

Arab Approaches to the Political Process and Normalization with Israel

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In the course of 2016, the Sunni Arab states, led by Egypt and Saudi Arabia, were noticeably engaged in efforts to break the deadlock in the Israeli-Palestinian political process and renew peace negotiations.

On two separate occasions, including from the podium of the UN General Assembly in New York on September 20, 2016, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi called directly on the people and leadership of Israel to recognize the importance of resolving the Palestinian issue and strive to reach a solution. He stressed that today is “a real opportunity to write a bright page in the history of our region,” which in turn would grant stable security and economic prosperity to Palestinians and Israelis.¹ These remarks follow his declaration in May that a solution to the Palestinian issue would pave the way for a “warmer” peace between Israel and Egypt.²

In a related development, in July 2016 a delegation of Saudi academics and businessmen visited Israel with the permission of the King, and met with the Director General of the Foreign Ministry and Knesset members to encourage discussion in Israel on the Arab Peace Initiative.³ In response, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared in a speech at the UN General Assembly in September that Israel welcomes “the spirit of the Arab Peace Initiative” and is interested in engaging in dialogue with Arab countries about a comprehensive peace that would include the Palestinians. He noted with satisfaction that many Arab states now recognize that Israel is not their enemy, but rather an ally in the struggle against Iran and the Islamic State, and in achievement of regional goals of security, prosperity, and peace.⁴

The positive exchanges between Israel and Egypt and Saudi Arabia, however, have thus far not translated into a political breakthrough, or into a summit meeting convened by Egypt or another state between the Israeli Prime Minister and the Chairman of the Palestinian Authority, or senior officials sent on their behalf. The reasons for this are connected to all of the stakeholders: Israel and the Palestinian Authority are not ripe for historic compromise on the core issues of the conflict, particularly Jerusalem, the settlements, the right of return, and recognition of Israel as a Jewish state. Israel's right wing coalition and the internal Palestinian divisions between Fatah and Hamas likewise constitute major obstacles to adoption of a conciliatory and consensual policy. The United States, the main candidate to broker the negotiations, was preoccupied with its presidential election, and its leverage for influence over Israel and the Palestinians is too limited given the wide gaps between the positions of the respective parties. The political impasse is a source of frustration among Arab states that see the peace process as in their national and regional interests, yet these states are hard pressed to devise a formula that would extricate the political wagon from the proverbial mud. For Israel, this period may prove to be a historic missed opportunity for large scale normalization toward multi-dimensional and overt regional cooperation. Conversely, if peace negotiations are renewed and if a breakthrough is reached, under the current regional circumstances this will most probably create an opening to integrate Israel as a legitimate actor in the Middle East arena.

Arab Interests in Jumpstarting the Political Process

The significant interest displayed by Sunni Arab countries (especially Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt, and the UAE) in an Israeli-Palestinian agreement is explained officially by shared interests, some common to all and some unique to specific countries. An obvious issue, prominent at least on a rhetorical level, is the historic and ongoing Arab commitment to the Palestinians, which was and still is defined as a primary pan-Arab concern. While visiting Israel in July 2016, Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry repeatedly emphasized political efforts to solve the Palestinian issue. In el-Sisi's speech at the summit of the Non-Aligned Movement in September in Venezuela, he stressed Egypt's support for the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people

to establish an independent state with East Jerusalem as its capital, and his rejection of the ongoing occupation and increased pace of settlement construction. Yet at the same time, in a changed posture, Egypt's solidarity with the Palestinians was joined by a measure of responsibility ascribed to the Palestinians for the political deadlock, given the ongoing rift between Fatah and Hamas, which impedes the Palestinian Authority's ability to negotiate on behalf of all Palestinians and settle the status of the Gaza Strip.⁵

An additional reason to promote the political process stems from the common belief shared by Arab countries that continuation of the conflict creates fertile ground for the spread of radical Islam and increases instability in the region, while a peace agreement would quash a significant source of terrorism. Egypt, which is recovering from two revolutions, and Jordan, which is dealing with waves of Syrian refugees, place stability at the top of their national agendas. As far as these two states are concerned, the status quo and the periodic eruptions of violence between Israel and the Palestinians fan internal unrest and strengthen destabilizing forces challenging their regimes. Given Jordan's delicate demographic composition, flare-ups of violence in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict pose a substantive threat, with any escalation serving to increase support for the Islamist forces undermining the monarchy. For its part, Egypt is interested in an arrangement that prevents violent conflicts between Hamas and Israel that may foment incendiary Egyptian public opinion. In addition, its efforts to ease tensions in the Middle East are an integral part of its intensive efforts to improve its economy by restoring the image of the region as safe for tourism and foreign investment. El-Sisi's statement at the UN – "the Arab-Israeli conflict remains the major [source] of instability in the Middle East, and requires countries in the region and the international community to join forces to achieve a permanent settlement to the conflict"⁶ – may be understood in this context. Saudi General Anwar M. Eshki, chairman of the Jeddah-based Middle East Center for Strategic and Legal Studies, explained during his visit to Israel that the Palestinian-Israeli conflict serves as a breeding ground for the growth of Iranian ideology and strengthens terrorist elements that benefit from the Palestinian issue; resolution of the conflict would undermine this environment.⁷

For Egypt and Saudi Arabia, an additional reason to promote the peace process involves their desire to leverage their influence – in the case of

Egypt, through mediation between Israel and the Palestinians, and in the case of Saudi Arabia, through promotion of a framework for a permanent settlement – to strengthen their regional leadership among Arab countries and thereby improve their status in the eyes of the West, especially the United States. Egypt, the pioneer of peace with Israel, has played a major role over the years in mediating between Israel and the Palestinians. Cairo sees its peace agreement with Israel and its involvement in promoting the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians as part of its international stature. For the Sisi regime, fostering Egypt's image as a peace-seeking country and cultivating the current President's image as continuing the path of Sadat is part of the branding of Egypt as a "responsible adult," an anchor of stability in an unstable and divided region suffering from terrorism and bloody civil wars. Furthermore, some in Egypt hope that their contribution to regional peace will clear the way for increased American aid and assistance from international financial bodies in Washington.⁸ For its part, Riyadh believes it would improve its political standing and image in the international arena should the Arab Peace Initiative, approved by the Arab League in 2002 under Saudi leadership, finally be accepted by Israel and the Palestinians as the formal basis for negotiations on a comprehensive Arab-Israeli settlement.

An alternative perspective, carefully obscured in official Arab statements but clearly evident in semi-formal public discourse, sees the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as an opening for a new regional order, in which the Arab states and Israel can freely join forces on security and economic issues. The novelty here is the Arab interest in promoting normalization: if as part of the original Arab initiative normalization was a "lure" to urge Israel to enter the peace process, now it reflects authentic Arab interest in creating a new Middle East that includes broader and more open partnerships with Israel than in the past. According to this perspective, the resolution of the Palestinian issue is meant to help the Arab regimes legitimize in the minds of their people the transformation of yesterday's enemy into tomorrow's ally. In the security sphere, significant progress on the peace process will facilitate Arab-Israeli cooperation against common enemies that threaten regional stability and peace, particularly Iran and Salafi-jihadist terrorist groups. In the economic sphere, it should clear the way for establishing

cooperation between the region's countries in areas such as energy, water, agriculture, tourism, transport, and trade.

Future Relations between Israel and the Arab States

The instability that has plagued the region in the current decade has weakened the traditional linkage between Arab-Israeli normalization and progress on the Israeli-Palestinian track. The weakened dependency between the two is the result of several processes: the decreased centrality of the Palestinian issue; the growing focus of Arab countries on their internal needs; enemies common to Israel and the Arab states; and most of all, the military, political, and economic interests that can be pursued once Arab states and Israel tighten their relations. Consequently, promoting normalization and progress on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process are no longer integrated processes, but rather independent variables that are harder to balance. Hence, Arab-Israeli collaborations may evolve in a discreet and measured manner even without a political breakthrough. However, these relationships can thrive and emerge from behind the scenes only with the achievement of progress in the political process, even if this progress is on a symbolic level. Achievement of the full potential of these relations, especially in light of the unprecedented Arab willingness today for a deep change on Israel's status in the region with concrete and cultural dimensions, depends on a new political reality of an Israeli-Palestinian agreement.

The political stalemate is not necessarily a recipe for decline or stagnation in Israel-Arab relations. Arab countries soberly analyze the chances of achieving a permanent settlement between Israel and the Palestinians, and are reluctant to make their vital interests in promoting ties with Israel hostage to a political breakthrough that may not come in the foreseeable future. These interests join the widespread assessments in Arab circles that conditioning normalization on comprehensive peace has not proved its effectiveness, and its use as an instrument of pressure against Israel must be revisited. According to these assessments, the gaps in the balances of power between Israel and its neighbors have only widened in recent years, and Israel therefore no longer sees its relations with Arab countries as sufficient incentive for political concessions.⁹ These circumstances require the Arab states to examine alternatives for managing their relations with Israel. For

example, Tarek Fahmi, head of the Israeli Unit at the National Center for Middle East Studies in Cairo, who was known until recently for rejecting normalization, has determined that Egypt cannot remain captive to past patterns of behavior and must formulate a new peace strategy to extend the relationship with Israel beyond the security and intelligence spheres. He notes Egypt's ability to use Israel's good relations with Washington to build a new foundation for three-way strategic, economic, and security relations: Israel-Egypt-United States.¹⁰

A survey of Arab discourse in Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia shows that the normalization issue remains charged, and that its legitimacy continues to be a matter of public controversy in the absence of comprehensive peace. However, open public debate on the topic is underway, with opinions on both sides being heard – in itself a noteworthy change, as for many years the subject was considered taboo. David Pollock, a researcher at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, has labeled the relationship developing between Arab countries and Israel as “the new normal,” as “the Israeli enemy of my enemy may not be a friend, but could become my partner.”¹¹ Under current geopolitical conditions, sweeping opposition to normalization is seen among Arab regimes as an anachronistic policy that does not serve the national interests of their countries, and may not produce any benefit to the Palestinians. As Egyptian journalist ‘Abdel Monem Sa’id, chairman of *al-Masry al-Youm*, made clear in his article in *al-Ahram* about the current Arab position on considering new variables: “Conflict with Israel or peace with it, normalization or boycott of it, cannot be based on the realities of two decades ago, but rather on the current realities of Israel, of the region, of Egyptian and Arab interests, and of Palestinian interests. What we need, perhaps, is a kind of calm reflection and understanding that international relations are based on networks of conflict, competition and cooperation, and we must continually assess the situation so that we avoid fighting windmills or fighting the wars of the past.”¹²

Although Palestinian interests were the last item on Sa’id’s list, they are still present. This means that slow covert movement toward normalization is possible under current conditions, but the Arab regimes will not put their full weight behind it without significant progress in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Arab demands of Israel are decisive and clear, foremost the

establishment of an independent Palestinian state based on the 1967 borders with East Jerusalem as its capital, with the potential compensation for Israel, if it meets these demands, of unprecedented opportunities. These plans, with terms such as “new Middle East,” “regional cooperation,” and “shared regional front,” which led to backlash and suspicion in the Arab world when they were proposed by Israel in the past, are now offered to Israel as informal Arab initiatives.¹³ One example is the plan proposed by Sa’ d ed-Din Ibrahim of the Ibn Khaldoun Center for Development Studies in Cairo, which was published in August 2016 by *al-Masry al-Youm*, entitled “From Struggle and Boycott to Integration and Development.” The plan includes establishing regional economic partnerships, with Egypt and Israel at the center, to be carried out subject to the establishment of a Palestinian state and Arab recognition of Israel. The proposed model for the program is the Franco-German relationship: after World War II the two states created an economic bloc that formed the basis for the establishment of the European Union. According to Ibrahim, the fruits of this model in the Middle East would include renewed land, civilian, and commercial connections between states in the Levant (Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Jordan) and the Maghreb (Algeria, Morocco, Mauritania, Tunisia, and Libya) through Egypt and Israel; established Middle East labor and consumer markets to attract extensive regional and international investments; end of the arms race and the transfer of weapons budgets to development goals; and promotion of democratization.¹⁴

Conclusion

Arab Sunni states are currently interested in advancing the Israeli-Palestinian peace process out of commitment to the Palestinians, but even more so, out of concern for their own interests: weakening the Islamist forces that threaten their regimes and in their view are fed by the conflict with Israel; strengthening their regional and international status by filling a position of responsibility in peace negotiations; and gaining public legitimacy to expand normalization with Israel. For Israel, these trends underline the added value in a regional settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the potential of turning the Arab Peace Initiative, amended and adjusted, into the basis for peace negotiations. With wide Arab and Islamic backing, the Palestinians may become flexible in their positions and demonstrate willingness for historic

compromise on the most explosive core issues of a permanent settlement, particularly the right of return and the status of Jerusalem. The success of negotiations of this kind, which would take place under an Arab umbrella, can be expected to pave the way for unprecedented cooperation between Israel and its neighbors at various levels – political, security, and economic.

When Israel assesses regional opportunities available to it at the start of 2017, it must take into account the predicament of Arab regimes in light of the considerable gap between the benefits inherent in developing mutual relations with Israel and their public's reservations about such developments. An appropriate metaphor for the ambivalence of the past year surrounding this Arab dilemma was a judo match at the 2016 Olympic games in Rio: Egyptian judoka Islam el-Shehaby, set to compete against Israeli opponent Or Sasson, refused to shake his hand; bowed at the beginning of the match, but not at its end; in effect, he acquiesced to normalization with the Zionist enemy, but also denied it. These contradictions in the individual athlete's conduct reflected the wider dissonance characteristic of the Arab world, which must maneuver between the myth of Israel as the "historic enemy," the reality of strong Arab-Israeli peace agreements, and shared strategic interests, as well as the Palestinian issue whose solution, at present, is not in sight.

Notes

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- 4 PM Netanyahu addresses the United Nations General Assembly, Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, September 22, 2016, <http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/PressRoom/2016/Pages/PM-Netanyahu-addresses-the-United-Nations-General-Assembly-22-September-2016.aspx>.
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- 6 Shadi 'Abdallah, "The Situation in the Middle East Reflects International Conflicts," *al-Ahram*, September 22, 2016, www.ahram.org.eg/NewsQ/552214.aspx.
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