



Middle East Mediterranean

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Editorial Team

Evangelos Venetis, *Editor in Chief,*
The Middle East Research Project, ELIAMEP

Evangelos Tembos,
Research Associate, ELIAMEP

George Tzogopoulos, *Web Editor*
Bodossakis Post-Doctoral Fellow at ELIAMEP

Thanos Dokos, *Senior Advisor,*
Director-General, ELIAMEP

Editorial Office

Hellenic Foundation for European and foreign Policy - ELIAMEP
49, Vas. Sofias str., Athens, 10676, Greece
T.: (+30) 210 7257110
Email: mideast@eliamep.gr; venetis@eliamep.gr

Middle East Mediterranean (MEM) is an unbiased bimonthly report of the *ELIAMEP Middle East Research Project*, focusing largely on geopolitical and economic developments, debates as well as policies, affecting the future of the Middle East. Having a global outlook MEM hosts analyses, commentaries, interviews and news, conducting research in the fields of politics, economics and culture in the Middle East and adjacent areas, such as the Eastern Mediterranean.

NOTICE: The views expressed in the articles of the *Middle East Mediterranean* do not reflect the point of view of the Hellenic Institute for European and Foreign Policy and the Editorial Team.

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Editor's Note

This is a transitional period for the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East. The Arab Spring through series of events has highlighted the transition from the autocratic post-colonial past to a more democratic, of uncertain outcome though, future. Moreover at a time during which new alliances have been shaped and the region is reshaped in many aspects, Israel and Palestine try to adjust to these new developments without finding a *modus Vivendi* which could ensure a way out of this ongoing crisis.

The recent Israeli elections have reasserted the role of conservative parties at the expense of central left political powers. This aspect of the election results, in spite of the existence of many parties of equal seat power in the parliament, gives a hint of the policy that Israel will pursue regarding the expansion or halt of Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian lands.

The current issue of the Middle East Mediterranean focuses on those aspects of developments related to Israel and the Palestinians that are expected to have a strong impact on future developments, i.e. the case of Israeli settlements, relations between Israel and Hamas, and the outlook of Israel regarding its neighborhood.

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Analyses

Israel's New Governing Coalition: Business as usual or new policies in the regional setting?

Dr Stefanos Vallianatos,
Hellenic Foundation for Culture

Israel's domestic environment does not offer promising prospects, apart from rhetoric. It is the regional and global one that can tilt Israel's policy.

It was only after two months of intensive and uncertain negotiations – in fact, an extension had to be granted by President Perez for their completion – between the parties, that Prime Minister Netanyahu could secure the forming of Israel's 33rd government, with a majority of eight seats. Coalition governments have tended to be the rule rather than the exception, and therefore compromises in term of policies and portfolios is the nature of the game; yet, what raised eyebrows and accordingly expectations, is the coalition's composition: at the core lies the Likud-Beitenu alliance from the nationalist right, with that of the newly established centrist Yesh Atid (the real winner of those elections), to be filled with the rather leftish Hatnua and the right-wing and religious oriented Habayit Hayehudi (i.e. Jewish Home). Hence, there is a striking absent of the mainstream haredi parties (the religious, usually ultra-orthodox, ones) for the first time since 2006 (and for only the

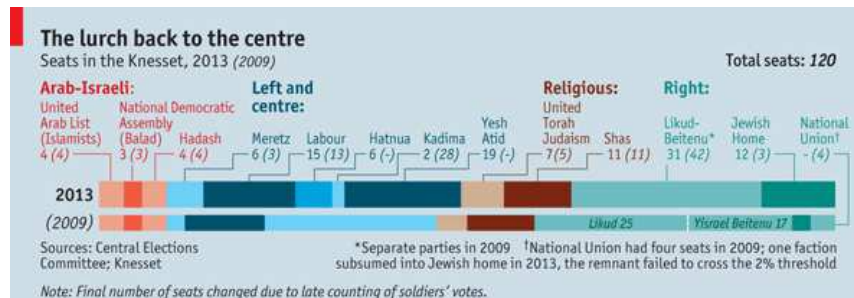
third time since the establishment of the influential Shas), hence, an undeniable twist towards the centre.

Such outcome, in view also of the regional and the global setting, raises the question on whether one should expect any re-orientation and changes in Israel's regional policy, especially with regard to the Palestinian issue. Yet, while the inclusion of Tzipi Livni in the government's inner circle as the ministry of Justice with the additional role of chief negotiator with the Palestinians, indicates the intention of re-activating the negotiations with the Palestinians, a closer look at the coalition partners' position would indicate a much more complex setting.

The coalition partners' stand on the Palestinian issue varies, therefore making them strange bedfellows. On the one side, is Livni's undisputed commitment to reach a viable peace settlement with the Palestinians, along the lines of a two-state solution and a jointly

administered Jerusalem. At the other extreme, lies Bennet's party, who

rejects the idea of a two-state solution and any settlement with



From *The Economist*, "Israel's election: The hawk's wings are clipped", Jan 26th 2013.

regard to Jerusalem and the West Bank. A settler himself, and having performed a successful campaign that attracted voters beyond the settlers' communities and the religious right, is bound to further enforce the settlers' voice in the political agenda. Yair Lapid's centrists, share Livni's belief about the need for peace, along the lines of a two-state solution; yet, he considers that Jerusalem can only remain a Jewish city and that there should be a clear separation between the two entities. Finally, Netanyahu's scepticism and his ties to the right seems to co-exist with the concern about the danger of Israel's international isolation and therefore the need for a change in the status quo.

In contrast, with regard to dealing with Iran's nuclear issue, it is the Likud hard-line position that seems to dominate the debate, and there seems to be little opposition to

such a stand. In terms of relations with the new Arab regimes, although there is a divide between right and left, with the left arguing about the need to re-embark on a fruitful relationship in contrast to the right's scepticism with regard to the reliability and willingness of those regimes to do so, this was not a major issue in the newly established parties' agenda. In fact, the agenda was dominated by domestic rather than foreign policy issue. Yet, one of the concerns of the partners is the state of Israel's relations with the USA, which, under Netanyahu, has turned sour. In view of the second term of Obama in office, and the need to maintain this 'organic link' with their trans-Atlantic ally, Bibi found himself under pressure and criticism about his handling and therefore, it should not go unnoticed that it was Libni's appointment that took precedence in his policy – it was her party the first he turned to and

the one to join the coalition – and just prior to Obama's visit to Israel.

What are we then to expect? The most probable outcome it would be 'business as usual'. Israel will maintain its hard-line rhetoric vis-a-vis Iran, where the military action, under the new Defence Minister, will be considered as only a last resort, security considerations will dominate Israel's approach in its regional handling, with Tel Aviv maintaining a cautious approach, exploring opportunities, whereas the re-emergence of the Kurdish element adds another card on the table of the Israeli-Turkish tense relations – along with the Syrian front. Accordingly, relations with Cyprus would hardly be affected, as they are beneficiary to both, unless a major change takes place in the Turkish-Israeli front.

With regard to the Palestinian issue, Libni's involvement should not be overestimated. The prime minister retains the final word in any potential deal, which must also be approved by the Knesset and the cabinet and the domestic environment is not keen on any brave break through. In fact, the issue was hardly present in election agenda. Israelis voted primarily on economic and social issues such as the cost of living and compulsory military service for the ultra-orthodox, as well as the future direction of Israel as a state and

nation (hence, Lapid's insistence on receiving the ministry of education). The shift to the centre does not necessarily reflect a similar willingness on their side for crucial compromises. The settlers' staunch activism is expected to further increase their power position with Bennet's rising prominence and the re-discovering of a, modern, religious right, matched by a disillusion by many peace supporters with the two-state solution. In any internal political friction, Libni seems to be a dispensable partner: her electoral performance on an almost exclusive Palestinian agenda rewarded her with only six seats in the Knesset, therefore her exclusion from the government would not bring it down (but the poor state of relations between Bibi and Bennet can).

Hence the domestic environment does not offer promising prospects, apart from rhetoric. It is the regional and global one that can tilt Israel's policy. A third Palestinian Intifada (widely anticipated yet failing to happen, or postponed maybe?) is bound to challenge the partners' stand, as indeed Iran's presidential elections' outcome, while the US current administration will most probably increase the pressure for renewed peace talks between the two neighbors. Still, the domestic scene would have the final call, hence expectations should remain low. 🇮🇱

Israeli Elections: The Move Rightwards and the Continuation of Settlement Expansion

Dr. Nada Ghandour-Demiris,
University of Bristol, United Kingdom

The recent Israeli elections did not mark a revival of the center-left but rather indicated a move further rightwards. Netanyahu's support for settlement expansion, together with the increased presence of settlers in the Knesset, leave little room for hope that a viable solution for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will be achieved in the near future.

Binyamin Netanyahu gained another term in the recent Israeli elections. However, it was a narrow win and now, a month later, a coalition government has not yet been decided. These elections did not mark a revival of the center-left, as most media presented the results, but rather indicated a further rightward shift in the center of political gravity in Israel – particularly on the future of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In fact, the composition of the largest parties and platforms illustrated the degree to which the right and even the far right dominated the new Knesset (Israeli parliament). For example, the Likud's liberal wing has been shrinking and being replaced by ultra-nationalists, such as Moshe Feiglin, who has been trying to take over the Likud party on behalf of the settlers for more than a decade and who has now occupied a Likud seat in the Knesset. Furthermore, Likud

joined two other parties on the far right – Yisrael Beiteinu (Israel is Our Home) and Habayit Hayehudi (the Jewish Home) – that have maneuvered themselves into the political mainstream, even while holding on to their extremist platforms.

The move rightwards is also obvious in the presence of two Jewish religious fundamentalist parties, Shas and United Torah Judaism, in the Knesset. The ultra-Orthodox Jews (Haredim) were once clearly anti-Zionist, believing that the establishment of a Jewish state before the arrival of the Messiah was a blasphemy. But Israel's Zionist parties slowly co-opted the Haredim, mainly by building exclusive ultra-Orthodox communities (i.e. settlements) just over the Green Line, in the West Bank. These Haredi towns are now the largest and fastest-growing settlements in the West Bank. As a consequence, the

ultra-Orthodox have become ambivalent about Zionism, but ever more committed to investment in the settlements and the displacement of the Palestinians¹. Their parties, especially Shas, have responded with increasing anti-Arab rhetoric and opposition to a peace process. Following these elections, the far-right bloc and the Jewish religious parties have 61 seats of 120 Knesset seats (i.e. slightly over half).

Even the “centrist” parties (including Lapid’s Yesh Atid, the now barely functioning Kadima Party established by Ariel Sharon seven years ago as a breakaway from Likud, and the new Hatnuah set up by former Kadima leader Tzipi Livni) provided no real counterbalance to the rightward shift of these parties. They adopted positions that were once typically associated with Israel’s traditional right wing. During his campaign, Lapid – the main winner of the center – did not elaborate on his views on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In fact, Lapid launched his party’s program in Ariel, the most controversial settlement block in the West Bank. Moreover, according to Israeli polls, half of Lapid’s supporters are ideological right-wing, some of them former Likud voters put off by the party’s relentless march to the far right. From all the

centrist parties, only Livni’s Hatnuah made Israeli-Palestinian peace a centrepiece of its campaign. Yet, the polls showed that it did not attract that many voters (6 Knesset seats).

Settlements are illegal under international law as they violate Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, which prohibits the transfer of the occupying power’s civilian population into occupied territory. Since 1967, about 250 settlements in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, have been established with or without government authorization. The number of settlers is estimated at 520,000. In the last decade the settler population has grown at a rate almost three-times higher than the population in Israel itself.

The Netanyahu government (2009-2013) has contributed to the consolidation and expansion of settlements. Characteristically, between 2009 and 2011 government spending on the settlements increased by 38%; a formal policy of “legalization” of illegal settlement was adopted, leading both to additional illegal construction and new illegal outposts, and to the establishment of new settlements for the first time in decades; and preferential funding was offered for settlers and settlements. During his recent electoral campaign, Netanyahu agreed to build over 3000 settlement units in the occupied

¹ Jonathan Cook (2013), ‘Israel’s Left Turn to the Far Right’, *Al Akhbar English*, January 27.

territories. While this decision had negative implication on the international diplomatic front, it was aimed at gaining votes from the settler community and the extreme right. Today, 11 Members of the Knesset (MKs) (9%) of the 120 newly elected Knesset members reside in the settlements. From these 11 MKs, only one does not belong to a right or far right wing party. According to a report on settlers' voting patterns by the non-governmental organization Peace Now, the vast majority of the settlers (84.2%) voted for right wing or ultra-orthodox parties.

In the previous four-year term, the Netanyahu government's policies and actions in the West Bank and East Jerusalem disclosed a clear intention to use settlements to systematically undermine and render impossible a realistic, viable two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Given the move rightwards in the recent elections, the increased presence of settlers in the Knesset and the re-election of Netanyahu as Prime Minister, it seems highly unlikely that this

strategy will change, except under extreme international pressure.

While no coalition government has yet been agreed at the time of writing this article, it is clear that there has been a move rightwards in the center of political gravity in Israel. Based on the agendas of the popular parties, it seems that the peace process is not a top priority. At the same time, the increased presence of settlers in the Knesset and dominant pro-settlement policies suggests that it is unlikely that settlements construction will be freezed in the near future, and hence making it even more difficult to reach a peace agreement with the Palestinians. Palestinians themselves believe that these elections demonstrated that as long as they are concerned nothing will be changed, or that the occupation might even worsen. It remains to be seen whether the possible appointment of Tzipi Livni as Minister of Justice will advance peace or if her appointment will serve as a fig leaf for Netanyahu to form a more extreme right wing government. 🇮🇱

Comments

The Future of Turkey-Israel Relations: Could an Apology Make the Difference?

Dr. Stefanos Kordosis,
Independent Scholar

The recent apology of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to Turkey about the victims of the Mavi Marmara is an important diplomatic development. In this article it is suggested that despite the importance of the aforementioned event, Israel's apology is not expected to affect the booming Greek-Cypriot-Israeli ties.

In the last four years Turkish-Israeli relations have been tense. In the aftermath of US President Obama's visit to Tel Aviv, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's recent apology has caught by surprise many in the West and the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East. Netanyahu's move caused much inconvenience in Israel a few weeks after Erdogan's statement about Zionism being a crime against humanity, and raised questions in other countries in the region. In Greek media Israel's apology has been presented as a successful advancement of Turkey's foreign policy in the region and a settlement of its relations with Israel which have been damaged in the last four years. Is it the case?

Israel's apology, apart from hurting the pride of Israel in its

domestic political scene, it will ephemerally boost Turkey's leading image amongst Muslims at the expense of the Sunni Arab and the Shiite Iranian forms of Islamism. And this is not bad for Israel because such a move weakens the momentum of its adversaries in the Muslim world. And Turkey is certainly not, for now, amongst them.

Besides Netanyahu was bold enough to negotiate with Obama this act of apology, exchanging it with the US tolerance for the continuation of Israel's settlements in the occupied Palestinian lands. Israel acted orally and what it got in return was a freehand to gain materially. Yet Netanyahu's critics fear that Israel's image has been hurt in the eyes of its allies.

In his recent *Jerusalem Post* article, Avigdor Lieberman, Head of the Knesset Committee for Foreign Affairs and former Foreign Minister of Israel, has criticised Netanyahu for apologizing to Turkey because, in his view, such a move damages the geopolitical profile of Israel and causes much uncertainty amongst Israel's regional friends.

On its part, Athens, has been concerned about recent developments and has reacted cautiously. Despite the positive development for Turkey and Israel's relations Greece is inclined to believe that Greek-Israeli ties will not be affected or reduced. Greek Ambassador's Lambrides's comments in the *Jerusalem Post* expresses precisely Athens's point of view. Greece is aware of the fact that Israel's relations with Turkey have

been essentially damaged in terms of long term mutual intentions and that any diplomatic development of this kind can only have ephemeral rhetorical effects.

In brief, Israel and Turkey will enjoy an improvement of bilateral relations but on an ephemeral basis. In the mid-term the regional agendas of Ankara and Tel Aviv do not share the same goals. Apparently Lieberman's viewpoint expresses a wider stream of Israeli politicians, policy makers and public. In spite of Turkey's strategic significance for the US, NATO and Israel, many believe in Israel that Ankara's Islamic government is not as a trustworthy ally as the past nationalistic governments. And Netanyahu knows it. 🇮🇱

Hamas and Israel: Time is ticking out

Dr. Evangelos Venetis
Middle East Research Project - ELIAMEP

The Arab Spring has boosted Hamas's momentum in Palestine, this time in a more moderate strategic scheme. If Israel's settlements policy continues, then room for maneuver for moderate Palestinian voices will be restricted.

Two years ago the Arab spring created high expectations in the West and the region that the Middle was heading to a new era, that of democratization. Indeed, old, well established rulers were deposed and new ones emerged through elections. In this context, the Palestinian issue has been also affected by regional developments. The election of an Islamist government in Egypt, the increasing Islamization of Turkey's politics along with a shifting policy of rapprochement between Qatar, and S. Arabia and Hamas, have become turning points for the geopolitical outlook of Hamas's Islamist rulers.

The aforementioned developments seem to have marked a change in the policy of Khalid Meshaal's relations with major Arab Sunni countries and the sudden deterioration in his relationship with his traditional Shiite allies in Iran, Syria and Lebanon in the context of the Syria crisis. Meshaal was assured by Qatar and Egypt, under the

condition of reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah, that they would support Hamas morally and materially, accommodating the organisation's offices in their lands. Indeed, this was a sudden shift of unprecedented dramatic proportions. Old foes became friends and vice versa.

In this context, Israel has quietly encouraged this moderation process of Hamas by Qatar and Egypt because it views a possible strengthening of the Sunni influence in Hamas as an important step for neutralizing and eventually eradicating the dominant Iranian influence in Gaza. As a result, Tel Aviv facilitated in terms of security the visits of al-Thani, the Emir of Qatar and Muhammad Morsi, the new Islamist President of Egypt in Gaza, the first visits of heads of states in the region after 2006. Moreover, the Israeli President Shimon Peres has openly expressed his openness to have Hamas engaged in formal

negotiations with Israel, provided that Hamas is moderated up to the point of recognizing Israel's right to exist as a state. Having these in mind, it is interesting to have a look at future developments in Palestine in the aftermath of Israel elections.

Given the fact that Tel Aviv has the military and economic tactical advantage vis-à-vis the Palestinians, the new Israeli government is not expected to alter any major aspect of the Israeli policy in Palestine. The pillars of Israel's policy remain intact: a combination of systematic construction of settlements in occupied Palestinian lands and a *divide and rule policy* in the domestic Palestinian political scene. Israel does not seem to favor a settlement of the dispute with the Palestinians any time soon. It will continue overlooking political and social developments in Palestine aiming to neutralize Hamas.

Tel Aviv openly supports the Palestinian Authority as the only legitimate negotiator in the peace process. Yet Israelis are alarmed and concerned by the increasing level of popularity that Hamas enjoys in the West Bank. Hence the policy of arrests of Hamas members in the West Bank has been enforced by Israel since 2006. Although Israel's settlements construction boosts Hamas's profile and weakens Fatah's grip of power in the West Bank, Israel does not alter its policy. The

reason: apparently Israel feels confident that it is strong enough to control security in the occupied lands even with radical Hamas in power in Gaza and possibly in the West Bank.

Moreover it pays much attention on the reconciliation process that has been initiated lately in the ranks of Palestinians. Israel views this process as the last chance for neutralizing Hamas. Because reconciliation, in the view of Israel and Fatah, means moderation and compromise in Hamas's radical worldview and strategy. But is it possible to have reconciliation amongst the Palestinians when Israel continues its settlements policy? Apparently not.

Hamas draws its popularity in the West Bank mainly by the fact that it has ruled Gaza resisting Israel's tough sanctions and the West's blind eye to the humanitarian crisis that Gaza has been undergoing as a result of these sanctions. Moreover Hamas knows that Fatah is losing ground in the public opinion of the West Bank as long as Abu Mazen cannot stop Israel's settlements and the shrinking of Palestinian lands. It is an open wound for the Palestinians that Abu Mazen is powerless. The Israeli settlements clearly threaten Fatah's power in the West Bank even in the short term. For Abu Mazen this reconciliation process is most probably his last effort to contain

Hamas's rise of profile amongst the Palestinians. If he fails, his time in power will be minimal.

On its part Hamas seems to be advancing tactically at the expense of Fatah since it now enjoys the support of Sunni states. Yet it is highly unlikely that Meshaal will abolish his radical views. This is actually his policy: to take advantage of the Arab Spring in order to establish his profile as the leader of Palestinians in the Arab world. He has no reason to compromise vis-à-vis Israel. If he does so, then Abu Mazen will be the winner because Hamas owes its popularity to the uncompromising and radical content of its message. Hamas will probably reconcile

superficially and technically, not in principle, in order to go to new elections where Meshaal hopes to repeat his landslide victory in the Palestinian lands.

Having these in mind, it could be suggested that the Arab Spring has boosted Hamas's momentum in Palestine, this time in a more moderate strategic scheme. If Israel's settlement policy continues, then the time for moderate Palestinian voices will continue to tick out. And there is not much time left. 🇵🇸

The Israeli Policy on the Syrian Crisis

Dr. Aref Alobeid
Independent Scholar

According to some Israelis, efforts to bring democracy in Syria could be exploited by Islamist, and hence anti-Israel, powers, such as the Muslim Brotherhood and various Salafist groups.

The outbreak of the Arab Spring uprisings has caused great concern to Israel fearing the change of the balance of power after the emergence of new systems with unknown intentions and identities. Also, polls show that 56% of Israelis have negative thoughts about the developments in the Arab world, and especially in neighboring countries such as Egypt and Syria. Although the demonstrations are seeking to change authoritarian regimes, many Israelis consider these demonstrations as reflecting the clash between moderate pro-Western secular groups and those of radical Islam. For the Israelis the shift to democracy in Syria could be exploited by some groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafist groups, which in their political program are against Israel due to the importance they give to the Palestinian issue.

The new challenges in the area require, from an Israeli point of

view, the allocation of additional financial resources for security and national defense at the expense of education, health, and medicare in order to address the new risks it faces. Moreover, these cuts exacerbate and deteriorate the already difficult economic and social situation that affects a significant portion of Israeli society.

Though Israel has signed peace agreements with Jordan and Egypt, the silent unwritten agreement formed in 1973 with the Assad regime is considered more important than others. The mutual exchanges, such as the acceptance of peace and security on the Golan front by the Assad regime and the acceptance by Israel of the Alawite minority to stay in power in Syria, maintained peace between the two sides for about 40 years.

Damascus has bothered Tel Aviv when it hosted the liberation movements of Palestine, mainly the Hamas movement and provided

military, financial and political assistance to Hezbollah. But this is nothing compared to the possibility of initiating a clash in the Golan front; something that would probably be a nightmare for Israel.

The determination of the majority of the Syrian people for change in Syria and the reduced probability of an Israeli strike against Iran at this time forced the Israeli officials to revise their policy towards the Syrian crisis. So the new change in the Israeli position literally aims to weaken the axis of Iran, the Syrian regime and Hezbollah. The fall of Assad would lead to shrinkage of Iranian influence in the Middle East and would limit the power of Hezbollah due to the possible end of arms trafficking from Iran to Syria, ending in southern Lebanon. Then Hezbollah will be forced to compromise and share power with other political parties in Lebanon which may be more conciliatory with the State of Israel in the future.

Initially, the interest of Israel is to ensure that the transitional period in Syria will not cross the red line causing problems to the Jewish state. Apart from this, Tel Aviv seeks to extend the duration of civil war in Syria in order to destroy the economic, military and social infrastructure of the country. Therefore, the Israeli plan aims to make the new Syrian leadership have 2 to 3 decades to rebuild its country,

which would give enough time to the Israelis to handle all the changes in the geopolitical area for the years to come.

There are many Israelis who do not hide their desire for control being taken over by a senior member of the Ba'athist regime and Assad being portrayed as a war criminal in the eyes of the world. Moreover, there is an Israeli view which would prefer to see Syria divided into at least three states. Clearly, the state of the Alawite minority would be one of them. Finally, Israel's plan for the fragmentation of the Arab world is real and this plan is already evident in the division of Sudan and Iraq.

Today the Israeli veto on Western countries for not supporting the fall of Assad is more powerful than that of Russia and China. Beside this, the Jewish state does not hide its deep concern for the insecure northern borders and for this reason it began constructing a wall in the Golan Heights for its defense and security. Furthermore, the emergence of conservative groups in power in Syria restricts the chances for reconciliation and enhances the possibility of the fall of Assad's chemical and biological weapons in the hands of radical Islamic groups.

Because of its power to influence the European and American foreign policy decisions (e.g. in respect to Iran and Turkey), Israel is considered a key regional

player in future developments in Syria. Also of equal importance is the fact that several Israeli officials have Russian origin and hence understand and support the Russian attitude toward Assad.

Lastly, the changes in the Middle East cause justified concern in Israel. But Israelis have contributed to this concern and found themselves in this difficult situation because they have not exploited the conditions that emerged after the signing of Camp David agreement in 1979 for the expansion of peace to other Arab

countries. The Israeli authorities should realize that the best protection for the security of their country is peace. As we know, Israel has high technology and expertise that Arabs do not have, but the latter possess one of the largest markets in the world that can be great for attracting Israeli products. This marriage of interests in conjunction with respect and implementation of UN resolutions could ensure Israel's security and make it to be exempted from costly expenses for its defense, so it is worth making the first step. 🇮🇱

Focus on Israel

Israel's strategic role is important for understanding regional developments in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East. Given the deterioration of Turkey-Israel relations, the simultaneous improvement of Greece-Israel relations as well as the emergence of energy as a pivotal factor for the geopolitical balance in the region, a new balance of power seems to be unfolded. The Crisis in Syria, the Iranian nuclear programme and the boosting of the geopolitical profile of the Arab world in the context of the Arab Spring have created a new security environment for Israel.

In this context, H.E. Mr. Arye Mekel, Ambassador of Israel in Greece, highlights key aspects of the Israeli foreign policy.

Q: *What do you think of the collaboration between Cyprus and Israel in their Exclusive Economic Zones respectively?*

A: The discovery of large natural gas deposits in Israel and Cyprus can truly be a game-changer in the East Mediterranean.

Israel and Cyprus signed an agreement for the delineation of their EEZs in December 2010. Some of the same companies which discovered the large natural gas deposits in Israel are also the ones responsible for the successful exploration for natural gas in Cyprus.

Jerusalem and Nicosia are currently exploring ways to strengthen their collaboration in the fields of natural gas and electricity interconnectivity in a cooperation that also has the potential to include Greece.

Q: *What are the prospects for the construction of the undersea pipeline which will carry Israel and Cyprus gas to Europe via Greece?*

A: The option you mentioned is one of several being discussed in the ongoing deliberations between the governments of Israel, Greece and Cyprus for energy cooperation in the field of natural gas. Another possibility is the construction of LNG terminals.

Israel has repeatedly stated that it would like Greece to become a hub for the transport of our large quantities of natural gas to Europe in a triangular cooperation with Cyprus. Combined, our countries may develop into a regional power. Furthermore, through official channels, several Israeli companies have expressed an interest in carrying out exploration for natural gas in Greece's territorial waters.

The new Israeli Government that will soon be established will take major decisions about the handling of Israel's natural gas, including export opportunities. We believe natural gas will soon become a major growth engine for the Israeli economy.

Q: *What will Israel's reaction be if Turkey takes military action against the Israel-Cyprus Exclusive Economic Zone or threatens to disrupt an Israel-Cyprus Gas transportation scheme or harm its future pipeline?*

A: I don't answer hypothetical questions. The energy cooperation between Israel and Cyprus is in full accordance with international law. Its aim is to foster stability and serve our mutual interests. Our hope is that it will serve as a model of cooperation for all countries in the region. Naturally, our ties with Cyprus are continuing to develop in all fields.

Q: *Given their increasing military collaboration in recent years, do you think that signing a mutual military cooperation pact between Athens and Tel Aviv is possible in the short term?*

A: Athens and Jerusalem have already signed annual programs for defense cooperation. There are strengthened ties and exchanges between our defense establishments. Our Air Forces and Navies have conducted several joint exercises.

The Greek Minister of National Defense, Mr. Panos Panagiotopoulos, visited Israel in September 2012, followed by the Chief of Staff of the Greek Armed Forces, General Mikhail Kostarakos, in December.

Q: *After the Mavi Marmara incident, Israel-Turkey diplomatic relations have been decreased in the level of Second Embassy Secretary. Are your relations with Turkey going to be improved or remain as such?*

A: The deterioration of relations with Turkey was not our choice. It appears to be the result of a shift in Turkish foreign policy. Israel wants to have good relations with Turkey and all countries in the region. For the time being, attempts for a rapprochement have not borne fruit, but efforts in this direction will continue.

Q: *Will Turkey's geopolitical role in the Eastern Mediterranean be upgraded?*

A: It would be best to direct this question to my esteemed Turkish colleague. What I will say is that the development of relations between like – minded democracies with common values like Israel, Greece and Cyprus can foster stability and our mutual interests in the region.

Q: *Is the new government in Israel going to continue or review the settlements policy in the West Bank?*

A: The new government in Israel will seek to renew peace talks with the Palestinian Authority.

According to the peace agreements we have signed (Oslo, Interim Accord), the issue of settlements along with many others like borders, refugees, Jerusalem, security arrangements etc., are final status issues that are to be resolved in peace negotiations with the Palestinians. We are ready to resume the peace process immediately without preconditions.

Successive Israeli Governments including that of Prime Minister Netanyahu, have expressed their support for a two-state solution involving the recognition of Israel as the nation state of the Jewish people and a Palestinian state for the Palestinians. Israel has repeatedly called on the Palestinians to return to the negotiating table to discuss all issues, but to no avail. Instead, they resort to unilateral measures like the recent UN vote to gain non-member status. The peace talk avoidance tactic of the Palestinian leadership will do nothing to change reality on the ground and will not lead us any closer to a two-state solution.

Q: *Regarding the Palestinian Issue, is Israel ready to negotiate with Hamas if the latter reconciles with Fatah without recognizing Israel's right to exist?*

A: The Hamas is a terrorist organization recognized as such by the US and EU. It rejects the peace process and Israel's right to exist. It has transformed the Gaza Strip into a stronghold from which to launch attacks against innocent Israeli citizens, thus forcing Israel to take measures against it. In the past, the International Quartet (UN, US, EU and Russia) issued three preconditions to the Hamas when it was part of a Palestinian unity government in order for the Palestinian Authority to continue receiving direct financial aid: 1) accept the previous peace agreements; 2) renounce violence; 3) recognize Israel. Unfortunately, the Hamas has not displayed any willingness whatsoever to retract from its extremist positions and accept the international community's demands.

Q: *Are economic sanctions having an effect on curbing Iran's nuclear aspirations?*

A: The Iranian nuclear program is a regional and global danger with the potential of endangering the Middle East and East Mediterranean areas leading to an arms race and the strengthening of extremists.

We believe sanctions are having an effect but more are needed with continued vigilance in order to convince the Iranian regime that its

nuclear aspirations do not serve its interests.

Q: *Is, and in what way, Israel concerned about the dramatic change of the political scene in Egypt and the rise of Mohammad Morsi?*

A: Egypt is an important partner for peace with Israel. The two countries have had peaceful bilateral relations since 1979. We look forward to continuing our peaceful cooperation with the new Egyptian Government.

Q: *Does Israel support a regime change in Syria or it is concerned about the emergence of Sunni Islamic extremism at its doorstep?*

A: Israel does not decide what happens in neighboring countries. We simply deal with the facts. The Syrian situation is dangerous for several reasons: The conflict is extremely brutal with 60.000 dead. Regional powers like Iran and others have become embroiled in it. Worrisome Jihadist elements have also emerged along with the brutal Assad regime. There is a danger of clashes spilling over into Israel's Northern border, not to mention the tremendous refugee problem in neighboring countries. In addition, Syria has a large arsenal of chemical and biological weapons which could possibly fall into the hands of extremists. As the only real democracy in the Middle East, Israel can only hope for the best and take

all the necessary measures to protect its citizens.

Q: *After the recent bombing bus attack in Bulgaria, is Israel concerned about the security status of Israeli assets and individuals in the Balkans?*

A: Naturally, Israel is concerned about the globalization of the terror activities of Iran and its proxies like Hezbollah against Israeli and Jewish targets. They have occurred in the past in places as diverse as Argentina and Thailand. The latest investigation of Bulgarian authorities pointed to Hezbollah involvement in the bomb attack against Israelis in Burgas during the summer. The Greek Foreign Ministry issued a statement condemning the attack in Burgas and also offered to assist Bulgarian authorities in their investigation. Cypriot authorities recently arrested a purported Hezbollah operative who was planning attacks against Israeli tourists.

These developments point to the need for vigilance and close cooperation in combatting terrorism between democratic countries, including Israel and our Balkan friends. They also underscore the need for the EU to recognize the Hezbollah as a terrorist organization, as it has done in the past with the Hamas.

Monitoring the Middle East

Afghanistan

Karzai bans armed groups hired by coalition forces (28, Feb. 2013)

Karzai issued a decree on Thursday, appointing a delegation assigned to ask coalition forces to hand over within three months the mentioned armed groups to Afghan security institutions.

Senior Taliban commanders killed (12, Feb. 2013)

Tor Jaan, a senior Taliban commander was killed in the southern restive province of Kandahar in a precision strike conducted in a joint military operation by Afghan security and coalition forces.

Bahrain

Manama: Iran's IRR Guards behind terror cell (21 Feb., 2013)

Bahrain's Head of Public Security said that a militant cell has been discovered, as part of a group called the Imam Army. This group included Bahrainis at home and abroad and members of other nationalities. Bahraini authorities arrested eight members of the group on Sunday.

Two Bahrain policemen acquitted of killing protester (27 Feb., 2013)

The High Criminal Court of Bahrain acquitted two policemen who were charged with shooting dead a protester two years ago.

Comment: The crisis in Bahrain in the Persian Gulf has become the geopolitical equivalent of the ongoing crisis in Syria in the Mediterranean.

Cyprus

Turkey warns against Israel-Cyprus gas deal (27 Jan., 2013)

At Eurasian Economic Summit in Istanbul Turkish envoy tells his Israeli counterpart that a potential Israel-Turkey gas pipeline could be squandered by Israeli partnership with Cyprus on natural gas.

Egypt

Egypt's main opposition coalition boycotts election (26 Feb., 2013)

According to Sameh Ashour, a member of the National Salvation Front of Egypt (NSF), the party will boycott parliamentary elections in April due to lack of guarantees for a transparent process.

Comment: A give and take process is necessary for Morsi to consolidate his rule.

Greece

Prime Minister Samaras in Qatar official visit (29 Jan., 2013)

Greek Prime Minister Antonis Samaras paid an official visit to Qatar. Samaras and his delegation arrived in Doha in order to boost efforts for further bilateral economic collaboration.

Iran

Iran and P5+1 meet at Almaty (27 Feb., 2013)

A new round of talks was held in Kazakhstan between Iran and the Group P5+1. The resumption of talks aims to overcome the stalemate about the Iranian nuclear program under ongoing stiff western sanctions against Iran.

Iraq

Exxon Mobil at odds with Baghdad (3 Feb., 2013)

Despite opposition by the Iraqi government, representatives of the US Exxon Mobil and Kurdish officials visited the Qara Hanjir oil exploration block 35 km SE of Kirkuk in a territory disputed by the central government and the autonomous Kurdistan region.

Comment: A de facto recognition of Kurdistan's economic independence from Baghdad will make the Shiites in the south to do the same, redrawing borders in the region.

Kuwait

Kuwaiti MPs complain against ministers' 'favoritism' (28 Feb., 2013)

Efforts are currently underway to prevent the conflict between the parliament and cabinet from spilling over in the wake of four grilling motions filed against ministers, as well as some MPs 'complaining' about certain ministers acting in a discriminatory fashion.

Kuwait celebrates National Day and Liberation Anniversary (26 Feb., 2013)

Kuwaitis in Greece celebrated their country's 52nd National Day and 22nd liberation anniversary on Tuesday evening in Athens.

Lebanon

Syria Sunni Militants attacking Shia villages on the Lebanese border (27 Feb., 2012)

According to a televised speech broadcast of Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah, Syrian Sunni militants conduct religious cleansing in border Shiite villages.

Libya

Sunni Salafi groups threatening the Greek Orthodox Community of Tripoli (27 Feb., 2013)

Radical Salafists have made threats against the lives of the Greek Orthodox Bishop of Tripoli and his flock, attempting to prevent them from operating in the Hagios Georgios Greek Orthodox Church in Tripoli.

Comment: The fate of Christians in Iraq and Libya is under threat. Could Syria follow suit if the Salafists prevail?

Palestine - Israel

Hamas and Fatah leaders agree to push for reconciliation (30 Jan., 2013)

At a meeting in Cairo Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas and exiled Hamas chief Khaled Meshaal have agreed to expedite a stalled reconciliation deal between the rival factions.

Comment: Building trust in Palestine while Tel Aviv constructs Israeli settlements in Palestinian lands.

Qatar

Qatar against EU arms ban on Syria militants (30 Dec., 2012)

Qatar has criticized the European Union for refusing to exempt militants fighting against the Damascus government from an arms embargo on Syria.

Saudi Arabia

Khaled appointed Riyadh Governor (15 Feb., 2013)

Prince Khaled bin. Bandar, commander of ground forces, has been appointed new governor of the Riyadh region, following the death of Prince Sattam.

Somalia

Somalia and African union troops seize Burhaqaba (27 Feb., 2013)

The strategic town of Burhaqaba is located some 190 km south of Mogadishu forcing Al-Shabab Islamist militants to suffer a defeat and withdraw further.

Syria

150.000 Syrian refugees in February only (27 Feb., 2013)

Jeffrey Feltman, the UN Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs told the UN Security Council the Syria crisis has led 900.000 peoples to flee to neighboring countries, including 150.000 in February alone.

Comment: Alarming signs of migration for the social and economic stability of EU's South.

Tunisia

Tunisia opposition leaders shot dead (6 Feb., 2013)

Tunisia's leading leftist opposition leader Chokri Belaid was shot dead after leaving his home in the capital Tunis.

Turkey

Erdogan makes anti-Zionism remarks (27 Feb., 2013)

At the opening of the Fifth Alliance of Civilizations Forum in Vienna, Erdogan claimed: "Just like Zionism, Anti-Semitism and Fascism, it becomes unavoidable that Islamophobia must be regarded a crime against humanity."

Turkey receives AWACS systems from Israel (18 Feb., 2013)

Israel has delivered airborne electronic systems to Turkey which will integrate the systems into its airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) military aircraft.

Comment: Is there a hidden Ankara-Tel Aviv agenda behind the contradictory signs between their words and acts?


United Arab Emirates

UAE military contracts worth of 4.9 b. US dollars (20 Feb., 2013)

The UAE armed forces have signed deals worth of 4.9 b. dollars for repairing and overhauling aircraft, upgrading naval vessels and acquiring ammunition and spares.

Yemen

Yemenis mark the second anniversary of revolution (12 Feb., 2013)

Holding flags and banners, the Yemeni demonstrators called on the country's president Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi to make Yemen a true independent nation putting an end to western intervention. 



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