

Palestinian Issue and Israel in the Post Arab Uprisings Regional (Dis)Order

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Abstract: The regional (dis)order brought about as a result of the tectonic shifts set in motion by the Arab Uprisings have afforded Israel a number of opportunities to advance a process of backdoor normalization with the Arab world. An Arab-Israeli rapprochement centered on a number of files of common interest is likely to remain a facet of the geo-political landscape for the foreseeable future. This process however does not mark Israel's acceptance into the Middle East nor the full normalization of ties. Israel tries to render the Palestinian issue irrelevant for normalization in the face of rising opportunities of strategic cooperation with the Arab states. However, Israel's unresolved conflict with the Palestinians will still remain a salient issue that will continue to constrain their developing relations.

Israel's Place In The New Middle East

Israel is seeking to position itself within a fluid regional situation brought about by many of its neighbors falling prey to domestic turmoil as well as a geopolitical realignment produced by Saudi-Iranian competition and increasing Russian assertiveness in the face of the US' perceived withdrawal. In this context, Israel is emerging as one of the main beneficiaries of the post-Arab Spring regional order. However, the perception that time (and history) is on Israel's side may prove ill-founded in the long run.

Despite the chaos engulfing many of its neighbors, there are certainly elements in the current regional model that benefit Israel from a security perspective. Iran and its proxy forces, most notably Hizbullah, are bogged down in a number of regional wars. Israel's proven ability and willingness to use military force in Syria to defend its interests have further enforced a degree of calm along its borders. Meanwhile, the fracturing of the traditional nation state structure, once reproduced through a series of political systems starting with the Sykes-Picot agreement, heralds the prospect of new Israeli alliances with minority groups such as the Kurds and Druze.

In Israeli eyes, there is nothing in the current model that challenges Israel's ability to maintain the status quo within the Palestinian territories or imposes any significant cost should the occupation continue. Rivalries amongst regional actors have exacerbated internal Palestinian divisions and constrained the Palestinian decision process. Moreover, Egypt's strategic outlook after the 2013 coup under the Sisi regime has moved ever closer to that of Israel, with a common enmity towards political Islam serving as the basis for an unprecedented level of cooperation on Sinai and Gaza.

Disorder in the region has also been used by Israel to justify the lack of progress on the Palestinian issue and deflect criticism over its behavior in the occupied territories. Violent conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen – to name but a few – have crowded out the foreign policy agenda of world leaders, which means that many now see the Palestinian issue as less strategically consequential than it once was for the Middle East. Against this backdrop, Israeli leaders argue that the current regional turmoil proves that the non-resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is no longer the main driver of instability and grievance in the region.

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Israeli officials have castigated the already limited international involvement in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a disproportionately large focus on Israel at a time when the rest of the region is burning. Why, they ask, in such a dangerous neighborhood, should Israel be forced into compromises that could threaten its security? Such comments ignore the previous two decades of relative regional stability in which peace talks remained at a standstill and the relevant comfort afforded by backdoor relations with a number of Arab states.

Backdoor Normalization

Although Israel has talked up its image as a villa in the jungle¹ surrounded by “wild beasts”², the jumbling of the Middle East’s geopolitical map has provided unprecedented opportunities for carrying out a process of back-door normalization with regional powers in a form that is largely de-coupled from the Palestinian track.

Facing a number of challenges at home and abroad, Arab regimes have injected a large dose of realpolitik into their dealings with Israel on key issues, from Iran and ‘the fight against terrorism’³ to trade and energy access. While Israel already enjoys close relations with Egypt and Jordan as a result of peace agreements reached in 1979 and 1994 respectively, it has been growing steadily closer to a number of other Arab countries which do not officially recognize Israel, and in particular with Gulf States such as the UAE.

Many of Israel’s relationships with Arab countries have been developing quietly in the background for a number of years, if not decades. While they remain for the most part discreet and a universe away from those it enjoys with the Europe and the US, the current regional context has allowed for these relations to gradual surface and be expanded.

In particular, there has been a convergence of interests in containing and ultimately rolling-back Iranian hegemony and Shiite sectarianism that has acted as a catalyst for Israel’s broadening relations with Sunni Arab regimes across the Middle East. These have dovetailed with common frustration and opposition to the US-sponsored nuclear agreement with Iran and the perceived withdrawal of the US from the Middle East.

As Prime Minister Netanyahu has argued⁴, “There is a new recognition among major countries in the Middle East that Israel is not their mortal enemy, to say the least, but is a potential ally in addressing these common challenges.” Israel’s previous Defense Minister was equally clear⁵: “We can meet in closed rooms but we do have channels to speak with our Sunni Arab neighboring countries. Not just Jordan and Egypt — Gulf states, North African states. For them, Iran is an enemy.”



Prime Minister Netanyahu has repeatedly portrayed Israel as the natural partner of Arab governments in the fight against terrorism, radical Islam and Iran – three adversaries he regularly conflates. In March 2016, for example, Netanyahu explained that “different countries understand that Israel is not the enemy of the Arab world, rather its partner in the common struggle against radical Islamic elements.”⁶ The designation of Hezbollah as a terrorist organization by the GCC in March 2016 would seem to lend further credence to the belief that Israel can make common cause with the Sunni world against Iran and its proxies.⁷

In many ways, today’s regional landscape is allowing Israel to undermine the Palestinian drive for recognition with its own drive for normalization. Pointing to burgeoning relations with states in the Middle East, Asia and Africa – as Netanyahu enjoys doing – allows Israeli leaders to argue that solving the Palestinian issue is no longer a pre-requisite, even in the Muslim world, for the recognition of Israel and its acceptance as a strategic partner. Israel is in particular seeking to make inroads into Africa, with efforts to renew diplomatic ties with Chad – a majority Muslim country – likely to bear fruit in the near future. Further afield, Netanyahu has mooted the possibility of establishing diplomatic relations with the world’s most populous Muslim country, Indonesia, arguing that “It’s time to change our relationship, because the reasons preventing it are no longer relevant.”⁸

While there is likely still plenty of room for Israeli-Arab relations to develop before bumping into the ceiling of what is possible without full normalization, it would be wrong to interpret what is still a limited rapprochement with Arab states as marking Israel’s acceptance into the Middle East. Nor should the current circumstances be taken as a sign that Arab states will publicly

forego the conditionality they have placed on normalization through the Arab Peace Initiative.

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Far from filtering through to the grassroots, Arab-Israeli relations remain only as deep as astroturf. While Arab elites do show an increasing readiness to cooperate with Israel on areas of mutual concern, Arab public opinion remains virulently anti-Israeli. Therefore, as long as this remains the case, Middle Eastern leaders will be limited in their ability to deepen their ties with Israel. Moreover, the volatility and shifting nature of regional alliances (and high-turnover rates among regional leaders) means that the progress that Israel has made with Arab states is easily reversible and should not be taken for granted over the long term in today’s Middle East.

Moreover, increasing ties with the Arab world could make Israel vulnerable to a Palestinian strategy that is able to leverage these relations to advance its prospects of statehood. Likewise, the disappearance of a two-state solution and its replacement with a one-state reality in which Palestinians are denied a full set of rights would have real implications for Israel’s regional relations.

The Missing Palestinians

While some Arab states such as Egypt have evoked the possibility of a regional approach to solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, this remains largely a game of smoke and mirrors, aiming to obscure and legitimize closer relations with Israel. In fact, Prime Minister Netanyahu’s biggest foreign policy



accomplishment has been to bring forward the normalization effort with Arab countries without budging one inch on the Palestinian issue.

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The bar that Israel has to meet on the Palestinian issue in order to maintain its relationships with regional states is decidedly low, and this allows Israel to maintain a maximalist line on the Palestinian issue even as it endeavors to deepen its ties with the rest of the region. To many Israelis, the operating theory that Arab states will grudgingly turn a blind eye to Israeli transgressions towards the Palestinians for the sake of more immediate strategic necessities has yet to be disproven.

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Of course, Israeli actions do occasionally lead to deteriorations in regional relations, but these tend to be blips. Jordan and Egypt recalled their ambassadors to Israel in response to Israeli actions on the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount in November 2014 and Gaza in November 2012 respectively. Both were eventually returned in an effort to mend relations. During the 2014 Gaza war – the bloodiest to date – Israel and Egypt actually engaged in extensive cooperation as they sought to strangle Hamas. The overthrow of Egypt's former President Mursi facilitated the extension of this cooperation.

Even the far more serious rupture in Israeli-Turkish relations following the killing of nine activists aboard the Turkish-owned Mavi

Marmara flotilla by Israeli forces in May 2010 has been mended. While Turkey was able to extract an apology and compensation from Israel, it ultimately conceded on its third condition, relating to the removal of Israel's blockade on the Gaza Strip, settling instead for the provision of Turkish humanitarian supplies to Gaza via the Israeli port of Ashdod. Although this was something that the Turkish government felt it could spin at home as marking an Israeli concession, this deal does not have the capacity to fundamentally alter Israeli policy towards the Strip or significantly alleviate the conditions under which Gazans live.

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Israel's recent policies show that it is trying to reduce the Palestinian file to a series of technical issues such as infrastructure, security, economics and administration. In doing so, it has sidestepped efforts to tackle the political causes that lie at the root of these issues and steered the conversation towards a series of short term technical fixes. This reductionist approach allows Israel to avoid the political context and provides its regional (and international) partners political capital that can be sold domestically to legitimize their engagement with Israel.

Missing in all of this has been any sense of Palestinian agency or disruptive strategy to either call out or embarrass Arab leaders for embracing Israel at their expense. Nor have Palestinians shown any ability to leverage Israeli-Arab relations to their advantage. Instead, Palestinian actions to garner Arab



support seem designed only for internal consumption to save face with their own public. The Palestinian leadership seems to define its engagement with the Arab world merely as a means of buttressing its institutional relevancy and legitimacy at a time of rising domestic frustration.

Insulating The Palestinian Territories – For How Much Longer?

Prime Minister Netanyahu would undoubtedly argue that the current regional model shows every sign of durability. Despite acting as a microcosm of regional rivalries, the Palestinian territories have remained remarkably insulated from regional dynamics. In many ways, the events of the (post-)Arab uprisings seem to have passed the Palestinians by. The demands for dignity and rights witnessed in a number of Arab countries have not translated into any significant mobilization aimed at advancing the Palestinian struggle. Nor have Palestinians themselves so far engaged in the same revolutionary behavior witnessed in Egypt or Tunisia, despite a majority of Palestinians perceiving the Palestinian Authority as a burden.⁹

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The Palestinian territories have also remained immune from the sectarian violence and extremism rocking the rest of region. The real drivers behind the ongoing wave of Palestinian violence against Israelis could not be any more different to the sort of terror witnessed in Paris or Brussels or Baghdad – contrary to Netanyahu's claims.¹⁰

As a group of former senior Israeli security officials themselves have recognized, far from being the result of religious extremism, "the current wave of [Palestinian] violence is, in large measure, the product of Israel's rule over more than two million Palestinians and their resulting humiliation, abject poverty, despair and the absence of hope for a better future."¹¹

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In the long run though Israel may find that the post-Arab Spring regional order is not as sustainable as it predicts. Far from permanently insulating the Palestinians from regional contagions, there is a real risk that these eventually catch-up with Palestinian grievances that result from living under prolonged occupation. Israel's calculations remain based on its ideological drive, and it refuses to redraw its map of regional threats. Israel sees its fight not as being against the ISIS extremism that has affected Europe, but against Shiite militancy exported by Iran. But as the recent attack in Tel Aviv by two Palestinians reportedly inspired by ISIS's ideology – the first of its kind – demonstrates, it would be wrong to believe that the Palestinian territories will remain forever immune to regional contagion.

Palestinian violence has until now incorporated a predominantly nationalistic component, yet the seeds for greater religious radicalization are there. While Salafi Jihadi groups retain only a marginal presence in the Palestinian territories, high unemployment rates coupled with popular frustration and a sense of entrapment among young people represent the usual foundations



for possible radicalization – especially in Gaza where such dynamics are the most acute. Avoiding violence and radicalization will require the loosening of the social and political quarantine imposed on Gaza and the translation of any diplomatic track into tangible improvements to the daily-lives of Palestinians. Such efforts could also provide the impetus for a more lasting ceasefire between Hamas and Israel.

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Gaza will however require more than just economic rehabilitation. Healing the Strip also necessitates Palestinian unification, both geographically and politically. If regional powers are interested in making a positive contribution, then they should promote a process of Palestinian reconciliation that is not predicated on the zero sum calculations that currently seem to be shaping such talks. Given their links with various Palestinian parties and Israel, Egypt and Turkey have a particularly important role to play in promoting Palestinian reconciliation.¹²

A Regional Peace Process?

The perceived aligning of Israeli and Arab interests, coupled with Egyptian indications that it may push for a regional peace process, has been seized upon by European officials and Israeli politicians as a historic opportunity that could “undoubtedly change the face of the region.”¹³ This belief has seemingly been bolstered through recent visits to Israel by a senior Saudi delegation and Egypt’s foreign minister, Sameh Shoukry, to discuss the prospects for regional peace.¹⁴ Added to this is the potential for a reciprocal visit to Cairo by Netanyahu in the near future.

This idea that an expanded regional role in the peace process could help solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has proven particularly attractive to the EU’s High Representative, Federica Mogherini, and other European leaders. However, Europe must guard against Israeli efforts to bamboozle their way into yet another open-ended process with Egyptian help, not least given that both seem to be using the process as a ploy to further a set of self-interests that do little to advance the prospects of a peace agreement with the Palestinians.

For Egypt, owning a process gives the Sisi regime increased political legitimacy on the world stage and helps him personally secure his relations with the US, not to mention distracting the international community from economic and human rights issues at home. For Israel, this allows it to play out the clock during the remaining months of President Obama’s administration and block steps more likely to have an impact, whether in the form of the French peace initiative or a US reiteration of internationally endorsed parameters to frame future peace negotiations.

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This of course has not stopped the Israeli government from making a show of rediscovering the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative (API). Despite Arab states offering full normalization of relations in exchange for an Israeli peace agreement with the Palestinians, no Israeli government has until now provided



an official response. In what likely constitutes Israel's first reaction, 14 years after it was first tabled, Netanyahu has declared that while the API includes positive elements that can help revive constructive negotiations with the Palestinians, a new peace process would necessitate Arab states to make revisions to the plan.¹⁵

Israel itself sees little real need to make painful concessions on the Palestinian issue in order to get from regional states what it already has, or is likely to get should current dynamics continue.

Hidden between the lines of the Israeli Prime Minister's comments is a desire to push Arab states to make concessions that the Palestinians are not willing to give – whether on borders or the Jewish character of Israel. At the same time, Israel itself sees little real need to make painful concessions on the Palestinian issue in order to get from regional states what it already has, or is likely to get should current dynamics continue.

Prime Minister Netanyahu is attempting to reverse the idea that normalization should be the consequence of a peace agreement with the Palestinians

In describing how shifting regional alliances could pave the way to a lasting peace agreement with the Palestinians, Prime Minister Netanyahu is attempting to reverse the idea that normalization should be the consequence of a peace agreement with the Palestinians. Should there be any doubt, Tony Blair (who has played a role in pushing for an Egyptian-Israeli peace initiative) explained that “provided the Israeli government is ready to commit to a discussion around the Arab peace initiative ... it would be possible to have some steps of normalization along the way to give confidence to this process.

With the new leadership in the region today, that is possible.”¹⁶

Given Israel's history of pocketing concessions and avoiding the path to Palestinian statehood, playing the normalization card for the sake of yet more meaningless discussions would be a serious mistake. To not link the development of Arab-Israeli ties to genuine progress towards a two state solution merely affirms Israel's belief that it can park the Palestinian issue indefinitely while pursuing valuable relations with Arab states. Instead, the Arab League and its members must hold fast to the conditions set out in the Arab Peace Initiative, in particular making regional normalization conditional on a peace deal with the Palestinians.

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If Arab states remain committed to increased cooperation with Israel, as seems to be the case, then they should explore how these growing ties might be leveraged to advance the cause of Palestinian sovereignty. This could include discussions with the Palestinians (and Europe) on what interim steps could be offered short of normalization in exchange for concrete and irreversible actions by Israel that improve the further prospects of Palestinian sovereignty.

Arab states could for instance consider holding out the offer of Arab League recognition of Israel within its internationally recognized 1967 borders in exchange for Israeli recognition of a Palestinian state based on long-standing internationally accepted parameters for resolving the



conflict. This could be linked to a package of Israeli confidence building measures, such as completing the third Further Re-Deployment (FRD) envisaged under the 1998 Wye River Agreement and the 1999 Sharm El-Sheikh Memorandum, in which Israel pledged to transfer territory from Areas C to B to A; increased Palestinian economic access to Area C; a freeze on settlement activity and ending demolitions of Palestinian property; as well as allowing for the re-opening of Palestinian institutions in East Jerusalem and the holding of Palestinian elections there.

Although Israel would be hard pressed to accept such conditions, this would at least challenge it to demonstrate real commitment to a two-state solution and re-impose a degree of conditionality in its relations with the Arab world.

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