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# TRIP REPORT

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## Israel and the Arab Spring: a trip report

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**Executive Summary:** In mid-September Professor Nicholas Rostow and I attended the *World Summit on Counter-Terrorism* organized by the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT) in Herzliya, Israel. Speakers came from the right-of-center of Israeli politics, security agencies, and Israeli and non-Israeli academics. They included former directors of Mossad, the Israeli Defense Forces, national security advisors, Defense Ministry officials, former ambassadors to the United States, and international experts on global jihad. Their focus was on 3 issues currently threatening Israeli and global security: the Palestinian quest for statehood at the United Nations; the implications of the so-called Arab Spring for Israel; and the Obama Doctrine for the Middle East. Not mentioned were the break with Egypt (the Israeli Embassy in Cairo had been under siege the night before the conference opened), the hasty departure of the Israeli Embassy in Amman the following evening, and the near total break in relations with Turkey, Israel's only Muslim friend in the region.

In addition to the conference, Drs. Rostow and Yaphe met with a number of Israeli academics and policymakers who represented less and more conservative points of view. They included former military and intelligence officers, senior advisors to the Ministries of Defense and Strategic Planning, and journalists. Some held strong views on the need for Israel to continue to oppose any concessions, especially statehood, to the Palestinians, while some questioned the wisdom of Israel continuing to oppose Palestinian

statehood. The latter looked for ways to disarm the Palestinians psychologically while turning the issue to Israel's advantage.

### *It Is Not Israel's Fault*

The strongest condemnation of the United States came from former head of Mossad Shabtai Shavit, who is the chairman of the ICT Board of Directors. Shavit said, "Dictatorship is preferable to Islamic extremism" and "It is better to leave things as they are." He saw Islamist extremist parties—primarily offshoots of the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood—as the heart of the opposition movements in all the Arab countries. He blamed President Obama for the chaos in Egypt, saying he pushed Mubarak out to appeal to the masses but, Shavit warned, the masses cannot lead and cannot govern. Shavit accused President Obama of "political naïveté" in his "hesitant efforts" to support Saudi Arabia and quiet the revolution in Bahrain. Shavit insisted that the Arab countries with U.S. support—as in the conclusion of the \$60 million air deal with Saudi Arabia—could defeat Iran. Instead, he described U.S. efforts to quiet Saudi reaction in Bahrain as "desertion and disbelief." No wonder, he said, the Saudi response had been "if you desert us, we will find others to protect us."

Many Israelis voiced the fear that the Arab Springs would become venues for political takeovers by Sunni Muslim extremists. For them, the Arabs have no other model and no choice for change. Western Europe had civil society organizations and a history

of liberal traditions to guide them through their revolutions. The countries of the Middle East have no similar conditions or experiences and no traditional civil society. The only alternative to the status quo is Islamic revolution as identified by the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood.

### ***To do justice, do terror***

The U.S. inability to defeat the Palestinian bid for recognition at the UN was a clear test for the Obama administration in the eyes of these Israelis. According to Shavit, President Obama is not important to this process because he sees Israel's security linked to its relations with the Palestinians. Other speakers said they no longer saw the United States as an "honest broker." Another former Israeli official noted that "nothing has brought peace yet" and said "concessions [by Israel] only encourage more bad behavior." Land has not brought peace or security; a state needs protective borders for strategic depth; quoting the late Prime Minister Yitzhaq Rabin, assassinated by an extremist Israeli settler in 1995, the Palestinians will get less than a state, no right of return, and no Jerusalem.

Other experts from outside the Israeli government and outside Israel saw Iran driving the Arab Spring to enhance its regional leadership and secure wide Islamic validation. Egypt was incorrectly seen as open to Iranian inducements, mil-mil cooperation, and informal contacts between the Muslim Brotherhood and Iranian clerics. A key question for some: if Egypt's historical role in Arab politics is diminished, will Iran benefit? Iranian involvement in Bahrain, it was acknowledged, may be based on circumstantial evidence, but there was little doubt Tehran's leaders see Iran winning in its proxy war with Riyadh in Syria and the Gulf. Most Israelis present argued that most significant challenge to Iran was the destabilization of Syria. A Syria in the throes of regime change, they argued, could constrict Iranian operations in Lebanon. For Israeli scholars and other international experts, however, the successes of the Arab Spring represent risk and not opportunity in Iran. For Iran's leaders a new

Persian Spring would mean a revival of the protests orchestrated by the Green Movement after the debacle of the 2009 presidential election in Iran, not something the regime would like to ponder four months before the next majles elections.

### ***What Lies Ahead?***

Many Israelis continue to believe that to make any concession is to show weakness. So long as there is no Palestinian leadership to work with and no preparation of the Palestinian people for democratic governance or education in self-rule, then there can be no negotiations. The Arab Spring promises anarchy and not democratic governance in the Arab world. Military control is essential to protect democratic change. Secure borders and strategic depth are more important than demilitarized zones in Judaea and Samaria. In this dark vision of the future, some Israelis saw no stable solution—"Peace," said member of the Knesset and the ultra-conservative Yisrael Beiteinu Party Uzi Landau, "nothing has yet brought peace. Peace is the continuation of war by other means. Unless the Palestinians are educated to recognize Israel as the Jewish state, there can be no peace."

In addition to his presentation at the ICT conference, Dr. Rostow attended an event honoring the publication of *Israel's Rights as a Nation-State in International Diplomacy* by the Institute for Research and Policy of the World Jewish Congress. His article on "The Historical and Legal Contexts of Israel's Borders" is included in the volume.

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