Addressing Israel's Strategic Threats

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Were it possible to encapsulate the current strategic threats Israel faces in three categories, they would be: a) Iran and its nuclear program; b) the Arab-Israeli conflict, with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict at its center; and c) asymmetrical confrontations with non-state or hybrid players, as discussed by Maj. Gen. Amos Yadlin. The question is: does the Israeli government have a comprehensive plan or strategy for tackling these threats? My sense is that the answer is no.

My impression is that the current government has defined only a partial set of goals, because there is no agreement on many of the goals, and certainly not with regard to those associated with the Israeli-Palestinian track. Furthermore, it made a conscious decision to deal with the Iranian nuclear program as the first priority. All the rest have been ad hoc responses to pressures from outside, especially the United States. Yet for there to be a strategy, it is first necessary to prioritize the handling of the various risks. This prioritization is linked to a number of points: the severity of the threat, its intensity, its urgency, and Israel's capability of handling it, because if there is a threat that we can do absolutely nothing about, it is pointless to place it at the top of the agenda.

My own view is that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict should be at the top of Israel's priorities, for three reasons: a) because it threatens the existence of the State of Israel as a democratic Jewish state; b) because this is the best way to deal with the advancing process of delegitimizing Israel on the international area; and c) because it will also have an effect on relations with Iran. Even the Iranian regime, assuming it retains its authoritarian nature, needs to justify its policy to its own people. In the absence of an Israeli-Palestinian conflict I do not see how a confrontation with Israel can

be seen as legitimate in the eyes of the Iranian nation. Similarly, it would stop being such a useful tool for wielding Iran's influence on the Arab and Islamic world.

What else should such a strategy include? First, it must refer to the two tracks – the Israeli-Syrian and the Israeli-Palestinian – with an understanding of their interrelationship. There must be a decision on how to coordinate both, and how much progress should be made on either track. Such attention must lead to the conclusion that it is necessary to consider seriously giving precedence in the first stage to the Israeli-Syrian track. The questions involved on that front are relatively simple. This agreement can be reached and implemented relatively easily. The risks are smaller, the solution in this track depends to a large extent on our own decision, and it carries within it the potential for changing the strategic balance in the Middle East. However, is it right and possible to proceed only along the Israeli-Syrian track? I do not think so. There are many risks, from a new conflagration on the Palestinian arena to the loss of everything that has been gained to date.

In all, some very positive developments have occurred on the Palestinian scene and create a situation in which one can answer "yes" to the question: do we have a Palestinian partner. It may be that the question we should ask ourselves is not, do we have a Palestinian partner, rather: how do you construct a Palestinian partner, because we are in the midst of a process of constructing a Palestinian partner. Beyond the other risks, however, is the primary risk of creating a point of no return, a situation in which the implementation of the two-state solution will no longer be possible and only two options remain: a non-democratic Jewish one-state solution or a democratic non-Jewish one-state solution.

In contrast to the Israeli-Syrian issue, we know that there are tremendous difficulties on the Israeli-Palestinian track. The internal political situation on both sides is problematic. The issues for negotiation are highly sensitive and difficult to resolve. There are large gaps between the sides on some of the issues. And even if we do get to a settlement, the difficulty in its implementation, which will obviously involve the evacuation of a large number of settlement residents, is enormous. This reality suggests that we ought to proceed on the Israeli-Palestinian track, but with a realistic view of the difficulties and constraints.

On the basis of this understanding, about a year ago we at INSS established a team to examine precisely this question: how can we proceed on the Israeli-Palestinian track without requiring either side to make decisions they cannot cope with politically in the early stages. We came to a conclusion that is to an extent congruent with the conclusion reached by MK Mofaz. We wanted to construct a flexible system of tools for the political echelon. Therefore we built an approach based on proceeding through partial agreements at different levels, with the levels constructed according to some primary parameters. The first and second are, of course, territory and security; they always go hand-in-hand. The third is the economy, the fourth is outstanding civilian issues between us and the Palestinians, and the fifth and sixth are Jerusalem and the refugees. Our plan did not deal fully with the latter two issues but we are aware that it will be impossible to implement any such plan with the Palestinians unless we communicate our willingness to discuss those issues too. So we tried to deal with these issues to a certain extent in order to communicate such a message.

By means of a process of partial agreements we can create a situation in which the Palestinian government controls a growing portion of the West Bank. Its authority also expands according to improvements in the capabilities of the Palestinian government, in part with the help of outside players. Assistance by regional and international players allows the Palestinians to maintain the state-building process – be it through the construction of security services or other institutions – whose proper performance is critical to the existence of a state.

All this can happen on the basis of Fayyad's plan, which has a very ambitious goal: to reach a situation in which within two years the Palestinians can establish a state. I do not know if it is possible to meet such a deadline, but on the whole this concept – constructing the institutions of the state and coming to a point that enables a permanent settlement and the establishment of a state – serves us too, on condition that the process takes place in coordination and agreement with us, and as part of an Israeli strategic plan rather than as a unilateral step by the Palestinians.

The participation of regional elements and the influx of outside assistance are crucial, and can be implemented on the basis of the Arab peace proposal. It is a better fulfillment of the Arab peace initiative than the

attempt to court gestures from the Arab world in the form of El Al flights through Saudi air space. El Al flights over Saudi Arabia are less important than creating a situation in which it is possible to reach an agreement with the Palestinians.

There is one other element that cannot be ignored: Hamas' rule over the Gaza Strip. How do we prevent Hamas from playing the spoiler? I think that one of the fundamental difficulties in negotiations with the Palestinians is the need for those negotiating with us to take into account the possible resistance of Hamas and its supporters, and the constant need to relate to the question of whether Hamas can use negotiations for contrary purposes. Similarly, negotiations demand awareness that Hamas is quite able to disrupt implementation of agreements using the very effective tool of violence.

The developments since the Second Lebanon War and Operation Cast Lead indicate that given an appropriate policy with regard to Lebanon and Gaza, it is indeed possible to prevent Hamas and Hizbollah from upsetting all agreements. I do not think that it is possible to rely only on deterrence. When you bring the other side to the point at which its back is against the wall and it has nothing to lose, no deterrence will be effective. Therefore, the key in neutralizing Hamas as a spoiler lies in strengthening Israel's deterrence on the one hand, while on the other, creating a situation in which there are enough positive incentives to continue the current situation of relative calm.