

ISRAEL AND DEMOCRATIZATION OF THE ARAB WORLD

This article explains that contrary to common assumptions, the democratization of the Arab world is in the interests of Israel. Recognizing the dangers on the one hand, the author concludes that even if democratization efforts fail, they will render Israel safer by empowering groups that are now suppressed, thus weakening pan-Arabist discourse and the coalition against Israel.

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Fifteen years ago, Lisa Anderson, a Columbia University political scientist claimed that democratization of the Arab world and the improvement of the relationship between Israel and its Arab neighbors were contradictory processes; any strides made in one direction would be at the expense of the other.

The late Israeli Prime Minister, Yitzchak Rabin, the man who signed the Declaration of Principles document on the White House lawn with a reluctant handshake with Yasser Arafat, agreed.

In explaining to his constituency his willingness to conclude a deal with a man deemed responsible for more Israeli fatalities than any other leader since Hitler and Stalin, he stated: "I'm making peace without *Bagatz* and without *Betzelem*." *Bagatz* is the name of the petition to Israel's High Court of Justice that deliberates the legality of any government action committed in Israeli-controlled areas including of course within Israel itself. Palestinians from the territories regularly take advantage of this right in contesting Israeli rule. *Betzelem* is Israel's leading human rights organization focused mostly on Israeli treatment of Palestinians, particularly Israeli rule in the West Bank and Gaza.

To the average Israeli listener Rabin's statement was crystal-clear; once empowered with an interim autonomy, Arafat would not only have a vested interest in continuing the peace process, but would have no inhibitions and all the capabilities to suppress any internal opposition.

Rabin was true to his word: The PLO-Tunis' arrival in the West Bank and Gaza in the summer of 1994 to set up the Palestinian Authority looked more like a military takeover than the first physical manifestation of an ongoing peace process. The TV cameras showed lorry after lorry of armed uniformed soldiers belonging to the Palestine Liberation Army crossing the bridge from Jordan. □

And if this was insufficient, Israel allowed the distribution of 9,000 high caliber rifles to the Palestinian Authority to be used by the nascent Palestinian security forces the PA began setting up upon arrival. In short, the PA, which by the letter of the agreement could have no armed forces, in fact possessed more firepower than many a full-fledged state.

So was Arafat keen in maintaining this particular aspect of the bargain. To begin with, a huge painting "of the leader and the symbol" (*al-qaid, al-ramz* in Arabic), was placed on the window pane of each of those trucks. Arafat obviously took his cue from the most (in)famous authoritarian Arab ruler at the time. Syrian army trucks in Beirut frequently bore the portrait of Hafiz al-Asad. To be fair there was also a pinch of originality; Arafat unlike al-Asad, was dressed in his famous *kafiyya* and uniform, his revolver being hidden from view for the simple fact that the portrait featured him from the chest up. Many Palestinians were

brave enough to complain of the “militarization” (*askara*) of Palestinian society and bade farewell to prospects, at least in the near future, of initiating democratic Palestinian government. The Palestinian Authority indeed proceeded to rule “without *Bagatz*, without *Betzelem*.”

Rabin and Anderson, I contend, at least from the Israeli point of view, were wrong – if not dead wrong. Israel has a vested interest that its neighbor states and Palestinians tread the democratic path and should embrace the May 2004 G-8 Broader Middle East Initiative wholeheartedly for reasons explained below.

Why Israel Should be Interested in Democracy: History and Theory

Before explaining Israel’s vested interest in democracy in the Arab world, it is important to realize the magnitude of its absence. According to Freedom House which monitors states along two dimensions 1) the extent to which they guarantee civil rights, that is to say, protection from the state, and 2) political rights, principally the right to elect and be elected, nearly half the states in the world live under “free” governments, a further 28 percent live under “partially” free states and only one quarter live under essentially despotic regimes. The Arab world presents a world of contrast to the overall picture; ominously, not one Arab state is free, five are partially free and 11 are despotic. If by 1996, 66 percent of the states of the world were using elections to choose their leadership in a free elections none of the Arab League’s 22 states did so. Even the Palestinians, who did run a free presidential election in 1996 and in 2005, divorced the presidential elections from the election process to the Palestinian Legislative Council in the latter case.

Table 1. Global Trends in Freedom

Year Under Review	Free Countries	Partly Free Countries	Not Free Countries
1974	41 (27%)	48 (32%)	63 (41%)
1984	53 (32%)	59 (35%)	55 (33%)
1994	76 (40%)	61 (32%)	54 (28%)
2004	89 (46%)	54 (28%)	49 (26%)
States with Muslim Majority			
2004	2 (4%)	17 (36%)	28 (60%)
Arab States			
2004	0	5 (31%)	11 (69%)

A vast literature on “the democratic peace” would alone justify Israeli interest in having democracy take root in the Arab world. True, in the short term, as indeed Anderson has argued, such democratization could inflame passions against Israel rather than assuage them. Politics in the initial stages of democratization would be captured by Arab the intellectual elite which have been pampered by

the despotic regimes they have served. A deepening of democracy would usher in a more professional, competitive capitalist society that would not tolerate the privileges accorded this class under the existing regimes and require them to compete in international society. It would also place them in regional and international competition with Turkish and Israeli professionals who are exposed to such international competition and who realize the long-term rewards to society and themselves as a result of such exposure. Local society would also make them more accountable in ways unimaginable under the present regimes. No wonder this intellectual class is in the forefront in the campaign against normalization with Israel.

Making Arabic-speaking society more focused on the domestic arena as a means of competing on the international scene, would be a major boon for Israel. Were democracy to deepen in Arabic-speaking states, new middle class elites and more popular constituencies would counter this intellectual class – not of course as a result of more amicable feelings towards Israel – but out of concern to improve the international competitiveness and quality of life in local society. □

Democracy and its correlates, capitalism, competition and international professionalism would cultivate affinities between the societies of these states with the rest of the world – especially the more developed part. Its citizens will reject those who see everything in binary terms – Islam against the rest, Arab against the West, the oppressed against their oppressors – that only deepens the marginal status of these societies. Bin-Ladens of all sorts find little breathing space in Japan, Korea or Turkey – all of which have discovered that democratic forms do not necessarily mean a rejection of tradition.

Iraqis by the thousands have proven in their insistency in reaching the polling stations in the face of imminent danger that the democratic message can be found in the Arab-speaking world. Israel wants the Iraqi experiment to succeed and replicate itself. For its spread carries with it a hope to engage in dialogue and mutual discovery with these states and societies, to reduce its military budget, and to engage in mutually beneficial industry, commerce and science. Above all, neighboring states and societies would discover that Israel, however dynamic and successful, is a small state that can hardly overrun them and be the threatening bastion of the West or a repeat of the Crusades.

Israel's Interest in Democracy: The Realpolitik View

Even if Israel can not afford taking the long view, or the outcome turns out to be less idealistic because either democracy does not take root in the neighboring states, or because the states despite democracy continue to be hostile to each other and to Israel, the Jewish state nevertheless has a vested interest in the attempt to democratize.

From a Machiavellian view, it is clear that if democracy does not prevail as a

result of democratization, most of the states hostile to Israel will be weakened by the endeavor. Democratization brings to the fore social, ethnic and religious groups and ideologies formerly suppressed by radical pan-Arab regimes. In the 1950s and 1960s, pan-Arab discourse successfully suppressed mention and indeed denied political salience to the deep-seated differences existing in what is known, though perhaps somewhat illusionary – as the Arab world. With the possible exception of Lebanon, religious group differences were largely plastered over by pan-Arab discourse and the obsession with the emergence, existence and development of Israel, and even in Lebanon, the salience of the Shi'ite factor, at least in the beginning, had to do more with the Iranian revolution than with domestic developments. Ethno-national conflict, principally in Iraq between Kurds and Sunni Arabs who effectively ruled Iraq under the Ba'ath masthead, and the opposition in the south of Sudan to Arab rule, was made marginal by the salience of the Arab-Israel conflict or seen as extension of the conflict with the West. □

Today, that reality has all changed. If the Arab wide satellite stations were supposed to herald a new cultural pan-Arabism replacing the failed political attempts at pan-Arabism more than a generation ago, the news reports and discussion shows mention terms, Shiites, Sunnis, considered taboo a decade ago. The United States' invasion of Iraq and the subsequent democratic experiment was a watershed in this regard; the newspeak, the almost wall-to-wall suppression of social groups gave way to politics that reflected real groups and interests and equally authentic attempts at coalition-building with the inevitable fact that terms such as Sunnis and Shiites were not only increasingly voiced and heard but became durable formative political facts.

Israel's primary interest is of course a prosperous, pluralistic, democratic united Iraq that concentrates on the formidable tasks of economic, social and cultural renewal. The word united should be placed in bold; a united Iraq is clearly Israel's first choice even if Israeli official statements in favor of the territorial integrity of the Iraqi state were not always taken at face value, especially in Turkey, because of past Israeli support to the Kurdish nationalist movement in Iraq as part of a strategy of seeking alliances with non-Arab minorities in its quest to weaken the Arab world.

Foreign Minister G_1, for example, was reported to complain about Israeli banks funding land purchases by Kurds from Arabs and Turkomen in an attempt to change the demographic profile of Kirkuk in the oil-rich region. There were also rumors about Israel's desire to reopen the old Kirkuk-Haifa oil pipeline even though it runs through Syria (a rival of Israel), which would compete with the pipeline that runs through Turkey. Turkey expressed its fears and anger of Israeli economic activity, and particularly of Israeli military assistance to the Kurds in Northern Iraq. Israeli officials visiting Turkey were constantly questioned on these issues and their denials were taken with a grain of salt.

The idea that promoting Kurdish independence serves Israel's interests, however, is ill conceived.

Israel supported the Kurds in the 1950s and 1960s in order to weaken Iraq. But all such support took place *before* the emergence of the Islamic Republic in Iran in 1979, which is arguably Israel's major state foe. Strategically, the breakdown of Iraq does not serve Israel's interests; a relatively strong Iraq that would counterbalance Iran's strategic preponderance in the Gulf area does. Only a unified Iraq can serve such a role. Moreover, Israel must also contend with the possibility that a landlocked Kurdish political entity threatened by Turkey would probably fall under Iranian influence, allowing Tehran to establish a contiguous corridor from North Iraq, through Syria and extending to its protégé, Hizbullah, in Lebanon. Conceivably, one could imagine the emergence of a coalition of non-Arab Sunni forces and states - a Shiite Iraq, a Kurdish state, a Syria controlled by the Alawite elite and a Hizbullah bolstered by Iran - working against the Jewish state rather than for it as originally countenanced by Israeli strategists in the 1950s and 1960s.¹ Even if such a prospect does not materialize would it be logical for Israel, aware of Turkish opposition to the establishment of a Kurdish state, to risk jeopardizing an important strategic relationship with a regional power in order to ally with a new, small, weak and potentially unstable state? Ankara and Jerusalem have a common goal in Iraq, namely to see the emergence of a stable state, sufficiently strong to act as a counterweight to Iran but not one that could become aggressive toward its neighbors.

At the same time, Israel can hardly deny that a failed Iraq divided into three states – the second-best solution - would be much better than a centralized Iraq under pan-Arab rule as was the case under Saddam. Whereas the success of democracy ushers in mainly promise from an Israeli perspective, the rising salience of ethnic and confessional divisions, should the democratic thrust fail, harbors both prospects and dangers, with the former perhaps overriding the latter.

A potential alliance between the Sunni states and Israel against the rising Iranian-Shi'ite threat may be in the offing. The removal of the Alawite regime in Syria and its replacement by a Sunni-majority led state would seek to balance against Iran, Hizbullah, the effective ruler of much of Lebanon, and a Shiite Iraq. Israel might be the new novel address for such a regime. Already, much of the security cooperation between Egypt and Israel in Gaza and some of the resilience of Hashemite Jordanian-Israeli relations has to do with the potential Shi'ite threat. Relations between these two states with Israel could only improve were such a threat to materialize in Iraq.

The salience of a Shi'ite alliance might even have a positive impact on Israeli-Palestinian relations provided that Hamas does not achieve predominance in the domestic political arena.

¹ For the "Periphery Doctrine," see Michael Brecher, *The Foreign Policy System of Israel* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), p.278.

Yet Israel must not be blinded by the dangers of the failure of the democratic project, the likely corollary spread of the phenomenon of “failed states” and the implications that has on the spread of radical Islamist terror in which Israel will be the inevitable target.

To conclude, Israel is a small though strong and vibrant democracy. As a small developed power, its basic interest is to live in peace and security with its neighbors. Culturally, many citizens, certainly its Arab citizens, yet nearly half of its Jewish population as well, have cultural affinities to the cultures of its neighboring states. The prospect of being surrounded by democratic neighbors, focused as most democracies are today, in the pursuit of economic development, social welfare and equality, is warmly welcomed. As such, Israel has a vital interest in the success of the democratic project. Yet, even if such a project were to fail, the realpolitik effects of the drift left in the wake of such failure would probably be better than the status quo. However, the potential of joining a Sunni state coalition to balance against an Iranian threat is a poor second best alternative to a democratic Middle East that would look more like Europe rather than a conflict between authoritarian states and ayatollahs.