

Conclusion

Darkening Clouds on the Horizon

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Israel is now in a period characterized by accelerated diplomatic and security threats. The recent worsening of Israel's strategic situation has occurred partly as a result of developments in the Middle East and the global arena over which Israel has only limited control, and partly because of the lack of an appropriate response to these developments from Israel's political establishment. The Israeli government, composed of political powers with what at times are diametrically opposing views, has avoided formulating a consistent policy with clear goals on key issues on the agenda, and has chosen instead to postpone decisions or mitigate immediate international pressure through partial steps. As a result, more than a year after the formation of the government headed by Binyamin Netanyahu, Israel does not have answers to many of the challenges that will influence its political status and its security situation in the coming years.

The principal differences of opinion in Israel's government focus on the degree of openness to negotiations on a political and territorial compromise in the two areas that hold the key to improving Israel's regional status, and as such, its international status: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Israeli-Syrian conflict. Those who oppose effective striving for a compromise are not prepared to pay the price of promoting and formulating an agreement, especially when it concerns territory. There are a variety of reasons for this opposition, some fundamentally ideological. Other reasons include the lack of trust in the other side's intentions/capabilities to fulfill its part

of the agreement if it is achieved, and therefore, the fear that territorial concessions will create an intolerable security danger. In addition, there is the internal political context and the reluctance to confront opponents of compromise among the Israeli public. In contrast, other members of the government maintain that striving for agreements is an Israeli interest of the first order, given their assessment that Israel will pay a heavy price if it does not try to advance agreements in the conflict arenas. In the short term, this will be a political price manifested in a worsening of relations with central international actors; an accelerated process of delegitimization; and increasing security threats. In the long term, Israel will be facing these same ever-growing challenges, as well as a concrete threat to its character as the democratic state of the Jewish people.

In the face of international pressure to renew the diplomatic process – and heavy pressure from the Obama administration in particular – the Israeli government decided to give preference to the Israeli-Palestinian track and to the renewal of the negotiations with the Palestinian Authority. Apparently the assessment was that the domestic or international political price of stalemate on this track would be higher than the price of stalemate in the Israeli-Syrian arena. In addition, Israel assumed it could cope successfully with the security threats resulting from a stalemate on the Syrian track, especially through the deterrence posture it succeeded in establishing following the 2006 war in Lebanon. Nevertheless, the drive to renew the negotiations on the Palestinian track, which enabled the launching of proximity talks with the PA in May 2010 with American mediation, was not based on a definition of clear goals and an intention to reach a permanent status agreement that realizes a two-state solution in a defined time frame. The renewal of dialogue with the Palestinian Authority became a means to ease American pressure. Israel and the PA share the assessment that there is little chance of the proximity talks' success; therefore, the two sides' main goal is at the end of the four-month period allotted for the proximity talks by the US and the PA to be in a situation in which they can place the blame for the failure on the other. From Israel's point of view, this means mainly postponing the decisions and the expected crises, both between Israel and the PA and Israel and the American administration, the mediator and sponsor of the talks.

The first crisis is expected in September 2010: the chance that at the end of four months it will be possible to bridge the substantive gaps between the sides and make the proximity talks the basis of direct talks is tenuous at best. In addition, at that time Israel's commitment to a construction freeze in the settlements will expire. The Palestinians and the US will expect the freeze to be extended, but the government of Israel will find it difficult to do so because of internal and domestic pressures. The main reason that the freeze encountered relatively moderate opposition is that it was limited to a number of months. Extending the freeze will create a new situation that would in practice mean a freeze not limited in time, and therefore there will also be serious opposition within the Likud, the party in power.

The deadlock in the diplomatic process has prompted the Palestinians to consider a unilateral solution in the form of the establishment of a Palestinian state without Israel's cooperation, which would include a strong element of international coercion towards Israel. It is not clear how much substance there is to this idea in its various versions, and to what extent the international community is ready to adopt ideas of coercing Israel. In any case, the plan to prepare the infrastructure for a state within two years, published in August 2009 by Palestinian prime minister Salam Fayyad, could bring the PA to a situation in which at the end of the period, the international community would conclude that the sole obstacle to implementation of the two-state solution is Israel's policy. An additional challenge that faces Israel is the possibility that a deadlock will threaten the PA's status and its survival in its present form and bring about a situation in which the achievements in building new PA security forces with the help of the United States, the European Union, and Jordan will disappear. Any undermining of the security situation in the West Bank could be accompanied by escalation in Gaza, which will have severe ramifications for Israel.

The sad state of the diplomatic process has grave implications for Israel's international and regional standing. Against the backdrop of the stalemate, a great deal of tension developed over the past year in relations between Israel and the US, Israel's chief source of strategic support. Although tensions on this front have been mitigated to a certain extent – because of the compromise on the construction freeze in the settlements,

the opening of proximity talks, and the US domestic political focus on mid-term Congressional elections – it is quite possible that this calm is only temporary. The Obama administration has given high priority to attaining an Israeli-Palestinian agreement on the assumption that settling the conflict, or at least laying out a clear and binding course to realize the idea of two states, will make it easier to cope with advancing the American agenda in the Greater Middle East: recruiting pragmatic Arab states for an anti-Iranian front, stabilizing the security situation and the political system in Iraq, and curbing the influence of radical Islam in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The administration has therefore formulated a policy that combines pressure on Israel's government to progress in negotiations with the Palestinians with steps that demonstrate a major commitment to Israel's security and a willingness to provide security guarantees that will allow Israel to advance toward an agreement.

The stalemate in the diplomatic process and in particular, the criticism of Israel's part in this stalemate – to which even outstanding friends of Israel, including German chancellor Angela Merkel, are party – has accelerated a process of delegitimization of Israel in the international arena. Even governments friendly to Israel have a hard time coping with the animosity to Israel among their respective publics. Israel's military moves in recent years, especially the campaigns in Lebanon and Gaza, led to severe condemnation of what were perceived as violations of international law; the Goldstone report and the international community's reaction to it reflected this atmosphere well. The friction between Israel and the United States over Israel's policy in the Palestinian arena contributes a great deal to this process of delegitimization: scathing criticism from the US removed restrictions and gave the green light to unrestrained attacks on Israel. Against this backdrop, the only recent ray of light in Israel's international status is its economic performance. Israel has succeeded in coping with the world economic crisis better than most Western states. Its economic achievements led to a decision by the OECD, which brings together the developed nations of the world, to accept Israel into its ranks.

Israel's relations with Middle Eastern countries have also deteriorated. In this context, the decline of relations with Turkey and the move from partnership to tension and hostility is especially noticeable. The change

in the nature of the government in Turkey, including the weakening of the military's influence on the political establishment, has played a central role in the changed relations with Israel. At the same time, the stalemate in the diplomatic process and the rejectionist image of Israel's government make it difficult for Israel to meet the strengthening of Islamic forces in Turkey with optimal tools that will lessen the tension.

Relations with Arab countries, which appeared to be improving at the end of the previous government's term, are also in the process of deteriorating; in the current situation, it is difficult for the Arab states that have common interests with Israel to cultivate them. Two examples of this situation are Israel-Jordan relations and Israel-Egypt relations. There has been an unprecedented worsening of Israel-Jordan relations, and the dialogue between the countries has ceased almost entirely. King Abdullah of Jordan has no trust in Israel, and the Jordanians are afraid of a flare-up in the Israeli-Palestinian arena – as a result of the diplomatic stalemate or an Israeli military response to a provocation by militant Palestinian elements – that will threaten the stability of the Jordanian regime. The Hamas takeover of Gaza and the fears of Iran going nuclear have strengthened the interest shared by Israel and Egypt to contain these threats. However, against the backdrop of the political stalemate, Egypt is hard pressed to cooperate with Israel, and the dialogue between the sides is laden with friction.

Israel's increasing regional and international isolation is especially severe in light of the fact that without international cooperation and coordination, it will face heightened difficulties in coping with the threats that it faces. This subject is especially relevant to two current major security challenges: Iran's nuclearization and the asymmetric struggle with non-state actors, or more precisely, quasi-state actors.

Iran progresses with its nuclear program without any real interference; it continues to stockpile fissile material with a low level of enrichment, and it is moving to the next stage of enrichment to a level of 20 percent. More than a year after President Obama entered the White House, his policy of dialogue with Iran is in a hopeless situation. The riots in Iran following the presidential elections delayed the dialogue, and the partial and limited dialogue that took place stopped when Iran rejected the proposal to transfer material that had already been enriched to other countries, in exchange for

fuel rods for its research reactor. The domestic tension in Iran makes it more difficult to renew the dialogue and progress toward understandings. Indeed, the United States has difficulty holding an effective dialogue with an oppressive regime, seen as having erased the small amount of democracy it had in its country. For its part, the Iranian regime has hardened its positions toward the West, which it sees as inciting and aiding the elements that threaten the regime's stability. Overall, then, even the fourth round of sanctions against Iran, approved by the Security Council in June 2010, do not bespeak a qualitative improvement in the US-led drive to deal with the Iranian challenge.

Any means of action that Israel's decision makers consider to stop Iran's nuclear program will require the cooperation of the international community, especially the United States. The need for international cooperation is clear concerning diplomacy and imposition of effective sanctions, and even more so regarding military options. The resource-rich United States, whose forces are already deployed in countries around Iran, has the most auspicious capability to deal with Iran's nuclear program through military means. It is true that Israel can carry out aerial attacks in Iran even without American cooperation, as it did in Iraq in 1981, but its achievements would be far more limited because of the longer ranges involved, the difficulties of executing more than one round of attack, and the dispersal of the Iranian nuclear project. The price of the attack, particularly in diplomatic terms, would be great. For this reason, Israel will find it difficult to attack Iran without a green light, or at least a yellow light, from the United States, and without an assessment of whether the diplomatic price of the action will be tolerable.

If the attempts to stop the Iranian nuclear program fail, the need for international cooperation to contain the Iranian threat will grow. Israel is liable to need American nuclear guarantees to strengthen its deterrence against Iran. There will be a need, no less strong, for guarantees and American aid to Arab Gulf states lest some of them defect to the Iranian camp, believing that if they cannot beat Iran, they would do better to join it and receive its protection.

Furthermore, an attempt to stop the spread of nuclear weapons in the Middle East is liable to increase the pressure on Israel to take steps to help

realize the vision of a nuclear-free Middle East. Signs of this trend were seen at the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference that met in New York in May 2010. US administration spokesmen, including the secretary of state and the national security advisor, reiterated the traditional policy: the United States has adopted the vision of a nuclear-free Middle East, but it does not think that with the current political situation in the Middle East it is possible to make concrete moves to realize the vision. However, America's ability to withstand pressures in this realm has been weakened, which could be seen in the closing statement of the review conference.

At the same time, it will be necessary to create means to block Iran's efforts and those of its allies to exploit Iran's improved strategic status and exert greater pressure on Israel and the pragmatic Arab states, while employing Tehran's various protégés, especially Hizbollah in Lebanon and Hamas.

Hizbollah and Hamas are a key tool in Iran's hands in its struggle against Israel, the pragmatic Arab states, and the West, but as political organizations representing local populations, they also have independent agendas. For this reason, the increasing tension between Israel and the Iran-led radical camp was not manifested on Israel's borders with Lebanon and the Gaza Strip in the last year. From a security standpoint, the past year was one of the quietest periods for Israel since the 1960s. This quiet is a result of the strengthening of Israel's deterrence and internal considerations of both Hizbollah and Hamas following the 2006 military campaign in Lebanon and the 2008-9 operation in the Gaza Strip. Hizbollah's leadership is coping with the political damage caused by its image as a party that in the name of foreign interests dragged Lebanon into a war that brought disaster to the country. Therefore, it is not eager to renew conflict with Israel. For its part, Hamas was also dealt a hard blow in Operation Cast Lead without managing to exact a significant price from Israel, other than the diplomatic price that Israel paid for the intensity of the attack on Gaza. The Hamas leadership is aware of a sharp drop in its public support in the Gaza Strip, and it fears that another round with Israel would only make things worse.

Nevertheless, Hamas and Hizbollah have exploited the past year to strengthen their military capabilities and to increase their stockpiles of

weapons while they improve their capabilities of launching rockets, and possibly missiles, deep into Israel. At this stage, Israel's deterrence is stable on both fronts and therefore the talk, mostly in Lebanon, about a war in the near future seems groundless, but it will be difficult for deterrence alone to ensure quiet for the long term; on both fronts, there are also destabilizing factors.

For example, an Israeli or American attack on Iran's nuclear facilities could bring about Iranian pressure on Hizbollah to cooperate in the battle by setting Israel's northern border ablaze, though it is not certain that Iran will choose to endanger its outpost in Lebanon when Iran itself is under military attack. Likewise, it is not certain that pressure from Iran will bring about a Hizbollah action against Israel; Hizbollah's leadership is liable to recoil from a conflict that will strengthen its image as an organization willing to sacrifice Lebanon for the sake of foreign interests. On the other hand, Hizbollah has not yet succeeded in taking revenge on Israel for the assassination of its senior member Imad Mughniyeh, and the organization might err again in assessing Israel's response and carry out a retaliatory action that will ignite the Lebanese front.

On the southern front, the main cause of instability is the increasing pressure on Hamas from both within and without. The change in Egyptian policy following the failure of attempts to bring about internal Palestinian reconciliation, as well as the discovery of a Hizbollah network in Egypt, has been expressed in increased and more effective action to stop the smuggling of weapons and money into the Gaza Strip. Hamas is suffering financial difficulties due to fewer money transfers from Iran, and it is having difficulty financing the salaries of government workers in Gaza. This fact contributes to the decline in the organization's popularity. If the deterioration in Hamas's situation continues, the organization's leaders may conclude that an additional round of violence will extricate them from their domestic distress. Another scenario – though far less likely given the slim chance of a breakthrough in the negotiations between Israel and the PA – is that Hamas will try to escalate the conflict with Israel in order to foil any significant progress in the talks.

Nevertheless, it is very possible that the negative trends that are worsening Israel's strategic situation will not come to dramatic fruition in

the coming year and that it will be a relatively quiet year from a security standpoint. Such a situation is liable to create the illusion of calm in Israel and encourage a belief that the continuation of the status quo is the best option. This would delay, if not preempt, the concentrated efforts necessary to improve Israel's security situation, promote its regional and international status, and prevent further deterioration.