

The Arab Risings, Israel and Hamas

Commentary for April 15, 2011 — A Reprint Stratfor Article by George Freedman¹

Protests against Israel have been noticeably lacking in the recent popular uprisings in Arab countries. While Arab religious hatred of Israel continues, the people (the “Arab street” as it is sometimes called), seem to no longer accept rulers who limit political, educational, and primarily economic opportunity to only a few.

While the issues in each country are unique, these uprisings have been led by young educated people who do not seem to have common ideologies. Nor are these risings driven by military forces that usually support regimes in power. Those rising up against their leaders desire freedom from economic deprivation as well as an end to political coercion and detention. This Stratfor.com article is titled “[The Arab Risings, Israel and Hamas](#).”

“There was one striking thing missing from the events in the Middle East in past months: Israel. While certainly mentioned and condemned, none of the demonstrations centered on the issue of Israel. Israel was a side issue for the demonstrators, with the focus being on replacing unpopular rulers.

This is odd. Since even before the creation of the state of Israel, anti-Zionism has been a driving force among the Arab public, perhaps more than it has been with Arab governments. While a few have been willing to develop open diplomatic relations with Israel, many more have maintained informal relations: Numerous Arab governments have been willing to maintain covert relations with Israel, with extensive cooperation on intelligence and related matters. They have been unwilling to incur the displeasure of the Arab masses through open cooperation, however.

That makes it all the more strange that the Arab opposition movements — from Libya to Bahrain — have not made overt and covert cooperation with Israel a central issue, if for no other reason than to mobilize the Arab masses. Let me emphasize that Israel was frequently an issue, but not the central one. If we go far back to the rise of Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser and his revolution for Pan-Arabism and socialism, his issues against King Farouk were tightly bound with anti-Zionism. Similarly, radical Islamists have always made Israel a central issue, yet it wasn't there in this round of unrest. This was particularly surprising with regimes like Egypt's, which had formal relations with Israel.

It is not clear why Israel was not a rallying point. One possible explanation is that the demonstrations in the Islamic world were focused on unpopular leaders and regimes, and the question of local governance was at their heart. That is possible, but particularly as the demonstrations faltered, invoking Israel would have seemed logical as a way to legitimize their cause. Another explanation might have rested in the reason that most of these risings failed, at least to this point, to achieve fundamental change. They were not mass movements involving all classes of society, but to a great extent the young and the better educated. This class was more sophisticated about the world and understood the need for American and European support in the long run; they understood that including Israel in their mix of griev-

¹ This article is republished with permission of STRATFOR. George Friedman, Ph.D., is the founder and chief executive officer of Strategic Forecasting, Inc. (Stratfor), a leading private intelligence company delivering in-depth analysis, assessments and forecasts on global geopolitical, economic, security and public policy issues. Accessed April 12, 2011.

ances was likely to reduce Western pressure on the risings' targets. We know of several leaders of the Egyptian rising, for example, who were close to Hamas yet deliberately chose to downplay their relations. They clearly were intensely anti-Israeli but didn't want to make this a crucial issue. In the case of Egypt, they didn't want to alienate the military or the West. They were sophisticated enough to take the matter step by step.

Hamas' Opportunity

A second thing was missing from the unrest: There was no rising, no intifada, in the Palestinian territories. Given the general unrest sweeping the region, it would seem logical that the Palestinian public would have pressed both the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) and Hamas to organize massive demonstrations against Israel. This didn't happen.

This clearly didn't displease the PNA, which had no appetite for underwriting another intifada that would have led to massive Israeli responses and disruption of the West Bank's economy. For Hamas in Gaza, however, it was a different case. Hamas was trapped by the Israeli-Egyptian blockade. This blockade limited its ability to access weapons, as well as basic supplies needed to build a minimally functioning economy. It also limited Hamas' ability to build a strong movement in the West Bank that would challenge Fatah's leadership of the PNA there.

Hamas has been isolated and trapped in Gaza. The uprising in Egypt represented a tremendous opportunity for Hamas, as it promised to create a new reality in Gaza. If the demonstrators had succeeded not only in overthrowing Hosni Mubarak but also in forcing true regime change — or at least forcing the military to change its policy toward Hamas — the door could have opened for Hamas to have increased dramatically its power and its room to maneuver. Hamas knew that it had supporters among a segment of the demonstrators and that the demonstrators wanted a reversal of Egyptian policy on Israel and Gaza. They were content to wait, however, particularly as the PNA was not prepared to launch an intifada in the West Bank and because one confined to Gaza would have had little effect. So they waited.

For Hamas, a shift in Egyptian policy was the opening that would allow them to become militarily and politically more effective. It didn't happen. The events of the past few months have shown that while the military wanted Mubarak out, it was not prepared to break with Israel or shift its Gaza policy. Most important, the events thus far have shown that the demonstrators were in no position to force the Egyptian military to do anything it didn't want to do. Beyond forcing Mubarak out and perhaps having him put on trial, the basic policies of his regime remained in place.

Over the last few weeks, it became apparent to many observers, including the Hamas leadership, that what they hoped for in Egypt was either not going to happen any time soon or perhaps not at all. At the same time, it was obvious that the movement in the Arab world had not yet died out. If Hamas could combine the historical animosity toward Israel in the Arab world with the current unrest, it might be able to effect changes in policy not only in Egypt but also in the rest of the Arab world, a region that, beyond rhetoric, had become increasingly indifferent to the Palestinian cause.

Gaza has become a symbol in the Arab world of Palestinian resistance and Israeli oppression. The last war in Gaza, Operation Cast Lead, has become used as a symbol in the Arab world and in Europe to generate anti-Israeli sentiment. Interestingly, Richard Goldstone, lead author of a report on the operation that severely criticized Israel, retracted many of his charges last week. One of the Palestinians' major achievements was shaping public opinion in Europe over Cast Lead via the Goldstone Report. Its retraction was therefore a defeat for Hamas.

In the face of the decision by Arab demonstrators not to emphasize Israel, in the face of the apparent failure of the Egyptian rising to achieve definitive policy changes, and in the face of the reversal by Goldstone of many of his charges, Hamas clearly felt that it not only faced a

lost opportunity, but it was likely to face a retreat in Western public opinion (albeit the latter was a secondary consideration).

The Advantage of Another Gaza Conflict for Hamas

Another Israeli assault on Gaza might generate forces that benefit Hamas. In Cast Lead, the Egyptian government was able to deflect calls to stop its blockade of Gaza and break relations with Israel. In 2011, it might not be as easy for them to resist in the event of another war. Moreover, with the uprising losing steam, a war in Gaza might re-energize Hamas, using what would be claimed as unilateral brutality by Israel to bring far larger crowds into the street and forcing a weakened Egyptian regime to make the kinds of concessions that would matter to Hamas.

Egypt is key for Hamas. Linked to an anti-Israel, pro-Hamas Cairo, the Gaza Strip returns to its old status as a bayonet pointed at Tel Aviv. Certainly, it would be a base for operations and a significant alternative to Fatah. But a war would benefit Hamas more broadly. For example, Turkey's view of Gaza has changed significantly since the 2010 flotilla incident in which Israeli commandos killed nine Turkish civilians on a ship headed for Gaza. Turkey's relationship with Israel could be further weakened, and with Egypt and Turkey both becoming hostile to Israel, Hamas' position would improve. If Hamas could cause Hezbollah to join the war from the north then Israel would be placed in a challenging military position perhaps with the United States, afraid of a complete breakdown of its regional alliance system, forcing Israel to accept an unfavorable settlement.

Hamas had the same means for starting a war it had before Cast Lead and that Hezbollah had in 2006. It can still fire rockets at Israel. For the most part, these artillery rockets — homemade Qassams and mortars, do no harm. But some strike Israeli targets, and under any circumstances, the constant firing drives home the limits of Israeli intelligence to an uneasy Israeli public — Israel doesn't know where the missiles are stored and can't take them out. Add to this the rocket that landed 20 miles south of Tel Aviv and Israeli public perceptions of the murder of most of a Jewish family in the West Bank, including an infant, and it becomes clear that Hamas is creating the circumstances under which the Israelis have no choice but to attack Gaza.

Outside Intervention

After the first series of rocket attacks, two nations intervened. Turkey fairly publicly intervened via Syria, persuading Hamas to halt its attacks. Turkey understood the fragility of the Arab world and was not interested in the uprising receiving an additional boost from a war in Gaza. The Saudis also intervened. The Saudis provide the main funding for Hamas via Syria and were themselves trying to stabilize the situation from Yemen to Bahrain on its southern and eastern border; it did not want anything adding fuel to that fire. Hamas accordingly subsided.

Hamas then resumed its attack this weekend. We don't know its reasoning, but we can infer it: Whatever Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Syria or anyone else wanted, this was Hamas' historic opportunity. If Egypt returns to the status quo, Hamas returns to its trap. Whatever their friends or allies might say, missing this historic opportunity would be foolish for it. A war would hurt, but a defeat could be turned into a political victory.

It is not clear what the Israelis' limit is. Clearly, they are trying to avoid an all-out assault on Gaza, limiting their response to a few airstrikes. The existence of Iron Dome, a new system to stop rockets, provides Israel some psychological comfort, but it is years from full deployment, and its effectiveness is still unknown. The rockets can be endured only so long before an attack. And the Goldstone reversal gives the Israelis a sense of vindication that gives them more room for maneuver.

Hamas appears to have plenty of rockets, and it will use them until Israel responds. Hamas will use the Israeli response to try to launch a broader Arab movement focused both on

Israel and on regimes that openly or covertly collaborate with Israel. Hamas hopes above all to bring down the Egyptian regime with a newly energized movement. Israel above all does not want this to happen. It will resist responding to Hamas as long as it can, but given the political situation in Israel, its ability to do so is limited — and that is what Hamas is counting on.

For the United States and Europe, the merger of Islamists and democrats is an explosive combination. Apart, they do little. Together, they could genuinely destabilize the region and even further undermine the U.S. effort against jihadists. The United States and Europe want Israel to restrain itself but cannot restrain Hamas. Another war, therefore, is not out of the question — and in the end, the decision to launch one rests with Hamas.”

Prophetic Significance?

The analysis by Dr. Freedman and Stratfor looks at the current situation, analyzes it, and projects the outcome based on current trends. It does not take into account any aspects of prophecy or theology from the Bible.²

The Bible gives us additional accurate data so we can know the outcome of current trends farther into the future. For example, the changes in Arab countries are occurring because God is motivating people to demand that their governments allow economic opportunities. They demand a better life; the mass of people are sick of poverty. They simply want greater economic control of their lives. These tremendously energetic peoples will bring great wealth to their countries and to the region if that energy can be put to their personal economic benefit. Many of these countries have great energy resources which should benefit all the people.

At some future time, hopefully soon, Israel will come to an accommodation and economic cooperation with its neighbors during which Israel will lead an economic renaissance. At present, Hamas in Gaza is Israel's most dangerous adversary. Yet even Gaza and the West Bank will come to an agreement with Israel that will benefit all parties economically if not religiously. God will need to intervene to make that happen.

Bible prophecies indicate that several of these Arab countries will coalesce into the Kingdom of the South.³ First will come greater liberty (with many fits and starts — and bloodshed). Then will come increased trade and cooperation that will include Israel. A king shall form an empire with Egypt at its core, comprising much of North Africa, Sudan, perhaps other African countries and maybe even Saudi Arabia and other nations in the Arabian Peninsula. One of the Kings of the South shall confront the Kingdom of the North. Each of these kingdoms will have a minimum of two rulers, (and probably more).

A realignment of governments is happening now. However, several years of change (perhaps decades) must transpire for wealth to flow to the people of the region and not just to rulers who suppress liberty. Pray that God speeds world affairs to happen quickly.

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² Dr. Freedman's very useful background analysis in "[The Geopolitics of Israel, Ancient and Modern](#)" (reprinted by ASK) did use biblical history correctly, without reference to any prophetic understanding.

³ See Dr. Martin's presentation, "[The Coming Splendor of Egypt](#)," especially footnote #13 and Ezekiel 30:5, which may indicate Egypt gaining control of the nation of Saudi Arabia.