

# Israel's Strategic Environment

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## Reality after September 11

The strategic environment in the aftermath of September 11, 2001 has four principal dimensions:

■ First, there is a sharper distinction between the concepts and values of the Western world and those of the Islamic-Arab world. The terrorist attack against the United States strengthened the claim that Islam is the source of terrorism.

■ Second, the United States is gradually adopting a more active policy against terrorism. This change is manifested on two levels – the realization of the need to respond aggressively, and the change in the worldview of President Bush and his associates who now regard the war against terrorism as a crusade.

■ Third, the American government's determination to lead the fight against terror has implications for world public opinion, both in the West and in Arab countries. International awareness of terrorism's significance is growing, while the tendency to accept it as a "natural" phenomenon that needs to be understood is decreasing. These

opinions are compelling western countries to act with greater resolution and cooperation in the war against terrorism. The United States policy is also impacting on Arab states, putting them in a conflicting situation. Whereas in 1991 they requested assistance and action against the Iraqi invader, today they are being asked to stand up and declare their allegiance on the "Good Guys" vs. "Axis of Evil" antipodes. That is, in order to fight alongside the United States, Arab countries must state their commitment to fighting terrorism – a step that is difficult for them to take.

■ Fourth, paradoxically, the September 11 terrorist strike against the United States is likely to expedite the spread of weapons of mass destruction. Pakistan, for example, received official recognition as a member of the nuclear club without any opposition being voiced. This type of response has had an influence on the nuclear policy of other countries, such as Iran, Lybia, and Egypt.

## The Implications of September 2001 for Israel

What influence does this strategic reality have on Israel's two-front war against the terrorism of the Palestine

Authority (PA) and the Hizbollah in the north? Both the PA and Hizbollah have adopted a policy of long-range attrition, to proceed in stages, in which they wage a jihad or holy war of terrorism through the flagrant use of suicide bombers. The impact of Israel's confrontation with these terror fronts goes beyond the borders of the PA areas and South Lebanon, and extends to neighboring countries, the entire Middle East, and the international community.

The war against terror has had both a positive and negative influence on Israel. On the positive side, the deep friendship between the United States and Israel has grown even stronger, especially since September 11, 2001. The United States supports Israel in every way possible, recognizes its right to extirpate terror and protect its citizens, and identifies with Israel's security requirements. The increased abhorrence of terrorism in world public opinion, and in the United States in particular, has improved Israel's international standing. Furthermore, American policy towards Iraq and Iran, both of which are "members" of the "Axis of Evil," and the branding of Hizbollah as a terrorist organization, have provided fertile ground for tightening American-Israeli cooperation. United

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States policy in this area is important for Israel's own struggle against its local "Axis of Evil."

On the negative side, the United States is interested that "relative quiet" be preserved at every stage in its war against terror. Therefore, in order to allow the American administration to continue its campaign, Israel could find itself being required to pay a price that from an American view might be considered "minor," but for Israel would be unbearably heavy.

In this light, the international and regional reality offers opportunities as well as tangible dangers for Israel. The path that Israel embarks upon, its strategic decision-making, and the implementation of its decisions, will be of crucial import in determining its future.

### **The Strategic Objective of Operation "Defensive Shield"**

At the outset, the objective of Operation "Defensive Shield" was defined as "the creation of a different and favorable security reality for Israel" through the destruction of terrorism's infrastructure. Was the objective realized? Yes, but with certain reservations.

### ***Military Perspectives of Operation "Defense Shield"***

The main point to be emphasized is the erroneous Palestinian assumption that severe terrorist attacks will exhaust Israeli society and lead to its gradual disintegration, and eventually to the internationalization

of the conflict. In other words, the aim of the intensive use of terror is to bring about international intervention and the introduction of an international force that would accomplish what the PA failed to achieve at the Camp David summit in July 2000. This approach led to the intolerable wave of terrorist attacks that peaked in March 2002 when Israel suffered 129 dead, more than one quarter the total

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number of casualties since September 2000 when the violence erupted. Operation "Defensive Shield" halted the murderous surge of terror that involved all of the Palestinian organizations. Despite the renewal of terrorist activity since the operation, Israel is today further from the outburst of terror that it experienced in March and its deterrent power has been restored.

The blow to terrorism's infrastructure allows Israel to continue taking systematic, pinpoint action against the new centers of terror that have begun to spring up. Therefore, in order to guarantee the ongoing success of "Defensive

Shield," the IDF continues to operate in the PA's Area A. At the same time, "Defensive Shield" palpably demonstrated the limitations on Israel's freedom of military action due to political exigencies. The "political hourglass" proved to be a critical factor in this kind of an operation, and not only in an all-out war. The extent of influence the "Arab street" had on Arab governments became manifestly clear as it forced even moderate ones, such as Egypt and Jordan, to resort against their will to the dangerous application of threats and punitive steps against Israel. Israel's military limitation was also the result of changes in world public opinion. The IDF's massive operation against terrorism's infrastructure deeply entrenched in civilian centers, and especially in the refugee camps surrounding the big cities, led to Israel's condemnation in the world's eyes, which was further reinforced by pictures broadcast on television.

### ***Strategic Influences of Operation "Defensive Shield"***

The main strategic significance of the operation was the creation of a modus operandi and groundwork for reshaping the game rules in the confrontation with the Palestinians. This change occurred as a result of a basic reorientation in thinking, rooted on the principle "Arafat is the problem, not the solution." This cognitive change took place in the United States, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan, and is even widespread among the Palestinians. Unprecedented pressure, internal and

external, was put on Arafat to introduce changes.

Evidence for this can be seen in President Bush's remarks when he accused Arafat of failure as a leader – for not dealing with the interests of his people, and for not seizing the opportunity that was within his grasp for bringing peace to his nation. Likewise in Arab countries, Arafat is seen as a very serious threat to regional stability and the survival of moderate regimes. This view may explain the unparalleled attempts of Egypt and Saudi Arabia to wield their influence on the internal mechanism of the PA by turning directly to the heads of the militant organizations, and in effect sidestepping Arafat's authority.

In the internal Palestinian theater, there is a strong consensus regarding the need for inculcating basic changes in the PA's policy and administration. In a poll taken in the last week of May 2002, over 90% of the respondents stated that the PA is corrupt and that changes should be made in the regime and a new government established – a far-reaching cry that has no parallel in the Arab world. The PA leadership senses that this is its "last chance," and there is thus a willingness to respond to the pressure from below and carry out changes. In the past, vociferous criticism of Arafat was made behind closed doors; today it is expressed in broad daylight. Despite the current bellicose atmosphere in the Palestinian public towards Israel, there is an abiding desire to rebuild the ruins and return to routine. The Palestinians are fed up with war and

voices are being raised accusing Arafat personally for the bleak situation their nation is stuck in. Little surprise, then, that support for Arafat has plummeted for the first time, and on a number of issues the popularity of other figures in the Palestinian leadership has risen above Arafat's.

Nonetheless, Arafat still enjoys the undisputed position of national leader and symbol, and since there is

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no personality to challenge him, key Palestinian players continue avoiding discussion of his replacement. Since these figures harbor no illusions about Arafat's intention to seek an alternative candidate to himself, they are trying to jumpstart a process that would generate the needed changes in the PA and at the same time "clip Arafat's wings."

The international arena is seeking to force the Palestinians to deal with the basic problems that have undermined the foundations of any effective settlements until now. Three prominent demands should be noted:

1. The demand for the decentralization of financial

resources: the donating countries, the United Nations, and Arab states such as Saudi Arabia all realize that none of the money channeled to the PA arrives at its destination. Therefore, the supervision of the allocation of these funds would have great influence on Arafat's decision-making process.

2. The demand for reform in the security networks so that they can be centrally and efficiently controlled, and employed effectively against terror.

3. The demand to hold elections and introduce changes in the legislative and executive bodies.

At the same time, in the internal Palestinian arena and among moderate Arab countries, demands are being made for the gradual removal of Arafat's authority. Egypt has outlined plans for reforming the government and the security agencies, and is pressuring Arafat to put them into effect; Saudi Arabia has threatened to exercise economic sanctions and to take direct action against Islamic organizations to prevent suicide attacks against Israel.

Under the impact of these pressures, Arafat seems to be bending to new game rules and beginning to cooperate, albeit in a limited fashion, in implementing reforms. Three examples of this are the approval of a law regarding the autonomy of the judicial authority; changes in the security apparatus; and the prospects for early elections. It appears that Arafat is attempting to carry out reforms in a way that will guarantee his retention of control and avert the



decentralization of power, so that he will continue to manipulate the budget and dominate the security agencies. Indeed, at the same time as taking first steps towards reform, Arafat rejects any demand for dismantling the Tanzim or applying serious pressure on the militant organizations, first and foremost Hamas, in order to halt the terror. In other words, terrorism can be expected to continue.

### ***Hizbollah and Operation "Defensive Shield"***

Hizbollah perceived the escalation in Israeli-Palestinian relations as an opportunity for opening a "second front" on the northern border, since it assumed that Israel would be too weak to manage two military campaigns simultaneously. In this way the organization strove to exacerbate military confrontation as part of the intensified attrition war it is interested in waging against Israel. The organization also estimated that international attention would be focused on castigating IDF activity in Operation "Defensive Shield" and not inclined to deal with violations of the status quo on the northern border. Moreover, Hizbollah relied on the wide popular support expressed in the Arab world for any group assisting the Palestinian cause and glorifying its stature.

In its design to drag Israel into a limited military confrontation, Hizbollah progressively escalated border incidents by means of "legitimate" acts (heavy barrages on Mt. Dov) and "illegitimate" activities

for which it claimed no responsibility (such as the road massacre at Matzuva). It also appears that Hizbollah is prepared to unleash a mega-strike that will include Katyusha and long-distance rockets should Israel decide to retaliate on Lebanon's infrastructure.

However, contrary to Hizbollah's expectations, Israel did not let itself get pushed into the "strategic

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ambush," and the absence of a swift Israeli response forced the terror organization to choose between pursuing its escalatory activity, which could have placed Hizbollah's legitimacy in jeopardy, or pacifying the situation and keeping on the lookout for another opportunity. At first the organization resumed activity only in the Mt. Dov region; only later it returned its forces to routine deployment. Israel is aware that Hizbollah holds Syrian and Iranian interests in high regard and avoids injuring them. Therefore, although the messages of restraint passed on to the guerilla organization from Syria and Iran (in the wake of heavy

international pressure) were relatively hazy and late in arriving, Hizbollah realized their importance and decided to cease the escalation.

## **The "Axis of Evil" and Radical Power in the Middle East**

### ***Syria***

Two of the main objectives that dominate Syrian foreign policy are: one, the strengthening of Syria's position in the Arab world; and two, the return of the Golan Heights to its control. Syria is fully aware of Israel's military superiority and prefers to advance its political objectives obliquely, especially through its support of terrorist organizations. Syria has allowed Palestinian terrorist organizations to set up their headquarters in Damascus and it sanctions terrorist activity against Israel. Syria also encourages Hizbollah to carry out terrorist activity against Israel along the northern border and apply constant pressure on this region of Israel. For years Iranian arms shipments have been flown into Syria and then transferred to Lebanon. Syrian cooperation with Iran is expanding, and in the first half of 2002 the rate of arms shipments to Hizbollah also increased. The Syrians support the continuation of fighting in the Shab'a Farms sector, but are not interested in full-scale escalation; therefore they are careful not to make any claims of direct responsibility for the organization's activity. For its part, Hizbollah operates autonomously,

independently of Syria, but it is aware of Syrian strength\* and is, as mentioned, mindful to take Syrian interests into consideration. In this respect Hizbollah is unique – it directs a military campaign like a regular army, but is independent of the authority of any country and acts in clearly asymmetrical conditions against Israel.

Bashar al-Assad, the president of Syria, neither acknowledges nor is interested in specific incidents in South Lebanon, nor does he fully apprehend the potential threat of Hizbollah activity to regional stability. In messages passed on to him by Americans, Europeans, the United Nations, and Israel, he tends to see the Syrian presence in Lebanon in terms of honor to Syria's position "as the lord of the manor" and as testimony to Syria's power and prestige in the region.

### **Iran**

Iranian leadership and security organizations, propelled by radical religious ideologies, are determined to wage a progressive anti-Israel campaign of attrition whose goal is

the annihilation of the Zionist state. To achieve this goal, Iran operates in a number of ways: first, by developing a non-conventional weapons capability and ground-to-ground missiles capable of conveying its non-conventional capability to Israeli soil; second, by backing Palestinian terrorist organizations with financial assistance, weapons, and training in "internal terrorism." The Israeli navy's mid-sea seizure of the ship "Karine A" on its way from Iran to the PA was conclusive proof of Iranian aid to Palestinian terror. Third, Iran is involved in the wide-scale arming of Hizbollah in Lebanon and encourages it in carrying out terrorist acts on the Israeli-Lebanese border.

At the same time, a reformist camp is active in Iran, headed by Khatami, and, according to some estimates, it has the support of approximately 70% of the population in Iran. There is a large following that is displeased with the radical policy of the country's spiritual leader, Khaman'i. Although it is not clear when a change will occur, it is indeed expected, and voices are heard in Iran today calling for

reforms and democratization. The fourteen independent newspapers published in Iran are further indication of this trend. Under these conditions a fundamental change will occur one day.

### **Conclusion: Factors Blocking Escalation in the Middle East**

Against this background, it should be emphasized that there are several factors that work at calming and defusing the escalation in the Middle East: the United States' deep commitment in the region and its determination to fight terrorism; the alignment of pragmatic Arab countries led by Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan; the emergence of a reformist trend in Iran; the international and internal pressure being applied to Arafat. All of these processes are engaged in curbing escalation. It should be kept in mind that the leaders in the region and the United States have the ability to shape the security reality and the directions in which regional conflicts develop and will perhaps be resolved.

## **Strategic ASSESSMENT**

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