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Prospects for Cooperation between Israel and its Arab Neighbors

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The James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies, the National Defense University, and the Institute for National Security Studies held a two-day nonproliferation dialogue in Israel, April 29–30, 2018. The purpose of the dialogue was to exchange views on evolving threat perceptions, perceived gaps in goals, priorities, and policies, and identify further opportunities for deepening US–Israel cooperation in countering the proliferation of WMD and related threats. The following policy memo is based on the author’s presentation delivered during the dialogue.

Over the last seventy years, Israel’s foreign policy and diplomatic relations with neighboring states have drastically changed. The once close relations between Israel and the non-Arab states in the region—specifically Iran and Turkey—have deteriorated following Iran’s 1979 Islamic Revolution and gradually since the establishment of the Justice and Development Party (AKP)-led government in Turkey. In stark contrast, the once constant military confrontation between Israel and its Arab neighbors has been transformed into two peace treaties—with Egypt and Jordan—as well as significantly improved relations with other Sunni Arab states despite the lack of formal relations.

All of these developments have significantly improved Israel’s relations with Sunni Arab states and contributed to Israel’s main strategic goal: to be accepted by and integrated into the wider region. increase the risks of nuclear proliferation.

Several developments have contributed to strengthened cooperation between Israel and Arab states during the last decade: the intensification of the Shiite–Sunni confrontation,

which is driven by the growing concern over Iran’s regional influence; Arab states’ preoccupation with domestic political challenges; and the subsequent decline in the centrality of the Palestinian issue. All of these developments have significantly improved Israel’s relations with Sunni Arab states and contributed to Israel’s main strategic goal: to be accepted by and integrated into the wider region. increase the risks of nuclear proliferation.

Bilateral Relations

Israel–Egypt relations are undoubtedly the most important to Israel. Both countries have many shared interests vital to their national security. A top priority for Israel is the continued stability and survivability of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi’s regime. The two states are cooperating on several different fronts, including intelligence sharing and security cooperation in the fight against the Islamic State in the Sinai as well as vis-à-vis Hamas in the Gaza Strip. During times of escalated conflict, Egypt acts as a mediator between Israel and Hamas. Both states have a problematic relationship with Turkey.

Economically, Egypt and Israel have limited ties. The \$15 billion gas agreement announced in

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February 2018 between the two states has, so far, not been met with any public protests in Egypt.

While Israel and Egypt clearly share numerous mutual interests, there are discrepancies as well: first is the Palestinian issue, where Egypt would like to see progress in the peace process. There also are differences on the urgency of the Iranian issue, which is not as much a priority for Egypt as it is for Israel. The same can be said about the ongoing conflict in Syria, where Egypt finds it difficult as an Arab state to support the removal of Bashar al-Assad. Egypt also maintains its traditional anti-Israel stance within the context of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and a weapon-of-mass-destruction-free zone (WMDFFZ) in the Middle East. It is clear that, despite many common interests, there are several significant challenges to address in order to achieve the full normalization of ties between the two countries.

Israel currently attaches great importance to its relations with **Jordan**, with whom it shares its longest border. It views stability of the Jordanian monarchy as a vital Israeli national security interest. Robust bilateral security cooperation focuses on fighting terror activity against the Islamic State and other terror groups that may jeopardize the Hashemite Kingdom's survival. There is also dynamic security and political coordination between the two states regarding a de-escalation zone in southern Syria, where both states share a border.

On the economic level, Israel currently sells and transports gas to Jordan, despite public Jordanian protests against open economic ties with Israel. A 2010 water supply agreement also commits Israel to supply Jordan with 100 million cubic meters of water.¹ Economic cooperation is likely to continue to grow: The Syrian Civil War has largely closed Syria's borders, forcing goods destined for Jordan and the Gulf states to reroute, mostly through Israeli ports. Israel also, since 2014, has begun to issue Jordanians with permits to work in Eilat, where they receive much higher salaries than they would in Jordan.

Yet, many points of contention between the two states remain. Of these, the most important one remains the Palestinian issue, especially Jerusalem—Jordan's King Abdullah II is the custodian of Jerusalem's Holy Sites—which has caused an immense strain on Israel–Jordan relations. This is partly a result of the high percentage of Palestinians in Jordan, many of whom came from Israel as refugees between 1947 and 1967. In general, Israel's relations with Jordan have evolved similarly as they have with Egypt, where government-to-government relations, with an special emphasis on security, are close, while the public remains vehemently hostile to Israel and the normalization of relations until the Israeli–Palestinian conflict is resolved.

Likely—but unconfirmed—intelligence cooperation has likely characterized recent Israel–**Saudi Arabia** relations along with increased shared security interests. Both countries perceive combating the growing Iranian influence in the region a top priority. This includes Iran's proxies such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza, and the Houthis in Yemen. Published reports indicate that Israel and Saudi Arabia coordinate some of their operations to combat the Islamic State in addition to each state's existing coordination on that front with Egypt and Jordan.

Common security threats and interests, driven by current issues and changing regional dynamics, have fueled the widening mutual agenda. Both states are concerned by the declining role of the United States in the Middle East and the potential consequences of its decreased influence as the region's external security guarantor. Both states invest significantly in US military equipment and have benefited from US military cooperation and security guarantees.

While Israel welcomes the alignment of threats and interests and increased coordination between the two countries, it is unlikely to result in formal relations with Saudi Arabia without substantial progress on the Palestinian issue. Despite the relative decline in the importance of the Palestinian issue in the Arab world generally, it remains an important issue for the Saudis. The

Arab/Saudi Peace Initiative, introduced in 2002, and re-endorsed by later Arab League summits, has remained the common denominator for going forward and has yet to be formally answered by Israel. It is therefore difficult to foresee the formalization of relations without significant developments on the Palestinian front.

Policy Recommendations

It is clear that there is ongoing security cooperation between Israel and important countries in the region. There is a need to deepen and widen such cooperation, especially between Israel and Sunni Arab states. This should be done in a way that benefits all parties involved and strengthens mutual security.

There is also a need to strengthen Israeli relations with both Egypt and Jordan, states with which Israel has signed peace treaties. This includes relations on the official governmental level as well as between civil societies, in order to fully realize the political and economic potential relations between these nations.

However, the Palestinian issue will continue to be an obstacle to full normalization between Israel and its neighbors. Only a substantial development toward a solution, ideally through direct

negotiations, will pave the way for an all-encompassing and profound co-existence between Israel and the Arab world.

The United States has been a crucial actor in the Middle East and can continue to play an important role in increasing stability and prosperity in the region. A potential disengagement by the United States would only fuel regional instability and conflict. To that end, the United States should build a long-term strategy to preserve its power in the region and work with its allies to preserve mutual interests. For example, the United States can play a significant role in bringing together Sunni Arab states—specifically the Gulf states—and Israel to strengthen relations in a comprehensive way and to address common challenges and mutual interests. In parallel, the United States should ensure that countries in the region do not use their nuclear energy programs as a pretext for establishing nuclear weapons programs. This is a major concern for Israel and has the potential to risk if not ruin the cooperation between Israel and its neighbors.

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¹ The agreement was initially for Israel to provide 50 million cubic meters annually to Jordan, but this maximum amount was doubled in 2016.