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## In Israel protests, a surprise Arab-inspired taste

By DIAA HADID

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Israelis, living in an island of relative freedom and comfort and surrounded by countries they generally view with disdain, are not accustomed to taking their cues from Arabs.

So the idea that the eruption of a mass movement protesting Israel's corrosive social inequality could have been influenced - even inspired - by the Mideast's Arab Spring revolts, for many Israelis, just doesn't compute.

But the traces of influence were there as a quarter million Israelis took to the streets last weekend to protest a stratospheric cost of living, poor public services and one of the highest income gaps in the developed world. Chants echoed those that rang out in the streets of Arab capitals, and tent protest camps on the style of those in Cairo's Tahrir Square have arisen in the streets of Tel Aviv and other Israeli cities.

Both movements also shared a dramatic suddenness: Much like Arabs had for decades seemed resigned to dictatorships, Israelis had taken economic divisions as a fact of life, until each decided they had had enough.

The Israelis aren't calling for regime change, and their country already has a democracy. But some Israelis embrace the connection and even find a pleasant surprise in the thought that,

despite decades of hostility and distrust, the Mideast antagonists share similar hopes for a better life.

"It's definitely not an accident," said Iddo Felsenthal, a 27-year-old school teacher and protester. "I personally hope that it would lead to a better understanding between Arabs and Jews."

Felsenthal was sitting in Jerusalem's downtown Independence Park, where protesters camped in some 30 tents. Men and women sat in the shade. Some scrawled signs. A man worshipped among them, swaying as he recited prayers. A dog pestered protesters to toss him a ball. Children played on the grass. A slogan, "The tent city is just the beginning," was emblazoned in Hebrew on a large sheet.

To an outsider, it would hardly seem strange that Israelis would be affected, if even subconsciously, by what is going on in the Arab world. But in fact their country is deeply isolated from its neighbors, and not just by decades of enmity and violence.

A majority of Israelis are culturally closer to the West than the Middle East, a legacy of the Zionist movement that emerged from Europe and the European origins of the vast majority of those who have led the Jewish state since. That can translate at times into a disdain for Arab countries as backward.

Israel's military might and the strength of its economy compared to its neighbors have heightened a feeling of superiority.

Until the recent convulsions, few tended to pay much attention to regional developments, even though Israel borders Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, the Palestinian territories and Egypt.

So many bristle at the suggestion that the tremors in the Arab world could have given Israel a jostle.

"We are some nice quiet people. We don't want problems," said Nissim Slama, a 28-year-old volunteer at another Jerusalem protest tent. "It's not like Tahrir."

For Slama, the idea that Jews came together decades ago to build their own state was enough inspiration.

"We know if people get together can do crazy, awesome things - like create a country."

The wider public who dove into the moment in recent days may not feel inspired by the Arab Spring, but some of those who initially organized Israel's protests acknowledge the influence, in some cases citing also Spain - where young people have been protesting rampant joblessness for months, in some cases erecting tent camps and scuffling with police.

"People saw that other people managed to leave their houses and demand their rights. People here were quite desperate - but quiet and even numb," said protest leader Stav Shaffir. "But in

Spain ... and the Arab countries - to demand their rights and cope with violence and challenges was of course a great inspiration," she said.

In Cairo's Tahrir Square, where hundreds of thousands demonstrated until President Hosni Mubarak stepped down, the signature chant was, "The people demand the fall of the regime."

The same cadence is in the Israelis' chant, "The people want social justice."

One sign in the Tel Aviv demonstration Saturday scrawled the Arabic word and anti-Mubarak slogan, "Irhal" - "Leave." Underneath, the protester wrote in Hebrew, "Egypt - it's here."

There are other similarities. In both countries, the middle class is leading struggles. They share communal solidarity: in impoverished Egypt, volunteers distributed food to demonstrators. In Israel, some protest tents have kitchen volunteers who cook and serve three meals a day. Both began with a single grievance.

Israel's social justice movement began with a tent encampment on an upscale boulevard in Tel Aviv last month, protesting high housing prices for purchase and rental. It quickly spread, attracting supporters from Israel's squeezed and exhausted middle class: high prices, an eroding health system, expensive child care, high taxes, overcrowded schools and wages that often do not match increasingly ambitious expectations.

Three weeks later, protest tents dot most Israeli cities. There's music and mingling singles along with evening meetings and political discussions.

The weekly focus is Saturday night, when protesters organize mass demonstrations. Police estimate that in cities across Israel, at least 250,000 demonstrated last Saturday night, headed by a colorful gathering in downtown Tel Aviv that filled streets as protesters were serenaded by top Israeli pop icons.

Responding to the demonstrators, the government formed a panel of economic and social experts who will recommend ways to improve living standards. It is set to meet for the first time on Sunday.

Even protesters who see regional inspiration draw sharp distinctions.

They note that Israel is a democracy, despite its flaws. Government forces are not attacking demonstrators. The chant of "revolution" is ballot-box saber-rattling. Protesters demand social justice, not regime change.

Conditions unique to Israel also fostered momentum. The country has been relatively free of Palestinian attacks for several years. That quiet has allowed Israelis to focus on social and economic problems, instead of security matters, traditionally the country's chief concern.

"The water we were sinking in reached our noses," said unemployed 49-year-old Amnon Tsur, who lives with his mother.

To Ayala Levy, a 45-year-old mother of four, social desperation is part of the spark, but she also points to a Jewish tradition of communal solidarity and dismisses any influence from the Arab Spring.

"You need more than inspiration to leave your own home and live in a tent," she said.