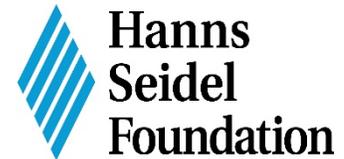


HSS DISCUSSION PAPER

by Prof. Dr. Gisela Dachs

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Panel 1: The breakthrough towards Israeli-Arab normalization: Its potential impact on the region and on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

„The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: New approaches to an enduring conflict“

Time for a Re-Set

Europe seems to have remained stuck in its foreign policy. Looking for new ways to approach the Middle East does not have to come on the account of the Palestinians.

When Federica Mogherini became the European Union’s High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy in November 2014, she was optimistic about the future of the Israeli-Palestinian relationship. At the time, she suggested that it might even be possible to reach a two-state solution within her five-year term. In December 2019, her successor, Josep Borrell, took over the reins at the EU foreign office, without any progress whatsoever on the Israeli-Palestinian front. Mogherini’s statement - raising high expectations - illustrate Europe’s declarative skills that have been central to the formation of its common foreign policy¹, but which appear often quite removed from the realities on the ground.

Today, many Israelis have adopted a narrative that is not entirely unjustified, namely that whenever their army withdraws from territories – for example, from Lebanon in 2000 and the Gaza Strip in 2005 – the tendency is for Islamists to then take control in those areas and maneuver into a better position to attack Israel. In this case, however, security concerns also overlap with ideological claims. The Two-State solution seems far-fetched for most, at least for the foreseeable future.

At the same time, how much irrelevant it might have been declared by both camps on the left as well as on the right, the two-states-paradigm remains the only viable game in town if Israel seeks its long term future as a Jewish and democratic state. Rabin’s basic premise that the Israeli state cannot be simultaneously Jewish, democratic and all-embracing continues to apply to this day. This premise is also ultimately accepted by Israelis who see it as their historical birthright to settle on biblical soil. In other words, in order to safeguard the Zionist project, they see it as necessary to separate from the Palestinians. The hard question remains of how to do this in a safe manner that preserves Israel’s defense needs.

¹ Anders Persson (2020) *Eu Diplomacy and the Arab-Israeli conflict, 1967-2019*. Edinburgh University Press.

When it comes to assess power in the Middle East, a double asymmetry has characterized the European-Israeli relations for a long time. Israelis have always perceived their country more as a threatened island in a mostly hostile Middle East than as the powerful occupier of the Palestinians – which is the image that dominates the European perception. Having more allies in the region, would not only make Israelis feel safer, but also impact public opinion as how to deal with the Palestinian question. According to a recent Mitvim Poll, 34% of Israelis think that the Israel-UAE agreement increases the prospects of achieving Israeli-Palestinian peace, compared to 12% who think it decreases the chances. 40% think that the agreement does not make a difference.

The recent Abraham accords reversed a deeply entrenched European view of the conflict. A long lasting EU vision of peace stipulated that a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict precedes all other reconciliation moves in the region with the Jewish State. This inside-outside approach has now been outdated by the normalization of Israel's relations with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Sudan. Europe, being at odds with (the now outgoing) President Trump, was not only absent from the signing ceremony in the White House, but reacted only reluctantly to these breakthroughs.

While the incoming US President Joe Biden intends to take a different path in his foreign policy from his predecessor, he certainly will uphold this part of the Trump legacy. The Abraham accords remain therefore an invitation for European leaders to rethink their policy approach by taking into account the underlying geostrategic and generational changes in the region. Since the onset of the Arab uprisings in 2011, many regimes have viewed the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as just one of several conflicts in the region. Priorities have shifted from traditional political considerations to urgent economic needs with Israel as a partner for cooperation. Moreover, the need to counter Iran's regional ambitions has all become an alternative frame of reference to Israeli-Arab relations. Instead of watching from afar, Europe should be at the forefront of the effort to promote this new regional dynamic as a conciliatory path.

The potential of the “outside-in” approach is indeed worthwhile to be further explored. Enhancing Israel's regional normalization does not have to mean a withdrawal from the Palestinian issue. The fact that the Abraham accords were enabled by the Israeli commitment to put annexations plans on hold, offers new perspectives that could influence the current political stalemate. The regimes in the United Arab Emirates and other Gulf States are not strong enough to disregard criticism from the opposition and if they are to ensure the stability of their regimes, they have to make diplomatic moves supported by the broader public. Such steps might include initiatives designed to foster progress on the Israeli-Palestinian front, drawn from regional action strategies similar to the Arab Peace Initiative from 2002. A collective move, especially if it involved Saudi Arabia, would also positively impact the Israeli public opinion.

Europe with its own rich regional experience could actively encourage such multilateral moves. This could also be translated by a revival of the Middle East Quartet enlarged by other relevant members – such as the new allies of Israel in the region. Another possible scenario could be a return to secret negotiations with more actors.

Although foreign policy might not be among his first priorities, Joe Biden is likely to continue seeking new partners in the Arab world for peace agreements with Israel. His election makes it easier for the Palestinians to climb down the tree and to finally re-engage again with Israel - a move halted by the perception of Donald Trump as being unabashedly pro-Netanyahu.

The challenge now remains to reengage Israelis and Palestinians in a process that seems promising to all sides by looking for a way out of the zero-sum game that dominated in the last decade again the field of peace making. A close transatlantic cooperation would be highly beneficial for such a process, so as not to falling back into old patterns with the Palestinians counting on Europe to help them ending the occupation by pressuring/boycotting Israel. Instead of cultivating victimhood only, the Palestinians need as well to reconsider their own role as a responsible actor including a reassessment of failed past strategies. Pressure should be put on both sides to implement things already agreed upon.

Furthermore, the narrow focus on territory pushes aside that there are also other important issues at stake in this conflict related to collective rights and national identity. The Israeli insistence to have their state recognized as a Jewish in a future agreement points to this and behind it is much more than merely a diplomatic tactic to hamper progress. These concerns have to be taken more seriously once negotiations have become once again a realistic path.

If this were to occur, the next question would be who exactly the Israelis would meet at the negotiating table. The Palestinians are still deeply divided into two political camps: the Hamas in Gaza and the President Mahmud Abbas' Fatah party ruling the West Bank. However, both camps are struggling for legitimacy in the eyes of their own populations, and many Palestinians would like to see new forces come to power. As Abbas is 85 years old, many are watching out for what the era after him might bring.

This shift is particularly noticeable among Palestinian youth, who have become increasingly alienated from Palestinian politics and elites. According to a recent poll of the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PSR) in Ramallah, Palestinian support for a Two-State-Solution is at an ever low, from 55 percent in 2011 to only 39 percent in summer 2020. While the younger generation seem to be politically more radical than their parents, they are also likely to change their mind if progress - embedded in a larger regional framework - comes along. In the case of a continued absence of a united Palestinians leadership, Israel could renew the talks and bilateral links with the Palestinian Authority on the one hand, and make also progress toward implementation of an arrangement with Hamas in the Gaza Strip on the other hand.

Whatever happens, the Middle East is currently undergoing a rebalancing of power that creates new horizons for both Arabs and Israelis. Europe could positively influence these regional dynamics by supporting normalization moves in the region as well as by re-strengthening transatlantic ties. Germany, which is seen by Israelis as the third most important country for them after the US and Russia, could have an important role in this.