

Israel:

The Search for Peace and Security

Oct 18, 2009



In-Depth Reports

Download (<templateC04.php?CID=317>) the complete proceedings.

On October 18, 2009, Israeli deputy prime minister Dan Meridor delivered a keynote address to The Washington Institute's annual Weinberg Founders Conference in Leesburg, Virginia. Dan Meridor is Israel's deputy prime minister and minister of intelligence and atomic energy. During three decades in government, he has served as minister of justice, minister of finance, and chairman of the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee.

The following is a rapporteur's summary of his remarks.

The Israeli government remains focused on the longstanding search for peace and security. And the prospect of Iran obtaining nuclear capabilities remains Israel's most dangerous threat. If Iran is successful in its efforts to become a nuclear power, the consequences could be devastating.

The ramifications of a nuclear Iran are not limited to Israel, however. If Tehran realizes its ambitions, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty could collapse. For example, Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt have stated that they would pursue their own programs if Iran goes nuclear. These ambitions could spread further, leading to unchecked proliferation worldwide. Interestingly, most Arab countries believe that Israel possesses nuclear weapons, yet they do not feel threatened by this fact. Only after Iran stated its nuclear intentions did these countries begin to speak of building their own nuclear capabilities.

A nuclear Iran would also undermine America's alliance with the Gulf states. These bonds are already being challenged by Iran's growing influence in the region. If Iran becomes a hegemonic nuclear power, the Gulf countries would have no choice but to submit to Tehran and reduce their ties with Washington.

In addition to unsettling Arab states, a nuclear Iran would have a major effect on the Islamic world. As Tehran's power grows, it will weaken moderate Muslim-majority states as well as those moderate individuals and factions that support these governments. Meanwhile, jihadists and other extremists will rally around Iran and treat it as the leader of their revolution. Thus, while Iran has directly and explicitly threatened Israel and pledged to "remove this cancerous tumor," its efforts to attain nuclear weapons are in fact a global issue that endangers the entire world.

Clearly, then, time is of the essence. Iran is building missiles and enriching uranium on a daily basis. Washington must act now to avoid finding itself in a position where it is limited to two options: attack Iran or live with a nuclear Iran. If the United States mounts sufficient pressure and builds a coalition that takes concrete political, economic, and diplomatic steps against Iran, it will produce positive results, however difficult this route may be. Alternatively, if no immediate action is taken and Iran becomes nuclear and hegemonic, progress will be many times more difficult to achieve.

European countries seem to be voicing stronger rhetoric against Tehran's nuclear activities than is the United States. Yet, they have not matched their speech with actions, especially regarding their deep trade relations with

Iran. Moreover, it is unclear if other key countries such as Russia would join a coalition against Iran. Russia's participation is not a prerequisite for success, however -- Western countries possess enough power, economic and otherwise, to make effective moves against Iran. By using sanctions, coalition building, and an assortment of carrots and sticks, the U.S. administration is assembling a strategy that will likely yield results.

Iran's attainment of nuclear weapons would also have an impact on the peace process, another issue at the top of the Israeli government's agenda. By going nuclear, Iran would strengthen proxies such as Hizballah and Hamas in their fight against Israel and seriously impede any peace efforts.

In recent years, the Israeli leadership has offered significant compromises toward a peace agreement and the establishment of a Palestinian state. The Israeli right wing has moderated its desire to possess all of the land of Israel, and Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu of the Likud Party recently expressed support for a two-state solution. Former Likud prime minister Ariel Sharon also made a large concession in 2005 by disengaging from Gaza. Yet this concession led to an unstable and dangerous situation with the election of Hamas and its subsequent takeover of Gaza. Even as Israel made compromises, the Palestinians in Gaza squandered an opportunity to assume control over their own land when they elected Hamas. Now Israel faces a serious security threat from Gaza, and the Palestinian leadership is divided. Progress is further impeded by the fact that many Palestinians are not serious about establishing a state alongside Israel because they refuse to recognize Israel's right to exist. Until they are willing to recognize that the Jewish people are not simply a religious group but rather a nation that deserves its own state, a final agreement will be difficult to reach.

Despite recent setbacks in peace negotiations -- specifically, the paralyzing focus on a settlement freeze -- the process has come a long way in recent years. In the West Bank, the threat of terrorism has been diminished through cooperation between the Israeli and Palestinian security forces. The more-stable security situation has enabled economic progress to take hold. Checkpoints and roadblocks erected to prevent terrorist attacks are now being lifted, and trade is increasing. Today, the economic growth rate has risen to an estimated 8 percent. The improved situation on the ground is also providing a more normal life for Palestinians in the West Bank and giving them hope for the future.

In light of these conditions, the Israeli government is confident that negotiations will resume and result in measurable progress. Yet it is important to articulate exactly what these negotiations should aim to accomplish, rather than creating unrealistic expectations and running the risk of dashed hopes and resultant destabilization. In particular, the parties are unlikely to resolve final-status issues at this time. Although they can discuss such issues, it is more important that they emphasize issues on the ground, such as institution building and economic progress. Building these initiatives from the bottom up can change the reality of Palestinian and Israeli lives.

In addition to the peace process and Iran, the Israeli government is concerned about the UN's Goldstone Report on Gaza and its implications for international law. Following World War II, international laws regarding war became more relevant. The Geneva Conventions, the UN Security Council's courts, the International Criminal Court, and, more generally, the expansion of universal jurisdiction have all empowered the international community to set boundaries on traditional warfare. This idea of upholding certain moral standards during times of war is vital. Yet Hamas and Hizballah have changed the paradigm of war through their use of terror and civilian shields. During Operation Cast Lead, Israel showed more concern for Palestinian civilians than Hamas did, dropping flyers and making phone calls warning civilians of impending attacks. Despite these efforts to protect civilians, the Goldstone Report found Israel guilty of war crimes.

Clearly, those who drafted the report did not account for Hamas and Hizballah's paradigm-shifting tactics and therefore found Israel to be overwhelmingly at fault. Moreover, the UN Human Rights Council, which commissioned the report, has a history of unfairly targeting Israel. Many members of the investigative committee openly opposed

Israel's conduct in Gaza even before the investigation was launched. As a result, the text of the report is one-sided and contains recommendations that would make it impossible for Israel to defend itself against enemies who change the rules of war. Overall, the report was intended to intimidate Israel into avoiding military action in the future, but Israel will not be intimidated.

The Goldstone Report's ramifications are not limited to the Gaza war -- they will influence the future of the peace process as well, since Israel will cede land only if it knows that it can defend itself if attacked. Moreover, the report could dictate how other countries around the world defend themselves in the future. Alternatively, nations can take steps to adjust international law in a way that reflects recent changes in the rules of war.

Despite many challenges, Israel has made great progress since its inception. It has built a strong economy and flourishing culture and produced countless scientific and technological advances. The Israeli government is hopeful that even the difficult issues currently facing the nation can be solved. Specifically, the Iranian threat can be contained if the correct amount of pressure and sanctions is applied; the peace process can move forward if the bar is not set prohibitively high; and international law can be enhanced if countries are willing to discuss the new paradigm of warfare. ❖

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Grant Rumley

(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy\)](/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)

TOPICS

[Arab-Israeli Relations \(/policy-analysis/arab-israeli-relations\)](/policy-analysis/arab-israeli-relations)

[Peace Process \(/policy-analysis/peace-process\)](/policy-analysis/peace-process)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Iran \(/policy-analysis/iran\)](/policy-analysis/iran)

[Israel \(/policy-analysis/israel\)](/policy-analysis/israel)

[Palestinians \(/policy-analysis/palestinians\)](/policy-analysis/palestinians)