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A Free Egypt Can Be Good for Israel



While Israel has legitimate concerns regarding its future alongside an Egypt that will be reflecting the will of its people, democratization could also be to Israel's benefit. But attention needs to be paid to the opportunity of creating a true peace between two peoples rather than between two governments.

The very valuable commentary below is written by Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Kai Bird. She is the author most recently of *Crossing Mandelbaum Gate: Coming of Age Between the Arabs and Israelis, 1956-1978*, which has just been named a Finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award in autobiography.

Why the Egypt Revolution Is Good for Israel by Kai Bird

It's not pretty, and there certainly are risks, but the fall of Mubarak could mean a better, lasting peace in the Middle East.

I long to be back in Cairo. I have fond memories of the two years I spent there from 1965 to 1967. I remember sipping sweet black tea in the Old City's Khan al-Khalili souk, hanging out on weekends at Groppi's Tea Room, and riding the train to the southern suburb of Maadi, where I attended an international high school. I have vivid memories of Tahrir Square's chaotic sidewalks. There were crowds of people everywhere, a moving mosaic of gentle, jostling chaos. It was a noisy city, home to both considerable wealth and desperate poverty, and over the three decades of President Hosni Mubarak's rule the inequality gap has grown even wider.

I wish I could be there today, in solidarity with the thousands of young and old Egyptians, to celebrate the demise of his dreadful regime. But what we are witnessing is more than the end of a government — it is nothing less than the birth of a new liberal order in Egypt. And that's not only good news for the beleaguered citizens of Egypt, but also the United States and Israel.

The upheaval in Egypt marks the demise of two generations of stagnation in the Arab world that began with the Naksa ("Setback") — the Arabic word to describe the defeat in the 1967 war. That loss ushered in a cynical era of autocracy, corruption, repression, and fatalism. It marked the defeat of the secular Arab project and profoundly humiliated Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser, the last Arab leader who could plausibly claim to reflect the broad popular will. Nasser's defeat was also the defeat of any notion that the Arab world had a progressive, modernist future.

In the wake of the 1967 war, Mohamed Heikal, Egypt's prominent pundit, punned that power had shifted in the Arab world from thawra ("revolution") to tharwa ("wealth"). Not incidentally, the defeat of secular Arab nationalism created an intellectual vacuum that was filled by religiosity. As Syria's Yale-trained philosopher Sadik al-Azm said, "At the same time, the political regimes responsible for the military defeat began utilizing religion in general and Islam in particular in a campaign designed to protect them from the aftermath of the defeat."

Nasser's successor, Anwar Sadat, adopted the language of Islam, partly in an attempt to co-opt the Muslim Brotherhood and give himself a semblance of legitimacy. He cracked down on the secular left and shifted the regime to the right with his Open Door policies, welcoming American investment and influence. In the wake of the October 1973 war, Sadat was briefly seen as a genuinely popular national leader. In November 1977, he astonished everyone by flying to Jerusalem. Most Egyptians were tired of war and so welcomed the subsequent Camp David Accords and the Egypt-Israel peace treaty. But at the same time was still regarded with suspicion and even hostility. It was always a cold peace.

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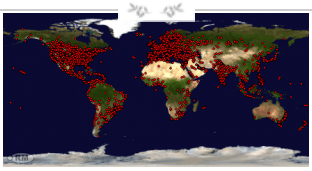
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14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
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