

Israel through Arab Strategic Lenses: A Changed Reality

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Since it was founded, the State of Israel has sought both peaceful relations with its Arab neighbors and acceptance by the Arab world as a legitimate political entity. The assumption was that the process of integrating in the Middle East theater was essential for Israel's political and economic development, the mitigation of its security problems, and its guaranteed future. Until the 1970s, however, Israel was rejected by the Arab world, which found it hard to accept the resounding defeat of the 1948 war and still hoped to overturn its outcome. Even after the Arab humiliation in the Six Day War, the Arab world rejected every move towards acceptance of Israel. The most prominent expression of this rejection was the "three no's" of the Arab summit in Khartoum in September 1967: no peace, no negotiations, and no recognition of Israel. Despite the Khartoum resolution, however, the 1967 war proved to be a watershed in the Arab world's attitude towards Israel: from then on, the strategic objective of most of the Arab world – although not all – became reversing the results of the war, i.e., regaining the territories won by Israel in 1967. The goal of overturning the results of 1948, a code phrase in the Arab world for Israel's destruction, receded in Arab political discourse.

The signing of the peace treaty with Egypt in March 1979 created a dual expectation in Israel: peace with Egypt included positive components that would put it on a firm, lasting footing, and it would lead to peace agreements with other Arab countries and normalization between Israel and the Arab and Muslim world. This expectation has been realized only in

part. Peace with Egypt has been stable for thirty years, and even periods of severe confrontation between Israel and the Palestinians or wars in southern Lebanon have not damaged its foundations. Fifteen years after the peace treaty with Egypt was signed, Jordan signed a peace agreement with Israel, and several Arab countries have informal relations with Israel. No less important, leaders of all Arab countries, without exception, now accept the principle that the Arab-Israeli conflict should be solved diplomatically and not militarily, albeit on terms acceptable to them.

On the other hand, the peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan, not to mention relations with other Arab countries, remain cold. Egypt has made no serious effort to deepen the relationship and expand economic and technological cooperation, and Jordan is disappointed with the extent of its economic cooperation with Israel. More importantly, no effort has been made in either country to educate the public about the significance of true peace or to limit hatred and hostility towards Israel. In both Jordan and Egypt, as in other Arab countries, there are still numerous circles, among them intellectuals and academics, that express hostility towards Israel and object to peace with it. In neither country has the regime done much to change this attitude. Although the perception of Israel as a threat has ebbed among the Arabs in the last generation, most of the Arab world still sees Israel as a threat and adversary, and some even as an enemy. The Arab countries have done little to educate their publics to moderate their opposition to normalization of relations with Israel and emphasize that these relations also benefit the Arab world.

Normalization: Difficulties and Obstacles

Sixty years after Israel's founding and thirty years after the signing of the peace treaty with Egypt, progress in normalization between the Arab world and Israel continues to encounter a formidable obstacle: a large part of the Arab world finds it hard to accept Israel as an integral and legitimate part of the Middle East. Where the Arab world is concerned, Israel is an alien entity – the sole non-Muslim country in a Muslim region, a political entity founded by Western imperialism that deprived the Palestinians of their rights. This bias compounds the perception of Israel as a threat. Many Arabs believe that Israel wants to expand its territory to the extent that its

military power will allow, seeks (with the help of the US) to perpetuate its military superiority over the Arab countries, and is inclined to use military force to promote its interests. In their view, Israel wants to use peace and normalization as a tool to persuade the Arab countries to come to terms with its territorial conquests and its military and technological advantage.

The growth of radical Islamic movements in the Arab world in the past two decades has aggravated this perception. Extremist Muslim groups constitute the hardest core of opposition to peace with Israel, both in the Arab and Muslim countries and among the Palestinians. This opposition is a matter of principle: Israel seized land belonging to the Muslim nation, controls holy places sacred to Islam, and represses millions of Muslims under its rule. There is therefore no compromising with or accepting Israel's right to exist, and supporting infidels is forbidden by Islam. Not surprisingly, then, the leading opposition to Israel's existence is the radical Islamic (though non-Arab) regime in Iran, which promotes the continuation of armed struggle against Israel. Most of the Arab world disagrees with the radical Islamic movements and regards them as hostile and a threat to the Arab regimes themselves, but these movements have much influence on Arab public opinion, and the moderate Arab regimes are unable to ignore them and their anti-Israel stance.

The most difficult tactical problem in achieving progress in normalization remains the unsolved issues of the Arab-Israeli conflict: the Palestinian issue and the Syrian issue. Peace between Israel and Syria can in itself aid in further thawing Israel's relations with the Arab world but it is the Palestinian question that is critical to future relations between Israel and the Arab world, because Arab countries regard themselves as obligated to aid in the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. There is also a weighty emotional aspect to the Palestinian question that is absent from the Syrian issue: since the first intifada the Arab world has been exposed repeatedly to scenes of Palestinian suffering in the media and identifies with this population. For this reason, as long as the Palestinians do not have their own state, many will regard normalization with Israel as betrayal of the Palestinian issue, sanction of Israel's possession of Palestinian territories, and damage to the Palestinians' chances of obtaining their rights through negotiations.

Furthermore, over the past twenty years the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has escalated to a much higher level of violence and counter-violence, as reflected in the two intifadas and Operation Cast Lead in the Gaza Strip. These developments impact negatively on moderate countries, particularly Egypt and Jordan, because influenced by both Islamic groups and the harsh scenes on television, the publics there have pressured the regimes to help the Palestinians and downgrade their relations with Israel.

Israel and the Arab World: Positive Changes

Since the 1970s and especially since the early 1980s, important changes have occurred in the Arab world's attitude to Israel. First of all, most Arab leaders, state and non-state alike, have gradually reached the conclusion that Israel is a fact and cannot be destroyed, both because of its military power and due to the steady commitment of the US to its existence and security. Furthermore, Egypt's – followed by Jordan's – choice of peace with Israel and withdrawal from the cycle of war, combined with Iraq's downfall in its wars with Iran (1980s) and the West (1991 and 2003), have prevented the formation of an Arab military front against Israel. The collapse of the Soviet Union dealt the final blow to the military option against Israel by depriving Syria of strategic superpower backing, and leaving the US, with its special relationship with Israel, as the sole superpower. These developments led to the realization among Arab leaders that the conflict with Israel should be ended through diplomacy, because war was neither practical nor to the Arabs' benefit.

Second, in the first half of the 1990s, two new diplomatic channels developed between the Arabs and Israel: the Israeli-Syrian channel and the Palestinian channel. Although the Syrian channel has to date led to no agreement and the Palestinian channel has yielded only limited agreements and been accompanied by outbreaks of extreme violence between Israel and the Palestinians, the very existence of the process contributed to the legitimacy of dialogue with Israel and the creation among moderate Arab governments of an interest in encouraging this process.

Third, for several years a part of the Arab world has recognized increasing willingness by Israel to pay a higher price for resolution of the Palestinian issue and perhaps also of the Syrian issue. This was reflected

primarily in Israeli government support of a two-state solution and in the 2005 withdrawal from the Gaza Strip. Some in the Arab world claim that normalization of relations with Israel will be possible only after Israel withdraws from all Palestinian territory and solves the refugee problem, because otherwise a change in the attitude to Israel will harm the Palestinians and their bargaining power. Others assert that dialogue with Israel, even before it withdraws further from the territories, will help the Palestinians because it will be possible to influence and soften Israel's positions.¹

Fourth, other threats and dangers to the Arab countries have emerged and command attention, some long term and others relatively new: the Iranian threat, particularly the possibility that Iran will obtain nuclear weapons; the crisis in Iraq and its effects on its neighbors; the strengthening of the Iran-led radical Shiite axis, including Shiite Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and the Palestinian theater; the need to combat radical Islamic terrorism, including from al-Qaeda and its affiliates; and socioeconomic problems, aggravated by the current global economic crisis. Solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would presumably facilitate dealing with the other problems.

The strengthening of Hizbollah in Lebanon and Hamas' rise to power in the Gaza Strip have also alarmed the moderate Arab governments. The Arab world regards these two developments as linked to Iran's efforts to expand its influence in the Arab world and establish footholds along the Mediterranean coast. The confrontations between Israel and Hizbollah and Hamas alarm the moderate governments, since they contribute to unrest in Arab public opinion and reinforce the radical trend. Therefore, although Israel was widely condemned by the Arab governments during both the Second Lebanon War and Operation Cast Lead, the moderate governments harbored silent hopes that Israel would deliver a military blow to the two organizations and thereby weaken them.

The Saudi Peace Initiative

The Saudi Arabian peace initiative was published in February 2002, when Crown Prince (later King) Abdullah was quoted in an interview to the effect that in return for Israel's withdrawal to the June 1967 borders, the Arab countries would agree to a comprehensive peace with Israel and

provide it with security guarantees.² The Saudi initiative became an Arab initiative when it was endorsed, with extensions and revisions, at the Arab summit in Beirut in March 2002. The initiative proposed a sweeping deal between the Arab world and Israel: Israel would withdraw completely from the Arab territories it conquered in 1967, including the Golan Heights and Lebanese territory that remained occupied, and return to the June 1967 lines; agree to the establishment of an independent Palestinian state in the territories conquered in 1967, with East Jerusalem as its capital; and reach a negotiated solution to the Palestinian refugee problem, according to UN General Assembly Resolution 194 of 1949. In return, the Arab countries would declare that the Arab-Israeli conflict was over, sign peace agreements with Israel, conduct normal relations with it, and provide it with security guarantees.³

The Arab initiative formally embodies the significant change in the Arab world towards Israel and the Arab-Israeli conflict. In place of the question of Israel's right to exist and Arab recognition, which dominated the resolutions of the 1967 Khartoum summit, the question of the Arab territories that Israel conquered in 1967 is the focus of the conflict. The formula stipulates that if Israel withdraws from these territories and the refugee problem is solved, the conflict will end. Furthermore, the Arab initiative offers Israel more than what individual Arab parties – the Palestinians and Syria – can give it as autonomous entities, namely peace and normalization with all Arab countries.

Despite the important change it represents, the Arab initiative has so far made no progress towards Arab-Israeli peace. The timing of its publication – at the height of the al-Aqsa intifada, when Israel and the Palestinians were not open to peace initiatives – was inauspicious. The Beirut summit passed several resolutions that appear to contradict at least part of the initiative. Some parts of the initiative were totally unacceptable to Israel, and its government, headed by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, rejected it because the initiative appeared to be a package deal that included language unacceptable to Israel. It was claimed, for example, that solving the refugee problem according to Resolution 194 was tantamount to recognition of the refugees' right of return, and that the purpose of the initiative was therefore to detract from the Jewish character of Israel by returning the refugees. The

quid pro quo offered to Israel appeared to be overly general and vague, and some claimed that it was nothing but a Saudi Arabian exercise in public relations aimed at improving that country's image following the terrorist attacks of September 2001. The Palestinian side also expressed disappointment that the initiative did not explicitly mention the Palestinian refugees' right of return.⁴ The Palestinians in any event did not have enough power to influence the initiative.

Although the Arab initiative did not restart the diplomatic process, it has since been revived and was reconfirmed at a summit in Riyadh in March 2007. The moderate Arab parties have tried to market the initiative to the Israeli public: Jordan distributed the resolution in Hebrew to the members of the Knesset in 2007, and the PLO published the initiative as an announcement in the Israeli press in November 2008. International parties have renewed their interest in the initiative. More importantly, the subject began to be raised in talks between members of Israeli and Arab governments, and Israeli president Shimon Peres praised the initiative in November 2008, saying that while it was not perfect from Israel's perspective, it merited examination as to its feasibility, including the possibility of conducting talks with a team acting on behalf of the Arab League.⁵ Presumably the renewed interest in the initiative stemmed from rising concern in the moderate Sunni camp about the strengthening of the radical Shiite axis, and the drive to accelerate negotiations between Israel and both the Palestinian Authority (PA) and Syria.

Likewise, the Annapolis Conference, which was designed to jumpstart the peace process for a permanent settlement between Israel and the Palestinians and create a mechanism for expediting negotiations between the two sides, took place in November 2007. By that time, however, Hamas had already seized control of the government in the Gaza Strip, which greatly weighed the process down. The internal weakness of the respective leaderships, both Palestinian and Israeli, did not allow them to create a real process, beyond the bare fact of the negotiations between them.

The IDF's operation in the Gaza Strip in January 2009 damaged, at least temporarily, prospects for the Arab initiative and the ability to set in motion a peace process based on the initiative's principles. The emergency Arab summit that convened in Qatar in response to the operation called

for rescinding the Arab peace initiative, and Syrian president Bashar al-Asad declared that the initiative was dead. At the same time, this summit was not considered a binding meeting, because over one third of the Arab countries did not attend, among them key countries like Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan, as well as the PA. For this reason, this call is not an official cancellation of the initiative.

Israel in the Eyes of the Arab World

The changes that have taken place over the last generation in the Arab world vis-à-vis Israel, specifically the Saudi peace initiative, raise several questions for Israel about its attitude towards the peace process: what can the Arab world contribute to the peace process, beyond those directly involved, namely, the Palestinians and Syria? What should Israel's expectations be? Can the Arab world aid the process before a breakthrough is achieved, especially when the Palestinians and Israel are still not ready to reach a comprehensive settlement? Can the common regional interests of Israel and the moderate Arab countries, including those involving the peace process, be exploited?

The Saudi/Arab initiative apparently reflects a genuine Arab interest in a diplomatic resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The assertion that the initiative was a public relations ploy to improve Saudi Arabia's image is tenuous. Almost from the outset the initiative was an Arab initiative, not merely a Saudi Arabian one, and is presented as such. Indeed, Saudi Arabia had already proposed a peace initiative – the 1981 Fahd plan for a diplomatic settlement between Israel and the Palestinians. More important, the Arab initiative reflects the willingness of all leaders of Arab countries to end the Arab-Israeli conflict – particularly its Palestinian core – through diplomatic means on terms acceptable to the Arabs, and achieve a comprehensive settlement of the conflict with the help of international entities, headed by the US.

Those responsible for formulating the Arab initiative did not state what the Arab governments were willing and able to contribute to the peace process, beyond a general definition of the terms for a settlement, but several possibilities can be mentioned:

1. The Arab world already offers Israel a quid pro quo that the parties directly involved in questions of a settlement – the Palestinians and Syria – are unable to offer in the framework of a bilateral peace agreement: peace treaties and normalization with all Arab countries, and perhaps also regional cooperation mechanisms in various areas. This expansion of the scope of the peace agreements to include all Arab countries will lend the agreements additional stability and durability.
2. Arab countries can provide Israel with benefits even before peace agreements are reached with Syria and the Palestinians in order to assist Israel in taking difficult decisions. Several Arab countries have already done this by establishing informal relations with Israel.
3. The Arab world can provide support for the Palestinians when they are required to take difficult decisions in the framework of negotiations with Israel. This backing can strengthen the Palestinian leadership, mostly against the anticipated opposition among the Palestinian public.
4. The Arab world can pressure the Palestinians and perhaps Syria as well to show flexibility at key points in future negotiations with Israel in order to reach an agreement. This has not happened to date, but there were cases in the past in which Egypt pressured the Palestinian leadership to become more flexible.
5. It is possible that Arab countries will be willing to be included in peace arrangements, for example, peacekeeping forces or security arrangements. An example is Egypt's declared – though not yet proven – willingness to help prevent smuggling into the Gaza Strip, following Operation Cast Lead.
6. The support of the Arab world can weaken and thwart radical elements seeking to prevent the achievement of peace agreements or to undermine them. In this context, an arrangement with the Palestinians, and especially a peace treaty with Syria, can drive a wedge between Iran and Syria and weaken Hamas and Hizbollah, thereby contributing to an easing of the Iranian threat, even if the threat is not eliminated.

It is no accident, however, that the Arab initiative has been stalled for the past six years. In spite of its possible important contribution to future arrangements between Israel and the Arabs, the initiative has encountered major difficulties, beyond the fact that Israel and Palestinian and Arab

groups object to all or part of it. The main problem is that the Arab initiative cannot move ahead by itself; its progress depends on progress in the negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians and/or Syria. As long as these negotiations do not move forward in their own right, the Arab initiative cannot help or complement them. Meanwhile, there is almost universal agreement that the negotiations for a comprehensive settlement between Israel and the Palestinians are not on the verge of a breakthrough, in part because the Palestinians are not ready to establish a strong regime capable of implementing a stable settlement with Israel; because Hamas rules the Gaza Strip, which constitutes a significant obstacle to a comprehensive Israeli-Palestinian settlement; and because Israel is also a party to the dead end that the peace process has reached. An Israeli-Syrian settlement, although ostensibly simpler than an Israeli-Palestinian settlement, also depends first and foremost on decisions by the two sides to endorse the necessary concessions, while such decisions have not yet been taken.

Second, while the Arab world is likely to back the Palestinians in taking difficult decisions and perhaps also pressure them to reach a settlement with Israel, it is hard to believe that the positions of the Arab world will be much more flexible than those of the Palestinians or Syrians. Differences between the respective positions are minimal. Furthermore, it will be difficult to negotiate with all the Arab countries or their representatives – for example, with the Arab League – because the Arab countries will find it hard to reach agreement among themselves, and any common denominator is liable to be shaped by the more extreme positions. This is why Israel has consistently preferred to negotiate separately with Arab leaders rather than with an Arab collective.

There are other aspects to the Israeli position. It is not clear to Israel whether the Arab initiative is an integrated unit whose components are not open to negotiation, or whether it is a general framework facilitating dialogue. Moreover, following the meager results of the peace process with the Palestinians and their behavior over the years, it is unclear whether Israel still regards the benefit that the Arab initiative offers in normalization as sufficiently attractive.

The position of the Arab world in Israel's strategy also has a broader aspect. The moderate Arab camp and Israel currently share regional interests: curbing the Iranian threat, weakening the radical Shiite axis, and dealing with Islamic terrorism. To this can be added common economic interests. Nevertheless, it is hard to expect real cooperation between this camp and Israel, both because the Arab countries will be deterred from joint action with Israel on sensitive inter-Arab questions and are fearful of the response of the radical elements, and because they will regard far reaching policies with respect to Israel as inappropriate while the Palestinian problem has not yet been solved.

The conclusion is that there is willingness in the Arab world to contribute to progress towards a comprehensive diplomatic solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict, particularly to its Palestinian component. Potential also exists for cooperation with the moderate Arab camp in containing the threat of radicalism. In all probability, however, such measures will not be realized in the near future. Inclusion of the Arab world in the peace process can probably take place only after the direct principals in the negotiations – Israel, the Palestinians, and Syria – achieve real progress on their own, which the Arab world can then complement. Regional cooperation against the radical threat, if it ever happens, can occur only after a general settlement of the unsolved issues of the Arab-Israeli conflict emerges.

Notes

- 1 See "Debate in the Arab and Muslim World over Normalization with Israel," *MEMRI*, November 28, 2005.
- 2 Thomas Friedman, "An Intriguing Signal from the Saudi Crown Prince," *New York Times*, February 17, 2002.
- 3 See www.al-bab.com/arab/docs/league/peace02.htm for the official version of the initiative.
- 4 See Abdel Monem Said Aly and Shai Feldman, "Ecopolitics: Changing the Regional Context of Arab-Israeli Peacemaking," Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard University, 2003, pp. 23-27.
- 5 www.yozmatshalom.com/links.html.