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How the Syrian War Shifted Attitudes Towards Arab-Israeli Rapprochement

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Hadeel Oueis is a writer and journalist focusing on the Middle East. She majored in political studies and in 2011, at the age of 18, was arrested by the Assad regime for playing a key role in the early days of Syrian protests. In 2012, the United States delegation in Geneva met with Oueis and helped her relocate to the United States. She currently analyzes U.S. policies in the Middle East for major Arabic networks. Oueis reported for years through the @JIMENA platform about Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews and has been an active voice in calling for peace in the Middle East.



Brief Analysis

Anti-Israel mobilization and rhetoric have always been a prominent feature of official Arab discourse, regardless of political orientation. Islamist, nationalist, and secular parties have all seen vocal hatred of Israel as a cornerstone for rallying support and a vehicle to spread unrelated political messages to achieve related objectives, with unrelated acts being framed as forms of ‘resistance’ against Israel. This discourse is also evident in how Arab media outlets depict stories relating to the Israeli state, its people, and Jews overall. These outlets circulate reports and articles that often confuse what is political and what is religious, linking anything Jewish to the Arab-Israeli conflict without distinguishing between government policies and interests, on the one hand, and, on the other, the relations between people who have coexisted with each other in peace for generations.

However, the Syrian civil war has slowly shifted the dynamic of who is considered ‘enemy’ in the Arab world. Groups that have called for armed resistance against Israel have since engaged in a bloody confrontation with the Syrian people, challenging their narrative of ‘resistance’ against Israel as their only motivating factor. Even traditional extremist jihadist groups—such as the infamous ISIS—have waged wars where the main targets were within the Arab world rather than Israel.

Through this reframing process, the Syrian war and its catalyzing of new alliances has reinforced the conviction of a broad group of Arab governments and peoples that Iran and political Islam are real enemies that pose an existential threat. In this vein, the Iranian ‘resistance’ project is visible not only in Syria, but is also strangling the Lebanese by dominating political parties and other forces through Hezbollah, and targeting the influential Saudi Arabia, most recently through a brazen attack on the country’s oilfields.

This is not to say that the rhetoric of resistance against Israel is faltering in the Arab sphere. Arab meetings and summits still continue to focus on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. But what has changed is that the confrontation

between Iran's proxies and other Arab states and groups has contributed to the Arab-Israeli conflict reentering the minds of many individuals in the Arab world, from its youth to its governments. The crimes committed by the axis of resistance—ranging from Assad's Syria, Hezbollah, Hamas, Iran, and the Islamic Jihad Movement—against Arabs have been far worse than the stereotypes depicted in 'resistance' literature about Israel.

For example, more than half a million Syrians, including civilians and their children, have been killed at the hands of Iranian agents and other local Syrian groups. In contrast, Israeli hospitals during this period provided displaced Syrians with healthcare and safe rooms away from Assad's barrel bombs and Iranian militias. This initiative, while small, has had an impact on the attitudes of segments of the Syrian community, where Iranian and Israeli actions towards Syrians were contrasted in sharp relief.

Iranian expansionism and the destabilizing role it and its proxies have played in Syria has also pushed the wealthy Gulf countries to assume a larger political role regionally. With the political decline of historically key states such as Egypt, Syria, and Iraq, the Gulf self-conception—less historically based in rhetoric surrounding the Arab-Israeli conflict—has also made its governments more accepting of the idea of peace between Arab and Israeli peoples. This new attitude is clear in the Kingdom's notable and unprecedented campaign against hatred and anti-Semitism led by Sheikh Mohammed Al-Issa, Secretary General of the Muslim World League. Al-Issa has condemned those who disseminate hate speech against Jews in several conferences and press forums both in Saudi Arabia and abroad, emphasizing the need to adhere to the principles of moderate Islam which "coexists with everyone ... believes in difference, diversity, and pluralism as a norm and part of the nature of creation [and] believes in the right of others to believe [in their faith]."

At the grassroots level, open access to the Internet has also expanded young Arabs' access to and understanding of Jews, Israelis, and Israel. Ironically, Ahed Tamimi's experience in Israeli prisons as recorded online has become a major point of comparison between the state of law and rights in Israel with that of youth opposition in the jails of Arab countries.

Moreover, Arab youth can access positive as well as negative images of Israel for the first time through social media—including the Israeli government's creative Arabic-language outreach—where the country's educational, industrial, and technological developments and its democratic system are all highlighted. The new access to information about Israel as a state has given the residents of its neighboring countries reason for reflection on the state's successes in a new way, notwithstanding some circles that continue to explain away Israeli progress through conspiracy theories.

These shifts may ultimately impact the role that certain states play in ending the Arab-Israeli conflict. Despite the fact that a number of Arab countries have publicly rejected the Kushner initiative, there seems to exist a new reality where different Arab countries are acting towards the prospect of peace as they see fit and in line with each state's priorities. And the understanding that peace is important to the United States is certainly influencing matters. The Kushner Plan represents an additional incentive for friends of the United States, such as Bahrain, to move forward with unprecedented social, athletic, and even political engagement with Israel.

The Gulf capitals are increasingly forming a new narrative in line with their interests that rejects the old 'axis of resistance' model still visible in the rhetoric of states such as Iran. And societally, there is an increasing recognition that 'resistance' rhetoric has been a tool used to achieve political gains irrelevant to the Arab-Israeli conflict that serve instead the leaders of the resistance and their militias, otherwise ostracized internationally and burdened with international sanctions and economic isolation. It is increasingly clear that these groups are clinging to this rhetoric as a means to justify their continued existing. Though the American peace initiative seems on hold at the moment, there appears to be a new desire, especially in the Gulf, to end this historical conflict which has wreaked havoc and hampered development in the region.

Thus, while the tragedy in Syria has opened this door, the fact that this process of change is emerging particularly from the Gulf suggests a certain likelihood of success. Movement from the Gulf on this issue has the potential to be more effective—this region is the most conservative in the Arab world as well as the most expansive in its outreach to other Muslim communities through religious messages and social organizations. A shift among Gulf nations in their attitudes towards anti-Semitism and hate speech against Israel may become one of a number of efforts to reform the Gulf's societal norms, such as loosening legal restrictions on women. By openly discussing the mistakes of the past, and breaking social and cultural taboos once considered unbreakable, the Arab World may see a recontextualization of the Arab-Israeli conflict in line with other challenges in the region, which may open a way towards rapprochement and negotiations to reach peace. ❖



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