

## IDENTITY FACTOR IN ISRAEL'S FOREIGN POLICY TOWARD THE ARAB SPRING

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**Abstract.** The anti-regime uprising movement, the so-called Arab Spring, which began in December 2010 in Tunisia and quickly spread to the entire Arab World, has had a transformative impact on the current regional order. In Israel, the Arab Spring movement has been perceived as a threat to national security rather than as an opportunity. Many studies have argued that Israel's perception of the Arab Spring movement as a threat to its national security stems from the transformation in the regional distribution of power and the increased insecurity in the regional environment. As an alternative to these arguments, it will be argued in this study that Israel's response to the Arab spring movement from the point of national security is due to Israel's identity. In this study, Israel's response to the Arab Spring will be discussed in three sections. The first section will examine the Israeli identity formation in relation to the Arab states in the pre-Arab Spring period. The following section will focus on the main political developments affecting Israeli-Arab relations before and during the Arab Spring. The final section before the conclusion will reveal to what extent political developments during the Arab Spring have constituted the Israeli security concerns.

**Keywords:** Israeli identity, Arab Spring, Pan-Arabism, Pan-Islamism, Security

### Basic provisions

The anti-regime uprising movement, known as the Arab Spring, which began in Tunisia in December 2010 and soon spread across the Arab world, has created a transformative effect on the current regional order [1-2]. While the Arab Spring was welcomed by Western states in the hope that it would have an impact on democratization in authoritarian states [3-5], it was perceived as a threat to national security rather than an opportunity in Israel [6-8]. Israeli leaders chose to call the riots "Arab winter" and "Islamic winter". Compared to European 1989 national revolutions, the riots of the Western states compared to the 1979 Iranian Revolution. For Israel, democracy would not come to Arab countries after the regime was changed after the riots [9-10].

### Introduction

Israel's perception of the regional transformation brought about by the Arab Spring as a threat to its security has made Israeli foreign policy again the focus of the Realist approach. In this context, many studies have tried to explain Israel's reaction to the Arab Spring from a Realist perspective. For example, Philipp O. Amour, Amichai Magen and Efraim Inbar examined Israel's response to the Arab

Spring within the framework of regional anarchy, balance of power and survival notions.

Amour argued that the transformation brought about by the Arab Spring uprising to the Middle East regional order worsened the regional anarchy and exacerbated insecurity and conflict in Israel. According to him, the political developments since 2011 have initiated changes in the regional balance of power that will result in Israel's detriment. Regional insecurity has heightened Israel's potential concerns and sensitivity to its priority over the balance of power in the Middle East.

Similarly, Magen stated that as a result of the uprisings in Arab countries, the overthrow of authoritarian governments and the replacement by Islamist governments were perceived as a threat to Israel's national security. According to him, Israel's foreign policy towards the Arab Spring stems from its hostile environment that poses a threat to its security. Therefore, the notion of survival has made security the primary focus of Israeli foreign policy.

Inbar, on the other hand, stated that the Arab Spring worsened the regional balance of power that worked in favor of Israel. According to Inbar, Israel was more concerned about the rise of radical Islamists as a result of the regime change brought about by the Arab Spring in its immediate neighbors such as Egypt, Jordan and Syria, for its security. In addition, Israel was worried that the political changes brought by the Arab Spring would weaken the pro-Western Arab countries and increase the influence of Iran, which is the supporter of Hamas and Hezbollah terrorist organizations in the region.

According to these studies, as a result of the Arab Spring, Israel increased its defense expenditures and preferred to pursue a foreign policy that rejects the notions of openness and reconciliation that would promote peace and cooperation with Arabs and Palestinians [6, p.298]. In addition, Israel pursued the aim of “non-entanglement” in the developments in Arab countries unless the red lines are crossed [7, p.63].

Studies evaluating Israel's response to the Arab Spring in terms of security have not highlighted the importance of identities. When they talk about the rise of radical Islamism after the uprising, they have overlooked that these are identity politics. This study aims to provide an alternative approach to Realist studies by examining Israel's response to the Arab Spring in terms of identities. Despite the realists' arguments that the security concerns in Israel stem from the changes in the regional power balance brought by the Arab Spring, I will argue that in this study, as an alternative to these arguments, Israel's response to the political developments brought by the Arab Spring is due to the change in Israeli identity or the structure of regional identities.

In the study, Israel's response to the Arab Spring will be discussed under three sections. First, the formation of Israeli identity before the Arab Spring will be considered in the context of its relations with Arab states. Secondly, the focus will be on important political developments affecting Israeli-Arab relations before and during the Arab Spring. And finally, before the conclusion, it will be revealed to what extent the political developments during the Arab Spring pose a security concern for Israel.

### **Description of materials and methods**

This study uses discourse analysis method to explain the social construction of the Israeli state identity and its influence on Israeli foreign policy towards the Arab countries using the primary sources of data obtained from the Israeli and American archives. The study used a constructivist approach in International Relations, which emphasizes the role of identities in constituting the interests that states pursue in their foreign policies as its conceptual framework. The study begins by investigating the role of the Holocaust narrative in the construction of the Israeli state identity and then shows how it has created the sense of victimhood and the fear of annihilation among the Israeli policymakers and the public in the result of domestic and international developments.

### **Israeli Identity: Fear of Destruction and Status Quo**

Theoretically, state identities have both subjective (“*I*”) [11, p.271] and intersubjective (“*me*”) dimensions [12, p.142]. In other words, state identities have national and international sources. So, what is Israel's identity? While the majority of studies examining Israeli identity construction give more weight to intrastate or national elements [13-18], very few focus on the international dimension [19-20]. Existing studies have failed to draw attention to the interrelatedness of both national and international sources of Israeli identity for understanding its foreign policy. This study tries to fill this gap by revealing the relationship between these dimensions in the formation of Israeli identity.

There are many components that make up the Israeli identity at the national and international level. However, in terms of the scope and subject of the study, two more striking aspects emerge. The first is the traumatic Holocaust collective memory, known as the crux of antisemitism or hatred of Jews, which has persisted for centuries [19, p.521]. The other is the “peripheral state” identity formed in the context of Israel's position in the region and its relationship with its states [20, p. 48].

These two dimensions of Israeli identity began to be built almost at the same time. The trauma of the Holocaust did not exist in the Israeli collective memory

before 1960. Under the influence of the Eichmann Case in 1961, a Holocaust trauma was “nationalized” and placed in the collective memory [21, p.96]. On the other hand, Israel, which remained isolated by being surrounded by enemy Arab states after the 1956 War, started to develop close relations with non-Arab peripheral states that shared the idea of a common threat to get out of isolation. This relationship has built Israel's “peripheral state” or “moderate state” identity.

While the Holocaust built the perception of victimhood and the fear of destruction in the Israeli identity, the identity of the “peripheral state” reinforced the belief in status quo based on preserving the current order. Israel has made a distinction between regional states and trans-state regional actors, depending on the criteria arising from these two components. On the one hand, the “core states” that do not recognize the State of Israel and pose an existential threat by destroying it, and on the other hand, the “periphery states” that recognize the State of Israel, share the common threat idea and focus on preserving the existing order. Israel has tried to balance the threat from the “core” states by forming an informal military alliance with the “periphery” states [22, p.47].

### **The Arab Spring and the Breakdown of the Structure of Identities**

In the period until the Arab Spring, Israel tried to maintain the current situation by normalizing its relations with the moderate axis states by balancing against the potential threat from the radical axis. However, with the effect of the Arab Spring, the existing regional order began to transform [1-2]. The transformation of the current order started with the fall of authoritarian regimes in moderate states and their replacement by Islamists.

### **Results**

October December 2010, as a result of the Arab Spring uprising that began in December, authoritarian regimes fell in moderate axis states such as Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Islamist parties came to power instead. The arrival of Islamist parties in the “moderate axis” states has begun to worry Israel [23, p. 87]. Because the fall of moderate regimes has meant that Israel is again surrounded by anti-Israeli states, becoming isolated and threatening its security [9, p.127].

Israel's concern about the regional transformation brought about by the Arab Spring was very high in the period between the overthrow of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and his replacement by the Muslim Brotherhood in February 2011, and the military coup and the overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood in July 2013. Israel was more worried about the regime change in Egypt than the regime change in “moderate axis” states such as Tunisia and Libya [8, p.121].

### **Discussions**

Why did Israel perceive the Islamist parties that came to power through democratic elections after the uprising as a threat to its security? Firstly, the parties that came to power were fed with anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic anti-Semitism. During the uprising, anti-Israeli and anti-Jewish slogans proliferated in the squares, in the media and on social networks. There were also attacks on Jewish synagogues and diplomatic institutions. In January-February 2011, a synagogue in Tunisia was burned down by insurgents. Jewish cemeteries were destroyed. In September 2011, rioters in Egypt attacked the Israeli Embassy in Cairo [24, p. 44].

Secondly, the attitudes of the Islamist parties that came to power after the uprising towards Israel were negative or radical. For example, the Muslim Brotherhood, which came to power in Egypt, refrained from establishing direct relations with Israel, stated that it would review the 1979 Camp David Agreement and normalize its relations with Iran [24, p.131].

### **Israel's Security Concerns**

As during the Arab Spring uprisings, the Islamist parties that came to power after the uprising adopted anti-Israel, anti-Semitic and anti-Zionist attitudes. For Israel, the Islamists who came to power after the Arab Spring were no different from Iran. Like Iran, they were radical Islamists who did not recognize Israel. For Israel, this meant the rise of the "radical axis" in the region where radical Islamists are located, the termination of peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan, the isolation of Israel with the weakening of the "moderate axis", and the increase in attacks with the rise of terrorist organizations such as Hamas and Hezbollah [7, p.69].

Israel tried not to get involved in Syria for a while, where the uprisings turned into a civil war, and preferred to remain a spectator. However, as the war in Syria approached the Israeli borders in 2013, Israel began to intervene in the civil war in Syria. Israel's intervention was more likely to prevent Iran and Hezbollah, which it supports, from strengthening its position in Syria, rather than the Assad regime. Although Israel thinks that the Assad regime poses a threat to itself, it is not very keen on his fall. Because Israel cannot foresee what kind of regime will emerge after Assad and is particularly worried about the formation of an Islamist regime. In this respect, it can be said that Israel is in favor of the survival of the old Assad regime, which it knows very well from a new regime [25, p.329].

As a result, Israel's interpretation of the Arab Spring as a threat to its security stemmed from the change of identities rather than the regional balance of power. Because the coming to power of the Islamist parties as a result of the Arab Spring meant that the "balance of identities" between the "moderate axis" and the "radical axis" that provided the regional order for Israel was disrupted.

## **Conclusion**

In this study, Israel's response to the Arab Spring was evaluated in terms of identity and security. It has been tried to answer the question of how the Arab Spring movement, which created a regional transformative effect, was perceived as a security threat for Israel. As an alternative to realists' explanations of anarchy, balance of power and security, it has been argued that Israel's pessimistic response to the Arab Spring stems from identities. In order to reveal this, the Holocaust and environmental state components of the Israeli identity, both national and international, were examined. It has been revealed what kind of perceptions and beliefs these components have built in the Israeli identity and how they have changed over time.

With this change, since the 1990s, Israel began to distinguish the regional states as "moderate axis" and "radical axis", and tried to maintain the current situation by forming informal allied relations with those on the radical axis, whom it perceived as a potential threat, with those on the moderate axis, which it identified with itself. However, as a result of the anti-regime Arab Spring uprising that started in Tunisia in December 2010 and spread to other regional states, the old regimes fell in many states and the new government came to power. The Arab Spring has shaken the balance between the moderate axis and radical axis states. The moderate axis states, especially the coming to power of Islamist parties in Egypt, were perceived as a threat to Israel's security. Because while the identities of the new regimes and the state were redefined, they became antisemitic and anti-Israeli. After Egypt, Israel began to worry about the coming to power of Islamist parties in Jordan and other moderate states. Because the regime changes isolated Israel; most importantly, it has meant that Iran and radical groups such as Iran-backed Hezbollah and Hamas will strengthen and Israel will be exposed to attacks. However, since the middle of 2014, the failure of Islamist parties in many countries, especially in Egypt, and the suppression of uprisings have reduced Israel's security concerns.

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## **ИЗРАИЛЬДІҢ АРАБ КӨКТЕМІНЕ ҚАТЫСТЫ СЫРТҚЫ САЯСАТЫНДАҒЫ БІРЕГЕЙЛІК ФАКТОРЫ**

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**Аңдатпа.** 2010 жылы желтоқсанда Тунисте басталып, бүкіл араб әлеміне тараған «араб көктемі» деп аталатын режимге қарсы көтеріліс аймақтық тәртіпті трансформациялық тұрғыдан өзгертті. Израильде «араб көктемі» көтерілісі мүмкіндік ретінде емес, ұлттық қауіпсіздікке қатер ретінде қабылданады. Көптеген зерттеулер Израильдің «Араб көктемі» көтерілісін өзінің ұлттық қауіпсіздігіне қатер ретінде қабылдауы күштің аймақтық бөлінуіндегі өзгерістер мен аймақтық ортадағы қауіпсіздіктің күшеюінен туындайтынын алға тартты. Бұл аргументтерге балама ретінде осы зерттеуде Израильдің араб көктемі көтерілісін ұлттық қауіпсіздік тұрғысынан бағалауы Израильдің мемлекеттік бірегейлігіне байланысты екені талқыланатын болады. Бұл зерттеуде Израильдің араб көктеміне реакциясы үш бөлім аясында талқыланады. Бірінші бөлімде араб көктеміне дейінгі кезеңде араб мемлекеттеріне қатысты Израиль бірегейлігінің қалыптасуы қарастырылады. Келесі бөлімде араб көктеміне дейін және кезінде Израиль-араб қарым-қатынастарына әсер ететін негізгі саяси оқиғаларға назар аударылады. Қорытындыға дейінгі соңғы бөлім араб көктемі кезіндегі саяси оқиғалардың Израильдің қауіпсіздік мәселелерін қаншалықты алаңдатқанын көрсетеді.

**Тірек сөздер:** Израиль бірегейлігі, араб көктемі, панарабизм, панисламизм, қауіпсіздік.

## **ФАКТОР ИДЕНТИЧНОСТИ ВО ВНЕШНЕЙ ПОЛИТИКЕ ИЗРАИЛЯ В ОТНОШЕНИИ АРАБСКОЙ ВЕСНЫ**

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**Аннотация.** Восстание против режима, так называемая «арабская весна», начавшаяся в декабре 2010 года в Тунисе и быстро распространившаяся на весь арабский мир, оказало преобразующее воздействие на нынешний региональный порядок. В Израиле движение арабской весны воспринимается как угроза национальной безопасности, а не как возможность. Многие исследования утверждают, что восприятие Израилем движения «арабской весны» как угрозы своей национальной безопасности проистекает из трансформации регионального распределения власти и повышенной небезопасности в региональной среде. В качестве альтернативы этим аргументам в этом исследовании будет утверждаться, что реакция Израиля на движение арабской весны с точки зрения национальной безопасности обусловлена государственной идентичностью Израиля. В этом исследовании реакция Израиля на «арабскую весну» будет обсуждаться в трех разделах. В первом разделе исследуется формирование израильской идентичности по отношению к арабским государствам в период до арабской весны. Следующий раздел будет посвящен основным политическим событиям, влияющим на израильско-арабские отношения до и во время «арабской весны». Последний раздел перед заключением покажет, в какой степени политические события во время «арабской весны» вызвали озабоченность Израиля по поводу безопасности.

**Ключевые слова:** израильская идентичность, арабская весна, панарабизм, панисламизм, безопасность.