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Case Analysis

Israel and the Islamist scarecrow after the Arab revolts

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Introduction

Israel's ruling establishment and its affiliated elites have consistently questioned the nature of revolutions in the Arab world and cautioned the world against their consequences, claiming that they will bring Islamist movements to power.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has raised the specter of experiences to which the West has been particularly sensitive, especially that of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, which began as a movement protesting the shah's regime and ended up with the establishment of the Islamic Republic. Netanyahu has not missed the opportunity to warn that Egypt will share a similar destiny if Islamists come to power as a result of the revolution.¹

Not only has he cautioned of the risks of the Islamists' ascent to power, but has also has tried to give the impression that he is keen on the emergence of a rival "democratic" force. He has called for an international fund to support the opponents of Islamists – i.e. "those with liberal views", as per his description – across the Arab world, comparing his idea to the Marshall Plan implemented by the United States following World War II in support of Western Europe. Netanyahu even sent his assistant national security adviser, Eran Lerman, to the United States to discuss this proposal with leaders in Congress.²

In an attempt to demonize the democratic change in the Arab world and mobilize the world against it, Israeli elites have followed suit. They have been keen on recalling the Iran and Hamas cases and suggesting that the world will see a repeat of the two experiences. Some have considered what happened in Egypt a "coup not a revolution," predicting that the event will result in the Muslim Brotherhood's rise to power, establishing a "Sunni version of the Islamic Republic of Iran". They have argued that there is no inclination toward democratic change and freedoms, in Egypt, that, in fact, the opposite is true.³

Yossi Beilin⁴ has warned that the world's acceptance of the transfer of power to Islamists in the wake of the Arab revolutions is "irresponsible", claiming that President Barack Obama has made

¹ Jonathan Lis, "Egyptian PM: Egypt can go to Iran", *Haaretz*, February 7, 2011, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/hasite/spages/1213820.html>

² Eli Berndastein, "Netanyahu Plan to Stop Rise of Islamists", *Maariv*, March 8, 2011, <http://www.nrg.co.il/online/1/ART2/219/690.html?hp=1&cat=404>

³ David Bakai, "Not a revolution, it is a coup", Sama News Agency, from *Yedioth Ahronoth*, February 14, 2011, <http://www.samanews.com/index.php?act=Show&id=88026>

⁴ Former leader of the leftist Meretz Party, Beilin served as minister of justice under then-Prime Minister Ehud Barak (1999-2001).

the same “mistake” of President Jimmy Carter, who “forsook” the shah, leading not only to the fall of imperial rule in Tehran, but also to a radical change in the entire region⁵.

Eitan Haber⁶ has alleged that the revolution in Egypt is a milestone “marking Egypt’s break-up with secularism and Westernization”, expecting “the pictures to come from Egypt to match those coming from Iran, which has been orchestrating the events from the backstage, to achieve one goal: ruining the atmosphere of peace and reconciliation with Israel.”⁷

Elyakim Haetzni, a settlement leader in the West Bank, has argued that the Islamists’ “inevitable” rise to power thanks to Arab revolutions will result in significant support for Hamas, thereby posing a strategic threat to Israel. He considers that such a rise to power would limit Israel’s ability to act against Hamas, given what he says is the strong possibility that the new regime in Egypt would provide the movement with military and logistic equipment capable of limiting Israel’s ability to use force.⁸

Despite such public positions that attempt to mobilize the world against Arab revolutions by manipulating the Islamist scarecrow, we find behind closed doors, Israeli officials voice satisfaction with Hamas’s control of the Gaza Strip, though publicly urging the overthrow of its rule.

The contradictions of Israeli officials, in public vis-à-vis behind closed doors, on the nature of the experiences of Islamist movements, calls for more to be learned about Israel’s real motives in launching its campaign to strip the Arab revolution of international legitimacy, under the pretext of the ascent of Islamist regimes.

Research problem:

The research problem lays in Israel’s attempt to cover up the real motives behind its cautioning against Islamist rule following the democratic revolutions in the Arab world. The research will attempt to find an answer to a main question: what are the objectives Israel seeks to achieve by spreading alarm about the Islamists’ ascent to power after the Arab revolutions?

⁵ Yossi Beilin, “Where was Obama”, Walla News Website, January 30, 2011, <http://news.walla.co.il/?w=/2680/1786357>

⁶ Former bureau chief for the late Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and prominent journalist and political commentator.

⁷ Eitan Haber, “The Hidden Flames”, *Yedioth Ahronoth*, March 23, 2011.

⁸ Elyakim Haetzni, “A plot to break off all relations”, Sama News Agency, from *Yedioth Ahronoth*, February 14, 2011: <http://www.samanews.com/index.php?act=Show&id=88250>

Significance of the study

This research has special importance as it highlights the mechanism adopted by Israel to demonize the revolutions for democratic change in the Arab world, and the objectives it seeks to achieve by doing so, both of which might help develop an Arab strategy to face and defeat the Israeli campaign.

Research objectives:

My research aims to discern the aims of the Israeli campaign to stir global concern over the prospective rise of Islamists to power in the Arab world. There also are some complementary aims, including:

- Defining the relation between the mobilization against Islamists and Israel's interest in the survival of dictatorial regimes in the Arab world;
- Predicting Israel's behavior patterns concerning a political settlement of the conflict with the Arabs in light of the anti-Islamist campaign;
- Highlighting Israel's concerns over the consequences of democratic change in the Arab world;
- Explaining Israel's manipulation of the Islamist scarecrow to blackmail the US government;
- Understanding the mechanisms employed by Israel to retain the stereotype of Islamists; and
- Defining the main factors by which Israel determines its attitudes toward political currents in the Arab world.

Research questions

1. What is the relation between Israel's incitement against Islamists and its association with dictatorial Arab regimes?
2. What is the future of efforts toward the peaceful settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict following the Israeli incitement against Islamists?
3. What are the Israeli concerns over the consequences of democratic change in the Arab world?
4. What are the mechanisms applied by Israel in attempt to retain the stereotype of Islamists?
5. What are the main factors by which Israel determines its attitudes toward political currents in the Arab world?

Approach

I have adopted an approach that brings together the tools of descriptive and inductive methods and analytic deductive methods, relying on rigorous daily monitoring of Israeli sources and the attitudes of Israeli officials and elites as these regard the revolutions of democratic change in the Arab world.

Israel between dictatorships and the Islamists

There are multiple obvious indicators that Israel's keenness on creating panic about the Arab revolutions by cautioning about the rise of Islamists reflects the bitterness it feels about losing the advantages of the dictatorial regimes that had been associated with it. A barrage of official statements indicates that the Israeli government is basically attached to dictatorial regimes. The warning against Islamism seeks to help keep dictatorial regimes in place, such regimes having been no threat to Israel. This is evident in the fact that Netanyahu, overstating the danger of Islamist takeovers, had himself actively sought to keep dictatorial regimes in place. In late January 2011 he formed a task force in his cabinet for the purpose of launching a political and diplomatic campaign to persuade world powers not to allow then-Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's ouster.⁹ He disclosed the secret behind his keenness on Mubarak's survival, explaining that the ousted president had been a very valuable ally of Israel and that perils lie

⁹ In a newscast at 8:00 p.m. on February 1, 2011, Israel's Channel 1 disclosed that Netanyahu had been beside the phone for four hours, making calls to European leaders and senior US lawmakers to urge them to move against the overthrow of Mubarak's regime. He discussed with them ideas allowing the regime to continue even if Mubarak agreed to step down.

ahead for the Camp David Accords if the Egyptian leader stepped down.¹⁰ Another proof that Netanyahu is not supportive of a rise of democratic regimes to power in the Arab world is his keenness in every meeting with foreign leaders, journalists and intellectuals, inside Israel and abroad, on maintaining that Israel is the only democracy in a region of dictatorships.¹¹ If Netanyahu were in favor of the region's transformation, why was he the only leader to exert tremendous efforts in order to keep the Mubarak regime in place?

Just days before retiring from his position as chief of the Israeli military's General Staff, Gabi Ashkenazi was more forthright than other officials in acknowledging that Israeli interests are linked to dictatorships, writing that "[in] the Middle East, the stability of Israel is better than democracy."¹²

It is important to recall the renowned phrase spontaneously and expressively uttered by former Israeli Infrastructure Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer, who called President Mubarak "Israel's greatest strategic treasure." Israel obviously could not expect that Mubarak's successor would be a politician with the same care for its interests, and consequently it sounded the alarm.¹³ *Haaretz's* editor-in-chief stresses that Egypt under Mubarak was "Israel's guard", indicating that Israel has situated its interest in the stability of authoritarian regimes in neighboring Arab states.¹⁴

The warning about the rise of Islamists aims particularly to maintain the official Israeli narrative, which holds that the demise of authoritarian regimes in the Arab world will necessarily mean an inevitable rise of Islamist movements, making it a global duty to prevent this scenario from taking place. Beilin admits that successive Israeli governments have always preferred dictatorial regimes because these are pragmatic and content with paying lip service to the Palestinians while forging alliances with Israel. On the other hand, democratic regimes are accountable and take decisions with transparency.¹⁵ Beilin supports his point with Wikileaks cables that clearly showed that Arab regimes have been more concerned with confronting Iran and its nuclear

¹⁰ Aluf Benn, "Netanyahu Becomes Thirst", *Haaretz* website, February 2, 2011, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/hasite/spages/1212916.html>

¹¹ Yossi Verter, "Quick Sands", *Haaretz*, February 4, 2011, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/hasite/spages/1213268.html>

¹² Ashkenazi, "Stability Better than Democracy", *Yedioth Ahronoth*, February 11, 2011.

¹³ For Israeli testimonies about how much Israel benefits from the totalitarian regimes in the Arab world, especially the Mubarak regime, see: "Omar Suliman , Israel: Testimonies of High Caliber", Safa News Agency, February 5, 2011, <http://www.safa.ps/ara/?action=showdetail&seid=40838>

¹⁴ Aluf Benn, "Egypt was Israel's Bodyguard", Sama News Agency, July 30, 2011, <http://www.samanews.com/index.php?act=Show&id=101866>

¹⁵ Yossi Beilin, "Before It is Too Late", *Israel Today*, February 10, 2011 http://www.israelhayom.co.il/site/newsletter_opinion.php?id=5576

program than confronting Israel, and illustrated that Arab regimes do not care about the Palestinian plight or about resolving the issue.¹⁶

In the Israeli political rhetoric, the concept of “stability in the Middle East” has been linked to the survival of dictatorial regimes, and Israel considers any attempt to topple such regimes a threat to regional “stability”. The Israeli internal debate shows that the ruling elites obviously tend to prefer the survival of totalitarian regimes, even if they belong to the so-called “Axis of Rejection”, because, as is the case with the so-called “moderate” states, they provide a ‘guarantee of stability’.¹⁷ Needless to say, this “stability” in the region furthers Israeli interests, regardless of the suffering of hundreds of millions of Arab citizens under dictatorial regimes.

“Stability” means that Israel can continue to evade the obligations of any political settlement, even if it were the minimum for Arabs and Palestinians, as it knows that the authoritarian regimes are only concerned about their survival. Consequently, they will not take the initiative to change the type of existing relations with Israel so long as its governments refuse to fulfill the obligations of conflict settlement.

Israeli journalist and writer Gideon Levy believes that it is thanks to this “stability” that for decades Israel has deprived the Palestinians living under occupation of their political rights and denied the Palestinian refugees the right of return¹⁸. Moving ahead with the analysis of the “stability” that Israel fears revolutions could affect, Levy writes: “Stability that Israel is willing to retain includes leaving behind tens of millions of poor Egyptians while the ruling family continues to enjoy fortunes of billions of dollars ... Stability means the swelling of security services that are only concerned with preserving the ruling regime at the expense of budgets that should have been allocated to health, education, development and social welfare ... Stability means a political hereditary authority passed from father to son and rigged elections for which

¹⁶ For details about Israel’s bets on regimes see: Saleh Al Naami, “Israeli Panic over Tunisian Revolution”, Al Jazeera.net, January 1, 2011, <http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/1DA92564-ACEF-405E-91BC-A023B936F9AC.htm>

¹⁷ For proof that Israel bets on the survival of the “Rejection” regimes, as is the case with “moderate” ones, see: Saleh Al Naami, “Israel and Syrian Intifada: Bets on Least Bad Option”, Al Jazeera Center for Studies, May 15, 2011, <http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/BF1A9D41-74ED-489E-B846-BEE1C201C704.htm>, idem, “Israel, Constitutional Monarchy in Jordan”, Al Jazeera.net, April 14, 2011, <http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/EXERES/F55BD074-F5C3-4E5F-8631-FA1CB57F9241.htm>. Cf. Mahmoud Meehi, “Israel: Al Gaddafi fall after Mubarak is a threat to Israel”, *Youm 7* newspaper, March 16, 2011, <http://www.youm7.com/News.asp?NewsID=370758>

¹⁸ Gideon Levy, “Vilifying Stability”, *Haaretz*, February 10, 2011, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/hasite/spages/1214608.html>

only ruling party candidates run. Israel is concerned with stability even through the continuation of Arab civil wars, inter-Arab wars or under gross corruption”.¹⁹

Netanyahu’s exaggeration of the consequences of the Islamists’ rise to power is in fact a rejection of any change in the region for any such change would be inconsistent with Israel’s interests, which are linked to the persistence of dictatorial regimes. Israel is simply trying to maintain the old system in the Middle East. Netanyahu, like other Israeli leaders, prefers to deal with tyrannical rulers, Mubarak and the like, provided that they maintain the status quo and repress the forces that push for change.

Arab revolutions and the dilemma of the Israeli right

Although the Israeli elites, whether leftist or rightist, have questioned the nature and consequences of Arab revolutions and shared the warning of the consequences of the Islamists’ ascent to power, the Israeli right wing has been particularly keen on employing the Arab revolutions to add credibility to its ideological attitudes toward the conflict, refusing any political settlement based on withdrawal from the occupied Arab territories. It argues that if Islamist movements are to assume power in the Arab world, why should Israel withdraw from territories that represent a strategic reserve for it? According to Israeli right-wing rhetoric, Islamists who come to power would not feel bound by any agreements signed by former governments, leaving Israel facing an existential threat in the event of war with Arab parties. Many right-wing elites, in particular, are found to reiterate such arguments.

Yoram Ettinger, chairman of the right-wing Bemahshava center, believes the Arab revolutions will lead Islamists to power. This fact, in his view, will lay the foundations for more wars between Arabs and Israel, making it necessary for Israel not to give up the West Bank in any political settlement with Palestinians, on the premise that Israel cannot continue to exist without the West Bank, being near to the major residential communities inside Jewish state. By controlling the West Bank, Israel is better-equipped to take security precautions in the event of sudden war²⁰. To create panic among Israelis, Ettinger warns that the outcomes of Arab-Israeli wars after the Arab revolutions will be more serious than those of 1973 war, if the Israeli Army withdraws from the West Bank. He indicates that Israel will be stripped of any strategic depth.²¹

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Yoram Ettinger, “Egypt and Tunisia have come here to West Bank!”, *Yedioth Ahronoth*, January 30, 2011
<http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4021419,00.html>

²¹ Ibid.

Ettinger also has warned that the Islamists' rise to power would place Israel with very serious social and demographic consequences, claiming that an Islamist regime in Egypt would allow a flow of African immigrants across the Egyptian-Israeli border.

The most burning question is: of all the political currents in Israel, why has the right wing in particular been so keen to incite against the Arab revolutions, warning of the consequences of Islamists' taking power thereafter?

Udi Sommer, professor of political science at Tel Aviv University, answers this question. Sommer believes that one of the most important reasons behind the shock that has swept the various political currents in Israel, particularly the right wing, following the Arab revolutions, and their excessive expressions of fear, is the assumption that has long governed Israel's strategic thought – i.e. the internal situations in the Arab world are not likely to change, and therefore Israel can stick to its traditional attitudes toward the conflict without fear of a serious Arab reaction.²²

Sommer comes to a significant conclusion: that this assumption has eventually seen the Israeli public drifting to the extreme right because public opinion in Israel has not felt that the adoption of extremist attitudes entails a big loss for Israel. He believes that no individual with limited abilities like those of current Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman would be a potential candidate for the prime minister's office if the public opinion were not absorbed by such an assumption.²³ Thus, the right fears that deeper understanding of the true potential consequences of the Arab world's changes may lead some demographic sectors to drift away from it. This explains the sensitivity with which the right-wing elites regard the Arab revolutions, and pushes those elites to spread panic by sounding the alarm over the risks of Islamists taking power. They try also to persuade the public that the new situation in the Arab world requires tough, decisive policies that are offered only by the right. The right has always tried to create an impression that its policies are the best to deal with the Arabs. This impression has seen the most obvious manifestation in the election campaigns of the ruling right-wing Likud Party. The party adopts the slogan: "Only the Likud Can."

The foregoing indicates that the sensitivity demonstrated by the Israeli right toward the Arab revolts is basically linked to its concern over its ideological perception of the conflict with the Arabs after the revolutions, fearing a decline in its popular support. As a result, it has been striving to demonstrate that the outbreak of Arab revolutions is proof of the plausibility of its

²² Udi Sommer, "Lieberman: Watch Out!", *Yedioth Ahronoth*, March 1, 2011, <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4035904,00.html>

²³ *Ibid.*

positions toward the conflict, by trying to spread panic about the Islamists' ability to take the reins of power following such revolts. It is likely that Israel, under the right wing, will be even more inflexible toward a negotiating solution to its conflict with the Arabs after the outbreak of Arab.

Israel's concerns with the consequences of democratic change in the Arab world

Israel realized long ago that any comprehensive Arab renaissance would set the stage for a change in the current balance of power, in which Israel has the upper hand. It realized that such a renaissance would be connected with real democratic change that brings about political regimes capable of adopting genuinely progressive projects. Israel realized that democratic changes in the Arab world would substantially depend on a broad, effective middle class. Therefore Israel has sought to indirectly contribute, through its policies toward the Arab world, to the weakening of such classes. One mechanism has been to cut down the options available for members of the Arab middle class with regard to their national identity and attitudes toward Israel. Only two options have been available for the Arab middle class: either joining the Islamist movements, or becoming part of the social structures connected with dictatorial regimes and thereby aligning their interests with the stability of such regimes. These structures therefore demonstrated a false enthusiasm for reaching a settlement with Israel.²⁴

Officially, Israel linked the outbreak of Arab revolutions to the changes taking place on the level of the effectiveness of the middle class in some Arab countries.²⁵

Israel is never at ease with Islamist movements and their slogans. But it prefers at the same time to have light shed on them, as confrontation make easier the building of broad coalitions that resist Islamists and combat them. In such resistance, the ruling regimes will play the decisive role and the West will have a significant role too. Driven by their survival instincts and frightened by the Islamist alternative, the Arab regimes resist the Islamist movements. The global views proposed by Islamist movements, driven by yearnings for the remote past, raise panic in the West in particular.

So what Israel really fears with regard to the Arab middle class following the revolutions is:

First: The middle class has risen from its deep sleep and played a decisive role in the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions.

²⁴ Sefi Rachlevsky, "Turkish Middle East", *Haaretz*, February 15, 2011

²⁵ This connection has been recorded in the testimony of military intelligence chief Aviv Kochavi before the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, excerpts of which selections were broadcast during the Israeli Channel 1 newscast at 8:00 p.m. on June 22, 2011.

Second: The winds of Arab revolution can narrow the gaps between the agenda of Islamic elites and that of secular elites in the Arab world, leading to an agreement on platforms which lay the foundations for political regimes governed by democratic values that undertake progressive projects, especially of the type that Israel fears, under limited international rejection. Hence, Israel has strived to demonize the Arab revolutions, questioning their consequences in order to persuade the world that such revolts cannot lead to democratic regimes. In this way it hopes that the world powers' reactions will help strip such revolutions of legitimacy, and/or at that they will move publicly and secretly to impose restrictions on them.

Some objective Israeli elites have not been deceived by the goals of the elites who warned of Islamist takeovers. They believe that Netanyahu's warnings imply a racial practice that strips Arab citizens of their legitimate right to play a role in designing the public policies of their states. This is precisely what pushed Israeli writer Zvi Barel to state that the emphasis of Israel's ruling class and its affiliated elites on the possibility of Islamist rule aims to build an impression that Arabs do not deserve democracy.²⁶ Any democratic parliamentary regime, he argues, will inevitably allow all social forces, including religious ones, to express themselves. The author also recalled that the former US administration of George W. Bush was largely linked to Protestant fundamentalists who are at the same time the staunchest allies of Israel in the United States.²⁷

Some Israelis have called on the ruling elites to come up with objective analyses of what happened in Egypt, instead of raising fears. They ask the ruling elites to recognize that the Arab peoples will no longer place unlimited trust in their leaderships at the political, economic or partisan levels, for the Arab peoples now see themselves to be as valuable as their counterparts in Western states.²⁸

Israeli writer Hagai El-Ad stressed that the Israeli warnings and claims that Arabs would inevitably turn to dictatorship imply racial dimensions. He believes Israel's ruling elites and commentators, particularly the Orientalists, think in such a way that "democracy is too big for Arabs." Israelis, in the writer's opinion, do not want to admit that Arabs are able to manage their affairs democratically.²⁹

²⁶ Zvi Barel, "Mubarak to Saudi Arabia or Tel Aviv?", *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, February 2, 2011, from *Haaretz* <http://www.alquds.co.uk/index.asp?fname=today\02qpt955.htm&arc=data\2011\02\02->

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ *Haaretz* editorial, from Sama News Agency, January 14, 2011, <http://www.samanews.com/index.php?act=Show&id=87173>

²⁹ Alon, Elad, "Those are not ready yet for democracy", *Maariv*, January 1, 2011, <http://www.nrg.co.il/online/1/ART2/206/220.html?hp=1&cat=479>

The above information shows that Israel fears the consequences of democratic change in the Arab world. It explains why Israel spares no effort to demonize the Arab revolts by manipulating the Islamist scarecrow.

Blackmailing the US government

The Israeli elite obviously has been keen on attacking Obama's stance. They blame him for the downfall of "moderate" Arab regimes, particularly that of Mubarak. By so doing, they ignore the fact that Obama's administration put pressure on Mubarak to step down only after concluding that the masses would realize this goal. The US administration thought of sacrificing Mubarak only while maintaining his regime too.

By exaggerating the risk of an Islamist government taking power, Israel tried to prevent the US government from maneuvering, and to hold it partly responsible for any consequences of an Islamist takeover of politics in the Arab world. By attacking the US stance in the midst of Arab revolutions, the Israeli elites tried to achieve the following objectives:

First: Justifying demands for a doubling of US military aid to Israel and working on the restoration of the Israeli government's international standing by raising fear about the Arab revolts and claiming that if Islamists assume power, the stability of the region will fall apart. This position implies that Israel is the only country in the region on which the West, and specifically the United States, can count for maintaining their interests³⁰. Many Israeli officials believed that such scenario would oblige the United States to further support Israel, both militarily and economically. Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak asked the Obama Administration to provide an extra USD 20 billion for the Israeli defense budget to help Israel face the consequences of Arab revolutions for its national security in the near future. He told the Americans that investing this amount would benefit the United States "because ensuring the superiority of Israel represents one of the factors of stability in an unstable region."³¹

Israel also employed the Islamist scarecrow to attract European governments to its position. Netanyahu stressed a "system of shared values" that binds Israel to Europe, telling every European official visiting his country that the Arab revolutions prove that Israel "is the only country in the region that shares common values with Europe. We belong together; we have a common heritage and we share the same future."³²

³⁰ Yoram Ettinger, *Ibid* (source cited earlier).

³¹ Ehud Barak: Israel is considering the demand of additional twenty billion dollars for the security budget. The Marker, March 8, 2011.

<http://www.themarker.com/misc/1.605082>

³² Yussi Verter, *Ibid* (source cited earlier).

Second: Downplaying the impact of the Arab-Israeli conflict on the region's stability, claiming that the outbreak of Arab revolutions shows that instability is mainly associated with internal conditions in Arab countries, and therefore that even if the conflict were settled, this would not guarantee stability.³³ The Israelis assume this approach could lead the United States to reestablish its policy in the region on new foundations. As a result, Israel sought to reduce the ability of President Obama to pressure it in all matters relating to negotiated settlements with the Palestinians and Arabs by holding him responsible in part for the growing importance of "extremist groups" in the Arab world and the weakening of "moderate" regimes. Consequently, the Israeli elite accused Obama of complicating the process of reaching a settlement of the conflict through his reluctance to support the Mubarak regime. Zalman Shoval, the former Israeli ambassador to the United States, claimed that Obama's policy during the Egyptian Revolution reduced the chances of settling the conflict with Arabs.³⁴

According to Shoval, despite Bush's discourse about the democratization of the Arab world, he did not actually approach the Arab regimes like Obama did, arguing that US attempts to bridge the gap between "American ideals" and "pragmatic interests" would produce a state of "political schizophrenia."³⁵

Third: Weakening President Obama's position inside the United States by instigating the American public against him, arguing that he has contributed to creating conditions favorable to Islamists' taking power in the Arab world and emphasizing that this scenario would jeopardize the strategic interests of the United States itself. Ettinger has argued that Obama's policy will enable "radical Islam to harm Western interests in the Red Sea, Horn of Africa, Sudan and Jordan", claiming that such changes are occurring while the United States takes steps that reflect its weakness, particularly withdrawing troops from Iraq and the Obama administration's decision to set a date for withdrawal from Afghanistan.³⁶

Ettinger warns that paving the way for Islamists under these transformations carries significant risk, noting at the same time that even if the Islamists do not reach power and some regimes maintain their support for the United States, these regimes will be impacted by the prevailing

³³ Many top Israeli officials have emphasized this conclusion, including Lieberman in an interview with Israel's Channel 2 television broadcast during the 8 p.m. newscast on March 14, 2011.

³⁴ Zalman Shoval: "Turmoil in Cairo: American Schizophrenia", Sama News website, *Israel Today* magazine, February 1, 2011.

<http://www.samanews.com/index.php?act=Show&id=87267>

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Yoram Ettinger, Ibid.

atmosphere and will take hard-line positions against Israel and America. Israeli writer Arie Shevet almost “mourns” the United States because of the prospective rise of the Islamists, predicting that America is heading for the same fate that befell the Soviet Union in 1989, because the arrival of Islamists to power means the beginning of the “sinking” of the Western ship.³⁷

Fourth: Questioning the Obama Administration’s commitment to Israel’s security because it did not act to save Mubarak’s regimes, on the grounds that the fall of the regime, and the consequent participation of Islamists in elections, will threaten the Camp David Accords, which are vital to Israel’s security. Dov Weisglass, once a senior adviser to former Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, who was responsible for coordinating strategic relations with Washington, clearly expressed this view. He views the participation of Islamist movements in the political process in the Arab world as a “disaster” for Israel for which Obama’s administration bears a large part of the responsibility. He argues that US behavior has completely contradicted its rhetoric, which emphasizes commitment to Israel’s security³⁸. According to Weisglass, Islamist participation in the Egyptian government will lead to increased extremism and create conditions that jeopardize the continued existence of the Israeli-Egyptian peace agreement.³⁹

Attempts to prevent the collapse of the stereotyped image of Islamist movements

By warning of the ascent of Islamists to power and reiterating claims that this will lead to disastrous consequences, Israeli elites have tried to prevent the collapse of the stereotypical image of Islam and Islamist movements that many Orientalists in Israel and the West are keen to retain. To achieve this goal, some Israeli intellectuals continued to reject the intellectual reviews of Islam that flourished in the West after the Arab revolutions. Shaul Rosenfeld, a right-wing professor of philosophy at the Hebrew University, launched a fierce attack against John Brennan, Obama’s counter-terrorism adviser, and James Clapper, Washington’s director of National Intelligence. The former said in a lecture that the term “jihad” means initiating a sacred struggle that enables one to rid himself of sin and that there is no link between Islam and killing innocent people. The latter gave a statement before Congress in which he maintained that the Muslim Brotherhood does not embrace violence and is primarily concerned with social affairs and political reforms.⁴⁰

³⁷ Arie Shevet, “The Sinking of the West”, Haaretz, February 3, 2011.

<http://www.haaretz.co.il/hasite/spages/1213134.html>

³⁸ Dov Weisglass, “American Slam”, Palestine Today website, from *Yedioth Ahronoth*.

<http://paltoday.ps/arabic/News-100636.html>

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Shaul Rosenfeld, “Egyptian Intifada and Western Prophecies”, *Yedioth Ahronoth*, February 14, 2011.

<http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4028066,00.html>

Rosenfeld claimed that the Muslim Brotherhood's keenness on building its platform on slogans urging justice, progress and the eradication of poverty was an attempt to persuade Egyptian authorities to accept the group within the circle of legitimacy, so that it could change the situation calmly and silently. He further claimed that Islamist movements work under the principle of *tuqia* (caution), revealing something while concealing something else. He argued that this rule governs the behavior patterns of all Islamists, be they in Iran, Turkey, Egypt or Gaza.⁴¹ It is clear that reaching such a judgment comes as a consequence of a superficial attempt to distort facts.

Dore Gold⁴² argued that Islamist groups are instinctively anti-democratic and wish to use elections to seize power.⁴³

Ron Breiman, head of a group called "University Professors for the Immunity of Israel", claimed that all those who believe the Arab world, especially Egypt, will move from dictatorship and tyranny to democracy are wrong. He predicts Egypt will either be ruled by the military or the Islamists. Breiman acknowledges that every "sane" Israeli would prefer military rule to others.⁴⁴ He affirms that countries ruled by Islamist movements will necessarily become hostile to Israel, citing what happened in Turkey in the aftermath of the Freedom Flotilla incident.

But some Israeli researchers who tracked the performance of the Islamists during the Arab revolts were convinced that the Israeli attempts to demonize the Islamists and the Arab revolutions came out of the disappointment of Israelis that followed the collapse of the stereotype of Arab citizens, as rooted in Israeli literature.

According to Israeli researcher and journalist Nadav Eyal, prejudice against the Arab revolutions by the Israeli elite, specifically the Orientalists and commentators on Arab affairs in various media, has to do with their disappointment. This followed the collapse of the stereotypical image they created for the Arab human that ultimately proved unrealistic, especially since the Arab revolutions showed the fragility of the Orientalists' claims that Arabs have an innate tendency to

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Former Israeli ambassador to the United Nations and head of the right-wing Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies.

⁴³ Dore Gold, "Democratic Transition in the Arab World is an Israeli interest", Sama News, *Israel Today*, February 18, 2011.

<http://www.samanews.com/index.php?act=Show&id=88556>

⁴⁴ Ron Breiman, "Beware the Arrogant", *Maariv* newspaper, February 15, 2011.

<http://www.nrg.co.il/online/1/ART2/212/363.html?hp=1&cat=479>

surrender and not to challenge rulers, and that especially Egyptians cannot overcome the barrier of fear of the regime.⁴⁵

Dror Zeevi, professor of Oriental studies at Ben Gurion University, rejects the prevailing opinion in Israel that Islamists would resist democracy and adopt patterns not based on democratic values. He supported his opinion with the following arguments:⁴⁶

- 1- The majority of Islamic literature indicates the Islamists will behave like the rest of secular components of the national community, specifically in Egypt; pointing that all the evidence asserts that the Islamists will act in accordance with the principles and values dictated by Arab revolutions and not according to the intellectual heritage of such movements. Zeevi predicted that such movements will be concerned about corruption, and seek to achieve economic growth and solve the economic problems of people. He also indicated that the Arab youth who managed to topple the regimes will not tolerate their countries being governed by undemocratic values, and they would be able to face any regime that denies these values, even if it were Islamist. According to Zeevi, those who claim that the arrival of Islamists to power means the end of democratic rule ignore the “rich and interesting controversy” among central Islamist circles on how to harmonize Islam with democracy, pointing out that there is evident dynamic change in this direction.
- 2- There are profound implications of the *fatwa* of Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, dubbed by some as an influential religious authority in the Sunni world, in which he stressed that the state in Islam must not be religious, like those established in Western countries during the Middle Ages, and that “the ruler of the Muslim state is an employee who represents the nation and that the nation, represented in authorities, has the right to hold the ruler accountable, observe him, shut him away, struggle against him and even remove him from power, if he does not act according to the interests of the nation.”⁴⁷ In his view, this *fatwa* represents the antithesis of the understandings of religion prevailing in both Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Amid the ferocious campaign that cautions against the consequences of repeating the Islamic Revolution in Iran, many Israeli Orientalists and other commentators have discerned dramatic

⁴⁵ Nadav Eyal, “Apart from what commentators say”, *Maariv*, February 13, 2011.

<http://www.nrg.co.il/online/1/ART2/211/308.html?hp=1&loc=29>

⁴⁶ Dror Zeevi, “Do not be afraid of Islamicization”, *Yediot Ahronoth*, April 28, 2011.

<http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4061709,00.html>

⁴⁷ See Qaradawi site

<http://qaradawi.net/component/content/article/5029.html>

differences between the democratic revolutions in the Arab world and the Islamic one in Iran. Orientalist Yoram Meital points to the fact that the Egyptian Revolution was not monopolized by the Islamists, but was shouldered by a mosaic of groups and organizations, all supporting the concept of the civil state concept.⁴⁸

Islamists or secularists?

A question arises here: Is it really true that the decision-making circles in Israel believe that the rise of Islamists poses a threat to their interests more than the risk embodied by other components of the national community in every Arab country?

The record shows that, contrary to their declared positions, the ruling elites in Israel assess the impact of the world's political forces based on reality and their own practical experiences, not only in light of their slogans and ideological stands. Perhaps the clearest example of this was revealed by a US diplomatic cable leaked by WikiLeaks. The cable said that the former chief of Israel's Military Intelligence Directorate, Amos Yadlin, told US Congressmen that Israel was comfortable with Hamas's takeover of Gaza. The movement's monopoly of power, he explained, gives Israel an opportunity to monitor and control its leaders and members, and to know the whereabouts of their offices and homes. That allows for easy liquidation if Israel decides to respond to any military operations by the movement, he said. Moreover, for him, the rise of Hamas represents a historic opportunity to demonstrate the failure of its ruling philosophy.⁴⁹

This assessment, expressed behind closed doors, represents the real Israel's real evaluation of the Islamist movement, although Israel has been attacking the Hamas regime and calling for its ouster. This means that Israeli warnings about the danger of Islamist movements gaining power as a result of the Arab world's democratic revolutions have to be dealt with very carefully. Some Israeli researchers have urged the ruling elite in Israel to help Hamas rule Gaza. They say the responsibilities of ruling would preoccupy the movement and force it to control the pace of resistance emanating from Gaza Strip; so this situation does not give a justification to Israel to target government institutions and put pressure on the Palestinian public to urge them to rebel against Hamas.

Researcher Agal Levy believes that it is in Israel's interest to enhance the legitimacy of Hamas. Doing so, he says, would allow the movement to control other groups and prevent them from continuing resistance. He also has called on the Israeli government to strengthen the political

⁴⁸ Yoram Meital, "Peace for Peace", *Yediot Ahronoth*, January 31, 2011.

⁴⁹ Amos Yadlin, "We can deal with the Sector as an enemy", *Sama News*, December 12, 2011.

<http://www.samanews.com/index.php?act=Show&id=84069>

leadership of the movement at the expense of the more extremist military wing.⁵⁰ Researcher Aern Samson has advised the Israeli leadership to allow Hamas to rule Gaza without recognizing the Movement. The researcher claims that Hamas would have much to lose if it crossed the red line in matters relating to the conduct of resistance activities coming from Gaza, be they carried out by the military arm of Hamas or any other faction.⁵¹

Israel attaches importance to the ideological positions and slogans registered by the different political currents in the Arab world, including Islamist movements. But there is no doubt that the standard basis Israeli elites use to measure the seriousness of any Arab political current is how close it is to the materialization of a renaissance that affects Israel's military superiority and bridges the technology gap, the latter being the mainstay of growing military power and economic strength. Israel cares about this issue, regardless of the ideological background of the current leading any such renaissance. Israel destroyed the Iraqi nuclear reactor in 1981 and the nuclear research facility in Syria in 2007, even though both countries were under secular Baath Party rule. And now Israel is doing its best in a quest to recruit the world to thwart the Iranian nuclear project.

Israel has experienced the misery of military solutions in the face of Islamist movements, since it was found that the outcomes of such solutions are very limited. For example, Yuval Diskin, the former head of Israel's Shin Bet domestic security agency,, has declared that he advised the ruling elites in the country to launch a military campaign to topple Hamas, but at the same time he acknowledged that the destruction of Hamas would not stop Palestinians from loving it, and that the option of toppling Hamas would lead, in practice, to more dramatic consequences for Israel.⁵²

If this is the case, why does Israel cling to the scarecrow of Islamist movements and Islamists?

Israel's leaders and elites recognize that in light of the prevailing stereotypes about Islamist movements in the West, it would be easy to incite them against the Arab revolutions by repeating the claim that such revolutions will hand power to Islamists. However, since the outbreak of the Egyptian Revolution, what drew the attention of the Israelis among the statements and attitudes of Egyptian opposition leaders were precisely those of secular leaders. Yaacov Amidror,

⁵⁰ Agal Levy, "Hamas rule should be supported", *Haaretz*, March 27, 2011.

<http://www.haaretz.co.il/hasite/spages/1222368.html>

⁵¹ Aern Samson, "Hamas is not to be recognized but should be allowed to rule", Reut Institute website, April 29, 2008.

<http://reut-institute.org/Publication.aspx?PublicationId=3203>

⁵² Akiva Eldar, "Sayings of the Living Gods", *Haaretz*, May 25, 2009.

<http://www.haaretz.co.il/hasite/spages/1087933.html>

Netanyahu's national security adviser, expressed Israel's extreme concern over the statements of Egyptian secular leader Ayman Nour, in which the latter called for a re-evaluation of the Camp David Accords. Amidror said Israel would work to convince the United States not to engage in any dialogue with any secular Egyptian groups that take negative attitudes toward the treaty.⁵³

Journalist Amnon Abramovich reveals that most of the reports submitted by Israel's strategic assessment bodies to the Netanyahu government assert that in all matters relating to Israel, there are no fundamental differences between Islamist and secular forces in the Arab world.⁵⁴

In fact, Israelis recognize that the Arab revolutions prompted the Islamist movements to take more flexible, realistic attitudes and that these movements are seeking recognition from the international community by seeking dialogue with the West in general and the United States in particular. Thus, the campaigns of incitement against Islamist movements aim at one of two goals: leading these movements to show flexible positions toward Israel and the agreements signed with it, or urging the world, specifically the West, to stop dialogue with them, which in turn would jeopardize the legitimacy of these movements and the Arab revolutions at large.

Israel has sought to buttress its anti-Islamist incitement with two main rationales. On the one hand, it considers that the arrival of Islamists to power means instability for the whole region because of their rejection of peace with Israel. On the other hand, it claims that Islamists oppose the values of democracy and are hostile to them. Thus, in the Israeli views, the regimes they establish would be even worse than the current dictatorships.

The pressing question here is: Does Israel's behavior demonstrate its respect for "peace"? Did not the current Israeli foreign minister threaten to bomb the High Dam? Was Mubarak not insulted on the rostrum of the Knesset⁵⁵? Did many Israeli circles not incite the US Congress to impose sanctions on the Mubarak regime, which was described as a strategic ally, when he occasionally criticized Israeli behavior? Did Israel not always talk about how Egyptians in general hate Israel?

The ruling elites in Israel claim that the rise of Islamists will put an end to any possibility of reaching peace with the Arab world, but many statements by Israeli officials assert that other religious groups, specifically Jewish ones, contribute significantly to the impossibility of

⁵³ Dror's statements were broadcast by Israel's Channel 2 television during the 8 p.m. newscast on May 23, 2011.

⁵⁴ His statements were broadcast by Israel's Channel 2 television during the 8 p.m. newscast on March 17, 2011.

⁵⁵ When Lieberman was deputy prime minister in the interim Olmert government (2006), he commented on Mubarak's refusal to visit Israel from the Knesset rostrum, saying: "Let him burn in hell!"

reaching settlement with Arabs.⁵⁶ The Israeli political regime has allowed Jewish religious authorities to incite against diplomatic efforts that offer a resolution to the conflict. It also has allowed these authorities to call for the killing of Palestinian women, children and the elderly, without subjecting them to accountability and punishment.⁵⁷ Israeli public opinion is the party that adopts extremist positions on any resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.⁵⁸

With regard to democracy, I find that compared to Jewish religious movements, particularly those representing the ruling coalition in Israel, Islamist movements in the Arab world adopt very advanced positions vis-a-vis democracy and its values. The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt has clearly announced commitment to the idea of a civil state⁵⁹, while the mainstream Jewish religious authorities explicitly reject the values of democracy if they conflict with the teachings of the Torah.⁶⁰

There is insufficient space here to delve into the discrimination on the bases of religion and race practiced by Israel against the Palestinians of 1948, or the oppression of Palestinians under Israeli occupation in the West Bank and Gaza.

Because of all this, Israel has no moral right to feign keenness on peace and democracy in its quest to demonize the Arab revolutions that may lead to the ascent of Islamists, because of their stands of peaceful settlement and democracy.

⁵⁶ Former Israeli Justice Minister Yosef Lapid, who was a member of the Ministers Committee on Security Affairs in the government of Ariel Sharon (2003-2006), said he had concluded that no Israeli government could sign a political settlement based on the principle of withdrawal from the West Bank and the dismantlement of the settlements because of the resistance that would be expressed by the religious current in Israel, mostly represented by the residents of these settlements. His statements came in an interview in Hebrew with Israel Radio on July 24, 2005.

⁵⁷ For further details see Saleh Al Naami, "Israel and the Making of Fatwa", Al Jazeera Net, December 1, 2009. <http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/598F6BA2-4D23-48EF-A32B-6F6064370DEA.htm>

⁵⁸ For example, see Asaad Ghanem and Anton Shalhat, "The stances of Israelis living in Palestine on different issues related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict", Israeli Issues, Volume 5, Issue 19, 2005. Pages 17-36.

⁵⁹ Essam Al Eryan, "The Muslim Brotherhood and the Concept of the State", Palestine Dialogue Network, January 2, 2010.

<http://www.paldf.net/forum/showthread.php?t=541537>

⁶⁰ Kobi Nahshoni, "Rabbi Levanon: The Rabbi should abide by the Torah and not by democracy", *Yediot Ahronoth*, October 14, 2010.

<http://www.ynet.co.il/Ext/Comp/ArticleLayout/CdaArticlePrintPreview/1,2506,L-3969208,00.html>

Conclusion

Israel has realized that the democratic revolutions sweeping the Arab world represent the end-stage of the conflict with the Arabs. The ruling elite is aware that these revolutions have overturned many facts which previously underpinned perspectives of Israeli policy toward the Arab world, consequently threatening the rules that steered Israel's behavior, and opened the door to numerous changes, some of which are major strategic challenges for the Jewish state.

Moshe Yaalon⁶¹ has summarized Israel's predicament in the wake of the Arab revolutions, by mourning the collapsing Arab regimes: "The genie that you know is better than the human you do not know."⁶²

Hence, Israel found that it has to fight Arab revolutions by questioning their goals. It could not find a better way than employing the scarecrow of Islamist movements, and disseminating the impression that the revolts will lead to Islamists, believing that the prevailing stereotype of these movements will ensure the achievement of the following objectives:

- 1- Convincing major world powers to wait and not to intervene actively on behalf of the revolutions currently brewing in more than one Arab country on the pretext that their success and the toppling of dictatorial regimes may lead to a takeover by the Islamists. Israel seeks to convince world powers to exercise pressure on the elites that have taken over, in countries where revolutions have succeeded, to restrict the emerging political systems, arguing that these are imperatives dictated by the need to prevent Islamists from gaining power.⁶³
- 2- Providing a rationale to justify Israeli positions that reject a negotiated solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict.
- 3- Enhancing the status of Israel in the West, especially in the United States, on the basis of the Israeli argument that the Arab revolutions proved that Israel is the only regional country on which the West can count, and the subsequent justification of the demand for increased

⁶¹ Vice prime minister, minister in charge of facing strategic threats and the former chief of Israeli military's General Staff.

⁶² Yaalon's comments came in an interview with Israel's Army Radio during the 7 a.m. news on February 14, 2011.

⁶³ "Netanyahu sets red lines for the Egyptian revolution and Obama ensures them", *Al W3y Al Arabi* magazine, March 5, 2011.

economic and military support for Israel to protect it from the consequences of the revolutions.

- 4- Attempting to prevent the changing of prevailing stereotypes in the West about Islam and Islamist movements.

- 5- Impeding the political consensus among the components of national communities in every Arab state to ensure the completion of a genuine democratic transition, a prerequisite to any renaissance that disturbs the balance of power between Arabs and Israel. Given this effort, the components of the national community in every Arab state, including the Islamist movements, have to show utmost caution, and accelerate consensus on national platforms to ensure completion of the task of democratization, with the highest levels of flexibility.

The political currents in the Arab world that believe in the importance of the break with the era of tyranny and oppression must be aware that the completion of the democratic transition requires a maximum effort to prevent Israel from mobilizing world powers to hinder the opening of a new page that leads to completion of the renaissance projects that would change the course of conflict with the occupying entity.