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## TIME

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### **The Storm Before the Calm**

*The political turmoil wrought by the Arab Spring is a precursor to positive change in the Middle East*

**By Fareed Zakaria**

The crowds in Cairo gather these days not to denounce autocracy but to raid the Israeli embassy or rail against the American University. In Egypt, in Libya and elsewhere, the open political arena is empowering Islamists with thoroughly reactionary views. The mood seems to be shifting everywhere in the region. Turkey is distancing itself from the West. The Palestinians are pursuing a more confrontational policy. Has the Arab Spring turned into a nasty winter?

Actually, no. The democratic movement in the Middle East is a powerful positive force for both its people and the world at large. It is a seismic shift in a region that has stagnated for many decades. It will unsettle old norms and practices and cause political upheaval. The Islamists, being organized, will gain strength in the first phase, but that might spur the moderates to get their act together. In Indonesia, in the first years after Suharto's fall, both chaos and Islam rose. Today, moderation and economic reform are the norm.

Already the Arab Spring has had one positive strategic effect, the weakening of Iran. For a decade, Iran has been making an ambitious bid for regional leadership. On the hard-power front, it has pursued a nuclear program and supported regional rogues like Syria and Hizballah. It has also tried to present itself to the Arab street as a friend and ideological ally. It has routinely set itself apart from the old Arab tyrannies and embraced the great cause of the Arab masses, Palestine.

The rise of a genuine democracy movement in the Arab world has utterly discredited Iran's pose. Tehran no longer looks like a place of inspiration for the Arab masses; instead it resembles the old Arab autocracies. (Ayatullah Ali Khamenei is now one of the longest-serving dictators in the Middle East.) As its ally Syria has been besieged, Iran has become part of the problem, standing in solitary defense of a regime that is systematically butchering its people.

Tehran's other claim to street fame—sticking up for Palestine when Arab leaders like Hosni Mubarak were too "scared" of Washington to do so—has also been undermined, as the new government in Egypt has been willing to more clearly express popular feelings on the Israeli-Palestinian issue.

That's likely to continue. During the Arab Spring, American commentators often pointed out that there were few signs or slogans about Palestine on the streets. But people's most pressing concerns were justice and democracy. That didn't mean Arabs didn't care about the Palestinian cause. In fact, polling shows that it is of enormous importance to people across the region. And the more democratic a government is, the more likely it will reflect its people's views.

Nowhere is this new democratic approach more evident than in Turkey, a country that has been transformed in recent

years from a semidemocracy with its foreign policy run by the army to a full-fledged democratic nation. Its Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, is a natural politician and senses the public mood instinctively. The result is a Turkish foreign policy that reflects both his own views and those of his people. This presents Israel with new challenges. But the fact is that the old Israeli model—cutting deals with kings and dictators, getting Washington to lean on Turkey's generals—will not work anymore. And the fretting about Turkey's new attitude has missed a key effect: Turkey has utterly eclipsed Iran as the leader of the Arab street. When Erdogan visited Cairo on Sept. 12 and 13, he was greeted like a conquering hero. Cafés that once had photographs of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad are replacing them with images of the Turkish leader.

It is a commentary on the paucity of leadership in the Arab world that the two countries vying to lead—Iran and Turkey—are non-Arab. And it is profoundly to the region's and the world's benefit that Turkey win that contest. Turkey is a democracy with deep ties to the West. It has just agreed to situate an important NATO-backed U.S. radar on its territory, affirming its military alliance with the U.S. And after some prodding by President Obama, Turkey has ended up on the right side of things in Libya and Syria. It wants to be a respected member of the international community, and it can be reasoned with.

A more democratic, populist Middle East will present new challenges, not all of them easily dealt with. But they reflect new openness, dynamism and energy in a region where people's aspirations are finally being heard. Spring in the Arab world is often filled with gales and violent sandstorms. But eventually they yield to calmer weather.

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