

The Middle East Security Agenda: An Israeli Assessment

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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In keynote remarks made at The Washington Institute's 2009 Soref Symposium, Michael Herzog discussed the Israeli perspective on growing security challenges in the Middle East, with particular focus on the Iranian threat. Michael Herzog, a brigadier general in the Israel Defense Forces, currently serves as chief of staff to the Israeli minister of defense. A former visiting fellow at The Washington Institute, he is the author of the Washington Institute Policy Focus [Iranian Public Opinion on the Nuclear Program: A Potential Asset for the International Community \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=243\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=243) (2006).

The following is a rapporteur's summary of General Herzog's remarks. [Download a transcript of General Herzog's remarks in their entirety \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/html/pdf/HerzogKeynote.pdf\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/html/pdf/HerzogKeynote.pdf) (PDF).

The Middle East is in a transitional period. There are new governments in Israel and the United States. Lebanon is about to hold elections, and the Palestinians may do the same by 2010. More broadly, the region has felt the effects of the global economic situation. And many are concerned about both the Iranian nuclear threat and the potential consequences of the Taliban gaining control over Pakistani nuclear facilities. The sand dunes are shifting, and it is important to determine sooner rather than later where the Middle East is headed.

The primary concern for Arab countries is Iran. Many are skeptical of the notion that Tehran's nuclear program can be stopped -- they worry that the United States will not be assertive enough, and that the Arab states will be sold out. As a result, the divide between radicals and moderates is sharpening, with regional actors judging both the Iranian issue and other events along these axes. This could be seen in the reactions to the 2006 Lebanon war and, even more clearly, the war in Gaza. Today, fault lines are deepening between Palestinian and Lebanese factions. Saudi Arabia is pouring huge sums into the Lebanese elections. Morocco has cut off official ties with Iran. Bahrain is becoming increasingly concerned about Tehran's claims of sovereignty over the island nation, while Qatar has decided to align with Iran due to their close proximity. And Syria is keeping its options open by engaging in peace efforts, and by building ties with Iraq and Turkey rather than with Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

To address the region's growing divisions, we must clearly identify their source. The radical contingent has its head

in Tehran, its body in Damascus, and its arms in Lebanon and Gaza. Although each of these players presents different challenges, the main problem is Iran and its pursuit of nuclear weapons. Some argue that Iran wants civilian nuclear power, not weapons, but there is clear evidence to the contrary.

In order to fulfill its nuclear ambitions, Tehran needs three elements: fissile material, delivery systems, and weaponization. Israel and the United States disagree on whether or not Iran truly halted its weaponization program in 2003. Yet, regardless of who is correct, weaponization is not a significant obstacle -- the nuclear program's success is much more dependent on acquiring delivery systems and enriching uranium.

Iran already has the required delivery systems -- missiles -- and is working to extend their range to 2,000 kilometers by purchasing and developing new systems. Uranium enrichment is therefore the key issue. According to the latest intelligence and International Atomic Energy Agency reports, Iran already has more than a ton of low-enriched uranium. At this pace, it will have enough to produce a bomb as soon as the end of 2010 or early 2011.

Tehran will have four main options once it reaches breakout capacity. First, it could announce to the world that it is a nuclear power. This is probably not Iran's first choice, since it would draw international condemnation. Based on North Korea's experience, however, Iranian leaders may decide that announcing they have gone nuclear will shield them from repercussions. Therefore, this possibility cannot be ruled out.

Second, the Iranians could continue stockpiling low-enriched uranium without refining it into the high-enriched material needed for a bomb. In that case, they could bide their time, waiting until they feel that international resolve is weakened or pressure on them has lessened before moving forward with the program. A third possibility would be to halt enrichment while still increasing their stockpile by stealing or diverting additional low-enriched uranium. And a fourth option is to establish an entirely clandestine program parallel to their known, inspected program -- in fact, we cannot rule out the possibility that they have already done so.

Regardless of which scenario comes to pass, we will be in a danger zone once Iran reaches the breakout point. There is time for engagement, but not much. Although engagement is a sensible option, Israel has several questions for the United States about what such a strategy means.

First, what is the goal of engagement? How do you define it and measure it in clear, concrete terms? Second, what is your timeframe for this approach? Third, what benchmarks will you set in determining whether engagement is working? This is important because the Iranians will continue to enrich uranium as Washington and Europe attempt to engage them. Fourth, what will you do if engagement does not achieve its desired goal?

If engagement fails, the international community may choose to exploit Iran's acute vulnerability to sanctions. For example, the country's oil infrastructure has deteriorated to the point where Iranians have to import 40 percent of their refined petroleum needs. In light of this dependency, Europe could deny credit to companies that do business with Iran. These and other sanctions would place a great deal of pressure on the regime given the low price of oil and the global economic situation.

As far as Israel's stance on Iranian nuclearization is concerned, I would just make the following points: when we say that a nuclear Iran is unacceptable, we mean it. And when we say that all options are still on the table, we mean it.

Regarding the other key players in the region's growing radical contingent, Hamas remains a major Israeli concern. Israeli leaders are often asked -- even by many Arabs -- why they did not crush Hamas during the recent fighting in Gaza. The reason is primarily tactical. To borrow from Tom Friedman, the choice was whether to eradicate Hamas or educate it. Eradicating the group would have required a massive military deployment and a return to Israeli control over Gaza, with no exit in sight. The Palestinian Authority would not want to resume control amid Israeli bayonets, and no international actor would be willing to take Israel's place following such a campaign. Although Hamas is a concern, it is not Israel's top priority at the moment, and so the choice was made to "educate" the group instead.

Another common question is why, if the goal was to halt rocket attacks from Gaza, did Israel not reoccupy the Philadelphia Corridor on the Egyptian border? First, this would not have been sufficient to stop the smuggling of rockets -- Israel would also have had to control Rafah, where the smuggling tunnels end. Second, Egypt has recently become much more effective at preventing smuggling. We know this because the price of weapons in Gaza has increased dramatically. In retrospect, Hamas was badly beaten, and today it is trying to maintain quiet by forcing other groups to respect the ceasefire. Israel hopes that this ceasefire will last long enough for it to finish developing antirocket systems, whose necessity became clear after the 2006 war in Lebanon.

Hamas control of Gaza will continue to complicate the peace process with the Palestinians, of course. It is unclear how Israel can negotiate with Abu Mazen when some 40 percent of the Palestinian population is not under his control. Furthermore, if Hamas does not allow elections to be carried out in Gaza, even the Palestinians are unsure of what the potential consequences might be. In any case, the new Israeli government is still conducting its policy review on the peace process, so it is premature to say what Prime Minister Netanyahu will do.

In the meantime, both top-down and bottom-up state-building efforts should continue in order to lay the foundation of a Palestinian state. In particular, Gen. Keith Dayton should be permitted to continue his mission. Israel is very impressed with the professionalism and commitment he has shown in training Palestinian security officials and ensuring their cooperation with Israel. Although it is not yet possible to turn over complete security control to the Palestinians, the level of professional pride among the battalions trained in Jordan is unprecedented. In addition, we should continue with economic and infrastructure projects; such initiatives led to Palestinian economic growth rates of up to 4 percent in 2008 alone.

To the north, the Lebanese situation remains a concern as well. Although Israel has been successful during the past decade in preventing conflicts on that front from spreading elsewhere, Lebanon is still a sticking point in Israeli-Syrian negotiations. In the past, it was assumed that Lebanon would follow Syria's lead. Yet, recent political developments -- particularly the growing strength of Hizballah -- have changed the situation. Hizballah could conceivably win the upcoming Lebanese elections. A further difficulty is that Syria refuses to even negotiate until it knows what territory it will gain from Israel. For its part, Israel refuses to cede the Golan Heights until it knows that Syria will stop aiding Hizballah and Hamas.

Despite these bleak pictures, there are many opportunities for constructive action in the region. Such action will require cooperative effort, and Israel's neighbors are willing to take part as long as they believe that will not be left stranded, and that events are moving in the right direction.

[Download a transcript of General Herzog's remarks in their entirety](#)

<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/html/pdf/HerzogKeynote.pdf> (PDF). ❖

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