

Iran, the Peace Process, and the Future of War: Strategic Issues for the Coming Year

Dan Meridor

This address will focus on three interconnected topics: the American struggle against Iran; Israeli-Palestinian relations; and the effect of the Goldstone report on the future of war.

Iran

The struggle currently developing between Iran and the United States is the struggle that requires the most attention in the coming months. Should this struggle end with Iran as a nuclear state – i.e., with an American defeat and an Iranian success – there will be far reaching ramifications not only for the Middle East but also for the rules of the game at the world level and the global balance of power. It may be that such a result would mark the collapse of the NPT, whose rules have governed the world for forty years. As a result of Iran becoming a nuclear power, the NPT regime would be damaged because already today a fair number of states – among them Egypt and Saudi Arabia – are saying that should Iran become a nuclear power they too would attempt to obtain nuclear capability. A world with uncontrolled nuclear proliferation, which represents a real danger, looms before us.

A second area where a detrimental change is liable to occur is in the very important relations that have developed between the United States and the West on the one hand and the Arab and Gulf states on the other. For almost seventy years, since the Treaty of Baghdad, relations have included supporting the Arab regimes in return for the unimpeded flow of oil from the Gulf. Many states in the Middle East, especially the Arab states, are

asking themselves if the United States will be able to continue to protect them against the export of the Iranian revolution and a destabilization of the region. They do not wish to see Iran succeed because of what Iran represents and does. However, some states are already saying that if Iran does in fact attain hegemony in the region they will have no choice but to play along. Clearly, such a scenario represents a significant change in both the region and the world order.

A third potential area of detrimental change, related to the previous issue, concerns the processes underway in the Muslim world from Pakistan and Afghanistan in the east to Algeria and Morocco in the west. The Muslim world encompasses over one billion people, most of whom are moderate citizens who would like to lead their lives in stable regimes. However, in almost every state in the Muslim world there are fundamentalist, revolutionary minorities and movements. Whether the movements are labeled al-Qaeda, Taliban, Hizbollah, Jihad, or Hamas, all threaten the internal order. All view Iran as the spearhead, and therefore the sense of an Iranian victory is highly dangerous to the stability of the Muslim world at large. What a revolutionized Muslim world means for the rest of the globe does not need to be spelled out. For all these reasons, it seems clearer and clearer that it is critical that the struggle between the United States and Iran end with an American success.

In talks with Americans I have had the occasion to tell them that they do not have to persuade Israel that the policy they are following is the correct one. Rather, the United States will have to convince the Saudis and the Egyptians that their policy will prevent Iran from becoming a nuclear state. Furthermore, the United States can also enlist Europe, which has a not insignificant amount of economic clout, thanks to its still extensive trade ties with Iran. The United States can and must enlist nations such as Australia, Japan, Canada, and some of the Gulf states, and possibly also Russia and China. This is a struggle of the highest order of importance because it will determine the balance of power and rules of the game for the entire world.

Although the results of the American efforts against Iran are significant for Israel, it is necessary to examine the issue beyond the limits of the Israeli perspective. An attempt is underway to change the world in which we live, and Israel has a clear interest in seeing the American efforts

succeed. The leaders of the regime in Iran are trying to instill in the world a sense that America is weakening. Presenting America's economic troubles alongside its campaigns in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iraq as indications that its importance is waning is a dangerous process that could allow Iran to cast itself as a rising counterforce that other states would do well to support.

Among the host of issues on President Obama's desk, most of which he inherited, there is no comparable achievement to the potential success of the Iranian question. Iraq cannot be a distinctive success, nor can Afghanistan. It is necessary to make sure that the legitimate differences of opinion between the Israeli government and the American administration – in themselves not an unusual phenomenon – do not mute the fact that Israel is part of the global camp led by the United States. A strong such camp clearly lies in Israel's best interests, and therefore a strong America and a successful American president are clear Israeli interests.

Should the process end with Iranian success, the ramifications on the conduct of players such as Hamas and Hizbollah will be profound. Beyond providing intelligence assistance, Iranian success will embolden these organizations and strengthen the belief that they are riding the wave of success that has removed politics between states from the arena and substituted it with the politics of God. Such a process would make it much more difficult to make peace in the Middle East. As such, there is a link between the outcome of the struggle between Iran and America, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Israeli-Palestinian Relations

Israeli public opinion has undergone a major transformation regarding the Palestinian question. From a society split down the middle into two camps over the question of whether the whole of the land of Israel, from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean, should be retained, or whether most of the territories should be returned in order to achieve full peace, it has come to a point where 80 percent of the public supports the two-state solution. The last three prime ministers, Ariel Sharon, Ehud Olmert, and Binyamin Netanyahu – who were all once Likud loyalists – endorsed the explicit formula of “two states for two peoples,” meaning the establishment of a Palestinian state next to the State of Israel. This represents a tremendous

shift resulting from many complex processes that lie beyond the scope of this address. Israeli society is moving towards a compromise while attempting to prevent the conflict from becoming a religious one. We have tried to fight the idea that relinquishing parts of the land of Israel constitutes a religious prohibition and therefore lies outside the authority of any government. The people of Israel opposed this notion at the ballot box, even during the disengagement from the Gaza Strip. Unfortunately, no such reciprocal process has taken place on the other side; on the contrary, the clearest manifestation of the reverse trend, a move from a nationalist paradigm to a religious paradigm, was the transition from a Fatah-led to a Hamas-led government in the Gaza Strip.

Israel has undergone an additional change. Beyond its expressed willingness to accept the two-state solution, it also experienced two massive failures to reach such a solution and thereby bring about an end to the conflict. I was present at the first such attempt in 2000 at Camp David, with President Clinton, Prime Minister Barak, and Yasir Arafat. However, when an end to the occupation was proposed, when a Palestinian state was proposed, when the division of Jerusalem was proposed, and even when President Clinton offered \$10 billion as aid for the refugees, Arafat said no. Clinton has made it clear that he held Arafat responsible for the Camp David failure.

The second attempt was recent. We tend to disregard it, as it represents writing on the wall we would rather ignore. Ehud Olmert made a serious, intensive effort to reach an agreement. He conducted very intensive negotiations with Abu Mazen alongside the discussions held between Foreign Minister Livni and Abu Ala. The proposals were more far reaching than ever before, both with regard to Jerusalem and with regard to other issues. The Palestinian leader did not accept even this proposal. I will not go into detail, but this is the truth. In addition, we are in a situation in which it is clear to us that there is no central Palestinian government that can unite the Gaza Strip and Judea and Samaria into one entity. There is a growing gap and no real desire – certainly not on the part of the PLO – to reach an agreement with Hamas. The Americans and others are likewise not interested in this happening, because this would mean the end of the peace process.

If that is the case, what positive processes are nonetheless taking place? For a year now there has been virtually no terrorism. No terrorism: this sounds normal; it is only natural to become accustomed to positive situations; but Israelis remember well the horrors of terrorism. While the IDF and Israeli security forces engaged in significant activity to curb terrorism, the Palestinian security services were also simultaneously engaged in significant, positive activities to that end. As a result of the calm on the security front, another positive development is taking place. The security calm has allowed the removal of roadblocks, which in turn has contributed to the Palestinian economy. Clearly, the positive processes described here are no substitute for the peace process, but one must not treat them as something self-evident. Therefore, it is necessary to use caution in further steps so as not to create expectations that might be dashed on the rocks of reality and ruin even the little that exists today.

How do we move forward from this point? In the past, ambitious visions were presented to the public with much fanfare, but we must remember that we live in reality. Without a link between vision and reality, we will soon be mired in a very difficult situation. The ladders that must be constructed between heaven and earth, like Jacob's ladder in his dream in Beit El, are crucial in the political realm.

Because the Palestinians are not prepared to discuss anything except for the permanent settlement, it would be right to hold discussions on two tracks, two levels, in tandem. One is the permanent settlement – Jerusalem, refugees, borders, security – i.e., all the issues that must be resolved to put an end to the conflict. My estimate is that the chances of reaching such an agreement are not high, but I may be wrong. However, in order to prevent an explosion and disintegration, we must at the same time talk about constructing something from the bottom up. That is to say, we must significantly expand what already exists on the ground. To a great extent, this goal meshes with what is called “the Fayyad plan.” Our common interests are to build more and more institutions, capabilities, and authorities in the Palestinian territories, so that even if there is not yet a full solution it will be possible to promote a move from the bottom to the same extent and at the same time that it hopefully advances at the top.

For that to happen it is necessary to renew the peace negotiations, but a change has come over the Palestinian stance and there are currently no

negotiations. Yet as long as the Palestinians continue to think that there is an alternative to a give-and-take process, i.e., there may be international coercion, there will be no negotiations. The moment it becomes clear to them that they must make decisions that involve not only taking but also giving, I think there is a framework that, given proper work, can promote relations, raise them to a higher level, and even arrive at a permanent settlement. Some of us, though I hope only a dwindling minority, suffer from the illusion that the status quo can be maintained over time. This is impossible, and is hardly in need of explanation

It may have been that this understanding led Prime Minister Sharon to the conclusion that even without a settlement it was important to change the status quo. Perhaps he erred in this, but the conclusion was profound, as change is necessary. This is not to say that maintaining the status quo is hurting only Israel's interests. The Palestinians are also losing. Once they understand this, I hope that with American efforts it will be possible to advance negotiations. This will of course require difficult decisions, including political ones.

The Goldstone Report and the Future of War

The enemy succeeded in establishing a new paradigm of war for which we do not yet have a good response. This paradigm necessitates a massive change in warfare, as it is unlike anything we have known before. We are no longer talking about a war in which divisions face divisions, armies face armies, and airplanes in the sky face surface-to-air missiles. The new paradigm comprises two or three elements. One is the relatively simple but very effective technology of missiles and rockets in massive numbers. In Lebanon, Hizbollah has already stockpiled close to 40,000 rockets, most of them short range but some capable of reaching most parts of Israel. Hamas has thousands of such missiles. This is the first element – massive numbers of missiles and rockets.

The second element is the positioning of these missiles within very densely populated areas. The third element, well known but nonetheless noteworthy, is the fact that on the other side there are no soldiers in uniform shooting, as defined by the Geneva Convention. Thus, a situation is created in which a war is begun and Israel is barraged by hundreds, even thousands, of missiles for a period of days. There's a launcher firing rockets,

surrounded by civilians. No rule of war obligates you to be a sitting duck until you're hit. The only way is to try to damage the launcher. However, damage to the launcher is liable to cost the lives of many civilians. This situation imposes an operational and moral dilemma. There is no other way but to defend our lives at the cost of the lives of others. Here we have a question concerning international law and the rules of war.

In the Goldstone report, I did not see enough of an attempt to grapple with the dilemma I just posed. It is important to grapple with it because this is not the last war that will be prosecuted in this way. Others deem this mode of warfare successful, and therefore the phenomenon will grow. There will be more missiles and more rockets, capable of striking at longer ranges, with more lethal warheads, and with better precision. And they will be fired from population centers. The next war will not be between divisions, but between civilians: war from amid civilians aimed at civilians.

I am not sure that it is necessary to change the rules of war, but it is necessary to change their interpretation to fit the new situation. What was created as the result of the Goldstone report is yet another unconventional weapon in the hands of our enemies, designed primarily to weaken our resolve in the next war, if and when it happens. It is a weapon designed to weaken the resolve of the government in order to prevent it from making decisions lest it be accused of war crimes. Therefore, it is in our own best interests to face this openly and courageously and raise the real problem in public, here and everywhere. The world too must tackle this issue, as it lies at the doorstep of all of humanity. Make no mistake: this trend – appealing to the International Court of Justice and nations around the world to pass universal judgment, and turning to the United Nations to castigate Israel as a nation operating outside the law and committing war crimes – will continue. As I have stated publicly, my opinion was and remains that it would have been proper to establish a committee to investigate these claims. I am still hoping this may happen. I am certain that there are excellent answers to most of the claims in the report. The IDF is not an army that commits war crimes, though it is possible that as in every war, improper incidents did occur. International law stipulates that a nation investigating itself is not investigated externally, and this is how we ought to have acted.

As for the question of our differences of opinion with the American administration, it behooves us to remember that there was never full agreement between Israel and the United States about resolving the conflict. In 1969, Secretary of State Rogers presented the Rogers Plan, and said that the border must adhere to the 1967 lines “with minor modifications or non-substantial alterations.” Since then, American administrations and indeed the entire world have repeated this formula. We have thought differently, and by “we” I mean both the Likud and Labor parties. So when has the world sided with us? On the issue of terrorism. We have suffered from terrorism all these years. Terrorism has helped the terrorists but has also made the situation in the world difficult for them. When there is no terrorism, the gap between the Israeli and American stances surfaces. So it should come as no surprise that we are seeing differences of opinion now, differences of opinion that have always existed between us and the Americans.

In recent years there was a certain amount of success in narrowing the gaps, although it too came at a cost. This success may have been expressed in the letter by President Bush to Prime Minister Sharon about the settlement blocs (“population centers”), which indicated that they would be included within Israel’s borders. I think it is clear to everyone that should there be a permanent settlement, the lines will be such that a significant portion of the settlements will remain within Israeli territory. The question of the cost, of course, is one that still has to be dealt with.

If we restart the process of reconciling with the Palestinians, which to a great extent is a function of the Iranian-American conflict, and if this process makes progress – and we have to assume more risk, in order to move our forces out of more of the territories – it is critical that it be possible for us to defend ourselves should we be attacked from those areas. It would be unwise of us to put ourselves in a situation where we have tied our own hands and therefore cannot take necessary risks in order to promote the peace process. These are the three issues with which we will have to live in the coming year and perhaps even beyond.