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Conflict or conflict management in Israeli-Palestinian relations?

1. Introduction

The violent conflicts throughout the Middle East that erupted at the end of 2010 had major impacts on Israel, the Palestinians and the links between them. This relationship was already extremely complex before the regional turmoil began, and has become even more difficult due to the extreme violence in Syria, Libya, Yemen and elsewhere. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which began and has continued since the UN Partition Resolution of 29 November 1947, has not been close to resolution at any time, and continues to be characterised by contrasting and incompatible narratives, fear of elimination and the absence of third parties able to provide credible security guarantees.

In addition, the divisions and friction among Palestinians, particularly between Hamas-controlled Gaza and the West Bank under Fatah (the dominant group in what remains of the Palestinian Authority), add further obstacles to negotiations and agreements. In 2014, Hamas and the Israeli military engaged in a violent 51-day conflict, with casualties, destruction and lasting traumas on both sides. No reconstruction plan to return the Palestinian Authority to Gaza has been implemented due to the continued internal conflict between the two Palestinian factions.

For Israel, security remains the central concern in negotiations, reflecting the history of invasions, mass terror campaigns, rocket bombardments from Gaza, Lebanon (via Hezbollah), and Sinai (via Al Qaida), and the growing Iranian threat. The geographic reality of a very small hard-to-defend territory is central to Israeli perceptions of the conflict and prospects for its resolution.

Therefore, no peace agreement with the Palestinians and no significant territorial withdrawal are possible without credible and realistic solutions to the security challenges. The incomprehensible violence and mass killings in Syria, Iraq and elsewhere in the region reinforce these long-established security concerns.

Simultaneously, the withdrawal of the United States as an active and influential actor in the region and the growing friction between Israel and the Obama administration adds to the obstacles facing negotiations. The failure of the peace efforts brokered by Secretary of State John Kerry as well as the friction over negotiations with Iran over Tehran's nuclear programme sharpened the dispute, and substantially reduced American influence in the diplomatic realm.¹ At the same time, Europe continues to have little leverage or influence on any of the actors.

As a result of these factors, to the degree that progress in Israeli-Palestinian relations is possible or likely, the focus should be on conflict management, in the form of reducing friction through gradual measures. In addition to increased economic cooperation and development of joint enterprises, the transfer of additional territory in the West Bank to Palestinian control (in the language of the Oslo framework, Area C to Area B, and Area B to Area A), is under quiet discussion, as is recognition of the Israeli consensus 'settlement blocs' along the pre-1967 'Green Line'. In parallel, but unconnected, are the discussions regarding a long-term ceasefire in Gaza, but the problem of enforcement remains. Under these circumstances, the implementation and agreement on any of these measures would be seen as a major accomplishment.

¹ Steinberg, *Riding Out the Storm*, 2014.

II. Washington vs. Jerusalem

Relations between Israel and the Palestinians and efforts to contain, reduce or even resolve the conflict are closely linked to the role of the US government. The Americans have been the only external party able to connect the parties and their leaders and promote negotiations. The Palestinian Authority, led by President Mahmoud Abbas and his Fatah faction, is dependent on US aid, while Israel and the US have maintained close strategic and diplomatic relations for many years. The foundation of this alliance includes a history of shared democratic values and threat perceptions, as well as similar understandings of international politics in general, and in the Middle East in particular.

As a result of this relationship, Washington aided Israel in taking security risks in peace negotiations, such as in the Egyptian and Jordanian peace treaties, and the creation of the Palestinian Authority under the 1993 Oslo framework. Politically, the US has also been able to prod Israeli leaders and provide assurances to a nervous Israeli public. The US has generally supported Israel at the United Nations and other international frameworks, often vetoing hostile resolutions in the Security Council and opposing political warfare and false allegations, such as the Goldstone report on the 2008-2009 Gaza conflict presented to the UN Human Rights Council.

However, this special relationship has been shaken by America's strategic retreat from the Middle East. Under the Obama administration, the realist-based US foreign policy has been overshadowed by an idealistic approach, based on the view that international law and institutions, such as the UN, can reduce or even eliminate the need for military force.

For Israel, this emphasis on international institutions and diplomatic engagement regardless of circumstances, as well as declining US military involvement in the region, is a major concern. While President Obama and other US officials continue to tell Israelis that "America's got your back"² and "you are not alone",³ these words have lost their credibility.

For both Israelis and Palestinians, the decline of American influence and the growing instability in the region are significant. In Israel, public opinion polls, election returns and other indicators show that a substantial majority of the population supports a two-state agreement, but lacks confidence that the existing Palestinian leadership can deliver such an outcome – or that the US can guarantee Israel's vital interests.

Furthermore, most Israelis do not see evidence that the necessary conditions for a stable agreement exist, including Palestinian renunciation of the 'right of return' of millions of refugees from 1948 and for their descendants.⁴ Israelis seek a definitive 'end of conflict', including recognition of Jewish historical rights in Jerusalem. Israelis are also highly cognisant of the strength of Hamas, which took over Gaza in a violent coup in 2007, and could potentially do the same in the West Bank in the event of Israeli withdrawal.

From the beginning of his presidency in 2009, President Obama placed major emphasis on renewed peace negotiations, pressing Netanyahu to publicly endorse a two-state solution and declare a nine-month settlement freeze. For Obama, Israel is the dominant power, and must make concessions and take risks. The Palestinians, as weak victims, are not expected to compromise on key issues, such as refugee claims, that Israelis need as reassurance.

² Benhorin, *Obama: US will always have Israel's back*, 2012.

³ Somfalvi, *Obama in J'lem: You are not alone, but 'occupation must end'*, 2013.

⁴ The so-called 'right of return' refers to the claims of Palestinians displaced during the 1948 War of Independence – as well as their descendants – to Israeli territory, thereby creating an Arab majority which would end Jewish sovereign equality.

But for the majority of Israelis, as demonstrated in the support for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his political allies, the approach to peace based on the theory of 'power equalization' is a dangerous illusion. Israelis see themselves as highly vulnerable, and view Palestinian behaviour as zero-sum, with no commitment to compromise in which the vital interests of both sides can be satisfied. Campaigns based on allegations of war crimes and apartheid at the UN and the International Criminal Court, and the boycott movement, are viewed as a form of continued warfare, with the goals unchanged since 1947. As a result, Israelis do not see signs of the ripeness for the compromises necessary for a stable peace.

In addition, while the Palestinians – and, to a significant degree, the US and Europe – emphasise borders based on the armistice lines at the end of the 1948 war and arrangements for sharing Jerusalem, Israel focuses on security, including maintaining long-term control of the Jordan Valley as a vital buffer zone. The Americans press for 'creative solutions', including the stationing of international forces in this area, while for Israelis such international forces are seen as largely symbolic and unreliable – based on past experience.

As a result, when the initial Obama peace effort of 2009 ended without any *quid pro quo* from Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas, Prime Minister Netanyahu rejected the US demand for an extension in the unilateral Israeli building freeze. A stalemate followed, and Netanyahu moved further in implementing a programme of economic development and cooperation for the West Bank. Many roadblocks and other security obstacles were removed in order to facilitate further cooperation.

In 2013, President Obama's newly appointed Secretary of State, John Kerry, reopened formal Israeli-Palestinian negotiations with a nine-month deadline. As regional chaos in-

creased, the US sought cooperation from Jordan and Saudi Arabia without success.⁵ Kerry invested heavily in this process, repeatedly invoking the need to develop trust and confidence between Israelis and Palestinians – terms which seem disconnected from Middle Eastern realities of intense religious and ethno-national hatreds and violence.

Although expressing scepticism, Netanyahu and his government agreed to participate in the US-driven process, hoping to prevent more friction with Washington. This involved the release of more Palestinian terrorists, again without any Palestinian *quid pro quo*. Once again, however, no progress was made. The negotiations ended and terror resumed in June 2014, when three Israeli teens were kidnapped and murdered by Hamas in an aborted effort to exchange them for more jailed Palestinian terrorists, igniting a large-scale conflict between Israel and Hamas.

Without fundamental changes in the Palestinian leadership and Israeli perceptions, and rapprochement between Washington and Jerusalem, the prospects for progress are very limited, and the potential for further violent explosions, particularly in Gaza, remains high. As in the past, further attempts to force grand peace agreements on the basis of hope and assumptions that are removed from reality, such as theoretical multinational security forces to prevent terror attacks or reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah, are likely to increase the prospects of violence. To avoid doing damage, at this stage, limited steps to develop confidence and economic cooperation, gradually moving towards a sustainable status quo, must guide Israeli-Palestinian relations.

III. The Impact of Regional Chaos

The Israeli-Palestinian relationship is far from an isolated conflict capable of being addressed on its own terms. Instead, the wider map of the Middle East, in which Israel, the

⁵ Keinon and Abu Tomeh, *Kerry Seeks Support for Peace Process from Saudi, Arab League*, 2014.

West Bank and Gaza are deeply embedded, is essential for understanding the issues, the sources of conflict and the major obstacles to peace. From the creation of modern Israel in 1948, the surrounding Arab states were deeply involved in the attacks against and the rejection of Israel, and while Egypt and Jordan have peace treaties with Israel, many other regional players, including Iran, have become leaders in the 'rejectionist front' against Israel. They supply funds, weapons, terror training and political support (via campaigns based on accusations of war crimes, 'apartheid' and other slogans) to this front.⁶

In recent years, regional instability, including the Sunni-Shiite conflict and the rise of the Islamic State, have resulted in the most significant changes in Israel's geopolitical environment since independence in 1948. Three of the countries with which Israel shares a border – Egypt, Syria and Lebanon – are directly involved, and the stability in Jordan is considered precarious. The unprecedented political upheavals have erased the political boundaries established by the European colonial powers during the 20th century, and the state system in much of the Middle East has collapsed.

As the revolutions and wars spread from Tunisia to Egypt and Syria, Israel kept a close watch on developments, while considering the impacts and options on Gaza and the West Bank. The Israeli debate on this aspect can be examined in terms of two schools of thought – optimists and pessimists. The optimists argued that the end of the dictatorships and the new Middle East regional order offered an opportunity to implement the two-state formula as well as the Arab League peace initiative (initially proposed in 2002).⁷ The pessimists, including Netanyahu, rejected

this analysis, arguing that in an environment of unprecedented instability and violence, Israel could not increase the risks by withdrawing from additional territory, thereby enabling terror groups to take control.⁸

The US mediation effort of 2013, led by Secretary of State Kerry, ended in predictable failure and was followed, as is often the case after failed peace talks, by a war between Hamas forces in Gaza and Israel, which lasted for seven weeks and caused considerable destruction. (After Israel withdrew all forces and civilians from Gaza in 2005, Hamas took over the area in a violent coup in 2007, ousting Fatah and the Palestinian Authority.)

The optimists, including leaders of the opposition Labour Party and Israeli peace activists, many funded by and with close links to European governments, argued that a two-state solution would greatly reduce the salience of the Palestinian issue when regional violence ends and new regimes are in place.⁹ Professor Joshua Teitelbaum wrote, "Netanyahu should propose an Israel Peace Initiative that would include and acknowledge the aspects of the Arab Peace Initiative, which Israel views favourably, and there are several of those."¹⁰ Pessimists, however, warned that the risks that Israel would be required to accept were too great.¹¹

During the 2015 election campaign, discussions of withdrawal from territory in the West Bank as part of a peace agreement were muted among centre-left opposition parties. In attempting to draw voters from parties further to the right of his own Likud party, Prime Minister Netanyahu declared, "I think that anyone who is going to establish a Palestinian state today and evacuate lands is giving

⁶ "The Sources of Hamas Financing, and the Implications Related to Providing Assistance to a Recognized Terror Organization," in *Filling in the Blanks: Documenting Missing Dimensions in UN and NGO Investigations of the Gaza Conflict*, ed. Gerald M. Steinberg and Anne Herzberg (Jerusalem, Israel: NGO Monitor and UN Watch, 2015), http://www.ngo-monitor.org/2014_Gaza_Conflict.pdf.

⁷ Stein and Brom, *Why Should We Fear the Recognition of a Palestinian State?*, 2014.

⁸ Sherwood, *Binyamin Netanyahu attacks Arab spring uprisings*, 2011.

⁹ Herzog, *An Israeli Labor Party Perspective on Peace*, 2011.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Weinberg, *Israeli-Palestinian Diplomacy: Whereto?*, 2013.

attack grounds to the radical Islam against the state of Israel. Anyone who ignores this is sticking his head in the sand. The left does this time and time again. We are realistic and understand.”¹² After the election, and under intense international criticism, Netanyahu explained that he still supported a two-state approach to peace, but that this process could not ignore the regional changes and the risks that these carried.¹³

IV. Looking Forward

For the reasons cited above, the concept of grand agreements to end the conflict is entirely unrealistic, but at the same time the status quo is recognised as unstable. Therefore, the primary avenue for progress in Israeli-Palestinian relations is through measures to promote cooperation and conflict management, short of a peace treaty. Israel, under a Netanyahu government, or a grand coalition between Likud and Labor, might agree to transfer some additional territory in the West

Bank to Palestinian control in exchange for recognition of the blocs that have been built along the pre-1967 ‘Green Line’ (the armistice line following the 1948 war between Israeli and Jordanian forces). In Gaza, there is potential for a long-term ceasefire stipulating an end to rocket attacks targeting Israelis, and a replacement of the naval blockade with an international offshore inspection system.

While these steps are modest, they are far more realistic than an elusive full-fledged peace agreement, with the need to resolve issues such as Jerusalem, borders (particularly the strategic Jordan Valley) and credible security arrangements. Although gradual and limited conflict management steps will be politically difficult for all leaders, they are possible if the populations involved are convinced that a reduction in violence can indeed occur. In contrast, as in the past, grand initiatives that have no foundation in reality will not bring peace, and when they collapse, as in 2014, they will likely trigger further violence and conflict.

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¹² Quoted in Booth, *Netanyahu says no Palestinian state if he wins*, 2015.

¹³ Rudoren and Shear, *Israel’s Netanyahu Reopens Door to Palestinian State, but White House Is Unimpressed*, 2015.

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All internet sources were accessed and verified on June 22, 2015.

NUR FÜR MITGLIEDER

97. NUMOV-Länderforum

Fokus Vereinigte Arabische Emirate

am 28. August 2015, 09:30 – 12:30 Uhr

Wir freuen uns sehr, dass zum 97. Länderforum **Botschafter S.E. Eckhard Lübke**, deutscher Botschafter in den Vereinigten Arabischen Emiraten, am Länderforum teilnehmen wird. Nach einer Einführung über die aktuelle Lage in der Region wird er für Fragen zur Verfügung stehen.

Dieses Länderforum findet im Anschluss an die Botschafterkonferenz im Auswärtigen Amt statt, so dass unsere Mitglieder Gelegenheit erhalten, sich an diesem Vormittag mit S.E. Herrn Lübke noch mal besonders auszutauschen.

Für unsere neuen Mitglieder der Hinweis, dass das Länderforum eine Diskussionsplattform ist, auf der Mitglieder sich untereinander mit ihren Erfahrungen austauschen können. Dies betrifft die gesamte Region. Traditionell seit nunmehr 20 Jahren gibt es dafür auch einen Sondergast, der als ausgewiesener Fachmann sowohl für die Einführung als auch für Fragen, in diesem Fall zu den VAE, zur Verfügung steht. Auch Teilnehmer aus dem AA oder BMWi sind in der Regel anwesend. **Traditionell findet das Get Together am Abend vorher statt. Den Treffpunkt teilen wir noch mit.**

Für Hotelreservierungen empfehlen wir: www.hrs.de - www.booking.com - trivago.de
In der Nachbarschaft im neuen Einkaufszentrum hat ein neues Motel One eröffnet. Um die Ecke in Mitte sind eine Reihe weiterer preiswerter Hotels.

Rückmeldungen an NUMOV: Fax: 030 – 20641010 - E-Mail: numov@numov.de

- Ich/ Wir möchte/n am 97. NUMOV - Länderforum in Berlin teilnehmen.
- Ich/ Wir möchte/n auch am Vorabendtreff teilnehmen.

Name, Vorname, Mitgliedsfirma, Anschrift, Tel./Fax, E-Mail