

# Israel and the Pragmatic Sunni Camp: A Historic Opportunity

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## **The Palestinian Issue and Arab-Israel Relations: An Inverted Dynamic**

Until the establishment of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in the 1960s, the Palestinian issue was no more than a single element in the broader conflict between Israel and the Arab states, which had not come to terms with the establishment of a Jewish state in a region characterized by Arab-Muslim dominance. The Arab states' resolute opposition to the partition plan proposed in the United Nations General Assembly in 1947, which was accepted by the Jewish leadership in Mandatory Palestine, indicated that the interest of preventing the establishment of a Jewish state prevailed over any commitment to the self-determination of the local Arab population. This is the origin of the Arab states' role in the creation of the Palestinian problem.

After their defeat in Israel's War of Independence, the Arab states continued to view Israel as a foreign, temporary intruder that had to be ousted. The Palestinian issue became their primary means of attacking Israel and they took care to demonstrate a commitment to it, while at the same time perpetuating it in order to maximize the double benefit they derived. First, this was a means of weakening Israel and promoting an explicitly anti-Israel foreign policy. Second, the issue elicited a sense of identification in the Arab street, and was therefore exploited by the authoritarian Arab regimes to deflect domestic discontent and rally public criticism around the issue of the Zionist enemy. The regimes, which from time to time have had to contend with internal unrest, took full advantage of the opportunity

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to institutionalize a pan-Arab consensus against an external enemy that appeared to threaten the Arab *umma*. In addition to enabling a release of steam in respective states, this approach helped create a strong sense of unity in an Arab world characterized by numerous contradictions among its constituent identities (e.g., religious, ethnic, tribal) and that has been hard pressed to rally around any other issue.

Over the years the Arab states' demonstrated commitment to the Palestinian issue has always been prominent among various issues that have served Arab but not necessarily Palestinian interests, and have been advocated at the expense of the State of Israel while exacting little from the Arab states themselves – for example, the refugee issue. Following Israel's War of Independence, some 700,000 Palestinians left the area – some to the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and others to the neighboring Arab states, which refused to absorb them within their territory and insisted that they be repatriated to Israel. Although this policy harmed the Palestinians, who were forced to live in difficult conditions in the refugee camps, it served the interests of the Arab states in two ways. First, actualization of the "return" would result in the destruction of the Zionist project from a demographic perspective; and second, until then, as long as the refugees remained within their borders, these states would be the recipients of economic aid and compensation.

This is also reflected in the distortion of the role of the UNRWA, whose original mandate was to provide temporary aid to the refugees<sup>1</sup> (until the end of 1950) for rehabilitation and integration in the Middle East states where they were living. Under the pressure of the Arab states, which refused to resettle the refugees within their borders and at the same time sought to exploit and increase the aid they were receiving in order to maintain them, UNRWA became a massive bureaucratic welfare system perpetuating the very problem it was mandated to solve.<sup>2</sup> Today, the humanitarian hardship facing the refugees' descendants (who do not meet UN criteria for refugee status) is also perpetuated out of political considerations.

The double standard of Arab commitment to the Palestinian issue can likewise be observed in the context of living conditions of Palestinians in Arab countries, such as with problems acquiring work permits, discrimination with regard to social welfare rights, and the like. In recent years, profound criticism has been voiced regarding the Arab states' failure to deal with these issues, which directly affect large Palestinian populations, and these

states' insistence on dealing only with issues that are perceived as a potential platform for the denunciation of Israel.<sup>3</sup>

Over the years, the Arab world has begun to understand that Israel is not a passing episode. Egypt was the first Arab country to recognize Israel when the two countries signed a peace treaty in 1979. Egypt demonstrated its commitment to the Palestinian cause by insisting that the Camp David Accords, which preceded the treaty, refer to future Palestinian autonomy in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, Egypt itself completely washed its hands of Gaza, despite the fact that until the Six Day War this territory was under Egyptian rule. In doing so, Egypt shifted full responsibility to Israel, indicating that its commitment to the Palestinian issue remained in force as long as Israel bore the burden.

Jordan, which was the first Arab state to establish a secret strategic alliance with Israel in 1970, abandoned all claims of representing the Palestinians when in 1988 it withdrew all claims to sovereignty in the West Bank. At that point, as part of its recognition of the Palestinian right to conduct independent negotiations, King Hussein severed all administrative and judicial ties with the West Bank (with the exception of custody of the Muslim holy sites in Jerusalem).<sup>5</sup> Consequently, responsibility was shifted to Israel in a manner that for the first time defined the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a bilateral conflict, whose resolution would be within the borders of what had been Mandatory Palestine. The Madrid Conference was thus the last framework in which an effort was made to discuss the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in a multilateral framework, before the shift during the Oslo process to bilateral contacts with the PLO as the representative of the Palestinians.

Yet even after the conflict was defined as bilateral, efforts to intervene were made by different Arab states in pursuit of their own internal interests, and objective issues that require coordination with Israel remained, e.g., the situation on the borders. Furthermore, as the conflict has always been characterized by involvement on the part of the Arab states, it is reasonable to mobilize their involvement, existing in any event, in the attempt to move forward on the regional track, especially after such a long period in which the bilateral Israeli-Palestinian track has been deadlocked.

### **The Arab Initiative as a Potential Basis for Regional Negotiations**

The origins of the Arab initiative lie in a plan that was advanced by then-Saudi Crown Prince and later King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz al-Saud. The timing of its publication in the *New York Times* in February 2002 by

journalist Thomas Friedman was no coincidence. Approximately half a year after September 11, 2001, in which 15 of the 19 terrorists who took part in the attacks were Saudi citizens, Saudi Arabia found itself in United States crosshairs. It urgently needed to repair its image as an “exporter of terrorism” in order to preserve its strategic alliance with the United States that from a security perspective is critical to Riyadh. At the same time, the wave of Palestinian terrorism raging since September 2000 had sparked demonstrations in the Arab world and undermined regional stability, and with it the energy market, which constitutes the foundation of the Saudi economy and regime. Promoting regional conciliation and peace even only for the sake of appearance now became a Saudi interest, and the Arab initiative was born to serve this interest.

In March 2002, the initiative was presented at the Arab League summit in Beirut, and after pressure by Syria and Lebanon prompted a new clause in support of the right of return, it was adopted unanimously by the League’s 22 members and became the “Arab Peace Initiative.” The initiative was ratified by the Arab League on a number of occasions, and the Organization of Islamic States – 57 in number – also announced its support of the plan, and with the exception of Iran has renewed it in its annual conferences. Beyond the timing, the firm demand to accept the initiative as is, despite the fact that that Israel would clearly reject it, raised doubts as to the sincerity of the initiative from the outset. Now, however, in light of the profound changes in the region over the past 16 years, the most relevant question appears to be: Are the shared interests between Israel and the pragmatic Arab world sufficient to leverage the initiative’s underlying ideas into an updated framework that will facilitate their implementation?

The initiative calls for an end to the Arab-Israeli conflict based on recognition that it is a conflict that has no military solution. It presents Israel with demands; if met, the Arab states commit to proclaim an end to the conflict and to reach a comprehensive peace agreement that includes, for the first time ever, the normalization of relations with Israel for the security, stability, and prosperity of future generations. These demands can be summarized as follows: first, an Israeli withdrawal to Israel’s pre-1967 Israeli borders, including a full withdrawal from the Golan Heights, the Gaza Strip, and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem; second, achievement of a just and agreed solution for the refugee problem, in accordance with UN General Assembly Resolution 194, while assuring “the rejection of all forms of Palestinian patriation which conflict with the

special circumstances of the Arab host countries” (although the right of return is not explicitly mentioned, it is implied by the Arab states’ refusal to recognize those refugees who do not wish to leave the host territories); and third, agreement to the establishment of an independent and sovereign Palestinian state in the territories from which Israel would withdraw (with the exception of the Golan Heights), with its capital in East Jerusalem.

The advantages of the initiative lay first and foremost in the proposal of normalization, which holds historical significance for Israel due to its aspiration, since its establishment, to achieve peace and good neighborly relations with the Arab states.<sup>6</sup> There is also a logic behind discussing the issues that influence the entire Arab world (such as Jerusalem and the refugees) with other parties, as opposed to the Palestinians alone, who over the years have sought the support of the Arab world regarding these issues and have refrained from deciding them on their own. At the same time, the dictated package deal in exchange for normalization was problematic, to say the least, and Israel rejected the initiative.<sup>7</sup> Even if some in Israel welcomed the Arab willingness it reflected, it was always consistently stressed that the initiative would not be accepted as long as it came in the form of a dictate. Over the years, the Arab states have repeatedly reaffirmed their support of the initiative in a manner that won them international credit, but enabled them to do the minimal for the Palestinians while in practice distancing themselves from the conflict. Yet in order for a framework for future discussion to be relevant as far as Israel is concerned, it must change the approach of the dictated equation and openly discuss both the demands and the essence of the normalization in question; promote gradual steps of normalization during the negotiations and not only at their conclusion, in order to build trust and win over the hearts and minds of the public on all sides; and remove the Golan Heights from the equation, in light of the situation currently prevailing in Syria.

### **New Priorities in a New Geopolitical Reality**

The geopolitical changes that have occurred in the region and the world over the past decade have changed the priorities of the pragmatic Sunni states and in tandem influenced their perception of Israel. The fact that they find themselves in the same boat with Israel regarding most of the regional challenges is a factor that encourages closer relations and the attempt to find a framework for cooperation. These challenges’ relegation of the Palestinian issue to the bottom of regional priorities, and the growing

frustration with the current Palestinian leadership in contexts that are broader than the conflict with Israel, has allowed the pragmatic Sunni states to consider closer relations with Israel as a realistic option.

Since early in the current decade, the Middle East has experienced ongoing upheaval that has sprouted and fueled significant regional challenges, including:

- a. Shiite Iran, which, as the leader of the radical axis, is working tirelessly to undermine the Sunni regimes and to divide the Arab world. Bloody civil wars in Syria and Yemen are microcosms of the tensions and regional struggles over control.
- b. The growing number and buildup of terrorist elements, including both Salafi jihadist groups like the Islamic State and non-Salafi extremists such as the Muslim Brotherhood movement, which today is advancing largely under Turkish patronage.
- c. The neo-Ottoman buildup efforts of Erdogan, who will use all means necessary to position Turkey as a regional Islamic hegemonic power and broaden the territory under its influence.
- d. Internal unrest and tensions against a primarily economic background, which have beset all the governments of the Sunni states. The regional upheaval has made it clear that unrest in one country can have far reaching regional implications, such as the extreme scenarios in Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen.

The Arab states, which have found themselves contending with these challenges on multiple fronts, openly acknowledge today that it can no longer be seriously argued that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the most burning issue.<sup>8</sup> They also acknowledge that those who maintain that it is the source of regional instability are motivated by foreign interests and are cynically exploiting the Palestinians.<sup>9</sup>

Today, Saudi Arabia is troubled by an Iran that strives to achieve military nuclear capacity and regional hegemony. In the local arena Riyadh is engaged in a struggle against Iran in Yemen, and in the international arena, it is part of the effort to bring about the renewal of the sanctions regime against Iran and establish closer ties with the American administration. Egypt is fighting an ongoing war with the Islamic State in Sinai and is troubled by the organization's spread within the borders of its neighbor Libya. In Jordan, the country's Palestinian majority and its historic role as custodian of the holy sites in Jerusalem imbues the Palestinian issue and the question of the status quo in Jerusalem with special sensitivity. Still,

the threat that these factors pose to the stability of the kingdom and the Hashemite regime is marginal compared to the threat posed by the Islamic State, both on the Syrian-Iraqi border and from sleeper cells among more than one million Syrian refugees, which today constitute more than 15 percent of the population of Jordan.<sup>10</sup>

Another manifestation of the decreasing weight and attention that Arab states ascribe to the Palestinian issue can be seen in the steady downward trend in these states' contributions to the Palestinian Authority since 2012. According to the Palestinian Authority's Ministry of Finance<sup>11</sup> and the budget of 2017,<sup>12</sup> external aid to the PA, which stood at approximately \$1.2 billion between 2007 and 2012, totaled less than \$700 million in 2017, with only one quarter provided by the Arab world.<sup>13</sup> Former PA Minister of Planning and Labor Samir Abdullah noted that the \$500 million that the Arab states used to transfer to the PA each year has dwindled to some \$150 million.<sup>14</sup>

The reduced prominence of the Palestinian issue in recent years has also been evident among segments of the Arab population. According to an annual survey conducted among young adults in the Arab world by ASDA's Burson-Marsteller, the Islamic State and high unemployment (which is also perceived as a motivation for joining the Islamic State) were ranked as the top threats in the Middle East in 2017, with the threat of terrorism close behind at one percentage point lower. In comparison, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was relegated from seventh place in 2016 to eighth place in the 2017 survey.

These trends are complemented by the charged debate in the social media regarding the importance of the Palestinian issue, its rightful place on the Arab agenda, and the performance of the Palestinian leadership. Under the hashtag "Riyadh is more important than Jerusalem," tens of thousands of Arab internet users, especially Saudis, denounced Palestinian conduct in general and the conduct of Hamas in particular, and called to stop dealings with the Palestinians and instead to focus on internal affairs, with statements such as: "Please, they should turn to Iran for it to liberate them and make their lives a paradise, as it has done [for those who live] in Syria and Lebanon"; "All the Arab peoples liberated themselves without assistance. Why does this [Palestinian] issue continue without a solution?"; "We, as Saudis, are asked to be more Palestinian than the Palestinians"; and others.<sup>15</sup>

Unrelated to Israel, also emphasized was the disproportionate attention that the Palestinians command from the Arab world, in comparison to the

Syrian refugees, for example, who are double in number of the Palestinian refugees and face greater hardship. In addition, the crisis in leadership and the ongoing unsuccessful efforts to reconcile between Fatah and Hamas have aroused much frustration among the states most involved in mediation efforts, led by Egypt and Saudi Arabia. The signs of this frustration remained visible even after the signing of the reconciliation agreement of October 2017. Overall, the pragmatic Sunni camp still regards Hamas as part of the radical axis, reflected in the public discourse and the contemptuous responses to the political document that Hamas issued in May 2017, replete with vague wording and contradictions. A significant portion of the criticism focused on the unrealistic refusal to recognize Israel, which relegates Hamas to an isolated position running counter to all the Arab countries that accepted the Arab initiative.<sup>16</sup> With regard to the disturbances on the border of the Gaza Strip in recent months, voices in Saudi Arabia lay blame for the dead on Hamas in the service of Iran, and expressions of support for the Israeli response have increased.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, Mahmoud Abbas, as the leader of Fatah and the Palestinian Authority, has come under harsh criticism from leaders and public opinion shapers in the Arab world, some of whom have expressed open and active support for his rivals in Fatah. Finally, accusations are growing stronger against the Palestinian leadership for missing many opportunities over the generations to solve the conflict with Israel, and voices maintaining that the time has come for internal reconciliation and peace with Israel are growing louder.<sup>18</sup>

Nonetheless, and despite its decline as a priority, the Palestinian issue still enjoys a special status as a unique issue that gives the impression of Arab unity. For years, the 22 members of the Arab League have been unable to reach agreement on the truly burning issues in the Arab world due to their various interests. Therefore, in order to present a united front, the Palestinian issue receives extensive attention in summit discussions and in the decisions issued at the end of summits. In this way, the issue has traditionally served as the fig leaf for the Arab League to cover up its lack of agreement on other subjects.<sup>19</sup> As evidence, Morocco refused to host the summit in 2016 on the grounds that it was not willing to cooperate with the false demonstration of unity.<sup>20</sup> In doing so, it was presumably referring, at least in part, to the Palestinian issue.



## The Regional Interest: Release from Artificial Restrictions

It is hard to imagine that anyone would volunteer for a decisive multi-front battle against determined and dangerous enemies with one arm intentionally tied behind his or her back. Since the beginning of the current decade, many of the pragmatic Sunni states have been engaged in an existential struggle against a host of threats in the realms of ideology and security, climate and sanitation, economics and infrastructure, and more. Israel, which has been forced since its establishment to contend alone with simultaneous threats, has developed capabilities and expertise that have transformed it into a potential force multiplier to the campaign in question. Despite Israel's willingness to cooperate with the Arab states, and despite their recognition of the advantages of cooperation, obstacles that are no longer relevant yet have become fixed through the power of inertia are forcing all the involved parties to engage in the joint regional campaign with one arm tied behind their backs.

As noted, the Arab states have come to recognize their increasingly overlapping interests with Israel. In the security realm, there has been close cooperation with Jordan and Egypt, as well as with more distant parties. For example, as part of the joint war against the Islamic State, since 2013 Israel has allowed Egypt to bolster its forces in the Sinai Peninsula, despite the demilitarization restrictions specified in the military annex to the peace treaty. Israel was also incorporated into the Egyptian strategic measure of returning the Tiran and Sanafir islands to Saudi Arabia. Remarks in January 2017 by IDF Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Gadi Eisenkot to the Saudi media regarding Israel's willingness to "exchange information with the moderate Arab countries, including intelligence," and his assertion that with regard to certain issues, "there is complete agreement between us and Saudi Arabia,"<sup>21</sup> would have been unthinkable a few years ago. These remarks illustrate the change in Israel's position in the region and the extent of the shared interests, which are turning the developing relationships into a strategic layer of the national security of the states involved.

Progress has also been visible in the economic realm. 2016 witnessed the signing of a \$10 billion agreement whereby Israel is to supply Jordan with natural gas for 15 years, and in February 2018, a 10-year deal was signed with the Egyptians in the realm of trade, transportation, and energy. For countries like Saudi Arabia, which seek to transition from an oil-based economy to a modern and diversified economy based on knowledge, services, and advanced products, Israel, as the closest technological superpower,

is a natural partner in the process. Finally, beyond the expected direct benefits of cooperation, it can be assumed that their contribution to the stabilization and development of the region (not to mention tourism) will attract foreign investments that will serve as incentives for the promotion of regional normalization.

Another issue that is not assigned the importance it merits in the regional discourse is the need to contend with the intensifying water shortage. The repeated droughts, desertification, and intensifying water problems constitute an existential threat that engages all regimes in the region. Egypt is immersed in the African struggle revolving around the distribution of the water of the Nile River, and disturbances have broken out in Syria against the background of water shortage. Israel's expertise in water-related issues, desert agriculture, and food security could help all the countries in the region and contribute to their stability. Thanks to its advanced desalination capabilities, Israel supplies a substantial amount of water to Jordan and to the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. In Section 6 of the peace treaty between Israel and Jordan, the countries committed to work together to preserve and develop water sources. As a result of the severe water shortage in the kingdom, Israel doubled the amount of water it transported to Jordan in 2014. In addition, the new desalination facility that is to be established in Aqaba, which will supply 80-100 million m<sup>3</sup> of water, to be divided equally between Israel and Jordan, will be the first stage of the regional strategic Water Canal project, which is intended

to provide potable water, help preserve the Dead Sea, and produce electricity. Along with the realm of water, cooperative efforts are underway in the realm of agriculture.

These and other examples from more distant countries, which need not be revealed here, are indicative of a trend of change on the map of regional interests, in which Israel is gradually changing from a "problem" into a major part of the solution to the challenges of the region. As a result, the Arab interest in perpetuating the Palestinian issue as a means

of attacking Israel and an obstacle to establishing relations is becoming superfluous. Indeed, conditioning progress in the establishment of closer relations between the Arab states and Israel on a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is an artificial obstacle that allows the Arab states and

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Israel to be held hostage to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, whose resolution appears nowhere on the horizon. This raises the question of whether the Arab states, which are intensifying their cooperation with Israel behind the scenes, will be convinced of the advantages of closer relations with Israel on a public level.

The geopolitical changes in the past decade have led large parts of the Arab world to come to terms in practice with a number of Israel's reservations regarding the Arab Peace Initiative. All claims regarding the Golan Heights hold no relevance in light of the situation in Syria due to clear security reasons. With regard to the refugees, although they have continued to fan the flames on this issue publicly for political reasons, Arab and even Palestinian leaders have, behind the scenes, recognized that Israel will not accept a "right of return" or any other demographic change that will threaten its continued existence as a Jewish state. Moreover, it is becoming increasingly clear, from a sober and balanced historical perspective, that the demand of a right of return fails to take into account the 850,000 Jewish refugees who were forced to flee Arab countries after Israel's War of Independence and who have yet to receive compensation from them.

On these bases, the Arab initiative has, over the years, been updated in ways that though too minor to transform it into a realistic platform from Israel's perspective, proved that it can be modified under circumstances that justify doing so in the eyes of the Arab states. At the Arab League summit in 2017, the Egyptian delegation proposed replacing the words "reaffirming the Arab Peace Initiative" in the concluding declaration of the summit with the words "taking note of the Arab Peace Initiative."<sup>22</sup> The measure, which recognizes the limitations of the initiative and suggests a willingness to promote relevant and effective discourse, was supported by the Egyptian foreign minister and the secretary general of the Arab League, who argued that "the Middle East peace process is stuck," and that new ideas for solving the crisis in the region were necessary. However, the Palestinian delegation, which resolutely opposed the "sudden" change, thwarted the measure in a manner that the Arab League's secretary general described as "extremely unyielding."<sup>23</sup>

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Approximately one month later, the Egyptian newspaper *al-Masry al-Youm* published a debate on the possibility of adding Israel to the Arab League following the resolution of its conflict with the Palestinians.<sup>24</sup> In addition, in May 2017, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that the Gulf states, under the leadership of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, were discussing a proposal to implement normalization measures in various realms, in exchange for measures that reflect Israel's commitment to advance the process vis-à-vis the Palestinians, with an emphasis on freezing construction in the West Bank (outside the settlement blocs) and easing the restrictions on trade with the Gaza Strip.<sup>25</sup> In April, on the eve of the Arab League summit in Dhahran, an establishment-affiliated Saudi daily published an article calling for the Arab countries at the summit to proclaim the establishment of peace and normalization with Israel as part of the reorganization of the regional array of forces and the struggle against Iran.<sup>26</sup> These are just a few examples of the attempts to promote closer relations that illustrate the momentum that has recently emerged. If in the past the Arab interest lay in demonstrating its commitment to the Palestinian issue and encouraging Israel to conclude the conflict, and to do so the Arab states were willing to offer Israel normalization, today the tables are turned, and normalization with Israel in itself serves major genuine interests in the pragmatic Arab world, while the Palestinian issue is standing in the way.

### **The Aversion to Closer Public Relations with Israel**

Despite the closer relations behind the scenes, the pragmatic regimes have been extremely careful not to appear overly enthusiastic about normalization. This has stemmed from the broad, powerful public resistance in these countries to normalization prior to a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which would be perceived as neglect and betrayal of the Palestinian cause. Even Egypt and Jordan, which enjoy diplomatic relations with Israel and engage in extensive security and intelligence cooperation with it behind the scenes, have been careful to avoid displaying too conciliatory a posture. This explains King Abdullah's resolute declarations that there can be no peace or stability in the region without a just and sustainable resolution to the Palestinian issue by means of a two-state solution. Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, who is regarded as a reformer and whose unprecedented statements regarding Israel are revolutionary, noted – in March 2018 during a closed meeting with the leaders of Jewish

organizations in New York, in itself, a noteworthy event – that normalization could not move forward without significance progress with the Palestinians. In this context, the crown prince expressed sorrow and great frustration with the Palestinian leadership, which, he maintained, had missed one opportunity after another by rejecting all the peace proposals it received. His fundamental message was that “it is about time the Palestinians take the proposals and agree to come to the negotiations table or shut up and stop complaining”; his assertion that the Palestinian issue is not a high priority for Saudi Arabia<sup>27</sup> is indicative of frustration that can be ascribed in part to an understanding that the Palestinian issue is an obstacle preventing Saudi Arabia from achieving other interests that are higher priorities.

This deep gap between the strategic interests of the pragmatic regimes and public opinion within their borders means that every step toward closer relations with Israel comes at an internal and regional political price. In the internal arena, the governments of the pragmatic states face challenges threatening their stability, be they hostile internal elements fomenting against them, economic tensions stemming from the reliance on oil, or rapid social and technological changes that create new demands. In a political arena that is already replete with challenges, few leaders are anxious to risk expending the political capital involved in publicly establishing closer ties with Israel. In the regional arena, the competition with Iran over Islamic hegemony in the Middle East, and Iran’s cynical use of the Palestinian issue, assures that all efforts to establish closer relations with Israel will be exploited by Iran to damage the legitimacy of the Sunni states and blame them for abandoning the Palestinians and for heresy against Islam, in cooperation with the United States and Israel. The Sunni states in general and Saudi Arabia in particular cannot allow themselves to provide Iran or Turkey with ammunition that will enable them to accrue regional political capital at their expense.

Given the political price involved with publicly establishing closer relations with Israel and the benefit that the Arab states derive from their secret relations with Israel in any event, it is important to also consider the potential profits that will make the price of normalization worthwhile in the long term.

### **The Advantages of Public Relations with Israel**

First, although the benefits of secret cooperation are opportune, they are also limited. Why should the Gulf states, which seek development in hi-

tech and the cyber realm, exclude themselves from some of the world's leading conferences in these fields only because they are held in Israel? Why should they make due with foreign coverage of Israeli industry instead of receiving their own unmediated impressions and developing trade relations with it? To maximize the strategic, security-related, and economic benefits enjoyed by both sides, the closer relations must be public. This would allow the pragmatic camp to enjoy a trustworthy ally that will provide it with substantial assistance in developing the region and contending with its array of challenges, as well as with international prestige. For its part, the State of Israel would benefit from widespread recognition and legitimacy as an integral and contributing part of the Middle East. Moreover, the establishment of closer relations with additional Arab states would strengthen Israel's relations with its older allies – Egypt and Jordan – and increase its status in the Arab world. Finally, the Middle East as a whole will benefit from an important reinforcement of regional security, which, in addition to the inherent advantage of improved security, is a precondition for improvement of the regional economy through expanding the scope of trade and attracting foreign investors. Economic prosperity, as a stabilizing force in itself, is another incentive for intensified cooperation between Israel and the pragmatic camp.

In addition to limited effectiveness, another significant disadvantage of clandestine cooperation is the expenditure that goes along with maintaining secrecy. The very act of concealing cooperation creates an added cost for every action, from compartmentalization mechanisms and cover stories, to complex systems for coordination, to increased concrete security risks. Of course, in some areas secrecy is essential and must be maintained. However, in other areas, in which secrecy stems from fear of the public's reaction, it is an immense waste of time, energy, and resources that would be better off invested in a constructive process aimed at changing the public mood, or invested directly in shared aims that will convince the public that relations are worthwhile.

Despite cautionary measures, there is always an element of danger in revealing secret relationships. Indeed, revealing a covert measure can be expected to create a commotion that is many times more severe than the original opposition to the measure itself, due only to the deception involved in concealing it. However, delaying normalization is not bringing the parties any closer to an end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The aim of establishing closer relations with the Arab states is not to achieve a peace treaty that

is forced on the Palestinians, as such an agreement would clearly have no chance of success. Israel needs to channel its national energy and resources into the issues where the parties involved have demonstrated a sincere willingness to advance, in order to derive mutual benefit. Unfortunately, the conflict with the Palestinians under their current leadership does not meet these criteria. Hopefully, the welfare that the entire region is likely to enjoy following improved relations between Israel and the Arab states will make the fruits of peace more concrete and turn them into an incentive for the Palestinians and Israel to emerge from the current deadlock and resume genuine negotiations for an end to the conflict and an end of claims. Finally, if Israel's closer relations with the pragmatic camp results in a breakthrough in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the achievement would provide the pragmatic camp and its members with credit and international prestige, as well as a resounding victory over Iran and the radical camp, which are cynically exploiting the Palestinian issue as a tool for attacking the secular Arab regimes and for splitting the Arab world.

### **Opportunities and Implications: The Next Step**

The main obstacle in the Arab world standing in the way of normalization is public opinion, which "obligates" the Arab regimes to precede normalization with a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It is an obstacle that can be overcome by means of a solution to the conflict with the Palestinians or by persuading the Arab world that it makes sense to sever the artificial dependence of one on the other. Due to the complexity of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the sense of a dead end, and especially the profound gaps between the sides, it would be an illusion to think that the momentum created between Israel and the Arab states is enough to bring the conflict to an end. Moreover, almost paradoxically, making normalization conditional upon a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict only pushes off its conclusion: it directs the bulk of pressure toward Israel in a manner that relieves the Palestinians (for whom normalization is not an incentive) of responsibility, and encourages them to entrench themselves in hardened positions on the assumption that time is on their side. This is also the reason for the heavy pressure against normalization that the Palestinians are exerting on the Arab states, out of fear of losing a significant bargaining chip in the struggle against Israel. Since 2002, the approach of making normalization conditional upon a solution to the conflict has not brought its resolution any closer, and has only constituted an obstacle to other processes that

would benefit the entire region. It therefore makes sense to pause and “to recalculate the route” for each of the issues separately. A turn toward the Arab states will not exempt Israel from the need to contend with the Palestinian issue, as it is an issue that neither can nor should be evaded. However, positioning it as a structural obstacle to all efforts to achieve closer relations is not productive and endangers interests of the entire pragmatic camp in the Middle East.

This article seeks to persuade readers of the existence in the current geopolitical environment of a critical mass of common interests shared by Israel and the Arab countries that is capable of breaking the artificial glass ceiling preventing normalization that the Palestinian issue constitutes. The current period offers a historic opportunity to move forward in a complex process that, if managed correctly, will to a certain extent serve the advancement of the region as a whole.

The optimistic picture painted above does not need to remain a dream. However, it is contingent upon a profound change in consciousness with regard to the image of the State of Israel in the Arab world in general, and to the glass ceiling that the Palestinian issue poses for closer relations in particular. The pragmatic Arab states and some segments in Israel, which have grown accustomed to thinking that the path to relations with the Arab states will remain blocked as long as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is unresolved, need to free themselves from this conception and to separate the two issues. Doing so will require leadership with vision and political courage. The Arab regimes that have fixed the dependence in question will need to start the long, slow process of ending the demonization of the State of Israel and winning over hearts and minds toward closer relations. This can be enhanced by symbolic and gradual gestures between the sides, such as establishing the infrastructure for direct communications, opening airspace to commercial flights, and promoting direct frameworks and contacts that will help dismantle the psychological blocks throughout the communities, for example, by issuing visas to athletes, artists, and businesspeople as a first step. Above all else, it is necessary to promote the required changes in the education systems. For its part, the State of Israel can promote economic and infrastructure projects for the Palestinian population in the West Bank, including projects in construction, plans for Area C, industrial zones, and the establishment of a new city.

It is a profound, difficult, and complex process, but also one that is certainly possible, and whose seeds can already be discerned. For example,



the textbooks in Jordan have been updated to include maps of Israel. Responses from Syria recognize the provision of Israeli medical treatment and aid, both on the part of the state through Operation Good Neighbor and many private civilian elements.<sup>28</sup> The social media have reflected growing interest and sympathetic reactions among Saudi citizens to official Israeli positions, particularly regarding the Iranian issue.<sup>29</sup> In addition, discourse in the Saudi media has emerged that is favorable to Israel and supports an agreement with Israel, along with calls for opening an Israeli embassy in Riyadh.<sup>30</sup> The importance of the civilian activity lies in its ability to crack the walls. However, it is essential that brave leaderships on both sides adopt an explicit policy of responsibility and commitment to a constructive and consistent process. In this context, encouragement can be drawn from the recent statements of Saudi Crown Prince Bin Salman, including his interview with the *Atlantic* in early April, in which he recognized the Jewish people's right to live in its state.<sup>31</sup> In addition to the historic importance of these statements, they also appear to have provided inspiration to former Qatari Prime Minister Hamad bin Jassim bin Jaber al-Thani, who issued a similar statement on his Twitter account just a few days later.<sup>32</sup>

In conclusion, despite the increasing interest in the Arab states in establishing relations with Israel, for internal political and regional reasons, they continue to regard the Palestinian issue as an obstacle to public closer relations. If the Palestinian leadership manages to identify the regional momentum, recognizes Israel, and agrees to resume genuine negotiations for an end to the conflict, Israel will welcome such a development. Until then, however, the artificial mutual dependence between normalization and the Palestinian issue has not brought it any closer to a solution. Instead, it has enabled the pragmatic Arab camp and Israel to be taken hostage by a conflict whose end is nowhere on the horizon, contravening their own strategic interests. Therefore, the time has come to abandon the equation that perpetuates deadlock and to begin a sober and practical examination of initiatives for gradual mutual steps of normalization that will benefit and advance the region as a whole.

## Notes

- 1 UNGA res. 302 (IV), Dec. 8, 1949, para. 6, <https://unispal.un.org/DPA/DPR/unispal.nsf/0/AF5F909791DE7FB0852560E500687282>.
- 2 “Arab States do not want to solve the refugee problem. They want to keep it as an open sore, as an affront to the United Nations and as a weapon against Israel. Arab leaders don’t give a damn whether the refugees live or die”: Sir Alexander Galloway, former UNRWA official, April 1952. See Nitza Nachmias, “UNRWA Betrays Its Mission,” *Middle East Quarterly* 19 (September 2012), <https://goo.gl/rR7U5m>.
- 3 Khaled Abu Toameh, “Palestinians in the Arab World: Why the Silence?” Gatestone Institute, July 20, 2010, <https://goo.gl/8BN0Z1>.
- 4 See “The Camp David Accords – The Framework for Peace in the Middle East, 1987,” Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, <https://goo.gl/MBf8Yu>.
- 5 See King Hussein’s speech of July 31, 1988, [http://www.kinghussein.gov.jo/88\\_july31.html](http://www.kinghussein.gov.jo/88_july31.html).
- 6 As reflected in the Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, which states: “We extend our hand to all neighboring states and their peoples in an offer of peace and good neighborliness, and appeal to them to establish bonds of cooperation and mutual help with the sovereign Jewish people settled in its own land. The State of Israel is prepared to do its share in a common effort for the advancement of the entire Middle East.”
- 7 The government of Ariel Sharon rejected the initiative within the framework of its 14 reservations regarding the Roadmap presented by the Bush administration.
- 8 See Muhammad al-Sheikh in Special Dispatch No. 6757 in *al-Jazeera* (Saudi Arabia), January 24, 2017, *MEMRI*, January 26, 2017, <https://goo.gl/k1lIlgQ>.
- 9 Abdulrahman al-Rashed, “Opinion: Moving the Embassy May Have Repercussions,” *a-Sharq al-Awsat*, January 25, 2017, <https://goo.gl/AZnX1R>.
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- 12 Palestinian Ministry of Finance, Palestinian Authority budget for 2017.
- 13 Ohad Hamo, “A Dive in the External Aid to the Palestinian Authority,” *Channel 2 News*, August 10, 2017, <https://goo.gl/2SXU74>.
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- 15 “Twitter Clash: Saudis vs Palestinians on Palestinian Cause, Palestinian Resistance,” *MEMRI*, November 30, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2uFbCOI>.
- 16 According to a senior Saudi analyst, Hamas’s refusal to recognize Israel runs counter to the position of all the Arab states that approved the Arab initiative, *MEMRI*, May 1, 2017, <http://www.memri.org/cgi-webaxy/item?4420>. For a fundamental critique of Hamas’s new political document within the Palestinian Authority, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, see *MEMRI*, May

- 12, 2017, <https://www.memri.org/reports/palestinian-arab-reactions-to-hamas-policy-doc>.
- 17 Z. Harel, "Shift in Saudi Media's Attitude to Israel – Part II," *MEMRI*, May 30, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2JxmqDI>.
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- 19 Abdulrahman al-Rashed, "Region's Crises a Real Test of Arab League's Value," *Arab News*, April 18, 2018, <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1285621>.
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- 23 Ibid.
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- 25 Jay Solomon, Gordon Lubold, and Rory Jones, "Gulf States Offer Better Relations if Israel Makes New Bid for Peace," *Wall Street Journal*, May 15, 2017, <https://goo.gl/R8jcUL>.
- 26 Ahmad Aljamiah, "The Dhahran Summit: Peace with Israel and Confrontation with Iran," *al-Riyadh*, April 14, 2018, <http://www.alriyadh.com/1674976>.
- 27 "MBS: Palestinians Should Accept Trump Proposals or Shut Up," *al-Jazeera*, April 30, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2KpxQL7>.
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- 30 Harel, "Shift in Saudi Media's Attitude to Israel – Part II."
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