

THE ARAB SPRING AND THE ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT: A VICIOUS CIRCLE OF MUTUALLY REINFORCING NEGATIVE REPERCUSSIONS

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Protests, revolts and the fall of decades-old leaderships have brought about political openings and the chance, at least in some Arab states, to embark on paths that could lead to more open, more just and more participatory political and economic systems. Yet, their repercussions with regard to peace in the Middle East, i.e. the implications for a settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict, have been less positive. Indeed, the situation in the Eastern Mediterranean has become increasingly volatile and Israel has become ever more isolated in the region since the beginning of 2011. Although the Arab Spring has been one important factor in this, other developments, such as the frictions over recently discovered natural gas in the Levantine basin and a more assertive Turkish foreign policy, have added to it. As a result, not only does violent escalation loom large, the prospects of a two-state-approach to settle the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are dim. Protracted conflict will, in turn, have repercussions for transformation in Arab countries, above all in those neighbouring Israel – even more so should the struggle once more turn violent. It will also negatively affect European credibility and interests in the Arab world.

Already, Europeans and the US have missed the opportunity of the Palestinian UN initiative to realise the Palestinians' right to self-determination, define the contours of a two-state settlement and create a more balanced starting point for negotiations. Now, in face of the urgency of a two-state settlement and against the backdrop of the US administration's paralysis due to the US election campaign, Europe needs to act. The E3 (France, Germany and the United Kingdom) should take the initiative to move the Quartet process – re-launched in September 2011 – forward. In this, a mediation effort is needed that evens out, rather than exacerbates the asymmetric relationship between the two parties. Europeans should draw up the parameters of a conflict settlement (as already presented in February 2011 in the Security Council) and a binding time table, establish an oversight mechanism, get Quartet backing for it – and spell out the consequences of the (probable) failure of a negotiated solution.

Israel Loses its Partners in the Region

Due to the Arab Spring, Israel has lost further partners in the region and thus finds itself increasingly isolated. As a result of the 2008/2009 Gaza War Israel's strategic alliance with Turkey had already come under strain. This has been exacerbated by the May 2010 flotilla affair and the row over the September 2011 publication of the United Nations Palmer Commission report on the same affair. Rather than leading to reconciliation, Israel still refused to apologise for the deaths of nine Turkish activists. Turkey expelled the Israeli ambassador, cancelled military cooperation agreements with Israel and announced its intention to increase its military presence in the eastern Mediterranean. This rather drastic reaction has to be read not only against the backdrop of Turkey's political and economic interests in the Arab world but also in view of fierce competition over exclusive economic zones in the eastern Mediterranean as well as the Cyprus question. As a result, Israel has not just lost its only strategic partner in the region, but also an alliance with an increasingly influential regional player. Indeed, while Turkish-Israeli relations have become rather hostile, at least with regards to the rhetoric, and in the process have produced stronger Israel-Greece-Cyprus and Turkish-Arab cooperation, considerable room for repairing relations remains. As a matter of fact, Turkey has taken on responsibility for Israel's security by installing the central radar of NATO's missile defense on its territory, which is intended, above all, to protect Israel from Iranian missiles.

With the end of the Mubarak era in February 2011, Israel lost one of its most important and reliable Arab partners. Since the formation of a transitional government in Cairo, relations have deteriorated. Deliveries of Egyptian gas to Israel, which had covered some 40% of domestic demand, have been disrupted time and again due to attacks on the Sinai pipeline. Egyptian political figures announced that they intended to renegotiate cooperation agreements – particularly with regards to Qualifying Industrial Zones (QIZ) and gas deliveries. Moreover, the military junta ruling the country bowed to public pressure and distanced itself from previous Israeli-Egyptian cooperation on the blockade of the Gaza Strip. Egypt's May 2011 decision to open the Rafah Crossing signalled a new policy here – in the end, however, Egypt loosened the blockade only slightly rather than removing it effectively.

Even the weakening of the Asad regime by the Syrian revolt has proved problematic for Israel. True, both countries have formally been at war with each other, Syria under Bashar al-Asad has deepened its alliance with Iran as well as positioning itself as the leader of the “camp of resistance” against what is seen as Israeli and American designs for the region, and it has supported militant movements such as Hamas and Hezbollah. Yet, Syria has proved reliable when

it comes to securing its border with Israel – which it has kept quiet for some 40 years (since the 1973 war). Indeed, over the last few years, Syria even cooperated with Israel, insofar as it allowed exports into Syria from the occupied Golan Heights. While the fall of the Asad regime could open the way for a more open, participatory and inclusive political system as well as for a détente in Israeli-Syrian and Israeli-Lebanese relations, this is by no means guaranteed. After all, it is rather unlikely that a new Syrian leadership would be any less robust in its demands for the return of territory occupied by Israel. In addition, in late November 2011, a gradual and peaceful transfer of power seems to be rather unrealistic. Rather, confrontations between regime, defectors and protesters are more and more developing into an armed power struggle and bear the imminent danger of large-scale civil war and atrocities between ethnic and religious communities. Already today, Syria's neighbours are affected by the violence in the form of refugees and cross-border violence. In the case of escalation of communal violence, which also risks bringing further regional meddling and proxy fighting, massive destabilising effects are to be expected – not only for Israel but also for other neighbours, in particular Lebanon.

Popular Influence Increases and Decreases Arab Regimes' Room for Manoeuvre

The Arab Spring has affected next to all Arab regimes forcing them to seek renewed legitimacy. Against this background, the scope of action enjoyed by Arab leaders has been considerably diminished. True, Arab protests and uprisings have first and foremost brought to the fore domestic political and socio-economic grievances and demands. Burning Israeli and US flags has been at most a side-show. Arabs turned out to be unwilling any longer to accept repression at home in the name of resistance or steadfastness against Israel. Yet there has been no warm peace between Israel and any of its neighbours, and thus a normalisation of relations between Arab societies and Israel has not taken place. Indeed, the very notion of this kind of rapprochement is overwhelmingly rejected by the Arabs as long as the Israeli occupation of Arab territories persists. This is why a growing popular influence on regional relations is a particular problem for Israel. After all, more representative Arab governments will have to legitimise their actions to public opinion rather than bending to external actors such as the US or simply pandering to the ruling elite's interests. In addition, those regimes that are not prepared to allow greater popular participation in decision-making will still (or maybe even more strongly) avoid taking deeply unpopular decisions.

For that reason, no Arab government is going to push for any peace initiative towards Israel's right-wing government in the months to come. Also, none of them will have an interest in positioning themselves on Israel's side or being perceived as doing so, e.g. by stepping in to prevent demonstrations and marches on Israel's borders should they occur. Rather, clashes between Palestinians and Israeli border guards might serve as a welcome diversion from domestic tensions for some neighbouring regimes – as was already the case on the eve of the Nakba anniversary on 5 June 2011 on the Syrian-Israeli border. Another source of tension stems from the very fragile security situation in the Sinai which has not only entailed repeated attacks on the gas pipeline but also serious cross-border attacks on civilians and military personnel in Israel leading to the killing of Egyptian border guards in August and again in November 2011. A crisis erupted when the Israeli embassy in Cairo was stormed and besieged by a mob in reaction to the August incident and its staff had to be evacuated – amidst escalating rhetoric on both sides. Further attacks from the Sinai bear the danger of violent escalation as well as of a further deterioration of Israeli-Egyptian relations and a dangerous dilution of Camp David arrangements. This remains true even if bilateral relations relaxed temporarily in the context of the October 2011 Egyptian mediation of the Israel-Hamas prisoner exchange.

Israel Misses the Chance to Refashion its Relations with the Neighbours

The insecurity brought about by protests and upheavals in the region, the anti-Israel rhetoric of Turkey's Prime Minister, the strengthened influence of Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Iranian nuclear programme, as well as the perceived rise of Iranian influence in the region have reinforced the bunker mentality of Israel's right-wing government. The coalition under Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has felt confirmed in its attitude that the time was by no means ripe for peace overtures or "concessions," even though parts of the Israeli Left, of the opposition of the Centre (Kadima) and of the security establishment urged the government to exert stronger efforts to reach a peace agreement with the Palestinians and to positively approach the changing environment. Instead, the government has concentrated on building up its military advantage over its Arab neighbours and Iran, on a diplomatic campaign to prevent recognition of Palestine and its admission as a full member to the United Nations and on shifting the debate towards the Iranian threat.

In the summer of 2011, the Israeli government was challenged domestically by a countrywide protest movement. The protesters demanded social justice,

affordable living space and fair costs of living – with Israel being the OECD country with income gaps second only to the US. Even though young Israelis were inspired by the Arab Spring, as their placards showed, only few of them demanded their political leadership to work for a rapprochement with Israel's Arab neighbours. Also, very few of them made the link between Israel's low expenditure for education and social welfare on the one hand and the cost of occupation and military strength on the other. In the end, the Israeli government did not exert serious efforts to make use of the changing regional environment to build new and better relations with the newly forming societies and systems.

Palestinian Power-Sharing Agreement and the Palestinian UN initiative

The Arab Spring brought renewed impetus to efforts to overcome internal Palestinian division. In early May 2011, Hamas and Fatah, together with smaller Palestinian factions, signed a power-sharing agreement, after years of earlier talks and different mediators had failed to overcome the differences between the main competitors. The deal reflected the realisation of the leaderships in Ramallah and Gaza City (or rather in Damascus) that the people of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip were no longer willing to accept their competing governments' intransigence or the consolidation of two increasingly authoritarian systems. Unlike in other Arab states, Palestinian protests in mid-March 2011 focused not on the demand to overthrow the regime(s) but on overcoming internal divisions. This demand has also been consistently expressed in opinion polls as one of the Palestinian priorities for years. Other factors linked to the Arab Spring also had an effect on both movements' considerations. After all, both saw their regional supporters weakened or overturned: the Mubarak regime, the main supporter of Fatah, had already been displaced; the Syrian regime, Hamas's principal sponsor, was wobbling, which necessitated a reorientation of the Hamas leadership. In addition, an – at least temporarily – more independent, more self-confident and more constructive Egyptian foreign policy, which did not favour one Palestinian movement over the other let alone putting US-American or Israeli concerns first, allowed for the agreement to be sealed. Still, due to the contradictory interests of Fatah and Hamas, implementation of the agreement did not see progress until late 2011.

Another factor that had opened the way for the power-sharing agreement to be concluded was the lack of progress in the peace process. No bilateral Israeli-Palestinian negotiations had taken place since September 2010, when a temporary and partial settlement moratorium ran out. US President Barack Obama's

speeches on the Arab Spring and the Middle East delivered in May 2011 at the State Department and at the AIPAC (American-Israel Public Affairs Committee) Conference were overwhelmingly welcomed in Israel as confirmation of the US commitment to Israel and the strength of the Israeli-American friendship, as was Benjamin Netanyahu's speech before both Houses of Congress. For their part, the Palestinians welcomed Obama's insistence on a two-state settlement based on the 1967 borders with agreed land swaps. Yet, the Palestinian leadership also interpreted the speeches as clear indications that they should not expect active, consistent or balanced US mediation and that negotiations with the Netanyahu government would lead nowhere. The Palestinian leadership therefore focused its political efforts not on a renewal of negotiations but on mobilising international support for full membership in the United Nations, thereby trying to improve its international standing and internationalising the resolution of the conflict. In this approach, the Palestinians were able to rely on widespread international empathy as well as recognition of its efforts in state- and institution-building from international organisations. At the same time, it was clear from early on that full membership was a way off, as the US had announced its intention to use its veto in the Security Council. In the end, while Palestine was welcomed by a large majority as a full member into UNESCO in early November 2011, it did not even muster the nine votes necessary in the Security Council to pursue full UN membership.

Prospects and Conclusions for EU Policies

The prospects for conflict settlement are anything but good. To the contrary: the mutual reinforcement of negative tendencies and the increased insecurity in the region make a constructive approach to conflict resolution increasingly unlikely. Following the failure to turn the Palestinian UN initiative into a constructive step towards Palestinian self-determination, an end to Israeli occupation and a peace agreement, there is a risk of heightened tensions and of a third intifada – which might well have larger regional implications than the last Palestinian uprisings. This danger is heightened even further due to the weakening of the Palestinian Authority as a consequence of Israeli and US reactions to the Palestinian move at the UN: the severe US reduction of financial support for the PA, the Israeli withholding of tax and customs transfers to the PA, as well as a renewed settlement drive. An option discussed ever more frequently among Palestinians is to dissolve the Palestinian Authority, hand all responsibility for the Palestinian territories back to the occupying power and concentrate the struggle on achieving equal rights within the State of Israel rather than independence from it. Such an approach, should it be pursued even against the strong interests of Palestinian elites, would clearly mark the definitive end of the Oslo process.

But it would most likely not see success – as Israel has no incentive to annex those territories on which the better part of the Palestinian population live and make them citizens – and it would certainly not help to solve the conflict.

The persistence of conflict, but even more its violent escalation, will be accompanied by all those elements that make the consolidation of more open and participatory political systems in Israel's neighbourhood less likely: oversized armies and an allocation of resources that favours military and defence over human development, a dissent-intolerant atmosphere, an unfavourable investment climate, a strengthening of radical forces and non-state armed groups and the further weakening of states as well as the Palestinian Authority. It will also negatively impact on Europe's relations with states and peoples in the region as long as Europeans do not follow up there stances with concrete and credible engagement at conflict settlement.

Already, European attempts to dissuade the Palestinians from presenting their initiative for full UN membership to the Security Council as well as (some) European countries' voting on the Palestinian UNESCO membership bid and their stance in the Security Council in November 2011 were in stark contrast to the enthusiastic European support for other Arab peoples' quest for freedom and self-determination. They were also out of sync with the agreed European approach towards the Arab-Israeli conflict: Europeans have held that the conflict should be settled through a two-state arrangement for its Israeli-Palestinian dimension, complemented by peace agreements between Israel and its Arab neighbors (Syria and Lebanon) on the principle of land for peace as well as peaceful, neighbourly relations between Israel and the wider Arab and Muslim world – as spelt out in the Arab Peace Initiative. It is with this intention that, since the beginning of the Oslo Process in 1993, the EU and its member states have supported the building of a Palestinian state with considerable financial and technical assistance. Accordingly, in March 1999, towards the end of the interim period agreed in Oslo, the EU announced that it would consider recognising a Palestinian state “in due course”, an intention reiterated in the EU Council Conclusions of December 2009 and 2010. In spring 2011 the UN, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank all confirmed that Palestine had fulfilled the preconditions for statehood – to the extent possible under continuing occupation. At the end of July the United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, Robert Serry, told the Security Council that the Palestinian Authority was “ready to assume the responsibilities of statehood at any point in the near future”. However, the Europeans – in alliance with the US and Israel – tried to block the Palestinian initiative rather than using the opportunity to turn it into a constructive step towards conflict settlement. In

this, they have also signalled to the Palestinians that all peaceful and legal possibilities to achieve Palestinian rights under international law are blocked.

Today, the situation must be described as paradoxical: the contours of an Israeli-Palestinian settlement are well known, and have been sketched out in the December 2000 Clinton Parameters, the results of the January 2001 Taba Summit and the unofficial Geneva Accord of autumn 2003. Also, a two-state solution has become the internationally accepted paradigm for the settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and has been supported by majorities in both populations. Still, the prospects for its realization are fast disappearing. The increasing fragmentation of the West Bank and the isolation of East Jerusalem neighbourhoods from their surroundings due to continued (or rather, reinforced) construction of settlements, settler roads, checkpoints and the separation barrier as well as the political and territorial separation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip make a two-state solution increasingly unlikely. At the same time, there is no alternative that would satisfy the national aspirations of both people and would be acceptable to neighboring states such as Jordan and Egypt.

The plan presented by the Middle East Quartet (USA, EU, Russia and the UN) in September 2011 to resume Israeli-Palestinian negotiations puts the onus to lead on the Europeans. The USA will be in the midst of a (pre-)election campaign for the time to come and the US administration thus even less in a position to act as the “honest broker” that is needed to conclude negotiations by the end of 2012. While only a comprehensive regional settlement will be sustainable, for now mediation should, obviously, focus on the Israeli-Palestinian track. Here, active and consistent mediation is required – mediation that evens out, rather than exacerbates the asymmetric relationship between the two parties. In addition, rather than renegotiating basic principles of a settlement, Europeans should insist on the parameters that they presented in February 2011 in the Security Council: a territorial arrangement on the basis of the 1967 borders with an agreed exchange of territory; security arrangements that meet the needs of both sides; a just and agreed solution for the refugees; Jerusalem as the capital of both states. They should also draw up a binding time table, establish an oversight mechanism and spell out the consequences of the (probable) failure of a negotiated solution. Unless the E3 agree on a common approach on these issues and take the initiative, there is little hope, though, to move forward and resolve the conflict. Violent escalation is looming – and with it the demise of the two-state solution.