



Picture by Phillip Martin¹

Arab-Israeli Peace: A New Strategic Argument

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In October 1973, Israeli leaders felt very comfortable with their security posture. After their victories against Arab armies in 1967, Israel established defensive positions in captured Syrian and Egyptian territory, giving them operational depth to defend the Jewish state. The Israeli Army established strong defensive positions along the east bank of the Suez Canal and the upper edges of the Golan Heights, backed up by the region's best air force. Given Israel's military reputation following the 1967 war, few in Israel gave serious thought to another Arab army jeopardizing Israel's safety. However, their overconfidence obfuscated strategic developments that would later cost them dearly in the Yom Kippur War.

Forty years later, Israel appears to be operating from a similar position of strength. Syria is in upheaval, embroiled in a vicious conflict between government forces loyal to the Alawite regime of Bashar Al Assad and a disparate group of Sunni rebels fighting under the banner of the Free Syrian Army. Egypt appears weakened with a dismal economy and political uncertainty. Jordan and Lebanon, Israel's other neighbors, are also looking inward as they deal with refugees, sectarianism, and radicalized elements. The threat from Palestinians appears manageable, with violence primarily confined to Gaza and very little international repercussions for their controversial policies on settlements or its blockade.

However, Israeli security defined within the boundaries of narrow tactical objectives may be blurring Israel's greater strategic security interests from a rapidly changing region. If one looks at the trajectory of the collective developments occurring in the Middle East—the rise of Islamic political parties, an Islamic youth bulge, and virulent religious tones against the West -- these trends pose a growing threat to Israel's security. And if a radicalized state in the region, like Iran, develops nuclear weapons, it would only magnify these threats.

However, the Arab Spring and Iran's continued malign behavior may present a unique opportunity for Israel to strengthen its security by leveraging the common interests of Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. Many GCC leaders have openly expressed the grave nature of the threat that Iran's aggressive ambitions pose to stability in the region. However, the old issues of Israeli state legitimacy and the marginalization of the Palestinian population are significant stumbling blocks to cooperating together to contain this Iranian threat. Nonetheless, Israel stands to improve its long-term strategic security interests by adopting the framework of the 2002 Saudi Peace Initiative to build trust with Arab GCC countries and reestablishing its relationship with Turkey, as opposed to continuing with its divisive policies on Jewish settlements and the blockade of Gaza. While the blockade and walled-in settlements may improve their tactical security (local and short term), it is having a counter effect on Israel's strategic security situation that is shaping their future. This is not to say that a final peace agreement with the Palestinians is a necessary condition; however, the process of moving forward with a plan that assures the formal recognition of Israel's legitimacy is a way to redefine its relationship with the GCC to better address its long-term security threats. By taking the initiative on the Peace plan and reaching out to America's Arab partners, Israel could help relieve pressure fomenting with young Arab populations with a fair and just solution, and allows them to focus on the real threat of malign Iranian influence and violent Islamic extremist networks.

There are a couple of important points with respect to the future of the Palestinian Peace process. First, the tensions between the Arab and Jewish communities have not always been a visceral and violent struggle. In fact, for many years the Middle East was a much more hospitable place for the Jewish people than Europe or Russia. As anti-Semitism became more pervasive and violent throughout Europe, Jews began returning to their ancestral home with the goal of one day establishing a Jewish state. Essentially, the principal strategic goals of these early Zionist pioneers of the 1890s and those of the Israeli government today remain the same: establishing a safe and secure homeland for the Jewish Diaspora and providing for the security of its citizens. However, the establishment of this Jewish homeland in Palestine plagued both the Ottoman Turk and British governments during their imperial mandates and it has since been a perennial struggle for the United Nations (UN) to find a peaceful solution in the aftermath of the holocaust and the Second World War.

Second, though problematic, the partition between two states, one Arab and one Jewish, is still the best path forward. The conclusions of the 1937 Peel Commission and 1947 United Nations Special Committee on Palestine are still valid with regard to partition as the only viable solution for these two cultures. The last seventy years of war, broken promises, and missed opportunities have only reinforced the differences between the two sides and it continues to fuel extremism on both ends.² Despite seemingly insurmountable odds, a final agreement on partition was nearly achieved by the United States and its allies in the 1990s and early 2000s. Unfortunately these negotiations have now been moribund since September 2010.³ The lack of negotiations have been further strained by talks of incorporating Hamas into a Unity Government; continuing rocket attacks into Israel from Gaza that have resulted in a blockade; and the unabated expansion of Jewish settlements into Jerusalem and the West Bank. The continued expansion of these settlements has now so disillusioned the Palestinians that they see no future in continuing negotiations and have chosen a different path toward statehood. Since 2011, they have appealed to the international courts and the UN General Assembly as opposed to negotiations which, as they see it, without an agreed upon terms of reference and preconditions, only buys Israel more time to expand into designated Palestinian territories.⁴

There are others that argue for a democratic one state solution. Diane Bhutto, a former member of the PLO negotiating team and Harvard University professor, argues that conditions on the ground do not physically support the legitimate territorial sovereignty rights for a state and that a better option is to

move forward with a one state solution that guarantees the democratic rights of all citizens. However, Israel would never agree to these terms based on the population majorities of Palestinians which would seriously impact Jewish political power and thus destroy Israel's identity as a Jewish state.

The problem today is that Israel sees no reason to move forward on the peace plan; its foreign policy is rooted on the narrow tactical definitions of its security interests. In other words, Israel might achieve tactical strength in the short run but at the cost of losing the greater strategic campaign. Recently, their reluctance to move forward on the Palestinian issue has adversely impacted Israel's strategic security in three ways. First, there is the breakdown of Israel's relationship with Turkey, one of its rare friends in the region. Turkey was the first Muslim majority country to recognize Israel back in 1949, and stayed away from armed conflict during the 1948, 1967, and 1973 Arab-Israeli wars. However, it has been very critical of the Israeli government's handling of the Palestinian issue. Since 1987, Turkey has denounced the "Israeli oppression" of people in the occupied territories and supported the Palestinians' right to self-determination.⁵

More recently, Turkey condemned Israel's military campaign in Gaza in 2009 and broke off relations when nine activists (eight Turkish citizens and one Turkish-American with dual citizenship) were killed by Israeli commandos on May 31, 2010. The activists aboard the *Mavi Marmara* were part of the "Gaza Freedom Flotilla," a convoy of six ships carrying pro-Palestinian activists, journalists, and humanitarians attempting to break through the Israeli blockade of Gaza. Despite a UN investigation that justified Israel's blockade, it also criticized the Israelis for their overuse of force.⁶ The incident angered Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan who described the raid as "state terrorism" and recalled Turkey's ambassador from Israel.⁷ Today, the relationship remains sour. Ibrahim Kalin, chief advisor to Turkey's Prime Minister, laid out three conditions before relations will be restored with Israel: 1) a formal apology from Israel; 2) compensation for the affected families; and 3) lifting of the blockade of Gaza. The loss of Turkey as an ally has been a great blow to Israel especially as it pertains to shaping the outcomes of the crises in Syria and Iran.⁸

The second is the rise of political Islam. The Arab Spring movements that brought about the surprising downfall of so many autocratic governments also opened up the political process to many Islamic groups that had been repressed for years. In fact, the Arab Spring has been characterized by some leaders, especially those in Iran, as the Islamic Awakening. Iran is home to the Islamic revolution, which is seen as the manifestation of the repudiation of Western influence. Iran envisions itself as the regional leader who is able to offer an Islamic alternative to corrupt and illegitimate Western-supported autocracies. Iranian Supreme Leader Khamenei said at the Islamic Awakening conference in September 2011, "The recent Islamic movements in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Bahrain and Yemen are divine blessings... Our position is to support and strengthen them and we hope that these Islamic movements will lead to the total end to the domination of the main enemies, which are the Zionists and the United States."⁹

Even though the rise of Sunni Islam in politics is very different than the Shia revolution that took place in Iran, it is clear a majority of people in the region are calling for more Islamic-guided politics. The victories in Egypt and Tunisia in late 2011 by the Muslim Brotherhood were not nearly as telling as the victories by Sunni Salafi parties. Together, these two parties present a clear security risk to Israel if they attempt to undermine the 1979 Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty.¹⁰ Turkish politics have also started reversing key Kemalist policies. Reforms led by the Islamic AKP party of Prime Minister Erdoğan have now legalized certain Islamic practices that were at one time forbidden. If this Islamitization trend continues, it will not only further isolate Israel but could be the foundation of a new violent campaign that frames the Palestinian matter as a religious issue instead of one about human rights, freedom, and security.¹¹

The last trend is the rise of a nuclear Iran. Despite six years of sanctions, it is clear that Iran: 1) mastered uranium centrifuge enrichment technologies; 2) is constructing a heavy water reactor capable of manufacturing plutonium; 3) has a well-developed rocket and missile capability; and 4) may have a clandestine military program. While there is no evidence that the Iranian leadership has made the decision to manufacture a nuclear weapon, Iran has not yet provided the IAEA with the cooperation or transparency required to assure the IAEA of the exclusively peaceful nature of their nuclear programs.¹² Although Iran has never declared its intentions to construct a nuclear weapon, it remains adamant on its rights to nuclear enrichment; meanwhile, the clandestine nature of Tehran's nuclear research activities and failure to abide by its obligations in the Non-Proliferation Treaty are troubling.

The clear threat resulting from a nuclear armed Iran has led to broad international sanctions from the UN and even harsher sanctions from the U.S. and EU. The danger of a nuclear Iran is manifested in two ways. First it is the likely danger that a nuclear Iran would spark a nuclear arms race in this volatile region that will involve Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and probably Egypt. Nawaf Obaid, a senior fellow at King Faisal Center for Research & Islamic Studies in Riyadh and Managing Director of the Saudi National Security Assessment Project made it clear that if Iran makes the decision to develop nuclear weapons, Saudi Arabia will get a weapon the next day.¹³ Second, a nuclear-armed Iran would be more aggressive both diplomatically and militarily, to include challenging Saudi Arabia and Israel on their repression of minority populations. The protection from retaliation by a nuclear deterrent would embolden Iran to increase its support to armed proxies and expand their campaign to "export the revolution." Worse, there is a risk that Iran could equip any one of its proxies to deliver a crude weapon in something like a commercial shipping container with a GPS trigger that may be hard to trace back to Iran. The threat arising from this danger has not only been recognized by Israel but it has mobilized the Arab States in the GCC. The GCC recently took the historic step forward of integrating their air defense networks and called for greater unity to counter harmful Iranian influence.¹⁴

The bottom-line is that if Israel remains transfixed on its tactical footing in Gaza and the West Bank, it will lose a strategic opportunity to isolate Iran. As it stands now, instead of cooperating on the regional isolation of Iran, Israel is the country that stands alone. It faces an emboldened Iran with an already shaky, if not outright hostile, relationship with its Arab neighbors and without the support of Turkey. Israel risks its greater strategic security interests by continuing to support settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem as opposed to sending clear signals of rapprochement with Arab countries and expressing a willingness to do once and for all what is necessary to establish a Palestinian state. There is the risk that if they do not, Iran could leverage the broader Islamic identity of people in the region to turn the Palestinian conflict into a violent religious confrontation as the only hope for "ending the oppression by the western-supported Zionist regime."

Therefore, it is in Israel's larger strategic interests to move forward with Palestinian Peace process and not to get hung up on preconditions or lesser important tactical issues. Meanwhile, If Israel were to move forward along the lines of the Saudi Peace Initiative and reconcile with Turkey, these strategic efforts would begin to remove the corrosive nature of this historic and bitter dispute. The United States and its friends and allies could offer leadership, incentives, and security guarantees to Israel to help overcome the barriers to peace. This effort would create the conditions to develop a regional coalition of nations to discourage Iranian misbehavior and collectively offer a path for the Islamic republic to rejoin the community of nations. This approach provides Israel with greater strategic security options than that of the current hardline agenda which calls for the continued construction of Jewish settlements in the West Bank and Jerusalem. In today's post-9/11 security environment, where religious fanaticism can inflict unimaginable damage, we must take risks for peace and reconciliation, and not

endanger generations to come. As Jordan's King Abdullah concluded in his recent book, we are quickly approaching our last best chance for peace.¹⁵

¹ Phillip Martin, phillipmartin.info, <http://wars.mrdonn.org/powerpoints/israeli-palestinian-conflict.html>

² Dan Cohn-Sherbok and Dawoud el-Alami, *The Palestine-Israeli Conflict*, Oxford, England: Oneworld Publications, 2001.

³ King Abdullah II of Jordan, *Our Last Best Chance: The Pursuit of Peace in a Time of Peril*, New York: Penguin Books, 2011, p. xii.

⁴ Dr. Husam Zomlot, "Palestinian Statehood and the UN," lecture, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA, September 12, 2011.

⁵ The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, "Timeline of Turkish-Israeli Relations, 1949–2006," 2006, available from <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/documents/44edf1a5d337f.pdf>.

⁶ Sir Geoffrey Palmer, Chair, President Alvaro Uribe, Vice-Chair, Mr. Joseph Ciechanover Itzhar, and Mr. Süleyman Özdem Sanberk, "Report of the Secretary-General's Panel of Inquiry on the 31 May 2010 Flotilla Incident", *United Nations*, September 2011, available from http://www.un.org/News/dh/infocus/middle_east/Gaza_Flotilla_Panel_Report.pdf.

⁷ Sebnem Arsu and Alan Cowell, "Turkey Expels Israeli Envoy in Dispute Over Raid," *New York Times*, September 2, 2011.

⁸ Interview of Dr. Ibrahim Kalin with Neil Conan, "Turkish Adviser Responds To Conflict With Syria," *National Public Radio (NPR)*, available from <http://www.npr.org/2011/12/21/144077866/turkish-advisor-responds-to-conflict-with-syria>.

⁹ Ahmad Majidyar Ali Alfoneh, and Michael Rubin, "Iran News Round-Up Sep 16, 2011," *American Enterprise Institute (AEI) critical threats daily newsletter*, available from <http://www.criticalthreats.org/iran-news-roundup/iran-news-round-september-16-2011>.

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¹² International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) report, "Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement and relevant provisions of Security Council resolutions in the Islamic Republic of Iran," *IAEA*, November 8, 2011, available from <http://www.iaea.org/Publications/Documents/Board/2011/gov2011-65.pdf>.

¹³ Nawaf Obaid, "A Saudi Perspective on the alleged Iranian Plot," *CNN World*, October 25, 2011, available from <http://globalpublicsquare.blogs.cnn.com/2011/10/25/a-saudi-perspective-on-the-alleged-iranian-plot/>.

¹⁴ Ali Al-Bluwi and Ghazanifar Ali Khan, "King's strategic call to GCC bloc: Move from cooperation to unity," *Arab News*, Dec 20, 2011, available from <http://arabnews.com/saudi-arabia/article550750.ece>.

¹⁵ King Abdullah II of Jordan, *Our Last Best Chance: The Pursuit of Peace in a Time of Peril*.