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# To build a Jewish-Arab leftwing alternative

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The year 2012 is upon us, and we see a wave of historic developments in the Middle East and around the world. In October 2011, Europe suffered an economic crisis which brought far-reaching political changes in Greece, Italy and Spain. The effort to escape bankruptcy brought down the governments in all three states. Meanwhile in Tunisia and Egypt democratic elections took place which led to a sweeping victory for the Muslim Brotherhood. Influenced by the Arab uprisings, the Syrian people continue their intifada for freedom, paying a heavy price in blood.

### **The Arab Spring in Islamic clothing**

The elections in Egypt were the greatest and most significant achievement of the January 25 uprising and the Arab Spring. The elections decided the struggle between the revolutionaries and the army over the character of the future regime and the role of the military. Without the elections, Egypt could easily have succumbed to a military coup due to the development of anarchy and the inability of political forces to agree among themselves and fill the vacuum left by the old regime.

The high turnout (more than 60%) reflected the Egyptian people's hunger for democracy and their desire to participate in shaping their own fate. Though the Muslim Brotherhood victory was expected (they received some 40% of votes), the rise of the Salafi party Al-Nour with 20% of votes was a big surprise. This party has not yet played any significant part on the political stage. Some choose to see the empty half of the glass – the rise of Islam – and not the other half, which heralds the start of a new chapter in Egypt. The thirst for democracy and the burial of the dictatorship make up the spirit which will guide Egyptian political life. This is the clear message to the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafis: power has been granted to them temporarily, and they can continue to hold it only by fulfilling their promises to the voters.

The Muslim Brotherhood understands the complex situation it is in. Today it faces three demanding forces: the people who elected it and who hope to see improvement to their lives; the young, secular revolutionaries who led the uprising; and the army, which will not willingly relinquish the privileges it enjoys (it holds 25% of the economy) or its influence on the state. A policy of withdrawal from the world, or religious coercion and the adoption of Sharia law instead of the principles of civil democracy, will isolate the Islamic forces and lead to an economic embargo which will make it impossible to solve the problems facing the Egyptian nation.

The Muslim Brotherhood wants to integrate into the global capitalist economy by encouraging foreign investment to power the Egyptian economy, and thus douse the social unrest spreading throughout the country. They know they do not have much time, and that the people expect to see immediate tangible improvement. The Brotherhood faces an enormous wave of strikes in all economic sectors. The central demand of these future strikes will be wage increases. But the Brotherhood must also manage the private sector, which controls important branches of the economy. Private factories, unwilling to raise wages, are even bringing in migrant labor from India and other states. The Brotherhood will also have to cleanse the state of corruption and bring to justice those responsible for repression, torture and murder. These are enormous tasks, and it will be difficult to carry them out.

The religious discourse characteristic of the Islamic movement and its slogan “Islam is the solution” are in direct contradiction with the movement’s need to govern the state. Openness towards the capitalist market requires dialogue with the US, which demands that Egypt uphold the Camp David agreements. The Egyptian army, which receives some \$1.5 billion each year from America, is also subject to American strategic interests in the region, especially concerning Iran. Therefore the Muslim Brotherhood’s decision-making freedom is limited, despite fiery speeches about the “Jewish and American infidels.”

The Left in Egypt took part in the elections as part of a left-wing coalition called the Revolution Continues Alliance (RCA). Although it received some 3% of the votes in the first round, its leaders enjoy public credibility. The Alliance introduces the discourse of socialism as an alternative to the Brotherhood’s capitalism. Now it must work on presenting an economic program as an alternative to free-market and privatization policies. The workers’ strikes on one hand and the revolutionary shabab’s general demand for a civilian, democratic constitution on the other form the main axis for the Left’s activities. The Left’s task is to organize the workers, support their struggles in the trade union arena, and represent them in parliament. It must also protect democratic rights to freedom of expression and association, women’s rights, and minority rights.

### **The Arab Spring never came to Palestine**

As the Arab revolution gathered steam at the beginning of last year, Palestinians began calling on their leadership to put an end to the divisions in the Palestinian arena. Despite the agreement reached in May between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority (PA) in Cairo, and despite the fact that the PLO held an expanded session with Hamas in December, the agreement is not being implemented in practice. It included the agreement to establish a temporary government, the release of prisoners from Palestinian jails, and preparations for elections in the middle of the year. But no progress has been made; the internal schisms remain, and the two sides continue to assail each other and try to enforce their control – Fatah in the West Bank and Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

The struggle between them is not only over the regime, but also over the political program of the Palestinian nation. The Fatah movement sees links with the US as the strategic basis for its policies and the key to a Palestinian state; it holds to cooperation with Israel via negotiations. Hamas rejects negotiations with or recognition of Israel, and calls for a popular intifada as an alternative to armed struggle.

The truth is, the “reconciliation” between Fatah and Hamas stems from the failure of both sides. The Arab Spring shuffled the pack. With the fall of Mubarak, Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) lost his main ally. Hamas too lost its ally, with the uprising in Syria. Thus each of the two sides has lost its political axis and program. We have noted many times that the path chosen by Fatah – futile negotiations with Israel – would not lead to any achievement, but merely provides Israel with a fig leaf for continued settlement in the occupied territories. On the other hand, Hamas, which offered suicide bombing as an alternative to a realistic political program, also led to complete failure, isolation, destruction and poverty. Thus the agreement is a refuge for both sides, which had reached a political dead end and lost credibility in the eyes of the people.

Despite the PA’s commitment to the Oslo Accords and to all American and European guidelines and dictates, it failed to achieve any political breakthrough. A reverberating slap in the face came when Israel’s opposition to the Palestinian bid for UN recognition received support from the US, which claimed it was against “unilateral steps.” Today, despite all the PA’s declarations that it will not negotiate with Israel unless settlement construction is halted, the PA leadership has once again begun a new round of talks in Amman, in response to American requests. The PA claimed, as many times before, that it wanted to prove that the obstacle to negotiations was PM Binyamin Netanyahu.

Hamas too understands that the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt will not continue its oppositional policies which

supported armed struggle, and that as soon as it gets into government it will be compelled to compromise and draw nearer to the US, with all that this entails.

But despite all efforts at reconciliation, and despite the adoption of nonviolent resistance, neither movement has the vision, the program or the impetus to start a popular, civilian intifada, one which would unite the youth, the workers and the activists, as well as the middle classes, toward overcoming the occupation and forming a new Palestinian society - a society that rejects the religious extremism of Hamas and the corruption of Fatah. It seems that the fate of the Palestinian nation, like that of the other Arab nations, depends on the rise of youth who will build a revolutionary alternative, different from the traditional and religious parties who dominated regional politics in the past and led their peoples to a dead end. Today the Palestinian people requires a third option – revolutionary, democratic and civilian, able to deal with the occupation and cleanse society from the grime remaining from Fatah and Hamas rule.

### **Israel's social protest movement: hostage to the Zionist consensus**

The Achilles heel of Israel's social protest movement was, and remains, its refusal to present an alternative political stand against the right wing. The immediate expression of this was the freedom Netanyahu enjoyed in continuing to reject peace, the continued discrimination against Israel's Arab citizens, and the continued economic policies which favor capital above labor. The most prominent aspect of the movement's discourse was its attempt to retain a Zionist consensus and not to lose the Right.

Netanyahu himself deflected the flames. He succeeded in dividing the movement by appointing the Trajtenberg Committee. Meanwhile, Sheli Yachimovich reaped the benefits of the protest. She was elected to head the Labor Party, but her program is devoid of any reference to the issue of peace. She even outdid herself when she announced her intention of getting settlers and the liberal religious public to join her party. The result was media celebrity Yair Lapid's declaration that he would establish a new party, also in the spirit of the social protest – but Lapid also announced that he would confront the religious public which does not serve in the army.

These political developments, especially the refusal of all sides – the social protest leaders, the Labor Party, and Yair Lapid – to face fundamental issues such as war and peace, the occupation, and discrimination against Arab citizens, merely increased the government's confidence that it has no real opposition. This was reflected in a wave of racist laws, strongly opposed by a loud but very small minority.

The decline of democracy and the Supreme Court's power came to a symbolic peak with the High Court decision, passed by a narrow majority, to allow the Citizenship Law and reject the petition submitted by Adalah (the Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel) and the Association for Civil Rights in Israel. This law, which effectively denies Israeli citizenship for residents of the occupied territories married to Israeli citizens, is exclusively directed at Israel's Arab citizens. Israel thus retreats from the principle of equality before the law. This precedent merely supports Arab citizens' claims that the state discriminates against them in every one of its branches of government: the legislative, the executive and the judicial.

The latest division in the Labor Party, after Defense Minister Ehud Barak left and established the Independence Party in order to remain in the government coalition; the split taking shape in Kadima between the two contestants for leadership, Tzipi Livni and Shaul Mofaz; and the decline of Meretz's popularity – all these developments indicate a large political vacuum and the lack of a real opposition to the right-wing and racist line that is currently dominant in Israel.

The truth must be voiced: the government of Israel, with its rejection of peace, enjoys a broad Zionist consensus. It

has no real opposition, and Netanyahu remains the most popular candidate in the coming elections.

Feeling this solid support, Netanyahu is working to create an atmosphere which will ease his reelection, and like the leader of any fascist movement, he appeases the middle classes while rejecting peace and continuing the settlement of the occupied territories. However, his efforts to placate the middle classes are superficial. He decides to implement an ancient law which was never put into practice regarding free schooling for children aged three years and up, yet the funding for this move comes not from the defense budget but from across-the-board cuts to all ministry budgets. He also decides to grant tax relief to the middle classes, and he may yet decide to do something to reduce housing costs.

Thus the problems of the working class, especially those working in poverty, remain unsolved, with no union representation, rock-bottom wages which don't meet rising costs of living, and declining education, health and social services.

These mounting needs. In addition to the conditions suffered by the Palestinians, especially those in the occupied territories, will cause an explosion sooner or later. The Arab Spring and Arab public opinion are creating increased hostility to the occupation, settlement and oppression. There is no way of avoiding the fact that eventually the Palestinian people will demand what all Arab peoples are demanding – freedom, democracy and social justice.

### **The Da'am Workers Party takes the initiative**

Despite the demise of the social protest movement, the fundamental problems that led to its growth have not disappeared or been solved. On the contrary, the lack of a strong political opposition enables the government to continue its economic policies which harm the working class and middle class in particular.

Da'am - the Workers' Party – supported the social protest and took part in most of its activities, while calling for political clarity on one hand and support for workers' organizations on the other. The positive atmosphere and willingness to listen which characterized the protest enabled us to cooperate with many organizations as well as universities and other academic institutes in order to explain our position to thousands of young people.

The protest did not create a new framework capable of cutting the connections to the Zionist consensus. Neither did it adopt the Arab Spring, in particular its secular and democratic aspects, perceiving within it a potential for a new socialist discourse in the Middle East. If such a framework had formed, Da'am would have joined it, even as a future electoral alternative. Our contribution to such a framework would have been to encourage a connection with the new discourse in the Arab world, and to work toward ending the occupation, as a basic condition for building a democratic society which respects human rights and ensures social justice. But since this process did not take shape, we will continue to forge local alliances for joint campaigns or activities, and we will put ourselves forward in the coming elections independently.

As a Jewish-Arab party, we work in every possible sphere to break the wall between Arabs and Jews. Among Arab youth, especially in the universities, joint Arab-Jewish activities are seen in a negative light. This attitude has developed out of the despair felt by these young people, who don't see any willingness or desire among Jews to work against racism or the occupation. Even if this attitude is understandable, it is fundamentally flawed, because it fails to see that even in Jewish society there are organizations and forces which seek change. Instead of working with these groups, the Arab youth closes itself off and thus contributes to perpetuating the situation.

The problems besetting Arab society result directly from the lack of a worthy leadership. The Arab intellectuals leading Arab society today take little interest in their people. The local Arab authorities are elected according to family

ties, and corruption abounds. The Islamic faction is tolerant of male violence and the suppression of women; it sees progress, science and openness to the world as heresy. We assert that the struggle against state discrimination starts with internal change to strengthen the society. This is exactly the insight that forms the basis of the Arab Spring. Enough with blaming the entire world for our sorrows! We must start by understanding what is not in order with us, and act to change this.

Da'am works to nurture a new discourse, open and critical towards both the Arab and the Jewish side. Thus, for example, we are continuing, for the third year, a program of meetings between Arab and Jewish high school students. This program is based on the understanding that both societies have shortcomings but that we are all suffering under Israel's economic regime. If each group learns to act against the flaws in its own society, the desire for social change can become a platform uniting Arab and Jewish youth.

On the same basis, Da'am works to organize Jewish and Arab workers into a common trade union platform.

The dedication of our activists, as well as our political clarity, together with our daily work on the ground, attract the interest of new activists who join the party. Economic developments around the world, the changes in the Middle East, the new understanding in Israel that privatization and the rule of capital are impoverishing society – all these are enabling new ideas to gain a footing, ideas whose task is to organize society and humankind upon the basis of justice, equality and welfare for all.

*Post-scriptum :*

*Translated by Yonatan Preminger*

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