

Existing and Potential Cooperation between Israel and Key Arab States

Snapshot, Mid-2019

September 2019

For the past two years, Mitvim Institute experts have been studying the changing relations between Israel and key Arab states – Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, the United Arab Emirates and Iraq. They examined the history of Israel's ties with each of these states; the current level of Israel's diplomatic, security, economic and civilian cooperation with them; the potential for future cooperation and the impact of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on Israel's ties in the Middle East. Based on their research and on task-team deliberations, the experts put together a snapshot of the scope of existing and potential cooperation between Israel and key Arab states, as of mid-2019.*

A. Saudi Arabia

Israel and Saudi Arabia are probably conducting clandestine security cooperation, mostly vis-à-vis Iran's nuclear activities and its involvement in the region. While there are quite a few reports pointing to intelligence cooperation between the states, there is no public, concrete information about its scope and nature. There were reports in the past that Saudi Arabia would allow Israel to use its airspace en route to bombing Iranian nuclear installations, should a decision to carry out such an attack be made. In terms of security and intelligence, the Palestinian issue does not appear to constitute an obstacle to cooperation between the two states, and the existing potential is being tapped to a large extent. The two states' joint interests in stabilizing the region vis-à-vis Iran's growing power generate backroom Saudi-Israeli diplomatic cooperation, too. As for the Palestinian issue, Saudi Arabia does not have sufficient influence to affect a significant breakthrough in the peace process, but it has a certain role as the initiator of the Arab Peace Initiative and custodian of Islam's holy sites.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict constitutes a clear obstacle to tapping the economic cooperation potential between the two countries. On this level, there is a wide gap between the potential and its limited fulfillment through clandestine activity and third-party contacts. On the civilian level, despite certain potential in tourism, religion and the environment, there is almost no current interaction between the two states. Limited ties between individuals may take place under the auspices of international frameworks and through social media. In this aspect, too, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict explains the gap between the potential and reality to a large extent.

* This periodic assessment is based on research, analysis, deliberations and rankings carried out by Yitzhak Gal, Dr. Nimrod Goren, Merav Kahana-Dagan, Dr. Roei Kibrik, Amb. (ret.) Haim Koren, Einat Levi, Prof. Elie Podeh, Dr. Michal Ya'ari, Dr. Moran Zaga and Dr. Ronen Zeidel.

B. Egypt

On the diplomatic level, there is significant coordination between Israel and Egypt, but it is largely dependent on changing geopolitical and international circumstances. In addition, most of the diplomatic contacts are conducted through the two countries' security forces and not their political leadership, foreign ministries and government bureaucracies. The security cooperation is better than ever, but it is not perfect and is challenged by conceptual and technological gaps between the two armed forces, as well as by residues of their past enmity.

On the economic level, there has been recent improvement in the QIZ (Qualified Industrial Zones) mechanism and growing cooperation on energy issues at the ministerial level (the establishment of the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum in Cairo and agreement on Israeli gas exports to Egypt). Nonetheless, Israel's government apparatus and more so the Egyptian one place obstacles in the way of promoting economic ties and tapping their potential. Despite significant tourism, research and environmental potential, there is hardly any cooperation on these issues, except for an uptick in Israeli tourism to Sinai. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is still the core impediment to realization of the relationship's multi-faceted potential, especially given the dominant public Egyptian discourse rejecting any indication of normalization with Israel.

C. The United Arab Emirates

There is no cooperation on the diplomatic level other than participation of senior Israeli officials in international events held on the United Arab Emirates' soil and clandestine cooperation on the Palestinian issue and in the campaign against Iran. The United Arab Emirates reiterates its willingness to expand diplomatic cooperation with Israel, but conditions it on significant progress in negotiations with the Palestinians. The two countries cooperate, albeit under the radar, on security and defense matters, in defense technology trade and even in regional and international military exercises. Improved relations would result in additional and public cooperation between the two countries' navies and air forces, as well as intelligence cooperation.

In terms of economic ties, which hold a greater potential, there is only limited, clandestine exploitation of the opportunities with the help of third parties, mostly in the diamond and defense technology trade. There is certain potential for civilian cooperation on issues such as research, the environment, tourism and medicine, but it is hardly tapped. The existing civilian ties mostly include Israeli participation in international sports and culture events hosted by the United Arab Emirates and aspects of religious tolerance. The Palestinian issue constitutes a significant obstacle to tapping the relationship's potential.

D. Iraq

There is almost no Israeli cooperation with Arab Iraq on diplomatic, defense and economic issues. Israel maintains certain security and energy ties with the Kurds in northern Iraq and has even recognized their national aspirations for independence. Israel is sensitive about conducting similar cooperation with Arab Iraq due to Iran's involvement there, although certain circles in Iraq are willing to engage with Israel.

Despite formal approval granted by the Israeli government a decade ago to trade with Iraq, the two states do not conduct any significant economic interaction. Diplomatic cooperation will not occur barring a change in the current balance of power in the top Iraqi political echelons and unless the power of the pro-Iranian camp is curbed. The potential for defense and diplomacy cooperation with Iraq is even more limited than with other Arab states.

However, on the civilian level there is greater potential. There are a few efforts being made to advance cultural ties, especially through social media (including an Iraqi-targeted Facebook page of Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs); Israel provides limited humanitarian aid to the Kurdish region and plans are being made to expand this aid to the Arab regions of the country, for example by encouraging health tourism from Iraq or civilian assistance in rehabilitating the water system in southern Iraq. Israel lacks a human infrastructure in Iraq on which to build and establish ties. Although Iraq has adopted the Arab Peace Initiative, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not a significant factor in its considerations and not the main cause of the major gap between the potential Iraqi-Israeli relationship and its fulfillment.

E. Morocco

Israel and Morocco have been conducting a certain amount of secret diplomatic and security cooperation directly and under the auspices of international frameworks. The (secret) security cooperation between the two states has a long history going back to the late 1950s, and it has the potential to expand, especially into partnerships within regional and international frameworks. Economic cooperation exists, especially in private sector partnerships, directly or through third parties.

The significant potential in civilian fields, especially in tourism and cultural ties, relies to a large extent on the large Moroccan diaspora in Israel and its deeply rooted ties with Morocco. This link is only being partially tapped, and a significant civilian boycott movement in Morocco hampers its development. Nonetheless, there is constant traffic back and forth – of significant Israeli tourism and mutual visits of individuals from the fields of culture and media. Morocco also enables Israeli participation in international sports events that it hosts, including the flying of the Israeli flag and playing of its anthem. The continued Israeli-Palestinian conflict has a significant dampening effect on the ability to tap the potential cooperation between the two states.

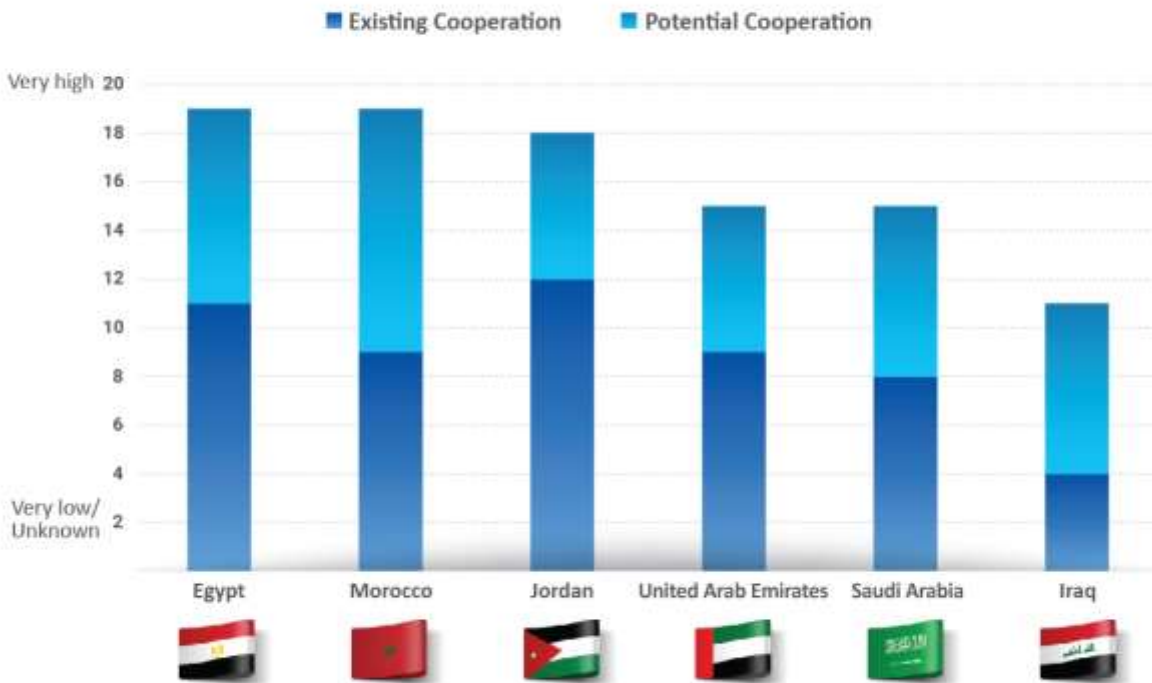
F. Jordan

Ties between Israel and Jordan are strategically important to both states. Against the backdrop of joint security interests in regional stability, and in countering terrorism and Iranian expansion, there is a high degree of security cooperation and a basic level of diplomatic cooperation. However, in light of diplomatic tensions over the Palestinian issue and the distrust it generates, the ties are far from exploiting their potential. The economic agreements between the sides have survived since the signing of their peace treaty, but only certain aspects of the economic potential are being tapped, especially in energy, commerce and industry. The economic cooperation manifests itself in ongoing trade through the Haifa Port and imports from the Gulf to Israel via Jordan, as well as in cooperation over the Red Sea-Dead Sea Canal project, the agreement on gas exports from Israel to Jordan and Jordanian labor in Israel's tourism industry.

On the civilian front, there is certain movement of tourists and a certain amount of cross-border, environmental initiatives. The significant potential of cooperation in cultural, research, religious, water and other fields is largely untapped. The Palestinian issue significantly overshadows prospects of improved relations and cooperation in a multitude of fields, generating significant public objections in Jordan to ties and normalization with Israel.

G. Summary and Concluding Charts

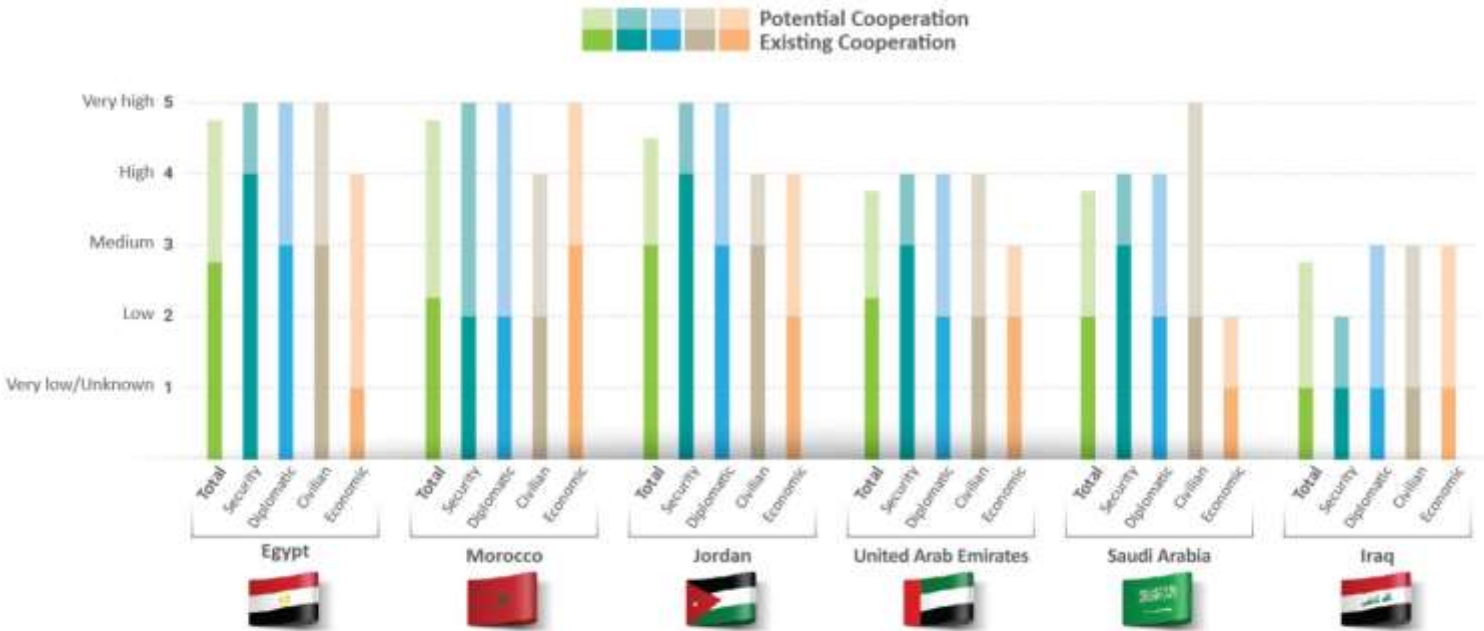
Varied cooperation between Israel and key Arab states is possible, and takes place to a certain extent even today, also with countries with which Israel does not have official diplomatic relations. With each state, the potential is different and existing relations differ in type and scope. What all have in common is the dampening effect of the stagnation in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, which significantly hampers relationships even with states where the conflict is not high on the agenda. Israel has been granted an opportunity to reshape its relationships in the Middle East – to forge ties, to turn clandestine relations into open ones, to expand and deepen joint activity and to promote national interests. However, to do so it has to display commitment to the two-state solution and take steps to advance Israeli-Palestinian peace. Otherwise, the gap between the potential for regional cooperation and the situation on the ground will remain significant and might even grow.



The rankings are based on a series of research papers published by the Mitvim Institute on "Israel's Relations with Arab Countries: The Unfulfilled Potential", and on additional assessments by relevant experts at the Mitvim Institute.



Existing and Potential Cooperation between Israel and Key Countries in the Arab World (According to categories; July 2019)



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