



SMA Reach-back

Question (R2#12): How does the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict influence, affect, and relate to current conflicts in the region?

December 29 2016

Contributors: *Professor Michael Brecher (Angus Professor of Political Science at McGill University), General (Ret.) Shlomo Brom (Senior Research Associate at the Tel Aviv University Institute for National Security Studies), Professor Aron Shai (Eisenberg Professor for East Asian Affairs, Departments of History and East Asian Studies, Tel Aviv University), Professor Shibley Telhami (Sadat Chair for Peace and Development, University of Maryland, and Senior Fellow, Brookings Institution), Dr. Jonathan Wilkenfeld (University of Maryland)*

Editor: *Dr. Jon Wilkenfeld*

Compiler: *Sam Rhem, SRC*

Executive Summary

Jonathan Wilkenfeld, University of Maryland

The Israel-Palestine conflict has been a constant presence in the Middle East since Israel's independence in 1948. But even earlier in the 20th century, Arabs and Jews were in conflict over competing claims to the same territory. The Balfour Declaration of 1917, which provided a home for the Jewish people in parts of Palestine, along with the Sikes-Picot Agreement of 1916 which divided up the territories formerly ruled by the Ottoman Empire, remain a continuing thorn in the side for Arab states in general, and for Palestinians in particular. It is also true that the rise of Arab nationalism, coupled with the centuries-old Sunni-Shi'a divide, have shaped the perceptions and destinies of Arab leaders and populations.

The critical question is the extent to which these seemingly separate conflicts overlap such that developments in one impact the others. In particular, under what circumstances does the status of the Israel-Palestine conflict today impact the larger conflict dynamics at play in the region? Is Israel-Palestine at the heart of all conflicts in the region, or is it merely a convenient whipping boy and perhaps even a singular unifying factor for populations and states riven by seemingly unrelated competitions for power?

Not surprisingly, then, the subject matter experts we have consulted on this question have expressed a considerable diversity of opinion. Nevertheless, one critical theme has gained traction. For the most part, the SMEs argue that Israel-Palestine has little to do with the broader conflict dynamics that characterize the region today. The quest for greater participatory democracy that typified the Arab Spring movements in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, and Yemen would seem to be unrelated to developments in Israel-Palestine. Similarly, the overarching competition for power in the region between Shi'a and Sunnis, as reflected in the intense competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia, has on the surface little to do with Israel-Palestine. But as all the SMEs observe, Israel-Palestine is invoked at the level of a "sacred value," in this case a deep-rooted feeling of shame and helplessness that periodically rises to the surface and is invoked either as a scapegoat by failing governments or as an unfulfilled quest by their restless populations. And so even as all dismiss the notion that the Israel-Palestine conflict is the primary driver of all conflict in the region, its invocation as a continuing grievance and as a motivating force must be factored into our own perceptions of these other conflicts and their underlying causes.

And thus, the answer to the Command's seemingly straightforward question is complex. The circumstances under which Israel-Palestine becomes a central narrative for Arab leaders and their populations with quite diverse local conditions and goals can include these and other factors:

- National leaders seek to divert attention from internal divisions and their inability to address local grievances – economic, social, and political
- Local populations express anger with the US and the West for their historical support for authoritarian regimes through criticism of their role in perpetuating the Israel-Palestine conflict
- Islamist revolutionary movements seek a unifying theme to garner support from local populations through championing the Palestinian narrative

In the following passages, we summarize the key points made by the group of SMEs consulted on this issue. This is followed by their full input, and biographical sketches.

Professor Michael Brecher (Angus Professor of Political Science at McGill University) takes the position that to view the Israel-Palestine conflict as a central driver of all conflict in the Middle East is to ignore dynamic forces of change in the region, particularly increasingly positive relations between Israel and several of its Arab neighbors. This latter trend has the effect of blunting the impact of Israel-Palestine tensions. Even though the relations between these former inter-state adversaries could not move beyond a Cold Peace, their bilateral conflicts and the Arab/Israel Conflict as a whole had begun the process of accommodation and conciliation. The extent of change became clear at the turn of the century (2000), when the Arab states adopted the Arab Peace Initiative, which offered Israel recognition and normal relations with all members of the Arab League, in exchange for Israel's withdrawal from its occupation of Arab territories in 1967 and acceptance of the Palestinians Right of Return, in accordance with the UN 1949 Resolution. Israel did not accept those conditions and the conflict continued. Nonetheless, Israel's right-wing Prime Minister publicly accepted the 'two state' solution to the Israel/Palestine conflict in 2009. Moreover, the Arab League renewed its 'Peace initiative' in 2007 and 2014.

General (Ret.) Shlomo Brom (Senior Research Associate at the Tel Aviv University Institute for National Security Studies) argues that while neither the Arab Spring uprisings nor the current Sunni-Sh'ia divide have anything to do with Israel-Palestine, sometimes Israel serves as a convenient card played by these regional powers in their struggles. For example, Iran is using its hostility to Israel as a way to buy influence in Sunni Arab societies. Nevertheless, Arab societies' frustrations that led to the present chaos in countries like Libya, Yemen, and Syria were fed also by feelings that they were wronged by the Western powers and Israel and the perceived injustice done to the Palestinians are part of these wrongs in the Arab psyche. One can also argue that the Arab authoritarian regimes that are another cause for the present situation fed on the Arab-Israeli conflict and used it to justify their rule and the huge expenditure on security and the armed forces that were the base of their rule.

Professor Aron Shai (Eisenberg Professor for East Asian Affairs Departments of History and East Asian Studies, Tel Aviv University) posits that it is easy to dismiss Israel's culpability in the larger regional, ideological, and religious conflicts sweeping the region today. But for Israel's current right wing government, the mere fact that Arab states and extremist movements invoke Israel-Palestine as a basis for struggle, is used as justification for not seriously initiating sincere steps towards peace. Arab and Palestinian views tends to magnify the impact of the conflict and in fact internationalize it. This serves Israel's interests quite well.

Professor Shibley Telhami (Sadat Chair for Peace and Development, University of Maryland, and Senior Fellow, Brookings Institution) offers the following listing of instances where the Israel-Palestine conflict has been a factor in seemingly unrelated conflicts.

- The social media groups that were critical for the Arab uprisings in 2010 were initially mobilized over the 2008-9 Gaza war between Israel and Hamas
- Opposition groups, including militant Islamists, continue to invoke Palestine centrally in their mobilization efforts

- The verdict is still out on how much stability will come to both Egypt and Jordan, with the opposition in both continuing to invoke Palestine/Israel
- Despite the Arab media focus on the Arab uprisings, especially Syria, once war flared in Gaza again in 2014, Palestine overtook all other stories including Syria
- Despite stable peace agreements between Israel on the one hand and Egypt and Jordan on the other hand, Egyptians and Jordanians continue to reject Israel over its occupation
- While some Arab states in the GCC would like to cooperate even more with Israel over some issues like Iran, they fear a domestic backlash (as happened recently over Saudis who made contacts with Israelis). And the take has been that Israel would make it harder for the Saudis to ask other Muslim nations to take its side against Iran if Israel is seen to be on the Saudis side.
- The Jerusalem issue remains one that resonates across the Muslim world. Crises could bring this to the top.

SME Inputs

Michael Brecher (*Angus Professor of Political Science at McGill University*)

The Arab/Israel Conflict and other Middle East Conflicts

The apparent assumption by CENTCOM officials that the Arab/Israel Conflict has a profound effect on all Middle East conflicts 2016 is flawed in that it does not reflect an understanding about conflict persistence among states: it ignores the crucial reality of CHANGE, both in terms of a conflict relationship over time and the impact of one conflict on conflicts in the region in which it occurs. The Arab/Israel Conflict flourished over a lengthy period, from Israel's emergence in May 1948, accompanied by the first of many Arab/Israel wars, and earlier in the inter-communal phase of the Arab/Jewish Conflict. Its spill-over effects continued for three decades. However, change was evident as early as the mid-1970s, when many elite groups in Egypt began to perceive that the longstanding Arab goal, the destruction of Israel, sanctioned by the three Noes proclaimed at the Khartoum Conference of Arab League members in August 1967, "No peace with Israel, No recognition of Israel, No negotiations with Israel", was no longer a viable policy, in terms of Egypt's primary, compelling national interest – regaining the territories, the Sinai Peninsula and the Gaza Strip, conquered by Israel in the June 1967 Six Day War.

The result was a major change, dramatized by the signing of peace agreements between Egypt and Israel in 1979 and between Israel and Jordan in 1994, and a premature Israel/Palestine Oslo Accord in 1993. Even though the relations between these former inter-state adversaries could not move beyond a Cold Peace, their bilateral conflicts and the Arab/Israel Conflict as a whole had begun the process of accommodation and conciliation. The extent of change became clear at the turn of the century (2000), when the Arab states adopted the Arab Peace Initiative, which offered Israel recognition and normal relations with all members of the Arab League, in exchange for Israel's withdrawal from its occupation of Arab territories in 1967 and acceptance of the Palestinians Right of Return, in accordance with the UN 1949 Resolution. Israel did not accept those conditions and the conflict continued. Nonetheless, Israel's right-wing Prime Minister publicly accepted the 'two state' solution to the Israel/Palestine conflict in 2009. Moreover, the Arab League renewed its 'Peace initiative' in 2007 and 2014, including the rare public call, in an Israeli newspaper, Ha'aretz, by the Saudi monarch to be, for peace with Israel in 2015. Further, Israeli and Palestinian senior officials came close to an agreement on an overall peace agreement, based on the "Clinton Parameters", especially in the Taba Talks (2001). Moreover, while the direct negotiations between the President of the Palestine Authority, Mahmoud Abbas, and Prime Minister Olmert in 2008 did not produce a mutually-acceptable peace deal, it indicated that the conflict between the two principal adversaries in the Arab/Israel Conflict were/are capable of serious negotiations aimed at a meaningful peace agreement, fulfilling the promise of the 1993 and 1995 Oslo Accords.

As for the sweeping assumption by CENTCOM officials that the Arab/Israel Conflict permeated all conflicts in the Middle East, this too is belied by the reality of conflict in the Middle East. While Saddam Hussein attempted to link Iraq's behavior in the 1990-91 Gulf Crisis-War to the Arab/Israel Conflict, this did not prevent Egypt and Syria from participating in a war against another Arab state. More recently, there is evidence of meaningful cooperation between Saudi Arabia and all of the smaller

Gulf states with Israel. Furthermore, there is virtually no-spillover from the Arab/Israel Conflict to the Arab struggle for control of Syria during the past five years.

In sum, the Arab/Israel Conflict influenced the behavior of several other conflicts in the Middle East. However, that linkage diminished during the past 25 years, especially since the first Gulf War. What remains, as so often in international conflicts, is ideological incompatibility and verbal hostility between Israeli nationalism and Arab nationalism, with a steadily-declining impact on other regional conflicts.

These are examples of Middle East conflicts in which the Arab/Israel Conflict did not play any role:

1. The Iran/Iraq conflict, that included a devastating war, with one million casualties in their 1980-88 War; this age-old rivalry for influence in the Middle East dating to antiquity, continued well-beyond 1988
2. The Iraq/Kuwait War in 1990 that mushroomed into Gulf War I in 1991
3. The Iran/Saudi Arabia non-violent conflict between Sunni and Shiite major powers for pre-eminence in Middle East international politics
4. The Turkey/Saudi Arabia rivalry and conflict over power in the Middle East region, continuing
5. The Turkey/Kurdish conflict, unabated, with periodic outbursts of violence
6. The Egypt/Saudi Arabia conflict in the 1960s for control over Yemen, with on-going current Saudi involvement in a long-term Yemen civil war
7. The conflict between Egypt and Syria versus Iraq that included the involvement of the first two states in the U.S.-led Coalition against Saddam Hussein's Iraq in Gulf War II

In none of these conflicts was the Arab/Israel conflict directly, even indirectly involved, though Saddam attempted to embroil Israel by air attacks on Israel in Gulf War I. Moreover, Israel may have sent military hardware to the Kurds in their endless struggle against Turkey and the Iraq regime. Deep in the psyche of Middle East Muslims, officials and mass publics, Israel remains anathema; but even with this there is evident a growing willingness of Middle Eastern Muslim states to move towards normal interstate relations with Israel, especially Saudi Arabia, the lesser Gulf states and Jordan.

Shlomo Brom (*Senior Research Associate at the Tel Aviv University Institute for National Security Studies*)

After 7 years of violent tremors in the Middle East that were initially called the Arab Spring I think it is clear to all observers of the Middle East that many of the violent conflicts in the Middle East have nothing to do with the Israeli-Palestinian conflicts. For example, the Sunni-Shiite divide is rooted in almost 1400 years of Muslim history and in current competition among regional power (Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and others) that has nothing to do with Israel. For example, the competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia on Hegemony in the Gulf sub-region has nothing to do with Israel. Though, sometimes Israel serves as a convenient card played by these regional powers in their struggles. For example, Iran is using its hostility to Israel as a way to buy influence in Sunni Arab societies but one of the few positive effects of the recent years' developments is that this blunt instrument became much less effective because many Sunnis are much more concerned with the growing power of Shiite Iran than with Israel.

The main bloody conflicts; the civil wars in Syria, Libya and Yemen have nothing to do with Israel as well as the conflicts in Iraq among Sunnis, Shiite and Kurds.

On the other hand, it is not true that there is no linkage at all between the Israeli- Palestinian conflict and the wider Israeli-Arab conflict and broader developments in the Middle East. Arab societies' frustrations that led to the present chaos were fed also by feelings that they were wronged by the Western powers and Israel and the perceived injustice done to the Palestinians are part of these wrongs in the Arab psyche. One can also argue that the Arab authoritarian regimes that are another cause for the present situation fed on the Arab-Israeli conflict and used it to justify their rule and the huge expenditure on security and the armed forces that were the base of their rule.

Aron Shai (*Eisenberg Professor for East Asian Affairs, Departments of History and East Asian Studies, Tel Aviv University*)

Firstly, I'd like to underline an obvious and well known assertion -- methodologically speaking, as we are not talking about an issue in the realm of the experimental sciences, we cannot guarantee that our observation(s) are indeed fully valid. There are numerous hidden factors – local and others – which one always misses and is unaware of, these factors being totally foreign to one's mentality, experience etc. I think we are unable to weigh and/or insert those factors properly into our formulae. Can we really determine that radical Islamization, in say, Central Asia, Xinjiang (East Turkistan, China) or deep in black Africa is influenced by, or a spillover from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and if so, to what extent? – Negligible! The almost evaporation of Christian communities in some regions of the Middle East, has it got anything to do with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

Indeed, the world goes global and the Middle East is brought home to television sets along the Silk Road as well as to different corners of the globe. But still, proportions should be observed.

The question posed is a pretty naive view of the Middle East in general, and the Israel-Palestine conflict in particular. This week, for example, we learned that the Chinese authorities don't mind Islamic

extremists as long as they are not Uighur! State control over religious activity depends on ethnic and geographical factors. Beijing is particularly anxious about terrorism as an ideological problem, treating it as an ethnic one, trying to contain it in Xinjiang on account of security considerations i.e. anxiety regarding China's territorial integrity. Where does the Israeli-Palestinian conflict factor come into this recipe?

As for Q12, I believe that indeed, it could be asserted that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict does influence and does affect various conflicts in the immediate region, but I do not think that it is the *primary* driver for all conflicts around us, certainly not in the second or third circle. Even being a spillover from Israel-Palestine into other regional conflicts is doubtful. If we take recent upheavals in Egypt, for example, can it seriously be argued that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the reason for what the people of this country are experiencing? Or, rather, it is at times a comfortable rhetorical diversion or red herring which serves respective quarters.

It is useful (critical is perhaps too strong a word) to understand, let alone be aware of, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, one should by no means regard it as critical or as a major reason. It certainly helps us examine other conflicts. It should not be regarded as policy guidance.

Interestingly enough, if we look into the internal political scene in Israel, the current government and right-wing circles here tend to argue that it is not the Israeli-Palestinian conflict which influences conflicts in various corners of the world. Rather, there are deeper historical trends which are by far more significant. This tactic removes the onus for not seriously initiating sincere steps towards peace from the Israeli decision-makers. Arab and Palestinian views tends to magnify the impact of the conflict, in fact internationalize it. This serves them quite well. My own view is that had there been a more relaxed situation in the Israeli-Palestinian front, say, as Prime-Minister Rabin envisaged, perhaps a more desirable atmosphere would have prevailed in our immediate neighborhood as well. But one should not exaggerate and believe that the problems and conflicts we witness in the second and third circles would have evaporated altogether. Indeed, we should take this hypothetical assertion with a grain of salt.

Shibley Telhami (*Sadat Chair for Peace and Development, University of Maryland, and Senior Fellow, Brookings Institution*)

The Palestine question has been historically a question of identity for many Arabs, dating back to 1948; even Arabs who were sometimes angered by Palestinian groups, viewed the cause as a way of organizing their attitudes toward the world, friend and enemies. There has always been a gap between public attitudes and governmental priorities, with all Arab governments, like others, focused on maintaining and expanding power, which often meant that Palestine was less of a priority.

The Arab uprisings and the post-Iraq war strategic shift has altered priorities further. Many Arabs are so absorbed by their own pressing issues (Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Yemen), that Palestine is not an apparent priority. And Arab governments, fearing the rise of Islamist opposition/revolt on the one hand, and the rise of Iran on the other, have focused even less on Palestine with some even more open to strategic cooperation with Israel, despite Israel's continued occupation of Palestinian territories.

But make no mistake: The absence of Israeli-Palestinian peace is still dangerous and has consequences. Good to keep in mind a few things:

* The social media groups that were critical for the Arab uprisings in 2010 were initially mobilized over the 2008-9 Gaza war.

*Opposition groups, including militant Islamists, continue to invoke Palestine centrally in their mobilization efforts.

*The verdict is still out on how much stability will come to both Egypt and Jordan, with the opposition in both continuing to invoke Palestine/Israel

*Despite the Arab media focus on the Arab uprisings, especially Syria, once war flared in Gaza again in 2014, Palestine overtook all other stories including Syria.

*Despite stable peace agreements between Israel on the one hand and Egypt and Jordan on other hand, Egyptians and Jordanians continue to reject Israel over its occupation.

*While some Arab states in the GCC would like to cooperate even more with Israel over some issues like Iran, they fear a domestic backlash (as happened recently over Saudis who made contacts with Israelis). And the take has been that Israel would make it harder for the Saudis to ask other Muslim nations to take its side against Iran if Israel is seen to be on the Saudis side.

*The Jerusalem issue remains one that resonates across the Muslim world. Crises could bring this to the top.

Biographies

Michael Brecher

Professor Michael Brecher is the R.R. Angus Professor of Political Science at McGill University in Canada. His research and publications over more than six decades can be divided into three phases. In the first, his focus was on political leaders, including books on Kashmir and a political biography of Nehru. The second phase focused on foreign policy as a system of actions. He published four books during this phase, most notable among them the Yale University Press publication of The Foreign Policy System of Israel. The third phase of Brecher's research, still ongoing, focuses on theory and case studies of international crises and protracted conflicts. Thus far, he has published 9 books on these topics, with 4 forthcoming. These latter include the following titles: The World of Protracted Conflict, Political Leadership and Charisma, Dimensions of the Arab-Israeli Conflict, and Interstate Crises and Conflicts.

In addition to his appointment at McGill University, Brecher has also taught at the University of Chicago, the University of California Berkeley, and Stanford University. He has been the recipient of numerous grants, including sustained funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, and in 2009 received the Lifetime Achievement Award from the American Political Science Association, Conflict Processes Section.

Shlomo Brom

Shlomo Brom, a senior research associate at the Institute for National Security Studies, joined the Jaffee Center in 1998 after a long career in the IDF. His most senior post in the IDF was director of the Strategic Planning Division in the Planning Branch of the General Staff. Brig. Gen. (ret.) Brom participated in peace negotiations with the Palestinians, Jordan, and Syria, and in Middle Eastern regional security talks during the 1990s. He continued to be involved in Track 2 dialogues on these subjects after his retirement from the IDF. In 2000 he was named deputy to the National Security Advisor, returning to JCSS at the end of his post. In 2005-2006 Brig. Gen. (ret.) Brom was a member of the Meridor committee established by the Minister of Defense to reexamine the security strategy and doctrine of the State of Israel. His primary areas of research are Israeli-Palestinian relations and national security doctrine.

Brom authored *Israel and South Lebanon: In the Absence of a Peace Treaty with Syria*, and edited *The Middle East Military Balance 1999-2000* and *The Middle East Military Balance 2001-2002*. He is the editor of *In the Aftermath of Operation Pillar of Defense: The Gaza Strip*, November 2012, co-editor (with Meir Elran) of *The Second Lebanon War: Strategic Perspectives* and (with Anat Kurz) the *Strategic Survey for Israel* series.

Aron Shai

Aron Shai is the Shoul N. Eisenberg Professor for East Asian Affairs Departments of History and East Asian Studies, Tel Aviv University. He is currently Pro-Rector, Tel Aviv University, Rector/Provost (2010-2015). Author of 11 books and an editor of many others, *Between 1972 and 2016* published over 50 articles and chapters in scientific and academic journals and edited books, Courses on modern history, China's contemporary history and political economy and on issues relating to Israel studies. Served as a guest/Visiting Professor at Oxford, Toronto, New York, Paris and Jerusalem. Member, the Council of Higher Education. Director at two Israeli insurance companies. B.A and M.A., the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, D. Phil., University of Oxford.

Shibley Telhami

Shibley Telhami is the Anwar Sadat Professor for Peace and Development at the University of Maryland and a nonresident senior fellow at the Brookings Institution. His best-selling book, *The Stakes: America and the Middle East*, was selected by *Foreign Affairs* as one of the top five books on the Middle East in 2003. In addition, his most recent book, *The World Through Arab Eyes: Arab Public Opinion and the Reshaping of the Middle East*, was published in 2013. Telhami was selected by the Carnegie Corporation of New York along with the *New York Times* as one of the "Great Immigrants" for 2013. Telhami is a recipient of the Excellence in Public Service Award, awarded by the University System of Maryland Board of Regents in 2006, and the University of Maryland's Honors College 2014 Outstanding Faculty Award. In the past, Telhami served as a senior advisor to the U.S. Department of State, advisor to the U.S. Mission to the United Nations, advisor to Congressman Lee Hamilton, and as a member of the Iraq Study Group. Telhami is an expert on U.S. policy in the Middle East, on Arab politics, and on shifting political identities in the Arab world. He regularly conducts public opinion polls in the Arab world, Israel, and the United States. In addition, he was selected by the Carnegie Corporation of New York with the *New York Times* as one of the "Great Immigrants" for 2013.

Jonathan Wilkenfeld

Jonathan Wilkenfeld is Professor and prior Chair of Government and Politics at the University of Maryland and Director of the ICONS simulation project. He is a specialist in foreign policy decision-making, crisis behavior, and mediation, as well as in the use of simulation in policy studies. Since 1977, Wilkenfeld has served as co-Director (with Michael Brecher) of the International Crisis Behavior Project, a cross-national study of international crises in the twentieth century. The project has served as the basis for systematic research into a range of crucial foreign-policy issues, including state motivations during times of crisis, conflict management practices, and protracted conflict trajectories. Wilkenfeld is founder of the International Communication and Negotiation Simulations (ICONS) Project, which provides decision-makers with interactive training experiences in the fields of conflict behavior, negotiation, and crisis management.

Wilkenfeld's most recent books include *A Study of Crisis* (1997 and 2000, with Michael Brecher); *International Negotiation in a Complex World* (1999, 2005, 2010, 2015 with Brigid Starkey and Mark Boyer); *Mediating International Crises* (2005 with Kathleen Young, David Quinn, and Victor Asal); and *Myth and Reality in International Politics* (2015). His current work focuses on mediation processes in international conflicts and crises.