

# Israel Enters the Arab World



WHEN BENJAMIN NETANYAHU addressed the Joint Meeting of the U.S. Congress on March 3, 2015, he stood alone and, seemingly, isolated. The Israeli prime minister had come to make the case against the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), known as the Iran nuclear deal, which the Obama administration was vigorously pursuing.

In fact, it was not the American president who had invited Netanyahu, but the Republican speaker of the House of Representatives, John Boehner. In the press, critics decried the move as interference by a foreign head of state in American politics. Support for Israel risked becoming a partisan issue. And Netanyahu's indictment of the proposed Iran nuclear deal sharply exposed the differences between Jerusalem and Washington on one of the most sensitive foreign-policy issues of the day. With his speech, Netanyahu seemed set to alienate Israel's most powerful ally.

But there was another audience that took note of the events on Capitol Hill that day. Watching from capitals across the region,

many Arab heads of state heard Netanyahu lay out the evidence for Iran's plans for increased control of the Middle East and found themselves nodding in agreement. Reportedly, there was even a message of thanks conveyed to Jerusalem. In shining the spotlight on the Iranian threat, it was said, the Israeli prime minister had been "speaking for all of us as well."

With hindsight, Netanyahu's controversial appearance in Washington in March 2015 looks like the catalyst that accelerated rapprochement between Israel and many Arab states. It set the stage for the Abraham Accords in August 2020, which formalized new normalization agreements between Israel and key Arab states. Iranian aggression — more so than any peace plan or blueprint for economic cooperation — became the glue that was binding Israel and some of its former adversaries together.

Now the questions are: What more can be done to make this remarkable Jewish-Arab rapprochement permanent? And what can we learn from the failed experiments, missed opportunities, or mostly forgotten successes of the past? Let me offer a few observations.



For sure, the focus of Netanyahu's speech that day was the danger of the Iranian nuclear program. He argued that the permanent five members of the UN Security Council, plus Germany, would be unable to contain the program diplomatically, given the reported terms of the document. But he began his speech with a much broader view of what Iran had been up to since the 1979 Islamic Revolution that had brought Ayatollah Khomeini and his successors to power. According to the new Iranian constitution, that regime would establish a Revolutionary Guard "to export the revolution throughout the world."

Iran had unquestionably left its mark on much of the Arab world in the years since the Revolution. A contingent of the Revolutionary Guards had been deployed in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley

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since 1982. As part of the Iran–Iraq War, Iran fired missiles into Kuwaiti territory back in 1987. In 1996, Iran employed a branch of Hezbollah to detonate a truck bomb at Khobar Towers near Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, killing over a dozen U.S. Air Force personnel. It fortified its presence on three islands belonging to the United Arab Emirates, near the strategic Straits of Hormuz.

King Abdullah of Jordan sounded the alarm about Iran in late 2004, warning that Tehran sought to erect “a Shia crescent” across the Middle East. Revolutionary Guards protected an Iranian presence in Port Sudan for Tehran’s naval outreach toward the Horn of Africa. In the wake of what was being called the Arab spring, in 2011, Tehran fully exploited the resulting vacuum and extended its influence to the heart of the Arab world. It began seeking to create a Mediterranean presence at the Syrian port of Latakia, partly in exchange for helping to keep the embattled regime in Damascus alive.

The Israeli prime minister delved into what was happening in the Middle East and explained how, up to that date, four Arab capitals—Baghdad, Damascus, Beirut, and Sanaa—had fallen under Iranian domination. “If Iran’s aggression is left unchecked,” he warned, “more will surely follow.” In fact, Iranian media at the time was predicting the imminent fall of Saudi Arabia.

Netanyahu then went through the nuclear concessions that the JCPOA would give away to Tehran. No nuclear facilities would

be dismantled. If the Iran deal was adopted, the centrifuges that could enrich uranium to the weapons-grade level would remain, allowing Iran to assemble an atomic weapon in a relatively short period of time.

While Netanyahu’s energies were focused on scuttling a nuclear deal that seemed to directly threaten his country, it was his broader sketch of Iran’s expansionist plans that caught the attention of Arab leaders.

Communication channels soon opened between Arab states and Israel, even in the absence of formal agreements. Information surfaced that Iran had used its embassy in Algiers as a conduit for providing arms and training for the Polisario Front forces fighting Morocco in the Western Sahara. Rabat responded by breaking diplomatic ties with Tehran. Following in the footsteps of the Gulf states, Morocco negotiated a normalization agreement with Israel. Without having planned it, Israel’s diplomatic campaign against the Iran deal opened its door to the Arab world.

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Inadvertently, the Iranian threat reorganized diplomatic ties in a Middle East where previous intentional efforts to do so had failed. Following the 1991 Madrid Peace Conference, the United States and the Soviet Union had launched multilateral meetings on a host of diplomatic subjects from arms control to protecting water sources. Israeli and Arab delegations had sat together and held rounds of negotiations in different capitals.

But these talks quickly became moribund. They did not fundamentally alter the political dynamics of the Middle East. Likewise, a theory among the members of the European Union called “functionalism,” which predicted that new economic ties in the Middle East would lead to closer political connections, did not catch on. Increasing imports and exports was not going to be the glue to hold Israel and its neighbors together.

Indeed, talking about trade could have the exact opposite effect. Writing in *Foreign Affairs* in May 1995, Fawaz Gerges described how large delegations of Israeli businessmen attending a major economic conference in Morocco in 1994 only aroused fears of Israeli economic dominance. Those were stoked further when Foreign Minister Shimon Peres was misquoted in the Egyptian press as saying, “Egypt led the Arabs for 40 years and brought them to the abyss; you will see the region’s economic situation improve when Israel takes the reins of leadership in the Middle East.” Egyptian political leaders, too, came to believe that peace meant Israeli economic hegemony. Clearly the Middle East was not going to follow the European Union’s blueprint.

For those who believed that progress on the Palestinian issue was the key to a wider Middle East peace, the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993 held the greatest potential for altering the region. But these, too, did not lead to any profound changes that had any degree of permanence. True, Israeli trade offices were opened in Qatar, Oman, Morocco, and Tunisia in the mid-1990s, but they were shut down promptly when military escalations erupted between Israel and Hamas in the years that followed.

With the Palestinians divided between Ramallah and Hamas, and with the latter committed to jihadism rather than peace, the chances that the Palestinian cause would trigger a regional peace were slim. Moreover, Hamas was primarily funded by Iran, the nemesis of the Sunni Arab states.

Perhaps the closest precedent to the recent rapprochement between Israel and the Arab states was the situation in Europe in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. At that time, America was demobilizing and keen to “bring the boys home,” while on the other side of the continent, the Red Army remained on a wartime footing with large tank formations in East Germany and Czechoslovakia.

Under strong American leadership, former adversaries such as France and Germany came together under a new security umbrella

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called the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). There, it was the mutual Soviet threat that cemented the alliance among former adversaries.

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In 1996, I was invited by Hassan bin Talal, then crown prince of Jordan, to a seminar in Amman of policymakers and some academics under the title “Middle East Forum.” Hassan was a true intellectual and statesman seeking to understand peacemaking across the globe. The seminar lasted several days and was held in the Hashimiyya Palace. At one point, someone put his hand on my shoulder. It was the former secretary of state, Henry Kissinger.

Kissinger went straight to the point: What you need, he said, was a “code of conduct” for the Middle East. In 1971, the United States had entered negotiations with the Soviet Union, seeking to achieve a Strategic Arms Limitation Agreement that would become SALT I. The problem America faced in that period was the readiness of

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Moscow to dispatch pro-Soviet surrogates to fight in Africa and Asia, in such places as Angola and Mozambique.

Was Washington prepared to announce a new era of détente when Cuban forces were rampaging against pro-Western regimes? Was it sustainable to hold negotiations with the Soviets on arms control on the one hand and simultaneously fight their allies in the Third World on the other? Formally, Washington drafted “Basic Principles of U.S.–Soviet Relations” to fix norms for how the superpowers were to interact.

Kissinger designed this code of conduct for such situations. It created clarity for those who adhered to its terms. If the Soviets abided by the code of conduct in the various conflict zones where they were engaged, it would allow America to declare an overall détente between the superpowers. But if Moscow violated the code of conduct, it would be relatively straightforward for Kissinger or his successors to denounce it in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee or to the press.

The United States would then have a free hand to take countermeasures. The principles of this code of conduct would “ease tensions” if implemented, Kissinger wrote in his memoirs, and “if flouted, they could provide a rallying point to Soviet aggressiveness.”

The code was not legally binding, but it helped clarify which kinds of international behavior were permissible and which were clearly prohibited.

Clarity was exactly what the Israeli–Palestinian peace process needed. In 1996, Yasser Arafat had been prepared to use terrorism to put pressure on Israel during negotiations. In 1997, Israeli military intelligence disclosed that he had secretly given Hamas a green light to resume terrorist attacks, even while he was trying to curry favor in the West to support his policies.

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Then, as now, the region needs its own political etiquette—a Middle Eastern code of conduct. The following principles should apply:

1. State support for terrorism of any kind is prohibited. This includes training, financial backing, and the transfer of arms.
2. States must refrain from threatening the territorial integrity of other states.
3. States must resolve their territorial differences through negotiations.
4. States must respect the religious and historical centers of diverse faiths. Their places of worship must have immunity from attacks of any sort.

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When the Helsinki Final Act was reached in 1975, the signatories set up the Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe. In 1994, it was formally renamed the Organization for Security

and Cooperation in Europe. It was based on a code of conduct in security, with proposals such as the prior notification of military exercises and economic innovations as well. It was not just an abstract set of principles. It created an actual organization that included Western powers and the Soviet bloc. In the Middle East, an organization of this sort could serve a special purpose.



Throughout its diplomatic history, Israel has been looking for mechanisms that would allow it to better integrate with its neighbors. As foreign minister, Abba Eban spoke at the 1973 Geneva Peace Conference, explaining this predisposition: “The ultimate guarantee of peace lies in the creation of common regional interests in such degree of intensity, such multiplicity of integration, such entanglement of reciprocal advantage as to put the possibility of war beyond rational contingency.” The Israeli interest in entering the Arab world was basically a hedge against a return to armed conflict even after treaties are signed. If, for France and Germany, a return to war had become unthinkable, then Israel and the Arab states, it was thought, needed to reach a peace with the same conditions.

Speaking to Israel, the West Bank, and Jordan, Eban tirelessly expounded on the applicability of the three-way Benelux (Belgium, Netherlands, Luxembourg) economic union, in force since 1948, but the idea did not take off. Another multilateral experiment was considered in the 1994 Treaty of Peace between Israel and Jordan: a Conference on Security and Cooperation in the Middle East (CSCME). While both Israel and Jordan undertook in Article 4 of their treaty to form such an organization, this commitment ultimately remained unfulfilled. But the agreement pointed to the fact that both states were prepared to take the idea of a code of conduct and develop it for the Middle East, and that Israel could finally find a way to realize its quest to be an integral part of the region.

A rulebook on international behavior could become a guard-rail at a time when an organization such as Hamas can disrupt the regional order in the Middle East, yet still enjoy diplomatic support from the UN’s Human Rights Council. Terror groups may not consider themselves beholden to a newly created CSCME or its rules, but a code of conduct could tilt sympathies among Western states.

Even now, it is clear that Israel has achieved a level of integration with a large part of the Arab world that would have been unthinkable not long ago. The threat Israel and many Arab states face is the same. Iran’s dreams of “wiping Israel off the map” are well documented. But Tehran also likes to remind its people that the Arab states had once been part of its territory, and that those lands must one day be returned to Iran.

This leaves Israel and the Sunni Arabs on the same side, at least strategically, at least for now. But a common threat, to adapt a phrase, is a terrible thing to waste. The time to move this improbable, promising, and essential alliance forward is now. \*