

# **The implications of the “Arab spring” for the Israel-Palestine conflict: or ‘Things Fall Apart’<sup>1</sup>**

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This paper attempts to evaluate the significance of the “Arab spring” for the Israel-Palestine conflict. There has been some speculation on this topic based on a number of events that have unfolded since the beginning of the so-called Arab spring, beginning with the fall of Hosni Mubarak, followed by the re-opening of the Rafah crossing (at the border between Egypt and the Gaza Strip), the reconciliation deal between Fateh and Hamas, the storming of Israel’s embassy in Egypt, and the prisoner exchange between Israel and Hamas that saw the release of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit. In order to evaluate the significance of these events, as well as other, less reported events, it is necessary to understand the configuration of power relations between Israel, the Palestinians and the Arab countries preceding the “Arab spring” and to understand how the “Arab spring” has affected this configuration of power relations. In particular, this paper examines the following:

- 1) The nature and source of the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians;

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<sup>1</sup> *Things Fall Apart* is the internationally-acclaimed novel by Nigerian writer, Chinua Achebe, published in 1958. The story addresses how different characters in a Nigerian village deal with British colonization and the changes that it brings. I refer to the novel’s title in an attempt to highlight how the “Arab spring” has ushered in a process of transformation within the Middle East, to which different actors will react in different ways. I do not intend to make an analogy between the “Arab spring” and British colonialism.

- 2) The impact of the Arab spring on the Palestinian Authority/Fateh, Hamas and the Palestinians;
- 3) The impact of the Arab spring on the Israeli government.

### **1) The nature of the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians**

The nature of the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians is a contested terrain. The main actors in the international community (US, EU, Russia, China, UN, WB, etc.) as well as a significant part of scholarship on the subject, view it as a conflict between two national groups (Jews and Arab Palestinians) over a circumscribed piece of territory (historic Palestine) (for example, see, Gelvin 2005; Smith 2010; amongst others). Within this scholarship, different culprits are identified as bearing responsibility for fuelling the conflict, through their actions, responses and pronouncements (Britain, the Zionists, the Arab countries, the Palestinian leadership, the US). Having defined the nature of the conflict, the solution is identified as a ‘compromise’ between the two national groups in conflict by sharing the land between them. The goal of a conflict resolution process is to transform what many regard as the Israelis’ and Palestinians’ perception of a ‘zero-sum game’ (Gelvin 2005: 256) into a cooperative and mutually beneficial relationship (a liberal vision). This is the thinking behind the Oslo process, which, most anticipated would result in a ‘two-state’ solution.

Another, smaller but perhaps growing, group of actors and scholars view the conflict as rooted in Zionist colonisation and ethnic-cleansing of Palestine, which is not limited to the period before 1948 but continues until this day, under the banner of the so-called peace process (for example, Abdo 2011; Massad 2000; Taraki 2006). The viewpoint that Israel embodies Zionist colonization was included in the PLO charter

of 1968, but abandoned by the PLO when it signed the Oslo Accords in 1993. Such an understanding of the conflict eschews both realist and liberal assumptions and, instead, conceptualises Israel as a project of ‘settler colonialism’ that must be ended in order to bring about a just settlement to the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. Joseph Massad, comparing Israel to the United States, South Africa and Rhodesia, argues that ‘[these states] instituted themselves as postcolonial states, territories, and spaces and instituted their political status as independent in order to render their present a postcolonial era. Yet the conquered people of these territories continue [...] to inhabit these spaces as colonial spaces and to live in eras that are thoroughly colonial’ (Massad 2000: 311). Amongst those who use a post/colonial lens to view the conflict, there are some (but not all) who oppose the ‘two-state’ solution as a just solution to the conflict, particularly from amongst the Palestinian diaspora/refugees and Palestinian citizens in Israel. This opposition has increased since the release of the ‘Palestine Papers’ in early 2011, where it became clear that the PLO leadership was willing to compromise significantly on the ‘right of return’—long a central aim of the Palestinian national struggle—as well as to agree to possible land swaps along the 1967 borders that could have included Palestinian citizens of Israel (Carlstrom 2011; Howeidy 2011; Al-Arian 2011; amongst other articles on Al-Jazeera English’s Palestine Papers pages). This discontent with the two-state solution, as it has been pursued through the Oslo process, has led to a growing movement calling for a one-state solution, in which Israelis and Palestinians would have equal rights within a democratic and secular state (Abunimah 2006; Makdisse 2008; amongst others). However, it should be noted that the one-state proposal appears to be a project promoted more amongst the Palestinian diaspora

and Palestinian citizens of Israel rather than amongst Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Since 2000, many observers have called time on the Oslo Peace Process. This process was supposed to lead to an end to the conflict by Israel and the Palestinians finding a way to share the land and solve key problems, namely: refugees, Jerusalem, settlements and security. At the end of this process (due to conclude in 1997), it was implied that a Palestinian state would be created, existing side by side with an Israeli state. This never happened. Following the failure of the 2000 Camp David talks between Ehud Barak and Yasser Arafat, a last ditch attempt by then President Bill Clinton to reach a negotiated settlement, the Second Intifada broke out. President Bush's Roadmap to Peace also attempted, explicitly, to create a two-state solution by 2005 by pressuring the Palestinians to reform and stop violence and by pressuring Israel to stop military incursions into Palestinian areas and to freeze settlement building. This did not happen. Under the Obama administration, there have been no direct negotiations between the Israelis and the Palestinians, except under a Jordanian initiative in January 2012, which failed to achieve any progress.

Jonathan Rynhold (2008) has summarised understandings of the failure of Oslo as either, a) a flawed process (because the liberal principles of the Oslo peace process were not implemented); or, b) flawed accords (because the accords contained 'destructive ambiguity' regarding the nationalist aspirations of each group). An alternative reading of the failure of Oslo would identify the continuing colonising actions of Israel, under the banner of an internationally-supported 'peace process' (Roy 2007: 233ff). Meanwhile, resistance to Israel's continuing colonisation has been

considered by Israel and the international community to be illegitimate and labelled as terrorism.

Since the signing of the Oslo Accords, the Palestinian national movement has become bifurcated as a result of the Oslo process. One wing (Fateh/Palestinian Authority) can be considered to have adopted an ‘earned sovereignty’ approach (Hammami 2011). This approach aims at demonstrating to the international community that Palestine ‘deserves’ sovereignty by abiding by the donor-imposed state-building process. A central element of externally-driven state-building has been the reform of the security services, whose main objective has been to crackdown on Palestinian resistance to Israel (ibid; Sayigh 2010). The second wing of the Palestinian national movement was the resistance approach, associated mainly with Hamas and Islamic Jihad, but after the second intifada, there are also factions of the PLO that began to take-up armed resistance. This wing believes that negotiations with Israel have failed to achieve Palestinian rights and, therefore, violence is the only way.

The ‘Road Map’ in 2002 ushered in increased donor pressure on the Palestinian Authority to ‘reform’ (that is, bring in neo-liberal and good governance reforms) in order to become a ‘suitable’ partner for peace (that is, suitable to the Israeli government, Turner 2009). The failure of these reform efforts to address the growing impoverishment of Palestinian society and contributed to the election of Hamas in 2006 (Turner 2009). Following the election of Hamas to the Palestinian Authority, the international community boycotted the PA and supported President Mahmoud Abbas (Fateh). This resulted in the political and geographical fragmentation of the Palestinian national movement—with Fateh taking control of the PA in the West Bank and Hamas forming a new administration and taking control of the Gaza Strip

in 2007. Since then, the international community has supported Fateh as the ‘suitable partner for peace’ and continued its state-building project in the West Bank. In 2009, PA prime minister, Salam Fayyad, launched a plan for the creation of a Palestinian state in 2011, called, ‘Ending the Occupation, Establishing the State’. Meanwhile, Hamas has built its own quasi-state institutions under blockade by Israel and Egypt (Sayigh 2010) (until the Rafah crossing was opened by Egypt in 2011).

In many ways, the Oslo peace process, the Road Map and the reactions of the international community to the election of Hamas have all had devastating consequences for the Palestinian national movement and for the Palestinian people. Israel has been able to further entrench its occupation (for example, Halper 2000; Gordon 2008) and its apartheid (Yiftachel 2009; Davis 1987, 2003). Both of these processes (occupation and apartheid) may be considered as a continuation of the conquest and control of land and the transformation of the ethnic structure of society that is central to settler colonialism (Rodinson 1973; Wolfe 2006; Yiftachel 1998).

### **The Palestinians and the ‘Arab spring’**

The success of the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings helped to break the ‘fear barrier’ amongst those opposing their governments across the Middle East (and even globally). The issues are often the same: rising unemployment and poverty, corruption, autocratic rule and lack of political and civil freedoms. The Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip have not been immune from this wave of people power flowing through the region.

Palestinians demonstrated on the streets in solidarity with the Egyptian people from the beginning of the Egyptian uprising in January 2011. Both the Fateh-dominated Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and the Hamas government in the Gaza Strip tried to suppress these protests, fearing the implications of people power for their own governments. There have been no elections in the Occupied Palestinian Territory since the elections that brought Hamas to power in 2006. The term of office of the Palestinian Legislative Council (the PA legislature) expired in 2010 and no elections have been held since (whether in the West Bank or Gaza Strip). The international community's sponsored state-building in the West Bank has taken place without any democratic oversight and the Fateh-led PA is regarded as acting like the authoritarian regimes being deposed in neighbouring countries. Under international siege, the Hamas-controlled administration in Gaza also limits political freedoms. Unsurprisingly, Palestinian demonstrations in solidarity with the Egyptians turned into calls for political reform of the Palestinian leadership. On 15 March 2011, Palestinians, led by youth groups, organised protests in several Palestinian towns and cities calling for reconciliation between Hamas and Fateh and for elections to a Palestinian National Council.

A lot of attention has been given to the calls for reconciliation between Hamas and Fateh. Pressure from the street, combined with the loss of external patrons (Mubarak, in the case of Fateh, and the Syrian regime, in the case of Hamas) undoubtedly pushed Fateh and Hamas to enter into talks. A reconciliation agreement, brokered by Egypt, was signed in April 2011. The agreement provides for the holding of elections to the PLC and the PNC no later than one year later.

But many of those protesting believe that elections to the Palestinian National Council and not just reconciliation between Fateh and Hamas are more important to

unite ALL Palestinians—not only those in the occupied Palestinian territory. There have been no direct elections to the Palestinian National Council—which is the body representing Palestinians wherever they may be—since 1968. The PNC is the legislative body of the Palestine Liberation Organisation. Through its resolutions, it guides the actions and strategies of the PLO. It has met approximately every two years since its formation. However, since the formation of the Palestinian Authority in 1994, both the PLO and the PNC has been marginalized, at the expense of voices of Palestinians in the diaspora. The call for direct elections to the PNC is to ‘reform and reactivate the PLO institutions so that they embody the will of the Palestinian people as a whole’ in order to achieve national liberation (statement of 27 January 2011, General Union of Palestinian Students).

For many in the ‘15 March movement’ there is little love for Hamas or Fateh and, in fact, ‘The movement’s horizon may render existing political parties meaningless as invigorated youth activists search for creative ways to shatter the stagnation of their domestic condition in an effort to buttress their ongoing struggle against Israeli colonization’ (Erakat 2011).

The “Arab spring” has led to the voicing of discontent amongst Palestinians with their leadership’s inability to end the Israeli occupation. The PA initiative to unilaterally declare a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip (the origins of which predates the Arab spring) has not been enthusiastically embraced by all Palestinians. Whilst an approximate two-thirds majority of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip see it as a way to end Israel’s occupation, others, particularly in the diaspora, see it as an abandonment of the right of return for Palestinian refugees, an acceptance of the status quo regarding Israel’s settlements, wall and annexation of Jerusalem, and entrenching the mini-police state that donors have

helped to build in the West Bank and, which Hamas has done despite the lack of donor support in the Gaza Strip.

Indeed, it remains to be seen not only how Fateh and Hamas may put aside their political rivalries but, more significantly, how they will reconcile demands for a new political leadership with their own promises to hold elections, which will surely bring their popularity into question as well as raise questions about what strategies should be pursued to end Israel's occupation.

There is a political transformation occurring across the Arab world that neither Fateh nor Hamas are able to control and from which they may not benefit. A 'third intifada' was declared for 15 May 2011 –the anniversary of the Nakba, when Palestinians and their supporters remember the loss of Palestine and the displacement of around three-quarters of Palestinians (around 700,000 according to the UN). A group of Arab and Palestinian activists created a Facebook page in March 2011 (which was initially removed by Facebook, for allegedly inciting violence). Nevertheless, the page reappeared and attracted hundreds of thousands of followers. The Third Palestinian Intifada calls on all Arabs, and not just Palestinians, to protest against Israel's occupation and call for the implementation of the right of return for Palestinian refugees by protesting peacefully outside Israeli embassies and consulates globally. As one Egyptian writes: 'It is very true that the whole Arab spring with revolutions erupting almost all over the Arab world has nothing to do with Israel as far as motivation is concerned, but that doesn't mean that Israel is immune from its ripple effect. ... If the Arab people decided to address 60 years of unmet socio-political demands then the Palestinian issue should undoubtedly come on top of that list.' (Ezzat 2011). Indeed, a number of protests took place in Arab countries, the

Occupied Palestinian Territory and Israel. Marches in Egypt and Jordan were prevented by security forces from arriving at the borders with the Gaza Strip/Israel as planned. However, in unprecedented images, protesters from Lebanon, Syria, the West Bank and Gaza Strip marched towards the ceasefire lines (de facto borders) with Israel and thousands of protesters breached the border between Syria and the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights (Sherwood 2011a).

Whilst the protests of 2011 have not led to a ‘Palestinian spring’, we are witnessing the voicing of different positions within the Palestinian movement and these are no longer along the lines of Fateh vs Hamas. Instead, voices, predominantly from amongst young people independent of these two parties, are calling for non-violent resistance against Israel and greater democracy within the Palestinian movement in order to end the occupation. This is a rejection of the methods of both Fateh and Hamas. The former has embraced the track of international diplomacy since the 1980s and the latter has been, until recently, a proponent of armed struggle. Both tactics have failed to end Israel’s occupation, whilst both parties are currently without a democratic mandate (which expired in 2010). These new Palestinian voices are potentially supported by a re-energised Arab solidarity movement, as well as a growing international solidarity movement focused around boycott, divestment and sanctions. It is this power shift that represents the greatest challenge to Israel’s position within the so-called peace process.

### **Israel and the “Arab spring”**

The Israeli government has watched the so-called Arab spring unfold with some dismay. In November 2011, PM Binyamin Netanyahu attacked the Arab spring, as an ‘Islamic, anti-western, anti-liberal, anti-Israeli, undemocratic wave’ (Sherwood

2011b). The Israeli government is concerned about the political turmoil on its borders—not only by the toppling of its longstanding ally, Hosni Mubarak, but also by the possible replacement of its longstanding foe, the Syrian regime, by a Muslim Brotherhood-dominated government. As Daniel Byman argues, ‘Israel is a status quo power in many ways. [...] So change, even if it means the toppling of regional foes, risks rocking this prosperous boat’ (Byman 2011).

Israel’s response to the “Arab spring” ‘has taken the form of “winter hibernation.” Like a polar bear, Israel retreated into its cave, withdrew into itself and waited until the rage passed. Building security barriers on the border with Egypt and Jordan, enlarging the security budget and abstaining from any gesture toward the Palestinians have been only some of the steps taken’ (Ravid 2011).

The most significant consequence of the Arab spring for the Israeli government has been the overthrow of the regime of Hosni Mubarak. The 1979 peace treaty between Israel and Egypt has been strategically important to Israel’s security (by removing the largest Arab army from the Arab-Israeli conflict) and the lynchpin of Western security strategy towards the region. Since 2006, until the overthrow of the old regime, Egypt has cooperated with Israel to maintain the blockade of the Gaza Strip and it has agreed with Israel over the need to contain Hamas and to prevent Iran from increasing its influence throughout the region. Israel’s alliance with Egypt became even more important since its relations with Turkey (a long-time ally) have become increasingly frosty since the Gaza war—compounded by Israel’s killing of several Turkish citizens on a ship carrying aid in May 2010.

The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, which took over power after Mubarak stepped down until presidential elections in May 2012, has been vocally criticised for

the slow pace of reforms. However, SCAF has signalled its break with the Mubarak regime and its responsiveness to popular opinion with regard to new policies towards the question of Palestine. It has not cancelled the peace treaty but it has opened the Rafah crossing (thereby breaking the international blockade of the Gaza Strip) and has successfully brokered reconciliation talks between Hamas and Fateh. The Israeli government opposes both of these moves, which effectively end the political and geographical isolation of Hamas. Netanyahu told Fateh, in May 2011, that it had to choose between peace with Israel and peace with Hamas and withheld \$100 million of taxes collected on behalf of the Palestinian Authority.

Israel has also been concerned by what they regard as a security vacuum along the Egyptian-Israeli border and the Sinai peninsula more broadly that enabled a cross-border raid by suspected Palestinians into Israel in August 2011 and repeated sabotage of the gas pipeline between Egypt and Israel (and Jordan). Israel responded to the cross-border raid immediately by pursuing the attackers into Egypt, resulting in 5 Egyptian policemen being killed. This outraged Egyptian public opinion and hundreds of Egyptians protested outside the Israeli embassy in Cairo, and then stormed the embassy, leading to Israeli embassy staff being evacuated. Israel also launched air strikes on the Gaza Strip, to which Hamas and other groups responded by firing rockets into Israel.

However, it may be erroneous to evaluate these events as constituting new security threats to Israel. Brent Sasley argues that, ‘the reality is that the Arab Spring hasn’t changed Israel’s regional position or strategic calculus to any great degree [...]. Instead, the challenges the Arab Spring poses for Israel are no different from the

broader cyclical challenges Israel has been facing since 1948' (Sasley 2011). Moreover, rather than representing a threat to Israel, it could be argued that the 'Arab spring' has potentially distracted the international community from Israel's continuing settlement building and its introduction of new laws discriminating against Palestinian citizens of Israel. According to the BBC in 2011, 'Since the beginning of this year there have been increased demolitions of homes [of Bedouin in the West Bank]. UN data shows more than a hundred Bedouin structures have been demolished. Settler harassment is also a growing problem' (Knell 2011). The Israeli government is also planning to evict Bedouin from their historical lands in the Negev (Knell 2011; The Economist 2011b). A right-wing-dominated Knesset passed a law in July 2011 to punish any Israeli individual or group calling for a boycott of Israeli settlements in the West Bank. In January 2012 the Israeli Supreme Court upheld a 2003 law prohibiting Israelis from living with their West Bank/Gaza spouses in Israel (a law that almost uniquely affects Palestinians of Israeli citizenship). *The Telegraph* reported that, 'The ruling comes at a time when Israel's parliament has faced growing criticism for a series of legislative proposals that critics say are either designed to discriminate against the country's Arab minority or to curtail the freedoms of groups that defend Palestinian rights, including the Supreme Court itself. The Israeli right has defended the moves, saying they are needed to protect the Jewish identity of the state' (Blomfield 2012).

The other issue that precedes the "Arab spring" is Israel's concern over Iran's nuclear capability. In fact, Israel's concern over Iran's influence in the Middle East has been growing since the US-invasion of Iraq in 2003, which ended the most important check on Iran's influence in the region. Israel has been threatening military

strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities since 2003 (news.scotsman 2003). These threats appear to have increased in 2012, with US Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta expressing his belief of a strong likelihood that Israel would attack in the spring of 2012 (The Economist, 2012).

It is not possible to establish a direct link between Israel's continuing policies towards the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, its increasingly anti-democratic measures against Palestinians of Israeli citizenship and its war-mongering against Iran, on the one hand, and the "Arab spring", on the other. Nevertheless, it can be argued that Israeli political leaders and commentators have framed the "Arab spring" as a potential threat to Israel (which has thrived on the status quo ante), thereby providing a legitimising discourse for pursuing such measures, which fit into a Zionist worldview of the need to secure Israel as a Jewish state at any cost.

Against this back-drop, Israel's agreement to a prisoner exchange (in which 1027 Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails were swapped for the captured Israeli soldier, Gilad Shalit) is a result less of its recognition of potentially growing Arab/Palestinian power but more a result of the need to placate domestic Israeli opinion, following a 'summer of discontent' in which hundreds of thousands of Israelis protested against the rising cost of living and economic inequality (The Economist, 2011a).

### **Conclusion: Things fall apart?**

In summary, we can say that the "Arab spring" does not immediately benefit the resolution of the Israel-Palestine conflict—at least as the process is currently conceptualised. If we conceive of the conflict-resolution process as one in which two national groups, Jewish and Palestinian, engage in negotiations on how to share

historic Palestine then the Arab spring appears to have thrown up more barriers to this already difficult endeavour. Israel has retreated to its bunker and has not ceased those policies that are damaging to a two-state solution (primarily, settlement building), whilst further eroding the trust of Palestinian citizens of Israel in the democratic nature of the state. Meanwhile, the unity between Fateh and Hamas has not reconciled the two different strategies of the two parties (diplomacy vs armed struggle), although it may represent a tacit acknowledgement by Hamas of the two-state solution.

However, the “Arab spring” has shaken things up, highlighted the need for a new strategy to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and potentially opened up spaces for new political actors to emerge (particularly from within the Palestinian diaspora and amongst Palestinian youth). However, as Noura Erakat argues, there is a need for the articulation of a political programme and not merely the use of new strategies to achieve Palestinian self-determination (Erakat 2012). One possible political programme, which looks more and more attractive as Israel continues its colonisation policies, is that of the one-state solution in which Israelis and Palestinians enjoy equal citizenship, as the only solution capable of dismantling Israel as a colonial-settler state and resolving the Israel-Palestine conflict and laying the groundwork for a just peace.

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