

The Palestinian-Israeli Conflict Discussed at U.S.-Islamic World Forum



Natan B. Sachs | June 9, 2013 6:12pm

In 1993, Benjamin Netanyahu, then just a Member of Knesset, published a book titled *A Place Under the Sun*, in which he wrote critically about "the theory of Palestinian centrality", the idea that the plight of Palestinians is the key to broader Middle East issues. Rather, Netanyahu and others have claimed, the Palestinian issue is a useful ruse for Middle East leaders to deflect domestic criticism away from their own governments toward a hated foreign foe. In private, some would say, Arab leaders' attitudes toward Israel sounded very differently than they did in public.

At the time, some in Israel, like Netanyahu, argued that this diversionary tactic would only subside when democracy would come to the region, making governments accountable for the wellbeing of their people and answerable to popular needs and votes. With democratic accountability, the argument goes, foreign diversions can only go so far before their hollowness is exposed.

For supporters of a resolution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the issue warranted, and still warrants, attention in its own right, regardless of its effects on the rest of the region--resolution of the conflict would have a tremendous benefits for Palestinians and Israelis, its effects on others notwithstanding. But for those opposed to the peace process of the 1990s, the undue attention given in their view to the Israeli-Palestinian relations, masked the wider issues in the Middle East that drove the conflict and obscured the true security risks that Israel faced in its relationship with all its neighbors.

The dramatic changes in the Arab world since the end of 2010 put these assumptions to a partial test. On the face of it, the plethora of domestic, constitutional and economic issues that countries like Egypt now face, not to mention the horrors of the Syrian civil war--with a casualty count that dwarfs that of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict--suggest that the Palestinian question would move down in regional priorities.

Indeed, at last year's U.S.-Islamic World Forum in Doha, participants discussed an array of complex questions pertaining to the relationship of democracy and religion, democracy and development and U.S. relations with nascent attempts at democracy; all issues that have

little to do with the Palestinian-Israeli conflict but whose importance for the future of Middle East societies cannot be overstated. New governments in the Arab world are now preoccupied--as some would say they should be--with deeply vexing domestic issues and uncertain futures.

And yet, no senior official speaking here before the 2013 U.S.-Islamic World Forum, now underway, has failed to mention prominently the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, from representatives from Benin and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, to the Deputy Prime Minister of Qatar, to the President of Afghanistan, Hamid Karzai.

In part this persistent emphasis on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict may be due to a second facet of the growing role of public opinion in Muslim-majority countries: the publics in the Muslim world care deeply about the issue. More answerable to them, leaders may be more likely, not less, to highlight Palestine in a genuine way.

On Tuesday, Shibley Telhami, who recently published a comprehensive view of Arab public opinion, titled *The World Through Arab Eyes*, will join Dalia Mogahed, Samer Shehata and Rashad Hussain in a conversation with Khaled Elgindy on to discuss the role of public opinion in the changing Arab world. The centrality of the Palestinian question--the idea of which Netanyahu rejected in 1993--is sure to come up.