

Anti-Semitism is why the Arab Spring failed

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About two years ago, when the so-called pro-democracy movement, better known as the “Arab Spring,” began in the region, many commentators hailed it as “a great step forward,” “a turning point in the contemporary Arab world history”, and a “fourth wave of democratization.” I remember those days very well because my colleagues at Iran’s foreign ministry were very excited. Like most Iranians, they supported the toppling of the old tyrants in the Arab world. Many of my colleagues were saying – in private of course – that Iran would be next in the domino effect, and the whole region would take great strides towards democracy.

I was not as optimistic. I argued that, unlike Iran’s opposition Green Movement – which was an uprising backed by predominantly secular, middle class and pro-western layers of society – the major opposition forces in the Arab streets were made up of Islamists and even salafists from poor neighborhoods, not real forces for change for the good. I contended that circumstances were not ripe for a positive transformation and that quick and bloody change would only exacerbate the situation by bringing anti-West extremist elements to power.

My skepticism gained further momentum by hearing and reading news headlines such as: “With more than 2000 years of Jewish heritage, Egypt shuts down its last synagogue,” or “Attacks on Coptic places of worship continue,” and “Egyptian high profile officials call Jews ‘apes,’” and “David Gerbi, the Libyan-Italian Jew who returned to his homeland, receives death threats,” and “The last synagogue in Iraq is closed, signaling the end of a 2,700-year Jewish presence there.”

These and other similar examples were indications that not only were the remaining small Christian and particularly Jewish communities becoming extinct in the Muslim world, but the already low tolerance towards the “other,” was shrinking. This is the main reason I continue to believe that Arab uprisings are unlikely to bring any change for the better.

“Israel is to blame” policy

With the start of the Arab Spring revolts, both the rulers and the opposition tried to portray the issues through a ridiculous but strangely rife theory that Jews were behind all the events and were busy conspiring against Muslims and Arabs. By forging competing anti-Semitic propaganda and producing conspiracies for the purpose of pointing a finger at Israel and Jews, each side tried to demonize the other side by associating it with Israel. In Libya, rebels claimed that the mother of Muammar Gaddafi was Jewish as a way of defaming the anti-Semitic dictator; Iranian officials did not hesitate to call the Syrian uprising, in its early phase, a conspiracy masterminded by Zionists; and Bashar al-Assad repeated the same accusations. And this list goes on.

Narrow-mindedness kept the uprisings’ leadership and supporters from harnessing all existing potential. Instead of dealing with root causes of the problems, they had a ‘one size fits all’ diagnosis with a single prescription for all ills: just point a finger at Israel and the Jews.”

In my view, one reason why the Arab Spring succeeded in toppling old dictatorships but didn’t succeed in replacing them with genuine democracy was that narrow-mindedness kept the uprisings’ leadership and supporters from harnessing all existing potential. Instead of dealing with root causes of the problems, they preferred to choose a simplistic answer and solution for all unresolved issues. They had a “one size fits all” diagnosis with a single prescription for all ills: whenever there is a mess, a dilemma or a complicated situation, just point a finger at Israel and the Jews.

This particular strategy has been employed extensively in Iran’s domestic politics since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, both as a scapegoat for internal problems and as leverage against political rivals. For example, after President Ahmadinejad defied Supreme Leader Khamenei, ultra-conservative groups labeled him a secret Jew. His mentor, Rahim Mashai and Rahim’s companions are labeled ‘Devious Current’ by Khamenei’s supporters. This is partly because, despite disavowing his words and lambasting Israel’s policy, Rahim Mashai once opined that the two nations of Iran and Israel are friends. Within this context, Jews equal evil and are considered the source of all wrongdoing, misery and misconduct.

My personal experience

I used to write in Persian but when I decided to write in English a couple of months ago, I chose to contribute to Israeli papers. To my surprise, my close friends became infuriated and told me that “writing in Jewish media is a red line and you are putting your credit and your future at stake by getting your pieces published there.” I told them I’d continue to contribute, even though I might anger my old friends and colleagues.

Unfortunately, our society is so biased and unfair when it comes to Israel and its policies that even many pro-reform, pro-democracy groups in and outside Iran deliberately distance themselves from anything that can tie them to Jews. Writing and talking about B’nei Yisrael and their past sufferings is still a taboo and no one wants to hear prejudice-free information about Jews and their tragic history, such as the forced 20th century exodus, en masse expulsion and massacre in the Middle East.

I strongly believe that if we are going to establish a healthy, tolerant society that respects differences, and pursues a pluralistic democracy, we have to accept that Jews and the Jewish community have been part and parcel of our own communities. This affirmation of coexistence represents the essence of today’s civilization. An ‘Arab Spring’ without religious tolerance that rests on strong anti-Semitic attitudes cannot bring about genuine democracy and freedom. In a peaceful and democratic Middle East, everyone can prosper and flourish.

As the most successful democracy, possessing a strong and diversified economy and a dynamic multiparty political system in a tyranny-affected region, Israel can be a role model. I sincerely believe that there are many other things that we can learn from each other provided that we put aside prejudice and hatred and embrace new ideas with an open mind. We need a change in mentality, and, as Muslims, we will need to make strong cordial ties with the Israeli people and build the future of our shared Middle East together with Jews and Christians. Then, the Israelis will be ready to sacrifice some disputed lands and approach a compromise for a lasting peace guaranteeing their security and existence in a hostile region currently surrounded by adversaries.

Intellectuals as well as secular and religious scholars of the Muslim world need to understand that without resolving the core principle of tolerance for the “other” – starting with Israel – they cannot reach genuine democracy and peace. We must search within ourselves for the roots of our problems. The age-old problems of inequity and discrimination, violence, disrespect for human rights, misogyny and anti-woman behaviors, intolerance and racial hatred, sectarianism, corruption, fundamentalism and extremism are deeply rooted in our

sociopolitical structure. Our region has faced these problems since long before the establishment of the Jewish state in 1948 and they have nothing to do with the Israel of today.

We need to be self-critical and reexamine our values and revise the way of thinking which has led us to this chaos. We need to address this if we are to live in a better future. We should embrace and welcome the very existence of the Jewish state and its people as a dispersed but indigenous and ancient regional nation. Most of the wars and clashes in the Middle East and North Africa have taken place between the Arab and Muslim countries themselves. Despite nonsensical remarks made by certain extremist Muslim and even Jewish (Neturei Karta) clerics, the disappearance of the State of Israel would not solve the region's lingering problems. The existing culture of fratricide and endless clashes among rival groups within the Arab and Muslim countries exist irrespective of the State of Israel and have nothing to do with it.

Some measures that could serve to heal our wounds are cultural relativism, respecting human rights, accepting the fact that the Jews and Christians were living in the region prior to Muslims, religious tolerance and respecting all faiths including Abrahamic (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) and non-Abrahamic monotheism (like the Bahá'í faith, Sikhism, and Zoroastrianism) as well as agnosticism and atheism.

Iran's state sponsored anti-Semitism

The scourge of anti-Semitism has a long and disgraceful history which should not be reduced and limited to the Nazi crimes. For example, even "Jew" and "Jewish" still bear insulting and negative connotations in our proverbs and daily conversations. The most abhorrent example of state-sponsored anti-Semitism is theocratic Iran, particularly the current administration.

Anyone who denigrates Jews, denies the Holocaust and rejects the existence of Israel can turn into a hero overnight. Holocaust deniers and anti-Semites like Edoardo Agnelli, son of the owner of Fiat auto giant, the late French thinker Roger Garaudy (a mentally unbalanced Holocaust denier who I witnessed some years ago receiving a hero's welcome at the Qom Feyziye Seminary, in Iran), and anti-Israel rabbis such as Yisroel Dovid Weiss and Moishe Arye Friedman are all welcome in Iran only because they hate Israel and deny its right to exist.

As writers, scholars, human rights activists and ordinary citizens of the region, we owe a historic apology to the Israelites for the harassment, persecution and mass expulsion from their ancestral lands. This is a phenomenon that can be labeled a "lesser holocaust" which led to the annihilation of Jewish communities in most Arab and Muslim countries. Even though we can do nothing to undo what happened in the past, we need to have the courage to face the realities with the hope of a brighter future, enriched by a mosaic of different cultures, religions and colors.