

**EVENT REPORT**

**The Arab world is changing. What about Israel?\***

**BÖLL LUNCH DEBATE 20 JUNE 2011**

*The revolution in Tunisia set the ball rolling for a changing Arab world. Egypt followed the example and the people succeeded in forcing Hosni Mubarak to resign. The days of Muammar Quaddafi in Libya seem to be numbered and the whole world holds its breath in the face of the violence the Syrian government perpetrates against its own people. Yemen's President might also have to leave power as he is being treated in Saudi Arabia after being hit by a missile. In Bahrain, the rebellion was suppressed with the support of Saudi Arabia.*

*What is the situation in Israel in this context? What are the reactions in Israel to these revolutionary events? Do the Israelis see those changes as an opportunity or as a threat? What is happening within the political arena in Israel?*

*Will the Arab Spring influence the Palestinian-Israeli peace process? And what about its civil society?*

After initial hesitations, the EU now explicitly communicates that the Arab spring is considered to be an opportunity rather than a threat to the Middle East peace process, including Israeli-Palestinian reconciliation. This can, for example, be seen by the fact that the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Catherine Ashton, on the occasion of her visit to the region at the end of June, discussed with Prime Minister Netanyahu the possibility of a UN vote. The EU's clear priority is to bring the different parties back to the negotiation table, as unilateral steps on either side are considered not helpful. In the view of repeatedly stated EU principles like the non-recognition of changes to pre-1967 borders including Jerusalem or the illegality of the settlements under international law, the 1500 new housing units planned in Har Homa and a possible expansion of 2000 housing units in Ramat Shlomo represent a disturbing and threatening trend in Israeli politics. The continuing problems for the Palestinian population in East Jerusalem such as difficult access to religious sites, health care facilities and education services as well as the ongoing closure of Palestinian institutions are further cause for concern. Another example of clear discrimination against the Arab population are disputes on property in Sheik Jarrah, where Jewish settlers successfully claimed land they had possessed before 1948, through Israeli courts. Due to the "absentee property law", Israeli Arabs, who have the same proof of property prior to 1948, cannot claim it back in front of Israeli courts. Additionally, the EU certainly remains worried about the situation of the civilian population in Gaza, which was also expressed by the Quartet Statement (issued by the United Nations, the Russian Federation, the United States, and the European Union) at

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\* Speakers were **Christian Jouret**, European External Action Service, Advisor on the Middle East, **Haguit Ofran**, Head of the settlement monitoring for Peace Now, **Sara Benninga**, a leader of the Solidarity movement with Palestinians from East Jerusalem in Sheikh Jarrah and Silwan. The debate was moderated by **Simone Susskind**, President of Actions in the Mediterranean

the beginning of July. The EU's wish of seeing Jerusalem emerging as the capital of the two states seems far from becoming reality, in particular as the Israeli right wing enjoys a comfortable majority in domestic polls which makes it unlikely to even see Israel moving back to the negotiation table.

Thus, the be-all and end-all which determines future developments in and around Israel seems still to be the Israeli public opinion: In the context of this violent conflict, the Israeli public seems to have adopted an omni-present sense of self-protection which automatically triggers negative reactions to many different kinds of events: experiences thus do not allow for a neutral assessment of developments but immediately appear as a threat to Israel. This can also be observed in the reactions to the Arab spring: The most obvious example is certainly Egypt, to which Israel had a peaceful, albeit very fragile relation before the revolution and now fears losing the convenient agreements they used to have. Prime Minister Netanyahu's reaction to the agreement between Hamas and Fatah can also be seen as another example of an automatic negative reaction.

The public's opinion, however, does not only consist of this pessimistic paradigm and the 'right wing' but also of the so-called peace-camp. Now, a decade after the failed Israeli-Palestinian peace agreements, it has become possible to use the term 'two-state-solution' or 'Palestinian state', even by members of the right wing. Public opinion thus has shifted dramatically in the past ten years. At the same time, some people warn of a rising nationalistic ethno-centric tendency within Israel, which was, for example, very obvious during a community-organised march on Jerusalem Day in Sheik Jarah when hate paroles against the Arab population could be heard everywhere.

Consequently, the end of conflict, an eventual two-state-solution and peace in the Middle East rests in the hands of the people of Israel. Even the most right wing politician might have to change his/her mind if the Israeli public started to condemn the settlements. Also the automatic protectionist reaction needs to be overcome, even though there are of course reasons for the public to have feelings of fear and mistrust. In order to change public opinion and in order to raise awareness of the immorality of incidents such as in Sheik Jarah, a possible initiative is to promote Jewish morals and values which contradict the negative and dangerous self-dynamics surrounding the settlements and the conflict in general.