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As government leaders, and disastrous financial institution bosses struggle to keep their footing on an increasingly steep precipice, little can offset a growing sense of foreboding and a palpable fear that another Great Depression could set the world irrevocably sliding towards cataclysm.

At the same time the popular movements, which have risen to challenge the political, economic and social injustice not only in the Middle East, are confronting the reality that systems of power are not as easily overturned as individual figureheads.

The tinderbox countries where social inequity is triggering significant social action are only partly reflected in the statistics of Gini coefficients highlighting rising disparities between the rich and poor. It should come as no surprise to

find that countries like Mexico, the USA, Israel, the UK and Italy top the OECD's Gini inequality charts.

Yet the real surprise was not just that Arab intellectuals and middle classes took to the streets, but that Israel's middle class turned out in their hundreds of thousands - not quite emulating the Arab Spring, but equally vocal in their condemnation of the system and their leadership.

Sliding living standards turn out to be only one of a list of grievances, with a deeper fault line now exposed between largely European secular Jews opposing often American ultra-Orthodox haredim seeking to impose extreme fundamentalist restrictions across the board.

Against this complex backdrop, it was ironic that Israel - attached to some UN European regional bodies for political expediency - was able to wrong foot the UN in a side show recently. Many governments despatched ministerial delegations to participate in what turned from an innocuous meeting into a highly controversial conference in Jerusalem. Ostensibly to discuss a new European policy for health, high on the meeting's agenda was the issue of the social inequity with the chair of the World Health Organization's Commission on Social Determinants of Health, Sir Michael Marmot, as the star speaker. Yet the issue of social health inequalities affecting millions of Palestinians on the conference doorstep was not up for discussion.

Despite a statement by an embarrassed WHO headquarters insisting that it "will align itself with the UN position and practice of not holding meetings in Jerusalem", the conference only switched from Jerusalem to Tel Aviv on November 29 - the International Day of Solidarity with Palestine observed at the UN headquarters both in New York and Geneva recalling the date in 1947 when the UN agreed Resolution 181 - the partition plan for Palestine.

Most Israelis have a permanent blind spot when it comes to the subsequent injustice and discrimination affecting Palestinians on either sides of Israel's apartheid 'segregation' wall and the millions still languishing in refugee camps in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria as well as the West Bank and Gaza.

If Israelis do have concerns, they are perhaps more to do with the social and economic burden of the country's occupation of Palestine, increasingly coupled with the wayward belligerence of their right-wing leadership apparently willing to risk triggering a global cataclysm via an outright attack on Iran.

We need more than self-interested social uprisings to drag not merely Israel but the rest of the world back from the brink. The fear, as the US Republican presidential candidate amply demonstrated, is that blind prejudice rather than blind justice will prevail. There are few choices on offer. At best we face a continuation of the present-day status quo with increasingly militarised and oppressive regimes hiding behind the mask of democracy, whilst acquiring increasing power to control and suppress dissent. At worst we will be hurled into the abyss of more wars that serve only the interests of corporate profiteers.

Back in 1947 in the aftermath of the Second World War, one book caused a storm in the USA. Laura Z Hobson's ***Gentleman's Agreement*** told the story of a journalist exposing the depth of anti-semitism embedded in American society. A film version hastily made by the director Elia Kazan (later widely held in contempt for his denunciation of colleagues at McCarthy blacklisting hearings) ended with some prophetic words from a dying mother: "The world is stirring in very strange ways. Maybe this is the century for it. Maybe that's why it's so troubled..."

Wouldn't it be wonderful if it turned out to be everybody's century when people all over the world - free people - found a way to live together?"

Maybe this is the century?

Neville Rigby

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