

The New Normal: Today's Arab Debate Over Ties With Israel

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Brief Analysis

Normalization remains controversial in Arab circles but is no longer taboo, as more Arabs come to view Israel as a potential partner against enemies like Iran.

A recent spate of reports in major Arab media about official and other contacts with Israelis -- including very widely publicized Saudi and Egyptian visits to Israel in the past month -- is generating renewed regional debate over the pros and cons of this phenomenon. Much of this debate, however, obscures one key point: Arab contacts with Israel, far from being brand new, actually have a very long history, with many ups and downs along the way.

In fact, official Arab-Israeli meetings and signed agreements date almost all the way back to Israel's creation, with the Rhodes Armistice accords of 1949. For nearly two decades thereafter, there were periodic if generally low-level official meetings about security incidents, water, refugees, and other issues -- along with many private, higher-level meetings. The 1967 war produced the famous "three no's" of the Arab summit conference in Khartoum: no peace, no recognition, and no negotiations with Israel. But just a few years later, after the 1973 war, contacts resumed, culminating in the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty of 1979. Ever since, through all the turbulent decades until today, Egypt and Israel have maintained diplomatic, security, and economic relations.

It is true that most Arab governments, spearheaded by Saddam Hussein's Iraq, attempted to isolate Egypt in response. Yet within about a decade, after the liberation of Kuwait from Saddam's occupation, the Madrid peace conference of 1991 brought many Israeli and Arab officials -- including Syrians, Saudis, Palestinians, and others -- publicly together again.

Exactly two years later, in September 1993, one of the most historic moments of dialogue came via the first Oslo Accord, with the Rabin-Arafat handshake and formal mutual recognition between Israel and the PLO. This was

followed in short order by a whole series of Arab-Israeli meetings, from the regional economic conferences in Casablanca, Amman, and Doha, to the Jordanian-Israeli peace treaty of 1994, to the Sharm al-Sheikh foreign ministers meeting of 1996. At the latter event, Arafat, Shimon Peres, Saud al-Faisal, Amr Mousa, and other leaders all appeared publicly with each other, and pledged to fight terrorism and work for peace together.

Ever since that time, despite some interruptions during the second intifada or other crises, many other high-level Israeli-Palestinian and Israeli-Arab summits, meetings, handshakes, and other contacts have occurred. The Annapolis peace conference of 2007, the Netanyahu-Abbas meeting of 2010, and the various bilateral and multilateral meetings during Secretary Kerry's peacemaking effort in 2013-2014 all come to mind. Meanwhile, at the security and intelligence levels, direct contacts between Israeli and Palestinian, Egyptian, Jordanian, and other Arab officials have become so frequent and mutually useful as to be routine.

So some degree of practical dialogue with Israel is nothing new, notwithstanding continual controversy about it. What is noteworthy today is that the issue is being actively and openly debated in major Arab media, with both proponents and opponents each having their say. And that not just Egypt, Jordan, and the Palestinians, but other major Arab outlets including Saudi ones are participating in this discussion.

Particularly noteworthy in this respect is a long article in the current issue of the popular and influential pan-Arab weekly *al-Majalla* (<http://eng.majalla.com/2016/08/article55250783/arab-israeli-relations-new-regional-framework>), based in London but widely circulated and read in both print and online editions in the region. This article not only reviews the long history of Arab-Israeli relations, but also cites statements about that by Israeli ambassador to the United States Ron Dermer at great length.

Responses by Saudi writers are mixed, but some are very vocally in favor of dealing with Israel. For example, Ahmed Adnan, writing for the Alarab.co.uk website, even argues that Arabs should follow Turkey's model: "Ankara has ties with Israel, but no one can accuse Turkey of being biased against the Palestinians." His article was reprinted in the leading *al-Arabiya* (<http://english.alarabiya.net/en/views/news/middle-east/2016/08/08/Saudis-against-normalization.html>) website on August 8.

Among Egyptian writers, the idea of regular dealings with Israel still excites fierce debate, even after nearly four decades of official peace. The owner of the prominent independent daily *al-Masry al-Youm* outspokenly advocates pragmatic close bilateral ties, in Egypt's own interest. But leading *al-Ahram* columnist **Hassan Nafaa** (<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/News/17046/21/Shifting-relations-with-Israel.aspx>), in sharp contrast, argues strenuously against "free gifts" to Israel.

It is intriguing, however, that today even some Egyptian writers and academics most critical of ties to Israel acknowledge that the younger generation, turned against Iran, Hamas, and the Muslim Brotherhood both by their own experience and by their government's changing positions, is losing some of its animosity toward their Israeli neighbors. Examples of this discourse can be found in articles penned this year by Egyptian authors Muhammad Laithi in *al-Watan* and by **Ahmed Hidji** (<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/07/egypt-israel-relations-normalization-visit-shoukry-sisi.html>) in Al-Monitor, who cites three different Cairo professors lamenting their students' growing openness to Israel.

All of this raises a delicate question: Is this revived movement toward some kind of dialogue leading toward peace with Israel just a policy of certain Arab governments, or perhaps of an elite fringe? In other words, does it enjoy any grassroots support? Here the evidence is surprisingly clear, and also surprisingly positive. While Arab publics overwhelmingly dislike Israel (and Jews), solid majorities in most recent surveys, on the order of 60 percent,

nevertheless voice support for a "two-state solution," which implies peace with the Jewish state. And they do so even when the question is worded to call explicitly for peace with Israel, or for abandoning the struggle to liberate all of Palestine. The exception that proves this rule, ironically, is the Palestinian public in the West Bank and Gaza, where support for a two-state solution has lately fallen to just below the halfway mark.

The combination of data points suggests that the majority support for eventual peace with Israel reflects not affinity but the converse: common enemies, and therefore common interests. Those include common concerns -- as measured in the same surveys -- about jihadi terrorism; about Iranian aggression, subversion, and nuclear weapons; and about perceived flaws in American policies toward all those issues.

As far back as 2010, even before the Saudi-Iran proxy wars in Syria, Yemen, and elsewhere, a reliable private poll showed that one-fourth of the Saudi urban public supported quiet military cooperation with Israel against the Iranian nuclear threat. And in the past two years, polls not only in Saudi Arabia but also in Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates show that "the Arab street" is much more concerned about the conflicts with Iran, with Bashar al-Assad, and with Daesh than about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The conclusion is clear: today a broader regional approach to Arab-Israeli peacemaking, rather than a strictly bilateral Israeli-Palestinian one, offers somewhat better prospects of success -- whether at the official, elite, media, or even popular levels. Normalization with Israel remains controversial in Arab circles, but it is no longer taboo. For an increasing number of Arabs, the Israeli "enemy of my enemy" may not be a friend, but could become a partner. The next U.S. administration would do well to ponder this unaccustomed situation, and to adjust its policies accordingly. ❖

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