

# A Villa in the Jungle?

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WE ARE in the middle of a geological event. An earthquake of epoch-making dimensions is changing the landscape of our region. Mountains turn into valleys, islands emerge from the sea, volcanoes cover the land with lava.

People are afraid of change. When it happens, they tend to deny, ignore, pretend that nothing really important is happening.

Israelis are no exception. While in neighboring Egypt earth-shattering events were taking place, Israel was absorbed with a scandal in the army high command. The Minister of Defense abhors the incumbent Chief of Staff and makes no secret of it. The presumptive new chief was exposed as a liar and his appointment canceled. These were the headlines.

But what is happening now in Egypt will change our lives.

AS USUAL, nobody foresaw it. The much-feted Mossad was taken by surprise, as was the CIA and all the other celebrated services of this kind.

Yet there should have been no surprise at all - except about the incredible force of the eruption. In the last few years, we have mentioned many times in this column that all over the Arab world, multitudes of young people are growing up with a profound contempt for their leaders, and that sooner or later this will lead to an uprising. These were not prophesies, but rather a sober analysis of probabilities.

The turmoil in Egypt was caused by economic factors: the rising cost of living, the poverty, the unemployment, the hopelessness of the educated young. But let there be no mistake: the underlying causes are far more profound. They can be summed up in one word: Palestine.

In Arab culture, nothing is more important than honor. People can suffer deprivation, but they will not stand humiliation.

Yet what every young Arab from Morocco to Oman saw daily was his leaders humiliating themselves, forsaking their Palestinian brothers in order to gain favor and money from America, collaborating with the Israeli occupation, cringing before the new colonizers. This was deeply humiliating for young people brought up on the achievements of Arab culture in times gone by and the glories of the early Caliphs.

Nowhere was this loss of honor more obvious than in Egypt, which openly collaborated with the Israeli leadership in imposing the shameful blockade on the Gaza Strip, condemning 1.5 million Arabs to malnutrition and worse. It was never just an Israeli blockade, but an Israeli-Egyptian one, lubricated by 1.5 billion US dollars every year.

I have reflected many times – out loud – how I would feel if I were a 15 year-old boy in Alexandria, Amman or Aleppo, seeing my leaders behave like abject slaves of the Americans and the Israelis, while oppressing and despoiling their own subjects. At that age, I myself joined a terrorist organization. Why would an Arab boy be different?

A dictator may be tolerated when he reflects national dignity.

But a dictator who expresses national shame is a tree without roots – any strong wind can blow him over.

For me, the only question was where in the Arab world it would start. Egypt – like Tunisia – was low on my list. Yet here it is – the great Arab revolution taking place in Egypt.

THIS IS a wonder in itself. If Tunisia was a small wonder, this is a huge one.

I love the Egyptian people. True, one cannot really like 88 million individuals, but one can certainly like one people more than another. In this respect, one is allowed generalize.

The Egyptians you meet in the streets, in the homes of the intellectual elite and in the alleys of the poorest of the poor, are an incredibly patient lot. They are endowed with an irrepressible sense of humor. They are also immensely proud of the country and its 8000 years of history.

For an Israeli, used to his aggressive compatriots, the almost complete lack of aggressiveness of the Egyptians is astonishing. I vividly remember one particular scene: I was in a taxi in Cairo when it collided with another. Both drivers leapt out and started to curse each other in blood-curling terms. And then quite suddenly, both of them stopped shouting and burst into laughter.

A Westerner coming to Egypt either loves it or hates it. The moment you set your foot on Egyptian soil, time loses its tyranny. Everything becomes less urgent, everything is muddled, yet in a miraculous way things sort themselves out. Patience seems boundless. This may mislead a dictator. Because patience can end suddenly.

It's like a faulty dam on a river. The water rises behind the dam, imperceptibly slowly and silently – but if it reaches a critical level, the dam will burst, sweeping everything before it.

MY OWN first meeting with Egypt was intoxicating. After Anwar Sadat's unprecedented visit to Jerusalem, I rushed to Cairo. I had no visa. I shall never forget the moment I presented my Israeli passport to the stout official at the airport. He leafed through it, becoming more and more bewildered – and then he raised his head with a wide smile and said "marhaba", welcome. At the time we were the only three Israelis in the huge city, and we were feted like kings, almost expecting at any moment to be lifted onto people's shoulders. Peace was in the air, and the masses of Egypt loved it.

It took no more than a few months for this to change profoundly. Sadat hoped – sincerely, I believe – that he was also bringing deliverance to the Palestinians. Under intense pressure from Menachem Begin and Jimmy Carter, he agreed to a vague wording. Soon enough he learned that Begin did not dream of fulfilling this obligation. For Begin, the peace agreement with Egypt was a separate peace to enable him to intensify the war against the Palestinians.

The Egyptians – starting with the cultural elite and filtering

down to the masses – never forgave this. They felt deceived. There may not be much love for the Palestinians – but betraying a poor relative is shameful in Arab tradition. Seeing Hosni Mubarak collaborating with this betrayal led many Egyptians to despise him. This contempt lies beneath everything that happened this week. Consciously or unconsciously, the millions who are shouting “Mubarak Go Away” echo this contempt.

IN EVERY revolution there is the “Yeltsin Moment”. The columns of tanks are sent into the capital to reinstate the dictatorship. At the critical moment, the masses confront the soldiers. If the soldiers refuse to shoot, the game is over. Yeltsin climbed on the tank, ElBaradei addressed the masses in al Tahrir Square. That is the moment a prudent dictator flees abroad, as did the Shah and now the Tunisian boss.

Then there is the “Berlin Moment”, when a regime crumbles and nobody in power knows what to do, and only the anonymous masses seem to know exactly what they want: they wanted the Wall to fall.

And there is the “Ceausescu moment”. The dictator stands on the balcony addressing the crowd, when suddenly from below a chorus of “Down With The Tyrant!” swells up. For a moment, the dictator is speechless, moving his lips noiselessly, then he

disappears. This, in a way, happened to Mubarak, making a ridiculous speech and trying in vain to stem the tide.

IF MUBARAK is cut off from reality, Binyamin Netanyahu is no less. He and his colleagues seem unable to grasp the fateful meaning of these events for Israel.

When Egypt moves, the Arab world follows. Whatever transpires in the immediate future in Egypt – democracy or an army dictatorship - It is only a matter of (a short) time before the dictators fall all over the Arab world, and the masses will shape a new reality, without the generals.

Everything the Israeli leadership has done in the last 44 years of occupation or 63 years of its existence is becoming obsolete. We are facing a new reality. We can ignore it – insisting that we are “a villa in the jungle”, as Ehud Barak famously put it – or find our proper place in the new reality.

Peace with the Palestinians is no longer a luxury. It is an absolute necessity. Peace now, peace quickly. Peace with the Palestinians, and then peace with the democratic masses all over the Arab world, peace with the reasonable Islamic forces (like Hamas and the Muslim Brothers, who are quite different from al Qaeda), peace with the leaders who are about to emerge in Egypt and everywhere.