

## **THE COMING CRISIS IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

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*The gap between dominant Western perceptions of the Middle East and the region's reality is dangerously wide. While the "Arab Spring" is celebrated as an advance for moderation and democracy, in fact the advance is going to revolutionary Islamists. Developments in Turkey and Egypt especially threaten to plunge the Middle East back into an era of conflict, instability, and the worst threats to Western interests in decades.*

There are several things very much predictable about the future of the Middle East area during the next year. First, on June 12, 2011, Turkey will have an election. That election will probably be won by the government, whether or not it gets a two-thirds majority. The current rulers will interpret this as a signal to take a much tougher line toward Israel and the United States. It is possible that the extent of the increase of Turkey's enmity toward Israel after that election will astonish the world.

If the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) wins a two-thirds majority, this means it will have control of rewriting the Turkish constitution. They will try to create a presidential regime, Erdogan will run for president, and Turkey will move into an increasingly visible alliance with Iran, Syria, Hamas, and Hizballah. This is not alarmism, it is a cold analysis based on facts.

Second, the Palestinian effort at the UN to gain unilateral recognition for a Palestinian state will fail. The United States will veto this, but it will to be a mess, a mess created by the incompetence of the Obama administration, which could have prevented it.

Third, regarding Egypt, there is no doubt that the Egyptian revolution is just as significant and just as bad as Iran's 1979 Islamist revolution. That development so destabilized the region and promoted revolutionary Islamism that it helped lead to six wars (Iran-Iraq; Iraq's invasion of Kuwait; U.S.-led invasion of Iraq; U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan; Hizballah-Israel war; Hamas-Israel war) and September 11 as well as to various Islamist upheavals, terrorism, and civil wars elsewhere (including in Algeria and Egypt).

Egypt will hold parliamentary elections in September 2011. As of now, the moderate democrats have not organized any serious party. The only serious parties organized are Islamist parties, not only the Muslim Brotherhood but others, and left-wing parties or radical nationalist ones.

### **THE COMPREHENSIVE TRANSFORMATION OF EGYPT INTO A RADICAL STATE**

To put it simply, what has happened in Egypt is not just the undoing of the "Mubarak regime" but the undoing of the "Sadat regime," that is, the revolution Anwar al-Sadat brought to Egypt in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Sadat changed Egypt's course from being a radical state seeking to destabilize other

Arab countries, destroy Israel, and oppose U.S. interests. He deemphasized spreading revolution, made peace with Israel, and allied Egypt with the United States.

Now, with assistance from President Barack Obama, those processes have been undone. Egypt will return to the pre-Sadat era. The only question is the proportion of radical nationalism and Islamism in that mix.

It is not clear whether there will be an Islamist majority, but there will be a radical anti-American majority in parliament. There is no doubt of that. It literally cannot be any other way, so this will have to be covered in the media.

It will be interesting to try to predict what the headlines will look like in the *New York Times* the day after the election. How will they spin this? What will they say? What can they say about this? This is very, very serious. At that point, it should be clear that the Obama policy has been a catastrophe. He helped bring down the Egyptian regime and the result is a radical anti-American regime that is ready to go into conflict with Israel.

The opening of the Gaza border is one step in that direction. What then does it mean that they are opening the border, even if not now but when a new elected president and parliament take office? It means that weapons, terrorists, and money will flow freely into Gaza.

This in turn means that Hamas will become bolder, and at some point, perhaps in 2011-2012, it will attack Israel with rockets and mortars. Israel will then have to respond militarily. Though at that point, everyone will have to ask the question of what Egypt will do. What will the Egyptian government do? If Amr Moussa is president with a radical parliament or even an Islamist parliament, they could send troops. It could become an Egypt-Israel war.

There are, however, other possibilities. Perhaps they will simply let thousands of Egyptian volunteers go into Gaza to fight. Perhaps it will allow, or not be able to stop, or not try too hard to stop attacks across the Egypt-Israel border. Again, this is not some alarmist fantasy but realistic scenarios that one must be prepared for.

If Amr Moussa, who is not an Islamist or a supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood, is elected president, will he be able to resist pressure from parliament and the masses in order to maintain a tough stance? Will he want to do so? Instead, won't he try to take advantage of this to promote his own interests and anti-Israel beliefs? This is especially true, as Egypt's terrible economic situation would not permit him to offer the masses a better life or even food at current prices.

Now, one can say not to worry, that they won't do anything because the Egyptian military wants to continue to receive American aid money. That is indeed an argument, but is that enough? Can the entire Middle East strategy be based on that hope?

There have been cases where countries and governments have been willing to give up American aid for political goals. Remember that the Iranian revolution threw away all the American aid and military sales. Thus merely to maintain that everything will be fine because of that money issue is not a satisfactory

argument. Moreover, one must keep in mind that Egypt is going to face a major economic crisis for which there is no solution, and no amount of U.S. aid is going to resolve that problem. The price of food will continue to increase.

The Egyptians will not be able to build new housing. They will not be able to handle the problem of unemployment. They will not be able to create jobs. This is the reality. What then will happen when—as is fully predictable—Egypt’s government is unable to deliver on its promises and the country goes into crisis?

This turn of events is completely predictable, but the media ignores every such possibility. Now the new line is that the Muslim Brotherhood are “good guys” and moderates, while the problem is the radical jihadi Salafi groups. The Muslim Brotherhood is good; jihadists are bad; but the Muslim Brotherhood is a jihadi group and is an alliance with these groups. It is thus ridiculous to make this distinction.

Thus, a series of totally predictable crises lie ahead, yet there has been no serious analysis of the problems—much less the solutions—by the U.S. government, media, experts, and the public debate generally. Moreover, even those three crises leave aside other issues. As of June 2011, the U.S. government has still not done anything at all on Syria. Sanctions on Iran are leaking, and the three main reasons for this are known—they are China, Russia, and Turkey. The U.S. government, however, is doing nothing about that. In fact, it is consciously permitting leaks to continue.

There is a serious crisis ahead, one that might be seen as the return to the 1970s with Islamists in place of Arab nationalists. Yet again, all of this is totally predictable. While the Obama administration strategy on Israel is problematic, that is not the main problem. Nor is the problem the U.S.-Israel relationship. The problem is U.S. strategy in the region. In saying this, what has been observed is the following:

First, there are a significant number of people in the Arab world who agree with this analysis since it corresponds with their thinking. The fact that Saudi Arabia, with all of its faults, has had to take the lead in battling Iranian and Syrian influence shows that the U.S. government has not been doing its job properly. Second, it is increasingly being recognized by the American foreign policy establishment—although more privately than publicly—that the above statements are accurate, that the situation is dangerous, and that the White House in particular is doing a terrible job. There are also more and more people at the State Department, the Defense Department—including the secretary of defense and at least partly the secretary of state—who seem to be aware of these issues and problems. However, as long as they do not have the support in the White House, there is clearly little they can do to change it.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR ISRAEL**

There are options in dealing with these threats. Israel can deal with this to a large extent successfully, or at least as successfully as possible. The first thing, which is already happening, is the need to rebuild what in Israel is called the Southern Front, which is the defense along the border with Egypt. This will be costly and Israeli army reserve soldiers will have to serve additional days, but it can be done.

Israel will also have to deal with the flotilla, which arrives in mid-June 2011. In addition, Israel will have to

deal with any attempts by people to cross its border. What Israel does or does not offer the Palestinian Authority (PA) in negotiations is one of the least important issues for Israel at the moment; it is currently not a central issue.

The ideas held by Western governments, experts, and pundits are very much out of date. The central issue is not what borders Israel has or the future of Jerusalem. Rather, one is dealing with strategic issues. One must deal with 2011; the 1980s and 1990s have passed.

Nonetheless, by returning to the 1970s, this means going back to a time when Arab governments were radical or were intimidated by the radicals enough to go to war with Israel; when the United States was not the world's sole superpower, and movements genuinely believed they would lead a revolution throughout the region to transform their societies in a radical and undemocratic manner. Today, Iran and Turkey have joined in on that destabilizing set of beliefs and policies.

There is no real U.S. pressure on Israel. The Israel-Palestinian issue is not the core problem in the region. It is a sideshow. It is not important.

At any rate, people focused on the wrong sentence in Obama's May 2011 speech. They focused on the sentence about the pre-1967 borders. The important sentence was the sequential plan, which was for Israel to turn over the entire West Bank to the Palestinian Authority in exchange for some unspecified security guarantees, thus producing a de facto Palestinian state.

What is important is *not* this sentence: "The borders of Israel and Palestine should be based on the 1967 lines with mutually agreed swaps, so that secure and recognized borders are established for both states." Rather, it is these two sentences that matter: "The full and phased withdrawal of Israeli military forces should be coordinated with the assumption of Palestinian security responsibility in a sovereign, non-militarized state. The duration of this transition period must be agreed, and the effectiveness of security arrangements must be demonstrated."

Obama says, again it is important to repeat it, that Israel should withdraw to the 1967 borders and Palestine should become a non-militarized state. Then the two sides will negotiate about refugees, Jerusalem, and final borders. Obama was thus calling for the 1967 borders, with Israel giving up all of its bargaining leverage, and then—and this might never happen—the independent Palestinian state would agree to some border swaps. In effect, this means that Israel will return to its 1967 borders without "mutually agreed swaps."

In effect, what Obama told the PA is not to go through the UN, that his administration would give the PA what it wants in exchange for very small things. Of course, according to Obama's plan, the PA will have to agree to security guarantees and demilitarization, both of which they can disregard when they become an independent state.

What then will Israel do when it is back to its 1967 borders and the state of Palestine builds an army and lets cross-border terrorist attacks take place? Will it launch an invasion of a neighboring country? Will it depend on Obama to force the state of Palestine to keep its commitments?

Obama won't even force the PA to keep its commitment not to partner with a group that rejects the entire peace process framework (Hamas) or force Egypt to maintain its commitments under the Egypt-Israel

peace treaty, guaranteed by the United States. Obama has no credibility, and no country—not only Israel, but nobody—can rely on him. At the same time though, there is no real pressure on Israel at all from the U.S. government. Obama is telling the truth when he says that in fact the security relationship is quite good. Thus his talk about the peace process is just words, but his conduct of U.S. strategy is dangerously real.

## **WHAT SHOULD U.S. POLICY DO?**

The United States should call for the downfall of the Syrian and Iranian governments. Even a purely verbal policy is superior to what is currently going on. It would encourage the opposition forces in those countries, who have been publicly saying, “Nobody is supporting us. Nobody is helping us.” It is true.

The first step is a purely declaratory policy. Whatever possibility there is of Islamist takeovers in Egypt and Libya, there is less such prospect in Syria. First, one must remember that the Sunni Muslim Arab population of Tunisia is 100 percent. The Sunni Muslim Arab population of Egypt is 90 percent. The Sunni Muslim Arab population of Syria is 60 percent. Moreover, there seem to be proportionately more moderate democrats among Sunni Muslim Arabs in Syria than in Egypt. Is the Muslim Brotherhood a threat in Syria? Yes, definitely. Is it less of a threat than in virtually every other country except for Lebanon? The answer is also, yes.

## **CAN THE SYRIAN OPPOSITION OVERTHROW ASAD?**

The Syrian opposition is not likely to be able to overthrow Asad, though it might. They should be supported, and the people of Iran should be supported (and those in Lebanon and Turkey should also be supported). At present, none of them are being supported by the United States.

Why have a policy of being nice to your enemies and nasty to your friends? Yet again, when discussing this, it is not just a matter of Israel. It is a matter of wide variety of political forces.

As for Egypt, the end of the peace treaty in practice is a certainty. Here is the problem: If Egypt no longer adheres to the treaty but does not publicly say that, then it becomes a judgment call for the United States. In other words, the Obama administration will have to decide whether or not it believes that the treaty is being kept. Thus for all practical purposes the treaty may be torn up, but the United States will refuse to acknowledge this.

If the PA and Hamas are able to agree on a joint cabinet—which may or may not happen—they will try to do it in a way that allows them to say, “Oh, no, Hamas is not part of the government.” The U.S. government then will have to interpret whether or not it deems Hamas to be part of the government. Therefore, it is not inevitable that this would trigger a cutoff of U.S. aid to the PA or even any change in U.S. policy on the “peace process” issue at all.

The Obama administration can say no, Hamas is not part of the government, and the United States should continue to give aid. Then Congress will have to decide whether or not it views the PA to be in violation of the congressional law on aid and relations with the PA. Will there be a massive battle between Congress and the administration? Again, this is something that is terribly predictable, and people are not dealing with it.

The Obama administration can say that Hamas or no Hamas, supporting the PA is a vital U.S. interest. It can, indeed already is, saying the same thing about Hizballah participation in Lebanon's government. Soon it will have to decide on the Muslim Brotherhood and Egypt's government, though Obama has preemptively said that it is okay with him. So the U.S. government will have no problem with the participation in governments of three different groups calling for genocide against the Jews and jihad against America.

What is needed is a strategy that recognizes that the principal regional problem is the challenge of revolutionary Islamism. The United States needs to take the lead in developing an alignment that brings together the United States, the Europeans, the relatively moderate Arab regimes, and Israel. They must build a strategy that supports the oppositions in Turkey, Iran, and Lebanon, and that recognizes the enemies are Iran and Syria, Hamas and Hizballah, the Muslim Brotherhood, and Iraqi insurgents. They must then deal with that in the manner that the Soviet Union and its allies were dealt with during the Cold War. It is very simple, and of course one would have to get into the details, but they are not going to do it.

What is truly amazing is that all of these things are visible; and yet people in positions of power—political, media, and intellectual—are simply pretending it is not happening. As a result, they will not be prepared. As a result of their not being prepared, the crisis will be worse.