

Conclusion

Risks and Opportunities: The Era of Interim Solutions

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As the first decade of the 21st century draws to a close, the question marks are more numerous than ever with regard to the stability of western Asia. The United States and its allies in Afghanistan are far from able to describe their efforts there as a success. The ability of Pakistan's central government to actually govern and preserve the state as a single unit is in doubt, as is its ability to prevent part of its nuclear cache from reaching the hands of Muslim extremists. The danger of know-how and hazardous materials falling into the hands of terrorist organizations currently based in regions beyond the Afghani-Pakistani border is growing.

Iran is striding unhindered towards full uranium enrichment capability, and this brings it ever closer to the capability of manufacturing nuclear weapons. It has ignored three Security Council resolutions and stymied the efforts of the European Union and the United States to halt its nuclear and missile activities. This defiance, taken together with Iran's support for armed sub-state organizations in the region, e.g., Hamas and Hizbollah, has already spurred anxiety among the Arab regimes in the Persian Gulf and the Middle East and made them hope for some kind of operation that would halt the Iranian nuclear armaments race. By means of its nuclear

activities, but primarily because of its close connection to Syria, Hamas, and Hizbollah, Iran has succeeded in dictating the Middle East agenda. Its strong and unlimited support for these elements allows it to influence possible progress in the Arab-Israeli peace process.

The withdrawal of American forces from Iraq, scheduled to begin this coming year, will almost certainly have implications for the stability of Iraq itself and for the region as a whole. The shockwaves are liable to reach even states that do not share a border with Iraq. Of particular interest is the effect of the withdrawal on Iran's regional geopolitical standing and the way that regional countries will relate to the United States. The sharp decline in oil prices has made Iran more vulnerable than before, but it has also weakened the moderate Arab states.

This is part of the current landscape confronting the new governments in Israel and the United States. Both countries are facing political-security decisions that will have far reaching implications for the future of the Middle East. These questions as well as the future of the Arab-Israeli peace process will naturally stand at the center of the bilateral dialogue between the US and Israel.

The idea of the two-state solution developed into a political initiative when the Palestinian national movement recognized the right of Israel to exist as a sovereign state (1988). All three major efforts since then to translate the idea into reality have failed. The Oslo Accord (1993) was a framework agreement and did not deal with the solution itself, rather hinted at it. The Camp David talks, along with the advance and subsequent negotiations and proposals (2000-2001), in particular the Clinton parameters, were conducted on the clear premise that a Palestinian state would arise in their wake. The third attempt, which began in November 2007 at the international conference in Annapolis, was based on the accepted idea and terminology of "two states for two peoples."

If the intention of the second Palestinian intifada, which erupted in late 2000, was to force the withdrawal of Israeli troops from the West Bank, it failed. On the other hand, terrorism in Israel's large cities severed or at least weakened the connection between Israel proper and the territories. Israelis' inclination to distance themselves from the large Palestinian cities was amplified and concretized by the security fence and other physical

barriers. Thus rather unintentionally, the twofold Israeli dilemma has grown even more acute: if the majority in Israel desires to maintain the country's Jewish and democratic character, it cannot achieve this by controlling another nation, or alternatively, by granting equal rights to the Arab population of the territories, which would join the Arab population in the State of Israel of the pre-Six Day War lines. The second dilemma, stemming from the first, is how to put into practice the two-state solution when fundamentalist Islamic forces in Palestinian society are growing ever stronger, and having taken over the Gaza Strip, dream of doing the same in the West Bank. Even those supporting the two-state solution cannot ignore the risks and dangers Israel would be assuming should it accept the establishment of an independent, sovereign Palestinian state on its southern and eastern borders.

The combination of a fence that represents a significant barrier to terrorist activity against Israel with other preventive activities within the West Bank has proven to be effective. It has also repressed and distanced the Palestinian problem and reduced the pressure on Israel to find a long term solution to the relationship between Israel and the Palestinian entity. It is hard to imagine that the new Israeli government will embrace the understandings arrived at by previous Israeli negotiators; on the other hand, the constraints on the PA will not allow it to make unequivocal decisions about a permanent settlement even if the new Israeli government expresses its willingness to continue with the negotiations at the point they ended. Given this situation, the American administration must decide how to continue the process, despite the inauspicious circumstances. The successive failures – Oslo, Camp David, and Annapolis – provide no incentive for a fourth attempt in the foreseeable future based on the same underlying assumption, i.e., that it is possible to arrive at a permanent settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This is a risk that the new administration, laden with a host of problems from Afghanistan to Iraq to Iran, would do well to avoid.

The Obama administration, which has promised to give serious attention to the Israeli-Palestinian issue, will have to weigh whether it is preferable to find a way to make gradual progress towards a permanent settlement based on the two-state principle. The new government in Israel

has not committed itself to the principle, but has expressed its willingness to advance the negotiations, and the prime minister has stated a number of times that he wants to improve the PA's economic situation, while making it clear that he does not view that as a substitute for political negotiations. This rather murky formulation allows for a great deal of creativity, with the United States identifying the political spheres of flexibility of both sides, Palestinian and Israeli.

At the same time, the administration will have to decide on the extent of the attention it invests in a political process between Syria and Israel. In this case, too, the starting conditions do not promise an easy task. Since the last direct negotiations, in 2000, the Iran-Syria connection has grown ever closer, and it is through this connection that Iran supports Hizbollah. Syria has also strengthened its precision missiles capability, and Israel's security requirements have changed in the last decade. The new Israeli prime minister declared during the election campaign that "Gamla will not fall again," and the political platform of its coalition partner Yisrael Beitenu states that negotiations with Syria will be conducted on the basis of "peace for peace." For his part, Syrian president Bashar al-Asad continues to declare his desire to renew the negotiations immediately and arrive at a settlement within a short period of time.

Should negotiations be renewed, Israel will demand that Syria take definitive decisions such as severing its ties with Iran and all else that has made Syria a central link in Iran's subversive activities in the region. The question is whether Asad will take any such decisions before the withdrawal of American forces from Iraq and the Iranian-American dialogue gets under way. An additional and not insignificant point is the role of the United States in negotiations between Syria and Israel, if and when renewed. In the last round, Turkey filled the role of mediator in indirect negotiations. Passing the torch to the United States will require arriving at an understanding with Turkey in order to prevent friction with a state that in the past has demonstrated its sensitivity when it comes to perceived affronts to its status in the Middle East.

Against the backdrop of the Middle East peace process and the withdrawal of the American forces from Iraq, it appears that Iran occupies a central role in the potential of the United States to spearhead complex

moves. This invites the question whether the order of things should be reversed, i.e., first bring about deterrence with regard to Iran and stop the activity that threatens the region's regimes as well as the political process between Israel and its neighbors. Success in halting Iran would increase maneuverability in relation to all sides in the political process and would reduce Israel's aversion to taking risks in both arenas of the political process. On the other hand, lack of success in a dialogue with Iran will have significant negative effects on the United States' ability to steer political moves, in particular in the field of agreements between Israel and its neighbors. The Iranian card plays a central role on the Syrian-Israeli negotiations channel, and therefore dealing with Iran seems a prerequisite to a renewal of negotiations. In contrast, the Iranian issue affects the Palestinian channel to a lesser degree, and it is possible to progress even if the process is not defined as negotiations over a comprehensive permanent settlement. As a preliminary move, Israel and the United States will have to arrive at understandings regarding central issues, in particular the question of settlements and the willingness of Prime Minister Netanyahu to advance the economic development of the Palestinian Authority.

In tandem with the activity on the Israeli-Palestinian track, regional activity in the form of the working groups established by the Madrid Conference in 1991 should be renewed. This process is important on several levels. Renewed regional cooperation may serve as a counterweight to Iran's subversive activities, and it is also one of the central components of the 2002 Arab initiative. Nonetheless, both the Israeli government and the Arab League are liable to find themselves in an embarrassing situation if the international community, via the Quartet, for example, proposes the renewal of some of the regional working groups on the basis of Madrid Conference decisions and the Arab initiative. Israel is likely to oppose the renewal of the working groups because of some objectionable statements that form part of the Arab peace initiative, such as the formulation with regard to the Palestinian refugees, while the Arab League is likely to oppose concessions to Israel necessary to turn the Arab initiative into the basis for renewing the working groups. It is true that Israel supports the renewal of regional cooperation and has even appointed a cabinet minister with responsibility for this specific issue, but neither this government nor

its predecessors ever adopted the Arab initiative in toto. Furthermore, the Arab League made normalization of relations with Israel conditional on a full withdrawal to the 1967 borders, a just solution to the refugee problem, and the establishment of the Palestinian capital in East Jerusalem, and in its view, the activity of the regional working groups is a component of normalization. Nonetheless, it is possible that precisely this “balance of problematics” will allow the process to progress, a process that while not a substitute for direct negotiations does have the potential for advancing the process of resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Along with the diplomatic efforts to identify and foil Iranian activity, it is necessary to increase cooperation on the issue of terrorism. Egypt’s efforts, intensified since the beginning of 2009, have started to bear fruit in the form of limiting the attempts to smuggle Iranian arms into the Gaza Strip. The fact that Egypt joined the active warfare against the Iranian effort to maintain and support its allies is most significant, as it is the most critical component in Iran’s access to the Gaza Strip.

A related development is the steady improvement in the functioning of the PA security forces in some of the major Palestinian cities. This improvement, which harbors much potential for the creation of Palestinian governance of the West Bank, also creates a certain risk for Israel, because Israel will be forced to respond favorably to this improvement in a way that will harm neither the PA’s increasing law enforcement capability nor Israel’s critical security interests. At this stage, it is clear that the joint Palestinian-Israeli work is what is preventing the West Bank from becoming the locus of subversive activity, as was the case during the first years of the second intifada. However, to the extent that the PA’s governing bodies and law enforcement services are strengthened, the pressure on Israel will grow to reduce the volume of its direct activity in the West Bank.

Another crucial link in the axis of action against Iran is Jordan. The successful preventive efforts in the Sinai Peninsula are liable to push Iran towards relocating its activities to Jordan so as to create a supply pipeline to Hamas. The Jordanian authorities are, along with Israel, presumably aware of this possibility and are preparing to counter it.

The Iranian-American dialogue, if and when it begins, is liable to generate amorphous results that do not respond to the Israeli demand to

deny Iran unequivocally any ability to achieve military nuclear capability. Such a possible outcome would occur if the United States agrees to allow continued enrichment in Iran with both an Iranian commitment to not reach the stage of manufacturing nuclear weapons and tight oversight arrangements. This outcome resembles the so-called Japanese model. It would present Israel with a most difficult dilemma. Any solution acceptable to the United States will be acceptable to the international community. Even the Arab states, especially those along the Persian Gulf coast, will be hard pressed to criticize it aloud. From Israel's perspective, this solution would be a non-solution, and Israel is liable to find itself in a position of having lost justification for taking independent action against Iran. It would also demand of Israel a high political price in the form of concessions in the Arab-Israeli conflict arena.

The cumulative picture is one of a chain of challenges spread out from Pakistan in the east to the shores of the Mediterranean in the west. What most of these challenges have in common is the lack of ability to reach a comprehensive satisfactory solution. If this conclusion is correct, the most optimistic forecast of mid 2009 is of partial solutions allowing for partial stabilization of the situation; these would offer hope that more positive conditions emerge that will eventually allow for progress towards viable long term solutions. In light of the great risks inherent in the current situation – the destabilization of Pakistan, the trickle of hazardous materials into the hands of terrorist organizations, the deterioration of the situation in Iraq and its surroundings, and another flare-up in the Israeli-Palestinian and/or Israeli-Lebanese conflict – even partial solutions are inviting.