

COMMENTARY

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The Arab Spring: An Impediment or an Opportunity for Peace?

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There is an ongoing debate in and outside of Israel as to whether or not this is the right time to forge peace with the Palestinians in light of the regional upheavals and instability. The peace process, at this juncture, is hopelessly frozen while the expansion of the Israeli settlements and the continued internal Palestinian strife and factionalism increasingly dims the prospect of reaching an agreement. That said, the Arab Spring, which has triggered the rise of the Arab youth against their governments and has been accompanied by uncertainty, is not an impediment but an opportunity to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict based on a two-state solution. The reality on the ground strongly suggests that maintaining the status quo will be particularly detrimental to Israel.

Those inside the Netanyahu government who suggest that now is not the right time to seek a peace agreement with the Palestinians because of the regional turmoil and the existential threats that Israel now faces are both misguided and disingenuous. On the contrary, given the threats from Iran and its surrogate Hezbollah and the potential consequences of a failed state in Syria, it is a particularly critical moment for Israel to forge peace with the Palestinians. By doing so, Israel would be in a position to focus on the vastly more serious threats emanating from its real adversaries and would prevent the rise of a Palestinian fifth column, should Israel become mired in these regional conflicts. To enhance their positions, those who oppose peace now offer three faulty arguments to justify their stance.

First, the Palestinians cannot be trusted and Israel “correctly” points to the precedents of the partial disengagement from the West Bank between 1993 and 2000, the complete withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 2000 and the withdrawal from Gaza in 2005. From the Israeli perspective, all of these moments attest to the Palestinians’ inability or unwillingness to forge a permanent peace, despite having ample opportunities.

Second, due to Palestinian factionalism and infighting, there is no credible partner with whom Israel can negotiate as the Palestinians have been unable to sustain a unity government. The Netanyahu government is convinced that even if an agreement is reached, it will still prove transient.

Third, there are extremist Palestinian groups, such as Hamas, Islamic Jihad and others, along with non-Palestinian factions, including Hezbollah and Al Qaeda, that are vehemently antagonistic towards Israel and remain committed to its destruction.

However, none of the three arguments above can pass careful scrutiny. These types of arguments are used as excuses and a cover for the Netanyahu government’s deep conviction that the Jews have an inherent right to whole “land of Israel”. This remains an indefatigable nonstarter to reaching a peace agreement that requires significant territorial concessions, including the conversion of Jerusalem to the capital of Israeli and Palestinian states. From the Netanyahu government’s perspective, the conditions of no peace and no war that currently prevail are preferable to a compromise of the Jews’ historical rights and through a strong and determined will, Israel will eventually triumph.

In light of the reality on the ground, which both the Israelis and the Palestinians alike must face by virtue of their inevitable coexistence, Israel must act now because the passage of time may well be to its detriment, if not its very existence. There are three critical issues that increasingly work against Israel.

Considering Israel’s demographic situation, its evolutionary path has shifted radically as emigration from Israel over the past two decades (about one million) is roughly equal to the immigration into Israel for the same period. This, along with low birth rates relative to the Palestinian population, continues to erode the sustainability of Israel’s national character as a Jewish state. Should this growing demographic imbalance between the Jewish and Palestinian populations continue, Israel will be forced to either establish a single state (an unacceptable proposition for them as it will instantly make the Jewish population a minority) or resort to apartheid policies that will be vehemently rejected by the international community.

In recent years Israel has been fortunate that Gaza and the West Bank were generally quiet with limited resistance to the occupation and only marginal rocket attacks from Gaza that the Israeli military was able to handle with ease. Maintaining the occupation, however, and the continuance of the creeping expansion of the settlements, coupled with the uprisings of Arab youth against

their own governments, now make it only a matter of time before the Palestinians will be inspired, if not forced, to rise against the occupation. They will not remain indefinitely passive, as they clearly see that the longer they wait, the more their land will be consumed, resulting in an irreversible reality on the ground that will deny the rise of an independent and viable state.

Moreover, Israel will continue to face intensifying pressure from the international community due to the perpetuation of the status quo, which will dramatically increase Israel's isolation. For the United States and the European Union, who continue to be steadfast supporters of Israel, the lack of progress has a destabilizing effect on the region, which directly and indirectly impacts their national strategic interests and undermines Israel's national security. Israel should not be surprised if its closest allies, especially the US, decide to advance their own frameworks for peace largely based on prior Israeli-Palestinian negotiations in an attempt to save Israel from charting its own disastrous path.

In a broader context, Israel's current enemies, specifically Iran and Hezbollah, will continue to exploit the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to their advantage. To counteract this encroaching threat, Israel can at least begin to neutralize its antagonists' positions by taking steps that open the door for a negotiated solution and normalization of relations with the Arab states by accepting the Arab Peace Initiative as a basis for negotiations. While this strategy may not initially and necessarily change the principle objection to Israel's very existence by actors such as Iran and Hezbollah, Israel could shift the geopolitical conditions in the region in its favour. As I was convincingly told time and time again by top Arab officials, the Arab states are prepared to move towards establishing full diplomatic relations with Israel once an Israeli-Palestinian peace is achieved. They cite the changing dynamics in the region in the wake of the Arab spring and the ensuing battle between Sunnis led by Saudi Arabia and Turkey and Shiites led by Iran who seeks regional hegemony.

Despite the complex situation that Israel finds itself in, the basic question remains: how much longer can it sustain its present course without experiencing horrific and self-inflicted wounds? Israel must face the inevitable now while it is still in a strong position to negotiate an agreement with the Palestinians, a population that has, and can continue to, withstand the test of time. Unlike the precipitous withdrawal from Southern Lebanon and Gaza, any agreement with the Palestinians should be made with the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and should be based on a quid pro quo that would involve phased withdrawals from the West Bank over a few years in order to foster mutual trust and normalization of relations while ensuring Israel's national security.

Set against the context of the Arab Spring, Israel remains an oasis of stability with its economic, military and technological advantages continuing to strengthen over time. The inability of the Palestinians to change the dynamics in their favour has deepened the Israelis' complacency while removing any sense of urgency to solve the conflict, as they remain intoxicated by their military

prowess and the deceptive calm before the storm. Simply put, passively waiting for the region to achieve a modicum of stability while Israel further entrenches itself in the territories is a non-starter as the Arab upheavals are not a fading phenomenon and will remain an engine of change for years, if not decades, to come. The Palestinian's turn will come sooner than expected.

I must emphasize that the Palestinians, by their own violent actions and hostile public utterances, have directly contributed to the Israelis' scepticism and deepening of their conviction that the Palestinians are not partners to be trusted nor are they a population with whom they can negotiate a lasting peace. That said, it is up to Israel not to allow past experiences to blur its vision for the future and it must now chart its own future course by ending the occupation under specific "rules of disengagement" with the Palestinian Authority. Israel must never abandon the principles of equality and human rights regardless of race, colour or religion, as they are the very basis on which the state arose from the ashes of the Holocaust.

Netanyahu will eventually have to answer to the Israeli public as to what he has achieved over the past four years. The Israelis must now determine whether or not Netanyahu has made the conflict with the Palestinians considerably worse since he took office in 2009 and what price Israel will have to pay for his misguided and ominous policies.

Note: This article is published in collaboration with Prof. Ben-Meir's web portal. Link: http://www.alonben-meir.com/article/the-arab-uprising-an-impediment-or-an-opportunity-for-peace/?utm_source=Subscribers&utm_campaign=2e4d6de859-UA-5963141-2&utm_medium=email

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