

Israel's Geostrategic Position at a Time of Regional Instability

2014 Scholar-Statesman Award Dinner

by [Itamar Rabinovich \(/experts/itamar-rabinovich\)](/experts/itamar-rabinovich), [Michael Oren \(/experts/michael-oren\)](/experts/michael-oren)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Itamar Rabinovich \(/experts/itamar-rabinovich\)](/experts/itamar-rabinovich)

Itamar Rabinovich is a former Israeli ambassador to Washington and founding president of the Israel Institute.



[Michael Oren \(/experts/michael-oren\)](/experts/michael-oren)

Michael Oren represents the Kulanu Party, part of the Likud coalition in the Knesset, where he serves on the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee and chairs the lobby for U.S.-Israel relations.



Brief Analysis

On December 2, 2014, Ambassadors Itamar Rabinovich and Michael Oren were presented with the 2014 Washington Institute Scholar-Statesman Award for their contributions to the academic study of the Middle East and the practice of diplomacy. Oren is the author of two acclaimed books -- *Power, Faith and Fantasy: America in the Middle East: 1776 to the Present* and *Six Days of War: June 1967 and the Making of the Modern Middle East*. He also served as Israel's envoy to the United States from 2009 to 2013. Rabinovich, a renowned scholar of the Arab world, was Israel's ambassador to the United States and chief negotiator with Syria from 1993 to 1996. President of Tel Aviv University (TAU) from 1999 to 2007, Rabinovich continues his academic pursuits at TAU, New York University, the Brookings Institute, and the Israel Institute. After the award presentation, the diplomats joined Institute executive director Robert Satloff in an unscripted policy discussion. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks. [A complete transcript is available in PDF format \(/uploads/Documents/other/2014_SSAD_Transcript3.pdf\)](/uploads/Documents/other/2014_SSAD_Transcript3.pdf)

Meeting on the day that Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu dissolved his government, Ambassadors Itamar Rabinovich and Michael Oren focused their remarks on Israel's strategic position in an increasingly volatile region and on its unique bilateral relationship with the United States. Despite its internal political turmoil and threats on all its borders, Israel represents an island of relative stability in an unstable region. Oren asserted that the current period is not the first time in its history in which Israel simultaneously faces critical threats and unique opportunities.

Israel has managed to avoid becoming embroiled in one such threat, the conflict in Syria. Rabinovich stated that

although he is often critical of the prime minister, he supports Netanyahu's handling of the Syrian civil war. Both ambassadors concurred that it is in the best interest of their nation to refrain from meddling in Syrian affairs. Should ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declare Israel its new enemy, Israel will be compelled to act. Similarly, if Iran commands Hezbollah, its surrogate in Lebanon, to advance upon Israel, the Jewish state will respond. Iran threatens Israel not only through Hezbollah, but also through its ongoing nuclear research. The ambassadors expressed concern about the course of negotiations now taking place between Iran and the five permanent representatives of the United Nations Security Council and Germany (P5+1). According to Oren, it is naive to believe that Iranian president Hassan Rouhani is a moderate, that Iran is capable of fundamental change with regard to terror, and that the international community is capable of averting a nuclear Iran. Israel has no room for error, he said, particularly in light of evidence indicating that Iran has systematically lied regarding its nuclear program for the past thirty to forty years.

Rabinovich, on the other hand, focused his fears on the greater Middle East. Israel's existence, which is protected by second- and third-strike capability, is less at stake. But if Iran achieves nuclear capabilities, Saudi Arabia and the rest of the Middle East will follow suit, resulting in a nuclear Middle East and risk worldwide.

One proactive option for Israel moving forward may be to form strategic partnerships with Sunni Muslim states, including those in the Gulf. Rabinovich expressed his belief that the Saudis and Qataris, in particular, would be willing to cooperate with Israel. Oren had a more nuanced view, explaining that although Israel and the Gulf are experiencing a high point in their relations, open cooperation remains elusive. Given the common threats of ISIS, Iran, and the Muslim Brotherhood, Israel and the Gulf states have engaged in significant "discreet" cooperation, but whether this will translate into a frank and ongoing partnership remains to be seen. The two ambassadors agreed that additional cooperation will likely correlate with positive movement on the Palestinian issue.

Oren emphasized that, in the short term, the Israeli-Palestinian problem can only be "managed," not "solved." The ambassadors concurred that in order to enhance Israeli security and identity as a Jewish and democratic state, it is in Israel's best interest to work to better the lives of Israelis and Palestinians alike. As Israeli presence -- particularly military -- decreases in areas such as Ramallah, Nablus, and Jenin, increased cooperation is already evident in such fields as energy, water, and commerce. Rabinovich admitted that although peace is not possible right now, he remains optimistic that it can be achieved in the long run in the same way that the European Union was created despite the wounds of World War II.

Oren stated that one of the pillars of Israel's security is its relationship with the United States. Although the majority of the American populace self-defines as pro-Israel to varying degrees, the countries' respective administrations appear to be moving in opposite directions. While the Israeli government may shift toward the conservative right -- particularly in light of the recent government collapse -- the U.S. administration hovers left of center. This ideological difference has caused strained relations between Israel and the United States on a level that rises beyond personal differences between the nations' two leaders. Rabinovich suggests, nonetheless, that the U.S.-Israel relationship can be improved through directness, openness, and trust. The president and the prime minister should identify common causes and work together to create a joint legacy based on their unique strengths and capabilities.

While the strong U.S.-Israel relationship is a historical anomaly, the challenges facing the Middle East today date back to World War I and the Skyes-Picot agreement, in which France and Britain divided up the region without concern for cultural and ethnic borders. As this structure unravels, Israel's first priority is to take responsibility for its own security and to preserve its Jewish and democratic identity, Oren said. Despite Hamas in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and ISIS in Syria and Iraq, Israel is at peace with Egypt and Jordan, enjoys a strong partnership with the United States, has relations with China and India, and boasts a thriving economy. If Israeli leaders demonstrate strong statesmanship following the upcoming election, Israel can take advantage of current conditions to improve its

geostrategic position.

Rapporteur's summary prepared by Rebecca Allen.

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