

# Israel's Strategy for Security and Peace

Mar 3, 2000



Brief Analysis

**T**he Palestinian Track The recent delay in talks between the Israelis and Palestinians is the result of an unnecessary crisis initiated by Palestinian Authority (PA) chairman Yasir Arafat. The motivation behind this tactic is the idea that you can squeeze more out of the Israelis through crisis than you can at the negotiating table. This artificial stalemate is designed to achieve more for the Palestinians, but ultimately it will not. Such political maneuvering is a mistake. The current dispute regarding the transfer of 6 percent of West Bank territory concerns implementation of one aspect of last year's Sharm al-Sheikh agreement, and this technicality has no real meaning with regard to final status. The Israelis are willing to discuss such issues, but Palestinian eagerness to stonewall the talks pertaining to them draws both parties away from the most important concerns.

Now is the time to confront the difficult issues. Israelis believe that Israeli and Palestinian goodwill and benevolent intentions will bring about a final status agreement by September of this year. The Palestinians should not try to delay any longer because peace will not only bring an end to the conflict, but also foster a new age of economic prosperity for the Palestinian people.

In the negotiations, Israel has four red lines. First, there must be demilitarization of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Second, there must be an Israeli presence along the Jordan River. Third, there is to be no partition of Jerusalem within its current municipal borders. Finally, Israel wants to keep most of the settlers under Israeli sovereignty.

The Syrian Track Recent Syrian behavior casts a dark shadow of doubt over Damascus's sincerity about reaching a peace agreement. The Israelis are certain the Syrians are willing to negotiate, but are they willing to commit to a final agreement? The Israelis are doubtful, primarily for two reasons. First, there has been a new wave of Syrian propaganda that compares the Israelis to the Nazis. Such comparisons are a terrible insult to every Israeli, who wonders why the Syrians would employ such methods when it is ultimately the Israeli people who decide, through referendum, if the peace agreement is acceptable. Second, Syria has encouraged Hizballah to wage guerilla-style attacks against Israeli soldiers along the Lebanese border and inside the security zone. The Syrians also facilitate the shipment of ammunition from Iran to south Lebanon through the international airport at Damascus. The Syrians are trying to inflict as many Israeli casualties as they can. It appears that the Syrians want negotiations, but they want Israel to come to the table weak and bleeding. Such policies are truly counter to Syrian interests. Nevertheless, Israel will not sit idly by if such attacks continue.

In the negotiations, which may commence next month, Israel will pursue four demands. First, Israel wants a sound security arrangement. Second, it needs a defensible border with Syria following the peace. Third, the natural water resources of the Golan Heights must be in Israeli hands. Finally, there must be a reasonable degree of normalization. Israel is committed to achieving a sound agreement with the Syrians, but the Israeli people will only approve an agreement if it provides their nation with more strength and security.

Withdrawal from Lebanon Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak promised to redeploy the Israeli Defense Forces behind the Lebanese border no later than July of this year. Israel has made it a priority to achieve this redeployment

through an agreement, but it will not hurry the talks with Syria in order to hasten a withdrawal from Lebanon. If Syria and Israel can get off to a serious start in their peace talks and achieve a framework of understanding with regard to the issue of withdrawal, such an agreement would reduce the number of casualties and normalize conditions in south Lebanon as well as in northern Israel.

Thus far, there has been no erosion in the performance and spirit of Israel's ally, the South Lebanese Army (SLA), despite the heavy losses that they have suffered. The SLA understands that Israel is committed to SLA soldiers and their families as well as to the 150,000 people of south Lebanon. Israel feels responsible to this community that has been under its protection for the past twenty-three years. Israel has no intention of turning these people into refugees.

**Iranian Elections** Recent Iranian parliamentary elections illustrate the broad and profound resentment of the Iranian people toward the theocratic regime in Tehran. But Iran's basic policies remains unchanged with respect to the export of terrorism and the production and development of weapons of mass destruction and long-range missiles. Even if it becomes clear that President Muhammad Khatami's reformers have secured a majority in the parliament, it is difficult to imagine that Iran will undergo a peaceful transition to moderation; the hardliners who now control the regime are unlikely to relinquish power quietly.

**Decline in Terrorism?** Terrorism in Israel has dropped to its lowest level in twenty-three years. There has been no change, however, in the motivation or operational capabilities of Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and other terrorist organizations. The decline in terrorism can be attributed both to the increased capacity of Israeli intelligence and to Israeli-Palestinian cooperation. The Palestinians are acting sincerely and efficiently in this regard. Perhaps they now understand that terror is the common enemy of both sides.

◆ This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Marcus Oliver.

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