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**The Munich Security Conference:**  
**Main Points and Implications for Israel**  
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The annual Munich Security Conference, attended by heads of state, defense and foreign ministers, serving officeholders, and directors of leading research institutes from all over the world, took place on February 15-18, 2018. The conference portrayed a challenging view of the global security environment, marked by a dangerous combination of worsening trends regarding the world's climate, economy, and society; weakening strategic architectures; disrupting technologies; and volatile crisis areas. What follows are the main points discussed and their significance for Israel and its national security.

**Global Centers of Crisis: North Korea and Syria**

North Korea, currently the primary threat to global security, leads the list of crisis areas. The Trump administration is determined to keep North Korea from tipping its intercontinental ballistic missiles with nuclear warheads that could threaten the United States, and remains unimpressed by the display of unity between the two Koreas in the 2018 winter Olympic Games in Pyeongchang. Many assess that a military conflict, should it break out, would be the worst the world has known since the end of World War II, not least because of the possible use of nuclear weapons. A senior US senator said: "If this thing starts, it's going to [probably be] one of the worst, catastrophic events in the history of our civilization, but it is going to be very, very brief." For its part, China seems to hold the key to calming the crisis by means of political and economic tools, but clearly has no intention of helping the United States, at least not without charging a significant strategic return. China places equal blame for the crisis on North Korea and the United States; to assuage it, China recommends talks and confidence building measures of a "reciprocal freeze," at both sides' expense and to the benefit of Beijing.

Syria: While the intensity of the fighting has ebbed, the fact that the civil and proxy war has become an armed conflict between nations and superpowers (involving Russia, the United States, Turkey, Iran, and Israel) is seen as greater threat to world stability than its previous phase. For the first time, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu threatened to attack Iran directly, given its actions aimed against Israeli in Syria; Iran accuses the United States of an illegal occupation of the area east of the Euphrates; Russia is hurt by the US strikes against Assad supporters that caused many Russian casualties; Turkey's foreign minister stressed Turkey's war on Kurdish terrorism and called for the

preservation of Syria's territorial integrity (which his own nation violates with its incursion into Afrin); the Lebanese foreign minister placed the blame for tensions on Israel which, he charged, constantly violates Lebanese sovereignty by attacking Syria from Lebanon's skies. Russia, which today is understood by all to be the leading power in Syria, sees progress mainly in the reduction in the number of "terrorists" and the return to normal life, with the help of a "diplomatic network between Moscow, Ankara, Damascus, Tehran, Washington, and Tel Aviv." In addition, Russia has showed no willingness or intention to replace Assad, who is anathema to many in the Syrian opposition, while the US stance on the need for Assad's removal is not backed by any clear implementation mechanism.

### **Superpower Relations**

From the US perspective, China and Russia are challenging the world order: in its foreign relations, China combines a broad trade partnership with deepening strategic rivalry over economic and technological superiority, while Russia challenges the West through military action in Georgia, Ukraine, and the Baltic states, and through interference in the politics of Western democracies.

*The United States:* At the start of Trump's second year as president, it seems that the world has grown accustomed to his behavior. Little importance is attributed to his tweets; the appointed US establishment and the elected Congress function successfully as the constitution's built-in checks and balances, resulting, generally, in continuity of US policy from the previous administration. However, the United States is projecting an image of greater isolationism, leaving China and Russia more room for maneuver at its expense. On the other hand, the lack of consistency in the Trump administration, reflected in the "America First" slogan, is seen as a major factor in the uncertainty afflicting the international system, in terms of both security/politics and the economy.

*Russia,* represented at the conference by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and former Ambassador to the United States Sergey Kislyak, criticized the West's Russophobia, the failure of the United States and its partners in the Middle East and North Africa, the return of fascism and Nazism in European politics, and the current nuclear destabilization caused by the United States. Russia is calling for cooperation with Europe and multilateral action headed by the UN and other frameworks, such as Euro-Asia and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. "The elephant in the room" – Moscow's interference in the last US presidential election – was dismissed and denied by the Russians, who accused the US for most of the world's cyberattacks.

Parallel to the crisis with North Korea and tensions surrounding Iran's nuclear ambitions, the start of a renewed nuclear arms race between Russia and the United States is

emerging. This one seems focused on tactical arms and rapid delivery systems, as the sides trade accusations on violations of the INF Treaty.

*China's* representative at the conference, Fu Ying, the chairwoman of the National People's Congress Foreign Affairs Committee, reiterated Beijing's official positions. Europe is eyeing China's economic-strategic influence, exerted mainly through its colossal Belt and Road Initiative infrastructure projects, with growing concern.

*Europe* appeared more self-confident than in the past. The French and German defense ministers demonstrated the strength of their axis and determination to confront Russia, terrorism, and immigration and refugee issues, against the backdrop of Brexit. The Europeans' commitment to spend 2 percent of their GNP on defense is a financial expression of resolve, though not all nations will meet the goal in the next few years; closing the gap of a quarter of a century represents a significant burden on public expenditure.

### **The Iranian Nuclear Issue**

Israel's prime minister had nothing but scathing criticism for the JCPOA and posited that a US withdrawal from the agreement would not necessarily mean an Iranian withdrawal; former US Secretary of State John Kerry and Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Zarif contended otherwise. The Europeans are vehemently against abrogating or even changing the agreement, and are eager to invest in Iran. US National Security Advisor Herbert McMaster cooled their enthusiasm by noting that investing in Iran means financing Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps murders throughout the Middle East. The address by Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir focused mostly on Iran as a persistent, multi-faceted threat to peace in the Middle East and the world. The similarity to Israel's position was fascinating.

### **Terrorism**

German Interior Minister Thomas de Maizière and US Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats both noted that after the fall of Mosul and Raqqa, the Islamic State was territorially vanquished but that the organization will reappear in some other format and continue to exert its influence. The combination of ideology, theology, and access to large audiences through cyber networks allows ideas to survive even in times of physical weakness (the "virtual caliphate"). Foreign fighters who flocked to the Middle East during the glorious days of the Islamic State are not returning to Europe; they are moving to other Islamic State strongholds, especially in Sinai and Afghanistan.

The response required to confront terrorism must remain integrated, systemic, and proactive over the long haul. The response to radical interpretations of the Qur'an as a

foundation for terrorism will come not from Christians but from the Muslim public, its leaders, imams, and intellectuals. The fundamental causes of the economic situation and the Shiite-Sunni conflict require attention. Intelligence cooperation among organizations and nations is a key element in this regard, and close coordination among states allows for a watchful eye on borders far from their nations' own borders.

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

The Palestinian issue was marginalized, given its low influence on Middle East problems in general. It was barely preserved in the talking points of outdated actors, such as the Arab League, or manipulative ones, such as Lebanon. Prime Minister Netanyahu called for giving peace and a Trump plan a chance, despite Abu Mazen's refusal, and presented his own outline for a settlement: less than a Palestinian state, with maximal self-rule but with no compromises on Israeli control over security. Netanyahu responded to Palestinian attempts to shift the negotiations setting to a new international forum by insisting on the vital role of the United States in the process.

### **Technology**

In addition to the classical security components, the conference also dealt with information technologies, with emphasis on artificial intelligence, and on the disruptive effects of social media, and cyberattacks on politics, government systems, and international security. Particular note was made of the tremendous impact of disinformation in social media on political atmospheres and internal divides; the concern that trust in the political system, elections, and liberal democracies is being eroded was loudly voiced. AI and robotics applications are profoundly changing the battlefield, with some comparing this to the nuclear weapons revolution. At the same time, senior hi-tech and cyberspace figures noted that an AI-controlled war machine is still far in the future; one individual said that people have been watching too many science fiction movies, and that he wasn't even willing to fly in a passenger plane piloted by a learning robot.

### **Implications for Israel**

The strategic environment sketched by the conference's senior participants has two primary implications for Israel. First, the Middle East is a secondary focus of attention for the international community, currently occupied with the urgent crisis in the Korean peninsula and the potential for nuclear war. This is particularly true for the United States, whose attention is now almost entirely on East Asia, greatly limiting its interest in and influence on the theaters closer to Israel, including Syria and Lebanon. Thus the Palestinian issue has, for better or worse, been sidelined. This leaves Israel significant scope for presenting its own initiatives to shape its future and environment, with emphasis on its relations with the Palestinians. The field of common interests with regional and international players, especially those designed to curb Iran and Sunni

terrorism, signifies real potential for progress; positive movement vis-à-vis the Palestinians would help remove obstacles to the fulfilment of such progress. On the other hand, the path to a direct collision given the vector of Iranian influence in Syria and Israel's resolve to stop it is highly evident.

Two, information technologies, AI, and social media are emerging as the “next big thing” in terms of national security. The downside is the need to prepare for the large scale use of these capabilities by enemy states and forces, in their attempt to destabilize the government system in Israel and to damage the state's national security, inhabitants, and interests. The upside is Israel's clear advantages in these fields, which represent the potential for the nation to position itself globally in the technological-operational forefront of military applications – both offensive and defensive – as it did in the past with regard to unmanned platforms.