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A Villa in the Jungle: The Arab Awakening through the Lens of the Israeli Media

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Abstract

In the Israeli media, the message conveyed to Hebrew-speaking audiences has been that the uprisings in the Arab world are clashes between ethnic, religious or tribal groups. This depiction fits well within the representational framework of Israel as an island of civilization surrounded by savages. This conceptual framework serves to determine Israel's regional policies, both with many of its neighboring countries and with the Palestinians. The Israeli media, in other words, has perpetuated an isolationist jungle metaphor, while trying to convince the viewers that the uprisings will have only minor impact on the villa that is Israel.

Keywords

Israel; media; Arab revolutions

Immediately following the outbreak of mass protests in Tahrir Square, commentators in Israel assured the public that “Egypt is not Tunis.” The consensus was that the Egyptian security apparatus was loyal to the regime and, consequently, there was little if any chance that President Hosni Mubarak's government would fall. “The demonstrations do not threaten Mubarak,” one of Israel's “experts on Arab Affairs” averred a few days after the protests began, but rather “provide a glimpse of what might happen once his tenure ends.”¹

After it became clear that this line of analysis was erroneous, however, most commentators followed Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's lead and began criticizing President Barack Obama's administration for failing to support Mubarak. “The fact that the White House is permitting the protests is reason

¹) Channel Ten, 25 January 2011.

for worry,”² complained the Foreign News editor of one television channel, while the prominent political analyst Ben Kaspit expressed his longing for President George W. Bush in an op-ed: “We remember 2003 when George Bush invaded and took over Iraq with a sense of nostalgia. Libya immediately changed course and allied itself with the West. Iran suspended its military nuclear program. Arafat was harnessed. Syria shook with fear. Not that the invasion of Iraq was a wise move (not at all, Iran is the real problem, not Iraq), but in the Middle East whoever does not walk around with a big bat in his hand receives the bat on his head.”³

Kaspit was merely echoing a widespread sentiment in Israel. Indeed, most media commentators seem to have internalized Defense Minister Ehud Barak’s now domestically famous depiction of Israel as a “villa in the jungle”—namely, a civilized Western island surrounded by semi-barbaric Arabs and Muslims—and have accordingly related to the Arab Awakening almost solely through the lens of this image. The prevalent and increasingly vocalized view that the Arabs are uncivilized helps explain why Israeli commentators reporting about the awakening have been equivocal on potential democratization in the Middle East. One columnist explained that it takes years for democratic institutions to be established, and for people to internalize the practices necessary for democracy. Amir Hazroni from the popular news website *NRG* went so far as to write an ode to colonialism:

When we try to think how and why the United States and the West lost Egypt, Tunis, Yemen and perhaps other countries in the Middle East, people forget that the original sin began right after WWII, when a wonderful form of government that protected security and peace in the Middle East (and in other parts of the Third World) departed from this world following pressure from the United States and Soviet Union ... More than sixty years have passed since the Arab states and the countries of Africa were liberated from the “colonial yoke,” but there still isn’t an Arab university, an African scientist or a Middle Eastern consumer product that has made a mark on our world.⁴

Hazroni is undoubtedly expressing an extremist position, but this kind of orientalist perspective has permeated much of the discussion about the Arab awakening within Israel. As a rule, the uprisings have not been presented as an outcome of real grievances arising from exploitation and repression, but rather as clashes of civilizations: between Sunni and Shia Muslims in Bahrain;

²) Channel Ten, 2 February 2011.

³) *NRG*, 30 January 2011.

⁴) 7 February 2011.

Sunni versus Alawi in Syria; as tribal feuds in Libya and Yemen; and as being led by Islamist forces, which want to take over the modern secular state in Tunis and Egypt. As a result, an analysis of the socio-economic processes leading to the awakening has been almost totally missing from the coverage, and many of the key actors in the protest movements—such as labor organizations, students, university graduates, women and youth—have been rendered invisible. This approach has helped bolster an already existing fear of political Islam among the Jewish citizenry, which is constantly being presented as an ominous force that is both antithetical to democracy and an existential threat to Israel.⁵ Indeed, it has helped to reinforce the Zionist trope that Israel is an island of civilization in the Middle East, and serves as a wall against barbarism.⁶

Extent of Israeli Coverage

The Arab Awakening has been covered extensively in the Israeli media, but the time dedicated to each country has varied significantly. News agencies have mostly concentrated on uprisings that have direct implications for Israel. Hence, there has been relatively little coverage of Tunis, Yemen, and Bahrain; a fair amount of reporting on Libya (primarily due to NATO's intervention); and a great deal of attention on Egypt and Syria, both of which share borders with Israel. During the climatic days of massive protests calling for regime change in Egypt, the television news programs and current affairs talk shows spent most of their airtime covering the unfolding events, while some channels provided extended live coverage alongside commentary. The daily papers, in turn, dedicated half the news pages to Egypt, while many of the comments on the opinion pages dealt with the uprising. The dominant attitude, especially after it became clear that Mubarak's days were numbered and particularly on television, was one of anxiety and a sense that the developments in Egypt were inimical to Israel's interests.

However, the intense emotional investment and anxiety pervading the media's coverage of the Egyptian revolution has generally been absent from its coverage of the uprisings in other Arab countries. Israel does not have a peace agreement with Syria, and therefore the overall perception has been that Israel

⁵ For more about this fear see Haggai Ram, *Iranophobia: The Logic of an Israeli Obsession* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).

⁶ Avi Shlaim, *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World* (New York: Norton Books 2001).

has little to lose or gain from the unfolding events there. The other countries neither share a border nor have a peace agreement with Israel, and the end results therein are not perceived as having any profound bearing on Israel. Consequently, most of the commentary has been dedicated to factual reportage about daily developments, such as the number of people killed and the protests' escalation or lack thereof, alongside assessments regarding the likelihood of a given uprising's success in propelling regime change.

The Awakening as an Ethnic-Religious Struggle

What emerges most forcefully when examining the Israeli coverage of the Arab Awakening is that the revolts have been depicted as ethnic and religious uprisings, not as popular pro-democracy struggles against authoritarian regimes, which bulldozed the basic rights of their own citizenry.⁷ Moreover, the economic exploitation, corruption and repression characterizing these regimes were, for the most part, ignored.⁸ This can be seen both in the daily analyses of the uprisings, as well as in the Israeli construction of the political subjects propelling them. To the extent that the descriptions of the protestors are framed within ideological perspectives, the way the Israeli media portrays them provides insight into how the uprisings have been depicted to, and understood by, Hebrew-speaking audiences.⁹

As a whole, Israeli commentators described the Egyptian protesters as being led by a coterie of intellectuals and the “Facebook and Twitter generation.” The coverage provided by Israeli reporters stationed in Cairo was accompanied by sympathetic interviews with Egyptian citizens, who generally underscored the importance of Egypt's peace agreement with Israel, while simultaneously expressing opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood. “We are not the Muslim

⁷ For an analysis of the causes leading to the uprisings see Michael Sakbani, “The Revolutions of the Arab Spring: are democracy, development and modernity at the gates?” *Journal of Contemporary Arab Affairs*, Vol. 4, Issue 2, April-July 2011: 127-148.

⁸ For an analysis of some of the economic forces driving the uprising in Egypt consult Amal A. Kandeel, “Egypt at a Crossroads,” *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 18, Issue 2, 2011: 37-45. For a similar analysis of the Syria case see Bassam Haddad, “The Political Economy of Syria: Realities and Challenges,” *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 18, Issue 2, 2011: 46-61.

⁹ On the constitution of the political subject see Jacques Rancière, “Ten Theses on Politics,” *Theory and Event*, Volume 5, Issue 3, 2001. On framing in the Israeli press see Neve Gordon, “Rationalizing Extra-Judicial Executions: The Israeli Press and the Legitimization of Abuse,” *International Journal of Human Rights*, 8(4) 2004: 305-324.

Brotherhood, we are Egypt ...” one protester insisted, “We want a fair leader. We do not want war with Israel, we want democracy.”¹⁰

The coverage from the ground did not, however, sway the “experts on Arab Affairs” nor lead them to alter their ideological analysis of the situation. Sitting in the studios in Tel-Aviv and Jerusalem, these commentators described the protestors who were interviewed as naïve, and consequently expressed a concern that their fate would follow that of the Iranian intellectuals who led the protests against the Shah. Ehud Ya’ari, Channel Two’s “expert on Arab Affairs,” noted that “The fact that you do not see the Muslim Brotherhood does not mean they are not there,” while Arad Nir, Channel Two’s Foreign News editor, added “Today is indeed joyful, but as Scarlet O’Hara said, ‘tomorrow is a new day’.”¹¹

Although the Israeli media reported that the Muslim Brotherhood did not take an active part in mobilizing the protests, and that the Muslim organization refrained from distributing Islamists banners in Tahrir Square, this was interpreted as a tactical decision on behalf of the Brotherhood in order to avoid undermining the opposition’s objective of regime change. Zvi Yehzkeli, Channel Ten’s “expert on Arab affairs,” warned his viewers: “Do not be mistaken by El Baradei’s Viennese spirit, behind him is the Muslim Brotherhood.”¹² Most commentators described the Muslim Brotherhood as the authentic (and only) opposition in Egypt, while referring to Mohammad El Baradei and the other opposition parties as irrelevant. In a news program on Channel Ten, the anchorman asked: “Is there an opposition that can take over the government?” To which one expert commentator responded: “There is no other body other than the Muslim Brotherhood which can take the leadership in Egypt ... Surely not a good message for Israel.”¹³

Along similar lines, the Syrian uprising has been presented as a Sunni rebellion against the Alawi minority, symbolized by the ruling Assad family. Zvi Yehzkeli from Channel Ten claimed that the uprising began in the southern city of Dara, since the central government has less of a hold on the periphery, and the Sunni population there is more devout, hates the Alawi, and “considers Assad a kind of heretic.”¹⁴ In an op-ed published in *Globes*, Yehzkeli went on to claim that one of the fallacies of “western analysis” is that it strives to

¹⁰ Channel Ten, 30 January 2011.

¹¹ 11 February 2011.

¹² 30 January 2011.

¹³ 28 January 2011.

¹⁴ 21 March 2011.

make sense of the Middle East through the lens of democratic values, while the Syrian uprising is driven by religious motivations and has nothing to do with democracy.¹⁵ Channel Two's "expert on Arab affairs" seemed to agree: "It began due to social problems, but it is now assuming a new dimension, an additional dimension, of Sunni against Alawi."¹⁶ Shlomi Eldar and a series of other experts concurred: "Syria is Alawi and Sunni, there is no real opposition; there is no opposition in Syria."¹⁷ Accordingly, the protestors in Syria have been depicted as masses united due to their desire to topple Assad. Occasionally, they have been presented as heroic actors, like Yehezkeili who informed his viewers that this "story is about courageous citizens and the military [they confront],"¹⁸ and on a couple of occasions it has been noted that among them are young people, students, women and moderates.¹⁹ Nonetheless, secular Syrian opposition groups have not been mentioned, and the only oppositional organization that has been discussed is the Muslim Brotherhood. Channel Two's "Arab expert" explained that the Muslim Brotherhood has officially taken the lead,²⁰ while Channel One's "Arab expert" averred that although the Brotherhood is not leading the protests, its members are "standing in the background ... the situation is similar to Egypt."²¹ The implication of this analysis is that "if Bashar falls, hundreds of thousands of Alawi might die";²² "Syria is on the threshold of a bloodbath, a big catastrophe like 1982, Hama";²³ and "there will be a butchering of monstrous proportions."²⁴ Interestingly, the only way for the Hebrew-speaking audience to find out what the protestors' demands actually are is through a marginal news blog called Kav Hutz, meaning "Outside Line".²⁵

The coverage of the uprising in Bahrain has been portrayed as a struggle led by the majority Shia population rebelling against Sunni rule due to blatant discrimination. Practically all of the commentators have emphasized Iran's

¹⁵ 2 April 2011.

¹⁶ 25 March 2011.

¹⁷ Channel Ten, 25 March 2011. For similar remarks see *Ynet*, 27 March 2011 and *News1*, 25 March 2011.

¹⁸ Channel Ten, 26 April 2011. See also Channel One, 1 May 2011.

¹⁹ Channel Two, 20 April 2011.

²⁰ 30 April 2011.

²¹ 22 April 2011.

²² *Ynet*, 27 March 2011.

²³ Channel Two, 19 April 2011.

²⁴ *Ma'ariv*, 29 April 2011.

²⁵ Kav Hutz, 23 April 2011.

support for the demonstrators. One commentator explained that this tiny island is the last hurdle preventing the spread of Shia to Saudi Arabia, and another one added that we “also need to remember that Kuwait is 40 percent Shia ... the region just east of Saudi Arabia, the most important oil region in the world.”²⁶ Yemen, not unlike Bahrain, has also been perceived as a site where local power struggles between Shia and Sunni are being played out, with Iran supporting the Shia and Saudi Arabia supporting the Sunni. Unlike the other countries, though, Yemen has been presented as a failed state, while separatist groups and tribal leaders—whose goal is to secure independence for south Yemen—have been portrayed as leading the rebellion.²⁷ Commentators have tended to agree that once the existing regime collapses, Yemen will become a haven for radical Islam. Yehzekeli from Channel Two has characterized the power struggle as a war between Shia and Al Qaida, and has predicted that Yemen will become the largest Al Qaida center.²⁸

Other than Egypt and Syria, which share borders with Israel, Libya has received the most media attention. Yet, the coverage has been quite vague in many respects, with hardly any analysis of the causes leading to the rebellion, and no discussion of the rebels’ demands. Time and again, commentators have focused on Gaddafi’s character, while the uprising has been depicted as a tribal war over power and resources. Israeli viewers have repeatedly been told that some of the tribes that traditionally supported Gaddafi have now turned against him.

All in all, there has hardly been any mention of the impact that social factors have had on the uprisings, or the real and acute grievances caused by failed economic policies and years of corruption.²⁹ Rather, the Arab Awakening has been presented in Israel as being propelled by atavistic forces, or spurred by clashes among different ethnic and religious groups. Thus, on the surface, there are differences among the characterizations of the political subjects leading the uprisings in each Arab country; however, in fact, these descriptions usually boil down to one tribe against another, or one form of Islam trying to gain precedence over the other. One exception is Zvi Barel from the Israeli daily newspaper *Ha’aretz*, who has described the Arab Awakening as being motivated by economic disparity and poverty. Other dissenting voices have

²⁶ Channel Two, 17 February 2011.

²⁷ *Yisrael Hayom*, 20 February 2011.

²⁸ 21 March 2011.

²⁹ Clemens Breisinger, Olivier Ecker, and Perrihan Al-Riffai, “Economics of the Arab Awakening: From Revolution to Transformation and Food Security,” IFPRI Policy Brief 18, May 2011.

included Fruma Zaks, who has claimed that the impetus for the Syrian uprising was economic and class-based, and has described the protestors as “trying to guard [Syria’s] national rather than ethnic character; there is a strong effort on behalf of the protestors to say that ‘we are all together’.”³⁰

No Democracy for Arabs

The majority of commentators seem to believe that the Arab countries in the region are not ready for democracy, and that elections will only lead to the rise of Islamic forces. The coverage has two dimensions that are at times clearly articulated, while on other occasions merely implied: on the one hand, political Islam (which will, according to the analysis, win the day) and democracy are perceived to be contradictory, while on the other hand, Arabs are not ready for democracy.

Before it was clear what would happen to Mubarak, Zvi Yehezkeili from Channel Two stated: “Behind all the beautiful pictures there are Muslim brothers. If everything does indeed collapse and they go for a kind of democracy like Tunis, that’s it! The Muslim Brotherhood will take it walking.”³¹ An Israeli diplomat, cited in *Yisrael Hayom*, declared: “Elections are the end of the process, not its beginning.”³² Similarly, on Channel Ten, an anchorman asked a former government Minister (someone who is considered to be an expert on Egypt): “[Is] the person who says to himself, how wonderful, at last the state of Egypt is a democracy, is naïve?” To which the Minister responded: “Permit me to laugh. We wanted a democracy in Iran and in Gaza. The person who talks like this is ignoring the fact that for over a decade there has been a struggle of giants with tons of blood between the Sunni and Shia ... The person who speaks about democracy does not live in reality.”³³

Likewise, democracy is not considered to be on the Syrian horizon. To stress this point, commentators have often compared Syria with Israel. The general thrust is that Israel is an enlightened democracy, and Syria a violent tyranny that cannot or will not become a democracy. “I don’t see how someone reaches democracy at this pace, whether it is the Egyptian actor ... or the Syrian actor who is still massacring and being massacred,” noted Channel Ten’s “expert on

³⁰) Channel One, 1 May 2011.

³¹) 27 January 2011.

³²) 30 January 2011.

³³) 10 February 2011.

Arab Affairs”.³⁴ A few days after this comment, Ben Kaspit from *Ma’ariv* made a cynical remark: “If Assad falls, who do you think will replace him? The Dalai Lama? Amnesty? It is obvious that this will not happen. A new murderer will come.”³⁵

Talking about protests in Libya, Yehezkeili says “we need to stop and ask ourselves whether it is for democracy or settling internal disputes,”³⁶ while Zvi Barel from *Ha’aretz* explains that the tribes in Yemen are “not yearning for democracy – they want a larger budget [i.e., more money from the government].”³⁷ It is not only that Israeli commentators do not believe the Arab countries are ready to transform into democracies, and therefore will not become democracies; many analysts think that such a transformation—despite its very unlikely occurrence—would be inimical to Israel’s interests. Former Defense Minister, Moshe Arens, effectively captured this sentiment while writing for *Ha’aretz* when he claimed that Israel had, until now, signed peace agreements with tyrants, and it would be much more difficult to sign such agreements with democracies because they would not be able to meet Israel’s demands.³⁸

Anxiety about the Future

Aside from Egypt and Syria, the different awakenings have not really led the Israeli media to express anxiety about the future. There are several reasons for this—one key factor being the firm Zionist conception of Israel as a wall against barbarism. Thus, the portrayal of the Arab Awakening has been packaged within a conceptual framework that is already firmly rooted in Jewish Israeli self-definition and mythology, while underscoring Israel’s difference from its neighboring countries.

One outlier, as mentioned, was Egypt. The protests in Egypt were depicted as destabilizing and as having the potential to ignite the region, and the anxiety clearly stemmed from the uprising’s possible negative impact on Egypt’s peace agreement with Israel. Although the pervasive view held that it was in Egypt’s interest to uphold the peace agreement with Israel, many commentators declared that the permanence of the peace agreement could no longer be taken

³⁴) 26 April 2011.

³⁵) 29 April 2011.

³⁶) Channel Two, 16 February 2011.

³⁷) 20 February 2011.

³⁸) 1 February 2011.

for granted. As Israel's Chief of Staff put it, "The quiet Israel is experiencing is breakable."³⁹ The general opinion was that Israel would have to invest more resources in surveillance in the Sinai and Gaza Strip. Channel One's political correspondent noted that, "We are moving from an era of stability, where the border was quiet and there were strategic understandings between Israel and Mubarak's Egypt, into a new era which lacks clarity. And this increases concern."⁴⁰ The diplomatic correspondent for Channel Two summed up the widespread feeling when he asserted, "Hosni Mubarak is a dictator, but he zealously protected the peace agreement. The real fear is that the 'democracy-instant' in Egypt may be grabbed by extremist forces."⁴¹

Discussions about Syria reveal a different kind of anxiety. A number of commentators have claimed that Syria might, as a last resort, attack Israel.⁴² Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu underscored this kind of anxiety when he noted that Israel supports a democratic Syria, but fears that the country will transform into a fanatic religious regime.⁴³ Ben Kaspi from the daily newspaper *Ma'ariv* declared that if Assad survives he will likely be "more comfortable, weaker and more attentive to the west," while his colleague Ofer Shelah claimed that a weak and disintegrating Syria will be good for Israel.⁴⁴

Most of the debate about the Syrian uprising's implications for Israel has revolved around speculation regarding how the uprising would have affected Israel had a peace agreement been signed with Syria. The commentators are divided into two camps: those who have asserted that the events in the Levant prove that peace with Syria constitutes a real danger; and those who have claimed that if a peace agreement had been signed, it would have survived the uprising and would have been beneficial for Israel. Prime Minister Netanyahu is a member of the former camp. He has supported Israel's past decisions against signing an agreement with Syria, because Israel cannot know who its future partners will be.⁴⁵ Speaking on Channel One, *Ha'aretz* commentator Ari Shavit concurred. One of the uprising's implications, he announced, is that "there is no chance for peace."⁴⁶ Along similar lines, Mordechai Keidar

³⁹) Channel Ten, 8 February 2011.

⁴⁰) 10 February 2011.

⁴¹) 10 February 2011.

⁴²) See *Ha'aretz*, 29 April 2011; and *Yisrael Hayom*, 29 April 2011.

⁴³) Channel Two, 30 March 2011. See also *Ynet*, 30 March 2011; and *Ynet*, 22 April 2011.

⁴⁴) 29 April 2011.

⁴⁵) Channel Two, 30 March 2011.

⁴⁶) 29 April 2011.

criticized the “Syrian experts” who have supported Israel’s withdrawal from the Golan Heights,⁴⁷ and Danni Kushmero maintained that due to the instability in Syria, the Golan would stay in Israeli hands for many years to come.⁴⁸ By contrast, Ben Kaspit said that if Israel had signed an agreement with Syria it would have endured due to common economic interests,⁴⁹ and Yoel Marcus from *Ha’aretz* asserted that it is crucial to encourage an agreement with any regime, because agreements tend to last even in periods of instability (he gives Egypt as an example).⁵⁰

Criticism of the “International Community” and Israel’s Imperial Logic

The Israeli media has been critical of the way the international community has handled the Arab revolts, with the exception of the West’s decision to attack Libya—which was conceived in favorable terms. With respect to Egypt, the major target of criticism was Obama’s Administration. The statements made by President Obama, Secretary of State Hilary Clinton, and the White House Spokesperson—which called upon Mubarak to resign, and later insisted that a gradual process of handing over power should take place—were deemed both inconsistent and myopic. Channel Ten’s anchorman stated that “President Obama abandons Mubarak during live broadcast,” while one of the experts noted that “We cannot count on the United States.”⁵¹ A few days later, a Foreign News editor in Channel Ten stated: “The fact that the White House is permitting the protests is reason for worry.”⁵²

In its coverage of the Syrian uprising, Israeli criticism has mostly been directed against “the world’s” duplicity. Both in Egypt and Syria, the West and the UN executive bodies have not been seen to be doing their job. With respect to Egypt, the Prime Minister and the media wanted the West to protect Mubarak’s regime, while in Syria’s case, the West has been considered hypocritical because it decided against an attack (as opposed Libya). At least up until the end of May, US policy was described as hesitant, irresolute and too friendly towards Syria. In an article called “Assad’s Back,” two commentators

⁴⁷⁾ *News1*, 25 March 2011.

⁴⁸⁾ Channel Two, 9 April 2011.

⁴⁹⁾ *Ma’ariv*, 29 April 2011.

⁵⁰⁾ 29 April 2011.

⁵¹⁾ 29 January 2011.

⁵²⁾ 3 February 2011.

for *Ma'ariv* noted that “the reporting about massacres throughout Syria did not impress the United Nation’s Security Council.”⁵³ Moreover, Arad Nir claimed that, according to Hilary Clinton, Assad is a reformer, and then asked his viewers to judge her assessment of the Syrian leader while the camera showed a sniper shooting at citizens during a demonstration.⁵⁴

An imperial logic connecting Israel’s criticism of the “international community” becomes apparent in light of the above-noted commentary. First, the international community is consistently identified with the West—namely, the United States, Western Europe and NATO. Second, according to these commentators, the decision to intervene should not be based on the degree of social wrongs within a country, or on government efforts to obstruct processes of democratization. Rather, it should be based on the relation of the governing dictator with Western powers.

Self-Criticism

On the margins of the coverage is some internal criticism of Israel. Aluf Ben noted that Syria has cancelled its emergency laws *before* Israel,⁵⁵ and Moria Shlomot claimed that the Israeli media loves the Syrian soldiers who refuse to take part in the oppression of their people, but hates the Israeli refusniks from the left.⁵⁶ In a prime time satirical program, Assad’s character appeared before a committee responsible for choosing the winner of the prestigious “Israel prize.” Here, Assad declares that he is a worthy candidate because he is “the only one who enables [Israel] to look good in the world.” He then remarks: “After they see what I do to my citizens, what Israel is doing in Gaza will appear like family entertainment.”⁵⁷

Conclusion

None of the uprisings have been portrayed as pro-democracy struggles against social wrongs. Rather, the message conveyed to Hebrew-speaking audiences

⁵³ 29 April 2011.

⁵⁴ Channel Two, 1 April 2011. See also Channel One, 26 April 2011.

⁵⁵ *Ha'aretz*, 20 April 2011.

⁵⁶ *Yisrael Hayom*, 29 April 2011.

⁵⁷ *Eretz Nebedert*, Channel 2, 29 April 2011.

has been that these protests are clashes between ethnic, religious or tribal groups. This depiction fits well within the representational framework of Israel as an island of civilization surrounded by savages. This conceptual framework, as Akiva Eldar from *Ha'aretz* asserted in a different context, serves to determine Israel's regional policies, both with many of its neighboring countries and with the Palestinians: "the animals of the jungle understand only strength. Negotiations are not conducted with savages. The only way to survive in a hostile environment is to erect barriers, shut yourself up in your house – and to hell with the neighbors. For our part, let them kill each other, let them die of starvation, some sooner and some later."⁵⁸

The Israeli media, in other words, has perpetuated the isolationist jungle metaphor, while trying to convince the viewers that the uprisings will have only minor impact on the villa. There has been, to be sure, recognition of the monumental changes taking place, but these have not been interpreted as having an effect on Israel. Not a single commentary that I came across interpreted the Arab Awakening as an opportunity for Israel to normalize its relations with Arab countries in the region, and only a few considered it to be detrimental (and here, only in relation to Egypt). The Arab Awakening is not consequential to Hebrew-speaking viewers because Israel conceives of itself as an island, cut off from the region's populations and social problems.

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⁵⁸) 30 January 2006.