

MIDDLE EAST NOTES AND COMMENT

Allies at Odds

by Jon B. Alterman

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The United States is used to looking for trouble from its enemies, but a growing set of problems will emerge from its allies. In the eastern Mediterranean, three U.S. allies are increasingly at loggerheads, and the situation is likely to get worse before it gets better.

The United States has had long and durable relationships with Egypt, Turkey and Israel, and for decades it made a priority of nurturing ties between the three.

The U.S.-Egyptian relationship grew closer as a direct consequence of Egyptian-Israeli peace. As an inducement to Egypt to make peace with Israel in 1979, the United States gave Egypt tens of billions of dollars in aid to compensate for Arab aid that would be withdrawn, helped build up Egypt as a regional power, and modernized the Egyptian military.

Turkey is a NATO ally, and for a whole set of reasons it long pursued a strategic relationship with Israel. The Turkish General staff grew close to their Israeli counterparts, Israeli jets trained over Turkish airspace, and Israel helped supply the Turkish military with advanced weaponry.

Israel was long the beneficiary of these efforts. In the first three decades of its existence, Israel fought four wars that required mobilizing the entire country. In the four decades since the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty, Israel's wars have been far more limited and far less threatening to its existence.

Although many Israelis felt that they continued to live in a hostile neighborhood with constant threats, they had learned to manage them. Stolid Arab politics had produced long-running but predictable governments that would make neither peace nor war with Israel. All sides had reached a *modus vivendi*. And then, the region began to shift.

Husni Mubarak's fall, and the current embattled state of Egypt's military leadership, fundamentally alters Israel's strategic calculations. While Israelis often complained of the "cold peace" on their southern border, past Israeli and Egypt-

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Toons That Teach

Arabs read and write in formal Arabic, but few regularly speak it. Most speak dialects that vary with location, class, and setting. Increasingly, a range of dialects have appeared on television and in movies. Arab children's television, however, has proven surprisingly immune to the trend.

With a third of Arab television viewers under age 12, children's networks are a powerful force. Dubai-based SpaceToon TV dominates airwaves, with an audience of over 230 million across 22 countries. SpaceToon describes its content as "educational, family-friendly, and acceptable to Arab culture," part of which is using cartoons as a pathway for language instruction. SpaceToon's programming features animals and heroes who speak in Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), essentially a foreign tongue to many young viewers.

Part of the logic is that teaching reading and writing requires exposure to MSA as a living language—and young Arabs get a lot of exposure. According to a study by IPSOS, 85 percent of mothers in the Middle East encourage their children to watch children's programming in MSA. Yet, studies link rising television consumption to rising childhood obesity rates, and in some Arab countries people already watch a daily average of six hours of television.

Arab children's television teaches more than language. Public service announcements warn children in conflict areas of the dangers of explosives, and in every country they discuss general safety. Television can make learning sweet, but when accompanied by sweets, it creates a whole new set of problems. ■ MdT

Arab Monarchies Confront the Arab Spring

On November 22, 2011, Jon Alterman spoke on a panel at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, entitled "Arab Monarchies Confront the Arab Spring." Dr. Alterman argued that the stability of Arab monarchies depends on three pillars: legitimacy, staying above the fray of political disputes, and diffusing power. He judged that, in the Arab Gulf, people seek better outcomes and a sense of justice more than the mechanics of democratic systems. Still, many Gulf governments are pre-emptively expanding democratic representation, adopting the strategies of relatively poorer countries such as Jordan and Morocco. One such strategy is managing the participation of religious factions, often dividing them through setting rules for who may and who may not participate in politics. For more information, please click [HERE](#). ■

tian leaders reached fundamental understandings on common interests, starting with security and intelligence cooperation, and extending to the tourist trade and later energy. Since the Egyptian military essentially ran the Egyptian state, it barred any serious challenge to these arrangements.

Political change in Egypt puts that all in question. The electoral victories of Islamist parties who neither feel beholden to the United States nor see shared interests with Israel are a fundamental challenge to Israeli security doctrine. It is hard to imagine how groups that agitated for years against normalization with Israel can sustain that normalization. It is equally hard to see how an Islamist-led government will not be deeply sympathetic to Hamas rather than deeply hostile to it, as was true of Hosni Mubarak's Egypt. Further, it remains unclear how much sway the Egyptian military will retain, casting doubt over Israel's future channels of influence.

The Turkish relationship is equally disturbing to Israelis. After decades of close cooperation, ties were slowly unraveling before the pre-emptive Israeli raid on a Turkish ship in 2010 resulted in the deaths of eight Turkish citizens and one Turkish-American. Since then, the decline has been sharp. As in Egypt, the change is partly a consequence of a shift toward more Islamist politics in Turkey and the increasing marginalization of the secular-leaning military. A likely future source of friction is the large natural gas reserves found around Cyprus, which Israel sees as crucial to its energy security and economic growth. Turkey has its own claims to the gas, and it sees Israel's approach to gas rights as threatening Turkey's position as the only alternative to Russia in supplying gas to Europe.

Across a wide range of issues, Turks and Israelis are increasingly at loggerheads. Turkish officials are almost universally optimistic about changes underway in the Arab world. Turkey journeyed from secular military government to religious civilian rule over eight decades, and they see the Arab world going swiftly to the same destination. They see the governments likely to result from the ongoing upheaval as fundamentally friendly to Turkey, helping the country to secure both influence and trade. They expect the West to acquiesce.

By contrast, Israel sees Islamists as a menace. They not only foresee a need to renegotiate many agreements with neighbors, but also to reassert their deterrence. If the Syrian government falls, its successor is likely to orient toward Turkey and away from Iran. For the United States, Europe, and much of the Arab world, this would be good news—an Iranian proxy brought under the sway of a NATO ally. Many Israelis would be ambivalent or even hostile to such a change. The Assad government's fall would likely shatter the Iranian-Syrian axis, but many Israelis would see it as the establishment of another Islamist state on their borders, and part of what they see as a Muslim Brotherhood encirclement of Israel.

The U.S. government seems not to share Israelis' concerns. U.S.-Turkish relations have grown closer under Prime Minister Erdogan, in part because Turkey's rising role makes it a more important player in Washington's security calculations. While there is concern in Washington about Egypt's direction, it has not yet reached the level of alarm. The Obama administration appears to accept that more democratic politics in the Middle East will mean greater Islamist participation, and that the promise of the former outweighs the threat of the latter.

The result of regional shifts is not likely to be a full-blown regional war. Instead, a more isolated Israel is likely to fight more limited wars against irregular forces, as it did in Lebanon in 2006 and in Gaza in 2008. Repeated limited wars are likely to lead to greater Israeli isolation, leading toward an Israeli predilection to reassert its deterrence. In such a situation, Turkey and Egypt are unlikely to remain as neutral as they did in 2006 and 2008. The spiral would continue from there.

It has never been easy for the United States to manage its relationships in the eastern Mediterranean. It is about to get much harder. ■ 12/8/2011

Links of Interest

USA Today quoted Jon Alterman in "Egyptians expect to 'see a lot of bloodshed.'"

CBS quoted Jon Alterman in "U.S. finds reassurance in Egypt's peaceful voting."

BusinessWeek quoted Jon Alterman in "Islamist Parties May Have Won 70% of Vote in Egypt's Election."

Reuters quoted Jon Alterman in "Analysis: 'Cold War' with Iran heats up across Mideast."

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