

The Israeli periphery

BY REVA BHALLA

THE state of Israel has a basic, inescapable geopolitical dilemma: Its national security requirements outstrip its military capabilities, making it dependent on an outside power. Not only must that power have significant military capabilities but it also must have enough common ground with Israel to align its foreign policy toward the Arab world with that of Israel's. These are rather heavy requirements for such a small nation.

Security, in the Israeli sense, is thus often characterized in terms of survival. And for Israel to survive, it needs just the right blend of geopolitical circumstance, complex diplomatic arrangements and military preparedness to respond to potential threats nearby. Over the past 33 years, a sense of complacency settled over Israel and gave rise to various theories that it could finally overcome its dependency on outside powers. But a familiar sense of unease crept back into the Israeli psyche before any of those arguments could take root. A survey of the Israeli periphery in Egypt, Syria and Jordan explains why.

Maintaining the Sinai Buffer

To Israel's southwest lies the Sinai Desert. This land is economically useless; only hardened Bedouins who sparsely populate the desert expanse consider the terrain suitable for living. This makes the Sinai an ideal buffer. Its economic lifelessness gives it extraordinary strategic importance in keeping the largest Arab army Egypt sat a safe distance from Israeli population centers. It is the maintenance of this buffer that forms the foundation of the 1979 peace treaty between Egypt and Israel.

The question percolating in Israeli policy circles is whether an Islamist Egypt will give the same level of importance to this strategic buffer. The answer to that question rests with the military, an institution that has formed the backbone of the Egyptian state since the rise of Gamal Abdul Nasser in 1952.

Over the past month, the military's role in this new Muslim Brotherhood-run Egypt quietly revealed itself. The first test came in the form of the Gaza crisis, when the military quietly negotiated security guarantees with Israel while the Muslim Brotherhood basked in the diplomatic spotlight. The second test came when Egypt's Islamist president, Mohammed Morsi, attempted a unilateral push on a constitutional draft to institutionalize the

Muslim Brotherhood's hold on power.

The military bided its time, waiting for the protests to escalate to the point that rioters began targeting the presidential palace. By then, it was apparent that the police were not to be fully relied on to secure the streets. Morsi had no choice but to turn to the military for help, and that request revealed how indispensable the military is for Egyptian stability.

There will be plenty of noise and confusion in the lead-up to the Dec. 15 referendum as the secular, anti-Muslim Brotherhood civilian opposition continues its protests against Morsi. But filter through that noise, and one can see that the military and the Muslim Brotherhood appear to be adjusting slowly to a new order of Nasserite-Islamist rule. Unlike the 1979 peace treaty, this working arrangement between the military and the Islamists is alive and temperamental. Israel can find some comfort in seeing that the military remains central to the stability of the Egyptian state and will thus likely play a major role in protecting the Sinai buffer. However, merely observing this dance between the military and the Islamists from across the desert is enough to unnerve Israel and justify a more pre-emptive military posture on the border.

Defending Galilee

Israel lacks a good buffer to its north. The most natural, albeit imperfect, line of defense is the Litani River in modern-day Lebanon, with a second line of defense between Mount Hermon and the Sea of Galilee. Modern-day Israel encompasses this second barrier, a hilly area that has been the target of sporadic mortar shelling from Syrian government forces in pursuit of Sunni rebels.

Israel does not face a conventional military threat to its north, nor will it for some time. But the descent of the northern Levant into sectarian-driven, clan-based warfare presents a different kind of threat on Israel's northern frontier.

It is only a matter of time before Alawite forces will have to retreat from Damascus and defend themselves against a Sunni majority from their coastal enclave. The conflict will necessarily subsume Lebanon, and the framework that Israel has relied on for decades to manage more sizable, unconventional threats like Hezbollah will come undone.

Somewhere along the way, there will be an internationally endorsed attempt to prop up a provisional government and



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maintain as much of the state machinery as possible to avoid the scenario of a post-U.S. invasion Iraq. But when decades-old, sectarian-driven vendettas are concerned, there is cause for pessimism in judging the viability of those plans. Israel cannot avoid thinking in terms of worst-case scenarios, so it will continue to reinforce its northern defenses ahead of more instability.

Neutralizing the Jordan River Valley

The status of the Jordan River Valley is essential to Israel's sense of security to the east. So long as Israel can dominate the west bank of the river (the biblical area of Judea and Samaria, or the modern-day West Bank) then it can overwhelm indigenous forces from the desert farther east. To keep this arrangement intact, Israel will somehow attempt to politically neutralize whichever power controls the east bank of the Jordan River. In the post-Ottoman Middle East, this power takes the form of the Hashemite monarchs, who were transplanted from Arabia by the British.

The vulnerability that the Hashemites felt as a foreign entity in charge of economically lackluster terrain created ideal conditions for

Israel to protect its eastern approach. The Hashemites had to devise complex political arrangements at home to sustain the monarchy in the face of left-wing Nasserist, Palestinian separatist and Islamist militant threats. The key to Hashemite survival was in aligning with the rural East Bank tribes, co-opting the Palestinians and cooperating with Israel in security issues to keep its western frontier calm. In short, the Hashemites were vulnerable enough for Israel to be considered a useful security partner but not so vulnerable that Israel couldn't rely on the regime to protect its eastern approach. There was a level of tension that was necessary to maintain the strategic partnership, but that level of tension had to remain within a certain band.

That arrangement is now under considerable stress. The Hashemites are facing outright calls for deposition from the same tribal East Bankers, Palestinians and Islamists that for decades formed the foundation of the state. That is because the state itself is weakening under the pressure of high oil prices, now sapping at the subsidies that have been relied on to tame the population.

One could assume that Jordan's oil-rich Gulf Arab neighbors would step in to defend one of the region's remaining monarchies of the post-Ottoman order against a rising tide of Muslim Brotherhood-led Islamism with heavily subsidized energy sales. However, a still-bitter, age-old geopolitical rivalry between the Hejaz-hailing Hashemite dynasty and the Nejd-hailing Saudi dynasty over supremacy in Arabia is getting in the way. From across the Gulf, an emboldened Iran is already trying to exploit this Arab tension by cozying up to the Hashemites with subsidized energy sales to extend Tehran's reach into the West Bank and eventually threaten Israel. Jordan has publicly warded off Iran's offer, and significant logistical challenges may inhibit such cooperation. But ongoing negotiations between Iran's allies in Baghdad and the Jordanian regime bear close watching as Jordan's vulnerabilities continue to rise at home.

Powerful partners abroad

In this fluctuating strategic environment, Israel cannot afford to be isolated politically. Its need for a power patron will grow alongside its insecurities in its periphery. Israel's current patron, the United States, is also grappling with the emerging Islamist order in the region. But in this new regional dynamic, the United States will eventually look past ideology in search of partners to help manage the region. As US-Turkish relations in recent years and the United States' recent interactions with the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood reveal, it will be an awkward and bumpy experience while Washington tries to figure out who holds the reins of power and which brand of Islamists it can negotiate with amid messy power transitions. This is much harder for Israel to do independently by virtue of ideology, size and location.

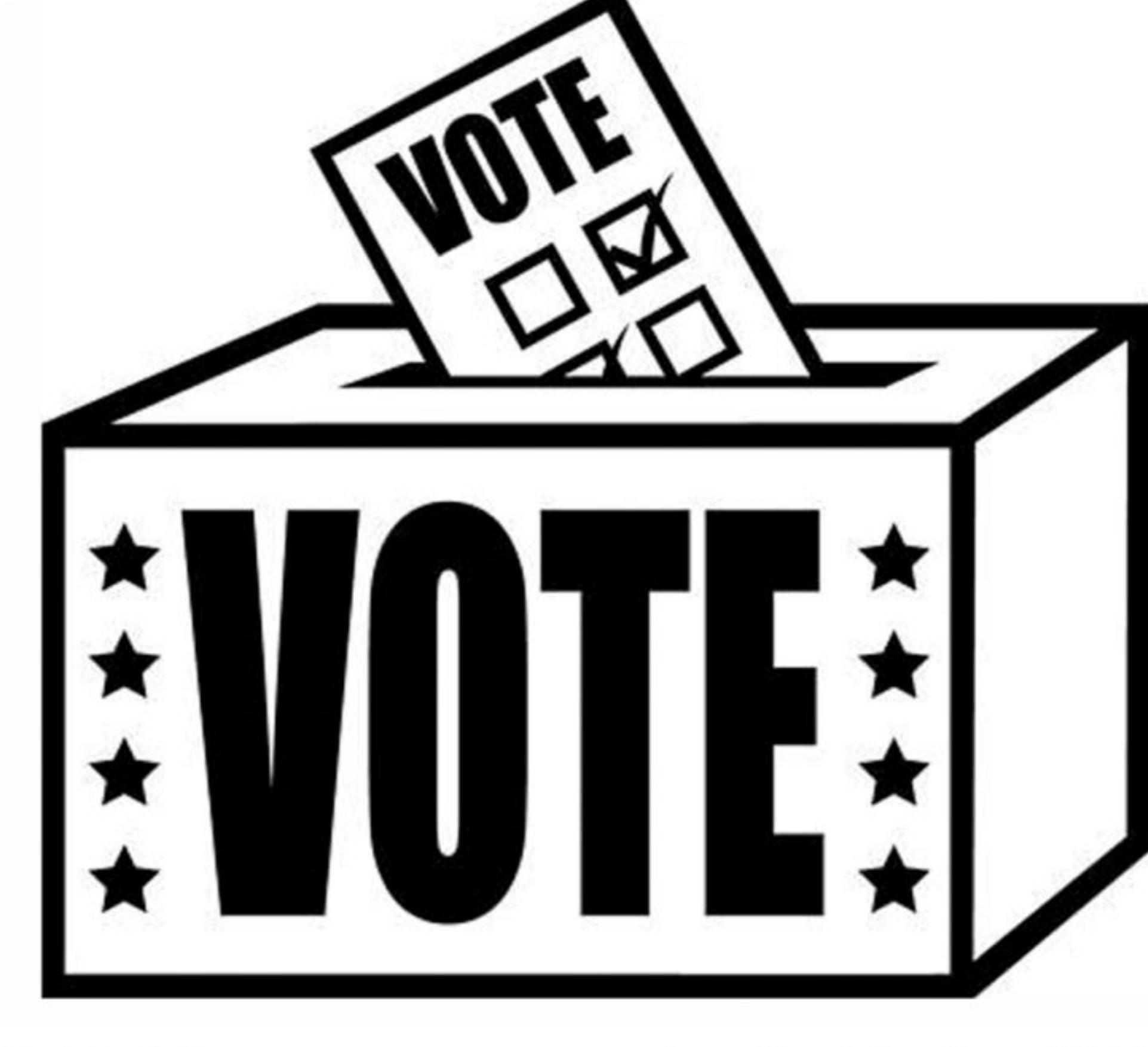
Israel's range of maneuver in foreign policy will narrow considerably as it becomes more dependent on external powers and as its interests clash with those of its patrons. Israel is in store for more discomfort in its decision-making and more creativity in its diplomacy. The irony is that while Israel is a western-style democracy, it was most secure in an age of Arab dictatorships. As those dictatorships give way to weak and in some cases crumbling states, Israel's survival instincts will again be put to the test.

The writer is the Vice President, Global Affairs.

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2012: The Year of Elections



March 04, 2012

Putin returns to the presidency

Vladimir Putin runs for a third term as president against a backdrop of mounting public opposition. Putin, who served as president for two terms before assuming the position of prime minister for four years, claims victory on March 4 with 64 percent of the vote. Meanwhile, opposition groups reiterate allegations of voting fraud and turn out en masse to demonstrate during Putin's May inauguration.

April 01, 2012

Myanmar's 'new era'

Myanmar's quasi-civilian government allows democracy leader Suu Kyi to participate in parliamentary by-elections. Suu Kyi and her party NLD win forty of forty-five contested parliamentary seats in a land-

mark vote. Though the military still holds a vast majority of parliamentary seats, the vote signals a significant political shift from Myanmar's longtime military dominance and provides an impetus for lifting international economic sanctions.

May 06, 2012

French voters reject austerity

Amid euro zone debt crisis, France undergoes a presidential election with high stakes for the direction of euro zone negotiations, transatlantic relations, and European integration. Francois Hollande's win makes him the first Socialist president of France in seventeen years and places him at the forefront of the continent's discussions on the euro zone's future, pitting his argument for economic growth against Germany's push for austerity.

June 16, 2012

Struggling for power in Egypt

'New' Egypt holds its first presidential election since the ouster of Hosni Mubarak. The race culminates in an unexpected runoff between Muslim Brotherhood candidate Mohammed Morsi and former Mubarak-era air force commander Ahmed Shafiq. Morsi wins, setting the stage for a standoff between the military, judiciary, and presidential office as Egypt struggles with a glut of economic problems, ongoing street protests, and cooling ties with the United States.

June 17, 2012

Greeks vote to stay in the Eurozone

Amid euro zone debt crisis, Greece holds parliamentary elections that will effectively decide whether the country accepts the EU-IMF proposed \$51 billion bailout package. The first elections, held in May, fail to give any one political party a majority in parliament. Greece holds a second parliamentary election in June, and the victor is New Democracy's Antonis Samaras, who is committed to cooperating on reform packages that will allow Greece to stay in the troubled monetary union.

July 01, 2012

Mexico brings back the PRI

After the 2000 victory of the National Action Party (PAN) ended seventy years of consecutive rule by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) in Mexico, the PRI is poised for a historic comeback in the 2012 presidential election as the country grapples with chronic drug-related violence, sluggish economic growth, and long overdue energy and labor reforms. PRI's charismatic presidential candidate, Enrique Pena Nieto wins the presidential election with 38 percent of the vote.

July 07, 2012

Testing Libya's transition

Less than a year after the toppling of Qaddafi, Libya's transitional government

sets parliamentary elections amid scattered violence, with voters choosing among a group of more than 2,500 candidates for 200 parliament positions. The moderate National Forces Alliance coalition, led by US-educated Mahmoud Jibril, dominates the election. The new parliament faces its first test when protesters storm the building over its choice of cabinet ministers, but the selections are approved by late October, forming Libya's first post-Qaddafi government.

October 01, 2012

A boost for Georgian Democracy

Georgia's parliamentary election results in the country's first democratic power turnover in its post-Soviet history when the ruling party of president Mikheil Saakashvili concedes defeat to the Georgian Dream opposition coalition. The leader of the coalition, billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, expresses a desire to reestablish diplomatic ties with Russia, which have been severed since the countries waged war over South Ossetia and Abkhazia in 2008.

October 07, 2012

Venezuela's Comandante maintains the revolutions

Hugo Chavez runs for the fourth term as president of Venezuela. The economy and domestic insecurity are top campaign issues amid a persistently high crime rate and frequent shortages of basic goods. Henrique Capriles leads the newly unified opposition coalition and pledges to boost private sector growth and reformulate Venezuela's foreign relations to take a more economically pragmatic course. Voter turnout reaches a historic high on Election Day, and Chavez defeats Capriles 54 to 45 percent.

November 06, 2012

Obama wins another four years

Amid an incremental economic recovery, American presidential election is dominated by concerns over unemployment,

immigration reform, tax policy, and health care. Republican nominee Mitt Romney faces off against incumbent president Barack Obama, vowing to repeal the administration's signature health-care legislation, create 12 million new jobs, and lower tax rates. Obama, meanwhile, touts his achievements in health care, staving off a deeper economic depression, and killing Osama bin Laden. Obama wins both the electoral and popular vote and secures reelection for a second term.

December 16, 2012

Japan calls elections as economy fail

Facing an ailing economy, Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda calls for December elections in order to pass critical legislation for deficit financing and government reforms. Noda's Democratic Party of Japan is expected to lose the majority of seats in the lower house to the Liberal Democratic Party. The election's top campaign issues are Japan's slumping economy, including a controversial sales tax increase passed in June, the future of nuclear power, and a free trade deal with the United States and other Asia-Pacific nations.

December 19, 2012

A narrow race in South Korea

South Korea holds a presidential election to determine a successor for President Lee Myung-bak. Conservative candidate Park Geun-hye and former human rights lawyer Moon Jae-in compete for the presidency. Pre-election polls show the two candidates in a tight race, with job creation and welfare reform at the forefront of campaign issues and North Korea dominating foreign policy discussions. Park, who would be South Korea's first female president, pledges to engage with North Korea and seek "balanced diplomacy" with the United States and China, while Moon announces plans to reform the country's legal system and welfare policy.

Source : CFR and AFP.