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Normalization between Israel and Arab States: Is the Idea Still Viable?

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The rise to power of political parties with Islamic ideology in North Africa, and the possibility that this phenomenon will recur in Egypt, the Palestinian Authority, and other neighboring countries, places a question mark over the possibility of normalizing relations between Israel and the Arab world.

The idea of normalization received significant formal expression in the Peace Treaty between Israel and Egypt (1979) and various ancillary agreements. Even though only a small fraction of these agreements were ever realized and the peace with Egypt has been dubbed a “cold peace,” the agreements provided an important reference point.

The five working groups established as a result of the Madrid Conference (1991), which dealt with issues of water, environment, economic cooperation, refugees, and arms control, also served as a significant cornerstone in strengthening the idea of normalization between Israel and its neighbors. These working groups, as well as the normalization agreements with Egypt, were proof of the correlation between progress in the political process with the Palestinians and normalization; when the political process had stalled beginning in 1996, the activity of the working groups was suspended as well. Paragraphs on the establishment of people-to-people relations in the Peace Treaty with Jordan (1994) and the Oslo Accords (1993-95) suffered a similar fate.

In the international arena too, at least two frameworks were created relying on the Oslo Accords and the peace treaty with Jordan. In 1994, NATO created the Mediterranean Dialogue between NATO members and seven other nations (Jordan and Mauritania are not Mediterranean states but were nonetheless invited to this setting; they joined Israel, Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, and Egypt). In 1995, the European Union created the Barcelona Process, built on the idea of political-security, economic, and cultural cooperation between EU members and their southern neighbors in the Mediterranean basin. This framework was updated and expanded in 2004 with the creation of the European Neighborhood Policy, and in 2008, with the establishment of the Union for the Mediterranean. These frameworks allowed for meetings of ministers, government

functionaries, experts, and representatives of civil society from all nations in the region, including Israel (Libya was excluded).

NATO and the EU could have provided an alternative to the cold peace between Israel on the one hand and Egypt and Jordan on the other, but neither of these two frameworks produced any far reaching results at the multilateral level, they were of great political significance and enabled progress at the bilateral level. Accordingly, NATO and the EU adopted the idea of “differentiality,” which allowed each nation to advance its relations with these organizations according to its particular ability and desire, without requiring parallel progress with other partners in the Mediterranean Dialogue or Barcelona Process.

It is unlikely that these frameworks will continue, even at a low level, following the changes that have already taken place in some of the Arab states. Another question that comes into sharper focus concerns the normalization element in the equation at the base of the Saudi initiative. Granted this is a theoretical question, as the Israeli-Palestinian political process is frozen and the normalization side of the equation has no chance of being realized. On the other hand, the ideological platform of the Islamic movements and statements issued by their leaders question their willingness to accept the “Zionist entity” even after a full resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

To a large extent, promoting Israel’s relations with the EU and NATO depends on a resolution, even if partial, to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Nonetheless, Israel can leverage the expected weakening of these two frameworks in order to advance its own interests in relations with NATO and the EU. Both organizations will almost certainly try to preserve their bilateral relations with the Arab nations, and the latter may also want to continue to maintain their relations with these two organizations. Yet for two reasons the Arab nations as well as the EU are liable to encounter difficulties in this regard: a) legislation adopting *shari’a* law by countries that cooperate with Europe and NATO may obstruct any efforts to maintain and promote bilateral relations; b) Israeli participation in NATO and the EU at the multilateral level. Even before the outbreak of the “Arab spring,” Arab nations showed little interest in the multilateral aspects, and in Israel too, the allure of encounters attended by Lebanese or Syrian representatives has declined, while the preference for bilateral cooperation has increased. In the near future, the Arab nations’ desire to participate in any framework where Israel is also active will likely wane and perhaps disappear altogether. Israel can take advantage of this to intensify its own cooperation with NATO and the EU and upgrade relations with them.

In everything related to the EU, Israel may find an unlikely partner in the form of Turkey. Even now, more and more voices in Turkey are expressing doubt about the usefulness of Turkey becoming a full member of that organization. Both Israel and Turkey may find

themselves looking for a model of “membership minus,” i.e., a somewhat lower level of relations than that of full membership but one that still confers many advantages, both for themselves and for the EU.

All of the above does not exempt Israel from the obligation to seek a resolution, if only partial, to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This is a paramount Israeli interest, independent of the normalization of relations. At the same time, it may also be necessary to seek a more practical and less ambitious definition of normalization. The new Arab regimes will be forced to confront difficult economic issues, and cooperative ventures, even if indirect or excluding people-to-people components, may be acceptable. Despite the nine explosions of the gas pipeline in the Sinai, both Israel and Egypt are interested in the continued flow of gas and in cooperation in the field of energy. The region’s water needs also require regional cooperation. Indeed, even a nation ruled by the Muslim Brotherhood will not be able to ignore the need to confront economic challenges or the fact that cooperation with Israel, albeit indirect, is likely to produce economic benefits.

It is thus necessary not only to identify the emerging difficulties following the rise in Arab nations of political forces for whom normalization with Israel is anathema, but also to realize the opportunities latent in this situation.

