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# **An Alternative Model of Israeli-Arab Encounters**



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**The Arab Spring presents Israel with new opportunities for dialogue with the region. Nevertheless, only little effort has been invested so far in organizing bi-lateral encounters between Israelis and their Arab counterparts. This article outlines a model for such Israeli-Arab meetings. It proposes to hold meetings that are informal and secretive, and that bring together liberal intellectuals from both sides to thoroughly examine issues as democracy, liberalism, identity, minorities, and the Jewish communities in Arab countries. Such non-political meetings can enable the exchange of knowledge between Israeli and Arab scholars, and can even assist parallel political meetings to be more successful. This model has been recently successfully implemented in meetings between Israeli intellectuals and counterparts from a major Arab country.**

This article will attempt to propose a new concept of organizing encounters between Israelis and colleagues from Arab countries, based on personal experience. For obvious reasons I prefer not to reveal details about the experience in question or the country in question. I will use the Oslo outline in its initial stages when it was, from the Israeli side, an encounter between academics, as a point of reference for developing the model. The alternative model has several pronounced advantages: it focuses on a single country each time, brings together intellectuals for in-depth meetings and through them makes it possible to reach broad sectors of that country's society. The proposed model is an alternative both to meetings with politicians from the particular country and to multi-lateral encounters as part of international conferences or other unique events, because it provides its participants with the freedom to engage in depth issues and stimulates their curiosity to learn from the other side. The other kind of event is hardly conducive to either.

The Arab Spring opens new opportunities precisely in countries whose previous regimes were strongly anti-Israeli: Syria, Libya and Iraq (the latter may not have experienced the Arab Spring but has undergone far reaching changes since 2003). In countries that did not undergo drastic changes, connections can be made on the basis of the Jewish past and Jewish association with the country (Morocco), questions of identity and secularity (Algeria) and regional development (the Gulf states). It is precisely in the core countries of the Arab Spring (Egypt and Tunis) where resistance can presently be expected on part of the liberal intellectuals. The latter are steeped in forging the future image of their countries. If the question of Israel comes up at all, it is associated in their minds with the previous regime. In Egypt the post-revolutionary stage included fierce anti-Israeli tones from all quarters, including the liberal intellectuals, culminating in the attack on the Israeli Embassy in Cairo. In Tunis the new constitution

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might forbid contact with Israelis. However, two important factors that might change the situation in those countries must not be overlooked:

1. The emergence of a democratic system in which it might be easier to deviate from the mainstream. The disappearance of state oppression and the emergence of an elected political system open an array of channels of influence that will no longer be limited to government circles alone. The new system allows turnover of the forces who govern politics and therefore, looking forward, there could be a dramatic change of the political map as a result of disappointment from the Islamic parties.
2. In both countries the struggle between the Islamists and the modernists has come into sharp focus. Almost 50% of voters in Egypt voted for Ahmad Shafik in a protest vote against the Muslim Brotherhood. The Coptic public is full of fear of the future. In Tunis, advocates of secularity and gender equality, who were previously accustomed to a comfortable environment dictated by an authoritarian government, are coming out in defense of the status quo. This is a large, strong and influential public, which still controls the media, for example. I am not advocating seeking out those parties, which could be seen as an Israeli attempt to instigate dissent, but if they contact us we should respond in the affirmative.

### **Oslo as a point of reference**

As far as we know, the steps that began the “Oslo process” were taken spontaneously without early planning and therefore apparently set a precedent. Once the official and senior political Israeli echelon come into the picture, it was harder to go back to the beginning point I have in mind. For our purposes, Oslo was a secret bi-lateral process between Israelis and Palestinians from the PLO. It was held in a neutral and distant location that did not attract attention, namely Oslo. It was funded by a neutral party: the government of Norway. The encounters began, from the Israeli side, as low-level “academic” encounters, while conveying messages to the senior echelons but with an opting out strategy including denial of the very encounters in the case of failure.

Oslo posed an alternative from a number of aspects: the bi-lateral encounters with the Palestinians stood in contrast to multi-lateral meetings that had been held with them earlier or simultaneously (the Madrid and Washington talks). The location of the distant Oslo contrasted with other, more central venues of talks (Geneva, Madrid, London, Washington). The Norwegian auspices did not exist previously: the Norwegians were careful not to interfere or try to influence either side to achieve an outcome. All of those elements can serve as models of emulation for the proposed track. The main difference is that the talks went up a notch in Oslo, when the Israeli political echelon joined them and the academics retreated. In the model proposed here the talks between the intellectuals would continue even if they led to talks on the political level.

## The proposed model

Like Oslo, the proposed model includes bi-lateral talks between Israelis and colleagues from a single Arab country. It is surprising to see how little has so far been invested in organizing such talks with most of the Arab countries. For well-known reasons no such talks have been held with the conflict countries with which other bi-lateral issues have been discussed. We must seek to establish teams to work simultaneously on organizing bi-lateral meetings in the proposed model with colleagues from the different countries.

Bi-lateral encounters are by far preferable to periodical multi-lateral forums (such as the Mediterranean Sea Basin encounter) where Israeli representatives meet colleagues from a number of Arab countries. Those encounters, which I do not rule out, are not a comfortable stage for in-depth talks and encounters between Israeli and Arab representatives are not always possible. The latter are often not able to conduct talks with Israelis independently, whether because they are official representatives of their countries or because representatives of other Arab countries are present. Therefore, the benefits for us as Israelis and for the organizers, who surely want to promote Israeli-Arab rapprochement at these conferences, is extremely marginal. By moving the talks to the bi-lateral level I disengage, if only temporarily, the discussion from “disruptive contexts” and especially the pan-Arab solidarity on the Palestinian issue. That disengagement is necessary to achieve progress in the talks.

From my familiarity with the think tanks in the Arab world (as opposed to the situation in Turkey, possibly), I do not see the practical advantage of meeting their people. First of all, many of them are nothing but funding channels for cronies of the regime and do not conduct ongoing intellectual activity, to say nothing of their lack of a public basis of support. No Arab regime, whether it underwent a change or not, is influenced by these think tanks and they have no status in the decision-making processes. The independent research institutes, such as Saad Eddin Ibrahim's *Ibn Khaldun Center for Development Studies* in Cairo, are more important, but their dependence on foreign funding makes them very vulnerable in the current situation. They have no influence on decision-making either and are quite disconnected from the public. I do not rule out holding talks with institutes that are interested, but I tend to minimize their importance. We must be picky and invest our limited time, funding and energy in more profitable directions. In general, I think it makes more sense to focus on independent intellectuals rather than a group of researchers from a research institute with all of their restrictions.

I am talking about confidential bi-lateral meetings. The confidentiality is absolutely necessary. Without it the representatives of the other side will not show up. It allows even prominent figures on the other side to attend and reflects the other side's curiosity to get to know Israel. We Israelis must be very strict about that. Our Arab colleagues will not leak the fact of the meeting because it could cost them their lives. Past experience points to leaks from the Israeli side which led to the cancellation of similar encounters: for example, recently a meeting between Israeli and Egyptian members of parliament that was supposed to take place in Washington at the initiative of the Washington Institute was cancelled because of a leak from the Israeli side. The damage was even

wider: the Washington Institute announced that it would hold no further such encounters. We must appreciate the great risk the other side is taking and the price it might pay.

The meetings must be held at a neutral venue and thought must be given to finding a suitable location. The Middle East is not a neutral place and many believe neither is the US. Europe and other continents can provide neutral locations far from the limelight. We as Israelis should actively seek a venue to meet at and not wait for a neutral party to offer itself or for the Arab side to bring up its own proposals. The choice of a meeting place in the particular country should be examined carefully: we must avoid places identified with Israel, the Zionist movement or institutions that are problematic for the Israeli side, such as countries that do not accept Israeli passports (Malaysia, Indonesia).

The question of funding is extremely important. We must see not only to a source of funding – a fraught issue in its own right – but also make sure the money comes from a neutral source. Neutral funding means credibility. We must avoid attempts, direct or indirect, to use sources of funding that are not neutral (the Israeli Foreign Ministry, research funds in Israeli universities and so on) even if that means postponing or even cancelling a meeting. If a source of funding that is not neutral is exposed, it could cause as much damage as cancelling the confidentiality, undermine our credibility, put our colleagues at risk and eliminate the possibility of renewing the encounters in the future. On this issue too it is we (as Israelis) who are responsible for finding neutral funding. Naturally, neutrality works both ways. An Arab source of funding might appear to the Israeli side not to be neutral, limit the subject of discussion and maybe even implicate our representative with the Israeli legal authorities.

In the proposed model the Israeli side is the initiator. Any initiative from the other side will be examined and if it is found suitable (according to criteria which will be stated below) it will be welcomed. It is important for the initiative to come from the involved parties. Proposals from neutral parties will not be ruled out but we must understand they were not born "naturally" and may serve the interests of the summoning party.

It is recommended to plan a series of encounters at the same venue or in a number of locations once or twice a year. The time between the encounters could be devoted to learning the lessons and organizing the next encounter. In internal communications between the organizers we may exchange reports about the contribution of the discussions at the encounter to the participants' products but this is not necessary. In other words, in contrast with other kinds of meetings, the participants will not be required to submit a report about the encounter's impact on them. We can hope that the commitment will evolve by itself. We should try for each meeting to have a larger number of participants surrounding the core organizers. If it is impossible to expand, we should encourage turnover within each of the sides, all surrounding the original core of organizers. The number of participants on each side must be equal.

## Who should participate?

First we must identify the sectors in each country that are open to dialogue. I do not mean those who are willing to talk but those who will engage in a dialogue. The difference is not semantic: past experience shows that those willing to talk are sometimes delusional characters with no status, who are willing to talk to promote their own agendas. Unfortunately, you have to be weird or bold in the Arab world today to talk to Israelis. We must sift out the weirdoes. Defining the target audience as “people who are open to dialogue” would address a broader audience that shares common values and has avoided contact with Israelis in the past. I am not talking about encounters with diplomats or members of parliament, who are extremely sensitive and could undermine such encounters. Often they are not very influential and they are harder to engage in the kind of in-depth encounters I wish to propose.

Some claim that a new political elite is rising in the Arab countries that is more conservative and more religious. This elite, which is required to take leadership positions and lead policy on the international level, lacks experience in foreign policy, diplomacy and geopolitics and therefore will have an interest in learning more about issues related to Israel, through us. This may be true for Turkey. In the Arab world, unfortunately, the point of departure of the Muslim Brotherhood and their Salafi colleagues is anti-Western, anti-liberal, anti-feminists and anti-Israeli, and that is just a partial list. That is why it is hard to view their representatives as partners in any talks, let alone in-depth discussions. If these circles become more moderate, the more apt forum will be professional diplomatic talks rather than the proposed model.

Preparation of an encounter of this sort requires basic knowledge of the intellectual world in the target countries. In the Israeli academic world researchers maintain ongoing contact with colleagues in the various Arab countries. More than a few Israeli researchers have specialized in the intellectual environments of those countries and maintain contact with leading intellectuals. In the country that I study I have identified a relatively broad constitutional willingness to engage in dialogue and get to know Israel and Israelis, stemming from much broader reasons. We must understand that willingness, which exists in other countries as well, in its local context: in Syria and Libya (and in the non-Arab world possibly also in Iran) it could be a challenge to the declared anti-Israeli position of the previous or current regime. In other countries it could be curiosity “to taste the forbidden fruit” and learn first-hand the Israeli model of democracy.

The way to an encounter begins with finding a local contact person and through him building ties with other intellectuals. The local contact person should be almost as committed as us or even more so. The contact with him is the “main artery” for organizing the encounter. In my case, that person connected me with other leading intellectuals but chose the list of participants in the planned meeting himself. We must respect the other side's choice and not interfere in it. Certainly, the contact person must be well-connected and not everybody is. We must get a sense of that person before we suggest organizing a meeting.

We may and should be selective. Unfortunately, many important sectors in the Arab world are not ready yet to meet Israelis. The political Islamic element is one of them. Even if there are a few exceptions in those sectors, they are not harbingers of change. It would be preferable to focus on the representatives of sectors that are better prepared for dialogue. One such sector is the liberal intellectuals. There are such people in each one of the countries who more or less share common values but also common fears. Some of them are bold and nonconformist. This group has been neglected by Israel despite its great importance. Intellectuals are seen and heard in all of the media.

The common definition of a liberal intellectual is anyone who supports two kinds of freedom: "freedom from..." and "freedom to..." Freedom from all kinds of tyranny and freedom to express your opinion in any area and live your life however you please without breaking the law or hurting others. In the Arab world many of the liberal intellectuals have a problem with the second kind of freedom. A liberal intellectual will support freedom of speech, the defense of human rights and the extension of minority rights in his country, and will act to build a political system based on pluralism. These intellectuals are the public opinion makers and originators of the discourse in the Arab countries. They can gradually introduce new ideas. These are the writers, poets, journalists, media people, academics, human rights activists, thinkers, clergy from all religions, lawyers and others.

However, not all intellectuals are liberal. Not everyone who defines himself as a liberal intellectual in the Arab world meets the accepted definition of a liberal intellectual in the West and the rest of the world (this is particularly relevant on the question of their attitude towards the very existence of Israel). Furthermore, there is a difference between a liberal intellectual in Egypt and his colleague in Iraq, for instance. For our purposes, all of the liberal intellectuals, even if they are hostile to Israel, are the target audience.

Once an encounter has been agreed upon, each side chooses its own participants. Compatibility between the sides and within the sides is very important. When choosing the Israeli delegation, it is important to include people who get along with each other. The unfortunately common sight of an Israeli delegation bickering in front of the other side is not pleasant to behold. The selection of the delegation by the organizer reflects how the organizer wants Israel to appear to the other side. The delegation ought to include intellectuals who represent different shades of the political and cultural discourse in Israel. A delegation I composed included academics, leading intellectuals, leading authors, publicists and activists. Selection of the Israeli side is difficult because many will want to participate. It should be done carefully, especially before the first encounter, knowing that there will be further encounters for those who did not participate.

It is not desirable for there to be a large number of researchers of the other country in the delegation. The ratio I chose was two out of eight. Too many researchers of that country could create the appearance that the Israelis are taking advantage of the encounter to study the Arab country. The discussions might be one-sided: the Libyans

would talk about Libya while the Israelis also talk about Libya. As I shall demonstrate as follows, the purpose of the encounters is to be bi-lateral, with each side learning from the other's experience. Moreover, having too many experts on the Israeli side would create a knowledge gap on that side and alienate some of the Israeli participants.

In the case in which I am involved, the other side chose not to include intellectuals from an important group in that country. We, of course, did not interfere with their choice and respected their decision, which apparently stemmed from internal dynamics in that country. Likewise, we expect the other side to respect our decisions as to the composition of the delegation. The question of including Palestinian citizens of Israel came up. I approached several prominent Palestinian intellectuals and was met with reservations, mainly because of the complexity of the subject of the encounter: identity. I decided that at this stage, the initial stage, the delegation would include only Jews. The main reason was the curiosity of the other side to meet Israeli Jews in their array of identities and see how Jewish identity contends with its sub-identities and contains them. Palestinian citizens of Israel will of course be included later on.

At least in the first stage, it is recommended to include in the delegation Israeli Jews born in the Arab country in question (if there are any) and others whose families hail from there. Their inclusion creates a common background and a pleasant atmosphere. In several Arab countries today there is growing interest in their Jewish history, which also draws intellectuals to participate in the encounters. Including such Jews in the delegation motivates the other side and creates closeness between the sides. It also allows the other side to gauge how those Jews were absorbed in Israel, beyond familiar clichés. Of course in this case as well one should avoid including confrontational Jews and prefer people who are willing to listen and speak out.

### **The contents of the encounters**

Even though the encounters are defined as “bi-lateral”, they do not deal openly with the relations between the two countries. The participants are not diplomats and it is not their job to discuss that relationship in the past, the present or to chart its course for the future. Each encounter should be devoted to a single “depth issue”: culture, identity, pluralism, democracy, nationalism and more. One might want to prepare such a list of subjects for the future. The subject is agreed between all the parties (Israelis, Arabs, hosts) well in advance and together the parties prepare a facilitated and structured encounter surrounding the selected subject. We chose the subject of identity. The other side accepted it with enthusiasm and even sent us its “credo” on the subject. The hosting party helped build the program surrounding the subject, contributed speakers and facilitators and even demanded to participate in the discussions. It is advisable for the Israeli delegation to hold a preparation meeting before the event.

My assumption is that depth issues elicit attention and patience on both sides, whereas political issues might instigate arguments that are not helpful. These issues satisfy the honest intellectual curiosity at the basis of the desire to meet. They expose both sides to



issues that are not emphasized in the media, as opposed to the political issues. The Arab intellectuals do not come to the encounter because they identify with Israel or the Palestinians. What they are interested in is a first-hand look at the "Israeli model" to check the feasibility of its implementation in their countries. In a facilitated and structured meeting surrounding a depth issue, the common points between the countries can be explored, thereby building a connection. However, if a political issue arises in the encounter or at its edges, such as in the form of a question from the Arab side, it can be channeled to a constructive and helpful direction.

The central rule of the discussions themselves is that each side speaks only about itself. There are three reasons: to avoid arguments and preaching; to get to know the other side, and; to learn from the other side.

The assumption is that each side is ignorant of the other side, and susceptible to stereotypes. The other side of ignorance is the curiosity that draws both the Arab and the Israeli participants to come to the meeting. The participants from the Arab side know something about Israel. They might even know more about Israel than the Israeli intellectuals know about their countries. We must understand that they want to learn about the Israeli experience first-hand in order to implement it in their country and we have to help them do so.

The advantage of depth issues such as pluralism or identity is that they place intellectuals from different places on an equal footing. The subjects are relevant to Israel and all the Arab countries. Both our side and the other side have had impressive successes in certain areas and resounding failures in others. Exchanging experiences about dealing with the issues and problems is a central objective of the encounters and makes them more than narrow political and diplomatic discussions. We also avoid the propaganda trap of choosing more focused subjects like high-tech, technology, education and others that emphasize how developed Israel is and how backward the Arab countries are.

Encounters of this kind should have follow-up beyond the formal series of encounters. Exchanges of publications between the participants should be encouraged during the encounter: authors should bring their books and those of others, academics should bring their publications. Translation of the works into Hebrew and Arabic and their publication by local publishers in the respective countries should be encouraged. So should maintaining contact between all of the participants after the encounter via e-mail and social networks. Other initiatives by the participants should be welcomed.

### **Are we aiming for the next stage: talks in official channels?**

As opposed to Oslo, the proposed model does not aim at moving the talks to official channels. Such a step would necessitate engaging in political subjects from the outset and contradicts the program. A move to official channels might occur as a direct or indirect outcome of the proposed outline or independent of it. Unlike in the case of Oslo,

the proposed model does not aim at abandoning the cultural channel in favor of political outcomes. Even if an official process develops, the encounters should continue. An overly hasty transition to the formal stage could compromise the process.

The intellectuals who attend these meetings are public opinion makers. The idea is to reach a large number of intellectuals in each country who will influence growing segments of the public. With this dynamic, if it succeeds, the core initiators become increasingly involved and invested in the process and go on to recruit additional participants in their country. This lays the groundwork for political change so that if it comes it will stand on a more solid basis. The initiators of the process do the planting, watering and fertilizing, and nature does the rest.