

How Middle East regional dynamics affect the Israeli-Palestinian peace process

By Yossi Alpher

■ Executive summary

The Israeli-Palestinian peace process is currently influenced by regional dynamics – specifically the Iran nuclear controversy and the Arab revolutions – in ways that militate both against and in favour of a successful outcome. The chaos in Syria and Egyptian Sinai is an example of a revolutionary development that works at least theoretically in both ways: persuading Israel to avoid new undertakings until the Arab smoke clears, but also presenting a strategic environment free of major military threats to the country that is conducive to taking risks for peace. Similarly, Israel's dissatisfaction with the U.S.-led Geneva nuclear deal with Iran militates against its taking security risks with the Palestinians, while it also drives Israel and Saudi Arabia closer together, thereby enhancing Riyadh's capacity to offer Israel incentives to reach a two-state solution.

Other regional developments, for example the U.S. military withdrawal from the region, Jordan's preoccupation with Syria, and the Egyptian army's coup against the Muslim Brotherhood, are more unequivocal in their influence over the peace process. While none of these developments may prove crucial to Israeli-Palestinian peace, their overall effect should not be discounted.

Israeli-Palestinian relations – whether they take the form of *intifada*, peace process or merely the “status quo” – have never developed in a vacuum. Not only have interested third parties such as the U.S., European Union and Norway been involved, but so have immediate neighbours like Egypt and Jordan. The Arab League has also been involved, usually with Saudi urging, in initiatives like the Arab Peace Initiative of 2002 and the earlier 1982 Fahd plan.

Yet the current Israeli-Palestinian negotiations are exceptional in their heavy exposure to two major regional dynamics: international manoeuvring over Iran's nuclear project and the Arab revolutions. This expert analysis explores the ramifications of these dynamics for the peace process.

U.S. policy toward Iran and Syria

In the current Israeli perception the U.S., led by a risk-averse president, is retreating from its presumed commitments in the Middle East. Following on withdrawals from Iraq and Afghanistan that leave behind chaos and violence, the U.S. recently backed off from attacking Syria, thereby

“rewarding” Bashar al-Asad for chemical attacks on his own citizenry and enabling him to stabilise his rule. Most recently, Washington made a deal with Tehran that allegedly leaves Israel exposed and moves a nuclear Iran toward rapprochement with the international community.

Israel is not alone in this perception. A number of Arab countries in the Gulf region, led by Saudi Arabia, share Jerusalem's concerns over the Iranian danger, Asad's staying power, and the credibility of existing and future U.S. commitments to support their security needs in the region.

These developments have two immediate ramifications for the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. On the one hand, Israel's possible readiness to offer territorial and security concessions to the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) could now be constrained by concerns that the “traditional” assumption of U.S. military involvement in peacekeeping tasks can no longer be taken for granted. Conceivably, a U.S. military that is on its way out of the Middle East will not be available to police West Bank demilitarisation; alternatively, Washington's conditions for deploying its

military will no longer be acceptable to Israel. Conceivably too, offers of U.S. security guarantees for Israel within the framework of a peace agreement with the Palestinians will now prove to be non-credible in Israeli eyes.

On the other hand, the seeming convergence of views regarding Iran and Syria among Israel, Saudi Arabia, other Gulf Arab states, Jordan (see below) and possibly Egypt – with all the Arab states recognising that Israel currently presents the only likely military deterrent to Iran – could provide an incentive for Israel to register progress in peace negotiations. The Saudis, after all, appear to condition overt security co-operation with Israel against Iran on a successful peace process or at least progress toward this end, citing the Arab Peace Initiative as a possible framework.

Moreover if – as now appears quite possible – the Assad regime triumphs in the Syrian civil war or at least secures the southern and western parts of the country, several years hence in the post-war period Israel can expect to face an enhanced Syrian-Iranian-Hizbullah alliance on its northern border. This suggests yet another reason for Israel, backed by Iran's Arab enemies, not to postpone peacemaking with the Palestinians. Interestingly, then-Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin made a similar observation about Iran some 20 years ago in explaining the rationale for the Oslo process.

In contrast, the Netanyahu government's calculations regarding the scope of territorial and security concessions to the Palestinians appear to be negatively influenced by the U.S.-led P5+1 agreement with Iran. About a year ago an Israeli columnist coined the phrase "Bushehr for Yitzhar": Netanyahu would feel freer to risk dismantling isolated West Bank settlements like Yitzhar and enter into a U.S.-sponsored deal with the Palestinians if the Iranian centrifuges at Bushehr were dismantled as part of a deal to close the Iranian nuclear project.

Now what appears to be emerging is a "neither Bushehr nor Yitzhar" paradigm: because the deal with Iran appears to Netanyahu to leave Tehran's nuclear programme intact, he will be less forthcoming on concessions to the Palestinians. Because U.S. secretary of state John Kerry is in charge of both negotiations, the perception of sharp U.S.-Israel disagreement has become unavoidable, thereby exacerbating yet further Israel's approach to talks with the PLO. (Never mind that Bushehr constitutes a presumed existential nuclear threat, while Yitzhar has only negative security significance for Israel and represents the demographic disaster that Netanyahu and the settlement movement are driving Israel toward. Under current circumstances, the prime minister's only complaint about announcements of new settlement-building plans is the timing, not the substance.)

The Salafist role in the Arab revolutionary wave

Like the interplay between U.S. Middle East policy and the Israeli and Saudi response, the emergence of a strong Salafist element amid the chaos of the Egyptian and Syrian revolutions appears to affect the Israeli-Palestinian peace process both positively and negatively. On the one hand, precisely because neighbouring Arab armies are preoccupied with extremist threats to their governments, and in the Syrian case because the national army has suffered serious losses in men and materiel, the Israel Defence Forces currently face no major strategic military threat along any border. Even the massive rocket threat from Hizbullah in southern Lebanon has been sidelined by that organisation's deep involvement in the Syrian fighting. Is this not, then, the optimal time for Israel to take security risks for peace?

On the other hand, Israeli security planners can cite the neighbouring anarchy and Salafist threats as preoccupations that ostensibly preclude any serious peace initiatives on Israel's part. In the Egyptian case the Salafists are situated directly on Israel's Negev border with Egyptian Sinai and have also infiltrated the neighbouring Gaza Strip.

This, then, is arguably a time for Israel to "keep its powder dry" and wait for developments to unfold in the region before acting. Why, for example, negotiate the emergence of a new Arab state – Palestine – at a time when existing Arab states are crumbling and part of Palestine (Gaza) presents a growing Salafist threat? This is one of the contentions of the Israeli right in opposing the creation of a Palestinian state.

The rise and fall of the Muslim Brotherhood

Mention of Egypt and the Gaza Strip invokes the rise and fall of the Muslim Brotherhood in the course of Egypt's revolution as a development that affects the peace process. In particular, it affects the Palestinian approach.

During the year of Muslim Brotherhood rule in Egypt between mid-2012 and mid-2013 Hamas drew strength and prestige from the Cairo regime. Hamas, which is in effect the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood, enjoyed a relatively open Gaza-Sinai border and open access to its supporters in Egypt. It was even implicated in violent attacks on Egyptian security forces.

While the Morsi presidency did have some problems with Hamas's behaviour and a year ago sponsored negotiations that led to a relatively successful Israel-Hamas ceasefire, Hamas's overall prestige among Palestinians grew thanks to Egyptian Islamist backing. This in turn constrained the freedom of manoeuvre of PLO leader Mahmoud Abbas with regard to a possible renewed negotiating process with Israel: Abbas feared the impact on the Palestinian public of Hamas criticism of his peace policies.

Thus it was no coincidence that U.S. secretary of state Kerry was able to renew the process only after the Egyptian army took power in July 2013. Egypt's military rulers removed the Brotherhood from power and began energetically closing the Gaza-Sinai border smuggling tunnels and cracking down on Salafists in both Sinai and (through pressure on Hamas) Gaza. With Hamas weakened, Abbas can negotiate in an atmosphere relatively free of domestic Islamist pressure. Moreover, under current conditions, any Israeli military response to attacks from Gaza is likely to be dealt with tolerantly by the ruling Egyptian military authorities, who in any case now favour the PLO over Hamas.

A new wave of Palestinian refugees

There are several hundred thousand Palestinian refugees, dating from 1948, in the Damascus area, mostly in the Yarmouk camp, which has witnessed prolonged fighting in recent months. When these Palestinians try to flee from Syria, Jordan rejects them and Lebanon mounts obstacles to their entry. Both countries fear that a new influx of Palestinians would prove a disruptive demographic factor.

The United Nations Relief Works Agency, which deals exclusively with Palestinian refugees, at one point this year tried to persuade both the Gazan and West Bank-based Palestinian leaderships to accept Palestinians fleeing Syria. The initiative failed when it ran up against Palestinian fears lest refugee absorption be seen by Israel and possibly the international community as an exercise of the "right of return" and the creation of a new permanent status of "returned" refugees on Palestinian soil, thereby compromising Palestinian negotiating positions regarding refugees. It is important to keep in mind that current final-status negotiations regarding the refugee/right of return issue are taking place at the same time that a new Palestinian refugee drama is unfolding.

Jordan's preoccupation with Syria

Jordan, with its large Palestinian population and shared borders with both Israel and the West Bank, is undoubtedly the Arab country most sensitive to the possible consequences of a failed peace process and/or new unrest in the West Bank. It is also, by dint of its peace treaty with Israel, a participant in any solution or new arrangements concerning Jerusalem. Accordingly, for years the Hashemite kingdom has both pressured Israel to engage in serious two-state solution negotiations and offered its good offices to facilitate talks.

But Jordan also has a strategic relationship with Israel. And because of the fighting in Syria, it is this relationship that appears to have been awarded priority over the Palestinian issue in recent months. In the course of 2013 King Abdullah II met quietly at least twice with Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu to discuss not Palestine, but the threat of violent revolutionary overflow from Syria into Jordan. That the meetings were leaked in Jordan (rather than in Israel, where such leaks are chronic) points to Abdullah's need to signal his public where his current strategic priorities lie. Jordan is reeling under a huge refugee influx from Syria. And because it reportedly facilitates the infiltration into Syria of rebel manpower and arms in consultation with the U.S. and Saudi Arabia, it fears being dragged into the fighting. The leaks regarding meetings with Netanyahu even produced unconfirmed reports of Israeli-Jordanian military consultations and co-ordinated Israeli drone reconnaissance flights along the Jordan-Syria border.

The upshot of these developments is evidently a reduction in Jordan's involvement in Israeli-Palestinian contacts and in pressure by the monarchy on Israel to reach a two-state agreement.

Conclusion

We have noted the ramifications of both the Iran nuclear issue and the Arab revolutions that affect the Israeli-Palestinian sphere. Some of these ramifications, such as Israeli concern over an international deal with Iran and Jordan's preoccupation with Syria, appear to militate against or at least not encourage progress toward an Israeli-Palestinian agreement. Others, such as military rule in Egypt, appear to have the opposite effect on prospects for an agreement.

Ultimately, the fortunes of such an agreement will be influenced far more by internal politics, the quality of leadership on both sides, and possible U.S. pressure on Israel and Arab pressure on the PLO. But the effect of regional dynamics should not be discounted. Indeed, in some instances the more positive among these developments, such as in Egypt and the Gulf, could conceivably be directed toward helping Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. ■

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