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In Israel, Egypt's unrest raises questions

by Claire Schaeffer-Duffy



Men pray in front of a tank during a protest in Cairo Feb. 7. (CNS photo/Goran Tomasevic, Reuters)

The Egyptian uprising has dominated the headlines in Israel over the past weeks.

As anti-government demonstrators continued to press for the removal of Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak Feb. 4, *NCR* spoke with Adam Keller, a founding member of the Israeli peace organization Gush Shalom and editor of *The Other Side*, a bi-monthly newsletter documenting the struggle for Israeli/Palestinian peace.

Following is that conversation, edited for clarity.

***NCR:* What's your assessment of Israeli reaction to events in Egypt?**

Keller: Very many people in Israel, especially the political establishment, are regarding events in Egypt quite negatively. They feel that the Israeli/Egyptian peace agreement is threatened.

There is an interesting turn-around. The very same political groups which seven years ago were very enthusiastic about spreading democracy in the Middle East when the Iraq war was pushed, are now very much afraid of democracy when it comes without American tanks, just from the grassroots of Egyptian society.

It is quite a big left-right division in Israeli society. The more left you are, the more you are happy with what is happening in Egypt, with the prospect of democracy in Egypt. The more right-wing you are, the more unhappy you are about it

And what are your own views about the revolt in Egypt? Were you surprised?

I was surprised. I cannot say that I would have predicted it. It looked like the Mubarak regime was something more or less eternal. I think this was also the feeling that Egyptians themselves felt.

I think people in Israel are gradually coming to the conclusion that the time of Mubarak has ended. There is, of course, the debate over what [government] is going to replace him.

When the Israelis look at the reports from Egypt, they especially look at how much [support] the Muslim Brotherhood have. The right-wing in Israel emphasizes this and says, "See. This is going to be a Muslim country. A new Iran!?" The left-wing says, "Look, there is very much a variety of social and political currents -- secularists and religious, Muslims and Christians [involved in the uprising].?"

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The concern of the Israelis is naturally with whether Egypt will be a real democracy or an Islamic dictatorship. Of course, there could be something in between, a democracy where an Islamic party would win the election but they would not make a dictatorship. The right-wing in Israel is not ready to accept that subtle distinction.

And this is not just happening in Egypt. There was something of a shake-up happening earlier in the week in Jordan.

Yes. Tunisia, and now in Yemen. I think all kinds of rulers in the Arab world are trying to anticipate it and to make concessions before the concessions are extracted from them. Egypt is, of course, the center of the Arab world. What happens in Egypt immediately affects the whole Arab world.

There is one thing which is very fundamental, which in fact we, [at Gush Shalom] have been saying since very long ago. Israel has made peace in the Arab world with regimes and not with peoples. Israel has made a formal peace with Egypt and Jordan and has some kind of contact with other regimes.

But in all these countries, peace has been made with the regime, with the ruler not with the people. The people are not very happy with the peace. The reason for that is very simple. Israel is continuing to occupy the Palestinians, to oppress them, and to build settlements.

If we want to have peace with the Egyptian people and not just with the regime in Egypt, whatever the regime might be, we must make peace with the Palestinians.

In fact, if we look back historically to when Egyptian President Anwar Sadat came to Jerusalem [in November 1977], what he intended is not what actually happened. He did not intend to have peace with

Israel while Israel continues to occupy the Palestinians. What he intended was that Israel would make peace with the Palestinians. Israel would give up all the occupied territories, not just the Sinai.

When the ordinary Egyptian sees that Israel is oppressing the Palestinians and there are all kinds of killings from the massacres at Sabra and Shatila in Lebanon, 1982, which happened just a few months after Israel completed the peace treaty with Egypt, to the bombing in Gaza, and all kinds of things in between, the ordinary Egyptian naturally wonders, "Why do we have peace with [the Israelis]?"

He is told: "We have to continue the peace with them because otherwise we lose the two billion dollars of American subsidies." Then the Egyptian feels, "We have been bought. We have betrayed our honor for money." That is not a real basis for peace. Making peace with the Palestinians is the key for Israel to have real peace with the Arab world.

How might the uprising in Egypt affect the Israeli/Palestinian conflict?

It could affect the conflict in many contradictory ways and it is really too soon to tell.

There are some people [in Israel], like myself, who are saying, "Now we must make peace with the Palestinians, otherwise we lose everything and we become isolated in the Middle East." That would be the left-wing response.

The right-wing response would be: "You see, peace with Arabs does not mean anything. You make peace with the regime and then the regime falls. We must keep our security. We must keep the territories. We must keep the West Bank, or at least, part of the West Bank, and so on and so on."

In a sense, of course, everyone in Israel would find in this crisis a confirmation for the position which he has anyway.

There is also the question of what conclusions the Obama administration will draw from this about the Palestinians. Right now, the Obama administration does not have time to pay attention to the Palestinians because they have to deal very urgently with the crisis in Egypt.

But I hope they will come to the conclusion that in order to preserve American influence in the Middle East, they must do something concrete to really end the occupation.

I think this is a crucial point. If the Obama administration does not give this basic thing to the Palestinians, then probably the Palestinian Authority will collapse. Either it will dissolve itself or it will be dissolved from below by some kind of popular uprising.

[Palestinian president] Abu Mazen is much weaker than Mubarak. It will require much less of a popular upsurge among Palestinians to get rid of Abu Mazen than what is going on in Egypt. The only justification Abu Mazen can give to his continued rule is if he can show he is moving forward toward ending the occupation.

What do Israelis think of how the Obama administration has handled the Egyptian uprising so far?

The right-wing is saying Obama has betrayed Mubarak. In short, Obama is not reliable. There are some left-wing people, who are usually not very friendly toward the United States, who now approve of Obama in this case.

There are also people who are saying, "If Obama so easily turns his back on Mubarak, who has been a United States ally for such a long time, can we rely on Obama to support us when we need him?"

In a way, that is not such a bad thing for Israel to realize it cannot rely 100 percent on the United States and must establish its own position in the Middle East.

Any predictions on what will happen next in Egypt?

I think it is a very reasonable prediction to assume Mubarak will not cling to power much longer. What happens beyond that?

My hope is that there will be a real transition to democracy and there will be really free elections where Egyptians could choose their own government. For sure, if there are free elections, the Muslim Brotherhood will be one of the political forces and will get into Parliament.

I hope they will not emerge as the dominant force in Egypt. I would prefer to see secular parties in power.

If the Muslim Brotherhood does get into power, I hope it will not follow the Iranian example but the Turkish model. There is [in Turkey] an Islamic party which is in power. Many people in Israel are not very happy with this Islamic power in Turkey, but definitely Turkey is still a democracy.

Whatever else can be said about Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan, he has not overthrown Turkish democracy. He has not imposed Islamic law. I hope that if Egypt becomes a democracy and the Muslim Brotherhood gets the majority, they will behave in a similar way.

NCR contributor Claire Schaeffer-Duffy is conducting interviews with people connected to the unrest in Egypt this week. For her previous interviews, see:

- **Egyptian uprising 'far beyond what people expected'**, a conversation with Egyptian expert John Esposito
- **In Egypt, most powerful example of 'people power' in history**, a conversation with Gene Sharp, a renowned scholar of nonviolent struggle
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