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The Changing Dynamics between Israel
and the Arab World: An Analysis through
the Realist Lens

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Abstract

The relationships of the Middle-East, within itself and with the rest of the globe, has come to now be broken into multitudinous strands, leaving the footprints of their past upon the upcoming platters for collaboration. This paper attempts to understand their various dynamics of these relations in the specific context of Israel and the Arab World, who have come to occupy the main stage in terms of conflicts and instability that persist in the region. It presents an analytical perspective upon the centuries-old areas of dissension and subsequently leads to the global and regional endeavours for cooperation. It then goes on to critically scrutinize the recent and imperative deal made between both the parties and accords the realist lens to the same to be able to provide a study in this field of international relations. The paper shall conclude with proving how the deal stands to be of benefit and bookend the catastrophic nature of these relationships that have reached a stage where there can be no returns made.

Keywords *Israel, Arab World, Dynamic, Cooperation, Realism, Zionism, State, Normalisation, United Nations, Protracted Conflicts, Bilateral Relations*

1.0 Introduction

The evasive, long-drawn history between Israel and Arab worlds has presented one of the most challenging yet riveting themes for the study of international relations. The regional issues, conflicts, attempts at reformation – bearing the mask of global instability – and even the coordination with other nations and the global community, have only given way to 30 international crises and 9 wars since the onset of the first official conflict in 1948. {Brecher (2017)}. The core problems that arose, have been deeply rooted in the fabric of Israel and the Arab world and resulted in the germination of multifarious dimensions of irregularities, power dynamics and global instability. Most attempts to cool down even the smaller uprisings have always failed.

The Islamist and Zionistic extremism has prevented both to take a step forward in the direction of cooperation. {Brecher (2017)}. The nature of the Arab world, comprising multiple regions, with separate political statuses, further hindered its progressive missions for inclusivity. Moreover, the increasing roles played by the U.S.A., Britain, Europe, Asia and even the other smaller middle-eastern regions influenced the conflict resolution process.

The support, as provided on multiple occasions, by international organisations has also been able to act as a catalyst in peace-making missions. This study presents an opportunity for analysis of the cavernous conflict of this region from multiple lenses and offers theoretical perspectives and suggests measures for peaceful co-existence.

Realism is a theory within the International Relations field which has four major tenets or assumptions. These assumptions are: first, states are the most important actors in the study of international relations and represent the key unit of analysis. These states exist in a state of anarchy, meaning there is no central authority which exists above the states. Second, realists view the state as being a unitary actor. This means that when the state acts it is assumed to be speaking with one united voice. Third, realists assume that states are rational actors. This means that when making decisions, states consider their alternatives and weigh the costs and benefits to each course of action and then act according to what they believe to be in their best interest. Fourth, realists believe that the most important issue for states is security. Having stated the four assumptions that define Realism, the next step is to analyse the extent to which it has been applied in Arab politics. It seems that in the majority of the cases, with a few exceptions realism has been the go-to-approach by the Arab nations, in particular, and all the countries, in general.

2.0 The Trajectory of Conflicts:

The conflicts between Israel and the Arab world have existed long since the initial establishment of each into what is presently understood as their respective native regions. {Shlaim (1977)}. There have been various natures of conflicts arising out of multifarious factors and the intermingling of ideologies, resulting in the centuries-long territorial, religious, cultural and economic warfare.

The ancient Israelites entered Jerusalem long before the Islamic belief system began, to foster their faith in Judaism. {Cohen, Musmar (2020)}. It was in 638 C.E. that the initial presence of Islamised Arabs in the contested city of Jerusalem was recognised¹. Another level of the conflict stemmed from the French Revolution that led ideas and movements of Arab nationalism to spread in Beirut and Cairo with Jewish national movements emerging as “facts on the ground”.

¹ Brecher, M. (2017). *Dynamics of the Arab-Israel conflict: Past and present, intellectual odyssey II*.

The Jewish State in 1896, was given institutional form at the founding conference of the World Zionist Organization in 1897 as a result of slow Arab and Jewish nationalisms. The principal source of Israel-Palestine conflict was the purchase of Palestinian land by Jewish immigrants from the Ottoman government and the exclusivist organization of Jewish agricultural settlements. The myriad of political acts by these two communities and the British Mandate authorities, as implemented during the World War I, to secure Arab support and subsequent exclusion of the British commitment to support an independent Arab state including portions of Syria, further stemmed the communal conflicts in the future. In this promise of an independent Arab nation, Palestine was included in the list of areas that should be Arab and independent.

The Jewish community was sustained for a long time by their distinctive and unifying belief system, Judaism. The gradual coming of the ideology of nationalism then led to the emergence of the distinctive national identity among the Palestinians, who observed migration and were identified as 'South Syrians'. Post-WWI, both West Bank and Gaza Strip became a part of British-mandated Palestine, which continued throughout till WWII when there was a strong demand from Jews fleeing Nazi Europe for a homeland within Palestine, a region dominated by the Arabs. This also led Jerusalem to become a bone of contention between the Arabs and the Jews as it was the only region considered as a holy city by them. The end of the British mandate in 1947 led the United Nations to call for a partition of Palestine into Palestine – 47% Palestinian majority land – and formation of Israel – 53% of the Jewish majority land. However, this was not well accepted by the Arab countries of the middle-east, regardless of which concern, the state of Israel was formed by force in 1948. This is considered as the initiation of the first Arab-Israel war. Throughout the Israel–Palestine segment of the Arab–Israel PC, the balance of military capability favoured Israel. While Israel's military strength during most of the first war (1948–49) was inferior to the combined Arab military power, the Palestinian component of the Arab coalition was virtually non-existent. The whirlpool of religious strife escalated to a point of undeterred expansion for Israel over Palestine, meanwhile, West Bank and East Jerusalem came under the control of Jordan, West Jerusalem to Israel and Gaza Strip under the Egyptian Military rule. Both Jewish nationalism and Palestinian nationalism created institutions to mobilize support from their own and other communities, and to perform valuable political, economic, and public relations activities to advance their cause.

The Zionist Organization, 1897 and the Jewish Agency for Palestine, 1929 were the first significant institutional manifestations of a Palestinian identity. In response, the Arab Higher Committee 1936 as the central organization of the Arab community of Palestine, at the initiative of Haj Amin al-Husseini, one of the most controversial Palestinian leaders of the twentieth century. Later, in 1964 the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) was created as the Palestinian counterpart of Jewry's independence-striving institution, the Zionist Organization—created 67 years later, and 16 years after the proclamation of Israel's independence. The dominant party within the PLO since the late 1960s, Al-Fatah, was compelled by domestic Palestinian pressures and civil war to share the mantle of Palestinian leadership since 2006 with the Islamist organization, Hamas (Palestine Resistance Movement), the governing party in the Gaza Strip since 2007. The wake of nationalism called for the invalidation of Treaties that were fostering force and oppression. Such was the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty of 1936 which allowed for British Military presence in the Suez Canal region. In the wake of WWII, Egyptian military forces called for the reversal of this action and to drive out the British forces under the leadership of Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1956. His forces also engaged in sporadic wars with the Zionist nation which was driven out of his antipathy towards Zionism. The Suez Canal crisis involved distractions on part of the involved parties as evident from the delays from Britain and France, Soviet Union's occupation with the crisis in Hungary, Czechoslovakia's involvement with the Egyptian government and construction of the Aswan Dam and the threat of nuclear war due to the influence of Cold War actors. Here began the direct involvement of the United States into the Middle-Eastern affairs and ultimately, Israel was forced to bow to the U.S. in 1957, relinquishing control over the canal to Egypt. This marked the first use of a UN Peacekeeping Force, i.e., The United Nations Emergency Force, dispatched to the area to supervise hostilities and withdrawal of the three occupying forces. This crisis played one of the most important roles in determining the international world order of the time and thereby influencing the subsequent rise and falls of polities.

The official formation of Israel as a nation was proclaimed with the de-facto recognition by the U.S.A. within 11 minutes, and de-jure recognition by USSR within 3 days of it attaining independence. Still yet, the Arab World refused to award this recognition in 1967, sparking another war, famously known as the Six-Days-War.

On June 5, Israel staged a sudden pre-emptive air assault thereby incapacitating a large percentage of Egyptian and Syrian air force. With loss of air support, Egypt found itself in a vulnerable position with no option but to attack. The next three days allowed for Israel to successfully occupy the Gaza Strip and all of Sinai Peninsula, leading up to the bank of the Suez Canal. Since 1967, a large part of the Palestinian population had been living under Israeli-occupied territories in both West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Gradually, Israel observed a rise in its strength and successively began to build settlements for its Jewish community in the newly occupied Palestinian territories, including West Bank and Gaza Strip.

The war ended with a call for ceasefire from UN Security Council, which was accepted immediately by Israel and Jordan and a day later by Egypt while Syria continued to shell villages in Israel and came to an agreement on June 10. The Six-Days-War caused the biggest phase of conflict, with more than a million Palestinian refugees and only with UN Resolution 242 began the initiative for diplomatic cooperation.

The next major conflict of the region was the 1973 Yom Kippur War when Egypt and Syria launched a joint attack in the Sinai Peninsula and Golan Heights. Gradually, and yet again, the momentum shifted in Israel's favour causing Syrians to be almost completely pushed out of Golan Heights. The Israelis had struck at the "hinge" between two invading Egyptian armies, crossed the Suez Canal (where the old ceasefire line had been), and cut off an entire Egyptian army just as a United Nations ceasefire came into effect.

3.0 Dynamics of Cooperation:

“The Oslo was the greatest idea Israel ever had. It led them to continue the operation without paying any of the costs” – Mustafa Barghouti, Palestinian National Initiative.

The Oslo Accords, a pair of agreements between the Government of Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), signed in Washington, D.C., in 1993; and the Oslo II Accord, signed in Taba, Egypt, in 1995, marked the start of the Oslo process, a peace process aimed at achieving a peace treaty based on United Nations Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338, and at fulfilling the "right of the Palestinian people to self-determination." It allowed for part of the West Bank to come under Palestinian Authority, which still controls, with varying authority, parts of the region while the rest lies with Israel.

While *prima facie*, the accords appear beneficial and a step towards greater cooperation, they were in fact a tactical move on part of Israel to, as is evident from the events that took place over the next 20 years, allow itself to justify the further expansion of illegal settlements that began in with territorial occupation in 1967. Oslo, Norway was approached by Yasser Arafat in 1979 to provide a secret back channel to the Israelis. However, it was only a decade later, with the outbreak of Intifada protests, a sustained series of Palestinian protests, and in some cases violent riots, against the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza that had begun twenty years prior, in 1967 in Israel and PLO that Arafat announced the acceptance of UN Resolutions 242 and 338 which granted Israel a window to “secure and recognise boundaries”, and allowed it to continue its occupation in strategic parts of the West Bank. Israel was under pressure, presented by the global community, to begin peace talks with Palestine. Norway proved to be beneficial for it to have secret negotiations with as it was also a Zionist region. Further, PLO’s support for Iraq angered the Arab world and thus Saddam Hussain’s defeat left it weakened. The Oslo Declaration of Principles was not a peace treaty; rather, its aim was to establish interim governance arrangements and a framework to facilitate further negotiations for a final agreement, which would be concluded by the end of 1999. Intended to be initiated for a period of 5 years, two decades later, there was virtually no progress observed. As history repeated itself in 2000 with the Second Intifada, Israeli opposition leader Ariel Sharon declared the area as an eternal Israeli territory.²

The Arab Peace Initiative of 2002, is a 10 sentence proposal for ending the Arab-Israeli conflict, was brokered by the then King of Saudi Arabia King Abdullah for the restoration of Palestine state with Jerusalem as its capital as a ‘fair solution’ for the 3.8 million stranded Palestinian refugees, including but not limited to Syrian Golan Heights and the Israeli occupied southern-Lebanon. The initiative was endorsed by Arab League’s 22 members at the Beirut Summit in 2002. Continuing on the UN resolutions 242 and 338, it collectively called for Israeli withdrawal and peaceful ties with Arab neighbours with “respect for the right of every state in the area to live in peace within secure and recognised boundaries”. While the plan was supported by U.S. President George Bush, it was opposed by the British PM Tony Blair and by factions in both Arab and Israeli camps.

² Shlaim, A. (1994). The Oslo Accord. *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 23(3), 24-40. doi:10.2307/2537958

The usage of the term ‘normalisation’ was outrightly opposed by Syria. The very day of the announce of the plan witnessed the death of 20 people and injury of over 120 by the act of a Palestinian suicide bomber in Netanya³. In response, on March 29, Israel launched Operation Defensive Shield, a massive Israeli military operation in the West Bank, causing even greater destruction and loss of life.

Sharon in 2003, prior his elections, expressed his support for his country’s continued settlement in the Gaza Strip; yet, following his elections, he appeared to have changed his mind, explaining that the Disengagement Plan would work to reduce terror and grant Israeli citizens with security as much as possible. For the purposes of strengthening Israeli economy and improving quality of life, the plan was considered appropriate and was therefore proposed to George Bush stating that Israel “relocate military installations and all Israeli villages and towns in the Gaza Strip” and the removal of four illegal settlements from the northern West Bank. The proposal received the Knesset’s approval and thus in August, the process began, offering the settlers compensation for moving while force was widely used in case of non-cooperation. The operation was perceived, initially, as an extremely positive step towards resolving the middle-east crises; it “was indeed a historic precedent, the paradox was that it also marked the beginning of a crippling decade-long economic blockade of Gaza and three military onslaughts by Israel more devastating than any in the territory’s turbulent history.” However, within a week after declaring Gaza as an extrajudicial territory, Israeli jets bombed the Strip, claiming that while the disengagement was a golden opportunity for the Palestinians to move towards economic prosperity, the greenhouses left behind were immediately destroyed by Palestinians in a characteristic frenzy of short-sightedness.

These measures, tactics and secretive proposals, while were attempts for mutual and personal benefits, have yet only proved to be disastrous a have continued the centuries-long conflict, having escalated out of proportion.

³ Podeh, Elie. (2014). Israel and the Arab Peace Initiative, 2002–2014: A Plausible Missed Opportunity. *The Middle East Journal*. 68. 10.3751/68.4.15.the

4.0 Deal for Collaboration

On 15th September 2020 the two age-old rivals came together to sign a peace treaty and put a halt to their differences. The Israel–United Arab Emirates normalization agreement, officially the Abraham Accords Peace Agreement: Treaty of Peace, Diplomatic Relations and Full Normalization Between the United Arab Emirates and the State of Israel, was initially agreed to in a joint statement by the United States, Israel and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) on August 13, 2020, officially referred to as the Abraham Accords, thereby making UAE, the third Arab country, after Egypt and Jordan, in having normalized ties with Israel. The treaty was ratified by the Israeli Cabinet and Knesset on October 12 & 15 respectively. The treaty recognizes each state's sovereignty, obliges the two states to exchange ambassadors and conclude bilateral agreements on several topics including visa agreements. In this section, this deal between UAE and Israel for further collaboration will be discussed.

4.1 Understanding the Changed Dynamic – From the Realist Perspective:

Realism has been the go-to-approach by the Arab nations, in particular, and all the countries, in general. For instance: between September 1970, and July 1971 the Jordanian government engaged in a series of military clashes with Palestinian nationalist groups inside of Jordan. This period, which came to be known as Black September, saw the Jordanians successfully expel the Palestinian guerrillas from their country. In fact, it involved an Arab state reaching out to Israel for assistance when the Khartoum resolution was hailed for the three No's. Thus, we see that the notion of Arabism being defined by opposition to Israel is undermined and the realist notion that when threatened with a security crisis, states will act to ensure their survival is hailed. So, when the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) attacked Jordanian military and civilian targets and took Irbil by force, King Hussein chose to opt a realist approach by thinking of the security, stability and power of his nation rather than succumbing to the ideational factor. Therefore, even at the cost of challenging the symbol of Arab nationalism, he acted in accordance with realist precepts and negotiated with Israel. In future, they also signed a peace treaty.

What does this analysis entail? It entails that whenever there has been a struggle between security and ideational concerns like the symbol of Arab nationalism or unity versus sovereignty, we see nations and states act through the lens of realist perspective. {Viotti, Kauppi (2012)}.

This deal of the Abraham Accords is no exception. In light of the increasing power of Israel, this deal was about to happen and the probability of UAE striking a deal was certain after we saw multiple occasions of open cooperation between the two such as the signing of multiple deals and treaties as stated above and negotiatory dialogue through mediation by the UN, USA etc. The deal is a clear reflection of how the countries are ready to shed their ideological garb. This deal once again places security concerns over ideational concerns. Abu Dhabi's crown prince, Mohammed bin Zayed, the undisputed leader of the Emirates, clearly has been drawn to Jerusalem by an imminent threat, Iran—twenty-one miles across the Strait of Hormuz, a chokepoint for shipping Gulf oil. With this deal, bin Zayed is hedging his bets, gaining Israeli aerial and intelligence help and advanced U.S. weapons systems which are already in place in Israel. In fact, in a report, Bin Zayed demanded F-35 jets and Predator drones from the U.S. before he agreed to proceed with normalization. Thus, the history of wars, hostile relations and the symbolism of Arab unity against Israel was shed instantly as they saw a regional threat from Iran and its proxies, once again proving that security and stability concerns are more important in the international arena. This 'realism' of UAE is incredible and rational. It as an act of 'bandwagoning' with Israel and the United States, in the hope of establishing a trilateral US-Israeli-Arab strategic alliance to contain Turkey's influence and tame or destroy the Iranian regime. This new alliance reinforces the already growing role of Mohammed bin Zayed, the crown prince of Abu Dhabi, as the top strategic leader of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

Thus, this deal reiterated the argument made by Stephen Walt in his book "The Origins of Alliance" (1987) which laid out a modification to the balance of power theory in attempting to explain alliances where he argues that states balance not against power, but against perceived threats, which are defined by geographic proximity, offensive capabilities, and perceived intentions. We see how this deal assists the UAE from the perceived military and economic threat.

When we try to review the Arab attitude, both official and popular, toward the peace process with Israel, realism steps in. This dynamic shift from conflict to cooperation is a result of political realism. But why do we see the realist approach in this changing dynamic? It is because various events transpired and circumstances changed, and the Arab, regional and international politics, saw new players ushering onto the scene. Since the early 2000s, the strategic landscape in the Middle East has profoundly changed.

Egypt has grown poorer and gradually lost its credibility and credentials as the leader of the Arab world. Equally important, since 1980, Iraq has experienced calamitous wars against Iran, the United States, and the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). Finally, since 2011 Syria has been enmeshed in a civil war, which dealt a heavy blow to its economic prosperity and political stability. This decline of the three major Arab countries has opened the door to the GCC states to fill the vacuum. In contrast to the “cold peace” that Cairo and Amman have maintained with the Jewish state, there are growing signs of cooperation and “warm peace” between individual GCC states and Israel.

If we were to understand these changing dynamics from an ideological perspective, we would see Arab nations championing the Palestinian cause. But from time and time again, we have seen how Arab nations have side-lined the Palestinian cause for the sake of maintaining their security and stability. This realism is not new. It is believed that President Anwar Sadat was a pioneer in the introduction of political realism concerning the Palestinian issue when he removed it from ideological illusion to political reality, from a state of mind to geographical space. He saw Arab-Israeli hostility, refusing to deal with Israel, or rejecting it, more precisely, as a result of a mental block that grew over the years through continuous ideological messaging that portrays Israel as a permanent Zionist imperial conspiracy that will never alter its nature regardless of the nature of reconciliation with it. By this logic, dealing with Israel, in any way, is an exercise in futility. But the transformation of Israel has compelled the Arab states to undergo a mental revolution and climb over the mental block barrier. Therefore, we see that the call for a realistic way to deal with Israel, as it is an established state whether we like it or not, and as a regional power with which other states can ally against the imperial ambitions of Iran and Turkey. It is only rational, on their part, rather than wasting resources, sacrificing prosperity and entire generations’ futures, for the sake of illusions tied to the cause. It might seem that it's obscure to choose a political impasse where neither the cause is resolved, nor is a more prosperous future assured.

5.0 Conclusion

The relationship of the Arab States and Israel has travelled the roads of ups and downs. It has been dynamic, in its literal sense. In different periods, they have been involved in different kinds of relationships. From hostile to establishing cordial relationships, conflict to having cooperation; they have come a long way. The cost of this cooperative relationship is debatable but there can be seen both formal and informal cooperation since long. The recent treaty that has been signed between UAE and Israel is an epitome of the changing dynamics in the region.

From the realist perspective, one can justify the present deal that has changed the dynamics of the region. The deal can be seen as a result of cooperation that has years old roots. In light of the security threat posed by Iran and Turkey, the deal seems rational and realist. Moreover, it would be unwise to turn blind to the increased military and technological capabilities of Israel. Thus, the deal might not be a win-win situation for the Palestinian cause, but it surely benefits UAE and Israel. Having said that, we saw that calling this treaty as a ‘peace deal’ is a misnomer given that UAE is hailed as being the most pro-war in the region, rivalled only by Israel. {Pack (2020)}. Moreover, the promise of normalisation is a sham because the deal in no way is a solution to the problem of the Palestinians. It worsens their situation and proves that in the international arena, the fight against injustice can be side-lined when it comes to the security and stability of a particular nation, as seen in this new dynamic. The prospect of Israel normalizing its relations with Arab states might seem an enticing idea. Nevertheless, the vision of Israel normalizing its relations with Arab states without the agreement of the Palestinians is fanciful, and even modest steps toward normalization will require Israel to do much more than many Israelis seem to realize.

Thus, the new dynamics in the form of this deal is a result of the US diplomacy that seeks primarily to get the economic and political elites of a range of willing nations to agree strategically on their common interests and form the kind of loose alliance that promises to maintain some kind of general order in the world. This, however, doesn’t worry about the expectations of the people or the historical wrong inflicted on a certain section (in this case, the Palestinians). So, no matter the benefits that the deal holds, it in no way can be seen as a step towards peace or normalisation, neither does it try to rectify the injustice meted out to the Palestinians. And once again, we see that ideas like justice and fairness are easily cast off and the security concerns and balance of power are prioritised.

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