

# COMMENTARY

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## Israelis Must Rise Up To Avert National Disaster

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I believe it is about time for the “Arab Spring” to reach the Israeli shores. It is time for the Israelis to rid themselves of the bondage of occupation and be free again. It is time to stop zealots and messianic leadership from gradually bringing Israel to the brink of national disaster. Israelis can no longer remain complacent in the face of their country’s growing isolation and the mounting danger of forsaking the prospect of a two-state solution, which remains the only viable option to save Israel as a democratic Jewish state. It is time for the Israelis to rise up before it is too late and demand an end to the conflict with the Palestinians.

Notwithstanding the failure of successive Israeli governments in the past to reach a peace agreement and regardless of the fact that the Netanyahu government, contrary to its public utterances, implemented policies that torpedoed any prospect for an agreement, it is time for the Israelis to ask themselves the question: where do we go from here? The nature of the Israeli political system, along with the current political landscape lacking in visionary and courageous leaders, will more than likely dim any hope for a peaceful breakthrough any time soon. Only the Israelis who are not deceived by the relative calm and economic prosperity and who are not swayed by demagoguery and siege mentality will realize that the country is on a path of self-destruction. They must now rise and demand the restoration of Israel to the principles set by its founders: a free, democratic, and strong home for the Jews, living in dignity, walking the high moral ground with their heads held high.

Nearly a year and a half ago hundreds of Israelis went to the streets demanding affordable housing, better wages and less taxation while bitterly complaining about the rising cost of food and gasoline, but no one demanded an end to the occupation on which the government on average spends over \$6 billion annually on overall security and military expenditures. Beside the misappropriation of funds, how many Israelis really believe that Israel can “keep on growing and prosper” while it continues to occupy Palestinian land against the will of its people at a staggering cost? Then again, is Israel really becoming more prosperous when 20 per cent of Israeli families (representing 1.7 million people including 840,000 children) live under the

poverty line? If the Israelis are not conscious of their internal socio-economic malaise, how can they possibly be conscious of the Palestinian plight?

Equating the settlement enterprise with national security is not only illusory, but it robs impoverished Israelis of a dignified living while allowing the conflict with the Palestinians to simmer. How much longer can the relative calm be sustained before it explodes in the face of Netanyahu and his cronies? The billions spent on settlements and the most sophisticated security apparatus did not stop Hamas from terrorizing tens of thousands of Israelis. The last flare up with Hamas does not explain or justify continued occupation or the blockade; on the contrary, it points out the futility of military prowess in the absence of peace.

The dismal failure of successive Israeli leaders to end the humiliating conditions for Israelis and Palestinians alike demands that the Israeli public rise by the hundreds of thousands, day in and day out, to put an end to the occupation. They must end the travesty committed by corrupt political leaders, stuck in dead-end ideology and engaged in intrigue and political manipulation to preserve their personal interests at the dire expense of the state. It is time for the public to rise as it takes a short time for preparation, especially when the timing is right and a window of opportunity presents itself.

Effective leadership emerging from academia and student organizations are needed to serve as the catalyst for uniting the general public in an uprising around the common cause of ending the occupation – leaders who can provide a sense of purpose, a true vision for a democratic and free Israel unshackled from the harsh and discriminatory policies that has converted the historically oppressed Jews to oppressors. The behaviour of the Netanyahu government runs against every tenant of Jewish values and the principles by which Jews live and die—the principles of equality, justice and human dignity. Young and old Israelis must reclaim these noble values that have sustained the Jews throughout history and will now provide the ultimate security guarantees for Israel.

It cannot be over-emphasized the importance of keeping the uprising non-violent at all costs. Only peaceful protesters can genuinely convey the importance of peaceful resolution to the conflict. Moreover, since the success of such a movement will largely depend on attracting an increasing number of supporters from within and outside the country, maintaining the peaceful nature of the uprising becomes even more critical. The protesters must never allow themselves to be intimidated by the presence of security forces; should limited and inadvertent violence occur, it must never be dealt with counter-violence, which is the only way to reinforce the peaceful intent of the uprising. Indeed, the more peaceful the protesters are, the greater the moral ground they stand on.

The uprising must be en masse with hundreds of thousands pouring into the streets, especially in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, to demand a change in the status quo. A sizeable public display of democratic expression will not only fuel the spirit of the demonstrations, but will send a clear message to the government, regardless of its political coloration, that the public will no longer rest unless a demonstrable change of policy is at hand. The public must remain unwavering in its

commitment to bring about peace and use the plentiful means of modern communications to raise public consciousness.

A consistent and systematic approach to a peaceful uprising is the only way to guarantee the overall success of public demonstration. Public relentlessness must be the hallmark of the uprising. The protesters should use symbols and banners to convey their indignations such as: Down with Occupation, We are Against Moral Decadence, Only Peace Provides Safety, Must End Illegal Detention, Democracy cannot be Part of Militarism and Racism, End Creeping Apartheid, End the Expansion of Settlements, and so on. Some of these slogans should be accompanied by drawings, creating unforgettable images that can make injustices visible and stir strong public emotions.

The failure of the government to respond favourably to the public outcry must be followed by selective labour strikes and civil disobedience: for example, walking out en masse from classrooms at universities across the country while making full use of popular media to disseminate information blow-by-blow about what is happening in various parts of the country. Student, faculty and think-tank strikes can provide powerful symbolism of not only intellectual resistance, but a generational manifestation that opposes subjugation of another people, which is contrary to what they believe and stand for.

The message to the Palestinians will be loud and clear. Repeated polls reveal that a majority of Israelis ranging between 65 and 70 per cent want a two-state solution to end the conflict, which will disabuse many Palestinians of the notion that Israel does not want peace. This, of course, does not suggest by any means that the Palestinians have no part to play or responsibility to shoulder. The point here is that we must start with Israel only because the whole world, including the United States, places the onus on Israel, accusing it of intransigence, defiance, and committed more to the settlement enterprise than to peace. Moreover, as Israel is the more powerful party, it can take the initiative even with limited risks without appearing weak and with the ability and capability to change course at will.

The call for an uprising against the system may not be popular and certainly may be objectionable to the vast majority of right-of-center Israelis who believe in their cause and their right to the land of their ancestors. These Israelis, however, must ask themselves the simple question: where will Israel be in 10 or even 20 years from today? The fact that Naftali Bennett, leader of the new Jewish Home party and rising star in the Israeli political scene, stated “I don’t know” in response to a question on Israel’s future direction is a crass and dangerous indication that Israel’s potential leaders may be the engineers of their country’s demise.

No leader, however dedicated he or she may be to Israel, has the right to chart a course that could threaten the existence of the state without knowing where Israel will be a generation down the line. The future of Israel cannot be placed in the hands of such reckless and misguided leaders who are blind to what the future might hold in store for the only Jewish refuge.

**Note:** This article is published in collaboration with Prof. Ben-Meir’s web portal. Web Link: <http://www.alonben-meir.com/article/israelis-must-rise-up-to-avert-national-disaster/>

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