

The Middle East is changing. Will Palestinians be left behind?

Opinion by **Dennis Ross**

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At the White House on Tuesday, Israel will formalize peace with the United Arab Emirates and sign a declaration of peace with Bahrain. For some, this event symbolizes the advent of a new day in the region. Others bemoan it for rewarding the Israelis and doing little to end the occupation of the Palestinians.

The latter tend to ignore that at least in the UAE’s case, its decision stopped Israel’s unilateral annexation of the territories allotted to it by the [Trump peace plan](#). As such, they overlook that it very clearly applied the concept of linkage in any Arab moves toward Israel: for partial or full normalization by Arab states, Israel will need to take positive — or in the UAE’s case, avoid negative — steps toward the Palestinians.

The UAE example can be used to foster a resumption of diplomacy that can change the stalemated reality between Israelis and Palestinians. But critics have missed this point. They have also missed the point that the Palestinian Authority’s efforts to produce condemnation of the UAE’s action by the Arab League and the [Organization of Islamic Cooperation](#) were rebuffed. Historically, any resolution that Palestinians pushed to condemn or criticize a move toward normalization with Israel would have been adopted almost reflexively. But not now. Why? What does this, and [the Bahraini decision to also formalize peace with Israel](#), tell us about how the region is changing?

The Palestinian issue has become far less of a priority for most Arab states. Their preoccupation is not with the Palestinians but with threats from Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood, and they see Israel as a bulwark against both. They see benefits from cooperation with Israel on security. But it is not only on security that they see the value of cooperation. Covid-19 and worsening drought conditions are confronting states in the region with immense new challenges to meet health, water and food security needs. Israel, with its medical and research capabilities, its technical expertise on conservation, drip irrigation and use of waste water, and its development of drought resistant crops — among other things — looks increasingly like a natural partner for many of the states in the region.

Like the UAE and Bahrain, others in the region are going to be driven by their own national interests. The risk for the Palestinians is that they will be left behind. The Palestinians need to adjust their behavior, but not by giving up on two states. Those who see Palestinians’ weakness and isolation as an argument to forsake an independent Palestinian state and pursue instead equal rights in a binational Arab-Jewish state ignore the reality that we are not in a post-nationalism era. They overlook that those states in the Middle East that have more than one national, sectarian or tribal identity (such as Syria, Iraq, Libya and Lebanon) tend to be consumed by conflict or paralysis. One state for Israelis and Palestinians is not a prescription for peace between them but for endless conflict. And in any case, Israel is not about to surrender its national identity.

Rather than embracing the chimera of one state, Palestinians should adjust and recognize that Arab outreach to Israel can actually build their leverage. Instead of insisting on a maximal position of no steps toward Israel without complete Israeli withdrawal — something that is not going to happen — why not engage Arab states in a discussion in which Palestinians suggest a menu of actions that Israel should take in response to Arab public outreach to the Jewish state. Wouldn’t it have been better for the Palestinians to approach Bahrain and suggest it seek certain steps from Israel in response to normalization? If, as is likely, others may contemplate lesser moves toward Israel, such as deciding to have open exchanges of governmental experts on water conservation or food security, those states could ask Israel to approve new and significant waste water projects for the Palestinians in the West Bank.

Or if there are going to be visits of higher-level officials, those states could ask the Israelis to approve Palestinian housing construction in area C, the 60 percent of the West Bank that is controlled by Israel. Such construction would not only meet an acute housing shortage but also provide considerable employment. The more politically visible and meaningful the steps Arab states take toward Israel, the more politically significant would be their “asks” of Israel — a good example being requiring Israel to stop settlement construction outside of the settlement blocs, a move that could preserve the possibility of separation of Israelis and Palestinians and of two states.

It is not just the Palestinians who need to adjust their behavior or likely get left behind. Supporters of their cause need to look again at what is happening in the region. Old assumptions are like habits: They are hard to give up. But the Israeli-UAE-Bahrain breakthroughs are a reminder that the political landscape of the Middle East and the Arab-Israeli issue is changing. Time to change with it.

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