

BEWARE AN ALLIANCE OF THE WEAK

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**Even in a region that is unfree, Israel has shown that it can maintain liberty.
There is no substitute for independent power.**

January 19, 2014 | Martin Kramer

This is a response to *Israel in the Eye of the Hurricane*, originally published in *Mosaic* in January 2014

Ofir Haiivry has given a historically well-versed [account](#) of the evolution of Zionist and Israeli grand strategy, from Herzl to the present. He also makes a trenchant case that Israel has strayed from the “activist” precedent set by David Ben-Gurion in the early years of the state.

There was always something romantic about the “activist” doings of Israel—forging ties as far afield as Ethiopia and Iran, dabbling in the secessionist causes of the Kurds of Iraq and the blacks of southern Sudan. And, of course, there was the longest and most cherished play of all: the cultivation of ties with the Maronites of Lebanon. Ah, that view from the heights above Beirut. . . .



Members of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Kurdish Partiya Karkerên, PKK) in Kurdistan/Iraq. Courtesy James Gordon/Flickr.

But as romantic as it all may seem in retrospect, this “activism” failed to achieve its primary end, which was to keep Arab states so preoccupied with other problems that they would avoid war with Israel. In each decade, Israel ended up fighting wars with Arab states: 1948, 1956, 1967, 1973. Each war had its own dynamic, but together they combined to create the firm impression in the world that the Arab-Israeli conflict was indeed the “Middle East conflict,” the source of all the region’s problems. Israel’s support for the southern Sudanese and Ethiopia didn’t restrain Egypt, its support for the Kurds didn’t deter Iraq, and its backing of the Maronites didn’t stop the PLO from carving out a mini-

state in Lebanon. Relationships with Turkey and Iran did nothing to cause Arab states to think twice.

The problem was that Israel's would-be friends among the region's minorities were too weak, which was precisely why they sought Israeli support in the first place. Israel's *sub rosa* allies, the monarchies of Ethiopia and Iran, were also weak at their cores, and both would be toppled by revolutions, in 1974 and 1979 respectively. Attempts to rekindle these ties never translated into meaningful strategic gains, and one of them, Israel's mediation in the Iran-Contra affair, totally backfired.

The only way to break the cycle of wars with the Arabs was to get Egypt out of it. Egypt, too, had engaged in an “activist” policy following the 1952 revolution. In his *Philosophy of the Revolution* (1955), Gamal Abdel Nasser placed Egypt in three “circles”: Arab, African, and Islamic. Egypt began meddling in all of them, thinking this would inflate its importance as a regional power. Instead, this ceaseless “activism” turned into a burden, culminating in Egypt's disastrous military intervention in a civil war in Yemen, which may have set the stage for Nasser's humiliating defeat in 1967. Pan-Arabism was the Arab version of “activism,” and it, too, failed. When Anwar Sadat also sought an exit from the cycle of wars with Israel, his first move was to jettison it altogether.

It was the dual failure of Israeli and Egyptian “activism” to end costly wars that drove both countries to abandon it in favor of a direct deal for peace. The contribution of this peace to Israel's security has been indisputable. Israel hasn't fought a full state-to-state war since 1973. The costs of small wars, from Lebanon to the intifadas and Gaza, have never approximated those of waging a war with an Arab state—or worse, a coalition of them. No wonder Israel has preferred the stability of Egypt, although it has no way to promote it, and can only pray for it.

The drawback of the old “activism” was that it committed Israel to weak parties who didn't bring enough heft to the relationships. The list presented by Haivry in arguing for a new “activism” today isn't much more promising. There is no reason to be in the morass of southern Sudan, for instance, if there is no threat from Egypt, and even then it would be a very weak card. The same is true of the North African Berbers, also of little use to Israel absent a threat from Egypt. The Christians scattered across the Fertile Crescent are vulnerable, and they are emigrating whenever they can. The Druze everywhere sway with the wind, as they must do in order to survive, and they saw enough of Israel in Lebanon to know that they would be foolish to rely on it.

The Kurds, a big item on Haivry's list, are much more interesting than they were way back

when Israel cultivated them against Saddam. If they don't overplay their hand, they may even acquire some trappings of sovereignty. But Israel will never be more than a bit player there, given that the Kurds are landlocked and Turkey has resolved to play the dominant role. Then there are the Alawites, who, if they did retreat to a coastal enclave in northern Syria—far from certain—would do so in defeat, and would need more than they could give. (Russia would remain their patron.)

As for the Azeris and other ethnic groups in Iran, despite decades of Western efforts to entice them to break off, they remain in a fixed orbit around the Iranian state. (Azerbaijan itself is a better play, although its significance is more economic than strategic.) Ethiopia, again, is valuable only if Israel faces a hostile Egypt, which it doesn't. Lately, Israel has reached out to Greece and Cyprus, to tweak Turkey. But these are the basket cases of the European Union—better than nothing, but far inferior to any future reconciliation with a post-Erdogan Turkey.

This may be as good as it gets, and the Mossad could be kept busy collecting little bits and pieces of the shattered mosaic. But let's not rule out alternatives to an alliance of weaklings.

One is some kind of cooperation with the Arab oil states, which are economically powerful but militarily exposed, and which are worried (perhaps excessively so) that the United States might sacrifice them to a reconciliation with Iran. No, they are not "natural" allies of Israel, and in the Saudi case, they are as distasteful to Israelis as Israelis are to them. But here, too, there are significant differences. The statelets that line the Gulf may funnel money to Islamists in Syria and elsewhere, but at home they are comparatively tolerant, to the point of allowing Arabs and Muslims to fall into the minority through the importation of foreign workers.

The emirs who build extensions of the Guggenheim and the Louvre, open branches of American universities, and put their resources not into weapons but skyscrapers, are more than just "Sunni authoritarians," in Haivry's phrase. These small states represent the most functional part of the Arab expanse (remember, it's all relative), they're not totally benighted, and they have strengths to offset their weaknesses. If Iran's power grows, and confidence in the United States diminishes, these micro-states will do what it takes to survive, perhaps opening opportunities for Israel.

They are also in league with Egypt and Jordan, which remain bound to Israel by treaties that have stood many tests. The behind-the-scenes cooperation between Israel and the military in Cairo and the monarchy in Amman remains far-reaching. Those observers who, only a few years ago, wrote off the generals and the royals as vestiges of the past have a lot of explaining to do. Just as important, the ruling elites in both countries have shown grit in

the face of challenges, and they can deliver on security when it is in their interest to do so. The simple geographic fact is that they are the custodians of Israel's two longest borders, and no amount of romantic adventure in distant corners can substitute for solid relationships with immediate neighbors.

It would be splendid if all these considerations could be cast aside in favor of building, as Haivry writes, a league of "forces in the Middle East seeking self-determination, democracy, and liberty." The problem is that these forces don't have much force, and their commitment to the lofty principles that underpin Western modernity is far from unequivocal. In any case, the prevention of war is just as moral a pursuit as the promotion of democracy, especially where prospects for the former far outweigh the unlikely success of the latter. Even the United States, the greatest champion of liberty in human history, has been humbled by its failure to spread its values in the Middle East. Fortunately, Israel has shown that it can maintain liberty even in a region that is unfree. It can afford to wait until the peoples surrounding it transform themselves, however long it takes.

Israel has also shown that it can flourish even in the absence of a Palestinian state. In Israel, the question of whether the status quo on this front is sustainable is a subject of political disagreement, but it doesn't break down along the lines of support for "activism" versus "stability." For example, one might get the impression from Haivry that Amos Yadlin, the former chief of military intelligence, is a potential "activist" who sees opportunities everywhere except in the Palestinian track. In fact, he so supports a Palestinian state that he would have Israel [thrust](#) it upon the Palestinians even if they don't want it—as a way to stabilize *Israel*.

Yes, there are some who believe that Israel, like Arab regimes, is also losing legitimacy (through its own actions or hostile "delegitimation"), and so must be saved by an alternative "activism" personified by John Kerry, who presents Mahmoud Abbas, the old-guard head of the Palestinian Authority, as a new "opportunity." The problem with Abbas is that he is just another one of the weaklings, reliance upon whom is more likely to drain Israeli power than enhance it.

Which brings us to the "special relationship" with the United States. It is absolutely true that the United States is retrenching (the result of its own deep disillusionment with the "activism" of George Bush's "forward strategy for democracy"). Elsewhere I have [argued](#) that Israel needs to think about a "Plan B" for a post-American Middle East. But I must also admit that no one, myself included, has one. I recently chaired a panel of Israel's most astute strategic thinkers, from the full range of the political spectrum, but when I asked them what could be done to offset American retrenchment, their answers were

identical: there is no alternative. If India is indeed a “principal candidate,” as Haivry suggests, it will be a long time before any outside power fills the vacuum, so Israel will have to find ways to do so itself.

In particular, it will have to make sure that Iran doesn’t fill that vacuum. To some, Israel’s preoccupation with Iran may seem excessive and obsessive. I myself think it can be best apprehended by viewing [this single image](#). Look at it carefully. Today, no regional power is capable of making this nightmare scenario come true. If Iran emerges with such a capability, Israel’s entire grand strategy will have to be revamped to embrace a very different kind of “activism,” well beyond drinking coffee with Kurds and Druze.

The possible parameters of such a posture deserve fuller treatment, but it would be better not to have to go there at all. That is why Iran must remain at the top of the agenda, and that is why Israel mustn’t be distracted by Arab springs, Islamist winters, and various photogenic “awakenings.” It must keep its eye on this ball, lest the ball become a fireball. No ramshackle structure of “partnerships” will matter if the image above becomes not just thinkable, but feasible.

The strength of Zionism and Israel has been their adaptive character, and particularly their ability to identify extraneous sources of power and to draw upon them to build independent Jewish power. Our heirs in the decades to come will judge us by whether, in these times of relative security, we prepared Israel for more troubled days. There can be no substitute for independent power, in the absence of which our fate would be comparable to that of Kurds, Christians, and Druze. By all means, let us seek new friends. But let us not forget that we must prepare ourselves to survive as a people that dwells alone.

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