

Mubarak's Ouster: Good for Egypt, Good for Israel

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The inspiring triumph of the Egyptian people in the nonviolent overthrow of the hated dictator Hosni Mubarak is a real triumph of the human spirit. While there will likely be continued struggle in order to ensure the military junta will allow for a real democratic transition, the mobilization of Egypt's civil society and the empowerment of millions of workers, students, intellectuals and others in the cause of freedom will be difficult to contain.

It is disappointing, then, that what should be a near-universal celebration comparable to what greeted the nonviolent overthrows of authoritarian regimes in the Philippines, Czechoslovakia, Chile, Serbia and elsewhere has been tempered by the right-wing Netanyahu government in Israel and its supporters in the United States who oppose Egypt's democratic revolution.

Israel's standing among democrats in Egypt and elsewhere in the Arab world has no doubt suffered as a result of the Israeli government's outspoken support for Mubarak and opposition to the pro-democracy struggle during the Egyptian dictatorship's final weeks. Indeed, the very assumption that the continued suffering of 82 million Egyptians under a corrupt and brutal authoritarian regime was somehow less important than the possible negative ramifications of democratic change for five and half million Israeli Jews smacks of racism.

In reality, Israel has nothing to worry about.

While sympathy for the Palestinian cause runs deep among ordinary Egyptians, it is hardly the principal focus of the Mubarak regime's opponents, who are demanding political freedom and economic justice. Unlike the movement which overthrew the Shah of Iran in 1979, Egypt's movement is overwhelmingly secular, their civil society is much stronger, the country's intellectuals and business class are far more open to the West, and there is no religious hierarchy with control over vast networks of resources.

The overwhelming role played by religious forces in Iran contrasts with the demonstrations, strikes, and other actions in Egypt, which has been led from the outset by secular youth through the Internet and other means of communication. The slogans, communiqués, banners, graffiti, tweets, and [Facebook](#) messages have been almost exclusively secular in orientation, pushing nationalistic and liberal democratic themes. And, despite decades of U.S. support for the Mubarak dictatorship, the Egyptian protests have featured virtually no explicit anti-American or anti-Israel overtones, a striking contrast with the Iranian revolution. Indeed, the protests have almost exclusively focused on Mubarak's misrule rather than the U.S. role in enabling it.

Although most of the Egyptian protesters are presumably practicing Muslims, they show no desire to establish an Islamic state, which was an explicit demand of much of the Iranian revolution's leading activists from the beginning of the struggle.

The Muslim Brotherhood -- which represents at most about 25% of the population -- still embraces a tiresome anti-Israel rhetoric, but the current generation in leadership are also pragmatists who have renounced violence and condemned terrorism. Ayman Al-Zawahiri, who had been a Muslim Brotherhood activist as a teenager and later went on to co-found Al-Qaeda, has denounced the Brotherhood precisely for its "betrayal" of what he claimed were "Islamic principles" because they, among other things, "acknowledge the existence of the Jews."

In a democratic election, the Muslim Brotherhood would likely win scores of seats in the 454-member lower house and could even conceivably be a junior partner in a coalition government. But its political orientation would not be much different from the legal conservative Muslim-identified parties currently in the Jordanian and Moroccan parliaments or even the ruling Justice and Development Party in Turkey. Indeed, the Muslim Brotherhood would likely be more moderate and more committed to the democratic process than some of the hard-line fundamentalist Jewish parties in the current ruling coalition government of Israel.

More importantly, the Muslim Brotherhood -- like virtually all Egyptians, in particular the armed forces -- recognizes that Israel cannot be defeated militarily. Egypt fought four wars with Israel between 1948 and 1973 and lost each one badly at considerable costs; the military balance is even more skewed in Israel's favor today. Similarly, support for terrorist groups would invite devastating Israeli military reprisals. Allowing arms, rocketry, or other weapons to Hamas militia could provoke another disastrous military confrontation with Israel which would likely spill over to Egyptian territory.

With so many desperate economic and other domestic problems to deal with in a post-Mubarak era, the last thing Egyptians would support is a war with a powerful neighbor they would surely lose. Military aid and cooperation with the United States, as well as the badly needed economic assistance, would end if Egypt threatened war or supported terrorism.

And, while there has long been popular opposition to the Camp David Accord, the disagreement has generally not been because it made peace with Israel. To most Egyptians, the 1978 peace agreement was problematic for other reasons:

One was that the agreement did not address the plight of the Palestinians or create a comprehensive peace. Just months after Israelis withdrew their troops from a now-demilitarized Sinai Peninsula and no longer having to worry about their southern flank, Israel launched its devastating 1982 war on Lebanon. With the Arab world's largest and most powerful armed forces no longer able to play a deterrent role, Israel has subsequently been emboldened to launch a series of large-scale military incursions into Lebanon, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip; colonize much of the West Bank to the verge of making the establishment of a viable Palestinian state impossible; and place 1.5 million Palestinians of the Gaza Strip (administered by Egypt between 1948 and 1967) under a draconian siege with devastating humanitarian consequences. As a result, Mubarak was seen as an accomplice to Israeli militarism, unilateralism, and oppression.

A second objection was the agreement included what was essentially a tripartite military pact. While most peace agreements historically have resulted in demilitarization, the Camp David agreement instead led to dramatically increased U.S. arms transfers to both Israel and Egypt totaling \$5 billion a year. This costs the Egyptians greatly, since -- while the military hardware came courtesy of U.S. taxpayers -- it ended up costing Egyptians billions in terms of additional personnel, training, and spare parts. Furthermore, this aid included training and equipment in domestic political repression, mostly used against nonviolent pro-democracy advocates.

The agreement also led to large-scale U.S. economic penetration and the privatization of public assets to wealthy well-connected Egyptian elites and multinational corporations, which further resulted in growing inequality and corruption. Contrary to popular belief in the West, Mubarak's predecessor Anwar Sadat was not assassinated for having made peace with Israel. All indications are that his assassins -- part of an underground extremist Islamist group -- were far more upset about his domestic repression and opening the country up to Western influence than the peace treaty with Israel. Indeed, the assassin's cry, "I have killed Pharaoh" -- the same moniker given Mubarak by his critics for his autocratic condescending rule -- is hardly indicative of an obsession with Israel.

Ironically, most of the prominent American pundits and politicians claiming that the overthrow of the Mubarak dictatorship would threaten Israel are the very politicians who have encouraged Israel's wars on civilian populations in Lebanon and the Gaza Strip and other policies which have helped create extremist elements that really do threaten Israel. Similarly, those now claiming that Egypt's nonviolent indigenous struggle against Mubarak will result in a repressive Iranian-backed anti-Israel fundamentalist regime are some of the very people who supported the U.S. invasion of Iraq -- which has resulted in a repressive Iranian-backed anti-Israel fundamentalist regime.

Pro-Mubarak politicians -- be they [Republicans](#) like Senator John McCain, House Foreign Affairs Committee Chair Ilana Ros-Lehtinen, or former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, or [Democrats](#) like Senator Dianne Feinstein or Representatives Howard Berman and Gary Ackerman -- appear committed to continuing the policies of divide and rule between the Semitic cousins of the Middle East. From providing military aid to rhetorical support, they continue to support the suppression of pro-democracy movements in the Middle East only to then insist the United States has to back the rightist Netanyahu government because Israel is "the sole democracy in the Middle East." As much a protection racket as a self-fulfilling prophecy, their support for the militarization of the region and their backing of tyrannical regimes appears designed to reinforce their insistence that because Israel is surrounded by authoritarian regimes, close cooperation between the rightist expansionist camp in Israel and the United States military is necessary in order for the Jewish state survive. With Israel as its surrogate, it enhances the U.S. military presence in the critical region of the Middle East.

One cost of U.S. support for authoritarian Arab regimes is that it provides yet another rationalization for blaming the Jews. President [Barack Obama](#)'s delay in coming around to support Egypt's pro-democracy movement -- though largely the fault of pressure from Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, and other hawks in the foreign policy establishment -- was instead widely blamed on the Israeli government and "the Israel Lobby." Meanwhile, the Mubarak regime -- supposedly a friend of Israel -- was claiming that the protesters and the foreign journalists who were covering them were part of an Israeli plot; pro-democracy demonstrators, human rights monitors and journalists attacked by Mubarak's goons were routinely subjected to anti-Semitic epithets.

For decades, Arab dictators -- now joined by the autocratic Iranian regime - have used Israel as an excuse for their militarization and authoritarianism, cynically manipulating the Palestinian cause for their own ends. Democratic systems, however, are usually far less likely to give in to such scapegoating and paranoia.

Virtually all of the largely nonviolent civil insurrections around the world over the past three decades have led to democratic governance and moderate secular leadership. There is little reason to suspect Egypt would be different. Such nonviolent revolutions require the building of broad coalitions that help encourage pluralism and compromise, empower ordinary people, and build civil society. This creates not just political change but fundamental social change of the kind that has the will and the means to resist potential encroachments against newfound democratic institutions and individual liberties and disingenuous efforts to mobilize support for aggressive war.

Thus, there is little chance Egypt would abrogate Egypt's 1978 peace agreement with Israel or threaten armed conflict.

However, a democratic Egyptian government would likely be more outspoken in support of the Palestinian cause and in opposition to the current right-wing Israeli government. A democratic Egypt would likely ease the blockade of food, medicines and other humanitarian goods into the besieged Gaza Strip. Egypt would presumably mobilize its diplomatic clout to try to pressure the Obama administration to go beyond words in blocking Israel's illegal colonization of occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem.

Taking such positions does not threaten Israel, however. Indeed, these are the very steps necessary for making peace.

The emergence of an Arab democratic order that is assertive against the occupation, while not threatening Israel militarily, could help galvanize the Israeli peace movement and other opponents of the Israeli occupation. As Kai Bird, writing in *Foreign Policy*, [noted](#), "the emergence of an Arab democratic polity should convince Israeli voters that their leaders have become too complacent and too isolationist. After Tahrir, a majority of Israelis may conclude that they can't live in the neighborhood without forging a real peace with their neighbors."

What we have seen between Israel and Egypt for the past 33 years has been a cold peace, based upon a Pax Americana, arms transfers, and dictatorial rule. What the region needs is a real peace, made by the democratic governments representing the peoples of the affected countries, based upon international law, self-determination, and human rights.