

FSD - AN ISRAELI PERSPECTIVE

Germany-Israel Strategic Forum, December 2, 2020

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

This year's Germany-Israel Strategic Forum is held in light of two very significant developments – the election of a new administration in the U.S. and the breakthrough towards Arab-Israeli normalization. These developments are likely to have a major impact on the region in the coming years.

Israel's recent normalization agreements with the UAE and Bahrain (later followed by Sudan) are very different than Israel's previous peace agreements with Egypt (1982) and Jordan (1994). The previous agreements essentially formalized non-belligerency between neighboring countries with a bitter history of wars and disputes, but never led to the full normalization they were supposed to and remained "cold peace." Now, Arab countries who have no border and no direct dispute with Israel are leaping directly to full normalization, not only between governments but also between peoples.

Why did the UAE decide to step forward and normalize relations with Israel? The official Emirati explanation highlights its desire to stop an Israeli move to applying Israeli sovereignty in the West Bank. However, this desire was only the immediate trigger. The deeper reasons are to be found in several seismic undercurrents coming together and surfacing.

The region is plagued by daunting geopolitical and socio-economic challenges resulting in inherent instability, multiple failed or failing states and acute socio-economic crises – all further exacerbated by COVID-19. It has just experienced a decade of extreme, violent upheavals (what started as the so-called Arab Spring), continues to grapple with the ideological and practical challenge of jihadism (despite the territorial defeat of ISIS), and above all feels seriously threatened by Iranian and now increasingly Turkish hegemonic ambitions.

Against this background Israel is increasingly viewed as a potent actor holding the potential to make a real contribution to the region's stability and well-being, and wielding considerable influence in Washington. In recent years, the major Sunni Arab countries and Israel have been developing close, below-the-radar cooperation, mostly but not exclusively on security. Israel's determined push-back against Iran in Syria no doubt added value in the eyes of relevant Arab actors to cooperating with Israel.

In recent years, this attitude has gathered steam in the region, though anti-Israel sentiments are still widespread in it. Informing this line of thought is a broad regional perception that the United States is in a historic mode of retreating from the region because the region is less important to it. There is also growing regional criticism on the Palestinian leadership (as recently expressed by Prince Bandar Bin Sultan) for running a corrupt enterprise, being ungrateful to the Arabs and repeatedly missing opportunities to advance a peaceful solution to the conflict. More and more Arab states refuse to grant the Palestinians a veto power over their decisions on developing relations with Israel in support of their own national security interests.

The trajectory of Arab-Israeli normalization is likely to continue in the Biden era because it represents the self-interest of regional actors. The Biden administration will support and encourage it, though it may not push for it as hard as the outgoing U.S. administration. It is also reasonable to expect that some of those regional actors who will follow the UAE may not go all the way to full normalization but take partial measures in that direction.

Israeli-Arab normalization could well translate into a regional strategic agenda, given converging threat perceptions about the Iranian-led axis (including shared concerns regarding a possible re-entry of the Biden administration to the JCPOA on its original terms), Turkey's regional ambitions and political and jihadi Islamists (including shared concerns lest the Biden administration follows the Obama administration in viewing it as part of the solution).

The Biden administration is not expected to give the Israeli-Palestinian conflict a high priority and will likely avoid launching a peace plan or focusing on Israeli-Palestinian negotiations at an early phase of its tenure. It will however focus its attention on keeping the window open to a future two-state solution, including taking the issue of annexation off the table, opposing settlement expansion and shoving the Trump peace plan. In this context, it might examine ways of using Israeli-Arab normalization to open space for future Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking by encouraging the Arabs to play a bigger role in it.

Europe should be part of all of this, not only an observer or bystander. It should align itself with the new and emerging realities in the region, play a role in fostering Israeli-Arab normalization for the sake of improving the regional stability and well-being, and view it as an opportunity to build bridges to improve Israeli-Palestinian relations and chances for peace. The expected revival of trans-Atlantic close cooperation in the Biden era affords it the opportunity to play such a role.