Currents

Israel and the Arab Spring

Benjamin Balint & Daniel A. Doneson

A new Middle East appears to be taking shape before our eyes, and the form it is taking is surprising both in itself and in the profound ways it implicates Israel.

Declarations of a new Middle East, of course, have been heard before. The first new Middle East was determined by the conferences after World War I that divided up the region—Iraq, Jordan, and Palestine to the British, Syria and Lebanon to the French, Saudi Arabia to the Saud clan. Another "new Middle East," enthusiastically heralded by Shimon Peres' book of that name, was proclaimed with the signing of the Israel-PLO declaration of principles on the White House lawn in September 1993. Political rivalries and religious passions, it was optimistically said, would be overcome by the transformations in the same technology and economics that were essential in ending the Cold War. Witnessing these transformations—the information revolution behind the "third wave" economy, missile technology that made strategic depth of territory irrelevant, and the end of Soviet sponsorship of Arab states—Peres concluded that the Oslo accords, the Jordan-Israel peace treaty, and ensuing trade with nations that formerly boycotted Israel would together bring about the dawn of regional prosperity and peace, or what he liked to call a "'Benelux' arrangement for economic affairs."

Today, a new Middle East is in fact emerging, but it is not the one envisioned by either the victors of World War I or the architects of Oslo. It begins, rather, with the American defeat of Saddam Hussein's regime, itself inspired by the aspiration evident in the Bush administration's tectonic

policy shift after 9/11: To spread freedom to Middle Eastern peoples living under tyrannical, terror-feeding regimes. At the heart of what has come to be called the Bush Doctrine—articulated in the president's speech to a joint session of Congress on September 20, 2001, his State of the Union address of January 2002, his remarks on the Middle East that June, and the launch of the Middle East Partnership Initiative that December—lies the ambition to cultivate democracy in the Middle East so as to strike at the roots of terrorism.

Since then, a tempest has been gathering in the Arab world: The historic January 30, 2005 elections in post-Saddam Iraq; shortly thereafter municipal elections in Saudi Arabia and presidential and local elections in the post-Arafat Palestinian Authority; massive protests in Beirut after the assassination of former prime minister Rafiq Hariri, resulting in Syria's withdrawal of its 14,000 troops from Lebanon and the first elections there in three decades in the absence of Syrian forces; Egypt's first multiparty presidential elections this September; under the banner of *kifaya* ("Enough!"), crowds protesting President Hosni Mubarak's twenty-four-year rule; the announcement this July from Gamal Mubarak, Hosni Mubarak's 42-year-old son, that for the first time the ruling National Democratic Party's leaders at both the central and regional levels would be choosing the party's presidential nominee; the decision in Kuwait's parliament this May to grant women the right to vote and run for office; Oman's first full-suffrage elections held in October 2003; Qatar's adoption of a new constitution in September 2004 granting greater political rights; Bahraini elections for municipal councils in May 2002 and for the lower house of parliament that October—the first elections held in that country in 28 years; and King Abdullah's December 2003 speech calling on his government to make "radical changes" aimed at turning Jordan into "a modern, democratic country."

Electoral reforms, which in and of themselves do not a liberal democracy make, are simply the most obvious signs of a profound shift in attitude. And yet, Saad Eddin Ibrahim, the well-known Egyptian democracy activist, argued last year that the prospects for democracy in the Middle East

have never been so bright. In 2002 and 2003, the United Nations' *Arab Human Development Report,* written by Arab intellectuals, included ardent calls for democratic change as necessary to revitalizing Arab society. And the latest survey by the Pew Global Attitudes Project, conducted among nearly 18,000 people in 17 countries this spring and published this June, finds that large and growing majorities in Morocco (83 percent), Lebanon (83 percent), and Jordan (80 percent) say democracy can work well, and not just in the West.

We should have no illusions about the fragility of some of these advances, or about the degree to which those in the more fervently theocratic quarters of the Arab world bristle at the very notion of democracy, which they consider a Western heresy. Some Arab countries, like Libya, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Tunisia, are highly authoritarian, while others—like Morocco and Lebanon—are much less so. Some of these changes, moreover, reflect genuine, popular dissent, while others are cosmetic, top-down reforms accepted only under foreign pressure or as exercises in public relations. Indeed, it is too early to tell to what degree they together represent the early stages of a domino effect, or whether the United States will feel the need to "push" the dominos itself. But it is just as clear that in these tentative moves toward expanded political participation, political realities are shifting, and a new Middle East is emerging.

Although a great deal of attention has been paid to these transformations, surprisingly little has been devoted to Israel's role in the region's democratization—by which is meant not only free and fair elections, but also the institutions of liberty that protect individual rights of speech, property, and religion through a system of law not subject to arbitrary government manipulation. To the degree that attention *has* been devoted to the issue, it has tended to be monolithically skeptical—both about Israel's possible contributions to democratization and about democratization's possible advantages for Israel. Two contradictory fears are at work with regard

to Arab democracy: On the one hand, that it cannot work; and on the other, precisely that it will.

A common objection voiced by both Arab and Western critics of political reform is that, to put it simplistically, Israel—perceived as America's colonialist lackey—is bad for democratization. A campaign to promote democracy in the Middle East, they say, will be either futile or counterproductive without a Palestinian-Israeli peace settlement. Typical of this view is Arab League Secretary General Amr Moussa's statement in April 2004: "Nothing will change in the region if the Palestine question is not resolved fairly and justly."

A variant claim is that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict fuels anti-American sentiment among Arabs, which in turn impedes democratization. Thomas Carothers, a democracy expert at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, claims that restoring American credibility in the Arab world will be very difficult "without a substantial rebalancing of the U.S. approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict." Former U.S. national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski similarly contends that the United States must "define the substance of a peace settlement in the Middle East and then work energetically to put that agreement in place" so as to "give greater credibility" to its democracy initiative. In this way of thinking, the unresolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict, for which Israel is often held to be primarily responsible, perpetuates a climate that inhibits political reform.

But after the fall of Saddam, the Iraqi elections, and the constitutional convention there, the view that American credibility in the Middle East primarily depends on the Arab-Israeli conflict is no longer tenable. That credibility, rather, is now bound far more tightly to the results of the efforts of the Iraqi people, working with the Americans, to found a new constitutional regime in the heart of the Middle East. The wisdom of the policy, of course, can ultimately be proven only retrospectively. But if the American strategy in Iraq succeeds, Arab peoples will take notice. Nothing succeeds like success.

There is little truth, moreover, to the claim that democratization in the region is in any way held hostage by the Palestinian issue, which in many cases is simply a pretext offered by Arab autocrats to preserve their rule. This is why in Syria, for instance, commitment to the Palestinian cause remains a central pillar of Ba'ath party doctrine, and in Egypt it is used to prop up the Mubarak regime. According to this logic, if there were no Israel, the regions' Arab states would already be democratic, or at least well along the path to liberalization. The main impediment to Arab democratization is not Israeli behavior but the unfree nature of Arab regimes themselves.

If the first group of skeptics asks whether Israel is good for Arab democracy, a second asks whether the prospect of Arab democracy is good for Israel. Subscribing to the classic realist doctrine's faith in the paramount importance of strategic stability, they answer that it is not. Promoting democracy in the Arab world is counterproductive, it is said, because democratic Arab regimes are likely to adopt a more hostile position toward the Jewish state. Such critics frequently point to the overwhelming victory in Algeria's first parliamentary elections in December 1991 of the militant Islamic Salvation Front (which prompted the military to seize power and annul the results) as an example of Arab democracy gone dangerously awry. Here too, Arab dictators themselves encourage this belief, insisting that nascent democracies emerging from a long period of dictatorship are often politically unstable. "If we open the door completely before the people, there will be chaos," Hosni Mubarak explained in March 2004.

Yet much of the naysaying about Arab democratization comes from within Israel itself. Indeed, Israeli scholars and public figures, anxious to preserve a more or less stable status quo, rarely discuss Arab democratization, and when they do, it is treated as a product of American naïveté. Yossi Alpher, for instance, former director of the Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, worries that "democratization appears to be strengthening pro-Iranian,

militant Islamist parties and movements in Iraq, Palestine (Hamas), and potentially Lebanon (Hizballah)." Yehezkel Dror, elder statesman of Israeli political scientists, adds:

> Let's assume a quick democratization of Egypt and Jordan. Will it strengthen their peace with Israel? Certainly not. The ruling elites understand the need for peace with Israel. But the public in the streets, the masses in the marketplaces, definitely do not.

But perhaps the most eloquent articulation of realist worries in Israel comes from Efraim Halevy, former head of the Mossad and director of the Hebrew University's Center for Strategic and Policy Studies. In many countries of the region, he has argued,

> an attempt at Iraqi-style democratization will place power in the hands of religious-tribal entities, while in others it will topple regimes that identify with the United States and with the West in general. . . . It is highly doubtful that dressing Middle Eastern countries in democratic garb. . . will help them in their fateful battle against al-Qaida and similar groups.

This attitude is not entirely surprising, of course. The aim of Israeli foreign policy has always been to survive in an intensely hostile neighborhood, not to "gentrify" that neighborhood by spreading liberty and democracy.

On several crucial counts, however, these skeptics are wrong. To begin with, they fail to take into account the extent to which extremist Islamic movements are in fact fueled by the Arab world's authoritarian political climate itself. If the government monopolizes the public square, Islamism retains the allure of purity and the power of protest politics. Governments must open up a genuine public square to allow non-Islamists to make their case against the state so that Islamists no longer monopolize the language of protest and are progressively marginalized. Hence moves toward

democracy in the Arab world may be vital steps toward marginalizing Islamist extremists and delegitimizing political violence.

The skeptics also underestimate the stability democratization in Arab states may yield in the long term. This is not the place to rehearse the arguments that democracies tend to recognize the legitimacy of other democracies, to avoid going to war with one another, and thus to contribute to stability. Such arguments have been convincingly advanced recently in *The Democracy Advantage: How Democracies Promote Prosperity and Peace*, by Morton Halperin et al., and in Natan Sharansky's *The Case for Democracy: The Power of Freedom to Overcome Tyranny and Terror*. In Sharansky's memorable formula: "So-called stability brought by dictators brings about long-term instability." Bush put it equally memorably in November 2003. "Sixty years of Western nations' excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East," he said, "did nothing to make us safe, because in the long run, stability cannot be purchased at the expense of liberty."

The typical realist objection to Arab democratization is that elections in Arab countries are all too often corrupt or go unrepeated; that Arab democracy simply means "one man, one vote, one time." In Iran, ousting the Shah made way for an election, which in turn enabled the mullahs to destroy democracy. Yasser Arafat rigged an election in 1996 and we had to await his death for another. Algeria's 1991 elections provoked a military coup and then civil war. Still, even these depressing scenarios are illuminating. The mere fact, for instance, that the mullahs in Iran were elected places on them a burden of legitimacy that even a "moderate" regime like that of the Saudis cannot attain. In an Arab democracy, even a subverted one, citizens are more likely to place the blame for failures with their own leaders, rather than with Israel or the West.

Besides these strategic considerations, much of the skepticism of Arab democratization is driven by the notion that Arab culture is incompatible with democracy. But Israel's granting to its Arab citizens the full spectrum of democratic rights seems to refute what Bush has in another

context called the "soft bigotry of low expectations." Israel's example—its 1.2 million Arab citizens are currently represented by three Arab parties with eight Knesset members—contradicts the view that democracy is somehow incompatible with Arab culture, a notion that is as false as it is fundamental to skepticism of Arab democratization. Such skepticism is often rooted in an *idée fixe*: Arab culture has always been prone to "oriental despotism." But Bernard Lewis had it right in a recent issue of *Foreign Affairs*: "To speak of dictatorship as being the immemorial way of doing things in that part of the world is simply untrue. It shows ignorance of the Arab past, contempt for the Arab present, and unconcern for the Arab future."

Beyond these arguments from hope, however, which offer reasons to believe that democratization will ultimately bring about a regional climate less inimical to Israel than today's, there is also the argument from what we might call a "new realism." Halevy and the realists who, relying on a pre-9/11 paradigm, refuse to admit the new strategic reality, have thereby lost touch with a consequence of that reality: The old bargain—stability purchased at the expense of liberty—no longer works at a time when non-state actors terrorize New York, London, and Madrid. They do not see that the attempt to found a democracy in the Arab Middle East is meant to counter the old choice between two now-unacceptable alternatives: Corrupt Western-leaning autocracy and Islamist extremism. They fail to recognize, in other words, the "dark side of globalization" that the 9/11 attacks revealed. If Oslo was premised on a utopian hope in the bright possibilities of globalization as a technological solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict, 9/11 laid bare the dark possibilities of the new technologies that served as "force multipliers," enabling a ragtag band of terrorists to inflict immense harm on the world's most powerful country. Bin Laden and his minions revealed that the risks in giving democracy a chance in the Arab world are now far more manageable than the risks of not doing so.

Democratic self-government—liberty and equality and the rights dependent on them—are ideals to which all people can aspire. The post-Iraq

Middle East and the American-led drive for democratization present Israel with the unique opportunity to seize an old argument with new urgency, and to present itself not merely as no impediment to regional democratization, but as an exemplary instance of it. In most cases, overt Israeli support of Arab reformers would only damn their cause. But a wise Israeli response to the burgeoning *pax democratica*, one that does not make the mistake of disdaining the American democracy initiative, can work to subtle but powerful effect. The world needs examples of Middle East democracy, and while the Americans work towards this goal with the Iraqis, Israel—undeterred by classical realists, cultural relativists, or isolationist leftists—should exemplify it in its treatment of its Arab citizens and demand it from the Palestinians, especially in post-Arafat and post-disengagement Gaza.

Such a salutary change in thinking would greatly benefit Israel. It would imply abandoning the kind of nearsighted realism that encouraged negotiations, covert or overt, with authoritarian regimes like Bashir Assad's in Syria and—even as the EU is renewing contacts with Hamas—would strengthen its resolve to avoid implicit legitimization of Hamas and Hezbollah by bargaining with their leaders. A revision of Israeli assumptions, moreover, would insure that the U.S.-Israel dialogue no longer at best ignores, and at worst disdains the subject of regional democratization, and in this way would insure that the U.S. and Israel are firmly on the same page. Finally, a measured jettisoning of its old skepticism—about its own exemplary character as much as about the desirability of Arab democratization—would allow Israel to link peace negotiations with domestic political reforms.

The time is ripe for the dissolution of the region's authoritarian status quo not only for reasons of politics, but also because of the much remarked-upon revolutions in technology, which play a crucial role in spreading the example of democracy. The technophiles forget that technology is morally neutral: Progress in technology and economy need not compel a corresponding progress in morals and politics. Globalization makes

possible global terror networks as surely as it facilitates networks of commerce and communication; the circulation of commodities, technologies, ideas, money, and people can aid networks of terror, as well as trade and travel. Moreover, the dissemination of the terrorist act by mass media amplifies its propagandistic effects and thus helps it achieve its political ends.

But while al-Qaida exploited the revolutions in technology that were to usher in Peres' wonderfully interconnected "new Middle East," Israel can harness the very same revolutions to promote democracy. And this is yet another sense in which the skeptics have it wrong. Just as the Soviet regime rested on the control of the production, distribution, and exchange of information—a control made untenable by the communications revolution—the demise of Arab dictators could be determined in no small measure by technological transformations. Modern communications technologies place uncoerced means of expression, as well as new possibilities for seeing other points of view, at the disposal of ordinary people. If the old communications were monopolized by the reigning ideology, the new technologies resist such monopolization by virtue of their universal accessibility. The world is fast becoming a single echo chamber. Sights and sounds from the Iraqi elections, disseminated by television stations like al-Jazeera, amplified the "revolution of purple ink" that captured imaginations in Beirut and Cairo—but also in Damascus and Gaza.

Israel, the region's most potent example of freedom and democracy, has taken some first steps in this direction, but nothing approaching concerted policy. The Israel Broadcasting Authority, for instance, now offers an Arabic-language Middle East Satellite Channel. In 2001, the Israeli newspaper *Yediot Aharonot* launched ArabYnet, an Arabic translation of its popular Hebrew news website. ArabYnet today logs nearly a million unique monthly users, giving it the unlikely distinction of being one of the most visited sites in the Arab world. Saudi Arabia ranks first in the number of visitors, and 70 percent of the site's users have been traced to computer servers in North America, meaning that Arab citizens have bypassed their governments' attempts to block access.

Other opportunities have originated in the Arab world, allowing young people throughout the Middle East to tune in to Israeli television and see Israeli Arabs and Jews in spirited debate, regularly denouncing their own government's policies. Viewers who were once confined to tightly con-trolled state-run television now choose from multiple independent satellite services that influence public opinion in ways Arab governments have found it impossible to ignore. Today, 60 percent of Palestinians receive their news from satellite television. Al-Jazeera, with some 50 million viewers, airs Israeli Channel 2 together with CNN coverage from Israel for up to two hours at a time, at the height of the Intifada showing interviews with Israeli politicians almost daily. There were also broadcasts of policy debates in the Labor party, and the dissenting voice of an Israeli-Arab lawmaker criticizing the closing of a Muslim welfare society for suspected links with Hamas. According to Akram Khouzam, al-Jazeera's Moscow bureau chief: "For the first time, Arab viewers have seen representatives of Israel." These onlookers may be critical of what they see, but they see it nonetheless.

Indeed, the sights from this vibrant, proud democracy may already be having an effect. A December 2003 study conducted by the U.S. National Science Foundation found that 84 percent of West Bank Palestinians and 85 percent of Gaza residents agreed with the statement that democracy is the best form of government. According to a survey conducted by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research in Ramallah and published in June 2004, Palestinians in the territories view Israeli democracy as the preferred model for a future Palestinian state. According to Khalil Shikaki, the center's director, Palestinians rank Israeli democracy before Western democracies such as the United States, France, Germany, and others. "Despite the discrimination and injustice faced by Arab citizens," Hashem Abdel Rahman, the mayor of the Arab-Israeli city Umm el-Fahm has said, "the democracy and justice in Israel are better than the democracy and justice in Arab and Islamic countries." And amazingly, at the World Economic Forum in Jordan this May, over 700 leaders, mostly from the Middle East

and North Africa, named Israel as a "possible role model" of governmental transparency and accountability.

Providing an example of the possibility of freedom and explaining the grounds and institutional forms of liberty and equality are among the greatest services a democracy can offer to those who live under tyranny. Although a freer Middle East will take a long time, and there will be daunting and disheartening setbacks along the way, there is no alternative. Today, a patient democratic idealism is more realistic than realism.

—————————————

Benjamin Balint is Associate Editor of Azure. *Daniel A. Doneson is Literary Editor of* Azure.