

Israeli Responses to the Arab Spring

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Israel's initial reaction to the onset of the Arab spring could be fairly described as one of apprehension bordering on high anxiety. Such a response was not altogether groundless. After all, the Arab uprising's first targets – Zein al-Abdin bin Ali in Tunisia and Husni Mubarak of Egypt – were known quantities and Mubarak, in particular, was the central pillar of a regime holding a critically important Arab state to a political course that complemented Israel's vital security interests. Mubarak was hardly the Zionist sympathizer caricatured by some of his domestic and regional opponents. For example, he allowed the unchecked circulation of virulent anti-Israel, anti-Semitic, and anti-American propaganda while Egyptian media were strictly forbidden even to speculate about the state of the President's health. Mubarak did, however, consistently interpret Egypt's national interest to require maintenance of the Israeli-Egyptian Peace Treaty, confrontation with Islamist extremists, active suppression of terrorists, and close coordination with the United States. From an American perspective, what Franklin Delano Roosevelt is alleged to have said about the Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza (or, in a different version of what might may well be an apocryphal tale) about his Dominican counterpart, Rafael Trujillo), could have been said with equal validity about Mubarak: "He may be a son of a bitch but he's our son of a bitch." And given the importance to Israel of American regional influence, the ouster of leaders in the American orbit necessarily augured badly for Israel, too.

Israeli concerns were further exacerbated when it began to appear as though the forces most likely to benefit from and exploit the fall of established regimes were not the secular, liberal, middle class youth who featured so prominently in the early breathless coverage of events by Western media, but rather the long suppressed but highly resilient Islamist movements that had

built their own social networks, not just in the less affluent neighborhoods of the major cities but also throughout the vast, under-reported countryside.

However, it soon became apparent that the assumption that had so discouraged Israel and so encouraged Iran and its allies in the region, including the regime in Syria, namely, that the only ones at risk were the “good guys,” i.e., moderate or pragmatic authoritarian rulers, was quite unfounded. The spread of the Arab spring to places like Libya, Yemen, and especially Syria held out the promise that whatever setbacks were implied by the weakening or overthrow of regimes congenial to Israeli interests might be compensated, at least in part, by the weakening or overthrow of regimes unreservedly inimical to those same interests. And that potential gain would be magnified almost beyond calculation if the impulses that led to the brief uprising in Tehran in 2009 that was, in some ways, a precursor to the Arab spring, were to return to Iran with enough force this time to result in the overthrow of the regime there.

Furthermore, the Islamist movements that began to thrive as political space opened up have shown some signs of being rather more ambivalent about their hostility to Israel, or at least about the urgency with which they intend to act on it. How authentic expressions of relative moderation or pragmatism actually are remains an open question, and it is entirely possible that they are merely lip service meant to reassure domestic and especially foreign audiences. But even in the latter case, the felt need to relate to Israel in a manner less diametrically opposed to the course chosen by their predecessors and unlike what their established ideologies would have indicated at least raises the possibility that the consequences for Israel of their coming to power might represent something less than an unmitigated political disaster and intolerable security threat.

What to Do

The predominant Israeli approach to the Arab spring is that Israel must prepare itself to deal with whatever the consequences may be, but without any pretensions to influence the manner in which it evolves, even in the dimensions most relevant to Israel. To a large extent, that approach is fairly realistic. After all, outside actors, even major world powers like the United States, are limited in what they can do to shape the course of events in directions they favor. Still, marginal influence is not the same as no influence at all, and some possibilities to mute or divert negative

consequences for Israel of political change in the Arab world can at least be considered, both at the bilateral and the broader regional levels. One example of preemptive bilateral damage containment might involve Jordan, whose regime's character (like that of Egypt under Mubarak) is largely congenial to Israel security interests. To the extent that challenges to such a regime are fuelled by economic discontent, Israel, as Oded Eran suggests in his article, might be able to take advantage of proximity and manageable scale to help alleviate economic stress, especially with respect to water and fuel. Another example, proposed by Gallia Lindenstrauss, is to search for common perspectives on the implications of the Arab spring in the hope of checking and reversing the deterioration in Israeli-Turkish relations. Thirdly, Israel might try to explore whether channels of communication with Islamist and other emerging political forces in the region might be opened (as the United States has done) in an effort at least to reduce misunderstandings and discredit harmful stereotypes. Finally, at the regional level, Israel might consider whether the need to lower the toxicity of Israel's image in light of ongoing political upheaval and uncertainty might not give added urgency to a constructive reference to the Arab Peace Initiative and a renewed search for some kind of Palestinian-Israeli understanding on how to proceed toward a resolution of the conflict.

There is, of course, no assurance these initiatives or others in the same vein would actually further either their immediate or more comprehensive objectives. Nor are they certain to invalidate the underlying calculation that it is beyond Israel's capacity to alter the course of such profound developments. Still, motorists and homeowners believe that they can do something to "winterize" and "summerize" their cars and houses against what are truly elemental forces of nature. Any effort to "springerize" Israel's foreign and defense policy might well be equally worthwhile.