

One step closer to Israeli normalization

The last piece of the puzzle is now visible. If it fits, Israel could become a nation like the others, at last.

by Conrad Black



The announcement on Thursday of the finalization of talks to normalize and tighten relations between Israel and the United Arab Emirates is an important step toward general Arab acceptance of the right of Israel to exist as a Jewish state. Often forgotten in the endless and bitter wars and arguments over Israel's status is the fact that it was specifically set up by a unanimous vote of the founding members of the United Nations on the motion of Soviet leader Joseph Stalin's ambassador, seconded by U.S. President Harry Truman's ambassador, at a time when they already agreed on little else, that Israel was being established from the League of Nations

mandate as a homeland for the Jews. This development in 1948 was effectively an acknowledgement by the international community that the unspeakable atrocities inflicted upon the Jewish people in Germany and Nazi-occupied Europe required action by the whole world to give the ancient and talented Jewish people a national home where they could give refuge to their persecuted coreligionists. Vivid in the recollections and the consciences of all Western nations were the pathetic and horrifying travails of the persecuted Jews of Europe in the 1930s.

That had been far from the finest hour of the British Empire. The declaration by foreign secretary and former prime minister Arthur James Balfour in 1917 that after the British had expelled the Ottomans from what had been called in Roman times Palestine, a Jewish homeland would be created that would not compromise the rights of the Arab people already there was a desperate ploy in dark hours of the First World War, as Russia folded, for accelerated American and international Jewish support. The British did not then occupy any of Palestine and Turkey, despite having been reviled for a century as "the sick man of Europe" and "the abominable Porte," was holding its own and had outlasted Russia in the greatest war in history. But in effect, the British sold the same real estate (which they did not own) to two different and antagonistic parties, and throughout the British occupation of Palestine under a League of Nations mandate, it did a poor job of conciliating the conflicting ambitions of the Jews and Arabs. (In my capacity as a member of the House of Lords in 2002, I felt it my duty to point out to my noble friends, who weren't enthused to hear it, that given the British performance as overlords of the area it did not lie in the mouths of the British government or Parliament to disparage the efforts of the United States to resolve the proverbially intractable problems of the Middle East.)

Were it not for the strategic importance of the immense oil

reserves discovered in Arabia and nearby between the world wars, the view of the world powers toward the Middle East would have been akin to what Otto von Bismarck thought of the Balkans, which he famously asserted were not "worth the bones of one Pomeranian grenadier" (he further declared that the great powers "must not become involved in the quarrels of these sheep stealers"). But the unimaginably barbarous destruction of half of the entire Jewish population of the world in Nazi camps (and although it has been under-recognized, an approximately equal number of non-Jewish victims) made the survival, concentration, legitimization and effective renaissance of the Jews an overwhelming practical and moral imperative. The Jewish population of what is now Israel, though it has been present there for nearly 6,000 years, was at one time reduced to only about 30,000 people. The origins of the enduring antagonism between Jews and Arabs, Christian Arabs as much as Muslims, are buried in the mists of antiquity, but it seems that apart from increased general prosperity, the only method of de-escalating that antipathy is the approach of a common threat.

Enhancing the prosperity of the Arab states that are not petroleum-rich, especially Egypt, has generally proved an elusive goal, even as Israel flourished and has advanced in two generations from a mostly undeveloped to a North American standard of living. But the Arabs' ancient foes, the Turks and the Persians (who have historically been relatively indulgent of the Jews), have now re-entered the theatre and their ambitions are having a halcyon placatory affect on anti-Semitic passions. The militant Palestinian movements, the Palestinian Liberation Organization and Hamas, failed to recognize that the Arab powers were supporting and encouraging them not out of unshakable devotion, but primarily to distract the Arab masses from the misgovernment that they were inflicting upon them. With the Turks and Iranians meddling in Syria and Iran dominating parts of Iraq and promoting civil wars in Lebanon and Yemen, Arab solicitude for the

Palestinians has effectively evaporated. At any time in the last 50 years the Palestinians could have had their state, though it would be a diminutive country, but they preferred the worldwide notoriety achieved by Yasser Arafat and some of his entourage than to be the leaders of another dusty little Middle Eastern country.

Now that ship has sailed. At the announcement of the agreement between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, the imperishable but tedious Palestinian spokesman Hanan Ashrawi wanly declared that, "We are no one's fig-leaf." Perhaps not, but they have no influence either. Mercifully, almost the entire Palestinian public relations campaign against Israel, all the nauseating rubbish about boycotts and disinvestment of the "Jewish apartheid state," is now almost inaudible. U.S. President Donald Trump, with his often annoying bluntness, recognized these realities in moving the U.S. Embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, recognizing permanent Israeli control of the Golan Heights and producing with Israel a peace agreement that provided for a sketchy Palestinian state in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip connected by a tunnel, but with most Israeli West Bank settlements consolidated into Israel. The Palestinians rejected it before it was announced, but the Arab powers were circumspect.

It is now clear that Trump, as he showed in leaving an extended period for subsequent negotiation, was prepared to counsel the Israelis to be flexible. The agreement with the U.A.E. specifically postpones any Israeli annexations in the West Bank. Given the close relationship between the U.A.E. and most of the other petro-states, it is reasonable to hope that Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain and Oman will all be climbing up on this bandwagon soon, and joining Egypt and Jordan in full relations with and recognition of Israel. The North African states will follow them; Syria and Iraq have effectively disintegrated and their official opinions are at present not relevant.

The last piece of the puzzle is now visible: as long as Trump is re-elected, which is likely despite the wishful conjurations of the international Trump-hating media, he will maintain such economic pressure on the ayatollahs, backed up by the explicit threat of military action to prevent Iran becoming a nuclear power, that it will abandon its jihadist crusade and cease meddling in the Arab world. At that point Syria and Iraq could be patched somewhat back together, and in diplomatic terms, Israel could become a nation like the others, at last. Never again.

First published in the