



## PERSPECTIVES

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# Peace with the Arab States and the Palestinians Must be Delinked

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** US officials and envoys dangle the prospect of peace with Arab states in front of Israel as bait to encourage it to make painful concessions on the Palestinian issue. It would be a grave strategic mistake for Israel to fall for this gambit. As the Oslo Accords proved, peace is not made on the White House lawn but in Ramallah, Jerusalem, and Gaza.

President Donald Trump, PM Benjamin Netanyahu, and numerous US officials have all warned that both sides of the forthcoming “agreement of the century” are going to be asked to make painful concessions.

To reduce resistance to those concessions on the Israeli side, US officials and envoys like Jared Kushner and Jason Greenblatt are offering Israel the prospect of peace with Arab states as bait. This idea has numerous supporters among Israeli politicians, think tanks, and academics who invoke the Arab Peace Plan of 2002 as the basis for such a solution.

However, linking the Palestinian issue to peace with Arab states would be a grave strategic mistake for Israel. Simply put, the rewards of making peace beyond the two Arab states with which Israel already has a peace treaty – Egypt and Jordan – are too paltry to warrant linkage to the complex and important Palestinian issue.

This holds true whether one considers the danger of a binational state to be a mortal danger to Israel (the position defining much of Israel’s center and center left) or see annexation of major parts of the West Bank as Israel’s best option (the position held by much of the right).

Why is the prospect of peace with other Arab states an insufficient sweetener? Primarily because of the radical decline in power and influence of those states over the past forty years – a process that seems to be accelerating in recent years.

The logic that lies at the basis of Trump's thinking is the idea that the Arab states would have sufficient influence over the Palestinians to ensure that any deal they accept will not be characterized by irredentist drives in the future – for example, directed towards Israel's Arab citizens – in the quest to further carve up Israel in the Palestinians' favor.

This premise is false, as history clearly shows. Consider the Arab Plan itself. The plan was drawn up by the Saudis, undoubtedly the Arab state with the most financial clout. It was publicized over 16 years ago. Yet it has had no influence whatsoever on Israeli-Palestinian or Israeli-Arab relations since then.

The plan was irrelevant to the continuation of the so-called "al-Aqsa Intifada," which was only defeated in the West Bank by military assertiveness. The lack of such assertiveness in Gaza yielded three major bouts of confrontation there between Israel and Hamas.

Nor did the will behind the plan prevent the inter-Palestinian partition between a Hamas-dominated Gaza and Abbas's Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, which has rendered peacemaking complicated if not impossible.

Certainly the Arab states had no influence over the other war waged between Israel and an Arab adversary – Hezbollah, a proxy of Iran. Though some of those states intimated that they were on the side of the Israelis, their intimations had no effect in terms of either intensifying the war (which states like Saudi Arabia might have desired in the hope of decisively defeating an Iranian proxy) or bringing it to an end.

The Arab states' lack of clout with the Palestinians is not the only reason for doubt. Their inability to act collectively must also be considered. In the 74 years since the emergence of the Arab League, little has occurred to suggest that the Arab states will unify effectively on the matter of Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking.

The only example of near unity was in 1973, and it concerned making war with Israel, not making peace – as the temporary isolation of Egypt after it signed a peace agreement with Israel in 1979 proves. Unity also prevails in the verbal belligerency these states express towards Israel at the UN and in other international fora.

There is every reason to believe Arab disunity will continue to feed both Israeli-Palestinian and inter-Palestinian tensions, even if the peace treaty is signed. Three Arab states are obvious candidates to play the role of spoiler – Syria, as Iran's proxy; Lebanon, forever on the verge of becoming one; and Iraq, which

the US is trying to keep from sliding into the Iranian orbit. Iran and its proxies will have a strong vested interest in undermining the agreement.

Close at their heels are Qatar and Turkey – not an Arab state, but a political actor with clout in the Arab world.

Even relations among more Israel-friendly Arab states can exacerbate tensions in the Israeli-Palestinian relationship, as they have in the past. There is no assurance that Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia will see eye to eye on many aspects of the Israeli-Palestinian peace.

All these tensions will all too readily be absorbed in a local setting characterized by the hard and fast division between a Hamas/Muslim Brotherhood-dominated Gaza and a nationalist PA.

Rest assured that immediately after the signing of the agreement on the White House lawn, Hamas will launch rockets, incendiary balloons, and thousands of demonstrators and terrorists at the fence to assert its claim to all of Palestine. They will go back to the playbook of over 25 years ago, when Hamas and Islamic Jihad sent their terrorists into action after the signing of the Declaration of Principles.

That comparison proves, in fact, just how weak is the bait of Arab regional support. The Palestinian spoilers pulled off their destructive feats at the height of US hegemony. It was soon after the demise of the Soviet Union, and the American military triumph of defeating Iraq – a blitzkrieg on a par with Germany's onslaught on Poland and Israel's victory in the Six-Day War – was still fresh.

Today, Trump – like his predecessor Obama – is signaling an American retreat from the Middle East. Under such circumstances, local spoilers, supported by their regional sponsor, Iran, will certainly be willing to play the same role they did over a quarter century ago.

As Prof. Benny Miller observed, cold war and cold peace are made with the help of international powers. Warm peace and hot war are made exclusively by the locals.

One thing is for sure: peace will not be made on the White House lawn, but in Ramallah, Jerusalem, and Gaza. Anything else is wishful thinking.

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