



## DEBATE: What Happened to Arab Support for the Palestinians?

Moderated by George N. Tzogopoulos

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**Q:** While the continuing influence of the Palestinians on the Arab world should not be underestimated, the current landscape in the Middle East is bringing new policy priorities to the fore. As Israel's ambassador to Washington, Ron Dermer, recently observed, "[The Arab states are no longer dancing to the Palestinians' tune.](#)" BESA joins the debate by posing the question: What has happened to Arab support for the Palestinians?

**Respondents:** Sarah Feuer, Jonathan Schanzer, Asaf Romirowsky, Michael Wilner, Hillel Frisch, Neri Zilber, James Dorsey



[Sarah J. Feuer](#), Research Fellow, Institute for National Security Studies, Tel Aviv

I would perhaps reframe the question. It's not that Arab countries have decided to withdraw their support for the Palestinians, but rather the nature of that support has become fragmented. This shift reflects the more general fragmentation afflicting the Arab world since the uprisings of 2011. With some states still reeling from the aftershocks of the "Arab Spring," a resultant prioritization of domestic security and

economic concerns on the part of key countries such as Egypt, as well as intra-Arab disputes that continue to simmer or intensify, the geopolitical bandwidth of many Arab countries has narrowed at the expense of the Palestinian cause. It has been downgraded from the top spot it traditionally enjoyed in these states' foreign policy priorities (in rhetoric, if not always in action). The ongoing schism within the Palestinian national movement has likewise undermined Palestinian efforts to solicit and receive assistance.

Still, we should be careful about interpreting the fragmented nature of Arab support for the Palestinians as a decline in that support. For one thing, countries such as Qatar have continued to openly and generously support (certain) Palestinians, financially and politically. For another, even in states lacking the largesse of their Gulf peers, support flows in symbolically powerful ways. Consider Tunisia, where the 2014 constitution enshrined the population's dedication to the Palestinian cause, and where the legislature will soon take up a bill criminalizing ties with the Jewish state. Even in Saudi Arabia, where Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Salman made headlines for tacitly acknowledging the Jewish people's right to their own homeland, King Salman thereafter issued a strong rebuke of the Trump administration's decision to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital, as did the imam of the Grand Mosque in Mecca. Arab support for the Palestinians may no longer be coming from traditional forums like the Arab League, but support remains if one knows where to look for it.



**[Jonathan Schanzer](#), Senior Vice President, Foundation for Defense of Democracies, Washington DC**

The Obama administration's decision to embrace the Muslim Brotherhood in 2011 and then enter into the Iran nuclear deal in 2015 rattled the Sunni Arab states to their core. Washington, the historic guarantor of Arab security, undertook two decisions that threatened these countries directly. That's when the Sunni Arab world began to draw closer to Israel, the region's strongest military power with a track record of successfully countering the Brotherhood and Iran. This dynamic has become more pronounced during the Trump administration. Trump has strong ties to both Jerusalem and Riyadh, and is actively working to solidify the new and evolving "regional architecture" between Israel and its neighbors.

All the while, the Trump administration has actively weakened core Palestinian negotiating positions in anticipation of a new peace deal. The Palestinians have vociferously opposed this deal, while the Sunni states have not. The Arab states may not have given up on the Palestinian cause entirely, but it is increasingly clear that the Palestinian cause is no longer a core national interest. Given this remarkable turn of events, it's worth asking whether it was a core national interest in the first place.



**Asaf Romirowsky**, Fellow at the Middle East Forum, and coauthor with Alex Joffe of *Religion, Politics, and the Origins of Palestine Refugee Relief*

The Palestinian narrative sees Israel's 1948 War of Independence as the Nakba – “the catastrophe.” More to the point, it is the original sin. The birth of a sovereign Jewish state is perceived as the root of all evil because it supposedly solidified the theft by a small Jewish community of the Palestinians' land.

That is the recurring mantra found in Arab historiography – a hypersensitive focus on discrimination and inequality. In general, Arab scholars tend to ignore most of the huge corpus of materials in the archives on the war and zoom in on what are legitimate or illegitimate claims, using UN resolutions as the be all and end all.

These feelings and attitudes have not dissipated within the Arab-Palestinian collective memory. As the Arab state architecture weakens, the Palestinian leadership is finding it harder and harder to sell “the struggle for Palestine” to the Arab world as the cause célèbre of the day. The ongoing crisis in Syria is receiving more attention than the evergreen Palestinian cause.

Finally, as the large Arab Sunni states are trying to ensure their stability while dealing with the growing threat of Iran, the Palestinian cause has become secondary.



**Michael Wilner, Washington bureau chief and White House correspondent for  
*The Jerusalem Post***

It's not that the Palestinians don't enjoy support from Arab countries – they certainly do. The Palestinian cause still resonates with the people of the region. It's that Arab interest is waning in the face of significant, arguably existential pressures on regional governments, which have shed a new light on Israel as a potential strategic ally.

For the first time, the Israelis benefit from direct communication and collaboration with Arab leaders who give them an opportunity to make their case, show their own humanity, and share their side of the story. Arab capitals gained respect for Israel's PM Benjamin Netanyahu when he so publicly confronted former President Barack Obama over the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran, and have since viewed him as a reliable partner in intelligence-sharing – a critical exercise in building trust. And the Iranian threat to Arab world stability, for now, brings with it a sense of urgency in the region more so than the Palestinian file, which has remained largely stagnant for decades.

The real question is whether the Palestinians can make their cause urgent and relevant again. For the time being, it seems the Arab world feels it is preoccupied with more pressing matters.



**Hillel Frisch, Professor of Political Studies and Middle East Studies at  
Bar-Ilan University**

One of the few achievements of Yasser Arafat's otherwise destructive leadership of the Palestinian movement was his ability to achieve a measure of independence from Arab state meddling in Palestinian affairs, while at the same time demanding and

receiving their support in international fora. The political, ideological, and geographical split between two entities, the PA and Hamas, has completely erased Arafat's legacy in this regard. Arab states are once again playing a key role in keeping the Palestinians divided, though they continue to give rhetorical support to the idea of a Palestinian state, whose prospects will be determined by facts on the ground rather than in international platforms. The prospects for a Palestinian state look dimmer than ever.



**Neri Zilber**, journalist based in Tel Aviv and adjunct fellow of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, for which he co-authored *State with No Army, Army with No State: Evolution of the Palestinian Authority Security Forces 1994-2018*

The Israeli government has, for a few years now, been marketing the notion that the Palestinian question no longer troubles the rest of the Arab world; that with the rise of Iran, shared security threats, and untold economic and technological opportunities, the Jewish State and the moderate Arab states are on a path to normalization irrespective of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Some have even referred to it as the “outside-in” paradigm, whereby progress regionally would dictate the future course of events in the Palestinian Territories (as opposed to vice versa). This notion is appealing as it absolves Israel of any responsibility for forward movement on the peace process. It also happens to be mistaken.

While not as central as it perhaps once was in Arab capitals – and even this centrality is debatable given the checkered history of Palestinian-Arab relations – the Palestinian question still resonates widely. Arab leaders – from Egypt's Sisi to Jordan's Abdullah to Saudi's Salman – consistently emphasize the need for a two-state solution based on the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative, including East Jerusalem as the Palestinian capital.

More to the point, in their actions, too, Arab leaders are still heavily engaged with the Palestinian file, precisely because they view it as important in their own politics and societies. Egypt has attempted to facilitate the resumption of peace talks between Israel and the Palestinian Authority; it is now mediating both a Gaza ceasefire deal and a Fatah-Hamas reconciliation. Qatar is the largest donor state to the Gaza Strip

(with Israeli encouragement). Jordan is, arguably, the strongest advocate for the Palestinians in Washington and is heavily invested in Jerusalem affairs, especially the Al-Aqsa Mosque. Saudi Arabia, despite generational differences within its leadership, reemphasized the importance of Israeli-Palestinian peace and Jerusalem at a recent Arab League summit; it continues to provide financial aid to the PA.

None other than President Donald Trump undermined the “outside-in” paradigm when he relayed that 12 Arab leaders had approached him at a summit meeting in Riyadh, all saying the same thing: “You can’t have peace in the Middle East without peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians.” Despite the real warming of relations between Israel and certain Gulf kingdoms, this is still largely the case, even if Israel wishes it weren’t.



**[James Dorsey](#), Senior Fellow, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies,  
Singapore**

Lack of Gulf support for the Palestinians at a time that key tenets of the Palestinian negotiating position are being attacked by the Trump administration has raised the specter of a slackening of Arab support. That is true at one level for Saudi Arabia and the UAE, but it appears far more complex on a closer look at Saudi and UAE maneuvers as well as the responses of other Middle Eastern players. What is certainly true is that the days of Palestine serving Arab autocrats as a lightning rod that distracted from more immediate problems at home and offered a release valve for pent-up anger and frustration ended with the 2011 popular Arab revolts.

However, the reduced utility of Palestine does not necessarily mean that Palestine has slipped into obscurity. On the contrary. The UAE and Saudi Arabia are working behind the scenes, so far with limited success, to reengineer Palestinian politics in their mold and counter Qatar's role in seeking to mediate some kind of sustainable formula for Gaza as well as Turkish moves in Jerusalem. Moreover, with Turkey having adopted the mantle of the Islamic world’s leader in opposing the Trump administration’s policies, and Jordan, for domestic reasons, refusing to align itself with the Saudi-UAE approach, Palestine remains on the agenda even if the dynamics have changed.

Finally, King Salman of Saudi Arabia has made clear that he has not budged on the kingdom's position on Palestine. He has publicly countered his son, Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman, though that has not stopped Muhammad from cooperating with Israel on confronting Iran and political Islam. King Salman's position indicates that Palestine remains an emotive issue for leaders even if they have become more pragmatic in their attitude towards Israel.

Greater pragmatism, moreover, does not mean that Palestine remains an emotionally charged issue among the publics of the Middle East and the larger Islamic world. The popular revolts of 2011, and more recent waves of protest in Morocco, Jordan, Iran, and Iraq demonstrate that autocratic leaders ignore public sentiment at their peril – never more than at a time when they are unilaterally rewriting social contracts.

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