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The Domestic Impact on Israel of the “Spring,” “Summer,” and September

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The “Arab Spring” would appear to have inspired similar uprisings in quite varied places around the globe, although each such protest obviously has been influenced by specific circumstances and developments, from Tunisia to New York. To understand the case of the “Israeli Summer” that began in July 2011 and continues, albeit in muted form, to the time of this writing, one must return to an earlier era. At its inception, the state of Israel was a welfare state, with a strong dose of socialism and a decidedly collective culture. To a large degree, the sense of and dedication to the collective was a phenomenon common to countries at the stage of nation-building, with the added element of the siege mentality created by the ongoing conflict with the country’s neighbors. While

there were, in fact, rifts within Israeli society, these first decades, a period of economic austerity, were characterized by a general sense of solidarity within the society—one which could boast the lowest gap in the world between well-to-do and poor.

The standard of living gradually rose in the late 1960s-early 1970s, but an almost abrupt change occurred in the 1980s with the introduction of privatization and the onset of globalization.¹ The first overriding effect was run-away inflation, which, once stabilized by the mid-1980s,² gave way to rampant unemployment that reached a high of 11 percent by the early 1990s.³ The resultant situation was one in which Israel went from a standing of having the smallest economic gap in the world to having one of the largest gaps between rich and poor. The free market economy, with its capitalist-style competition, generated a shift from the collective ethic to individualism. To a large degree, social solidarity was replaced by

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an attitude of “everyone for himself” as consumerism became the new hallmark of Israeli society.

Politically, this shift may actually have had a positive effect, for it is in this period of the late 1980s-early 1990s that opinion polls clearly indicated a public move toward willingness to compromise with regard to the occupied territories, along with a greater interest in peace.⁴ This was, of course, the period of the First Intifada, the major contributing factor to the change in public opinion. But it was accompanied by sentiments often expressed by people in the street and in the media of a desire to just get on with their lives, free of the concerns—and dangers—connected with the conflict. The results were the election of Itzhak Rabin in 1992 and the Oslo Accords, supported by 65 percent of Israelis.⁵

Since that time, the economy has experienced ups and downs. The Oslo period of the 1990s saw a boom, as investment and tourism increased and Israel doubled the states with which it had diplomatic relations. Through a combination of the prospect of peace (i.e., long-term stability) and the creation of a New Deal-type policy of public works absorbing the roughly one million new immigrants, unemployment was reduced, leveling off at about 7 percent, and economic growth reached 3-4 percent.⁶ The failure of Oslo and the extraordinary violence of the Second Intifada disrupted this progress, leading to economic distress in certain sectors of society and growing poverty. Nonetheless, this situation, too, appeared to be stabilized, with Israel already out of its recession by the time the 2008 economic crisis erupted in the United States and Europe. Israel’s economy at the macro level suffered no dramatic shifts or problems post-2008.

The Israeli Summer of 2011

Yet these developments took their toll, providing the background to the outburst of the Israeli Summer of 2011. While some seven or eight individuals or families dominate the economy—their large and numerous companies enjoying tax relief to spur production—poverty has increased, including some 800,000 children in families living below the poverty line.⁷ The middle class, too, has been badly hit. High prices abound in every area, from food to services to consumer goods to child care and education, as real wages decline. Housing is a particular problem. As in Europe, the rental market is small; most people own their apartments or

homes. But continuously rising real estate and housing prices have made it virtually impossible, especially for young people, to find decent accommodations or any long-term solutions (except for subsidized housing in the settlements). Moreover, Israelis pay among the highest taxes in the world, perhaps the most glaring being the 100 percent tax on cars, along with a high value added tax. And while the cost of living is hurting most of the society, the quality of education and health care has been steadily declining. Many, if not most, state services have been privatized; safety nets have been reduced or eliminated. Some of the latter have been assumed by civil society groups struggling to find the ways and means to replace the once public welfare sector. But the overall sentiment was that Israeli society had lost its sense of solidarity.

All of the above must be seen against the backdrop of the conflict or what is more broadly referred to as “the security situation.” Indeed, this is not a backdrop but rather the opposite: the security situation has always taken center stage, society’s ills ignored. There are even those who would argue that the government purposely places the conflict center stage so as to divert attention from the problematic economy or social gaps and fissures with Israeli society.⁸ The present Israeli government, in particular, has manipulated the public and their fears, be it with regard to the threat from Iran, Hezbollah, or Hamas or the “de-legitimization” of Israel abroad, thereby nurturing extreme nationalism and xenophobia.

Not all of these “threats” are totally false, of course, but their manipulation plays into the general political mood. Since the failure of Oslo, the violence of the Second Intifada, and the apparently perpetual stalemate in the so-called peace process, the general political mood amongst the public has been one of resignation. There is a belief that there is no partner for peace on the other side and that, therefore, the conflict cannot be resolved.⁹ The general conclusion, in essence, is that we must be strong (“continue to live by the sword”¹⁰), and this sentiment could be seen in the electoral swing to the right in Israel’s last legislative elections in 2009. There are those who place the responsibility for this shift on the massive Russian immigrant population,¹¹ and it is true that xenophobic rhetoric does resonate with the majority of those from the former Soviet Union who also abhor anything suggesting left-wing policies. However, there are many other contributing factors as well as other segments of the population. An additional example may be found in some previously dovish, ultra-orthodox political parties that now, seeking inexpensive

housing for their impoverished voters, have found solutions in the settlements and, thus, have become staunch supporters of right-wing policy.

The Arab Spring Effect

Into this environment of what looked like a basically resigned, disillusioned society without much hope for the future, come the images of Egypt's Tahrir Square. It may not be entirely easy to explain, but Israelis were glued to these images on television. Network ratings clearly indicated such viewing, as people were somehow thrilled by the events unfolding in Egypt. There had not been much public awareness, if any, in Israel regarding the oppression of Hosni Mubarak's regime. What captured the public's enthusiasm, apparently, were the spontaneity and non-violence of the protests along with the universality of the demands. The response of the Israeli government differed from that of the public, bemoaning what it viewed as the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood and the possible collapse of the Egyptian-Israeli peace agreement along with chaos and instability in the region that would strengthen Iran and harm Israeli interests. These were not totally unfounded concerns, especially since it was clear that democratic rule would have to respond to popular support for the Palestinian cause in Egypt and elsewhere in the Arab world. Thus, such concerns were shared by many in Israel,¹² but they were not what caught the imagination of most Israelis, apparently, nor were they the focus of public attention; the government attempt to manipulate fear did not work this time.

The first sign of a response was a public protest over the price of cottage cheese. In itself, this was not the most unusual event for Israelis; protests and strikes are quite common. But this limited protest was almost immediately joined by a simple event: a young woman student whose Tel Aviv rent was (once again) to be increased, gathered friends and the media and set up a tent in the middle of the city. There have been tent-city housing protests in Tel Aviv in the past, but the post-Tahrir atmosphere rendered this protest entirely different. Conducted mainly by middle class young people, the protest immediately expanded and spread all over the country. Joined by various civil society groups—most notably and effectively by the well-organized national student association, but also supported by the labor unions and the media—tents went up all over the country. The young women leaders led

massive weekly demonstrations in major cities and development towns, which climaxed in parallel events that saw half a million demonstrators out on the streets—in a country of fewer than eight million residents.

The two major slogans of the protest were for social justice and for a return of the welfare state. In areas, such as Haifa, where there are mixed Jewish and Arab populations, slogans for equality were heard; in Beersheba, Bedouin were among the speakers. Refugees and foreign workers joined the protest as did genuinely homeless people, but also young parents with their children in strollers, middle-class supporters who understood the problems of making ends meet every month and the cost of housing. Few, if any, politicians dared challenge or interfere in the protests given the clear electoral risk it would have posed,¹³ and the police clearly shared most of the protestors' demands. Only after the leaders of the protest ceased the demonstrations in early September and moved to a post-tent phase of protest (as they put it) did the authorities begin to crack down. In the meantime, the government created a committee of economists and other experts to propose solutions to some of the issues raised by the protestors. At the same time, an informal group of academics and protestors formed committees to come up with their own proposals for change.

In addition to formal political party participation, the other thing that was glaringly and intentionally missing from the protest was any demand or reference to the conflict. This was extraordinary for a country that had focused for its entire existence on this issue—and despite a terror attack in the south and the government's almost continuous proclamations regarding the threat of the impending Palestinian bid for UN recognition in September; avoidance of the issue was deliberate. Encompassing as it did the broad majority of the country, including the underprivileged base of the right-wing Likud party, the protest was wary of losing support if the divisive issue of the conflict was aired. Despite slogans for a change in government priorities, even the obvious connection between monies going to the settlement project rather than neglected areas such as education were avoided, except by the press and various intellectuals and peace groups in their own events. No mention was made of social justice extending to the population under occupation and no reference was made to the economic benefits that might come with peace. However, the slogans were often decidedly anti-government or against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and the minor attempt by settlers to join the protest was ignored and absent (presum-



ably excluded) from the public speeches or events of the social justice movement.

The massive protests ended in early September followed by short-lived attempts to seek housing as squatters in abandoned buildings or maintain tents (for truly homeless people) in some areas. Once the recommendations of the government appointed Trachtenberg Committee¹⁴ were made public and deemed unsatisfactory by the protest leaders, it was decided that demonstrations would resume at the end of October, just prior to the reconvening of the Knesset for discussion of the state budget. The move to resume the protest was supported by 80 percent of the Jewish public and 63 percent of the Arab public.¹⁵ Nevertheless, it is uncertain that the summer's momentum can be revived, especially with the beginning of the academic year and the onset of winter. Further, there is little reason to believe that anything more than minor changes, such as those recommended by the Trachtenberg Committee (e.g., cuts in the defense budget, plans for building low-cost housing, and a slight rise in taxes on high income earners) will be introduced—if they are even ultimately approved by the government, given both strong opposing lobbies and the fact that Netanyahu's basic approach to society's problems is greater competition, further deregulation, and streamlining of government.¹⁶ Obviously, this is a far cry from a return to the welfare state.

Even if the protest cannot be resumed with the full force of the summer, nor the public's demands met, the impact of these events may still be felt. First, one lasting effect may be the psychological challenge to the credibility and authority of the government. Politicians as a species have long been unpopular in Israel, but a major complaint voiced by thousands over the summer was that the government cannot be believed or trusted. Notable among the complainers were many Likud voters and even the occasional activist. This loss of faith could have long-term ramifications provided the people, especially the young people, who feel this way do not regress to apathy but, rather, continue to challenge government decisions, even if less demonstratively.

Secondly, Netanyahu himself went down markedly in popularity.¹⁷ There are many who believe that Netanyahu's turn-about regarding the deal with Hamas to release Israeli prisoner Gilad Shalit was an effort to improve his ratings in the polls.¹⁸ Given the fact that the deal varied little from the one offered two years ago and rejected by Netanyahu (as well as earlier by his predecessor Ehud Olmert), this interpreta-

tion may well be correct. The government's explanation for its reversal was actually the Arab Spring or, as they put it, events in the region that might make a future deal impossible. If, in fact, Netanyahu made this decision (to release 1,027 Palestinian prisoners in exchange for Shalit) in the spring, when he named a new Israeli negotiator,¹⁹ the government explanation may be true. Be that as it may, the actual news of the deal in mid-October—as well as the choreography of the reception, by Netanyahu, of the released soldier a few days later—was clearly designed to bolster his sagging popularity at home. The Shalit family had conducted a professional, public five-year campaign for their son's release, creating unprecedented popular pressure in the country, which, by the way, was picked up and embraced by the social justice protest of the summer. Thus, though there were voices against such a one-sided deal or giving into a hostage situation, the move was decidedly a popular one.²⁰ How long this boost in Netanyahu's popularity will last, however, is not certain. Other effects of the summer protest may render it difficult to stretch renewed popularity all the way to the next elections.

This may be due to still a third effect of the protest: the election of Sheli Yachimovich as leader of the Labor party in primaries that took place in September. The Labor party was clearly a beneficiary of the social justice protest. Polls during the summer saw a rise in the number of seats Labor would win if elections were held at the time (the left-wing Meretz party also gained seats).²¹ It was in this more favorable atmosphere that the primaries took place, and it was not surprising that the two leading candidates in the first round of voting were both strongly associated with social justice issues, while the only ex-general running came in a very poor last place. Indeed, Yachimovich, a journalist who had entered the party and the Knesset only six years ago, had dedicated all of her political and legislative activity solely to social justice issues. No one in the party, and few politicians in the country, was as completely identified with these issues as she. If the Labor party were to reap the benefits of the summer's events, Yachimovich was the logical person to lead the party.

A related, less direct, and admittedly a more convoluted effect is connected to the competition between Labor and the centrist Kadima party led by Tzipi Livni. The selection of Yachimovich was supported (behind the scenes) by the Likud for the expected draw she would have for middle-class Kadima voters, supporters of the summer's protest. Thus, the major challenger to the Likud, namely Kadima, would be

weakened at no cost to the right-wing. However, the fact that a woman was picked to head Labor might affect the internal leadership race inside Kadima, for Livni would no longer have the advantage of the potential to attract women's votes for the party that she had garnered in the last elections.²² If that were the case, her challenger, former Israeli Defense Force chief of staff Shaul Mofaz, might take the lead. This could have a far more important effect on the next elections inasmuch as Mofaz, as an ex-general of a more right-wing tilt than Livni, might bring votes from the right of the political spectrum. Indeed, some of the summer's disappointed, socially underprivileged Likud voters might shift to Kadima. Thus, the center-left, pulling votes from the right, might be able to form the next government.

The September Effect

Surprisingly, perhaps, September—that is, the Palestinians' bid for UN membership as a recognized state—has played no role in the events described above. The Israeli government certainly tried to involve the issue. Well before the summer, the government had been warning about the danger of the Palestinian move and in more recent months strenuously sought to prevent it. Moreover, during the protest, Netanyahu frequently sought to shift attention to September, warning of dire repercussions for Israel and the Palestinians. For the most part, the media as well as numerous political pundits tended to echo this, according a good deal of attention and concern to the events unfolding at the UN when the leaders arrived in New York.

Yet, despite these dire warnings, a poll conducted by Hebrew University expert Jacob Shamir (one of regular studies he conducts in parallel to Khalil Shikaki in Ramallah) found that 69 percent of Israelis said that if the UN accorded the Palestinian state recognition, Israel should accept it.²³ A poll published a week later by the Israel Democracy Institute said 51 percent of Jewish Israelis said Israel should cooperate should the Palestinian state get recognition; 42 percent said no to this suggestion. This general compliance on the part of the Israeli public, as distinct from the dire warnings of the government, came not necessarily from moderation but, rather, from disinterest. Indeed, at the prime television time (in Israel) of Netanyahu's speech to the UN General Assembly, program ratings indicated the vast majority of

Israeli viewers were watching a popular cooking show. The public (aside from settlers) has long since lost interest in matters connected with the "peace process," out of despair that anything will come of the various moves and proposals. No more than a few intellectuals and the low-circulation, high-brow daily *Haaretz* even pay attention to (or possibly know of) the Quartet's proposal for resumed talks. Public disinterest aside, the September, then October, and probably November, efforts at the UN could still have an impact. While the Quartet is continuing to try to prevent further moves at the UN by generating a resumption of talks, it has little chance of succeeding. Netanyahu refuses to freeze any settlement construction, with the possible exception of the small amount of public building,²⁴ and Abu Mazen is unwilling to negotiate while settlements are expanded, at least not so long as Israel refuses to accept the 1967 line as the border of the Palestinian state. The Hamas-Israeli prisoner agreement has made it still more important for Abu Mazen to achieve something at the UN inasmuch as the Hamas success in winning the release of over a thousand prisoners by means of violence and hostage taking stands in stark contrast to the continued failure of Fatah's preference for non-violence and the path of negotiation (and security cooperation with Israel in the West Bank).²⁵ Thus, at some point, the Palestinians are likely to move their bid from the Security Council (before or after defeat, or US veto, there) to the UNGA, where they are expected to obtain status at least of a non-state member. This at least would help to restore some of the strength Abu Mazen had garnered prior to the Hamas prisoner deal, possibly facilitating a move toward some form of renewed negotiations. Nor would UN General Assembly recognition be the worst thing for Israel (as 69 percent of the population agrees), given the fact that UN acceptance of the Palestinian resolution for recognition as a state within the 1967 borders with East Jerusalem as its capital could accord Israel, by implication, recognition of its eastern border and its claim to West Jerusalem, two things that no state nor the UN has ever done officially so far. However, Israel's response to the beginning of the Palestinian move at the UN has been to authorize the building of a new settlement in East Jerusalem and over a thousand additional units in an existing one there.

In sum, however, one may point to some positive impact at least of the Arab Spring and the Israeli Summer. There is the potentially positive political effects of the social justice movement in Israel, in anticipation of the elections due most likely

in 2012, namely the strengthening of Labor, the weakening possibly of the Likud, possible shifts to Kadima from the right. While the Israeli Summer itself was linked inspirationally to the events in the Arab world, these events have had another possible fruitful effect on Israel. From the early days of Tahrir Square important figures in Israel's security circles have expressed concern over the increased pressure on Israel likely to occur if democracy does in fact sweep the region (and/or if the Muslim Brotherhood is strengthened), concluding that the Arab Spring ultimately makes it all the more imperative, and urgent, for Israel to reach agreement with the Palestinians.²⁶ Other possibly positive effects of all the recent developments relates to Hamas. Events in Syria have weakened somewhat the Hamas leadership there, to the benefit of Egyptian influence with regard to the group. The Hamas-Fatah reconciliation agreement, and more recently the prisoner deal may be at least partially attributed to these circumstances. Greater influence for Egypt, still a supporter of peace with Israel and the two-state solution for the Palestinians, is a positive development that might have a still greater effect on Hamas. One might add to this the socialization if not actual relationship that developed in the course of the Israeli-Hamas negotiations, with Egyptian mediation, over the prisoner deal. Hamas is not willing, yet, to recognize Israel, but ultimately it will have to be part of a peace agreement in some way, should such an agreement ever be reached. And that can only happen if Abu Mazen too is strengthened, and a new government is voted in by Israelis.

Notes

- 1 Economists may have different explanations and descriptions of the economy that follow, but these are the views generally perceived by the public and political observers.
- 2 Stabilization was achieved largely as a result of an agreement reached by the national unity government (negotiated by Shimon Peres first as Prime Minister and then as Finance Minister) with the trade unions and the manufacturers.
- 3 Israel Central Bureau of Statistics
- 4 Michal Shamir and Jacob Shamir, *The Anatomy of Public Opinion*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2002.
- 5 Israel did not yet have direct election of the prime minister, but the Labor party ran its campaign emphasizing the election of Rabin as prime minister.
- 6 Israel Central Bureau of Statistics
- 7 *Jerusalem Post*, 11 August 2010.
- 8 See, for example, Avirama Golan, *Haaretz*, 24 September 2010.
- 9 These are the consistent findings of the Peace Index, Israel Democracy Institute.
- 10 This is long a mantra of the right-wing in Israel.
- 11 President Clinton's comments (ynetnews.com, 22 September 2011)
- 12 Forty-seven percent of Israelis expressed this concern (Israel Peace Index, Israel Democracy Institute, February 2011).
- 13 Only a negligible few sought to label the protestors as "leftists" or anti-government.
- 14 This is the committee under economist Manuel Trachtenberg, created by Netanyahu in August, to provide recommendations in response to the protests.
- 15 Peace Index, Israel Democracy Institute, September 2011.
- 16 Netanyahu's comments at a government press conference presenting the recommendations of an earlier committee on monopolies (Israel radio, 26 September 2011).
- 17 *Haaretz*, 25 September 2011 (fell to 32 percent in the summer; rose slightly after UN appearance in September)
- 18 For example, commentaries in *Haaretz*, 19 and 20 October 2011
- 19 An account by peace activist Gershon Baskin, who played a role in securing the deal, traces the turn-about to April. (*Jerusalem Post*, 19 October 2011)
- 20 A poll conducted the evening before Shalit's arrival in Israel indicated that some 29 percent of Israelis said their approval of Netanyahu had risen due to the prisoner deal. (*Israel Hayom*, 19 October 2011). Ten days later, Netanyahu's popularity had risen to 51 percent, according to a poll by Israel TV channel 10 on 23 October 2011).
- 21 *Jerusalem Post*, 28 September 2011.
- 22 The failure to relate to the summer's protest has also weakened Livni.
- 23 Thirty-four percent said Israel should then begin negotiations with the Palestinians about implementation of the UN statehood decision; 35 percent said Israel should not allow any change on the ground; only 16 percent said Israel should oppose the decision and intensify construction of settlements; 7 percent thought that Israel should annex the Palestinian Authority's territory; and 4 percent thought Israel should invade the PA and use force to prevent the establishment of a Palestinian state. (PSR Poll No.41, Press Release 21 September 2011.)
- 24 *Haaretz*, 20 October 2011 carried a report, later denied by the PM's office, that there could be a freeze on public building. In any case, private building accounts for the vast majority of construction in the settlements (in 2010 just 16 percent of the construction in the settlements was government construction (Peace Now Settlement Report, "Peace Freeze," www.peace-now.org)
- 25 There is reportedly a difference of opinion within the government and between the government and the army regarding the issue of trying to strengthen Abu Mazen because of prisoner "bonus" Hamas received, or "punishing him" for going to the UN (Netanyahu and Foreign Minister Liberman are associated with the latter). (*Haaretz*, 24 & 25 October 2011; Israel Radio, 26 October 2011.)
- 26 For example, Boaz Ganor, head of the Institute for Counter-terrorism, Herzliya, in *Haaretz*, 11 May 2011.



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