



The Waning Power Of The Palestinian Cause

September 22, 2020 **Ilan I. Berman** *Al-Hurra Digital*

Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Islamic Extremism; Israel; Middle East

In December of 2016, the Brookings Institution's prestigious annual gathering, known as the Saban Forum, showcased John Kerry as its featured speaker. The outgoing Secretary of State used the occasion to outline his views on prospects for Middle East peace – and the centrality of the Palestinians to that endeavor. "There will be no advance and separate peace with the Arab world without the Palestinian process and Palestinian peace," Kerry told his audience. "Everybody needs to understand that. That is a hard reality."

Fast forward three-and-a-half years, and the man who once served as America's top diplomat has been proven profoundly wrong. Last week's signing of the Abraham Accords, as the unfolding peace and normalization deals between Israel, the UAE and Bahrain have come to be known, marks a massive shift in the politics of the Middle East. It is also a stunning repudiation of the traditional thinking about the region that has long been embraced by Kerry and far too many others.

Indeed, since the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993, the Israeli-Palestinian confrontation has come to be seen in the West as the central pivot of Mideast politics. For more than a quarter-century, the issue has commanded an inordinate amount of attention within the Washington Beltway and in assorted European capitals. It has spawned countless international conferences, repeated peace initiatives and numerous diplomatic overtures, eclipsing a great many other pressing regional concerns in the process. At its core was a singular notion: that Israel needed to pursue an "inside out" strategy, making peace with the Palestinians as a prerequisite for any sort of recognition or normal relations with the Arab world.

Over the past decade, however, that equation has been turned on its head. Israel and the Arab states of the Gulf have drawn progressively closer, propelled by shared concerns regarding a rising and nuclear-hungry Iran. But these early contacts gradually became much more: a regional rapprochement encompassing everything from politics to trade. These ties, conducted largely away from the public eye, were broad, vibrant and ongoing – and all the more striking because they persisted despite an Israeli-Palestinian dialogue that has essentially remained moribund for the better part of two decades. Last week's White House ceremony simply marked the public culmination of this previously-tacit process.

Yet none of this should be seen as an abandonment of the Palestinian cause, as some have contended. Far from it. In his formal remarks on Tuesday, Emirati Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan took pains to stress his government's ongoing commitment to Palestinian prosperity. The Trump administration has done much the same; its "deal of the century," unveiled this past January, includes a pledge of \$50 billion in commercial investment into the West Bank and Gaza Strip – equivalent to more than three times the current annual GDP of the Palestinian Territories.

But those things don't seem to be appreciated by the Palestinian leadership, which has characterized the new agreements as nothing short of a betrayal, and promised to sever diplomatic ties with any Arab nation that normalizes relations with Israel. As experts have noted, that stance has put the Palestinians on a "collision course" with the rest of the Arab world. Indeed, Nayef Al-Hajraf, the Secretary General of the Gulf Cooperation Council, went so far as to formally demand an apology from the Palestinian Authority for its conduct and rhetoric.

"The secretary general condemned the falsehoods questioning the historic stance of Gulf nations in support of the rights of Palestinians, calling on responsible Palestinian leaders who participated in that meeting, headed by President Mahmoud Abbas, to apologize for these violations and provocative and false statements, which are against the reality of the relations between the states of the Cooperation Council and the brotherly Palestinian people," the GCC said in an official statement.

That stance speaks volumes about the unfolding politics of the region, where more and more states are now contemplating normalization with Israel, and fewer and fewer are prepared to have their national interests held captive by the Palestinian cause. The resulting message should be crystal clear: the Palestinian Authority needs to join the new political wave, or get left behind.