Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (l) with Sultan Qaboos in Oman, October 29, 2018. Photo: GPO/Handout via REUTERS

Israel and the Arab World: Breaking the Glass Ceiling

Eyal Zisser

Relations between Israel and its Arab neighbors seem poised to embark on a path of mutual cooperation. This new reciprocity stands in marked contrast to the relations of Israel's first decades, and reflects a transition from hostility, hatred, and rejection to coexistence and perhaps peace and cooperation, even if this change stems from the lack of other options. These new relations also reflect the changing face of the Middle East of recent years: the weakening of the Arab states, the decline of Arabism, and the rise of Israel to the point of its becoming a regional actor with significant military, political, and economic power. Although the Palestinian cause has lost its centrality as a defining issue in Arab-Israel relations, it continues as a glass ceiling that blocks efforts to promote relations between Israel and the Arab world. In addition, the relations Israel has formed with its Arab neighbors rest on regime and political interests, but lack widespread support among Arab public opinion.

Keywords: Arab-Israel relations, peace process, Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Arab world

Introduction

In December 1999, peace negotiations between Israel and Syria were restarted. At a ceremony on the White House lawn, Syrian Foreign Minister Farouk a-Sharaa, who was sent to Washington by Syrian President Hafez al-Assad to engage in the peace talks with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak, declared that achieving peace between the two countries would turn the "existential conflict" between Israel and the Arabs, in which the two sides conducted a total war aimed at destroying one another, into a "border dispute" that could be settled at the negotiating table. A-Sharaa explained,

> Those who refuse to return the occupied territories to their original owners in the framework of international legitimacy [the UN resolutions] send a message to the Arabs that the conflict between Israel and Arabs is a conflict of existence in which bloodshed can never stop, and not a conflict about borders, which can be ended as soon as parties get their rights…We are approaching the moment of truth…And there is no doubt that everyone realizes that a peace agreement between Syria and Israel and between Lebanon and Israel would indeed mean for our region the end of a history of wars and conflicts, and may well usher in a dialogue of civilization and an honorable competition in various domains— the political, cultural, scientific and economy. (a-Sharaa, 1999)

Later, at a conference of the Arab Writers Union in Damascus in February 2000, a-Sharaa added that the Arabs should recognize that Zionism had the upper hand in its historic struggle with the Arab national movement, a struggle that began early in the 20th century with the emergence of these two movements on history's stage. He stated that achieving a peace agreement with Israel was therefore a lesser evil for the purpose of ending this struggle, which the Arabs could no longer win (a-Sharaa, 2000).

These remarks by a-Sharaa, and the fact that he was sent to the White House to meet Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak, showed willingness, and perhaps even urgency, on the part of Damascus to reach a peace agreement with Israel. The failure of the summit between Syrian President Hafez al-Assad and United States President Bill Clinton in Geneva in March 2000, however, and the Syrian President's death in June 2000 ended any chance of an agreement between Israel and Syria. Several months later, in September 2000, the second intifada broke out. This prompted the collapse of the negotiations that were underway between Israel and the Palestinians, and doomed the two sides to continue a bloody struggle that cost them thousands of victims (Rabinovich, 2004).

For a moment, it appeared as though the trend toward acceptance, and even reconciliation, between Israel and the Arabs, which in the late 1990s seemed to have progressed to a point of no return, had come to a halt. Two additional indications of this were Hezbollah becoming a recognized and important actor in Lebanon, following the IDF's unilateral withdrawal from the security zone in southern Lebanon in May 2000, and the Hamas takeover in the Gaza Strip in a military coup against the Palestinian Authority (PA) in February 2007, more than a year after Israel unilaterally withdrew from the area in August-September 2005. These two organizations reject the possibility of any acceptance of Israel or reconciliation with it, and advocate maintaining an armed conflict. Their achievements in Lebanon and the Gaza Strip therefore seemingly showed that despite the statements by Foreign Minister a-Sharaa, there was no necessity or urgency in reaching a settlement with Israel. On the contrary; it was possible to continue fighting and score achievements in this armed conflict. Eventually, however, Hezbollah and Hamas also had to reach understandings

with Israel, even if indirect. Moreover, Israel continued to advance relations with most of its Arab neighbors, and even achieved cooperation with several of them, mostly of a clandestine nature concerning security matters.

The story of Israel's relations with its Arab neighbors since its founding in May 1948 is therefore one of evolution from hostility, enmity, and rejection of acceptance, to readiness for coexistence and peace, albeit sometimes for lack of choice, culminating even in a common desire for cooperation, partly in strategic dimensions, given shared challenges and threats.

All of this reflects the changes in the Middle East in recent decades: the weakening of Arab states and the decline of pan-Arabism, while Israel grew stronger and became a militarily, politically, and economically powerful regional actor. This change in the Middle East narrowed the centrality of the Palestinian question to the establishment of Arab-Israeli relations, as it was no longer the axis around which those relations revolved. The issue is still important, and continues to constitute a glass ceiling in any effort to promote relations between the Arab world and Israel. As of now, however, Arab countries have successfully maneuvered between their commitment to the Palestinian cause, especially the commitment of Arab public opinion on this issue, and their pressing political interest in preserving and advancing their relations with Israel.

The Arab-Israeli conflict, and even the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, has been perceived for many years as a key issue for the future of the Middle East, and of central importance to the stability of the entire region, with consequences for stability in other parts of the world. This accounts for the efforts that have been made by the international community and are still underway to resolve the conflict. Over the years, however, it has emerged that the conflict, or rather this amalgam of conflicts between Israel and the Palestinians and Israel's other Arab neighbors, was only one of a long series of conflicts and crises competing for a

place on the current regional and international agenda, and not necessarily the most important. Other issues, such as religious fundamentalism, the spread of Islamic terrorism, and the rise of radical Islamic jihad groups such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State have taken the place of the Arab-Israeli conflict on the public agenda. Furthermore, many Arab countries have experienced internal crises, some of which have caused the collapse of the nation-state; the appearance of non-state players, e.g., Hezbollah and Hamas; and the outbreak of bloody civil wars. Also noteworthy is the competition for influence and regional hegemony between two old-new regional powers, Turkey and Iran. Iran is the more dynamic, intransigent, and daring of the two. The rise of Shiite Iran and the tension between it and large parts of the mostly Sunni Arab world have marked a divide that now extends throughout the entire length and breadth of the Arab and Muslim world. Its success in consolidating its grip in large areas of the Middle East has cast a threatening shadow over Israel, but also over many of Israel's Arab neighbors.

The Middle East of today poses quite a few challenges to Israel, but opens a window of opportunity for it to play a leading role in the region, and in any case enables Israel to cultivate further its relations with the surrounding Arab world. Israel's working assumption should be that Arab-Israeli coexistence and cooperation can rest on firm ground, not on shifting sands.

Israel and the Arab World: From War to Peacemaking

During the first decades of its existence, Israel's relations with the Arab world surrounding it consisted of a bloody struggle between Jews and Arabs over the Land of Israel. This conflict began during the late period of the Ottoman Empire, when Jews began immigrating to the Land of Israel, and escalated during the years of the British Mandate. The conflict reached a peak in Israel's War of Independence in May 1948, which ended in a double defeat for the

Arab world: the defeat of the Arabs living in Palestine, many of whom became refugees in the neighboring Arab countries, and the defeat of Arab countries that sent their armies to take part in the fighting, with the declared aim of preventing the establishment of a Jewish state (Morris, 2003).

The conflict between Jews and Arabs in Palestine thereby became a conflict between Israel and the Arab world, and in effect an amalgam of conflicts between Israel and its Arab neighbors. Each of these conflicts—the conflict between Israel and Egypt, the conflict between Israel and Syria, and so on—developed in its own direction. These conflicts were linked to each other, and all of them obviously concerned the Palestinian question. Nevertheless, each developed, escalated, and erupted into an active conflict—and in the Egyptian and Jordanian cases, was resolved—in its own way.

The point of departure for the Arab side in the conflict was a determined and unequivocal refusal both to recognize Israel's right to exist in the region and to form peaceful relations with it. The Arab refusal fed a belief that the elimination of Israel was not only a "historic necessity," because the Arabs regarded Israel as an aggressive entity aiming at expansion, but also an achievable goal, even if in the long term, given the sources of Israel's weakness, above all a demographic imbalance in favor of the Arab side (Harkabi, 1968).

Over the years, however, cracks appeared in the walls of enmity and hostility surrounding Israel. De facto, the Arab world began to accept Israel's existence and show willingness to end the conflict and establish peaceful relations with it. The Six Day War in June 1967 and the Yom Kippur War in 1973 to a great extent paved the way to peace, because they refuted the Arab belief that their victory was guaranteed in the long run, and that they should therefore adhere to the status quo of neither peace nor war. It became clear to the Arabs that if they wanted to regain the territories they had lost during the Six Day War, and if they wanted to

gain entry to the heart and coffers of the United States in order to address their domestic social and economic problems, they would have to achieve a peaceful settlement with Israel.

Egyptian President Anwar a-Sadat was the first to breach the Arab wall of hostility and hatred with his historic visit to Jerusalem in November 1977. The two sides subsequently signed a peace agreement in March 1979 (Stein, 1999). Following the defeat of Saddam Hussein in the Gulf War in the spring of 1991 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union later that year, then-US Secretary of State James Baker said there was a historic opportunity for promoting a political solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. In October 1991, a peace conference was convened in Madrid, thereby opening a new chapter in Israel's relations with the Arab world, followed by peace negotiations between Israel and its Arab neighbors, including with the Palestinians (Bentzur, 1997).

The Arab-Israeli political process led to the signing of the Oslo Accords between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in October 1993 and the signing of a peace agreement between Israel and Jordan in October 1994. The Oslo Accords were designed to pave the way to achieve an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement based on mutual recognition between Israel and the Palestinians, led by the PLO, of each side's national rights. The process also included a multilateral channel for promoting economic cooperation between Israel and Arab countries. Diplomatic ties were institutionalized, albeit on a low level, between Israel and several Arab countries, including Tunisia, Morocco, Oman, and Qatar.

The Decline of Arab Nationalism, the Weakness of Arab States, and the Rising Power of Iran and Turkey

The change in the Arab stance toward Israel, which eventually led to the signing of peace agreements between Israel and some of its Arab neighbors, took place at a time when Arab nationalism was declining as a force in the Arab

world. The death of Nasser in September 1970, the undisputed leader of Arab nationalism at the time, preceded by the Arab defeat in the Six Day War, spelled the end of Nasserism and Egypt's struggle under Nasser's leadership for influence if not hegemony in the Arab world. Competing ideologies and doctrines replaced Arab nationalism, which had failed in its attempt to unify the Arabs and defeat Israel (Ajami, 1979/1978, 1981; Susser 2003).

The basic cause of this failure was the accumulation of domestic social and economic difficulties afflicting large parts of the Arab world. These difficulties stemmed from accelerated population growth, obstacles preventing modernization and economic progress, and the backwardness of Arab society. The Arab world was left trailing behind other parts of the globe by an ever-increasing margin. There is no doubt that the absence of openness and democracy also contributed to the failure (Ayubi, 1996).

The difficulties that afflicted the respective Arab countries motivated each to lend priority to its particular national interests, and especially those of the ruler and his regime, over the interests of Arab nationalism and a focus on the Palestinian question. This latter issue therefore lost its centrality and importance. The result was Arab willingness, or at least willingness on the part of several Arab countries, to settle the conflict with Israel and to make progress in political, security, and economic relations (Sela, 1998).

Israel was not the only beneficiary of the changes to the Middle East map. In the first decade of the 21st century, two old-new regional powers seeking to bolster their regional standing stood out: Turkey and Iran. These countries were perceived in the region as continuing the policy of two empires: the Ottoman Empire and the Persian-Safavid Empire (succeeded by the Qajar Empire), which fought against each other for hundreds of years. The Ottoman Empire controlled the Middle East for nearly 500 years, from the early 16th century until the end of WWI,

when the region fell into the hands of Western powers, Britain and France.

Turkey and Iran now have the opportunity to try to regain their previous standing. Turkey, under the rule of Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the charismatic leader of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), has succeeded in giving Turkey political stability and economic prosperity. In contrast to all other Turkish governments since Ataturk, the founder of the modern Turkish Republic, Erdogan has regarded the Arab and Muslim world, not Europe, as his preferred theater of action. He has tried to take advantage of the Islamic character of his party to promote his status and that of Turkey in the Arab world, with the help of Islamic political parties—mostly those belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood movement, which took advantage of the Arab Spring to improve their standing, and in several cases achieved power and kept it for a while: Hamas in the Gaza Strip, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and the Nahda Movement in Tunisia (Tol, 2019).

Iran has also profited from the changes in the Middle East. Tehran's ambitions to attain influence and hegemony and to create a security zone stretching from the Iranian mountain range to the Mediterranean shore began decades or even hundreds of years ago. These ambitions were evident under the shahs, who preceded the current regime of the ayatollahs. Moreover, Iran clearly profited from the wars waged in the region by the United States, first in Afghanistan in the winter of 2001, and then in Iraq in the spring of 2003, which led to the collapse of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq. Both of these regimes were bitter enemies of Iran, and served as a counterweight to its eastward and westward expansionist ambitions. Of particular importance was the downfall of Saddam Hussein and the overthrow of the Iraqi state, through which Iran now seeks to penetrate the Fertile Crescent. The US entanglements in Afghanistan and Iraq also helped Tehran establish itself in the vacuum that emerged after the departure of

the United States and increase its power. Since Iran is a Shiite country trying to promote Shiite Islam and use it to consolidate its status among Shiite communities throughout the Arab world, its rise is also perceived as the rise of the Shiite world at the expense of the Sunni world. Iran has made strenuous efforts to develop nuclear capability, and its involvement in terrorism and subversion among Shiite Arab communities was designed to destabilize many Arab countries, especially the Gulf states, such as Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and even Kuwait. These actions have made these countries feel threatened, and have accentuated their fear of Iran (Saikal, 2019).

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With the threat of Iran hanging over them, many of the moderate Arab countries, such as the Gulf states, have been increasingly willing to step up their cooperation with Israel and accept help against the Iranian threat. As early as the 1990s, in the wake of the Arab-Israeli peace process led by the United States, a dialogue began between Israel and the Gulf states. Channels of political and security cooperation between them were created, and trade and economic ties, which previously had been kept on a low profile and a small scale, were expanded. Two Gulf states, Oman and Qatar, hosted official visits by Israeli leaders, such as the visit by Prime Minister Shimon Peres to Doha in early 1996. Diplomatic offices were opened in Israel, and the opening of Israeli offices in these countries was approved (Guzansky, 2009).

Israel and the Arabs: Dialogue for Lack of Choice

Events, however, have disproved the assumption that the peace process between Israel and its Arab neighbors has progressed beyond the point of no return, and that achievement of peace between the parties is mainly a question of time. In March 2000, the peace talks between Israel and Syria reached a deadlock. Israel and the Palestinians also failed in their efforts to bridge the gap between their respective positions. The al-Aqsa Intifada, which began in September 2000, widened the rift between Israel and the Palestinians, and worsened Israel's relations with many Arab countries.

The belief that a solution to the conflict is "historically inevitable" was put to the test and disproven in 2000, not only by the second intifada, but also by Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon after 18 years of involvement, including the presence of the Israeli army. This withdrawal followed Israel's failure in dealing with Hezbollah and the bloody clashes in South Lebanon.

Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah was quick to portray Israel's unilateral withdrawal from southern Lebanon as a turning point in the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict. He claimed that Hezbollah had been able to achieve what no Arab country or army had ever achieved before—the unconditional removal of Israel from territory at no cost whatsoever, let alone a settlement or peace agreement. Nasrallah further explained that what happened in Lebanon proved that economic prosperity could be achieved and maintained without peace or any commitment from Washington, and even despite American opposition. Furthermore, Nasrallah boasted that Hezbollah possessed the key, and even a blueprint, that would subsequently enable the Arabs to overcome Israel, based on the disclosure of Israel's Achilles' heel—the fatigue and exhaustion felt by Israeli society, and its excessive sensitivity to the lives of its soldiers, as shown by the war and its aftermath (Zisser, 2009).

On May 26, 2000, Nasrallah gave a victory speech in the village of Bint Jbeil, from where the IDF had withdrawn a few days previously. This has become known as the "spider web"

speech, in which Nasrallah bragged, "Several hundred Hezbollah fighters forced the strongest state in the Middle East to raise the flag of defeat…The age in which the Zionists frightened the Lebanese and the Arabs has ended…Israel, which possesses nuclear weapons and the most powerful air force in the region—this Israel is weaker than a spider's web" (Hezbollah, 2000).

The results of the Second Lebanon War in the summer of 2006 ostensibly provided support for Hezbollah's perception of Israel's weakness. Although the war was far from a Hezbollah victory, the organization saw quite a few achievements, and also exposed the limits of Israel's power and several of its weaknesses (Harel & Issacharoff, 2008). Indeed, in his "divine victory" speech on August 2006, following the end of the war, Nasrallah said that the war was a historic turning point in the chronicles of the Arab-Israeli conflict (Hezbollah, 2006). The takeover of the Gaza Strip by Hamas in February 2007 was also regarded in the Arab world as proof of the reversal of the trend—from reconciliation and acceptance back to hostility and enmity, and especially the withdrawal from previous Arab willingness to reconcile with Israel.

The failure to progress toward an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement, followed by the outbreak of the second intifada, halted progress in relations between Israel and Arab countries, and even reversed progress that had been made. At the same time, Israel's peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan survived the challenge, as did the channels of communication between Israel and other Arab countries, headed by the Gulf states. Led by Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states invested considerable effort in an attempt to revitalize the peace process and achieve progress. As part of this effort, they proposed various initiatives, most prominently, the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative (API). This initiative was designed to break the deadlock in the peace process, with the Arab countries providing the Palestinians with backing and sponsorship, thereby making it easier for the Palestinians to accept painful compromises, while guaranteeing Israel what it sought—normalization in its relations with the entire Arab and Muslim world (Fuller, 2002). The API, however, was far from meeting the requirements of the Israeli government, which did not accept it. Later, during the Second Lebanon War between Israel and Hezbollah, many of the Gulf states, among others, almost openly supported the Israeli stance and military operations against Hezbollah in Lebanon. Finally, as the first decade of the 21st century drew to a close, with the possibility of an Israeli attack on Iran's nuclear facilities to prevent Iran from attaining nuclear capability, many Arab countries again supported Israel, albeit tacitly and indirectly (Kedar, 2018).

The Gulf states, headed by Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates, regard Iran as a concrete, immediate, and mounting threat. Iran has challenged them on their own territory or in their immediate neighborhoods, i.e., not only in remote theaters such as Lebanon, where Hezbollah has labored to impose itself on the country's political system and challenge the Sunni population and its leaders, most of whom were sponsored by Saudi Arabia, such as Saad el-Din al-Hariri (for example, Hezbollah's takeover of West Beirut in May 2008). Nor was it confined to Syria, led by the Alawite Assad dynasty, which adhered to its strategic alliance with Tehran, nor even to Iraq, where Iranian influence struck deep roots among the country's Shiite population.

This was apparently the background for the bolstering and expansion of the dialogue between Israel and several of the Gulf states, headed by Saudi Arabia. The media reported signs of covert cooperation between Israel and Saudi Arabia as part of the two countries' effort to thwart the Iranian nuclear program. For example, meetings were reported between Israeli leaders, including Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, and a Saudi leader, probably Prince Bandar bin Sultan, a former director general of the Saudi Intelligence Agency. It was also reported that Mossad head Meir Dagan visited

Riyadh. There were many media reports of an effort to achieve security coordination between the two countries for a possible Israeli military operation against Iran's nuclear facilities (Israel Held Secret Talks, 2006).

At the same time, modest progress was also made in Israel's economic relations with the Gulf states. In the first decade of the 21st century, the Gulf states became the third largest destination for Israeli goods in the Middle East, after the PA and Turkey. Trade with these countries was conducted primarily through third parties, which makes it difficult to obtain up-to-date statistical information, but it has been estimated at over $500 million annually, and presumably the true extent is greater than reported. The media also occasionally reported that companies producing security products—know-how, technology, or weapons—were conducting large-scale connections with these Gulf states. This trend toward economic cooperation gained momentum as Israel became a global leader in cyber intelligence (Zaken, 2019; Atkins, 2018; Levingston, 2019).

The Fall of the Arab Spring

The so-called Arab Spring, which began in December 2010, was a turning point in the history of the region that greatly changed the prevailing order, including relations between Israel and its Arab neighbors. The Arab Spring destabilized many of the Arab countries, overthrowing several regimes that had been in power for decades. At its height, it seemed to pose a challenge to the legitimacy of the borders and the 20th century political order in the Arab world that were determined at the San Remo conference in April 1920 (Michael & Guzansky, 2016). In addition, at least momentarily, it seemed that the Arab world was following the example of other parts of the world, such as Eastern Europe and South America, where politically active young people led a movement for change and even democracy. The term to describe the upheaval in the Arab world, "Arab Spring," originated in discourse in the media and

among Western academics, reflecting the hope that this unrest would overthrow the prevailing political and social order in the Arab world, and propel Arab societies toward democracy and enlightenment that would culminate in political stability, economic prosperity, security, and social justice (Bayat, 2017). The Middle East, however, marches to its own drum, and the liberal-progressive wave gave way to an Islamic wave promoted by the forces of Islam in the region. The protests and revolutions were later succeeded by bloody civil wars that caused instability, insecurity, and chaos (Govrin, 2016; Podeh & Winckler, 2017; Rabi, 2017).

The regimes of Zine el-Ben Ali in Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak in Egypt were overthrown. The Islamic political parties took power briefly, but both of these countries eventually returned to their starting point of before the Arab Spring. In Tunisia, some of the secular forces that regained power had been part of Ben Ali's government. In Egypt, the army took power in June 2013 in a military coup led by Minister of Defense Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, overthrowing the Muslim Brotherhood government led by Mohamed Morsi. In Libya and Yemen, on the other hand, the overthrow of the regimes led to the collapse of the nation-state and the outbreak of bloody civil wars.

In Yemen, forces loyal to the Houthi movement (named for its founder, Hussein al-Houthi), which belongs to the Zaidi Shiite faction, gained control of Sanaa, the capital of Yemen. Iran became the Houthis' main supporter in their battle for control of Yemen, located in Saudi Arabia's backyard. Riyadh has long feared a scenario of Yemen becoming an Iranian frontline, from which it could threaten Saudi cities with missile barrages and blockade shipping in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait at the entrance to the Red Sea. Fear of the Houthis and Iran, which increased its involvement in Yemen with the help of Hezbollah, united the Gulf states, led by Saudi Arabia. In March 2015, the Gulf states launched Operation Decisive Storm, an aerial offensive aimed at

preventing the Houthis from taking over Yemen and denying Iran the stronghold it hoped to acquire in the southern Arabian Peninsula and at the entrance to the Red Sea. Saudi Arabia, however, was unable to achieve victory, and became entangled in a prolonged war in Yemen that exacerbated the security challenges created by the aid given by Iran to the Houthis (Gordon, 2018). The statement by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in October 2019 that Iran had stationed advanced missiles in Yemeni territory capable of hitting Israeli targets showed that Yemen had become a source of concern not only for Saudi Arabia, but for Israel as well (Eichner, Friedson, & Fuchs, 2019).

In Syria, Bashar al-Assad held on to power, but in his struggle for survival he dragged his country into a prolonged and bloody civil war in which over half a million Syrians were killed and millions more fled the country, becoming refugees. More important was the fact that Bashar al-Assad's victory was achieved because in September 2015 Russia and Iran entered the war on his side. These two countries' involvement gave them influence and control over events in Syria (Zisser, 2020).

Moscow was thereby able to play a key role in shaping the map of the region and designing its image according to Russia's interests and historic goals in the Middle East. Moscow's rise came at the expense of Washington. In the end, the outbreak of the Arab Spring signaled the end of a prolonged Pax Americana in the Middle East that began following the Gulf War in the spring of 1991 and gained greater force when the Soviet Union disintegrated in December of that year. Under both the Obama and the Trump administrations, it was believed that the United States wanted to sever itself from the region and its problems.

Russia did not operate in a vacuum, and was not the only power in the region. Iran and its satellites, which are all part of the radical Shiite axis that has emerged in the Middle East in recent decades, served as a platform and a helpful partner for Russia in the resumption of

its place in the Middle East. Ironically, the Arab Spring, which many in and outside the region regarded as the rejuvenation of the Sunni Arab world in response to the Shiite challenge facing it, has strengthened the Shiite axis, instead of weakening it. Together with Russia, and in close cooperation with it, Iran has become an important element in large parts of the Middle East, and is perceived by many inside and outside the region as an actor contributing to stability in the Middle East, even while—and at the price of—promoting Tehran's goals in this region (Bolan, 2018). Tehran has thus been able to take advantage of the chaotic situation in the region to consolidate its grip in Iraq and Syria, and even in Yemen. Many Arab countries, especially Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, regard the strengthening of Iran as a threat. They turned to Israel because they regard it as an important regional actor, and also as a possible ally and partner, against the growing threat of Iran.

Initially Israel was thought likely to suffer as a result of the Arab Spring, which led to the overthrow of regimes regarded as its allies, above all the Mubarak regime in Egypt. The emerging trend in the early years of the Arab Spring toward strengthened Islamic movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood, which gained power in Egypt and ruled there for about a year, was also regarded as a negative development liable to pose a threat to Israel. However, the chaos that took hold in the Arab world, and the efforts by Arab regimes to retain power despite the threats they faced, strengthened Israel's position, and led a few Arab countries, notably Saudi Arabia and several other Gulf states, as well as Egypt and Jordan, to cooperate with Israel on matters of interest and importance. This cooperation was highly reminiscent of the alliance of the periphery, and in a more practical way, Israel's covert cooperation in the late 1950s, including in intelligence and security, with Ethiopia, Turkey, and Iran against the rising power of Egyptian President Gamal Abdel al-Nasser (Alpher, 2015). This time, however, the

cooperation was not aimed against Egypt, which instead was an important partner in this web of relations, together with other countries that joined forces against the threat of Iran, perhaps also against Turkish ambitions of hegemony, and in an effort to combat and halt the Islamic terrorism that has surfaced in the Arab world.

Turkey, the largest Sunni Muslim country, albeit not an Arab country, could have served as an axis for a general regional campaign by moderate pro-Western Sunni states aimed at countering and halting Iran. This, however, did not occur. Turkey's close alliance with Israel in the early 1990s came to an end with Erdogan's rise to power. Turkey tried to use the Arab Spring and ride the Islamist wave that appeared likely to sweep the Arab countries. The defeat of the Muslim Brotherhood, however, was also a defeat for Turkey, which was left with an unsated appetite. In any case, Erdogan, who more than once has subordinated Turkish foreign policy to his personal fancies or personal political interests, prevented Turkey from using the crisis to strengthen its standing, even though Ankara has expressed dissatisfaction with the strengthening of Iran, Turkey's biggest Shiite and regional competitor (Schanzer & Tahiroglu, 2016).

One example of this was Ankara's policy toward Israel and Egypt, two important regional actors. Due to Turkey's use of the Palestinian issue, its relations with Israel plummeted, and a prolonged rift began following the *Mavi Marmara* flotilla incident, followed by Erdogan's wild anti-Israeli rhetoric. In relations with Egypt, Erdogan refused to recognize the legitimacy of the military coup led by el-Sisi against the Muslim Brotherhood government in June 2013. This caused a rupture and severance of relations between the two countries. Turkey's growing intervention in the war in Libya in the last months of 2019 and its attempt to establish facts on the ground concerning ownership of territorial waters in areas adjacent to Egypt, which includes the proposed natural gas pipeline from Israel via Cyprus to Europe, again

heightened the tension between Cairo and Ankara, and threatened to involve Israel in this dispute (Ben-Yishai, 2019).

The vacuum created in the region and the Iranian—and some will also say Turkish—threat have forced Israel and the other countries to step up the cooperation between them (Jones & Petersen, 2013). In this case, as with the alliance of the periphery 60 years earlier, there is no formal and official alliance; what is involved is a covert web of cooperation, mostly in intelligence and security. Israel has taken advantage of the war in Syria to attack arms deliveries that Iran tried to send to Hezbollah through Syria, and later targeted the bases established by Iran on Syrian territory for the Revolutionary Guards al-Quds force, or for the Shiite militias it brought to Syria. Israel has been at least partly successful in this campaign, since Iran has hesitated to embark on an all-out direct conflict with it. Iran withdrew its forces slightly from the Israeli-Syrian border, and also refrained from moving forward with the consolidation of its forces deep within Syrian territory. Israel's determined struggle against Iranian consolidation in Syria is believed to be effective and to have deterred Iran, and for the time being has also hindered if not halted Iranian consolidation in Syria. It has thereby provided a model and example for other countries, which have been inspired by Israel's willingness to confront Iran (Byman, 2018). Needless to say, the tightening of relations between Israel and the Gulf states was validated and rendered more significant by President Trump's intention to withdraw United States forces from Syria as part of a general US disengagement from the Middle East, a measure already begun by President Obama (Hall, 2019). Washington's reluctance to respond in the summer of 2019 to Iranian acts of aggression against the Gulf states merely augmented their reliance on Israel. Even when the United States killed al-Quds force commander Qasem Soleimani in Iraqi territory in early January 2020, many of the Arab countries gave Israel credit for the act.

To be sure, this Arab-Israeli cooperation is subject to constraints and weaknesses and a glass ceiling that the parties will have difficulty in overcoming, especially in the absence of any progress in the political process between Israel and the Palestinians. Some in Israel believe that this cooperation rests on shifting sands, and is regularly threatened by well-grounded relations between Israel and its Arab neighbors, and certainly by public opinion and elite circles in these countries, in contrast to the defense establishments, which favor this cooperation.

Nevertheless, the burgeoning cooperation between Israel and the Arab countries shows how the Middle East has changed, and the transformation in Israel's relations with the Arab world from enmity and hostility to acceptance, readiness to live in coexistence, and cooperation on essential strategic interests of many Arab countries. Furthermore, this cooperation can lay the groundwork for more extensive regional cooperation in the Mediterranean Basin by both Israel and the Arab countries with other players. One such example is the developing connection between Israel—and Egypt—with Cyprus and Greece.

Another example is the unprecedentedly close military cooperation between Israel and Egypt in combating the threat posed by the branch of the Islamic State operating in the Sinai Peninsula. Israel reportedly attacked Islamic State targets in Sinai in cooperation with the Egyptian army, and supplied the Egyptian army with intelligence information for assistance in the campaign against Islamic extremists. The Egyptian public has not changed its attitude toward Israel, but there is no doubt that the Egyptian government has become more committed and willing to undertake unprecedented cooperation with Israel in the military and intelligence spheres (Egypt, Israel in Close Cooperation, 2019). Jordan has also tightened security, and even military, cooperation with Israel, following efforts by the Islamic State to gain a foothold in the Syrian-Jordanian border strip, but also in view of Iran's

plans to consolidate its grip near Jordanian territory.

> This cooperation can lay the groundwork for more extensive regional cooperation in the Mediterranean Basin by both Israel and the Arab countries with other players. One such example is the developing connection between Israel—and Egypt—with Cyprus and Greece.

Cooperation is also expanding between Israel and the Gulf states, headed by Saudi Arabia (Melman, 2016). Along with closer security and intelligence ties, a political dimension has been added to these relations (Jones & Guzansky, 2019), for example, with Israel's willingness to come to Riyadh's aid in relations with the US administration following the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, which was attributed to Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. Israel also expressed readiness to help Sudan following a historic meeting in February 2020 in Entebbe, Uganda between Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, Chairman of the Sovereignty Council of Sudan (Netanyahu Says Israeli Airliners Now Overflying Sudan, 2020). For their part, the Arab countries helped Washington promote the Trump administration's "deal of the century" as a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and were willing to pressure the Palestinians to accept the proposal, which involves painful compromises for the Palestinians (Caspit, 2018). To the Palestinians' dismay, the response of some Arab countries to the publication of the American peace plan in late January 2020 was moderate, and even friendly. The Arab countries were not deterred by the fact that the Trump administration was regarded as committed to Israel, or by the measures it took even before the plan was published, such as moving the American embassy to Jerusalem, recognizing the Israeli presence in the Golan Heights, and stating that the Israeli settlements in the West

Bank did not constitute a breach of international law (Ravid, 2017).

Joining the enhanced military cooperation, and to some extent also political cooperation, is economic cooperation, which has expanded as a result of the discovery of offshore natural gas fields in the Mediterranean Sea. Israel was the first to discover and make use of gas fields, which made it an important player. Israel became a supplier of natural gas to Jordan, after having already committed in the 1994 peace treaty to supply water to Jordan, and it has increased the water quota over the years. Israel also signed agreements to supply gas to Egypt. Israel's efforts to leverage these discoveries to improve its relations with Turkey have been unsuccessful, as Erdogan's hostility has prevented any agreement for exporting gas to Europe via Turkey. As a substitute, Israel chose the Greek-Cypriot channel for gas exports to Europe. These economic ties were part of a deeper set of ties, unquestionably motivated by the three countries' anxiety about Turkey under Erdogan's leadership (Karbuz, 2017).

The system of regional alliances that Israel hopes to create is not limited to moderate Sunni Arab countries. Together with its connection to parties in the region such as the Kurds and South Sudan, which have historically been allies of Israel, Israel has also strengthened its connections with Cyprus and Greece, as well as Egypt. These relations carry economic weight, due to the desire to develop joint energy resources, especially offshore gas fields in the Mediterranean Sea. These relations have a security dimension as well, due to the anxiety about Turkey shared by Cyprus and Greece and the hostility between Cairo and Ankara (Macaron, 2019). Some also regard Israel's ties with countries such as Azerbaijan, Greece, Cyprus, Ethiopia, South Sudan, Chad, and other Asian and Africa countries as a continuation of the historical alliance of the periphery in the 1950s.

Nevertheless, the shadow of the conflict with the Palestinians continues to hamper the effort to improve Israel's relations with the Arab countries (Black, 2017). One example is the chill in relations between Jordan and Israel. Amman refrained from celebrating the 25th anniversary of the peace agreement between the two countries, and demanded the return of the enclaves in its territory cultivated by Israeli farmers at Tzofar in the Arava region and at Naharayim. This deterioration in relations was a result of pressure from public opinion in Jordan, but also recognition by the Jordanian government itself that progress toward a solution of the Palestinian question is a critical issue for the kingdom—not necessarily out of concern about the Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, but out of concern that continuation of the conflict, or even the possibility that Israel will annex parts of the West Bank, is likely to pose a real threat to Jordan's stability and prompt a new wave of Palestinian refugees to Jordan and the possibility that the Palestinian national movement will seek to focus its efforts and activity in Jordan itself (Landau, 2019; Gal & Svetlova, 2019).

Conclusion

Over the 72 years since its founding, Israel's relations with the Arab world have changed completely. Hostility and enmity have given way to acceptance; willingness to live in coexistence—even if only for lack of choice; and relations of cooperation with strategic implications.

In the early decades of Israel's existence, Arab nationalism and its undisputed leader, Egyptian President Gamal Abdel al-Nasser, were perceived as enemies and the principal threat to Israel. Today, Iran is the reference threat for both Israel and many of its Arab neighbors. For this reason, the Arab countries with which Israel was in a prolonged and apparently unsolvable conflict, among them both Egypt and Saudi Arabia, became allies because of the Iranian threat, and to a lesser degree because of the Turkish challenge.

At the same time, this cooperation with Arab countries has clear limits involving the

lack of ability, and probably also the lack of desire, to make these relations public and extend them beyond security relations between rulers, governments, and defense institutions to normalization and a friendly peace between peoples.

An interesting question is whether the process is reversible, particularly in view of the fact that recognition of the importance of ties with Israel is confined to the Arab rulers, and particularly the security and military establishments behind the rulers. In contrast, popular opinion remains hostile to Israel, although it does not advocate a conflict with it, as it did in the Arab world in the 1950s and 1960s. This basic hostility, however, is fed by the absence of progress in negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians, as well as the perception of Israel as a non-Arab and non-Muslim foreign entity in the region that sometimes looms as a threatening opponent. This attitude constitutes a kind of glass ceiling hampering any effort to promote and enhance relations between Israel and the Arab world (Miller & Zand, 2018).

The Palestinian issue has therefore ceased to be a burning question, and no longer constitutes a barrier to all progress in relations between Israel and its Arab neighbors. It still casts a shadow over such relations, however, and as such constitutes an obstacle that is hard to overcome. While Arab countries are no longer willing to subordinate their national and political interests to the Palestinian cause, and may also be willing to expand their relations with Israel even without a resolution to the Palestinian issue, they need calm and stability, and keeping this issue under the radar is a definite necessity for this purpose.

The Palestinian question remains a low common denominator for Arab public opinion in its search for identity and meaning, as well as a tool exploited by opposition groups and opponents of the regime in Arab countries to bait their rulers. The Palestinian issue is the sole issue around which it is possible to unite

without fear of a rift or dispute between Arab communities in the Arab world or outside it, including expatriate Arab and Muslim communities, for example, Arab intellectuals and students on campuses in Western higher education institutions. This issue is the only one that can still trumpet the Arab identity that is still essential for many groups in the Arab world, and certainly among expatriates; hence the reason for the sensitivity of this issue among Arab rulers and regimes. In the absence of any chance of achieving an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement in the foreseeable future, the Palestinian issue will continue to cast a shadow on the effort to promote normalization and deeply rooted connections between Israel and the Arab countries. The truth is that peace currently appears more distant than ever, given the unbridgeable gaps between the parties' positions; the absence of leadership that is committed to peace, believes in it, and is willing to take risks to achieve it; and the hardening of Israel's positions, such as the disavowal among many of a commitment to the two-state solution and the desire to annex territory in the West Bank, including the Jordan Valley.

> **The Palestinian issue has therefore ceased to be a burning question, and no longer constitutes a barrier to all progress in relations between Israel and its Arab neighbors. It still casts a shadow over such relations, however, and as such constitutes an obstacle that is hard to overcome.**

Current relations between Israel and the Arab world reflect the changing face of the Middle East and the fundamental processes it has experienced, above all the fading of Arab nationalism and the decline of the Arab world, coupled with the rise in the influence and power of Iran and Turkey. These two powers are now dictating the path of the Middle East. The Arab Spring did not directly cause this development, but it unquestionably accelerated it. Cooperation between Israel and the Arab

countries, especially with the Gulf states, may focus on Iran, but it also has the potential to develop beyond the struggle against Iran, because both sides share additional political and security interests. It reflects Israel's transformation, not only from an ostracized state into a state accepted by the Arab world, but also from a marginal and weak country into a powerful actor that everyone in today's Middle East must take into account.

A wise policy by Israel's leadership, as well as by Israel's partners in the system of relations and given the understandings now emerging in the Middle East, is likely to enhance stability and promote peace efforts in the region, or at least dialogue and reconciliation. No less important, it is likely to yield substantial economic benefits for all of the regional actors. On the other hand, the use of these relations to enshrine the status quo and preserve it, or even to initiate conflict, in contrast to defense and deterrence against common enemies, is liable to aggravate instability in the region, and lead to cycles of violence. For example, the drawbacks of unilateral measures such as Israel's annexation of territory in the West Bank, while taking advantage of its edge over the Arab countries, even those with which there is cooperation, are likely to outweigh the benefits. Israel should also act with moderation and caution from a stance of legitimate defense in its conflict with Iran and its political friction with Turkey, not from an assertive and adventurous stance. Otherwise, a heavy shadow will be cast over the relations that Israel has formed with its neighbors, which are far more significant than mere acceptance of Israel's existence for lack of choice. These relations are still not sufficiently stable and established; they rest exclusively on regime and state interests, and lack a base in broad public support in Arab public opinion.

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