

Strategic ASSESSMENT

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Strategic ASSESSMENT

The purpose of *Strategic Assessment* is to stimulate and enrich the public debate on issues that are, or should be, on Israel's national security agenda.

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The Return of “One State”: How “One State for Two Peoples” is Taking Root in the Palestinian Arena

Michael Milstein and Avi Issacharoff

The concept of “one state” has existed in Palestinian thought alongside the “two-state vision” since the first days of the conflict with the Zionist movement. When the Palestinian Authority was established, the idea of one state was pushed aside, although it had been rooted in the Palestinian establishment for many decades (mainly in the “Palestinian democratic state” objective). However, in view of the multi-faceted crises besetting the Palestinian system in recent years, and at their heart an understanding of the difficulty of realizing the two-state vision, there has been a revival of the idea of one state. Unlike the past, when this debate was limited to an elite and fed by ideological and political considerations, today these matters are widely discussed, driven by practical and materialistic considerations – the desire for a stable life. Unplanned and unintentionally, the two-state vision is gradually moving toward a one-state reality, in which the inherent tensions between the two peoples stand to become more extreme and volatile.

Keywords: Israel, Palestinian Authority, Israeli-Palestinian agreement, political process, two-state vision

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"You and I will say, 'It'll never happen, they'll come to their senses'...but how long can you live with the status quo? We're going to wake up one day and it's going to be effectively one state. It's like [a scene from the movie] *Thelma and Louise*. You're going down the highway and life is great. But there's a cliff."¹ These words of Dan Kurtzer, a seasoned American diplomat and former US ambassador to Israel and to Egypt, illustrate to a large extent the fundamental gap in the Israeli attempt to understand the challenges developing from the Palestinian arena. Most political and security elements in Israel operate at a fast rate. They are driven by the memory of past precedents (mainly the most traumatic ones) and focus on tracking ongoing developments, particularly in the political and military spheres. As a result, they are consistently poised to confront dramas such as waves of terror, popular uprisings, and chaos. However, the challenges that actually have the greatest effect on reality often develop in deep undercurrents and at a fairly low speed.

The Idea of One State

The one-state scenario – in other words, one political entity in the entire territory between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea – is an example of a challenge that is hard to identify and interpret. The idea is not new, and has been around since the start of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In fact, for decades it has co-existed with the two-state vision, and at times was even the dominant idea, particularly in Palestinian circles. Moreover, this is not a monolithic idea, rather a broad and sometimes even polarized array of interpretations of what appears to be one concept. Among both Palestinians and Israelis the dominant interpretation stresses the uniqueness and hegemony of one group, and the suppression of the other to second class status (for example, the Hamas goal of establishing one Palestinian state with an Islamic character; the goal of Palestinian elements in the nationalist movement and the left wing movement to establish an Arab Palestinian state; or on the other hand, the desire of right wing elements in Israel to establish one state with a clear Jewish majority and character). The second interpretation of the term, which emphasizes partnership between the two peoples, has always had a much more limited appeal on both sides of the dividing line. In this context, the bi-national or federation model is most prominent.

In Israel, discussion of the one-state idea has been widespread among politicians and the public over the past decade, accompanied by some

serious thought about the character of such a future state. Left wing and centrist elements in Israeli politics regularly caution that one state may be a consequence of failure to advance the political process and generate serious ramifications, above all the loss of the Jewish majority. In contrast, it is described by many on the right as a welcome opportunity to promote Israel's national objectives. However, the Israeli debate consistently ignores the question of how the one-state solution is analyzed on the Palestinian side.

Among the Palestinians in recent years there has been growing interest in, discussion of, and to a large extent support for the idea of one state. The idea has gradually moved from the fringes of the debate to the center, accompanied by more serious collective examination than in the past. However, in many ways the current interpretation of the idea by the Palestinians departs significantly from the previous concept. First, the idea was formerly championed by a limited group of political and intellectual elites, contrary to the current situation in which it is gaining support among the general public (distinct from the current Palestinian leadership, which is still demonstrating a reserved approach to the subject). Second, past promotion of the idea was driven by ideological and strategic considerations, while today it rests largely on practical-material considerations, mainly the desire to preserve or improve the lives of the individual and the Palestinian collective. Third, the Palestinians previously defined the one-state idea in the framework of their hegemony over the entity (largely in the context of "one Palestinian democratic state"), while today there is significant readiness among many to be annexed to the State of Israel and to live – at least in the short term – under Jewish hegemony.

The growing support for the one-state concept among Palestinians is accompanied by a change in the nature of the struggle against Israel and with Israel: they are no longer satisfied with the demand to realize national rights and political independence, and now seek the implementation of civil rights and individual rights. Another new feature of the current struggle linked to the idea of one state is the growing connection between Palestinians on the West Bank and the Arab sector in Israel. The demand by Arabs in Israel for equality and full civil rights is accompanied by a growing aspiration to change the state's character, and at the margins there is even a call to implement the one-state objective throughout the territory of "historical Palestine" – an objective that could potentially become the axis of cooperation between Palestinians on both sides of the Green Line.

The change in the Palestinian attitude on the idea of one state derives from a combination of trends at the strategic level and developments at the social, economic, and cultural levels. At the strategic level there is a collective sense that the Palestinian national movement is currently at an all-time low, in view of several processes: the deep freeze in the political process as establishment of an independent state appears an increasingly remote possibility; the internal split between the governments in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, which threatens the formation of a united Palestinian entity in the future; the growing alienation between the public and the two Palestinian leaderships, and the lack of public belief in their ability to achieve the goal of independence; the sidelining of the Palestinian issue from the focus of the regional and international agenda, due to preoccupation with matters perceived to be more important; and the severe crisis in relations between the Palestinians and the current United States administration. Consequently, there is a growing argument in the Palestinian discourse that all the strategies for realizing national objectives, and above all political negotiations, have been tried and failed. The talks were supposed to realize the vision of two states and the establishment of an independent Palestinian state within the 1967 borders – an objective that most Palestinians feel has dissipated over the years. Moreover, the common assumption among Palestinians today is that Israel does not intend to implement the two-state vision, and is actually working toward gradually and quietly absorbing the territories, and particularly the West Bank.

Along with despair over the two-state vision, the growing support for the idea of one state is fed by internal trends, representing a gradual change in the image of Palestinian society. Above all, there is the collective desire to retain a relatively stable standard of living (this stability has been particularly evident in the West Bank over the past decade); a widespread trend in many segments of the public toward de-ideologization and depoliticization, reflecting exhaustion after many years of violent conflict driven by revolutionary fighting slogans, which ultimately failed to achieve any Palestinian national objectives; the lessons from the severe decline that engulfed Arab societies in the region following the Arab Spring revolutions, and the fear of sharing this nadir; and the rise of the younger Palestinian generation, most of whom are concerned with personal fulfillment and development, and harbor suspicion and even alienation toward the sources of authority around them, including the Palestinian leadership. Collective interests have not disappeared entirely, but they are in the shadow of the

public attempt to examine an alternative to the two-state vision, which will provide a response to Palestinian national aspirations while securing material interests.

The Political Context

Deep disappointment with the two-state vision and calls to examine the one-state alternative have been part of the political process from the start. In the second half of the 1990s these views were already expressed by leading Palestinian intellectuals and political and media figures. They dismissed the Oslo process as a failure and even as a threat to Palestinian national objectives, and called for the adoption of the one-state goal. It was argued that the Oslo process provided Israel with a fig leaf while it entrenched its control over the territories (particularly through the expansion of settlements and the Judaization of Jerusalem), and that it would not end with the establishment of an independent Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital, far less the return of refugees. At the focus of the criticism was the claim that the Oslo process perpetuated a reality of cantons or bantustans (the term for the quasi-homelands for black inhabitants set up by the apartheid regime in South Africa). In this framework it was alleged that the Palestinians were being enclosed in “reservations” created for them by Israel – a process that can deliver security calm together with an opportunity to gradually take over most of the territory of “historic Palestine.”

Supporters of the one-state idea claim that it would give the Palestinians a solution to their current problems, as well as strategic opportunities. According to this approach, one state would bring unity among all the elements in the Palestinian arena that has been fragmented for decades (the West Bank, Gaza Strip, East Jerusalem, and the Arab sector in Israel), and would eventually enable the full return of the refugees and Palestinian domination over the one state, as the demographic majority. Hussam Khader, a leader of the refugee sector in the West Bank and formerly one of the heads of Fatah in the Nablus area, claimed that the idea of one state, whether a state for all its citizens or a bi-national state, would create an opportunity for full realization of the return of the refugees – whereas within the framework of the Oslo process, prospects to realize this objective were highly limited.² Ali al-Jirbawi, formerly the Palestinian Authority Minister for Higher Education and Vice President of Bir Zeit University, insisted that he personally preferred the vision of two states, but when considering the choice between the emerging “state of cantons” and the idea of one state,

he was obliged to choose the latter alternative, although it was clear to him that it would be very difficult to achieve, particularly in view of the opposition of most of the Jewish public.³

The one-state idea has gained prominence in Palestinian political discourse over the last decade against a background of increasing despair over the possibility of achieving an independent state in view of the ongoing political crisis. This can be seen in the attitudes of senior officials of the Palestinian Authority who raised the subject – as a means of expressing their despair at the political stagnation, but often also as a threat to Israel of the “nightmare scenario” for both parties if the two-state vision fades. The Palestinians demonstrated their understanding of the deep-seated fears among the Jewish public of a change in the demographic balance that would endanger the Zionist enterprise and Israel’s ability to exist as a Jewish democratic state. In this context, the speech delivered by Abu Mazen at the UN General Assembly on September 20, 2017 was particularly striking. He warned that if the two-state dream were shattered, the Palestinians would demand “equal rights for all the residents of historic Palestine in the framework of one state.” He also claimed that “if the two state solution is destroyed by the creation of a situation where there is one state with two legal systems, apartheid...neither you nor we will have any other choice but continuation of the struggle and a demand for equal rights for all Palestinians in historic Palestine...that is not a threat, but a warning deriving from the fact that Israeli policy is dangerously undermining the two-state solution.”⁴

The Social-Public Context

In contrast with the political level, where there are still reservations over the one-state idea, among the Palestinian public and particularly on the West Bank there seems to be growing interest in the idea. This trend does not reflect any enthusiasm or hopes for the future and lacks ideological depth or an orderly framework, but it chimes with a new desire for self-fulfillment, particularly among the younger generation. In the past, the Palestinians were more committed to self-sacrifice, patience, and putting the collective goal before individual interests. Circumstances today channel the public toward more practical, utilitarian ways of thinking, a rejection of ideas that seem unrealizable at present, and a focus on ways of improving the situation of both individuals and the group in the foreseeable future. All this

should be achieved without renouncing identity and national ambitions, but realizing them in a way that suits the current reality.

The trends described above are well reflected in Palestinian public opinion polls conducted in recent years. In September 2016, the Jerusalem Media & Communication Center (JMCC) surveyed about a thousand young people aged 15-29 in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. They were asked: what is the best way to bring about political change? Fifty-two percent replied that the best way was to be a good citizen, and above all to study and work hard; 20 percent thought that the best way was to join a local civilian social organization; 13 percent – to participate in demonstrations; 10 percent – to join a political party; and 5 percent said that the best way was to carry out individual attacks. The survey also found that 54.5 percent of the young people defined unemployment as the central problem facing Palestinians; 10.7 believed that political crises were the main problem; about 10 percent pointed to low wages; 6.7 percent pointed to travel restrictions imposed on the Palestinians; and 3.2 percent pointed to very strict and restrictive social and cultural codes.⁵ A survey by the AWRAD Institute (Arab World for Research and Development) illustrated the limited interest shown by the younger generation of Palestinians in political issues: 43 percent of participants could identify the founder of the PLO, while 73 percent could identify the founder of Facebook.⁶

Direct dialogue with the Palestinians, and in particular the younger generation, clearly shows the growing support for the one-state idea and the difference from attitudes to this idea in the past. Young people from all geographical areas and social sectors stated that material achievements and self-fulfillment were their main aspirations, no less than their continuing devotion to the realization of collective national objectives, which was sometimes equal to the former or even slightly greater. The most significant development in public Palestinian discourse on the one-state issue is shown by the clear understanding that implementation of this scenario in the current circumstances means annexation to Israel and acceptance of Israeli hegemony (at least in the first phase) – a scenario that many are prepared to accept in return for citizenship and full rights. The model for the Palestinians in the West Bank is the Arab sector in Israel, and their main desire is to acquire a blue Israeli ID card.⁷

The hold of the one-state idea on the Palestinian public also finds striking expression in opinion polls. Examination of the responses over the last two decades to the same question asked in the JMCC survey about the

degree of support for the two-state vision and the one-state idea reveals some interesting findings. In 2001, against the background of the al-Aqsa intifada (the "second intifada"), support for the two-state vision was in sharp retreat while support for the one-state idea climbed (to about 30 percent, the highest rate since the Oslo Accords were signed); over the next fifteen years and as hostilities with Israel ebbed, public support for two states grew stronger, while support for one state fell (10-15 percent). However, in recent years, as the crisis in the political process deepened, there was a return to the situation of twenty years earlier – less support for two states and more support for one state; an unprecedented low in public support for two states was recorded in September 2018, when 37.5 percent of respondents were in favor, while the idea of one state gained 30.3 percent support (similar to the level of support in 2001). On the West Bank the change was particularly strong, with support for two states standing at 37.1 percent (compared to 48 percent in February 2017), while support for one state was 31 percent (compared to 20.3 percent in February 2017).⁸

Similar findings emerged from the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PCPSR). The PCPSR surveys from the mid 1990s show that 80 percent of respondents supported the two-state goal, while 5 percent supported one state. By 2005, this ratio had shrunk to 70:20, and in 2015 it reached 50:30. This trend is particularly striking in a series of surveys over the last decade: in June 2008, 58 percent supported two states and 27 percent supported one state; in May 2009, the figures were 61 percent and 23 percent, respectively; in March 2010, 57 percent supported two states and 29 percent supported one state; by September 2016, 30.6 percent expressed support for the one-state idea; in August 2017, the two-state vision was supported by 53 percent and the one-state idea or annexation by Israel was supported by 21 percent; by January 2018 support for two states stood at 46 percent while 27 percent supported one state or annexation by Israel. In addition, all the surveys conducted by the Center since early 2015 until now indicate that a majority of about 60 percent of respondents believe that the vision of two states is not practical, particularly in view of the Jewish settlement project in the West Bank.⁹ Thus it is clear that support for one state derives largely from the ongoing decline in the Palestinian public's faith in the hope for the two-state vision.

The growing public support for one state lacks an orderly framework to translate the existing energies into a political movement, replacing longings of the heart with practical steps. Indeed, organizational expression of public

support for the idea is very limited in the Palestinian system. Groups of public activists and thinkers who support the one-state solution have worked in recent years to establish an organizational framework for their activity, largely to recruit additional support among the public. Some of them maintain links with groups in Israel, mainly groups of intellectuals who share their support for the one-state idea. Prominent among these is the Popular Movement for One Democratic State on Historical Palestine, which was founded in May 2012 and has recruited tens of thousands of public activists, intellectuals, and academics, the vast majority also members of Fatah. The movement is headed by Radi al-Jara`i, who teaches political science at al-Quds University and was a prominent Fatah activist during the first intifada.

Uncharted and Inadvertent: How Will the One State be Realized?

Many researchers, intellectuals, and media figures in Israel have argued in recent years that one state is not a potential future scenario, but rather a reality that is already emerging with no official planning or announcement. Historian Matti Steinberg claimed that in view of the gradual decline of the two-state paradigm, the concept of a bi-national situation in one space is taking hold, and this could be the “precedent for a de jure arrangement of a binational constitutional reality.”¹⁰

Indeed, the situation on the West Bank to a great extent reflects a widening of the contact line between the two populations. The territorial space – and with it the demographic weight – of Israeli settlement in the West Bank is increasing steadily around both towns and villages and is almost contiguous with Palestinian territorial space. Moreover, Israeli and Palestinian civilian infrastructures and economic spaces are experiencing increasing merger processes, which highlights the West Bank’s almost complete dependence on Israel, for example, regarding utilities (electricity and water, in particular), the importance of Israel’s tax rebates for the Palestinian Authority budget, Palestinian dependence on Israel in imports and exports, and the growing number of Palestinian workers employed in Israel and in West Bank settlements. All this is in addition

A one-state scenario will likely not be realized at one clear point in time, and also apparently not by virtue of an orderly decision, but out of the dynamics of becoming, an unconscious and unplanned “awakening” that in fact is already underway among both peoples.

to the complete dependence of West Bank Palestinians on Israel for all aspects of traffic within and to and from the area.

A one-state scenario will likely not be realized at one clear point in time, and also apparently not by virtue of an orderly decision, but out of the dynamics of becoming, an unconscious and unplanned "awakening" that in fact is already underway among both peoples. On the way to official establishment of the one state there will presumably be a number of important stations. The first could be the weakening of the central Palestinian government and the development of a fragile "state of cantons," instead of what should have been the basis of an independent Palestinian state. This stage could materialize, for example, following the departure of Abu Mazen from the political arena, leading to a situation of confusion, instability, and leadership struggles. The next stage could be the official Israeli annexation of all or part of the West Bank (such as Area C), which would blur the borders between the two entities and lead to the granting of partial or full residency or citizenship to Palestinians in the area. The third stage would probably be some form of apartheid, in view of Israel's basic unwillingness to "absorb" three million West Bank Palestinians as citizens with equal rights. Even now the Palestinians express the fear that the one-state reality (as distinct from an official one state) would mean the continuation of Israeli rule over the Palestinians by other means. Palestinian researcher Ra'if Zureiq maintains in this context that one state does not mean the end of the struggle and the resolution of Palestinian problems, since it is likely that Jewish hegemony would be retained ("a master-slave relationship"), and the Palestinians would be obliged to promote a broad-based demand for civil rights, while enlisting international support.¹¹

However, strong internal tension in Israel, plus the internal Palestinian struggle together with heavy external pressure on Israel from the international arena, could ultimately lead to the fourth and last station – the official declaration of one state, in which all residents would be citizens with equal rights. This would probably be the start of a new historical chapter, which would not necessarily obliterate the tensions and hostility of the past, but might in fact reinforce them.

A Look to the Future

With each day that the current situation continues, Israel and the Palestinians are moving toward translating the one-state idea into a reality. This trend is driven by despair, adjustment, loss of faith in other strategic options,

and a tendency of both sides to prefer nurturing the idea of here and now over continuation of the exhausting struggle and the ideologies of the past. This is particularly striking among the Palestinians, who seem to be moving toward the one-state situation due to a practical approach lacking any ideological dimension.

Nevertheless, the realization of one state is not expected to mark the end of the road, and certainly not of the struggle, but rather to signal the beginning of a new conflict, this time in the spirit of "balkanization," after the contact between the peoples has increased at all levels: institutional-governmental, economic, geographic, and demographic. At the same time, the idea of one state is not a determinist scenario, and there are still many difficulties and obstacles on the way to its possible realization – yet also possible exits that could develop from an understanding of the destructive future facing both people. Furthermore, a large portion of the Israeli and Palestinian publics are still opposed to the idea of one state, because of their wish to maintain national exclusivity. The Jews fear anything that undermines the Jewish character of Israel, and many Palestinians are aware that they will not be accepted as equal citizens by Israel and therefore want to establish a state with a clear Palestinian majority. The idea also encounters reservations among the international community, which continues to give overwhelming support to the vision of two states as the main formula for resolving the conflict. In general, therefore, the discourse around one state is accompanied by passivity and fear more than by a feeling of euphoria and hope.

In recent years Israel has shown greater awareness of the fragility of the Palestinian system and the possibility of internal developments within it that will quickly and extensively impact on the situation within Israel. The main concern in this context refers to immediate threats such as violent conflict, a third intifada, or the rapid breakup of the Palestinian Authority, accompanied by internal chaos and waves of terror. Yet it is possible that the real threat does not lie in the "explosion" that Israel has warned of for several years and that has yet to materialize, but rather in the quiet daily creep of the creation of a new and unfamiliar one-state reality. This is the deceptive calm that creates the illusion of being able to continue the existing arrangement for a long time, based on maintaining material stability. Ultimately, in the next few years this quiet process will lead to a situation where both peoples face a complex reality that they may have envisaged in general terms, but have never imagined in a concrete way.

Not only will this situation change the basic strategic conditions in which Israel operates, but it will also force it to conduct a profound debate about its nature and future as a Jewish and democratic state, and may even oblige it to change its basic characteristics.

This conclusion requires Israel to think deeply about the strategic options available to it in the Palestinian context in general, and in the West Bank in particular. The current reality is not likely to continue for any length of time, and stands to be challenged by possible changes in the Palestinian system (for example, consequences of the day after Abu Mazen) or in Israel (for example, implications of economic shockwaves in Israel for the Palestinian economy). Against this background, it is imperative that Israel weigh the range of strategic alternatives before it: from a coordinated arrangement between the sides – a preferred alternative for the sides, which is difficult to implement at this time – to a unilateral move in the West Bank. Above all, the central strategic purpose of any alternative that is chosen should be the prevention of the slide into the one-state scenario.

Notes

- 1 David M. Halbfinger, "As a 2-State Solution Loses Steam, a 1-State Plan Gains Traction," *New York Times*, January 5, 2018.
- 2 Hussam Khader, "From al-Nakba to the One-State Solution," *Haq al-Awda* (Bethlehem), No. 17, May 2006.
- 3 Ali al-Jirbawi, "The Palestinian Impasse and the Only Way to Get Out of It," *al-Darasat al-Falastiniyya*, No. 58 (Spring 2004): 9-10.
- 4 Palestinian Television, September 20, 2017.
- 5 Survey no. 88, p. 24. The survey can be found on the Institute's website: www.jmcc.org.
- 6 The survey can be found on the Institute's website: www.awrad.org.
- 7 See the impressions of this kind that emerged from meetings held by Avi Issacharoff in the town of Sa'ir in Mount Hebron (*Walla! News*, March 7, 2016), and in the Jenin refugee camp (*Walla! News*, January 15, 2016).
- 8 See all the surveys on the Center's website: www.jmcc.org.
- 9 See the Center's surveys over the years on its website: www.pcpsr.org.
- 10 Matti Steinberg, "How the Palestinians Perceive and Accept the Idea of One State," lecture at the Tami Steinmetz Center for Peace Research, April 17, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dSXelPgW6U>.
- 11 Ra'if Zureiq, "The One-State Solution: From Struggle till Death to the Dialectic of Master and Slave," *al-Darasat al-Filastiniyya*, No. 86 (Spring 2011): 128-42.

The Internal Palestinian Split: Thinking Differently about the Conflict with Israel

Yohanan Tzoreff

The years 1987-2000, from the start of the first intifada to just before the second intifada, were the formative period that shaped the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as we know it today – a dispute over borders rather than an existential conflict, with a significant religious but not necessarily hegemonic dimension. An analysis of relations between Fatah and Hamas during those years reveals a struggle that challenged Hamas and sometimes even forced it to accept a status inferior to that of Fatah. An examination of their discourse and how each side dealt with mutual allegations shows a link between the friction within the Palestinian arena and the processes of pragmatism, and even a kind of acceptance of the reality. In the context of this internal Palestinian friction, Israel was and remains a central player, with influence on the outcome of the competition between these two organizations.

Keywords: Palestinians, Fatah, Hamas, political split, Israel, pragmatism

The conflict with Israel has shaped Palestinian society for over 100 years. The conflict was the basis of solidarity and an internal way of life that developed among various sectors, and the source of the ethos that shaped this society as a national entity. Yet even while the narrative that has been transmitted from generation to generation continues to unify all elements of Palestinian society, it has fractured, as the discourse on maintaining national principles and loyalty to the chosen path collides with pragmatic positions that recognize the limits of these principles. Although Palestinian history has known disputes, crises, and enmities since before the arrival of the

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Zionist movement, it seems that the constant friction with Israel since the start of Zionist immigration to the country (early in the twentieth century) has intensified the challenge that Palestinians have had to confront, and created numerous tensions within Palestinian society. It finds itself partly surprised, partly helpless in the face of Zionist initiative and activity, and is hard pressed to identify common denominators for uniting the public around a shared goal. As time passes, the challenge grows and the internal disputes become harsher and more difficult to address.

These internal Palestinian rivalries have undermined societal strength and considerably weakened the opposition to the Jewish presence. It was only the rise of the Fatah movement and its takeover of the PLO (1968) – which until then was controlled by Arab countries – that for the first time provided the Palestinians with one address. The slogan “PLO – the sole representative of the Palestinian people” was not easy to accomplish,¹ but was a huge achievement in the eyes of many Palestinians. It expressed not only a change in the pattern of the struggle against Israel, but also a sense of a common goal and internal solidarity, which until then was perceived as an unattainable objective.

Fatah as an agent of change has over the years enjoyed the status of the first among equals or a firstborn: nobody questioned its hegemony and most of the public identified with its national objectives. The reality in which there is an alternative Palestinian entity, Hamas, has challenged Fatah and its ruling status. This reality has split the Palestinian people, sharpening the differences between the camps and blurring the clan-local dimension that was more dominant in the past. Until 1987 there was nobody to challenge the hegemony of Fatah, which was perceived as the expression of the pan-Palestinian voice. The challenge posed by Hamas to Fatah also undermined the exclusivity of the PLO as the representative of the Palestinian people and presented an alternative to its hegemony. The Hamas victory in the 2006 elections revealed the almost equal status of these two organizations among the public, something that couldn't be quantified in the 1987-2000 years.²

The internal Palestinian split along the lines that have become familiar since 1987 and the friction it creates between the two camps has generated changes in the positions of the parties regarding the conflict with Israel and the motivation to continue the struggle. The split is stronger than the direct friction with Israel because of the internal weakness that it exposes between the parties and the growing recognition in recent years,

particularly in Hamas, of its inability to resolve the Palestinian problem without cooperating with its rival.³ Therefore, the call for reconciliation and unity is directed at both organizations from all parts of society.

The Split: A Kind of Nationalism?

“Since when is division a kind of nationalism?” cried a Hamas poster on August 18, 1988, a few days after King Hussein announced that Jordan would disengage from the West Bank.⁴ The writers of the poster saw the Jordanian move as an action that damaged Arab unity and left the Palestinians alone to face Israel.⁵

In the first months of the intifada, Hamas already assessed that for the nationalist movement, the purpose was not to free Palestine from the river to the sea, as was generally thought before then, but to establish a Palestinian state alongside Israel.⁶ Meanwhile the Unified National Command of the Intifada (UNC), which included all the PLO factions, issued a proclamation on August 5, 1988, praising the Jordanian disengagement from the West Bank as a highly important achievement of the “great popular uprising,” which would strengthen the status of the PLO as the sole representative of the Palestinian people.⁷ One month later (September 6, 1988), the UNC criticized Hamas for its efforts to decide its own agenda and impose additional strike days on the public, which “broke ranks, damaged unity, and weakened the joint struggle.” This proclamation also called on Hamas to unite with “the fighting position.”⁸ Another proclamation published on November 20, 1988, a few days after the declaration of Palestinian independence, addressed Hamas from a patronizing position, saying: “The Command calls on a number of fundamentalist elements to put the national interest... of our people...before the foundations and the interests of their factions.”⁹

The truth is that the organizers of the intifada did not intend to split the Palestinian public. They were looking for a new way and an alternative to the Palestinian power that was lost in the dispersion caused by the 1982 Lebanon War, after the PLO was expelled from Lebanon. The Palestinian arena was left with a weak, scattered leadership, far from the center of events, and subject to harsh internal criticism due to the difficult Palestinian situation.¹⁰ Enter the intifada’s leaders, most of whom were graduates of Israeli prisons and academics with a nationalist political identity shaped by Fatah and the Popular Democratic Front who were looking for new and more effective ways to combat Israel.¹¹ Some had used their time in prison to study and acquire an education. They discovered the history of

the Zionist movement, which led them to recognize the importance of public opinion in Israel and its influence on the government's decision making process. They also learned about the importance of international relations, with the emphasis on the special symbiosis between the Israel and the United States, and of backing from the international community, which continued to demand that the Palestinians lay down their arms and answer Israeli calls for a peace agreement.

Nonetheless, the intifada became the start of the struggle for power between Fatah and Hamas, while ironically, the general population experienced a sense of exhilaration and optimism at the display of brotherhood and unity. The struggle intensified as the differences grew sharper and Hamas succeeded in strengthening its position as an alternative to the Fatah approach. Until then Fatah had represented the consensus. It defined itself as a national movement and refused to adopt any social, economic, or religious ideology. It wanted to be a home for every Palestinian.¹² Hamas, on the other hand, managed to persuade many people that there was a solid alternative, religious-nationalist in nature. In its writings and messages, Hamas stressed the fact that it was both Palestinian and Islamic, and was not deterred by criticism from its rivals in Fatah for not including the word Palestine in its name (Hamas is an acronym for Islamic Opposition Movement in Arabic), i.e., its main priority was not Palestine, but the Islamization of Palestinian society.

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The rivalry reached a new height with the Palestinian Declaration of Independence in Algeria (November 15, 1988), with its change of direction that for Hamas confirmed its concerns. The proclaimed goal was no longer the removal of Israel, a Palestinian state from the river to the sea, non-recognition of Israel, and "revolution until victory," but a state alongside Israel based on cooperation, good neighborliness, and normalization. In the Declaration of Independence, the Palestine National Council actually clarified that it accepted the partition plan that was rejected in 1947 and wanted to establish a state alongside Israel, explaining that it respected all the resolutions of the

UN Security Council and the General Assembly – including resolutions that had been rejected by the PLO, such as 242 and 338, calling for Israel to withdraw from all or some of the territories captured in 1967.¹³ Senior

Palestinian figures spoke about the 1967 borders and expressed a wish to inform Israel of these ideas.

The demonstrations of support and victory rallies all over the Gaza Strip and the West Bank strengthened the UNC. For the many who considered the PLO as their sole representative, the way of the intifada was the correct move, because of the interest it aroused in the international community and the growing expectation of an Israeli response. Hamas was alert and did not ignore the broad support for its rival, sensing that the challenge was greater than before the declaration, because it now had to struggle for the hearts of the public. Therefore, Hamas made an attempt to combine the idea of a state within the 1967 lines with its Islamic approach.¹⁴ The intention was to establish a state on condition this did not involve recognition of Israel and did not form the basis for ending the conflict,¹⁵ but matters developed in a different direction. The frequent discussions between representatives of the PLO-supporting nationalist stream and many groups in Jewish society in Israel, the many visits by Israeli groups to the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, the mutual satisfaction of participants and broad international interest – all these showed Hamas the depth of the turnaround. It was no longer a matter of intentions or ideas to be discussed, but of policy that was about to be implemented.

Thus a serious rift in the Palestinian home was created, which to some extent weakened the struggle waged by the leaders of the intifada. There was a noticeable decline in response to the proclamations issued by both organizations, which were tests of respective strength. If a strike took place on the date specified by a proclamation, it demonstrated support for the organization that issued it. When the call was heeded by very few, the organization appeared to be losing strength. Gradually, the organizations understood that strike days were a heavy burden on the people and limited them, but this did not reduce the mutual tension. Accusations of treachery, normalization, defeatism, deceit of the public, and abandonment of sacred national principles were repeated again and again in Hamas journals and at public appearances. Hamas figures refused to meet with anyone from Fatah or the PLO, considered them to be traitors, and claimed that “we can’t sit together with them.” In other words, “the PLO must not get the impression that Hamas will follow them to a political settlement.”¹⁶

Nevertheless, both sides wanted to avoid violent confrontation. Hamas feared that hostilities would exacerbate their inferior status in the public opinion. They preferred to be content with expressions of protest, writing

critical texts and holding mass rallies. Their rivals in Fatah and in the UNC were also unwilling for the situation to become violent, although the daily friction was stronger than any requests and instructions given to activists. Although Hamas was a young, fresh, and small force compared to Fatah, it posed a palpable challenge to Fatah and the PLO. It broke the dichotomy between Islam and politics dictated by Arab regimes and gave legitimacy to this combination. Fatah had to deal with a rival that was proposing the same ideas but arguing that implementation had failed so far because they were “cut off” from the religion.¹⁷ But according to the national school of thought, the combination of religion and nationalism brought the risk of exclusion. Through its “totalism,” Islam ignores and even suppresses the rights of non-Muslims, gives them inferior status, and seeks to impose religion on daily life. The Arabism that had developed into a national idea was intended to some degree to serve as an alternative to the comprehensiveness of Islam.

The rise of Hamas was the first expression of the growing strength of emerging political Islam and aroused much hope among those for whom religion was a central element of their identity.¹⁸ Hamas accused its rivals of corruption, neglecting the public interest, abandoning the refugees and weak members of Palestinian society, and concentrating on internal and personal matters. These accusations found an eager audience and strengthened the public status of Hamas. The heaviest challenge for Hamas came when the Oslo Accords were signed. Hamas leaders wondered how to continue the opposition to Israel without becoming embroiled in a fight with the Palestinian Authority, and how to frustrate the agreement without being drawn into a civil war. The answer was to postpone the larger conflict to a later stage, and meanwhile to undermine public trust in the accords.

The Erosive Friction

The directives Hamas issued just before the arrival of the PLO leadership to the region in April 1994 emphasized the importance of avoiding friction with any Palestinian government element, while continuing and even intensifying the armed struggle with Israel. The instruction was to avoid any conflict with the Palestinian security mechanisms, even at the cost of “turning the other cheek.”¹⁹ On the one hand, Hamas was concerned about an internal conflict in which it would lose the public support it enjoyed at the time, and on the other hand, it saw it as a test for the PLO and its leader, Arafat. Would they stand against Hamas activists, forbid “opposition to the occupation,” and appear to the public in the service of Israel, or would

they be restrained, look the other way, and not use all the pressure that Israel and the other observers who signed the accords expected from them?

The reality that developed in the first months after the establishment of the Palestinian Authority played into the hands of Hamas. True, Israel withdrew from the Strip, but the terror attack by Islamic Jihad less than two weeks later and other attacks by Hamas forced Israel to make the process of crossing in and out of the Strip more difficult. Gradually quantities of goods and numbers of people crossing the border between Gaza and Israel declined. There were big losses to traders whose goods were held up at the border, and the loss of freedom of movement drastically affected daily life within the Strip. Employment rates dropped, and with them the purchasing power of the population. Commercial life was severely disrupted, and there was a serious crisis of expectations. The high hopes that prevailed just before the Oslo Accords were signed, that Gaza would flourish and “be a new Singapore,” seemed unreal. The anger toward the Palestinian Authority intensified, together with the distrust of Israel. Israel was accused of bringing the PLO leadership from Tunisia to release it from the burden of responsibility for the Strip, and not necessarily in order to bring peace. There was a strong sense of suffocation, and the Strip was defined as one large prison. The argument that was already being sounded between Abu Mazen and Arafat about what message the Authority wished to send to the Palestinian opposition became central to public discourse. Many people supported Abu Mazen, who wanted Arafat to take a strong line against these rival organizations and renounce the military option he still propounded, as it was contrary to the signed accords; they criticized Israel for not putting Arafat in his place and exposing the double talk he used in his contacts with these organizations.²⁰

The message received by the public also worked in Hamas’s favor – the Oslo Accords were not intended to improve the situation for ordinary people, and the signatories were not guided by the good of the people but by what was good for the PLO and Fatah. Arafat clearly wanted to convince his detractors that he retained a military option, in order to maintain his image as a fighter and revolutionary. But Israel’s avoidance, for reasons of its own security, of a tougher approach to Arafat was perceived as a conspiracy to serve both parties to the accords.

The situation became more complex because of the negative effects on public opinion within Israel. There too a strong opposition demanded a halt to implementation of the Oslo Accords due to the terror attacks. The

opposition saw this as definitive proof that the Palestinians were unwilling or unable to fulfill their commitments, and that signed agreements did not indicate their true intentions. Hamas saw that terror attacks served its purpose: they increased the public credit that it needed, and also intensified opposition within Israeli society to Oslo.

The murder of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin on November 4, 1995 marked the start of a change in the relationship between the Palestinian Authority and Hamas. Arafat, who saw Rabin as a partner and had developed a relationship of trust, felt that an important piece of the edifice they had constructed together had collapsed. However, like many Israelis, he believed that the opposition would pay the price in the elections planned for May 1996. As time passed, however, Arafat learned the extent of the danger of failing to take action against the terror attacks. Hamas exploited the confusion of the Palestinian Authority, saw the murder as a positive development, and continued its efforts to frustrate implementation of Oslo. It carried out a number of terror attacks that seriously undermined the Israeli electorate's trust in the Palestinians. The result was that the opponents of the accords were victorious in the elections, which raised a large question mark over Oslo's further implementation. From now on, Israeli delegates to talks with the Palestinians were preoccupied with how to prevent implementation of this or that clause of the accords without actually breaching them, rather than how to implement them in a way that would satisfy both sides. In other words, the motivation changed and there was a growing demand on the Palestinians to prove their intentions.

It was only after these elections that Arafat understood what he refused to recognize previously, that the destruction that Hamas and its supporters were trying to cause to his political plans was substantive, and that unless he took stronger action against them and other opposition groups, he would lose his government. Indeed, the Palestinian Authority's campaign of pursuing and breathing down the neck of the opposition after the Israeli elections was unprecedented. Large numbers of Hamas members were arrested and imprisoned, weapons were confiscated, there was closer monitoring of the money coming into their accounts and how it was used, and activities were monitored. Cooperation with Israeli security mechanisms improved, as well as the Palestinian Authority's image in the eyes of the international community and Arab countries.

Not long after, Hamas threw up its hands. At a press conference in October 2000, leader Ahmed Yassin attributed the small number of attacks

carried out by his organization at the start of the al-Aqsa intifada to the fact that Hamas “suffered from past problems that everyone recognizes.”²¹ The Hamas journal *Felastine al-Muslama* included discussions of the question “has the armed resistance lost its relevance.” Public support for Hamas waned and the organization cut back on its terror attacks against Israel. It began a process of self-reflection that included a prominent element of coming to terms with the limits of its power against the Arafat-led Palestinian Authority. For a short time it looked as if the struggle between the two was over, and Hamas leaders recognized they would have to formulate a new policy and use other means. In media interviews during the period of intense pressure from the Palestinian Authority, Yassin and other leaders admitted their weakness and inability to deal with what they called a powerful four-way coalition between the Palestinian Authority, Israel, the United States, and the international community and Arab states, mainly Jordan.

In fact, this was the end of the first chapter in a relationship fueled by anger and blood, which began with the first intifada and ended before the second intifada. Hamas put its head down, aware that circumstances were not in its favor. It believed that this was temporary, and better to lose a little now and gain a lot later, estimating that Israel would never give the Palestinians what they wanted. The Palestinians had to prove their credibility and the link between words and actions, and that they could control the territories handed over to them. Hamas contended that Israel was simultaneously enjoying the status of referee and party to the agreement, and this view was widely held among the Palestinian public. Arafat and his people believed that the third parties acting as brokers – the United States and Europe – would restore the balance to this asymmetry. Since then, Hamas has never stopped arguing that it is not possible to reach a settlement without equal status between the parties.

The situation indeed developed as Hamas foresaw. Talks between Israel and the PLO failed, there were renewed hostilities and bloodshed between Israel and the Palestinians, and Hamas returned as a much stronger player, with greater public legitimacy. Thus, began the second chapter of blood-stained friction between the two Palestinian organizations, fed by distrust and a large element of competition. Ultimately, there was a striking dissonance

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between each side's understanding of the limitations of power and the need to unite, and the barriers that threatened organizational identity and prevented such unity.

The Lessons

The intifada that erupted in late 1987 in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank could be labeled as "the first Arab Spring." But unlike the Arab Spring of the twenty-first century, the first intifada led to changes in the thinking of both sides. It created a reality in which the masses led the leadership, rather than vice versa, and decisions followed. In other words, it was a bottom-up process, where the initiative moved from the popular level to the PLO leadership. It also posed a different kind of challenge to Israel, and in 1988, the Palestinian Declaration of Independence questioned what had been the major Israeli assumption until then, that the Palestinians would never accept its presence in the region.

Nonetheless, it seems that the main change took place within the Palestinian community. The Declaration of Independence posed a very difficult challenge to Hamas and other opposition elements. The public, so Hamas hoped, would tend to support it, because the Declaration of Independence clashed with national principles. But the public backed the move, gave the PLO credit, and was in fact the prop on which the process relied. PLO leaders and supporters believed that the link with Israel and the political progress would lead to economic prosperity and serve as leverage to pressure Hamas and the other opposition groups, who kept warning against what they called capitulation to Israel and international patronage. In other words, the added value that the PLO had and has over Hamas in the deep enmity between them is the partnership with Israel. When this partnership proceeds constructively with positive outcomes,

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it can remove many Palestinian obstacles buried deep in their religion, history, and scars caused by the conflict with Israel.

The PLO's abandonment of the demand to remove Israel shattered the Palestinian package. There was no longer one end of the spectrum that can lead to a solution of the Palestinian problem without the

other end, and in the absence of unity, weakness becomes paralysis. In the eyes of parts of the Palestinian public, Israel – the third element in this equation – has failed to do its job. It did not stand with the PLO and did

not show its rival, Hamas, that it had little chance of defeating the party with which it had signed agreements. It is true that Arafat, as head of the Palestinian system, through his double talk and retention of the military option, severely disrupted the process, but there was much anger toward him in the Arab media, among the PLO leadership, and above all in the Palestinian street, who knew Israel and believed it would not support such conduct and would play the role of a mentor to put anyone who strayed back on the right track. Thus it is not surprising that Ahmed Yassin and his Hamas followers spoke in terms of surrender when Arafat's mechanisms became more aggressive against the organization (1997-2000). Hamas understood that Arafat relied on the broad shoulders of Israel and the international community. They saw Arafat's use of Israeli and international backing as a change in the rules of the internal Palestinian game, and willingness to risk the organization's image of revolutionary fighter. The public backing for Arafat's moves contributed to the weakness of Hamas.

Reality saw another reversal when the second intifada broke out in 2000. But the lesson to be learned from these developments is that Israel was and remains a central player in the internal Palestinian arena. In the eyes of many Palestinians, Israel was part of the dowry that the PLO brought to the dispute with the opposition groups, and the critical mass that would decide the dispute. If Israel kept its eyes on the Palestinian public and supported the path of recognition and negotiations chosen by the PLO, it would show that public support for this move was correct. If it devoted its resources only to the fight against terror and the armed opposition to Hamas, it would erode any remaining Palestinian support for the Oslo process and the status of the PLO leadership.

A decision in the Fatah-Hamas dispute is therefore essential in order to achieve any political settlement. Although Arafat's conduct did not help to implement this lesson, the expectations of the Israeli public were high in those years, and today – years after Arafat – implementation of the lesson is still of much relevance.

Notes

- 1 At the Rabat Conference in 1974 the Arab League recognized the PLO as the sole representative of the Palestinian people.
- 2 The period from 2000 to 2017, which is not examined in this article, shows the reasons why internal reconciliation is so hard to achieve, the growing friction between Fatah and Hamas, how Hamas is regaining its strength, and the struggle for hegemony in the Palestinian arena.
- 3 A few months after the Hamas electoral victory, Ismail Haniyeh, Chairman of the Hamas Political Bureau, stated in a speech at the National Dialogue Conference in Gaza that was designed to find a solution to the internal rift that hampered the creation of a government under his leadership: "There is one fact that nobody disputes, that there are two main forces on the Palestinian street – Fatah and Hamas, who both enjoy wide popular support... There is no home without family members with allegiances to these two forces." See Wafa, May 25, 2006, http://www.wafa.ps/ar_page.aspx?id=U3Yowqa63434337450aU3Yowq; similar sentiments were expressed by Khaled Mishal, Haniyeh's predecessor as Chairman, in the years following the coup in Gaza. He often stressed: "We were wrong when we thought we could rule alone... Any thought of an alternative is a mistake... cooperation is the solution." See 24, September 25, 2016, <https://bit.ly/2Cl5rmx>.
- 4 Ze'ev Schiff and Ehud Yaari, *Intifada* (Tel Aviv: Shocken, 1990), p. 351.
- 5 The Jordanian disengagement came a few months after the first intifada broke out. King Hussein had started processes of "Jordanization" some years earlier, and saw the intifada as an opportunity to sharpen the distinction between Jordanian identity and Palestinian identity and to rid himself of responsibility for the fate of the West Bank.
- 6 See, for example, a Hamas proclamation distributed on February 23, 1988, a few months after the start of the first intifada, which criticizes those who "run and pant after Shultz and his envoys... to close miserable deals behind the scenes." See Shaul Mishal and Reuven Aharoni, *Stones aren't Everything: The Intifada and the Proclamation Weapon* (Tel Aviv: Hidekel, 1989), p. 209.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 134.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 142.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 159.
- 10 At a speech to the PLO Central Council (October 27, 2018), Abu Mazen encouraged his audience by saying that the period following the expulsion from Lebanon (1982) was harder for the PLO than the present period. He reminded them that it was not possible for PLO institutions to assemble in 1984, due to the absence of a quorum. He said that people denied their membership in the organization and were unwilling to participate in meetings. They had to recruit members in order to re-activate these institutions.

- 11 Mutzafa Kabhaa, *The Palestinians: A Dispersed People* (Raanana: Open University, 2010), p. 282.
- 12 See, for example, a review published in *Arabi-21*, January 26, 2016, <https://bit.ly/2HatzxO>.
- 13 "Palestinian Declaration of Independence (1988)," Declaration Project, <http://www.declarationproject.org/?p=397>.
- 14 See Matti Steinberg, *Facing their Fate: Palestinian National Consciousness 1967-2007* (Tel Aviv: Yediot Ahronot, 2008), p. 249.
- 15 See the Hamas journal *Felastin al-Muslama*, December 1988; see also Wael abed Elhamid el Mabhouh, *Opposition in the Political Thought of Hamas Movement 1994-2006* (Beirut: al-Zaytuna, 2012), pp. 99-100, which reviews the Hamas position on the political settlement issue, <https://bit.ly/2CgjARO>.
- 16 These statements are attributed to Khalil Koka of Hamas, who was expelled from Shati refugee camp in Gaza at the start of the first intifada, reached Jordan, and refused to meet with Arafat. See Schiff and Yaari, *Intifada*, p. 239.
- 17 Meir Litvak, "Hamas: Islam, Palestinian identity, and Jihad," in *Islam and Democracy in the Arab World*, ed. Meir Litvak (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 1997), pp. 156-57.
- 18 Article 27 of the first Hamas Charter is very striking in its explanation of the difference between it, Fatah, and the national stream given the PLO's distance from Islam and its adoption of the idea of a secular state: "On the day that the PLO adopts Islam as a way of life we will be its soldiers," Schiff and Yaari, *Intifada*, p. 364.
- 19 Hamas, "Preliminary Paper: How to Avoid Physical Conflict without Losing the Right of Self Defense," September 1993.
- 20 See, for example, an article published by Abu Mazen in the East Jerusalem paper *al-Quds* a few years later, with its strong criticism of Arafat whom he accused of responsibility for all Palestinian problems since implementation of the accords began. "Directing the Intifada to a Military Track Diverted it from the Correct Track," *al-Quds*, November 27, 2002.
- 21 Sheik Ahmed Yassin: "Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades are ready, but the question is one of time. We do not expect the Arab and Islamic states to mobilize their armies for us," Hamas website, October 13, 2000.

The Slim Prospects for a Complete Economic Recovery in Syria

Oded Eran

The civil war in Syria that erupted in early 2011 has ravaged the country and changed its face entirely. Out of 24 million residents prior to the war, about six million fled to Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon, while another three million have been displaced within Syria itself. Most international efforts focus on finding immediate solutions for the hardships of the refugees, while very few studies tackle the problems involved in launching a planned and funded comprehensive reconstruction process. Without such a reconstruction process, any arrangement for Syria's political future is liable to encounter obstacles and foment persistent instability inside Syria and in neighboring countries where millions of Syrians have sought refuge. At this stage, there are more questions than answers, and presumably the questions will persist for a long time. Israel has a direct interest in several questions pertaining to the reconstruction process, including: what kind of regime will rule in Damascus, who is involved in funding and reconstruction, and which regions and economic sectors will benefit most from the reconstruction process.

Keywords: Syria, Israel, world powers, economic reconstruction, refugees

The Magnitude of the Devastation

Any war of the scale that has waged in Syria over the last eight years is devastating to society, infrastructures, basic services, production capacity, and housing. Therefore, an initial basic question involves measuring the magnitude of the devastation in order to gain an understanding of how to devise a solution. Given the very high number of casualties and wounded, the three million people displaced inside Syria itself, and the six million

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refugees who fled from Syria, as well as the scope of the economic damage, the civil war in Syria is among the largest disasters since World War II. The following is an illustrative summary of the dimensions of the devastation, based mainly on a comprehensive report from the World Bank.¹

Destruction of Infrastructure

- a. Residential buildings: in the Aleppo governorate, 320,000 housing units (out of 890,000) were destroyed or damaged; in the Damascus governorate – 103,000 housing units; and in Idlib – 47,000 housing units.
- b. Water infrastructure: Syria suffered from water-related problems even prior to 2011, the combined result of drought, mismanagement of the water economy, and poor rainwater collection. The war exacerbated the situation. In the governorates examined in the survey, two thirds of the water treatment facilities, and likewise half of the pumping facilities and a quarter of the sewage treatment facilities were destroyed. One sixth of the water wells were destroyed.
- c. Electricity: the national power grid was left in reasonably operable condition. Two power plants, in Idlib and in Aleppo, were damaged. Nevertheless, electricity generation has plummeted by 62 percent since 2011, mainly due to a shortage of fuel.
- d. Transportation: prior to the civil war, there were about 45,000 kilometers of paved roads in Syria. In the Aleppo area, one third (about 1,500 km) of the roads were damaged; in the Homs region, 200 km were damaged, out of about 1,300 km); and in the Daraa district – 100 km out of 650 km.
- e. Aviation: of the three international airports – Damascus, Aleppo, and Latakia – only the airport in Damascus functioned in 2017.
- f. Healthcare services: in the ten cities examined in the World Bank survey, 16 percent of the healthcare facilities were completely destroyed, and 42 percent were partially damaged. In Aleppo, 35 percent of the healthcare facilities were destroyed, and in Daraa, 69 percent of the health service infrastructures were partially damaged. In addition, medical equipment and devices were destroyed.
- g. Education: some of the forces participating in the war used schools as command posts and shelters. About 15 percent of the buildings used as schools and academic institutions were destroyed. About 57 percent of the facilities used for educational purposes in 2011 are still operating today, albeit without a full supply of water and electricity.

Damage to Economic Sectors

- a. GDP, which was \$60 billion in 2011, dropped to \$15 billion in 2016. Prior to 2011, 25 percent of Syria's income derived from the energy sector. Since 2011, oil production has plummeted by more than 90 percent, as did the production of natural gas, after the Islamic State destroyed the production facilities.
- b. The agricultural sector, which was adversely affected by the water problems and the war, shrank by 41 percent, after it had already dropped by 10 percent in 2010.
- c. The tourism sector, which developed impressively until it accounted for 8 percent of GDP in 2010, stopped functioning nearly altogether, although some recovery was evident in 2018.
- d. With regard to industry, in Aleppo, where the majority of Syria's industrial activity is located, 67-81 percent of the four industrial zones were destroyed. Because of the war, many manufacturers relocated to safer areas inside Syria itself, or to neighboring countries and to Egypt. One of the main indications of the destruction of the manufacturing infrastructure was the dramatic drop in exports, from \$7.9 billion in 2011 to \$631 million in 2015.
- e. Foreign currency reserves in the central bank, which are an indicator of a country's survivability, dropped from \$21 billion in 2010 to less than \$1 billion in 2015.
- f. The unemployment rate rose to 53 percent of the entire population, and to 78 percent among the young generation. Three out of every four Syrian workers are not engaged in work that generates added value. Therefore, the statistic that 60 percent of the population live under conditions of extreme poverty is not surprising.

The report acknowledges that data collection is problematic due to the conditions prevailing in Syria. It emphasizes that the tangible damages do not reflect the long range damage created by the loss of human capital, the destruction of the economic system, and the loss of economic initiatives.

Who Will Decide the Main Reconstruction Questions?

At this stage, questions about the reconstruction of Syria, especially the political questions, are not debated in any serious professional study, and most of the international activity is channeled to assistance in providing immediate answers to the humanitarian problems, mainly in Syria itself, and assistance to Syrian refugees in neighboring countries. Any comprehensive

discussion will be influenced by the political reality in Syria and the standing of President Assad in the overall political order, and by the implications of this political reality for the decision making process and the debate itself. Countries that operated in Syria during the war and those with funding capabilities have strategic considerations – primarily political but economic as well – and they are not necessarily compatible.

The dearth of discussion about long range reconstruction, relative to the magnitude of the problem, derives mainly from the deep disagreement within the relevant international community (with its political weight and its financial capabilities) about the future of the current regime in any future political solution in Syria. The European Union boasts it is the largest donor to the immediate reconstruction efforts – 11 billion euros since 2011. However, when it comes to long range reconstruction, the EU has adopted a much more rigid stance. The High Representative of the European Union (who is essentially the EU’s Minister of Foreign Affairs) declared on March 15, 2018 that “the EU will be ready to assist in the reconstruction of Syria, only once a comprehensive, inclusive and genuine political transition is firmly in place in accordance with UNSC Resolution 2254 and the 2012 Geneva Communiqué.”² Security Council Resolution 2254 of December 2015 adopts the announcement of several parties, including the United States, Russia, Turkey, France, Britain, the Arab League, and the European Union, which convened in the United Nations headquarters in Geneva on June 30, 2012. On “the perspective for the future,” all agree that Syria must be “genuinely democratic and pluralistic, giving space to established and newly emerging political actors to compete fairly and equally in elections,” and comply with international standards on human rights.³

The United States, which was a senior partner in achieving the Geneva declaration and Resolution 2254, also made them a precondition to its participation in the reconstruction efforts. Furthermore, the President’s announcement on December 19, 2018 on the withdrawal of American troops from Syria limits and in fact essentially eliminates any chance of significant US involvement in the process.⁴

The current situation in Syria is far from the political vision envisioned by the countries that convened in Geneva nearly seven years ago, and it is highly unlikely that the foreseeable future includes changes that will bring Syria closer to the objectives set down during the Geneva summit. If the major potential donors, such as the United States and the European Union – which also wield considerable influence over decision making by

international financial institutions, such as the World Bank – continue to make economic reconstruction contingent upon progress in the political framework in Syria, it is doubtful that any comprehensive reconstruction process will be launched.

Respective Considerations of the Major Players

President Assad

President Assad’s blood-soaked victory in the war, his road to victory, and his entire mode of conduct since he succeeded his father two decades ago show that the chances are slim that he will adopt even a portion of the framework adopted in Geneva in 2012. In the seven years since then, he and the countries that supported him and saved his regime – particularly Russia and Iran – succeeded in nearly eradicating the Islamic State completely and in overpowering most of the local Syrian forces that actively opposed the regime. The regime today already controls large sections of the country, apart from border regions with Turkey and Iraq. In these circumstances, there is little chance that Assad will suddenly turn magnanimous and sacrifice his government for the sake of promoting the full reconstruction of Syria for its remaining inhabitants or those who seek to return. On the other hand, Assad’s regime has an interest in controlled reconstruction, where it can dictate objectives and direct implementation – provided it does not necessitate the conditions imposed by the international community in Geneva and in Resolution 2254, since complying with these conditions is liable to jeopardize his survival.

Already now, even before a reconstruction plan is formulated that involves external actors, Assad is exerting efforts to return life to normal in cities and regions where the citizens remained loyal to his regime. Homs is an example of a city whose non-Sunni residents helped the regime eliminate the rebels, the majority of whom were Sunni, and later encouraged Sunni residents to flee; these efforts are now rewarded by the regime.⁵ The Syrian President also apparently sees positive aspects to the outcomes of the war, and already in the first half of 2017 said that while it is true that Syria has lost its young generation and its infrastructure, it gained a healthier and more homogeneous society.⁶ He himself does not often refer to the issue of the Syrian refugees, and it is highly doubtful that he wants them to return to Syria. Presumably among the six million Syrians who fled there were many opposed to the regime, and the more their return is delayed or denied, the smaller the reconstruction burden will be. If the Syrian regime

exhibits any willingness to absorb refugees in the future, it will be selective and likely give priority to the wealthy, so that the cost of absorbing them will be lower, and so that they contribute to resumed economic activity. In this way, the regime will be able to fend off allegations that it is actually preventing the return of refugees.

At this stage, the Syrian regime is not under international pressure to repatriate refugees. The opening of the border crossing between Jordan and Syria ostensibly enables Syrian refugees to return, but the regime has instituted various measures in order to make it difficult for those seeking to return. For example, men up to the age of 43 who return to Syria are under a compulsory draft order to join either the military or another security service six months after they return. There has also been much publicity about Law 10, which enables the government to expropriate private land for development purposes, and anyone seeking compensation was supposed to have submitted his application along with documents proving ownership within one month of the promulgation of the law. International pressure (mainly by Russia) postponed the deadline to one year after the law was announced.⁷

The current mode of international assistance is apparently what is preferred by the regime in Damascus. President Assad himself assesses the sum required for reconstruction at \$250-400 billion,⁸ but these sums are contingent on preconditions that are unacceptable to Assad. On the other hand, during the war years, the international community agreed to grant substantial sums of humanitarian assistance to Syrian civil society and to refugees in neighboring countries in order to help them survive under extreme conditions. A major conference of donor countries was held in Brussels on April 25, 2018 under the joint auspices of the European Union and the United Nations, with the participation of 57 countries, 10 regional organizations and international financial institutions, and 19 different UN agencies.⁹ At the conclusion of the conference, it was announced that a total of \$4.4 billion was pledged for 2018, while a sum of \$3.4 billion was donated for 2019–2020. In addition to these grants, several countries and various financial institutions such as the European Bank, the European Investment Bank, and the World Bank agreed to provide \$21.2 billion in loans under easy terms. Although the concluding statement of the conference's joint chairs referred to Security Council Resolution 2254, it was not mentioned as a precondition. The funds that have been granted to date were utilized to improve infrastructure and to restore residential buildings – actions

that the regime takes pains to publicize as proof of its efforts to repair the devastation and improve the conditions for its citizens.

External Actors

Several external political and other actors that operate in the Syrian arena are interested in a different and varied model for Syria's long range reconstruction. Countries that already have a military and political presence in Syria also have an interest in strengthening their influence and reaping economic profits in sectors that are expected to generate revenues once the reconstruction process is completed. Russia and Iran invested massive sums in stabilizing Assad's regime against the rebel forces and the Islamic State, and they expect that accelerated economic activity in Syria will help companies partially recoup the military expenditure incurred in the efforts to defend Assad's regime. Russian and Iranian companies that are already operating in Syria are promoting reconstruction of the energy, petrochemical, and tourism industries.¹⁰ While Russia focuses mainly on oil and gas exploration, Iranian companies entered the power plant sector and the telecommunications sector. The Iranian company MAPNA constructed a gas-powered power plant in Latakia that will generate 540 MW, and another Iranian company, Iran Power Plan Repairs, engages in repairs of damaged power plants. Iran will also construct a new power plant in Aleppo that will generate 125 MW. The Iranian telecommunications company, TCI, won a service provider concession and succeeded in ousting the Syrian service provider from its top position in this sector.¹¹ The implementation of these and other concessions entails enormous investments, and it is doubtful whether Russia and Iran will be able to carry them out alone in the long range. Consequently, President Putin has invited European leaders several times to join the reconstruction efforts, but thus far, without success.

On the other hand, the United States and EU countries have remained steadfast in their positions and conditioned their involvement in long range reconstruction efforts on profound political change in Syria. Even prior to 2011, they showed no economic interest in Syria, and given the considerable influence of Russia and Iran, the American and European sanctions against Syria, and the uncertainty about Syria's ability to repay the investments, Western companies are increasingly averse to investment in Syria. Already in August 2018 President Trump announced that the United States will discontinue its participation in the international funding for Syria, and it is thus not involved in the humanitarian assistance efforts.¹² Moreover,

the withdrawal of US troops from Syria proves, inter alia, that President Trump is not bothered by Russia and Iran's nearly absolute political-security control over Syria, or by their taking control over vital economic sectors. The European Union, which was unsettled by the wave of refugees from the war zones and impoverished regions in the Middle East (as well as in Africa and central Asia), found a solution, at least temporarily, in offering a financial incentive to Turkey to close its borders to refugees attempting to enter and pass through its territory en route to Europe. Clearly, the EU's interest in Syria's reconstruction has also diminished, and it has aimed to repel those Syrian refugees who did succeed in reaching Europe – an attempt that revived the ideological dispute in Europe and played into the hands of extreme right wingers, who peddled the “refugee threat” to Europe.

China is one of the few countries with the financial and technological capabilities of contending with the challenge of Syrian reconstruction. China's interest in the Middle East derives from the number of votes of the Arab-Islamic bloc in international institutions, from the region's being China's main source of energy, which is vital to its burgeoning economy, and from its being an important link in President Xi Jinping's One Belt, One Road initiative, which is supposed to link China to Europe via two main channels – the overland belt and the sea-based road. The overland Silk Road Economic Belt crosses central Asia and Turkey, but from China's perspective, it might also branch off southward toward the Mediterranean Sea. Chinese investments in Syria, therefore, are based on strategic interests, especially since Beijing does not share the American-European set of moral and political considerations with regard to the future regime in Syria. Indeed, official spokesmen of both Syria and China have spoken favorably about Chinese involvement in the reconstruction efforts. China has provided \$2 billion for this purpose, and both sides emphasize that Syria can constitute an important link in One Belt, One Road.¹³ At present, however, Chinese involvement in Syria is limited, apparently given its reluctance to invest in a country that still contends with internal confrontations, and Syria's insignificant strategic value to China. True, China did deploy a military presence in Djibouti, for example, despite the instability in the region, but there is no doubt that its location on the marine route from China to Europe constitutes a key consideration in this regard. Furthermore, the possibility of colliding with some Russian vital interest may also be a deterring factor in China's thinking about Syria.

There is an interest in involvement in the Syrian reconstruction process among countries in the region, out of the assumption that businesses from these countries will be able to benefit from the resources to be injected into the efforts. Companies with funding capabilities in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey are likely interested in a chunk of the reconstruction activity, but they have no advantage over Russian, Iranian, or US companies that bring with them greater funding potential.

Israel

After nearly eight years of war, President Assad's balance sheet is mixed. Unlike Saddam Hussein, Muammar Qaddafi, or Husni Mubarak, he and his regime survived, but he no longer commands the undisputed standing that he enjoyed prior to the civil war. It is doubtful that in the future he will rule over the entire territory of Syria, because it is unclear if and when all of the non-Syrian forces will withdraw (e.g., Turkey's forces and the militias sent by Iran). Some of the forces (such as Hezbollah forces) were sent in order to defend the regime, but this does not necessarily mean that the Syrian President can determine when these forces leave. Assad's survival was also made possible thanks to Russian and Iranian bayonets, and apparently, Russia and Iran have deepened their grasp on Syria, because they also initiated a reconstruction process and have taken control over vital infrastructure services.

Israel's preferred idea of Syria's reconstruction resembles the model demanded by the United States and European countries, on the assumption that a regime that approaches the standards imposed by the West and benefits from massive Western assistance will be less prone to considerable influence from Tehran and Moscow. However, there is not much chance of the Western vision materializing. From Assad's perspective, the fact that six million Syrians fled their country has improved his position, because as a result the number of opponents to his regime from inside Syria has diminished; Russia and China provide him with a political umbrella; and he is willing to forfeit Western assistance and thereby avoid a political process of national reconciliation, which would entail ending his rule.

Under these circumstances, Israel is forced to resign itself to a long term Iranian presence in Syria, which also extends to strategic issues, such as national infrastructure. Even if it wanted to, Israel will not be capable of preventing Iran from establishing an economic base and strategic infrastructure in Syria. Were the United States and European countries

willing to change the conditions they posed to Assad and link the receipt of massive assistance to a demand to eject the foreign forces that entered Syria “at his request” or with his consent, and to a demand that he cooperate with an international reconstruction management mechanism, Assad might overcome his hostility toward the United States and rejection of the Western conditions. But this at best is a remote possibility, which means that Israel is incapable of influencing Russian and Iranian involvement in long term reconstruction which, from its viewpoint, affects its vital interests.

At this stage, the regime’s efforts in Syria focus on reconstructing areas that are crucial for increased civilian support, and particularly the city of Aleppo, the economic hub that was severely damaged during the war. This reconstruction effort still focuses on areas far from the Israeli-Syrian border in the Golan Heights, and issues such as reconstruction target areas and the relevant responsible parties are still not worrisome. On the other hand, the telecommunications company TCI, for example, is under the control of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards. If telecommunications operations bring it close to the Israeli-Syrian border, Israel is liable to end up facing a dilemma.

The withdrawal of the US troops from Syria increases the need to strengthen the Israeli-Russian dialogue, which currently engages mainly in military matters, to try to coordinate on political-strategic issues, including aspects of the reconstruction efforts. The cooperation between Russia and Iran in Syria does not mean that they agree on all subjects, and presumably they also compete against each other for concessions. An Israeli perspective on particular reconstruction matters could prompt Russia to take action in Damascus against awarding a particular project to Iranian parties.

The reconstruction of Syria will be a long process, even if conducted in limited fashion, due to the lack of financial resources for an accelerated process. Some aspects and events relating to reconstruction can become catalysts for a political arrangement, but also causes of unrest. All of these require constant Israeli monitoring and the inclusion of this matter in the political dialogue that Israel conducts with the countries involved in the political, economic, and military processes in Syria.

Notes

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Diplomacy and the War in Syria: Individual Interests or Genuine Efforts to Rebuild the State?

Anat Ben Haim and Rob Geist Pinfeld

Throughout the Syrian civil war, a number of regional and global actors have embarked on international initiatives that seek a political solution to the conflict. These initiatives differed significantly from each other in terms of their objectives, scope, and the identity of those leading them. This article describes and compares the most prominent international initiatives, assesses the effectiveness of each, and defines the enduring obstacles facing any diplomatic solution. Much has been written about the virtues of “soft power” and one of its leading tools, diplomacy. However, this article argues that in the Syrian civil war, the distribution of “hard power” among the actors involved is what lays the foundations for the future of Syria, rather than any international peace process.

Keywords: Syria, diplomacy, Russia, United States, Israel and its neighbors, United Nations

In Syria today, fighting on the battlefield has assumed a secondary role to political attempts to shape and reconstruct the country. It is already clear that the Assad regime has emerged with the upper hand, and more and more actors, both inside and outside Syria, see this victory as an established fact. This is also true for Israel, which has de facto recognized Assad’s renewed control of the Syrian Golan Heights. By contrast, the influence and power of the opposition and rebel organizations are steadily eroding.

In order to assess possible future directions of a political settlement in Syria, this article examines the main channels of dialogue that have

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developed over the years of war in Syria and asks why they have so far not led to a breakthrough. It outlines the central diplomatic initiatives that were formulated to prevent further violence and achieve a peaceful solution to the conflict. The article examines in detail the various political processes, compares their effectiveness, and discusses the implications for Israel.

International Diplomacy: The Geneva Talks and the Vienna Agreement

A short time after the civil war broke out in Syria in 2011, various international diplomatic initiatives to stop the violence began to take shape, with the aim of reaching a political solution. However, these processes, which continued in parallel with the fighting, did not bring about significant changes on the ground. Notwithstanding the sincere intentions of some of the international actors involved, over the years the initiatives became less and less relevant. Arguably, these conferences and talks served as a fig leaf, while the stronger actors pursued their goals on the battlefield and shaped the future direction of the country. Among the most prominent diplomatic initiatives were the talks in Geneva under the auspices of the UN, and from 2012 under the leadership of former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, in his role as envoy of the UN and the Arab League. In August 2102 Annan resigned as mediator,

The political initiatives, which continued in parallel with the fighting in Syria, did not bring about significant changes on the ground. Arguably, the conferences and talks served as a fig leaf, while the stronger actors pursued their goals on the battlefield and shaped the future direction of the country.

after reaching the conclusion that it was impossible to bridge the differences between the parties. In May 2014 his replacement, Algerian diplomat al-Akhdar al-Ibrahimi, also resigned after disparaging the lack of sufficient international involvement in attempts to solve the conflict. In spite of the UN's ineffectiveness, the Italian diplomat Staffan de Mistura was appointed UN Special Envoy to Syria and the Arab League in the summer of 2014. From then until late 2018, de Mistura led the talks in Geneva.¹ In 2019 he was replaced by Norwegian diplomat Geir Pedersen.²

In 2015 the foreign ministers of 20 countries signed the Vienna Agreement, which included a commitment to bring the Syrian government and the opposition to the negotiating table under the auspices of the UN. Critics of the Vienna talks argued

that they did not include all the local actors involved in the Syrian civil war, and instead the delegations consisted of too many external parties. Nevertheless, the agreement paved the way for the adoption of Security

Council Resolution 2254 in December 2015, which called for a ceasefire, the formation of a transitional government in Syria, the introduction of a new constitution, elections within 18 months, and the establishment of a non-sectarian democratic government. The UN resolution was accepted by all the external states involved in the conflict, including Russia, but was rejected by the Assad regime. Moreover, Bashar al-Jaafari, head of the Syrian regime's delegation to Geneva, declared that there would be no political progress toward ending the fighting as long as the opposition continued to demand Assad's removal. The Syrian rebel and government delegations refused to speak directly to each other, and the talks took place with de Mistura's mediation.³

Russian-led Initiatives: Astana and Sochi

In tandem with the Geneva process, talks have been underway in Astana (the capital of Kazakhstan) since January 2017, between the leaders of the three state-level actors with arguably the most military and political influence over events in Syria: Russia, Iran, and Turkey. At first, the Astana process was limited to the promotion and supervision of a ceasefire in areas where humanitarian crises had developed. The Astana process represented Russia exploiting the unwillingness of the United States to play a central role in the political process in Syria. Sans major US involvement, Russia was able to establish its status as a leader of the international diplomatic initiatives.⁴

On May 5, 2017 the delegations at Astana signed a memorandum that called for the formation of de-escalation zones within Syria. Russia, Iran, and Turkey were guarantors of the agreement, which represented another attempt to reach a prolonged cessation of hostilities. Four de-escalation zones were created: in Idlib; in the enclave between Hama and Homs; in the enclave to the east of Damascus; and in southern Syria near Dara'a and Quneitra, close to the borders with Israel and Jordan. The declared aims of the agreement were to restrain the intensity and scope of the fighting, relieve the humanitarian distress, and enable refugees to return to their homes. The overall goal was to lay the foundation for a solution to the crisis, while freezing the conflict in sensitive and less stable areas. Concurrently, the actors involved in the Astana process declared their support of a united Syria.⁵

Another Russian initiative to resolve the conflict was the organization and hosting of the Syrian Congress for National Dialogue in Sochi in late January 2018. The congress was an attempt to create a national dialogue

under Russian auspices. The Russians wanted the congress to represent all the political camps involved in the conflict, including prominent opposition groups, the Assad regime, the Kurds, and representatives of the various ethnic and tribal groups. The goal of the congress was to draft a proposal for a new constitution, which would serve as the basis for a political settlement. Other aims announced by Russia included introducing constitutional reforms; setting up a transitional government (which would in fact ensure that Assad remained President); promoting local, parliamentary, and presidential elections in Syria before 2021; and even suggesting a proposal for the Kurds to discuss a kind of federal arrangement granting them partial autonomy, in return for broader support for the Assad regime remaining in power.

Comparisons between the Different Channels

Both the Russian-led political process and the other processes led by the international community were accused of ineffectiveness. The Sochi congress encountered numerous problems, including an invitation to the Kurdish delegates that angered the Turks, and the refusal of Syrian opposition delegates to leave the airport and join the talks (although some of them were finally persuaded to do so by a Turkish delegate). In spite of these problems, the Sochi congress managed to bring together a range of political, ethnic, and religious groups from Syrian society, including supporters and opponents of the regime, to sit around one table and seek a political solution to the crisis. The concluding document announced the formation of a committee of 150 representatives who would draw up a future Syrian constitution, based on mutual understandings. However, even this proposal encountered difficulties, including disagreement over the future political structure of Syria; general opposition by the Syrian government to a new constitution; the future status and involvement of guarantor countries; and the question of who would participate in writing any new or amended constitution. Concurrently, Russia used the Sochi congress to call for an end to the violence, but aerial bombardments under its auspices continued to kill civilians.⁶ For opposition groups and Western countries, this confirmed their concerns that the Russian-led congress was a smokescreen intended to buy time for the pro-Assad coalition forces (Russia, Iran and its proxies) to defeat opposition forces.

In terms of achieving results on the ground, it appears that the Astana talks were more effective than the Geneva talks. This is primarily because the Astana talks were led by the countries involved in the fighting, and as

such, these actors wield significant influence over the various players in Syria: Russia and Iran are patrons of the Assad regime, and Turkey is an ally of the rebel groups that are not part of the Salafist jihadi movement. Moreover, the Astana talks set several key precedents: (a) they facilitated cooperation between Moscow and Ankara and a thaw in bilateral ties; (b) they legitimized Iranian political involvement within Syria, on top to its military activity; and (c) they brought about a change in the nature and structure of the opposition delegation to the various diplomatic initiatives. For the first time, the opposition delegation was composed of forces actually present in Syria, rather than representatives without influence based mainly outside the country.

The Assad regime opposed the Geneva process, but under Russian pressure agreed to cooperate with the Astana talks and the Sochi congress. The Russians claim that they invited the United States to join these talks (a US representative was sent to Astana as an observer), and during the G20 Economic Conference in Hamburg in July 2017, President Putin received the support of President Trump for the creation of a de-escalation zone in southern Syria. In June 2018 representatives of the three countries at Astana met in Geneva to lay the foundations for a committee to amend the Syrian constitution. UN Special Envoy de Mistura was also present at this meeting, and announced that a list of candidates for the committee had been drawn up, and that preliminary understandings were reached. Thus Russia's coordinated efforts to recruit additional actors and increase its influence on events were more successful at Astana than at the Sochi talks.⁷

So far the original goals of the Geneva talks have not been realized, including a new constitution and elections. The lack of progress in the Geneva talks is not just the result of Western weakness compared to continued Russian and Iranian entrenchment in the Syrian conflict, but also due to the UN's helplessness because of significant differences in the positions of the various actors involved. The opposition is characterized by a large number of actors with diverse interests and agendas, and the disputes between the opposition delegates and the government have focused on the future character of Syria.

On the other hand, the decisions taken at Astana have directly affected events in Syria. This is illustrated by the establishment of de-escalation zones and checkpoints manned by Russian military police, the deployment of Turkish troops around Idlib, and the formation of the Syrian Constitutional Congress. Yet even these decisions have at times served mainly to advance

the goals of the pro-Assad coalition led by Russia and Iran, and have tended to change according to their respective operational needs on the ground. For example, when Russia decided that the timing was right for an attack in southern Syria, it announced that the de-escalation zone there was no longer in effect. Therefore, although it can be argued that the Astana and Sochi channels are more effective than the talks in Geneva or Vienna, it is doubtful whether any diplomatic process led by Russia will achieve an even-handed resolution to the conflict. Instead, the Russian-led talks tend to focus on legitimizing the military achievements of the Assad regime, by providing a diplomatic and multi-national stamp of approval. Concurrently, it appears that the military actions of the pro-Assad coalition, rather than any negotiations, are determining the future outlook for Syria.

A decisive point of friction between the parties involved in the diplomatic efforts is the question of which channel should lead the political process. While the West supported the UN-led Geneva process, Russia tried to push the Astana process and the Sochi congress as alternative channels under its full control, even though it itself was part of the Geneva process. Russia wanted to retain the lion's share of influence over events. Nevertheless, the Syrian opposition is divided over its willingness to cooperate with Russia, arguing that Moscow is only interested in securing the future of the Assad regime. Moreover, the government and the rebels have never talked directly with each other, in any diplomatic forum.

The Assad regime does not feel committed to the Geneva talks, and tends rather to support Astana and Sochi. Years of warfare have weakened the work of the UN, partly because of the repeated use by the Russians of their veto, in order to undermine any Security Council resolutions that attempt to address the conflict in Syria. The meeting in Geneva under the auspices of the UN in December 2018 between Staffan de Mistura and the foreign ministers of Russia, Iran, and Turkey was a symbolic victory for the Astana process. This is because the UN diplomats leading the Geneva process learned that even their own initiatives will to a large extent play second fiddle to the talks at Astana, which wield decisive influence on the ground and therefore also at the negotiating table.⁸

The Obstacles to a Political Solution

Several issues have frustrated and continue to obstruct a political agreement. First, there is the question of which rebel organizations are legitimate and which constitute Salafist jihadi terror groups that deserve no part

in the political process. Disagreements on this issue have led Turkey to strengthen its ties to organizations that Russia and the West have defined as terrorists. Similarly, the Assad regime and Russia have bombed groups they considered terrorists, while signing ceasefire agreements with other rebel groups. Moreover, throughout the civil war, rebel organizations have united and split frequently, while Salafist jihadi elements have actually grown stronger in the face of the weakness of the less extreme rebel groups, such as the Free Syrian Army.

Second, there is the question of Assad's future: until his regime strengthened its military position on the ground, most Syrian opposition elements, as well as Turkey, Sunni Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia, and most Western countries demanded Assad's removal from the presidency, as a condition for a future settlement. The Syrian government (with Russian and Iranian backing) was not prepared to compromise on this matter.⁹ However, the opposition has recently moderated its stance on this issue, due to changes in the balance of forces. Turkey has also demonstrated a more moderate line toward the Assad regime, and the Turkish Foreign Minister announced that his country was ready to work with Bashar al-Assad if he were to emerge the winning candidate in free democratic elections.

For their part, the Arab countries, which suspended Syria's membership in the Arab League in 2011, have showed an increased willingness to bring President Assad back into the fold of Arab states, by proposing a series of confidence building measures. In September 2018, at the fringes of the UN General Assembly, there was a meeting between the foreign ministers of Syria and Bahrain, which included embraces and mutual flattery. Since then, Bahrain has announced that like the United Arab Emirates, it is working to reopen its embassy in the Syrian capital; a high level Jordanian delegation visited Damascus; and in December 2018, Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir made the first visit to Syria by leader of an Arab country since the start of the war, while a Syrian delegation visited Cairo.¹⁰ These events suggest that the survival of the Assad regime may now be less of an obstacle to a diplomatic agreement. However, some Arab states, particularly Saudi Arabia, are still unwilling to help reconstruct Syria and stabilize its government while Iran continues to entrench itself there.¹¹

A third obstacle is the dispute over the future character of Syria. The United States and Russia support a united country with a decentralized government and autonomy for certain communities, such as the Kurds in the northeast. The Assad regime and Iran, however, want a strong

government that is even more centralized than before the outbreak of the civil war. Turkey supports autonomy for the Sunnis in northern Syria, but opposes autonomy for the Kurds, and in March 2018 even captured the Kurdish Afrin district. The Assad regime has not agreed to proposals from the Geneva and Sochi talks, which concern the division of government powers, the establishment of a transitional government, powers to be granted to the opposition and voting rights for Syrian refugees, reforms in the state security apparatus, a long term ceasefire, and free elections.

Finally, the main dispute that has hampered the political process is the question of foreign forces in Syria. Russia seeks a fairly rapid withdrawal of foreign forces, while Iran wants to continue entrenching its military and political presence in Syria, maintaining its proxies – the Shiite militias and Hezbollah – and furthering its aims of changing the demographics in areas that are essential to it, such as along the Syria-Lebanon border. Meanwhile, Turkey has entrenched itself in northern Syria and worked to limit the spread of areas under Kurdish control. Turkey has established closely supervised Sunni autonomy in areas that it perceives as essential to its national interests, such as Afrin. Turkey is also considering extending this arrangement to Idlib. Because of the expected American withdrawal from Syria and its possible abandonment of its Kurdish allies, it is likely that Turkey will strengthen its hold in northern Syria, and it is not expected to withdraw in the near future.

What to Expect? More of the Same

As the Assad regime continues to retake control of rebel territory in Syria, it will probably adopt a more inflexible position, in order to deny the opposition any political power and influence. The Assad regime has even managed to divide the rebel organizations, by incorporating the less extreme ones within the regime's forces. However, it appears that this policy will extend for a limited period only, until the regime can establish its rule and settle accounts with the rebels. In terms of internal politics, the main lesson the Assad regime has learned is that it must strengthen its internal security forces and establish local militias of supporters, with Iranian assistance and direction, and thereby prevent any future insurgencies. In other words, the regime is likely to tighten control and reject any diplomatic efforts calling on it to become more open to active participation by Syrian citizens in the political system. With the help of its allies, the Assad regime will probably exploit the vacuum left by the American withdrawal, and with the help of

Iranian directed militias, continue to expand its control of regions in the Syrian desert and near the border between Syria and Iraq. This will give the regime a stronger grip on the territory and thus make it unwilling to accept any political compromise or introduce future reforms. Changes in the policy of Arab states also put the regime in a comfortable position between two hawkish camps (led by Saudi Arabia on the one hand and Iran on the other) that are both interested in closer ties with the Assad regime.

Another failure of the political process is that the three countries intervening in Syria, the members of the Astana forum, are growing further apart in their views over the future of Syria. Turkey, which is about to lose its influence in Idlib (the last stronghold of Sunni rebel elements) as the regime prepares to retake territory there, feels betrayed by Russia and Iran, which prevented it from deriving the maximum benefit from the talks between the umbrella organization of the rebels under its influence, the National Liberation Front, and the umbrella organization of the Salafist jihadi rebels, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham. Following the US withdrawal from Syria, Turkey will probably strengthen its grip in the north and adopt harsher measures against the Kurds, particularly since President Trump declared that President Erdogan is someone who can continue the struggle against the Islamic State. In these circumstances, Turkey's ambitions to set up a security zone under its control along the Syrian side of the border seem more achievable than ever. Thus it is not clear if, when, and how Turkey will withdraw its forces from northern Syria – something that will make the political process even more complex and contribute to the divergence in the positions of the Astana countries over Syria's future.¹²

Russia and Iran also have different views on the future of Syria. The Iranians want to reinforce their long term influence in Syria with the help of a strong, central government led by Bashar al-Assad. This would allow them to maintain their strongholds, and perhaps even extend their control in the Syrian desert regions and along the Syria-Iraq border, once the US forces evacuate the al-Tanf base. On the other hand, Russia believes that in order to maintain stability, all foreign forces must leave Syria (apart from Russia, which has an agreement with the regime to continue to maintain its bases along the coast). In addition, Russia asserts that it is essential to consider the

The regime is likely to tighten control and reject any diplomatic efforts calling on it to become more open to active participation by Syrian citizens in the political system.

balance of forces within the country and give more power to the regional and local councils that manage the daily lives of the population. Thus once the Assad regime takes control of the Idlib district with the backing of the Russian-Iranian coalition, the Astana forum will likely have completed its role in the management of the war.

The Geneva channel will continue to focus on the reorganization of the Syrian political system, and on finding a formula for national consensus and extending participation in the political process. At the same time, this channel will be engaged in Syrian reconstruction and the return of the refugees. Here too problems are expected, due to the Assad regime's unwillingness to share political power or work toward the return of the Sunni refugees, and due to the difficulty in recruiting Arab and Western support for rebuilding Syria, as long as the Assad regime controls the country and Iran's influence remains unconstrained. As such, little progress can be expected from the Geneva talks, which from the start has not been very effective. Notwithstanding the eulogy delivered against the Astana process in early December 2018 by United States Special Representative to Syria James Jeffrey, the three countries leading the Astana process have been invited to participate in the international discussions at the UN on the future of Syria, at a time that the US is withdrawing. Because of the polarization among the parties, when de Mistura met with the foreign ministers of Iran, Turkey, and Russia in December 2018, they were unable to reach agreement over the composition of the Syrian Constitutional Committee. The only real chance of rebuilding Syria will be for Russia and the United States to find a way to cooperate, and seek to mutually reinforce openness by incorporating opposition elements into the political system. But in spite of the potential for a shared role in the future of Syria – since both Russia and the US advocate a more politically decentralized Syrian state, and both want the withdrawal of foreign forces as soon as possible – it appears that the chances of any substantive cooperation are nil. The fundamental commitment of both the Russia and the US to regional players with opposing interests prevents them acting on a mutually cooperative basis, and the result is a weakened political process. The withdrawal of the US from Syria will not increase the potential for Russia-US cooperation, because the exit of US forces will only further erode its regional status and the perception that it has abandoned local allies.

Implications for Israel

Israel announced that it would not intervene in the Syrian civil war as long as it was not under direct threat, since it has no territorial designs over the country. In fact, Israel has shunned all diplomatic processes that attempt to shape the future of Syria, and has de facto accepted Assad and his government as the ruling party. Israel did not manage to make its non-intervention conditional on its continued control of the Israeli-controlled side of the Golan Heights, the formation of a security coordination mechanism, or the creation of channels for dialogue to prevent accidents and reduce tension. Nor did Israel try to influence the Assad regime's position on Iranian involvement in Syria. Even if it were invited, Israel is not interested in being part of the Geneva forum, in case the question of returning the Golan Heights comes up, particularly considering Staffan de Mistura's declarations concerning the "withdrawal of all foreign forces from Syria." Israel considers this position as putting the legitimacy of its presence in the western Golan Heights at risk.

The main Israeli objective at this time is to block the entrenchment of Iran and its proxies in Syria, while preventing the development and transfer of strategic capabilities and advanced military infrastructures to the Syrian government or to Hezbollah. Israel has little choice but to accept the continued survival of the Assad regime, at least for the foreseeable future, with responsibility for seeking stability and minimizing the chances for the return of Salafist jihadi groups to the northern border. In the context of Syrian reconstruction, Arab and Western countries are making their aid conditional on Iranian withdrawal. However, due to continued Iranian entrenchment on the ground and with the political process effectively led by Russia, Iran, and Turkey, this may not be a realistic demand. Israel understands that it has been left to face Iranian efforts alone (mainly due to the US withdrawal), and thus must continue its military activity with tactical and kinetic actions, while promoting bilateral talks with Russia and the US to achieve its goals and reduce friction as much as possible. Within the political sphere, though, there does not seem to be room for Israel at the international negotiating table, nor any Israeli inclination to be involved.

Israel understands that it has been left to face Iranian efforts in Syria alone, and thus must continue its military activity with tactical and kinetic actions, while promoting bilateral talks with Russia and the US.

In conclusion, the various diplomatic processes affecting the situation in Syria will probably be more influenced by events on the ground than vice versa. Concurrently, many diplomatic initiatives have served to veil the military actions of the pro-Assad coalition thinly, while maintaining the appearance of their participation in international processes. Diplomatic initiatives will likely continue to encounter difficulties and be ineffective, and ultimately the future of Syria will be determined by the distribution of military assets on the ground. Therefore, Israel must continue to maintain its deterrence and work toward realizing its interests, without pinning its hopes on the diplomatic sphere.

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France's Role in Syrian Reconstruction, and the Implications for Israel

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After almost eight years of brutal violence, the Syrian civil war is nearing a conclusion. The ultimate outcome of this conflict and the subsequent reconstruction of Syria are of utmost importance to Israel, which will need to rely on the actions of other parties in the arena with interests similar to its own. France is one such party. The French strategic interest in Syria spans decades, and since the outbreak of the civil war and the rise of the Islamic State, France has paid renewed attention to Syria. France now has now the largest Western military presence in Syria and is one of the leading providers of humanitarian aid. With the end of the war in sight, France also needs to evaluate how it can play a role in Syrian reconstruction. This article investigates the possible French involvement in the reconstruction process, focusing on the challenges President Macron will face in Syria, particularly in terms of coordination with key allies such as the United States and the European Union. Finally, the article discusses the implications of French involvement in Syria for Israeli security.

Keywords: France, Syria, reconstruction, civil war, Israel, European Union, United States

France and Syria have maintained close ties over many years. Their cultural and historical connection was formalized following the end of World War I, when France assumed a League of Nations mandate for Syria (and Lebanon). Between 1920 and 1946, France had control of economic and educational institutions that affected the lives of most Syrians. Since the end of the Mandate, however, Franco-Syrian relations have gone through numerous upheavals. In 2000, for example, French President Jacques Chirac attended

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Syrian President Hafez al-Assad's funeral, the only Western leader to do so.¹ However, relations soured in 2005 after Chirac blamed Syria for the assassination of Chirac's close friend, Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri.² Syria then entered a phase of isolation, and efforts to re-integrate it into the family of nations were only launched following the election of French President Nicolas Sarkozy, who proposed that Syria join the Union for the Mediterranean – a platform for enhanced regional cooperation and dialogue involving the European Union and 15 countries in the southern and eastern Mediterranean.³ However, Syria suspended its membership in December 2011 following the outbreak of the civil war and the imposition of sanctions by the EU.

French Involvement following the Outbreak of the Civil War

Since the beginning of the civil war, French leaders have made it clear that the removal of President Bashar al-Assad is a top priority. France was the first country to join the United States-led coalition against ISIS, and in that context, supplied anti-Assad opposition forces with logistical support and military aid. Throughout the conflict, France has continued to insist that President Assad must resign in order for the war to end.⁴ The United States, by contrast, realized earlier on that viable alternatives to Assad's leadership had been exhausted and announced in 2017 that it would agree to Assad's remaining in power until the next scheduled election in 2021.⁵

France has also firmly articulated its staunch opposition to the use of chemical weapons. Following the deadly strike in 2013 in the area of Ghouta, President François Hollande called for military intervention, and in 2015, France began small scale airstrikes on Assad's chemical weapon facilities. After the deadly November 2015 attacks in Paris, France justified its intensified intervention against the Islamic State by citing self-defense and invoking Article 51 of the United Nations Charter and Article 42.7 of the European Union.⁶

Due to its strong opposition to the Assad leadership and its determination to fight against the Islamic State, France has repeatedly declared its support for the rebel opposition forces. By 2014, President Hollande confirmed the delivery of arms to the Syrian rebels, based on the conviction that only the non-Islamist rebels were committed to a democratic process in the country.⁷ France's tough stance in the Syrian conflict enhanced its self-perception as a great power and justified its involvement in security operations with Western allies.⁸

Challenges Facing President Macron

Like his predecessors, Macron has two main goals in Syria: to defeat the Islamic State, and to install a fair political process in Syria. France is a key partner in the global coalition against the Islamic State, which works to retake territories held by the Islamic State and ensure stability in those areas. A residual challenge for France is posed by French citizens who fought with the Islamic State and are returning home with their children. Of the European citizens who enlisted with the Islamic State, the largest contingent is French (about 42 percent of all European foreign fighters). However, of the 1,910 French foreign fighters, only 225 (12 percent) have returned to France.⁹

France's role in the coalition has become even more vital following President Donald Trump's announcement in December 2018 of the planned withdrawal of US troops from Syria. When this occurs in 2019, Macron will become commander of the largest Western force in Syria. Although there are no precise numbers of French troops actually present, Turkish media reported in March 2018 that there were 70 French soldiers serving as advisors to the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in northeastern Syria and an estimated 200 special forces operating in the country.¹⁰ As the United States withdraws, the SDF and the Kurdish People's Protection Unit (YGP) will become more vulnerable both to residual Islamic State forces and to Turkish and Turkish-supported Arab Islamists. Macron's commitment to the SDF and YPG, therefore, becomes even more critical. France has provided arms and training to the YGP-led militia, which has been an essential partner in the fight against the Islamic State, and in late March 2018, he welcomed a delegation of SDF officials to the Elysée Palace. There he reiterated his commitment to the Kurds by providing French troops to support them, and expressed his hope for an inclusive and balanced leadership in northeastern Syria within the appropriate framework.¹¹ After Trump's announcement, the Kurds urged France to play a bigger role in Syria.¹²

Ultimately, the only kind of true economic influence that France and the EU have over Syria is through the sectoral sanctions. These are hardly powerful enough to convince Assad to step aside, but they may persuade him to make smaller compromises.

The French government has also provided significant humanitarian assistance packages. In April 2018, the Secretary of State to the Minister of Europe, Jean-Baptiste Lemoyne, announced that France's contribution in 2018-2020 would be over 1 billion euros

(250 million euros in grants and 850 million euros in loans).¹³ France has also been an active member of the Syria Recovery Trust Fund (SRTF), which provides assistance in projects ranging from water and sanitation to electricity, education, and waste management.¹⁴ Over the course of the civil war, France has contributed 20 million euros, making it the second largest donor (after Germany) among the European countries involved.¹⁵

Insofar as political outcomes are concerned, Macron's government has repeatedly stated that it wants a stable and legitimate solution to Syria, with free and fair elections.¹⁶ As part of the international community, France agreed to the adoption of the Geneva Communiqué of 2012, thus stipulating that the reconstruction of Syria should be agreed among Syrian factions under the supervision of the United Nations Special Envoy. In a speech in August 2018, Macron told his ambassadors that having President Assad remain in power would be a major mistake but that it was not up to France to appoint the future leaders of Syria. That said, Macron also emphasized that the removal of Assad was not a precondition for sending foreign aid to Syrian society, and that France would continue to do so.¹⁷

Like Israel, France has become increasingly worried about Iranian influence in Syria.¹⁸ While Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Macron may not see eye to eye regarding the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action agreement (JCPOA), Macron has been vocal on Iranian influence in the region and has strongly condemned it. Furthermore, in October 2018, the French government froze the assets of specific Iranian intelligence officials directly linked to a foiled bomb plot in Paris.¹⁹ French authorities had reportedly been alerted to suspicious activity by the Mossad and took

significant steps against the Iranian regime.²⁰ On the other hand, France, together with Germany, has tried to set up a back channel to maintain trade with Iran and bypass US sanctions.²¹ This channel may possibly provide France with some leverage over Iranian behavior in Syria.

Although Macron has been vociferously critical of Assad's leadership, he has also shown that he can work with other leaders involved in the conflict. In July, for example, he met with Russian President

Apart from the JCPOA, French and Israeli interests with respect to Iran and the Iranian presence in Syria overlap, and there is room for productive consultation between the two countries.

Vladimir Putin to discuss a joint humanitarian aid initiative. This initiative has been seen as a test of the French President's negotiating skills in dealing with Russia, which has a clear interest in maintaining President Assad in

power. After the meeting, France and Russia announced that they had reached a deal to deliver 44 tons of humanitarian cargo to the population of Eastern Ghouta. France gave the Russians a chance to see if they were as committed to the needs of the Syrian civilians. Although the two leaders agreed to send the aid under UN auspices, the UN denied that it was ever involved. Instead, Russian aircraft delivered the cargo into the hands of the Syrian regime, and it cannot be demonstrated that it went to meet the needs of civilians.²² For Macron, this proved that Russia's priority is maintaining the Syrian regime rather than helping civilians in need.

With the end of the civil war in sight, France must consider its role in Syria's reconstruction, which the United Nations estimates will cost \$250 billion.²³ Macron too will have to accept that for the foreseeable future, the only real alternative to dealing with Assad is abandoning any pretense at contributing to the reconstruction of a more stable Syria. This reality has implications for Israel.

President Macron's Challenges with the United States and the European Union

The cooperation of France and the United States in Syria is of high importance, but the planned withdrawal of the United States will leave France as the only Western power with "boots on the ground" in Syria. Prime Minister Netanyahu announced that the withdrawal of US troops will not affect Israeli policy, which will continue to act against Iran's attempts to entrench itself in the region.²⁴ Although that may well be the case, Israel would clearly prefer to coordinate actions with others. For Israel, there may be no true substitute for partnership with the United States, even absent a direct American military presence in Syria, but in the new reality following American withdrawal, the value of Franco-Israeli consultations will clearly be enhanced.

Of course, France will also want to coordinate closely with the European Union. The Syrian civil war has affected many EU member states, not least because of the influx of refugees seeking relief from the violence and depredations of both ISIS and the Assad regime. The EU has provided massive humanitarian assistance to those in need and has mobilized over 10.8 billion euros from its member states, making the EU the leading supplier of international relief. Furthermore, in 2011, the EU suspended its cooperation with the Syrian government and began implementing sanctions. These sanctions target the oil sector in particular, but the EU

has also frozen assets of individuals with the Syrian central bank. In total, 259 individuals and 67 entities are targeted by an EU-wide travel ban, due to their role in the violent oppression of Syrian civilians.²⁵

At the same time, divergent perspectives on Syria clearly exist within the EU. When the United Kingdom, the United States, and France conducted airstrikes on regime facilities in April 2018, the EU took its time to react and then released a statement to the effect that it “understands” the actions the three countries took but called for the urgent resumption of peace talks that could finally end the civil war.²⁶ The Union then organized the Brussels II conference in which all participating countries agreed to maintain the flow of financial assistance. However, participants produced no new ideas regarding a political solution to the conflict, instead merely restating their support for Security Council Resolution 2254 and the Geneva Communiqué and their position that the only viable solution was to implement a fair political process.²⁷ The event proved to be simply another gathering of countries reaffirming their humanitarian promises, and it highlighted how most European countries have very little desire to participate in the political rehabilitation of Syria. Indeed, some have questioned whether the reconstruction of Syria constitutes a genuine national interest. These inhibitions have left France as the only EU member with a militarily and politically significant role in Syria.

In October, Macron met with Russian President Vladimir Putin, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Istanbul to discuss solutions to the civil war. As expected, however, no significant result emerged from these discussions. All four leaders agreed that the best solution would come from a political process, not from military action.²⁸ Meanwhile, Assad’s forces, backed by Russian airpower, have recaptured significant stretches of Syria. Only the northern Idlib province remains in rebel hands. Russia and Turkey agreed earlier to de-escalate there because intensified fighting could well produce a humanitarian disaster.

France and Germany are keen to see a political solution that reduces the pressure of refugees seeking asylum in Europe.²⁹ And as the post-war stage of rehabilitation approaches, Russia has called on European nations to help. However, many European countries do not have the available funds or the direct interest driving them to participate in Syrian reconstruction. German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas has stated that Germany is willing to help with reconstruction on condition that Assad is removed from power. France too wants to see a diplomatic solution. And since Russia itself cannot

afford to repair all of the damage in Syria, the appeal for financial assistance from France and Germany gives the latter some potential leverage over Moscow. France, together with Germany, might also have some influence over Iran via the back channel on trade. Ultimately, however, the only kind of true economic influence that France and the European Union have over Syria is through the sectoral sanctions. These are hardly powerful enough to convince Assad to step aside, but they may persuade him to make smaller compromises.

Implications for Israel

Given the impending departure of US troops from Syria, France seems likely to become the Western country with the greatest influence in Syrian affairs and the greatest potential to limit Iranian presence in Syria. France's promotion of a back channel for trade and investment with Iran in an attempt to mitigate US sanctions potentially gives the French some direct leverage on Tehran. France is also apprehensive about Iran's attempts to create a Shia land bridge over the Middle East (and about Iranian involvement in French internal affairs). For all these reasons, French and Israeli interests with respect to Iran (apart from the JCPOA) and the Iranian presence in Syria overlap, and there is room for productive consultation between the two countries.

Conclusion

France's role in Syrian reconstruction is potentially significant. Given French history and foreign interests, President Macron will want to be involved. Nevertheless, to do so constructively, Macron will first have to reconcile himself to Assad's remaining in power, even at the expense of France's commitment to a peaceful and fair resolution of the conflict and the institution of a democratic process. If that happens, then French sanctions on Syria may give Macron some leverage over Assad, as does the trade channel with Iran, which provides some potential influence in Tehran. The impact of these tools should not be overestimated, but neither are they negligible. This means that a continued French presence in Syria can be compatible with Israeli security interests.

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Egypt's Identity during the el-Sisi Era: Profile of the "New Egyptian"

Ofir Winter and Assaf Shiloah

From the beginning of his presidency – and particularly since his second term of office began in June 2018 – Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi has promoted an official campaign to shape Egyptian national identity and create a “new Egyptian.” Various actors are part of the campaign, which has received much coverage in the established media and in conferences dedicated to the young generation. An analysis of the campaign reveals two main themes: first, the “new Egyptian” is conceptualized as an antithesis to “the Islamist other”; second, the Egyptian identity is built as a rich mosaic composed of seven pillars – Pharaonic, Greco-Roman, Coptic, Islamic, Arab, Mediterranean, and African. The official identity discourse decries the clear preference that the Muslim Brotherhood attributes to the Islamic layer of Egypt’s character, and is intent on uniting the Egyptian public around the regime’s political, economic, and social agenda and improving its international image. Yet despite the regime’s efforts to inculcate a new identity, its messages are challenged by competing forces, and it is too early to assess to what extent they are internalized by the general Egyptian public.

Keywords: Egypt, national identity, Egyptian personality, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, Muslim Brotherhood

Egyptian author Fathy Embaby has likened the contemporary struggle over Egypt’s identity to a game of musical chairs, with identities standing up and sitting down – with one difference: the identity left without a chair

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does not leave the game, but rather, waits for the next round in order to recapture its seat.¹ Indeed, the last one hundred years have seen changes in the balance of power between competing perspectives on Egypt's identity, ranging from particularistic nationalism, which advocates "Egypt First" and considers the Nile Valley as a primary context for Egyptian loyalty, to supra-national identities that perceive Egypt as part of broader collective frameworks (Islamic, Arab frameworks).² In rough terms, particularistic Egyptian nationalism flowered during the 1920s and 1930s; throughout President Nasser's reign, Egypt's affiliation with the Arab world was emphasized; in 1928, the Muslim Brotherhood was founded as an Islamist alternative to the existing political order, but reached the government only during the presidency of Mohamed Morsi.

The upheavals that Egypt experienced following the January 25, 2011 and June 30, 2013 events had no clear and agreed ideological approaches toward national identity. Rather, they prompted competing forces to exploit the transitional stage to forge Egypt's future character according to their respective world views. Liberal activists advocated taking a pluralistic democratic direction that would ensure civil equality and focus on promoting Egypt's particular affairs;³ the Muslim Brotherhood sought to channel their victory in the parliamentary and presidential elections to institutionalize the Islamization of Egypt, and managed to enact a constitution in 2012 that inter alia established that Egypt is part of the Islamic nation;⁴ the Salafist jihadi organization Ansar Bait al-Maqdis swore an oath of allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in 2014, and became Wilayat Sinai, the "Sinai Province" of the Islamic State.⁵

The identity debate intensified after the Muslim Brotherhood was ousted from the government in the June 30, 2013 revolution and evolved under the regime of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. The new leader attempted to mold an identity that suited his needs and policies and instill it among the young generation, while weakening competing and revolutionary identities – particularly the Islamist identity – that threaten his hegemonic agenda. Early in his second term of office, the regime launched a wide scale campaign toward "building the new Egyptian" (*binaa' al-insan al-masri al-jadid*), to forge the character of Egypt's young population, cultivate their identification with el-Sisi's policies, and encourage norms that are consistent with his goals.

The current discourse about the identity of the "new Egyptian" in statements by regime officials, articles in official newspapers, and conferences targeting the young generation includes two fundamental

components. First, there is a negative component that conceptualizes the Egyptian identity as the antithesis of the Islamist identity advocated by the Muslim Brotherhood. While during Nasser's rule, the image of "the other," which the new Egyptian identity came to replace, was the West, colonialism, or Zionism, today, the Muslim Brotherhood fulfills this role. The second is a positive component, which presents the Egyptian personality as a multi-layered synthesis of identities: Pharaonic, Greco-Roman, Coptic, Islamic, Arabic, Mediterranean, and African. This construction constitutes an alternative to the prioritized positioning that was given to the Islamic layer in Muslim Brotherhood doctrine. However, it is too early to assess the extent of its assimilation into the general Egyptian society.

Egyptian Identity as the Antithesis of Islamism

The Tamarod coalition that led the demonstrations to oust the Muslim Brotherhood regime on June 30, 2013 was an opposition movement not supported by any organized or consensual ideological alternative. The idea that united the majority of its members, and the military that supported it, was concern about the Islamization processes instituted by the Muslim Brotherhood, such as the enactment of the constitution of 2012 and President Morsi's actions to expropriate authorities and push opposition groups from circles of influence.

The regime that rose to power after the June 30 revolution claimed that it rescued Egypt from a plot by a terrorist movement disguised as a democratic organization and from inevitable political, social, and economic destruction, which would have occurred were the Muslim Brotherhood to remain at the helm. Concurrently, the new regime launched a campaign about the Egyptian identity, focusing on the contrast between Egyptian citizens who are loyal to their homeland and Islamists who seek to undermine the legitimacy of the nation state and revert to the Islamic caliphate. This discourse served three main functions: first, to present the el-Sisi regime as the protector of the Egyptian identity, an outcome of a revolution that rescued Egypt from an existential threat that sought to convert its unique identity to a supra-Egyptian pan-Islamic vision;⁶ second, to legitimize the ousting of the Muslim Brotherhood government by describing it as an enemy that acts on behalf of ideas and forces foreign to Egypt and strives to fundamentally change the state's identity and hijack it from its citizens;⁷ third, to justify the iron fist that the regime wields against the movement

and its members, being “thieves of conscience and common sense, robbers of identity, and traitors to their homeland.”⁸

Already in his first interview to Egyptian television in May 2014, el-Sisi, then a presidential candidate, declared that the June revolution was launched by Egyptian citizens who were afraid of losing their identity.⁹ During a speech following his inauguration as President, el-Sisi argued that under the Muslim Brotherhood government, Egypt had experienced extreme polarization that nearly dragged the country into civil war and jeopardized its unity. Egypt, he argued, thwarted the plot, thanks to a “patriotic and united army that does not believe in any doctrine besides [the welfare] of our homeland.”¹⁰

The effectiveness of contrasting between patriotic Egyptians and “the other,” who undermines Egyptianism, derives from an authentic concern shared by many in Egypt about an Islamic theocracy, which was fueled at the time by the proliferation of the Islamic State. This contrast was able to forge national solidarity by negating Islamism, even without an orderly alternative vision and a firm perception of identity. However, over time, this proved to be insufficient. In his column in *al-Masry al-Youm* in November 2014, Mahmoud Kamal, a close associate of the President’s office, described the war over the abandoned identity between the Egyptian regime and the Islamist camp as a zero-sum game, and explained the necessity of building a positive national identity:

The battle [with the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafist jihadi forces] does not concern differences of opinion about the legitimacy of the ruler or about the regime’s economic and political trends, but rather, is about the continuing existence of the Egyptian homeland and country as we know it. This is a battle over Egypt’s culture and identity. [Although] the Egyptian identity is not secular, and religion has always been a component of its identity, it never was an exclusive component. The renaissance of Egyptian nationalism and the culture associated with it is the most important weapon needed to repel the current attack on Egyptian identity.¹¹

Building the “New Egyptian” in Response to Egypt’s Challenges

As his government became more established, el-Sisi began formulating a positive vision for Egypt’s future, which included economic reforms and ambitious development ventures. In tandem, he cultivated a discourse on identity to serve as an alternative to competing, primarily Islamist, debates

about identity. From el-Sisi's first term of office, a key role in formulating the new identity was assigned to the official religious establishment in Egypt. In November 2016, the Minister of Awqaf, Mohammad Mukhtar Jumaa, called for a dialogue whose objective is to "rebuild the Egyptian personality in a positive light."¹² A key figure in developing the discourse about the Egyptian identity is Usama al-Sayyid al-Azhari, the presidential advisor for religious affairs and a lecturer at al-Azhar University. Al-Azhari was appointed a parliamentary representative by el-Sisi in December 2015, and he undertook to devote himself to "reconstruct the Egyptian person" and strengthen Egyptian self-confidence in light of today's challenges.¹³ In his column in *al-Ahram* in September 2016 – which later was expanded into a book – he enumerated the unique qualities of the Egyptian persona, including steadfastness in the face of crises; strong roots; innovative capability; broad horizons; passion for development; cultural depth; and belief in God.¹⁴

The discourse about Egyptian identity gained momentum at the start of el-Sisi's second term of office. In his speech during his inauguration ceremony in June 2018, the President declared that building the Egyptian person is the country's top priority, in face of the attempts to undermine it.¹⁵ In July, he ordered his government to formulate an action plan on the subject of identity building,¹⁶ and Prime Minister Mostafa Madbouly announced the launch of a national policy for the young generation, for the purpose of building a "new Egyptian" who will be able "to reap the fruits of the economic reform."¹⁷ In September, Ministry of Education Spokesman Ahmed Khairy announced that the school curriculum for 2018-2019 would engage in strengthening the Egyptian identity.¹⁸ Efforts peaked with events dedicated to the young generation: the youth conference at the University of Cairo in July 2018, which included a special session on "building the new Egyptian," and the World Youth Forum in November, which adopted the seven pillars of the Egyptian identity as a leading motif. The events were organized by the Office of the President and were held under the auspices of the President and with his participation. The Ministry of Endowments, also recruited to join the President's efforts, held conferences on the subject of the Egyptian personality in July and in October.¹⁹

At the core of the establishment's identity campaign is the call to build a "new Egyptian" who is prepared for the political, economic, and security challenges facing Egypt. The call to "build a new person" is not unique to the el-Sisi regime. It appears in different countries throughout history, during times of revolutions, reforms, and dramatic changes, mainly under

authoritarian or totalitarian regimes.²⁰ The hegemonic government and intellectual elites designate the "new person" as a prototype, a utopian ideal that civilians should strive to achieve, and the development of that character involves active educational, cultural, and ideological efforts dictated from the top down.²¹

In modern Egypt, the concept of the "new person" has already undergone several permutations: during the al-Nahda period of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the challenging encounter with the West stimulated intellectual attempts to construct a new Egyptian national identity, such as through the book by Qasim Amin *The Character of the Modern Egyptian Woman*.²² Following the 1952 revolution by the Free Officers Movement, the regime preached pan-Arab nationalism focusing on the "new Arab," whose identity was intertwined with the fate of the Arab nation;²³ during the Sadat era, the regime returned "the Egyptian" to center stage in lieu of "the Arab," as part of the focus on Egypt's unique political and economic interests. This trend of particularism was reflected in books and articles that engaged in the "new Egyptian," in the law devoted to educating the population to be "Egyptians," and even in an anthropological project sponsored by the University of Alexandria entitled "Rehabilitation of the Egyptian."²⁴

The purpose of this call, in its current permutation, is to recruit state institutions to reconstruct the Egyptian's character after decades of neglect, in a way that will enable him to contribute to Egypt's cultural and scientific renaissance.²⁵ An article in *al-Ahram* called for a multi-discipline reorganization of systems: an education system that will cultivate productive citizens; religious institutions that will instill values of respect, order, cleanliness, and integrity; cultural institutions that will encourage creativity; art that will disseminate values of tolerance; and communications that will focus on the positive instead of the negative.²⁶ Above all, the "new Egyptian" needs to be enlisted in the ambitious economic projects that the regime is promoting, to be steadfast in the face of difficulties, and to bear painful reforms, which involve a slash in subsidies, a hike in the cost of living, and deepened poverty, at least in the short term. He is also a conformist to the regime, cooperating with its policies and recoiling from the revolutionary model manifested by the youth of Tahrir Square. As clarified in an article in *Rose al-Yusuf*, "The greatest challenge that our country is facing is in transforming the populace in Egypt from a burden

on development and on the national economy into productive citizenry who push the development cart."²⁷

Naturally, the efforts to build "the new Egyptian" focus on the young generation. Within this framework, the regime announced the promotion of a curriculum to prepare Egypt's youth for the challenges of the 21st century, emphasizing mathematics and the sciences and encouraging openness to the West by learning foreign languages.²⁸ The regime further strives to build a new young elite that will support the establishment's political agenda, see itself as a partner to its objectives and values, and acquire the tools needed to fulfill the role designated for it in domestic and foreign arenas. The cultivation of a loyal, educated, and productive elite that will produce leaders, public opinion leaders, and experts is done, *inter alia*, through the youth conferences inside Egypt and through the World Youth Forum. These events send a message to the young generation that the regime is attentive to their needs and wants to see them integrating in the efforts to build Egypt. These forums also serve as an educational framework to "strengthen cultural consciousness among the youth" and to shape their identity.²⁹

The Egyptian Identity Mosaic

The identity that the regime ascribes to the "new Egyptian" is composed of a mosaic of historic layers (Pharaonic, Coptic, Islamic, and Greco-Roman) and geographic layers (Arab, Mediterranean, and African) that together comprise the Egyptian personality. The establishment's synthesis of identities helps it to convey a series of messages to domestic and foreign target audiences: on the domestic plane, it creates a roof that can accommodate a broad spectrum of the Egyptian population, thereby constituting an antithesis to the polarizing identity that the Muslim Brotherhood represents; on the international plane, it is designed to improve Egypt's branding as a country possessing a moderate, tolerant, and cooperative character and capable of playing roles in promoting peace, stability, and anti-terrorist efforts, and is deserving of outside assistance to help it contend with its economic and security challenges.

The building of the Egyptian persona as a mosaic of identities was also prevalent in past intellectual writings about Egyptian identity.³⁰ The current innovation lies in the regime's official adoption of an approach that does not prioritize the Arab and Islamic layers of identity and link it to its core narrative. The initial signs of the described formulation and synthesis

of identities were evident in the 2014 constitution, which included new references to the Pharaonic, Coptic, Christian, and Mediterranean layers of Egypt's identity. The preamble to the constitution states that Egypt is "the heart of the whole world and the meeting point between civilizations and cultures," "the tip of Africa on the Mediterranean," and a country that sacrificed "thousands of martyrs in defense of the Church of Jesus"; the constitution states that "Islam is the religion of the state and Arabic is its official language" (Article 2), and "the Pharaonic, Coptic, and Islamic Egypt" constitute part of its material, moral, and cultural heritage (Article 50).³¹

This discourse about identities expanded early in el-Sisi's second term of office. During the youth conference in July 2018, a session attended by the President explored the subject of the strategy for building "the Egyptian person." The secretary-general of the youth wing of the al-Tagammu' political party, Alaa Azzam, delivered the keynote speech and emphasized that the Egyptian identity is not limited to the Islamic religion and the Arabic language, but rather includes components relating to Pharaonic history, Egypt's geographic location, and its cultural heritage. According to Azzam, the ancient Egyptians invented the idea of the state in order to govern the Nile River regime and established a state of law and order while other peoples lived as tribes, and exported sciences throughout the world during their contacts with the major philosophers of ancient Greece. Furthermore, Egypt embodies the harmonious golden path (*wasatiyya*): a geographic point where Europe, the Silk Road, and Africa intersect; the stronghold of religious moderation; a melting pot of civilizations; the cradle of monotheistic and pagan religions.³²

A significant layer was added to the identity-building during the World Youth Forum in November 2018 in Sharm el-Sheikh, sponsored by the President and attended by thousands of young people from Egypt and around the world. The main motif selected for the forum was the seven pillars of the Egyptian identity that appeared in the book (1990) by the intellectual Milad Hanna (1924-2012): Pharaonic, Coptic, Greco-Roman, Islamic, Arab, African, and Mediterranean,³³ and they were highlighted during the Forum through sculptures, pictures, and posters. The canonization of the definition of identity originally designed by Coptic Christian philosopher was highly symbolized, while a film screened during the opening ceremony defined Egypt as the meeting point between continents, religions, nations, and cultures.³⁴ Osama Saraya, formerly the editor in chief of *al-Ahram*, summarized the spirit of the conference: "Egypt...recognizes that the modern

Egyptian is Arab by language and culture, but even so, he is incapable of disengaging from the Pharaonic heritage enrooted in him, from the Greek influences, and from its Coptic history that is intertwined in its genealogy. The introduction of Islam imparted a new aspect to our identity, but this is an identity that cannot be limited to a particular period, since the Mediterranean culture also constitutes a part of us, and the African dimension is our future."³⁵

Furthermore, in its establishment version, each of Hanna's seven pillars of personality fulfills particular functions that help the regime weave continuous intricate links between the collective past and Egypt's contemporary political orientation. For example, the ancient Pharaonic civilization is described as a nostalgic golden age that can and should revitalize Egypt's achievements by inculcating its values in the "new Egyptian" in a variety of fields: science, technology, efficient authoritarian government, and collective cooperation in establishing mega-projects.³⁶ Alaa Thabet, editor of *al-Ahram*, called on the Egyptian people to delve deeply and draw on their heritage of scientific innovation and capacity for collective work, which characterized their Pharaonic ancestors, since "it is inconceivable that the descendants of the builders of the pyramids will be at the bottom rung of the ladder of modern culture."³⁷

Similarly, the Greco-Roman component emphasizes ancient Egypt's contribution to Western civilization, and signals Egypt's aspiration to once again serve as an intercultural meeting place, a hub of global trade, and a scientific lighthouse that is a magnet for the entire world.³⁸ The Mediterranean component gives tangible and instrumental validity to these messages, in light of the extensive cooperative efforts between Egypt, Greece, Cyprus, Israel, and Italy in the field of gas and energy. Nasser Kamel, an Egyptian diplomat currently the secretary-general of the Union for the Mediterranean, announced during the World Youth Forum that the Mediterranean Sea is one of the most important pillars of Egyptian identity, and expressed hope that the cooperative efforts between Egypt and other Mediterranean countries would be upgraded to a comprehensive strategic partnership.³⁹ Additionally, the Forum's magazine stated that Egypt and Mediterranean countries maintain a harmonious relationship today as they did in the past, in the fields of culture and economics, which constitutes a continuation of their relations in ancient times.⁴⁰

Compared to the innovation reflected in the revival of Egypt's Mediterranean orientation, the World Youth Forum cited the Arab component

and the African component in the context of rehabilitating Egypt's leading standing in the two geographic regions where it operated and wielded influence in earlier decades. In relation to the Arab pillar, the emphasis was placed on Egypt's cultural leadership, which was defined as "the beating heart of Arabism" since the Islamic conquest.⁴¹ In relation to the African pillar, the importance of Egypt was highlighted as a trade artery between Africa, Asia, and Europe for its efforts relating to the economic development of Africa, and for its historic and cultural relations with Nile Basin countries and the current need to cultivate and strengthen them.⁴²

The Coptic component and the Islamic component, jointly and independently, served to emphasize Egypt's openness and religious tolerance. During the World Youth Forum exhibition, reference was made to the tolerance that Christianity instilled in Egypt, and the Forum's magazine contained a statement that Christianity is no less authentic in Egypt than in the Vatican. The more dominant Islamic component was conceptualized in newspaper articles and during the Forum by emphasizing the continuity of the unifying nonviolent meetings between religions in Egypt since the initial days of Islam and up to the coexistence that prevails between them today. Similar continuity was attributed to the historic educational standing of the al-Azhar institution, "the fourth most important symbol of Islam," due to its current role in resuming religious discourse and in preaching moderate interpretations that are helpful to the global ideological battle against terrorism and Islamic radicalism.⁴³ The references to Egypt's tolerant character did not disregard Judaism. In December 2018, Minister of Antiquities Khaled al-Anany expressed support for Egypt's financial investment in renovating synagogues, because "the Jewish heritage is part of Egypt's heritage...and it is prioritized equally to the Pharaonic, Roman, Islamic, and Coptic heritages."⁴⁴

Significance

Given the upheaval in Egypt since the beginning of the decade, the definition of Egypt's identity has become a controversial issue. The ousting of the Muslim Brotherhood from power in 2013 thwarted the fulfillment of the Islamist vision and created an "identity vacuum" that was gradually filled by the el-Sisi regime, which presented an ideal example of a "new Egyptian" to its citizens – one who is patriotic, supports the sciences, productive, moderate, tolerant, conformist and possesses a multi-layered identity. The most significant challenge facing the campaign to build the "new

Egyptian" is to ensure that the discourse trickles from the top down, from the government to the general Egyptian public.

The campaign has strengths and weaknesses: on the one hand, the regime can reach broad audiences through the education system and the mass media, which are under its control, and impact on small focus groups, such as through the youth conferences. Furthermore, the identity mosaic that the regime preaches is perceived by many Egyptians as authentic, since it encompasses historic, religious, and cultural realities, alongside Egypt's interests in the geographic circles where it operates – in the Arab, Mediterranean, and African arenas. Moreover, the agenda expresses the broad national consensus that currently prevails in Egypt about the need to prioritize domestic affairs over foreign affairs (a position supported by 84 percent of Egyptians).⁴⁵ The regime does not disregard the traditional supra-Egyptian layers of Egypt's personality, but it conceptualizes its links to them in an instrumental manner, while prioritizing their impacts on the robustness of the Egyptian nation-state in the channels of economic development, security stability, scientific advancement, religious tolerance, and civil solidarity.

On the other hand, unlike under Nasser and Sadat, who during their incumbencies enjoyed a wide monopoly over the agents of socialization when designing the "new Egyptian," the current regime operates in a multi-voice media reality of satellite channels, websites, and social networks, which make it difficult to maintain tight control over the discourse. The regime can attract a narrow elite, but inculcating an identity, norms, and values among the masses requires complex efforts of persuasion, which are exposed to major challenges from competing forces and factions. According to a survey by the Washington Institute, the Muslim Brotherhood still enjoys at least a "somewhat positive" opinion among about one third of the Egyptian population, despite the delegitimization campaign waged against it and the fact that the organization was outlawed.⁴⁶ Their supporters are obviously appalled by the regime's attempt to position the Islamic pillar of the Egyptian identity on par with other pillars. Furthermore, among the regime's critics, including some liberals, are those who consider the campaign to build the "new Egyptian" a cynical attempt to cultivate a disciplined and obedient young generation that is required to acquiesce to an identity that is dictated from above, without any ability to influence or appeal it. Critics are also pointing out internal contradictions in the establishment's narrative: calls for openness to the rest of the world, alongside the regime's

suppression of internal dialogue; slogans about pluralism, acceptance of "the other" and religious tolerance, alongside continuation of the practices of discrimination, persecution, and oppression.⁴⁷

Since the assimilation of identity and the building of the "new Egyptian" are long range processes, and since the efforts of the Egyptian regime in these directions are still underway, it is too early to assess the prospects for success. Their outcomes will be determined according to the regime's ability to convey its messages to the young generation and, more importantly, to back them up with an effective, credible, and consistent policy that will draw the "new Egyptian" toward the new reality, which it so desperately needs.

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Control of the Global Technology Market: The Battle of the Superpowers

Hiddai Segev and Galia Lavi

In early December 2018, Meng Wanzhou, CFO of Huawei and the daughter of the company's founder, was arrested in Canada at Vancouver Airport. The arrest was made at the request of the United States, for an alleged breach of American and European sanctions on Iran. While the Chinese government strongly condemned the arrest and demanded Meng's release, the incident highlighted the broader struggle between the United States and China for control of the global technology market and the future international standards in this field. Israel, which enjoys special strategic relations with the US and growing trade relations with China, must choose its moves wisely to avoid being caught in the inter-power struggle.

Keywords: China, United States, Huawei, communications, networks, 5G

In early December 2018, Meng Wanzhou, CFO of Huawei and the daughter of the company's founder, was arrested in Canada at Vancouver Airport. According to the indictment filed against her, in the years 2009-2014 Huawei operated in Iran through a subsidiary called Skycom. If Meng is found guilty of deceiving the banks regarding the link between the companies, she faces 30 years in prison. Although the arrest came immediately after the meeting of US President Donald Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping at the G20 Summit in Buenos Aires, where the trade war crisis between the two powers was clearly on the agenda, there may not be a direct link between the two events. The Chinese government strongly condemned the arrest and demanded Meng's release, but the incident highlighted the broader struggle between the United States and China for control of the global technology market and the future international standards in this field.

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This article examines the essence of the struggle, presents the responses of various countries, and proposes recommendations for Israel. In order for Israel to protect its good relations with both the United States and China and avoid being injured in the crossfire, it must take three steps: maintain an ongoing dialogue with the United States and Western countries; define suitable review processes; and set up a mechanism for clear communication with China.

The Struggle for Future Global Control

The United States and China are struggling for control of the global technology market in general, and for the infrastructure for fifth generation (5G) networks in particular. These networks make it possible to transfer data at a speed of 1 gigabyte per second, ten times faster than today's 4G networks, and they enable advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), the internet of things (IoT), and big data to work much faster. Control of communications networks is a strategic asset that affects governments, technology companies, industries, and people, since it allows control of the flow of information and governs how it is stored and utilized for commercial, security, and strategic needs. Therefore, both the United States and China have an interest in determining international standards in the field and thereby control future access to the networks.

The United States is working energetically to be the leader in this technology race. Its national defense strategy for 2018 explicitly states that it seeks to promote big data and AI technologies, in order to have an advantage over its rivals. In October 2018, President Trump signed a presidential memorandum with instructions for long term national strategic planning on this issue, and announced the formation of a team in the White House to guide federal authorities, in conjunction with the private sector, on the utilization of 5G networks. At the same time, leading internet providers in the United States such as Verizon, AT&T, and T-Mobile began to examine the use of 5G networks.¹

China too considers anything relating to 5G as supremely important, and it has often declared its wish to be a world leader in the new networks in accordance with its national vision of Made in China 2025; the goal is to promote its industry and economy and make China independent in the development and manufacture of advanced technologies. Already in 2012, two years before the entry of 4G technologies to the country, several Chinese companies embarked on a joint effort to conduct research and

development of the 5G technologies expected to be in commercial use by 2020. In addition, and like the United States, China is already working on the development of sixth generation (6G) communications networks – which will enable data transfer of 1 terabyte per second, and which are expected to be ready by 2030.²

The chokepoint that worries the United States in particular is the fact that there are currently only four companies in the world engaged in building 5G networks. Two are Chinese – Huawei and ZTE, and two are European – Erikson and Nokia. The Korean company Samsung has also recently taken steps to enter this market, but it has little experience. The surprising absence of the United States from this field may perhaps be explained by the assumption that control of chips, essential for the 5G networks through the monopolies of Qualcomm and Intel (both American companies), will be sufficient to ensure control of the entire field.

Huawei Technologies Co., Ltd. is a private company that was established in 1987 by Ren Zhengfei, a former engineer in the Chinese army. The company, headquartered in Shenzhen in southern China, employs about 180,000 people. As of 2017, Huawei was considered one of the world's largest providers of communications with revenues of about \$92 billion – largely from overseas transactions. In 2018, the company supplied some 10,000 5G communications stations to various countries around the world, along with an additional 26 contracts to supply components for building 5G networks. Total income from sales that year was \$108.5 billion.³

The second company in the field of building communications networks is ZTE, which was established in 1985 in Shenzhen. It was originally founded by the Ministry of Aerospace Industry as a straw company whose function was, *inter alia*, to send camouflaged agents overseas to collect technological information on aviation and space matters.⁴ ZTE, like its larger competitor Huawei, already caught United States attention after it breached American sanctions and traded with North Korea and Iran through illegal deliveries of products and American technology. In early 2018, following long negotiations with the United States, ZTE was forced to absorb a severe economic blow when the US Department of Commerce banned American companies from selling components to it for the next seven years, and forced it to pay financial penalties, fire a number of senior executives, and agree to a mechanism for American supervision of its activity within the United States. The sanctions were a heavy blow for ZTE, which relies on essential parts made by American companies.⁵

Since the United States has no local manufacture of 5G communications infrastructure, it is therefore dependent on European companies to build its 5G networks.⁶ In this situation, China can gain a significant edge in the future global communications market, including in the determination of standards and rules. The United States, which could find itself pushed out of its leading global position, is currently working energetically against the two Chinese communications company, in order to retain its technological advantage.

In this context, it is important for Israel to recognize and understand the latest trends in the rivalry between the powers, and in particular the position of the United States, which in recent months has pushed its allies “to choose a side” in the global race with intensive activity that is already bearing fruit, as other countries, mainly Western, accept the US position and boycott the Chinese communications companies for reasons of national security.

International Reactions

United States

The United States sees China as a competitor and rival, and there is a struggle between the two for global influence, economic competition, and technological leadership. Since 2007 members of the US Congress have adopted a hawkish attitude to the rise of Chinese communications companies, due to concerns about spying and the ability to shut down networks, and for economic reasons that could affect the profitability of American companies. In 2012 the House of Representatives Intelligence Committee called on Americans to avoid doing business with Huawei and ZTE, because of the allegedly significant cyber threat they represent to the United States.⁷ Another complaint raised against ZTE was its refusal to give the Intelligence Committee documents concerning its business activity in Iran and North Korea. The committee called on regulators to block acquisitions on behalf of Huawei and ZTE, and recommended the removal of all Chinese-made software or components from security system computers due to espionage concerns. In 2018 the Trump administration also banned government employees from using cellular devices of Chinese manufacture.⁸

In July 2018, the *Globe and Mail* reported that the United States and Canada held talks to plan a consistent strategy in the attempt to prevent Chinese communications companies from controlling 5G infrastructure technologies.

These talks followed discussions held in the Five Eyes intelligence alliance, which includes Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Britain, and the United States. The newspaper reported that these countries agreed they should avoid relying on Huawei as sole provider for building communications infrastructure, because of its links with the Chinese government.⁹ Moreover, the United States has recently started to put pressure on its allies to boycott the Chinese companies and stop them from building communications networks within their territory. For example, it was reported that members of the Senate Committee on Intelligence Matters had pressured the Prime Minister of Canada to thwart the involvement of Huawei in the construction of 5G networks. Senators Marco Rubio and Mark Warner, Republican and Democrat, respectively, wrote an official letter to the Prime Minister saying that “while Canada has strong telecommunications security safeguards in place, we have serious concerns that such safeguards are inadequate given what the United States and other allies know about Huawei.”¹⁰

Australia and New Zealand

A notice issued by the Australian government in August 2018 did not mention the Chinese companies by name, but stated that “the involvement of vendors who are likely to be subject to extrajudicial directions from a foreign government that conflict with Australian law, may risk failure by the carrier to adequately protect a 5G network from unauthorised access or interference.”¹¹ Some two months later, Mike Burgess, the director-general of Australian Signals Directorate (ASD), which deals with foreign signals intelligence, argued that foreign communications companies should not be permitted to build 5G networks due to possible national security dangers. According to Burgess, Australia cannot allow the involvement of foreign companies in the construction of a sensitive communications infrastructure, since any breach due to infected components could shut down other sensitive infrastructures such as water, electricity, and health systems.¹² In addition to the concern over Chinese companies gaining access to communications, Australia is also working to deny these companies access to neighboring countries. For example, Australia forced the Solomon Islands to abandon a deal with Chinese communication companies in return for funding an undersea communications link.¹³

In November 2018, New Zealand also joined the countries boycotting Huawei when its intelligence agency notified its local communications

provider that it was banning it from using components made by Huawei to construct 5G networks, for reasons of national security.¹⁴

Britain and Elsewhere

In April 2018, the British National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) issued a warning to the local communications industry not to use equipment and services from ZTE, as the equipment represents a threat to Britain's national security.¹⁵ A report from the Huawei Cyber Security Evaluation Centre, a body set up by the British signals intelligence agency (Government Communications Headquarters) to assess levels of data security in Huawei's communications and broad band networks, claimed that "it is not possible to state with certainty that Huawei networks are not a danger to national security." The investigation found problems in the engineering processes of the Chinese company that "exposed new risks for British communications networks" and also "insufficient control of security of third party components."¹⁶ Later, British Telecoms announced that it would remove Huawei components from its 3G and 4G networks over the next two years, and would not use Huawei components when setting up 5G networks in the future.¹⁷ In response, Huawei undertook to invest \$2 billion to allay the concerns of the British intelligence agency over use of its equipment and software. Senior officials in the Chinese company met with officials from the NCSC and agreed to a number of conditions that would lead to a change in the company's conduct in Britain.¹⁸

Other countries are also adopting the US position. In December 2018, Japan announced that it would boycott the Chinese communications companies and stop them from participating in building 5G networks there.¹⁹ Similarly, the Indian Ministry of Communications announced that the Chinese companies would not participate in tenders to build Indian 5G networks.²⁰ However, other voices were also heard. Germany announced that it opposed any kind of boycott of communications providers,²¹ and the French Minister of the Economy referred to Huawei when he said that they were welcome in France.²² As of early December 2018, Canada was the only member of the Five Eyes Alliance that had not yet taken any steps to boycott the Chinese companies on its territory. Yet the arrest of senior Huawei executive Meng Wanzhou by the Canadian authorities has already led to a diplomatic crisis between China and Canada, and in retaliation China arrested three Canadian citizens.²³

Chinese Involvement in Communications in Israel

The State of Israel, through the National Data Security Authority in the Israel Security Agency, does not allow China to build communications networks of any kind within the country, and Israeli communications companies have adopted the same security position and avoided introducing any Chinese parts into their equipment. This seems to indicate an unofficial Israeli policy against Chinese communications networks, for security reasons. However, there is no official policy regarding the installation of Chinese communications components within strategic infrastructure facilities such as ports and railway lines, which are built or operated by Chinese companies. Thus, in the context of the tender for the operation of the Haifa Port by the Chinese corporation SIPG, the Israel Ports company announced that the international operators were required to plan, fund, and set up the operating area of the port, including communications systems.²⁴ Similarly, in February 2018, NTA Ltd. (the Metropolitan Mass Transit System), which is responsible for construction of the light railway system in metropolitan Tel Aviv, announced that the Chinese CRTG Group had won the tender for the electricity and communications systems and the installation of light railway tracks.²⁵ Therefore, although there is some kind of ban on bringing Chinese communications infrastructures into Israel, it is not clear exactly how and to what extent it is enforced.

Moreover, Toga Networks of Hod Hasharon is actually operating as the Israeli development center of Huawei. The company develops switches and routers for telecom companies, cloud storage systems, and various applications for cloud based storage centers.²⁶ The presence of this kind of development center in Israel raises concerns that military information could reach the Chinese government, due to the possibility of the employment of graduates of IDF technology units who can contribute to the company from their military experience.

Aside from the direct security issue, Chinese communications companies have a commercial foothold in Israel (table 1). For example, cellular devices from Chinese companies account for almost a fifth of the cellular market in Israel – a fact that illustrates the influence of Chinese companies on the Israeli economy.

The United States and its close partners see China in general and its communications companies in particular as a genuine threat to their national security. As such, the activity of these companies in Israel is bound up with direct dangers to national security and implications for relations with the United States.

Moreover, unlike the United States, military and government elements are not subject to a sweeping ban on the use of Chinese-made cellular devices. For example, in 2016 Meizu Ltd. was among the winners of the cellular tender to supply mobile devices to government ministry employees.²⁷ In addition, three Chinese companies, Xiaomi, ZTE, and Huawei, together invested tens of millions of dollars in Israeli technology companies engaged in Medtech, data security, and software.²⁸

Table 1. Market share of Chinese communications companies in Israel, Q4 of 2018²⁹

Chinese company	Importer in Israel	Market share
Huawei	Electra	3.74 %
Xiaomi	Hemilton	12.26 %
One Plus	Cell Now	1.31 %
Oppo	No official importer	0.28 %
Meizu	Bug	0.65 %
ZTE	Eurocom	0.09 %
Total share of Israeli cellular market		18.33 %

When looking to the future, all the technologies and devices linked to the 5G network must be considered, and already a wide range of electronic devices made in China are sold in Israel. In August 2018, the importer Hemilton launched its first store for products from Xiaomi in Tel Aviv, offering various low priced devices such as electric scooters, televisions, and cameras.³⁰ This store is a further step in the entry of Chinese technologies into Israel, which could lead to Chinese control of information through various smart technologies, such as an electric scooter connected to a network that knows the user's location at any given moment, as well as civilian drones that are accessible to everyone and able to take photographs in sensitive areas.

Another issue that could represent a future danger is the involvement of cities and local councils in technological cooperation with China. For example, it was recently reported that a Chinese delegation that heard that Netanyahu was "among the most advanced places in the field of smart city management," wished to visit the city and examine options for strengthening business ties with it.³¹ Smart city management is not unknown in China, which itself is a world leader in facial recognition technologies that are assimilated in its smart cities and help the local authorities to manage and control the population.³² Chinese technology installed in tracking

cameras deployed in public areas have already led to suspicions that the data they collect could find its way to the Chinese government agencies. The assimilation of such systems in Israel could enable China to use its smart devices to sabotage operations and gain access to data through the various devices as one of the known weaknesses of the IoT, if and when it decides to exert influence on countries, companies, and individuals.

But in spite of the risks that Chinese technology poses for Israel, it is actually cooperation in the other direction – the sale of advanced Israeli technologies to China – that could be a greater danger, because of the risk that the United States could interpret it as aid to their big rival precisely in a field that is the core of the struggle between the two. While the transfer of Israeli military and dual use technologies to China is blocked entirely, the supervision of advanced civilian technologies is less strict, and their transfer to China could lead to a crisis in Israel's relations with both the United States and China.

Recommendations for Israel

In an era when Chinese communications companies led by Huawei are at the heart of an international storm, and when relations between the United States and China are at a low because of the trade war and the struggle over the future global technology market, the United States is ostensibly asking its allies all over the world to choose whether to support the US or China. At the moment it appears that US pressure is focused on communications, and it is indeed managing to influence its allies to boycott Chinese communications companies and prevent them from building 5G networks in those countries. The Chinese companies are absorbing severe blows in terms of their finances and image, but it is too early to assess how China will react to the current – and from its vantage, negative – trend. In the long run, China will likely continue to seek stability on the technological front, and will also use the current hostility to learn lessons and sharpen strategies. Even now it looks as if Chinese companies are prepared to make changes and adaptations in line with the rules in other countries.

The current involvement of Chinese communications companies in Israel is low, but it could increase thanks to the products they offer that are of good quality and attractive prices. Israel must remember that the United States and its close partners see China in general and its communications companies in particular as a genuine threat to their national security, and therefore the activity of these companies in Israel is bound up with

direct dangers to national security and implications for relations with the United States. In addition, Israel must give special attention to Chinese investments in other branches of advanced technology where Israel is at the forefront of development, and which the United States has marked as critical for its national security

At the same time, strong economic relations with China are highly important to Israel. In order to maintain good relations with both superpowers and avoid being injured in the struggle between them, Israel should pursue three objectives. First, it is particularly important to ensure an ongoing, serious dialogue with colleagues in the United States and Western countries, primarily through the security establishment and the intelligence community, in order to promote a joint view of the problem and ways to respond, and to incorporate their positions into policy. Second, the Israeli government must carry out a risk assessment and define suitable control mechanisms at all echelons of government in order to ensure proper adoption of advanced technologies, while also ensuring that advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence and cyber technologies do not find their way to unauthorized foreign entities. It was recently reported that the government is engaged in preparing a comprehensive regulatory protocol that will enable future foreign investments to be examined in a smarter way. This is a positive step, but it is important to guarantee that regulatory considerations are in line with United States demands on this subject. Third and no less important, Israel must assess the situation regarding its relations with China, in order to minimize any damage to Israel-China relations as a result of changes in Israeli policy. In this context too, there should be a mechanism for ongoing dialogue with the Chinese, to explain Israel's position and to prevent any unnecessary misunderstandings and loss of face for China.

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