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The Copernicus Journal of Political Studies nr 1 (3), 97-112

2013

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

WHAT'S WITH ISRAEL?

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ISRAEL IN A NEW MIDDLE EAST: HOW TO RESPOND?

ABSTRACT

Israeli foreign policy, its mechanisms, conditions, as well as driving forces is a complex phenomenon composed of intersecting elements of security, defense, and foreign interests that are inseparably braided. Generally speaking, there are at least four main interests which determine states' foreign activity, firstly security of the state and its territory, secondly economy and development, thirdly international position, prestige among other states, and lastly international society common benefits. The only way to understand Israel's international conduct is to look deeper into its national identity, political tradition, and historical burden as well.

So the goal of this paper is to study the priorities of the Israeli foreign policy, particularly while the so called Arab Spring, crisis over Iranian nuclear program, and the changes in the Middle East.

Key words

Israel, foreign policy, the Middle East, the Arab-Israeli conflict, Iran, Syria, Russia, U.S., the Arab Spring, Arab revolts, the Iranian nuclear program

1. The main drivers of Israeli foreign policy

In the case of Israel, security is a predominant and key driver influencing each sphere of its foreign policy. In this way the need to survive in a hostile neighborhood has ever been the essence of Israel's policy, so the idea of an

existential threat has formed Israeli way of thinking and its perception of international politics. Perceiving Arabs as a threat to Israel's very existence has been the core of its international strategy, an instrument of maintaining the image of an endangered state in the Middle East, as well as an explanation for defense itself by preemptive and retaliatory use of force.

The decades of Israeli independence have been marked by dramatic changes in regional conditions, and also by a significant alternation in the international environment. The inception, evolution, then end of the Cold War, and later the establishment of an American hegemony have led to changes in Israeli approaches and policies. Living under the threat of being wiped out by hostile Muslim neighbors derives from the Jewish identity of Israeli state, and to make the story more complex – the state being established on the mostly former Palestine (under the British Mandate). This brings both Jewish history and contemporary Jewish concerns to the forefront of politics and policy. What is more Israel's policy is conditioned by its view of Jewish history as a history of negatives. The great turning points in Jewish history are negative events – the destruction of the Temple, the exile of the Jews from the Holy Land, the creation of the concept of the diaspora, anti-Semitism (the Jewish Question), persecution and discrimination, and the Holocaust. Among the symbolic locations of modern Israel are Masada, Yad Vashem, and the Western (Wailing) Wall – each a symbol of and memorial to a great negative event in Jewish history. The creation of the state was something of an aberration, because it was a positive event, but even that was short-lived, as the Arab states were designed to restore Palestine to the Palestinians and eliminate the newly born Jewish state. Israeli thinking is reflected in such phrases as “never again”, in which it is suggested that the horrors of the past (mostly the Holocaust) cannot be allowed to be repeated in the modern world. So Israeli history, based on Jewish history, provides the basis for attitudes that condition thinking about foreign and security policy. Its way of explaining history and modern politics is recognized as the “ghetto mentality” with its unique interpretation of history, isolation, and victimization. Jewish history, which derives from the Biblical period and perceives the Bible as a recording of history, provides a basis for foreign policy, and strengthens the sense of isolation and insecurity¹.

Israel is the creation of political Zionism described and defined by Theodor Herzl. It also resolved the Jewish Question by creating a sovereign Jewish state that would serve as a haven for imperiled and persecuted Jews through widespread

¹ *Israel's Strategic Agenda*, E. Inbar (ed.), London 2007.

anti-Semitism, pogroms in Eastern Europe, and finally the Holocaust. Israel's declaration of independence formally declared "the establishment of a Jewish state in Eretz-Israel, to be known as the State of Israel". The Law of Return, passed by the Knesset on July 5, 1950, established this principle as a legal requirement of the state. By granting virtually any Jew the right to immigrate to and become a citizen of the Jewish state it formalized a connection between the state and the people, and created a foreign-policy requirement for the state. Thus Israel's history is marked by the immigration waves of European Holocaust survivors, Jews of the Arab world, and, later, the Jews of Ethiopia, and the former Soviet Union. Each affected the nature of the state and its politics in its own way.

Isolation in the Middle East and the feeling of a direct threat for the state existence results in the image of a "besieged fortress". So, the fact is that Israel is a small state located in an Arab world much larger in both size and population. Israel's territory is comparable to the area of a small province of France, and the population exceeded seven million in 2012. Israeli society is in fact a mosaic of Jews, Israeli Arabs (Palestinian), immigrants from post-Soviet republics, and Ethiopia. The acute social and political division is an important feature of Israeli political scene and way of thinking, as well. There is the old saying, that if there are two Israelis there are three political parties to reflect their viewpoints. That manifests itself in the fact that all Israeli governments since the set up of the state have been coalitions, as no single party has ever achieved an absolute majority in the Knesset, so the fractionalization of the political scene is a feature of Israeli way of making decisions. In this case, the intersection of domestic and foreign politics has become even more obvious than usual².

The image of "besieged fortress" has eroded, and today Israel is perceived as a regional power with a vibrant economy, a dynamic high-tech sector, and a powerful military. In the eyes of the world, Israel has lost its image of a small state struggling against impossible odds. Israel now has "security needs" and "requirements" rather than existential fears. Its power obligates it to be more magnanimous and forthcoming on peace issues, and its strength should produce restraint, not excess. Indeed much of the erosion of Israel's image is driven by the realities and perceptions of an asymmetry. Israel with its GDP per capita of 31,000 USD and 100 companies on the New York Stock Exchange is no more a weak country. The World Economic Forum's Global Competitiveness Index ranks Israel sixth in innovation capacity, just after the United States. It is

² B. Reich, *Israeli Foreign Policy [in:] Diplomacy in the Middle East: The International Relations of Regional and Outside Powers*, L. Brown (ed.), London 2006, pp. 121–139.

only behind the United States and China in the number of companies listed on Nasdaq. Militarily, Israel is the region's superpower, with an armed force that could easily defeat any of its neighbors. U.S. aid³ enhances its military edge. It also has one of the world's largest nuclear arsenals, estimated at more than 200 missiles. At home the wall along the West Bank has essentially solved the problem of Palestinian suicide bombing, rendering Israel safer than at any point in its history⁴.

There is much truth in this image of Israeli might, and those who deny that capacity trivialize Israel's most powerful moment in its history. But there is also truth in Israel's vulnerabilities, and the asymmetry of power does not work in Israel's favor here, either⁵. Israel's eroding image flows from its own actions and conduct towards the neighbors. Many international actions, mainly by using force but labeled as preemptive attacks are widely criticized in the world such as the 1981 attack on the Iraqi reactor; the 2007 preemptive strike on the fledging Syrian one, illegal settlements in the occupied territories, or building the separation wall. But as the Israeli founding father David Ben Gurion used to say is: It doesn't matter what the goyim say; what matters is what the Jews do⁶.

Israel's security as well as foreign policy are integrated. Without understanding the idea of deterrence no analysis of Israel's international moves makes sense. The concept was formed in early 1950s by its political and military leadership: Moshe Dayan, David Ben Gurion, Shimon Peres, and Yigal Allon. The roots of the idea lay literally in the problems of infiltrating the Israeli territory by Egyptians in the 1950s. Moshe Dayan explained the idea based on these problems that Israel did not have the capability to defend itself from every possible infiltration and thus could not address the challenges from Egypt. retaliation was used as a strategy of punishment that forced Arab army commanders to evaluate whether penetrating the border was worth the humiliation they suffered at the hands of Israelis.

So in Israeli deterrence strategy a few factors are of fundamental importance. The first is the immediate, asymmetric retaliation, what is the proof of capability to deter, the second is the reputation of being capable, the third the Israel's enemies' calculations of the costs of the attack. As a result of Israel's capability

³ Congress recently moved to add 1 billion USD for Israel's missile defense program to the president's budget.

⁴ F. Zakaria, U. Netanyahu, *Israel Is Stronger than Ever*, "Washington Post" May 10, 2012.

⁵ A. Miller, *Israel's Image Revisited. What's Driving Israel's Very Bad PR?*, "Foreign Policy" May 16, 2012.

⁶ Ibidem.

demonstrated in many retaliatory acts, the Arab governments would be forced to first ask themselves whether their military could compete with Israeli military and, in the long run, whether the destruction of the state of Israel was a realistic goal. In the long term deterrence stabilizes the political situation around Israel. It also explains the need to dominate in every military aspects over Arab states, and determination to keep such a *status quo*, because this is the only way to keep Israelis foes at bay.

While Israel has had more or less impact on creating balance of power the Middle East for 40 years, the recent Arab revolts, known as the Arab Spring has generated an earth quake in the Middle Eastern *status quo*, reshaping it from grass-roots. Ongoing political change in the Arab Middle East could have a lasting impact on Israeli perceptions of security. Following Israel's peace treaty with Egypt in 1979, the priority that Israel had placed since its founding in 1948 on defending against a concentration of Arab conventional armies at its borders gave way to concerns about generally asymmetric threats posed by terrorism and rocket arsenals. Near-complete success in stopping Palestinian terrorist attacks inside Israel after 2006 led to greater Israeli focus on perceived threats from Iran – including a possibility of existential nuclear threat – and non-state actors allied to it in Lebanon and the Gaza Strip. What is more the closest neighborhood of Israel has been changing, because of taking power in Egypt by Muslim Brotherhood, civil war in Syria, which might destabilize Lebanon and Jordan, as well as fuel Palestinian resistance. So once again Israel is uncertain about what to expect from Egypt and Syria, and is also concerned about the future stability of Jordan's monarchy.

The newly emerged unstable environment makes up serious security problems for Israel. Firstly, Jerusalem authorities are afraid of increasing Islamist influence in post-Spring Arab states, which may create not only anti-Jewish regimes of revolutionary zealots, but also repeat the scenario of making the states – failed, like in Libya and Yemen. In this perspective Israelis look carefully at the developments in Iraq and Syria. Secondly, the rising non-Arab powers in the Middle East, Iran and Turkey, are unfriendly toward Israel. Domestic changes, beyond Israel's control, have led to the foreign policy reorientation of these regional powers that were once Israel's allies. In Turkey, the entrenchment of the Islamist AKP⁷ moved this pivotal state into the anti-Israel camp. Both instances indicate further regional isolation for Israel. Thirdly, the Arab Spring underlines the further erosion of the US position in the region, and consequently weakens

⁷ After successive electoral victories 2002, 2007 and 2011.

Israel's deterrence capability. The strategic alliance, and American guarantees for Israel's security have always been a crucial component of deterrence. Furthermore, Israeli use of force as preventive or preemptive move could worsen American-Israeli ties – a pillar of its national security. Such considerations are however not new, but nowadays they are more relevant than in the past when Israel considered military action against Hamas, Hezbollah and Iran.

2. Israel strategy in the post-Arab Spring neighborhood

Arab hostility forced Israel to secure its existence, and to look for opportunities to break the isolation. Its first Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion developed the concept of “the peripheral states”, known also as “strategic depth” according to which if Israel had no relations with its immediate neighbors it should seek the friendship of “the neighbors of the neighbor”. At the early stages Israel was looking at regional non-Arab states, much of the focus was Turkey and Iran. They gained attention because of their geographical and religious position, as well as historical relations with the Arab states. Tensions over borders, colonial past, and religious-ideological differences between these two Muslim but non-Arab states and the Arab world suggested opportunities for Israel to develop ties that would enhance its regional position and, perhaps, contribute to its security and assist in resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict. Although both (Iran and Turkey) voted against U.N. partition plan that created Israel, they soon established diplomatic relations, albeit limited in scope. Over time these improved and became increasingly complex.

Iran, on its part, was viewed by Israel as an especially important country in the region due to its strategic location, its size and economic potential, and it seemed to have no reason for conflict with Israel. After the fall of the Shah and creating the Islamic Republic of Iran its role in Israeli foreign policy has reversed, and Teheran became a number one enemy, “pushing Israel to the sea”, and looking for wiping out “the Zionist state”⁸. The loss of Iran was very sore for Israel, because their enduring community of interest was shaping the Middle Eastern geopolitics for 40 years. What is more, Israel was supplied in oil by Iran in return for military equipment and intelligence.

After the 1991 Gulf War, Israel urged the world to keep the “Iran issue” high on its agenda. The Shia Iran, which started rebuilding its nuclear program

⁸ B. Downing, *The Israeli Endgame in Iran*, “Asia Times”, June 27, 2012.

became a state, which was able to undermine Israeli strategic superiority in the region⁹. Teheran gained growing influence in Lebanon and Syria along Israel's northern and eastern boundaries. That is how Iran became Israel's primary strategic threat. Israel was also concerned about Iran's nuclear and long-range missile program, which was perceived as a major strategic challenge. Since that moment by and large, all subsequent Israeli prime ministers and ministers of defense never miss an opportunity to stress the "Iranian danger", censuring Iran's "dark regime" blaming Iran for acts of terrorism and presenting it as a major threat to the free world.

What makes the Iranian nuclear program an issue is not the possibility of acquiring a nuclear warhead to allegedly wipe out the state of Israel from the face of earth, but fundamentally the balance of power, and an excessive growth of Teheran's influence in the region, violating the Israeli strategic nuclear monopoly in the Middle East. Hence keeping this narrative is in Israel's interest, what the Benjamin Netanyahu government and his hawkish allies in the West have been doing. It allows to intensify international pressure on the Islamic regime, and to restrain ayatollahs from concentrating their influence in the region¹⁰. A deterring function of nuclear arsenal is worth remembering, because if Iran decided to target Israel with nuclear missiles using such weapon would bring to self-elimination, which is guaranteed by so called MAD doctrine¹¹. New waves of hysteria over an imminent Israeli attack on Iran are used to keep the international attention at Iran's threat, as it provides arguments for tougher Iran sanctions¹².

Thus, it is crucial for Israel to prevent any Iran-West diplomatic compromise, which will give Tehran a free hand to enhance its regional influence and maintain a modern nuclear infrastructure. Simultaneously Israel has repeatedly warned of "preemptive strike" if diplomatic efforts of stopping Iranian nuclear program fail. A unilateral attack on Iran would bring negative consequences also for Israel. Firstly, radicalization of the Muslim world, however Iran is its Shia branch, secondly, reaction of terrorist groups supported by Iran – Hezbollah on the Lebanese border and Hamas inside the Palestinian Autonomy, thirdly, triggering a huge regional war, because Iran would respond to any aggression, and lastly, it may at best set back Iran's nuclear ambitions a couple of years.

⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰ R. Heydarian, *Israel Hampers Diplomacy on Iran*, "Asia Times" August 10, 2012.

¹¹ B. Downing, *The Israeli Endgame in Iran*, "Asia Times" June 27, 2012.

¹² *Israel and Iran*, "The New York Times" August 13, 2012.

It is rather of low possibility for Israel to start a direct military strike on Iran without American backing, however toppling Iran's closest regional ally – Syria is believed to bring to undermining the Islamic Republic's regional influence by striking a blow to the Tehran-Baghdad-Damascus-Hezbollah axis of power, which Jordan's King Abdullah nervously identified as the "Shia crescent". The problem for Israel is the politics of Syria after the ouster of Assad's regime and coming into power Sunni Islamists¹³. It is stressed that if the Assad regime stays in power it will not attempt to repossess the Golan Heights by military force and will meet with Israeli leaders to negotiate for peace, whereas the an open question is how a post-Assad Syria would handle the problem of Golan Heights occupied by Israel since 1967.

Another problem for Israel would be the rule of radical Muslims instead of the Alavit regime. Even if the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood would not take power in post-Assad Syria, or even if it does not change Syrian foreign policy *vis-a-vis* Israel-Palestine, Israelis worry about the consequences of the change of rulers in Damascus. Assad's regime is however for Israel an enemy, but a predictable one and ousting the president from the post could lead to a disintegration of the Syrian state, what constitutes a security threat for Israel¹⁴. Efraim Inbar, director of its Begin-Sadat (BESA) Center for Strategic Studies, believes that "in the event that the Syrian regime collapses, Syria's advanced arsenal, including chemical weapons, shore-to-ship missiles, air defense systems, and ballistic missiles of all types could end up in the hands of... radical elements". The growing presence of Al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia in Syria has been evident since the turmoil began in 2011, and the potential for AQI, or other militant groups like Hezbollah, to acquire such weapons could create new dilemmas for Israel¹⁵. Although the Muslim Brotherhood has become increasingly moderate in the last 30 years, the other radical Islamist elements in the region, such as the Salafists or even al-Qaeda, could gain influence in Syria.

On the other hand the collapse of the Syrian regime would isolate Iran in the Middle East, however potentially provide it with an additional rationale to develop nuclear weapons. As Syria has provided Iran with the capacity to transform Hezbollah into a force that the Israeli military cannot defeat, the loss of Syria may likely mean a weaker Hezbollah, thus decreasing Iran's ability to

¹³ G. Cafero, *Syria: America versus Israel*, "Asia times" June 6, 2012.

¹⁴ Ibidem.

¹⁵ E. Inbar, *The 2011 Arab Uprisings and Israel's National Security*, "Mideast Security and Policy Studies", No. 95, p. 16.

deter Israel from attacking its nuclear facilities. Defense Minister Ehud Barak, arguably the most important Israeli decision-maker on this question, told that the Assad regime's fall "will be a major blow to the radical axis, major blow to Iran... It's the only kind of outpost of the Iranian influence in the Arab world... and it will weaken dramatically both Hezbollah in Lebanon and Islamic Jihad in Gaza Strip"¹⁶.

Lebanon, a northern neighbor of Israel influences its security for a few reasons, firstly, *via* connections with Syria. Lebanon is affected by what is happening in Syria due to their long-lasting historical, political, social, and economic ties. Lebanon's security and stability have been negatively affected by the Syrian violence, not just because of the steady influx of refugees seeking shelter within Lebanese borders, but also the rise in cross-border smuggling of weapons. Secondly, the Syrian crisis has created rifts within the Lebanese government, which consists of the Shia parties, Hezbollah and Amal, standing steadfastly behind President Assad. So in this perspective although there are no diplomatic relations between Israel and Lebanon, destabilization of Beirut challenges the security of the Jewish state, surprisingly not due to Hezbollah's control of the southern part of Lebanon, but the possibility of the final destabilization of Lebanon which may end up with an another domestic war. According to Israeli analysts what is happening in Syria negatively affects Hezbollah. A weakening Assad regime may disrupt Hezbollah's vital long term support from Damascus and Teheran, because the emergence of openly hostile radical Sunni groups on its doorstep in Syria challenges Hezbollah's previously unrivaled dominance¹⁷.

The region's revolutionary tremors have shaken the cornerstones of Israel's national security, even raising doubts about the future of its peace agreement with Egypt under Muslim Brotherhood in power. When Egypt's longtime leader, Hosni Mubarak, was toppled in 2011 Israel worried about the loss of a dependable strongman who had helped preserve a reliable if chilly peace. The concerns have grown as Egyptians from across the political spectrum have demanded a review of the treaty, and in particular, its restrictions on Egypt's military presence in The Sinai Peninsula. It has once become a subject of serious potential problems that could lead to strategic damage to Israel-Egypt relations. Even before Mubarak's ouster it was not fully under Egypt's control, demonstrated by massive smuggling

¹⁶ J. Rubin, *The Real Reason to Intervene in Syria Cutting Iran's Link to the Mediterranean Sea Is a Strategic Prize Worth the Risk*, "Foreign Policy" June 4, 2012.

¹⁷ T. First, E. Yogev, *Jihad in Syria: The Penetration of Radical Islam in the Syrian Conflict*, "INSS Insight" 2012, No. 355.

into Gaza, but the situation has deteriorated since the revolution in Egypt. Israeli military is worried about the spread of crime in Sinai and smuggling weapon from Libya to Gaza, as well as Islamic jihadist terrorist groups like apocalyptic Salafists, and al-Qaeda elements consolidating terror cells in the Sinai area¹⁸. It also has an impact on Israeli-Egyptian economic relations, due to the fact that Egypt is one of the gas suppliers for Israel. Gas began to flow in February 2008, but repeated attacks by militants or tribal groups in the Sinai have disabled the pipeline carrying gas to Israel and Jordan multiple times since Mubarak's departure. Although the pipeline supplies over 40% of Israel's natural gas, its energy resources dependence is minimal, so supply disruption actually has a greater effect on Jordan's energy security¹⁹.

Civil war in Syria may also have a destabilizing impact on the domestic situation in Jordan, which is a unique neighbor for Israel due to the fact, that as the only one the Hashemite Kingdom has been maintaining good and predictable relations with the Jewish state. While the peace treaty signed by Israel and Egypt has already been endangered by new Muslim elites, a Israeli-Jordan peace accords of 1994 have still been valid. Normalization of ties is however not popular with the Jordanian people, over half of whom are of Palestinian origin either from the West Bank or the area now comprising the state of Israel. There are an estimated 1.9 million United Nations-registered Palestinian refugees in Jordan, and, while many no longer regard their stay in Jordan as temporary, they have retained their refugee status both as a symbolic sign of support for Palestinians living under Israeli occupation and in hope of being included in any future settlement.

Thus in such refugee perspective the Hashemite royal family has concerned about another refugee problem, but this time from Syrian direction. According to recent UN figures, more than 142,000 refugees have fled to Jordan since the conflict broke out in Syria, but only 37,000 have registered as asylum seekers. What is more, the problem is not in numbers, but in the possibility that the Syrian fraction of the Muslim Brotherhood will look for its momentum in Jordan, and what is worse such enormous wave of refugees may bring with it the seeds of trouble, planted in the form of terror cells of organizations like al-Qaeda smuggled into Jordan in the guise of refugees²⁰.

¹⁸ U. Dekel, O. Perlov, *President Morsi and Israel-Egypt Relations: Egyptian Discourse on the Social Networks*, "INSS Insight" 2012, No. 357.

¹⁹ S. Brom, *The Crisis in Israeli-Egyptian Relations*, "INSS Insight" 2011, No. 278.

²⁰ O. Eran, *Jordan's Internal and External Pressure Cooker*, "INSS Insight" 2012, No. 358.

Before the Arab Spring started there have been some worrying changes for Israeli policy in the region. Apart from Iran, which since 1979 seems to have been a challenge for Israel, Turkey started deteriorating its relations with Israel. Such a change is crucial for Israel because since the very beginning close relations with Ankara were pretty beneficial for Israel at least due to a few reasons: firstly, a unique chance to break free from regional isolation, secondly, Ankara's role as a Muslim country, thirdly, Turkey's anchorage to the West. Not to overestimate for Israel is the symbolic fact, that Turkey was the first, and for decades, the only Islamic country that recognized the Jewish state, setting up diplomatic relations with Israel in 1949. During the cold war both countries played a similar role in the Middle East as Western allies to counter the Soviet alliances in the Arab world. With the end of the cold war, their pro-Western orientation, self-perception as bastions of democracy, and free-market values put them again in the same strategic boat. So in the 1990s bilateral relations bloomed economically, diplomatically, and militarily²¹. For political support Israel was in return the only Western state providing military technology to allow Ankara suppress the Kurdish insurgency. Generally speaking Turkey became second closest after U.S. ally for Israeli leaders in Jerusalem.

Their relations started deteriorating after the electoral victory of the Islamic rooted AK Party (AKP) in October 2002, however initially cooperation even in the strategic field was continued. Despite this worrying change in Ankara authorities in Jerusalem believed that their strategic cooperation will successfully face the upcoming crises, such as on one hand Israeli support for the establishment of a Kurdish state in fractured Iraq²², and on the another hosting of Hamas delegation in Ankara (January 2006). Then Israel disappointed Turkey with not informing about its attack on Gaza and with not making enough concessions to Syria in the Turkish mediation effort. Moreover, in September 2009, Israel turned down a request from Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu to enter

²¹ Defense trade during that time was worth several million dollars. Major programs included a \$700 million deal to modernize Turkey's aging fleet of F-4 Phantoms and a \$688 million deal to upgrade its M-60 tanks and an array of other sophisticated weapons systems. In return the Israeli Air Force was allowed to use Turkish air space to practice complex operations and the countries collaborated on issues of counter terrorism and intelligence.

²² Also in 2010 Turkish military and government officials have also accused Israel of providing support to militants from Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan (the Kurdistan Workers' Party – PKK), including during a May 31 attack against a naval base in Iskandirun that left seven servicemen dead and six more wounded.

Gaza Strip from Israel, where he planned to meet Hamas officials before crossing back into the Jewish state²³. In return the Turks cancelled the participation of the Israeli Air Force in the international “Anatolian Eagle” exercise in October 2009. In August 2010, Israel’s Defense Minister Ehud Barak expressed apprehensions about the appointment of a pro-Iranian candidate to head the MIT (Turkey’s intelligence agency) commenting it as the continuing of the process of leaving the Western block. Turkish-Israeli relations reached their lowest point as a result of Israel’s May 2010 seizure of a Turkish ship – the Mavi Marmara in international waters that was part of a flotilla intending to break Israel’s blockade of Gaza Strip in order to deliver humanitarian aid²⁴. Turkey accused Israel of “state terror”, recalled its ambassador from Israel, cancelled joint military exercises, and banned Israeli military planes from its airspace. It demanded an apology, compensation for victims, and an international investigation. Israel withdrew its military advisers from Turkey, warned Israeli tourists against traveling there, and refused to apologize after maintaining that it had acted lawfully in self-defense and alleging that the flotilla’s planners had terrorist links.

Although Israel and Turkey take more or less a similar position towards the civil war in Syria, looking at details shows that their interests are not composed. The Kurdish issue makes Ankara vulnerable to the international pressure and may weaken Erdogan politically. Kurdish problem exists also in Syria and Iran, what makes Israel naturally involved in it at least to deter and weaken Syria, Iran, and recently Turkey. To make it more interesting a sovereign Kurdistan would not only be one of the most populous states in the region, but also one of the biggest territory, and naturally bound to the Jewish state. That is why Israeli intelligence and businessmen have longstanding contacts with the Kurdish Peshmerga in northern Iraq.

Apart from the Kurdish issue another weak point of Turkey is Cyprus. From Israel’s perspective, Cyprus is attractive not only as an EU member, and a stable democracy, but also has highly developed infrastructure and untapped natural resources. The crucial factor is however the need to look for new friends in the region, as Israel’s relationships with former allies Turkey and Egypt are strained.

²³ This decision was part of Israel’s policy of not meeting with foreign statesmen who, on the same trip, met with Hamas officials.

²⁴ Turkey expelled Israel’s ambassador when Tel Aviv refused to meet its demands, which included an official apology for the incident, compensation for the families of the victims and an end to the Gaza blockade. Ankara also froze all military and security cooperation with Israel and filed criminal charges against the chiefs of the Israeli armed forces.

What is more discovery of huge natural gas reserves off the coast of the Greek-dominated Republic of Cyprus attracts the interest of nearby Israel, which itself made two stunning gas discoveries of its own – Tamar and Leviathan – in recent years. The two countries began to discuss how they could help each other take advantage of their new finds, which could make both states energy-independent, if not exporters of natural gas.

The fact is that all cooling incidents of the Israeli-Turkish relations have their political reasons, namely the so called “neo-Ottoman” orientation in Turkish foreign policy, and new diplomatic priorities “zero problems with the neighbors”. An important factor became the Palestinian issue, which helps Turkey to lead in the Middle East, but to achieve that partnership with the Jewish state had to deteriorate²⁵.

3. Israel and the United States: change or continuation

Political isolation as well as existing in constantly insecure environment made Israel look for the support of at least one major power. Special relationship²⁶ that exists between Washington and authorities in Jerusalem have developed over the years and are now a central focus of Israeli foreign policy, however this was not always so to the same extent. At Israel’s birth the U.S. seemed to be a dispassionate, almost an uninterested, midwife – its role was essential and unconventional, but also unpredictable and hotly debated in U.S. policy circles. Also today it is believed that Israeli-American relations have deteriorated after Barack Obama coming to power. Some specialist point that the reasons of mistrust and chilly relations are new, comparing to previous American presidents, attitude towards

²⁵ M. Herzog, S. Cagaptay, *How America Can Help Its Friends Make Nice*, “The New York Times” June 20, 2012.

²⁶ America’s attitude to Israel rests on three major pillars. The first is the idealistic dimension in United States foreign policy: America’s commitment to fight for and defend democracies abroad. Since Israel is a democracy, supporting Israel is an American interest. The second is the American Jewish community, which serves as a bridge between Israel and the American people. The third pillar is shared security and foreign affairs interests. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union was the common enemy in every way. Since the end of the Cold War, a shared interest has been the war on terrorism, as terrorism is viewed as a common threat and as such is supposed to ally the two nations (although unlike Israel, America has made no official declarations linking al-Qaeda terrorism to Palestinian terrorism aimed at Israel). In Israel’s view, the Iranian threat, first and foremost the nuclear challenge, is another threat linking the two nations.

the Middle East, and dislike between the hawkish leaders of Israel – Netanyahu and Barak on one hand, and dove – the President of U.S. Barack Obama on the other.

The first discrepancy in Israeli – American agendas is about Iranian nuclear program. Israel is fairly disappointed by the conduct of President Obama's administration in the talks with Iran. Prime Minister Netanyahu stated that the threshold of demands presented to Iran is far from satisfactory to Israel²⁷. On the other hand American administration is more distanced from Israeli conduct in the Middle East, because as they predict the United States will hold responsibility to a greater degree for Israel's actions. In other words the White House does not enthusiastically perceive the Israeli traditional prerogative of "defending itself, by itself". At the same time American analysts assume that in spite of decline of the U.S. activity in the Middle East the recent Arab revolts in the Israeli neighborhood make Israel much more dependent on U.S. security guarantees, strategic cooperation, and regional influence.

Thus nowadays the discussion is about, whether to launch a "surgeon attack" on Iranian nuclear facilities with the American "green light" or without it. Simultaneously statements made by administration officials are clear evidence of the administration's unwillingness to be viewed as the one giving Israel even a tacit "green light" to attack Iran. Pentagon analysts estimate that even a sustained Israeli air campaign would set back the program by only a few years, drive it further underground and possibly unleash a wider war²⁸. On the other hand Israelis stress that they may take such sole military action without American acceptance, because similar were taken previously, like those of Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion on the eve of the Sinai Campaign, when it was clear that a military operation against Egypt would meet with a negative American response, or even more similar to Prime Minister Menachem Begin's position on the eve of the bombing of the atomic reactor Osirak in Iraq.

The second Israeli-American discrepancy is about civil war in Syria. Washington's two primary interests in Syria are to strengthen the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) *vis-a-vis* Iran and to undermine Russia's influence in the Middle East. The collapse of the Assad regime would almost inevitably decrease Russian power in the Middle East, as Syria has hosted Russia's naval

²⁷ Z. Shalom, *Israel and the United States in Disagreement over Iran*, "INSS Insight" 2012, No. 340.

²⁸ Z. Shalom, *The US on an Israeli Military Strike against Iran: A Change in Position?*, "INSS Insight" 2012, No. 317.

base in Tartus for several decades and, since 1971 has been Moscow's closest Arab ally. Furthermore Syria is the largest Arab purchaser of Russian weapons and is seen by Moscow as Russia's doorstep into the Middle East. So if the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood removed Syria from Moscow's and Tehran's spheres of influence, the regional balance of power would be shifted fundamentally. Washington is assuming that the Muslim Brotherhood, the most influential party within the Istanbul-based Syrian National Council, would end the Iran-Syria alliance if it came to power²⁹. Israel shares American interests in cutting off Iran and Russia's growth in the region, however there are some diverse interests. While Washington used in the past the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood as a proxy to topple the Ba'athist regime³⁰, which has governed for almost half a century, Israel is primarily concerned about the future security consequences of Assad's ouster.

To sum up, although recent relations between Israel and the United States have been called as pretty chilly, the truth is that such ups and downs have occurred in the past. The United States is an indispensable ally of Israel. It provides the Jewish state with economic, technical, military, political, diplomatic, and moral support. It is seen as the ultimate resource against potential enemies, the source of Israel sophisticated military hardware, and its interest in lasting peace is central to the Arab-Israel peace process. Although there is this positive relationship, there is also Israeli reluctance to abdicate security to another party's judgment and action. Israel will continue to consider its perceptions of threat and security as decisive. It has been a vital foundation of Israel's security and foreign policy for years.

²⁹ G. Cafiero, *Syria: America versus Israel*, "The Asia Time" June 6, 2012.

³⁰ Beginning in 1956, in coordination with Saudi Arabia, the Dwight D Eisenhower administration sought covertly to overthrow Syria's left-wing nationalist government. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, through Jordan and Israel, Washington backed the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood's armed uprising against the regime of Hafez Assad. Syria is only one country where Washington supported Islamists to undermine nationalist and leftist forces. This alliance between the United States and Islamist organizations was widespread throughout the Muslim world during the Cold War, as Washington deemed such forces – Zia ul-Haq in Pakistan, the Mujahideen of Afghanistan, Abu Qurah in Jordan, and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt – to be reliable partners in the effort to undermine Communism and Arab nationalism. After the Soviet Union imploded in 1991, the United States continued to foster alliances with Islamist groups to undermine governments that did not cooperate with the "New World Order".

4. Conclusions

Israel's foreign policy shaped by historic burden and security concerns has been very dynamic due to the ongoing Arab revolts and the changing regional balance of power in favor of Turkey and Iran, who both encourage radical elements in the region. What is more, American decline in the Middle East has been weakening Israel's position in the Middle East, and reducing its deterrence. Israel in Arab eyes is no longer an "exceptional" partner of the most influential state in the world. By and large Israel feels much more isolated and endangered by the changing neighborhood, rising Islamist radicalization of Arab states, and grooving anti-Israeli postures of the Middle Eastern societies.

Not to exaggerate the international troubles of Israel, the fact is that it remains the strongest in every aspect of military affairs in the region. Israeli military analysts are however worried about the ongoing "arms race", because it results in shortening the asymmetrical domination of Israel over Muslim states, and consequently may deteriorate Israeli deterrence strategy.

It may be predicted, that political and military crisis in the Middle East will change the environment for Israel, but the basic pillars seem to persist, such as special, however quite unspontaneous partnership with U.S., cooperation with Jordan, "chilly" friendship with new Muslim governors in Cairo, who cannot deny the financial weight of American support, weakening of the danger of Hezbollah in the southern Lebanon, which suffers from declining support from Syria and Iran, what results in making it more vulnerable to the deterrence strategy of IDF.