

Preface

This volume compiles edited versions of presentations delivered in December 2009 at the third annual Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) international conference. The conference series, “Security Challenges of the 21st Century,” brings together political leaders, academicians, and practitioners to probe the most critical and challenging issues on Israel’s national security agenda and then together search for the policies that best advance Israel’s national security interests. Held in Tel Aviv, the focus of this year’s conference was “Vision and Reality in the Middle East.”

Three main challenges were identified as the most significant in late 2009, almost one year after the new administrations in Washington and Jerusalem entered office. The Iranian quest for a nuclear military capability looms increasingly close to fruition, yet remains slowly and only partially managed by the international community. There is the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which at the time had ground to a new standstill with no political prospect with the PA on the horizon and with renewed Israeli military deterrence versus Hamas in Gaza, following Operation Cast Lead the previous year. The third challenge, the tension in US-Israel relations, dominated the other issues and sparked grave concerns as to the future of the special relations between the countries that were long a cornerstone of the Israeli strategic posture, particularly during the eight years of the Bush administration.

Most speakers concurred that the three challenges are in many ways interrelated and mutually influential. However, the degree of interrelationship, how this connection is manifested, and the implications of the linkage were subject to dispute, especially regarding the cause and effect factor. Whereas some suggested that the friction, lack of intimacy, and perhaps the inadequate understanding and hence poor coordination

between the Obama administration and the Netanyahu government had a negative effect on the political process, others argued that the root cause of the volatile atmosphere in the Middle East lay in the trends of radicalization in the region, inspired by Iran's uncurbed extremism and its quest for regional hegemony. All agreed that 2010 would likely be a critical year requiring major decisions to shape the future of the Middle East and the Israeli position within it. This in turn sparked disagreement – especially among leading Israeli politicians – as to what exactly Israel should do in order to improve its strategic situation.

The memorandum that follows is divided into four parts. Part I presents the Israeli national intelligence assessment, delivered by Maj. Gen. Amos Yadlin, head of IDF Military Intelligence, the organ responsible for Israel's overall strategic evaluation. In a panoramic survey, Yadlin analyzed Israel's revitalized deterrence and the prevailing security stability on the northern and southern fronts in the aftermath of the 2006 Second Lebanon War and Operation Cast Lead of 2008-9. He cautioned, however, that deterrence can be easily overturned and yield to another round of conflict, which will feature a more robust and dangerous Hamas and Hizbollah endowed with improved military capabilities. Beyond this immediate threat, Yadlin outlined seven principal challenges for Israeli security in the foreseeable future: the Iranian nuclear threat and its ramifications for proliferation; the empowerment of the radical axis; the implications of future hybrid warfare; the dangers emanating from the two Palestinian entities; the challenges to Israeli legitimacy; the precarious state of Israeli cooperation with its allies; and finally, the need to preserve the supremacy of the Israeli technological edge in general and in the sphere of cyber warfare in particular.

Part II of the volume deals with the Arab-Israeli conflict, with a focus on the Palestinian issue. The six presentations on this theme fall into two groups: one delivered by politicians who naturally assess the issues through their particular approaches and beliefs. The second group contains analyses by researchers who bring an academic perspective to the discourse.

Deputy Prime Minister Dan Meridor, who serves in the inner Cabinet, better known as “the Seven,” chose to tackle the interface between the Iranian threat, the Palestinian issue, and the question of deligitimization. On the Iranian issue Meridor emphasized the Israeli interest in the success of the US-led international move, urging Israel to ensure that Israel's

legitimate disagreements with the US do not overshadow and hamper the importance of the US-led global coalition, which is essential for Israel. On the Palestinian issue Meridor noted the advantages in the Fayyad concept of strengthening the foundations of the future Palestinian political system and in resuming the peace process, especially given his assessment that it is impossible to preserve the status quo, that change is inevitable, and that together with the US it is possible to advance the negotiations, even if it demands difficult political decisions from Israel.

Member of Knesset Tzipi Livni, leader of the opposition and formerly foreign minister, insisted that the vision of a Jewish and democratic Israel necessitates a twofold strategy: a strong stand against Hamas, which is not a partner to the political process, and a concerted attempt to reach a detailed agreement with the PA. The negotiations, which should resume from the point at which they stopped under the previous government, would earn the support of the international community. Gradual implementation of the agreement would occur with the establishment of a responsible, internationally-recognized Palestinian government, to include the Gaza Strip.

Arguing that time is not on Israel's side, Member of Knesset and former defense minister Shaul Mofaz urged that the passive stand of the Netanyahu government be replaced with a political plan, in part to preempt any imposed solution. The essence of the Israeli initiative should be based on the establishment of borders and security arrangements that provide a solution to the conflict. According to Mofaz's plan, in the first stage the Palestinians would receive 60 percent of the West Bank and Gaza territory, and in the final stage they would receive land equivalent in size to the 1967 territory. Israel will gain defensible borders that include the settlement blocs, while in the first stage it would not be required to relocate settlements or military camps, and 99 percent of the Palestinians will reside in Palestinian territory. Following the first stage negotiations would begin on the core issues.

Deputy Prime Minister Ze'ev Binyamin Begin, also a member of "the Seven," presented a different concept. He suggested that it was not possible to meet the Palestinian expectations, nor was it feasible that an agreement with the PLO could be reached in the foreseeable future, unless the organization changes its policies. There is no mediator who

can bring the parties to an agreement, and any political process will end up in a stalemate, as was the case in the past. In the meantime, until the circumstances change, Israel must preserve its strength and freedom of movement. It is crucial that Israel be wary of formulae suggested by others, even friends, since often their guidelines do not correspond with Israel's interests, which are based not only on security considerations but also on the nation's natural and historical right to its land.

Professor Itamar Rabinovich, former Israeli ambassador to the US, focused on the Syrian dimension, analyzing what led the US administration to decide not to adopt the option of "Syria first" and the reasons for the failure of the American attempt to engage Damascus. He discussed the factors behind the improved Syrian posture in the region, and concluded that Syria seems to remain part of the problem rather than part of the solution.

The presentation by Brig. Gen. (ret.) Shlomo Brom of INSS concludes this section of the volume. Brom argued that Israel lacks a comprehensive strategic program to face the challenges of Iran, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and hybrid warfare. At best, each receives an ad hoc position, based primarily on external pressures. While there is a need to relate to the Syrian track and perhaps even grant it priority, the Palestinian issue deserves a more thorough consideration. He contended that there is a Palestinian partner and that Israel must consider how to empower this partner. In light of the prevailing political reality, he suggested an agreement in stages, which deals first with issues of territory and security arrangements, then economic and civilian questions, and only at the last stage with an attempt to tackle the core issues of Jerusalem and the refugees. On the basis of the Fayyad plan, it is possible to advance to an agreement on the first issues and establish a Palestinian state in two years, with regional Arab assistance.

The third part of the volume deals with the international environment and its impact on developments in the Middle East. Of primary significance in this context is the American approach following the election of President Obama and what seems to be a shift in US attitude and consequently its policies, which has spawned a new atmosphere of concern in Israel.

According to Dr. Martin Indyk, former US ambassador to Israel and now of the Brookings Institution, President Obama entered office facing three critical interrelated issues that have direct relevance to the Middle

East: the threat of al-Qaeda, the Iranian challenge, and the Arab-Israeli conflict, with the Palestinian question at its core. Convinced that time was not on Israel's side and that failure to resolve the Palestinian issue will have negative repercussions on American national interests, President Obama devised a strategy that included a rehabilitation of relations with the Arab and Muslim world; an attempt to engage Iran, while building the international consensus against its nuclear program; and advance of a comprehensive solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict, including drawing Syria into the pro-Western camp. In late 2009, the picture was not encouraging as far as this strategy was concerned. Washington found itself disappointed by the attitude of most partners, including Saudi Arabia, the Palestinians, and Israel. Still, the president was expected to continue to press for the implementation of his strategy and seek the cooperation of regional leaders.

Ambassador James Cunningham, US ambassador to Israel, also surveyed the broad challenges facing the US. He focused on the administration's initial emphasis on change, primarily from military conflicts to diplomacy, dialogue, and engagement. Given the prevailing political reality, the administration's strategy is one of incrementalism, with major efforts to recruit allies to partner with the US in advancing the goals of stability and security.

Ambassador Sallai Meridor, the former Israeli ambassador to Washington, suggested that US-Israel relations have been affected by the administration's attitude of "anything but Bush," which put Israel in a state of growing isolation in the international arena. Thus Meridor argued that together with the US, Israel should formulate new options for negotiations, without neglecting the Syrian option. If there is no progress on the Palestinian issue, towards 2011 Israel should expect an attempt by the US to "save the parties from themselves," by pushing them to act according to their "real" interests, as perceived by Washington.

Ambassador Dan Gillerman, former Israeli ambassador to the UN, presented a more optimistic stance, based on his conviction that there is a growing understanding, including in the moderate Muslim world, of the threat of radicalism. With this comes a realization that the challenge posed by Iran, and not the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, represents the core of concern. If the more pragmatic forces could mobilize to find a realistic solution for

the Palestinian question, they will find themselves in an improved position to face the dangers of fundamentalism. Gillerman suggested that President Obama can rely on this option, which might facilitate reconciliation and normalization with the Arab and Muslim world.

Ambassador Shimon Stein, former Israeli ambassador to Germany and currently at INSS, explained that the European community seeks stability in the Middle East, convinced that this enhances stability in its own yard. This is the reason for European activism on the Middle East, even though European leaders are aware of their limitations in this regard. To a large extent the Europeans base their Middle East policies on the principle of reward and punishment. If Israel adopts a policy perceived as forthcoming by the EU, it will be rewarded accordingly in ways that will enhance its practical and strategic relations with Europe.

The fourth part of this volume deals with the Iranian challenge and how Israel should consider tackling it. Professor Maj. Gen. (ret.) Isaac Ben-Israel suggested that a nuclear weapon held by Iran does not necessarily represent an existential threat to the State of Israel; at the same time, this would constitute an intolerable threat. He contended that international sanctions may succeed in bringing Iran to a point that it does not cross the weaponization threshold, despite the technological capabilities it has acquired. Ben-Israel suggested that any delay of the Iranian program is also significant, partly due to the domestic pressure on the regime.

Maj. Gen. (ret.) Giora Eiland of INSS, formerly head of Israel's National Security Council, examined Israel's possible military options against Iran. He focused on four dimensions: the political context; the risk of living with a nuclear bomb versus the risk of a preemptive move; the question of the American approach to an Israeli strike; and the pure military context. In this last domain Eiland mentioned the need for precise and adequate intelligence; the capability to bring the critical mass of explosives to the right targets; the question of the expected damage to these targets and the implications for the nuclear program; and the operational window of opportunity. Eiland suggested that Israel may find itself having to choose between two bad choices: foregoing a military operation and living with an Iranian bomb, or taking the initiative and attacking despite the potential risks.

The last essay, by Professor Irwin Cotler of Canada, asserts that Ahmadinejad's Iran is the current most severe security challenge to the world. His thesis is that Iran has emerged as a clear and present danger to international peace and security, to regional and Middle East stability, to Israel and world Jewry, and increasingly to its own people. In Ahmadinejad's Iran there is the toxic convergence of four distinct yet interrelated threats: the nuclear threat; the danger of state-sanctioned incitement to genocide; the danger of state sponsorship of international terrorism; and the danger of persistent and pervasive massive violations of domestic human rights. Iran is not punished for these threats. What are needed, argued Cotler, are targeted, calibrated, and comprehensive sanctions to deal with all four threats and leverage threat-specific remedies, namely, solutions that are targeted to the very nature of the threats themselves.

Significantly, what was analyzed and posited in late 2009 remains highly relevant in the second half of 2010. The three interrelated main strategic issues still figure high on the Israeli agenda, with the same threats and the same degree of uncertainty as to Israel's capability to maneuver and realize its basic interests. It is more apparent now that the key to answering these questions is the nature of relations between Jerusalem and Washington. As long as they continue to be mired by suspicion and lack of intimacy, the relationship will hinder the calibrating and coordinating of a united front, which will make it more difficult for Israel to translate its strategic assets into sustainable achievements, and vice versa. Building confidence and consequently coordination between Washington and Jerusalem will serve the two sides better in their quest to enhance their interests.

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