

Continued from page 1

Trump's Plan for Middle East Peace Could Actually Work

The Trump administration's big idea is reportedly that Sunni-majority Arab countries could form a NATO-like alliance.



This grouping could then have a less formal but still highly cooperative relationship with Turkey. And, most importantly, it could engage in meaningful coordination and cooperation with Israel to form a united regional bloc against additional Iranian mischief and pursuit of hegemony.

A new strategic affiliation between the Arabs and Israel one that offered the latter new regional legitimacy, recognition, and a key role in a united front against its mortal enemy, Iran would be meant to provide Israel new incentive to come to terms with an independent Palestinian state. The Palestinians, in turn, would be provided by Israel and Arab nations with political cover, diplomatic support, and economic aid to help make the necessary compromises for a final peace deal.

In theory, this is a great idea. It's the only approach that anyone has posited in many years that might break the deadlock, potentially offering a win-win-win scenario for Israel, the Palestinians, and the Arab states. And there is evidence that Israel, some key Arab countries, and the Palestinians might be open to such a dynamic if it can ever get off the ground.

But would-be peacemakers should not be preparing for their photo on the White House lawn just yet. The diplomatic and political obstacles in the region remain at least as daunting as the gains are enticing.

The key challenge is who will go or perhaps blink first. Israel already has peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan, so the crucial players on the Arab side are Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and any other Arab countries they can bring along. The most promising development is a draft "discussion paper" being circulated by Saudi Arabia and the UAE that describes a range of confidence-building measures between Israel and the Arab countries. These would involve gestures such as telecommunications and commercial and overflight relations with Israel in exchange for Israeli moves toward the Palestinians, such as restricting settlement activities or easing the blockade on Gaza.

The mainstream Arab position is still characterized by the "Arab Peace Initiative," introduced by Saudi Arabia and unanimously adopted by the Arab League in 2002 and reconfirmed twice since then. It essentially promises Israel fully normalized diplomatic and trade relations with the Arab countries once they reach an agreement with the Palestinians. Israel has dismissed the proposal from its outset. Saudi Arabia and the UAE are now signaling they are prepared to improve relations with Israel beyond the terms set by the initiative. Israel would be wise to recognize that the price for strategic cooperation with Arab countries and regional recognition of its de facto legitimacy have never been lower.

Israeli leaders might be tempted to believe that if they wait longer, the concessions required of them will drop still further still. That would be a mistake. The cost of normalized diplomatic ties is never going to be zero. These countries are constrained by both their long-standing diplomatic and political positions, genuine values, and honest assessment of the destabilizing political impact of the ongoing occupation that began in 1967 (and hence entering its 50th year with no end in sight).

In the past, major movement between Israel and Arab countries would have required a final status agreement between Israel and the Palestinians. For a number of reasons, particularly mutual alarm about Iran, that's no longer the case. What's required is progress that can breathe new life into the long-term prospects for a two-state solution. The more steps Israel takes, the more the Arab countries can do in return. Under current circumstances, the best-case scenario is probably some sort of interim accord that maintains Israel's overall security control, while also limiting Israeli settlement activity and other aspects of the occupation and expanding Palestinian prerogatives and areas of authority. Trump seems to realize that this sort of partial agreement is the most that can be secured, which is probably why he doesn't bring up the two-state solution or Palestinian independence. If he's really shooting for

an interim agreement which would actually be the first major progress since 1993 and hence no mean feat calling it "peace" would be consistent with his "truthful hyperbole" style of branding by exaggeration.

For the Arab countries, such an agreement is hardly ideal, but it would surely be enough to allow for greater cooperation with Israel. Even the revival of the process itself, short of an interim agreement, might allow for some significant steps. For Palestinians, the prospect is more painful but the choice is also starker.

None of this is what Palestinians want, which is an independent state in place of the occupation. Moreover, the prospect of an interim agreement presents them with a dreadful but familiar choice. This is completely understandable: 50 years of occupation and 24 years of Oslo, both of which were supposed to be temporary, feel extremely permanent. Yet as so often in the past, Palestinians may be presented with a very small and highly unsatisfactory set of limited gains, all of which come with a concomitant price. Or they can reject whatever is presented to them, and enjoy what they essentially have now, which amounts to nothing.

This is an infuriating conundrum. But it only has one rational answer, which is a grudging and resentful yes. Palestinians will be forced to compare the prospect of a deal with the situation they were in a few months ago. In recent years, they found themselves isolated, ignored, and deeply concerned that their issue had been discarded, not only by the international community but even by the Arab world. Now, suddenly, with Trump, they are back in the limelight, on the agenda and in the game.

For Abbas and his secular nationalist allies, this is all a political godsend. It not only revives their hopes that their diplomatic strategy can achieve tangible results, it also reaffirms their role on the international and regional stage. All that adds to the incentive to say yes despite all the obvious reservations. Shifting Israel might be more difficult. Netanyahu has expressed enthusiasm for stronger ties to Arab countries but he's notoriously skeptical about a broader agreement with Palestinians. Left on his own, the prospect of stronger ties with Saudi Arabia and the UAE might entice him to make concessions. But some of his coalition partners, particularly Naftali Bennett of the ultra-right-wing Jewish Home Party, are waiting to pounce on any moves he makes toward the Palestinians. Bennett's long-term prospects depend on challenging Netanyahu from his right, largely by denouncing him as compromising Israel's ambitions and security in the occupied territories. Netanyahu's strategy for preventing this has been to keep Bennett close within the cabinet but if he wants to move in the direction in which Trump is nudging him, he would have to allow Bennett to leave the coalition in favor of center and center-left groups. The profoundly risk-averse Netanyahu might soon find himself with the unenviable choice of defying an American president who he hoped would be his strongest ally, or risk being outflanked on the right by powerful rivals.

This Israeli conundrum goes to the heart of why there is such an impasse in the peace process and why the "outside-in" approach could work.

Under current circumstances, most Israelis feel little pain from the status quo, and Palestinians lack any form of leverage to get them to consider compromising. It therefore seems a no-brainer for most Jewish Israelis and their politicians to take no risks politically or in terms of national security. Bringing in the Arab and regional component reminds Israelis of the broader context — including the threat from Iran and the myriad benefits that would come from greater cooperation with and recognition from the Arab world.

Perhaps the biggest challenge, though, amounts to a chicken-and-egg question: Which shall come first? Is Israel going to move into a serious process with the Palestinians, in hopes of stronger ties with the Arabs? Or will Arab countries start building more open and robust cooperation with Israel in hopes that the Israelis will be more cooperative on peace? Neither side is likely to move on spec.

Here's where the Trump factor becomes potentially decisive. Washington could push both sides together, but it would involve some very heavy lifting. It would probably require both carrots and sticks for the Israelis, which could come at a political price at home, especially among Republicans. And to move the Arab states, the United States would probably have to demonstrate some real progress in rolling back Iran's influence in countries like Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Lebanon. It's highly questionable if this is consistent with either Trump's "America First" agenda, or the widespread aversion among Americans to getting sucked into additional Middle Eastern imbrlios.

TV Series Depicts Israel-Palestinian Conflict

Television Drama Puts Human Faces on Israeli-Palestinian Conflict in both Hebrew and Arabic.



TEL AVIV - Hisham Suleiman now hears calls of "Abu Ahmad" when walking down the street a sign of the popularity of a television drama that dares to present a complex view of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The show "Fauda," or chaos in Arabic, sees Arab Israeli actor Suleiman portray Abu Ahmad, a Hamas militant being pursued by an Israeli undercover unit.

Its first season captivated viewers by showing the more human aspects of characters often portrayed in black and white, while at the same time keeping them on edge with tense storylines.

It is the first Israeli television show in both Hebrew and Arabic.

A second season is now in preparation, and Netflix has also picked it up, with the first season available with English subtitles and dubbing.

Avi Issacharoff, co-creator of the show and who for years covered the Palestinian territories as a journalist, said: "We tried to show both sides of the story."

The series follows Doron, a retired member of the undercover Israeli unit who breaks with the peaceful family life he had transitioned into and rejoins the fight at the request of his former chief.

Suleiman's character -- the member of the Palestinian Islamist movement -- is behind a series of suicide attacks that killed more than 100 Israelis.

Doron thought he had killed him, but it turns out he is still alive, so the former agent returns to finish the job.

The 12 episodes of the first season depict the pursuit that follows, with the story portrayed in meticulously constructed scenes reflective of the daily lives of Israelis and Palestinians. That includes pervasive security constraints, attacks and nighttime raids by the Israeli army in Palestinian territory.

- 'Honest and nuanced' -

Two-thirds of the show is in Arabic, with the characters played by Jewish and Arab Israelis. In 2016, it won six Ophir prizes awarded by the Israeli Academy of Film and Television, including best dramatic series.

It has also gained fans globally both due to its availability on Netflix and its appearance at international festivals.

Issacharoff said it was difficult at first to garner interest in the show.

While "Fauda" was written for an Israeli audience and Hamas can be seen as the "bad guys", all characters are portrayed with a rare complexity.

"The way in which the screenwriters have illustrated the conflict is very fair, honest and nuanced," said Einav Schiff, television critic for Israeli paper Yediot Aharonot.

In one episode, Amal, a young Palestinian woman whose fiance was killed at their wedding ceremony by a member of the Israeli undercover unit, decides to take revenge.

She brings a bomb in an Israeli bar where the girlfriend of one of the Israeli agents works.

Inside the bar, while holding the bag with the bomb inside, Amal hesitates, her eyes darting, seemingly staggered by the kindness of the waitress, the agent's girlfriend, who asks if something is wrong. A harrowing scene then follows.

Suleiman, who comes from the northern Israeli city of Nazareth and, like many Arab Israelis, sees himself as a Palestinian, said he appreciated that the show's creators allowed him to play a Hamas member more complex than the typical "violent and macho" portrayal.

He says he has been inundated with messages from fans from a range of backgrounds.

"Jews, Christian and Muslim Arabs, people from the left and right, even settlers from Kiryat Arba," he said, referring to a hardline Israeli settlement in the occupied West Bank.

Suleiman says that the show's blurring of lines is another sign that the conflict may not be as intractable as it seems.

Tunisia Seeks to Add Djerba to World Heritage List

Tunisian Culture Minister Says his Country Seeks UNESCO Status for Jewish Pilgrimage Isle which is Site of Africa's Oldest Synagogue.

TUNIS - Tunisia plans to seek UNESCO World Heritage status for the island of Djerba, site of Africa's oldest synagogue and an annual Jewish pilgrimage, its culture minister said.

Speaking on the last day of the pilgrimage to the Ghriba synagogue, Mohamed Zine El-Abidine said the island was important for its "cultural and religious uniqueness".

He said the application to add Djerba to the World Heritage List would highlight the rich religious heritage of the island, which is home to centuries-old mosques, churches and synagogues.

The cultural agency of the United Nations already lists eight sites in the North African country, including the old cities of Tunis and Sousse and the city of Carthage, once the capital of the Mediterranean-wide Phoenician empire based in Lebanon.



Some 3,000 pilgrims attended this year's Jewish pilgrimage to the island, under tight security following a string of jihadist attacks in Tunisia. "There has been a real increase compared to the past two years," Tourism Minister Selma Elloumi said.

The number of pilgrims visiting the synagogue has fallen sharply since a suicide bombing claimed by Al-Qaeda struck Ghriba just before the 2002 pilgrimage, killing 21 people.

Before then the event attracted as many as 8,000 pilgrims a year.

Believed to have been founded in 586 BC by Jews fleeing the destruction of the Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem, the Ghriba synagogue has long been a destination for pilgrims, especially for Jews of Tunisian descent.

Around 1,500 Jews live in Tunisia today, down from an estimated 100,000 before the country won independence from France in 1956. Many of today's pilgrims went to Europe, the United States and Israel.

Prime Minister Youssef Chahed was in Ghriba and delivered what he called "a double message", Tunisia is a country several thousand years old, with a deep-rooted history of openness to all religions," he said.

Secondly, he said, "security has come back to Tunisia".

Rocked by instability since the fall in 2011 of longtime dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, Tunisia was hit by a series of jihadist attacks in 2015 and 2016 that left dozens dead, including 59 tourists.

The country's key tourism sector, devastated by the attacks, has since registered a rise in visitor numbers.

According to Elloumi, there has been a 34 percent rise in tourist arrivals from Europe over the past year.

To Advertise: email us

info@An-NourNews.com

or call us :

770-608-3343