ARAB RALLYING CRY IS: 'DIGNITY!'

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John Bell, The Toronto Star, 1 February 2011
Tunisia has fallen, Egypt is on the verge, Jordan, Yemen and Algeria are feeling the tremors. Many commentators have mentioned that these revolutions are about bread, freedom and justice, and they also frequently mention "dignity."

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A Palestinian shows his support for Egyptian protesters as he holds the Egyptian flag during a demonstration in Jerusalem

This need for status and legitimacy is basic and universal, and can be disregarded only at considerable cost. Certainly Arab states have not offered their citizens this dignity, and now they are suffering the consequences.

Many Arab leaders have also failed to proffer dignity at another level. They are perceived as, intentionally or not, complicit in Israeli occupation, weak in standing up to Israeli actions — thereby striking another blow at the Arab need for dignity.
This reality explains the popularity of Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah, who through his words and war machine against Israel provides Arabs with the dignity that most of their leaders have failed to deliver. This kind of "outward" dignity regarding an enemy trumps the need for internal dignity because, in the Arab world, the needs of the group supersede those of the individual.
Curiously, this may also explain why Syria, a tougher and more thoroughly oppresive regime than Egypt's, may prove more resistant to revolution than other Arab countries. Beyond its ruthlessness, Syria's "politics of Arab dignity" and support for resistance against Israel, as much as they are a facade, may provide a measure of immunity from popular revolt. Its refusal to "fold" to Israeli and American demands makes it much less susceptible to the "Dignity Revolution" sweeping the Arab world.
The Syrian people may still find their government sufficiently lacking in liberties to warrant a revolt, but the pan-Arab sense of a lack of dignity due to Israeli oppression will nevertheless not go away.

Indeed, the more democratic Arab governments will be, the more they will demand of Israel an end to occupation.

If Israel had any foresight regarding the future of the region, it would rush to create a Palestinian state along durable and fair lines (i.e. not interim, not partial and not in denial of history) and so avoid decades of future confrontation based on this profound Arab need. Although not a sure bet, it is the best one available. The status quo is a guarantee of conflict.

The real question is what are the limits of this natural desire for dignity, and how does it take concrete form. Within Arab states, the need for status and respect will have to be balanced alongside that for bread and freedom, as well as the development of the necessary political culture and structures — a long-term proposition. Regarding Israel, the need for dignity will revolve around where Israel ends and Palestine begins in terms of borders, the status of Jerusalem and the Palestinian refugees.

So far, Israel has rejected answering these basic questions, thus permitting radicals like Nasrallah to claim the need for dignity ad infinitum in terms of both space and time. The responsibility of countries like the United States will be to insist that the need for redress for Palestinian, and thus Arab dignity, is answered fairly and squarely, and soon, by defining the limits of an Israeli and Palestinian state and the other core issues of the conflict.

By doing so, it would nip in the bud a natural cause of Arab revolt and conflict against Israel for decades to come. All the bread, new political structures and development projects in the world will not make this basic, and universal, need for status and respect go away. Over time, the current Arab revolutions will only naturally look to ensure that the Palestinians are also "worthy of respect."

John Bell is director of the Middle East Program at the Toledo International Centre for Peace in Madrid and co-author of The Missing Piece, a political blog on the Middle East .