Egypt/Turkey-Israel: 'A clean break'

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It is not Israel backed by the distant US that inherits the Ottoman mantle of hegemony in the Middle East, but some combination of Turkey and Egypt...

While Egypt's revolution was very much about domestic matters — bread and butter, corruption, repression — its most immediate effects have been international. Not for a long time has Egypt loomed so large in the region, to both friend and foe. At least 13 of the 22 Arab League countries are now affected: Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia and Yemen.

But just as powerful has been the resonance in Israel. It has no precedent for an assertive, democratic neighbour. Except for Turkey.

As the US was putting the finishing touches on NATO (established in April 1949), Turkey became the first Muslim nation to recognise Israel, in March 1949 (Iran did so a year later). Under the watchful eye of its military, Turkey and Israel had close diplomatic, economic and military relations throughout the Cold War.

The first hint of trouble was Turkey's denunciation of "Israeli oppression" of the Palestinians in 1987, but it was not until the Justice and Development Party came to power in 2002 that a strong critical voice was heard. In 2004 Turkey denounced the Israeli assassination of Sheikh Ahmed Yassin as a "terrorist act" and Israeli policy in the Gaza Strip as "state-sponsored terrorism".

Saudi acquiescence to US-Israel hegemony is understandable because of the Saudi monarchy's total reliance on the US dollar income from its oil. As US secretary of state Henry Kissinger told Business Week after Saudi Arabia defied the US with its oil embargo in support of Egypt in the 1973 war against Israel, any more such behaviour would lead to "massive political warfare against countries like Saudi Arabia and Iran to make them risk their political stability and maybe their security if they did not cooperate".

His words were not idle. King Faisal, who had risked all to help the Egyptians and Palestinians, was assassinated shortly after that, and his act of defiance was the last peep heard from the Saudis. Or Egypt, which went on to make peace with Israel. Even as Turkey's resistance to Israel has grown hotter, Israel continued to find comfort in the accommodating nature of president Hosni Mubarak's rule, though it has been a "cold peace" between enemies.

Yes, enemies. For despite official relations and a trickle of photo ops of Egyptian-Israeli leaders shaking hands over the past three decades, 92 per cent Egyptians continued to view Israel as the enemy, according to a 2006 Egyptian government poll. Perhaps Mubarak also

found maintaining good relations with Israel distasteful, but he complied with US wishes, getting the second largest US aid package (after Israel).

Current Israeli military strategy was honed in the early1980s, after the elimination of Egypt as a military threat. Two names are identified with it. Ariel Sharon announced publicly in 1981, shortly before invading Lebanon, that Israel no longer thought in terms of peace with its neighbours, but instead sought to widen its sphere of influence to the whole region "to include countries like Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, and areas like the Persian Gulf and Africa, and in particular the countries of North and Central Africa". This view of Israel as a regional superpower/ bully became known as the Sharon Doctrine.

Sharon's invasion of Lebanon in 1982 followed traditional imperialism's strategy of direct invasion and co-opting of local elites, in this case a Christian one. But already this strongman policy was losing its appeal. It didn't work for Israel in Lebanon. There was always the risk of a strongman turning against his patron or being overthrown.

The more extreme version of the new Israeli game plan to make Israel the regional hegemon was Oded Yinon's "A Strategy for Israel in the 1980s". Yinon was nicknamed 'sower of discord' for his proposal to divide-and-conquer to create weak dependent statelets with some pretense of democracy, similar to the US strategy in Central America, which would fight among themselves and, if worse comes to worst and a populist leader emerges, be sabotaged easily – the Salvador Option. Hizbullah leader Hassan Nasrallah described the Israeli policy based on Yinon in 2007 as intended to create "a region that has been partitioned into ethnic and confessional states that are in agreement with each other. This is the new Middle East."

Yinon was using as a model the Ottoman millet system where separate legal courts governed the various religious communities using Muslim Sharia, Christian Canon and Jewish Halakha laws. Lebanon would be divided into Sunni, Alawi, Christian and Druze states, Iraq divided into Sunni, Kurd and Shia states. The Saudi kingdom and Egypt would also be divided along sectarian lines, leaving Israel the undisputed master.

"Genuine coexistence and peace will reign over the land only when Arabs understand that without Jewish rule between Jordan and the sea they will have neither existence nor security." Yinon correctly observed that the existing Middle East states set up by Britain following WWI&II were unstable and consisted of sizable minorities which could be easily incited to rebel. All the Gulf states are "built upon a delicate house of sand in which there is only oil".

Following on Yinon's strategy in 1982, Richard Perle's 1996 "A Clean Break" states: "Israel can shape its strategic environment, in cooperation with Turkey and Jordan, by weakening, containing, and even rolling back Syria. This effort can focus on removing Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq – an important Israeli strategic objective in its own right."

Israeli internal security minister Avi Dichter said shortly after the invasion of Iraq in 2003: "Weakening and isolating Iraq is no less important than weakening and isolating Egypt. Weakening and isolating Egypt is done by diplomatic methods while everything is done to do achieve a complete and comprehensive isolation to Iraq. Iraq has vanished as a military force and as a united country."

According to *Haaretz* correspondent Aluf Benn writing on the eve of the US invasion of Iraq

in 2003, Sharon and his cohorts "envision a domino effect, with the fall of Saddam Hussein followed by that of Israel's other enemies: Arafat, Hassan Nasrallah, Bashar Assad, the ayatollah in Iran and maybe even Muhammar Gadaffi." By presenting the US with facts-on-the-ground and using its US lobby, Israel would keep itself at the heart of American plans for the Middle East.

The invasion of Iraq was always intended as a prelude to the invasion of Iran. The Israeli logic, which is hard to fault, is that with Iraq now occupied, unstable and its inevitably pro-Iranian Shia majority asserting control, Iran has been strengthened, and that the same war plan against Iran is necessary to defeat the chief remaining regional anti-Israeli regime, which is now gathering support from not only Shia, but from Sunni opponents to the US-Israeli project throughout the Arab world. Ben Eliezer told the gathering: "They are twins, Iran and Iraq."

Despite Turkish storm clouds on the horizon, until 25 January 2011, Israel's plan was still to replace the Ottoman Turks of yore as the local imperial power. The Arab nations (prepared by British imperial divide-and-conquer and local-strongman policies) would be kept divided, weak, dependent now on Israel to ensure safe access to oil. An Israeli-style peace would break out throughout the region.

But this tangled web has unravelled. Despite the $36 billion poured into Egypt's military and Americanisation of Egypt's armed forces since the peace treaty with Israel, according to *wikileaks-egypt.blogspot.com* US officials complained of the "backward-looking nature of Egypt's military posture" (read: Israel is still Egypt's main enemy), that the army generals remained resistant to change and economic reforms to further dismantle central government power.

Egyptian Minister of Defence Muhammad Tantawi "has resisted any change to usage of FMF [foreign military financing] funding and has been the chief impediment to transforming the military's mission to meet emerging security threats." In plain language, Egypt's *de facto* head of state was criticised by the US because he refused to go along with the new US-Israeli strategy which would incorporate Egypt's defence into a broader NATO war against "asymmetric threats" (read: the "war on terror") and to acquiesce to Israel as the regional hegemon.

Mubarak was the Egyptian strongman that fit Sharon's strategy for the region. But he was overthrown in a truly unforeseen manner — by the people. Yinon's divide-and-rule strategy — in the case of Egypt, by inciting Muslim against Copt — has also come to naught with the popular revolution here, one of its symbols being the crescent and cross.

There has indeed been "a clean break" with the past, but not the one foreseen by Perle. His scheme can be rephrased as: Egypt and Turkey can shape their strategic environment, in cooperation with Syria and Lebanon, by weakening, containing, and even rolling back Israel. As for Dichter's hubris, it is impossible at this point to see what the future holds for Iraq, but it will not be what he had in mind. And Iran can now breathe a sigh of relief.

A year and a half ago, an Israel Navy submarine crossed the Suez Canal to the Red Sea, where it conducted an exercise, reflecting the strategic cooperation between Israel and Egypt, aimed at sending a message of deterrence to Iran. Just one week after the fall of Mubarak, the canal is being used to deliver a message of deterrence – but this time the message is for Israel, as Iranian warships cross the canal on their way to Syrian ports.

Nor are the upheavals across the Arab world at present following the sectarian scenario envisioned by Yinon. Even the Shia uprising in Bahrain is more about an oppressive neocolonial monarchy, originally imposed by the British, than about Shia-Sunni hostility.

Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman has expressed fears about Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood "undermining the peace treaty" which 85 per cent of Israelis approve of. But he need not fear. While Egyptians have no love for Israel, none contemplate another war against what is clearly a more powerful and ruthless neighbour.

What really hurts for the Likudniks is the new Egypt in cooperation with the new Turkey will put paid to the Sharon/ Yinon strategy for establishing Israel as the regional empire. It will have to join the comity of nations not as a ruthless bully, but as a responsible partner.

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