

An Oriental Fantasy: Revolution in Israel-Palestine

Dateline: Tel Aviv, Sometime in late 2011 or beyond...

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The streets of Tel Aviv are overflowing with demonstrators, who are waving the Palestinian flag, its insignia dominating a blurred sea of other flags, including some with the star of David. At the culmination of months of mass protests here as well as in other Israeli cities and across the Gaza Strip and the formerly occupied West Bank, Israelis, both Arab and Jewish, join hands with Palestinian refugees released from the camps, to celebrate the birth of new Palestine.

All inhabitants of historic Palestine are preparing for a popular referendum, in which they will cast their votes either for a single state guaranteeing equal rights of citizenship to all, regardless of religion or ethnic background, or two separate and equal states. A provisional government, composed of leading peace activists, human rights organizers and Palestinian political figures including the freed Marwan Barghouti, has assumed responsibility for organizing the referendum, while a commission of legal experts has begun studying the parameters of a Constitution — either for the one-state solution or the new Palestinian state — a Constitution which is something the state of Israel never had. The martial law which had been in force off and on since 1948 has been lifted, and the check-points and other barriers which had chopped up the land into Bantustans are being removed. The first bulldozers have started smashing the hated wall, the border to Gaza has been opened on both sides, to Egypt and to the rest of Palestine. A Truth Commission is being constituted, on the model of the South African experience, to lay the basis for reconciliation between Israelis and Arabs. The Commission has two departments, one which will examine all records pertaining to the expulsion of the Palestinians in the Nakba, and the second which will review violations of human rights from that time to the present.

Former leaders of the ancient regime have left the country, many, like former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, returning to their native land, the United States. Others, like Tzipi Livni, Ehud Barak, Avigdor Lieberman, and Shimon Peres, have gone underground, i.e. made off to safer havens, to avoid being slapped with international arrest warrants. Numerous Israeli ambassadors abroad have tendered their resignations, also in pursuit of political refuge somewhere, somehow.

How It Happened

It all began with the Arab rebellion which swept North Africa beginning in December 2010 in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya and beyond.

From the onset, it was the issue of social justice which sparked the upheavals. Mohammad Bouazizi's self-immolation in Tunisia was an act of protest against the social and economic injustice he and his family had been subjected to. Following the ungracious flight of dictator

Bin Ali and his hated wife Leila Trabelsi to Saudi Arabia, the spark of revolution passed like the Olympic torch to Egypt. Over one million Egyptians demonstrating in Tahrir Square and throughout the country forced Hosni Mubarak out, and later brought him before a court of law to answer for the deaths of over 800 demonstrators. In Yemen, strongman Ali Abdullah Saleh resisted the pressure of the street as well as generous mediation bids from the GCC until finally forced, by ailing health and political pressure, to bow out. Muammar Qaddafi's ruthless repression of civilians provided the pretext for a UN resolution of dubious legality, which in turn was exploited to launch a NATO war against the country. Only after months of prolonged bloodletting and massive destruction of Tripoli through aerial bombardments was a compromise struck, allowing the Libyan leader an exit. In Syria, the Assad regime struck out with utmost brutality against its people, killing above 2,000, and resisted all attempts from abroad to mediate, until a pragmatic faction inside the Alawite minority, exploiting the isolation that an EU oil embargo had imposed on Syria, moved against the Assad clan, and deposed it, thus creating the conditions for a transition to some form of representative government.

And the wave of Arab rebellion did not stop there. Demonstrators in Bahrain staged unprecedented protests. Miscast in the international media as a purely sectarian challenge mounted by the repressed Shi'ite majority against the Sunni ruling minority, they called for wide-ranging economic, political, and social reforms. Some opposition forces pursued a constitutional monarchy, others called for the abolition of the monarchy tout court. The politically and militarily outnumbered Bahraini royal family had to call in reinforcements from neighboring Gulf Cooperation Council states which arrived on March 14. In a grotesque parody of "Arab unity," soldiers from Saudi Arabia and the UAE moved in to protect strategic sites, freeing up Bahraini police to confront demonstrators. The Saudi dynasty preempted social upheaval at home by announcing it would dish out \$100 billion to raise living standards.

Oman and Kuwait were not immune to the radical protest wave, nor were the United Arab Emirates. In the cases of the Gulf sheikhdoms, it was representatives of disenfranchised ethnic and religious communities demanding an end to discrimination and adequate political representation in new state institutions which should replace the archaic, oligarchical structures through which the oil-rich sheikhs had governed their fiefdoms, in total disregard for the most basic human rights. Given the immense economic assets at stake in the several small but immensely rich oil emirates and sheikhdoms, there was no hesitation on the part of their Western allies and oil consumers to come to their aid. But the social, psychological, and political dynamic that had been unleashed would not surrender to traditional measures of repression. Civil war conditions threatened many of the sheikhdoms, leading to forced changes in the political status quo: profound reforms redefined some of the absolute monarchies into constitutional entities along the Spanish or Scandinavian models. Although far from perfect, the changes forced through by the power of the street succeeded in replacing some of the antiquated medieval aristocratic structures with half way decent pseudo-democracies, where the people could begin to think of themselves no longer as subjects but as citizens.

The younger and more modern-thinking monarchs in Jordan and Morocco succeeded in staving off open social conflict by introducing reforms which reduced the power of the monarchy and gradually expanded the prerogatives of parliament. Though far from constituting fundamental political change, the cosmetic measures helped maintain social control.

Panic in Tel Aviv

It was in Israel that the most panicked responses to the Arab Spring emerged. The Israeli establishment was caught utterly off guard by the Egyptian revolution. The formidable intelligence agencies, starting with Mossad, had failed to foresee the revolutionary upsurge, not because they were ignorant of developing opposition trends over the past ten years, but because of their ideological belief that Egyptians (they are only Arabs after all) would never, could never mount a credible challenge to Mubarak's rule. Buttressing their prejudices was their political commitment to the Mubarak regime which had provided Israel with a reliable Arab partner in the fight against the Palestinian cause, be it through political pressures on Fatah or outright repressive measures against Hamas. According to Wikileaks, Mubarak not only passively tolerated Israel's 2008 war against Gaza, but solicited it.

Now Mubarak, the pillar of stability for Israel in the Arab world, had been toppled. And it did not end there. Israel feared that if Egypt backed out of its 1978-79 Camp David peace agreement, Jordan could follow suit, abrogating its 1994 peace deal with Israel. And this was not paranoia. As the Egyptian revolution prevailed and protestors in Libya challenged the rule of Muammar Qaddafi, demonstrators filled the streets of Amman demanding a new government and the introduction of real reforms, beyond the token changes that King Abdallah II had proposed.

The Israeli elite was thunderstruck. Initial statements issuing from the government echoed those of the dethroned Arabs, conjuring up the image of extremist Muslim Brotherhood fundamentalists poised to seize power. Otherwise Tel Aviv pleaded for clemency: that the new Egyptian government, whatever it might be, please not break previous treaties with Israel, and above all, not enter into an adversary relationship. The prompt statements by a rational and mature leadership in the Egyptian High Military Council from Cairo, assuring that all international obligations would be respected, provided relief to nervous politicians in Tel Aviv. And assurances that natural gas deliveries, that had been temporarily suspended, would be resumed, also allayed fears in Israel. But then in February, for the first time in 30 years, Egypt allowed Iran to send two naval ships through the Suez Canal, a move that ignited paranoid fears in Tel Aviv that the new regime in Cairo might ally with Israel's arch-enemy Iran. More generally, Israelis were terrified that the Egyptians might abandon Mubarak's commitment to the unwritten clauses in Camp David regarding security in Gaza. Above all, they feared the new Egyptian leadership would place relations with the Fatah faction and Hamas on an equal footing, and open the border to Gaza. Israeli leaders feared that, were they to launch a new war against the Palestinians in Gaza or the West Bank, Egypt this time would not sit back on the sidelines and watch.

The Revolt Comes to Israel-Palestine

While Israeli politicians were biting their nails over such terrible eventualities, none of them entertained the possibility that such a development as was sweeping the Arab world might also engulf Israel. Just as the reputedly all-knowing Israeli intelligence service Mossad had been taken utterly by surprise by the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings, so too had they underestimated or ignored the growing signs of a similar process brewing in Israel/Palestine itself.

In all the thousands of press commentaries about the Arab revolution, there were precious few journalists who even contemplated the possibility that the process might sweep

Palestine. This derives from the unspoken assumption among not only press but also ordinary citizens in the region, that Israel is Israel, i.e. a Jewish state, and therefore, anything that called itself an Arab revolution would have no place here. But, in point of fact, Israel/Palestine is Arab...

The first significant move towards the revolution in Israel-Palestine came when representatives of Palestinian youth from Gaza and the West Bank met in Cairo on March 3, with the intention of urging leaders of Fatah and Hamas to overcome their hostilities and, in the interest of organizing Palestinians for the establishment of a sovereign state, join ranks. Following the Cairo meetings, Palestinian youth organized a demonstration of 1,000 for unity on February 24 in Ramallah, all sporting the Palestinian flag. On March 15, their counterparts in Gaza mounted a similar protest, demanding that Fatah and Hamas leaders to rise above their petty differences and map out a serious strategy for Palestinian statehood. Estimated tens of thousands marched through the strip with signs saying "End the Split."

In April, Hamas leader Haniya issued an invitation to Abbas to visit Gaza for talks. In their discussions, the Hamas and Fatah leaders read the writing on the wall: either they would overcome political differences and forge a united Palestinian front for statehood, or they, as Hamas in Gaza and Fatah on the West Bank, would be challenged by Palestinian masses, and, like Bin Ali, Mubarak, Saleh, etc., would be forced to relinquish power. In fact, after the fall of Mubarak, there had been many smaller demos on the West Bank, sporting slogans like, "Mubarak today, Abbas tomorrow." In Gaza, a poll in mid-March showed that 2/3 of those asked supported demonstrations for regime change.

The Palestinian demonstrations on the West Bank and in Gaza were crucial in waking up the split Palestinian leadership to the fact that, in the current revolutionary juncture, it could not afford to sit back and wait it out. By the end of April they had struck an accord comprising 5 points which included an interim unity government, elections within a year, combining security forces, and freeing prisoners. Abbas appeared to take the bull by the horns on July 18 when he announced that he would present the bid for Palestinian statehood to the UN Security Council, and, in the likely event of a US veto, transfer the matter to the General Assembly. The plan was to unleash "Palestine 194" demonstrations calling for it to become the 194th state beginning at the time of the UNGA meeting. And in fact, promptly on September 20 demonstrations broke out throughout the Occupied Territories - and also inside Israel.

The Israeli protest movement, which had started in July, began as a movement for affordable housing, better living conditions, — in sum, "social justice" - and its leaders explicitly avoided linking that process to political support for Palestinian statehood. Many among the Israeli youth had feared that broadening the protest to embrace Palestinian statehood, would alienate more conservative participants. But they had to awaken to the fact that any call for "social justice" would be a mockery if the issue of Palestine were not included. As the demos grew, and tent cities populated the entire country, growing numbers of Arab Israelis joined. The calls for social justice had given way to demand for regime change in Israel at the end of July, as protestors sported posters saying, "Bibi go home" and "Leave!" (in Arabic) — all directed at Benjamin Netanyahu. On July 30 well over a dozen cities mobilized, including Nazareth, where Jews and Arabs marched together. In early August a quarter of a million turned out. Despite the "security crisis" orchestrated by the Netanyahu government following the August 18 killing of 8 Israelis near Eilat and Israel's retaliatory bombings of Gaza, the Israeli protests did not cease. In mid-August thousands

marched in Tel Aviv to protest the high cost of living. Significantly, here too, Jewish-Arab solidarity was a theme: “Jews and Arabs refuse to be enemies,” chanted the marchers. No amount of promises from Netanyahu that his “commission” would review the social issues could stem the protests, and they expanded culminating on September 3 in demonstrations that brought nearly a half a million into the streets. In a country of 7.7 million this represented a whopping majority. These were the largest demonstrations ever held in Israel. Demonstrators spoke of the event as a “second day of independence.”

By the time the issue of Palestinian statehood came before the UNGA, the two processes had become one. The Israelis’ protest against cuts in housing, health, and other social infrastructure were indirect attacks against Netanyahu’s settlement expansionist policy. The rightwing extremist settlers were enjoying subsidies and modern housing facilities, while students in Tel Aviv could not find places to live. Meanwhile the government was continuing to authorize new housing on Palestinian land including in East Jerusalem. The two issues could no longer be kept apart. As planned by the Palestinian leadership, demonstrations in favor of the UN vote started on September 20 throughout the West Bank and Gaza, and dovetailed with the continuing protest demonstrations in Israel.

So, although the Security Council vote was as expected sabotaged by a U.S. veto – a gesture which was to strip President Obama of his last shreds of credibility — the UNGA delivered a whopping majority vote for Palestinian statehood. Meanwhile, the demonstrators in Israel-Palestine were establishing facts on the ground. It was the “diplomatic tsunami” which Barak had feared. On March 13 he had warned that as the September 20 date approached, “we stand to face a diplomatic tsunami that the majority of the public is unaware of,” referring to the “international movement that may recognize a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders.” Barak had joined other Israeli leaders and their American counterparts in a major diplomatic campaign to arm-twist UN members not to vote for a Palestinian state, but to no avail. The U.S. had gone so far as to issue a diplomatic demarche in late August to over 70 countries, demanding that they oppose the Palestinian bid for statehood, on grounds that it would destabilize the region and hinder progress in the (long since defunct) “peace process.”

The Israeli establishment was helpless in the face of such a phenomenon. It was not the UN vote per se that made the difference – since its value was largely symbolic, though morally powerful – but the convergence of the social upheaval inside Israel and the Palestinian demos throughout the Occupied Territories. The IDF might have no qualms about opening fire on Palestinians as in the past, but could not do the same to Israeli citizens. Even facing a Palestinian revolt as a thing in itself would have presented problems. Lt. Gen. Benny Gantz told a Knesset committee in early August that “there is potential for confrontation in September,” adding that the military would not allow demonstrators to move towards settlements. And Amos Gilad, head of the Defense Ministry’s Political Department had admitted, “We’re not good at dealing with Gandhi.”

Now what they faced was more than that: a general uprising of Israeli citizens alongside Palestinians, demanding justice for all.

Israeli Myths and Press Blindness

The revolution in Israel-Palestine caught many analysts and journalists by surprise, largely because they had ignored the social, political, and economic reality of the country, while swallowing the prevailing assumptions about living conditions in Israel. They had overlooked

the common characteristics between life in Israel and life in those Arab nations being rocked by revolt. One such mistaken assumption held as universal had been that Israel was a democracy, indeed the only democracy in the region. The comments by the prime minister's spokesman Mark Regev after the massive July 30 protests were laughable: he said he didn't think the protestors were "calling for democratic reforms, because they know we live in a democratic society." What democratic society? Few had raised the question: how can you have a democracy when you have no Constitution? It surely takes more than periodic elections, conducted among a collection of parties which may have superficial differences but all accept the status quo. Another question not raised earlier was: how can you have a democracy when martial law is in effect?

Not a democracy, but an oligarchy, ruled Israel, as the protestors gradually came to realize. Examining the structure of economic and financial power in the country, they denounced the existence of a small elite, of about ten powerful families, who controlled the wealth of the nation.

Another social factor that Israel had in common with the Arab dictatorships was the existence of an ageing and corrupt ruling elite. Although not represented by one dynasty, the Israeli elite presented a collective dynasty led by figures like Shimon Peres and Ariel Sharon (though incapacitated), who had been in power for decades. And corruption had been rife: whether sex scandals like those that hit former President Katsav, who was jailed for rape, or financial corruption as in the case of Ehud Olmert or President Ezer Weizman, not to mention the dirty dealings of Ariel Sharon and his sons, the Israeli elite had not differed much from its counterparts in Egypt or Tunisia. Not to mention continuing accusations of abuse meted out by Netanyahu's wife Sara against domestic servants.

Thus, the revolution in Israel-Palestine should have surprised no one. It was only ideological blinders that prevented world public opinion from seeing what was developing in Israel-Palestine, as part of the process of the Arab Spring.

Fantasy or Reality?

I have long argued the case that, for there to be any progress in Arab-Israeli relations, a fundamental crisis must erupt in Israel, a crisis of moral, political, and existential dimensions, which forces the elite and the general population to rethink all their basic assumptions, - about how Israel came into being, what its relationship to the Palestinian people has been since 1948, what its *raison d'être* should be as a nation if it is to have any legitimacy. That crisis is now at hand, and it should be welcomed as a most healthy phenomenon - no matter what ultimately emerges from it.

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