

# Israel's Foreign Policy Agenda

Nov 1, 1999



Brief Analysis

**O**n October 24, 1999, Shlomo Ben-Ami, Israel's minister of public security, delivered the closing keynote address at The Washington Institute's Inaugural Weinberg Founders Conference. The following is a rapporteur's summary of his remarks. [Read a full transcript. \(templateC07.php?CID=82\)](#)

A conceptual gap exists between the foreign policies of former Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu and Prime Minister Ehud Barak. Netanyahu viewed Israel's position in terms of threats rather than opportunities to pursue common interests with the Arabs. For him, security was a precondition for comprehensive peace; there would be no peace unless national security was guaranteed. This was a strategic fallacy. The Barak government presupposes the opposite: peace with Israel's neighbors is the prerequisite for a stable, secure regional order.

**Palestinian Peace Track.** Palestinian self-determination and potential for statehood is now a platform of the Labor Party. There is less agreement, however, on the issue of separation from the Palestinians, a question that goes far beyond technical matters and must include a discussion of the underlying disparities between the two societies. Economic integration with the Palestinians should not be an overriding goal; Israel has attempted integration with the Palestinians over the last thirty years and has gained little more than a cheap labor force and increased corruption in certain Israeli businesses.

The establishment of a Palestinian state must not be unilateral. The significance of Israel's concession on this issue must not be undermined by declarations of support for Palestinian statehood by Europe and the United States. Rather, a Palestinian state must occur through mutual consent in order to prevent hostility.

**National Consensus.** Israeli society has developed a strong aversion to ideological governments. The large, pragmatic Israeli center is essential to achieving national consensus on an acceptable permanent settlement with the Palestinians. The Israeli national consensus on Judea and Samaria is based on four premises: there will be no return to the 1967 borders; no foreign army will be allowed to cross the Jordan river; settlements will be concentrated in "blocs"; and united Jerusalem will remain Israel's capital, while creative formulae will be elaborated to accommodate legitimate Palestinian rights in "Greater Jerusalem." The approach of the Israeli leadership in fashioning this reality must be sober and cautious while maintaining flexibility in responding to the challenges of forming political solutions to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

**Jerusalem.** Creativity is necessary to solve the problem of Jerusalem. "Greater Jerusalem" is where the potential for a final settlement is possible. Ideas must be advanced to accommodate Palestinian legitimate rights in "Greater Jerusalem." Palestinians already possess ingredients of sovereignty in eastern Jerusalem; specifically, the social services in Arab eastern Jerusalem are largely in the control of the Palestinian Authority (PA). In negotiations, the choice becomes to reverse or maintain this limited amount of self-rule or to upgrade it. It is only logical that the negotiations will lead to an upgraded Palestinian role in Jerusalem, not a diminished one. The idea of boroughs that has been put forward may contribute to negotiation.

**The U.S. Role.** The U.S. role in the peace process is primarily that of a facilitator. The moment the United States

becomes a daily broker, every conflict Israel has with PA chairman Yasir Arafat becomes a conflict with America. Yet, Barak's preference of a limited U.S. role in negotiations may not materialize; the tendency of the PA to call on U.S. intervention when difficulties slow the process combined with the pressure on the U.S. administration to ensure success before the end of the President Bill Clinton's term may increase U.S. involvement. The Israeli government asks the U.S. administration to be cautious of the level of involvement when it is not needed. Moreover, the most essential form of U.S. involvement is economic support to the peace process.

**Syria-Lebanon Peace Track.** There is reason to be skeptical of a breakthrough in peace negotiations with Syria. Both confrontation and peace are destabilizing to Syrian president Hafiz al-Asad's regime. Peace would create for him a situation in which the dictatorial nature of Syria may weaken. Syria derives some of its regional strength from its role as one of the only Arab powers that has not ended its political struggle with Israel; the likelihood that peace would entail the loss of that role and status is a threat to Asad. In contrast, maintaining a political conflict with Israel and assuring the succession of his son Bashar may be more vital concerns for the Syrian leader.

These factors greatly complicate Barak's plan for an Israeli pullout from southern Lebanon. A unilateral pullout at this point could entail direct confrontation with Syria if Hizballah subsequently decided to attack Israeli civilian settlements south of the border. Israel may be forced to act unilaterally so as finally to free itself of the Lebanon morass. Israel needs to deprive Syria of the Lebanon "card" and turn the issue instead to Israel's advantage vis--vis Damascus.

**Regional Security.** Regional security can be built alongside progress in the peace process. An end to the Arab-Israeli conflict will make a system of regional security possible. Nevertheless, the absence of shared values in the region, the lack of stability, and the lack of a common threat make global security in the Middle East problematic.

**Egypt:** It is in Israel's interest to terminate the Nasserite option in Egyptian foreign policy. Israel must try to increase the quality of relations between the two countries. Strategic dialogue with Egypt is good for Israel, as is heightened Egyptian participation in the peace process.

**Jordan:** The stability and prosperity of Jordan are essential interests of Israel. On the bilateral level, economic and financial cooperation must continue and increase. This, however, is contingent upon success in the remaining issues of the peace process. Israel must allow King Abdullah II to develop his inter-Arab relations while it discreetly makes clear that his rapprochement with Syria or Iraq should not reach the point where it changes in any substantial way the regional equilibrium of forces facing Israel.

**Iran:** Along with Iraq, Iran represents the most serious threat to Israel's security. A nuclear Iran will not only threaten Israel but will become a destabilizing factor in the entire region. It would encourage the nuclearization of other countries in the Middle East. Nevertheless, the real threat from Iran lies in the nature of the regime, not in the weapons at its disposal. The Barak government should acknowledge that Europe's way of "critical dialogue" between the West and Iran is a useful opportunity to enhance the process of internal change that would eventually contribute to Iran's coming to terms with the essential consequences of the Arab-Israeli peace process.

**Turkey:** Turkey is expected to continue its policy of strategic cooperation with the Israel. Israel will most likely strengthen its relations with Turkey while continuing economic cooperation. Israeli-Turkish relations must be viewed by both parties as a way to forge a wider vision of regional security.

**Russia:** The policies of both Yitzhak Rabin's and Netanyahu's governments vis--vis Russia lacked direction. Russia is an extremely important regional power and Israel must finally develop a national policy toward it. It is unthinkable to allow Israel's relations with Russia to become the fiefdom of specific political parties. In its rapprochement with Russia, Israel must be wary of vital U.S. interests, and in policymaking it should avoid centralizing the issue of the Kremlin's transfer of weapons technology to Iran.

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