

MERIA

THE NEW MIDDLE EAST: FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE OLD MIDDLE EAST

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This article examines as a case study the Arab reaction to Shimon Peres' economic initiative, the New Middle East. The initiative, which followed the Oslo peace accords, offered a comprehensive program to strengthen cultural, scientific, political, and primarily economic ties between Israel and its Arab neighbors. However, the paper shows how the initiative was viewed in most sectors of the Arab world as a plot to shift Israel's military domination of the region toward economic hegemony. In order to understand the Arab reaction, the article applies the theory of collective beliefs in conflict-resolution to this intractable conflict. It explains this reaction in terms of negative collective beliefs, primarily delegitimization of the enemy by presenting documentation showing the imperialist image of Israel held generally in the Arab world prior to the Oslo process and how this image was used as an argument against the New Middle East initiative. The article concludes that complete and final conflict resolution must be achieved prior to efforts at reconciliation in order for the latter to succeed.

During the 1990s, Israel's foreign policy was focused on various attempts to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict. Diplomatic initiatives such as the Madrid conference, the Oslo accords, and the peace treaty with Jordan represented modest progress toward resolving the conflict. However, the failure (some say temporary) of these initiatives is evidenced in the al-Aksa Intifada and the continued violence between Israel and the Palestinians.

One possible explanation for the failure of conflict resolution generally, and of resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict in particular, is the deep-rooted enmity between the two hostile parties in the conflict. According to research in the field of conflict resolution, the entrenched hostility between hostile communities over the years of the conflict is the primary factor preventing a complete and final

resolution. These studies present cases in which two communities deeply entrenched in conflict were able to agree to the terms of a formal resolution, yet the collective perceptions of the two sides prevented a full and final resolution.

The Middle East is one of the regions examined most extensively in the literature. Numerous articles have appeared over the past ten years documenting how, over the course of the conflict, Israeli society developed a negative image of the Arabs involved in the conflict. This phenomenon continues to be an obstacle to any attempt to resolve the conflict. Although the same studies point out that the Arabs, on their part, have also developed a range of negative images of Israel, very few of them focus on this aspect of the question.¹

This article undertakes to deal with

the two aspects—the theoretical one and the empirical one—and to link between the two in order to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the Israeli-Arab conflict. In the theoretical aspect, the article presents a theoretical explanation addressing the obstacles of conflict resolution. The empirical aspect of the article argues that a common image of Israel in the Arab world is of an imperialistic state. The linkage between the two aspects demonstrates how using the theoretical explanation, one can understand how the peace initiative of the New Middle East failed due to negative images of Israel in the Arab world.

Part One of the article demonstrates the connection between violent conflict and delegitimization of the enemy, using examples from the Arab-Israeli conflict. Part Two addresses the plan for the New Middle East, and presents the attitude of the Arab world toward this program. The concluding section of the article examines the extent to which the negative image of Israel impedes resolution of the conflict and the lessons to be drawn with regard to future efforts to resolve it.

FOSTERING COLLECTIVE BELIEFS DURING THE COURSE OF AN INTRACTABLE CONFLICT

One of the most conspicuous phenomena typical of conflicts between states or ethnic groups is the formation and conscious development of collective beliefs as a means of coping with the situation.² These collective beliefs are conceived and developed by public opinion-makers within that group in order to justify and explain to all the members of the group

the reasons for the conflict and to help them overcome the negative consequences of the state of conflict. The media, schools, various educational and social institutions are all used as means of conveying and maintaining collective beliefs throughout the course of the conflict. Daniel Bar-Tal describes eight types of collective beliefs used by societies involved in conflicts: 1) Justification of the objectives of the particular social group vis-à-vis the conflict; 2) Definition of the security boundaries of the group; 3) Delegitimization of the hostile party; 4) Positive self-image; 5) Self-conceptualization as victim; 6) Encouraging demonstrations of patriotism; 7) Strengthening social unity; 8) Self-conceptualization of the group as seekers of peace.³ Despite the importance of all eight types, since this article focuses on the means of delegitimization, the theoretical portion of the article will elaborate on our understanding of such beliefs.

Bar-Tal describes delegitimization as “a specific instance of group membership, in which the group is attributed to the most negative social category, the lowest category, outcast from the norms and/or accepted values.”⁴ The process of delegitimizing the opponent the enemy can be accomplished through various means: 1) Delegitimization of the hostile party (equating them with animals or monsters); 2) Attribution of negative characteristics to the hostile party (parasite, for example); 3) Characterization of members of the hostile party as beyond the pale of social norms (thieves, madmen), thus severing the group from human society; 4) Equating the group with a different social group that commands a

negative image (Huns, vandals); 5) Use of political labels (such as Nazis or imperialists) in describing the hostile party as a political entity that poses a threat to the fundamental values of the society.

The phenomenon of delegitimizing the opponent does not occur in every conflict between two rival groups; thus, we can identify the type of conflict in which delegitimization does take place. According to Bar-Tal, this kind of delegitimization characterizes violent conflicts that are viewed by their participants as existential struggles (zero-sum games). Delegitimization of the enemy develops in violent conflicts when each side attempts to attribute acts of violence to the opposing side. In an existential struggle, delegitimizing the enemy enables each side to represent its opponent as harboring long-term, unjustifiable intentions that threaten the fundamental interests of the hostile party.⁵

Various methods for distinguishing between different types of conflict have been suggested by scholars of conflict. For example, some have used duration of the conflict as a determining factor, differentiating between a protracted and a short-term conflict. Others have used cost as a criterion, distinguishing between conflicts that would exact a high price from one or both parties, and conflicts that would not. During the 1990s, Kriesberg proposed using the degree of control over a conflict as a distinguishing criterion, that is, whether a conflict is tractable or intractable.⁶ In a tractable conflict, both sides attempt to resolve the dispute through negotiation, and they are mutually agreed to avoid violence.

An intractable struggle, on the other hand, would be characterized by its long duration by perceptions on both sides that no means of mediation would be effective (a zero-sum game), by both sides having a certain interest in the continuation of the conflict, and by acts of violence perpetrated by both parties.

We see that Kriesberg's definition of an intractable conflict corresponds to Bar-Tal's thesis of conflicts characterized by a process of delegitimization of the enemy. A violent conflict perceived by both sides as a zero-sum game would be defined by Kriesberg as an intractable conflict, while Bar-Tal would predict that a conflict of this type would lead the parties to a process of delegitimization of their hostile party. Therefore, one might argue that over the course of an intractable conflict, delegitimization will take place among the hostile parties. Once the process of delegitimization establishes itself among both groups, a negative image of the hostile party begins to take root among the populace. This in turn serves to increase the difficulty of settling the conflict; and since each of the rival groups holds the belief that any action taken by the other group is negative—even actions designed to bring the conflict to an end by peaceful means—each side will be perceived by the other as acting out of negative motives.

DELEGITIMIZATION OF THE "OTHER" IN THE ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT

After explaining the theoretical aspect of using delegitimization in an intractable conflict, the article will turn

to the empirical world and examine how this process took place in the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Until the mid 1970s, both hostile parties to the Arab-Israeli conflict viewed the conflict as a zero-sum game.⁷ The Arab world objected to the very existence of the State of Israel, perceiving it to be an alien presence in the Middle East—a presence whose existence vitiated Palestinian self-determination. On their part, most Israelis believed that the ultimate goal of the Arabs was to annihilate the State of Israel. From its inception, the Arab-Israeli conflict has been characterized by extreme acts of violence (the murder of innocent civilians committed by both sides of the conflict). Even though peace accords were signed after the mid-1970s between Israel and two Arab states (Egypt and Jordan), and a peace process between the Israelis and the Palestinians was initiated, the terrible violence that continued throughout the 1980s and 1990s, and has increased since 2000, are proof of how remote the possibility is of turning the Arab-Israeli conflict into a tractable dispute. Thus, the existence of both preconditions—extreme violence and a perception among most of the people involved that the conflict is a zero-sum game—enable us to define the conflict as intractable.

The thesis that the phenomenon of delegitimization of the enemy will take place in an intractable conflict holds true for the Arab-Israeli conflict. The process of delegitimization is apparent on both sides of the conflict.

Research has demonstrated that a negative image of Arab society developed among the Israeli public, at least until the mid-1970s. In those studies, it was found that the Arabs

were often perceived as cruel, as thieves, and as liars.⁸ Other studies have shown how schoolbooks issued by the public school system, and other children's literature, have helped inflate the negative image of Arabs within Israeli society.⁹

Parallel to the process that took place on the Israeli side of the conflict, delegitimization of the enemy occurred within Arab society. The Arabs used negative political claims as a means of delegitimizing Israelis. From the outset of the conflict, one of the most common of these was the portrayal of Israel as an imperialistic-colonialist nation seeking to gain control of the entire Middle East. There are numerous examples throughout the Arab world of descriptions of Israel as an imperialist state; we present here a few of these.

The following is an excerpt from an article in the Syrian newspaper *Tishrin*, attacking the peace agreement between Israel and Egypt:

But, unlike the right of self-determination accorded in other places, our problem remains unresolved because of the imperialism against which the Palestinians and the Arab nation are struggling, for it is a different sort of imperialism: in the past, imperialism meant army bases and conquered territory; but the new imperialism is economic imperialism. The kind of imperialism we are faced with is colonialism.¹⁰

Another example comes from an article in the *New York Times*, in which a senior Syrian official is

quoted: "Israel needs Arab markets and manpower and wants to turn the Arab society into a consumer market for Israeli goods produced by Arab workers."¹¹

Israel's attempt to fulfill the dream of "Greater Israel, from the Nile to the Euphrates" has fueled Arab perceptions of Israel as an imperialist state. The image of Israel as a country with imperialist aspirations has motivated scholarly research and has found expression in numerous forums, all of them based on the assumption that Israel aspires to fulfill the dream of "Greater Israel."¹²

The Arab defeat in the 1967 war intensified the image of Israel as an imperialist state. The war was described as the culmination of Stage II of Israel's master plan to gain control over the entire Middle East. Moreover, a widespread claim made by most of the Arab leaders and the media was that the Arab states were defeated by three imperialistic states, Israel, Britain, and the United States.¹³ This way of description of the war, intensified the image of Israel as the imperialist bridgehead of the West in the Middle East.

Given the closed nature of Arab society, it is difficult to measure precisely the extent to which those responsible for shaping public opinion in the Arab world succeeded in painting Israel's image as an imperialist state. However, surveys conducted in Arab countries reveal that this is indeed the image held by most citizens of the Arab world. Studies conducted among school pupils in Jordan and Egypt showed that most of the respondents viewed Israel to be an imperialist state whose intentions were to exploit its neighbors.¹⁴ Another

study, conducted among the social elite of some of the Arab states, revealed that most held the belief that Israel's goal was to expand beyond its current borders.¹⁵

Cultivating the image of Israel as an imperialist state serves two purposes. The first of these is to justify the failure of the Arab states to defeat Israel. When Israel is portrayed as the "little" imperialist state, the representative of the United States (itself an imperialist nation) in the Middle East, it enables leaders of the Arab states to explain to their own citizens why their military failed against Israel.

The second objective served by cultivating the image of Israel as an imperialist state is to justify the continued struggle against Israel. Arab leaders claimed that Israel, as an imperialist state, aspires to control the entire Middle East; it therefore would be unthinkable to accept its existence.

In summary, the character of the Arab-Israeli conflict as intractable caused both sides to engage in delegitimization of the other. As a result, negative imagery of the opposing side was created and encouraged. The Arab states were perceived as barbaric, uncivilized, and untrustworthy. Among Arabs, Israel was perceived as aggressive, imperialistic, and aspiring to hegemony in the Middle East. The following section of the present article will demonstrate how this image of Israel as an imperialist state has had a negative influence on the realization of the plan for the New Middle East.

THE PLAN FOR THE NEW MIDDLE EAST

The plan for the New Middle East was formulated in 1993 following the signing of the Oslo Accords. Shimon Peres, who was then foreign minister, authored the plan, presenting its principal ideas in the book *The New Middle East*.¹⁶ Progress in the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians, complemented by the peace agreement with Jordan, accelerated the attempt to implement some parts of the plan for the New Middle East. The concept of a New Middle East is based on the premise that only by establishing a regional framework that includes all of the countries in the Middle East, will it be possible to bring to an end the conflict between Israel and the Arab states.¹⁷ Such a framework would encourage the countries of the region to work together to resolve regional problems; this cooperation would in turn promote regional economic development.¹⁸ In a speech before the United Nations General Assembly, Peres stressed that the concept of a New Middle East was not designed to lead to Israeli economic domination in the Middle East, but rather was designed to aid economic development in all the countries of the region. Peres claimed that the Arab states were faced with two options: the first, to support the program for the New Middle East, and thereby join the developed world; the second, to reject the program, and thereby remain poor, internally unstable nations.

The plan for the New Middle East was formulated to achieve four goals, the achievement of which would help attain regional stability.¹⁹ These goals are: halting the spread of radical Islamic fundamentalism, raising the standard of living, improving the sense

of national security in each country by means of arms control, and fostering democratization in the nations of the region. Four “belts” for regional action were defined for the first stage of the implementation²⁰: the green belt, concentrating on combating desertification and contending with water problems in the region; the blue belt, focusing on the development of regional tourism; the gray belt, to create a transportation and communications network among countries in the region; and the white belt, to limit the arms race. In practice, Israel and the world invested most of their efforts in realizing the economic and commercial aspects of the plan—that is, improving living standards in the Middle East. Meetings and economic conventions—for example the Casablanca Conference of 1994 and the Amman Conference in 1995—and the establishment of offices of trade and commerce contributed to easing the commercial ties between Israel and the Arab states (primarily the monarchies of the Persian Gulf and the Maghreb states). Another element of economic development that enjoyed broad international support was the establishment of joint trade zones between the Palestinian Authority and Israel—for example, the industrial area of the Karni border crossing.²¹

However, the practical successes in these facets of the program were miniscule—more significant on paper than they were in fact. The actual result of the economic conferences was limited; indeed, from the Casablanca conference onward, the size of the Israeli delegation to these conferences diminished. The highlight of the Casablanca conference consisted, not in the strengthening of economic ties,

but rather in the fact that it represented the first meeting between economic players on both sides. Likewise, the high point of the Amman Conference was the establishment of a regional development bank—not the sealing of business deals between Israeli and Arab companies. Ultimately, no substantial growth has occurred in the volume of trade between Israel and Arab states.²² When he came to power in 1996, Benjamin Netanyahu's foreign policy did nothing to promote the idea of a New Middle East. Under Netanyahu's leadership, governmental support for cooperative projects like joint industrial zones diminished.

The foreign policy of the Netanyahu government led to a boycott of the economic conference in Doha by some of the Arab states; this in turn seriously damaged the chances of carrying out plans for the New Middle East. The outbreak of the second intifada precipitated the closure of most of the trade offices maintained in Israel by states like Qatar and Bahrain, and to a freeze on construction of joint industrial zones. This effectively put the final nail in the coffin of plans for a New Middle East. Even during the most promising period of progress, when a multitude of plans appeared interwoven into a vision for the New Middle East, only a tiny fraction of these projects were carried out.

The question that rises from this description is why the attempt to implement the plans of New Middle East failed, even during the climax of the peace process. The next section offers an explanation to this question, and suggests that the image of Israel in the Arab world as an imperialist state damage the likelihood of implementing the vision of the New Middle East.

PERCEPTIONS OF THE NEW MIDDLE EAST IN THE ARAB WORLD

Due to the vast size of the Arab world, and the cultural and social differences and closed nature of the various Arab countries, it is not possible to generalize. Thus, although one cannot say how exactly the populations of Arab countries perceived the idea of the New Middle East, an attempt to form a picture of the perception among public opinion-makers in the Arab countries will be made. In order to do this, remarks made by government officials, journalists, academics, and intellectuals in the Arab world have been selected. In addition, data from a survey conducted among Syrians, Lebanese and Jordanians in the upper middle class is presented.²³

One of the harshest criticisms of the New Middle East program was expressed in the introduction to the Arab language translation of the book, *The New Middle East* (El-Ahram, Cairo: 1995). It reads, in part:

When the Protocols of the Elders of Zion were discovered about 200 years ago by a French woman and disseminated in mans' languages, including Arabic, the international Zionist establishment tried its best to deny the plot. They even claimed that it was fabricated and sought to acquire all the copies on the market in order to prevent them from being read. And now, it is precisely Shimon Peres who brings the cutting proof of their validity. His book confirms in so clear a way that

it cannot be denied that the Protocols were true indeed. Peres's book is yet another step in the execution of these dangerous plots.

It is obvious that the intention of the publisher (El-Ahram) in publishing the translation was to warn readers of the Jewish master-plan to achieve economic domination over the entire world, beginning with the Arab world.

Among senior officials in Arab countries, various opinions were expressed. Some suggested that the New Middle East was designed to help both Israel and the Arab countries. The following, for example, is Egypt's foreign minister Amr Moussa's response to a question about the notion of a New Middle East: "We, as a great nation, have nothing to fear from the creation of a Middle East market.... We must not be perturbed by the participation of a country like Israel in such a market."²⁴ Another supporter of this approach is Dr. Osama Elbaz, thought to be one of the principal policy-makers in Egypt. Elbaz claimed that:

[T]he widespread claim that a Middle East market will enable Israel to take control and dictate her will to the Arabs through economic means, after she has despaired [of achieving that goal] by military might.... In my opinion, cooperation is both possible and desirable, preconditioned on coordination and cooperation among Arab states on the economic front, so

that they present a unified front.²⁵

By contrast, some viewed the idea of the New Middle East as a formula designed to serve only Israeli interests. For instance, the Jordanian Minister of Transportation and Commerce, Dr. Aime Hilef, rejected the idea, claiming that "the rash and hasty establishment of a Middle East market will serve Israel's interests."²⁶

Perceptions in the Popular Media

An enormous volume of articles and editorials have been published that are critical of the plan for The New Middle East. Following the peace agreement between Israel and Jordan, Abdallah al-Akailah and Ahmad Majduba warned against Israeli social, cultural, and economic practices flooding into Jordan.²⁷ The newspapers *Al Hayat* and *Al Jedida* carried articles about The New Middle East stating, "We must proceed systematically and attentively on the international front in order to expose the Zionist-colonialist conspiracy, and the objectives of that conspiracy, which consist in the destruction not only of the region, but of the entire world."²⁸

The negative overtones of these articles are conveyed, not only in the text itself, but also in the caricatures that accompany them. The following cartoon (Figure 1), which appeared in an Egyptian newspaper, constitutes one example among the many such cartoons, reflecting a negative attitude in the Arab press toward the idea of a New Middle East. In the cartoon, two Jews depicted with anti-Semitic features (an oversized, crooked nose, a hat and suit) are shown arriving at the

economic conference in Cairo. On one of the suitcases they carry, the words “Domination Conspiracy” appear. The intention of the cartoonist is to intimate

that Israel hatched the idea of the New Middle East in order to turn Israel into the dominant economic player in the Middle East.



Figure 1. A cartoon from *al-Jumhuriyya*, November 15, 1996

Articles in Academic Journals and the Publications of Professional Associations

Professional associations throughout the Arab world were inexorable in their opposition to any attempt to further the idea of The New Middle East. Even in Jordan, where the government supported the plan to a certain extent and engaged in a public debate on the subject, the professional associations led the movement against it.²⁹ In academic journals in the Arab world, a few studies were conducted to assess the extent to which the plan for The New Middle East might contribute to the economies of Arab states. The majority of these studies concluded

that the plan would result in Israeli economic hegemony in the Middle East.³⁰ For example, an article in the Egyptian economic monthly, *Elahras Elaktizadi*, claimed that the plan was “an Israeli attempt to guide Arab policy toward changing the map of the Middle East, so that each state would have a specific role that would serve Israel's goals.”³¹ Another study, which addressed the tourism element of the plan (Blue Belt), reached the conclusion that, “Israel will get the tourists and will determine how long, how much and where they spend their tourist dollars. The Arabs will get day trippers at most.”³²

Only a minority of Arab academics took an official, public position in

favor of the plan. The most prominent of these were Muhammad al-Sayyid Sa'id, Deputy Director of the al-Aram Institute for Strategic Studies, and Ibrahim Awad, who believed that regional cooperation would give a significant boost to the Egyptian economy. They rejected the claim that Israel constitutes a cultural threat to the Arab-Islamic world.³³ Nevertheless, the belief that the New Middle East would, at best, not improve the economies of the Arab states, and at worst would do great harm to them, was widespread within professional associations and academic publications in the Arab world.

Intellectual Leaders

Among Arab intellectuals, few discussed the New Middle East in a positive light. The most prominent among these favorable voices were authors Najib Mahpuz and Toofik al-Hakim in Egypt, Zelika abu Risha in Jordan, and Syrian poet Adonis. The majority of intellectuals throughout the Arab world denounced those who expressed support for the plan. Some were ejected from their professional associations and a few were even attacked physically.³⁴ Such reactions testify to the negative attitude held by most intellectuals in the Arab world regarding the New Middle East. One intellectual, the highly influential Edward Sa'id, expressed opposition to the Oslo peace process in a number of fora, claiming that the process was designed to achieve Israel's imperialist objectives. Regarding Peres, Sa'id remarked, "Peres seems to make concessions, but if one looks back at his record the pattern is quite clear. He took advantage of Arab disunity and

Palestinian gullibility to open up Asian and African (and of course Arab) markets to Israeli economic advantage."³⁵

Referring to the idea of a New Middle East, Sa'id states in another article, "A small number of businessmen and speculators have prospered, however are written about in the international press, and are organizers of conferences with the Israelis and the Americans to further business and investment opportunities in the area."³⁶

In his book, *The Dream Palace of the Arabs*, Lebanese-born author Fuad Ajami denounced the leadership of the Egyptian elite regarding a broad range of current events topics.³⁷ The fifth chapter of the book deals with the relationship between the Egyptian elite and Israel since the signing of the peace accord between Egypt and Israel. Ajami claims that Egyptian intellectuals saw in the New Middle East a plan designed to destroy the existing Arab order and replace it with a new regional structure headed by Israel. "[Shimon Peres] will cause a schism within the Arab ranks and will force a new era upon them built upon Israeli superiority."³⁸

Public Opinion Surveys

Given the non-democratic and closed nature of Arab countries, it is nearly impossible to conduct reliable public opinion surveys in these countries. Dr. Khashan, who taught at Beirut University during the mid-1990s, conducted a number of surveys among Lebanese students and professionals from Syria and Jordan who had come to Lebanon to work. Although these surveys are not based

on a representative sample of the population, they enable one at least to form an impression from their conclusions regarding widely held opinions about Israel, held by the upper middle class in those three countries. One of these surveys addressed the issue of Israel's intentions in the peace process. Respondents were asked to place three objectives in what they believed to be Israel's order of priority in the peace process. An examination of the survey results reveals that a majority of respondents (61 on a weighted scale) believe that Israel's primary purpose in entering the peace accords was to achieve economic hegemony.³⁹

The Israeli Angle

The negative reaction of public opinion-makers in the Arab world did not escape the notice of many in Israel. Uri Saguy, who was then head of Military Intelligence, was quoted in the daily *Ha'aretz* as saying, "The leadership in Arab countries is very concerned about Israel attempting to achieve economic hegemony."⁴⁰ Yossi Beilin, foreign minister during the same period, directed his ministry to limit the size of the Israeli delegation to the economic conference in Amman; for, in his opinion, the large delegation that participated in the Casablanca conference only reinforced Arab suspicions about Israel's economic-imperialist intentions.⁴¹

Even in the Israeli press, there were articles describing the negative attitude of Arab public opinion-makers. "The Casablanca economic conference proved a typical example of the atmosphere of suspicion among the educated classes, journalists and

intellectuals in the Arab world, particularly in Egypt. In a number of the Cairo newspapers there were articles warning against Israeli economic domination, in place of military and political dominance. The words, 'the New Middle East' or 'regional economy' were perceived as a threat."⁴²

In conclusion, we see that public opinion-makers in the Arab world were vehemently opposed to the plan for a New Middle East. Even in countries like Jordan, where the government allowed for public dialogue on the issue, a majority of speakers rejected the idea altogether. The arguments put forth against the plan can be divided into categories. The first category includes groups that were fundamentally opposed to any dialogue with the state of Israel. The second category includes those who believed that the plan posed a cultural threat to the Arab-Muslim world, by blurring or even obliterating Arab-Muslim identity.⁴³ The third category is comprised of those whose opposition to the plan was based on economics: They believed that the New Middle East would damage the economies of Arab states and strengthen Israel's economic position in the Middle East.⁴⁴

More than any other factor, however, it is the belief that the plan for the New Middle East forms a part of Israel's imperialist aspirations, which formed the basis of the most vocal and most widespread opposition to the plan.⁴⁵

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Two questions arise from the failed attempt to realize the plan for the New

Middle East. The first question is why was opposition to the plan for the New Middle East so fierce and so vehement, despite the plan's stated purpose of promoting the interests of both sides? Also, what can be learned from this experience that might be of service in future attempts to resolve the Middle East conflict?

One might argue that there is a direct connection between the failure of the New Middle East plan and the pace of progress toward peace in the Middle East. Until Benjamin Netanyahu became prime minister, efforts to establish a collaborative regional plan continued, and indeed, commercial ties were developed between the two sides. Netanyahu's rise to power and the slow-down in the peace process led directly to a curtailment of cooperation by Arab states in pursuing a regional plan (an example of this would be the failure of the economic conference at Doha). However, a careful examination of Arab attitudes toward the plan for the New Middle East reveals that from the very outset, many public opinion-makers were opposed to it. Even in the mid-1990s, at a time when progress in the peace process was at its apex (signing of the peace accord with Jordan, and partial realization of the interim accords with the Palestinians), there was widespread opposition to the plan. Therefore, one may surmise that Israel's policies during the latter half of the 1990s were not the cause of this opposition.⁴⁶

In my view, it is clear that an explanation based on the psychology of the situation leads to a better understanding of the failure of the New Middle East. In this case, the rejection of the plan by large sectors of the Arab

population strengthens the thesis that the power of images and popular beliefs constitute a cause of the failure to persevere in the process of dispute resolution. The idea of a New Middle East was basically a positive idea designed to offer the general populace of the Middle East economic dividends from the peace process. In addition to the favorable economic outcome to be gained by all countries of the region, the plan was intended to strengthen ties between the peoples of the region, thereby limiting the negative image of the enemy. This would serve to increase support for the peace process. Unfortunately, the image of Israel as a nation with colonial aspirations destroyed any chance of carrying out the plan. The New Middle East was perceived by many key opinion-makers in the Arab world as a continuation of Israel's imperialist policies; this was the primary argument put forward by those who opposed the plan. The end result was an increase in hostility toward Israel, whose negative image not only remained undiminished, but was reinforced. The conclusion, for reference at future junctures, is that the success of regional development plans like the New Middle East depends upon the extent to which they are accompanied by changes in popular beliefs on both sides of the conflict. Such change is possible only when public opinion-makers on both sides recognize the right of the other side to exist and act through communications media and the education system to promote changes in the negative perception of the enemy.

The case study, presented in this article, can advance understanding regarding conflict resolution in general and conflict resolution in the Middle

East in particular. In the literature on resolving disputes, a distinction is made between conflict resolution and reconciliation. Conflict resolution is defined as the formal end to the conflict; it is the result of a political process within whose framework the parties end the lack of correspondence between their goals and their interests, and create a situation in which the objectives and the interests of both sides are consistent. Conflict resolution is accomplished, for the most part, by means of negotiations leading to an accord between the leadership of both sides, and comprehends a bilateral understanding that the ultimate goals of the parties are not mutually inconsistent with one another.⁴⁷ The peace agreements between Israel and Egypt, and between Israel and Jordan, can be viewed as examples of conflict resolution. By contrast, reconciliation leads to peaceful relations devoid of hostility between the warring parties. Peaceful relations can take two different forms. When two groups are in conflict but live in the same country, reconciliation is manifested in an agreement between the parties to unite in a single, joint political, economic, and social system. When the conflict is between two countries, reconciliation occurs when both countries foster economic, commercial, and cultural ties. The best example of a successful outcome to a process of reconciliation is the countries of Europe after World War II.⁴⁸

The majority of scholars agree that a successful process of conflict resolution is a necessary precondition for successful reconciliation.⁴⁹ One explanation for this claim relates conflict resolution, changes in a society's beliefs, and reconciliation.

According to this explanation, social beliefs that are mutually hostile constitute the primary cause for failure to achieve reconciliation. Public opinion-makers are the players most able to change such beliefs. However, they will act to change beliefs in their society only if they sense that the formal agreement ending the conflict is just.⁵⁰ Thus, only conflict resolution achieved through an accord that is embraced by public opinion-makers can lead ultimately to reconciliation.

The case presented in this article supports the theoretical claim regarding the necessary precondition of conflict resolution. It seems to this author that the goal underlying the New Middle East was not to suffice with resolution of the conflict, but rather to advance the reconciliation process in the Middle East. Whereas the Oslo process constitutes the first stage in the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict, the New Middle East initiative was intended as the first stage in the reconciliation process between these peoples. The premise that it would be possible to advance the reconciliation process before fully resolving the conflict turned out to be fallacious.

Another false premise adopted by advocates of the plan was that it would be possible to promote reconciliation before changing the perceptions of Israel held by Arab public opinion-makers. Although progress was achieved toward resolution of the conflict, the parties were unable to reach a final agreement acceptable to Arab public opinion-makers. The fact that there was opposition among a majority of Arab public opinion-makers to even the first stages of the process increased significantly the

difficulty of getting the reconciliation process off the ground (that is, the New Middle East). The opposition of Arab public opinion-makers to any attempt to resolve the conflict foiled any possibility of changing beliefs about Israel in the Arab world. This resulted in all-out rejection of the idea of a New Middle East.

The current situation in the Middle East, in which public opinion-makers in the Arab world are refusing to try to bring about changes in social beliefs about Israel, teaches a lesson about the limitations of any peace accord that might be reached in the region. Since Arab opinion-makers are unwilling to change social beliefs among their target populations, one must acknowledge that, at least in the short term, the peace process will not lead to recognition of Israel as a legitimate state in the Middle East. Therefore, any peace initiative must first and foremost work toward cessation of official enmity and hostility between the two sides—that is, resolution of the conflict. Only after this objective has been achieved can cautious steps be taken toward a change in the image of Israel in the Arab world; and that is only on condition that the agreement reached to resolve the conflict is accepted by public opinion-makers in the Arab world. Once the process of changing the perceptions of the parties is complete, these nations will be able to accept the idea of Israel's true integration in the Middle East.

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NOTES

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² Daniel Bar-Tal, "From Intractable Conflict through Conflict Resolution to Reconciliation: Psychological Analysis," *Political Psychology*, Vol. 46, No. 1 (2000), pp. 65-81; Hebert, C. Kelman, "The Political Psychology of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict," *Political Psychology*, Vol. 8 (1987), pp. 347-63.

³ Bar-Tal, "From Intractable Conflict through Conflict Resolution to Reconciliation," p. 354.

⁴ Daniel Bar-Tal, "Causes and Consequences of De-Legitimization: Models of Convict and Ethnocentrism," *Journal of Social Issues*, Vol. 46, No. 1 (1990), p. 65. See also: Ralph K. White, *Nobody Wanted War: Misperception in Vietnam and Other Wars* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1970); Ross Stagner, *Psychological Aspects of*

International Conflict (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967).

⁵ Bar-Tal, "Causes and Consequences of De-Legitimization," pp. 67-90.

⁶ Louis Kriesberg, "Intractable Conflicts," in Eugene Weiner (ed.), *The Handbook of Interethnic Coexistence* (NY: Continuum, 1998), pp. 332-42.

⁷ Kelman, "The Political Psychology."

⁸ Lorand B. Szalay and Elahe Mir-Djalali, "Image of the Enemy," in Robert W. Rieber (ed.), *The Psychology of War and Peace: The Image of the Enemy* (New York and London: Plenum Press, 1991), p. 226.

⁹ Adir Cohen, *Panim Mechoarot Bamaraa [An Ugly Face in the Mirror: National Stereotypes in Hebrew Children's Literature]* (Tel Aviv: Reshafim, 1985); Daniel Bar-Tal, *Societal Beliefs in Times of Intractable Conflict: The Israeli Case* (Jerusalem: NCJW Research Institute for Innovation in Education, School of Education, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1996).

¹⁰ Raphael Israeli, *Peace is the Eye of the Beholder* (Berlin: Mountain Publisher, 1985), p. 192. For further discussion, see: Israeli, *Peace is the Eye*, pp. 1-7; Yehoshafat Harkabi, *Arab Attitude to Israel* (Jerusalem: Israel Universities Press, 1972).

¹¹ *New York Times*, December 11, 1977, p.3

¹² Daniel Pipes, "Imperial Israel: Nile to Euphrates Calumny," *Middle East*

Quarterly, Vol. 1 (1994), pp. 29-40; For examples of academic researchers with the intention of showing the imperialistic nature of Israel see: Khalid Kishtainy, *Whiter Israel? A Study of Zionist Expansionism* (Beirut: Palestine Liberation Organization Research Center, 1970); As'ad Razzouk, *Greater Israel: A Study in Zionist Expansionist Thought* (Beirut: Palestine Liberation Organization Research Center, 1970); Edward W. Said, *The Question of Palestine* (NY: Vintage Books, 1979). For the imperialistic description of Israel in Syrian textbooks see: Meyrav Wursmser, *The Schools of Ba'athism: A Study of Syrian Textbooks* (Washington D.C.: MEMRI, 2000), pp. 7-11.

¹³ Sami Hadawi, *Palestine Occupied* (New York: The Arab Information Center, 1968); Eli Podeh, "The Lie That Will not Die: Collusion, 1967," *Middle East Quarterly*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (2004), pp. 51-62.

¹⁴ Szalay and Mir-Djalali, "Image of the Enemy," pp. 224-25.

¹⁵ Heradstveit, *Arab and Israeli Elite*, p 22.

¹⁶ For a slightly different description of the plan see: Yossi Beilin, *Touching Peace: From the Oslo Accord to a Final Agreement* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1999).

¹⁷ This hypothesis is based on Neo-Liberal theories. Andrew Moravcsik, "Taking Preferences Seriously: A Liberal Theory of International Politics," *International Organizations* Vol. 51, No. 4 (1997), pp. 249-77;

Robert, Z. Lawrence, *Towards Free Trade in the Middle East: The Triad and Beyond* (Cambridge, CA: Institute for Social and Economic Policy in the Middle East, Harvard University, 1995); Awartani Hisham and Kleiman Ephraim, "Economic Integration among Participants in the Middle East Peace Process," *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 51 (1995), pp. 215-29.

¹⁸ Shimon Peres, *The New Middle East* (New York: H. Holt., 1993), p. 61.

¹⁹ Peres, *The New Middle East*, pp. 3-61.

²⁰ Peres, *The New Middle East*, p. 72.

²¹ A list of the projects can be found at <http://www.peres-center.org>.

²² Raphael Bar-El and Dafna Schwartz, "The Potential Effect of Peace on Regional Economic Cooperation in the Middle East," *Peace Economics, Peace Science and Public Policy*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (2003), pp. 1-32.

²³ Avraham Sela conducted similar research exploring the diverse Arab opinions towards the peace process in general and the plan of the New Middle East in particular. Avraham Sela, "Politics, Identity and Peacemaking," *Israel Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (2005), pp. 15-71.

²⁴ Arnon Regular, "Ha'Shuk Ha'Mizrach Tichoni Ha'Chadsh Beinei Ha'Aravim" ["The New Middle East Market in the Eyes of the Arabs"], *Executive* (October-November 1994), p. 35.

²⁵ Regular, "Ha'Shuk Ha'Mizrach Tichoni," p. 35.

²⁶ Regular, "Ha'Shuk Ha'Mizrach Tichoni," p. 36.

²⁷ *The Jordan Times*, November 7, 1994 and December 7, 1995.

²⁸ November 6, 1997.

²⁹ Paul L. Scham and Russell E. Lucas, "'Normalization' and 'Anti-Normalization' in Jordan: The Public Debate," *Israel Affairs*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (2003), pp. 141-64.

³⁰ Naqib Fadel, *Al-Iqtisad al-Israili Fitar al-Mashrua al-Sahyuni* [*The Israeli Economy within the Zionist Project: An Analytical Study*] (Beirut: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1995); Jamil Hilal, *Istiratijiyat Israil al-iqtisadiyah Lil-Sharq al-Awsat* [*Israeli Strategy on the Economic Future of the Middle East*] (Beirut: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1995). For more examples see: Sela, "Politics, Identity and Peacemaking," pg. 110.

³¹ Regular, "Ha'Shuk Ha'Mizrach Tichoni," p. 34.

³² Fouad Moughrabi, "The Oslo Process and the Arab World," in George Ciacaman and Dag J. Lonning (eds.), *After Oslo* (London and Chicago: Pluto Press, 1998), p. 47.

³³ Sela, "Politics, Identity and Peacemaking," p. 47.

³⁴ Muhammad Miári, "Attitudes of Palestinians toward Normalization with Israel," *Journal of Peace*

Research, Vol. 36, No. 3 (1999), p. 343.

³⁵ Edward W. Said, *The End of the Peace Process: Oslo and After* (London: Granta Books, 2000), p. 59.

³⁶ Said, *The End of the Peace Process*, p. XVII.

³⁷ Fuad Ajami, *The Dream Palace of the Arabs: A Generation's Odyssey* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998).

³⁸ *Ibid*, p. 256.

³⁹ Hilal Khashan, *Partner or Pariah? Attitudes towards Israel in Syria, Lebanon and Jordan* (Washington D.C.: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1996), p. 20.

⁴⁰ *Ha'aretz* (April 30, 1995).

⁴¹ Beilin had already expressed this fear in April 1994 during a convention in Jerusalem. Yossi Beilin, "Visions for a New Middle East: An Israeli Perspective," in Helena L. Schultz and Michael Shultz (eds.), *Visions for a New Middle East* (Padigru Papers, 1994), pp. 24-25.

⁴² Guy Bachur, "Slow Change in the Attitude of Arab Intellectuals towards Israel," *Ha'aretz*, October, 30, 1995.

⁴³ Sela, "Politics, Identity and Peacemaking," pp. 39-44.

⁴⁴ Sela, "Politics, Identity and Peacemaking," pg. 106.

⁴⁵ The following all come to a similar conclusion: Regular, "*Ha'Shuk Ha'Mizrach Tichoni*"; Sela, "Politics, Identity and Peacemaking"; and

Avraham Sela, *The Decline of the Arab-Israeli Conflict* (NY: State University of New York Press, 1998).

⁴⁶ An additional explanation for the failure of the New Middle East plan is an economic one. This explanation argues that the major difference between the open Israeli economy and the centralized Arab economy is the cause of the failure (Eliyahu Kanovsky, "Will Arab-Israeli Peace Bring Prosperity?," *Middle East Quarterly*, Vol. 1 (1994), pp. 3-10; Arie Arnon and Jimmy Weinblatt, "Sovereignty and Economic Development: The Case of Israel and Palestine," *The Economic Journal*, Vol. 111 (June 2001), pp. 291-308; Bar-El and Schwartz, "The Potential Effect of Peace.").

⁴⁷ Louis Kriesberg, *International Conflict Resolution* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992); John W. Burton, *Conflict: Resolution and Prevention* (New York: St. Martin's, 1990).

⁴⁸ Alice Ackermann, "Reconciliation as a Peace Building Process in Postwar Europe: The French-German Case," *Peace and Change*, Vol. 19 (1994), pp. 229-50.

⁴⁹ Robert L. Rothstein, "Fragile Peace and its Aftermath" in Robert L. Rothstein (ed.), *After the Peace: Resistance and Reconciliation* (Boulder CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999), p. 224.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, p. 229.