

# Tsunami in Egypt

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UNTIL THE very last moment, the Israeli leadership tried to keep Hosni Mubarak in power.

It was hopeless. Even the mighty United States was impotent when faced with this tsunami of popular outrage.

In the end it settled for second best: a pro-Western military dictatorship. But will this really be the outcome?

WHEN CONFRONTED with a new situation, Obama's first response is generally admirable.

Then, it seems, second thoughts set in. And third. And fourth. The end result is a 180 degree turn.

When the masses started to gather in Tahrir Square, he reacted exactly like most decent people in the US and, indeed, throughout the world. There was unbounded admiration for those brave young men and women who faced the dreaded Mukhabarat secret police, demanding democracy and human rights.

How could one not admire them? They were non-violent, their demands were reasonable, their actions were spontaneous, they obviously expressed the feelings of the vast majority of the people. Without any organization to speak of, without leadership, they said and did all the right things.

Such a sight is rare in history. No sansculottes screaming for blood, no cold-minded Bolsheviks lurking in the shadows, no Ayatollahs dictating their actions in the name of God.

So Obama loved it. He did not hide his feelings. He practically called on the dictator to give up and go away.

If Obama had stayed this course, the result would have been historic. From being the most hated power in the Arab world, the US would have electrified the Arab masses, the Muslim region, indeed much of the Third World. It could have been the beginning of a completely new era.

I believe that Obama sensed this. His first instincts are always right. In such a situation, a real leader – that rarest of all animals – stands out.

BUT THEN came the second thoughts. Small people started to work on him. Politicians, generals, "security experts", diplomats, pundits, lobbyists, business leaders, all the "experienced" people – experienced in routine affairs – started to weigh in. And, of course, the hugely powerful Israel lobby.

"Are you crazy?" - they admonished him. To forsake a dictator who happens to be our son-of-a-bitch? To tell all our client dictators around the world that we shall forsake them in their hour of need?

How naïve can you get? Democracy in an Arab country? Don't make us laugh! We know the Arabs! You show them democracy on a platter and they would not know it from baked beans! They always need a dictator to keep them in shape! Especially these Egyptians! Ask the British!

The whole thing is really a conspiracy of the Muslim Brotherhood. Look them up on Google! They are the only alternative.

It's either Mubarak or them. They are the Egyptian Taliban, worse, the Egyptian al-Qaeda. Help the well-meaning democrats to overthrow the regime, and before you know it you will have a second Iran, with an Egyptian Ahmadinejad on Israel's Southern border, hooking up with Hezbollah and Hamas. The dominos will begin to fall, starting with Jordan and Saudi Arabia.

Faced with all these experts, Obama caved in. Again.

OF COURSE, every single one of these arguments can easily be refuted.

Let's start with Iran. The naïve Americans, so the story goes, forsook the Shah and his dreaded Israeli-trained secret police in order to promote democracy, but the revolution was taken over by the Ayatollahs. A cruel dictatorship was replaced by an even crueler one. This is what Binyamin Netanyahu said this week, warning that the same is inevitably bound to happen in Egypt.

But the true Iranian story is quite different.

In 1951, a patriotic politician named Mohammad Mossadegh was elected in democratic elections – the first of their kind in Iran. Mossadegh, neither a communist nor even a socialist, instituted sweeping social reforms, freed the peasants and worked mightily to turn backward Iran into a modern, democratic, secular state. In order to make this possible, he nationalized the oil industry, which was owned by a rapacious British company which paid Iran miniscule royalties. Huge demonstrations in Tehran supported Mossadegh.

The British reaction was swift and decisive. Winston Churchill convinced President Dwight Eisenhower that Mossadegh's course would lead to Communism. In 1953 the CIA engineered a coup, Mossadegh was arrested and kept in isolation until his death 14 years later, the British got the oil back. The Shah, who had fled, was put back on his throne again. His reign of terror lasted until the Khomeini revolution, 26 years later.

Without this American intervention, Iran would probably have developed into a secular, liberal democracy. No Khomeini. No Ahmadinejad. No talk about nuclear bombs.

NETANYAHU'S WARNINGS of the inevitable takeover of Egypt by the fanatical Muslim Brotherhood, if democratic elections were held, sound logical, but they are similarly based on willful ignorance.

Would the Muslim Brothers take over? Are they Taliban-like fanatics?

The Brotherhood was founded 80 years ago, long before Obama and Netanyahu were born. They have settled down and matured, with a strong moderate wing, much like the moderate, democratic Islamic party that is governing Turkey so well, and which they are trying to emulate. In a democratic Egypt, they would constitute a legitimate party playing its part in the democratic process.

(This, by the way, would have happened in Palestine, too,

when Hamas was elected – if the Americans, under Israeli guidance, had not toppled the unity government and set Hamas on a different course.)

The majority of Egyptians are religious, but their Islam is far removed from the radical kind. There are no indications that the bulk of the people, represented by the youngsters in Tahrir Square, would tolerate a radical regime. The Islamic bogeyman is just that – a bogeyman.

SO WHAT did Obama do? His moves were pathetic, to say the least.

After turning against Mubarak, he suddenly opined that he must stay in power, in order to carry out democratic reforms. As his representative he sent to Egypt a retired diplomat whose current employer is a law firm that represents the Mubarak family (much as Bill Clinton used to send committed Jewish Zionists to “mediate” between Israel and the Palestinians.)

So the detested dictator was supposed to institute democracy, enact a new liberal constitution, work together with the very people he had thrown into prison and systematically tortured.

Mubarak’s pathetic speech on Thursday was the straw that broke the back of the Egyptian camel. It showed that he had lost contact with reality or, worse, is mentally deranged. But even an unbalanced dictator would not have made such an atrocious speech had he not believed that America was still on his side. The howls of outrage in the square while Mubarak’s recorded speech was still being aired was Egypt’s answer. That needed no interpreters.

BUT AMERICA had already moved. Its main instrument in Egypt is the army. It is the army that holds the key to the immediate future. When the “Supreme Military Council” convened on Thursday, just before that scandalous speech, and issued a “Communique No. 1”, hope was mingled with foreboding.

“Communique No. 1” is a term well known in history. It generally means that a military junta has assumed power, promising democracy, early elections, prosperity and heaven on earth. In very rare instances, the officers indeed fulfill these promises. Generally, what ensues is a military dictatorship of the worst kind.

This time, the communique said nothing at all. It just showed

on live TV that they were there – all the leading generals, minus Mubarak and his stooge, Omar Suleiman.

Now they have assumed power. Quietly, without bloodshed. For the second time within 60 years.

IT IS worthwhile recalling the first time. After a period of turmoil against the British occupiers, a group of young officers, veterans of the 1948 Israeli-Arab war, hiding behind an elderly general, carried out a coup. The despised ruler, King Farouk, was literally sent packing. He put to sea on his yacht from Alexandria. Not a drop of blood was shed.

The people were jubilant. They loved the army and the coup. But it was a revolution from above. No crowds in Tahrir Square.

The army tried first to govern through civilian politicians. They soon lost patience with that. A charismatic young lieutenant-colonel, Gamal Abd-al-Nasser, emerged as the leader, instituted wide-ranging reforms, restored the honor of Egypt and the entire Arab world – and founded the dictatorship which expired yesterday.

Will the army follow this example, or will it do what the Turkish army has done several times: assume power and turn it over to an elected civilian government?

Much will depend on Obama. Will he support the move to democracy, as his inclination will undoubtedly suggest, or will he listen to the “experts”, Israelis included, who will urge him to rely on a military dictatorship, as American presidents have done for so long?

But the chance of the United States of America, and of Barack Obama personally, leading the world by shining statesmanship at a historic moment 19 days ago has been wasted. The beautiful words have evaporated.

For Israel there is another lesson. When the Free Officers made their revolution in 1952, in the whole of Israel only one single voice was raised (that of Haolam Hazeh, the news magazine I was editing) calling upon the Israeli government to come out in support. The government did the opposite, and a historic chance to show solidarity with the Egyptian people was lost.

Now, I am afraid, this mistake will be repeated. The tsunami is being viewed in Israel as a terrifying natural catastrophe, not as the wonderful opportunity it is.