

Winds of Change in the Middle East: A View from Israel

by [Amos Yadlin \(/experts/amos-yadlin\)](/experts/amos-yadlin)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Amos Yadlin served for five years as the head of Israeli military intelligence and, from 2011-2012, was Kay fellow on Israeli national security at The Washington Institute. Over his distinguished career, General Yadlin spent more than forty years in uniform, including service as defense attache in



Brief Analysis

Part of a series: [Zeev Schiff Memorial Lectures \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/zeev-schiff-memorial-lectures\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/zeev-schiff-memorial-lectures)

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The former head of Israeli military intelligence delivered the fourth annual Zeev Schiff Memorial Lecture on Middle East Security.

On March 30, 2011, Maj. Gen (Ret.) Amos Yadlin of the Israel Defense Forces delivered the fourth annual Zeev Schiff Memorial Lecture on Middle East Security at The Washington Institute. General Yadlin, the new Kay fellow on Israeli national security, recently retired after more than forty years' service in the IDF, including the last five as head of military intelligence. The following is a rapporteur's summary of his remarks.

[Watch a playlist of excerpts from this event. \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g3GmHhDczdo&list=PL80A5275030022DB3\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g3GmHhDczdo&list=PL80A5275030022DB3)

Although the "Arab Spring" is undoubtedly the most significant event to happen in the Middle East since the 1970s -- with dramatic import for Israel -- we do not yet understand its trajectory. It is far too early to predict the consequences of the Egyptian elections, the war in Libya, or the unrest in Syria. Furthermore, the two most important regional "superpowers" -- Iran and Saudi Arabia -- have hardly been affected by the turmoil.

To assess the consequences of the sweeping revolution, we must do a state-by-state analysis. We should -- not assume that a domino effect will take hold, since each nation faces different challenges, divisions, and historical contexts. While some states have coped with demonstrations by firing officials, others have sent military forces to the streets, and still others have paid billions to their citizens to quell the winds of change.

Moreover, there is fundamental disagreement over the narrative of the revolution. Tehran and al-Qaeda would likely depict the Arab Spring as a victory for the Islamic Revolution. In contrast, the Syrian narrative holds that the revolutions arose in opposition to peace with Israel. Perhaps the most accurate narrative, however, is that of Arab peoples who aspire to freedom, justice, and a better future. Of course, democracy takes time to develop, and Arabs should be entitled to design democratic models that are appropriate to their individual country's history and traditions.

To date, the Arab Spring remains a leaderless revolution; the world is still waiting for leaders to emerge who will carve out its future. It is important to note that a number of countries have joined the Arab spring but have no enthusiasm for actual revolution. Lebanon, Iraq, and the Palestinian people have already paid a high price for confrontation between domestic factions and are not willing to sacrifice their stability by renewing such unrest.

Historically speaking, past revolutions offer several lessons and warnings. First, revolutions can be hijacked, as happened in France in 1789, Russia in 1917, and Iran in 1979. In such cases, the first wave is often a popular uprising inspired by good intentions, but the second wave brings a leader who proves to be even more oppressive than the previous regime. Thus, we must be cautious that the second wave of the Arab Spring is not a counterrevolution.

Second, substantial change might only become apparent in the long term. Although the 1948 "Spring" among European nations failed in the short term, the liberal and national ideas born from that movement affected the course of European history throughout the twentieth century.

Third, our analysis and predications must take into account the novel yet unpredictable power of social and mass media. Although a Facebook revolution allows for incredibly rapid communication that can mobilize people to the streets en masse -- much faster than governments can make decisions and mobilize their troops -- it is not a phenomenon that can solely decide the fate of a revolution.

Fourth, it is important not to panic. Israel cannot remain indifferent to the democratizing process that is advancing values Israel endorses -- freedom, justice, rule of law, democracy -- even if these changes appear dangerous in the short run. Since democracies rarely go to war with each other, the process of Arab democratization is overall a very positive development for Israel. A number of other opportunities could have positive implications for Israel as well:

- On the Arab street, realization is growing that Israel is not the core problem in the Middle East. As the Arab world faces up to its own problems, it is beginning to see that regional ills would not simply melt away if only Israeli-Palestinian issues were resolved.
- If Syrians realize that their country's future lies in political openness and peace -- as opposed to leaning on Iran and supporting Hizballah and other terrorist organizations -- they could spur deterioration of the region's radical axis.
- And most important of all, if the revolution spreads to Iran, the number-one problem facing Israel and the Middle East could be overcome.

Despite these opportunities, Israel must continue to examine and prepare for the least optimal outcomes. First among the threats is a return to violent confrontation with Egypt. Although neither country wants renewed bloodshed or reallocation of resources for defense purposes, Israel must explore this possibility in order to remain prepared.

Second is the threat posed by potential instability in Jordan, with which Israel shares its longest border. To date, however, the region's monarchies have been attentive to their peoples' needs and have withstood the pressure of revolution.

Third, Israel must remain wary of the tendency of Arab regimes to export their problems to Israel, whether by word or force. For example, Syria could attempt to divert attention from domestic unrest by initiating violence in the Golan Heights or asking Hizballah to instigate conflict in the north.

Fourth, Israel would be threatened if any of the revolutions led to chaos. For example, if the Egyptian, Syrian, or Jordanian governments were dissolved or weakened indefinitely, they could lose control over military arsenals that in some cases include ballistic missiles and chemical weapons.

In terms of formulating Israeli policy, the first and foremost implication of these lessons is to assume a "passive strategizing" posture that eschews both intervention and interference. Israel would not benefit from forcing itself into a process of which it is not the focus. Israel must also be careful in responding to provocations by Iran, Hizballah, or Hamas, especially if these actions are intended to divert attention from unrest in a given society, such as Lebanon or Gaza.

Of course, lines must be drawn somewhere, and if Israel is forced to take action, it will need to calculate its moves prudently. It must also continue planning for the long term, maintaining the strategic deterrence already in place. Israel should not assume worst-case outcomes, but it must begin preparations in case such problems do emerge.

In the wake of the Arab revolutions, some regimes and rulers are gone, yet most of the problems traditionally plaguing the Middle East remain. Although Israel may now appear as a mere peripheral concern amid momentous events, we must not allow this to detract from the two most pressing regional issues: Iran's nuclear ambitions and the ME peace process. Israel's pursuit of effective policymaking during the Arab Spring should not eclipse the grave significance of these two issues or the new opportunities to address them.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Sheli Chabon.

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