

The Abraham Accords and the Palestinian Issue

Written by Massimiliano Fiore

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MASSIMILIANO FIORE, NOV 1 2020

A new chapter in the history of the Middle East has begun with the signing of the Abraham Accords. These agreements between Israel, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates reflect a strategic realignment against the two non-Arab powers, Iran and Turkey, threatening their interests in the region. The uprisings and civil wars of 2011 heightened the decades-old divisions between the competing sides in the Middle East and gave rise to a more genuinely regional geopolitical order, defined by mutually hostile nationalisms and sectarian identities. These developments led Bahrain and the UAE, nervous of a diminishing US commitment to the Middle East, to re-evaluate their priorities and to turn towards peace with Israel, the region's dominant military power. In doing so, the Gulf monarchies are seeking to counter efforts to extend Iranian influence across the region and to lessen that of the Muslim Brotherhood and affiliated Sunni Islamist movements backed by Turkey and Qatar, regardless of the impact on the Palestinians.

This unprecedented rapprochement has left the Palestinians feeling abandoned by traditional allies and reaching for a well-worn playbook in a fast-changing Middle East. Their isolation is attributable to a failure to grasp these changes and the Sunni Arab world's resultant unwillingness to continue to accept a veto from the West Bank or Gaza on a development that is clearly in its interest and necessary for its defense against Iran, Turkey and the Muslim Brotherhood.

The Palestinians have long sought to secure freedom from Israeli occupation on the basis of the Arab Peace Initiative, a pan-Arab policy calling for Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories and acceptance of Palestinian statehood, offering normalization of relations with the Arab world in return. However, 18 years have passed since its formal adoption in March 2002, and other common interests have taken precedence. In the absence of progress or any realistic hope of achieving it, standing by the Palestinians has ceased to be a priority for the Gulf monarchies in the face of clear and present threats from Iran, Turkey and the Muslim Brotherhood, combined with the emergence of common economic and security interests. Relations with Israel have simply become more urgent than the Palestinian question.

The Palestinian leadership could react to this diplomatic body blow in one of two ways: either by attempting to transcend their sense of betrayal and make the most of the situation, or by radicalizing further and seeking to make common cause with Hamas and its international backers. A concomitant, if rather more startling, possibility is that Turkey and Qatar's growing support for Hamas (largely financial in the latter's case) could lead both countries to align more closely with Iran. A sign of this came shortly after the normalization agreement was announced – and some weeks after President Recep Erdogan had hosted two senior Hamas representatives in Istanbul – with Hamas Political Chief, Ismael Haniyah, traveling to Lebanon to meet Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah, his stated purpose being to reinforce the anti-Israel 'axis of resistance'.

The Abraham Accords are potentially more significant than existing Israeli peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan. While those are both pillars of Middle Eastern stability, they mainly operate at the governmental level. They were agreements between governments to end military conflict, despite leaving the Palestinian issue unresolved and normalization between their societies pending. To date, there is still negligible exchange between the peoples, hardly any tourism (apart from in the Sinai) and not much trade (expect now for gas).

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What makes the Abraham Accords different is their lack of historical baggage. Bahrain and the UAE do not border and have never waged war against Israel, and the numbers of Palestinian refugees living there are relatively low. The accords are based on shared regional perceptions and have a major potential to boost economic growth, with four mutually beneficial micro-agreements already signed on investment, scientific cooperation, civil aviation and visa exemptions respectively. Even more remarkable, perhaps, are the clear signs of an atmosphere for a warm peace developing: Bahrainis, Emiratis and Israelis are excited about their joint peacemaking project. Not just politicians and officials, but also leaders of civil society, business people, academics and artists have joined in expressing hopes of a genuine peace and proposing specific plans to develop it.

In their normalization of relations and their focus on travel, trade and business, the Abraham Accords go further than the cold peace Egypt and Jordan concluded with Israel decades ago, and which has often been strained by events. The status of Bahrain and the UAE as regional business hubs means the accords will promote personal interactions between increasing numbers of Israeli visitors and hundreds of thousands of Arab workers. They thus make good on a crucial deficiency of the two earlier agreements. Israel's historic 1979 peace treaty with Egypt retains its status as a major milestone on the road to ending the Arab-Israeli conflict by removing the Arab world's most populous and powerful nation from the equation. But that agreement and its 1994 successor with Jordan are the co-ordinates of a cold peace, one that is limited to robust security coordination and a handful of economic deals.

New prospects for Israeli-Palestinian peace will not suddenly emerge as if by magic. It will take a concerted effort on both sides to renew faith in the possibility of peaceful coexistence. Confidence that Israeli and Palestinian political leaders can play a positive role in this endeavor is currently very low. The Abraham Accords do, however, potentially offer a new vision for resolving the conflict, taking normalization between governments as a route to normalization between peoples. If the parties use them wisely, their agreements could positively influence Israeli-Palestinian relations, offering a new framework for negotiations and accelerating progress towards a two-state solution. Israel could promote Emirati aid or investment in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and allow the UAE to present itself as an honest broker between Israel and the Palestinians. In addition, by brokering goodwill gestures and concessions on the part of Israel, the two Gulf monarchies could demonstrate to the Palestinians that they were capable of delivering on legitimate Palestinian demands. This could eventually lead to the emergence of a Palestinian leadership and society that was more moderate and responsible, and thus a more willing peace partner for Israel.

But peace involves concessions on both sides. To encourage Palestinian acceptance of Bahrain and the UAE as trustworthy intermediaries, Israel must approach the Palestinian people directly and demonstrate that these accords can have positive implications for them. Step one would be for Israel not just to suspend, but to call a permanent halt to the building and expansion of settlements and infrastructure beyond the settlement blocs into the West Bank heartlands. The new geopolitical regional order gives Israel a strategic advantage, as normalization with regional partners is no longer dependent on a green light from the Palestinians, and the moment calls for courageous leadership from Israel. A magnanimous Israeli response could maximize the benefits of the new regional order by effecting significant progress in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

There is no clear Palestinian strategy for dealing with the new regional constellation. The Palestinians have no military option, their politics are chaotic and their current leadership has been in power since 2006 without electoral consent. The vast majority of Palestinian people are weary of their corrupt, ineffective leaders and want fresh elections. The existing political strategies of the two main leading Palestinian factions, Fatah and Hamas, have led nowhere, resulting only in advancing Israeli control over the whole of Palestine. After years of factional in-fighting, long-overdue Palestinian elections would renew the mandates of both the president and parliament, granting them more leverage abroad through increased legitimacy at home. Palestinians should rebuild their institutions from the grassroots level up and redefine their objectives around a new national consensus. They need a leader with the strength and charisma to unite them and offer them hope – a leader with a compelling vision that has a chance of being fulfilled, with a reasonable and viable plan for the Palestinian future. President Mahmoud Abbas, now 84, is not that person. It is thus essential that all forces in Palestinian society carefully review their methods and evolve a deliberated long-term strategy. They need to rethink past approaches, understanding how other liberation movements have succeeded despite an unfavorable balance of power, and wooing all potential allies in their struggle. The warm Arab-Israeli relationships born of the Abraham Accords could ultimately benefit the Palestinian

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cause, but the Palestinians need to engage.

There have been calls for the Palestinian leadership to seize the moment and resume peace negotiations with Israel in the framework of an international peace conference, but Abbas has made his response contingent on the results of the US elections. Americans elect their next president on 3 November and their choice is likely to affect Israeli-Palestinian relations in its implications for US policy in the Middle East and peacemaking efforts there. For many years, the US was relatively consistent on the peace process through various changes of administration, with shifts only of emphasis and minor differences over the extent of US involvement. The Trump administration, however, has taken a number of decisions that represent a significant departure from traditional US policy post-1967, and especially since the advent of the peace process in the 1990s. President Trump has dramatically shifted policy on key controversies such as the status of Jerusalem, Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights, the building of settlements and the right of annexation. Moreover, US ties with the Palestinian leadership have been cut for the first time since the signing of the Oslo Accords, with the US closing down the PLO mission in Washington and blocking aid to the Palestinians.

If Joe Biden becomes President, all of that could change, not least because the current Israeli leadership has made no secret its close ties to Trump. A Biden win is likely to result in the Palestinian question becoming a key focus of US policy in the region once again. Biden is expected to reprise the Obama administration's policy on settlements and take a tough line against their expansion. He is also expected to reaffirm categorical US support for the two-state solution, where the Trump administration has equivocated, and to firmly reject any suggestion that the West Bank be annexed.

If Biden wins, will he plunge headlong into an attempt to revive the peace process? There is, of course, no sure way of knowing, but there are a number of key points to bear in mind. First, the US coronavirus crisis in all its health and economic ramifications looks set to monopolize Biden's attention on the domestic front, at least in the early part of his term, with his secretary of state left to handle foreign affairs. Even without the crisis, Israel-Palestine would not be expected to be a US foreign policy priority, at least not near the beginning of a Biden presidency.

If Trump wins, will he push on with current policy or implement changes? A key consideration is whether annexation would find its way back onto the agenda or whether the administration would put this controversial idea to one side so as to enhance the Arab world's normalization with Israel. Trump has reportedly promised the UAE not to support any Israeli annexation moves until at least 2024. Another Middle East policy question in the event of Trump's re-election is whether the administration would simply disregard the Palestinian issue or try to restore ties with the Palestinian Authority. The answer is to some extent contingent on whether other Arab states considering normalization with Israel would make it conditional on progress with the Palestinians.

A Trump victory would be bad news for the Palestinian leadership and could lead either to an attempt to renew ties with Washington or to angry radicalization and efforts to make common cause with Hamas and its international backers, Turkey and Qatar. Other actors, not least the EU, might step in to fill the diplomatic vacuum created by a second Trump term with their own alternative initiative. This has not yet happened, but it would be interesting to see if a renewed mandate for Trump proved to be the catalyst for such a development.

**The views expressed in this publication are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of Rabdan Academy or the UAE Government.*

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