



PolicyWatch 2199

# Quiet Partnerships for a New Era: Emerging Opportunities for Arab- Israeli Cooperation

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Regional circumstances point to both the possibility and the need for enhanced Arab-Israeli efforts to address challenges in the security, energy, food/water scarcity, and public-health domains.

The uprisings in the Maghreb, Egypt, and the Levant have transformed the region's security landscape and spawned new challenges for Israel and its Arab neighbors. Jihadist groups have established themselves in ungoverned spaces; Iran is expanding its influence in the Levant at a time when many fear that ongoing nuclear negotiations may confirm its status as a nuclear threshold state; and the very existence of the state system that has underpinned the region's security architecture since World War II is at risk of being undermined by instability and violence. The problems that Israelis and Arabs face are too large for any single nation -- even a great power -- to address alone. Rather, they require a degree of cooperation among regional states if they are to be managed, if not resolved.

## **EXISTENTIAL THREATS CREATE NEW OPPORTUNITIES**

Israel has long worked quietly with Arab neighbors to achieve common goals, including security cooperation with the Palestinian Authority and Jordan to thwart terrorism, as well as intelligence sharing with Gulf Cooperation Council states regarding the Iranian threat. Yet one can also discern the beginnings of new cooperative approaches to emerging challenges, such as Egyptian-Israeli efforts against jihadist groups in Sinai, Israeli-Jordanian efforts to contain spillover from the war in Syria (reportedly including reconnaissance drone flights along the Syria-Jordan border), and a recent water cooperation agreement between Israel, the PA, and Jordan that will enable them to tackle shared scarcity problems. These developments may be a sign that more extensive Arab-Israeli cooperation on hard (military) and soft (nonmilitary) security challenges is possible.

Such cooperation would serve the interests of all parties; in fact, it is increasingly becoming an existential imperative. For Israel, unilateral military solutions have become less applicable to, and less effective against, the various security threats along and beyond its borders. Likewise, many Arab states feel imperiled by the threat of domestic unrest catalyzed by food/water scarcity and governance challenges. They also fear that violent extremist groups such as al-Qaeda and external actors such as Iran may exploit the situation. The growing unrest has even revived public health challenges long thought to be solved, as seen in Syria's recent polio outbreaks.

Under these unprecedented conditions, old approaches are becoming increasingly irrelevant. Whether it be Hamas supporters, Gulf Arabs, and wounded Syrians seeking medical care in Israel, or the PA and Jordan working with Israel on water security, people in dire straits will put politics aside when it is in their vital interest to do so. Going forward, more Arab states may overcome their traditional reluctance to engage Israel due to the ongoing conflict with the Palestinians, perhaps even setting conditions for progress in peace negotiations.

## **POTENTIAL AREAS OF COOPERATION**

Arabs and Israelis have ample room to increase their cooperation in several hard and soft security domains:

*Intelligence.* Although much is already happening in this domain below the surface, Israeli and Arab intelligence services could do much more. In particular, they could share information about terrorist cells, activities, organizations, routines, plans, and smuggling infrastructure, thereby gaining a better understanding of threats in the region. Routine intelligence sharing also creates working relationships that enable agencies to develop early warning channels for terrorist plots, arms transfers, and movement of suspects, as well as a basis for action to counter such activities.

*Interdicting arms supply lines.* Since the outbreak of Arab uprisings in several countries, the Middle East has become even more of a magnet for arms transfers and those seeking to wage jihad. Iran and al-Qaeda have exploited existing smuggling routes and created new ones in order to push arms to Syria, Yemen, and Gaza. Regional cooperation could help thwart some of these arms transfers.

*Virtual centers of excellence.* Since most countries in the region share the same security challenges, unilateral learning is less beneficial than shared learning. Israel and its Arab neighbors should therefore consider sharing the lessons they have learned regarding border, sea/airport, and homeland security. While conducting such exchanges in person might not be possible, the countries could form a virtual center of excellence based on cloud technologies and third-party services.

*Pooling of military capabilities.* Through third parties, Israel and Arab countries could exchange military equipment they no longer need, desire, or maintain, but which might be useful to other parties engaged in internal security and counterinsurgency operations (assuming they have an urgent need that cannot be met through traditional arms supply relationships). Such transfers have occurred in the past, and there is even greater potential for such cooperation in the future.

*Critical infrastructure protection, border and maritime security, and homeland security.* At a time when new offshore natural-gas projects are emerging in the Mediterranean, terrorist groups continue to target energy facilities (e.g., in Iraq, Sinai, and Mali). This increases the importance of international cooperation regarding airport, seaport, and maritime security technologies and doctrines, remotely-guided vehicle operations (air, ground, and sea), critical infrastructure protection, as well as cooperative civil defense and consequence management.

*Cross-border planning .* Through third parties or indirect negotiations, Israel and its neighbors could work on ways to improve and integrate their roads, waterways, sewers, electricity, and communication networks, creating beneficial synergies between their respective national infrastructures.

*Water and food security .* The best way to deal with the region's numerous water and food challenges is to pool funds, land, and knowledge. Israeli innovations in water management and drip irrigation, along with other modern agricultural techniques, could help Arab countries boost domestic food production (instead of, for example, Gulf states buying thousands of acres of farmland in Sudan, Kenya, Ethiopia, and Mozambique).

*Public health and preventive care.* Ongoing violence in Syria and elsewhere could lead to public health threats that require cooperation among relevant agencies in all neighboring states.

## **FORMULA FOR SUCCESS**

For such cooperative efforts to succeed, they need to be pursued quietly. They must also be accompanied by conciliatory attitudes on the peace front: Israel should adopt a more flexible approach to dealing with the Palestinians, while Arab states should show their support for a two-state solution through words and actions.

Most of these efforts need to be government-led and pursued on an opportunistic, nontransactional basis. At the same time, governments should empower private businesses and NGOs to seek their own opportunities for cooperation. They should also encourage Jewish and Arab diaspora communities to catalyze cooperation in the region through individual partnerships in these domains, including joint investments.

## **THE U.S. ROLE**

While Washington has tended to emphasize high-level diplomacy as the primary means of resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict, new regional realities make it imperative to take a two-track approach. Enhanced low-key cooperation between Israel and Arab countries is both a U.S. interest on its own merits and a means of bolstering peace diplomacy. Quiet U.S. support for initiatives that build bridges between the parties would not only help lay the foundation for future success in the peace process, but also counter the growing regional perception that the United States is decreasing its role in the region or leaving entirely.

This approach will bear fruit even if current U.S. peace diplomacy does not lead to rapid success. Continuous, multifaceted efforts to encourage cooperation between Israel and its Arab neighbors would help Washington manage instability and shape future realities in a region that will remain of vital importance for decades to come.

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