The events over the last two months in Tunisia and Egypt, and now in Arab countries stretching from Bahrain to Libya, have reminded us that these nations were/are ruled by dictators at odds with the people. These strong men used a variety of techniques to keep citizens under control, from brutal police tactics and suppression of free speech and the media to providing cheap gasoline and sometimes even free food.

Propaganda has played an important role in diverting the Arab populace's attention from their circumstances. Perhaps the most successful and widespread propaganda ploy has been to cite what the Muslim world sees as the unjust Israeli occupation of Palestine. The decades-old struggle between Israel and the Palestinian Arabs over the control of the same land has usually been a surefire way to align the people with their government, at least on this one topic.

As part of this, conspiracy theories involving Israeli spies and agitators are widespread and the mythology of Israel's power and abilities holds so strong that even the most ludicrous rumors gain currency. The repeated blame placed on "foreign activists" (i.e., Israel) by the Arab governments whose people are protesting their rule is just one example of the ease for which the Jewish nation can be blamed for any problem.

Government oppression is just one of many causes of the rebellions in Tunisia and Egypt. Another was the large number of young people for whom there were no jobs. The governments attempted to blame both of these serious, systemic problems on Israel. It is to the protestors' credit that they saw this propaganda for what it was, i.e., empty propaganda, and went ahead to hold their governments responsible for the situation.

So does this newfound perspective mean that there will be less anti-Israel rhetoric in these newly liberated Arab countries? Probably not. What will change is the reason for that rhetoric. Instead of governments attacking Israel to shift attention from themselves, it will be different groups of people using anti-Israel slogans to bring followers to their own positions.

Let me put it this way. If dictatorships stifle debate and promote only their own position, then democracies encourage debate and invite everyone to let their views be heard. If there is too much debate, then there is no national unity and chaos ensues.

This is where political and religious parties get involved. They work to persuade people that their platform is correct and that people should join and promote their party. If lots of people join a party, then a unified position arises and the cacophony of too many voices begins to subside. Ultimately, the chaos of everyone having their own views transforms into most people following a limited number of party positions.

How does a party, whether religious or political, persuade people to join? Perhaps the ideal is that everyone takes a rational approach to determining their position, thinking through each party's platform and then making a reasoned choice. The reality is quite different. Parties use any strategy that works to bring in members. In the United States, one political ploy accuses the nation's Christian president of being a Muslim, that is, of belonging to a "foreign" religion. About a quarter of Americans think this is true, according to a recent poll. If the rhetoric works, use it! Even in a seasoned democracy like our own, that is an example of political debate.

So in new democracies such as Tunisia and Egypt, you can be sure that anti-Israel rhetoric will still be widely used, because it works. It will be put to the purpose of attracting people to political parties rather than distracting them from the lack of jobs or from state oppression, but it will still be there. To follow the democratic developments in these nations, we need to understand why it is used, rather than stop at noticing that it is used.