

The “Arab Spring” and the New Geo-strategic Environment in the Middle East

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ABSTRACT

Contrary to the evaluation of several political leaders and analysts, the new Islamic governments that have been elected in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya in the aftermath of the Arab Spring do not follow the zealous Islamic Iranian model. Rather, they tilt more to the Turkish Islamic democratic system. Significantly, the new Muslim Brothers' regime under president Morsi in Egypt has adopted a balanced realistic policy in domestic, regional and international affairs. While giving Shi'i Iran a cold shoulder, Morsi is inclined to play a leading role in a new regional Sunni-Muslim coalition with Saudi Arabia and Gulf Emirates, and Turkey, the major Sunni Muslim power. Although the would-be Ankara-Cairo new axis will be cautious not to alienate Tehran, it will probably make efforts to contain Iran's attempts to create a Shi'i crescent in the region to control the oil resources in the Gulf. Turkey and Egypt will try to reduce Iran's advances in Iraq and Syria by fostering their Sunni Muslim communities and helping the Syrian Muslims to topple the Alawi regime. Finally the Ankara-Cairo strategic axis, backed by most Sunni-Muslim regimes and in coordination with Obama's new administration, is likely to induce Israel to settle the Palestinian issue.

It is still premature to fully evaluate the consequences of the Arab Spring's uprisings and upheavals, as well as their impacts on the new emerging geo-strategic posture in the Middle East. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to tentatively outline and examine the unfolding developments in the region, concerning these upheavals and their possible repercussions on the geo-strategic environment. In this regard, it is important: a) to briefly trace the new trends of Islamization and democratization in several Arab countries, notably Egypt; b) to explore whether either of these trends follow, or tilt, either toward the radical Islamic Iranian model (as some Israeli policymakers have claimed), or toward the pragmatic Islamic Turkish example, or to neither of them; c) to delineate the impact of these trends on the regional policies of both Turkey and Iran; d) to assess the effects of the “Arab Spring”

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upheavals on Arab countries relations with Israel, and the USA; e) to evaluate

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the consequences of a possible Israel-Iranian war on the regional balance of power and geo-strategic developments, including the energy issue; f) finally, to critically observe Israel’s regional policies, notably concerning the Palestinian issue vis-à-vis the Arab Spring’s eruption.

II

The eruption of the “Arab Spring” started in Tunisia at the end of 2010, and during 2011 spread into Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, and Syria with some repercussions in Jordan and Oman. These popular uprisings have constituted a remarkable historical political phenomenon of the Arab street secular and religious, male and female, casting off the “barrier of fear” against their oppressive, despotic, and corrupt rulers, insisting on obtaining freedom, dignity, justice, equality, and democracy. Although the degrees and consequences of these unprecedented outbreaks are markedly

different from country to country, in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya they brought about free elections as well as democratically elected Islamic parliaments and governments. This is in contradiction to a distorted Western notion that Islam and democracy are incompatible. True, these emerging Arab-Islamic democracies are not identical to the Westminster or to the Jefferson British and American models, respectively.

But like other Islamic democracies in Turkey, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Kosovo, and Albania, they tend to practice democratic methods, including free elections, freedom of assembly, freedom of speech, and the protection of minorities, etc. Furthermore, these new Arab-Islamic democracies seem to defy an assertion by Israeli leaders, such as PM Netanyahu, that these new regimes followed the zealous Islamic Iranian model and were “anti-West, anti-liberal, anti-Israel and anti-democratic”.¹ If anything, these new governments have tended to follow the Turkish Islamic pragmatic system, although developing their own domestic and foreign strategies. This mainly concerns the status of Shari’a Law (Islamic Law) and of women in public life, as well as their foreign policies toward the USA and Israel. For example, Tunisia, the pioneer of the “Arab Spring” (the Jasmine revolution) experienced free democratic elections in October 2011, with 81 parties and independent candidates. The Islamic Nahda

(revival) party, led by Rashid Ghanushi, has established a modern, moderate Islamic government that has been influenced, inter alia, by the role of modern educated liberal women.² And despite a small radical anti-Semitic Salafi opposition, the new government is pro-West, pro-Jewish, and not anti-Israel. Similarly, in Libya, despite pessimistic predictions, the July 2012 free democratic elections brought to power a moderate Islamic party, "The Forces of National Alliance," led by Muhammad Jibril. It won 39 seats in the new parliament, compared to the 17 seats for the radical "Muslim Brothers."³ And despite the assassination of the US ambassador by Muslim militant terrorists in September 2012, it would appear that the new moderate government is likely to develop a pro-Western orientation. By comparison, the neighboring North African Arab countries, Algeria and Morocco, were hardly affected by the "Arab Spring" upheavals, while their nationalist-secular and Islamic moderate regimes respectively, have prevailed.⁴ In Algeria, the Islamic parties gained only 10% of the vote in the May 2012 elections, whereas in Morocco king Muhammad VI manipulated the two "Muslim Brothers" factions by co-opting one faction in his government and neutralizing the other. He also introduced some changes in Morocco's constitution, giving it a more democratic character within a pro-West moderate Islamic regime.

III

Unlike these North African Arab countries, the results of the Arab Spring upheavals in Egypt have been more ambivalent as far as our relevant issues are concerned. Particularly, as the biggest Arab country, with the Muslim Brotherhood at the helm of the new regime, Egypt's domestic policies and especially its foreign orientations may crucially impact the newly emerging geo-strategic posture of the Middle East. The Muslim Brothers – the Freedom and Justice Party – indeed secured 45% of the parliament seats in the free democratic elections of the winter of 2012. The more radical Islamic-Salafi party, Al-Nur (The Light), gained 28% of the

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seats, and the Brothers' leader Muhammad Morsi was elected as Egypt president by 52% of the people. Several days later, on August 12, 2012, he dismissed the top military command – his major rival – and completed the Brothers' control on Egypt's domestic institutions and foreign policies. On the face of it, one could have assumed that the new Islamic regime would possibly adopt the Iranian model of a devout Islamic state, based on the Shari'a as well as create an ideologi-

cal and strategic alliance with Tehran, as militant Egyptian “Muslim Brothers” have expected. In fact, however, Morsi, representing a more moderate-pragmatic section of the “Brothers,” seems to have developed a system, which resembles in some major aspects, the Turkish democratic-pluralist Islamic model (not to mention Morsi’s prompt measures against the army command). Similar to Erdogan, Morsi cannot ignore the large secular, nationalist and military seg-

more relevant to our discussion is that Morsi has apparently attempted to create a new strategic balance between the Suni-Muslim states, Shi’i Iran, and Israel as well as between the USA, Russia, and China. Indeed, Morsi, himself, stated recently that “international relations between all states are open and the basis for all relation is balance. We are not against anyone, but we are for achieving our interests.”⁶ Still, it would appear that Morsi’s strategic approaches

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have been fairly balanced, but with a marked inclination to the Sunni countries in the region, and the USA. For example, on the one hand, he made overtures to renew diplomatic relations with Iran, and visited Tehran for several hours at the end of August 2012 to attend a conference of the non-aligned countries. But on the other

ments of the Egyptian population, whose representative, Ahmad Sahfiq, obtained 48% of the vote in the presidential elections. Nor can Morsi overlook the need to feed some 85 million Egyptians, by reviving Western tourism and securing the United States’, the World Bank’s and Saudi financial help. Aware of these factors and constraints, Morsi had already promised during his elections campaign “full freedom and genuine democracy, as well as equality to all citizens, and the appointment of a woman and a Copt as vice presidents.”⁵ But he also adopted harsh measures to control the media, once he became president. Nonetheless,

hand, in this conference he harshly attacked the brutal acts of Syria’s Bashar Assad, the major Arab ally of Iran. He indirectly criticized Iran as the main supporter of Assad’s regime, which will most likely have the effect of discouraging or even rejecting Tehran’s new courtship. Consequently, it is likely that the new Egyptian regime would develop alliances with the Sunni Muslim countries that have been exposed in different degrees to the Shi’i Iranian threat or challenge, notably Saudi Arabia, the Gulf Emirates, and Turkey.

Indeed Morsi’s first foreign trip as president was to Saudi Arabia. In addi-

tion to seeking financial aid, president Morsi and King Abdallah discussed "regional stability," while Morsi stated that "the stability of the regime depends on the stability of Egypt and the Gulf, at the head of stands Saudi Arabia."⁷ It may be assumed that the new Egyptian government considers these and other Middle Eastern countries as potential strategic partners for sustaining regional stability and combating the factors of instability, notably the Iranian and Syrian regimes as well as the unresolved Palestinian problem.

IV

The more compelling partnership for such a strategic coalition is not Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Emirates but primarily Turkey, since both Turkey and Egypt are regional powers with Sunni-Islamic democratic systems. According to Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ahmet Davutoglu, "a partnership between Turkey and Egypt could create a new democratic axis of power."⁸ To be sure, both Ankara and Cairo are not hostile to Iran as are Saudi Arabia and most of the Gulf Emirates. Both the Turkish and Egyptian governments will endeavor not to antagonize Iran unless their interests are in jeopardy. For example, one contentious issue between Turkey and Iran is Turkey's dependence on Iran's gas supply

and its leverage over the PKK through Iranian (and Syrian) Kurds.

Turkey and Egypt have a common interest and will probably coordinate their efforts to contain Tehran's attempts to create a "Shi'i Crescent" and control oil resources in the Gulf region. This strategy would certainly obtain full cooperation from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Emirates as well as the USA. Yet, both democratic Turkey and Egypt would be careful not to fully identify with the autocratic-monarchic-conservative Sunni-Muslim regimes, such as in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. They may even act as mediators between these Sunni regimes and Tehran.

In dealing with Iraq and especially Syria, the Turkish-Egyptian axis is likely to be more assertive. They will most likely work together to reduce Iran's influence on the Iraqi Shi'i and the Syrian

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Alawi regimes – the major components of the Shi'i crescent. Turkey is particularly worried about the growing political economic and educational activities of

Iran in Iraq, notably among the majority Shi'i-Arab population, including the government. Ankara is also concerned that autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan will en-

key as a model of Islamic democracy and leadership and as a defender of their interests. This has been especially true in Syria, where the Sunni-Arab rebellion against the pseudo-Shi'i Alawi minority rule still prevails. Erdogan, who had developed several years ago close strategic relations with Bashar al-Assad, dramatically changed his attitude when Bashar adopted harsh measures, involving mass killings against the Sunni rebels and innocent non-combatants. But despite the critical attitude of Turkey, the Arab

To be sure, Turkey's major aim is to depose Bashar and his regime not only for humanitarian reasons but also for national strategic interests. The goal, here, is to help establish a Sunni-Muslim democratic government that will join the new Turkish-Egyptian axis, distance itself from the Shi'i Iranian orbit, and contain Iran's regional advances

courage Turkish Kurds to emulate their Iraqi brothers. However, Turkey has been unable to stop or change these undesirable developments and is thus likely to continue its support of the Sunni Arab minority in Iraq, even at the risk of hurting relations with Nuri al-Maliki, Iraq's Shi'i prime minister. A case in point is the recent crisis between Erdogan and al-Maliki over the refusal of the former to extradite Tariq a-Hashimi, the Sunni vice president of Iraq, who found refuge in Turkey after being charged in Iraq with terrorist acts.⁹

By contrast, Erdogan and his new strategic ally, Morsi, are likely to fare better with the Sunni Arab majority population in Syria, Palestine, Jordan and in other Sunni Arab communities. Indeed, in the weeks surrounding the "Arab Spring" and the emergence of Islamic parties and currents in the region, many Sunni-Arabs have looked to Tur-

League, and most of the international community Bashar's regime has continued to survive. This is due to a number of factors: a) the backing of most military officers and units as well as the Mukhabarat (secret services); b) the allegiance of the modern middle-higher class, composed of Alawis, Christians, and Sunni-Muslims; c) the massive military, diplomatic, and financial help from Iran as well as Russia and China; d) the failure of NATO and the UN to intervene, as NATO did in Libya; e) the relatively small scale defections by military officers and units as well as the growing conflicts among the rebel groups, both civilians and military.

More than any country in the region and beyond, Turkey has done a good deal to castigate Bashar's highly aggressive behavior, extend humanitarian assistance to many thousands of Syrian refugees, and provide various facilities



Photo: REUTERS, Stringer

Moroccans hold signs during a peaceful march to show solidarity with Tunisians and mark the first anniversary of the Arab Spring revolution in Rabat.

for Syrian armed rebel groups. To be sure, Turkey's major aim is to depose Bashar and his regime not only for humanitarian reasons but also for national strategic interests. The goal, here, is to help establish a Sunni-Muslim democratic government that will join the new Turkish-Egyptian axis, distance itself from the Shi'i Iranian orbit, and contain Iran's regional advances. So far, Turkey has abstained from direct military intervention in Syria, possibly for fear of painful retaliation by Iran and a full-scale bloody disintegration of Syria. But within the new partnership with Egypt, Turkey could exercise further politi-

cal pressure on Bashar's regime to step down and help better organize the Syr-

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ian military opposition with the goal of changing the regime in Syria.

V

The Syrian dilemma is not the only test case of Turkey's Middle Eastern leadership and its central role in shaping the

emerging regional strategic configuration in the wake of the Arab Spring events. Equally important and challenging is the crucial Israeli-Palestinian prob-

Indeed within the newly emerging regional strategic axis between Ankara and Cairo, the Israeli-Palestinian issue will gain priority, alongside the Syrian crisis and the Iranian threat

lem, namely Israel's stubborn refusal to allow Palestinian self-determination in the West Bank in a form of a state and its continued siege over the Gaza Strip. It is true that Israel was not involved in the Arab Spring and preferred by and large to work with the old authoritarian Arab rulers, notably Egypt's Hosni Mubarak. But as it turned out, the "Arab Spring" events in several Arab countries, especially Egypt, were accompanied by anti-Israeli demonstrations and riots and by pro-Palestinian popular manifestations. These sentiments have certainly reflected the deep solidarity of many Egyptians and other Arabs with the Palestinian plight. They also harbored antagonism and animosity toward Israel, the occupier of Palestinian territories, including East Jerusalem, with its holy shrines for Islam.

These anti-Israeli manifestations, which had been largely curtailed by Mubarak's regime, erupted once this regime collapsed and full freedom of expression has been granted. Obviously, these pro-Palestinian and anti-Israeli sentiments have reflected the

deeply rooted ideology of the Muslim Brothers and of their leaders who were elected to govern Egypt. Indeed, Muhammad Morsi, the new president stated on August 15, 2012 in a conference of Islamic states in Mecca, "The Palestinian issue is paramount for Egypt and the rest of the Arab and the Muslim states." Earlier, on June 30, 2012, Morsi addressed students at Cairo

University, saying as follows: "We shall support the Palestinian people until they achieve their legitimate rights." He also appealed to president Obama in late September 2012, asking him to help in settling the Palestinian issue in the form of an independent state. He argued that if Israel expects Egypt to respect its peace treaty with it, Israel should also implement its commitments regarding the Palestinians within this peace treaty. Morsi has openly dealt with the public demand of members of the Muslim Brotherhood's to sever diplomatic relations with Israel and abolish the 1978 and 1979 peace accords. However, aside from hinting that this treaty could be revised, Morsi has not cut diplomatic relations with Israel and even appointed a new Egyptian ambassador to Tel Aviv in early September 2012. Simultaneously, Egypt's new defense minister, Abd Ali Abd al-Ali Fath al-Sisi, coordinated with his Israeli counterpart, Ehud Barak, the dispatch of Egyptian armored and commando units to Sinai to fight Salafi and Jihadist elements.

VI

It is reasonable to assume that the Egyptian government will not cut diplomatic relations with Israel in the near future. However, it is probable that it will attempt to negotiate with it changes in the Camp David Accords (1978) and the peace treaty (1979), essentially to permit more Egyptian troops to be deployed in the Sinai. Presumably, Egypt will not initiate hostile military actions against Israel, for the time being, due to Israel's strategic military advantage and Egypt's dependence on US military and financial assistance. But apart from continuing its previous demands that Israel signs the NPT, Egypt will probably exercise intense political-diplomatic pressure on Israel to permit the creation of independent Palestinian state along the pre-1967 lines, with East Jerusalem as its capital. On this issue, Egypt will certainly be backed or supported by most Arab Muslim states, as well as obtaining close cooperation with Turkey. Indeed within the newly emerging regional strategic axis between Ankara and Cairo, the Israeli-Palestinian issue will gain priority, alongside the Syrian crisis and the Iranian threat. Although both Turkey and Egypt maintain cold diplomatic relations with Israel, they can help broker a political settlement between Israel and the Palestinians, including Hamas, owing to their close relations with both Palestinian factions.

However, if Israel continues its status quo policy vis-à-vis the Palestinians – including expanding Jewish settlements and besieging Gaza – the Ankara-Cairo axis may adopt hard measures against Jerusalem. Turkey has already downgraded diplomatic ties with Israel and expelled the Israeli ambassador in early September 2011. This took place following an Israeli attack on the Mavi Marmara Turkish ship, that carried pro-Palestinian activists to Gaza, killing 9 of them on May 31, 2010. Prior to this act,

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Prime Minister Erdogan strongly condemned Israel for its Cast Lead military operation against Hamas in the Gaza Strip in December 2008-January 2009, killing many non-combatant Palestinians.

Presumably, both Erdogan and Morsi will be waiting until the US elections on November 6, 2012 to make any new moves. If Obama is reelected as president, they may first signal to Netanyahu that they will cut diplomatic relations with Israel, unless it resumes full peace negotiations with Mahmud Abbas. Egypt and Turkey will simultaneously request King Abdallah II of Jordan to follow suit and King Abdallah of Saudi Arabia to withdraw his peace initiative of 2002.

The current right-wing government in Israel that would prefer to see Mitt

Romney elected as the next US president will possibly reject such a Turkish-Egyptian demand. If the current Israeli government continues to impose a “Ban-tustan” type of control, similar to the Apartheid system, over the West Bank, Israel will be further isolated in the international community. Equally critical to Israel’s future and to the regional geo-strategic environment is the potential highly polemic decision by Netanyahu’s government to bomb the nuclear facilities in Iran. Such an attack would likely trigger fierce retaliations not only from Iran, but possibly also from Syria and Lebanon’s Hezbollah, involving considerable loss of lives and severe destructions in all these countries. This would transform Israel into an outcast by the international community.

VII

In conclusion, it can be assumed that Iran will in due course produce a nuclear bomb, but would not use it to attack Israel for fear of a deadly Israeli retaliation. It is likely that Tehran will employ the bomb to squeeze concessions from neighboring Arab countries, especially the oil producing ones. This is with the aim to control the Persian Gulf oil and to protect and develop the Shi’i communities in the region.

In response, countries like Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan may also develop nuclear programs in order to deter Iran, but while Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states will also rely on the US strategic umbrella, they will discretely

welcome an Israeli attack on Iran nuclear facilities. In contrast, Egypt and Turkey are likely to oppose such an attack, and Egypt may even see a merit in a nuclear Iran that could counterbalance Israel’s regional strategic edge. Yet, Turkey and Egypt would probably coordinate their policies to jointly contain Iran as well as Israel – the two rival regional powers. In particular, as indicated above, the new Turkey-Egyptian alliance would work together to topple Bashar’s regime in Syria, and establish instead a Sunni-Muslim democracy. It will also back the Sunni-Arab community in Iraq, endeavor to curtail Iranian influence there, and dissuade the Kurds from breaking away from Iraq. Turkey is especially concerned about the impact of such Kurdish irredentism on the PKK Kurdish followers.

Finally, the US is likely to adjust its Middle Eastern strategy in the wake of the “Arab Spring” revolutions and the recent attacks by Muslim militants on US embassies in several Arab and Moslem countries. These attacks resulted, in its most extreme expression, in the assassination of the American ambassador to Libya, Christopher Stevens, on September 11, 2012. Washington will certainly upgrade its cooperation with pragmatic Arab regimes to combat Islamic militant groups, such as Al-Qaida, the Salafis, and other Jihadists that also endanger these regimes. In particular, Washington will continue to help the new Yemenite government to eliminate the Al-Qaida foothold in the south and to assist both Bahrain and Saudi Ara-

bia in combatting their Shi'i opposition groups. Simultaneously, the US under Obama's leadership will continue to support the new pragmatic Islamic democracies in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya. In particular, Obama, if reelected, is likely to coordinate his Middle Eastern strategy with a new Islamic democratic axis between Turkey and Egypt.

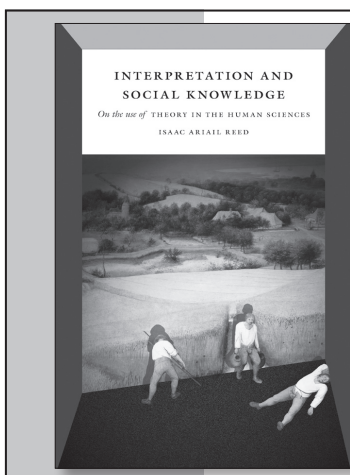
In order to secure the cooperation of this important axis as well as to improve the US position in the Arab and Muslim world, Obama is likely to fulfill his old commitment in his Cairo speech of June 2009, "America will not turn our backs on the legitimate Palestinian aspiration for dignity, opportunity and a state of their own... the only resolution is for the aspirations of both sides to be met through two states where Israelis and Palestinians each live in peace and security. That is Israel's interest, Palestine's interest, America's interest and the world interest. That is why I intend

to personally pursue this outcome with all the patience that the task requires." Obama reiterated this position in his recent speech at the UN General Assembly, in September 2012.¹⁰

Endnotes

* This article is partly based on a lecture delivered at a conference in Çeşme on, "Democratization in the Arab world and Turkey," on 29 June–1 July 2012, as well as on a piece in Mitvim on-line.

1. *Daily Telegraph*, London, November 24, 2011.
2. *Reuters*, October, 27 2011.
3. *Reuters*, July 18, 2012.
4. *The New York Times*, May 12, 2012.
5. *BBC News*, June 30, 2012.
6. *Daily News* (Egypt), August 29, 2012.
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8. Quoted by Hasan Kosebalaban, "Turkey and the New Middle East: Between Liberalism and Realism," *Perceptions*, Autumn 2011, p. 109; *The New York Times*, September 19, 2011.
9. *Gulf News*, September 15, 2012.
10. *The New York Times*, June 4, 2009, and 25 September 2012.



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