

# Hurrah for Egypt!

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**T**HE IMPOSSIBLE HAS happened. The Egyptian parliament, democratically elected by a free people, has convened for its first session.

For me this is a wonderful, a joyful occasion.

For many Israelis, this is a worrisome, a threatening sight.

I CANNOT but rejoice when a downtrodden people arises and wins its freedom and human dignity. And not by the intervention of outside forces, but by its own steadfastness and courage. And not by shooting and bloodshed, but by the sheer power of nonviolence.

Whenever and wherever it happens, it must gladden the heart of any decent person around the globe.

Compared to most other revolutions, this Egyptian uprising was bloodless. The number of victims ran in the dozens, not thousands. The current struggle in Syria claims that number of victims every day or two, and so did the successful uprising in neighboring Libya, which was greatly assisted by foreign military intervention.

A revolution reflects the character of its people. I always had a special liking for the Egyptian people, because they are - by and large - devoid of aggressiveness and violence. They are a singularly patient and humorous lot. You can see this in thousands of years of recorded history and you can see it in daily life in the street.

That is why this revolution was so surprising. Of all the peoples on this planet, the Egyptians are among the most unlikely to revolt. Yet revolt they did.

THE PARLIAMENT convened after 60 years of military rule, which also started with a bloodless revolution. Even the despised king, Farouk, who was overthrown on that day in July 1952, was not harmed. He was bundled into his luxurious yacht and sent off to Monte Carlo, there to spend the rest of his life gambling.

The real leader of the revolution was Gamal Abd-al-Nasser. I had met him several times during the 1948 war - though we were never properly introduced. These were all night battles, and only after the war could I reconstruct the events. He was wounded in a battle for which my company was awarded the honorary name "Samson's Foxes", while I was wounded five months later by soldiers under his command.

I never met him face to face, of course, but a good friend of mine did. During the battle of the "Faluja pocket", a cease-fire was agreed in order to bring out the dead and wounded lying between the lines. The Egyptians sent Major Abd-al-Nasser, our side sent a Yemen-born officer whom we called "Gingi" (Ginger), because he was almost totally black. The two enemy officers liked each other very much, and when the Egyptian

revolution broke out, Gingi told me - long before anyone else - that Abd-al-Nasser was the man to watch.<sup>1</sup>

"Nasser", as most people called him for short, was not a born dictator. He later recounted that after the victory of the revolution, he had no idea what to do next. He started by appointing a civilian government, but was appalled by the incompetence and corruption of the politicians. So the army took things into its own hands, and soon enough it became a military dictatorship, which lasted and steadily degenerated until last year.

One does not have to take Nasser's account literally, but the lesson is clear: now as then, "temporary" military rule tends to turn into a lasting dictatorship. Egyptians know this from bitter experience, and that's why they are becoming very very impatient now.

I remember an arresting conversation between two leading Arab intellectuals some 45 years ago. We were in a taxi in London, on our way to a conference. One was the admirable Mohammed Sid Ahmad, an aristocratic Egyptian Marxist, the other was Alawi, a courageous leftist Moroccan opposition leader. The Egyptian said that in the contemporary Arab world, no national goal can be achieved without a strong autocratic leadership. Alawi retorted that nothing worthwhile can be achieved before internal democracy is established. I think this case has now been settled.

AS WINSTON CHURCHILL famously said, "democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried." The bad thing about democracy is that free elections don't always turn out the way you want them to.

The recent Egyptian election was won by "Islamists". The tumultuous first session produced by this whiff of freedom was dominated by deputies with religious beards. Elected members of the Muslim Brotherhood and the more extreme Salafists (adherents of the Salafiyeh, a Sunni tendency which claims to follow the teaching of the first three Muslim generations) form the majority. The Israelis and the world's Islamophobes, for whom all Muslims are the same, are aghast.

Frankly, I don't like religious parties of any stripe - Jewish, Muslim, Christian or what have you. Full democracy demands full separation between State and religion, in practice as well as in theory.

I would not vote for politicians who use religious fundamentalism as a ladder for their careers - whether they are American presidential candidates, Israeli settlers or Arab demagogues. Even if they were sincere, I would still vote against them. But if such people are elected freely, I accept them. I certainly would not let the success of the Islamists spoil my joy at the historic victory of the Arab Spring.

<sup>1</sup>I cannot restrain myself from voicing a pet peeve here. In Western films and books, Arabs often bear the first name Abdul. Such a name just does not exist. "Abdul" is really Abd-al-, which means "servant of" and is invariably followed by one of Allah's 99 attributes. Abd-al-Nasser, for example, means "Servant of (Allah) the Victorious". So please!

The way it looks now, Islamists of various shades are going to be influential in all the new parliaments that will be the products of Arab democracy, from Morocco to Iraq, from Syria to Oman. Israel will not be a “villa in the jungle”, but a Jewish island in a Muslim sea.

Island and sea are not natural enemies. On the contrary, they complement each other. The islanders catch fish in the sea, the island shelters the young fish.

THERE IS no reason for Jews and Muslims not to live peacefully together and cooperate. They have done so many times in history, and these were good times for both.

In any religion, there are many contradictions. In the Hebrew Bible there are the inspiring chapters of the prophets and the abominable calls for genocide in the Book of Joshua, for example. In the New Testament, there are the beautiful Sermon on the Mount and the disgusting (and obviously false and later inserted) description of the Jews calling for the crucifixion of Jesus, which has caused anti-Semitism and untold suffering. In the Koran are several objectionable passages about the Jews, but they are overshadowed by the admirable command to protect the “peoples of the book”, Jews and Christians.

It is up to the believers of any religion to pick from their holy texts the passages they want to act upon. Once I saw a Nazi book composed entirely of quotations from the Talmud – hundreds of them. I was certain that they were all false and was shocked to the core when a friendly rabbi assured me that they were all authentic, only taken out of context.

JEW AND Muslims can and did live peacefully together, and so did Israelis and Egyptians.

Just one chapter: in November, 1944, two members of the pre-state underground Lehi organization (aka Stern Gang) assassinated Lord Moyne, the British Minister of State for the Middle East, in Cairo. They were caught, and their trial in an

Egyptian court turned into an anti-British demonstration. Young Egyptian patriots filled the chamber and made no effort to hide their admiration for the accused. One of the two (with whom I was acquainted) reciprocated with a rousing speech, in which he dismissed Zionism and defined himself as a freedom fighter out to liberate the entire region from British imperialism.

When Israel was founded soon after, some of us suggested that the new state use this and other acts in order to present ourselves as the first Semitic state that had liberated itself from foreign rule. In this spirit, we publicly welcomed Abd-al-Nasser’s 1952 revolution. But in 1956, Israel attacked Egypt in collusion with France and Great Britain, and was branded as an outpost of Western colonialism.

AFTER ANWAR SADAT’S historic visit to Jerusalem, I was one of the first four Israelis to arrive in Cairo. For weeks we were the heroes of the city, lionized by one and all. Enthusiasm for peace with Israel gave rise to a carnival mood. Only later, when the Egyptians realized that Israel had no intention whatsoever of allowing the Palestinians to achieve their freedom, did this mood evaporate.

Now is the time to try to restore this mood. It can be done, if we resolutely turn our face toward the Arab Spring and its winter offshoots.

That raises again one of the most basic questions for Israel: Do we want to be a part of this region, or an outpost of the West? Are the Arabs our natural allies or our natural enemies? Does the new Arab democracy arouse our sympathy and admiration, or does it frighten us?

This leads to the most profound question of all: Is Israel just another branch of world Jewry, or is it a new nation born in this region and constituting an integral part of it?

For me, the answer is clear. And therefore I salute the Egyptian people and their new parliament: Congratulations!