

The Death of the Arab-Israeli Conflict

A big problem that the Biden administration suddenly
won't have to deal with

BY MICHAEL OREN JANUARY 12, 2021



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, at left, holds up the document after participating in the signing of the Abraham Accords, in which Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates recognize Israel, at the White House in Washington, D.C., Sept. 15, 2020 SAUL LOEB/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Entire shelves of my office library are devoted to the Arab-Israeli conflict. The titles range from *The History of the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, 5th Edition, to the *Routledge Atlas of the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, and *Teaching the Arab-Israeli Conflict*. There are the reference books once considered essential—*The Arab-Israeli Conflict: Readings and Documents*, by John Norton Moore, and *Walter Laqueur's, The Arab-Israel Reader*. There are right- and left-wing perspectives, works by Muslims, Christians, Jews, the memoirs of peacemakers and generals. The literature spans over seven decades and seemed destined to expand through many more. But, suddenly, these books *about* history have become books *of* history. Now, with the signing of the Abraham

Accords between Israel, the United Arab Emirates, Sudan, and Bahrain, and the Moroccan-Israeli peace deal, the Arab-Israeli conflict is dead.

In fact, it was never fully alive. The notion that Israel faced an Arab world uniformly devoted to its destruction was belied by years of secret talks, even in-depth cooperation, between Israel and several Arab states such as Jordan, Lebanon, and Egypt. Shortly after seizing power in 1952, a young Gamal Abdel Nasser warmly corresponded with Israeli leaders, and years before making peace with Israel, Jordan's King Hussein maintained an open line with Jerusalem. Peace proposals were routinely exchanged and weighed, sometimes with the most virulently anti-Zionist regimes.

Even the term "Arab-Israeli conflict" was a misnomer. Israelis at various stages battled British and Soviet troops as well as pro-Arab terrorists from Germany and Japan. The Arabs fought not only Israelis but Anglo-French and American forces, and volunteers from around the world. Sometimes, as in the Jordanian civil war of 1970 or the 1982 Lebanon War, some Arab armies were openly or indirectly allied with Israel. The conflict was never exclusively Arab or Israeli or comprehensively a conflict at all.

Still, acknowledging the nuanced nature of the Arab-Israeli conflict and even the inaccuracy of the term does not in any way diminish its long and often desperate chronicle of violence. The five Arab armies that invaded the nascent Jewish state in May 1948 sought not only to defeat it in battle but, uniquely, to destroy it entirely. The same was true of Nasser who, after severing his secret ties with Israel, allied with the Soviet Union and declared his determination to "liberate Palestine." The Arab forces that massed on Israel's borders in May 1967 openly stated their goal of "driving Israel into the sea," and might have if not swiftly defeated in June. Six years later, Egypt and Syria launched a surprise Yom Kippur assault across the Sinai Desert and the Golan Heights which, if not for valiant Israeli defenders, could have ended in Haifa and Tel Aviv. Throughout, there were attacks by Palestinian terrorists backed by Arab states and the Israeli retaliations against those states. There was an Arab economic boycott and maritime blockade of Israel designed to strangle it economically and an Arab oil embargo which, in 1973-74, sought to isolate Israel internationally.

The duration and frequency of these clashes, and the intense media attention they received, no doubt contributed to the conflation of the Arab-Israeli

conflict with all Middle Eastern conflicts in general. Iraqis and Iranians could engage in a brutal eight-year war, and the Lebanese could massacre each other for 15, yet the term “Middle East conflict” referred almost exclusively to that between Israelis and Arabs. This misconception was instilled in generations of American students whose universities offered popular courses on the Arab-Israeli conflict and all but ignored other regional disputes. Not surprisingly, successive American administrations, Republican and Democratic alike, subscribed to the notion of “linkage.” This held that the core conflict in the Middle East was that between Arabs and Israelis. Resolve it and all other struggles would fall dominolike in peace.

The Abraham Accords merely dealt a coup de grace to this myth, but it had in fact been dying for decades. The process began with the Egypt-Israel peace treaty of 1979, the 1993 Oslo Accords between Israel and the PLO and the following year, Israel’s peace agreement with Jordan. Two Gulf wars, in 1991 and 2003, proved once again that the Arabs had faced bigger threats than Israel, and the Arab Spring of 2011 demonstrated that Middle Easterners had other things on their minds, such as democracy and freedom.

Yet still the myth persisted, albeit in a pared-down form. If, in the past, regional stability was only attainable through Arab-Israeli peace, now that peace could be achieved solely through Israeli-Palestinian reconciliation and the creation of a Palestinian state. This notion was enshrined in numerous organizations such as the U.S.-based Alliance for Middle East Peace and the European Union’s Middle East Peace Projects, which were not really dedicated to regional peace but almost exclusively to an Israeli-Palestinian accord. “Recognizing that the Israeli-Palestinian issue was at the core of the Arab-Israeli conflict,” the Foundation for Middle East Peace was established in Washington.

Not surprisingly, then, Palestinian-Israeli linkage became official American policy. “Of all the problems the administration faces globally ... This is the epicenter,” President Obama’s National Security Adviser, Jim Jones, declared in 2010. “If God had appeared in front of the President and said he could do one thing on the planet it would be the two-state solution.” Six years later, Secretary of State John Kerry insisted that “There will be no ... Separate peace with the Arab world without ... Palestinian peace. That is a hard reality.”

Like the Arab-Israeli linkage concept, the reduced Israeli-Palestinian version was disproved by the Abraham Accords and the agreement between Israel

and Morocco. Though the Arab signatories continued to pledge fealty to the Palestinian cause, they effectively sidestepped the issue and even hinted that the Palestinians themselves were to blame. After rejecting three offers of statehood in the West Bank and Gaza—in 2000, 2001, and 2008—and then failing to take advantage of the eight years of Barack Obama’s highly sympathetic presidency, the Palestinians could no longer wield a veto power over peace. Eager to access Israeli technology and to ally with Israeli military strength, many Arab states were ready to move on.

Their decision has irrevocably changed the region and created numerous opportunities. In addition to wedding the world’s most innovative state with some of the most affluent, the treaties will help erect a united front against common threats. They will also alter the peacemaking paradigm. If, in the past, the assumption was that Arab countries would first sign peace agreements with Israel and then only gradually normalize their relations with it, now normalization comes first with peace rendered largely a formality. If formerly Israel enjoyed peace with the leaders of Egypt and Jordan but not with their citizens, now the peace is not only between governments but peoples.

But there is one achievement that these diplomatic breakthroughs have not produced: an end to Middle Eastern conflict. On the contrary, such disputes will continue to plague the region and even proliferate. In place of the Arab-Israeli conflict, there is now a broader and potentially more explosive showdown between the Sunnis supported by Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and the Gulf states, and the Shiites backed by Iran. There is battle between moderate Sunnis and Islamic extremists, many of them embraced by Turkey. And there will still be civil wars in Syria and Yemen and chronic instability in Iraq. And there will be an unresolved conflict between Israel and the Palestinians waged in the U.N. and in the international courts but also, occasionally, on the battlefield.