

Israel in the Middle East the Aftermath of the Arab Spring (2010-2017): An Involved Observer from the Sidelines

Eyal Zisser, Tel Aviv University, Tel Aviv, Israel

ABSTRACT

This article describes how in the middle of the winter of 2010 the “Spring of the Arab Nations” suddenly erupted without any warning all over the Middle East. However, the momentum of the uprisings was impeded rather quickly, and the hopes held out for the “Spring of the Arab Nations” turned into frustration and disappointment. While many Israelis were focusing their attention in surprise, and some, with doubt and concern as well about what was happening in the region around them; suddenly, in Israel itself, at the height of the steamy summer of 2011, an “Israeli Spring” broke out. The protesters were young Israelis belonging to the Israeli middle class. Their demands revolved around the slogan, “Let us live in our land.” However, similar to what happened in the Arab world, the Israeli protest subsided little by little. The hassles of daily life and security and foreign affairs concerns once more became the focus of the public’s attention. Therefore, the protesters’ hopes were disappointed, and Israel’s political, economic, and social order remained unshaken. Thus, towards the end of 2017, the memory of the “Israeli spring” was becoming faded and forgotten. However, while the Arab world was sinking into chaos marked by an ever deepening economic and social crisis that deprived its citizens of any sense of security and stability, Israel, by contrast, was experiencing years of stability in both political and security spheres, as well as economic growth and prosperity. This stability enabled Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his Likud party to remain in power and to maintain the political and social status-quo in Israel.

KEYWORDS

Arab Spring, Egypt, Israel, Israeli Spring, Social Protest, Syrian Revolution

FLEETING “SPRING” IN THE MIDDLE EAST

In the middle of the winter of 2010, a new “Spring of Nations,” the “Spring of the Arab Nations,” suddenly erupted without any warning all over the Middle East. The preceding decades had been marked by economic and social stagnation, together with a surprising degree of long-term political stability under the shadow of dictatorial regimes. The Arab Spring now brought changes the Middle East had not experienced since the 1950s. Waves of protest swept the region, led by the younger generation calling for change, liberty, and justice. In their wake, several dictatorial regimes collapsed unexpectedly, even though they had seemed to outside observers to be firmly in control and immune to any serious threat to their power (Haas & Lesch, 2013).

Many in Israel and the whole region, especially in the West, went out of their way to greet this “Spring of the Arab Nations.” Many wanted to believe it would convert the backward Middle East into a Garden of Eden enjoying economic prosperity, liberty, and freedom. In particular, these observers

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hoped the region would become a fertile breeding ground for democratic regimes, replacing the authoritarian governments that had collapsed so suddenly and dramatically. To anyone viewing the live broadcasts from Tahrir Square in the heart of Egypt's capital, Cairo, it must have seemed as if the young and determined demonstrators – the espresso, Internet, Facebook YouTube, and cell phone generation – would bring about in Egypt, and in their wake, in other Arab states as well, a revolution such as brought down the communist regimes in Eastern Europe. After all, there the revolution had turned the former Soviet satellites into democratic states capable of becoming members of the European Union and, in certain cases, even members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

However, the momentum of the uprisings was impeded rather quickly, and the hopes held out for the “Spring of the Arab Nations” turned instead into frustration and disappointment. Indeed, the Arab revolutions reached a dead end. In Egypt, for example, the wheel was turned back and an authoritarian military regime was reestablished. In other states, like Libya and Syria, the protests lurched out of control, and in both countries the state and society descended into chaos and anarchy, creating a bloody civil war. With this it became clear that the establishment of a new order, and certainly a Western-style democratic system, was a task beyond the power of the young protest generation in the Arab world.

While many Israelis were focusing their attention in surprise, and some, without a doubt, with concern as well, on what was happening in the region around them, suddenly, in Israel itself, at the height of the steamy summer of 2011, an “Israeli Spring” erupted. The protesters were young Israelis belonging to the Israeli middle class. Their demands revolved around the slogan, “Let us live in our land.” They made it clear they wanted an improvement in their economic conditions and a more equitable distribution of the country's wealth and natural resources. This protest was undoubtedly influenced by what was happening in the nearby Arab world. The protest succeeded in pushing the Israeli government to undertake a series of economic measures designed to appease and placate the protesters, although the measures were mostly limited or short-term in character.

This middle-class protest found political expression somewhat later when the “Yesh Atid” (“There Is a Future”) party arose and quickly advanced to the center of the political stage in the 2013 Knesset elections. “Yesh Atid” built up its power from the wave of public protest and represented itself as the party of the middle class.

Significantly, the protesters were careful to restrict their demands to social and economic issues, mainly because they wanted to enlist as much support as possible among the Israeli public. Therefore, they made no reference to Israel's internal politics and especially avoided foreign policy issues, and in particular, the Arab-Israeli conflict. In any case, similar to what happened in the Arab world, the Israeli protest increasingly subsided. The hassles of daily life and security and foreign affairs concerns once more became the focus of the public's attention. And so the protesters' hopes were disappointed, and Israel's political, economic, and social order remained unshaken (Shalev, 2013; Manor, 2013).

Towards the end of 2017, the memory of the “Israeli spring” was becoming faded and forgotten. However, while the Arab world was sinking into chaos marked by an ever deepening economic and social crisis that deprived its citizens of any sense of security and stability, Israel, by contrast, was experiencing years of stability in both political and security spheres, as well as economic growth and prosperity. This stability enabled Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his Likud party to remain in power, even though Netanyahu ended his partnership with Yair Lapid and his “Yesh Atid” (“There Is a Future”) Party following the 2015 elections. Instead, the Prime Minister formed a new coalition based upon the religious and right-wing parties in the Knesset (Ben Meir, 2017).

Behind Netanyahu's success to remain in power stood several reasons: 1) the economic growth and prosperity being experienced by most Israelis, along with the awareness that matters in the country were quite stable; 2) the relatively high sense of security enjoyed by the Israeli population, while at the same time it was aware of the dangers threatening from abroad due to the chaos reigning in the Middle East region and the rising Iranian threat; 3) the general lack of faith in the possibility of advancing a political (i.e., peace) process at this time; 4) and the tendency of the electorate to support the right-wing of the political spectrum.

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