

Whither America, Israel, and the Arabs in the Quest for Middle East Peace?

By
Dr. Khalid M. Abdalla



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Cover Photo Credit: Reuters/AHMED JADALLAH/Archive Photos

Sobhiya Al-Amour, 50, confronts an Israeli bulldozer as it bulldozes a field and destroys two Palestinian houses near the Jewish settlement of Kfar Darom in the self-ruled Gaza Strip. February 12, 2001. Reprinted with permission.

Introduction

The National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations is pleased to publish this monograph, *Whither America, Israel, and the Arabs in the Quest for Middle East Peace?* by Dr. Khalid M. Abdalla, former Washington Representative of the League of Arab States.

Mideast peace maintains its elusive quality, never quite beyond hope while at the same time remaining just out of reach. Dr. Abdalla enhances American understanding of the viewpoints pertaining to peace among those in positions of power and responsibility in the Arab world. He provides hard-to-come-by information and perspective on Arab views regarding the issue of Palestine. One need only briefly look at the continuing state of affairs in the region to appreciate the need for the kind of rational counsel that he provides on what needs to be done to achieve peace and justice in this vital but troubled part of the world.

The National Council publishes this work in the spirit of contributing to the national dialogue on U.S. policies toward the Arab countries, the Mideast, and the Islamic world.

Dr. John Duke Anthony

President and CEO

National Council on

U.S.-Arab Relations

Whither America, Israel, and the Arabs in the Quest for Middle East Peace?

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At the macro level, the three main strategic objectives of Arab policymakers are economic development, regional peace, and domestic security. Linked to these objectives are additional micro goals at the level of policy formulation, policymaking, and policy implementation.

In the broader economic and social fields, policymakers and decisionmakers point to a range of core prerequisites to ensure the Arab countries' ongoing modernization and development en route to their successful navigation through the new millennium.

It is, of course, redundant to say that the achievement or failure of each major goal will significantly impact the accomplishment or lack of success in pursuit of the other goal. And to say that the quest for enhanced Arab economic growth requires regional peace is self-evident.

Paving the Way for Enhanced Regional Development

No one believes that a just, enduring, and comprehensive settlement of the Mideast's most important conflict will be a panacea for the region's numerous and multifaceted challenges. But what practically everyone does agree on is that a settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict, like nothing else, will pave the way for positive developments vis-à-vis a range of all kinds of development challenges across a broad front.

Not least, the achievement and maintenance of a region-wide peace over time would contribute substantially to obviating the principal forces and factors that fuel the region's increasingly costly and dangerous arms races. More than anything else, the successful conclusion and implementation of a series of genuine, lasting, and far-reaching peace accords between Israel and its Arab neighbors would help free up financial resources that, in effect, remain unavailable for more productive developmental use.

Such resources for development are desperately needed to advance the prospects for the region's economic growth. They are vital to the Mideastern people's material welfare. Without their prudent utilization, one cannot hope to strengthen the social stability of these nations

If Arab-Israeli peace were to break out and sink its roots deep into the region's soil from one end to another, this, coupled with the removal and

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significant reduction of other threat assessments, would go a long way towards bringing to an end the destruction and ravages manifested in the more protracted instances of armed conflict. Such conflicts, one hardly needs to be reminded, have been among the most fundamental reasons for the overall slower and uneven pace and extent of modernization and development in the Mideast in comparison to other areas over the past few decades.

A Real Versus a False Mideast Peace

But real peace in the Mideast will continue to be elusive until and unless it is coupled to something else. Such a peace will have little chance to endure if it is not linked to a system of regional defense and national security that removes from the region all weapons of mass destruction together with the means of their production and delivery.

As the Al-Aqsa Intifada dramatically demonstrates, the inability to address root causes is what ignites and sustains conflicts.

No one can afford to be less than precise and specific as to what this will entail. Because the issues surrounding such weaponry affect the needs and aspirations of hundreds of millions of people in one of the world's most vitally important regions, analysts and policymakers who would pursue an era of lasting peace and prosperity in the Mideast must be very clear as to what is required. That is, the focus cannot be limited to just *some* weapons and not others; the focus of any dialogue on defense matters must be on *all* weapons.



Israeli military trucks used for detention of Palestinians

Photograph: Michael S. Lee

Otherwise, one cannot claim to be serious or credible in dealing with root causes rather than what policymakers, if they are candid and honest, will acknowledge to be merely the cause's symptoms or manifestations. As the Al-Aqsa Intifada dramatically demonstrates, the inability to address and solve root causes is what ignites and sustains conflicts.

To gain insight into what is needed to end the Palestinian uprising against the Israeli occupation, one need not look far. Algeria's long and bloody war of independence against France, a conflict that left a million Algerians orphans upon the country's achievement of independence in 1962, ceased the moment France agreed to grant the Algerian people their freedom from colonial rule. In America's armed struggle against Great Britain in the eighteenth century, the conflict ceased when, in 1781, British General Lord Cornwallis conceded the validity of the rebels' cause and, on behalf of King George III, agreed that the hitherto colonized Americans would henceforth be free.

Moreover, Mideast foreign policymakers and institutional leaders who would be frank and have their constituents and the public at large know the truth will acknowledge the need to be forthright about something else. This is that there will be little if any prospect for achieving a lasting peace in the region if the relevant officials fail to adopt and implement as their core working premise a peaceful objective that reverberates among the vast majority of the Mideast peoples. This objective is enshrined in the strategic imperative of eliminating the region's weapons of mass destruction (WMD), ceasing their manufacture, and halting efforts to enable and enhance their means of delivery.

The Implications of Exclusivity *versus* Inclusivity

The objective will have little if any meaningful prospect of success if its proponents focus their efforts upon some Mideastern states but not all of the region's countries. To suggest that one proceed otherwise – that one or more countries ought to be excluded from the policy implications of such considerations – would be morally wrong and strategically mistaken. It would also be politically and otherwise harmful to the national interests of all the region's countries in deriving the benefits rooted in their inherent right to self-preservation.

It is important to take care to ensure that no Mideastern country is entitled to "exceptional" treatment, or "exclusivity." Nor should one extend to it the benefits of a "grandfather clause," whereby one or more countries are allowed to enjoy a special "exempt" status that is denied to others.

Here is where there are lessons from the past, and the ongoing present, for all to see. Indeed, the Western policy of allowing only one country to enjoy the privilege of owning weapons of mass destruction is a policy that has served neither peace nor regional defense. What it has done instead is to heighten the fear among Arab and other Mideastern and Islamic countries that the WMD capabilities of any country that is deemed "fenced off" from the policy issues under consideration here will be used to threaten and intimidate countries that lack such capabilities.

Even scenarios that fall short of the actual use of such capabilities have no way of preventing a country that has the capabilities from dictating a certain course of action to its neighbors in order to enforce upon them its views and to dominate their economic activities. For a single country to possess nuclear weapons in a region where normal relations do not prevail between that country and its neighbors is a sure-fire recipe for serving such purposes.

Threats to Regional Peace and Stability: A Different Perspective

This is what we dread the most. We fear that Israel, equipped and armed with its longstanding nuclear program, will generate horror, tilt dramatically the balance of power in the region, and provoke reciprocal endeavors which, in themselves, will constitute additional potential threats to the region's peace and stability.

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The realization of the goal of a region free of weapons of mass destruction and their means of delivery – being a strategic goal in support of peace – will not happen overnight. Indeed, even the short-term objective of achieving a measure of progress in this direction depends on a multitude of factors. Not least among the several things that are required is increased pan-Arab and broader Mideastern acceptance of responsibility for making headway on this issue.

Thus far, the record reflects that Arab countries have been quick to accept responsibility on this front. Illustrative of the sense of seriousness and eagerness with which Arab leaders throughout the region have sought to pursue this goal can be seen in the way they have proceeded to promote economic development, peace, and security.

Increasing Investment Incentives

In the economic arena, virtually all of the 22 League of Arab States members are striving to create an improved environment for investment. To do so, the overwhelming majority some time ago began a major restructuring process that included the adoption of policies and programs in accordance with recommendations by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. The underlying objectives of the adopted financial and monetary policies have been to control and decrease budget deficits, to deregulate previous highly constrained or privileged economic activities, to privatize many publicly owned enterprises, and to open up the Arab economies further to increased direct foreign investment.

Laudable Objectives Amidst Daunting Challenges

The main objective of these broad-based reformist efforts in the realm of public commercial and economic laws, policies, institutions, and practices is to integrate the Arab economies further into the global economy. However, the road to integration into the global economy poses a formidable array of challenges. One of the most fundamental and pervasive of these challenges is an underlying bias among many who favor the trend towards economic globalization. The bias is reflected in the view that, as a matter of policy, all countries that seek to enhance their international economic competitiveness ought to be treated equally.

But what such a viewpoint either overlooks or dismisses is the fact that countries that are treated equally are not necessarily equally endowed with resources. Neither do they function on a level playing field with regard to experience and high levels of technology. The European Union (EU), for example, did not expect Spain, Portugal, and Greece to be equal partners with the other EU countries at the outset or as a precondition for allowing them to join the Union. On the contrary, they granted these countries the right of entry without such discrimination. Simultaneously, the EU adopted and implemented a policy of doing what it could to assist those countries. The objective was to aid them in such a way as to bring their economic structure and development to a level more nearly in reach of the other members.

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It should also be emphasized that almost all Arab governments accept the notion of a free market as the most effective tool for economic growth. Even so, reality alone makes it imperative that Arab leaders initiate measures to guard against the inevitable excesses of an unbridled market. This is for no other reason than elementary prudence with a view to limiting the suffering that such excesses can cause not only to one's own purpose but to those of other people as well.

The answer to market failings should not lie in a standardized, one-size-fits-all recipe that ends up compounding the problem. Rather, it lies in finding solutions that will provide social safety nets. It lies in providing remedies through the implementation of regulations aimed at preventing and curbing market excesses. And it lies in devising mechanisms that will extend assistance, technological as well as financial, to developing countries to enhance their ability to compete on the global market.

Peace as the *Sine Qua Non* of Regional Economic Development and Integration

On the peace issue, the Arab countries stated publicly their intention and position early on and very clearly nearly a generation ago. The Arab League advanced in 1982 its most articulate, comprehensive, and consensual initiative in support of a peacefully negotiated settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Arab leaders ever since have repeatedly reaffirmed that peace is their strategic option. They have made innumerable concessions to help make peace a reality. By contrast, in the aftermath of the liberation of Kuwait in 1991, when the United States and the other four Permanent Members of the U.N. Security Council sought to implement their commitment to bring an end to the Arab-Israeli conflict, Israel was far less forthcoming. Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir was the *last* to agree to come to the negotiating table at Madrid. Subsequently, Israel's new Labor government, which signed the Oslo Accords afterwards, used calculated procrastination and delaying tactics to postpone or flout some of the articles of these agreements.

When Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu came to power, following the assassination of Premier Yitzhak Rabin and the defeat of Rabin's would-be successor, Shimon Peres, in Israel's May 1996 elections, the peace process took a dramatic turn for the worse. Mr. Netanyahu's declarations and policies not only antagonized the U.S. administration and the governments of many other countries, but also brought the peace process to the brink of collapse.

To this end, Mr. Netanyahu effectively ended the peace process's multilateral track. The multilateral talks were bold in vision and far-reaching in scope. They

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entailed simultaneous meetings between Arabs, Israelis, and more than two dozen other countries convened to address such region-wide issues as arms control, water, refugees, and economic cooperation. *Lest one forget, these were issues that Israel itself, as a condition for joining the peace talks, had insisted should be accorded equal weight to its agreement to enter into bilateral negotiations with the neighbors whose lands it occupied.*



Photograph: Michael S. Lee

Home destroyed by Israeli forces
in Dheisheh refugee camp

How can the conflict be ended when Israel continues to envisage a final solution that is based on continuous hegemony over the Palestinian people through controlling their external borders, controlling their internal movement, dominating their economy, expropriating and thereby truncating their land, and denying them the most rudimentary elements of human dignity?

To rationalize his opposition to the Oslo Accords, Mr. Netanyahu invoked – not for the first time by an Israeli Prime Minister who sought to evade having to comply with external pressures – the issue of “national security.” As on previous occasions when this ploy was exercised, even Israelis regarded the tactic as disingenuous.

Specialists within Israel and the world over agreed then and subsequently that it was the Palestinians who were in dire need of security to protect them from the Israeli military juggernaut that was inflicting on them such heavy punishment. It was, and to this day remains, Israelis who occupy Palestinian and Syrian land, not Palestinians or Syrians who occupy Israeli land.

The arrival of Mr. Ehud Barak as Israeli Prime Minister raised expectations, soon to be diminished, as his approach to the peace process started to unfold to the rest of the world. Even though his style differed radically from that of Mr. Netanyahu, one is at pains to discern much in the way of fundamental differences between the two erstwhile, would-be yet again, heads of state on substantive issues.

Mr. Barak’s agenda, almost from the outset, raised doubts about the kind of peace that he wanted to usher into the region. Among the troubling aspects of his agenda, foremost was his vision of a final settlement. His views on Jerusalem, borders, settlements, and refugees reflected a rigid position that was totally unacceptable. This was not only because his preferred “solutions” were in violation of international law and the norms of acceptable behavior among members of the United Nations. It was also because of the view of Arabs, Africans, Asians, Europeans, and many in North and South America alike that comprehensive peace can only be achieved by resolving the question of Jerusalem, reaching an agreement on the settlements and settling the refugee issue based on the right of return. It can only be achieved, in addition, by an Israeli commitment to end its illegal occupation of Palestinian and Syrian territories.

The Politics of Delay and Procrastination

Viewed in this light, Mr. Barak’s vision of a final settlement was destined to defeat its purpose to end the conflict and achieve a comprehensive peace. How can the conflict be ended when Israel continues to envisage a final solution that is based on continuous hegemony over the Palestinian people through controlling their

external borders, controlling their internal movement, dominating their economy, expropriating and thereby truncating their land, and denying them the most rudimentary elements of human dignity?

Mr. Barak's efforts to delay implementation of the October 1998 Wye River Accords were another troublesome issue. It may be, as some analysts believe, that the rationale behind his insistence on deferring the withdrawal of Israeli troops from certain sections of the West Bank until the final status negotiations was strategic. That is, it could be that his intent was to deny the Palestinians either full or partial control over the maximum extent possible of the West Bank in order to use such denial as a negotiating chip to trade against future Palestinian demands.



Israeli military personnel in the West Bank

Photograph: Michael S. Lee

If so, this would have equated to standard Israeli policy. Delaying tactics and procrastination over the implementation of signed agreements have functioned as constants in the policy of various Israeli governments. Lest one forget, it was the late Israeli Prime Minister Rabin who said that dates and timelines ought not to be viewed as "*sacred*." Nor, according to Mr. Netanyahu, who became a consummate expert in the art of renegotiating signed agreements, ought such agreements to be viewed as "*binding*."

America's Role: Active or Passive, Central or Marginal?

The other aspect of Mr. Barak's agenda was to try to consign the American role in the peace process to a back seat. During his visit to Washington in July 1999, Mr. Barak expressed his view that the United States should *not* play an active role in the peace negotiations. Stripped of its rhetoric, this statement indicated Israel's preference that the United States step back from its previously declared role as an objective arbiter.

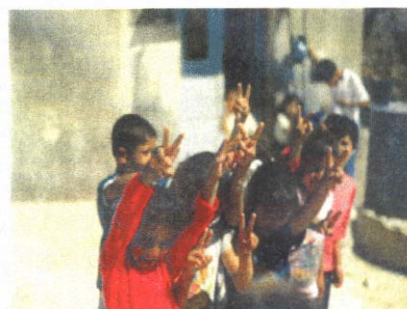
But could the United States accept being consigned to a back seat role and be removed from its role as a disinterested or evenhanded go-between? Certainly it can, but with a price. Were it to do so, the United States would undermine its credibility. America is Israel's primary protector. It is the predominant provider of Israel's external financial assistance. It is the plea bargainer par excellence on Israel's behalf. As such, the United States cannot afford to shirk its responsibility to use the considerable leverage it has to compel Israel to respect and abide by the relevant U.N. Security Council Resolutions and international law, as well as to compel compliance with signed agreements by the Arab side.

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In addition, there are far-reaching implications of the U.S. policy to champion U.N. resolutions authorizing the use of force in support of the U.N. Charter's prohibition against the acquisition by force of territory elsewhere in the region.

Can the United States renounce its responsibility to apply the same standards regarding the norms of international law and legitimacy when it comes to Israel?

All U.N. resolutions should be equally respected and implemented. It is nonsensical and irresponsible to claim that violations of international law, and noncompliance with U.N. resolutions, differ from one case to the next. Of course, one case differs from the next; no two international issues, conflicts, or challenges, in all their particulars, are exactly the same.



Photograph: Michael S. Lee

Palestinian children in Dheishere refugee camp

Peace is a required condition for protection against external threats to the area's peace and stability, but, by itself, it is insufficient. One of the major ongoing obstacles to achieving a measure of regional stability based on effective systems of deterrence and defense is the ongoing presence of weapons of mass destruction.

However, the bottom line is respect and adherence to international law. Hence, it is hypocritical, if not morally audacious, to insinuate that not all U.N. resolutions deserve respect and full compliance, and that only some merit U.S. attention. And, it is unbecoming of a Great Power to demonize some violators of international law whilst turning a deaf ear or a blind eye to the transgressions of others.

The Quest for Regional Defense

The third major goal Arab countries are working hard to achieve is a system that will enhance the region's defense. Peace is a required condition for protection against external threats to the area's peace and stability, but, by itself, it is insufficient. One of the major ongoing obstacles to achieving a measure of regional stability based on effective systems of deterrence and defense is the ongoing presence of weapons of mass destruction.

A major hurdle to the achievement of a Mideast that would be free of such weapons is Israel's longstanding nuclear program. Israel's nuclear program defies a growing body of evidence and international consensus that the mere possession and capability to deploy such weapons is hardly the guarantor of a country's national security. This is one thing. But, Israel's steadfast refusal to submit its nuclear program to inspection by, and the safeguards of, the International Atomic Energy Agency is quite another. There are many reliable reports that Israel has produced hundreds of nuclear warheads.

However, what Arab leaders from one end of the region to the other continue to find troubling is the official U.S. attitude towards Israel's nuclear program. Israel has not only rebuffed each and every U.S. overture over the last three decades that it join the United States, the Arab countries, and most of the rest of the world in signing the NPT. It has also received from various countries all kinds of overt and covert technological assistance to develop its broad-based missile and nuclear programs.

On this question, as with many other issues, Israel has consistently refused to heed the relevant U.N. resolutions. The U.N. General Assembly, since the mid 1970s, has passed twenty resolutions calling for the establishment of a nuclear-free zone in the Middle East. What is of interest is that over the years and up until 1990, Israel has officially declared its readiness to comply with these resolutions *provided* it does so in the context of direct negotiations with Arab countries.

Today Israel *has* direct negotiations with Arab countries. Already the result has been two Israeli peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan, as well as an interim agreement with the Palestinian Authority.

But, here's the rub. In spite of this progress, Israel refuses to be engaged in any negotiations leading to its accession to the NPT. Yet Israel was at the forefront of the idea that there should be multilateral negotiations parallel to the bilateral peace negotiations between Israel and the remaining Israeli-occupied Arab territories. Despite this, Israel never allowed its refusal to adhere to the NPT issue to be put on the agenda of the arms control and regional defense group within the framework of the multilateral negotiations.

Not only is there a lack of international pressure from any quarter on Israel to join the NPT; there are numerous prominent international relations specialists who are willing to play the role of apologist for Israel's intransigence.

Here one need only pause, step back, and ask, "What kind of an example does this set for the rest of the world?"

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Photograph: Michael S. Lee

Israeli tanks on the Golan

About the Author

Dr. Khalid M. Abdalla



Dr. Khalid M. Abdalla is a former Chief Representative of the League of Arab States in Washington, D.C. His responsibilities in that Ambassadorial-rank position included lecturing at various American business, academic, and leadership forums, and providing analysis and comment to the American and Arab media on events in the Middle East.

Dr. Abdalla began his career with the Arab League in 1980 in the League's Department of International Economic Affairs. He later served as Director for Economic Affairs at the League's Department of Strategic Studies (1984-1987), as Director of the League's Mission to the Government of Austria and the Vienna headquarters of international organizations (1987-1991), and as the Deputy Assistant Secretary General for Palestinian Affairs (1992-1994).