

Israel in the Wake of the Arab Spring: Seizing Opportunities, Overcoming Challenges

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Introduction

The Arab Spring – a term referring to the recent revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen, the civil war in Syria, as well as the reforms launched by various Arab regimes – was initially embraced with much enthusiasm and hope in the West. In Israel, however, it has been generally perceived as a threat to national security, as the start of a possibly-long era of instability characterized by a menacing process of Islamization of society and regimes. Here, “Arab Spring” was rather quickly replaced by the term “Arab/Islamic winter,” which expresses the Israeli negative reading of regional events.

Israel’s official policy towards the Arab Spring reflects these concerns: it aims at maintaining the status quo; it refrains from expressing political or moral support to the protestors in the different Arab countries; it is passive in nature – preferring to wait and see how developments unfold before taking any significant action; it lacks belief in the possibility of promoting peace and regional integration; and it seeks new partnerships with countries in Israel’s non-Middle Eastern periphery. But the risks and threats that the Arab Spring presumably hold for Israel form only part of a larger and more complex picture: recent developments also offer important opportunities for Israel’s regional foreign policies and for its standing in the Arab and Muslim worlds. The significant changes in the region should not be seen only through a negative lens but should also be used to promote some long-sought Israeli interests. The question is whether Israeli decision makers will identify these opportunities and attempt to act on them. While not ignoring the risks and challenges facing Israel, this paper will attempt to look at the opportunities which the present situation in the Middle East offers to Israel.

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An analysis of Israeli official and public voices with regard to the Arab Spring reveals the existence of three schools of thought: The first, and dominant one, perceives it as a negative phenomenon with grave implications for Israel. Its main proponents are Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and other right-wing politicians, who paint a very harsh and threatening picture of regional developments. The second school - represented by actors within the security and diplomatic establishments - accepts the overall negative framing but outlines a more complex picture with a different reading of the potential consequences and conclusions. The third school – represented by President Shimon Peres and Natan Sharansky, Chairman of the Jewish Agency - challenges the negative framing, attempting to illuminate the potential for positive gains. These voices, however, are not common, and are often presented only in the international, rather than in the Israeli, media.¹

Polls indicate that the Israeli public, in general, tends to support the first school, seeing the Arab Spring as a threat to the country's national security. A more positive view could be found among the Palestinian citizens of Israel, although they too have their share of confusion.² Even Israeli peace organizations have not easily embraced the regional movement calling for democracy. They have mostly reacted in a passive way that generally corresponded to that of Israel's government.³ These trends in the Israeli discourse are by and large the result of the traditional manner in which Israelis view the Middle East; negative images regarding Islam and Arabs are widespread, and represent a significant component of the dominant Israeli ethos of the conflict. The Arab world is often seen as homogeneous; nuances and complexities, not to mention differences between countries, societies and cultures, often go unobserved.

Challenges and Opportunities

The Arab Spring is not an event but rather a process, one which may take years and spill over to neighboring states. To date, what we have seen is an overwhelming rejection of dictatorship and authoritarianism, although democracy, while seemingly the goal, has not yet been fully embraced. Arab societies are struggling to find their own political model. As different segments of society have disparate – and sometimes antagonistic – aims, this struggle may well bring

¹ Lior Lehrs, "Egyptian Plague or Spring of Youth? The Israeli Discourse Regarding the Arab Spring," in Nimrod Goren and Jenia Yudkevich (eds.), *Israel and the Arab Spring: Opportunities in Change* (Ramat Gan: Mitvim – The Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies and The Friedrich-Ebert Foundation, forthcoming).

² Ghaida Rinawie-Zoabi, "The Arab Spring and the Palestinians in Israel," in Goren and Yudkevich, *ibid.*

³ Yael Patir, "The Israeli Peace Organizations and the Arab Spring," in Goren and Yudkevich, *ibid.*

further instability and volatility to the Arab region. In this age of changing realities, Israel will have to cope with the following challenges and opportunities:

1. *Engaging with Political Islam:* The major challenge confronting Israel in the post-Arab Spring era is the emergence of new political regimes dominated by Islamic parties. The coming to power through free democratic elections of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, *al-Nahda* in Tunisia, and the rise of other Islamic forces in Libya, Yemen and Syria, seemed to herald the strengthening of anti-Western, anti-Israeli and perhaps anti-Semitic rhetoric in the Arab world, to the point of posing a threat to the existence of the peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan. In contrast to alarming predictions, however, the new Islamic regimes have thus far been moderate or pragmatic in their domestic and foreign policies, including their attitudes to Israel and Jews.⁴ The adoption of pragmatic policies in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya is the result of political and economic necessities, as well as ideological shifts within the Islamic parties.⁵ Yet, the Arab Spring also gave rise to militant *Salafist* and *Jihadist* elements that are not willing to recognize Israel and are bent on its destruction.

The de-facto moderation of political Islamic groups that have seized power opens opportunities for Israel to engage with these new regimes. Egypt, the most important regional country for Israel, has upheld their peace treaty under Muslim Brotherhood leadership; President Mohamed Mursi has not only developed good relations with the US, but also appointed a new ambassador to Israel, exchanged greetings with President Peres, expressed his interest in helping to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and cooperated with Israel in reaching an informal agreement with Hamas (following Operation Pillar of Defense, last November) and in his efforts to fight terrorist elements in the Sinai Peninsula.

In the collision between ideology and interests the Muslim Brotherhood regime tends to adopt a pragmatic policy, which stems partially from the country's economic hardships and deep reliance on foreign – mainly Western – loans. Interestingly, under an Islamic regime, Egypt has more leverage than did the previous regime, headed by Hosni Mubarak, to exert on Hamas in its dealings with Israel. No less important is the fact that a treaty honored by the Brotherhood sends a message across the Muslim world that peace with Israel is not anathema and this might

⁴ Moshe Ma'oz, "Political Islam and the Arab Spring," in Goren and Yudkevich, *ibid*.

⁵ See, for example, Elie Podeh, "Egypt's President Morsi Moves to a Pragmatic Policy on Israel," <http://www.geopolitical-info.com/en/regional-reports/maghreb-and-middle-east>

affect the position of Hamas in the long run. Thus, though Israeli-Egyptian formal relations will probably remain cold, behind-the-scenes contacts (particularly between the two military and security establishments) will likely continue to flourish and might even open news vistas in the realm of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

2. Benefitting from the Asad Regime's Collapse: The civil war in Syria has been going on for more than two years and an end is still not in sight. Though inevitable, the process of Bashar al-Asad's regime downfall will be longer than initially predicted. And it will bring chaos and instability, with ripple effects in the neighborhood, in countries as Jordan and Lebanon. Apart from lingering instability, the main Israeli concern is the potential of al-Qa'ida-type groups to exploit the regime's weakness in order to carry out terrorist activities in the Golan area. Otherwise, however, the Syrian enigma offers some opportunities to Israel: first, in the long run, is the likely rise to power of a Sunni legitimate regime that might be more amenable to peaceful relations to Israel. Second, in the more immediate future, it signals the weakening of the anti-Israeli axis, led by Iran and Syria. Iran's ability to project power on Israel's immediate environment has undoubtedly declined; the weakening of Iran and Syria is also taking a toll on the non-state players in the "resistance" camp, Hamas and Hizballah. Moreover, the fact that the latter continue supporting Asad's brutal atrocities further stigmatizes the Shi'i organization in the Sunni world.⁶

The Syrian crisis offers Israel two additional opportunities, which have been partially exploited: First, Jordan's apprehension of the possible spillover effect within its borders – in terms of terrorism, instability and refugees – creates a potential for warmer Israeli-Jordanian relations. Indeed, there are indications that Prime Minister Netanyahu and King 'Abdallah II are tacitly coordinating their policy vis-à-vis the Syrian front.⁷ Second, the deteriorating Turkish-Syrian ties may serve Israeli-Turkish ties. The opportunity to mending these ties, which were damaged severely as a result of the Gaza flotilla crisis (May-June 2010), presented itself with the re-election of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in June 2011, coupled with the dramatic events of the Arab Spring. Yet, a draft reconciliation agreement, which was prepared with US mediation, was rejected by Netanyahu in summer 2011. It was only in March 2013, during

⁶ Ehud Eiran, "The Arab Spring: Opportunities," *Palestine-Israel Journal*, 18(1), 2012.

⁷ King 'Abdallah II himself stated in March 2013 that his relations with Netanyahu have improved. Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Modern King in the Arab Spring," *The Atlantic*, 18 March 2013.

President Barack Obama's visit to Israel that the two countries actually embarked on a new - albeit rocky - path toward reconciliation.⁸

The Israeli willingness to apologize to Turkey may indicate that Jerusalem has begun to internalize the implications of the changing realities in the region. Rather than looking for allies elsewhere – such as Greece, Cyprus, Romania and Bulgaria – Israel must find ways to tap into regional processes and to establish ties and working relations with its neighbors as well as with regional powers.

3. *Benefitting from the Growing Sunni-Shi'i Rift:* The rise of Islamic Sunni-Arab forces in the Arab world changed the balance of power between the Sunna and Shi'a. The growing Iranian role in the Middle East, which in recent years was supported by Syria and Hizballah, and largely encouraged by the changing role of the Shi'is in Iraq, received a blow by the Arab Spring. Consequently, a new Sunni coalition seemed to be emerging in the region, with Turkey and Egypt being central players in its formation, backed by the moderate monarchies of Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Morocco. This Sunni axis and Israel have several common interests in the region: first, diminishing the Iranian nuclear challenge, which threatens the security, status and economic interests of the Sunni Muslim countries; second, containing the looming threats from Syria, and possibly even assisting in deposing the Bashar regime; and third, ending the stalemate on the Palestinian front, which might deteriorate into a third Intifada.

4. *Engaging with the Arab Street:* In the past, Israel has dealt mainly with Arab rulers and elites. Yet, the Arab Spring accentuated the role of the masses in decision making; not only was the "street" important in toppling established orders, the new regimes found themselves accountable to the wishes, desires – and sometimes even the whims – of the gathering masses in the main squares of the big cities. Though Israel has not been a major issue on the agenda of the Arab Spring, still it suffers from a negative image in the public eye. Granted, reaching out to the Arab masses – be they secular or Islamic – is difficult for Israel. Yet, because of the importance of these voices in triggering changes in the Arab world and their impact on the decision makers, Israel should attempt – publicly or behind the scenes – to reach out to different parties and associations within Arab civil society. As the Arab Spring empowered the common people, it also created an opportunity for self-expression of groups and communities. In the

⁸ Nimrod Goren, "Israel and Turkey during the Arab Spring: An Unfulfilled Opportunity for Reconciliation," *Insight Turkey*, 14(2), 2012, pp. 121-135; Nimrod Goren, "Time for an Overture to Turkey," *Haaretz – English edition*, 28 February 2013.

“new” Arab world, there is growing curiosity and readiness to challenge the conventions of the old regimes. These circumstances might just enable a new discourse on Israel and with Israelis.

The opening of the political sphere in Arab countries provides a chance to introduce the peoples of the Middle East to Israeli voices committed to peace and regional belonging via Arab new media, TV stations and newspapers. It is an opportunity to deepen Arab knowledge and understanding of Israel, its society and politics. It is also possible for Israeli policy institutes to engage in forward-looking regional policy dialogue with emerging think tanks in the Arab world. New opportunities for second-track diplomacy also exist – whether these are conducted with liberals that feel greater freedom to talk with Israeli counterparts or with emerging Islamist elites that are coming to positions of power and feel a need to broaden their foreign policy expertise, including in regards to Israel.⁹ Undoubtedly, progress on the Israeli-Palestinian track (see below) would serve Israel in reaching out to different Arab civil society groups.

5. Promoting and Maintaining Peace: The Arab Spring has stymied one opportunity for Israeli-Arab peace, at least in the short-term – that of reaching peace with Syria. Given Assad’s loss of domestic control and the extreme violence he uses against his own people, he can no longer be considered a partner for peace. The Israeli-Palestinian track, by default, remains the only possible track for negotiations. The lack of trust and the conviction, on both sides of the conflict, that there is no partner to negotiate with, seems to impede any progress. The Palestinian achievement in the UN, influenced to a certain extent by the Arab Spring, gave the Palestinians a sense of empowerment that eases their way back to the negotiating table. Yet, the Fatah-Hamas rift seems to be undermining the ability of Mahmoud ‘Abbas to reach an agreement. Progress towards Palestinian reconciliation may thus assist the negotiation process in the long run.¹⁰ The composition of a new Israeli government, as well as the new US mediation role, may facilitate both sides’ return to the negotiation table. However, without a determination to solve the conflict on the basis of a two-state solution the deadlock will continue.

In the absence of a breakthrough in the bilateral talks, Israel may want to use the Arab Peace Initiative (API) – which was launched as early as March 2002 – to break the ice. The allegation that the changes of regimes during the Arab Spring has in fact rendered the API meaningless is

⁹ Ksenia Svetlova, “The Mass Media and Israeli-Arab Relations Following the Arab Spring,” in Goren and Yudkevich, *ibid*; Kamal Ali-Hassan, “The New Kingdom of Forces: Middle Eastern Research Institutes,” *ibid*; Ronen Zeidel, “In the Shadow of the Arab Spring: An Alternative Model of Israeli-Arab Encounters,” *ibid*.

¹⁰ Ido Zerkovitz, “The Intra-Palestinian Reconciliation Process and the Arab Spring: Risks and Opportunities,” in Goren and Yudkevich, *ibid*.

untrue as the annual summit of the Arab League, convened in Qatar in March 2013, clearly reaffirmed it. The results of the meeting between US Secretary of State John Kerry and Arab League leaders in May 2013 have also made this evident. This indicates that the new Islamist regimes are also committed to the implementation of the API.¹¹ Clearly, significant progress in the Arab/Palestinian-Israeli peace process is the key to improving Israel's standing in the Middle East: it would mitigate the anti-Israeli rhetoric of Arab regimes and civil society elements; open opportunities for cooperation with Turkey, Egypt, Jordan and possibly other Arab Sunni states; and allow Israel to concentrate on confronting threats posed by Iran, Hizballah and Jihadist-type-organizations.

In sum, the Arab Spring – in contrast to the prevailing Israeli view – does not only offer risks, threats and challenges, but provides opportunities for Israel as well. The Arab Spring may have led Israelis to alter some longstanding beliefs and images regarding the Arab peoples – from passive citizens willing to live for decades under dictatorships, to active, courageous and capable citizens standing up for their rights and risking their lives in a demand for change. In this context, it is worth noting that it was not a coincidence that the Israeli social protest of summer 2011 adopted slogans that originated in the Arab Spring states. Israeli decision makers may take advantage of these developments in order to introduce a change in the traditional Israeli policy toward the Middle East, which has thus far been characterized by a policy of “prevention” rather than “initiation.”

¹¹ Akiva Eldar, “Israel Ignores the Outreached Hand of the Arab League,” *Al-Monitor*, 29 March 2013. Decisions of the Arab League Summit 2013 (in Arabic), <http://www.lasportal.org/wps/wcm/connect/d289c9804f0a09648a349ea79d151c73/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA.pdf?MOD=AJPERES>