



The Arab Spring: A View from Israel

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Abstract

The Arab Spring is one of the most complex and surprising political developments of the new century, especially after a decade of anti-Muslim and anti-Arab western propaganda. While it is too early to properly evaluate the process and its various national apparitions, it is important to see it in a historical context. This article places the Arab Spring firmly within the history of pan Arabism, and the threat it posed to the west and Israel in its earlier, Nasserist phase. The work of Amin, Marfleet and others, is used to frame the current developments, and present the limited view offered from an Israeli perspective, where any democratisation of the Arab world is seen as a threat. This is so despite the obvious influence the Arab Spring had on protest in Israel in Summer 2011, a protest which has now seemingly spent itself; it is fascinating to note that the only protest movement in the Middle East not involving violent clashes with the regime it criticised, is also the one which has not achieved any of its aims.

Keywords

Pan-Arabism, Arab Spring, democratisation, Zionism, colonialism

The past, as many have pointed out, is another country. In it the present and future lie recumbent and hidden, mere hopes or fears, a genetic code of things to come, a promise or a threat, which may or may not be realized. In the past are grouped many of the developments that could or should have taken place, but did not, together with those that should never have been allowed to pass, but were destined to come and trouble us for generations. To understand either the present or the future, we must stare backwards, like Benjamin's angel of history, and see not just the ruins and destruction, but also the outlines of great hope. We need to see the option tree, in Raul Hilberg's words, or the historical options for action in that point in the past, which led to where we are, entangled and bound by past events. The current events in the Arab world are a case in point.

The start of a new decade in the twenty-first century saw the beginning of a unique sociopolitical process gripping the Arab world, one without precedent in the region, and of a magnitude totally unpredictable, even a short time ago. The process started, somewhat surprisingly, in Tunisia, then spread so fast that it was virtually over within less than a fortnight. A protester put himself on fire, leading to a successful removal of the tyrant who had ruled the country for decades, then launching it into a complex and dangerous advance toward a form of parliamentary democracy. Within two weeks, on 25 January 2011, the masses rose in Cairo, and then in other cities in Egypt. After a painful and often difficult struggle, the Mubarak regime came down with his resignation on 11 February; the army intervened, supposedly as guarantor of a peaceful transition to full democracy. The process remains undecided, as the hand on the tiller is that of the generals who were an inseparable part of the *ancien regime*. As these lines are written, the SCAF (Supreme Council of the Armed Forces) appears intent on using its power to retain control of the country through a tainted election process, and thereby confound the demands of the protesters and revolutionaries at Tahrir and elsewhere.

While the Egyptian revolution was still ongoing, other protest movements began, also inspired by the Tunisian model of social change.¹ Even before the resignation of Hosni Mubarak, protests started in most countries of the Maghrib and the Mashriq: from Morocco, Algeria and Libya through Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and Palestine to Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Bahrain—the Arab masses were on the march, proving wrong those who, time and again, argued that the Arab world is a stranger, presumably by some essentialist quirk of nature, to democracy, human rights and modernity. By September 2011, Qaddafi had been deposed, the Yemeni tyrant was on his way out of the picture, and President Assad of Syria continues to massacre Syrian demonstrators, unabated and undisturbed, but clearly on his way out. It is clear that the Arab people are no strangers to democracy and are prepared to lay down their lives in order to achieve it.

The right-wing essentialist assumption about the Arab world was strongly promoted by the Zionist state of Israel and by its western ideological allies in North America and Europe. The stereotypical picture drawn by

¹ All these movements owe a debt to the first Palestinian Intifada (an unarmed civic struggle against military occupation and oppression) that began in December 1987 and lasted some six years. The structure of popular action committees and horizontal organization that developed during this period has been studied and copied by the movements elsewhere some two decades later.

those adversaries of the Arabs and Islam were stark and clear—the Arab world seemed to be immune to modernity; ruled by fundamentalist Islamic traditionalists; hostile to human and democratic rights, parliamentary democracy, rights for women and minorities; and indifferent to social inequalities. In projecting this unified fantasy, regional, religious, cultural and economic differences were not only conflated, but were hardly acknowledged, in order not to disturb the completeness of the panoramic ideological view. In reality, those promulgating such an image, albeit an ahistorical and grotesquely inaccurate one, were in fact engaged in one of the last (one sincerely hopes), acts of crude *orientalism* of the western nations and their rulers, painting the Arab world into the ideological corner they have designed for it.

This was not merely an act of stereotypical description, of course—the West has spent more than a century in setting up, supporting and exploiting Arab regimes that upheld such undemocratic and tyrannical value systems. While supposedly committed to social democracy and freedom, the United States, United Kingdom and other western powers have continuously propped up and enabled dictatorships in various parts of the world, from the former shah of Iran to Pinochet of Chile, the House of Saud and Egypt under Hosni Mubarak.² Indeed, the word *tyrant* was never applied to Mubarak by western media outlets until the very week of his departure, after more than three decades of brutal tyranny. On the contrary, Mubarak was hailed as a ‘man of peace’ by such figures as Bill Clinton, both the Bush presidents, Tony Blair, and most other European leaders. He was spoken of as the epitome of moderation, a man who held back extremism and religious fundamentalism. The fact that he abused the Egyptian constitution by rewriting it into an instrument giving him Pharaoh-like rule, that he actively fostered and fomented religious hatred between Muslims and Copts and ran a police state—these facts almost never made news headlines in leading western media. His trenchant support of that other major partner of the West, the state of Israel, and his enablement of its harsh measures against the Palestinians in Gaza, was further proof of his accolade as a ‘man of peace’, a description to which Tony Blair adhered until the day

² Arguably, the system created by the West, and mainly by the United States, of inter-linked dictatorial and undemocratic regimes could be seen as interdependent, and was conceived and managed as such. South Africa, Israel and Iran, for example, have depended on each other for various essentials, and each supported each other's needs. In that way, a much stronger system was created. In hindsight, the fall of some of the dominoes has destabilized the rest of the regional pieces, and hastened their demise.

Mubarak resigned, well after he was responsible for the brutal murder of hundreds of Egyptian protesters during the period leading to his downfall.

Unsurprisingly, the West has chosen and supported rulers and systems of control that served its myriad of interests in the Middle East: oil, regional political hegemony and economic penetration. These interests were first shaped and defined in the Sykes-Picot agreement in 1916, further amended by the Balfour Declaration in 1917, and perfected during the Cold War period, when the fear of communism taking over the Arab world drove US foreign policy. By the time the vast empire of Soviet power crumbled in 1989, the West, and especially the United States, remained as the only power broker in the Middle East, seemingly guaranteeing the interests of the nations concerned. The fact that the interests of the Arab masses were continuously betrayed by their western-backed corrupt rulers was not a problem for western leaders who lauded the Arab ‘moderates’ at every opportunity. The Arab masses were, according to accepted wisdom, undemocratic ‘by nature’, not to be trusted with political power, and best controlled by their appointed autocratic leaders, such as the House of Saud, placed there by the British empire to guarantee its own interests. It seemed that such tyrannical and traditionalist leaders were necessary, if the Arab world was to be relied upon to enact the policies and actions favored by its western masters.

In this *orientalist* atmosphere, it was easy and logical for Israel to coin and use the iconic slogan to describe itself as ‘the only democracy in the Middle East’. After all, we were repeatedly told, the Arabs were neither worthy of democracy, nor capable of it. The nature of this ideological construction and representation of the Arab world has cemented Israel’s special place at the heart of western interests,³ and linked its policies to those of the West—synchronized with the undemocratic Arab elites, and against the Arab people everywhere. It did not matter that the Israeli ‘democracy’ seemed to be underwritten by the continued existence of the undemocratic regimes all around it—this very fact assisted Israel in establishing its *exceptional* nature. Israel was proud to point out at every opportunity that its own Arab citizens enjoyed more democratic rights than their brethren living in the Arab states around them; this propaganda coup was especially useful with western leaders and media audiences. As long as Israel could be

³ This, after all, was exactly what Theodor Herzl has planned and hoped for—Zionism as an active agent of imperial and colonial powers in the Middle East, guaranteeing their interest against assaults by ‘Asiatic hordes’, and benefitting from its crucial role of regional watchdog of imperial interests. See for example Herzl (1956: 118–124).

seen as the ‘only democratic state in the Middle East’, a kind of mini European enclave in a hostile region, its special status was safe with its western backers.

An important plank of the Israeli anti-Arab propaganda was the pretense that Israel, despite its self-definition as a ‘Jewish State’, and ‘Jewish democracy’, was somehow also the only secular democracy in the Middle East, while all other regimes were either fundamentalist Islamic states, such as Saudi Arabia, or confessional states, such as Lebanon. The pronounced illiberal nature of some of the Arab regimes, and their attitudes toward other religions and cultures, especially in the case of the Wahhabis, was a persuasive argument in supporting Israel’s westernized value system. This was true despite the growing and swift *Judaization* of the Israeli state, its military occupation of Palestine and, at times, other Arab territories, and its intensely unequal and racist policies toward the non-Jews under its control. Thus a militarized, ethnic theocratic state was termed a democracy. It was a question of comparability—relative to the worst Arab states, Israel may have seemed like an identifiable western democracy, especially to the uncritical eye of the western news media machine, with its *orientalist* pro-Israeli bias; Israel’s deeply undemocratic nature eluded the western critics of Arab tyranny.

It is of course much too early to evaluate either the success, exact nature, or the longevity of the Arab spring of 2011. The shockwaves of this political earthquake continue to spread, even as these lines are drafted, and the aftershocks will continue for some time, as the long-term patterns of change clarify and establish themselves. Some patterns are already evident, however, and could be discussed as surprisingly prevalent, and crucially important for any future developments. The first is the fact that in all the protest movements in the Arab world, and also extending to Iran’s green revolution of 2009, the Islamic parties and sentiments were all but missing from the process, and played either no role, or a small and insignificant one in the movement for change. This is not only in contrast to Israeli predictions, but also of those of the western intelligence community, strongly influenced by Israeli analysis and outlook. Their warnings that the Muslim Brotherhood was behind the Egyptian uprising were unsupported by events—to such an extent that the Brotherhood’s leadership came under pressure from its members to play a larger role in the developments.⁴

⁴ This does not mean, obviously, that such Islamic parties will not struggle to control societies in which they exist, to a greater or lesser degree. The Interim Egyptian Constitution, passed by a plebiscite in May 2011, is an example of how such a party, the Muslim

Of course, given their long history of organization and action, and a public image untainted by collaboration with the tyrants, it was easier for Islamic parties to gain the upper hand in elections, once these got under way. In Tunisia and Morocco, the Islamic parties have become the largest political forces. The elections in Egypt seem to offer a similar result for the party sponsored by the Muslim Brotherhood as well as the Salafist party. In this way, the fact that the Islamic parties were not the motivating force of the revolutionary process, did not stop them from capitalizing on it after the first stage of removing the tyrant was concluded.

A related misapprehension, also strongly supported by Israeli propaganda, was the claim that the protest was mainly fueled by anti-Israeli (and according to some deluded commentators, even anti-Semitic), sentiments, and would by its nature bring anti-Israeli governments into being, and revive the Arab-Israeli wars. While it is clear that Egyptian anger was also directed at Mubarak's servile and collaborative attitude toward Israel, and his role in enforcing the illegal Gaza blockade, as an active agent of Israeli policy, the revolt was surely driven by more central complaints—the corrupt, undemocratic and repressive nature of his regime, which was also what made the reactionary policies toward Palestine possible. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict as such did not play an important role in the Arab wave of protests. It is indeed probable that a democratically elected Egyptian government will be unlikely to continue Mubarak's policies toward Israel, but there was no sign of anti-Israel sentiment as the main driver of the protest.⁵ This was, crucially, an Egyptian protest, concentrating on Egyptian issues—freedom, justice, civil liberties, food, housing and employment, and an end to police brutality and the illegalities of the regime and the intelligence services (*mukhabarat*).⁶

Brotherhood, is intent on wresting power from the forces which brought about the social change; that it did so by conniving with the Interim Military Government is an ominous sign for the future.

⁵ Indeed, six months after the removal of Mubarak, the illegal closure of Gaza is still supported by Egypt, though its terms have been somewhat relaxed. On the whole, SCAF does not seem more hostile toward Israel than Mubarak was.

⁶ Even when this pattern was disturbed, as it was during August 2011, when six Egyptian soldiers were killed by the IDF, on hot pursuit of what was believed to be a Palestinian cell that has killed some Israelis en route to Eilat, and entering Egyptian territory in violation of the peace agreement—the outrage which has arisen, with a call for a 'million men march' against Israel, fizzled out very quickly, the march raised only a few hundred demonstrators in front the Israeli embassy in Cairo and led to the ousting of the Israeli embassy staff from Cairo.

In that sense, the protest movement in Israel, which arose in July 2011, was clearly inspired by the Arab spring events (according to some of its leaders). The Israeli protest movement, or the 'tent protest' as it came to be known, shunned the complex issues of the post-1967 occupation and control of Palestine, the failed 'peace process', or the question of the refugees and their return, and concentrated instead on a raft of economic and social issues, ranging from the price of cottage cheese to affordable housing, health and education. Indeed, the leaders of this protest movement have gone out of their way to avoid the great political issues, and did all they could to attract the most extreme of the settlers in the West Bank. While their movement seeks 'social justice', this seems to apply only to Jews, and excludes the great injustices caused by over four decades of military occupation, or the continued denial of Palestinian political and human rights since 1948. It seems that in order to include ALL hues of the Israeli Jewish 'volk', the protestors have, in effect, decided to exclude Palestine and Palestinians. If this can be termed socialism, as some of the protesters repeatedly claimed, it must be a form of 'national socialism'.⁷ After its initial success in raising public sympathy and interest, and heightening public debate of political priorities, the movement seems to have petered out prematurely without achieving its aims. It is possible, of course, that some long-term transformations will result from the 'tent protest' movement, but there is no such evidence at the moment. Ironically, it was the only protest movement in the Middle East which was not brutalized by the state police forces, not a single protester was hurt; it seems to have been the easiest to defeat by the regime in power, as the commitment of the protesters to change the system was somewhat limited in comparison to the societies around it.

It is nonetheless of great interest to examine the Israeli public reactions to the Arab spring, and to analyze these so as to understand Israeli political assumptions about the new Middle East. The Arab spring has shattered many certainties that Israel (and the United States) has invested in and relied upon, and the loss of this sense of certainty is affecting Israel, both in the long and short terms. In order to fully comprehend the depth of Israeli apprehensions about developments in the Arab societies around it, one needs to think in historical terms.

⁷ Some individual protesters have seen this as troubling, and carried posters such as 'Tahrir is here!'; They did not manage to sway the majority or the leadership of the 'tent protest'.

The Threat of Pan-Arabism

In the past, Israel has managed to prevail over the most serious political threat it faced—in the 1960s—with much assistance from the United States, combined with favorable historical developments. This threat was posed by the doctrine of pan-Arabism, developed and promoted mainly by the late President Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt, but in itself an older phenomenon. Pan-Arabism was based on the commonality of language and culture across the Arab world (from this perspective, Islam is a part of this culture, rather than Arab language and culture being a part of Islam) and the history of the spread of Islam since the seventh century. In this world-view, the nationalist struggles fought by the various Arab peoples to establish their independence from European colonial rule were parts of the greater struggle to establish the rightful place of the Arab *umma*, the broader community of the Arab people. It is this Arab brotherhood within the *umma* which was also behind the ineffectual fight in 1948 and 1949 by various Arab armies against Israel's occupation of most of Palestine, and the expulsion of the indigenous population. The fact that the Palestinians had no army themselves made such intervention even more necessary, unsuccessful as it indeed was.

The motivating force behind Nasserist pan-Arabism was a mainly secular anti-colonial sentiment formed in opposition to the continuation of over a century of European control of the Arab East, mainly by Britain and France, and particularly symbolized by the great colonial undertaking of the nineteenth century—the Suez Canal. After its completion, in 1863, the canal became not just a crucial waterway for European imports and exports, but also militarily essential to Britain's rule over India. To control the canal meant to hold Egypt, by definition; arguably, the canal could not have been built without the measure of control the British Empire had in Egypt, even as Egypt was still a nominal part of the Ottoman Empire. This complex relationship is carefully mapped by Marfleet (2009), Thompson (2008: 293–315), and Amin (2011) among others. Indeed, the economist Samir Amin sees the Nasserist period as the direct continuation of earlier struggles for independence: 'Nasserist systematization is nothing but the final chapter of that long series of advancing struggles, which began with the revolution of 1919–1920' (Amin 2011). This is because, Amin argues, despite Nasser having wiped out the historical precedents, he presented his own initiatives not as parts of a continuum, but as unprecedented new social moves. Nasser of course used pan-Arabism against the two opposing political blocs

in Egypt which posed an alternative to his regime—the Muslim Brotherhood and the Communist party, with some help from the security services.

After the Egyptian revolution in 1952, and especially after Nasser's coming to power in 1954, the simpler Egyptian nationalism (typified by the Wafd party) was replaced by a complex *Third Worldism*, which emerged from the April 1955 Bandung conference of the non-aligned nations, where Nasser took center stage as leader of the Arab countries. This anti-imperialist drive was expressed politically in the movement toward political unity in the Arab world, initiated by Nasser, and supported by the two Baathist regimes—Syria and Iraq. In the case of Syria, full unification was planned with Egypt: the United Arab Republic (UAR) was declared in 1958 (Thompson 2008: 304–306),⁸ though it existed mainly on paper until 1971. Arguably, the main plank of the unification was a military union—the rest of the social structure in both countries remained unaffected by the notional union. It was this military union that greatly concerned Israel, especially as it was also combined with more than a decade of Soviet support for the Nasserist project, as a way of developing a bulwark against western, and especially US support of the Gulf regimes as client states of the West.

In this way, the Middle East became the sandbox in which the major conflict between the two superpowers—the United States and the USSR—was played out. As a counter move against western support and military aid to Israel, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, the USSR armed and trained the armies of Egypt, Syria and Iraq, the pan-Arab axis at that time. This had obvious repercussions for Israeli military planning; Israel (and the United States) did all it could to undermine and destabilize it. The collapse of the pan-Arab alliance followed the Arab defeat in 1967, when the combined armies of Egypt and Syria, with some support from Jordan and Iraq, were defeated in a surprise attack on 5 June 1967 by the Israeli armed forces. The defeat was such that Nasser offered his resignation as president, but withdrew it when mass rallies demanded he stay as leader. Nasser remained president until his death in 1970, but the pan-Arab campaign was as good as dead. It was not revived by the two army officers, Sadat and Mubarak, who followed him as president and who were more comfortable with the earlier version of Egyptian nationalism. They made the shift to reliance on the West (the United States), instead of the declining USSR, for large annual

⁸ The union also included North Yemen (1958–1961) as part of the United Arab States. Nasser was president of both elusive entities. *ibid*, p.307

handouts. The death of Nasser brought about the decline of pan-Arabism while the United States became the dominant force, and later the sole arbiter, of political power and influence in the Middle East.

This period of 'stability', or from a more analytical perspective, political and social stagnation, under the aegis of despots governing with the support of western powers and serving their multifarious interests—came to an abrupt end in 2011 almost three decades later. While it is still unclear what direction the various Arab societies might take, it is unlikely that the servile relationship to the United States will be maintained under a more democratic form of government. Priorities have changed—the fate of the Arabs is now more important than the demands of the neo-imperial powers. Imperfect as the emerging democracies in the Arab world may prove to be (and which democracy can claim perfection?), they are likely to be more representative of the populations that have produced them, and better represent the deep and ongoing need for more modern social structures. The emerging governments are much less likely to do the bidding of Israel and the United States than the tyrants of the last few decades were. This is fully realized in Israel.

What those in Israel also realize (though this may be less true in Europe and the United States) is that the Arab spring is an updated twenty-first century version of pan-Arabism, an extension of the sociocultural project started by Al-Jazeera television in 1996, of connecting the Arab world by a virtual network and producing an Arab *public sphere*, an intellectual, political and social space for debating and settling issues within the Arab *umma*. This new Arab *continuum* echoes the earlier one during Nasser's heyday, but is based on cultural and social characteristics, rather than on military or administrative aims and institutions; indeed, the army is a problem, rather than the solution, as has been proved so decisively in the case of Egypt.

The Threat of Arab Modernity

As long as Israel could depend not just on the collaboration of the Arab despots around it, but also on their societies remaining backward and undemocratic, it felt quite safe. Since the war in 1973, the Middle East had become an interdependent matrix of US dependencies, a system of interconnected client states. Even the loss of Iran in 1979, an important part of this network, did not shake this new system. With the United States as master of the Middle East since the departure of the Soviet military 'advisers'

from Egypt and Syria, the power of the United States has gone unchallenged and its oil-related political interests were properly supported by a coalition of client states. Though the Palestine conflict continued to mar this New Middle East (Peres 1993)⁹ utopia, the differences were not deep enough to undermine either US or Israeli interests. As long as modernity was harnessed, delayed and deformed by the combined interests of the West—a set of interests Israel has come to personify—the status quo in the Middle East seemed safe enough. The US struggle against a radical solution to global warming was also a basis for the historical partnership with the Gulf states. Especially after the collapse of the Soviet empire in 1989, the power and influence of the United States in the Middle East seemed beyond challenge. For Israel, the ability to present itself as a modern bulwark of western values in the region, against the ‘orientals’—an amalgam of Islam, Arab identity and religious fundamentalism—seemed to offer the ideal position for the Zionist settler-state, as prophesied by Herzl (1956: 40–67). That this was not only done for external consumption was clear—Israel has depended on this identity, and continued to conceive and present itself both as ‘European’, western, and, jokingly but with some justice, as the ‘51st state’ of the United States. Certainly it has received more financial support than most of the actual US states. This identity was carefully honed and developed, and depended on a continuous projection of Israel as a valuable and dependable ally of the West, and particularly of the United States.

An obvious aspect of this ‘special relationship’ was Israel’s self-imposed right to vet any US Middle East policies, such as military sales to Saudi Arabia, for example. The Saudis were understood to be a bulwark against Shia Islam and the military might of post-revolutionary Iran, so their demands for more modern armaments were considered seriously and sympathetically. The US military-industrial complex, described carefully by Chomsky and others (Chomsky 2006; Hartung 2011; Pavelec 2010), has always used the Arab dictatorships to funnel US administration funding to its conglomerates; it did so with Israel as well. But the US interest in selling arms to Saudi Arabia has been, or has been perceived to be, in conflict with Israel’s ‘inviolable security interests’. The powerful and resourceful AIPAC¹⁰

⁹ A term coined by Shimon Peres, by which he meant the growth of Israeli influence, through military and economic means, over the Middle East as a whole.

¹⁰ American Israel Public Affairs Committee, the main Israeli lobby in Washington. It supports most US legislators financially in return for their guaranteed support of Israel, whatever it may do.

has made this one of its key demands—that Israel must have the right of veto over US defense decisions in the Middle East. No US administration has, in living memory, defied the Israeli lobby for long.¹¹ It is clear that this expectation of Israel was also supported by western and US *orientalism*; the premodern, religion-bound and servile nature of Arab populations was a fact and facet of western dogma, it seems. This type of ‘understanding’ was inherited from the British Empire, where it led policy for over a century, with limited success. It meant that Britain has done all it could to support these corrupt leaders, once it had installed them in position; part of this support was the continued struggle against the modernization of Arab societies, against the democratization of the Middle East. This is the long-established pattern that President Nasser endangered, and which the Arab spring now threatens. The United States continued to support despots like Mubarak until just days before his fall, in order to support their control over the social structure; This is now in jeopardy, though the United States has, since February 2011, attempted to re-engineer its foreign policy, and continue supporting its interests by derailing and defocusing the Arab revolts, as they did openly in Libya, and more covertly in other societies. But, of course, the success of the ‘updated’ US policy cannot be guaranteed: this has seriously undermined Israeli confidence in US invulnerability. This can be seen by Israeli reactions to the unfolding drama of Arab social change; the reaction of Israelis from across the political spectrum to the Arab spring was strikingly unified and telling—not a single voice from the political arena welcomed or offered solidarity to the incredible wave of democratic energy and action across the Arab world; instead, speakers and writers all voiced deep consternation and concern about the loss of their favored interlocutors—the various tyrants they had been dealing with, especially Hosni Mubarak in Egypt.

In an article in the *Guardian* published at the height of the Libyan conflict, well before the collapse of the Qaddafi regime, the Israeli editor-at-large of the liberal *Haaretz* daily, Aluf Benn, clearly described the unified reaction:

Even in its third month, the Arab revolution fails to resonate positively in Israel. The Israeli news media devote a lot of space to dramatic events in the region, but our self-centered political discourse remains the same. It cannot see beyond the recent escalation across the Gaza border, or the approaching

¹¹ An example may be President Obama—on coming to the White House, he announced that freezing the building of new settlements is crucial for the ‘peace process’. He had to abandon this position after less than a month.

possibility of a Palestinian declaration of statehood in September. Israel's leaders are missing the old order in the Arab world, sensing only trouble in the unfolding and perhaps inevitable change (Benn 2011: 31).

As Israel has modeled itself as the agent of western interests in the region, it has, by definition, set itself up as an opponent of the genuine interests of the Arab world and its citizens, and now it finds it difficult if not impossible to shake off this role, to see in the new region an opportunity rather than a further threat. Benn points this out: 'No serious political figure in Israel has reached out to the revolutionaries, celebrating their achievement or suggesting we need to know them better since they might share values and ambitions with secular, liberal Israelis' (Benn 2011: 31). A few months later, in November 2011, as the Egyptian army and police forces killed tens of protesters, Prime Minister Netanyahu was reported in the *Guardian* thus:

In February, when millions of Egyptians thronged to the streets in Cairo, commentators and quite a few Israeli members of the opposition said that we're facing a new era of liberalism and progress. . . They said I was trying to scare the public and was on the wrong side of history and don't see where things are heading. But, he told the Knesset, events had proved him correct (Sherwood 2011).

The unmistakable satisfaction that events have developed 'his way' is clearly discernable.

Democratic governments in the Arab world will, by definition, be less reliable from the Israeli-Zionist point of view, but they may, one hopes, be less corrupt, less pliable to pressure from Israel and its western allies, less willing to serve its interests, and less willing to subdue the Palestinians on Israel's behalf.

So, one result of the Arab spring, a seemingly unintended consequence of this complex process of sociopolitical change, is the fact that unless Israel changes its priorities and behavior radically, it will find its current *modus operandi* difficult if not impossible to persevere with, even with the level of support it currently enjoys from the United States, the European Union, and western allies elsewhere. It is no longer a question of presentation—Israel would indeed be unable to use the old slogan of the 'only democracy in the Middle East', but will also have to start behaving more democratically, or it will stand out from its neighbors in a most unwelcome manner. Its brutal and racist nature have been increasingly noted over the decades of the occupation since 1967, but were always ameliorated by the undemocratic nature of the region in which it was situated; this may no longer be a likely outcome—the comparison may be made with democratic states, rather than with tyrannies whose citizens are denied of

human and political rights. If Israel chooses, as seems most likely, to continue its illegal occupation of Palestine and the oppression of its people, it is more likely to meet with international censure of its policies and actions, probably leading to a global campaign, resembling the anti-apartheid movement, with boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) being increasingly enacted against it, until it is forced to abandon those policies under global pressure.

This putative result of the current conflagration is not only probable because of Israeli action or inaction, but will be a result of the likely changes in the balance of power over the next few decades. With the decline of western, American and European power and the rise of the BRIC countries—Brazil, Russia, India and China, as well as regional powers like Turkey—one is also likely to see a marked rise in the political fortunes of Middle Eastern countries, which under future democratic leadership will find their just place in the pecking order. Egypt under Mubarak was a pawn of the West; Egypt under a democratic government will climb up from its insignificance and servility. Such likely changes will also bring about a shift in the way western powers relate to the Arab world, and may also bring about long-overdue changes to the UN and its Security Council, where the out-of-date, undemocratic veto of the old imperial powers still pertains. A world where the United States cannot easily and automatically veto any resolution relating to Israel will be a very different proposition; thus Israel's continued angst about the changes in the region and the world must be understood in the context of long-term trends, not just the short-term power changes in individual countries. In the long run, the Israeli mission of ridding Palestine of its indigenous population cannot prevail when we take into account the direction of change.

It is also interesting to examine the likelihood and potential for change in Israel itself, as the trends of global change must also be evident to Israeli politicians. We can never again argue that change is impossible, as the current wave of change in the Arab world has clearly demonstrated; the question is: What change is possible in Israel, and what conditions limit it? Could Israeli society, voluntarily and willingly, offer a major change in its priorities, when faced with the new realities? Given the popular protest in Israel since July 2011, this question becomes important to examine.

This question was broached recently by Gideon Levy, writing on the day after Mubarak fell:

The news from Egypt is good news, not only for that country and the Arab world, but for the entire world, including Israel. Now is the time to be happy for the Egyptian people, to hope that this amazing revolution will not go

wrong. Let us lay aside all our fears—of anarchy, of the Muslim Brotherhood or a military regime—and let this great gamble have its say. Let us not wallow in the dangers; now is the time to bask in the light that shines from the Nile, after 18 days of popular, democratic struggle (Levy 2011).

One is left wondering if Levy indeed believes in the possibility that his own adulation could be shared across Israeli society, or has he written the piece ironically, knowing well the impossibility of such a change of heart. With Mubarak's departure, the almost palpable feeling of relief evident around the world was evident by its total absence in Israel—a sentiment that Israel must have shared only with the rulers of Saudi Arabia, Syria and Yemen. Indeed what was clear is the opposite—a feeling of despair for the deposed tyrant. This striking difference between the sentiments in Israel and the rest of the world can only be explained by the many decades of instrumental colonialism, in which colonial reality forms consciousness, and being/action dictates thought. One is what one does, after all, and it is impossible to continue to uphold liberal and progressive values if one is involved with occupation, brutalities and injustice on a daily basis. Many Israeli intellectuals try to fool themselves (or maybe the rest of us), claiming that even after four and half decades of iniquitous occupation, they are still upholding human rights and liberal values. This is plainly untenable, and the lack of fraternity toward the Tahrir Square victory over tyranny, or of a call during the recent 'tent protest' to end the occupation of Palestine, is the clearest evidence that such emotional and intellectual *salto mortale* by Israeli 'liberals' is sheer nonsense. By its very nature, Israeli society has excepted itself from the great mass of humanity which has expressed elation with the fall of a brutal regime in Egypt, achieved by unarmed masses with the slogan *silmiyeh* ('peaceably' or 'peacefully') being the most common one. It seems certain that, like the South African apartheid state before it, Israel will only relent under the most intense political, financial and cultural pressure from the world community. That pressure is developing swiftly, and is now more likely than ever to lead the complex political dynamics which will bring about the collapse of the apartheid state in the Middle East.

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