

Israel's New Crisis

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Backed up against the Mediterranean Sea on one side and facing a sea of Islam everywhere else, the tiny state of Israel is accustomed to constantly reviewing external threats. Since its declaration of statehood in 1948, its history has been marked by major and minor wars with its neighbors, as well as continual *intifadas* and other guerrilla actions against it. Because of its location, lack of defense-in-depth, and general hostility from the Arab world around it, Israel is never far from an existential crisis. One way it has staved off such crises is through a series of peace treaties and other understandings with its neighbors.

It has been observed that nations do not have friends—they have interests. When those interests significantly align, nations can develop an understanding that will last until the interests diverge again. Thus, the United States had an understanding with the Soviet Union during World War II, when Nazi Germany was seen as a common threat to the interests of both nations. However, that alliance devolved into the Cold War shortly thereafter, when the interests of Washington and Moscow collided rather than aligned.

The same is true for the state of Israel. It has had an ally in Turkey, not because the nations are friends, but because for decades the threat of the Soviet Union was great enough to cause Israel's and Turkey's critical interests to align. Israel has had a peace treaty with Egypt since 1978-79, not because Israelis and Egyptians feel good about each other, but because the regime in each country has perceived it to be in its interests not to have a hot war with a neighbor. Likewise Jordan: In 1994, the two countries signed a peace treaty to end the declared war that had been in existence since 1948. Israel's relationship with Syria is not as officially stable, but Israel does have an interest in the continuance of the present Syrian government, perceiving that the current relationship is more manageable than what would emerge out of the (Islamist) Sunni majority in Syria.

But time waits for no man—let alone a nation—and Israel's current understandings with its neighbors and allies are not static. The alignments of interest that it has struggled to achieve on all compass points are coming under pressure at the same time. Significantly, much of what is threatening the alignment of interests stems from shifts within the Middle East away from secularism (especially of the old Pan-Arab movement) and toward Islamism. Secularism is a religion-vacuum, so it is only a matter of time before it is filled. Though many Middle Eastern governments are officially secular, they are sitting atop restive Islamist populations that do not perceive any common interests with Israel—including its right to exist.

To the south, Egypt has recently seen its president, Hosni Mubarak, deposed, even though the ruling regime—the military—remains intact. Egypt's ruling class is still interested in maintaining the peace treaty with Israel; it is not ready for a third round with the Israeli military. However, the largest faction in Egyptian politics is rooted in the inherently anti-Israel Muslim Brotherhood. The Egyptian military has promised parliamentary elections later this year as it turns over the reins of day-to-day governing (so that it can go back to ruling), but this risks empowering Islamists within the government. Then again, if the regime is seen as siding with Israel, the protests of last spring may

increase in intensity, putting undue pressure on the military. Either way, Israel is looking at the possibility of Islamists in Egypt undermining the peace treaty, and with it a major pillar of national security.

To the far north, Turkey has been undergoing changes of its own. It is turning from an inward-looking shell of an empire, whose military guarantees its secular underpinnings, to a more Islamic-minded regional strongman that has recently brought the military under civilian control. As it rises, its interests have begun shifting from having common cause with Israel to increasing its influence in the (Islamic) Middle East—and nothing burnishes credentials in that part of the world like distancing oneself from Israel. Last year's controversy over the Gaza-bound flotilla can be understood in this light, as can Turkey's refusal to let the matter drop—not to mention cutting its defense ties with Israel. On top of this, the U.S. wants Turkey to shoulder the responsibility of regional security, as America winds down its wars in the neighborhood. In some areas, then, it is willing to let Israel's interests be subjugated to Turkey's for the sake of placating Turkey.

To the northeast, Syria is currently experiencing its own popular uprising. While the regime of Bashar al-Assad is not now in grave danger, a favorite lever of despots in the region is to stir up anti-Israel sentiment to divert attention from the regime. Syria is in a position to take this one step further, however, because it is a major patron of Hezbollah, the Lebanese Islamist group dedicated to Israel's destruction. If the Assad government becomes too uncomfortable, it may arrange for Hezbollah to reignite its war with Israel to draw the focus away from its policies and problems.

To the east, Israel's understanding with Jordan is coming under pressure because of September's United Nations vote for Palestinian statehood. Jordan has its own restive Palestinian faction, which it would rather not have to contend with, so when it comes to the future of Palestinians, it continually sides against Israel. Though Jordan respects its treaty with the Jewish state, it is certainly not the same thing as having an affinity for Israel. Jordan is very interested in a Palestinian state (to which its Palestinians can immigrate), regardless of—or even because of—the strategic and political cost to Israel.

The state of Israel is thus surrounded, not by armies, but by the steady erosion of semi-stability that it has enjoyed in recent years. The national interests of the neighboring players are undergoing significant shifts, and as those interests begin to fall out of alignment with Israel's, the potential for major turmoil is ratcheting up—in a region that is on edge by default.