



INSS Insight No. 243, February 27, 2011

Cairo Viewed from Gaza: Too Soon to Celebrate

Mark A. Heller

Dramatic popular uprisings across the Arab world have overshadowed the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in recent weeks. Nevertheless, last week's exchange of fire across the Gaza-Israel border, including the firing of Grad rockets at Beer Sheva and Israel Air Forces strikes at targets in Gaza, serves as a reminder that the potential for violent confrontation on that front remains. Indeed, because of the historical connection between Egypt and Gaza, there has been speculation that the overthrow of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, by further emboldening Hamas, may well contribute to that outcome. Some linkage no doubt exists, but whether it will actually operate in that manner remains in doubt.

At first glance, Hamas should have every reason to welcome the developments in Egypt. Under Mubarak, Egypt actively repressed its own Islamists and cooperated with Israel in trying to enforce tight controls over movement of people, goods, weapons, and money into and out of Gaza, while simultaneously serving as a patron for Hamas' Fatah rivals in the West Bank. Nevertheless, Hamas (like Fatah) discouraged public manifestations of support for the uprising in Egypt. This suggests that it was actually somewhat ambivalent, if not about Mubarak's ouster, then at least about the way in which it was brought about, i.e., by huge popular protests coupled with reluctance by elements of the regime's own security forces to act ruthlessly against the public. The ambivalence probably stems from Hamas' lack of self-confidence in its ability to forestall or contain such developments should they spread to Gaza, as they have done to other parts of the Arab world.

Besides, Mubarak's enforced retirement contributed little to clarify Egypt's future course, since that outcome seemed to be the only agreed objective of the various opposition forces. Of course, Hamas will benefit greatly if the overthrow of Mubarak ultimately culminates in an Islamist revolution. Hamas itself is an outgrowth of the Muslim Brotherhood in Gaza, which is historically tied to the movement in Egypt. By most accounts, the Brotherhood continues to be the most coherent and disciplined opposition movement in the country. That means that it is probably best positioned to take advantage

of any opening up of political space in post-Mubarak Egypt. Indeed, there are already some indications of greater Islamist assertiveness in recent weeks, including the return to Egypt of the radical preacher Sheikh Yusuf Qardawi after over 40 years of exile abroad, and the greater visibility of Brotherhood elements in the demonstrations that continue to take place in Tahrir Square in Cairo. Nevertheless, the mass movement that resulted in Mubarak's ouster was not initiated by the Brotherhood (which was actually rather late in joining the bandwagon) and was not dominated by Islamist themes or demands. Nor does the Brotherhood appear to enjoy anything like majority support in Egyptian public opinion. In one admittedly limited telephone poll, only 15% of respondents "strongly" or "somewhat" approved of the Brotherhood and only 7% endorsed the notion that the Mubarak regime's insufficiently Islamic character was either the first or second most important reason for the uprising against it. These facts help explain why Hamas, like the Iranian government, might have wished that the uprising in Egypt indicated a triumph of Islamic principles, but unlike the Iranian government, did not confuse the wish with the reality.

Still, an Islamist takeover in Egypt is not the only scenario that could work to Hamas' advantage. The movement might also benefit indirectly from general Egyptian sympathy for the Palestinians, which a post-Mubarak government, regardless of its ideological complexion, might feel obliged to accommodate. Finally, there is the possibility that continuing political disorder, exacerbated by an unending wave of strikes and the inability of the country to satisfy the economic demands of newly-empowered labor and professional organizations, might prevent the maintenance of effective authority throughout the country. Weak government control, particularly in eastern Sinai where there is traditional Bedouin resentment of domination by Cairo, would facilitate large scale smuggling of weapons and the provision of training and other sorts of support from Iran and elsewhere.

For the time being, none of these scenarios has come to pass. The army's nimble handling of the situation has enabled it to shape developments and prevent a breakdown of order. What seems to have emerged might be termed "Mubarakism without Mubarak," except that the military has conveyed its intention of facilitating and guiding the orderly evolution of a participatory civilian system rather than retaining direct control of Egypt's politics. It remains to be seen whether it is truly willing or able to move developments along that course.

Either way, Fatah has apparently concluded that events in Egypt and elsewhere in the Arab world oblige it to anticipate challenges to its own domestic legitimacy by suggesting new elections and a new initiative on Palestinian national reconciliation. But Hamas appears to be too unnerved by those same events to respond to either proposal. At the same time, conditions do not appear ripe for it to cultivate an alternative source of renewed legitimacy – another large scale confrontation with Israel. All in all, this seems to

mean that however gratifying Mubarak's ignominious departure might be to the Hamas leadership, it has not yet had any material impact on the movement's reading of the overall correlation of forces. In these circumstances, the default option for Hamas remains "wait and see."