

# The Cold Peace Between Israel and Arab Countries

by Hilal Khashan - December 29, 2022

Israeli journalists covering the World Cup in Qatar were stunned by Arab fans' hostility toward them. Considering that six Arab countries have normalized relations with Israel, while others maintain back-channel communications with Israeli officials, the journalists believed Arabs would show a greater willingness to engage. They were wrong. An Israeli correspondent said he couldn't find anyone willing to speak to him and that Arabs "approach us and criticize our presence." The reporter concluded that there was no hope for improving Israel's relationship with the Arab people.

In 2017, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told the Knesset that the obstacle to peace with the Arab world was not Arab leaders but rather the Arab people themselves. But as Israeli tensions with Arab governments have eased, the Arab public's hostility toward Israelis is, at its core, a result of the failure to resolve the Palestinian question.

## Cultural Incompatibility

The failure to establish cordial relations between the Arab and Israeli peoples goes back decades. David Ben-Gurion, Israel's founder and first prime minister, did not believe that Israelis and Arabs would become partners in peace. He thus showed little interest in engaging the Arab region, preferring to build bridges with other foreign countries instead. Israel developed a robust foreign policy in Africa, Asia, Latin America, the U.S. and Western Europe but did not train diplomats to operate in Arabic-speaking countries and cultures.

Ben-Gurion believed the failure to communicate stemmed from deep-seated cultural differences between Israelis and Arabs. Arab culture is collectivist, polychronic and hierarchical, whereas Israel's is individualistic, monochronic and egalitarian. In "Culture and Conflict in Egyptian-Israeli Relations: A Dialogue of the Deaf," author Raymond Cohen aptly describes how culture stood in the way of peace negotiations, even when the two sides eagerly sought to resolve their differences.

Arab culture stresses interpersonal relations, subtlety, reservation and conformity. It prioritizes community, honor and respecting superiors. Conversely, Israeli culture is democratic, ostentatious and communicative, although at times divisive. Arabs choose their words carefully and avoid conflict, while Israelis speak bluntly and abrasively. Guilt is embedded in the Jewish conscience and derives from the need for repentance and atonement for sin, which became a driving force toward

productivity and excellence. In Arab culture, shame evolved into an escape from reality, driving people to hide their ill-doings rather than correct them.

Many Arabs feel shame over their many defeats at the hands of Israel. They direct their anger and frustration not only at Israelis but also at Palestinians, whom they tend to hold responsible for losing their country, falsely claiming that they sold their land to the Zionist movement. They argue that the Palestinians didn't deserve the generous support provided by Arab countries. The Palestinians, they say, must get their own house in order before asking for help as they are the root cause of the problem with Israel. They see the Palestinians as a constant reminder of their defeat.

Arab leaders, meanwhile, were concerned less about the loss of Palestine and more about strengthening their regimes and nation-building, as evidenced by the coups in Syria and Egypt. When attempts at peace were made, cultural differences stood in the way. Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, for example, found it difficult to make peace with Israel because he didn't want to tarnish his reputation as the champion of Arab nationalism. Still, Arab leaders maintained secret lines of communication with the Israelis for years.

## **Behind Closed Doors**

Indeed, Arab and Jewish officials communicated behind closed doors even before Israel's establishment in May 1948. Despite last-minute differences before the 1948 war, Jordan's King Abdullah I sent his army to Palestine not to prevent the creation of a Jewish state but to seize the Arab part of the 1947 Palestine partition plan. Private talks between the Hashemites and Israelis continued until Abdullah's assassination in 1951 and throughout the reign of his grandson King Hussein. On the eve of the 1967 Six-Day War, the Israelis informed Hussein that they would not attack the West Bank if he did not initiate hostilities. In the 1973 war, he collaborated closely with the Israelis, despite sending an army brigade to Syria in a show of Arab solidarity.

In 1954, Nasser told Le Monde newspaper that Egypt needed peace with Israel so it could focus on domestic issues and that the U.S. could facilitate the normalization. However, Mossad's botched Operation Suzannah, which targeted Western interests in Egypt in order to sabotage U.S.-Egyptian relations, led to rising tensions, which in turn resulted in the 1956 Suez War.

The 1978 Camp David Accords between Egypt and Israel opened a new chapter in Arab-Israeli relations. In 1981, then Saudi Crown Prince Fahd announced a comprehensive peace plan between Arabs and Israelis – though both sides ultimately rejected it, with Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin describing it as a plan to gradually destroy the Israeli state. In 1994, eight years after Jordan

renounced its claim to the West Bank, Amman made peace with Israel and recognized the Palestine Liberation Organization as the sole representative of the Palestinian people.

In 1999, representatives of Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein met secretly with Israeli negotiators and offered to resettle Lebanon's 300,000 Palestinian refugees in Iraq as an olive branch to Washington. Though neither the U.S. nor Israel took the offer seriously, it would have resolved the question of the refugees' right of return, one of the preconditions set by the PLO to reach a final status agreement with Israel. In 2020, former Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz told a Saudi newspaper that he visited "every Arab state but in secret during the performance of military missions." He even visited Algeria, which, since its independence in 1962, has adamantly refused to recognize Israel's existence. Notably, Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika decided to dismantle his country's nuclear program over Israeli security concerns, despite his country's firm anti-Israeli position. In 1999, Bouteflika shook hands with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak while attending the funeral of Morocco's King Hassan II, telling him he could count on Algeria to facilitate peace in the region.

## **Unresolved Issue**

Israel has long been eager to make peace with Arabs. The sticking point, however, has always been the Palestinian question. Since 1967, Palestinians in the West Bank have been denied civil rights. Under Israel's Military Order No. 101 issued in 1967, political assemblies of 10 or more persons are prohibited for public safety reasons, in violation of international law. Military Order No. 1651, issued in 2010, criminalized attempts to influence public opinion with a 10-year prison term. Last February, Amnesty International described Israel's treatment of Palestinians as a "cruel system of domination and a crime against humanity." These conditions have led to frequent violent clashes, which killed 227 Palestinians and 27 Israelis in 2022 alone.

Arab attitudes toward Israelis also stem from a massive anti-Jewish political socialization campaign that began as early as 1919, when Eastern European Jews started arriving in Palestine. After Israel's founding in 1948 and the subsequent Arab-Israeli wars, these negative sentiments grew. Arabs' position on the Palestinian question reflects this intense socialization.

At the 2002 Beirut summit, Arab heads of state presented an initiative to normalize relations with Israel. They demanded that Israel withdraw from the land it occupied in the 1967 Six-Day War and accept the formation of a Palestinian state with east Jerusalem as its capital. The Israeli prime minister immediately rejected the plan. Nearly 20 years later, however, Israel signed normalization deals with four Arab countries – the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan.

Though it now publicly engages with some Arab governments, Israel has not yet convinced them that it's serious about resolving the Palestinian question, which remains the core issue between them. Arabs show no empathy for the Jewish people's historic travails, with many even denying that the Holocaust occurred. People on both sides engage in the politics of denial to rationalize their actions and avoid challenging their misconceptions about each other.

There's no evidence that the stalemate will end any time soon. Israel is preoccupied with security, understandably so given that it's surrounded by hostile populations whose ruling elites are interested only in security arrangements and have no affinity for Jews. The UAE, for example, misled the public about its intention to normalize relations with Israel. Before signing the peace treaty in 2020, UAE officials said they would seek normalization to stop the annexation of West Bank lands. The official English version of the treaty, however, mentioned merely suspending annexation, not stopping it.

## Looking Ahead

For the Palestinians, the options are limited. Israeli historian Mordechai Kedar proposed creating Palestinian emirates similar to the United Arab Emirates. The Palestinian Emirates would include eight autonomous cities – Gaza, Jenin, Nablus, Ramallah, Jericho, Tulkarm, Qalqilya and Hebron – which would be connected by Israel through land routes for travel and trade.

This seems to be the only workable solution. Neither Israel nor Arab countries want to see the creation of a Palestinian state. The land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean is too small to accommodate two countries. Moreover, Arab leaders see the Palestinians as destabilizing agents and fear their revolutionary zeal. The more the Palestinians wait to achieve statehood, the more they lose. They cannot count on the Palestinian Authority, which is hopelessly corrupt and nepotistic. Kedar's proposal will at least preserve a semblance of Palestinian national identity and end the conflict with Israel. In peace and stability, Israel will probably inch toward liberal democracy.

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