



Workshop Summary

Israeli Peace Organizations and the Arab Spring

How to work more effectively in a changing regional environment

Mitvim - The Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies, the Peace NGO Forum and the Friedrich-Ebert Foundation conducted a joint workshop on March 11, 2013 at the offices of One Voice. The workshop was based on a research paper by Yael Patir entitled [“Israeli Peace Organizations and the Arab Spring,”](#) written as part of the “Opportunities in Change” project of Mitvim and the Friedrich-Ebert Foundation. Participants in the workshop included leaders of peace organizations and experts on foreign policy and the Middle East. Yael Patir presented the research findings and recommendations, and Prof. Elie Podeh offered remarks in response. This was followed by a discussion on ways to improve the effectiveness of the peace organizations’ work in light of the changes in the region.

The study indicated that the response of peace organizations to the Arab Spring corresponded, in general, to the response of Israel’s government. This is because the Arab Spring was perceived as an internal matter of the Arab states and was not seen as directly connected to the conflict. This response also stemmed from uncertainty and difficulty in linking the developments in the region to the advancement of a political accord, as well as an atmosphere of threat and fear in Israel vis-à-vis the repercussions of the Arab Spring. However, the changes in the region offer a range of opportunities for peace organizations to work for a change in the discourse within Israel and to cultivate new connections with Israel’s neighbors, in parallel to promoting an Israeli-Palestinian peace accord.

[The Mitvim Institute](#) aims to bring the discourse of regional opportunities onto the agenda of peace organizations, and help them to adapt and improve their work in light of the changing regional reality. This document summarizes the discussion held on this subject among the participants in the workshop.¹

¹ The workshop participants included: Anat Ben-Nun, Ilan Baruch, Gidon Bromberg, Dan Goldenblatt, Dr. Nimrod Goren, Tal Harris, Alona Volinsky, Dr. Ronen Zeidel, Ofer Zalberg, Lior Lehrs, Arik Segal, Prof. Elie Podeh, Dr. Ron Pundak, Lior Finkel, Yael Patir, Dahlia Sheindlin, Hillel Schenkar and Eyal Sher.



The importance of making progress on the Palestinian track

There are difficult and objective limitations in attempting to address the civil society in Arab states. A substantial change in the way civil groups in these states view Israel has yet to occur; this is because the heart of the problem lies in Israeli policy towards the Palestinians. The Palestinian issue deeply troubles the citizens of Arab states, and the possibility of dialogue with them is limited as long as this issue remains unresolved. This also includes the liberals. An anti-Israeli approach is what sometimes connects the Islamists and the liberals in the Arab world. The anti-normalization feeling in the Palestinian public underlines this and poses an additional challenge.

Therefore, the peace organizations in Israel should focus on resolving the Palestinian issue. It is incumbent upon them to generate an internal change in Israel for revising policy on this matter, and to communicate a message that ending the occupation is the most burning issue. Israeli peace organizations must not be perceived in the Arab world as seeking cooperation with Arab partners in specific niches while abandoning efforts to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Israeli peace organizations should re-examine paradigms and basic assumptions in light of the regional changes. For example, they should consider moving from an approach of separation and differentiation (“we are here and they are there”) to an approach of connection and cooperation, with a primary focus on the question of the nature and type of relations to be forged between Israel and the future Palestinian state. The peace organizations should also promote solutions of “enlarging the pie” – peace as an opportunity for common gain in various social and economic spheres, and not just a political accord.

The impact of the internal developments in the Arab world

The Arab Spring empowered the common person in Arab states. It created an opportunity for self-expression of groups and communities, and boosted the ability of common people to do what they think is right. In the “new” Arab world, there is curiosity and readiness to challenge the conventions of the old regime. It opens opportunities for a new discourse on Israel and with Israelis.

The peace organizations can now increasingly work vis-à-vis the citizenry in Arab states, and not only vis-à-vis the governments. In some cases, this change has also occurred among official entities. For example, Friends of the Earth Middle East (FoEME) reports that it is now easier to conduct cross-border meetings with Jordan than in the past. When there are concrete and



practical goals, and when there is sound preparation – it works. This is evident in the fact that FoEME was able to mobilize the support of some Jordanian members of parliament.

The need for a change of consciousness in Israeli society

Israeli peace organizations should work to change the Arab Spring's negative framing in Israel and to promote the understanding that a peace accord with the Palestinians is both essential and possible. The media, in general, constitutes a challenge. There is a negative slant vis-à-vis the Arab Spring, and a clear tendency to highlight negative and extreme events that serve this narrative. There are also quite a few right-wing organizations that work to instill this attitude and who enjoy substantial financial support from private donors.

Peace organizations should highlight positive events occurring in Arab states (including positive aspects in the discourse on Israel), broaden the understanding of Israelis about what is happening in the region, explain the need to end the occupation and achieve a peace accord (also via a negative campaign focusing on the dangers of failing to reach an accord), promote regional thinking, expose the public as much as possible to the cooperation that is already taking place between Israelis and representatives of neighboring states, and encourage new players – including members of the Arab society in Israel – to serve as commentators in the media on regional affairs.

In addition, it is important to encourage key moderates in the Israeli public to speak positively about regional developments, about the need for connecting with Israel's neighbors, and about the chances for peace. Peace organizations can help them to formulate the messages they express and to maximize the impact of these positive messages so they will not get lost in the dominant wave of negative discourse.

Peace organizations should try to generate change within the existing media channels, also by convening seminars for Israeli journalists. However, in light of the difficulty of this task, peace organizations should work in parallel to create independent media platforms ("a pro-peace MEMRI," social media, etc.) through which they can communicate messages without being dependent on the establishment media.

It is also important to start broadcasting messages of peace to the citizens of Arab states, to show them that Israelis care about what is happening in the region, to condemn injustice and violence by the regimes (in Syria, for example) and to search for ways to offer humanitarian



assistance when possible. It is a moral obligation, but also an important tool considering the fact that many people in Arab states are unaware of the existence of a peace camp in Israel.

Promoting regional thinking and the Arab peace initiative

The peace organizations should encourage thinking in regional and multilateral terms, rather than a bilateral approach. The multilateral negotiations successfully conducted in the 1990s can serve as an example (and an attempt could also be made to salvage what is possible from the fruits it produced then). The peace organizations should continue to search for ways to create regional channels of discourse with interlocutors from the Arab and Muslim world. Various international forums – anti-proliferation committees, for example – can serve as an arena for meeting with senior figures from the region.

The centerpiece of the regional approach is the Arab Peace Initiative. This initiative requires a positive response from Israel; without such a response, the stalemate will continue. The Arab League could also decide to retreat from the initiative – after all, some of the regimes that conceived the initiative have been replaced. The initiative has yet to win the hearts and minds of the Arab peoples, and a situation could arise in which the new Arab leaders seek to differentiate themselves from their predecessors by withdrawing support for the initiative. Therefore, while the Arab Peace Initiative is still on the table, it is an opportunity that must not be squandered.

The Arab Spring also creates an opportunity to turn to new figures in the Arab states and in Israeli society and to propose collaborative work on the initiative, including the possibility of making some modifications to it. The Israeli public is not sufficiently familiar with the initiative, despite many efforts in this direction. The peace organizations should focus efforts on educating the public about it by creating continuity and collaboration between various projects that address this subject, and by exploiting the momentum and connections these projects generate. Each re-ratification of the initiative by the new regimes in the region is something that should be highlighted.

Talk with whom, and about what?

There are various approaches to seeking partners in the changing Arab world. It is possible to distinguish between liberals and Islamists, or between pragmatists (who recognize Israel as an existing fact but strongly oppose its policies) and ideologues (who are completely unwilling to recognize Israel). It is important to try to create channels to the groups who are willing to talk,



and to broaden this readiness to include new groups. This is easier when done discretely, individually and with the help of a third party.

Important sectors that should be addressed include: members of the growing middle class (with whom it is possible to find common economic interests), political Islamists (who are playing an increasingly central role), youth (a large sector in the Arab world, which is gaining importance and is characterized by greater openness and curiosity).

Discourse with partners in the Arab world is easier if official entities in the Arab states support this. This is possible when there is potential for concrete gain for both sides. This requires preparatory work to identify shared interests and to forge cooperation for achieving them. Economic and environmental cooperation is apparently easier, certainly in comparison to attempts to create ideological or political rapprochement.

Security topics can also be relevant in this context. A central challenge that requires cooperation with neighboring states is the creation of regions with limited sovereignty, such as the Sinai Peninsula. This presents the opportunity to jointly discuss the revision of existing agreements and the signing of new accords that are relevant to the new reality.

One of the characteristics of the Arab Spring is a more complex and cross-border Arab discourse on topics such as the status of women, equality and human rights. This enables new partnerships and discourse on subjects that were not on the Israeli-Arab agenda in the past. The issues of social struggle are important in this context, and an attempt could be made to connect leaders of the social protest in Israel (some of whom drew inspiration from the Arab Spring) with their Arab counterparts. In this type of dialogue, it is important to involve diverse groups in Israeli society, including groups that do not take part in most of the dialogue initiatives today.

For further information:

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