

Opinion | What's Behind Israeli-Arab Peace Agreements, and What Do They Mean for the Palestinians?

There is reason to be concerned when a deep lack of trust hangs over the relations between Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Benny Gantz and the rest of Israel's security establishment. We also need to be concerned when a dark cloud hangs over the credibility of the prime minister in connection with Germany's sale of submarines to Israel and of advanced American weaponry and F-35 airplanes to Arab countries. It is almost certain that this is the tip of the iceberg, concealing what was agreed upon between the Gulf states and the Trump administration over a solution to the Palestinian issue.

Precisely due to the realistic approach that is the basis of the Gulf states' diplomatic strategy – serving their economic and security interests – and the distance that they are putting between themselves and the fervor of the pan-Arab national vision that characterized Egypt under President Gamal Abdel Nasser and the nationalist radicalism that took hold in Iraq and Syria, these countries have been crying out for Arab legitimization of the far-reaching steps that they have been taking vis-a-vis Israel. The regimes in the [United Arab Emirates](#) and the other Gulf states are not strong enough to disregard furious criticism from opposition forces at home and abroad, and if they are to ensure the stability of their regimes, they have to be able to justify diplomatic interests in the accepted parlance of pan-Arab solidarity.

Blunting the criticism over the conciliatory steps toward Israel requires them to make diplomatic moves that would be supported by the broader public. Such steps might include initiatives designed to bring about a breakthrough on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – drawn from regional action strategies in a style similar to Saudi Arabia's 2002 Arab Peace Initiative.

At the core of that plan was the establishment of overall peace between Israel and the Arab states and the Islamic world in general in return for an Israeli withdrawal to the 1967 borders. Although Israel never responded to the plan, it's still alive and kicking in Arab consciousness and was even repeatedly mentioned in statements by the rulers of the Gulf states.

One cannot exclude the possibility that quiet understandings have been reached between the United States and the Gulf countries, including [Saudi Arabia](#), that down the road would lead to the gradual resurfacing of the principles of the Arab Peace Initiative as a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian dispute. That would place Israel on the horns of a dilemma: Would it dig in its heels and stick to its traditional position – mainly in support of the current situation – or would it carry out a diplomatic turnabout when it comes to prevailing positions on the Palestinian issue?

Such an initiative from the Arab side, which might later receive American backing, would make it difficult for Israel to continue to cling to its ideological flak jacket and stick with its series of security-related mantras, foreclosing any possible solution acceptable to both sides.

Under such circumstances, Israel wouldn't seriously be able to claim that the peace agreements with the Gulf countries were a paradigm shift – to peace in exchange for peace rather than peace in exchange for territory. Such a claim is entirely baseless and plants the misconception in Israeli public opinion that the [Palestinians](#) have been dealt a decisive blow and will have no choice but to accept Israel's dictates, meaning the kiss of death when it comes to their aspirations for self-determination and independence.

Under the current circumstances, with American interests in the Gulf stemming from a combination of economic issues and geo-strategic considerations, it cannot be expected that the United States would endanger the assets that it has amassed in the Persian Gulf simply to continue to provide uncompromising support for an Israel that is insistent about not forgoing its influence in the Palestinian territories in the [West Bank](#) and the [Gaza Strip](#).

It is nearly certain that from the point of view shared by all of the Arab countries supportive of peace agreements with Israel, a solution to the [Israeli-Palestinian](#) conflict requires a systematic approach. That means that efforts would no longer be concentrated on bilateral agreements between Israel and the Palestinians but instead would look toward dynamic multilateral agreements. These would be arrangements based on peaceful relations founded on mutual recognition, while preserving interpretations that provide all the parties involved with the capability to adopt national and religious justifications for diplomatic arrangements that would tend toward permanence and will remain defined as temporary in ideological terms.

Such a hybrid strategy – encouraging arrangements that would tend toward permanence and at the same time are ideologically defined as temporary – summon up not only a prospect for far-reaching change in the relationship between the Sunni-Muslim-Arab world and Israel, but also the potential for coexistence between both sides and Shi'ite Iran. Such an approach would be perceived at first as unacceptable and would then encounter strong resistance, but ultimately it would shape an inevitable new reality.

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