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Citation for published version:

Voller, Y 2015, 'From periphery to the moderates: Israeli identity and foreign policy in the Middle East', *Political science quarterly*, vol. 130, no. 3, pp. 505-535. <https://doi.org/10.1002/polq.12360>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1002/polq.12360](https://doi.org/10.1002/polq.12360)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Political science quarterly

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FROM THE PERIPHERY TO THE MODERATES: ISRAELI IDENTITY AND FOREIGN POLICY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Since the late 1990s, Israeli foreign policy toward the Middle East has been shaped by what I define as the Moderate Axis Conception. According to this conception, the Middle East is in a midst of a conflict between moderate, pro-status quo and generally pro-Western Arab regimes, and a radical Iran-led Islamist axis. Israel, the conception suggests, could rely on cooperation with the moderates in its own conflicts with the radical axis. This article examines the sources of this conception. It argues that it has been shaped not purely by rational calculations of power and threat, but by Israel's identity and self-perception. Viewing itself as a moderate in a region prone to radicalism, Israel has sought to forge alliances with similar actors. In fact, this article demonstrates, this self-perception has guided Israeli foreign policy before the rise of this conception. The Periphery Doctrine, which dominated Israeli strategic thinking until the 1980s, is another example for this inclination. However, whereas in the Periphery Doctrine the moderates were represented by non-Arab or non-Muslim powers in the region and the radicals by pan-Arabism, the Moderate Axis Conception has redefined the moderates and the radicals, or the periphery and center.

Observers of Israeli foreign policy since the early 2000s would identify a constant reference to the “moderate Arab states,” “moderate Sunni axis,” “moderate Arab governments,” or simply “moderate Arabs.”¹ These terms usually, if not always, denote the conservative secular dictatorships and monarchies in the Middle East and North Africa. These include Egypt, Jordan, the member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) led by Saudi Arabia and Qatar, and the Maghreb states (especially Morocco and Tunisia).

The frequent use of this term reflects the increasingly popular conception among Israeli policy makers and public opinion that some kind of a “moderate axis” has emerged in the Arab World. At the heart of this conception lies the Israeli belief in the potential of establishing an alliance with members of this so-called moderate axis against joint threats in the region, and particularly the ones emanating from Iran/the so-called Shi'i Crescent and from Islamist terror networks, such as al-Qa'eda. This conception constitutes an important turn in Israeli foreign policy making and regional security strategy. I refer in this article to this turn as the emergence of the *Moderate Axis Conception*.

Albeit its prominence in Israeli thinking, most observers have failed to notice, or at least fully comprehend, the growing prominence of the Moderate Axis Conception. This paper provides one of the first accounts of this conception, its origins, evolution and impact. Tracing the origins and the evolution of this conception could provide us with important insights into Israeli foreign policy toward the Middle East, as well as regional geopolitics.

In this article, I explore the evolution of the Moderate Axis Conception and its impact on Israel's foreign policy. Although the conception came to prevail in Israeli thinking in the late 1990s and early 2000s, my research has gone back to the early days of the formation of Israeli foreign policy. The hypothesis guiding this is that one cannot understand the formation of a foreign policy conception independently of previous conceptions and trends. My research has come up with several findings concerning Israel's foreign policy. First, my investigation reveals some strong aspects of continuity between the Moderate Axis Conception and previous conceptions and doctrines. Although, as I elaborate below, the components of each conception are notably different, many of the same ideas and principles have guided both conceptions. The similarities are particularly striking given the different environments in which both emerged. Second, my research reveals that both conceptions gained popularity even though they failed to fulfill some of their promises. This leads me to my third argument based on the research. The above two findings reveal that Israel's foreign policy making has been molded by factors other than regional rivalries, sense of threat and conflict. Another important factor that should be taken into account is Israel's identity and self-perception, as shaped by its political elites. Israel's identity and self-perception have been important in shaping its understanding of threat, regional rivalry, and consequently also its view of potential allies.

These findings have significant implications for our understanding of Israel's foreign policy in particular and of regional geopolitics in general. Students of Israeli foreign policy

have tended to portray its foreign policy making as based on rational calculation of balance of power and threat. Consequently, they have come to see regional geopolitics as defined by a relatively narrow set of conflicts and contestations over regional hegemony. A good example for that is Trita Parsi's study of the history of Israeli-Iranian relations. Already at the beginning of his work, Parsi asserts that "the geopolitical rivalry between Israel and Iran has – since the Cold War – been the underlying conflict that defined the context of almost all other matters in the region."² Parsi's portrayal of Middle Eastern geopolitics presents a somewhat simplistic picture, which renders any effort to understand the sources of actors' decision-making processes unnecessary.

Certainly, the conflict between Israel and Iran is an important theme in regional geopolitics. However, I argue here that this conflict is only one aspect of wider processes within both Israel and the region. In other words, the Iranian-Israeli conflict, or perhaps what has come to be described as a regional "cold war," is the product, rather the underlying cause, of historical socio-political dynamics in the Middle East. Similarly, Israel's growing adherence to the so-called moderate axis cannot be narrowed to their common fear of the Iranian threat (real or exaggerated), or of any other specific threat, such as transnational Islamist terrorism. The Moderate Axis Conception itself marks such a significant turn in Israel's stand toward its Arab neighbors that it requires us to go beyond explanations that revolve around material capabilities or perceptions of threat. Taking into account Israel's identity and self-perception as essential factors of policy making comes in handy in explaining Israel's perceptions of threat and alliances.

This begs the following questions: what is actually Israel's identity? And how can we prove the causal link between Israel's identity and its policy making? Michael Barnett has defined identity as "the understanding of oneself in relationship to others."³ According to Barnett, such understanding is molded not solely by the other's actions, but also by one's

historical experiences, key events and evolution. Here there is a wide agreement among students of Israel's history about the key events that have shaped its evolution and identity. Most notable are the history of persecution in Europe, which culminated in the holocaust; the conflict with the Arabs, both inside and outside of Palestine; and the 1948 War of Independence. Barnett has highlighted religion, nationalism and liberalism as important elements of Israeli identity.⁴ Mira Sucharov has also added the pre-exile events of the fall of Masada (73 CE) or the Bar Kochba Revolt against the Roman Empire (132 CE) as experiences that have influenced modern Israeli identity. Both Sucharov and Barnett agree that these factors have created among Israeli elites and the wider public a sense of isolation and defensiveness in relation to its immediate environment. As Barnett suggests, Israel has perceived itself as “existentially isolated, its existence is always in jeopardy, and it faces a series of threats from various quarters that vary only in the level of overt intensity and hostility.”⁵ Sucharov maintains that Israel has come to view itself as a *defensive warrior* that engages only in “no-choice (*eyn breira*)” wars.⁶

This sense of isolation has indeed been reflected in both pre-state Zionist discourse and the official discourse and conduct of the Israeli state. An early example is the Iron Wall theory of the Revisionist Zionist leader, Ze'ev Jabotinsky. Manifested in his 1923 essay bearing the same title, Jabotinsky came out against contemporary efforts by the leaders of the *Yishuv*, namely pre-state Zionist institutions in Palestine under the British mandate, to seek reconciliation or forge alliances with Arab forces. Jabotinsky held the opinion that the Arabs would never accept Israel's existence at the heart of the Arab World. Therefore, he advocated an isolationist policy of unilateralism to guarantee the security of the Jewish state to come.⁷ In 1996, the-then Israel's Foreign Minister Ehud Barak presented another manifestation of this sense of threat and isolation. In a speech before American Jewish leaders he declared that Israel is “a modern and prosperous villa in the middle of the jungle... No hope for those who

cannot defend themselves and no mercy for the weak.”⁸ Thus, since its early days Israel’s political elites have viewed their country as an alien in the region, perennially subjected to hostilities from those constituting the center, bound to remain so in the future to come. In contrast to an environment characterized by irrationality and radicalism, Israel has viewed itself as a moderate, committed to status quo and regional stability.

The Moderate Axis Conception echoes this notion. As I demonstrate in this article, Israel has come to perceive the members of the moderate axis as reflecting its own identity, at least to an extent, and therefore as potential allies. Here comes in my second hypothesis. I argue here that the Moderate Axis Conception is not exceptional in this regard. Rather, this conception is in fact a reincarnation of the *Periphery Doctrine*, which had guided Israeli foreign policy in the region throughout most of its existence until the 1990s. The premise of this doctrine was that Israel's Arab neighbors could not accept the existence of Israel in the region due to their adherence to pan-Arabism. Hence, advocates of Periphery Doctrine advanced a strategic collaboration between Israel and non-Arab or non-Muslim actors in the Middle East. Those included Iran, Turkey and Ethiopia, as well some non-state actors in the region, and most notably the Maronites in Lebanon. The essence of the doctrine was that these actors shared with Israel the same sense of threat from pan-Arabism, and would therefore embrace such collaboration. The Periphery Doctrine has served as subject of some debate among students of Israeli foreign policy. Several observers, and most markedly students of Israeli-Iranian relations, have inclined toward the explanation that the Periphery Doctrine ceased to exist during the 1990s.⁹ In contrast, students of Turkish-Israeli relations have asserted that the Periphery Doctrine survived well into the 1990s, and even the 2000s.¹⁰

I suggest here a different interpretation of the fate of the Periphery Doctrine. While the doctrine as envisioned by its founders had indeed become obsolete toward the late 1980s due to shifts in regional geopolitics, the logic that had guided this doctrine remained highly

relevant, continuing to guide Israeli policy makers. The Moderate Axis Conception, while at first glance different from the Periphery Doctrine, actually represents the same core beliefs held by Israeli elites about Israel, its identity, place in the Middle East and interaction with its surrounding states. The character of *periphery* and *center* might have changed now, but not existence of such concepts. This is because the Periphery Doctrine never really treated the concepts of periphery and center in geographical terms. Rather, the center was defined by the threat to Israel. The periphery, in turn, came to be composed of those sharing the sense of threat from the center. The enemy has been the ideologies coming out against Israel's values and identity. Since Israel identified itself with moderation, rationality and order, this meant that its potential enemies have been those associated with radicalism and the challenge to the existing order. The demise of the Periphery Doctrine and the rise of the Moderate Axis Conception toward the late 1990s support this assertion. The Moderate Axis Conception, in fact, has been a transmutation of the Periphery Doctrine. Pan-Arabism had ceased to be associated with radicalism, whereas radical Islamism ascended. This transition has had less to do with capabilities and intentions, but rather with the way Israel has come to perceive its enemies.

What I propose in the following sections is that there is nothing obvious or predicted about the way Israel has defined its threat and its allies. The way in which Israel has envisioned its allies has relied greatly on the belief that they share with Israel's some features of its self-perception. To be sure, there have been a few studies to have traced identity as a source of Israeli foreign policy. Michael Brecher demonstrated that the enemy's image was an important factor in shaping Israeli foreign policy decision making in times of crisis during the 1970s.¹¹ Ofira Seliktar identified the rise of "New Zionism," dominated by aspirations for territorial aggrandizement, as a source of change Israel's foreign policy systems and decisions since 1967.¹² Sasson Sofer argued that different ideological streams of Zionism had

different impact on the formation of Israeli foreign policy.¹³ Michael Barnett used Israel's decision to engage in peace negotiations with the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), in spite of the latter's obvious military inferiority, to challenge explanations based on the distribution of power and capabilities.¹⁴ Sucharov has examined Israel's path to the Oslo Accords with the PLO as a consequence of cognitive ideational processes. Applying tools from psychoanalysis to the study of foreign policy, she has traced the source of the seeming paradox in Israel's choice to embrace negotiations to the growing dissonance between Israel's self-perception as a defensive warrior and its increasingly preemptive and perceived aggressive conduct against the PLO in Lebanon in the 1980s and the Palestinians during the First Intifada.¹⁵ Brent Sasley has also pinpointed identity as a factor in Israel's foreign policy making, and especially Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's path to the Oslo Accords. He has highlighted emotions, or more precisely affect heuristic, as a source of policy making. According to Sasley, "an affect heuristic shapes decisions by highlighting the intuitive or emotional meaning that objects, events, or people have for the decision-maker."¹⁶ The fact that Rabin, unlike his predecessor Yitzhak Shamir, had no emotional attachment to the idea of Greater Israel, meant that it was easier for him to go for the Oslo Accords.

These works have been instrumental in establishing the importance of identity as a variable in Israeli decision-making process. Therefore they provide an important platform for my argument. However, they have focused primarily on the formulation of foreign policy than its implementation. In addition, they have not given enough room to structural factors, whether in terms of interaction with other actors or regional geopolitics.¹⁷ As I demonstrate, focusing on identity and ideational factors as sources of strategy and policy making does not render structural dynamics and factors irrelevant. Geopolitical developments, the discourse, signals and actions of other actors are filtered through Israel's identity and perceptions of self and other. In addition, most of these studies have examined specific episodes in Israeli

foreign policy making. In contrast, I focus here on aspects of continuity and change in Israel's regional strategy and foreign policy since its formation. In this manner, this paper provides one of the first comprehensive examinations of the role of Israel's identity in shaping its security strategy over the long term.

To achieve its aim, the rest of this article is divided into four parts. The first section examines the evolution of the Periphery Doctrine. The following section focuses on its gradual transmutation into the Moderate Axis Conception. The third section discusses the aims of the Moderate Axis Conception. The final section before conclusion provides a brief analysis of the prospects of this conception, amid recent developments in Israel's immediate environment, and particularly the events of the Arab Spring.

The Periphery Doctrine: Israel's coming to Terms with its Status

We can trace the *modus operandi* of the Periphery Doctrine to the Yishuv days, when its leaders established contacts with the Maronite Church in Mount Lebanon. The Jewish leadership sympathized with the Maronite community, whom it viewed as another isolated ethno-religious minority, facing Arab and Islamic expansionism.¹⁸ This gave birth to the notion of natural alliance, which was in turn boosted by the Maronite Church's occasional support of the idea of a Jewish state.¹⁹ This idea of a natural alliance will become a recurring theme of the Periphery Doctrine.

The doctrine as systematic agenda guiding Israel's foreign policy began to take shape during Israel's first years of existence. In 1952 a group of officers led by Colonel Gamal 'Abd el-Nasser, known as the Free Officers, overthrew the Muhammad Ali Dynasty that had

ruled Egypt since the early years of the 19th century. This coup d'état marked a turn in regional geopolitics. It witnessed not only dramatic reforms in Egypt's politics, economy and society, but also the rise of the *Nasserist* stream of pan-Arabism. Striving toward the unification of the Arab states, Nasserism viewed colonialism and imperialism as the main obstacles to achieving this goal. For the Nasserists, Zionism and the State of Israel represented both in the region.²⁰ The 1956 War, in which Israel joined Britain and France in attacking Egypt, intensified this notion and Nasser exacerbated his verbal attacks on Israel.

Another current of pan-Arabism to emerge during that period was *Ba'athism*. The Ba'ath (renaissance) Party and its ideology began ascending during the 1950s in Syria and Iraq, eventually becoming the dominant ideology in both countries during the 1960s. Much like Nasserism, Ba'athism sought the reunification of the Arab world through struggle against imperialism and its representative in the region, namely Zionism.²¹ Soon, and especially after the failure of the Syrian-Egyptian unification (1958-1961), both ideologies began competing against each other for the minds and hearts of the Arab publics. Consequently, both Nasser and the Ba'athists increased the level of their verbal attacks on Israel.

Students of regional politics have questioned the level of Nasserist and Ba'athist commitments to their discourse.²² But for contemporary Israeli analysts, still bearing the memories of the joint Arab attack on Israel in 1948 and gradually exposed to the horrors of the holocaust, pan-Arabism came to constitute an existential threat. In fact, Israeli policy makers viewed pan-Arabism as a threat even before the rise of Nasser. Baruch Uziel, a Member of Knesset (MK), who was to be one of the first advocates of the Periphery Doctrine, argued already in 1948, even after its victory over the invading Arab armies, that the greatest danger facing Israel was the aim to create a unified "Arab confederation" or empire. Such entity, he lamented, would not tolerate non-Arab entities in its heart.²³

In reality, both the Egyptian and the Syrian armies were inferior to the Israeli armed forces, subjected to political intervention and underequipped. Nevertheless, the statements and actions of pan-Arabism became increasingly worrying from an Israeli perspective. Nasser's closure of the Straits of Tiran in 1956 and Egypt's support of the Palestinian *Fedayeen* (who were raiding Israel from the Gaza Strip and Jordan) exacerbated this fear. Israeli leaders now deemed pan-Arabism as an irreconcilable power, a radical element seeking to eradicate Israel as part of its aspiration to alter the regional order.

Some revisionist historians have suggested that the Israeli leadership, and particularly Ben-Gurion and the IDF Chief of Staff at the time, Moshe Dayan, in fact sought to engage in a war with Nasser and the other Arab states after the former had come to power. Some accounts have gone as far as suggesting that Israeli actions aimed to drive Nasser to declare war on Israel, and that the 1956 Suez Crisis was a product of such efforts.²⁴ However, even if this argument carries some merit it does not necessarily contradict Israel's sense of alarm and threat amid Arab intentions. Ben-Gurion and Dayan's eagerness to start a war can be seen as part of a preemptive strategy. More important, the discourse employed by Israeli policy makers at the time, before but also after the 1956 War, still reflected the Israeli apprehension of pan-Arabism. Baruch Uziel, for example, reiterated his statements about pan-Arabism.²⁵

The Periphery Doctrine was a response to the threat emanating from pan-Arabism. This doctrine did not emerge in a vacuum. During this period the United States and Britain orchestrated the formation of the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO, also known as Baghdad Pact). CENTO united regimes on the periphery of the Middle East, including Turkey, Iraq and Pakistan, to serve as a bulwark against Soviet influence in the region and access to the oil-rich Persian Gulf region. The Israeli leadership was exposed to CENTRO's formation mainly through Israeli government's constant consultations with the Eisenhower administration.²⁶

This inspired Ben-Gurion and his aides to seek establishing their own peripheral alliance. If the “center” was characterized by pan-Arab radicalism, the-then natural allies were to be those believed to be threatened by it. Turkey, Iran and Ethiopia matched the profile. The 1958 coup d’état in Iraq, led by General ‘Abd el-Karim Qassem and his team of Free Officers, brought the threat of pan-Arabism to Iran’s doorstep.²⁷ Ethiopia, in turn has long felt threatened by Egyptian hegemonic aspirations. The strengthening of Nasserists in Sudan gave Ethiopia more reasons for concerns.²⁸ The Maronites in Lebanon were also considered as a potential element in the doctrine. Israel’s intervention in support of the leading Maronite party, the Lebanese Forces (*Kataeb*) in the 1958 civil war in Lebanon can be seen as one of the first steps toward implementing the Periphery Doctrine. Of all potential allies, Ankara was the least receptive to the idea of the alliance. It had warmer relations with the Arab states than Iran or Ethiopia,²⁹ was more dependent on Arab oil and was already a recipient of American-aid as a NATO member. The increasing influence of pan-Arabism in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon drove Turkey to somewhat overcome its initial hesitance, but up until the 1990s Turkey had remained the weakest link in the doctrine, frequently cooling and warming its relations with Israel.

Israel’s aim was to create a multilateral alliance whose members would come to each other’s aid when facing a threat from the center. Yet, the doctrine never fully materialized and failed to achieve most of its goals. According to Baruch Gilad, no formal treaty was signed and cooperation between the constituent members remained mostly bilateral. For that, Gilad notes, the term Periphery Doctrine is “misleading.”³⁰ Nevertheless, these bilateral alliances had been productive, at least until the 1970s. They involved intelligence, economic and even cultural exchanges. One of the better known examples was Israeli-Iranian cooperation in support of the Kurdish uprising in Iraq in the early 1970s. Aiming to

counteract the Ba'ath government, this cooperation also integrated, at least for a short period, the Kurdish guerrillas into the doctrine.

Even these bilateral relations, however, began cracking during the 1970s. In 1973, the Ethiopian monarch Haile Selassie cut his formal ties with Israel under pressure by the African Union and the Arab states following the 1973 crisis. In 1974 Selassie was ousted in a coup by Marxist-leaning officers, who severed most remaining cooperation with Israel. The oil embargo declared by the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) forced Ankara to minimize its formal cooperation with Israel and demote the level of bilateral diplomatic relations. Finally, in 1979 the Iranian Shah, Muhammad Reza Pahlavi, was forced to flee Iran amid a mass public protest, which turned into the Iranian Revolution. After a short period of political contestation, power was taken by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, a cleric who steered Iran into becoming a Shi'i theocracy. As Nasserism before, the Islamist regime in Tehran turned Israel into a subject of constant attacks as a symbol of Western imperialism. This time, Khomeini spoke in terms of the Muslim, rather than the Arab, world.

From an Israeli perspective as well, the doctrine lost some of its rationale. The 1967 War, in which Israel defeated the Egyptian and Syrian armies in six days, greatly undermined the foundations of Nasserism and pan-Arabism. Nasser's death in 1970 and the coming to power of his successor, Anwar Sadat, marked the end of Nasserist pan-Arabism. Although paying lip service to Nasserism, Sadat held different views with regard to Egypt's future and its relations with the West. Even the 1973 War, which Egypt launched against Israel jointly with Syria, aimed at improving the former's position in future negotiations, rather than eliminating Israel.³¹ In 1979 Israel signed the Camp David Accord with Egypt. The leader of pan-Arabism was now formally ostracized by most other Arab states. In reality, other Arab states also began revising their stance toward Israel.

Still, during most of the 1980s Israel continued to adhere to the Periphery Doctrine. In 1982 Israel invaded Lebanon, torn by a civil war between the Maronites on the one side, and the Shi'i and Palestinian factions on the other. Israel's stated-purpose was to clear southern Lebanon of the PLO, which was using the chaos in the country to launch attacks against Israeli border towns. Nonetheless, Israeli leaders had other, far-reaching plans. Defense Minister Ariel Sharon hoped to take over Beirut and "crown" the leader of the Maronite Kataeb leader Bashir Gemayel as president. He envisioned a pro-Israeli government that would serve as a bulwark against Syria. The plan collapsed when Gemayel was assassinated shortly after his election for presidency.

A more notable remnant of the Periphery Doctrine was Israel's cooperation with Iran during the Iran-Iraq War. Following the takeover of the American embassy by militant revolutionaries in 1979 and the ensuing hostage crisis, Iran became subjected to international embargo. In contrast, Iraq enjoyed the not so tacit support of the Gulf Arab states and the US. Desperate for arms, members of the Iranian government addressed their Israeli contacts from the Shah days for assistance. Israel still viewed Iraq as the greater menace. The Iraqi Ba'ath regime spearheaded the campaign against Israel. It sponsored the PLO and other Palestinian factions, and also pursued nuclear capabilities.³² On the other hand, many of those who experienced the golden age of Iranian-Israeli cooperation believed that the enmity with Iran is only temporary and that the Shah's regime will be restored. Hence, the Israeli government permitted Israeli arms dealers to mediate a deal between Iran and senior figures in the Ronald Reagan administration. The Reagan administration in turn, accepted the deal in return for the release of American prisoners held by Iran's ally in Lebanon, Hezbollah. The money was used to sponsor the Contra rebels in Nicaragua.³³ The affair was exposed in 1986 and was terminated. Toward the late 1980s even the most optimistic among the advocates of the Periphery Doctrine realized that chances for restoring Israeli-Iranian cooperation are slim.

Prima facie, the Periphery Doctrine represents a classic case of realpolitik. Amid the seeming danger emanating from pan-Arabism on its different currents, Israel looked for allies that shared with it this sense of threat. However, a closer examination of the doctrine and Israel's conduct would reveal that Israel's decision to ally with the so-called periphery was not based solely on pure strategic calculations of power distribution and threat. Israel stuck to the Periphery Doctrine even when its potential allies proved incapable of providing what Israel had been looking for. It kept sticking to the doctrine even during the 1980s, after its members had renounced it or proven incapable of contributing to it. And it did so even as the threat from pan-Arabism clearly declined.

A better explanation for the Periphery Doctrine, therefore, would be one that takes identity into the picture. Israel's view of Turkey, Iran, Ethiopia and the Maronites as potential allies was based on the fact that these actors seemed to have a shared identity with Israel. Albeit having inherently different political systems, all potential members of the alliance espoused a regional order which put the nation state at the center and objected universal trends such as pan-Arabism or Communism. Of course, some of the more conservative Arab regimes, such as the Saudi and Hashemite monarchies, espoused similar views. In public, nonetheless, the norms of pan-Arabism, which dominated regional geopolitics, induced them to act within the pan-Arab framework.³⁴ In addition, these actors were dominated by Westernized elites, whose identification with the West went beyond mere strategic necessity. As such, all of the members of the Periphery Doctrine felt not only threatened by pan-Arab radicalism and (declared) desire to destroy the existing regional order, but also antagonistic toward the pan-Arabs' anti-Western sentiments. This sense of sympathy was particularly clear in the case of the Maronites. An esoteric but good example for that is the common reference by Israeli Defense Forces' (IDF) officers to the Kataeb militias as "aftershave warriors," an allusion to the Maronites' so-called Western customs.³⁵ Years of close

collaboration between Israeli intelligence officers and the Kataeb heavily influenced Israel's support of the Maronites and the Israeli leadership's interpretation Maronites' interests and actions.³⁶

One more underlying factor behind the Periphery Doctrine was Israel's desire to exhibit its vitality and viability to major powers, and especially the US. As Michael Bar Zohar suggests, "for the first time, Israel sensed that it had something to offer to the Americans: no longer would it be a small, isolated ally, hated and ostracized by all Arab countries, but the leader and the connecting link of a bloc of states."³⁷ This and the other factors shaping the Periphery Doctrine teach us that Israel's perception of its allies has been not solely a response to external threats, but were also a product of internally-driven factors, and chiefly Israel's identity and self-perception. The rise of the Moderate Axis conception further supports this assertion.

The Moderate Axis: Breaking a Taboo

The image of some sort of a moderate Arab axis is not a novelty. Foreign powers, as well as some of the Arab regimes themselves, have used this terminology to describe political camps in the region, or justify their choices of allies. Mostly, the term has been used to describe political elites either willing or desiring to accept some form of Western presence or influence in the region and to coordinate policies with Western powers, due to political, cultural or economic interests. Already in 1939 the British mandate authorities in Palestine referred to existence of "moderate' Palestinian Arab leaders," prepared to take a "less uncompromising line than that adopted by the more extreme leaders."³⁸ By the 1950s, the division between moderates and radicals by American foreign policy makers reflected the rise

of Nasserism and pan-Arabism in general as the epithet of radicalism. In 1958 the Executive Secretary of the U.S. National Security Council, James Lay, argued that the U.S. government should “seek to counterbalance Egypt’s preponderant position of leadership in the Arab world by helping increase the political prestige and economic strength of other more moderate Arab states such as Iraq, the Sudan, Saudi Arabia, and Lebanon.”³⁹ In 1967 a British cabinet report echoed this view; discussing the possibility of an oil embargo on Britain and the US, it concluded that such act is “what the more moderate governments have judged to be the least they could get away with as a gesture of solidarity and a safety valve for popular pressures.”⁴⁰ In 1973 it was the Saudi Minister of State for Foreign Affairs’, Omar al-Saqqaf, who urged Washington to “strengthen the hand of Arab moderates at the [Arab League] conference.” He commented that “Baghdad’s and Tripoli’s absence [from the conference] will make it much easier for the more moderate Arab states to dominate the session.”⁴¹

The years to follow witnessed some change and the surfacing of what would turn into the contemporary Arab moderate camp. With Nasser’s demise and the coming to power of Sadat, even prior to the Camp David Accords, Egypt gradually integrated into the moderate camp. A CIA report on the Arab Summit that took place in November 1973 (that is, after the 1973 War) reported that “President Sadat's efforts to assure that the moderate Arab states control the summit have pre-empted the radicals.”⁴² In 1982, a CIA report on potential Arab intervention in the Iran-Iraq War noted that “None of the moderate Arab states except Egypt have the military capability to make a significant contribution to the fighting.”⁴³

Yet, the Israeli political elites had remained aloof toward the existence of “moderate Arabs.” Even the peace agreement with Egypt did not suffice to defuse such skepticism. In 1986 Likud MK Ehud Olmert declared in the Knesset that

The murderous Palestinian terrorism could not have spread as cancer... if not for the nurturing, support and encouragement by Arab states. Syria and Libya are the most radical, irrational and

unrestrained among them. But what about the other, allegedly peaceful, Arab states, which are considered, justly or not, as civilized and moderate? Has Iraq not served as a base for PLO activism in the region? And... what about Jordan, which serves as one of the most important PLO bases in the region? And... what about our friend Egypt?⁴⁴

Olmert's proclamation is remarkable because as prime minister (2006-2009) he would adhere to the Moderate Axis Conception. Earlier, in 1981, Defense Minister Ariel Sharon uttered that "we face massive arms concentrations in the countries making up what is termed in the West as the moderate Arab states, be it Iraq, Syria, Libya, Ethiopia [sic] or South Yemen."⁴⁵ There were of course some exceptions. In 1978 opposition MK Yitzhak Rabin implored the Likud government to come to the Maronites' aid in the civil war, contending that "the combination of militarily strengthening the Christians and political activity in which Egypt and other moderate Arab states will participate, is the key to a settlement of the situation in Lebanon."⁴⁶ Nonetheless, in the short-term Israel remained mostly unconvinced by Arab moderation

Throughout most of the 1990s Israel's strategy's main pillar in the region was its strategic partnership with Turkey. Still dominated by the Periphery Doctrine, Israel now focused its efforts on its last willing member. During this period, bilateral security and diplomatic cooperation, and even cultural exchanges, reached new peaks. In 1996 both countries signed a military agreement. As a result, in October 1998 Israel pledged its support for Turkey in its military standoff with Syria.⁴⁷ Also in the spirit of the Periphery Doctrine, both governments sought to expand it to other actors. One example was Azerbaijan, Turkey's rising ally from among the former Soviet Republics. Through Azerbaijan, Turkey and Israel aimed to contain Iran, Azerbaijan's neighbor.⁴⁸

Nevertheless, developments during the early 1990s started a process of change, which drove Israel to revise its attitude toward the Arab moderates. Most notable among these were

Iraq's defeat in the 1991 Gulf War; the of Israeli-Arab dialogue which began in the Madrid Conference in 1991; and the ascendance of political Islam as a major political force. Iraq's decision to invade Kuwait, and more so its defeat by a US-led coalition which also included Egypt and Syria and was supported by other Arab states, set a final blow to pan-Arabism. Already losing much of its appeal in the 1970s, the Gulf War fully exposed this ideology's fragility and irrelevance. The Madrid Conference in 1991 and the Oslo Peace Accord between Israel and the PLO under Yasser Arafat in 1993 cracked Israel's sense of isolation. In 1994 Israel signed a peace agreement with Jordan. After years of covert collaboration, the Oslo Accords legitimized the outing of the cozy Hashemite-Israeli relations. While not signing a formal peace agreement, Morocco as well felt more comfortable about its quasi-secret dealings with Israel. An unparalleled development was Israel's budding relationship with the Gulf monarchies. The rapprochement between Israel and the GCC states remained mostly informal. Nonetheless, two member states, Qatar and Oman, formed official partial diplomatic relations with Israel. According to Uzi Rabi, these two small oil-rich monarchies aimed to establish a foreign policy independent of their neighbors, and especially Saudi Arabia.⁴⁹ The latter, weakened by a sharp decrease in oil prices, grudgingly accepted this normalization.⁵⁰

Along these developments, Islamism now ascended to the center stage of regional geopolitics. Soon it took the place of pan-Arabism as the epitome of radicalism in the Middle East, and hence as the main threat facing Israel. Islamism has actually had three different forms. The first has been Iran. The former ally has now taken the lead in the campaign against Israel's existence, employing virulent attacks against Zionism. During the early 1990s Iran was also alleged to stand behind deadly attacks against Israeli and Jewish targets across the globe, and most notably the attacks on the against the Jewish Community Center and Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires, taking place in 1994 and 1992 respectively. The second

embodiment has been Hezbollah. The Lebanese party, proclaiming to represent the Shi'i community in Lebanon, constantly targeted Israeli presence in Southern Lebanon. Perceived as Iran's arm in the Mashreq region, Hezbollah was also an alleged accomplice in the Buenos Aires attacks and other global operations. The third form of Islamism has been the Sunni threat. During the 1990s it was represented by the Palestinian Hamas and Islamic Jihad. These movements comprised the "Rejectionist Front" against Palestinian-Israeli peace, and inflicted upon Israel heavy military and civilian casualties through sporadic campaigns of suicide attacks.⁵¹ Toward the late 1990s, and mainly after the September 11 attack in 2001, transnational Sunni Islamism came to the fore, also encompassing Hamas and Islamic Jihad.

The rise of Iran as a major existential threat resurfaced Israeli fears of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), and especially nuclear weapons capability. The polemic within Israel around the Iranian nuclear threat, which has dominated Israel's security concerns in recent years, actually began long before Iranian oppositionists uncovered the Iranian nuclear program in the early 2000s. Already in 1991, one of Israel's leading newspapers reported that "according to various assessments, Iran is now some five years from producing the [nuclear] bomb."⁵² Shortly after, IDF Intelligence reported that "Iran may achieve a dangerous nuclear and missile capability."⁵³ In 1995 an Israeli intelligence source reported to the daily *Yedi'ot Aharonot* that "Iran has been developing its ability to produce chemical warfare agents and has been stockpiling large quantities of them."⁵⁴ The source admitted that this has been going on since 1984, that is, while Israel assisted Teheran in the Iran-Iraq War. In reality, hardly any public discussion of Iranian ballistic capabilities had taken place in Israel prior to the 1990s.⁵⁵ This is despite the fact that Israeli policy makers supposedly had some knowledge of the subject, given that Israel may have assisted the Shah in developing such capacities.⁵⁶ The possible explanation for that is that since Iran became so closely associated with radicalism,

actions which in the past could be considered acceptable even if taken by the revolutionary government, now transformed into signs of emanating threat.

Israel's sense of alarm can vividly in Ehud Barak's 1996 "villa in the jungle" speech. In addition to this controversial statement, Barak also warned that

The possibility of radical Islamic fundamentalism guiding global terror and acquiring the bomb is not a menacing prospect, but it may prove to be a real threat, not only to Israel, but to the stability of the region and to the world order as a whole.⁵⁷

He then added: "The Arab political leadership, excluding countries like Iraq, Libya, and Iran has in fact recognized Israel...We now have relations with one hundred and seventy countries, including a promising beginning of ties with Tunisia, Oman and Qatar."⁵⁸ Barak's speech does not only unveil the changing nature of threat in Israel's view; it also conceals the nucleus of the Moderate Axis Conception, namely the idea that Iran constitutes a threat to regional stability, and therefore to Israel's neighbors.

These developments affected the tilt toward the Moderate Axis Conception. One of the first to identify the new trend is Leon Hadar. In 2001 Hadar pinpointed the consolidation of two major camps among Israeli policy making circles, to which he referred to as the "Turkey" and the "Egypt" schools of thought. The "Turkey school," according to Hadar, advocated Israel's strategic partnership with Ankara as the main pillar of Israel's regional security strategy. As such, members of the school represented the prevalent thinking during the 1990s. Many of the members of this school were hawks who objected to any territorial compromise with the Palestinians, including Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in his first term as prime minister. The strategic partnership with such a powerful regional actor, they believed, deemed other regional arrangements unnecessary. In contrast, the "Egypt school" advocated closer collaboration with Cairo. Through Cairo, this school sought to form a regional coalition with the Arab states in order to counter the Iranian threat. Peace with the

Palestinians, according to the Egypt school, was a necessary component of this process.⁵⁹ The leading member of this school was Shlomo Ben-Ami, the Foreign Minister in Barak's Labor government.

The Egypt school marked an early stage of the Moderate Axis Conception. Nonetheless, these were regional and global developments during the early 2000s that advanced the conception to the mainstream of Israeli thinking. These included the eruption of the Second Intifada in October 2000, the September 11 attack, and the American-led invasion of Iraq and the overthrow of the Ba'ath regime. These developments had several important implications: they amplified the globalizing threat of radical Islamism; and they created incentives, and opportunities, for collaboration between Israel and the so-called moderates.

The second Intifada marked the increasing power and influence of the rejectionist front. Hamas and Islamic Jihad now enjoyed unprecedented support among the Palestinian public, partly as a reaction to the degeneration and corruption of the PLO leadership dominating the Palestinian Authority (PA). Moreover, the tactic of suicide attacks, long associated with Islamist insurgency, was now embraced by the supposedly secular insurgents, such as Yasser Arafat's Fatah movement (or at least elements of it). In addition, the Second Intifada once again drove Israel toward temporary isolation. Particularly traumatic has been the rift with Ankara. Now ruled by the conservative and religiously-oriented Justice and Development Party, Turkey gradually began severing its close cooperation with Israel. On the Arab front, Qatar and Oman officially closed Israeli diplomatic representations in their capitals.⁶⁰

In 2002 new information began pouring on the Iranian nuclear program. An Iranian opposition group unearthed the construction of a uranium enrichment facility and a heavy water installation by the Iranian government. This was a clear violation of the Non-

Proliferation Treaty, of which Iran is a signatory. Its failure to report these two projects to the International Atomic Energy Agency intensified the notion that Iran was trying to conceal its program. As noted above, Israel had already envisaged an Iranian nuclear threat in the early 1990s. The news on Iran's moves seemed to buttress Israeli fears. In addition to that, Iran also deepened its covert activism in the region. Further to its traditional alliance with Hezbollah and Syria, Iran now strengthened its relations with the Palestinians. In January 2002, in the midst of the Intifada, the Israeli navy captured a ship carrying 50 tons of weapons, including Katyusha rocket launchers, AK-47 rifles and more, to the PA. Following an investigation, the Israeli authorities concluded that the weapons were shipped to the Palestinians from Iran. Some have casted doubt in the validity of this allegation,⁶¹ but for Israel this was a proof of Iranian presence on its doorstep. Regionally, with the overthrow of the Ba'ath regime Iran's influence in Iraq grew sharply. The victory of a coalition of Shi'i parties, dominated by the Islamic *Da'wa* Party, provided Iran with unprecedented access to Iraqi policy makers. Iranian-backed Shi'i militias, such as *Jaysh al-Mahdi* (the Mahdi Army), were now garnering popular support by fighting Sunni insurgents and American and British presence in Iraq. Shi'i clerics, once persecuted by the Ba'ath, were now free to act.

The September 11 attacks illustrated the threat emanating from transnational networks of Islamists insurgents. In addition to its traumatizing effect, the attack also served as a turning point in regional geopolitics, which became crucial for the formation of the Moderate Axis Conception. Following the attack, the George W. Bush administration redrew the political map of the Middle East. This map bluntly divided states in the region into "good" and "bad," namely those who fight terrorism, and those who support it.⁶² The administration defined the latter as the "axis of evil," comprising of Iraq, Iran and North Korea. The former camp, on the other hand, consisted of Egypt, Jordan, the GCC member-states, the North African governments, and of course Israel. The term "moderate Arab states" resurfaced in

American discourse. Reviewing American-Egyptian relations, a 2002 Issue Brief for the Congress stated that “Another U.S. interest in good relations with Egypt is to sustain Egypt’s moderate voice in Arab councils.”⁶³ A January 2003 report to Congress regarding the ensuing invasion of Iraq concluded that “there have been signs that some moderate Arab states may be softening their previous opposition to allowing large-scale U.S. military operations from their territory against Iraq.”⁶⁴

Israel was quick to express its sympathy with the US. Yet, it also spotted in the new reality common grounds with the moderate Arab regimes. Advocacy for cooperation began shortly after the attacks. David Kimche, a former diplomat and senior Mossad operative, publicly urged Israeli representatives to meet with Yasser Arafat in order to “enhance the support of the moderate Arab states in the Bush administration.”⁶⁵ That Kimche, during his service in the Mossad, was heavily involved in the formulation of the Periphery Doctrine reaffirms the link between the two agendas. The significance of Kimche’s message also lies in the fact that now the PLO became a “member” of the moderate club. Even Ariel Sharon, a fierce objector to reconciliation in the past, accepted the existence of a moderate axis among the Arabs, although he excluded the PLO from this axis. In a speech before the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) in 2001 Sharon stated that “Arafat and the Palestinian Authority are returning to the belief that they can defeat Israel by means of armed struggle... Arafat is willing to destabilize the entire Middle East, including moderate Arab regimes, in order to achieve his goals.”⁶⁶

Sharon’s statement did not reflect merely a wishful thinking. In the period following September 11 the so-called moderates signaled their willingness to accommodate Israel. Although they had to pay some lip service to the Palestinian cause, informal dialogue was taking place between the Arab regimes and Israel. Even though the Israeli representation in Qatar was officially shut down, the head of Israeli representation in Doha disclosed that

Israeli representatives still remained in the city.⁶⁷ A more blatant sign for the continuation of dialogue was the Arab Peace Initiative. The Initiative was presented in the 2002 Arab Summit in Beirut by the Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah Al-Saud (thus known as the Saudi Initiative). Very broadly, it called Israel to withdraw to the 1967 lines, allow the formation of an independent Palestinian state, and resolve the Palestinian refugee question. In return, the Initiative committed to Arab normalization with Israel.⁶⁸

Israel did not formally accept the Initiative because of its insistence on Israel's withdrawal to the 1967 borders rather than territory exchanges, and due to the failure of Arab representatives to establish direct channels to Israeli public opinion.⁶⁹ Yet, this move served those who advocated reconciliation with the Arabs in promoting their cause. One commentator for the left-leaning *Haaretz* newspaper suggested that the initiative was a "Saudi-Egyptian effort to halt terror."⁷⁰ MK Roman Bronfman lamented that "in recent months we have missed a historic opportunity... The government, the Knesset and the public have not treated this transition in the position of the moderate Arab states with the respect it deserves."⁷¹

But perhaps the most significant push for cooperation was the growing Arab willingness to discuss the rise of the alleged Shi'i threat. It was King Abdullah II of Jordan who most vividly expressed this notion. The violence in Iraq, Hezbollah's militancy on the one hand and its increasing political leverage in Lebanon on the other, and the tightening Iranian-Syrian cooperation drove King Abdullah to warn in an interview to the *Washington Post* of a "Shi'i crescent." With Iran at its core, the king suggested that this axis has aimed to destabilize the Gulf region and lead to an all-out Sunni-Shi'i conflict. He added that "Even Saudi Arabia is not immune from this."⁷² Both Iraq and Saudi Arabia protested this portrayal of regional politics, and even the US, Jordan's ally, eschewed the king's terminology. Eventually, the king changed his tone and expressed support for the Iraqi political process.⁷³

Notwithstanding these denials, on the ground the fear of a perceived Shi'i crescent was spreading among Israel's neighbors.⁷⁴

For the Israeli leadership, the Sunni alarm of the Shi'i crescent reasserted its own fears. However, it was not just the Shi'i threat that Israel shared with the moderate regimes. It was Islamist radicalism in general. At this stage, Israel came to view the moderate Arab regimes, *not* states, in the same terms that Michael Barnett had earlier applied to Israel; as "existentially isolated" and facing "a series of threats from various quarters that vary only in the level of overt intensity and hostility."⁷⁵

The Moderate Axis Conception has been the product of Israel's new understanding of itself and Arab neighbors. At its core stood the idea that Israel could establish strategic collaboration with its neighbors on a regional basis, with the aim of countering the now prevalent threat – Sunni and Shi'i alike. Shlomo Ben-Ami summarized this conception by asserting that "the threat from Iran and from Islamic fundamentalism," together with "the will of... the so-called moderate Arab countries," were enough to pave the way to cooperation and collaboration with Israel.⁷⁶

By the mid-2000s, the concept of moderate Arab states became an integral part of Israeli discourse, pointing to the change Israeli leaders have undergone in assessing their potential regional allies. One example is a speech carried in 2006 by Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, a former Likud hawk, at the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies:

I believe that the interest of Israel, the interest of Abu Mazen [Mahmoud Abbas, Arafat's successor as the leader of the PA], and the interest of the international community -- plus the interest of moderate Arab leaders in our region -- are the same interest [*sic*]... When we are talking about moderate Arab states or moderate Arab leaders, of course they are facing forces of extremism and radicalism within their own states... [the] Hamas leadership is not only a threat to Israel, it's not only a threat to the moderate Palestinian society, but it is also or can be a threat and it can send a wrong message to the extremists within these moderate Arab states.⁷⁷

Livni's statement presents the essential idea behind the Moderate Axis Conception, namely that Israel has come to associate the moderate Arab states (including the PA) with one of the core Israeli characteristics – the adherence to a regional status quo, based national interests represented by the different states. With time, I demonstrate below, Israeli policymakers became more and more committed to this notion. Before, nevertheless, we should perhaps question Israel's aims with regard to the Moderate Axis Conception. What has Israel hoped to achieve through this potential informal collaboration with the moderate governments? Answering this question could shed more light not only on Israel's motivations, but also on the ideas shaping its decisions.

Aims of the Moderate Conception

The Periphery Doctrine had a visible military logic to it. Its advocates envisaged a scenario in which members of the alliance would come to each other's help in times of crisis. This materialized rarely and only bilaterally (with Turkey in 1998, the Maronites in 1982 and 1958, and Iran in the 1970s). Multilateral cooperation took place primarily in the form of intelligence exchange. Nevertheless, the military element did guide this doctrine.

In the Moderate Axis Conception this element has been largely absent. One reason is that in spite of the rapprochement between Arab regimes and Israel, and the seeming shared-interests, the Arab public has kept viewing Israel as an illegitimate entity. Sympathy with the Palestinians, religious sentiments and inherent distrust of Israel have contributed to that. Consequently, no Arab regime, including Egypt, Jordan and the GCC states, could militarily collaborate with Israel without risking their domestic legitimacy. The second reason is the military weakness of most Arab armies. The Turkish, Iranian and Ethiopian armies were formidable forces in regional terms. In contrast, the Arab armies have exhibited mostly

debility in recent decades. Since the 1970s the Arab armies have been primarily preoccupied with suppressing domestic threats to the stability of the regimes, rather than with militaries' traditional purposes.⁷⁸ The 1991 Gulf War exposed this weakness when the Arab regimes that supported the invasion, albeit their intensive investment in arms purchases before the war, had to rely on external help to defeat Iraq.

Despite these weaknesses, the moderate Arabs have had some important assets to offer to Israel. The first asset has had some tactical value. In preparation for a possible airstrike on Iran, the moderate Arab states, and especially Saudi Arabia, could provide the attackers, either Israel, the US, or an international coalition, access to Iran. Israel has expected that in case of an initiated strike, Saudi Arabia and Jordan would allow Israeli jetfighters to cross their airspace. Negotiations over this took place under the orchestration of Meir Dagan, the former chief of Mossad.⁷⁹ Several reports argued that the Saudis had given their consent to the plan,⁸⁰ although the Israeli government denied them.⁸¹

The second asset lucidly reflects the ideational element in the Moderate Axis Conception. This asset has been legitimacy for Israeli operations against radical Islamists, namely Iran, Hezbollah, Hamas and the Islamic Jihad. This legitimacy meant implicit, or even explicit, support for actions which in the past the moderates might have harshly condemned. This support could take the form of expressing support for Israel's actions and needs; condemnation of the other party; or silent consent. This support has offered Israel a far wider room for maneuvering not only vis-à-vis its adversaries, but also international community. After all, if Arab leaders can accept Israeli conduct, Israel's allies in Europe and the United States could not turn their backs on it.

One example for this support was Israel's 2006 Lebanon War. Both the Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and the Saudi government rebuked Hezbollah for its adventurism

and for starting the crisis. Israel relied on this condemnation to justify the continuation of the operation.⁸² This led one Israeli analyst to suggest that “undoubtedly, Israel and the moderate states are in consent with regard to the Iran’s regional aspirations and the danger of radical Islam in the region, whether supported by Iran or not.”⁸³ Another example took place in 2009, when Israel launched Operation Cast Lead against Hamas in Gaza. Egypt, Jordan, the Gulf States and Morocco refrained from condemning Israel. The Israeli ambassador to the UN, Gavriela Shalev, told at the time that “we have open European and American support, but there are other states that support us. They do not publicly identify with us, but they are worried about the rise of radical Islam and affiliated terror.”⁸⁴ In a bolder step, Egypt and Saudi Arabia prevented the assembling of the Arab League for the condemnation of Israel. Finally, Mubarak refused to give up to public pressure to lift the blockade from over the Gaza Strip as long as Hamas was controlling it.⁸⁵

Israeli commentators considered this a strategic achievement, and a sign of the maturation of the Moderate Axis Conception. In an article in *Maarachot*, the IDF’s monthly bulletin, a member of the IDF General Staff described the Gaza operation as an “important milestone in the development of Israel’s diplomatic strategy and military doctrine in coping with the radical axis.”⁸⁶ He added that “Operation ‘Cast Lead’ bolstered the position of the moderate Arab states, led by Egypt, and helped in tying them to the struggle against the Iranian threat.”⁸⁷ In another analysis of the operation, Shlomo Brom, a former IDF Major General, predicted that the rebuilding of Gaza would now turn into a battleground with “the PA, the moderate Arab axis and the West on the one hand,” and the “Iranian-led rejectionist axis” on the other.⁸⁸ A report published by the influential Tel Aviv-based Institute for National Security Studies shortly after the crisis concluded that

The majority of Arab states, and certainly the moderate among them, reject Hamas’s conduct and grip of Gaza, viewing it as a radical element affiliated with Iran and part of the radical Shi’i

axis, which threatens them, instigates the Palestinian arena and prevents any Israeli-Palestinian settlement. Most of them wish, even if secretly, that Israel will strike Hamas as it struck Hezbollah in 2006.⁸⁹

The moderates' consent to a potential Israeli operation against Iran has been another consideration for Israel. Israeli officials have frequently alleged coalescence between Israel and the moderates on the subject. In 2006, shortly after the Lebanon crisis, Foreign Minister Livni reported to a journalist that "several Arab leaders approached her and discretely expressed their concern of Arab states supported by Iran." The report added that "she also believes that Iran is the greatest threat to the region, and that the Hamas government shares this radicalism [with Iran]."⁹⁰ Prompted by what he perceived as American hesitance on the subject, the former Defense Minister and a leading member of the "Egypt school," Benjamin Ben-Eliezer, declared that the Iranian nuclear program threatens not only Israel, "but also the moderate Arab states, as well as American and European interests... There is an opportunity for cooperation based on a mutual interest between us, the Americans and the moderate Arab world, around the core issue – the Iranian threat."⁹¹

Israel's freedom of maneuvering has not been unlimited though. If Israel gained some political leverage vis-à-vis Hamas, it now had to weigh carefully its actions on the PA front. The Moderate Axis Conception became a key factor in pushing for a resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli impasse. Already in 2004, the Director of the Israeli Foreign Ministry, Ron Prosor, maintained at the prestigious Herzliya Conference that

If we do not take into account the regional impact of each of our actions, we might miss an opportunity to change the nature of our region... Our key aim, which we share with the US, Europe and the moderate Arab states, is the emergence of a [Palestinian] leadership that could serve as a partner for negotiations and reduce the threat of terrorism... Correct conduct vis-à-vis Europe, the Quartet and the moderate Arab states could also provide dividends in other sectors and amid other threats to our national security... [We] must draw a road map for the moderate Arab states... that would lead to normalization of Israel's place in the region and

would facilitate the peace process... Nuclear Iran has dramatic implications over the moderate Arab states' ability to redefine the face of the entire Muslim world.⁹²

Benyamin Ben-Eliezer as well stressed that “We should take the opportunity and move toward negotiations... As soon as the moderate Arabs, led by Egypt, realize that we seriously intend to adopt a diplomatic resolution, they will cooperate with us and back up our moves.”⁹³ Shlomo Ben-Ami, a long-time advocate of peace with the PA, explicitly described the Iranian threat as an “opportunity for a Middle East peace.”⁹⁴

At least until the eruption of the Arab uprisings in 2011, it seemed as if the moderate Arabs had accepted their role in the conception. They have certainly utilized it for promoting their stance on the Palestinian-Israeli issue. Following the 2006 Lebanon War the Qatari Foreign Minister, Sheikh Hamad Al-Thani, called Israel to return to negotiations. He warned that “Maybe [the next generation of Arab leaders] will once again say they want to throw the Israelis into the sea. So why not take advantage of reasonable people and cut a deal?”⁹⁵ In 2007 the Saudis reiterated their 2002 peace initiative. This time they modified it to meet some of Israel's early concerns. In a 2008 op-ed in Haaretz, Marwan Mubasher, the former Jordanian ambassador to Israel and Jordan's Foreign Minister, wrote that “the initiative was the embodiment of the moderate camp in the Arab world and of its leap of faith in addressing both Arab and Israeli needs.” He went on to describe it as an interest shared by “the moderate camp, in both the Arab world and in Israel.” He concluded that “The moderate Arab Peace Initiative still stands and goes a long way toward achieving that objective.”⁹⁶

Israeli policymakers and mainstream media responded positively to this development. Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, who in 1986 denied the existence of Arab moderates, now pledged before the Knesset's Security and Foreign Affairs Committee that “Every initiative by the Arab states and the Saudis – if they wish to negotiate – we will.”⁹⁷ An editorial in Haaretz asserted that Hezbollah, Hamas and Iran “created a rare common incentive for Israel,

the Arab League, and the Quartet - headed by the United States - to strengthen the circle of Middle East moderates... before Tehran completes its nuclear program.”⁹⁸ Yet, just as in the case of the Periphery Doctrine, domestic upheavals joined regional developments in undermining Israel’s new conception.

The Arab Spring and the Future Prospects of the Conception

Not everyone in Israel has embraced the conception. On both left and right, Israeli commentators have questioned its validity. For instance, Zvi Barel, a veteran commentator on Middle Eastern affairs at Haaretz, wrote in a 2010 op-ed that “the idea that there is a bloc of moderate Arab states that detest Iran and are capable of taking part in a military operation at a time of conflict might turn out to be yet another empty slogan, formulated in the corridors of the White House.”⁹⁹

The widespread popular upheaval that erupted in the Arab World toward the end of 2010 has somewhat validated such views. Between 2010 and 2011 it resulted in the overthrow of the Tunisian, Yemeni, Libyan and Egyptian governments. These events, which have come to be known as the Arab Spring, have had visible effects on the regional geopolitical map, and have borne potential implications for Israeli foreign policy. Tyrannical, conservative and generally hostile toward all forms of radicalism, including political Islam, Israel considered these regimes, except for Libya, as members of the moderate axis. Most painful from an Israeli perspective has been the fall of Hosni Mubarak in 2011. Under Mubarak, Egypt had been a pivotal element in the moderate axis and its military and security services tightly cooperated with Israel in its struggle against Hamas in the Gaza Strip and against al-Qaeda cells in Egypt’s Sinai Peninsula. The ousting of Mubarak was followed by purges of senior security personnel, many of whom had close personal relationships with

Israeli policymakers and intelligence community.¹⁰⁰ In 2012 a new president was elected by the Egyptian people – Mohammed Morsi, a member of the conservative Islamist, and up-until then quasi-legal, Muslim Brotherhood. Upon his election Morsi pledged to “honor agreements it [Egypt] had signed,” referring to the Camp David peace agreement.¹⁰¹ But the tight coordination of the Mubarak era was gone.

No less detrimental than the overthrow of conservative regimes has been the shock effect it had on the regimes that survived the Arab Spring. Those now realized the potential repercussions of popular unrest. While suppressing public protests, they also rushed to demonstrate their willingness to meet popular demands. Their de facto normalization of relations with Israel was one of the first victims. In 2012, Saudi Arabia warned that it will intercept any Israeli airplane violating its airspace.¹⁰² Certainly, Saudi Arabia never publicly condoned an Israeli operation against Iran, nor has it ever committed to allowing any form of Israeli presence in its territory and airspace.¹⁰³ Nonetheless, the public renouncement of the idea was exceptional. This served the leaders of the moderate axis to preempt attacks from the rising Islamist-oriented governments in Egypt and Tunisia (as well as the rebels in Syria).

Despite the negative implications, the Arab Spring has had some positive aspects from an Israeli perspective. The civil war that has ravaged Syria since 2011 has further distanced the possibility of a conventional war. The weakening of Bashar al-Assad and the Ba’ath regime has also meant that the temporary fall of an important ally of Iran and a supply route to Hezbollah. Nevertheless, as uncertainty remains high, Israeli policy makers are still struggling to figure out what the future may yield up. In 2012, nearly two decades after he first made his “villa in the jungle” statement, Ehud Barak reiterated it. Celebrating the Jewish New Year in an air force base, he declared that “this is neither Western Europe nor North America. This is a tough environment, indeed a ‘villa in the jungle’, and we are surrounded by hostile elements.”¹⁰⁴

Conclusion

Concluding the section on the Periphery Doctrine, I explained how paying attention to Israel's identity can better explain some of the puzzles regarding Israel's security agenda and its preference of allies. To put it shortly, Israel stuck to the Periphery Doctrine even after its foundation had proven to be shaky, its members had turned their back on it and the threat upon which it was based had declined both in terms of commitment and capabilities.

The analysis of the Moderate Axis Conception that follows does not only serve to describe the change that Israeli foreign policy has undergone; it also helps to buttress my argument about the Periphery Doctrine, and about the centrality of identity in Israel's foreign policy making. The Iranian threat has been constructed along the rise of Islamism as an alternative to pan-Arabism as the embodiment of radicalism and the main threat to regional order. Islamism became a threat before Iran had begun developing its nuclear capabilities. On the other hand, Israel was willing to assist Iran even though it was aware of its arsenal of chemical weapons. In other words, both Iran's intentions and capabilities have been understood by Israel not from a pure strategic assessment, but rather through Israel's self-perception. This can be applied to radical Islamism in general.

In short, then, aspects of continuity in Israeli foreign policy have been far greater than what most analysts and commentators have assumed. Even more importantly, they have been as great, or even greater, than aspects of change. The Moderate Axis Conception has meant that different actors now assumed different roles – past radicals have now turned into the moderates. The center, in turn, has been occupied by a new force, that is, radical Islamism. The new form of threat has steered the Middle East into a new era of uncertainty and struggle. Nonetheless, the essence of the Periphery Doctrine has survived the transitions. In

spite of the shifts in regional balance of power and the new political dynamics, of which Israel has been an inseparable part, Israel still views itself as a peripheral actor, facing constant pressures from the center. The Moderate Axis Conception embodies this as the moderate regimes have come as well to be seen in these terms.

The still unfolding events of the Arab Spring mark a turning point in regional geopolitics. As violence still rages in Syria, and as the Egyptian army struggles to consolidate its power vis-à-vis the various Islamist factions in the country, it is still hard to envision the future political map of the Middle East. Nevertheless, we can assume that some important changes may take place. Israel may be slow to respond to such changes, as happened in the transition from the Periphery Doctrine to the Moderate Axis Conception. Or it may learn the lessons and quickly reassess its old commitments and agendas. But if there is one thing we can learn from Israel's policy making and responses to changing regional threats is that the actions and decisions of Israeli foreign policy makers will continue to be percolated through its identity and self-perception. Whether these are going to change is as difficult as determining the future of the Middle East.

¹ The adjective *moderate* is not uncontroversial. Commentators, and especially in the Arabic media, tend to add inverted commas when using the term. While the arguments against describing these states or governments as moderate are substantial, this paper does not devote space to this debate. The point here is that Israeli policymakers, media and public have come to associate these actors with political moderation.

² Trita Parsi, *Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran and the United States* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 1.

³ Michael Barnett, "The Israeli Identity and the Peace Process: Re/creating and the Un/thinkable," in Shibley Telhami and Michael Barnett, ed., *Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 62.

⁴ Michael Barnett, "Culture, Strategy and Foreign Policy Change: Israel's Road to Oslo," *European Journal of International Relations* 5, 1 (1999), 5-36.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁶ Mira Sucharov, *The International Self: Psychoanalysis and the Search for Israeli-Palestinian Peace* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005).

⁷ Ze'ev Jabotinsky, "The Iron Wall," *Razsviet* 4 November 1923, English translation can be found at http://www.jabotinsky.org/multimedia/upl_doc/doc_191207_49117.pdf. For a discussion on the implications of Jabotinsky's thought on the planning of Israeli foreign policy see Sasson Sofer, *Zionism and the Foundations of Israeli Diplomacy* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 199-224.

⁸ Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Address by Foreign Minister Ehud Barak to the Annual Plenary Session of the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council," 11 February 1996, accessed at

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