

## Israel's Pessimistic View of the Arab Spring

Americans took heart as they watched Egyptian demonstrators rally in Tahrir Square and topple the regime of Hosni Mubarak in a peaceful revolution. Next door in Israel, however, the mood was somber: "When some people in the West see what's happening in Egypt, they see Europe 1989," an Israeli official remarked. "We see it as Tehran 1979."<sup>1</sup> Political leaders vied to see who could be the most pessimistic, with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu publicly warning that it was even possible that "Egypt will go in the direction of Iran," with the new Cairo government becoming even more dictatorial and lashing out abroad.<sup>2</sup> As he pointed out in remarks to the Knesset, "They too had demonstrations; multitudes filled the town squares. But, of course it progressed in a different way."<sup>3</sup> As unrest spread from Egypt to Bahrain, Jordan, Syria, and Yemen, the gloom seemed to deepen.

These apocalyptic predictions and Israel's doom-and-gloom mentality are easy, too easy, to dismiss. Israelis are always sensitive to their security. Indeed, their reaction to the spread of democracy so close to their borders seems churlish, as does their tendency to look on the dark side when so many of their Arab neighbors now have hopes for a better life. But dismissing Israeli concerns would be a mistake. Some of Israel's fears are valid, and others that are less so will still drive Israeli policies. The new regimes and the chaotic regional situation pose security challenges to the Jewish state. These challenges, and the Israeli reactions to them, are likely to worsen the crisis in Gaza and make the prospects for peace between the Israelis and Palestinians even more remote. The

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## Dismissing Israeli concerns would be a mistake.

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new revolutions also have the potential to complicate the U.S.–Israel relationship further and make it harder for the United States to benefit from the Arab Spring.

In the end, however, neither the United States nor Israel is behind the winds of change sweeping the Middle East. Egypt will have a new regime, and other Arab countries may

too. Others may reform, while still others may become more reactionary, or even, as in Libya, collapse into civil war. Decrying this trend risks missing opportunities to nudge it in the right direction. It is in Israel's interest, as well as Washington's, that the regional transformation is peaceful and that democratization succeeds.

### Fear Factors

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The list of Israeli concerns about the wave of revolution sweeping the Arab world is long. Some concerns are overstated or erroneous, but others are understandable and legitimate. And because both the irrational and rational concerns will drive Israeli policy, all deserve serious attention.

#### When Friends Become Enemies

The biggest Israeli concern, and the one that has gotten the most attention, is the replacement of the Mubarak regime in Egypt by, well, that's the question. For much of Israel's history, Egypt was its most dangerous foe, and the two countries fought bitter wars in 1948, 1956, 1967, 1969–1970, and 1973. Egyptian President Anwar Sadat upended this seemingly constant belligerency when he made peace with Israel, transforming Israel's greatest foe into a partner. Islamist extremists killed Sadat, in part because of his embrace of peace, and Israelis still honor his memory. Mubarak never won the goodwill of ordinary Israelis as did Sadat or the late King Hussein of Jordan, but he did maintain the peace treaty, cooperate on counterterrorism, oppose Iran, and otherwise share strategic objectives with the Jewish state. And he and his regime seemed immovable. Israeli analyst Aluf Benn points out that “Israel has replaced eight prime ministers, fought several wars, and engaged in peace talks with multiple partners, and Mubarak was always there.”<sup>4</sup>

Who comes to power next is of tremendous concern to Israel. Netanyahu and others are particularly fearful that Islamists, led by the Muslim Brotherhood, will gain power, either legitimately through democratic elections or by seizing power during a time of chaos. The Brotherhood often criticized Sadat and then Mubarak for making peace with Israel, pointing to this as one (of many) factors that de-legitimized the regime. In February, days before Mubarak stepped down,

Rashad al-Bayoumi, a Brotherhood leader, declared, “after President Mubarak steps down and a provisional government is formed, there is a need to dissolve the peace treaty with Israel.”<sup>5</sup> Yossi Klein Halevi, an Israeli analyst, points out that a Muslim Brotherhood victory “would bring to power an anti-Semitic movement that is committed to ending Egypt’s peace treaty with the Jewish state.”<sup>6</sup> Barry Rubin, another Israeli analyst, even warns that Egypt could once again embrace radical nationalism and renew its alliance with Syria.<sup>7</sup>

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The Brotherhood’s prospects for power are unclear. It enjoys support from many Egyptians, but does not appear to command the loyalty of a majority. Some estimates put Brotherhood support at around 20 percent of the Egyptian population, but this is more guess than science. However, no rival group enjoys support from a majority of Egyptians. In addition, the Brotherhood is well-organized and could gain power simply because secular rivals do not get their electoral act together.

The Brotherhood rejected violence under Mubarak, though Israeli skeptics would say that this was a move driven by necessity given Egypt’s powerful security forces, not conviction that violence is wrong. For now, the Brotherhood has stressed that it favors democracy and seeks to work with, not supplant, other Egyptian political forces. The Brotherhood has even declared that it will not run a candidate for president in order to allay concerns in Egypt as well as abroad about its power. But the Brotherhood’s organization and power base will make it an important factor in determining Egyptian policy in the years to come.

Hamas’ history is rooted in the Muslim Brotherhood, making Israel even more leery of a Brotherhood-influenced regime in Egypt. Hamas has shot at Israeli soldiers and civilians, and launched rockets at and sent suicide bombers into Israeli cities. A like-minded regime in far more powerful Egypt makes Israelis shudder.

Israel’s bigger problem is that the Brotherhood is not alone in its anti-Israel sentiment. Israelis focused less on the many Tahrir Square demonstrators whose uplifting pleas for liberty inspired Arabs throughout the region and more on the few who also hanged a puppet with a Star of David on it to symbolize Mubarak while chanting “God Is Great.”<sup>8</sup> Even moderate Egyptian leaders who enjoy support in Washington, such as Ayman Nour and Nobel Laureate Mohamed ElBaradei, have called for revising the peace treaty with Israel or holding a referendum on it. Amr Moussa, formerly Egypt’s foreign minister and now a leading presidential candidate, has long criticized Israel. He enjoys the

distinction of being mentioned in a top pop song, with the lyrics declaring, “I hate Israel and I love Amr Moussa.”<sup>9</sup> Nour even declared, “the era of Camp David is over” though he claims to favor revising, not abrogating, the treaty.<sup>10</sup>

It is easy to dismiss statements like Nour’s as empty posturing during a lead up to elections. And, more encouragingly, Brotherhood leaders have also made statements to the effect that what is signed is signed—they oppose the peace treaty with Israel, but won’t do anything to change it. So, much of the anti-Israel rhetoric is likely to be honored in the breach. However, in a true democracy, politicians cannot always escape their campaign promises. As former U.S. peace negotiator Aaron David Miller contends, “The irony is that the challenges a new Egypt will pose to America and Israel won’t come from the worst case scenarios imagined by frantic policymakers and intelligence analysts—an extremist Muslim takeover, an abrogation of peace treaties, the closing of the Suez Canal—but from the very values of participatory government and free speech that free societies so cherish.”<sup>11</sup> Anti-Israel sentiment is strong in Egypt. A Pew poll taken after Mubarak’s fall found that Egyptians favored annulling the peace treaty with Israel by a 54 percent to 36 percent margin.<sup>12</sup> Leaders who do not make good on promises to distance Egypt from Israel will face criticism and punishment at the polls, particularly if a conflict in Gaza or another crisis again dominates the headlines.

To be clear, no Egyptian government is likely to abrogate the peace treaty with Israel in the near term, and there are few signs of a radical realignment of Egyptian foreign policy. Leading Israeli security officials such as former defense minister Moshe Arens and former Mossad chief Efraim Halevy point out that Egypt’s economy is weak and its military depends on the United States. Should Egypt become more bellicose, it would jeopardize the more than \$1 billion it gets from Washington every year. Even more important, both foreign investment and tourism would plunge, wreaking havoc on the Egyptian economy. Should Egypt turn to war, the formidable Israel Defense Forces (IDF) would quickly destroy Egyptian forces.<sup>13</sup>

Most Egyptian elites recognize this and accept the necessity of peace, even though they oppose Israeli policies, and many do not accept the legitimacy of the Jewish state. The peace has endured for more than 30 years, and Egypt’s current elites, particularly those in the still-influential military, want it to continue because they know a return to war would be disastrous. As Moroccan political scientist Mohamed Darif simply states, “Israel is a fact.”<sup>14</sup> Israelis, however, take little comfort that cold calculation will keep the peace going. Their intelligence services did not anticipate Mubarak’s fall or other revolts, and they worry that assurances like Darif’s will fall by the wayside as the tumult overturns all the certainties of past decades.

Because the peace treaty is likely to endure, it is easy to dismiss Israeli fears regarding Egypt entirely without acknowledging that some Israeli worries are valid. The Egyptian peace with Israel, always cold, could become even chillier. Mubarak, supposedly Israel's friend, only visited Israel once—for the funeral of assassinated Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin—and even then declared “this is not a visit.”<sup>15</sup> Intelligence cooperation, pressure on other Arab states to embrace peace initiatives, and (as discussed further below) help for Israel in containing Hamas all may diminish. Egypt has already made overtures to Iran, which Israel considers its nemesis. Egypt allowed an Iranian warship to transit the Suez Canal, and on March 29 acting Egyptian Foreign Minister Nabil al-Arabi announced Egypt would eventually normalize relations with Iran and its Lebanese ally Hezbollah.

Egypt—the largest and most important Arab country, as well as Israel's neighbor—understandably dominates the headlines, but Israelis also worry about other allies. Jordan, which has also signed a peace treaty with Israel and cooperates closely on intelligence matters, is of particular concern. Jordan has been especially helpful to Israel on stopping infiltration into the West Bank and otherwise assisting Israeli counterterrorism. King Abdullah, like his father King Hussein before him, is a staunch friend of Israel. However, he rules over a restive, Palestinian-majority population, and his openly pro-Western and pro-Israeli stance is not popular among his own people. Demonstrations have shaken Jordan, and a government of and by the people there—again, with possible Muslim Brotherhood leadership and a greater Palestinian voice—also raises Israeli fears that another longstanding ally could become hostile almost overnight.

Palestinians, both moderate and militant, are also vulnerable to unrest, and Israelis fear change will create instability and bolster extremists. Both the Hamas government of Gaza and the Fatah-led West Bank have seen unrest. Some Palestinians depict President Mahmoud Abbas, whose moderation regarding Israel makes him so prized in Washington, as a Mubarak clone. The Palestinian Authority government of the West Bank under Abbas' leadership is highly authoritarian—“moderation” applies to his attitude toward Israel, not civil liberties at home. And sure enough, Abbas reacted to unrest in Mubarak style, banning demonstrations and even censoring a television program that mocked Libyan dictator Muammar Qaddafi.<sup>16</sup> While Israelis often scorn, belittle, or ignore Abbas, they also recognize that he is willing to make peace and, perhaps more importantly to many Israelis, crush Hamas and other enemies of Israel on the territory he controls. A new Palestinian leader may not be so conciliatory. Hamas, usually more deft with Palestinian public opinion, was even more heavy handed against the protesters than was Abbas.

To offset pressure for democratic change, Hamas and Abbas' government did the unthinkable: they united, at least on paper. In April, the two signed a unity agreement that would satisfy Palestinians' long-standing demand to end the division created after Hamas and Fatah came to blows in 2007 and Hamas seized power in Gaza. In so doing, both parties could please constituents on a key issue without risking their own holds on power.

Whether this unity lasts is an open question, but Israelis have reacted harshly to it. Many observers in the United States believe Palestinian unity is necessary for peace: Abbas now claims he can negotiate on behalf of all Palestinians, and if Hamas uses terrorism against Israel it risks disrupting inter-Palestinian peace as well as provoking an Israeli reaction. Nevertheless, on May 3, Netanyahu called on Abbas to cancel the agreement, contending that Israel could not make peace with a Palestinian government that included a terrorist organization.

### **Devils You Know**

One of the most surprising Israeli reactions is the apparent concern that unrest could topple adversaries like Bashar al-Assad in Syria. Assad supports Hamas and

Hezbollah, rejects peace (or at least has not embraced negotiations, as has Abbas), and is a close friend of Iran. In 2007, Israel even bombed Syria to destroy a suspected nuclear facility there. Assad's regime, however, is less erratic than what came before.

Salah Jadid, the predecessor to Bashar al-Assad's father Hafez, whipped up popular sentiment against Israel, agitating on behalf of the Palestinians to the point that the situation spiraled into war in 1967—a conflict that Damascus was not prepared

to fight and resulted in the loss of the Golan Heights to Israel. Hafez, who consolidated power in 1970, learned his lesson and controlled and manipulated popular sentiment, and at times went against it, to avoid a conflict with Israel. His son Bashar takes more risks, but he too recognizes that an open clash with Israel would be disastrous for Syria and his regime.

Relations between Syria and Israel are governed by many rules, most of which are unspoken but are nevertheless quite real. So while Syria supports Hamas, it also places limits on the Palestinian group's activities. In Lebanon, Syria backs the anti-Israel Hezbollah, but also checks its activities when Damascus fears escalation. Changes in Syria could bring to power a new government that does not know these subtle rules and, again, plays to popular opinion rather than strategic reality.

**The most surprising Israeli reaction may be the apparent concern that unrest could topple Syria.**

Nor must Assad or other regimes fall for these effects to be felt. Regimes that survive the wave of unrest are likely to be battered in the process. Even if Assad stays in power, he may feel compelled to stir up anger against Israel to divert the pressure of popular opinion. If Syria's economy continues to stagnate (and that may be its best hope given that violence there is disrupting trade and scaring off investors), Assad may try to seize on anti-Israeli sentiment to deflect popular anger and adopt more confrontational policies.

Israel's fear of Iran is growing as a result of this uncertainty. U.S. and Israeli officials accuse Iran, and its ally Hezbollah, of helping the Syrian regime crush peaceful demonstrators.<sup>17</sup> Iran worries that unrest could spread to its soil, but it also comforts itself by claiming that unrest in the Arab world is proof that the people there reject Westernized regimes, like Mubarak's and Tunisia's Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, and want more religion in their lives.<sup>18</sup> This may not jibe with the reality of the revolutions so far, but Iran nevertheless is riding high and may be more aggressive in backing Hezbollah, Hamas, or other allies in the region.

As most of the above concerns suggest, Israel is a status quo power in many ways. While Israelis bemoan their situation, the country's position is strong. Terrorism is down from the high levels of ten years ago. Israel is the military giant in the region. Its economy is strong and growing stronger. So change, even if it means the toppling of regional foes, risks rocking this prosperous boat.

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### **Down with the People**

In the past, Israel used the lack of democracy in the Arab world to justify its special closeness to the United States and its isolation in the region. Israel was an island of democracy in a sea of dictatorship, and as such had a special affinity for the United States, the world's oldest and most powerful democracy. Netanyahu used to argue that democracy was vital for true peace, as undemocratic countries were not trustworthy and thus might not honor any treaty they signed. He tempered these views after Hamas won elections in Gaza in 2006, and now seems to have shelved them completely.<sup>19</sup> Democracy, it seems, is not necessarily welcome.

Given how strong anti-Israel sentiment is in much of the Arab world, Israelis do not trust public opinion. A 2010 University of Maryland/Zogby poll found that almost 90 percent of Arabs saw Israel as "the biggest threat to you."<sup>20</sup> "The ugly facts," said former Defense Minister Moshe Arens, "are that the two peace treaties that Israel concluded so far—the one with Egypt and the other with Jordan—were both signed with dictators: Anwar Sadat and King Hussein."<sup>21</sup> In other words, Israelis fear that the Mubaraks, Husseins, and other dictators are as

good as it will get for Israel *because* these leaders are outside the mainstream of their societies.

## **Crisis Points**

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Most of the above concerns are ineffable and long-term, though their vagueness makes them no less potent. While Israel may plan for these problems, many will not pan out. More immediately, the dramatic changes in the Arab world are likely to exacerbate two important security issues for Israel: its confrontation with the Hamas government of the Gaza Strip and the status of the peace process.

### **The Coming Crisis in Gaza**

Since Hamas took control of Gaza in 2007, Israel has tried to contain and undermine the Islamist regime with a mix of diplomatic isolation, economic pressure, and occasional military strikes. To intimidate Hamas, Israel also retains the threat of a more massive military response, such as the 2008–2009 “Cast Lead” operation, which led to more than 1,000 Palestinian deaths. Despite this considerable pressure, Hamas has consolidated power and is steadily building up its armed forces. It now has rockets that can reach well beyond Israeli towns near Gaza such as Sderot and can hit major cities like Ashkelon, Ashdod, Beersheba, and perhaps even Tel Aviv.

At the same time, since Cast Lead, Hamas largely has adhered to a ceasefire, at times allowing groups like Palestine Islamic Jihad or salafi-jihadist organizations with an ideology more akin to Osama bin Laden’s to strike Israel, but not using its own forces. Hamas is now the government of Gaza, and as such it focuses not only on fighting Israel, but also on the prosperity of Gaza (or, more accurately, preventing Gaza’s disastrous economic situation from getting worse) and shoring up its political position there.

Under Mubarak, Egypt quietly helped Israel against Hamas, much to Hamas’ outrage. Egypt mostly kept the Rafah crossing point between Egypt and Gaza closed, helping Israel restrict the flow of goods and people into and out of Gaza. Over time, a massive tunnel complex between Egypt and Gaza developed, and Israeli officials complained that a mix of incompetence, corruption, and sympathy kept Egypt from shutting these down. Israelis, however, recognized that Egypt could be far more helpful to Hamas, and thus muted their criticism even as they pressed Cairo to be more aggressive. And in the last months of Mubarak’s rule, Egypt heeded Israel’s call, building a barrier on the border that extended deep underground, making tunneling much harder.

The revolution in Egypt and unrest elsewhere in the Arab world has shaken this always-fragile equilibrium. Sympathy for Gazans in Egypt is high, and Hamas’ resistance to Israel is also popular. Rami Khoury observes that there is



“widespread indignity felt by Egyptians who see themselves as the jailers of Gaza on behalf of Israel and Washington.”<sup>22</sup> Any Egyptian regime that reflects popular opinion will (the interim government announced in May that it plans to open Rafah soon) release pressure on Gaza by easing restrictions on the Rafah crossing point and looking the other way at smuggling. This would probably be the least that a popularly elected regime could get away with, and there would be pressure to directly aid Gaza and Hamas, not just end restrictions. Already the new Egyptian government announced it will open Rafah and no longer cooperate with the economic isolation of Gaza. Egyptian Foreign Minister Nabil El-Arabi declared “Egyptian national security and Palestinian security are one.”<sup>23</sup>

Should pressure ease, and should Hamas—as is likely—exploit this to acquire weapons and send personnel in and out for training, Israel will be tempted to take unilateral action. This may involve operations on or near the Egyptian side of the border of Gaza, as well as increasing the pace of killing Hamas leaders in Gaza. Such actions, in turn, would inflame popular sentiment in Egypt further against Israel and increase pressure on any regime in Cairo to further aid Hamas.

Hamas too may be bolder. Where Israel sees a loss of an ally in Egypt, Hamas sees a potential friend, particularly if the Muslim Brotherhood enjoys increased influence in Egypt. Hamas can now play to the Egyptian people even if the Egyptian military and any elected leaders prefer to avoid a confrontation with Israel.

Even more important, popular opinion will play an increasing role in Gaza. Hamas is not immune from the demands for change sweeping the region. The ceasefire Hamas largely has observed has damaged its credentials, increasing its incentives to fight Israel as a resistance organization, and now it needs those credentials. On March 18, Hamas fired more than 30 mortars at Israel and claimed responsibility, justifying the attack as revenge for an Israeli airstrike that killed two Hamas members. On April 7, an anti-tank weapon fired from Gaza hit an Israeli school bus, mortally wounding a 16 year-old boy and the bus driver. Israel responded with military strikes on Gaza that killed three militants and three civilians. The unity agreement with Abbas also shows the increased importance Hamas now attaches to placating public opinion.

Hamas may seek to burnish its resistance credentials in order to counter any legitimacy loss from its authoritarian ways. On a rhetorical level, this may involve measures such as Hamas leader and Gaza Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh’s praising of Osama bin Laden after the United States killed him on May 1—the only leader of a (pseudo) state to do so. Hamas will also find it

**H**amas may look to get its credentials as a resistance organization back.

harder to back down from its on-again, off-again confrontations with Israel. Even if Hamas itself does not engage in attacks, more radical groups like Palestine Islamic Jihad and salafi-jihadists will still attack Israel, and Hamas may fear that cracking down on them would hurt it politically.

### **Poor Prospects for Peace**

Beyond the usual reasons that peace is desirable—security for Israel, justice and dignity for the Palestinians, and greater stability for the region—a successful peace process would take away one of the greatest rhetorical weapons of extremists and make it harder for demagogues to create an escalatory spiral. It would also improve Israel's relations with the United States and Europe at a key moment in the region's history. Israel, however, will be even more skeptical of taking risks for peace. For now, the long-term identity of Netanyahu's peace partner is an open question. If Mubarak can go, so too can Abbas or Assad. So why, Israelis ask, take risks for peace if your partner may be gone tomorrow?

Nor are Arab leaders likely to extend a hand. New leaders of nascent democracies are not likely to risk their popularity by embracing a peace which, under most conceivable scenarios, would be seen by their own people as selling out the Palestinians. Battered old regimes are also less likely to embrace a peace which would not be popular with their constituents when their own legitimacy is suspect. Palestinian leaders will be less compromising. Abbas, for example, is already under pressure because of his authoritarian ways in the West Bank, and the charge of "sellout" might topple his regime.

Should actual negotiations commence, Israeli demands for security guarantees are likely to grow. One Israeli analyst called for demands to include "a demilitarized Palestine, Israel's right to respond to terror attacks, and an Israeli military presence along the Jordan River."<sup>24</sup> Some of these demands have been accepted in a de facto way by Palestinian negotiators (like a demilitarized Palestinian state), but others represent a more hardline stance than previous Israeli positions.

Given Israel's overwhelming conventional military superiority, and the unlikely prospect that impoverished Syria or a new, revolutionary regime in Jordan could suddenly field a strong conventional military, these demands are not strategic but political, meant to reassure the Israeli public in an uncertain time. But they are political on the Palestinian side too, and acceptance of additional Israeli security demands would tell many Palestinians that their sovereignty means little in practice—so little, in fact, that Israeli troops could stay along their borders and go into their cities without interference.

## America Caught in Between

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The United States will be caught between its commitment to Israel and its desire to gain the goodwill of the new Arab leaders and advance democratization in the region. U.S. regional interests go well beyond the security of Israel, of course, embracing issues from counterterrorism to energy security.

The peace process is an obvious point of potential contention. One way to make the success of the Arab Spring more likely is to remove one of the greatest radicalizing forces in the region—the Palestinian question—from the agenda. New governments and old will want the United States to once again beat its head against the wall in hopes of a breakthrough. For Israelis, peace was not about being welcomed in the Arab world. Aluf Benn argues that “most Israelis viewed the peace process as a means for bettering relations with Europe and the United States and not as a channel to regional acceptance.”<sup>25</sup> Well before the Arab Spring began, the Obama and Netanyahu administrations had locked horns on this issue.

The divisions within the Palestinian camp, the rightward shift in Israeli politics, and the coming election in the United States already made this peace-process season unlikely to bear fruit, but the Arab revolutions mean it will be almost impossible. The result will be the triumph of form over substance. Miller contends that “in the coming months we’ll see a lot of process but not much peace.”<sup>26</sup> Even an empty process, however, can lead to disputes, particularly if the Obama administration believes Netanyahu and company are refusing to put a serious proposal on the table.

Gaza offers the risk of a high-profile crisis that both the new leaders and the United States would rather avoid. The United States, however, will find it hard to press Israel to restrain itself in Gaza if Hamas becomes more aggressive. Mortar attacks and shootings from Gaza deserve an Israeli response, but a new regime in Egypt, unlike Mubarak, may not play ball with Israel.

Israel’s fears are much more likely to become reality if reform efforts stall or fail. Like it or not, Mubarak is gone. The *ancien régime* will not return in Cairo, and pro-Western allies from Bahrain to Morocco are shaken. It’s worth thinking about what the failure of democracy in Egypt would look like. Failure would empower radicals in Egypt and throughout the region, “proving” that a Western, democratic model is not right for the Arab world. Reformers would point to a lack of Western support, while critics would use U.S. support for Israel as a cudgel to beat back moderates. More extreme voices would only gain resonance.

Should regimes start to fail, scapegoating becomes more likely. Anti-Israel sentiment has long been a way for dictatorships to deflect popular dissatisfaction with the regime, and new rulers will use this tool too. If these regimes suffer economic and political problems, the political logic of scapegoating grows.

Conversely, if regime legitimacy grows because new leaders enjoy the consent of the governed and are showing material progress on political and economic grounds, the need for scapegoating diminishes. Israeli President Shimon Peres has contended that “poverty and oppression in the region have fed resentment against Israel and the better our neighbors will have it, we shall have better neighbors.”<sup>27</sup>

Scapegoating, however, may avail new regimes little if they cannot govern well. Indeed, one positive sign for Israel regarding the Arab Spring is that it is not about Israel. The Syrian uprising in particular shows that Arab publics will not buy regime attempts to deflect their anger over corruption, stagnation, and repression at home onto Israel. Scapegoating is more likely to succeed, however, if Israel’s policies are viewed as provocative and uncompromising.

The success of democratization in Egypt is particularly important. Egypt’s size will always make it important, but its political stature in the region fell under Mubarak’s sclerotic rule. Now, as the likely leader of the Arab democratic camp, it will again enjoy enormous prestige. Indeed, Israeli fears that Iran will exploit the void can best be countered by a politically strong Egypt that enjoys credibility with the Arab people and offers a more powerful message than what Tehran promotes.

Under these new circumstances, Egypt’s peace treaty with Israel could become particularly important. No longer is it a deal of elites. Now, the Egyptian nation will be embracing it in a de facto way, making it easier for leaders in other countries to convince their own people that an unpopular peace may be the best they can hope for given today’s political and strategic realities.

**In the end, regional revolutions can work to Israel’s benefit.**

In the end, regional revolutions can work to Israel’s benefit. Change, however, must be managed properly. Israel in particular must recognize the new regional dynamics, including the potential for escalation and the political realities of its neighbors and potential peace partners. Such recognition will not make the new challenges go away, but they will make Israel ready to seize

opportunities for peace and less likely to engage in a dangerous escalation that could spiral into disaster.

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