CENTRE FOR THE NEW MIDDLE EAST
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An Alternative to the French Peace Initiative:

A way forward for Israel and its Arab Neighbours

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Executive Summary

- The recently launched French initiative for reviving the Israeli–Palestinian peace process seeks to resolve that conflict through a multilateral approach. This plan hopes to break the existing deadlock. However, the French proposal also risks sidelining the importance of direct negotiations, and at the same time risks repeating policy errors which are likely to further exacerbate tensions.
- Washington has signalled its reservations about elements of the French initiative. Britain should now take steps to distance itself from this plan, and instead make public moves to promote and strengthen cooperation between pro-Western Middle Eastern powers, such as Israel and the Gulf States.
- Britain's strong ties with the Gulf States and its good relations with Israel place this country in a unique position to help further advance the development of the new regional alignment that is now beginning to emerge. Such moves toward reconciliation between these countries in an otherwise troubled region would advance Britain's own national interests in terms of security and of commercial and diplomatic opportunities in the Middle East.
- Any effort to achieve durable and comprehensive peace will likely fail if it neglects to take into account the dramatic changes the region has undergone in recent decades. The instability and turmoil occurring across that region adds significant challenges to making peace. Similarly, the growth of militant Islamist factions in territories Israel has previously conceded has caused a shift in Israeli attitudes regarding territorial compromises. At the same time, ideological and religious radicalisation in Palestinian society presents new obstacles to peace.
- Today, the threat from Iran is the primary security concern, not only for Israel, but also for many of the region's most influential Sunni powers. The shared strategic interests created by this threat mean that Israel is now entering into an ever closer alliance with key Sunni neighbours such as Egypt, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States.
- The naturally occurring alliance that is emerging between Israel and its pragmatic Arab neighbours may represent one of the most promising possibilities for healing rifts and encouraging stability in that region. Managed strategically at the diplomatic level, this shift in relations could subsequently open the way to progress on the Palestinian front.

Introduction

With peace talks between Israel and the Palestinian Authority having been stalled since the collapse of John Kerry's initiative in early 2014, the French government is now seeking to lead international efforts for the launch of a new multilateral push for peace. At the beginning of June 2016 an international conference of 28 nations convened in Paris to formulate a solution to the Israeli–Palestinian dispute. Yet, at this convention, both the Israelis and Palestinians were conspicuous by their absence. While those backing the French initiative hope that the two sides will be in attendance at a second conference planned for later this year, a number of significant challenges stand in the way of this process bearing fruit.

The French plan envisages moving away from the existing model of bilateral talks and toward a multilateral solution that could be agreed internationally—with consultation from Israel and the Palestinian Authority—before then being implemented as an instruction coming at the international level, possibly through the UN Security Council. While this offers a new approach to a process that has been dysfunctional in recent years, it threatens to undermine the role of direct negotiations and the need for the two sides to reach peace through dialogue. This principle of Israelis and Palestinians mutually agreeing to end the conflict through a process of direct negotiations has been at the core of a long-standing international consensus on ending the conflict. The French proposal appears to represent an abrupt break with that consensus.

There have previously been suggestions from the Palestinian Authority to break with the existing format of negotiating peace with Israel without preconditions, with Palestinians talking instead of "internationalising the conflict". Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas has previously expressed his intention to bypass negotiations and the process of reciprocal concessions, instead suggesting that the Palestinians would seek a UN Security Council resolution setting out borders and imposing a timetable for Israeli territorial concessions. This, of course, would in effect mean granting one side's demands without addressing the other side's security requirements or obliging either side to formally end the conflict with a binding agreement. As such, the Israeli government has always opposed such moves, and continues to oppose the French initiative on the same grounds.

The French peace initiative may also fail to make progress if it is unable to win the backing of the United States. So far the US government has appeared at best ambivalent about the strategy set out as part of this new diplomatic push. Secretary of State John Kerry was in attendance at the Paris conference in June. However, even while he was at the conference, Kerry made clear that it was the intention of the United States to continue pushing for direct negotiations. Furthermore, it has been widely speculated that the Obama administration may have its own diplomatic timetable, one that runs counter to the thinking of President Hollande's government. It is unlikely that the Obama administration will play a proactive role on the Israeli–Palestinian issue prior to the November 2016 US elections. After that point, anything that the Obama presidency is planning would have to happen within the tight window before the inauguration of a new president in January of next year.

Britain also needs now to reconsider its position on the French initiative, particularly in light of the fact that the French model may conflict with the UK's policy of supporting a negotiated peace settlement between Israel and the Palestinians. If the French proposals continue to look unlikely to engender progress, but instead risk further exacerbating tensions in an already critically unstable

part of the world, then supporting this initiative may well not be in Britain's national interest. However, with relations and security cooperation improving between Israel and a number of its regional neighbours, this might now be an alternative arena in which Britain could play a constructive role. As we have already seen with renewed talk of reviving the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative, and offers from the Egyptian government of convening talks with the Palestinians—an offer Jerusalem has expressed openness to—improving Israel's relations with regional powers could eventually open the way to progress on the Palestinian front. Given that these ties are already progressing rapidly behind closed doors, Britain could use its standing and influence with the Gulf States to encourage a much more public and official process of reconciliation.

While the French initiative risks undermining the current international consensus for achieving peace through direct negotiations, it also appears to repeat approaches that have proven problematic in the past. In particular, the French proposal of an international conference is in many respects reminiscent of the multilateral Madrid Conference convened by the United States in 1991. The Madrid Conference was also met by reservations from the Israelis in particular, who have long insisted on the importance of direct, face-to-face, bilateral negotiations of the kind that ultimately yielded a peace agreement between Israel and Egypt. At the time, the Madrid Conference appeared to risk an escalation of tensions between various parties, with states such as Syria using the conference as an international platform from which to attack and demonise Israel.

While the Madrid Conference failed to lead to any significant progress in achieving peace between Israel and the Palestinians, it did allow for the beginning of face-to-face negotiations that eventually led to a peace agreement between Israel and Jordan, as well as the beginning of a formal negotiating process between Israel and Palestinians. The Oslo Accords that were subsequently signed in 1993, and then taken further with the implementation of Oslo II in 1995, were able to open the way to some initial progress between the two sides. Most significantly, those agreements established a Palestinian Authority in Gaza and the West Bank which was understood to represent the foundational institutions of a future Palestinian state. Yet that process failed to result in peace, either in practice or in terms of the signing of a formal peace agreement. Indeed, during the 1990s violent terror attacks, particularly suicide bombings in Israeli cities, became increasingly common, even as progress in implementing the Oslo process was being made at the diplomatic level.

Oslo set out a clear timetable for reaching a final peace agreement, as part of which the two sides were obliged to agree arrangements to resolve the core issues such as borders, refugees, water, settlements and the division of Jerusalem. In line with this schedule, in 2000 Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak pushed for final status peace talks with Palestinian Authority president Yasser Arafat at Camp David. The sides failed to reach an agreement at these talks, with the Palestinian Authority rejecting President Clinton's proposed parameters for peace and failing to offer an alternative model for a final agreement. The breakdown of these peace efforts was followed by the violent crisis of the Second Intifada, and it is now widely understood that Arafat and the Palestinian Authority played a decisive role in triggering, if not directing, this.

More recent attempts to reach a comprehensive peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinian Authority have followed the vision set out in Oslo. So far this has yielded no meaningful success. Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's efforts to reach a peace agreement with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas proved fruitless, while pressure from the Obama administration to persuade the two sides to finalise an agreement appeared at times to only inflame tensions and growing mistrust.

As things stand, neither the Israeli government nor the Palestinian Authority appear ready to enthusiastically and proactively lead on reaching a peace agreement. Rather, the most emphatic calls for peace now come from international leaders. The experience of multiple past failures would appear to have depleted enthusiasm for making concessions for peace among both the Israeli and Palestinian publics, while their leaders now seem equally as unwilling to expend political capital in this area.

It may well be the case that, for the moment at least, the most that Israel feels able to concede in an agreement falls short of the minimum Palestinians are prepared to accept in return for ending their conflict with Israel. A peace agreement is also made more unlikely at this time by the deep divisions within Palestinian society, as well as the weakness of the Palestinian Authority. President Abbas's mandate to rule expired in 2009 and yet he remains in power, partly thanks to the presence of the Israeli Army in the West Bank preventing a Hamas takeover. Yet the concern remains that in the event that Israel were to sign an agreement with the Palestinian Authority and withdraw from the West Bank, it might still face a Hamas takeover further down the line. Similarly, because of the Hamas takeover in Gaza, a peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank would only represent an agreement with one side of the various groups representing the Palestinians.

Indeed, under the present conditions, a peace agreement between Israel and the leaders of the Palestinian Authority would be unlikely to bring about a clear end to the conflict. The conflict as it exists today is not between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. Rather, any future and ongoing conflict involving Israel will likely be with Iran and its proxy Hezbollah, as well as with Hamas and various other smaller Sunni splinter groups such as Islamic Jihad. The signing of an agreement with the Palestinian Authority, and the dramatic Israeli territorial and security concessions required to make such an agreement possible, would in no way end the potentially far more dangerous conflict between Israel and the aforementioned parties, each of which is currently committed to destroying the Jewish state and killing as many of its civilians as possible.

Since further progress between Israel and the Palestinian Authority appears to have stalled for the time being, and since any such progress through the established channels may be unlikely to have a transformative effect upon Israel and the regional conflict, it is clear that alternative options for progress toward peace should be explored. In particular, any further approach will need to take into account the region's wider geopolitical realities, as well as the dramatic changes that have occurred since the formulation of the Oslo peace initiative. For this reason, British policy could play a more constructive role if it were to be reoriented toward focusing on encouraging a strengthening of the developing alliance between Israel and the other pragmatic pro-Western powers in the region. In time, this could also open channels for achieving progress on resolving the dispute between Israel and the Palestinians.

The New Regional Context

Much has changed in the Middle East since the signing and implementing of the Oslo accords. These regional changes necessarily impact the prospects for peace as much as the internal domestic shifts that have happened within the Israeli and Palestinian societies. Many of the conditions that existed in the 1990s, to make progress in the peace process possible and to make that process appear viable, have since either become absent or ceased to be relevant in the same way. Any strategy for resolving the dispute between Israelis and Palestinians today will need to be reformulated around the realities as they now exist in that part of the world. The Oslo model, with its partial successes, was in many respects unique to the time and circumstances of Israel and the Middle East in the early to mid-1990s, directly after the Cold War. The Middle East that confronts us today is, in parts, virtually unrecognisable as the one that existed just two decades ago.

Most significant has been the Arab uprisings and the growth of Islamist groups which have been able to capitalise on the numerous power vacuums that have opened up in the under-governed areas created by Arab states that had been weakened—in some cases to the point of disintegration—by the popular uprisings. Across the region, the governments, and in places the state apparatus, which existed during the Oslo peace process no longer exist. In Tunisia, Libya, Iraq, Yemen, Egypt and Syria, instability and uncertainty dominate the political landscape. Of those countries, the latter two are arguably the most significant to the Israeli–Palestinian peace process, and in recent years Israel's borders with both of these states have become volatile and extremely dangerous.

In the wake of the Arab uprisings, Israel now looks out over a formidable range of Islamist militant groups proliferating on its borders. These range from Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in southern Lebanon, through to Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria and al-Qaeda and Islamic State-aligned militias in the Egyptian Sinai. Significantly, many of these groups are for the moment engaged in their own separate conflicts and struggles that do not necessarily involve Israel directly. Hezbollah, like the militants in the Syrian Golan, is of course currently preoccupied with the civil war in Syria, while Islamist militants in the Sinai continue to battle with the Egyptian military. To a lesser extent, having fought its way to power in Gaza by ousting Fatah, Hamas too now faces some challenges to its rule from smaller Salafist splinter groups. The potential intervention of Islamic State in these areas also remains a very real concern. For while IS forces have not reached Israeli-controlled territory on the Golan, in November of 2014 the leader of Sinai-based Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis (ABM), Abu Khattab, and group's the Shura council pledged allegiance to Islamic State. That group is not only operational in areas directly adjacent to Israeli territory, but is also believed to have a branch in Gaza. The relationship between Hamas and ABM has long been unclear, as has been knowledge about the extent of the group's ability to cross back and forth at the Rafah border between Gaza and Egypt. Nevertheless, the rise of the Islamic State in the Sinai represents another example of how Islamist militants are proliferating just beyond multiple Israeli borders.

So far Israel has not become engaged in sustained fighting with militants in either the Sinai or the Golan. Equally, for the moment, various other regional conflicts are dominating international attention. Given that much of the time the confrontation between Israel and the Palestinians remains a cold conflict, the more violent and intense fighting in other parts of the Middle East—such as in Libya, Syria, Iraq and Yemen—has become far more pressing and urgent on the

geopolitical scene. Indeed, the common wisdom that the Israeli–Palestinian conflict was the primary driver of instability and unrest in the Middle East now appears self-evidently flawed.

Once, when commentators referred to the "Middle East conflict", it was generally understood that they were talking about the dispute between Israel and its Arab neighbours, particularly the Palestinians. Today, however, this phrase would more accurately reference a complex range of sectarian conflicts and civil wars taking place across the region. The significant dividing line in the Middle East is no longer between Israeli and Palestinian or Jew and Arab, but rather there are multiple dividing lines between Islamists and moderates, dictators and reformers, and, perhaps most significantly of all, between Sunnis and Shia. This latter divide is given added significance by the way in which Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States are aligned on one side of this sectarian struggle, while Iran is placed firmly on the other.

While the turmoil beyond Israel's borders may draw international attention away from the Israeli–Palestinian dispute for the moment, it nevertheless impacts quite profoundly upon the question of the peace process. With regard to the calls for Israel to make territorial concessions for peace, it cannot be overlooked that when Israel makes a strategic assessment of its security predicament, Israelis see that many of the Islamist militant groups that now seek to launch attacks against their country are in fact operating from territory that Israel previously conceded in an effort to resolve the conflict. They recall that the Sinai, Gaza and Southern Lebanon are all territories from which Israeli forces withdrew, and are all territories from where Islamist militants operate and from which these groups have launched attacks against civilian centres in Israel. Similarly, during the height of the Second Intifada, when Israeli city centres were subjected to a wave of suicide bombings, it was apparent that the very urban areas that Israel had handed to the Palestinian Authority had been transformed into centres from which these attacks were being launched.

It is also the case that territories that Israel has been called upon to relinquish in the past are now feared liable to fall into the hands of militants. This is most apparent in the case of the Golan Heights which sit adjacent to Israel's primary fresh water source in the Galilee. There have been comparable concerns about what might happen in the Jordan Valley were Israel to withdraw its forces from this similarly strategically significant stretch of territory. In Israel's strategic calculus, such withdrawals are believed to equate with essentially creating power vacuums that are ultimately susceptible to coming under the control of militants. As such, territorial withdrawals have effectively involved moving a range of security threats ever closer to Israel's civilian population centres and core national infrastructure.

The extent of this strategic threat perhaps only fully crystallised in 2006 when Israel became engaged in a fierce conflict with Hezbollah, which had set up its own mini-state in Southern Lebanon following the Israeli withdrawal in 2000. From this vantage point the terror group was able to target its missiles at the major population centres in Israel's north. While Israel was able to temporarily reduce Hezbollah's strength in the 2006 conflict, since then, backed by Iran, the Shia militia has rearmed and significantly increased the size of its ranks. It is now believed that Hezbollah's standing fighting force has reached significantly more than 20,000 men (approximately 5,000 of which are

stationed in Syria), whereas in 2006 that number was just 3,000.[1] Similarly, in 2006 Hezbollah was armed with some 13,000 short-range rockets. Today, however, it is believed that Hezbollah is armed with more than 100,000 Iranian-supplied missiles, including long-range systems equipped with precision strike capabilities.[2] There have also been concerns that in the course of the Syrian civil war, Hezbollah may have been able to transport military hardware from Syria into Southern Lebanon. As such, Hezbollah now stands as one of the more formidable and experienced fighting forces in the region, representing a primary security challenge for Israel.

Had efforts to secure additional Israeli territorial withdrawals advanced further, then by now Israel might have faced a similar threat from its border on the Golan Heights. Indeed, previous Israeli governments under both Prime Minister Ehud Barak (in the late 1990s) and Ehud Olmert (in 2008) have pursued efforts to relinquish control of the Golan Heights to Syria in return for a peace agreement with the Assad regime. Given what has transpired in Syria since that time, the consensus in Israel is that such a move would in fact have greatly jeopardised the security of Israel's north. Regardless of whether or not the Assad regime could have been trusted to uphold any such peace treaty, the civil war in Syria has raised questions about whether neighbouring Arab governments are secure enough to guarantee the commitments they make in negotiations. What changed with the Arab Spring, as evidenced by the coming to power of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, is that Israel can transfer territory into the possession of a regime in return for pledges of peace, but there is no guarantee that that territory will continue to be secure, nor that that particular regime will remain in place long after the signing of a peace treaty.

Israel's peace treaty with Jordan has looked more secure given that that country has not been impacted by the Arab uprisings in the way that Egypt was. Nevertheless, the growing popularity of Salafism in Jordan has called into question the long-term stability of the Hashemite monarchy and current political system in that country.[3] Similarly, the large influx of Syrian refugees into Jordan from the neighbouring conflict zone has led to speculation about the possibility of extremists having been able to cross the border, along with more general concerns about the potential destabilising effect this could have upon Jordanian society. These concerns about the future survival of the relatively pragmatic and pro-Western regime in Jordan has contributed to Israel's insistence that the Jordan Valley should be retained as the Jewish state's easternmost border, or alternatively that the Israeli military be permitted to retain forces in that area.

One answer to the security threats that Israel faces from rocket and missile fire emanating from territories Israel has relinquished has been the further deployment of sophisticated anti-missile defence systems such as Iron Dome and David's Sling. Yet the high operational expense of such measures risks making Israel's defence budget increasingly dependent upon financial assistance from the United States, something which is certainly not guaranteed indefinitely. Indeed, Iron Dome is a $1 billion programme, with every interception costing $60,000.[4] During the 2014 Gaza war with Hamas, Israel's Iron Dome system is estimated to have cost $1 million for each day that it

[1] Nerguizian, A., 'Assessing the Consequences of Hezbollah's Necessary War of Choice in Syria', CSIS, June 2013, available at: https://www.csis.org/analysis/assessing-consequences-hezbollah%E2%80%99s-necessary-war-choice-syria, last visited: 3 August 2016.
[2] White, J., 'A War Like No Other: Israel vs. Hezbollah in 2015', January 2015, available at: http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/a-war-like-no-other-israel-vs.-hezbollah-in-2015, last visited: 3 August 2016.
[3] Schenker, D., 'Salafi Jihadists on the Rise in Jordan,' Washington Institute for Near East Policy, *PolicyWatch* no. 2248, 5 May 2014.
[4] N.P., 'How Israel's "Iron Dome" Works', *The Economist*, July 2014, available at: http://www.economist.com/blogs/economist-explains/2014/07/economist-explains-12, last visited: 3 August 2016.

was operating, with 584 of the more than 3,460 rockets fired by Hamas being intercepted.[5] Furthermore, even with such systems in place, the risk from unintercepted rockets, as well as falling shrapnel from the intercepted ones, means that civilians are still required to take shelter during an attack. As seen during previous conflicts with both Hamas and Hezbollah, the debilitating effect of such rocket attacks makes normal daily life impossible, and has a highly detrimental impact on the Israeli economy. This, combined with the cost of the anti-missile defence systems, allows militants with cheaply manufactured rockets to potentially gain the upper hand in a war of attrition. As such, international parties encouraging Israeli territorial withdrawals must be aware that there is still no definitive security solution for Israel once its former territories have fallen into the hands of militant groups.

Shifting Attitudes in Israeli and Palestinian Societies

Since the height of the Oslo process years in the mid-1990s, public enthusiasm on the peace process appears to have jaded among both Israelis and Palestinians. Whereas polling from the time of the signing of the first Oslo accords suggested support for the principles of the peace process among both the Israeli and Palestinian publics,[6] there are numerous indications that these sentiments may since have waned. According to polling from September 2015, support for a two-state solution among the Palestinian public has fallen to less than half, with 51 per cent opposing such a plan.[7] Support for the principle of two states remains solid among Israelis, with polling from January 2016 indicating that 56 per cent favour a two-state solution;[8] however, 82 per cent believe that such a solution is unlikely to happen within the next ten years.[9] Similarly, since the elections of 2009, Israeli political parties promoting a more hawkish defence policy have received greater electoral support than those associated with more actively promoting territorial concessions for peace.

The already mentioned experiences of failed territorial concession for peace have undoubtedly intensified popular sentiments in Israel that oppose such concessions. These feelings have in turn been reflected in the rhetoric of the Israeli leadership. At the time of the 2014 Gaza War, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu asserted that Israel could not afford to give up control of the West Bank, and in doing so would risk the creation of "another 20 Gazas".[10] Not since the late 1990s has the dovish Labour party won office, and throughout the 2000s it was the centrist and somewhat more pragmatic Kadima that dominated government. Crucially, it was the violence of the Second Intifada that saw the end of Ehud Barak's premiership and the electoral success of the hawkish Ariel Sharon. Since 2009, Benjamin Netanyahu's centre-right Likud has held power, and while Netanyahu has expressed his support for the principle of two states, the governments he has led have remained far more cautious on the question of far-reaching territorial concessions. The gap between what Israelis tell pollsters and how they vote in practice might suggest that while most

[5] Sales, B., 'How much has Israel's war against Hamas cost?', *The Times of Israel*, January 2015, available at: http://www.timesofisrael.com/how-much-has-israels-war-in-gaza-cost/, last visited: 3 August 2016.
[6] Seitz, C., 'Tracking Palestinian Public Support over 20 Years of the Oslo Agreements', Jerusalem Media and Communications Centre, November 2013, available at: http://www.jmcc.org/documents/Oslo_polls_booklet_112013_FINAL.pdf, last visited: 3 August 2016.
[7] Sawafta, A., 'Most Palestinians no longer support two-state solution', Reuters, September 2015, available at: http://www.reuters.com/article/us-palestinians-israel-survey-idUSKCN0RL1DF20150921, last visited: 3 August 2016.
[8] 'The Peace Index – December 2015', The Israeli Democracy Institute, December 2015, available at: http://www.peaceindex.org/files/Peace_Index_Data_December_2015-Eng.pdf, last visited: 3 August 2016.
[9] Ibid.
[10] 'Netanyahu: Gaza Conflict Proves Israel Can't Relinquish Control of West Bank', *The Times of Israel*, 11 July 2014.

Israelis support the compromise of establishing a Palestinian state, for the moment they do not believe that this is implementable, or fear that it will not likely advance peace or stability.

The apparently pragmatic attitudes of the Israeli voting public are in part a response to some of the more overtly ideological shifts taking place in the societies around them. The rise of Islamism over nationalist ideological movements appears to make the prospect of negotiation and reconciliation far more fraught. Unlike the Arab nationalism that dominated the region for much of the twentieth century, most of the regional adversaries that now pose any kind of significant challenge to Israel align with radical Islamism: an ideology that refuses to be appeased by any conceivable set of Israeli concessions.

Yet the rise of Islamic extremism is not simply a matter that relates to the adversaries beyond Israel's borders. The evidence suggests that Islamism has been on the rise in Palestinian society for some years now. This trend initially became apparent with the emergence of Hamas in 1988 at the time of the First Intifada. The wave of suicide attacks carried out by Hamas and others during the Oslo years, and which intensified following the collapse of the Camp David peace talks, came as a stark demonstration of the impact of Islamist violence on efforts to achieve peace. By the mid-2000s, the presence of Salafist and more hard-line Jihadist factions was observed to be on the rise in Gaza. This included the emergence of numerous small splinter groups, such as Jaish al-Islam (Army of Islam), Jaish al-Umma (Army of the Nation) and Fatah al-Islam (Islamic Conquest), which collectively were impacting the character of the political life in the Gaza Strip.[11]

Inevitably, these trends have also played out through Palestinian public opinion, as evidenced in polling data from this time. One 2004 survey of Palestinian opinion conducted by the Jordanian Center for Strategic Studies suggested that support for al-Qaeda was markedly greater among Palestinians than in other Arab countries, with 70 per cent endorsing the description of al-Qaeda as a resistance movement as opposed to being a terrorist one.[12] Another survey from the following year conducted by the Norwegian group Fafo indicated that 65 per cent of Palestinians supported al-Qaeda attacks against the West, and in Gaza that figure was as high as 79 per cent.[13] European observers based in Palestinian areas during that period reported this trend of growing popular extremism, with one European diplomat describing how Palestinian society was undergoing "an accelerated process of broad Islamization and radicalization".[14]

The extent to which the international community failed to appreciate the strength of support for Islamism in Palestinian society became particularly apparent in 2006 when, under pressure from the United States government, Palestinian elections were held. The surprise victory of Hamas, which few had predicted, then posed a serious setback to prospects for peace. More recent surveying suggests that extremist attitudes remain prevalent within the Palestinian population and that these views manifest themselves through significant opposition to reconciliation with Israel. Indeed, there are indicators that Palestinian attitudes may even have hardened over time. A 1995

[11] Schanzer, J. and Mark Dubowitz, *Palestinian Pulse: What Policymakers Can Learn from Palestinian Social Media* (Washington, DC: Foundation for Defense of Democracies, 2010).
[12] 'Revisiting the Arab Street: Research from Within', Center for Strategic Studies, University of Jordan, February 2005.
[13] Hasselknippe, G., 'Palestinian Opinions on Peace and Conflict, Internal Affairs and Parliament Elections 2006', Fafo *Paper* 2006:09, 2006.
[14] Cohen, Y. and Matthew Levitt, with Becca Wasser, 'Deterred but Determined: Salafi-Jihadi Groups in the Palestinian Arena', Washington Institute for Near East Policy, *Policy Focus* no. 99, January 2010.

survey conducted by JMCC found that 65 per cent of Palestinians believed that Israel had no right to exist.[15] A 2015 poll produced by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy found that, when asked if they thought that Jews have some rights to the land along with Palestinians, only 12 per cent agreed; however, more than 80 per cent agreed with the assertion, "This is Palestinian land and Jews have no rights to it."[16] Polling from 2011 conducted by the Pew Research Center found 96 per cent of Palestinians said that they had a "very unfavorable" view of Jews, while 88 per cent said that Judaism is the most violent religion.[17]

Given the prevalence of such attitudes among Palestinians, it may be easier to understand why so many Palestinians continue to support violent conflict with Israel. Following the 2014 war in Gaza, polling of Palestinians revealed that support for Hamas had doubled among residents of the West Bank, increasing sharply from 23 per cent in March to 46 per cent in September.[18] A PSR survey from 2014 found that 79 per cent of Palestinians actually felt that Hamas had won that summer's war, while only 3 per cent believed that Israel had been victorious.[19] This was despite the fact that the war had had a devastating impact on both Hamas forces and Gaza as a whole, as well as the fact that by the end of the war Hamas was forced to accept the same ceasefire terms that had been presented to it at the beginning of that period of fighting. Despite the devastation of the war, nine out of ten Palestinians backed the continuing of rocket fire at Israeli civilians. Still more striking was that 54 per cent of Palestinians told pollsters that they supported Hamas's kidnapping and murder of three Israeli teenagers, which had happened at the beginning of the war.[20]

The hardening of Palestinian attitudes and the mainstreaming of extremist anti-Israel views has also been reflected in the rhetoric of the Palestinian leadership. Fatah's Mahmoud Abbas has long been championed internationally as a moderate and a suitable partner with which Israel can reach a peace agreement. Yet the language increasingly being adopted by President Abbas might previously have been associated with Islamist groups. Speaking before the parliament of the European Union in June 2016, Abbas made a bizarre and anti-Semitic claim that rabbis had been encouraging Israel to poison Palestinian water, an inflammatory allegation with no basis in fact.[21]

The danger that this kind of speech can have in inciting violence among Palestinians was made clear at the beginning of the so-called Knife Intifada. In September 2015, after weeks of rising tensions at Jerusalem's religious compound on the Temple Mount, Mahmoud Abbas gave a speech in which, in addition to asserting, "We will not forsake our country and we will keep every inch of our land," the Palestinian President adopted the language of Jihadist preachers, telling Palestinians that "every drop of blood spilled in Jerusalem is pure, every shahid [martyr] will reach paradise, and

[15] 'Poll No. 10, October 1995 – On Palestinian Attitudes Towards the Taba Agreement and the PNA's Assumption of Authority over West Bank Towns', Jerusalem Media and Communications Centre, October 1995, available at: http://www.jmcc.org/Documentsandmaps.aspx?id=501, last visited: 3 August 2016.
[16] Pollock, D., 'Long-Term Palestinian Views on Israel: Two States Now, One State Later?', Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 2015, available at: http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/long-term-palestinian-views-on-israel-two-states-now-one-state-later, last visited: 3 August 2016.
[17] 'Muslim-Western Tensions Persist', Pew Research Center, July 2011, available at: http://www.pewglobal.org/files/2011/07/Pew-Global-Attitudes-Muslim-Western-Relations-FINAL-FOR-PRINT-July-21-2011.pdf, last visited: 3 August 2016.
[18] 'We're Back: Hamas in the West Bank', *The Economist*, 3 September 2014, available at: http://www.economist.com/blogs/pomegranate/2014/09/hamas-west-bank, last visited: 3 August 2016.
[19] 'Special Gaza War Poll', PCPSR, August 2014, available at: http://www.pcpsr.org/sites/default/files/Special%20Gaza%20War%20Poll%20english%20_0.pdf, last visited: 9 August 2016.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Hadid, D., 'Mahmoud Abbas Claims Rabbis Urged Israel to Poison Palestinians' Water', *New York Times*, June 2016, available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/24/world/middleeast/mahmoud-abbas-claims-rabbis-urged-israel-to-poison-palestinians-water.html?_r=0, last visited: 3 August 2016.

every injured person will be rewarded by Allah".[22] This speech marked the beginning of an upsurge of violence and unrest that saw a wave of stabbing, shooting and car-ramming attacks by Palestinians against Israelis.

As rioting broke out across the West Bank, President Abbas did nothing to calm matters. Having accused Israel of desecrating the Al-Aqsa Mosque "with their filthy feet",[23] later that month Abbas also declared before the UN general assembly, "I call on the Israeli government, before it is too late, to cease its use of brutal force to impose its plans to undermine the Islamic and Christian sanctuaries in Jerusalem, particularly its actions at Al-Aqsa Mosque."[24] There is no evidence that the Israeli government is taking any steps to change the existing arrangements at these sites; rather, Israeli security forces have gone to considerable lengths to maintain them and to prevent any kind of Jewish worship on the Temple Mount. Despite this, the conspiracies endorsed by Abbas appear to have had traction among many Palestinians. According to PSR survey data from 2015, a majority of Palestinians believe that Israel wishes to destroy al-Aqsa and Dome of the Rock mosques and replace them with a synagogue.[25] This in turn has very real implications for the prospect of reaching any kind of peace agreement, with the existing polling suggesting continued Palestinian opposition to dividing Jerusalem and its holy sites.[26]

How the United Kingdom can promote a way forward for Israel and the Arab World

Given that the signing of a comprehensive and definitive peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinian Authority is unlikely to be on the immediate horizon, it has generally been understood that there can be little progress regarding Israel's relations with the rest of the Arab world. According to this thinking, Arab states will only reconcile with Israel once a final peace agreement has been signed between Israel and the Palestinians. Yet past experience suggests that this need not necessarily be the case, and that peace between Israel and the Palestinians may not be the crucial prerequisite for Arab states to normalise ties with Israel. As seen with Israel's 1979 peace agreement with Egypt and the 1994 peace treaty with Jordan, it has been possible for such agreements to be signed prior to a final agreement with the Palestinians, albeit with the expressed expectation that progress would be made on that front in the future. While Israel's official diplomatic ties with most surrounding states remain either cold or non-existent, the fraught realities of the region and the threat of Iranian dominance do in fact appear to be increasingly drawing Israel and some of the surrounding Sunni powers closer together. Just as pragmatic interests saw a transformation of Israel's relations with Egypt and Jordan, so too could shared interests encourage a warming of ties with states formerly hostile to Israel.

While the French peace initiative seeks to push through a settlement on Israelis and Palestinians, a more constructive effort might involve a country such as Britain using its influence in the region to

[22] Ben Zion, I., 'Abbas: Blood of "martyrs" spilled on Temple Mount is "pure"', *The Times of Israel*, September 2015, available at: http://www.timesofisrael.com/abbas-blood-of-martyrs-spilled-on-temple-mount-is-pure/, last visited: 3 August 2016.
[23] Ibid.
[24] 'Full text of Abbas's 2015 address to the UN General Assembly', *The Times of Israel*, September 2015, available at: http://www.timesofisrael.com/full-text-of-abbas-2015-address-to-the-un-general-assembly/, last visited: 3 August 2016.
[25] 'Palestinian Public Opinion Poll No 57', PCPSR, October 2015, available at: http://www.pcpsr.org/sites/default/files/p57e%20Full%20text%20%20English%20desgine.pdf, last visited: 5 August 2016.
[26] Ibid.

work to bring Israel and willing Arab states into a closer diplomatic relationship. Increasing cooperation is already taking place away from public scrutiny, but in the near future we may reach a point where a more public reconciliation could take place. This could ultimately have a stabilising effect on the region, creating an alliance against Islamist militants such as Islamic State, while also offsetting Iranian hegemonic ambitions in the Middle East. Such a move would represent a historic opportunity for Britain to demonstrate its leadership on the world stage. Eventually, this could also help to create the conditions for settling the Israeli–Palestinian dispute, with improving Israel's standing in the region acting as a catalyst for peace with the Palestinians, rather than something that could only come about once an agreement had been reached.

To be sure, there continue to be very significant obstacles that mean that the Arab states in question will likely be deterred from bringing their increasing ties with Israel into the open. Fierce hostility to the Jewish state among the publics of many Arab countries would certainly make it politically difficult for the leaders of those states to justify openly embracing Israel. Arguably, comparable degrees of hostility existed in Egyptian and Jordanian societies when those states made peace with Israel. Still, the assassination of President Sadat serves as a lasting reminder to other Arab leaders who might consider such moves toward peace. Equally, Sunni states will be wary of the way in which being seen to be openly aligned with Israel could be exploited by Shia Iran, as well as groups such as Islamic State, to score various propaganda victories.

For the moment, these political realities mean that no one should expect to see states such as Saudi Arabia signing peace treaties with Israel or opening embassies there. Yet in the case of Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and some of the other Gulf States, there has been a remarkable strengthening of ties with Israel, even if much of this has happened discreetly and away from public attention. These ties, primarily oriented around security cooperation, have for the most part come about as a matter of pragmatic necessity. The turmoil that has followed in the wake of the Arab uprisings and particularly the rise of Islamic State has created a crisis in which regional powers can no longer afford to let ideological objections get in the way of forming strategically advantageous alliances. This is all the more the case given that under President Obama the United States has significantly scaled back its involvement and intervention in the Middle East. In one sense or another, Israel, Saudi Arabia and Egypt—all long-standing allies of the United States—feel that under the Obama Presidency, Washington has cooled relations, giving rise to concerns that America may not always remain the reliable force in the region that it has been in past decades.

The fear that Obama's America is no longer such a dependable friend and advocate is given an added sense of urgency by the ascent of Iran and its various proxies throughout the region. This Iranian threat, perhaps more than anything else, has brought together Israel and the pragmatic Sunni states, each of which fears the rise of Iran as a regional hegemon and the prospect of a growing Iranian nuclear threat. In recent years, as it became increasingly apparent that the Obama administration was not prepared to intervene directly to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons capabilities, but rather intended to lift sanctions on Iran in return for a temporary scaling back of Iran's formerly illegal nuclear programme, the need for shared security arrangements appeared increasingly apparent to both Israel and a number of key Arab states.

Officially, Israel and countries such as Saudi Arabia have no diplomatic ties; Saudi still claims not to recognise Israel's right to exist. Despite this, there have been indications that increasing degrees of clandestine cooperation have been taking place for quite some time. In 2010, at the time of the

Wikileaks revelations, it was reported that behind closed doors Israel was maintaining remarkably warm diplomatic relations with both the UAE and Saudi Arabia.[27] In particular there was the suggestion that Saudi had given the green light for Israeli warplanes to use Arabian airspace in the event of seeking to carry out a strike on Iranian nuclear facilities. Following the formalisation of president Obama's nuclear negotiations with the Geneva initiative in 2013, further reports surfaced of Israeli–Saudi cooperation on the prospect of thwarting Iranian efforts to acquire nuclear weapons. According to these reports, Israel's Mossad intelligence agency had been working with Riyadh to put in place plans for joint military cooperation in the event that Obama's diplomatic initiative failed to robustly deal with the Iranian nuclear threat.[28]

Elements of these formerly clandestine relations began to be made more public in June of 2015 when retired Saudi general Anwar Majed Eshki shared a platform at an event in Washington with former Israeli ambassador to the UN, Dore Gold.[29] Once again the subject that brought these two figures together was Iran, a reminder of the extent to which this common enemy is helping to foster previously inconceivable alliances in today's Middle East. Indeed, while the appearance of former Israeli and Saudi officials on a shared platform may seem like a small step, it is one that would have been all but unimaginable just a few years previously.
Nor was this move a one-off anomaly. Rather it appears to have been a testing of the waters for further such gestures. In May of this year, Netanyahu's former national security adviser Yaakov Amidror shared a platform with another Saudi official during a foreign policy event in Washington, this time with Prince Turki al-Faisal. During the event the two were not only in direct conversation but, perhaps most significantly of all, discussed pathways to achieving a two-state solution, a move that necessarily implies a recognition of the existence of the state of Israel.

More overt moves have followed these tentative first steps. In July of this year, General Anwar Majed Eshki made an extremely unusual signal by leading a small Saudi delegation on a visit to Jerusalem to meet with Israeli foreign ministry officials for the express purpose of discussing the Arab Peace Initiative. Such steps would appear to give further credence to the notion that shared strategic interests might eventually bring about significant progress on the diplomatic front. As too would the announcement in November of last year confirming that Israel would be opening its first diplomatic mission in the UAE. Not an embassy or a consulate by any means, but another important first for Israeli relations with the Gulf.

Far from simply being token gestures or a question of interactions restricted to cooperation on the Iranian front, the changing relationship between Israel and some of its Arab neighbours is already having a concrete impact on diplomacy elsewhere in the region. In April 2016, it became publicly known that Israel had played a cooperative role in an agreement that saw Egypt agree to return sovereignty over two Red Sea islands to Saudi Arabia. Israel's Defence Minister Moshe Yaalon announced that there had been a written agreement from Saudi Arabia assuring the free and safe

[27] Ravid, B., 'WikiLeaks Blows Cover Off Israel's Covert Gulf States Ties', *Haaretz*, November 2010, available at: http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/wikileaks-blows-cover-off-israel-s-covert-gulf-states-ties-1.327758, last visited: 4 August 2016.
[28] Mahnaimi, U., 'Two old foes unite against Tehran', *The Sunday Times*, November 2013, available at: http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto/news/world_news/Middle_East/article1341561.ece, last visited: 4 August 2016.
[29] Lake, E., 'Israelis and Saudis Reveal Secret Talks to Thwart Iran', Bloomberg, June 2015, available at: https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2015-06-04/israelis-and-saudis-reveal-secret-talks-to-thwart-iran, last visited: 4 August 2016.

passage of Israeli vessels through these waters.[30] Under Israel's peace agreement with Egypt, the Egyptians are prohibited from transferring control over Sinai territory relinquished by Israel to Egypt, which includes these Islands. Israel's consultation in this process and the fact that the Israelis now appear to trust Saudi Arabia to guarantee Israeli right to pass through the Red Sea is another sign of how relations have changed, even in the absence of formal recognition or any kind of official peace agreement.

While the future of Israel's peace treaty with Egypt appeared uncertain during the brief period of Muslim Brotherhood rule, since the coming to power of President Sisi, relations between the two countries have warmed markedly. The two countries engage in particularly close cooperation over security efforts to thwart Islamic State in the Sinai, with Israel permitting Egypt to increase its military presence on the peninsular well beyond the limits set by the peace treaty. Similarly, both Israel and Egypt consider the Gaza Strip to be a particularly problematic area in terms of security, and the Egyptian authorities have taken far more draconian measures than Israel in blockading Gaza, keeping the border completely closed for lengthy periods as well as demolishing homes in the Rafah area as part of efforts to prevent smuggling. Israel's opposition to Hamas, and by extension to the Muslim Brotherhood, is of course also now shared by the current Egyptian government, which has now been joined by Saudi Arabia and the UAE in proscribing the Brotherhood as a terrorist group.

Just how strong the Israeli–Egyptian alliance has become was made apparent during Israel's recent talks with Turkey. Once again regional turmoil and shared security challenges have led the Turkish government to pursue a renewal of formerly friendly relations with Israel. Prior to the process of rapprochement between Jerusalem and Ankara being completed, Egypt's own problematic relations with Erdogan's government appeared to slow down Israeli moves to publicly formalise improved relations with Turkey. Specifically, the new agreement between Israel and Turkey will allow for some Turkish access to Gaza on the grounds that Turkey will be involved in carrying out limited humanitarian activities there. Reportedly, however, the Egyptian government has been staunchly opposed to a Turkish presence in Gaza, and it is understood that this initially slowed progress between Turkey and Israel.[31]

Such disagreements are just one reminder of the complexities of a region where there is no single dividing line between rivalries and conflicts, but rather a kaleidoscope of ever-shifting alliances over a patchwork of ethnicities and religious factions. Nevertheless, the collapse of the rigid old order in that region has created new flexibilities and opportunities for reforming power structures that formerly prevented progress for Arab–Israeli reconciliation. Although the chances for signing a formalised peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinian Authority remain slim—and indeed non-existent in the case of Israel's genuine adversaries Hamas, Hezbollah and Iran—a de facto peace is evolving between Israel and the pragmatic Sunni powers in the region.

In the long term, this naturally developing phenomenon could open a more lasting and meaningful reconciliation between Israel and the Palestinians too. An Israel that believes itself to be more secure in the region it inhabits may well feel more able to afford difficult concessions and greater

[30] Eglash, R., 'How two Red Sea islands shed light on secret relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia', *The Washington Post*, April 2016, available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/04/13/how-two-red-sea-islands-shed-light-on-secret-relations-between-israel-and-saudi-arabia/, last visited: 4 August 2016.
[31] Caspit, B., 'Is Israel forming an alliance with Egypt and Saudi Arabia?', *Al-Monitor*, April 2016, available at: http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/04/israel-al-sisi-egypt-saudi-arabia-islands-transfer-alliance.html, last visited: 4 August 2016.

risks for peace. Equally, if Israel and states such as Saudi Arabia do become more closely aligned, then it is conceivable that such powers would be prepared to intervene to encourage the Palestinians to pursue the same pragmatic approach to Israel that they themselves have adopted.

There are already initial signs that Arab states could be able to play a constructive role in encouraging peace between Israel and the Palestinians. In May, Egypt's President Sisi publicly offered to help facilitate the renewal of negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians.[32] Importantly, in the same speech the Egyptian president also made an offer to assist with reconciliation efforts between rival Palestinian factions. This, of course, would be a crucial step toward ensuring that a negotiated peace would actually be comprehensive and more likely to have some success. But it is a step that has apparently often been overlooked by Western diplomats and statesmen who have repeatedly failed to account for how an agreement between Israel and the Palestinian Authority might quickly fall apart if the Palestinians remain divided between factions in Ramallah and Gaza.

Arab states may also be better placed than Western countries when encouraging Palestinian leaders to show moderation during the negotiation process. During a recent conference in the UAE at which the Director-General of the Israeli Foreign Ministry addressed listeners, one senior Emirati official reportedly criticised the Palestinian Authority's decision to pursue statehood via the United Nations Security Council.[33] Such comments serve as a reminder that even regimes overtly sympathetic to the objectives of the Palestinians have become increasingly frustrated by Mahmoud Abbas's leadership in recent years. In the future, these governments may be willing to play a role in encouraging a shift on the Palestinian side that could break the current deadlock.

Although there may be relatively little that countries in the West can do to force a change in attitudes between Israelis and Palestinians, facilitating better relations between Israel and its Arab neighbours, however, could be a first step toward a more far-reaching peace agreement. Britain, with its long-standing good relations in the Gulf, would be well placed to assist the process of emboldening burgeoning ties between Israel and countries such as Saudi Arabia. This role now particularly falls to Britain at this time, given the way in which the Obama administration's own relations with countries such as Egypt, Saudi and other Gulf countries has become strained in recent years. Britain, however, has maintained good and improving relations with both the Israelis and the Gulf States, presenting a rare opportunity to assist with facilitating an organically occurring process of rapprochement between these countries. For the time being, this avenue of activity appears more promising than attempting to pressure any kind of radical change in the relations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, where for the moment there is little basis for new progress.

What Britain could add to the current dynamic is a strong, friendly and reliable third party able to competently facilitate an eventual transition from the mostly clandestine moves toward cooperation currently taking place, to an official and open normalisation of relations between Israel and those Arab states with which Israel currently has no diplomatic ties. It will likely be the case that Saudi Arabia in particular will expect to see some movement on the Palestinian front alongside any official

[32] 'Egypt's Sisi lends backing to Israel-Palestinian peace efforts', Reuters, May 2016, available at: http://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-palestinians-egypt-idUSKCN0Y81FQ , last visited: 5 August 2016.
[33] Ahren, R., 'If Paris goes ahead with peace summit, I doubt we'll be there, says Israel's Foreign Ministry Chief', *The Times of Israel,* July 2016, available at: http://www.timesofisrael.com/if-paris-goes-ahead-with-peace-summit-i-doubt-well-be-there-says-israels-foreign-ministry-chief/, last visited: 4 August 2016.

moves Riyadh makes toward publicly reconciling with Israel. This too, however, may be a process that Britain can help to manage, if the various parties come to see it as being in their interest to do so. If confidence can be built at a regional level, then this could likely help foster an atmosphere in which Israel and the Palestinian leadership might feel more inclined to moderate their positions and take greater risks for peace. If the parties are able to take such a step, then Britain will have played a crucial role in changing a long-standing stalemate between the various sides. However, even if progress between the Israelis and the Palestinians were not to be immediately forthcoming, encouraging a regional alignment between Israel and the other pragmatic and pro-Western states in the region will have been a good in and of itself.

Adopting a role that encourages moves toward reconciliation between Israel and friendly Arab states would arguably be in Britain's own direct interest. Britain's interests in the Middle East are best served by the advance of stability in that region. A secure and stable Middle East would be far more hospitable to Britain's commercial activities in that part of the world, and would present fewer security challenges to Britain at home and abroad. As well as opening the potential for significantly expanding growing trade and security ties with both Israel and the Gulf, encouraging this kind of cooperation would represent an impactful non-military intervention in the Middle East, showcasing the United Kingdom's continuing ability to play a constructive leadership role on the world stage.

Conclusion

The multilateral peace initiative now being proposed by France for resolving the Israeli–Palestinian conflict seeks to break the long-standing deadlock. However, many of the obstacles that have proved to be stumbling blocks in the past are still in place, while new ones have emerged in the wake of the Arab Spring. Disregarding the realities on the ground, and simply attempting to impose a solution on Israelis and Palestinians—as the French initiative risks doing—is unlikely to serve as a productive strategy for peacemaking. A first step for creating the conditions for progress between Israelis and Palestinians could involve reconciliation between Israel and the pragmatic states in the Middle East. Britain's unique standing with several of the Gulf States, particularly Saudi Arabia, puts this country in a strong position to lead efforts to shift some of the dynamics currently preventing progress in the peace process. Increased cooperation between Israel and the pragmatic Sunni states is already occurring out of mutual self-interest, but it remains at a mostly unofficial level. In the near future an opportunity could arise for Britain and countries such as the United States to encourage an upgrading of these ties to a more prominent and public level.

The unpredictability and turmoil now raging throughout the region has overturned many of the existing assumptions about how international actors might best pursue peace between the Israelis and Palestinians. In particular, the experiments with territorial withdrawals as part of efforts to resolve the conflict now appear much more problematic and carry far more risk. The fact that several of the areas from which Israel withdrew have subsequently fallen to militant Islamist groups who use these territories to attack Israel means that attitudes in Israeli society have shifted with regard to making territorial compromises for peace. Accordingly, Israeli parties proposing a more dovish policy have struggled at recent elections.

Although public opinion in Israel is now far less open to the kind of far-reaching concessions that have typically been thought necessary to reach an agreement with the Palestinians, public opinion

among Palestinians is deeply inhospitable to an accommodation with Israel. In particular, the ideological and religious shifts in Palestinian society present dramatic new challenges for achieving peace. Most significant has been the increasing prominence of Islamism in Palestinian politics, as demonstrated by the rise of Hamas and other smaller Jihadist factions. This has had two disastrous effects on prospects for reaching a peace agreement between Israelis and Palestinians. The first is that since the Hamas takeover in Gaza the Palestinian polity is now split and there is no one unitary Palestinian Authority with which Israel can reach a peace agreement. The second—and perhaps more subtle—impact of the rise of Islamism has been the advancement of Islamist notions about never accepting the existence of the Jewish state. Rather, many more Palestinians have been radicalised, favouring violent struggle against Israel, as became particularly apparent with the wave of Palestinian stabbing and shooting attacks that have been directed against Israeli civilians in recent months.

While Hamas continues to represent a significant security challenge to Israel, today Israel's conflict is not with the Palestinian Authority, and this is not where the greatest security challenges come from. Rather, Israel's primary conflict is with Iran and some of the radical Islamist groups that act as proxies to Iran. No peace process can be expected to have a comprehensive impact if it neglects to take these threats into account. The threat from Iran, rather than from the Palestinians, is the primary security concern engaging not only Israel but also many of Israel's pragmatic Sunni neighbours. While official diplomatic relations may remain strained or non-existent, Israel is now entering into an ever closer alliance with key Sunni neighbours such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States.

The strategic cooperation and ever strengthening alliance that is now emerging between Israel and some of its Sunni Arab neighbours may represent a new and promising way forward for healing rifts and working toward stability in the Middle East. With the United States having scaled back certain aspects of its engagement in the region, this process of enhancing the relationship between a number of key pro-Western regional players is one that Britain is uniquely placed to help encourage. By capitalising on its friendly ties with Gulf countries, as well as with Israel, there is a clear opportunity to play a constructive diplomatic role to help foster the kind of regional cooperation that could eventually have a transformative effect on a region currently beset by turmoil and conflict.

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