

Netanyahu's Government and Relations with the Arab Periphery

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Brief Analysis

While much of the analysis of Benjamin Netanyahu's electoral victory has emphasized the impact on negotiations with the Arab "inner ring," relations with Arab states on the periphery of the Arab-Israeli arena have been largely overlooked. This is despite the fact that links with Gulf states and North African countries are important to Israel's new leadership, evidenced by Netanyahu's June 5 telephone calls to Oman's Sultan Qaboos and Qatar's Foreign Minister Hamad bin Jassim bin Jabr al-Thani and the new government's commitment "to raise relations with Arab countries which have connections with Israel." Strategically, the Netanyahu government appears to want to deepen ties with the Gulf and North Africa while maintaining a slower pace of change with the Palestinians and altering the framework of negotiations with the Syrians. The goal may be to "delink" the core and the periphery further, confirming a pattern of behavior in which many Arabs have welcomed agreements with the PLO and Jordan and moved forward with Israel in the absence of visible progress in talks with Syria.

Background: There is no doubt that the progress on the Israeli-Palestinian track gave impetus to the evolution of Israel's relations with the wider Arab world. For example, with the signing of the Declaration of Principles in September 1993, those Gulf and North African countries that had previously confined themselves to the Multilateral Peace Process began to explore bilateral ties with Israel, particularly in the sphere of economics. Although this would suggest an inherent link between the Palestinian track and normalization, upon closer analysis this link is not entirely clear. Rather, it was a combination of factors -- including the United States' regional predominance, an intensification of inter-Arab rivalry, a general easing of the political environment resulting from the multilateral talks as well as progress on the Palestinian front-- that created the appropriate atmosphere for normalization to take place.

In this context, it was the Jordan-Israel Washington Declaration and subsequent bilateral peace treaty between the two countries that proved to be the immediate catalyst for Israel's relations with the Gulf and North Africa. Shortly after the Jordan-Israel accord was signed, Israel established a liaison office in Rabat, Morocco, and Prime Minister Rabin made the first-ever Israeli state visit to a Gulf country when he visited Oman. At the Amman economic summit in October 1995, Qatar agreed to supply Israel with three million tons of liquified natural gas (LNG) through the U.S.-based Enron corporation, committing itself to invest up to \$5 billion in the project. Mauritania and Israel exchanged

diplomatic and economic representatives shortly after the same conference. Furthermore, the process of normalization with the Arab periphery has continued though serious challenges to the peace process have developed. Tunisia opened a commercial interests office in Tel Aviv shortly before the Israeli elections despite Israel's recent military operations in Lebanon and the continued security closure of the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

> The Gulf states and the North African countries are not, however, willing to disregard Palestinian and Syrian sensitivities completely and move forward with full normalization. Rather, they have opted to maintain low-level ties with Israel while emphasizing that commercial links are more important to the development of regional relations than traditional diplomatic gestures like the exchange of ambassadors. Speaking at The Washington Institute, Oman's Minister of State Yusuf bin Alawi bin Abdullah recently asserted that business, not diplomatic relations, "will be the engine of regional cooperation." Although "diplomatic normalization" is important for Israel, Jerusalem may have to be satisfied with the benefits of "economic normalization" as the way-station in advance of additional progress in bilateral negotiations with Assad and Arafat.

The Election and Normalization: The initial reaction from the Gulf and North Africa to Netanyahu's victory was long on rhetoric but short on real threats to disrupt growing economic ties with Israel. With varying degrees of candor, Qatar, Oman, Tunisia, and Morocco all put Netanyahu on notice that their ties with Israel were dependent on Jerusalem's continuing commitment to the peace process. Qatari and Omani newspapers, which praised Peres in front-page coverage during his April visit to the Gulf, reacted sharply to Netanyahu's victory. As Qatar's al-Orouba daily stated: "Peres is no different from Netanyahu, they are both involved in terrorism; they are two faces of the same Zionist coin."

> However, beyond the words of measured concern from government officials and fiery rhetoric of newspaper editorials, none of the four countries was willing to place relations with Israel on hold. Saudi-owned al-Hayat reported that Qatar will supply Israel with LNG as planned and that Israel's recently opened trade office in Doha will remain open. It also reported that Israeli and Tunisian trade representatives will remain in Tunis and Tel Aviv respectively and that recently signed cooperation agreements concerning irrigation technology, agriculture, and tourism will be unaffected by Peres' defeat. Morocco and Mauritania have also signalled that they have no intention to suspend ties with Israel and a planned agreement between Muscat and Jerusalem to provide the sultanate with Israeli water desalination technology, reducing Oman's current water costs, does not appear to be at risk. So far, it seems that the Gulf and North African states have not permitted economic self-interest to be overshadowed by ideology or calls for "Arab unity."

Relations with Israel and the Politics of Arab Summitry: Three Arab mini-summits were held in the week following Peres' defeat and a larger affair is planned to begin in Cairo on Friday. Ostensibly an opportunity for the Arabs "to take a stand in support of the peace process," the Egyptian and Saudi governments have underscored that the summits are not intended to counter the Likud victory, nor any effort to slow the process of normalization for the time being. Syria has not, however, been so restrained. Perceiving an opportunity to rehabilitate his negotiating position with the Israelis, which has steadily eroded as the process of normalization has continued, Syrian President Hafez al-Assad is applying pressure on the Gulf to freeze normalization with Israel. A day after the Assad-Mubarak-Abdullah summit in Damascus, Qatar's foreign minister, during his own visit to the Syrian capital, sounded somewhat less conciliatory than in previous statements, threatening to "reassess" relations with Israel if the Netanyahu government is not as forthcoming as its predecessor. According to London-based al-Quds al-Arabi, barring any positive response from Qatar and Oman, the Syrian leadership warned that its only other alternative is to strengthen ties with Iran and reconcile with Iraq.

> The Syrian strategy appears flawed, however. Qatar and Oman are not likely to be unsettled by Syria's threats as they both maintain diplomatic relations with Iraq and Muscat has extensive political and economic ties with Tehran.

Moreover, Syria itself possesses little means to pressure the two sheikhdoms. In fact, rhetoric aside, much of the Arab world has conducted its diplomacy toward Israel with scant regard for the lack of progress on the Syrian track and only marginally more for the fate of the Palestinian Authority, now that the Oslo breakthrough has been achieved. Consequently, the Moroccan, Omani, and Tunisian heads of state have turned down Egypt's invitation to the summit, all preferring to send lower level delegations. A key factor will be the influence of Saudi Arabia. Thus far, Riyadh has sent mixed signals, with Crown Prince Abdullah assenting to a confrontational communique from the Damascus tripartite meeting and King Fahd issuing a fairly mild and moderate statement less than seventy-two hours later. The true direction of Saudi policy remains unclear.

Although the Gulf states may not accord Israel's new prime minister the same type of hospitality they bestowed upon Shimon Peres, the Arab periphery has quietly invested much in its relations with Israel. Thus, it is not unreasonable to expect that the declaratory quid pro quo linking normalization and progress with Syria -- and, less so, the Palestinians -- will be superseded by the national self-interest of each party. With adroit diplomacy emphasizing continuity on the Palestinian track and common perceptions of regional security threats, the incoming Netanyahu government may not only be able to prevent an erosion of ties with the Gulf and North Africa, but it may even succeed to enhance them.

Steven Cook is a Soref research fellow at The Washington Institute.

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