

Israel: Confronting the Strategic Challenges Ahead

May 12, 2006



In-Depth Reports

On May 12, 2006, Dan Meridor, former Israeli minister of finance, justice, and strategic affairs, addressed The Washington Institute's Soref Symposium. The following is a rapporteur's summary of his remarks.

The last several years have witnessed two parallel movements in Israeli and Palestinian societies. From the Israeli side, there was a movement toward an agreement with the Palestinians that required concessions and risks on Israel's part. On the Palestinian side, there was a simultaneous movement away from negotiations and toward extremism with the January 2006 election of a Hamas majority to the Palestinian Legislative Council.

Additionally, one can see the importance of religion and politics in these changes. In Israel the hardcore of the settler and religious national movements have argued that the Israeli government, even with majority support, has no right to give up land they believe was given to them by God. This dangerous assertion was also made by Yitzhak Rabin's assassin, Yigal Amir, though his actions were rejected by the vast majority of Israelis. The Palestinians had the same option in their last election, but moved away from politics and into the realm of religion. With a religious argument that God bequeathed territory to the Muslims, there can be no compromise.

Today Israel is in a very good strategic situation. With Egypt and Jordan at peace with Israel, there is no conventional threat between Israel and its neighbors. However, the battlefield is changing and Israel's opponents are taking their fights to new levels, namely above the conventional battlefield -- nuclear weapons -- and below it -- terrorism. Israel now faces significant threats from an axis of three, namely, Iran, Hamas, and Hizballah. All three have expressed a belief that Israel should not exist and must be eliminated. In addition to this rhetoric, Israel faces not only terrorism, but also Iran's development of nuclear weapons

At the same time, Israel is facing the implications of a significant setback in its relationship with the Palestinians: the lack of a central government. Israel cannot negotiate peace if there is no leader who is in a position to impose a peace agreement on his own people. Even if it was decided that war, rather than negotiations, would be the best alternative, the lack of a central leadership hinders even this effort, as there is no head of command to be pressured or who can concede. Israel needs a Palestinian leadership that is centralized.

In Israel there has been a shift in the political landscape that dominated the country over the last forty years. Since 1967, there has been a split between the left and the right. However, the dreams of both camps have collapsed -- the left in the wake of renewed terror attacks and the right in a realization that Israel can not hold onto the Palestinian territories and remain a Jewish democratic state. The Israeli people have become more realistic about the situation confronting them. In every poll 70-80 percent of Israelis believe in a two state solution.

Though the new Israeli government was elected and sworn in just a week ago it must move quickly. Ehud Olmert and his Kadima Party were elected on a platform to act and they must fulfill their commitment. The new government faces three major challenges. First, it must strengthen stability in the region and its partners in peace. Jordan is Israel's primary regional partner and any decision that Israel makes concerning the Palestinians must take into account the Jordanians. While Egypt has not been very active in taking initiative in the Arab-Israeli conflict it also

must be considered and Israel should support stability in Egypt and be aware of the threat of the Muslim Brotherhood. Beyond, these two nations Israel should seek to draw other Arab countries into this circle of peace.

Second, Iran presents three threats: the nuclear threat, the unprecedented terror threats (with money, instruction, and incitement), and also dangerous rhetoric of eliminating Israel. If Iran is allowed to get what it wants, it is a threat to everything Israel has built so far. If one understands the magnitude of Iran's threat and the development of nuclear weapons, its relationship with Russia must also be an issue of great concern.

Finally, Israel faces the significant challenge of how to deal with the Palestinians and what to do about Israel's eastern border. Israel should do everything possible to work toward peace as quickly as possible. However, this goal may be impossible given the current political situation. The current coalition, while wide, is very fragile and it must act quickly to prepare and implement a plan. The Israeli government understands that it cannot stay idle and wait for developments, especially with the threat of Hamas renewing terror attacks. It is in this context that Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert's May 23 visit to Washington is so important. Israel must continue to address questions that have not yet been answered, including which settlements are to be dismantled, where to relocate settlers, whether there will be a Palestinian partner with whom to work on withdrawal issues, and whether the Israeli Defense Force will remain in the West Bank or leave as it did from Gaza. A particularly important question will be the American reaction to the withdrawal. Perhaps the United States cannot say that the lines to which Israel withdraws are final borders, but that leaves many possibilities for how the United States can react positively to the withdrawal, for instance by declaring that the withdrawal lines are boundaries, though temporary ones.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Elizabeth Young. ❖

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