



Unconventional Wisdom in the Middle East

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Recent events across the Middle East put the lie to one of the foreign policy establishment's most enduring tenets of conventional nonsense: that Israeli-Palestinian peace is key to greater regional peace and stability.

Sharing concerns over hegemony-seeking Iran and radical Islamic forces like the Islamic State group and Muslim Brotherhood, the key Arab states of Egypt and Saudi Arabia are drawing ever closer to Israel - with officials appearing together publicly, meeting privately and collaborating to confront their mutual adversaries.

That helps explain why, in the face of global opposition, the central committee of Israel's ruling Likud Party, felt free to unanimously endorse a resolution the other day that called for annexing West Bank settlements, and why some leading Likud members now openly dismiss the viability of a Palestinian state.

For decades, foreign policy elites across the West have argued that Israeli-Palestinian peace will pave the way for broader Arab-Israeli peace, less terrorism, less anti-American animus, and solutions to such seemingly separate challenges as Iran's regional expansionism and nuclear pursuits. Even Jared Kushner, President Donald Trump's son-in-law, who's spearheading the administration's Israeli-Palestinian peace push, felt compelled to echo that view last month, saying, "I think that if we're going to try to create more stability in the region as a whole, then you have to solve this issue."

The global community largely plays along with this silly narrative because leaders of different nations actually believe it or they don't want to ruffle public feathers by suggesting otherwise. So, when Trump upsets the conventional appletart as he did recently by stating the obvious - that Jerusalem is Israel's capital - governmental leaders across the world blast the decision in apocalyptic terms and the United Nations denounces it by an overwhelming vote.

But, take a closer look and you'll discover that, facing far more serious challenges, Arab leaders are moving on. On this issue, never has the gap between conventional wisdom and on-the-ground reality been wider.

Consider, for example, the telling *New York Times* story of the past weekend, which surely won't get the attention it deserves if only because it threatens longstanding and comfortable certainties about the region. When, the *Times* reported, Trump issued his Jerusalem declaration, Egyptian officials directed several influential TV talk show hosts to persuade viewers to accept the decision and - though Trump himself didn't go this far - even suggest that Palestinians accept the West bank town of Ramallah, where the Palestinian Authority is headquartered, rather than East Jerusalem as the capital of a Palestinian state.

"We, like all our Arab brothers, are denouncing this matter," Egyptian Capt. Ashraf al-Kholi reportedly told one talk show host about Cairo's public stance. "After that, this thing will become a reality. Palestinians can't resist and we don't want to go to war. We have enough on our plate as you know." An anti-Israeli intifada over the issue, he explained, would threaten Cairo's interests because it would "revive the Islamists and Hamas," the latter of which battles Israel and Egypt from the Gaza Strip.

Or consider the equally telling *New York Times* story from early December, which revealed that when Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas visited Riyadh, Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman presented an Israeli-Palestinian peace plan that was heavily tilted toward Israel. It reportedly called for a Palestinian state, but one with non-contiguous parts of the West Bank, limited Palestinian sovereignty, no change to the vast majority of Jewish settlements, no capital in East Jerusalem, and no full right of return for Palestinian refugees and their descendants.

"[T]he Saudi Prince has made clear that his top priority in the region is not the Palestinian-Israeli issue, the fulcrum of Arab politics for generations, but confronting Iran," the *Times* reported. "Regional officials and analysts say they believe he might be willing to try to force a settlement on Palestinians in order to cement Israeli cooperation against Iran.

That is, rather than accede to longstanding Palestinian demands - whether reasonable ones like a contiguous state or unreasonable ones like a multi-generational right of return - Saudi officials would impose their own solution on the Palestinians to secure greater collaboration between Jerusalem and Riyadh.

As the political theorist Lee Benson, from whom I learned in college, used to say, "out-group conflict produces in-group cohesion." In other words, groups set aside their differences and come together in the face of shared threats. What's true of groups is true of nations, as witnessed by today's Middle East.

Think the foreign policy establishment will notice?

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