Imagining a Likud Foreign Policy

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Brief Analysis

Regional TrendsFebruary marks ten years since the end of the Gulf War. The situation in the Middle East today is vastly more dangerous than in 1991. The favorable regional conditions in 1991 that allowed the current peace process to begin have been reversed. Three key trends are the following:

After Iraqs defeat in the Gulf War, it was placed under UN monitoring and extensive sanctions, thereby removing a major threat from Israels calculus. Today, the situation is drastically different, with the absence of UN inspections for more than two years and the deterioration of sanctions against Iraq.

In 1991, Iran was still recovering from its exhaustive war with Iraq and could not fully participate in regional, specifically ArabIsraeli, affairs. By contrast, Iran is currently testing intermediate-range missiles and is expressing its strategic weight in places like Lebanon, where it has increased its support to Hizballah.

In 1991, the USSR was crumbling before its eventual collapse and was no longer in a position to offer strategic and military support to the enemies of Israel, while its successor the Russian Federation has more or less acquiesced to U.S. positions on the Middle East. Since 1996, however, Russia has taken a contrary approach to many U.S. policies and leadership in the region, in particular with regard to Iraqi sanctions and weapons inspections and the transfer of missile technology to Iran.

A Flawed Peace ProcessThe collapsing PalestinianIsraeli peace process has caused Israel to question some assumptions underlying the Oslo process. First, it is not clear that Israeli concessions improve regional stability, as Oslo assumed. For instance, Israels unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon may not have helped the stability of the region; indeed, it may have served as an impetus for the Palestinian al-Aqsa Intifada. Israelis see a paradox in the current situation: Baraks government offered the most concessions of any Israeli government and yet the internal security situation today is probably the worst since 1948.

A second assumption was that the Palestinians had undergone an irreversible change of intentions namely, a strategic choice for peace. The peace envisioned in the Oslo process requires that there be such a strategic change, because that peace will leave the Palestinians in a position to threaten Israel were they so inclined. This idea is quite different from the EgyptianIsrael peace treaty whereby security arrangements were put in place so that Egypt would not be able to threaten Israel in the unlikely, but nonetheless possible, case that its intentions toward Israel changed

for the worse.

Finally, it was assumed that if Israel resolved its dispute with the Palestinians, there would be regional benefits namely, that the states in the region would recognize Israel and live in peace with it. However, improved relations with some countries in the Arab world proved to be fleeting and provisional, subject to the ups and downs of the negotiations with the Palestinians. Moreover, the peace process with the Palestinians had no effect on larger regional strategic problems, especially the hegemonic threats of Iran and Iraq.

The Clinton PlanPresident Bill Clintons December 23 proposal deepened the mistakes of Oslo. This plan would make Jerusalem into a chessboard with some areas Israeli and some Palestinian, which means that there would be no security guarantees that would protect Israeli neighborhoods in the event that Palestinian intentions turned hostile. In effect, Clintons plan would make all of Jerusalem subject to the same problem that now afflicts Jerusalems Gilo neighborhood, where Palestinian extremists operating from nearby communities under Palestinian control (in this case, the village of Beit Jala) could fire into an adjacent Israeli neighborhood.

Similarly, Clintons plan does not provide security guarantees in the Jordan Valley against the possibility that the regional security environment could turn hostile. This plan would also require Israel to withdraw from the Jordan Valley after three to six years, irrespective of what has happened on the regional scene. Indeed, it is entirely possible that three to six years from now Iraq will no longer be under UN monitoring or sanctions and thus will be able to restore both its non-conventional and conventional forces, while Jordan could find itself under great pressure from Iraq. Under those circumstances, Israel could face the nightmare of an "eastern front" in which it faces the combined forces of Iraq, Syria, and Jordan directly across the Jordan River. Until this risk is gone, an Israeli withdrawal from the Jordan Valley seems worse than imprudent.

Alternatives to OsloSome have said that "Oslo is dead." This does not mean that the political institutions created by Oslo, such as the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC), are dead. Nor does it mean that negotiations will be fruitful. Actually, negotiations should continue, since negotiations are always preferable to unilateral actions in particular, a unilateral declaration of Palestinian statehood would be a mistake. However, this does mean that there will need to be a change in how the peace process is conducted in the future:

There must be a greater emphasis on the overall regional environment. The dual track system of IsraeliPalestinian and IsraeliArab negotiations must be revived. Furthermore, the process must address the hegemonic threats of Iran and Iraq.

Some differences are at present unbridgeable. Bridging proposals put forth over the years, such as making the village of Abu Dis on the outskirts of Jerusalem the Palestinian capital, have proven unacceptable to one or both sides. Faced with this reality, it is appropriate to think about interim agreements. A set of "arrangements for co-existence" would create conditions so that both Israelis and Palestinians, even with their differences, could live side by side. Over time, perhaps, these differences will narrow.

Any such arrangements would have to lower the current violence and provide for an enduring "non-belligerency" accord. Furthermore, any agreement must have clauses within it to withstand the shifts in balance of power, ideology, and national mood in the Middle East. These interim agreements must also protect Israels red lines such as the Jordan Valley and Jerusalem, allowing Israel its right under UN Security Council Resolution 242 "to secure and defensible borders." It will be difficult to convince the Palestinians to accept less than what they were offered at Camp David, but it is not necessarily impossible; after all, at Wye in 1998, the extent of the third redeployment was negotiated down from Arafats high expectations.

Clear rules of behavior must be established for continuing negotiations; specifically, violence cannot be acceptable as a tool of negotiation. Violence with negotiations will erode any public confidence in the peace process, and any

agreement reached will not be stable.

The time frame for negotiations must not contain arbitrary deadlines. Processes in international relations cannot be confined to limited time periods, including the terms of office of political leaders. Time is also needed to test the durability and permanence of interim arrangements and to ensure reciprocity of implementation.

High-level U.S. involvement should be reserved for situations where a breakthrough is close at hand and careful preparations have been made. The last few years have seen an intensive high-level U.S. role without achieving the desired results, perhaps relying too heavily on presidential involvement and thereby weakening its potential impact. There may be value in holding back high-level U.S. involvement in the peace process and principally allowing the parties to engage by themselves.

This Special Policy Forum report was prepared by Liat Radcliffe.

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