

From Camp David to Oslo: A Realpolitik Reassessment

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Brief Analysis

The peace process has, in practice, meant Israel's acceptance by the Arab world. This process, however, is not irreversible. It is mainly a function of Israel's military, economic, and strategic strength and the Arab recognition of structural weakness. Only as long as current conditions hold, the peace process will continue.

The American role in the peace process is important yet should not be overstated. Much has occurred without the involvement of the United States. The Oslo Accord, which occurred without American knowledge of the negotiations, is a primary example. The peace treaty between Jordan and Israel also did not have much input from the United States. To be sure, a change in U.S. policy toward increased isolationism could significantly threaten the peace process.

Realpolitik Reasons for the Peace Process. The root cause for the peace process has been several realist considerations:

Reaction to past conflict. Failed attempts to eliminate Israel by military means have forced the Arab world, however reluctantly, to accept Israel. The use of force has proven too difficult and too costly in dealing with Israel. In addition, Arab recognition of Israel's nuclear capabilities has reinforced the notion that Israel is militarily strong and cannot be easily removed from the map.

Weariness toward war has also forced the countries of the region to redefine their national goals. Populations have grown tired of protracted conflict. This has led to a willingness to discuss the possibility of peace by all nations in the region. Israel, is likewise war-weary and for this reason is no longer attracted to the concept of "Greater Israel." This was similarly a factor in Egypt's willingness to make peace with Israel and the development of the Palestine Liberation Organization's more realist expectation of the limited results of military conflict.

Changing trends in the Arab world. Three trends in the Arab world made the peace process more acceptable:

- Pan-Arabism has declined in importance in the political motivations of Arab states since Nasser's time. The decline of pan-Arabism has made it easier for each state to carry out its own foreign policy agenda and has also led to a decline in Arab states' commitment to the Palestinian issue.
- An emergence of new threats to both Israel and the Arab states has introduced the notion that Israel and its neighbors may sometimes share common interests. Islamic radicalism, for example, has been recognized as a serious threat both to secular Arab elites, who fear for their regimes, and to Israel. The resurgence of a more assertive Iran has also been a matter of concern both to Arab states and to Israel.
- The PLO was enfeebled by the Israeli destruction in 1982 of the PLO mini-state in Lebanon, the refusal by the Arab world to host the PLO leadership, the emergence of a new Palestinian leadership living under Israeli occupation, and the PLO's alliance with Saddam Husayn during the Gulf War.

The global balance of power. Changes in the global system have reorganized the balance of power in Israel's favor. Arab countries were weakened further by the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Arabs no longer had the backing of a superpower, thus limiting their military options. Israel, however, was and continues to be allied with the United States, the winner of the Cold War. The emergence of the United States as the only global superpower has made Arab countries more responsive to U.S. allies.

In addition, new Turkish-Israeli relations have united the two strongest countries in the region, decreasing the possibility of removing Israel from the region. In contrast, Israel has prevented the development of military coalitions among Arab nations, limiting the potential power of the Arab countries.

Economic problems. Significant economic problems in various countries throughout the Arab world have forced the ruling elites to confront domestic problems to stabilize their regimes. Israel's economic strength, exemplified through a gross national product of European standards, has pushed Arab leaders to accept Israel as a viable economic partner in the region.

The Future of the Peace Process. In a certain sense, the peace process has run its course; that is, whatever can be accomplished may have already been accomplished. Bilateral treaties exist between Israel and both Egypt and Jordan. Peace with the Palestinians is in progress even though, because of greatly divergent visions, the details will take some time to work out. Syria does not appear interested in developing a peace with Israel.

There are limits to what the peace process can achieve. To date, the peace is among the ruling elites rather than the masses: It remains one of policy rather than one of attitude. That is not likely to change for years to come.

Educational systems in the Arab world remain full of bias, stagnating the potential for change in public perceptions. Israel has developed an educational curriculum of peace studies that explains the existence of stereotypes. Yet, in the Middle East, this seems to be a solo effort.

Overall, Palestinians and Israelis are more competitors than partners. Neither side is happy with the leadership of the other side. Israelis are disappointed with Palestinian Authority chairman Yasir Arafat's leadership, but there is no enthusiasm for the only alternatives: to reinstate Israeli rule over the Palestinians; to accept chaos; or to find someone other than Arafat to rule the Palestinians. As for the leadership of Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu, his overwhelming priority is to win the next election. To do so, he does not have to make major advancements in the peace process. Rather, as long as he has proven to the political center in Israel that he has made enough of an effort in the peace process, and that the derailment of the peace process is the result of an unwillingness by the Palestinians, he will likely be reelected.

Arab or Iranian acquisition of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) will not directly affect the peace process, nor will the peace process affect WMD proliferation. Israeli negotiations or peace with the Palestinians will not have an effect on the considerations of Iraq or Iran about the desirability of having WMD. Perhaps the peace process can help establish an atmosphere in which the weapons are less likely to be used, but Iranian and Iraqi calculations about whether to use such weapons against Israel will not necessarily be affected by the atmospherics. In short, the issue of WMD proliferation is not directly related to the peace process.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Laura Zarembski.

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