

Israel in the Whirlwind: A New Government Meets a Changing Security Environment

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On June 3, 2013, Shai Feldman and Dan Schueftan addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Dr. Schueftan is director of the National Security Studies Center at the University of Haifa and the Goldman visiting professor of government at Georgetown University. Dr. Feldman is the Judith and Sidney Swartz director of the Crown Center for Middle East Studies at Brandeis University. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

SHAI FELDMAN

The recent volatility in the Middle East raises both serious challenges and important opportunities for the new Israeli government. Thus far, Israel has avoided making a major mistake in the two years since the Arab awakening began. In fact, it has handled the fallout from the regional uprisings with careful decisionmaking and an almost unparalleled clarity. This is particularly true in Syria, where Israel has refused to take sides in the civil war, focusing instead on preventing weapons transfers to Hezbollah. Such successes will make it easier for the new government to handle the more difficult decisions needed to ensure Israel's future as a democratic Jewish state.

One of those decisions is what to do about the Iranian nuclear program. Israelis continue to debate this issue thoroughly, with all options seemingly resulting in serious consequences.

Another central issue is Israel's relationship with Turkey. The two countries have already taken steps to mend the breach, but it remains unclear how far such efforts will stretch, and for how long. Whatever the case, the issue will remain significant given Turkey's ambitions and rising status in the region, its robust economy, and its skill at using soft power.

The Arab awakening will influence Israeli decisionmaking as well. Although it remains an internal Arab movement, the combination of rising political Islam and growing regional instability directly affects Israel. In particular, the potential role of jihadists in Syria and the uncertain status of Jordan's stability will shape Israel's future security landscape.

Despite these challenges, Israel has also developed several important strategic assets in recent years. First, U.S.-

Israeli relations have reached a unique intimacy, particularly in the defense realm.

Second, Israel faces no conventional military threat at the moment. Syria and Iraq are consumed with their own domestic conflicts; more broadly, the region is increasingly divided between the Shiites of Iran, Iraq, and Hezbollah on the one hand, and the Sunnis of Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the smaller Gulf states on the other. Israelis have a distinct strategic advantage in such an environment, particularly since some Gulf states may in fact be inclined to unite with them against Iran.

A third asset is the recent reaffirmation of the Arab Peace Initiative, a Saudi-led proposal for Israel-Palestinian peace first proffered in 2002. Its reappearance indicates that Arab states are more amenable to productive discussion than they were in previous years.

A fourth asset is Israel's strong deterrence against nonstate actors such as Hezbollah and Hamas. No rockets have been launched from Lebanon since summer 2006, and Hezbollah is now being sucked into Syria's civil war, further distracting it from conflict with Israel.

Fifth, Israel is experiencing a spurt in economic growth resulting from responsible management of its fiscal and banking systems, with per capita gross domestic product now reaching European levels. In addition, the country is moving toward energy independence thanks in part to new hydrocarbon discoveries.

Despite the clear benefit of these strategic advantages, however, they also make it easier for the Israeli government to remain risk-averse and postpone tough decisions about ending the occupation of Palestinian territories. If Israel continues to do nothing, it risks sliding toward a de facto binational state instead of two states for two peoples. Any attempt to resolve the issue unilaterally will fail; Prime Minister Netanyahu must work with the Palestinian Authority to achieve a real, strategic success and defuse the existential threat inherent in the continued absence of regional peace. At a time when Washington is once again working to foster productive negotiations with the Palestinians, Israel should demonstrate its willingness to make impactful moves that lead to visible progress.

Indeed, the future of U.S. involvement in the region is itself a crucial factor in Israel's security calculus. Without active American interest and participation in the region, Israel would be isolated and therefore deeply threatened. Although the Arab uprisings have distracted certain states from their conflicts with Israel, they have also heightened the role of public opinion in these countries. In some cases this has brought radicalization to the fore, limiting Israel's ability to outwardly cooperate with many Arab states. Such dynamics could harm Israel's strategic standing, especially if Washington disengages from the region and Israeli leaders postpone important issues for too long.

DAN SCHUEFTAN

Over the past decade, Israeli society has undergone a fundamental change that will affect government decisionmaking for years to come. Beginning with the second Palestinian intifada in 2000, the country's concept of peace morphed drastically, with many Israelis coming to believe that the operative part of their aspirations toward peace should be shelved, if not discarded altogether. Beyond preventing war and deterring immediate enemies, Israel seemed to place any active push for peace with the Arabs on the back burner. In the past, many assumed that this wall of deterrence alone would eventually convince Arabs to stop undermining Israel. Yet despite repeatedly showing its societal, military, and political strength, Israel now faces a conflict that has not faded, but rather taken on a new form.

To be sure, Israel retains conventional military superiority in the region. But most of its enemies have moved away from the battlefield, switching to tactics that effectively pit population against population (e.g., indiscriminate rocket fire against Israeli villages). Similarly, some aspects of political decisionmaking in Arab countries have shifted from government leaders to the street, where radicalized citizens tend to view Israel as an enemy. Although many Arab states share strategic interests with Israel, the growing influence of radical public opinion has largely prevented significant cooperation between them.

Together, these factors indicate that Israel has entered a "post-peace process" era with the Palestinians. Although their new government is mostly center-leaning, Israelis see no Palestinian partner for peace. They also believe that the unstable regional circumstances do not allow for serious concessions or intensive negotiations. In particular, their uncertainty about how the Arab uprisings will affect Jordan means that no final deal can be made with the Palestinians on borders and related issues. For their part, the Palestinians will not accept a peace agreement without the inclusion of Gaza, where Hamas and its vehement anti-Israel stance continue to hold sway.

Despite this forlorn outlook on the prospects for lasting peace, Israel should still disengage from the West Bank -- not because such a move would bring about an agreement, but because it is necessary to maintaining the state's Jewish identity. Under the current circumstances, Israel cannot achieve that goal in any manner beyond unilateralism. Further, by steadily transferring control to the Palestinian Authority -- shifting territory from Area C to Area B, and from Area B to Area A -- Israel can show the international community that it is committed to withdrawing from Palestinian areas. To bolster such moves, the United States could help Israel further develop its counterterrorism barrier around the West Bank. U.S. approval of Israel's actions in the West Bank could also help shelter the country from UN and European pressure. Without such international acceptance, Israel risks being forced into a binational state.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Gabrielle Tudin.