Israel must pursue peace urgently as Egypt unravels, former U.S. Rep. Wexler says

By Ana M. Valdes, The Palm Beach Post

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As the world watched Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's government teeter, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Wednesday called for "bolstering Israel's might" in response to the chaos.

Many Middle East experts in Palm Beach County and throughout the United States agree.

"The Israelis are rightfully alarmed," said Robert Wexler, a former Florida congressman and current executive director of the Center for Middle East Peace and Economic Cooperation in Washington. "All of their presumptions, particularly as they relate to security on the southern border, have been turned upside down."

For decades, Egypt has been Israel's closest ally in the Middle East, particularly after both countries signed a peace treaty in 1979. Since then, Mubarak has acted as a bridge between Israel and the Palestinians to the broader Arab world.

But that stabilizing influence fell further into question Wednesday, despite Mubarak's pledge on Tuesday not to seek re-election. Protests escalated and Mubarak supporters countered by charging into Cairo's central square in what appeared to be an orchestrated assault against anti-government protesters.

Wexler said Israelis, in their efforts to preserve peace in their nation, should heed Egypt's crisis.

"Israel ought to seek to resolve its issues with the Palestinians while Israel still enjoys a position of strength and holds most of the strategic cards," he said.

He said he knows many Israelis would disagree with him and prefer a "protect our homeland" approach. "But it's not an insightful policy that will ensure Israel's security in the long term," he said.

Netanyahu, in his most direct response since the crisis began, told the Israeli parliament Wednesday that he expects any new government in Egypt to respect the peace treaty with Israel. He warned that Iran wants Egypt to turn into Gaza.

Netanyahu said that Islamic groups already have taken over by democratic means in Iran, Lebanon and Gaza.

"Is there freedom in Iran? Is there democracy in Gaza? Does Hezbollah promote human rights?" he asked. "[Iranians] want an Egypt that goes back to the Middle Ages. They want Egypt to turn
into another Gaza, that will be run by radical forces that are against everything we want, everything the democratic world stands for."

Robert Rabil, a Florida Atlantic University political science professor and an expert in U.S.-Arab relations, said that although he understands Israel's concern over Iran's ties to radical groups, it may not be the right time for the Israeli prime minister to focus on how Egypt's instability will hurt his country.

"There is a big difference now between being worried and being paranoid," said Rabil, a native of Lebanon. "My advice is to not say anything now. Yes, you are concerned, but this is about Egypt. Let it be Egyptian."

*The Associated Press contributed to this story.*

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