



## Israel and the Region: Still Trapped in a Maze

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### *Middle Eastern Maze: Israel, the Arabs, and the Region, 1948-2022*

by Itamar Rabinovich

Maarachot and the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, 2022

486 pages [in Hebrew; published in English, Brookings Institution, 2023]

*Middle Eastern Maze* by Prof. Itamar Rabinovich is based on two of his previous books, *The Lingering Conflict: Israel, the Arabs, and the Middle East, 1948-2011* (Brookings, 2012) and *Waging Peace: Israel and the Arabs 1948-2003* (Princeton University Press, 2004). In his new book, Rabinovich combines insights drawn from his rich diplomatic experience as Israel's Ambassador to the United States and Israeli negotiator with Syria with the conclusions of a long-time historian and researcher of the Arab-

Israeli conflict. His purpose is to lead readers through the winding Middle East maze that Israel has navigated since its establishment in 1948. Out of the tangled events, the author proposes a dual and ostensibly paradoxical thesis: on the one hand, the center of gravity of the regional dispute involving Israel has moved from Arab states to Iran; on the other hand, the Palestinian question, at the root of the conflict, is still at the heart of the Middle East agenda and refuses to go away (p. 11).

This thesis was honed in the years 2012-2022, the period that separates this book from its predecessor, and the events of those years justify the expansion and update of that book. The last decade included the aftershocks of the so-called Arab Spring, the recurrent outbursts of violence between Israel and the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, the nuclear deal (JCPOA) between Iran and the great powers and its collapse, three United States presidents, an ongoing political crisis in Israel, the signing of the Abraham Accords, and the outbreak of war in Ukraine, whose end is still not in sight.

The book has 11 chapters, most with a chronological orientation: a background chapter that summarizes the course of the conflict in the years 1948-1991; three chapters that focus on the peace process that began with the Madrid Conference, continued with the Oslo Accords, and ended with the second intifada; two chapters devoted to the regional changes during the governments of Ariel Sharon and Ehud Olmert; three chapters covering the decade that began with the Arab Spring and ended with the Abraham Accords; and finally two thematic chapters discussing the nature of Arab-Jewish relations and Arab attitudes to normalization.

With the period it covers, *Middle Eastern Maze* speaks to the new book by Eli Podeh, *From Mistress to Known Partner: Israel's Secret Relations with States and Minorities in the Middle East, 1948-2020* (Am Oved, 2022), and adds to it. While Podeh focuses on the level of covert relations, Rabinovich mainly discusses

the overt layer, and while Podeh looks deeply into bilateral contacts between selected Arab states and Israel, Rabinovich takes a bird's eye view of historical events, describing a variety of changing perspectives. For example, the Oslo Accords and the peace treaty with Jordan are examined against the background of internal Palestinian and internal Israeli disputes around the peace process, the concerns of regional actors such as Syria and Egypt, and the international interests of the United States (pp. 52-53, 60-61, 66, 76-79).

The book does not overlook historical episodes that are mired in public and academic controversy, and above all the failure of the 2000 Camp David Summit, notwithstanding the unprecedented concessions offered to the Palestinians by then-Prime Minister Ehud Barak. The author proposes four competing explanations for the failure of the talks: the first, called the "orthodox" explanation, places most of the blame on Yasir Arafat, who was unable to grasp the momentous nature of the opportunity; the second, the "revisionist" explanation, puts the blame on Barak's mishandling of the negotiations; the third, the "deterministic" explanation, claims that the summit was doomed to failure due to political circumstances in Jerusalem and Washington; the fourth, the "eclectic" explanation, splits the responsibility between all the parties involved (pp. 162-178).

Contrary to previous studies on this subject (for example, Sasson, 2004, pp. 277-280; Morris, 2012, pp. 95-105), Rabinovich avoids a definitive choice among the four proposed narratives, but it seems that he leans toward the eclectic. He notes that Arafat withdrew compromise offers regarding the territories of the future Palestinian state and refused to be flexible on the issues of refugees, Jerusalem, and the end of the conflict (pp. 153-154). At the same time, he is sensitive to the Palestinian assumption that Israel was weak and further concessions could be squeezed from it, and criticizes the Israeli negotiators who were unable to express clearly and provide a solid basis for their demand to

maintain sovereignty over a small part of the West Bank (pp. 179-181).

Later Rabinovich criticizes Abu Mazen for his refusal to commit in writing to the understandings that were achieved in the negotiations that began in November 2007 with the Ehud Olmert government at the Annapolis Conference, and defines this as "a serious error" (p. 256). He notes that Olmert gave the Palestinians the most far-reaching offer they had ever received but they chose not to respond, due to the Israeli Prime Minister's shaky political status and with the vain hope that they could win further concessions in talks mediated by the Obama administration, which assumed office in January 2009.

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Benjamin Netanyahu served as Prime Minister for much of the period covered by the book. His first government (1996-1999) is accused of slowing down the peace process with the Palestinians, whether deliberately or because of inexperience, evidenced inter alia by the uncoordinated opening of the Western Wall Tunnel, the internal differences that clouded the work of the government, and the reduced interest in the peace process shown by the US administration. Rabinovich describes how satisfaction with Netanyahu's election—in Jordan (hoping that his victory would prevent hasty moves to set up a Palestinian state) and in Egypt (wanting to pull back slightly from the realization of Shimon Peres's vision of "the new Middle East")—was replaced by a crisis in their relations with Israel due to what they saw as an extreme change in his government's policy (pp. 102-114).

Netanyahu's lengthy second term of office (2009-2021) is discussed mainly in the context of the Arab Spring and the Abraham Accords. The author believes that the change in the Prime Minister—from acceptance of the two-state principle in the Bar-Ilan speech in June 2009, to a freeze on the Israeli-Palestinian track in the past decade—is connected to his perception that a period of regional upheaval and uncertainty requires a more cautious approach that avoids concessions. In parallel, Netanyahu invested much effort in promoting routes to regional peace with the Gulf states and pushed aside the Palestinian problem in favor of focusing on the Iranian issue (pp. 271-299). As Rabinovich sees it, the US withdrawal in 2018, with Netanyahu's encouragement, from the 2015 nuclear deal achieved the opposite of its desired aim, and brought Iran closer to the status of a nuclear threshold state (p. 310).

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The Abraham Accords are presented by Rabinovich as the ironic and unplanned outcome of Donald Trump's "deal of the century," to which Netanyahu was pushed by default, after the US administration opposed the annexation of areas of the West Bank, due to pressure from Defense Minister Benny Gantz, Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi, and Arab countries. As such, he in effect adopts the narrative presented by Barak Ravid in his book *Trump's Peace* (2022). The added value of the analysis by Rabinovich is its placement of the Abraham Accords within a broad historical perspective, mainly as the outcome of shared Arab-Israeli challenges that emerged during the previous decade due to threats from Iran, Turkey, and Salafi-jihadist terror, reduced United States involvement in Middle East affairs, and increasing opportunities for economic and energy collaboration (pp. 379-399).

The book's two thematic chapters can easily stand alone, but remain detached from the book as a whole. While the chapter dealing with the web of relations in the Middle East broadens the debate on the roles of Turkey, Iraq, and Israel's Arab minority in the regional dynamic, it also repeats much of the content of previous chapters, and deviates from the book's chronological structure. It would have been better to make use of the important new items it includes—such as the negative role played by Egypt at the 2000 Camp David Summit (p. 320)—to enrich the relevant chapters. For its part, the chapter on the Arab discourse regarding normalization lacks an up-to-date discussion of positions that have arisen over the last two decades in online media. Technological innovations paved the way for the emergence of a new, young Arab generation of intellectuals, bloggers, and activists on social media, for whom Arab-Israeli normalization is no longer an abstract idea but a daily reality, even if largely conducted in cyberspace (Sallam & Winter, pp. 26-28).

The book is easy to read, although more thorough editing would improve its quality. In some places there are typographical and design errors (for example on pages 83, 103, 225). More jarring are the lack of necessary corrections and updates of some details that appeared in previous versions of the book: contrary to what is stated in the text, Operation Cast Lead took place 14 years before the book was published, and not just four (p. 261); David Petraeus has not been the director of the CIA since 2012 (p. 267); the civil war in Syria has claimed half a million victims and not 8,000 (p. 282); Mohamed Sid-Ahmed's book *After the Guns Fall Silent* was published almost 50 years ago and not over 25 years ago (p. 412). These are just a few examples, but they should be corrected in its online electronic version or when another edition of the book is printed.

In conclusion, readers who wish to study the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict in a regional and broad international context will find great

value in this text. Rabinovich has enriched the academic bookshelf with an essential, succinct, and free accessible guide that will be very useful to anyone who wishes to navigate the Middle East maze that continues to challenge Israel, even 75 years since its establishment. In the closing chapter of the book, the author adds a message with echoes for the future (pp. 444-447): while Israel has had the opportunity to form new normalization agreements with new Arab countries and to reinforce some aspects of the older agreements with Egypt and Jordan, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which is at the heart of the Arab-Israeli struggle, has only grown deeper. The sub-text is that the viable way to exit the maze was and will continue to be dependent on the resolution of this conflict.

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