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Israel's Foreign Policy Beyond the Arab World: Engaging the Periphery

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Reviews

Israel's Foreign Policy Beyond the Arab World: Engaging the Periphery
by Jean-Loup Samaan
(Oxon: Routledge, 2018), 164 pages

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In his book, *Israel's Foreign Policy Beyond the Arab World,* Jean-Loup Samaan looks at the origins and development of the periphery doctrine in Israel's national security strategy. The idea behind that doctrine was that to break through Israel's regional isolation, it had to focus on strengthening relations with states in the region's hinterland. From the 1950s on, in light of the hostile attitudes of its Arab neighbors, Israel strove to form close relations with Iran, Turkey, and Ethiopia, as well as with minorities in the Middle East such as the Kurds of Iraq and the Maronites in Lebanon. By the early 1990s, after a series of seismic events in the region including the peace agreement with Egypt (and later with Jordan), the Islamic Revolution in Iran, and the end of the Cold War, the periphery doctrine became less apparent in Israel's policies. However, it never disappeared from Israeli thinking, and reemerged again in the 2000s, offering an explanation as to what lay behind Israel's close relations with Azerbaijan, Greece, Cyprus, and South Sudan. Samaan, an associate professor of strategic studies for the United Arab Emirates National Defense College, rightfully claims that the term "peripheral" cannot be understood only in a geographical sense (pages 2, 140), and also looks into Israel's improving relations with the Gulf States, India, and China.

The scope of Samaan's work, both in terms of the various bilateral relations investigated and the exploration of the policy's genesis and evolution from Israel's pre-state period to today, is impressive and provides a useful overview of the doctrine. Moreover, it is written in a concise, lucid manner. In this respect it can serve as an excellent introduction for those interested in Israel's foreign policy beyond its relations with the Arab world.

The author is quite skeptical about the success of the periphery doctrine both historically and in the current era. He claims that the predominance of covert cooperation in Israel's relations with its peripheral partners precluded it from achieving full normalization with them. According to Samaan, relations were meant to be covert only in the preliminary stage; however, what were intended

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as temporary measures gradually became the norm, since peripheral allies were reluctant to advance relations with Israel for fear of jeopardizing their relations with the Arab world (p. 34). He also argues that despite Israeli policymakers' intention that the doctrine would take the form of a multilateral endeavor, its implementation remained mostly on the bilateral level.

With regard to the current era, Samaan's critique focuses on the fact that Israel's newer partners are weak actors compared to Turkey and Iran, which were its main partners in the original periphery pact. Moreover, he claims that contrary to earlier periods in which demonstrating the usefulness of these relations to the US was part of the appeal of the pact, nowadays, some of Israel's relationships conflict with Washington's interests, reflecting a hedging attempt in case of further American retrenchment in the Middle East (p. 140). Following the claim that the current choice of peripheral partners represents a hedging strategy rather than a balancing one (p. 124), Samaan also points out that there is no attempt to form a multilateral alliance, thus rendering the current incarnation of the periphery doctrine less ambitious and even, perhaps, "superficial" (p. 140).

This rather harsh criticism of the doctrine contrasts with that of Yossi Alpher, who claimed in his 2015 book, *Periphery: Israel's Search for Middle East Allies*, that overall, the strategy was largely successful, as the price Israel paid was relatively small.[1] Alpher opined that the periphery strategy was also not an impediment to achieving peace with Israel's neighbors, whereas Samaan sees the policy as one of the factors that fuels conspiracy theories in the region and thus makes it harder for Israel to achieve normalization in its relations with the Arab states (p. 36). In part, the divergence in opinion between Alpher and Samaan can be explained by fact that the former was in many respects an insider regarding the policy (due to his long service in the Israeli intelligence services and the Mossad), while the latter is looking at it from the outside. More fundamentally, for Samaan, the intrigue of examining this doctrine is in how it remained a part of Israeli strategic thinking even though it was not able to prevent some dramatic failures. These included the enmity that developed between Israel and Iran despite the fact that Tehran had been a close peripheral partner, and Jerusalem's failure to utilize its relations with the Lebanese Maronites to achieve success in the 1982 Lebanon War (pp. 146–47). Still, seeing as both Samaan and Alpher discuss the successful elements of the doctrine alongside the problematic ones, in practice, there is not much divergence between their more specific assessments of the doctrine's elements.

The claim that the current periphery policy does not have a multilateral element (p. 120) ignores, however, the trilateral dimension of the burgeoning Israel–Greece–Cyprus relationship. More generally, the very brief reference to Israeli–Cypriot relations is problematic. This lacuna is even more apparent in light of the choice to include a discussion of Sino–Israeli relations. To some, including

China may seem an overstretch of the concept of periphery—one of Samaan's criticisms of how the doctrine's current implementation is perceived (p. 140). Moreover, while it is true that in the current incarnation of the doctrine ties are forged with actors weaker than the original peripheral partners, today's relationships have a much stronger public diplomacy element, thereby reinforcing them.

Given the impressive number of interviews conducted by Samaan (sixty in total, see p. 7), and the fact that many details about the periphery doctrine have been published over the years, his decision to conceal the identities of all the interviewees is curious. It may also serve to obstruct further research into the subject. As Alpher explains in his book, the refusal to disclose details on Israel's relations with its peripheral partners is, in large part, the result of inertia.[2] Moreover, regarding partnerships today, there is less of a need for opacity (as was the case in the past relationships), due to the current trend of more vigorous public diplomacy.

Overall, Samaan's book is a welcome contribution to the growing literature on Israel's ties with regional actors beyond the Arab world. Even for those who focus on the Israeli–Arab conflict, an understanding of Israel's peripheral alliances could greatly contribute to their assessments, since, as Ziv Rubinovitz explains, the depth of Israel's relations with its peripheral partners is closely related to developments in its relations with the Arab states.[3] Samaan's critical views of the doctrine, and the reasons for Israel's enduring attachment to it, open up various new avenues for research. Moreover, the book can well serve readers who are interested in how foreign policy doctrines evolve in general, as well as in Israel in particular.

Notes

[1] Yossi Alpher, Periphery: Israel's Search for Middle East Allies (London, 2015). See my review in *The Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs* X:1 (2016), 125–127.

[2] Ibid, p. 87.

[3] Ziv Rubinovitz, review of *Israel's Foreign Policy beyond the Arab World: Engaging with the Periphery*, H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews, September 2018, https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=51708.