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ISRAEL AND THE CHANGING MIDDLE EAST

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INTRODUCTION

Complexity and ambivalence are inherent in Israel's relationship with its Middle Eastern environment. Israel's national security agenda is shaped by the hostility of a large part of the Arab and Muslim worlds. During the past 66 years, Israel has been able to crack the wall of Arab hostility, to make peace with two Arab neighbors, and to establish semi-normal relations with several Arab states. But the Arab-Israeli conflict, and its Palestinian core in particular, rages on, and Iran has joined the fray as a powerful and determined adversary.

In Israel, debates over the state's identity, its place and role in the region, and the more specific issues of the future of the West Bank and Israel's relationship with the Palestinians, govern the country's politics and national discourse. The March 2015 Israeli elections are being conducted over a wide range of issues, but they are seen first and foremost as a referendum on these key questions. Politics and policy can hardly be separated. Appearances can be misleading. Currently, the focus of the election campaign seems to be on socio-economic issues. The main challenger of Netanyahu's current government and potential right-wing coalition is "The Zionist Camp" led by Isaac Herzog and Tzipi Livni. They are strong advocates of reviving a peace process with the Palestinians, but they realize that the Israeli public has drifted to the right. Furthermore, the primaries in the Labor Party produced a left-leaning list of candidates. But whatever the current drift of the campaign, in the elections' immediate aftermath, whoever forms the next government will have to deal primarily with the Palestinian issue and the national security challenges facing the country.



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THE CHANGING MIDDLE EASTERN SYSTEM

The Middle Eastern regional system is in a permanent state of flux. As a region given to domestic unrest, intra-regional conflict, and superpower competition, it has never been marked by stability, but during the first decades of the post-colonial era there was a pattern: the two protagonists of the Cold War cultivating their local allies; Turkey and Iran playing limited roles; a series of inter-Arab conflicts, primarily between radical, revolutionary regimes allied with the Soviet Union on one side and pro-Western, moderate / conservative regimes on the other; and the endemic Arab-Israeli conflict.

This pattern has been gradually altered since the late 1970s. Although the Persian and Ottoman empires had dominated the region in earlier centuries, their two successor states played limited roles in the region's affairs for most of the twentieth century. However, with the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Iran suddenly went from being on the margins to being a central player in the Middle Eastern political arena. Similarly, Erdogan's rise to power and Turkey's subsequent shift from a European orientation to a foreign policy focused more on its immediate neighborhood to the south and east saw Turkey become a prominent political actor

in the Middle East in the early years of the twenty-first century.

The entrance of these two full-fledged, powerful actors into the fray had a profound impact on the region's politics. Iran and Turkey are large, populous, non-Arab Muslim states seeking to promote their brand of Islam in the Arab world. Each has sought regional hegemony in its own way: Erdogan's vision of himself as the most popular leader in the Arab world and of Turkey as a model of "Islamic Democracy" (which culminated in the years 2008-2011) ended in disappointment and was replaced by more modest interest in its immediate neighbors, Syria and Iraq, and support of the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas.

In the aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse, its own success in the first Gulf War, and as the sponsor of a successful Arab-Israeli peace process, the United States enjoyed a position of unprecedented influence and prestige in the Middle East. However, since the early 2000s, both Washington's position in the region and its view of the Middle East have been altered.

Iran's quest has been more sustained and ambitious. Iran is not just a regional power seeking hegemony; it is also a revolutionary regime seeking to transform the region's politics and upend the status quo in several Middle Eastern countries.

During the 1990s, in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse, its own success in the first Gulf War, and as the sponsor of a successful Arab-Israeli peace process, the United States enjoyed a position of unprecedented influence and prestige in the Middle East. However, since the early 2000s, both Washington's position in the region and its view of the Middle East have been altered by a series of developments: the unsuccessful wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the failure of two efforts (a Republican one and a Democratic one) to promote or impose democracy in the Arab world, the collapse of (and failure to revive) the Israeli-Arab (and more specifically, Israeli-Palestinian) peace process, the diminished importance of Middle Eastern oil to the U.S. economy, the failure to navigate between reformists and Islamists in the context of the Arab Spring, and the apathetic response to the Syrian civil war. All of these developments have combined to create both the perception and the reality of diminished American interest and influence in the region. The United States did put together the military coalition against the Islamic State and it does play the leading role in the air campaign against the group, but the conviction that Washington is no longer ready to commit ground troops to cope with Middle Eastern crises has had a significant impact on the region and on America's standing in it.

Needless to say, the events of the past five years—particularly the Arab Spring and the subsequent descent into chaos—have had a profound impact on the regional political system. Five states—Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, and Yemen—

can now be defined as “failed states.” The Syrian crisis has become the arena of a proxy war between rival regional coalitions. The swift rise of the Islamic State – its control of a large swath of land on both sides of a non-existent Syrian-Iraqi border, and the challenge it poses (alongside other jihadist challenges) – is a now a major issue for several states in the region, as well as for the international system.

Under these circumstances, it is difficult to refer to “a regional order” in the Middle East (“disorder” might be a more appropriate term). The organizing principles of earlier decades (the Cold War, the Arab Cold War), and the pattern mentioned above are absent from the scene. When trying to define the current paradigm in the Middle East, it is more useful to point to four regional axes:

1. Iran and its dependencies: the Iraqi regime (to a limited degree), Bashar al-Asad’s regime in Syria, and Hizballah in Lebanon;
2. Turkey, Qatar, and the non-state actors identified with the Muslim Brotherhood, primarily Hamas in the Gaza Strip;
3. Moderate / conservatives states—Saudi Arabia and its allies in the Gulf, Egypt under Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, Jordan, Morocco, and Algeria;
4. A jihadist axis composed of the Islamic State, al-Qa’ida, and affiliated groups across the region.

A N E W S T R A T E G I C E N V I R O N M E N T

For the first five decades of its existence, Israel’s main national security concern was conventional warfare: how to deter, minimize, and win conventional wars.

At present, and for the foreseeable future, Israel does not face a conventional military threat. It is at peace with Egypt and Jordan, and the Syrian and the Iraqi armies have been decimated by domestic developments and the 2003 American invasion of Iraq. But the conventional threat has been replaced by fresh challenges at the supra- and sub-conventional levels.

The supra-conventional threat is twofold. One threat is Iran’s construction of a nuclear arsenal. The diplomatic and clandestine efforts and the threat to resort to military action in order to stop the Iranian nuclear project have been dominant issues in Prime Minister Netanyahu’s national security and foreign policies since 2009. Israel was successful in aborting Iraq’s (1981) and Syria’s (2007) quests for a nuclear arsenal, but dealing with the Iranian nuclear project is a much tougher challenge.

Israel’s threat to act militarily loomed large in 2012-2013, but has since been eclipsed by the interim agreement reached by Iran and the P5+1 (the permanent five members of the United Nations Security Council—the United States, the United Kingdom, France, China, and Russia—plus Germany). Like Saudi Arabia and other regional actors, Israel was critical of the interim agreement, is dubious

about the prospect of completing the negotiations with a satisfactory final agreement, and it is monitoring them closely. It is doubtful that Israel's expectations of keeping Iran at a relatively safe distance from a breakout point will be met fully. Israel may balk at what would be a middle-of-the-road solution. But a total collapse of the negotiations or an egregiously unsatisfactory agreement could push Israel to revive the military threat, particularly if the March elections produce a purely right-wing government.

The other challenge at the supra-conventional level has been the adoption of "high-trajectory fire" arsenals (missiles and rockets) by both neighboring and distant foes. Iran has a significant arsenal of medium-range missiles, and Syria's arsenal has been diminished but not eliminated by the civil war; however, it is primarily in the context of its past and potential future conflict with Hizballah and Hamas that Israel has to deal with this new dimension. What began in the 1970s (in Lebanon) and in the early 2000s (in Gaza) as short-range harassment by rockets has developed into a strategic threat. Israel's war with Hizballah in 2006 and three wars (or mini-wars) with Hamas demonstrated the escalating scope of the missile threat to Israel's cities and infrastructure and the difficulty of neutralizing that threat.

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Hizballah's and Hamas's arsenals of missiles are intimately connected to the sub-conventional level of the conflict. Israel's military engagements with these organizations are in many respects a form of asymmetric conflict—that is, a conflict between a conventional army and a non-state actor. It is difficult for a regular army to emerge from such a conflict with a clear-cut victory. However, Hizballah and Hamas are not exactly non-state actors, and they can rely on their arsenals of rockets and missiles in order to deter Israel, or in the event of war, to force Israel to escalate its operations to the point of antagonizing international public opinion and exacerbating the erosion of its legitimacy. They thus offer a rare example of combining sub- and supra-conventional levels of threat.

Hizballah's and Hamas's military capabilities are also a by-product of Iran's regional ambitions and policy. Hizballah's rise to political preeminence in Lebanon is the single greatest success of Iran's quest to export the Islamic revolution. But beyond exporting the revolution and cultivating an important Shi'ite constituency, support for Hizballah in Lebanon (and, in a different fashion, for Hamas in Gaza) serves additional Iranian interests: in effect, supporting these groups has enabled Iran to catapult itself from the Middle East region's eastern

periphery to its core area on the Mediterranean and on Israel's northern and southern borders. Hizballah's arsenal is clearly also designed to serve as a deterrent against Israeli attacks on Iran's nuclear installations. While the threats Hamas and Hizballah pose to Israel pale in comparison to the prospect of a nuclear Iran, they are taken seriously by Israel's national security establishment.

Iran's support of Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad has turned it into a significant actor in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. (It should be noted that Turkey's political and diplomatic support of Hamas is less significant than Iran's military supplies). Iranian and Syrian support of Hamas has been disrupted by the Syrian civil war, but the support has not completely vanished. Thus, as Israel's leaders and national security establishment assess the prospect of an armed conflict in 2015, the three most likely scenarios they see are another round of fighting with Hamas in Gaza, a second major clash with Hizballah, and a transition from diplomatic to military conflict with the Palestinian Authority.

Mahmoud Abbas, as leader of the Palestinian Authority, has been and remains opposed to resorting to armed conflict. He believes that diplomatic and legal pressure and the threat of a one-state solution are sufficiently powerful weapons in his toolkit. But Abbas is not in full control of his own movement or of the Palestinian Authority, is not popular in the West Bank, and is definitely not capable of restraining Hamas should the latter decide to launch military activity. Thus, the prospect of another uprising or of a decision either by Hamas or by groups closer to Fatah to launch military action against Israel looms larger as the political and diplomatic stalemate continues and popular pressure accumulates.

REGIONAL CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

In crafting its foreign and national security policies, Israel's current choices at the regional level are limited and clear. Of the four axes in regional politics, three are certain or likely to remain hostile. This is certainly the case with regard to Iran and its allies and subordinates. There is also no prospect of a fundamental improvement in Israel's relations with Turkey. Erdogan is interested in maintaining the economic and trade relationship but not in diplomatic normalization, let alone a restoration of the strategic relationship. Under these circumstances, the prospect of exporting Israeli gas via Turkey remains dim, and Turkey will likely remain a bitter critic and regional rival of Israel, though not an enemy. Qatar, under Saudi and GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) pressure, has moderated its support of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, though it is still unclear what impact (if any) this pressure will have on Qatar's support of Hamas. Israel will probably continue its ambivalent policy toward Qatar: wary of its support of Hamas but interested in keeping the bridges open with an important regional actor that has maintained a modicum of normalization with Israel.

Israel's obvious choice is to seek to develop its relationships with the

moderate/conservative states: Saudi Arabia and its allies in the Gulf, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and Algeria. Israel shares with Saudi Arabia a firm opposition to Iran's nuclear program and its quest for regional hegemony, a wariness over Washington's Middle East policy, and a concern with the rise of the jihadist current in regional politics. Israel and Sisi's Egypt have common interests in the Sinai Peninsula and in the Gaza Strip, and they share similar views of the region and U.S. policy in it. Israel and Jordan maintain tacit and effective security cooperation, and Jordan can reasonably assume that it can count on an Israeli safety net in the event of a major crisis emanating from the Islamic State or from Syria. On the Palestinian issue, Israel and Jordan are still performing a subtle minuet—Jordan, at best ambivalent on the notion of a Palestinian statehood, has been pressuring Israel to complete the final status negotiations and accept Palestinian statehood while expecting Israel to pay the cost of stemming the tide of Palestinian nationalism.

Jordan, like Egypt, has also recently decided to buy (indirectly) Israeli natural gas and depends on Israel for its water supply. There has been public criticism in both Jordan and Egypt of economic cooperation with Israel in the form of buying Israeli gas. Critics are concerned that such cooperation represents a normalization of relations with Israel and fear that Jordan and Egypt will become dependent on Israel to meet their energy needs. Normalization with Israel was controversial even at the height of the peace process of the 1990s and has become much more so as the peace process grinded to a halt. So far, though, both governments have decided that the need to obtain relatively cheap and secure energy outweighs the political costs of collaboration with Israel.

THE ARAB SPRING AND THE GREAT UNRAVELING AND THE RISE OF THE ISLAMIC STATE

The pace and intensity of political change in the Middle East over the past five years have been exceptional even for a region proverbial for its instability. The high hopes of the Arab Spring in late 2010 and in 2011 have now been replaced by the grim realities of the "Great Unraveling"—a term commonly used to refer to the period marked by the Syrian civil war, the disintegration of the Iraqi state, the lingering failure of the Lebanese state, the anarchy in Yemen and Libya, and the rise of the Islamic State. Against this backdrop, Israel's response has been rather limited and passive.

There was not much that Israel could do in the context of the Arab Spring. Israel had a clear vested interest in the welfare of the Egyptian and Jordanian regimes, with which it had functioning peace treaties, and more broadly, in the stability of the moderate / conservative regimes, but Israel was limited in its ability to shore up these regimes. An academic debate arose in Israel between the right-wing proponents of the status quo in the Middle East and the more liberal

advocates of democratic change in the region, with the latter arguing that in the long run, democratic change is the key to stable peaceful relations with Israel's environment. The one concrete policy debate in this context focused on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. President Obama (and Netanyahu's domestic critics) felt that this was the time to move forward in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, and that by ending the conflict with the Palestinians as part of the Arab Spring, Israel would place itself on "the right side of history." For Netanyahu and his right-wing allies, on the other hand, the Arab Spring merely reinforced their skepticism about the prospects for peace. In their view, a time of turmoil was not the right time to give up territory and take risks.¹ In any event, the Arab Spring abated, the peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan, two pillars of Israel's national security, were preserved, and the old order largely survived in much of the Arab world.

The challenges and opportunities posed by subsequent events were different. Today, Israel's most important policy dilemma is how to deal with the Syrian crisis. A neighboring state, a formidable military foe, and a partner to intermittent peace negotiations has been thrown into a lengthy, terribly destructive civil war and has become the battleground of a proxy war between regional and international rivals. Important Israeli interests are at stake: Syria's future as a state, the prospect of its partition into statelets, and the dangers of an Islamist takeover; the repercussions for Iran's and Hizballah's position in Lebanon; the disposition of Syria's advanced weapon systems and weapons of mass destruction; and, finally, the prospect of a victory by an axis composed of Russia, Iran, the Asad regime, and Hizballah.

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Two schools of thought on how to confront these challenges have emerged in Israel's policy and national security communities. The first, the "devil we know" school, argues that despite of all his faults and shortcomings, Asad remaining in power in Syria is preferable for Israel, as the alternative is either chaos or an Islamist / jihadist takeover (or both). The other school argues that Asad's survival would leave Israel with a dangerous Iran-Syria-Hizballah coalition on its northern borders (the memory of the 2006 war in Lebanon is still fresh in Israeli minds), while his fall would mean a defeat for Iran's regional policy as well as a related first step in dismantling Hizballah's position and arsenal in Lebanon. In 2012 and 2013, when Asad's regime seemed to be on the verge of defeat, some Israelis began to speculate on the potential impact of a Syrian partition with an 'Alawite statelet on the coast and Kurdish autonomy in the east; however, these speculations never developed into serious policy planning.


Whatever the arguments raised by the proponents of these two schools, Israel's actual response to the Syrian crisis has been cautious and limited.

Extending support to the moderate, secular opposition was not seriously considered—nor was it desirable to most of the opposition groups, which felt that an Israeli connection would undermine their legitimacy. Instead, Israel offered medical and humanitarian aid, interdicted several times the transfer of advanced weapon systems to Hizballah, and retaliated several times in response to local attacks in the Golan Heights. But ironically, of Syria’s neighbors, Israel remains the least affected by, and the least involved in, the Syrian civil war. However, it is important to point out that this state of affairs could be reversed in short order and that Israel could easily face a sudden national security crisis emanating from the Syrian conflict. This could happen in a number of ways: a decision by the Asad regime to retaliate against future Israeli interdiction of another attempt to transfer weapon systems to Hizballah; jihadist groups taking control of a larger part of the country and deciding to turn their weapons against Israel; or, in a development that is presently unfolding, a decision by Hizballah to start operating against Israel from the Syrian part of the Golan Heights. In mid-January, tensions rose along the Lebanese-Israeli border and in the Golan Heights when Israeli drones apparently destroyed two vehicles in the Syrian Golan, killing 12 Iranians and Hizballah personnel. In addition to an Iranian General among the dead was Jihad Mughniya, the son of former Hizballah Chief of Operations Imad Mughniya, who had been killed in Damascus in 2008. Israel has refrained from taking responsibility for this operation and is trying to calm down its northern front. It seems, though, that Israel became aware of Hizballah’s preparations and decided to nip them in the bud without realizing that its operation would lead to such a dramatic outcome. The current tension may well be brought under control, but the potential for escalation remains considerable.

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Israel’s policy toward the Syrian crisis derived from several sources: the tendency of Netanyahu to be cautious, deliberate, and wary of bold, grand moves; the lessons of Israel’s spectacular failure in Lebanon in 1982, when it tried to tinker with the politics of a neighboring state; a sense of satisfaction at the idea that major conflicts can unfold in the Middle East in which Israel is not involved and that the violence and instability cannot be attributed to the Arab-Israeli conflict or the Palestinian question; and the absence of a “pull factor” in Syria—something equivalent to the Lebanese forces that played a crucial role in pulling Israel into the Lebanese crisis in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

A similar outlook has governed Israel’s policy toward Lebanon in recent years. Israel is worried by Hizballah’s arsenal and would be happy to see a



fundamental change in Lebanese politics. Hizballah's position in Lebanon has been weakened by its involvement in the Syrian civil war, and Sunni-Shi'ite tensions have been exacerbated. Lebanon has also been affected by the movement of a large number of Syrian refugees into its territory. But whatever the potential for Israel to exploit the new fluidity in Lebanese politics, Israel has so far chosen to keep away from Lebanon's domestic politics and focused its attention on Hizballah's military build-up and the group's conduct along the border.

Israel is naturally interested in the future of the Iraqi state and the prospect of its disintegration, but this interest is less intense than Israel's interest in the future of its immediate neighbors. The issue that is of highest potential interest for Israel in the Iraqi context is the prospect of Kurdish independence. Iraq's Kurds have benefited from the turn of events that began with the American invasion in 2003 and culminated with the Islamic State's rattling of the Iraqi state in June 2014. The Iraqi Kurds now control more territory and oil and have a stronger position vis-à-vis Baghdad. The temptation for the Iraqi Kurds to move from full autonomy to sovereignty and statehood is evident, but prospects for independence are tempered by American and Turkish opposition. The United States is interested in preserving Iraq's territorial integrity and would rather not face the embarrassment of a failed Iraq in the aftermath of the U.S. invasion and withdrawal. Turkey sees a mortal danger in the establishment of an independent Kurdish state on its border and the potential impact this could have on its own Kurdish population. Developments in Iraq have been compounded by the autonomy that Syria's Kurds now enjoy. Turkey's anxiety is also heightened by the prominence among Syria's Kurds of elements identified with the PKK, the militant Kurdish organization that has been fighting against the Turkish state for decades. The Iraqi Kurdish leadership knows full well that its current good relations with Turkey and the flow of oil through Turkish territory would come to an end if they were to cross the threshold separating full autonomy from independence.

Israel has an obvious interest in the prospect of Kurdish statehood. There is a historic relationship between Israel and Iraq's Kurds. In the 1970s, Israel trained and supported the Kurdish rebels in Iraq, seeking to tie down the Iraqi army rather than have it join Arab efforts against Israel on what was then known as the Eastern Front. That collaboration was terminated by the Shah's Iran and Israel, leaving some residual resentment among the Kurds; nevertheless, Israel and the Kurds still view each other as potential partners. Seeking alliances with other non-Arab elements in the Middle East has been a traditional component of Zionist and Israeli policy, and a Kurdish state in Iraq and possibly in Syria could have positive strategic implications for Israel. However, though Prime Minister Netanyahu offered one public statement of support of Kurdish independence, and Israel did buy some oil from Iraqi Kurdistan, Israel, like the Kurdish leadership itself (and for the same reasons), treads very carefully in this minefield.²

Ironically, Israel feels less threatened by Salafi-jihadists than do several other Middle Eastern states that either have a significant jihadist presence in their

territory or are directly threatened by jihadist groups. This is somewhat deceptive, though: groups like al-Qa'ida and the Islamic State are sworn foes of Israel, have occasionally acted against Israel or Israeli targets, and at some point are likely to focus their attention and activity on Israel. At this point they have made a conscious policy decision to deal first with supposed "apostate" Arab regimes and their Western allies, but slogans like "First Damascus, then Jerusalem" truly reflect their longer-term objectives.

As recent events in France and Belgium have demonstrated, the threat of terrorist attacks against Jewish and Israeli targets outside the Middle East is growing.

Israel does also face current challenges from jihadist groups. The group Ansar Bayt Al-Maqdis is active in the Sinai Peninsula, and although this group is primarily concerned with fighting the Egyptian regime, it has collaborated with groups inside the Gaza Strip, launched a number of attacks across the Egyptian-Israeli border, and tried several times to fire rockets into the Israeli city of Eilat. Small jihadist groups in Gaza and southern Lebanon occasionally fire rockets into Israel, sometimes in collaboration with, and sometimes in defiance of, Hamas and Hizballah. In southern Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra, a branch of al-Qa'ida, is the dominant opposition group. It has so far avoided engagement with Israel, preferring to focus on its conflict with the Assad regime, but this may well change over time. More significantly, the Islamic State in northern and eastern Syria is now the main opposition group fighting against the regime. Its effectiveness has been somewhat diminished by the U.S.-led air campaign, but the prospect of the Islamic State's ability to expand its territory, control, or influence southward cannot be ruled out. The Islamic State also recruits Israeli-Arabs and threatens to undermine the stability of Jordan. And finally, as recent events in France and Belgium have demonstrated, the threat of terrorist attacks against Jewish and Israeli targets outside the Middle East is growing.

The struggle against the Islamic State in Iraq has created at least a partial alignment of interests between the United States and Iran. Israel, like Saudi Arabia and other interested parties in the region, is following this development with concern. When the interim agreement over the Iranian nuclear issue was being negotiated, Israel and the other concerned parties suspected that in the side talks between American and Iranian negotiators, not just a nuclear deal but potentially also a larger understanding regarding Iran's regional position and policy was being discussed. From an Israeli point of view, an American-Iranian understanding that would moderate Iran's policies and change its position in Syria and Lebanon could conceivably be a positive development. But the current Israeli government, skeptical of the Obama administration and its policies in the Middle East, worries that any concessions would be made by Washington rather than by

Tehran. Israel is specifically concerned that Iran would not be pushed sufficiently back from the threshold of breakout capacity and that the monitoring arrangements would not be sufficient to prevent clandestine Iranian enrichment and weaponization. In the event of such a development, Iran's regional ambitions would be boosted and a more aggressive policy might well be pursued both in the Gulf and in the Syrian-Lebanese arena. Furthermore, several Arab countries would likely reach the conclusion that Washington cannot be relied upon and that they should therefore make their own deals with Tehran.

C O N C L U S I O N

The Israeli elections of March 2015 are likely to have a decisive influence on Israel's policies toward the Palestinian issue and the Arab world. Should a new Israeli government decide to resume negotiations with the Palestinian Authority, it is quite likely that the new government would seek to place the negotiations in the context of a broader understanding with the Arab world. It is a traditional maxim of Israeli policy that it is easier to come to terms with the Arab states than it is with the Palestinians. The Arab states represent a larger arena that offers greater flexibility, and Israelis have greater confidence in agreements made with states than with non-state actors. In the background, the Arab Peace Initiative of 2002 (and 2007) is still waiting for an Israeli response. Such a response could be an excellent starting point for a major change in Israel's current position in the region, as well as in its international standing. But while Israel's interest in improving relations with the Arab states could provide a compelling new incentive for Israel to seek a resolution – or at least an amelioration – of the Palestinian issue, it will not necessarily take away many of the barriers on both sides to resolution or progress that have plagued the process for so long. At this point, however, Israel's ability to affect events and trends in the Middle Eastern regional arena remains limited.

¹ Itamar Rabinovich, *Israel and the Arab Turmoil* (Hoover Institution Press, 2014).

² For details, see: Ofra Bengio, "Meet the Kurds, a Historically Oppressed People Who Will Get Their Own State." *Tablet* (August 14, 2014); Ofra Bengio, "Surprising Ties between Israel and the Kurds." *Middle East Quarterly*, vol. 21, no. 3 (summer 2014), pp. 1-12.