The Beginning of the End of the Arab-Israeli Conflict?

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In its familiar format, the Arab-Israeli conflict is fading away. The peace treaty with Egypt in 1979 marked the end of the beginning of the conflict, and we are now witnessing the beginning of the end. This is not the dream of peace that was promised by the Oslo process. The threats to Israel may have actually increased, because the Arab enemy of yesterday was far less dangerous than the Iranian enemy of today. Nor does it mean that the radical Arabs fighting Israel are any less determined or ruthless. It certainly does not signal the end of the conflict with the Palestinians. What is new is Israel's success in breaking the pan-Arab front against it, and in convincing most Arab countries that a strong Israel is not a threat, rather, an essential condition for their survival. While the region remains rife with violence and instability, the axis of struggle is not between Israel and "the Arabs"; it is between an Arab-Israeli coalition on the one hand, and Iran's Islamic Revolution and Erdogan's Turkey on the other.

Keywords: Arab-Israeli conflict, Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Iran, Turkey, Palestinians, Egypt, Abraham Accords

Introduction

In its familiar format, the Arab-Israeli conflict is fading away. The peace treaty with Egypt in 1979 was the end of the beginning of the conflict, and we are now witnessing the beginning of the end. This is not the dream of peace (some would say the delusion of peace) that was promised by the Oslo process. It is possible that the threats to Israel have actually increased, because the Arab enemy of yesterday was far less imposing and dangerous than the Iranian enemy of today. Nor does it mean that the radical Arabs fighting Israel are less determined or ruthless. It certainly does not signal the end of the conflict with the Palestinians. The lives of Hamas supporters are shaped by their desire and at times their ability to inflict physical harm on Jews, even when this does not further their cause or actually detracts from their position. Those in the West Bank are intoxicated with their ability to gain the support of "progressive" groups in Europe and the United States against Israel, without this being of any particular use to their cause. Their national movement, in both the Gaza Strip and on the West Bank, is flawed in that it has no constructive goals that drive its national agenda.

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What is new is Israel's success, aided by the Arabs' structural weaknesses, in breaking the pan-Arab front against it, and in convincing the majority of the Arab countries to effectively acknowledge in their policy that a strong Israel is an essential condition for their survival, not a threat to rally round. Violence and instability in the region remain as they were, but the axis of struggle is not between Israel and "the Arabs"; it is between an Arab-Israeli coalition on the one hand, and Iran's Islamic Revolution and Erdogan's Turkey (and the Salafi-jihadi threat) on the other. The former to a large extent overlaps with the de facto coalition of Israel and a majority of the Arab countries against the Muslim Brotherhood.

The prevailing idea in Europe and of former President Obama that "the Middle East conflict" revolves around the struggle between Israel and the Palestinians, supported by "the Arab world," was always misguided, simplistic, and ideologically (as opposed to analytically) driven, but it is now proven to be unfounded and untenable. The most recent conflict with the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip (Operation Guardian of the Walls in May 2021) confirmed this assessment. Following the operation, relations between Israel and the major Arab countries that are part of this coalition, primarily Egypt, became closer, and the overt and covert partnership between them deepened. These countries fear that a Hamas achievement is apt to encourage the Muslim Brotherhood in their territory and threaten their regimes.

Crystallizing the Pan-Arab Format

The Arab collective began to mobilize for the struggle against Israel late in the Mandate period, but the Arab-Israeli conflict in its quintessential form took shape when Nasser ruled Egypt. In the 1940s, Egypt made a final decision to assume the leadership of the Arab world and to displace the Hashemites in Iraq and Jordan from their principal position in the Arab east (Gershoni, 1980, 1981; Kedourie, 1970). With the end of the British Mandate, when the fate of Palestine hung in the balance and with Zionism threatening to institutionalize what the Arab narrative regarded as a continuation of foreign control at the expense of the rightful Arab owners of Palestine, anyone seeking regional leadership was forced to rally in "defense of the Palestinians." Even in the mid-1940s, the Egyptian leadership, with the exception of the Muslim Brotherhood movement, did not show much interest in the matter. Eliyahu Sasson of the Jewish Agency's political department met with Egyptian Prime Minister Ismail Sidky in September 1946, and reported, "It seemed to

me as if I was sitting with one of my friends from the department, and we were consulting" (Sasson, 1978). King Abdullah, ostensibly the leader of the Arab invasion designed to "save" Palestine from the Jews, was in effect in a strategic alliance with Israel against the Palestinian national movement and against Egypt. When he tried to make peace with Israel at the end of war, however, he discovered that the mood in the Arab world would not allow him and the Jordanian elite to deviate from the regional consensus (Schueftan, 1987).

During Nasser's presidency, the restriction on public and direct contacts with the "Zionist entity" was elevated to a supreme taboo, defining the degree of patriotic loyalty of all Arabs and tarring violators as traitors. The messianic movement of the Egyptian president succeeded in inflaming the elites and the political public "from the [Atlantic] Ocean to the [Arabian] Gulf," with its promise to restore the Arabs to their erstwhile greatness. Nasser regarded Egypt, located at the geopolitical junction of the Fertile Crescent, the Arabian Peninsula, and Northern Africa, as destined by its history, size, stability, culture, and leadership to lead Arabic speakers from Morocco on the Atlantic coast to Iraq and Saudi Arabia on the Gulf coast. The argument that won their hearts was ostensibly convincing, and initially proved valid: the Arabs were destined for greatness; they were weakened by internal division and struggles; this division resulted from a lack of leadership and weakness against their enemies. Nasser proved his ability to offer them unifying leadership, and in his successful conflicts with the West demonstrated his ability to ensure them a place of honor and reverence in the international theater (Kissinger, 1994). Underlying all of these impressive achievements was pan-Arab solidarity. Anyone dissenting from this solidarity betrayed the hopes of the Arabs for their future. The conflict with Israel was a critical tier of the Arabs' struggle to regain the Arab homeland in the Middle East, in which Western colonialism had planted a Jewish state. This state drove a wedge between the Arab east in the Fertile Crescent and the Arabian Peninsula (Mashreq) and the Arab west in North Africa (Maghreb).

Nasser used this taboo to close Arab ranks behind him and impose his authority over even his fiercest opponents. He adopted the radical goal of "liberating Palestine" without determining a binding time framework, and after the Sinai Campaign in 1956, realized that destroying Israel would require a vast increase in his military power. His objective, however, was not military, but political. The prerequisite for realizing the Arab hopes of liberating themselves from the foreign yoke and rebuilding their power and respect, becoming prosperous, and regaining the land taken by the Jews was unity under Nasser's messianic leadership. Anyone opposing unity for the sake of the common struggle and an absolute boycott against Israel was a heretic. Such a person would be punished by his own people, who would eliminate him, at least politically and probably also physically, for betraying the hopes and future of the nation. Nasser developed this argument in particular at the peak of the "Arab Cold War" in the 1960s:

> The campaign underway in every part of the Arab homeland is between two currents: the national current and the non-national current. The former includes all of the national and progressive forces, while the latter includes the enemies of nationalism and unity, including those who deny Arabism, reactionaries, ethnicists, imperialists, Israel, and capitalists linked to reactionism and imperialism. The campaign between these two currents is cruel and difficult, because it is a fateful struggle. (Radio Cairo, 1963)

The manifesto of the Federal Union between Egypt, Syria, and Iraq (April 1963) stated:

> Unity is especially a revolution because it is profoundly connected with the Palestine cause and with the national duty to liberate that country. It was the disaster of Palestine that revealed the conspiracy of the reactionary classes and exposed the treacheries of the hired regional parties and their denial of the people's objectives and aspirations….It was the disaster of Palestine that clearly indicated the path of salvation, the path of unity, freedom, and socialism. (Laqueur & Schueftan, 2016, p. 92)

The delegitimization campaign against the "reactionary" monarchies was designed to put them on the defensive and force them to fall in line with Nasser's policy against their national needs, more than it was designed to eliminate their regimes (Kissinger, 1994). Under such circumstances, Jordan, for example, could not express its partnership of interests with Israel, and other Arab countries did not dare to ignore the struggle against Israel, even though they had no direct interest in it.

Radicalism at an Impasse: From the Six Day War to the Collapse of the Soviet Union

This system functioned well in Nasser's service until the early 1960s. Toward the middle of the decade, it turned against him, and eventually brought about the most painful defeat of his messianic movement. In a poetically just case of falling into one's own trap, an even more radical Arab actor, Syria, succeeded in using Nasser's own device to embarrass the Egyptian president and put him on the defensive on the issue of Palestine. During the bitter clash between Egypt and Syria over the blame for dismantling the United Arab Republic in 1961, the Syrians demanded that Nasser fulfill his commitment to go to war against Israel, fully aware of his determination not to do so at that time. In a 1962 speech before the Legislative Council in the Gaza Strip, Nasser explained to the Palestinians, of all people, why the pan-Arab solidarity in whose name he was called "to liberate Palestine" conflicted with his responsibility as leader of the Arabs to avoid being dragged into a test of power with Israel at a time when the Arab armies were not ready for it. He reminded them of the defeat in 1948, when irresponsible leadership sent the Arab armies to war in Palestine without the preparations necessary for victory, and described the lessons to be gleaned:

> And the leader who has no doubt of victory and strives to instill the thought of the impending victory—is a traitor to his country and his homeland…. When we undertake military actions, we must be ready to do so. If we are not ready, we are obligated to act in a calculated way until we are ready, so that what happened in 1948 does not happen again….I am also bound to refrain from gambling with the fate of my country, and avoid a second disaster like that of 1948…. War is defense, retreat, and attack, and a victorious commander knows when to attack and when to retreat. (Harkabi, 1972)

The Syrians themselves eventually began provoking Israel, and following Israel's responses, demanded that Egypt join and lead the struggle, as required by the core of the pan-Arab solidarity of the Nasserist messianic movement, including in the realm of the Arab-Israeli conflict. After years of provocation by Damascus, Nasser was no longer able to withstand the mechanism that he himself had created, and embarked on escalation that led to his defeat and destruction in the Six Day War. The same demand for boundless pan-Arab solidarity that was at the heart of the Arab-Israeli conflict in its most distinct format also dragged Jordan into a hopeless war that King Hussein

did not want, in which Jerusalem was lost, and Israel gained control over all of "Palestine" west of the Jordan River. On two occasions, King Hussein explained his considerations at the beginning and during the crisis:

> When Nasser moved his forces across the Suez Canal into Sinai, I knew that war was inevitable. I knew that we were going to lose. I knew that we in Jordan were threatened, threatened by two things: we either followed the course we did or alternately the country would tear itself apart if we stayed out and Israel would march into the West Bank and maybe even beyond….It wasn't a question of our thinking there was any chance of winning….We knew what the results would be. But it was the only way and we did our best and the results were the disaster we have lived with ever since. (Shlaim, 2007)

From a historical perspective, the complete and decisive fulfillment of pan-Arab solidarity in 1967 created the conditions that brought about its erosion, disintegration, and dissolution, followed by its complete collapse in the succeeding decades. It remained in force until Nasser's death in 1970; its swan song was in the Yom Kippur War and the oil embargo, but was irretrievably erased by the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty at the end of the decade. It was further damaged by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the 1991 Gulf War, and suffered protracted and tormented agony following the Arab Spring in the second decade of the 21st century. The Abraham Accords reflected the mortal state of pan-Arab solidarity and instilled it as a matter of widespread public knowledge. Each of these stages deserves a brief discussion.

The Erosion of Arab Solidarity

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Arab solidarity reflected a sense of growing power among radical elements in the international and regional arenas. Egypt's astute positioning in the Cold War greatly increased Nasser's bargaining power with the superpowers. His international status thrilled his disciples in the Middle East, and forced his rivals to join his camp. After the Arab defeat in 1967, it was still widely hoped that a combination of Arab determination in the struggle and their position in the global theater would force Israel to relinquish the fruits of its military accomplishments with no political quid pro quo, as it had in 1957. Less than two years after the war, Nasser described his perception of the determining balance of power as follows:

> We lost a battle in June 1967, but the enemy did not win the war… because it was unable to impose terms corresponding to its assessment of this military victory. The main reason is that its military victory was unnatural, unreasonable, and opposed to any correct evaluation of the forces involved. The crux is that the enemy could not impose political terms, because our nation, its right, its endurance, and its resources—natural, political, psychological, and economic—are much greater than his. It was therefore capable of winning a battle, but not the war. We must redirect our resources and re-muster them in order to rectify what happened, and much more than that. (*Papers of Gamal Abdel Nasser*, pp. 49-52)

The Arabs' achievements in the Yom Kippur War and the dramatic global effect of their power and wealth during the energy crisis sustained their hope until the late 1970s of resurrecting their status and enforcing their will on Israel. In the first half of the decade, not only did a dramatic change for the better occur in the Arabs' bargaining position; their self-confidence and hopes for the future also soared. Nizar Qabbani, an acclaimed poet who published harsh criticism of the cultural characteristics that he held responsible for the Arabs' defeat in 1967 ("In the Margins of the Record of the Defeat"), wrote immediately after the Yom Kippur War about the difference in self-image between 1967 and what he felt following the achievements by the Arab soldiers in 1973. Before the war, he wrote, "My eyes were two caves in which bats and spiders are nesting…I bear on my forehead a deep scar named June 5"; after the war, he wrote, "I was born under the floating bridges and ladders" for crossing the Suez Canal and "I came out of…the womb of the armored personnel carriers and cannon barrels…I was one of those who came out of the womb of tragedy and rage…here I swim in the waters of the Suez Canal as a shark and tear the flesh of the Israeli soldiers in the Golan Heights with my teeth" (Sivan, 1974).

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Sadat's initiative and the separate peace treaty with Israel concluded by the largest and most important Arab country in 1979 damaged this hope irreversibly. It was not only the end of pan-Arab solidarity with the removal of its keystone; it also enabled Israel to divert resources from defense to internal affairs and thereby catapulted its development (Ben Zvi, 2002),[1] and widened the gap dramatically with the Arab parties still adhering to the struggle against it. The disintegration of Arab solidarity was reflected a few years later in the lack of response by Egypt and all other Arab countries to Israel's attack on the nuclear reactor in Baghdad in 1981 and Israel's occupation in 1982 of Beirut, the capital city of an Arab state. The impotence of the Arab countries deepened with the collapse of the Soviet Union at the end of the decade (1989), not only because the Arab radicals lost the military and political support of a superpower, but also because all Arab states lost their strategic maneuverability and bargaining power lent by the competition between the superpowers during the Cold War. In the 1991 Gulf War, two years after the Soviet Union collapsed, the downfall of pan-Arab solidarity was highlighted when Hafez Assad, ruler of the country that had led the radical consensus, including in the struggle against Israel, joined the alliance created and led by the United States in its war against the radical regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq.

The Palestinian Dimension

In the 1990s, the change in the global balance of power aroused groundless hope in Jerusalem that Israel's willingness to dramatically change its policy on the Palestinian question would facilitate a historic compromise with the Palestinian national movement. This hope was based on the assumption that Arafat and his partners in the Palestinian leadership realized that in the American era, their struggle to achieve all of their national goals had no chance of success. The inevitable failure of the Oslo process was due to a basic misunderstanding by its architects of the essence of the Palestinian national movement under the leadership of Mufti of Jerusalem Haj Amin al-Husseini, Arafat, and their successors. From the outset, this movement rejected any historic compromise (Porat, 1971, 1978; Schueftan, 1987),[2] even when in the late 1940s its leaders were fully aware of the catastrophic alternative to such a compromise in the form of an Israeli-Jordanian

partnership at the expense of Palestinian national independence. The attitude prevailed after Sadat's initiative, when Arafat himself understood that Begin's autonomy proposals would lead to a Palestinian state (Levy, 1998).[3] Arafat and his successor continued to reject any historic compromise, even after the Oslo process collapsed in the second intifada, during the terms of Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Prime Minister Ehud Olmert (MEMRI, 2020).[4]

The suicidal radicalism from the Mufti until the present is anchored in the Palestinian assumption that the pan-Arab format of the conflict with Israel will prevail, as will denial of the structural features of the cumulative change in this format since the 1970s described here. In the 1990s, the Palestinians assumed that in the future they would also receive massive support from the Arab world for their struggle, just as solidarity with the Palestinian cause had pulled the Arab countries into war in 1948, dragged Egypt and Jordan into war in 1967, prevented separate settlements until 1977, and isolated Egypt outside this ring of solidarity for another decade and a half following the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty. In the early 1990s, Arafat realized that the Israeli government was eager to believe in the chances of peace, and was willing to allow him and his partners to take control in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. He helped this government deceive itself, until his radical strategy started to emerge, revealing as early as 1995 (Galili, 1995; Bron, 1995)[5] that this foothold was designed to escalate and strengthen the struggle against Israel, not to end it with a compromise.

In retrospect, notwithstanding the heavy damage inflicted on Israel, the Oslo process also helped to continue the erosion of pan-Arab support for the Palestinians. Jordan identified in the process an excuse to justify peace with Israel in 1994, arguing that the PLO was working in the same direction. Countries in Asia and Africa forged ties with Israel, or renewed them after breaking off relations in the 1970s. Even the use of brute force to end the second intifada early in the 21st century had no significant negative impact on the erosion of solidarity with the Palestinians.

The term "Arab Spring" exposed the gap between great expectations and painful reality. The two positive byproducts of these events, disillusionment about the "new Middle East" and the collapse of pan-Arab solidarity in the struggle against Israel, cannot compensate for the humiliating failure and terrible suffering that the "spring" inflicted on the region.

The Collapse of Arab Solidarity Following the Arab Spring

After the Six Day War, the most dramatic blow to the essential component of the Arab-Israeli conflict in its familiar format, namely, pan-Arab solidarity on the Palestinian issue, occurred in the second decade of the 21st century, during the Arab Spring and what emerged in its wake. This solidarity had been forged under the momentum of Nasser's achievements and his messianic movement at the peak of Arab self-esteem and power. The lessons of the Arab Spring drawn by the Arabs themselves, their enemies, and experienced observers of the region undercut the Arabs' self-image and outsiders' judgment concerning the Arabs' standing and their future hopes.

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fundamental change in the tribal social and political order—without willingness to upset patriarchal foundations, develop civil society, and adopt a pluralistic approach to society and politics. Without such infrastructure, even free elections can only replace one destructive tyranny with another oppressive regime.

Today, after a decade of Arab-style "spring," the tyranny, anarchy, civil wars, misfortune, and despair prevailing in the Middle East are more severe than what preceded it. The situation is worse, both because millions of people have undergone great and unnecessary suffering and because the hopes of improvement have been dashed. Even in Tunisia, where a positive change appeared initially, its fulfillment depended on the good will of the Muslim Brotherhood, which is adept at offering assistance to the oppressed and extending its grip on society in preparation for the imposition of its authoritarian governance. This was precisely Erdogan's policy in the first decade of his rule, before the oppressive nature of his version of the Muslim Brotherhood's crafty strategy was revealed.

In the other loci of the Arab Spring—Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen, and countries that weathered fear but evaded seminal upsurge—old hardships and failure have prevailed, or even worsened. In the most important Arab country, when the president (Mubarak) was ousted from office, the elections replaced a dysfunctional but stable and moderate regime with a dangerously militant and oppressive alternative of the Muslim Brotherhood, which eliminated any chance of pluralism and democracy. This regime was replaced in turn, with broad public support, by a military dictatorship. Where the effort to overthrow the ruler failed, the president (Bashar Assad) conducted a large-scale massacre of civilians and survived thanks to merciless cruelty. Where the ruler (Qaddafi) was murdered, the only alternative that Libyan society could offer was a state of tribal chaos that was even worse than the rule of the oppressive and mentally unstable former president. In Yemen, two armed gangs slaughtering each other guarantee suffering and distress for the population. Even if Lebanon, against all odds, initially somehow managed to escape collapse, the decay and structural corruption are wreaking devastating havoc on the country. Defying the national interest, Hezbollah puts the country at risk of a disastrous war, and Iran's involvement exacerbates the situation. The impressive prosperity in parts of the Gulf rests to a large extent on a precarious pyramid, with a decisive majority of foreign workers and a small privileged minority. Where the Palestinians have established their own regime—the Gaza Strip and Area A in the West Bank—oppression and structural corruption prevail.

"Poetry, it has been said, was to Arabs what philosophy was to the Greeks, law to the Romans, and art to the Persians: the repository and purest expression of their distinctive spirit" (Ajami, 1998, p. 80). One of the most important Arab poets of the last generation, if not the most preeminent, has eloquently shared his despair and sense of stagnation. Ali Ahmad Esber, known as Adonis, born in 1930, is an Alawite from the Latakia district in Syria who migrated to France decades ago. In his "Medarat" (Scopes) column in *al-Hayat*, an important newspaper published in London, Adonis wrote:

> The long play now staged on the Arab land/ does not deal with the discovery of new light/ but its opposite: Is the course of events enough to say/ that thanks to the "Arab Spring"/ a person on Arab soil has no/ outlet of hope?... In an Arab-like voice, history said: I died today, and tomorrow I will send in a different Arab-like body/ tribes and ethnic groups torn and devouring one another./ I have learned nothing other than expertise in killing and its arts. (Adonis, 2016)

In a column on June 29, 2017 entitled "Arabism Conversing with Itself," he wrote:

> I, Arabism, am isolated, ill/ which is only an expression./ They make declarations about me daily.
> I am Arabism—My books are rising up against me,/ casting off from their shoulders enormous loads of hallucination and nausea.
> Every word declares the overall grief of its history,/ on its present and its future.
> On its history—because it migrated or was forced to migrate/ to a place to which it refuses to return.
> Its present—because it is an inevitable collapse/ on its future—because it is an opening to deficiency and deletion.
> Yes…from now on, the future will be behind you./ Oh, my Arabic language.
> (Adonis, 2017)

Hazem Saghieh, editor of the political supplement of *al-Hayat* and one of the most astute and esteemed political commentators in the Arab world, described the desperate state of society a decade after the outset of the seminal events in an article entitled "Arab Spring: The Ten Bitter Years" (Saghieh, 2020). He describes the Arab Spring as the most significant revolution in modern political history, which should have been the foundation for the Arab future. The revolution was supposed to liberate the Arabs from adherence to emotional goals beyond the needs of peoples and nations: from the need to strive for an Islamic solution, for Arab unity, for a struggle against strategic alliances or to liberate Palestine. Thus, the various peoples who revolted had a common universal interest in "freedom, bread, and human dignity." They wanted to return the power to the people peacefully, to replace the effort to achieve eternal goals with relative achievements, and to connect to the scientific, technological, and information revolutions that were unavailable to them.

Saghieh describes the process in which after two years these trends were eliminated by the military regimes and the radical Islamists through violence, cruelty, and civil wars. They also revived the discourse based on the failure to reach out to the achievements of the modern world and on the distortion of human isolation. According to him, this defeat was rooted in the weaknesses of Arab society: the weakness of the bourgeois, the fragility of urban society, and the eruption of repressed rural tribalism. A decade later, the counterrevolution was completed with the restoration of military regimes or the rifts in societies along religious, sectoral, and ethnic lines—a kind of sub-patriotism in place of the promised combination of patriotism and universalism. Broad segments of society are paying the price of freedom's defeat with expulsion and exile. "As for the revolutionary forces," Saghieh laments, "they are in a state of rot that makes a swift revival unlikely—not only that of the revolutions but also of the countries themselves."

In his youth, Hisham Melhem, a leading Lebanese-American journalist who for many years has been the Washington bureau chief of the al-Arabiya News Channel and a correspondent for the *an-Nahar* newspaper, was active in reformist groups in the Arab world. In June 2017, on the 50th anniversary of the Six Day War, he sorrowfully described the destruction of the Arab political order, the "primitive and backward" religious structures, and the sinking of Arab society into an abyss. He mourns the destruction of the bustling cosmopolitan cities he knew in his youth: Damascus, Aleppo, Baghdad, Mosul, Cairo, and Alexandria. He describes the destruction and exile of shocking proportions that the Arabs brought on themselves in the wake of the horrors of the Arab Spring (contending that while Arabs constitute 5 percent of the world's population, they account for 50 percent of its

refugees). Melhem notes the rise of the non-Arab powers in the region—Iran, Turkey, and Israel—caused by the Arabs' weakness and the disintegration of Iraq and Syria, which he doubts can ever be reunited. He especially laments that Egypt has been shunted to the sidelines, depends on handouts from the Gulf states for its survival, and in its struggle against strongholds of the Islamic State in Sinai needs the assistance of the same Israeli air force that destroyed the Egyptian air force in 1967. Although Melhem tries to take comfort in the struggle by young Arabs from business, higher education, and the arts, who have not abandoned their hope of a better future, he concludes on a note of despair: "They constitute thousands of points of light, but in reality, these flickering embers of enlightenment will continue for years to come to be engulfed in darkness, thick darkness" (Melhem, 2017).

The three writers quoted above—Adonis, Saghieh, and Melhem—live in Paris, London, and Washington, respectively, in exile from the Arab world, but their assessments on the state of the Arabs resonate widely and deeply in their cultural community. The fact that in their native countries they are unable to tell the bitter truth about the cultural depth of the Arab failure is one of the structural weaknesses of this culture.

Perhaps the two most influential critics who wrote with painful empathy about their society's impasse were Syrian philosopher Sadiq Jalal al-Azm and Lebanese born Shiite scholar Fouad Ajami. They too lived in the West, in Berlin and Washington, respectively. Both died in the middle of the preceding decade, and did not experience the full destruction that the Arabs brought upon themselves in the Arab Spring (early in the decade, Ajami still believed in the project's success, and wrote an optimistic book about the events in Syria). Both identified the profound structural crisis years before it surfaced (Ajami, 1998; al-Azm, 2004).

Following their perpetual failure in hundreds of years of friction with the West and decades of Western colonial rule in their countries, the Arabs are especially sensitive to their image in Europe and the United States. They are inclined to be easily offended by critical assessments of their culture and often ascribe unflattering Western views to racism or Islamophobia. Their sensitivity and Western political and cultural intellectual fashions have inhibited severe criticism of Third World elements at almost any cost, especially in academic circles and the media, even when objectively justified. Noteworthy, therefore, is an example of the deep disappointment in liberal circles at the Arab Spring's failure that was published before the full horror in Syria and other places was widely reported. An article in July 2014 in the balanced and critically acclaimed *Economist* stated:

> A thousand years ago, the great cities of Baghdad, Damascus and Cairo took turns to race ahead of the Western world. Islam and innovation were twins. The various Arab caliphates were dynamic superpowers—beacons of learning, tolerance and trade. Yet today, the Arabs are in a wretched state. Even as Asia, Latin America and Africa advance, the Middle East is held back by despotism and convulsed by war.
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> Hopes soared three years ago, when a wave of unrest across the region led to the overthrow of four dictators—in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen—and to a clamor for change elsewhere, notably in Syria. But the Arab spring's fruit has rotted into renewed autocracy and war. Both engender misery and fanaticism that today threaten the wider world. Why Arab countries have so miserably failed to create democracy, happiness or (aside from the windfall of oil) wealth for their 350 million people is one of the great questions of our time. What makes

> Arab society susceptible to vile regimes and fanatics bent on destroying them (and their perceived allies in the West)? No one suggests that the Arabs as a people lack talent or suffer from some pathological antipathy to democracy. But for the Arabs to wake from their nightmare, and for the world to feel safe, a great deal needs to change. ("Tragedy of the Arabs," 2014)

The article affirms that only the Arabs can reverse their civilizational decline, yet at that time, there was little hope of that happening. It insists that what is needed—pluralism, education, and free markets—were characteristic of the Arabs in the distant past, but there is little likelihood of the Arabs adopting them anew in the foreseeable future.

There is no need for rhetoric from poets, scholars, Arab journalists in exile, or British weeklies to attest to the prevailing recognition among the Arabs of their weakness vis-à-vis Israel, beyond the social and cultural roots of this weakness. The president of the largest and most important Arab country admitted as much at a ceremony marking the only war against Israel perceived as an Arab victory. At a meeting of military figures on the 45th anniversary of the Yom Kippur War, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi praised the heroism of Egyptian soldiers for their willingness to fight against the superior power of the IDF: "The major gap did not deter Egypt or its army. It's like one was driving a Seat and the other a Mercedes. The truth is that it was obvious the Mercedes would win. Who would even imagine competing against a Mercedes with a Seat, except true men?" El-Sisi added that "the results of the war were a miracle…the Egyptian army could do that in the past, it could do it every time" ("El-Sisi on the October War," 2018). The message was clear: Israel's superiority is structural.

Suffering weakness, lack of self-confidence, and well-grounded fear, the Arabs can no longer afford solidarity of the kind that will weaken each one of them. They need other partnerships that conflict with this solidarity in order to cope with new dangers, including threats of existential proportions. What was exposed in the Arab Spring has deeply affected Arab bargaining power and Arab-Israeli relations. Given the special importance of this latest chapter in the history of the region and its political and cognitive complexity, a slightly more detailed discussion of this phenomenon is called for.

For generations, especially since the Arab countries were founded and gained independence in the mid-20th century, observers from both the West and the region attributed the Arabs' failure to cope with the challenges of the modern world to the tyranny and corruption of the local rulers. This trend became stronger in the era of political correctness—and with the formative influence of Edward Said on Western academics. In this era, discussion of the endogenous failings of non-Western societies was banned in broad circles, especially regarding non-white societies that were subject to colonial rule. Discussion of such failings that did not focus on the lingering damage caused by foreign rule led to the speaker being condemned as a racist, to the detriment of his professional and public status.

Following its publication in 1978, Said's book *Orientalism* had a seminal effect on the process of delegitimization of the objective discussion on Western campuses of post-colonial societies, hinging the debate on a presumption of Western responsibility for Arab failures. To Said, the original sin was "orientalism" that distorted the region's image, and repentance for this sin requires reversing the unacceptable prevailing pattern of Western academic discussion, which tends to belittle and defame the people of the region in order to serve the West's appetite for control. The contribution of Said's book to an understanding of the region was negligible, but his influence in suppressing free thought and dictating the scholarly perspective in Western academic institutions was revolutionary (Said, 1978; Kramer, 2001).[6]

In contrast, in a lecture at Oxford, then-Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh of the Congress Party presented a fair and thorough discussion of the complex reciprocal relations between the colonial power and the society shaped under the influence of the British Empire during and after foreign rule. Alongside criticism of colonial rule, Singh expressed gratitude for the contribution of the British tradition to constitutional government, the rule of law, free media, professional public service, and academic education and research (Ministry of External Affairs, 2005).

According to the dictates of political correctness, the local population can be held responsible only if the focus is on corrupt tyrants imposed on their country by the colonialists and their Western successors by either force or manipulation. When the history of the rise of these leaders makes such an accusation difficult, it is customary to claim that colonial heritage or Western policy and intervention aroused a response of this kind (Levi & Young, 2011). The hopes that accompanied this distorted description (and to a great extent engendered it) centered on a broad popular uprising, while ousting these rulers and replacing them with popularly elected rulers who faithfully reflect the local society.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, a simplistic and populist argument has been added to this hope, accompanied by an unsustainable conclusion: the democracies triumphed because they brought freedom, democracy, peace, and human rights; this quality of life arouses jealousy and is familiar in the world thanks to television and the social networks; everyone wants such a life, and understands that it can be obtained only through democracy, regional cooperation, and prevention of wars and conflicts. Consequently, it is frequently but falsely concluded that if the tyrannical and corrupt rulers are removed from office and replaced by others elected by the people who want such a good life, a pluralistic change must occur in the Middle East, as it did in Eastern Europe. The most unrealistic version of this simplistic idea was voiced by Shimon Peres in the early 1990s (and constituted the basis for the Oslo process). He also stated that this cultural metamorphosis was bound to occur, because the alternative was failure and hardship. He assumed that such failure (which, as could have been predicted, is what actually occurred) could not persist (Peres, 1993). Versions only slightly less divorced from the cultural and political reality were very common in the West, particularly among academics and the European elites, and to a great extent dictated expectations and policy in the Middle East.

The Weakness of the Arab World and the Implications for Israel

The Arab world is painfully aware of its weakness, and has lost many of its hopes. Euphoria of the type that prevailed at the peak of Nasserism, or after the 1973 war and during the energy crisis, when a great deal of wealth was accumulated, has vanished. The hope of stabilizing the situation, envisioning an economic horizon beyond bare survival, and ensuring a reasonable quality of life has also been seriously hampered. The Syrian civilian sees the ruin of his country, the Iraqi witnesses his homeland torn to pieces, and the Lebanese, beset by the plummeting situation in his country, finds it difficult to subsist at the most basic level. The environment is violent, threatening, and unpredictable. No relief is in sight, much less a solution. Even in countries that have managed to avoid large-scale outbreaks of violence, such as Jordan, the economic situation is depressing, the country is dependent on unstable external aid, internal tension is rising (for example the attempted coup in Jordan attributed to Prince Hamzah), and the regime's political base has been eroded. In a 2020 survey among thousands of Arabs between the ages of 18 and 24 from 17 countries in the Middle East, 63 percent of respondents from the Levant (Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon, the Palestinian territories, Syria, and

Yemen) said that they had tried or would like to emigrate. In 2021 this number dropped to a still very high 42 percent, similar to the percent in North Africa (Arab Youth Survey, 2021). Even under Israeli occupation in the West Bank, the situation is not nearly as bad.

Ostensibly, this gloomy picture should encourage Israel: weak countries are less dangerous enemies, they are able to devote only limited energy to Israel, and they pay less attention to the struggle against it. Solidarity in this struggle is exhibited primarily in the absurd conduct of international organizations, whose marginal and biased influence on regional realities can be almost totally ignored. This weakness, however, also has a negative impact on important Israeli interests. The frailty, impasse, and hopelessness typical of the region ensures that in the foreseeable future, Israel will face an unstable and violent environment of failed states (Michael & Guzansky, 2016; Schueftan, 2020), with the violence on occasion inevitably spilling over to Israel. More importantly, the weakness of divided Arab countries invites their neighbor—Iran, a large, strong, radical country hostile to Israel—to take control of them and impose its will on the region at large.

Regional Challenges and the Arab Partnership with Israel

The Iranian Threat

The possibility of Iranian hegemony in the Middle East poses a threat to Israel of existential proportions. Since Nasser was at his pinnacle, there has been no single power threatening to control the region's economic (oil and gas), strategic (Persian Gulf, Bab el-Mandab Strait, Suez Canal), and cognitive (Mecca, Medina, al-Aqsa) resources, and to employ them, inter alia, against Israel. The Iranian threat is greater than the Egyptian threat was at the time, because Iranian society is more imposing, its science more developed, its technology more advanced, and its fanaticism more extreme. In addition, Iran is incomparably more sophisticated, and the strategic tools that it can supply to even primitive proxies like the Houthis in Yemen have no regional precedent in any time or place.

This dangerous Iranian threat to Israel also has a welcome and revolutionary byproduct in its effect in the Arab theater. Iran is aware of the Arabs' weakness, and aiming for hegemony, seeks to impose its radical ideology on them. Cognizant of their helplessness against this threat, the Arabs need external support. A considerable and important proportion of the Arab countries realize that the traditional American prop has lost a great deal of its impact, a large part of its motivation, and most of its credibility. They know that the party most committed to resist Iran's hegemonic aspirations is Israel, and they have learned to appreciate its power and determination. Israel is much less important than the United States, but when it actually fights against Iran and its proxies utilizing a range of covert and overt measures, it is far more credible and effective.

In these circumstances, the existential threat to the Arab regimes obviously takes precedence over pan-Arab solidarity on the Palestinian issue, which in any case is dubious and fading. It is possible, even desirable, to pay lip service to the issue, but it is clear that the majority of the Arab countries do not possess many political resources they are willing to devote to this purpose. They also have much less emotional interest and deep commitment to the matter. Above all, there is no one who will threaten them and force them to even pretend on the issue of Palestine, as Nasser managed to do in his time. Public opinion in these countries is, predictably, mostly busy with other anxieties, justified and pressing. Most of the elites in Egypt, for example, accept comfortable rules of the game: they turn a blind eye to cooperation with Israel as long as it is not too public or involves symbolic matters, while their friends in the labor unions undertake meaningless gestures to resist normalization. In Jordan, where more proactive action is needed because of the country's Palestinian population, the king "punishes" Israel in attention-getting

moves, such as cancellation of the lease in Naharayim and the Arava, critical interviews, rebukes in the media, and bans on the Israeli prime minister flying through the kingdom's airspace. Security cooperation, however, is close and important. The Gulf principalities do not bother to pretend, and even Saudi Arabia no longer conceals its shared interests and the possibilities for cooperation with Israel. Leading Saudi journalist Abdulrahman al-Rashed, former editor of the Saudi-owned daily *Asharq al-Awsat* and former director-general of the al-Arabiya television channel, published an article supporting normalization between the United Arab Emirates and Israel. He added:

> Every Arab country [like the Palestinians] is entitled to handle its own international relations, including its relations with Israel. Every state makes its own sovereign decisions according to its own interests, not according to what the Palestinians or other Arabs desire…The Palestinian losses have never stopped, because of their failure to deal with reality and their refusal to understand the circumstances of the Arab countries that maintain relations with Israel, which could [actually] be of great help to them. (al-Rashed, 2020)

Shortly after this article was published, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) invited then-Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to a meeting in the city of Neom on the Red Sea coast, near the Straits of Tiran. Netanyahu arrived on a direct flight from Israel, accompanied by Mossad Director Yossi Cohen, and remained there for about four hours. Israeli censorship permitted immediate publication of the report (Blumenthal & Eichner, 2020).

The Biden administration's determination to return to a policy of strengthening Iran at the expense of the United States' regional allies, joined by Israel's inability to halt this trend, has forced Saudi Arabia to renew its contacts with Iran in an attempt to contain the damage caused by this American policy. MBS is also forging military ties with Russia, thereby signaling to Washington possible alternatives to his country's heavy dependence on the United States. Biden's partial sobering following the American failure in Afghanistan and the difficulties in its negotiations with Iran somewhat alleviates the level of anxiety in Riyadh. Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia has no illusions about the dangers of Iran, the limitations of American support, or Israel's determination to fight Iran.

United States Policy in the Region

The concern shared by Israel and Arab countries about the underlying trends of the American attitude toward the region and the emerging policy of the Biden administration is thus a critical issue compounding the Iranian threat. Three factors are currently distancing the United States from the Middle East. The first is its need to focus its efforts on the rivalry with China, requiring a robust presence in East Asia. The second is America's energy independence and the end of its dependence on fossil fuel energy resources in the region, which reduces the motivation to maintain an extensive presence there. The third is the trauma of the prolonged and ineffectual presence in Iraq and Afghanistan, which has made a massive military engagement in the region impossible in terms of domestic American politics, certainly in the absence of an immediate and critical threat to essential American interests. These considerations were joined in the Obama era by the willingness to abdicate important parts of the United States' superpower status and the attending responsibilities. In the Middle East, this is reflected in the tacit acceptance of the Iranian Islamic Revolution's efforts to achieve regional hegemony, both directly and through its proxies underminig Sunni regimes, and in a shortsighted policy toward the Iranian nuclear program. Obama's actions signaled to Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the Gulf states that

he might well replace the historic American alliance with them by an alliance with the "moderates" in Iran, and perhaps also the Muslim Brotherhood. On the nuclear issue, he essentially coordinated with Iran a delay by a decade or slightly more the time at which Iran could become a nuclear threshold state, failing to address the Iranian progress in both delivery systems and weaponization that are required to secure this status.

The focus of the Obama and Biden administrations on human rights in several of Israel's Arab allies creates difficulties for this coalition. For example, the military dictatorship of Egyptian President el-Sisi and the involvement of the Saudi Crown Prince in the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Istanbul prompted Washington to give a cold shoulder to the two most important Arab countries in the struggle against Iran and Turkey. This policy hinders the coalition against Iran, but it also paradoxically strengthens Arab ties with Israel. The Arabs appreciate the fact that in contrast to the purists in Washington, Israel knows that the choice in the Middle East is not between democracies and harsh autocracies. From long experience in the region, Israel knows that the choice in the real world is between pro-American harsh autocracies like the ones in Egypt and Saudi Arabia, which are willing to develop a partnership of shared interests with Israel, on the one hand, and radical, aggressive, and oppressive regimes with barbaric practices, like those in Syria and Iran, which regard the United States and Israel as enemies, on the other. Where less brutal autocratic regimes are sustainable, such as in Morocco and Jordan, they are preferable, but a regime's toughness depends on the level and dimensions of the domestic and regional threat to it.

The Turkish Challenge

Alongside the Iranian threat, Israel and Arabs alike face the threat of the Muslim Brotherhood and that of Erdogan's aggression in the Eastern Mediterranean. The Turkish challenge poses less of a threat to the region as a whole than the Iranian, and does not include a nuclear dimension. It is important, however, and affects Arab relations with Israel in the same direction as the Iranian threat and American regional policy. Erdogan's danger and potential damage lie in two spheres: he is the patron of the Muslim Brotherhood, which threatens many regimes in the region, and he is already using force to impose his will on the Eastern Mediterranean basin. In a broader context, he is also striving for regional hegemony, including in the Caucasus. El-Sisi's regime in Egypt faces a constant domestic threat from the Muslim Brotherhood. Despite cautious conciliatory measures in 2021, el-Sisi regards the Muslim Brotherhood supporters in Ankara as a dangerous enemy. Had the Muslim Brotherhood retained power in Egypt after 2013 (practically with the benefit of Obama's blessing), the entire region would have fallen into an acute predicament, and Israel would have found itself in severe tension, and possibly a confrontation, with the largest and most important Arab country. The Muslim Brotherhood in power in Turkey, Egypt, and Gaza would have endangered the Hashemite regime in Jordan by encouraging menacing opposition in the kingdom and would have contributed to a Hamas takeover in the West Bank. Saudi Arabia and most of the Gulf states also regard the Muslim Brotherhood as a danger.

In the Eastern Mediterranean basin, Erdogan, with characteristic aggression, demands an exclusive economic zone for gas drilling, while trampling over the rights of Greece and Cyprus and potentially causing severe damage to Egyptian and Israeli interests. Erdogan's close ties with the al-Sarraj government in Libya and the military aid that he proffers, including through foreign militias, threaten Egypt on its western border. Erdogan threatens the Kurds on Turkey's southern border and in northern Syria; he is bothersome to Israel, despite their stable bilateral economic ties, is an important supporter of Hamas in the Gaza Strip, and is even cautiously facilitating terrorist activity by

Hamas agents that he hosts in Turkey. Erdogan is also systematically undermining the status of Israel in Jerusalem and the special status of Jordan on the Temple Mount. Occasional efforts to ease the conflict, due to concern about the Biden administration's critical attitude toward his policy, do not change this picture.

The Tests to the Arab-Israeli Coalition

All of the factors discussed here—the Iranian threat; the uncertainty regarding American support; the challenge from Erdogan and the Muslim Brotherhood; the Arabs' weakness and their appreciation for Israel's resolve—have combined to create a new regional situation that impacts dramatically on Arab-Israeli relations. "The Arabs" no longer stand together against Israel; there are no longer merely exceptions that are on the political defensive against a hostile pan-Arab consensus. It practically amounts to a strategic coalition of Israel and most of the Arab countries against Iran, Turkey, the Muslim Brotherhood, and jihad groups. This coalition is in great need of American support, but it is not led by the United States, and sometimes even acts in opposition to American priorities. What matters to Israel is not only shared interests and cooperation with these Arab countries; it is also the recognition in Washington that there is no need to choose between the Jewish state and "the Arabs." Instead, the choice is between Israel together with most of the Arab countries on the one hand, and radical actors that are anti-American in any case on the other. There is a chance that Europe will also gradually come to recognize this, at least in part.

The Abraham Accords were designed to institutionalize this reality, and to affirm it publicly in order to enhance the message and infuse it with momentum. Under the Trump administration, the United States was willing to invest considerable effort in its relations with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and especially Sudan and Morocco, in order to promote the agreements. It also sought to add other Arab countries to the agreements, above all Saudi Arabia. Despite its lack of enthusiasm, the Biden administration is unable or does not want to withdraw from the Accords. Although the administration did not like the fact that all of this converged to expose the myth that the Palestinians have far-reaching influence on stability in the region and veto power over Arab-Israeli relations, it cannot ignore the recognition that the Abraham Accords have greatly eroded the Palestinian bargaining position. Biden can renew aid to UNRWA and try to reopen the consulate in Jerusalem as an embassy to the Palestinians, but he cannot change this downward trend (Schueftan, 2021[7]).

The most critical test of the Arab-Israeli strategic coalition, which cannot realize its full potential when it is conducted clandestinely, is the willingness of Arab public opinion to come "out of the closet" and defy what was portrayed as treason to generations of educated and politically aware Arabs. Until recently, a broad consensus prevailed that the threshold of irrepressible riots among Arabs throughout the region, and of hundreds of thousands of Muslims beyond it, was very low. This assumption deterred players in Europe, the United States, and even Israel from acting in ways that seemed to them correct, lest the "gates of hell" be loosened and the rage of violent fanatics sweep everything away. There is a kernel of truth in these fears, and it requires that caution be exercised, particularly in the context of what can be cast as a "threat to al-Aqsa." Yet even in these sensitive areas, it emerged that the bark is worse than the bite.

One interesting and important test in this area was the Muslim and Arab world's response to the relocation of the American embassy to Jerusalem. For generations, ever since 1947, the issue of Jerusalem was regarded as so sensitive that all were afraid to touch it for fear of an outburst of Islamic and Arab rage. Even the United States and Israel's friends refused to officially recognize the hard fact that West Jerusalem has been Israel's capital since 1949.

Since 1967 there has been no real dispute about Israel's sovereignty in the western party of the city, but even then, friendly administrations in Washington refused to recognize West Jerusalem as Israel's capital, and linked such recognition to an agreement with the Arab countries, and later with the Palestinians. Although Congress passed a law requiring such recognition in 1995, Presidents Clinton, Bush, and Obama refrained from transferring the embassy by postponing implementation of the transfer every six months. When Trump relocated the embassy in 2018 with much fanfare, the few protests faded into silence. It appears that even on this question, "the Arab world" no longer exists, and predictions of global outbreaks of Islamic rage failed to materialize.

In a much less dramatic matter, but interesting and significant in its own right, the resilience of the Arab-Israeli coalition was tested by Operation Guardian of the Walls in May 2021. In the previous format of Arab-Israeli relations, the Israeli operation would have led to an outburst of rage in the Arab world that would have forced the regimes to align themselves politically against Israel and roll back relations. This time, however, Arab public opinion responded with token opposition,[8] despite systematic pounding in the heart of densely populated areas in the Gaza Strip, the killing of Hamas leaders whom Israel managed to locate, and the destruction on live television in real time of high-rise buildings in luxury neighborhoods. The Arab regimes in the countries of this coalition did not even have to pretend that they were withdrawing from cooperation with Israel ("Israel-UAE-US: A Year of Cooperation," 2021).

According to the dubious index of media reports, Arabs in Europe took advantage of the opportunity to riot in the streets more than their counterparts in Arab capitals. The fact that Hamas in the Gaza Strip constitutes part of the Muslim Brotherhood movement threatening the Arab-Israeli coalition took precedence over the fact that the Palestinians involved were ostensibly entitled to pan-Arab national solidarity. Israel and Egypt have a common interest in increasing Hamas's dependence on Cairo, because both understand the dangers of the organization. Israel's relations with Egypt, Jordan, Bahrain, and Morocco even improved, including in the sensitive public dimension. Shortly after the conflict in the Gaza Strip, the Israeli Minister of Foreign Affairs visited Cairo, the first such visit in 13 years. With the formation of the new government a few months later, a long series of meetings at the highest level took place, including a meeting between the Israeli prime minister and the Egyptian president in Sharm el-Sheikh, meetings of the Israeli prime minister and foreign minister with King Abdullah in Amman, a visit by the foreign minister to Bahrain and Morocco, including the opening of the embassy in Rabat, an exchange of ambassadors with the United Arab Emirates, and the appointment of an ambassador in Bahrain. The processes of normalization with the Gulf states were also stepped up, following an increase in direct flights to and from Israel.

Most of the Arab states are unwilling to go to war against Israel, contribute concrete and significant national assets to the struggle against it, or refrain from cooperation with Israel on matters of importance to them.

Conclusion

It is important to depict accurately the new situation that has gradually emerged over the last generation, and to voice a loud and clear warning against an excessively optimistic interpretation and unfounded expectations for a transformation of Arab-Israeli relations in the foreseeable future.

On the positive side, the collective pan-Arab struggle against Israel, and even solidarity under duress involving actual contributions to the conflict under pan-Arab pressure, has ebbed, dissolved, and decreased to the vanishing point of its core. Most of the Arab states are unwilling

to go to war against Israel, contribute concrete and significant national assets to the struggle against it, or refrain from cooperation with Israel on matters of importance to them. Some are even willing to conduct joint military exercises with Israel. Outrageous condemnations by international organizations reflect in any case an absurd where "nonaligned" states with overt close ties with Israel, and even self-righteous European countries, systematically vote against it.

The pan-Arab struggle and boycott against the Jewish *yishuv* and Israel first emerged in the late 1930s. It influenced participation in the 1948 war, and peaked with the Nasserite messianic movement in the second half of the 1950s and the early 1960s. This format began to wane after the 1967 defeat and Nasser's death in 1970. A short-lived rebirth in the Yom Kippur War and the mid-1970s energy crisis was followed by the first big breach—the "beginning of the end" of the format—with the withdrawal of Egypt from the circle of war in the late 1970s. The pan-Arab format suffered another setback with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the end of the Cold War, and the unipolar reality of the 1991 Gulf War. The short-lived illusion that the weakening of the radicals in the region could be used to end the Arab-Israeli conflict has evaporated during this decade by the failure of the Oslo process to solve the conflict with a historic compromise with the PLO. This pan-Arab format was dealt a decisive blow with the arrival of the Arab Spring in the second decade of the 21st century, when the Arabs themselves recognized their failure and weakness, and realized the full significance of the Iranian threat. Following American policy under the Obama administration, many rulers in the region understood the need for a reliable strategic partnership with Israel. These understandings were publicly affirmed by the Abraham Accords.

The necessary caution from attributing to the new format final and revolutionary significance is no less important than understanding the deep change in the format of the conflict The new reality does not resolve the conflict or eliminate its violent dimension. It is certainly not peace, certainly not regional peace. It appears that Israel will continue to face a hostile and violent environment for at least the next generation; there will be at least one important Arab country in the radical pole of the conflict in the foreseeable future. This role was previously assumed by Nasser, Saddam Hussein, and Qaddafi. When Syria recovers from its civil war, it is likely to reclaim the leadership of the radical camp. Iran is currently a bitter and dangerous enemy, and Erdogan's Turkey is hostile. Only a change in regime can change the picture in these two countries. The Palestinian society has chosen conflict with Israel as a way of life, and does not intend to focus on state-building and society-building. Hamas is concentrating on a violent challenge; in its current form, the PLO prefers political conflict accompanied by "popular" violence. Among a majority of Palestinian society, especially in the West Bank, it is hard at present to detect energies leading to a large-scale violent confrontation with Israel, but the pattern of the past 100 years has not vanished. This pattern has repeatedly dragged a majority of the public into struggles that radical groups have placed at the top of the Palestinian agenda.

The positive trends discussed here depend predominantly on Israel's power, the image of this power in the Arab environment, and also on regional and global developments. For example, should the Biden administration adopt an Obama-style American policy of hesitant and conciliatory posture toward Iran, this is liable to persuade the Gulf states that appeasing Iran at the expense of ties with Israel will contribute to their survival. Implementation of a strategic alliance between Iran and China, and American acquiescence with the Iranian momentum in regional hegemony are liable to arouse a similar response. A revolution bringing the Muslim Brotherhood to power in Egypt will dramatically change the region. Collapse of the ayatollahs' regime in Iran will steer it in a different direction.

Nonetheless, the demise of the pan-Arab format of the conflict is an important milestone for Israel's national security. Israel entered the Middle East balance of power through the front door as one of the most important actors, after having tried for many years to influence it from the rear window. Its range of opportunities has greatly increased, and its room for maneuver is much greater than ever before.

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Notes

1 Israel's total defense consumption, after deduction of defense grants, fell from 30 percent of GDP in 1973-1975 to 20 percent in 1976-1981, 15.5 percent in 1982-1985, 10.2 percent in 1986-1998, and 6.7 percent in 1998.

2 As early as 1923, the Palestinians rejected a political framework ("legislative council"), even though it would likely have given them an effective tool for thwarting the Zionist enterprise. In the late 1920s and mid-1930s, radical Palestinians thwarted further efforts. The Palestinians also rejected the Peel Commission's partition proposal, and even Britain's anti-Zionist policy formulated in the 1939 White Paper. With the exception of Jordan, the Arab states followed the lead of the Palestinian Arab Higher Committee in rejecting this white paper. Following the Arab rebellion of 1936-1939, Arab society was exhausted and fragmented, with a profound crisis of confidence in its leadership and within the society itself. In 1948, the Palestinian society adopted a radical position in the decisive struggle over its fate, leading to defeat and national ruin. The taboo on a historic compromise that would accept a Jewish state is currently as deeply rooted as ever, thereby guaranteeing at this stage that the conflict will persist, accompanied by outbreaks of violence.

3 Following an interim period, the Autonomy Plan was supposed to lead in the direction of sovereignty. In an interview with Gideon Levy in the presence of Shimon Peres, Arafat explained that he rejected the possibility of accepting it "because of the mood in the Arab world. Had it not been for this I might have been able to make peace with Begin."

4 In an interview with the Jordanian newspaper *ad-Dustour*, chief PLO negotiator Saeb Erekat described in detail the negotiations between Olmert and Abu Mazen in 288 meetings in 2007-2008, at the end of which the Palestinians rejected a far-reaching compromise agreement. He explained their refusal: "[The Israeli proposals] reached 90 percent in Camp David, and have now reached 100 percent. If that is the case, why should we hurry, after all the injustice imposed on us?"

5 In August 1995, this author screened video clips at the Knesset of Arafat's speeches in the Gaza Strip in which Arafat praised female Palestinian terrorists, inter alia for their terrorist action deep inside Israel that killed dozens of Israelis, among them 12 children (the 1978 terrorist attack on the coastal road). Arafat also compared the Oslo Accords to the seventh century agreement with a tribe in the Arabian Peninsula, which the Prophet Mohammed violated after two years. Two weeks later, Rabin was asked about it in the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee. He answered that all of the intelligence agencies had been instructed to bring such materials, and added, "I heard about this specific speech by Arafat. I contacted intelligence, and they really did not have the speech. We found the recording in the hands of Prof. Dan Schueftan. I admit that we were deficient in gathering information." Shimon Peres stated, "This is an awful recording." There were many such statements by Arafat, not just one.

6 Martin Kramer cites many detailed examples of the severe damage to academic research in the United States and to an understanding of the Middle East caused by these dictates.

7 See the article for my discussion with General James Jones, the first National Security Adviser in the Obama administration, about the weight of the Palestinian issue in the Middle East.

8 The enlistment of Hamas on behalf of Jerusalem and al-Aqsa, and what was portrayed as its heroic stance against Israel, indeed greatly enhanced its prestige among the Palestinians in the West Bank and Israel, according to surveys by Khalil Shikaki, but the strategic significance of this development is limited. The public in the Arab countries did not respond to the conflict in the Gaza Strip with large-scale outrage requiring the regimes to even pretend that they were downgrading their relations with Israel.