

The End of the Forty-Year Peace Between Israel and Arab States

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Despite recent strategic shifts in the region, there is much the United States can do to postpone the return of interstate Arab-Israeli conflict.

Even before Gaza fell silent the other week, the blogosphere was full of lists of "winners and losers" of the mini-war that helpfully came to a halt before ruining Thanksgiving dinner. In one article after another, the big winner was Egypt's President Muhammad Morsi, followed by the leaders of Hamas, and maybe Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu; the big loser was Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas, followed by Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and maybe Netanyahu.

Titillating though it may be, this focus on personality politics missed the larger significance of the Gaza conflict as the beginning of a new era in the Middle East -- one defined by the end of the region's forty-year peace.

Don't blame yourself if you didn't realize that the Middle East has enjoyed four decades of peace. But that is precisely what has transpired between Israel and Arab states since the Yom Kippur War of 1973. In its first twenty-five years of independence, Israel was characterized by multi-state war with intermittent bouts of unsuccessful diplomacy. Six Arab armies invaded Israel in 1948; Israel fought four Arab armies in June 1967; twelve Arab armies participated in the 1973 war. In the forty years since, Israel has fought no wars against an Arab state, and its history has been characterized by frequently successful diplomacy with intermittent bouts of terrorism and asymmetric war against non-state actors.

The difference between these two realities may not be great to the grieving mother, the widowed wife, or the orphaned child, but the difference is profound in strategic terms. For the past forty years, Israel knew no active state-to-state attack on any of its borders; its main local threats came from a guerilla organization, Hezbollah, and from the intra-state challenge of rebellion, terrorism and insurrection known as the first and second uprisings (popularly known as "intifadas").

Further afield, of course, Israel was a target for Saddam Hussein's long-range missiles and the two ends of Iran's threat spectrum: terrorism and nuclear ambitions. But there is a profound difference between the urgency and reality of regional war and the challenges Israel has faced over the past forty years. Indeed, it is this difference that gave Israel the freedom and latitude to develop from a broken, near-bankrupt, third-world economy to a first-world economic and technological power and, along the way, to emerge as **an important strategic asset to the United States (/policy-analysis/view/asset-test-how-the-united-states-benefits-from-its-alliance-with-israel)**.

With Hamas's strong political backing from regional states, future historians might very well view the Gaza conflict as the first episode of a new era of renewed inter-state competition and, potentially, inter-state conflict in the Arab-Israeli arena. This is not to suggest that full-scale Arab-Israeli war is in the offing. Israel's potential adversaries, such as Islamist-led Egypt and an Islamist-led post-Assad Syria, may quite likely be consumed with other priorities, such as sorting out internal socio-economic problems or resolving domestic ethnic disputes, for years or even decades to come. This focus on problems at home may, for a long time, mask the strategic shift now underway -- a shift in which countries that used to share strategic interests in preventing direct state-to-state conflict may find tactical ways to postpone conflict to another day. But that doesn't make the shift any less real or menacing, either for Israeli or American interests.

What makes this development particularly worrisome for friends of Israel is that it puts the Jewish state at the heart of two mega-trends that are defining what can be termed the "new new Middle East." The "old new Middle East" was a region of peace, trade, and regional cooperation about which visionaries, like Shimon Peres, waxed poetic. This Middle East reached its heyday in the mid-'90s, when Israelis were welcome everywhere from Rabat to Muscat. The "new new Middle East" is the region defined by the twin threats of Iranian hegemonic ambitions and the spread of radical Sunni extremism, a vast area where Israelis are not only unwelcome but where they are building fences along their borders to separate themselves from the Gog-versus-Magog fight around them.

In some parts of the region, such as Syria and Bahrain, these two trends are fighting each other, whether directly or via proxies. But in the Arab-Israel arena, these two trends have found a way to join forces, as seen in the division of labor between Iran's provision of rockets and weapons to Hamas and the growing Sunni (Egyptian-Qatari-Tunisian-Turkish) provision of political support to Hamas. That these two trends, which battle each other ferociously elsewhere in the Middle East, can find common ground in their battle against Israel does not augur well for Israel's strategic situation in the future.

All is not lost. Despite this strategic shift, there is much the United States can do, individually and with partners, to postpone the return to inter-state Arab-Israeli conflict. Such a strategy begins with strengthening American-Israeli cooperation and includes such initiatives as preventing Hamas from winning a political victory over the moribund Palestinian Authority, incentivizing moderate behavior from the calculating Islamist leaders of Egypt, speeding the demise of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria, and preventing the collapse of a wobbly Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. These are the five most urgent policy priorities in the Arab-Israeli arena. They don't address the broader challenges of Iran's hegemonic ambitions and the spread of radical Sunni extremism, but they may, at least, limit the drift to renewed Middle East war.

Admittedly, this is not a happy agenda, full of peace conferences and White House signing ceremonies. That era has passed; it was lovely while it lasted. But its passing does not lessen the centrality of the Middle East to U.S. strategic interests. Despite all the talk about multi-polarity, energy independence, American decline, and the urgency of a pivot toward Asia, two facts remain undisputed: the Middle East remains a region of vital importance to the U.S., and there is no outside power that comes close to America in its ability to influence the region. If anyone is going to bear the heavy lifting in preventing a descent to full-scale regional war, it is going to be us. Again.

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[subject \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-gaza-conflict-and-the-end-of-the-forty-year-peace\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-gaza-conflict-and-the-end-of-the-forty-year-peace). ❖

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