



# **The American Discourse on the Arab Spring and its Relevance to Israel:**

## **A Survey of American Think Tanks' Publications**

*Michal Eskenazi, July 2011*

The democratic wave sweeping across the Arab world has transformed the strategic and political landscape of the region and has created an opportunity for paradigmatic shifts in the West's Middle Eastern policies. Better understanding those changes can be a great asset for Israeli policymakers, analysts, and scholars. Israel, as a country that is being directly affected by the recent events in the Middle East, will be also influenced by the way the international community interprets the current events in the region.

A survey of publications of the American think tank world reveals new opportunities to engage with the Arab world as well as new uncertainties and new challenges for policymakers, such as questions about radical Muslim groups, the role of the military in post-revolutionary Arab states, and the future of democracy in the region. But along with retailing the topics and arguments pointed by the American analysts, it is also very interesting to zoom out, to try to frame the general outline of the discourse. Does the discourse imply a new American approach towards the Middle East? Does it indicate a new approach in the United States' foreign policy? Which issues are excluded from the discussion on the Arab Spring? And what can Israel learn from that?

### **Main Issues**

#### *1. Democratic romanticism?*

Some commentators and scholars in Israel have depicted American policymakers as having a 'Messianic faith'<sup>1</sup> in the victory of democracy in the Arab world. The United States tends to be pictured as looking at the situation in the region through an idealistic Western lens, pushing a vision of a better world full of peace and love without any understanding of the Middle Eastern 'rules of the game.' In this case, however, this image is clearly wrong.

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<sup>1</sup>Shlomo Avineri, Not so Fast (*Lo Kolkach Maher*), *Haaretz*, February 4, 2011,

<http://www.haaretz.co.il/hasite/spages/1213247.html>

Nathan Zach, Democracy is not a Car (*Democratia Hi Lo Mechonit*), *Haaretz*, February 8, 2011,

<http://www.haaretz.co.il/hasite/pages/ShArt.jhtml?itemNo=1213959&contrassID=1&subContrassID=12>

Nachik Navot, From Carter to Obama, *Haaretz*, February 2, 2011,

<http://www.haaretz.co.il/hasite/spages/1212904.html>

The assessments in the American media and think tanks that emphasized the revolutions as heralding genuine democracy in the future were mainly written early on, right after the end of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions and at the beginning of the protests in Libya. However, more skeptical assessments emphasizing the difficulty of establishing democracy in the Arab Spring countries appeared after a couple of months and soon proliferated. In any case, analysts have clearly expressed the complexity and uncertainty of democracy in the Middle East.

Thomas Friedman, for example, saw the self-empowerment of the Egyptian people and the game-changing potential of Egypt's democracy movement as coming to fruition only "if, and it remains a big if, Egypt can now make the transition to democracy."<sup>2</sup> Leslie Gelb wrote in the *Daily Beast* that he was "not betting on a bright and more democratic future. Too many things can come a cropper on the rocky road to democracy, especially in the troubled and religiously quixotic world of Arabs and Islam."<sup>3</sup> In recommending U.S. policies in the region, many mentioned the professional and economic assistance that the administration should provide to Egypt's provisional military regime in order to support a transition to a fully democratic government; yet even in such essays, the authors almost always sounded a note of caution, such as "[t]his means neither a rush to early elections and wholesale or hasty constitutional changes, nor an overly protracted or truncated handover"<sup>4</sup> or "political change will not always mean democracy."<sup>5</sup>

There is no illusion in the West that the Egyptian, Tunisian or Libyan society will establish a solid democracy in the short term, and no fantasy that religious groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood will become liberals overnight. In the Libyan case, there is no clear consensus among analysts that the opposition will certainly win.<sup>6</sup> There are discussions of models of democratic change, and of constitutional reform in the Arab monarchies versus the Tunisia-Egypt-Yemen model of overturning regimes. There is a debate about how the international community and the United States should be involved. But one rarely finds the tone of complete naiveté that American commentators are sometimes described as having.

## 2. Realist Versus Idealist Arguments

The debate about values and interests in foreign policy is well known to every student of international relations. However, it is interesting to see how central this issue was in American analyses of the Arab Spring. President Obama, who has distinguished himself from Bush by rejecting the idea of using force in order to promote the idea of democracy and freedom, had to

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<sup>2</sup>Thomas Friedman, They Did It, *The New York Times*, February 13, 2011,

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/13/opinion/13friedman.html?ref=thomasfriedman>

<sup>3</sup>Leslie H. Gelb, Libya Protests: Watch Out, Barack Obama, *The Daily Beast*, February 22, 2011,

<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2011/02/22/how-president-obama-should-navigate-the-new-arab-landscape.html>

<sup>4</sup>Dina Guirguis and David Pollock, Protecting Egypt's Evolving Democracy, *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, February 25, 2011, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=3314>

<sup>5</sup>Stephen R. Grand, Starting in Egypt: The Fourth Wave of Democratization?, *The Brookings Institution*, February 10, 2011, [http://www.brookings.edu/opinions/2011/0210\\_egypt\\_democracy\\_grand.aspx](http://www.brookings.edu/opinions/2011/0210_egypt_democracy_grand.aspx)

<sup>6</sup>International Crisis Group, Libya: Achieving a Ceasefire, Moving toward Legitimate Government, May 13, 2011, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/publication-type/media-releases/2011/libya-achieving-a-ceasefire-moving-toward-legitimate-government.aspx>

suddenly face the challenge of having to act in ways that do not necessarily serve the United States' interests in order to support democratic values.

In this case, however, "idealist" arguments were intertwined with "realist" arguments in describing Obama's step of pressuring Mubarak to leave office and begin a transition to a new democratic government as a pragmatic and idealist act.

Robert Kagan wrote in favor of idealism as, in the Egyptian case, converging with America's strategic needs. "The 'idealists' who argued for Mubarak's departure in February were just as concerned about America's strategic interests as those who opposed it [...] let us not fall into the trap of thinking that the apparently 'pragmatic' course is really the safest. It is time again to let our reason be guided by our ideals."<sup>7</sup>

Obama's zigzagging message before Mubarak resigned was analyzed on the background of the idealist-realist debate. Accounts emphasized the two approaches dividing Obama's foreign policy team, the contrast between those who were worried about American strategic interests in the region, and those who were concerned that the United States would find itself on the wrong side of history.<sup>8</sup>

This idealist-realist discourse emerged soon after the revolution in Egypt, following the demonstrations in Libya and the Obama administration's decision to join the air campaign against Gaddafi's forces. Many argued that advancing American interests in Libya, which presumably included the protection of civilians and providing momentum to the revolutionary fervor sweeping the region, would come at a potentially high cost to the United States if the aircampaign were not sufficient to turn the tide of the conflict.<sup>9</sup> Leslie Gelb, for instance, counseled that it was "[b]est under such circumstances to maintain military operations at about current levels rather than do more and still fail.... Best to let Paris and London complain about NATO (read the U.S.) not doing enough and leave the brunt of the fighting to them. After all, they were the prime advocates of military intervention."<sup>10</sup>

### 3. What about Israel?

The issue of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the context of the Arab Spring was raised mainly by institutions and commentators that focused on this issue in general, such as the Washington Institute or Thomas Friedman in his op-eds. Nevertheless, Israel and its peace accord with Egypt were mentioned in many reports and essays about the Egyptian revolution, particularly those dealing with the United States' policy toward the new government in Egypt. Maintaining

<sup>7</sup> Robert Kagan, A Foreign Policy That Needs Realism and Pragmatism, *The Brookings Institute*, April 28, 2011, [http://www.brookings.edu/opinions/2011/0428\\_middle\\_east\\_policy\\_kagan.aspx?p=1](http://www.brookings.edu/opinions/2011/0428_middle_east_policy_kagan.aspx?p=1)

<sup>8</sup> Helene Cooper, Mark Landler and David E. Sanger, In U.S. Signals to Egypt, Obama Straddled a Rift, *The New York Times*, February 13, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/13/world/middleeast/13diplomacy.html>  
Ryan Lizza, The Consequentialist, *The New Yorker*, May 2, 2011, [http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2011/05/02/110502fa\\_fact\\_lizza](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2011/05/02/110502fa_fact_lizza)

<sup>9</sup> Andrew M. Exum and Zachary M. Hosford, Forging a Libya Strategy: Policy Recommendations for the Obama Administration, *Center for a New American Security*, March 28, 2011, <http://www.cnas.org/node/6060>

<sup>10</sup> Leslie H. Gelb, How Libya Saps America's Power, *The Daily Beat*, April 17, 2011, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2011/04/17/how-americas-failure-to-knock-out-libyas-gaddafi-emboldens-iran-north-korea.html>

the Israel-Egypt peace agreement was repeatedly mentioned as an American interest in the Middle East and, therefore, an issue to keep track of throughout Egypt's political metamorphosis. This concern stemmed from the common assumption that the new regime in Egypt will be more inclined to criticize Mubarak's alliance with America and Israel. Yet most analysts predicted that even a Muslim-Brotherhood government would be unlikely to abrogate the peace treaty, while a shift in policy toward Israel may manifest itself largely in increasing support for the Palestinians, with Egypt no longer being a voice pushing Palestinians to make compromises in the name of peace.

## Mode of Analysis

A vast majority of the publications on the Arab Spring did not lay out a strategic plan for the United States, the new Arab governments, or any other actor in the region. Apart from a very few reports, such as the International Crisis Group's report on popular protests in North Africa and the Middle East,<sup>11</sup> the mode of most of the publications was commentary—short pieces focusing on specific subjects. These subjects included, at times, suggestions for future policies, but there were not many attempts to look at the wider picture, sketch future scenarios, or develop options for future foreign policies in the region.

## Topics of Analysis

### 1. Who is the main actor?

American commentators on the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria have tried to assess the power and influence of the role of different groups in the Middle East. In Egypt's case, commentators split into camps: those who saw the Muslim Brotherhood as the main issue of the revolution, and those who saw the revolution as a triumph of a young. Then, as the uprising expanded, the Egyptian military attracted more of the writers' attention. It is interesting to note that assessments of the opposition in Tunisia, Libya, and Syria was much more limited, mainly because commentators had so much less information on the groups that compose it.<sup>12</sup>

One noteworthy issue was the role of Islamist groups in the Arab Spring. In regard to Egypt, there were different points of view regarding the depth of support for the Muslim Brotherhood within Egyptian society and the likelihood that the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) would pursue an extremist agenda if elected into the government. Many agreed that "portraying the Brotherhood as eager and able to seize power and impose its version of sharia on an unwilling citizenry is a caricature that exaggerates certain features of the Brotherhood while ignoring

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<sup>11</sup>International Crisis Group, *Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (I-V)*, February 24-June 6, 2011 <http://www.crisisgroup.org>

<sup>12</sup>An exceptional example is an International Crisis Group Report, *Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (V)*, June 6, 2011, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/libya/107-popular-protest-in-north-africa-and-the-middle-east-v-making-sense-of-libya.aspx>.

others, and underestimates the extent to which the group has changed over time..<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, Leslie Gelb warned against those experts who argued that the United States can trust the MB, because according to Gelb, the MB is the “only group capable of taking power. And if they do gain control, it's going to be almost impossible for the people to take it back.”<sup>14</sup>

Many commentators agreed that the MB will continue to rail against United States and Israel, would demand the recognition of Palestinian rights, and could one day seek to revise the terms of Egypt's relationship with Israel through constitutional channels.<sup>15</sup> From a counterterrorism point of view, many agreed that Washington declaring that the MB should be excluded from power would be a mistake, because it would radicalize the Islamist movement. Although the MB during the uprising deemphasized their religious aspect and highlighted issues of social justice and democracy, commentators had no illusions that after taking power, the MB would become liberals. There was a consensus that the MB would probably remain social conservatives and hold views that most American would strongly disagree with, particularly on subjects such as women's rights.<sup>16</sup>

Many, if not the majority, of the publications on this subject argued that it would be in America's interests to initiate a regular, substantive dialogue with Islamist groups sooner rather than later. Some observers argued that the United States may find more common ground with these groups than it expects. Shadi Hamid cited the example of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, brutally repressed by President Hafez al-Assad in the 1980s, which has long shared U.S. fears of a powerful Iranian-Syrian-Hezbollah axis. Having such a large consensus on this issue represents a changing emphasis in the American discourse on the Middle East.

An additional issue raised in some publications is the role of civil society in building future democracy. In Egypt, for example, Mubarak's regime deliberately weakened the institutions of civil society. Therefore, commentators stressed the need to identify the internal and external challenges currently facing civil society organizations in Egypt. The focus on this issue may represent an additional difference between the Middle East discourse during Bush's administration and the 'soft power' approach that has been more popular in the White House in the past couple of years.

The role of the army during and after the uprising in Egypt was also at the center of the debate on the Egyptian revolution.<sup>17</sup> Here voices were split between those who perceived the army as a stable institution that will slowly transform itself into a force for Egyptian democracy, and others who believed that the real concern was that the provisional government would slowly turn into a

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<sup>13</sup>Carrie Rosefsky, The Muslim Brotherhood after Mubarak, *Foreign Affairs*, February 3, 2011, [www.foreignaffairs.com](http://www.foreignaffairs.com)

<sup>14</sup>Leslie Gelb, Beware Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, *The Daily Beast*, January 29, 2011, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2011/01/29/beware-egypts-muslim-brotherhood.html>

<sup>15</sup>Carrie Rosefsky, The Muslim Brotherhood after Mubarak, *Foreign Affairs*, February 3, 2011, [www.foreignaffairs.com](http://www.foreignaffairs.com)

<sup>16</sup>Shadi Hamid, The Rise of the Islamists, *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2011, [http://www.brookings.edu/articles/2011/0512\\_middle\\_east\\_democracy\\_hamid.aspx](http://www.brookings.edu/articles/2011/0512_middle_east_democracy_hamid.aspx)

<sup>17</sup>The Tunisian army played a less significant role in that country's uprising, as it has a significantly smaller role in the country's security forces under Ben Ali's regime. The army in Libya, many of whose units were organized along tribal line, divided into factions: part of the army joined the revolutionaries and others stayed to fight for Qaddafi together with mercenaries.

military regime, or pursue a role similar to that of military in Turkey. Since there still are many unknowns and uncertainties in the situation, many commentators and analysts raised both arguments, without taking a firm position, after giving some background on the army's history.

## 2. United States Policy

A notable approach regarding future American policy in the Middle East is one that advised keeping a low profile. In this approach, the Arab Spring was not viewed as directly relevant to the West "One reason the Tunisian revolution succeeded in toppling the president without major ramifications for the U.S. is that the revolt was not viewed as directly related to the West,"<sup>18</sup> just as the events in Egypt, Yemen, and Syria were not about America.

Another interesting approach – one that was uncommon during the Bush administration – emphasized making policy on a country-by-country basis, paying attention to each country's different needs, history, and culture. There was also a strong stress on the need to engage and find common ground with whoever takes control in the new governments, following a widespread understanding that the United State has, and should have, a very limited ability to engineer political outcomes in the region. As Shibley Telhami puts it "it is better to initiate a regular, substantive dialogue with Islamist groups sooner rather than later. In discussing key foreign policy concerns, the U.S. might discover more convergence of interests than it expects."<sup>19</sup>

The type of American involvement recommended in Egypt included supporting an extension of the transitional phase of government, promoting reform in Egypt's security sector, supporting the civil society sector, and remaining engaged in Egypt's political development.<sup>20</sup> President Obama has already proposed an aid package aimed at supporting democracy and financial development in the region. But even as many agreed with this new 'Marshall Plan', others raised doubts about this idea, worrying that American money would be squandered in a sea of corruption.<sup>21</sup> Some advised the need to involve the Arab oil states in this financial assistance.

As of the time of this writing, most voices were encouraging the administration to take further steps and impose harsher sanctions on the Assad regime in Syria to stop its attacks on its own citizens. These suggestions focused on using economic pressure, supplying more money for the opposition in Syria, and pursuing a strategy of diplomatic isolation with the involvement of the UN Human Rights Council and other international bodies.

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<sup>18</sup> Shibley Telhami, Don't Make Egyptian Upheaval About Washington, *The Brookings Institute*, January 31, 2011  
[http://www.brookings.edu/opinions/2011/0131\\_egypt\\_telhami.aspx](http://www.brookings.edu/opinions/2011/0131_egypt_telhami.aspx)

<sup>19</sup> Shibley Telhami, The Rise of the Islamists, *The Brookings Institute*, May/June 2011,  
[http://www.brookings.edu/articles/2011/0512\\_middle\\_east\\_democracy\\_hamid.aspx](http://www.brookings.edu/articles/2011/0512_middle_east_democracy_hamid.aspx)

<sup>20</sup> David Schenker, Egypt's Enduring Challenges: Shaping the Post-Mubarak Environment, *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, April 2011, [www.washingtoninstitute.org/pubPDFs/PolicyFocus110.pdf](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/pubPDFs/PolicyFocus110.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> Leslie H. Gelb, Libya Protests: Watch Out, Barack Obama, *The Daily Beast*, February 22, 2011,  
<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2011/02/22/how-president-obama-should-navigate-the-new-arab-landscape.html>

## What is Missing?

### 1. A study of the changing dynamic in the Middle East as a region

Until six months ago, analyses of the Middle East as a region generally included a look at the changing forces in the Middle East: the rising Iran-Syria-Hezbollah axis facing the traditional leaders of the region such as Egypt and Saudi-Arabia.

The Arab Spring will almost certainly change the known and studied forces in the region and will help determine crucial economic, military, security, and political policies for countries in the Middle East and worldwide. Yet this point was hardly mentioned in the reviewed publications. Most of the references to the region took the form of a comparative look at revolutions or at the probabilities for uprisings in other states. There was little emphasis on strategic plans for either the United States or other countries in the region in the light of this changing dynamic between countries in the Middle East.

### 2. Strategic planning - Considering the impossible option

As mentioned above, as of the time of this writing, only a few publications outlined a strategic policy towards the region, for the new governments or for the United States. Only a few publications focused on the on the fact that the uprisings caught so many by surprise. Looking at past strategic policy reports on the Middle East (and in general), we see an interesting tendency to avoid scenarios for what seemed to be “impossible” options. As Nassim Taleb and Mark Blyth argue, when a policymaker defines risks as unfeasible, they are immediately pushed off of the observational ‘radar’.<sup>22</sup> One may argue that it is impossible to predict an impossible thing, and strictly speaking, that is true. But my argument is about the need to keep in the field of vision those options that seem less plausible, instead of pushing them out of strategic planning. Reports on the region should not only reassess the situation on the ground, but also look at new ways of planning strategic policy.

### 3. Technology

The subject of the role of new technology in the Arab Spring was arguably overused in the media (and in the speeches of Obama administration officials), so much so that it turned into a cliché. Even so, there were not many references to it in American think-tank publications. It is indeed very easy, with all the talk about technology, to be bewitched by superficial gimmicks, but the political aspects of technology can and should be a much deeper subject than that. Technology should be a fundamental element of today’s policy planning and can be an important tool for understanding current reality.

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<sup>22</sup>Nassim Nicholas Taleb and Mark Blyth, *The Black Swan of Cairo*, *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2011, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/67741/nassim-nicholas-taleb-and-mark-blyth/the-black-swan-of-cairo>

## Conclusion

This report reviewed the major points in the American discourse about the recent events in the Middle East and North Africa. These points are interesting not only in their relevance to the issues at stake, but also in their form and focus and in the changes of discourse that they represent. Discussions of realism vs. idealism, a closer engagement with the Muslim world, or a 'low profile' American policy are interesting developments in the American foreign policy debate. Overall, they imply a less hard-power-oriented attitude. The upheaval is not only in the Middle East – it is also in the way the United States perceives the Middle East.

What lessons should we learn from this? The primary lesson is simply that the world is changing, and this is a good opportunity to devise a different approach for Israel's foreign policy in the region. Using the language of security may be considered essential, but it definitely can no longer be the only language used. Further engagement with the Muslim world, a combination of hard-nosed realism with universalist idealism, understanding that old alliances are changing, taking into consideration even the "impossible" options—all these must be part of Israel's policy planning discourse. Israel should adjust its strategic policies in the region not only to adapt to the changes in its neighboring countries, but also to be able to communicate with its allies overseas.

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