

*INSS Insight* No. 1256, February 6, 2020

**At the Opening of the New Decade, Regional Challenges Test Israel's  
Strength**

Main Insights from the INSS 13<sup>th</sup> Annual International Conference  
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**The INSS 13<sup>th</sup> Annual International Conference (January 28-30, 2020) hosted senior political and military figures, experts, and decision makers from Israeli and abroad. Discussions centered on four areas: the international power system; the regional environment; Israel's political and security challenges; and Israel's internal arena – all with a view toward the coming decade. Particular attention was paid to “the deal of the century,” Iran after Soleimani, and Israel's northern front. This article presents the main insights from the conference sessions.**

The Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) 13<sup>th</sup> Annual International Conference (January 28-30, 2020) hosted experts and decision makers from the political and military echelons, both Israeli and foreign, and examined four subject areas: the international power system, the regional environment, Israel's political and security challenges, and Israel's internal arena – all with a view toward the coming decade. This article presents the main initial insights from the conference sessions.

**General Overview**

The risks Israel faces are growing, given a weakened and fragile surrounding Middle East where combat arenas and interconnected zones of instability abound. It is particularly difficult to assess the unintended consequences of military and political action, and there is an ongoing process of learning and improvement underway among Israel's adversaries, who take advantage of advanced technologies that are cheap and readily available. There is increased difficulty in attaining a proper grasp on reality in a world of clashing narratives and questioned truth, which compromises decision making.

*Several meta-shapers can generate significant pivots.* Maj. Gen. Tamir Hayman, chief of IDF Military Intelligence, presented three: 1. Iran's amassment of nuclear capabilities by; 2. fissures within the Shiite axis after the targeted killing of Quds Force Commander Qasem Soleimani, given that he "has a successor, but it is doubtful he can be replaced." Soleimani transformed the Shiite axis from a network of organizations into a network of armies that requires a command and control mechanism and a management infrastructure. His successor will find it hard to maintain and advance this complex initiative; 3. US

President Donald Trump's "deal of the century" for resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has the potential to shake current balances within the Israeli-Palestinian arena and upset Israel's relations with countries with which it has signed peace treaties (Jordan and Egypt), mainly if Israel sees in the Trump plan legitimacy for a unilateral application of law (annexation) over settlement areas in the West Bank and the Jordan Valley.

### **The Balance of Power among the Superpowers**

*A Contest for Global Hegemony:* Former US National Security Adviser Gen. (ret.) H. R. McMaster assessed that China will continue combining economic belligerence with international espionage, mainly technological, in order to achieve dominance over the international economy. Within this framework, it will try to take over strategic assets, for example, ports in Israel. In the absence of counter-competition by the United States and Europe, China will grow more aggressive. As action the West should take given this threat, McMaster said, "What the Chinese Communist Party perceives as our weaknesses [should be turned] into strengths: democracy, rule of law, the free press, and international investment standards." If the United States does not confront China on a range of issues, nothing will curb a broadening of its global activities and influence.

The United States remains the dominant economic and military power, but President Trump's "America First" approach distances the US from international coalitions and cooperation arrangements. According to former Bank of Israel Governor Stanley Fischer, this approach also weakens the global trade structure and raises a risk of global recession in the coming decade. In addition, the end of the US hegemonic role could lead to a loss of oversight mechanisms against the proliferation of nuclear weapons.

*US interests in the Middle East are changing.* According to Gen. (ret.) Joseph Votel, former commander of the US CENTCOM, the United States is less dependent on the region's resources than in the past. That said, US involvement in the Middle East is still necessary, given the contest with Russia and China for regional influence and the challenge posed by Salafi-jihadists seeking local opportunities to emerge anew. In the wake of the Soleimani killing there has been a rise in US motivation to continue economic and military pressure against the Iranian regime.

It is difficult to forge a Middle East coalition against the Shiite axis, and Washington sees few regional partners that can be trusted. Israel remains the only ally that can be relied upon, such that heavy responsibility will shift to Israel if and when the administration decides to withdraw US forces from Syria and Iraq – at which point Israel is likely to be fighting for American interests, as well as its own.

### **"The Deal of the Century"**

After the Trump plan on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was made public (which coincided with the opening of the conference), three main scenarios were analyzed:

- a. *Review and suspension:* Given Palestinian rejection of the plan, Israel accepts it in principle but decides not to take dramatic steps until the Knesset election (March 2020) and, announces that it will invite the Palestinian Authority to discuss implementation of the outlined steps after the election.
- b. *Initial gradual implementation, leaving an opening for negotiations:* Israel accepts the plan, seeing an opportunity to craft an improved strategy. With that, it expresses interest in cooperation with the Palestinian Authority, which it tries to enlist toward an arrangement. If the PA refuses, Israel does not wait, and embarks on steps for implementing the plan, while still leaving a door open for the Palestinians to join in the future. The first steps could be applying the law over settlements in the West Bank, but without changing the routine situation on the ground.
- c. *Unilateral annexation:* Israel accepts the plan, and uses the rejection by the Palestinians to shape the area on its terms. Within this framework, Israeli jurisdiction is applied to the Jordan Valley and the settlements (as outlined by the plan) with a willingness to contend with the move's negative impact on the Palestinian arena and its relations with the Palestinians, as well as on its relations in the regional arena – specifically, the northern front – and in the international arena.

As part of the conference, the implications of the "deal of the century" were analyzed and several insights emerged:

- a. In the view of the experts who took part in the conference, and regarding the three scenarios above, in the next five years no sovereign Palestinian state will be established – in other words, there will be no real prospect of creating two states for two peoples. Furthermore, in the absence of Palestinian unity and the given the currents of internal erosion within Palestinian society, it is possible that the Palestinian Authority will collapse after Chairman Mahmoud Abbas departs the political scene. The speakers were hard-put to see a possibility of internal Palestinian reconciliation and unity, even in response to a phased implementation of the Trump plan by Israel.
- b. The plan does not allow for the creation of a viable Palestinian state, and in actuality it would divide up a Palestinian entity, surrounded and imprisoned in Israeli territory, into six separate cantons, with Israel controlling the entry points, exit points, traffic routes, and border crossings of the Palestinian entity. Accordingly, there is concern that unilateral annexation moves by Israel on a large scale (Jordan Valley and all settlements) would accelerate the disintegration of the Palestinian Authority and prompt it to “return the keys” to Israel. In that case, it

would fall to Israel to control the territory, and in so doing, attend to the welfare and socio-economic needs of some 2.5 million Palestinians, without external economic aid. A one-state reality is liable to result, which actually reflects the goal of a significant segment of the young generation of Palestinians, who believe that the time for armed struggle toward Palestinian independence alongside the State of Israel has passed, and that the goal should be one state with equal rights for all its citizens.

- c. Inability to implement the plan consensually and unilateral Israel steps that would foil any two-state solution would alienate the US administration – Republican or Democratic alike – as well as the rest of the international community striving to advance a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, leaving Israel to deal with the Palestinian problem alone. Pursuant to this scenario, it was assessed that a Democratic administration might well try to compel Israel to grant full rights to everyone residing between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. That would spell the end of the Zionist dream of a Jewish state.
- d. For those who champion annexation moves, a reality of de facto rather than de jure annexation is preferable. However, announcement of the plan shifts the momentum from a quiet, incremental annexation to a trumpeted and active annexation, which is likely to inject new energy into the conflict theater. Before a decision is made, it must be understood that annexation of territory incurs annexation of feelings of hatred, anger, and revenge. Annexation without consent is doomed to lead to violence and protracted instability.
- e. While Jordan does indeed prefer an Israeli military presence in the Jordan Valley as part of security arrangements within the framework of an Israeli-Palestinian accord, it rejects political annexation of the Valley, which from its perspective would exacerbate the view that the kingdom is the alternative Palestinian homeland, and undermine its foundations. In other words, this could effectively end of the option of an independent Palestinian state.
- f. It is crucial to preserve the two-state option by any means: as an aspirational horizon for the Palestinians, should they be persuaded, in the future, to adopt principles within the Trump plan as a basis for an arrangement with Israel; as an asset for legitimizing, vis-à-vis the international and regional spheres, the State of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state; as a value that would secure Israel's relations with the United States, including when a Democrat returns to the White House; and as a shield in the face of any attempt to impose a one-state solution on Israel or of a one-state reality emerging on the ground. The two-state reality is supported by a majority of the Jewish public in Israel – 55 percent, with close to 70 percent in favor of separation from the Palestinians.

## **The Northern Front**

A wargame was held as part of the conference, simulating escalation on the northern front. As it unfolded, what became clear is that all actors were interested in avoiding war. The scenarios emerged from an Israeli operation within the framework of the “campaign between wars” against Iranian military entrenchment in Syria and against the precision-guided missile project, in parallel with a strike against US forces in Iraq by local militias serving as Iran's proxies. It was further demonstrated that due to restraining forces – the aversion to war evinced by all actors was joined by the influential presence of Russia and the United States in the region – a window of opportunity was left for the campaign between wars, with the goal of arresting and preventing the construction of the Iranian war machine.

- a. *Iran* aspires to keep the risk of war far from its border, preferring that the payment for its aggression will be damage to non-Iranian Shiite proxy forces and not its own forces. From its standpoint, the preferred arena for an escalation with Israel is Syria, where there is no strong public opinion against it, and where expected losses would be tolerable, with an attack on weapons and proxies. Iran would do everything possible not to become embroiled in a war with the United States, while activating its proxies in Iraq to strike US forces in order to stimulate President Trump’s intended evacuation of US military forces from Iraq and Syria.
- b. *Israel* sees Syria as the weakest and most vulnerable link in the Shiite axis. However, the main threat to Israel emanates from Lebanon: Hezbollah's military capabilities (many thousands of missiles – including precision-guided, rockets, UAVs, and commando forces capable of penetrating the border). Lebanon is thus the front presenting the main threat to Israel, which can be expected to use any escalation to deliver a heavy blow to Hezbollah – the organization’s military capabilities and combat-support infrastructures. The preference for action on the Lebanese front stems from both Hezbollah being Iran's main proxy and Lebanon being the country most under Iran’s influence. Striking at Syria per se might well generate an exit strategy for a confrontation on the northern front, because Russia would then likely intervene in order to bring about a quick end to the fighting so as to preserve the Assad regime and minimize the damage to Syria.
- c. *Hezbollah* has no interest in war at this time. The organization's patron Iran is also interested in continuing to preserve the organization's capabilities for the critical day when there is a showdown over its nuclear capabilities. Thus Iran could be expected to orchestrate a scenario of measured escalation that would conclude with a bolstered deterrent image for Hezbollah and perception of Hassan Nasrallah as a Soleimani successor. Hezbollah would opt for an action that Israel could contain – an attack on military targets only within Israeli territory – and try to have the last word: a message that any Israeli operation will meet with a response.

- d. *The United States* does not want war, but neither is it fleeing war. Thus it could be expected to respond harshly against the Iraqi militias for the strike on its soldiers and to extend absolute support to Israel – albeit while restricting the IDF from taking action within the Iraqi theater. Similarly, the United States could be expected to do its best to leave Iran out of the war, both because it is not interested in direct military confrontation with Iran and due to concern about the confrontation's ramifications for its friends in the Persian Gulf.
- e. *Russia* would exact maximum profit from a controlled escalation, due to its role as mediator among the warring sides. At the same time, Russia stands to lose much from a war within Syria, mainly due to the ensuing imminent threat to the Assad regime.

**The Situation in Syria:** Contrary to common perceptions, the war has not ended. The weakening of the Syrian state continues, and there is no central power element capable of imposing law and order, internal security, and stability. The Assad regime has apparently restored its control over some 70 percent of Syrian territory, but throughout the country basic services like electricity and gas are lacking. The national economy has collapsed and there is no reconstruction agent. The rebels' agreement of surrender and the arrangement drafted by Russia have been wiped out, and jihadist elements are regrouping and resuming terrorist attacks. Russia aspires to institute a central governance model, while by contrast, Iran is building and operating regional and local militias that are stronger and enjoy better conditions than the Syrian military.

**Iran** will pursue an aggressive policy in order to preserve the regional influence that it achieved, mainly over the last five years, and in response to the “maximum pressure” applied by the United States, which is perceived in Tehran as designed to topple the regime. The Soleimani killing left Iran with a score to settle with the United States, and retaliation can be expected to focus on an effort to make life difficult for US forces stationed in Iraq and bring about their withdrawal – which, as it happens, has at this stage prompted President Trump to postpone their departure.

**The question of the sanctions mechanism as an effective strategic tool:** When the “maximum pressure” doctrine on Iran is reviewed, specifically the efficacy of US sanctions against Iran in staving off its attainment of nuclear weapons, it appears that the opposite is happening. The sanctions indeed generate an economic crisis and public despair in Iran, but these are not enough to compel it to act like a “normal country.” David Peyman, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Counter Threat Finance and Sanctions, made clear that the US is now conducting a maximum pressure campaign against Iran, and in 2020 will shift to “super-maximum pressure.” He stated, “Our sanctions are intended to deprive this regime of revenue it uses to engage in malign

activities across the region.” The pressure is intended to present Iran's leaders with a choice: either cease the belligerent actions or watch its economy collapse. Peyman added that the sanctions are very effective: Iran is isolated and its economy has shrunk by more than 9 percent. Consequently, the budget for Shiite militias in Iraq has been cut, there has been a significant decline in the cash flow to terrorist groups all over the world, and groups like Hezbollah are forced to seek other sources of income. As for the future, Peyman said the United States will not yield on the sanctions until Iran behaves like a normal country within the international system.

**The discourse in the Arab world:** The conference presented the ongoing discourse that INSS holds with Arabs in the region through the publication of research studies over social media. These are viewed by around a million people and prompt hundreds of thousands of responses. These figures point to the Arab public in the region being open to information and findings, eager to hear opinions from Israel and to be exposed to different viewpoints. Young people in the Arab world are especially keen on alternative information to what regime media in their countries provide. Among findings of an opinion poll of the Arab world that INSS conducted using social media is that in the eyes of the Arab public, the most negative force in the Middle East is Iran – double the negative view of Israel. Most respondents see a low probability of war between Israel and Iran, but in the event such were to erupt, a third of respondents said they would side with Israel, and less than a third said they would side with Iran. The primary issues that preoccupy the public in the Arab world are corruption, unemployment, and lack of governance.

**In conclusion,** Israel's strategic position has improved, and stands in marked comparison to the weakness and fragility prevalent in the regional environment. Israel's adversaries, chiefly Iran and its proxies, are not interested in a confrontation that would bring about a war with Israel, and they fear United States intervention in fighting alongside Israel. The operational zone for Israel in waging the campaign between wars – below the war threshold – has not shut. Thus, it would be right for Israel to keep up its efforts to delay and disrupt the consolidation and the buildup of Iranian war machine in the northern arena. At the same time, Israel must take into account its adversaries' weakness and avoid exploiting operational opportunities without weighing the strategic consequences. From a political standpoint, exploiting what looks like an opportunity to reap immediate gains, specifically by annexing territory in the West Bank, would make it difficult in the future to achieve a political, demographic, and geographic separation from the Palestinians, and this would also open a door for Palestinian and regional weakness to seep into Israel, thereby undermining Israel's strength.