

The Egyptian Uprising – Implications for Regional Stability: the US, Iran and Israel

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The popular uprising in Egypt will have far reaching consequences for many years to follow. **Regardless** of the domestic implications of the uprising, the impending regime change will have a profound impact on Middle Eastern geopolitical stability. The region is due to enter a period of volatility and increasing chances for eruption of violence. This argument is based on the following assumptions.

First, neither President Mubarak, his son, nor any other political figure affiliated with his corrupt regime will remain in power. Second, the next President or ruling party will be chosen democratically, or at the very least will be more representative of the political aspirations of the people. The majority of Egyptians identify Mubarak's corrupted regime as a tool for American and Israeli interests. To receive public support, a new government will likely not follow his pro western line. Third, Egypt has been a regional power as well as the pillar for the moderate pro-western axis that countered radical Islamist groups in the Middle East. In the ensuing transition period and possibly afterwards, Egypt's political system will be divided, weak, and more vulnerable to external intervention. Consequently, it will prove harder for Egypt to maintain its regional dominance. The region's three main actors, the United States, Iran and Israel, will react to these developments accordingly.

The US: Many analysts are puzzled as to why the US has preferred to support values of global human right rather than to pursue its national interests that entail support for President Mubarak. I argue that the response by the United States to the events in Egypt correlates with Obama's new foreign policy. US' foreign policy in Obama's second half of his presidency has focused more pressingly on Asia rather than the Middle East. The main reason for this change was the appointment of Tom Donilon as Obama's National Security Adviser. Donilon, who was appointed last October, believes that the US should re-balance its international interests away from Afghanistan, Iraq and the Middle East towards China and India which pose a greater challenge to US economic interests. An additional factor for consideration is that the Middle East has not yielded any positive political gains for a US President since President Bill Clinton. As a brilliant politician, Obama realizes that in order to be re-elected for a second term, his policies must focus on rebuilding the American economy rather than entanglement in the never ending problems of the Middle East. Evidence of this approach can be found in Obama's State of the Union Speech from January 25th during which he did not mention the Peace Process at all, as well as the recent and more frequent mutual visits between American and Chinese officials. The waning influence of United States in the region can be observed from their withdrawal from Iraq, lack of involvement in the events taking place in Lebanon, the deadlocked Peace Process, and now the eminent fall of one of the closes allies of the US in Middle East, Husni Mubarak. The American void gives more room for the increasing influence of the two prominent regional powers: Turkey and especially Iran.

Iran: Egypt and Iran are both regional powers that have competed for regional supremacy and influence in the Middle East since they took opposite directions in 1979. It is highly likely that Iran is looking to take advantage of a weakened Egypt to promote its interests in the region. Karim Sadjadpour, an Iran expert says: "If there is a vacuum of power and leadership in Egypt, Iran is not going to stay on the sidelines and watch, it will try to exploit the situation by funding its like-minded cohorts. Iran has used this playbook in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Lebanon". Despite Shia-Sunni differences and rivalry, Iranian leaders share theological background and regional interest with the Muslim Brotherhood – the largest and most organized political party in Egypt. Before the 1979 revolution Ayatollah Khomeini used the writings and ideas of Sayyid Qutb, one of the founders of the Muslim Brotherhood and the master mind behind Al Qaeda ideology, as the basis for his notion of an Islamic State ruled by clerics. Moreover, the Muslim Brotherhood and Iran share a common enemy (Israel), a motivation that has been historically used to bridge cross-sectarian and other deep rooted differences. In order to expand its influence in Egypt, Iran can use its ties with Hamas, an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood. The congenial relationship between Hamas and Iran was further enhanced during the Gaza campaign in 2009. Hamas leader Khaled Mashal praised Iran by saying "Iran has definitely played a big role in the victory of the people of Gaza and is a partner in that victory." From the Iranian perspective, the turmoil in Egypt could not have come at a better time. President Ahmadinejad has successfully entrenched his rule after crushing political and public opposition in the aftermath of the 2009 disputed elections and Hezbollah is close to gaining political control over Lebanon.

Israel: Since the signing of the peace agreement in 1979, Egypt and Israel became strategic partners and along with American support effectively maintained a moderate pro-western alignment in the Middle East. Egypt supplies Israel with nearly half of its natural gas supply, allows Israeli war ships to sail through the Suez Canal, tacitly supported Israeli war against Hamas and acted as a mediator with the Palestinians. In a further show of support, Egypt did not intervene during Israel's war with Lebanon and operation in Gaza and only demonstrated symbolic diplomatic protest during the two Intifadas. A possible regime change in Egypt will alter this close relationship for two reasons. First, the main viable political alternatives to the current regime seem to be the Muslim Brotherhood or Muhammad El Baradei, both known as being hostile towards Israel. Second, the demonstrators who demand an end to Mubarak's rule see him as an "Israeli-American agent" and will pressure any new regime to revise this approach and support the Palestinian cause. The remark of former Israeli Ambassador to Egypt, Eli Shaked, further highlights this point: "The only people in Egypt who are committed to peace are the people in Mubarak's inner circle, and if the next president is not one of them, we are going to be in trouble." In the near future, Israel might be forced to defend its southern border and reallocate its military and economic resources. Nevertheless, any new Egyptian government will have to consider the significant American annual aid it receives when planning its approach towards Israel. Taken together with the breakdown of relations with Turkey, Israel may very soon remain without any ally in its neighborhood.

Looking at the big picture it is clear that the balance of power in the Middle East has dramatically changed. Egypt is about to join Iraq and Lebanon in experiencing a protracted period of domestic political turmoil. With less American influence, Iran will likely use this

situation to promote its interests in the region, destabilizing the existing status quo, leaving Israel more isolated than ever and the Middle East more prone to violence. Israeli Foreign Minister Lieberman was right when he said "the recent events in the Arab world prove that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not the main issue in the area". However he is wrong for not realizing that once the Arab world gains its freedom, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will definitely be the **main issue** in the area and there will be no pro-Israeli regime to counter popular sentiments. Therefore, a sensible Israeli government should re-focus its foreign policy agenda and push forward with the Peace Process. The only other option is isolation and conflict.