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The Self-Defense of Middle Eastern Conservative Regimes, and Israel's Role

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Although there is no direct link between them, both the recent elections in Jordan and Egypt and the WikiLeaks publications are instructive regarding the determination of conservative regimes in the Middle East to defend themselves and enhance their survivability.

The Royal Court in Jordan can view the results of the November 9 parliamentary elections with a great deal of satisfaction. The regime can rely on at least three quarters of the elected representatives and maintain the delicate balance between the Hashemites and Palestinians in Parliament. In addition, on November 24 outgoing Prime Minister Samir Rifai was reappointed by the king, and he retained two-thirds of the previous cabinet. Thus continuity in Jordan was maintained, aided by the fact that opposition elements did not run as identifiable blocs in the elections. Some disturbances in cities north of Amman to protest the results were quickly quelled.

In Egypt, the first round of parliamentary elections took place on November 28. The number of seats was increased over the last parliament, elected in 2005, in order to ensure greater representation for women. In the previous elections, the Muslim Brotherhood won 88 seats. At the time, the Egyptian government succumbed to pressure by the US administration – which was still promoting its reformist initiative to democratize the Middle East – and allowed a relatively free election campaign. In the most recent elections the Egyptian regime applied a lesson learned in the past and took a strict approach towards any candidate not from the central parties, the National Democratic Party and the New Wafd Party.

The Muslim Brotherhood was not allowed to run as an identified independent party, and the Egyptian regime cracked down especially hard on candidates identified with the movement. Over the last three years many of the movement leaders and central activists were arrested, and over the last three months the international press reported on hundreds of detainees. Dozens of candidates were arrested and disqualified. Not surprisingly, the day after the elections the Muslim Brotherhood announced that none of the candidates identified with the movement were elected. In contrast, Cairo is eyeing the Wafd Party

favorably, as the successor to the party that ruled Egypt most of the period between World War I and the 1952 revolution. The regime allowed 250 candidates from this party to run and did not obstruct them as it did to the Muslim Brotherhood's candidates.

Early in his second term, President Bush abandoned his vision of a democratic Middle East. For his part, President Obama has not attempted to revive that vision and even drastically reduced the budgets to promote reforms in the region. One may assume that the administration in Washington is more concerned about the question of succession in Egypt in light of President Mubarak's age (82) and waning health.

While President Obama and Secretary of State Clinton have questioned Egypt's handling of elections in private conversations with Egyptian officials, this has all been done behind closed doors. Only after the publication of a *Washington Post* editorial (November 26, 2010) did a State Department spokesperson express concern and disappointment at the interference suffered by the opposition and the arrests of their candidates, as well as the fact that the media was prevented from approaching opposition spokespeople. The State Department also said that the United States believes that international monitoring is of great importance in building confidence in the election results. A spokesman for the Egyptian presidency tersely protested the statement, as well as a State Department report on religious freedom in Egypt (part of a report on religious freedom worldwide, published on November 17, 2010), but it is safe to assume that this will end the exchange of public messages at the relatively low level of spokespeople.

The conduct of the Egyptian regime regarding the elections signals its determination to handle the succession of the presidency in the same manner. When this happens, there is no doubt that the regime will not allow more than a token public discourse on the topic and will firmly suppress any expression of opposition to the succession or the manner in which it occurs, no matter who the successor may be.

At the same time and unrelatedly, WikiLeaks and some major American and European newspapers published documents revealing the attitude of the moderate conservative Arab regimes towards Iran. One cable from the American Embassy in Cairo stated that Mubarak is fiercely hostile toward Iran, claiming it intends to destabilize the region in general and Egypt in particular: "There is no doubt that Egypt sees Iran and its greatest long-term threat, both as it develops a nuclear capability and as it seeks to export its 'Shia revolution'" (*The Guardian*, November 28, 2010). Mubarak was also quite blunt, in public as well, about the attitudes of other Arab leaders in the region. In addition, the documents cited the president of the Jordanian senate, Zeid Rifai, who, according to the American ambassador in Amman, said: "Bomb Iran, or live with an Iranian bomb." Jordan's King Abdullah warned Special Envoy to the Middle East George Mitchell "that direct American engagement with Iran at this time would just deepen intra-Arab schisms and that more countries 'without a backbone' would defect to the Iranian camp."

There is nothing new in the revelations by WikiLeaks or in the reports about the conduct of Middle Eastern regimes in election campaigns, but they highlight the struggle between the two central forces in the region – the so-called "conservative" and pro-Western camp

and the radical camp that also includes sub-state movements and organizations. The damage to the image of the United States and the absence of a real peace process between Israel and its neighbors do of course have an impact on the results of this struggle. The Israeli and US governments face difficult dilemmas in weighing and determining the way to respond to the central issues in the process. There is logic to the claim that while the region is facing so significant a crossroads it would be unwise of Israel to make fateful decisions regarding its relations with its near neighbors. On the other hand, neither does the status quo serve its long term interests, and its conduct might have some influence, if only in a very partial way, on the results of the titanic struggle taking place in the region.

A political process, even on the basis of interim solutions, can ease the situation for the moderate elements in the region. Such a process would also allow this camp to progress in creating regional instruments for handling issues such as water, energy, and transportation and thereby contribute to economic development, a critical component of the struggle between the opposing Middle East camps. Therefore, Israel should adopt a proactive strategy rather than merely enjoy reading the leaked cables that prove that in the view of the moderate conservative camp in the Arab world, Iran, rather than the Palestinian issue, is the true existential threat.