



# **A Changing Discourse on Israel in the Arab World**

**Dr. Abdullah Swalha**  
**Director, Center for Israel Studies, Jordan**

**A keynote address delivered at a  
Mitvim Institute symposium  
*Jerusalem, Israel; 13 August 2015***

**Dr. Abdullah Swalha, Director of the [Center for Israel Studies](#) in Jordan, was the keynote speaker at a symposium held by [Mitvim - The Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies](#) on 13 August 2015. The symposium focused on the changing discourse on Israel in the Arab world as well as on opportunities for regional cooperation. It also featured MK Ksenia Svetlova (Zionist Union), Kamal Hassan (Policy Fellow at the Mitvim Institute), and Dr. Nimrod Goren (Head of the Mitvim Institute).**

Hostility toward Israel has historically been the one unifying factor in the Arab and Muslim world that has trumped disagreements on other matters between and within the different countries. This, however, is beginning to change in light of the impact of the Arab Spring and the regional ramifications of the Iranian nuclear program. Nevertheless, the Arab states will stay reluctant to pursue close relations with Israel in the absence of progress towards the resolution of the Israel-Palestinian conflict.

## **A. The impact of the Arab Spring**

**The Arab Spring gave rise to a new generation that brings new voices, demands, and ways of approaching politics.** New media, including Facebook and Twitter, have created opportunities for mass communications and social spaces that regimes cannot control.

These developments allowed young people to "compare notes" with their counterparts in other countries, and to recognize how their own governments wasted wealth and time to enhance their own power, while ignoring the needs of

their people. It opened their eyes. Therefore, when the people took to the streets in Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen, Syria, and Libya, they did not demand the destruction of Israel, but rather dignity, social justice, education, solutions to unemployment, and an end to corruption. **Our generation has other worries than picking a fight with Israel.**

Indeed, **many Arab citizens were struck by Israel's solid democracy.** They realized the failure of the Arab regime to create a model of development and deliver democracy to the Arab citizen. Israel provides a stark contrast in that it has been engaged in seven wars over the past 63 years of its existence, but nevertheless maintained its democracy.

**Israel ought to support the spread of democracy in the Middle East, and view this as a window of opportunity.** Israel should not remain an island of affluence in an ocean of poverty. Democratic and developed economies in the region will be an asset to it, as improvement of the lives of one's neighbors means the improvement of the neighborhood in which one lives.

## **B. The regional ramifications of the Iranian nuclear program**

Israel and the pragmatic Arab states are finding **new common interests in opposing Iran.** The pragmatic Arab states fear that the deal between Iran and the West enables an Iranian-American rapprochement, at the expense of their own relations with the US, especially in light of the reduced American dependence on oil from the Gulf.

The Arab states fear that Iran will use this deal as an opportunity to increase its influence and hegemony in the Middle East. Iran will grow stronger as a result of the sanctions removal: it will no longer be isolated and it will be provided with legitimacy among the nations, while at the same time preserving its nuclear capabilities. In the eyes of the pragmatic Arab states, especially those in the Gulf, the current US administration is willing to give Iran the "keys to the region", at their expense.

The lifting of sanctions will facilitate the immediate influx of more than \$100 billion to Iran, and many more hundreds of billions of dollars over the coming decade. These will all help Iran advance its hegemonic aspirations and subversive activities in the region. Even just a fraction of this sum would be enough to double the annual budget of terrorist organizations such as Hezbollah, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad.

The new geo-strategic situation creates both a need and an opportunity for change: **in the eyes of moderate Arab states, Israel is beginning to look more like a potential ally than an enemy.** For some Arab rulers greater enemies than Israel have appeared in recent years: Iran, Al-Qaida, the Islamic

State, Huthis, and assorted Arab terrorist groups. These new threats seem as an existential danger to them, a kind of danger that Israel never constituted.

**This reality creates a favorable time and strategic opportunity to promote cooperation between Israel and several Arab countries** sharing common interests and concerns regarding Iran and its terrorist proxies, the Shiite axis, and state and non-state forces identified with radical Islam. Israel and the pragmatic Arab states have shared enemies and interests: Iran and the radical Islamic terror organizations. They even share the disappointment over American policy in the Middle East. Israel has enemies in the Middle East but it is now also gaining friends in the Middle East.

### **C. The need for progress toward Israeli-Palestinian conflict resolution**

Even given changing sentiments regarding Israel in the Middle East, the Arab states will stay reluctant to pursue close relations with Israel in the absence of progress towards the resolution of the Israel-Palestinian conflict.

In order to overcome this obstacle, **Israel must launch a diplomatic initiative, while adopting the Arab Peace Initiative (API) as a basis for negotiations.** The growing power of radical Islamic groups, the escalation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the deterioration of Israel's relations with the US due to the Iran deal, all suggest that Israel should take a different approach and respond favorably to the API.

Arab states' representatives have stated more than once that **following an Israel acceptance of the API as a basis for negotiations, they will be open to discuss Israel's reservations** and the Palestinians will be able to adopt a more pragmatic approach for solving any points of contention. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, together with representatives of the international community, are currently trying to renovate the API so as to present Israel with a more suitable basis for a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

**Israel's regional standing is deeply tied, now more than ever, to its policies with respect to the Palestinians.** Now is not the time for passivity, but rather it is time to take a bold stand. Therefore, Israel must act to renew serious peace negotiations, to urgently address the issue of settlements in the West Bank, to reconsider its refusal to a deal with Hamas, and, finally, not to hinder the Palestinian efforts for Fatah-Hamas reconciliation.

**Without a new Israeli peace initiative, Israel's international standing will increasingly deteriorate.** This will likely include a continuation of violence, growing international pressures for the establishment of a bi-national state, and an increase in Israel's international isolation and its tensions with the US and European countries over the settlements.

The absence of a proactive Israeli diplomatic strategy towards the region has one explanation in the Arab world: **Israel has no foreign policy, but only domestic politics.** The small parties in the Knesset seem to extort the ruling party for concessions. Thus, Israel needs to change its political system, especially its electoral system, in a way that will enable effective foreign policy that is not influenced so heavily by domestic politics.

**So far, the Israeli government has focused on managing the conflict with the Palestinians rather than solving it.** Israel perceives itself as a small and isolated country surrounded by potential enemies, living under a sense of constant threat. So, the country has invested greatly in the strength of its military. **Israel is well-placed to defend itself in the region through hard-power, but at the same time, it has scarce diplomatic and political influence** or 'soft power' in its own neighborhood.

Israel perceives the conflict with the Arab world as a zero-sum game in which the victory of one side comes at the expense of the other. Yet this approach is completely wrong: **The Arab states often act according to their own national interests which sometimes align with the interests of Israel.** Bringing an end to the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians will help the young Arab generation realize their aspirations, and the Muslim world will be willing to recognize Israel, normalize relations with it, and end hostilities.

**A nation cannot choose its neighbors, but all peoples can choose what kind of relations they want to have with their neighbors.** The Center for Israel Studies hopes to open a new chapter in the regional dialogue. This is an opportunity that should not be missed out on. For this purpose, we should work to rebuild close relations, restore the credibility and the trust between us, and demonstrate strong commitment for diplomatic cooperation.