

America, Israel, and the Strategic Implications of the Arab Uprisings

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Articles & Testimony

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As Egyptians lined up to vote in their first contested leadership election in 7,000 years, how should we understand the speed, scope and variety of change transforming the Middle East?

A year ago, the narrative was simple -- Arabs had awoken from their millennial slumber and demanded to be citizens, not subjects. But since then, change has come in all shapes and forms. Will the iconic image of the Arab uprisings be the patient queueing of Egyptian voters or, perhaps, the self-immolation of Tunisia's Mohammad Bouazizi? Or will it be something less heroic, like Gaddafi hounded like a rat out of his drainage pipe in Libya? Or something profoundly cruel, such as the YouTube video of a Syrian man buried alive by shovel-wielding Alawi thugs taunting the victim to recite "There is no God but God and Bashar is his Prophet"? Or, alternatively, will we look back and see photos of Saudi anti-riot vehicles cruising across the causeway to support the crushing of Bahrain's "Arab spring" moment as the most consequential image of the past 18 months?

The reality is that that the "Arab spring" -- a misnomer of olympian proportions -- is really a catch-all concept that encompasses many different national experiences spanning a broad spectrum. To lump them together is both stupid and foolish, not least because most countries are still at act one or two of a five-act drama. In many places, it will be years before the political dust settles and we can see clearly how the uprisings of 2011-12 actually transformed the strategic orientations of Middle East regimes.

Still, it is not too early for strategists to look at broad patterns. Intimate observers of the Arab Middle East -- such as Americans and Israelis -- have no choice but to connect whatever dots are available as they make judgments about the threats and opportunities. And the sad reality is that, viewed from Washington or Jerusalem, the upheavals of

the last 18 months have transformed an already difficult regional landscape into perhaps the most inhospitable strategic environment in modern history.

A VIEW FROM WASHINGTON

One useful way for an American strategist to assess US standing in the Middle East is to evaluate relations with the region's three most significant countries -- Iran, Turkey and Egypt. These countries, each of which sits astride a strategic waterway, are heirs to millennia -- old cultures, with long-established national identities, large populations, and substantial economic and military influence. A central goal of US policy should be to have close relations with at least two and, if possible, all three of these countries, as a way to project power throughout the region.

For most of the post-World War II era, Washington did have excellent relations with at least two of these countries; for a brief period in the 1970s -- between Anwar al-Sadat's turn to the West and the fall of the Shah of Iran -- the United States even enjoyed close ties with all three. In retrospect, that was the high water mark for US influence in the region. Since then, one after another of these countries has drifted away from the pro-American camp.

First to go was Iran, when the Shah's regime was swept away in the Islamist revolution in 1979. Then, Turkey drifted away with the ascendance of the Islamist AK Party, which has neutered the once-powerful military and moved the formerly reliable NATO ally into a more neutralist position on key strategic issues. Today, it is Egypt's turn. With Islamists dominating parliament and the military expected to return to the barracks shell-shocked after a disastrous year running the country, even a victory by an anti-Islamist presidential candidate will, at most, slow Egypt's slide away from the pro-American, pro-West, pro-peace camp in the Middle East. Taken together, American strategists surveying the region will -- for the first time in the post-WWII era -- find no strong allies among any of them.

A VIEW FROM JERUSALEM

Given differences of geography, economics, and military capacity, an Israeli strategic thinker will, of course, look at the region differently from an American. But she will likely reach similarly grim conclusions. Indeed, when one compares the new landscape with the regional situations that gave rise to the two grand strategies that guided Israeli security doctrine over the past six decades, Israelis can't be faulted for scratching their heads and wringing their hands.

As designed by its founding father, David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first grand strategy was based on the idea that the fledgling Jewish state could most effectively confront hostility from neighboring Arab states by building ties with more distant non-Arab states on the region's outer rim, or "periphery." The result was that Israel quietly developed relationships with the Shah's Iran and secular Turkey, contacts that proved critical to Israel's survival in the 1950s, '60s and '70s.

Two historic events in the 1970s -- Egypt-Israel peace and the Iranian revolution -- led to a fundamental change in Israel's strategic calculus. The loss of a faraway strategic partner and the gain of a new one just across the Sinai desert gave rise to a new doctrine, most clearly enunciated by Israel's second great strategic thinker, Yitzhak Rabin. A hawkish dove, Rabin believed Israel needed to take advantage of the opportunity of peaceful relations with the Sunni Arab states of the "inner circle" as a way to forge common ground against the "outer circle" threat posed by non-Arab Iran. For the last 30 years, Israel's peace diplomacy with Jordan, Syria and the Palestinians, supported in fits and starts by the Gulf states and North Africa, was a product of this new strategic calculation.

Those days are gone. Today, as a result of the transformational change of the Arab uprisings, Israel faces a new and unprecedented regional situation. For the first time in its history, both the "outer circle" and the "inner circle" are either led by radical Islamists or headed in that direction. The periphery boasts Islamic Iran under the deepening military dictatorship of the Revolutionary Guards, and an AK-controlled Turkey that has jailed fully one-third of the

nation's generals and admirals, the historic allies of a strategic partnership with Israel. In the core, where Israel already has two Islamist-dominated regimes (Gaza and Lebanon) on its borders, Egypt is now poised to join the list, with the prospect that post-Assad Syria will not be far behind. When only the spine of the Palestinian Authority's Mahmoud Abbas and the pluckiness of Jordan's King Abdullah stand in the way of total encirclement by Islamist-oriented regimes, Israelis have good reason to lose sleep.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

Of course, all is not lost in the Middle East, either for America or for Israel. The United States remains the region's undisputed military power, and it has created a system of tacit and acknowledged alliances with key states, especially the Arab monarchies, that has effectively blunted Iran's quest for regional influence. For its part, Israel is the envy of the region -- in military might, economic prowess, social cohesion, and the depth of its relations with its superpower ally. Neither America's ignominious retreat from the region nor the collapse of the third Jewish commonwealth is a near-term proposition.

Still, Washington and Jerusalem cannot be complacent about the direction of regional politics. There is much to be done -- separately, together, and in concert with other regional and international actors -- to slow the negative drift, to improve the chances that electoral politics eventually produces more liberal outcomes, and to bolster the remaining pro-West forces in the region. Trying to win back at least one of the three main regional powers is an especially high priority. In practice, that means working patiently to restore some semblance of working relations between Turkey and Israel -- no easy feat when Turkish courts are indicting Israeli generals. And it means investing in the potential for the sort of transformative change inside Iran that was stifled but, one hopes, not extinguished by the regime's crackdown on the Green Movement three years ago.

As for Egypt -- still in the early days of its revolutionary moment, outsiders wield little sway over the direction of its turbulent politics. With the leverage provided by \$1.5 billion in aid and an influential vote on the boards of international financial institutions being asked to loan billions to shore up the failing Egyptian economy, Washington would be wise to focus on securing its most essential security interests; not try to micromanage the political reform process or manipulate the evolving relationship between civil and military authority. For its part, Israel has already made the right decision -- build a fence along the porous Sinai border and resuscitate the moth-balled army division that once protected against invasion from the south. While a conventional attack is not likely anytime soon, Egypt is inexorably drifting into a no war/no peace posture from which anything is possible.

So, today we celebrate the relative peace, order, and fairness of Egypt's elections -- and justly so. Tomorrow, however, is another day. ❖

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