Neighbors Brace for the New Netanyahu Era

Critical Neighbors
Egypt, Jordan, and the Israeli-Palestinian Arena

An Israeli Perspective
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A Palestinian Perspective
Ibrahim Eid Dalalsha

A Jordanian Perspective
Farah Bdour

An Egyptian Perspective
Hesham Youssef
Table of Contents

Neighbors Brace for the New Netanyahu Era 1
An Israeli Perspective 2
A Palestinian Perspective 7
A Jordanian Perspective 11
An Egyptian Perspective 16
About the Authors 20
Neighbors Brace for the New Netanyahu Era

With a new Israeli government sworn in and its leaders’ policy commitments beginning to translate into action, the implications for Israel’s neighbors and others in the region and beyond appear ominous. Some leaders, who had expressed concern in private about stated intentions regarding the West Bank, Jerusalem, and sensitive holy sites, have already reacted publicly and sharply to the government’s early actions.

How likely is this trend to continue? What might be its ramifications on Israel’s relations with its critical neighbors and others, including the United States?

Members of an Israel Policy Forum task force offer four perspectives—Israeli, Palestinian, Jordanian, and Egyptian—on these developments.

The opinions and proposals expressed in these pieces are only reflective of the respective authors’ opinions and do not necessarily reflect the policies or positions of Israel Policy Forum.
An Israeli Perspective

A New Year, a New Government, and a Very Different Israel

by Nimrod Novik

Background: From Netanyahu to Bennett and Lapid

It was a year of (relative) harmony.

Under Netanyahu, a decade of ups and downs in Israel-Jordan relations had ended with downs not witnessed since the signing of the peace treaty in 1994. His successors, Bennett and Lapid, wasted no time in conveying to Amman that their view of the Hashemite Kingdom, appreciation of its strategic importance, and awareness of its sensitivity to all matters Palestinian—the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif in particular—differ from their predecessor’s. They did not excel in living up to commitments and expectations, but there was a marked change from the blunt offenses to and blanket disregard of Jordanian sensibilities that characterized the previous Netanyahu tenure.

Relations with Egypt experienced less turmoil under Netanyahu, so the transition to his successors represented continuity on that front. While on more than one occasion President Sisi reportedly felt “stabbed in the back” by Netanyahu and conveyed that sentiment to the prime minister1, he nonetheless chose to not let such aberrations, however offensive, undermine what he judged most important for Egypt. Likewise, with those notable exceptions, Netanyahu pursued policies reflective of his appreciation of Egypt’s strategic importance. This was manifested, inter alia, in unprecedented levels of bilateral cooperation regarding security in the Sinai, as well as support for Egypt in Washington. Indeed, the Egyptian president felt comfortable enough with the long-serving Israeli prime minister that a senior aide half-jokingly intimated in 2019 that Sisi “votes Netanyahu.”
Though 2022 saw moments of tension in Egypt-Israel relations, these were minor and discreetly handled. Overall, security coordination continued as effectively as ever. Moreover, for whatever reason (some attributed it to Cairo’s regret at being behind as the Abraham Accords signatories reaped the fruits of the peace Egypt pioneered), President Sisi took steps to break with the past and embraced expanding business and other economic relations with Israel.

Back to Netanyahu? Not Really.

A year of turmoil is coming to our critical neighborhood.

Those in the region and beyond might not recognize the typically cautious leader they had known in the previous decade in the one now emerging as the leader of a troubling coalition and government.

The election results, the coalition agreements, and the new government’s early conduct do not bode well for Israel’s relations with its neighbors. Even pessimists (the undersigned included) proved far too optimistic in anticipating the scope and pace of measures that the new coalition would adopt, which stand to undermine virtually every value enshrined in Israel’s Declaration of Independence. However, these developments have been covered extensively and thoroughly analyzed elsewhere and are beyond the scope of this exchange.² Their impact on regional stability and Israel’s relations with those who we dub Critical Neighbors and others in the Arab world is.

Delayed Gratification

One feature of the new government’s agreed measures and emerging policies that are relevant to our discussion is incrementalism. It appears that in seeking to avert international reaction, the leadership of even the most extreme elements in Israeli society has accepted a piecemeal approach to pursuing their far-reaching ambitions. Thus, for example, in lieu of sweeping legislation to annex West Bank territory—deemed likely to trigger a harsh international reaction—they opt for a host of partial legislative and administrative measures. While their cumulative effect will lead to a very similar outcome, the intent is to make it difficult for outsiders to connect the dots and understand what is happening before facts are already established on the ground.

Likewise, without abandoning their ultimate objectives, the most extreme advocates of exclusive Jewish sovereignty on the Temple Mount have signaled their intention to go slow. As detailed below, even provocateur-in-chief Itamar Ben Gvir opted for a visit to the shrine that was far more stealthy than his typically inflammatory modus operandi.

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¹Two such incidents are noteworthy: first, in 2016, Netanyahu urged Sisi to launch a regional initiative for Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, in advance of which he committed to bringing MK Isaac Herzog and his Labor party (with 24 Knesset seats) into his coalition to create a majority for the move. On that basis, Sisi made public his intention to lead such an initiative, only to learn that Netanyahu had a change of heart, bringing hardliner Liberman (and his seven seats) into the coalition instead, thus dooming any prospects of getting coalition support for negotiations. The second took place in 2018 after Netanyahu hosted Gen. Khaled Fawzi, head of the Egyptian General Intelligence Directorate. During the meeting, the prime minister gave a green light to a proposed Egyptian strategy designed to change dynamics in the Gaza Strip, only to torpedo it weeks later after the Egyptian president publicly committed to it.

²See, for example, recent Israel Policy Forum Koplow Columns, podcasts, and webinars.
Constituents’ Hunger and Sense of Urgency

In both instances, though, constituents make gradualism hard to sustain. Cognizant that Israeli coalitions rarely last their full term, both annexationists and Temple Mount activists are signaling growing impatience with their elected leaders’ newfound pragmatism. Moreover, expecting Netanyahu to live up to his written and verbal commitments only as long as he needs his coalition partners to legislate his freedom from justice, they believe that their moment is now.

The recent ascent of National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir to the Temple Mount is a telling case in point, both with regard to the potency of pressure from the base and to the merit of Netanyahu’s declaration to every foreign reporter that the fears of his coalition are baseless, as he alone is ultimately at the wheel and makes final decisions.

Weeks ago, Ben Gvir told a cheering crowd celebrating their electoral accomplishment that his first act as a minister will be to celebrate it on top of Temple Mount. As coalition negotiations approached a successful conclusion, sources close to Ben Gvir revealed his decision to yield to Netanyahu on all matters related to Temple Mount, timing of visits included. Within hours, senior members of his political base flooded the media with harsh reactions. That statement was rescinded within 24 hours. The visit, he declared, will take place within a week of his assuming office. Over the following few days, Netanyahu reportedly tried to impress upon him to delay, but Ben Gvir made public his refusal to do so. He ended up looking for a compromise: hold the visit early in his term as demanded by his constituents, but heed the advice of the security agencies: create a tactical surprise by not informing the media beforehand, hold it at an early-morning hour when few worshipers are there, and lower its overall profile to reduce its provocative effect.

This “compromise” hardly reassured Israel’s critical neighbors or others in the region and beyond. It reinforced concerns about the overall trajectory of Israeli policy under the new government.

A Recipe for Trouble

Based on the coalition agreements, control over much of West Bank policy is to be shifted from the IDF to representatives of the most ambitious annexationists. This includes providing Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, a leading annexationist, with a second ministerial post overseeing much of West Bank policy. The new coalition is thus bound to aggressively pursue settlement expansion, sweeping legalization of illegal outposts, and Palestinian home demolitions, all as part of what Smotrich and other coalition members dub as “the war over Area C.” Concurrently, Itamar Ben Gvir, representing the most extreme, anti-Arab element in society as well as the most aggressive messianic Temple Mount activists, was appointed as minister of national security and given unprecedented authority over the Israeli police—West Bank- and Jerusalem-dedicated Border Police units included. Even prior to Ben Gvir’s Temple Mount visit, the results have already been evident: violent settlers and Temple Mount messianics are emboldened, settler violence has increased, and efforts to bolster Jewish presence in and the Jewish character of East Jerusalem and the Temple Mount has accelerated.

These alarming developments coincide with an ever-weaker Palestinian Authority that has lost control over large swaths of West Bank territory and lacks public legitimacy, growing belligerence among young Palestinians who see anti-Israel and anti-PA violence as the only worthy expression of grievances and aspirations, and a Gaza Strip that previously reacted violently to similar developments.
Washington: MIA or is the Firefighter on the Way?

With the Biden administration having emerged from the November 2022 midterm elections far stronger than many had anticipated, some in Israel hoped that the reinvigorated White House could impact Netanyahu’s calculations in terms of how far he can accommodate his coalition partners’ ambitions on matters relevant to relations with the U.S. Having mastered the use of the American factor in persuading demanding partners to hold their horses and go slow—a practice commonly referred to during much of his previous tenure as “but Obama...”—many expected him to employ a “but Biden” argument during the coalition negotiations. The outcomes suggest otherwise. It is too early to tell whether he will ultimately resort to this argument as coalition agreements become policy.

On the other hand, it seems that Washington can get its way with Netanyahu on matters it deems important. The U.S. veto, for example, was credited with preventing the appointment of Smotrich to the position of defense minister.

With that single—if significant—exception, and without presuming to be privy to intimate, direct communications between the Biden administration and Netanyahu, thus far the public face of U.S. diplomacy reflected passivity. It went from the benign “we’ll judge the government on its actions, not statements made or personalities involved,” evolved into spelling out expectations that seemed detached from the Israeli reality (whereby the White House “look[ed] forward to working with the new Israeli government to promote peace, security, and prosperity in the region”), and ended most recently with the reiteration of the administration’s commitment to two states and opposition to “policies that endanger its viability.” Even the Ben Gvir provocation did not trigger a reaction stronger than expressions of concern, objections to unilateral acts, and reiterations of the importance of the status quo.

It was only the blunt violation of Israel’s commitment to the U.S. not to repopulate the northern West Bank settlement of Homesh, built largely on private Palestinian land and evacuated in 2005, that triggered what many in Israel viewed as setting red lines. In the words of State Department Spokesperson Ned Price, the U.S. “call to refrain from unilateral steps certainly includes any decision to create a new settlement, to legalize outposts, or allowing buildings of any kind deep in the West Bank...or on private Palestinian land,” adding specifically that “the Homesh outpost...is illegal even under Israeli law.”

The recent announcement of National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan’s plan to visit Israel on January 19, with a visit by Secretary of State Antony Blinken reportedly to follow later this month, seems to indicate a realization that merely reiterating U.S. policy preferences might not impress intended audiences in Jerusalem. Indeed, those who expected the administration to intervene on related matters promptly and with the same vigor as it did on the appointment of the minister of defense must wonder whether, having failed to prevent the spreading of fuel, the firefighter is determined to put out early flames and prevent an inferno.

Regional Ramifications

Whereas both Egypt and Jordan have long expressed concerns about the impact of Israeli-Palestinian tensions on national security and other interests (with Egypt focused primarily on the Gaza Strip and Jordan on Jerusalem and the West Bank), at the outset, Abraham Accords signatories initially seemed less interested in the Palestinian sphere. This changed rapidly with the May 10, 2021 outbreak of hostilities and the 11-day Gaza war that ensued.
By early 2023, neither the peace pioneers nor more recent normalizers were keeping their concerns to themselves. Just like his two predecessors, Bennett and Lapid, Netanyahu too received private messages from Arab leaders near and far. Prior to the swearing-in of his government, some reportedly went as far as to caution against bringing extreme elements into his coalition. All, however, pointed out the possible regional ramifications of policies that undermine West Bank stability or the sanctity of Jerusalem’s Islamic shrines.

Couched in diplomatic language, the messages were nonetheless clear: without presuming to preach to Israel on how it should defend itself, those leaders urged attention to the effect of Israeli-Palestinian tensions on their respective domestic audiences. They also pointed out that were they to remain mute at such moments of tension, adversaries (Iran included) would be quick to exploit such silence in seeking to undermine regime legitimacy and internal stability by accusing them of having turned their backs on the Palestinians and of dereliction of duty in defending al-Aqsa. Some of the more stern messages included language suggesting that given such developments, they might not be able to pursue normalization at the intended and desired pace, nor even sustain that which had already been accomplished.

These sentiments were expressed quite bluntly—and this time, publicly—in reaction to Ben Gvir’s provocation. With Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, and others expressing alarm with what some called “the Ben Gvir assault” on Islam’s third holiest shrine, the UAE went even further. Its written reaction “strongly condemned” the “storming” of the holy grounds, called upon Israel to prevent such “provocations”, and reiterated “the need to respect the custodial role” of Jordan over the holy site. It also took active measures. Resorting to its temporary standing as a member of the U.N. Security Council, it called for a special session. It also postponed Netanyahu’s planned visit to the country, originally scheduled for the week of January 9. The visit is expected to take place later in January.

Viewed from the region, Washington’s noted choice of refraining from administering timely and effective preventive medicine reinforced doubts about its will to stand up to those expected to pursue aggressive, belligerent policies against West Bank Palestinians and Israeli Arab citizens, as well as Islam and Christianity’s holy sites. Consequently, the administration has so far deprived regional players of the potentially most effective source of deterrence against the forces to be unleashed over the coming weeks and months by the new government’s members and policies.

**Diplomatic Containment?**

The year 2023 seems to present our critical neighbors and the region at large with serious challenges. Netanyahu’s justified pride in the Abraham Accords as the star accomplishment of his previous term, the Accords’ popularity among Israelis, and the prime minister’s declared resolve to achieve normalization with Saudi Arabia offer those countries some leverage. But on their own, and absent U.S. leadership, this is likely to prove inadequate.

It will be interesting to find out, first, whether the members of the so-called Arab peace camp have the will and skill to coordinate among themselves and with the U.S., employing their combined leverage in diplomatic containment; second, whether the U.S. is up to it; or third, whether they all sadly resign to the need to change course in the face of what they are bound to view as offensive Israeli policies.
The PA at an Existential Crossroads

by Ibrahim Eid Dalalsha

The Israeli Far Right Takes Charge

It has not been long since Netanyahu was serving his previous term as prime minister of Israel. The Palestinian leadership under President Abbas thus experienced déjà vu as the right-wing Israeli prime minister was re-inaugurated, but this time alongside far-right ministers whose political agenda is no less than the dismantlement of the Palestinian Authority and doing away with all prospects for a two-state solution in an absolute and irreversible manner. Netanyahu himself has reiterated his longstanding policy on settlement expansion and made pledges to his fellow right-wing ministers in this regard. Furthermore, he tirelessly supported the passing and amendment of laws giving the two far-right ministers expansive powers over portfolios directly related to the Palestinians and the Palestinian Authority. Thus, Mr. Itamar Ben Gvir took over as minister of national security, which now has an expanded mandate over the Israeli police, including the units of border police operating

A poster of Yasser Arafat at a Fatah rally in Gaza City marking the 18th anniversary of his death, November 10, 2022
in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. In addition, Mr. Bezalel Smotrich is now in charge of the Civil Administration as an additional minister in the ministry of defense alongside his position as minister of finance, who is responsible for transferring tax revenues to the Palestinian Authority on a monthly basis.

To make things worse for the Palestinians and beyond, Ben Gvir does not conceal his agenda to change the status quo on the most sensitive of all religious sites, Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount.

“We Told You So”

Indeed, while extremist provocations had been expected, Ben Gvir’s calculated provocation of touring the holy site on Tuesday, January 4, within days of assuming office, triggered angry reactions from the region and beyond. It also created new dynamics. Hours after his tour, the PA and Jordan got the United Arab Emirates, which is a rotating member of the U.N. Security Council, to approach the forum demanding a special session aimed at issuing a presidential statement condemning the move. The UAE, which had avoided coordinating policies vis-à-vis Israel with the PA, nonetheless did not hesitate to take up the initiative. It moreover issued a strongly worded condemnation. Whereas direct or indirect PA-Emirati cooperation on Israeli affairs has been anything but “business as usual,” the emerging practices and policies of the Netanyahu–Ben Gvir government don’t only create security tensions with Palestinians. They also generate new regional political dynamics.

To Palestinians, these dynamics vindicate their early opposition to the Abraham Accords, which now seem more realistic in their assessment of the Accords’ impact on Israel’s conduct than the signatories had anticipated. The danger posed by this government to the third-holiest site in Islam thus overshadows regional political differences. It serves those hostile to normalization with Israel in challenging the legitimacy of regional moderates and pragmatists for enabling such Israeli conduct by pursuing normalization in the face of such offenses.

While the Palestinian Authority has no intention of initiating a conflict with the new Israeli government, the prospects of security deterioration and upticks in violence as a result of some or all of the Israeli right-wing agenda seem inevitable. In fact, many are predicting security troubles as the only possible consequence should these trends continue.

Bad Memories, Worse Expectations

Anxious over what is yet to come, the Palestinian leadership and public vividly recall the experience with the previous Mr. Netanyahu. His tenure was marked by no generosity toward the PA (quite the contrary), but his caution restrained the most extreme elements in his society. Ironically, he is now the enabler of those extremists’ policies towards the Palestinians. During his two successive previous tenures, the U.S. administration during Obama’s two terms attempted to launch peace talks between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Those two bids failed to achieve any tangible progress and, in several ways, were torpedoed at the outset. With one notable exception, Mr. Netanyahu resisted the United States’ insistence that he base negotiations on the principle of the 1967 lines and refused to institute a settlement expansion freeze for the duration of the negotiations beyond an initial nine-month moratorium that excluded Jerusalem. He also refused to implement serious confidence-building measures to enable negotiations to proceed beyond that initial moratorium.
Reversing the Logic of the API

Later on, based on those inflexible positions, the Israeli prime minister, along with the Trump administration, worked on a master plan to strip the Palestinians of the only diplomatic leverage at their disposal, to be traded for ending the Israeli occupation, i.e. the Arab Peace Initiative of 2002. Upon the signing of the Abraham Accords in 2020, the Israeli prime minister made several declarations announcing that the goal is to strike peace agreements with Arab states while excluding the Palestinians. It was abundantly clear that the Israeli prime minister adopted a policy that was meant to circumvent the conflict with the Palestinians and work towards normalizing relations with the Arab countries—a stark departure from the Arab Peace Initiative, which calls for an opposite sequence.

In preparing the stage for what is yet to come, the new prime minister recently issued statements highlighting his intent to exert efforts and hold talks with Saudi Arabia with the purpose of reaching a mutual recognition agreement. Needless to say that while it is doubtful that he will succeed in achieving such an agreement, the composition of his coalition and its stated policies make clear that he has no intention to exert efforts to reach an agreement with the Palestinians. Hence, there is nothing positive for the Palestinians to look for during the term of his new government.

Worse Is Coming

In light of these dynamics, the Palestinian Authority is bracing itself as far-right policies become the Israeli government’s agenda. This is bound to trigger a multi-layer crisis. While the PA has no intent to stop security coordination, which is a critical safety valve of Palestinian-Israeli relations, the security situation is expected to deteriorate. Settler violence and Palestinian attacks are likely to increase during the coming weeks and months. The Palestinian political system can’t stand idle when illegal settlement outposts are legalized, more settlement outposts are created, settler violence increases, and the government treats these developments with total impunity and support.

On another level, inviting more instability, the Palestinian Authority has nowhere else to turn other than international organizations. In addition to this approach being arguably ineffective in confronting the Israeli right-wing government, under Netanyahu’s previous governments such acts by the Palestinian Authority were met with sanctions, including withholding of tax revenues and soliciting enormous pressure on the PA from the international community including the U.S. As the Palestinian Authority prepares to initiate diplomatic, political, and legal actions in the international arena, this could trigger harsh Israeli punitive actions that would substantially weaken the already troubled PA. The PA, which has been suffering from economic, financial, and security problems, is no longer in a position to sustain more blows without directly undermining its ability to maintain law and order in many West Bank areas and provide other services to millions of Palestinians.

Internal Challenges

All those complex challenges facing the Palestinian Authority amid the inauguration of this far-right government in Israel come at a time when the internal legitimacy of the Palestinian governance is eroding by the day. Adding insult to injury, there are many other factors that harbingers more serious deterioration. These include the continued internal divide between Fatah and Hamas, the resulting weak security environment in the West Bank, the Palestinian public’s overwhelming resentment of the PA, and the PA’s lack of legitimacy to take any serious action. It all coincides with the worsening succession strife within the ruling Fatah party’s leadership. On top of these paralyzing factors, the PA
is facing increasing isolation among relevant influential Arab countries.

**Bottom Line: An Existential Crossroads**

The extent to which the extremist ministers in the new Israeli government will succeed in translating their respective parties’ agendas into an official government policy is yet to be determined. Regardless of whether this happens in full view or in a manner designed to camouflage ultimate objectives, either way the consequences are written in capital letters on the wall: the Palestinian Authority as we know it may not survive, as it is in no position to weather the expected increasing security, financial, domestic, and external pressures. The rise of this new government in Israel leaves the Palestinian Authority at an existential crossroads: It either confronts the government’s extremist policies head-on or faces the inevitable fate of being completely undermined, reaching a state of paralysis and irrelevance. In either case, the prognosis for both Israelis and Palestinians is centered around how bad the worsening trajectory is. Prospects for progress or even proper crisis management are almost nonexistent.
Looming National Security Challenges
by Farah Bdour

With the formation of Israel’s 37th government, Jordan’s relations with Israel are expected to be fraught with more tension than at any point since the signing of the peace treaty. One can identify various friction points that would complicate the relationship. However, the main friction point will likely be the anticipated collision between Israel’s political and security echelons on the issues that matter to Jordan the most, namely Jerusalem and annexation. The Israeli security echelon, which traditionally has been more attuned to Jordan’s stability, will lose much influence over policies that directly impact Jordan’s interests. Given the likelihood that these tensions will disrupt the status quo of Israel-Jordan relations, navigating them without undermining the strategic relationship altogether is bound to prove a major challenge for the Jordanian leadership in the next phase.

Post-Peace Relational Norms
After signing the peace treaty in 1994, seven right-wing governments shaped Israel’s bilateral relations
with Jordan. Five were under Netanyahu’s leadership. Under these governments, tensions surrounding policies on Jerusalem and annexation simmered for years and descended into outright crises on a number of occasions. One was President Trump’s “deal of the century” proposal in 2020, which prompted the Jordanian king to warn Israel of a massive conflict if Israel proceeds with plans to annex West Bank territory and threaten the territorial integrity of the future Palestinian state. Another moment of tension was in 2021 when Jewish extremists stormed al-Aqsa Mosque and Haram al-Sharif in violation of the status quo and of an understanding that Netanyahu himself reached with King Abdullah II and Secretary Kerry in 2014. In response, the Jordanian authorities summoned the Israeli envoy in Amman, and the king led intensive diplomacy to halt the worst Israeli-Palestinian violence in years.

Despite these tensions, the Israeli military and intelligence establishments played a critical role in insulating the bilateral relations from right-wing political adventures. Their appreciation of the strategic importance of this relationship to the national security of both states has led the security establishments to warn against annexation and changing the status quo in Jerusalem. The calculus is simple: instability and escalation in the territories threaten to trigger a domino effect that might destabilize Jordan with untold consequences, including for Israel’s security. Jordan is a key partner and strategic ally of the United States in one of the most volatile regions of the world. It continues to play an integral and leading role in maintaining peace and stability in the region, particularly on the Palestinian-Israeli front, the fight against violent extremism, and in hosting millions of refugees from neighboring countries.

The Bennett-Lapid government internalized the security establishment’s assessment and accordingly sought to repair the fraying of the bilateral relations that had occurred over the previous decade. The frequent trips between Amman and West Jerusalem made the local news and the general impression was that the bilateral relations had finally gotten a lifeline. However, there are reasons to expect that Israel’s 37th government will pursue policies that might inflict severe damage on bilateral relations. This is true about both stated policies and personalities, most notorious among them National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir and Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, who was handed authority over much of West Bank policy.

The rise of these radical-right Jewish supremacists to power brings to the fore sour memories of a revisionist ideology that has periodically shaped Israel’s strategic thinking since 1977. From the First Lebanon War in 1982, when then-Defense Minister Ariel Sharon planned to drive the PLO out of Lebanon and into Jordan, turning the country into the de facto Palestinian state; to Netanyahu’s sophisticated campaigns of disinformation and propaganda about “Jordan is Palestine,” which he supervised in his capacity as deputy chief of mission at Israel’s Washington embassy and as ambassador to the U.S.; to the First Intifada, which concluded with 1100 Palestinians and 58 Israelis being killed; Jordan has adopted assertive policies that had drastic transformational consequences to its security.

Judging the newly appointed ministers by their declared positions on Jerusalem and annexation, former Jordanian officials called on the government to impose a national military conscription to prepare for an eventual confrontation with Netanyahu’s far-right government. Others have warned that the new Israeli government would work to transfer the Palestinian “demographic burden” to Jordan by creating conditions under which Jordan would find itself forced to assume administrative and/or security responsibility for the Palestinians in the occupied territories. Jordanian officials have
repeatedly shared concerns regarding a possible outbreak of an armed intifada in the West Bank that could lead to the collapse of the PA and strengthen the influence of radical forces, who will benefit from the growing frustration in Palestinian society as their right to self-determination is reduced to work permits.

Jordan is also deeply concerned about changing the status quo in Jerusalem. According to media reports, during a meeting on the sidelines of the COP27 climate summit in Sharm el-Sheikh, King Abdullah II met with President Herzog and shared concerns regarding potential unilateral changes to the status quo at al-Aqsa Mosque and Haram al-Sharif. This was followed by King Abdullah II inaugurating Waqfiyyat al-Mustafa, which was attended by Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, Bahrain's minister of justice, and Islamic Affairs and Endowments Minister Nawaf bin Muhammad Al Maaawda, representing Bahraini King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa. The initiative was meant to support the steadfastness of Palestinians, especially in Jerusalem, in line with the Hashemite Custodianship of Islamic and Christian holy sites in the city, and serve as a preemptive measure to counter the far-right intrusions through maintaining a Palestinian presence at the compound at all times.

**The Friction**

What is concerning about the new coalition agreements is that they have transferred authority over several sensitive domains from the traditional center of gravity—the defense establishment—to dangerous ideologues.

The border police, which was directed by the police commissioner but operated in the territories under IDF command, now falls under the control of Ben Gvir in his capacity as a national security minister. The Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT) and the director of the West Bank Civil Administration, who are responsible for all West Bank policies including construction in Area C, have been moved from the control of the IDF regional commander (as prescribed by international law), who answers to the defense minister, to the same Smotrich mentioned above, in his second capacity as a minister in the defense ministry.

Judged in a context of priorities, assessments, interests, and decision-making, frictions among all those now responsible seem unavoidable. The inevitable outcome is the disruption of Israel-Jordan relational norms. Moreover, the future trajectory of Israeli internal dynamics threatens to produce trends within the military establishment itself that pose substantive threats to Jordan's security. These threats will interact in complex and cascading ways with each other amidst a global great power competition and an increasingly evolving world order and multipolarity. Uncertainties about the 2024 U.S. elections have yet to add to this complexity. Facing these threats requires that the leadership in Amman revisit the post-1994 security assumptions and formulate an integrated preventive response to face current and looming security challenges.

Some will argue that the above reading is overly pessimistic and that Netanyahu, who is keen on “making history” and signing new peace deals with Arab countries, has the power to moderate the behavior of his government and avoid escalation. There are a number of signs to support the notion that the bilateral relations will not necessarily deteriorate under the new government. Following the Israeli elections on November 1, King Abdullah II and President Isaac Herzog agreed on the implementation of the water for energy deal. Later, the two signed a letter of intent as part of a collaborative endeavor to restore the Jordan River’s ecology. On Nov 14, a public phone call was held...
between King Abdullah II and Netanyahu, after which the latter described the call as “favorable.”

While the leaked audio of Ben Gvir advocating moderation and his handshake with the ambassador of the UAE might suggest a behavioral change among the new ministers, it’s very hard to imagine how the coalition ideologues can avoid delivering on promises to their support base even if they want to, as their base has already reiterated its resolve to seize the moment and is known for its aggressive inclinations. Moreover, when calming statements such as Ben Gvir’s (above) and Smotrich’s (in a recent Wall Street Journal op-ed) are examined against measures they have secured in the coalition agreements, optimism has very little to rely upon.

**Business Is Not as Usual**

In an interview with CNN, King Abdullah II warned the incoming Israeli government not to cross Jordan’s “red lines” and stated that “we’re quite prepared” to face conflict if those redlines were crossed. While the king didn’t elaborate on the nature of the Jordanian response, one interpretation is that the king seemed to be preparing more seriously for action.

That same week, far-right National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir stormed al-Aqsa Mosque/Haram al-Sharif in a move that received wide condemnation from the international community including U.S., UK, KSA, UAE, and Qatar. On its part, Jordan condemned the visit in the severest terms and summoned the Israeli ambassador in Amman. The envoy reiterated Israel’s commitment to the status quo.

There is no question that Jordan possesses tools and has a wide range of options to confront the Israeli threats. Jordan seems to be coordinating very closely with the PA to internationalize the issue and build on the momentum of the UNGA resolution calling on the International Court of Justice to give an opinion on the legal consequences of Israel’s illegal occupation of Palestinian territories. Jordan may try to push for referring the Israeli provocation on Haram al-Sharif to the UNSC and seek support from the UAE, which represents the Arab League at the council.

Moving forward, Jordan should mount pressure on the Netanyahu government and design a preventive strategy, the essence of which would be to persuade Israel to abort policies that undermine Jordan’s security and regional stability. Jordan should communicate upfront what its redlines are and its response should redlines be crossed. This should include responses to incremental measures that cumulatively have the very similar outcome of establishing facts on the ground and changing the status quo. Jordan may capitalize on its niche, value-added capabilities of intelligence gathering (among others), which have been critical in contributing to and sharing the burden of regional and global security.

Jordan may also resort to its allies and partners and engage in diplomatic efforts with the UAE, Bahrain, and Morocco to leverage the Abraham Accords in influencing the behavior of the Israeli government. The Jordanian ask should be for the Abraham Accord signatories to warn Israel that violations of the status quo in Jerusalem or annexation in all its forms will be met with credible threats like:

- Reducing diplomatic representation with Israel and summoning their ambassadors from Tel Aviv
- Employing diplomatic clout in the United Nations, UNESCO, and every other multilateral venue to garner support for the protection of Palestinians and Jerusalem Islamic and Christian identity
- Supporting the PA in taking legal measures by way of the International Court of Justice
• Abrogating economic deals and suspending investments in Israel
• Suspending of flights
• Suspending parts of the Accords that include security and intelligence cooperation
• Canceling joint military exercises

How Jordan will navigate the competing interest of preserving the strategic peace with Israel and countering the looming national security challenge posed by the new Israeli government is going to be one of the central stories on a regional level and a defining characteristic of how the countries’ bilateral relations develop in the future.
An Egyptian Perspective

Are We Witnessing the Death of Prospects for Israeli-Palestinian Peace?

by Hesham Youssef

There has been a broad and grave—perhaps even unprecedented—concern about the new right-wing extremist Israeli government in the last few weeks from different countries and experts who are preoccupied with the future of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The situation is much more dangerous than it has been for years, and the concerns are multifaceted at the Israeli, Palestinian, regional, and international levels.

At the Israeli Level

The concern as far as Israel is concerned should not be limited to the new Israeli government. It is about an Israeli establishment that moved to the extreme right and believes that the status quo is sustainable, that it is not necessary for Israel to make any meaningful concessions, that the Palestinians must accept whatever is given to them, and that the maximum that they should expect is some form of limited autonomy in isolated Bantustans.
During the previous Netanyahu government, many around the world believed that the plan to annex 30% of the West Bank would constitute crossing the tipping point for them to conclude that the prospect of achieving the two-state solution is dead. A growing number of Israelis and Palestinians have already reached this conclusion, having lost hope that a two-state outcome is possible.

At the same time, many had argued that despite a few minor improvements like legalizing the status of thousands of Palestinian families and increasing work permits, the Bennett-Lapid government was in some respects worse than the Netanyahu government that preceded it in terms of Palestinian deaths, settlement permits, home demolitions, etc. The situation today, however, is a totally new ballgame.

Developments that we are witnessing today in the Israeli scene may prove to be yet another possible tipping point that would push more and more Israelis and Palestinians to believe that not only is the two-state solution dead, but that prospects for peace have become as remote as they have ever been since 1948.

The friction points and the time bombs waiting to explode are more numerous than they have been in years. These include, first and foremost, the situation in al-Aqsa Mosque, the tensions pertaining to possible evictions in Sheikh Jarrah and other Palestinian neighborhoods in East Jerusalem, tensions with settlers who have become increasingly emboldened in the last few years, Palestinian communities subject to possible eviction like Khan al-Ahmar, creeping or, more accurately, galloping annexation and in particular the encircling of East Jerusalem including E1, the so-called battle over Area C, demolitions of Palestinian homes, a possible military confrontation with Hamas or Islamic Jihad in Gaza, possible tensions in mixed cities in Israel, and more.

At the Palestinian Level

The Palestinian situation has been deteriorating for years. Palestinians have been divided since the 2006 elections, and since then all reconciliation efforts have failed to overcome this division.

President Abbas has seen his popularity decline to an all-time low and a poll by a Palestinian center found that 78% of Palestinians want Abbas to resign and a mere 19% think he should remain in office.

Corruption has been on the rise and the death of Nizar Banat, a harsh critic of the Palestinian Authority, at the hands of Palestinian security forces ignited protests that were met with a security crackdown with 74% believing that Palestinian civil rights were violated. In general, the PA has been harshly cracking down on Palestinian opposition.

Furthermore, relations deteriorated between the Palestinian leadership and a few Arab countries after the signing of the Abraham Accords.

As a result of these developments, Arab support for the Palestinians has been on the decline. Perhaps the only recent positive signal is related to the ongoing effort to improve relations between the Palestinian leadership and both Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which have been at an all-time low.

At the Regional Level

Historically, the Palestinian question was the core priority of the Arab world since the late 1940s. With major developments affecting the region, particularly after the earthquake of the Arab revolutions in 2010, its importance remained but its priority has dramatically declined, and this is unlikely to change
soon. The recent normalization agreements that took place in the last two years are also a reflection of this dramatic change.

The main debate since these normalization agreements were reached was whether they would constitute a bridge to advance peace or a bypass around the conflict. So far, normalizers did not use the leverage that they gained to advance peace and there are no signals that there is any political will in this direction.

However, it is becoming clear that prospects for advancing bilateral relations between Israel and the new normalizers have a ceiling in the absence of progress in addressing the conflict, and those prospects will further diminish in the likely situation when violence escalates further, and this also applies to the newly established Negev Forum.

**At the International Level**

The declining priority of the conflict for the region is also reflected in its priority at the international level. The great power competition, the war in Ukraine, the ensuing energy crisis, and other issues are consuming the attention span of major powers.

The situation is further sidelined as a result of the U.S. position that no major steps can be undertaken at this point, and the Europeans being preoccupied with a multitude of their own predicaments.

However, this conflict has its ways of grabbing the attention of the international community mainly through violence, and with the aforementioned friction points, this is likely to happen sooner rather than later. Furthermore, it will be difficult, for example, for Western powers to pursue Russian accountability pertaining to Ukraine while ignoring Israeli practices, particularly in light of recent reports from B’Tselem, Human Rights Watch, and Amnesty accusing Israel of major human rights violations.

**What can be done?**

In conclusion, a few points should be stressed:

First, the violence in the occupied territories has been escalating. Tor Wennesland, the U.N. Middle East peace envoy, told the Security Council on December 19 that more than 150 Palestinians and over 20 Israelis have been killed in the West Bank and Israel in 2022—the highest number of deaths in years. 2022 was the deadliest year for Palestinians in the West Bank since the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs began systematically tracking Palestinian fatalities in 2005.

After the 11-day war of May 2021, the U.S. in cooperation with Egypt, Jordan, and others were instrumental in their effort to prevent a similar escalation in May 2022—when the overlap of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim holidays occurred again—proving that preventive diplomacy can be consequential. The current wait-and-see attitude by the U.S., the EU, and several pertinent regional players is not the right approach.

Second, friends of Israel should press Netanyahu regarding his slogan of “peace for peace.” This is not a recipe for achieving peace. For peace to be achieved it has to be based on reciprocal concessions. Furthermore, the current normalization agreements require huge efforts to become a bridge rather than a bypass of the conflict.

Continued excuses that the Israeli government is either too fragile and will break down if it is
pressured, or that it is too right-wing to head the international community’s position and advance on the path toward peace is a recipe for the eternal perpetuation of the conflict. This cycle must be broken. The apparent intention of the extremist parties in Israel to implement elements of the Trump plan de facto on the ground will be a recipe for a future struggle by the Palestinians toward one state with equal rights, which is also a recipe for perpetual conflict. The only way to achieve peace is to ensure that both Palestinian and Israeli national aspirations are achieved on the ground.

Third, Egypt and Jordan—in coordination with Saudi Arabia, which presented the proposal that later became the Arab Peace Initiative—should step up and demonstrate their leadership by taking the initiative and bringing the parties to negotiations in a more effective process to advance the prospects for peace.

This is as serious as it gets. We are at an inflection point and the future strategy cannot be based on business as usual. As long as hope is alive, the prospects for peace will remain alive. However, we are coming too close to the death of hope, and this should ring alarm bells in capitals around the world.
About the Authors

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