



Israel's Relations with Key Arab States in 2019

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Israel-Jordan: Continued Deterioration

Yitzhak Gal*

A. Introduction

The Israel-Jordan peace treaty of 1994 provided the Hashemite Kingdom with a vitally important strategic anchor, stabilizing and strengthening its Israeli defense umbrella and boosting its strategic ties with the US. The peace agreement also provided a pillar of diplomatic-strategic stability for Israel, as demonstrated in a comprehensive [study](#) of the Israel-Jordan relationship conducted in 2018.

The two states developed extensive security cooperation. The initial years saw significant positive developments on the economic front, too. The 1998 signing of the Jordanian-American-Israeli trade agreement creating Qualifying Industrial Zones (the QIZ Agreement) provided favorable terms for exports to the US and was an important outcome of the peace treaty. The trade deal yielded a series of follow-up economic agreements that placed Jordan on a path of accelerated export-based growth and made it a leading force in the Arab world in terms of integration in the global economy. Israel and Jordan developed significant cooperation in tourism and industry, especially the clothing industry, as well as in water.

These economic, diplomatic and civilian ties have been neglected over the past decade, and the extent of Israel-Jordan cooperation has greatly diminished. The most serious obstacle to the relationship was and remains the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which undermines Israel-Jordan ties and leads to alienation and hostility toward Israel in Jordanian public opinion.

The divisions over the al-Haram a-Sharif/Temple Mount are of particularly explosive potential. Additional diplomatic issues souring the relationship include repeated Israeli mentions of the “Jordan is Palestine” idea, and events that stir up negative public opinion in Jordan, such as Israel’s detention of Jordanian nationals. Israel’s possible annexation of the Jordan Valley (on the Palestinian side) is a particularly volatile issue.

Beyond all these issues, the leadership and public in Jordan share a disquieting sense that Israel does not respect them, ignores their interests and sensitivities, and repeatedly places the monarchy in difficult situations to the extent of threatening its stability. This paper reviews the main developments in the relationship in 2019 against the backdrop of the above-mentioned issues.

B. Details of the Cooperation

Diplomatic ties

Diplomatic cooperation between the states is limited and continuously eroding in recent years. In the past, relations were sufficiently robust to overcome serious crises, such as Israel’s attempted 1997 assassination of Khaled Mashal in Jordan or the terror attack

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carried out that same year by a Jordanian soldier on the Peace Island border enclave. However, in recent years, relations have worsened to the extent that the King [rejected](#) Prime Minister Netanyahu's request for a meeting in 2019. This decline has made it hard for both sides to overcome even minor difficulties. In addition, the erosion of diplomatic relations leaves a host of unresolved issues and Jordanian claims against Israel (on economic and civilian matters). The accumulation of these issues has poisoned the relationship between Israel and Jordan and intensified its negative trend.

The deterioration in relations was prominently manifested in the failure to resolve the issue of the Tzofar and Naharayim enclaves. The peace agreement clearly intended for the special arrangement for these two border enclaves (that were leased to Israel by Jordan) to last many years. Renewal of the land-lease agreement after its initial 25 years was supposed to be automatic, but poor communications between the sides, mistrust and an accumulation of unresolved disputes led Jordan to reclaim the lands. Israel should have dealt in time with renewal of the agreement in the broader context of the relationship. Absent the requisite organized handling of the matter, and against the backdrop of the toxic relations, the fate of the enclaves became a difficult political issue for the Jordanian government and monarch, and ended in the rejection of Israel's request to extend the land-lease arrangement.

The ongoing delays in implementation of agreed upon projects vital for Jordan's dire water shortage further poisoned the climate between the two sides. Chief among these issues is the Red Sea-Dead Sea project, which was planned to include a large desalination plant in Aqaba. Israel decided the project was not financially and environmentally feasible, but rather than discussing alternatives with the Jordanians in order to respond to their urgent need for new water sources, Israel unilaterally suspended the project. At the same time, agreed upon measures to increase the quantity of water pumped from the Sea of Galilee for Jordanian use were repeatedly [postponed](#), with and without any connection to the Red Sea-Dead Sea project suspension.

Against this backdrop, Israel's administrative detention of two Jordanian citizens evolved from a minor affair into a diplomatic crisis at the end of 2019. The Jordanians increasingly felt that Israel was disrespecting the King, ignoring Jordan's vital interests, and even openly violating its commitments under the peace agreement. For the Jordanians, the most egregious example of such Israeli behavior was [the discourse](#) regarding [annexation](#) of the Jordan Valley, which was conducted in Israel and was oblivious of Jordan as a key stakeholder in this matter. The issue was first raised by Netanyahu on the eve of Israel's second 2019 elections in September, reportedly against the advice of the defense establishment. Subsequently, prior to the January 2020 unveiling of the Trump plan, and afterward, Netanyahu announced immediate, concrete intentions regarding the annexation. The Blue and White party also expressed support for such measures (albeit while referring to the need for international coordination). While [cognizant](#) of the timing of these declarations during an election campaign, Jordan nonetheless reacted strongly and [warned](#) of the danger that lay in such measures to the peace treaty between the two countries.

Security ties

Security cooperation is the most developed facet of Israel-Jordan cooperation, yielding tremendous benefits for both sides. The broad cooperation is the result of recognition by both sides of its vital need, and their willingness to invest the efforts, resources and

attention required to develop and sustain it, despite negative developments on other issues. With most activity in this regard being classified, reports of specific events that took place in 2019 are not publicly available. In addition, the fact that the security cooperation takes place largely behind the scenes means that the public is largely ignorant of the essential nature of this aspect of the relationship. However it is important to note that this anomalous situation of excellent security relations along with the overall toxic nature of the relationship is not sustainable. Without significant across-the-board improvement in the relationship, maintaining robust security ties will become increasingly difficult.

Economic ties

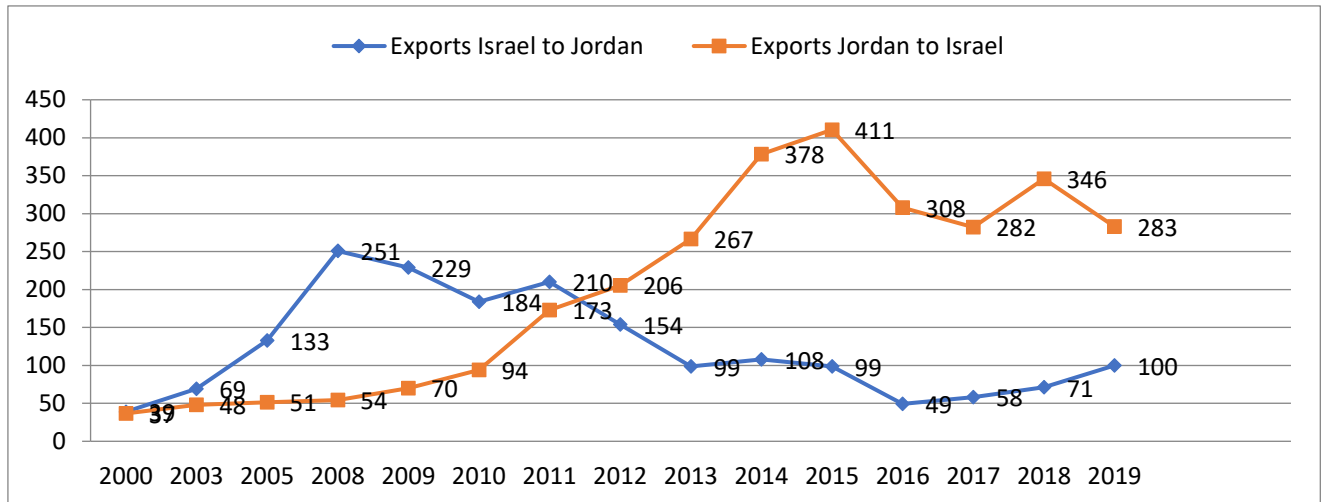
Two contradictory trends have emerged in this regard in recent years. Positive developments, some of significant economic value, have been recorded in several specific areas, albeit largely far from the public eye, as well as in several fields in which Jordan has a special interest. However, beyond these specific arenas, the toxic relationship is manifested in an almost complete Jordanian boycott of trade and public economic and financial activity with Israel and Israelis. The most important of the [positive](#) developments had to do with natural [gas](#). In 2016, Israel started exporting gas to Jordan from its offshore Tamar reservoir to the Jordanian Dead Sea industries. At the end of 2019, supply began from Israel's Leviathan reservoir as well, to the Jordanian power corporation NEPCO (in concert with the start of supply to Egypt and the domestic Israeli market). Under the contract between the sides, Israel will provide Jordan with 10 billion USD worth of gas for a period of 15 years. In consideration of vehement opposition to cooperation with Israel by the Jordanian public and parliament, the gas supply is being conducted by a foreign company to avoid the appearance of a direct deal between Israeli and Jordanian companies. With the start of Israeli gas exports to Jordan and Egypt, Israel became connected to the regional gas system – both in commercial terms and in terms of the deployment and use of gas piping infrastructure.

Transit trade is yet another sphere which has experienced an ongoing positive trend for nearly a decade. This trade consists mostly of Israeli imports from the Gulf that are transported through Jordan, generally of products from the Gulf's chemical and petrochemical industries, as well as various consumer goods from the major free trade zones in the Gulf. In Israel's official trade data, these imports from the Gulf are listed as imports from Jordan, manifesting an ostensibly rapid increase of Israeli imports from Jordan. In fact, however, bilateral trade between the two sides, excluding the transit trade and Israeli gas exports to Jordan, has shrunk to minute dimensions – Israeli exports of some 50 million USD annually to Jordan and even fewer imports from Jordan itself.

The trade route from Jordan through the Port of Haifa, which could have greatly increased Jordan's agricultural exports to European markets, is also operating at far lower capacity than its potential. Another area in which Israel is involved concerns Jordanian-Palestinian trade, which has been significantly increasing in recent years due to improvement in infrastructure and services for Palestinian exporters and importers at the King Hussein (Allenby Bridge) border crossing. This improvement stems from concerted efforts by the Israel Airport Authority that operates the crossing. Nonetheless, the Jordanians claim Israel still piles significant obstacles in the way of their exports to the Palestinian Authority, which Jordan views as a natural market.

Tourism, aviation and hotel cooperation has also experienced significant development. This includes Israeli tourism to Jordan, albeit not in extensive numbers (mostly holiday tourism of Arab Israeli citizens and of other Israelis to Petra and other desert tours in southern Jordan), flights by Israelis to the Far East through Amman, flights of Israeli Muslim pilgrims to the *haji* through Jordan, and employment to a limited extent of Jordanians in Eilat hotels. However, in this field, too, the extent of the cooperation speaks to a great unfulfilled potential.

Israeli trade with and through Jordan, 2000-2019
(Including gas and transit trade; in millions of USD)



Source: Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics, 2020

Civilian ties

The fact that Israel and Jordan are adjoining countries, which share physical infrastructure and have many common needs, invites cooperation between them in a wide array of civilian areas, alongside their economic cooperation. However, only a few of the dozens of agreements signed in the initial years after the peace treaty have been implemented to some degree (in transportation, border crossings, arrangements relating to air and maritime borders, and environmental protection). In other fields, such as culture and science, energy, crime and drug trafficking prevention, health, medicine and more, implementation of the agreements is very limited.

Israel's Arab citizens continue to be the most active players in civilian cooperation between the two countries. Along with tourism, the most concrete expression of civilian cooperation is the large number of young Arab citizens of Israel studying in Jordanian universities. Limited cooperation also exists on environmental issues, especially by several NGOs such as EcoPeace and the Arava Institute. Several important civil society organizations that were very active in Israel-Jordan relations during the first decade after the peace treaty was signed (such as the Israel-Jordan Chamber of Commerce) are no longer active. Nonetheless, in 2019 some Israeli and Jordanian think tanks and policy experts continued to conduct limited joint activities and contacts.

C. Conclusions

The year 2019 saw additional deterioration in Israel-Jordan relations to the point where ties can be described as “toxic”. Israel’s continued callous disregard of Jordanian sensitivities and interests on policy issues (such as al-Haram a-Sharif/Temple Mount) and economic issues (such as water), was further exacerbated by the particularly volatile issue of the Jordan Valley annexation. Strong security ties continued to provide the basis of the relationship, although they are conducted largely behind the scenes. Economic and civilian cooperation declined, except for the Israeli gas exports to Jordan, which are of strategic importance.

Nonetheless, and despite Jordan’s frustration, anger and disappointment with Israel, new content can be infused into the relationship in order to rehabilitate it. Both states have a clear interest in cooperation. The tremendous diplomatic and economic potential of Israel-Jordan relations creates strong incentives for its realization. Considering the toxic state to which relations have deteriorated, their rehabilitation requires a comprehensive restart. Israel’s next government should give his priority to improving ties with Jordan. It should establish new channels of dialogue, be attentive to Jordan’s needs and complaints, and resume and expand joint projects. In this context, restoring Israel’s credibility with the Jordanians is of great importance. Israeli promises and commitments must be strictly met and guarantees should be made to their long-term continuity.

The issue of annexing the Jordan Valley is of special importance as is any change in the status quo on al-Haram a-Sharif/Temple Mount, both issues are of particularly explosive potential in terms of the Jordanian regime and stability of the Kingdom. In addition to avoiding actions and declarations on these two volatile issues, restarting Israel-Jordan relations must include economic cooperation – projects of substantive, quick and highly visible impact. In this regard, priority must be given to water-related matters, including speedy implementation of the water desalination facility in Aqaba (even de-linked from the Red Sea-Dead Sea project if necessary), and taking advantage of the recent rainy winter and rising water level in the Sea of Galilee to accelerate water supplies to Jordan. Beyond these measures, a comprehensive plan for wide-ranging economic cooperation on water and energy must be advanced: Expansion of cooperation on natural gas to additional energy projects such as Jordanian power supply to Israel from its solar fields, supply of desalinated water from the Mediterranean to Jordan, and other hydrological initiatives including cooperation on rehabilitating the Jordan River and Dead Sea.

Israel-Egypt: Strategic Warming, Civilian Coolness?

Amb. (ret.) Dr. Haim Koren*

A. Introduction

Since President Abdel Fatah a-Sisi's rise to power in 2014, Israeli-Egyptian ties have been marked by defense-strategic cooperation. This is based on the shared perception of Iran and radical Islamist terror organizations as a threat, and the common interest in managing the Palestinian issue, in general, and specifically the Gaza arena. In the inherent tension between ideology and national interests, Egypt continues to strive for an agreement between Israel and the Palestinians (Fatah, Hamas and the other Palestinian factions) and seeks to bring about internal Palestinian reconciliation beforehand (between the leaderships in Ramallah and Gaza). Its role as a key mediator between Hamas and Israel is crucial and is in line with Egypt's international standing as an important regional leader.

Egypt's role as a mediator acceptable to all sides allows it to ensure that the "arrangements" it helps broker serve its own interests as well, including its desire to pursue cooperation with Israel on strategic issues such as security and energy. Addressing the 2019 Herzliya Conference, Egyptian Ambassador to Israel Khaled Azmi [expressed](#) his country's key interest in preserving its stability as a nation-state in the face of regional challenges. He also emphasized the importance of providing a response to the aspirations of millions of young people in the Middle East (where [60%](#) of the population is below the age of 30).

Israel perceives its peace with Egypt as a highly important asset. Four decades of peace have proven its resilience in the face of changes and shockwaves, and have provided a potential platform for strategic cooperation. However, relations between Israel and Egypt are characterized as a "cold peace". Egypt is unwilling to fully normalize with Israel, despite crucial shared interests, as long as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains unresolved. Although this position has become somewhat muted considering the growing defense-strategic cooperation between Israel and the Sunni states in the region, it still dictates the nature and extent of relations. A 2018 [study](#) that examined existing cooperation between Israel and Egypt pointed to strategic cooperation between the states, as well as cool bilateral relations on all other fronts. This article follows-up and looks at the 2019 developments in the relations.

B. Details of the Cooperation

Israeli-Egyptian links are an asset to the region, especially to the states of the Arab Muslim Sunni axis, as well as to the US and other powers (Russia, the EU, China and India). All of them regard the ties as a boost to regional stability in light of a period of great upheaval. Throughout 2019, Egypt was a pivotal actor in ties between Israel and the Palestinians. All attempts to arrange ceasefires with Hamas were conducted in close cooperation with Egypt, as well as UN mediation and the help of Qatari funds. Israel and Egypt both sought to limit Iran's presence in the Middle East, to advance increased

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sanctions against it by diplomatic means, and to fight its various proxies. Israel and Egypt also worked, each individually, to limit Turkey's activity in the Eastern Mediterranean by nurturing alliances in the region. They also mounted campaigns against terror organizations, born of a joint perception of the threat they pose and the required responses. Israel and Egypt also share a similar view of the US role in the region, resulting in Israeli-Egyptian coordination in many fields.

Diplomatic cooperation between Israel and Egypt, and the mutual trust built between them, resulted in a 2018 Egyptian [request](#) that Israel mediate in its dispute with Ethiopia over the Renaissance Dam (the Nahda), which is of strategic importance to Egypt. Israel tried to help, raising the issue in talks with the Ethiopian government, after years of frequent Egyptian accusations that it was stealing water from the Nile. Along with such cooperation on the diplomatic front, 2019 saw continued security cooperation between Israel and Egypt, which has underpinned relations between them in recent years. At the start of the year, President a-Sisi [declared](#) in a CBS News interview that security cooperation with Israel was unprecedented, saying Israel had been helping Egyptian forces battle terrorism in the Sinai Peninsula.

The year 2019 marked the 40th anniversary of the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty. Given the level of cooperation between the two states, as described above, a high-profile celebration would have been expected. However, while Israel held academic seminars and various other events to mark the anniversary, and President Reuven Rivlin [hosted a ceremony](#) participated by Egyptian Ambassador Azmi, no similar events were conducted in Egypt. The only event in Egypt marking the anniversary was held by the US Embassy in Cairo, with the participation of Israeli Ambassador Govrin. The Egyptian ambassador to the US and his Israeli counterpart took part in [a ceremony](#) marking the anniversary held at the State Department in Washington. Ambassador Govrin completed his term at the end of July 2019, and Israel currently does not have an ambassador in Cairo. The ambassador-designee's October 2018 [appointment](#) has not yet been presented for government approval.

[Energy](#) was the most prominent new sphere of cooperation between Israel and Egypt in 2019, based on commercial-economic interests along with diplomatic-strategic ones. Significant steps were taken to promote cooperation allowing Egypt, Israel, Cyprus and Greece (and perhaps Lebanon in the future) to form a regional hub of natural gas production as a basis for export to Europe. In January 2019, the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF) was launched in Cairo by seven Middle Eastern and European states, among them Israel and the Palestinian Authority (but without the participation of Turkey and Lebanon). Israeli Energy Minister Steinitz [met](#) with his Egyptian counterpart al-Mullah in full view of the cameras during the launch event. In January 2020, the EMGF ministerial meeting in Cairo decided to upgrade the status of the forum to a recognized international organization, which France asked to join, and which will include the US, EU and World Bank as observers. The boost to multilateral cooperation among the states of the Eastern Mediterranean also helped strengthen bilateral Israeli-Egyptian ties.

In September 2019, Israel's state-owned Eilat Ashkelon Pipeline Company signed a contract with the owners of the Egyptian EMG gas pipeline to allow the flow of gas from Israel's offshore Leviathan and Tamar gas fields to Egypt. The deal is expected to yield the Israeli company an annual commission of NIS200 million. In addition, a compromise was reached between the Egyptian government and the Israel Electric Corporation (IEC), according to which the Egyptians would only pay the IEC \$500 million of the \$1.76 billion

ruled in its favor in international arbitration several years ago. That compromise removed the remaining barriers to the supply of natural gas from Israel to Egypt, and in January 2020, Israel [began exporting](#) gas to Egypt from the Leviathan reservoir. As of 2021, the Tamar and Leviathan partnership is scheduled to export some 6.4 billion cubic meters of gas annually. None of the above would have been possible without intensive contacts between the Egyptian and Israeli governments and without a diplomatic umbrella for the deals.

Nonetheless, other than in the energy field, no significant changes occurred in Israel-Egyptian economic cooperation in 2019. The Qualified Industrial Zones (QIZ) continued to operate in their current format, as did agricultural projects. Unfortunately, there were no new initiatives in the spheres of solar energy, water desalination or green energy, which could have been very beneficial to the Egyptian economy. No progress was reported in scientific, medical, technological or academic cooperation, either. The Israeli Academic Center in Cairo continued to operate out of its offices in the Maadi neighborhood, attended daily by Egyptian students and lecturers. However, the center's series of lectures by Israeli writers, lecturers and intellectuals for Egyptian audiences has not been renewed.

One area in which progress was recorded was tourism, with hundreds of thousands of Israelis visiting the Sinai Peninsula and a few thousand touring Egypt itself. Positive developments occurred in the other direction, too – with the growth of Egyptian Copt pilgrimages to Israel, especially for the “Great Sabbath” and Easter holy days. Their numbers grew from some 5,000 in 2015 to about 7,000 in 2019. In December 2019, the annual World Youth Forum [was convened](#) in Sharm a-Sheikh under the auspices of President a-Sisi, who saw it as an opportunity to tighten cooperation among Mediterranean states in such fields as climate, science, illegal migration and counter-terrorism. Israeli attendance at the forum's activities could provide an additional channel for strengthening people-to-people ties between Israel and Egypt.

As part of Egypt's efforts to display more tolerant and liberal attitudes, especially toward religious minorities, among them Jews and Copts, progress was made in terms of Egypt's commitment to refurbish Jewish heritage sites. In 2017, a-Sisi announced that the Egyptian government would restore religious Jewish compounds. The restoration of Eliyahu Hanavi Synagogue in Alexandria begun in 2018 and the site was inaugurated in an impressive January 2020 ceremony. Cairo's Bassatine Jewish cemetery compound was renovated in 2019 with Egyptian government funding. After years of ignoring the need for restoration, the Egyptians have even allocated government budgets to the projects (rather than seeking funding from world heritage foundations or Jewish communities around the world). Egypt's Antiquities Authority approves the registration of 13 relics, including Torah books, candlesticks and lanterns belonging to the synagogue in Alexandria and in other Egyptian towns, in preparation for their registration under the Protection of Antiquities Law. Mohamed Mahran, head of the Central Department of Jewish Antiquities at the Egyptian Ministry of Antiquities said registering the Jewish relics was the first move of its kind. It should be noted that ambassadors from many countries were invited to the impressive synagogue ceremony, but the Israeli ambassador was not invited. The Egyptians framed the event as a Jewish rather than Israel-related occasion. Along with Egypt's positive shift on the Jewish issue and progress in areas such as security and energy, “cold peace” characteristics continue to mark Israeli-Egyptian relations. Egyptian avoidance of cultural cooperation continues to pose a significant obstacle to the bilateral relationship. The trend of Mediterranean identity starting to take

root in certain Egyptian and Israeli circles may generate a dialogue that will eventually yield more open cultural relations. Social media, which enable a direct and comprehensive discourse with significant swathes of the predominantly young Egyptian population, interested in the world outside their borders, constitute another arena in which Israel operates and which holds potential for civilian rapprochement. The [reactions](#) of Egyptian internet surfers to Arabic-language social media pages posted by the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs express an interest in Israel, its culture, the role of science and technology in its fabric of life and lifestyle. Nonetheless, certainly compared with similar activity Israel has undertaken vis-à-vis Iraq and the Gulf States, reactions in Egypt are still negative, for the most part. Promoting the cultural aspects of the relationship, in combination with the potential of social media, is fertile ground for additional rapprochement between Israel and Egypt, requiring persistence and patience.

C. Summary

Over four decades of Israeli-Egyptian relations testify to continuity and change. The two states' mutual interests constitute the basis for their peace, despite the obstacles, disagreements, and tensions over the years. The emerging regional and international reality (especially since a-Sisi's rise to power) has increased cooperation but was not successful in thawing Egypt's cool attitude toward the peace with Israel. The "cold peace" persists in areas such as culture, science, medicine, agriculture and industry. Nonetheless, the regional coalition that views Iran as a threat and the radical Islamist organizations as terrorists who must be defeated adds a significant dimension to Israeli-Egyptian ties. The ties were further boosted in 2019 by bilateral and regional energy-related cooperation of strategic diplomatic and economic importance.

Also of importance to the relationship was Israeli-Egyptian cooperation on the Palestinian issue, especially as regards the situation in Gaza, in which Egypt plays a key role. The fact that Egypt sought Israeli mediation in its dispute with Ethiopia over the Renaissance Dam, a crucial issue for Egypt, is also important, and Egypt's commitment to restoring and preserving Jewish heritage sites is a welcome development. Perhaps the discourse (while still limited to certain circles) in Egypt and Israel regarding identification with Mediterranean culture will promote broader civilian cooperation in the future and a sense of regional partnership, which could also be fostered by new communications channels provided by social media. It is important that Israel quickly appoint a permanent ambassador to Egypt, one able to support and lead attempts to bolster ties between the two states and take advantage of new opportunities to forge warmer ties.

Israel-UAE: Warming Relations, Also in Civilian Affairs

Dr. Moran Zaga*

A. Introduction

The relations between the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Israel are primarily characterized by mutual interest and cautious rapprochement steps. The rapprochement can be attributed to the pragmatic character of the two states and their shared interests, including, inter alia, opposition to the Iranian nuclear program, opposing religious extremism, regional trade, modernization processes, handling similar environmental issues, and participation in global events and projects. The cautious approach and the limitations in these relations derive mainly from the UAE's avoidance of official normalization with Israel due to the latter's conduct regarding the Palestinian issue.

[A research paper](#) that was written on the subject in 2018, in the framework of a Mitvim Institute project on the unfulfilled potential of Israel's relations with Arab states, outlined how the UAE and Israel cooperate in four central areas: diplomacy, security, economy, and civilian affairs. The paper concluded that, at the date of its publication, there was a large and diverse array of partnerships in the economic sector. The paper also pointed to the fact that most of these partnerships are founded on ad hoc interests and temporary opportunities, and therefore the relationship between the countries cannot be described as consistent or deep. The majority of these collaborations are characterized by secrecy, due to the lack of formal relations or normalization between the UAE and Israel. At the same time, collaborations that take place in international platforms benefit from a higher level of legitimacy and exposure. Examples of this include the joint air force exercises of the two countries together with Greece, Italy, and the US; Israeli athletes' participation in sporting events that take place in the UAE; and the gatherings of statespersons in various international fora that take place in the UAE. Most of these collaborations stem from the UAE's desire to expand its role in the international community, and its wish to serve as a hub for international events and conferences. Within this framework, relations between the UAE and Israel have been tested a number of times in recent years, and were eventually strengthened, following the gradual removal of obstacles by the Emiratis.

In 2019, a series of events sharpened the UAE's focus and priorities: the withdrawal of its forces from Yemen and its efforts to stabilize Yemen's political system; its involvement in multiple regions, such as Libya and the Horn of Africa; the rising tensions around violent events in the Gulf and the diplomatic measures that the UAE took to pacify Iran; the ongoing crisis with Qatar; and the UAE's focus on domestic issues, such as the Federal National Council's elections and efforts to expand local workforce in the labor market. These changes of focus led, inter alia, to the marginalization of the Palestinian issue in the UAE's foreign affairs during the last year. The UAE's involvement in the Palestinian arena was, in the last year, rather distant and symbolic, with continued [humanitarian aid](#) via UNRWA and the support of Mohammad Dahlan (believed to be a protege of Mohammed bin Zayed and the UAE's main channel to the Palestinians). Additionally, the enduring participation of the Palestinian Nusseibeh family in senior positions in the UAE (Zaki Nusseibeh as a government minister, and his daughter Lana

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Nusseibeh as Permanent Representative to the UN) serves as another manifestation of the UAE's solidarity with the Palestinians, though in their own territory.

The rather marginalization of the Palestinian issue was also manifested in a significant decline in statements of support for the Palestinian cause, and in decreased concrete involvement (or involvement attempts) in this arena by the UAE. The extent of the UAE's support and commitment to the national struggle of the Palestinians is in dispute between researchers and policymakers. Though the decline in the UAE's active involvement in the Palestinian issue does not necessarily attest to a decline in its commitment to the Palestinians. It may be attributed to its inability to exert influence in the Palestinian arena or to the increasing rapprochement between the UAE and Israel. The first aspect can be linked to the important role of Qatar and Egypt in the Gaza Strip, which restricts Dahlan and the UAE's ability to exert influence in this arena except in [unique cases](#), such as the months following the Qatar crisis in June 2017.

Turning to the second aspect, simultaneously and in contrast with moving away from the Palestinian arena, the UAE has shown greater openness to Israel and Israeli and Jewish audiences this past year. 2019 was characterized by improved informal relations between the countries, and these collaborations increased and became more diverse. The UAE's decision to allow Israel to participate in Expo 2020 starting October of this year has become the driving force in shaping direct relations between the countries, and continues to shape them in various areas.

This paper examines existing cooperation between Israel and the UAE, and the changes that have taken place in the relations throughout 2019. The paper assesses these changes in four main areas: diplomacy, security, economy and civilian affairs, and briefly describes the main developments in each area in order to point to common denominators and indicate key trends.

B. Cooperation Between Israel and the UAE

Relations between Israel and the UAE can be divided into two categories: those that take place in a wider international context, and those that take place in a direct bilateral framework. The first category is mostly public and will be expanded upon in this chapter. The second category is mostly characterized by secret partnerships about which not much information is available.

Much of the cooperation between Israel and the UAE that takes place in the broader international framework is related to the latter's importance on regional and international levels in general, and its importance for Israel in particular. The UAE hosts many international events and senior Israeli officials continue to visit the country within these platforms. Thus, for example, Israeli Minister of Foreign Affairs Israel Katz [visited](#) Abu Dhabi in June 2019 as part of a UN conference on environmental issues, and a delegation of senior Israeli officials from the Ministry of Justice [attended](#) an international conference in Abu Dhabi in December. Despite the increasing Israeli presence in the UAE, and the Emiratis' gradual opening of their doors, these developments do not indicate a new formal policy toward Israel.

Senior officials in the UAE express a variety of approaches and explanations for this rapprochement, and specifically regarding the importance of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process to bilateral relations. For example, in an interview, the UAE Minister of

State for Foreign Affairs Anwar Gargash defined the welcoming of Israeli delegations in the UAE as secondary and marginal gestures. Gargash stated that a breakthrough in relations will only take place in the context of progress in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. In contrast, Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the UAE Minister of Foreign Affairs, demonstrated a more open approach toward Israel. In December, he [shared an article](#) on Twitter about the new partnership developing between Israel and the Arab world. Some interpreted this post as a sign to Jerusalem of his readiness to develop further cooperation between the countries, without relying on the advancement of the diplomatic process with the Palestinians. Even though this was not an official statement from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, his status as a senior minister confers weight and legitimacy, and influences policy and public opinion.

The character of the alliance outlined in the article that Abdullah bin Zayed shared is not necessarily one opposed to Iran, as is commonly thought. Rather it is an expression of the moderate Arab world's stand against political Islam and radical Islamist movements, Sunni and Shia alike. These movements are perceived as a threat to the Gulf states and they are leading to the creation of new alliances, [including with Israel](#). The various approaches represent the general trend over the past decade. A rise in the number of declarations supporting relations with Israel, regardless of the Palestinian context, is apparent, as is a rise in the level of statements of this kind from senior officials in the UAE. Another recent manifestation of that approach is the engagement of the UAE's embassies throughout the world, which published during the past year [greetings on social media](#) for Jewish holidays, generating lively public internet discourse from both sides.

From the Israeli side, 2019 was characterized by more practical steps to develop relations and the creation of a positive discourse between Israel and the UAE. It is apparent that there is increased outreach by various Israeli government officials to the Gulf States in general, and to the UAE in particular. In his spoken and written declarations, Prime Minister Netanyahu has continued to express Israel's desire to become closer to the Gulf states. Through his Hebrew Twitter account, Netanyahu responded to Abdullah bin Zayed's tweet with the following words: "I celebrate the closeness between Israel and many Arab states. The time has come to achieve normalization and peace."

Israel Katz's appointment as Minister of Foreign Affairs in 2019 has led to an increase in comments of this type. In his previous role as Minister of Transportation, Katz took steps to expand relations with the Gulf States through his "Tracks for Regional Peace" initiative. As such, his appointment was an additional tailwind to Netanyahu (who served as the acting Minister of Foreign Affairs prior to Katz) in strengthening these relations. While visiting the UAE, Katz declared: "I am excited to stand here in Abu Dhabi and represent the interests of the State of Israel to the Arab Gulf States. This is a significant upgrade in the relationship between Israel and states in the region. I will continue to act together with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to advance the policy of normalization." Similarly, Katz has taken steps to advance non-aggression agreements with the Gulf states, spoke about it in public, and has been assisted by the Americans in transferring this message to his counterparts in the Gulf. However, he has yet to receive public comments from them on this initiative.

The Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), which has been a relatively marginal player in developing relations with the UAE in previous years, has taken a more central role in 2019 in initiatives that advance relations between the states, as well as between the

people. Israel's upcoming participation Expo 2020 (in Dubai) is under the MFA's [area of responsibility](#), and the MFA is in contact with [official representatives of the UAE](#) regarding the relevant preparations. Additionally, the MFA decided to operate an innovative "[virtual embassy](#)" by launching a Twitter page named "[Israel in the Gulf](#)". The page, which was introduced in pursuance of the countries' growing interests in one other, has shared [positive messages](#) intended for an audience in the UAE. Within a year, the account has gained an impressive momentum by drawing 30,000 followers. This trend was also expressed in the MFA's main Twitter account in Arabic "[Israel in Arabic](#)", which gained in 2019 an increase of 50 percent followers from the Gulf states. These two accounts achieved high engagement in comments, shares, and likes, as well as a rise in the rate of positive comments, from users in the Gulf states. Diplomatic initiatives are trickling down to society and public opinion, through social media, thereby creating an additional dimension of connections and virtual collaborations.

It appears that security ties have remained approximately the same. The joint aerial exercises, between the militaries of Israel, the UAE, the US, Italy, and Greece, [took place in 2019 as in previous years](#). Furthermore, information on partnerships between Israel and the UAE, based on deals for the purchase and procurement of military equipment, continues to [emerge](#) from time to time in the media. An [article](#) published in the New York Times about Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the crown prince of Abu Dhabi, and in practice, the leader of the UAE, publicized that Israel has sold advanced military and technological equipment to the UAE for its F-16 fighter planes, as well as spyware for mobile devices. The identity of the Israeli company that sold the military equipment was not disclosed, but transactions of this type are signed, it appears, with the involvement of the most senior politicians on both sides. Deals with the UAE are also made by private Israeli entrepreneurs. A leading example is the Israeli businessman Mati Kochavi's [NIS 3 billion deal to export](#) surveillance aircraft to the UAE. Previously, Kochavi was mentioned as a supplier of advanced defense and border security systems to the UAE, as well as networks of security cameras in Dubai.

In the past, Israel-UAE cooperation on civilian affairs has been extremely limited. It was mostly happening around international sports events. In contrast, in 2019, the civil channel has become the most interesting and diverse one. This development, more than any other, attests to the significant rapprochement between Israel and the UAE. It runs parallel to the ongoing trend of increased engagement in international events, such as the hosting of Israeli athletes in [Judo](#) competitions in the UAE, including the display of Israeli national symbols, and the hosting of Israeli students at the [Robot Olympics](#).

In the UAE, 2019 was declared as a "Year of Tolerance." Within this framework, the country strengthened its relations with the Jewish community within it and outside of it. Although a distinction must be made between cooperation in the religious context and cooperation in the national context, one cannot completely disentangle the relationship between Judaism and Israeliness. Therefore, every interfaith encounter initiated by the UAE also advances, somewhat and indirectly, relations with Israel. Throughout 2019, there were several significant developments in this context, where the UAE [strengthened](#) the legitimacy of the existence of a religious Jewish community in Dubai (although it has yet to officially recognize the Jewish community), and [announced](#) the creation in Abu Dhabi of the Abrahamic Center, a center for the three monotheistic religions, which will include a mosque, a church, and a synagogue under a shared compound. The UAE also issued an official [permit](#) for the position of Campus Rabbi of New York University in Abu Dhabi, and hosted multicultural events with the participation of Jewish and Druze

representatives, including some Israelis. Among them was the spiritual leader of the Druze community in Israel, Mowafaq Tarif, who was [hosted](#) at the World Tolerance Summit in Dubai, with the blessing of the Emir Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum.

Expo 2020 serves as an [opportunity](#) for increased cooperation on civilian affairs. This public event is planned to include an Israeli pavilion in Dubai for almost half a year (given that the Coronavirus will not lead to the cancelation of the event). The pavilion will display Israeli technological innovations and will include performances of various Israeli artists. Such a level of public Israeli presence in an Arab-Muslim state will be unprecedented. At this stage, it appears that many Israelis will attend the Expo exhibition. However, it remains unclear what their visa status will be, and whether entrance will be permitted for all bearers of an Israeli identity card. If this is the case, it will set an additional precedent in relations between Israel and the UAE. Israeli tourism interest is expected to further develop due to a rising awareness of the UAE as an attractive tourist destination following the Expo. This is also expected to contribute to the strengthening of civil relations between the two states. Indeed, on the Israeli side, it appears that coverage of the UAE in the Israeli media has already significantly increased, as well as the interest in visiting the UAE. Two in-depth magazine articles, introducing the UAE to the Israeli audience, were published last year in the leading daily newspaper *Yedioth Ahronoth*, after a senior reporter traveled there: one on the [Jewish community](#), and a second on [Dubai as a tourist destination](#). These articles had significant exposure and further expanded Israeli interest in the UAE.

Whilst we became more accustomed to hearing about Israeli tourism to the Gulf in 2019, tourism in the opposite direction has also developed somewhat in the last year. There was an increase in the number of inquiries from residents of the Gulf about visiting Israel. Journalists, social media figures, and others visited Israel from the Gulf, as part of several official delegations organized by the Israeli MFA. Social media emerged as an additional platform where connections are made and messages are passed between the people. On Twitter, there has been increasingly positive interactions between the sides, despite the voices of Arab criticism towards Israel that continue to be dominant. Social media figures from the UAE write openly about their hope for stronger relations with Israel. The blogger Hassan Sajwani, for example, sometimes posts [messages in Hebrew](#), and has received supportive comments from Israelis. This development characterizes Israel's relations with other Gulf States as well. Similarly to developments in interfaith cooperation, the virtual interaction on social media also highlights the complex entanglement of religious and national issues within the discourse between Israel and the UAE.

C. Summary

The developments in 2019 demonstrate that senior officials in the UAE are increasingly interested in taking significant steps forward in their country's relations with Israel. This is part of a broader trend of closer relations between Israel and major Arab states. The UAE will probably not be the Arab state that will lead a public breakthrough in relations with Israel; it wishes to join an ongoing process, after other states will pave the way forward. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the UAE's attitude towards it, are decisive in shaping Israel-UAE relations. There are different approaches on the issue among senior officials in the UAE, and a unified Emirati policy on the subject remains absent at present. In practice, we can identify increased rapprochement between Israel and the UAE, together with a positive attitude between the two states. However, the path to

normalizing ties is still long, far, and contingent on similar decisions being made in the neighboring Gulf states as well as on changes in the shifting Israeli political landscape.

The new channels of cooperation that are being formed between Israel and the UAE on social and cultural levels demonstrate the emergence of a deeper dimension of relations. In contrast to the ad-hoc opportunities that characterized relations until 2018, the increased cooperation on civilian affairs in 2019 attests to an element of long-term cooperation and mutual public interest, beyond relations between the leadership of both countries. One of the interesting phenomena in this context is the connection between the diplomatic dimension and the civil dimension, where “the virtual embassy” of the Israeli MFA has received positive reception on the Emirati side just as the holiday greetings of the Emirati embassies throughout the world have received enthusiastic responses from Israelis. The positive discourse apparent in social media, the tolerant approach of the UAE towards Judaism, the great interest that the UAE demonstrates in interfaith relations, Israel’s anticipated participation in Expo 2020, and the resultant Israeli public and tourist interest – all advance relations between the countries. In this respect, 2019 was a year of many significant and positive developments in cooperation between Israel and the UAE.

Israel-Morocco: Warming from the Bottom Up

Einat Levi*

A. Introduction

A 2018 [paper](#) entitled “Israel and Morocco: Cooperation Rooted in Heritage”, written within the framework of the Mitvim Institute’s project on the unfulfilled potential of Israel’s relations with key Arab states, described the wide-ranging cooperation between Israel and Morocco. This cooperation is based on two main pillars. One is the Jewish-Moroccan connection dating back over 2,000 years, which enables cultural links based on mutual Moroccan values and principles. The other is security and intelligence cooperation between the states going back to the 1950s, which continues to this day. The combination of the two generates mutual trust and deep connection between the two people. Nonetheless, since the failure of the Camp David summit and breakout of the second *intifada* in October 2000, Israel and Morocco do not have official diplomatic relations. However, cooperation between them, and especially the warm ties between their people, continues to deepen, although in a limited scope given the stagnation in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

This article examines the current Israel-Morocco cooperation and its development through 2019. It briefly describes developments in diplomatic, security, economic and civilian arenas in order to find common ground and identify trends. Naturally, the paper will not elaborate much on the security-intelligence aspect of the cooperation, despite its centrality, due to its classified nature.

B. Details of the Cooperation

The Diplomatic Arena

The diplomatic developments during the preparations of the Trump plan for Israeli-Palestinian peace and ahead of its unveiling (in January 2020) affected Morocco, too, as well as the prospects of upgrading its relations with Israel. Morocco participated in the June 2019 Bahrain workshop at which the economic aspects of the Trump plan were presented, but was only represented by [mid-level](#) officials. Such was the case with most other Arab states invited to the event and that essentially wanted only to fulfil one’s obligation. Morocco [was also identified](#) as one of key states in the region which both the US and Israel were interested to promote a non-belligerence agreement with. However, in this case just as before, Morocco remained reserved and cautious as usual.

In January 2019, ahead of the April Knesset elections, [media reports](#) emerged that Netanyahu was planning a visit to Morocco, but the Moroccan government [denied](#) them. Such a visit would have been a significant diplomatic achievement for Netanyahu, and Morocco would have been perceived as helping him achieve it. This, in turn, would have generated harsh domestic and foreign criticism of Morocco. Eventually, Netanyahu did not visit Morocco but the possibility of such a visit was raised once again in December

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2019. Netanyahu met with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in Portugal, who was on his way to meet the Moroccan King in Rabat. According to Israeli media reports, the agenda of Pompeo's Rabat meeting was supposed to include issues such as the Iranian threat and promotion of official ties with Israel. Pompeo ended up cutting short his Morocco visit and the meeting with the King was cancelled at the last minute. To this day, nothing has been reported about the reason for the change in plans and whether a warming of Morocco-Israel relations was indeed on the agenda. The only reaction was [a denial by senior American officials](#), who even accused the Israeli media of publishing a leak prompted by domestic Israeli interests and nothing more.

The Economic Arena

Economic cooperation between Israel and Morocco continued through unofficial and intermediary channels (such as international corporations). The cooperation in agriculture, however limited in scope, is of great importance given this sector's centrality to the Moroccan economy. Cooperation in this field includes Israeli entrepreneurs who set up private farms in Morocco, serve as advisers to local farmers or export advanced farm equipment to Morocco. Morocco continued to export foodstuff and processed goods to Israel, such as sardines, olives, Argan oil and couscous.

Tourism remained the most prominent area of economic cooperation, with the number of Israeli tourists to Morocco ranging from 30,000 to 45,000 annually. In 2019, the FIT – Frequent Independent Traveler to Morocco also began to develop. If, in the past, Israeli tourists traveled to Morocco mostly via organized groups, these days many Israelis choose to visit Morocco independently. This alternative option is suited to those reluctant to join organized tours and wishing to visit at their own pace. It encourages direct contact with Moroccan society and culture and is very popular among those with Moroccan roots. In addition, against the backdrop of constantly rising numbers of Israeli tourists in Morocco, several reports have indicated over the past year that the national carrier El Al and the Flying Carpet tourism company intend to launch [direct flights](#) between Israel and Morocco. The veracity of these reports about direct flights between these two countries that do not maintain diplomatic relations is doubtful, given their provenance in the airline industry and media, and that they have not been substantiated by officials or led to the signing of agreements.

The situation of Moroccan tourism to Israel remains fairly grim, with only [some 3,000](#) Moroccans visiting Israel in 2019, as was the case in 2017 and 2018. The meager number of Moroccan tourists to Israel also stems from a series of bureaucratic and economic obstacles they face. The procedure they have to undergo is complicated, complex, expensive and often requires several trips abroad to arrange a visa to Israel.

The Civic and Cultural Arena

Civic relations between Moroccans and Israelis remained warm and even deepened despite the lack of official ties between the states. These relations are based first and foremost on mutual values, identity and a common Moroccan culture. Consistent and persistent cooperation takes place in fields such as Moroccan Jewish heritage, music, cinema, art, sports, education and research. This section will briefly review the outstanding events, among many, of 2019.

The myriad civic ties are made possible in two realms. One is the physical, which includes Morocco, Israel and the Moroccan diaspora around the world. Jews and Muslims of Moroccan origin meet and collaborate thanks to the high degree of mobility, which makes the world smaller than ever. The tourism industry contributes to these interactions, enabling constant traffic between Israel and Morocco, whether in groups or by independent travelers. Along with the physical space, a parallel, virtual space encourages new contacts, maintains existing ones, and enables discourse and greater visibility. Groups and communities active on social media link the Moroccan Diaspora through a sense of shared longing. One example is the [virtual documentation communities](#) working to document and preserve the Moroccan-Jewish heritage of towns and villages in Morocco. The [Jews of the Demnat community](#) are particularly active in this respect, with former town residents visiting twice in the recent year, meeting with local officials, collaborating to restore the Jewish cemetery and plan an international conference that will focus on the Jewish heritage of Demnat and will take place in Demnat itself. The use of the virtual space enables to reunite the community that has spread throughout the world and was somewhat forgotten, allowing it to move from a blurry nostalgic sentiment to communal accountability and actual joint action.

The Jewish community that remains in Morocco leads a full and rich cultural life and constitutes one of the foundations of the civic ties between Morocco and Israel. Despite the perpetually declining number of Jews (only some 2,500), several events took place within the Jewish community that indicate some sort of a reawakening. In April 2019, Rabbi Yoshiyahu Pinto was appointed dean of the rabbinical courts in Morocco, an appointment considered tantamount to that of a chief rabbi. The same month, the King of Morocco [instructed](#) that elections will be held in the Jewish community institutions. Such elections have not been held for 50 years and they are supposed to address the problem of centralization of Jewish community institutions and to awaken it. In addition, events of a Jewish nature were acknowledged in 2019 by widespread media coverage and the presence of high-ranking officials. In December 2019, for example, Chabad organized a resplendent Hanukkah candle lighting ceremony in Casablanca with the participation of over 700 guests. The special event was widely covered, including by the state broadcaster 2M. That same month, the president of the Jewish communities of Fez, Oujda and Sefrou Dr. Armand Guigui passed away. His funeral was broadcasted live on television and attended by many Moroccan officials who came to pay their last respects. An additional interfaith event occurred in March 2019 during the historic Morocco visit of Pope Francis. The King and the Pope met at the palace in Rabat and together signed the [“Al-Quds Appeal”](#) for the protection of Jerusalem’s multi-religious character, saying the city’s sacred sites must be accessible to worshippers of all faiths. The visit was intended to boost the status of King Mohammed VI as a moderate alternative to Islamist leadership and at the same time to convey a message of reconciliation to Europe’s Christian and Muslim residents. However, this important call for religious tolerance was not conducted in the presence of a Jewish representative.

In the field of cinema, two key events recently made headlines. The first occurred at the September 2019 Haifa International Film Festival, which included three Moroccan movies: “Razzia” by director Nabil Ayouch, “Sofia” by director Meryem Ben M'barek, and “Apatrid” by director Narjiss Nejjar. About a week before the festival, the anti-Israel boycott movement began issuing [protests](#) against the films’ participation in the event. As a result, the screening of “Apatrid” was cancelled, but the two other films were screened before packed audiences. A creative response to the protest was found for “Razzia” by preceding its screening with a short film on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In November

2019, the film “In Your Eyes I see My Country” by director Kamal Hachkar was screened in a festive premiere at the International Marrakesh Film Festival. The film documents the voyage from Jerusalem to Morocco of Neta Elkayam and Amit Hai Cohen, two young Israeli musicians searching for their roots. The movie was successful in generating a discourse about the uprooting of Morocco Jews, their nostalgia for their homeland and the influence of the uprooting on Moroccan Muslims. The movie was widely reviewed by Moroccan media, which described it as a work that enriches the hues of Moroccan culture and recognizes its Jewish part. Along with the positive reviews, the boycott movement and its supporters criticized the screening as an expression of cultural normalization with Israel, but it was minor. At the end of the day, the cinema still serves as an encounter space for interfaith and cultural discourse between Israelis and Moroccans focused on their common Moroccan values and identities.

Israeli and Moroccan musicians and artists have performed together at events and festivals in Morocco, Israel and around the world. In October 2019, for example, at the 16th Andalusian Atlantic Festival in Essaouira, Jewish and Muslim artists and musicians performed together. The [opening session of the festival](#) was conducted in four languages among which there was also Hebrew, due to the growing number of Hebrew speaking attendants. Two weeks later, in November 2019, Les Femmes De T'touan, a Moroccan women's ensemble, appeared at the [Festival Mediterranee](#) in the Israeli town of Ashdod as part of the Judeo-Arab events. The women were even interviewed on “Café Gibraltar”, a radio program broadcast on Kan, Israel's public radio and TV show. Shortly after, in December 2019, [the Israeli Andalusian Orchestra of Ashdod performed in Casablanca](#) at the Andalussiat Festival, despite protesters' calls to cancel their performance. Unlike Israeli musicians who perform independently in Morocco and do not represent the State of Israel, the Andalusian Orchestra of Ashdod was recognized in 2017 as a national Israeli orchestra along with the Andalusian Orchestra.

In November 2019, a performance by a famous Moroccan Andalusian singer Marouane Hajji at the Jerusalem Oud Festival was cancelled due to Israeli-Palestinian fighting following the assassination of Islamic Jihad commander Abu al-Atta in Gaza. Reports in Morocco of the planned performance generated criticism of the singer's decision to perform in Jerusalem while Israel was attacking Gaza. Eventually, the performance was cancelled, and Hajji even denied the intention to perform in Israel.

Unlike other states in the region, such as Tunisia and Algeria, Morocco chose to accept the conditions set by international sports federations allowing Israeli athletes to compete under the Israeli flag and in their national uniforms. In return, Morocco gets to host international competitions and sports events, and enjoys the resulting benefits, such as international recognition, tourism revenues and promoting its image as a host country. Following this development, in March 2019, 10 Israeli judokas took part in the Grand Prix Judo Tournament in Marrakesh. Competing with Israeli national symbols, Timna Nelson-Levy and Gefen Primo won a bronze medal and the Israeli flags were flown during the awards ceremony.

C. Summary

Currently, progress in official relations between Israel and Morocco is not feasible, mostly due to the ongoing impasse in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and political uncertainty in Israel. Nonetheless, 2019 saw an increase in diplomatic and media discourse about such a future option and about US willingness to help move it forward.

Morocco's reserved and cautious response to the US initiatives (including the Trump plan) indicates that it does not want to be depicted as deserting the American effort but is also well aware of its limitations and implications for itself.

Alongside the limited diplomatic cooperation between Israel and Morocco, the cultural, civic and diasporic ties continue to stand out in their depth and range. These ties are based on joint Moroccan culture, identity and values and are made possible thanks to the Jewish connection, ongoing Israeli tourism to Morocco and dialogue in virtual platforms. Nonetheless, in light of the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict and its vicissitudes, these ties remain limited in terms of their possible expansion. Significant progress between Israel and the Palestinians would facilitate official relations between the two states and help fulfill the potential of ties in all fields. In the 1990s, due to the progress of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, Israel and Morocco opened liaison offices in Rabat and Tel Aviv, and such a development could happen again. It is important to recall that while Morocco is ruled by a king, his decisions reflect to a large extent the common Moroccan public opinion on most agenda issues. The Moroccan public supports the establishment of a Palestinian state and finds it hard to welcome open diplomatic ties with Israel. Resumption of the peace process would make it easier to remove this obstacle and enable Israel and Morocco to advance an official and institutional infrastructure for their cooperation.

Israel-Iraq: Security Challenges and Civilian Warming

Dr. Ronen Zeidel*

A. Introduction

The final months of 2019 were marked by widespread, prolonged protests throughout Iraq, which began in October. Baghdad was the focal point of the demonstrations, which were directed at the ruling political elite and the state backing it: Iran. Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi resigned at the end of November, throwing official Iraq into a political vacuum and guaranteeing that any premier appointed to replace him would be considered an interim ruler and as such, his government would only be accepted by the weakened political elite, but not by a significant part of the population.

A 2018 [study](#) of Israel-Iraq relations, written within the framework of a Mitvim Institute project on the unfulfilled potential of Israel's ties with Arab states, stressed that a rapprochement between official Iraq and Israel was unlikely. Its central argument was that relations between the two countries were hardly affected by the Israeli-Palestinian or Israeli-Arab conflict and that the main factor influencing relations was the conflict between Israel (and perhaps the US, too) and Iran. The events of recent months bolstered this assessment. Iran and its proxies within the Iraqi regime accuse the West and Israel of fanning the unrest. The Shiite militias, the standard bearers of Iraq's cooperation with Iran, ramped up their anti-Israel rhetoric even before the protests broke out. Given this polarized state of affairs, another trend spotlighted in the previous study is gaining momentum – wide-ranging solidarity manifested on social media between a growing number of Iraqis and Israelis, stemming from hostility to Iran and an affinity for the history of Iraqi Jewry. Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and senior political figures contributed significantly to boosting this trend in 2019.

This article reviews the changes that occurred in 2019 in the nature of Israel-Iraq cooperation, as they relate to diplomatic, security, economic and civilian aspects.

B. Details of the Cooperation

No significant change occurred in 2019 in terms of diplomatic relations between the two states. Prior to the protests' eruption, Iraqi Foreign Minister Mohamed Ali al-hakim, a minor figure in the outgoing government, reiterated his country's support for the Arab Peace Initiative. Before that, in July 2019, Iraq's ambassador to the US, Dr. Farid Yassin, was quoted, unbeknown to him, as saying he believed there should be ties between Iraq and Israel (but also saying he realized that was unrealistic under the present circumstances).

On the other hand, Israel's perception of Iraq as a security challenge went up a notch in 2019, with Israel viewing Iraq as an important link on the supply route of ballistic and other weapons from Iran to the front with Israel. Israel is closely monitoring the construction of the military base near the Syria-Iraq border crossing of Albukamal al-Qaim. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and senior defense officials began [referring](#) to Iraq as a security challenge after ignoring it for years. In the summer of 2019, several

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drone attacks [attributed to Israel](#) were conducted against Shiite militia bases in Baghdad and deep in Iraqi territory, resulting in fatalities. Previously, Israel carried out several attacks on Iraqi militia targets [in Syria](#), also resulting in some deaths, without assuming responsibility for them. Israel's strikes deep within Iraq were the first since its 1981 attack on the Iraqi nuclear reactor.

The attacks placed the Iraqi government in an embarrassing situation, portraying it as weak on all fronts. The Americans were demanding that Iraq stop turning a blind eye to Iran's entrenchment on its territory, while Iran and the militias demanded that Iraq respond to the attacks within its borders. The Iraqi government appointed an investigative committee, which determined, after much delay, that [Israel was responsible](#) for the attacks, but the government did not commit to a response. The militias, for their part, adopted increasingly harsh rhetoric against Israel. Most Iraqis condemned the manner in which Iran was turning their country into a wrestling ring with the US and Israel. On the sidelines of this discourse, prior to the demonstrations, the strike on the hated militias prompted gleeful Iraqi responses on social media.

The Kurdish region has not taken part in the country-wide protests, but has been affected by them given its dependence on developments in Baghdad. Before the protests broke out in October 2019, the Kurdish administration, which is still under the control of the Barzani family and the Democratic Party of Kurdistan had forged a good relationship with the al-Mahdi government, despite its growing pro-Iran leanings. The Kurds are leading a "damage control" campaign following the referendum conducted in September 2017 on independence for the region. They are trying to reassert their standing and place in Iraq as an autonomous region. Al-Mahdi was a more attentive partner in this regard than his predecessor, Haider al-Abadi. The rapprochement between the Barzanis and Iran should also be analyzed against this backdrop, as evidenced in the memorial ceremonies held throughout the region for Qasem Soleimani, sponsored by the local leadership and with the participation of senior officials of major parties. This process contributed, understandably, to reducing the level of Kurdish ties with Israel. There were no significant visits in 2019 of Kurdish figures in Israel or interesting statements about the relationship. In that sense, one could say that official Israel "discovered" Arab Iraq in 2019, whereas in previous years, Israeli declarations of solidarity were mainly directed at the Kurds and their aspirations.

As was the case in the diplomatic arena, no significant change was discerned in terms of economic ties between the two countries, which are still non-existent. Israel's MFA considered providing humanitarian aid to Iraq following the 2018 Basra water protests, including offers to attempt to deal with the infrastructure problem, but no appropriate channels for such aid were found. Helping Iraq develop a high-tech industry was also under consideration. One of the underlying themes of the protests was a desire to cut off the supply of Iranian goods, which have been flooding Iraqi markets and stifling local agriculture and industry, in order to encourage local production. If that were to occur, Iraq would not be open to Israeli exports, but perhaps modest imports to Israel of unique (high quality and inexpensive) Iraqi products would help develop trade between the two states. Under a standing 2003 waiver from Israel's Ministry of Economy, renewed every six months, Iraq is exempt from Israel's list of enemy states and thus a possible trade partner.

As underscored in the 2018 paper, the civilian, cultural and identity arena holds potential for establishing relations between Israel and Iraq. The major importance of the Jewish

dimension in forging such ties, through a channel perceived as more “legitimate” by Iraq, was also highlighted. Two interesting initiatives in this regard emerged at the beginning of 2019: (1) An initiative by Edwin Shuker, Vice President of the European Jewish Congress, a British Jew of Iraqi origin who tried to promote the return of Iraqi citizenship to all Iraqi Jews who want it. His initiative struck a receptive chord in Iraqi public opinion, but did not progress to parliamentary or government discussion. (2) An initiative to allow Jews of Iraqi origin holding Israeli passports to visit Iraq according to a model adopted by Tunisia, meaning in connection with an important Jewish religious festival (such as the Shavuot holiday) but not throughout the year. This initiative did not progress, either. Nonetheless, relations continued to develop between a growing number of Iraqis and Israelis. While Iraq’s political elite is bound to Iran on the Israel issue, it has not prevented examination of a new model of relations: “Winning hearts and minds” from the grassroots up, based on a people-to-people model. This trend continued and even intensified after the demonstrations began. Privately, through social media and rare visits, a growing number of Iraqis express their desire for ties with Israel after their country undergoes the desired change. They are also hoping for Israel to support the Iraqi people by harming Iran. On the other hand, due to claims by the regime that the protesters are backed and funded by Israel, the protesters have refrained from publicly identifying with Israel although anti-Israel expressions are very marginal.

Israel is clearly encouraging this trend, with the MFA assuming a significantly more active role than it had in the past. In late 2018, the ministry launched a unique, first of its kind Facebook page called “Israel in Iraqi Dialect” (إسرائيل باللهجة العراقية). The Arabic-language page, aimed at encouraging discourse with the Iraqi people, gained momentum in 2019. As of February 2020, the page had some [292,000 followers](#). Once the wave of demonstrations began, the page expressed clear sympathy for the protesters, who responded with appreciation, and the number of followers grew. Four delegations from Iraq visited Israel in 2019 as guests of the MFA, and Iraqis were also included in another visiting Arab delegation.

After the MFA leaked news of the visits in April, discussions began in Iraq regarding normalization (تطبيع) of ties with Israel. The militias took the most radical line against the issue and since they were armed, people listened. In early September, a list of Iraqis accused of working to normalize relations with Israel was posted on Facebook. It included political analysts, academic researchers and intellectuals. As far as is known, none of them were engaged in ties with Israelis or called for normalization. In September, a pro-militia journalist posted a threatening item regarding the planned participation of Iraqi intellectuals at a London conference on Iraqi Jewry, which was also attended by Israelis. The threat directed at Iraqis who meet with Israelis is serious and concrete.

In July 2019, a further development was recorded with [a message](#) by Israel’s Foreign Minister Israel Katz wishing the Iraqi people well and expressing his desire for increased cooperation with them. By appealing directly to the Iraqi people, Israel sought to bypass the Iraqi government and avoid a direct appeal to the regime. On 4 November, after the wave of protests began, Katz issued [a message](#) of support for “the Iraqi people” and their justified demands. On 8 December, Netanyahu [condemned](#) the massacre of protesters carried out by militias in Baghdad and blamed Iran for the bloodshed. The senior echelons in Israel view the protests as an opportunity to challenge Iran, but that does not negate the fact that Israel is the only state in the region to have expressed support for the protesters and their demands, thus far.

C. Summary

In the second half of 2019, Israel began referring to Iraq as a security challenge because it served as a conduit for the supply of Iranian weapons to the front. For the first time since its 1981 attack on the nuclear reactor, targets deep within Iraqi territory were attacked, and the government in Baghdad blamed Israel. On the other hand, the trend of solidarity between Iraqis and Israelis continued and recently received official Israeli government backing against the backdrop of the wave of country-wide protests. Senior echelons in Israel expressed support for the Iraqi protesters' demands, in light of the anti-Iranian sentiment underpinning the protests.

Iraq is at a crossroads that is sure to impact relations with Israel. If the protests are suppressed with active Iranian support, Iraq will become Iran's first "proxy state" in the region. If that happens and the real ruler in Baghdad is the commander of the Revolutionary Guards' al-Quds force, the ability of the puppet regime in Baghdad to oppose Iran's demands, for example in military terms, will be very limited. The repercussions will be felt mostly in the realm of security. For example, Iran could move ballistic equipment to Syria without interruption and perhaps even use Iraq as a launch pad.

A continued status quo between the government and the protesters in Iraq will further weaken the government, which is already having to lean on Iran as its sole source of support. The little legitimacy it still has will disappear. Iraq will sink into political paralysis and self-centeredness, and will further lose its importance as a factor and target for improved relations with Israel. On the other hand, if the protesters succeed in toppling the regime, an opportunity will open up for Israel. The deep anti-Iranian sentiment underpinning the protests will lead the state's new rulers to distance themselves from Tehran. The new Iraq will seek new regional allies that will respect the change it has undergone, and that would be compatible with Israeli interests.