

The New Middle East: An Era of Uncertainty

Ephraim Kam

It is hard to overstate the importance of the earthquake currently underway in the Middle East. It is a shock wave affecting multiple systems, and its impact, already felt, will be sensed more in the future. Regimes have fallen and others may follow suit. New elements are demanding and beginning to receive their share as the governing structure in several countries starts to change. These changes will have economic implications, and oil prices have already increased. The shock wave is liable to alter relations and the balance of power among the leading countries in the region. It will affect US standing in the Middle East, and there will be implications for Israel and the prospects of peaceful relations with its neighbors.

This article examines the significance of the events in the Middle East of winter 2011. It traces emergent trends and potential processes, but as dramatic events continue to unfold as of the time of this writing, the analysis is qualified by the caveat that much yet remains unknown.

Stability of the Arab Regimes

In the period since 1970, Arab regimes have enjoyed remarkable stability. With the exception of the Sudanese regime that was overthrown in 1989 in a military coup, not one Arab regime was toppled. This stability is in marked contrast to the preceding tempestuous decades, when a wave of military takeovers and attempted takeovers swept across Arab countries. Even the murders of key Arab rulers such as King Faisal of Saudi Arabia in 1975 and President Sadat of Egypt in 1981 did not place the regimes in danger of collapse, and power was passed peacefully to their heirs. The sole exception to this regional norm occurred in the non-Arab country

Dr. Ephraim Kam, Deputy Director of INSS

of Iran, where in 1979 the masses overthrew the shah's regime. In the generation since the Islamic Revolution, the Iranian precedent has not recurred in other countries.

Several reasons account for the four decades of stability. The military coups of the previous generation taught the regimes that the key to stability rests with the military: if the military supports the regime, internal threats can be managed – and vice versa. Based on this understanding, the regimes cultivated their relationships with the armed forces. They made sure to grant preferential service conditions to their loyalists and offered senior military personnel key positions in the economic and political systems following their retirement; some of the Arab countries were ruled by former military officers. The method proved itself, and since 1970 the militaries displayed their loyalty to the Arab regimes, save for the case of Sudan (and the murder of Sadat, committed by a small group of Islamists that had infiltrated the army). Even amid the agitation that led to the fall of the shah, the military remained loyal to the regime to the last moment.

Along with assuring the military's loyalty, the regimes developed independent physical means of protection. The most important of these was the buildup of large military forces serving in parallel to the regular army such as the Revolutionary Guards in Iran, the Republican Guard in Egypt, Syria, and Iraq, the Royal Guard in Jordan, and the Saudi Arabian National Guard. Their mission, first and foremost, was to protect the regime and serve as a counterweight to the regular army, whose loyalty was at times suspect. Regimes also built efficient internal security services that monitored suspicious individuals inside and outside the military, and internal security forces to manage demonstrations and shows of civilian unrest. Against these tools of power, the prospects for a military conspiracy against a regime were slim.

However, while the regimes were thus reasonably insured against military conspiracies, other internal threats developed gradually from two directions. In a considerable number of states there was a growing sense of public dissatisfaction with the character and policies of the regime. This dissatisfaction stemmed mainly from the economic situation, unemployment, housing shortages (especially for young people), restrictions on freedom of organization and political expression, and the suppression of individual rights. In some cases, unrest erupted

into mass demonstrations against the regime, which was forced to use police forces against the masses, for example, in the riots in Egypt in 1977 and 1986 that followed hikes in food prices. In these cases, the regimes were able to suppress the agitation relatively quickly, which apparently lent them confidence of their ability to contain unrest in the future. The most conspicuous protest actually erupted in Iran in June 2009, following the revelation of forged results in the presidential election; then the regime was forced to use extreme force in order to curb public agitation.

A second type of threat has emerged from the strengthening of Islamic movements in several regional states over the past two decades. To date Islamic movements have not attained power in any Arab country, but they have posed a significant threat to several Arab regimes. In addition, a fundamentalist Islamic regime rules in Iran; in Turkey a party with Islamic roots rose to power in democratically held elections; in the Gaza Strip it was Hamas that assumed power, likewise in democratic elections. In Algeria, a radical Islamic movement almost came to power following elections in 1992, but was blocked by the army by force, which led to a lengthy and severe civil war.

Fear of the strength of Islamic movements contributed to rulers' opposition to political reform. Some rulers occasionally authorized a limited increase in political freedoms, mainly following pressure from the American administration. However, not one regime developed a methodical, long term process aimed at laying the necessary foundation for a democratic society. Rulers frequently claimed that Arab society was not yet ripe for the establishment of Western style democratic regimes. Prematurely and hastily opening up the political system, they said, would lead to its takeover by radical elements, primarily Islamic movements.

The Outbreak of Unrest

Potential for unrest in Arab countries has existed for a long time. Many in the Arab world have wished for change in the character of the regimes, which would include opening up the political system and allowing the participation of additional elements in government so as to represent the face of society; improving the economic situation; expanding individual rights; and limiting corruption. Cultivating the seeds of unrest and a desire for change has been the information revolution. Round-the-clock television channels led by the al-Jazeera network and the expanded

use of the internet revealed to the masses what the regimes sought to conceal: that a different and better life exists in other countries. But until the winter of 2011, this potential remained dormant, as no leadership was found to spearhead any movement for change and organization at a national level was lacking. The masses who wanted change didn't believe in their power, especially as previous regime changes in the Arab world had come about only through military coups. There was no precedent for changes based on popular uprisings. True, the revolution in Iran showed that the masses could also topple a regime, but the Iranian case was perceived as an exception, with its own special explanations not necessarily applicable to Arab countries.

The spark that ignited the fire arose in fact in a non-central Arab country of limited influence in the Arab world – Tunisia – where the success of the masses to quickly topple the regime of Zine al-Abdeen Bin Ali proved to the multitudes in other countries that they have the power to change their situation. The fire from Tunisia spread quickly, bringing down the Mubarak regime in Egypt, challenging the future of Qaddafi's rule in Libya, and bringing forth a wave of demonstrations and riots in about a dozen other Arab countries and Iran.

The intensity of the riots, the demands of the demonstrators, the response by the regimes, and the results of unrest differ from country to country. However, several phenomena recurred among the different venues. Generally speaking, the demonstrations have largely been led by the young generation, mainly students, joined by representatives of political movements. From the outset, the demonstrators lacked clear leadership; but as the demonstrations continued, representatives emerged from among them and conducted negotiations with the authorities. Second, although the demonstrations began spontaneously, protestors were aided in organizing them through technological means, particularly social networks. Third, while economic distress was the critical factor underlying the eruption of unrest, what stood out among the demands of the demonstrators was a call for the removal of the rulers, an end to emergency measures and repression, and expanded political freedom. Foreign affairs occupied a secondary position among demonstrators' demands. The rulers quickly understood the seriousness of the demonstrations, and attempted to mollify demonstrators through promises of political concessions and economic perks. However, once

these concessions did not appease the masses, some of the regimes resorted to force to quell the unrest.

The Overthrow of the Egyptian Government

The fall of the Mubarak regime was a formative event in the wave of unrest, as developments in Egypt, the foremost Arab country, will necessarily affect other Arab states. Events in Egypt will also influence the regional balance of power and Egypt's relations with the US and Israel. The demonstrators who toppled the government included members of student groups and young peoples' organizations severely hurt by unemployment, political parties that tried to ride the wave of agitation, and members of the Muslim Brotherhood. The demonstrators' principal demands were the removal of Mubarak and his loyalists, political freedom and free elections, an end to suppressive rule, cancellation of the state of emergency, and elimination of corruption. Although economic distress was a catalyst for the outbreak, economic reforms did not figure among the leading demands of the demonstrators, perhaps because there actually had been considerable improvement in the economic situation in Egypt in recent years. Demands related to external matters, including relations with the US and Israel, were also not stressed.

At this stage, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces has taken power for a six month period. The transition government it appointed for this period will be followed by the transfer of power to civilian authorities. Likewise, the existing constitution will be amended in matters concerning parliamentary and presidential elections, which will take place at the end of the transition period. Emergency laws passed in 1981 will be cancelled once circumstances permit, and further promises made to the demonstrators will be implemented. Many activists are demanding a new constitution that would limit presidential authority. However the army feels that in the meantime, the deeper changes will have to be made by the parliament that is elected.

The army has constituted a central force in the Egyptian system since the 1952 Free Officers Revolution, and following the 1973 war has been held in particularly high esteem. Aside from its role of defending the country against external threats, the army wields political weight, is meant to protect the regime, serves as a symbol of national unity, and has economic roles as well. There is almost no doubt that following the

establishment of the new regime, the army will continue to be a central factor in Egypt, and the next regime will have to arrive at an understanding with it that preserves its status and its interests.

Is the army prepared to lead Egypt to democracy? It seems the army is prepared to spearhead changes and introduce certain political reforms, although it is unclear to what extent. The army was strongly linked with the Mubarak regime and is not the ideal body to bring about true democracy. The business of the army now is to preserve stability and prevent violence, ensure its own status in the system, and curb radical elements from leading the regime. The army may also seek to restrain efforts by democratic activists to dismantle the trappings of power the military enjoyed under Mubarak, and its strength and popularity will assist it in doing so. All this is not compatible with full democracy. Thus a reasonable possibility is that the army will allow gradual, cautious, and moderate political development, to include relatively free elections, expanded political freedom, transparency of the political system, and limitation of corruption.

To what extent will the democratic process in Egypt deepen? Democracy, far more than only elections to the parliament or the presidency, involves institutions, processes, values, culture, transparency of the political process, preservation of individual and minority rights, and a system of checks and balances. All these, as in other Arab countries, were almost non-existent in Egypt, and it will take much time until these develop. Therefore it is possible that after relatively free elections are held, the army or other elements that gain political power will employ force to limit individual and minority rights and build up their own power.

An important question concerns the role of the Muslim Brotherhood within the framework of the next regime. The movement's power is unclear. In the parliamentary elections of 2005 it gained 17 percent of the seats, but in the 2010 elections the regime made sure that the Brotherhood did not enter parliament. Over the years the Brotherhood has undergone changes and today seeks to join the democratic process. It supports gradual reform through a peaceful and constitutional struggle, and rejects all forms of violence or terror. The movement opposes al-Qaeda and has condemned the September 11 terror attacks. It is not corrupt and its power is in part built on the supply of social services to places

not reached by the regime. The current leader, Mohammed Badie, is not a charismatic man and is modern-minded with a pragmatic approach.

On the other hand, the Brotherhood has never abandoned its goal to establish an Islamic religious state in Egypt and the greater Muslim world. Radical and jihadist offshoots have emanated from the Brotherhood, including al-Qaeda, al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya, al-Takfir wal Hijra, and Hamas. Disposed negatively to the US, the Muslim Brotherhood opposes American policy in the Middle East. It has never accepted the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel or Israel's right to exist, and it has called for a severance of diplomatic relations with Israel, although it has also claimed it would not embark on a war against it.

The common assumption is that if relatively free elections were held, the Brotherhood would not attain a majority but would gain a substantial portion of the vote and emerge as a large party. The most organized political body in Egypt, the Brotherhood enjoys considerable financial support, highly motivated constituents, and much sympathy among certain parts of the public due in part to the previous regime's policies of suppression; hence the possibility that the Brotherhood may well be included in the post-election government, even if it does not actually head it. The army does not intend to prohibit the Brotherhood from participating in elections, but it will not support a fundamentalist Islamic state. Therefore it will probably oppose the establishment of a regime headed by the Brotherhood should it emerge as the largest party. In any case the likelihood of the establishment of an Iranian style regime in Egypt is not high. More likely is a regime built on the Turkish model: a regime that integrates a moderate Islamic identity and modernization.

If nonetheless the Brotherhood attains a decisive status in the next regime, it is unlikely it would propel Egypt to launch a war with Israel, as there is no body in Egypt, itself included, that demands it. It would also presumably not cancel the peace treaty, although it might make several adjustments in this regard. It could, as it has suggested, bring the peace treaty to a national referendum and diminish its significance, and it can be much more supportive towards Hamas in the Gaza Strip. And even if the Brotherhood constitutes a minority in the government, its participation there would be a negative factor for Israel. In any event, even without Brotherhood representation in the government, cooperation with Israel will likely suffer under the next regime, at least in the immediate term. As

such, there may be expanded smuggling into Gaza and increased terror against Israel from Sinai.

Relations with the US will likely be influenced by two considerations. On the one hand, the next regime will not want or be able to forfeit the financial assistance pledged by the US. The Egyptian army has close ties with the American military and it will likely labor to preserve these ties. Continued American assistance will also be linked to the continuation of peaceful relations with Israel. On the other hand, a considerable portion of the Egyptian public is not sympathetic to the US, in part due to the US intervention in Iraq and its support for Israel, the Mubarak regime, and other Arab autocratic rulers. In all, the next regime is likely to be less friendly to the US than the Mubarak regime, and the American administration will have to rebuild relations with Egypt – which it has already begun to do.

Other States

The potential for change also exists beyond Egypt and Tunisia, where the ruling regimes were toppled, and Libya, where Qaddafi's rule is faltering. In some states, unrest has already broken out but has not ripened into upheaval; in some, it has not yet broken out. With all the requisite caution, several observations concerning unrest in those countries can be made.

Significant potential for change in Iran was evident long before the current wave of unrest, displayed most dramatically in the widespread riots that erupted in June 2009. There is a real potential for regime change in Iran, because a large portion of the population desires a different type of regime that supports political openness, personal freedom, and less intervention in personal lives. They seek a regime that allows economic recovery and eliminates corruption. The current unrest in the Middle East has also led to demonstrations in Iran, apparently to a relatively limited extent, and so far has not produced tangible changes. Indeed, the situation in Iran is different from Egypt. The regime in Iran is ready to exert brute force to curb rioting, and this force has successfully deterred demonstrators. The regime also relies on the political and economic strength of the Revolutionary Guards, which have a fundamental interest in preserving the regime. Therefore, in order for change to occur, what is needed is a combination of three factors: charismatic leadership,

widespread organization, and popular determination to continue the struggle despite the activation of force against the protestors.

Demonstrations in Syria began somewhat later, quickly spread and escalated, and have assumed the face of protest against the Alawite minority. The regime has resorted to a *mélange* of political concessions and military force in order to suppress the demonstrations, and has maintained control. However, the unrest has far from abated, and if this trend continues, the future of the regime may be in question.

Jordan is of special importance to Israel, both for the peace treaty between them and its linkage to the Palestinian issue. There too, demonstrations held to protest the economic situation and corruption were accompanied by a demand for political openness. The demonstrations thus far have been limited and have not been directed against King Abdullah. Rather, they reflect opposition – primarily on the part of Transjordanian elements – to the policy of the regime and not to the regime itself. As in other states, the regime hastened to announce economic benefits. Both the Muslim Brotherhood and leftist groups are active in Jordan, but to the Hashemite regime's benefit is the backing it enjoys from the Transjordanian component of the population, which would be hard hit should the regime fall. If demonstrations intensify, the regime would likely not be deterred from using extreme military force against demonstrators.

The survivability of the Qaddafi regime in Libya is unclear, following the takeover of parts of the country by opponents and in face of increasing international pressure. Qaddafi's situation is difficult, but he has underscored his determination to fight. In addition, Qaddafi's construction of his regime around himself and his family prevented the establishment of institutions and bodies that could take on authority and ensure the continued function of the country's central government. If the Qaddafi regime falls, the significance would be primarily intra-Libyan, save for two aspects: the effect of the internal struggle on oil prices, and the possibility that Libya would become a hotbed for jihadist terror should a weak central government rule Libya.

Yemen is not a key Arab state, although it is highly important to the United States, as the administration sees al-Qaeda's Yemenite branch as a major danger for terror attacks against the US. The organization operates in the mountainous region of Yemen, is assisted by sympathetic

tribes, attacks the country's security forces, and feeds Yemen's instability. Yemen is also home to multiple severe problems that fan the flames of agitation: it is one of the poorest of the Arab countries, it suffers from high unemployment, and it is tainted by corruption. It is given to inter-tribal conflicts, as well as a secessionist movement in the south and the Houthi revolt in the north. Thus far the regime has maintained control of the situation. President Ali Abdullah Saleh hurried to announce a package of economic benefits and political concessions, including his readiness to resign and transfer power to a responsible party. However, the concessions did not appease the demonstrators and a worsening situation could easily evolve. If that happens, at risk are both the regime and the state, which is liable to collapse. This would play into the hands of al-Qaeda, which could strengthen its hold in Yemen as a central base for dispatching terrorist activity.

The protest in the Gulf states has so far remained limited, in part because most of the states are not plagued by economic distress, and the regimes are able to contain would-be dissent through monetary compensation. This occurred in Saudi Arabia, where the regime rushed to pledge billions of dollars for education, health, and infrastructures, on top of the considerable resources it has already invested in these areas over the years. However, this is no guarantee that protests in Saudi

Arabia and the Gulf states will not intensify, mainly because the structure of the political systems there are relatively closed and do not permit political openness. Moreover a young generation has come of age and is demanding its share of authority. Clearly, if the Saudi regime is undermined, implications would be far reaching.

However curtailed the change seems, it is real and palpable. The wave of protest that broke out in Arab countries and Iran shows that millions of people in the region want a change in the nature of the regimes ruling them.

The exception to the limited protests in the Gulf is Bahrain, where unrest broke out at an early phase. Bahrain too is not a central Arab state, but shock waves there have considerable regional implications. Most of the Bahraini population is Shiite, so protest there resounds of an attempted

Shiite uprising against the country's ruling Sunni minority. The protest is also significant in the Iranian context: Bahrain is the only country to which Iran lays historical claims; a toppling of the Sunni regime would be

perceived as an Iranian victory. Moreover the unrest in Bahrain is liable to spread to other countries in the Gulf, including Saudi Arabia, which was quick to send a military force to Bahrain to help stabilize the situation. Finally, Bahrain serves as an important base for American forces in the Gulf and is an important element in American deployment in the Gulf and the campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. A fall of the Bahraini regime would constitute a severe blow to the US, Saudi Arabia, and the moderate Arab states, and would be an important achievement for Iran.

Initial Assessments

One of the marked features of the shock wave rocking the Middle East is the uncertainty that will accompany the region in the upcoming period. Rulers are not guaranteed they will be in power next year or who their neighbors will be. The orientation of states whose regimes have already fallen or will fall shortly is unclear, as the replacement regimes have yet to take shape. This amorphous situation is complicated by other questions. Is there a chance that true democracy will be established, in at least part of the region? What will be the external and security policies of the new regimes and their attitudes to the US and Israel? Will new associations or rivalries form among the region's states? Will radical Islam be able to exploit the Middle East tremor to attain key positions in the region? This uncertainty will oblige concerned countries, including the leading states in the Middle East and the US, to plan their regional policies based on a significant component of uncertainty regarding the foreseeable future.

Seemingly, the change that has occurred up to now in the region is partial and contained. The Mubarak regime was brought down, but as the control by the army that replaced it is not fundamentally different from what preceded it, this cannot be classified as a true revolution. The Tunisian regime was also toppled, but its successor does not herald a revolution either. Several other regimes in the region are experiencing tremors but are in the meantime surviving through a combination of force and limited concessions.

Yet however curtailed the change seems, let there be no mistake: the change is real and palpable. The wave of protest that broke out in Arab countries and Iran shows that millions of people in the region want a change in the nature of the regimes ruling them. The masses believe in and recognize their power to achieve change. Furthermore, the regimes

understand the latent power of the masses and can no longer assume protection by the military. This recognition obliges them occasionally to exert force in order to protect their rule but also to take steps to lower the flames: to forego certain authorities, expand the authority of parliament and freedom of expression, and try to bring about an improved economic situation. So long as these steps are perceived by the demonstrators as being insufficient, the intensity of the protest will not fade, at least in some of the countries.

Therefore, the starting assumption should be that the shock wave will continue for a period of at least several months if not longer, because the conditions that launched it continue to exist. Even if the unrest ebbs, it is liable to erupt in the future, and the mutual influence among the waves of unrest in the different countries has already been proven. The success of the demonstrators to bring down the regime in Egypt, which was perceived as a bastion of stability, is likely to serve as a model for agitated masses in other countries. Their degree of success will largely depend both on their determination to continue undeterred and strong leadership. At the same time, success will depend on the determination of the regimes to defend themselves. Furthermore, states where protest movements are successful are liable to undergo a period of instability. The regimes that rise upon the ruins of the old order are not necessarily those that will stabilize over time. Emergent political forces may also alter the character of the regimes that take power, and if the new regimes do not fulfill popular expectations, there is a possibility they will be replaced by other regimes, perhaps of even a more radical nature.

Given that the Middle East shock wave is still underway, one can envision a number of scenarios regarding the changes that might occur. One scenario is that the changes will essentially stop at the current level. In other words, there may be further, limited demonstrations and violent outbursts in the near term, but the Arab regimes will withstand these with few political concessions. If so, the Middle East as we know it will more or less continue to exist, despite the fall of the Mubarak regime, and the democratization process will remain limited. At this stage, the likelihood for this scenario to materialize is moderate.

An antipodal scenario depicts the fall of key regimes in the Middle East, in Saudi Arabia and/or Iran. The fall of either of these two regimes would lead to a significant strategic change in the region. The fall of

the regime in Tehran would to a large degree reduce the significance of the Iranian threat and create an opening for dialogue between the new regime and the US, and later, perhaps, also Israel. The fall of the Saudi regime into the hands of a radical force would be a major blow to the US and the moderate forces and present a major threat to them. Currently the probability of this scenario seems low.

In a less extreme scenario, unrest would continue and lead to a change of additional regimes, for example, in Libya, Yemen, or the smaller Gulf states, but with limited influence on the greater region. There are, however, regimes with important regional influence such as the regimes in Syria, Jordan, and even Bahrain. Regime change in Jordan would have a negative impact on relations with Israel, while a change in Damascus could open up new options for dialogue with the US and perhaps with Israel. Conversely, a new regime could be more militant towards Israel. In any event, renewed dialogue between Israel and Syria will not occur as long as the unrest in Syria continues and it is unclear who will hold the reins of power in Damascus. The likelihood of the fall of regimes such as in Yemen or Libya seems higher than that of the previous scenarios.

No less important is the depth of change, namely, whether the shock wave spreading across the region will lead to even limited democratic processes. The political systems in various Arab states will likely become more open. Most of the Arab regimes have promised to implement political reforms, some fundamental and some superficial, including political freedom and freedom of expression. However the trend towards democratization will encounter difficult obstacles: the reluctance of the regimes to open up their systems to a substantial extent, conflicting interests of different power groups, and the lack of processes, institutions, and values capable of producing a basis for true democracies.

The establishment of democratic regimes could be the best outcome for Arab countries as well as for the Western world and Israel. Democratic regimes can address the aspirations of the majority of the public in Arab countries. They would likely minimize the weight of radical Islamic movements and likewise the terror infrastructure in the region. Such regimes might encourage dialogue between the Arab world and the US and the West, and consequently, more meaningful dialogue between Arab countries and Israel.

The West and Israel do not fear democratization of the Arab world, rather the opposite scenario: Iran-style Islamization; the possibility that Islamic movements will rise to power through elections; that the forces that brought about the strengthening of Islamic movements in the region over the past two decades will prove to be stronger than the proponents of democracy. In early 2006, logically speaking, the best scenario for Gaza Strip residents was the democratic election of a moderate regime that would preserve Palestinian unity, build up the Strip following the Israeli withdrawal, and perhaps try to build normal relations with Israel. However, this did not happen. If radical Islamic regimes indeed rise to power in key Arab countries or countries linked with the Arab-Israeli peace process, it would change the face of the region. Fundamentalist regimes would threaten Arab regimes that remain moderate and strengthen Iran's regional status. They would influence Arab-Israeli relations and exacerbate the strategic threat against Israel; they would impact on American and Western interests as well as the US regional status.

The shock wave might change the regional balance of power. Some of the rulers in Arab countries are apt to be weaker; in any case they will have to focus on internal matters and consolidate their regimes. This would project an additional dimension to the weakness inherent in the Arab world, which continues to vacate the regional center stage for Iran and Turkey. Within this framework, Egypt's regional standing may be weakened. Thus far, Egypt was the leader of the moderate Arab camp, the foremost US ally, and the leader of the struggle against Iran, radical elements, and terror. Its leadership ability is liable to erode if it has to invest the better part of its resources in internal matters. An open question is whether relations between Egypt and the Iranian regime will grow closer in the event that the Brotherhood becomes a central force in the new government.

Already today, in and at the fringes of the Middle East, are several weak governments and parts of their countries that have become safe havens for terror organizations and armed militias in the style of al-Qaeda and its affiliates. The main examples are Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Somalia, and Lebanon. The possible weakening of some of the Arab regimes might expand this phenomenon into additional countries, Yemen and Libya, for example.

If the regional shock wave does not ultimately harm the Islamic regime in Tehran, Iran could find itself among its beneficiaries. Iran is already expressing satisfaction with the changes underway in some of the states. Several other possible events could play into the hands of the Iranians: the integration of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Egyptian government; injured relations between Egypt and the US and Israel; an improved standing for Hamas; changes in the government in Bahrain; tremors in additional moderate Arab countries; damage to US stature in the region.

The American administration expects its status in the Middle East to be strengthened if the process of democratization gains momentum. However the process is liable to be prolonged, and in the meantime there are other developments that could have an opposite effect, namely: the possibility that Egypt and the moderate Arab countries become immersed in establishing their regimes; damage to Egypt-US relations; the possibility that Iran turns out to be one of the big winners from the regional shock wave. The fact that the American administration did not stand by Mubarak at the critical hour is also liable to erode US credibility.

Israel has absolutely no ability to influence developments in Arab countries and it too is liable to be harmed by regional changes. Against the background of diminished US standing in the region, relations with Egypt and Jordan may deteriorate, and the standings of the Iranian regime and Hamas might improve – unless the domino effect hits them too. Although the regimes in Egypt and Jordan are unlikely to cancel the peace treaties with Israel, the main fear is that the peace treaties with both Arab countries and Egyptian cooperation against Hamas would be weakened.

The regional shock wave is liable to negatively influence the peace process with the Palestinians as well. Beyond all of the problems that in any case hinder the process, Israel will be faced by an uncertain debate over its course. Should it avoid making fundamental decisions so long as the region is in the midst of these major changes, particularly in the context of peaceful relations with Egypt and Jordan? Or should it try to contribute to improving its relations with the moderate Arab camp by embarking on new initiatives in the peace process? To this state of doubt will be an added dimension should the tremor also hit the Palestinian Authority and arouse increased doubts as to whether it has the power to fulfill agreements.