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# The Mass Media and Israeli-Arab Relations following the Arab Spring



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**The Arab Spring has changed the mainstream media scene in the Middle East. Major pan-Arab TV stations have been losing audience, while new media such as Twitter, Facebook, and independent blogs have been gaining traction and significance in the region. The focus of the Arab mainstream media has shifted to domestic coverage of the changes occurring in various Arab countries, and has largely put aside the Israeli-Arab conflict. While hostility and suspicion towards Israel is still widespread in the region, the Arab mainstream media is reflecting more openness and curiosity towards Israel than before. Those Arabs willing to somehow engage with Israel now find it easier to do within the overall atmosphere of change brought by the Arab Spring.**

It was called the “Arab Spring” during the first half of 2011, while toward the end of the year, when the parliamentary elections in both Tunisia and Egypt took place, some in Israel began applying the term “Islamic winter”<sup>1</sup> on the fascinating wave of changes that was and still is sweeping throughout the Middle East. While the optimists were counting on the revolutions to produce fresh democracies in the Arab region,<sup>2</sup> the pessimists predicted the reign of *Sharia* and collapse of existing relations between the Arab world and Israel. However, reality proved that both were wrong.

The changes were unique to every Arab country, and the results mostly unpredictable in terms of political calculations. At the same time, there is no doubt whatsoever that apart from speedy political changes, a slower and perhaps much more significant change is building up in Arab societies across the region. The urge for stability and peace did not undermine the urge for transparency and freedom but rather it was vice versa. The young vibrant societies are struggling to find their ways in the raging sea of changes; the old structures are falling apart while the new ones have not emerged yet. How did the revolutions affect the views, the opinions and the attitudes towards Israel in the Arab world? And what will be the place of Israel in the brand new geopolitical Middle Eastern structure? As usual, the picture is not black and white. There are plenty of nuances and details that must be explored thoroughly to set the necessary course of action.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael J. Totten, "Arab spring or Islamist winter," *World of Affairs*, January-February 2012, [www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/arab-spring-or-islamist-winter](http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/arab-spring-or-islamist-winter)

<sup>2</sup> Tiku Nitasha, "President Obama addresses Egypt's revolution," *New York Magazine*, 2 November 2011, [http://nymag.com/daily/intel/2011/02/president\\_obama\\_addresses\\_egyp.html](http://nymag.com/daily/intel/2011/02/president_obama_addresses_egyp.html)

This article will examine Arab-Israeli relations through the prism of mass media in the Arab world and Israel. The article will conclude that the nature of relations between the Israeli government and Arab states did not change significantly during this period, while the negative coverage of Israel in the Arab media had decreased.

### **Israeli Media and Establishment versus Change: The Fear of Tomorrow**

During the last fifty years, Israel was accustomed to dealing with familiar and largely predictable actors in the region. It is easy to understand why Israeli political elites are so afraid of change across Israel's borders – the *Stockholm syndrome*<sup>3</sup> runs deep under the skin, enters the blood stream and it is virtually impossible to get rid of. Israel was ready to deal with the reality of animosity, boycotts, and revelations of Anti-Semitism<sup>4</sup> that were often heard in both Jordan and Egypt – the only public partners of Israel to regional peace agreements – while maintaining stable relationship with well-known figures who were not replaced along the years, but rather rotated among themselves in key positions. The defrosting of the cold peace, however, was literally impossible, due to anti-normalization legislation and public agenda in these countries. The latter were in many cases promoted by the same power brokers who gladly shook hands and exchanged hugs with their Israeli partners on private occasions.

At the same time, the individuals or organizations which tried to promote establishing bridges with Israel or with specific segments of the Israeli society (even with the Arab-Israeli sector) were often persecuted or punished by state security services and eventually were silenced or pushed into immigration. Egyptian screenplay writer Ali Salem, journalist Hala Mustafa,<sup>5</sup> and sociologist Saad Eddin Ibrahim and many others paid the price of getting too close to Israel and were forced by the regime itself to back off. But nevertheless their voices were heard. Activists came to participate in joint seminars abroad, in which Israelis also participated, and some fearlessly visited Israel and came back to spread their knowledge about the country which is viewed by overwhelming majority of the Egyptians as “the enemy”.

Naturally, the Arab regimes nurtured the idea of their exclusiveness, warning Israel and the West that the regimes are the sole guardians of secular nationalism against the Islamists. While these regimes were maintaining their own truces with the Muslim Brotherhood, they were picturing doomsday scenarios of Islamist rise to power. So, it is no wonder that since early 2011 the military and political prognosis on Israel-Egypt relations focused on dangers and risks. Negative events, such as burning Israeli and American flags, as well as break-ins to Israeli and American embassies in Cairo and Tripoli, continued to feed the beast of fear.

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<sup>3</sup> The Stockholm syndrome is a psychological phenomenon in which hostages express empathy and have positive feelings towards their captors, sometimes to the point of defending them.

<sup>4</sup> "Anti-Semitism in Egyptian media – February 2001-February 2002," *Anti-defamation League*, [www.adl.org/egyptian\\_media/media\\_2002/default.asp](http://www.adl.org/egyptian_media/media_2002/default.asp)

<sup>5</sup> "Israeli ambassador breaks bread with Hala Mustafa," *Bikya Masr*, 17 September 2009, [www.bikyamasr.com/tag/hala-mustafa/](http://www.bikyamasr.com/tag/hala-mustafa/)

The fear had reached its culmination on 6 August 2012, soon after the deadly attack on Egyptian troops in Rafah, where 17 servicemen lost their lives. President Mohamed Morsi ordered a high-scale military operation in Sinai and pushed the Egyptian troops into the demilitarized zone, allegedly violating the terms of the Camp David peace accords.<sup>6</sup> In a week's time, he also fired the chief of intelligence, General Murad Muwafi, and literally got rid of the Higher Military Council, making Field Marshal Omar Suleiman and General Sami Anan resign along with many other Mubarak-era key military figures. At that time, the Israeli media exploded with war-time headlines such as "Blatant violations of the Camp David treaty", "Building up pressure in Sinai", and "Why did Egypt increase its military force in the peninsula". By 29 August 2012, the Israeli government notified the Knesset that there were no violations of the Camp David agreements and that all the Egyptian moves were coordinated with Israel.<sup>7</sup>

During the first days of September 2012, every media outlet in Egypt reported that the last "extra" Egyptian tank had left the Sinai Peninsula. However, this news item was not covered in Israel as widely as the previous news on possible violations of the Camp David treaty. Despite the negative prognosis, it soon became clear that there are still viable and strong ties between the Israeli and Egyptian intelligence services, that the Rafah crossing between Gaza and Egypt was closed time and again, and that the Egyptian army is now energetically closing up the underground tunnels to Gaza that were wide open during Mubarak times.

To sum it up, most Israeli and Western analysts were wrong in their ability to foresee the imminent changes conducted by Morsi in the army and intelligence ranks, as well as the tempo and characteristics of relations between post-Mubarak Egypt and Israel. For now, both the Egyptian Embassy in Tel-Aviv and the Israeli Embassy in Cairo (as well as the Israeli Academic Center there) function as usual. Egypt and Jordan even successfully nominated new ambassadors to Israel during that time. Israeli and Egyptian military and intelligence circles continue their intensive level of cooperation. Israeli politicians from both the coalition and the opposition are making efforts to engage in some kind of contact with the Muslim Brotherhood. Prior to the presidential elections in Egypt, a delegation of Israeli MP's was supposed to meet with a Muslim Brotherhood delegation in Washington.<sup>8</sup>

The logical conclusion of this experience must be that a more objective and detailed media coverage of the events is needed. The wider public, as well as the political establishment, should be offered additional types of analysis to these events and their possible implications. It is obvious that the Arab-Israeli conflict and the situation in the Middle East in general are not popular issues in the Israeli public agenda. No political party apart for left-wing *Meretz* had made the political settlement with the Palestinians

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<sup>6</sup> "Egypt beefs up troops in Sinai," *Al-Arabiya*, 10 August 2012, <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/08/10/231454.html>

<sup>7</sup> Tzvi Zinger, "Government to Knesset: there is no Camp David violation in Sinai," *Megafon*, 29 August 2012, <http://megafon-news.co.il/asys/archives/76533>

<sup>8</sup> Moran Azulay, "A summit in US: Knesset members will meet Muslim Brotherhood men", *Ynet*, 11 June 2012, [www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4241113,00.html](http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4241113,00.html)

its priority. There is need to bring it back on the agenda and to raise awareness to regional developments and to the importance of clear Israeli positions regarding them.

### **The Arab Media and Israel in the Post-Arab Spring World**

It is hard to anticipate that the barrier of hatred will fall at once, and it is not likely that even progress towards peace with Palestinians will end the mutual animosity and suspicions. There are still many in the region who oppose the mere existence of a Jewish state in the Middle-East.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, in an atmosphere of change, it became easier for both official and unofficial actors interested in ties and contacts with Israel to act, especially since the attention of the Arab media today is diverted from the Israeli-Palestinian issue towards ongoing developments in Syria, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and other countries.

“The Israeli-Arab conflict is definitely out of the spotlight today. Events that are far more dramatic are taking place in many Arab countries, so Palestinian affairs do not make it anymore into the top five or even top ten news items. It is no longer in prime time”, says Walid al-Omari, director general of *al-Jazeera* bureau in Israel and the Palestinian Authority.<sup>10</sup> Al-Omari also admitted that following the dramatic unfolding of events in Syria, the ratings of top Arab networks such as *al-Jazeera* and *al-Arabiya* were dropping tremendously, while local traditional media (print and broadcast) as well as social media were on the rise.

The Jasmine revolution in Tunisia and the Tahrir revolution in Egypt proved that despite the illiteracy and the lack of personal computers, social networks and the new media are immensely powerful and popular in these countries, as well as in many other Arab countries. Whereas most of Egyptians still get their daily portion of news reading the *al-Ahram* or *al-Masry al-Youm* newspapers, in desperate times the new media may become the only source of news for wide segments of the public. The traditional media quickly adapted to the changes that followed the revolutions in Egypt and in Tunisia. However it is difficult to say that the media in those countries is not subject to censorship anymore or that it fully enjoys the privilege of free speech. During his first 100 days in power, Morsi cracked down on many journalistic freedoms, firing editors of *Tahrir* and *Doustor* publications. Charges were pressed against Tawfiq Okasha, the owner of *Faraeen* TV for “instigating to murder the president”.<sup>11</sup> The Egyptian court released Okasha on bail and later ruled that he is not guilty.

While on the governmental and the security levels Israeli-Arab ties are developing in the same pace as before the revolutions, a few cracks started to show in the seemingly unbreakable wall of hostility and animosity towards Israel in civil societies in Arab countries. Israeli organizations supplied humanitarian aid to Syrian refugees in Jordan,

<sup>9</sup> “A free Palestine, free from the river to the sea,” *The Uprooted Palestinians*, 24 September 2011, <http://uprootedpalestinians.blogspot.co.il/2011/09/free-palestine-free-from-river-to-sea.html>

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Walid al-Omari, aired on Israel TV Channel 9, 16 September 2012.

<sup>11</sup> “Press crackdown: Egypt’s Morsi slammed for censorship,” *Russia Today TV*, 18 August 2012, <http://rt.com/news/press-crackdown-egypt-mursi-996/>

while Israeli MP's succeeded in building ties with Syrian opposition leaders on the ground and abroad. During 2012, a record number of artists, writers and filmmakers from Morocco,<sup>12</sup> Tunisia<sup>13</sup> and Algeria<sup>14</sup> visited Israel – despite the intimidations, threats and boycotts. An official Moroccan delegation visited Israel for the first time since 2000 in April 2012,<sup>15</sup> and a number of unofficial visits by Egyptian businessmen and political figures took place. Radical Islamist and nationalist circles in the respective countries condemned the visitors, of course, and some were ostracized by trade unions, etc. However, the mere fact that such visits took place, despite the gruesome prognosis, are of much importance. Interestingly enough, since early 2011, Israel's name was heard in increased positive rather than negative connotations in the Arab world.<sup>16</sup> In Syria, for example, the angry refugees shouted that “even Israel does not slaughter the Syrians as much as Bashar al-Assad”.<sup>17</sup>

Therefore, for Israelis who are interested in reaching out to the Arab press, the option of integrating into social media in Arabic language, meaning the blogosphere, Facebook and Twitter must also be considered. On a more detailed level, influential bloggers (some of them are professional journalists while others are not) can be easily identified and possibly approached directly or through a third party. At the same time, the Gulf-based media (or, better yet said the London-based Gulf media such as Saudi owned *al-Arabiya*, *Ash-Sharq al-Awsat* and *al-Hayat* in addition to *al-Jazeera*) might be significantly easier to approach.

After the dramatic fall of the Mubarak regime, it is clear for many in the Arab Gulf states that Israel is a constant and stable element in the region, in both security and economic terms, and given the common fear of Iranian hegemony, this relationship can be fostered even more. Lately, many Gulf newspapers and TV stations (all of them controlled by the state or owned by power brokers close to the regime) published interviews with Israeli officials, among them Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Minister of Foreign Affairs Avigdor Lieberman. The Saudi *Elaph* (online newspaper) had published for more than three years the memoirs of Prof. Shmuel Moreh from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

It seems that in the post-revolutionary countries the new media might be easier to approach and establish connections with, whereas in the conservative countries of the Gulf – where the internet is heavily restricted and censored – the traditional media outlets must be approached. Furthermore, the Arab-Israeli media, which now enjoys

<sup>12</sup> [www.haifaff.co.il/eng/Movie%20Info.php?id=6185](http://www.haifaff.co.il/eng/Movie%20Info.php?id=6185)

<sup>13</sup> Elhanan Miller, "Exiled Tunisian filmmaker comes to Tel Aviv," *Times of Israel*, 8 June 2012, [www.timesofisrael.com/tunisian-filmmaker-i-used-to-believe-in-boycotts-but-no-longer-do/](http://www.timesofisrael.com/tunisian-filmmaker-i-used-to-believe-in-boycotts-but-no-longer-do/)

<sup>14</sup> Itamar Eichner, "Algerian author suffers boycott," *Ynetnews*, 24 Jul 2012, [www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4259415,00.html](http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4259415,00.html)

<sup>15</sup> "Official Moroccan delegation visits Israel," *Al-Resalah*, Quoted in *Elder of Zion*, 15 April 2012, <http://elderofzion.blogspot.co.il/2012/04/official-moroccan-delegation-visits.html>

<sup>16</sup> Abdulateef Al-Mulhim, "Arab spring and the Israeli enemy," *Arab News*, 6 October 2012, [www.arabnews.com/arab-spring-and-israeli-enemy](http://www.arabnews.com/arab-spring-and-israeli-enemy)

<sup>17</sup> Ksenia Svetlova, "What will happen to Syria," *Slon.ru*, 28 April 2011, [http://slon.ru/world/chto\\_budet\\_s\\_siriyey-587496.xhtml](http://slon.ru/world/chto_budet_s_siriyey-587496.xhtml)

improved relations with the larger Arab world, must be considered as a mediator and partner in possible media-related initiatives between Israel and the Arab world.

## Conclusions

So far, the Israeli academia, media, and think tanks continue to analyze the unprecedented events of the Arab Spring along the well-known security lines, feeding public fears and insecurities. Although it is still early to make final conclusions, it is already quite clear that for now the Arab Spring did not change tremendously the nature of relations between Arab regimes and Israel, while the negative coverage of Israel in Arab media significantly decreased.

The changes in the Arab world allowed the opening of small windows of opportunity, allowing some new actors on the Arab arena to reassess the possibility of ties with some circles within the Israeli society or the Israeli government. These windows of opportunities must not be missed. New opportunities should also be explored in order to best make use of the flexibility that the current period of change enables. Many actors in the Arab world – emerging power brokers such as current Syrian opposition leaders, Gulf States politicians, writers, journalists and filmmakers – are now ready to explore new possibilities and opportunities. However, just a tiny fracture are ready to admit ties with Israelis and to face the furious criticism, since the anti-Israeli circles also feel that they are free to act in absence of strong central power. Attacks and assassinations on liberals are nothing new to the Arab world,<sup>18</sup> but now those who individually seek rapprochement with Israel might experience more of physical and brutal violence.

The current period should be used to privately reach out and explore new possibilities for ties and connections. As for Israeli media coverage of the Arab spring and its consequences – the Israeli public is entitled to know more about the unfolding events of post-revolutionary Arab societies, in order to make up its individual opinion of them. More interviews, op-eds and analysis on a different note than what is supplied by the mainstream media should be provided to both the Israeli public and political establishment.

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<sup>18</sup> Sasson Somech, "Memories of Mahfouz," *Haaretz*, 22 April 2011, [www.haaretz.com/weekend/week-s-end/memories-of-mahfouz-1.357582](http://www.haaretz.com/weekend/week-s-end/memories-of-mahfouz-1.357582)