

# Perceptions of Israel in the Armies of Syria, Egypt and Jordan

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The reasons for change in state elites' perceptions of the adversary are fiercely contested by realists, constructivists and neo-liberals in the international relations literature. A series of events – beginning with the October 1973 war and culminating in the Oslo peace process – offers a unique opportunity to assess the value of these theories in explaining change in the perceptions of Israel and Zionism in Syria, Egypt and Jordan. This study is based on articles on Israel and Zionism that appeared in the official army journals of these three states. The analysis suggests that, since the 1973 war, Egypt has perceived Israel as a formidable foe that must be restrained, Syria continues to deny Israel's legitimacy, and Jordan's perceptions of Israel changed dramatically from demonization to recognition. The realist paradigm, which focuses on changes in the regional and international balance of power, does best in explaining variations in the portrayal of Israel amongst these actors. Nevertheless, none of the theories offers a complete, timeless explanation of the issue. The limitations of any single theory to account for change in the perceptions of the adversary suggest that caution should be used in attempting to capture the complexity of social and political life in any single overarching theory.

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The reasons for change in state elites' perceptions of the adversary are fiercely contested in the international relations literature. Idealists and constructivists suggest that ideas and norms lead to changes in how interests are conceived, formulated and prioritized (Barnett, 1995; Barnett and Finnemore, 1999; Cruz, 2000; Russett *et al.*, 2000; Wendt, 1994). Neo-liberals emphasize economic factors relating to implacable globalization (Keohane, 1986): they suggest that stresses and opportunities in the international economic market and their ramifications on the domestic political and economic situation bring states to perceive each other more benignly as a prelude to greater cooperation. Realist and neo-realist accounts, by contrast, focus on balance of power or balance of threat in explaining variations in the behavior between states and their perceptions of each other (Walt, 1987; Inbar, 1995; Waltz, 2000). Theorists like Ayooob (1991) and David (1991) claim that considerations regarding domestic security determine foreign policy, perceptions and behavior.

The decade-old Israeli–Palestinian peace process (which might have come to an end with the initiation of wide-scale violence in October 2000) offers a unique opportunity to assess the value of these theories in explaining change in the perceptions of state adversaries. A series of events – the Madrid peace conference in 1991, the breakthrough during the Oslo peace process that culminated with the signing of the Declaration of Principles by Prime Minister Yitzchak Rabin and the Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat on the White House lawn on 13 September 1993, and subsequent agreements between Israel and the Palestinians – suggested that the Middle East was on the verge of a Kuhnian paradigm shift from bitter realist

– perhaps even a conflict of civilizations between Arabs and Palestinians and Israel – to one of a far more benign liberal competition. This new paradigm was even given a name – the ‘new Middle East’ – a term first coined by Shimon Peres (1993), who hoped that neo-liberal ideas would transform an area of conflict into an area of cooperation (Peres, 1993). Many scholars, including some from the region, seemed to agree. A prominent Egyptian academic argued that Arab states, principally Egypt, were in the process of changing their policies, from those focusing on geo-strategic concerns to those focusing on geo-economic concerns (Aly, 1996). Of course, not all shared the initial optimism. Scholars and prominent centers of Arab studies who advocated some form of Arab unity mobilized against such *sharq al-awsatiyya* (Middle Easternism) (Marsi, 1995; al-Dasuki, 1995; Hilal, 1995). The nationalists insisted that integration be based on Arab culture and language to the exclusion of non-Arab Israel. Muslim fundamentalists joined forces with the nationalists to combat the normalization of relations with Israel, which, in their minds, was the real intention behind the new paradigm (al-Jamal, 1994; Shash, 1995).

In this paper, I analyze the extent to which this paradigmatic change took place in the education of army personnel in Syria, Egypt and Jordan. The database consists of official journals of the respective armies. The analysis extends back to the initial interim ceasefire agreements after the October 1973 war when the peace process between Israel and Egypt began. I will begin by outlining the research hypotheses, proceed with a description of the army journals, and then test these hypotheses in explaining changes in Syrian, Egyptian and Jordanian perceptions of Israel.

### Research Hypotheses, Design and Methodology

There are three possible perceptions of Israel, all of which fit nicely with the three basic theoretical paradigms in international relations. The identity-driven *constructivist* perception, which can be either Islamic or pan-Arab or a mixture of both, is clearly the most hostile. This discourse is easily identifiable by the repetitive use of code words such as ‘Zionist entity’ or ‘Zionist regime’. These terms are frequently placed in quotation marks, which in Arabic render the object located within the marks illegitimate. These code words or the use of quotation marks are meant to deny the legitimacy of the state of Israel. The discourse would be *realist* if the terms ‘Israel’ or ‘the Israeli government’ – or even ‘the Israeli enemy’ (without quotations) – are used. In short, the lowest denominator in order to be classified as realist would be to recognize Israel’s essential statehood. In Arabic, the realist-constructivist debate is characterized by two words that rhyme: the ideologues claim that the conflict with Israel revolves over its very existence (*wujud*), and the realists describe it as a struggle of borders (*hudud*). To classify a discourse as *neo-liberal*, Israel would have to be acknowledged in areas of human activity other than those focused purely on political and security dimensions. Terms such as ‘partner’ and ‘neighbor’ would typically be used to describe Israel, just as they come readily to the lips of US officials in describing relations with Canada.

If economic factors are indeed as salient as neo-liberals argue, Jordanian perceptions of Israel should have improved by the mid-1980s when the kingdom was

beset by severe domestic economic crisis, rather than after the peace treaty with Israel signed in October 1994 (Ryan, 1998); Syrian perceptions of Israel should have improved significantly as Soviet and Arab budgetary support in the late 1980s dried up, even before the Soviet Union's political demise and the emergence of the US as the sole superpower (Plaut, 1999); and Egyptian perceptions of Israel should have continued to improve in the late 1980s and early 1990s as the state faced severe economic crisis at the end of the Arab oil boom (Richards and Waterbury, 1996).

Realist theories would fare well if these changes in the perception of Israel corresponded with major shifts in the global and regional power equation. If that were true, Egyptian perceptions of Israel should have reflected the ebb and flow of the geopolitical relationship between the two states. One would expect, for example, that Israel's invasion of Beirut in 1982 and the warming of Israeli-Turkish relations in 1996 would sully perceptions of Israel and that the signing of the Declaration of Principles with the Palestinians in 1993 would induce a more favorable portrayal of Israel. Jordan's traditionally close ties with the US and its secret ties with Israel should have made it reticent to portray Israel in too harsh a light in the 1970s and 1980s. This certainly should have been the case after the second Gulf war, with the defeat of a radical and threatening Iraq obviating Jordan's need to bandwagon, and the emergence of the US as the sole superpower. By the same token, Syria's perceptions of Israel (and the US) should have changed in the late 1980s when it became clear that the Soviet Union could no longer support it militarily.

The 'internal' version of realism that stresses the importance of domestic forces and threats in Third World states in determining the relationship between rival states would suggest different, if not opposite, outcomes (Ayooob, 1991; David, 1991; Barnett, 1991). Jordanian perceptions of Israel should have been rabidly anti-Israeli, given the Palestinian influence on public discourse in Jordan even after the signing of the Oslo process interim agreements in 1993, which deferred talks on the right of return and other final status issues to the end of the decade. Similarly, Egyptian perceptions of Israel should have become increasingly hostile in the 1990s in an attempt to co-opt traditional Islamic sentiment in the fight against Islamic fundamentalist infiltration in the military. And Syria should have continued to be hostile to Israel even after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, using enmity against a foreign power as a means of upholding a regime widely seen in the Arab world as being in the hands of a small and heterodox minority.

Constructivist accounts would be corroborated if a high level of correlation, for example, is found between regime ideology and perceptions. Therefore, Syria, as a one-party state that espouses an official Ba'ath ideology (an extreme form of pan-Arab ideology), should have shown little improvement in its perceptions of Israel as long as such a regime persisted. By contrast, Egyptian perceptions of Israel should have improved dramatically in the wake of President Anwar Sadat's strenuous efforts in 1979 to develop the theme of peace, and they should have been subsequently reinforced by the peace discourse that accompanied the Oslo peace process. The same could be said of Jordan after the treaty signed in 1994 at the height of the peace process.

**Table 1: Number of Articles Relating to Israel and Zionism in the Official Army Journals of Syria, Egypt and Jordan (1973–1999)**

<i>Name of journal</i>	<i>Country</i>	<i>Number of issues covered</i>	<i>Number of articles relating to Israel and Zionism</i>
<i>Jaish al-Sha'b</i>	Syria	81	90
<i>al-Nasr</i>	Egypt	59	38
<i>al-Aqsa</i>	Jordan	20	14

*Note: Number of issues for al-Aqsa from 1988.*

This study is based on articles on Israel and Zionism that appeared in the three official army journals of Syria, Egypt and Jordan. In the case of Egypt and Syria, the issues covered go back to 1973; in the case of Jordan, the issues go back to 1988. The Egyptian and Jordanian journals were published on a monthly basis, the Syrian bi-monthly. Table 1 presents a breakdown of the issues and the articles covered.

### **The Army Journals of Syria, Egypt and Jordan**

A variety of sources are available to analyze the perceptions of Israel in Syria, Egypt and Jordan and track changes over time, ranging from popular media to textbooks used in the government school systems. I chose official army journals on the assumption that they reflect best what the regimes want to inculcate amongst an important, if not the most important, sector in society. They are one of the means of informing and educating army personnel about developments, their specific military environment, and the military and political environment of neighboring hostile and friendly states. Their most important task by far, however, is to foster loyalty amongst the officers and soldiers to the respective regimes in these states. This is overwhelmingly so in the case of Syria, yet even preponderantly so in the relatively more tolerant Egypt and Jordan. In all three states, the support of the military is crucial to the regime's continued existence. In Syria, the army subdued an Islamic insurgency in Homs and Hama in 1982 and, one year later, in coping with a challenge by President Hafez al-Asad's brother, Rif'at al-Asad (Zisser, 2001, pp. 6–7). In Jordan, the support of the military was crucial in confronting the challenge of factions of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1970–71. Since then, Jordan has refrained from initiating compulsory military service in order to avoid recruiting Jordanians of Palestinian origin and to rely almost exclusively on recruits of east Jordanian origin, even though the Palestinians are the majority of the population (Brooks, 1999, p. 35). And in Egypt, the army is widely perceived as a bulwark against fundamentalist challenges to the regime (Droz-Vincent, 1999, p. 26).

Ensuring loyalty of the military and security organs – and preventing them from challenging the regimes – is one of the major factors determining civilian–military

relations in these states, perhaps more important even than defending the state from external enemies (Brooks, 1999, pp. 19, 44; Ayoob, 1991, p. 260). Like many other Third World security structures, many Arab regimes 'counterbalance' the regular armed forces with the far more privileged and highly trained units earmarked to defend the president and the state elite (Quinlivan, 1999, p. 140; De Atkine, 1999, p. 24). Frequently, the regime promotes officers on the basis of loyalty rather than professionalism (Brooks, 1999, pp. 48–9). According to De Atkine, practices designed to ensure the loyalty of the security forces in defending the regime from the internal enemy may partially explain why many Arab states performed poorly in wars against the Israeli adversary (1999, p. 25). In addition to practices common to all three states, there are also differences in the means of achieving such loyalty. Both Egypt under President Husni Mubarak (1981 onwards) and Syria in the 1990s have increasingly relied on expanding the military's economic activities in giant state projects as a form of compensation for refraining from political involvement (Frisch, 2001, Altunisik, 2002). In Syria, a Ba'th political officer command structure parallels the regular army command. In Jordan, the royal family fosters a special and personal relationship with the army (Brooks, 1999, p. 33).

Journals published by the armies of these states provide one of the many means to ensure such loyalty. In this sense, they cannot be likened to professional armed forces journals in the West, which are published either by research or command centers within the military or civilian academic institutions or forums. The latter are designed to promote innovative thinking to test the validity of military approaches and doctrine in order to enrich debate amongst policy-makers and the military alike. To give a striking example of this difference, the official military journal of the Israel Defense Forces, *Maarchot*, rarely if ever has any reference to the political leadership of the state, which is also true of the US Army journal *Parameters*. By contrast, all the journal issues analyzed here included more than one reference, usually laudatory, to the leader of the respective state. The aim of these journals is to persuade and inculcate from the top down rather than to be a forum that can also persuade the policy-maker.

Such attempted inculcation of loyalty can be measured best according to the sum total of square inches of portraits and photos devoted to the presidents in Syria and Egypt and to the king in Jordan. Measuring space devoted to the leader would yield a close race between the Jordanian and Syrian army journals. Mubarak's portrait is far less prominent in the Egyptian army journal. Not only does it devote least space to the leader's legitimacy, but it has also reduced such coverage considerably from the Sadat and early Mubarak period.<sup>1</sup> Both the comparative and longitudinal patterns can probably be best explained by the concept of 'stateness' (Ben-Dor, 1984). Egypt, as an homogenous and historically rooted political and social unit dating back to at least the early nineteenth century, has more 'stateness' than both the eighty-year-old Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan (where Palestinians are the majority) or Syria (which is of even more recent origin). Syria is hamstrung by the fact that the regime is identified with the Alawite minority, which is considered to be heterodox and therefore unacceptable to many of Syria's Sunni Muslim majority (Dam, 1996).<sup>2</sup>

Stateness and regime legitimacy is related not only to how often leaders are portrayed, but also to *how* they are portrayed. In the Syrian journal, where the armed forces are linked to civilian life through the Ba'th party, there is frequent mention that Asad is commander-in-chief, but he is rarely portrayed wearing a military uniform. In the Egyptian journal, Mubarak is also rarely seen wearing a uniform, but neither is he portrayed often as the supreme commander. And in Jordan, by contrast, the Hashemite family identifies itself most with the army; in the Jordanian journal, the king and various family members are frequently portrayed viewing, or even participating, in exercises in uniforms.<sup>3</sup> Obviously, the Jordanian regime is more dependent on the army than the Syrian regime, which is also based on one-party rule. This dependency on the military may explain why the ruling family has attempted to isolate the army from surrounding society and why its journal devotes least coverage to 'civilian' affairs, including domestic and regional politics.

The importance of inculcating and fostering loyalty to the regimes is also reflected in the titles of the journals. In Syria, the official army journal is called *Jaish al-Sha'b* (The Army of the People), a title echoing the communist influence of Syria's long-time patron, the Soviet Union, as well as reflecting the socialist populist dimension of the state's official Ba'th ideology (*Jaish al-Sha'b*, 1998a). The Syrian army's affinity to the communist model is also reflected in the relationship between the party and the army. The latter provides the cadres of the 'Political Department of the Syrian Arab Army', which also edits and publishes *Jaish al-Sha'b*. The title of the other official journal, *al-Jundi al-'Arabi* (The Arab Soldier), reflects Syria and the Ba'th party's pan-Arab identity and commitment, and therefore complements the definition of the state as defined by the constitution ratified in 1973.<sup>4</sup> In Egypt, the official army journal is called *al-Nasr* (Victory). It was founded in 1958 and bears the same name as Egypt's all-powerful president at the time, which can hardly be a coincidence. But victory is also an appropriate goal of any nationalist regime. In Jordan, by contrast, the official army journal is called *al-Aqsa*, the name of the famous mosque on the Temple Mount (*al-Haram al-Sharif*) in Jerusalem. The title thus underscores Jordan's commitment to religion, to Jerusalem and to the Palestinian problem.

The three journals vary in a number of ways. *Al-Nasr* is the most civilian in character because of its breadth of coverage: it includes sections and columns devoted to culture, literature, women's affairs and the family, which may explain why it is on sale to the general public. *Jaish al-Sha'b*, by contrast, is the most political, reflecting the important role played by the Ba'th party in the Syrian army. The least 'civilian' (even in the more narrow political sense) is *al-Aqsa*. Like army journals in the West, all three espouse a basic patriotism, but at least two – *Jaish al-Sha'b* and *al-Aqsa* – are heavily imbued with other ideological elements. *Jaish al-Sha'b* is the most pan-Arab and is moderately socialist, whereas *al-Aqsa* is more Islamic. The most patriotic in the tradition of the West (at least until the advent of the post-modern army) is *al-Nasr*, where the army is portrayed as being specifically Egyptian (rather than Arab), defending the state and furthering its national mission; nevertheless, even in this journal, there is a firm commitment to Arab nationalism (Aly, 1996).<sup>5</sup>

The deliberate politicization of the Syrian army and the equally deliberate efforts to distance the Jordanian army from politics naturally impact on the relationship of these states to peacemaking and to their perceptions of Israel. It is only natural that in *Jaish al-Sha'b*, where the Ba'ath party figures prominently, there would be numerous mentions of Israel and Zionism, even in excess of what is to be expected in a journal of a state whose territory Israel continues to occupy. The absence of news pertaining to civilian politics in *al-Aqsa* means that Israel – easily one of the most visible issues in the Jordanian civilian press and in domestic Jordanian politics – appears rarely in the journal. And the Egyptian government, by sanctioning coverage of civilian subjects, obviously wants military personnel to have a good general knowledge of Israel; yet even in *al-Nasr*, inculcating how (from the regime's perspective) one should feel about Israel is probably more important than knowing the reality in Israel itself.

### Syria's *Jaish al-Sha'b*

The tenor and substance of Syrian perceptions of Israel's role in the peace process and Zionism has much to do with the fact that Syria, unlike Egypt and Jordan, has yet to reach a settlement with Israel. Two distinctive features characterize those perceptions. First, President Asad's portrayal of Israel as reported in *Jaish al-Sha'b* is consistently moderate. By 'moderate', I do not mean of course a meeting of minds between the two states or between its leaders – if that were the case, it would have yielded a peace agreement – but an acceptance of Israel as a state and its leaders as leaders of that state. Throughout the period after the 1973 war, Asad tended to portray his demands for total withdrawal from the Golan Heights in defensive terms – a restoration of a state status quo rather than as a means of continuing the battle against Zionism. Second, the commentary provided by both the staff of the journal and senior officers has tended to delegitimize Israel as a state and, even more extremely, the Zionist ideology that presumably dictates the way it acts. In the terms employed, Asad usually called Israel by name, whereas the articles written by the staff usually referred to the 'Zionist entity'.

These differences are evident even in the tense period after the 1973 war when Syria, in contrast to Egypt, continued to wage a war of attrition against Israel. In an interview conducted in December 1974, Asad never questioned Israel's intrinsic legitimacy, even though the interview focused on the possibility of an Israeli surprise attack, the outbreak of total war, and a scenario of a combined American–Israeli assault on Arab oil fields. Thus, although the interviewer, a journalist from India, exclusively employed the terms 'enemy' or 'Zionist enemy' in phrasing the questions, in his response Asad insisted on referring to Israel by name (*Jaish al-Sha'b*, 1974a, p. 8). His feelings towards his protagonist, however, were hardly neutral: 'We operate on our proven knowledge of Israel's aggressive expansionist nature as the entire world knows' (p. 8). Elsewhere in the speech, he described the Jewish state as 'fascist' (p. 8). By contrast, the news items and commentaries that were published at the same time exhibited no such restraint. For example, the sentencing of Hilarion Kabutshi, the Greek Orthodox bishop, to ten years imprisonment for using his diplomatic status to infiltrate ammunition and

explosives into Israel on behalf of the PLO was described as an act of 'Zionist terrorism' (*Jaish al-Sha'b*, 1974b). The use of such terms is hardly unique to the journal's staff: the official announcement of the Syrian Arab Republic, published in full, described the decision in similar terms (1974c).

Nor did the tone of these commentaries necessarily moderate as the years progressed. On the contrary, after the Camp David peace accords that culminated in Egyptian–Israeli agreements in 1978 and Egypt's 'betrayal' and subsequent isolation of Syria, the tone in the references and commentary became, in many ways, even more extreme towards both Israel and some of the Arab states. After the historic meeting of the Labor prime minister Shimon Peres and King Hassan II of Morocco in August 1986, Syrian soldiers and officers learned that 'the Zionist entity is trying to market Camp David through the King of Morocco' (Hamadah, 1986). In another article appearing two pages later, a picture of the Moroccan king appeared with an ominous Star of David across his forehead under an equally ominous title 'New Treachery is Committed by the King of Morocco against the Arab Nation' (*Jaish al-Sha'b*, 1986). If this is the rhetoric to describe former allies, one can imagine the terms used to describe Israel and the peace process. A similar response, at least in tone, is employed in describing 'the Zionist American move' to oust the international forces from Lebanon (Fatira, 1986, p. 10).

Political factors, notably Syria's isolation in the Arab world, were responsible for the radicalization in the rhetoric. A short article written just before the invasion of Kuwait and, perhaps even more importantly, before the downfall of the Soviet Union (under the title 'Zionism: The Political–Social Cancer') suggests that little had changed between the beginning of liberalization in the Soviet Union in 1986 and 1990 (Hasan, 1991). Against one mention of 'Israel' (with quotation marks), there are several references to the 'Zionist entity', the last of which appeared in the final paragraph and is qualified by the term 'racist' (p. 16). The basic theme is that Zionism is incorrigibly evil, whether under a right-wing Likud government or under a Labor government. Implacable hatred of the 'Zionist enemy' continued to prevail, and even intensify, after the Madrid peace conference in 1991 when the process favored the Palestinian track over the Syrian, increasing the danger that Israel would agree to concessions to the former only to be more obdurate with the latter.<sup>6</sup> The adoption of a more moderate tone in response to Syria's financial crisis, as predicted by neo-liberal theory, is sorely lacking.

The bifurcated portrayal of Israel – illegitimate in the news items and commentaries, and grudgingly acknowledged only in the interviews with Asad – seems to have changed only after the first intensive efforts by the US to bring about a peace between Syria and Israel in early 1994. By that time, 'full withdrawal for full peace' had become the most recurrent theme. Yet even after commentators referred to Israel by name, the tone remained intensely hostile. Thus, Colonel Dr Siyah al-'Azzam, commenting on the Labor prime minister Yitzchak Rabin's decision to make withdrawal from the Golan Heights contingent on a popular referendum, wrote: 'An aggressor state, that occupies the lands of another state by force, which demands a referendum on occupied territories is strange. Indeed it negates common sense, international law and its principles' (1994, p. 9). Nevertheless,

Israel is implicitly recognized as a state in a way that echoes the interview with Asad twenty years previously.

Asad himself became increasingly mellower over the years, even as he continued to criticize Israel. This came through in a long interview concerning a meeting, the first of its kind, between the Syrian president and a delegation of Israeli Arab politicians and dignitaries in October 1994. They had come to express their condolences after Asad's son Basil had been killed in a car crash (*Jaish al-Sha'b*, 1994). He told his audience that, before the Six-Day War in June 1967, UN observers lodged at least a hundred complaints of ceasefire infringements, apportioning at least 98 percent of the blame on Israel rather than Syria. Despite his harsh criticisms of Israel, he consistently referred to Israel without qualifiers and continuously emphasized Syria's desire to make peace on the basis of full withdrawal:

Peace means rights in the sense that each side achieves his right that he becomes sovereign over his interest. That is our understanding of peace ... and when we say peace of the brave, we mean that total peace be achieved and that each achieves his right and that no one tramples the other. (*Jaish al-Sha'b*, 1994, p. 8)

Asad's address to officers and soldiers on the occasion of the fifty-third anniversary of the founding of the Syrian Arab army in July 1998 also expressed moderation:

The 53rd commemoration day to the establishment of the Syrian Arab army comes at a time when we are in the midst of the battle for peace that we want to be fair and comprehensive. We conduct it with the same resolve the people and the army conducted all the battles. This battle has continued far longer than we expected, and has become much more complex than foreseen due to the obstinacy of the present government of Israel and its denial of the bases upon which the peace process set out. (*Jaish al-Sha'b*, 1998b, p. 4)

Nevertheless, rabid hostility continued to characterize articles relating to Israel's emergence, the Palestinian *nakba* (disaster), Zionist history and the alleged evil nature of the Jews. Major Sami' Ahmad Sulayman wrote this historical description of Syria's enemies in 1998:

Our Arab Syrian people had waged in the course of its history a bitter struggle against the various types of imperialists: the Ottomans, the French and finally the greedy Zionist invaders. As a result of the so-called Balfour promise, the racist Zionist entity was set up in the occupied land of Palestine, evicting its people. It did not make do with that but began to extend itself at the expense of neighboring Arab land; into the West Bank, Gaza and our beloved Julan [Golan] and into southern Lebanon. (Sulayman, 1998, p. 28)

The distinction that characterizes, for example, Palestinian national thought – between Zionism and Jews and Judaism – is markedly absent in *Jaish al-Sha'b*. An article entitled 'A Jewish Message', which appeared in a regular feature column in

1998, is an especially rabid but not unusual example of the description of Jews in the journal:

The material, which we have brought you is taken from an internal memo published in Israel in 1985 and is distributed amongst the Zionists in European countries in order that they operate according to its contents and distribute them amongst their relatives after reading it. The letter begins with the statement 'Read this message and give it to your relative in order to strengthen his spirit and do not fear the gentile (goya [sic]) from all the ethnic groups in the world'.

Anyone who delves into the meaning of this message discovers the hatred, blind fanaticism and racism, which flows like deadly poison against all ethnic groups indiscriminately. One also discovers the extent to which 'Israel' including its leaders and its Rabbis share an outlook of wiping out the (non-Jewish) world especially the Arabs who form the daily nightmare to the security of Israel. (al-Khalid, 1998, p. 50)

From the above analysis, it is clear that neo-liberal perspectives fail to explain the initiation of change in Syrian perceptions of Israel. Syria undertook its first liberalizing economic reforms in 1991 when it brought out an investment law that encouraged foreign private participation in the Syrian economy. Nevertheless, a significant change in perceptions took place only in 1994. Realism better explains the initiation of change. It occurred when the US was prepared to foster Israeli-Syrian talks, which Syria believed might lead to Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights. But even realism cannot explain the persistence of the portrayal of demonic images of the enemy (as the above quotations demonstrate) long after these talks ensued. That would require recognition of the importance of ideology, as the idealists and constructivists argue. Similarly, constructivist accounts alone fail to explain the change that did take place. In short, the findings suggest that no single theory can explain the patterns of both continuity and change.

### **Egypt's *al-Nasr***

On an unspecified day in August 1973, the minister of war and the general commander of the Egyptian armed forces Marshal Ahmad Isma'il Ali told the graduating class of a reserve officer training course that 'Our understanding of the Israeli enemy and his methods increases with every passing day and on the basis of that understanding we are preparing day in day out for battle' (*al-Nasr*, 1973, p. 17). This brief quotation from a speech given so close to the outbreak of the war in October provides a striking contrast to the portrayal of Israel in the Syrian military. Although Isma'il described the state as the enemy – as an occupying force in the Sinai – he nevertheless called the enemy by name and therefore signified, at least implicitly, that it was a state. In May 1979, soon after the signing of the Camp David peace agreement in March of that year, *al-Nasr* published what was previously unimaginable – a photograph of an Israeli diplomat shaking the hand of an Egyptian diplomat on a raised table with the American, Israeli and Egyptian flags prominently in the background (1979, p. 10). The prominence of the Israeli flag in the picture – more center stage than the Egyptian flag – is striking, and it is visually unparalleled in the Jordanian and Syrian journals.

President Sadat's considerable efforts to convince the Egyptian public of the merits of peace were reflected in the military as well. In the April 1979 issue of *al-Nasr*, leading Egyptian singers, film actors, authors and playwrights are quoted extolling the virtues of peace and expressing thanks to the president for achieving it (al-Tuhami, 1979). In the following month's issue, it was the turn of leading economists and businessmen to show how peace would translate into economic growth and higher standards of living for many Egyptians (al-Nazir, 1979). In short, a sense of euphoria over the 'victory of peace' swept the issues of *al-Nasr*, just as it did the civilian press. Significantly, Israel is rarely mentioned in these articles. But that euphoria faded against the dimmer realities of the peace process. The peace accords did not resolve the Palestinian problem, exposed Egypt to the hostility of Arab states – particularly Syria, for its 'betrayal' of the Arab cause – and was followed by the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. For the first time in over thirty years of Arab–Israeli conflict, in June 1982 Israeli troops occupied the outskirts of a capital of an Arab state and then, two months later, parts of the capital itself (Bregman, 2000, pp. 113–15).

Nevertheless, the basic commitment to peace, albeit a very cold one, was a continuous feature of *al-Nasr* under the regime of the new president, Mubarak, despite him having reversed Sadat's policy of relative isolation to re-emphasize the importance of the Arab world for Egypt (Aly, 1996). Throughout his rule, Israel was portrayed primarily through the realist prism as an adversarial state to be reckoned with militarily as well as politically – militarily, because Israel possesses technological knowledge that it integrates effectively into a powerful conventional army and a very rewarding relationship with the US. From the beginning of Mubarak's rule in 1981, *al-Nasr* expressed both Egypt's commitment to a full peace – which called for the complete withdrawal from all occupied lands and the resolution of the Palestinian problem – and Egypt's contentious but essentially correct relationship with Israel as a result of Israel's failure to resolve these issues. These themes appeared as early as the president's inaugural address to the People's Assembly, published in the October 1981 edition, soon after Sadat's assassination. It was a period of flux and instability in Egypt – the new president made frequent mention of the fact that the assassin was a member of the armed forces and the 'one and only traitor' in its ranks – but also a low point in Egyptian–Israeli relations. The assassination took place after major incidents of violence linked to Israeli retaliation raids in Lebanon. Nevertheless, he maintained a restrained view of Israel:

Egypt the State, Egypt and the people will persevere on the path of a lasting and comprehensive peace, based on the frameworks arrived at in Camp David and based on the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel to the letter.

Egypt the State, Egypt the people, will not spare any effort or time in continuing the talks on self-rule in order to place the Palestinian people on the first correct path in realizing its legitimate goals. (Mubarak, 1981, p. 43)

Seventeen years later, during the administration of the Likud prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu (1996–99), and yet another low point in Egyptian–Israeli relations, the tone is little different. An extensive article on the strategic goals of

Israeli policy reflects a classic realist reading of the former enemy (al-Dweik, 1998), which also stands in sharp contrast to Syrian commentaries on similar subjects. Under the sub-heading 'Zionist Ideology', the author noted that

Facts of history, most often destructive to Jewish life and property, bring Jews to focus on the sovereignty and continuation of the Hebrew state, which is the only Jewish state in the world. It has been established on what they believe to be their Torah land after a period of exile and suffering lasting 2000 years with Jerusalem as its eternal capital. Immigration is the formative principle of Zionism and considered to be the basic right enjoyed by Jews all over the world. What distinguished the Jews from others is that they exist in a regional setting that is either hostile or does not extend a hand of peace and refrains from complete normalization. (al-Dweik, 1998, p. 32)

Most Zionist Israelis would agree that this is a fair enough portrayal of the ideology they espouse. His portrayal of Israeli national security objectives would seem to them equally fair:

Successive Israeli governments – especially the present Likud government – accords first priority to protecting Israeli national security and ensuring the security of Israeli citizens according to the nature of both internal and external threats. Because of its importance, the military security complex in Israel is the cornerstone in policy and decision-making within Israel. Military officers (within the service and those retired) are regarded with great deference and possess great influence especially during periods when Israeli governments attempt to preserve Israel's qualitative military edge over its neighbors and those factors that deter confrontation with the Arab states. (al-Dweik, 1998, p. 32)

A fair treatment of the national security objectives of Israel, however, does not mean accepting that it has peaceful intentions. As this comment from the final paragraph shows, the author still perceived Israel as a threat to Arab security:

These are the controversial relations between Israeli national security and the strategy of its foreign policy ... This is in a nutshell, what strategic experts over the past consecutive fifty years have stressed. If only it would motivate the Arabs to renew the Arab strategy that was the cause of the victory of the 1973 war. I believe that this question calls for a detailed study regarding the realization of Arab strategic requirements on the threshold of the twenty-first century in light of the continuation of the Israeli and American threat to Arab security. (al-Dweik, 1998, p. 33)

And although right-wing Israeli governments suffered the brunt of the criticism in the pages of *al-Nasr*, the Labor government suffered its share, even when it was making territorial concessions to the Palestinians. The journal highlighted Egypt's intention to promote Arab economic integration by convening conferences limited to Arab states rather than conferences aimed at integrating Israel in a Middle Eastern framework of cooperation that conformed to Peres's vision of a new Middle East (al-Dweik, 1997, p. 32). During Rabin's second administration (1992–95), it expressed the government's opposition to what it perceived as the judicization of

Jerusalem, the establishment of new settlements and the extension of existing ones, and perceived Israeli delays in fulfilling their commitments to territorial withdrawal (*al-Nasr*, 1995a). Relations were also unfortunately clouded by reports that claimed that Israeli forces massacred surrendering Egyptian troops during the 1956 Sinai Campaign, the wars in June 1967 and, once again, in October 1973 (*al-Nasr*, 1995b). It is important to note, however, that it distinguished between the right-wing Likud governments and the Labor governments and acknowledged the peace camp's existence, even if it questioned its effectiveness (al-Dweik, 1997, p. 33). Yet for all its criticism of Israeli policy, the pejorative terms such as 'Zionist entity' or the references to 'Israel' or 'Israeli' in quotation marks so frequently found in the Syrian journal did not appear in *al-Nasr*.

Egyptian perceptions of Israel very much fit into the realist paradigm. Israel is regarded as Egypt's military rival, and the possibilities of war, since the initial euphoria following the signing of the Camp David peace agreements, have not been ruled out. Attempts by the US and, to a lesser extent, the European Community to foster regional economic integration were not, as neo-liberal theory might have predicted, met with enthusiasm in Egypt, but rather by hostility, even though the Egyptian government formulated a policy of economic liberalization. On the contrary, these regional economic conferences were seen as an extension of the political and potentially military battlefield. Once again, however, even the realist model falls short of providing a complete explanation. It fails to account for the change from realist to neo-liberal perceptions of Israel under Sadat. Constructivist accounts do, but then again the realist paradigm explains the regression to perceptions of a very cold peace that the Egyptian military entertains of Israel. A minor but important theme, specifically directed at the Netanyahu government, was the religious coloring of many of its ministers and chief consultants and what was perceived to be the radical ideology they espoused. The Egyptians related it to the internal security problem that fundamentalism posed to most states in the region. This conforms to those theories that see domestic concerns as shaping foreign policy and the perceptions of foreign states.

### Jordan's *al-Aqsa*

For decades, the Jordanian leadership had been known to have been secretly meeting with Zionist and Israeli leaders. The fact was indirectly acknowledged by King Hussein in his speech at the summit meeting on 25 July 1994 (presided over by US President Bill Clinton at the White House) in which he met Rabin for the first time in public (*al-Aqsa*, 1994c). Rabin's speech is also quoted at length. Hussein made it clear that, in contrast to the Egyptians, he was talking about a normal peace:

We believe that we are close to achieving this dream and that we bequeath to the coming generations in our region hope and clarity so that what is natural will replace what has been unnatural in our life, something that unfortunately was natural over so many years ... What is natural is that neighbours meet and people will give birth to human relations, that we all look to channel all our significant abilities to bring about a better future and a better tomorrow ... (*al-Aqsa*, 1994c, p. 6)

Even the criticism of Israel that appeared after the signing of the Israeli–Jordanian peace agreement in October 1994 – for example, during Netanyahu’s administration – is a world apart from how Israel was described in *al-Aqsa* before the official peace treaty. To begin with, all historical analysis of Zionism and Jews ceased. Reports relating to Israel are confined to current affairs relating to the peace process. The bulk of them are synopses of interviews and speeches by Hussein or by Crown Prince Hassan, clarifying Jordan’s positions and emphasizing its support for the Palestinian people and their right to independence and return (though never specifically to the Palestinian leader Arafat). Although they expressed their disagreements with Israel and disappointment in failing, in their view, to live up to its commitments and promises, they were careful to treat it as a sovereign state with which Jordan had signed a peace agreement (*al-Aqsa*, 1998b–e).

The sentiments expressed in Hussein’s speeches contrast sharply with an article, an example of many of its type, by a retired lieutenant-colonel entitled ‘The Roots of the Struggle between Nazi Germany and World Zionism’, published only five years earlier in the same journal (*Jumhur*, 1989). This version of the Nazi persecution of the Jews would probably raise eyebrows even amongst the most anti-Jewish revisionist historians:

The European people during the Middle Ages found out that the Jewish usurers had taken over most of their palaces, fortresses, herds and agricultural lands as a result of their inability to pay back the loans they borrowed from them to cover the costs of the Crusades. They therefore expelled them from all of Europe after they took back all their property [that the Jews appropriated]. The Jews then lived in ghettos in areas around the Mediterranean. During the European Renaissance and the age of discovery, the Jews reorganized themselves under the United Priestly Council and Supreme Masonry Council, returned to Europe and then, through the establishment of new religious orders, spread dissension and bloody disputes between the Church and the state ... After viscous media campaigns over a period of fifty years so did Germany have to succumb and granted the Jews these rights. No sooner had they secured them, however, that they also took over most of the leading positions in official institutions of the state, in journalism, the universities, railroad and the factories ... (*Jumhur*, 1989, p. 58)

The author then proceeded to claim that Europe’s six million Jews had left the continent by 1939. The holocaust, therefore, was a fabrication intended to secure world support for Zionist claims and to wring out massive reparations from Germany.

Perceptions of Israel itself before the peace treaty are also characterized by extreme hostility. In an article on Jordan and pan-Arabism written in 1989, the author pointed to Jordanian participation and aid in the 1936–39 revolt on behalf of the Palestinians, Emir Abdullah’s acceptance of partition as a means of protecting Palestinian land, and Abdullah’s leading role against Jewish immigration (*Fureihat*, 1989). These strenuous efforts on behalf of the Arab cause, according to the author, continued under Hussein when he attempted to convene an Arab summit on the eve of the Suez war to warn against the coming strike by the Jewish

state. The radical change in the portrayal of Israel in so short a time can only be explained by the primacy of regional and international political factors such as the peace process between Israel and the PLO and the transformation of the international system into a US-dominated unipolar world in which Jordan could more easily acknowledge basic common interests it shared with Israel by signing a peace treaty with it.

## Conclusion

Geopolitical factors conforming to the realist paradigm best explain changes in the perceptions of Israel over time in the army journals of Syria, Egypt and Jordan. Egyptian perceptions of Israel reflect the ebb and flow of Egyptian–Israeli relations. Yet despite movement up and down, there is also a basic continuity in the way Israel was portrayed. Except for an extremely short period of time, Israel was rendered neither entirely acceptable nor entirely illegitimate. Instead, it remained, in the realist tradition, a state adversary to be reckoned with. Nevertheless, there were ideological dimensions, such as a loyalty to Arabism, that colored the Egyptian narrative. These dimensions are best accounted for by the constructivist paradigm, which explains in larger measure both Syrian and Jordanian perceptions of Israel. But even constructivism does not account for the bifurcation into the way the Syrian commentators and feature columnists portrayed Israel and the way President Asad did, nor does it account for the mellowing of the rhetoric over the years. These changes are best accounted for by the realist paradigm – the loss of the Soviet ally and the dominance of a US interested in stabilizing state relations between Israel and its neighbors. In the Jordanian case, not only were the changes more dramatic, but the reason for it is also much clearer than in the Syrian case – the peace treaty with Israel after the Palestinians signed their interim agreement with the Jewish state. I could find no evidence to support the robustness of neo-liberal explanations. Despite a vested interest to globalize, and the inevitable linkage between globalization and making peace with Israel, economic crisis did not lead to changes in the perceptions of Israel.

The internal security paradigm fared somewhat better. In the case of Jordan, the vast improvement in perceptions of Israel, albeit only amongst the leadership, compared to its previous vilification, might be explained by the interim agreements signed by the PLO a year before. Whether this move legitimated Israel, at least to some degree, amongst Jordan's Palestinians is uncertain. After all, only the top leadership made reference to Israel after the signing of the peace agreement. The discrepancy between Asad's references to Israel and those made by the commentators can be explained by the nature of the regime. Perhaps only the leader is allowed to show moderation until at least formal peace is achieved. Nevertheless, this perspective does not account for the mellowing trend in Syria.

To conclude, changes in the regional and international balance of power and ideology are the principle factors that explain both variations in the portrayal of Israel amongst these actors and the variability in its portrayal over time in each state. Nevertheless, none of the theories offers a complete, timeless explanation of the issue. This suggests that theory should take into account the possibility of different layers of discourse and perception that coexist simultaneously. Changes in

layers closer to the diplomatic surface need not entail change in perceptions of Israel when more deeply embedded historical and structural issues relating to the adversary are being discussed. The limitations of any single theory to account for change in state elites' perceptions of the adversary suggest that caution should be used in attempting to capture the complexity of social and political life in any single overarching theory.

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### Notes

- 1 Of the five jacket covers I was able to locate for the years 1990–91, Mubarak's picture appeared on three – flimsy evidence, perhaps, but it does indicate a trend of depersonalization.
- 2 Asad, as a member of the Alawite sect, has gone to great lengths to show that he is a true Muslim and thus appease the Sunni majority.
- 3 For three of the many photos of the royal family in uniform, see those of King Hussein, Crown Prince Hassan and Prince Hashim, respectively, in *al-Aqsa* (1994a, b; 1998a).
- 4 Articles, Section 1 and 3, Syrian Constitution (available at [http://www.oefre.unibe.ch/law/icl/sy00000\\_.html](http://www.oefre.unibe.ch/law/icl/sy00000_.html)).
- 5 The inclusion of other ideological messages in addition to patriotism in the army journals of Syria and Jordan is yet another reflection of Egypt's legitimacy as a state.
- 6 A sample of titles of articles published in early 1992 would probably suffice to make the point (see Hasan, 1992; al-'Azzam, 1992; al-Budi, 1992).

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