

Pursuing Democracy and Peace in the Middle East

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Brief Analysis

One of the best ways to reconcile Israel and the Arab world and, simultaneously, meet the interests of the United States is to maintain a demarcation in the Middle East between rogue states—e.g., those in the "axis of evil"—and moderate states. These moderate states, which are also allies of the United States, include Israel, Jordan, Egypt, Turkey, and some Persian Gulf and North African countries. All of these countries must work together to ensure stability in the Middle East and contribute to the containment of rogue states.

A coalition of moderate states is feasible—such cooperation became prominent after the Oslo Accords, and it reached a high point at the 1996 Sharm el-Sheikh summit of peacemakers, where Israel, Turkey, and the moderate Arab states joined to condemn terrorism. Although this alliance is currently fractured, the circumstances required for its resumption can occur again. However, it is unlikely that such a coalition can be re-formed as long as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains unresolved. Whenever the Palestinian issue is a bleeding wound, the Middle East divides in the old way, with Israel on one side and the Arab and Muslim states on the other. The Palestinian issue is the only issue on which all the Arab states, moderate and rogue, tend to unite. When the peace process was on a positive track, however, the moderate states succeeded in isolating rogue states like Iraq.

Arafat as an Obstacle

Today, the primary obstacle to peace and serious dialogue with the Palestinians is Yasir Arafat. It is a tragedy that the Palestinian people—at a stage where they could gain statehood—are represented by such a leader and burdened with such a distorted mechanism of decisionmaking. The Palestinian opposition is unique in its lack of visible moderate elements; one sees only hardliners and radicals. The Israeli government does not seek to replace the Palestinian leadership; it can only demand the immediate cessation of terrorism. There is no opportunity for political dialogue with a leader who allows terror to continue. If there is no leadership on the Palestinian side willing to go along with the Zinni, Tenet, and Mitchell programs, then there will be more violence and terror.

The current Israeli coalition government is based on agreements, internal compromise, and joint action. Because the Israeli people are under attack and are facing life-threatening dangers, the unity government will not be fractured. As long as the Labor Party is a partner in the decisionmaking process, it will remain in the unity government. This government has discussed the question of expelling Arafat from the territories. The opinions on this, as on many security issues, are not divided according to party lines; this issue is not a matter of politics, but of what is in Israel's best interests. Ultimately, it was decided that expelling Arafat would not serve these interests.

Current Operations

Israel has been told that a political horizon is needed in order to restart the peace process. It has also been told that the only currently feasible horizon is the Saudi peace initiative recently adopted by the League of Arab States. The Saudi plan has many problems, however. First, it is not balanced—it demands very tangible concessions from Israel but offers only vague promises of rewards. Second, it addresses the issue of Palestinian refugees—one of the most sensitive issues for both sides—in an unacceptable way. Despite such problems, the Israeli government does not

reject the Saudi plan; Israel does want to see negotiations resume, and the Saudi initiative is a plausible starting point. The Israeli government's approach toward the Saudi plan has been very realistic, sober, and responsible.

Before negotiations can resume, terror must stop. There is no chance for a resumption of talks while terrorism against Israel continues. The purpose of the current military operation in the West Bank is to destroy the infrastructure of terror and save Israeli lives. Israeli security forces have succeeded in destroying dozens of explosives laboratories, along with several workshops and factories where Qassam rockets are manufactured. These forces have also arrested or killed those who masterminded some of the most deadly attacks on Israel, including the Passover bombing in Netanya, the Sbarro pizzeria bombing in Jerusalem, and the restaurant bombing in Haifa. The Israeli government hopes that this operation can be completed soon, but its objectives must be accomplished. The cessation of terrorism is essential to attaining stability in the region. Without stability, any discussion of a new Middle East is irrelevant. Military action cannot provide a comprehensive solution, but operations like the current one can meet urgent, lifesaving needs until a time when a long-term solution can be implemented. Although this operation will serve as a blow to the infrastructure of terrorism and perhaps bring about a pause in terrorist activities, Israel realizes that it will not result in a total cessation of such activities.

The Sharon government has taken into consideration the Bush administration's advice about this operation. The Israel Defense Forces began to withdraw from the West Bank, and the government went so far as to cancel some aspects of the operation. Again, Israel hopes to end this operation soon. Nothing will diminish the strong relationship between Israel and the United States or the respect that Israel has for President George W. Bush. At the same time, Israeli cabinet ministers are the ones who must go to the funerals of terror victims, look into the eyes of their relatives, and assure them that Israel did all it could to save their loved ones.

After the current operation, Israel may create buffer zones, more or less along the old Green Line. Something should be done to create an obstacle to terrorists looking to infiltrate Israel from the Palestinian areas; this idea has the backing of the entire cabinet. In many areas, the only practical location for such a separation is along the old Green Line. That said, any buffer zones would serve a security function only; they would have no political meaning concerning future borders.

Israel's Northern Border

Recently, obvious attempts have been made to open a second front on Israel's northern border with Lebanon. Hizballah is expanding its activities from the Shebaa Farms region to the entire Israeli northern border. The group has begun to shell Israeli civilian villages and military compounds in Israel and the Golan Heights. This is a blunt attempt to provoke Israel and open a new front. These new attacks are inspired by an Iranian strategy to destroy Israel from within by attacking Israeli civilians. The Karine-A arms shipment was a part of this strategy. The Israeli government has shown a great deal of restraint on such matters; it is very thankful that the United States has relayed a clear message to Syria and Iran that they are leading the region to the brink of explosion with their reckless behavior.

There is no doubt that Iran seeks to unleash Hizballah. With Syria, however, the situation is quite different. A warning message to Syria can be effective. The United Nations, from a legal and moral point of view, must speak out against these attacks, because Israel fulfilled its UN obligations by unilaterally withdrawing from Lebanon to the line required by the UN. That said, the Israeli government doubts that the UN secretary-general will be able to exert real pressure on Syria; such pressure can be applied only by the United States.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Aaron Resnick.

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