

Israeli–Palestinian Peacemaking

The Role of the Arab States

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Summary

- The positions of several Arab states towards Israel have evolved greatly in the past 50 years. Four of these states in particular – Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the UAE and (to a lesser extent) Jordan – could be influential in shaping the course of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.
- In addition to Egypt and Jordan (which have signed peace treaties with Israel), Saudi Arabia and the UAE, among other Gulf states, now have extensive – albeit discreet – dealings with Israel.
- This evolution has created a new situation in the region, with these Arab states now having considerable potential influence over the Israelis and Palestinians. It also has implications for US positions and policy. So far, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the UAE and Jordan have chosen not to test what this influence could achieve.
- One reason for the inactivity to date may be disenchantment with the Palestinians and their cause, including the inability of Palestinian leaders to unite to promote it. However, ignoring Palestinian concerns will not bring about a resolution of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, which will continue to add to instability in the region. If Arab leaders see regional stability as being in their countries' interests, they should be trying to shape any eventual peace plan advanced by the administration of US President Donald Trump in such a way that it forms a framework for negotiations that both Israeli and Palestinian leaderships can accept.



Introduction

This briefing forms part of the Chatham House project, ‘Israel–Palestine: Beyond the Stalemate’. It pursues one of the main themes of our previous briefing, published in July 2018 (*Israeli–Palestinian Peacemaking: What Can We Learn From Previous Efforts?*),¹ namely the potential importance of the role of the Arab states, or at least some of them.

The objective of this briefing is to stimulate discussion with policymakers and opinion-formers in the Middle East and in capitals outside the region.

Like its predecessor, this briefing is intended for those already engaged in consideration of policy towards the conflict. It therefore assumes an existing knowledge of the subject.

The briefing offers four scenarios concerning the role of the Arab states in Israeli–Palestinian peacemaking, namely:

- **More of the same**, in which there is neither a breakthrough in terms of peace between Israel and the Palestinians nor a sustained escalation of violence. In this scenario, the Arab states act only to protect their own immediate interests.
- **An ‘outside-in’ peace initiative**, in which key Arab states (especially Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the UAE and Jordan) engage with Israel, the Palestinians and the US administration to help restart peace negotiations within the framework of a Donald Trump-led peace plan which the parties find acceptable.
- **Imposition of a Trump peace plan** strongly skewed in Israel’s favour. In this scenario, the Arab states – despite serious misgivings about the plan – assist the US in seeking to coerce the Palestinians into accepting it.
- **‘Things fall apart’**. In this scenario, worsening conflicts in other parts of the region divert the attention of the international community away from the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, with the Palestinians turning to violence to draw attention back to their cause.

Only one of these scenarios – the second – has a positive outcome. In order to reach that outcome, the Arab states (and especially Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the UAE and Jordan) would need to be proactive and assertive in discussing with the US administration what shape a Trump peace plan ought to have. Their aim in doing so would be to ensure that the plan is sufficiently balanced to serve as a basis for Israeli–Palestinian negotiations. In discussions with Israel, these key Arab states and others would need to make clear the full extent of the offer to Israel: namely, a complete end to the dispute with the Arab world and full normalization of relations with all the Arab states. Arab leaders would need to make clear to Israel that these benefits would only be available in the context of a conflict-ending Israeli–Palestinian peace agreement.

Once negotiations on the basis of a Trump peace plan were under way, the Arab states would have to provide moral and diplomatic support to the Palestinian leadership. (Some difficult compromises would be required from the Palestinians, as well as the

¹ Mekelberg, Y. and Shapland, G. (2018), *Israeli–Palestinian Peacemaking: What Can We Learn From Previous Efforts?*, Briefing, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/israeli-palestinian-peacemaking-what-can-we-learn-previous-efforts> (accessed 8 Jan. 2019).

Israelis, for negotiations to reach a successful conclusion.) Such support would be particularly important in respect of Jerusalem, over which the Palestinians would be vulnerable to criticism from the wider Arab and Muslim worlds, as well as from their own people.

The story so far

Arab states have supported the Palestinian cause in various ways (giving diplomatic, military and sometimes financial support; hosting Palestinian refugees) over the past 70 years. However, the Arab regimes that supported the Palestinians were only half-heartedly committed to the Palestinian cause. At times, they exploited it for their own ends. At the very least, despite their pro-Palestinian rhetoric, these regimes made sure that when their national interests clashed with those of the Palestinians, they gave priority to the former.

While generally maintaining official positions supportive of the Palestinians, several Arab states have therefore, over the years, established relationships of various kinds with Israel. In 1979, Egypt signed a peace treaty with Israel, abandoning initial attempts to secure a parallel agreement for the Palestinians. Jordan had informal relations with Israel for decades before it felt able, following the signature of the Oslo agreement by the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Israel, to sign its own peace treaty with Israel in 1994. Representatives of Arab countries attended the US-sponsored Madrid peace conference in 1991 and took part (some more enthusiastically than others) in the multilateral track of the peace process.

The Arab Peace Initiative

In early 2002, Crown Prince Abdullah of Saudi Arabia floated the idea of a peace initiative in which the Arab states would give Israel unqualified acceptance in the Middle East if it withdrew from all the Palestinian territories it had occupied in 1967.²

In March 2002, an Arab League summit unanimously adopted a resolution based on Abdullah's ideas. The resolution, which became known as the Arab Peace Initiative (API), offered Israel an end to the Arab–Israeli conflict, along with comprehensive peace and normal relations. In exchange, Israel would have to end its occupation of the West Bank (including East Jerusalem) and Gaza 'in implementation of UN Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338', accept an independent Palestinian state in those territories with its capital in East Jerusalem, and accept 'a just solution' to the Palestinian refugee problem. The solution to the refugee problem was 'to be agreed upon in accordance with UN General Assembly Resolution 194'.³

The API, being based on UN resolutions, did not introduce new thinking into the business of Israeli–Palestinian peacemaking. Two aspects of the API were new, however. One was that the initiative had come from Saudi Arabia, normally regarded as one of the back-markers in terms of acceptance of Israel in the region. The other was that all Arab states had voted for the API, thus offering Israel a comprehensive deal.

² Friedman, T. L. (2002), 'An Intriguing Signal From the Saudi Crown Prince', *New York Times*, 17 February 2002, <https://www.nytimes.com/2002/02/17/opinion/an-intriguing-signal-from-the-saudi-crown-prince.html>.

³ S. Daniel Abraham Center for Middle East Peace (undated), 'Arab Peace Initiative', <http://www.centerpeace.org/explore/arab-peace-initiative/>.

The API could have served as the basis for renewed Israeli–Palestinian negotiations. However, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, who had no intention of relinquishing control of the West Bank, rejected the API.⁴ Publicly, Sharon justified this by portraying the API as a package of non-negotiable demands that Israel could not be expected to accept. Many Israelis objected to the inclusion in the API of a provision for the resolution of the refugee issue ‘in accordance with UN General Assembly Resolution 194’, something that implied the ‘right of return’. Moreover, there was no public pressure on him to do otherwise: ‘the launch of the API took place in the midst of the Second Intifada, which included a series of major terrorist attacks against Israeli civilians that greatly reduced Israeli receptivity to talk of peace and the concessions it might entail.’⁵ Palestinian Authority (PA) president Yasser Arafat, no doubt eager to secure as much international support for the Palestinian cause as he could, and to repair his image in the wake of the ‘Karine A’ arms-smuggling affair and the violence of the Second Intifada, accepted the API.

The Arab League re-endorsed the API at its 2007 summit. Six years later, at a meeting in April 2013 hosted by US Secretary of State John Kerry, a delegation representing the Arab League softened the API’s demands of Israel by accepting the idea of mutually agreed land swaps.⁶

At its summit in March 2017, the Arab League once again endorsed the API.⁷ However, this officially agreed Arab position did not translate into vigorous diplomatic action against President Trump’s December 2017 announcement on Jerusalem, despite the call in the API for Israel to accept East Jerusalem as the capital of a future Palestinian state. Nor was there more than the most muted Arab support (for example, a statement on the Arab League website by the secretary-general of that organization)⁸ for the declaration to the UN Security Council in February 2018 by Mahmoud Abbas, the current president of the PA, that the API was a necessary component of any relaunched peace process.

The current picture

The Arab states as players in the trajectory of the Israeli–Palestinian drama: leading, supporting and cameo roles

Three Arab states (Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE) could play a major part in the evolution or resolution of the conflict. In Egypt’s case, this is due partly to its geographical adjacency to Israel and Gaza and partly to its diplomatic and military weight in the Middle East, something recognized in Washington.

Although not geographically adjacent to Israel and Palestine, Saudi Arabia is also likely to be a key player. This reflects several factors, including its wealth and size and the prestige its rulers have in the Arab and Muslim worlds as guardians of the

⁴ Smith, C. D. (2017), *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, Bedford/St Martin’s.

⁵ Mekeberg and Shapland (2018), *Israeli–Palestinian Peacemaking: What Can We Learn From Previous Efforts?*

⁶ S. Daniel Abraham Center for Middle East Peace (undated), ‘Arab Peace Initiative’.

⁷ Khoury, J. and The Associated Press (2017), ‘Leaders at Arab Summit Reaffirm 2002 Two-state Solution Peace Plan’, *Haaretz*, 29 March 2017, <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/jordan/leaders-at-arab-summit-reaffirm-2002-two-state-solution-peace-plan-1.5454997>.

⁸ Wafa (2018), ‘Arab League chief urges international community to back President Abbas’ peace vision’, 21 February 2018, <http://english.wafa.ps/page.aspx?id=ifEd9Da96611495277aifEd9D>.

Muslim holy places in Mecca and Medina. Access to power in Washington is also a major factor: although such access has varied greatly over time, for now the Saudis' close personal connections to the Trump administration give them great potential influence in the White House (though not in Congress, where, because of the war in Yemen and the Jamal Khashoggi affair, their standing is much lower than it was). Another factor has been the Saudis' inclination to be much more active in the Middle East generally than they used to be. This did not start with the rise of Mohammed bin Salman, the crown prince, but has been most noticeable since then.

The UAE, while lacking the size and religious clout of Saudi Arabia, is nonetheless both wealthy and active. Like Saudi Arabia, it enjoys privileged access in Washington.

A fourth state, Jordan, has a huge stake in the trajectory of the conflict. Jordan shares a border with Israel and the occupied West Bank, and the majority of its population is of Palestinian origin. Moreover, the country's Hashemite rulers are strongly attached to their role in the protection of the Muslim holy places in Jerusalem (something set out in the 1994 treaty with Israel). Given these interests, and the fact that Jordan is a small, vulnerable and indebted state in a volatile region, dealing with Israel is a necessity rather than a matter of choice. (Israel may also, however, be a source of opportunities for Jordan.) Not having the wealth of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the size of Egypt, or special access to the White House, Jordan has less ability to influence events than those three states have. But Jordan does have one major asset in its quest for allies who might protect its stake in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict: namely, its contribution to the containment of instability in the region.

Other Arab states have involved themselves in various ways in the conflict but do not have the weight of Saudi Arabia, Egypt or the UAE. Qatar is both wealthy and active (mainly in respect of Gaza), although its influence has been reduced since June 2017 when Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt cut ties with it.

Other Arab states – more distant geographically from the conflict, less wealthy, preoccupied with their internal problems, or more cautious about becoming involved in the conflict – have been and will probably remain much less significant. A partial exception is Morocco, which chairs the al-Quds (Jerusalem) Committee of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and which could have a niche role in respect of Jerusalem.

The potential influence of all these Arab states is greatly increased by their relationships with Israel. These relationships take a variety of forms, as outlined below.

Egyptian and Jordanian relations with Israel

Egypt and Jordan have bilateral peace treaties with Israel. Both countries have security and economic relations with Israel. Egypt works with Israel to contain Hamas and other militant groups in Gaza and to counter insurgents in Sinai: in an interview in early January, President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi acknowledged that his country's cooperation with Israel was 'the closest and deepest' ever.⁹ Moreover, Egypt aspires

⁹ Reuters (2019), 'Egypt's Sisi acknowledges close coordination with Israel in Sinai', 7 January 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-egypt-sisi-usa-idUSKCN1P101X>.

to become an export hub for liquefied natural gas, with imports of Israeli gas as part of that concept.¹⁰

For its part, Jordan cooperates extensively with Israel on security, as well as on practical matters such as gas (Jordan has signed an agreement to buy supplies from Israel)¹¹ and water, which the two countries share under the terms of their 1994 treaty.

Gulf states' relations with Israel

Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states maintain less formal relationships with Israel. For Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the perceived threat from Iran has probably been the most important driver of closer ties with Israel.¹²

These Gulf–Israel relationships include discreet security cooperation against Iran and its allies (the Saudis, Emiratis and Bahrainis feel the need for such cooperation particularly acutely) and joint counterterrorism work, as between Saudi Arabia and Israel.^{13, 14} The meeting in the White House in March 2018, at which senior Saudi, Emirati, Qatari and Omani officials discussed with their Israeli counterparts how the humanitarian crisis in Gaza might be alleviated, represented another manifestation of greater Arab acceptance of Israel.¹⁵ (The Palestinians, however, boycotted the event, in reaction to US policies on Israel–Palestine.)

Interactions between Israel and the UAE became particularly visible during the course of 2018. In March, UAE and Israeli fighter jets took part in an international exercise in Greece. In late October, the Israeli national anthem was played for the first time in the UAE when an Israeli athlete won gold at an international judo competition in Abu Dhabi. Just as remarkable was the fact that this took place in the presence of Miri Regev, Israel's minister of culture and sports.¹⁶ Regev also visited the Grand Mosque in Abu Dhabi.¹⁷ And in December 2018, a synagogue was opened in Dubai.¹⁸

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¹⁰ Malsin, J. (2018), 'In Egypt's Vision of Energy Independence, Egyptians Pay More', *Wall Street Journal*, 27 August 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/in-egypts-vision-of-energy-independence-egyptians-pay-more-1535367601>.

¹¹ Ghazal, M. (2018), 'Israeli gas to Jordan expected in 2020 – official', *Jordan Times*, 5 July 2018, <http://jordantimes.com/news/local/israeli-gas-jordan-expected-2020-%E2%80%94-official>.

¹² Feldman, S. and Cofman Wittes, T. (2018), 'Everyone Loves Israel Now', *Foreign Policy*, 26 March 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/03/26/why-everyone-loves-israel-now/>.

¹³ Middle East Monitor (2017), 'CIA: Saudi Arabia working with Israel to fight terror', 4 December 2017, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20171204-cia-saudi-arabia-working-with-israel-to-fight-terror/>.

¹⁴ Schwartz, F., Stancati, M. and Said, S. (2018), 'Covert Saudi Outreach to Israel Sputters After Journalist's Murder', *Wall Street Journal*, 18 December 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/covert-saudi-outreach-to-israel-sputters-after-journalists-murder-11545129001>.

¹⁵ Oliphant, J. (2018), 'White House hosts meeting on Gaza crisis without Palestinians present', Reuters, 13 March 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-palestinians-gaza/white-house-hosts-meeting-on-gaza-crisis-without-palestinians-present-idUSKCN1GP34M>.

¹⁶ Katzir, I. (2018), 'Israel's Anthem Plays in Abu Dhabi for First Time as Judoka Wins Gold', *Haaretz*, 28 October 2018, https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/israel-s-anthem-plays-in-abu-dhabi-for-first-time-as-judoka-wins-gold-1.6600967?utm_campaign=newsletter-daily&utm_medium=email&utm_source=smartfocus&utm_content=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.haaretz.com%2Fisrael-news%2Fisrael-s-anthem-plays-in-abu-dhabi-for-first-time-as-judoka-wins-gold-1.6600967.

¹⁷ Reuters and *Haaretz* (2018), 'Israeli Minister Tours Abu Dhabi's Grand Mosque Days After Netanyahu Visits Oman', 29 October 2018, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/israeli-minister-tours-abu-dhabi-s-grand-mosque-days-after-netanyahu-visits-oman-1.6601784>.

¹⁸ Ferziger, J. and Odenheimer, A. (2018), 'As the Gulf Warms Up to Israel, a Synagogue Grows in Dubai', *Bloomberg Businessweek*, 5 December 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-12-05/as-the-arab-world-warms-to-israel-a-synagogue-grows-in-dubai?srnd=premium-middle-east>.

Oman has also been ready to develop its relations with Israel. In late October 2018, Israel's prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, visited Muscat.¹⁹ Within days of Netanyahu's visit, Yusuf bin Alawi, the Omani foreign minister, told a conference in Bahrain that 'Israel is a state present in the region and we all understand this'. The following month, the Israeli transport minister, Yisrael Katz, spoke at an international transport conference in Muscat and proposed a rail link between the Gulf and Israel, via Jordan.²⁰

Saudi Arabia has been less publicly forthcoming than the UAE and Oman. Moreover, the Saudis' position *vis-à-vis* Israel has been harder to read. Mohammed bin Salman has referred publicly to the 'right' of Israelis as well as Palestinians 'to have their own land'.²¹ He has developed a close relationship with Jared Kushner, President Trump's senior adviser and son-in-law, who is known both for his close ties to the present Israeli government and for his disregard of Palestinian red lines relating to a resolution of the conflict. (Netanyahu is a family friend of the Kushners.) The crown prince's father, King Salman bin Abdul-Aziz Al Saud, however, has followed a more traditional Saudi line. At the Arab League summit in April 2018, he announced an 'extraordinary contribution' of \$50 million to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).²² In a speech in November 2018, he said that Palestine would always be his country's 'first issue'.²³

The Saudis have not made the same high-profile gestures of friendship towards Israel as the Emiratis and Omanis have done. Saudi Arabia does now allow Air India to use its airspace for flights between New Delhi and Tel Aviv – something the Saudis had previously refused to permit, despite US entreaties, when the Oslo process seemed close to producing an Israeli–Palestinian deal.²⁴ (The flights also use Omani airspace.) According to the media, the Saudis have allowed Israeli business people to visit the kingdom using special travel documents rather than their Israeli passports.²⁵ However, these are much lower-key concessions to Israel than having Israeli ministers visit or letting Israelis take part in sports/competitive events in the kingdom. Indeed, Saudi Arabia recently forfeited the right to host the world chess championship because of its refusal to allow the entry of Israeli competitors.²⁶

In early December 2018, an Israeli media report indicated that Netanyahu wanted to formalize diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia and hoped to make his country's ties to Saudi Arabia public 'in coming months'.²⁷ There has been no Saudi reaction to

¹⁹ Reuters (2018), 'Israeli PM Netanyahu makes rare visit to Oman', 26 October 2018, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-israel-oman/israeli-pm-netanyahu-makes-rare-visit-to-oman-idUKKCN1N01VN>.

²⁰ AFP (2018), 'Rail from Israel to Gulf 'makes sense,' says minister', France24, 7 November 2018, <https://www.france24.com/en/20181107-rail-israel-gulf-makes-sense-says-minister>.

²¹ Goldberg, J. (2018), 'Saudi Crown Prince: Iran's Supreme Leader 'Makes Hitler Look Good'', *The Atlantic*, 2 April 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/04/mohammed-bin-salman-iran-israel/557036/>.

²² UNRWA (2018), 'Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Makes Landmark Contribution of US\$50 million to UNRWA', press release, 27 April 2018, <https://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/press-releases/kingdom-saudi-arabia-makes-landmark-contribution-us50-million-unrwa>.

²³ Al Wasmī, N. (2018), 'King Salman calls for curbing of Iran's influence', *The National*, 19 November 2018, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/gcc/king-salman-calls-for-curbing-of-iran-s-influence-1.793528>.

²⁴ Landau, N. (2018), 'Making History, First Flight to Israel Overflying Saudi Arabia Lands in Tel Aviv', *Haaretz*, 22 March 2018, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/historic-flight-to-israel-over-saudi-arabia-takes-off-from-india-1.5935687>.

²⁵ Schwartz, Stancati and Said (2018), 'Covert Saudi Outreach to Israel Sputters After Journalist's Murder'.

²⁶ Gladstone, R. (2018), 'Saudi Arabia loses right to host international chess tournament after banning Israeli players', *The Independent*, 5 December 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/saudi-arabia-chess-tournament-israel-banned-riyadh-world-blitz-rapid-championship-russia-a8667951.html>.

²⁷ The New Arab (2018), 'Israel's Netanyahu to make ties with Saudi Arabia public 'in coming months'', 9 December 2018, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2018/12/9/netanyahu-to-make-relations-with-saudi-arabia-public-soon>.

what looks like early electioneering on Netanyahu's part. And there is little likelihood of the formalization of relations between the two countries in the absence of progress towards a resolution of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

Gains for Israel, gains for the Arab states

The arrangements described above work well for all sides. Gains for Israel include a partial end to its isolation in the region, a reduction in international pressure to make concessions to the Palestinians, and receipt of foreign exchange from sales of goods. The gains to the Arab states in terms of economic and security benefits have been outlined above. At least as important to these states is the diplomatic pay-off, in the form of a more sympathetic hearing in Washington.

On the other side of the coin, the disunited nature of the Palestinian leadership (especially the split between Fatah in the West Bank and Hamas in Gaza) has been a factor in discouraging Arab regimes from offering vigorous support to the Palestinians: why support a cause when its leaders cannot act together, let alone effectively?²⁸

Keeping it discreet

While it appears that some Arab leaders regard the Palestinian cause as a lower priority than their relationship with Israel (and, through Israel, with the US), they nevertheless want to avoid the unrest that open and formal relationships might provoke. The discreet nature of the exchanges – often handled by intelligence agencies rather than overtly by diplomats – provides some protection against accusations from their own people that they are 'selling out' the Palestinians.

To prevent Iran (or other rivals, such as Turkey) from posing as the Palestinians' champion, regimes such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE continue to give rhetorical support to the Palestinian cause. However, these regimes have so far refrained from using the influence they possess to try to change Israeli and US policies and actions. In the case of the US, the Saudi and Emirati regimes may feel that such ambitions might jeopardize the indulgence they enjoy in respect of their domestic policies and their conduct of the Yemeni conflict. For the Omanis, friendly gestures towards Israel may be seen as offering some insurance against US, Saudi or Emirati irritation with certain aspects of Oman's foreign policy (such as its good relations with Iran and contacts with the Houthis in Yemen).²⁹ For their part, the Qataris probably accord a much higher priority to the need for Washington to restrain the Saudis, Emiratis and Egyptians than they do to the promotion of the Palestinian cause.

Arab disunity

Furthermore, behind their lowest-common-denominator statements, the Arab countries are far from united. One major rift, to which allusion has already been made, is that between Qatar on the one hand and Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt on the other. Another but less public tussle is that between Jordan, which wants to

²⁸ Feldman and Cofman Wittes (2018), 'Everyone Loves Israel Now'.

²⁹ Cook, S. A. (2018), 'Oman Just Bought Israeli Insurance', *Foreign Policy*, 7 November 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/11/07/oman-just-bought-israeli-insurance/>.

retain its custodianship of the Muslim holy places in Jerusalem, and Saudi Arabia, which wants to challenge Jordan's role.³⁰ Such divisions undermine the potential for common action in support of the Palestinians, even should the will to take such action exist.

There certainly seems to be little appetite on the part of the leaders of influential Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE for making the development of closer cooperation with Israel contingent on a resumption of peace talks on terms acceptable to the Palestinians. This is not true of all Arab states: some, such as Kuwait, remain prepared to champion the Palestinian cause.³¹ But the readiness of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Oman (as well as Egypt and Jordan, and – separately – Qatar, over Gaza) to deal with Israel without progress in Israeli–Palestinian negotiations leaves the Palestinians in a weak position *vis-à-vis* both Israel and the US.

What might the future hold?

A Trump plan – and Arab attempts to set limits

The Trump administration's plan for Israeli–Palestinian peace has yet to materialize. Rumours of what it might contain have highlighted the role of regional powers such as Saudi Arabia in such a plan, giving it an 'outside-in' character. And in an interview published in late July 2018, Jason Greenblatt (Trump's special representative for international negotiations) confirmed the importance of the Arab states: 'A lot has to be done with regional countries in order to try to make this a success, so I've spent a lot of time in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt, and so on.'³² Moreover, in late August 2018, Nikki Haley, at the time the US permanent representative to the UN, suggested that Arab states would need to put pressure on the Palestinians in order to achieve a final agreement.³³

This emphasis on the importance of certain Arab states could give them a degree of influence over the content of any US plan or the manner of its presentation (something that could make such a plan more acceptable to the parties). The Arab states involved may choose not to use this influence, or at least not to use it as fully as they could, whether out of a desire to remain on good terms with the Trump administration or out of a belief that their impact would not be very great (or both). In the particular case of Saudi Arabia, and especially Mohammed bin Salman, widespread condemnation in the US Congress both of the Khashoggi murder and the conduct of the Saudi military campaign in Yemen may translate into even less Saudi readiness to put the relationship with the Trump White House to the test.

³⁰ Abou Jalal, R. (2018), 'Is Riyadh really pushing for control of Jerusalem holy sites?', *Al-Monitor*, 2 July 2018, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/07/saudi-arabia-holy-sites-jordan-jerusalem-pa-guardianship.html>.

³¹ Caschetta, A. J. (2018), 'Kuwait Seizes the Palestinian Cause', *Jerusalem Post*, Middle East Forum, 16 June 2018, https://www.meforum.org/articles/2018/kuwait-seizes-the-palestinian-cause?utm_source=Middle+East+Forum&utm_campaign=62d77fcc07-CASCETTA_CAMPAIGN_2018_06_19_10_47&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_086cfd423c-62d77fcc07-33866149&goal=0_086cfd423c-62d77fcc07-33866149.

³² Lehmann, S. (2018), 'The Understated Statesman: An Interview With Jason Greenblatt', *Hamodia*, 29 July 2018, <https://hamodia.com/features/the-understated-statesman-interview-jason-greenblatt/>.

³³ Cortellessa, E. (2018), 'Haley: Palestinian 'right of return' should be 'off the table'', *The Times of Israel*, 29 August 2018, https://www.timesofisrael.com/haley-palestinian-right-of-return-should-be-off-the-table/?utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=twitter.

While the leaders of key Arab states may not feel bold enough to try to shape a US plan in detail, some have made clear their positions on its essential components. According to one newspaper report, King Salman has told senior US officials that Saudi Arabia would not support a plan that did not include a Palestinian capital in East Jerusalem. The same report asserts that Jordan and Egypt have asked the US not to present its plan if it is not ‘fair’ to the Palestinian side.³⁴ King Abdullah II of Jordan said publicly in June 2018 that there could be no peace without a Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital.³⁵ And in late July 2018, President Sisi of Egypt reiterated to China’s Xinhua news agency his country’s stance in support of the establishment of an independent Palestinian state, with East Jerusalem as its capital and based on the pre-1967 borders and the relevant UN resolutions.³⁶

If the US plan fails to respect these positions, the Arab leaders concerned will find it hard to support it. However, if the plan is presented by Trump himself and backed by the full force of US diplomacy, they will equally find it hard to reject it – particularly if rewards in terms of economic or security assistance (or both) are offered as inducements for their backing.

Scenarios

This briefing, in offering some thoughts about what role the Arab states might play from now on, adopts a scenarios-based approach. Such an approach provides a way of organizing one’s thinking about the future. It is, though, inevitably speculative. However carefully scenarios are constructed, what happens in the future may well not resemble any of them at all closely. The least one can say is that other scenarios are undoubtedly possible. As the Danish physicist Niels Bohr is said to have remarked, ‘Prediction is very difficult, especially about the future.’³⁷

The scenarios explored in this briefing are as follows:

1. More of the same
2. An ‘outside-in’ peace initiative
3. Imposition of a Trump peace plan
4. ‘Things fall apart’

Scenario One: More of the same

In this scenario, no US plan for the resolution of the conflict emerges, only one designed to relieve the humanitarian crisis in Gaza. The Arab states continue to pursue their own interests with Israel (and the US), while keeping a wary eye on domestic opinion and paying lip service to the Palestinian cause as a way of managing that

³⁴ Tibon, A. (2018), ‘Saudi King Tells U.S. That Peace Plan Must Include East Jerusalem as Palestinian Capital’, *Haaretz*, 29 July 2018, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/saudis-say-u-s-peace-plan-must-include-e-j-l-as-palestinian-capital-1.6319323>.

³⁵ Reuters and *Haaretz* (2018), ‘Jordanian King Says No Peace Without Jerusalem as Capital of Palestine, Days After Meeting Netanyahu’, *Haaretz*, 21 June 2018, https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/jordanian-king-says-no-peace-without-jerusalem-as-capital-of-palestine-1.6197839?utm_campaign=newsletter-breaking-news&utm_medium=email&utm_content=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.haaretz.com%2Fmiddle-east-news%2Fjordanian-king-says-no-peace-without-jerusalem-as-capital-of-palestine-1.6197839&utm_source=smartfocus.

³⁶ Ariel, B. (2018), ‘Sisi to Israel: Take advantage of opportunity for peace’, Arutz Sheva, 30 July 2018, <https://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/249731>.

³⁷ Quoted in Ellis, K. A. (1970), *Teaching and Learning Elementary Social Studies*, Boston, MA, p. 431.

opinion. Relations between Israel and the Arab states remain important but largely covert, with Arab leaders making no attempt to put pressure on Israel (or to persuade the US to put pressure on Israel) in terms of recognizing that it could gain more from these relations if it treated the Palestinians better and resumed meaningful peace talks. Israeli leaders continue to believe that they can get a good deal in terms of what they want from the Arabs (even if formal relations, where they don't already exist, remain out of reach) while ignoring the Palestinians and managing, but not attempting to resolve, the conflict.

Israel continues to make (or continues to allow the settler movement to make) moves that render a two-state solution ever more difficult to achieve. In response, its Arab allies issue statements of condemnation but take no action. The US makes further contentious statements on the core issues of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

Some of the Arab regimes, including Saudi Arabia and Egypt, keep the relationship with Israel as discreet as they can, to avoid criticism.³⁸ Others, including the UAE and Oman, are more open but remain unwilling to establish formal diplomatic relations with Israel. For their part, Israel's leaders would like more explicit acceptance of their country's place in the region and, if possible, formal diplomatic relations. However, they do not need such things for their political survival. They are not, therefore, prepared to pay a price for these gains in terms of concessions to the Palestinians.

The Palestinians are the biggest losers. The leadership seeks further international recognition for a Palestinian state. However, its successes are purely symbolic and do not produce any improvement in the reality on the ground. With the path to a Palestinian state blocked, a younger generation of Palestinians turns increasingly to a struggle for individual rights within a single Israeli–Palestinian polity.

These younger Palestinians exploit all available opportunities to assert their rights, including voting in municipal elections in Jerusalem, although none of these moves is enough, by itself, to transform the situation. Such action encourages Israelis of Palestinian origin to vote for the United List in Knesset elections, as a means of increasing the strength of the Palestinian voice in Israeli politics. Palestinians of all kinds accept that the struggle will take decades rather than years, but are encouraged by the emergence of a Palestinian majority in the territory between the River Jordan and the Mediterranean.

A one-state reality takes shape, albeit without any formal political framework. This reality is unstable and often violent. It has echoes of the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa – that is, political struggle is conducted by means of acts of terrorism as well as mass protest, and is met by harsh Israeli reprisals. The conflict is protracted and bad for Israelis (especially those who care strongly that their country should be both Jewish and democratic) as well as Palestinians, although much worse for the latter. (In this scenario, the conflict is contained within limits. However, if it escalates, it could degenerate into a third intifada and thereby something resembling, in some respects, our third and fourth scenarios.)

In this scenario, a one-state reality takes shape, albeit without any formal political framework. This reality is unstable and often violent

³⁸ al-Omari, G. (2018), 'Ghaith al-Omari's Comments on Abdulhameed Hakeem "Who holds the keys of peace with Israel?"', The Washington Institute, 10 April 2018, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/ghaith-al-omaris-comments-on-abdulhameed-hakeem-who-holds-the-keys-of-peace>.

A ‘more of the same’ scenario could also result from the presentation of a US plan that is so limited in scope or so poorly constructed that it fails to secure the backing of the parties or the Arab regimes.

Scenario Two: An ‘outside-in’ peace initiative

In this second scenario, the key Arab regimes are faced with popular protests that combine calls for an end to the oppression of the Palestinians with protests at the lack of freedoms at home and the cost of adventures abroad. Opposition movements, hitherto clandestine, emerge into the public domain and use the Palestinian cause as a rallying cry. Fearing a threat to their own positions, wanting peace and quiet in order to attract investment from abroad, and anxious not to present a propaganda gift to Iran, the Arab regimes feel compelled to engage in proactive diplomacy.

They convince Trump (who needs a diplomatic success to distract attention from his domestic difficulties) that his dream of the ‘ultimate deal’ can only be turned into a reality if the Palestinians are offered a fair package. With this consideration in mind, the US peace plan that emerges is based on the API, and as such offers Israel comprehensive and formal acceptance by the Arab world. In order to create a ‘warm’ peace (something that Israelis have long sought), the multilateral working groups are revived, with the promise of much more committed Arab participation. As a further incentive, the Arabs agree to compensate Jews who fled their homes in Arab countries to live in Israel (or elsewhere).

In return, the Palestinians are offered: a fully fledged state with its capital in East Jerusalem; recognition of the wrongs done to the Palestinian refugees; and recognition of the wrongs done to those who stayed where they were and suffered, in different ways from the refugees, as a result. (However, because of Israeli fears of a major influx of refugees and their descendants, the refugee aspects of the deal are largely tokenistic.) While negotiations based on the plan are taking place, Arab leaders give Abbas the moral support necessary to encourage him to make reasonable concessions on sensitive issues – something Arafat did not get at Camp David in 2000. Morocco, as chair of the al-Quds Committee of the OIC, is active in securing the acceptance of Arab and Muslim states for the deal, especially those aspects which relate to Jerusalem, thus deflecting criticism from Abbas.

Not all Arab regimes are enthusiastic about this process, but it secures the acquiescence of those that are not: no Arab leader sees it as being in his interest to actively oppose it.

Negotiations within this framework are protracted but eventually produce a conflict-ending agreement. The region receives an economic boost that benefits everyone.³⁹

Scenario Three: Imposition of a Trump peace plan

In this third scenario, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt cooperate with the Trump administration to try to impose a skewed, pro-Israel peace plan on the Palestinian leadership. The US offer to the parties is a take-it-or-leave-it one, with no room for negotiation of the main elements. The Saudis, Emiratis and Egyptians do not like the plan, but need US support against an increasingly aggressive Iran and so agree to

³⁹ Tony Blair Institute for Global Change (2018), ‘Assessing Israel’s Trade With Its Arab Neighbours’, 14 August 2018, <https://institute.global/insight/middle-east/assessing-israels-trade-its-arab-neighbours>.

try to make it work. The Saudis, under pressure over the Khashoggi affair and their adventurism in Yemen, are especially keen to retain the sympathy of the White House and use their money as leverage to try to get the Palestinian leadership to agree to the plan. Israel accepts the plan, despite serious reservations, feeling confident that the Palestinians will reject it for failing to address their central demands.

Among other elements unacceptable to the Palestinians, the plan prescribes a capital for the Palestinian state in Ramallah or Abu Dis (a Palestinian village bordering Jerusalem) and hence requires the abandonment of the aspiration for a capital in East Jerusalem. (There was media reporting in early December 2017 that such an idea was under consideration.)⁴⁰ Under the plan, access to the Muslim holy places would be preserved for worshippers but the sites would fall under Israeli sovereignty. The plan makes no attempt to address the claims of the Palestinian refugees. Instead, ignoring the turmoil in Syria and Lebanon and the delicacy of the political situation in Jordan, it recommends that they be resettled *in situ* – something the Palestinians have always vociferously rejected as a denial of their ‘right of return’.

President Abbas knows that he could not survive if he accepted the plan. (Any conceivable successor to him as the leader of the Fatah-dominated PA would make the same calculation, especially given that a new leader would need to consolidate his position.) He therefore rejects it, prompting the US to impose sanctions. In response to these measures, Abbas abandons his quest for peace with Israel and decides to pursue reconciliation with Hamas instead. In line with his new course, he ends security cooperation with Israel and encourages resistance to the occupation, leading to a full-scale intifada.

Scenario Four: ‘Things fall apart’

The Trump administration, having failed to find a formula acceptable to US allies in the region, gives up its attempts to produce a peace plan.

Meanwhile, miscalculation in Syria leads to sustained armed conflict between Israel and Iran. Both countries suffer heavy losses. Iranian forces eventually claim victory and withdraw from Syria, having no existential reason for remaining there. This prompts a resurgence of armed opposition to the Syrian regime, and offers opportunities which Arab states opposed to Bashar al-Assad try to exploit. Elsewhere in the region, Yemen implodes; Saudi and Emirati forces make extracting themselves from Yemen a high priority.

In these circumstances, the Arab states and the broader international community completely lose sight of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. With the attention of the world on other matters, Israel annexes large parts of Area C on the West Bank.

In order to attract attention to their situation, Palestinians turn to large-scale, organized violence against Israelis. Some of this violence is directed by Hamas, which is resurgent in the West Bank. Palestinian groups and individuals carry out acts of terrorism against Israelis in Israel itself, as well as against settlers in the West Bank. The PA security forces are unable to contain this violence and collapse under the strain. Members of the security forces abandon their organizations’ efforts to suppress the intifada and take part in it instead.

⁴⁰ Barnard, A., Halbfinger, D. M. and Baker, P. (2017), ‘Talk of a Peace Plan That Snubs Palestinians Roils Middle East’, *New York Times*, 3 December 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/03/world/middleeast/palestinian-saudi-peace-plan.html>.

Having completely lost control of the situation, President Abbas stands down. An armed struggle between rivals for the succession occurs. The PA collapses into civil war and can no longer provide services to the Palestinians in the West Bank.

Israel attempts to restore security using massive and indiscriminate force. At the same time, it seizes the opportunity to coerce as many West Bank Palestinians as it can into leaving the territory. Large numbers of Palestinians seek refuge on the other side of the River Jordan. This in turn destabilizes Jordan.

Hamas in Gaza attempts to exploit the pressure on Israel by launching rockets in very large numbers against Israeli targets, and by encouraging other militant organizations in the territory to do the same. Israel responds heavily and indiscriminately. Gazans flee in their thousands into Egypt, overwhelming the Egyptian border forces, which are unable to prevent them entering. Egypt and the international community are confronted with a new Palestinian refugee community in Sinai. Hamas develops a closer alliance with Hezbollah.

Some Palestinian groups and individuals link up with a resurgent Al-Qaeda under Hamza bin Laden, son of Osama, to attack targets in Western countries as well as in Israel. The Palestinian cause becomes identified in Western minds with international jihadi terrorism. As a consequence, some members of the international community side increasingly with Israel. Others do not, but, despairing of a resolution of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, concentrate their efforts on what they see as the more immediate need to fight terrorism.

Conclusions

Because of their good relations with both the US and Israel, certain Arab states, notably Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the UAE, are well placed to play an important role in Israeli–Palestinian peacemaking. Whether they choose to do so – and, if so, what precisely they decide to do – will depend on a number of factors. One of the most significant is the priority they attach to supporting the Palestinian cause. For many Arab regimes, the issue is slipping steadily down their agenda, although they continue to pay it lip service. However, they have to bear in mind the feelings of their citizens, who are often strongly pro-Palestinian – and concomitantly anti-Israel. The regimes also have to consider the stability of the region, something that cannot be achieved, at least in the long term, without a resolution of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

Some Arab states feel threatened by Iran or extremist groups (or both). They see the military and intelligence capabilities of the US and Israel (including the hardware both can supply) as offering protection against these perceived threats. They therefore seek good relations with both countries – albeit, in respect of Israel, generally discreet ones. In these circumstances, the posture of key Arab states on Israeli–Palestinian peacemaking will be determined by the priority they accord to these alliances *vis-à-vis* the need to show their citizens that they are not abandoning the Palestinians. Another consideration may be a desire to manage expectations and avoid giving the impression that the Arab regimes could contribute significantly to Israeli–Palestinian peace (assuming they believe they could not).

In these circumstances, the easiest course for Arab leaders would be to maintain the present balance between these competing agendas – whether or not a Trump plan ever emerges. This would not, however, lead to a resolution of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, which would continue to contribute to instability in the region.

Much depends on the nature of any eventual Trump plan. If the plan goes some way towards meeting Palestinian demands, Arab regimes might play a very positive role. They could, for example, offer public moral support for the Palestinians as the latter confronted the need to make concessions in negotiations. Such support could be especially helpful regarding Jerusalem, which is an issue of great sensitivity for many Arabs (and Muslims more widely). Here, a Saudi ‘seal of approval’ could be decisive.

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In another scenario, Arab regimes might feel compelled to support a Trump plan even if it were wholly unacceptable to the Palestinians. They might press the Palestinian leadership to accept such a plan (or at least go through the motions of pressing the Palestinians to accept it), in order to maintain their (i.e. the Arab regimes’) relationships with the US. While the regimes in question might gain credit with the US administration for their efforts, the Palestinians would still almost certainly reject the plan.

In a fourth scenario, one in which the region descends even further into chaos, the Arab states (and the rest of the international community too) are completely preoccupied by conflicts other than that between the Israelis and Palestinians. With their cause forgotten, the Palestinians might turn to violence, including terrorism.

Of the four scenarios considered in this briefing, the only one that delivers a positive outcome is the one in which Arab leaders engage with the US administration to help it formulate a plan that both Israelis and Palestinians can accept as a framework for the resumption of serious negotiations. The positive outcome of this scenario is also the result of vigorous support for the plan, once it has been made public, on the part of key Arab states (and acquiescence on the part of others). In other words, success may depend on the degree to which the Arab states are prepared to be proactive in contributing to a resolution of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

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