

# Israeli National Security Strategy in the Expanded Coalition

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Brief Analysis

**O**n June 19, 2012, Shaul Mofaz addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. General Mofaz is vice prime minister of Israel, minister without portfolio, and head of the Kadima Party. A former military fellow at the Institute, he has also served as deputy prime minister, defense minister, and chief of staff of the Israel Defense Forces. The following is a rapporteur's summary of his remarks.

Today, Israel has a historic opportunity to achieve its national goals. Politically speaking, it enjoys the largest government coalition since the state's establishment, giving it the potential to agree on and work toward domestic and foreign goals. With a year-and-a-half until the next elections, time has become the most important issue for the Israeli government, and it will need to choose its priorities carefully.

## PRIMARY OBJECTIVES

**T**he new coalition has four primary objectives that have both domestic and foreign implications. First, it aims to pass a new law that will give all citizens -- including ultraorthodox Jews and Israeli Arabs -- the opportunity to undertake military or national service.

Second, it will seek to reform the political system, as the frequency of elections under the current system makes it difficult to implement decisions and plan for the long term. Consider that in the sixty-four years since Israel's establishment, there have been thirty-two different governments -- on average, a new government every two years. A reformed political system would give more power to the government and prime minister to govern rather than just survive. Israel must also adopt a new democratic rule that the largest political party forms the government. Under the current system, a party must be elected twice: first by the people, and then within the Knesset. It is possible to achieve both of these goals in one step, which would streamline and stabilize the political process. Also helpful would be a law stating that an elected government must serve for four years. In addition, the threshold for political parties should be raised from 2 percent to 3 or 4 percent. More than twelve parties participated in the most recent election, a huge number for a country of only 7 million people.

Third, the new coalition must pass a national budget that includes a social agenda. More must be done to reduce the cost of living, make various social improvements, and provide more opportunities for young and middle-class families.

Fourth, Israel must break the ice with the Palestinians and kickstart negotiations. These are not easy goals, particularly given the limited timetable. But with a strong coalition, they can be achieved.

## RESUMING NEGOTIATIONS

**F**or both Israel and the Palestinians, now is the time to get back to the negotiating table. Currently, there is little trust between the two sides, and the resultant gap makes it nearly impossible to reach a comprehensive resolution. Yet an agreement can and should be reached regarding issues on which the parties are already close, such as borders and security arrangements.

For example, the current gap between their proposals for redrawing the 1967 lines is only 3-5 percent. Furthermore, Israel believes that the Palestinians should be permitted to have their own security forces (though not a full-scale military that could threaten Israel). An interim agreement on these and related issues would brighten the atmosphere, rebuild trust, improve economic conditions, and make it easier to reach agreement on other core issues such as Jerusalem, refugees, water, holy sites, airspace, and so forth. In other words, an interim deal would pave the way for a permanent resolution to the conflict.

Now is not the time for unilateral steps, which should be considered only as a last resort. Instead, both sides must return to the table without preconditions, which caused the failure of negotiations two years ago. From Israel's perspective, agreeing to a settlement construction freeze as a precondition to talks sets an unacceptable precedent. It would be easier to put such agendas on the table once direct negotiations have begun. Whatever the case, the two sides can at least agree on terms of reference in the limited time before Israeli elections next year. Israel cannot continue to rule another nation; it must seek a solution that involves compromise on both sides.

At the same time, Israel must be clear about certain red lines. Security is one; another is the right of return. A two-state solution will require that Palestinian refugees settle in the Palestinian state alone. Israel is the only democratic Jewish country in the world, and it should remain so. Indeed, if the conflict is not resolved in the coming years, it would likely result in Israel losing its Jewish majority -- a prospect it considers even more dangerous than the Iranian threat. Time is therefore not in either party's favor.

The situation in Gaza represents another challenge for Israel. Hamas cannot be part of a Palestinian state unless it accepts the criteria put forth by the Quartet (i.e., the UN secretary-general, the EU, the United States, and Russia): namely, renunciation of violence, acceptance of previous agreements, and recognition of Israel. Failing this, Israel cannot see the group as a partner. An additional complication is Iran's deep involvement in Gaza, which includes active guidance and funding for terrorist groups.

## **IRAN'S NUCLEAR PROGRAM**

Israel regards the extremist regime in Tehran as an existential threat because it calls for destruction of the Jewish state, fields long-range ballistic missiles, and has shown a strong desire to acquire nuclear weapons. Yet unlike the Israeli-Palestinian issue, which must be resolved first and foremost by the two parties, Iran represents a problem for the West and moderate Arab countries as well.

As with prior talks in Istanbul and Baghdad, the recent negotiations in Moscow between Iran and the P5+1 (i.e., the United States, Britain, China, France, Russia, and Germany) did not yield an agreement on the nuclear program. Any viable deal must require Iran to halt all enrichment activity, remove all enrichment materials, and allow inspection and dismantlement of all underground facilities (mainly in Qom). Time is a critical factor here; thus far, Iran has been very successful at using negotiations as a delaying tactic. Although diplomacy and sanctions remain the preferred avenue at the moment, time is limited. Israel, the United States, and the rest of the international community must prepare for all options.

The military option should only be used as a last resort, and not before two issues are carefully considered: how much a strike would delay the nuclear program, and what impact it would have on the rest of the region.

## **COLLAPSE OF THE ASSAD REGIME**

Bashar al-Assad will not be able to remain in power for much longer, as any regime that slaughters its own innocent citizens will eventually collapse. The regime has only survived this long because of the loyalty of its military and support from Iran and Hizballah. Russian assistance to Damascus continues as well. Nevertheless, even the military has limits on how far it will go in killing its own people. Once the army begins to desert in large numbers,

the regime will quickly collapse. Until then, the international community, particularly Western countries, should provide humanitarian support for the people and warn Assad that he must stop the massacre.

## PEACE WITH EGYPT AND SECURITY IN THE SINAI

The formal results of Egypt's presidential election will soon be announced and will likely yield a more radical regime. Israel will continue its relationship with Egypt regardless of who becomes president. The Israeli government hopes that the new regime will not be actively hostile, and that it will view safeguarding the bilateral peace treaty as one of its highest priorities.

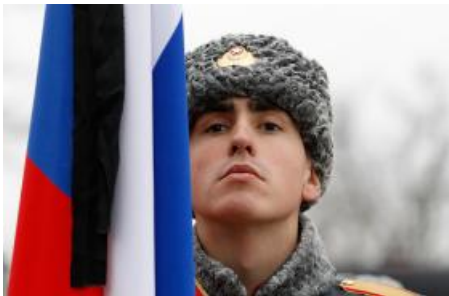
Although Israel's primary goal in Egypt is preservation of the treaty, security in the Sinai Peninsula is becoming increasingly important as well. In recent years, Sinai has turned into a no man's land; if this problem persists, it could impede good relations with Egypt. Israel expects Cairo's newly elected leadership to control Sinai in order to prevent cross-border terrorist attacks like the one that took place on June 18.

*This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Cory Felder. ❖*

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