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The Israeli Discourse regarding the  
Arab Spring**



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# Egyptian Plague or Spring of Youth? The Israeli Discourse regarding the Arab Spring

**Lior Lehrs\***

From the outset of the protest events in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya and other countries, many people in the world began using the term "Arab spring" to describe the sequence of events in the various locations. The term was based on the term "the Spring of Nations," that refers to a wave of national revolutions in Europe in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. It seemed to take a little longer for the term to penetrate the Israeli discourse on the subject and even when it did many hesitated to accept it and had reservations about its positive and optimistic connotations.

For instance, Minister of Strategic Affairs Moshe (Bogie) Yaalon stated that "the event is dramatic and historic and will be given a name, but not the Arab spring."<sup>1</sup> Former Mossad chief Meir Dagan also opined it was a mistake to use the term "Arab spring" and explained that "whoever coined the phrase drew it from events that occurred in Europe in 1848, when liberal ideas proliferated in the world. The truth is there is no liberal message."<sup>2</sup> Former head of military intelligence Amos Yadlin said "we understand today that the pair of words 'Arab spring' did not describe correctly the phenomenon that rocked the Middle East in 2011."<sup>3</sup> The Israel Defense Forces' intelligence branch discussed the issue and decided that the term "Arab spring" was unsuitable and decided to use the term "upheaval" as the official term describing the events.<sup>4</sup> Many other people in Israel, as shall be described below, began using the terms "Arab winter" or "Islamic winter" as terms to challenge the original term and express a negative reading of the events.

This article wishes to present an analysis of the Israeli discourse following the Arab Spring events as articulated by different parties in diverse forums of conversation. The article analyzes the public and media conversation in Israel and includes an analysis of statements, articles and public opinion surveys and refers to different players (politicians, public figures, journalists and military commanders) and different issues and questions that have arisen as part of the conversation on the subject.

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<sup>1</sup> Reut Levy, "Minister Moshe Yaalon: 'Peace will not come from leniency, withdrawal and capitulation,'" *B@r Ilan* – Bar Ilan University's online newspaper.

<sup>2</sup> Lior Guttman, "Meir Dagan: 'The military threat against Israel has dissipated for three to five years,'" *Calcalist*, July 10, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Amos Yadlin, "One year after the Arab uprising," in Yoel Guzansky and Mark Heller (Eds.), *One Year of the Arab Spring: Global and Regional Implications* (Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, March 2012), p. 11.

<sup>4</sup> Amos Harel and Avi Issacharoff, "Intelligence Humility," *Haaretz*, 16 December 2011.

## "There is no place for the naïve in the Middle East"

In 1993 Benjamin Netanyahu published his book "A Place among the Nations," in which he devoted a chapter to the question of the connection between democracy and peace. In that chapter Netanyahu argued that the main obstacle to peace in the Middle East is the fact that none of the countries in the region except Israel are democratic. Netanyahu asserted that any Western party that wishes to promote "Western-style" peace in the region must first exert pressure on the Arab regimes to move towards democracy. Netanyahu criticized the West for never having exerted such pressure or attempting to link benefits to the Arab regimes with demands for democratic reforms.<sup>5</sup> Similar things were said by Netanyahu in his first speech as Prime Minister in the US Congress, in July 1996.<sup>6</sup>

Almost two decades later, in 2011-2012, Netanyahu's reaction as Prime Minister to the Arab Spring events was fundamentally different from what he wrote. Precisely when expressions of a democratic process began in the Arab countries, and precisely when the Western countries received that development with enthusiasm and welcomed it, Netanyahu presented a different position and, in his comments to the Israeli people, painted a very negative, harsh and threatening picture of the very developments he once hoped for. In his first public reference to the revolution in Tunisia, Netanyahu did not mention the democratic aspect of the events but described them only as an expression of the unstable nature of the Middle East. "The area we live in," said Netanyahu, "is an unstable area. We can see this in several different places in the region where we live."<sup>7</sup> His initial response to the protest in Egypt also ignored its democratic context and focused on the fear that the events would lead to the establishment of a "radical Islamic regime of oppression." "Such a regime," said Netanyahu, "tramples on human rights and threatens peace."<sup>8</sup>

In a speech Netanyahu made at the opening session of the Knesset in October 2011, he spoke in detail about the developments in the Arab world and sharpened his message on the subject. "Friends," said Netanyahu, "if I had to summarize what we can expect in the region, I would use two terms: instability and uncertainty... In the face of the uncertainty and the instability before us we need two things: power and responsibility." Netanyahu asserted in his speech that "if religious fanaticism does not modify its worldview, it is doubtful that the grand hopes that blossomed with the Arab Spring will come true. Realization of those hopes might even be delayed by a generation."<sup>9</sup> About a month later Netanyahu made another, stronger Knesset speech, in which he reiterated his position and added a critical and reprimanding tone towards

<sup>5</sup> Benjamin Netanyahu, *A Place among the Nations* (New York: Bantam, 1993), pp. 248-249. See also: Piki Ish-Shalom, "The Rhetorical Capital of Theories: The Democratic Peace and the Road to the Roadmap," *International Political Science Review* 29(3), 2008, pp. 281-301.

<sup>6</sup> See: [www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/MFAArchive/1990\\_1999/1996/7/PM+Netanyahu++Speech+to+US+Congress++July+10+1996.htm](http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/MFAArchive/1990_1999/1996/7/PM+Netanyahu++Speech+to+US+Congress++July+10+1996.htm)

<sup>7</sup> Jacky Hougi, "Netanyahu: Tunisia – proof we must protect our security," *IDF Radio*, 16 January 2011.

<sup>8</sup> Eli Bardenstein, "Netanyahu: Afraid of the development of a fanatical regime in Egypt," *NRG*, 31 January 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Prime Minister Netanyahu's speech at the opening of the 2011 Knesset winter session, 31 October 2011.

anyone who saw the events as a good sign. "The Middle East is no place for the naïve," said Netanyahu. "Last February I stood on this stage while millions of citizens of Egypt streamed into the streets of Cairo. At the time commentators and many of my friends here in the opposition explained to me that we were facing a new era of liberalism and progress that would wash away the old order... I said that we wish those things would come true but despite all of our hopes chances are that an Islamic wave will wash through the Arab countries, an anti-Western wave, an anti-liberal wave, an anti-Israeli wave and ultimately an anti-democratic wave. They said I was trying to scare the public and I didn't see, I didn't understand which way things were moving. They are moving but they are not moving forward towards progress, they are moving backwards. I chose to adjust our policy to reality and not to our dreams. I ask you today: who did not understand the reality? Who does not understand history?"<sup>10</sup> In September 2012 Netanyahu repeated those comments and said: "I am the last dinosaur who did not make the mistake of seeing in the Arab Spring progress and brotherhood rushing towards us at full speed."<sup>11</sup>

The spirit of Netanyahu's statements to the citizens of Israel is clear and unmistakable but at the same time Netanyahu spoke in a different voice to the outside world. In messages directed outwards Netanyahu presented a more optimistic approach to the changes and expressed appreciation and empathy for those who caused them. It appears that in those statements Netanyahu returned to the spirit of what he said and wrote in the 1990s. For example, in February 2011 Netanyahu told diplomatic parties that "Israel is a democracy that encourages the promotion of free and democratic values in the Middle East and the promotion of such values will benefit peace."<sup>12</sup> In reports about this statement, "government sources in Jerusalem" explained that Netanyahu "felt he had to narrow the gap between him and the international community" and that "the Prime Minister, as the leader of the only democracy in the Middle East, understood he could not ignore international criticism of Mubarak and therefore this time addressed the issue of promoting democracy in the region."<sup>13</sup>

In his UN address in September 2011, Netanyahu's reference to the Arab Spring was positive and he declared that he was reaching a hand to "the people of Libya and Tunisia, with appreciation for those who are trying to build a democratic future... (and) the people of Syria, Lebanon and Iran, with awe for the bravery of those fighting cruel oppression."<sup>14</sup> Statements to that effect were also made on occasions when Netanyahu addressed Arab audiences. For instance, when Netanyahu responded to questions by Internet surfers from the Arab world, he said in response to a question about the Arab Spring that "increasing the freedom within the countries will promote their prosperity and

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<sup>10</sup> Prime Minister's comments at the Knesset's "forty signature discussion," 23 November 2011.

<sup>11</sup> Yossi Verter, "Gentlemen, history is repeating itself," *Haaretz*, 21 September 2012.

<sup>12</sup> Hezky Ezra, "Netanyahu: Promoting democracy and freedom will benefit peace," *Arutz 7*, 1 February 2011.

<sup>13</sup> Arik Bender, "Netanyahu: Egypt might follow Iran and threaten its neighbors," *NRG*, 7 February 2011.

<sup>14</sup> Prime Minister Netanyahu's speech to the UN General Assembly, 23 September 2011.

the increased freedom of information can help the cause of peace."<sup>15</sup> Likewise, in an interview he gave the Al-Arabiya network Netanyahu said: "If there is true democracy in the Arab world... Then there will be true peace. Because true democracy reflects the will of the people, and most peoples – Arabs, Jews, everyone – do not want to see their sons and daughters dying in the battlefield. They want peace. That is why the spread of democracy is good for peace. It might be hard. There might be a period of vibrations, of turmoil, but ultimately it will lead in a good direction." When Netanyahu was asked about the fear of the rise of Islamists in the wake of the Arab Spring he replied that he believed the Arab people "want a world of progress...(and) a world of real reform. They do not want to return to the dark ages, they want a different world."<sup>16</sup> These statements are very different from the assessments Netanyahu presented at the Knesset, where he claimed that "in most of the countries around us the Islamist movements are the most organized and strongest force whereas the liberal forces, who strive for freedom and progress, as we understand those concepts, those forces are divided and weak."<sup>17</sup>

We can see a certain duality in Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman as well. For example, in a letter he wrote to Netanyahu in April 2012 – a letter leaked to the press – Lieberman described a nightmare scenario of the consequences of the Arab Spring in Egypt. "The Egyptian issue is much more disturbing than the Iranian issue," wrote Lieberman, and added: "We cannot rule out that after a new president is elected in Egypt, Egypt will violate the peace treaty materially and pour significant forces into Sinai." Lieberman called in the letter "to take a brave political decision, to rebuild the southern command by re-establishing the southern corps that was dismantled after the peace treaty."<sup>18</sup> Conversely, on a trip to France Lieberman spoke in a different voice, saying: "Despite the strengthening of radical elements, the Arab Spring has brought out new, young, educated and liberal forces." Lieberman asked France to help build a dialogue between Israel and those forces, which could "create understanding based on humanistic and universal values."<sup>19</sup>

Scrutiny of the public diplomacy arguments put forth by senior Israeli spokesmen in the context of the Arab Spring portrays a system surrounding four main arguments. The first argument asserts that the events prove the region is unstable and emphasize that Israel is an island of stability and democracy in the region. Netanyahu declared, for example, in an interview in which he responded to questions of international Internet surfers through YouTube, that "the ground is shaking everywhere, from the West Indies to the

<sup>15</sup> "The Prime Minister for the first time answers through Facebook questions of surfers from the Arab world," website of the Prime Minister's Office, 30 January 2012,

[www.pmo.gov.il/PMO/Communication/Spokesman/2012/01/spokechat300112.htm](http://www.pmo.gov.il/PMO/Communication/Spokesman/2012/01/spokechat300112.htm)

<sup>16</sup> "Interview with the Prime Minister for the Al-Arabiya network," website of the Prime Minister's Office, 24 July 2011, [www.pmo.gov.il/MediaCenter/Interviews/Pages/interviewalarabiya240711.aspx](http://www.pmo.gov.il/MediaCenter/Interviews/Pages/interviewalarabiya240711.aspx)

<sup>17</sup> Prime Minister Netanyahu's speech at opening of the 2011 Knesset winter session, 31 October 2011.

<sup>18</sup> Ben Caspit, "Lieberman warns Netanyahu: Egypt a greater worry than Iran," *NRG*, 22 April 2012.

<sup>19</sup> Tal Shalev, "Lieberman to France: mediate between us and the 'Arab Spring' countries," *Walla*, 23 July 2012.

Straits of Gibraltar. Everything is shaking and rocking and the only stable place, the only stable country, is democratic Israel."<sup>20</sup>

The second argument attacks claims that present the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as the heart of the problem in the region and asserts that the events prove that the root of the problem is within the Arab world and stems from the absence of democracy and from economic problems, not from Israel or the conflict. Thus, for example, Foreign Minister Lieberman said at the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations that Israel suffers in the world from many misunderstandings and one of them is the claim that the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians is the heart of the problem in the Middle East. "I see no connection," said Lieberman, "between our conflict with the Palestinians and the riots in Bahrain, the uprising in Tunisia, what is happening in Libya or in other countries."<sup>21</sup>

The third public diplomacy argument is related to the peace process and the pressures exerted on the Netanyahu government in that context. According to this argument, the Arab Spring led the region into a state of uncertainty and under such conditions Israel cannot take the risks that come with diplomatic processes with the Palestinians. It was also argued that the new situation justifies the Israeli insistence on demands connected to security arrangements. So, for example, Netanyahu declared after the Tunisian revolution that "the lesson from the revolution is that it is important to maintain security in any peace agreement." And following the attack on the Israeli embassy in Cairo, Netanyahu said: "At this time we must maintain security. That is the anchor of our existence, especially during times of turmoil... I believe that today many people in Israel and the world who see the events in the region understand much better our justified insistence on defending Israel's security needs in any future settlement."<sup>22</sup> In his speech at the Conference of Presidents, Netanyahu said: "There is tremendous pressure on our security and that makes it harder to reach an agreement with the Palestinian Authority."<sup>23</sup>

The fourth argument is linkage between the Arab Spring and the Iranian question and a warning against Iranian intervention in the events and exploitation of the events in its favor. Thus for example Netanyahu declared in an interview with the French network AFP that "we might find the Arab Spring turning into an Iranian winter."<sup>24</sup>

Along with Netanyahu, a number of parties in different systems in Israel adopted the pessimistic view and reinforced the negative framing given to the events, primarily

<sup>20</sup> "YouTube World View interview with PM Benjamin Netanyahu," MFA website, 30 March 2011, [www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Government/Speeches+by+Israeli+leaders/2011/YouTube\\_World\\_View\\_interview\\_PM\\_Netanyahu\\_30-Mar-2011](http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Government/Speeches+by+Israeli+leaders/2011/YouTube_World_View_interview_PM_Netanyahu_30-Mar-2011)

<sup>21</sup> Foreign Minister Lieberman's comments at the Fourth Israeli Presidential Conference, 21 June 2012.

<sup>22</sup> "Prime Minister Netanyahu's comments following the events in Cairo," website of the Prime Minister's Office, 10 September 2011, [www.pmo.gov.il/MediaCenter/Speeches/Pages/speechcairo100911.aspx](http://www.pmo.gov.il/MediaCenter/Speeches/Pages/speechcairo100911.aspx)

<sup>23</sup> "Netanyahu: 'the Arab Spring' makes it difficult to reach agreement with the Palestinians," *Ynet*, 19 February 2012.

<sup>24</sup> Shlomo Cezana, Boaz Bismuth and Daniel Sirioti, "Prime Minister: the Arab Spring might turn into an Iranian winter," *Yisrael Hayom*, 20 April 2011.

players from the IDF and the security establishment. For example, Maj. Gen. (Ret.) Amos Gilad, head of the political military staff in the Defense Ministry, claimed that "the Arab Spring is leading to the establishment of an Islamic empire." The Commander of the Home Front Corps, Eyal Eisenberg, said "it is called the Arab Spring of the Nations, but it can turn into a radical Islamic winter, and this raises the likelihood of total war."<sup>25</sup> Another example is Maj. Gen. (Ret.) Yoav Galant, who said that "the Arab Spring might turn out to be a long and cold Islamic winter."<sup>26</sup> A negative forecast was also presented by the head of military intelligence, Maj. Gen. Aviv Kochavi, who said in August 2012 that "next year Israel is going to find itself in an unstable regional environment, much tenser and Islamist than before. It is an environment dealing with a series of regional and internal crises," said Kochavi, "which raise the sensitivity threshold of all of the players and could lead, even without prior planning, to conflagrations."<sup>27</sup>

A similar approach was voiced by ministers and politicians from the coalition. Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon (Yisrael Beiteinu) said: "This is not a spring but more of an Arab winter. Anyone who thought the Arab Spring was going to repair problems in the Arab countries was wrong... Observers might entertain the fantasy that the Islamic parties in the Arab countries are moderate, but their leaders are not moderate and the expectation that fundamental flaws that characterize the Arab societies will be corrected under the rule of the Islamic parties is not going to be fulfilled."<sup>28</sup> Minister Yaalon also use the term "Arab winter" and criticized the parties who expressed enthusiasm over the events and claimed that "this is in fact the collapse of a Western conception. The conception was based on ignorance, naiveté and a tendency towards wishful thinking... This conception was also based on Western patronizing."<sup>29</sup>

### "More opportunity than risk"

On the other hand, there were also parties in the Israeli establishment who challenged the negative hegemonic framing given to the Arab Spring events. There were two kinds of these: the first included parties who radically challenged the framing and suggested an alternative positive and more optimistic framing. Within the official and institutional establishments in Israel there were two main figures leading this approach. The first of them was president Shimon Peres. In April 2011 Peres penned an article in *The Guardian* entitled: "We in Israel welcome the Arab Spring." Peres wrote in the article that "Israel welcomes the wind of change, and sees a window of opportunity."<sup>30</sup> In his address to the Israeli Presidential Conference Peres argued that the Arab Spring was

<sup>25</sup> Yoav Zeitun, "General Eisenberg: the risk of total war has grown," *Ynet*, 5 September 2011; "Amos Gilad: the Arab Spring is leading to the establishment of an Islamic empire," *Makor Rishon*, 15 June 2012. In November 2012, Maj. Gen. (Ret.) Amos Gilad stated that out of a desire for democracy, a terrible dictatorship has emerged in Egypt.

<sup>26</sup> Amos Harel and Natasha Mozgovaya, "Galant: The changes in the Middle East complicate Israel," *Haaretz*, 15 June 2012.

<sup>27</sup> Yoav Zeitun, "Military Intelligence Branch: The region is becoming less stable, conflagration possible," *Ynet*, 27 August 2012.

<sup>28</sup> Ayala Or-Ei, "The visit of the deputy minister," *Ynet*, 15 May 2012.

<sup>29</sup> Yoni Kampinski, "The Arab Spring - collapse of the Western conception," *Arutz 7*, 14 June 2012.

<sup>30</sup> Shimon Peres, "We in Israel welcome the Arab Spring," *The Guardian*, 1 April 2011.

not necessarily an Israeli winter. "A spring of youth is a blessing to us all," he said. "We are willing to pitch in and give a hand to their success, not out of arrogance but because we are freedom lovers."<sup>31</sup> In a speech to the Knesset Peres said: "There is no doubt that the good of the entire region, including Israel, is for a new alignment to arrive, a reconstruction of the Middle East so that it has food to eat and freedom to breath. The struggle is still young, it must not be judged by the first act or by a single act." In these words Peres was subtly criticizing the skeptics and calling for an evaluation of the events as a long-term process. Peres paid tribute to the young generation in the Arab world leading the events and asserted that they were "more educated, more open, more modern." He admitted there was a doubt as to their ability to achieve their wishes "in one go" and that in the first round the Muslim Brotherhood might win, but explained that if they did not offer real solutions to the problems and if poverty and oppression continued, "hunger will overpower such a victory... the young people will not be able to calm down."<sup>32</sup>

The second figure was Natan Sharansky, chairman of the Jewish Agency. Like Netanyahu, Sharansky had called for years to promote democracy in the Arab world and created an association between democracy and peace.<sup>33</sup> Sharansky maintained that position even after the events of the Arab Spring. In an article published in the Washington Post in December 2011, entitled "The West should bet on freedom in Egypt," Sharansky criticized the position that called to support dictators in the name of stability and called on the West to "bet" on the demands and slogans calling for freedom in Tahrir Square.<sup>34</sup> Sharansky argued in comments he made and wrote that in politics "nothing is immediate" and called on the West to act to strengthen the civil society and democratic structures in the Arab countries, and even to use economic aid as a tool to promote those objectives.<sup>35</sup> Sharansky directed his comments mainly outwards and they appeared only in the foreign press and could not be found in the Israeli discourse. Furthermore, he focused on giving advice to the Western countries led by the US, and made no reference to the Israeli context.

The second kind of challenge to the reigning narrative included parties who largely accepted the negative framing as a frame of analysis but tried to propose a more complex picture with additional angles and offer a different reading of the consequences and conclusions. Those who adopted this approach pointed for example to the fact that the Arab Spring also had some positive consequences for Israel. An example of this can be found in the words of Amos Yadlin, former head of military intelligence, who declared that the wave of protests in the Arab world was "more of an opportunity than a risk." "What is happening today in the Arab world," explained Yadlin, "weakens the radical alliance that was working against Israel."<sup>36</sup> Meir Dagan, the former Mossad chief, also

<sup>31</sup> President Peres's address at the opening session of the Fourth Israeli Presidential Conference, 19 June 2012.

<sup>32</sup> President Peres's speech at the opening of 2011 Knesset winter session, 31 October 2011.

<sup>33</sup> In this regard, see also: Piki Ish-Shalom, "The Rhetorical Capital of Theories: The Democratic Peace and the Road to the Roadmap," *International Political Science Review* 29(3), 2008, pp. 281-301.

<sup>34</sup> Natan Sharansky, "The West should bet on freedom in Egypt," *The Washington Post*, 17 December 2011.

<sup>35</sup> Justin Jacobs, "Sharansky speaks," *The Jewish Chronicle*, 20 May 2011.

<sup>36</sup> Boaz Feiler, "Yadlin: 'The Arab Spring,' more opportunity than risk," *Ynet*, 20 June 2011.



argued that following the Arab Spring the military challenge to Israel had disappeared for the next three to five years.<sup>37</sup> It is worth mention that both Dagan and Yadlin had been critical of the Netanyahu administration in other political and diplomatic contexts as well and their words should be read in that light.

Minister of Intelligence Affairs Dan Meridor can also be seen as a leader of this approach. For example, in an interview in December 2011 Meridor called "to seek opportunities in the changes occurring in the Arab world" and argued that "new opportunities for alliances have arisen, most of which are secret."<sup>38</sup> Elements in the foreign ministry can also be classified as players in this group. For example, Yitzhak Levanon, Israel's ambassador to Egypt until November 2011, explained in an interview that "we must not look only at the empty half of the glass," and pointed to the fact that for the first time in Egypt transparent and free elections were held, and that Egypt had transitioned from the rule of a single party to an era of coalitions. Levanon offered soothing messages: he asserted that the Muslim Brotherhood "is less dangerous and much more pragmatic than they are being portrayed in Israel," and estimated that they could have a positive influence on Hamas.<sup>39</sup>

The media reported that the Foreign Ministry had rejected a request by Levanon to launch a dialogue with the Muslim Brotherhood, but that position changed after the elections for parliament. Levanon's successor, Yaacov Amitay, received a green light to go forward.<sup>40</sup> In June 2012 an initiative emerged for a meeting in Washington between Israeli members of Knesset and Egyptian members of parliament, including representatives of the Muslim Brotherhood, but the news leaked and the meeting was cancelled.<sup>41</sup> Another voice that can be grouped in this category is that of Tzipi Livni, who served as chair of the opposition until March 2012. In her comments on the subject Livni accepted the pessimistic assumption about the Arab Spring but strongly criticized Netanyahu's conduct surrounding the events. This is evident for example in her appeal to Netanyahu in a Knesset speech as follows: "We all know that the Arab Spring can be the beginning of a radical and cold Islamic winter, Mr. Prime Minister, but what are you doing about it except for warning the public?"<sup>42</sup>

### **The Arab Spring and Israeli public opinion**

Public opinion polls by "The Peace Index"<sup>43</sup> allow us to analyze the positions of the Israeli public towards the Arab Spring. A poll taken in March 2011 found that 48% of Israelis viewed the events in the Arab world as positive for Israel versus 30% who

<sup>37</sup> Lior Guttman, "Meir Dagan: 'The military risk to Israel has dissipated for the next 3-5 years,'" *Calcalist*, 10 July 2012.

<sup>38</sup> Mazal Mualem, "Meridor: 'Egypt has no interest in canceling the peace treaty,'" *NRG*, 4 December 2011.

<sup>39</sup> Eli Bardenstein, "We should encourage dialogue with the Muslim Brotherhood," *NRG*, 18 December 2012.

<sup>40</sup> Eli Bardenstein, "Change in Israel's position: permission to talk to Muslim Brotherhood," *NRG*, 4 January 2012.

<sup>41</sup> Moran Azulai, "MK meeting with Muslim Brotherhood canceled," *Ynet*, 12 June 2012.

<sup>42</sup> Tzipi Livni at opening of 2011 Knesset winter session, 31 October 2011.

<sup>43</sup> The data of the Peace Index surveys can be found at [www.peaceindex.org](http://www.peaceindex.org). I would like to thank Prof. Ephraim Yaar and Yasmin Alkelai for their help.

viewed them as negative developments. 55% responded that they viewed them as positive developments for the people of the region, versus 29% who saw them as negative developments. The survey found that the Arab public in Israel had a more positive outlook: 55% saw the events as positive for Israel (versus 47% of Jews) and 65% saw them as positive for the people of the region (versus 53%).

But along with the survey we can find other results that indicate signs of concern and worry as to the consequences for Israel. In February 2011, 46% of Israelis estimated that the Egyptian Revolution would negatively impact relations with Israel, 21% estimated it would have no impact and only 9% envisioned a positive impact. In May 2011, 44% responded that they thought Israel's status in the region was worse following the changes of regime in the Arab world, 41% responded that its status had not changed and only 10% thought that its status was better; and in November 2011, 68% claimed that following the changes in the Arab world Israel's national security was worse. The high rate in this answer can be explained by the timing (after the violent attack on the Israeli embassy in Cairo and the victory of the *al-Nahda* party in Tunisia), as well as by the wording of the question that focused on the security angle and mentioned the rise in the power of the Islamists.

An analysis of the initial reactions to the Egyptian Revolution indicates differences of approach between the Jewish and Arab publics in Israel. For instance, a large majority of Jews (70%) estimated in February 2011 that the chances for a democratic regime to emerge in Egypt in the foreseeable future was low compared to a large majority of Arabs (74%) who claimed that chances for that were high. Furthermore, half of the Jews assessed there was a high chance that a radical Islamic regime would emerge in Egypt while among the Arabs only 28% thought so. There were also differences surrounding the Obama administration's policy on the subject. While 52% of Jews thought that the US had been wrong to support the demonstrators against Mubarak, 70% of Arabs thought it was a correct step. The critical attitude in Israel towards the Obama administration's treatment of Mubarak was evident in the media and public discourse. For instance, *Yedioth Ahronoth* chose to give the report about the Obama administration's declaration during the Egyptian Revolution of its support of "a credible transition in Egypt" the following headline: "The US turns the knife." Former minister Ben Eliezer declared: "The Americans do not yet understand the disaster into which they pushed the Middle East." And *Yated Ne'eman* wrote in response: "Does anyone still believe that the US administration will stand by Israel in a time of need?"<sup>44</sup>

After Muslim Brotherhood candidate Mohamed Morsi won the elections for the Egyptian presidency in June 2012, the Israeli newspaper headlines reflected grave fears. "Plague of darkness," (*Yedioth Ahronoth*), "Following with concern" (*Yisrael Hayom*), and "The Muslim Brotherhood Empire" (*Makor Rishon*). However, figures from a survey held at that time showed that after Morsi's victory there was a certain abatement of the public's

<sup>44</sup> *Yedioth Ahronoth's* Washington correspondent and Smadar Peri, "The U.S. turns the knife," *Yedioth Ahronoth*, 31 January 2011, p. 4; "Ben Eliezer: Obama does not understand what a disaster he pushed the Middle East into," *Globes*, 2 February 2011; A. Yitzhaki, "A broken reed," *Yated Ne'eman*, 1 February 2011.

fears of future consequences. This could be seen by comparison between answers to a question about the future of the peace agreement in the event the Muslim Brotherhood rose to power in Egypt asked both in November 2011, before the elections for parliament and the presidency in Egypt, and in June 2012, after the Muslim Brotherhood's success in the parliamentary elections and the victory of their candidate for president. In June 2012 the rate of Israelis who believed the treaty would not be cancelled rose from 63% to 74% (among Jews alone the rate rose from 60% to 74%).<sup>45</sup>

Meanwhile, the rate of Israelis who anticipated the worst-case scenario of cancellation of the treaty and a return to a state of war dropped from 13% to 6%. A segmentation by voting patterns found that this trend crossed political lines and occurred both on the right and on the left and the rise in the rate of respondents who estimated the treaty would not be cancelled (June 2012 compared to November 2011) was particularly dramatic among right-wing voters: among National Religious Party voters it rose from 20% to 82%, among National Union voters it rose from 52% to 92% and among Yisrael Beiteinu voters it rose from 47% to 85%. It can be assumed that the transformation of the possibility of a Muslim Brotherhood victory from an abstract and uncertain nightmare scenario to a concrete reality, as well as the calming messages the new president Morsi and other Egyptian figures conveyed, influenced the public and alleviated its concerns. As for Israel's policy following the Arab Spring, the surveys indicated unequivocal public support of a policy of non-intervention. 83% of the public was supportive of Israel not having expressed support during the Egyptian Revolution either of Mubarak or of the demonstrators (February 2011) and 79% supported a similar approach to the struggle in Syria (February 2012). As for the policy required from the West, it is evident that public opinion changes depending on the country in question. Concerning the events in Egypt, a majority of Jews (52%) opposed the American policy of support for the demonstrators and a majority of Arabs (70%) supported that policy.<sup>46</sup>

But when it came to the events in Libya, a majority both of the Jewish public (52%) and the Arab public (62%) supported Western intervention in support of the rebels.<sup>47</sup> As for the events in Syria, half of the Israeli public supported Western support for the Syrian opposition and one third supported non-intervention (survey from February 2012). It seems that given the anti-Israeli policy of Gadhafi and Assad and their cruel treatment of their citizens, the Israeli public was more supportive of Western assistance to depose them, but it is still interesting to note that despite the aforesaid the level of support for Western intervention was only half of the public and not more. The reason might be the fear that the deposition of those leaders would lead to worse regimes. The survey about Syria was conducted in February 2012 and positions may have changed since then. The survey also shows in the Syrian context that 36% of the public thought that the fall

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<sup>45</sup> June 2012 survey: the 74% was comprised of 27% who assessed the treaty would remain as it was and 47% who assessed the treaty would not be cancelled but the relationship would deteriorate. The second figure of 20% was comprised of 14% who assessed it would be cancelled and there would be a state of neither peace nor war, and 6% who expected it to be cancelled and that Egypt would go back to a state of war with Israel.

<sup>46</sup> After the Morsi electoral victory the rate of Jews who opposed the US policy rose to 58% and the rate of Arabs who supported that policy dropped to 67% (June 2012).

<sup>47</sup> The survey about Libya was held in March 2011.

of the Assad regime was good for the Israeli interest, 31% thought it would be bad and 22% thought it did not matter. A majority of the public (55%) also thought that Israel should not receive Syrian refugees even if their lives were in real danger.

To conclude this section, it is interesting to note that on many questions about the Arab Spring, segmentation by voting patterns (the data in this regard refers only to the Jewish public) indicates that voters for religious and ultra-Orthodox parties tended to interpret the events more negatively. But when a principled question was presented about the probability of a government with a majority of religious parties governing democratically and protecting minority rights, freedom of expression and equality, it was the voters for the religious and ultra-Orthodox parties who responded by a significant majority that such a scenario was likely,<sup>48</sup> whereas among voters for secular parties a majority of respondents answered that they did not believe in such a possibility.<sup>49</sup>

### **The Arab Spring and the political and public discourse in Israel**

The dramatic events in the Arab world penetrated and influenced the political and public discourse in Israel in different arenas and contexts. One example is the question of the consequences for the Israeli-Palestinian arena. Journalist Ari Shavit defined the dilemma in an article in *Haaretz* in which he wrote that "with the Middle East boiling, the occupation cannot be ended peacefully. But with the Middle East boiling, there is no way to cling to the status quo either."<sup>50</sup> Surveys at the outset of the process showed that the public was divided on the subject: 35% assessed that the events would not impact the peace process with the Palestinians, 28% assessed it would have a negative impact and 26% assessed it would have a positive impact.<sup>51</sup>

Right-wing speakers, led by Netanyahu, pointed to the events as a reason to justify avoidance of a political initiative in the Palestinian context. Netanyahu explained that "Israel is facing a period of instability and uncertainty in the region," and that "this is surely not the time to listen to those who say... follow your dreams;"<sup>52</sup> Minister of Education Gidon Saar claimed that the upheaval in the Arab world "requires a thorough examination of the Israeli political discourse" and that "the margins of risk that Israel can afford to take today are very narrow."<sup>53</sup> Journalist David Merhav from the *Makor Rishon* newspaper wrote that "with Mubarak's fall, the last nail was driven into the coffin of the left's political fantasies... Israel cannot afford even a single political adventure."<sup>54</sup> There were other voices on the right that used the events as a tool to attack regional leaders:

<sup>48</sup> 95% of Shas voters, 82% of Torah Judaism voters and 80% of National Religious Party and National Union voters.

<sup>49</sup> The largest majority was among Meretz voters – 91% – and the lowest was among Likud voters – 53%.

<sup>50</sup> Ari Shavit, "A political Iron Dome," *Haaretz*, 31 March 2011.

<sup>51</sup> *The Peace Index*, March 2011. Internal segmentation found that among voters of right-wing parties the rate of those who anticipated a negative impact was higher (54% of National Religious Party voters, 50% of National Union voters) whereas among voters of left-wing parties the rate who anticipated a positive impact was higher (42% of Meretz voters, 39% of Kadima voters) and among Arabs the rate of those who anticipated a positive impact (48%) was higher than the rate among the Jewish public (22%).

<sup>52</sup> Prime Minister Netanyahu at the Knesset's "forty signature session", 23 November 2011.

<sup>53</sup> Sophia Ron Moria, "Minister of Education against principles of Bar Ilan speech," *Makor Rishon*, 25 December 2011.

<sup>54</sup> David Merhav, "The decline of the West and the new war of civilizations," *Makor Rishon*, 8 February 2011.

MK Arie'el Eldad (National Union) called on King Abdallah to declare Jordan the Palestinian nation state and explained that if he did not do so "he might find himself very soon facing masses of Jordanian citizens demanding he do so in the streets and squares" (his comments ignited fury in Jordan and drew a condemnation from the Foreign Ministry);<sup>55</sup> and Foreign Minister Lieberman aimed his arrows at Abu Mazen and said: "We saw that betting on dictators in the Middle East helps no one; in the end they're going to throw out Abu Mazen too."<sup>56</sup>

Meanwhile, speakers on the left read the map differently and claimed that the upheavals in the region emphasized the need to work towards an agreement with the Palestinians and strengthen alliances with moderate parties in the region. Tzipi Livni said "the Zionist movement through all of its years always took the initiative in tough situations;"<sup>57</sup> and President Peres explained that "uncertainty is part of our lives... The tendency to wait with closed eyes until the storm calms is naive... What we need is the daring to make decisions in states of uncertainty;"<sup>58</sup> The Geneva Initiative claimed that with a peace agreement with the Palestinians, Israel would have a better standing in relation to the events of the Arab Spring;<sup>59</sup> and journalist Ron Ben Yishai claimed that one of the conclusions from the events in the region was that Israel must do everything to maintain the stability of Abu Mazen's regime, and called on Israel to make gestures towards him and take actions to cultivate economic prosperity in the West Bank.<sup>60</sup> In the face of voices from the right calling to avoid "political adventures," the left argued that in light of the events, and in light of the growing influence of the public in the Arab world, Israel must avoid military adventures and pursue measures that would change the Arab street's attitude towards Israel. Journalist Gidon Levy wrote in *Haaretz*: "From now on the people are speaking and they will not tolerate violent or colonialist behavior towards Arabs and their leaders will have to take that into consideration... Israel no longer has the option to live solely by the sword."<sup>61</sup>

The events of the Arab spring also raised for re-discussion the question of Israel's relationship with Turkey. Many voices claimed that considering the regional instability and the increase of Israel's isolation, it was necessary to repair relations with Turkey because of its being an important and stable party in the region and because of the convergence of many interests between the countries. This trend was highlighted by Turkey's renunciation of the Assad regime and in the context of the tension between it

<sup>55</sup> Pinkhas Wolf, "MK Eldad to submit petition to Jordanian ambassador: 'You Are Palestine,'" *Walla*, 23 May 2012; Barak Ravid and Yuval Azulai, "Jordan protests vigorously MK Eldad's comments to Knesset," *Haaretz*, 26 May 2012.

<sup>56</sup> Barak Ravid, "Lieberman: Betting on dictators helps no one, even Abu Mazen will be thrown out in the end," *Haaretz*, 26 August 2012.

<sup>57</sup> Yossi Verter, "An island of stability," *Haaretz*, 16 December 2011.

<sup>58</sup> President Peres at the opening session of the Fourth Israeli Presidential Conference, 19 June 2012. In another speech Peres said that "we must act to renew negotiations with the Palestinians and reach the end of the conflict, which will remove the grounds for incitement and radicalization by the radical fanatics." From President Peres's speech at the opening of the 2011 Knesset winter session, 31 October 2011.

<sup>59</sup> See Geneva Initiative website: [www.heskem.org.il/yoyma.asp?id=6](http://www.heskem.org.il/yoyma.asp?id=6).

<sup>60</sup> Ron Ben Yishai, "Protect Abu Mazen and get through the Arab Spring," *Ynet*, 28 November 2011.

<sup>61</sup> Gidon Levy, "Hate of Egypt," *Haaretz*, 20 August 2011

and Iran.<sup>62</sup> A discussion developed around the question of the chances the processes would result in democracy in the Arab world. Scholars in Middle Eastern studies and experts on the region posed differing assessments.<sup>63</sup> In relation to this issue, Elliott Abrams, the deputy national security advisor in the Bush administration, argued that "the Israelis do not believe in the universality of democracy... (They) believe Arab culture does not allow democracy." He compared that to American "experts" who used the claim that democracy does not suit Latinos and Asians.<sup>64</sup> Israeli journalist Ofer Shelah claimed that he had come across many people who argued to him that "democracy is not for Arabs" and he argued that such an approach came out of fear but also arrogance.<sup>65</sup>

In different circles of discourse and different groups of the population the discussion of the Arab Spring received different emphases and references and raised different issues and questions. For example, in the ultra-orthodox press there was criticism and dismissal of analysts and experts who tried to explain the events and predict the future. It was argued that "devout Jews... understand that things have meaning that goes well beyond their immediate perception" (*Hamodia*)<sup>66</sup> and that "everything goes according to divine providence, it is not commentary" (*Yated Ne'eman*).<sup>67</sup> Likewise, in an editorial in *Yated Ne'eman*, a unique positive angle was found in the Arab Spring in the fact that on the backdrop of these events there had been a lull in "the ongoing assault against the public of believers and Torah students."<sup>68</sup>

Another article worth mention is one by Yaacov Schonfeld that appeared in the "Hamodia" newspaper, in which Schonfeld analyzes the world picture and distinguishes between the Christian world – which he claims became indifferent to its religion and found a new idol in money – and the Muslim world – where a religious revival is occurring. Schonfeld draws a parallel between that division and the situation of the Jewish people, where on the one hand there is the left, which "carries the banner of Western culture...with all of its filth and decadence," and on the other are "the masses joining the keepers of the holy guard and slowly accepting the yoke of the Torah and commandments and streaming to the synagogues."<sup>69</sup> A different approach could also be found among the Arab public, with the general attitude to the events being more positive (there were also voices of criticism of Israel's negative attitude),<sup>70</sup> as well as

<sup>62</sup> See for example: Ilil Shachar, "The Israel-Turkey relationship: on the way to recovery?" *IDF Radio*, 25 July 2012; Adi Sagi, "Shelly Yachimovich: the Labor Party to form the next government," *Magazine Hamoshavot*, 9 August 2012; Itzik Wolf, "Livni: Turkey felt Israel was isolated and weak," *News1*, 7 September 2011. Also, see results of a public opinion poll on this topic, initiated by *Mitvim*: [http://mitvim.org.il/images/Israel-Turkey\\_Poll\\_September\\_2012.pdf](http://mitvim.org.il/images/Israel-Turkey_Poll_September_2012.pdf)

<sup>63</sup> See for instance: Guy Bechor, "The menorah of the Arab spring," *Gplanet*, 19 December 2011; Uriah Shavit, "Islamotopia: Democracy, Muslim Brotherhood style," *Tchelet* 45, 2011; Elie Podeh, "The revolution is not over yet," *Haaretz*, 31 July 2012; Uri Goldberg, "This too is democracy," *Haaretz*, 3 January 2012.

<sup>64</sup> Ran Dagoni, "Israel's friends in the US: Why do you fear the fall of Mubarak?" *Globes*, 8 February 2011.

<sup>65</sup> Ofer Shelah, "Democracy is not for Arabs," *NRG*, 1 February 2011.

<sup>66</sup> "The Day's Echo," *Hamodia*, 30 January 2011.

<sup>67</sup> P. Hovav, "On the agenda," *Yated Ne'eman*, 2 February 2011.

<sup>68</sup> "Yated Today," *Yated Ne'eman*, 4 March 2011.

<sup>69</sup> Y. Schonfeld, "Why do the heathen rage?" *Hamodia*, 4 February 2011.

<sup>70</sup> See for instance: Oudeh Basharat, "The Arabs are not the same Arabs," *Haaretz*, 4 September 2012; Zoheir Andreus, "Why is Israel afraid of democracy in Egypt?" *Ynet*, 7 February 2011.

unique issues that came up such as a fierce argument over the interpretation of the events in Syria, which caused a deep split in the Arab public<sup>71</sup> and demonstrations by parties on either side of the debate.<sup>72</sup>

The events in the Arab world also seeped into the public discussion of domestic Israeli affairs. For instance, in the context of the Israeli discussion about expressions of religious radicalization and the exclusion of women, and following events such as the "price tag" operations and the "rabbis' letter" against renting apartments to Arabs, there were speakers who pointed to an association between the rise of political Islam and a similar trend in Israel. Yossi Gurvitz, for example, wrote that "while the Israelis pay a lot of attention to their fear of the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, they consistently ignore the rise of the 'Jewish brotherhood.'"<sup>73</sup> The subject even came up in the traditional argument over the size of the defense budget, with both sides (Defense Minister Ehud Barak on the one hand and Finance Minister Yuval Steinitz on the other) using the events as tools to justify their positions.<sup>74</sup> Some even argued that the subject was going to play a role in the impending elections and a senior Likud official said his party was going to use the events in its election campaign.<sup>75</sup>

### The Arab Spring and the Israeli summer

With the public awakening in the Arab world, a discussion began in Israel over whether such protest events could happen in Israel as well. Shuki Sadeh wrote in *Haaretz* in February 2011: "The question 'when will people start going out onto the streets here' has been heard again and again in different variations in the last two weeks." And Yair Nativ wrote in *Ynet* the same month that "the residents of the Arab countries are protesting their living conditions and making revolutions. And here? Most of the complaints are being addressed to the television set during the news."<sup>76</sup>

<sup>71</sup> For instance, the Peace Index of February 2012 found that in the Arab public in Israel, 43% supported Western support of the Syrian opposition whereas 23% supported Western support of the Assad regime.

<sup>72</sup> In February 2012, a support rally for the Syrian regime was held in Haifa, with representatives of the Balad and Hadash parties, and in Tamra in June 2012 there was a demonstration against the Assad regime organized by the Islamic movement. See: Hasan Shalan, "Demonstration in Tamra: Assad is a criminal massacring his people," *Ynet*, 9 June 2012; Hasan Shalan, "Conference in Haifa for Assad: Israel enjoys the killing," *Ynet*, 26 February 2012.

<sup>73</sup> Yossi Gurevitz, "The Jewish Brotherhood charges forward," *Friends of George (blog)*, 5 February 2011. Neri Livneh made a similar argument, writing in *Haaretz* that "instead of worrying about the Muslim Brotherhood in the Arab countries we should start worrying about the Jewish brotherhood that is about to take over Israel." From Neri Livneh, "The Jewish Brotherhood," *Haaretz*, 27 February 2011.

<sup>74</sup> See: Gili Cohen, "Defense Minister Barak: A nuclear Iran is more dangerous than bombing the facilities," *Haaretz*, 26 July 2012; Omri Nachmias, "Steinitz in favor of cutting defense spending: 'the Arab countries are weaker,' Mofaz: 'The budget is being managed behind your back'," *Nana*, 21 November 2011.

<sup>75</sup> Yossi Verter, "An island of stability," *Haaretz*, 16 December 2011.

<sup>76</sup> Shuki Sadeh, "Nobody stood up," *Haaretz*, 9 February 2011; Yair Nativ, "So why don't we go out to the streets?" *Ynet*, 24 February 2011. For examples of articles in a similar vein in the haredi press see: "Yated Hayom: abuse without reaction," *Yated Ne'eman*, 2 February 2011; A. Margalit, "The rulers' seats on a volcano," *Hamodia*, 4 February 2011. The question was also asked in the Peace Index of February 2011 and a majority of 86% of respondents estimated that the chances that the Israeli public would take to the streets and use civil disobedience to change the government were low.

When in July 2011 broad public protests broke out in Israel demanding "social justice," there were many references to the protests in the Arab world, including signs carried at demonstrations saying: "The corner of Rothschild and Tahrir," "Mubarak, Assad, Netanyahu," "ارحل" (step down) Egypt is here," and in statements by activists who threatened the "tahrirization" of the social protest.<sup>77</sup> Even the main slogan of the protest movement – "The people demand social justice" echoed the slogan of the demonstrations in the Arab world: "The people demand to topple the regime." Many pointed to the connection between the events. Roy Jarani wrote in an article in *Mako* that "no one doubts that what happened in Egypt in January 2011 woke us up from our winter slumber and by summer we too were on the streets." And Yonatan Gur wrote in an article in *Common Ground*: "I have no doubt that if it weren't for Mohamed Bouazizi, if it weren't for Tahrir, the name Rothschild too would still be identified with a fashionable and sleepy boulevard, as it was until just a little while ago."<sup>78</sup> That connection was also the subject of an exhibit by photographer Yaira Yasmin, under the title: "Revolutions: Corner of Rothchild and Tahrir."<sup>79</sup> It was also reflected by a letter written by activists from the Israeli *Maabara* movement to activists in the Arab world.<sup>80</sup> Furthermore, after Moshe Silman set himself on fire at a demonstration in Tel Aviv, many in the Israeli media and the Arab world drew a parallel between him and Mohamed Bouazizi.<sup>81</sup>

### Summary and proposals for an alternative framework of discourse

The events of the Arab Spring at first created a feeling of change in the patterns of public discourse and media coverage in Israel regarding the Arab world. Those patterns had previously focused solely on negative contexts of the conflict with Israel and usually only in reference to the leaders, and for the first time Israel took a close look at internal developments that did not have direct relevance to Israel. It was also the first time Israel looked at the people of the Arab world, sometimes even with sympathy. At first the events drew a high level of interest and for the first time the Israeli public en masse watched direct broadcasts from the city squares of the neighboring countries. A survey in March 2011 found that 76% of the Israeli public was interested in the events.<sup>82</sup>

An analysis of the reporting throughout the relevant period found that the discussion of the Arab Spring focused almost completely, naturally, on the points of interface between

<sup>77</sup> See for instance: "Protest activists demonstrate against Huldai: We are going to do a Tahrir on you," *Walla*, 25 June 2012.

<sup>78</sup> Roy Jarani, "The corner of Tahrir and Rothschild," *Mako*, 27 December 2011; Yonatan Gur, "The Corner of Rothschild and Tahrir," *Common Ground*, 16 September 2011. Members of the *Hadag Nachash* band also referred to that angle in a song they wrote about the protest in Israel, including this line: "I will not give in/I got heaps of inspiration from my neighbors/everyone deserves four walls and a ceiling." See: Or Barnea, "Hadag Nachash in new song following tent protest," *Ynet*, 7 August 2011. In this regard, see also Hillel Schenker's article in the *Palestine-Israel Journal*, <http://pij.org/details.php?id=1424>

<sup>79</sup> See: Elad Ben Elul, "Revolutions: Exhibit between Rothschild and Tahrir Square," *Achbar Ha'ir*, 30 August 2011.

<sup>80</sup> Moshe Heller, "Heads of protests in Jerusalem to activists in Tahrir Square: We are all Middle Eastern," *NRG*, 16 February 2012.

<sup>81</sup> See for instance: [www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4257382,00.html](http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4257382,00.html), [www.alwafd.org/D1J'6/241523](http://www.alwafd.org/D1J'6/241523)

<sup>82</sup> *Peace Index*, March 2011.



those events and Israel, and the subject entered the agenda mainly due to events such as the explosion of the gas pipe in the Sinai or the attack on the Israeli embassy in Cairo. As a result, those were the events that reflected and shaped for the average Israeli the meaning of the entire process. Furthermore, the events in the closer circle of countries to Israel, Egypt and Syria, drew more interest than the events in the further countries such as Tunisia, Libya and Bahrain. Analysis of the Israeli discourse finds that although the hegemonic framing is largely negative, the picture is complex and dynamic and has different characteristics when referring to different stages in the events in the process, different players, different groups and sectors and different places of events. Likewise one can distinguish between the analysis of assessments in different contexts: short-term versus long-term consequences; implications for different issues such as impact on the security situation, impact on the Iranian issue, impact on the chances for peace with the Palestinians, impact on Israel's military freedom and the argument over practical conclusions.

In summary, while recognizing the limitations and problems in the Israeli discourse on the subject, we might ask how a more complex conversation can be pursued and how alternative frames of analysis to the existing framing can be offered.

1. **Regional phenomenon, different arenas:** A deep and serious discussion of the Arab spring requires the understanding that while there is a connection and mutual influence between the events in the different countries, they are still particular arenas and different societies undergoing different processes. Therefore we must beware of generalized and simplistic conclusions that fail to recognize the differences. The discussion of the phenomenon must emphasize that in each arena there are differences of players, different motives for the protest, different social, political and economic conditions and of course also differences in the outcomes and consequences. The Tunisian model is different from the Libyan model and the events in Egypt are different from the events in Syria.<sup>83</sup>
2. **Know the new players:** We must welcome the fact that as a result of the events, Israel began to understand (including its intelligence branch)<sup>84</sup> that discussion of the Arab world has to move from focusing on the leaders to an analysis that recognizes an array of new players in the field: politicians, military commanders, political parties, extra-parliamentary movements. However, there are signs of a convergence of the discourse to a dichotomous and simplistic view of "Islamists" versus "non-Islamists." We must beware of this approach and act to increase the public's familiarity with a wide array of players and forces. For instance, Tunisia is no longer only Bin Ali but it is also not only "the Islamists," as it was presented by the media, but includes different players such as President Moncef Marzouki, a human rights activist from a secular party, Prime Minister

<sup>83</sup> An example can be seen in the article by Elie Podeh, "Four seasons in the Arab world," *Haaretz*, 10 June 2011.

<sup>84</sup> Amos Harel and Avi Issacharoff, "Intelligence modesty," *Haaretz*, 16 December 2011.

Hamadi al-Jabali, from the moderate religious party al-Nahda, Minister of Education Abdellatif Abid, of a center-left party, and opposition leader Maya Jribi, who heads a secular liberal party.

3. **Complex facts:** Despite the understandable wish to simplify a complex and volatile reality, we must make room for information and facts that help analyze the picture better and recognize the influencing structures and processes rather than being limited merely to the bottom line. For instance, along with the bottom line of the victory of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Egyptian presidential elections, and viewing this fact as a clear sign of the rise of political Islam in the Arab world, there is also room to mention that an analysis of the results of the elections for president in Egypt portrays a more complex picture. For example, in the first round of elections most voters (55%) voted for secular candidates (Ahmed Shafiq, Hamdeen Sabahi and Amr Moussa). Similarly, in the second round, Morsi defeated his rival Shafiq by a small margin of 51.7% to 48.3%.
4. **Coverage gaps:** Monitoring developments and trends in societies undergoing transitions and regime changes (transitional states) is a difficult and complicated task that requires a deep and slow examination of processes on different levels and in different areas. These countries are simultaneously undergoing a series of complicated and sensitive processes of democratization, building new government systems, transformation of their law and justice systems, changes in their educational and cultural systems and attempts to deal as a nation with past events. In such cases, press reports, going by the rules and standards of the press, can be expected to naturally provide a distorted and partial picture. By its nature the media tends to cover extreme events extensively and prominently, usually including acts of violence and intimidation, and is less adept at giving equal coverage to slow and complex processes that may draw less public interest and are also sometimes difficult to document with clear television images.

Therefore, the murderous act of the attack on the US consulate in Benghazi and the murder of the US ambassador gained front page headlines and reached every average Israeli news consumer, whereas simultaneous events that occurred in Libya, such as the victory of the liberal NFA party and the defeat of the Muslim Brotherhood in the elections, the appointment of a moderate and liberal president, the condemnation and apology of the Libyan president following the ambassador's murder and the protest demonstrations in Libya against the event – hardly received any press coverage and reached only those who showed special interest in the subject. Ultimately, it is the events that are covered that will shape public opinion and frame the public's interpretation and might lead to the development of a partial picture. Therefore it would be advisable to act to include additional events and processes in the media agenda, even if that is not an easy task.

5. **Personification:** Sometimes it is easier to understand and become interested in major historic developments through the personification of the process and humanization of the events. Looking at processes like revolutions and regime changes from the point of view of the simple citizen gives the events a concrete and simple translation and provides a character with whom the viewer can identify. Of course this is no substitute for an analysis based on additional sources and angles but an encounter with such characters would help the Israeli viewer better understand how macro processes are expressed on the micro level.<sup>85</sup>
  
6. **New thinking about political Islam:** Political Islamic movements in the Arab world are perceived in the Israeli view as dangerous and radical parties which must not be legitimized and with which dialogue is impossible, and are associated in Israeli thinking with terror organizations and Iran. In reality the picture is more complex and since those movements have become key players on the new Arab stage and have moved from the benches of the opposition to government frameworks, there is cause to develop a discourse that proposes a new, serious and less one-dimensional reading of the subject, discuss ways and tools to deal with the new reality and pursue official or unofficial dialogue with those parties. Such a conversation might for example refer to the fact that inclusion of such movements in the government in many cases leads to their moderation and forces them to give up radical rhetoric in favor of recognition of the existing reality. It must also address the argument that a dialogue with regimes that include such elements would achieve broader legitimacy and give the diplomatic process greater validity.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> A good example can be seen in the movie by Itai Engel broadcast on Channel 2 about the revolution in Tahrir Square in Egypt: [www.mako.co.il/tv-ilana\\_dayan/2011-8815731c7cfdc210/Article-fe95f38b9943e21006.htm](http://www.mako.co.il/tv-ilana_dayan/2011-8815731c7cfdc210/Article-fe95f38b9943e21006.htm).

<sup>86</sup> A good example of a commentary article in this spirit is: Assaf David, "Israel, the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas: Room for dialogue?" *Can Think*, 16 March 2012 [Hebrew].