



From Gaza to ISIS: A Trip Report Assessing the Arab-Israeli Arena

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September 12, 2014

This report is based on travel in Egypt, Jordan, and Israel in early September, including meetings with high-level political, security, and diplomatic officials in all capitals.

The Middle East today is a region characterized by stunning ironies and jarring disconnects. It is almost as though the *Onion* replaced the *New York Times* as the region's paper of record. Here are ten headlines:

1. Arab states rally in defense of Sykes-Picot, long viewed as Western plot to divide Arabs. This is the most important observation. Here in the West, it is now common, even chic, to bemoan the demise of the Arab state system devised by the colonial powers after World War I. The reality, however, is that some Arab leaders, after being consumed for the last three-plus years by the task of either protecting their systems at home or fighting to extinguish domestic chaos and emerge intact, have finally realized that they have an interest in the system at large. They realized that the collapse of Iraq, the collapse of Syria, and the collapse of Libya have enormous regional impact, and they are determined to do something about it. This is "Sykes-Picot's revenge," and it is a powerful motivation for leaders around the region.

2. Some Arabs have taken the lesson of Washington's "lead from behind" strategy to heart and are now taking matters into their own hands. If the message from Washington for the last several years is that we have wanted local players to bear more of a burden for their own security, some in the Middle East are actually doing it. I was struck, for example, by how Libya dominates the security discussion in Egypt. For Egyptians, their national security order of priority is Sinai (through which they also see a Hamas hand, which hardens their view of Hamas even more), then Libya, then the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) and other regional problems. They are apoplectic about the threat from Libya, which spills over into Egypt in terms of attacks on Egyptian troops and security personnel and weapons smuggling. I am convinced they will do something about it. In fact, we should not be surprised if, before too long, there is an African Union authorization for a "neighbors force" -- led by Egypt and Algeria but including others -- intervening in the Libya conflict and preventing the jihadist groups there from running amok with the country.

By the way, this is about Libya but not just Libya: it's also proxy war for the fight between the anti-Islamist states and the Islamist sympathizers, Qatar and Turkey. One very influential Arab policymaker explained the United Arab Emirates attack on the rebels holding the Tripoli airport as really a message to Qatar, because the rebels there were essentially wholly owned subsidiaries of Qatar; in effect, the Emiratis, he said, went a very long way to deliver a message to their neighbors in Doha. America should take no pride in seeing this sort of freelancing by its Arab "partners" -- initiatives like this are a symptom of the lack of cooperation and coordination between Washington and these states.

3. Three years after the Arab Spring, blackouts are the new norm in Cairo -- but it's not just electricity, it's politics. The lights are often out in Cairo these days, but they aren't the only thing that goes dark. There really isn't politics anymore in Egypt either. Yes, there's haggling between various political parties to form, unform, and then reform coalitions in advance of parliamentary elections whose date has not yet been set. But this is schoolyard politics, not the tidal wave of political activity the world got used to seeing over the last three years. That's largely disappeared. The Muslim Brotherhood is gone as a political actor. Political Islam of all varieties has been decimated as a political actor. Street activists -- liberal, left, center -- are largely gone as political actors. Blackouts, something that every Egyptian now sees as a common occurrence -- one that will happen with more and more frequency, local energy experts told me -- is a useful metaphor here.

But even without politics, the leadership in Egypt is still wrestling with defining the exact direction of the Egyptian state on the core issue of the relation between religion and politics, namely how to find the "sweet spot" between rejecting Islamism but not rejecting Islam. This is what I call the tension between "naked ladies" and "jiggling tummies." In a visit to the presidential palace to meet a senior official, I was struck to see the anteroom filled with small statues that resembled Greek busts -- almost all of them busts of amply endowed women. At the outset of my interview, I noted this to my interlocutor and asked whether the statues were there a year and a half ago, when Muslim Brotherhood president Muhammad Morsi was in power. He chuckled and congratulated me on my powers of observation. No, he said, the first thing Morsi did when he came to the palace was have the statues removed; in addition, he said, Morsi also removed a large, historic tapestry in the president's inner office that showed a map of Egypt and Sudan. He explained that the message from Morsi was pro-Islamist, anti-nationalist. And he then said that one of the first decisions President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi made upon entering the Presidential Palace was to put the tapestry back on the wall and put the busts back into the sitting room.

That's one side of the equation -- the naked ladies. But the very same day, the government of Egypt took a step in the opposite direction, banning a national belly dancing competition then being broadcast on a popular satellite channel. Evidently, the public display of jiggling tummies offended popular sensibilities, in a way that the private viewing of busts of naked ladies did not. Which decision will determine the ultimate direction of the new Egypt? Much depends on one man -- President Sisi.

4. President Sisi is digging Egypt into a deep hole, literally, and the people are cheering. I refer here to the new Suez Canal, a hugely ambitious project not just to build a second Suez Canal that will allow two-way traffic in the famed waterway, but also to reorient Egypt's economy in such a way as to make the canal zone the hub for national economic activity -- new industrial zones, commercial zones, technology zones. At its core, the strategy is to inject hope and enthusiasm into the economy and, more broadly, into the society. The plan, closely associated with the new president, is essentially "dig now, ask questions later." No one I spoke with could cite professional feasibility studies or other assessments of how Egypt is really going to make money from this grand undertaking, and the financing is a bit of a pyramid scheme (excuse the pun) in which more and more public bonds need to be bought so the government can pay out the promised rates of high interest at regular intervals.

But so far, it is working -- people are hopeful and enthusiastic. The question is whether this will last, whether the president can continue to find new ways to inject hope and enthusiasm into the public consciousness to carry him through the dark period when the economic situation is likely to worsen before it improves (if it improves). For now, the country is both calm and deferential to its new leadership. Indeed, even when there are blackouts -- and the country just experienced the most severe national blackout in more than a decade -- many people still blame Morsi rather than Sisi. How long that lasts is a major question for the new president.

5. Egypt and America -- if one word describes the situation, it is contempt. Egyptians of all stripes have contempt for Washington. Some are driven by conspiratorial views of U.S. policy, i.e., that the White House is controlled and directed by the Muslim Brotherhood. Among serious people it is born of what they see as the inexplicability of Washington being unable to see where U.S. interests lie and America's perplexing refusal to follow through on commitments. The problem is larger than just the Apache helicopters, whose delivery to help Egypt fight jihadists in Sinai has been promised many times but never fulfilled; it runs much deeper. I actually had one very senior Egyptian explain to me that in the minds of Egyptians, a generation of Russian aid left behind the Aswan Dam, whereas a generation of American aid left behind nothing more than shipments of condoms that kids hawk for party balloons on street corners.

Reality, of course, is very different, but this contempt is reflective of something deep. Egyptians politely note that they have "other options" -- Russia, China, India -- but I think the implied threats are only that. They want a relationship with Washington and can't figure out why it isn't happening. The first meeting between the two presidents -- to take place in New York in late September, when the UN General Assembly convenes -- is an opportunity to turn a new page, but it needs to be more than just a polite talk; it should launch a serious strategic dialogue, in which each side sits down for sober, well-planned discussions about all of their concerns and priorities. Here, priorities are key. Washington and Cairo will not agree on all topics, but despite profound disputes on certain issues that deserve to be aired, they should find a way to cooperate and coordinate on key issues, especially in the security realm. Each side needs to look in the mirror and see what it can do to restore some element of partnership to a relationship that has dangerously frayed.

6. The Gaza war proves to have been urgent but not very important. For fifty days, Gaza grabbed the world's attention. The threats -- rockets into cities, tunnels into villages, bombardments of urban areas -- were frightening and compelling. The visuals were striking. Israel was involved, always an attraction for global media. By Syria or Iraq standards, the casualties were not large, but by Arab-Israeli standards they were tremendous. By the end of the conflict, the U.S.-Israel relationship was brought to the brink of real crisis; after intervening in the normal procedure for the disbursement of military goods to Israel, it will be difficult for the Obama administration to again say that, political differences aside, the U.S.-Israel security relationship is unshakable. After all, it was just shaken, during wartime no less. For all these reasons, Gaza was urgent. But was it important? Did it change anything?

So far, the answer is very unclear. By the end of the conflict, a very real opportunity emerged -- thanks to Egyptian-Israeli understandings -- to change the dynamic in Gaza and leverage the outcome to begin the long process of shifting power there from Hamas toward the Palestinian Authority. This included the idea of linking reconstruction to disarmament, or at least preventing rearmament; the idea of conditioning international reconstruction efforts on PA security control of the crossing points; and the idea of conditioning the transfer of outside funds to pay local salaries on using only PA-controlled financial institutions, not Hamas. All this could have begun a hopeful, if difficult, process of change.

But one key player has balked -- not Hamas, which never welcomed these ideas but may have swallowed them given how desperate the situation is inside Gaza, but Mahmoud Abbas, the head of the PA. He has decided not to play along. At eighty years old, he evidently sees this strategy as consigning him to be the building contractor for Gaza, and he wants to play on a bigger stage -- hence his diplomatic initiative at the UN that will achieve nothing. He also likely worries that he lacks the men and muscle to take on Hamas and fears an ignoble retreat.

The end result is that the Gaza situation, with all the destruction triggered by Hamas's attrition strategy, is pretty much just where it was when the conflict started. In fact, despite the current interim ceasefire and despite the promise of a negotiation for an enduring ceasefire -- a negotiation that likely will never even convene let alone succeed -- there is not a small chance that the conflict could erupt again soon. This is a huge lost opportunity. If the parties are back to where they started, this is what I mean by the Gaza conflict having been urgent but not very important.

7. The silver lining in a dark Middle East: Arab relations with Israel. If the one-word characterizations in Egypt are "contempt" for America, "disgust" for Hamas, "disdain" for Abbas, and "hatred" for Qatar, it is "respect" for Israel. One should not exaggerate; it is not as though President Sisi has become a card-carrying Zionist. (In this regard, I don't believe a single word of the fantasy news stories that Sisi offered a piece of Sinai to the Palestinians to create a state.) But one should appreciate the core reality -- that Israel and Egypt view the regional situation in a similar way and act on that convergence of analysis and interests. This is one of the most hopeful elements of the Middle East today. (That Cairo and Israel cooperate in part because they both have lost much faith and confidence in Washington is the negative side of this positive story.)

One hears about the importance of a strategic relationship with Israel even more in Jordan, where Israel is a true partner in many respects. This was exemplified most recently by the signing of a major gas supply deal that -- despite the wide unpopularity of Israel following the Gaza conflict -- was inked just days after the ceasefire. Indeed, one of the most unusual moments of my trip was to hear certain Arab security officials effectively compete with one another for who has the better relationship with Israel. In this regard, times have certainly changed.

8. Jordan's strategic situation never looked as gloomy, but its cafes never looked as full -- is this King Abdullah's finest or final hour? My takeaway: don't bet against the king. He very prudently managed an impossible situation vis-a-vis Syria, ultimately standing up to potent Saudi pressure to take a forward, active role in the fight against Bashar al-Assad, which might have found Jordan a frontline actor in the Syria fighting or paying for saying no to Riyadh by losing all Saudi aid. This was, in my view, a gutsy decision that may have repercussions in the future (Jordan's debt burden is huge, and those chickens will eventually come home to roost) but kept the fighting far away from Jordan's borders; it is in line with the traditional Hashemite principle of dealing with today's problems today, tomorrow's problems tomorrow. When Hashemites are confronted with the decision of getting stuck in a dangerous war today or bearing an unbearable debt burden tomorrow, the choice is clear.

It is useful to differentiate four different security threats to Jordan:

- *Direct military threat from ISIS.* There is general agreement that, unlike the Iraqi army, the Jordan Armed Forces is an effective, disciplined, cohesive military that can handle the threat. They will fight effectively and convincingly.
- *Burden of refugees.* After accepting more than a million Syrian refugees over the last three years, Jordan has reached the saturation point. As a result, it has taken effective measures to bring the current net flow to zero. But all this depends on keeping the fighting a long way from the Syria-Jordan border. If it does move there, between a quarter- and a half-million Syrians will flow into Jordan and, in the view of many knowledgeable observers, the system really will break.
- *The spread of Salafism and, even worse, jihadism, at home.* This could be serious. There is some evidence that approximately 7-8 percent of Jordanians have some sympathy for ISIS. According to officials,

there are about 10,000 Salafists in the country, and about 1,400 Jordanians have already gone abroad as "foreign fighters" -- many originally to Jabhat al-Nusra, but now more to ISIS. Most are Palestinians, but certainly not all. I heard stories from some prominent Jordanians about young cousins who telephoned families out of the blue from Istanbul airport saying "Mom, Dad, I'm off to the jihad." If that phenomenon spreads, it's very serious. So far it is manageable, but this is a very worrisome wild card.

- *Jordan's systemic problem is economic.* Historically, Jordan's fate has been to be a tin cup state. At the moment, it gets \$1 billion from America -- per capita, the second most in the world -- but nothing from Saudi Arabia and very little from other Gulf states. Domestic blowback against everything the state spends to support the refugees could trigger something here. I believe this is real and serious though not yet urgent.

9. From the fight against ISIS to solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict -- could there be a connection? In his September 11 speech outlining his administration's approach to the ISIS threat, President Obama essentially outlined a "Sunni strategy" that begins with an inclusive Iraqi government that reintegrates Sunni Arabs into key positions in the political, bureaucratic, and military apparatus. Indeed, the State Department fact sheet distributed after the president's speech referred to the new, improved Iraqi government as the "heart and backbone" of this campaign. Beyond that there are other key players, mostly Sunnis -- Turkey and the Kurds - - but especially Sunni Arabs, such as the non-jihadist rebel groups in Syria.

A major problem Washington will have to overcome for this strategy to succeed is that America's standing with Sunni Arabs is very low. While we rightly acted to protect Yazidis and to protect the Sunni Kurds of northern Iraq, President Obama resisted entreaties for three years to act in defense of the Sunni Arabs of Syria, mercilessly slaughtered by their government. And during this time, Washington essentially looked the other way as the Shiite-dominated government in Baghdad effectively disenfranchised the Sunni Arabs of Iraq. Moreover, the administration's flirtation with Iran -- which too many in Washington view as an opportunity, not a threat -- only worsens this problem.

All this is prelude to two comments: first, that America's confidence deficit among Sunni Arabs will make implementing our anti-ISIS strategy an uphill battle, and second, this is where the story may, before long, come back to Israel.

Israel? How is it possible that our anti-ISIS campaign leads to Israel?

In the coming days, as Washington works to create an effective, motivated coalition, some in Washington may survey the region and ask themselves "Who has assets that could help us attract Sunni Arabs?" It is not too wild a thought that some will look to Israel. They'll be looking not at its military strength, but at the Palestinian issue. They may see a reinvigorated peace process as an asset to help secure Sunni Arab help in the "long war" against ISIS.

In my view, such an initiative would be the result of bad analysis -- Sunnis are largely focused elsewhere, and Israel has its own contacts with Sunnis these days. But that's not the point of my remark. My point is to underscore the idea of how Israel may find itself involved in the anti-ISIS campaign.

In this respect, it may be useful to ask whether the analogue to the current situation isn't so much 1990, but 1977, when Arabs and Israelis (in that case, Anwar Sadat and Menachem Begin) came together to thwart

President Jimmy Carter's international conference idea by pursuing an initiative on peacemaking on their own. How might that work?

Earlier this year, Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu offered something quite significant in negotiations with the Palestinians. This major concession has stayed largely under the radar for the last several months, but it was a major move nonetheless -- agreement that negotiations can proceed on the basis of the 1967 lines with the principle of mutually agreed land swaps. Since then, diplomacy has collapsed, but this concession remains in his pocket. Washington may want to use this as the basis to restart peace talks, perhaps as a way to blunt the self-destructive diplomatic initiative that Abbas is now pursuing at the UN. But such a plan will lead nowhere; Israelis today have no interest in giving anything to Abbas, certainly not when he refuses to play the role allotted to him in postconflict Gaza.

But is there a regional option? Could Israel and the Sunni Arab states who see eye to eye on so much these days find a way to create a new plan based on the Arab Peace Initiative first proposed in 2002, now lubricated by this significant Israeli concession? Is the appeal of going to Dubai or, even better, Jeddah enough to overcome the rightist tilt of Israeli politics since the guns fell silent in Gaza? This is an idea I hope creative Arab and Israeli minds consider pursuing. To a great extent, it depends on my final point.

10. Is Netanyahu the region's weakest strong man or its strongest weak man? Is he someone who truly controls the reins of power but is afraid to use them to pursue a major national interest, or is he someone who may appear to be the only giant in a field of political pygmies but is actually more vulnerable than he lets on? There is some evidence for both points of view. Netanyahu likes to project the idea that "there is no one else" who could serve as prime minister in Israel's currently fractured political scene, but he has stood idly by as subordinates take measures -- like implementing territorial and settlement moves in the West Bank -- that have important political consequences. At the same time, one of his main political antagonists, his on-again/off-again ally Foreign Minister Avigdor Liberman, was close this week to pulling off a political maneuver that, if successful, would have left the Likud as no longer the largest party in the Knesset. The details are too inscrutable even for this presentation, but the bottom line is that current events highlight a core conundrum that has trailed Bibi throughout his prime ministry -- who is he and what does he want?

The Gaza conflict showed what he wasn't -- a risktaker willing to gamble with the lives and prestige of the Israel Defense Forces to satisfy popular demand for a response to a complex problem. Indeed, he showed himself to be prudent and patient, even if prudence and patience was not a popular position. We know what he isn't, but Israelis are still, after all these years, figuring out what he is. Perhaps the allure of a regional peace initiative that would anchor Israel more firmly as an accepted piece of the Middle East -- even before the details of a permanent peace agreement with the Palestinians are finalized -- would clarify this identity problem.

These ten observations only begin to scratch the surface of the complexities that characterize the Middle East today. Out of all this, at least one thing is certain: There won't be much more talk about "the pivot to Asia" in the last years of this presidency. Indeed, one clear implication of the incrementalist approach to dealing with ISIS that President Obama outlined is that -- for better or worse -- the Middle East will remain a dominant theme of U.S. foreign policy for many years to come.