

The “Arab Spring” Revisited

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Last time I came on a speaking tour for the Jewish Federations was a year-and-a-half ago, at the height of the violent demonstrations on Tahir Square in Cairo. The revolt in Egypt and the fall of Mubarak were all over the news.

On TV, we saw people demonstrating and being killed by their government. The revolt in Egypt was part of a domino effect that had started in January 2011 in Tunisia with the overthrow of President Ben-Ali.

Soon, this historical moment was described by journalists as “The Arab Spring.”

The expression “Arab Spring,” of course, was coined after the “Spring of Nations,” a revolt against European monarchs that spread throughout Europe in 1848.

I haven’t been able to track down the journalist who came-up with the expression “Arab Spring.” But he or she is either very ignorant or very knowledgeable about European history.

Why? Because the European “Spring of Nations” collapsed within a year, and because it did not bring freedom to Europe.

So either the author of the “Arab Spring” expression mistakenly thought that the “Spring of Nations” replaced tyrants by democracies. Or he already knew two years ago that the revolts in the Arab world were not going to bring freedom and democracy to North Africa and to the Middle-East.

If the “Arab Spring” expression was chosen to echo the failure and disappointment of the “Spring of Nations,” then it was spot on –except

of course for the fact that Ben-Ali and Mubarak were overthrown in the winter and that Gaddafi was overthrown in the summer.

But if the “Arab Spring” expression was conceived to suggest that the overthrow of tyrants would bring about freedom, then the journalist I couldn’t track down should be awarded a prize for the lousiest expression of the 21st century.

I mean, as I am talking, Syrian President Bashar Assad is still killing his own citizens with the active support of Iran and with the tacit consent of China and Russia.

Meanwhile, all the free elections held in the Arab world since the so-called “Arab Spring” have brought Islamists to power.

In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafists won a majority in Parliament. The elected President, Mohamed Morsi, is a Muslim Brother.

Islamists also won a majority in the elections that were held in Tunisia and in Morocco.

So far, Libya is the only country that hasn't been swept by an Islamic electoral victory –even though the Islamists came second in the polls and are needed to form a government.

Could these results have been predicted? Free elections in the Arab world are so rare that we don't have many case studies. In fact, we only have four.

Elections were held four times in the Arab world before the ill-named "Arab Spring:" in Algeria in 1991, in Iraq in 2005, in the Palestinian Authority in 2006, and in Iraq again in 2010. In all four elections, the Islamists won: the Islamic Salvation Front in Algeria, Hamas in the Palestinian Authority, and the National Iraqi Alliance in Iraq in 2005.

On paper, the Islamists didn't win the 2010 elections in Iraq. But in practice, the Islamists got their way since both the Prime Minister and

the Defense Minister are from the Islamic Dawa Party –a party that openly backed the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, and that receives financial support from Teheran.

So saying that the Arab world is not embracing democracy and liberalism is an understatement. From Morocco to Iraq, the peoples who have been given an opportunity to elect their leaders have consistently and overwhelmingly chosen Islamic parties.

But in the Middle East, political Islam has been chosen by non-Arabs as well. The Iranians brought down their pro-Western monarchy for an Islamic regime in 1979. And in Turkey, the Islamic Justice and Development Party won the 2003 elections. It has been in power ever since.

Some people say that the “Arab Spring” has turned into an “Islamic Winter.” Whatever you call it, it is clear that the Middle East has made the choice of Islamism.

America may have eliminated Ben-Laden, and Al-Qaida may be mostly decimated, but from a historical perspective Ben-Laden did achieve one of his objectives: to replace US-backed Arab regimes by Islamic states.

What does that mean, and what are the implications for Israel?

First, we need to understand that the same way that the “Arab Spring” is a European expression, today’s Middle-East is basically a European creation.

Think about it. Before World War I, the Middle-East was dominated by the Ottoman Empire. The Empire was multinational and multilingual but Islam was a common denominator in terms of allegiance and identity.

The Arabic word “Ummah” means altogether “community” and “nation” but it is commonly used to designate Islam as a nation and not only as a religion.

Under the Ottoman Empire, Middle-Easterners considered themselves part of the “Ummah.” In their mind, there was no difference between nation and religion, but there was also no difference between politics and religion.

The separation between church and state is foreign to Islam.

In Christianity, there is a distinction between the divine and the political authority (“Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s, and unto God the things that are God’s” says the Book of Matthew). In Western democracies, political authority belongs to the state alone –as German sociologist Max Weber put it, the state has a monopoly over legitimate violence. Religious authority only applies to individuals, who can either accept it or reject it.

No such distinction exists in Islam.

Until the First World War, those two different value systems lived separately and were rarely at peace with each other. There were many

wars between the Ottoman Empire and the European powers, and whoever won imposed his values and his political system.

There were wars here and there, but World War I dealt a final blow to the Ottoman Empire.

Britain and France broke the Ottoman Empire apart and then shared the dowry. They created and imposed new and artificial national entities such as Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine –entities that did not exist under Ottoman rule.

Or take Libya. It was invented by the Italian Ministry of colonial affairs in December 1932. Historically, Cyrenaica in the east was part of Egypt, while Tripolitania in the west was part of Tunisia.

The Islamic “Ummah” was replaced by the European nation-state model. Except that in this new Middle-East, these were nation-states without nations.

Or, to be precise, there was an Arab nation divided between artificial states or mandates. Other Middle Eastern nations were vying for their own and separate nation-states: the Persians, the Turks, and the Jews.

Turkey, so to speak, became more catholic than the pope. Its first post-World War I leader, Ataturk, remodeled his country as a European nation state. Most significantly, Ataturk adopted the Western model of separation between state and religion.

Persia became a pro-Western monarchy, and in Palestine the Jewish national movement engendered an antagonistic Arab nationalism.

After World War II, it looked like the European nation-state model was taking root in the Middle-East: Jews, Arabs, Persians and Turks had their own nation-states and they spent most of their time fighting and killing each other, just like in Europe.

But one has to understand that this apparent victory of the West was deeply resented by Islam. After all, Islam and the West had been

fighting each other for centuries, and until the 16th century the Ottoman Empire had been mostly victorious.

With the end of the Ottoman Empire, Britain and France became colonial powers in the Middle East. To Muslims, this was a humiliation. The Muslims also perceived Zionism as part of a Western plot to dominate the Middle-East.

And so Arab nationalism crystallized against the West and against Israel. Arab nationalism was mobilized against the West by leaders such as Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt, Saddam Hussein in Iraq, and Muammar Gaddafi in Libya. When Nasser humiliated Britain and France in 1956, he became a hero in the Arab world.

Because the nationalist Arab leaders were positioning themselves against the West and because this was the Cold War, they teamed-up with the Soviet Union. If you remember, Gaddafi even wrote a small book that tried to find the middle-ground between Marxism and Islam.

Other leaders in the Middle-East sided with the West. Turkey became a member of NATO. Iran under the Shah was a strong US ally. Nasser's successor, Sadat, switched allegiances. From a Soviet client, Egypt became a US ally.

The Middle-East was part of the Cold War. It was divided between pro-American and pro-Soviet regimes.

And then, in 1979, something happened that pulled the rug under this edifice. There was an Islamic revolution in Iran. It was both anti-American and anti-Communist. Its declared purpose was to undo the nation-state model imposed by Europe, to reunite the "Ummah," and to recreate the fusion between politics and religion.

The new Iranian regime publicly humiliated the United States by seizing the US embassy in Teheran. The message was clear: you don't need to be pro-Soviet in order to be anti-American. Indeed, both Western materialism and communist atheism are foreign ideologies that corrupted and subjugated the once glorious "Ummah."

1979 was not only the year of the Islamic revolution in Iran. It was also the year of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. And what this invasion did was to crystallize the anti-Soviet feelings of the Muslim world.

While during the Cold War, you had to choose your camp, the Iranian revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan had the effect of uniting more and more Muslims against the United States *and* against the Soviet Union.

So when the Cold War ended ten years later, pro-American Arab leaders had to explain an alliance that was no longer justified by the Soviet threat. Why side with America now that the Soviets were defeated?

The Islamists had an answer to that question: there *was* no reason. It is just that Mubarak and his peers were the enemies of Islam. Mubarak, the Islamists claimed, was getting 2.5 billion dollars of American aid every year to enrich his family, to keep the peace with Israel, and to serve US interests.

For years, Islamists have been preaching that America is paying corrupt dictators to subjugate the once glorious “Ummah.” No wonder they have systematically won all the elections held in the countries formerly ruled by Western-backed leaders.

This is also true of Turkey. During the Cold War, it was a strong US ally. In 2003, Islamists came to power for the first time. The new Islamic Prime Minister Erdogan made a point of rejecting America’s request to invade Iraq from the North via Turkey. Ergodan became a hero overnight in the Muslim world.

Once a pro-Western secular republic, Turkey now symbolizes Islamic pride and nostalgia for the Ottoman Empire.

The islamization of the Middle East has far-reaching implications for Israel’s security and foreign policy.

The mutation of the Middle-East from US-backed nation-states to Iran-backed Islamic states has turned Israel's former regional partners into hostile and violent enemies.

In the late 1950s, Israel had developed what its leaders called at the time "the periphery strategy." It meant turning the non-Arab states of the Middle-East's periphery into Israeli allies: Iran, Turkey, and Ethiopia. This strategy worked, since all three countries became strong allies of Israel.

But both Iran and Turkey turned from allies to enemies the moment they became Islamic: Iran in 1979, and Turkey in 2003.

Then there is Egypt. It was never part of the "periphery strategy" of course, but it signed a peace agreement with Israel in 1979. Egyptian President Sadat came to realize that he would never recuperate Sinai without a peace agreement with Israel, and that Egypt wouldn't survive economically without US financial aid.

There never was true peace between Israel and Egypt, but at least there was a peace agreement that was guaranteed –and basically paid for- by the United States.

Now, do you remember who murdered Sadat? An Islamist who claimed he had killed the modern Pharaoh in the name of Islam. And who replaced Mubarak? Muhammad Morsi, an Islamist who paid an official visit to Teheran last week and who will never pronounce the word “Israel” in public.

This is what I mean when I say that Israel’s former regional partners – Iran, Turkey, and Egypt- have become hostile to Israel after turning into Islamic regimes.

So what is Israel supposed to do?

The first thing is not to delude ourselves. Let me remind you that today is 9/11. On that day eleven years ago, Islamist kamikazes committed a mass-murder and caused the Twin Towers to collapse.

What motivated them? Osama Bin-Laden answered that question very clearly: the West has subjugated Islam, and so killing as many westerners as possible is a religious duty. In other words, for Islam to recover its past glory, non-Muslims must die.

Iran's president Mahmud Ahmadinejad shares this genocidal ideology but with a special focus on the Jews. In his Shiah messianic belief, the 12th Imam will only reappear after the Jews are eliminated. He is developing nuclear weapons to terminate Israel in one shot.

The leaders of Egypt and Turkey don't make those kinds of genocidal statements about Israel. But as Islamic leaders, they strongly believe that there is no room for a sovereign Jewish state in "Dahr el-Islam" – lands that were conquered by Muslim armies in the past and that were once ruled by Islam.

According to that ideology, Jews can be tolerated as "dhimmis," meaning as the subjects of Islamic rulers, but certainly not as a sovereign country.

Israel faces two major challenges and threats in the Middle-East today: the Iranian threat, and the region's Islamic radicalization. The two are related, since Iran breeds this radicalization. But Iran is, so far at least, the only country in the Middle East developing nuclear weapons with the declared aim of wiping Israel off the map.

History has taught us that when Jew-haters threaten to kill Jews, they should be taken seriously. Ahmadinejad must be taken seriously.

And what has History taught us about how to stop nuclear programs? Here also, we have four case studies –just just like with elections in Arab states before the ill-named “Arab Spring.” Those case studies are Iraq, Libya, North Korea and Pakistan.

Of those four countries, two built nuclear weapons (Pakistan and North Korea) and two gave-up their nuclear program (Iraq and Libya).

The Reagan administration really didn't want Pakistan to go nuclear, and the Bush junior Administration really didn't want North Korea to go nuclear. But despite the pressures and the sanctions, both countries went ahead.

So why did Iraq and Libya give-up? In Iraq, Saddam Hussein abandoned his nuclear ambitions after his French-built nuclear reactor was bombed by Israel in 1981. In Libya, Muammar Gaddafi stopped his nuclear program right after the US and British invasion of Iraq in 2003. He feared he was next in the line and so he raised the white flag.

Even Iran temporarily suspended its nuclear program after the invasion of Iraq for fear of a US strike. As soon as it became clear that the Bush Administration had abandoned the idea of destroying Iran's nuclear plants, Iran renewed its nuclear program.

Not surprisingly, economic sanctions are not convincing Iran to stop its nuclear program. For a start, these sanctions are a sham because they are not enforced by China (which needs Iran's oil) and by Russia (which sees in Iran the last obstacle to US hegemony in the Middle East).

As I'm talking to you, Iran and Egypt and negotiating an oil deal to make up for lost sales to the European Union. Iran supported the 2011 uprising that brought Muhammad Morsi to power. Now it is ripping the economic benefits of having a new Islamic ally.

But even if sanctions were actually enforced against Iran, they would be powerless: a leadership that has declared its readiness to sacrifice millions of its own citizens for the sake of destroying Israel surely has no misgivings about temporarily lowering the living standards of its future victims.

Sanctions have never stopped nuclear ambitions. Iran is no exception.

Without military action, Iran will have the bomb.

So saying that sanctions are the best way to get Iran to abandon its nuclear ambitions is simply ridiculous and nonsensical.

The ill-named “Arab Spring” will turn into a nuclear winter if Iran gets the bomb. Nothing, except for a devastating military strike, will prevent this from happening.

America has the military capability to annihilate Iran’s nuclear program.

But an American military strike is unlikely to happen, simply because America can live with a nuclear Iran. After all, the United States has already lost most of its Middle-East allies to Islamic regimes. So why contain and deter Iran? It has already achieved its goal of replacing US-backed Arab regimes with Islamic ones.

A nuclear-armed Iran could technically close the Straits of Hormuz (a major oil route) without fear of American retaliation. But such a move would be so harmful to Iran’s economy that it is unlikely.

America was able to live with a nuclear Soviet Union, and it is able to live today with a nuclear Russia, a nuclear China, a nuclear Pakistan, and a nuclear North Korea.

A nuclear Iran would further undermine US interests and power, but it would not constitute a strategic threat to the United States. A nuclear Iran constitutes an existential threat to Israel, not to America.

So Israel has good reasons to suspect that the current US Administration is bluffing when it says that all options are on the table to prevent Iran from getting the bomb.

Last week, the International Atomic Energy Agency declared that Iran is moving its nuclear production underground by doubling the number of centrifuges it has installed at its facility near the city of Qom. While Iran is approaching the “immunity zone” that would make its underground nuclear fuel sites impregnable to attack, the US Government isn’t sending any ultimatum to the Mullahs.

So it does look like Israel is on its own when it comes to Iran. To add insult to injury, the current US Administration is trying to hold us back.

But as Prime Minister Netanyahu said today: “Those in the international community who refuse to put red lines before Iran don’t have a moral right to place a red light before Israel.” He is a 100% right.

Israel is on its own today when it comes to Iran, the same way that it was on its own when it declared its independence in 1948, when it grounded the Egyptian air force in 1967, and when it rescued Jewish hostages in Uganda in 1976. In all cases, the Jewish leadership made a tough decision that defied logics but that relied on what Israel’s Declaration of Independence calls “The Rock of Israel.”

Israel cannot survive in the Middle-East without military deterrence.

But what is no less important than military deterrence is moral assertiveness. Our message to the Islamists should be the following: we believe that you say what you mean and that you mean what you say. So let us make this clear to you: *so do we*.

We mean what we say and say what we mean when we tell you that our freedom and our values are dear to us and that we will do everything to protect them.

It is your right to choose Islamism, and we actually respect that choice. But you should know that we Jews have no intention whatsoever of becoming “dhimmis” again.

Intimidations will be met by resolve, threats will be met by preemptive actions, and attacks will be met by devastating retaliation.

But we will also remind our neighbors in the Middle-East that we are cousins who all descend from Abraham, and that rejecting the Jews’ right to their land is not consistent with the teachings of Islam.

For this is what the Koran says (Chapter 17, Verse 104): "Then we said to the children of Israel: Live in that land! When the other promise comes true, we shall bring you back collectively."

So if Muslims are true to their faith, they must make peace with Israel precisely because of that faith.

Until that happens, Israel must be strong, alert and assertive. And even if one day peace finally prevails between the descendants of Abraham, I wouldn't give-up on deterrence.

As you know, the book of Isaiah says that one day the sheep and the wolf will lie peacefully next to each other. An Israeli joke says that even when that happens, it will be safer to be the wolf than the sheep.

I know I may sound skeptical and even pessimistic. But I'm actually very optimistic.

I'm optimistic, because Israel is a success story. We keep progressing, while our neighbors keep regressing.

I'm optimistic, because in the new Middle-East the three main Islamic powers (Iran, Egypt, and Turkey) will soon compete with one another, and this competition will eventually turn nasty.

I'm optimistic because Israel has proven its ability, time and again, to turn challenges into assets.

It is because we are a dry country that we've become a leader in water-saving irrigation.

It is because France cut-off its military aircraft supplies to Israel after the Six Day War that Israel developed one of the world's most advanced aircraft industries.

It is because we are a country at war that our military has become the incubator of Israel's booming high-tech industry.

I believe in taking responsibility for our future and I believe in our ability to change reality for the better. This is why I moved to Israel and this is why I am now running for Knesset.

I mean I'm also running for Knesset because, after over ten years in Israeli academia, I need a break from politics.

But, more seriously, I believe that some serious changes need to happen in Israel and that these changes can only be made by decision-makers and not by academics.

I believe that we must reform Israel's electoral system in order to achieve what Israeli politics is lacking today: stability, efficiency, and accountability.

I believe that Israel should take the lead in promoting and implementing the energy revolution that will break the monopoly of oil in transportation and that will release the free world from the political blackmail of oil exporters.

I believe that Israel must be more proactive in promoting Aliyah from the world's two largest Diasporas: the United States and France.

And I believe that people like me, who grew-up in Western countries and who understand both the language and the mentality of foreign media and public opinion, should be in charge of Israel's PR and public diplomacy.

So I'm optimistic as it is, but I'll be even more optimistic once I'm elected.

In the meantime, I'd like to thank you again for inviting me and for listening to me, and wish you all a healthy successful and peaceful year.

Shana Tova.