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A few springs past the start of the Arab Spring, and the Israeli peace camp's flowerbed has yet to blossom. The Israeli peace organizations had difficulties in connecting regional developments to their agendas. Fear and suspicion in Israel regarding the changing Middle East makes this task even more difficult. Peace NGOs must find a way to connect with the regional developments and populaces, no matter what impact that has on their short-term goals. This article offers various opportunities for peace NGOs to formulate and refine messages, re-examine current perceptions, and create new partnerships.

In Israel, the public feeling towards the Arab Spring, as shaped by the political and military leadership, was not of hope but of concern and suspicion. The result of the difficulty to predict what had happened and what was going to happen was that of confusion in the various state security and political systems and an apparent decision not to take a stand or develop a policy. The developments in the Arab world also caught the Israeli peace organizations¹ by surprise. Accordingly, in the first months of the uprisings, we did not witness reactions or initiatives by the organizations. In fact, the main difference between the response of the organizations and that of the government was that the organizations experienced lesser degree of suspicion and a willingness to examine the regional developments in a positive light.

The Gush Shalom organization ads that appear every Friday in the *Haaretz* newspaper give us a certain index of the temperature in the Israeli peace camp towards the Arab Spring. An examination of these ads from January 2011 to June 2012 indicates that only two of them referred to the Arab Spring. One, on February 18, 2011, hailed the heroism of the Egyptian people, and the other, in February 2012, called to link the peace with Egypt with peace with the Palestinians. Indeed, the atmosphere of the first ad reflects a feeling that was shared by some of the peace organizations: excitement over the democratic spirit and courage demonstrated by the Tunisian and then the Egyptian demonstrators. Some hoped this would lead to new courses of action and

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¹ In this article I refer to the peace organizations first of all as legally incorporated bodies and secondly as organizations that define themselves as such and work primarily to promote peace between Israel and the neighboring countries. The organizations include for example Peace Now, Gush Shalom, the Geneva Initiative, the Israel Initiative, the Bereaved Families Forum, Friends of the Earth ME, Radio All for Peace, Economic Cooperation Foundation (ECF), the Council for Peace and Security, the Peace School at Neve Shalom, One Voice, the Sulha Peace Project. This is as opposed to the human rights organizations or struggle organizations like Sheikh Jarrah, Hithabrut-Tarabut, the Regional Council of Unrecognized Villages and so on.

partnerships, which were not possible when government permission was needed to participate in such activity. Others hoped that the democratic spirit would soften Israeli public opinion and elicit feelings of solidarity with the Arab neighbors. Some even hoped that the spirit of protest would seep into the Palestinian territories and give the Palestinian struggle a tailwind.

The small number of ads also indicates the difficulty the Israeli peace organizations had to draw a positive connection between their feelings in light of the regional developments and the agenda they advocate. The difficulty grew with the election results in Tunis and Egypt, which further increased Israeli suspicion and challenged the ability to draw the developments in positive terms of opportunity. To a certain extent, the developments actually highlighted the problem of signing peace agreements with leaderships that might be replaced by different ones who might not respect them, and mainly, with leaderships that do not represent the will of the people.

The Israeli organizations did not remain indifferent to the Arab neighbors' struggle for freedom and justice. Some welcomed it, and most held internal strategic discussions, public events and roundtables, and wrote a few articles. However, hardly any initiative came forth and, as a whole, modes of operation were not changed. In conversations I had with central leaders of the Israeli peace organizations, most testified that after consideration, internal discussion and evaluation of the new situation they concluded it did not affect the basic assumptions of the organization's activity and therefore that activity did not need to be changed.

There are a few reasons for that. First, the Israeli peace organizations are concerned primarily with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which did not play a central role in the Arab uprisings, which focused on internal calls to change the regime in each country. For many peace organizations who treat the pursuit of peace as a matter of foreign policy and security (as opposed, for example, to internal Israeli peace between different sectors of society), the model of the Arab Spring is irrelevant. On the other hand, it did serve as a source of inspiration for Palestinian protests calling for reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas, or, as leaders of the "tent protests" attested, for last summer's demonstrations in Israel.

Secondly, the new situation, namely regional instability, destabilization of Israel's old alliances, the appearance of new and unfamiliar leaders, and exposure to the feelings of the neighboring peoples that had been hidden from the Israeli public, manufactured a lot of unknowns. Given the uncertainty, it is difficult for the peace organizations to create positive and/or credible arguments to make a connection between the developments and the chances for peace. Furthermore, the suspicious public atmosphere and the framing of the regional developments as dangerous for Israel create a media challenge difficult for the organizations to overcome. Some even admit they simply don't know what is going to happen and therefore cannot draw a line between the Arab Spring and peace between Israel and its neighbors.

These difficulties, as formulated by leaders of the Israeli peace camp, explain why the vast majority of the peace organizations, after discussions, found no reason to change their strategy of operations. On the contrary, the regional developments created difficulties for the organizations and therefore they preferred to ignore them.

Opportunities

When setting out to examine the opportunities the Arab uprising presents for the Israeli peace organizations, we need to recognize that peace activity is not made of one cloth and therefore is not a single arena of activity. We need to make a distinction between two main concepts of peace. One comes from the world of diplomacy and international relations and means the absence of war, and therefore refers to the relations between countries (or popular movements). The other concept is broader and describes a condition of human security, justice, relief and prosperity.²

Israeli peace organizations advocate both the narrow and the broad concepts of peace as described above by various means. I looked at organizations that use strategies aimed at ending the conflict between Israel and its neighbors through peace agreements and cooperation between countries (on the diplomatic, economic and educational levels, for instance)³ and strategies of establishing relations of peace and respect between people (in and outside of Israel).⁴

In light of these goals and strategies and considering the consequences of the Arab Spring, I suggest looking at the following opportunities that exist for the Israeli peace organizations.

In every change there is opportunity. There seems to be no dispute that the Middle East (and the whole world) is undergoing unprecedented upheavals that are changing its character (the economic crisis, the erosion of the nation state, the anti-globalization movement, the environmental movement and so on) – things are not going to be as they were. On the other hand, the Israeli-Palestinian peace process is at a standstill. There exists an equilibrium that allows the sides to stay in a new chapter of conflict management instead of moving towards its solution. Even though it seems as if the status quo is being maintained, actually the reality on the ground and in people's awareness is constantly changing.

The peace organizations must first of all see the regional changes as an opportunity to re-examine the assumptions that drive them. The technological revolution and liberation from the shackles of government provide direct access to all and sundry. We can see

² Baruch Spinoza described it well in his famous line: "Peace is not the absence of war. It is a virtue, a state of mind, a disposition for benevolence, confidence, justice."

³ They might take different forms of activity such as track two negotiations, research and information dissemination, extra-parliamentary political activity, lobbying and advocacy.

⁴ They use educational practices, dialogue activities, civil cooperation projects (in business, economics, academe, health, activism etc.) and unique activities to build trust and foster humanization, reconciliation, conflict mediation, overcoming violence, improving communication patterns etc.

that in Facebook campaigns such as We Love You Iran,⁵ which succeeded in record time to connect hundreds of thousands of people from enemy countries under a joint platform. This is a genuine opportunity for open and active listening to different people and groups within the neighboring countries, which might give rise to new perceptions and ways of operation.

An alternative discourse and new partnerships. Anyone listening to the feelings of the residents of the region will notice that a rights discourse (welfare, women's, workers' rights etc.) is replacing the political discourse. It is a border-crossing discourse based on common concepts of justice, equality and freedom and can serve as a basis to shape the struggle for peace in terms that are accessible to large audiences. A new discourse might undo old partnership that compartmentalized or excluded segments of the population and replace them with partnerships based on new identities and identifications. Such a discourse would present the opportunity to create coalitions surrounding non-political issues that are also related to peace such as the fight against corruption, job security, the war on hunger and so on.

Regional thinking and models. The Arab Spring proved that a fire that starts in Tunis can very quickly spread to the rest of the Middle East. The Arab Spring demonstrated not only historic and cultural similarity, or a common awareness or identity of the people of the region, but also the regional context of their political condition (which is not always evident to Israelis). Meanwhile, Israel's disconnection from the region and in fact its inability to affect developments or seize opportunities also became clear. The main reason for that disconnection is Israel's conflict with the Palestinians. Therefore there is no doubt that Israel will not be able to integrate in the region without ending the conflict, but also that ending the conflict depends on other countries in the region (primarily solution of the refugee problem).

In light of the aforesaid there is a clear need to think about the solution to the conflict in regional terms as well as thinking about Israel's integration. Just like we cannot separate the plight of Hamas from the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt or the weakening of Assad in Syria, we cannot separate the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from the developments in the region. Today there is a single joint regional basis initiated by the Arab countries which is the Arab Peace Initiative (API). The initiative provides the opportunity to move from a bilateral approach to making peace between Israel and its neighbors to a multilateral approach. Ultimately, solution of the conflict must take into consideration, provide solutions for and especially involve as many players in the Middle East as possible.

The importance of cooperation and dialogue on the civil society level. The events in the Arab world generated an openness of civil society and a freedom of action that did not previously exist. The change is the result of a revolution that is not only political but one of awareness: it consists of liberation from the fear that was the lot of anyone living under a regime devoid of the considerable personal freedom and questioning of

⁵ www.indiegogo.com/IsraelIran

conventions that come from access to a free press; disillusionment with what the regime says (because the regime's messages did not withstand the test of reality) and curiosity to learn about others and be exposed to them. The change is very evident on the social networks. The ability of citizens in some of the countries to create an actual revolution and in others to generate significant reforms strengthens the power and role of civil society and the belief in its ability to influence and change.

A new generation. One of the moving changes created by the developments in the Arab world is the awakening on the Arab street and especially the role young people played in it. The Arab world has 100 million young people ages 15-29 who are different from their parents because they are more exposed to the world and to the "rights discourse" and have a developed cultural and political awareness. This change leaves out no one including, of course, the religious or conservative elements. We must examine how to find our place in this generation change or make room for new players who can do so.

Strengthening moderates or liberals. Within the events of the Arab Spring, voices to which we had not previously been exposed to stood out. Between the governing elites and the Islamic forces a new, liberal third power emerged. This power may not have taken the reins of government but it exists, is organizing and can gain momentum. This is an opportunity to find and build relations with new forces.

Recommendations for the peace organizations vis-a-vis Israeli public opinion

To a very great extent, since public support in Israel of the two state solution became the majority position, the Israeli peace camp lost its attractiveness and its ability to recruit masses to that agenda. Since the second intifada and the entrenchment of the idea that there is no partner on the other side, and with the rise of the mistrust between the parties, things only got worse. In the current atmosphere the peace organizations have difficulty manufacturing a mobilizing agenda, certainly one of hope. In that respect the Arab Spring provides the peace organizations with a number of opportunities to start a new public conversation. The organizations might consider how to integrate and advance the following messages in their activity:

1. Emphasizing the dangers of the status quo in a changing reality in the midst of regional changes. In light of those changes, the organizations might encourage Israel to take the initiative in shaping its future in the region instead of being led by regional developments over which it has no control. It is precisely the insight that Israel's status in the region does not enable it to intervene and take part in the developments around it that might encourage the government to initiate a process in relation to the Palestinians that could help strengthen Israel and position it more positively in the region.
2. The democratization process means peace agreements must now stand the test of public opinion. The neighboring Arab countries are concerned and committed to the Palestinian issue. The Israeli public must understand that it can now

achieve a more stable and warmer peace with all the nations of the region, but the price will definitely have to be ending the occupation and establishing a Palestinian state alongside Israel.

3. It can be argued that since the Arab regimes will be more representative and will need to be more considerate of public opinion, and since they are not yet secure in their control, it would be hard for them to launch foreign attacks or wars at this time. This is an opportunity for Israel to seize the chance to shape a reality that best suits its interests.
4. The security calm and separation between Israelis and Palestinians makes it difficult to persuade the Israeli public of the benefit it would gain from an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement, which is widely perceived as a concession and compromise. The combination between the new conditions created by the Arab Spring and the API increases the circle of reference to the Israeli-Palestinian issue. The API makes it possible to enlarge the pie in the sense that Israel has more to gain or lose. The offer gives Israel, in exchange for ending the conflict with the Palestinians, a new status in the region and normalization with the countries of the region, which would open many opportunities for Israel on the level of development, economy and business.

Recommendations for the peace organizations to deepen dialogue and cooperation with the neighbors

In light of the analysis of opportunities I hereby propose a number of suggestions for new activities or work with new audiences:

1. To expand the goals and banners the organizations carry on the regional level. When doing so they ought to think of new solutions and implement ways Israel can exert a positive influence on regional developments and reinforce its legitimacy in the region. The peace organizations can expand their activity beyond campaigning for a Palestinian state or against the occupation regime and support the struggles for liberty and justice on the regional level. This may not be able to be direct involvement since an Israeli contribution in the present circumstances might only harm the struggles and make them illegitimate but we may think of creative solutions.

An example of this was given by Dr. Alon Liel,⁶ head of the Israel-Syria Peace Society, who suggested in an article from March 2012 that Israel offer humanitarian aid to Syrians wishing to escape to Israel. In his proposal, Liel emphasized both the ability to provide a concrete solution to a neighbor's crisis and a show of goodwill. Such activities would also bolster the legitimacy of the peace organizations in Israel by demonstrating they are not interested solely in

⁶ Alon Liel, "Bashar Can Forget about the Golan," *Haaretz*, 5 March 2012.

the good of the Palestinians but are guided by concern for the good of humanity at large and of Israel in particular.

2. To identify opportunities for collaboration with liberal forces or change-oriented forces in the region which would be cultivated discreetly, most likely outside of the Middle East (as was done in the past with the Palestinians). Such partnerships might grow on the basis of joint business or academic interests with cultural figures, business people, retired diplomats and so on. In any case we must find those who are willing to talk, initiate an open dialogue with them and leave it undefined so that it can generate organic outcomes. It should be seen as an opportunity to help those forces and strengthen them according to their wishes and non-coercively.
3. Due to global and regional changes there is cause for the emergence of new groups offering a basis for new partnerships crossing sectors and borders based on a joint struggle. One example is a group of Israeli descendants of immigrants from Arab and Muslim countries who connect the struggle for Mizrahi and Arab identity in Israel with the struggle against oppressive and exploitative regimes in the Middle East. The background for its rise is the Ashkenazi dominance of the Israeli peace camp along with accusations that Israeli peace advocacy is not authentic because it is motivated by economic interests or because it is too conciliatory and is not connected to the cultural, religious and historic context of the region. Indeed, the Ashkenazi elite has a limited ability to relate as equals to parts of Israeli society and the Arabs in the neighboring countries.

New groups might be able to shatter those old boundaries. Thus the group "Ruh Jedida: A New Spirit for 2011," which in April 2011 published a letter to "members of our generation in the Middle East and North Africa," offering the new generation in the Arab, Muslim and Jewish worlds to bridge across the walls of hostility on the basis of a new identity. The letter said: "We believe that, as Mizrahi Jews in Israel, our struggle for economic, social, and cultural rights rests on the understanding that political change cannot depend on the Western powers who have exploited our region and its residents for many generations. True change can only come from an intra-regional and inter-religious dialog that is in connection with the different struggles and movements currently active in the Arab world. Specifically, we must be in dialog and solidarity with struggles of the Palestinian citizens of Israel who are fighting for equal political and economic rights and for the termination of racist laws, and the struggle of the Palestinian people living under Israeli military occupation in the West Bank and in Gaza in their demand to end the occupation and to gain Palestinian national independence."⁷

⁷ Ruh Jedida/A New Spirit for 2011, <http://arabjews.wordpress.com/young-mizrahi-israelis%E2%80%99-open-letter-to-arab-peers/>.

For some of the peace organizations the transition to advocating a policy of struggle against the West or the global capitalist arrangement is light years away. They do not have to change but make room for new groups to enter the fray and have an influence.

4. It is important to identify civil society and peace organizations in the Middle East (including in Turkey) and try to create joint platforms with them, especially with civil society organizations from other places in the world to allow border- and nation-crossing cooperation for concrete goals such as fighting governmental corruption, promoting women's rights and so on.
5. Alongside more "natural" partnerships based on common cause with liberal elements, an effort must also be made to connect with religious and especially Islamic elements. Such contacts are less customary and therefore harder to realize but can be made on a concrete basis, such as lifting the restrictions on Gaza. A good example of this was the involvement of Israeli peace activist Dr. Gershon Baskin in the release of abducted soldier Gilad Shalit as a result of contacts he had with senior Hamas officials.
6. The rise of the middle class in the Arab countries provides opportunities for business collaborations. This is a platform where there exists a common language and it is easy to find overlapping interests. Business collaboration should be geared towards the economic development of the Middle East as a joint interest. Israeli motivation to integrate in the region can be an engine to do this.
7. Finally, the Israeli peace organizations must take advantage of the new opportunities that opened and the openness that came with them in order to communicate and convey messages of peace to the people of the region. These messages must emphasize Israeli support of the Arab struggle for liberation and honor, what we have in common, Israel's wish to integrate in the region from a position of respect (and not from a position of arrogance and domination), the joint Jewish-Arab struggles in Israel to promote social justice and against the occupation, the humanist side of Israel and so on. An example of such activity is the support clip Israelis made for the Egyptian people following the revolution, "We are with Egypt."⁸

The developments that were given the name the Arab Spring do not change the basic assumptions of the peace organizations or provide new foundations for action. However, they open many windows of opportunity to formulate and reinforce messages or revise perceptions and partnerships. Either way, they signal the arrival of a new agenda for which we must all prepare, including the Israeli peace organizations.

⁸ Children of Liberty, 11 February 2011, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-6eW_V3ph94.