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The Arab Spring and the Palestinians of Israel



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The conversation among the Palestinians of Israel about the Arab Spring raises a number of key moral, political and social dilemmas. In light of the regional turmoil, they debate the impact of regional events on their societal structure, the next phases of their public struggle for equality, and the nature of their future relations with the Arab world. The Palestinian media in Israel is a key arena in which these dilemmas are being addressed. There is no unified voice regarding the Arab Spring, but there is an evident concern that the revolution would destroy the revolutionaries and subject them to the interests of the West.

The Arab world has suffered for decades from intolerable economic, social and political conditions, severe restrictions on human rights and dictators who controlled its countries, its citizens, its infrastructures and its resources. In late 2010 a sweeping wave of revolutions and demonstrations started in the Arab world in protest against those problems, primarily the poverty, the corruption, the political disenfranchisement and the dictatorship. Those revolutions were led by young people and were typically nonviolent, with the exception of the cases of Libya and Syria.

The wave of protests began with the action by Tunisian Mohamed Bouazizi, a street vendor who set himself on fire in front of the government offices to protest the poor social and economic conditions and the difficulty to make a decent living. Bouazizi's action started a popular revolution in Tunisia, leading to the departure of president Zein al-Abidine bin Ali on January 14, 2012. The protests spread to other countries and created a tremendous wave of uprising in the Arab world, which came to be known as the Arab Spring.

After the fall of the Bin Ali regime, Hosni Mubarak of Egypt and Muammar Gadhafi of Libya also fell. The president of Yemen stepped down after reaching an agreement with the revolutionaries and in Syria the process is still underway. These protests used similar slogans in different Arab countries, such as the slogan "the people want to topple the regime". There was also extensive use of advanced technological means with which social groups were created and supported by millions of young people. These groups produced a concerted effort that brought down regimes that had been stable for decades. The Arab Spring broke the fear barrier imposed by the Arab dictators, which they used to secure their rule.

This article will discuss how the Palestinians in Israel relate to the Arab Spring and the consequences of the revolutions in the Arab world for them. The article presents a

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general background about the Palestinians in Israel, examines how the Arab Spring is covered by the Palestinian media in Israel and presents findings of a public opinion survey conducted among young Palestinians in Israel in relation to the Arab Spring.

Background about the Palestinians in Israel

The Palestinians of Israel are a local native minority constituting 20% of Israel's citizens. They live mainly in small cities and villages throughout Israel and have a separate education system. The Palestinian population is very young and occupies a low socioeconomic status. In 1948 most of the members of the Palestinian people became refugees, some of whom settled in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, while the Palestinians who remained received Israeli citizenship but lived under a military government until 1966. Since 1967 the Palestinian leadership of Israel has presented two demands: ending the occupation and establishing a Palestinian state, and equal civil rights for the Palestinian community in Israel.

Serious events in the last two decades have shaken the Palestinian population in Israel and led it to reconsider its relationship with the state: the failure of the Oslo process in the 1990s; the October 2000 riots in which 13 young Palestinian-Israeli demonstrators were killed by Israeli security forces; and the 2006 Lebanon war, in which most of the casualties from the Hezbollah missiles were Arab citizens, as a result of the lack of emergency preparedness in the Arab settlements. After all of these events the Palestinian population of Israel understood it was on a crossroads: it had no backing from Israel, the Palestinian Authority or the international community. Therefore, the Palestinian community of Israel decided in the last decade to take responsibility for its fate and to launch a proactive initiative.

In 2006 they published “The Future Vision of the Palestinian Arabs in Israel”, a document that marked the first joint public decision to initiate a dialogue with the state about the legal and mandatory status of the Palestinian community in Israel. The Palestinian citizens of Israel want to advance their civil status and influence the political-economic decision-making system in Israel. They decided that they must do so by self-empowerment of their civil institutions.

Three subgroups in the Palestinian community of Israel are most influenced by external factors: women, youth and leaders. The main factors that influence these three subgroups are the Internet and social networks, satellite television, Jordan as the gate to the Arab world, globalization and of course the events of the Arab Spring.

Questions among the Palestinians of Israel about the Arab Spring

The influence of the Arab Spring – and the changes it wrought in the regimes of the Arab countries – did not skip over the Palestinian residents of Israel. The conversation among the Palestinians in Israel about the Arab Spring has been extremely lively and has addressed a number of key moral, political and social dilemmas. Until the advent of the Arab Spring the pride of the Palestinians of Israel focused on their ability to lead a

public campaign against racism and prejudice in Israel, while the Arab public in the Arab world remained oppressed and passive. Now they lost that advantage. However, the Arab Spring proved that a nonviolent struggle to change reality and governments is possible.

During the revolutions in Tunisia and then Egypt people were astonished, excited and inspired by the very act of Arab residents of the Arab world rising up against the “king”, and forcing that “king” to give up his throne – without military intervention. The public sphere filled with a general sense of pride in our being Arabs. No questions were asked about the “day after”.

The case of Libya was different because it raised several dilemmas:

1. Geopolitically: What is and what should be the role of international/Western/American intervention? Will Libya become another Iraq?
2. In terms of internal politics: Why did a nonviolent revolution in Libya fail whereas it succeeded in Tunisia and Egypt?
3. Morally: Did the horrific lynch of Gadhafi reflect the face of the Libyan revolution?

These questions were compounded by the chaos in Syria. Since international intervention in Syria is perceived as biased, there are many question marks about it and the public discussion about the events in Syria is much more complex and therefore more mature. This applies also to the discussion of questions of greater concern to the Palestinians in Israel, such as the Palestinian relationship with the Arab world and with Israel, and domestic questions such as social and religious values and gender equality:

1. What are the moral boundaries of a public campaign? Where are the red lines?
2. What will our relations with the Arab world be in the future? Will we be an influential party in the future geopolitical reality?
3. How will the “new voices” in the political parties impact the traditional leadership? Will the internal criticism being voiced have an impact on the defective functioning of the traditional leadership?
4. What will the role of women be in the public campaign? Will it be behind the scenes or overt?
5. How will all this influence our social character: in terms of religious divides – Islam vs. Christianity, Sunni vs. Alawi/Shiite; gender – women in the public sphere; and the role of young people in changing reality?

The Arab Spring as reflected by the Palestinian media in Israel

The Palestinian media in Israel has written much about the Arab Spring and addressed many of the questions mentioned above. It asked whether it really was a new spring that would bring prosperity or perhaps a dreary and dark fall with nebulous results. The media played a very important role in presenting a comprehensive picture of the events to the Arab public in Israel. In the Arab Spring, new media and social networks also played a central role, especially Facebook, which reported and included the public in developments to an exceptional degree, especially by exposing the corrupt regimes that perpetuated the injustice and oppression in their countries.

Among the Palestinian media and Israel, the newspaper *Kul al-Arab* played a key role in relation to the Arab Spring. It wrote extensively about the subject, especially about the developments in Egypt and Syria, while emphasizing the morality of the revolution and the need to protect human dignity. This subject was addressed by Dr. Shukri Hazal, who presented the moral concept of resistance to a depriving regime and the right of nations to resist, whether through quiet revolution or armed resistance: "Such a revolution must be run according to moral standards that determine its course, on the principle that the occurrence of a revolution is an alternative to the existing arrangements, an alternative to dictatorship, and therefore the revolution must not use oppression and deprivation, not even against the symbols of the previous regime".

The author went on to describe the brutality of the Arab revolutions with the following words: "Unfortunately, the Arab revolutions have adopted extremely cruel practices against the other side, just like the regimes that preceded the revolution, in which mercenaries were central elements. That cruelty has seeped into the ranks of the revolutionaries in the Arab world and colored them in a negative light. This led to skepticism among the Arab peoples in the world as to the credibility of the revolutions of the Arab Spring movement". The author went on to note in his writings that there was a huge gap between the democratic regime the Syrian people had yearned for for generations and the democratic Syria sought by the US, the UK, France, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey – a destructive democracy, in his words, whose ultimate goal is the destruction of the Assad regime without any consideration of the dimensions of the destruction and injustice that will be caused to the Syrian population.

After the crisis in Syria, many of the Arab media channels in Israel attempted to withdraw and not express their opinions about the Arab Spring. They tended to limit themselves to presenting figures about the developments.

The local newspaper *Hadith al-Nas* presented the events of the Arab Spring in a weekly column through public opinion interviews, asking especially about the massacre in Syria: do the respondents oppose or support the Assad regime, with a focus on the question of the responsibility of President Assad's regime for the events, the involvement of Western countries, responsibility of the Arab media such as *al-Jazeera* and the responsibility of the Arab League.

On August 26, 2012 *Hadith* published an article saying that the Syrian priest Francois had announced at the inauguration of a mosque in Kafr Kana that the Syrians and Syria were in excellent shape and that most of the reports broadcast on *al-Jazeera* and *al-Arabiya* were false. The figures present at the ceremony (including Kamal Khatib, MK Masoud Ganayem and Sheikh Akrama Sabri) left those comments unanswered.

The newspaper of the northern faction of the Islamic movement, *Sawt al-Haq wal-Huriyya*, which wrote a lot about the Arab Spring, usually attacked the Syrian regime and presented it as bearing exclusive responsibility for the events in Syria. The newspaper also encouraged the election for the Egyptian presidency of Mohamed Morsi, emphasized the complexity of the Libyan regime and strongly criticized the Salah regime in Yemen for its evasion and bargaining over immunity from the Gulf States.

Many articles and reports analyzed the Syrian case. On the one hand they criticized the regime's corruption and deprivation but on the other hand they expressed strong resistance to Western intervention in Syria. They also criticized the association made between the Syrians, Syria as a homeland and the Assad regime in Syria. The articles usually called for cautious distinction between the internal revolutionary forces and external intervention in the area's internal affairs by the West, the Iranians and the Turks.

The Arab press in Israel did not express a uniform opinion about the events in the Arab countries in the Arab Spring. It did voice concern that the Arab Spring would turn into an Arab fall – that the revolution would destroy the revolutionaries and subject them to the interests of the Western countries, whether directly or through Arab countries such as Qatar, which have close ties with the West and especially with the US. The Western intervention in the Arab countries was presented as such that could eliminate all of the hope created by the Arab Spring, and neutralize the revolutionary spirit among the young. The fear was that the fall of the corrupt Arab regimes that cooperate with the West would ultimately lead to the emergence of regimes that would be dependent on and loyal to Western countries. This would be a complete disaster for Arab nationalism because it would create mental, logistic and economic dependence on the West and enslave the Arab countries to the West's interests.