

# The Arab Revolutions: An Israeli Perspective

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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### Brief Analysis

Israel has been watching the ongoing upheaval in the Arab world with steadily growing concern. While they hope to see a happy, democratic end to the popular eruptions of protest and discontent against dictatorial regimes, Israelis are bracing themselves for a series of less optimistic outcomes.

A different Middle East is emerging, one that may be temporarily called "square-ocracy," or the transfer of power from governments to masses of demonstrators in the streets. Rulers are bowing to popular demands, fearing the fate of former Tunisian president Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali and former Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak. But it is still unclear who will lead these countries in the long term, in which direction they will move, and what type of "freedom" will emerge. An extended period of uncertainty and instability may lie ahead, forcing Israel to cope with a highly volatile environment and reassess some of its longstanding assumptions about the nature of its relationships with some neighboring states.

To be sure, Israel was hardly mentioned during the huge, early demonstrations in Egypt and elsewhere. Over time, however, some anti-Israeli slogans began creeping into the protest movement's inventory. For example, tens of thousands cheered in Cairo's Tahrir Square when previously exiled Islamist leader Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi urged them to march on Jerusalem. Mubarak was portrayed as a Zionist agent with a Star of David smeared over his face. Calls for suspension of the bilateral peace treaty and expulsion of Israeli embassy staff were often heard during demonstrations in Amman. In Yemen, demonstrators shouted accusations that President Ali Abdullah Saleh was collaborating with Israel. In Libya, insurgents have often described Muammar Qadhafi as a Jew.

In short, a degree of anti-Israeli sentiment has slowly been mixed into the overwhelmingly domestic agendas of Arab protesters. Israel is clearly not at the top of these agendas, but it has become a part of the revolutionary discourse. Below is a short list of Israel's most pressing concerns about the ongoing unrest.

## Egyptian Gas Sales and Treaty Review

The Supreme Military Council under Field Marshal Muhammad Hussein Tantawi is making a quiet effort to reassure Israel that Cairo's policy toward it has not changed, and that Egypt still regards bilateral peace as a major strategic asset. At the same time, however, the army's high command seems reluctant to resume gas exports to Israel for fear of public reaction. At this point, the hesitancy is political in nature, not a function of technical

difficulties. The council is particularly concerned about the current investigation into charges of corruption involved in the most recent contract governing Egyptian gas sales to Israel, which was orchestrated by Mubarak's close friend Hussein Salem, one of the first Egyptians to flee the country when the revolution gained momentum. The longer this suspension continues, the more difficulty Cairo will have announcing a resumption in sales. The latest word from the new government is that the gas supply will resume soon but prices will be renegotiated.

Whatever the results of the eventual presidential and parliamentary elections, the next government will likely seek a "review" of several elements in the 1979 peace treaty with Israel. For example, some Egyptian politicians have indicated a desire to link progress toward Palestinian statehood with continued implementation of the treaty. The Muslim Brotherhood has already called for resubmitting the treaty to a national referendum.

Indeed, with the official dissolution of the Mabahith, or State Security Investigations -- the Egyptian agency traditionally tasked with curtailing Ikhwan activities -- the Brotherhood is becoming bolder by the day. It will certainly use its clout to contest about a quarter of the seats in the parliament, as well as to influence the outcome of the presidential race. The organization's growing power, combined with policy statements by potential presidential candidates, seems to indicate that Egypt's next leaders will adopt a new policy toward Hamas in the Gaza Strip. In short, a less friendly and cooperative government in Cairo is almost a certainty.

## **Instability in the Sinai**

**T**he next Egyptian government will also likely focus on removing the peace treaty's "limitations over sovereignty," meaning the provisions requiring demilitarization of eastern Sinai. Israel has already permitted Egypt to deploy three battalions in the demilitarized areas, to protect Sharm al-Sheikh and the al-Arish-Rafah region bordering the Gaza Strip. Israel could also conceivably accept a limited revision of the Military Protocol to allow an Egyptian military presence close to the border in the hope of improving Cairo's hold over the Sinai.

Since the revolution, Egyptian authorities have effectively lost control over most of the peninsula and some of its Bedouin tribes. The army has vacated the positions it previously maintained in Central Sinai, instead concentrating on securing the northern coastal road and the road along the Gulf of Aqaba. As a result, the Sinai is fast turning into a wild frontier, a safe haven for local arms smugglers and migrating jihadist groups. Hamas is taking advantage of this situation by developing its network of allies among the armed tribes with the intention of mounting terrorist attacks against Israel via the peninsula. Iran and Hizballah are also redoubling their efforts to gain a solid foothold there.

These activities would only accelerate if Cairo changed its official policy toward the Hamas regime in Gaza. In early contacts between the Egyptian military and Hamas officials, a permanent reopening of the Rafah terminal was discussed not only for individual travel, but also as a trade corridor. This portfolio is now with Gen. Murad Muwafi, who replaced Omar Suleiman as head of General Intelligence. In his previous role as governor of North Sinai, Muwafi dealt with Hamas issues on a daily basis.

In light of these factors, Israel may soon face a major dilemma: how to foil terrorist attacks emanating from the Sinai (e.g., new attempts to lob missiles at Eilat) if Egypt proves unwilling or unable to do so. Preemptive Israeli operations across the border would certainly trigger a major crisis between the two countries.

## **The Palestinian Authority**

**A**ccording to various indicators, some Palestinian groups may view the storm of successful demonstrations throughout the Arab world as a model for unrest against Israel. Discussions are already quietly under way among different Palestinian groups concerning the structure and potential format of nonviolent marches by thousands of people toward Israel Defense Forces positions, West Bank settlements, Israeli security barriers, and, most important, Jerusalem. The Israeli army is already taking measures to prepare for these possibilities.

For its part, the Palestinian Authority has obtained information about plans to call for mass demonstrations in the West Bank urging an end to the Fatah-Hamas split. Hamas has already allowed a similar demonstration in Gaza. It is difficult to predict at this stage whether West Bank Palestinians would respond to such calls in large numbers. From Israel's point of view, other dangers may emerge in addition to the challenge of dealing with the demonstrations themselves. For example, pressure from the streets could spur Mahmoud Abbas to accept a "unity before reconciliation" deal that gives Hamas complete security control over Gaza, allows it to take part in a "national unity government," and enables it confront Fatah in West Bank elections. Such a deal would legitimize Hamas without securing any substantial concessions from the movement.

## Jordan

Under constant pressure from petitions and potential demonstrations, King Abdullah has been promising to speed up reforms in the Hashemite Kingdom. Various opposition groups -- including the Muslim Brotherhood, Palestinian nationalists, and East Jordanian critics of the king's conduct -- are all voicing reservations regarding peace with Israel. Attentive to this mood, Abdullah has appointed some well-known anti-Israeli politicians to the new cabinet, formed by Prime Minister Marouf Bakhit. He also nominated a harsh critic of Israel, Khaled al-Karaki, to the all-important job of chief of the Royal Cabinet.

Clearly, then, Amman is heading toward a policy of cooling relations with Israel, though coordination on security and water issues continues. In fact, this may be the worst period in the short history of peace between the two states. Israeli officials are now worried that the king will accept Iranian overtures to improve relations and visit Tehran.

## Conclusion

Severe tests lie ahead for Israel's relationships with its Arab peace partners. Much effort will be needed to protect the peace treaties from the growing assertiveness of the Muslim Brotherhood and other hostile factions. The United States can greatly facilitate this goal by making clear that it regards peace as the cornerstone of its regional policies, even as it supports transition to democracy in the Arab world. Otherwise the Middle East may enter an era of reform under reformers who view peace as a liability. Washington should put the word out that the process begun at Camp David is not finished, and that peace treaties are a benefit for new democracies.

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