# A New-Old Middle East: Current Developments and their Implications for Israel

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In recent months the Middle East has experienced profound changes, some of them unprecedented in terms of their nature and impact. They figure among the most dramatic transformations to occur in the region since it was molded into its modern form after World War I. The unrest has emerged in several individual states, but the confluence of events and their similar backgrounds, as well as the fact that the upheavals tend to reinforce one another, has lent the unrest the sense of a widespread regional groundswell. To date it is unclear where the unrest is heading, but it is obvious that it has already changed the face of the Middle East.

The high point of the unrest is without a doubt the dramatic developments in Egypt, not only because of its geopolitical impact on the regional and international levels, but also because of the surprise, strategically speaking, of the events, to observers of the region – Arab and Western analysts, local actors, and most of all, the Egyptian regime itself. To a large extent the dramatic changes in the Egyptian arena encapsulate what is happening in most of the Arab world. They reflect an essential change in the conduct and power of some of the key players in the Arab world, as well as the emergence of unfamiliar phenomena and elements.

The transformation is evidenced throughout the arena. Entrenched, powerful regimes that are usually described as the moderate camp in the Middle East, supporters of the United States and foundations of regional stability, are suddenly described as oppressive dictatorships and exposed

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as weak. The Arab street, until now deemed primarily submissive and indifferent, has proven an active and influential element, capable of overturning established orders. Arab militaries, hitherto considered to be entirely loyal to the whims of the regimes, are demonstrating unexpected independence. Islamic movements, usually perceived as the central threat to the regimes, have been shown − at least for now − to be fairly restrained. The European Union, which has generally resisted physical intervention in the Middle East, has spearheaded the campaign against Libya's Qaddafi (a campaign led by France), and the United States has surprised the world by turning its back on longstanding allies, thereby demonstrating it has drawn some operative conclusions − however limited − from past experience. Along with the changes among the veteran actors, new and powerful actors have taken the stage, headed by the virtual social networks, modern media, and the community of young people, all of which played central roles in the recent developments. The gamut of changes is evidence of the need to revamp some of the fundamental concepts used to date to describe the reality and basic processes in the Middle East.

The purpose of this essay is to analyze the nature of the current unrest in the Middle East, even as it continues to unfold. The essay attempts to identify the major paradigm shifts that are transforming the arena, while pointing out threads from the past that continue to influence it.

## The Political Dimension: The End of the "Jumlukiyya" Era

The unrest in the region is largely heralding the end of the prevalent order, which generally sported several trademarks: an entrenched, powerful leader, a ruling party controlling all aspects of life, a bureaucracy serving the interests of the ruling elite, and a strong army with absolute loyalty to the ruler. Most of the elements in this equation have either been undermined or erased in recent months, while some have behaved differently than expected.

A distinguishing feature of the recent events has been the widespread uprising of the public against entrenched, powerful ruling establishments. This was especially apparent in regimes that for many decades purported to be harbingers of social, political, and cultural reforms. These regimes assumed a veneer of republicanism and were a priori established as the revolutionary antithesis to the traditional monarchies. However, with

the passage of time the revolutionary republics themselves turned into corrupt regimes where control passed from father to son. Thus, these regimes earned the sobriquet "*jumlukiyya*," a term in Arabic combining the words *jumhuriyya* (people's republic) and *mamlaka* (monarchy). The representatives of this order are disappearing from the scene: President Husni Mubarak of Egypt and Zine al-Abdeen Bin Ali, Tunisia's longtime prime minister, have been pushed out of office; Qaddafi is conducting a bloody civil war to preserve his regime in Libya; and other leaders in the Arab world such as Syrian President Bashar al-Asad and Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh are under fire as never before. Interestingly, the monarchies in the region, usually portrayed negatively as degenerate and corrupt, have not experienced similar unrest (with the exception of the extraordinary case of Bahrain). This is perhaps because these regimes did not tout revolutionary slogans, and therefore were not caught in a web of contradictions between vision and reality. In addition, the society of these states, especially in the Persian Gulf, is generally more traditional, making it easier to accept tribal dynasty-based regimes.

Another surprising phenomenon has been the conduct of the Arab armies, which departed from the image associated with them in recent decades. Especially since the entrenchment of the Arab regimes during the 1970s, the armed forces were perceived as the main loyal prop supporting the regimes in the region. The actual conduct of the past months of the armies in Egypt, Tunisia, and to a large extent Libya undermines this longstanding image. The militaries are returning to the forefront of the political stage, demonstrating surprising independence with regard to the rulers, and in some countries are careful not to carry out repressive measures against the protest movements (in Libya and Yemen part of the army even joined the protesters). Consequently, the armies are perceived sympathetically by most of the public as powers protecting national interests. The central role of the military in the new order is especially apparent in Egypt, where it has been running the country since Mubarak's resignation and will continue to do so until democratic elections are held. At the same time, in countries such as Syria, Jordan, and Bahrain, the army still represents the interests of the ruling minority and therefore earns a hostile attitude from a significant portion of the public. These armies would presumably be less tolerant of widely developing protest movements in their countries, because of

their understanding that a change in the nature of the regimes would also undermine their own status. Evidence of this trend can be found in the violent suppression by security forces of protests in Syria and Bahrain, where dissent was aimed against the ruling minority.

Amidst the growing uncertainty, the army in the Arab world may regain, if only partially, the influence it once had on the political arena. As in the past, the army of today continues to be the strongest and best organized institution in most Arab countries. As such, it may also be pivotal in curbing the Islamic stream, particularly if the latter grows stronger through democratic elections. Until the last decade this was the dynamic in Turkey, whereby the army preserved the country's secular nature and limited the influence of the Islamic governing party.

Another profound trend demonstrating the weakness of Arab regimes is the enfeeblement of the ruling parties. This has been a multi-year process that seems to have peaked with the present unrest. Together with the *jumlukiyya* sovereigns, the ruling parties rested on the laurels of the valiant struggle for national liberation and waved the flag of social revolution, but in the end turned into debased bodies ruled by small elites. The collapse of the National Democratic Party in Egypt and the Constitutional Democratic Rally in Tunisia was recent palpable evidence of this trend; these parties followed in the way of other ruling parties in the Middle East – the FLN in Algeria, Fatah in the Palestinian arena, and the Ba'ath Party in Iraq, crushed after the American invasion (2003). Against this background, the strength of the Ba'ath Party in Syria is indeed questionable, as is the extent to which it is capable of helping the regime in Damascus deal with the current challenges, which seem especially severe because of Syria's deep inter-sectarian and inter-religious tensions.

## The Social Dimension: Anti-Western Democracy?

What exactly do the demonstrators want, and what vision underlies the slogan "the people want to bring down the government" shouted by the protestors in the region? It is clear that the upheaval in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya and the ongoing unrest elsewhere point to the existence of an active, influential civil society in a sizable portion of the Arab world. The revolt in Tunisia was the first ever to have taken place in the Arab world, the one in Egypt was the most important and most media-saturated,

and the one in Libya is the most violent. These processes have yet to be completed: while in Egypt and Tunisia the entrenched dictators have been ousted, the states are still ruled by the army – a symbol of the old order, and they will be ruled by the army until democratic elections are held; in Libya, the old dictator is using force to stop the revolution. Nonetheless, such phenomena have never before been seen in the region, with the exception of the revolution in Iran. Indeed, the Arab public has usually been described as lacking the requisite maturity for a modern political order, not to mention for conducting a proper democracy. However, after years in which "the myth of the Arab street" became the phrase connoting the passivity of the Arab public, the people of the Arab states have shown their power to change entrenched realities.

It is difficult as yet to characterize the rising popular power with any precision. The primary moving force of the revolution lies with the young urban middle and lower classes, which for years have nursed tremendous rage over their situation, marked by ongoing economic distress, government corruption, limitations on political activity, and human rights violations. These young people are a primary demographic sector in the region. Many have had modern academic schooling but cannot find work commensurate with their education. Culturally, they are aware of what is happening in the West and feel alienated by the political and social orders around them. Many turn to Islam as a refuge from their hardships. Their banding together in the public squares of the Arab world and Iran and their willingness to confront the regime with a demand for change embody powerful processes that pervade the Middle East on the social, cultural, and demographic levels.

> The Arab desire for democracy is not necessarily accompanied by a desire to become Western, either conceptually or culturally. Western observers must be wary of projecting their own conceptual world on what is happening in the Middle East.

However, the force of the wave of revolts also exposes a striking fundamental problem. This wave is fed by many desires for change of a rather general, amorphous nature, without a clear common agenda. Some of the current protest stems from economic grievances, which in conjunction with the sources of political unrest feed the fire of the current shock wave. In some states the protests, assuming the mantle of a struggle for democracy, are actually

fed by tensions of a traditional, religious, ethnic, or tribal nature. So, for example, in Libya, the locus of the protest against Qaddafı's regime is the district of Cyrenaica, partly because of tribal and regional rivalry with the elite in the district of Tripoli. In Bahrain, the protest movement primarily reflects a struggle between the Shiite majority (some 80 percent of the population) and the ruling Sunni minority (the Saudi army's entrance into Bahrain in March 2011 in an attempt to protect the government there has turned the crisis into a wider arena of confrontation between the Sunni and Shia worlds, and between the Arabs and Iran). In Yemen, the calls for reforming the regime also swelled into a demand by the population in the district of Aden to secede from the state and thereby once again become an independent state, as it was until 1990. And in Saudi Arabia, the popular protests have developed primarily in Shiite population centers in the eastern part of the kingdom.

The revolutionary wave in the Arab world has thus opened a Pandora's box, and various tensions, latent and blatant alike, are now coming to the fore. Therefore the events should not be seen as a thirst for freedom or as an embodiment of democratic revolutions such as those that occurred in the Communist bloc in the late 1980s, an image most of the protest movements in the Arab world are trying to project. Democracy does indeed figure prominently among the demands of the protest movements, but it is only one of many and not necessarily the most developed.

Significantly, the desire for democracy is not necessarily accompanied by a desire to become Western, either conceptually or culturally. On the contrary, some of the elements promoting the popular protests in the Arab world today, and not just the Islamic stream, are fundamentally hostile to the West in general and the United States and Israel in particular. Consider, for example, the artificial distinction made by some Western commentators between the masses of young people comprising the core of the protests and the Islamic elements among them. In fact, however, many of the young people filling the streets are decidedly Islamist, and it is impossible to distinguish fully between the "secular" and "religious" protests. The outside − especially Western − observer must therefore exercise caution in analyzing the current developments. Without a doubt this is an authentic popular protest that aims − among other goals − towards the establishment of democracy, but it does not

entail Arab society becoming more like its Western counterpart and does not signal, at least for now, the emergence of what is known in the West and Israel as "a peace camp." Moreover, the voice of the masses right now is to a large extent the voice of al-Jazeera with its prominent anti-Israel and anti-America tones. In the case of Mubarak, for example, the disgust with the dictator stemmed from both the corruption rampant in regime and the fact that the Egyptian president tied his fate to the United States and was seen as a defender of the political settlement with Israel.

The Islamic element has had a central if surprising role in recent events. The long-held nightmare of the Western world and the Arab regimes about a violent regime change led by Islamic organizations has not played out. Instead, it seems that they − and especially the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt − prefer not to take advantage of the unrest in order to overtake the states by force, but rather prefer more guarded ways of attaining that goal. These elements are likely motivated by the understanding that a violent takeover would lead them to a frontal confrontation with the regime, which would make it easier for the regime to take aggressive steps to suppress the popular protests. This in turn would earn the regimes legitimacy at home and among the international community, which also harbors deep suspicions of Islamic elements.

Most of the Islamic elements have therefore adopted a more moderate stand, adhering to the principle of *sabr* (patience), a fundamental principle of the Muslim Brotherhood doctrine. In Egypt and Tunisia, for example, they have joined the popular protests, and receiving unprecedented recognition from the local regimes and the international community, are stepping up their preparations for forthcoming elections. The Islamic organizations, especially the Muslim Brotherhood, are in good starting positions with regard to the challenge: they have a large, effective organizational structure; they enjoy widespread public support stemming in part from their extensive network of social assistance institutions and programs; they have an ideology that over several decades has struck a resonant chord in the region; and they are led by people widely admired and reinforced by the return of many senior leaders after many long years of exile abroad (e.g., Yusuf al-Kardawi, the highly influential Egyptian authority on religious law, who is something of a spiritual father for the Muslim Brotherhood throughout the Arab world, and Rashid al-Ghanoushi, the leader of the Islamic movement in Tunisia − al-Nahda).

Most of the secular opposition elements in the Arab world enjoy far less organizational effectiveness and ideological pull than the Islamic ones. Therefore, the secular opposition will find it difficult, at least for now, to present a viable alternative to the regimes that have collapsed or to the Islamic stream.

Another major social phenomenon that emerged in the recent events across both the political and the public spheres is the tremendous effect of modern media. The current unrest is not the first example of the growing impact of the internet and inter-Arab media networks, especially al-Jazeera. The most prominent example of this phenomenon took place in Iran following the June 2009 presidential elections, in the clashes between the thousands of demonstrators and the Islamic regime. Elsewhere, the power of al-Jazeera to ignite the Arab street has been particularly evident in struggles between Arab and non-Arab forces, for example in the al-Aqsa intifada, the American campaign in Iraq, the Second Lebanon War, and Operation Cast Lead. In all these instances the network encouraged popular uprising, accompanied by criticism of the Arab regimes for their indifference and helplessness in face of the attacks on the Arab and Muslim world. Thus some of the most powerful and unprecedented processes of the protest movement began and have continued via the virtual networks.

Yet in the current unrest the modern media realized more of its potential power than before. In an unplanned team effort, the virtual social networks supplied the organizational setting for the protest movements, while al-Jazeera in Qatar helped shape the conceptual framework of the revolutions and worked as a catalyst to prepare the masses to challenge the regimes. The synergy between the two types of media neutralized the enforcement capability of the regimes and their control of the message dispensed for both internal and external consumption. The new phenomenon allowed the public at large to come together, exchange information, and plan moves above the heads of the regimes. The various regimes in the region, especially the *jumlukiyya* – whose leaders are usually members of the older generation – did not fully grasp the power of social networks and modern media and were caught off guard by the rapid development of the revolution. These leaders have acquired capabilities to deal with threats from the past, such as terrorist attacks, revolts, and military coups, yet most were helpless in

the face of the mass gatherings in the large city centers that paralyzed the centers of government. However, inherent in the popular strength is also the fundamental weakness of the new phenomenon. The powerful public dynamics unleashed by the media and virtual social networks are generally not accompanied by any institutionalized leadership, an orderly planning of moves, or a defined agenda. All these are necessary foundations for formulating a viable alternative to the current order.

Thus the public in the Arab world has in most cases demonstrated its ability to operate as a civil society motivated by the desire for freedom. It has come together to oppose detested regimes and has even toppled some of them. In recent years the public in some states demonstrated its ability to hold genuinely democratic elections. However, passing the democracy test requires not only extreme events such as revolutions or elections, but extended steps of maintaining a liberal order over time. The degree to which the Arab public is ripe for democracy will be expressed in its openness to a wide range of opinions and the willingness of every government to preserve the democratic rules of the game. To date, experiments with democracy in the Middle East have raised profound doubts as to this potential. Almost every state in the region where proper democratic elections took place in the last two decades saw significant successes reaped by Islamic forces, as in Algeria, the Palestinian Authority, and Turkey. These elements do not harbor natural sympathy for the democratic idea in its Western context, let alone a willingness to maintain a pluralistic political and social theater. Moreover, their rise to power by no means necessarily heralds a moderation of their political views. While sovereignty incurs responsibilities and constraints, it has not generated a change in traditional core ideologies.

Thus, in face of the most recent changes Western observers must be wary of projecting their own conceptual world on what is happening in the Middle East. The wave of protests instigated by the young people and the calls for toppling dictators are not necessarily what the West knows from its own past or would like to see in the Middle East. These are not expressions of Westernization, secularization, or ideological pluralism, and certainly not the formation of a peace camp desirous of reconciliation with the Western and Arab worlds, first and foremost Israel and the United States. This is a desire for a different democratic order, largely severed from universal or Western definitions, and for a

fundamental change, though many of its proponents are still finding it hard to delineate its precise form.

## The Regional Dimension: Victory for the Resistance Camp?

A first – and not necessarily mistaken – glance suggests that for a number of reasons the current unrest plays primarily into the hands of the Middle East resistance camp, led by Iran, and works against the region's moderate camp. The unrest has primarily hit the moderate states, headed by Egypt, that have constituted the major obstacle to the resistance. The United States is now viewed as a hollow reed for its allies and toothless vis-à-vis its enemies in the sphere, further weakening its status in the Middle East. Recent events have the potential to strengthen the Islamic camp in the region, especially in Egypt; and the international focus on the upheavals in the Arab world is deflecting attention, if only for a limited time, away from other critical arenas, chiefly the Iranian nuclear issue. The upheaval is of course not the result of any initiative on the part of the resistance camp, but it has enhanced the rise of the resistance in the region and deepened the weakness of the moderate camp, which is in effect in tatters.

Still, it seems that the resistance camp also harbors serious concerns about a protest wave heading in its direction. This is especially true regarding the protests in several areas. Syria has seen violent clashes between the regime and the demonstrators, reflecting the deep-seated hatred between the Sunni majority and the ruling Alawi minority. The protest movement in Iran has reawakened, inspired by events in the Arab world (though the Islamic regime continues to rule the country with an iron fist), and there is increasing popular dissatisfaction with Hizbollah in Lebanon. Unlike in Tunisia and Egypt, leaders of the resistance camp appear prepared to suppress popular dissent – which they perceive as an existential threat – with force.

Yet in any case, recent developments match the strategic analysis that has long informed the resistance camp and provides encouragement for the future. In the background are a number of fundamental changes: Turkey, led by the Islamic AKP, is slowly forging closer relations with the resistance camp while gradually unweaving its strategic connections with Israel; chronic instability continues to characterize Iraq, especially after the withdrawal of most of the American troops, a situation seen by

the resistance as an opportunity to entrench its influence in this arena; and the United States grows weaker in the region, in part because of its ongoing failure to ensure stability in various locations where it is active, especially Afghanistan and Iraq.

Taking a wider view, it seems that the dissent in the region, and especially the revolution in Egypt – for many years the leader of the Arab world – is a milestone in a long process in which the Arab world is growing weaker and the non-Arab, peripheral forces are gaining strength. This has been underway for some decades, especially since the collapse of the Pan-Arab vision in the late 1960s. This vision reached a nadir in the last decade, which witnessed several traumatic crises in the Arab world, first and foremost the United States conquest of Iraq, a central player in the Arab world, and the toppling of the powerful regime of Saddam Hussein, which served as the central shield of the Sunni Arab world against its enemies, headed by the Tehran-led Shiite camp.

The current upheaval has prompted the leading Arab actors to look inward, which in turn, may bring into starker relief their inability to come together and operate as a collective. The vacuum is gradually being filled by non-Arab forces on the margins of the Arab world, particularly Iran, Turkey, and Israel. These states, especially Iran, are slowly expanding their influence over key regional arenas, foremost among them Iraq, the Persian Gulf, the Palestinian arena, Lebanon, and the Red Sea arena. These actors, Iran in particular, are liable to see the regional upheaval as an opportunity to further their influence, especially in the arenas experiencing the strongest tremors, such as Egypt, North Africa, and the Arabian Peninsula.

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## The International Dimension: "Arab DNA" and "American DNA"

In recent months many analyses have dwelled on the misunderstandings implied by the American response to the upheavals in the Middle East. Special attention is given to the abandonment of Mubarak, one of America's most important allies in the region, during his most difficult hour, in order to side with the ideal of promoting democracy in every arena in the world, without taking special circumstances into consideration,

even if this plays into the hands of elements hostile to the West. Many have compared Obama's conduct to that of President Jimmy Carter towards the Shah of Iran on the eve of the Islamic Revolution. In the late 1970s, the Shah tried to nip the developing revolution in the bud, but encountered American pressure to soften his stance and promote human rights. This greatly damaged his domestic image and undermined his self-confidence in dealing with the opposition. In addition, there are questions about the American failure to learn the lessons of the past, as evinced by US pressure on Egypt to hold fair elections in 2005, a move that strengthened representation of those identified with the Muslim Brotherhood in the Egyptian parliament, or the American support in January 2006 for free elections in the Palestinian Authority with Hamas participation, a step that enabled the movement to take over the Palestinian government.

The approach of the administration in Washington towards the regional upheaval is deeply rooted in the American worldview and has been common to all US administrations, namely, sympathy for popular struggles for freedom and a deterministic belief in the victory of democracy in every arena in the world. It is also possible that Washington's moves were imbued with the hope that the new-old line would help restore America's image in the Middle East, which has traditionally been negative. Some in the United States even claimed that the seed of the current wave of revolutions in the Arab world were planted with the demise of Saddam Hussein's regime. According to this school, the toppling of one of the strongest *jumlukiyyas* in the Arab world and Hussein's media-covered capture propelled the gradual dissolution of the fear of the Arab public to confront their regimes, a process that has peaked in recent months.[1]

However, at least for now it seems that America's moves have achieved the opposite result: not only has the United States failed to win sympathy or gratitude by supporting the popular protests; rather, its image as an interested, opportunistic party meddling in Arab affairs has been reinforced. In the situation in which Washington now finds itself, almost any move it makes vis-à-vis events in the region is interpreted negatively by the Arab world: intervention in events is seen as an expression of aggressive policies stemming from concerns over economic interests, while non-intervention is viewed as a reflection of the American administration's hypocrisy, also stemming from material motives,

particularly the fear of higher oil prices. Entangled in this conundrum, Obama has primarily focused on avoiding American involvement on the ground, as in Libya, primarily to avoid further damage to his domestic image.

Washington's conduct has already incurred strategic damage to the United States, precisely at a time when American influence in the Middle East is on the wane. This will affect the self-confidence of US allies in the sphere and their trust in Washington as a strategic buttress, not just toward external threats such as Iran, but also towards grassroots domestic challenges. This comes at a time when the American administration is facing some challenges that require the US to recruit regional allies, among them stabilizing Iraq; eradicating global jihad in Afghanistan, and increasing international pressure on Iran. New signs that Washington's status in the region has been damaged are appearing in Saudi Arabia, which has emerged as the leader of the moderate Arab camp. Riyadh apparently did not inform Washington ahead of time that it was sending troops into Bahrain, and it recently cancelled planned visits by Secretary of State Clinton and Secretary of Defense Gates to the kingdom.

An interesting demonstration of the administration's problematic interpretation of what is occurring in the Middle East may be seen in the analysis by Fouad Ajami, published a month before the outbreak of the unrest in the region. In an essay entitled "The Strange Survival of the Arab Autocracies,"[2] he admitted that five years ago he thought that under the aegis of the American administration, the Arab world would march towards its own "spring of democracy" inspired in particular by events such as the Cedar Revolution in Lebanon that followed the murder of Rafiq al-Hariri and resulted in the withdrawal of Syrian troops from the country; the first free presidential and parliamentary elections in Iraq in 2005; and the pressure on Egypt to promote political reforms. Now the vision seems far less rosy: Iraq is far from being a stable democracy serving as a model for other states in the region; the dramatic changes in Lebanon were obliterated by the war it was dragged into by Hizbollah in 2006; and the Palestinian arena has split into two entities. According to Ajami, the sorry results of the democratic experiment in the Arab world have made Arabs and Washington alike distance themselves from the vision, recognizing that the sphere is not ripe for such attempts and that promoting them may backfire and actually undermine rather than

enhance stability. Apparently even as esteemed an expert as Ajami did not correctly assess not only the basic weakness of most of the autocracies and the intensity of the popular desire for change, but also the willingness of the United States to cling to its program of establishing democracies while ignoring the region's complexities.

## A View to the Future: The Israeli Angle

Even before the various crises are fully resolved, the reversals in the Middle East in general and in Egypt in particular have weighty strategic significance for Israel on several levels. At the center is of course the question of the stability of Israel's peace agreement with Egypt, a highly important strategic pillar for Israel's security concept over the last three decades. Any change in the regime, and especially the possibility that the Muslim Brotherhood may gain in strength, has the potential to alter Israel's security concept. At least in the short term, and as long as the Egyptian army dominates the regime, it seems that the peace agreement will remain stable. However, the strategic sensitivity of the issue for Israel requires that it closely assess the ramifications of Egypt's internal situation for its foreign policy and security concept, especially after the elections expected to be held there at the end of the year.

With the world's attention, and especially America's attention, fixed on the Arab world, focus is diverted from other issues of strategic importance for Israel, first and foremost the Iranian nuclear problem. Moreover, the upheaval in the region is liable to deepen the concern of various international players about promoting economic and political – and certainly military – steps against Iran at this time so as not to exacerbate the regional instability.

It is unlikely that the changes in the Middle East will ease the pressure on Israel to promote the political process with the Palestinians or help undermine the increasing delegitimization of Israel on the international arena.

As for the resistance camp, it seems that its members are drawing succor from the weakening of the moderate Arab regimes and the embarrassing confusion besetting the United States. Resistance elements are liable to find a more convenient scope for maneuvering at all levels, including military, and an opportunity to enhance their impact on various regional arenas now in the process of transformation. They have already begun to examine what their range

of maneuvering may be by initiating moves such as the dispatch of two Iranian warships to the Mediterranean (February 2011) or the attempts to transport arms shipments from Iran to the Gaza Strip through naval and land routes (March 2011). Conversely, the undermining of Bashar al-Asad's regime in Syria may deal an overall blow to the resistance camp, and more particularly to Iran's influence in the region. If Asad's regime approaches its finale, part of the resistance camp may escalate action against Israel, in an attempt to prevent the collapse of the Ba'ath government in Damascus.

On the Palestinian arena, the recent upheavals are liable to deepen the strategic distress in Abu Mazen's regime, in light of the loss of the powerful regional ally in the guise of the Mubarak regime and the profound doubts about the stability of America's support. All of these trends play into the hands of Hamas, which − like the other resistance members − senses that the changes in the region are working in its favor, among them the weakening of the Egyptian regime, which had exerted heavy pressure on the Hamas government in the Gaza Strip, and the possibility that the Muslim Brotherhood, of which Hamas is an offshoot, may strengthen its position in Egypt. To prevent a fate similar to Mubarak's, Abu Mazen has taken steps to break the stalemate with Israel, and on the internal arena he is signaling his intentions to promote reconciliation talks with Hamas. He has also announced his basic willingness to hold parliamentary elections at the end of the year, and is promoting international moves to censure Israel.

Against this background, the probability that Abu Mazen's government will advance more daring moves, such as declaring an independent Palestine within the 1967 borders (a notion gathering support internationally) or increasing friction with Israel in the West Bank, grows more likely. On the political public diplomacy level, for now it seems that the present upheavals are not enough to undermine the basic assumption of the international community in general and the United States in particular that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the source of regional instability. In light of this, it is unlikely that the changes in the Middle East will ease the pressure on Israel to promote the political process with the Palestinians or help undermine the increasing delegitimization of Israel on the international arena.

In terms of security, the weakening of the Egyptian regime's enforcement capabilities in the Sinai Peninsula has already made it easier to smuggle arms and militant operatives into the Gaza Strip, helping to accelerate the terrorists' buildup processes in the region by equipping themselves with improved armaments, especially long range rockets and sophisticated anti tank systems, naval vessels, and planes, all of which are liable to limit the IDF's scope of maneuvering in the Gaza Strip sector.

Thus the most recent developments in the Arab world, especially the revolution in Egypt and the protests in Syria, appear to pose many challenges and few opportunities for Israel. The changes are largely another piece in the decade-long process of the worsening of the regional strategic reality Israel must face. The process is complex and saddled with an internal contradiction: over the years, Israel military and technological might has grown and its economy has strengthened, while at the same time a consistent regional change for the worse is palpable, expressed primarily in the number of threats to the country and their military and political potency – in particular, Iran's regional strength, its nuclear program, and the consolidation of the resistance camp in Tehran, and, on the other hand, the decline of political opportunities, especially the political process with the Palestinians and Syria.

## The Morning after the Revolution

The crisis in the Middle East is still unfolding. It is too early to sum it up or formulate long term strategic assessments, which just a few months ago were not deemed relevant or possible. The emerging Middle East seems to be embracing both new and old phenomena. Decoding this situation requires a profound understanding of its subterranean streams as well as the neglect of some of the preconceptions and images that for several decades informed analyses of the region.

What began as a euphoric, pioneering struggle for democracy has in different areas turned into confrontations with familiar characteristics. Under the banner of the struggle against tyranny, a host of tribal, ethnic, religious, sectarian, and ideological struggles have recurred. Their eruption has revived some phenomena long familiar to the region: tyrants who think nothing of forceful suppression of their own people, tribes and sectarian groups fighting one another, and the ever-present danger of sliding into internal anarchy, from which the major winners would be

the region's extremists. These phenomena are particularly prominent in Libya, Syria, and Yemen as well as Bahrain, where the rising struggle between the Shiite majority and Sunni ruling minority is feeding the deep Arab fear of Iranian subversion and the profound tensions between Sunnis and Shiites. These developments join older problems threatening the integrity of states in the region: Sudan, on the verge of division into two states; Iraq, suffering from the underlying weakness of the central government and growing strength in the periphery (especially the Kurdish autonomous government in the north); Lebanon, slowly being conquered by Hizbollah; and the PA, which has split into two separate geographical and political entities. The Arab state is still managing to survive despite the tremendous challenges it faces, but in most cases, its nature is changing and the power of the central government is waning. It seems that the more homogeneous the Arab state is, such as Egypt and Tunisia, the less violent is the revolution, the more prominent is the struggle for democracy, and the more orderly is the transition to new regimes. By contrast, in the more heterogeneous and less institutionalized nations the revolutions are accompanied by severe outbreaks of violence and anarchy.

Most of the region's states are experiencing the collapse of – or at least profound shocks to – the traditional forms of government. The old order, based on autocratic regimes, is rapidly being replaced by a new order striving to establish itself according to democratic rules. Once the storm dies down, states are often left with two central powers: the army, to a large extent representing the old order, including ties to the West and defiance of the Iran-led resistance camp, and perhaps a link to the pre- and post-revolutionary eras; and the Islamic stream, the largest and best organized public and political entity in most of the states, prepared to assimilate into the new order and assume a dominant role. While it is true that the secular political and public elements are gaining strength, their impact seems to be less profound than those of the Islamic groups. Therefore, it is unclear if they will reap much success in upcoming tests of power, especially democratic elections, which would allow them to establish dominance in government.

This situation is liable to mean a recurrence of dramatic upheavals that the region has already experienced: the gradual takeover of a regime by the Islamic stream while the army is weakened, as in Turkey (a scenario

that is likely to be particularly relevant for Egypt); the army preventing the Islamic stream from taking over the government, leading to a violent confrontation between the two, as was the case in Algeria; or the collapse of the governing establishment and an aggressive Islamic takeover, according to the Hamas-Gaza Strip model. In addition, one can imagine scenarios – currently less likely – in which the Islamists do not dominate, such as an orderly transfer of government to secular institutions without links to any Islamic movement, as the result of democratic elections. The emergence of familiar or new scenarios in the region depends on a number of variables: the strength of the armies; the strength of the protest movements and elements opposed to the regimes, especially the Islamic groups; the policy that the international community, especially the United States, is likely to adopt; and how the internal rifts develop in various loci in the Arab world.

The discourse accompanying the current regional wave of protests seems to contain the seeds of future revolutions. The tremendous rage at the entrenched, hopeless reality largely ignores the fact that it is rooted in profound social, demographic, and economic problems that are at best difficult to solve, and certainly cannot be solved with the speed desired by the masses. As in many previous revolutions, the current wave too may soon face an acute crisis of failed expectations. This might play into the hands of the next group to promise salvation for the people, but might also lead to tyranny and violence, as has many times been the case with revolutions that had utopian visions inscribed on their banners.

## Notes

1 See the interview with Fouad Ajami, who was influential in formulating the Bush administration's Middle East policies, *Haaretz*, February 25, 2011.

2 Fouad Ajami, "The Strange Survival of the Arab Autocracies," www.hoover.org/publications/defining-ideas, December 13, 2010.