



A “NEW” MIDDLE EAST? IMPLICATIONS FOR ISRAEL’S SECURITY

„NOWY” BLISKI WSCHÓD? IMPLIKACJE
DLA BEZPIECZEŃSTWA IZRAELA

*Agnieszka Bryc** 

— ABSTRACT —

The turbulent changes in the Middle East which were seen at the very beginning as good news for Israel, at the end of the day became more ambiguous. The Arab Spring and then the war in Syria that had erupted along with massive social protests ended up with regime changes, but what was crucial, the primary success of the Arab awakening was captured by Islamist movements. The changes in the Middle East were even deeper due to at least two factors – Russia „coming into” and the United States „going out” of the region. These new regional circumstances combined with the geopolitical shift in the Middle East and a crumbling American supervision made Israel conclude that its security has become more complex and the U.S has no more been the only significant great power player in the region. Hence the difficult political and military situation around Israel has created a need to adapt to security challenges and simultaneously, to take political opportunities.

The goal of this paper is to highlight basic ramifications for Israeli security and diplomacy

— ABSTRAKT —

Dynamiczne zmiany, jakie zaszły na Bliskim Wschodzie, początkowo postrzegane były jako korzystne dla Izraela, ostatecznie jednak okazały się bardziej dwuznaczne. Arabska wiosna i następnie wojna w Syrii, które wybuchły na fali wielkich protestów społecznych, doprowadziły do zmiany władzy, lecz kluczowym rezultatem było to, że zostały one przejęte przez ruchy fundamentalistyczne. Zmiany na Bliskim Wschodzie były poważniejsze i głębsze przynajmniej z dwóch powodów – Rosji „powracającej” na Bliski Wschód oraz Stanów Zjednoczonych „opuszczających” region. Obie te okoliczności wraz ze zmianami geopolitycznymi w regionie oraz słabnącą dominacją USA na Bliskim Wschodzie zmusiły Izrael do przewartościowania swojej polityki bezpieczeństwa. Stąd Izrael stanął przed szeregiem wyzwań dotyczących bezpieczeństwa, ale także wobec nowych okoliczności stanowiących szansę na poprawę jego stanu.

Celem artykułu jest wyjaśnienie głównych implikacji tych zmian dla bezpieczeństwa oraz polityki zagranicznej Izraela. Kluczowe pytania

* Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, Faculty of Political Science and Security Studies.

of the American and Russian factors in the current Middle East politics. The key questions are: How to secure Israeli interests in these new circumstances? How to assess, on the one hand, the risk of the ongoing decline of American interests in the region and, on the other hand, the complexity of the Russian strategy in the Middle East? Finally, whether Israel might be able to gain recognition by the Arab world, not to mention to keep its strategic domination in the region which is already being challenged by the Islamic Republic of Iran and its nuclear ambitions.

Keywords: Israel; Syria; Russia; the U.S.; the Middle East; war; conflict; security

dotyczą: możliwości zapewnienia bezpieczeństwa Izraela w nowych uwarunkowaniach regionalnych; określenia, jakie ryzyko dla bezpieczeństwa Izraela wiąże się z osłabieniem aktywności USA na Bliskim Wschodzie przy jednoczesnym rosnącym zaangażowaniu Rosji. I wreszcie – czy w takiej sytuacji Izrael zdoła doprowadzić do zwiększenia uznania jego państwowości w świecie arabskim, a także czy będzie w stanie utrzymać swoją dominację strategiczną w regionie podważaną przez ambicje jądrowe Iranu.

Słowa kluczowe: Izrael; Syria; Rosja; USA; Bliski Wschód; wojna; konflikt; bezpieczeństwo

INTRODUCTION

Israel belongs to the countries which domestic policy and international behavior are determined by security matters (Kącka, 2011), likewise the Middle East belongs to the regions which geopolitical map only at first glance seems to be stable, predictable and clear. What differentiates the Middle East and increases its significance in world politics is the combination of intense multidimensional – sectarian and political – hostility, violent conflicts and ability to widespread instability well beyond its traditional boundaries (Bojarczyk & Bryc, 2013). For the last forty years Israel has had some impact on creating balance of power in its neighborhood and only the recent Arab Spring has generated an earthquake in the Middle East *status quo*, reshaping it from grass-roots. Accordingly, the newly emergent unstable environment has created challenges and assets for Israel, but currently, the key factors are twofold – Russia “coming-in” and Americans to some extent “going-out” from the region. Since Russia’s intervention in Syria in 2015, the region has been perceived as one of the battlegrounds in relations with the West. Their rivalry has complicated all geopolitical calculations of all powers operating in the Middle East as well as regional players and particularly Israel. So, the key cards to be played in the Middle East by Washington and Moscow are definitely three – the future of Syria, the Iran nuclear program and its regional expansion, and at last – the regional strategic balance remaining in the state of flux.

RUSSIA IN SYRIA: A FRIEND OR A FOE?

Apart from the challenges created by the war, Syria has been the focus of Israeli attention for a few reasons – firstly, geographic proximity; secondly, long-standing hostility between the two countries; thirdly – in contrast to Egypt and Jordan – the lack of a peace treaty; and finally, Syria's demands to recover the Golan Heights, taken by Israel in 1967. At present, the importance of Syria is definitely a function of its client relations with Iran and Russia, as well as the likelihood of the spillover effect across the Golan Heights.

The war in Syria was therefore for Israel both an opportunity and a challenge. At the very beginning, Israelis were hoping the Alawite regime of Bashar Assad would be replaced by a new and moderate one, but with time the challenges have dominated the assessment mostly due to mounting destabilization along Israeli border and the risk of Syria becoming a satellite of Iran. Trying to avoid this worst scenario, Russia's role in Syria was perceived by Israelis twofold: as a necessary complication as well as a chance to hold Iranians at bay (Bryc, 2013, pp. 101–102).

Today Syria is the main battleground among the leading regional players – the Islamic Republic of Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia – for their position in the Middle East. Simultaneously, global powers like the United States and the minor one but desperate to improve its international status – the Russian Federation – have made the war in Syria a significant part of a global agenda. Furthermore, most of them maintain a military presence on the ground or operate via proxies. There are thereby Iranian and Iranian-proxy forces in support of the Assad regime; Turkish ground and air forces, allegedly formed in the past as a part of the anti-ISIS coalition but currently used rather to deter Kurds, as well as American, French, British, Jordanian, Russian, and Israeli air forces.

In practice, Syria is already split internally and divided into areas of foreign influence. Hence, the question for Israelis is, who would be able to shape Syria's future and thereby the Middle East stability – Americans, Russians, or someone else? Definitely the importance of the U.S. in the region is doubtless for them, however the future of American impact on the region remains vague. In contrast to the full-scale engagement in the past in Iraq and Afghanistan, American absence in the war in Syria is being so striking. Not surprisingly, in Israeli assessments, it is Russia and its military success in Syria that has shaped significantly new ramifications for Israel's security policy (Dekel & Magen, 2015).

Russia's decision to use force in Syria in September 2015 stemmed from several considerations. First of all, military support for Assad has challenged the United States, whose position and impact on the regional balance of power is believed to be reduced. Challenging the American interests in the Middle East may help Russia to exploit its influence in Damascus and bargain more successfully with Washington after their relations became frozen as a result of the Russian annexation of Crimean Peninsula in 2014. Being aware of the long history of Russian-Syrian cooperation and the Kremlin's strategic interests there, Israel realizes that Russia's actions in Syria are aimed at, firstly, keeping the bastion of its influence in the region; secondly, recovering previously lost influence in the Arab world; thirdly, expanding with military facilities outside post-Soviet area; lastly, keeping a market for arms sales and finally filling each vacuum created by a limited activity of Americans in the region.

In spite of the complex situation due to Syrian war, Israel and Russia have been trying to keep pragmatic bilateral relations, mostly in terms of security. Nevertheless, the deployment of Russian S-400 ground-to-air missiles in northern Syria has challenged Israel by virtue of limiting the Israeli Air Force's freedom of action and secrecy because S-400 system covers extensive areas in Syria, Lebanon, and northern Israel. From the new position at Lakatia on the Syrian coast, the range encompasses half of Israel's airspace, including Ben Gurion International Airport (Gross, 2015).

So Russian military and political presence in Syria combined with Israel's interest to deter any terrorist group (Hezbollah) or Shia militias from entering the Golan Heights motivated both countries to find a channel of communication and operational coordination to avoid any confrontation. Such a "deconfliction mechanism" has been operating at multiple levels. Nevertheless, it is always a matter of time until something happens. The first such deep crisis broke out in September 2018 as Syrians downed, instead of Israeli jet, the Russian airplane. The Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu expressed immediately his sorrows but reaction of the Kremlin was acute. Although Putin did not decide to downgrade bilateral relations, he ordered to transfer to Syria advanced S-300 ground-to-air missiles systems that might challenge any air operation of Israeli air forces. Such systems (S-400) were being operated in Syria, though they were only being used by the Russians and not being employed against Israel, so far. Now, however Israelis declare that in their opinion both countries still have a fundamental interest in continuing good relations and maintaining their understandings in

Syria, the risk of Russia repaying Israel with the same is more serious. And the last Netanyahu wants now is a confrontation with Russia.

Paradoxically, the key challenge for Israelis is not a military but a political one. Undoubtedly, the Israeli government is deeply disturbed by the Russian assistance extended to the Iranian-led Shiite axis in Syria and by cooperation with Iran as well. Israelis suspect that Russians are training Hezbollah how a world-class army gathers intelligence, makes plans, and executes operations. Israelis are also warning that, by working side-by-side with Russian officers, Hezbollah is likely to refine a modern military strategy that would make Israeli military specialists reassess the capacity of Nasrallah's group. Consequently, a newly offensive-minded Hezbollah capable of more complex operations could deal heavier blows to the Israeli army in a clash along the southern Lebanese border. It may even attempt to enter Israeli territory, as Hamas did in the 2014 conflict, albeit in a more capable manner (Allouche, 2016).

Although it is not difficult to see Russia's motivations for supplying Hezbollah with weapons, many specialists doubt this. According to Eyal Zisser, a professor at the University of Tel Aviv, "The Russians are careful not to engage directly with Hezbollah. Russia's message to the Israelis is quite clear – as long as you do not sabotage our efforts in Syria you are free to do with Hezbollah whatever you want" (Cohen, 2016). On the other hand, not all Israeli analysts dismiss the story. Yiftah Shapir, the head of the Middle East Military Balance project at Israel's Institute of National Security Studies, does not believe that Russia would openly sell P-800 Yakhont cruise missiles and Buk surface-to-air missiles (SA-17) to Hezbollah – the main threats as far as Israel is concerned. However, he believes that Hezbollah is resupplied with Soviet-origin weaponry – artillery shells for guns, artillery rockets for MRLs and anti-tank missiles (Cohen, 2016).

An ostensible support of Hezbollah and open backing of Iran and Syrian President al-Assad are presenting Russia as a reliable ally in the Middle East, which does not change much in the region now, but in the long term may allow Russia to rebuild its wider presence in the Arab Peninsula and successfully weaken Americans in the region. Thanks to Russia's loyalty and decisive operations in Syria, it sends a clear message to Arabs that, unlike the United States, Russia indeed supports its allies and does not betray them (Trenin, 2018, pp. 86–112). This has also ramifications for Israel, because the question is not only whether Russia is coming back to the region, but more importantly, who will be the Kremlin's ally – Iran, Turkey, moderate Arabs, or Israel?

Looking back to Russian allies in the Middle East so far, the Jewish state has been challenged by the Russian-Iranian cooperation, particularly by Russia's role in developing Iran's nuclear program. Israelis are worried about Tehran's ongoing efforts to arm itself with nuclear weapon, develop its missile program and generate a military presence on Israel's borders with Syria and Lebanon. The final success would mean for Israelis the end of its strategic superiority in the region and neutralization of its defense and deterrence capabilities. Seen from Moscow, the alliance with Iran is one of the most useful cards to play in the game in the Middle East, but undoubtedly their bilateral relations are overshadowed by a long tradition of mutual fear and suspicion. Therefore, their cooperation is definitely broad, but much more of tactical importance. Kremlin's choice is based on the recognition of Iran's growing importance as a regional power, which, along with hostile Iranian-American and Iranian-Israeli relations, is giving Russia many tactical possibilities in front of the U.S., Israel and the Arab countries (Moore, 2014, pp. 47–65). What is more, it would help Russia to erase the label of a junior partner in relations with the United States. In fact, Russian leaders have no illusions about the nature of the Iranian policy and they realize the danger of proliferation in the world's still most combustible region, but all these concerns are part of the more comprehensive concept of Russian international strategy. Russia's backing of Iran is neither unconditional nor unambiguous, so consequently to keep the balance, Russia has supported a few UN Security Council resolutions on Iran, three of which imposed light sanctions on that country, and was part of the P5+1 (alongside with the other four permanent members of the Security Council and Germany) group that had negotiated the nuclear deal with the Iran (Trenin, 2010, p. 14). Certainly, Russia, like the rest of the world, does not want Iran to develop nuclear weapons, but it is not interested in waging a preemptive war against Iran, like the U.S. did in Iraq. For these reasons it condemned Trump's threats to withdraw from the 2015 landmark deal with Iran that aims to curb Tehran's nuclear program in exchange for lifting sanctions. As the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov argued, such reckless policy of the American administration could end up with international destabilization or even more unpredictable consequences (Lavrov, 2017).

What Israel can do in this case is to count on the competing interests of Moscow and Tehran in the Middle East and the broader international scene and try to attract Russia in security matters (Bryc, 2017, pp. 85–95). Such thinking does make sense, because even in Syria there is much room for Russian-

Iranian rivalry. Their views on the future of Syria are the first but not last bone of contention. While from Iran's perspective Assad's survival is of substantial importance – since any regime that could take its place would be much less convenient for Iran – from Russia's perspective the Assad regime is important but not critical. This means that the Kremlin is in fact ready to negotiate with the U.S. some compensations in Syria in return for the lifting of economic sanctions that followed its annexation of Crimea in 2014 and a recognition of Russia as a significant global player (Piechowiak-Lamparska, 2019). The next area of potential dispute between Russia and Iran is the future dependence of Syria. While Russians have dominated the diplomatic and political backing of Syria in international politics, they had to share the military campaign with Tehran, which has helped Iran to expand its influence into Syria with the perspective of creating a broader political, military and logistics land-bridge between Iran, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. So the question of who will dominate the Syrian regime – Russians or Iranians – would be a room for rivalry between these both powers. Another reason for potential dispute between Russia and Iran is the future of Syrian Kurds. Iran is closely watching Russian and American military relations with the Syrian Kurdish nationalist Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG). While Iran has worked with the PYD and Russia to back Assad's forces, given its own increasingly volatile problems with Kurdish separatist groups, Tehran has rejected federalism in northern Syria (Geranmayeh & Liik, 2016, p. 6).

The Kurdish card is played by Russia not only in front of Iran, but mainly in relations with Turkey. Nevertheless, today Russian-Turkish relations seem to have reconciled after the freeze caused by the downing of a Russian jet by the Turkish air force on November 24, 2015. The fact is, there is by all means more rivalry than cooperation between Russia and Turkey. Firstly, Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Vladimir Putin represent aggressive and ambitious leaders driven by the desire to transform their respective countries into the powers they once were. It is no accident that their nicknames are "sultan" for Erdogan, and "tsar" for Putin. Even if current Russian-Turkish relations are pragmatically warm, there is not enough space in the Middle East and in the post-Soviet sphere for such ambitious leaders, and one day their interests are likely to clash once again. Secondly, regarding the Syrian crisis, they occupy the opposite positions in terms of Assad's removal from power and the role of Kurds in the Syrian conflict. Furthermore, while both countries formally had opposed the Islamic State and declared to weaken it, they were actually making use of it to garner legitimacy for their activities in Syria.

However, a variety of future scenarios in the Turkish-Russian confrontation are still possible, and the fact is that the stability in Syria is rather not possible without the mutual cooperation of Ankara and Moscow.

So, what are Israel's options for Russia in Syria? Choosing among bad and worse options – Bashar Assad's survival with Russian patronage in Syria or Iranian presence *vide* their proxies operating in close neighborhood with Israel – the calculation is quite clear in favor of adopting for Russians behind the borders. This is why the Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has officially called on President Putin to follow a few demands or otherwise Israel will successfully hit any peace attempts by military involvement in Syria. Firstly, Israeli interests have to be taken into consideration during peace talks sponsored by Russia and Israel must be, even covertly, involved in these negotiations. Secondly, Russia – not Iran – should take responsibility for security in Syria. Thirdly, Israel will not accept any Iranian infrastructures for manufacturing, assembling, and storing advanced weapons anywhere in Syria. Lastly, Israel will not allow for Russian or Iranian arms transfers to Hezbollah or Shia militia in Syria (Dekel & Magen, 2017).

It is no wonder that when an Iranian drone was intercepted in Israeli airspace in February 2018, Israelis decided to respond militarily and strike targets in Syria. Despite the precise military operation, for the first time since the first Lebanese war in the 1980 the Israeli jet was brought down by anti-aircraft. This incident was definitely a mutual Israeli-Iranian exchange of messages that, on the one hand, Israel is ready to intervene and risk a full-scale conflict in Syria with Iranian forces and their allies, including Hezbollah if they would dig in on Syrian territory and approach the boundary with the Israeli-held portion of the Golan Heights. On the other hand, bringing down F-16 was a clear signal to Israel that the next such operation should be assessed as of a high risk and the capabilities of Iran in Syria must be taken as operative.

All in all, Israel took a few lessons from this accident. First of all, Iran has demonstrated its military capacity, what suggests that in the case of any Israeli intervention in its sphere of responsibility, Iran will respond. The scenario of a conflict with Hezbollah, which thanks to its involvement in Syrian war is now more experienced, better equipped and well trained, seems to be more likely. Hence, Israel should take into consideration a broader clash in the northern front of Golan Heights with the Iranian proxies in Syria and in southern Lebanon with Hezbollah. To make it more complex, the alternative of the conflict in the northern front is burdened by the risk of drawing Russia into the regional

confrontation. Therefore, the next conclusion is that Israel could not restrain Iran alone and any military scenario must consider not only the Russian factor and the assessment of how long Moscow could remain neutral but first of all whether the American administration would grant their permission being aware of the likelihood of a confrontation with Russia (Shapiro, 2018).

TRUMP FACTOR

The U.S. support is fundamental for Israel for the variety of reasons. The key factors are however the military and financial aid allowing Israel to keep the "qualitative military edge" (QME) over neighboring militaries, international backing which successfully neutralizes anti-Israeli resolutions in the United Nations, not to mention deeper mutual understanding and shared values (Sharp, 2018). Nevertheless, the U.S.-Israel special relationship used to be far from perfect. And the case was not only Barack Obama's presidency when some of the underlying foundations of this special alliance were challenged by more critical attitude towards Israel regarding to settlements' policy in the West Bank or the peace process in deadlock. Also, what was crucial for the Prime Minister Netanyahu – the diplomatic opening with Iran, an initiative that would end three decades of Iranian-American hostility in return for depriving Israel its strategic superiority in the Middle East (Katzman, 2016, pp. 65–94).

Not surprisingly, Netanyahu's government had been seriously concerned about the Israeli-American alliance under Barak Obama. It was in particular the rapprochement between the U.S. and Iran that was recognized as directly touching Israel's security and strengthening the risk of the U.S. abandoning its strategic ally (Jervis, 2017, pp. 31–57). Hence, it was ironic that it was Barak Obama, whose contact with the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was notoriously cold, to sign the largest in the U.S. history a 10-year agreement of \$38 billion deal for military aid to Israel (Booth & Eglash, 2016). Politically, such a huge package was partly a response to the nuclear deal that the United States and other P5+1 powers had finalized in July 2015, and it was harshly criticized by Netanyahu, who called it a "historic mistake" that would ease sanctions on Iran while leaving it with the ability to get the bomb one day, and the new money was an attempt to pacify Israeli concerns about continuing threats from Iran (Green, 2016).

Fortunately for Benjamin Netanyahu, Donald Trump has been sharing his antipathy for the Vienna deal, even as it sets them apart from the overwhelming majority of other world leaders. In line with the Israeli Prime Minister's stance, the American President firstly signaled his intention to withdraw certification of the Iran deal and then finally took the step. Although that does not lead directly to the end of the agreement, but it allowed to restore sanctions on Iran. In fact, Israel has little if any chances to stop Iranian nuclear deal, so Benjamin Netanyahu has to understand and appreciate his limitations and the tiny likelihood of stopping Iranian nuclear system by using primarily military solutions instead of diplomatic and political ones (Landau & Stein, 2015).

The Trump's staff responsible for the Middle East dominated by hawks and critics of the Iran deal as well as supporters for sanctions and preemptive attacks suggests that the American policy in the Middle East is likely more pro-Israeli and anti-Iranian than in the past. It is not surprising as President's Trump electorate is Christian and for biblical reasons pro-Israeli. They believe that creation of the Israel as a Jewish State was the fulfillment of biblical prophecy. This way the Israeli-American alliance is not only the result of political calculations and shared interests, but comes from more spiritual political philosophy. Consequently, there are numerous pro-Israeli politicians in the White House like Jared Kushner, the President's son-in-law leading the diplomatic effort in working on a proposal of a new Middle Eastern peace agreement, Jason Greenblatt, a special envoy to the Palestinian-Israeli peace process (till September 2019), and Nikki Haley, the U.S. envoy to the UN (till the end of 2018). In the very beginning, President Trump nominated David M. Friedman, a lawyer aligned with the Israeli far right, as an ambassador to Israel. Pro-Israeli were also John Bolton, a security advisor, and Mike Pompeo, the former director of CIA who replaced Rex Tillerson as the Secretary of State.

Coming to evangelical Christians' expectations, President Trump took the decision on moving the American embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem already in 2018 to make it coincide with the 70th anniversary of the establishment of the State of Israel planned for the 14th of May. The decision came despite overwhelming global opposition, not only the Palestinian one and the most of Muslim world, but it was in contrast to previous political consensus of all presidents so far. Putting aside the fact that the movement of the embassy to Jerusalem will not change anything on the ground, as for Israelis Jerusalem is their capital city, as well as Palestinians will not give up their claims for the East Jerusalem as their capital city.

All in all, this would bring to at least two consequences. Firstly, it is widely feared that moving it to the Holy City for Jews, Christians and Muslims will fuel anti-Jewish radicalism in the Muslim world if not spark anti-Israeli violence in the region. Secondly, it will push back already waning efforts to achieve peace between Israel and the Palestinians. Despite these worries the majority of the Israeli analysts has welcomed this decision. Some of them even doubt whether Palestinians and other Arab nations would carry out massive upheavals. For instance, Elliott Abrams, Senior Fellow for Middle Eastern studies at the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) in Washington, DC and Former Deputy Assistant to the President and Deputy National Security Advisor in the administration of President George W. Bush, claims that violence depends only on Arab leaders and if Palestinians want peace, they will negotiate for peace – wherever the U.S. embassy sits (Tzogopoulos, 2017).

There are justified worries, however. American politics in the Middle East being so favorable to Israel might force the Jewish State to face more security challenges than opportunities. First of all, recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital by moving the American embassy there from Tel Aviv disgraces the Palestinian authorities and primarily President Mahmoud Abbas, who turns out to lose his face in front of the Palestinian people and remain helpless in this situation. The problem for Israel is indeed not a weakening position of Abbas, but the risk of long-lasting, non-violent resistance of Palestinians both in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank to which Israeli security forces are definitely not prepared. The logic is quite clear, as long as violence is on the Palestinian side, the Israelis will legally respond with force, but a non-violence may challenge Israel because it will likely help Palestinians to gain more international support and weaken their deeply ingrained image of terrorists and extremists. As a result, the more successful the non-violence is, the less successful is the Israeli campaign against a worldwide international criticism (Hussein, 2015, pp. 143–160).

Another potential threat for Israel is a risk of a new hybrid war. The U.S. politics in the Middle East bias towards Israel will likely fuel all grass-roots anti-Jewish sentiments in the region. Contrary to the conventional threat, the challenge would be the asymmetrical conflict against those with both guerilla and regular capabilities like Hezbollah and Hamas. These organizations could not be perceived any more as typical irregular militias based on spontaneous supporters due to the long-lasting experience of Hezbollah in Syria or Hamas in three mini-wars with Israel, more professionalism thanks to an advanced military training delivered by high professionals (Russians and Iranians for Hezbollah),

financing from abroad, better equipment and improvement of logistic skills (Davis, 2016, pp. 68–72). While none of them is interested in a direct clash with Israeli, it is predicted however that a potential conflict cannot be excluded in south of Lebanon, the Gaza Strip and most of Israel's parts, according to the range and location of Hezbollah or Hamas rockets and missiles regardless of the capabilities of the Israeli anti-rocket system intercepting missiles in the air (Eilam, 2016, pp. 247, 254).

Hamas has been governing Gaza since 2007 and for more than ten years it has been in charge of managing the public security, health system and administration. Within a decade Gaza's two million residents have suffered from poor humanitarian conditions, high unemployment (44 percent), poverty (40 percent), not to mention the lack of reconstruction after wars with Israel (*Palestine's Economic Outlook*, 2017). Struggling with the fallout from an Israeli-Egyptian border blockade since 2007, Hamas has found it increasingly difficult to govern or provide basic services to Gaza's residents. So, the very last reconciliation agreement that Hamas and Fatah signed in Cairo in October 2017 has been giving Hamas some political benefits. However, its implementation is still questionable and quite likely may end up like the previous attempts. Nevertheless, the handover of Gaza administrative control to the Palestinian unity government will allow Hamas to saddle all costs and responsibility of governing Gaza with Mahmoud Abbas' administration especially as he started pushing Hamas to return the territory to the PA's control by refusing to pay for Gaza electricity, administration salaries and public health. This is why Hamas – eager to rid itself of the burdens of governing, though unwilling to disarm its military wing – showed flexibility at the talks. The calculation is clear, public and administration will become the responsibility of Fatah whereas security and resistance of Hamas. Moreover, the process of reconciliation might help Hamas to weaken the position of President Abbas, who is now suffering from a general criticism in the West Bank for lack of success in attempts to negotiate the terms of Palestinian statehood with Israel, no legacy and chronic corruption. Simultaneously, it helps him to strengthen Abbas' rival Mohammad Dahlan, the ousted Gaza leader of the Palestinian Fatah movement, who lives in exile in the United Arab Emirates. Hamas is hoping that an alliance with Dahlan would persuade some Arab countries to provide financial aid to the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. Finally, Hamas does not want to be the party responsible for the reconciliation's failure lest this undermines its relationship with Egypt as its position has been weakened by recent developments in the region, includ-

ing Saudi-led moves against Qatar, once a major financial contributor to Gaza (Haaretz & Reuters, 2018).

Despite its weakness and reconciliation process with Fatah, Hamas realizes that at a time when the entire Arab world is fighting the U.S. President Donald Trump's decision to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital, it cannot remain on the sidelines. Thus, it is trying to show that it is actively opposing Trump's announcement by, *inter alia*, organizing "The March of Return" in Gaza, a return not to the peace process, which Hamas rejects out of hand, or to the pre-1967 boundaries, which it refuses to recognize, but to 1948, the year of setting up Israel (Chafets, 2018). The "March of Return" has unveiled a new tactic, mass swarming, designed to force Israeli troops at the border, provoke to use force and, at the end of the day, the international condemnation. It seems, however, not to work so successfully. Meanwhile, the lesson for Israel is that it should improve its capabilities in case of such not-so-violent "marches" and "days of rage" but very provocative and aiming rather at gaining the mass-media attention and international societies' hearts and minds.

The U.S. pro-Israeli decisions are creating, among many challenges, also opportunities for the Israeli government. More precisely, although the decision of moving the embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem would reverse decades of the U.S. policy on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and undermine Washington's role as a broker in the peace process, the undoubted advantage is that Israel's relation with some Arab countries, mostly the Persian Gulf monarchies and mainly Saudi Arabia, has become no more so-covert-alliance as well as no more a taboo. Such a shift may bring a broader, however, still limited pragmatization of contacts with the Arab countries based on mutual interests, like, first of all, confrontation with Iran by exchanging intelligence with the Saudis. What is important for Israel, Saudis and Qataris play a significant role in the Palestinian conflict, which is for now fairly low on the agenda of the Middle East in turmoil, but in case of restarting the peace process it would be crucial to limit the Arab monarchies involvement onto the talks or at least their critical reaction to the "ultimate deal" which President Trump promised to make between Israelis and Palestinians.

The image of the U.S. as solely pro-Israeli ally is one thing, practical strategy is quite another. Although many of Trump's words may be welcome in Israel and Saudi Arabia, both governments know that the U.S. policy seems adrift in the region. The declining role of Americans in the Middle East since Obama's presidency has created a more complex situation of Israel and encouraged the local players retained greater ability to determine regional politics on their own.

As a result, historical grievances, geopolitical rivalries and ideological clashes, which never disappeared from the agenda, are able to manifest themselves more freely than before, and here it is enough to point a virulent competition for regional hegemony between Saudi Arabia and Iran which is able to destabilize entirely the region (Istomin, 2016, p. 4).

The lesson for Israel is – in spite of the ongoing alliance with the U.S. – to be more self-reliant in terms of security in the Middle East. President Trump's decisions may harm Israel in the long run, like by stating in Ohio in March 29, 2018 that the American forces will be pulled out of Syria "very soon". The problem is not the sole declaration but the following words "Let the other people take care of it now" (Merica, Liptak, & Diamond, 2018), which suggests that Syria will likely become either Russia's "protectorate" or Iran's. Such declarations are concerning Israel and other regional nations like at least Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Lebanon as being the most impacted by the war in Syria. From their perspective, the U.S. military presence in Syria has been seen as a buffer against Iranian activity, and especially against Tehran's desire to establish a contiguous land route from Iran to the Mediterranean coast in Lebanon.

IN LIEU OF A CONCLUSION

The Arab Spring and the following war in Syria have transformed the regional politics as well as shifted the balance of power. First of all, it has highlighted declining interest of the United States in the region and simultaneously elevated regional states like Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey and the newcomers like Russia. Consequently, the political vacuum created by a limited activity of the Americans has been filled to some extent by Russians taking any opportunity to find and use the leverage to bargain with the U.S. in other regions.

The Arab Spring, seen from Israel, was a chance to topple the regime of Bashar Assad and install in Damascus more moderate government. These hopes became soon pointless due to capturing the success of the Arab Spring by Islamic fundamentalists and particularly Iran. So, once again it turned out that in the Middle East things are not always what they seem to be.

Moreover, Moscow, at first glance seen as an acceptable partner in the Middle East, is in fact much more a risky one. Its interests are more global than Israeli ones and the Middle East is not a priority for Russia, as it is rather an instrument of leverage in front of the United States. So, President Putin, who is recognized

rightly as pro-Israeli, might easily maneuver between Israel, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Israel to achieve Russia's interests. If in Kremlin's strategy would be a rapprochement with Tehran, Moscow will not hesitate to act in favor of Iran. Nevertheless, the paradox and at the same time the room for Israel is that Russia's position in the Middle East is neither so stable, nor so crucial. In fact, Americans who are seen as abandoning the region cannot disengage from the Middle East completely and are able – if needed – to limit Russian inroads to the region.

Finally, however the regional political circumstances have been changed dramatically, the task for Israeli security has not been changed so much and remains focused on not-so-new two assumptions – to rely first of all on itself in terms of defense and to keep the U.S. involved and focused into the Middle East.

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