

Strategic ASSESSMENT

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Strategic ASSESSMENT

The purpose of *Strategic Assessment* is to stimulate and enrich the public debate on issues that are, or should be, on Israel's national security agenda.

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Abstracts

A New-Old Middle East: Current Developments and their Implications for Israel / Michael Milstein

In recent months the Middle East has experienced profound changes, some of them unprecedented in terms of their nature and impact. The unrest has emerged in several individual states, but the confluence of events and their similar backgrounds, as well as the fact that the upheavals tend to reinforce one another, has lent the unrest the sense of a widespread regional groundswell. The gamut of changes is evidence of the need to revamp some of the fundamental concepts used to date to describe the reality and basic processes in the Middle East. This essay analyzes the nature of the unrest in the Middle East, even as it continues to unfold, and identifies the major paradigm shifts that are transforming the arena, joining threads from the past that continue to influence it.

The New Middle East: An Era of Uncertainty / Ephraim Kam

The earthquake currently underway in the Middle East is a shock wave affecting multiple systems, and its impact, already felt, will be sensed more in the future. Regimes have fallen and others may follow suit. New elements are demanding and beginning to receive their share as the governing structure in several countries starts to change. There are economic implications, and the shock wave is liable to alter relations and the balance of power among the leading countries in the region. It will affect US standing in the Middle East, and there are implications for Israel and its prospects of peaceful relations with its neighbors.

The United States in the Middle East: An Exercise in Self-Defeat / Ron Tira

This article contends that the administrations of George W. Bush and Barack Obama designed a Middle East policy based to a large extent on idealism, but did not support their respective policies with the necessary dose of cold, calculated strategy. The character of the Middle East is heavily defined by local factors, and the extent of US influence over the region should not be exaggerated. Still, the two administrations have had

difficulty coping with the Middle East strategic game. Consequently, they have – albeit inadvertently – contributed to weakening the political and military front that had curbed Iran and protected essential interests of the United States and its allies, and have shaped an arena that is more suited to Iran’s realizing its relative advantages.

Quiet in the Palestinian Arena: The Eye of the Storm / Shlomo Brom

In recent months, governmental crises, revolutionary fervor, and popular protests have spread like wildfire from one Arab state to another. In the midst of the incendiary Middle East, however, the Palestinian Authority represents an island of relative calm. This phenomenon seems at odds with the gloomy forecasts that regularly affirm the weakness of the current PA government and its limited viability. The contrast seems even starker in the wake of the al-Jazeera leaks, which were used by the network and others to fuel virulent attacks on the PA. The essay examines what underlies the relative calm in the Palestinian arena, and infers relevant conclusions for the Israeli-Palestinian political process.

The Challenge of the Palestinian Authority: State Building without Governmental Legitimacy / Ephraim Lavie

The popular uprisings in the Arab world have so far not ignited similar dissent among the Palestinian public on the West Bank. In recent years there has been relative calm on the security front within the PA, driven by PA recognition that it is necessary to maintain calm on the security front in order to construct the institutions and economy of a state-in-the-making. At the same time, the leadership is quite aware that negative sentiments, influenced by events in the Arab world, may arise in the West Bank and perhaps lead to a popular groundswell against it. The essay examines some of the challenges the PA faces regarding the legitimacy of its rule, criticism over human rights violations, and the fact that much of the population is not enjoying the fruits of the economic growth, and discusses the PA’s attempts to deflect these challenges.

Unilateralism Revisited: An Agreement on a Palestinian State is Not at Hand / Dan Schueftan

Countering oft-quoted sentiments that an Israeli-Palestinian agreement is well within reach, this essay contends that the establishment of a Palestinian state based on a political agreement is not about to happen. The test of scrutiny from all angles – Israeli-Palestinian, intra-Palestinian, regional, or global – indicates the divide between idealism and reality. Under these circumstances, the author argues in favor of measured Israeli unilateral moves that will promote the separation of Israel from the Palestinians under conditions acceptable to Israel. While unilateralism in this context is necessarily a flawed alternative, the Zionist imperative demands that in the current local, regional, and international reality such measures be taken.

Turkey and Iran: The Politics of Strange Bedfellows / Yoel Guzansky and Gallia Lindenstrauss

In recent years, Israel and other Western states have followed the apparent reversal in Turkey's foreign policy and its distancing from the West with some trepidation. One of the manifestations of this about-face is the growing closeness between Turkey and Iran, which is a pronounced change from the mutual suspicions that long characterized the bilateral relations. Yet despite the current bonds between Iran and Turkey, the potential for discord and competition for regional dominance also exists. This essay identifies points in dispute between Turkey and Iran that may lead to more intense disagreement and questions whether an Iranian-Turkish axis capable of seriously threatening Israel is likely to arise, and if so, what its weaknesses may be.

A New-Old Middle East: Current Developments and their Implications for Israel

Michael Milstein

In recent months the Middle East has experienced profound changes, some of them unprecedented in terms of their nature and impact. They figure among the most dramatic transformations to occur in the region since it was molded into its modern form after World War I. The unrest has emerged in several individual states, but the confluence of events and their similar backgrounds, as well as the fact that the upheavals tend to reinforce one another, has lent the unrest the sense of a widespread regional groundswell. To date it is unclear where the unrest is heading, but it is obvious that it has already changed the face of the Middle East.

The high point of the unrest is without a doubt the dramatic developments in Egypt, not only because of its geopolitical impact on the regional and international levels, but also because of the surprise, strategically speaking, of the events, to observers of the region – Arab and Western analysts, local actors, and most of all, the Egyptian regime itself. To a large extent the dramatic changes in the Egyptian arena encapsulate what is happening in most of the Arab world. They reflect an essential change in the conduct and power of some of the key players in the Arab world, as well as the emergence of unfamiliar phenomena and elements.

The transformation is evidenced throughout the arena. Entrenched, powerful regimes that are usually described as the moderate camp in the Middle East, supporters of the United States and foundations of regional stability, are suddenly described as oppressive dictatorships and exposed

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as weak. The Arab street, until now deemed primarily submissive and indifferent, has proven an active and influential element, capable of overturning established orders. Arab militaries, hitherto considered to be entirely loyal to the whims of the regimes, are demonstrating unexpected independence. Islamic movements, usually perceived as the central threat to the regimes, have been shown – at least for now – to be fairly restrained. The European Union, which has generally resisted physical intervention in the Middle East, has spearheaded the campaign against Libya’s Qaddafi (a campaign led by France), and the United States has surprised the world by turning its back on longstanding allies, thereby demonstrating it has drawn some operative conclusions – however limited – from past experience. Along with the changes among the veteran actors, new and powerful actors have taken the stage, headed by the virtual social networks, modern media, and the community of young people, all of which played central roles in the recent developments. The gamut of changes is evidence of the need to revamp some of the fundamental concepts used to date to describe the reality and basic processes in the Middle East.

The purpose of this essay is to analyze the nature of the current unrest in the Middle East, even as it continues to unfold. The essay attempts to identify the major paradigm shifts that are transforming the arena, while pointing out threads from the past that continue to influence it.

The Political Dimension: The End of the “Jumlukeyya” Era

The unrest in the region is largely heralding the end of the prevalent order, which generally sported several trademarks: an entrenched, powerful leader, a ruling party controlling all aspects of life, a bureaucracy serving the interests of the ruling elite, and a strong army with absolute loyalty to the ruler. Most of the elements in this equation have either been undermined or erased in recent months, while some have behaved differently than expected.

A distinguishing feature of the recent events has been the widespread uprising of the public against entrenched, powerful ruling establishments. This was especially apparent in regimes that for many decades purported to be harbingers of social, political, and cultural reforms. These regimes assumed a veneer of republicanism and were a priori established as the revolutionary antithesis to the traditional monarchies. However, with

the passage of time the revolutionary republics themselves turned into corrupt regimes where control passed from father to son. Thus, these regimes earned the sobriquet “*jumlukiyya*,” a term in Arabic combining the words *jumhuriyya* (people’s republic) and *mamlaka* (monarchy). The representatives of this order are disappearing from the scene: President Husni Mubarak of Egypt and Zine al-Abdeen Bin Ali, Tunisia’s longtime prime minister, have been pushed out of office; Qaddafi is conducting a bloody civil war to preserve his regime in Libya; and other leaders in the Arab world such as Syrian President Bashar al-Asad and Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh are under fire as never before. Interestingly, the monarchies in the region, usually portrayed negatively as degenerate and corrupt, have not experienced similar unrest (with the exception of the extraordinary case of Bahrain). This is perhaps because these regimes did not tout revolutionary slogans, and therefore were not caught in a web of contradictions between vision and reality. In addition, the society of these states, especially in the Persian Gulf, is generally more traditional, making it easier to accept tribal dynasty-based regimes.

Another surprising phenomenon has been the conduct of the Arab armies, which departed from the image associated with them in recent decades. Especially since the entrenchment of the Arab regimes during the 1970s, the armed forces were perceived as the main loyal prop supporting the regimes in the region. The actual conduct of the past months of the armies in Egypt, Tunisia, and to a large extent Libya undermines this longstanding image. The militaries are returning to the forefront of the political stage, demonstrating surprising independence with regard to the rulers, and in some countries are careful not to carry out repressive measures against the protest movements (in Libya and Yemen part of the army even joined the protesters). Consequently, the armies are perceived sympathetically by most of the public as powers protecting national interests. The central role of the military in the new order is especially apparent in Egypt, where it has been running the country since Mubarak’s resignation and will continue to do so until democratic elections are held. At the same time, in countries such as Syria, Jordan, and Bahrain, the army still represents the interests of the ruling minority and therefore earns a hostile attitude from a significant portion of the public. These armies would presumably be less tolerant of widely developing protest movements in their countries, because of

their understanding that a change in the nature of the regimes would also undermine their own status. Evidence of this trend can be found in the violent suppression by security forces of protests in Syria and Bahrain, where dissent was aimed against the ruling minority.

Amidst the growing uncertainty, the army in the Arab world may regain, if only partially, the influence it once had on the political arena. As in the past, the army of today continues to be the strongest and best organized institution in most Arab countries. As such, it may also be pivotal in curbing the Islamic stream, particularly if the latter grows stronger through democratic elections. Until the last decade this was the dynamic in Turkey, whereby the army preserved the country's secular nature and limited the influence of the Islamic governing party.

Another profound trend demonstrating the weakness of Arab regimes is the enfeeblement of the ruling parties. This has been a multi-year process that seems to have peaked with the present unrest. Together with the *jumlukiyya* sovereigns, the ruling parties rested on the laurels of the valiant struggle for national liberation and waved the flag of social revolution, but in the end turned into debased bodies ruled by small elites. The collapse of the National Democratic Party in Egypt and the Constitutional Democratic Rally in Tunisia was recent palpable evidence of this trend; these parties followed in the way of other ruling parties in the Middle East – the FLN in Algeria, Fatah in the Palestinian arena, and the Ba'ath Party in Iraq, crushed after the American invasion (2003). Against this background, the strength of the Ba'ath Party in Syria is indeed questionable, as is the extent to which it is capable of helping the regime in Damascus deal with the current challenges, which seem especially severe because of Syria's deep inter-sectarian and inter-religious tensions.

The Social Dimension: Anti-Western Democracy?

What exactly do the demonstrators want, and what vision underlies the slogan “the people want to bring down the government” shouted by the protestors in the region? It is clear that the upheaval in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya and the ongoing unrest elsewhere point to the existence of an active, influential civil society in a sizable portion of the Arab world. The revolt in Tunisia was the first ever to have taken place in the Arab world, the one in Egypt was the most important and most media-saturated,

and the one in Libya is the most violent. These processes have yet to be completed: while in Egypt and Tunisia the entrenched dictators have been ousted, the states are still ruled by the army – a symbol of the old order, and they will be ruled by the army until democratic elections are held; in Libya, the old dictator is using force to stop the revolution. Nonetheless, such phenomena have never before been seen in the region, with the exception of the revolution in Iran. Indeed, the Arab public has usually been described as lacking the requisite maturity for a modern political order, not to mention for conducting a proper democracy. However, after years in which “the myth of the Arab street” became the phrase connoting the passivity of the Arab public, the people of the Arab states have shown their power to change entrenched realities.

It is difficult as yet to characterize the rising popular power with any precision. The primary moving force of the revolution lies with the young urban middle and lower classes, which for years have nursed tremendous rage over their situation, marked by ongoing economic distress, government corruption, limitations on political activity, and human rights violations. These young people are a primary demographic sector in the region. Many have had modern academic schooling but cannot find work commensurate with their education. Culturally, they are aware of what is happening in the West and feel alienated by the political and social orders around them. Many turn to Islam as a refuge from their hardships. Their banding together in the public squares of the Arab world and Iran and their willingness to confront the regime with a demand for change embody powerful processes that pervade the Middle East on the social, cultural, and demographic levels.

However, the force of the wave of revolts also exposes a striking fundamental problem. This wave is fed by many desires for change of a rather general, amorphous nature, without a clear common agenda. Some of the current protest stems from economic grievances, which in conjunction with the sources of political unrest feed the fire of the current shock wave. In some states the protests, assuming the mantle of a struggle for democracy, are actually

The Arab desire for democracy is not necessarily accompanied by a desire to become Western, either conceptually or culturally. Western observers must be wary of projecting their own conceptual world on what is happening in the Middle East.

fed by tensions of a traditional, religious, ethnic, or tribal nature. So, for example, in Libya, the locus of the protest against Qaddafi's regime is the district of Cyrenaica, partly because of tribal and regional rivalry with the elite in the district of Tripoli. In Bahrain, the protest movement primarily reflects a struggle between the Shiite majority (some 80 percent of the population) and the ruling Sunni minority (the Saudi army's entrance into Bahrain in March 2011 in an attempt to protect the government there has turned the crisis into a wider arena of confrontation between the Sunni and Shia worlds, and between the Arabs and Iran). In Yemen, the calls for reforming the regime also swelled into a demand by the population in the district of Aden to secede from the state and thereby once again become an independent state, as it was until 1990. And in Saudi Arabia, the popular protests have developed primarily in Shiite population centers in the eastern part of the kingdom.

The revolutionary wave in the Arab world has thus opened a Pandora's box, and various tensions, latent and blatant alike, are now coming to the fore. Therefore the events should not be seen as a thirst for freedom or as an embodiment of democratic revolutions such as those that occurred in the Communist bloc in the late 1980s, an image most of the protest movements in the Arab world are trying to project. Democracy does indeed figure prominently among the demands of the protest movements, but it is only one of many and not necessarily the most developed.

Significantly, the desire for democracy is not necessarily accompanied by a desire to become Western, either conceptually or culturally. On the contrary, some of the elements promoting the popular protests in the Arab world today, and not just the Islamic stream, are fundamentally hostile to the West in general and the United States and Israel in particular. Consider, for example, the artificial distinction made by some Western commentators between the masses of young people comprising the core of the protests and the Islamic elements among them. In fact, however, many of the young people filling the streets are decidedly Islamist, and it is impossible to distinguish fully between the "secular" and "religious" protests. The outside – especially Western – observer must therefore exercise caution in analyzing the current developments. Without a doubt this is an authentic popular protest that aims – among other goals – towards the establishment of democracy, but it does not

entail Arab society becoming more like its Western counterpart and does not signal, at least for now, the emergence of what is known in the West and Israel as “a peace camp.” Moreover, the voice of the masses right now is to a large extent the voice of al-Jazeera with its prominent anti-Israel and anti-America tones. In the case of Mubarak, for example, the disgust with the dictator stemmed from both the corruption rampant in regime and the fact that the Egyptian president tied his fate to the United States and was seen as a defender of the political settlement with Israel.

The Islamic element has had a central if surprising role in recent events. The long-held nightmare of the Western world and the Arab regimes about a violent regime change led by Islamic organizations has not played out. Instead, it seems that they – and especially the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt – prefer not to take advantage of the unrest in order to overtake the states by force, but rather prefer more guarded ways of attaining that goal. These elements are likely motivated by the understanding that a violent takeover would lead them to a frontal confrontation with the regime, which would make it easier for the regime to take aggressive steps to suppress the popular protests. This in turn would earn the regimes legitimacy at home and among the international community, which also harbors deep suspicions of Islamic elements.

Most of the Islamic elements have therefore adopted a more moderate stand, adhering to the principle of *sabr* (patience), a fundamental principle of the Muslim Brotherhood doctrine. In Egypt and Tunisia, for example, they have joined the popular protests, and receiving unprecedented recognition from the local regimes and the international community, are stepping up their preparations for forthcoming elections. The Islamic organizations, especially the Muslim Brotherhood, are in good starting positions with regard to the challenge: they have a large, effective organizational structure; they enjoy widespread public support stemming in part from their extensive network of social assistance institutions and programs; they have an ideology that over several decades has struck a resonant chord in the region; and they are led by people widely admired and reinforced by the return of many senior leaders after many long years of exile abroad (e.g., Yusuf al-Kardawi, the highly influential Egyptian authority on religious law, who is something of a spiritual father for the Muslim Brotherhood throughout the Arab world, and Rashid al-Ghanoushi, the leader of the Islamic movement in Tunisia – al-Nahda).

Most of the secular opposition elements in the Arab world enjoy far less organizational effectiveness and ideological pull than the Islamic ones. Therefore, the secular opposition will find it difficult, at least for now, to present a viable alternative to the regimes that have collapsed or to the Islamic stream.

Another major social phenomenon that emerged in the recent events across both the political and the public spheres is the tremendous effect of modern media. The current unrest is not the first example of the growing impact of the internet and inter-Arab media networks, especially al-Jazeera. The most prominent example of this phenomenon took place in Iran following the June 2009 presidential elections, in the clashes between the thousands of demonstrators and the Islamic regime. Elsewhere, the power of al-Jazeera to ignite the Arab street has been particularly evident in struggles between Arab and non-Arab forces, for example in the al-Aqsa intifada, the American campaign in Iraq, the Second Lebanon War, and Operation Cast Lead. In all these instances the network encouraged popular uprising, accompanied by criticism of the Arab regimes for their indifference and helplessness in face of the attacks on the Arab and Muslim world. Thus some of the most powerful and unprecedented processes of the protest movement began and have continued via the virtual networks.

Yet in the current unrest the modern media realized more of its potential power than before. In an unplanned team effort, the virtual social networks supplied the organizational setting for the protest movements, while al-Jazeera in Qatar helped shape the conceptual framework of the revolutions and worked as a catalyst to prepare the masses to challenge the regimes. The synergy between the two types of media neutralized the enforcement capability of the regimes and their control of the message dispensed for both internal and external consumption. The new phenomenon allowed the public at large to come together, exchange information, and plan moves above the heads of the regimes. The various regimes in the region, especially the *jumlukiyya* – whose leaders are usually members of the older generation – did not fully grasp the power of social networks and modern media and were caught off guard by the rapid development of the revolution. These leaders have acquired capabilities to deal with threats from the past, such as terrorist attacks, revolts, and military coups, yet most were helpless in

the face of the mass gatherings in the large city centers that paralyzed the centers of government. However, inherent in the popular strength is also the fundamental weakness of the new phenomenon. The powerful public dynamics unleashed by the media and virtual social networks are generally not accompanied by any institutionalized leadership, an orderly planning of moves, or a defined agenda. All these are necessary foundations for formulating a viable alternative to the current order.

Thus the public in the Arab world has in most cases demonstrated its ability to operate as a civil society motivated by the desire for freedom. It has come together to oppose detested regimes and has even toppled some of them. In recent years the public in some states demonstrated its ability to hold genuinely democratic elections. However, passing the democracy test requires not only extreme events such as revolutions or elections, but extended steps of maintaining a liberal order over time. The degree to which the Arab public is ripe for democracy will be expressed in its openness to a wide range of opinions and the willingness of every government to preserve the democratic rules of the game. To date, experiments with democracy in the Middle East have raised profound doubts as to this potential. Almost every state in the region where proper democratic elections took place in the last two decades saw significant successes reaped by Islamic forces, as in Algeria, the Palestinian Authority, and Turkey. These elements do not harbor natural sympathy for the democratic idea in its Western context, let alone a willingness to maintain a pluralistic political and social theater. Moreover, their rise to power by no means necessarily heralds a moderation of their political views. While sovereignty incurs responsibilities and constraints, it has not generated a change in traditional core ideologies.

Thus, in face of the most recent changes Western observers must be wary of projecting their own conceptual world on what is happening in the Middle East. The wave of protests instigated by the young people and the calls for toppling dictators are not necessarily what the West knows from its own past or would like to see in the Middle East. These are not expressions of Westernization, secularization, or ideological pluralism, and certainly not the formation of a peace camp desirous of reconciliation with the Western and Arab worlds, first and foremost Israel and the United States. This is a desire for a different democratic order, largely severed from universal or Western definitions, and for a

fundamental change, though many of its proponents are still finding it hard to delineate its precise form.

The Regional Dimension: Victory for the Resistance Camp?

A first – and not necessarily mistaken – glance suggests that for a number of reasons the current unrest plays primarily into the hands of the Middle East resistance camp, led by Iran, and works against the region's moderate camp. The unrest has primarily hit the moderate states, headed by Egypt, that have constituted the major obstacle to the resistance. The United States is now viewed as a hollow reed for its allies and toothless vis-à-vis its enemies in the sphere, further weakening its status in the Middle East. Recent events have the potential to strengthen the Islamic camp in the region, especially in Egypt; and the international focus on the upheavals in the Arab world is deflecting attention, if only for a limited time, away from other critical arenas, chiefly the Iranian nuclear issue. The upheaval is of course not the result of any initiative on the part of the resistance camp, but it has enhanced the rise of the resistance in the region and deepened the weakness of the moderate camp, which is in effect in tatters.

Still, it seems that the resistance camp also harbors serious concerns about a protest wave heading in its direction. This is especially true regarding the protests in several areas. Syria has seen violent clashes between the regime and the demonstrators, reflecting the deep-seated hatred between the Sunni majority and the ruling Alawi minority. The protest movement in Iran has reawakened, inspired by events in the Arab world (though the Islamic regime continues to rule the country with an iron fist), and there is increasing popular dissatisfaction with Hizbollah in Lebanon. Unlike in Tunisia and Egypt, leaders of the resistance camp appear prepared to suppress popular dissent – which they perceive as an existential threat – with force.

Yet in any case, recent developments match the strategic analysis that has long informed the resistance camp and provides encouragement for the future. In the background are a number of fundamental changes: Turkey, led by the Islamic AKP, is slowly forging closer relations with the resistance camp while gradually unweaving its strategic connections with Israel; chronic instability continues to characterize Iraq, especially after the withdrawal of most of the American troops, a situation seen by

the resistance as an opportunity to entrench its influence in this arena; and the United States grows weaker in the region, in part because of its ongoing failure to ensure stability in various locations where it is active, especially Afghanistan and Iraq.

Taking a wider view, it seems that the dissent in the region, and especially the revolution in Egypt – for many years the leader of the Arab world – is a milestone in a long process in which the Arab world is growing weaker and the non-Arab, peripheral forces are gaining strength. This has been underway for some decades, especially since the collapse of the Pan-Arab vision in the late 1960s. This vision reached a nadir in the last decade, which witnessed several traumatic crises in the Arab world, first and foremost the United States conquest of Iraq, a central player in the Arab world, and the toppling of the powerful regime of Saddam Hussein, which served as the central shield of the Sunni Arab world against its enemies, headed by the Tehran-led Shiite camp.

The current upheaval has prompted the leading Arab actors to look inward, which in turn, may bring into starker relief their inability to come together and operate as a collective. The vacuum is gradually being filled by non-Arab forces on the margins of the Arab world, particularly Iran, Turkey, and Israel. These states, especially Iran, are slowly expanding their influence over key regional arenas, foremost among them Iraq, the Persian Gulf, the Palestinian arena, Lebanon, and the Red Sea arena. These actors, Iran in particular, are liable to see the regional upheaval as an opportunity to further their influence, especially in the arenas experiencing the strongest tremors, such as Egypt, North Africa, and the Arabian Peninsula.

In the situation in which Washington now finds itself, almost any move it makes vis-à-vis events in the region is interpreted negatively by the Arab world.

The International Dimension: “Arab DNA” and “American DNA”

In recent months many analyses have dwelled on the misunderstandings implied by the American response to the upheavals in the Middle East. Special attention is given to the abandonment of Mubarak, one of America’s most important allies in the region, during his most difficult hour, in order to side with the ideal of promoting democracy in every arena in the world, without taking special circumstances into consideration,

even if this plays into the hands of elements hostile to the West. Many have compared Obama's conduct to that of President Jimmy Carter towards the Shah of Iran on the eve of the Islamic Revolution. In the late 1970s, the Shah tried to nip the developing revolution in the bud, but encountered American pressure to soften his stance and promote human rights. This greatly damaged his domestic image and undermined his self-confidence in dealing with the opposition. In addition, there are questions about the American failure to learn the lessons of the past, as evinced by US pressure on Egypt to hold fair elections in 2005, a move that strengthened representation of those identified with the Muslim Brotherhood in the Egyptian parliament, or the American support in January 2006 for free elections in the Palestinian Authority with Hamas participation, a step that enabled the movement to take over the Palestinian government.

The approach of the administration in Washington towards the regional upheaval is deeply rooted in the American worldview and has been common to all US administrations, namely, sympathy for popular struggles for freedom and a deterministic belief in the victory of democracy in every arena in the world. It is also possible that Washington's moves were imbued with the hope that the new-old line would help restore America's image in the Middle East, which has traditionally been negative. Some in the United States even claimed that the seed of the current wave of revolutions in the Arab world were planted with the demise of Saddam Hussein's regime. According to this school, the toppling of one of the strongest *jumlukiyyas* in the Arab world and Hussein's media-covered capture propelled the gradual dissolution of the fear of the Arab public to confront their regimes, a process that has peaked in recent months.¹

However, at least for now it seems that America's moves have achieved the opposite result: not only has the United States failed to win sympathy or gratitude by supporting the popular protests; rather, its image as an interested, opportunistic party meddling in Arab affairs has been reinforced. In the situation in which Washington now finds itself, almost any move it makes vis-à-vis events in the region is interpreted negatively by the Arab world: intervention in events is seen as an expression of aggressive policies stemming from concerns over economic interests, while non-intervention is viewed as a reflection of the American administration's hypocrisy, also stemming from material motives,

particularly the fear of higher oil prices. Entangled in this conundrum, Obama has primarily focused on avoiding American involvement on the ground, as in Libya, primarily to avoid further damage to his domestic image.

Washington's conduct has already incurred strategic damage to the United States, precisely at a time when American influence in the Middle East is on the wane. This will affect the self-confidence of US allies in the sphere and their trust in Washington as a strategic buttress, not just toward external threats such as Iran, but also towards grassroots domestic challenges. This comes at a time when the American administration is facing some challenges that require the US to recruit regional allies, among them stabilizing Iraq; eradicating global jihad in Afghanistan, and increasing international pressure on Iran. New signs that Washington's status in the region has been damaged are appearing in Saudi Arabia, which has emerged as the leader of the moderate Arab camp. Riyadh apparently did not inform Washington ahead of time that it was sending troops into Bahrain, and it recently cancelled planned visits by Secretary of State Clinton and Secretary of Defense Gates to the kingdom.

An interesting demonstration of the administration's problematic interpretation of what is occurring in the Middle East may be seen in the analysis by Fouad Ajami, published a month before the outbreak of the unrest in the region. In an essay entitled "The Strange Survival of the Arab Autocracies,"² he admitted that five years ago he thought that under the aegis of the American administration, the Arab world would march towards its own "spring of democracy" inspired in particular by events such as the Cedar Revolution in Lebanon that followed the murder of Rafiq al-Hariri and resulted in the withdrawal of Syrian troops from the country; the first free presidential and parliamentary elections in Iraq in 2005; and the pressure on Egypt to promote political reforms. Now the vision seems far less rosy: Iraq is far from being a stable democracy serving as a model for other states in the region; the dramatic changes in Lebanon were obliterated by the war it was dragged into by Hizbollah in 2006; and the Palestinian arena has split into two entities. According to Ajami, the sorry results of the democratic experiment in the Arab world have made Arabs and Washington alike distance themselves from the vision, recognizing that the sphere is not ripe for such attempts and that promoting them may backfire and actually undermine rather than

enhance stability. Apparently even as esteemed an expert as Ajami did not correctly assess not only the basic weakness of most of the autocracies and the intensity of the popular desire for change, but also the willingness of the United States to cling to its program of establishing democracies while ignoring the region's complexities.

A View to the Future: The Israeli Angle

Even before the various crises are fully resolved, the reversals in the Middle East in general and in Egypt in particular have weighty strategic significance for Israel on several levels. At the center is of course the question of the stability of Israel's peace agreement with Egypt, a highly important strategic pillar for Israel's security concept over the last three decades. Any change in the regime, and especially the possibility that the Muslim Brotherhood may gain in strength, has the potential to alter Israel's security concept. At least in the short term, and as long as the Egyptian army dominates the regime, it seems that the peace agreement will remain stable. However, the strategic sensitivity of the issue for Israel requires that it closely assess the ramifications of Egypt's internal situation for its foreign policy and security concept, especially after the elections expected to be held there at the end of the year.

It is unlikely that the changes in the Middle East will ease the pressure on Israel to promote the political process with the Palestinians or help undermine the increasing delegitimization of Israel on the international arena.

With the world's attention, and especially America's attention, fixed on the Arab world, focus is diverted from other issues of strategic importance for Israel, first and foremost the Iranian nuclear problem. Moreover, the upheaval in the region is liable to deepen the concern of various international players about promoting economic and political – and certainly military – steps against Iran at this time so as not to exacerbate the regional instability.

As for the resistance camp, it seems that its members are drawing succor from the weakening of the moderate Arab regimes and the embarrassing confusion besetting the United States. Resistance elements are liable to find a more convenient scope for maneuvering at all levels, including military, and an opportunity to enhance their impact on various regional arenas now in the process of transformation. They have already begun to examine what their range

of maneuvering may be by initiating moves such as the dispatch of two Iranian warships to the Mediterranean (February 2011) or the attempts to transport arms shipments from Iran to the Gaza Strip through naval and land routes (March 2011). Conversely, the undermining of Bashar al-Asad's regime in Syria may deal an overall blow to the resistance camp, and more particularly to Iran's influence in the region. If Asad's regime approaches its finale, part of the resistance camp may escalate action against Israel, in an attempt to prevent the collapse of the Ba'ath government in Damascus.

On the Palestinian arena, the recent upheavals are liable to deepen the strategic distress in Abu Mazen's regime, in light of the loss of the powerful regional ally in the guise of the Mubarak regime and the profound doubts about the stability of America's support. All of these trends play into the hands of Hamas, which – like the other resistance members – senses that the changes in the region are working in its favor, among them the weakening of the Egyptian regime, which had exerted heavy pressure on the Hamas government in the Gaza Strip, and the possibility that the Muslim Brotherhood, of which Hamas is an offshoot, may strengthen its position in Egypt. To prevent a fate similar to Mubarak's, Abu Mazen has taken steps to break the stalemate with Israel, and on the internal arena he is signaling his intentions to promote reconciliation talks with Hamas. He has also announced his basic willingness to hold parliamentary elections at the end of the year, and is promoting international moves to censure Israel.

Against this background, the probability that Abu Mazen's government will advance more daring moves, such as declaring an independent Palestine within the 1967 borders (a notion gathering support internationally) or increasing friction with Israel in the West Bank, grows more likely. On the political public diplomacy level, for now it seems that the present upheavals are not enough to undermine the basic assumption of the international community in general and the United States in particular that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the source of regional instability. In light of this, it is unlikely that the changes in the Middle East will ease the pressure on Israel to promote the political process with the Palestinians or help undermine the increasing delegitimization of Israel on the international arena.

In terms of security, the weakening of the Egyptian regime's enforcement capabilities in the Sinai Peninsula has already made it easier to smuggle arms and militant operatives into the Gaza Strip, helping to accelerate the terrorists' buildup processes in the region by equipping themselves with improved armaments, especially long range rockets and sophisticated anti tank systems, naval vessels, and planes, all of which are liable to limit the IDF's scope of maneuvering in the Gaza Strip sector.

Thus the most recent developments in the Arab world, especially the revolution in Egypt and the protests in Syria, appear to pose many challenges and few opportunities for Israel. The changes are largely another piece in the decade-long process of the worsening of the regional strategic reality Israel must face. The process is complex and saddled with an internal contradiction: over the years, Israel military and technological might has grown and its economy has strengthened, while at the same time a consistent regional change for the worse is palpable, expressed primarily in the number of threats to the country and their military and political potency – in particular, Iran's regional strength, its nuclear program, and the consolidation of the resistance camp in Tehran, and, on the other hand, the decline of political opportunities, especially the political process with the Palestinians and Syria.

The Morning after the Revolution

The crisis in the Middle East is still unfolding. It is too early to sum it up or formulate long term strategic assessments, which just a few months ago were not deemed relevant or possible. The emerging Middle East seems to be embracing both new and old phenomena. Decoding this situation requires a profound understanding of its subterranean streams as well as the neglect of some of the preconceptions and images that for several decades informed analyses of the region.

What began as a euphoric, pioneering struggle for democracy has in different areas turned into confrontations with familiar characteristics. Under the banner of the struggle against tyranny, a host of tribal, ethnic, religious, sectarian, and ideological struggles have recurred. Their eruption has revived some phenomena long familiar to the region: tyrants who think nothing of forceful suppression of their own people, tribes and sectarian groups fighting one another, and the ever-present danger of sliding into internal anarchy, from which the major winners would be

the region's extremists. These phenomena are particularly prominent in Libya, Syria, and Yemen as well as Bahrain, where the rising struggle between the Shiite majority and Sunni ruling minority is feeding the deep Arab fear of Iranian subversion and the profound tensions between Sunnis and Shiites. These developments join older problems threatening the integrity of states in the region: Sudan, on the verge of division into two states; Iraq, suffering from the underlying weakness of the central government and growing strength in the periphery (especially the Kurdish autonomous government in the north); Lebanon, slowly being conquered by Hizbollah; and the PA, which has split into two separate geographical and political entities. The Arab state is still managing to survive despite the tremendous challenges it faces, but in most cases, its nature is changing and the power of the central government is waning. It seems that the more homogeneous the Arab state is, such as Egypt and Tunisia, the less violent is the revolution, the more prominent is the struggle for democracy, and the more orderly is the transition to new regimes. By contrast, in the more heterogeneous and less institutionalized nations the revolutions are accompanied by severe outbreaks of violence and anarchy.

Most of the region's states are experiencing the collapse of – or at least profound shocks to – the traditional forms of government. The old order, based on autocratic regimes, is rapidly being replaced by a new order striving to establish itself according to democratic rules. Once the storm dies down, states are often left with two central powers: the army, to a large extent representing the old order, including ties to the West and defiance of the Iran-led resistance camp, and perhaps a link to the pre- and post-revolutionary eras; and the Islamic stream, the largest and best organized public and political entity in most of the states, prepared to assimilate into the new order and assume a dominant role. While it is true that the secular political and public elements are gaining strength, their impact seems to be less profound than those of the Islamic groups. Therefore, it is unclear if they will reap much success in upcoming tests of power, especially democratic elections, which would allow them to establish dominance in government.

This situation is liable to mean a recurrence of dramatic upheavals that the region has already experienced: the gradual takeover of a regime by the Islamic stream while the army is weakened, as in Turkey (a scenario

that is likely to be particularly relevant for Egypt); the army preventing the Islamic stream from taking over the government, leading to a violent confrontation between the two, as was the case in Algeria; or the collapse of the governing establishment and an aggressive Islamic takeover, according to the Hamas-Gaza Strip model. In addition, one can imagine scenarios – currently less likely – in which the Islamists do not dominate, such as an orderly transfer of government to secular institutions without links to any Islamic movement, as the result of democratic elections. The emergence of familiar or new scenarios in the region depends on a number of variables: the strength of the armies; the strength of the protest movements and elements opposed to the regimes, especially the Islamic groups; the policy that the international community, especially the United States, is likely to adopt; and how the internal rifts develop in various loci in the Arab world.

The discourse accompanying the current regional wave of protests seems to contain the seeds of future revolutions. The tremendous rage at the entrenched, hopeless reality largely ignores the fact that it is rooted in profound social, demographic, and economic problems that are at best difficult to solve, and certainly cannot be solved with the speed desired by the masses. As in many previous revolutions, the current wave too may soon face an acute crisis of failed expectations. This might play into the hands of the next group to promise salvation for the people, but might also lead to tyranny and violence, as has many times been the case with revolutions that had utopian visions inscribed on their banners.

Notes

- 1 See the interview with Fouad Ajami, who was influential in formulating the Bush administration's Middle East policies, *Haaretz*, February 25, 2011.
- 2 Fouad Ajami, "The Strange Survival of the Arab Autocracies," www.hoover.org/publications/defining-ideas, December 13, 2010.

The New Middle East: An Era of Uncertainty

Ephraim Kam

It is hard to overstate the importance of the earthquake currently underway in the Middle East. It is a shock wave affecting multiple systems, and its impact, already felt, will be sensed more in the future. Regimes have fallen and others may follow suit. New elements are demanding and beginning to receive their share as the governing structure in several countries starts to change. These changes will have economic implications, and oil prices have already increased. The shock wave is liable to alter relations and the balance of power among the leading countries in the region. It will affect US standing in the Middle East, and there will be implications for Israel and the prospects of peaceful relations with its neighbors.

This article examines the significance of the events in the Middle East of winter 2011. It traces emergent trends and potential processes, but as dramatic events continue to unfold as of the time of this writing, the analysis is qualified by the caveat that much yet remains unknown.

Stability of the Arab Regimes

In the period since 1970, Arab regimes have enjoyed remarkable stability. With the exception of the Sudanese regime that was overthrown in 1989 in a military coup, not one Arab regime was toppled. This stability is in marked contrast to the preceding tempestuous decades, when a wave of military takeovers and attempted takeovers swept across Arab countries. Even the murders of key Arab rulers such as King Faisal of Saudi Arabia in 1975 and President Sadat of Egypt in 1981 did not place the regimes in danger of collapse, and power was passed peacefully to their heirs. The sole exception to this regional norm occurred in the non-Arab country

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of Iran, where in 1979 the masses overthrew the shah's regime. In the generation since the Islamic Revolution, the Iranian precedent has not recurred in other countries.

Several reasons account for the four decades of stability. The military coups of the previous generation taught the regimes that the key to stability rests with the military: if the military supports the regime, internal threats can be managed – and vice versa. Based on this understanding, the regimes cultivated their relationships with the armed forces. They made sure to grant preferential service conditions to their loyalists and offered senior military personnel key positions in the economic and political systems following their retirement; some of the Arab countries were ruled by former military officers. The method proved itself, and since 1970 the militaries displayed their loyalty to the Arab regimes, save for the case of Sudan (and the murder of Sadat, committed by a small group of Islamists that had infiltrated the army). Even amid the agitation that led to the fall of the shah, the military remained loyal to the regime to the last moment.

Along with assuring the military's loyalty, the regimes developed independent physical means of protection. The most important of these was the buildup of large military forces serving in parallel to the regular army such as the Revolutionary Guards in Iran, the Republican Guard in Egypt, Syria, and Iraq, the Royal Guard in Jordan, and the Saudi Arabian National Guard. Their mission, first and foremost, was to protect the regime and serve as a counterweight to the regular army, whose loyalty was at times suspect. Regimes also built efficient internal security services that monitored suspicious individuals inside and outside the military, and internal security forces to manage demonstrations and shows of civilian unrest. Against these tools of power, the prospects for a military conspiracy against a regime were slim.

However, while the regimes were thus reasonably insured against military conspiracies, other internal threats developed gradually from two directions. In a considerable number of states there was a growing sense of public dissatisfaction with the character and policies of the regime. This dissatisfaction stemmed mainly from the economic situation, unemployment, housing shortages (especially for young people), restrictions on freedom of organization and political expression, and the suppression of individual rights. In some cases, unrest erupted

into mass demonstrations against the regime, which was forced to use police forces against the masses, for example, in the riots in Egypt in 1977 and 1986 that followed hikes in food prices. In these cases, the regimes were able to suppress the agitation relatively quickly, which apparently lent them confidence of their ability to contain unrest in the future. The most conspicuous protest actually erupted in Iran in June 2009, following the revelation of forged results in the presidential election; then the regime was forced to use extreme force in order to curb public agitation.

A second type of threat has emerged from the strengthening of Islamic movements in several regional states over the past two decades. To date Islamic movements have not attained power in any Arab country, but they have posed a significant threat to several Arab regimes. In addition, a fundamentalist Islamic regime rules in Iran; in Turkey a party with Islamic roots rose to power in democratically held elections; in the Gaza Strip it was Hamas that assumed power, likewise in democratic elections. In Algeria, a radical Islamic movement almost came to power following elections in 1992, but was blocked by the army by force, which led to a lengthy and severe civil war.

Fear of the strength of Islamic movements contributed to rulers' opposition to political reform. Some rulers occasionally authorized a limited increase in political freedoms, mainly following pressure from the American administration. However, not one regime developed a methodical, long term process aimed at laying the necessary foundation for a democratic society. Rulers frequently claimed that Arab society was not yet ripe for the establishment of Western style democratic regimes. Prematurely and hastily opening up the political system, they said, would lead to its takeover by radical elements, primarily Islamic movements.

The Outbreak of Unrest

Potential for unrest in Arab countries has existed for a long time. Many in the Arab world have wished for change in the character of the regimes, which would include opening up the political system and allowing the participation of additional elements in government so as to represent the face of society; improving the economic situation; expanding individual rights; and limiting corruption. Cultivating the seeds of unrest and a desire for change has been the information revolution. Round-the-clock television channels led by the al-Jazeera network and the expanded

use of the internet revealed to the masses what the regimes sought to conceal: that a different and better life exists in other countries. But until the winter of 2011, this potential remained dormant, as no leadership was found to spearhead any movement for change and organization at a national level was lacking. The masses who wanted change didn't believe in their power, especially as previous regime changes in the Arab world had come about only through military coups. There was no precedent for changes based on popular uprisings. True, the revolution in Iran showed that the masses could also topple a regime, but the Iranian case was perceived as an exception, with its own special explanations not necessarily applicable to Arab countries.

The spark that ignited the fire arose in fact in a non-central Arab country of limited influence in the Arab world – Tunisia – where the success of the masses to quickly topple the regime of Zine al-Abdeen Bin Ali proved to the multitudes in other countries that they have the power to change their situation. The fire from Tunisia spread quickly, bringing down the Mubarak regime in Egypt, challenging the future of Qaddafi's rule in Libya, and bringing forth a wave of demonstrations and riots in about a dozen other Arab countries and Iran.

The intensity of the riots, the demands of the demonstrators, the response by the regimes, and the results of unrest differ from country to country. However, several phenomena recurred among the different venues. Generally speaking, the demonstrations have largely been led by the young generation, mainly students, joined by representatives of political movements. From the outset, the demonstrators lacked clear leadership; but as the demonstrations continued, representatives emerged from among them and conducted negotiations with the authorities. Second, although the demonstrations began spontaneously, protestors were aided in organizing them through technological means, particularly social networks. Third, while economic distress was the critical factor underlying the eruption of unrest, what stood out among the demands of the demonstrators was a call for the removal of the rulers, an end to emergency measures and repression, and expanded political freedom. Foreign affairs occupied a secondary position among demonstrators' demands. The rulers quickly understood the seriousness of the demonstrations, and attempted to mollify demonstrators through promises of political concessions and economic perks. However, once

these concessions did not appease the masses, some of the regimes resorted to force to quell the unrest.

The Overthrow of the Egyptian Government

The fall of the Mubarak regime was a formative event in the wave of unrest, as developments in Egypt, the foremost Arab country, will necessarily affect other Arab states. Events in Egypt will also influence the regional balance of power and Egypt's relations with the US and Israel. The demonstrators who toppled the government included members of student groups and young peoples' organizations severely hurt by unemployment, political parties that tried to ride the wave of agitation, and members of the Muslim Brotherhood. The demonstrators' principal demands were the removal of Mubarak and his loyalists, political freedom and free elections, an end to suppressive rule, cancellation of the state of emergency, and elimination of corruption. Although economic distress was a catalyst for the outbreak, economic reforms did not figure among the leading demands of the demonstrators, perhaps because there actually had been considerable improvement in the economic situation in Egypt in recent years. Demands related to external matters, including relations with the US and Israel, were also not stressed.

At this stage, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces has taken power for a six month period. The transition government it appointed for this period will be followed by the transfer of power to civilian authorities. Likewise, the existing constitution will be amended in matters concerning parliamentary and presidential elections, which will take place at the end of the transition period. Emergency laws passed in 1981 will be cancelled once circumstances permit, and further promises made to the demonstrators will be implemented. Many activists are demanding a new constitution that would limit presidential authority. However the army feels that in the meantime, the deeper changes will have to be made by the parliament that is elected.

The army has constituted a central force in the Egyptian system since the 1952 Free Officers Revolution, and following the 1973 war has been held in particularly high esteem. Aside from its role of defending the country against external threats, the army wields political weight, is meant to protect the regime, serves as a symbol of national unity, and has economic roles as well. There is almost no doubt that following the

establishment of the new regime, the army will continue to be a central factor in Egypt, and the next regime will have to arrive at an understanding with it that preserves its status and its interests.

Is the army prepared to lead Egypt to democracy? It seems the army is prepared to spearhead changes and introduce certain political reforms, although it is unclear to what extent. The army was strongly linked with the Mubarak regime and is not the ideal body to bring about true democracy. The business of the army now is to preserve stability and prevent violence, ensure its own status in the system, and curb radical elements from leading the regime. The army may also seek to restrain efforts by democratic activists to dismantle the trappings of power the military enjoyed under Mubarak, and its strength and popularity will assist it in doing so. All this is not compatible with full democracy. Thus a reasonable possibility is that the army will allow gradual, cautious, and moderate political development, to include relatively free elections, expanded political freedom, transparency of the political system, and limitation of corruption.

To what extent will the democratic process in Egypt deepen? Democracy, far more than only elections to the parliament or the presidency, involves institutions, processes, values, culture, transparency of the political process, preservation of individual and minority rights, and a system of checks and balances. All these, as in other Arab countries, were almost non-existent in Egypt, and it will take much time until these develop. Therefore it is possible that after relatively free elections are held, the army or other elements that gain political power will employ force to limit individual and minority rights and build up their own power.

An important question concerns the role of the Muslim Brotherhood within the framework of the next regime. The movement's power is unclear. In the parliamentary elections of 2005 it gained 17 percent of the seats, but in the 2010 elections the regime made sure that the Brotherhood did not enter parliament. Over the years the Brotherhood has undergone changes and today seeks to join the democratic process. It supports gradual reform through a peaceful and constitutional struggle, and rejects all forms of violence or terror. The movement opposes al-Qaeda and has condemned the September 11 terror attacks. It is not corrupt and its power is in part built on the supply of social services to places

not reached by the regime. The current leader, Mohammed Badie, is not a charismatic man and is modern-minded with a pragmatic approach.

On the other hand, the Brotherhood has never abandoned its goal to establish an Islamic religious state in Egypt and the greater Muslim world. Radical and jihadist offshoots have emanated from the Brotherhood, including al-Qaeda, al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya, al-Takfir wal Hijra, and Hamas. Disposed negatively to the US, the Muslim Brotherhood opposes American policy in the Middle East. It has never accepted the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel or Israel's right to exist, and it has called for a severance of diplomatic relations with Israel, although it has also claimed it would not embark on a war against it.

The common assumption is that if relatively free elections were held, the Brotherhood would not attain a majority but would gain a substantial portion of the vote and emerge as a large party. The most organized political body in Egypt, the Brotherhood enjoys considerable financial support, highly motivated constituents, and much sympathy among certain parts of the public due in part to the previous regime's policies of suppression; hence the possibility that the Brotherhood may well be included in the post-election government, even if it does not actually head it. The army does not intend to prohibit the Brotherhood from participating in elections, but it will not support a fundamentalist Islamic state. Therefore it will probably oppose the establishment of a regime headed by the Brotherhood should it emerge as the largest party. In any case the likelihood of the establishment of an Iranian style regime in Egypt is not high. More likely is a regime built on the Turkish model: a regime that integrates a moderate Islamic identity and modernization.

If nonetheless the Brotherhood attains a decisive status in the next regime, it is unlikely it would propel Egypt to launch a war with Israel, as there is no body in Egypt, itself included, that demands it. It would also presumably not cancel the peace treaty, although it might make several adjustments in this regard. It could, as it has suggested, bring the peace treaty to a national referendum and diminish its significance, and it can be much more supportive towards Hamas in the Gaza Strip. And even if the Brotherhood constitutes a minority in the government, its participation there would be a negative factor for Israel. In any event, even without Brotherhood representation in the government, cooperation with Israel will likely suffer under the next regime, at least in the immediate term. As

such, there may be expanded smuggling into Gaza and increased terror against Israel from Sinai.

Relations with the US will likely be influenced by two considerations. On the one hand, the next regime will not want or be able to forfeit the financial assistance pledged by the US. The Egyptian army has close ties with the American military and it will likely labor to preserve these ties. Continued American assistance will also be linked to the continuation of peaceful relations with Israel. On the other hand, a considerable portion of the Egyptian public is not sympathetic to the US, in part due to the US intervention in Iraq and its support for Israel, the Mubarak regime, and other Arab autocratic rulers. In all, the next regime is likely to be less friendly to the US than the Mubarak regime, and the American administration will have to rebuild relations with Egypt – which it has already begun to do.

Other States

The potential for change also exists beyond Egypt and Tunisia, where the ruling regimes were toppled, and Libya, where Qaddafi's rule is faltering. In some states, unrest has already broken out but has not ripened into upheaval; in some, it has not yet broken out. With all the requisite caution, several observations concerning unrest in those countries can be made.

Significant potential for change in Iran was evident long before the current wave of unrest, displayed most dramatically in the widespread riots that erupted in June 2009. There is a real potential for regime change in Iran, because a large portion of the population desires a different type of regime that supports political openness, personal freedom, and less intervention in personal lives. They seek a regime that allows economic recovery and eliminates corruption. The current unrest in the Middle East has also led to demonstrations in Iran, apparently to a relatively limited extent, and so far has not produced tangible changes. Indeed, the situation in Iran is different from Egypt. The regime in Iran is ready to exert brute force to curb rioting, and this force has successfully deterred demonstrators. The regime also relies on the political and economic strength of the Revolutionary Guards, which have a fundamental interest in preserving the regime. Therefore, in order for change to occur, what is needed is a combination of three factors: charismatic leadership,

widespread organization, and popular determination to continue the struggle despite the activation of force against the protestors.

Demonstrations in Syria began somewhat later, quickly spread and escalated, and have assumed the face of protest against the Alawite minority. The regime has resorted to a mélange of political concessions and military force in order to suppress the demonstrations, and has maintained control. However, the unrest has far from abated, and if this trend continues, the future of the regime may be in question.

Jordan is of special importance to Israel, both for the peace treaty between them and its linkage to the Palestinian issue. There too, demonstrations held to protest the economic situation and corruption were accompanied by a demand for political openness. The demonstrations thus far have been limited and have not been directed against King Abdullah. Rather, they reflect opposition – primarily on the part of Transjordanian elements – to the policy of the regime and not to the regime itself. As in other states, the regime hastened to announce economic benefits. Both the Muslim Brotherhood and leftist groups are active in Jordan, but to the Hashemite regime's benefit is the backing it enjoys from the Transjordanian component of the population, which would be hard hit should the regime fall. If demonstrations intensify, the regime would likely not be deterred from using extreme military force against demonstrators.

The survivability of the Qaddafi regime in Libya is unclear, following the takeover of parts of the country by opponents and in face of increasing international pressure. Qaddafi's situation is difficult, but he has underscored his determination to fight. In addition, Qaddafi's construction of his regime around himself and his family prevented the establishment of institutions and bodies that could take on authority and ensure the continued function of the country's central government. If the Qaddafi regime falls, the significance would be primarily intra-Libyan, save for two aspects: the effect of the internal struggle on oil prices, and the possibility that Libya would become a hotbed for jihadist terror should a weak central government rule Libya.

Yemen is not a key Arab state, although it is highly important to the United States, as the administration sees al-Qaeda's Yemenite branch as a major danger for terror attacks against the US. The organization operates in the mountainous region of Yemen, is assisted by sympathetic

tribes, attacks the country's security forces, and feeds Yemen's instability. Yemen is also home to multiple severe problems that fan the flames of agitation: it is one of the poorest of the Arab countries, it suffers from high unemployment, and it is tainted by corruption. It is given to inter-tribal conflicts, as well as a secessionist movement in the south and the Houthi revolt in the north. Thus far the regime has maintained control of the situation. President Ali Abdullah Saleh hurried to announce a package of economic benefits and political concessions, including his readiness to resign and transfer power to a responsible party. However, the concessions did not appease the demonstrators and a worsening situation could easily evolve. If that happens, at risk are both the regime and the state, which is liable to collapse. This would play into the hands of al-Qaeda, which could strengthen its hold in Yemen as a central base for dispatching terrorist activity.

The protest in the Gulf states has so far remained limited, in part because most of the states are not plagued by economic distress, and the regimes are able to contain would-be dissent through monetary compensation. This occurred in Saudi Arabia, where the regime rushed to pledge billions of dollars for education, health, and infrastructures, on top of the considerable resources it has already invested in these areas over the years. However, this is no guarantee that protests in Saudi

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Arabia and the Gulf states will not intensify, mainly because the structure of the political systems there are relatively closed and do not permit political openness. Moreover a young generation has come of age and is demanding its share of authority. Clearly, if the Saudi regime is undermined, implications would be far reaching.

The exception to the limited protests in the Gulf is Bahrain, where unrest broke out at an early phase. Bahrain too is not a central Arab state, but shock waves there have considerable regional implications. Most of the Bahraini population is Shiite, so protest there resounds of an attempted

Shiite uprising against the country's ruling Sunni minority. The protest is also significant in the Iranian context: Bahrain is the only country to which Iran lays historical claims; a toppling of the Sunni regime would be

perceived as an Iranian victory. Moreover the unrest in Bahrain is liable to spread to other countries in the Gulf, including Saudi Arabia, which was quick to send a military force to Bahrain to help stabilize the situation. Finally, Bahrain serves as an important base for American forces in the Gulf and is an important element in American deployment in the Gulf and the campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. A fall of the Bahraini regime would constitute a severe blow to the US, Saudi Arabia, and the moderate Arab states, and would be an important achievement for Iran.

Initial Assessments

One of the marked features of the shock wave rocking the Middle East is the uncertainty that will accompany the region in the upcoming period. Rulers are not guaranteed they will be in power next year or who their neighbors will be. The orientation of states whose regimes have already fallen or will fall shortly is unclear, as the replacement regimes have yet to take shape. This amorphous situation is complicated by other questions. Is there a chance that true democracy will be established, in at least part of the region? What will be the external and security policies of the new regimes and their attitudes to the US and Israel? Will new associations or rivalries form among the region's states? Will radical Islam be able to exploit the Middle East tremor to attain key positions in the region? This uncertainty will oblige concerned countries, including the leading states in the Middle East and the US, to plan their regional policies based on a significant component of uncertainty regarding the foreseeable future.

Seemingly, the change that has occurred up to now in the region is partial and contained. The Mubarak regime was brought down, but as the control by the army that replaced it is not fundamentally different from what preceded it, this cannot be classified as a true revolution. The Tunisian regime was also toppled, but its successor does not herald a revolution either. Several other regimes in the region are experiencing tremors but are in the meantime surviving through a combination of force and limited concessions.

Yet however curtailed the change seems, let there be no mistake: the change is real and palpable. The wave of protest that broke out in Arab countries and Iran shows that millions of people in the region want a change in the nature of the regimes ruling them. The masses believe in and recognize their power to achieve change. Furthermore, the regimes

understand the latent power of the masses and can no longer assume protection by the military. This recognition obliges them occasionally to exert force in order to protect their rule but also to take steps to lower the flames: to forego certain authorities, expand the authority of parliament and freedom of expression, and try to bring about an improved economic situation. So long as these steps are perceived by the demonstrators as being insufficient, the intensity of the protest will not fade, at least in some of the countries.

Therefore, the starting assumption should be that the shock wave will continue for a period of at least several months if not longer, because the conditions that launched it continue to exist. Even if the unrest ebbs, it is liable to erupt in the future, and the mutual influence among the waves of unrest in the different countries has already been proven. The success of the demonstrators to bring down the regime in Egypt, which was perceived as a bastion of stability, is likely to serve as a model for agitated masses in other countries. Their degree of success will largely depend both on their determination to continue undeterred and strong leadership. At the same time, success will depend on the determination of the regimes to defend themselves. Furthermore, states where protest movements are successful are liable to undergo a period of instability. The regimes that rise upon the ruins of the old order are not necessarily those that will stabilize over time. Emergent political forces may also alter the character of the regimes that take power, and if the new regimes do not fulfill popular expectations, there is a possibility they will be replaced by other regimes, perhaps of even a more radical nature.

Given that the Middle East shock wave is still underway, one can envision a number of scenarios regarding the changes that might occur. One scenario is that the changes will essentially stop at the current level. In other words, there may be further, limited demonstrations and violent outbursts in the near term, but the Arab regimes will withstand these with few political concessions. If so, the Middle East as we know it will more or less continue to exist, despite the fall of the Mubarak regime, and the democratization process will remain limited. At this stage, the likelihood for this scenario to materialize is moderate.

An antipodal scenario depicts the fall of key regimes in the Middle East, in Saudi Arabia and/or Iran. The fall of either of these two regimes would lead to a significant strategic change in the region. The fall of

the regime in Tehran would to a large degree reduce the significance of the Iranian threat and create an opening for dialogue between the new regime and the US, and later, perhaps, also Israel. The fall of the Saudi regime into the hands of a radical force would be a major blow to the US and the moderate forces and present a major threat to them. Currently the probability of this scenario seems low.

In a less extreme scenario, unrest would continue and lead to a change of additional regimes, for example, in Libya, Yemen, or the smaller Gulf states, but with limited influence on the greater region. There are, however, regimes with important regional influence such as the regimes in Syria, Jordan, and even Bahrain. Regime change in Jordan would have a negative impact on relations with Israel, while a change in Damascus could open up new options for dialogue with the US and perhaps with Israel. Conversely, a new regime could be more militant towards Israel. In any event, renewed dialogue between Israel and Syria will not occur as long as the unrest in Syria continues and it is unclear who will hold the reins of power in Damascus. The likelihood of the fall of regimes such as in Yemen or Libya seems higher than that of the previous scenarios.

No less important is the depth of change, namely, whether the shock wave spreading across the region will lead to even limited democratic processes. The political systems in various Arab states will likely become more open. Most of the Arab regimes have promised to implement political reforms, some fundamental and some superficial, including political freedom and freedom of expression. However the trend towards democratization will encounter difficult obstacles: the reluctance of the regimes to open up their systems to a substantial extent, conflicting interests of different power groups, and the lack of processes, institutions, and values capable of producing a basis for true democracies.

The establishment of democratic regimes could be the best outcome for Arab countries as well as for the Western world and Israel. Democratic regimes can address the aspirations of the majority of the public in Arab countries. They would likely minimize the weight of radical Islamic movements and likewise the terror infrastructure in the region. Such regimes might encourage dialogue between the Arab world and the US and the West, and consequently, more meaningful dialogue between Arab countries and Israel.

The West and Israel do not fear democratization of the Arab world, rather the opposite scenario: Iran-style Islamization; the possibility that Islamic movements will rise to power through elections; that the forces that brought about the strengthening of Islamic movements in the region over the past two decades will prove to be stronger than the proponents of democracy. In early 2006, logically speaking, the best scenario for Gaza Strip residents was the democratic election of a moderate regime that would preserve Palestinian unity, build up the Strip following the Israeli withdrawal, and perhaps try to build normal relations with Israel. However, this did not happen. If radical Islamic regimes indeed rise to power in key Arab countries or countries linked with the Arab-Israeli peace process, it would change the face of the region. Fundamentalist regimes would threaten Arab regimes that remain moderate and strengthen Iran's regional status. They would influence Arab-Israeli relations and exacerbate the strategic threat against Israel; they would impact on American and Western interests as well as the US regional status.

The shock wave might change the regional balance of power. Some of the rulers in Arab countries are apt to be weaker; in any case they will have to focus on internal matters and consolidate their regimes. This would project an additional dimension to the weakness inherent in the Arab world, which continues to vacate the regional center stage for Iran and Turkey. Within this framework, Egypt's regional standing may be weakened. Thus far, Egypt was the leader of the moderate Arab camp, the foremost US ally, and the leader of the struggle against Iran, radical elements, and terror. Its leadership ability is liable to erode if it has to invest the better part of its resources in internal matters. An open question is whether relations between Egypt and the Iranian regime will grow closer in the event that the Brotherhood becomes a central force in the new government.

Already today, in and at the fringes of the Middle East, are several weak governments and parts of their countries that have become safe havens for terror organizations and armed militias in the style of al-Qaeda and its affiliates. The main examples are Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Somalia, and Lebanon. The possible weakening of some of the Arab regimes might expand this phenomenon into additional countries, Yemen and Libya, for example.

If the regional shock wave does not ultimately harm the Islamic regime in Tehran, Iran could find itself among its beneficiaries. Iran is already expressing satisfaction with the changes underway in some of the states. Several other possible events could play into the hands of the Iranians: the integration of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Egyptian government; injured relations between Egypt and the US and Israel; an improved standing for Hamas; changes in the government in Bahrain; tremors in additional moderate Arab countries; damage to US stature in the region.

The American administration expects its status in the Middle East to be strengthened if the process of democratization gains momentum. However the process is liable to be prolonged, and in the meantime there are other developments that could have an opposite effect, namely: the possibility that Egypt and the moderate Arab countries become immersed in establishing their regimes; damage to Egypt-US relations; the possibility that Iran turns out to be one of the big winners from the regional shock wave. The fact that the American administration did not stand by Mubarak at the critical hour is also liable to erode US credibility.

Israel has absolutely no ability to influence developments in Arab countries and it too is liable to be harmed by regional changes. Against the background of diminished US standing in the region, relations with Egypt and Jordan may deteriorate, and the standings of the Iranian regime and Hamas might improve – unless the domino effect hits them too. Although the regimes in Egypt and Jordan are unlikely to cancel the peace treaties with Israel, the main fear is that the peace treaties with both Arab countries and Egyptian cooperation against Hamas would be weakened.

The regional shock wave is liable to negatively influence the peace process with the Palestinians as well. Beyond all of the problems that in any case hinder the process, Israel will be faced by an uncertain debate over its course. Should it avoid making fundamental decisions so long as the region is in the midst of these major changes, particularly in the context of peaceful relations with Egypt and Jordan? Or should it try to contribute to improving its relations with the moderate Arab camp by embarking on new initiatives in the peace process? To this state of doubt will be an added dimension should the tremor also hit the Palestinian Authority and arouse increased doubts as to whether it has the power to fulfill agreements.

The United States in the Middle East: An Exercise in Self-Defeat

Ron Tira

Idealism or Realism

In his book *Diplomacy*,¹ Henry Kissinger contends that while Europe's foreign policy has been characterized by the pursuit of calculated strategic interests, *realpolitik*, and the attempt to stabilize a balance of power, American foreign policy has generally been characterized by idealism. According to Kissinger, the American approach holds that conflicts stem from misunderstandings that can be clarified or from injustices that can be corrected, and not from a clash of basic interests. The general assumption is that respective parties share a common desire to live harmoniously, and that if we only reach out, meet, understand the other, and demonstrate good will, everything can be ironed out.

Any sound foreign policy strives to combine pragmatism with ideology. Accordingly, the worldview of a US administration is a source for interpreting national interests, and its values provide the perspective for examining questions such as: what are preconditions for the use of force; to what extent is international legitimacy important; is the blessing of international institutions required; and how can the tension between collectivism and American exceptionalism be decided. This article contends that both the administrations of George W. Bush and Barack Obama designed a Middle East policy that is based to a large extent on idealism – even if the ideals of the two administrations are, of course, different – but did not support their respective policies with the necessary dose of cold, calculated strategy. This is not a dichotomous question

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of idealism vs. pragmatism, but a question of weight and balance, and mainly, the extent to which worldview is relying on realpolitik.

In its first term, the Bush administration undertook too many momentous endeavors, without the requisite American domestic political backing, sufficient allocated resources, and the national determination required to realize them. Therefore, the second term saw the administration overstretching and struggling in the test of national stamina, and as a result, with the uphill battle to change the nature of the Middle East. The Obama administration has attempted to create an atmosphere of good will and mutual respect, but in practice, it has created a situation whereby on the one hand its deterrence is eroded and it is less effective in its confrontation with America's adversaries, and on the other, it does not back America's allies as it should. Consequently, in the past two years the Obama administration has reduced the Arab leaders' incentive to adhere to American policies and interests.

The character of the Middle East stems from a host of mostly local factors, and the extent of American influence over the region should not be exaggerated. Even the sole superpower cannot shape the Middle East as it sees fit; still, it can be claimed that the two American administrations have had difficulty coping with the Middle East strategic game. Therefore, in spite of the fact that this was not their intention, the bottom line is that the two administrations have contributed to weakening the political and military front that had curbed Iran and protected the vital interests of the United States and its allies, and have shaped a theater that is better suited to Iran's realizing its relative advantages.

Optimizing the Theater for Iran

Until the late 1990s, "dual containment" was a cornerstone of American strategy in the Middle East. The United States identified both Iraq and Iran as threats to its vital interests, and therefore it aspired to contain them both. To a large extent, the term "dual containment" is misleading, since it was not only the United States that engaged in containing these two states, but it was the two states that contained each other. This is especially true of the period in which Iran and Iraq were focused on the violent conflict between them. Therefore, perhaps "balance of power policy" is a more appropriate term.

Following the September 2001 terror attacks, the Bush administration adopted a strategy of preemption and changing the nature of the Middle East. In this context, the United States occupied Afghanistan and Iraq. At the outset, it appeared that the deployment of American forces in these two states created a direct threat to Iran and limited its freedom of action. The United States itself replaced Iraq as the balancing power against Iran. The projection of American power was maintained and even strengthened for a few years after the occupation of Iraq, and in fact, the military operations during President Bush's first term were perceived as part of a more extensive strategy that would bring the United States to a collision with other states. The projection of American power and deterrence brought about Libya's withdrawal from its nuclear program in 2003, contributed to the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005, and may have also contributed to a temporary pause in the Iranian nuclear program.

But it quickly became apparent that from among the alternatives that were ostensibly open to it, the Bush administration had chosen a problematic strategy towards Iraq. The first alternative was to defeat the Iraqi military in battle and remove Saddam Hussein and his family, but to preserve the Iraqi armed forces, the ruling Sunni elite, and the Ba'athist state institutions. This option would have been far from guaranteeing a definitive result, but the regime might perhaps have become friendly, and the Iraqi state would have remained a unified and functioning entity. The second alternative was to dismantle the Sunni-Ba'athist regime, mold a new Iraqi national consciousness, establish strong civil institutions, and educate a new, post-Saddam generation with Western values. This alternative is possible – if at all – only at a heavy price of a generation-long occupation and intense involvement. The domestic American public-political system was not prepared to pay such a price, and therefore the United States dismantled the Sunni-Ba'athist regime, but did not allocate sufficient resources and did not muster the necessary will and tenacity to create a new pro-Western Iraq.

A thorough analysis of whether nation building is a realistic task is beyond the scope of this essay, and the following observations will suffice: Central European states such as the Czech Republic, Poland, and Hungary evolved on the wellsprings of European culture, and therefore when the yoke of the Soviet dictatorship was removed, it was not difficult

for them to turn into normative Western countries. Japan and Germany are coherent nations with strong unifying foundations, and therefore when their leaderships changed in 1945 (and following massive casualties among both civilian populations), the two nations readily adjusted themselves to their new contours. Iraq is lacking these basic elements: it was born from an almost random drawing of borders by the colonial powers, and it includes fractions of three rival populations. It never cultivated internal coherence and it remained unified only under the iron fist of Saddam. Moreover, the history of local democracy is meager at best. Under these conditions, dismantlement of the Ba'ath regime and a reconstruction program of a few years were not sufficient to realize the ideological goals of the Bush administration.

Following the liquidation of the Ba'ath regime, a war broke out – indirect, covert, and nameless – between Iran and the United States over the character, hegemony, and future of Iraq. Even though the United States is the world's sole superpower, and in spite of its resources and its aspiration to mobilize a wide spectrum of national capabilities (the “whole of government” approach²), Iran demonstrated superior effectiveness and persistence in the indirect war for hegemony in Iraq.³ Now, in accordance with the commitments by Presidents Bush and Obama, the United States is close to completing the withdrawal of its forces from Iraq, and to a large extent, a retreat from confronting Iran over hegemony in Iraq.

With its operation in Iraq, the United States contributed to shaping a theater optimal for Iran. Iran recoils from direct confrontations yet has an advantage in indirect conflicts, while the United States has removed

It is possible to consider the Iraq that takes shape after the American withdrawal as an Iranian strategic defense zone.

the main direct threat to Iran and left an arena convenient for Iran to work in through indirect means. Saddam Hussein's regime was formed from materials that are suited for containing Iran, for fighting fire with fire. Therefore, dual containment (in the sense of a balance of power) had an effective strategic basis. The dismantling of Saddam's regime removed the main balance

to Iran from a bordering country and possibly turned Iraq into a failed state. As expected, the elections promoted by the United States brought about the rise of the Shiites as the dominant political element in Iraq.

Moreover, Iraq has become a convenient base for Iran's indirect means, with Iran acting through carrots (funding, bribery, *dawa*, religion, and tribal support) and sticks (terrorism, militias, the Revolutionary Guards, and the al-Quds force) within the Iraqi system to prevent the creation of a future Iraqi threat to Iran, and to prevent the use of Iraqi territory as a springboard for third party activity against Iran. In fact, it is possible to consider the Iraq that takes shape after the American withdrawal as an Iranian strategic defense zone. Once the direct threat from a bordering country was removed, all that remained for Iran was to apply its indirect means within or against states and territories that do not border it (Lebanon, Yemen, Bahrain, the Horn of Africa, Gaza, and so on). And of course, Iranian missiles and potential future nuclear weapons are free from limitations that might otherwise be imposed by the need for a shared border.

Two other bordering countries, Afghanistan and Turkey, are worthy of mention. The Afghan case is somewhat reminiscent of the Iraqi situation, and there too the collapse of the system made Iranian involvement and influence through proxies possible. Afghanistan, like Iraq, has become an arena that commands the resources of some Iranian adversaries. Once mired there, they become exhausted and lose domestic legitimacy for other confrontations, and the projection of their power toward third parties is diminishing.

Turkey's strategic reversal is not a result of mistaken American or Israeli policy. Perhaps it is a result of European policy, but it is more reasonable to assume that the Turkish turn to the east is mainly an outcome of internal Turkish processes. The turn to the east involves a new interpretation of Turkish national interests, and its first signs can be traced back to 2003, when Turkey refused to allow the United States to use its territory to open a second front against Iraq. Nevertheless, Turkey also opposed the American invasion of Iraq out of fear that it would set in motion isolationist tendencies among the Kurds in Iraq, which were liable to spread to the Kurds in Turkey. Therefore, it is possible that even a Turkish government without an Islamist orientation would have opposed the invasion, but the United States failed to factor this vital Turkish interest in its realpolitik calculations and its expectations of Turkey. That being the case, the United States has found it difficult to influence Turkish policy. As a result of Turkey's strategic reversal, in

spite of the fact that Iran borders a country that is a NATO member, and in spite of the potential for regional competition between Iran and Turkey (whose long term importance should not be underestimated), Iran today can consider itself free of a direct threat on its northwestern border.

A Sampling from the Secondary Theaters: Lebanon and the Palestinians

Following the assassination of Rafiq al-Hariri in 2005, American and French pressure brought about the end of Syria’s thirty year occupation of Lebanon. Ostensibly this was an impressive strategic and ideological success. However, while the withdrawal of its armed forces prompted Syria to attempt indirect and clandestine means of influence in Lebanon, it quickly became clear that Syria’s effectiveness in the Land of the Cedars was on the decline, while Hizbollah’s dominance in Lebanon was growing. Although Syria and Hizbollah avoided defining the strategic situation between them as a competition for hegemony in Lebanon, the result in practice was that Hizbollah (and indirectly, Iran) gradually replaced Syria as the dominant player in the Lebanese system.

The United States and Israel had effective leverage against an actor such as Syria, and more than once this led to Syria’s restraint, and thereby,

to restrained developments in Lebanon. However, the ability of the United States and Israel to rein in Hizbollah and Iran was not as considerable as their ability to restrain Syria. The United States and its allies also found it difficult to compete in the disintegrating domestic Lebanese arena and to sufficiently strengthen the pro-Western elements there, to the extent that this was at all possible. The ineffectiveness of the United States and its allies was evident, for example, in the crisis of May 2008 and the ensuing developments. In the Second Lebanon War, Israel too lacked its longstanding leverage – pressure on Syrian armed forces in Lebanon. Thus a clinical analysis reveals that pushing the Syrian military out of Lebanon – when

Pushing the Syrian military out of Lebanon merely curtailed the ability of the US and its allies to restrain particular developments in Lebanon and created the conditions for increased Iranian and Hizbollah dominance in the country.

not accompanied by the buildup of pro-Western actors endowed with sufficient strength in the domestic Lebanese system – merely curtailed

the ability of the United States and its allies to restrain particular developments in Lebanon and created the conditions for increased Iranian and Hizbollah dominance in the country.

In 2006, as a result of American pressure, elections were held in the Palestinian territories. Although based on agreements between Israel and the Palestinians Hamas was banned from participating in the elections, the Bush administration – for ideological reasons and contrary to its self-interests – exerted pressure to include all the Palestinian factions in the elections. The elections resulted in a Hamas victory and led to a struggle that ended with Hamas' takeover of the Gaza Strip. Hamas did not become democratic, but only took advantage of the mechanics of the (thus far, non-recurring) elections to promote its non-democratic goals.

The Palestinian elections and the processes they generated led to a number of results, led by the bifurcation of the Palestinian government. Consequently, the Palestinian Authority no longer represents either the entire population or the entire territory. The Palestinian Authority will find it difficult to deliver the goods in a future peace agreement, and its freedom of action – mainly its potential to agree to concessions – is limited by its rival, the other, more extremist Palestinian administration. Hamas is not an Iranian proxy, but Iran is the foreign power that has the most influence over it. Therefore, Hamas' capture of Gaza increased Iranian influence in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and Iran has gained an indirect military foothold in Gaza. If that is the case, the elections did not promote democracy and peace; rather, they brought about Iranian penetration of the Sunni world and a threat to Egypt (at least, according to Mubarak's net assessment), the Palestinian Authority, and Israel.

Obama in Egypt: A Roll the Dice Strategy

Egypt is the political core of the Arab world and the strongest Arab state, and since the late 1970s it has been the most stable and loyal pro-American power in the Arab world. The political and military alliance with Egypt was a source of strength and influence for the United States, and a cornerstone of Israel's strategic jigsaw puzzle. Egypt was the key player on the front to curb and contain hostile actors such as Iran and its proxies.

The second key player in containing Iran and its proxies is Saudi Arabia, but the Saudi state suffers from deep-seated weaknesses, mostly

recoils from direct confrontations, and tends to hedge its bets. If Saudi Arabia is left alone in the battle, it might seek to limit its risks. Hence, Egypt’s role is doubly important: it is not only essential in and of itself, but it is also an element that empowers Saudi Arabia and allows it to play a constructive regional role. Egypt is important on the bilateral level, but also in the fact that the Egyptian-Saudi axis has played an important proactive role in influencing third parties in Lebanon, Iraq, Bahrain, Yemen, Sudan, and so on, and in lending political backing to concessions by the Palestinians. Mubarak, who was a key player in mitigating crises between Israel and the Palestinians, feared the historic connection between the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas, and therefore he labored to reinforce Fatah’s standing within the Palestinian system and to curb Hamas.

It is too early to assess what Egypt will look like when the processes that recently took the country by storm have evolved, and there are still a number of possibilities. It is also possible that the actual American influence on the demonstrations in Tahrir Square and the processes to which they gave rise was limited, and that the United States has no choice but to ride the train that in any case has left the station. It is also possible to identify signs of pragmatism and a moderated White House position, as compared with the initial position expressed in late January 2011. This is evidenced by the fact that the United States’ main interlocutor in the discussion on the future of Egypt is the Egyptian military (and not the civilian opposition). Nevertheless, White House policy towards the Mubarak regime – especially in the first moments of the crisis – raises serious questions.

What do the pro-Western Arab monarchs find more formidable, Iran’s aspirations to hegemony or the White House’s democratization policy?

The Obama administration stood by when its adversary Ahmadinejad was challenged in similar demonstrations in 2009, and when Tunisia experienced demonstrations a short time before the events in Tahrir Square. But when Mubarak, a loyal ally, was challenged, the Obama administration, out of ideological reasons, hurried to turn its back on him – publicly and behind the

scenes. What conclusion, then, should the royal houses of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Jordan, and the emirs and sultans of the Gulf reach from President Obama’s policy toward Mubarak? Whether these monarchs

can count on the White House as an ally in time of distress is far from certain. And what do the pro-Western monarchs find more formidable: Iran's aspirations to hegemony or the White House's democratization policy?

A basic understanding of realpolitik reveals that with its conduct, the White House has created a situation that greatly reduces its freedom to maneuver and leaves it with two undesirable options: one, to continue to promote its values and confront every one of the Arab kings, emirs, and sultans that are its allies. In such a case, the White House is likely to distance itself from most of its Arab allies, and Iran would be happy to take advantage of the wedge that would be driven between the United States and its allies. The second choice is to concede that Mubarak was an exceptional case, and henceforth, the White House will back up its allies. In such a scenario, the White House would lose its credibility, appear fickle, and in fact admit that United States participation in the sacrifice of Mubarak was unnecessary and unhelpful, and that it stemmed in part from misunderstanding the rules of the game. At the time of this writing, it appears from the White House approach to the crises in Bahrain, Yemen, and states ruled by other autocratic allies that it is, in fact, changing direction to a pragmatic approach, and that it prefers the second choice.

It is possible to criticize the Bush administration's Middle East policy, for example, its overstretching and setting of unrealistic goals, but it could claim two strategic assets: it deterred its enemies (especially in its first term), and it was generally loyal to its allies. The Obama administration, however, does not bolster the projection of a strong American stick, and its conduct vis-à-vis Iraq, the Iranian nuclear program, and other areas of conflict reinforces this assessment. On the other hand, its conduct towards Mubarak raises questions concerning the carrot: loyalty to its allies. In addition, in his attempts to draw closer to adversaries such as Iran, Obama failed to take sufficiently seriously the vital interests of allies like Saudi Arabia. This can be seen, for example, from his hesitant and indecisive approach to the Iranian nuclear program. A clinical, unemotional analysis reveals that in the absence of the carrot and the stick, it is difficult to identify an incentive that the Obama administration could supply to an Arab ruler in order for him to be counted as part of the American camp.

And indeed, why should a monarch risk a confrontation with Iran if at the end of the day, the United States itself will demand that he give up his throne (and will even act to confiscate his money)? At the very least, when it turned its back on Mubarak, the Obama administration should have presented a new set of strategic carrots and sticks.

Another angle is that the Obama administration is pushing for change without attempting to ensure in advance where the change will lead. In fact, if democratic elections are held in Bahrain and the Shi'ite majority takes power in the home port of the US Navy's Fifth Fleet, or if there is liberalization in Saudi Arabia and the undercurrents come to the surface, will these developments serve American interests? Kissinger aptly characterized the typical American approach: "What [the United States] resists is not change as such but the method of change . . . A Bismarck or a Disraeli would have ridiculed the proposition that foreign policy is about method rather than substance, if indeed he had understood it."⁴

The White House is pushing to present democratic mechanics without studying the lessons from Russia, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, Iraq, Afghanistan, Gaza, and the like: the mechanics of democracy without a democratic culture and without sound civil institutions does not ensure the establishment of democracy, but is liable to end with the cynical exploitation of democratic mechanics by nondemocratic elements.

The die has not yet been cast concerning the identity of the new Egypt and the way in which it will interpret its national interest. It is possible that there has not been a revolution and that all that will happen is that the military will replace the retired general Mubarak with another veteran general.⁵ It is possible that Egypt will continue to see Iran as a major strategic threat, especially if Iran seeks to take advantage of the opportunity to increase its attempts to intervene within Egypt or to pressure it,⁶ and hence, that Egyptian foreign policy will not change. But there is also another possibility: Egypt is liable not to stop playing by the rules but to adopt a policy similar to that of Turkey. It might sink into a prolonged period of turning inward and withdraw from the regional arena; and of course, the possibility of an Islamic takeover cannot be ruled out. Each of the last scenarios undermines the national interest of the United States and its allies, and is likely to be useful to Iran. But surprisingly, in spite of the weight of the interests at stake, the Obama

administration decided to gamble, roll the dice, and see what strategic number comes up.

If the more detrimental scenarios evolve and the United States loses Egypt as a strong and proactive partner, this will seriously undermine American Middle East strategy of the past four decades. This would happen without the United States having developed an alternative strategy or alternative centers of power, or having answered the question of how to maintain the regional balance of power and how, on the day after, to protect its national interests.

Libya: The Place to Spend Political Capital?

At the time of this writing, the United States is halfheartedly participating in an air campaign in Libya. The picture in Libya is far from clear, and the possibility of an optimistic scenario in which the air campaign assists a friendly and democratic entity to assume power and ensure that Libya remain a functioning state – and as a result, projection of United States power and strategic effectiveness is heightened – cannot be ruled out. However, there are currently more questions than answers. With all the areas of friction in the Middle East, the United States chose to intervene militarily in one of the less critical. Qaddafi is a colorful figure, and there has been much media coverage of his repression of his own people, but in realpolitik calculations, the Qaddafi regime (version 2011, as opposed to earlier decades) does not constitute an immediate threat to United States vital interests. In a world in which it is possible to use force only sparingly, and the public-political system is liable to quickly lose its appetite for applying force for a host of reasons, it is possible that the attack on Libya squanders the political credit that is needed for intervening in more pressing crises with greater strategic significance. It is possible that the very act of allocating management attention and political capital specifically to Libya reflects a lack of strategic understanding.

The United States is also committed to the battle to assist the rebels, about whom there is little information. It is not clear who they are, whether they are even a coherent group, what their intentions are, and why – if the campaign succeeds at all – the United States will benefit from their being in power in Libya. It is doubtful whether Libya was a habitat for covert liberal forces that burst forth in recent weeks, and it is not clear if success by the rebels would leave Libya a functioning state. In breach

of almost every rule of the Weinberger doctrine, the United States has waged an idealistic-preventive campaign: preventing human tragedy and preventing Qaddafi's continued rule. But even if this campaign succeeds, it is not clear how it will positively promote American national interests.

Conclusion: The United States Dismantles its Own Front

There is no doubt that Presidents Bush and Obama, with their substantive differences of approach, harbored good and noteworthy intentions. In addition, American influence in the Middle East should not be overestimated. For example, it is eminently possible that Mubarak would have fallen even if President Obama had backed him. And still, it appears that the unintended result of the actions by Presidents Bush and Obama was a "shaping operation" that contributed, to a not insignificant extent, to the transformation of the theater in a manner that is optimal to the competitive advantages of Iran; to weakening the Arab front that served the interests of the United States and its allies; and to undermining the regional balance of power.

The main military actor that contained Iran was Saddam Hussein's Iraq, and the main political actors were Egypt and Saudi Arabia. When the United States conquered Iraq and Afghanistan, it appeared as if it would take upon itself the military containment of Iran. In fact, all it did was weaken Iran's two neighbors – mainly by dismantling the armed forces and the Ba'ath regime in Iraq – and then it began to withdraw. One of Iran's main weak points is its difficulty coping with direct threats and with a regime that is made of Saddam-like materials, yet the United States removed this threat to Iran. The dismantling of the Ba'ath regime turned Iraq into a convenient space for indirect Iranian means, and Iran is becoming the most influential foreign player in Mesopotamia. In fact, once the United States withdraws, Iraq will gradually become a strategic defense zone of Iran. Therefore, it will not be surprising if the United States reconsiders the pace of withdrawal.

The processes underway in Egypt are not yet complete, but among the range of possibilities are a reversal in policy, intensifying Islamic Brotherhood influence, or a process of turning inward. If Egypt is lost as a proactive ally, an important element in the political containment of Iran will also be lost. Saudi Arabia will likely not want to remain the lone Arab ranger combating Iran (as it is being drawn into this role in Bahrain), and

hence, the loss of Egypt is also liable to cause the weakening of Saudi Arabia as an asset in the struggle for containment.

The American policy toward Mubarak has produced a hovering cloud over its relations with its remaining Arab allies, almost none of whom were elected in democratic elections. Tragically, the pressure from the White House to promote democratic reforms is effective when it is directed at its close allies (such as Mubarak), and it is less effective, if at all, when directed at its adversaries (such as Ahmedinajad). The White House is trapping itself, and it appears that any choice it makes now will harm its standing. Either Obama will find himself the enemy of Arab regimes (including his allies) or he will admit that he erred, did not understand how to play the game, and helped to sacrifice Mubarak in vain.

The removal of the Iraqi threat from Iran and America's recoiling from a direct confrontation with Iran have steered the struggle for hegemony in the Middle East to indirect channels: the use of proxies and non-state actors, terrorism, bribery, *dawa*, religious and ethnic levers, and more. Iran has a relative advantage in these indirect channels, which it wields in Iraq, Lebanon, eastern Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Gaza, and other areas of friction. The confrontation is therefore now conducted in the part of the envelope in which Iran is strong and its adversaries are weak.

Among the Palestinians, the combination of the elections that brought Hamas to power in Gaza; the possibility of an Egyptian withdrawal – followed by Saudi Arabia – from backing a Palestinian moderate line; and the undermining of America's position as a reliable strategic buttress of Fatah, reduce the chances of achieving an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement.

Once the White House dismantles its own front, the moderate options are likely to evaporate, so that only the far reaching options remain: passing the baton of regional hegemony to Iran or a direct confrontation with it. And in fact, even now, a lack of American success in conducting a strategy of *realpolitik* and the Iranian advantage in indirect conflicts have narrowed Saudi Arabia's room to maneuver to a choice that is both undesirable and unusual for Saudi Arabia: direct and overt military intervention in Bahrain. Saudi Arabia, which is typically risk averse, was pushed into a corner, and it then executed an interesting direct move,

which poses difficult dilemmas in the face of the Iranian strategy of indirect approach. Is Bahrain a sign of things to come?

The supreme American interest in the Middle East is stability. Stability ensures freedom of access and flow (and price) of oil, and it prevents wars, terrorism, and arms races (including a nuclear arms race). One way to achieve stability is through unipolar American hegemony. The second way is through the balance of power. The promotion of ideology (conservative or liberal), especially when it is not accompanied by carrots and sticks taken from the spoken language of strategy, is a poor way to ensure stability. Idealism must be backed by practical language that Machiavelli too would understand.

Notes

- 1 Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994).
- 2 US Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Roles and Mission Review Report*, January 2009, pp. 31-36.
- 3 Yoel Guzansky, "'Made in Iran': The Iranian Involvement in Iraq," *Strategic Assessment* 13, no. 4 (2011): 85-100; Ron Tira, "Shifting Tectonic Plates: Basic Assumptions on the Peace Process Revisited," *Strategic Assessment* 12, no. 1 (2009): 91-107.
- 4 Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, p. 22.
- 5 George Friedman, *Egypt: The Distance Between Enthusiasm and Reality*, Stratfor Global Intelligence, February 14, 2011.
- 6 As occurred during passage of Iranian warships in the Suez Canal, which is liable to be an Iranian error, since it put pressure on the new Egyptian regime and embarrassed it early on, and publicly.

Quiet in the Palestinian Arena: The Eye of the Storm

Shlomo Brom

In recent months, governmental crises, revolutionary fervor, and popular protests have spread like wildfire from one Arab state to another. In the midst of the incendiary Middle East, however, the Palestinian Authority (PA) represents an island of relative calm. This phenomenon seems at odds with the gloomy forecasts that regularly affirm the weakness of the current PA government and its limited viability. The contrast is even starker in the wake of the al-Jazeera leaks, which were used by the network and others to fuel virulent attacks on the PA following the exposure of Palestinian documents on the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations and the PA's relations with the international community. The purpose of this essay is to examine what underlies the relative calm in the Palestinian arena, and to infer relevant conclusions for the Israeli-Palestinian political process.

The Presumed Weakness of the PA

Assessments about the PA's weakness are grounded principally on four factors. The first factor is the political split between Fatah and the Fatah-allied camp ruling the West Bank and the Hamas camp ruling the Gaza Strip, and various assessments regarding Hamas' relative strength over Fatah.

The second factor concerns the legitimacy of the Palestinian government. Although President Mahmoud Abbas was elected in free democratic elections, his term in office ended in January 2009, and the PA has not held new presidential or parliamentary elections because of the split between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Hamas won a majority

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in the last parliamentary elections (2006), but due to the split in the PA the Palestinian Legislative Council has ceased to function. There is thus some basis to the claim that the current government in the PA was not democratically elected and is rather a dictatorship based on the security services, as is the situation in other Arab states experiencing popular uprisings.

The third factor is the status of Fatah. Despite reliable surveys taken in the PA indicating that Fatah enjoys much greater support than Hamas¹ and that the trend is of growing support for Fatah at the expense of support for Hamas, the party is suffering from internal rivalries and lack of organization. Last year Abbas decided to hold municipal elections in an attempt to restore regime legitimacy, but the elections were canceled due to Fatah's fears that despite its public support it would be defeated given its internal problems and lack of organization.

The fourth factor is the deadlocked political process. Since the start of the Oslo process, the Fatah movement, which controls the West Bank, is linked in the minds of the Palestinian population to the political process with Israel. A deadlocked process robs this camp of its agenda and jeopardizes public support for Fatah. If the Palestinian public concludes that the political process has exhausted itself and the alternative is a renewal of the armed struggle, then Hamas stands to supplant Fatah in popular support, since in Palestinian eyes it is more successful at violence than Fatah.

Given this constellation of factors, the common assessment among the Israeli and Western media was that the al-Jazeera leaks would have

a significant negative political impact on the PA. However, this did not occur. In the Palestinian media there were a few attacks on the PA because of what were deemed "its far-reaching concessions" in the negotiations, but these did not exceed the usual attacks by the usual suspects. The Palestinian street was not particularly riled, and attempts to organize demonstrations around this issue failed. On the contrary, Fatah succeeded in organizing demonstrations against al-Jazeera and

The Palestinian public's limited response to the al-Jazeera leaks may be explained by the fact that what was published revealed nothing new of significance.

the network's anti-PA spin. The public's limited response to the leaks may be explained by the fact that what was published revealed nothing

new of significance. They merely added a little color to information that was already widely known to any Palestinians with political awareness paying attention to the media. Still, it may be that precisely this limited response should have challenged claims regarding the PA's overriding political weakness.

The Calm in the West Bank

Thus far, then, attempts to foment protests in the PA using social media internet networks, similar to the organized upheavals elsewhere in the Arab world, have not borne fruit. Responses in the Palestinian street have been quite moderate, despite public opinion polls indicating widespread Palestinian support for revolutionary streams in the Arab world.² Both in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip there have been attempts to organize demonstrations against, respectively, the PA and Hamas governments, but they have largely not succeeded. To date, there have been a few sparsely attended demonstrations in both areas that failed to gather momentum. The failure to instigate anti-government fervor was particularly apparent in the West Bank in light of the PA's response to the events in the Arab world. Support by the Egyptian, Jordanian, and Saudi regimes has always been critical to the PA; therefore, it could do little more than express support for the current regimes. It could not play the old game of identifying with the Arab masses and their desire for democracy based on the hope that this would help it ride the waves of protest. Although this behavior ostensibly had the potential to enrage the Palestinian street, this did not happen.

Several reasons can help explain this non-activism. First, despite the claims that the PA is undemocratic and uses its security apparatus as a means of oppression, the atmosphere in the West Bank is still more open than in most of the Arab world. People are usually not persecuted for expressing opinions or for organizing politically. The only exception is Hamas, which could complain of political repression and victimization by the security apparatus. However, Hamas cannot legitimately make this claim, as it uses the very same methods against Fatah in the Gaza Strip.

Second, the political storm in the Arab world is partly the result of difficult socioeconomic conditions: severe economic problems, increased inequality in the distribution of income, and rampant corruption and

cronyism reflected in outrageous patronage. Even where there has been impressive growth in the GDP, as in Egypt in recent years, it has not trickled down to the public at large and thus most of the population has not benefited. Rather, most of the population remains mired in unemployment and a poor standard of living. There has been no sense of improvement or auspicious prospects on the horizon. The common belief was that the regime and its institutions serve only the interests of a small, corrupt ruling elite. By contrast, the PA has recently witnessed significant improvements in its economic situation, and these extend to wider segments of the population, especially in the drop in unemployment rates.³ The economic growth spurt resulted from a more stable security situation and fewer limitations by the IDF on freedom of movement in the West Bank. During the intifada economic activity dropped sharply; once the Palestinian economy returned to more normal functioning it was possible to achieve impressive growth in a short period of time.

Third, recent years have seen steady improvements in Palestinian governance. Under the direction of Prime Minister Salam Fayyad and the leadership of President Abbas, the government is undertaking an ambitious state and institution building enterprise. The level of corruption has decreased dramatically, there is more transparency, and there is a greater sense that the government is serving the citizens, not just the interests of the ruling elite.

The area in which the institution building project has seen most success is security. With the help of key international (the United States and the EU) and regional (especially Jordan, and to a certain extent, Egypt) actors, the PA has succeeded in executing comprehensive reforms in the security organizations and constructing solid security capabilities. Anarchy in the streets has given way to law and order, and the Palestinian police are far more attuned than in the past to their goal of serving the citizenry. These capabilities and the cooperation with Israel have made it possible to eliminate Hamas' military infrastructure in the West Bank almost completely. Hamas' civilian and political infrastructures have been severely damaged, as has the organization's ability to rise up against the ruling power in the West Bank.

Moreover, generally speaking the Palestinian public is not open to initiatives that will interfere with its normal routine. After many long years of the second intifada in which it was impossible to live a normal life

and the Palestinian reality was one of ongoing hardship, the Palestinians have lost much of their appetite for violence, anarchy, and grinding poverty. At the same time, in the eyes of the Palestinian public, the reality is that they are living under occupation. The real enemy is Israel and not their own government, and therefore there is little point in venting at the government, which can at most be accused of cooperating with the enemy, Israel. In turn, the Palestinian government could easily divert the rage and refute these claims by displaying aggressive policies towards Israel, which is not hard to do given the political deadlock.

For its part, Hamas is hard pressed to take advantage of the uprisings in the Arab world in order to incite the Palestinian public against the PA, in part because it finds itself in a similar situation. The government in the Gaza Strip is a Hamas government. It too has a problem of legitimacy because new elections have not been held; its rule of the Gaza Strip is also dictatorial and relies on its security apparatus. Hamas is apparently heeding the adage that people who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones.

Complementing these strategic reasons is the PA's tactical competence in weathering various crises that threaten its government. The first crisis is the deadlock in the political process. In managing this crisis, several factors have worked in the Palestinian leadership's favor. First, from the outset the Palestinians were under no illusions and did not believe that a political process with the Netanyahu government would lead to any positive outcomes. When there are no expectations there is less frustration stemming from disappointment. Second, most Palestinians do not want to return to a reality filled with violence and therefore reject armed struggle as the preferred operating method vis-à-vis Israel. The Palestinian leadership has succeeded in taking advantage of this situation by adopting alternative, non-violent methods, such as action in the international arena. The hope is that success here will compensate for the inability to make progress directly with Israel. So, for example, the Palestinians are making an effort to achieve widespread international recognition of a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders and are considering turning to international institutions such as the UN Security Council regarding issues such as the Jewish settlements in the West Bank. This policy aims to exert pressure on Israel, but is also a function of internal considerations and the need to demonstrate that

the PA is not stagnant and that its activity bears fruit. Another method is non-violent public struggle against the occupation, such as the protests against the security barrier or against Jewish settlement in Jerusalem's Arab neighborhoods. This method has had only limited success because of the reluctance of the public at large to upset its normal routine. On the other hand, it is a good outlet for anyone who wants to participate and rally against the Israeli occupation.

The second crisis is the al-Jazeera leaks. Here too the PA managed the crisis well and did not succumb to pressure, nor did officials apologize for their seeming "concessions." Instead, they conducted an effective counterattack against al-Jazeera, with Fatah showing not inconsiderable organizational capability in fomenting anti-al-Jazeera protests that overshadowed the failed attempts to organize anti-PA demonstrations. Another step was ostensibly taken when Saeb Erekat, the head of the Palestinian negotiating team, took responsibility for his department's role in the leaks and announced his resignation, though there was much play-acting in this too, as Erekat continues to fulfill the same functions as before, albeit under a different job description.

The third and most severe crisis is the storm that erupted in the Arab world and is still underway. The outcome is as yet unknown, though the storm has the potential to generate deep strategic changes. In this case, likewise in a reflection of its improved organizational skills, the Palestinian leadership was able to channel public frustrations in different directions. The PA allowed protests but made sure that Fatah would be in control and divert them to other grievances. Some of the protests focused on the occupation and Israeli measures. For example, the large demonstration

that took place on Friday, February 25 was supposed to have been part of the attempt to mark "a day of rage" against the PA; in practice, it turned into a protest in Hebron against the restrictions on Palestinians' freedom of movement in the H-2 area of the city. Other demonstrations protested the American veto of the Security Council resolution condemning the Jewish settlements in the West

Bank. The PA also used the support among the Palestinian public for reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas to turn some of the protests into a show of support for such rapprochement. Thus the protests on March

Recent crises have proven the strength of the PA and the capabilities of its leadership.

15 focused on the split between Fatah and Hamas, and in actuality, the protest in Gaza was bigger and forcibly dispersed by Hamas security forces. The ensuing image of popular defiance against Hamas, which is deemed the main culprit in the split, provides positive propaganda for the Palestinian leadership in the West Bank.

PA leaders, naturally concerned about possible waves of protests that could weaken them, took a number of additional steps to stave off the danger. Abbas preempted the call for democratization by setting a new date for municipal elections and declaring his intention to call for presidential and parliamentary election by this September. However, once the leadership saw that the situation was less severe than anticipated, the tone changed. In his most recent statements, Abbas has made the elections contingent on certain conditions, whose practical effect is that the elections will almost certainly not take place. He announced that presidential and parliamentary elections were contingent on their being held in Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip; he can presumably rely on both Israel and Hamas to make sure this condition is not met. By contrast, Salam Fayyad, aware of the appeal of the idea of unification, proposed a plan for renewed unification of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip under a joint government, though each political entity would continue to control the area it currently controls. In the wake of the March 15 demonstrations, Abbas also announced that he is prepared to travel to Gaza to discuss the end of the rift. These plans, however, stand little practical chance of success given the response by Hamas, which rejected Fayyad's plan outright. From Hamas' perspective, developments in the Arab world are playing into Hamas' hands, and in such a situation, the movement is not interested in rapprochement with Fatah. For its part, Fatah is not prepared to give Hamas a real foothold in the PLO.

Implications for the Political Process

The stability of the PA and its continued performance under crisis conditions should encourage discussions in Israel about negotiations with the current Palestinian leadership to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Conventional Israeli thinking says that it was impossible to arrive at a settlement with Yasir Arafat, who harbored malicious intentions and did not really want a settlement, and it is impossible to arrive at a settlement with his successor, Mahmoud Abbas, because Abbas lacks the necessary

political clout and is too weak. The recent crises have proven the strength of the PA and the capabilities of its leadership, notwithstanding the factors presented above that weaken the PA.

One might claim that the stability of the current Palestinian government depends on the absence of the political process, as the government does not have to tackle questions on which there is no consensus among the Palestinians. This claim is problematic for several reasons, first because the Palestinian leadership is under political attack primarily because of both its failure to attain a settlement with Israel and its avoidance of the alternative of armed struggle. Second, it is doubtful that the Palestinian leadership need fear Hamas' ability to exploit progress towards a settlement for incitement against Fatah at a time when Hamas is weak in the West Bank. Indeed, this claim holds little water when considering that Abbas, when negotiating with the Olmert government, presented positions seen by the Palestinian opposition as near treasonous and that he was apparently prepared to do the same with the Netanyahu government. Indeed, he submitted a document detailing the Palestinian positions on the basis of the negotiations with Olmert and asked to open the negotiations with the Netanyahu government with a similar presentation of Israel's positions. This proposal was rejected by Israel.

This claim also ignores the fact that the intent to have a state declared by September 2011 entails many risks to the Palestinian leadership. The

The recent developments should strengthen Israel's understanding that it has a credible partner on the Palestinian side for conducting negotiations and arriving at a settlement.

date was picked because it marks the end of Salam Fayyad's state building program and also the end of the two-year period after which, according to declarations by the American administration, the Palestinian state is supposed to be established. Even if the UN General Assembly, by a large majority, adopts a resolution supporting the establishment of a Palestinian state, reality on the ground will in all likelihood not change. This may trigger severe disappointment within the Palestinian public, which could be directed

towards Abbas and others. In this sense, the threat represented by the Palestinian efforts in the international arena helps the Palestinian leadership because it exerts pressure on Israel to change its policy and

challenges the current government. But if the threat materializes without Israel changing its policy, the situation is liable to become worse than a zero-sum game and cause both sides to lose.

A completely different question is, given the current situation, to what degree is the Israeli government motivated to conduct effective negotiations that would conclude a permanent settlement with the Palestinians. Even before the current deadlock, there were serious doubts about the Netanyahu government's genuine interest in such negotiations. Perhaps some of its reluctance stemmed from assessments having to do with the other side's presumed weakness, but it seems that this reluctance stemmed primarily from two other reasons. The first involved internal political considerations, i.e., the desire to maintain the integrity of the coalition. The second was the assessment by Israel's decision makers that a settlement that would meet the requirements of the current government is impossible because no Palestinian side would accede to its demands. The various initiatives on negotiations over a new interim settlement are manifestations of the Israeli government's reluctance to enter into negotiations over a permanent settlement.

Now, after the outbreak of the crisis in the Arab world, Israel will likely harden its demands, especially in the realm of security, due to the sense that developments in the Arab world worsen Israel's security and increase the possibility of dire scenarios. Under such circumstances, a settlement with the Palestinians must, according to this view, include tighter security arrangements that provide strong security guarantees. This may, for example, affect Israel's security demands in the Jordan Valley area. Because of these considerations, there might also be a clear preference for a wait-and-see policy on the Palestinian track. It is possible that Israel may feel that given the developments in the region and beyond, there should be some Israeli initiative in the political process designed to decrease the pressure on Israel. Yet even if such thinking occurs, it may well encourage a tendency to prefer the Syrian track over the Palestinian because it is less complex.

Israel finds itself in a situation in which the recent developments should strengthen Israel's understanding that it has a credible partner on the Palestinian side for conducting negotiations and arriving at a settlement. However, the circumstances make it difficult to translate this understanding into operative conclusions.

Notes

- 1 The most recent (December 2010) poll taken in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip by the Ramallah-based PSPR, directed by Khalil Shikaki, asked, "Were parliamentary elections in the PA held today, for whom would you vote?" Forty-four percent of respondents answered Fatah; 25 percent said Hamas; and 11 percent said they would vote for other, smaller parties with a secular national platform similar to Fatah's. See <http://www.pcpsr.org/survey/polls/2010/p38e.html#domestic>.
- 2 A poll taken by an-Najah University revealed that 80.1 percent of respondents supported the revolutions in the Arab world, according to an IMRA report published on February 28, 2011.
- 3 The September 2010 report of the World Bank stated, "In the West Bank, unemployment fell from 15.9 percent in the second quarter of 2009 to 15.2 percent in the second quarter of 2010." See <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTWESTBANKGAZA/Resources/WorldBankSep2010AHLReport.pdf>, p. 9. The September 2010 report of the International Monetary Fund stated, "By 2009, the WBG's [West Bank and Gaza] real GDP per capita had fully recovered to its 1994 level... The West Bank's real GDP per capita has grown steadily since 2007 and is projected to be about 60 percent above its 1994 level by 2013." While this may seem unimpressive, this is very significant in light of the destruction of the Palestinian economy during the years of the intifada. See <http://www.imf.org/external/np/country/notes/wbg.htm>.

The Challenge of the Palestinian Authority: State Building without Governmental Legitimacy

Ephraim Lavie

The popular uprisings in the Arab world against tyrannical regimes have so far not ignited similar dissent among the Palestinian public on the West Bank.¹ Even al-Jazeera's exposé of the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations (January 2011), which sought to present the Palestinian leadership as conceding Palestinian principles and assets, did not spark popular protests. In recent years there has been relative calm on the security front within the PA – a combination of Israeli deterrence, the public's concern about a return to anarchy, and the government's efforts at institutionalization and governmental stability. The PA and its security apparatus enforce law and order and operate against Hamas in cooperation with Israeli security elements, driven by the idea that it is necessary to maintain calm on the security front in order to construct the institutions and economy of a state-in-the-making.²

The policy of President Abu Mazen and Prime Minister Salam Fayyad of abandoning the armed struggle and transitioning to political institutionalization enabled the formation of a government that in recent years has operated with transparency and succeeded in promoting economic and social development programs. The government has rebuilt its ministries and security forces and made great strides in improving their efficiency, is enforcing law and order, has started to root out corruption using the police and courts, and has restored civilian

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life to a manageable routine after the al-Aqsa intifada. The security and stability have drawn foreign investors from the Arab world and the West, promoting business and investments. The PA has made concerted efforts to encourage the private sector in order to promote economic growth and combat unemployment through the creation of jobs. This in turn has moved the international community to continue its support for the PA, both materially and politically.

At the same time, the PA leadership is quite aware that negative sentiments, influenced by events in the Arab world, may arise in the West Bank and perhaps lead to a popular groundswell against it. The leadership understands that notwithstanding the geographical and governmental divide in the territories, Palestinian society recognizes its power as a player, and familiar with the ways of non-violent struggle, might use them to generate a change in its situation.³ The leadership is attentive to homegrown criticism about the legitimacy of its rule and the question marks regarding the authenticity of its representation of the various sectors in the Palestinian population. These questions have become more insistent since Hamas' victory in the general elections (January 2006), the PA's loss of control of the Gaza Strip (June 2007), and the end of the terms of office of the PA presidency and the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) over a year ago (January 2010); the terms of the local governments have likewise expired. Added to this is criticism over human rights violations and the fact that large parts of the population are not enjoying the fruits of the economic development and continue to suffer economic distress and high unemployment rates. For now, the voices of criticism are not overly loud, but they are too poignant for the PA to ignore for long.

The PA leadership has been careful not to support the popular uprisings against the rulers of Tunisia and Egypt, but had no choice but to allow demonstrations of support for these uprisings.⁴ Qaddafi's violent reaction in Libya against protestors allowed the PA to channel expressions of hatred towards him: the leadership has allowed the media to encourage demonstrations against him and thereby deny its own resemblance to tyrannical Arab despots. At the same time, it has started marketing a package of democratization steps, including announcements of a change in government and local and general elections, in an attempt to channel any potential popular protest against the occupation or the

American veto on construction in the settlements in the West Bank, or rally popular sentiment in favor of national reconciliation.

To these ends, the Palestinian leadership has recruited its electronic and print media as well as the virtual social networks. In terms of propaganda, senior officials in the PA have tried to underscore that the Fayyad plan for building a Palestinian state entails sweeping reforms that include economic and social elements and the defense of human rights, while stressing that the essence of these reforms in no way contradicts the demands of protesters throughout the Arab world.

The Challenge of the Young and the Danger of the Social Media

The Palestinian population on the West Bank currently stands at 2.4 million. The birth rate is one of the highest in the world,⁵ and the number of young people is particularly large: 57 percent of the population is age 20 or under, and 65 percent of the population has not yet turned 25.⁶ Some 200,000 live in refugee camps,⁷ and the level of education is relatively high compared to the neighboring Arab countries. Data from the Palestinian Bureau of Statistics indicates an unemployment rate of about 16.5 percent in the first quarter of 2010 (18.1 percent in the fourth quarter of 2009), particularly acute in the 15-29 age bracket.⁸ Despite the high percentage of young women with a high school education, women's participation in the job market is among the lowest in the world (representing only 18.7 percent of the work force).⁹

The Fayyad government's programs to promote economic growth and create jobs on the West Bank have so far borne fruit; signs of recovery and growth are reflected in macroeconomic data such as a steady rise in the GDP, drop in unemployment, increased growth, and decreased inflation.¹⁰ However, the economic growth is felt primarily in the large cities, while the villages and smaller towns are excluded from the fruits of growth and continue to suffer economic distress and high rates of unemployment.¹¹ Unemployment among Palestinian academics is only slightly lower than unemployment among the population at large,

It seems that young Palestinians today lack a concrete collective goal for promoting their own social or political agenda, and therefore have no need of organizing via the internet or social media.

and is higher in the outlying areas – in the northern and southern parts of the West Bank – than in the center.¹²

Polls and studies show little interest in politics and political activism in Palestinian society, and it appears that young Palestinians distrust the political system and feel alienated by it.¹³ One of the reasons is the disappointment with the various political parties and factions, which failed to make the transition from revolutionary movements to political parties; today they are seen as tools for the advancement of narrow personal or party interests.¹⁴ Most of the Palestinian public does not distinguish between left and right political orientations and is tired of the major parties, Fatah and Hamas, as neither of them has proven itself in resolving the political issue or social and economic problems. Under such circumstances, the young generation is developing an individualistic approach, elevating education, employment, and personal advancement above national, collective issues. Thus, for example, during Operation Cast Lead there were no anti-Israeli demonstrations by young people identifying with the plight of the Gaza Strip.

Palestinian society enjoys satellite TV, private media, and local radio and TV stations, and compared with other Arab regimes, the PA has shown a liberal attitude towards them.¹⁵ The public at large has a wealth of outlets of expression, both electronic and print, and the rate of internet and social media use is high relative to neighboring Arab societies. PA institutions, most of the political parties and splinter groups, the civil organizations, and the private media all make extensive use of the internet. Nevertheless, the nature of the broadcasts in the PA media as well as the private local media shows that these outlets are still in the service of the regime. Thus, for example, the familiar trend to cover PA and local leaders without giving any details remains, typical of reporting in Arab despotic regimes. This suggests the lack of involvement or motivation among the young to generate a media revolution. Similarly, the internet infrastructure of the online media in the West Bank is not as developed as would be expected.

It seems that young Palestinians today lack a concrete collective goal for promoting their own social or political agenda, and therefore have no need of organizing via the internet or social media. Nevertheless, as a result of the events in Tunisia and Egypt, Palestinian society has engaged in public deliberations about the internet and Facebook as agents of

change.¹⁶ The Palestinian leadership hurried to ride the wave and co-opt the discussion for its own needs. It sought to prove that it is closely involved with the public and not disconnected from its troubles, and that it grasps the power of the internet and social media.¹⁷ Indeed, the leadership has started to use these media in order to enlist young people in what it considers to be worthy causes – the occupation and the lack of Palestinian unity – thereby averting the possible danger of the social media being turned against it.¹⁸

However, the young people on the West Bank have demonstrated only a limited desire to take part in protests organized by the PA and Fatah against the occupation and the internal Palestinian rift. The protests that took place were for the most part not spontaneous and were attended by a few thousand young people at most. Nor was there a mass event over a defined issue that would have obligated the Palestinian security forces to respond with force and act to suppress it. “The Young People’s Protest,” scheduled for March 15, was not a mass event of young people moved to go out and protest spontaneously. Those who came were young people who had been recruited, mostly from among Fatah activists, and men and women employed by the PA. Inspired no doubt by the pictures of Tahrir Square, the security forces helped sponsor the event, handing out food, drinks, and flags, and even took part in the post-event clean-up, as a symbol of collective responsibility for restoring order.

A prominent example of young people’s more lively protests has actually been noted within the Palestinians’ left wing splinter groups, such as the Popular Front, the Democratic Front, the People’s Communist Party, and the Initiative Party (al-Mubadra) led by Mustafa Barghouti. Young people’s participation in protests organized by these groups to mark events such as the days the organizations were founded was more extensive than it has been in previous years and seemed to reflect genuine support. So, for example, the People’s Party protest to mark its founding became a show of joy and identification with the Egyptian people. It seems that the political vacuum left by Fatah and Hamas is drawing some young people into smaller alternative settings that have civil platforms not opposed to Fayyad’s state building program and whose leaders are untainted by corruption.

The Question of Legitimacy

Questions about the legitimacy of the PA's rule stem primarily from the fact that though required by law, there have been no elections for the presidency, the Palestinian Legislative Council, or local government since their terms expired. Abu Mazen's term in office as elected president ended, as did the term of the PLC, which has ceased to function. Attempts at national reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah through Egyptian mediation, in order to hold PA presidential and parliamentary elections on time (January 2010) or even later, failed miserably. About a year ago, the PLO's leadership anchored the governmental reality in law, which extended Abu Mazen's term as PA president until the next elections. A constitutional problem regarding local governments likewise arose, once the heads of local councils elected on the Hamas slate were summarily dismissed and the elections that were supposed to have been held in the summer of 2010 were canceled; Hamas supporters were also dismissed from civil service. Furthermore, the PA government lacks public political support and Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, who is not a Fatah member, is a thorn in the side of most of the senior Fatah leadership because his economic and social achievements are not credited to Fatah.

The PA government, then, is an appointed government consisting mostly of technocrats. It does not include representation of the society's political powers and it functions without a constitutional basis and without parliamentary oversight. The process of legislation rests on the president's authority to make emergency decisions that have the status of law if the PLC is not functioning. Legislation that government ministries are interested in promoting in various civil fields are drafted by legal consultants in the ministries and passed on to the president to be announced into law. Thus, lacking a separation of powers, the executive branch of the government commands extensive legislative and executive authority without any public oversight.

In light of the popular protests in the Arab world and the toppling of the regimes in Tunisia and Egypt, the PLO Executive Committee rushed on February 12 to announce that presidential and parliamentary elections would be held in September 2011, stressing that elections are the only means to end the internal rift and restore national unity.¹⁹ Furthermore, promises were made that the elections would be free and fair and would take place under international supervision,²⁰ although in later statements

Abu Mazen estimated that it would be impossible to hold general elections because of the split between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank.²¹ Another move, made on February 13, was the announcement that the current government was being disbanded and reconvened so that it would include representatives of Fatah and other groups. Members of Fatah's Revolutionary Council told Abu Mazen that they accept Salam Fayyad's appointment as prime minister in order to ensure the support of the United States for the PA, but as the controlling political party, demand the important ministries in the government.²²

Preceding these moves was the PA's decision to respond to a court order issued by the Palestinian Supreme Court, obligating the PA to hold local government elections. The left wing Palestinian political parties, including the Popular Front, the People's Party, and the Palestinian National Initiative Party, had waged a legal and public struggle to force the PA to hold local elections, which were supposed to have been held in the summer of 2010 and were canceled. These political parties submitted a petition to the Palestinian Supreme Court, which in mid-December 2010 instructed the PA to set a date immediately for the elections, as any delay constitutes a violation of the Court's decision. As a result, the Palestinian Minister for Local Government announced that local government elections would be held in the summer of 2011. Party functionaries praised the decision by the Palestinian Supreme Court and rejected claims that elections in the West Bank only would deepen the Palestinian split. They explained that their function is to save democracy from the internal split and from external intervention in matters relating to the Palestinian people.

The Hamas leadership in the Gaza Strip continues to challenge the PA rule in the West Bank and refuses to acknowledge the legitimacy of Fayyad's government and its decisions. In light of the winds of change in the Arab world and the call of the various splinter groups and the PA to end the internal split, Ismail Haniyeh called on Abu Mazen and Fatah to launch a comprehensive national dialogue and respond to the people's demand. In turn, Abu Mazen announced that he is prepared to come to the Gaza Strip in order to end the split and establish a government of independent elements that will organize elections for the presidency, the PLC, and the Palestinian National Council within six months.²³ Hamas' leadership will likely persist in opposing reconciliation as long as the

central questions concerning the future of Hamas' security apparatus and its involvement in security on the West Bank remain unsettled and as long as the PA apparatus is connected to the United States and continues its security cooperation with Israel. Moreover, it seems that the Hamas leadership considers it quite plausible that the Muslim Brotherhood will be incorporated into the government in Egypt and that as a result Egypt will withdraw support from the PA and transfer it to Hamas. Accordingly, Hamas' leadership is likely to wait until the PA falls because of the nonexistent political process and the lack of legitimacy for its continued function.

Representation of the Palestinian People

As head of the PLO, Abu Mazen is aware of the criticism of the status of the organization as the only legitimate representative of the Palestinian people and the refugees in the diaspora, especially given Hamas' victory in the 2006 general elections to the PLC and his loss of control of the Gaza Strip. The attempts to recruit public opinion to endorse the call for elections and national reconciliation have been met by various Hamas conditions, among them reforms in PLO institutions and the election of a new Palestinian National Council, which would allow the integration of Hamas into the organization according to an agreed-upon formula, as well as the demand for changes in the organization's political positions.

The question of representation is liable to grow more acute with the establishment of a new regime in Egypt. The Palestinian leadership is concerned that the secular political parties in Egypt will lack enough power to constitute a coalition without the Muslim Brotherhood after democratic elections; it may even be that the Muslim Brotherhood will win more votes than any other political party and will therefore be authorized to form a coalition.²⁴ Should this happen, a strategic change would occur in Egyptian policy, which would adopt a worldview resembling the Brotherhood school, and accordingly, transfer support to Hamas and hasten the end of both the Palestinian national leadership and Hamas' estrangement from the Arab world.²⁵

The challenge to the PLO and the foot dragging in the political process have heightened doubts as to the PLO's political direction and strengthened the voices within the Palestinian system doubting the viability of the two-state solution. For these reasons, Abu Mazen has in

recent years made the “Arab Initiative,” based on the principle of two-states-for-two-peoples, the foundation of his policy. He views the Arab initiative as the inter-Arab tool that would back up the PLO’s political platform regarding a political settlement with Israel and stabilize its standing as the legitimate national body representing the Palestinian people. Egypt played a central role in this policy and President Mubarak was its principal advocate within the Arab League, which adopted a unified Arab stance on the necessary outlines of the agreement as a condition for renewing the negotiations. The general terms included the establishment of a state within the 1967 borders with East Jerusalem as its capital, mutually agreed-upon land swaps, and a full freeze on construction in the settlements in the West Bank, including Jerusalem.

The common assessment within the Palestinian leadership is that as long as the present Israeli government is in office no significant political negotiations will take place because of the continued construction in the settlements and the government’s policy on the core issues. This is reinforced by the public discourse in Israel in the wake of the developments in the Arab world, which does not encourage promoting the political process, rather warns of a peace agreement in light of recent events. The Palestinian leadership is also frustrated that the United States and the Quartet will likely not impose a construction freeze and a renewal of direct talks on Israel. And even if the conditions for a renewal of direct talks are somehow created, Abu Mazen would likely be hard pressed to act without Egyptian support and thereby be able to demonstrate flexibility in negotiations. In the past, for example, he vehemently opposed progress in stages, partial agreements, and the establishment of a state within temporary borders, as various elements in Israel have proposed, and one may conclude that without inter-Arab backing he will find it difficult to accede to such ideas, let alone exhibit flexibility on the core issues of the permanent settlement.

Consequently, the Palestinian leadership will likely seek to take advantage of the momentum of recent years, whereby the international community has declared that there is no choice but to end the occupation. It will continue to recruit international support that will allow it to turn to the UN and demand a *de jure* recognition of a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders, on the basis of UN Resolutions 242 and 338. This path will enable the Palestinian leadership to take Israel’s exclusive prerogative of

deciding the fate of the territories and the future of the Palestinian people out of Israel's hands and claim it as its own.

Criticism over Human Rights Violations

In recent years, journalists and human rights organizations have decried the PA's denial of democratic and human rights. For example, the leader of the PA's Independent Palestinian Human Rights Commission, Dr. Mamdouh al-Acre, recently admitted that the level of human rights in the PA is not acceptable and warned that not confronting the problem is liable to turn the PA into a kind of "police state."²⁶ In Commission reports and related interviews, al-Acre points to limitations on the right to congregate and freedom to demonstrate, illegal and random arrests, torture of detainees, screening of candidates for public service by the intelligence and security apparatus on the basis of political criteria, ongoing detention by the security apparatus, and ignoring of court orders. Al-Acre criticized the establishment of the security apparatus under the aegis of the occupying power as well as its inflated size, requiring one-third of the PA's budget to continue to operate, which comes at the expense of health, education, and welfare funds. Criticism is also directed at the lack of party activity in the PA: Fatah is in the grips of a longstanding internal crisis, Hamas activity has been banned in the West Bank, and the small parties have so far not developed a real ability to propose an alternative agenda or command public power.

Mamhoud al-Acre has pointed to a new wind blowing in the Palestinian public, which demands the return of the Palestinian issue to its rightful context: the struggle of the movement for national liberation. In his opinion, it is necessary to reestablish PLO leadership of the Palestinian people with new leaders, and to change the function of the PA so that it retains the authority of a large municipality. Al-Acre said that he feels the incipient changes in the demonstrations taking place in the villages, and in the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) NGOs. These bodies are working to promote economic boycotts such as on products made in the territories, impose cultural and other sanctions against Israel, and block investments there. He estimates that what happened in Tunisia and Egypt will accelerate the process within the territory controlled by the PA.

In the absence of any realistic alternative the PA still enjoys some public support, but its dependence on material assistance from the international community, bought with security cooperation with Israel, the undermining of Hamas infrastructures, and concomitant damage to democracy and human rights is viewed by the public as problematic. This calls into question the government's stability and prospects for successful state building, and nurtures despair and cynicism in Palestinian society. Aware of these sentiments, senior members of the PA and Fatah are working to shake the negative image resulting from security cooperation with Israel and stress, especially to the younger generation, the Palestinian interests involved.²⁷ They hope that the public accepts these explanations and agrees that in the national order of priorities, the political struggle against Israel takes precedence over the internal struggle against the deficient performance of the Palestinian government.

Significance for Israel

The unrest undermining the regimes in the Middle East differs from what characterizes intra-Palestinian dynamics. Palestinian society, split internally, is under occupation and is engaged in a struggle for political independence. Its young people lack a collective goal, either social or political, reflected in their preference to focus on their personal ambitions while integrating into the private or public sector and state building processes. The waning of national symbols of this society in recent years – primarily Fatah, the national liberation movement that lacks internal cohesion, commanding leadership, and public support; the rupture of national unity due to the loss of the Gaza Strip and the split with Hamas; and the abandonment of the notion of resistance (*al-muqawama*) in favor of state building – all indicate that today there is no political movement or force in the West Bank that can jumpstart widespread popular processes such as opposition to the PA or an uprising against the Israeli occupation.

Progress towards settling the conflict politically will require Israel to modify its support for differentiation of the West Bank from the Gaza Strip.

At the same time, the Palestinian leadership is not ignoring a long line of challenges that are liable to change current reality. It is aware that the question of legitimacy, given the lack of elections and the loss

of control of the Gaza Strip, the ongoing economic and social hardships, the democracy and human rights violations, and security cooperation with Israel without progress in the political process, are all liable to abet popular anti-government dissent, as well as dissent against the central political powers – Fatah and Hamas – that brought about the split and caused the weakening of Palestinian society from within. In this sense, such an awakening, from the bottom up, may be based on social groups similar to those that touched off the events in Tunisia, Egypt, and other states, which were not spurred by the power of political party ideology.

Questions about the legitimacy of the PA's rule and Abu Mazen's presidency will remain for the foreseeable future, at least until the next general presidential and parliamentary elections. However, to the same extent the elements ensuring the PA's continued existence and Abu Mazen's presidency will be maintained: first, despite the geographical as well as political split, Hamas and Fatah have a shared interest to preserve the PA in the territorial setting of two areas and not establish separate entities; second, Israel, the Arab states, and the greater international community all uphold the reason for the existence of the PA, and have continued to support its existence in recent years, both materially and politically.

Yet it is clear that in light of the events in the Arab world, the PA will need more backing and support from Israel and the international community in the form of an invigorated political process, assistance in state building processes, and assistance in the economic and welfare programs. Israel will be able to contribute to the PA's stability if it encourages the leadership for achievements in ensuring the rule of law and order and restoring security to the region, and will continue to view it as a partner for political and security dialogue. In fact, and contra to Israeli popular opinion, the PA is not inciting to violence: in recent years, senior officials have not made statements in support of terrorism or in favor of returning to the armed struggle,²⁸ and as a result of its struggle against Hamas, the mosques and campuses are no longer centers for anti-Israel incitement and activity. Therefore, Israel ought to recognize the Palestinian need to commemorate those who, in their mind, are heroes of the national struggle for liberation and not view this as incitement, while at the same time allow them to continue on the practical route they have chosen: state building and concluding a settlement with Israel.

Progress towards settling the conflict politically will require Israel to modify its support for differentiation between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip,²⁹ even if this happens gradually: first of all, by continuing to demonstrate the advantages to the Palestinians from the alternative proposed by the PA in the West Bank over Hamas' alternative in the Gaza Strip in terms of achieving political independence and state and society building; second, by renewing the political process for a Palestinian state to be established in both geographical areas and making real progress in this direction; third, by enabling elections: under these circumstances the PA would hold elections on the West Bank, even if Hamas' leadership does not respond to reconciliation efforts, as it becomes clear to all that a political solution achieved will apply to both regions. In this case, Hamas will be seen as the entity that prevented progress in ending the occupation and establishing an independent Palestinian state in both the West Bank and Gaza Strip, while the elections will be seen by Palestinian public opinion as a unifying rather than a divisive move. Renewing the political process while continuing security coordination and promoting state building processes are likely to reduce the impact of the events in the Arab world on the PA's rule and contribute to its stabilization. Israel's interests require that the establishment of a Palestinian state result from negotiations with the existing pragmatic leadership, rather than an externally imposed *fait accompli* that obligates recognition of a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders.

Notes

- 1 This essay is based in part on conversations by the author with leaders in the Palestinian Authority, academics, civil society, Fatah, and other activists, West Bank businesspeople and industrialists, and ordinary residents, during visits to the West Bank.
- 2 Abu Mazen has declared that the situation in the PA is stable and that the PA is the only regime in the Arab world that allows demonstrations by its citizens. See *a-Sharq al-Awsat*, March 6, 2011.
- 3 Palestinian society started the first intifada (December 1987) against the occupation and paved the way for the PLO, the Madrid Conference, and the Oslo process; it started the second intifada (September 2000) in order to protest against the continued occupation as well as against corruption in the PA and its human rights violations; it toppled the rule of Fatah and brought Hamas to victory in local elections (during 2005) and in the general elections for the Legislative Council (January 2006).

- 4 As a rule, Palestinian television, identified with the PA, avoided direct broadcast of events in Tunisia and Egypt and did not dedicate a separate discussion program to the ramifications of the events in the Arab world for the Palestinians. So, for example, the Friday sermon by Sheikh Qaradawi in Tahrir Square was not broadcast live on this channel, whereas Hamas' al-Aqsa Channel did broadcast it.
- 5 See the website of the Association of Bureaus of Commerce, February 7, 2010, at <http://www.chamber.org.il/Content.aspx?code=5866&cat=0>.
- 6 *CIA World Factbook*: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/we.html>.
- 7 *PASSIA Yearbook* 2009, p. 327; UNRWA website at <http://www.unrwa.org/htemplate.php?id=95>.
- 8 <http://hala.ps/ar/index.php?act=Show&id=16876>.
- 9 *PASSIA Yearbook* 2009, pp. 344-45.
- 10 Tani Goldstein, "PA Economy Flourishes, Hamastan Economy in Freefall," *Ynet*, December 4, 2009, at <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-3813386,00.html>.
- 11 The Palestinian economy maintains some Third World hallmarks: it is based on agriculture and traditional industry such as small plants (carpentries, sewing workshops, metal shops, oil presses, stone quarries), and continues to rely decisively on external budgetary assistance and assistance in the form of food, medication, and equipment distributed by UNRWA and human rights organizations. The labor force is to a large extent dependent on Israel. The PA's Ministry for Social Affairs conducts several social assistance programs with the help of donor nations, such as the PNCTP, which transfers cash to needy families, in order to reduce poverty rates. See the website of the Palestinian Welfare Ministry, June 23, 2010, at www.mosa.pna.ps.
- 12 The PA's policy of boycotting the settlements and prohibiting working there without providing appropriate alternatives has added to the resentment of thousands of laborers (some 25,000) for losing sources of income, and there were voices calling to ignore the prohibition.
- 13 See Bernard Sabila, "The Effect of the Family on Political Involvement of the Youth," in Rafi Netz, ed., *The Palestinian Family* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, Tami Steinmetz Center for Peace Research, 2003), pp. 74-91.
- 14 Young people on the program "Shu Birasak?" ("What's on Your Mind?"), Radio RAYA FM, March 17, 2011.
- 15 See Rafi Netz, ed., *The Palestinian Media* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, Tami Steinmetz Center for Peace Research, 2003).
- 16 See, for example, the articles by Baker abu Baker, Akram Massalem, and Salah al-Wadia in, respectively, *al-Hayat al-Jadida*, February 16, 2011; *al-Ayam*, February 20, 2011, and *Maan*, February 17, 2011. These publicists called for young Palestinians to use the social networks only for purposes that advance the Palestinian national cause, such as mending the internal divide and ending the occupation.

- 17 Prime Minister Salam Fayyad has started a direct dialogue with the public via Facebook and is answering questions sent to him with short film clips. Similarly, he gives a weekly radio address on the Voice of Palestine and local stations.
- 18 "A Proper Cause" is a Facebook campaign calling for the return of Palestinian refugees to their homes on May 15, 2011. See MEMRI of March 8, 2011 at http://www.memri.org/cgi-webaxy/sal/sal.pl?lang=he&ID=107345_memri&act=show2&dbid=articles&dataid=2714.
- 19 See statements by Yasir Abd Rabo and Azam al-Ahmad on Radio Ajial, February 12, 2011, and by Dr. Muhamad Ashtiyeh on the Voice of Palestine on February 13, 2011, at <http://www.palvoice.com/index.php?id=29012>.
- 20 Nabil Shaath on the Voice of Palestine on February 13, 2011, at <http://www.palvoice.com/index.php?id=29015>.
- 21 *A-sharq al-Aawsat*, March 6, 2011.
- 22 The process of reconvening the government has been frozen in light of Abu Mazen's proposal to the head of the Hamas government, Ismail Haniyeh, to establish a temporary technocratic government until the elections.
- 23 *Al-Hayat al-Jadida*, March 16, 2011; www.palestine-info.info, March 15, 2011.
- 24 This assessment is supported also by the comparison with Hamas, founded by the Muslim Brotherhood, which in the past declared that it had no interest in governing (as the Brotherhood says today in Egypt), but in practice has operated differently whenever it has been possible for it to do so.
- 25 Statements by Palestinian Foreign Minister Dr. Riyad al-Malki at a symposium at Tel Aviv University, March 22, 2011.
- 26 See interview with Dr. Mamdouh al-Acre, *Haaretz*, February 3, 2011, and PNN Agency, March 13, 2011.
- 27 For example, a spokesman for the PA's apparatus, Adnan Damiri, told students at an-Najah University in Nablus, "The security coordination is in the best interests of the Palestinian people and designed to make everyday life easier." Local TV station in Ramallah, *Watan*, February 28, 2011.
- 28 The PA's media does not broadcast incitement by leaders. Senior PA officials state clearly and repeatedly that the lessons of the second intifada have been learned.
- 29 At the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, Yuval Diskin, head of Israel's General Security Service, stated: "The distinction between the Gaza Strip and Judea and Samaria is good from Israel's security perspective. It would be a serious security mistake to reconnect the Gaza Strip with Judea and Samaria. Such a connection would provide the opportunity for building terrorist infrastructures that would harm the State of Israel." *Ynet*, December 29, 2009.

Unilateralism Revisited: An Agreement on a Palestinian State is Not at Hand

Dan Schueftan

The establishment of a Palestinian state through a political agreement negotiated with Israel is not at hand. External pressures or unilateral steps may lead in this direction, but even that would not produce an end of conflict, rather an unstable, hemorrhaging mutation of the national struggle, threatening to erupt, sooner or later, into a violent confrontation.

Under the current circumstances it is clearer than ever that whoever constructs his regional strategy on the assumption that a Palestinian state will stabilize the Middle East, blunt the edge of the hostility towards the United States, and facilitate “an alliance of the moderates” to oppose the region’s radical forces has little understanding of the regional powers and the dynamics of their interface. This strategic fancy does not withstand the test of scrutiny from any perspective – the Israeli-Palestinian, the intra-Palestinian, the regional, or the global – and certainly not when they all interact. The dramatic events of the Middle East of the last few months demonstrate more than ever the divide between this fancy and the regional reality.

The Israeli-Palestinian Context

The perception that Israel and the Palestinians are close to an agreement is superficial and misleading. The urban legend fashionable in the media and spouted commonly by international elements – “everyone knows the essence and contours of the settlement; what’s needed is merely a courageous political decision by the leaders” – presumes that on some

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issues of critical importance one can ignore the determined political commitment of the leaders to uphold their publicly stated positions, because “they know full well” that these positions are impossible to realize. For over a decade and a half, this presumption has defied the optimistic assessments of an imminent settlement. It is based on a dramatic underestimation of the Palestinian national commitment to the refugees’ “right of return” into the State of Israel and an overestimation of Palestinian willingness to accept severe limitations on the sovereignty of the Palestinian state as required by Israel’s vital security needs. The Palestinians prefer to feed the illusion that those commitments are a facade, because it is convenient to pretend to democratic Western and Israeli public opinion that the real impediment to the establishment of their state is Israel’s territorial greed – manifested in the settlements in the West Bank. They are not interested in exposing to this audience the fact that they do not enjoy a legitimate public mandate to end both the conflict and claims vis-à-vis Israel’s institutionalizing the Jewish nation-state at the expense of the 1948 refugees.

The assumption that Israel’s minimal strategic defense demands – control of the airspace and electromagnetic spheres and effective monitoring of demilitarization arrangements – can be institutionalized through agreement has no firm political foundation. Even if preliminary deliberations create a positive impression, and even when isolated, pinpoint agreements are reached, it is highly doubtful that these will withstand the political test at the moment of truth once the public cost of these demands – severe, visible restrictions on the sovereignty of the Palestinian state – becomes clear. Moreover, even in the best case scenario, possible agreements will be based on the involvement of external power, yet experience has demonstrated how these arrangements dissipate quickly and their security value is tenuous at best. The dramatic events in the Middle East of recent months, indicative of the inherent regional instability, the weakening of the United States, and the waxing strength of the radicals, require any responsible Israeli government to be extremely cautious regarding security, especially in response to the negative changes on the “eastern front” that is liable to reemerge between the Iranian-Iraqi border and the Jordan Valley. No government in Jerusalem can ignore the concern that a Palestinian state could turn into a strategic extension of these radical elements and threaten the stability of the

Hashemite Kingdom. This concern will grow more acute if and when “Hamastan” in the Gaza Strip hooks up with the West Bank to establish a joint Palestinian sovereignty, as envisioned by the Palestinians and their primary godparents – Europe and the Obama administration.

The success of the visionaries of the Palestinian state to repress in everybody’s consciousness, including their own, the dramatic impediment to realization of their political vision – the profound and growing split between the Gaza Strip and West Bank – is astounding. On the one hand, it is obviously impossible to establish by agreement with Israel a viable state for just over half of the Palestinians in the territories, when the other near-half have established their own entity. This is particularly true when the Gaza Strip is controlled by a movement whose socio-cultural essence and national policy contradict the fundamental concepts on whose basis the West Bank leadership is ostensibly conducting negotiations with Israel. On the other hand, should the leaders of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip hammer out a joint national strategy, this strategy would presumably be intolerable for Israel, even if it is cleverly formulated to allow the Europeans and the Obama administration to delude themselves. In short, *without the Gaza Strip it is impossible to establish a viable state; with Hamas, it is impossible to reach a lasting agreement with Israel*. Even those who toy with the hope that it is possible to reach an agreement with Abu Mazen and Fayyad that will neutralize the “right of return” and allow Israel to secure its minimal required level of security must abandon such hope when Khaled Mashal, Ismail Haniyeh, and Ahmad Jaabari join the circle of decision makers.

The Intra-Palestinian Context

The intra-Palestinian context presents the most intractable impediment to an agreement. Those who are negotiating with Israel (in practice, with the United States) are incapable of mobilizing a Palestinian consensus for an historic compromise. Salam Fayyad can, for the first time in Palestinian history, claim credit for an impressive focus on nation building rather than on a sterile, destructive confrontation with external elements. Abu Mazen has well understood the strategic error of Palestinian terrorism and is determined, under difficult conditions, to distance his society from another violent eruption. Both are pursuing constructive policies for the Palestinian people and are providing political backing for the

struggle against terrorism and violent radicals. Considering their shaky political status within their own society, however, it is extremely unlikely that their people will follow their leadership when historic concessions on the core of the Palestinian vision are at stake. That vision is built on negating the legitimacy of the Jewish nation state since its establishment, and on the demand of turning back the historic clock via the refugees' "right of return."

The Palestinian public can accept that as long as the conflict endures this vision will not be fulfilled, but it cannot accept abandonment of the vision as part of a conflict resolution process. It can temporarily stomach the objectionable existence of Israel, but not the institutionalization of the Jewish state alongside an Arab-Palestinian state as part of a "two-states-for-two-peoples" agreement. Fayyad and Abbas can, in the name of the Palestinian people, demand a state in the 1967 borders with East Jerusalem as its capital and even agree to limited land swaps, but not abandon the core of the matter. The Palestinian public supports them when they deliver billions of dollars, mobilize world sympathy, recruit pressure on Israel, and improve the Palestinians' standard of living and quality of life. However, Fayyad and Abbas are themselves aware of their political limitations even in the West Bank – let alone among the Palestinian population throughout the territories, not to mention the refugees and the Palestinians in the diaspora. When Abbas underestimates these limitations, even on simple tactical matters that are a long way from abandoning the "right of return" or institutionalizing the legitimacy of the Jewish state, the Palestinian political system provides him with an immediate and painful reminder. This is what happened when he tried to overlook the propaganda advantage of the Goldstone report in order to advance negotiations with Israel and the United States.

Aware of their limitations, Abbas, Fayyad, and their immediate supporters currently have no motivation to establish a Palestinian state through an agreement with Israel. Advanced negotiations that would allow this to happen would expose their political impotence even on the West Bank, not to mention in the Gaza Strip and the Palestinian diaspora. This impotence would cause the failure of the national project at a point where the onus is on the Palestinians. They prefer the negotiations to reach a dead end at precisely the point they are at right now, where Israel is blamed and they enjoy the best of all worlds: the Palestinians have earned the sympathy of

the entire world and Israel is shoved into a strategic defensive, its basic legitimacy eroding, while they – Abbas and Fayyad – are not required to stand the ultimate test of national leadership. As long as they don't reach an agreement with Israel, neither they nor the people they represent have to take responsibility for administering day-to-day life in a wretched and embattled state. They would rather perpetuate their position as the ultimate victim and live at other people's expense.

Fortunately for them, the Palestinian leaders do not have to worry about exposure of this reality. President Obama has adopted a policy that exempts them from the need to negotiate directly with Israel. The Europeans have made the issue of a Palestinian state into a meta-political, almost theological article of faith, and are bringing intense pressure to bear on Israel. President Mubarak, who supported a settlement, is gone. Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu has made it easier for the Palestinian leaders to avoid making hard decisions by adopting a shortsighted policy in the face of President Obama's peculiar strategy, in his own attempt to evade difficult decisions. The paradox is that the lack of progress towards the establishment of a negotiated Palestinian state puts far more pressure on Israel than it does on the Palestinians.

The Regional Arena

Even before the dramatic events of early 2011, regional conditions were not conducive to an agreement between Israel and the Palestinians. Now such an agreement is even less plausible. There is a considerable gap between what the responsible regimes in the Arab states would have liked to see happen and what the Arab collective can approve. This gap was demonstrated in the various incarnations of the so-called "Saudi Initiative," which became the "Arab Initiative" at the Arab League's Beirut summit in 2002. It began as a Saudi Arabian proposal in a format that was designed to facilitate a settlement between Israel and the Palestinians; it then led to a dead end by Syria, when it assumed a format that ensured that such a settlement would have no chance of success. The Saudi format was designed to compensate Israel for its concessions to the Palestinians with recognition by the Arab

The lack of progress towards the establishment of a negotiated Palestinian state puts far more pressure on Israel than it does on the Palestinians.

states and normalized relations with them; its all-Arab format, inspired by Syria, was issued as a diktat that includes return of 1948 refugees within the Green Line, according to UN General Assembly Resolution 194, requiring Israel to sign the Arab formula *as a precondition* for any discussion of the initiative's details and its implementation.¹ The Saudis, Egyptians, Jordanians, and anyone else who wanted to promote the chances of a settlement did not dare to stand up to the Arab street and remove what a priori sealed the fate of the initiative: the format of the diktat and the "right of return." The Palestinians could not ask for less than what the consensus of the Arab League was demanding in their name. For the reasons presented above, Fayyad and Abu Mazen are the last ones who are capable of proposing to the Palestinians in the West Bank – not to mention the Gaza Strip and the diaspora – to concede the core of the Palestinian national ethos when the entire Arab world insists on its realization.

Were there even a faint possibility that important components of the regional system would back daring, taboo-breaking steps by the Palestinian leadership in order to bring about a settlement acceptable

Simplistically linking regional stability and containment of the radical elements with the negotiated establishment of a Palestinian state, the Obama administration ignored the reluctance of both sides to reach an agreement and tried to induce them to establish a Palestinian state on an accelerated schedule.

to those on the Israeli side seeking a compromise, this possibility would have been extinguished, at least for the foreseeable future, following the upheavals in the Arab world in recent months. This sort of backing requires the heads of state to close the gap between their strategic assessments and consideration of public sentiment. Even before the upheavals, the al-Jazeera documents demonstrated the political cost of leaking Palestinian willingness for even minor flexibility, a far cry from what is required to reach an agreement. Afterwards, the only regime (Mubarak's) that could have led to more extensive Arab support for such flexibility fell, and the Arab regimes are now more careful than ever not to challenge the sentiment of the people even on issues much more important and urgent for them than a settlement of the Palestinian

issue. Add to this reticence the strengthening of the radical elements, the weakness of the United States and its confused policies, and the volatile

nature of Arab public opinion, and what emerges are perhaps the least favorable circumstances imaginable for positive regional involvement in an Israeli-Palestinian settlement.

The Global Arena

The history of settlements between Israel and the Arab world demonstrates that global powers usually cannot initiate such settlements, but their involvement is necessary to conclude and implement them once the motivation of the parties has ripened. In almost every case that involvement has been American.

At the current stage of efforts to settle the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it seems that the Obama administration is more eager for a settlement than the parties themselves. With much initial momentum and deep conviction, this administration adopted a peculiar perception simplistically linking regional stability and containment of the radical elements (primarily Iran) with the negotiated establishment of a Palestinian state. Obama ignored the reluctance of both sides to reach an agreement under the prevailing circumstances and tried to induce them, willy-nilly, to establish a Palestinian state on an accelerated schedule as a necessary first step for containing the radical elements in this region and beyond. He identified the settlements in the West Bank as reflections of Israeli illegitimate territorial greed and the primary obstacle to negotiations and agreement, and focused his efforts on freezing their construction. Obama grossly underestimated the significance of the fact that Abbas chose not to embrace Olmert's 2008 proposals, based on the 1967 lines and division of Jerusalem, which anyway would have generated a massive evacuation of settlements and compensated the Palestinians with territory inside the Green Line equal in size to the settlement blocs that would be left in place.

Obama's policy was designed to corner Israel – and indeed, it succeeded as such – on the issue of the settlements, where it cannot enlist effective support even among its friends. His insistence on a complete construction freeze, pointedly including East Jerusalem neighborhoods that were agreed upon in principle to be incorporated into Israel, and the artificial crisis Obama created following an administrative announcement of building plans during Vice President Biden's visit to

Jerusalem, extinguished any remaining motivation on either side for seriously negotiating at that time.

Abu Mazen's lack of motivation to put his leadership to the ultimate test by trying to enlist public support for an historic compromise was complemented by Obama's policies, which also removed Palestinian motivation for direct negotiations. Israel's acceptance of a Palestinian state (the Bar-Ilan speech) was practically forced on Netanyahu by Obama without any reciprocal contribution by Abbas. During the ten-month freeze on settlement construction, designed to enable direct negotiations, no pressure was brought to bear on Abbas to hold such talks. By the end of that period, Abbas could not afford to engage in negotiations even if he had wanted to, because Obama himself was the one who had presented the sweeping freeze as a precondition, and the Palestinians could obviously not demand of Israel anything less than what the American president insisted on. It quickly became apparent to the Palestinians that *avoiding negotiations*, combined with harsh American criticism of Israel regarding the absence of negotiations, was the most effective catalyst for unprecedented pressure on Israel, its isolation on the European and international arenas, and unilateral recognition of their state, as well as diplomatic upgrades from Santiago to London.

At the same time, it became clear to Israel that any settlement reflecting this political reality would be strategically counterproductive

The paradigmatic question is whether the division of the land is a matter between Israel, the Palestinians, the Arab states, the United States, and Europe, or is rather a Zionist imperative.

and devoid of what the Israeli mainstream deems vital. While Prime Minister Netanyahu's serious mistakes played a role in the creation of this reality, Obama's policy was anchored in such a coherent (and erroneous) worldview and regional and global strategy, that even smart conduct on the part of the Israeli prime minister could not have changed the balance of power now arrayed against Israel.

The response of the United States to the dramatic events in the Middle East in early 2011 further weakened the motivation of either side to reach a settlement. Again, under the current conditions the Palestinians will find it even more difficult than previously to enlist support for an historic compromise, even if Abbas were interested in making one. Abu

Mazen saw how the United States treated an Egyptian president who, for an entire generation, led the responsible elements that helped the United States stabilize the region. Israel too observed the United States' weakness and President Obama's feeble policies, and has learned the lesson of the abandonment of America's closest ally in the Middle East in his hour of supreme need. Israel has understood all too well that its own profound isolation on the international arena and the extensive campaign against Israel in Europe, even after the spurious link between the Palestinian issue and regional stability has been exposed,² are the result of Washington's inspiration and at times encouragement. Even if these elements were not an intentional attempt to undermine Israel's strategic position (the Obama administration has been careful not to detract from the security assistance to Israel, and has in fact strengthened it), they were perforce meant to bring Israel to a settlement of the Palestinian issue under conditions difficult even for Israeli compromise-seekers, without the Palestinians being required to make any profound historic compromise of their own.

Conclusions for Israel

The unpleasant reality presented here – regarding the Palestinian, the regional, and the global, especially American, arenas – obligates decision makers in Israel to face a paradigmatic question that goes far beyond the narrow confines of policy towards the Palestinians or the Obama administration: is the division of the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea a matter for Israel's relations with the Arabs, or does it involve a far greater and immeasurably more important context, touching on Israel's Zionist objectives, the nature of Israeli society, and Israel's ability to operate in the international arena to consolidate these objectives.

If the former, Israel may be interested in entrenching its positions, assuming a Palestinian state incorporating the Gaza Strip with the West Bank would be unfriendly, unstable, and irresponsible, and likely collude with enemies near and far to continue the struggle against Israel. It stands to reason that even after the state's establishment responsibility for its predicaments would be laid at Israel's doorstep, internationally, in Europe, in some no longer insignificant circles in the United States, and even within Israel itself. Consequently, digging in at this time is

only reasonable, both because of regional uncertainties and the Obama administration's detrimental policies. However, in the latter case, if the context is Zionist and goes far beyond the question of relations with the Palestinians, the Arabs, and President Obama, an entirely different policy is called for.

The Israeli mainstream, as well as Prime Minister Netanyahu, has long since internalized the understanding that what is at stake is the broader Zionist context. In every public opinion poll, the Jewish mainstream indicates that it has adopted the complex synthesis between distrust of the Arabs, deep suspicion towards the Palestinians, and a clear-eyed view of the "peace" delusions, on the one hand, and the willingness to divide the land and take security risks, including the establishment of a Palestinian state, on the other. Netanyahu is enthused by the Arab environment and relies on the peaceful intentions of the Palestinians even less than the Israeli mainstream. He knows that Palestinian demands for state sovereignty could endanger the foundations of Israel's security, and stipulates conditions designed to curb this danger. Even though because of the Zionist implications and in face of conditions on the international arena he has made intellectual peace with the need to divide the land, he finds it difficult to give operational expression to his strategic understanding. Netanyahu finds this hard in part due to his personality and his coalition, but primarily because it is clear to him that the Palestinians are not ready for an historic compromise, lacking both a public prepared to pay the price of such a compromise and a leadership capable of enlisting the public to effect it.

Since returning to office, Netanyahu has been pushed inadvertently onto a political course that in hindsight seems fairly coherent. Had he proposed this path of his own volition at the beginning of his term in office, he would have garnered far greater political assets while confronting the sophisticated maneuvers by the Palestinian leadership and the political caprices of President Obama.

Netanyahu could have proposed to Obama to maintain two simultaneous tracks – one track for good faith negotiations, even with questionable chances for success, and a second, gradual, unilateral track focused on transferring land to the Palestinians (the Americans could have called this "the dismantlement of the occupation").³ In this second track, Israel would transfer lands designated Area C, under its

complete control, to Area B, under Israeli security control and Palestinian civilian control, and lands designated Area B to Area A, under complete Palestinian control. The areas to undergo re-designation would be chosen by Israel at a pace it would determine, seeking to create relatively extensive and ever-growing Palestinian territorial contiguity, with initial emphasis on northern Samaria, surrounded by a full security fence and containing few Jewish settlements. While withdrawal was underway in the north, the security fence would be completed in all areas in direct contact with Israel, including around the various settlement blocs. Withdrawals would continue as long as the Palestinian “Dayton Forces” continued their successful struggle against terrorism in coordination with Israel. This program can be marketed as “coordinated,” “parallel,” or “complementary” steps, in tandem with Salam Fayyad’s unilateral institution building measures, in preparation for the state’s institutionalization in September 2011, rather than as pure unilateralism that conveys despair with the Palestinians.

Netanyahu could have asked for American backing against unfriendly initiatives by international and European bodies as long as the process continued; Obama would have found it difficult to refuse. Such a move would have averted Obama’s sweeping crusade against all settlements, making it easier for Israel to keep the major settlement blocs and the Jewish neighborhoods in East Jerusalem. It would also have allowed evacuation of settlements in the heart of populated areas, based on Israel’s preferences and the differential political sensitivities of the particular sites slated for evacuation. A critical advantage of this unilateral strategy would have been the preservation of Israel’s vital security interests (e.g., control of the airspace and flexible deployment of IDF forces), as the entire move does not require Palestinian consent.

In hindsight it seems that Netanyahu is inadvertently being pushed into a format similar to what he could have proposed of his own initiative, without securing any of the aforementioned returns, at a very high cost to Israel’s international standing. He announced his willingness to establish a Palestinian state and accepted a ten-month freeze; he took steps to stimulate the economy and ease the movement of people and goods; in practice, he greatly expanded the de facto control of the PA throughout the West Bank. Now, his close circle is reporting that he is

also considering augmenting the same strategic logic with a territorial dimension.

A notion such as the one presented herein, perhaps less dramatic and more careful, is not unrealistic from the internal Israeli political perspective. It sits well with a bottom-up approach, which Netanyahu has already been preaching. It also does not contradict the approach of his senior coalition partner, Avigdor Lieberman, which accepts partition but holds that the Palestinians are not ready for a negotiated permanent settlement. Even the remnants of the Labor Party and the defense minister's Independence Party would view it positively; so too, the main opposition in Kadima would not disqualify it out of hand, would view it as a step in the right direction, and would conceivably help defend it in the Knesset against opponents from the right. While other considerations might prevail – Netanyahu would not want to dismantle the coalition with Shas, the remnants of the Labor Party would want to set themselves apart, Kadima would have no interest in helping a right wing coalition – the real question is what realistic alternatives Israel faces come September 2011.

The concluding question here brings the discussion full circle: what is the return? "Why make unilateral concessions in the heart of the Land of Israel and take major security risks, if it is clear that in return we will not achieve peace or end of conflict? Have we not learned the lessons of Lebanon and the Gaza Strip? We returned to the international border and received terrorism, Hizbollah, and Hamas." Here we come back to the paradigmatic question posed earlier: is the division of the land a matter between Israel, the Palestinians, the Arab states, the United States, and Europe, or is it a Zionist imperative? If it is a Zionist imperative, the prize is disengaging from cohabitation under one sovereign system with millions of Palestinians. The challenge is, on the one hand, to minimize the damages to Israel's values and political standing resulting from a permanent presence in the territories, and on the other hand, to minimize the security damages involved in handing land over to the Palestinians.

The traumatic experience of Hamas terrorism after the disengagement from the Gaza Strip deters many Israelis from further unilateral moves. What is required in order to put the policy proposed herein to the test of the lessons of this disengagement is twofold: a decisive *difference* concerning security, and a reference to the invaluable *contribution* to

national resilience. The *difference* is the IDF's presence on the ground, wherever and whenever necessary. In the Gaza Strip the army withdrew with the civilian settlements, and the war against terrorism was commensurately damaged. As part of a move in the West Bank, the IDF is meant to be deployed according to security needs – minimally, as long as the Palestinians work to combat terrorism and do not join up with radical forces, forcefully and extensively should they behave otherwise. Even a settlement, if and when reached, would be conditioned on the gradual, controlled withdrawal of the IDF from the outer envelope of the populated area and on a security arrangement that would allow it to operate effectively to foil major threats. The *contribution* is expressed in what the supporters-in-practice of the Zionist paradigm in Israel's mainstream consider as strengthening Israeli society, resulting from the termination of Israel's control of some million and a half Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. Israel's primary asset in its historic struggle with the Arab surroundings is the fortitude and resilience of its society, which in recent generations has been steeled while maintaining ongoing willingness to make historic compromises even without the promise of peace. The underlying assumption is that an Israeli society that does not control Gaza is far stronger than one controlling the Strip's population.

This is not the place to debate the paradigmatic question itself. Suffice it to say that in the context discussed herein, the country's mainstream has already made its decision, and that this conviction has a firm grip even within Netanyahu's current right wing government. On the one hand, the political and ethical costs of the existing reality have accelerated in recent years and are at present snowballing towards a critical mass. On the other hand, under the current and foreseeable conditions, there is no way to reach a permanent, negotiated settlement with the Palestinians that would finally free Israel of the Palestinian albatross. If Israel can relieve itself of this burden by its own initiative in a controlled way, without having to rely on the goodwill of the Palestinians, this option should be thoroughly examined. If this can be done, with Israel not only unilaterally determining the evacuation moves but also adjusting the features of the security arrangements to the level of tolerable risk, it will be possible to reach a result almost as good for Israel as a permanent settlement of the type discussed herein, at an inestimably lower cost to the quality of the security arrangements and to the danger of an internal rift in Israel.

If peace and Palestinian repudiation of the conflict were within reach, in exchange for a Palestinian state alongside the Jewish nation state, there would be reason to disqualify the flawed unilateral alternative. However, all expectations of peace and an agreement are, at this stage, wishful thinking. The operative question on the table is: will Netanyahu be pushed into taking uncalculated emergency steps towards September, or will he, late but not entirely too late, take the initiative and reap the political benefits of the steps he will be forced to take later in any case, under pressure and in isolation.

Notes

- 1 Israeli proponents of the "Arab Initiative" latched on to the fact that the text mentions "a just solution to the problem of the Palestinian refugees *to be agreed upon* (emphasis added)." However this agreement is supposed to be reached *after* Israel signs the dictated Arab version, which also requires that the solution be "in accordance with UN General Assembly Resolution 194," which sanctions the right of every refugee (in practice – the refugee's descendants) to choose, should s/he so desire, to "return" to the State of Israel. It was accompanied by a declaration of Arab leaders negating the re-settlement of refugees in their current places of residence in Arab countries. In total contradiction to the intentionally misleading impression of those who leaked and published the al-Jazeera documents, the documents that have so far been made public contain no evidence whatsoever supporting the headlines that attribute to the Palestinian negotiators the abandonment of the Palestinian demand for an all-inclusive right of any descendant of the 1948 refugees to "return" to Israel should s/he choose to do so.
- 2 The Palestinian question has a direct impact on several important issues in the region, foremost the stability of the Hashemite Kingdom (and, to a lesser degree, of Lebanon). It also serves as a convenient pretext for radical elements that seek popular support for provocative activity in other areas. What is patently fallacious is the notion, developed in Europe and by the Obama administration (especially by the President's first National Security Advisor, General James Jones), that makes regional stability and the chance of enlisting the Arab states against the radicalism of Iran and its allies dependent, to a large extent, on reaching an Israeli-Palestinian settlement.
- 3 The concept presented here has been proposed by the author of this essay since the deadlock, following Prime Minister Olmert's proposals made at the end of 2008. A concept including similar components was published in Shlomo Brom, Giora Eiland, and Oded Eran, "Partial Agreements with the Palestinians," *Strategic Assessment* 12, no. 3 (2009): 67-86. See <http://www.inss.org.il/publications.php?cat=68&incat=&read=839#12.3>.

Turkey and Iran: The Politics of Strange Bedfellows

Yoel Guzansky and Gallia Lindenstrauss

In recent years, and especially since Operation Cast Lead and the Gaza flotilla incident, Israel and other Western states have followed the apparent reversal in Turkey's foreign policy and its distancing from the West with some trepidation. One of the manifestations of this about-face is the growing closeness between Turkey and Iran, along with other members of the radical axis. Turkey is not a party to the extensive criticism of the radicals in the Middle East that is voiced in the West and the moderate Arab states. At times it departs sharply from the positions of other NATO members, for example, in its "mediation" proposal on the Iranian nuclear issue together with Brazil, its opposition to intensifying the sanctions against Iran, and its resistance to the deployment of anti-missile defense systems on its soil.

The closeness of recent years between Iran and Turkey is a pronounced change from the mutual suspicions that long characterized the bilateral relations, particularly following the Islamic Revolution in Iran. Neither state has any territorial claim against the other, and in public statements the Turks and Iranians often stress the longstanding (over 400 years) peaceful nature of their shared border.¹ Trade relations have been greatly expanded and exceed the \$10 billion mark. On several occasions representatives of both states have declared their goal of tripling bilateral trade over the next five years,² and the two states are considering the possibility of signing a free trade agreement.³ They are also, more than in the past, cooperating in their fight against Kurdish dissidents.

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This growing closeness should be seen in light of several factors. In recent years, the Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ahmet Davutoğlu, has promoted Turkey's zero-problems policy vis-à-vis its neighboring states, whereby it must labor to resolve problems with adjacent states and encourage stability in neighboring regions. A second factor concerns America's intervention in Iraq in 2003. Neither Iran nor Turkey has any interest in seeing the Iraqi state dismantled, and America's operations in Iraq have stirred up vehement anti-American sentiments within Turkey, reminiscent of the anti-American views rampant in Iran. Furthermore, the fact that an Islamic-oriented political party currently rules Turkey means that Turkey is less hesitant than in the past about developing ties with the Shiite regime in Iran. In addition, there is the economic dimension. Turkey is the world's fifteenth largest economy; the imperative to expand its export markets and its energy needs have encouraged Turkey to develop relations with states with which it previously had few dealings.⁴ From Tehran's perspective, the growing closeness with Turkey somewhat offsets the international isolation of Iran and the rounds of sanctions that have resulted from its nuclear program.⁵

The current role of Turkey in the Middle East, including in its opposition to Israel, represents a counterweight to Iranian involvement and regional ambitions, and in this sense – indirectly – is likely in the long term to serve Israel's interests.

Yet notwithstanding internal developments in Turkey and Ankara's foreign affairs policies, there are fundamental differences between Turkey and Iran.⁶ Despite profound Islamization processes, Turkey has a Sunni majority and its regime maintains liberal characteristics; revolutionary Iran, however, is a fundamentalist Shiite religious state. Second, both Turkey and Iran, each for various historical, geographical, and material reasons, see themselves as a regional – if not global – power, which may over time result in heightened competition and even overt rivalry between the two. Iran and Turkey also disagree on the nature of the desired regime in Iraq, the situation in Lebanon, and the Arab-Israeli peace process. Especially if Iran acquires nuclear capabilities, Ankara is likely in the long

run to scale back its closeness with Iran, primarily because the two states have different long term goals and the already apparent disagreements will intensify.

Furthermore, Turkey is closely tied to the West and the United States, primarily because of its NATO membership since 1952 and its being a founding member of the G-20, and also because it is a signatory to a long list of multilateral and bilateral agreements and treaties with Western states on several issues. Because of its significant role in resolving various issues, Turkey is still the West's primary partner on a number of essential fronts, such as Iraq, where Turkey is involved in resolving the Kurdish problem; Afghanistan, where the Americans want Turkey, as a NATO member, to step up its presence; and in Iran over the nuclear issue, as Turkey's fundamental interest is to prevent a nuclear Iran. Even during the uprisings in Egypt and Libya, there has been an open channel of communication between President Obama and Prime Minister Erdoğan in order to coordinate positions. In this sense, even if Turkey seems like a much more independent player than it was in the past, it retains significant ties to the West, and the West, headed by the United States, is still interested in maintaining them.

Despite the bonds between Iran and Turkey, therefore, the potential for discord and competition for regional dominance also exists. In general, Turkey does not share Iran's ideology or interests, and in its conduct, it still seeks to maintain a balance between East and West to help it preserve its regional status. Thus in the long term, strengthening Iran's status at the expense of other elements in the region would be problematic from Turkey's perspective. Conversely, the current role of Turkey in the Middle East, including in its opposition to Israel, represents a counterweight to Iranian involvement and regional ambitions, and in this sense – indirectly – is likely in the long term to serve Israel's interests.

The purpose of this essay is to identify the points already in dispute between Turkey and Iran that may lead to more intense disagreements. This analysis can also shed light on the question of whether an Iranian-Turkish axis capable of seriously threatening Israel is likely to arise, and if so, what the weaknesses of such an axis may be.

Potential Points of Conflict

Progress in Iran's nuclear program has several negative implications for Turkey-Iran relations. First, the Turks have on numerous occasions stated that they oppose nuclear proliferation in the Middle East.⁷ While this pronouncement primarily targets Israel's nuclear policy, Turkey

is in principle still opposed to Iran acquiring nuclear weapons.⁸ In late December 2010, Minister Davutoğlu explicitly stated that should Iran renege on its commitment to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, Turkey, even before the United States, would condemn Iran.⁹ This vehemence is understandable given the effect of Iran's acquiring nuclear capabilities on the military balance between them, which today favors Ankara. Second, the West's response to Iranian nuclear development has already posed several dilemmas for Turkey, which favors dialogue with Iran over sanctions; still, Turkey wants to be seen as a state operating on the basis of international law. A manifestation of this tension was apparent in the UN Security Council vote on expanding the sanctions against Iran (Resolution 1929, which Turkey voted against) and the anti-missile defense program NATO is promoting (which Turkey endorsed but qualified as follows: that it be publicly declared that the stationing of the missiles is not meant to deal with threats from any particular country, i.e., Iran). Third, progress on the Iranian nuclear program also means the failure of Turkish mediation efforts on the issue. While the Turks could blame the West, especially the United States, or even Iran for the failure, it would still damage Ankara's prestige.

The future of Iraq following the withdrawal of American troops may also generate problems for Turkey-Iran relations. While both states, out of respective security implications, fear a dismantling of Iraq, they have different notions of what the Iraqi state should look like. Turkey would like Iraq to be ruled by as broad-based a coalition as possible that also includes appropriate representation for the Sunni minority,¹⁰ while Iran prefers a weak state that is isolated as much as possible from Western and Arab influences and enjoys Shiite political dominance. In general, Iranian involvement in Iraq is motivated by what is, from the Iranian perspective, its natural sphere of influence. It is fed by both the fear of what a future Iraqi state might look like and the desire for regional hegemony, with the understanding that Iraq is an important component in its hegemonic ambitions.

Still, Iran, like Turkey, would not like to see Iraq's internal situation deteriorate, because instability there is liable to spill over into its own territory. However, should the central government in Baghdad be weakened, Iran, to the great displeasure of Ankara, could tighten its grip on the Shiite south. At the same time, Turkey already has significant

influence and economic interests in northern Iraq. In the post-US era, it may increase its influence in this part of Iraq in order to prevent the Kurds in these areas from declaring independence. Indeed, the Kurdish question in Iraq has for many years been the basis for cooperation but also for conflicts between Turkey and Iran: Turkey has accused Iran of sheltering PKK members while Iran has accused Turkey of attacking Kurdish targets in its areas of control.

With regard to Lebanon, Turkey has tried to mediate among the different factions in Lebanon and between Lebanon and Syria. However, Iran's ongoing support of Hizbollah is a source of instability within Lebanon and for the Lebanese-Israeli dynamic. In November 2010, Erdoğan visited Lebanon – a visit that earned extensive media coverage – a short time after the Iranian president's visit there; this may be interpreted as an attempt to increase Turkey's influence in Lebanon at the expense of Iran's. During the visit, Erdoğan, in an effort to be seen as Lebanon's champion, criticized Israel harshly and even threatened to respond should Israel have the audacity to attack Lebanon.¹¹ However, the extent to which Turkey has forged closer relations with Hizbollah is unclear. For example, it was reported that when Erdoğan returned from Lebanon he said that Hizbollah was not linked to the murder of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri.¹² In addition, Turkey proposed postponing publication of the report by the UN commission of inquiry on the murder of al-Hariri so that the Lebanese situation does not again deteriorate into civil war. After the resignation of Hizbollah ministers and the collapse of the Lebanese government in January 2011, Turkey persisted in its effort to mediate between the factions in Lebanon. The Turkish foreign minister and the prime minister of Qatar even met with Hizbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, although Turkey and Qatar subsequently suspended their mediation efforts.¹³ This may be viewed as a Turkish failure in weakening Iran's foothold in Lebanon but also as a desire to distance itself somewhat from Hizbollah.

Syria: In addition to establishing Ankara's status as a mediator, the purpose of Turkey's mediation efforts in the Israeli-Syrian channel (four rounds of indirect talks between May and December 2008) was to demonstrate that Syria is not a member of the "axis of evil": it is a secular state and unlike Iran, Hizbollah, or Hamas, does not rule out the possibility of peace with Israel. Moreover, it is not inconceivable that

the growing closeness between Turkey and Syria has Iran worried that Syria is considering exchanging its strategic reliance on Iran for strategic reliance on Turkey. Indeed, in recent years Ankara and Damascus have increased their joint military activities (joint exercises, the first of their kind, started in April 2009) among the air, armored, and infantry forces along the shared border; there were likewise reports of Turkish-Syrian cooperation against the PKK.¹⁴ Also significant were Turkey's efforts at mediating between Syria and Iraq after the latter accused Damascus of closing its eyes to – and even assisting in – acts of terrorism on Iraqi soil in August 2009.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict: Despite the current poor relations between Israel and Turkey, Turkey still supports a settlement, whereas Iran denies the basic legitimacy of the State of Israel. Iran lies outside the Arab-Israeli/Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and it is doing all in its power to undermine any possible settlement by financing, training, and shipping arms to terrorist organizations such as Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hamas. By contrast, the relationship between Turkey and Hamas (Turkey recognized the Hamas government as early as 2006 and even hosted Khaled Mashal in Ankara that same year) stems not necessarily from a desire to strengthen the organization's control of the Gaza Strip, rather from its stance that to advance negotiations between Israel and

Egypt's weakening stresses the greater process of the weakening of existing Arab regimes; this will, in the long term, increase the chance for a struggle between Turkey and Iran over regional hegemony.

the Palestinians it is necessary to treat Hamas as a legitimate actor. Beyond this, Turkish public opinion has long empathized with the Palestinian struggle; there is also some sense of responsibility for the fact that the Palestinian problem was created during the end of the Ottoman era. The result, at least for the Palestinian issue, is that Erdoğan is trying to position Turkey somewhere between the Arab/Muslim world and Israel/the West, thereby impeding Iran's attempt to take exclusive control of the issue as a way of increasing its influence on Arab public opinion above the heads of Arab leaders.

Another possible locus of friction between the states is the struggle over image and leadership in the Muslim world. It has been claimed that Turkey's image in the Arab world today is the most favorable that it

as been since World War I.¹⁵ In a public opinion poll taken in a number of Muslim countries shortly after the flotilla to Gaza, Erdoğan, with 20 percent of the respondents' support, was voted the most popular leader.¹⁶ Erdoğan was also CNN Arabic-language website's 2010 Man of the Year, with 74 percent of the vote.¹⁷ In a poll taken among Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, 43 percent of respondents saw Turkey as the state most supportive of their struggle.¹⁸ These polls, as well as T-shirts and posters with Erdoğan's picture sold not just in the West Bank and Gaza Strip but also in some Arab states, are a measure of his tremendous popularity in the Middle East. The editor of the daily *al-Quds al-Arabiya* who, after the flotilla incident criticized the impotence of Arab regimes vis-à-vis Israel, praised the Turkish prime minister saying, he was more Arab than the Arabs.¹⁹ The flotilla to Gaza, preceded by Erdoğan's harsh words about Israel during the Second Lebanon War and even more so during Operation Cast Lead and the incident in Davos involving Israeli President Shimon Peres, established Erdoğan's status in the Arab world as a tenacious opponent of Israel. The fact that the opposition is primarily rhetorical and relies on "soft power" yet nonetheless generates results, raises the question among Israel's opponents if this is not the more appropriate route to take rather than the violent one promoted by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Hassan Nasrallah.²⁰

Future developments in the Arab world may also ignite clashes between Iran and Turkey. While officially Tehran was pleased by the shock waves rolling through the Arab world and especially the fall of the Mubarak regime,²¹ there were also concerns that the waves of protest would spread to Iran. For its part, Turkey was more cautious in its statements about Egypt but also called on Mubarak to step down. Similar to the tense relations between Iran and Egypt under Mubarak, relations between Ankara and Cairo were strained even before the revolution in Egypt because of the more dominant role in the Middle East that Turkey was trying to appropriate.²² In this sense, Mubarak's disappearance from the stage could lead to improvements in Egypt's relations with both states. Nonetheless, Egypt's weakening stresses even more the greater process of the weakening of existing Arab regimes; this will, in the long term, increase the chance for a struggle between Turkey and Iran over regional hegemony. The possibility that the Muslim Brotherhood will strengthen its grip on Egypt raises the question whether a Turkish democracy can

indeed serve as a model for Egypt. By contrast, Iran presents a different model, and therefore struggles for influence over the future of Egypt are a real possibility.

Another source of friction between Iran and Turkey may result from Ankara's forging of closer relations with the Arab Gulf states, which fear Iran and seek to prevent its attaining nuclear capabilities. This concern joins their disappointment with America's Middle East policy, and the growing sense that they can no longer rely fully on an American defense umbrella brought about a honeymoon in Turkey-Gulf states political, economic, and security relations (e.g., the goal within the next two years is to expand trade between Turkey and Saudi Arabia to \$10 billion, compared to \$3.5 billion in 2009 and \$5.5 billion in 2008).²³ In the view of the Arab Gulf states, a strategic partnership with Turkey may help balance Iran's power in the Gulf. Therefore, they supported Turkey's candidacy as an observer in the Arab League, Turkey's Israel-Syria mediation attempts, and the strengthening of Gulf state cooperation with NATO. Recognition of Turkey's status in the Gulf was made official with the signing of a security memorandum of understanding: for the first time in the Gulf states foreign policy, a state was recognized as a strategic partner of the Gulf Cooperation Council.²⁴

Another issue is energy. In recent years, Turkey has come to the conclusion that control of energy pipelines is no less important than who controls the energy sources. Iran is the second largest supplier of natural gas to Turkey after Russia, and in 2009 several joint agreements were signed to transport natural gas from Iran through Turkey. The realization of some of these agreements is far from certain, however, because of the intensified sanctions against Iran. It is not certain if the other partners in the Nabucco Project, which envisions the building of a pipeline from the Caspian Sea and the Middle East to Europe through Turkey, will agree to Iran's being one of the states providing the natural gas.²⁵

The energy issue is also linked to the broader question of a possible struggle between Iran and Turkey over influencing the central Asia states, some of which border the Caspian. While most of those states have Turkmeni majorities, creating the potential for Turkish influence there, Iran views the area as its own backyard and its legitimate sphere of influence.²⁶ Regarding the Caspian Sea states, especially Azerbaijan and the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, there have been disputes between Turkey

and Iran in the past and these could surface again. Iran has a significant Azeri minority (almost 25 percent of the population) and therefore its relations with Azerbaijan have usually been tense out of the concern that the latter would want to establish a greater Azerbaijan. On the other hand, Azerbaijan is the state closest to Turkey from among the Turkmeni states, even though in recent years there has been a certain cooling-off in Azeri-Turkish relations due to Turkish attempts to engage with Armenia, Azerbaijan's enemy in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Ramifications for Israel

From a state with a pro-Western image and a partner in the Israeli-Palestinian and Israeli-Syrian peace processes, Turkey has become a problematic if not a downright negative element from Israel's perspective. It has extended a hand to Iran, Syria, and Hamas – and even Hizbollah – while establishing itself as a fierce critic of Israel. Indeed, in the short term Ankara's position has brought it closer, if only in mindset, to Tehran. Turkey's moves to distance itself from Israel and its critical expressions on Palestinian issues have been welcomed by Iran's Supreme Leader, who stated that in this way Turkey "is coming closer to the Muslim world."²⁷

Generally speaking, Erdoğan's Turkey seeks to strengthen its position in the Arab and Muslim world, even at the cost of its ties with Israel. This has immediate problematic ramifications from Israel's perspective. At the operational security level, the growing closeness between Ankara and Tehran (and Syria) allows easier transport of arms to Hizbollah and Hamas by means of Turkey.²⁸ The fact that Turkey has knowledge of advanced warfare methods and armaments due to its cooperation with Israel is liable to serve Israel's enemies. Indeed, it was recently reported that Turkey has agreed to train Syrian forces.²⁹ In addition, the loss of cooperation between Israel and Turkey's air forces and intelligence branches is liable to damage Israel. Defense Minister Ehud Barak even warned of Israeli information leaking from Turkey to Iran in light of the years-long working relationship between the Mossad and Turkish intelligence.³⁰

It may be that a struggle between Turkey and Iran will emerge over leading the struggle against Israel.

While uncomfortable from Israel's perspective, this may indirectly lead to a weakening of Iran's influence in the region.

To be sure, Turkey, which apparently wants to have its cake and eat it too, is paying a significant price in its ties with Europe and the United States for its growing closeness to Iran and attitude to Israel. The American administration has cast doubts on the ability of the Turkish government to be a reliable partner, has characterized its government as one “infiltrated by extremist Muslims,”³¹ and has even hinted that Turkey is violating the sanctions against Iran.³² US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates expressed concern over the deterioration in Turkish-Israeli relations and its effect on regional stability.³³ These sentiments join the difficulties Turkey is facing in its efforts to be accepted into the EU. Overall, then, Europe’s unwillingness to strengthen its ties with Turkey and some of America’s actions in the Middle East are among the elements affecting Ankara in its eastwards move. Therefore, the deterioration in Turkish-Israeli relations should be viewed in the greater context of Turkey’s changing orientation.

The crisis in Turkish-Israeli relations and Turkey’s possible turning away from the West may connect Turkey with Iran if only because in the past the Israel issue cast a shadow over the states’ relations. Iran, for example, had reservations about security cooperation between Ankara and Jerusalem and for years exerted pressure on Turkey to scale it back. Nonetheless, it may be that a struggle between the two will emerge over leading the struggle against Israel, one that is uncomfortable from Israel’s perspective but that may indirectly also lead to a weakening of Iran’s influence in the region.

The recognition that the level of cooperation that had characterized Turkish-Israeli relations will not return, at least not in the near future, has made Israel, as part of its own process of disenchantment, place greater emphasis on relations with states such as Greece and Bulgaria, which share Israel’s concerns about Turkish policies and identify the potential for security, economic, tourist, and technological cooperation with Jerusalem. The “Balkan alliance” has already produced frequent mutual visits at all diplomatic levels, and at the strategic level joint exercises of the air forces are taking place.³⁴ Nonetheless, relations between Israel and Turkey have fluctuated before, and both states have sought to maintain open channels of communication to the extent possible. Even under the pall cast by the current crisis, commercial, cultural, scientific and tourist relations continue to be preserved, albeit of smaller scopes than in the past.

Conclusion

Turkey and Iran have become leading players in the Middle East; in tandem, bilateral relations have grown stronger. Nevertheless, in the long term, a substantive challenge to Turkey's regional ambitions may actually be posed by Iran. Similarly, Ankara's policies are likely to represent a significant constraint for Tehran's regional objectives. While in the short run Tehran is reaping significant dividends because of Turkey's growing opposition to Israel, its championing of the Palestinian cause, and its efforts to mediate on the nuclear issue, in the long term Turkey's attempt to increase its regional influence may come at the expense of Tehran, which is also seeking a hegemonic role in the Middle East, and it too, like Ankara, is using the same means – especially opposition to Israel – to make that happen.

At least on some issues Ankara and Tehran's essential interests are opposed to one another, and this divergence could generate a clash between the two rising non-Arab powers in the Middle East. Nevertheless, it is far from certain the two states could not succeed in resolving these disputes through negotiations. Indeed, the zero-problems policy promoted by Turkey vis-à-vis its neighbors demonstrates how the change in that nation's fundamental perception of Iran is driving the growing closeness between the two states. However, some of the regional issues raised above will require both states to take a clear stand, which may put them at odds with one another and become obstacles to attempts to tighten the ties between them even further.

Notes

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- and Alcohol," *Haaretz*, January 12, 2011, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/hasite/pages/ShArt.jhtml?itemNo=1209185>.
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 - 6 There are those who view the processes occurring in Turkey as similar to the processes experienced by Iran, albeit more gradual. Thus, for example, Bernard Lewis said (February 18, 2011), at the home of the American ambassador to Israel, "Turkey is marching to the place where Iran is coming from."
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