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ISRAEL'S ROLE IN THE ANTI-TERRORIST COALITION

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The United States has declared war on international terrorism. Because of the difficulty in identifying an elusive enemy, locating its sources of strength and support, and defining the most effective means of uprooting this scourge, the war will be long and complex. But it is clear that America needs and intends to build a broad coalition to support its campaign, and Israel's role in it is a matter of some controversy.

Israel has long been at the forefront of the counter-terrorism struggle. It has considerable experience and expertise in the field, along with a history of cooperation with the United States, other western countries, and even some Arab states. It would therefore only seem logical that Israel play a central role in the global coalition. However, in all of America's diplomatic efforts to forge this coalition, Israel is officially absent. But while Israel is basically being asked to stand aside, the US is making a real effort to recruit Arab and Muslim partners, including the Palestinian Authority, Iran and Syria. This state of affairs has caused some Israelis to take offense in a way that reflects a hypersensitive if not childish approach to international relations.

It is clearly in Israel's interest that Arab and Muslim states take part in the international coalition. But a risk exists that any war against terrorist groups and states supporting them will be depicted as a clash of civilizations between Judaeo-Christian culture and Islamic culture or between the First World and the Third World. If that image prevails, it will be extremely difficult to isolate terrorists and their supporters, further complicating the campaign. After all, terrorist infrastructures are largely located in Arab and Muslim states bordering on other Arab and Muslim states. To confront the terrorists effectively, it is necessary to operate from and in those states, and that means isolating the terrorists from the local populations and regimes.

Regimes and rulers in many Arab and Muslim states are themselves fighting Islamist terror, and in most of these states, the regimes have registered some signal successes. A key element has been public support based on the ability of governments to persuade their own societies that joining the world order is better than trying to destroy it. The US must therefore strive to turn most Arab and Muslim states into allies rather than forcing them into the enemy camp.



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In this context, it is vital for the US to lower the flame of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. That conflict limits the ability of Arab states to stand at America's side and provokes anti-American sentiment in Arab public opinion. But the US cannot lower this flame, much less extinguish it, unless it enlists the Palestinian Authority headed by Yasir Arafat.

Israel, of course, is concerned that this will come about at its expense. And it is clear that Israel will have to pay some price – perhaps in terms of self-restraint and/or concessions to the Palestinians, perhaps in terms of its image as a country outside the official coalition. Israel may also incur direct damage from retaliatory actions by terrorists and their supporters if, for example, Iraq is also attacked by the coalition. But all these costs pale in comparison to the potential benefits of a global campaign against terrorism. In this respect, the situation today resembles the Gulf War, during which Israel was forced passively to absorb Iraqi missile attacks but from which it eventually reaped huge rewards: the destruction of Iraq's conventional military power, the elimination of its nuclear project, severe damage to its other weapons of mass destruction programs, many years of supervision of and sanctions on Iraq, a further split in the Arab world, and the creation of a window of opportunity for the peace process.

For years, Israel has tried to mobilize the western world in the fight against terrorism. Now, not only the west is mobilized. So, too, are states like Russia and China, which are also threatened by Islamist terror. The coming campaign will inflict damage on elements hostile to Israel and reduce their ability to operate against Israel. The campaign will also change global norms and minimize the world's tolerance of any sort of terrorism. In joining the coalition, even those that have supported terrorism will be forced to make some changes in their behavior.

It is not just coincidence that Syria and the PA, for example, suddenly feel the need to be more cautious and that they have acted accordingly. There are strong indications that Syria has ordered Hizbullah to lay low; Arafat has not only declared a ceasefire but appears, for the first time, to be making a serious effort to enforce it, albeit with imperfect results.

It would be naive to assume that Syria will be completely transformed or that Arafat will renounce his entire past. But circumstances have changed, and those who have recognized the need to side with America will also have to change. Historical parallels should not be taken too far, but it is conceivable that the new situation will even breathe new life into the peace process. Just as Syria understood before the Gulf War and Arafat did afterward that it was in their interest to join the camp of the "good guys" and not be identified with Saddam Hussein and his ilk, they now face the same kind of choice. And joining the "good guys" ultimately means abandoning violence and re-engaging in a political process. In the right circumstances, Israel can take advantage of this opportunity.

Nor are there real grounds for concern about Israel's place in the coalition against terror: its role will be respectable precisely to the extent that it is not overly prominent. In this case, the Gulf War analogy is only partially valid, because this will be a different kind of war. Showcase operations involving missile launches, air strikes and tank charges will be far less important than shadowy, small-scale actions against anonymous terrorists and their supporters. The war will go on for years and it will be based on intimate cooperation among members of the coalition. In this war, Israel can play an important, even major role, but only if it does so out of the limelight.