



Israel, America, and the Long War

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I am honored to participate in this year's ICT conference in Herzliya. I extend my heartfelt congratulations to Dr. Boaz Ganor for organizing this exemplary event and my gratitude to him for offering to include me in it.

Two preparatory remarks:

First, I would like to echo my colleagues in thanking ICT for the moving tribute to Dr. Nick Pratt last night and to add a word about the man who delivered the tribute—Lt. Gen. Keith Dayton. It is simply this: if you are looking for the human embodiment of the idea that America's rightful role in the peace process is to help Israel and its neighbors achieve a truly secure peace, look no further than General Dayton.

Second, I would like to send my personal condolences to the family of Steven Sotloff, who I know was associated with ICT Herzliya. Despite the close spelling of our names, he was not a relative of mine; we had no personal connection. But over the last few days, I have acquired a certain odd connection with Mr. Sotloff. If you Google "ISIS and Satloff"—spelled the way I spell it, not the way he spells it—you will find that I have been killed several thousand times. This experience has made me think about the terrible fate of Mr. Sotloff in ways I have never considered in terms of other victims. It is a jarring feeling—one, of course, that cannot begin to approximate the sense of loss felt by the Sotloff family but a jarring feeling of violation nonetheless. And so, with special meaning, I send my condolences to his family.

I am a bit like a fish out of water. Here, at ICT, I am surrounded by counterterrorism experts. I am not one of them. I know something about modern Middle East history and history and something about U.S. policy in the Middle East. But CT is too important to leave to me. I can offer some observations on the margin.

The title of my talk is "America, Israel, and the Long War." This is connected to an article of mine which appeared yesterday in Mosaic magazine, which itself is a response to an article by Elliott Abrams on Israel's strategic situation today. The essential point of Elliott's article is that Israel today needs to view itself as just having completed, in Gaza, one in a long series of episodes—"a long war"—over its existence. To paraphrase, this is the idea that Israel, despite all its remarkable successes in its young life, remains shackled with a series of profound threats and daunting challenges that will likely define its strategic predicament far into the future. He lists five—the uncertainty of American leadership, the ambitions of the Iranian ayatollahs, the barbarism of Sunni jihadists, the decadence of Palestinian politics, the base populism of the "Arab street"—these, he argues, are regrettably potent features of the contemporary Middle East. Perhaps these trends aren't immutable but, he argues, they have depressingly powerful staying power. In such a violent world, the Jewish state can win battles, but victory in the war—real, ultimate, final victory in the form of full acceptance, from leaders and their

peoples, as a legitimate, even welcome partner in the region—is a distant dream. Until then, winning the battles, while building the state, should be sufficient. Dayenu.

As with much of what Elliott writes, I found myself agreeing with quite a lot. Yes, there is no wishing away either the mullahs' dream of evicting the Zionist "cancer" from the Middle East or their practical efforts to bring that about. Yes, there is no contesting the visceral Jew-hatred that passes for reasonable political discourse in many corners of the region. (In this regard, I was shocked to watch a clip from just last month, usefully cataloged by MEMRI, showing a senator delivering a Friday mosque sermon explaining the Jews' historic bloodlust for Christian children—shocked because it aired on the official television station of Jordan, one of only two Arab states at peace with Israel.) Yes, there is no arguing that Palestinians have been cursed too often and too long with leaders who look benignly at corruption and murder. And yes, there is, sadly, no dispelling the common view among Arabs, Israelis, Turks, and Iranians—to the chagrin of some, the glee of others—that America is, well, preoccupied. Yes, basically I agree with his core proposition: the grim reality for Israel is, of necessity, "the long war."

And yet I still felt there was something significant missing. He's right, as far as he goes, but it's not the whole story. Something basic, something fundamental, was missing. And that's what I wanted to focus on this morning.

What's missing? In my view, it is the idea that Israel is not just acted upon but that it is an actor in determining its fate. In an essay that justifiably celebrates Zionism as "the only democratic nationalist movement of the 20th century that succeeded," the fundamentally Zionist idea that Israel plays a role in shaping its destiny, beyond merely fending off enemies until they tire or move on to other enemies, is virtually absent.

Before I go any further, let me put some nervous listeners at ease. Mine is not the "if only" critique: the position of those who argue that "if only Israel—fill in the blank: withdrew from the West Bank, divided Jerusalem, gave up its nuclear deterrent, the list goes on—then the long war would end and peace would reign in the Holy Land." To many of its antagonists, the problem with Israel is not what it does but what it is, a sovereign Jewish state. There is not much Israel can do about that—setting aside, of course, the idea of a "one-state solution," as perverse a term as Middle East politics has ever produced.

But to recognize that there is nothing Israel can (or even should) do to change the views of the annihilationists of Iran, the beheaders of ISIS, or the Holocaust deniers, quenelle flashers, and blood libelers lurking in the dark corners of Western democracies and Middle Eastern despotisms alike does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that Israel's actions have no impact on its strategic position.

To the contrary, Israel's actions can have a substantial impact

- on the political class in democratic countries that shapes critical decisions about economic ties, diplomatic relations, and defense cooperation;
- on the truly "undecideds," including the many highly educated, highly sophisticated people whose lives shockingly don't revolve around the granular complexities of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute;
- on the changing demographic components of the American voting public, which no Israeli strategist should take for granted—one of Israel's most undervalued strategic assets.

In the military realm, it is axiomatic that actions have consequences; in Israel's case, military victory enhances deterrence while battlefield stalemate invites continued adventurism by its adversaries. Similarly, the idea that Israel's political actions have repercussions should not be controversial. Perhaps those repercussions are reasonable prices to be paid for the gains accrued from certain policies; the task of leaders is to make such assessments and reach judgment. But to suggest that there are no repercussions is delusional.

It is in this vein that, with all humility, I would suggest that what is sometimes missing is the political dimension for Israel of fighting the long war. This would include, for example, discussing the strategic importance of Israel's liberal values (championed, for example, by Benny Begin, no security slouch); the long-term benefits of embracing the higher standards of ethical behavior Israel demands of its warriors (a theme associated with Natan Sharansky, also no shrinking violet on security matters); and the immense value to Israel of projecting itself as ever ready for partnership in pursuit of real, secure peace, no matter how bleak the political horizon may be.

And just as war planners limit vulnerabilities and shorten lines of communication to make them more defensible, Israelis might consider applying the same approach to the political side of the long war. One area where this could entail a serious national discussion is over disentangling Israel's military occupation of the West Bank, a moral imperative that derives from aggression against Israel in 1967 and the absence of peace since then, from the highly political issue of the Jewish settlement project there.

More generally, I believe Israel will face unusual challenges as America—after several years of “time-out”—grudgingly accepts the reality that it too is in a long war. It's not the same as Israel's—a war over legitimacy, acceptance, and existence—but it is a long war nonetheless: a long war about Islamist extremism, both Sunni and Shiite, manifested through terrorism, unholy ambitions, and the pursuit of regional supremacy.

American strategy currently is muddled. That is a diplomatic understatement. Tomorrow night, the President will explain the goal and how we will achieve it. So, while we don't have to wait long to see what the strategy is, I think it is useful to point out how profound the difference will be between 2014 and 1990.

Think back: In 1990, a president declared that there was a threat in the Middle East—not a direct threat to American lives but one that was a direct threat to our friends and interests and one that could develop into a direct threat to us and, to address this threat, we were sending 500,000 American troops to the region. We said that countries in the region and around the world were welcome to join us—and many did—but we were coming nonetheless.

In 2014, I expect the president to say the following: there is a threat in the Middle East—not a direct threat to American lives but one that is a direct threat to our friends and interests and one that could develop into a direct threat to us and, to address this threat, we aren't sending any American troops. We are sending weapons, training, support, logistics, intelligence, and airpower, but we aren't sending troops. Others in the region and around the world are welcome to provide the manpower, but we are coming in the way I just defined.

This is not a call for deploying hundreds of thousands of American troops in the Middle East against ISIS—it is foolhardy, in our political environment, to even think of that sort of engagement. But it is constructive, I believe, to underscore how far we have come—and how far both our friends and adversaries will see we have come.

Some in America will advocate a Shiite strategy—working with Iran, Assad, Hezbollah, and their allies because their interest to destroy ISIS is real and their capabilities are proven. To some, the attraction of this strategy is real, but the costs are very high—not the moral costs, which I think should alone suffice to disqualify this approach, but the political costs, in terms of deepening American alienation of Sunni Arabs, on whom we will ultimately have to rely to defeat the Sunni Arabs of ISIS, are much too great.

My guess is that the president will outline a Sunni strategy that begins with Iraqi Sunnis and harkens back to the Awakening, and then expands to other Arab Sunnis, states, and peoples. But there are limits. Our stock with Sunnis is not so high right now.

Let me digress with this comment: as a citizen of one of the most churchgoing countries in the world, where faith is a vital piece of our national fabric, I am proud of our record in protecting vulnerable Muslims around the world: Kuwait, Bosnia, Iraq, Libya. Yes, we are often late and have not done enough, but this is still an enviable record of which we should be justly proud.

But we have a serious problem with Sunni Arabs these days. We rightly acted to protect Yazidis; we rightly acted to protect the Sunni Kurds of northern Iraq. But for three years we resisted our better instinct to protect the Sunni Arabs of Syria. We permitted the political disenfranchisement of Sunni Arabs in Iraq. And our flirtation with Iran—which too many in Washington view as an opportunity, not a threat—only worsens this problem.

This is where the story may, before long, come back to Israel. Some in Washington may survey the area and ask themselves, “Who has assets that could help us attract Sunni Arabs?” Some will look to you—and they won’t be looking at your military strength but your political control of the West Bank and Gaza. And they might see in this—namely, they may see in a reinvigorated peace process triggered by regional political considerations—an asset to secure Sunni Arab help in the long war.

In my view, it’s the wrong analysis—Sunnis are largely focused elsewhere and Israel has its own contacts with Sunnis these days. Indeed, after having arrived here after visits in Cairo and Amman, I can say that never before have I witnessed political and security officials of Arab countries compete with each other for who has better relations with Israel. But that’s not the point of my remark. My point is to underscore the theme that Israel either acts or is acted upon. My entire professional life, I have advised Israelis to take the initiative, control your destiny, or it will be controlled by others. That applies as much today to the U.S.-Israel relationship vis-à-vis Sunni Arab participation in the “long war” as it did in the era of Israel’s founding.

Let me conclude with the broader point. As the old joke goes, in one word, Israel’s situation is “good”; in two words, “not good.” The humbling reality is that Israel is likely to live for a long time in the gray netherworld between these two extremes. Many factors affect how light or dark the shade of gray will be. But Israel is not only acted upon, it acts. Strong, vibrant, creative, confident Israel has a role to play in this too.