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Israel's Strategic Concerns over Upheaval in Egypt

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The popular uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt caught Israel by surprise. Awe-inspiring as they are to Israel's government and people, these revolutions and the ongoing troubles in Bahrain and Libya are also of immense concern to Israel because of their potential strategic ramifications. Going forward, developments in Egypt will be particularly important given Cairo's traditional role in the region and the special nature of its diplomatic, security, and economic relations with Israel.

High Stakes

The Israeli government has always viewed the peace treaty with Egypt and subsequent relations between the two countries as a cornerstone of national security. Historically a regional heavyweight, Egypt wields the strongest Arab military force and shares a 150-mile border with Israel. It has also been the leader of the moderate Arab camp and an important ally of the United States. Accordingly, Israelis have regarded Egypt as the lynchpin of Arab war or peace with Israel.

Notwithstanding the cold nature of the three-decade peace and conflicting policies on some issues (e.g., the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, the peace process), the two countries developed close coordination over the years in order to counter radical Islamism and terrorism in their various expressions: Hamas, Hizballah, al-Qaeda, and other groups. Hosni Mubarak's Egypt also supported the international drive to counter Iran and its proxies.

Egyptian-Israeli relations intensified when Hamas commandeered the Gaza Strip in June 2007. The specter of an Islamist entity next door projecting radicalism into Egypt haunted the Mubarak government. Subsequent developments -- such as the spawning of Gaza jihadist groups (which Cairo blamed for the January 2011 suicide bombing of a Coptic church in Alexandria), jihadist cooperation with Bedouins in the Sinai, the smuggling of weapons and extremists from Gaza into Egypt, and the tearing down of the border fence by Palestinians -- only sharpened Cairo's concerns and contributed to increased security coordination with Israel.

As a result, Cairo also gave quiet consent when Israel launched Operation Cast Lead against Hamas in December 2008, in a bid to quell ongoing rocket fire from Gaza. Subsequently, Egypt played a pivotal role in establishing and maintaining a relatively stable ceasefire along the border. In addition, Israel quietly coordinated the closure of Gaza's borders with Cairo, which implemented similar policies at the Egyptian-controlled Rafah crossing.

Egypt also played an important role in the failed efforts to relaunch direct Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations and to release Gilad Shalit, an Israeli soldier abducted by Hamas in 2006. And on a personal level, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu developed a close dialogue with President Mubarak.

Israeli Concerns

In the seeming debate between democracy and stability in the Middle East, Israelis mostly lean toward

stability. This is not because they are antidemocratic; Israel has always believed that a democratic Middle East would be more stable and peaceful. What worries Israelis is the transition period between the two, given the risk of radical Islamist forces exploiting the turmoil to hijack the domestic political process away from democracy and peace. If this happens in Egypt, Israel could be directly impacted.

When Israelis discuss the events in Egypt, the historical references they tend to cite are not Eastern Europe in 1989 or Indonesia in 1998, but rather the 1979 revolution in Iran or the 2006 Hamas victory in democratic Palestinian elections, which led to the establishment of a vehemently anti-Israeli, antipeace, and antidemocracy regime in Gaza. While publicly recognizing that "the stronger the foundations of democracy, the stronger the foundations of peace," Prime Minister Netanyahu warned that Egypt could "go in the direction of Iran" and "threaten all those surrounding it."

Initial Israeli apprehension focused on the fate of the bilateral peace treaty. In various statements and communications -- including a recent phone conversation between the two countries' defense ministers -- Israel has emphasized that any future Egyptian government must be pressed to honor the treaty. Signed in 1979, the document closed a chapter in Israel's history of four comprehensive wars in less than three decades. The agreement demilitarized the Sinai, significantly widened Israel's margin of security, and enabled the government to decrease defense expenditures and redirect them to other fronts and threats.

Although Israel has generally kept a low profile during the unfolding events in Egypt, some official reactions were clearly blown out of proportion. An Iran-like takeover or abrogation of the peace treaty is not the most likely outcome. The Egyptian picture is much more nuanced for a variety of reasons, not least the critical role played by the military. The higher echelon of Egypt's armed forces favors close relations with the United States and has publicly called for upholding the treaty with Israel.

Nevertheless, Israel has other reasons for concern over the nature and depth of its future relations with Egypt. Because the longstanding bilateral peace is between governments, not people, the wide anti-Israeli sentiment among Egyptians -- which was fostered by Mubarak's regime -- could negatively impact relations on Gaza and other issues, especially if the Muslim Brotherhood becomes part of a ruling coalition. The Egyptian government already announced in recent days the opening of the Rafah crossing.

Meanwhile, the power vacuum in Cairo has allowed security to deteriorate in the Sinai. For example, an armed group from Gaza was reportedly arrested there after seeking to attack Israeli targets. And the barrier between Egyptian and Palestinian Rafah was partly torn open, leading to intensified smuggling. In response to these security threats, Israel consented to requests from Cairo to permit the deployment of some 1,500 Egyptian soldiers in northern and southern Sinai and in Egyptian Rafah, deviating from the peace treaty. Israel also decided to speed up construction of the new border fence with Egypt.

Furthermore, on February 5, the Egypt-Jordan natural gas pipeline in northern Sinai was sabotaged. The proximity of the Egypt-Israel pipeline (which was not targeted) led to the cessation of gas transfers to Israel. Around 40 percent of Israeli electric power generation relies on gas; much of it is obtained from an offshore field, but almost half of it is imported from Egypt. This is likely to continue even after Israel develops newly discovered offshore gas fields in the coming years. Ultimately, Israelis pin their hopes on Egyptian self-interest prevailing so that gas will continue to flow, the Suez Canal will remain open to Israeli ships, and the Qualifying Industrial Zones (which allow Egypt to export products containing certain Israeli input to the United States duty-free) will still operate.

Wider Context

Beyond Egypt, Israel is mostly concerned about the weakening of the pragmatic Arab center in the face of staunch radical forces. Egypt is unlikely to play its traditionally dominant regional role, at least for some time. Coupled with a feeble Saudi role due to aging leadership, and coming at a critical stage in the struggle between pragmatic and radical forces throughout the Middle East, this development could energize extremist

elements led by Iran -- unless Tehran faces mass protests of its own in the wake of Egypt's revolution. Israelis are particularly concerned about Jordan, fearing that if Cairo goes the wrong way, fragile Amman might be swept in the same direction.

Israelis have also paid close attention to the American role in the Egypt crisis. Some, including various officials, have concluded that the Obama administration cannot be trusted to support an ally at a moment of truth. Many officials, however, acknowledge the nuances and limits of U.S. policy. They also reason that the bond between America and Israel is deep rooted at the popular level and based on numerous shared values, not just interests, obviating the choice between democracy and stability.

On the peace front, Israelis are debating whether the regional turmoil calls for an effort to revive negotiations with the Palestinians or a wait-and-see attitude in a period of regional transition, a vacuum in Egyptian and Arab backing for the process, and regional perceptions of American weakness. At the moment, caution is the stronger sentiment in the Israeli government. One common conclusion is that peace agreements should encompass peoples, not just governments, and be fortified by solid security arrangements. Agreements alone do not guarantee stability.

Conclusion

In dealing with the new situation, Washington should take Israel's concerns into account and maintain close bilateral security relations. At the same time, the United States will have to perform a balancing act, ensuring that Egypt is moving toward democracy while maintaining stability, peaceful relations with Israel, and as much cooperation as possible in the face of regional radicalism. Concurrently, the international community should not give Iran and its proxies a free pass. Pressure should be elevated to include human rights and democracy promotion in the spirit of the changes resonating throughout the region.

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