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Itamar Rabinovich

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The ebb and flow of Israel's relations with the Palestinians are linked organically to its complex relationship with Arab countries. Broad trends have applied across the region. Under the umbrella of unity, there have always been exceptions, rivalries, and tensions within the Arab world—and those differences have applied to relations with Israel. This paper explores the web of relationship between Israel and Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, the Palestinians and Israeli Arabs, and Iraq.



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The Web of Relationship

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Abstract

The ebb and flow of Israel's relations with the Palestinians are linked organically to its complex relationship with Arab countries. Broad trends have applied across the region. The Arabs collectively rallied against Israel in 1948, participated in the conflict when it festered and swelled, were devastated by the defeat of 1967, condemned Egypt's Sadat in 1977 for moving toward peace, and adopted his formula only a decade later. But under the umbrella of unity, there have always been exceptions, rivalries, and tensions within the Arab world—and those differences have applied to relations with Israel. This paper explores the web of relationship between Israel and Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, the Palestinians and Israeli Arabs, and Iraq.

Keywords

Israël, peace negotiations, international relationship, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestinians, Iraq

As we have seen throughout this exploration of the Arab-Israeli conflict, the very term is somewhat misleading—implying as it does the notion that a single conflict pits Israel against the Arab world, and that the ebb and flow of Israel's relations with the Palestinians are linked organically to, say, its rivalry with Iraq or its complex relationship with Morocco. To a considerable extent, this has indeed been true: broad trends have applied across the region. After all, the Arabs collectively rallied against Israel in 1948, participated in the conflict when it festered and swelled, were devastated by the defeat of 1967, condemned Egypt's Sadat in 1977 for moving toward peace, and adopted his formula only a decade later. But under the umbrella of unity, there have always been exceptions, rivalries, and tensions within the Arab world—and those differences have applied to relations with Israel.¹

Egypt

For the thirty years between its participation in the Arab invasion of the young Jewish state in 1948 and the Camp David Accords of 1978, Egypt was Israel's most formidable foe. Its decision to enter the war in 1948 had not been a matter of course. It was preceded by a policy debate between two principal schools of thought, one upholding the *raison d'état* of the Egyptian state, and the other stressing Egypt's Arab and Islamic commitments, as well as the political imperatives of Egyptian leadership and hegemony.² The issue was decided at the eleventh hour by King Farouk, who was motivated to join in the war against Israel by dynastic considerations and personal ambition. His decision's momentous consequences included the monarchy's own downfall four years later, and the humiliation of defeat in the war added to Egypt's already complex attitude toward Israel.³

The 1948 war launched a quarter-century-long cycle of violence that included four full-fledged wars and a period of low-level conflict known as a war of attrition. On the Egyptian side, the interplay of ideological commitment, state interests, and personal ambition was broadened and intensified with the rise of Gamal Abdel Nasser's revolutionary regime. As the leader of a messianic pan-Arab nationalism, as the head of a military regime, as Moscow's ally, and as the president of the Egyptian state who was angry at the wedge Israel had driven between Egypt and the eastern

Arab world, Nasser mobilized hitherto unfamiliar resources against Israel. Israel viewed Egypt as the potential key to a peaceful settlement with the Arab world. Yet during most of the Nasserite period the prospect of a settlement seemed remote. Israel remained deeply concerned that Egypt's military power alone was a threat, and that threat was compounded by Egypt's ability to carry large parts of the Arab

world with it. In a crisis during May 1967 that deteriorated into the Six-Day War in June, Egyptian and Israeli misperceptions and misreading of intentions and capabilities were extreme.⁴

Six more years and two more conflicts were required before Israel and Egypt could begin moving to peaceful settlement and reconciliation, but the foundations for these were laid in the 1967 war, during which Israel demonstrated an overwhelming military advantage, acquired territorial assets for a land-for-peace deal, and dealt a devastating blow to Nasser

and his regime. When Nasser died in September 1970, his heir apparent, Anwar al-Sadat, was seen by other contenders for power in Egypt as a harmless transitional figure. But Sadat showed himself to be an astute politician, able to outwit his rivals, and emerged as a true international statesman—a dramatic personal evolution that set the stage for Egypt's reconciliation with Israel.

As part of his comprehensive reorientation of his country's politics and policies, Sadat decided that Egypt must disengage from the conflict with Israel. Beginning in 1977, his agenda and that of Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin overlapped enough to enable them to conclude the Camp David Accords in 1978 and a peace treaty in 1979. For Sadat, peace with Israel was necessary to regain the Sinai Peninsula and to build a new relationship with the United States. He was willing to dispute with the other Arab states over his and Egypt's right to follow this policy, which gave priority to Egypt's own interests over its commitment to the Arab and Palestinian causes. But at no time did Sadat intend to make a separate deal with Israel or to "divorce" his country from its Arab context—even though these were among the immediate results of the Camp David agreements. Begin, in turn, came to agree to a complete Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai as the price for peace with this most important Arab state. He also presumed that Egypt would willin-

gly acquiesce in a perpetuation of Israel's control of the West Bank and that somehow the Palestinian autonomy plan included in the peace treaty could be finessed.⁵ That certainly was not the Egyptian view of things.

Implementation of the bilateral components of the Israeli-Egyptian agreement proceeded smoothly, but the collapse of the autonomy negotiations, the continuation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and Israel's decision to go to war in Lebanon in 1982 combined to produce a very negative effect on the fledgling peace between Egypt and Israel. This negativity was reinforced by Egyptian considerations, including domestic Islamic opposition (both to the government and to peace with Israel), criticism from Nasserite elements, and a desire for conciliation with the rest of the Arab world. Over the years, Egypt, first under Sadat and then under his successor, Hosni Mubarak, adopted a policy of cold peace. Under this policy, which resulted not from a conscious early decision but rather from a murky trial-and-error process, Egypt honored its principal commitments toward Israel, including diplomatic relations, an agreed-on security regime in the Sinai, and allowing Israeli tourism in Egypt. But Egypt also kept economic and trade relations to a minimum, discouraged visits by Egyptians to Israel and cultural relations of all kinds, and signaled that the regime did not really frown upon critics of peace with Israel. Nor did the government curtail virulent verbal attacks against Israel and Jews, but instead invoked its stated commitment to freedom of the press.

This mixed policy, which Israel and occasionally the United States criticized, on the whole functioned reasonably well, and by the late 1980s Egypt's reconciliation with the Arab world was completed. With the Soviet Union's decline, even Sadat's most bitter critic, Hafiz al-Asad in Syria, eventually renewed his country's diplomatic relations with Egypt and indicated his readiness to try to resolve Syria's own conflict with Israel.

The inauguration of the Madrid process in 1991 and, even more so, the formation of the Rabin-Peres government the following year, should have dramatically improved Israeli-Egyptian relations. The separate peace with Israel was now part of a comprehensive peace process; and the new Israeli government used Egyptian help to advance its negotiations with the Palestinians, eventually signing an agreement with them (the

Oslo Accords) that was much more attractive, from a Palestinian perspective, than the original autonomy plan had been.

Yet a real improvement in relations between Israel and Egypt failed to happen, either in the 1990s or at any subsequent point. Mubarak's regime could not easily dissociate itself from the cold peace policy, for it was dealing with a radical Islamic opposition, was occasionally pursuing a neo-Nasserist regional and foreign policy, and wanted to signal that it was not Washington's captive. But the additional, larger dimension of Egypt's coolness was a renewed sense of Israel as a competitor. This concern was given a new urgency by the very success of the peace process. Egypt certainly did not wish to see Israel as a regional superpower enjoying a special relationship with the United States and flexing its military and economic muscles throughout the region and beyond.

There was a time, before the Oslo Accords were signed and for a few months afterward, when Egypt appeared reasonably pleased to mediate between Israel and other Arab parties. But when Israel signed a peace with Jordan, began to normalize its relations with the Gulf States and in North Africa, and developed new concepts for regional cooperation, this satisfaction was replaced by alarm.⁶ And the principal means Egypt used to articulate its unhappiness was through the issue of nuclear weapons. Egypt, like the rest of the Arab world, had taken it for granted that Israel had a nuclear arsenal, even though Israel adhered to a policy of studied ambiguity in this matter. For years Israeli governments had been using the convenient formula that "Israel will not be the first nation to introduce nuclear weapons to the Middle East," and had consistently refused to sign the Non-Proliferation Treaty, arguing that it was not willing to undertake the treaty's commitments while countries

like Iraq and Iran might develop nuclear weapons regardless of having signed the treaty. In the late 1960s, after considerable tension with the United States over this issue, Israel finally arrived at a *modus Vivendi* with Washington; also, Israel's destruction of Iraq's nuclear reactor in 1981 displayed its determination to deny the option of nuclear weapons to other Middle Eastern countries.

As the senior Arab state, Egypt traditionally led the Arab world's campaign at the United Nations and elsewhere against Israel's status as a presumed nuclear power. Also, as a populous country with a large conventional army, Egypt was genuinely opposed to the introduction of nuclear weapons to the Middle East, and it resented Israel's quest for nuclear deterrence and a nuclear monopoly, considering these as symptoms of Israel's hegemonic and exclusivist ambitions. When the security provisions for Israel's withdrawal from the Sinai were negotiated at Camp David in 1978, Egypt raised questions about the nuclear issue and was rebuffed. Sadat chose not to insist on the matter so as not to obstruct his main goal—regaining the Sinai. But for the next fifteen years, Egypt continued to raise the issue in the customary diplomatic settings. When a working group on arms control and regional security (ACRES) began to meet in 1992 (part of the multilateral track of the Madrid process), Egyptian-Israeli disagreements over this issue soon emerged, naturally enough. But by late 1994, a qualitative change had occurred: Egypt began to use the issue to slow the diplomacy—first in ACRES, then in the working group on environmental issues (given the issue of nuclear waste), and finally in the Madrid process multilateral steering group.

The change was to some extent due to the UN's approaching April 1995 conference to review the Non-Proliferation Treaty, which was scheduled to expire that year unless it was renewed. The United States wanted the treaty to be renewed indefinitely, and to Egypt this seemed like the last opportunity to bring pressure on Israel to sign the treaty, which it had refused to do. Egypt was able to extract from the United States acceptance of its demand that a Middle East annex be added that did not mention Israel by name but laid a foundation for future Egyptian initiatives. Israel recognized Egypt's genuine concern, but it calculated also that Cairo had a much broader agenda: Rabin and Peres could not quite understand why, after years of passive opposition to Israel's nuclear option, Egypt was shifting to active and vociferous opposition precisely when Arab-Israeli peace seemed to be in reach. As they and their advisers saw it, this was part of a deliberate effort to slow down Israel's "normalization" in the Middle East.

Puzzled and angry as they were, Rabin and Peres chose to moderate their reaction to this Egyptian policy. Israel's relationship with Egypt was

too precious and fragile to be guided by emotions. They also understood that when conflict between the two countries had ended at Camp David, it had been replaced not by friendship but by peaceful competition.

Incidentally, it also was convenient for both Egypt and Israel to pretend that Cairo's anti-Israel moves had been initiated by Foreign Minister Amre Moussa, an ambitious man subscribing to a new version of pan-Arabism. This allowed President Mubarak to stay above the fray as a supreme leader, arbitrating among rival factions in his government while preserving Egypt's relationship with Israel.⁷

After Peres succeeded the assassinated Rabin in 1995, Egypt shared some of Jordan's discomfort with Peres's expansive view of a future Arab-Israeli peace, but Egypt's criticism was milder, concerned principally with Peres's quest for a new regional order. It was also skeptical of his determination to have Israel come quickly to a far-reaching agreement with Syria, a prospect that stirred ambiguous feelings in Egypt. Syria's definition of a "dignified settlement" was expressed in terms that were in contradistinction to the Camp David Accords, and when Israel discussed Syria as the key to a comprehensive Arab-Israeli settlement, Egypt felt put in second place. But, unlike the Jordanians, the Egyptians still hoped to see Peres win in the May 1996 elections, their unhappiness with some aspects of the Labor government's peace policies being minor compared with the prospect of a Netanyahu victory.

When Netanyahu won those elections, Mubarak's unhappiness with the new prime minister and his policies was open and obvious; even so, he maintained a dialogue with Netanyahu's government. The Egyptian government also allowed further degrees of cultural normalization with Israel. Clearly, Mubarak and his aides had come to realize that the policy of cold peace was playing into the hands of the Israeli right wing. At the same time, Egypt took advantage of the political change in Israel to cut the peace process down to size: Egypt did not want this process to transform the regional politics of the Middle East. Having Israel come to a settlement with the Palestinians and eventually with Syria would be one thing; watching Israel use these agreements to develop a network of political and economic relations across the Middle East, to construct new strategic relations with Turkey, and to continue

special relations with Washington while remaining a nuclear monopoly—that was another.

The Arab-Israeli armed conflicts of the first decade in the twenty-first century—the Israeli-Palestinian war of attrition (the second intifada) of 2000–03, the Israel-Lebanon War of 2006, and Operation Cast Lead in 2008—all these confronted Egypt with a dual challenge: the decision to maintain its “normal” relationship with Israel, even at a cold peace level, plus the conflict’s immediate and potential effect on the Egyptian street. Like other Arab regimes, Mubarak’s Egypt had to take into account the repercussions of the media revolution of previous years. In marked contrast to earlier crises, the ubiquitous satellite television stations brought to numerous Egyptian homes graphic, vivid images of these conflicts, thereby agitating Egyptian public opinion.

This challenge was particularly apparent during Israel’s 2006 war with Hizballah. Like other Arab regimes, Mubarak’s government gave Israel’s operation initial tacit support. It viewed Iran and its proxy, Hizballah, as dangerous challengers of their own legitimacy and stability and were hoping that Israel would deliver a swift, deadly blow to Hizballah. When that failed to happen and the new war lingered for a month, public outrage built up, and Egypt and other conservative regimes became vociferously critical of Israel’s policies.

During the same decade, conditions also changed in the Gaza Strip and the Sinai. Egypt was rattled by the Hamas takeover of Gaza. Egypt now had on its border an entity ruled by the Palestinian offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood and allied with Iran. Cairo was concerned by large-scale influx of Palestinians from the impoverished, over-populated Gaza Strip and by penetration of agitators and weapons into its own territory. At the same time it was pressured by Israel to prevent smuggling into Gaza of weapons, missiles and rockets in particular—whether above ground or in underground tunnels. Egypt did close the border with Gaza, with very limited exceptions, thus becoming in fact a party to the siege of Gaza, but its efforts to prevent smuggling into Gaza were half-hearted and not entirely effective.

Egypt’s difficulties in this regard derived in large part from the Mubarak regime’s declining ability to control the Sinai’s Bedouin population. Hamas, and to a lesser extent Al-Qaeda, spent large amounts of money buying Bedouin cooperation

in the flourishing Gaza smuggling industry and in facilitating occasional terrorist activities in and from the Sinai. Another lucrative trade was the smuggling of thousands of African migrants and refugees through the Sinai and across the long, unprotected Israeli-Egyptian border.

The nuclear issue remained another bone of contention between Egypt and Israel. Egypt could not do much in this regard during the Bush years. But Barack Obama made reduction of the world’s nuclear arsenal one of his priorities, and he was less sensitive to Israel’s concerns than his predecessors had been. When a nuclear security summit was convened in Washington in 2010, Egypt’s diplomats were able to draw on the 1995 agreement to get Israel mentioned specifically by name and obtain a resolution that stipulated further discussion of the issue in 2012.

The Mubarak regime’s loss of control over the Bedouin in the Sinai was an early harbinger of its decline and ultimate fall in the revolution of January-February 2011. Israel followed these events with manifest concern. Intellectually, Israelis realized that in the long range a democratic Egypt and a democratic Arab world would be partners for a stable peace. But in more immediate terms they were concerned by the fall of a familiar regime that was, if not friendly, at least reliable—and by the prospect that the Muslim Brotherhood and other radical elements might end up as partners in any new regime and possibly even its masters. For more than thirty years, peace with Egypt, cold as it was, had been a cornerstone of Israel’s national security. Israel’s view of the revolutionary changes in Egypt were shaped primarily by Jerusalem’s concern with the durability of this peace. In the late winter and early spring of 2011, several statements by Egypt’s new foreign minister, Nabil al-Arabi, and other officials, and the increased influence of Islamist groups in the country, exacerbated Israel’s concern that Egypt, while not abrogating the peace treaty with Israel, had mounted a path leading to a different regional orientation and to a still colder, more limited, relationship with Israel. These concerns were heightened by a terrorist attack on August 18, 2011. It was launched by a small Palestinian organization from Gaza through the Sinai against Israeli vehicles traveling to Eilat along the Israeli-Egyptian border. The terrorists wore Egyptian uniforms and may have had support from some local Egyptian forces. Israeli troops who fought and

killed most of the terrorist also killed a number of Egyptian soldiers. This led to a large anti-Israeli demonstration in Cairo and to fresh demands by opposition groups to break the relationship with Israel. Egypt's military leadership stood firm, but the frailty of the relationship under the new political circumstances was evident.

Syria

Israel's current relationship with Syria has been shaped by a legacy of hostility and rivalry, by twenty years of intermittent and unfinished negotiations, and by new realities: the transition from Hafiz to Bashar al-Asad, Israel's departure from south Lebanon, the war in Iraq and the ensuing deterioration in Syria's relationship with the United States, and Syria's alliance with Iran.

For four decades in the aftermath of the 1948 war, Syria was Israel's most bitter enemy among the Arab states. Syria's self-perception as "the Arab Nation's pulsating heart," its particular closeness to Palestine and the Palestinians, and the radicalization and militarization of its politics positioned it as Israel's fiercest enemy. But the collapse of its Soviet patron and the circumstances created by the first Gulf War led Syria to come to the Madrid Conference in 1991 and endorse the notion of a negotiated peace settlement with Israel.

When Yitzhak Rabin jump-started the Madrid process in 1992, he (and most of his successors) acted on the assumption that they had to sequence their progression in the peace process—that the Israeli political system would not be able to sustain simultaneous major concessions in both the West Bank and the Golan Heights. As a result all Israeli prime ministers since 1992 (except for Ehud Barak during part of his tenure) have felt that they had to choose between a "Syria first" and a "Palestine first" policy. In the 1990s the Israeli leadership and the Clinton administration tended to assign priority to the Syrian track primarily for three reasons. First, the Syrian-Israeli conflict is "simpler" than the Israeli Palestinian one because it is essentially a territorial conflict as distinct from the clash of Israeli and Palestinian nationalisms. Second, unlike the fragmented Palestinian political system, Syria was an orderly state with a powerful, authoritative government. Third, Hafiz Al-Asad (in contradistinction to Yasser Arafat) was seen as a reliable, if difficult, partner.

And yet, and despite the major investment made by President Clinton and his administration, Israel and Syria could not reach agreement and negotiations collapsed in 2000. Even so, the shape of a settlement was adumbrated during these years. Israel accepted (hypothetically and conditionally) the notion of full withdrawal from the Golan, and Syria

agreed to adopt the main components of the peace treaty signed by Egypt in 1979: contractual peace, diplomatic relations, normalization, and security arrangements. What was most glaringly lacking was simultaneous political will to make the concessions and sign the deal.

The watershed year in the history of this negotiation turned out to be 2000. Hafiz al-Asad died and was succeeded by his son Bashar; and Israel withdrew fully from Lebanon and severed the Gordian knot between its Lebanese problem (discussed below) and the Syrian negotiation. In early 2001 Ehud Barak was replaced by Ariel Sharon, who focused on the Palestinian issue and had no interest in a Syrian deal, and Bill Clinton was succeeded by George W. Bush, who at the outset of his term sought to disengage from the Israeli-Arab peace process and shortly thereafter found himself on a collision course with Syria's new president.

Hafiz al-Asad had been a master of straddling the line. At the height of the cold war, he maneuvered between the United States and the Soviet Union, taking advantage of Washington's desire to lure him away from Moscow. During the 1990s he negotiated a peace agreement with Israel but supported a propaganda campaign by Hamas and other Palestinian "rejectionists" against Arafat's "capitulation" to Israel. He also supported Hizballah's military campaign against Israel in Lebanon, both because he wanted Israel out of Lebanon and because he believed that diplomacy had to rest on force and power, and therefore pressure had to be exerted until an agreement was reached.

His son and successor tried to emulate this strategy. The double game Bashar Asad played in Iraq before and after the American invasion earned him George W. Bush's hostility. With regard to peace talks with Israel, he also pursued a two-track line. From an early point in his presidency, he argued that he wanted to renew the peace negotiations with Jerusalem. He changed the terms of the peace agreement he had in mind

several times, but on the whole he indicated that he was willing to adhere to the terms that had tentatively been agreed to in the previous decade. But he also stated that he was preparing a military option should the diplomatic one fail. In addition to buying advanced weapon systems from the Soviet Union and to deploying Scud missiles, he struck a secret agreement with North Korea to build a nuclear reactor in northeastern Syria. Whereas his father had been Iran's ally since 1979, Bashar gradually lost the status of Tehran's peer and became the subordinate partner. Under Bashar, Syria became the most important component in the "resistance axis" constructed by Tehran. Hizballah, Hamas, and (the Palestinian) Islamic Jihad were the other partners in this camp. This camp pitted itself against the United States, Israel, and such moderate or conservative Arab states as Mubarak's Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan. The doctrine of resistance argued that by persevering, Muslims and Arabs could stand up to both the United States (as in Iraq and Afghanistan) and Israel. Peace with Israel meant capitulation and was to be avoided. Israel's unilateral withdrawals from Lebanon and Gaza were touted as prime examples of the ability to defeat Israel and as harbingers of its ouster from the whole of Palestine.

Syria's main contribution to Iran's efforts during these years was by affording it access to Lebanon and Gaza (by hosting the external headquarters of Hamas in Damascus). Asad and his team knew full well that Hizballah was ultimately an arm of the Iranian regime, but they saw it also as an ally in preserving Syria's own position in Lebanon. They were instrumental in building Hizballah's huge arsenals of missiles and rockets. This arsenal was deployed there primarily to deter Israel and the United States from attacking Iran's nuclear installations, but it also was seen as part of Syria's own deterrence against Israel.

During his tenure as prime minister, Ariel Sharon had no interest in negotiating with Syria, and he rebuffed a number of Syrian attempts to renew the dialogue with Israel. After 2003 Bashar al-Asad's efforts were motivated at least in part by his desire to break the diplomatic siege laid by the Bush administration. For Sharon, who was focused on the Palestinian issue, this was yet another reason to reject the Syrian gambits. Sharon had built an excellent working relationship with the Bush White House and he did not wish to

jeopardize it by talking to the president's *bete noire*. This was also Ehud Olmert's policy during his first year in office, but in February 2007 he changed his mind and, as has been described in an earlier chapter, authorized Turkey's prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, to start a mediation process with Damascus. This effort lasted for almost two years until it collapsed in December 2008. Olmert copied a page from Asad's own book, and when he found out that Syria and North Korea were building a nuclear reactor, he sent his air force to destroy it in September 2007. Israel refrained from taking credit for this action, in part to help Asad overcome the humiliation and to keep him from retaliating.

During these years the focus of the Israeli-Syrian give and take shifted significantly. In the 1990s the concept of a prospective Israeli-Syrian peace deal was modeled on Israel's peace with Egypt. Predicated on the principle of territories for peace, the core of the deal would be full withdrawal from the Golan in return for a (cold) peace agreement and a security regime. By the early 2000s the crucial issue for Israel was Syria's intimate alliance with Iran and the manifestations of that alliance in Lebanon and Gaza. Israel, without abandoning the expectation of peace and normalization, began to insist that Syria had to disengage from Iran and end its support for Hizballah and the radical Palestinian organizations if it wanted an Israeli withdrawal from the Golan. It is precisely this state of affairs that turned Israel's national security establishment into the chief advocate of an Israeli-Syrian deal. Looking at Israel's national security challenges, the leaders of this establishment argued in recent years that an agreement with Syria would be a crucial step in the effort to dismantle the challenge presented by Iran and in loosening Hizballah's stranglehold on Lebanon.

This view is not shared by Prime Minister Netanyahu. As a previous chapter noted, during his first term in the 1990s, he tried to shift from the Palestinian track to the Syrian one by employing his friend Ronald Lauder as an emissary to Syria. But in his 2009 election campaign, and once in office, he was consistent in rejecting the idea of withdrawal from the Golan. In January 2009 George W. Bush, Asad's foe, was replaced in the White House by Barack Obama, who in his own election campaign had promised "to engage" with Syria (as well as with Iran). As president, however, Obama invested his major effort on the

Palestinian track. He failed in his attempt to persuade Damascus to remain patient and settle for the time being on an improvement in Syria's bilateral relationship with Washington.

Israel's ambivalence toward Bashar al-Asad and his regime cut deep. The Israeli leadership was fully aware of the damage Syria inflicted on Israel in Lebanon and Gaza and by the destructive potential of a regime that had tried once to acquire nuclear weapons. But when confronted with the prospect of a regime change, Israelis ponder whether the current regime may not be preferable to the alternative, whether that is a regime dominated by Islamists or a long period of instability. After all, it was an unstable Syria that triggered the May 1967 crisis. In 2005, when President Bush seemed to be targeting Bashar al-Asad and his regime, his Israeli partners were not enthusiastic. In 2011, when the Arab Spring reached Syria and serious protests erupted, Israelis were once again uncertain what to think. They saw the weakening of the Iranian camp as a net gain but were not at all convinced that Asad's putative fall would be in Israel's immediate interest. This did not prevent Asad, when he finally addressed his people on March 30, from arguing that the unrest in Syria was not a domestic phenomenon but a conspiracy hatched from the outside by the United States and Israel. Israelis could only wish that they had such influence on the course of events in Syria.

On May 10, 2011, as the pressure on Asad's regime mounted, his cousin, Rami Makhluf, gave an unusual interview to the *New York Times* in which he threatened, among other things, that there would be no stability in Israel if there was no stability in Syria. Four days later, on what they call Nakba Day, hundreds of Palestinian demonstrators in Syria, clearly encouraged by the Asad regime, broke through the fence to Majdal Shams, a Druze village in the Golan Heights. It was the first serious infringement of Syria's 1974 Disengagement Agreement with Israel and also a message from the Asad regime that it did not intend to go down quietly.

In 2000, after the failure of the Clinton-Asad meeting in Geneva and before Hafiz al Asad's death, the Syrian intellectual Sadiq al-'Azm published an essay in the *New York Review of Books* in which he asserted that the Syrian public (by which he meant primarily Damascene society) had accepted the notion of peace with Israel.⁸ The

only remaining question, he said, was when the peace would be negotiated. (Al-'Azm's concept of peace was a different matter; it was quite far from Israel's most modest concept of peace with Syria.) Al-'Azm is well known as an independent, courageous intellectual and definitely does not speak for the Ba'ath regime, but his essay should be read with an awareness of the limits of free expression in Syria, particularly regarding such a sensitive issue as peacemaking with Israel.

Eleven years after its publication, al-'Azm's essay can be read with more than a touch of irony. It seems far removed from the present realities. But it remains significant. Present realities can change swiftly and dramatically—as the 2011 events in the Arab world demonstrated—and the deep currents of Syrian public opinion could once again become relevant.

Lebanon

In the 1950s and 1960s a political cliché was current in Israel to the effect that "Lebanon will be the second Arab state to sign a peace with Israel," simply because Lebanon did not have the regional clout to be the first. The cliché, clearly not borne out by the course of events, was inspired by earlier contacts between Zionist diplomats and some Maronite Christian leaders in Lebanon and on a mistaken perception of the nature of Lebanese politics. Many Lebanese Christians thought of Israel as another non-Muslim state that was or could be a bulwark against pan-Arab nationalism—and thus Israelis thought of them as potential allies. But most of these Christians also viewed Lebanon as a part of the Arab world and wanted to preserve the delicate domestic and external balances so indispensable to Lebanon's precarious survival.⁹

Those balances were upset in the early 1970s, and the Lebanese state and political system essentially collapsed during the 1975–76 civil war. From Israel's perspective, the civil war and lingering crisis in Lebanon had several negative results: the Lebanese state was incapable of exercising authority over Lebanese territory, Syria had become the paramount power and military presence in Lebanon, and the Palestinians built a territorial base in Beirut and southern Lebanon under the PLO's direction. Israel eventually responded in various ways: a tactical indirect understanding with Syria to preclude a Syrian military presence in southern Lebanon, an Israeli "security strip" inside Leba-

non, and a strategic alliance with several Maronite groups in Lebanon. But the Lebanese front was the main arena of the PLO's armed conflict with Israel during the 1970s. The growing Palestinian and Syrian challenge and a misguided belief that Israel could place a friendly government in Beirut and change the strategic configuration in the region led Menachem Begin's government to invade Lebanon in 1982.

For both Lebanon and Israel, the 1982 war had momentous, mostly unintended consequences. The PLO's leaders and troops were forced to move to Tunisia; Syria's hold over Lebanon, after an initial setback, was reinforced; and the Christian communities preserved some of their political privileges but lost much of their power. But the war's single most important outcome was the acceleration of a process that had been apparent earlier: the mobilization of the hitherto underprivileged Shiite community and its quest for a political position commensurate with its demographic strength in Lebanon. This trend was reinforced when Iran's Islamic revolution of 1979 was projected into Lebanon and its Shiite community, so far its only successful foreign destination.¹⁰ The Shiite militias of Amal and Hizballah were propelled not by nationalism but by religion, and they introduced into the conflict such then-novel elements as suicide bombings.

By 1985 Israel had given up any claim to figure in Lebanon's national politics and focused on the defense of its northern frontier. It withdrew to an expanded security zone in south Lebanon maintained by the Israeli Defense Forces with the help of a local militia. After that point, the security zone and occasionally Israel itself were attacked primarily by Hizballah, under direction from Tehran and with the tacit cooperation of Syria.

In October 1989 an Arab conference held in Taif, Saudi Arabia, tried to consolidate and formalize the situation. The compromise embodied in the Taif Accord envisaged Syria's military withdrawal from Lebanon, albeit as a remote prospect. But the accord remained a dead letter. In fact, Syria took advantage of its participation in the American-led coalition during the 1990–91 Persian Gulf crisis and Gulf War to consolidate its hold over Lebanon, fourteen years after its original invasion in response to the civil war. Syria finally controlled Lebanon through a functioning local government—maintaining a significant military presence there not as an army of occu-

pation but as a guarantor of its hegemony, as a defender of the western approaches to Damascus, and as a potential threat to Israel. Syria made a point of acting as the guardian of the trappings of Lebanese statehood, but in subtle and less-than-subtle ways it ensured Lebanon's acquiescence with its will and interests. Thus, no progress was to be made in Lebanese-Israeli negotiations so long as a breakthrough had not occurred in Syrian-Israeli relations. Syria undertook, once such a breakthrough occurred, to obtain a comparable agreement for Lebanon, and Lebanon's territory was to be used to pressure Israel to come to terms with Syria.

In 1994 the broad lines of an understanding about Lebanon were, in fact, worked out between Israel and Syria through their ambassadors in Washington. Provided that a Syrian-Israeli agreement was reached, Syria was willing to endorse an Israeli-Lebanese peace agreement to be implemented within nine months—a time frame that coincided with the nine months that Rabin envisaged in his discussions with Secretary of State Christopher for the first phase of a prospective agreement with Syria. But no such agreement was reached.

Unfortunately, there was also a violent side to this story. Hizballah's offensive against Israel's security zone in southern Lebanon and occasional Katyusha rocket attacks on northern Israel kept up a permanent cycle of violence along the Lebanese-Israeli border. Twice—in July 1993 and April 1996—Israel launched large-scale land operations in Lebanon in an effort to break the cycle. Both operations led to “understandings” between Israel and Hizballah that limited the violence but failed to end it.

Soon after the formation of his government in June 1996, Netanyahu sought to promote a “Lebanon first” initiative, which he hoped would win Syrian endorsement. But Syria suspected this effort was an attempt to drive a wedge between Damascus and Beirut and wasted no time in rebuffing the gambit. That September, a redeployment of Syrian troops in Lebanon led to a brief war scare, when some in Israel wrongly interpreted it as a preparation for launching an attack, and Syrians then wrongly interpreted Israel's statements and responsive movements as preparations for an attack. Eventually, reassuring messages were exchanged and a confrontation was averted, but the episode showed how explosive the Israeli-Syrian-Lebanese triangle was.

As the months went by and the number of Israeli casualties grew dramatically, so did public and political pressure to extricate Israeli soldiers from southern Lebanon. A mixed coalition of concerned parents, left-wing politicians, and Golan settlers who were eager to sever the diplomatic link between southern Lebanon and the Golan Heights led a movement calling for Israel's unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon. Netanyahu's government responded with a novel tactic—a conditional acceptance of Security Council Resolution 425, which in 1978 had required Israel to leave Lebanon after an earlier intervention. This put Lebanon's President Elias Harawi and Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in a difficult position: it was hard for them to explain why they were refusing to take Israel up on its offer to withdraw. Their predicament enhanced Syria's suspicions that they might seek accommodation with Israel on their own, and Syria made highly visible efforts to keep Lebanon's government in tow.

As has been described above, this state of affairs was transformed by Ehud Barak's decision to withdraw the IDF from south Lebanon, a decision that was implemented in May–June 2000. Barak took care to execute the withdrawal in close coordination with the United Nations (not a common practice in Israel's diplomatic tradition) and obtained the UN's stamp of approval for the completion of Israel's withdrawal to the international boundary. But Hizballah, and subsequently the government of Lebanon, complained that Israel's failure to withdraw from the Shaba Farms and the village of Ghajar (Syrian territory according to Israel and the UN) and Israeli overflights constituted ongoing acts of aggression. Hizballah used these complaints to justify the maintenance of regular low-level pressure on Israel's northern borders with occasional outbursts of more spectacular attacks.

Hizballah continued its campaign against Israel on two levels. It used its complaints about Israel's "aggression" and other open-ended issues to legitimize its claim that the resistance had to continue, and to argue that Hizballah was a more effective defender of Lebanon than the country's army and therefore could not be asked to disarm. On a deeper level, it acted as a spearhead of the larger resistance axis in the Middle East on Iran's behalf to demonstrate that there was no point in coming to terms with America and Israel and that perseverance was bound to end in victory. With help

from Iran and Syria, Hizballah built a massive arsenal of rockets and missiles, a small but well-trained military force, and an extensive military infrastructure in south Lebanon, stretching all the way to the Israeli border. Following Israel's withdrawal from south Lebanon in 2000, Hizballah staged occasional attacks against Israel, seeking first and foremost to abduct Israeli soldiers. One such attack in July 2006 triggered the 2006 war.

Lebanon went through several twists and turns during the 2000s, but by the decade's end, several trends and facts seem to have been established. Iran and Syria were the paramount external powers in Lebanon, and with their help Hizballah established itself as the paramount political force in the country. The March 14 Coalition, with American and French backing, did well in the elections of 2005 and won a less impressive victory in the election of 2009. In 2010, however, Hizballah, after demonstrating in a brief confrontation that it could, if it wanted, take over the government by force, was able to use political pressure to topple the government of Sa'd al-Hariri (the son of the assassinated former prime minister) and to form a cabinet headed by Najib Miqati, a Syrian political client.

For its part, Syria had been forced to end its long occupation of Lebanon in 2005 after Rafiq Hariri's assassination. But Syria's ouster was never complete, and it regained its position, though not its military presence, by the end of the decade. Likewise, Iran, by building and rebuilding Hizballah's massive arsenal of rockets and missiles, obtained the ability to retaliate against Israel's cities and infrastructure in the event of an American or Israeli attack on its nuclear installations—as well as to provoke a major crisis at will.

Israel faced these developments with mounting concern. The moderate Lebanese parliamentary republic had flourished and been a harmless neighbor during the decades when a balance of domestic and external forces sustained its unique pluralistic system. But if the current trends continue and Lebanon remains dominated and shaped by Hizballah with the support of Iran and Syria, Israel and Lebanon face the danger of additional, far more destructive wars and the added danger of becoming outright enemies. The Israeli policy of distinguishing between a benevolent Lebanon and the hostile elements that operate from its territory may no longer remain valid.

Jordan

Israel shares its longest border with Jordan, and the two countries have immense actual and potential impact on each other's national security and economy. Their relationship, however, is, and for a long time has been, primarily affected by their respective and common relations with a third party—the Palestinians.

Jordan's very birth as a modern state was intimately linked to this issue. When Great Britain decided in 1921 to create *ex nihilo* a principality for the Hashemite potentate Amir Abdullah, it needed to placate him personally and the Hashemite family in general for what the family considered a betrayal—their receipt of only a meager share in the postwar settlement in the Middle East. Britain's solution was to detach the East Bank of the Jordan River from the territory of Mandate Palestine and turn it into the Emirate of Transjordan. In doing so, Britain was also trying to reduce the impact that the formation of the promised Jewish “national home” in Palestine would have on the region.

During the next twenty-five years, Abdullah, with British help, developed a genuine polity in Jordan, and in 1946 his principality became a kingdom. At the same time, a significant political relationship grew between Abdullah and the leaders of the Jewish community in prestate Israel, the Yishuv. This understanding was predicated on their common enmity to radical Palestinian-Arab nationalism, as personified by Haj Amin al-Husayni, the mufti of Jerusalem. Abdullah was hostile not merely to the mufti personally but to his political style and to the brand of Arab nationalism that he represented. Never satisfied with the desert principality assigned to him, Abdullah also was eager to extend his rule to more significant territories and cities—Syria and Damascus, or Palestine west of the Jordan, and Jerusalem.

When the idea of partitioning Palestine into Jewish and Arab states came to the fore in 1937, a new dimension was added to Abdullah's relationship with the Yishuv. If this partition came to pass, he might assume the Arab leading role on Palestine and provide the stability and pragmatism that had been so glaringly absent from the scene. The term “Jordanian option” was coined later, but the concept originated then: the solution of Israel's Palestinian dilemma by means

of Jordan. This option became a viable after the UN's partition resolution of November 1947.

The Jewish leaders had accepted the notion of Palestine's partition and were quite content to go along with part of Abdullah's annexation plan. But they disliked what became another aspect of Abdullah's policy: his part in the Arab states' invasion of Palestine on May 15, 1948, the day after the founding of the state of Israel. By participating in that war, Abdullah sought to facilitate his own takeover of the area assigned to be a Palestinian-Arab state in the UN's partition plan.

During the war, Abdullah's army, the Arab Legion, was a resolute and effective enemy that inflicted on the young Israeli Defense Forces some of its most painful defeats, and at the war's end Abdullah was indeed in control of what became known as the West Bank and East Jerusalem. His annexation of these territories was formally recognized by only two foreign governments, but, whatever the legal aspects, it transformed the Jordanian polity. (The kingdom was called Transjordan until 1964 and Jordan thereafter.) Palestinians now made up a majority of its population; many of them regarded Abdullah, his kingdom, and his act of annexation as illegitimate.¹¹ And in the years before Abdullah was assassinated by a Palestinian in 1951, the transformation of his kingdom's traditional politics as a consequence of the annexation of this large, better-educated, politically mobilized, and embittered Palestinian population had become apparent. In 1949–50, a treaty between Israel and Jordan was negotiated and initialed but was not finalized, because Abdullah realized that he had neither the power nor the *de facto* authority to carry his country with him to a peace settlement with Israel.¹²

During the next fifteen years, the issue for Jordan was not territorial annexation but survival. Following a brief regency period, the eighteen-year-old Hussein ascended the throne that he was to occupy for forty-five years. The young monarch proved to be extremely determined, astute in maintaining external support and facing down domestic opposition, and unusually skillful and lucky at aborting plots and evading assassination attempts. By this point, revolutionary Arab nationalism (as exemplified by Egypt) held sway over much of the Middle East, and the king's Palestinian subjects were among its staunchest supporters. Yet at the same time, Jordan, reflecting the new demographic realities and in keeping

with its claim to embody the Palestinian issue, was the only Arab state that offered citizenship to Palestinians. In 1967 King Hussein joined Egypt and Syria in their war against Israel, and he paid dearly by losing the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Jordan now had no West Bank but a Palestinian majority in the East Bank; yet by then many Palestinians had been “Jordanianized” and had come to accept Jordan as their country and state. Yearning for Palestinian self-determination was one thing, and the realization that life under the Hashemites is quite attractive was another.¹³

So, the Six-Day War reopened “the question of Palestine.” For the first time since 1949, all of the territory that had been Mandate Palestine was placed under a single authority. Israel was in control of the sizable Palestinian population living in the West Bank and in the Gaza Strip, in addition to its own Palestinian Arab minority. The debate over the future of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip became the governing issue of Israeli politics. For Israel, three principal alternatives presented themselves: reviving the Jordanian option; seeking or accepting the creation of an independent or autonomous Palestinian entity; or perpetuating Israeli control, either as a deliberate policy or, more likely, by failing to make painful choices.

The Hashemite regime’s initial preference was to come to an agreement with Israel, but the king insisted that he could do so only on the basis of Israel’s full withdrawal from the occupied territories. With the passage of time, Israel’s attachment to the West Bank grew stronger, as did the PLO’s stature and power, and so the prospects for this Jordanian option waned. Nor did various notions of a Jordanian-Palestinian federation turn into a magic formula.

Its protestations of formal support notwithstanding, Jordan had consistently opposed or at least been uneasy about the idea of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. For Hashemite Jordan, a small Palestinian state in part of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip could not be a durable, satisfactory solution to the Palestinian problem, and

Palestinians were likely to direct their irredentist claims eastward and to seek the allegiance of Jordan’s Palestinian majority. True, many of the kingdom’s Palestinian subjects viewed themselves as Jordanians, but why expose their loyalty to such

a challenge?¹⁴ So, for many long years, staying with the status quo proved to be the easiest choice for Jordan, too. A channel of communication with the Israeli leadership was kept discreetly open (but not publicized) for nearly three decades. Several attempts were made to reach a settlement, various practical issues were sorted out, and a dialogue was maintained between King Hussein and most of Israel’s prime ministers. A community of interests was established with both Labor and Likud leaders, based on shared opposition to the PLO and to the notion of Palestinian statehood.

One tenet of this relationship—the Israeli belief that the survival of the Hashemite regime and its control of the East Bank were important Israeli national interests—was shaken when, in 1970, the Likud adopted the slogan “Jordan is Palestine” and took the position that there was no need to establish a second Palestinian state. The argument also presumed that, once the Palestinians took over the reins of government in Amman, their claim over the West Bank would weaken.¹⁵ The issue came into stark relief that September, when Israel was key in facilitating King Hussein’s victory over Syria and the PLO (discussed in chapter

1). Golda Meir and Yitzhak Rabin believed that the king’s survival and American-Israeli strategic cooperation should be Israel’s paramount considerations; their decision was subsequently criticized by Ariel Sharon, leader of Israel’s radical right, who argued that the government had missed an opportunity “to let nature take its course.”

In the rich chronology of Israeli-Jordanian history during these years, several defining events stand out: King Hussein’s decision not to join the Arab war coalition in October 1973; Henry Kissinger’s inability to effect an Israeli-Jordanian interim agreement in the spring of 1974; the Arab summit’s decision in October 1974 to designate the PLO (rather than Jordan) as the legitimate claimant to the West Bank; the London Agreement of April 1987, which was Israel’s last attempt to exercise the Jordanian option, albeit in a modified version; Jordan’s formal disengagement from the West Bank in 1988;¹⁶ and the 1990–91 Persian Gulf crisis and Gulf War, which represented the culmination of Iraq’s threat to Jordan’s independence.

The signing in 1993 of the Oslo Accords affected this history paradoxically. The Hashemites resented Israel's latest choice of a Palestinian option but decided that they had to draw closer to Israel, the better to affect the course of events. The emergence of a Palestinian state had grown more likely but was not a foregone conclusion, and Jordan and Israel still shared a significant agenda. But there was another side to the same developments. By signing the Oslo Accords with Israel, the PLO enabled Jordan and other Arab states to pursue their bilateral agendas with Israel. This was not such a simple matter, however, because any dealings with Israel ended up involving an ever-present third party, the United States. There were also complex regional issues to be dealt with, such as strategic cooperation with Turkey and the future of Iraq.

Meanwhile, Israel's commitment to the survival of King Hussein's regime was buttressed by a close personal relationship between the king and Yitzhak Rabin. This relationship played a crucial role in enabling the two states to sign a peace agreement in October 1994 and to formalize their relationship. This relationship changed during Peres's brief tenure as Rabin's successor. The king was worried that his policies would lead all too quickly to an independent Palestinian state and to Israeli-Syrian and Syrian-Lebanese agreements; these would jeopardize and dwarf Jordan's position. On the eve of the May 1996 elections, Jordan indicated its preference for Benjamin Netanyahu and a peace policy managed at a more deliberate pace.

Yet these hopes were not fulfilled. For, although Jordan was opposed to an accelerated peace process, it found a viable one essential, particularly vis-à-vis the Palestinians. The collapse of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, let alone outbreaks of Israeli-Palestinian violence, would make Jordan's peace with Israel hardly tenable. This might have been a tall order, but the Hashemites expected from Israel finesse and subtlety in the conduct of a delicate, fragile relationship. They soon came to believe that Netanyahu in the late 1990s was a prime minister who could not manage that relationship, who could not keep the king's personal trust, and whose real intentions with regard to the peace process could not be divined. The king vented his frustration in a scathing letter to Netanyahu, the text of which became available to the international media. Yet the king kept the lid on:

most of the interests that kept Jordan wanting a peace with Israel were still valid, and the cost of an open break with Israel still outweighed the benefits it might produce. And so, for the time being, Israeli-Jordanian peace survived, but the expectations of a special relationship, a warm peace, and a mutually beneficial web of economic and development projects failed to materialize.

In February 1999, King Hussein died of the cancer he had fought during the previous few years. On his deathbed he removed his brother Hasan, who had served as crown prince for more than thirty years, and appointed his oldest son, Abdullah, as his heir. After ascending the throne, the young king reassured Israel on several occasions that he was committed to the peace his father had signed. Yet Israeli apprehensions about Jordan's ability to contend with potential and external threats were exacerbated by the simultaneous loss of two brothers who had been experienced and familiar partners.

King Abdullah's early decisions and the change of government in Israel in the late spring of 1999 improved the atmosphere in the two countries' relationship, but the intimacy and special relations of the Rabin-Hussein years were not restored. Jordan anxiously watched the new Israeli prime minister Barak's apparently swift progress toward far-reaching agreements with Syria and the Palestinians (as it had under Peres). It was particularly alarmed by Barak's willingness to give up a permanent presence in the Jordan Valley, thereby laying the groundwork for Jordan's uncomfortable contiguity with a future Palestinian state. But in keeping with a long-established tradition, Jordan did not express such concerns in public and chose to pay lip service to Palestinian nationalism.

Jordan must not have lamented the collapse of the Israeli-Palestinian negotiation in July 2000. But the outbreak in short order of the al-Aqsa intifada created new pressures on a state with a Palestinian majority that had made and maintained peace with Israel. Amman lowered the profile of its relations with Israel and took security precautions. It was a tacit source of inspiration for what was initially known as the Saudi Initiative (adopted at the Beirut Arab Summit of 2002) and eventually as the Arab Peace Initiative. Together with Egypt, Jordan became the chief promoter of this initiative.

Jordan's role reflected its growing concern with the impact on its own politics of the unresolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Such events as the al-Aqsa intifada, the 2006 Lebanon War, and Operation Cast Lead in Gaza agitated the Palestinian majority in Jordan. And as the first decade of the twenty-first century wore on, Jordan's traditional anxiety with the repercussions of the potential formation of an irredentist Palestinian state gave way to growing criticism of Israel for the failure to move toward a resolution of the Palestinian issue. The king kept the essential elements of the peace with Israel, but he and other prominent members of the Jordanian establishment made no secret of their unhappiness with its policies.¹⁷

Early in 2011 the agitation that toppled Tunisia's Ben Ali, Egypt's Mubarak, and Libya's Qaddafi and that affected large parts of the Arab world also rattled the Hashemite regime, if only temporarily. Significantly, many of the chief protestors were not Palestinian but East Bankers, the monarchy's traditional power base.

The Palestinians

In November 1975, a senior State Department official and long-time specialist in Arab affairs, Harold Saunders, testified at a hearing held by the a subcommittee of the House of Representatives' Committee on Foreign Affairs. In his prepared written text, Saunders referred to the Palestinian issue as the core of the conflict between Arabs and Israelis in the Middle East.¹⁸ At the time, little attention was paid to Saunders's testimony, but it subsequently drew considerable attention and animated objections from Israel's government. Israel was then in the midst of a complex diplomatic process orchestrated by the United States and predicated on the assumption that the key to the Arab-Israeli conflict lay in Israel's relations with the major Arab states. Saunders's argument ran against the grain of U.S.-Israeli policies and was, indeed, a harbinger of the change that came with the subsequent Carter presidency. If the Palestinian issue was the core question of the Arab-Israeli conflict, did it not make sense to predicate the quest for Arab-Israeli peace on a resolution of the problem that lay at its heart? Indeed, the Carter administration, and Saunders as its top Middle East diplomat, acted in the Middle East on the dual assumption that it could resolve the Palestinian problem and that its

success would offer the key to a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace.

But was such a resolution feasible? Since 1948 Israeli attitudes toward the Palestinians were to a large extent shaped by a sense that the Israeli-Palestinian dispute is a zero-sum game, that Palestinian demands and expectations could be met only on intolerable terms. It was much easier for Israel and Israelis to think of Israeli-Arab reconciliation by means of negotiations and agreements with states like Egypt, Jordan, and Syria, which could focus on such issues as boundaries and water.¹⁹

This frame of mind was for many years reinforced by the course of Palestinian history and the drift of Palestinian politics. Between 1949 and 1964, the Palestinians were absent from the Middle Eastern arena as an independent force. They were crushed, fragmented, and dispersed. Their traditional leaders were discredited, and most young Palestinian activists invested their zeal in ideological parties that promised a remedy to the Palestinian predicament within a larger, pan-Arabic scheme. The Arab states, in turn, were eager to assume control of the Palestinian issue and to suppress the efforts made by Palestinian groups to take charge themselves. For more than a decade, the vast majority of them were under the spell of Gamal Abdel Nasser and his brand of messianic pan-Arab nationalism. They believed that when Nasser defeated the enemy—the unholy trinity of Western imperialism, Zionism, and domestic reactionary forces—and united the Arab homeland, Arab Palestine also would be liberated and redeemed. It was only with Nasser's and Nasserism's decline in the late 1960's that an authentic Palestinian national movement could assert itself.

The PLO was founded by the Arab states in 1964 as their instrument, but was taken over in 1968 by the authentic Palestinian groups that had emerged a few years earlier. Yet, for another twenty-five years, most Israelis did not consider the PLO an acceptable interlocutor. It had drafted a charter that called for Israel's destruction, and it used terror as a principal instrument to achieve that end. All efforts to persuade the PLO's leader, Yasser Arafat, to take positions that would enable the PLO to join the peace process in the 1970s were to no avail. The PLO only slowly adopted the formula of a two-state solution. Nor was Israel, the more powerful party to the conflict, ready or willing to take the initiative.²⁰

Thus, while Israel and Egypt went ahead toward their peace treaty of 1979, armed conflict between Israel and Palestinian nationalists and their struggle over the land of the West Bank continued. The ambivalence and equivocation about building Jewish settlements in the West Bank that marked Israel's Labor governments was replaced after the Likud victory in 1977 with open encouragement to do so. These efforts created (mostly by design) a new reality under which a workable compromise with the Palestinians became ever more difficult to achieve. Yet at the same time, the sight of expanding Israeli settlements persuaded many Palestinians, particularly in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, that time was not necessarily on their side and that reaching a settlement was imperative.

In 1988 Arafat finally endorsed the principle of a two-state solution, and on that basis diplomacy began between the PLO and the United States. The changes of position in Washington and the PLO amplified the considerable impact of the intifada, which began later that year, and increased the pressure on Israel's second national unity government to renew, after a seven-year hiatus, negotiations about Palestinian self-rule. The profound disagreement between the government's Labor and Likud components over this issue expedited the collapse of the talks in March 1990. When Israeli-Palestinian negotiations began again in 1991, they were part of the Madrid process, and they played out against the backdrop of other great changes: the breakup of the Soviet Union, the end of the Cold War, the Persian Gulf crisis and Gulf War, and a fresh wave of emigrants from the former Soviet Union to Israel.

In the course of putting the Madrid process together, Secretary of State James Baker discovered that Prime Minister Shamir's resistance to the very notion of negotiating with the Palestinians could be mitigated by shifting emphasis from the Palestinian issue to a parallel channel of diplomacy with Israel's Arab neighbors. This blunted the Palestinian edge of the Madrid process, which was further reduced by the formal incorporation of the Palestinian delegation into a Jordanian-Palestinian delegation. The junior status thus assigned to the Palestinians, and the PLO's formal absence from the Madrid process, reflected the PLO's decline in the Arab world after the Gulf War, though the effect of this humiliating

turn of events was limited at first, since no progress occurred during the first nine months of the post-Madrid negotiations. But when the Rabin government was formed, the PLO's hold over Palestinian politics acquired fresh significance. An Israeli-Palestinian agreement became a key to any progress; whether Israel would come to such an agreement without the PLO or deal with the PLO and find an acceptable formula became a crucial issue on its diplomatic agenda.

We have seen how Rabin pondered the comparative advantages of the Syrian and Palestinian options. In early August 1993, the hypothetical vacillation turned into an actual policy choice. Then, by signing the Oslo Accords, Israel predicated the new phase of the peace process on its agreement with the PLO, and not with a major Arab state such as Syria. This action resulted in a radical change of perspective. Having signed a framework agreement with representatives of Palestinian nationalism, Israel now argued that the core issue of the Arab-Israeli conflict had been addressed and the chief obstacle to Arab-Israeli reconciliation and normalization had been removed. A hitherto unfamiliar mutual dependence was created between the government of Israel and the PLO leaders.

The Oslo process was a very complex and fragile mechanism; genuine cooperation and a genuine sense of partnership were indispensable to its success. As we have seen, these were achieved to only a limited degree.

Moreover, the signing of the Oslo agreement did not mean that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was over. In both societies, powerful forces were opposed to reconciliation and continued to try to abort it. Competition for control of the West Bank and Jerusalem continued, and the leaders, cooperating as they did in implementing the agreements they had signed, still had very different visions of the final-status agreement. Both societies had yet to think through, separately or together, some fundamental issues. Were Israel and the Palestinians interested in separation, or in some form of cooperation or integration within the Israeli-Jordanian-Palestinian triangle? And if separation was what they wanted, was it feasible? What sort of relationship could be envisaged between societies separated by such social and economic gaps? How would as many as fifteen million Israelis and Arabs share the limited resources of land and water in the space between

the Mediterranean and the Jordan early in the next century?

The Oslo process ran its course during the 1990s without the Israeli-Palestinian dispute being resolved. We have seen how Benjamin Netanyahu failed to maneuver among the forces that buffeted his Palestinian policy, and how Ehud Barak shifted from the preference he had assigned to the Syrian track to the boldest effort yet by any Israeli leader to reach a final, comprehensive agreement with the Palestinian national movement. The collapse of Barak's negotiations with Arafat and the outbreak of violence in September 2000 set the stage for a resumption of a fullblown conflict between the two protagonists.

The Palestinian-Israeli war of attrition in 2000–03 (commonly known as the second intifada) exacted a high toll from both parties. Coupled with an economic crisis of the same years, this period was one of the darkest in Israel's history. The war also inflicted heavy damage on the Palestinians and eliminated many of the gains made during the 1990s. Israel won the war, but the military victory did not resolve the broader conflict. Arafat's death in November 2004 was preceded by political decline for two of the entities he headed: the Palestinian Authority and the Fatah movement. He was criticized by many Palestinians for resorting to violence and subjecting them to its consequences, and he was gradually emasculated by Sharon's siege of his compound in Ramallah and his own physical decline.

The Bush administration's original effort to diminish Arafat's role and provide the Palestinian Authority with a different type of government could now be implemented. With Mamud Abbas as president and Salam Fayyad as prime minister, the Palestinian Authority mounted a new track. Fayyad became the real leader of the effort to build a clean, accountable government and, with U.S. help, an effective security force to combat terrorism. In Fayyad's vision, this was to be a bottom-up effort to create the foundations of a Palestinian state. Israel saw in Fayyad an excellent partner, but at a certain point the interests of the two parties diverged. Fayyad was determined to achieve statehood, and if Israel did not accommodate him, he was ready to take unilateral action.

But "Fayyadism" was only part of the picture. Fatah did not undergo a process of reform and was seen by many Palestinians as tired and cor-

rupt. When the Bush administration insisted on free elections in the West Bank and Gaza, Hamas won, in January 2006. After a prolonged period of political uncertainty, Hamas in June 2007 staged a violent coup and took control of Gaza. The Palestinian polity was now divided physically and ideologically. Hamas, an Islamist movement, rejects the notion of a final status agreement with Israel. Hamas's impact is matched to some extent by the decline of secular Palestinian support for the idea of a two-state solution, since that solution proved to be so elusive. Quite a few Palestinian intellectuals and political activists have come to the conclusion that, ultimately, time is on their side and that in a decade or so a "one-state solution" could become a reality.

Hamas presents Israel with a manifold challenge. It is firmly in control of the Gaza Strip and, as we saw, Israel has failed to come up with a solution to the "problem of Gaza." Hamas was weakened, at least temporarily by the Syrian crisis of 2011, but it remains closely allied to Iran and is a beneficiary of Egypt's current weakness. It continues to challenge Fatah's hold over the West Bank and to present an alternative strategy that many Palestinians find attractive. As long as Hamas is in control of Gaza, any agreement that Israel might make with Abbas can be implemented only in the West Bank, with Hamas possessing the ability to obstruct it by restarting a cycle of violence from the Gaza Strip.

In 2008, during the final phase of his tenure, Ehud Olmert negotiated with Abbas and went even further than Barak did in 2000 (see above). Abbas did not respond to Olmert's final offer. Abbas and other Palestinians have since explained that there was less to the offer than met the eye and that there was no point in signing a deal with a departing Israeli prime minister. This may be true, but Abbas has yet to demonstrate that he is willing to offer Israel finality, an end of claims and acceptance of Israel as the Jewish people's national state in return for Israeli willingness to accept a Palestinian state with a territory comparable to the 1967 lines and a capital in Jerusalem.

The quest for a renewal of the Israeli-Palestinian negotiation was reinforced by Barack Obama's election as America's new president. The new president made the resolution of this conflict a priority, an important component of his effort to ameliorate the tension between the United States and the Muslim and Arab worlds. But Obama

also encountered a right-wing Israeli government that was once again headed by Benjamin Netanyahu. The Israeli electorate that had elected Ehud Olmert in 2006 on a dovish platform was pushed to the right by the Iranian threat and by the impact of the 2006 Lebanon War, Hamas's control of Gaza and operation cast led in 2008–09. Prime Minister Netanyahu grudgingly accepted the notion of Palestinian statehood, but that did not suffice to get the process restarted. Nor was it certain that Obama could find a willing and effective Palestinian partner for his effort. For much of 2011, the Palestinian preference seemed to be adoption by the UN General Assembly of a resolution that would recognize a Palestinian state in the lines of 1967. The impact of the Arab Spring of 2011 on Palestinian politics and on the Palestinian-Israeli equation was also unclear. President Obama and others suggested that it actually made an Israeli-Palestinian deal more urgent and more feasible. Netanyahu's government and quite a few Palestinians argued that major decisions could not be made in times of flux and uncertainty. In Gaza the Hamas leadership was biding its time, hoping that the kindred Muslim Brotherhood would become more influential in Egypt. Both the Fatah and Hamas leaderships were concerned that their constituencies might be affected by the prevailing mood in the Arab world and take to the streets, while Israel was concerned that the same mood could lead to a third intifada.

From "Israeli Arabs" to "Israel's Palestinian Citizens"

In the original terminology of the Arab-Israeli dispute, the conflict in and over British Mandate Palestine was conducted between an Arab side and a Jewish side. It was only after the establishment of the state of Israel and the conclusion of the 1948 war that a stark distinction was drawn between Israelis and Palestinians as the successors of the Jewish and Arab communities in Palestine. In Israeli usage, the term "Arab" came to refer to the people who lived in the larger Arab world beyond Israel's borders, while the term "Palestinian" referred to Palestinians residing outside Israel. Israel's own Arab or Palestinian citizens were strictly referred to as "Israeli Arabs," as members of Israel's "Arab minority" or "sector." This curious choice of terms well expressed Israel-

is' uneasiness about the Palestinian issue. It was, in a way, easier to cope with a national minority pertaining to an amorphous Arab world than with a people who laid specific claim to Israel's own land.²¹ For twenty years or so, Israel's Arab citizens accepted this terminology and used it themselves, but by the 1970s, they began to refer to themselves as Palestinians or as Palestinians who happened to be Israeli citizens. This was but one of many profound changes in the complex relationship between the Israeli state and its Arab citizens.

When the 1948 war ended, some 160,000 Palestinian Arabs remained in the territory of the independent Jewish state and became its citizens. As a result, the fledgling state of Israel had a population of just over one million, and its Arab citizens constituted a minority of about 15 percent. In the aftermath of a brutal war, the victorious Jews considered this Arab minority as a potential fifth column, liable to be used by a hostile Arab world in an inevitable, imminent "second round." This underlying attitude was translated into a policy of control embodied first and foremost by the imposition of a system of military government on the Arab population, which was abolished only in 1966 by Israel's third prime minister, Levi Eshkol.

This policy of control was carried out in an ambivalent context. Israel was hard put to decide whether as a Jewish state it wanted to separate the Arab minority from the mainstream of Israeli public life or, as a democratic state dominated by a social-democratic political establishment, to integrate it. Ironically, integration was first accomplished, after a fashion, in the political realm. As full-fledged citizens of the state of Israel (though not as truly equal members of Israel's body politic and society), most Israeli Arabs voted for Zionist parties through satellite political party lists and, in fact, helped to perpetuate Labor's hegemony.

During these early years, the Arab minority, predominantly rural and Muslim, can best be described as powerless, traumatized, and confused. Its members had to adjust to defeat, to minority status, and to isolation from the other parts of the fragmented Palestinian community and from the larger Arab world. There also was an acute problem of leadership: the pre-1948 Palestinian Arab elites were now beyond Israel's borders (for example, in East Jerusalem), and those who had stayed tended to be poorer and less educated. Arab political opinion and activity in Israel

spanned a spectrum that went from pragmatic acceptance of the reality of the Jewish state to nationalist opposition to and rejection of it. Pragmatism was manifested by most Arabs' voting for the major Zionist parties, and opposition was manifested primarily through the Communist Party. Attempts to form a local Arab nationalist party (notably a grouping called Al-Ard, or The Land) collapsed when faced with an insurmountable obstacle: to qualify as such, the party would adopt a platform negating Israel's very existence and legitimacy as a Jewish state, and then the government and courts would label it seditious. A subtler, politically easier way for members of the intellectual Arab elite in Israel to express their rejection of the Israeli state was in literary prose and verse.

As in so many other respects, 1967 was a watershed year in the evolution of Israel's Arab minority. The reemergence of an authentic and effective Palestinian nationalist movement and the removal of the physical barrier that had once separated them from the Palestinian and Arab worlds beyond Israel's borders induced a process of Palestinization. But the balance that had been achieved in practice between Israeli and Arab nationalist components in the community was upset. It was a measure of this change that the term "Israeli Arab" was discarded, and Israel's Arab citizens came to refer to themselves as Palestinians. This nationalist awakening, coupled with socioeconomic improvements—a higher standard of living, a higher level of education, the partial breakdown of the extended-family system, the transformation of several villages into towns—led to a new phase of political activism. On March 30, 1976, a massive protest was organized, under the title The Day of the Land, against the expropriation of Arab-owned land in the Galilee (in northern Israel). In clashes with security forces, six people were killed. March 30 became an annual day of protest for Palestinians in Israel and in the West Bank and Gaza.

Yasser Arafat and the PLO turned the day into an all-Palestinian event, but as a rule the PLO did not view Israel's Arab minority as part of its constituency. Long before the PLO formally accepted the notion of a two-state solution, its leaders had presumed that would be the eventual outcome, while most Arabs in Israel, though galvanized by the idea of Palestinian nationalism, continued to see their future within the state of

Israel. Some Israeli Arabs crossed a physical and mental line and joined the PLO and its orbit, but the vast majority continued to live within the Israeli state and system. Israel's Arab minority did not join either the violent conflicts between the PLO and Israel or either of the intifadas.

Still, the patterns of organization and activity in Israeli-Arab political life underwent profound changes after 1967. The Zionist parties' satellite lists disappeared, and nationalist Arab parties were formed that found a way of operating within the boundaries of Israeli law (most notably Abdel Wahab Darawshe's Arab Democratic Party, founded in 1988). Semipolitical civic groups like the Committee of Heads of Local Arab Councils emerged. In the late 1970s a powerful Islamic fundamentalist movement appeared, partly as a reflection of regional trends and partly in response to particular local conditions. Muslim fundamentalists in Israel are primarily a religious and social phenomenon, but their potential political power is enormous.²²

In the post-1976 political chronology of the Israeli state's relationship with its Arab citizens, three events stand out as particularly significant turning points. One was the signing of the Oslo Accords between Israel and the PLO in 1993. The mutual recognition between Israel and the Palestinian national movement, the establishment of the Palestinian Authority, and the prospect of Palestinian statehood complicated the self view and political perspective of Israel's Arab minority. Most significantly, its members tended to "localize" their outlook and focus it on their position in and relationship with the Israeli state. This tendency was largely a by-product of the PLO leadership's decision to avoid dealing with the issues of the group known in Arab and Palestinian parlance as "the Palestinians of 1948." Because the issues of 1948 were to be dealt with in the final-status negotiations, Israel's Arabs saw no point in antagonizing the Israeli leadership and public by raising these sensitive issues earlier.

This being the case, Israel's Arab citizens felt that it was up to them to deal with their position and status in Israel. Several developments and forces combined to radicalize their quest. What had been a minority of 160,000 after the 1948 war had, in subsequent years, crossed the 1 million mark. Villagers became urban dwellers, and an increasingly large number of university graduates were frustrated by a lack of jobs or unsatisfactory employ-

ment. Successive Israeli governments failed to draw appropriate lessons from the March 1976 outburst and formulate a comprehensive policy for the Arab minority; they settled, at best, on a piecemeal approach to this cardinal problem (the one exception to this rule was the Rabin government of 1992–95). The rise and expansion of the Islamic movement introduced into the equation a powerful actor that claimed to be apolitical but had in fact a considerable, radicalizing political impact.

Many, if not most, Arab citizens of Israel were primarily preoccupied with mundane issues of integration and equality: educational opportunities, a larger slice of the national economic pie, and progress toward economic and civic equality. But the political and intellectual elites intensified their critique of the very foundations of the state, rejecting the prevalent description of Israel as of a Jewish and democratic state and advancing such themes and ideas as a “bi-national state,” the status of a national minority, “reopening the files of 1948” and the *Nakba* (catastrophe) narrative. *Nakba* is the common Arabic term for the events of 1948 and stands in sharp contrast to the Israeli-Hebrew narrative of independence and liberation.

The second event was the wave of violence that burst out in Israel on October 1, 2000, a response to the outbreak three days earlier of Palestinian violence that came to be known as the al-Aqsa intifada. In the clashes between the Israeli police and Arab demonstrators and rioters, thirteen Arab citizens of Israel were killed. It is difficult to overstate the importance of an event that had a traumatizing effect on both sides of the Arab-Jewish divide. On the Jewish side, the violent clashes of early October joined the outbreak of the intifada in creating the sense of the end of an era. If the peace process of the 1990s generated expectations for the normalization of life in Israel, the events of the autumn of 2000 underscored the fact that such normalization remained a remote prospect. In certain respects, the Arab-Jewish clashes inside Israel were more ominous than the outbreak of violence with the Palestinian Authority, in that they exposed the pernicious potential of the tension between the Israeli state and a national minority of nearly 20 percent. Critical or even hostile rhetoric by an Arab intellectual or member of the Knesset can be seen as releasing tension and frustration in a legitimate

fashion; but blocking roads or clashes of thousands of angry demonstrators with the police are a different matter. From the Arab perspective the use of fire arms by the Israeli police was seen as unjustified and as yet another manifestation at the Israeli state’s hostility.

On the eve of the February 2001 elections, Ehud Barak formed a commission of inquiry headed by a Supreme Court Justice (the Or Commission) to investigate the government’s (particularly the police’s) conduct during the October crisis. The formation of the Or Commission served to calm the atmosphere and to suspend full discussion of Arab-Jewish relations in Israel for nearly three years—the time taken by the commission to complete its work.

The Or Commission published its report in September 2003. The bulky report chided political leaders (former prime minister Barak, former interior security minister Shlomo Ben-Ami, a number of Arab members of the Knesset, or MKs), and the leadership of the police, and recommended sanctions against several police officers. But the importance of the report (coauthored by Professor Shimon Shamir and Justice Hashem Khatib) was in the thorough analysis of the relationship between the state of Israel and its Arab citizens. The commission was critical both of the conduct of the leadership of the Arab minority and of the Israeli government’s failure over the years to deal thoroughly with the political and socio-economic problems of the Arab minority.

Unfortunately, the Or Commission’s policy recommendations were essentially filed away and the rift between majority and minority in Israel grew ever wider. One outcome of this state of affairs was the publication between December 2006 and May 2007 of four papers authored by groups of Arab academics and civic leaders that came to be known as the vision documents. The documents, collectively and separately, present the boldest challenge to date to the current fabric of Arab-Jewish relations in Israel.

The vision documents constitute a total rejection of the current identity and make-up of the Israeli state. They are predicated on a refutation of the dominant Israeli-Zionist narrative. Israel is presented as an essentially imperialist, expansionist entity. The Arabs in Israel are an integral part of the Palestinian Arab people and are the abused,

indigenous, or native people. Two broad alternatives are offered to restore their lawful rights: a binational state as a comprehensive solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; or a two-state solution with far-reaching changes in the character of the Israeli state, transforming it from a Jewish state to “a state for all its citizens.”²³

The civic activism and radicalism of the Arab nongovernmental organizations in Israel has long been matched in the political arena by the Arab members of the Knesset. The Arab minority in Israel now constitutes some 17 percent of the population (the Arab residents of East Jerusalem not included) and (given the young age of the Arab population) 14 percent of the electorate. In Israel's fragmented-political system, when a few votes in the Knesset determine the fate of coalitions and governments, 14 percent of the electorate could in theory elect fifteen MKs and constitute a swing vote in Israeli politics. But that would require full acceptance of the rules of the game in Israeli politics and a high degree of coherence and unity. Neither of these have been the case. Over the years, the percentage of Arabs voting for what can be called Arab Zionist parties (those willing to participate fully in Israel's political process) declined dramatically, from 52 percent of the total Arab vote in the 1992 elections to 18 percent in the 2009 elections. Of the 15 Arab MKs in 2009, just four were from Arab Zionist parties. Turnout among Arab voters has also steadily dropped, from nearly 70 percent in 1992 to 53 percent in 2009.

The trajectory on the Jewish side of the equation appears as a mirror image of the dominant trends on the Arab side. The bulk of the Jewish population has for many years been oblivious and indifferent to this difficult, fundamental problem and has been rattled only occasionally, including by the violent outbreaks of 1976 and 2000 and by occasional egregious statements or acts by Arab members of the Knesset. But over time a significant part of the Jewish right wing came to assign growing importance to what it views as a domestic Arab challenge to Israel's national identity and security.²⁴

In this respect, the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993 was a turning point for the Jewish right wing as it was for the members of the Arab minority. If the fate of the Land of Israel was to be decided, should Arab voters be able to tilt the decision? The elections of 1996 were to a large

extent a referendum on the Oslo process, and one of Netanyahu's campaign slogans used his nickname to claim that “Bibi is good for the Jews.” Netanyahu won by a small majority; had Peres won by an equally small majority, his authority to continue the Oslo process would in all likelihood have been challenged by right-wing opponents claiming, among other things, that he was elected by Arab votes and had no moral right to partition the “Land of Israel.” (In the 1996 elections, thirteen Arab MKs were elected, compared with ten in the previous Knesset, and nine of them were affiliated with Arab and Jewish-Arab (non-Zionist) parties.)

As the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations wore on, and the idea of a land swap became part of the agenda, a new idea took hold about exactly what land should be swapped. In return for the 5 percent or so of the West Bank that would be annexed to Israel (along with some 80 percent of the settlers), the Israeli territory transferred to the future Palestinian state should not be a piece of southern Israel contiguous to the Gaza Strip, but rather a part of Israel with a sizable population of Israeli Arabs. The argument (made by Israeli centrists as well as those on the right) was that such a transfer would consolidate the Jewish majority and character of Israel and would ensure that a “two-state solution” would indeed rest on the country's partition between a purely Arab and a predominantly Jewish state.

Such a swap would in fact be “a transfer in place,” whereby a quarter of a million Israeli-Arab citizens would remain in their homes but lose their Israeli citizenship and become citizens of a new Palestinian-Arab state. The idea's proponents argued that this was hardly a calamity, since the population viewed itself as Palestinian. But the idea met with fierce opposition, some of it from Israeli Jewish liberals, and most of it from Israeli Arabs who argued that they wanted to remain citizens of a transformed Israeli state rather than become the citizens of an ill-defined Palestinian one. In short order, though, the centrist advocates of this idea were overshadowed by right-wing activists. Most prominent among the latter was Avigdor Lieberman, head of the Israel Beitenu Party, who turned the issue of the Arab minority's loyalty (or lack thereof) into the centerpiece of the 2009 election campaign that brought his party into Netanyahu's coalition and landed him in the respectable position of foreign minister.

Lieberman and his party persisted in their campaign against what they call Arab “disloyalty” to the Israeli state. This campaign culminated in March 2011 in the passage of the third reading of a Knesset bill that came to be known as the *Nakba* bill. It stipulated that the minister of finance was entitled to reduce the budgets of state-funded organizations and local municipalities should they reject the existence of the state of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state. Upholding the *Nakba* narrative (that the establishment of Israel was a catastrophe for Arabs) was cited as the prime example of such conduct. The law’s authors had a harsher version of their legislation in mind as well as other measures but had to reach a compromise with other coalition members who were reticent on grounds of principle or prudence to escalate the tension with the Arab minority. But even this milder version marked a further escalation in the vicious spiral that has come to characterize Israel’s relationship with its Arab minority.

Israel And Iraq: Conflict without Relations

Iraq occupies a special place among all of Israel’s relationships with Arab nations. Iraq is sufficiently remote from Israel to have chosen to act as a “nonconfrontation” state, but for a variety of reasons its rulers have preferred over the years to participate in military conflict with Israel even though it does not share a border with Israel. Indeed, the absence of a common border has radicalized the Iraqi-Israeli relationship. Arab-Israeli peace has mostly been predicated on two foundations—that the cost of war is prohibitive, and that “land” can be exchanged for “peace.” Neither is an element in the Israeli-Iraqi equation, and the conflict between the two countries has been nourished by other sources.

The pattern was established early. Iraq played an important part in the 1948 war, by pushing for Arab participation and by sending an expeditionary force to join the Arab campaign. But, unlike Israel’s immediate neighbors, Iraq chose not to end the war with an armistice agreement, and in similar fashion it dispatched expeditionary forces in 1967 and 1973 but took no part in the diplomatic activities that brought these wars to an end.²⁵

Israel’s conflict with the conservative Iraqi regime in power during the decade after the 1948 war was muted. But the overthrow in 1958 of the Iraqi monarchy and its replacement by a succession of revolutionary and postrevolutionary regimes changed the situation. Moved by their own ambitions for Arab leadership and their competition with Egypt and Syria, Iraq’s leaders from Abd al-Karim Qassem to Saddam Hussein tended to take the most radical positions concerning Israel and to pursue them from the comparative safety afforded by distance. Israel, in turn, was worried by the prospect of having to confront Iraq’s full potential as a participant in future wars, either as the linchpin of an eastern front comprising Iraq, Syria, and Jordan, or as an immediate neighbor if Iraq took over Jordan. To keep such possibilities at bay, Israel pursued two principal policies: it helped the Kurdish secessionists in northern Iraq (hoping to keep Baghdad’s leaders preoccupied on that front), and it cultivated a strategic alliance with the shah’s Iran. (This latter had a broader agenda, but common enmity with Iraq was an important component.) These Israeli actions, needless to say, were well-known to the Iraqis and helped to develop their view of Israel as a dangerous national enemy.²⁶

This configuration was altered in the late 1970s when Egypt signed its peace treaty with Israel, when Israel lost its alliance with Iran in the wake of the Islamist revolution there, and when the Kurdish rebellion collapsed. Saddam Hussein’s rise to power in 1979 thus ushered in a period of domestic stability in Iraq. Over time, Saddam built an outsized army of sixty divisions and also sought to obtain nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction. Along with Hafiz al-Asad, Saddam led the opposition to Sadat and the Egyptian-Israeli peace, but he and his country were soon absorbed in Iraq’s eight-year war with Iran.²⁷

Israel was worried not so much about Iraq’s conventional military buildup as about its actual or potential acquisition and development of weapons of mass destruction—chemical weapons, Scud missiles, and, most ominously, nuclear weapons. Israel was not necessarily the only likely target: Saddam’s army used chemical weapons against Kurdish civilians, and Scud missiles were launched against Iran. But the notion that a regime like Saddam Hussein’s might be in possession of nuclear weapons was unacceptable to

Israel. When, in June 1981, an Israeli air raid destroyed Iraq's nuclear reactor at Ossirak, Iraq did not respond or retaliate, but Israel's action further exacerbated Iraq's hostility.²⁸

The end of the Iran-Iraq war in 1988 had the effect of releasing the huge military machine that Saddam Hussein had constructed. He was determined to use it to aggrandize his regime, and he saw Israel as a principal foe and an obstacle to his schemes. In April 1990 he publicly warned that Iraq possessed "binary chemical weapons" and threatened to "make fire eat up half of Israel if it tries to do anything against Iraq." He may have been thinking of his plans for the conquest of Kuwait, or of Israel's anticipated opposition to any Iraqi act of aggrandizement, but he was also trying to deter Israel from interfering with his plans and to couch his expansionist schemes in anti-Israeli terms.²⁹ In the event, Saddam chose to carry out his aggrandizement in the Persian Gulf; he occupied Kuwait and threatened Saudi Arabia, thus triggering the crisis of 1990 and the war of 1991. He positioned himself as a latter-day Nasser fighting for the Arab cause against the West and against Israel, depicting his occupation of Kuwait as part of a broader challenge to the colonial order that had been imposed on the Arab world at the end of World War I. This was hollow posturing, and most of the Arab world saw it as such. But some mistakenly either accepted Saddam's claims or believed that he would somehow emerge victorious. The PLO's leaders and many Palestinians in the Gulf were among those who made these errors.³⁰

During the Persian Gulf War, Saddam fired about forty Scud missiles at Israel, primarily in hopes of drawing Israel into the war and thus splitting the Arab coalition the United States had organized against him. Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir's government, partly of its own volition and partly under American pressure, did not respond—restraint that paid off handsomely. The U.S.-led coalition decimated Iraq's military machine, and the constraints imposed on Iraq by the United States through the United Nations at the war's end led to the destruction of almost all, if not all, of Iraq's missiles and unconventional arsenal. In addition, a sanctions regime severely limited Iraq's oil exports and oil revenues. Washington's "containment" of Iraq has thus denied it any effective role in the Middle East since 1991.

In the 1980s, at the height of its war with Iran, and then in the 1990s, Iraq sent some indirect messages to Israel that it was interested in entering into a tacit dialogue. Some Israeli politicians and strategic planners supported this idea, arguing that it could balance the threat posed by Iran or provide leverage vis-à-vis Syria. Others argued that Saddam was not credible, that Israel should support U.S. policy to contain Iraq and not subvert it, and that in any event Iraq was not seriously interested in dialogue but, at best, in buying some goodwill in the United States. The latter arguments prevailed, and a tacit dialogue, whether or not Saddam intended it, never developed.

Israel, alongside the United States, closely monitored Iraq's compliance with the UN regulations imposed on Baghdad at the end of the Gulf War. With almost all of Iraq's arsenal of weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missiles destroyed, as well as its capacity to reproduce them, and with Iraq's oil exports limited to the bare minimum, this edge of Iraq's offensive capabilities was blunted. Saddam's limited resources were invested instead in his regime's very survival. But he was also remarkably consistent in his drive to escape this situation, to erode Middle Eastern and international support for Washington's policies, and to maintain or restore at least a measure of Iraq's offensive capability. On several occasions, the United States responded to these challenges with limited military action and in February 1998 prepared the ground for, but did not carry out, a large-scale operation.

As already discussed in chapter 5, George W. Bush's election to the presidency, the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001, and ultimately Washington's decision to invade Iraq and topple Saddam's regime transformed this dynamic. It is still not clear what Iraqi state and what Iraqi political system ultimately will emerge from this unfinished saga. At this point, Iraq does not play an active role in regional politics, and it has yet to formulate its own distinct policy vis-à-vis Israel.

Israel has no reason to regret Saddam's removal, but it has been adversely affected by the resulting weakening of America's position in the Middle East and by the boost given to Iran's regional ambitions through the removal of its arch rival.

Notes

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