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Arab Public Opinion Aired on the Social Networks, March 2012

Udi Dekel and Orit Perlov

The Events in Syria

The prevailing view among the public in Arab countries is that there is a civil war in Syria, and without help from abroad, it may continue for some time. With the exception of lip service attention in the form of economic and humanitarian assistance, the public does not pin its hopes on the leaders of the Arab nations and the Arab League to end the bloodshed in Syria.

The common assumption is that Syria's future leadership will not be appointed in either Istanbul or Paris but rather on Syrian soil. There is also some disappointment that Israel has refrained from intervening in the events in Syria (even after the statements made by Foreign Minister Lieberman). The longer the struggle lasts and Assad's regime survives, the Arab public suspects that Israel is interested in Assad's continued rule. Israel is not expected to intervene militarily, but there are expectations that it extend diplomatic, humanitarian, and other types of support.

Jordan and Lebanon

The citizens of Jordan and Lebanon take an avid interest in Syria and the potential implications of the events there. There is concern about an increase in the flow of refugees and greater pressure on the economies of these nations as a result of the refugee influx.

- a. Within the Lebanese public there is increased talk about the arms transfers from Syria to Lebanon (for Hizbollah). In the Lebanese view, this will make it difficult in the future to disarm Hizbollah, and there is growing concern that Hizbollah's continued armament will lead to a new round of violence with Israel. At the same time, the prevailing sentiment, which may reflect wishful thinking, is that Hizbollah will act rationally and not engage in provocation or escalation with regard to Israel.
- b. Jordanian public opinion has concluded that should the Hashemite regime face a concrete threat in the future, Saudi Arabia will come to its aid and will, if

necessary, even send forces there, as it did in Bahrain. By contrast, no one is expecting Israel to help ensure the survival of the Hashemites.

The Events in Gaza

The events in Gaza have earned a great deal of attention on the social networks, but less than that accorded to the events in Syria. Among the prevalent issues:

- a. The weakening of Hamas' hold on the Gaza Strip: It is clear that Hamas is not the only "boss" of the Gaza Strip and that it is incapable of fully enforcing its authority.
- b. Increased Iranian involvement in the Gaza Strip: Iran has yet to concede its desire to affect what happens in Gaza, and behind the scenes it encouraged escalation, contrary to the interests of Hamas.
- c. The importance of Egyptian mediation (this emerges particularly from social networks in Egypt and the Gaza Strip) and Egypt's role as the only authorized entity capable of mediating between the two sides.
- d. The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt has led an aggressive anti-Israeli line and called for the expulsion of the Israeli ambassador to Egypt. There has been no similar call by the Egyptian public on the social networks.

The Israeli version that the targeted assassination of the secretary general of the Popular Resistance Committees, Zuhair al-Qaisi (Abu Ibrahim), was meant to prevent a joint terrorist attack on the Israeli-Egyptian border in the Sinai Desert was well received. Still, there was harsh criticism of the killing of women and children in the Israeli attacks.

In Egypt there are again demands for reexamining the appendices to the peace agreement between Egypt and Israel, especially the articles dealing with security matters. The main factor that has encouraged the recent preoccupation with this issue has been the American threat (as part of the NGO crisis between Egypt and the United States) to stop its military aid. It seems that the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafists are examining the peace agreement solely on the basis of the economic ramifications for Egypt, rather than as part of an overall vision on political and security interests.

Turkey

On the social networks there is criticism and cynicism about Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's attacks on Israeli activity in Gaza at a time when the Turks are attacking the Kurds in northern Iraq.

In this context, people note that Erdoğan led the hard line against Assad in Syria but as time has passed the tone of Erdoğan's criticism has mellowed. The Arab public may have expected the deliverance of the Syrian people to come from Turkey, but given the gap

between declarations and actions, there is a sense of disappointment and a sense that an opportunity has been missed.

Conclusion and Assessment

The social networks serve as a platform for active discourse in the Arab world to express positions that do not correspond to the party line. In addition, given that the official channels of communication in all the Arab states have their own interests and agendas and are seen as planted and manipulative, the people active on the social networks find themselves committed to documenting their own versions of developments. Every citizen with a mobile phone with a built-in camera becomes a reporter on the ground giving depth, shade, and color to the events. At any given moment tens of thousands of photos and video clips are uploaded to the networks that directly, in an unmediated manner, broadcast the events as they occur in the Arab countries.

The basic worldview prevalent among those who are active on the social networks is that the Israeli government is the primary negative element affecting most of the ills of the Middle East, whether directly or indirectly. At the same time, these days the intense hatred is reserved for President Assad, the Iranian leadership, and Hizbollah. In tandem, the complete and total loss of faith in the reigning Arab leaderships, including that of Hamas in the Gaza Strip, is prominent; they are assigned responsibility for the region's problems, failures, and negative events, sometimes no less so than Israel. As a result, the violent energy and frustration are often directed inwards rather than at Israel. The criticism voiced outwardly, especially against Israel, and the links between internal and external problems are dominated by the Islamic movements; the liberal groups are less active in this respect.

At times the obsessive preoccupation with Israel, stemming from the view that it is involved in every matter, also has some positive aspects, stemming from Israel's image of success combined with its military and economic might. This leads to the demand that Israel be open to what happens in the Arab world, take constructive steps, and contribute towards changing the face of the region. Those who are active on the social networks expect that in Israel too there will soon be a change from within and therefore they prefer to maintain contact via people-to-people channels as a substitute for official Israel, which is deemed untrustworthy. This expectation targets the population of Israel directly. There is a willingness to hold a conversation through the new media and hope that the citizens of Israel will generate a change in this part of the world.