

THE ARAB-ISRAELI PEACE PROCESS: A REALISTIC ASSESSMENT*

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INTRODUCTION

This article reviews, first, the main reasons for the entrenchment of Israel in the Middle East and for the shift towards its greater acceptance as a regular international player in regional politics. The second part of the essay argues that the peace process is quite resilient and that it has realised most of its potential. The third part clarifies the peace process's often forgotten limitations, which the strategic and cultural realities of the Middle East impose on Arab states' relations with Israel. The last section offers advice against impatience and diplomatic hyperactivity.

THE ACCEPTANCE OF ISRAEL BY ITS REGIONAL FOES

The visit of Anwar Sadat, the President of Egypt, to Jerusalem in October 1977 signalled a dramatic change in the pattern of Arab-Israeli relations. The move, which made recognition of Israel a *fait accompli*, stunned the Arab world. Egypt's Arab brethren ostracised Cairo for several years because of Sadat's 1979 Peace Treaty with Israel and Egypt's defection from the Arab coalition against the Jewish state. Yet, most of the Arab world followed Egypt in negotiating peace with Israel after the 1991 Gulf War. Several reasons led to this process.

1) The most important reason for the peace process was the Arab political élites' growing realisation of the futility of attempting to eradicate Israel by force. Indeed, since 1973, we see a clear decline in the military intensity of the Arab-Israeli conflict. During the first three decades of its existence, Israel fought and won four large-scale wars (in 1948, 1956, 1967 and 1973) with its immediate neighbours, as well as fighting expeditionary forces from 'second ring' countries, such as Iraq and Sudan and even from more remote countries such as Morocco. Since October 1973, however, Israel and the Arab countries have fought no large-scale war against each other. After the 1979 Peace Treaty with Egypt, the Arabs lost not only the strongest military force mobilised against Israel, but also the ability to wage a two-front assault on Israel (its worst-case scenario).

Israel's nuclear option, coupled with an awareness of Israel's conventional superiority, contributed to the strategic calculus behind the Arab realisation that the price of eliminating the Jewish state by war could be extremely high. New links between Jerusalem and Ankara in the 1990s reinforced Israel's military strength as the combined might of the two changed dramatically the regional balance of power in favour of the non-Arab actors.

2) Parallel to the changing evaluations concerning the chances of destroying Israel, Arab countries have undergone a shift in their foreign policy orientation. They have moved since the 1970s from various degrees of allegiance to Pan-Arab ideology to a foreign policy more

openly determined by each country's own national statist interests.¹ This shift in the focus of regional politics led to a decline in the salience of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Palestinian issue, which were central in the Pan-Arab ethos.² This lessened the constraints on Arab states coming to an agreement with Israel, each according to its own perceived interests, such as Egypt agreeing with Israel on the Sinai without the Sinai's return being tied to the resolution of other disputes between Israel and its neighbours. Moreover, the success of the PLO in establishing itself as the voice, par excellence, of Palestinian nationalism, in attracting international attention to the Palestinian issue and in acquiring modest freedom of action in the Arab arena, allowed, paradoxically, Arab states to limit their commitment to the Palestinian cause.

3) An additional contributing factor to the evolution of the peace process is the weakening of the PLO, the main proponent of the Palestinian national movement, whose international status and regional influence peaked in the late 1970s. However, the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon put an end to the PLO mini-state, resulting in the removal of the PLO leadership and thousands of its personnel to faraway Tunisia, complicating the use of force against targets within Israel.

The most significant Palestinian action-the Intifada-was not the result of a PLO initiative. Moreover, the Palestinian uprising in the Israeli-ruled territories brought a new leadership to the forefront of the Palestinian struggle, the 'insiders', Palestinians who fought Israeli occupation inside the territories. These Palestinians infused a greater sense of realism into the Palestinian national movement, in terms of what could be achieved, as well as urgency in dealing with Palestinian problems, which also moderated their demands. They advocated accepting Israel within its 1967 boundaries and negotiating with it to bring about a withdrawal from the occupied territories. They were instrumental in pushing the PLO away from its maximalist platform, which did not recognise Israel, into adopting a two-state formula. The PLO's strategic blunder of 1990, the alliance with Saddam Hussein, cost it the diplomatic and financial support of many important Arab countries and angered the US, consequently bringing them on American terms to the November 1991 US-convened Madrid Conference. The PLO had to be content with sending its representatives within a Jordanian delegation, no longer demanding that a Palestinian state be on the agenda. Again, the 'insiders' were the moving force in moderating the Palestinian demands issued in Tunis. Apprehensions that the leaders of the Intifada within the Israeli-ruled territories would take over the Palestinian national movement, coupled with the deep financial crisis of the PLO, led Yassir Arafat to the September 1993 Oslo Agreement. Then, the PLO recognised Israel, renounced the use of force and promised the cancellation of the clauses in the Palestinian Covenant that called for the destruction of Israel.³

4) An important contributing factor to the peace process was the lesson learned by Arab leaders that Israel was not the biggest threat to the Arab world. Khomeini's Islamic revolution in 1979 deflected the focus away from Israel, limiting assistance to Israel's foes at times of need. The Syrians, who sided with Iran in the First Gulf War (1980-88), were left to face Israel on their own in 1982. Even the Palestinian uprising in 1987 did not elicit much support as the Arab countries were busy parrying the Islamic challenge. The threat from Iran enabled an initially ostracised Egypt to regain its leadership in inter-Arab affairs, without giving in to demands to change its policy vis-à-vis Israel, making its peace treaty with Israel more acceptable to the Arab world.

Only a few years later, another threat to the Arab world came from a former ally. Saddam Huseyin of Iraq became intent on hegemonic pursuits and the attainment of the riches of Kuwait. The result of Iraq's threat, and the consequent US-led military coalition to free Kuwait, aligned Israel de facto with many Arab states, although not for the first time.

Small states in the Arab world, such as Jordan and the Gulf states, came to see Israel as a balancing force in the region, particularly against hegemonic ambitions. The Israeli military more than once aided the Hashemites, the best known example being the events of September 1970, when Israeli military moves deterred a Syrian effort to invade Jordan. Jordan is indeed the closest Arab country to Israel and even takes part in the Israeli-Turkish alignment.

5) Another development facilitating the peace process is the growing social weariness with war, which has forced the political leadership in several countries in the region to redefine their national goals and to a greater willingness to discuss the possibility of peace on previously unacceptable terms. This was a clear factor in Egypt's disposition to sign peace treaties with Israel, and has influenced the Palestinians to accept more realistic outcomes from their national struggle. Israel is likewise war-weary and has little appetite to police the Palestinian inhabited areas and is no longer attracted to the notion of a 'Greater Israel'.

6) Changes in the international arena were also conducive to fostering a greater acceptance of Israel. Israel's alliance with the US was an important component of its deterrent power. The overall robustness of Jerusalem-Washington relations, particularly increased strategic co-operation between the two sides since the 1980s, has made the Arab goal of putting a wedge between the two unrealistic. The campaign to isolate Israel in the international community failed too.

Moreover, the end of the Cold War was beneficial to Israel. The Arabs no longer had the backing of the Soviet Union, which limited their military and diplomatic options. They were further weakened by the emergence of a buyers' market in the world oil economy, while the mismanagement of their economies further deteriorated their international standing. In contrast, Israel continued to be in alliance with the victor in the Cold War. The two most viciously anti-Israeli countries, Iraq and Iran, became the enemies of the US and subject to American sanctions. The fact that the US emerged as the only global superpower has made Arab countries more responsive to American preferences, including the acceptance of Israel.

Indeed, in 1991, in the aftermath of the Cold War, the Americans capitalised on their victory in the Gulf War and on the trends discussed above by promoting another attempt at continuing the peace process: the October 1991 Madrid Conference. This Conference initiated a process of bilateral negotiations, as well as the participation of an unprecedented number of Arab countries to discuss Middle East problems together with Israel.

However, overall, the regional processes in the Middle East have more clout than do global changes and superpower influence. This is indicated by America's continued failure to implement its peace plans and the fact that the main breakthroughs in the Arab-Israeli conflict (namely, Sadat's visit to Jerusalem and the Oslo agreement) were not due to an American initiative.

THE RESILIENCE OF THE PEACE PROCESS

To a great extent, the Arab world has crossed the Rubicon in lending Israel's existence, not legitimacy, but credence as an almost irrevocable fact and as a regular international actor in the Middle East. As long as the trends enumerated above continue, even in the absence of progress (usually a euphemism for Israeli concessions), the likelihood of a reverse in the historic accommodation towards Israel is small.

In many ways, the peace process is over, successfully. A reversal to belligerence in Egypt is unlikely as long as it holds on to an American orientation in its foreign policy. In 1994, Jordan signed a peace treaty formalising its good relations with Israel. On the Palestinian track, the 1993 Oslo agreement-in fact a repartition of Palestine-is being implemented, albeit gradually and not without difficulties. The contours of the Palestinian state, its borders and degree of sovereignty remain to be negotiated. The rationale of partition and the establishment of two entities is politically compelling.

Moreover, Israel, as a whole, has moved in favour of partition of the Land of Israel. The Likud-led government (1996-99) signed agreements transferring land to the PA-the January 1997 Hebron agreement and the October 1998 Wye Plantation Accords. Israelis have even reconciled themselves to the emergence of a Palestinian state.

On the Syrian track of the peace process, Hafiz al-Assad proved unwilling to go along and has refused to accept the Golan Heights in exchange for a peace treaty, as Yitzhak Rabin offered in August 1993, Shimon Peres in January 1996 and even Benjamin Netanyahu. It remains to be seen if Assad is ready for peace in December 1999's renewed negotiations. In any case, Syria has only limited potential to obstruct the acceptance of Israel in the region as Syria lacks a veto power in regional affairs, as proven by its futile opposition to Jordanian and Palestinian attempts to reach separate agreements with Israel.

Indeed, even when Arab states complain that Israel violated its agreements with the PA and is not generous enough, territory-wise, toward the PA and Syria, we see only little inclination in the Arab world to heed the advice of radical states to revert to a state of war. Despite the official rhetoric, in many ways it is business as usual between the Arab states and Israel. Moreover, states with large Moslem populations in Central Asia, and even Indonesia and Malaysia, further away, have various degrees of interactions with the Jewish state.

ON BEING REGULAR ACTOR IN THE MIDDLE EAST OR
THE LIMITATIONS ON PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE

Israel definitely has better relations with the Arab world than it had a few decades ago and this pattern is likely to continue. Yet, there are limits to what Israel can achieve in its ties with its neighbours. Expectations that Israeli-Arab relations can emulate the type of interactions characteristic of Western Europe or North America are totally unrealistic for several reasons that are rooted in the strategic and cultural realities of the region.

1) Basically, the old patterns of regional interaction-power politics-have remained unchanged, despite the removal of superpower competition in the area.⁴ Indeed, the dominant perception of international relations among the political leadership of the Middle East has remained power politics. This is why Cairo, Damascus and Baghdad fear the Israeli-Turkish entente. Moreover, in the Middle East, the use of force is still considered an acceptable and useful tool of foreign policy. Violence even accompanies peace negotiations. For example, Syria did not desist from using Hizbollah to bleed Israel while it engaged in peace negotiations. The PA turns a blind eye to Hamas terrorists when it believes it suits its interests. In September 1996,

the PA allowed its soldiers to shoot at the Israeli army, while Arafat often threatens Israel with a new Intifada should his claims be unsatisfied. The emerging Palestinian entity has great potential for developing into a revisionist and predatory state.⁵ Hosni Mubarak and other Arab leaders have repeatedly warned that in the absence of 'progress' there will be a violent eruption.

The best we can expect in the region is an armed peace. Such an outlook characterises both the Arab states' attitude towards Israel and inter-Arab relations. Neither Egypt nor Jordan capitalised on their peace treaty with Israel to reduce defence spending. Neither will they desist from arming themselves against each other. Indeed, all of Israel's Arab neighbours have legitimate security concerns with regard to their other neighbours.

Since, colonialist powers drew the borders in the Middle East, there is still room for revisionist policies. Syria has irredentist claims on Lebanon and by refusing to recognise Lebanon as an independent state, it has succeeded in turning it into its satellite. Iraq still has ambitions to annex Kuwait. Force united South Yemen with its neighbour, North Yemen, in May 1990. A dissatisfied Palestine could become a source for irredentist claims, east and west.

2) Arab societies are far from having internalised an acceptance of Israel. In stark contrast to their Israeli counterparts, many Arab intellectuals and professionals refrain from supporting the peace process and are most critical of the reconciliation with the Jewish state and, with a few exceptions, boycott any contacts with Israelis. Public opinion in the Levant clearly indicates that the peace process is limited primarily to regimes, not societies.⁶

Though Israel is viewed in less demonic terms than in the past, fears of an Israeli design to control the Middle East by economic means have replaced fears of Israeli territorial expansion. Paradoxically, Israel's efforts to integrate into the region have also triggered fears of cultural imperialism. Israel is still seen as an outpost of the West and its colonialist legacy in the Middle East, not only by the Islamists, but also by larger segments of the Arab political and intellectual élite.

The litmus test of change toward Israel in the long run is the education system, where the socialisation process of a new generation takes place. Unfortunately, the school curriculum even in the Arab countries that have signed agreements with Israel remains unchanged, propagating anti-Israeli views and rabid anti-Semitic images, as is the case with the Arab media (usually government-controlled).

3) Another politico-cultural Middle East feature that places limits on ties with Israel, as with the West at large, is the widespread Islamic radical appeal, particularly in Egypt, Jordan and Palestine, reaching beyond the two Islamic republics of Iran and Sudan, in almost every state in the region, including secular Turkey. While radical Islam has had only a limited ability to obstruct the peace process, Islamic political influence is a domestic constraint on pursuing cordial relations with Israel in many countries of the region.

4) Finally, the peace process, despite its present robustness, is not necessarily a one-way historic development. An abrupt change of direction is possible, although unlikely at this point in time. Scenarios for turmoil include an Islamic take-over of one of Israel's neighbours. Similarly threatening for Israel would be the demise of Hashemite Jordan and its conquest by Palestine, Syria or Iraq. Jordan is a pivotal state in the quest for regional stability. Its

disappearance would allow for the reorganisation of the Eastern Front against Israel, which is in dangerous proximity to the strategic heartland of Israel. The return of Russian influence to the Middle East could also re-energise radical forces in the region.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

The first policy-relevant observation concerns the policy-making community, which feels an urge to do good in the Middle East. The situation in the Arab-Israeli conflict has improved considerably, but cannot improve much further. Even if the evolving peace process were to stay its course, the attainment of the type of relations we see among democratic countries may take generations to develop in the Arab-Israeli arena. While the mere nature of politics (the pursuit of national interests) makes Israeli participation in interstate interactions easier, the religious and the cultural dimensions of the Arab-Israeli conflict are less amenable to quick change.

Second, foreigners have limited leverage, while the locals have inestimable power to block extra-regional initiatives. Breakthroughs have belonged to the regional actors and progress comes to fruition when they are ripe for it. The US can play a positive role in compensating the parties for the risks taken, but it cannot impose a Pax Americana.

Third, observation revolves around the time factor. The peace process evolved over two decades as a result of a number of regional developments. De-escalation in protracted disputes takes time and there may be temporary setbacks. Much of the impatience displayed in several quarters indicates an ignorance of the pace involved in historic processes.

Fourth, Israel's leverage vis-à-vis the Palestinians and other Arab actors is considerable. Only in May 1999 did Arafat desist from unilaterally declaring a Palestinian state as a result of Israeli threats. Indeed, Jerusalem can use carrots and sticks to achieve its foreign policy goals. Moreover, it can wait for a better offer in its negotiations with its neighbours. So far, time has been on the Israeli side and there is little to suggest that the time vector is changing course.

Finally, we must remember that power-politics considerations led Arab political élites to accept gradually Israel as a *fait accompli*. A strong Israel is a prerequisite for the peace process. Weakening it harms the peace process.

1 Fouad Ajami, 'The End of Pan-Arabism', *Foreign Affairs* 57/2, Winter 1978-79, pp. 355-73; Roger Owen, *State, Power and politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East*, London: Routledge, 1992.

2 Avraham Sela, *The Decline of the Arab-Israeli Conflict, Middle East Politics and the Quest for Regional Order*, Albany: SUNY Press, 1988.

3 For the PLO's long road to Oslo, see Bary Rubin, *Revolution until Victory: the Politics and History of the PLO*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994.

4 L. Carl Brown, 'The Middle East after the Cold War: Systemic Change or More of the Same?', in George Downs (ed.), *Collective Security beyond the Cold War*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994, pp. 197-216; Efraim Karsh, 'Cold War, Post-Cold War: Does It Make a Difference for the Middle East?', in Efraim Inbar and Gabriel Sheffer (eds.), *The National Security of Small States in a Changing World*, London: Frank Cass, 1997, pp. 77-106.

5 Efraim Inbar and Shmuel Sandler, 'The Risks of Palestinian Statehood', *Survival*, Summer 1997, Vol. 39, No. 2, pp. 23-41.

6 See Hilal Khashan, 'Polling Arab Views on the Conflict with Israel', *Middle East Quarterly*, June 1995, Vol. 2, pp. 3-13.

