

Original Paper

The Impact of Social Revolutions on the Arab-Israeli Conflict

Yaron Katz¹

¹ Holon Institute of Technology, Israel

Received: March 22, 2020

Accepted: April 3, 2020

Online Published: April 29, 2020

doi:10.22158/eprd.v1n1p17

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/eprd.v1n1p17>

Abstract

The Arab Spring refers to the protests and revolutions that spread across Middle Eastern and North African Muslim countries in the spring of 2011. It was the first “social media revolution”, which demonstrated the spread of social revolution and the way civil protests and demands for political reforms can swiftly spread globally through social media. Following the social movement in the Arab World, the turmoil in the Middle East continued with the Israeli Social Justice movement of summer 2011, which was also identified as a social media revolution. Same as in the Arab World, in Israel too new media increased the role of the public, who could influence political issues by bypassing the monopoly of the political establishment and traditional media on the political discourse. The research examines the way that the concept of democracy in the region changed in the digital age. The findings show that social media became crucial in shaping the political discourse and determined dramatic changes in the balance of political power in Israel and Arab countries. Through digital technology and online campaigns politics changed as young Arabs and Israeli altered public agenda from the traditional religious and political Arab-Israeli conflict to social and economic issues.

Keywords

democracy, Middle East, Arab World, Israel, social

1. Theoretical Perspectives: Democracy in the Digital Age

In discussing the role of technology in establishing the politics of the Middle East, we need to look first at the concept of democracy. This concept requires two major principles: on the one hand, on the side of the public, participation and cooperation for peaceful resolution of conflicts (Dahl, 1986). On the other hand, on the side of the political establishment, maintaining state and political structures that compromise between different interests in the decision-making process (Morlino, 2008).

In examining the evolution of democratic processes in the Middle East, we need to look at the way that the concept of democracy in the region changed with technology and globalization. According to Schumpeterian (1950), the democratic process is aimed at achieving binding decisions, where the

decision-making capacity of individuals is acquired. But since democracy is linked to free market (Almond & Powell, 1966; Berger, 1992) and independence (Schmitter & Karl, 1993), Islamic tradition is considered as an obstacle for democracy. This is where religion and tradition collided with technology and globalization. Muslims usually tend to consider religion as a primary source of identity that provides an essential principle of collective identification (Huntington, 1996; Huntington, 1997). But the rise of new media complicated traditional political systems since the diversity of content created opportunities for more voices to be heard. Although mainstream journalists do not believe that encouraging participation is their responsibility (Hayes & Lawless, 2016), new media allowed the public to directly engage in political activities and take part in protest movements, thereby introducing higher level of instability into the political process (Badr, 2019).

Following the social and political changes in the Arab World, we need to look at the concept of democracy in the region. The Arab Spring forced Arab states to challenge old policies as democratic regimes replaced the old authoritarian ones (Mustafa & Yousef, 2013). The uprising started as social movement of people who were kept away from outside world information. It was a democratic protest by people that were controlled and influenced by what their governments and the traditional media services (which were under the control of dictators) thought deemed to inform the people (Kenig, 2013). It then continued as a political revolution in countries that did not have a tradition of democracy and turned into a rebellion against regimes that had dominated the region since the end of the colonial era (Frantzman, 2018).

The research examines the social and political changes that occurred in the Arab World since 2011 and the impact they had on the long-standing conflict between Israel and the Arab World. The findings show that social media became crucial in shaping the political discourse in the Middle East and determined dramatic changes in the balance of political power in Israel and Arab countries. In the Arab World, the social revolution that called for social reforms and allowed ordinary citizens and activists to play a powerful role by sharing, commenting, liking and using different forms of digital interaction while actively participating in the production, distribution and reception of news. Similarly, Bronstein (2016) explains that the momentum from the demonstrations brought social and economic issues back to the forefront of Israeli public discourse, rather than security issues. The rapid accumulation of issues fed into the overall demand for social justice and was aimed at the government and its economic and social policies (Simons, 2018). The protest was a tremendous success that brought more citizens into the streets than any demonstration in Israeli history (Bronstein, 2016). The movement received media coverage for almost two months on all news outlets, emphasizing the protest's broad demands and the overall radical indictment against the economic system (Shoshan & Shultziner, 2017).

In order to understand the way geo-political changes in the Middle East were affected by civil movements, it is important to examine the relationship between Israel and the Arab world since 2011. Our goal is to examine if the social revolutions had a political impact on the long-lasting confrontation between Israel and the Arab World. The main issue examined here is the impact of social movements

and social media on the political changes that the Middle East has witnessed since 2011. The research determines that following the transformations that occurred in the region, Israel and the Arab World share today social, political, economic and global interests—rather than the religious and military conflict that divided the Middle East for centuries. The impact of the social uprisings remains significant today, as the new regional context requires researchers to rethink traditional assumptions of global issues.

2. Social Media Revolution

The Arab Spring can be considered as a “social media revolution”. Scholars argue that it accelerated the revolutionary events and highlighted the main cause of the uprisings (Khan, 2012; Salloukh, 2013) by underlying the presence of revolutionary conditions (Khondker, 2011). Despite the impact of traditional media in each country, the exposure of the public to social media accelerated as a wide unmediated public debate that took place on Facebook and Twitter. As determined by this research, social media increased public participation in political processes and encouraged young Arab people to participate in political discussion or activity online and offline (Cohen & Kahne, 2011).

The impact of the demonstrations in the Arab World was intensified by digital media. It was the first-time that social media was used to get a political message out, to rally support and to raise awareness of the people’s cause among the masse. It was also the first time that people around the world could see what was truly going on in the Arab World. Through digital technology and online campaigns Arab politics changed forever. Social media facilitated both the organization and the spread of the protests, which led to widespread enthusiasm about their alleged role for the mobilization of democratic resistance (Lorch & Burkhard, 2017). Public information that was supplied on social networks and Internet websites by ordinary citizens played an important role, successfully bypassing the traditional media and the old political establishment. Being capable of sharing an immense amount of uncensored information contributed to the cause of Arab Spring activists, who could organize offline protests through Facebook and Twitter. Social networks successfully broke the psychological barrier of fear by helping demonstrators to connect and share information and provided activists the opportunity to quickly disseminate information while bypassing government restrictions (Kassim, 2012).

Social media became the new and improved way to present the events in the Middle East, contrary to what governments and traditional media wanted to present. With social media, public agenda changed from the traditional and predominant issue of the conflict with Israel to social and economic issues. These issues included frustration with the economic situation, rising unemployment, widespread poverty and widening social gaps. The political issues included dissatisfaction with governments’ dictatorial style, which were characterized by widespread corruption, intolerance for pluralism and severe violations of basic human rights. Allahoun (2019) explains that the Arab revolution was against social injustices, in which social media were used as a tool of information and organization.

To understand the magnitude of the impact of new media on old regimes, it needs to be explained that the Arab Spring carried the promise that social media and the Internet were going to unleash a new wave of positive social change. While the Arab World was the most Internet-restrictive region in the world and Arabs were kept away from outside world information, the Arab Spring increased activism for a free and open public debate. Empowered by access to social media sites like Twitter, YouTube and Facebook, protesters organized across the Middle East and gathered together to speak out against oppression while inspiring hope for a better and more democratic future. This was the cause of success of the social revolution: activists were able to organize and mobilize to a large extent because authoritarian governments didn't clearly understand how to use social media. Since then however, all parties—the people, social organizations, Arab governments, and global forces—have learned how to work with the magnitude social and political transformations that transpired in the Middle East (Rahman, 2019).

The events in the Arab World had global impact, since for the first time the world was able to see what it was like to live in the Middle East and the people who lived in Arab countries were able to spread information to other citizens in the region. The social revolution became much easier with social media, since information spread fast and easy over the Internet. The world could see people praying for democracy, as clips of protests begging for help went viral. For the first time Arab citizens were exposed to the world and the world was exposed to what had been going on in Arab countries for decades. Though Arab governments tried to block access to websites, they were not successful—as civilians found a way to get online (Mourtada & Salem, 2012). Social media became the new way to revolt, as pictures and videos of protests showing women and men holding signs with “hashtags” spread from one country to another in the Middle East and around the world. From videos showing violent protests, to pictures of the rebellion, to clips of citizens crying for help and explaining the situation, the Arab Spring presented the fast-changing events in a way that caught the world's attention. It created geo-strategic interactions that exerted pressure on various political communities and uncertainty over the policy intentions of new leadership elites and the nature of the unfolding regional issues in the Middle East.

Following the social movement in the Arab World, the turmoil in the Middle East continued with the Israeli Social Justice movement in the summer of 2011, which was also identified as a social media revolution (Rabinovich & Brum, 2017). The research claims that the public sphere was inspired by the Arab Spring, since although the inequality issue is often debated in Israel, it was only after protests in other countries had started, that the Israeli public went to the streets (Sultan, 2018). What began as a Facebook-driven rebellion against the rising cost of living, turned into tent encampments protesting soaring real estate costs and became a full-scale social movement (Steinberg, 2011). Hundreds of thousands took to the streets calling for “social justice”, led and organized by social media—bypassing the traditional media and turning directly and without filters to the government (Schejter & Tirosh, 2015). The protests were drawn from social and political sectors closely associated with the middle

class, since Israel is one of the most unequal economies, with high inequality and socio-economic differences among the different groups of the population (Dattel & Maor, 2015).

The large demonstration followed 50 days of protests that raised hopes for a new social movement that would transform Israeli domestic politics (Sherwood, 2011). The movement had the support of about 90% of the population, according to opinion polls, in Israel's biggest ever demonstration to demand social justice, a lower cost of living and a clear government response to the concerns of an increasingly squeezed middle class (Bronstein, 2016). The demonstration became the issue that was mostly discussed on Facebook and was transmitted live on all national TV channels, to what became a social celebration with the participation of celebrities and leading singers and with wide public support. The success of the social movement was amazing: with the initiative of single protesters, a total of about 5% of the Israeli population from all segments of society actively participated in the large demonstrations.

3. New Politics of the Middle East

The revolution in Israel was different from the uprisings in the Arab World in that the government did not restrict social media and demonstrators used Facebook as the main tool to promote the Social Justice movement and encourage the general public to join the protest. But the conclusion of the research is that what is like the Arab Spring is the important and critical role of social media and the change of political atmosphere in favor of new politics. Same as in the Arab world, new media increased the role of the public, who could influence political issues by bypassing the monopoly of the political establishment and traditional media on the political discourse (Simons, 2018). As the research shows, the demonstrations in the Arab World and in Israel remained local, despite their global influence, and focused on social issues and political changes rather than the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Both social revolutions were based on domestic dissatisfaction with economic conditions and symbolized a common agenda that was influenced by region-wide anti-government sentiment.

The social media revolution in Israel came to prominence by driving the social protests and marked the start of "new politics", with a new era of political negotiation between the government and the people. The protests expended with Facebook as the main instrument for demonstrators to gain momentum and relate to other issues than the conflict with the Arab World, such as the social order and power structure (Steinberg, 2011). Perhaps the biggest geo-political achievements of the new politics that dominates in Israel today is that social media connect Israelis and Arabs and the Israeli government increasingly use social media as a diplomatic tool. After generations in which political propaganda in Israel and worldwide was traditionally communicated, it was technology and globalization that changed the way public diplomacy is conducted. Digital media changed the way Israel's interests are presented around the world. It also changed the nature of the Arab-Israeli conflict: whereas in the past conflicts between nations had been mainly military, today nations compete in the digital environment on control over and public opinion. Digital diplomacy plays an indispensable role in promoting Israel's foreign policy goals,

since by using digital media effectively, Israel can bypass the global mainstream press to get its message across over and above old media and political forces that used to dominate in the Arab World (Rotem, 2016).

The Arab Spring had serious geopolitical ramifications for Israel and was fruitful for Israel regionally and internationally (Eligür, 2014). Following the social uprisings, Israel adopted a foreign policy stance of entrenchment and challenged the political status quo in the Middle East (Aran & Fleischmann, 2018). The 2011 uprising tremendously changed the political establishment in the Arab World and had long-term implications on Israel-with its complex geo-strategic position being surrounded since its establishment by hostile Arab neighbors. Like the rest of the world, Israel was watching to see if the Arab Spring would lead to new forms of open and democratic governance in the region (Kurtzer-Ellenbogen, 2011) and indeed the new politics of the Middle East brought Israel and moderate Gulf States politically and militarily closer in their common opposition to Iranian hegemonic designs on the region (Frantzman, 2018).

There is no doubt that the Arab Spring changed the political surrounding in the Middle East (Ghannam, 2016). The political uprising in the region illustrates the impact of the Arab Spring on the Arab-Israeli conflict (Yaalon & Friedman, 2018). The new regional context requires a rethinking, since the Arab Spring held serious geopolitical ramifications for Israel. The popular revolts raised hopes for a more democratic Middle East (The National, 2011). But despite similarity between the protests in the Arab world and in Israel, the demonstrations did not reinforce the need for Israelis and Palestinians to return to peace talks. Due to the socio-economic discontent, most Israelis did not see the protests as equivalent to the Arab Spring, and Israel's unrest was never dubbed a "spring", but rather a social justice movement (Sultan, 2018). The Israel Defense Forces' intelligence branch discussed the issue and decided that the term "Arab spring" was unsuitable and decided to use the term "upheaval" as the official term describing the events. Many other people in Israel began using the terms "Arab winter" to challenge the original term and express a negative reading of the events (Lehrs, 2017).

The geo-political changes in the Arab World allowed Israel to use its technological superiority for digital diplomacy, as the use of the Internet and new information communication technologies helps to achieve diplomatic objectives. Israeli diplomacy is focusing on social media rather than official channels. It is highly active in the digital arena on various platforms, including Internet websites; Twitter feeds; Facebook pages; and profiles on Instagram, YouTube and other social media sites. Cave (2015) explains that when used properly, digital diplomacy is a persuasive and timely supplement to traditional diplomacy that can help a country advance its foreign policy goals, extend international reach, and influence people who will never set foot in any of the world's embassies. Thus, digital technologies have become an increasingly important tool to increase pro-Israel sentiments with massive increase in funding for it.

The change of public agenda and the internal and global political changes that identifies the Middle East created tremendous changes in the new politics of the region. With common regional interests, Israel's relations with Gulf states have shifted the focus from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to dealing with the Iranian threat (Bahr, 2018). Although Israel and Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Oman and Bahrain have not established official diplomatic relations, they perceive Iran to be their greatest enemy. This common fear is pushing these nations together, opening channels of diplomatic, intelligence and business cooperation (Kotler, 2019). Relations between Israel and other moderate Arab countries, including Jordan and Egypt—the two countries that established official relations with Israel—changed the traditional Israeli-Palestinian narrative of the conflict, which dominated the region since the establishment of Israel (Hilalah, 2019; Cohen, 2019).

4. Analysis and Conclusion

The research examines the new political environment that developed in the Middle East following the Arab Spring. It is argued that the political changes that occurred since 2011 were tremendous and had regional and global influence, with successive impact on the Israeli-Arab conflict. The two main conclusions of the research are that the new media environment encouraged social movements across the Middle East with the result that the interests of the people and governments have been well embedded in the new politics of the region.

Firstly, the paper examined how democracy in the digital age benefited the people and was implemented through social media.

The findings show that the impact of the social revolutions was significant since Arab countries were well-educated and politically active young population but with few employment opportunities (Riise, 2019). Thus, the emergence of a new generation of websites and social networks allowed them to find new areas of communication (Iribarren, 2019). The result is that social media played a central role in shaping political debates during the Arab Spring and since then (Howard, Duffy, Freelon, Hussain, Mari, & Maziad, 2019). This has accelerated since 2011, since today people in the Middle East are more frequent users of social media, according to a study by the Pew Research Center (2017).

The new politics of the Middle East is identified by the supremacy of social networks, which provide tools for citizens to vent their political frustrations and allows the people the means to participate in the political process (Howard, 2018). The significant political changes in the Arab World determined the collapse of undemocratic regimes which ruled Arab countries for centuries. The social media revolution proved that in the new political environment, the voice of the people is heard through the Internet and the traditional ruling forces—governments and the media—cannot ignore the impact of the new political powers—the people and social media—on the Arab World.

The political environment in the Arab World changed forever following the social revolutions, which showed how in the era of digital technology the power of the people has become transparent. The social movements demonstrated that new technology, including Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, is closing the gap between politics, politicians and citizens, offering inexpensive opportunities to spread messages and create public awareness. The Middle East witnessed a tremendous growth in digital communication technologies in a way that made it possible for political activists to get their message across through social media and change the ways in which governments interact with societies in the region. The new political environment started as a social revolution in demand for social, political and economic changes, led by the people and social organizations, and developed to a global process of geo-political changes led by Arab governments and global forces. Social media determined dramatic changes in the relationship and interests of Israel and Arab countries and became crucial in shaping the political discourse in the Middle East.

Secondly, the paper examined the new politics of the Middle East and the change of public agenda from the Arab-Israeli conflict to social and economic concerns.

The findings show that the politics of the region changed as non-democracies witnessed how the rapid growth of social media became a vehicle for civic activism (Geranmayeh, 2018). Today the digital landscape provides enormous opportunities for governments to engage with new policies involving digital technologies (Garrett, 2019). The use of the Internet and social media in the Middle East is significantly higher than a decade ago (Massimiliano, Donatella, & Sanders, 2018) and people in the Arab World can influence global political issues by bypassing the monopoly of the political establishment and traditional media on the political discourse (Simons, 2018).

The social and political changes influenced regional and global ambitions of governments and the geo-political changes resulted in new alliances that changed the history of the region. (Franzman, 2018). The impact of the political changes in the Arab World continued beyond the civil revolutions, as the Arab Spring resulted in long-term global political changes. It led to new forms of open and democratic governance in the region and determined tremendous geo-political changes with growing global impact. Following the social and political changes in the Arab World, the nature of global politics changed with the declining importance of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the growing economic and security cooperation between Israel and leading Arab countries. The new relationship was helped along by the nuclear agreement in 2015 that was aggressively promoted by the Obama administration (Podeh, 2018). The agreement was cancelled by the Trump administration and the Israeli-Arab Alliance against Iran is now led by the United States. It includes the two countries with peace treaty with Israel—Egypt and Jordan, and the Gulf states of Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Oman. As the research concludes, the new politics of the Middle East means that today there is not an Israeli-Arab conflict but only an Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The result is that Israel and moderate Arab countries share common interests, mainly the struggle against radical Islam and advancement of the regional economy.

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