



Netanyahu's Attempt to Delink Israel–Arab Relations from the Palestinian Issue

Published as part of the publication series:
Israel's Relations with Arab Countries: The Unfulfilled Potential

Dr. Yuval Benziman

April 2018

Netanyahu's Attempt to Delink Israel-Arab Relations from the Palestinian Issue

Dr. Yuval Benziman*

April 2018

The claim that emerged in 2000 that Israel has "no Palestinian partner" to negotiate with on the final status agreement has become a fixture in the Israeli public discourse ever since. During the premiership of Prime Ministers Ariel Sharon and Ehud Olmert, the working assumption was that even without a Palestinian partner, Israeli-Palestinian relations should change. However, ever since Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu came to power, he has been promoting an alternative political discourse and perception: it is possible to change Israel's regional reality by significantly improving relations with the entire Arab world, even without making progress in the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.

This paper compares the discourse promoted by the Israeli government, especially by the Prime Minister, that seeks to create an alternative discourse with the one that prevailed until a decade ago. The new discourse is constructed around two main pillars: hope for better relations with the Arab world, but not for a real "peace" or "agreement", and the belief that it is possible to promote such relations even without attending to the relations with the Palestinians. According to the new working assumptions of the Israeli leadership, this is possible because the Arab world no longer takes interest in the Palestinian struggle as it did in the past, due to two reasons: first, the conflicts within the Arab world (especially the Shia-Sunni conflict) push the moderate Arab states to view Israel as a partner rather than an enemy; and second, because of joint regional interests.

This new perception has no ground to stand on since historically, the relations between Israel and the Arab states have always depended on the Israeli-Palestinian relations. It also overturns the Arab League Initiative, which Netanyahu once claimed was "dangerous to the State of Israel in its current form" (2007) and later claimed "Israel welcomes the spirit of the Arab Peace Initiative" (2016). The "new" Netanyahu is willing to welcome the initiative as a basis for regional peace because he is ignoring its major requirement that an Israeli-Palestinian agreement be signed prior to the establishment of normal regional relations.

This article focuses on the discourse promoted by the Prime Minister and his surroundings since they are the most dominant and central actors shaping the debate. Moreover, even Netanyahu's political opponents find it difficult to create an alternative discourse: In the absence of a Palestinian partner, who can oppose any strengthening of ties with the Arab states? However, this discourse, sometimes consciously and overtly, tries to avoid the main problem: without an Israeli-Palestinian agreement, Israel's relations with the Arab and Muslim world cannot be normalized. Therefore, this perception leads in practice to continued attempts to manage the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, instead of encouraging its resolution.

* Dr. Yuval Benziman is a lecturer in the Program in Conflict Research, Management and Resolution at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. This article was written as part of a Mitvim Institute project that examined the unfulfilled potential of the relations between Israel and the Arab world.

A. Background: A desire to change reality, and a belief that there is “no Palestinian partner”

Following the failure of the Camp David II Summit in 2000, the perception that there was “no Palestinian partner” for an agreement emerged. At the same time, however, the Israeli leadership has adopted an approach according to which the conditions for managing the conflict should be changed. Prime Minister Sharon began building the separation wall, which was officially erected for “security” reasons but also had clear political implications. Sharon persisted in this path when he carried out the unilateral withdrawal from Gaza. Sharon's logic was clear: “There is no partner” and yet we must change reality, therefore we must act unilaterally. Thus, for example, he said on the Disengagement Plan in his October 25, 2004 Knesset speech:

“The disengagement plan is not in place of negotiations and does not seek to freeze the situation that will be created over time. It is an absolutely necessary step in a situation that does not currently allow for real negotiations for peace.”¹

Prime Minister Olmert, who replaced Sharon after he became ill, continued this trend. Olmert was elected prime minister while declaring that he would try to reach a negotiated agreement with the Palestinians, but if unachievable, he would initiate a “realignment plan” in a similar (albeit broader) unilateral move to Sharon's. Thus, for example, Olmert said in a speech on March 29, 2006, which became an appendix to the coalition agreement of the 31st government he headed:

“If the Palestinians wisely act soon, we will sit at the negotiating table to shape a new reality in our region. If they fail to do so, Israel will take its fate in its hands and on the basis of a broad national consensus and a deep understanding with our international friends, first and foremost by the US and President Bush, we will act even in the absence of agreement with them. We will not wait indefinitely. It is time to act.”²

Olmert said that “Abu Mazen is a legitimate partner,”³ and has said on several occasions that he is a “partner for peace”⁴ who has always wanted peace talks.⁵ Olmert even negotiated with him at the Annapolis conference in November 2007. However, Olmert also claimed that the “realignment plan”, is inevitable.⁶ Eventually, during his brief tenure he did not actually carry out any move towards disengagement and failed to advance an Israeli-Palestinian agreement.

At the declarative level, similar to Sharon and Olmert, the perception underlying Prime Minister Netanyahu's policy is that the reality of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict must be changed. Netanyahu repeatedly declares his desire to conduct negotiations and has even

¹ Sharon's speech to the Knesset on the Disengagement Plan, October 25, 2004: “The Disengagement Plan is not in place of negotiations and does not seek to freeze the situation that will be created over time. It is a step that is absolutely necessary in a situation that does not allow for real negotiations for peace to take place.”

² [“Appendix to the coalition agreement for the establishment of the 31st government of the State of Israel”](#), a speech delivered by Acting Prime Minister, Ehud Olmert, at Neve Ilan on March 29, 2006.

³ “Olmert: Abu-Mazen is a legitimate partner”, *Nana 10*, October 16, 2006.

⁴ [“Olmert: Abu-Mazen is a partner for peace”](#), *Walla*, September 21, 2007.

⁵ For example, Olmert was quoted saying: “Do not tell me that there is no partner. Abu Mazen never supported terror [...] He opposed terrorism when Yasser Arafat ruled. He was in favor of peace talks when Arik Sharon was prime minister and when I was prime minister. He did not want the peace we want, but no one can tell me after hundreds of hours of talks that he is not a partner.” Yitzhak Benhorin, [“Olmert: Abu Mazen Partner, Never Supported Terrorism”](#), *Ynet*, March 27, 2012.

⁶ Roni Sapir, [“Olmert: The Convergence Plan Is Inevitable”](#), *Ynet*, June 14, 2006.

made various (and sometimes contradictory) statements about the way he sees a future Israeli-Palestinian agreement ("two states", "state minus" and so forth). Like his predecessors, he too proposes changes to the Israeli-Palestinian relations and the relations between Israel and the region, when no Israeli-Palestinian agreement is in sight.

Netanyahu reflected this change of attitude when he was seeking to promote an economic peace before reaching an Israeli-Palestinian political agreement. According to him, in 2008:

*"Economic peace is a corridor to the possibility of political peace in the future [...] It does not make the negotiations on the permanent status agreement redundant but creates the conditions to ripen the tool. An economic peace is a tool to reach political solutions. The conflict with the Palestinians badly needs it [...] it is true that it does not solve the problem of national aspirations, but it should allow us to reach a dialogue on national aspirations in a better situation."*⁷

In his remarks, Netanyahu noted that a political agreement is a necessity, but the foundations of his conception, as is the case with his predecessors, rely on the premise that it is reasonable to assume that an Israeli-Palestinian agreement cannot be reached at this time, therefore the reality should be changed even in its absence. About a decade ago, Netanyahu believed that "economic peace" would change reality. In his view, during that period at least, economic peace could also have contributed to changing the reality by "its ability to prevent a broad recruiting base for radical Islamic activists."⁸

B. The new discourse: "A great change" in the relations with the Arab world without the need to progress in negotiations with the Palestinians

In the years since Netanyahu became head of the opposition, extensive changes have taken place in the region: the Arab Spring, the disintegration of Iraq and Syria, the emergence of a religious-political struggle between Sunni and Shi'ite states and forces, divided Palestinian society and institutions, and more. The Israeli political landscape has also changed, with Netanyahu enjoying an almost undisputed rule with no strong opposition, a situation that allows him to promote a political discourse that has very few opponents.

Since he assumed his role as prime minister, and especially in recent years, he also promoted a discourse that is very different than the one held by previous prime ministers – claiming that it is possible to create cooperation with the Arab world even without negotiations with the Palestinians. The summer of 2014 was a turning point in the acceleration of this narrative, following the failure of the talks led by US Secretary of State John Kerry and the war in Gaza. Although this discourse is complex and convoluted, three main arguments can be identified.

Argument No. 1: Relations with the Arab states, which "recognize that Israel is their ally",⁹ can be strengthened and a "very strong basis for relations" can be established with them (but not peace)

The idea of "economic peace", promoted by Netanyahu in the past, has remained part of the agenda that the country's leadership is trying to promote, but gradually, and even more

⁷ Ora Coren, "Netanyahu: '[Economic Peace](#)', before Diplomatic Negotiations", *Ha'aretz*, January 20, 2008.

⁸ "[Netanyahu's speech at the 8th Herzliya Conference](#)", *IDC Herzliya*, January 20-23, 2008.

⁹ "[Prime Minister Netanyahu's Speech at the UN General Assembly](#)", *Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, September 22, 2016.

so in recent years, it appears that Israel under Netanyahu's leadership has begun to create an alternative political discourse. Underlying this discourse is the prevailing assumption since 2000 that an Israeli-Palestinian final status agreement is not possible. However, the interesting thing in the new concept is that it sees possibility to strengthen relations between Israel and the Arab countries, even without any progress in Israeli-Palestinian relations. According to the new political-declaratory line, Israel does not have to deal with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in order to enjoy regional cooperation with Middle Eastern countries and the Arab world. Therefore, on the one hand, the new Israeli perception led by Netanyahu continues the policy and declarations of both his predecessors: a change must be made even when having "no partner". On the other hand, however, Netanyahu's assumption – contrary to that of his predecessors – is that it is possible to change the relations with the countries of the region even without changing Israel's relations with the Palestinians.

The idea of regional relations even without progress with the Palestinians is rooted in the worldview that the Arab world can be divided into the "axis of evil" and the "moderate axis," or the "Shi'ite states" versus the "Sunni states". According to this view, the moderate/Sunni part of the Arab world has similar interests to those of Israel, therefore cooperation can be made. Moreover, one of the most common arguments in this context is that the moderate Arab world fears radical Islam more than Israel. The new Israeli approach holds that the fear of the "axis of evil" and radical Islam, in the image of Iran, Hezbollah, Islamic State, and others – which are a common enemy for both Israelis and most of the countries in the region – can produce extensive cooperation even if no solution is found for the Palestinian struggle. To that we can add the events of the Arab Spring and the internal changes within the countries of the region that cause their leaders great tension, and to the widespread perception that the Palestinians are divided from within and lack a strong, cohesive leadership. In such circumstances, whereby the regional leaders fear external terrorism and radical Islam, as well as the internal situation in their own countries, and combined with lack of trust in the Palestinian leadership, the ties with the moderate Arab states can be strengthened significantly even in the absence of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. Thus, the component of shared interests, especially security-related, is added to the paradigm of economic peace.

An example of the new concept can be seen in the words of Yisrael Katz, Israel's Minister of Transport, Road Safety, and Intelligence, who outlined the following:

*"We are promoting a totally realistic vision, of connecting to the East, of the Sunni countries that have a common interest with us [...] against both Iran and Daesh [...] we give them a pathway to the Mediterranean, this is a strategic thing, and the Americans give us their back on that [...] at this point in time significant decisions can be made. There are risks and there are opportunities. The risks are in the south [...] Iran and Hezbollah. The opportunity is because of the common interest with the countries of this region in creating a regional economic peace. It is possible to include moderate Palestinians in this vision, it can be a very strong basis for a peace agreement later on, that will be on a higher level. At the moment, we need to strengthen our security and regional economic peace."*¹⁰

Katz's remarks, which are very similar to those of Netanyahu, deal with the dramatic change that may take place in the region, but it also embodies the understanding that full peace agreements and normalization with the Arab world will not occur without an agreement with

¹⁰ "Vilenskiy and Bardugo," *Galei Zahal*, March 2, 2017.

the Palestinians. Therefore, Netanyahu and the officials surrounding him speak about a "corridor" that leads to peace, or about creating collaborations that can "serve as a very strong basis for a higher-level peace". Thus, the aspiration is not an official peace but an economic peace. It is not a final status document, but something that can lead to it in the future.

Argument No. 2: The Palestinian issue is of interest to the Arab states "like yesterday's news"

The new discourse is reflected in many statements made by senior figures in the Israeli leadership. Most of them do not ignore the fact that an Israeli-Palestinian agreement should be reached, or that there is a need for progress on this front, but instead explain that this is almost impossible. In their view, the Arab world has already despaired of trying to resolve the conflict as well, and the Palestinian struggle is not of interest to the Arab world and is actually a burden for the Arab countries.

Thus, for example, in July 2016, the chairman of the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee and former Shin Bet chief Avi Dichter said that "the Egyptians are interested in the Palestinian issue like yesterday's news".¹¹ Dichter claimed that Egypt could significantly help the battle between the Israelis and the Palestinians, but in his opinion the Palestinian component is not at all important to them, and they only pay it lip service. Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman also claimed that the Arab world pays lip service to the Palestinian issue and that it has no real and genuine concern for the Palestinian issue.¹²

The person leading this approach is first and foremost the prime minister himself. He, like the ministers and Knesset members who surround him, does not claim that the Palestinian component should be completely ignored. He also argues that in order to achieve regional peace, the Israeli-Palestinian relations must be promoted. However, he declared that even without progress with the Palestinians, there is already a fundamental change in Israel's relations with the Arab world. In his speech at the UN General Assembly in September 2016, Netanyahu explained to his listeners that Israel's situation in the world is undergoing dramatic changes. According to him, even the UN, which is so hostile to Israel, will soon change its attitude since everyone is slowly recognizing that Israel is right. Speaking specifically about the Arab world, Prime Minister Netanyahu said:

"I will now surprise you even more. The big change in the attitude towards Israel is taking place elsewhere. It takes place within the Arab world. Our peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan continue to serve as anchors of stability in the volatile Middle East, but I must tell you this - for the first time in my life, many other countries in the region recognize that Israel is not their enemy. They recognize that Israel is their ally, our common enemies are Iran, and Daesh, and our shared goals are security, prosperity and peace. I believe that in the coming years we will work together to achieve these goals, we will work together openly. Therefore, Israel's diplomatic relations undergo no less than a revolution."¹³

In the same speech, Netanyahu claimed that he understood that the road to regional peace must also pass through an Israeli-Palestinian agreement. He said:

¹¹ "Hakol Diburim," *Reshet Bet*, July 11, 2016.

¹² Barak Ravid, "[Lieberman Calls for Postponing the Vote on the Law to Legalize the Outposts until the End of Obama's Office](#)," *Ha'aretz*, December 3, 2016.

¹³ "[Prime Minister Netanyahu's Speech at the UN General Assembly](#)," *Ibid.*

"Israel welcomes the spirit of the Arab Peace Initiative and welcomes dialogue with Arab countries to promote a broader peace. I believe that in order to fully achieve this broad peace, the Palestinians must be part of it. I am willing to resume negotiations to achieve that already today. Not tomorrow, not next week, today!"¹⁴

Supposedly then, the Palestinian component is still necessary, but Netanyahu stresses that even in the absence of progress, it can already be seen that "the greatest change in the attitude toward Israel [...] is taking place in the Arab world." In other words, the Palestinian component is important but the good relations with the Arab world are already happening without it, and we are witnessing a revolution in Israel's foreign relations even in the absence of negotiations with the Palestinians.¹⁵

Argument No. 3: "Israel welcomes the spirit of the Arab Peace Initiative,"¹⁶ but is interested in reversing its order

In a sense, Netanyahu's new political discourse is trying to turn the Arab Peace Initiative on its head. If, in 2002, the Arab Peace Initiative offered Israel a deal according to which an Israeli-Palestinian agreement could normalize relations between Israel and the entire Arab world. Netanyahu's new perception envisions strengthening the ties with the Arab world even without an Israeli-Palestinian agreement. In the Arab Peace Initiative, the Israeli-Palestinian agreement is a necessary condition for regional peace. The Israeli leadership today believes that Israel's relations with the countries of the region can undergo dramatic changes without this condition.

In fact, the assumption is that Israeli-Palestinian political development is possible only as part of a broader and more comprehensive process of regional peace. The new claim is that the Palestinian leadership, therefore, is unable to politically advance with Israel without the backing of the moderate Arab world, therefore the only chance to bring the parties to this stage is within a comprehensive process of regional peace. In other words, the agreement with the Palestinians is not a condition for peace with the Arab world; it is part of it, and regional peace will not be the result of peace with the Palestinians, but peace with the Palestinians will be one of the outcomes of regional peace.

Historically, when peace in the Middle East or regional peace was mentioned, it was understood that it would include and require an Israeli-Palestinian agreement. Moreover, throughout the years of negotiations between Israel and the Arab states, it was assumed that without a solution to the Palestinian struggle, the Arab states would not agree to establish meaningful ties with Israel. In support of this claim, let us remember that the Egyptian President Anwar Sadat conducted long and stubborn negotiations with Israel on the fate of the Palestinians, even though the Israeli-Egyptian conflict was about the Sinai Peninsula. Sadat refused to sign an Israeli-Egyptian agreement without including the

¹⁴ Ibid.

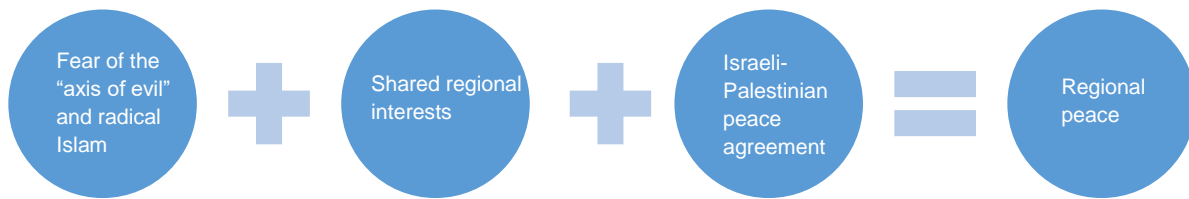
¹⁵ As noted, Netanyahu is not the only one to deliver dramatic descriptions of the new situation. Thus, for example, Maj. Gen. (res.) Amos Gilad, former head of the security-diplomatic wing at the Defense Ministry and one of the most influential people in the Israeli security situation, said: "Today our relations with the Arab world are amazing. I am talking about everything related to security and similar things [...] It is like a tree with one root, and in order to establish this wonder, we must have a tree with many roots, which is a political settlement or a political process that leads to an agreement [...]. There is no alternative to this and it is impossible to avoid the Palestinians." (From: "Hakol Diburim", *Reshet Bet*, March 5, 2017). Gilad also warned that without the "Palestinian component," it will not be possible to continue strengthening the various security partnerships. But he, too, spoke of a contemporary reality that is a "wonder" and "amazing".

¹⁶ ["Prime Minister Netanyahu's Speech at the UN General Assembly,"](#) *Ibid.*

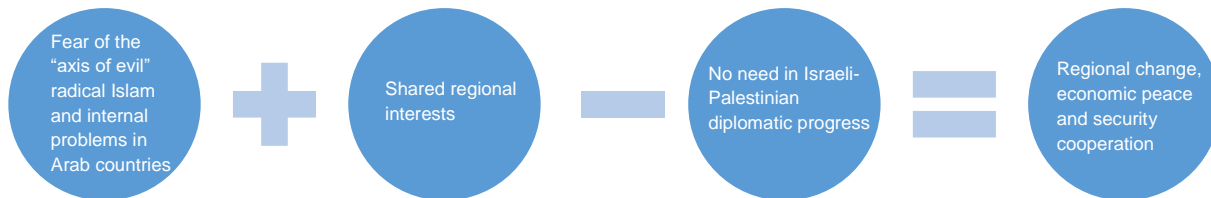
Palestinian component. He hoped that the annex to the Camp David accords – which dealt with the Palestinian issue – would make the peace treaty acceptable and legitimate in the Arab world (but was wrong in his assumption and was removed from the Arab League following the peace treaty). King Hussein, despite ongoing relations between the Israeli leadership and the Jordanian monarchy, did not sign an Israeli-Jordanian peace treaty even after he relinquished the demand to get the West Bank back in 1988; It was only after Israel signed the Oslo Accords with the Palestinians that it was possible to advance the official relationship between Israel and Jordan. In addition, Israel's relations with some of the Persian Gulf and North African countries were made possible only after the Madrid Conference and the Oslo Accords, which are based on Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.

However, according to the new political discourse, the Palestinian component is no longer seen as necessary to create a major change in Israel's relations with the Arab world. In this situation, Netanyahu, who in the past opposed the Arab Peace Initiative, while saying that "in its current format [it] is dangerous to the State of Israel"¹⁷, can now say that "Israel welcomes the spirit of the Arab Peace Initiative."¹⁸

Traditional Perception



New Perception



Traditional Perception	New Perception
Progress in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations is a necessary condition for normalization with the Arab world	Substantial changes can be made in Israel-Arab relations without progress on the Palestinian issue
An Israeli-Palestinian agreement is of the utmost importance	An Israeli-Palestinian agreement is one of many components of agreements between Israel and the Arab world
The Arab world is committed to the Palestinian struggle	The Arab world pays lip service to the Palestinian struggle, but in practice it is not important to him

¹⁷ "Netanyahu: The Saudi Initiative is Dangerous for Israel and for Peace," *Nana10* , June 4, 2007.

¹⁸ "[Prime Minister Netanyahu's Speech at the UN General Assembly](#)," *Ibid*.

Regional peace with the Arab world will be based on a peace agreement with the Palestinians, and will lead to a new Middle East	In the absence of an agreement with the Palestinians and recognizing that there will be no agreement with the Arab world without it – the goal is to strengthen ties with the Arab world, significantly change relations with it, and create a corridor for reaching diplomatic solutions and regional economic peace, without formal official peace.
---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

C. Netanyahu's regional discourse: "An unprecedented opportunity" whose practical outcome is the continued management of the conflict

If we adopt Netanyahu's approach, there is no basis for one of the main accusations against Israel since he was elected prime minister, according to which Israel does not initiate diplomatic moves. Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres initiated the Oslo process; Ehud Barak withdrew unilaterally from Lebanon, conducted negotiations with Syria, and conducted negotiations with the Palestinians at the second Camp David Summit; Sharon built the separation wall and withdrew unilaterally from Gaza; and Olmert spoke of a convergence plan. Netanyahu is accused of not initiating any diplomatic move, even though he repeatedly declares that he wants to negotiate with the Palestinians. However, Netanyahu declares that significant changes are indeed taking place: since the outbreak of Arab Spring, the chaos in the Arab world has led the Arab countries to the understanding that Israel is their ally and not their enemy. Netanyahu, who at first expressed great concern about the Arab Spring and claimed that what is expected in the region is "instability and uncertainty,"¹⁹ started claiming that the Arab states are ready to cooperate with Israel, strengthen ties with it and promote joint initiatives. If so, then it cannot be said that Israel is not adapting its policy to developments that change the face of the region. Moreover, since the Israeli leadership sees the Palestinian leadership as passive and unwilling to negotiate a final status agreement, the ability to change the regional reality without a Palestinian partner can be considered a diplomatic achievement. On Netanyahu's first visit to the US following the inauguration of President Donald Trump, he even said:

"If we can stop militant Islam, we can take advantage of an historic opportunity, because for the first time in my life and for the first time since the establishment of the State of Israel, the Arab states in the region do not see Israel as an enemy, but more and more see us as an ally [...] an unprecedented opportunity to strengthen security and promote peace, let us realize the opportunity together, let us strengthen security, find new ways to peace."²⁰

According to his approach, Israel has an unprecedented historical opportunity. However, it requires seeking new ways to achieve peace, because the familiar path from the past, based on an Israeli-Palestinian agreement, is not feasible. Yet Netanyahu too, according to his own testimony, believes that these moves cannot lead to normalization of relations between Israel and the Arab world. He wants to look for new ways toward peace, talks about a change in the attitude of the Arab world to Israel, and describes a revolution in the attitude of the

¹⁹ Lior Lehrs, "[The Darkness of Egypt or the Spring of Youth? The Israeli Discourse on the Arab Spring](#)," *the Mitvim Institute*, January 2013.

²⁰ "[Address by Prime Minister Netanyahu at a press conference with US President Trump](#)," *Prime Minister's Office*, February 15, 2017.

world toward Israel. But he also admits that the end of these processes will not be in peace agreements with the countries of the Arab world. Such agreements will not be signed as long as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not resolved. Even if the premise is that the Arab world only pays lip service to the Palestinian struggle, he himself said that "in order for us to fully achieve this broad peace, the Palestinians must be part of it."²¹

Indeed, if proof is needed that even when we envisage a "historic change" in Israel's relations with the Arab world, the Palestinian component cannot be ignored, on February 19, 2017, *Ha'aretz* reported that at the end of 2015 and the beginning of 2016 intensive negotiations were held to renew a regional peace initiative. The culmination of the talks was a quadripartite summit meeting in Aqaba attended by the Israeli Prime Minister, the US Secretary of State, the King of Jordan, and the President of Egypt. According to the report, this renewed initiative, which did not succeed, was supposed to be part of a broad regional move based on the Arab Peace Initiative, and Netanyahu asked that "senior representatives from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and other Sunni countries"²² join the discussions. As stated, the move failed and Netanyahu's request was not answered, apparently because of the Israeli desire to advance relations with the Arab world without the Palestinians. Hence, even in 2016, there was no real reason to hope for a regional process without negotiations with the Palestinians.

D. Conclusion

The outcome of the new governmental discourse led by Netanyahu is that it gives justifications to the continued management of the conflict instead of resolving it. The Israeli leadership proposes a political framework with four components: (1) Israel continues to operate without a new political initiative; (2) The world in general and the Arab world in particular, slowly understand that Israel is right; (3) In view of the events in the Arab world and the weakness of the Palestinian leadership, and in view of shared interests, the Arab states strengthen their ties with Israel; (4) Israel is lowering its expectations and under existing circumstances no longer aspires to peace agreements and instead believes in improving relations with the Arab world.

As far as the Israeli leadership is concerned, this diplomatic pattern does not require Israel to change anything in its conduct. Cooperation with the Arab world and strengthening ties therewith without having to pay any political toll are welcomed, of course. This is also hardly contested in the Israeli discourse. The Left (which is very weak) does not object to the strengthening of relations between Israel and the Arab world, and it seems that it is difficult for its representatives to present the public with a claim that it is wrong to welcome improvements in the relations between Israel and the Arab world. Even when there are voices that emphasize that a regional peace will not be possible without the Palestinian component, they are not opposed to strengthening ties with the Arab world in the absence thereof.²³ The Israeli right, even among those who do not think it is necessary to reach an agreement with the Palestinians, is prepared to ignore the statements that in the future the Palestinian component must be taken into account, as long as the change in Israeli-Arab relations today does not require any real political move.

²¹ ["Prime Minister Netanyahu's Speech at the UN General Assembly,"](#) *Ibid.*

²² Barak Ravid, ["Kerry presented Netanyahu with a regional peace initiative in a secret meeting with A-Sisi and Abdullah about a year ago, the prime minister was reserved,"](#) *Ha'aretz*, February 19, 2017.

²³ See, for example, [MK Nachman Shai's speech](#) at the conference of the Regional Cooperation Lobby at the Knesset in cooperation with the Mitvim Institute, July 20, 2016.

However, it seems that the governmental discourse that hardly has any opposition is only an Israeli wish that cannot last for long. The Israeli leadership claims a change in the attitude of the Arab world toward Israel – except that apart from the security community, who testify to what only they are exposed to, it is difficult to know whether this is happening, and if so, how significant this change is.²⁴ Moreover, it appears that the cooperation is mostly in the context of security and not in a broader sense. If this is the case, it may be assumed, based on past experience, that security cooperation will continue as long as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is conducted at a relatively low intensity. But during more difficult confrontations (which occur every two to three years in the past decade), and in the absence of formal agreements between Israel and the Arab states, it is doubtful whether the Arab world will demonstrate the change that the Israeli leadership claims is characteristic of its new attitude. This was well expressed by one of those well-known officials, former Mossad chief Tamir Pardo, who said:

"The secret cooperation that is taking place is important [...] but it does not advance anything in the regional context or in the context of legitimizing the State of Israel. Secret ties [...] have a very interesting feature, they exist but can be stopped once there are changes of interests, because they do not have, with regard to their background and depth, they do not fit within the national narrative, and in the end peace is made between countries, peace is made between communities, the game of security organizations [...] it is good for its time."²⁵

The events that took place in July 2017 on the Temple Mount/al-Aqsa Mosque were another example of how the Arab and Muslim world leaders and the peoples of the region see the Israeli-Palestinian reality. Even if collaborations do indeed take place at various security levels, a public campaign such as the Israeli attempt to place a metal detector at the entrance to the Temple Mount/al-Aqsa Mosque, and their immediate removal following the uprising in the Muslim Arab world, demonstrated the inefficacy of such collaborations, if they indeed exist. In addition, while the Israeli leadership claims that the moderate Arab world is not interested in the Palestinian struggle at all, the past teaches us that the Palestinian component was critical in establishing relations between Israel and the Arab states, and that the Arab public is certainly mobilized for the Palestinian struggle.

There is one issue that seems to be agreed upon by all the parties involved (the Israeli leadership, the Palestinians, the leadership of the Arab states, the Arab public, and the entire world): without a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, there will be no regional peace. This consensus raises doubts about the optimistic declarations of Israeli leaders about a major change and revolution that are taking place when there are no Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. If it is claimed that the Palestinians must be part of a regional peace agreement, but at the same time there is also an attempt to remove them from the equation, we are apparently witnessing the continued management of the conflict with the Arab world, rather than attempts to advance its resolution. Managing the conflict without an attempt to solve it – even prior to the age of “no partner” (starting in 2000) as well as in the period following it, and before the Arab Spring (starting in 2010) and following it – means wars and

²⁴ From the little we know, we can give a contrary example: The Israeli ambassador to Egypt was called back to Israel for "security reasons" for a number of months at the end of 2016 and the beginning of 2017, despite the apparently very close security relations. See: Itamar Eichner and Yoav Zeitun, "[The Israeli Ambassador to Egypt was Returned to Israel due to Alerts](#)", *Ynet*, February 14, 2017.

²⁵ Tamir Pardo, [speaking at the conference on "Making Safe Regional Peace"](#) by the Knesset Regional Cooperation Lobby, March 16, 2017. Later, the former head of the Mossad emphasized that "nothing will advance without the beginning of a solution to the Palestinian issue [...] There will not be anything regional, nothing regional, without a progress on the Palestinian issue."

deaths. The alleged security cooperation between the Arab states and Israel will not last as long as there are Israeli-Palestinian rounds of fighting; regional economic peace will not occur without resolving the Palestinian issue; and the Israeli discourse that no longer aspires to achieve peace agreements, but only a "corridor of change" will continue to perpetuate the management of the violent conflict instead of ending it.

Diplomatic Development/Change	Year	The Palestinian Component
Israel-Egypt peace accord	1979	The Camp David accords deal with Palestinian self-rule in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank
Israel-Jordan peace accord	1994	The peace agreement was signed only after the Israeli-Palestinian Oslo Accords
The Arab Peace Initiative	2002	An Israeli-Palestinian agreement will enable the establishment of normal relations between Israel and the entire Arab world
Unilateral disengagement from the Gaza Strip	2005	Israeli perception that there is no Palestinian partner, but that there is a need to change the Israeli-Palestinian reality
Changes in the Middle East following the Arab Spring	since 2014	Israeli perception that it is impossible to reach a comprehensive peace with the Arab world without an Israeli-Palestinian agreement, but that Israel-Arab relations can be fundamentally changed even without an agreement or progress with the Palestinians