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The Rising Power and Influence of Civil Society: Discourse from the Middle East Social Networks

Udi Dekel and Orit Perlov

The changes in the Arab world primarily reflect processes underway in Arab civil society, resulting from the rise in power of a younger and more educated middle class population that is mainly secular and has access to new communication technologies. As the processes unfold, it is difficult to predict where they will lead in the long term – to chaos, or to the rise of a new social order and state frameworks, along with the emergence of new elites. Nevertheless, it seems that the changes have passed the point of no return, and a return to previous social structures is unlikely.

The principal elements of the social change, as reflected in the social media in the Middle East, include:

The Rising Power of Civil Society: While the role of religion and the position of the state (nationalism) have weakened, civil society is becoming empowered and its influence is growing stronger. Citizens have begun to slowly reshape their societies and leaders according to their own needs and values, focusing on the state's obligations to its citizenry, rather than the citizens' obligations toward the state or their unqualified obedience to the government. Civilian society has become equipped with new communication tools, and the fear of expressing opinions, new ideas, and individual ambitions has disappeared.

The Ecosystem and Viral Spread of Ideas: Liberal ideas and the drive to create opportunities for self-fulfillment are spreading rapidly, and burying ideas is no longer a possibility – as in an ecosystem, when a change in currents, flood, or imbalance in one area prompts an unintended cross-border chain reaction. Social networks are a platform for the rapid spread of ideas. Moreover, the prevalent government approach of dealing tactically with one immediate problem, individually and "surgically," is no longer effective, and a broad systemic approach is needed.

The Disappearance of the Traditional Paradigm and the Decadence of the Elite: The state institutions are eroding because they are tainted by corruption and inefficiency, and

do not meet the needs of the public. The political, social, economic, media, intellectual, and military elites are losing their relevance, influence, control over information and events. However, the old elites find it difficult to adjust to the changes and the pace of developments, i.e., break out of their comfort zone and respond creatively to the new emerging situation. The main motive guiding the leaders is how to defuse tension, right here right now, with no vision and systematic, comprehensive planning for the long term, and no deep understanding of the potential consequences. The key tool at the disposal of the weakening elites is control of the bureaucratic systems, through which they attempting to block the formation of alternative systems.

The End of the "One Size Fits All" Era: Inflexible structures are losing their appeal and relevance, and individuals tailor their own outfits to suit their needs. Apart from the family, community, and language, shared values constitute the new ideology, particularly freedom, civil rights, social justice, and opportunities for self-fulfillment. Pressure groups are established and dissolved over common interests.

Shifting focuses from Outside to Inside: The focus of the government and the public is shifting inward. Foreign policy is losing its appeal, and the focus is on local and domestic issues, including internal security, law and order, the transition from centralization to decentralization, and privatization of power in the economy and the media.

The Weak State – Loss of Monopoly over Power and Effective Governance: The state is no longer fully capable of providing for the needs of the public, they are losing the ability to impose law and order, and are deteriorating into weaker systems akin to "mirage states." Where the state or the socio-economic monopolies do not provide for the needs of civil society, be it housing, personal security, transportation, the cost of living, gender equality, health services, or other issues, they often become nonfunctional even before alternative frameworks have been constructed. At the same time, local militias increasingly fill the vacuum created by the weakness and impotence of the police and the domestic security services. In addition, weapons, including high quality arms, are freely available. Social networks allow for discourse, and facilitate the spread of ideas and information and collective action between actors with a mutual interest, which are directed mainly against dysfunctional governmental frameworks. This reinforces polarization trends, inefficient governance, and chaos.

The National State Framework is Challenged: The framework of the national state is undermined, with a preference for the limited framework – sectarian, tribal, communal, or familial – over the state. In countries that do not have a homogeneous population, when the state's ability to govern is eroded, there is the potential for disintegration into a federalist system and autonomous enclaves (geographic, sectarian, cultural, and functional). In Syria, Libya, Iraq, and even Sinai, there are those, usually radical militias,

who are taking over the enclaves and imposing their authority and influence by using weapons and instilling an atmosphere of terror.

The Strategic Challenge for Israel

Trends that highlight the lack of a clear direction, the weakening of state actors, and the emergence of chaos and lawlessness in some countries point to an increase in the power of non-state actors and destructive, armed radical Islamic groups that do not have responsibility for an area and civilians and work against the structure of the old order, but also prevent a new order structure from emerging. In other words, despite the dissolution of the old paradigms and structures, neither the elites nor the driving force behind the change are prepared to shape an alternative vision and a working plan for an accountable, stable, and effective state actor that can cope successfully with public needs and create a stable reality.

The main challenge for Israel thus stems from the gap created by the dispersal of power from states to smaller, non-state actors and organizations, disintegration of the old frameworks, erosion of effective governance, and weakened principles that have traditionally maintained stability and the rules of the game.

In the face of the enormous changes in the Middle East, Israel has adopted a policy of non-intervention and remained on the sidelines, unless it senses an immediate and tangible threat. This approach in part results from the lack of leverage to influence the development of regional trends. This policy directs Israel to avoid being dragged into conflicts with rogue actors with the potential for escalation, and at the same time, that it contain the danger that negative events and their side effects will spill over into Israel. For this, it is necessary to strengthen the defense mechanism, establish buffer zones, and thwart direct security threats while controlling escalation. Nevertheless, to be effective, the reactive defensive policy can no longer stand alone, and therefore it is necessary to formulate new policy initiatives and the necessary capabilities to pursue them.

Is Israel really a villa in the jungle? Trends underway in Israeli society share characteristics with processes at work elsewhere in the Middle East, principally the rising power of civil society and its growing influence in formulating national security policy; erosion of effective bureaucratic systems and thus, a process of privatization of services; the emergence of a new elite managing and controlling the key tools of communication (Facebook, blogs, and Twitter); loosened internal glue; and greater social inequalities. External threats unite people less and do not divert attention outward. In Israel as elsewhere in the region, there is more focus on domestic issues, personal security, rights, welfare, and justice, and less attention to security and external threats.

Nonetheless, Israel has not developed an alternative to its instinctive isolation, which is driven by an emphasis on threat perception, prevention, and defense, and is less aimed at

seeking opportunities in the new environment. There is a need to take a proactive approach and integrate new tools to meet the regional trends described here. Israel will not be able to keep itself isolated and removed from these trends, and hence the reason to shape a new dialogue and build new platforms to engage with civil societies and constructive actors that do not represent the old order. Israel should share its strengths and capabilities, such as in technology, water, and gas, with others in the region. It must signal that it is connected to the processes and trends in the region. Internet tools and multi-disciplinary methods should be developed as part of a holistic, integrative approach. It is important to identify the current key players, and who will probably be leading actors in shaping the future Middle East.

