

Israel and the Middle East, 2005: A Strategic Overview

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Let me begin by underlining the intellectual humility necessary when attempting to analyze enemies and adversaries in times of uncertainty, such as today. I say this neither out of lip service to a slogan nor as a platitude for the record, rather because I believe it is true. Our world is not a traditional world like the one in which we lived during the “second wave” era. It is characterized by ups and downs and far-reaching changes. We must therefore be modest enough to appreciate the difficulties involved in gathering information, making assessments, and understanding the complex and integrated processes that impact on us.

When discussing the state of the nation, it is my belief that Israel is now facing three strategic challenges – security, the economy, and national identity. I am relieved that it is my job to deal only with Israel’s adversaries and enemies, and not the latter two challenges. I think that today, security is the least challenging threat facing the State of Israel, especially after the events surrounding the implementation of the disengagement plan, which was a challenge that required the utmost of us all.

Principal Formative Influences

Let me identify three principal influences that currently affect developments in the region and shape both our current strategic environment and unfolding strategic issues. These influences are:

- United States policy. Note that since November 2004, when Presi-

dent Bush was reelected, the region has witnessed great changes, not all of which have been acknowledged.

- Internal forces within Arab countries

- Global jihad

The first influence shaping Israel’s strategic environment is United States policy and the ongoing American presence in the Middle East. The American presence is a factor that leaders of the region can no longer ignore. If some regional leaders had hoped that presidential elections would retire

the administration in November 2004 and the American presence would be cut short, this has not happened. The leaders of the region have come to understand that the United States, a new neighbor in the Middle East, is here to stay. While we can predict neither the length nor the scope of this presence, the fact that America is here and is a neighbor of Iran, Syria, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey is clear to all. The United States sees its policy as a force spawning sweeping, generations-long changes that are already underway. In

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the eyes of the current administration in the United States, democracy in the Middle East will result in a better and safer America. While this argument is debatable, it is the main claim of the current American administration.

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The second major factor shaping Israel's security environment is the internal forces at play within the Arab countries. Due precisely to leaders' internalization of the American presence in the region, the last half year has witnessed the rise of strong internal forces within Arab states. The public, the media, the weakness of ruling regimes, and serious problems in the economy are the factors that brought about the changes. The leading issue on the agenda is a world view that holds *al-wataniya* (nationalism – from *watan*, meaning national homeland) above all else. The interest of the nation now takes precedence over interests of pan-Arabism, the Arab world, and the Arab League.

Urdun awalan ("Jordan first") is the initiative of King Abdullah, based on his understanding of the threat involved with the Israeli disengagement plan. The same is true of the

call of *Lubnan l'lubnani-in* ("Lebanon for the Lebanese"). And there is no need even to mention the elections in Egypt. We have not seen such phenomena in the past, and they signify a turn inward. Foremost on the agenda is safeguarding the national homeland and promoting the necessary changes. A posturing of this sort has never before existed so clearly in the Arab world.

The nature of self-criticism has also changed over the past year. If in the past, after March 2003, these countries denied their problems, denied their responsibility for terrorism and decline, and presented the Arab and Muslim world as a victim, other explanations have now emerged. The ills of the Arab world are slowly becoming the focus of public discussion. For example, *al-Hayat* editor Ghassan Shirbel wrote the following in a May 2005 editorial: "Change is knocking at the door of the Arab and his homeland, but he is hesitant to open it. This is a period of difficult adaptation, the success of which depends on accepting the principle of change and the willingness to make well-timed, painful decisions demanding a combination of courage and wisdom."

This public awakening has not been characterized by self-criticism alone, and extends to the Palestinian issue. If the Palestinians were once portrayed as the victims and Arafat was heralded as an Arab symbol and leader committed to lead his people, the Palestinian issue has now been relegated to a secondary role. Other voices are sounded that reflect in-

creasing doubt about the effectiveness of resistance. Debates within Hamas and Islamic Jihad currently include the speculation that perhaps their future lies in the political system, and that they may therefore also need, for the moment, to give up firing Qassam rockets and pursuing active resistance. Also in a unique position today is Hizbollah in Lebanon, which understands that its existence is guaranteed if it is enmeshed in the political system in Lebanon, where the group has two Shiite government ministers in its service.

Attitudes towards the United States and Israel are also currently changing and assuming a less prominent position. Until 2004, the United States was depicted as acting in the service of Israel. It was identified as an imperialistic, alienated, and destructive force. While this portrait has not changed, some voices are now saying that there is a need to address the challenge posed by the United States. To this end, people are undertaking multi-dimensional assessments of the American presence in the region. Signs of change are finding expression in acknowledgment of American power and the need to deal with it as an inevitable feature of the current political state of affairs, including in domestic issues.

Global jihad, the third force shaping Israel's strategic environment, is currently evolving and assuming new dimensions. The military intelligence prism yields a new intelligence assessment regarding Qaedat al-Jihad, which is al-Qaeda's real name. The



Egyptian Jihad, led by Ayman al-Zawahiri, merged with al-Qaeda in January 2001, nine months prior to the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States. The new organization was called Qaeday al-Jihad, and Ayman al-Zawahiri is the organization's number two man. Some say that he serves as the ideologue and the military-operational commander of the group. In this context, it is important to point out a few basic principles, as well as the changes that have direct implications for Israel that we believe are taking place within the organization.

The strategy of al-Qaeda has shifted due to defeats the organization has suffered since September 11, 2001, when international security and intelligence forces began pursuing them in earnest. Against the background of the attacks in Beslan (Russia), Spain, Turkey, and more recently, in Egypt, the heart of the Arab world, Jordan, and even Syria, more countries have internalized the need to fight international terrorism. This growing understanding among governments around the world has also increased pressure on al-Qaeda.

I will be cautious with my words about al-Qaeda, as Israel's intelligence capability regarding al-Qaeda is not on the same level as its capabilities

regarding the Palestinian Authority or Hizbollah. Therefore, I want to emphasize that the ideas presented here for the first time are tentative speculations and are not established beyond reproof. Al-Qaeda's strategy, as we have come to understand it over the past few weeks and months, divides its struggle into three realms: the West, the Arab world, and al-Sham and Egypt. The West and the Arab regimes, including the Palestinian Authority and Israel, are defined as enemies. This does not stem from the behavior of these entities, but rather from their fundamental nature. Egypt has ties with "the great Satan" (the United States), as does Saudi Arabia. For this reason, al-Qaeda sees jihad within these countries as legitimate. Syria, it feels, may change course and as a result Basher al-Asad should take heed not to abandon the jihad. Arab Islam is the heart of Islam both ideologically and geographically. According to al-Qaeda, action must be taken to topple Arab regimes that do not understand the religious core of Islam. The Arab regimes of the weakened Arab world must be expelled, and al-Qaeda is a dynamic force that advances this objective.

Today there is at least one known group, named Junud al-Sham (the soldiers of al-Sham), that is actually

al-Qaeda in Syria. Two additional groups linked to al-Qaeda are transnational groups. One is located at Jabal Hilal, in the center of the Sinai Peninsula, and consists of Egyptian Jihad soldiers, and the other group is known as the Egyptian Unity and Jihad. There is also Abu Musa Zarqawi's group that operates in Jordan and is al-Qaeda's representative in the land of the Tigris and Euphrates.

According to al-Qaeda, action must be taken simultaneously against the Arab world – to bring about the change of regimes – and against the West. For this reason, attacks will continue to occur in the Arab world as well as outside of it, in Spain, London, and Turkey. Today, the Arab world is a target for terrorism. Israel is located in the center of the Islamic world in which the caliphate should be established. The struggle in Iraq and the ejection of the Americans is merely a preparatory stage for the establishment of the caliphate. The confrontation with Israel, however, is of particular importance to al-Qaeda, for both theological and strategic reasons.

Those following the region during the past year, therefore, have seen al-Qaeda move increasingly closer to Israel. Intelligence sources that have not yet been fully authenticated tell us that a number of al-Qaeda opera-

tives crossed the border from Egypt into the Gaza Strip when the Philadelphia route was breached. If this is true, this would provide defiant elements in Hamas and even al-Aqsa Brigades with the ability to take refuge in the warm embrace of al-Qaeda. This has

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not happened so far because the Palestinian Authority has understood that a connection with al-Qaeda could inflict great damage on Palestinian interests. Al-Qaeda's struggle will not end with the ejection of American forces from the region, but rather only after a proper Islamic regime is established on the ruins of Israel and the current Arab regimes. After achieving this goal, al-Qaeda efforts will be directed outward to face the great Satan. This strategic approach was not known until now. Israel was never the focus of al-Qaeda strategy, and I am not certain that Israel will become the focus. However, we now undoubtedly face a growing, significant challenge by al-Qaeda.

The radical elements are pursued in earnest, but they will not give up. The situation is similar in Hizbollah, Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and al-Qaeda. They will find alternative new ways

to face the challenge that they perceive before them.

A fourth factor I regard as a primary force shaping Israel's strategic environment is Israeli policy. Without delving into this subject, let me suggest that in my reading of the overall strategic picture, the more time passes, the more Israel will be forced to take unilateral steps to assume responsibility for its future and its existence.

From Change to Transformation in the Middle East

To summarize the main thrust of all these developments, I would say that the Middle East has moved from a process of change to a process of transformation. Transformation comes from within, and we can see it, for instance, in Lebanon. Lebanon was influenced by UN resolutions 1559 and 1614, as well as by international pressure and the investigation of Hariri's assassination. However, the bottom line is that the process in Lebanon has been a genuine transformation because it has come from within, from inside the country itself. It appears that the transformation in Egypt has also been emerging from within. Out of 3,000 judges in Egypt, 1,000 were not willing to supervise the referendum held a few months ago on the amendment to section 76 of the Egyptian constitution. The reason for their refusal was that they were not willing to play a role in supporting corruption.

We must differentiate between democracy and processes of democratization. In my mind, there is still

no democracy in the Middle East, but there has been a different use of the democratization process aimed at bringing about profound change. This is what occurred in Lebanon, and this is what is underway in Egypt and the Palestinian Authority. Palestinian Authority president Abu Mazen appears to be the first leader in the Arab world to be elected by a 63 percent majority and not the customary 99.9 percent majority. The results of the Egyptian elections in which Mubarak was re-elected after twenty-four years in power are also of interest. This move from change to processes of transformation has profoundly influenced the important forces shaping the region. In 2004 the primary force was American policy. American policy is still a major force in 2005, but now internal forces are also dominant.

In response to attacks during one of his lectures on the American failure in Iraq, Fouad Ajami said: "Mr. Bush may not be given to excessive philo-

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sophical sophistication, but the revolutionary message he brought forth was the simple belief that there was no Arab and Muslim 'exceptionalism' to the appeal of liberty. For a people mired in historical pessimism, the message of this outsider [Bush] was a powerful antidote to the culture of tyranny."

To the trends discussed let me add a number of evolutionary processes pertinent to the region.

■ There is no *military* coalition against Israel.

■ The threat of the weapons buildup is expanding and is cause for concern. I call it “from the Qassam to the Shehab III” – from the rocket-based threat in the Gaza Strip (which I hope we will succeed in blocking from emerging in Judea and Samaria) to the rockets of Hizbollah to the Shehab III missiles in Iran.

■ The Middle East is a social and economic time bomb. Each year, the Middle East labor market increases by more than 3 percent, more than any other region in the world. This means that more than 3 million people over the age of nineteen will join the work force each year after 2005: approximately one million people in Egypt, about 800,000 in Iran, and about 300,000 in Syria. Assessing these figures in context of the dysfunctional regimes ruling the countries in question, the conclusion must be that a social, economic, and possibly even religious time bomb is forming in the region.

■ Changes in the region are evolutionary, not revolutionary, and require time and patience to understand and address.

■ There are increasing challenges to the stability of Arab regimes (Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Pakistan, etc.).

Risks and Opportunities for Israel

The attempt to synthesize the intelli-

gence ramifications for Israel, after assessing the balance of threats and risks on the one hand and opportunities on the other hand, suggests that the contemporary strategic environment in the region is increasingly comfortable for Israel. As chief of Defense Intelligence, it seems to me that it is the decision-makers who must take advantage of the positive processes we are witnessing, whose strength exceeds the power of the negative processes also currently underway. If they take advantage of these processes effectively, we are likely to see positive results. If they do not, the opposite is liable to occur.

The first trend concerns the strengthening of the Arab nation states: the respective national interests of the Arab states are increasing, and the burden of Arab collective responsibility is weakening. There are direct channels that can be developed with Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, and so forth. At the moment, Lebanon is not obligated to abide by decisions of the Arab League, which is growing increasingly weaker. We have seen Qaddafi make decisions independently, and the same has been true in other places. *Al-Wataniya* – nationalism – occupies the citizens of Lebanon, Syria, and other Arab countries more than events occurring outside their borders.

Second, the bloc in the north – Lebanon, Hizbollah, and Syria – is disintegrating. Syria has lost Lebanon. This is important from our perspective because it means that an independent Lebanese interest is emerg-

ing in many areas, including politics, the economy, and policy. The same is true in Syria. Hizbollah is a player in the game, and therefore at this point it must exercise greater restraint. In-

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deed, Hizbollah is facing hard times as a military organization and as a fighting jihad organization. It is obligated to honor decisions stemming from the domestic Lebanese arena, to which the organization must answer, and therefore it must now decide if it wants to be a political party (*hizb*) or the party of Allah (*hizb Allah*). This is the third process underway.

The fourth process concerns the changing nature of terrorism. The terrorist threat is now pursued more intensively and has changed in character. This is the case with regard to al-Qaeda, Hizbollah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad. At the same time, over the past two years we have witnessed the exercise of restraint by Hizbollah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad in terms of its terrorism. My assessment is that Hamas is currently at one of its lowest points ever in terms of operational capacity, though not in terms of motivation. Similarly, this does not mean that it is unable to carry out an attack when it decides to do so.

Fifth, continued pressure on Iran regarding its nuclear program has succeeded in delaying it for at least two years. Still, this issue must also be viewed from the complementary perspective; that is, pressure has not brought the program to a halt. Nonetheless, the efforts have provided some success, and have proven that such political measures can bring about change. A similar change also appears to be emerging in North Korea.

The sixth process, progress in democratization in the region, has a positive and negative side. Here, I am referring to its positive side. With regard to the dangers involved in this process, we must be especially sensitive, and in light of the strength of the United States and its friendship with Israel, we should be wary of a change in direction in the future. We must therefore recognize Europe's importance and the importance of other allies to Israel.

Against the positive trends, the risks and dangers must also be identified. For one, the terrorist organi-

zations still possess the power of deterrence, despite the fact that they are pursued and are currently under pressure. The elements responsible at the moment for calm between Israel and the Palestinians are the IDF, the Israeli security apparatus, the General Security Services, and Hamas. I would like to make clear that no security body within the Palestinian Authority is playing a part in maintaining the calm. This includes Abu Mazen. The preservation of calm has been an independent decision of Hamas, which is the force with influence. The downside of this situation is that it will be able to reactivate the violence when it decides to do so. So too with Hizbollah and global jihad organizations. They still retain deterrent power and operational terror abilities.

Second is the threat of shockwaves in the countries with treaties with Israel. We must be cautious and note the threat that Jordan perceives in the security fence and the disengagement. I regard peace with Jordan as a strategic asset just as peace with Egypt is a strategic asset, and we must therefore

be careful and aware of the dangers facing these two countries from outside forces.

My final point relates to the danger inherent in the completion of the Iranian nuclear program supported by a regime that is more extremist and conservative than in the past. I do not think that the opponents of the program will be able to arrest it, and therefore essential are security, military, and political intelligence evaluations concomitant with effective grappling with the threat that is taking shape before us. And in context of this danger, let me present two arguments, voiced to me in meetings with a number of senior officials in Europe, mitigating the urgency of the Iranian issue. The first: "I don't understand, sir, why you have cast this picture of a nuclear threat over Europe. After all, we lived under precisely a cloud of this sort following World War II." The second dismissal was, "In the end, either you or the Americans will solve the problem – so for now let's leave the matter alone."

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