

ISRAELI FOREIGN POLICY IN LIGHT OF DRAMATIC CHANGES IN THE REGION: DIPLOMATIC SUCCESS AND CHALLENGES AHEAD

The dramatic developments in the Middle East in the last decade have improved and strengthened Israel's position in the region. The implications of the Arab Spring, the discoveries of natural gas in the deep waters of the East Med, and specifically within the Israeli EEZ, initiated a regional process where Israel is playing a central, substantial and constructive role. It was manifested with the impressive regional architecture in the East Med (and in particular the establishment of the EMGF) and the Abraham Accords. Those developments strengthened Israel's room of maneuver and its self-confidence. At this strategic junction, a substantial and extremely important challenges are ahead of Israel's Foreign policy: Expanding the regional cooperation in the East Med to include more relevant players if possible; Deepening the cooperation with the Abraham Accords countries and using this model for wider cooperation in the region; and last but not least, initiating a political and realistic process with the Palestinians in order to revive the Two State Vision.

Michael Harari*



TPQ

Fall 2022

* Michael Harari is a Retired Ambassador of Israel, who worked in different countries including Cyprus, Egypt and Britain. He is a Policy Fellow at Mitvim, The Israeli Institute For Regional Foreign Policies; a Lecturer at the Political Science Department in Yezreel Valley College in Israel; a Consultant on Strategy, Policy Planning and Energy.

The past decade was characterized by dramatic developments in the Middle East and beyond, which directly affected the interests of all countries in the region, including Israel. Naturally, it won't be possible to refer in detail to the multitude of events, but the focus will be on the main consequences these events had on the region.

It is thus appropriate to emphasize five key developments:

1. The dramatic and surprising events through the Arab Spring, which raised many hopes initially, ended with a weak and disappointing result a decade later. Practically, those uprisings and their failures caused a significant weakening of most of the Arab countries and ongoing violent conflicts and civil wars, some of which are still occurring.
2. The strengthening of Iran at the expense of the Arab world; an assertive and forceful regional foreign policy, simultaneously with the American withdrawal from the nuclear agreement (by the Trump administration), which enabled Teheran to proceed with its nuclear program without restrictions or any agreed parameters.
3. Changes in the order of priorities of the American foreign policy, in a way that deepened the perception, or a reality, of a significant decrease in American attention to the Middle East.
4. The decline in the centrality of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, both in terms of the players in the region, and in terms of the international arena.
5. The energy discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean, with an emphasis on Israel's economic waters, made the Eastern Mediterranean stand out as a distinct sub-region and encouraged a rather impressive network of regional cooperation.

These developments changed the regional relationship almost beyond recognition and opened a fascinating latitude for Israeli foreign policy, which was not possible before. The practical expression of this was realized in two main directions: the regional alignment in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Abraham Accords with countries in the Gulf, Morocco and even Sudan.

It is essential to clarify how and why these trends developed and deepened.

The East Mediterranean

The discoveries of the natural gas fields in the East Mediterranean illustrated for Israel (and the entire region) the real potential that lies in the deep waters of the

region, energetically and no less importantly, from Political and strategical meaning and implications. It is worth mentioning that in those years, the relationship between Türkiye and Israel, and in fact with most of the countries in the region, was cold and critical. The Turkish support of the political Islam (Muslim Brotherhood), which grew more substantial in the first years of the Arab Spring, and even came to power in Egypt, was received with great disapproval among most of the regional actors, in Israel and in the Arab world. Moreover, the Hellenic countries - Greece and Cyprus - immediately recognized the regional window of opportunity that opened up to them. The result: a significant improvement in the relationship between Israel, Egypt, Jordan, Greece, and Cyprus, which later led to the establishment of the Regional Gas Forum (EMGF), which was joined by other players such as Italy, France and even the Palestinian Authority. The United States and the European Union joined as observers. As a matter of fact, the absence of Türkiye from that regional diplomacy helped create the “glue” between most of these countries during those years. Furthermore, the latest agreement between Israel and Lebanon regarding their maritime border, a dramatic and impressive development in itself, although additional unique factors stand at the root of it (mainly the unprecedented political-economic crisis in Lebanon), bears witness to the fascinating regional value. The attractiveness of the Eastern Mediterranean to Europe, due to the gas discoveries, and following the war in Ukraine and the current energy crisis, are added to all the developments listed so far.

“The Turkish support of the political Islam (Muslim Brotherhood), which grew more substantial in the first years of the Arab Spring, and even came to power in Egypt, was received with great disapproval among most of the regional actors, in Israel and in the Arab world.”

Bottom line, it can be summarized that the last decade has contributed to the developing an impressive regional architecture in the Eastern Mediterranean. It has reached, at present, a challenging junction of how to integrate, if possible, the “missing players” into this regional complex built, as mentioned, in recent years in the region—clearly, a challenge with quite many question marks of its validity.

The Abraham Accords

The agreements signed in September 2020 between Israel, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, to which Morocco and Sudan also joined (the latter is admittedly at a different stage, mainly due to the internal circumstances in the country), constitute a significant leap forward in the relationship between Israel and the Arab world, and clearly to the whole region. The Abraham Accords illustrates the depth of the changes that have taken place in the region in recent years. It is imperative to emphasize three key aspects which lies beneath it, or contributed to the realization of those agreements: the threat that the Arab countries, with emphasis on the Gulf countries, feel from Iran's direction; the marginalization of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with which progress in its solution, as recalled, was seen as a necessary and early condition for further Israeli-Arab normalization; and the question marks that have arisen, mainly in the Gulf, regarding the degree of American commitment to stand by their side in the event of a tangible Iranian threat (actually, as it took place in several times in recent years from the Gulf countries point of view). The agreements, which are known to have received discreet Saudi support, including a few public expressions on its part (such as Prime Minister Netanyahu's visit to the kingdom at the time, which was "leaked to the media"), emphasize the depth of the changes in the region. Furthermore, the ease, and the public manifestations of normalization between Israel and these countries, were seen in Jerusalem as a crucial testimony, or illustration, to the common interests of those countries.

The Abraham Accords joins the peace agreements between Israel, Egypt, and Jordan, significantly expanding the scope and depth of Israeli-Arab relations, and in Israel's view, stabilize a strong front against Iran. Moreover, those agreements represent to a large degree, a kind of model of future (and nowadays a present) Israeli – Arab relations in the region. It strengthens, to a substantial degree the reality of Israeli integration in the region.

The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict And The Two-State Vision

As mentioned, the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians has been pushed aside in the last decade, given the dramatic changes that have taken place in the region. The regional instability, the strengthening of political Islam (in the first years of the Arab Spring), the disintegration of countries such as Syria, Libya and Yemen, and the strengthening of Iran, greatly reduced the centrality of the Palestinian issue, in the views of the regional and the international arena. From Israel's point of view, all of these add to the narrative that has developed and deepened since the beginning of the 2000s - the failure of the Camp David negotiations and the second intifada – meaning the lack of a Palestinian partner for an agreement. Actually, there has been

no political dialogue at all between the two leaderships for more than a decade. The perception established in Israel during these years, of the absence of a Palestinian partner, has deepened more so in recent years, characterized by the twilight of Abu Mazen's rule in the Palestinian Authority. The Abraham Accords, which were received with much criticism by the Palestinians, alongside the established and deepened control of Hamas in the Gaza Strip, did not help the Palestinian issue vis-a-vis the Arab regional arena. Neither vis-à-vis the Israeli public opinion.

“In practice, a political process and the possibility of a permanent Israeli-Palestinian agreement are now seen as impractical at best. The Israeli arena is fixed, more than ever, with the “no partner” concept. From its perspective, the Palestinian arena is accustomed to this reality, and there are no substantial efforts to challenge this reality or establish some sort of dialogue with the Israeli Public.”

These regional processes and the profound changes in the Israeli and Palestinian arena pushed the discourse about the two-state vision to the margins. In practice, a political process and the possibility of a permanent Israeli-Palestinian agreement are now seen as impractical at best. The Israeli arena is fixed, more than ever, with the “no partner” concept. From its perspective, the Palestinian arena is accustomed to this reality, and there are no substantial efforts to challenge this reality or establish some sort of dialogue with the Israeli Public. It is fair to summarize the present circumstances with the tragic note that the Two State Vision may be seen as far from reality for both sides.

Israeli Foreign Policy – Where It Is Going (Or Should Go) Ahead?

The regional processes, described above, expanded Israel's room for maneuvering, regionally and internationally, and significantly strengthened the self-confidence in Israeli foreign policy. The regional cooperation in the Eastern Mediterranean on the one hand, and the Abraham Accords on the other, have proven that it is possible to develop a regional system, in which Israel plays a central and constructive role, illustrating the meeting of interests created fascinatingly, between Israel and many actors in the region. It is important to add, to that reality, the thaw in relations between Israel and Türkiye, including visits by the highest levels in both countries and the

return of political representation to the level of ambassadors. Turkish foreign policy has recently been characterized by improving and restoring relations with a series of countries in the region, beyond Israel - Saudi Arabia, the Gulf countries, and Egypt.

So, What Are The Challenges Facing Israeli Foreign Policy These Days?

This paper corresponds well with the current political reality in Israel, with the entrance of a new government in Israel. The administration will be required, it is assumed, to formulate an up-to-date foreign policy in light of and on the basis of the developments we have described. The war in Ukraine is exacerbating the Israeli dilemma regarding the proper policy, in the face of the ever-escalating Russian-Western conflict. Israel's affiliation with the Western camp is completely clear. Still, its precise expressions are not fully consolidated, regarding the degree of assistance it requires to Ukraine, and the consequences on the relationship with Moscow, including on the Syrian arena and vis-a-vis Iran. It is therefore requested to illuminate, and even suggest, a few desirable courses of action for Israel's foreign policy.

The Eastern Mediterranean

The challenge facing Israel (and the region) is twofold: how to deepen the regional architecture built in recent years, and at the same time inviting important players who were absent from it to integrate into this fabric constructively. This is of course, mainly in relation to Türkiye, and in a different way also to Lebanon. The Israeli - Lebanese agreement, which was signed not long ago, is a siren of regional reassurance and presents Lebanon with a challenging but promising way to integrate into these regional processes. The Turkish angle is challenging and promising at the same time. Israel's foreign policy has proven in recent years that it knows how to recognize a window of opportunity that opens before it, and to manipulate it properly.

The close relationship, and the high level of trust, that Israel has developed and deepened with countries such as Egypt, Greece and Cyprus should help strengthen the relationship between Israel and Türkiye. The last few years have proven, to a large extent, that it is possible to conduct diplomacy that is not necessarily based on a zero-sum game. In other words, Israel needs to improve its relationship with Türkiye, alongside its close and excellent relations with the other regional players. Türkiye's integration into the regional system is essential, even if it is not easy. **Israel should and can play a constructive role** in this, precisely based on the trust it enjoys and, of course its strategic relationship with the U.S. The growing attractiveness of the energy discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean for Europe and the West can help with this. This is another window of opportunity. The last decade has proven that countries in the region knew how to recognize it and step in. The

thinking around regional energy hubs, which implies competition or rivalry, must be put aside, and instead develop a variety of channels for cooperation, in which each country contributes its relative advantages.

The Abraham Accords

The rationale of these agreements reflects the shared sense of threat on the one hand, and the enormous potential inherent in regional cooperation, and in all fields, on the other hand. The relationship between the countries illustrated that there is no contradiction between the two. Israel's challenge is twofold: deepening the cooperation and expanding it, while "marketing" the model that stands at its foundation to the entire region. A central and most promising course of action can and should be in the connection between the two regional arrays - the Eastern Mediterranean and the Gulf.

There are multiple areas of cooperation, but it is appropriate that they focus on the connection, or the interface, between energy and the climate crisis. The climate conference in Egypt (COP27), which is currently taking place, and the future conference next year in Dubai (COP28) are a fascinating illustration of the required agenda in terms of the region. Israel, and its technological capabilities in the various relevant fields, can and must contribute and integrate into this.

The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

The absence of political discourse, or any political process, between the two sides was explained on the basis of the dramatic regional developments in the last decade. **However, inaction cannot be a policy.** Inaction pushes both sides to contradicting corners and promote, not necessary by an active way, the "one state" chaotic reality. Therefore, it is requested to lay the foundation for the renewal of a political process in preparation for more possible and practical circumstances down the road. Israel must harness the successful and fascinating regional strategies that have emerged in recent years, the improved self-confidence because of its positive integration in regional affairs, and the interests of most regional players to contribute to conflict resolution, in order to place the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on constructive lines. This challenge is presented to both sides, Israel, and the region: to encourage both public opinions and political arenas in Israel and Palestine to look towards the two-state vision in a more positive and sober light.

Concluding Remarks

It is of extreme importance to emphasize the fascinating and challenging reality lay

again ahead of us: Never before the East Mediterranean enjoyed such promising, and at the same time, escalating circumstances. The present architecture built in recent years has proved what could be achieved when actors recognize a window of opportunity and jump through it. But it hasn't completed its mission. It is so important and possible, to conclude this process, no matter how challenging it may be.