

The Uprisings in the Arab World and their Ramifications for Israel

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General Characteristics

The wave of protests, popular demonstrations, and anti-regime uprisings grouped under the rubric “Arab Spring” that erupted in Tunisia in late 2010 and spread over much of the Arab world since then has prompted a wave of speculations about future developments. Much of this analytical activity has focused on the presumed causes of what appears to be a sharp departure from the stability or quiescence that characterized Middle Eastern politics over the previous decades, and on the likely consequences across the region. This article focuses on the possible implications of these uprisings for Israel, based on several operating assumptions about the nature of the phenomenon. First, despite some commonalities, the uprisings are not a monolithic region-wide phenomenon, and consequently, few generalizations are universally valid. The few that do resonate widely relate to the vocalization of popular sentiments, the facilitation of communication and organization by dissidents due to the introduction of modern technologies (social networks), and the lowering of the barrier of fear.

Second, the sources of the unrest expressed in public demonstrations are not confined to the rejection of authoritarian rule, but consist of both political/psychological elements (e.g., denial of dignity, resentment over

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widespread corruption, sense of individual as well as collective, i.e., ethnic or confessional deprivation) and economic/material elements (either economic stagnation or the unfair distribution of whatever benefits any economic growth was producing). However, the precise mix of these elements varies in each country, because each one has its own historical, political, social, cultural, economic, and demographic peculiarities.

Third, varying sources of discontent and varying aspirations mean that in many cases, the strengthening of “people power” is not necessarily equivalent to democratization. Sometimes it is manifested in the assertion of “authentic” group/collective identities or even of millenarian visions rather than the struggle for individual liberties, and therefore produces deep apprehension among ethnic/religious minorities or women.

Not all the changes that emanate from these dynamics have negative implications for Israel, particularly insofar as regional alignments are concerned. However, the upheavals do imply significant threats and dangers. Israel is obviously unable to determine the outcomes of what are essentially domestic dynamics or even influence their course and direction. It can, however, take steps to mitigate their potentially threatening or dangerous ramifications.

General Consequences

Given the heterogeneous character of the region, it is not certain that all states will experience serious upheavals (as opposed to mere discontent), and in those that do, the outcomes of the domestic struggles are inherently unpredictable. Even after the first signs of “spring” in Tunisia, few analysts foresaw the emergence of mass protest movements in Egypt or Syria, and when that did happen, many were surprised both that Husni Mubarak in Egypt was overthrown so quickly and that Bashar Assad in Syria was not. In fact, there is no historic inevitability about the outcomes of these struggles. Authoritarian regimes are not necessarily doomed to be challenged, much less overthrown; their fate very much depends on the presence or absence of active foreign intervention (especially military intervention), which was a decisive factor in the ability of the Bahraini monarchy, for example, to survive (thus far, at least), as well as in the inability of Muammar Qaddafi to defeat the uprising in Libya.

What seems less uncertain is that the regimes that survive domestic challenges, and even those that are spared such challenges, will be more attentive to public moods even if they do not display a greater willingness to cede power. Those that do not survive will not necessarily be replaced by less authoritarian alternatives. Indeed, in circumstances in which a culture of tolerance and common citizenship has not yet come to prevail, the political space opened up by the overthrow of existing regimes may be most successfully exploited by Islamist and/or nationalist forces, no more predisposed to encourage or tolerate the political culture underlying true participatory democracy than were their predecessors. In other words, emerging polities that accurately reflect majority interests, identities, or beliefs may nevertheless be incompatible with the practices of liberal democracy. It is also possible that the contest for power will not be decided for some considerable period of time and that protracted domestic conflict will lead to prolonged instability and the weakening or even break-up of familiar territorial units – an outcome already witnessed in Sudan and one that cannot be entirely precluded in Syria and Iraq.

Finally, regional alignments and balances of power may be subject to significant changes, depending on the outcomes of these domestic upheavals. The most obvious example of such change (positive from Israel's perspective) would be the removal of the Syrian component in the Iranian-led "axis of resistance," although other, more negative changes are also possible.

Implications for Israel

The greatest risk to Israel is the possibility that Husni Mubarak's warning to the United States with respect to Egypt – that the only realistic alternative to his model of authoritarian rule is Islamist authoritarian rule – will be borne out, not just in Egypt, but across the entire region. The emergence of radical Islamist regimes bent on implementing their ideological preferences, insensitive to military balances, or simply caught up in escalatory political dynamics of their own making constitutes an obvious danger. A second-order risk is that the weakening of central authority will enable terrorist organizations to exploit power vacuums in frontier regions to enhance their operational capabilities and, in circumstances of their choosing, step up attacks on Israel. This has already happened in southern Lebanon and in Sinai (even before the fall of Mubarak)

and could conceivably happen in southeastern Syria and even in the Jordan Valley. Either or both of these developments would produce a tenser regional environment and greater day-to-day insecurity as well as intentional confrontation or strategic miscalculation. It is even possible, though perhaps not likely, that radical Islamists in Sunni Arab states will make common cause with Iran, if only for short term tactical reasons. Persistent rumors of exploratory attempts at conciliation between Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt have yet to be verified, much less to show tangible results, but the very fact that contacts have been established is noteworthy.

These risks are partially offset by more probable positive changes in regional alignments, i.e., the weakening of the Iran-led axis in the event that the Assad regime in Syria is overthrown. Moreover, it is not inconceivable that regimes led by Islamists will behave with greater practical restraint than their rhetoric/belief system might suggest, because of domestic and/or international constraints on their power. For example, following its electoral victory in Tunisia, the Islamist an-Nahda Party went to great lengths to reassure apprehensive Tunisians and interested foreign parties that it had no intention of implementing a repressive social agenda of the type favored by true fundamentalists. There are also some tentative signs, however inconclusive, that Muslim Brotherhood candidate Mohamed Morsi, the elected president of Egypt, is (willingly or unwillingly) committed to a more similar domestic course and to a more ambivalent attitude toward the peace agreement with Israel than could have been extrapolated from the longstanding approach of the Brotherhood to this question. It is, of course, premature to conclude either that such intentions are sincere or that they are merely a form of dissembling meant to preempt domestic and international pressures. But the former possibility cannot yet be categorically precluded.

Conclusions

In many respects, the phenomenon known as the “Arab Spring” has profoundly changed the political landscape of the region. At the same time, it is important not to overstate the totality of change. For example, the emergence of “people power” means that public opinion has become a greater force to be reckoned with. Still, the “Arab street” was always a factor that both governments and foreign actors were always and

rightly enjoined to take into account. Similarly, domestic and regional uncertainties have clearly been exacerbated, but it is not as though the first demonstrations in Tunisia suddenly swept away a situation of stability and predictability in the domestic and regional politics of the Middle East.

In such circumstances, Israel does not now find itself in an unprecedented situation in which it needs to consider contingencies and policy implications that it was never obliged to think about before. Israel was always an outsider in the regional system, on which political and social grievances could be conveniently focused. That remains the case. Israel may never transform itself into an accepted, integral element of the region and its vulnerability may well grow as fluidity and upheaval in Arab countries continue to intensify (even as social and economic challenges logically demand greater attention to domestic affairs and pose greater, even insurmountable challenges to both incumbent regimes and their successors – and perhaps precisely because of that). Consequently, Israel should prudently explore actions to reduce the potency and appeal of anti-Israel demagoguery, even in the full awareness that total elimination of regional hostility (authentic and therefore instrumentally useful) will remain a distant if not unrealizable goal.

To this end, several policies are in order for Israel. First, Israel should recognize the limits of power. Barring scenarios involving direct military intervention, even major world powers cannot decide the outcome of political upheavals in Arab countries. Israel certainly cannot do so. It cannot even help move events in desirable directions (with perhaps some minor exceptions).¹ Indeed, in some cases (especially Syria) it is far from self-evident what the desirable outcomes are or whether they bear any relation to reality. Moreover, Israel's generally toxic image means that even the appearance of a preference for one party or another in domestic conflicts may have a boomerang effect. At the same time, Israel should recognize that this is not a prescription for paralysis. Rather, it may be able to contain or reduce the potentially negative impact of current developments and perhaps

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exploit any opportunities that present themselves. In addition, it is important to avoid binary logic. The debate between those who advocate passivity while preparing for the worst and those who advocate activism in order to avoid the worst is based on a false contradiction. Both courses can and should be pursued simultaneously along different tracks.

Complementing these general imperatives are specific initiatives Israel might undertake. The first calls for proactive and highly publicized measures to reinvigorate the search for a resolution of the conflict with the Palestinians or at least to lower its profile. As the single most neuralgic issue in Arab (and non-Arab Muslim) attitudes toward Israel even before the Arab Spring, the imperative is not new, except in the urgency of the effort to reduce the possible negative fallout of the recent and ongoing wave of upheavals. Domestic policy disputes in Arab states will not be settled exclusively or even primarily by intellectual persuasion. Nevertheless, opponents of more aggressive approaches to Israel will at least have a better chance to put their case if they are provided with some “ammunition” to counter the putative rationale for escalatory actions by the proponents of confrontation.

In tandem and by the same logic, it is important that Israel endorse the principles of the Arab Peace Initiative and offer to discuss them with an Arab League contact group. Israel does not need to accept without reservation the content of the Arab Peace Initiative but it can benefit from any initiative to refute the claim that it continues to reject or ignore it. Similarly, Israel should attempt to open channels of communication with emerging political forces in the Arab world, including Islamists. There is no guarantee that Israel can succeed even in opening such channels (as the United States has done), much less generate some greater acceptance or empathy. But any effort at least to reduce misunderstandings and discredit harmful stereotypes is surely worthwhile. This could be enhanced by offers of humanitarian assistance. Such offers may well be rejected, and even if accepted, they are unlikely to have as appreciable an impact as will the assistance of states more willing and able to offer relief in the form of refuge to those fleeing the actual or anticipated consequences of violence, especially in Syria. Nevertheless, such offers, aside from their practical impact, may help to erode the hegemonial view of unmitigated Israeli hostility to Arab people.

In addition, other, more narrowly focused measures are indicated. One is the attempt to explore (with American help) whether Turkish-Iranian tensions, focused on Syria and Iraq but reflecting broader Sunni-Shiite suspicions, have created a more auspicious environment for Turkish-Israeli reconciliation. Two is the implementation of more active measures to help alleviate economic stress in Jordan (one of the elements contributing to instability in that country), especially in the fields of water and energy. Three, contingency planning for worst case developments, especially in Sinai, should be strengthened, including the fortification of border defenses and the creation in advance of command structures, force frameworks, and training programs that unfolding events may require. Possible responses to Egyptian requests for a review of the terms of the peace treaty should also be prepared. These actions should be undertaken in consultation with the United States and, wherever possible, with military authorities in neighboring states (in order to minimize misperceptions and unintended escalation) and should be accompanied by high profile offers of economic/technological cooperation, e.g., joint projects, with those states.

Note

- 1 The perception of Israel's negligible capacity to affect the direction of change is captured in a recent memorandum by the German Institute for International and Security Affairs, which surveys possible international responses to events in Syria and explicitly refers to Russia, China, Turkey, Europe, NATO, Iran, Hizballah, Jordan, the Arab League, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, but fails even to mention Israel. See Muriel Asseburg and Heiko Wimmen, "The Violent Power Struggle in Syria: Scenarios and Policy Options for the International Community," *SWP Comments* no. 9 (March 2012).