Israel is one of the concerns. Second, the new regime that would come to power could be hostile to Israel, i.e. radical Islamist groups, or the civil war, which is already going on could deepen further with no prospect for any stability for long time, which could spill-over to the region and Israel might be dragged into the conflict. Israel would try to avoid any of this scenario. Yet, the article also argued that the means that Israel has to affect the outcome of the developments is very limited. In a way, it can only play a limited role

and any support it will explicitly provide to any group in Syria is doomed to backfire. What can be expected in the near future could be small attempts by Israel to avoid any spill-over into its territories and its neighbouring regions. "Watching the developments from the sidelines", as many Israelis would say, seem to be the most probable option in the short run for Israel.

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