

Chapter 1

Israel and the International System

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On the whole, the international system that influences Israel most, led by the US, the European Union, and Russia, adopted an amicable approach towards Israel in 2007. Regarding Israel's three key regional issues – the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Iran, and Syria-Lebanon – Israel's positions enjoyed considerable international backing, whether in practice or in principle.

The US

The US's staunch support for Israel remained intact in 2007. Rumors that disappointment over Israel's performance during the Second Lebanon War would harm the perception of Israel as an important ally proved unfounded. The administration acceded to Israel's request to increase financial aid by 25 percent, to a sum of \$30 billion over a period of ten years; security and intelligence cooperation seems to be continuing at least at the previous level; the Sixth Fleet resumed its visits to Haifa Port after a seven year hiatus; the US chief of staff arrived for a visit to Israel for the second time in the history of relations between the two countries; and the US secretary of defense arrived for the first time in eight years.

In the political sphere, America continued its support for Israel's positions vis-à-vis the Palestinians, including the isolation of Hamas

and refusal to negotiate with the unity government. When the Annapolis process was started, the US accepted Israel's stance that consolidating the political horizon would not supplant the need for implementation of Phase 1 of the roadmap, which should at least occur simultaneously. Thus, the joint declaration of the Annapolis conference did not deal with the elements of a permanent settlement, as per Israel's preference.

With regard to Iran and Syria, Washington and Jerusalem are in basic agreement. While Israel's estimated timetable for Iranian acquisition of a nuclear military capability is shorter than the administration's, the seriousness of the threat and the imperative to deal with it are not in dispute. The US National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) published in December 2007 did not change the administration's position that Iran continues to constitute a threat, since Iran could restart its military nuclear program (if it was indeed interrupted) and Tehran is working to undermine stability across the Middle East. With regard to Syria, the differences are minimal. If Israel's response to President Asad's calls for peace seems hesitant, Washington is apparently even more resistant. The two countries view Damascus as an adversary that must be contained. Hence, their apparent coordination on the alleged Israeli air strike in northern Syria.

Finally, Israel's standing among American public opinion and on the political scene is as firm as ever. The good relationship Ehud Olmert enjoys with George Bush is seemingly one of the strongest ever between an Israeli prime minister and an American president. As in the past, all presidential candidates are positioned within the heart of the American consensus, viewing Israel as a strategic partner in a relationship based on shared values. Over 60 percent of the American public believes that the US must stand by Israel, while 50 percent have a negative opinion of the Palestinians. The pro-Israel lobby emerged unscathed by the Walt-Mearsheimer book and closed its year with considerable success.

The European Union

Notwithstanding Europe's traditionally greater sensitivity to Arab/Palestinian positions, 2007 was a good year for Israel-EU relations, in part because Israel demonstrated more openness to European involvement in the region. Despite apprehensions about regional deterioration, the Europeans remained faithful to the Israel-US-Quartet position, i.e., no contact with the Hamas government and no reason to forge ahead in political negotiations as long as Hamas refuses to fulfill the Quartet's basic conditions. Since the Hamas takeover in Gaza, the Europeans have also been partner to the isolation of Hamas and to support for negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority within the Annapolis framework. At the same time, the EU remained critical of Israel over the humanitarian fallout from its Gaza and West Bank policy. Furthermore, the official policy does not always reflect the anti-Israel sentiments within the public at large. According to a public opinion poll conducted in several EU countries in June 2007, only about 20 percent of respondents expressed sympathy for Israel, compared with 28 percent who were sympathetic with the Palestinians. This trend was reflected in a number of initiatives for specific boycotts against Israel.

The economic-civilian dimension in general and the humanitarian aspect in particular were stressed by the Europeans. To them, rehabilitating the Palestinian economy and building a functional government authority will advance the welfare of the Palestinians; strengthen Abu Mazen and the political process, thereby rebuffing Hamas; and oblige Israel, because of its improved security situation, to fulfill its obligations under Phase I of the roadmap. This emphasis was demonstrated at the December 2007 conference of donor states held in Paris, where EU countries pledged \$1.7 billion to the Palestinian Authority.

Israel and the EU have closed ranks on other issues as well. European diplomats, and certainly the leaders of the three principal countries, view Iran's nuclear program as a danger that must be contained. Hence the leading role the EU-3 has assumed (particularly

under the leadership of former French President Jacques Chirac), as well as public statements following the publication of the NIE. In a joint press conference, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Nicolas Sarkozy called for increased sanctions against Iran. Referring to the NIE, the spokesperson for British Prime Minister Gordon Brown said: “It confirms that we were right to be worried about Iran seeking to develop nuclear weapons [and] shows that the sanctions program and international pressure were having an effect in that they seem to have abandoned the weaponization element.” Actually, the report hardly changed the European position. True, from Israel’s vantage, Europe is dragging its feet over extra-UN sanctions. Nonetheless, Europe does not have to be persuaded that a nuclear Iran is not Israel’s problem alone but rather threatens the entire world. This is particularly evident in the French position, where senior spokespersons have declared how a situation of “either an Iranian bomb or bomb Iran” must be avoided. The need to apply economic-diplomatic pressure has translated into the continued decline of EU exports to Iran since 2006. In the first half of 2007 there was a further drop of approximately 16 percent in exports compared to the first half of 2006.

With regard to Syria-Lebanon, there is likewise sound agreement. European commitment to UN Resolution 1701 is reflected in European representation (more than 50 percent) among the 13,000 UNIFIL troops. Particularly striking is France’s attitude to the Assad regime. The previous French president spearheaded the international offensive against the regime and its Lebanese allies following the assassination of Rafiq Hariri. In early 2007, newly elected Sarkozy, against the backdrop of Lebanon’s ongoing political crisis, launched intensive political contacts with Damascus and Hizbollah, but with time, he, too, demonstrated undiplomatic firmness towards Syria. In late 2007, following a further postponement of Lebanese presidential elections due to Syrian manipulations, Sarkozy announced, “France will not have any more relations with Syria until Damascus shows it

is willing to allow Lebanon to conclude the current leadership crisis and appoint a new president.”

Sarkozy's positions in relation to Iran and Syria-Lebanon are part of the shift in France's foreign policy toward a pro-American and Western-oriented approach and a balanced Middle East stance. Sarkozy has indeed stated that France does not and will not automatically support the positions of Israel (or the US). On the other hand, his statements such as “Israel's security is a clear red line that is not negotiable” or “The establishment of the State of Israel can be called a miracle” reflect a positive change in France's approach towards Israel. In fact, there has not been such a positive roster of leaders of the chief EU countries, as far as Israel is concerned, in a long time. Already in past years Merkel displayed a more sympathetic attitude towards Israel than her predecessor Gerhard Schroeder. As for Britain, if there were apprehensions upon the departure of Tony Blair in June 2007, they have thus far remained unsubstantiated. True, his successor, Gordon Brown, does not demonstrate the same warmth as Blair (and not only regarding Israel), but there is no sign of any distancing from Israel.

Russia

Relations between Israel and Russia are cast both by observers and by the two governments as good, apparently since Israel has distinguished between bilateral relations and the detrimental aspects of Russia's Middle East policy. Russia was the second non-Arab country (after Turkey) to host an official Hamas delegation following the movement's electoral victory in 2006. In 2007 as well, Moscow argued against isolating Hamas, both before and after the movement's violent takeover of Gaza. Russia has for a long time supplied Syria with arms and recently sold it up-to-date surface-to-air missiles. The Kremlin has refrained from taking restrictive measures in this sphere, even in the face of Israeli charges that some of the arms are transferred from Damascus to Hizbollah. Indeed, Russian-made anti-

tank missiles and 220 mm rockets (manufactured under license in Syria) were used by Hizbollah in the Second Lebanon War.

Even more problematic is Moscow's stance in relation to Iran's nuclear program. Russia is the leading opponent of harsh sanctions against Iran; had Russia joined the Western line, China would likely have done so as well. During his visit to Tehran in September 2007, President Putin declared that "Iran has the right to develop civilian nuclear technology and industry." In an exceptional response, the Israeli prime minister invited himself for an immediate visit to Moscow, which ended with Olmert's announcement that "he was leaving encouraged"; a source in his entourage explained that the Kremlin is not interested in seeing Iran become a nuclear power, and "proof of this is that nuclear fuel is still not being supplied for the reactor in Bushehr." But the prime minister's optimism was premature. At the end of the year Russia began supplying 82 tons of nuclear fuel for the reactor, and continued even after Tehran made it clear it would not cease enriching uranium for the production of nuclear fuel, notwithstanding the supply from Russia.

Russia's policies on these issues ostensibly do not stem from an anti-Israel position. On the bilateral plane there is a good atmosphere, a steady desire to improve relations, and perhaps a perception of Israel as an effective channel of influence among certain circles in the US. Nonetheless, the Kremlin has taken steps opposed to Israeli interests, because they suit its basic tack of challenging the US and provide it with a return ticket to the Middle East. Hence, also, the renewed visits by the Russian fleet to the eastern Mediterranean, Russia's ambition to mediate between Israel and Syria, and Moscow's desire to host the next peace conference. President Putin has claimed several times that "Russia will not harm Israel's security," yet there is no doubt that the implications of Russia's policy augur poorly for Israel.

What Lies Ahead

Both the UN Security Council and the Quartet have recently taken steps that are convenient for Israel. In his capacity as the Quartet

representative in the Middle East, Tony Blair stated, “What is needed is Palestinian realization that they will not have a state unless it is managed properly. If I were Israel, I would not negotiate for the establishment of a Palestinian state if I was not certain that would be the case.” Despite Russia’s proven ability to hinder processes, Moscow has not attempted to disrupt the legal-diplomatic handling of the investigation into the Hariri murder or the implementation of Resolution 1701, which ended the Second Lebanon War. In both cases, the Security Council and especially UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon have demonstrated surprising persistence and determination, much to Israel’s liking and to Syria’s regret. In addition, the Kremlin has accepted the verdict of the Quartet regarding Hamas, a stance that has enabled continued international isolation of Hamas, even during the short life of the Palestinian unity government.

Israel’s comfortable situation vis-à-vis the international system should be attributed mainly to its adversaries. In the face of Hamas aggression and the weakness of the Palestinian Authority, the international community could not reasonably view Israel as primarily responsible for the deadlock. The conduct of Syria and Hizbollah has perforce focused international attention on containment rather than on Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights or a cessation of Israeli flights over Lebanon. And in light of Iran’s aggressive promotion of a radical Islamic agenda under Ahmadinejad, Israel has found a sympathetic ear not only for its fears over the nuclear issue but also regarding Iran’s regional allies. Israeli restraint, evident in the Gaza Strip (avoiding an extensive ground operation), in Lebanon (not seeking opportunities to capitalize on the political crisis), and in Syria (military caution on the Golan Heights, keeping quiet over the alleged air strike) has completed a picture that, in the world’s eyes, justifies a lenient attitude towards Israel.

The wider context has also helped Israel. At least to a certain degree, the fight against terror, the Sunni-Shiite rift, and Iran have bounced the Israeli-Arab/Palestinian conflict from center stage. Amid this atmosphere, there is more understanding than in the past

for Israel's situation, due to the West's ongoing confrontation with the radical jihadist wing of the Muslim-Arab world. The examples of Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan have made it clear that here, too, there is a complex problem with no magic solution.

A number of plausible scenarios are likely to create a less comfortable future situation for Israel vis-à-vis the international system. The most likely arena for any such change is the Palestinian theater. If Israel decides to intensify its military effort in Gaza, particularly to the point of an extensive ground operation, the negative media effect will probably exact a political price. Israel will be told to limit its military activity in order to minimize humanitarian suffering. If the IDF takes control of the Philadelphi route or establishes a permanent presence in a large section of the Strip, the international community will demand that Israel assume active responsibility, if not for the administration of the entire Gaza Strip then at least for the humanitarian dimension.

In negotiations over a permanent settlement, pressure on Israel to resolve core issues will likely increase. While the prime minister might personally be glad to do so, internal political considerations mandate extreme caution that will at the very least undermine Israel's standing. Moreover, as far as the issues of borders and Jerusalem are concerned, the position of the international community, including the US, is closer to Palestinian attitudes than to Israel's. As to implementation of Phase I of the roadmap, expectations of Israel are higher than of the Palestinian Authority. Already at the end of 2007, there were signs of impatience within the administration over Israel's disregard of its commitments to evacuate unauthorized outposts and freeze construction in the settlements. Concerning the outposts, President Bush said: "We've been talking about it for four years, and those illegal outposts have to be evacuated." Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has declared that Israel must also stop building in neighborhoods in East Jerusalem, a zone that the administration avoided referring to publicly up to now. No such concrete utterances were heard regarding Palestinian commitments to fight terror. Israel

is perceived as the stronger side, able but unwilling politically. The Palestinian Authority, under the leadership of Abu Mazen, is perceived as weak and in constant need of reinforcement, eager but unable. Based on past experience, pressure on Israel will thus be stronger than pressure on the Palestinians to perform what is required of them regarding security and fighting terror.

The leading factor in pressure on Israel will, of course, be the American administration. It is generally thought that in the past Secretary of State Rice preferred intensifying pressure on Israel but was restrained by the president, and it is difficult to envision whether this favorable pattern will continue. On the one hand, Bush regards the fight against terror as a chief objective and will probably be influenced by his warm relationship with Olmert; on the other hand, the president has received from two Israeli prime ministers repeated promises that remain unfulfilled. Bush is personally committed to advancing the Annapolis process and this is his last chance to bequeath a positive legacy in the Middle East. Thus, he will presumably support Rice, especially while the rest of the international system is inclined to pressure both Israel and Bush on these matters.

Two further trends might contribute to creating a less comfortable situation for Israel. On the Iranian matter, there are no signs of more stringent sanctions; even before the NIE there was no support for such toughening. It is difficult to suppose that the Security Council would adopt a further significant resolution or that France and Britain would succeed in convincing the remaining EU countries to impose independent sanctions. It appears that the international system's basic agreement with Israel will not find greater practical expression. Furthermore, in the context of global policy, it is quite likely that Russia will try to increase its involvement in the Middle East – via an upgrade in arms sales to Syria and Iran, pressure on Israel to negotiate with Syria, or some sort of sponsorship of Hamas. In any event, increased Russian involvement would probably not work to Israel's advantage.

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On the Palestinian issue, Israel closed a year of political deadlock, with responsibility assigned mainly to Hamas, and proceeded to a year in which it is primarily Israel that will be asked to take action. A year of slow progress regarding sanctions on Iran has given way to a year in which even this slow pace may be halted. To this one must also add the likelihood of disruptive Russian behavior. No conflict between Israel and the international system can be expected in the near future, but it is reasonable to anticipate less comfort, and in fact, more tension and frustration.