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The Revolution in Egypt: Recommendations for Israel

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On January 25, 2011, 7 million Egyptians, most of them young, middle class, educated city-dwellers, took to the streets and with the assistance of the army, toppled the regime of President Husni Mubarak. On June 30, 2013, 17 million Egyptians again took to the streets and demanded the resignation of Mubarak's democratically elected successor, Mohamed Morsi. This time, senior officials of the old regime, the Salafist movement, and the urban poor joined the protests. Three days later, and with the help of the military, Morsi was deposed, and the vast majority of the Muslim Brotherhood leadership was placed under house arrest. In both instances, the army supported the demands of the “street.” Furthermore, Egyptian military commanders, having learned the lessons of the 2011 revolution, were careful during the revolution of 2013 not to place themselves at the forefront, but to promote civilian figures acceptable to the public to lead during the transition period. Justice Adli Mansour was appointed president for the transition period and charged with establishing a transition government, forming a committee to draft changes to the constitution, and preparing Egypt for parliamentary and presidential elections within six months. In this sensitive period, the army and security forces will have to deal with suppressing opposition by Muslim Brotherhood supporters, maintaining order and stability, and ensuring the effective functioning of the transition government.

Since the start of the upheaval in the Arab world, Israel has viewed the revolutionary trend, changes in government, and internal struggles with concern. However, the government of Israel has demonstrated restraint and consciously avoided provocative rhetoric while preparing for the actual and potential challenges sparked by the Arab spring. In the Egyptian context, Israel has been meticulous about continuing and even tightening its special relationship with the Egyptian military, which is a key to peaceful relations between the two countries. The Muslim Brotherhood government avoided any open and direct diplomatic relationship with Israel, but it did not attempt to damage the formal relationship. The leading interest of both countries was, and remains, to avoid any deterioration that would incur the danger of a military confrontation. Against this

background, the Egyptian government worked to broker a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas in November 2012 that would end Israel's Operation Pillar of Defense.

The fact that the peace treaty between Israel and Egypt survived an Islamic regime that in principle rejects the State of Israel's right to exist is an important precedent. On the other hand, had the Muslim Brotherhood government become entrenched, grown stronger, and depended less on Western economic aid, the organization's deep ideological hostility toward Israel might have spewed forth and undermined Egypt and Israel's shared security and diplomatic interests. The deposing of the Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt in July 2013 with the support and leadership of the Egyptian military reduces the chances that this scenario will be realized in the near future. At the same time, the security challenge in the Sinai region remains.

Egypt has entered a prolonged transition period – particularly if the transition government does not complete the tasks it has been given – and in this period it will likely focus on domestic affairs: maintaining law, order, and stability, and avoiding an economic crash. In this context, the regime will be preoccupied with restraining public protests, suppressing the uprising by Muslim Brotherhood supporters, and amending the constitution in preparation for parliamentary and presidential elections and their implementation. These challenges will divert the government's attention from the Sinai situation. However, likely increased terrorist activity by jihadi and Salafist groups in the Sinai region, which will attempt to challenge the government in Cairo by striking at it directly, or indirectly through provocations against Israel, will undermine security in Sinai and spill over into Israeli territory. A possible consequence of escalation in this theater will be damage to the special relationship between Egypt's military establishments and Israel. This will be the major threat on the southern front in the coming months.

Challenges and Recommendations for Israel

Israel's strategic goal is to maintain and even deepen its peaceful relations with Egypt. Israel has a special interest in the establishment of a liberal, secular, and responsible government that functions effectively throughout Egypt and in the Sinai region. Israel must work on several levels in order to promote these objectives.

Israel must deepen its cooperation with the Egyptian army and continue to allow it to deploy troops in the Sinai against jihadi infrastructures and weapons smuggling to the Gaza Strip in numbers that exceed what is dictated by the military appendix to the peace treaty. Israel has acceded to prior Egyptian requests to use troops and resources beyond the limitations of the military appendix, and this should continue.

Egypt is experiencing an increasing challenge to internal security. Armed militias that do not accept the authority of security officials can be found today in every neighborhood.

The rule of these militias in the street can be expected to expand, the longer the economic deterioration in the country continues. It can also be expected that the poor, who are especially numerous, will revolt. Therefore, the test of governance and effective government will be the imposition of law and order domestically, as well as an improvement in the economic and employment situation. Given this, Israel would do well to support continued American security aid to the Egyptian army, expansion of civilian aid to Egypt by Western countries and international financial institutions, and international initiatives on Egyptian infrastructure development.

Regional players, in particular the Sunni monarchies – Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and the Gulf emirates – which prayed for the failure of the Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt because they feared for their own rule, can help stabilize Egypt and support the new government, particularly by economic means. Israel has limited influence in this area, but it can attempt to establish covert channels of coordination with the monarchies. Furthermore, restarting the diplomatic process between Israel and the Palestinians, even partially, could also promote broad regional coordination, not only in the effort to stabilize Egypt but also in the attempt to form a regional front against the radical axis led by Iran.

The relationship with the Egyptian army was and remains essential. However, at the same time, Israel cannot ignore the growing influence of civilian elements in Egypt: liberal, secular young people who had a significant influence on the ouster of Presidents Mubarak and Morsi. Israel has limited influence on the Egyptian political system. However, it must attempt to establish channels for dialogue with revolutionary elements while careful to avoid provoking the Egyptian army. Thus, Israel can attempt to advise civilian figures on economic issues and proper administration, and they in turn can receive assistance from and through Israel in order to encourage investment in Egypt.

Ostensibly one of the actors most severely damaged from the fall of the Muslim Brotherhood government is Hamas, which lost its main ideological and political supporter. This follows the loss of its stronghold in Damascus, the undermining of its relationship with Hizbollah, the rift with the regime in Tehran resulting from its closer relations with the government in Egypt, and the rebuff of the political leadership by Qatar. The young people in Egypt leading the revolution also perceived Hamas as a collaborator with the regime that was toppled and the “enforcer” of violent operations that harmed Egyptian society and the Egyptian army. In addition, Hamas suffers from increasing criticism from the Gaza “street.” There has been a considerable response to initiatives to have the Gazan population sign petitions against the Hamas leadership, on the Egyptian model of *tamarud*. Furthermore, the Egyptian army’s determination to curtail Hamas’s moves and the risk that the movement can cause security escalation have been reflected, inter alia, in difficulties in smuggling goods, particularly subsidized

goods, from Egypt to the Gaza Strip. The reduction in smuggling will make it difficult for Hamas to maintain the level of its revenues, and therefore it will be hard pressed to contain the protests against its rule. It will also be difficult to infiltrate weapons into Gaza, mainly enhanced rockets and surface-to-surface missiles.

It is still too early to see whether these difficulties will encourage the Hamas leadership to seek reconciliation with the Palestinian Authority, that is, the willingness to fulfill demands made by President Mahmoud Abbas as a condition for Hamas's integration into the PA. Rather, it is possible that given its distress Hamas will again attempt to consolidate its status on its ability to cause damage, which will be reflected in support for terrorist operations against Israel in Sinai, or in the initiation of events that will lead to a deterioration, escalation, and direct conflict with Israel.

In any case, the motivation of Hamas and jihadi elements from Sinai to launch attacks against Israel is increasing. Therefore, Israel must strengthen its defensive capabilities along its border with the Gaza Strip and with Sinai. Israel's freedom of action vis-à-vis the Sinai region is limited to a defensive response within its borders. It must avoid violating Egyptian sovereignty and the principles of the military appendix of the peace treaty, even in scenarios in which it could claim the right of self-defense. This is so as not to be involved in Egypt's domestic affairs and not to deflect attention toward Israel. In order to attempt to temper the motivation for violence among the ranks of Hamas and other extremist factions operating in Gaza, Israel can adopt a policy of expanding activity at the crossing points into Gaza and fishing permits, and even reach understandings concerning production of natural gas.

In conclusion, the fall of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt should be assessed in the broader context of regional trends and the turmoil in the Middle East. Until recently, there was a feeling that political Islam was the big winner. However, the fall of the Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt, and with it, the dispelling of notions such as "Islam is the solution," and the decisive proof that political Islam, like any other form of rule, will find it difficult to cope with complex challenges at home and abroad will have far reaching consequences for all Muslim Brotherhood elements in the region. In Jordan, a decline in influence of the Muslim Brotherhood opposition movement and an improvement in the ability of the Hashemite Royal House to cope with the movement are expected. It is possible that the balance of power in the Syrian opposition fighting the Assad regime will tip toward the liberal secular forces at the expense of Islamist elements.

Trends in these directions would be convenient for Israel. However, Israel must continue to watch developments and recognize that it has limited ability to influence them, while remaining aloof from the regional focus of attention, on the part of both the regimes and

the public. For its part, the Muslim Brotherhood will likely not easily relinquish the historic opportunity given it in Egypt, in light of the country's weight and status in the Arab and Muslim world. Therefore, a prolonged internal struggle in Egypt can be expected. In the meantime, it is not possible to determine definitively that the influence of the "street" will be reflected in the results of the forthcoming presidential and parliamentary elections. Therefore, Israel must conduct itself modestly, avoid harmful statements, and maintain its room to maneuver in the face of the volatile political situation in Egypt.

