

Israel and Palestine after the Arab Spring series

FPC Briefing: Israel, Palestine, and the “Urgency of Now.”

John Lyndon

“We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history there is such a thing as being too late.”

-Martin Luther King

2011 was the most tumultuous year in the Middle East in recent memory. Long-held assumptions about the entire region were turned on their heads, with dictators falling, societies rising up, and diplomats, experts and statesmen scrambling to make sense of a new reality that is still shrouded in uncertainty.

On the surface, Israel and Palestine largely seem to represent a rare exception to this region-wide phenomenon. Whilst places as geographically disparate as Tripoli, Sana’a and Manama were rocked by historic events and profound change, Jerusalem—for so long the political fault line on which the rest of the region is precariously balanced—appeared to remain relatively sanguine, all things considered.

Yet this analysis makes the same mistake that coloured much of the pre-2012 Middle East thinking. It is the sort of analysis that, as late as January 1st 2011, led to confident conclusions that President Mubarak was unassailable, and the Middle East was largely immune to tides of public protest. Previous historic shifts within this conflict, including wars, peace agreements and intifadas, have often taken seasoned analysts by surprise. Events and trends below the surface often conspire to create unexpected conclusions. The last twelve months have seen some very significant developments in both Israel and Palestine; winds of change that, if left unchecked, could have us all reaping whirlwinds before too long.

In Israel, the marked shift to the right has continued, augmented by a genuine and understandable nervousness about the profound uncertainty in the region, and the potential rise of governments much more hostile to Israel than those that preceded them. The Likud-led coalition under the leadership of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has brought forth a wave of legislation that has been increasingly nationalistic, insular and troubling.

The widespread protests on the streets of major Israeli cities last summer showed a young and politically forthright society that is willing to organise and mobilise on an enormous scale; but around social and economic issues rather than Israel’s greatest threat, the continued conflict with the Palestinians. If this groundswell of public mobilisation can be directed toward the occupation and the threat it poses to Israel’s very nature, we could perhaps see a situation transformed. In Palestine, some of the lowest levels of violence in recent times belie a society that is divided. Divided physically, between the West Bank, Gaza, East Jerusalem and the diaspora; politically, between Hamas, Fatah and a growing non-aligned movement; and existentially, between the two-state solution that the PLO has advocated since 1988, and an uncertain alternative that has yet to be fully articulated.

The 76 year-old President of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas, has signalled repeatedly that he will not run for office again and has no obvious successor within the Fatah establishment. With long-postponed parliamentary elections tentatively scheduled for May, underpinned by a shaky reconciliation agreement between Fatah and Hamas, it seems as though Palestine is on the cusp of some sort of political change. The *type* of change which emerges will depend not only on the events

in Palestine, but also on the behaviour of Israel and the international community, particularly the United States.

Both parties have disempowered the Palestinian moderate leadership over the last twelve months. The US effectively contradicted its own stated policy with regards to Israel's settlement programme in the UN when it vetoed a resolution condemning building in the Occupied Territories. It then set its stall out in firm opposition to the Palestinian bid for statehood in September, exercising quite a bit of diplomatic muscle to convince other states to follow its lead. Meanwhile, Israel negotiated the release of captured soldier Gilad Shalit with Hamas, releasing over 1,000 prisoners as part of the deal, and giving Hamas a huge political boost in the process. For too many Palestinians, the lessons they draw from these events are that Fatah's strategy of non-violence, negotiations and international diplomacy bears no fruit, whilst Hamas' more forthright and confrontational approach pays rapid dividends.

Taken together, these events should inspire a sense of urgency and commitment amongst those who care about the peaceful resolution of this conflict. The two-state solution, which has moved over the last two decades from being a radical position on the fringes of both societies into the mainstream with much consensus both in the region and internationally, is at risk. It has taken a generation for this consensus to be painfully built up, but it will take a fraction of that time for it to be shattered, with no workable alternative waiting in the wings.

In Israel, despite Netanyahu laudably committing to a two-state solution over two years ago in a speech at Bar Ilan University, many doubt whether the commitment is genuine and purposeful, and feel that the government that he leads is structurally incapable of affirming such a deal, with many Members of Knesset within it vocally and ideologically opposed to the very concessions that would be necessary to deliver an agreement.

Within Israeli society, the separation wall and the reduction in violence has allowed many people to push resolution of the conflict further from the forefront of their minds, which allows politicians to do the same.

Similarly, in Palestine, popular support for two states has dropped significantly, with many people so disenchanted with stalled and fruitless negotiations and the continued growth of settlements that they no longer believe it is possible. People need to pay attention to this phenomenon. If the two-state solution begins to look like fantasy, then people will mobilise behind other rallying calls, like a one state outcome or a bi-national state. These options are considered by most to be practically impossible, but people are increasingly saying the same thing about the two-state solution too, which—with its painful compromises and essence of mutual recognition—is a less intoxicating dream than more maximalist alternatives. Yet the two-state solution remains the only viable option that ends the occupation, allows both peoples to peacefully express their sovereignty, and reduces rather than increases the potential for future conflict. Ensuring that it remains viable is a priority of the very highest order.

Negotiations themselves have become debased, with the collapse of the talks held in Amman this January illustrating just how far the process has fallen. Palestinians have seen twenty years of negotiations coincide with a huge increase in settlement activity, and are deeply suspicious of a long-running process that has yet to pay dividends. For Israelis, the taboo of talking to the enemy has long been broken, with discussions between Israelis and Palestinians now barely troubling the front-pages of many national newspapers, and expectations for progress at an all-time low. With both the desired destination (two states), and the preferred mechanism to get there (negotiations) suffering from such a crisis in public confidence, it is clear that there needs to be an

effort to revive both, instilling new purpose and commitment into any future attempt to break the deadlock. A clear timetable for talks, terms of reference that guarantee that the right issues will be addressed, and a suspension in settlement activity for their duration will go some way toward reversing this trend.

It is within this uncertain but shifting context that the role of civil society becomes crucial. Both societies have the potential, within themselves, to challenge expectations and contradict many observers' grim analysis. If the two-state solution is indeed under threat, it is the responsibility of ordinary people, both in the region and internationally, to compel their leaders to act with the urgency that such a situation demands.

In March of this year, OneVoice Palestine activists in Nablus [participated in a sit-in](#), demanding national unity as a crucial step to ending the conflict, whilst many more [marched in Ramallah](#) under the same banner. Town hall meetings across the West Bank have engaged hundreds of people at a grassroots level, inviting political leaders to come and debate the issues that must be addressed if statehood is to be achieved. OneVoice Palestine mounted a campaign that supported and explained the Palestinian bid for UN membership, taking their message to Palestine's towns and villages. In Israel, OneVoice mounted a campaign during the autumn, calling for brave and urgent action from the government, culminating in an open-air roundtable discussion connecting over [650 people with 50 prominent Israeli thinkers](#). This month, they have been calling for a freeze in settlement construction in order to restart negotiations, illustrating their point with a [flash mob in Jerusalem's Zion Square](#).

Bit by bit, organisations and individuals are increasingly setting the context in both societies. It is this flowering of people power, the same force we saw in Egypt or Tunisia, which should give us the greatest hope for a breakthrough. The flaws and challenges within both leaderships are well known, with every detail of the elite political context pored over by the world's media. What are much less clearly understood are the capacity, intent and potential of civil society. If 2011 taught us anything, it is not to underestimate this force. If 2012 is to see the politicians take a step back from the political precipice and meaningfully re-engage with this process, it will need to be with the backing and encouragement of both their societies. Solving this conflict is a profoundly urgent priority. If this sense of urgency becomes more pressing amongst citizens, such a force can radically change the behaviour of even the most stubborn of leaders.

*John Lyndon is the Executive Director of OneVoice Europe www.onevoicemovement.org
OneVoice are holding a Gala Dinner on the 19th of March with David Miliband and activists from their Israeli and Palestinian movements. For tickets or further information email:
Europe@onevoicemovement.org.uk*