

Israel, America, and a Churning Middle East (Part I)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Stephen Hadley served as national security advisor in the George W. Bush administration.



Brief Analysis

On February 4, 2014, former U.S. national security advisor Stephen Hadley addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute after participating in the Institute for National Security Studies annual conference in Tel Aviv and the Munich Security Conference. He was joined by Robert Satloff and Dennis Ross, The Washington Institute's executive director and counselor, respectively. The following is a rapporteur's summary of Hadley's remarks; Satloff's observations were published as *PolicyWatch 2204* (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/assessing-u.s.-strategy-in-the-israeli-palestinian-talks-a-trip-report>), and Ross's as *PolicyWatch 2207* (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/israel-america-and-a-churning-middle-east-part-ii>).

SYRIA ON THE MENU

Israelis are concerned less with the strategic threat that Syria faces and more with tactical interventions to stabilize the Golan front and deal with the risks posed by Hezbollah. While Israelis feel the emerging threat of al-Qaeda and Sunni fundamentalist groups drawn to their border by the Syria crisis, they do not perceive it as the most immediate problem. They continue to view Iran as a much more dramatic threat and remain consumed by the internal debate over the peace process with the Palestinians.

ISRAELI ATTITUDES TOWARD IRAN DIPLOMACY

Recent observations from the region indicate that a minority of Israelis wish the United States had never begun negotiations with Iran, albeit without suggesting an alternative policy. Yet there is more widespread concern over shaping advantageous terms for a comprehensive agreement by pressuring the U.S. administration to be tough in negotiating.

In particular, there is real disagreement between the United States and Israel on whether the redline for Iran is drawn at preventing a nuclear weapon or a nuclear weapons capability. Israelis do not want Iran to be a nuclear threshold state. But Iran is in fact already a threshold state and will likely remain one -- that line has been crossed.

Apparently, the Iranians will not accept a deal unless it involves some degree of enrichment. The details of how much enrichment is allowed and what constraints are put in place will determine how much time would remain for outsiders to detect a breakout attempt, as well as how much time would be available to respond sufficiently to such

an attempt. If the current negotiations produce an agreement that provides sufficient safeguards -- that is, significant extension of the time available to detect an Iranian breakout -- then Israel is likely to accept a severely limited enrichment program over the alternative of a military strike.

PREPARING FOR SUCCESS OR FAILURE ON IRAN

If talks succeed and sanctions begin to ease, the United States and its partners should plan ways to work together to check Iran's hegemonic aspirations in the region. If talks fail, the current U.S. plan rests largely on increasing sanctions. Yet Iran's "Plan B" could trump Washington's, since Tehran would likely say to the international community: "This is the deal we offered the P5+1. It is a reasonable deal consistent with the rights of any other nation. We are prepared to enshrine what we offer in a UN Security Council resolution. Accept our offer and let us out from under sanctions."

Such a strategy would seriously split the international community and Washington's P5+1 partners (Britain, China, France, Germany, and Russia). That would be a nightmare of nightmares, putting Washington in essentially the same situation it faced in February 2003 with respect to Iraq.

POLITICAL OBSTACLES TO ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN PEACE

While there have been some positive developments, reaching a peace agreement between the Israelis and the Palestinians will be difficult because of ongoing political invective. Recent statements by the leaders of various Israeli parties show a marked stridency. For all the complaints Israelis rightly make about how Palestinians and Arabs talk about them, the way some Israeli leaders talk about the Palestinians is quite remarkable as well. Each side seizes on the other's most extreme statements to justify lack of confidence in the overall process.

This problem persists at a time when both sides have taken major positive steps. For example, Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas has changed his view of Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank. Originally demanding immediate departure, he has since shifted to a three-year transition, then to a five-year transition period, then to approving the idea of NATO peacekeepers operating anywhere in the West Bank. While the latest proposal is still not acceptable to Israel, it marks significant movement. Yet the politics in both communities make it nearly impossible for Abbas or Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu to take the initiative in pushing for an agreement.

A NEW U.S. FRAMEWORK TO CATALYZE TALKS

An American framework agreement is likely needed to move the peace process forward. While the parties need to negotiate directly, Secretary of State John Kerry is correct in assuming that he needs to put down a piece of paper as a framework for negotiations going forward.

The current framework is different from the 2003 "Roadmap" put forth by the Quartet (i.e., the UN secretary-general, the EU, the United States, and Russia). That document laid out three phases, and the last was when the parties were to negotiate the final-status issues; the document itself was very general about those issues. By contrast, the current framework will deal directly with the core issues and provide clear guidelines on how to resolve them. Having the two parties negotiate on the basis of such a document would represent a major step forward. Even if each side has questions or reservations about the framework, they would be saying in effect that this is the basis on which they will produce an agreement.

For instance, when the United States presented the Roadmap in 2003, the Israeli government announced fourteen reservations while the Palestinians accepted the document as is. The U.S. position was that it would address Israel's objections in the process of negotiations. This time, when Secretary Kerry formally presents the current framework, both sides are likely to say they are not prepared to accept it in toto and will announce their reservations. Yet if the diplomacy is handled properly, both sides will still show up when negotiations are convened.

Some people suggest that final-status talks should proceed in a certain sequence, resolving borders and security first (therein resolving the settlements issue) while leaving the disposition of Jerusalem and the Palestinian "right of return" for later. But this idea's time has either passed or has not yet come.

PRESIDENT OBAMA HAS TO BE "ALL IN"

The Munich Security Conference included discussion of the U.S. role in the peace process. Although participants expressed widespread respect for Secretary Kerry's energy and commitment, they also questioned whether the president is similarly committed.

While in Munich, Secretary Kerry noted that President Obama had said to Abbas and Netanyahu that if they are all in, then he is all in. Yet the formula should be the other way around: if they are to be all in, the president himself has to be all in.

DEMONSTRATING U.S. ENGAGEMENT IN THE REGION

The argument that the United States is still engaged in the Middle East because it is engaged diplomatically does not sell in the region, especially given Washington's clear reluctance to engage militarily in any way. Such an argument does not truly answer the question "Is America really engaged, or is it withdrawing?"

The administration could take several steps to demonstrate in deed that it is not pivoting away from the region, that it is prepared to actively check Iran's influence, and that the military instrument is not off the table:

- Continue helping Baghdad with intelligence and providing military equipment to deal with al-Qaeda in Iraq. Such an approach would give Washington more leverage to deal with Iranian influence there.
- Leave some military force in Afghanistan after 2014.
- Step up training and arming of the democratic opposition in Syria, limited to factions that are not affiliated with al-Qaeda.
- Say privately to the parties in the Geneva II negotiations (and then leak publicly) that the United States is not prepared to let Syria bleed for the next year to eighteen months. Make it known that if the talks fail, America will act.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Harry Reis. ❖

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