

A Political Vision for Israel

by [David Makovsky \(/experts/david-makovsky\)](#)

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An Interview by *Bernard Gwertzman, CFR.org*

Israel marked the sixty-third anniversary of its independence yesterday against the backdrop of the Arab Spring roiling the Middle East. The democracy movement holds out promise but also challenges for Israel, says Israel expert David Makovsky, because while Israel welcomes the idea of fellow democracies in its neighborhood, democratization is turbulent and potentially dangerous. Makovsky notes that with the Muslim Brotherhood likely to be the biggest party in Egypt, Israelis are concerned about whether Egypt will continue cooperating with Israel, which President Hosni Mubarak cultivated, or whether fresh fighting in Gaza might trigger "a flashpoint" in relations. On the recent Hamas-Fatah moves toward unity, Makovsky says the United States and Israel want to see whether the Palestinians keep strong security ties with Israel in the West Bank and whether Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Salem Fayyad, who has created "a culture of accountability" there, is retained. Makovsky argues Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who will be coming to Washington next week, should offer a far-reaching deal involving a swap of territory in return for Palestinian acceptance of a Jewish state or face an increasing Palestinian push for a UN General Assembly vote this fall favoring Palestinian statehood.

GWERTZMAN: Is there a feeling of unease in Israel about the recent regional protests and unresolved issues with the United States about Israeli-Palestinian negotiations?

MAKOVSKY: On the one hand, Israel is a country of enormous accomplishments amid the most trying of conditions. It lives in a very rough part of the world. When it began life as a state, there were six hundred thousand people, and now there are more than seven million. There is a booming high-tech industry; Israel's economy is strong. Israel has created a thriving democracy while being embroiled during a good part of its existence in wars with its neighbors or war with adjacent non-state actors like Hezbollah or Hamas. Yet, it clearly cannot sit on its laurels. Above all, it has to find a way to end its unresolved conflict with the Palestinians.

GWERTZMAN: What about the so-called "Arab Spring"? Is this viewed in Israel as a plus or a negative?

MAKOVSKY: The Arab Spring holds out both promise and a serious challenge. On the hopeful side, Israel has never wanted to be the only democracy in the Middle East. Democracies do not as a rule go to war with each other, so this is in some ways a very hopeful sign. But the process of democratization is very turbulent, even dangerous. Everyone wishes well the countries that evolve into democracies, but they will be facing challenges they haven't faced before. There are questions in Israel, for example, on how and whether the thirty-two-year-old peace treaty between Egypt and Israel will survive. The concern is how the Egyptians will deal with the messiness of democracy, because there

are elements within Egyptian society that have really still not come to grips with the peace treaty.

GWERTZMAN: Are you talking about some party coming to power that would abrogate the treaty?

MAKOVSKY: The Muslim Brotherhood looks like it will be the biggest party in Egypt right now. I don't think it will lead to an abrogation of the peace treaty, but there could be very significant policy shifts that will affect Israeli-Egyptian relations. Relations were much easier when Israel only had to deal with President Hosni Mubarak and the Egyptian military. Now Israel has to deal with a military that is trying to be responsive to different sectors of Egyptian society. That is the new challenge that they have not had to worry about since 1979 [when the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty was signed]. You could envision how another Gaza War could lead to a flashpoint in Egyptian-Israeli relations. There is another problem in democratization when you ask, "Are there forces out there keen on hijacking a revolution?"

GWERTZMAN: Be specific.

MAKOVSKY: In 2005, we saw a very hopeful sign in Lebanon. The Lebanese brought a million people to the streets; they brought Arab satellite television to herald in a new era. Their theme was "they did democracy in the Ukraine, we can do it here in Lebanon." Yet, Hezbollah held onto its militia and they fractured that pro-Western democracy movement known as March 14. The trajectory of these democracies isn't linear, and there can be many challenges ahead for Israel. But this is a revolution that is not against the United States; it is not against Israel. It is about economic empowerment, dignity. Everyone's heart goes out to anyone who seeks those very noble goals. Hopefully it will be a force for stability and peace for the Middle East, but the transition can be protracted and turbulent.

GWERTZMAN: Many people are skeptical about the recent interim agreement between Hamas and Fatah for a unity Palestinian government. The Israeli government has effectively rejected it and is holding off transferring tax revenues that are collected by Israel for the Palestinian Authority. Is Israel being too negative, and has it acted too quickly on this? Are there more positive possibilities from the accord?

MAKOVSKY: The approach of the United States is that it will wait and see. The United States wants to know if the security cooperation between Israel and the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank is going to continue. That cooperation for the last four years has been exemplary. The United States and Israel also want to know whether the government of Prime Minister Salam Fayyad will continue. [There were reports in the Arab and Israeli press that President Mohammad Abbas wants to retain Fayyad (Ynet) as prime minister.]

Fayyad has totally changed the paradigm of Palestine governance. Under PLO leader Yasser Arafat it was about victimization and entitlement: "We don't have to build a better society, the world owes us." Under Fayyad, it is: "How do you create a culture of accountability?" He has said he has taken a playbook from the Zionists. He has built from the bottom up with institutions. In his view, the building of the state precedes its declaration. This is a real change. He has achieved 9 percent economic growth during a worldwide recession; he has worked on security cooperation with Israel on the belief that this would bring calm to Palestinian cities, in order to enhance economic development. He has tried to focus on the theme of non-violence. These themes are important and are a real shift from what we've seen in the past. So what will be his future? Hamas says they want to get rid of him.

GWERTZMAN: Many in the U.S. Congress want to cut funds immediately to the Palestinians because Hamas might join the government.

MAKOVSKY: While Congress is inclined to cut off funding immediately, the administration's view is essentially to look at these yardsticks. The Israelis are skeptical that this is going to work. There are reasons to question to what extent [Fatah] can be in a power-sharing arrangement with Hamas' political leadership and at the same time work with Israel. The Israeli government is trying to signal by the withholding of the money (NYT) from taxes meant for the Palestinians that the Palestinians should not take Israel for granted. Israel has leverage in this equation. Fayyad has

confirmed this by saying this could impact the paying of salaries.

GWERTZMAN: Prime Minister Netanyahu is due to give a speech to Congress on May 25. What should he say?

MAKOVSKY: What's required here is a political vision that goes beyond the immediate. He needs to take the initiative, because if he doesn't, you will have this vote in September at the UN General Assembly on Palestinian statehood. Israel has never been in that position before. Instead of looking at the move toward Palestinian unity tactically and saying, " Hamas has helped us out" [because Hamas does not recognize Israel], I think Netanyahu should come forward and say: "Look, there are two major barriers to be crossed here. I will cross one, and Hamas should cross the other. I will cross the territory issue." That's what the Palestinians don't believe Israel on: They don't believe that Israel is genuine in promising to provide them with a continuous Palestinian state as part of an agreement. For that to happen, Hamas has to cross a threshold too, recognizing Israel as a Jewish state with equal rights for all citizens.

GWERTZMAN: Should the United States be actively promoting such a deal?

MAKOVSKY: The United States should be engineering this and synchronizing this. We've been absent in the region since December. Recently we've been preoccupied with the Arab Spring, which exploded in January. People say, well the president can give a speech. I don't think that is the ideal dynamic we want after the killing of Osama bin Laden. There is no substitute for working with the parties and having them cross the threshold. For Israel, that threshold is territory, and that is to say that the 1967 line is the baseline for future borders. It's not going back to what it exactly was in pre-1967 because things have changed. In such a deal, Israel would yield equal amount of land elsewhere. Right now, 80 percent of the settlers live in 5 percent of the land near the old boundary. This is doable. If the parties want to do a deal, they can do a deal that each side gets what they want. The impossible is achievable. The Palestinians can recognize their territorial ambitions and Israel can adjust their borders to include most of their settlers who live in a small part of the area. We need a statement from Netanyahu saying "I know what you want, and I will give you what you want if you will give me what I want. We both have to cross the threshold together."

GWERTZMAN: Do you think the United States ought to try to be the mediators we once were?

MAKOVSKY: There is a core bargain here. It requires each side to cross a historic threshold, and as you know mistrust is so deep that we need to engineer it and synchronize it. That would be the way to get them to accept it. In his last policy speech at Bar-Ilan University in June 2009, Netanyahu said this was his goal, to get the Palestinians to accept Israel in the region: It is not about the land, but it is about Israel's acceptance in the region. If he got what he wanted, he would then have to give as well. The key is that there are no shortcuts to the hard work. You've got to get each to cross these thresholds.

GWERTZMAN: How do you deal with Palestinians' insistence on a freeze on settlements, which has held up negotiations?

MAKOVSKY: That's why I'm so keen on there being a border worked out first. If there is a border, there are no more settlements. It makes the settlement issue moot. If you adjust the border by 5 percent, that will place most of the settlers inside of Israel. Instead of all of the focus on the symptoms, let's find a cure. Enough of the appetizer, let's deal with the main course.

The Palestinians could say that we got the 1/1 land swap and the Israelis could say we got 80 percent of the settlements.

David Makovsky is the Ziegler distinguished fellow and director of the Project on the Middle East Peace Process at The Washington Institute. Bernard Gwertzman is a consulting editor at CFR.org. ❖

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