



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

Three Months After the Abraham Accords, the Palestinians Have Lost the Arab Street

by Prof. Hillel Frisch

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,872, January 7, 2021

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The relative complacency with which the “Arab street” received the Abraham Accords, which might have seemed an aberration at the time of signing, has now faded. Former Israeli Arab MK Jamal Zahalka, who is only two years away from a lavish government pension, is now pining for the emergence of a modern-day Saladin to destroy the Jewish State and the Arab traitors.

While the Algerian FLN lost its bloody struggle against the French army and settlers (during which it killed more Algerian collaborators than Frenchmen), it won the political war. It achieved independence for Algeria thanks in large measure to the widespread regional support it received from Egypt and other radical regimes in the Middle East, as well as the Soviet Union and its satellite states.

The lessons of the Algerian struggle were clear to the founders of the Palestinian factions. To the PLO, which was formed two years after Algeria’s independence in 1962, the most important of those lessons was the value of maintaining the support of the Arab masses in service to the dogma that the central cause facing the Arab world was the resolution of the “Palestinian problem” via destruction of the Jewish state.

Little wonder, then, that at that time one of the most famous slogans of Fatah, the PLO’s largest constituent organization, was “Palestine is my identity, Arabia my [strategic] depth” (*Filiastiniyya al-Wijah, Arabiyya al-Umq*).

So important was the tenet of maintaining Arab popular support that the first draft of the proposed Basic Order (essentially the constitution) of the Palestinian Authority 30 years later, which omitted any reference to Palestine

as an Arab entity and an intrinsic and inseparable part of the Arab nation, was hastily amended to stress both.

The support of the “Arab street” for the Palestinian cause was supposed (at the very least) to intimidate the leaders of the Arabic-speaking states from making peace with Israel. With regard to the two states that dared defy the purported threat of the Arab street and to sign formal peace treaties with Israel, Egypt and Jordan, maintenance of popular support for the Palestinian cause was meant to prevent cold peace from growing warm.

One can hardly deny the intimidating and chilling effect Arab popular opinion, whether real or imagined, has had on Arab state leaders. Though Jordan’s King Abdullah, like his father before him, has held numerous secret and not so secret meetings with Israeli leaders, received military aid from the Jewish state, and maintained excellent security relations with Israeli security personnel in a common and successful effort to quell terrorism on both sides of the border, he has never challenged the cultural and educational boycott of Israel that prevails in Jordanian society and the anti-Jewish themes that pervade the local media.

Other Arab states, which have at times maintained consular activity, permitted Israelis with foreign passports to engage in business and commerce, and, in the case of Morocco, facilitated extensive tourism from Israel, followed the same path of cultural and educational boycott.

But three months into the Abraham Accords process, there is no doubt that Palestinian leaders on both sides of the PA-Hamas divide are deeply disappointed by, and worried about, the passivity of the Arab street.

And so they should be. If the passivity of the citizens of the very wealthy UAE and comparatively wealthy Bahrain could be explained away by the ability of its leadership to buy the support of the citizenry for unpopular policies like normalization, the argument wears thin regarding Sudan, one of the poorest Arabic-speaking countries, as well as the populous and relatively poor state of Morocco. This fear might explain why the Abraham Accords process began with the UAE as an initial test case: it was the richest of the states that were likely to normalize relations with Israel.

Contrary to the views of Israel’s many detractors—a prominent example of whom is Jamal Zahalka, former member of Knesset, former head of the Balad party, and soon-to-be recipient of a lavish Israeli government pension—the growing indifference of the Arab street to the Palestinian issue is a long-term phenomenon. It displays occasional spikes of interest, but they are always short-lived.

A Google Trends graph of searches of the phrase “normalization with Israel” in Arabic—a phrase with a derogatory connotation in much of the Arab world—dating from 2004 shows that interest spiked more in the first decade of the new century than in the second. The graph is characterized by rigid rather than curved lines, which reflects the relatively small number of searches on the subject.

Interest was of course higher among populations of those states that are now part of the normalization process with Israel, such as Bahrain and Sudan, and likely future candidates like Oman, Kuwait, and Qatar. Though the governments of Kuwait and Qatar have taken a hard line against normalization, they might change their position due to American pressure. Interest is also high among the Palestinians, who consider themselves the victims of the process, and the Lebanese, because of their proximity to Israel.

Even more worrisome for the PA and the Hamas government in Gaza, from a geostrategic perspective, is the lack of interest in normalization among the general public in the core Arab states, including Morocco (the last country so far to have joined the process). For every search on normalization with Israel in Morocco, there were 16 searches of the phrase in the Palestinian territories and Bahrain. A similar ratio prevailed for searches in rival and formerly radical Algeria. In Saudi Arabia, interest was only slightly higher.

The indifference of the Arab street is most marked in the most important Arab state for the Palestinians: Egypt. In the country that is Gaza’s only gateway to Arab world, the ratio between searches on normalization with Israel among Egyptians and residents of other Gulf States is one to 50.

Little wonder, then, that the Egyptians—in pretty brutal fashion—keep the Rafah gateway more closed than open; consistently refuse to release persons suspected of being Hamas terrorists with ties to the Islamic State in Sinai, including four well-known Hamas fighters who were abducted en route to Iran by the Egyptians in 2015; and relate to the Hamas government exclusively through the Ministry of the Interior and Egypt’s security agencies. Sisi has not only internalized the threat Hamas poses to his regime but is quite confident that the Egyptian people will not take to the streets on the Palestinians’ behalf.

Back to former MK Zahalka, who, in an article on a major Arab media site, denounces the states that are in the process of normalizing with Israel and mocks PA head Mahmoud Abbas for pinning his hopes on the Moroccan king to combat it.

He ends with what he considers a dire warning—that a Saladin will appear who will not only conquer Jerusalem but will avenge the Arabs by punishing the normalizing traitors.

It may be a long wait, given that 833 years have passed since Saladin wrested Jerusalem from the Crusaders.

That's not a problem for Zahalka, who can continue calling for Israel's destruction at the Israeli taxpayer's expense and while enjoying the protection he is granted by its democratic government.

Prof. Hillel Frisch is a professor of political studies and Middle East studies at Bar-Ilan University and a senior research associate at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies.