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## A discouraging picture

**Although Institute for National Security Studies researchers predicted a month ago that Israeli-Palestinian talks would likely not be renewed, now that they have been, the academicians are still pessimistic**

By [Amos Harel](#)

The introduction to a forthcoming Institute for National Security Studies publication predicts that it will be difficult to renew direct negotiations between Palestinians and Israelis in the near future. The collection of articles, entitled "Strategic Assessment for Israel 2010," was sent to the printer at the end of July. Since then, U.S. President Barack Obama has shown that it is possible to disprove bleak forecasts about the Middle East.

Oded Eran, director of the INSS, which is producing the publication, says now it isn't clear how the two sides will bridge gaps on central issues like Jerusalem, borders and refugees.

"Should they not reach an interim agreement, based on a declaration that it is designed to promote two states, the situation is liable to worsen," he explains. "Many say [Prime Minister Benjamin] Netanyahu has crossed the Rubicon, in terms of his attitude toward an agreement with the Palestinians. I am not sure that crossing the Rubicon means he is prepared to propose what [former prime minister Ehud] Olmert offered. The most important thing to come out of this summit will be whether the sides agree in principle that if no comprehensive solution is reached, the negotiations will not be broken off, as happened at Camp David a decade ago."

INSS senior research associate Brig. Gen. (res. ) Shlomo Brom, who co-edited the publication with research director Dr. Anat Kurz, says Improvement of Government Services Minister Michael Eitan "claimed in a letter he sent to Likud members a few weeks ago that Netanyahu has decided to support an agreement. But negotiations with the Palestinians are no simple matter, even if you are predisposed in favor of them. At Camp David, Ehud Barak wanted an agreement but did not get one."

Kurz asserts that she is not overly impressed by Netanyahu's pro-peace declarations or by his two-state speech at Bar-Ilan University more than a year ago. "When you look at the chances of an agreement, the internal weakness on both sides, the Israeli and the Palestinian, is very troubling," she says.

In their preface, Kurz and Brom write, "During the past year there was no breakthrough that would enable Israel to deal more effectively with strategic challenges. Moreover, threatening trends have intensified. The discussion process between Israel and the Palestinian Authority is facing a dead end ... The blockade of Gaza did not meet its goal of weakening Hamas in a way that would help the Palestinian Authority conduct concrete negotiations with Israel, and the blockade has become the target of stiff international criticism, which creates an atmosphere of diplomatic siege."

Hezbollah, write Brom and Kurz, is still obtaining arms and building up its political position in Lebanon. "While diplomatic processes between Israel and Syria have stalled, Hezbollah has become strengthened, and it would appear that Israel is facing a front that is becoming consolidated in the north and is more threatening than in the past," they note.

### **Deterred from deterrence**

Meanwhile, Iran is about to produce a nuclear weapon, and is reinforcing its status as leader of the region's anti-Israel camp. "That camp has, to a certain extent, added Turkey," the INSS document states, in the introduction. "Within this framework of threats, the campaign to delegitimize Israel is accelerating."

The two editors were skeptical about the aftermath of the Israel Defense Forces' Operation Cast Lead in the Gaza Strip.

"It is true that in recent years, Israel has shown an impressive ability to deter [the enemy] militarily," they write, "but this achievement has come at a high diplomatic price. International criticism over the forcefulness of Israel's responses is liable to deter Israel from taking steps to fortify its power of deterrence."

"The peace process, even if it will not necessarily solve anything, at least provides a diplomatic horizon," says INSS director Eran. "That is crucial for ensuring the stability of informal, moderate alliances in the region."

He notes that prior to Netanyahu's first meeting with Obama in the White House, in May 2009, the INSS "sent Netanyahu a message. We proposed that he connect two issues - [that he] promise Obama that Israel will make a supreme effort to solve the dispute with the Palestinians and also with Syria. Should

the Iranian threat - including its subversive activities in the region and use of proxies against us - dissipate, Israel will be able to move forward."

Brom adds: "I don't think Obama will give Netanyahu an official promise that the U.S. will attack Iranian nuclear sites should sanctions fail. But a better atmosphere on the Palestinian track will help the U.S. take more effective action against Iran. The Israel-Palestinian dispute creates major obstacles that impede necessary steps in the Iranian context."

Says Dr. Emily Landau, a senior research associate at INSS: "The whole discussion about Iran's nuclear program is based on the assumption that there is a solution that is not being implemented, but I am troubled by the impotence of the international community. Military strength is not a solution. The efficacy of sanctions against Iran will be measured in terms of whether the sides engage in serious negotiations.

"The military option is pretty much an announcement of failure. At most, it can delay Iran's program. The Obama administration is not investing enough in the diplomatic option. The Americans did not stage tough negotiations with Tehran. My conclusion is that the U.S. government apparently has become reconciled to Iran being just a few months away from possessing weapons of mass destruction."

Brom says there is "a synchronization problem between the various timetables on the Iranian issue. The sanctions approach is naturally very slow. With South Africa, decades passed before sanctions toppled the apartheid regime. In Iran's case, the most significant sanctions were implemented late, after the country's nuclear program had progressed to an advanced stage."

Dr. Ephraim Kam, INSS deputy head and an authority on Iran's nuclear program, is skeptical.

"The effect of the stiffest sanctions will not be felt in the next six months or year, or even longer; only after they take effect will we be able to draw conclusions. In the West, the working assumption is that Iran has yet to decide whether it wants to be a state that is on the nuclear threshold. U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates recently said that if Iran approaches that threshold, it will have to be regarded as a nuclear country, because there is no way of knowing when it will cross that point.

"The Americans will have to decide how to act before mid-2011. In the internal arena, the Iranian regime managed to contain the protests after the June 2009 elections, but fissures in the regime are discernible. Many circles in Iranian society loathe President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad."

Adds Eran: "the next two years are critical, with regard to questions of how to relate to Iran, the peace process, and the change of leaderships in the region. The general picture is not encouraging."

### **As America weakens**

"America's strategic status in the region will be tested. Several parallel developments are in motion: the peace process, America's withdrawal from Iraq, the intensification of its action in Afghanistan, and Iran's growing influence and its nuclear program," Kam observes.

"Meantime, Israel faces a ticking time bomb in the north (Hezbollah ) and in the south ( Hamas ). A failure in peace talks could light a spark, leading to an explosion."

Dr. Kurz worries that "the weakening of America and its inability to show clear achievements will intensify its demands on Israel, in terms of efforts to break stalemates in the region. On the other hand, if there is even a sign of progress toward an agreement on the Israeli-Palestinian track, Hamas is liable to launch terror attacks to undermine the prospect of diplomatic success."

Brom adds another element of pessimism: "The main danger in the current situation is the illusion of stability, stemming from the relative strategic success of recent operations in Gaza and Lebanon, which [are thought to have] reinforced Israel's deterrent strength. In the months since these operations, nothing was done to address the roots of the problems."

The INSS' strategic experts appear to be working on contradictory premises: They suggest Israel needs a successful diplomatic process with the Palestinians in order to end the siege, but also predict the chances of such a process succeeding are extremely low.

Asked about this apparent contradiction, Eran responds: "It is important that a serious process be undertaken, to create a diplomatic horizon. The Oslo Accords are proof of that. They did not resolve fundamental problems, but they fostered international willingness to perceive the Middle East in new ways, and they significantly bolstered Israel's ties with the European Union, NATO, Turkey and several neighboring states."

Asked why INSS staff has not raised the possibility of talks with Syria during the upcoming year, Brom replies: "This subject has exhausted itself. The strategic advantages of an agreement with Syria are manifest. But taking up this diplomatic route depends on [Israel's] decision. The terms of the agreement are known. Israel has to decide whether it thinks the deal is worthwhile. It is important to add that Israel's demand that Syria sever its connections with Iran and Hezbollah is unrealistic.

"Should an agreement be forged with Syria, Israel's profit would be in terms of how the deal changes the character of Syria's dealings with Hezbollah, but it is unrealistic to expect these ties to be cut."

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