

Analysis of "The Situation" in Middle East and Prospects for a Middle East Nuclear Free Zone

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By Hillel Schenker

1) Just one week ago, on Saturday night, on September 10th, I participated in an extraordinary example of peoples' democracy. Over 5,000 Israelis gathered around tables – mainly in Tel Aviv in the square in front of Art Museum, but also in other locations around the country.

It was the next stage of the mass summer protest movement, which climaxed a week before with 450, 000 Israelis marching in the streets for social justice.

At my table were a moderator, a woman taken notes on a lap-top, a PR specialist, an organizational consultant, a primary school teacher, her 13 year old daughter and two very principled and articulate pensioners.

We discussed the implications of the summer protest movement, discussed what should be done to change and improve the situation, and proposed initiatives, all of which were collected and sent to a coordination center for follow-up.

When Tel Aviv Mayor Ron Huldai came to the square, he was chased away by some angry protesters, revenge for having ordered the evacuation of some of the protest tents earlier in the week.

2) Not one word about this exciting dramatic tables' democracy appeared in the major Israeli newspapers the next day.

Why? Because all the main pages were filled with descriptions of the violent attempt in Egypt to take over the Israeli embassy.

The rest of the space was left for coverage connected to the Palestinian approach to the UN and preparations for the 10th anniversary of 9/11 in the United States, and the implications of that traumatic event 10 years ago.

3) So – what is "the situation" today?

a) The status quo is over.

The familiar relationship between Israel, Egypt and Jordan following the Camp David Accords – based on peace treaties between Israel, Egypt and Jordan, and understandings between leaderships, is undergoing transformation. Now the opinions of civil society, what is known as "the Arab street", must be taken into account.

The endless state of negotiations, or non-negotiation, between the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority, based on the Oslo Accords and mutual recognition, is on the verge of transformation to the unknown.

The former state of alliance between the secular Israel of Ben-Gurion and the secular Turkey of Ataturk is undergoing transformation.

b) The Arab Spring has been an extraordinary expression of civil society, driven by a highly educated and underemployed younger generation, with the knowledge and aid of social media tools. It has brought down authoritarian governments in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, contains tremendous promise for a better future, but also many dangers and question-marks.

c) The unexpected Israeli summer of mass protests came at a time when many of us veteran activists had given up on any possibility of change being generated from within Israeli society. It was generated and driven by a highly educated younger generation, frustrated by the growing gaps within Israeli society, problems of affordable housing and education, aided by the new social media tools.

However, until now, they have avoided dealing with questions connected to peace and security, the occupation, the settlements and the defense budget. If they want a genuine change in socio-economic priorities, they will have to deal with the cost of the settlements, the defense budget and the exaggerated funds given to the relatively non-productive ultra-Orthodox sector.

The summer protest movement will have a profound, long-term impact on the Israeli political process, though we will probably only see the results of this change in the next elections.

d) For months in Israel we have heard the warning that "September is coming". Well, September is here. Today is September 19th, one day before the convening of the fall session of the UN General Assembly.

Due to the lack of negotiations, the Palestinian leadership felt they had no alternative but to make an approach to the UN for a resolution on a Palestinian state in the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem, based on the 1967 borders, alongside the State of Israel.

I think this is a wise, game-changing move – which compliments the original UN GAR 181, the partition plan, which ended the British mandate and called for the establishment of a Jewish and an Arab state in Palestine. And it is a fundamentally non-violent, diplomatic move. 181 is the basis for Israel's international legitimacy as a state, and a new GA resolution is the natural next step.

Hopefully, such a GA motion will be followed by a renewal of negotiations between the Israeli and the Palestinian leaders, but this depends to a great degree on innovative and determined involvement by the international community, led by the Quartet – the U.S., EU, Russia and the UN.

Otherwise, grassroots Palestinian disappointment with a lack of change in their situation may lead to a very dangerous situation.

e) President Obama has tried to rebuild America's relations with Arab and Moslem world following disastrous George Bush period, There is no more unilateral regime change and imposed democracy. What we have is multilateral rather than unilateral solutions. But – there is also general disappointment that Obama has not been more forceful in facilitating progress towards Israeli-Palestinian peace.

f) The Arab Peace Initiative (API), originally issued in 2002 in Beirut, and reaffirmed 2007 in Riyadh, calls for recognition and normal relations with Israel, in exchange for the establishment of a Palestinian state alongside Israel and an agreed upon solution to refugees and Jerusalem.

This could be a key building block to progress, but there are questions about the state of API following the Arab Spring. Are the Arab governments and the Arab League still advocating the API?

g) We are all looking forward to the 2012 Nuclear and WMD Free Zone in Middle conference which was decided upon at the end of the NPT Review Conference in May, 2010.

In the current circumstances, it is very hard to move forward towards the conference.

At this critical moment in time, the first priority on the regional and international agenda is the stabilization of relations between Israel and its neighbors, and primarily the need to confront developments following the Palestinian approach to the UN.

When the situation becomes clearer, hopefully it will be possible in the near future to designate a UN facilitator who will be responsible for talking with all of the parties in the Middle East about the location and format of the proposed conference. Under the current circumstances, it will be very difficult to hold the conference in the Middle East itself, and logical candidates would be the UN cities – Geneva, Vienna and New York, or possibly Italy, if we consider a Mediterranean framework.

h) The role of civil society, ICAN, Peace Boat, CSCME (the civil society Conference on Security and Cooperation initiative), IPPNW and others, should be to raise consciousness about the need for a regime of Security and Cooperation in the Middle East, which will include a Nuclear and WMD Free Zone in the ME, in the context of Israeli-Palestinian and Israeli-Arab comprehensive peace.

i) Recently, a number of very dangerous statements have been made by Israeli public figures:

Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) Home Front Commander General Eyal Eisenberg warned of a growing possibility of regional war, with the possible use of non-conventional weapons. Prime Minister Netanyahu also spoke about a growing danger of nuclear warfare.

And there have also been newspaper reports about cooperation between Pakistan and a divided Saudi leadership to create a Saudi Sunni bomb, to counteract the possible Iranian Shiite bomb.

We, as civil society, must continue to emphasize the dangers of a possible deterioration in the situation, which might lead to armed conflict and the use of non-conventional weapons.

i) I believe the key to progress is a two pronged approach, based upon the API.

1) One track – negotiations towards Israeli-Palestinian and Israeli-Arab comprehensive peace;

2) Parallel track – negotiations towards a regional security regime which will include a Nuclear and Mass Destruction Weapons Free Zone.

j) Earlier this week, the Israeli Peace NGOs forum composed of 60 peace and human rights organizations launched a campaign "50 Reasons Why Israelis Should not be Afraid of a Palestinian State."

At the protest movement's people's democracy tables I proposed that we initiate a social media dialogue via Facebook, blogs, e-mail, etc. between Israeli and Arab activists in the Arab Spring & the Israeli Summer.

When it comes to the prospects for peace, cooperation and the need to advance the idea of a nuclear free Middle East, what we need is

INITIATIVE NOW!

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