

# Israel must tread carefully amid chaos in Arab world

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With deadly street battles between the military and the Muslim Brotherhood in Cairo; rocket attacks and chemical weapons in the Syrian civil war; car bombs targeting Shiites and Sunnis in Lebanon and Iraq; repeated assaults against Christian minorities, and more, occurring on a daily basis it should be clear that the Middle East really is a dangerous neighbourhood.

This description isn't a "right-wing Zionist myth" but the core environment in which Israel must operate, requiring great caution in selecting policies and responses.

In contrast to this complex reality, far too many "experts" – journalists, academics, politicians and diplomats – continue to offer the same simplistic mantras for solving conflicts and bringing peace. They speak and write with an air of great certainty about issues and situations that are inherently uncertain and constantly changing.

In reality, there are no magic or short-term solutions, and outsiders, no matter how well-meaning or powerful, including the president of the United States, are entirely incapable of imposing solutions. The best they can do is follow the Hippocratic oath taken by doctors: do no harm.

Indeed, the quick transformation of the Arab Spring into inhuman slaughter highlights the need for a strong and sobering dose of humility among analysts from all perspectives. Two years ago, most policymakers and opinion leaders in the West were excitedly predicting a new dawn as Arab totalitarian regimes and petty dictatorships were overthrown to make way for democracy and freedom.

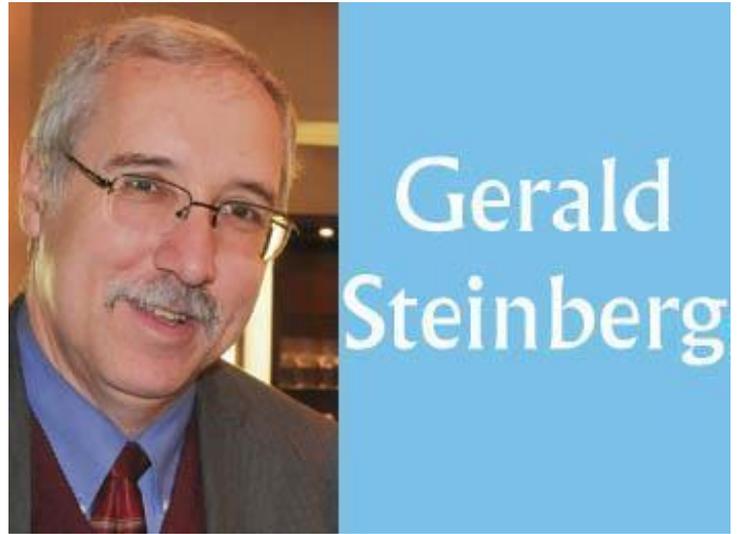
They confidently forecast that in Libya and Syria, the Gadhafi and Assad regimes would soon be replaced by tolerant and peace-loving liberal regimes, like (or almost like) in Europe and North America. In Egypt, the evil military regime had been ousted, and democracy had supposedly triumphed. In the commentaries and policy pronouncements, these romantic facades replaced the clearly stated core objectives of the Muslim Brotherhood, Al Qaeda and other jihadists.

Similarly, according to the accepted wisdom (introduced with words such as "everyone knows" or "it is obvious that"), an agreement to create a Palestinian state in the West Bank, end the "occupation," "share" Jerusalem and set mass terrorists free became the necessary ingredients for a peaceful Middle East.

The daily incitement from the Palestinian leadership, the ongoing violence and the intense power struggle between Hamas and the PLO are replaced by imagined signs of mutual understanding. And in this rosy fairy tale, a Palestinian state would be insulated from the terrible violence and chaos that is the norm everywhere else in the Arab world.

In parallel, the powerful leaders of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Oxfam and their partners frequently issue authoritative statements on the Middle East that reinforce the facade. Journalists (including at the CBC) confuse these empty pronouncements as substantive analysis and do no independent fact-checking. While obsessively spreading false accusations against Israel, the real war crimes, mass killings and daily human rights violations in the Arab world were ignored. It should be obvious that the narrow ideological officials who control many of the political advocacy NGOs got everything wrong, but they keep churning out sound bites.

For the consumers on the other end of all of this expertise and advice on the Middle East, the first recommendation is caveat emptor – buyer beware. The majority of Israelis have learned this lesson the hard way, and 20 years after the disastrous "Oslo peace process," simple-minded analysis and easy prescriptions are viewed with a healthy dose of skepticism. We know that there's no comparison between our neighbourhood and Europe or North America, and that mass violence is not due to differences over where to draw borders or "ending the occupation." Without



fundamental changes in Arab and Muslim societies, whatever policies Israel adopts are irrelevant.

And for the journalists, academics, political activists and others who kindly offer us advice from far away, a little humility would go a long way. Before they repeat the conventional wisdom and usual mantras about Israel, they might spend some time observing the violent conflicts being waged in Cairo, Damascus, Baghdad and across the Arab world. To avoid being pulled into this chaos, Israel's leaders must choose its policies very carefully and avoid recycled and simplistic slogans.