

# Ambassador's Inaugural Presentation: Israel's Strategic Challenges in a Changing Middle East

Dec 13, 2006



Brief Analysis

**O**n December 5, 2006, Sallai Meridor addressed The Washington Institute's Special Policy Forum. Recently appointed Israeli ambassador to the United States, he previously served as chairman of the Jewish Agency for Israel and as advisor to the Israeli ministers of defense and foreign affairs. The following is a rapporteur's summary of his remarks.

Shared values and very deep common interests bind the United States and Israel in a relationship that is critical to Israel's strength, well-being, and future. From freedom and peace to free trade to stopping weapons of mass destruction from getting into the hands of radical regimes, America's strategic interests are akin to Israel's.

## A New Middle East?

While 2006 marks the thirteenth anniversary of the Oslo agreements, optimistic expectations of the Middle East have not been realized. A new Middle East has indeed emerged, but with some very disturbing trends.

First, there is the marked increase in extremism. Coupled with the spirit of jihad and the resulting phenomenon of suicide bombers, this has effectively diminished the value of deterrence. Second, globalization has changed the dynamics between the global and the local; now local actors have the ability to impact the global theater. Third, Sunni and Shiite tensions have been exacerbated. Last, Iran is contributing to and capitalizing on these negative trends with ambitions to control the region, confront the West, and change the world order. Lebanon has become a microcosm of the conflict, and the entire region and world are passively watching. It is the world's challenge to ensure that Lebanon does not fall into the hands of Iran and Syria by urging the full implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1701.

We have seen one very positive development as well: the emerging similarity of interests between Israel and most moderate Arab countries. In the aftermath of the recent war with Hizballah, these similarities include unfavorable perceptions of Iran, the desire for stability in the region, and the need to fight terror and confront extremism. As the simplest test of the potential for cooperation between Israel and moderate Arab states, an analysis of shared adversaries and friends reveals a high degree of affinity. The challenge lies in building on these shared interests to improve the relationship between Israel and Arab states, to work together against the negative influence of Iran, and to inspire Arab states to help Palestinian moderates change course and move toward peace. The region faces a great threat, but this threat brings great opportunity that can hopefully be seized.

## Major Challenges Ahead

Israel, moderate Arab states, and the United States face major challenges. The Iranian attempt to obtain nuclear weapons capability constitutes the biggest threat to Israel, the region, and the world. With Iranian hands stretching across the region in the regime's pursuit of terror, Iran's acquisition of a military nuclear capacity would endanger the stability of all the moderate states in the region. Iran sees such moderate actors as obsolete at best, and shameful traitors to Islam at worst. If Iran controlled the region and its oil, the price the world would have to pay would not be

just monetary: it would be political and moral blackmail. Moreover, with a nuclear shield and long-range missiles, Iran would act in the West and against the West through incitement, subversion, and terror.

Three stated reasons underpin Iran's far-reaching ambitions. First, the regime sees in every Muslim a legitimate Iranian concern and interest; for example, President Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad has repeatedly voiced his concerns about the violation of religious minority rights in Europe. Second, Iran maintains that the Islamic revolution should not stay within the boundaries of the Middle East. Its means of spreading this revolution will probably not be peaceful, given Ahmadinezhad's stance on the issue (e.g., in one instance, he stated, "We are in the process of a historic war between the world of arrogance and the Islamic world"). With concerns about how long it will take for other Muslim countries and organizations like al-Qaeda to acquire nuclear capacity once Iran does, the threat to the region and the world grows. According to British prime minister Tony Blair, "It is not utterly fanciful to imagine states sponsoring nuclear terrorism from their soil, [and] not impossible to contemplate a rogue government helping such an acquisition [by terrorists]." His assertion accurately portrays the challenge facing Israel, the broader region, and the West. A greater sense of international urgency—embodied in a UN Security Council resolution against Iran—will help ensure that the Iranian threat does not become a reality. Confronted with the most severe threat since World War II, the world should get its act together in order to avoid repeating the mistakes of the 1930s.

The other challenge facing Israel is how to bring about peace with the Palestinians. Israel has undergone a major shift, from the right to the center, in the attitude of its people and the reflection of that attitude in its politics. Demographics, a perceived decrease in the threat posted by the eastern front, the absence of an overtly hostile Iraq, and the continual conflict with the Palestinians have all profoundly affected Israeli society. Today, the nation stands ready to recognize the right of the Palestinians to have a land of their own in peace alongside the state of Israel. Yet, Israel was disappointed by Yasser Arafat's rejection of Ehud Barak's offer at Camp David. This disappointment deepened when, after the Israeli disengagement from Gaza, Palestinians failed to capitalize on the opportunity to have their own sovereign state, instead choosing to freely elect a terrorist government and use the evacuated territories to mount attacks against Israel. In spite of this deep disappointment, ten days ago Israel decided to make yet another effort toward peace by accepting a ceasefire with the Palestinians, despite the inherent risks. Though some fifteen Qassam rockets have been launched since the ceasefire, Israel has chosen to remain restrained in its response—despite calls from some military elements and segments of the public to retaliate. It is Israel's hope that such restraint will allow Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas the opportunity to take positive steps toward stopping the attacks.

Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert's speech of eight days ago—the majority of which he wrote himself—was a message of peace intended to strengthen the moderates and weaken the extremists. To dissuade the Palestinians from using the ceasefire to prepare for another round of violence, Olmert's speech addressed two sets of Palestinian concerns. The first comprises immediate concerns—roadblocks, movement within the West Bank and between the West Bank and Gaza, the deteriorating economic situation, and, perhaps most important for Palestinians, prisoners. The second set of concerns involves the provision for an independent, sovereign Palestinian state existing alongside Israel in peace, security, and dignity. This is based on the concept of a two-state solution. Everybody knows that this is the only solution; the alternative is continuous bloodshed. Although Israel is strong and could continue under the current conditions indefinitely if forced to, it wants a different future for its children and the children of the Palestinians.

The path toward a two-state solution will demand rewriting Israel's national narrative, giving up some of its dreams, and uprooting many dutiful citizens. Nevertheless, Israel has the will and capacity to transform. For its part, the Hamas government must put aside games and deception and, in keeping with the requirements of the international community, do the following: (1) recognize Israel, (2) cease violence, and (3) abide by previous agreements. The

challenge faced by Palestinians is similar to that confronting Israelis. Palestinians will have to give up some of their dreams; they will have to tell diaspora Palestinians—as much as Israel will have to tell diaspora Jews—that they may return, but only to those places included in the new national state. Palestinians must replace victimhood with statehood, hatred with hope, and make a clear choice for peace over terror. We can help the Palestinians on this difficult road. Israel is prepared to offer assistance on issues such as the economy and prisoners—whose detainment is, it should be mentioned, the direct responsibility of the Hamas government. Arab states could afford much moral and material support as well. Still, at end of the day, it is a path only the Palestinians can walk. Israel prays that it is a path toward peace.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Zack Snyder. ❖

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