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Published version deposited in CURVE October 2015

Original citation & hyperlink:

Darweish, M. (2013) The Palestinian Israeli Conflict in the shadow of the Arab Revolutions. Journal of Conflict Transformation and Security, volume 3 (2): 154-172

<http://cesran.org/jcts-vol-3-no-2>

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Journal of Conflict Transformation & Security

The Palestinian Israeli Conflict in the shadow of the Arab Revolutions

By Dr Marwan Darweish*

Abstract:

Since its establishment as a state in 1948 Israel has based its relations with Arab countries and the Palestinians on the principles of denial of Palestinian national rights, the threat of military force and collaboration with corrupt, undemocratic Arab regimes.

The Arab revolutions sweeping the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) are having an impact on the relationships between Israel and the Palestinians on one hand and Israel and neighbouring Arab countries on the other.

The social and political changes that these revolutions have provoked have questioned Israel's military doctrine. They have also inspired Palestinians and Israelis to take nonviolent action in their pursuit of peace and justice.

Key words: Nonviolence, Arab Spring/Revolutions, Palestinian Authority, Conflict, Palestinian Israeli Conflict.

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The Palestinian Israeli Conflict in the shadow of the Arab Revolutions

Introduction

This paper analyses the impact of the “Arab Spring” on the Palestinian Israeli conflict and how it has changed the relationship between Israel and the Palestinian authority. The terms Arab “Revolutions” (Thawra in Arabic), “Awakening” (Nahda) or Intifada (Uprising) are the terms mostly used by Arab sources, with the “Arab Spring” mainly used in the West.¹ For this paper I use the term Arab Revolutions. Rabab El-Mahdi, in “Orientalizing the Egyptian Uprising”, criticises the way the Egyptian revolution has been depicted in the local and international media as if it is alien to the Arab culture.² This paper will highlight the different perceptions of the Arab revolutions amongst Palestinians and Israelis and will explore the influence it had on their own societies and political leadership. It will also reflect on the changes and reorientation of political powers in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) as a whole.

The outbreak of the Arab revolutions that swept the MENA countries from December 2010 came as a surprise to many observers, including media reporters and researchers. It caught political leaders, diplomats and foreign relations experts on Middle East affairs unaware, and unprepared for the scale and widespread nature of the nonviolent mass demonstrations.³ The international news media presented the death of the young Tunisian vegetable vendor Mohammed Bo Azizi as the spark that triggered the Arab revolutions. He set himself on fire on 17 December 2010 in protest against the confiscation of his goods and his humiliation. According to this argument, the case of Bo Azizi indicates that the root causes of the Arab revolutions are social, political and economic inequality and oppression. In Egypt the number of people living on less than two dollars a day grew from 39 percent to percent of the population during the last decade of Mubarak regime.⁴

By contrast, civil society organisations and opposition groups in Tunisia, Yemen and Egypt have argued that the process of the Arab revolutions started a few years ago and was the culmination of long and hard work by civil society organisations, trade unions, professional bodies and political groups in promoting advocacy and raising awareness. Protesters

1. For discussion on this issue see Rami Khouri, Drop the Orientalist term “Arab Spring” <http://english.alarabiya.net/views/2011/08/19/162970.html> for Accessed 3 September 2012. See also
2. Rabab El-Mahdi., Orientalizing the Egyptian Uprising, *Jadaliyya*, April 2011. <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/1214/orientalising-the-egyptian-uprising>. (Accessed 13 January 2013)
3. Jeremy Salt, Containing the “Arab Spring”, *Journal for and about Social Change movements*, volume 4, (1): 54-66, May 2012.
4. Rashid, Khalidi, Preliminary Historical Observations on the Revolutions of 2011, , in Eds, Bassam Haddad, Rosie Bsheer and Ziad Abu Rish, *The Dawn of the Arab Uprising, End of an Old Order*, Pluto Press, London, 2012.

overcame their fear and the tyranny of the regime to hold mass demonstrations in Tunisia in December 2010 and Egypt in January 2011, calling for the removal of Presidents Bin Ali and Mubarak and demanding political and social freedom. The slogan in Arabic “*Al-Shaa’b Yored Isqat al-Nizam*”, meaning the “the people demand the fall of the regime”, or “Irhal” (Go, Leave) united protesters across the MENA region and became an iconic feature of the Arab revolutions.⁵

In the last few decades, Arab leaders in the MENA countries have faced several attempted coups from within the military establishment or by radical Islamist groups to overthrow them by force. All of these attempts were suppressed and resulted in heavy restrictions on political freedoms and long term imprisonment for those involved. The Arab revolutions however were characterised by mass protest for civil and political rights, a contradiction of the top down approach that promotes change through violent means and with limited involvement of citizens. One argument is that the active nonviolent civil approach adopted by the revolution is the polar opposite to a military coup and as such has served to undermine the use of violence as a strategy for change.⁶ Bishara warns against the threat of violence and notes that “The challenge for the Arabs is to define their conflict through peaceful protest, and not be dragged into bloody conflicts that tend to change people for worse... [*change must be*] ...defined by the dream of a peaceful and prosperous future”.⁷

In both Egypt and Tunisia national armies were reluctant to use force to maintain presidential power. This prevented escalation of violence against demonstrators, although in Egypt there were some violent clashes with the army, which caused the death of many civilians.⁸ However both were in contrast to the situations in Syria, Libya, Yemen and Bahrain, where the military played a significant role in the repression of the opposition to the regime. The police, army and other special security forces in these countries conducted a violent attack against civilians, which caused hundreds of injuries and deaths. However, whilst the army in Egypt and Tunisia have retained the trust of the people, the police and special security forces are in a different position. Much of the public’s anger in the post-revolution period has been directed against them and the institutions they represent, not least because they deployed violence and control tactics aimed at preventing the spread of the demonstrations and containing the revolution.⁹

The Arab revolution in Egypt and Tunisia had two phases. The first phase united all political, social and religious forces under one slogan “down with the regime” and “leave, we don’t want you”. Secular forces, religious groups, trade unions, the working and middle classes, the young and old, men and women took to the streets in cities and villages to call for the downfall of the regime and for political freedom. Khouri described it as “the birth of the Arab

5. Marc Lynch, “The Big Think Behind the Arab Spring: Do the Middle East’s Revolutions Have a Uniting Ideology” *Foreign Policy*, December 2011.
6. Michael Theodoulou, *The National* newspaper, 27 July 2011, and Amro Ali, “Brothers in the Hood: Egypt’s Soft Powers and the Arab World. http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/8899/brothers-in-the-hood_egypt's-soft-powers-and-the-a (Accessed 14 January 2013)
7. Marwan Bishara, *A Rude Arab Awakening*, Al-Jazeera, 1 August 2011. <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2011/08/201181131751785145.html> (Accessed 13 January 2013)
8. See Jeremy Salt Ibid
9. <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/qa-state-human-rights-middle-east-and-north-africa-2012-01-10> (Accessed 15 January 2012).



citizen” and “true Arab sovereignty”.¹⁰ Dabashi argued that the Arab revolutions will define a new era in the Middle East and mark the end of Postcolonialism.¹¹

The second phase focused on the demands to transfer power from military rule to civil elected government. The challenge facing the revolutions was to transform the structures and the institutions that maintained regimes in power, and to seek the establishment of transparent and accountable political and judicial structures that would allow citizens to participate in the decision making and shaping of their society. Both countries held parliamentary elections in 2011/12. In Egypt the Muslim Brotherhood, under the name of the Freedom and Justice Party, and the Salafist Party (*Al-Aslah*) won a majority of the votes for the parliament. Similarly in Tunisia *Al-Nahada* (Muslim Brothers) also won a majority.

During this period of transition it will be critical to establish the foundation for free political participation and freedom of organisation, respect of human and civil rights and means to address the social and economic root causes of deprivation and marginalisation that impact on the majority in society. This is a daunting project facing the new elected governments, which must seek social and political reform and economic growth across the board, and to make provision for equal opportunities in work and education for many marginalised citizens.

Features of the Arab Israeli Conflict

Since its foundation, the Zionist movement has perceived the Arab indigenous population of Palestine as aliens and primitive people, proposing that Jews from Europe would modernise the country and “turn the desert to bloom”. By dint of their number, the Palestinian population were (and are) perceived as a threat to the integrity of Israel as a Jewish state – unique in the world. Ben Gurion, leader of the Zionist Movement and the first Prime Minister of Israel, declared as early as 1920 that the “Arabs of Palestine did not constitute a separate national entity but were part of the Arab nation”¹², arguing that ideally it would be better to have Palestine empty of its Arab Palestinian inhabitants to establish the Jewish homeland. Later Golda Meir, Israeli Prime Minister from 1969-74, took the position of publicly denying the existence of the Palestinian people.¹³ There has long been a clash between the fulfilment of the Jewish aspiration for a homeland in Palestine and the rights of the Palestinians over their land and sovereignty. Over time more than one million Palestinians have become refugees in neighbouring Arab countries and in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Many of these either fled or were displaced from lands in Israel during the 1948 and 1967 wars.¹⁴

The use of military force by Israel towards Arab countries and Palestine is one of the main features of their fractious relationship(s). Israel has military superiority in the MENA region and ranks within the top ten countries in the world for its military capability. It has had

10. Washington Report on the Middle East Affairs, Connecting the Arab Spring to Palestine, December 2011, Vol, 30, issue 9, pp 63-63.
11. Hamid, Dabashi, *The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism*, Zed books, London 2012.
12. Avi Shlaim, *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World*, London, Penguin Books, 2000, p17.
13. Ibid
14. For further discussion about the perception of the Zionist Movement of the Palestinians see Edward Said, *The Question of Palestine*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1980. Mossad, J “The post-colonial” colony: time space and bodies in Palestine/Israel” in Fawzia Afzal-Khan and Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks, eds. *The Preoccupation of Post colonial Studies*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

nuclear capacity since the late 1960s and remains the only nuclear armed country in the Middle East. It is not a signatory to the nuclear proliferation treaty and does not openly declare the extent of its nuclear capability. This is in contrast to neighbouring Arab countries, many of whom have been ranked much below Israel in terms of military capability. The asymmetry of power between the parties has enabled the Israelis to maintain a controlling and dominant position in its relationships with Arab neighbours.¹⁵

Jabotinsky, founder of Revisionist Zionism and father of the Israeli right, argued that it is only through the establishment of military force impervious to Arab pressure that the Jewish homeland can be secured. Ben Gurion voiced the same conclusion after the outbreak of the Arab Revolt in 1936, advocating for a gradualist strategy combined with the use of military power in order to force Arab neighbours and Palestinians to acquiesce to the establishment of Jewish state in the "Land of Israel". To implement such a strategy Israel has had to base its approach on the use of force, in the knowledge that Palestinians would not give up their national rights through free choice. Only through suppression could Israel impose its own will and agenda on the Palestinians and Arabs, compelling them to negotiate from a weak position.¹⁶

By examining the history and trajectory of the Israeli Arab conflict since 1948 we can see the success of this policy and the impact that Israel's military supremacy has had on conflict dynamics. Israel first signed the Camp David peace agreement with President Sadat of Egypt in 1979. It also signed the Oslo agreement with the PLO in 1993, and immediately afterwards signed a peace agreement with Jordan. In all of these, Israel was the powerful party. The military imbalance of power in favour of Israel has been translated to political coercion in the form of imposing political conditions for "peace agreement".

Meanwhile Israel has imposed military rule on the Palestinians who remained within the borders of the newly created state of Israel in 1948. It has imposed complex dual legal systems and policies in the West Bank and Gaza Strip since 1967, with one system for the Jewish settlers and another for the Palestinians. The settlers enjoy civil and political rights as the state's Jewish citizens, while the Palestinians have been denied their civil and human rights. Israel has total military control over the Palestinian territories, including entry and exit, and has imposed a movement restriction on the Palestinians within the territories through checkpoints and travel restrictions. Israel also has control over resources such as water, land, planning and building permissions. "A prolonged system and structure of discrimination has led to severe economic deprivation, exhaustion, despair and denial of the national rights of the Palestinians".¹⁷ The overall control of Israel on the life of the Palestinians reflects the imbalance of power between the parties and has become a defining feature of the Arab Israeli conflict.

15. Avi Shlim, *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World*, Penguin books, 2000

16. Avi Shlaim, *Israel and Palestine: Reappraisals, Revisions, Reflections*. Verso, 2009, part 1. See also *Ibid*, pp11-22.

17. Marwan Darweish, "Human Rights and the Imbalance of Power: The Palestinian-Israeli Conflict", Veronique Dudouet and B. Schmelzle (eds) *Human Rights and Conflict Transformation: The Challenge for Just Peace*, Germany: Berghof Handbook Dialogue Serious 9, 2010, p88.



While Israel is often perceived in terms which recognise its uniquely Jewish character and military supremacy, Arab countries in the MENA region also have their own defining features. They have long been characterised by the prolonged and intense control that Western colonial powers have exerted over the region. This extended from Morocco to Egypt and the Arab peninsula and through Iraq, Jordan, Palestine, Syria and Lebanon in the north. In the post-colonial period many Arab leaders stayed in power for decades after the struggle for national liberation in the 1940s and 50s. Anderson argues that is a situation unique to the region, stating that “The collective longevity of the rulers had no parallel anywhere else in the world: Gaddafi in power for 41 years, Assad father and son 40, Saleh 32, Mubarak 29, Ben Ali 23”.¹⁸ Both Mubarak and Saleh were preparing the ground for their sons to take power, had they been able to appoint a successor. Dynastic rule has been common, spanning the Saudi Royal family and other Sheiks and Sultans in the Gulf States, the Hashemite Royal family in Jordan and the Alaouite monarchy in Morocco. These families passed power down through generations of royal autocratic rule, typically with very little respect for human or political rights. They have also been considered vital allies of the US and Europe.¹⁹

Most of Israel’s and the USA’s long-term allies in the Middle East have been corrupt and undemocratic regimes, including those in Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia and Saudi Arabia. The people of these Arab countries have experienced political and economic corruption, grinding poverty and frequent violations of their human rights. Although MENA countries have about two thirds of the world’s known reserves of oil and natural gas, this wealth has not translated into fulfilling the political and economic aspirations of the region’s people.²⁰ The standard of living is still poor and most of the wealth of these countries is in the hands of a small exceptionally rich minority drawn from the political group in power. This failure to provide benefits to the wider population has caused political tension, frustration and alienation from the political leadership and state. It has encouraged corruption and nepotism and created cynicism amongst the ordinary people.²¹ This economic impoverishment of the majority of the population has been exploited by radical secular and Islamic groups in the region, as they provide fertile ground for recruitment to political and military opposition aimed at the overthrow of the regimes.²²

While these features in the Israeli Arab conflict are longstanding and likely to endure, they are also subject to changing political winds. This is particularly the case in the current period of political flux following the Arab revolutions, which are without precedent in the region. Traditionally the USA, Israel and Egypt have maintained a strategic military and political alliance since the signing of the Camp David agreement. By entering into the agreement Egypt secured its place as an ally of the USA and leader of the “moderate Arab camp”. It was

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18. Perry Anderson, “On the concatenation in the Arab world” *New Left Review*, no. 68, March-April 2011, p8.
 19. Crisis Group International, *The Shiite Question in Saudi Arabia*, Middle East Report N°45 – 19 September 2005. Also see [http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iran%20Gulf/Saudi%20Arabia/The%20Shiite%20Question%20in%20Saudi%20Arabia.pdf](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iran%20Gulf/Saudi%20Arabia/The%20Shiite%20Question%20in%20Saudi%20Arabia.pdf). Accessed 25 September 2011. Accessed 2 May 2012.
 20. Heather Deegan, *Third Worlds: The Politics of the middle East and Africa*, Routledge, 1996, pp154-56
 21. See the World Bank Gross National Income Per Capita for 2010. <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/DATASTATISTICS/Resources/GNIPC.pdf>
 22. Heather Deegan, *Third Worlds: The Politics of the Middle East and Africa*, Routledge, London, 1996, pp154-156. For more details see the web site and reports of Transparency International.

considered an important force in endorsing American foreign policy in the MENA region. Egypt also exercised leverage on the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) not to abandon the negotiations with Israel despite the continuation of Israeli occupation and failure of the Oslo peace process. Syria, by contrast, has led the radical and anti-American camp, an ally of Iran and Hezbollah and a base for Hamas and other Palestinian political groups opposed to the peace agreement with Israel.²³

Reflections on the impact of the Arab revolution on Palestinians

The Arab revolutions have enabled ordinary citizens in the Middle East to break the barrier of fear in opposing undemocratic regimes and in calling for collective dignity and political and social change. Palestinians have not been immune to this wind of change, which provides opportunities and possible new directions for the Palestinian independence struggle.

These areas of change and opportunity have opened up against a backdrop of deepening political divisions within the Palestinian political leadership and growing impoverishment throughout the territories. Since the Hamas victory in the 2006 election, tensions with rival party Fatah have escalated, and with Hamas' military takeover of the Gaza Strip in 2007 the conflict between the two parties intensified further still. In reality the Palestinians have two authorities, one in the West Bank led by Fatah and the other in Gaza Strip led by Hamas. Hamas controls the Gaza Strip and Fatah the West Bank, with the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) centre of power in Ramallah. This political division within the Palestinian political leadership has coincided with a deepening of Palestinian impoverishment in the occupied territories, with Hamas facing international boycott and the PNA facing increased pressure from donors to introduce neo-liberal economic reforms and good governance.²⁴

The Arab revolutions provided motivation and justification for Palestinian youth in the West Bank and Gaza Strip to take to the street to demand an end to the split between Hamas and Fatah and call for the formation of a new unity government. The 15 March Youth Movement and the West Bank Popular Committees have all called for dialogue and unity between the opposing parties. Both parties have been criticised for representing their own parochial interests rather than the popular aspirations of the Palestinians. A survey conducted by the Arab World Centre for Research and Development (AWRAD) amongst Palestinian youth indicates that 58 percent of young people hold Hamas and Fatah equally to blame for the division in Palestinian society.²⁵

The youth adapted the slogans of the Arab revolutions; keeping the rhythm "*Alshab Yored isqat al-Nizam*" in English "the people demand the fall of the regime" to "*Alshab Yored inhaa al inqisam*" in English "the people demand an end to the split". The Palestinian public is aware that to face Israel they have to unite and implement a clear strategy and vision to end the

23. Noam Chomsky, *Hopes and Prospects*, London, Penguin Books, 2010. For more details see chapter ten, pp251-258.

24. Mandy Turner, 'The Power of "Shock and Awe": The Palestinian Authority and the Road to Reform', *International Peacekeeping*, Vol.16, no.4

25. For more details see <http://www.awrad.org/etemplate.php?id=275&x=4>. See also the survey November 2011 amongst 1200 adult Palestinians in the occupied territories



occupation and establish a sovereign Palestinian state. The leadership of Hamas and Fatah have become more sensitive to public opinion and pressure for unity, yet demonstrators still face harassment and violence by the Palestinian security forces in both the West Bank and Gaza. On 16 March 2011, the day after a major demonstration from whence the 15 March Youth Movement claims its name, President Abbas announced his willingness to travel to Gaza to meet Hamas leaders to start reconciliation talks and the formation of a unity government.²⁶

In seeking to end the split between Fatah and Hamas and reconcile the Palestinian political leadership, President Abbas is in effect responding to popular opinion in Palestine. This is confirmed by a survey conducted by AWRAD in February 2012. Amongst 1200 youth in the West Bank and Gaza strip who were interviewed about their attitudes to the Arab Awakening, 43 per cent agreed that the events in other Arab countries are positively affecting the Palestinian situation. Another survey conducted by the same institution found that 50 per cent of the respondents agreed that the Egyptian revolution has had an impact on the Palestinian situation politically, and will ease living conditions.²⁷

The changes in Egypt have had a particularly profound effect in Palestine, not least because of the significant role that Egypt plays in Palestine's internal politics and external affairs. Since 2007 Egypt has played a leading role in mediating between Hamas and Fatah, though all the attempts have failed. This is partly because any agreement between Hamas and Fatah has been dependent on Israeli government and US approval, and both countries have pressured Egypt not to support an agreement that might strengthen Hamas and increase the influence of its allies.²⁸ Egypt under Mubarak was a central pillar for both Israel and the USA to maintain the status quo in the Middle East. Under Mubarak, Egypt also aided Israel to reinforce a tight economic and diplomatic siege on the Hamas administration in the Gaza Strip and to hermetically seal off the Rafah crossing. By contrast Al Arabi, the first Egyptian Foreign Minister to be appointed after the revolution, explained his intentions to strengthen relations with the Palestinians and invest in efforts to reconcile Hamas and Fatah.²⁹ There have been improvements in the relationship between Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, evidenced by the visit of the Egyptian prime minister to Gaza and communications with Hamas during the war in Gaza in November 2012. New arrangements to partially open the Rafah crossing at the Egyptian border have been made, breaking the international blockade. However, security cooperation between Israel and Cairo remains strong. In particular, the joint effort to "clean-up" the Sinai and expunge militants is at one of highest levels for years.³⁰

The Mubarak regime supported Fatah in its power struggle with Hamas, both because of the historical roots that Hamas shared with the (then outlawed) Muslim Brotherhood and

26. Personal interview conducted by the author with Civil Society activist, 17 July 2012, Gaza Strip.

27. See www.awrad.org.

28. Patrick Seale, *If Assad Falls, We Will See All the Region's Alliances Unravel*, *The Guardian*. 12 April, p28.

29. Doaa El-Bey, "New Face New Ideas", *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 23-29 June 2011, p.1.

30. Amos Harel, *Israel Egypt Security Cooperation at one of Highest Level since Peace Deal, Say Officials on both Sides*. *Haaretz* 9 August 2012. <http://www.haaretz.com/blogs/east-side-story/israel-egypt-security-cooperation-at-one-of-highest-levels-since-peace-deal-say-officials-on-both-sides-1.457085> (Accessed 23 January 2013).

because of the position that Hamas occupied as a hostile opponent to Israel and the USA at national and regional level. Erakat argues that “The fortitude of the Mubarak-Abbas alliance is also the result of profound and vested investment in maintaining US hegemony in the Middle East. The ouster of Mubarak would tip this balance and have broad ramifications”.³¹ The political changes that have resulted from the Arab revolutions have indeed had broad ramifications, not least by presenting new opportunities to reopen dialogue between Palestinian’s conflicting parties. The removal of Mubarak, an ally of Fatah, and an acknowledged disenchantment of Fatah with the US have contributed to a reorientation of perspectives amongst the factions.

The fall of Mubarak regime, the instability in Syria and the election of Morsi as President of Egypt, had created a new coalition between the Muslim Brothers in Gaza Strip and Egypt. The support to Hamas reached its highest level in November 2012, when a number of international and Arab leaders, including the Egyptian prime minister, visited Gaza. This change gave new legitimacy to Hamas in the Gaza Strip and elsewhere in the Middle East, which was short-lived after the President was deposed by the military in July 2013. Despite the new political reality it remains a challenge for the world to find a way to deal with political Islam empowered by political process.³²

The geographical proximity and the historical ties with Egypt further motivated Hamas to sign the Cairo agreement with Fatah on 4 May 2011. According to the agreement, a unity government would be formed mostly from technocrats and independent personalities in preparation for an election within a year. This would contest the Presidency, the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC, Palestinian Parliament), and the Palestinian National Council (PNC), a body that represents all the Palestinian political groupings. The control of the security forces was to be delayed until after the election, however new mechanisms were put in place to initiate reconciliation at grassroots level. The implementation of the agreement has stalled, initially because of Abbas’s insistence on retaining Salam Fayyad as Prime Minister, whom Hamas regards as too subservient to Israel and the West.³³ Hamas has argued that Fayyad is hostile to their party and is responsible for the arrest of thousands of their supporters, with the encouragement of Tel Aviv. However given resignation of Fayyad from his post in 2013 and the appointment of a new Prime Minister, it can now be argued that better conditions for reconciliation might emerge and drive this process forward.

Abbas has faced immense pressure from Israel and the USA to suspend talks with Hamas and to postpone efforts towards reconciliation. Israel threatened that it would withdraw facilities from the PNA leadership and withhold taxes collected by Israel on behalf of the Palestinians. This source of revenue is critical for the functioning of the PNA. The Obama administration has also exerted direct pressure on Abbas to keep Fayyad as Prime Minister or otherwise face political and financial sanctions. In his speech to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee,

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31. Noura Erakat and Sherene Seiklay, *Thahir’s Other Sky*, in Eds, Bassam Haddad, Rosie Bsheer and Ziad Abu Rish, *The Dawn of the Arab Uprising, End of an Old Order*, Pluto Press, London, 2012.
 32. Crisis Group International, *Palestinian Reconciliation: Plus Ca Change*, Middle East Report no.10, July 2011, p1.
 33. Joel Beinin. “The Israeli Palestinian Conflict and the Arab Awakening”, Middle East Research and Information Project, www.merip.org/mero/mero080111 Accessed 19 September 2011.



a powerful Israeli lobby group, President Obama made clear that “the recent agreement between Fatah and Hamas poses an enormous obstacle to peace”.³⁴

As well as increasing the public and political pressures on both sides of the debate on the rift between Hamas and Fatah, the Arab revolutions have highlighted the significance of nonviolent strategies in the struggle against Israeli oppression. Palestinians have a long tradition of using nonviolent action as a political strategy and means of resistance, being amongst the first to launch an organised popular uprising in 1936 to end British colonialism and in calling for an end to Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip during the first Intifada in 1987. The success of nonviolent popular resistance as a means for change in the wider Middle Eastern context has encouraged debate amongst the Palestinian leadership and public about its effectiveness as a strategy to achieve national and civil rights. Member of the PLC have commented that “We believe that nonviolent resistance is more participatory, it works locally and internationally. It broadens participation – armed struggle depends on small secret groups. Israeli power is more limited facing this kind of resistance; they cannot use their full power and justify its violence and force. Also what happened in Arab countries encouraged this approach. Pursuing this model will be more acceptable to the internationals and undermine Israeli propaganda about Palestinians as terrorists wanting to kill all Israelis.”³⁵

In 1948 thousands of Palestinians (700,000 according to the UN) were forced out of their homes to become refugees in the neighbouring Arab countries and the West Bank and Gaza Strip.³⁶ The recent nonviolent action may have provided fresh hope that their demands for participation in the Palestinian debate and the right to return could ultimately be successful. A group of Palestinians created a Facebook page in March 2011 calling for peaceful nonviolent protest in Arab countries and internationally against the occupation and demanding the right of return for Palestinian refugees in accordance with UN resolutions. In a few weeks hundreds of thousands of people were organised through social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.³⁷

On 15 May 2011 thousands of Palestinian refugees from Syria and Lebanon crossed the heavily protected border with Israel in the occupied Golan Heights. This was to commemorate *Nakba* day (Catastrophe day), the day on which thousands of Palestinians were forced to leave their homes in 1948 and become refugees in the West Bank, Gaza and the neighbouring Arab countries. This mass nonviolent action by Palestinians refugees demanding the right of return to their homeland can be seen as a key event in Israel's Palestinian Arab Spring.³⁸ Their actions were designed to highlight the plight of the refugees and expose the lack of legitimacy and authority of Arab regimes to decide their fate. This nonviolent protest, inspired by the Arab revolutions elsewhere, was enacted simultaneously in the West Bank, and on the borders of Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Gaza with Israel.

34. Khaled Amayreh, “Hamas-Fatah Discord on Fayyad persists”, Al-Ahram 23-29 June 2011, p2.

35. Personal interview with PLC member Bassam Salhi, 7 June, 2012, Ramallah.

36. Ibid Shlaim, 2009

37. www.economist.com/blogs/democracyinamerica/2011/05/israel_and_palestine_0 (Accessed 16 August 2011)

38. Ibid



Jordanian and Egyptian security forces prevented protesters from reaching the border with Israel.

Israel responded violently against the protesters and it was reported that more than twenty demonstrators were killed in different locations. Some argue that Assad exploited the Nakba Day to divert criticism and “manufacture” clashes on the border with Israel to deflect external attention on to Israel.³⁹ Regardless of this, the failure of Israel’s use of military force to suppress nonviolent civil resistance demonstrates that even with sophisticated aircraft and missiles it is difficult to prevent or respond to such actions. Ehud Barak, Israel’s Defence Minister, warned that “We are just at the start of this matter and it could be that we’ll face far more complex challenges”.⁴⁰

Other examples of nonviolent direct action were organised by different civil society organisations. Local popular resistance groups protested against the construction of the Separation Wall and confiscation of Palestinian land. There was activism in the neighbourhoods of East Jerusalem against the confiscation of Palestinian homes. The Israeli organisation ‘Solidarity’ and Palestinian popular local committees in Jerusalem organised a march on 15 July 2011 to support the campaign for Palestinian UN membership.⁴¹ Meanwhile the local and international movement for boycott, divestment in and sanctions against Israeli and settlement goods has continued to grow.⁴²

The Arab revolutions highlighted the demands of millions of people in the Arab world for freedom and democracy, participation, social justice and an end to corruption and dictatorships. These calls may have given the Palestinian leadership cause for concern, given that the PNA has been frequently accused of the violation of human rights, mismanagement and corruption. There have been no election for the Palestinian Legislative Council in the occupied territories since 2006 and no election for the President. Historically the PNA in the West Bank and the Hamas administration in Gaza Strip have behaved much like other authoritarian regimes in Arab countries. Perhaps in recognition of the growing reluctance across the Middle East to countenance authoritarian and unaccountable styles of leadership, the Fatah Executive Committee recently took the unusual step of expelling one member on corruption charges. He now faces prosecution. During interview, an (anonymous) member of a Palestinian NGO explained to the author that “The PNA feels the heat of the events in the Arab countries and the calls to punish those accused of corruption”.⁴³

This pressure on the Palestinian leadership has also accelerated the call to replace the PLO old guard and give the younger generation a chance to play a role in shaping the future of the Palestinian society and polity. For some years a younger generation, who were born and have lived under Israeli occupation since 1967, have been demanding a greater role in political

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39. <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/6082/roundtable-on-palestinian-diaspora-and-representat>. Round Table: Palestinian Diaspora and Representation. (Accessed 13 January 2013)
 40. Jonathan Cook, On an old anniversary, a new sense that change is possible, the National, 17 May 2011.
 41. Joel Beinin, The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict and the Arab Awakening, Middle East Research and Information Project, August 1, 20011. www.merip.org/mero/mero080111.(Accessed 1 September 2011)
 42. Rashid Khalidi, "The Uncertain Arab Autumn", New Statement, 19 September 2011, p. 46.
 43. Personal interview conducted by the author, 12 March 2012, Jenin.



participation. This call took another step with the campaign to mobilise and organise the Palestinian Shatat (Diaspora) to have representative bodies and mechanism for Palestinians and civic registration for direct election to the Palestinian National Council.⁴⁴ The campaign demanding political change gathered speed during protests organised in the West Bank and Gaza demanding political reforms, new elections and reconciliation. These calls for reforms came from young independent people who reject the methods and politics of both Hamas and Fatah. Khouri noted that "The success of the uprisings in other Arab countries will only fuel the burgeoning Palestinian desire for freedom and justice."⁴⁵

The Palestinian Israeli conflict is widely seen as at the core of the conflict between Israel and the Arab countries. Palestinian resistance has long been a source of pride and admiration for neighbouring Arab people, who over the years they have made a great show of their support for their fellow Arabs in Palestine. Yet today it is the Palestinian people who look to revolutions in Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen as a source of inspiration and a model for progressive change. Perceptions of Arab citizens have changed in Palestine, across the Arab region and worldwide. As former Palestinian negotiator Hanan Ashrawi states, "There is a new energy, a new dynamic".⁴⁶ The protests have unified the Arab public in their demands for "*Alshab Yored isqat al-Nizam*" meaning the "The people demand the fall of the regime" and inspired the revival of pan-Arab feelings.

The Arab revolutions and Israel

Israel is proud of its claim to be the sole democracy in the Middle East with a multi-party system, sharing the same values of liberal democracies in the West. The corruption and lack of democracy that has too often characterised Arab regimes in the Middle East has suited Israel's interests and image, strengthening its claim to uniqueness in the region as a fully-functioning liberal democracy surrounded by Arab dictatorships. By contrast to Israel, Arab leaders have been perceived as lacking in credibility and the support of their people. The moral legitimacy of Arab dictators to criticise Israel about its violation of human rights in the Palestinian occupied territories, or to make a credible demand for statehood for the Palestinians, has remained questionable for as long as they themselves were the main cause of political and social injustice in their own countries. Yet whilst Israel presented itself as above the autocratic fray, it also benefited from the 'strong leadership' that Arab regimes were able to provide. Klein has argued that "Israel has traditionally preferred to maintain close relations with non-democratic monarchs, rather than communicating with the people. Israel's security, according to this view, is assured first by its own force, and second by strong Arab leaders who agree to cooperate secretly or openly with Israel."⁴⁷ It is perhaps precisely

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44. Palestinians Organizing in the Diaspora: Part 1 Roundtable on the Palestinian Diaspora and Representation. http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/1671/palestinians-organizing-in-diaspora_part-i-roundta (Accessed 23 January 2013). See also Civic Registration for Direct Election to the Palestinian National Council. http://palestiniansregister.org/?page_id=45 (Accessed 23 January 2013)
 45. Washington Report on Middle East Affairs, Ibid
 46. Associated Press, "Inspired by Arab Spring, Palestinians Protest is Bursting with New Energy" Haaretz, 17 May, 2011. <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy/inspired-by-arab-spring-palestinian>. (Accessed 14 June 2011)
 47. Menachem Klein, Is the Arab Spring Israel's Winter, Palestine-Israel Journal, Vol 18, no.1, 2012. [WWW.pij.org/details.php?id=1404](http://www.pij.org/details.php?id=1404)

this kind of rationale that explains why in February 2011 the Israeli media confirmed that Netanyahu had offered Mubarak asylum.⁴⁸

Israel's first response to the Arab revolutions was one of complete surprise and denial, portraying it as unauthentic and short-lived. As time has passed the Israeli narrative has focused more on the danger to Israel, describing the Arab revolutions as "Islamist Winter" and highlighting the risk that the "Muslim Brothers" and other Muslim "extremists" groups would gain power and become a source of threat to Israel and in that way increase anxiety amongst the Israeli public. Klein has explained that the Arab Spring has pushed Israel deeper into a 'bunker mentality' in the face of perceived existential threats".⁴⁹ Israel is concerned about any change to the status quo in the region, not least because for many years it has expended significant energy and resources to maintain its military superiority and political influence. Yet the status quo is indeed changing. According to Barghouti it "no longer applies",⁵⁰ whilst Byman argues that any changes in the region will impact on Israel "Even if it means the toppling of regional foes risks rocking this prosperous boat".⁵¹

In the global media Arabs are often perceived as undemocratic, fundamentalist, and accepting of oppression and hierarchical authority, which of course jars with the notion that they would be capable of calling for social justice, freedom and democracy.⁵² Udi Adiv, an Israeli academic, explained: "Israel wants to maintain its image as the only democracy in the Middle East" and as the "shining star" in the Arab darkness of the Middle East.⁵³ Israel does not associate itself culturally, politically or economically with the wider Middle East, but rather it chooses to identify instead as part of the West where the Zionist movement was founded. Thus it came as no surprise when Netanyahu, Israel's Prime Minister, initially described the Arab revolutions as an: 'Islamic, anti-Western, anti-liberal, anti-Israeli, undemocratic wave', arguing that the Arab countries were 'moving not forwards but backwards'.⁵⁴

By mid-2011 however the Israeli tone had changed. The Israeli public was becoming more aware that the Arab revolutions represented a historical change sweeping through the region. At the same time, the main concern of the Israelis military and the government turned towards assessing the impact of the Arab revolutions on the relationship with their peace partners, Egypt and Jordan. Israel has struggled to maintain its political partnership with the Egyptians in the face of growing insecurity. The gas pipeline that supplies Israel from Egypt has been sabotaged several times during 2011/12. In September 2011 the Israeli embassy in Cairo was overrun by thousands of demonstrators. The ambassador and his family

48. Haaretz 3 August 2011. <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defens/mk-benelizer-israel-offered-political-asylum-to-mubarak-1.376721>

49. Ian Black, "Fretful Israel monitors the crumbling of the old certainties" *The Guardian*, London, 18 July 2012, p 12.

50. Washington Report on the Middle East Affairs, Connecting the Arab Spring to Palestine, December 2011, Vol, 30, issue 9, pp 63-63.

51. David Byman, "Israel's Pessimistic View of the Arab spring", *The Washington Quarterly* 34:3, summer, 2011.

52. See Edward Said, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How we See the Rest of the World*, Vintage Books, London, 1997.

53. Personal interview, 15 June 2011, Israeli academic and activist, Haifa.

54. Jonathan Cook, "Israel's Grand Hypocrisy: Netanyahu Slams 'Anti-liberal' Arab Spring, *Counterpunch*, December 1 2011



fled back to Israel.⁵⁵ This came a matter of weeks after Israel attacked the Gaza Egypt border, killing three Egyptian police officers. In response to the incident Cairo had withdrawn its ambassador in Tel Aviv pending the outcome of an official investigation. Israel later apologised for the deaths of the officers.⁵⁶

The mass participation of ordinary citizens from all walks of life in the Arab revolutions has further discredited the notion that Western countries might be able to embed democracy to the Middle East through intervention and regime change of the type pursued in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Arab revolutions have demonstrated that change has to be home grown, owned and developed by the people in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and other countries.⁵⁷ The unarmed civil resistance in MENA countries may be bringing into question Israel's focus on the centrality of hard power and the deployment of military force to achieve foreign policy objectives. It is possible that Israel is now aware that military might will not be able to respond to a determined popular nonviolent movement in the Palestinian occupied territories. As the Israeli defence Minister Barak told Haaretz newspaper "the Palestinians' transition from terrorism and suicide bombings to deliberately unarmed mass demonstrations is transition that will present us with difficult challenges".⁵⁸

The seismic political changes that are taking place in Arab countries have made Israel an even more important regional ally to the West, particularly the USA. Pratt and Salt argue the developments in Arab revolution countries have distracted the world's media attention away from the Israel Palestine conflict. The political uncertainty has also made global leaders more reluctant to advocate against Israel's continuing programme of building settlements and confiscating Palestinian land, and the new drive to introduce laws discriminating against the Palestinians citizens of Israel. This has had the net effect of introducing further barriers to resolving the conflict.⁵⁹

The wind of change in the MENA also inspired thousands of Israelis. It is estimated that more than 300,000 demonstrators took to the streets of Tel Aviv on 6 August 2011 and more in other cities, to press their demands for social justice and to protest over the lack of housing, expensive rents and the high cost of living that has hit mainly Israel's poor but also the middle income bracket. Moshe Silman, an Israeli protester, set himself alight at a demonstration over the high cost of living. He died a week later.⁶⁰ As Minister of Finance in 2003, Netanyahu led the policy of market economy that saw privatisation of the public sector and cut of subsidies for basic commodities. When he returned to power as Prime Minister in 2009 he

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55. Jonathan Cook, Next year in Jerusalem: Ongoing tremors of the Arab Awakening, The big idea of 2012. 19 December 2011. <http://www.jkcook.net/Articles3/0583.htm>. Accessed 5 May 2012.
 56. Harriet Sherwood, Israel 'regrets' deaths of Egyptian policemen, Observer, page 19, 19 August 2011.
 57. Marc Lynch, "The Big Think Behind the Arab Spring: Do the Middle East's Revolutions Have a Uniting Ideology" *Foreign Policy*, December 2011.
 58. Associated Press, "Inspired by Arab Spring, Palestinians Protest is Bursting with New Energy" Haaretz, 17 May, 2011. [Http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy/inspired-by-arab-spring-palestinian](http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy/inspired-by-arab-spring-palestinian). (Accessed 14 June 2011)
 59. Nicola, Pratt, The Implications of the "Arab Spring" for the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: or "Thing Fall Apart", Warwick University, March 2012. Also see Salt Ibid.
 60. Protester who set alight to himself dies see <http://www.ynet.co.il/home/0,7340,L-2,00.html> (accessed 22 July 2012)

continued with this drive to transfer services such as education, health, social welfare and others to the management of the private sector.⁶¹

The campaign started with a handful of tents erected in the centre of Tel Aviv to highlight the social and economic injustices in Israel. The movement rapidly mushroomed, extending to more than fifty Arab and Jewish localities in Israel and benefitting from wide public acclaim and enthusiastic support. This movement was exceptional in Israel, bringing political and social groups from the entire political spectrum; right and left, secular and religious, Jews and Arabs under one umbrella. It even included settlers from the occupied territories which caused intense controversy. Netanyahu, the Israeli Prime Minister, could not ignore this movement and immediately set up a committee to listen to the protesters and suggest recommendations. This same middle class that voted in Netanyahu was now demanding a review of the agenda of Israel's national priorities and was critical of the ideological motives of government in spending on settlements in the occupied territories and the military cost of maintaining settlements, which has reached \$1.5 billion annually. The majority of the movement avoided discussing the link between the occupation, military spending and the question of how profits from the occupation have given rise to poverty and social exclusion. A minority in the protest movement, mainly from the Israeli left and Palestinians in Israel, argued that the cost of settlements and maintaining the occupation, and the military's budget, and are the root causes for the poverty, lack of affordable housing and high cost of living.⁶²

These protests, along with earlier demonstrations organised by the Israeli left, highlighted the 44 years of Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza and attracted the participation of more than 20,000 people, both Arabs and Jews. An optimistic view from some activists in the Israeli peace movement argued that the events in the Arab countries gave them hope and increased support to the Palestinian struggle and that "Youth from Egypt sent messages of support to Palestinians and Israelis protesting against the Wall".⁶³ An Israeli peace activist summed up the impact of the Arab revolutions on Israeli society as follows: "I didn't believe myself saying that we should learn from the Egyptian how to rise up, it was unbelievable to see signs written in Arabic *Irhal* (go) and under it in Hebrew (Egypt is here)".⁶⁴

However, it is possible to argue that Israel has largely distanced itself from any link to the Arab revolutions next door. This view is confirmed by the survey conducted by the Israel Democracy Institute in February 2012⁶⁵, where 91 percent supported the protest but only 13 percent believed that it was influenced by the "Arab Spring".

Conclusion:

The Arab revolutions or uprisings inspired both Palestinians and Israelis in various ways to take nonviolent direct action to address social and political issues. The dictators in Egypt and

61. Saleh, Alnaami, *The "Tent" Revolution in Israel: Roots, Implications and Consequences*, Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, 8 September 2011.

62. Ibid

63. Personal interview conducted by the author with Israeli peace activist, 6 March 2012, Tel Aviv

64. <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/2379>

65. The Israel Democracy Institute, The Peace Index <http://www.peaceindex.org/indexMonthEng.aspx?num=207&monthname=July> (Accessed 23 January 2013)



Tunisia have gone but substantive transformation of the social and political structures which maintained the former regimes has yet to take place. This stage of transformation is a daunting challenge facing the democratically elected governments, tasked with creating new jobs and providing equal opportunities for accessing health, education and other services.

At the regional level, a new order is emerging that challenges Israel's dominance of the region.⁶⁶ There is a democratically elected political leadership in Egypt from the Muslim Brotherhood with strong links to Hamas. Turkey has emerged as a critical player, benefiting from its mediation role and promotion of trade with the Arab world. Turkey will be looking to strengthen its relations with the Arab countries and invest more politically and economically in this direction given the strained relationship with Israel since the incident of the Mavi Marmara.

One can argue that the use of largely nonviolent peaceful protest for social and political change has undermined military doctrine and highlighted the human security aspects of the citizens of the region and inspired many people struggling for peace and justice, including Palestinians. The widespread demand for democratic changes and respect for human rights has delegitimized the Arab regimes and their dictatorships, and opened the door to a new era of self determination and change.

Israel is facing new challenges. Rather than a military threat, these challenges arise because millions of Arabs are upholding their democratic rights. Israel "...has painted itself into the corner of only dealing with Arab potentates and thus it cannot tolerate such a gaze: for it cannot imagine itself existing in a democratic neighbourhood".⁶⁷

The Arab revolutions across the MENA are bottom-up movements for change, not top-down change. They have been brought about by the mass participation of ordinary citizens from all walks of life and not the political elite, or the "old guard". This has challenged the West and the US views and attitudes that they can bring democracy to the Middle East through "regime change" and the maintenance of support to the dictatorships in MENA as long as possible. The invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan aimed to topple the regime and establish Western-style democracy in the region. The Arab revolutions countered this new neo-colonial ideology of imposing liberal type democracy and has shown that true change is home grown, owned and developed by the people.

66. Nicos Panayiotides, "Is the Arab Spring Israel's Winter? Strategic Instability in the Middle East" *International Journal on World Peace*, Vol. XXIX no.1 March, 2012.

67. Dabashi Ibid

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