

Review Essay

Arab-Israeli Peace Runs Aground

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Structural Flaws in the Middle East Peace Process: Historical Contexts

Wright, J.W., ed.

Palgrave Press, New York, NY, 2002, pp. 256, \$69.95 Hardcover.

The Arab-Israeli Conflict Transformed

Hemda Ben-Yehuda and Shmuel Sandler.

SUNY Press, Albany, NY, 2002, pp. 291, \$78.50 Hardcover, \$26.95 Softcover.

Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East

Shibley Telhami and Michael Barnett, eds.

Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 2002, pp. 240, \$45.00 Hardcover, \$18.95 Softcover.

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Introduction

The lull in Arab-Israeli peacemaking in recent years gives today's scholars the opportunity to reflect on what was right and what was wrong in previous efforts to resolve the conflict. After a frenetic flurry of attempted peacemaking in the late Clinton Administration, the hard slog of the al-Aqsa Intifada made final status talks recede into the distance, even as an episodic progression of peace efforts – the Sharm al-Sheikh Agreement, the Mitchell Committee Report, the Tenet Work Plan, and the Quartet's 'Road Map' – sought to bring the parties into dialogue once again.

Long academic lead times, however, mean that authors publishing books now had conceived their projects during a much more hopeful period in Arab-Israeli peacemaking, when it appeared that final status talks might soon lead to the Promised Land of a comprehensive

Arab-Israeli agreement. By the time these books arrived on the publishers' desks, however, the depths to which cooperative efforts had fallen were apparent to all. The result is not so much to make these books irrelevant, but instead to cast them in a rather different light than that in which they had been conceived.

Economic Linkages

Even among optimists, few thought that the Arab-Israeli conflict would be wholly resolved in the near term. Indeed, even a formal peace treaty between Israel and the Palestinians would have necessarily required further negotiation, interaction and follow up for decades into the future. But while some warned of looming problems, few foresaw movements toward peace grinding to a complete halt. Some of the more pessimistic voices can be found in *Structural Flaws in the Middle East Peace Process*, a compendium of twelve authors' views on the difficulty of striking the peace envisioned in the Oslo accords. Although the book is subtitled 'historical contexts', the most interesting analysis by far concerns the shaky – and sometimes counterproductive – economic bases underlying regional peacemaking efforts.

The most interesting essay in the collection may be that of Ishaq Diwan and Michael Walton, two World Bank veterans who drafted the first version of their chapter for a conference in Cairo a decade ago. Entitled 'Between Jordan and Israel: The Economics of Palestine's Uneasy Triangle', the chapter both examines the economic interrelationships of Israel, Palestine and Jordan, and how new structures might be created to meet the needs of each. Departing from the rosy, yet hazy proclamations of a 'new Middle East' built on economic complementarity, the authors point out that Israeli, Palestinian and Jordanian actors' economic interests are frequently in competition or conflict, and will have to be reconciled in the long term. At the same time, the

three economies are inextricably linked to one another, thereby tying their fates, if not their interests, together.

When one goes below the surface, the conflicts are daunting. As the authors lay it out, the Palestinians' main commodity is labor, of which they have in great surplus. Paradoxically, they say, one of the primary demands for Palestinian labor is in settlement construction, which would presumably dry up in the event of progress in Arab-Israeli peace. The Arab boycott of Israel also applies to most Palestinian manufactured goods, thereby sharply limiting Palestinians' ability in the near term to build an industrial base that could contribute to a diversified economy in the longer term. Jordan fears opening its economy to direct competition with Israeli goods, as well as the fluctuations of a Palestinian economic sector that trades partly on Jordanian dinars but is largely beyond Jordanian government control. For their part, Israeli producers worry about the influx of cheap manufactured goods from the Arab world and smuggling into Israel.

One might posit that all three economies share an interest in attracting donor support from around the world. But the authors note that continued donor support paradoxically depends in some measure on the absence of peace rather than the achievement of it. Coordinating all of this into the future will require intricate structures of cooperation rather more intricate than anything tried in the European Union or through NAFTA, they argue, since the political environment is so much more difficult. Significantly, though, they highlight the importance of structuring the transitional period so as to contain dislocations in the constituent economies. Rather than hold out the prospect for a rosy future, the path forward seems fraught with danger.

Several additional chapters make interesting economic points, especially concerning the reliance of even non-oil economies on oil revenues, derived through remittances of expatriate labor forces working in petroleum-rich states. Although the direct relationship of some of these

chapters to the Arab-Israeli peace process is sometimes unclear, the chapters convincingly paint the rather grim economic choices facing Palestinian and Jordanian policy makers, who must buffet swirling international political and economic forces, in addition to the internal challenges they face. Especially fine in this regard are the essays by the book's editor on the various dependencies of the Jordanian and Saudi economies on oil revenues, and one by Nora Ann Colton on Palestinian and Jordanian expatriate labor. The essays make clear that, in the face of these swirling forces, there is no safe or easy position to take, and the prospects appear deeply challenging, if not altogether gloomy.

Early chapters in this book on the historic politics of Arab-Israeli peacemaking add less to the overall enterprise. They tend toward being too predictable, too short, and too descriptive to add much to what we already know.

Crisis and Interstate Conflict

Despite the persistently grim economic environment, there was time in the 1990s when the political environment appeared more encouraging. For decades, the key players in the Arab-Israeli conflict were states, either acting themselves or through proxies. As the 1990s progressed, states appeared to recede as antagonists in the Arab-Israeli conflict. The Madrid conference in October 1991 brought previously absent states like Syria into direct talks with the Israelis, and overt conflict on the state level appeared to diminish.

Ben Yehuda and Sandler take great pains to quantify this diminution in state-level violence. They base their work on Brecher and Wilkenfield's International Crisis Behavior (ICB) dataset, creating a new database for more recent events not coded by the ICB project. They then run this dataset through a Crisis Magnitude Index (CMI) model, measuring the realms of context,

process and outcome, and the indicators of gravity, number of actors, superpower role, crisis management techniques, scope of violence, and termination. The result is a series of tables and charts that generally illustrate that the amount of interstate conflict between Israel and its neighbors diminished in frequency and seriousness over the last half century.

Writing in 1999, one might plausibly have seen this as part of a progression toward peace: first the states drop out, then non-state violence declines, and finally the Oslo dream is realized. But by time this book was published, it was clear that the story had a very different ending. Indeed, the upsurge in violence after September 2000, combined with the rather clear involvement of surrounding states like Syria in supporting Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command, and Hezbollah suggests that an end to direct state-to-state violence may be very different from an end to one state's aggression against another.

The authors of this book seek to make a theoretical case: that realist approaches to international relations must be tempered by institutional and ethnic considerations. To suggest that reality doesn't fit into neat analytical models, however, is a rather modest achievement. Overall, the effort feels like the *ex post facto* dismantling of a straw man. Yes, direct interstate conflict declined over time, but the reader is not left entirely convinced that such decline drives, rather than is driven by, change in the nature of the conflict. The models the authors produce feel like better descriptors of the past than predictors of the future, which the authors themselves appear to realize with the collapse of the Oslo project.

Identity as a Moving Target

The most interesting contribution on Arab-Israeli peacemaking is, in fact, a book that is not really about Arab-Israeli peacemaking. Shibley Telhami and Michael Barnett's *Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East* is an edited volume that seeks to bridge the differences between rationalist and systemic approaches on the one hand, and constructivist approaches on the other, to understand the foreign policies of Middle Eastern states. That is to say, the approach suggests that regional states may have interests that they pursue in mostly rational ways, but those interests are informed by – and sometimes shaped by – domestic considerations that have as much to do with fervid emotional attachments as to coolly derived *raison d'état*. Identity is a useful prism through which to view these domestic considerations in the Middle East, which recalling University of California-Santa Barbara historian R. Stephen Humphrey's memorable book title, is often caught 'between memory and desire'. But it would be a mistake to take 'identity' as a static concept, either as a regional phenomenon or in individual states. As several of the chapters in this book stress, and especially Michael Barnett's fine chapter on Israel, identity in many Middle Eastern states is dynamic, even as many contending voices seek to stress themselves as uniquely authentic and thus immune from shifts in national mood or events. Identity in the Middle East has two important characteristics, which appear throughout this book: the presumptive importance of history, and the tension between identification with the state and a broader Arab community. On the non-state level, one might also note the continued salience of ties to ethnic groups, tribes and clans in important countries in the region, as well as the various religious ties that unite and divide communities across state boundaries.

Marc Lynch's chapter on Jordan examines the problem of defining the Jordanian nation, especially via its relationship to the West Bank. Lynch convincingly argues that Jordanian

notions of identity have shifted over the last half century, as Jordan sought accommodation in the region as well as a viable relationship with its own Palestinian population. Palestinians constitute a majority of Jordan's citizens, and the West Bank had been the breadbasket of the country before it was lost to Israel in 1967. Jordan as an entity was a new concept at the time of its founding in the 1920s, and early Jordanian leaders sought accommodation with Zionists and later Israelis at the same time that they wrapped themselves in a cloak of Arab unity. As Lynch tells it, it was the late 20th century struggle to define Jordanian national identity that prompted a fuller discussion of Jordanian national interests. He comes down more on the constructivist side of the ledger, arguing that the Jordanian leadership consciously used the notion of identity to shift the Jordanian public's views on the necessity of retaining the West Bank as an integral part of the Hashemite Kingdom.

Israel's rather public struggles in the 1990s to define the nature of the state form the core of Michael Barnett's chapter. He is especially good describing and analyzing how Yitzhak Rabin's understanding of the nature of the Israeli state differed from that of his predecessor, Yitzhak Shamir. As he points out, the Israeli electorate proved a moving target through this entire period, repeatedly confounding pollsters and shifting their understanding of what Israel is and what Israel is to be. The tight narrative especially lends itself as superb course reading on the winding ways of Israeli politics in the 1990s.

Another fascinating case study is Ibrahim Karawan's treatment of Egypt. As he points out, the idea of Arabism in Egypt long predated the regime of Gamal Abdel Nasser. But under Abdel Nasser's leadership, the Egyptian state deliberately constructed a particular form of Arabism – what Karawan describes as an aggressive 'state Arabism', to distinguish it from the more organic 'political Arabism' that had existed before. Abdel Nasser's state Arabism never

fully took hold in Egypt and was mostly discredited by Abdel Nasser's death in 1970. What followed was a shift toward defining Egyptian national interests more in Egyptian than Arab terms, and reducing foreign entanglements. Sadat's peace with Israel was a part of this, which Karawan describes as an act of realpolitik rather than ideological conviction.

What we see in Karawan's chapter is a fascinating example of a state's shift from a consciously constructed, activist (if not interventionist) identity to one that is more grounded in realism. This is not to say that Abdel Nasser was not motivated by realist considerations, but rather that he used a particular notion of identity in a particular way in order to achieve his goals, while his successor redefined that identity to achieve other goals. Whereas Barnett's chapter suggests the dynamism of notions of identity, Karawan's demonstrates the plasticity of those notions in the hands of committed leaders.

Conclusion

None of the studies here suggest that the Arab-Israeli conflict is closer or farther from resolution, but they each suggest the intricacy of reaching that resolution. Even in optimistic times, aligning all of the moving parts is a daunting task. The conception among some is that the Arab-Israeli conflict is a wholly intractable one driven by age-old animosities and irreconcilable claims. They advocate hunkering down and lowering expectations for a resolution of the conflict. If there is a common theme to these books, however, it is to highlight how movable all those parts really are. A dizzying number of variables do appear daunting, but these studies all suggest avenues forward through skilled technocratic attention combined with political leadership.