The chance for change in the Arab world: Egypt's uprising

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The Middle East and North African region has been a focus of interest for a very long time. For many decades in the more recent past it has been the hub of key political issues, controversies and crises; much further back in history, the civilizations, states and empires recognized worldwide as the earliest known to humanity were established in this region. Where Iraq lies today, Mesopotamia, considered by many to be the cradle of human civilization, gave rise to the Sumerians, the Akkadians, the Babylonians, the Assyrians; elsewhere in the region the ancient Egyptians and Phoenicians rose to power and widespread influence.

Even in ancient times the region's significance reached far beyond its borders; key urban centres of the Roman Empire, for example, such as Alexandria, lay within it. It was central, too, to histories of religion, for it was here that the great Abrahamic faiths were established, developed and thrived, and from here that they eventually spread to other parts of the world. Judaism, Christianity and Islam cannot be understood without reference to this region. More recent history also shows interaction between this region and the rest of the world to have been highly significant. The contacts, exchanges and relationships between the region and Europe, for example, were critical to the development of the northern continent. No one could deny that without the influence of the Middle East and North Africa, Europe would have turned out quite differently—as would, by extension, North America, South America and Australia, as continents themselves deeply affected by Europe. Exchanges different in nature, but similar in significance, occurred between the region and the eastern countries of China, India, South-East Asia, as well as between the Middle East and North Africa and the rest of the continent to its south.

Liberation Square—the unexpected revolution

For all these reasons and more, the Middle East and North Africa have attracted a great deal of interest over the centuries, both in Europe and more widely. This interest has continued in the contemporary era, both through the practice of international affairs and through the scholarly discipline of International Relations and its application to the region.

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It may seem surprising, therefore, in some respects that similar attention has not been given to the internal politics of the various Middle Eastern states and areas. This is not to say that the politics of these countries have not been watched—of course they have; but the internal dynamics of their political arrangements, the governance of these countries, have not exercised the same fascination. One might respond by wondering how much interest can be expected when the object itself is singularly uninteresting—as it arguably has been, in some of these countries at least.

Take Egypt, for example: a country with a very long history, with a civilization that has been of consuming interest to many over the centuries, and with a modern geopolitical position that is critical to western interests; yet also a country whose internal political dynamics hardly attracted a glance, because for so long these were dominated by an entrenched dictatorship which gave few signs of changing.

Such was my own assessment while living there. As a visiting professor at the American University in Cairo, and later as a Warwick University academic resident in Cairo, I found Egypt a good base for looking at regional political affairs. But it did not inspire much interest within me for looking at different political forces within the country—because power was confined within a small elite that possessed an aura of near invincibility and was perceived to be immovable. When I moved to Egypt in December 2010 for research purposes, I saw residence there as an opportunity to travel easily to other countries in the region, and to gain more direct insight into regional issues; I did not even consider giving the same attention to the internal dynamics of the political system within the country. This was not my perspective alone; it was shared by Egyptians in the country, as well as across the international community at large.

That time, and that perspective, seem now the stuff of ancient history. Egyptian internal politics has become a subject of great concern and interest far beyond its borders—precisely because of its potential to change the direction of the country. And this is a very important country: more than a quarter of all Arabs reside within Egypt, and its cultural, religious and geopolitical roles cannot be overestimated in coming to understand the modern region of the Middle East and North Africa.

Throughout the Egyptian uprising I was in Cairo, around 15 minutes or so away from Tahrir Square. *Tahrir* means 'liberation' in Arabic, and the 'Square of Liberation' was a fitting location for the Egyptian revolution of 25 January 2011. In the space of a few short months, the political dynamics within Egypt became irresistibly fascinating to Egyptians, to Arabs, across the region and throughout the world. As an academic and political commentator, I have often researched, analysed and written about historical episodes and contemporary events. But neither the most fascinating general election in the UK nor any of the controversies in the Muslim world that I have experienced offered the opportunity to be at the centre of something so historically significant as what happened in Egypt this year.

At the time of writing this article, the elections for the lower house in the Egyptian parliament (*majlis al-sha'ab*) had been set for 22 November 2011, with elections for the upper house (*majlis al-shura*) provisionally scheduled for mid-January 2012. The last time there were elections in Egypt, the run-up to and the results of the process barely registered either in the region or internationally, such was the certainty that the whole story had been predefined and predetermined by dictatorship and autocracy. Even after President Ben Ali fled Tunisia, I was extremely sceptical that Egypt would change. In fact, on the day before the uprising, 24 January, I published an article in a newspaper in the Arab world arguing that what the region needed was not revolution but vision. My reasoning was fairly simple: a huge state, whether it is dictatorial in nature or not, causes civil society to disengage at best, and to disintegrate at worst. This was certainly the case in Egypt, and so I believed that if the state just disappeared overnight, the likely result would be chaos. Moreover, I never believed a protest movement could actually protest for long without violence erupting all over the country— whether from the protesters or from obdurate security forces.

I think most people in Egypt would have agreed with me on 24 January. Within a few days, I changed my mind. I still think my concerns were well founded. But something extraordinary happened in Egypt over the following days—something that no one, not even those who went out on to the streets on 25 January, had really thought possible. Eventually, Tahrir Square was so full of people, people who stayed there, that it came to constitute almost a mini-autonomous zone. The military did control access points; but beyond those access points, the protesters were in charge. The mini-state they set up within Tahrir Square was one that called for no arms (and so they padded down everyone coming in), insisted on social justice (and so people fed each other), and required respectful relations between all people, regardless of religion, class or gender. Interestingly enough for students of libertarianism and the philosophy of law, none of these imperatives was spelt out as compulsory, except for the 'no arms' rule; where respectful relations were transgressed in a way that caused danger, others in the square would cordon off the offending party—peacefully, but quickly.

There were other such 'autonomous zones' in Egypt during the uprising. The government had called for the police to go home and instituted martial law. At the same time, thugs aligned with pro-government forces were loose on the streets, terrorizing people—and, suspiciously, prisoners had been let out of jails. On that first night of the uprising, most able-bodied men went out into the streets around their homes; they formed checkpoints and established teams who would stop cars as they came into the neighbourhoods—some would check the drivers' licences, others would search the cars. They had no legal authority to do this. But they deemed themselves to be acting in accordance with natural law, and no one whom they stopped objected in the slightest.

The rule of law in society is usually devised and enforced through a set of institutions designed to mediate between people when they disagree. Those institutions in Egypt had broken down long before 25 January 2011: the rule of law

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had been systematically degraded through corruption, brutality and political repression. In the perception of public opinion, the military somehow remained above that degradation, and few were surprised when it was widely suspected that the military had disobeyed a direct order from the regime to fire on protesters in Tahrir Square. Indeed, when Mubarak gave his now infamous defiant speech on 10 February, people's disappointment that the military did not force him from power immediately was allayed only by the fact that they did so less than 24 hours later.

Following 11 February, the stakes were very high for Egypt, and they remain so. While it was not the first player in the story of the Arab Spring (that status belongs to Tunisia), Egypt is the star actor: if the revolution in Egypt succeeds, then it is likely to have a positive impact on the rest of the region; if the revolution fails, it will have other consequences. Egypt, as the largest Arab country, has always had a huge role in the politics of the Arab world. Change in Egypt could certainly set off a chain reaction within the region—as indeed it already has, in Bahrain, Libya, Syria and Yemen. If Egypt was successful in creating a new governing structure, then that model would be highly influential throughout the region. Equally, however, if it were to fail, it would send negative shock waves reverberating across the region.

The transition to elections: promise and challenges

At the time of writing Egypt was, as it is likely to remain for some time longer, under military rule. Since the fall of Mubarak, the military establishment, led by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), has positioned itself as an army supportive of the revolution. Many Egyptians accept this assertion: according to a Gallup poll some months after the uprising took place, some 94 per cent of Egyptians were still expressing confidence in the military.[1] But this vote of support does not manifest itself in an absence of voices critical of the military— far from it. On the contrary, the media (even parts of the state media) are awash with criticism of the army, which is coming under attack from different elements across the political spectrum for a variety of reasons. As well as the broad division between the military and political groups, there are divisions between the various political forces, and some relationships are turning sour. Thus the question arises: can the revolution persuade Egyptian parties to put the national interest ahead of sectarian political interests?

During the uprising, all sectors of society were joined in opposition to Mubarak's regime. Leftists, feminists, Islamists, Arab nationalists—the protesters were a motley crew, from all social classes and all educational backgrounds. Soon after the downfall of Mubarak, however, the cracks began to show. It was clear that the different groupings did not share a united vision for the future of Egypt. The first differences to become apparent were those between the different Islamist

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[1] 'Egypt: from Tahrir to transition. Egyptians on their assets and challenges and what leaders should do about it', Abu Dhabi Gallup Center, June 2011, http://www.abudhabigallupcenter.com/147896/Egypt-Tahrir-Transition.aspxm, accessed 24 Oct. 2011.

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camps on the one hand and the 'liberal' (that is, non-religious) groupings on the other. The Muslim Brotherhood was by far the most organized force in Egypt after Mubarak's ruling party. It has been in operation for decades as an officially banned but nonetheless tolerated movement which had taken care of social welfare services in many parts of the country where the regime had failed to meet the needs of the people.[2] Within the Brotherhood itself were several subgroupings—the conservative leadership, the reformists and the young. Had the reformists and the young people managed to steer the movement as a whole, the revolutionary groupings might have stood together. The youth of the Brotherhood, in particular, had been very active in Tahrir Square, and had developed good relationships with other, non-Islamist, groupings.

This is not how things turned out. The Muslim Brotherhood decided—as any partisan political movement might have done—that now was the time to attempt to consolidate its position as a key player in Egyptian politics. It managed to alienate most other groups fairly quickly, beginning with the constitutional referendum that the military decided to hold a month after Mubarak's downfall. The referendum asked the Egyptian people to approve or reject a plan to bring into operation an amended constitution (the existing constitution having been suspended with the downfall of Mubarak) and put into motion a timetable that would lead to new parliamentary and presidential elections fairly soon. Most of the liberal and new political groupings rejected the idea—they wanted an entirely new constitution, and they wanted time to prepare for elections. Their fear was that if the elections were held soon, the Muslim Brotherhood and remnants of the former regime would take power, given an unfair advantage by their existing infrastructure and consequent ability to prepare for elections far more quickly than other groups.

The Brotherhood decided to campaign aggressively for a 'yes' vote, in contrast to most of the political forces that had stood against Mubarak. This was viewed by many in the protest camp as evidence that the Brotherhood was more concerned with its own partisan interest than with Egypt's national interest—although it is unclear whether any Egyptian political movement would have been any more generous and self-sacrificing in a similar position. In any case, many liberal political forces did not need much of an excuse to distance themselves from the Muslim Brotherhood, which they deemed to be far too conservative to agree to their vision of a completely new Egypt.

In March 2011, almost 78 per cent of the votes cast in the referendum supported the proposal, which had been portrayed by its political supporters as representing an effort to return to stability. While normal indicators of crime, such as assault or theft, had actually dropped in the months after the uprising, fear had risen dramatically at the same time—and certainly most media outlets (whether opposition or state media) seemed to encourage that perception.[3] The campaign for a

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[2] The Brotherhood's response to the 1992 earthquake was testament both to its organizational skills and relief efforts and to the government's poor response to devastating natural disaster. The Brotherhood has also been known to provide medical services to rural and poor communities.

[3] Gallup was due to release this finding to the public on www.gallup.com in late October 2011.

'yes' vote in the referendum focused on the hope that such a result would enable Egypt to turn a corner and begin a more stable phase.

The referendum should have taught the liberal groupings a key lesson—but it did not. Most of the country's political groups completely misread Egyptian public opinion: they thought that Egyptians would back them, as they had backed the protesters in Tahrir Square. But what they wanted above all was some kind of return to normality, and in a country 19 per cent of whose population live on incomes below US$2 a day,[4] it is not hard to see why. The newer political forces and most of the liberals were willing to pay the price of continued instability in the hope of bringing about real reforms; but in this they were in a small minority.

After the referendum, the Muslim Brotherhood continued to carve its own way ahead. Well aware that its candidates stood to do well in the early elections that would follow the referendum vote—quite probably better than they would if the polls were delayed—as they turned their sights towards those elections they began to become more and more ambitious. In March, their spokespeople suggested they would campaign for no more than 30 per cent of the parliamentary seats.[5] By May, that number had risen to 50 per cent.[6] This increase in confidence over just two months did not go unnoticed by other political forces, which saw it as a sign that the Brotherhood was not interested in political consensus, but was focused on securing its own position. It is worth noting that while there was a plurality of political forces apart from the Brotherhood, none of them could hope to match the likely electoral strength of the Brotherhood—and nor could they claim on the basis of any demonstrable evidence to be less politically partisan.

The divorce between the Brotherhood and most other political elements became complete at the end of May, less than four months after Mubarak's fall from power. At this point a wide range of political groups and young people's movements called for a protest against the military leadership. A small but vocal minority was calling for a new presidential council to replace SCAF until elections could be held later in the year, as well as demanding that a constitution be drawn up now, not after the elections. The military trials for civilians, the lack of speed in bringing stalwarts of the Mubarak regime to trial and the treatment of protesters imprisoned by the military were, and remain, extremely unpopular across the revolutionary spectrum. Many wanted Mubarak and his clique to stand trial, and called for restraint on the part of the military towards those demonstrating for an end to military trials. On 27 May all of these demands, and many others, were voiced by those present in Tahrir Square.

One major political force rejected the demands of 27 May, and its organized opposition led to the significant problem of disunity among the revolutionary forces. The Muslim Brotherhood in effect attempted to portray that day's demon-

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[4] '2011 world population data sheet: the world at 7 billion', Population Reference Bureau, http://www.prb.org/pdf11/2011population-data-sheet_eng.pdf, accessed 25 Sept. 2011.

[5] See H. Hendawi, 'Islamists look for gains in Egypt's freer politics', Associated Press, 5 April 2011, http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20110405/ap_on_re_mi_ea/ml_egypt_rising_islamists, accessed 23 Oct. 2011.

[6] See M. Michael, 'Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood eyes big political role', Reuters, 1 May 2011), http://en.news.maktoob.com/20090000718556/Egypt_s_Muslim_Brotherhood_eyes_big_political_role/Article.htm, accessed 23 Oct. 2011.

strations and demands as almost counter-revolutionary, and reaffirmed its support for the military and SCAF, even while issuing demands similar to those voiced by most of the other revolutionary forces. Many liberals in Tahrir Square were pleased that the Brotherhood was officially absent (although many of its younger members were there). However, its absence came at a price. As its young members had disobeyed direct orders in participating in the demonstrations, the Brotherhood officially withdrew its youth movement from the wider Revolutionary Youth Coalition. Thus the division between the Brotherhood and other political forces seemed to be well and truly entrenched.

The Brotherhood, other political forces and the elections

It is important not to fall into the trap of viewing the Egyptian political spectrum as divided primarily between 'liberal' and 'Muslim Brotherhood'. There are several other forces, including leftists and Arab nationalists; however, the relative strength of these various groupings is highly contested, and it is not clear which of them are electorally significant. At the time of writing, it seems that the most popular forces in the elections will be, in order, the Brotherhood; an amalgamation of liberal forces (most probably led by the 'Free Egyptians' party founded by the Coptic businessman Naguib Sawiris); and the remnants of the former regime. The prospects of the last group will be strengthened by the current voting system, which will (unless it is changed ahead of the elections) allow them to run as independents—a type of system which was criticized by most political forces in the country following the revolution.

However, there are important qualifications to this observation. The first is that while the Brotherhood is, at present, the most popular single party, its voting strength is not necessarily very great. Only 14 per cent of Egyptians polled in the months after the uprisings declared themselves likely to vote for the Muslim Brotherhood.[7] This is in spite of the fact that active religious affiliation is very strong in Egypt—some 96 per cent of all Egyptians, whether Muslim or Christian, consider religion important to their lives.[8] It seems at present that most Egyptians are wholly undecided as to which parties do or do not represent their aspirations—which means the political field is wide open.[9] The way in which neighbourhoods and voting districts are defined will be highly significant.

Nevertheless, while electoral support for the Brotherhood may not be particularly high, other public opinion polls held in the country suggest that most in Egypt do think well of it.[10] To position themselves as opposed to the Muslim Brotherhood, as many liberals did before the referendum, might have endeared them to a large section of Egypt's upper class, but did not go down so well among

[7] Michael, 'Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood eyes big political role', p. 13.
[8] 'Egypt: from Tahrir to transition', p. 6.
[9] H. A. Hellyer, 'Islam in the new Egypt', *Washington Post*, 26 Aug. 2011, see http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/guest-voices/post/islam-in-the-new-egypt/2011/08/26/gIQAqc3EgJ_blog.html, accessed 1 Oct. 2011.
[10] 'US wins no friends, end of treaty with Israel sought', Pew Research Center, 25 April 2011, http://pewglobal.org/2011/04/25/egyptians-embrace-revolt-leaders-religious-parties-and-military-as-well/, accessed 23 Oct. 2011.

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the overwhelming majority of the population. Even though that majority might not vote for the Muslim Brotherhood in elections, it would certainly sympathize with the Brotherhood's opposition to an elite that is widely viewed as far removed from the mass of the population in both religious attitudes and class. The profound class divisions that exist within Egypt distance the Muslim Brotherhood from the majority of the population, but not by so much as the gulf which separates the majority from the liberal elite.

So many unpredictable variables will play a role in the coming elections that the results are likely to surprise many, both within Egypt and beyond. In November, if the military keeps to its timetable, there will be parliamentary elections, followed by presidential elections a few months later. The most popular institution in Egypt—the army—says it will not be running candidates in the presidential elections, although this may change. Despite its abuse of human rights after the fall of Mubarak (human rights organizations estimate that the army has put more civilians in front of military courts during this year's military rule than it did during the entire period of Mubarak's reign[11]), the Egyptian people by and large have given them considerable leeway, meaning that if the military does put forward a presidential candidate, it could have a strong influence on the outcome. What is to happen following the elections in Egypt cannot be easily predicted.

Egypt, Israel and the future of international relationships

During the uprising, two key external relationships of Egypt's were repeatedly discussed in policy circles. The first was Egypt's relationship with the West—or, more particularly, with the US and the European Union; the second was its relationship with Israel, which would itself impinge directly on the former relationship.

Israel's first reactions to the uprising were, unsurprisingly, quite negative. Throughout the uprising, Israel expressed support for Hosni Mubarak's regime, out of fear that whatever replaced it would be worse for Israeli interests in the region: in particular, there was anxiety that a new Egyptian regime would be unduly influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood, which would lead to the cancellation of the Camp David accords and the ending of the state of peace between Egypt and Israel. Israel's security arrangements in the region depend heavily on that treaty, and the government in Tel Aviv was not confident that the arrival of democracy in Egypt would be conducive to its continued observance.[12] The centrist Israeli opposition leader, Tzipi Livni, speaking in July 2011 at the Aspen Institute in Washington DC, expressed Israel's caution *vis-à-vis* the uprising in Egypt, owing to the uncertainty that would follow Mubarak's departure. Some months after the uprising, an Israeli force entered Egyptian territory in pursuit of

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[11] Human Rights Watch, 'Egypt: retry or free 12,000 after unfair military trials', 10 Sept. 2011, http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/09/10/egypt-retry-or-free-12000-after-unfair-military-trials, accessed 1 Oct. 2011.

[12] See e.g. Moshe Arens, 'Can Israel only make peace with dictators?', *Haaretz*, 1 Feb. 2011, see http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/opinion/can-israel-only-make-peace-with-dictators-1.340493, accessed 1 Oct. 2011.

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what they claimed were Palestinian militants, and in the process killed five Egyptian soldiers.[13] The ensuing public outcry in Egypt led to Egyptian civilians tearing down the Israeli flag from the high-rise building in which the Israeli Embassy in Cairo is situated, and the Israeli ambassador returned to Israel. Questions about the future of Egyptian–Israeli peace became louder, with good reason.

However, the picture is more complex than this account might suggest. In the first days after the fall of Mubarak, SCAF expressed its commitment to the Camp David accords; it has not changed its position since, nor is it likely to do so. SCAF is more aware than possibly any other institution in Egypt of the potential cost to the country if Egypt were to break the accords, and does not believe it is in Egypt's interest to do so.[14] While political forces in the country differ in the details of their attitudes towards the peace treaty, calls for its annulment are rare—not even the Muslim Brotherhood, despite its periodic diatribes against Israel, has gone so far.[15] There have been increasingly frequent demands within Egypt to revise the Camp David accords (which are considered by Egyptians to be detrimental to Egypt's national interests in a number of ways)—but not at the expense, it is clear, of going to war with Israel. It seems likely that any calls to revise the treaty would be rejected by Israel, and thus the matter would not proceed further.

There is also the wider regional situation to consider. Israel's security strategy in the region for decades has been based on the existence of autocratic regimes that were able to maintain relationships with Israel, irrespective of any popular feeling against such relationships, and at the same time to ensure that no threats to Israel's security emanated from their territories.[16] This strategy was sustainable before 25 January, but it is not clear that it can remain intact for long. Arab popular opinion has become far more relevant for Arab regimes, and far beyond Tunisia and Egypt. With Arab public opinion so vigorously in support of the Palestinian cause, and so antipathetic to Israel, it is likely that Arab regimes and states, even autocratic ones, will take steps that either increase pressure on Israel or at least do not strengthen its position *vis-à-vis* the Palestinians. The fact that Turkey's relationship with Israel has been shifting injects another unpredictable variable into Israel's regional security strategy.[17] With Arab public opinion newly relevant for policy-makers, Israel will have to make corresponding adjustments in its regional security strategies. What those are, and what they might become under Israel's current political realities, are unclear.

[13] Maggie Michael and Ian Deitch, 'Egypt to withdraw ambassador to Israel over ambush', *Independent*, 20 Aug. 2011, http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/egypt-to-withdraw-ambassador-to-israel-over-ambush-2341011.html, accessed 1 Oct. 2011.

[14] Stratfor, 'Turkey seeks to reassert its influence as tensions flare between Egypt and Israel', 13 Sept. 2011, http://www.stratfor.com/geopolitical_diary/20110913-turkey-seeks-reassert-its-influence-tensions-flare-between-egypt-and-isr, accessed 1 Oct. 2011.

[15] 'Muslim Brotherhood seek revision of ties with Israel', *Daily News Egypt*, 11 Sept. 2011, http://www.thedailynewsegypt.com/egypt/muslim-brotherhood-seek-revision-of-ties-with-israel.html, accessed 1 Oct. 2011.

[16] Arens, 'Can Israel only make peace with dictators?'.

[17] Stratfor, 'Ankara's tougher regional stance', 9 Sept. 2011, http://www.stratfor.com/geopolitical_diary/20110909-ankaras-tougher-regional-stance, accessed 1 Oct. 2011.

The genie is out of the bottle

Taking all these aspects of the situation into account, and with due acknowledgement of the many uncertainties involved, one thing is clear: Egypt and the Arab world have changed, irrevocably. The Arab people are demanding change, and the 'forces of change' genie cannot simply be put back into the 'stability' bottle. Libya has changed; Yemen is changing; Bahrain and Syria are demanding change. The leaders of the different regimes realize this, and in different countries will take different steps to manage and temper those expectations. There may be further upheavals in other countries; but what cannot be denied is that this is the dawn of a new age for the region.

Is it for the best? Will a better region emerge, one that sees the aspirations of its people being fulfilled? It is too early to say—but for many, the curtain of fear has been torn aside. The freedom to hope has been established. The chance of creating a better future is there; whether it will be taken is yet to be seen. The promise of change has been made—and, for the first time in this generation, it is being taken seriously.