



# How far can they go?

The gaps between Israel and the Sunni Arab states remain huge, but common interests could produce a positive dynamic

**AFTER A** lengthy hiatus, the wheels of Arab-Israeli diplomacy are again spinning.

On May 17, Egyptian president Abdel Fattah al-Sisi publicly spoke of new opportunities to promote Israeli-Palestinian peace and promised the Israeli public that warmer relations with Egypt and other Arab states would be one of the consequences of such a peace. Moreover, this would apparently begin to be expressed in a reciprocal fashion: Israeli gestures toward the Palestinians would be matched by Arab gestures toward Israel. Prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu was quick to praise Sisi's intended involvement.

Following the appointment of Avigdor Liberman (who once suggested bombing the Aswan Dam) to the post of defense minister, Netanyahu and Liberman hastened to reassure a shocked Sisi (he had been expecting the more amenable Zionist Union leader Isaac Herzog to join the government) that they remained committed to a two-state solution. Moreover, they publicly affirmed that the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative contained positive principles that, if appropriately updated, could serve as a basis for negotiations.

The reasons for the new courtship are not hard to fathom. A confluence of interests between Israel and conservative Arab regimes in opposition to expanding Iranian influence in the region; the Islamic State and the Muslim Brotherhood; plus mutual concern over the depth of the US's continued commitment to them, has drawn them closer together, particularly in the security and intelligence realms.

Egyptian military operations against the Islamic State affiliate in Sinai have been expedited by Israel's waiving of the provisions in the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty that severely limited the size and types of Egyptian forces permitted to operate there. Egypt's severe crackdown on Hamas smuggling tunnels neatly dovetailed with Israel's interest. Recent reports speak of an improved atmosphere in the economic and commercial spheres, as well. Israel also may have agreed to Egypt hosting a regional peace conference, something that would assist Israel, Egypt and Saudi Arabia in deflecting growing international criticism, including in the US Congress.

Does all this indicate movement and not just motion?

For Israel, the value of the API lies primarily in the explicit willingness of the Arab states to end the conflict, live in peace and establish normal relations with it in the context of a comprehensive peace. Such language is light years away from the infamous "Three Nos" of the 1967 Khartoum Arab Summit – no peace, no negotiations and no recognition of Israel.

As for the specifics of the comprehensive peace laid out by the API, how much would Arab states be willing and able to deviate from them? The short answer appears to be: not much.

The API's main points include the long-standing collective Arab demands for an Israeli withdrawal to the June 4, 1967, lines; the establishment of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza with Jerusalem as its capital; and a solution to the Palestinian refugee



Egyptian president Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, in a May 17 speech, said new opportunities now exist to promote peace between Israel and the Palestinians, and warmer relations with Arab states

problem based on UNGA Resolution 194, which, in Arab eyes, confirms the sacrosanct Palestinian "right of return." The initiative also explicitly rejects all forms of "patriation" (*tawtin*) in Arab host countries with "special circumstances" – namely, Lebanon and Jordan would not be saddled with the burden of absorbing the masses of refugees currently living there.

Some analysts point to the distinction between insisting on the principle of right of return and being flexible on its implementation, as well as the fact that the API states that the solution should be both "just" and "agreed upon," thus requiring Israel's consent. But the gap between Israeli and Arab positions on the subject is likely to remain yawning.

To be sure, the Palestinian issue has declined in importance for most Arab states. However, it still retains symbolic value that cannot be easily dismissed by Arab regimes. Their publics are still, by and large, hostile to the notion of normalization with "the Zionist enemy." Moreover, Arab states have repeatedly been unwilling or unable to "deliver" the Palestinians in negotiations, or act as substitutes for them. The current division between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority makes such a task even more difficult.

What is perhaps possible is that the common interests that do exist between Israel, Egypt and Saudi Arabia can result in incremental steps that will begin to change the realities on the ground and create a positive dynamic.

Even that much will demand a hefty dose of leadership and wisdom from all sides. ■

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