

“Israele più solo, più forte” [Israel: the more lonely, the stronger], *Limes. Rivista italiana di geopolitica*, n. 5, October 2011, pp. 320

by *Arturo Marzano*

This issue of *Limes*, a bimonthly Italian geopolitical magazine born in 1993, entirely focuses on the political loneliness of Israel in the aftermath of the “Arab Spring”. It is divided into three parts. The first one, *Israel is Alone*, includes 13 essays, a short article by A.B. Yehoshua (already published on the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*), and two interviews to Israeli experts of security studies. The second one, *And All around Land is Trembling*, is strictly connected to the first part and is composed of 11 essays and one interview to Salman Sayh, Director of the Doha Brookings Centre. The third part, *Imazighen: a Berber Spring*, is much smaller and consists of 5 papers dealing with the current situation of the Berber minority in North Africa.

The main idea of the issue is that Israel has never been that isolated. Yet, at least currently, it is not weaker. As the Editorial “Not from this world?” clearly states, a series of events have progressively weakened the diplomatic status of Israel (and its perception). Specifically, the diplomatic crisis with Turkey; the fall of the Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, who has been the Israeli closest Arab leader for three decades; the American retreat from Iraq and the increasing Iranian influence on Baghdad; the Israeli uneasiness following the Palestinian Authority statehood bid at the United Nations; the risk of a power vacuum in Syria that might endanger the entire Middle East; the American influence decline in the region. On the contrary, the only diplomatic “plus” for Israel in the last year has been the Saudi Arabia strong stance against the Iranian influence in the region, which motivated the armed intervention and harsh repression of the Shia rebellion in neighbouring Bahrain.

According to the Editorial, if the three circles of the Israeli geo-strategy are analysed – the inner one (the Palestinians), the intermediate one (the neighbouring countries), and the external one (the other actors in the Middle East) – the most dangerous for Israel is the third one. The Palestinians are not presenting a real threat, given the still ongoing division between *Hamas* and *Fatah*, despite many attempts to reach an agreement. As to the Arab neighbours - keeping aside Jordan, which managed, so far, to find its way through the “Arab Spring” - political forces in Egypt are not interested in armed confrontation with Israel and therefore, even if «Israel has lost a useful point of reference, it did not get in exchange an aggressive enemy» (p. 19). It is

true that the Northern front is worrisome, and for this reason Israel is carefully following up the situation in Syria and Lebanon, but things seem to be under control, at least in the short run. On the contrary, as to the external circle, the Israeli isolation is more evident than ever, especially if a comparison is made within a larger historical horizon, i.e. considering the strong relationships Israel and Iran used to have until 1979 and the strict Israeli-Turkish partnership (in particular in terms of security) still working a few years ago.

While the inner circle is not widely addressed in the issue – only Umberto De Giovannangeli concentrates on the Palestinian bid for statehood – several articles deal with the intermediate and the external circles. For example, Amikam Nachmani and Margherita Paolini concentrate on the crisis with Turkey; Ofir Winter and Paola Caridi tackle the relationship between Israel and Egypt; Mordechai Kedar and Lorenzo Trombetta deal with the situation in Syria and the challenges that Bashar Assad's fall might create; Mauro De Bonis and Fabrizio Maronta focus on the relationship between Azerbaijan and Israel, favoured by their common enmity with Iran.

The American umbrella

As said, according to the Editorial, even if «Israel is (...) more lonely, it is not less secure» (p. 23). The main two reasons are that the Arab spring has deepened the rivalries among the Arab states and that the «American umbrella is still stable, though less waterproof than earlier» (p. 25). In this regard, the possibility that Washington might stop defending Jerusalem, which would lead to questioning the very existence of Israel, is considered «unthinkable» (p. 25). Though such a comment is totally sharable, the main question that *Limes* falls short of asking is not “what will happen” if the US stop protecting Jerusalem, but “how should Israel behave not to let it happen”, i.e. not to let the relationship between the US and Israel deteriorate.

If a decline in the US support for Israel is currently “unthinkable”, any analysis of the American-Israeli partnership should still consider that signals of an increasing uneasiness in the American perception of the Israeli politics are more and more visible. From this point of view, *Limes* does not pay attention to two intertwining phenomena that should be taken into consideration while dealing with the American support of Israel.

On one side, several diplomatic incidents occurred between Israel and the US in the last two years, which led to severe critics by American leading figures. On the other side, there is a minor - yet increasing - process of disaffection towards Israel by several sectors of the American Judaism. In this issue, no

article addresses any of the two aspects, and the only essay that deals with American Judaism (Martino Mazzonis, “Without Jewish vote, No Obama 2012”) only focuses on the importance of the Jewish vote in the next Presidential elections, especially in crucial states such as Pennsylvania and Florida (p. 163). Without denying the relevance of such an aspect, a more nuanced analysis of the American Jewish attitude towards Israel would have helped in better depicting the complexity of the US-Israeli relations.

The internal enemy

A very interesting topic that this issue deals with concerns the risks to Israel’s existence coming from “inside” rather than from “outside”. According to the Editorial, Israel «might not succumb to an enemy, but can surely destroy itself» (p. 26). If Zionism will increasingly concentrate of the ideas of Jewish exceptionalism and divine privilege, abandoning its universal values, «the future for Israel and (...) the Jewish Diaspora will be dark» (p. 25-26).

This idea is shared by Menachem Klein, professor at the Bar-Ilan University, author of the article “A residence in the jungle”. By using as a title for his contribution a famous quotation by the Israeli Defence Minister Ehud Barak, Klein states that the more Israel perceives itself as an oasis in the jungle of the barbarism, the more it becomes a prison, which won’t protect its citizens but will endanger them. On the long run, only political actions can guarantee the security that military option only provides on the short run. Therefore Israel needs to be put under pressure from the outside, i.e. the international community, in order to reach an agreement based on a two-state solution approach, since «it will never reach such an agreement by itself» (p. 118).

Similar conclusions, but with a more pessimistic tone, are shared by Carlos (a nickname used by an Italian diplomat) in his article “Israel’s options if you really love it”. By overturning an expression that was created by Israeli former Minister of Foreign Affairs Abba Eban to describe the Palestinian alleged attitude towards peace - «The Palestinians never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity (for peace)» - Carlos states that it was Israel to have indeed missed a great opportunity in 2002, when the Arab League proposed a peace agreement based on the two-state solution through the so-called Beirut Initiative. If the Israeli refusal might have been understandable at that time – it was one of the worst moments of the Second *Intifada* in terms of Israeli civilian casualties – Israel does not have any justification if it misses that opportunity now. Unfortunately, the Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu is not ready for such an action. Therefore, Israel should be strongly advised and even forced to sign

an agreement by its «real friends», who «should not be worried about the protection of Israel now (it is able to do that by itself), rather about its safety tomorrow» (pp. 137-138).

In light of what Menachem Klein and Carlos write, the triumphal tone that characterizes Ofir Haiivry article “The demographic decline. A myth difficult to destroy” is quite awkward. After having criticised all demographers who dealt with Israeli and Palestinian populations so far, by stating that they provided wrong data, Haiivry states that future is in favour of Israel, since Jewish birth rate is increasing, while Arab one is decreasing. Therefore, moving from demography to politics, Haiivry states that «we should not use alleged demographic previsions (...) to identify solutions to the Arab-Israeli conflict». On the contrary, «using some trends to justify specific solutions (the Israeli retreat from territories inhabited by Arab population) might unexpectedly become a justification for the opposite solution» (p. 54). The question whether time is in favour of Israel or of the Palestinians is a never-ending dispute and it is always possible to find completely opposite opinions. For this reason, hosting another essay with a different position on the same topic might have been useful to depict a more nuanced picture of the situation.

In conclusion, despite a few shortcomings – some essays are not particularly thorough; some others are not linked to the main topic; no contribution addresses the “big chill” in the relationship between Israel, Germany, France and Great Britain - this magazine issue is interesting and provides the reader with a deeper knowledge on a topic that is too often neglected in the Italian panorama, both at academic and journalistic level.

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