

Egypt Shakes the World - I - What is the reaction in Israel?

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SUZI WEISSMAN INTERVIEWED Yoav Peled and Mark LeVine on her program “Beneath the Surface,” KPFK Pacifica Radio in Los Angeles, on February 11, 2010. The following are edited excerpts from those discussions. Thanks to Meleiza Figueroa for transcribing. First part below. Second part: [Egypt Shakes the World - II - On Tahrir](#)

Suzi Weissman: I’m very pleased to have Yoav Peled join us right now to talk about the Israeli reaction to the events in Egypt, the relations between Egypt and Israel, and we’re going to ask Yoav about “Post-Post Zionism,” the title of Horit and Yoav Peled’s latest article in *New Left Review*, confronting the death of the two-state solution. Yoav is this year’s Hans Speer Professor at the New School for Social Research; he’s also a professor of political science at Tel Aviv University. His book *Being Israeli: the Dynamics of Multiple Citizenship* won many prizes, and his latest collection is *Democratic Citizenship and War*. Yoav joins us from New York. Welcome. So my first question to you is: what is the reaction in Israel?

Yoav Peled: The reaction in Israel is very, very nervous; naturally. Israel’s good relations with Egypt were precisely with the dictator. To the extent that Egypt democratizes — we still don’t know to what extent this will happen — Egypt will probably be less friendly to Israel. And I’m sure the U.S. government is also nervous, even though it has to say otherwise

To the extent that Egypt becomes more democratic, to the extent that there is a regime that is attuned to public opinion, it would be less friendly, or I should say less subservient to the United States and Israel. Of course we know that Saudi Arabia is very very nervous, and I’m sure Jordan too. So while a lot of people celebrate, there are a lot of people who don’t see a reason to celebrate in all of this.

SW: On the Egyptian side, can we assume that Gaza will no longer be an open-air prison and that the tunnels will no longer be blockaded?

YP: Well, I think this really probably the first point in which there will be a confrontation. I think that any regime in Egypt that is somewhat democratic will not be able to maintain the siege on Gaza, which Egypt has been maintaining in Israel’s service very religiously. They will probably open the border, but I think the reaction of Israel would be to re-occupy the border area from which it withdrew in 2005. This will be an immediate point of contention between Israel and the new Egypt.

Besides, the Muslim Brotherhood already announced that it is Israel that has not lived up to the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty of 1979, and they are right, because the first part of that treaty talks

about the Palestinians. It doesn't start with Israel-Egyptian bilateral relations, that's only in the second paragraph. And Israel of course has not lived up to its obligations under the treaty with respect to the Palestinians.

SW: We've seen that there is a young generation, workers and others, who are ready to have democracy. And I guess the real question is, can you imagine this wind of fresh air reaching the Palestinian territories by a Jordan or Gaza?

YP: Well, Gaza and the West Bank are not in the same situation. Gaza is under siege by Israel, but internally governed by Hamas. Hamas, of course, is an offshoot of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, and they are celebrating what's happening in Egypt. In the West Bank, if there is any attempt to imitate what happened in Egypt, it's the Israeli military that will intervene, and it will not treat the Palestinians the same way the Egyptian military treated the Egyptians.

SW: But would they dare, in this atmosphere, to put it down brutally while the whole world is watching?

YP: Israel is not interested in the whole world. Israel is only interested in the United States, which is not going to interfere. I mean, we've already seen that the Obama administration is completely and totally in the little pocket of the Israeli government, to an extent that's really amazing, even. So I don't think Israel has to worry about anybody's reaction, because the United States will support whatever it does.

SW: But I can imagine that with this democracy spreading, we can see the end of suicide bombers.

YP: There hasn't been any suicide bombing since 2002. This is not at all the issue. This is not about suicide bombers, but Israel's determination to maintain control over the Palestinian territories. It's not a matter of the Palestinians changing; it's a matter of Israel changing. And there is no indication that the lesson being learned in Israel, from what's happening in Egypt, is that Israel should change its treatment of the Palestinians.

No More Two States?

SW: We're also going to be talking about Yoav's latest article with Horit Peled that appears in the latest New Left Review on the end of the two-state solution. Yoav, you've long been a proponent of the two-state solution, and yet in this article you posit the end of the two-state solution. You and Horit summarize the retreat to the right of Israeli intellectuals who were previously critical. Can you summarize what's happened?

YP: The two-state solution is simply no longer an option. It was killed in July 2000 at Camp David, was killed by Ehud Barak [then Israeli Prime Minister, now Labor Party leader] with the very active help of Bill Clinton. Since then the development of Israeli settlements in the West Bank has been such that two states is no longer an option. It's as one of the Palestinians used to say: while we're negotiating about dividing the pizza, Israel is eating the pizza.

There's simply no more land for the Palestinians to have a state. Many people thought this happened a lot earlier, I thought it only happened in 2000, but anyway we reached the point of no return in terms of Israeli settlements. The whole question of a partition of the territory is no longer there. I think we honestly have to face the fact that there is one state now, and that state is one where 40% of the population has no citizenship rights of any kind — and this is what needs to be changed. What we're saying in our article is that we have to work now for a democratization of this state, where

40% have no rights.

SW: You also say, though, that the character of the state — as you talk about it — is a “post-Zionist state,” and that it would have to become a secular and democratic state. Is this something that you can actually see happening? And before you answer that, I wanted to ask, what is it that made the former liberals and so-called left in Israel move to the right?

YP: It was the combination of what happened at Camp David. The version told by Ehud Barak about what happened at Camp David, again the active assistance of Clinton, was that Israel offered Yasser Arafat everything, and that he refused. If Arafat refused to accept this generous offer, it means he doesn't want peace. It means he wants the whole country, doesn't want to have a partition of the country, and therefore we have no partner for peace.

That has been the slogan in Israel: “There is no partner for peace.” Since then the Second Intifada broke out, and then the suicide bombing happened on a very, very large scale. This was a real shock to the Israeli public in general, and Israeli liberals in particular. The psychological effect of the suicide bombings is simply unimaginable, and this is really what pushed almost the entire Israeli peace camp to the right.

SW: Do you think it's also the fact that so many Russian immigrants came into Israel and supported the far right?

YP: Yes, that changed the balance of opinion. The Russians, however, were never liberals — of course, there are exceptions, we shouldn't generalize completely — but by and large they never were. I'm talking about the Israelis who were liberals, the peace camp. It was, at its height, you could say almost 50% of the population.

Most of these people changed their views. Just in electoral terms, the two parties that supposedly represent the peace camp, Labor Party and Meretz, combined have 16 seats in the Knesset today. In 1992, they had 56 seats (out of 120). This shows you the change that's occurred.

SW: But you also say — in looking at the books of these formerly liberal and so-called leftist intellectuals — that you detect the same colonial mentality there that exists in the rest of the, let's say, pro-Zionist population. Has WikiLeaks, in revealing some of the attitudes of the Arab states as they pressured for an attack on Iran, for example, had any effect on Israel and on public opinion?

YP: Not really. There were more significant leaks, the Al Jazeera leaks of documents of the so-called negotiations between the Palestinian Authority and Israel since 2000, which showed that the Palestinians were willing to go to almost any length in order to reach an agreement, and everything they agreed to wasn't enough for Israel.

These things always tend to reinforce people's opinions. The Israeli mainstream said, “well, that shows that we don't have a partner. Look, they didn't agree to even more than that.” The few liberals left then said, “look, they agreed to so much, and we didn't agree, so it means the Palestinians don't have a partner for peace.”

SW: You've written so well in the past about the political economy of the peace process, and today as Mubarak gave way, I was thinking about the political economy of the Middle East as a whole. This obviously is going to change if the other dictators go. What do you think is going to happen if Israel is isolated, being the only one that supports the status

quo.

YP: The most important thing is that Israel can no longer rely on Egypt. It doesn't mean there will be a war tomorrow, or even that the peace treaty would be officially canceled. But from now on, in Israel's strategic planning, including its defense budget planning, it will have to take into consideration the fact that in a future war, Egypt will not stand on their side as it has done since the signing of the peace treaty.

There's also the question of commercial relations; 40% of Israel's natural gas is provided by Egypt for relatively low prices as the result of a bilateral agreement, and there's a whole series of other commercial agreements. This may also change. But Israel's economy, as you know, is booming. Israel is not affected by the global crisis. It will be an additional economic burden, but it's not anything that the Israeli economy couldn't withstand.

As far as the chances for peace, the Israeli public has despaired of the chances for peace and is no longer even interested in that. There was a very interesting cover story in Time magazine a few months ago detailing that development, and I think they were right. Overall, it's an added economic and military burden and a little bit more concern for Israel, but I don't think in the short run anything fundamental will change.

SW: That's sad. Let me ask you then, finally: you do say that the only real solution now is a secular democratic state, a one state, recognizing realities. Is that a wish, or is that something you think is eventually going to have to happen?

YP: I think it eventually will have to happen, or else the situation will be very unpleasant. I don't think this is around the corner or anytime soon. But the fact that Egypt might now become democratic and if the same thing happens in Jordan, the pressure on Israel will increase, then gradually the realization will come that they have to solve the issue with the Palestinians. They can no longer keep three and a half million Palestinians as subjects with no rights, and by then it will be clear that the only way is to simply give them rights because there is no possibility of partition. So I think this could happen, but it's really in the long term, not something that's going to happen anytime soon.

P.S.

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