

Summary: Central Asian governments are just beginning to measure the effects of the changes of the Arab Spring on the emerging regional order. Central Asia is not part of the Middle East; however, it has direct relations with many of its actors, namely Turkey and Iran, as well as a growing relationship with both Israel and the United Arab Emirates. The post-Arab Spring regional order has jeopardized Israel's geostrategic balance, and so that country is looking to deepen alliances in the Muslim world. Central Asian nations can fill that role.

Israel and Central Asia: Opportunities and Limits for Partnership in a Post-Arab Spring World

by *Marlène Laruelle*

The Arab Spring deeply shocked — and worried — all of the Central Asian governments. Although they have analyzed these events mainly from the perspective of their own domestic policies, they are just beginning to measure the effects of these changes on the emerging regional order. Central Asia is not part of the Middle East; however, it has direct relations with many of its actors, namely Turkey and Iran, as well as a growing relationship with both Israel and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Ironically, Western-produced analyses on the complex relationships between Middle Eastern countries and Central Asian ones often forget Israel, where interactions are long-established and cordial in the political, economic and strategic realms, and based on shared views of world order and intense person-to-person relations. The post-Arab Spring regional order has largely transformed the Central Asia-Israel potential partnership.

In their first years of independence, the Central Asian states largely turned to the Islamic *Umma*, led by the idea of recreating the bonds with their Muslim “brothers” that the Soviet regime had destroyed. Nonetheless, they remained very reluctant to participate in any anti-Israeli collective narrative. This strategy became more

pronounced in the second half of the 1990s, when all states in the region slowed their cooperation with Arab countries over concerns about the introduction of unmanaged, radical Islam on their territory. Pressures from Iran, which sought to adopt resolutions against Israel during its 1997-2000 presidency of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), led the Central Asian states to keep their distance from the organization on behalf of their good relations with Tel Aviv. Iran also sought a leading role in the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), but again, the Central Asian states rejected Tehran's attempts to politicize the organization; they demanded that the role of the ECO be limited to development assistance and regional transport.

The alliance between Israel and the Central Asian states did not waver in the 2000s. On the contrary, all of the Central Asian governments cultivated their secular traditions and stepped up their anti-Islamic stance for fear of the development of domestic, Islamic-oriented opposition. Islam has no specific legal status in any of the five states in the region, and the fight against alleged Islamic extremism has become a mainstay of domestic and foreign policies. Uzbekistan has mastered this security-oriented

reading of Islam and based its foreign policy on its image as a fortress against Islamic-led instability. Kazakhstan plays the “dialogue of cultures and religions” card by organizing the Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions (Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Judaism). The country also boasts of having hosted the 2002 session of the Euro-Asian Congress of Rabbis, opened the largest synagogue in Central Asia (Beit Rachel-Chabad Lubavitch) in Astana in 2004, and sending senior officials year each year to participate in Jewish holidays (Purim, Pesah, Lag BaOmer, and Hanukkah). In June 2009, Israeli President Shimon Peres visited Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Azerbaijan, continuing a long tradition of diplomatic exchanges.

In addition, anti-Semitism is largely absent from the Central Asian traditions, and only recently has the region been touched by the types of conspiracy theories in vogue in the other Muslim countries. The famous forgery *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* is still difficult to obtain in the region. However, some anti-Semitism has developed recently, influenced by the shared Russian-speaking information space or by discourses from the rest of the Islamic world. It became visible in Kyrgyzstan during the turmoil of 2010, when so-called Jewish bankers who were a part of the entourage of the president's son, Maxim Bakiyev, were violently denounced in the Kyrgyz press. Although an increasing share of Central Asian public opinion is in solidarity with the *Umma*, this new Islamic identity remains out of sync with the consensual dissemination of anti-Semitic/anti-Israeli ideas in the rest of the Muslim world.

Israeli investments have strengthened this political partnership. In 2003, Israel was the largest foreign investor in Uzbekistan, but bilateral trade has since declined. At present, Israeli-Uzbek cooperation projects have been redirected to other areas such as agriculture, high technology, and training. In Turkmenistan, some Israeli businessmen have succeeded in building a privileged relationship with President Saparmurat Atayevich Niyazov and his successor, Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov. The investment firm Merhav, which competed with Gazprom for control of the Israeli gas market, became Ashgabat's essential intermediary in its search for foreign investors.

Relations with Kazakhstan are also growing rapidly. Tel Aviv has a critical need to diversify its oil supplies, as it is in conflict with many producing countries. It has turned

logically to Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan for oil. Today, a quarter of Israeli's imports of the commodity is said to come from Kazakhstan. Security and military cooperation is also on the rise. In 2008, Astana signed an agreement with two Israeli companies, Soltam and Elbit, to develop new artillery systems with integrated command and control. Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI) is also present on the Kazakh arms market, and Russia agreed that Kazakhstan could make the Baikonur cosmodrome site available to Israel for launches of communications satellites.

Person-to-person relations between Israel and Central Asia are probably Tel-Aviv's leading means of influence in the region. The Persian-speaking Bukharan Jews emigrated almost entirely to Israel and North America, alongside the Russian-, German- and Yiddish-speaking Ashkenazi communities that settled in the region in the Soviet period. These diasporas from Central Asia now play an important role in the development of private trade, as well as state-to-state relations. The so-called “king of diamonds” in Israel, Lev Leviev, is a native of Uzbekistan and is president of the World Congress of the Community of Bukharan Jews. He is personally acquainted with Uzbek President Islam Karimov and Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev, and is an indispensable ally for anyone wanting to establish themselves in Central Asia. Uzbekistan has at its disposal several significant connections to the Israeli business and public affairs communities via the Israeli Minister of Foreign Affairs and the founder and leader of the radical right party Yisrael Beiteinu, Avigdor Lieberman, who has been campaigning for stronger ties to Central Asia, particularly to Tashkent, since the 1990s. In Kazakhstan, oligarch Alexander Mashkevich, who heads the holding Eurasian Natural Resources Corporation (ENRC) and also has Israeli citizenship, acts as a central intermediary for business. He chairs the Eurasian Jewish Congress, one of five branches of the World Jewish Congress, and has the ear of President Nazarbayev.

The post-Arab Spring regional order has jeopardized Israel's geostrategic balance. The old alliance with Turkey has been seriously undermined, and the strengthening of the new partnership between Egypt and Turkey — and potentially between Egypt and Iran — dramatically changed the situation for Israel. More or less moderate Sunni Islamists have won at the polls in revolutionary countries such as Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt, and probably would in a post-Bashar

al-Assad Syria too. More radical groups linked to al-Qaeda have become established in parts of Libya and probably in Syria, and have gained strength in the Maghreb and the Sahel regions.

Under these circumstances, it is in Israel's interest to seek new allies in the Muslim world, but these allies are becoming scarce. The Central Asian states and Azerbaijan are strong candidates for this status. They would provide Israel with new international visibility that is detached from the Middle East conflict, focused instead on clearly understood economic and energy interests. This alliance would value secular trends in the Muslim world and Israel's image as a regional power, which is strong thanks to its technical expertise and economic dynamism, rather than as a country at war. The negative side for Israel is that the alliance requires siding — once again — with authoritarian regimes whose legitimacy will likely be challenged in coming years.

Seen from Central Asia, an enhanced alliance with Israel would be welcome, provided it leaves aside completely the question of Iran's nuclear program. Whenever Tel Aviv has insisted that Central Asian nations rally to its positions on Iran, it was opposed on the grounds of inadmissibility. In the 2000s, the Uzbek government asked for Mossad assistance in eliminating local Islamist groups, but refused to consent to Israel's request for a boycott of Tehran. Beyond the Iran issue, and even though they consider Palestinian claims legitimate, the Central Asian states hope for Israel's increased involvement in the region, especially in terms of state and private trade, and growing security-oriented cooperation in the arms and high-technology sectors.

At the same time, the Central Asian states also are seeking to promote new partnerships with the UAE. They appreciate the economic dynamism of the Emirates, as well as what they see as a more modernized, secular, and potentially pro-Western form of Islam. Although relations between the UAE and Israel are difficult, Qatar's long-term tacit recognition of Israel and its ambition to shore up its position as a viable mediator between the West and the Arab world could support both Central Asian and Israeli interests. In addition, Israel has improving relations with Russia and a growing partnership with India, two external actors — one declining, the other rising — that are critical to the Central Asian region in the forthcoming decades.

It is up to the Israeli and Central Asian actors to determine whether or not a new, mutually beneficial alliance will emerge in coming years. Whatever the direction it takes, the rapidly moving Israel-Turkey-Iran balance in the Middle East will not come without implications for the Central Asian states. With growing competition between them, the three countries will quickly seek to reinforce their means on influence in Central Asia, a factor that the transatlantic partnership will also need to account for in its long term strategic planning.

About the Author

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