

Israel's Strategic Choice: Alternatives for the Alliance with United States of America

I. US-Israel relations

Israel and USA have maintained close ties that can be termed an unofficial alliance for a half century. As the structure of the international system evolves into multipolarity, the interest of USA shifts to Far East and tensions between Israel and USA grow, the question arises: does Israel have any alternatives to the present alliance? The American-Israeli relations are by no means doomed to worsen in the long run but it is important to know if Israel has a strategic option in case support from USA weakens. The aim of this text is to briefly: present different scenarios of the change in the Israeli strategic alliances, assess their viability and evaluate how much are they in agreement with Israel's interests.

II. Israel as a lone regional power

From its establishment Israel allied with one of the great powers, at the beginning it received support from USSR, than France and USA. For the first time in the history of Jewish state, this situation might change. If USA will at least partially disengage from the Middle East and Israel will lost its importance for the American interest the politics of the region will reshuffle. In the multipolar world, several great powers will try to influence it, but it is not clear that any of them will be willing to support Israel unequivocally. If the radical elements in the Muslim world rise to power, aiding Israel will become costly. It is unlikely that USA will sever all bonds with Israel, but perhaps the country will have to rely more on its own resources.

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Are they enough to secure Israel existence among Arab countries? It shouldn't pose a problem in the short run. Israel has retained its qualitative military edge throughout the years. It would most probably win any conventional conflict with its neighbor. What is more, none of them is willing to attack at present. Threats to Israel's security come to a greater degree from non-state actors and low-intensity conflicts. However, taking into account: 1. the demographical advantage of the Arab countries, 2. possible economic support of some great powers for Israel's enemies, 3. resources absorbed by the conflict with Palestinians and terrorist attacks prevention, and 4. potential fall of moderate Arab governments – Israel's future preponderance in the region is at least dubious.

Weakening of its position in relation to other Middle Eastern countries is not equal to an end of the Jewish state, but the existential threat would loom on the horizon ever since. Considering it, Israel should try to reinforce its alliance with USA but at the same time prepare for the situation where swapping allies is necessary.

III. Alliance with Russia

Russia is country most likely to play more significant role in the Middle East in a scenario of USA pivoting toward Pacific region. It: 1. is the most active adversary of unipolar world, 2. has preserved relatively substantial military potential, 3. continues to modernize its army and increase military spending, 4. has long history of involvement in the region, and 5. showed resolve in advancing its goals even as it antagonized many international actors.

Israel and Russia share two fundamental goals. They seek stability in the Middle East and uprooting of Sunni fundamentalists. Both countries have internal problems with Muslim radicals. The most evident divergence in their perspective of the region is assessment of so-called Shia axis (Iran, Syria and Hezbollah). For Israel it poses a real threat and its aggressive policy destabilize Middle East. Russia supports Shia because it sees it as a counterbalance to radicalism funded by the Sunni Arab monarchies. However, the future of the axis is not certain; conflict in Syria might undermine its significance. What seems more stable is Russian anti-Muslims stance, for example in Caucasus or Balkans, which hinders its alliance with Arab countries.

In the recent years, Israel tightened its ties with two countries enjoying very good relations with Russia based on common cultural heritage (Orthodox Christianity) and political interest. Cyprus has become Israel partner in developing the oils fields in the Mediterranean that were discovered a few years ago (there is also possibility of direct Russian involvement



in utilizing the fields). The second country, Greece, became ideal partner for Israel after its conflict with Turkey over Mavi Marmara affair in 2010.

The firm fundament of possible future cooperation is over million Russian-speaking Jews that immigrated to Israel from USSR and the countries created after its disintegration in the nineties. They changed Israeli perspective of Russia and vice versa. One of the Israeli foreign ministers, Avigdor Lieberman, comes from USSR.

All this makes deeper ties with Russia appealing possibility in case of USA losing its dominance or disengaging from Middle East. Russia will not have a potential to take up a role that USA plays today in the foreseeable future but its policy can contribute to stabilizing region and provide support for the Israeli state.

IV. Tightening cooperation with China

This scenario should not be seen as viable in near future. People's Republic of China (PRC) does not have a potential to play a key role in the Middle East in the next two decades. Even when we take into consideration a long term, the possibility of its realization depends on a few preconditions. First, USA disengagement from Middle East; second, PRC's continued stable economic development; third, taking up more active role in global politics by PRC, which will also necessitate offensive arms build-up that will enable it to project power overseas. At present, none of these is guaranteed.

But let's assume these developments occur. What would be cooperation's fundamentals, shape and outcomes? One of reasons for PRC's engagement in the Middle East will probably be raising dependence on its oil and gas. Economic ties with Arab countries do not need to lead to cool relations with Israel. PRC could take up USA's role – a super power allying different countries in the region trying to prevent emergence of regional leader and destabilization. Israel can continue to be key element of this balance of power. Sino-Israeli cooperation would be probably most fruitful on three planes: military, anti-terrorist and new environmental technologies.

Covert military ties between two countries can be traced back to the period after Six-Day War. Prospects of substantial Israeli arms sales to PRC appeared in nineties, but eventually American opposition prevented crucial deals. In new circumstances, Israel could increase exports regardless of American stance. PRC could provide financing to common military projects and, with time, also its rising expertise in that field. Another issue is terrorist threat. PRC is already dealing with attacks from Muslim Uyghur minority of Xinjiang region. With growing involvement in the Middle East and probable strengthening ties with the



moderate leaders of Arab countries, Chinese will be more susceptible to the attacks from Muslim radicals. Israeli experience in dealing with the problem might prove to be vital. The last prospective plane of cooperation is new technologies. PRC faces severe water quantity shortages and high levels of pollution. Israeli know-how on the desalinization, frugal use of water and “clean” energy might be very helpful to handle these long-term threats to Chinese development. Additionally, another element contributing to consolidation of the Sino-Israeli relation can be energy deal. Israel will become exporter of natural gas in the following years and Chinese Ministry of Land and Resources forecasts that energy demand in PRC will rise at an annualized pace of 4.5% in the next twenty years.

The importance of the relations’ cultural determinants is ambiguous. On the one hand, lack of anti-Semitism and high regard of a Jewish nation among Chinese people can strengthen the ties, but on the other hand, different attitude towards democracy can be a setback. Another factor that may render this scenario unlikely is growing importance of Islamism in the Middle East that would make close relationship with Israel a political burden.

V. Alliance with European Union

The viability of this scenario is reliant on two preconditions. First European Union should consolidate and strengthen its role as an independent international actor; furthermore, Israeli-Palestinian Peace must bear its fruit.

European Union (EU) interest in Mediterranean has been growing from nineties. From Barcelona Process in 1995, through the European Neighborhood Policy in 2004 and the Union for the Mediterranean in 2008, all European initiatives were subordinate to creating politically stable, democratic area of economic growth that would encompass both Israel and Arab countries. EU has never achieved this goal, but we cannot discard the possibility of its future success out of hand. Deeper integration and common policy toward the region might provide EU with instruments to shape new reality. We can interpret support of France for interventions in Libya (2011) and Syria (2013) as a step in this direction. But even if EU will build up its economic, political and military means of influencing Mediterranean Basin, it will be hard to stabilize area without taming Arab-Jewish enmity. Most of the Arab countries haven’t established diplomatic relations with Israel. Close European-Israeli cooperation would impede creation of multilateral Mediterranean union associated with EU. The key to changing the situation would be Israel-Palestinian agreement ending conflict of two nations and creating space for reconciliation with Arab states.

Yet there is another factor making realization of this vision unsure. Union for the Mediterranean can become effective tool of European policy only if the internal situation in



Arab countries will become stable. EU funds and perspective of closer cooperation with European countries might be helpful, but by far do not guarantee it.

Strong EU safeguarding stability in the region with its economic stimuli and military power would be a very positive scenario for a Jewish state. Culturally and politically Israel is to a great extent a European country and an alliance with EU would be natural for it. Trade with EU countries consists of almost total Israeli foreign trade volume. Within the legal framework of the Association Agreement Israel is gradually integrated into European policies and programmes. The main political obstacle to even closer cooperation is Palestinian issue and Israel's conflict with Arab states.

VI. Tacit strengthening ties with Sunni states in the Middle East

Although Israel does not have diplomatic relations with most Arab states, there are many cases of its direct and indirect cooperation with formal enemies. Some say that such an tacit cooperation is taking place currently. Both Sunni Arab states and Israel assess Iran's foreign policy as harmful and dangerous. Rivalry with Shia axis turned Israel into a potential partner for such states as Saudi Arabia, Bahrain or United Arab Emirates. Can this common interest of stopping Iran advances be a fundament for an unofficial cooperation?

This situation does not seem to be sustainable in the long run. Even if we don't take into consideration Arab-Jewish animosity, that can undermine prospects of long-term relationship, Shia-Sunni rift might not be enough. First, we cannot be sure, that Iran and its allies will not be marginalized in the coming years. Regime of Bashir Assad faces strong internal opposition, Iran fears external intervention, Sunni Lebanese can eventually stand against Hezbollah. But assuming that the Shia axis will preserve its current power, it does not seem sufficient to transform Iran into Middle Eastern hegemon. Strong Turkey will prevent Iran's ascendance and counterbalance its power. Cultural determinants will also curb influences of Iran in the region. As a Persian Shia country, it is deemed an alien by the Sunni-Arab majority of Middle East.

Lack of firm fundamentals of the cooperation with Sunni states renders it an unfavorable option for Israeli diplomacy.

VII. Conclusion

Alliance with United States seems to be most beneficial option from Israeli perspective. It is the most powerful country in the world and the situation will not change in the predictable future. Israeli foreign policy should focus on maintaining this alliance. At the



same time, America's future intentions are ambiguous and Jewish state should prepare for the possibility of changing partnerships. Closer ties with European Union would be the most desirable substitute and Jewish state should advance them. The move that would ease tensions with both USA and EU is adopting more open stance in negotiations with Palestinians and limiting settlement policy. As the conclusion of Peace Process is not predictable, Israeli diplomacy should also try to intensify cooperation with Russia, focusing on fields of culture, economy and anti-terrorist activities. Strengthening of military ties or wide-ranging intelligence cooperation should be avoided, not to antagonize current ally of Israel.

The theses and opinions included in this text express the opinions of the authors only

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