

Preface

This volume compiles edited versions of presentations delivered in December 2008 at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) second annual international conference, “Security Challenges of the 21st Century.” The conference was held in Tel Aviv, shortly after Barack Obama was elected the 44th president of the United States, and a few weeks before the February 2009 government elections in Israel. This transition period for both countries provided the focus of the conference: “The US and Israeli Roles in the Middle East under Changing Political Circumstances.”

By definition, the election of Barack Obama spelled change: the first US African-American president, he restored the Democrats to the White House after an eight-year Republican incumbency and brought Americans to the polls in the highest turnout percentage in forty years. Moreover, the need for change was the mantra of Obama’s campaign, and the drive to fuel change domestically and in US global strategy was perhaps the main celebrated principle of his agenda. Domestically, the most urgent issue was the world financial crisis and the impact on the US economy, and accordingly, what measures were imperative to reverse the downturn. On an international level, the Middle East assumed a central place on the new administration’s list of priorities. How change would affect the region, particularly America’s relations with the Arab world, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the US positions vis-à-vis the Iranian nuclear challenge was a pressing issue during the campaign and the focus of much speculation in the pre-inauguration transition period. These changes would inevitably be influenced by Israel’s new prime minister and the new coalition government, with its particular vision and political bent.

In December 2008, the Iranian challenge and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict lay at the heart of Israel’s agenda. While not new developments,

these issues were poised to take a decisive turn in 2009. Israel continued to be concerned by the Iranian regime's drive to attain a nuclear weapon. Closer to home, the deadline proposed at Annapolis for reaching a framework agreement for resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was set to expire. True, the security situation in the West Bank had improved over the previous year, with greater security coordination between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, and the West Bank was experiencing economic growth. Nonetheless, the conflict seemed as far from a solution – and as such, as potentially volatile – as ever. Indeed, only a few days remained to the six-month ceasefire between Israel and Hamas, and the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip would soon be targeted by Israel in its military campaign, Operation Cast Lead, designed to improve the security situation in southern Israel.

Against this backdrop, speakers at the INSS conference deliberated what could be expected for Israel in relation to these pressing regional issues under the incoming administration. There was no question that more than any other international player, the US would continue to exert the primary influence in the region. A recurring theme was that Obama the president, like Obama the candidate, would likely embrace the already established strategic ties between Israel and the US; in other words, US attitudes and interests vis-à-vis Israel did not stand to differ measurably in intent. What did stand to differ was the means the administration chose to advance its goals and agenda in the region at large. With a new president who had no history of a close relationship with an Israeli prime minister, to what extent could these bilateral relations be adjusted or redistributed without undue strain? How much substantive change in the region could or would the new administration effect? What long term processes could be launched that might indeed help stabilize this potentially explosive region that remains vital to US interests?

In broad terms the conference dealt with four major themes, beginning with the direction of US Middle East foreign policy in an Obama administration. With this primary question underpinning all the sessions, the opening lecture was delivered by former senator George J. Mitchell, who shortly afterwards was named the US presidential special envoy to the Middle East. Basing his analysis on his personal and successful involvement in the crafting of a solution to the conflict in Northern Ireland, Senator

Mitchell affirmed his belief that a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, however remote or unlikely it appears at times, is attainable. He insisted that any solution must be firmly rooted in a shared vision of the parties for a peaceful future, but experience has shown that firm, unrelenting, and creative US diplomacy can be highly constructive.

Looking ahead to the prospective foreign policy of the Obama administration, Congressman Howard L. Berman, the chairman of the House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee, chose to focus on the essential continuity of US goals and interests across administrations, and especially with regard to the Middle East. His sense, however, was that one would find a different approach to familiar strategic goals. Congressman Berman emphasized Obama's drive to draft a broader, more inclusive foreign policy vision and mobilize allies both to further and to realize his foreign policy agenda. Advocating a more regional approach rather than a nation-by-nation tactic, the incoming administration believes that connections and interfaces are both a means and an end.

Likewise anticipating the expected cornerstones of Obama's foreign policy, Professor Itamar Rabinovich of Tel Aviv University considered the nature of the special relationship between Israel and the United States. Underscoring that the dynamic between the new president and Israel's next prime minister was a significant factor yet to take shape, Professor Rabinovich stressed the value of the prime minister making that all-important first trip to the White House not long after assuming office with a plan in hand, rather than being the passive recipient of an American program.

Two lectures focused on the second theme of the conference: the future Middle East, specifically, emerging trends and their implications for the future of the region. Professor Asher Susser of Tel Aviv University discussed how longstanding fundamental parameters of the Middle East are no longer extant: the Middle East seems to be no longer dominated by Arab and Sunni states, as Iran, Turkey, Israel, and non-state actors like Hizbollah and Hamas have assumed leading roles in the region. Therefore, Professor Susser argued, Israel and the United States must cultivate a common understanding of the new Middle East, and any US attempt at engagement in the region must be made from a position of strength. Professor Manuel Trajtenberg, then head of the National Economic Council of the Prime Minister's Office, discussed the global financial crisis and how it might impact on the

strategic issues in the Middle East, especially Israel's capability to allocate resources to security needs. Increasingly costly security and anti-terrorism needs challenge Israel's ability to cope with the Iranian threat and maintain a proper conventional army. However, the Palestinians have also incurred increasing economic costs and perhaps, Professor Trajtenberg suggested, this common need might be a source of potential where convergent interests invite new possibilities and opportunities.

The third theme of the conference was the Iranian challenge. Dr. Gary Samore, then of the Council on Foreign Relations and thereafter appointed by the White House as US coordinator for the Prevention of Weapons of Mass Destruction Proliferation and Terrorism, assessed the range of diplomatic options available to the incoming president to tackle the Iranian nuclear threat, and possible US strategy if diplomatic efforts fail. Dr. Samore estimated that the Obama administration is in a much more advantageous position to achieve successful results through diplomatic efforts than was the Bush administration, even if relying on an amplified version of the familiar and already-attempted carrot and stick strategy.

Dr. Ephraim Kam of INSS delivered his estimation of the Iranian threat, questioning whether Iran would actually use nuclear weapons, but underscoring that Israel cannot rely on this assessment, particularly as it lacks a thorough understanding of the decision making processes in Iran. Dr. Kam also explored the regional repercussions of Iran's acquisition of a military nuclear capability. On the issue of regional support for Iran's nuclear aspirations, Dr. Martim Kramer of the Shalem Center in Jerusalem questioned the degree to which neighboring Arab states share Iran's vitriolic attitude towards the United States, and challenged the idea that public opinion might constrain Arab governments' support of US-led measures against Iran. In other words, the Obama administration has a serious opportunity to recruit support among the Arab states, and even the possibility that Iran might unleash terrorism in response is preferable to its possession of nuclear weapons. In the final lecture on this theme, Maj. Gen. (ret.) Giora Eiland of INSS discussed the objectives, risks, and potential fallout from an Israeli military operation against Iran. Gen. Eiland underscored the imperative of Israel preparing a military option, even if the desirability and the likelihood of its use are low.

The fourth theme of the conference was security aspects of Israeli and US policy in the region. Admiral (ret.) William J. Fallon, former head of US Central Command, spoke about US security assistance to Israel. He also stressed that in Israel, as in any country, some of the larger security issues are internal, and the best way to address security issues successfully, be they internal or external, is through tight, coordinated, and highly functional systems at home. Maj. Gen. (ret.) Aharon Ze'evi Farkash of INSS analyzed the security challenges embedded in the key changes in global and regional conflicts, including the reemergence of a multi-polar world; globalization; the spread of radical Islam; the increased threat of non-conventional weapons; and the growth of global terrorism. In addition, Gen. Farkash spoke about technological security cooperation between the US and Israel. This issue was also addressed by then-MK Professor Isaac Ben-Israel of Tel Aviv University, who lamented the lack of technological collaboration between the two countries. Professor Ben-Israel stressed the importance of Israeli military technological advances in order to instill trust in Israel's American counterparts, which in turn would encourage this cooperation.

Since the conference was held, both the new American president and the new Israeli prime minister have taken office and launched their domestic and international agendas. President Obama's stamp has certainly been felt in the Middle East; at the very least, the overtures to the Arab world have turned over a new leaf in the US posture in the region. Nonetheless, Iran continues to march towards nuclear weapons capability, Israel and the Palestinians have yet to resume negotiations, and a region-wide solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict has been mentioned often but has not advanced. The conference proceedings compiled here record the assessments at the time of the important transition period in anticipation of two new administrations, and provide a prism for evaluating expectations and the reality that ensued.

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