



How Israel Can Turn the Unrest in the Middle East into an Opportunity for Peacemaking

Massimiliano Fiore

Abstract

Only a few weeks ago, no one could have believed that what the peoples of Tunisia and Egypt accomplished was possible: they defied their dictators and won, causing worldwide euphoria and celebration. Yet, while such activism has inspired fellow Arabs throughout the region, it has been met with fear and trepidation in Israel. Mubarak's downfall, combined with the growing unrest in the Middle East, makes it vital for Israel to recalibrate its strategies toward its neighbouring Arab states. Many political analysts believe that this is the ideal moment for Israel to push hard for resuming the stalled peace process with the Palestinians. Yet it is unrealistic to think that a comprehensive agreement can be reached at this time. While the Israeli-Palestinian peace track is very troubled, the Israeli-Syrian track seems more within reach, and in the vital interests of both countries.

Keywords: *Israel / Israeli foreign policy / Egypt / Muslim Brotherhood / Middle East peace process / Palestine / Syria / Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations / Israeli-Syrian peace negotiations*

How Israel Can Turn the Unrest in the Middle East into an Opportunity for Peacemaking

by Massimiliano Fiore*

1. Introduction

Only a few weeks ago, no one could have believed that what the peoples of Tunisia and Egypt accomplished was possible: they defied their dictators and won, causing worldwide euphoria and celebration. Yet, while such activism has inspired fellow Arabs throughout the region, it has been met with fear and trepidation in Israel.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has expressed his concern that Egypt may turn into an Islamist regime controlled by the Muslim Brotherhood - a new Iran geographically closer to Israel and armed with state-of-the-art US weaponry. Yet, this scenario is extremely unlikely.¹

While in 1979 the Iranian Revolution was eventually taken over by a charismatic religious leader, the political leaders emerging in Egypt offer “no cult religious revolutionary figure like Ayatollah Khomeini”.² The most prominent figures (despite their “defeat” in the March 2011 referendum campaign) are avowedly secular. They include Mohammed ElBaradei, a Nobel Laureate and former Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and Amr Moussa, a popular career diplomat and current Secretary-General of the Arab League.

Moreover, although the Muslim Brotherhood is the largest, most organized and influential opposition group, its role in the uprising was secondary and it was not until five days into the protest that the Brotherhood officially mobilized in support of the protest. However, the fact that it is the most effective opposition group does not necessarily mean that it has the support of the majority of the people. In fact, evidence indicates quite the contrary. At most the Muslim Brotherhood commands about 20 per cent of the vote, not enough to form - and even less to control - a democratically elected government. Finally, the movement is hardly cohesive, and there are serious divisions between the progressive, pragmatic and conservative elements within the Brotherhood, which could possibly lead to its fragmentation into a number of political parties.³

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¹ A. Benn, “Mubarak’s Departure Thwarted Israel Strike on Iran”, *Haaretz*, 13 February 2011, <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/mubarak-s-departure-thwarted-israeli-strike-on-iran-1.343012>.

² K. Diab, “Israel Should See the Egyptian and Tunisian Revolutions as an Opportunity”, *Haaretz*, 15 February 2011, <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/opinion/israel-should-see-the-egyptian-and-tunisian-revolutions-as-an-opportunity-1.343473>.

³ H. Moghul, “Five Reasons the Muslim Brotherhood Won’t Turn on Israel”, 3 February 2011; http://www.religiondispatches.org/archive/politics/4177/5_reasons_the_muslim_brotherhood_won't_turn_o

While an outright majority win for the Muslim Brotherhood is unlikely, an important role in a coalition government is possible. However, this should not be viewed with too much concern by the international community and Israel because the Brotherhood is a relatively moderate and pragmatic organization “settled on a strategy of political participation”.⁴ It formally renounced armed struggle more than 40 years ago, and since 2001 it has denounced violence. Its political orientation, therefore, would be more similar to Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s Justice and Development Party in Turkey, whose successful example shows that there is no fundamental incompatibility between Islam, democracy and economic development, than to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s Alliance of Builders of Islamic Iran.⁵

Although the Brotherhood is strongly anti-Israel and anti-Semitic, pragmatism is likely to prevail.⁶ A democratically elected government would be more outspoken in support of the Palestinians and in opposition to Israel’s occupation, but it would not abrogate the 1979 Peace Treaty. However, the cold peace between Cairo and Jerusalem is inevitably destined to become frostier still. Yet, with 40 per cent of the Egyptian population living on less than US\$2 dollars per day, the unemployment rate between 11 and 17 per cent and a skyrocketing inflation rate, the last thing a new government will attempt is to risk Egypt’s strategic partnership with the United States. This partnership is absolutely essential for Egypt given the annual US\$2 billion Cairo has been receiving from Washington since 1979 for the maintenance of the Peace Treaty. And with Egyptian Armed Forces seeking to maintain US military aid, there is hope that were the Muslim Brotherhood to participate in a future democratically elected government, its approach would not fundamentally differ from that of Turkey’s Justice and Development Party.⁷

However, even if Egypt’s new government proves to be more moderate than many fear, Israel will still face a difficult new reality. No matter how the situation in Egypt is going to unfold politically, Israel needs to anticipate the possible return of a more hostile Egypt and prepare for that eventuality. “Rebuilding a large ground force ... is both costly and risks an unwanted arms race. Neglecting to do so, however, could be risky”, wrote Aluf Benn, Editor-at-Large of *Haaretz*, in an op-ed for *Foreign Affairs*.⁸

n_israel; C. Rosefcky Wickham, “The Muslim Brotherhood After Mubarak”, *Foreign Affairs*, 3 February 2011, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/67348/carrie-rosefsky-wickham/the-muslim-brotherhood-after-mubarak>.

⁴ J. Bajoria, “Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood”, *Council on Foreign Relations Backgrounders*, 3 February 2011, <http://www.cfr.org/africa/egypts-muslim-brotherhood/p23991>; D. Pioppi, “Is There An Islamist Alternative in Egypt?”, *IAI Working Papers 1103*, February 2011, <http://www.iai.it/pdf/DocIAI/iaiw1103.pdf>

⁵ L. Thomas, “In Turkey’s Example, Some See Map for Egypt”, *The New York Times*, 5 February 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/06/world/middleeast/06turkey.html>.

⁶ C. Rosefcky Wickham, “The Muslim Brotherhood After Mubarak”, *Foreign Affairs*, 3 February 2011, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/67348/carrie-rosefsky-wickham/the-muslim-brotherhood-after-mubarak>; K. Diab, “Israel Should See the Egyptian and Tunisian Revolutions as an Opportunity”, *Haaretz*, 15 February 2011, <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/opinion/israel-should-see-the-egyptian-and-tunisian-revolutions-as-an-opportunity-1.343473>.

⁷ A. Ben-Meir, “Above the Fray: Lessons for Israel from Egypt”, *The Jerusalem Post*, 11 February 2011, <http://www.jpost.com/Magazine/Opinion/Article.aspx?id=207648>.

⁸ A. Benn, “Overcoming Fear and Anxiety in Tel Aviv”, *Foreign Affairs*, 8 February 2011, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/67353/aluf-benn/overcoming-fear-and-anxiety-in-tel-aviv>.

Recent military intelligence reports have indicated that the Islamic Republic of Iran is working to bolster its weapons-smuggling infrastructure in the Sinai Peninsula, an Egyptian region bordering Israel. Allegations abound in Israel that Iran is seeking to take advantage of the current anarchy in that region to establish a stronger foothold in Gaza.⁹ The Israeli government is also concerned that the Islamic movement Hamas could regain the ability to hit Israeli territory by turning the Peninsula into a platform from which to launch attacks against Israel.¹⁰ One such incidence happened in August 2010 when Hamas fired five rockets into the city of Eilat from the Sinai.¹¹ It is feared that this strategy might now become more systematic, especially with the emergence of a new Egyptian government likely to be more sensitive to the situation in the Gaza Strip and subsequently ease the closure and reopen the crossing point, allowing Hamas to operate freely in the Peninsula and launch rockets into Israel.

Mubarak's downfall, combined with the growing unrest in the Middle East, makes it vital for Israel to recalibrate its strategies toward its neighbouring Arab states. Many political analysts believe that this is the ideal moment for Israel to push hard for resuming the stalled peace process with the Palestinians.

2. The Israeli-Palestinian Track

With the Middle East in turmoil and the Quartet (the United States, United Nations, European Union and Russia) eager to resume the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, Netanyahu is under intense international pressure to prove he is serious about achieving peace. His position is particularly uncomfortable since he needs to craft a political and territorial formula generous enough to satisfy the international community, and the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, without causing the break-up of his right-wing coalition.

Yet, the prospects of reaching a comprehensive agreement at this juncture are grim. Unfortunately, the current domestic political situations in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories are not suitable for advancing the peace process.

It is particularly difficult to imagine Netanyahu's narrow right-wing coalition government taking political action that would divide Jerusalem, agreeing to more than a symbolic Palestinian state consisting of a set of disconnected territories, giving up control of the Jordan River Valley or resolving the Palestinian refugee problem. It is equally hard to imagine Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas' fragile and discredited¹² Authority accepting from Israel anything less than a recognition of a truly viable and independent state in the West Bank (including a capital in East Jerusalem) and Gaza Strip, as well as some political formula to address the refugee issue. The current political

⁹ Y. Katz, "Iran Aiming At Exploiting Anarchy in Post-Mubarak Sinai", *The Jerusalem Post*, 27 February 2011, <http://www.jpost.com/IranianThreat/News/Article.aspx?ID=210019&R=R1>.

¹⁰ The Palestinian Resistance's ability to reach deep within Israeli territory has been severely limited since the building of the security fence and the unilateral Israeli withdrawal from, and subsequent sealing off of, the Gaza Strip.

¹¹ E. Benari, "Eilat Rocket Attacks Show How Hamas Uses Sinai", *Arutz Sheva*, 4 August 2010, <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/138936>.

¹² Particularly following al-Jazeera's publication of the Palestine Papers in January 2011.

fragmentation among the Occupied Palestinian Territories, with Hamas in control of the Gaza Strip and Fatah in control of the West Bank, also means that Abbas lacks the internal legitimacy to negotiate on behalf of all the Palestinian people.

What is more, it is quite clear now that, rather than negotiating directly with the Netanyahu Government, the Palestinian Authority's preferred strategy is to unilaterally declare a state in the West Bank (including East Jerusalem) and seek international support for this. According to Abbas' calculations, once his state is recognized, "Israel will become the illegal occupier of a sovereign state and full member of the UN. At that point, Israel would be subject to international sanctions that would destroy its economy and further undermine its image, condemning the country to the status of an international pariah".¹³

This is a gloomy picture, but it is unrealistic to think that a comprehensive agreement can be reached at this time. While the Israeli-Palestinian peace track is very troubled, the Israeli-Syrian track - given that the main conflict issue between Israel and Syria is the Golan Heights - "appears to be simpler to resolve than the complicated issues dividing Israelis and Palestinians".¹⁴ And a peace agreement between Jerusalem and Damascus seems to serve both Israel's and Syria's interests: the former wants to break away from its diplomatic isolation, while the latter is afraid to be the next in line to face a popular uprising, as it suffers deep authoritarianism, widespread corruption, high unemployment and growing inflation rates.¹⁵ Peace with Israel would give the Syrian regime a political boost and reinvigorate the economy because it would not only include the lifting of trade and financial sanctions by the US, but also a stream of foreign funds and investment into the nation.

¹³ S. Ben-Ami, "The Perils of Palestinian Strategy", *National Daily Newspaper*, 12 March 2011, http://www.nationaldailyng.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=4747:the-perils-of-palestinian-strategy&catid=161:project-sydicat&Itemid=689.

¹⁴ A. Bregman, *Elusive Peace: How the Holy Land Defeated America* (London: 2005), p. 4.

¹⁵ Anticipating a potential popular uprising, the Syrian Government took a number of preventive measures to "ease the kind of economic pressure that helped fuel unrest in Tunisia" by lowering food prices, raising heating-oil allowance for public workers, freezing the price of electricity, and offering grants to the poor. President Bashar Assad has also promised to fight corruption and to "push for more political reforms, aimed at initiating municipal elections, granting more power to non-governmental organizations and establishing a new media law". In spite all these preventive measures, demonstrations demanding political freedom and an end of corruption gained momentum in the second half of March 2011. J. Solomon and B. Spindle, "Syria Strongman: Time for Reform", *The Wall Street Journal*, 31 January 2011, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704832704576114340735033236.html>; S. Al-Khalidi, "Syrian Forces Kill Three Protesters in Southern City", *Reuters*, 18 March 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/03/18/us-syria-protest-idUSTRE72H88M20110318>.

3. The Israeli-Syrian Track¹⁶

What are the positions of Israel and Syria in this process?

The story behind the Israeli-Syrian peace negotiations is one of deep mutual distrust. "Israel considered Syria to be a significant strategic threat not just because of Syria's military strength, but also because of the fact that Syria controlled Lebanon, supported Hezbollah, provided a safe-haven for Hamas and had close relations with Iran".¹⁷ Negotiations with Syria have been problematic on the one hand, due to Syria's requirements for a full Israeli withdrawal from the land extending from the Golan Heights down to the Lake of Galilee, on which it is unwilling to compromise on. On the other hand, Israel has been equally stubborn, stipulating that a normalisation of relations with Syria would require adequate and concrete security arrangements and official Syrian recognition of Israel's water needs.

Yet, despite the deep-seated mutual mistrust, there were two periods in which an agreement was almost reached.

The first period of near success followed the signing of the Oslo Accords in September 1993, before the assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in November 1995. During this time, Rabin confirmed to the US Secretary of State Warren Christopher that he was willing to withdraw to the 4 June 1967 line provided there was normalisation of relations between Syria and Israel, adequate security arrangements and a five-year implementation period. On 22 May 1995, a compromise formula was achieved, which led to the drafting of the *Aims and Principles of the Security Arrangements*. This document is important because it established the principle of equality and mutuality, namely that the security of one side would not hinder the security of the other. The agreement made possible the resumption of talks at the level of Chiefs of Staff, but misunderstandings and disagreements immediately occurred, stalling the negotiations once again.

The second period when Israeli-Syrian peace was within grasp followed the election of Israel's Ehud Barak in May 1999 until the collapse of the talks in March 2000. During these months, Israeli-Syrian talks were formally re-opened in Washington in December 1999, followed by substantive talks in January 2000 in Shepherdstown, West Virginia. The talks were conducted through four parallel committees (security, boundaries, normalisation and water), but at the critical moment Barak was swayed by strong domestic opposition to full withdrawal.

Israeli domestic support for a peace treaty with Syria was clearly lacking. An opinion poll conducted in Israel just one day after the announcement of the resumption of

¹⁶ The following account of the Israeli-Syrian peace process is based on: S. Ben-Ami, *Scars of War, Wounds of Peace: The Israeli-Arab Tragedy* (London: 2005); A. Bregman and J. El-Tahri, *The Fifty Years War: Israel and the Arabs* (London: 1998); H. Cobban, *The Israeli-Syrian Peace Talks, 1991-1996 and Beyond* (Washington, DC: 1999); I. Rabinovich, *The Brink of Peace: The Israeli-Syrian Negotiations* (Princeton, NJ: 1999); D. Ross, *The Missing Peace: The Inside Story of the Fight for Middle East Peace* (New York City, NY: 2004); K. Schulze, *The Arab-Israeli Conflict* (Harlow: 2008); A. Shlaim, *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World* (London: 2000).

¹⁷ K. Schulze, *The Arab-Israeli Conflict* (Harlow: 2008), p. 101.

Syrian-Israeli talks in fact showed that only 13 per cent of the Israelis were in favour of Israel's full withdrawal from the Golan Heights. Moreover, when on 13 December 1999 Barak asked for support in the Knesset for his plan to re-open peace talks with Syria, only 47 out of 120 members backed it. Against this backdrop, Barak started to slow down the peace talks. It is quite ironic that "a summit that Barak himself had called for, and had been the driving force behind, was then scuttled by him".¹⁸ This failure, however, did not deter the Israeli Prime Minister from pursuing peace alternatives with Syria.

On 26 February 2000, Barak asked Bill Clinton to represent him in a make-or-break summit with Hafez al-Assad, in which the American President would present the Syrian President with Barak's bottom line. Clinton decided to take on this mission and, under the impression that Israel was now truly willing to withdraw to the 4 June 1967 line and allow Syria access to the Lake of Galilee, Assad agreed to attend the meeting. On 26 March, the Syrian-American Summit took place in Geneva. Again at the critical point, Barak's reluctance to commit to a full withdrawal to the 4 June 1967 line meant that the summit ended in an "historic failure".

It must, however, be said that these two nearly successful peace talks outlined the main topics that the peace agreement would have to cover. They also reached explicit agreement on the aims and principles of a lasting security arrangement and they generally concurred on the content of the peace agreement. Consequently, even though future Israeli-Syrian negotiations will undoubtedly be difficult, they still have a better chance of success than Israeli-Palestinian peace initiatives.

What are the current prospects for a revamped and durable Israeli-Syrian settlement?

After the failure of the 2008 indirect talks between Israel and Syria under the sponsorship of Turkey, which were close to resuming direct peace talks, it now seems that an agreement is once again within reach.¹⁹ Syrian President Bashar al-Assad declared to *As-Safir* in July 2010 that "Our position is clear: when Israel returns the entire Golan Heights, we will sign a peace agreement with it. What is the point of peace if the embassy is surrounded by security, if there is no trade and tourism between the two countries? That is not peace. That is a permanent cease-fire agreement. This is what I say: ... We are interested in a comprehensive peace, i.e. normal relations".²⁰ These remarks, however, did not make headline news in Israel and, at the end of January 2011, Assad restated his peaceful intentions in an interview to *The Wall Street Journal*: "We are focusing on the peace. ... War is not in our interest or in the interest of the region. ... Only peace can help us".²¹ One is left to wonder what more Assad can say to convince the Netanyahu Government that he is serious about making peace with Israel.

¹⁸ A. Bregman, *Elusive Peace: How the Holy Land Defeated America* (London: 2005), p. 47.

¹⁹ The peace process collapsed when Israel launched Operation Cast Lead against Hamas in the Gaza Strip on 27 December 2008.

²⁰ G. Levy, "A Peace Crime", *Haaretz*, 11 July 2010, <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/opinion/a-peace-crime-1.301190>.

²¹ WSJ, "Interview with Syrian President Bashar Assad", *The Wall Street Journal*, 31 January 2011, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703833204576114712441122894.html>.

Beyond such media outreach, over the last few months Assad has been working closely with US Senator John Kerry, Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and a close associate of President Barack Obama, on a plan to restart negotiations between Syria and Israel. Strong US support is absolutely crucial for the talks to have any chance of success. Every enduring agreement in the history of the Arab-Israeli peace process has in fact been the result not only of intense US-led mediations, but also of US commitment to pay billions of dollars in annual economic and military aid to the parties.

4. Conclusions

President Assad is prepared to sign a “total peace”, guaranteeing full diplomatic and economic relations in return for a complete Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights. How will Netanyahu respond to Assad’s overture? Though Netanyahu offered a “commonly agreed border based on the international line of 1923” back in 1998, might he now be willing to make the final step and accept Syria’s presence along the north eastern shore of the Lake of Galilee as well as Syrian control over the region south of the Lake? The difference between the two borders is small in terms of territory, but vast in terms of resources. Returning to the 4 June 1967 line would give Syria control over a substantial portion of the headwaters of the Jordan River.

But the potential benefits to Israel are also immense. By signing an agreement with Damascus, Jerusalem could break the circle of hostility that surrounds its border. Strengthened Israeli-Syrian relations could prompt Syria to disengage from Iran and wield its persuasion powers with Hezbollah to encourage peace talks with Israel. The ensuing political shift could also potentially moderate Hamas leaders in Damascus.

In *Scars of Wars, Wounds of Peace*, historian and former Israeli Foreign Minister, Shlomo Ben-Ami wrote that “the history of peacemaking between Israel and its Arab neighbours showed that it was the change of mind of the hawks and the shift in their positions, not the preaching of the doves, that allowed Israel to exploit the chances of peace at vital crossroads. The major breakthroughs in peacemaking were made and legitimized by the hawks. This was certainly the case with Menachem Begin in 1978 and Yitzhak Rabin in 1993”.²²

Netanyahu needs to change his “siege mentality”, act like his hawkish predecessors and swiftly seize the opportunity at hand, as Mubarak’s downfall has left Israel stripped of its most important regional ally.²³

Even if the new government that emerges in Egypt follows a political trajectory more like Turkey’s than Iran’s, Israel still needs to recalibrate its strategies toward the Arab states. And many Israeli policy-makers, including President Shimon Peres, believe that “Israel would be far more capable of dealing with regional shockwaves if it could

²² S. Ben-Ami, *Scars of War, Wounds of Peace: The Israeli-Arab Tragedy* (London: 2005), p. 364.

²³ Y. Halevi, “Israel’s Neighbourhood Watch”, *Foreign Affairs*, 1 February 2011, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/67344/yossi-klein-halevi/israels-neighborhood-watch>.

present the prospect of peace with its neighbours”.²⁴ This is especially necessary if the nation hopes to avoid cultivating “a status quo of regional instability ... and conflicts”.²⁵

The loss of its Egyptian ally may create for Israel a new sense of insecurity along its southern border. This would undoubtedly stymie political will to relinquish the West Bank and risk further threats.²⁶ Peace with Syria, however, would have the potential of unleashing political, economic and security benefits for Israel, if political leaders choose to seize the opportunity.

Will Netanyahu change his mind and shift his position, like Begin and Rabin did, or will he miss an historic opportunity for peace? His imminent actions will soon prove whether this “triumphant hawk” pattern might still be valid for peacemaking in the Middle East today.

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²⁴ Y. Alpher, “Known Unknowns: Israel and a Region in Flux”, *The New Jersey Jewish News*, 16 February 2011, <http://njewishnews.com/article/op-eds/known-unknowns-israel-and-a-region-in-flux>.

²⁵ A. Ben-Meir, “Above the Fray: Lessons for Israel from Egypt”, *The Jerusalem Post*, 11 February 2011, <http://www.jpost.com/Magazine/Opinion/Article.aspx?id=207648>.

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