

From Regionalism to Polarization: Trends in Middle East Rhetoric

May 1, 1997



Brief Analysis

As security cooperation between Israel and the Palestinian Authority remains largely suspended and relations between Israelis and Palestinians continue to worsen, a deepening polarization has come to characterize the wider political environment between Israel and the Arab world. Not only have most normalization efforts—from the Multilateral Peace Talks to the Middle East Development Bank—been effectively put on hold, but the heady spirit of regional cooperation has been placed by the menacing prospect of confrontation. This is evident in the written word in the region's media and the spoken word of the region's political leaders.

Whereas the region's media has long been more bellicose and outspoken than the region's leaders, the signals in recent days have been especially strident in both tone and substance. A notable example was the interview of the Mufti of Egypt, Sheik Nasr Farid Wassel, published last week in the Cairo economic daily *al-Alam al-Yom*. According to Wassel, a government employee, the Islamic world "must resort to war" against Israel if the current "peaceful jihad based on an economic, political and scientific boycott of Israel" does not succeed in stopping the "Judaization of Jerusalem." Another example is an opinion piece by Rida Muhammad Lari, in the April 10 edition of *al-Riyadh*, a government-controlled Saudi newspaper. In this essay, titled "The Legitimate Killing," Lari states that because of Israel's "Judaization" of Jerusalem, he calls on "the Palestinian popular resistance men in Israel to kill Benjamin Netanyahu, who is a symbol of aggression against the occupied Arab territories." Killing Netanyahu, he writes, will change current Israeli policy and force it to cede land to the Palestinians and Syria. Netanyahu's successor, he opines, will be faced with the choice of either assassination or "stop[ping] aggression" in the West Bank and Gaza.

While a descent to war is highly unlikely in the current circumstances, what is particularly remarkable about Lari's and Wassel's statements is how unremarkable they have become in recent political commentary in the Arab world. Less than four years after the renunciation of "armed struggle" with the signing of the Oslo Accords and just one year after the Sharm al-Shaykh conclave when Arabs and Israelis pledged cooperation against terrorism and violence, talking about war and terrorism as a viable option has become a not uncommon feature of Middle Eastern rhetoric. In contrast, the current Israeli government has adopted a course that underscores its difficult internal wrestling match with an Oslo process that it finds to be a distasteful *fait accompli* but it has not jettisoned the process or rejected its legitimacy; in any case, waging war and advocating terror is not part of its lexicon.

Egypt: Setting an Example The extreme bellicosity of the region's media mirrors a stiffening of the Arab states' approach to the Netanyahu government in recent months. Indeed, while the latter are not nearly as coarse or threatening as the former, the shift in state-to-state relations does seem to have provided a license for the more extreme shift in public discourse throughout the region. Here, the most influential actor is Egypt. After early signs that the Egyptian government would moderate a Syrian-led attempt in the Arab world to isolate Israel following Benjamin Netanyahu's election victory last May, Cairo has, in recent months, actively supported efforts for concerted Arab, Islamic and international pressure against Israel. Given Egypt's heavy influence in inter-Arab politics, this shift in Egyptian strategy has important ramifications for the actions of lesser Arab states, from North

Africa to the Gulf. This was clearly reflected in President Mubarak's decision last December publicly to enunciate a more hard-line position than Yasser Arafat on a central Hebron issue—Israeli security control of the Ibrahimi mosque/Tomb of the Patriarchs. This approach has continued through the March Arab League decision recommending reintroduction of the anti-Israel boycott. In fact, during the Islamic Summit last month, Mubarak described Israel's Har Homa construction and Jerusalem in general to be the "the Muslim world's primary cause" and the 52-member Organization of the Islamic Conference, acting at Egypt's urging, endorsed similar pro-boycott, anti-normalization language approved by the 21-member Arab League.

Whether intentional or not, there appears to be a connection between official statements and popular reaction. Mubarak's characterization of the current situation as "the worst crisis since 1977"—evidently, even worse than the 1982 Lebanon War—raises the notion that a reversion to the pre-Camp David era is possible. Sure enough, shortly after Mubarak's comment, 5,000 students marched at Cairo University, chanting "bullets are the only response to settlement building" and calling upon the Cairo government to "open the door to jihad against Israel." Sheikh Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi, the government-appointed head of the al-Azhar University—Egypt's highest religious authority and a relative moderate in Islamic circles—praised the students and said that Arabs must "defend their honor" against the Jewish state as they had done in wars over the past fifty years.

Syrian Threats In Damascus, the tone is even more martial, with actual threats of war articulated by senior Syrian officials. One of the most explicit threats came in an April speech by President Assad, commemorating the golden anniversary of the Ba`thist party. According to the government newspaper al-Ba`th, Assad said: "I will mobilize the nation's strengths to liberate occupied Arab lands and to reinstate trampled Arab rights, in view of a just and global peace in the Middle East. In this struggle, we will confront the tyrannic forces that want to hurt the Arab nation, exert pressure and impose favorable conditions for the aggressor, Israel." Two weeks earlier, an unnamed Syrian official was quoted as saying that "war is inevitable and Syria will continue to adopt the culture of confrontation even if normalization takes place." (The next day, Foreign Minister Sharaa issued a public repudiation of the quote, denying it had been uttered by any Syrian official.) On a similar note, al-Thawrah (another state-controlled newspaper) editorialized that Har Homa was "an open declaration of war on the Arabs and on peace." Ironically, this comes in sharp contrast to Syria's language just a few months ago, when Damascus offered its revisionist history of the failed peace talks with the Rabin-Peres governments, arguing that peace had been nearly at hand. Today, the message from Syria is that the region is on the verge of war.

Targeting Washington A secondary, but no less portentous, theme is the depth of Arab anger at Washington for its support of Israel. Indeed, the editor of the Saudi-owned, London-daily al-Hayat has proposed a radical response to America's support of Israel: an end to Arab purchases of American arms and a total boycott of U.S. goods. "Why should we buy weapons from the U.S. at inflated prices," he recently wrote, "when it provides superior weapons to Israel for free?" Of course, America's status as "sole superpower" brings out some animosity and there have long been leaders and commentators who resented Washington's ability to develop strong relations with many Arab states and Israel at the same time. However, the current storm of protest in the Arab world about Jerusalem and the Arab anger at Washington for vetoing UN Security Council resolutions condemning have taken this criticism to new heights. As Khazen declared, "I call for the U.S. to be boycotted and punished, and I am adamant that the Arab states are capable of doing that despite their weakness."

More serious implications for U.S. policy of this deepening Middle East polarization concern other U.S. regional interests, especially in the Gulf. Writing in Egypt's semi-official Al-Ahram, editor-in-chief Ibrahim Nafei threatened darkly, "No one knows what the future will hold for the peace process . . . or for American interests in the region, especially the Gulf, if the U.S. maintains its regrettable approach endlessly." Even when the peace process was proceeding relatively well, U.S. containment of Iraq was growing more unilateral in nature, with less and less overt

support from Arab members of the Gulf War coalition. Today, the chances that Arab anger at U.S. policy manifest themselves in a drive for "Arab unity"—symbolized by the reintegration of Iraq into the Arab world—are higher than ever before.

> Against this backdrop, U.S. diplomats struggling with ways to overcome the current Israeli-Palestinian impasse face a more systemic problem than simply finding a way to convince Arafat to resume full-scale security cooperation or to assuage Arab anger at Israel's construction in Jerusalem. Diplomats can find solutions for those problems. If Arab media and statements of Arab leaders are any guide, the more daunting task ahead is to slow or reverse a process of regional polarization that could be just one accident or terrorist attack away from a spiral toward hostilities.

Policy #133

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven

Feb 14, 2022

♦
Sana Quadri,
Hamdullah Baycar

(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven)

TOPICS

Arab-Israeli Relations (/policy-analysis/arab-israeli-relations)

Peace Process (/policy-analysis/peace-process)