

Israel's Partial Victory

The Arab states tiptoed away

By Daniel Pipes

THE STATE OF ISRAEL celebrates its 75th birthday in 2023, a year that will also mark a major but generally unnoticed milestone in the Arab–Israeli conflict. During Israel's first 25 years, from 1948 to 1973, Arab states—with Egypt, Jordan, and Syria in the lead, followed by Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Lebanon—fought it five times with conventional armed forces. They built up huge armies, allied with the Soviet bloc, and fought Israel on the literal battlefield. After 1973, the states quietly bowed out and remained out over the next 50 years—which is to say, for twice as long as the era during which they actively fought Israel.

The few exceptions to this cold peace—notably, a Syrian aerial confrontation in 1982 and an Iraqi mis-

sile attack in 1991—help make the point. Their brevity, limitations, and failure enforced the wisdom of not confronting Israel. The Syrian air force lost 82 planes, while the Israeli air force lost none. And 18 separate Iraqi missile attacks directly killed one Israeli. The Iraqi and Syrian regimes both started nuclear programs but gave them up after coming under Israeli attacks in 1981 and 2007, respectively.

Although most Arab states continued to assault Israel verbally and economically after 1973, they carefully withdrew from military confrontation. Focused on other issues—the Iranian threat, the Islamist surge, civil wars in Libya, Yemen, Syria, and Iraq, Turkey going rogue, and a water drought—hoary anti-Zionist taboos lost much of their hold in Arabic-speaking countries.

Six Arab states went on to open full diplomatic relations with Israel: Egypt in 1979, Jordan in 1994, and all of the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan in 2020. (Two other Arab states started in

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this direction but aborted: Lebanon in 1983 and Syria in 2000.) Saudi Arabia is widely expected to follow after the rule of 87-year-old King Salman ends, which would significantly move the Arab center of gravity in favor of accepting Israel.

Changes have occurred in a variety of ways. The Israeli minister of sports broke into tears in 2019 as “Hatikvah,” Israel’s anthem, was played in Abu Dhabi upon the victory of an Israeli athlete. In September 2020 alone, the preacher at Mecca’s Grand Mosque recalled Muhammad’s good relations with Jews, the Arab League turned down a Palestinian-sponsored anti-Israel resolution, and the UAE government “advised” all hotels “to include Kosher food options” in all their dining offerings.

Four Arab foreign ministers attending a meeting hosted by Israel in early 2022 (the Negev Summit) symbolized this new acceptance. More substantively, Israel sold advanced military equipment to the UAE, Bahrain, and Morocco totaling more than \$3 billion in two years; in 2021, that accounted for 7 percent of \$11.3 billion in Israeli global military sales. Obviously, one sells matériel only to governments expected to remain long-term allies.

But as Arab states exited the anti-Zionist arena, a range of other actors stepped in: Palestinians, Islamists, the Iranian and Turkish governments, and leftists. Conventional armed forces—ships, tanks, planes, rockets—nearly disappeared from the battlefield, replaced by other methods of attack: stabbings, weaponized kites, suicide bombings, weapons of mass destruction, and the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement.

Why did this overlooked switch take place, and what are its implications? Some history helps answer these questions.

Arab leaders insisted through their 25 years of confrontation with Israel that they would always persevere. On June 10, 1967, a mere four days after the Six-Day War concluded disastrously for them, for example, Algerian strongman Houari Boumédiène announced, “If we lost one battle, we will not lose the war ... the war must go on ... until right is restored to its proper place, until aggression is destroyed and until what has been imposed by brute force is undone. ... We must not lay down arms.” A day later, he doubled down on this

message, talking of “the road to victory, ... continuing the battle regardless of how hard it is or of the price we will have to pay.” Despite such bravado, the states abandoned those arms just six years later.

And for good reason. On the battlefield, the Arab states waged wars against Israel five times (1948–49, 1956, 1967, 1970, and 1973) and lost them all, badly. In particular, the defeats of 1948–49 and 1967 left Arab leaders shocked. Newborn Israel had seemed so vulnerable, while the Six-Day War was the single most lopsided debacle in military history. Add to this the 82–0 aerial wipeout of 1982 and direct confrontation with Israel lost its attraction. The states tiptoed away.

Incendiary anti-Israel rhetoric promised more than the leaders of Arab states could deliver. Early on, they found that arousing and channeling hostility through propaganda against Israel distracted their populations from problems at home, and so served them well. Gamal Abdel Nasser, who ruled Egypt between 1954 and 1970, mastered this art, winning massive approval as he attributed almost any problem to “the Zionists.” By 1973, however, Arab leaders realized that incessant anti-Zionism had created a tiger they could barely ride, so they toned down both the rhetoric and the actions.

A powerful brew of leftist ideologies, including anti-imperialism, Arab socialism, and Third Worldism, characterized Arab politics until roughly the time of Nasser’s demise in 1970. During that period, governments radiated an optimism, however crude and ill-conceived, about their own abilities. Histrionics surrounding the Six-Day War, for example, demonstrated this shrill and foolish self-assurance, with Nasser announcing, “War will be total, and the objective will be to destroy Israel. We feel confident that we can win and are ready now for a war with Israel.”

That reckless optimism eventually subsided, replaced by a bitter sense of realism, sobriety, and limitation. Repeated military failures against Israel fueled this change, as did a wider disappointment. When Arab speakers looked around, they found themselves trapped by repression, inequity, backwardness, and poverty, as symbolized by the much-discussed and very negative *Arab Human Development Report 2002*. Gloom replaced hope; mordant introspection took the place of exuberant ambition.

As Arab states receded, others rushed in—beginning with the Palestinians. They are a more impassioned enemy of Israel due to their greater personal stake in the conflict.

The same was true for economics as difficulties following the oil boom of 1970–80 exacerbated this shift. Massive oil revenues brought stupendous national growth during those heady, exhilarating years. Oil producers led the way, of course, but countries that serviced the producers, such as Egypt and Jordan, also benefited. Lebanon maintained a startlingly high economic standard of living through much of its civil war, from 1975 to 1990. The flood of money brought not just economic muscle and diplomatic power, but a sense that the trauma of modernization had been finessed. Past mistakes appeared swept away as a bright future beckoned. For a few glorious years, it seemed that oil would solve the Arabs' problems, perhaps even dispatch Israel, which found itself mercilessly squeezed (for example, 25 sub-Saharan African states broke relations with it after the 1973 war).

But binges rarely go unpunished, and the 1970s intoxication led to a 1980s hangover. Just as the boom blessed virtually all the Arab states, so the bust afflicted nearly every one of them, undoing prior gains. The consequences of the oil downturn could be traced with almost graph-like precision in many areas, from the price of Islamic art at London auction houses to African states reestablishing relations with Israel (eventually, 42 of the 44 sub-Saharan African states not members of the Arab League did so). Economics eventually also brought the Arab states closer to Israel. In 2018, then-Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu pointed out “a great change” in the Arab world, which has growing connections to Israel because it needs its “technology and innovation, ... water, electricity, medical care, and high-tech.”

Political woes aggravated the sense of defeat. Once renowned for the strength of their dictatorships (think Hafez al-Assad and Saddam Hussein), Arab governments more recently have faced the challenge of controlling their subjects. Substantial parts of Libya, Egypt (the Sinai Peninsula), Lebanon, Yemen, Syria, and Iraq have become anarchic. Obviously, regimes not fully governing their own territory can hardly play a forceful role beyond their borders.

The rise of Islamists, who emerged soon after the 1973 war and quickly presented the most dangerous domestic opposition in almost every Arab country, exacerbated the states' weakness. Ideologically

dedicated, they directly threatened governments as the distant and benign Israelis never did. From the Hama massacre of 1982 in Syria to the Rabaa massacre in Cairo of 2013, Arab governments gave priority to fiercely suppressing their Islamist foes. Anti-Zionism, it turned out, was a luxury—something to promote when convenient and put aside when not.

And then there was the problem of Iran. As soon as Ayatollah Khomeini took power in 1979, Tehran presented a threat to all the Arab states except its Syrian ally, further making the Palestinian cause an afterthought. The Iraq–Iran war of 1980–88 massively diverted attention from Israel. Subversion then replaced direct war, augmenting the Iranian threat to the point that the mullahs controlled the capitals of four Arab states (Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen) and sent drones with impunity to strike at a Saudi oil installation. Anti-Iran alliances with Israel began covertly soon after the Iranian Revolution but became openly acknowledged only with the Abraham Accords.

AS ARAB STATES receded, others rushed in—beginning with the Palestinians. They are a more impassioned, if much smaller, enemy of Israel due to their greater personal stake in the conflict. Their ancestors spearheaded anti-Zionism before 1948; recall the mufti of Jerusalem, Hajj Amin al-Husseini, and the Arab Revolt of 1936–39. They rose to the fore again after 1967 with the crushing of three Arab armed forces in six days. That fiasco encouraged the Palestinians to reassert their primacy in the anti-Zionist struggle, but what acknowledgment they won then was more symbolic than real, as state interests remained paramount. True recognition of Palestinian primacy dates to 1974, when the Arab League (the organization of Arab states) recognized the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) as the “sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people” and granted it full membership in the league. The 1993 Oslo Accords confirmed that centrality.

Although lacking the resources of the Arab states, and lacking a respectable economy or military, the Palestinians accomplished more than the states ever did. The many Palestinian wars (1982, 2006, 2008–09, 2012, 2014, 2021) may have been lopsided in

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Israel's favor militarily, but they served the purpose of making Israel look bad. Three Arab armed forces lost to Israel in six days, but the PLO managed to hang on against Israel for 88 days in 1982. Arab states lost the Sinai Peninsula, Gaza, East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and the Golan Heights to Israel, while the Palestinians convinced Israel to hand Gaza and parts of the West Bank over to them. Western governments and peoples largely shunned the Arab-state assault on Israel but widely ignored the Palestinian attacks on it. If Arab states felt constrained to observe treaties with Israel, however coldly, Palestinians with near impunity trashed the Oslo Accords and every other agreement. Their tenacity not only contrasted with the feckless Arab states, but their success also put the states to shame for their failures.

Islamists opened another front. They emerged soon after 1973 as a powerful and worldwide anti-Israel force. Their vitriol had the greatest influence in Muslim-majority countries, either by pressuring the government (Algeria in the 1990s), taking it over (Egypt under Mohamed Morsi), or destroying it (Syria since 2011). They also effectively spread their anti-Zionist message in the West, especially when they partnered with leftists, with a resulting impact on educational institutions, philanthropies, the media, legal systems, and politicians.

While the shah of Iran had maintained a quiet working relationship with Israel, the Islamic Revolution of 1978–79 turned Iran's government into a fanatic enemy, with anti-Zionism serving as a foundation of regime principles and propaganda. Symbolic of this new orientation, Ayatollah Khomeini granted his first audience with a foreign leader to PLO chieftain Yasir Arafat and instituted an annual Jerusalem Day. Tehran organized and funded many organizations to attack Israel, including Hezbollah, Hamas, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, while its nuclear program represents the single greatest threat to Israel's security. In turn, Israel has become the world's conscience and potential weapon vis-à-vis Iran's nuclear arsenal.

Turkish-Israeli relations, once a model for Muslim-Jewish cooperation, peaked in the late 1990s. That shifted in 2002 with the election of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), an Islamist organization. While Turkey's reorientation lacked the speed, consistency,

and totality of the Iranian precedent, it has proven consequential, with the country becoming an occasional base for operations against Israel, a supporter of Hamas, and a significant anti-Zionist voice internationally. At times, however, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan decides he needs Israel and warms up relations in an evidently transactional manner. Also, trade and tourism have continued through thick and thin.

The global left had an erratic record regarding Israel before 1967, with the Soviet Union playing a crucial role in the country's coming into existence and American liberals viewing it more favorably than conservatives (think Truman vs. Eisenhower). The shift away from Israel began as the left discovered Palestinians and made them its most-favored victim. Leftist antagonism to Israel culminated in 2001 with the United Nations' Durban conference "against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance," where many strands came together to criticize and ostracize Israel. Since then, the left—from European public opinion to Marxist unions in India to politicians Jeremy Corbyn in Great Britain and Gabriel Boric in Chile—has become increasingly hostile to the Jewish state.

Thus did the Arab-Israeli conflict splinter into the Palestinian-Israeli, Islamist-Israeli, and leftist-Israeli conflicts.

THESE DEVELOPMENTS have two main implications for Israel.

First, Israel won a victory over the Arab states, with their far larger populations, resources, economies, and diplomatic heft, a signal accomplishment that deserves far more attention than it has received. In 1994, for example, then-IDF Chief of Staff Ehud Barak argued that "in the foreseeable future, the main threat to the State of Israel is still an all-out attack by conventional armies." This year, Israeli strategist Efraim Inbar insisted that the "idea that Jewish and Arab states will coexist peacefully...ignores the reality on the ground." Granted, no Arab state signed a document of surrender or otherwise acknowledged defeat, but defeat was their reality. After going into battle with guns blazing in 1948, expecting easily to snuff out the nascent State of Israel, rulers in Cairo, Amman, Damascus, and elsewhere incrementally realized over a

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quarter-century that the scorned Zionists could beat them every time, no matter who initiated the surprise attack, no matter the terrain, no matter the sophistication of weapons, no matter the great-power allies. The fracturing of Arab-state enmity constitutes a tectonic shift in the Arab–Israeli conflict.

That said, lasting victory can take many decades to be confirmed. Russia and the Taliban looked defeated in 1991 and 2001, respectively, but their resurgences in 2022 put these in doubt.* A parallel revival seems unlikely for the Arab states, but the Muslim Brotherhood could again take over Egypt, Jordan's monarchy could fall to radicals, Syria could become whole again, and Lebanon could become a unified state under Hezbollah rule. We can say with confidence that the Arab states have been defeated at least for now.

That defeat raises an obvious question: Does it offer a model for Palestinian defeat?*** In part, yes. If states with large Muslim-majority populations can be forced to give up, that refutes a common notion that Islam makes Muslims immune to defeat.

But in larger part, no. First, Israel is a far more remote issue for residents of Arab states than for Palestinians. Egyptians tend to care less about making Je-

rusalem the capital of Palestine than installing proper sewer systems. Civil war has consumed Syrians since 2011. Second, states compromise more readily than ideological movements because of rulers' multiple and competing interests. Third, governments being hierarchical structures—and especially the Arabs' authoritarian regimes—a single individual (such as Anwar al-Sadat or Mohammad bin Salman) can, on his own, radically change policy. No one disposes of such power in the PLO or Hamas. Thus are state conflicts with Israel more tractable and more prone to change than the Palestinian conflict.

Fourth, despite claims about imperialist aggression directed against them, large Arab states never convincingly portrayed themselves as victims of little Israel, something the even littler Palestinians have done with great skill, making themselves the darlings of international organizations and senior common rooms alike, giving them a unique global constituency. Finally, long-ago peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan and the recent Abraham Accords have great importance in themselves but have next to no role in diminishing perfervid Palestinian hostility toward Israel. Likewise, the Palestinians' groupies—Islamists, Tehran and Ankara, global leftists—completely ignore the accords. If only victimized Palestinians matter, the retreat of Arab states is irrelevant.

For these reasons, Arab states withdrew after just 25 years of leading the charge against Israel, but Palestinians keep going at 50 years. [👉](#)

* This recalls the famous 1972 remark by China's Premier Zhou Enlai that it was "too early" to assess the impact of the French Revolution of 1789. In fact, he was referring then to the French student disturbances of 1968, but the misquote expresses a profound truth.

*** I argued for this goal in "A New Strategy for Israeli Victory," COMMENTARY, January 2017.