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From Pariah to Partner: A View from Israel on a Realigned Middle East

By Or Yissachar

Introduction

Flight number LY971 on Monday 31 August 2020, was in many respects anything but a mundane commercial flight traveling to another Middle East destination. Traditionally, the Arab world's maximum pressure campaign against Israel was designed not only to call into question its existence militarily, but crumble its legitimacy diplomatically – prohibiting Israeli citizens from entering their territories, banning Israeli and other airlines traveling to and from

Tel Aviv from using their airspace, much less land in their airports, even referring to it merely as “the Zionist entity”. Much more fundamentally than technical disagreement over policy items or territorial arrangements, the Arab world has made clear what was best enunciated in the infamous 1967 Khartoum “Three No’s”: “No peace with Israel, no recognition of Israel, no negotiations with Israel.” Despite episodic under-the-radar contacts, the Arab world had

operated under the assumption that any cracks in this well-fortified wall could have been construed as *de facto* recognition of a country considered a red rag.

Yet recently, this red rag has paled considerably. Aboard that debut flight from Tel Aviv to Abu Dhabi were Israeli Head of National Security Council Meir Ben-Shabbat, US National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien, and Senior Advisor Jared Kushner, traveling to meet their Emirati counterparts while flying over Saudi airspace on an El Al carrier in order to put together a peace deal. Both sides hailed this Arab-Israeli "historic peace", the first of its kind in a quarter of a century; the UAE now welcomes thousands of Israeli tourists, rolled out the red carpet for Israeli business leaders during the recent GITEX, and mutual investments are expected to soon reach 10 billion USD. Arab leaders have congratulated the move, and the Arab League rejected the Palestinian Authority's motion to condemn it, a previously-unimaginable scenario – while by contrast, 40 years earlier it condemned Egypt for its peace deal with Israel, suspending its membership for 10 years.

This anecdote can be seen as a forerunner of an unprecedented realignment of the Middle East's deep-seated axes of power. In recent years, moderate Sunni countries' orthodox national security strategy has gone through a transformative recalculation reflective of a tectonic geopolitical shift, of which their

relationship with Israel is but one component. Challenging the status quo, this reconfiguration mirrors the formation of the three new regional axes: Iran and its proxies, Turkey and the Muslim Brotherhood and other radical Islamist movements, and unprecedentedly, the Israeli-moderate Sunni-American axis.

A perfect storm

This novelty, Israeli-Arab normalization as basis for a mutually beneficial *détente* as well as for the formation of a likeminded regional security coalition facing Iran, has been the result of the intersection of three main geopolitical developments: Iran's hegemonic aspirations and military nuclear program; domestic unrest or even radical Islamist coups d'état in multiple Arab countries, mistakenly dubbed "the Arab Spring"; and steadfast determination alongside an off-protocol strategy by Washington. Together, these conditions have created a perfect storm, used by its protagonists to lead to these unprecedented outcomes: four Israeli-Arab normalization agreements to date, a visible anti-Iran coalition such as during the Warsaw Summit, acquiescence to previously-scandalous propositions such as repeated Israeli airstrikes against Iranian military infrastructure in Syria, and a complete disinterest – beyond lip service – toward the Palestinian question.

The combination of common challenges with straightforward and pragmatic Arab, American and Israeli leaders has led to unprecedentedly close ranks.

This heterodoxical approach comes as a polar contrast to the ruling orthodoxy, hitherto suggesting pre-conditioning regional normalization and cooperation by first addressing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through a list of demands Israel could not accept. Long controlled by the protocol – as outlined by the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative, the European Union’s statements and elsewhere – Arab leaders have been increasingly showing jarring flexibility on previously-considered deep-seated principles. With Iranian forces on their doorstep and sprouting inside their territories, Arab leaders have effectively warehoused the protocol to prioritize their own national interests, while taking a serious gamble with regards to their prestige and reputation. From an Israeli perspective, this new reality would also create a leverage on the Palestinian Authority leading to a more favorable compromise, rather than the other way around.

The combination of common challenges with straightforward and pragmatic Arab, American and Israeli leaders has led to unprecedentedly close ranks. Israel has thus transitioned from

being viewed as the region’s pariah, isolated and menaced, a political byword for the Arab World’s multiple issues, to its key partner to tackle primary security and economic concerns. Such a dramatic strategic development thus sheds new light on orthodox approaches to international relations more broadly as well, in a way that behooves critically rethinking concepts which are at times minimized in today’s march toward globalization: religion, tribe, national interest, and power.

Hard reality disrupts the status quo

Former National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes, once described as “Obama’s foreign-policy amanuensis”, famously stated that “President Obama has taken on some sacred cows.” Indeed, Obama’s pride of “rejecting the Washington playbook” is not entirely unjustified: by attempting to restart relations with Russia, relaunch relations with Cuba, and take a more holistic view on free trade between the US and Asia and the Americas, his administration has demonstrated its willingness to think outside the box and challenge old paradigms.

The same cannot be said, however, on its approach to Israel’s place in the Middle East. The Obama administration has made clear it viewed the ruling orthodoxy as the “only solution” to the conflict. By recognizing as “hard reality” the pre-conditioning of Israeli-Arab normalization

by an Israeli-Palestinian peace delivered solely according to the existing paradigm, it effectively institutionalized the decades-long status quo in which Arab leaders had benefited from their significant diplomatic, political, and resource leverage in order to self-legitimize and reorient international priorities.

Firstly, a quasi-automatic majority in international halls of power by Arab League and the Non-Aligned Movement members has led, for instance, to an astronomical 86% of the adopted UN General Assembly's country-specific resolutions to target Israel. Secondly, crises such as the 1973 OPEC oil embargo, following the Nixon administration's decision to back Israel during the Yom Kippur War, highlighted the West's heavy dependence on Middle East crude oil. Put together, this leverage has not only made Israel the ideal culprit – domestic stability in Arab countries by reuniting the people around a common enemy – it also greatly contributed to the establishment of widespread notions regarding the region and Israel's place in it.

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Yet while the Obama Doctrine may have been heartily welcomed by the Arab World in 2009, the same was no longer true as from 2011. Be it disinterest in the Middle East, the "Pivot to Asia", or the firm belief in diplomacy, the Obama administration has failed to supply the Israelis-Sunnis with what they considered quintessential survival guarantees facing the genuine hard reality – in particular, Iran's regional aspirations and domestic Arab uprisings.

Obama's rapprochement to Iran, culminating in the 2015 JCPOA (the "Iran Nuclear Deal"), was a red flag for both Israel and moderate Sunni leaders, who interpreted it as appeasement and containment of Iran's behavior. While vowing to prevent Iran from attaining deliverable nuclear weapons and imposing sanctions, the Obama administration's record has led regional countries to suspect a rhetoric-action gap. The Iranian regime's outspoken goal to annihilate Israel alongside its regional strategy of "exporting the revolution" by militarily supporting Syria's Assad, Yemen's Houthis, Iraq's Shi'ite militias, Lebanon's Hezbollah, Gaza's Hamas, and domestic resistance groups in Bahrain, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan and elsewhere, has alarmed the Israelis-Sunnis as to the changing regional balance of power. A regime flagged by the US State Department as a state sponsor of terrorism, going through significant rearmament by long-range ballistic missiles, Iran noted Obama's orders to cease Project Cassandra that targeted its protégé

Hezbollah's narco-terrorist network, in order to conclude the nuclear deal. A regime previously violating a series of agreements such as the NPT was viewed by Israeli-Sunnis as untrustworthy with diplomacy; yet the JCPOA itself was said to contain multiple loopholes, an expiration date, and crucially, excluding the skeptical countries of the region from the negotiations process.

Ruling out an American guarantee to stand by the Sunni countries in case of war with Iran, Obama explained this approach by these countries' lack of strategic autonomy, forcing an American military intervention. By contrast, the Saudi Crown Prince, Mohammed Bin Salman, questioned the Iranian regime's ability to genuinely change its behavior while in the same breath, landed a bombshell by acknowledging Israel's right to exist as homeland of the Jewish people, what no Arab leader ever did.

In parallel, with one long-serving Arab leader after another dethroned following the 2011 Arab uprisings, leaders have started, for the first time since decolonization, to develop genuine anxiety with respect to their own regime's survival. Domestically, the demand for their resignation was accompanied by little interest toward the traditional culprit, Israel. Washington, however, has made these leaders suspect they are left out in the cold, and their security interests are far from being understood. In Egypt's case, for example, President Mubarak was reportedly "shocked" by President Obama's

phone call, demanding him to resign and allow open election to all citizens – which ultimately led to the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood to power.

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Under this climax, Israel's national security strategy, underscoring strategic autonomy and dead-serious enforcement of self-defense, was quietly though strongly appreciated by Sunni leaders, especially with respect to Iran. Firstly, it made clear it will not allow Iran to threaten its immediate balance of power by establishing military infrastructure in Syria, reportedly carrying out hundreds of airstrikes – contrasting Obama's refusal to exercise his administration's red line following Assad's chemical weapons attack on Ghouta. Secondly, its reported clandestine under-the-radar warfare against Iran's nuclear program, from the Stuxnet virus to targeted killing of nuclear scientists. Thirdly, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu's outspoken Iran-skeptic rhetoric, culminating in a speech against the hatching JCPOA in front of a joint session of Congress, circumventing the White House at the cost of risking his already-testy relationship with the Obama administration. Lastly, as former Israeli Chief of Staff Dan Halutz

put it, Israel prefers stable dictators such as Assad as neighbors rather than their radical or anarchic substitutes.

Israel was also well aware of the Sunni World's private resentment regarding the Palestinians, whom they accused of "eternalizing" the conflict by turning down generous offers, choosing the path of terrorism, while benefiting their Arab partners' unsparing funds. The status quo simply did not meet the urgency of the hour. A previously-unlikely Israeli-Sunni partnership has thereby begun to form under-the-radar as the least-likely allies found themselves on the same boat, facing common threats and subject to the same cold shoulder from the US. These moderate Sunni leaders' chief interest – political survival – has remained constant; the way to exercise it, however, has turned on its head.

The Trump Middle East Doctrine: From orthodoxy to heterodoxy

If the Obama administration prided itself for taking on sacred cows, the Trump administration seemed eager to throw them out the window. The self-described disruptive administration has assumed what it called "principled realism" as the linchpin of its National Security Strategy and foreign policy, realizing that in order to turn the corner, following the manual was insufficient – rather, rewriting it was of the essence.

The following may be described as the key organizing principles of the "Trump Doctrine": preferring interests over ideals; highlighting sovereignty, religion, and tribalism rather than globalism; a Reaganite "Peace Through Strength" by complementing diplomacy with military deterrence and compellence; and *franc-parler* rather than political correctness.

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Firstly, Trump's Middle East strategy was reverse-engineered from the grassroots needs and interests of regional leaderships, rather than imposing *a-priori* ideal terms, what it called "listening rather than lecturing". On the Israeli-Palestinian issue, for instance, recognizing the existing reality by moving the US embassy to Jerusalem was one of the symbols of this depart from the orthodoxy. Its Peace Plan was the product of shuttle diplomacy by the administration's Middle East team; if, for example, Jordan publicly alarmed against Israeli enactment of sovereignty in parts of Judea and Samaria (the West Bank), officials leaked how in private they would prefer Israeli presence there over a dreaded scenario of a Palestinian-Iranian base on their western front.

Arab leaders publicly endorsed the Plan, even showing up to its unraveling ceremony.

The administration showed the same approach when it came to Iran. Obama's approach privately frustrated Gulf Arab leaders, for example, following his remarks at the Riyadh security summit, welcoming Iran's future potential as a responsible and peaceful regional actor. He also took the opportunity to criticize the Sunnis' failure to meet universal human rights standards, what was viewed as an attempt to dress democratic values on a region with no such tradition. By contrast, President Trump's music upon arrival to Riyadh seemed more reassuring, calling to isolate the Iranian regime while recognizing the region's responsibility to determine its own fate.

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The religious and tribal element is also central to communication with a deeply-conservative region, home to some of the world's central Holy Sites. By naming the historic peace deals "The Abraham Accords", underscoring the commitment to inter-religious unity, they also specified how Muslim citizens would

now be able to access the Al Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem. Given the absence of a Torah scroll in Manama's mostly-locked and abandoned synagogue, Kushner presented one to the Bahraini King upon arrival to the Manama Economic Peace Summit, unlocking the doors and praying with local and Israeli guests. The inauguration ceremony of the Dubai Multi Commodities Center representation at Israel's Ramat Gan Stock Exchange included fixing a Jewish Mezuzah on its doorpost. While Obama highlighted his suspicion of tribalism, these moves mirror this element's inseparability to address religion-based differences.

While the Obama administration pivoted to Asia, under Trump, the Middle East pivoted to America.

Finally, its decision to complement diplomacy with military deterrence and compellence has been demonstrated by its aggressive approach toward Iran. Taking down Iranian Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani in the aftermath of the attack on the American embassy in Baghdad sent a strong signal in that direction, standing in stark contrast to Obama's refusal to destroy by airstrike a US drone that landed in Iran due to technical failures and containing highly sensitive technology, preferring to formally request Iran its return, which was not granted. Netanyahu's insistence that in the

Middle East the strong survives thus seemed to recognize how in the region, sovereignty relies on power and prestige rather than UN resolutions. Combining all the above elements, the administration gained the region's trust; while the Obama administration pivoted to Asia, under Trump, the Middle East pivoted to America.

Conclusion

Facing grave national security challenges – Iran's aspirations and domestic political unrest – moderate Sunni leaders began fearing they might be victims of their own protocol, conditioning relations with Israel by following the Palestinian paradigm. Israel, they realized, with a proven record of military might, strategic autonomy, technological innovation, and common interests, could be a key survival device to their regimes – this time by cooperation, not rejection.

Between 2009 and 2016, the Middle East has gone through a great deal of turmoil and change, yet the Obama administration's foreign policy did not change with it. Refusing to challenge the paradigm, the administration's globalist orientation and relativist terminology has translated into a serious national security threat for the newly-formed Israeli-Sunni axis. The Trump administration, combining energy

independence and grassroots, heterodoxical strategy, signaled it was now the US that has leverage over the Arab World.

Mistakenly described often times as isolationist, the Trump administration has preferred leading regional regimes into a trust-based US-sponsored coalition of shared interests, much like the post-World War II hub-and-spokes system in Southern Asia, or NATO in Europe. As opposed to international forums, these leaders' national interests were now front and center, which they leveraged to harvest domestic public support, too.

This national- and sovereign-oriented strategy derives directly from the conservative legacy, and put together with the strong local, religious, and tribal elements it celebrates, constitutes an antithesis to the globalist approach of appeasement and containment that also led to the JCPOA. The success of this code-breaking paradigm may alarm the globalist camp, viewed as a serious threat to its longevity. Though if what finally counts is results, not parchment guarantees, recreating elsewhere this unparalleled success in a region long-considered a lost cause would be critical to strategize any future security conundrum.

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