What Window of Opportunity?

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Articles & Testimony

During the build-up to the 2003 Iraq War, President George W. Bush delivered a watershed speech at a prominent Washington DC-based think tank. In late February at the American Enterprise Institute, Bush suggested that after dealing with Saddam Hussein, Israel "will be expected to support the creation of a viable Palestinian state and to work as quickly as possible toward a final status agreement."

The point was not that the United States would be downgrading Israel as an ally the "day after," rather that Israel's improved postwar security situation would soon allow it to safely conciliate the Palestinians.

This mindset, shared by all four members of the road map's Quartet -- the multilateral body made up of the US, EU, UN and Russia -- was tacitly based on the post-1991 Gulf War experience. Then, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin came to believe that the (first) US victory over Saddam had created a proverbial "window of opportunity to take risks for peace."

This catchphrase held that with Iraq sidelined, Israel had a fleeting moment to solidify peaceful relations with its neighbors before they could reconstitute their forces and once again threaten Israel's survival.

Unfortunately, this historical analogy is flawed, with important implications for the road map.

The 1991 Gulf War did create a limited window of opportunity by qualitatively improving Israeli security. But the same cannot be said about the 2003 Iraq War.

During the 1980s, the Iraqi army had become the largest in the Middle East and the most powerful in the Persian Gulf. Iraq was also on the verge of acquiring nuclear weapons. The 1991 Gulf War destroyed half of Iraq's conventional military forces and led, in Rabin's words, to "the discovery of Iraq's nuclear plans, which postponed if not prevented a supremely dangerous threat."

Not only did the 1991 war neutralize Israel's toughest enemy, the Soviet Union was in the process of collapsing, thereby undercutting the Arab world's primary weapons supplier and creating a steady stream of Jewish emigrants to Israel.

By the time the Oslo framework was introduced to Rabin in early 1993, Israel's strategic position was thus at its pinnacle. This fact, more than any other, persuaded "Mr. Security" that Israel's postwar situation afforded the Jewish state a temporary opening to make concessions to the Arab world.

Now times are different. With Saddam's capabilities having never recovered from his 1991 defeat, subsequent inspections, and years of sanctions, Iraqi regime change has not significantly improved Israeli security.

This point was easy to miss. Leading up to the war the Israeli government and military elite actively contributed to the misperception that deposing Saddam Hussein would be a panacea for Israel. Whether it was a case of wishful thinking or the desire to support the US president, Israel's official line both before and after the war was exceedingly optimistic. And the international media, on the extremes of both the Left and the Right, often went even further by suggesting that the whole point of the war was to eliminate the Iraqi threat to Israel.

But rhetoric aside, Israel's main strategic threats have outlived Saddam. Rabin never fully appreciated the danger posed by terrorism. He called it a "second level of threat" that posed only small-scale safety problems for Israel.

Rabin was right, but only in reference to Palestinian terror based largely in neighboring states, where the Palestine Liberation Organization had operated since the mid-1960s. He did not foresee the impact of terror from within a Palestinian quasi-state, operating from bases in immediate proximity to Israeli cities.

The impact of this terror from 2000 onward went well beyond the daily personal security of Israelis, constituting a direct threat to Israel's economic security and Arab-Jewish modus vivendi. Rabin's "window," while there, was hence never as wide as believed.

Notwithstanding rosy predictions of postwar Israeli security, Saddam had always been a tertiary contributor to Palestinian terrorism. The bulk of resources funneled to Hamas and Islamic Jihad, not to mention Hizbullah, have come from Iran and Saudi Arabia -- not Iraq.

The Iranian threat has also intensified since Rabin's time. According to Muhammad el-Baradei, the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Iran's nuclear technology is considerably further along than Iraq's was at the time of the 1991 Gulf War.

That Teheran could potentially develop an "Islamic bomb" by as early as next year is particularly troublesome to Israel: Teheran has made veiled threats in the past that it would not hesitate to use nukes against the Jewish state. And these threats are lent urgency by credible reports of Iran's newly completed Shahab-3 ballistic missile, which is capable of striking anywhere in Israel.

In sum, defeating Saddam in 1991 significantly improved Israeli security -- though only temporarily and perhaps not enough for an "end of conflict" agreement, as envisioned in Oslo. In contrast, today Israel must contend with the mounting threat of Palestinian terrorism and a fickle Iranian regime on the brink of acquiring a nuclear option.

Like Oslo, the road map initiative adopts the window of opportunity mindset that calls on Israel to make immediate concessions before the Arab world poses a major threat. Unfortunately, we are presently past that point.

That does not mean Israel should rule out taking so-called risks for peace. But the road map to peace needs to lead through Arab and Muslim minds, not just the streets of Baghdad. ❖

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