

Contemplating Egypt at the Herzliya Conference

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The organizers of this week's Eleventh Annual Herzliya Conference on Israel's national security and Middle East affairs — like intelligence agencies and political analysts around the world — did not foresee the tumult that broke out in January in Tunisia, quickly spread to Egypt, and last night received momentous if ambiguous expression in Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's announcement that he would transfer power to Vice President Omar Suleiman. But the conference framework — a daily mix of small, focused roundtables, plenary session panel discussions, and keynote addresses that left ample opportunity for good old-fashioned schmoozing — proved flexible. It easily accommodated conference attendees' keen and anxious interest in the convulsions shaking Egypt.

Israeli security experts — and more than a few ordinary citizens — are by and large pessimistic. They see in the uprisings in Tunisia, regime change in Egypt, and stirrings of unrest in Jordan and elsewhere in the Middle East not only the hunger for freedom and equality but also the rise of anti-Western forces, the unleashing of religious extremism, and a reminder of the disadvantages of democracy where its foundations have not been securely laid. And they fear that the consistently inconsistent messages sent by the Obama administration reflect further evidence of the decline of American influence and power.

America has indeed wavered. At first, the Obama administration expressed support for Mubarak. On January 27, two days after the first demonstrations in Cairo, Vice President Biden insisted in an exclusive TV interview on PBS's *NewsHour* that Egypt's president was an American ally, he should not step down, and he should not be referred to as a dictator. Over the last two weeks, the Obama administration has erratically revised its assessment. In an emerging alliance with some neoconservative supporters of President Bush's freedom agenda, the administration has swung its support to the opposition, demanded that Mubarak leave office promptly, and optimistically called for substantial democratic reforms.

Unfortunately, the Obama administration's track record in the Middle East does not inspire confidence. To be sure, the consensus at the Herzliya Conference was that a new round of American-led sanctions, now nine months old, have slowed down Iranian development of nuclear weapons. But members of the Israeli military intelligence establishment stressed that at this late stage sanctions could at best delay, not prevent, their acquisition. And the stage is late in part because before imposing new sanctions the Obama administration squandered nearly 15 months on fruitless engagement with Tehran.

Obama administration engagement with Syria, moreover, has yielded results as barren as those produced by engagement with Syrian patron Iran. And the Obama administration has no discernible plan for dealing with the collapse of Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, the rise of

Islam in Turkey, and last month's brazen power-grab by Hezbollah in Lebanon. These ominous events reinforce the perception in the region that the administration is in over its head.

At the same time, the cascade of setbacks suffered by American policy along with the formidable challenge presented by rapidly changing circumstances in Egypt provide an opportunity for the administration to reconsider basic elements of America's Middle East policy. They also underscore the urgency of such a reconsideration.

That reconsideration should begin with the progressive interpretation of Middle East politics to which President Obama seems to subscribe. In his first two years in office, two mistaken beliefs characteristic of the progressive view have been on conspicuous display.

The first is that the primary source of instability in the Middle East is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The belief was encapsulated in remarkable fashion by General James Jones, the recently departed Obama national security adviser, who delivered a keynote address at the Herzliya Conference. Speaking to reporters after his address, he declared:

I'm of the belief that had God appeared in front of President Obama in 2009 and said if he could do one thing on the face of the planet, and one thing only, to make the world a better place and give people more hope and opportunity for the future, I would venture that it would have something to do with finding the two-state solution to the Middle East.

The second mistaken belief is that effective engagement with Syria, with Iran, and indeed with the greater Muslim world primarily depends on abandoning arrogant American rhetoric, owning up to the sins of American colonialism and imperialism, and approaching Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad with outstretched hand and open heart.

These two mistaken beliefs have obscured for two years what America's regional allies — Sunni Arab rulers as well as Israel — have been telling the Obama administration from the beginning. In their view, the Islamic Republic of Iran — because of its sponsorship of Islamic extremism, funding and arming of Hezbollah and Hamas, pursuit of nuclear weapons, and quest for regional hegemony — represents the great regional menace to their vital national security interests, which include the interest they share with the U.S. in the preservation of a stable international order.

In addition to obscuring the threat posed by Iran, President Obama's magnification of the regional significance of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and his exaggerated faith in engagement concealed a second major source of regional instability. It comes from the

grievances of, and mounting pressure generated by, more than 350 million non-Palestinian Arabs — approximately 5 million Palestinians live in the West Bank and Gaza — living under oppressive authoritarian regimes throughout the greater Middle East.

As the 9/11 attacks brought into focus for many Americans the long-simmering threat of transnational Islamic extremism, so too the uprisings in Tunisia and the upheaval in Egypt can provide an occasion for the Obama administration to clarify its understanding of the Middle East and the explosive, pent-up forces it contains. It would be a grave error, to which statements coming from the president and his administration seem prone, to see in these forces only the longing to be free. The mass demonstrations in Tahrir Square in Cairo also are driven by the dangerous desire to realize through politics the will of Allah, and the destabilizing aspiration to reassert pan-Arab nationalism.

None of this is to deny the importance of Israelis and Palestinians working assiduously to create an independent Palestinian state that represents, and protects the rights of, its citizens and that also establishes secure borders for Israel and provides recognition of it as Jewish and democratic. Such is in the interest of both Palestinians and Israelis.

At the same time, the Obama administration should learn from the fact that the popular protests that swept a dictator from power in Tunisia and have compelled the president of Egypt to step aside had next to nothing to do with the Palestinians or Israel.

In particular, recent events should persuade the U.S. to turn its attention to the internal sources of stability and instability of the autocratic Arab regimes of the Middle East. Understanding the internal sources of stability and instability of Arab autocracies — which Israeli national security experts stressed throughout the Herzliya Conference means appreciating the political impact of the spirit of Islam — is a prerequisite to a responsible American foreign policy, one that enhances stability in the region through gradual, incremental, cautious, calibrated, context-sensitive steps to promote freedom.

That policy will place an emphasis not on elections, which easily produce illiberal results, but on improving education, expanding rights, enlarging opportunity, and enhancing the rule of law. With a view to Egypt and beyond, reasonable pessimists and reasonable optimists at the Herzliya Conference agreed on one crucial point: if you want democracy in the long run, you must focus in the short and intermediate term on the moral and cultural preconditions of freedom.