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# The end of the 'Israeli Spring'

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**BY DANIEL BERTRAND MONK,  
DANIEL LEVINE | SEPTEMBER 12,  
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Corner of Tahrir" invited passersby to compare this "Israeli Spring" to the events in Cairo. Many have since done so.

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Eight weeks after the tent cities in Israel went up, they are now coming down. Having organized what was thought to be

the largest demonstration in Israeli history just over a week ago (approximately 400,000 people or 17 percent of the country's population took to the streets), the protest's leaders declared this phase of Israel's social protests to be over. This, despite the fact that the government made no concrete concessions to them. This fact alone should invite a reconsideration of the Israeli Spring in terms of its differences from the demonstrations in Cairo rather than its similarities. Central among these is the interaction between national-security threats and the preservation of unity within the ranks of the demonstrators.

Protesters in the Arab Spring deflected their regimes' attempts to use the specter of war with Israel or Islamic radicalism as an excuse for deferring long-deferred democratic and parliamentary reforms. In an already intensely parliamentary Israel, quite a different deflection has been at work: the demand for "social justice" has been put forward in terms that attempt to deny the centrality of the Israel/Palestine conflict on the conditions the protestors would seek to change. At "Rothschild, corner of Tahrir," the protestors have posited social justice as somehow beyond politics as presently understood and practiced in Israel.

Given the tendentiousness of the Palestinian question within Israel, it is only by virtue of this basic act of denial that the protests at this scale are at all possible.

To be sure, the residents of Israel's tent cities were a remarkably diverse lot. In addition to a core of committed geek-activists and university students, there were also remnants of Labor Zionism (like the youth group *Hashomer Hatza'ir*), advocates of Jewish-Arab cooperation, activists for divorced fathers' rights, organizations demanding the end of exemptions from military service for yeshiva students,

religious ecstasies ("Nach-Nachma" offshoots of Breslov Hasidism), and, most incongruously and briefly, a handful of members of the notorious "Hilltop Youth": second or third-generation settler-hippies, the hash-smoking but also highly militant counterculture of the West Bank settlements (To be sure, they arrived at the protests as a provocation and were largely ignored, but the response of the organizers was to invite them to stay).

Israel's tent city protest, in short, was itself a big tent. In it, consensus across so wide a community of protesters could only be preserved by tacitly agreeing to ignore the core questions

of Israeli politics. *Eretz Nehederet*, Israel's equivalent of *The Daily Show*, satirized this situation brilliantly. When its host asked a cast member playing Daphni Leef (the original organizer of the tent protests on Facebook) to specify the movement's aims, or to take a stand on precisely how conflicting demands on the state's coffers were to be reconciled, the actress playing Leef reverts to the same slogans, offered ever more loudly: *Ha'am-Doresh-Tzedek Chevrati* ("the People-Demand-Social Justice")! When pressed, she replies: "Um...the People demand the things everyone agrees on... about...them").

In its very construction,



the slogan itself — the People Demand Social Justice! — discloses the denial at work here. A reaction to the nation state's *political* fragmentation appears as a demonstration against *social stratification*. In shouting "The People Demand Social Justice," everyone involved in the Rothschild "revolution" agreed to act as if the social and economic consequences of placating settlers, ultranationalists, and the ultra-orthodox — all united by a shared material interest in perpetuating the occupation — had nothing to do with the government's inability to provide for the needs of "the People". To get 400,000 people onto the

streets of Israel without causing a similar counter-demonstration on the following Saturday night, Israelis identifying with a bazaar of essentially incompatible political positions tacitly agreed to pretend that Tel Aviv has joined the wave of popular protests in Madrid, London, and Athens against the structural adjustment programs that western economies used to impose upon the global south and have now turned against their own citizens.

But the numbers belie this. Israel's curious coalition of the disaffected has emerged in an economy that is enjoying higher growth in real GDP than

Bahrain, Brunei, and Oman. In sharp contrast to Athens or Cairo, Israel has almost halved its unemployment rate since 2003, and 80 percent of its wage earners are employed in service industries. Many of the "urban Bedouins" of Rothschild Boulevard would get up every morning, zip up their tent flaps, and go to work in the high tech sector. If nearly one quarter of Israel's citizens are now falling below the poverty line (and if its middle class has "vanished," as former Israel Manufacturers Board chair, Dov Lautman claims), it is because the government of Israel is forced to maintain the costly infrastructure of two para-states — one for

the ultra-orthodox and another for the settlers — before it can even begin going about its own business. A political double standard has long prevailed in Israeli domestic politics. While political transfer payments to settlers and ultra-orthodox are accepted as the cost of doing business, for everyone else — from the education and health care systems to the fire service, whose collapse due to sustained budgetary neglect left much of Israel to burn in forest fires last December — an ideology of austerity prevails. There is no addressing "the people's" demand for social justice without facing this.

The Israeli Spring has

lapsed directly into autumn because the movement sublimated the *political* causes of a contemporary crisis by protesting its *social* effects. What the movement teaches us by virtue of its existence rather than by its own claims is that in Israel today the stalemated politics of the occupation can no longer be called by name or looked in the eye. Capitulation to the occupation's advocates and beneficiaries has resulted in an unacknowledged and at times unconscious resource war between those in Israel who have a stake in the conflict's perpetuation, and, as various protest posters put it: "everyone else." Far from pointing to

triumph of new forms of social solidarity, then, this last season of protests actually signals the widening of potentially violent divisions in Israel that no longer map neatly onto the logics of the electoral left and right. A protest that called these other, deeper, divisions by name would differ as markedly from the present one as would a Berkeley "teach-in" from a general strike. That, we submit, is the true difference between the protests in Rothschild Boulevard and those in Tahrir Square.

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