

Arab Democracy and Israel: They Can be Compatible

It is hard to imagine that a matter as explosive as [The Palestine Papers](#) (a massive leak of some 1,600 documents the Palestinian Authority had, including minutes, strategy papers, maps and e-mails) could be completely drowned out by other events, but the massive upheaval in Egypt has done just that. The implications for Israel and the United States of the widespread protests throughout the Arab world and the Papers are not yet fully predictable, but they are sure to be profound.

The Palestine Papers have exposed the “peace process” as a sham, with the Palestinian Authority offering concessions that would probably [not have been acceptable to most Palestinians](#), Israel [downplaying and even ignoring](#) many of those same massive concessions and the United States doing [nothing to bridge gaps](#) and putting pressure only on the Palestinian side.

But the [spreading protests in the Arab world](#) signify a major shift in the status quo on the horizon. The United States, which learned nothing from its [experience of forcefully keeping a ruthless dictator](#) in power in Iran, has done the same with petty and violent dictators throughout the Arab world. Interestingly, the protests in [Tunisia](#) and Egypt, and the simmering ones in [Jordan](#) and [Yemen](#), have been completely focused on those countries’ respective dictators, and there has been relatively little anti-American rhetoric thus far; or at least very little has been reported. This may have a lot to do with American silence on both matters and our quick abandonment of our favored proxies once it became obvious they had lost control. Or it may be yet to come.

In any case, the issues of the US and Israel, and even the Palestinians have been sidelined as Egyptians, like Tunisians before them, demonstrate for democracy to overthrow their tyrants. But these developments will have serious implications for the US and Israel nonetheless.

One of the greatest fears of both the US and Israel has always been Arab democracy. For all the pro-democracy rhetoric that comes from both Tel Aviv and Washington, there is a reason that there has never been serious pressure on any Middle Eastern country to democratize. And that is because policies that reflect the will of the people will reflect the interests of the countries themselves, which will often be very different from Israeli or American interests. It may be impossible to generalize about “what Arabs want,” but it’s pretty clear that the vast majority want stronger action in support of the Palestinians and that a similar if not even greater majority wishes to see the resources of the Arab world used to benefit the Arab masses, rather than a few elites and their partners in Europe and the USA.

It’s not limited to the Arab world, but we can see what popular movements produce in the Middle East. [In Iran](#), an unpopular president who is currently

in office due to an election widely believed to have been fraudulent can still rally popular support by standing up to the United States and expressing hostility toward Israel. In Turkey, a key US regional ally, democratic politics have turned the government toward taking a much stronger stance in favor of the Palestinians and one less inclined to tolerate a rude Israeli foreign ministry.

In Lebanon, [American insistence that the Lebanese](#) government refuse to cooperate with Syrian and Saudi efforts to broker a compromise on the handling of the international Special Tribunal for Lebanon, which was investigating the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, led to that government's collapse.

While the protests throughout the Arab world have been calling for democracy, there is no certainty that, even if existing dictatorships are overthrown, democracy will obtain. Iran is a clear example of this. And perhaps ensuing governments will still be sympathetic to, or perhaps can be co-opted by the United States. But even if non-democratic movements emerge, they will need to be elevated to power by popular support. As such, whatever comes next is unlikely to be nearly as cooperative with the US' Israel-centered policy in the region.

What this means is that the United States and Israel will have to do a complete re-evaluation of their tactics, though the current Israeli government will be more inclined toward a bunker mentality in the midst of renewed Arab antipathy and strengthened support for the Palestinians.

Two basic directions will present themselves to the US and Israel, within each of which there will be many other possible choices and options. One is to give in to that bunker mentality in Israel and for the US to maintain and solidify a Middle East policy that puts not Israeli security but Israeli governmental geopolitical strategy above all other considerations. This will mean continuing deterioration in relations with Turkey, while Egypt, Lebanon, and Jordan all drift into increasing belligerence with Israel and the US.

Option two is the one Israel should have pursued many years ago, and that is to come to a credible, realistic and fair agreement with the Palestinians to end the occupation, end the siege of Gaza, determine a permanent status for Jerusalem that everyone can live with, come to a similar determination [on Palestinian refugees](#) and settle the issue of the Golan Heights with Syria.

That option, still the only way to move forward in a more secure, rather than more perilous, fashion for Israel, became much more expensive for Israel after years of intransigence that have now been revealed by the Palestine Papers. In order to pursue this option now the US and Israel must make it clear that they are not opposed to a free and open discussion among Palestinians of the issues and what should be done. And that is going to have to include those who support Hamas and other Islamist or militant groups, because those groups represent a significant minority among Palestinians.

This sounds groundbreaking, but is it, really? In Israel, even members of the Knesset speak openly of wanting to keep "Judea and Samaria" (the West Bank)

and most Israelis agree with the vision of Jerusalem as “the eternal, undivided capital of the Jewish people.” Many Israelis, too, espouse the view that there is no Palestinian people and that they should have no national rights, while some also contend that Arabs in Israel should not have the same rights of citizenship as Jews. All of these people are allowed to express their views and they all have their influence on Israeli politics. Despite this, Israeli leaders can negotiate and are generally recognized to have a mandate and the authority to work out a peace deal.

The Palestinians not only deserve the same, but if there is to be a peace agreement that Israel can trust, it must have the support, even if it is grudging, of the bulk of the Palestinians. [As I explained elsewhere](#), the absence of that Palestinian dialogue throws into question the PA’s ability to deliver on any agreement that is signed, which turns right-wing Israeli contentions that they cannot trust agreements made with the PA into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

If Israel settles its conflict with the Palestinians in a manner that neither side feels was forced down their throats, it will keep the focus of Arab protests on their own countries and not on the Palestinian issue. And this will allow the US to continue to sustain Israeli security while shifting its practices in the region away from support for dictators like [Hosni Mubarak](#) and [Zine El Abidine Ben Ali](#) and toward support for real democratic reform. And such reform also means that we respect the will, and the votes, of the people, [whether we like their choice or not](#).

Israeli security need not come at the expense of the freedom of hundreds of millions of Egyptians, Tunisians, Algerians, Jordanians, Yemenis, Lebanese and, yes, Palestinians. And such a policy, in any case, has a shelf life that isn’t very long, as we’re seeing in the Arab world today. Security is best achieved by diplomacy that establishes mutual recognition and builds relationships based on shared interests. That has always undergirded the Middle East peace movements, both in the region and around the world, and the bankruptcy of the alternative is being demonstrated in Egypt at this very moment.

Eventually, rule by force falls apart. Israel can’t afford a strategy which, however successful it might be is eventually doomed to failure. It has options, and it needs to start pursuing them with vigor. Israel lives in a dangerous neighborhood and it need not sacrifice its military strength to advance peace. But if it is ever to achieve security, it will have to use different tools. Refusing the sorts of offers the PA has made shows Israeli leaders’ preference to rely on their military might. That is a tool that increases the heat even as it puts out the fire. But peace with the Palestinians will turn Arab democracy into an asset for Israel’s future and security instead of a threat. It’s time to take that path before it’s too late.