

*INSS Insight* No. 1019, February 8, 2018

**Israel at 70:**  
**Strategic Advantages with Narrow Margins of Security**  
**Udi Dekel**

On January 29-31, 2018, the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) held its 11th annual international conference, with the participation of policymakers, military personnel, media representatives, and security and political experts from Israel and around the world. As in past years, the week following the conference is an opportune time to summarize the major insights on Israel's national security that emerged during the conference. Similar to last year, the general conclusion drawn from many of the discussions was that "Israel's overall strategic balance is positive; it is viewed as a regional power with military superiority over its rivals and enemies."

2017 was notable for closer relations between the White House and the Israeli government than in previous years, given that the Trump administration and the Israeli government see eye to eye about the regional challenges, both viewing Iran as the central regional problem. Jerusalem also maintains close strategic contact with Moscow; the pragmatic Sunni states consider Israel a potential friend more than a rival and a partner in blocking Iran's efforts to attain broad regional influence; and on the Palestinian issue, the fault for the political deadlock is, unlike the past, not attributed solely to Israel.

However, there is no basis for assuming that the balance of risks and opportunities in Israel's strategic environment, despite its clear positive features, will last indefinitely. Moreover, as IDF Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Gadi Eisenkot put it, Israel's margins of security are narrow. In other words, despite the low probability of fundamental changes in the state's strategic environment and security situation, Israel has little room to maneuver and act if and when a sudden change occurs in one of the arenas - in the north or the Palestinian arena. Therefore, it is necessary to prepare for a range of possible scenarios with maximal flexibility of response.

Of the array of issues discussed during the conference, several stood out. Seen together, they are the basic challenges Israel faces in the 70th year since its establishment.

**The Iranian Nexus: From Nuclear Weapons to the Northern Arena**

Israel's most notable challenge at this time is the desire of the Islamic Republic of Iran to strengthen its influence over the Middle East by developing nuclear capabilities and long

range missiles and by engaging in military, political, and other activity throughout the region. Because of President Trump's vehement stance against Iran and profound criticism of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, implemented two years ago, chances have increased that the United States will withdraw from the agreement. This would not be desirable for Israel because, the flaws in the JCPOA notwithstanding, Israel at this point can only lose from annulment of the agreement. Exiting the JCPOA might put Iran back on track to accelerated nuclear development and also trigger a widespread regional chain reaction, including a confrontation between Israel and Hezbollah, as Minister Yoav Gallant, a member of the security cabinet, pointed out at the conference.

By contrast, the preferable option from Israel's point of view, as noted more than once by INSS researchers, is to formulate parallel agreements between Israel and the United States and the European partners to the agreement, aimed at neutralizing any Iranian development of long range missiles and preventing Iran's expansion of its influence in the region. It seems that the conditions for this have ripened, even among the Europeans. In this context, a dual strategy was suggested: continuing to combat the jihadist terrorism of the Islamic State, Salafi jihadist, and al-Qaeda, while simultaneously stopping Iran's negative influence in the Middle East. This can occur under the leadership of the United States and with the participation of Europe, Israel, and the pragmatic Sunni Arab states. Enlisting the Europeans in this direction is possible if President Trump takes the possible annulment of the JCPOA off the table and if Europe recognizes Israel as the West's spearhead in the battle with the radical phenomena of jihadist and state terrorism.

Iran's actions in Syria and Lebanon, via its allies and proxies, represent a concrete threat to Israel. Indeed, the general sense, especially in the Israeli government, is that this is an acute threat on Israel's strategic map, and that in recent years the northern arena (Syria and Lebanon combined) has become a single and inseparable arena, representing fertile ground for the entrenchment of the military presence of Iran and its proxies in the region. Hezbollah is Iran's major expeditionary force. While mutual deterrence has been maintained since 2006, because the desire to maintain the calm has outweighed all other considerations that might have triggered a new outbreak of violence, it is clear that if Iran continues its efforts to expand and deepen its hold on Israel's borders, an armed conflict will erupt at some point. For example, an Israeli attack to prevent the construction of infrastructure for missile building in Lebanon has far greater potential for escalation than attacks attributed to Israel carried out on Syrian territory.

Israel's approach to the northern arena since 2011, when the Syrian civil war began, represents a calculated, balanced policy, involving close coordination between the political and military echelons. This policy may be credited in large part for the stability in the northern arena. Military activities in Syria attributed to Israel, security coordination

between Israel and Russia, and the caution displayed regarding involvement in the fighting on the other side of the border have all proved to be correct policy. On the other hand, Israel's policy of non-intervention has reduced its ability to affect the shaping of Syria's future after the civil war ends. As a response to developments in this arena, Israel has in the past year focused efforts on preventing the consolidation of Iran and its proxies in Syria and the buildup of Hezbollah in Lebanon. However, as noted, this policy entails potential for escalation following a chain of actions and reactions, as well as the possibility for miscalculating the conduct of Iran, Hezbollah, and even Russia. In his speech at the conference, Minister Naftali Bennett, a member of the security cabinet, proposed expanding Israel's range of action beyond Hezbollah and exacting a toll of the Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, i.e., the operative link between Tehran and Damascus and Beirut. According to Bennett, only determined action against Iran – "the head of the octopus" – can generate sufficient deterrence and curtail its long-armed reach into the region.

Although the current reference is primarily the northern arena – i.e., the Syrian and Lebanese fronts – and the next conflict has already been defined as "the first northern war," much of the discourse about the Lebanese front in the "Third Lebanon War" focuses on Hezbollah, Iran's main outpost in Lebanon. Both Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman and Minister Bennett articulated a clear line regarding a future conflict with Hezbollah, whereby Israel would make Lebanon, as the sovereign entity responsible for Hezbollah, pay the price. On this topic, conference participants heard two different US approaches. Ambassador David Satterfield, Acting Assistant Secretary, Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, explained the State Department's current Middle East policy of strengthening the Lebanese army, consequently also strengthening the Lebanese state, as a way of weakening Hezbollah. By contrast, Ambassador-at-Large and State Department Coordinator for Counterterrorism Nathan Sales claimed that the Lebanese army is a Hezbollah tool and that it is therefore counterproductive to strengthen it.

Another angle that surfaced in the context of a conflict in the northern arena is the Israeli home front's capacity to withstand violence and continue uninterrupted functioning of the nation's critical systems in case of a military confrontation. The home front is expected to be the main target of Hezbollah and its allies, armed by Iran with more accurate surface-to-surface missiles than before. However, the home front is currently not ready to handle the scope of anticipated damage.

### **The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict**

Given the ongoing political deadlock, developments linked to this conflict have only deepened the differences of opinion between the sides and the distrust between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital transformed

his administration into a biased broker, eliciting a scathing response from PA President Mahmoud Abbas. Expectations for an “ultimate deal” from the Trump administration that would resolve the conflict vanished due to the belief that at this point it is impossible to restart an effective political process. Any US proposal seen as close to Israel’s position would push the Palestinians against the wall and perhaps prompt them to opt for violence. On the other hand, in the absence of political hope, more recalcitrance by the Palestinians and an impulse to ascribe the blame to them are liable to spur those in the Israeli government advocating annexation to establish facts on the ground. Minister of Public Security Gilad Erdan called for annexation of Judea and Samaria, beginning with Ma’ale Adumim. Therefore, it is not inconceivable that the Trump administration, in trying to recreate its image as an impartial mediator, would propose various gestures to bring the Palestinians back to the negotiating table, just as he awarded Israel the gesture of recognizing Jerusalem as its capital while also deciding to reduce aid to UNRWA, the perpetuator of the Palestinian refugee issue. One idea aimed at breaking the political deadlock raised during the conference was to recognize a Palestinian state within provisional borders, as delineated in the second stage in the Roadmap.

Israeli government representatives who spoke at the conference presented a clear platform, whereby progress on the Palestinian issue is currently not on the agenda and that a significant step is pointless in the absence of a partner on the other side. President Abbas is viewed as a weak leader nearing the end of his career, particularly after a speech to the Palestinian Council in which he questioned the right of the Jewish state to exist. At the same time, it seems that the Israeli government feels it is possible to promote overt political connections with Sunni Arab states, as these are seeking cooperation with Israel to confront common challenges, especially Iran. According to this approach, Israel should leverage the interests of the Arab states to generate pressure on the Palestinians to return to negotiations without preconditions while at the same time promoting a regional agreement independent of a resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Significantly, guests from the Arab nations and experts in Arab affairs who participated in the conference rejected the idea that Israel can promote official relations with the Sunni states while bypassing the political process with the Palestinians.

At the same time, there a strong opinion emerged that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the most serious problem Israel currently faces. This argument insists that it is necessary to take immediate steps to resolve the conflict, primarily to maintain Israel as a Jewish and democratic nation. Not only is there no – and can there be no – regional arrangement without progress in the Palestinian arena, but the decision not to decide brings Israel incrementally closer to a single bi-national state between the Mediterranean and the Jordan. According to this opinion, separation from the Palestinians is imperative, if not by mutual

consent then by independent steps that preserve Israel's vital security needs. Any other option will erode Israel's democratic, moral, and security foundations.

The conference sessions paid special attention to the Gaza Strip, now on the brink of collapse. The reconciliation efforts between Hamas and the PA have hit a dead end, and although neither side wants an escalation, the humanitarian crisis has its own dynamic; a descent into a military battle would be a fatal blow to Gaza. INSS recently conducted a study on the situation in the Gaza Strip, noting the critical need to promote a joint international and regional effort to reconstruct the Gaza Strip in exchange for preventing Hamas from making further gains.

### **A Look Inward**

In recent years, Israel has begun to realize that the domestic arena is a vital component of Israel's national security and that social cohesion is a touchstone for its resilience in times of external challenges. On this topic, the sense at the conference was that recently, the balance between the state's Jewish nature and its democratic character has been undermined. Processes weakening the gatekeepers of democracy – including the Supreme Court, the media, the army, and the police – are underway and the risk that the glue holding Israeli society together will fail has intensified. Questions of religion versus state, the attitude to the other, the rights of minorities, the rule of law, freedom of expression, and other dilemmas are exposing deep-seated conflicts within society, to the point that the common denominator of the state, the foundation built when the state was established as an unwritten contract among its citizens, is in danger.

Also discussed in the context of the domestic arena, and not unrelated to the question of society's cohesion, were the IDF and the challenges before it. The IDF maintains its regional advantage in force buildup and application, but there is a widening gap between the army's values and the leading values of wide segments of the public - even though the army receives more public support than any other state institution in Israel. Today, the IDF is hard pressed to serve as the social melting pot it was during the first decades of Israel's existence and must adapt to changes in society as well as to changes required by contemporary security doctrine and strategy. The IDF's strategy paper written in 2015 and recently updated reflects both positive and negative aspects. The positive is that the IDF has defined for its own use the current conceptual framework in which it must operate and that must steer the army. On the other hand, the very fact that the document was articulated is indicative of a problematic situation and a lacuna: the political echelon has failed to define an orderly security doctrine and clear goals. This is nothing new in Israel; Israel does not have an organized, official national security concept. But the far reaching changes in the nation's strategic environment demand that a national security concept be formulated

at the level of the political echelon and then permeate the military echelon, rather than proceed from the military echelon to the political echelon,

### **Conclusion**

Israel is proud of its achievements in its 70 years of existence. Its current strategic situation is one of the most favorable the country has known. Nonetheless, it cannot rest on its laurels or rely on the IDF's military power. There must be political action to promote the future of the State of Israel as a Jewish, democratic, secure, and moral state. An analysis of the range of challenges discussed at the conference shows that they are closely interrelated: to confront Iran's ambitions to increase its regional influence, Israel must build partnerships with regional and international actors and engage in joint efforts. Progressing on the Palestinian issue and tabling the demand to cancel the JCPOA will allow Israel to promote the formation of a broad international coalition to curb Iran's negative impact on the Middle East, including pressure on it to stop the development of ballistic missiles and the distribution of advanced weapons to Iran's proxies in the Middle East.

The thread linking all of these runs through Washington. Stopping Iran is impossible without action on the part of the United States. Similarly, renewing the political process with the Palestinians and mediation with the Sunni Arab states requires US involvement. Even when it comes to internal Israeli issues (the Western Wall agreement, for example) or questions affecting the Jewish people as a whole (such as the rise of anti-Semitism throughout the West) it is important to address Israel-US relations, and especially Israel's relations with the American Jewish community. Some of the questions that hovered over Trump's administration were lifted at the start of his second year in the White House, at least at the declarative level. However, it is still unclear how he will act in practice on any one of the issues of importance to Israel's national security.

Despite Israel's special relationship with the United States, and in certain areas, Israel's dependence on the United States, there has been and there is still room for Israel to steer its own path to a better future. First and foremost, the time has come to discard the phrase "existential threat" – overused in the discourse on Israel's challenges. Israel is a fact of life, a nation benefiting from solid strategic advantages. Therefore, each challenge must be examined for what it is and for the severity of the threat it represents, rather than in relation to the very existence of the state (this holds true even for the Iranian threat). Moreover, we must recognize that it is only by seeking opportunities capable of promoting Israel at the next stage of its existence – toward its centennial – that a desired path is ensured. Maintaining ambiguity as to Israel's goals for the future and postponing difficult decisions are liable to erode the nation's current strategic advantages.