

2000-2010: An Influential Decade

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Looking back at the past ten years several decades from now, it may well be that this period will emerge as among the most important in the history of the Arab–Israeli conflict. Processes and events that occurred over the past ten years may well prove to be among the most decisive. Naturally, analyzing processes by decades entails an artificial division into chronological units, and is done only for the purpose of sharpening perspective. Clearly some of the processes began before the beginning of the decade and some will certainly continue into the next decade. Moreover, the selection of issues that are considered decisive and having shifted the balance is by no means exhaustive, and other observers of the period might choose to modify or expand the list.

Changes in Israeli and Palestinian Public Discourse

The peace process, and beyond that, the underlying process of mutual understanding and acceptance, is more complex than rounds of formal talks between official teams. Public discourse on both sides of the divide is a critical factor in the success of a process, both prior to an agreement and in its implementation. The absence of this element or a one-dimensional perspective on the parts of the Egyptian and Jordanian side is one of the causes of the cold peace with Israel. Public discussion in Israel, certainly leading up to and following the Camp David conference in the summer of 2000, is an example of its importance and influence. Then-Prime Minister Ehud Barak risked and perhaps even paid a political price by placing the future of the settlements and the future of Jerusalem up for public discussion. From that time on, it was possible to debate openly whether all of the settlements would remain intact following an agreement with

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the Palestinians, and to discuss whether Jerusalem might not indeed be divided one way or another within the framework of an agreement.

The proposals of then-Prime Minister Ehud Olmert in 2008 to his Palestinian counterpart Abu Mazen reflect in part the impact of public discourse on one who in 2000 opposed any concession to the Palestinians on the matter of Jerusalem. Olmert assumed, as he stated in public, that he would have enjoyed parliamentary support had he brought an agreement in the spirit of his proposals for territorial compromise for approval. (The proposals envisioned approximately 6.5 percent of the West Bank remaining under Israeli sovereignty, partitioning Jerusalem in the spirit of the late 2000 Clinton parameters, and a token return of refugees.) The reciprocal influence between a leader and public opinion is a known phenomenon, but it is interesting to track it in the context of efforts to achieve an agreement with the Palestinians, particularly in terms of taboos that are broken or in what is called – unfairly – the “zigzagging” of the leader.

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in Palestinian public discourse, although some interesting phenomena in this regard should not be ignored. Take, for example, the proposals of Sari Nusseibeh and Ami Ayalon, or the Geneva initiative. The divide between Hamas and Fatah also represents the Palestinian debate over political orientation and ideology, centered naturally on the attitude towards Israel, primarily, its right to exist and the recognition of Israel. The initiative of the Arab League in 2002 was not the outcome of a broad public discussion in Arab society; it perhaps might not have emerged had it depended on public discussion. But it represents an expression of

flexibility, limited though it might be, in Arab attitudes as to the question of refugees and recognition of Israel.

New Generations in Israeli and Palestinian Leadership

The death of Yasir Arafat may not have brought about an immediate change in Palestinian positions on core issues, but it freed the Palestinian

camp from a man who saw himself as the prophet of the Palestinian national movement. No longer does the person negotiating on the Palestinian side see himself as having to carry a gun, wear a uniform, and boast his rank. The departure of Prime Minister Sharon symbolized the continued exit from the stage (with Shimon Peres a notable exception) of a generation that established the state and was active in the 1948 War of Independence, and was personally involved in a confrontation that left indelible harsh imprints of the “other.”

The combination of changes in public opinion and the departure of the 1948 generation of leaders opens the door to further flexibility in official Israeli negotiating positions. An Israeli leader who wishes to arrive at an agreement with the Palestinians making “painful concessions” will be able to rely on Israeli public opinion to facilitate such an agreement. This is indicated by public opinion polls conducted by the Institute for National Security Studies and other groups. All Israeli prime ministers in the past two decades have been addicted to polls and consume them on an almost daily basis. Israel’s leaders are thus presumably aware of the ongoing changes in public opinion and their significance.

The Security Fence Effect

The wave of terror attacks in the first part of the decade spawned and accelerated implementation of the plan to erect a security fence (in some areas, for example the Jerusalem area, a wall) that in part coincides with the June 4, 1967 line and in part runs east of the line. The combination of Israeli anger following hundreds of casualties due to acts of terror and the positioning of a physical obstacle to block entry from the territories generated several results. The first outcome was a dramatic reduction in the number of terrorist acts and, consequently, the number of casualties. Although the fence was not the only cause of this decline in the mind of the Israeli public and among some decision makers and officials, the perception has been sealed that the fence is the primary factor behind this development.

Furthermore, beyond limiting the movement of terrorists, the fence has drastically reduced the inflow of Palestinian workers, more than 125,000 of whom used to enter Israel daily. For over 30 years, a generation of Palestinian workers and businesspeople grew familiar with Israeli social, economic, and political life. Some even spoke the language. It is

hard to quantify the influence of this phenomenon, but it presumably had at least in part a moderating effect on hard-line opinions. The interaction with Israel was a significant factor in the economic situation of Gaza and the West Bank. The generation that followed has been totally disconnected from Israeli society, which it perceives as soldiers, jailers, and deniers of free movement and transit. Thousands of Israelis who used to visit principal cities in Judea and Samaria stopped doing so due to terror and later due to the fence, which blocked the access to the markets set up on roads passing from west to east. Thus the interaction between the Israeli and Palestinian populations, which had been a positive phenomenon, ceased almost entirely.

The combined influence of the fence and the suppression of terror, especially in Judea and Samaria, led to the almost total elimination of the Palestinian issue and its deferment from the Israeli public consciousness. Such a mental disengagement has a dual effect. On the one hand, it obviates public pressure on the political leadership to act in one direction or the other regarding the Palestinian issue. On the other hand, it also allows the political leadership to work more freely towards an accord that includes “painful concessions,” if it so wishes.

The third result is the perception of the fence as a final border. The establishment in the Israeli subconscious of the fence as an effective line of defense allows the political leadership to rally around this line and,

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in negotiations, demand that it become the agreed upon border between Israel and the Palestinian state. The fence’s demarcation was based on two major considerations: the level of security the fence provides in its given route; and demographic considerations aimed at including a maximum number of settlements and a minimum number of Palestinians east of the Green Line. In Jerusalem the route was determined with the aim of adhering as much as possible to municipal boundaries drawn up in the wake of the 1967 war. If the final

border is demanded by Israeli negotiators based on the demarcation of the fence, it would be far removed from the maximalist Palestinian position in this regard. The fence as a final border would amount to an annexation of about 8.5 percent of Judea and Samaria, which exceeds the

Palestinian position that accepts at most 4 percent, offset by a land swap. Creative negotiations could bridge this gap. In the matter of the fence as a permanent border, Israel can also be helped by American support. Since 1967, the US has been in favor of defensible borders for Israel and has supported the preservation of large settlement blocs under Israeli sovereignty in an accord with the Palestinians.

International Involvement

This decade's levels of international involvement in the attempt to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict were unmatched in previous years. To some extent this is a positive development as far as Israel is concerned, although it may entail restrictions on Israel's freedom of action. In the economic sector, the separation between Israel and Palestinian Authority territory has led to the PA's increasing dependence on international financial assistance. Such assistance had already begun to flow since the Oslo accords in 1993. But territorial separation on the one hand, and fears of corruption and the diversion of international financial assistance to fund terror on the other, have led to increased international involvement in economic activity within the Palestinian Authority. To some extent this too is positive as far as Israel is concerned, since such involvement minimizes the damage of economic separation if it is forced by a worsened security situation. However, Israeli military action that resulted in damages to internationally financed projects, especially in Gaza, sparked tension, for example, between Israel and the European Union.

In tandem with – and as a direct result of – failed Israeli-Palestinian negotiations in 2000–2001 and the outbreak of the second intifada, international involvement has increased in an attempt to draft the outlines of a future accord. Associated with this process are the ideas proposed by President Clinton in December 2000, the Arab peace initiative of 2002, the Roadmap of 2003, the Annapolis conference in 2007, and renewed bilateral negotiations in September 2010 through US mediation. While these efforts reflect more US involvement than that of other international actors, the Quartet (comprising the US, the EU, Russia, and the UN) represents a new significant player in political and economic activity. Involvement of the Quartet is indeed felt mainly in economic matters,

but the overall activity of this framework has the effect of creating a precedent that Israel will be unable to ignore in the future.

An equally important precedent, perhaps even greater in its long range implications, is international involvement in security aspects. Obligations of the Palestinian Authority under the Roadmap include demolishing the terror infrastructure. The establishment of organized, trained security mechanisms intended to achieve security capability occurred through cooperation between the PA and the US on the one hand, and the EU on the other. Such direct involvement created an additional precedent that Israel will not be able to ignore or prevent from recurring. Indeed, Israel had also agreed to the presence of EU observers on the Gaza-Egypt border, as a partial substitute for its own presence at the crossing.

If an accord with the Palestinians is reached, Israel's demand for the presence of Israeli security forces as part of tight, effective security arrangements that will prevent the export of terror from the Palestinian state will likely meet with Palestinian refusal. This could invite the presence of international security personnel in order to provide a response, albeit only partial in Israel's view, to its security-related demands.

Two States as the Ultimate Political Solution

Although the two-state solution principle has been mooted at least since the Oslo agreement in 1993, it first received official American approval in President Bush's June 2002 speech and then in the Roadmap of 2003. When the Roadmap was accepted by Israel, albeit with reservations, it represented the first time that a majority of the right on the Israeli political map accepted the two-state principle (if the government formed by Ariel Sharon in 2001 is deemed reflective of the right wing mainstream). Only two ministers resigned from Sharon's government; not one resigned from the government of Binyamin Netanyahu following his Bar-Ilan speech in June 2009.

This is a significant ideological reversal within the right wing of the Israeli body politic that constitutes a necessary, though not exclusive, condition for attaining a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict acceptable to both sides. Clearly in the framework of negotiations, a heated argument will ensue concerning the nature of the Palestinian

state and the attributes of its sovereignty. However, the willingness of the right to accept the solution's basic premise is of historic significance.

Parallel or complementary to this Israeli recognition is the demand for Arab recognition of Israel as the national home of the Jewish people. This is also a novelty, as in all previous incarnations of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations the demand was never raised. Arguably, an end to the conflict and the end of claims by both sides, which will be part of a comprehensive agreement, provide a response to this demand. However, the Palestinian-Arab recognition that Israel demands implies a full acceptance of Israel's existence. There are ways to assuage Palestinian and Arab concerns as to the status and rights of the Arab minority in Israel, a concern that is offered as the reason for refusal to grant Israel's request. Additional legislation that ensures equality – should Israel adopt a constitution – and other practical measures could serve as a fitting additional response to a legitimate Arab concern.

Naturally the question of the legal status of Israeli Arabs and their social status is not new and was raised with the establishment of the State of Israel. However the issue has escalated, with radical expressions sounded over this past decade by both Jews and Arabs. These are liable to complicate the attempt to reach a solution to the overall conflict between Israel and the Palestinians.

Building Institutions of the Future State

The notion of establishing a Palestinian national home began to surface only about a decade following the Six Day War. The 1974 Rabat Conference, the autonomy agreement (part of the 1979 Camp David accords between Israel and Egypt) and the 1980 Venice Declaration of the European Union are some of the stepping stones in the idea's evolution over the years.

Israel's total control over territory in Gaza, Judea, and Samaria prevented full development of pre-state institutions that in the future could serve a nascent state. Israel's response to the second intifada was, practically speaking, the destruction of any seeds of those potential institutions. The years that followed, however, saw the Roadmap; increased involvement

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of major countries; the rise of Salam Fayyad, a Palestinian technocrat and representative of the International Monetary Fund, to the helm of the Palestinian government; and the creation of Palestinian institutions and security forces, mainly through US involvement. Fayyad's August 2009 plan to set up state institutions before a state was proclaimed constitutes the first attempt in Palestinian history during the new age to address the process of state-building in an institutional and methodical manner. Historians identify the 1920s–1930s as the period during the British Mandate in which institutions of the Jewish *yishuv* were formed in preparation for a state. Similarly, the Palestinians will look back on the decade as the period in which the infrastructure of the Palestinian state was destroyed and subsequently rehabilitated and expanded.

A Decade of Existential Challenges

Two types of challenges have intensified during this decade. The first is the attempt to undermine and topple Israel's moral-legal basis. It is important to distinguish between criticism (although critics are often unable to distinguish between Israel and an activity or policy implemented by it) and the challenge to Israel's justification for existence. But there is no doubt that this is the decade in which the floodgates were opened. The most egregious example of this, though not the only one, was the first Durban Review Conference. From hostile media to boycotts

of Israeli products, even those coming from pre-1967 Israeli territory, this campaign broadened in the first decade of the 21st century.

The second existential threat that intensified in this decade is Iran's military development of a nuclear capability. Due to the repercussion of the nuclear effort and Iranian actions, directly or through proxies such as Hamas and Hizbollah, Iran has become a factor that directly and indirectly influences prospects for a political solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Therefore, the conflict has gone from being an Arab-Israeli

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matter to a Middle East concern, involving additional regional actors that up to the year 2000 had no direct bearing on the character and substance of negotiations between Israel and its neighbors. This "addition"

makes negotiations between Israel and Syria, and to a certain extent also with the Palestinians, more intricate and complicated. In renewed negotiations with the Palestinians, and certainly with Syria if and when they resume, Iran will become a dominant factor, even if not present at the table – and not just because Israel will demand the severance of the Iran-Syria-Hizbollah military connection. Therefore, the linkage created during this decade between both the nuclear and subversive aspects of the Iranian threat and the peace process will have a decisive effect on chances of achieving a comprehensive Arab–Israeli settlement. Although the Iranian nuclear-subversive threat seemingly unites Israel and Arab states that feel threatened, this is not a natural alliance. Furthermore the life expectancy of the nuclear threat is unclear, and it does not serve as an incentive for existential decisions on the part of Israel in negotiating with either the Palestinians or Syria. In addition to the Iranian threat, the process of the US withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan adds factors of instability and uncertainty that will make it difficult for Israel to take decisions with long range implications.

Conclusion

The decade of 2001–2010 was not distinguished by dramatic political and military decisions. On the other hand, processes occurred in this decade that will create decisive influence on future directions of the Arab–Israeli conflict and the search for its solution. The peace process between Israel and the Arab world is not a perfectly linear one, but despite the disappointments and failures, one can discern positive developments and trends. Between well publicized milestones in the form of peace agreements with Jordan and Egypt and partial ones with the Palestinians, a quiet below-the-surface process has taken place that amounts to a paradigm shift. It is process that has made the glittering ceremonies on the White House lawn possible.