

The Arab World and the Political Process

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In order to jumpstart the Israeli-Palestinian political process in 2009, the Obama administration sought to foster suitable conditions for negotiations. It suggested that Israel commit to a comprehensive freeze on construction in the Jewish settlements, and the moderate Arab states make some gestures towards Israel. The idea was to give Israel a taste of the Arab peace initiative, thereby demonstrating to Israel's leadership and public what the fruits of peace with the Palestinians could be like. Assuming that for Israel the key to normalization with the Arab world was Saudi Arabia, the American initiative focused on Saudi Arabia and included a request that El Al be allowed to fly through Saudi airspace. Saudi Arabia responded negatively. In his meeting with President Obama in June 2009, King Abdullah refused to adopt any steps toward normalization with Israel before significant progress was made in negotiations with the Palestinians.¹

This episode again questioned the Arab world's commitment to the Israel-Palestinian and Israeli-Syrian peace processes, and the Arab states' willingness to help promote negotiations on both tracks. At issue is far more than a theoretical conundrum, because at least on the Israeli-Palestinian track, it is hard to fathom how the Palestinian side could reach any agreement without significant Arab backing and support. Indeed, many analyses tend to view the lack of Arab involvement in and support of the 2000 Camp David negotiations as a primary reason for their failure.

The Arab World and Relations with Israel

The contemporary Arab world is marked by a fierce struggle between two currents: that which favors a secular national state model, and that of the radical Islamic movements that hope to galvanize the Islamic *ummah* and often attribute little importance to national entities. The existing regimes belong primarily to the first current. They conduct pragmatic policies designed first to ensure the regimes' survival and only then to promote state interests, as they understand them. Most of the regimes have chosen to conduct relations with the West, chiefly the United States, assuming that these relations would best serve security, economic, and state interests.

The radical Islamic stream consists mostly of non-state actors that enjoy the support of the Iranian Islamic regime as well as popular support in all Arab states. Indeed, it is commonly assumed that were there ever genuinely free elections, various Islamic movements would emerge victorious in most of the Arab states. This is in fact what occurred in Algeria in 1991 and in the PA in 2006. Likewise in the Iraqi elections, the Shiite majority was represented mainly by political parties with Islamic tendencies. Radical Islamists view the West as an enemy that represents an existential threat, particularly in cultural terms. They favor the resistance model (*muqawama*), which represents defiance in the face of current Western hegemony and the drive to undermine the Arab regimes supported by the West.² This shared outlook enables them to bridge a second divide in the Arab world, that between Shia and Sunni, and facilitates alliances and coalitions between Shiites and Sunnis even as they maintain their bitter enmity elsewhere in the Arab world. Hence the paradox of Shiite Iranian and Hizbollah assistance to the Sunni Hamas movement, while Sunnis and Shiites are killing one another in a civil war in Iraq.

This is of course a simplistic outline that fails to present with any depth the various textures and shades of gray unique to particular countries. There are, for example, Arab actors that do not fall into their so-called natural category according to this division, or actors that want to court favor with many different sides rather than surrender to the limits of this grouping. Syria – a completely secular regime of the Ba'ath Party that is controlled by the Alawi minority whose belonging to Islam is in question – has nonetheless joined the resistance axis because this move serves the

interests of both the regime and the state, including with regard to the Lebanese-Israeli front. Similarly, Qatar, a monarchy, sees its ability to interact with all elements as a central component in constructing a political status out of all proportion to its small size.

This dichotomy in the Arab world greatly affects both general attitudes towards Israel and the ability by respective actors to conduct individual policies towards Israel. The Arab-Israeli conflict, especially the Palestinian component, plays a central role in encouraging large Arab populations to embrace the *muqawama* because from their point of view it represents a blatant expression of Western insurgence into the Arab world, or more specifically, a strategic-security threat, an ideological-cultural threat, and a demonstration of the wrongs perpetrated by the Western world against Muslims.³ For many Arab regimes, the desire to counter the negative influence of the conflict on domestic public opinion helps generate support for the political process. At the same time, public opinion greatly limits those regimes' freedom of action when they attempt to adopt a positive stance towards Israel in order to encourage progress in the political process. Thus in recent years Arab regimes have viewed the Arab-Israeli conflict, especially the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with its frequent violent outbreaks, as a severe threat; some have even viewed it as an existential threat. However, these regimes are often powerless to adopt any policy that could perhaps help them alleviate the threat, and this helplessness is another expression of the waning strength of the Arab nation states compared to the non-Arab states in the Middle East – Iran and Turkey.

The fighting in the Gaza Strip in late 2008 and in early 2009 demonstrated to the Arab states once again the extent to which negative developments on the Israeli-Palestinian track can affect the atmosphere “on the street,” weakening their own backing and encouraging support for the radical axis. Indeed, during Operation Cast Lead the demonstrations in the Arab capitals were louder and better attended than demonstrations in the West Bank. True, the Palestinian Authority took steps to keep the flames and demonstrations in check, but while state regimes were concerned that the demonstrations would spiral out of control, they were nevertheless hard pressed to limit them.

Arab Involvement in the Political Process

The Arab states view the Arab peace initiative as the primary tool to balance the need to advance the political process with the need to deal with domestic public opinion. The initiative, adopted in March 2002 at the Arab League summit in Beirut and ratified again at the 2007 Arab League summit in Riyadh, seeks to promote agreements between Israel and the Palestinians and between Israel and Syria. According to the proposal, should Israel succeed in reaching agreements on both of these negotiating tracks (the document outlines in general terms the required terms of the agreements), then the entire Arab world would commit itself to an end of the conflict and to peace and normalization with Israel, and would provide guarantees for its security.

Despite the dramatic contents of the Arab peace initiative, especially when compared with the “three no’s” of the 1967 Khartoum conference (no peace with Israel, no recognition of Israel, no negotiations with Israel), for several reasons Arab states have found it difficult to turn it into a tool that can in fact promote negotiations with Israel. First, the initiative was initially adopted during the bloodiest month of the second intifada, and the Israeli public and political leadership lacked sufficient resources to debate the initiative and its ramifications with any seriousness. Second, there were reservations in the Israeli political system regarding how the stipulations of the agreement with the Palestinians were worded, especially vis-à-vis the solution to the refugee problem, and therefore the initiative was presented in Israel as one that Israel could not accept. Finally, instead of trying to understand that the initiative was an Arab declaration of intent that could be used as leverage in enlisting Arab states to provide practical assistance to promote agreements with the Palestinians and Syria, the initiative became an object of dispute between the sides, with the central issue being Israel’s formal willingness to accept the initiative. The Arab League appointed a committee of representatives from the Arab states already maintaining diplomatic relations with Israel. The group was supposed to launch a dialogue with Israel about the initiative, but no significant talks ever ensued. An Israeli announcement immediately after the peace initiative was adopted by the Arab League, such that Jerusalem viewed the initiative as a basis for dialogue with the Arab world and a contribution to

the peace process, might have sufficed to spark a dialogue with interested Arab states. However, since then the sides have dug themselves further into their positions, and by the time Israel started showing a more positive attitude towards the initiative it was a case of too little, too late.

The year 2009 was characterized by two opposing processes. One was the increased motivation among several Arab actors to help extricate the negotiations from their frozen state and take concrete steps to foil obstructing elements, state and non-state actors alike, trying to waylay the negotiations even more, since a settlement with Israel would harm their own interests. On the other hand, the deadlock in the negotiations and the difficulty in jumpstarting them made it hard to maintain relations with Israel and created pressures on state actors to back down from the Arab peace initiative and any willingness to be involved in advancing and implementing a settlement.

A good example of this tension was the response of the Arab regimes to Operation Cast Lead. From their conduct and statements, the pragmatic regimes demonstrated that to a large extent they held Hamas accountable for the outbreak of the crisis, and tried to end it without incriminating Israel. On the other hand, they felt compelled to make extreme anti-Israeli declarations, and Qatar and Mauritania even broke off their relations with Israel. (The reaction of these two states was not surprising, because Qatar has one foot in each of the two camps of the Arab world, while Mauritania experienced a regime change that brought it closer to the radical camp.) Moreover, the crisis in the Gaza Strip also highlighted the tension between the two Arab camps. Each held its own summit conference during the war, and there were sharply worded exchanges of mutual recriminations that continued long after the fighting ended. A prominent example was the March 2010 sharp verbal confrontation between Syrian president Bashar Asad and Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas at the Arab League conference.

The willingness of Arab actors to take constructive steps to promote the political process was expressed, for example, in Egypt's efforts to prevent Hamas from automatically blocking any progress on the Israeli-Palestinian track. Egypt attempted to achieve this in various ways. It has tried – to date unsuccessfully – to facilitate reconciliation between Hamas and

Fatah that would allow the establishment of a Palestinian national unity government. The failure of the reconciliation talks, with Hamas unwilling to accept Egypt's compromise proposals, prompted Egypt to exert new pressure on Hamas. It sought to establish that Hamas is obligated to accept a compromise proposal, or at the very least cannot undermine the efforts to renew the political process. In addition, Egypt has taken more aggressive steps against Hamas's underground smuggling industry. It increased the scope and effectiveness of efforts to curb tunnel smuggling, and more recently, it announced plans to construct an iron wall along the Gaza Strip-Sinai border. This project will not have a great deal of practical significance any time soon because construction is a long term endeavor, but it has already exerted heavy psychological pressure on Hamas. The attempt to curb the smuggling into Gaza stems in part from Egypt's understanding in the wake of Operation Cast Lead that new arms smuggling into Gaza on the scale that took place before the war is liable to generate further violent outbreaks between Gaza and Israel.

Egypt's efforts are not motivated by altruism; rather, it sees developments in the PA, the split between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, and the lack of progress in negotiations as harmful to the interests of the Egyptian regime. Such damage was made manifest in January 2008 when Hamas brought down the wall on the Gaza border and thousands of Gaza residents streamed into Sinai to the dismay of Egyptian authorities. Another example that clarified for Egypt the link between the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the stability of the regime was the discovery of the Hizbollah network in Egypt engaged in arms smuggling into the Gaza Strip and subversive activities against the Egyptian regime. This revelation demonstrated both Iranian involvement and the close connection between the struggle of the opposing camps in the Arab world and developments on the Israeli-Palestinian track.

The major limit to Egypt's effectiveness against Hamas was and remains Egyptian public opinion, which views such measures as Egyptian cooperation with the Israeli enemy against their Palestinians brothers. The more the Egyptian regime can persuade its citizens that these operations serve Egyptian interests and support Egyptian sovereignty, the easier it will be to cope with public opinion. In this sense, the toppling of the wall was

a Pyrrhic victory for Hamas because it made it much easier for Egypt to present its actions against Hamas as a defense of Egyptian sovereignty. In practice, the result is that Israel and Egypt have cooperated in maintaining the so-called siege of the Hamas government in Gaza, based on the understanding that this helps to contain Hamas.

Another practical expression of involvement is the assistance by Arab states toward construction of a Palestinian state, an endeavor launched by the West Bank government of Prime Minister Salaam Fayyad. Jordan continues to train new units for the Palestinian security services with the help of the United States under the direction of security coordinator General Keith Dayton and his team; so far, five new battalions of the Palestinian security services have been trained by the Jordanians and another two are in Jordan at different stages of training. The Gulf states have offered financial assistance to the Palestinian government as both donor states and as funders of specific projects. One of the ambitious economic projects begun in the PA in the last year is the construction of a new Palestinian city, Rawabi. A Qatari real estate company is a partner in the project, undertaken with the encouragement of the regime in Qatar.

Syria is a further example of Arab willingness to be more involved in advancing the political process. The pragmatic Arab states are interested in removing Syria from the radical axis, thereby weakening the influence of Iran and its allies. If in the not-too-distant past these states all but wrote off the Syrian regime, severed their ties to it, declined to attribute much importance to Syria, and therefore focused in an almost obsessive manner only on the Israeli-Palestinian track, now their approach is different: they are trying to improve relations with Syria, conduct a dialogue with it, and influence it. At the same time, the Israeli-Palestinian track remains of primary importance in the view of these states because of its substantial influence on the Arab street.

Frustration with the Political Deadlock

Alongside a growing willingness to be involved there is also a great deal of frustration with the deadlock in the negotiations tracks and with what is seen as Israel's obstinacy. Therefore, proposals to revoke support for the Arab peace initiative are sounded before every summit meeting of the Arab

League. Thus, for example, Arab League Secretary General Amr Musa noted in a January 2009 press conference that the Arab peace initiative would not remain on the negotiating table for long, thereby repeating a statement in a similar vein made by King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia some weeks prior.⁴ Proposals in a similar nature were also raised before the March 2010 Arab League gathering in Libya, but it was ultimately decided to give a chance to the negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians that the United States was instrumental in jumpstarting. Accordingly, the issue will be discussed anew after the four-month period allotted by the Arab League. The Arab states have not yet considered the idea of a unilateral declaration of Palestinian statehood and have focused on pressures to gain deeper international involvement (especially by the United States) that would, in their assessment, generate more effective negotiations. If the deadlock continues and there is a withdrawal of the Arab peace initiative, it would have the symbolic significance of a sharp regression in the peace process, even if it has no practical impact.

Perhaps because he sees the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as an existential threat, underscored by statements in this vein since his ascent to the throne, King Abdullah of Jordan has become a prominent spokesman for Arab frustration with the deadlocked negotiations, especially on the Israeli-Palestinian track. Despite Jordan's involvement in the construction of the Palestinian state, especially in the field of security, the king's statements have expressed a deep frustration with Israel's positions and serious concerns about the effect of developments in the Israeli-Palestinian process on Jordan. These sentiments have affected Israel-Jordan bilateral relations. In contrast to the dialogue between the leaders ongoing since the signing of the Israel-Jordan peace treaty, the dialogue ceased almost completely in the past year, to the point at which there were assessments that the relations between the two states hit an unprecedented low. This situation is liable to harm cooperation between the sides in crucial areas, including security.

Syria too has shown impatience with the political stagnation. It continues to send hints at willingness to change its orientation and fill a positive role in the process vis-à-vis Israel, but it also continues to play a dominant role in the radical camp. Thus, the Syrian president continues to speak of his desire to renew negotiations with Israel and engage in dialogue with the

United States to resolve the problems between them. At the same time, relations between Syria and other actors in the radical camp have continued to tighten and Syria has become much freer in supplying Hizbollah with weapon systems that threaten the current balance, including the possible supply of Scud ballistic missiles to Hizbollah. This political dichotomy reflects the internal conflict in the Syrian leadership between the drive to maintain ties with the radical axis and reap the fruits of this alliance, and the understanding that Syria cannot solve its fundamental problems, especially its failing economy, as long as it remains in the radical camp. The regime may also be deluding itself into thinking it can have a foot in both worlds and continue playing its double game. This vacillation was reflected in Syria's attitude to the Arab peace initiative: Syria supported the initiative when it was accepted in 2002, yet over the past year, Syria was among the main elements seeking to revoke it.

Prospects for Renewing Multilateral Negotiations?

There were no recent clear indications of Arab willingness to renew the multilateral negotiating groups in tandem with renewed bilateral negotiations. However, contacts with diplomats in the Arab world about the possibility of renewing the dialogue over a cooperative security arrangement in the Middle East yielded very favorable responses. This was especially prominent in Egypt, the main player to have brought about the end of the discussions in the negotiating group over arms control and regional security (ACRS). There is a sense that Egypt has, to an extent, regretted the fact that it torpedoed the talks in the mid-1990s; since then, there has not been an appropriate forum for talks of this kind. It is still not clear if these positions reflect a view broader than that of a small group of interested parties in the relevant foreign ministries.

In the meantime, the position of the other players involved in the negotiations processes is also unclear. Israel has not expressed an unequivocal stance, and the United States too has at this stage focused only on attempts to renew the negotiations on the Israeli-Palestinian track. It is still uncertain if President Obama's administration adopted a broader conceptual political plan in the framework of which the Israeli-Palestinian channel meshes with the Israeli-Syrian channel and perhaps

even with multilateral talks. Should the United States decide to push for the renewal of multilateral talks, Israel would likely view this as a positive step. From the perspective of the Arab world, this could be a way to act in the spirit of the Arab peace initiative and maintain a dialogue with Israel about those areas where Arab nations could make a contribution to the advancement of the peace process should Israel be prepared to do what the Arab nations expect of it, i.e., conduct serious, effective negotiations in bilateral channels. In any case, if the deadlock in the bilateral channels continues, the Arabs will certainly find it well nigh impossible to conduct multilateral talks with Israel.

Conclusion

Because of the widened gaps between the Arab positions and the current Israeli government, it is highly doubtful if effective negotiations can be held on the Israeli-Palestinian and Israeli-Syrian tracks. Consequently, the Arab position and the involvement of the Arabs in the negotiations process are less relevant. However, if the Obama administration does succeed in its efforts to renew effective negotiations, the Arab states are likely to play an important part. The assumption that it is possible to conduct a significant dialogue with the pragmatic Arab states – that have a common strategic interest with Israel against the axis led by Iran – without effective negotiations at least on the Israeli-Palestinian track seems highly problematic.

Notes

- 1 Barak Ravid, "Senior Political Source: The US has still not Received Arab Agreement on Normalization with Israel," *Haaretz*, July 2, 2009.
- 2 See Michael Milstein, *Muqawama: The Challenge of Resistance to Israel's National Security Concept* (Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, Memorandum No. 102, December 2009).
- 3 Milstein, *Muqawama*, p. 16.
- 4 Nir Yahav, "The Arab Peace Initiative," *Walla! News*, January 31, 2009, <http://news.walla.co.il/?w=/13/1427466>.