

# Israeli Security in a Changing Regional Environment

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### Brief Analysis

Part of a series: [Zeev Schiff Memorial Lectures \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/zeev-schiff-memorial-lectures\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/zeev-schiff-memorial-lectures)

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## Watch the 2012 Zeev Schiff Memorial Lecture on Middle East Security with one of Israel's most experienced military leaders.

*On June 14, 2012, Maj. Gen. Yoav Galant, IDF (Ret.) delivered the fifth annual Zeev Schiff Memorial Lecture on Middle East Security at The Washington Institute. General Galant is a three-decade veteran of Israel's naval and land forces who served as military secretary to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and head of the Southern Command during Operation Cast Lead. The following is a rapporteur's summary of his remarks.*

Israel faces a challenging security arena in the Middle East today. Rapidly changing circumstances across the region have forced it to adapt even as events continue to unfold. While many of the problems Israel faces relate to security, other factors play a prominent role as well, with economic disparities, a population youth bulge, resource scarcity, and radical Islam forming the context for its strategic decisionmaking.

## SHIFTING SOURCES OF POWER

Historically, the two main sources of power in the Middle East have been the army and the mosque. Military establishments generally triumphed in this struggle, the most notable exception being Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution. Recently, however, the trend has shifted. This change began in Gaza with Hamas's victory over Fatah and is now becoming the norm across the Middle East. Religious political parties -- having sat on the sidelines for so long -- are fast becoming a new source of power in the region, with worrisome implications for Israel and the international community as a whole.

## CHANGING REALITIES IN EGYPT AND SYRIA

This trend is most apparent in Egypt, where the "Arab Spring" has given way to a long, cold winter. Developments there are especially problematic for Israel, given that Egypt has historically been a key actor in regional wars; even today, during a time of peace, it has a large, well-armed military. Although war is unlikely in the near term, it is important to recognize that conflict may be on the horizon. For example, the combination of decreasing Western investment, lack of tourism, loss of Suez Canal revenue, and absence of economic growth could trigger a new round of "bread riots." This time, however, the Egyptian people would not have an authoritarian ruler like Hosni Mubarak upon whom to focus their anger. Instead, they would likely blame outside enemies: namely, the "Great Satan" (the faraway United States) and the Lesser -- but closer -- Satan, Israel. As part of the buildup to conflict, it would not be surprising if Cairo sought to transfer a division of troops into the Sinai under the pretense of defending itself against some Israeli threat.

The shift away from traditional sources of power in the region is also evident in Syria, where more Arab civilians have died at the hands of the Assad regime than Israel has killed in more than sixty years. It is only a matter of time before Bashar al-Assad falls, and although he will almost certainly be the country's last Alawi ruler, post-Assad Syria will have its own dangers.

Three options seem plausible at the moment. Least likely is the emergence of a secular, liberal regime; indeed, the lack of unity among the opposition has already allowed room for radical Islamists and al-Qaeda to step in. The most likely scenario is the emergence of a coalition of different Sunni groups, both extremists and moderates/secularists. A third option -- worst of all -- is a war of attrition inside Syria in which Sunni extremists dominate and the Golan Heights becomes a potential setting for conflict. The international community must therefore act quickly to prevent extremists from filling the political vacuum.

What happens in Syria is likely to affect Israel's other neighbors as well. In Jordan, the royal family has been facing domestic criticism about economic justice and corruption. Events in Syria could exacerbate these tensions, which might in turn negatively affect Israel. In Lebanon, too, the Syria crisis is already having an impact. Hizballah is watching closely and preparing for the possible loss of its Syrian patron; if the group feels cornered or otherwise threatened, it will not surrender, nor will it hesitate to use its weapons against Israel or others.

## GAZA AND THE SINAI

In Gaza, the situation is worsening, with a steadily increasing military buildup and a continual flow of illicit goods across the Egyptian border via underground tunnel networks. Israel has three well-defined interests in Gaza: preventing the territory from becoming a source of attacks and instability; preventing the importation of destabilizing weaponry; and avoiding responsibility for the social and economic support of its residents. Defining these interests is simple; pursuing them simultaneously is the difficult part.

The situation in nearby Sinai is also becoming increasingly problematic. The original cause of these issues centers on the Bedouin, who have lost assets and livelihoods and have subsequently turned to smuggling and other illegal activities. Furthermore, they have no sense of rights or obligations with regard to the Egyptian government, and Cairo has only exacerbated the problem. Israel believes that the Egyptian military is capable of dealing with the peninsula on its own should it wish to devote the necessary personnel and resources. From this perspective, the Sinai problem is a domestic issue for Cairo to handle -- Israel has no desire to intervene and jeopardize its peace treaty with Egypt.

## LONG-TERM STRATEGIC CHALLENGES

The dramatic shifts taking place across the Middle East are affecting not only Israel's immediate strategic position, but also the future arena in which it will operate. Some of these shifts were evident well before the "Arab Spring" erupted. For example, one-third of the region's population -- more than 100 million people -- is under age twenty-five. The education this growing youth population receives -- which currently instills widespread hatred against Jews and Israel -- will ultimately have an enormous impact on the country's future relations with its neighbors. Israel must also grapple with the more-immediate strategic implications of demographic change in areas under its control. Within the next decade or so, the Arab population in the land between the Jordan

River and the Mediterranean Sea will equal the Jewish population.

## SEIZING OPPORTUNITIES

Despite these new challenges, Israel must continue looking for ways to change its environment for the better. One way to do so is by improving the political and economic situation for Palestinians in the West Bank. Although an eventual political solution between Israelis and Palestinians is vital, economic growth in the West Bank would make diplomatic progress more possible while benefitting Israel as well.

Israel's first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, once stated that the country's future depends on its might and its justice. A review of the past six decades shows that it has done well on the first front. The latter issue is more difficult, however: Israel must not only uphold justice, but also project the message of justice more effectively. Although it is a small country with only a fraction of the world's population, it should be proud of its record in promoting liberal values and building an equitable society where people have the opportunity to lead rewarding, satisfying lives full of culture and achievement. At the same time, Israeli leaders and citizens alike must remember to be humble, constantly striving for peace while understanding that it may take a long time to achieve.

Until then, Israel must continue seeking ways to contribute positively to the international community. And despite the challenging security problems it faces, it must take advantage of the opportunities emerging from regional turmoil. Historically, internal fragmentation has been detrimental to the Jewish people: they must remain united to continue to thrive.

*This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Cory Felder.*

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