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An Inside Look at Israeli National Security Strategy

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Moshe "Bogie" Yaalon, Israel's former defense minister and military chief of staff, was the Rosenblatt Distinguished Visiting Fellow at The Washington Institute in 2016.



Brief Analysis

Former Israeli defense minister Moshe "Bogie" Yaalon offers his views on the Iran nuclear deal, Israeli-Palestinian relations, and what he hopes (and expects) from the next U.S. president.

On September 15, former Israeli defense minister and military chief of staff Moshe "Bogie" Yaalon addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. The following is a rapporteur's summary of his remarks.

The ongoing earthquake in the Arab world over the past five years has reoriented the political landscape and contributed to deep instability that will likely persist for the foreseeable future. This realignment is due to the collapse of the nation-state system imposed by colonialist powers, with artificially constructed states such as Syria, Iraq, and Libya breaking apart and creating dangerous power vacuums. These broken states are unlikely to put themselves back together again; instead, they will probably be reconstituted into ethnically homogenous cantons or loose confederations.

Israel must be sober and realistic in addressing its dangerous neighborhood, and its response should follow a few clear principles. First, it should not engage in wishful thinking or patronizing behavior by trying to impose democracy or a nation-state framework onto countries that are unwilling to accept such arrangements. Real democracy means more than just holding elections -- it requires a long process of education and socialization, which these countries have yet to undertake.

Second, Israel does not wish to intervene in internal Arab conflicts, though it will act decisively when its interests are

threatened and retaliate in clear, predictable ways. It learned this lesson in part from the events that followed its support for Lebanese president Bashir Gemayel during the 1982 war. Today, the Israeli government has deliberately adopted a neutral stance by not taking a public position on whether Bashar al-Assad should remain in power in Syria. At the same time, it will not allow violations of its sovereignty in the Golan Heights, delivery of advanced weapons to its enemies, or delivery of chemical weapons; the Israel Defense Forces have already demonstrated that they will respond firmly to such actions. In tandem with this strategy, Israel also provides humanitarian aid in Syria, including food, medical treatment, and fuel, in order to ameliorate the difficult conditions for victims of violence and prevent the refugee problem from growing worse.

Israel has employed a similar approach with Hamas: retaliating after rockets are fired, but otherwise seeking to avoid escalation and provide humanitarian support to the people of Gaza, including water and electricity. Elsewhere, Israel's unprecedented strategic cooperation with Egypt and Jordan contributes to its overall security in the region.

Altogether, this strategy has led to a fairly calm security situation despite the regional turmoil. Hezbollah has been reluctant to pursue conflict with Israel, and there has not been a single cross-border attack by Sunni jihadists in Syria, including the Islamic State. Moreover, since Israel has been holding Hamas responsible for all rocket fire from Gaza, such attacks are now infrequent; the wave of stabbings that began a year ago has largely dissipated as well.

Israel's biggest threat comes from further afield, in Iran. Although the nuclear deal lengthened Tehran's timetable for building a bomb, it came with a host of negative consequences too. The Iranians will retain some of their nuclear infrastructure, and thus the capacity to build a weapon in the next ten to fifteen years. They also continue to make regular conventional weapons deliveries to terrorist groups throughout the Middle East, including Hezbollah, radical Shiite militias in Iraq and Syria, and the Houthis in Yemen. In all, Iran has helped establish terrorist infrastructure on five continents -- a fact that belies its portrayal as moderate under the leadership of President Hassan Rouhani. Some see Tehran as part of the solution to the roiling regional conflicts because of its willingness to fight the Islamic State. Yet its opposition to that Sunni jihadist group should not be viewed as anything more than a ploy to remove an ideological rival and gain a greater foothold in the region.

Despite these threats, the geopolitical earthquake has created opportunities for Israel as well. Currently, the Middle East is divided into four broad camps: Iran's Shiite axis, including the Assad regime, Hezbollah, and Yemen's Houthis; the Muslim Brotherhood camp, led by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan but also encompassing elements in Egypt and Hamas; the global jihadist camp, including the Islamic State and al-Qaeda; and the Sunni Arab camp, which comprises Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and others. Israel and the latter camp share several common adversaries, and while their cooperation is already robust (albeit quiet), it is in their mutual interest to increase it even further.

The United States should join Israel in publicly aligning with the Sunni Arab camp. One recent step in this direction was the signing of a bilateral Memorandum of Understanding in which Washington will grant Israel \$38 billion in military assistance over the next decade. Yet Sunni states have echoed Israel's frustration with the Obama administration for not addressing their concerns about the nuclear deal, for allowing Iranian proxies to stir up trouble in the region, and for wavering in its commitment to Sunni leaders, including Hosni Mubarak and Abdul Fattah al-Sisi in the wake of Egypt's revolutions. To be sure, these states are not asking the United States to deploy ground troops to the region -- they just want Washington to be more engaged by supporting partners on the ground with airstrikes and intelligence and making their alliances known more openly.

Finally, while the world's focus has largely shifted to wider Arab issues in recent years, the Palestinian question still occupies a good deal of attention. Solving the conflict would be ideal, but it is not solvable at this time. Contrary to conventional wisdom, the core of the conflict does not stem from the disputed territories captured by Israel in the 1967 war, but from the fact that the Palestinians are not willing to accept the presence of Israel as the nation-state of

the Jewish people. As long as they are unwilling to recognize Israel's legitimacy, there is no value in making territorial concessions. This line of reasoning also dispels the idea that unilateral Israeli withdrawals would create the political momentum for a peace plan.

Since the gaps are too wide to bridge at this time, Israel should manage the conflict rather than trying to solve it. To move toward a political resolution, Israel should focus on building Palestinian society from the bottom up by improving economics, infrastructure, law enforcement, and governance in the Palestinian Authority. Ultimately, the Palestinians will also have to make sweeping changes to their education system, stop demonizing Jews, and concede that Israel has a right to at least some of the land. In other words, they cannot advance the cause of peace while also claiming that Tel Aviv is a settlement. These broad changes to Palestinian society are a prerequisite to real negotiations.

This summary was prepared by Aryeh Mellman.



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