

# A Cultural Policy for Arab-Israeli Partnership

by [Joseph Braude \(/experts/joseph-braude\)](/experts/joseph-braude), [Tamara Wittes \(/experts/tamara-wittes\)](/experts/tamara-wittes)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Joseph Braude \(/experts/joseph-braude\)](/experts/joseph-braude)

Joseph Braude is president of the Center for Peace Communications.



[Tamara Wittes \(/experts/tamara-wittes\)](/experts/tamara-wittes)

Tamara Cofman Wittes is a senior fellow in the Brookings Institution's Center for Middle East Policy.



Brief Analysis

**Watch a lively conversation with Joseph Braude and Tamara Cofman Wittes on the opportunities for Arab-Israeli normalization created by initiatives beyond the commonly discussed security and economic sectors.**

*On February 11, Joseph Braude and Tamara Cofman Wittes addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute to mark the release of Braude's monograph [Reclamation: A Cultural Policy for Arab-Israeli Partnership](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/reclamation-a-cultural-policy-for-arab-israeli-partnership) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/reclamation-a-cultural-policy-for-arab-israeli-partnership>). Braude is a senior fellow with the Foreign Policy Research Institute and founder of the Center for Peace Communications. Wittes is a senior fellow in the Brookings Institution's Center for Middle East Policy and a former deputy assistant secretary for Near Eastern affairs at the State Department. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.*

## Joseph Braude

The monograph *Reclamation* focuses on how to reduce the culture of antisemitism and rejectionism in Arab countries, and foster a culture of partnership with Israel, through positive changes in the messaging of media, schools, and religious institutions.

Though hostility toward Jews in the region has ancient roots, the current depths of animosity are a modern phenomenon, owing partly to Western antisemitic ideologies imported to the region by locals who admired them.

Jews indigenous to Arabic-speaking countries once numbered 900,000, and even today a philosemitic strand survives within the countries they fled. There are traditions of tolerance to reclaim and build on.

Three new trends within the region provide an opportunity to improve the discourse and promote a culture of Arab-Israel partnership. First, there is a political convergence of interests between Arab states and Israel—a “top-down” development that has yielded modest improvements in official messaging regarding Jews and Israel. Second, there is the rise of grassroots voices within Arab states that are advocating for a “peace between peoples”—a “bottom-up” trend mainly centered on the younger generation. Finally, Israeli and American Jewish actors have begun to develop their own tools of communication and outreach to engage Arab publics from the “outside in.” The monograph includes the examples of a discrete social media app that brings together Israelis and diaspora Jews of Iraqi descent with Muslims and Christians inside Iraq. Books by and about Jews exiled from Arab countries have been published in Arabic translation and distributed locally within the region, including Eli Amir’s *The Dove Flyer (Mafriah Hayonim)*, now available on the streets of Baghdad.

Arab states sometimes green-light positive content about Jews or Israel with American perceptions in mind, particularly in light of recent concerns about the future of U.S involvement in the Middle East. While such changes can be associated with political expediency, many of the public voices are expressing themselves genuinely.

Despite progress on the discourse regarding Jews and Israel, there are countercurrents to these cultural developments. The intensification of sectarian sentiment has brought new mutations of antisemitism, such as allegations in Sunni Arab media that Iran and Israel have a secret alliance. Meanwhile, grassroots voices for peace face intimidation.

The promise of the present-day opportunity calls urgently for American leadership. The United States can and should encourage Arab allies to promote change and support the individuals advocating these new ways of thinking. U.S. involvement in this realm requires substantial preparation, and a dedicated team must be developed to engage in this kind of work.

Israel also has a key role to play in fostering these improvements. Israel has begun a number of initiatives, including a remarkable public diplomacy venture by the digital outreach team of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, via its Facebook page. Additionally, among the majority of Israel’s Jewish population who have roots in Arab lands, some have emerged to reengage their countries of origin. They can serve as civil ambassadors, raising awareness and understanding of their forced flight and mass dispossession as well as rekindling memories of the finer periods of coexistence and civil peace.

## **Tamara Cofman Wittes**

**J**oseph Braude’s monograph provides a unique opportunity for the foreign policy community to explore Arab-Israel relations outside the traditional bounds of policy on a societal level. The work also challenges a common false view of the Arab world as a monolith and highlights the nuances within the cultural dynamics of individual countries.

Three main questions emerge from the monograph. First, are the dynamics described in the text a product of the current historical moment? For instance, discourse around Israel and Jews expanded in the Arab world post-9/11. How can the political context of discourse and changing cultural views be reconciled? Second, the monograph calls on the United States and the American Jewish community to help actualize these cultural dynamics. Can America now play that kind of role, and what would an associated policy look like? Historically, this work could have been done through the U.S. Information Agency, but this organization was shuttered in 1999. Therefore, an institution must be empowered with a mission and the appropriate capacity to advance these goals. Alternatively, a demand signal must emerge that forces action; the current demand signal is weak, but this is an area for possible

development. Third, what is the relationship between cultural developments and political power, and to what extent can the changes Braude describes in the monograph be attributed to Arab states seeking greater ties to the United States in light of security concerns? The answers will intimate next steps in this evolving narrative.

*This summary was prepared by Basia Rosenbaum.*

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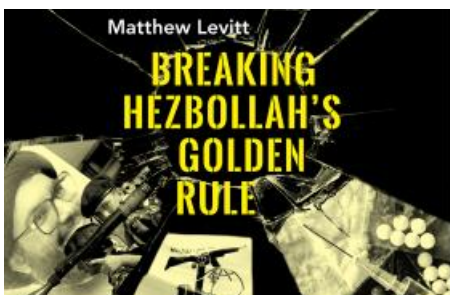
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