Beyond 'Mowing the Grass': U.S. and Israeli Strategy in the Middle East

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Apr 24, 2018
Also available in
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Brief Analysis

Two former policymakers discuss whether the longtime allies can move beyond tactical responses to their strategic challenges in the region.

On April 18, Chuck Freilich and James Jeffrey addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Freilich is a senior fellow in the Belfer Center's International Security Program and a former Israeli deputy national security advisor. Jeffrey is the Institute's Philip Solondz Distinguished Fellow and a former deputy national security advisor in the George W. Bush administration. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

CHUCK FREILICH

The most dramatic change in Israel's strategic circumstances is that it no longer faces the existential threat it did in past decades. David Ben-Gurion once said that if and when the Jewish population in Israel reaches 5 million, the country's existence would be guaranteed. Today, that figure stands at 6.5 million. The question is no longer if Israel will survive, but rather what kind of Israel will survive?

There is reason for optimism. For one, Arab states want a relationship with Israel, and Saudi crown prince Muhammad bin Salman made history by recognizing the state's right to exist. Moreover, no superpower is hostile to Israel. It is still somewhat diplomatically isolated, but its foreign connections have never been stronger. And the

potential threat from weapons of mass destruction has decreased as work on Iran's nuclear program has been deferred—at least for now.

Nevertheless, Israel faces serious strategic threats. It is surrounded on all sides by failed states, states in crisis, or states at risk. It also faces a number of adversaries led by Iran, the most advanced opponent it has ever encountered. Israel's weakest point is its home front, and that is exactly what Iran and its proxies have decided to target by fighting a war of attrition.

How should Israel deal with this opponent? An Iranian-dominated Syria would be the worst possible outcome for Israel, since war with the Islamic Republic could then break out on the northern front at any time—a troubling prospect given that Tehran may be the first adversary Israel cannot defeat outright.

Demographics pose another major problem. In the West Bank and Israel combined, 40 percent of the population is Muslim. Although the Zionist movement never defined what percentage was required for a Jewish state, 60 percent is unquestionably not high enough to merit that label. Israel today is basically maintaining a military occupation.

The delegitimization of Israel abroad is another major problem. In the West, many young people no longer believe in the justifications they have heard for Israel's existence, let alone in the idea that the state is a success story. Changes in American demographics have likewise altered the bilateral relationship for the worse.

Israel also needs to recognize that while the military is still the basis of its security, the utility of force has diminished. There is no military solution to the Palestinian issue. A military strike on Iran's nuclear program would only delay its progress for a few years (though if need be, Israel will take that step). The country never truly solved its problems with military force; it simply managed them. Tired of conflict, Jordan and Egypt made peace with Israel; even Syria once held advanced peace talks with its enemy across the Golan. In theory, the Palestinians may one day tire of conflict, but this seems unlikely.

In light of these challenges, several recommendations for Israeli security policy stand out. First, the country should either reach an agreement with the Palestinians or separate unilaterally. An agreement is unlikely anytime soon. In the Arab world, the conflict has often been framed as a battle for rights, so there is little room for compromise. Israel needs to make clear that it is actively pursuing peace, and that if an agreement is not reached, then Palestinian intransigence is to blame. Alternatively, if no agreement is reached in the next few years, Israel should pursue unilateral separation.

Second, Israel should change its electoral system, which is the source of many of its strategic problems. Existing electoral institutions once served the country well, but they are deeply problematic today.

Third, Israel should make its relationship with the United States central to its national security policy. Although the alliance sometimes limits Israel's freedom of maneuver, it is unclear if the country would survive without American support—at the very least, it would be significantly poorer and weaker. In practical terms, prioritizing the relationship means aligning with American interests whenever humanly possible. A security agreement with Washington could incentivize the Israeli public to make important concessions toward a peace deal with the Palestinians. Moreover, if Iran goes nuclear, the U.S.-Israeli alliance would play an important role in managing a proliferated Middle East.

In the past, a regional security system that included Arab countries, the United States, and Israel was unthinkable—rather, Israel needed the United States to give it a qualitative military edge over its Arab neighbors. Recently, however, such a system has become conceivable, even if Crown Prince Muhammad has not explicitly talked about it.

Finally, Israelis should adopt a fundamentally different mindset toward their security. Many of them still perceive their homeland as a weak, besieged state whose existence is constantly at stake. The reality is that Israel is not weak

or in imminent existential danger, so it can act with greater restraint if it so chooses, focusing more on defense and diplomacy. There will be circumstances, however, when it will need to go on the offensive, potentially in the very near future on the northern front.

JAMES JEFFREY

President Trump's National Security Strategy and the Pentagon's 2018 National Defense Strategy describe the administration's approach to two broad issues: the American-led international security system it inherited, and the "four-and-a-half challenges" it faces from Russia, China, Iran, North Korea, and violent Islamist extremism. Currently, eight countries are capable of complementing this American-led system as security producers: Britain, France, Germany, India, Israel, Japan, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. These states have historically faced serious security challenges on their borders. In contrast, Russia and China aim to dismantle this global system and enter a nineteenth-century-style security environment.

Yet while the system can be challenged, the United States itself is rarely challenged directly. Washington's role is to support the security system, but that is a difficult mission to sell to the American public and allied governments. The key is to reiterate how the U.S.-led system has served the world's best interests—namely, by facilitating widespread peace and extraordinary prosperity since 1945, in terms of trade, the free flow of people and ideas, and collective security.

How does Israel fit into this strategy? Historically, the country has always emphasized its unique bilateral security relationship with the United States. For a long time it was a security and diplomacy consumer, even though it was capable of defending itself. It did not see itself as a major player in any global security system, partly because it is not a NATO state, and also because of its problematic relationship with the UN. For its part, the United States supported Israel not just to save the country, but to maintain the premise of the global security system.

Israel's position in that system has changed dramatically, however. The country is now a major provider of security in the region. It is militarily engaged in three of its neighboring countries—two with their permission, and a third (Syria) where it is acting against an enemy regime's interests. It also remains locked in a tense military standoff with Lebanon. More broadly, its military and nuclear deterrence capabilities play a major role in slowing proliferation activity in the region.

Although the United States has become less central to Israel's security, the American-led security system is absolutely central to it. The main problem facing Israel is Iran. While Syria used to be an independent state allied with the Islamic Republic, it is now entirely reliant on Tehran and can no longer act independently. Israel faces a fundamental threat from this northern coalition, and the American security system has been unable to act effectively against it.

In response, Washington should build a regional security system in which Israel takes part and the United States plays a leading role. For example, the administration could announce that it will treat any attack on Israel as a direct attack on the United States. Meanwhile, Israel could coordinate with other countries against Iranian expansion—not just with the United States, but with other regional powers as well. Since American policymakers are not fully sure of what to do in Syria and the wider Middle East, Israel and other U.S. allies will likely have to coordinate with each other to pull Washington into a regional security system.

This summary was prepared by Samuel Northrup. ❖

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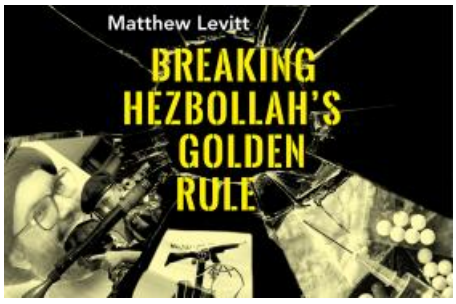

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