

The Geopolitical Chessboard in the Mediterranean: Ten Years After the Arab Spring

Normalization of Arab Countries with Israel: Regional Geopolitical Aspects of the Agreements

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The recent clashes in Jerusalem between Palestinians and Israelis have served as a reminder of a stark reality. The normalization of relations between certain Arab states and Israel does not change the fact that it is Palestinians, not other Arabs, who are living under occupation and with whom Israel has to come to terms. Israel's agreements with the Arab states might have served many other purposes, but so far they have not focused on trying to advance peacemaking in the region. In fact there is a credible argument that those deals, unintentionally perhaps, have only served to hamper peace.

The Trump Administration pushed through a plan that it mislabeled as the "Deal of the Century." This was a scheme designed to meet the needs of Israel and give formal cover to the annexation of 30% of the West Bank, in contravention of international law and without the participation of Palestinians. The aim of reaching a durable solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict that meets the minimum needs of the Palestinians seemed not to be of relevance.

In all four cases the normalization agreements – between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan – appeared largely to be tools to appease the Trump Administration so that it would acquiesce on issues that had nothing to do with peacemaking. The UAE succeeded in securing an arms deal with the United States to provide it with F-35 advanced air fighters. Sudan was removed from the list of state sponsors of terrorism. Morocco received US recognition of its sovereign

claim over the Western Sahara. And both Bahrain and the UAE prioritized their cooperation with Israel to contain Iran's regional influence over attempts to advance peace with the Palestinians. The question of peace is hardly mentioned in any of the agreements – if it is mentioned at all.

The West has hailed these agreements as breakthroughs in a region where peace has been elusive. However, will the agreements help to establish peace in the region? If they will, then this should be celebrated. But what if they will not? Let us examine these agreements' geopolitical implications.

One direct result of these agreements is that they have given Israel the false impression that it does not need to come to terms with the Palestinians with whom it shares the same land, if it is able to forge agreements with the rest of the region. In other words, if there was an incentive for Israel to try to reach a settlement with the Palestinians, that incentive has now been undermined. Israel today feels that it can have its cake and eat it too.

In 2002, the Arab world felt that Palestinians were unable to reach an agreement with Israel on their own. The Arabs realized that Israel wanted security and an end to the Arab-Israeli conflict, but that it would not surrender the land it had occupied in 1967 to achieve peace merely with the Palestinians. That is when they introduced a novel idea. The Arabs would offer Israel total peace – with every Arab state – in return for total withdrawal from occupied territories belonging to the Palestinians, Syria and Lebanon. The Arab world believed it was extending an offer that Israel could not refuse: peace agreements with every Arab country, collective security arrangements, an *agreed* solution to the refugee issue and *an end to all claims*. This was not just land for peace, but *total* land for *total* peace.

If Israel was not interested in that offer in 2002, it has even less of an incentive to be interested today. Its agreements with the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco violated the spirit and letter of the Arab Peace Initiative in two main ways. First, the Arab consensus, a key incentive of the initiative, was fractured. Second, the four states effectively abandoned the principle of land for peace. If the international community is interested in a two-state solution that could meet the aspirations of both Palestinians and Israelis, then it should have another look at the agreements before hailing them as instruments that advance peacemaking. Instead, they have rendered a two-state solution nearly impossible. By applauding the agreements as a breakthrough for peace, the international community has contributed to the delusion that one can achieve peace when no peace exists between the occupier and the occupied.

All four Arab countries have argued that the normalization agreements with Israel serve as levers of influence with the Israeli government to entice it to reach a solution with the Palestinians. They also point out that the agreements show the Israeli public the virtues of being more flexible on withdrawing from occupied territories and establishing a Palestinian state. But the record suggests otherwise. Egypt, the largest Arab country, signed a peace treaty with Israel in 1979, and Jordan, the country with the largest number of Palestinian refugees, signed a similar agreement in 1994. Despite the heavy references in both documents to the principle of land for peace and the need for Israel to withdraw from occupied territory, that never materialized. Moreover, in the last four decades, the attitude of successive Israeli governments and the Israeli public toward peace with the Palestinians has hardened. The peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan had little effect in making Israel more flexible when it comes to peace with the Palestinians.

In the period since Israel signed peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan, Israel has become more uncompromising not only toward Palestinians under occupation, but even those who are citizens of Israel. Israel's Parliament has passed a new basic law, the Nation-State Bill, proclaiming Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish people. The basic law views settlements as a national value, and has promoted their establishment and development, without specifying where. That vagueness may mean settling in lands

inside Israel as well as in the territories occupied in 1967, without regard for the 20% of Israel's citizens who are not Jewish. Israel now has a party in the Knesset, Otzma Yehudit, which is openly anti-Arab and which calls for the annexation of all of the West Bank. Even Israel's current Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, has publicly opposed a viable Palestinian state and is in favour of annexing large parts of the West Bank.

In short, peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan failed to moderate the Israeli position. On the contrary, Israel has adopted positions that are more intransigent than when peace agreements were reached with the two Arab countries. It is unclear, therefore, why or how the more recent normalization agreements with the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco can advance the cause of peace.

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Of course, the four agreements are a reality today. Significant numbers of people in some or all of these countries might push their governments to adopt a slower pace of normalization with Israel, just as the Egyptian and Jordanian publics did. So, what does all this mean, if coupled by the lack of any negotiating process since 2015, when the then-US Secretary of State John Kerry abandoned his efforts to bring Israelis and Palestinians together?

It means, first, that the Arab Peace Initiative is dead. Without the consensus of all Arab states that gave it significant moral power, without Israel's will to engage, and without an Arab leader today able to rally all Arab states around the idea of a peace settlement with Israel, the initiative has lost all its appeal. The Arab world's attempt to change the goalposts and offer Israel regional peace and security arrangements has fallen on deaf ears, and the conflict has gone back to its core Palestinian and Israeli elements.

Another casualty of the four agreements is the death of the two-state solution. The international community has tried valiantly to arrive at such a solution in recent decades. The two-state paradigm, based on separation between the Israeli and Palestinian communities and negotiations over core final-status issues, was logical and addressed the central needs of the two sides. Starting in 1991, there were a number of attempts at getting the two sides to negotiate an acceptable outcome – in Madrid, Oslo, Camp David, Taba and Annapolis. The parties or mediators proposed many plans: the Clinton parameters, the Arab Peace Initiative and the Middle East Roadmap, among others. In the end, the separation paradigm did not work, largely because Israel insisted on populating the occupied territories with settlers and refused to acknowledge the plight of Palestinian refugees or address it in any meaningful way. Israel has created facts on the ground in opposition to the separation principle, clearly signalling that its intention has never been to withdraw from the territories that it occupied in 1967.

Today, the two communities are so intertwined that separation has become almost impossible. With over 700,000 Israeli settlers in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, we are approaching a number equivalent to a quarter of the West Bank's population – a figure that keeps increasing. Yet the international community has clung to the old separation paradigm, refusing to acknowledge the changing reality on the ground. It has been unable, or unwilling, to put forward any new plans to bring that paradigm into the present. The result today is disjointed Palestinian enclaves encircled by 10-metre-high cement walls and razor wires, while Jewish-only settlements expand around them.¹

This reality has been tolerated by the international community ever since the Madrid peace process was initiated in 1991, in the hope that by some miracle a two-state solution might materialize. That has not happened. In fact, the four normalization agreements have encouraged Israel to keep the remaining occupied Arab territories for itself, and have moved it further away from any intent to arrive at a solution.

The Need for a New Rights-Based Approach

Israel has not been held accountable for violating international law. It has continued to expand settlements with impunity, while the international community has done nothing to stop this, even as it has continued to pay lip service to a two-state solution. Without a credible plan to bring about a solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, it may soon be too late to do so.

Meanwhile, the rights of Palestinians under occupation have been relegated to the sidelines in the hope that a two-state solution to the conflict might make the question moot. No more. After 30 years, it is obvious that Israel is unwilling to accept a viable Palestinian state and is intent on holding to as much of the occupied territories as possible. As the possibility of a viable Palestinian state disappears, Palestinians under occupation will increasingly demand that their rights be respected by the international community. If Palestinians cannot have their own state, it is only natural that they will shift toward demanding equal rights in the territories in which they live.

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In fact, such a shift is already occurring. A Carnegie Endowment study in 2017 found that Palestinian activists were increasingly focused on securing legal protections through documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Their focus was no longer on the shape of a solution that was increasingly devoid of substance.²

The situation today, if it persists, has moved away from a two-state solution to accepting the reality of

¹ MUASHER, Marwan, "After the Two-State Solution," *Foreign Affairs*, 27 April, 2021, www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/israel/2021-04-27/after-two-state-solution

² CAMMACK, Perry; BROWN, Nathan J. and MUASHER, Marwan, "Revitalizing Palestinian Nationalism," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 2017.

one state, in which two separate and unequal legal regimes exist for Israelis and Palestinians. This is the textbook definition of apartheid. The international community, in being passive in pushing more forcefully for a genuine and fair two-state solution, has made this one-state alternative a reality. The matter that it will have to address, therefore, will be the kind of one-state solution it is willing to accept – a democratic state or an apartheid system.

Is this overdramatizing the issue? Hardly. A recent poll conducted by prominent researchers Shibley Telhami of the University of Maryland and Marc Lynch of George Washington University came up with the same conclusion. They surveyed 521 experts on the region, 71% of them based in the United States and the rest living elsewhere. Among the issues covered were the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Arab Spring uprisings.

Perhaps the most striking takeaway was how the experts saw the future of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. A majority, 52%, said that a two-state solution was no longer viable, while 42% said it was achievable, but not within the next decade. The more important finding was how the mostly US-based experts viewed the political situation in Israel and the occupied territories. A full 59% described the status quo there as being that of a one-state reality akin to apartheid, while only 7% described it as a one-state reality with inequality that could not be compared to apartheid. When asked about the most likely scenario if a two-state solution were no longer possible, 77% of the respondents predicted a one-state reality akin to apartheid.³

The normalization agreements with Israel were undoubtedly meant to further the interests of the four countries that signed them. The Arab states in no way sought the reinforcement of an apartheid system. But the agreements, coupled with the death of the two-state solution, became a prime example of the law of unintended consequences. Regional co-

operation between Israel and the Arab world, if it is not part of a viable solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, could have disastrous consequences.

The international community should have no illusions about the future. By paying lip service to a two-state solution but doing nothing to make it possible, it has helped to kill prospects for such a solution. And by ignoring the rights of Palestinians under occupation, it is pushing the Palestinians to demand the world's attention in defence of such rights. The international community will not be able to say no to a Palestinian state and no to equal rights indefinitely. That would be tantamount to saying yes to apartheid. The international community will soon have to face this dilemma.

The term apartheid has been avoided by most states, but the failure to produce a two-state solution has led many people and organizations to realize that the description is perfectly accurate. In rapid succession, the largest Israeli human rights organization, B'Tselem, published a report in January 2021 under the title, "A Regime of Jewish Supremacy from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea: This Is Apartheid."⁴ The report accused Israel not only of apartheid against Palestinians under occupation, but also against Palestinian citizens of Israel. In April, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, one of the world's most respected thinktanks, published a report urging the Biden Administration to adopt a rights-based approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict and referred to Israel's apartheid practices.⁵ Soon after, Human Rights Watch issued a report as well, accusing Israel of practicing apartheid.⁶

This trend will increase with time. Normalization should not come at the expense of peacemaking, nor should it lead to the unintended consequence of making peace more unlikely. Either the international community is serious about coming to a durable solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, or it will have to deal with problems far worse than the occupation.

³ LYNCH, Marc and TELHAMI, Shibley, "Here's how experts on the Middle East see the region's key issues," *Project on Middle East Political Science*, Feb 2021, <https://pomeps.org/heres-how-experts-on-the-middle-east-see-the-regions-key-issues-our-new-survey-finds>

⁴ www.btselem.org/publications/fulltext/202101_this_is_apartheid

⁵ HASSAN, Zaha; LEVY, Daniel; KEIR, Hallaamal and MUASHER, Marwan, "Breaking the Israel-Palestine Status Quo: A Rights-Based Approach," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, April 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/specialprojects/breakingtheisraelpalestinestatusquo/>.

⁶ "A Threshold Crossed: Israeli Authorities and the Crimes of Apartheid and Persecution," *Human Rights Watch*, 27 April, 2021, www.hrw.org/report/2021/04/27/threshold-crossed/israeli-authorities-and-crimes-apartheid-and-persecution.