

Israel's Strategic Landscape: A Diplomatic and Military Assessment

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Michael Herzog was appointed Israel's ambassador to the United States in 2021. Previously, he was an international fellow at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

On October 26, 2010, Tal Becker and Brig. Gen. (Ret.) Michael Herzog addressed a special Policy Forum luncheon at The Washington Institute to discuss current Israeli strategic thinking at the negotiating table and on possible future battlefields. Mr. Becker is an Israel-based international associate with the Institute. Previously, he served as a legal advisor to Israel's United Nations mission and as diplomatic advisor to Israeli foreign minister Tzipi Livni. Mr. Herzog is a Milton Fine international fellow of The Washington Institute who has served, over the last decade, as senior aide and advisor to four Israeli ministers of defense. He has also been a key participant in virtually every Israeli peace negotiation, including the current U.S.-led proximity talks. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Tal Becker

Although Israel's overarching goal is to maintain both its democratic and Jewish character while maximizing national security and peace, there remains a lack of consensus on how to achieve this aim. In the Israeli-Palestinian context, both sides feel constrained by a host of regional factors, security considerations, and domestic politics:

- Iran and -- in a different way -- Turkey's changing regional role is a cause for concern and is having an impact on policy calculations across the region;
- On the one hand, most Israelis understand the importance of establishing a Palestinian state that realizes Palestinian national aspirations as part of bringing an end to the conflict; however, they fear that a Palestinian state in the West Bank will be a repeat of the Gaza experience. Meanwhile, Palestinians fear that the creation of a Palestinian state will not guarantee the end of Israeli control and thus view statehood as viable only as part of a comprehensive deal in which core issues such as Jerusalem and refugees are resolved;

- Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas contends with opposition from both Hamas and Fatah colleagues and must consider a range of reactions across the Arab world, while Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu is concerned that his political coalition and base could disintegrate if he makes serious concessions too early on.

Although both sides are operating in a difficult and inopportune context, peace is not impossible. However, rather than envisioning a utopian peace, the parties should measure progress in comparison to the status quo (which is rapidly degenerating). Negotiations must be seen as a means rather than an end in themselves. Instead of asking what it will take to return to the negotiating table, all sides, the United States included, must ask themselves what needs to be in place to produce meaningful results and create the best chance for a successful outcome. Negotiations must be reconceptualized as only one of a range of tools to achieve progress and create space and incentives for improvements on the ground, including within the context of the Palestinian statebuilding project in the West Bank.

Indeed, there are steps both sides can take, away from the negotiating table, that would contribute to a two-state outcome, and these deserve attention. More must also be done by the leaders to move away from the usual slogans and create a compelling case for the difficult decisions involved in changing the status quo. The importance of each specific issue to be included in an agreement needs to be weighed against the importance and impact of achieving the agreement itself. Rather than dwelling on the "costs" and compromises of peace, stipulating "dealbreakers," and presenting a treaty almost as a favor to the other side, Israelis and Palestinians must shift their discourse to present a peace agreement as the best way to advance the national interests of each. Moreover, until leaders see a direct correlation between their ability to make concessions for peace and their own political success, they will remain averse to making the difficult decisions that will ultimately prove necessary for real progress to be achieved.

Creating conditions for progress on the Israeli-Palestinian track cannot be divorced from the continuing struggle to deny regional extremist forces the ability to dictate the agenda. A dual approach is needed that advances peace while limiting the capacity, intent, and legitimacy of actors such as Iran, Hizballah, and Hamas to undermine the prospects for coexistence.

Should negotiations fail, an array of unsavory possibilities will likely fill the void. In the West Bank, there are growing signals of a greater appetite for a resistance campaign against Israel rooted in promoting boycotts, isolation, and overall delegitimization. Meanwhile, members of the public on both sides increasingly see unilateral action as a viable option. All told, this climate is contributing to a sense in Israel of a challenge to its legitimacy both as a Jewish and as a democratic state.

This idea of Israel as a Jewish state has caused some confusion in the international arena. It is simply the recognition of the Jewish people's right to self-determination, side by side with corresponding Palestinian rights. This principle was the basis for the international support for Israel's establishment and the idea of partition. Palestinian and Arab objections have focused on its implications for the refugee issue as well as possible harm to the rights of the Arab minority living in Israel. These concerns can be addressed without diminishing the legitimacy of mutual recognition for Palestinian and Jewish national claims. In the Israeli view, a Palestinian refusal to recognize Israel as the nation state of the Jewish people, without prejudice to the rights of all citizens and minority groups, reveals an underlying inability to come to terms with Jewish self-determination and a reluctance to genuinely end the conflict. While these issues can only be fully resolved in the context of a comprehensive settlement, each side can do more today to signal a willingness to come to terms with the other's legitimacy and rights.

Although conditions for progress are certainly far from ideal, Israel has a responsibility to its citizens, before anything else, to constantly evaluate and reconfigure its actions to move closer to the objective of living in peace and security with all its neighbors.

Michael Herzog

Israel's overall strategic situation is arguably worse today than in recent years, even though it has seen improvements:

- The nation's economy is strong, due in part to a booming high-tech industry. Meanwhile, the discovery of offshore natural gas resources supports increased self-sufficiency.
- The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) are implementing lessons learned from the 2006 Lebanon war to prepare for a possible future conflict. In addition, security and defense relations with the United States are excellent.
- Security cooperation between Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA) is unprecedented.

Despite this progress, however, there are -- in terms of regional and international perspectives -- reasons for pessimism.

The story begins with a weakening of centrist, pragmatic leadership across the Arab world, with the void being filled by non-Arab forces such as Iran and Turkey. Ankara is gradually adopting a soft Islamist orientation, and relations with Israel have deteriorated. Question marks also hang over the future leadership of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the PA. And the Israeli-Palestinian peace process is at a standstill, with the West Bank and Gaza divided and the PA still unable to hold elections. In Lebanon, Hizballah has gained strength both politically and militarily, as demonstrated by the self-confidence surrounding Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad's recent visit to the country. The International Independent Investigation Commission (investigating the killing of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri) could drive Hizballah to provoke Israel in the near future.

Another ominous development for Israel involves the perception, now spreading across the Middle East, of waning U.S. influence. Whether warranted or not, such a perception has been fueled by the economic crisis, the upcoming withdrawal of American troops from Iraq, and the failure to halt Iran's nuclear program along with the potential disintegration of peace talks between the Israelis and Palestinians. Israel relies on U.S. strength to counteract radical forces in the region and cannot afford to see a further decline in the perception of American prestige.

Israel also faces systematic delegitimization efforts in the international arena. In two recent asymmetric conflicts -- Lebanon in 2006 and Gaza in 2008-2009 -- Israel's opponents have operated against civilians from civilian-populated areas. In such instances, the IDF's logical military response to rocket attacks -- to use extensive firepower and ground troops -- becomes much more difficult to enact against a backdrop of constant delegitimization. While Operation Cast Lead (in Gaza) was considered a military success, the Goldstone report produced in its wake caused great damage to the perception of Israel's right to self-defense.

A number of gamechangers could shift the momentum in Israel's direction -- e.g., a breakthrough in negotiations with the PA, the launching of negotiations with Syria, or a stoppage of Iran's nuclear program -- but none of these scenarios seems likely. On the Israeli-Palestinian front, substantial gaps between the parties, a lack of trust, and domestic constraints on both sides have caused negotiations to slow to a halt. Even if Prime Minister Netanyahu agrees to extend the moratorium on settlement construction in the West Bank by several months, another crisis will be imminent unless the United States, the Israelis, and the Palestinians establish terms of reference for negotiations, allowing the talks to continue.

A collapse in the peace process would have serious repercussions, including the possibility that the Palestinians would appeal directly to the UN in a unilateral bid for recognition within the 1967 borders. Despite an understanding on all sides (including the United States) of the costs of failure, the parties remain unable to create concrete policies that will move them forward. One possible consequence of the failure of the peace process is a destabilized Israeli government.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Sheli Chabon. ❖

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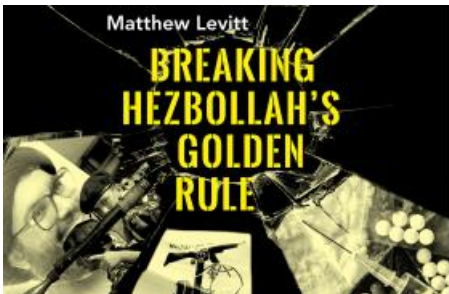
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