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Lessons From Tahrir Sq.

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Being back in Cairo reminds me that there are two parties in this region that have been untouched by the Arab Spring: the Israelis and the Palestinians. Too bad, because when it comes to ossified, unimaginative, oxygen-deprived governments, the Israelis and Palestinians are right up there with pre-revolutionary Egypt and Tunisia. I mean, is there anything less relevant than the prime minister of Israel going to the U.S. Congress for applause and the leader of the Palestinians going to the U.N. — instead of to each other?

Both could actually learn something from Tahrir Square. To the Palestinians I would say: You believe the Israelis are stiffing you because they think they have you in box. If you resort to violence, they will brand you terrorists. And if you don't resort to violence, the Israelis will just pocket the peace and quiet and build more settlements. Your dilemma is how to move Israel in a way that won't blow up in your face or require total surrender.

You have to start with the iron law of Israeli-Arab peace: whichever party has the Israeli silent majority on its side wins. Anwar Sadat brought the Israeli majority over to his side when he went to Israel, and he got everything he wanted. Yasir Arafat momentarily did the same with the Oslo peace accords. How could Palestinians do that again today? I can tell you how not to do it. Having the U.N. General Assembly pass a resolution recognizing an independent Palestinian state will only rally Israelis around Prime Minister Bibi Netanyahu, giving him another excuse not to talk.

May I suggest a Tahrir Square alternative? Announce that every Friday from today forward will be “Peace Day,” and have thousands of West Bank Palestinians march nonviolently to Jerusalem, carrying two things — an olive branch in one hand and a sign in Hebrew and Arabic in the other. The sign should say: “Two states for two peoples. We, the Palestinian people, offer the Jewish people a two-state solution based on the 1967 borders — with mutually agreed adjustments — including Jerusalem, where the Arabs will control their neighborhoods and the Jews theirs.”

If Palestinians peacefully march to Jerusalem by the thousands every Friday with a clear peace message, it would become a global news event. Every network in the world would be there. Trust me, it would stimulate a real peace debate within Israel — especially if Palestinians invited youth delegations from around the Arab world to join the marches, carrying the Saudi peace initiative in Hebrew and Arabic. Israeli Jews and Arabs should be invited to march as well. Together, the marchers could draw up their own peace maps and upload them onto YouTube as a way of telling their leaders what Egyptian youth said to President Hosni Mubarak: “We’re not going to let you waste another day of our lives with your tired mantras and maneuvering.”

Crazy, I know. Bibi is reading this and laughing: “The Palestinians will never do that. They could never get Hamas to adopt nonviolence. It’s not who the Palestinians are.”

That is exactly what Mubarak said about the Egyptian people: “They are not capable of being anything but what they are: docile and willing to eat whatever low expectations I feed them.” But then Egyptians surprised him. How about you, Palestinians, especially Hamas? Do you have any surprise in you? Is Bibi right about you, or not?

As for Bibi, his Tahrir lesson is obvious: Sir, you are well on your way to becoming the Hosni Mubarak of the peace process. The time to make big decisions in life is when you have all the leverage on your side. For 30 years, Mubarak had all the leverage on his side to gradually move Egypt toward democracy — and he never used it. Then, when Mubarak’s people rose up, he tried to do it all in six days. But it was too late. No one believed him. So his tenure ended in ruin.

Israel today still has enormous leverage. It is vastly superior militarily and economically to the Palestinians, and it has the U.S. on its side. If Netanyahu actually put a credible, specific two-state peace map on the table — not just the same old vague promises about “painful compromises” — he could get the Americans and Europeans to toss in anything Israel wanted, including the newest weapons, NATO membership, maybe even European Union membership. It could be a security windfall for Israel. Does Bibi have any surprise in him or do the Palestinians have him right: a big faker, hiding a nationalist-religious agenda under a cloak of security?

It may be that Israeli and Palestinian leaders are incapable of surprising anyone anymore, in which case the logic on the ground will prevail: Israel will gradually absorb the whole West Bank, so, together with Israel proper, a Jewish minority will be ruling over an Arab majority. Israel’s enemies will refer to it as “the Jewish apartheid state.” America, Israel’s only true friend, will find itself having to defend an Israel whose policies it does not believe in and whose leaders it does not respect —

and the tensions between the U.S. and Israel displayed in Washington last week will seem quaint by comparison.