

# Arab Spring, Arab Storm: Implications for Israel

by [Michael Singh \(/experts/michael-singh\)](/experts/michael-singh)

Oct 24, 2011

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Singh \(/experts/michael-singh\)](/experts/michael-singh)

Michael Singh is the Lane-Swig Senior Fellow and managing director at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

**O**n October 17, 2011, Dan Schueftan and Michael Singh addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Dr. Schueftan is director of the National Security Studies Center at the University of Haifa and a lecturer at the Israel Defense Forces National Security College and Command and Staff College. Mr. Singh, the Institute's managing director, formerly served on the National Security Council as senior director for Middle East affairs during the George W. Bush administration. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

## DAN SCHUEFTAN

**T**he Arab Spring has led to deep systemic changes -- mostly negative -- in the rules of the game throughout the Middle East. If this trend persists, it will harm the interests of not only the United States and Israel, but also Arab countries, particularly those that have been longstanding U.S. allies.

One crucial element of the structural shift is the heightened influence of the street. Formerly, regional politics consisted of relatively responsible governments pursuing, for the most part, moderate and sound foreign policies. Most of the problems in Middle East politics prior to the Arab Spring were not due to the regimes. Today, however, the street has greater impact on the state, urging policy in a more radical direction. This is perhaps the greatest danger to Israeli security in the region.

Of particular concern to U.S. and Israeli interests is the lack of a responsible alternative to the fallen regimes -- a result of the fact that Arab countries do not have the necessary institutions in place for stable democratic governments. There is a misconception in the United States that the two options in place of old regimes are moderates and potential moderates. The option of radicalism is too rarely taken into consideration -- many people in the region believe very strongly in dangerous ideologies.

Against this backdrop, it is wrong to focus on an Israeli-Palestinian agreement on the grounds that it would improve Israel's relations with other Arab states. As recent history has shown, relations between Israel and its neighbors are entirely contingent on the internal politics of the individual Arab states in question. For example, the internal dynamics leading to the 1979 Iranian revolution and the Turkish counterrevolution away from the Ataturk model did affect those states' relations with Israel, but were not caused by them.

The most significant regional changes in terms of Israel's security strategy are the power shifts and other domestic

trends in Egypt and Turkey. In Egypt, political jockeying between the army, the Muslim Brotherhood, and populist parties will further delay a long process of economic and political recovery while doing nothing to address widespread disappointment. Given this instability, Egypt can no longer serve as a regional anchor for responsible forces in the Middle East.

Meanwhile, Turkey continues to benefit from the vacuum in regional leadership and is conspicuously seeking regional hegemony. While the United States underestimates the growing radicalism in Turkish politics and society, from an Israeli -- and, coincidentally, Egyptian -- perspective, Ankara's hegemonic aims could be the greatest danger to moderate forces in the Middle East. The radical elements in the Arab world, including the Muslim Brotherhood, find Turkey very appealing.

It is important for the United States and its allies to realize that positive change in the region will not come from external forces. Change must be endogenous. In the meantime, Israel can take several steps to better position itself in a shifting Middle East. It must not fool itself into believing that investing in an Israeli-Palestinian agreement will change the regional dynamic. It must return to the policy of supporting allies and deterring enemies, which includes acknowledging that Turkey is a threat and that Jordan and Saudi Arabia are loyal friends. And it must work with responsible Arab states to demonstrate that radicals will fail and allies will succeed. Once this difficult period is over and the dust settles, Israel will once again prove to be the strongest and most dependable U.S. ally in the region.

## **MICHAEL SINGH**

**F**or policymakers, the most difficult aspect of recent events in the Middle East is the uncertain context in which policy must be made. Considering the challenges inherent in being a small country with hostile neighbors, Israel has long centered its security policy on three strategies: peace treaties, deterrence, and a series of partnerships that help make up for its lack of strategic depth, including the U.S.-Israel alliance, a qualitative military edge over its neighbors, and global trade ties.

On the surface, recent events have challenged Israel's security from several angles. The borders with Egypt and Syria are far less stable, and the Jordanian border is now in question as well. Iran's bold and unexpected actions make it a wild card for Israel, and Turkey is increasingly seen as a potential threat. And with the Eurozone in economic turmoil, Israel's reliance on its largest long-term trade partners could have a negative impact on its own economy.

On a more fundamental level, however, the Arab Spring has deeply altered the long-term context of U.S. and Israeli challenges in the region. First, the internal politics of Arab states have become increasingly important. Far from being a monolithic "Arab street," the people of these countries are diverse and have a range of views on issues such as relations with Israel and the United States. In places such as Egypt, where political change has brought a proliferation of different camps and parties into play, there will be a high degree of political jockeying.

Second, countries will become more anti-American and anti-Israeli because those alliances are associated with the toppled regimes in the minds of the people. The United States must work to overcome these attitudes and improve relations with newly forming governments.

Third, the potential for interstate conflict has increased. The old regional order -- consisting of Washington's Arab allies on one side, and those states actively countering U.S. interests on the other -- has been thrown into disarray. The future of regional leadership is a large question mark, with several states competing for primacy.

Thus, while there may not be a need for Israel to fundamentally alter its security strategy, the context in which that strategy is pursued has changed significantly. Given this fact and the uncertainty Israel faces in many quarters, it will likely continue to prefer the status quo over bold action on the Palestinian issue. This preference is already a major source of tension between Washington and Israel -- while President Obama has stated that the peace process

is more important than ever, it apparently remains a low priority for Israel. To be sure, the Palestinian issue is neither the cause of major changes in the Arab world nor the most important issue for Arab governments or populations. Yet it is by no means unimportant -- in fact, it is central to the way people in the region perceive Israel and the United States.

Going forward, Washington should work to maintain vigorous U.S.-Israeli security cooperation, rejecting the false notion that it must choose between Israel and Arab states. Rather, it must strive for close relations with both, preserving its ability to act as an honest broker. Given the absence of regional powers willing or able to act in a balancing role, Washington should restore its leadership and influence to avoid the destabilizing effect of perceived U.S. withdrawal from the region. Arab states are not immune to democracy and positive change, and the United States is not powerless in steering regional upheaval toward shared democratic values. Both Washington and Israel must find the right balance between anticipating and countering threats on the one hand, and not losing sight of short- and long-term opportunities for peace and democracy on the other. ❖

---

## RECOMMENDED

---

### BRIEF ANALYSIS

#### [Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆  
Grant Rumley

(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)



### ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

#### [How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆  
Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria)



### BRIEF ANALYSIS

# Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy

Feb 14, 2022

◆  
Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)

## TOPICS

Arab & Islamic Politics (/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

Arab-Israeli Relations (/policy-analysis/arab-israeli-relations)

Democracy & Reform (/policy-analysis/democracy-reform)

Peace Process (/policy-analysis/peace-process)

## REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Israel (/policy-analysis/israel)