

President Message: Israel Horizons – November 2020

Farcical Treaties

By Paul Scham

A popular Israeli song from the 1970s, *Machar* or “Tomorrow,” envisioned a future in which wars will cease and Israelis can sail from “Eilat to the Ivory Coast.” While the song’s premise that wars will end has not exactly been fulfilled, many Israelis apparently felt that they were almost there with the celebration of the “normalization” of Israel’s relations with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain in a ceremony in September in Washington, D.C. Sudan duly followed suit a few weeks later once the U.S. removed it from its list of state sponsors of terrorism, despite considerable internal opposition. The big prize, of course, is Saudi Arabia; perhaps when the current king dies and current Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) takes the throne? Or perhaps these bouts of “friendship” might be interrupted if Donald Trump isn’t reelected?

I was in Israel in March 1979 when the treaty with Egypt was signed, and saw first-hand Israelis’ joy and their expectations that the wall of hostility around them was crumbling, before the First Lebanese War inaugurated the “cold peace” that largely still prevails today. Fifteen years later, my wife and I visited Jordan a few months before the peace treaty with Israel was signed, and saw a Jordanian passport clerk literally jump in the air when he saw the Israeli stamps in our passport – before his boss told him to ignore them and let us in. I spent a lot of time in Jordan in the years after the peace treaty was signed in October 1994, and wrote a long article in 2000 warning that the process of “normalization” had already largely failed, published just before the Second Intifada made normalization the term of opprobrium in the Arab world that it still is today. Nevertheless, both treaties remain major achievements in the history of the Israeli-Arab conflict, despite the failure of so many of the hopes that accompanied them.

The UAE and Bahrain agreements

Are the treaties with the UAE, Bahrain, and Sudan in any way comparable to these genuine milestones? Can we realistically see them as helping to lead the way to a brighter future, at least as far as Israel’s conflicts with its neighbors are concerned?

The answer is almost certainly “not really.” Both of the previous treaties represented culminations of genuine peace processes, involved painful compromises, brought about solid geopolitical changes in their own right, and seemed likely to herald paths toward wider peace in the future. That there has not been a full-scale war between Israel and an Arab state since 1973 is a direct result of the treaty with Egypt. The pact with Jordan was made possible by the Declaration of Principles signed between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization the year before and was part of a serious

effort toward a comprehensive peace that, tragically, failed, despite the best efforts of numerous Israelis and Arabs.

The new treaties, by contrast, simply made official what everyone who cares about these matters knew had been going on for years, namely, extensive intelligence and military cooperation directed at the common enemy, Iran. Most important, Jordan and Egypt had both been at war, several times, with Israel – bloody wars, in which thousands had been killed. This is a major contrast with the UAE and Bahrain and Sudan, which had never fought Israel and had no bilateral issues with it at all.

Most important, of course, the recent treaties and their attendant festivities completely ignored the main adversary Israel still faces, whose issues with it were in no way addressed, namely, the Palestinians. While Israel has other enemies in the region – Iran, Hezbollah, and Syria are the most obvious – it is now clearly recognized by virtually the entire world that it is an Israeli- Palestinian conflict, and without full Palestinian participation, the international hostility to Israel – most obviously expressed by the widespread, though largely ineffectual, Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions campaign – will not diminish. While Israel's technological achievements, combined with strong American support and its status as a democracy, mean it is a full participant in the international system (unlike South Africa in the 1980s, or pariah states like North Korea today), Israelis still feel themselves in a precarious position, based both on Jewish history and the fact that the conflict with the Palestinians colors so many aspects of their national life. The new treaties, with their complete and conspicuous omission of the Palestinian issue, plus the resounding irrelevance of Trump's "Deal of the Century," simply highlight the current stalemate and the lack of any expectation of progress.

As quickly became apparent, these were almost completely economic deals (plus permission for the UAE to buy advanced U.S. F-35 fighter-bombers), greased by the desire to provide President Trump a foreign policy "success" in his reelection campaign. For those who recognize that without Palestinian buy- in no peace can be meaningful, the treaties simply highlighted the bleak environment. For most Israelis, between the new pandemic lockdown, a prime minister on trial for corruption, and ongoing massive, unprecedented demonstrations against him all over the country, it is simply a distraction – a welcome one, but with little meaning. It will make little difference in their lives apart, perhaps, from eventual vacation possibilities and travel options.

What does this mean for the Palestinians?

For Palestinians, however, whose bitter outcry was little heard or regarded, it should serve as a signal that history is passing them by. Their leadership is superannuated and ineffective and their ability to harm Israel has attenuated. They can prevent Israel from feeling at peace, but they have little power to change their bleak circumstances.

The one role they seem to be able to play is as a spoiler, usually dubbed "anti-normalization," to the delight of the Israeli and American Jewish right

wing. Most Palestinian organizations at this point refuse to deal with groups that support Israel in any way, no matter how highly critical that support may be. In practice, of course, that means brushing off overtures by liberal peace groups, since those on the right have nothing to do with Palestinians, anyway. Joint actions or strategies are thus foreclosed – and the field left open for autocracies, like the UAE and Bahrain or certainly Saudi Arabia (Sudan is currently in transition from a longterm dictatorship and needs all the friends it can get).

In fact, no one of genuinely good will could think relations between Palestine and Israel might be in any way “normal” until the Occupation is ended. It is thus doubly unfortunate that the term “normalization” has been hijacked and applied to high political gestures with little meaning, while potentially significant joint non-governmental or people-to-people activities for peace are usually prevented by Palestinians themselves. We can hope that a new Administration in Washington may provide some fresh thinking, something that has been even in shorter supply than PPE for a long time.



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