

EXPERTS LUNCH

THE WEST, ISRAEL, AND THE MIDDLE EAST

What Strategy should the West (and Israel) Take in the Face of the Ongoing Turmoil in the Middle East?

****The session was moderated and summarized by Brig. Gen. (Res.) Michael Herzog, Senior Fellow at the Jewish People Policy Institute (JPPI)****

Participants: Dr. Soner Cagaptay (Beyer Family Fellow of the Turkish Research Program, The Washington Institute), Amb. Stuart Eizenstat (Partner, Covington & Burling LLP), Dr. Joseph Joffe (Editor, Die Zeit), Prof. Edward Luttwak (Senior Associate, Center for Strategic and International Studies of Washington), Prof. Dominique Moisi (Senior Advisor, French Institute of International Affairs), Mr. Salameh Nematt (Founder, Pillar Seven), Amb. Itamar Rabinovich (Founding President, the Israel Institute), Ms. Sima Shina (Head of Strategic Division, Israel's Ministry of Strategic Affairs) ¹.

The Round Table discussion addressed the consequences of the dramatic eruption known as the Arab Spring. Naturally, such a dynamic historical event, made up of multiple and changing elements, raises great uncertainty, and provides different perspectives, as debated during the session.

The Arab Spring – Where is it headed?

The focus of the discussion debated the possible positive outcomes of the Arab Spring in the long-run: the opening up of the region to the values of freedom, democracy, liberalization and effective administration. A European perspective, on the one hand, compared the Arab Spring to the French Revolution – even if it was bloody and led to a very long, violent and unstable process, it eventually saved Europe. Most participants did not agree with such an analogy and it was suggested that the civil war in Syria better reflected by the Spanish Civil War and emphasized the long-term uncertainty and grave dangers in store.

It was agreed that the Middle East had entered a long period of instability. The region is fraught with failed, split, and weak states while non-state actors grow stronger. On the one hand, the Arab street has raised its voice, yet on the other hand, the powers of political Islam and jihadist Islam have begun dictating the regional discourse. The regional instability also produces new threats against the West and Israel, some of which are diffused and difficult to identify and respond to.

The countries in which political Islam has come to power have found it difficult to maintain stable, effective and successful governments, as exemplified by Egypt. Arab states are divided between Islamists and their supporters and their opponents and the economic crisis that characterizes the majority bar the oil rich states, exacerbates internal tensions and grievances against the regime. This unstable situation is expected to continue for a long period of time. It may be assumed that the failure of the Islamists in power will weaken them, if, for example, elections are held, but still instability will continue. Unfortunately, the liberals and other democratic elements in the Arab public remain weak and disorganized.

One of the characteristics dominating the region during this period is the heated contact points between Sunnis and Shiites – in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and others, and between Iran and the major Sunni forces – in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey and more. Sunni Hamas was forced to disengage from Iran due to its opposition of Assad. Russia has decided to side with the Shiite axis led by Iran and is contributing to the escalation of conflict in the region by supplying weapons. In contrast, the West is indecisive.

Syria

Syria is certainly a focus as well as a microcosm of the Arab Spring. The Syrian civil war embodies all the indicators mentioned above. This is both a civil war, a Sunni - Shiite war, (Sunnis and Shiites from across the Muslim world are flocking to join the war and fight each other on behalf of their spiritual leaders), and proxy war between external forces, both regional and international. The opposition is increasingly made up of dominant Islamic forces and Jihadists, while Iran is using its might to save Assad, who has gone from being a client to an becoming almost a "puppet", in sharp contrast to his father, who partnered with Iran. Against the Russia - Iran - Hezbollah axis, the West is quite passive and in this predicament, Saudi and Qatari money has limited influence over events on the ground.

In this context, questions regarding US policy objectives in Syria were raised, and it was argued that their needs are not clear and appear to contain internal contradictions; although Obama beckoned Assad to step down from power, US policy reveals the gap between facts and statements, and providing the rebels with light weaponry (doubt was expressed whether the US would go beyond this) clearly will not change the situation. Therefore, is the practical goal of US policy to maintain the rebels and allow them to conduct a long, bloody war? Is this an effective policy direction? What about the spill-over effect on neighboring countries such as Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon and Israel? Is the goal to create better conditions for a diplomatic solution? If so, can they be created while each party believes it will not be defeated? What is the right policy vis-à-vis the West? It was suggested that the US should do more to empower the major non-Islamic opposition.

Israel's policy toward the Assad regime was also discussed. It was contended that this is also unclear at least publicly, but some participants clarified that while Israel has a clear interest in weakening the radical axis led by Iran and hence the fall of the Assad regime, it is not interested in empowering radical Sunni elements, being drawn into the civil war, or diverting its attention or that of the US from the bigger issue – Iran.

The civil war in Syria, as it continues, brings negative consequences for Syria's neighbors. Jordan is a focus of particular interest; its northern neighbor's civil war is seriously affecting its economy (Jordan is hosting hundreds of thousands of refugees, trade that passes through Syria has been affected, and it is losing subsidized gas from Egypt) and threatens the internal stability of this important, pro-Western country. Despite this, a convergence of interests exists between many important factors, both-internal and external, in the desire to preserve the King's regime for fear of a worse alternative - Islamic / radical / anti - Western / Palestinian etc. Therefore Saudi Arabia and Qatar provide financial support, the US provides backing, the UK is transporting water to Jordan, Israel is maintaining security cooperation, and the Jordanian population will not allow the regime to fall. Equally noteworthy are the implications of the civil war on Lebanon and Iraq's domestic stability, which unlike Jordan, are torn by an internal Sunni-Shiite struggle.

The impact of the Arab Spring on major non-Arab regional actors -

Iran -

Balanced involvement; the struggle in Syria is crucial vis-à-vis the direction to be taken in the region. International sanctions have created real pressure on its economy, but not enough to change its nuclear policy. It is worthwhile noting that Iran has gained important influence Iraq.

It is clear that the impending period will be marked by a renewed diplomatic effort following the election of Hassan Rouhani as president. However, there was a general pessimism expressed regarding the prospects of diplomatic efforts to stop the Iranian nuclear program, considering that Iran will not agree to a diplomatic resolution that does not include uranium enrichment on its territory. Opinions were divided on whether the US will execute a military option against Iran if diplomacy fails (and assuming that the cyber war will not stop Iran's nuclear program). Clearly there is no "appetite" for this and there is a preference toward investing in the rehabilitation of the US economy (it was argued that the Pentagon is presenting Obama with a military action that is so extensive that he couldn't possibly adopt it). However, the strategic significance of failure to stop Iran as opposed to President Obama's commitment should not be overlooked. The question remains whether Obama will soften his policy toward an Israeli military option, as claimed by one of the participants.

Turkey -

There was broad consensus that the civil war in Syria revealed Turkey as a weak regional actor from the outset. Not only did its policy of "zero problems with neighbors" collapse but Turkey has shown weakness in the face of violence from Syria, including the shooting down of a Turkish plane and acts of terror in southern Turkey. There is no internal consensus in Turkey on the Syrian issue. One participant claimed that Turkey and the US compete on who "leads from behind" in Syria.

Regarding the development of internal unrest in Turkey, despite the particular similarity between *Taksim* Square demonstrations with those in *Tahrir* Square, it is not right to look at events in Turkey as another wave of the Arab Spring. The Turkish context is essentially internal; the tension between supporters of the ruling Islamist AKP, which is still the dominant and most popular party, and their opponents, and a variety of factors protesting the lack of liberalism and government intervention in civil life lies at its

core. The protest is not violent. It is likely to continue as it is the first time that Erdogan has opposition on the street. Domestic unrest in Turkey may adversely affect Erdogan's prospects of re-election next year. It is also unclear how the move will affect reconciliation efforts with the Kurds. In terms of foreign policy, despite the fact that the Arab Spring propelled Erdogan back into the arms of the US and NATO, internal unrest may actually further distance the realization of the vision of Turkey's integration into the EU. It is also very likely to slow or stop the process of normalization of relations with Israel. It is important that the protestors feel support from the West in their demand for increased liberalization.

Israel -

Militarily strong but politically limited in a largely hostile region. Some participants expressed the position that despite the fact that regional events have led Israel's neighbors to focus inwards, and international actors to focus on the regional earthquake, Israel should not sit passively by. Israel still suffers from regional and international illegitimacy, as exemplified by the European action to marking products manufactured beyond the Green Line. In contrast, the Arab Spring and Iran's hegemony might actually present an opportunity to promote an Israeli - Palestinian agreement (a convergence of interests against Iran and the Islamists) and Israel must leverage the initiative of the new US Secretary of State John Kerry, both politically and economically (an idea was raised regarding the development of a Qualifying Industrial Zone (QIZ) at the border between Israel and the Palestinian Authority). In this context, it was suggested that Israel should re-evaluate its ability to use the Arab Peace Initiative as a means of recruiting the Arab world to support a Israeli - Palestinian peace process. It is also important to complete the process of normalizing relations with Turkey.

The international community -

- **USA** - Its strategic direction is indeed to reduce its involvement in the region. However, this is a result of a variety of constraints and opportunities; scars from its involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan, the economic crisis, and the desire to converge inward. Additionally, its intention to pivot toward the Asian-Pacific arena and the Chinese challenge, as well as making the US independent with respect to energy and even exporting oil and gas within a few years, with the gradual elimination of dependence on energy sources in the Middle East has influenced its change in policy direction. With this however, there is no serious replacement for the US and it will not disconnect from the area, which still creates challenges that require investment.
- **Russia** – Endeavoring to fill the vacuum left by cautious and passive US policy in the region, and it is succeeding to some extent. However, Russia is invested in the Shiite axis and therefore has lost much of its influence in the Sunni axis and in the long-term its strength will decline.
- **China** - While its strength is growing, China is currently focused on securing energy resources and economic achievements and has no pretensions for taking a dominant political role in the Middle East. Its economic interest in Israel has been aroused in the energy sector in light of Israel's discovery of gas in the Mediterranean Sea and other infrastructure projects.
- **Europe** - Seems less relevant than other international forces. Is fearful that the Arab Spring will lead to radicalization of the Muslim population within its borders.

¹ For further information please see **List of Speakers**