



NOREF Report

Israel, America and the New Middle East

Henry Siegman

Summary

Virtually overnight, the Arab Middle East has been unrecognizably transformed. The implications of that transformation for America's vital interests in that region and for Israel-Palestine peacemaking will be far-reaching. The peace process so far has been a meaningless exercise as successive US administrations chose to ignore the reality that Israel's long-planned goal of establishing irreversible control through its settlements over Palestine was clearly in sight, if not already an accomplished fact.

Given the vast imbalances between the two parties, and the commitment of successive Israeli governments to expanding the settlement enterprise, there was never the slightest chance of a two-state solution without forceful US intervention. That intervention never came, as the US, deferring to domestic political pressures, pretended it believed Israel's declared commitment to a two-state accord.

Israel's leaders believed that Arab authoritarian regimes, whose survival depended to a considerable extent on the US security umbrella, would keep in check popular Arab outrage over the failure to halt Palestinian dispossession. The fall of Mubarak and the tremors it has caused in neighbouring Arab regimes will henceforth prevent them from exercising that restraining role, or from collaborating with the US and Israel in an anti-Iran coalition, thus undermining Israel's strategic situation.

Rescuing a sovereign Palestinian state offers the US a chance to restore the credibility and influence it has been losing in the region and to weaken Iran's. Given the tectonic changes in this area and the threat they pose both to American and Israeli interests, a US intervention to end the Israel-Palestine conflict is not only politically conceivable but, perhaps for the first time, achievable.

Henry Siegman is president of the US/Middle East Project (USMEP), an independent policy institute. He is also a non-resident visiting professor at the Sir Joseph Hotung Middle East Programme of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. Mr. Siegman has published extensively on the Middle East peace process and has been consulted by governments, international agencies, and non-governmental organizations. Major studies directed by Mr. Siegman for the Council on Foreign Relations include *Harnessing trade for development and growth in the Middle East* (2002), and *Strengthening Palestinian public institutions* (1999), conducted on behalf of the European Commission and the government of Norway. In 2002, he directed a study commissioned by the US Department of State and the US National Intelligence Council on the implications of "viability" for Palestinian statehood.

Israel, America and the New Middle East

Virtually overnight, the Arab Middle East has been unrecognizably transformed. The implications of that transformation for America's vital interests in that region and for Israel-Palestine peacemaking will be far-reaching. They will also be largely interconnected.

Most observers seem to agree that Israeli fears of an emergent political influence of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and of a consequent resurgence of Hamas in the West Bank ends what little prospect for an Israeli-Palestinian accord might have survived the latest deadlock in the US-brokered peace talks. But that conclusion may be as seriously flawed as has been their reading of the past.

Past notions about prospects for an Israeli-Palestinian accord were entirely illusory. America's peace efforts over the years – all of which have failed – have been based on the principle that “we cannot want peace more than the parties themselves do,” a mantra recently invoked again by the secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, to explain why the conflict can be resolved only by agreement between the parties, and not by outside coercion.

Pressure from the US lacking

In fact, there was never the slightest possibility of the parties themselves being able to reach agreement, given the overwhelming imbalance of power between them, and given Israel's voracious appetite for Palestinian territory. Successive US administrations chose to ignore the reality that Israel resolved to maintain its effective control over Palestine “from the river to the sea” as far back as the day after the Six Day War. (See “The Great Middle East Peace Process Scam,” Henry Siegman, *London Review of Books*, Vol. 29, No. 16, 16 August 2007.) It is a resolve that could have been overcome only if Israel's cost-benefit calculations were changed by *force majeure*, ie, effective pressure from the US.

That pressure never happened, because it required of an American president that he tell the Congress and the American public that Israel's proclaimed commitment to a withdrawal of the occupation and the establishment of a viable and sovereign

Palestinian state was a deception that served as a cover for the continuing expansion of its settlements. AIPAC and the other Jewish and Protestant evangelical fundamentalist organizations that serve as lobbies for Israel have seen to it that such candor is far too politically costly for any administration.

Israel's prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, and his government were convinced they had bested President Obama in their confrontation over continued settlement construction, and could now continue gobbling up the West Bank with impunity, disregarding not only American interests but international law and all previous agreements committing Israel to halting construction of settlements and to dismantling all illegal outposts. (Despite repeated promises, not only were the illegal outposts not removed, many were converted into full-blown settlements.) The long-planned goal of Israel's colonial enterprise – establishing irreversible control through its settlements over Palestine – was clearly in sight, if not already an accomplished fact.

America's credibility has waned

Israel's leaders based their indifference to widespread popular Arab outrage over its forty-four year occupation of the Palestinian people on their belief that Arab authoritarian regimes, whose survival depended to a considerable extent on the US security umbrella, would keep their subjects' rage in check. The deference of these regimes to the US was responsible for the stability of Egypt's and Jordan's peace accords with Israel and for the historic Arab Peace Initiative that committed all Arab countries to full normalization of relations with Israel once it will have achieved a peace accord with the Palestinians.

But America's credibility and influence began to erode even before the most recent popular eruptions in the region, in part because of President Obama's capitulation to Bibi Netanyahu. The fall of Mubarak (whose reign has effectively ended, no matter how much longer he manages to cling to his office), will weaken what willingness other Arab regimes may have had to collaborate with the US and Israel in an anti-Iran coalition and will strengthen Iran's influence in the region. For the enmity of most Arab regimes towards Iran was not shared by the

Arab street, primarily because Iran has been seen by them as having assumed a leadership in the struggle against Israel's occupation of Palestine that their own Arab regimes had abandoned.

The damage to Israel of the revolutionary changes now underway in the region may well be existential, depending on how it responds to these events. For with the removal of Mubarak, Israel may reap what it has so recklessly sown and return to its earlier status as a pariah nation in that part of the world. Netanyahu's government has already proven that if even if Zionism is not racism, Zionists can be racists. It is a government that, by denying Palestinians a state of their own and bringing about an Israeli apartheid regime, may yet succeed in persuading the world that the Zionism it practices is indeed racism.

Popular Arab anger over Palestinian humiliations

In any event, Israel's peace treaty with Egypt is what ruled out a successful military challenge to Israel by all other countries in the region. Egypt has by far the most effective military force in the Arab Middle East, and no Arab military challenge to Israel would have been dared without Egypt's participation. A change of government in Egypt that brings to an end Mubarak's policy of following America's coddling of Israel will significantly undermine Israel's strategic situation.

No matter what further changes may occur throughout the region, developments so far in Tunisia and Egypt have already drastically curtailed the ability of surviving Arab regimes to move towards rapprochement with Israel. It is difficult to imagine that the Arab Peace Initiative, so disdainfully ignored by Israel for nearly a decade, will not be withdrawn. No surviving Arab regime will dare challenge the popular anger that exists in every Arab country toward Israel for the humiliations Israel inflicts on Palestinians under its never-ending occupation. While the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not the first cause of the current upheavals, the failure of Arab regimes to halt Palestinian dispossession is not far from the top of the list of popular grievances against their rulers.

For the same reason, Jordan's peace treaty with Israel is not likely to survive if Egypt's peace treaty is abrogated. It is hard to imagine that Jordan would risk being the only Arab country that maintains normal relations with Israel.

American action on Palestine is crucial

The Obama administration's handling of the changing realities in the Arab world will not win prizes, even if its reluctance to abandon Mubarak, the regional lynchpin of its Middle East policies, is understandable. It now must play catch-up if it is to restore some of its lost credibility in the newly emerging Middle Eastern reality, particularly in light of its ineptness in dealing with Netanyahu's far-right nationalist and xenophobic government.

Ironically, it is precisely this one issue – rescuing a viable and sovereign Palestinian state from the maw of an unyielding Israeli occupation about to swallow Palestine whole – that offers the US a chance to restore some of its lost credibility. If the US were to succeed in such an effort and a viable Palestinian state were to emerge, not only would America's influence in the region improve and Iran's be weakened, but the major cause of Arab and wider international hostility to Israel – and of popular Arab support for Iran – will have been greatly diminished. It would also facilitate America's ability to come to the defence of Israel – diplomatically or militarily – should circumstances require it to do so.

Given the record of failed US peace initiatives over the years, is such an American rescue operation at all conceivable? Can an American President finally abandon the peace process for the fraud that it has been, present the parties with a detailed framework for a permanent status solution and obtain Israeli and Palestinian acceptance? The answer is yes, for two important reasons.

High costs for US interests

First, what has been changed by the upheavals in the region is the dramatically increased cost to American interests of its current policies in that part of the world, a cost that includes new dangers to the safety of its military personnel in the region. It is a cost that exceeds by far the cost

to any administration of suppressing the truth about Israel's culpability for the deadlocked peace talks. It is a cost to America's interests that even Congressmen in thrall to the Israel lobby may now find excessive.

Even if it were true that we cannot impose our ideas on another government, that has always been a lame excuse for our inaction. For no one has suggested the US punish Israel in order to get its way. What is being suggested is that we cease *rewarding* it – with unprecedented military, diplomatic and economic gifts – for its indifference to the damage its deliberate sabotaging of a two-state solution has been doing, not only to the Palestinians but to America's national interests, not to speak of the damage to its own interests.

The second reason an American president will now find it politically easier to put forward an American peace plan and achieve its implementation is the impact of the popular revolutions on Israel's own cost-benefit calculations.

For reasons indicated above, Israel is on the verge of reverting to an earlier isolation. Its peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan are at risk, international assaults on Israel's legitimacy, however ill-founded, are underway, and – as a consequence of its rejection of President Obama's proposals for an end to its confiscations of Palestinian territories that turned the peace talks into a farce – its American protector's influence and credibility have been greatly diminished. In these circumstances, an Israeli government that rejects the urgent demands of its only remaining true friend cannot long survive.

Rescuing a sovereign Palestinian state offers the US a chance to restore the credibility and influence it has been losing in the region and to weaken Iran's. Given the tectonic changes in this area and the threat they pose both to American and Israeli interests, a US intervention to end the Israel-Palestine conflict is not only politically conceivable but, perhaps for the first time, achievable.