Introduction

On the “Arab street”—a locution according to Rashid Khalidi “used to denigrate the people of the region” and one that “should now be permanently retired” (Khalidi, 2011b)—the Israeli-Palestinian conflict appears to have lost its appeal as the proverbial whipping boy of autocratic rulers. Demands for local accountability bolstered by newfound empowerment signal a shift in collective priorities, as “waves of anti-Israel protests [that] would wash over the capitals of Arab and Muslim states” (Eldar, 2011) fail, at least momentarily, to materialize. While large swaths of the Arab-world focus on setting their domestic house in order, Palestinians and Israelis appear to be paying attention. The ostensible effects, bearing in mind processes set in motion prior to the Arab-Spring, include rising Palestinian discontent with Hamas and Fatah leadership, greater support for a Fatah-Hamas reconciliation and a Palestinian UN bid, concessions, moderation and a move toward non-violent demonstrations by Hamas and Fatah. And on the Israeli side, concessions sparked by unprecedented protests—straddling class and political divides—to decry economic worries.

Tasked by the editors to assess how events related to the Arab Spring have affected the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (henceforth the “conflict”) writ large, its violent manifestation in particular, we put forth the following caveats. First, the Arab Spring is by no means monolithic in its effect on the conflict; within a single Arab state faced with imminent or realized regime change, any particular development may bode well for one party to the conflict and be undesirable to another. The pooled effects therefore need to be assessed in each state, across the set of states experiencing upheaval, and for the various parties to the conflict. Second, drawing a tie between external developments and internal levels of violence is not straightforward; at any given moment, distinct political actors perpetrate violence for largely dissimilar reasons, whereas a single actor may engage in violence for reasons that vary over time. A third qualification pertains to our writing in December, 2011—the proximity of our analysis to current events, our uncertainty as to how these events will unfold, and the realization that outcomes associated with specific uprisings will vary, even markedly.

With these caveats in mind, we analyze the available data for short-term changes in the source, location, and scale of violence. To analyze potential longer-term effects, we present
a set of perspectives that assesses how the Arab Spring has and likely will impact the conflict, distinguishing causes for optimism and pessimism from the perspective of each political actor. Our discussion is by no means exhaustive, yet constitutes an attempt to capture diverse views that link changes in affected Arab states to violence in Gaza, Israel and the West Bank.

Short-Term Patterns of Violence

Data from B’Tselem and OCHAoPT on Palestinian and Israeli fatalities in Gaza and the West Bank and on Palestinian attacks on Israelis, including data on rocket and mortar attacks from the Gaza strip collected by the Israeli Security Agency, reveal two distinct patterns in 2011: (i) the first consists of three episodes that deviate in scale from those in 2010; (ii) the second of smaller scale attacks that deviate marginally in timing from those of the previous year.

Three Large-Scale Episodes

Relative to 2010, the escalations in 2011 differ in terms of severity. In Gaza, where the brunt of violence occurred, Palestinian fatalities perpetrated by Israeli security forces increased by 25%, whereas Palestinian fatalities perpetrated by Palestinians decreased by 12% (see Figure 1A). A marked increase in rocket and mortar launches targeting Israeli cities (see Figure 1C) also occurred, from 244 in 2010 to 369 in 2011, albeit with the source and location of attacks unchanged.

The first escalation in March 2011 involved heavy rocket and mortar fire from the Gaza strip prompting retaliatory air strikes by Israel. In the confrontation, sparked by the murder of an Israeli settler family in Itmar on March 11th (Sherwood, 2011), Jerusalem suffered its first serious terrorist attack since 2004—a bomb attack on March 23rd in which one British tourist was killed and 39 injured (Lidman and Katz, 2011). Under public pressure and loosening popular support for adhering to a ceasefire with Israel since 2009, Hamas is believed to have orchestrated the escalation in an effort to reassert its militant credentials (Byman, 2011; Ha’aretz, 2011). Indeed, on March 19th Hamas openly claimed responsibility for a barrage of mortar attacks for the first time since 2009 (Donnison, 2011). The subsequent de-escalation towards the end of April marked a Hamas-Fatah reconciliation and an opening of the Rafah Crossing to civilian traffic (Abu Toameh and Keinon, 2011); violence decreased and remained at comparably low levels throughout May, June and July (Figure 1A, B and C).

In the aftermath of an incident near Eilat on August 18th in which 8 Israelis were killed (6 civilians and 2 security force personnel) and 29 injured (Lappin, 2011), violence escalated again. Israel initially blamed the incident on the Popular Resistance Committees (PRC) operating from Gaza and retaliated with air strikes targeting PRC operatives, to which the PRC, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Hamas and Salafi-Islamist groups responded with heavy rocket and mortar fire on Israel. The situation diffused toward the end of August when Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad agreed to a ceasefire (Jerusalem Post, 2011b; Macintyre, 2011a). A subsequent IDF investigation established that the attackers were not from

1 Whereas the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Popular Resistance Committees, and Tawhid and Jihad Brigades have claimed responsibility for various attacks, the perpetrators’ affiliation is not known with certainty.
Gaza but rather Egyptian residents of Sinai (Fishman, 2011), casting doubt on the alleged Palestinian responsibility.

After a period of relative calm in September, violence escalated for a third time in October. This time, an exchange between Israel and members of Islamic Jihad based in Gaza attributed to the organization’s need to re-asserting its standing: “Had the lull in the fighting gone on much longer Jihad risked fading from the public eye in Gaza.” (Harel and Issacharoff, 2011).

The three escalations in 2011 are not only more severe but also noticeably more abrupt in their initiation and subsequent de-escalation relative to 2010. On average, the number of rocket/mortar launches per month (Figure 1C) fluctuates between periods of escalation and

\[\text{Number of Rocket/Mortar Launches per Month} \]

\[\text{Figure 1. Violent Events and Fatalities (2009–2011)}\]

Note: Data on conflict related fatalities covers the period from January 19, 2009 to November 20, 2011; A: Fatalities in Gaza (small figure: fatality distribution Gaza/West Bank); B, C, D: all attacks on Israel/Israelis, Rocket/Mortar attacks from Gaza and small scale attacks respectively, as reported by the Israeli Security Agency.

relative calm by only 16 launches in 2010 and by 69 in 2011. In a similar vein, Palestinian fatalities from Israeli military action (Figure 1A) fluctuate on average by 11 in 2011 compared to 5 in 2010. The abrupt escalation and de-escalation and low levels of violence between escalations suggest that the three violent episodes in Gaza were coordinated in a top-down manner. In comparison, patterns in 2010 display less pronounced peaks in rocket/mortar attacks, pointing to less orchestrated violence dynamics.

### Small-Scale Attacks

Drawing inspiration from the Arab Spring, peaceful protests to commemorate Al Nakbahr paradoxically resulted in violent clashes with security forces between May 13th and 15th on Israel’s border with Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and in the Palestinian territories (Laub, 2011). Sixteen Palestinian casualties and hundreds of injuries effectively highlighted Israel’s ill-suited response to unarmed Palestinian protest. Commenting on the Israeli response, Ehud Barak noted “the Palestinians’ transition from terrorism and suicide bombings to deliberately unarmed mass demonstrations is a transition that will present us with difficult challenges” (ibid).

As in previous years, small-scale attacks (Molotov cocktails, stone throwing) in 2011 increased in tandem with large-scale violence between Gaza and Israel, with the following exceptions: (i) the increase in May (Figure 1D) that occurred in the absence of an escalation in Gaza (Figures 1A and C) and potentially in response to the Al Nakbahr incidents; and (ii) the absence of an increase in October during the Islamic Jihad/Israeli escalation in Gaza (Figure D). The ostensible decoupling of bottom-up from top-down violence in May/October, together with an increase in small-scale violence in the West Bank and Jerusalem, points to a deviation, albeit minor, from years past.

### Medium to Long-Term Implications for Violence

Operation “Cast Lead” curtailed the ability of Gazan groups to strike at Israel and was, as early as July 2009, accompanied by a professed shift in Hamas tactics from rocket attacks to a “culture of resistance” (New York Times, 2011). As such, levels of violence in 2011—636 rockets and mortar shells fired from the Gaza strip (here we refer to ‘launches’ which outnumber ‘attacks,’ given that several launches may constitute a single attack) into Southern Israel—are significantly lower than those in the years prior to “Cast Lead.” —3720 in 2008 and 2810 in 2007. Palestinian fatalities perpetrated by Israeli security forces in the West Bank and Gaza display a similar trend: 109 in 2011, compared to 456 in 2008, and 379 in 2007 (B’Tselem). Placing events in broader perspective, mindful that the Arab Spring continues to unfold and cognizant of its various consequences, we distinguish causes for optimism and pessimism from the perspective of each political actor, with attendant implications for violence in the medium to long term.

#### Israeli-Pessimistic

Pessimists suggest that the Arab spring has heightened Israel’s security concerns, as the certainty associated with the Mubarak- and Assad-led regimes gives way to more radical,
divided, and unstable power structures. In September 2011 General Eisenberg, commander of the IDF’s Gaza Division, suggested that a radical ‘Arab Winter’ could increase the chances of an all out war in the future (Harel, 2011). At the extreme is a fear that the uprisings will ultimately follow the Iranian example leaving Israel exposed to openly aggressive Islamic states—regimes far more hostile than their predecessors (Rubin, 2011) or ones that fail to abide by tacit rules responsible for maintaining the status quo (Byman, 2011). In Egypt, one of the two Arab signatories of a peace treaty with Israel, a poll conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press found that 54% of Egyptians support an annulment of the 1979 peace treaty with Israel (Pew 2010, 2011; Morris, 2011). A re-invigorated Egyptian-Hamas coalition tied to the political ascendancy of the Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt’s largest Islamist party to which Hamas owes its very origin, is in the making. Whether these ties will further moderate Hamas’ stance is questionable. What is clear is that if Hamas moderates it position, radical splinter groups in Gaza like Islamic Jihad will emerge as bigger players on the domestic scene. And should external events take a different turn with the Assad regime remaining in power, the risk is likely to be more diversionary in character, as Syria and Lebanon-Hezbollah foment conflict with Israel to deflect attention from domestic difficulties (Byman, 2011).

**Israeli-Optimistic**

Optimists note that in the new environment created by the Arab Spring Israel retains Egyptian support despite regime change. The Muslim Brotherhood, the party most likely to sweep the election, can be expected to exercise pragmatism stopping short of any open conflict with Israel for fear of alienating the Egyptian army and risking a loss of newfound power (Khalidi, 2011a). In Syria, the Assad regime’s preoccupation with internal challenges has shifted its focus away from Israel, potentially leaving room for a new peace initiative to develop (Rubin, 2011). Also tied to the upheavals in Syria, Hezbollah’s backing of Assad has resulted in loss of Syrian popular support, whereas Hamas’ criticism of Assad and backing of the Muslim Brotherhood has prompted a withdrawal of Syrian patronage, developments that presumably bode well for Israel (ibid). Iran, too, has cut its financial support for Hamas as the movement’s leadership contemplates relocation to Jordan and finds a new, possible Jordanian-Qatari axis of support (Greenwood, 2011). Any widening of the distance between Hamas and Iran is to be welcomed by Israel, as is a more limited set of options for movement—Meshal’s relocation to Egypt would be opposed by the military; his move to Lebanon would imply Hezbollah control; whereas a move to Qatar may be too far removed from the territories (Bar’el, 2011b). And then there is the benefit of Hamas setting up shop in Jordan, a far more acceptable host given its peace agreement and commitment to Israel’s security (ibid). With regard to Israel’s general position in the region, “[..] there can be a hope that democracy and domestic development will become a higher priority than fighting Israel, thus easing the pressure on Israel, or at least preoccupying Arabs and Muslims for a while” (Rubin, 2011). These developments, coupled with a Palestinian emphasis on non-violent protest, suggest that new avenues for moving the peace-process forward, with an attendant reduction in violence, could emerge from the changing environment.

**Palestinian-Pessimistic**

From the Palestinian perspective, a collapse of the Unity Agreement between Hamas and Fatah (signed on May 4th, 2011) would spell another political disaster and lead to a paral-
ysis of the type experienced since 2007. Leaving aside Israel’s refusal to negotiate with a unified Palestinian bloc that includes Hamas, the unpopularity of Hamas in the Gaza Strip—34% in favor of Hamas compared to 72% in favor of Fatah (Pew 2010, 2011)—provides added incentive to the movement’s leaders to curtail rising popular protest that may ultimately threaten their own control. Besides, Gazan frustration could clash with Hamas’ need to reaffirm its militant credentials—“armed resistance is our strategic option and the only way to liberate our land” (see Ismail Haniyeh’s recent comments at a 24th Anniversary Hamas rally as cited in Macintyre 2011b)—increasing the possibility of violent repression in Gaza. Whereas Meshal’s move to Jordan could increase tension between Hamas and Fatah, considering King Abdullah’s November visit to Ramallah intended to affirm Abbas’s position as the authoritative Palestinian leader (New York Times, 2011). And as Hamas avails itself of the relaxed controls at the Rafah Crossing, the risk of renewed conflict with Israel could also increase (Byman, 2011), with attendant consequences for violence.

Palestinian-Optimistic

Optimists draw attention to the fact that the “Palestinian Spring” has resulted in major changes to the perception and structure of the Palestinian movement—Abbas’s UN bid and Meshal’s willingness to compromise with Fatah in particular. The end result: Hamas and Fatah have joined forces to represent the Palestinian cause and pursue peaceful means of protest and resistance against Israel (Greenwood, 2011). Of the three political actors, Hamas appears to be the largest beneficiary of regime change in Egypt. The movement enjoys rising popular support in Egypt (New York Times, 2011), is vindicated by the rise of its parent organization, the Muslim Brotherhood, in the country’s ongoing elections, and has benefited from the opening of the Rafah crossing (Jerusalem Post, 2011a). Jordan’s bid to become a key player in Palestinian politics, together with Qatari support, may serve to moderate the movement’s position, though that remains to be seen. Fatah too, appears to have made out well. Abbas’ popularity has soared in the West Bank (from 52% in 2009 to 61% in 2011) and more notably in Gaza (from 51% to 73% over the same period).

Conclusion

Our analysis advocates caution in drawing a link between Arab uprisings and recent violence in Gaza, the West Bank and Israel: preliminary data suggest that the Arab Spring has thus far not significantly altered the nature of violence in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Only the peaceful Al Nakbah demonstrations evidence more widespread, grass-roots change; the most violent confrontations with Israel were orchestrated in a top-down manner, perhaps even more so than in previous years given the more sudden transitions to and from escalation. While the Arab uprisings coincided with, and may indeed have tipped developments toward (intra-Palestinian) reconciliation and non-violent protest, moderation on the part of Hamas was voiced following the Israeli incursion as early as July 2009, with calls for Palestinian unity voiced as early as mid-2007 following cycles of intra-Palestinian violence in Gaza. On the Israeli side, a direct link to the Arab uprisings is questionable—Tel Aviv’s “tent city” protestors arguably have more in common, from a socio-economic perspective, with protestors in Madison or Madrid than with the bulwark of Arab dissenters—and the likelihood that the deadlocked discourse of security and territory will cease to trump popular sentiment for change remains low.
Hope for the beginning of a beautiful friendship? Palestinian frustration may take the form of mass protest that is equally critical of its own leadership as it is of Israeli intransigence. Whereas the Al-Aqsa Intifada was orchestrated from Ramallah in a distinctly top-down manner and the 1987 grass-roots Intifada subsequently co-opted by the Palestinian leadership, a third uprising could break the mold of past, largely elite-directed episodes. Regardless, the response from the Palestinian leadership and the Israeli side will likely be to repress, for ultimately “peace, in its Israeli version, is made with leaders, preferably autocratic ones, and not with peoples” (Bar’el, 2011a). Hamas’ ever shifting commitment to non-violent means and ability to rearm as a result of laxer Egyptian control could set in motion a spiral of violence that ultimately tests Israel’s relationship with Egypt. And the ability, or lack thereof, of new Arab regimes to govern could reinstate the political appeal of Israeli scapegoating, with sectarian divisions increasing discord within Palestinian groups. Sadly, rounding up all the usual suspects appears to be a somewhat more probable outcome.

References


