

REFLECTIONS ON THE REVOLUTION IN EGYPT

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For Westerners, Egypt's revolution is seen as a wonderful development, a victory for democracy. Yet the enemies of America and the West view it is a defeat for the United States and the West, and as a step forward for anti-democratic revolutionary Islamism. It is possible that both sides could be right. Egypt may be both a democracy and no longer an ally of America or a source of regional stability. This might mean happiness for the Egyptians and problems for Western interests. Yet the success of Egypt's democratic experiment may not happen and Egyptians could end up suffering even more.

INTRODUCTION

"We ought to suspend our judgment until the first effervescence is a little subsided...and until we see something deeper than the agitation of a troubled and frothy surface." –Edmund Burke, Reflections on the Revolution in France (1790).

It is understandable that Arabs, who have been waiting decades for their democratic moment, are rejoicing at the political upheavals in Egypt and elsewhere. One wishes them well and hopes that this all works out in a new Middle East of democracy, peace, progress, and rising living standards. For Westerners, Egypt's revolution is seen as a wonderful development, a victory for democracy. Yet the enemies of America and the West view it is a defeat for the United States and the West, and as a step forward for anti-democratic revolutionary Islamism. Hasan Nasrallah, Hizballah's spiritual guide explains: "The anniversary of the Iranian revolution coincided with the occasion of the Egyptian people's victory over the tyrant. And it is out of good fortune and fate for February 11 to become the day of the fall of the two biggest and most important allies of America in the region: the Shah's regime in Iran and the Mubarak regime in Egypt."^[1]

It is possible that both sides could be right. Egypt may be both a democracy and no longer an ally of America or a source of regional stability. This might mean happiness for the Egyptians and problems for Western interests. Yet the success of Egypt's democratic experiment may not happen and Egyptians could end up suffering even more.

Consider the precedent of Lebanon, where in 2005, the same thing happened. In the Beirut Spring, as it was called, a far higher proportion of the population—arguably 50 times more—than in Egypt rallied to demand the end of Syrian control and the return of democracy Lebanese-style. There are two important lessons here that should be heeded.

First, an equally huge crowd demonstrated on behalf of Hizballah and continued Syrian control. That is, it is possible to generate mass support on behalf of anti-democratic movements and for Islamism. This phenomenon of the "reactionary masses" is well known in modern European history but has been

forgotten in the West today.

Indeed, in Egypt many of those demonstrating for “freedom” define it as having a Shari’a-dominated society at home and a radical foreign policy, including support for terrorism. . Second, the Lebanese experiment failed, and it did so as a result of free elections (along with a bit of Hizballah’s strategic violence). At the very same moment as Egypt was celebrating, Lebanon was succumbing to the rule of Hizballah, Iran, and Syria. It decayed into the present situation despite the fact that Lebanon has the strongest record of democracy of any Arabic-speaking country.

Events in Lebanon also marked another strategic advance for the Iran-led radical bloc that included Syria, Hamas, Hizballah, and Iraqi insurgents, supported by the Turkish government. This march toward possible regional hegemony was as significant, or more so, as the democratic upheavals. It was a sign that the Middle East’s history could go in more than one direction.

One is not well served if everyone does nothing but celebrate the fall of a dictatorship. It is important to ask questions and give warnings. History does not end today, no more than it ended in Russia in 1917, Cuba in 1959, or Iran in 1979. Those were all negative examples. There are also positive ones: in South Korea, Central Europe, and Latin America.

WHAT REALLY HAPPENED IN EGYPT?

The way it is being portrayed, one would think that in the early 1980s, Egypt was a nice democratic country. Suddenly, a money-hungry monster seized power. Now this one bad man has left and so things can get back to normal.

In fact, when Mubarak came to power, Egypt had already gone through 30 years of dictatorship. Before that, there was overwhelming dissatisfaction with the multi-party democratic system under the monarchy. The end of democracy in 1952 was marked with celebrations as big as those now being seen. After that, for 60 years Egypt was largely ruled by the military. This was not a one-man dictatorship, despite the use of Mubarak as scapegoat for all the country’s ills.

During its 60 years in power, the regime went through different phases. Consider how it dealt with the Muslim Brotherhood. When it came to power in 1952, the regime worked with the Muslim Brotherhood but when that group became too aggressive, the regime broke it. In the 1970s, President Anwar al-Sadat faced a leftist faction within his regime, and he allowed the Muslim Brotherhood to reemerge as a counterweight. Sadat was assassinated by Islamists—though not by Muslim Brotherhood members—and this gave Mubarak (who was sitting next to him) the feeling that Islamism might just be a problem.

Then, for the first time, the regime fell into serious dysfunction. Gamal Abdel Nasser, the first president, died and left the presidency to Anwar al-Sadat, who died and left it to Mubarak. Mubarak, however, did not die. He outlived his usefulness and so alienated the military and elite that it could not meet the challenge

of the 2011 popular revolt. One of the most basic factors in Middle East politics is that precisely when people think the government is weak and giving way, they escalate demands. This is what happened in Iran in 1978 and in Egypt in 2011. If governments do not show a strong face, they can disintegrate.

All the leaders who hate America understand this principle. If the army had been willing to put down demonstrations from the start, there would have been no revolution in Egypt. That is why there will be no revolution in Iran or Syria.

Again, Mubarak did not fall because people went into Tahrir Square. Mubarak fell because the army wanted him out, in part because it was tired of him and angry that he had not retired or prepared for the succession; in part because he was a useful scapegoat for all of the regime's sins. Thus, the army stood aside and did not lift a finger against the protesters. One must keep this point in mind, because it is very important for understanding other countries. The conditions prevailing in Egypt are not present elsewhere. The security forces in Iran, Syria, and the Gaza Strip would not hesitate to shoot. That is why the dictatorships on the other side are stronger than the authoritarian regimes that grant a wider margin of freedom on the anti-Islamist side.

THE REVOLUTION

“Considerate people, before they declare themselves, will observe the use which is made of power and particularly of so trying a thing as new power in new persons of whose principles, tempers, and dispositions they have little or no experience, and in situations where those who appear the most stirring in the scene may possibly not be the real movers.” –Burke

“The People Toppled the Government,” is *al-Ahram*'s headline, and the general interpretation of the Egyptian revolution around the world. This is true, but only partly. Mubarak's pedestal was shaken by the people, but he was pushed off it by the army and the establishment. The revolution in Egypt succeeded because the army did not want Mubarak any more. The turning point was not that the army would not shoot its own people—it has done so before—but that it would not do so in order to save Mubarak.

In normal times the army would have been content to let Mubarak rule until he died, despite being very unhappy with his behavior. He had been declining as a leader due to his age; had refused to name a vice-president, step down, or prepare seriously for succession; and he was trying to foist his inept son Gamal on a reluctant elite. When the demonstrations began and were gaining momentum, the army chose to remain passive. This signaled to Egyptians that no one would stop them from overthrowing the government. In Egypt, unlike other countries, the demonstrators did not have to fear repression and thus won easily. It was therefore a people's revolution conducted with the army's permission. This points to the military's future potential to retake power should it choose to do so.

This raises other important points about Egypt's future: The people are not inevitably moderate and democracy is not necessarily irreversible. After all, Egypt does not have strong institutions, a powerful

liberal sector, reasonably high level of education, a strong economic base, and all the other indices associated with successful, stable democracy. There are also three powerful forces: the army, the Islamists, and the radical nationalists, which are not wedded to a democratic approach.

As for the masses, the general Western concept seems to be that they are mainly concerned with material well-being (fixing pot-holes in the street, collecting garbage, providing good schools and jobs) and so would never support a radical or ideologically driven government. The idea that the more moderate is always the more popular fails to comprehend a great deal of world history. A corollary of this is the belief that if radicals do take power in a country they will inevitably become more moderate. In fact, every example in the Middle East shows the exact opposite to be true. A brief list of forces that were not moderated by taking power include: the Free Officers in Egypt, 1952; the Ba'th party in Syria, 1963, and in Iraq, 1968; Iran's Islamist revolution of 1979; the Taliban in Afghanistan; Yasir Arafat and the Palestinian Authority (PA) starting in 1994; and Hamas in the Gaza Strip. This is a very partial list and one can add to that Hizballah's new regime in Lebanon, the Sudan, and others.

The Economic Factor

"I should, therefore, suspend my congratulations on the new liberty of France until I was informed how it had been combined with government, with public force, with the discipline and obedience of armies, with the collection of an effective and well-distributed revenue, with morality and religion, with the solidity of property, with peace and order, with civil and social manners...." –Burke

The economic factor in Egypt is of enormous importance. If food prices increase an elected government could not keep them down, as it would lack money for subsidies. Such an elected government could face a huge crisis of unpopularity, unemployment, and apparent helplessness that would lead to its fall or radicalization. Young people want jobs. Where will they come from? The only solution is the method used by previous Egyptian governments: create unproductive government jobs funded by the state budget. Given China's growing international food purchases and the use of food for ethanol production, prices for food will rise. For this purpose and to maintain food subsidies, tens of billions of dollars will be needed each year. Starvation, bankruptcy, and thus political instability may well result.

A post-revolutionary civilian government is likely to follow policies that will subvert economic development. To keep the people happy, subsidies for vital goods (especially food) will be raised; to ensure that young people do not cause trouble, the government will continue to provide useless jobs that are basically subsidies to those who otherwise would be unemployed. In other words, while the country most needs low-paid, low-skilled but highly productive jobs for the urban poor, it will probably focus on keeping the urban middle class happy.

The likely model for Egypt, then, will not be China but Greece. It seems there will be a return to the statist economy of earlier years, which would almost certainly end Egypt's economic growth. With no source for major foreign aid available, the country is expected to be in serious trouble.

As the *Wall Street Journal* put it:

Economists say the region's regimes are fixated on survival and trying to spend their way out of trouble, but that could perpetuate the economic imbalances that helped fire protesters' disaffection....

"Overreliance on subsidies or transfers of wealth to placate the population is a short-term fix that raises serious longer-term vulnerability...." said Benoit Anne, head of emerging market strategy at Société Générale.

In material terms, Egyptians cannot expect much. Egypt has some oil, the Suez Canal, not enough arable land, low labor productivity, restrictive social rules (which will now become worse), and too many people. There is no source of massive international aid in sight.

So what happens when expectations cannot be met? Historically, this has led to radicalism, anti-Western, and anti-Israel hatred to soak up public anger. This is one great danger. Another is if the army and establishment themselves change, deciding that they must once again shift gears to stay in real power.

The situation, however, favors demagoguery. Already, Egyptians are demanding pay raises and higher subsidies. Where will the money come from? The situation is ripe for someone to say: loot the rich, undo privatization, create plenty of useless government jobs, hate the Americans who are exploiting us, and it is all Israel's fault. Alternatively, there is a perception in Egypt that as a result of economic and other problems, the first elected government will fail, thus the Muslim Brotherhood is not eager to form it but rather to wait for the second round.

THE FUTURE OF EGYPTIAN POLITICS

I must be tolerably sure, before I venture to congratulate men on a blessing, that they have really received one...." –Burke

The main issue is not whether Egypt will be either a happy democratic country or an Islamist state but rather what sections of the old regime will survive and whether radical nationalism or Islamism plays the dominant role in a post-Mubarak Egypt. What is critical for the military is that no one touches the army's privileges, money, and business enterprises and does not go after the rich establishment. Who needs to repress people if they are not causing the regime any trouble?

Thus, the military will allow constitutional changes and then free presidential and parliamentary elections. As of now, the two main presidential candidates seem to be a radical nationalist and an Islamist. This is not a great choice, though elections might not be held until 2013. The most likely alternative at present seems to be Amr Moussa, former Egyptian foreign minister and Arab League secretary-general. He often

worked closely with Mubarak, but this does not seem to hurt him. While a victory for the Muslim Brotherhood is obviously dangerous and Moussa is to be preferred, his mercurial personality and very radical views on foreign policy make him problematic as well.

Several recent polls purport to show the Muslim Brotherhood is unpopular in Egypt, but the most important single point is this: The Brotherhood is not at an “unpopular” 17 percent but a very popular 34 percent. In other words, one in every three Egyptians who has decided and will have a real role in the outcome is ready to cast a ballot for the Brotherhood. It is the largest single party. It also has advantages that make it likely to get more than 33 percent of the seats.

This is not bad in an election with more than 20 parties. With 20 political parties would one call the one supported by one-third of decided voters “unpopular”? In the United States 50 percent plus one vote is required to win, but the current ruling parties in multi-party Israel, Holland, and Turkey came to power with that level of direct support. In the last German elections, the Christian Democratic Union won with 27 percent of the votes (which yielded 31 percent of the seats); the Socialists won French parliamentary elections with 39 percent.

Following are adjusted figures for parties based on voters who back a party likely to win seats (more than 5 percent support in the polls).^[2] This is not to say that this analysis is perfect (for example, a party with 5 percent might get 2.5 percent of the seats due to half being elected on a national level), but it does give a good general idea of the situation:

1. Islamists: 34 percent Muslim Brotherhood (Freedom and Justice Party). Note that Salafi (even more radical) Islamist groups have not done well. Islamist voters are uniting behind the Brotherhood despite all the talk of splits.
2. Pro-old regime: 14 percent National Democratic Party, Mubarak’s old party.
3. Liberal, pro-democratic: 14 percent Free Egyptians Party, a liberal, anti-Islamist party founded by big businessman Naguib Sawiris. 10 percent Justice Party. This is the party most associated with the Facebook youth and well-known opposition leaders. 22 percent al-Wafd Party, historic liberal party.

Total for liberals: 46 percent. This is impressive but far less than it seems. Keep in mind, though, that it is better to have 34 percent for one candidate than 46 percent for three. In a district with that outcome the Brotherhood would win.

Moreover, liberals are badly divided. The Wafd has at times toyed with a Brotherhood alliance, while the Justice Party has some far-left leanings. The Free Egyptians seem to be a very serious anti-Islamist party, but it is largely dependent on the largesse of one man. If liberals received one-third of the seats, they could block the Brotherhood from power but not from having tremendous influence. By the same token, the Brotherhood would block a liberal majority. These three parties do not like each other, though if they cooperate and make election agreements that are implemented, this might really change things.

As for the radical left, there are four parties combining hardline anti-American, neo-Marxist and radical nationalist views: Egyptian Labor, the al-Ghad Party, Tagammu, and al-Karama. All together, they take 19 percent. Since they are rivals, however, they would probably receive about 10 percent of the seats. The bottom line is that the Brotherhood will be the most powerful party in Egypt’s November 2011 elections. There are a number of reasons to think it would get more than 34 percent. First, it is quite likely that just five parties—the Brotherhood, Wafd, Justice, Free Egyptians, and New Democratic Party—will have any

significant representation. With many votes “wasted,” the Brotherhood will have the advantage as the largest single party and may well take 40 percent of the seats.

Second, the Brotherhood could win in many districts merely by coming in first, albeit with only a minority of overall ballots. Liberal parties will “steal” votes from each other and put Brotherhood candidates into office in many places. Hamas only won the Palestinian elections because Fatah candidates ran against each other.

Third, Egypt’s first elected government will be very unpopular within a year or two. The economy is going to collapse; promises cannot be kept. The Brotherhood might prefer to be in the opposition during this period to reap more support in future.

Fourth, the Brotherhood can coopt independent candidates using ideology, offers of electoral backing, or rewards in parliament (such as –“pork” projects for their districts). Thus, the Brotherhood in parliament could command seats outside of its own official delegation more easily than its rivals.

Fifth, the Brotherhood is better organized. It will thus get its voters out on election day. Intimidation and the pressure for conformity so powerful in Egyptian society will also count, especially in the many tradition-oriented villages and poor areas of the big cities.

Next, one should not assume the far left and Brotherhood will not cooperate. They have similar views on foreign policy. Last, presumably the National Democratic Party will be a pariah and neither liberal nor Islamist blocs will work with it. Thus, another 14 percent of the seats will be irrelevant in forming any coalition, proportionately increasing the Brotherhood’s numerical edge. Liberals cannot deal with the hated old regime party, but leaders of the National Democratic Party could make a deal with the Brotherhood in order to keep their privileges. Brotherhood supporters would support such a bargain if it helped obtain their main priorities.

The Muslim Brotherhood

While the likelihood of the Brotherhood taking power in the near future is very low, the chance of it gaining power in the long run is now enhanced. At any rate, the Brotherhood is going to be an important force in Egypt and perhaps an influence on the government. The idea that the Brotherhood is now a moderate and pro-democratic organization is absurd. Take the endlessly repeated line that the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood has renounced violence. It renounced violence *only* within Egypt, as a condition to being able to operate at all. This policy could be reversed at any moment. Meanwhile, it continues to advocate violence not only against Israel but also against—though this point has not appeared a single time in the mass media—the United States.

All along, it has been said that there is a moderate faction in the Muslim Brotherhood; and there was: the people who wanted to form the al-Wasat party years ago. However, they were shut up by the Brotherhood’s leadership. Some left and they have formed their own party. Indeed, the former leader of the Brotherhood’s moderate faction, Abu Elela Mady warned against the organization in an interview: “The

Muslim Brotherhood will be the only group in Egypt ready for a parliamentary election unless others are given a year or more to recover from years of oppression.”[3]

Having an anti-Brotherhood president would mitigate their power. If, however, the first government falters—not being able to deliver better living standards—the Brotherhood would be waiting for its opportunity. Indeed, some close observers in Egypt believe that the Brotherhood does not want to take power in the first round since it assumes the next government will have a hard job and will lose popular support for its inability to deliver benefits. Even if the Brotherhood can never take over Egypt, its ability to become legal, influential, spread its message, and increase its base of support is a big victory for the group.

The Brotherhood’s draft platform, circulated in 2007, envisages an Islamist state in which Shari’a is the main determinant of law and a Supreme Council of Clerics would be able to veto laws as contrary to Islam.[4] Non-Muslim citizens would be “protected” but “no ritual, propaganda, or pilgrimage contradicting Islamic activities” can exist. Women would be second-class citizens and the peace treaty with Israel would be “revised.” The Brotherhood has not altered its ideology and program in the slightest.

For example, in a major October 2010 speech ignored by the Western media, the Brotherhood’s leader, Muhammad al-Badi, made the following points:[5]

–Arab and Muslim regimes are betraying their people by failing to confront the Muslim’s real enemies, not only Israel but also the United States. Waging jihad against both of these infidels is a commandment of Allah that cannot be disregarded. Governments have no right to stop their people from fighting the United States. “They are disregarding Allah’s commandment to wage jihad for His sake with [their] money and [their] lives, so that Allah’s word will reign supreme” over all non-Muslims.

–All Muslims are required by their religion to fight: “They crucially need to understand that the improvement and change that the [Muslim] nation seeks can only be attained through jihad and sacrifice and by raising a jihadi generation that pursues death just as the enemies pursue life.” Notice that jihad here is not interpreted as so often happens by liars, apologists, and the merely ignorant in the West as spiritual striving. The clear meaning is one of armed struggle.

–The United States is immoral, doomed to collapse, and “experiencing the beginning of its end and is heading towards its demise.”

–Palestinians should back Hamas in overthrowing the PA in the West Bank and unite in waging war on Israel.

–“Allah said: ‘The hosts will all be routed and will turn and flee [Koran 54:45].’ This verse is a promise to the believers that they shall defeat their enemies, and [that the enemies] shall withdraw. The Companions of the Prophet received this Koranic promise in Mecca, when they were weak... and a little more than nine years [later], Allah fulfilled his promise in the Battle of Badr.... Can we compare that to what happened in Gaza?.... Allah is the best of schemers, and that though Him you shall triumph. Islam is capable of confronting oppression and tyranny, and that the outcome of the confrontation has been predetermined by Allah.”

–“Resistance is the only solution.... The United States cannot impose an agreement upon the

Palestinians, despite all the means and power at its disposal. [Today] it is withdrawing from Iraq, defeated and wounded, and it is also on the verge of withdrawing from Afghanistan. [All] its warplanes, missiles and modern military technology were defeated by the will of the peoples, as long as [these peoples] insisted on resistance—and the wars of Lebanon and Gaza, which were not so long ago, [are proof of this].”

HOW DOES THE REVOLUTION AFFECT THE REGION?

Egypt will to move from a “pro-U.S.” to a “neutralist” stance on regional issues. This means it will not be of any help in combating Iranian influence (except possibly in the Gaza Strip) or working against Iran obtaining nuclear weapons, or on promoting the Arab-Israel or Israel-Palestinian peace process or on any other regional issue. Indeed, Egypt might back Hamas into a future war with Israel or even be drawn into conflict itself.

The radical forces view the Egyptian revolution as a victory for them since it knocks out their most significant adversary in the Arabic-speaking world. In dealing with their own internal challenges, the radical regimes—Iran, Syria, Hizballah, and its allies in Lebanon, and Hamas in the Gaza Strip—have armies and security forces willing to shoot to kill. There may be demonstrations but there will not be revolutions.

The wave of popular upheavals is more likely to destabilize more moderate regimes that are not hostile to the West and Israel than radical ones that are. Jordan and the PA will be intimidated. They know that any compromises with Israel or friendly relations with it will not sit well with their own people masses and Islamists who would agitate them into anger and action.

Another consequence, then, of the Egyptian revolution is to put the peace process, already frozen, into the very deep freeze. Those who believe that events in Egypt and anti-government demonstrations accord some great opportunity for advancing negotiations overlook this basic fact of how internal politics restrain the flexibility of leaders in the Arab world. To make matters worse, friendly Arab governments now have to worry whether America is a reliable ally that would protect them. Who knows whether Washington might declare them to be a dictatorship and support their opponents?

Finally, since Iran, Syria, and other Islamist forces see the Egyptian revolution as, at minimum, the destruction of their strongest Arab opponent and, at best, a possible gain for their side, they are likely to be emboldened. After all, they have virtually taken over Lebanon without any strong U.S. response and have entrenched the Hamas regime in the Gaza Strip. Then there is the crowing about how the Egyptian revolution is a big defeat for al-Qa’ida. Yet al-Qaida is in no way a political threat in the Arabic-speaking world and never has been. It can carry out terrorist attacks. Events in Egypt have no effect on its terrorist capability.

The Islamist threat—the kind of thing that can take over countries—comes from other places. First and foremost, it arises from the Iran-led bloc that also includes Syria, Hamas, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Hizballah, and Iraqi insurgents. This bloc now controls Lebanon and the Gaza Strip, a sign of its ability to advance in real ways.

The real issue is the Iran-led alliance consisting of Iran, Syria, Hamas, Hizballah, the Iraqi insurgents, and increasingly the Turkish government, to which Lebanon has now been added. This powerful anti-American, anti-Israel, and anti-Western coalition now controls four countries plus the Gaza Strip. The anti-Islamist side has just three important Muslim-majority countries left: Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Egypt.

To say that Egypt would follow the Turkish model is not a good thing. It means that the government would be friendlier to the Islamist forces than to the West. Even if one were to assume that Egypt will be more moderate than the current Turkish government and more neutralist than pro-Iran, which seems to be a reasonable expectation, this would still be a major loss for Western and U.S. policy. Egypt would not be a reliable anti-Islamist force abroad, even if the army kept the Islamists at bay at home. Moreover, it seems likely that the Egyptian government would view Hamas favorably, which would be a major blow to the PA and one more factor making the peace process dead.

The confidence of the remaining anti-Iran governments is shaken by what they perceive as the unreliability of the United States as an ally. For them, the Egyptian revolution is not a reason for rejoicing, and they also know that they cannot depend on an elected government in Cairo. Thus, despite the happiness and enthusiasm, the Egyptian revolution marks a strategic loss for the United States and its allies in the region and a gain for the opposing side, though not as big as the other side claims. The nature of the new Egyptian government will determine whether it will be a greater loss, but it is most unlikely that it will become a smaller one.

Israel

“The effect of liberty to individuals is that they may do what they please; we ought to see what it will please them to do, before we risk congratulations which may be soon turned to complaints....”–Burke

For Israel, even with the Egyptian army saying it will keep the peace treaty, the revolution is a source of strategic stress. Additional money and manpower must be used to build up the southern front, the border with Egypt, and there is a heightened possibility of a future war with a better-armed Hamas. Even the absence of war cannot be taken for granted, as it has for more than three decades.

Does the Egyptian revolution advance the Arab-Israel or Israel-Palestinian peace process? As noted above, the answer is “no.” The PA, already not exactly eager to negotiate a peace agreement, faced the “Palestine Papers,” which made Palestinian politics view compromise as treason. Now, it faces another example of what seems in the Arabic-speaking world to show that a policy of moderation and friendship toward the West is suicidal. Hamas is invigorated as a rival. The byword for the West Bank Palestinian leadership is toughness.

Is Israel inspired to make more concessions when—despite the assurances of Egypt’s military for the next few months—people who do not believe in the Egypt-Israel peace treaty are likely to come to power in Egypt? What of Jordan, facing a rising internal opposition led—far more than anyone in Egypt might dream

of—by the Muslim Brotherhood and others who want to abrogate the treaty with Israel? Moreover, the hardliners feel that they are on the winning side. They are not so much impressed by the spread of “people power” and democracy but by the fall of their most important Arab adversary. Iran, Syria, and their allies are on the march, now having added Lebanon to their—to use the term loosely—empire.

It is democratic Egypt, not autocratic Egypt, that threatens to abrogate the treaty with Israel. Would there be any possibility of a democratic Jordan, after overthrowing the monarchy, keeping their treaty with Israel? The answer is of course not. Assuming for the moment that the peace treaty Israel and Lebanon came close to signing in 1982 was completed, would the Hizballah-dominated regime that came to power in free elections abrogate that treaty? Of course it would.

The implications for Israel should be divided into two categories: those that relate to Egypt directly and those arising from the event’s fall-out on the regional situation. Even if one assumes a best-case outcome in Egypt—a stable, moderate Egyptian democracy—it presents Israel with some difficult problems. The simplest way to put it is that certainty has been replaced by doubt. The issues include:

Will the new government preserve the peace treaty with Israel? Not only the Muslim Brotherhood but also the two best-known oppositionists (Ayman Nour and Muhammad al-Baradei) have spoken of the need to revise the treaty, hold a referendum, or dispense of it altogether. Even if they never do it, Israel must assume that this kind of thing is in the realm of the possible.

Even if the treaty is not formally torn up—due to Egyptian fear of losing U.S. aid or of Israeli retaliation—it can be emptied of content. If Egypt violates the treaty without admitting it, Israel may have trouble convincing the United States to act. How does Israel respond without triggering a confrontation?

For example, what if out of economic interest the Egyptian government wants to keep open the gas pipeline, but it comes under repeated attacks by terrorists—the first of which has already happened—and soon no longer functions? Another problem is border security. Again, it is said that it is in the interest of Egypt, especially the army, to avoid having terrorists cross the border into Israel. Yet similar logic has often proven to be mistaken on many other issues. With junior officers and soldiers sympathizing with Islamism or radical nationalism, the orders of the generals back in Cairo might not be followed with a high degree of discipline. Thus, Israel will have to spend more money and reservist days to rebuild its defenses along the long border with Egypt. No matter how many international or Egyptian assurances are given, Israel cannot depend on what might turn out to be wishful thinking.

There is also the Gaza problem. Helping Hamas is considered a national and religious duty by most Egyptians. Maintaining the sanctions on Hamas and a closed border is unpopular. Can any elected government resist the popularity to be obtained by opening the border and want to sustain the unpopularity in maintaining the status quo?

Such a step would further embolden Hamas and entrench it in power. More arms and more sophisticated weapons would flow across the border. Indeed, this is already happening. The possibility of a renewed Hamas-Israel war in several years is increased. Suppose Israel needs to retaliate against a Hamas attack as happened in Operation Cast Lead? Can one assume that an Egyptian government would stand by and do nothing? Maybe it would; perhaps even probably Cairo would not intervene; but not definitely.

CONCLUSION

“[I]f liberty is not a benefit whilst it lasts, [it] is not likely to continue long.” –Burke

It is easy and pleasant, then, to be enthusiastic about the Egyptian revolution—and the others. The same applies to assuming that all will be well in a new, stable, democratic Egypt. Yet there are plenty of reasons for deep concern, even expectations that things will go very wrong, that instability will follow, blood will flow, and war may return to the Middle East.

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[1] *Now Lebanon*, February 16, 2011, <http://nowlebanon.com/arabic/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=241113>.

[2] Author's adjusted figures.

[3] Tom Perry, “Egypt Opposition Needs Time, or Islamists will Win,” Reuters, February 15, 2011, <http://af.reuters.com/article/topNews/idAFJOE71E01020110215>.

[4] “Public Debate on the Political Platform of the Planned Muslim Brotherhood Party in Egypt,” Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), Inquiry & Analysis Series Report No. 409, December 11, 2007, <http://memri.convio.net/site/R?i=mewUjIXOJ5LamEKPHhfoog>.

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