The window of opportunity

By BOAZ GANOR

Here in the Middle East, we have long since become accustomed to the status quo being the good news – even the best news – and to any change in it bearing the seeds of imminent catastrophe. The tectonic changes of the Arab Spring revolutions thus portend the danger that fundamentalist Islam might sweep the region, harboring any hint of Arab moderation, conciliation, or peacefulness. Yet if recent events are ominous, they also constitute a conjunction of rare opportunities with positive potential for Israel.

1. Regime change in Egypt.

The counter-revolution of the Egyptian military, which overthrew the Muslim Brotherhood regime, has strengthened the interests Egypt shares with Israel, leading to unprecedented cooperation between the two countries on stabilizing situations in the Sinai Peninsula and Gaza Strip, and on fighting the Islamist fundamentalists who threaten the Egyptian government and the fragile peace on Israel’s southern border.

The Egyptian military’s actions in the Sinai Peninsula and its aggressive destruction of the underground tunnels between the Sinai and the Gaza Strip are weakening Hamas, and may even endanger its stability and continued rule in the Gaza Strip.

2. The geopolitical situation of Hamas.

The destruction of the underground tunnel system has choked Hamasa’s “oxygen pipeline”, together with the collapse of its strategic backbone – the Muslim Brotherhood regime in Egypt – this has brought Hamas to its lowest point since inception. Hamas’s geopolitical standing began to deteriorate with the outbreak of civil war in Syria, when Hamas chose to support the Islamist rebels and the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood in their struggle against the Assad regime.

This was anathema to Assad and his Shia allies. Iran and Hezbollah, and seriously jeopardized their relationship with Hamas. In turn, this led Hamas’s external leadership to depart Syria and decamp to certain Gulf states. Concomitantly, Hamas’s relationship with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states weakened, leading to a severe economic crisis for Hamas and a deterioration in the status of its external leadership, headed by Khaled Mashal.

3. The geopolitical situation of Hezbollah.

Since the 2006 Second Lebanon War, Hezbollah has been exposed to increasing criticism within Lebanon, where its opponents present it as an offshoot of Iran rather than as an authentic Lebanese movement.

Hezbollah, which was indeed established by Iran to promote its interests in Lebanon, the Middle East and worldwide, and which has for years been Iran’s “terrorism subcontractor,” has been depicted as willing to sacrifice Lebanon’s interests to promote Iran’s.

In fact, Hezbollah’s response to Iranian demands that it send military forces to Syria to save the Assad regime has only proven to Hezbollah’s detractors that Hezbollah is indeed willing to risk Lebanon’s interests to risky civil war leaching into Lebanon, to sacrifice Lebanese fighters, and even to endanger the safety of Lebanon’s citizens – to satisfy the ayatollahs from Teheran.

Given its sensitive position, and with many of its forces still stationed in Syria, Hezbollah cannot now risk military involvement with Israel, without incurring the most destructive implications for itself.

4. The Syrian civil war and the neutralization of Syria’s chemical weapons arsenal.

The US and the West remained largely indecisive in their response to the Assad regime’s massacre of Syria’s citizens, even after Assad used chemical weapons against civilians. Nevertheless, recent weeks have seen the beginning of international surveillance of Syria’s use of chemical weapons, with the ultimate aim of neutralizing a significant portion of its chemical arsenal.

This positive development was until very recently only a pipe dream for Israel. Even if it does not lead to the elimination of Syria’s entire chemical arsenal, it will significantly reduce the unconventional capabilities, and even the conventional military capabilities, of Syria – to date the most dangerous of Israel’s enemies.

5. Political change in Iran and non-nuclear armament talk.

Even if Iranian President Hassan Rohani’s “fonslaught of smiles” is no more than a fraudulent ruse, a calculated ambush by Iran’s new regime, it nevertheless bodes well for Israel on two counts.

First, the regime change in Iran grew out of the real dissatisfaction of the Iranian people with Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s leadership. Rohani knows this: he must consider it in his internal and international behavior.

Second, Rohani must consider that the dynamic set in motion by the nascent talks with the West may lead to unwanted international surveillance, which will make it difficult for Iran to arm itself with atomic weapons.

Thus, any act by the Iranian regime that would upset the fragile stability of the Middle East is liable to lead to a military imbroglio, damaging Iran’s strategic interests.

6. The opening of direct talks between Israel, the Palestinian Authority, and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas’ internal situation.

The head of the PA knows that the sand in his political hourglass is running out. Arab Spring revolutions signal a clear trend: traditional-secular regimes are being replaced by varieties of Islamist regime, whose fulcrum is local branches of the Muslim Brotherhood. In Palestine, as well, the writing is on the wall: Fatah, headed by Abbas, is the traditional-secular regime; the local branch of the Muslim Brotherhood is Hamas.

Abbas realizes that only an immediate strategic move via a vis Israel can affect his political and perhaps even personal fate.

7. Identity of interests between Israel and Sunni Arab states in the Middle East.

Never before has Israel shared so many interests with neighboring Sunni Arab states such as Saudi Arabia, certain Gulf states, Iraq, Jordan and Egypt. All of these countries are concerned lest Iran become armed with atomic weapons, all of them are concerned about Shia/Iranian hegemony in the Middle East. They all hope that the stability of the existing regimes in Egypt, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority will persist, and they all hope that Hezbollah’s power in Lebanon will diminish.

8. A reduced danger of comprehensive war.

Since its establishment, Israel has faced the existential threat of a combined, coordinated Arab attack that would bring about its annihilation. The economic and political destruction wrought by the Arab Spring in some Arab states has neutralized this threat, at least for now.

The above processes and events have temporarily opened a narrow window of opportunity for Israel. It is not without dangers and risks, for any one of these processes is liable to end in disaster and in an actual return of the existential threat to Israel. Who is to say that the Egyptian military’s counterculture revolution won’t soon lead to yet another Islamist revolution, this time with American-Western backing under the guise of support for pseudo-democratic processes?

Can anyone promise that Hezbollah, despite its current vulnerability, won’t exploit the situation in Syria to funnel Syria’s unconventional weapons into its own strongholds in Lebanon?

Might Iran succeed in its atomic fraud, and quietly continue arming itself with atomic weapons while maintaining a veneer of moderation and willingness to compromise?

Surely, direct talks with the Palestinians could hit a snag; would this lead to the demise of Abbas politically or even, heaven forefend, physically?

What if Iran’s attempts to pull itself out of the muck and mire of its relationship with Hamas have dire consequences?

And what if countries visited by Arab Spring revolutions remain ungovernable, leaving them unable to control border skirmishes with Israel or terror in the Middle East, even if they can’t engage in a comprehensive war?

Each of the situations described above exists along a continuum, which ranges between a negative and a positive pole. The future is not deterministic. Israel can influence how many of these situations develop, pulling them toward the positive rather than the negative end of the continuum.

Today more than ever, Israel needs an inspired, visionary leadership. Leadership that knows the dangers and risks, but nevertheless sees the positive potential of the historic processes now taking place in the Middle East. Leadership that will take advantage of this positive potential to promote Israel’s strategic interests.

Arriving at a political agreement with the Palestinians is the primary and most effective tool available to Israeli decision-makers. It can be a force multiplier for the positive processes now beginning to take place. Israeli leaders must recognize that for the first time in its history, the status quo is not to Israel’s advantage.

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