

Israelis Await New Government Amid Old Security Perils

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By **Peter Berkowitz** - January 4, 2013

TEL AVIV -- Election season in Israel has brought the usual jockeying for power; an unusually clumsy making, unmaking and remaking of potential post-election coalitions; and, with the assistance of Israel's merciless TV and radio funnymen and -women, much comic relief.

In the minds of most Israelis, however, there is little suspense about the most likely result of the early elections called for Jan. 22 by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu: After three years as head of the current right-wing government, Netanyahu will get the opportunity to form a new government, courtesy of Israeli voters.

There is also little uncertainty about the daunting national security challenges that will occupy the new Netanyahu led-government in 2013.

In conversations with a dozen senior figures in the Israeli national security establishment, including several currently serving in the government, the same three themes kept arising: the increasing Islamization of the region, de-legitimization of Israel in the international arena, and Iran's pursuit of nuclear arms.

In a recent column marking the second anniversary of the Arab Spring, Amos Harel, widely respected military correspondent and defense analyst for the Israeli daily Haaretz, made an eye-catching observation in a newspaper that leans decidedly left and rarely misses an opportunity to criticize Israel's right-of-center prime minister. "From an Israeli perspective," he wrote, "it would appear that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's initial reading of the so-called Arab Spring was closer to reality than that of U.S. President Barack Obama and other Western leaders."

To be sure, as Harel noted, dictators in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen have been ousted, and the dictator in Syria -- who, to crush rebellion, has butchered approximately 45,000 fellow citizens -- appears to be losing his grip on power.

However, even in Tunisia and Egypt, where elections have taken place, the Arab Spring has created or intensified political instability, resulted in worsened economic conditions, and led directly to the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood, a Sunni organization that seeks to ground political authority in traditional Islamic religious law. This is more or less as Netanyahu and the national security establishment in Israel warned two years ago, even as Obama and European leaders celebrated the supposed emergence of freedom in the Arab world.

Israel's leaders understand well that as the Middle East's sole liberal democracy, Israel has a strong interest in the spread of freedom and democracy in the region. But while Israelis cast their gaze beyond their borders, they see a paucity of groups and leaders committed to freedom and a tightening of an Islamic belt around them.

Iranian-backed Hezbollah rules absolutely in southern Lebanon and dominates the Lebanese government. The Iranian-backed regime of President Bashar al-Assad in Syria, whose days most experts in Israel believe are numbered, could well be followed by the ascent to power in Syria of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Pro-western King Abdullah of Jordan confronts a restive population, 70 percent of whom are Palestinian in origin, along with a rising tide of Islamic sentiment and activism among his people. If he were to fall, the most probable result would be an Islamist state -- with a standing army and a modern air force -- on the east bank of the Jordan River.

On Israel's other flank, Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi is working to consolidate power under an Islamist constitution. Iranian-funded weapons continue to flow to Hamas in Gaza through Egypt's Sinai Peninsula for use against Israeli civilian populations. Most knowledgeable observers in Israel believe that if elections were held in the West Bank tomorrow, Hamas would win.

Not all the news is bleak, however. Assad's demise in Syria would deal a devastating blow to Hezbollah in Lebanon and to its patron Iran by destroying a crucial link in the Shiite axis Tehran has been constructing from the Persian Gulf to the eastern shores of the Mediterranean.

At the same time, the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria is weaker than the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. In Jordan, King Abdullah thus far has played his cards well at home, and he enjoys strong if quiet support from Israel even as the pro-Western gulf monarchies understand Jordan's vital importance to regional stability. In Cairo, Morsi has affirmed his support for peace with Israel and showed a pragmatic streak in brokering the cease-fire between Israel and Hamas that ended Israel's November 2012 Pillar of Defense operation.

Moreover, with the Egyptian economy teetering on the brink and the problem of feeding Egypt's nearly 85 million citizens intensifying, Morsi seems to appreciate that the last thing he needs is for Hamas to disrupt relations with Israel.

Meanwhile, Israel's recently concluded Gaza operation destroyed a high proportion of Hamas' most dangerous rockets and missiles. Since the end of that operation, Hamas and affiliates in Gaza have held their fire. In the West Bank, which has yet to be touched by the Arab Spring, the economy continues to grow at a brisk clip, as it has since the establishment of Prime Minister Salam Fayad's government in 2007.

In recent years, the Netanyahu government's relaxation of the hated roadblocks and checkpoints between Palestinian population centers in the West Bank has increased mobility and promoted commerce, giving Palestinians the opportunity to enjoy middle-class pleasures and develop middle-class habits.

When Israelis casts their gaze beyond the region and look to international bodies such as the United Nations General Assembly and the United Nations Human Rights Council, and the bulk of the commentary emanating from universities and news organizations in the West, it sees a barely veiled hostility that seems determined to deny Israel's right to defend itself -- or even exist.

Notwithstanding former South African judge Richard Goldstone's April 2011 retraction in the Washington Post of the most scurrilous and baseless charges leveled in the 2009 U.N. report that bears his name, the Goldstone report continues to be cited by those bent on vilifying Israel as an outlaw nation.

Even with the threats posed by Islamization and de-legitimization, there is little doubt in Israel that Iran's development of nuclear weapons is the most urgent threat the nation faces.

Netanyahu's great diplomatic achievement has been to compel a dawdling and distracted West to recognize the gravity of the threat a nuclear Iran poses not only to Israel, but to regional stability. The pro-Western gulf monarchies fully appreciate that the regional hegemony Iran envisages entails their necessary subordination, if not their overthrow.

And while Israeli officials are acutely aware that current sanctions are inflicting real pain on the Iranian economy, they also know that diplomacy hasn't worked, and they are convinced - - as are most Sunni Arabs in the region -- that diplomacy won't work. Indeed, the Iranians have taken every invitation to negotiate as the cheap purchase of additional time to enrich uranium, and all indications are that they will continue to do so.

Should the mullahs in Tehran acquire a nuclear weapon, it would only be a short time before Saudi Arabia and other gulf monarchies turned the Middle East poly-nuclear by purchasing their own nuclear weapons from Pakistan. Alternatively, a nuclear Iran might succeed in using its quantum leap in leverage to force those gulf monarchies to expel American troops from the region.

In these difficult circumstances, Israel must both prepare to take advantage of small openings and gird itself against grave dangers. There is little it can do to weaken the appeal of political Islam in the countries that surround it. Israel can, however, continue to seek common ground with Islamists as it has with Egypt's Morsi.

And it can exercise influence on the West Bank and among its own Arab citizens to reduce the appeal of radical Islam. Regardless of progress in negotiations concerning a final status agreement with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, Israel should improve cooperation with the United States, Europe and other willing and able members of the international community to assist West Bank Palestinians in building educational, economic, and political infrastructure.

At the same time, Israel should direct more domestic resources to enabling Arab citizens of Israel to take advantage of the equal rights they enjoy under law and to integrate them into mainstream Israeli society.

The publication of the Goldstone report -- with its slanderous accusation that Israel had adopted a strategy of deliberately targeting civilians during its Gaza military operation -- was a painful wake-up call to Israel, but a wake-up call nonetheless. As a result, Israel grasps that the defense of its good name in the court of international public opinion is a pressing national security interest. Since 2009, Israel has allocated substantial new resources to combating ignorance and prejudice abroad. It can do a good deal more. As Middle East analyst Tom Gross points out, "Israel needs to devote the same quality of strategic thinking to combating campaigns of disinformation and slander that it has successfully employed on military and intelligence matters."

As for Iran, it is fair to say that Israel continues to develop aggressively options to prevent Tehran from becoming a nuclear power. One way in which the United States could advance the vital national security interest it shares with Israel and the Sunni Arab states -- President Obama has repeatedly affirmed that Iran must be prevented from acquiring nuclear weapons -- would be to announce immediately U.S. support for international monitors of Iran's June 2013 presidential elections.

Needless to say, Tehran will reject any such proposal, not least because the Islamist revolutionaries who run the country know they cannot win a fair election. But just as Ronald Reagan's speeches condemning the Soviet Union provided vital moral support to those

caught in the Russian gulag, so too could Obama give heart to the sizable proportion of the Iranian population that yearns to rid itself of Islamic totalitarianism.

This will be for Israel a perilous year, as has been every year since 1948, when it declared independence. Expect Israel in 2013, as it has every year since its birth, to rise to the daunting challenges it confronts.

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