THE INTER-ARAB SYSTEM AND THE ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT: RIPENING FOR RESOLUTION
BRUCE MADDY – WEITZMAN

Dr Bruce Maddy-Weitzman is a senior research fellow at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, Tel Aviv University, and editor of the Center's annual publication, Middle East Contemporary Survey, Westview Press.

INTRODUCTION

A combination of sharp conflict and close co-operation has always characterised inter-Arab relations. Historically, they have been shaped by a myriad of factors: pan-Arab ideology, which tended to de-legitimise the very existence of multiple Arab states and demanded conformity to a common standard of political behaviour vis-a-vis the outside world as a minimum price for existence; the reality of multiple, emerging states with competing interests; competition for the role of regional leadership; and various social, economic and personal factors. Within this complex picture, the Arab-Israeli conflict served as a central component in shaping inter-Arab affairs, both uniting and dividing the Arab world. Quite often, the phenomenon of 'outbidding' (muzayada), in which one Arab party would seek to prove its fidelity to the ideals of Arabism by highlighting the alleged lack of militancy of another Arab state vis-a-vis Israel, exacerbated inter-Arab conflicts. In turn, 'outbidding' often generated a worsening of Arab-Israeli tensions.[1] However, the sea changes that have taken place in both the regional and international systems during the past decade, not to mention the renewal of the Arab-Israeli peace process, have left their mark on inter-Arab affairs. It thus behoves us to examine the extent to which inter-Arab relations have ceased having a negative influence on Arab-Israeli relations and even begun to affect Arab-Israeli dynamics in a positive fashion. One must now inquire as to the extent to which the majority of Arab states and societies are now ripe for a broader dialogue with Israel in the political-strategic, economic and even cultural spheres.

ARAB COALITIONS AND THE CONFLICT WITH ISRAEL

The League of Arab States was founded in 1945, marking the tangible emergence of an Arab state system within the broader Middle East region.[2] Since then, the common Arab opposition to Israel has resulted in the formation of three all-Arab war coalitions (1948, 1967 and 1973). In 1950, the League formally forbade any Arab state to make a separate peace with Israel, with the threat of major sanctions in case of violation.[3] This fundamental tenet of collective Arab action remained in force for nearly 30 years, until Anwar Sadat's peace initiative.

Arab reaction to Sadat's actions was initially confused and then coalesced into a policy of isolation of Egypt and suspension from the Arab League. However, Cairo's isolation proved only temporary. Throughout the 1980s, Egypt was steadily able to restore its standing at the centre of the Arab world, without renouncing its peace treaty with Israel. Egypt's return to the Arab fold was made possible in no small part by its balancing role as supplier of military equipment and manpower to Iraq in its bitter war with Iran. Concurrently, Arab states, at the Fez Summit Conference in September 1982, collectively endorsed the idea of a political settlement with Israel.[4] The Fez resolutions stood in sharp contrast to the famous 'Four No's' of the Khartoum Arab summit conference of August 1967, illustrating the distance which the collective Arab position had travelled.[5]

This political line, which was initially adopted with considerable hesitation and reservations, developed over time into something far more durable. Its expressions were numerous: the large-scale Arab participation at the Madrid Peace Conference in 1991 and subsequent multilateral talks, most Arab states' support for the Israeli-Palestinian and Israeli-Jordanian peace agreements between 1993-95, the lifting of the Gulf Arab states secondary and tertiary economic boycott of Israel, and the establishment of some form of diplomatic relations with Israel by a total of eight Arab League members (out of 21). The Cairo Arab Summit Conference of 1996, while warning the new Netanyahu government of the consequences of any backsliding in the peace process, endorsed the concept of a political settlement in the most explicit fashion ever.6

To be sure, the gradual evolution of Arab states' policies in favour of a contractual peace with Israel did not grow out of a feeling of national pride or collective cohesiveness. Rather, it took place in an atmosphere of overall weakness, fragmentation and inferiority vis-a-vis Israeli and American power, which seemed able to impose a political settlement based on what for the Arab world was an unfavourable balance of power.7 The triumph of the West over the Soviet Union, the patron of radical Arab regimes and movements, decisively confirmed this picture, even if, ironically, pro-Arab monarchies and republics could only benefit from this final blow to Arab secular radicalism. Arab feelings of weakness and inferiority also stemmed from the reality of inter-Arab fragmentation.8 In the eyes of Arab thinkers, commentators, leaders and the general public alike, the founding myth of Arab solidarity had been repeatedly shattered, perhaps beyond repair, by a sequence of events: the bloody, off-again, on-again Lebanese civil war between 1975-1990; Egypt's abandonment of Arab ranks in favour of peace with Israel; Syria's support for non-Arab Iran in its bitter eight year war with Iraq during the 1980s; the all-too-obvious Arab inaction in the face of Israel's war against the PLO and Syria in Lebanon, in 1982; and, most traumatically, the 'big bang'-Iraq's invasion and annexation of fellow Arab state Kuwait in August 1990, which led to the first full scale inter-Arab war in modern history.9

THE DOMESTIC SPHERE

Running parallel to geo-strategic developments was the inexorable legitimisation of the particular interests of individual, multiple Arab states versus abstract collective 'national' Arab interests: raison d'etat triumphing over raison de la nation. By the 1990s, most Arab states had attained a large measure of 'stateness', marked by functioning, developed bureaucracies, increased means of coercion, economic control, comprehensive educational systems, agreed notions of what constituted the national territory, and well cultivated national symbols and particular histories. While Egypt and Morocco alone had possessed significant attributes of 'stateness' in the past, most Arab states have developed them in recent decades. The increase in state legitimacy meant the decline of the right of Arab states to interfere in the affairs of neighbouring, 'brotherly' Arab states in the name of Arab unity.10 Iraq's unsuccessful attempt to fundamentally alter the prevailing Arab order also resulted in the explicit acknowledgement that oil resources were the exclusive property of the states where they were located, and not the larger Arab collective. However, the growth of 'stateness' had its down side, namely, the 'over-stating' of the Arab state.11 The 'state' had become at once too powerful and too unwieldy, and at the expense of other societal forces. Paradoxically, state hegemony over society served as a drag on state performance at a time when domestic social and economic reforms were vital to adapt properly to international trends and cope with the growing challenges at home. Entering the 1990s, Arab states were characterised by unproductive and non-competitive economies, excessive state control, large-scale indebtedness, large, youthful,

partially educated and unemployed populations, and authoritarian political systems. Radical Islamist movements had become the opposition of choice for many. Faced with these myriad challenges and with the example of Algeria's sudden democratisation and resultant collapse into chaos, Arab regimes preferred to move carefully in implementing needed reforms. For this, they needed time and Western support. In this context, achieving Arab-Israeli peace agreements became a necessary condition for most Arab regimes.

POST - MADRID DYNAMICS

The October 1991 Arab-Israeli peace conference in Madrid highlighted this broad consensus across the Arab world. Nearly every Arab state was represented there, either directly or through the presence of the secretary-generals of the five-nation Arab Maghreb Union and six-nation Gulf Co-operation Council. To be sure, translating this broad Arab consensus into concrete achievement was extremely difficult. For nearly two years, until the Israeli-Palestinian Oslo Accords, the Madrid process produced much Arab-Israeli talk but no results. Israel's Arab interlocutors put on the appearance of co-ordinating their positions with one another, but no more than that.

In inter-Arab terms, the Oslo breakthrough was reminiscent of the Sadat initiative: just as Sadat had left the Arab consensus in order to pursue specific, Egyptian national goals,12 Yasir Arafat concluded the Oslo Accords without either consulting with Egypt, the Arab world's 'big sister', updating Jordan's King Hussein or conditioning a Palestinian-Israeli agreement on progress on the Syrian-Israeli track. However, whereas Sadat's actions led to a temporary Arab coalescence into an anti-Egyptian bloc, Arab reaction to the Palestinian-Israeli agreement was completely different. For Arab states, the cumulative changes in the international, regional and domestic Arab spheres that had taken place in the previous 15 years now required forward movement in the Arab-Israeli peace process. Moreover, the Arab peacemaker, in this case, was Arafat, the symbol of the Palestinian struggle for a generation. Arafat's handshake with Yitzhak Rabin legitimised Arab 'peripheral' states in North Africa and the Gulf exploration of formal diplomatic and economic ties with Israel. More importantly, it stimulated a chain reaction toward Arab-Israeli peace, particularly between Jordan and Israel, in order for Jordan to lessen the potential threat the Israeli-Palestinian agreement posed to its own vital interests. To be sure, the piecemeal progress in Arab-Israeli peacemaking created inter-Arab tensions: between Syria and Jordan, and Syria and the Palestinians, with Syria angry at being left behind; and between Egypt and Jordan, and Egypt and Qatar, with Egypt being annoyed by Jordan's 'hastiness',13 and Qatar's perceived impudence in pushing for Arab-Israeli normalisation without reference to Egypt's regional pre-eminence. Nonetheless, Arab-Israeli peacemaking, taken in toto, has had, and continues to have, a reinforcing effect: the Israeli-Palestinian Sharm al-Shaykh Agreement of September 1999 and opening of final status talks clearly helped push Syria into restarting its own negotiations with Israel.14

In retrospect, the three years of the Netanyahu government in Israel, between May 1996-June 1999, was merely an interregnum in which the Arab-Israeli peace process went into a chilly holding pattern, but in which Syria was unable to lead the Arab world down a more strident path. Concurrently, an additional development occurred that further reinforced the sense of collective Arab weakness in the region-the rapid evolution of the Israeli-Turkish strategic alignment. Syrian and Iraqi reactions were nothing short of hysterical, viewing the alignment, quite understandably, as directed against them. Egypt was extremely uncomfortable with the alignment, but Egyptian officials, as opposed to the Egyptian press, were generally restrained

in their comments. Jordan, on the other hand, sought to participate in the alignment as a junior partner, while also trying to avoid excessive Arab criticism. In the final analysis, the worsening of the regional balance of power, in Syrian eyes, manifested by Syria's capitulation to Turkey in the Öcalan affair in late 1998, seemed to push Syria further in the direction of seeking a peace agreement with Israel.

NEW RULES OF THE GAME

What can one conclude from this admittedly complex picture? Inter-Arab relations from the outset were bedevilled by the contradiction between the ideal of Arab unity and the reality of inter-Arab competition and rivalry, in which the interference by one Arab state in the affairs of another was sanctioned by the ideal of Arabism. Moreover, particularly in the heyday of Gamal Abdel Nasser, Arab regimes lived in fear that the loyalties of their own populations would be given to the 'hero' in Cairo, or at least to like-minded revolutionaries at home, rather than to themselves. In recent years, however, one state's degree of penetration and intervention in the affairs of another has significantly lessened, thanks to the decline of Arabism as a workable ideology and the increased 'stateness' in most Arab states. When combined with the strategic and economic changes in the international system, plus the domestic challenges facing Arab states, the picture becomes clearer: the inter-Arab 'rules of the game' have dramatically changed, with positive implications for Arab-Israeli relations. The inter-Arab arena now constitutes a less central or effective environment for promoting the national interests of Arab states. The attention of Arab states' foreign policy makers is largely directed towards the industrialised states of the West and toward non-Arab Middle East powers-Iran, Turkey and Israel. Within this mixture, the historic dispute with Israel is no longer viewed in purely zero-sum terms. Indeed, the development of relations with Israel carries potential benefits, both directly, and more elusively, with regard to improving the image of Arab states in Western eyes.

One must emphasise that, at this stage, Arab-Israeli peacemaking does not include significant signs of a historical reconciliation process between the societies as a whole. Nor is it likely to do so in the foreseeable future. In most Arab minds, even those that wholeheartedly favour peace, Israel was born in sin. Peace is being made out of necessity, accompanied, in some measure, by feelings of defeat. In addition, the economic and social gaps between a dynamic, fully 'wired' Israel striding into the twenty first century global market, and Arab states lagging badly behind, both economically and politically, and struggling to feed their large youthful populations, promises a steady dose of Arab-Israeli tension, suspicion and hostility in the years ahead.

Indeed, Arab-Israeli relations could witness setbacks in the future for any number of reasons. There is no doubt that a renewed deterioration, particularly in Israeli-Palestinian relations, would negatively influence the overall fabric of Israeli-Arab relations. Notwithstanding all of the natural cynicism one may have regarding the collective Arab commitment to the Palestinian issue, one cannot ignore the emotional power, and thus its political importance, that the Palestinian cause can still generate, particularly in neighbouring Arab states such as Jordan, but also further afield. A collapse of Syrian-Israeli negotiations, while not posing the immediate threat of war, would adversely affect the gradual process of Arab accommodation to Israel's existence and have important negative strategic ramifications. More catastrophic still, albeit extremely unlikely, would be the advent of an Islamist regime in Egypt. Other possible adverse changes in the region include the return to regional prominence of a vengeful, nuclear capable Iraq, or renewed assertiveness by the radical ruling faction in

Tehran. Thus, it is in Israel's long-term strategic interest to conclude a comprehensive peace with all of its immediate neighbours in order to make it far more difficult for Iraq or Iran to fish in troubled waters for their own benefit. Moreover, Syrian-Israeli peace may encourage Iranian reformists towards greater pragmatism vis-a-vis Israel.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS ON DIALOGUE AND EVOLVING IDENTITIES

Now that the inter-Arab and Arab-Israeli rules of the game have been significantly altered, are the conditions ripe for a wider Arab-Israeli dialogue? In some cases, this dialogue has already quietly begun, involving at various times security personnel, businessmen and the media. Even the nearly monolithic wall of opposition put up by the intellectual classes, particularly in Egypt, has begun to crack in places. The establishment in 1999 of the Cairo Peace Movement by a number of prominent Egyptian scholars and ex-diplomats was a milestone in this regard. Alternative voices proclaiming the ineffective and counter-productive nature of the anti-normalisation approach are now beginning to be heard.15 Still, the bulk of the Arab media, intellectual and professional classes remains wedded to their anti-normalisation posture, which constitutes the last bastion against accepting Israel's legitimacy. They are reinforced by a deeply rooted religious and cultural antipathy to the idea of Jewish nationalism in an Arab-Muslim heartland.

Over the last decade, Israelis have been conducting an oft-heated internal dialogue over the meaning of 'Israeliness', particularly in the context of an evolving Arab-Israeli peace.16 Arab thinkers, commentators and even officials have begun to raise similar questions regarding their own societies. What is to be the basis of collective identity in the era of globalisation and Arab-Israeli peace, they ask. Arabism? Middle Easternism? Mediterraneanism? Which will be the most useful in their efforts to cope with the domestic, regional and global challenges facing them in the years ahead? In this context, it is especially instructive to examine the comments made by Syrian Foreign Minister Faruq al-Shar`a on the White House lawn in December 1999, marking the renewal of Syrian-Israeli negotiations. While wrapped in what seemed to be the traditional Syrian narrative of events designating Israel as the source of all trouble, Shar`a's comments were noteworthy in at least three respects and confirm the depth of the ongoing processes of Arab adaptation to the new regional and international realities: 1) he made no mention of the Palestinian issue, which Syria has traditionally sought to call its own; 2) he characterised the Syrian-Israeli conflict, in effect, as a dispute over borders, as opposed to existential questions; and 3) he posed a fascinating question to the Arab public. In the coming era of peace, he said, Arabs will have to ask themselves if the 50-year Arab-Israeli conflict was the single factor responsible for unifying the Arab world, as is commonly believed, or if, in fact, the conflict prevented the achievement of Arab unity? Shar`a's question, of course, was not directed to the past, but to the present and the future. As a politician, Shar`a certainly needed to justify Syria's decision to enter peace talks with Israel and to rebuff charges that Syria was betraying its own principles of steadfast opposition to Zionism (indeed, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood subsequently declared precisely that). But beyond the Syrian regime's narrow political needs, the question indicated recognition of the need for Syria to reinvent itself, to redefine the meaning of Arab collective identity on a more positive basis than had existed during the years of conflict with Israel. Shar`a also spoke of a better future characterised by a healthy "dialogue between civilisations" and an honourable competition between Arab and Israeli societies, politically, socially, economically and scientifically. Coming as they did from a senior Syrian official, whose state had long presented itself as the leader of the collective Arab struggle for existence against Zionist ideology, the state of Israel and its Western patrons, Shar`a's comments confirmed anew that

Arab ideology and praxis alike were meaningfully evolving toward a pragmatic accommodation to Israel's existence.

---

1 Malcolm Kerr, The Arab Cold War, Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971.
2 Yehoshua Porath, In Search of Arab Unity, 1930-1945, London: Frank Cass, 1986.
3 Bruce Maddy-Weitzman, The Cyrstallization of the Arab State System, 1945-1954, Syracuse, NY: Syracuse UP, 1993, pp. 133-35.
4 Daniel Dishon and Bruce Maddy-Weitzman, 'Inter-Arab Relations', in Middle East Contemporary Survey (MECS), Vol. VI, 1981-82, NY: Holmes and Meier, 1984, pp. 253-58.
5 For more on the evolution of the inter-Arab-Arab-Israeli nexus, see Avraham Sela, The Decline of the Arab-Israeli Conflict, Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1998.
6 Bruce Maddy-Weitzman, 'Inter-Arab Relations', MECS, Vol. XX, 1996, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997, pp. 77-78.
7 Fouad Ajami, The Dream Palace of the Arabs, NY: Pantheon Books, 1998, pp. 253-312.
8 Ajami, The Arab Predicament, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981.
9 Bruce Maddy-Weitzman, 'Continuity and Change in the Inter-Arab System', in G. Barzilai, A. Klieman, and G. Shidlo (eds.), The Gulf Crisis and its Global Aftermath, London and NY: Routledge, 1993, pp. 33-50.
10 Gabriel Ben-Dor, State and Conflict in the Middle East, NY: Praeger, 1983. For the domestic political factors explaining Arab unity initiatives, particularly during the 1950s and 1960s, and their declining value, see Malik Mufti, Sovereign Creations: Pan-Arabism and Political Order in Syria and Iraq, Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1996. For new theoretical insights regarding the centrality of Arab nationalist discourse in Arab politics, see Michael Barnett, Dialogues in Arab Politics: Negotiations in Regional Order, NY Columbia, UP, 1998.
11 Nazih Ayubi, Over-stating the Arab State, London: I.B. Tauris, 1995.
12 Kenneth W. Stein, Heroic Diplomacy, NY: Routledge, 1999.
13 See remarks by Egypt's Foreign Minister, Amru Musa, and the reply by King Hussein, at the Middle East and North Africa Economic Summit in Amman, in October 1995, in Bruce Maddy-Weitzman, 'Inter-Arab Relations', MECS, Vol. XIX, 1995, Boulder, CO: Westview, 1996, pp. 69-70.
14 For the Syrian-Israeli talks between 1992-96, see Itamar Rabinovich, The Brink of Peace, Princeton, NJ: Princeton, UP, 1998.
15 For example, the Lebanese writer and editor of the 'Ideas' page in al-Hayat, Hazim Saghiyeh, the Egyptian writer Amin al-Hindi, and the Kuwaiti scholar Shafiq Ghabra.
16 David Ohanna, The Last Israelis [in Hebrew], Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1998.