

# Strategic Challenges in a Changing Middle East

by [Moshe Yaalon \(/experts/moshe-yaalon\)](/experts/moshe-yaalon)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Moshe "Bogie" Yaalon, Israel's former defense minister and military chief of staff, was the Rosenblatt Distinguished Visiting Fellow at The Washington Institute in 2016.



Brief Analysis

Part of a series: [Zeev Schiff Memorial Lectures \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/zeev-schiff-memorial-lectures\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/zeev-schiff-memorial-lectures)

or see Part 1: [The Unlikely Peace: Prospects for an Israeli-Palestinian Agreement in 2008 \(/policy-analysis/unlikely-peace-prospects-israeli-palestinian-agreement-2008\)](/policy-analysis/unlikely-peace-prospects-israeli-palestinian-agreement-2008)

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## Moshe Yaalon, a senior minister in the government of Prime Minister Netanyahu and former chief of the IDF general staff, delivered the 2009 Zeev Schiff Memorial Lecture on Middle East Security

*On June 9, 2009 Lt. Gen. (Ret.) Moshe Yaalon of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) delivered the second annual Zeev Schiff Memorial Lecture on Middle East Security at The Washington Institute. General Yaalon is vice prime minister and minister of strategic affairs in the government of Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu. From 2002 to 2005, General Yaalon was IDF chief of the general staff. The following is a rapporteur's summary of General Yaalon's remarks.*

Once mainstream media believes something to be true, it becomes extremely difficult for anyone thereafter to question the veracity of the purported "fact." This phenomenon is manifest in Middle East news coverage in the Iranian issue, the tensions between pragmatists and radicals, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

## The Iranian Issue

The way in which the media frames the Iranian issue is problematic. First, the media portrays the problem as primarily a conflict between Iran and Israel.

Second, there is a recurring suggestion that sincere dialogue and nonmilitary sanctions will persuade the Iranians to peacefully give up their military nuclear program. The media does the world a disservice by framing the issue as such, because failure of dialogue and nonmilitary sanctions may necessitate a military solution.

Third, although the media treats Iran as a rational actor whose primary concern is American behavior, Iran has a

completely different agenda and motivations, many of which are very troubling to the West. Key Iranians consider the destruction of Israel as just the first step on the way to changing the entire American-led world order. Tehran is interested in turbulence and instability, since stability characterizes the very world order it wants to replace.

Israel does not claim that the military option should be the first to be exercised -- if anything, it should be the last. Effective political isolation and economic sanctions are big steps before any realistic military option and were successful in pressuring Libya to suspend its nuclear programs following the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.

## **Moderates vs. Radicals**

**T**he media has almost unanimously adopted two flawed approaches in addressing the tension between radicals and pragmatists in the Middle East: the dramatically nonempirical notion that the vast majority of Muslims embrace the same principles of peace, prosperity, and coexistence that the West exalts; and that the Western policy of confrontation has weakened the pragmatists, leaving radicals as the true representatives of Middle Eastern society.

This second notion errs by suggesting that radicals are ascendant primarily because of Western behavior and therefore can be stopped through engaging them in dialogue while granting pragmatists concessions. Both radicals and pragmatists take full advantage of the Western response to avoid accountability and expect more money and concessions, especially those that come at Israel's expense.

Therefore, it is counterproductive for the West to "regretfully" make more concessions, since this plays into the hands of the radicals and strengthens their claims. The West expects that concessions and apologies will lead to reciprocal moves on their part. In the Middle East, it just strengthens their convictions of victimhood and their resolve to restore honor.

One case that illustrates the dangers of this media-promoted approach is the claim that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the most important issue for Middle Easterners and must be solved to convince pragmatists to overcome radicals and help the West and Israel in confronting Iran. A serious look at that claim shows that radicalism in the Middle East predates the establishment of Israel and has always been characterized by anti-Western feelings.

Iran is the main reason for instability in the region. The strengthening of radicals and progress on the Iranian nuclear project are the main threats to Israeli and American security and regional interests. As long as radicals feel that they are marching toward victory, there can be no signs of weakness. This would only make the job more difficult.

## **The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict**

**W**hen it comes to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, there is again a set of so-called facts that have gone largely unchallenged: that the issue is primarily a territorial conflict and that a solution can therefore be achieved within a short period of time through conceding territory; that the only possible solution is a two state solution; and that Israeli "occupation" and settlement activity are major obstacles for moving toward this inevitable solution.

These assumptions were the basis of the Oslo process, and its failure indicates that they deserve reexamination. While the Israelis were ready for this kind of solution, the Palestinians did not accept that the two-state solution refers to two states for two peoples. In their view, Israel should remain undefined, so that in the future it can become a Palestinian state as well. The Palestinians refuse to accept Israel as a Jewish state because for them this is not a territorial dispute, but an existential conflict. The media's failure to report this most basic point creates a dangerously misleading portrayal of the situation and the prospects for its resolution.

The Palestinians have yet to remove the real obstacles to peace: accepting Israel as a Jewish state, stopping terror activity and incitement, and addressing the Palestinian Authority's (PA) lack of preparedness to assume the

responsibilities of a state -- governability, monopoly over the use of force, security, and economic stability. Unless these issues are fully addressed, the creation of a Palestinian state will lead to the establishment of an unstable terror entity that will threaten not only Israel but the stability of moderate regional states.

The goal of substantial progress toward a Palestinian state in two years is not realistic. If there is a political settlement in two years, there will be a "Hamastan" in the West Bank. Israel will not allow a repeat of the terror attacks after Oslo or a launching pad after the disengagement plan.

When the previous Israeli government engaged in talks with Syria, it spoke with now deceased president Hafiz al-Asad, who was clear about severing the relationship with Iran, dismantling all the militias in Lebanon, and prohibiting any Palestinian terrorists to operate from Damascus. But his son and current president, Bashar al-Asad, has honored none of these commitments. He will not commit to cutting the relationship with Iran or Hizballah, and he has made the status of Palestinians part of the deal. In addition, Bashar has said that even if there is peace, there will not be normalized relations.

## Bottom-Up Approach

Israel has no intention or will to govern the Palestinians, and is ready to consider ways to disengage and contribute to the ability of the PA to control the territories under its responsibility. The top-down approach that characterized the Oslo and Annapolis processes should be replaced by a performance-based, bottom-up approach, focusing on building the necessary infrastructure for peace.

This approach should include five reforms within the Palestinian authority, which at this stage can be performed only in the West Bank:

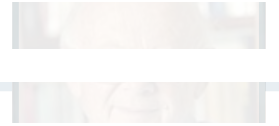
- educational reform, whereby the PA stops educating its people to deny any connection between the Jewish people and the land of Israel;
- economic reform that would focus on strengthening the role of the private sector and fight corruption;
- political reform that would promote an adequate governing culture by strengthening civil society and emphasizing universal values;
- law and order reform, which should lead to the implementation of the concept of "one authority, one law, one weapon" ; and
- security reform, under which there will be a unification of the security apparatus and a full range of activities against terrorism.

Success depends primarily on the Palestinian leadership, which until now has failed to establish an accountable political entity. It could take two, three, or five years; it is up to them. But once they reach it, final status issues can be discussed. The international community should encourage the Palestinians to make progress in this direction through the use of carrots and sticks and not by unconditional economic aid and blanket political support. Only when Palestinians give up the hope of destroying Israel and accept Israel's right to live in peace as a Jewish state will there be a chance to have a lasting peace.

*This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Max Mealy.*

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