

Discussion Paper

The Middle-East conflict: strategic dilemmas from an Israeli perspective

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The Arab Israeli conflict is affected by complex intertwined elements; thus, decision making regarding the conflict's outstanding issues must consider the impact, tradeoffs and dynamics of local, regional and international factors. The following is a collection of several basic trends and critical uncertainties that are significant, from Israel's perspective, for the purpose of assessing the threats, opportunities, and the spectrum of possibilities in promoting peace processes:

- The Middle East encompasses powerful long-lasting destabilizing rifts: radical Islamists versus moderate camps; Sunnis versus Shias; reformists versus conservative authoritarians; rich petrodollars states versus poor underdeveloped countries. For some of these internally-threatened regimes, Israel can serve as an easy alternative target for diverting resentment aimed at the leaderships.
- The intractable violence in Iraq may become the region's chief exporter of instability: struggles between interested parties, severe loss of life, refugee waves, safe havens for terrorists, spillover effects that will intensify ethnic and religious divisions and civil wars in neighboring countries, etc.
- A U.S. exit from Iraq that leaves behind a violent and destabilized country will be claimed as a victory for radical Islam. Indeed, the underlying social, economic, and religious realities on which Islamist terrorism thrives do not seem to be changing soon for the better.
- The prospective Iranian acquisition of nuclear capabilities will confront Israel with an existential threat and will encourage other countries to follow suit and 'go nuclear' themselves. The new nuclear powers will be tempted to threaten their neighbors and thus attain regional hegemony. (In addition, non-conventional weapons may find their way into the hands of terrorist groups).
- Moderate Arab states are fearful of Iran and its nuclear program, as well as of radical Islamists. This reality presents an opportunity for cooperation between Israel and such moderate Arab regimes, especially if a peace process between Israel and Syria, Lebanon and the Palestinians will be revitalized based on the Arab Peace Initiative.
- The victory of Hamas in the Palestinian elections and its brutal takeover of the Gaza Strip complicated the prospects to achieve comprehensive final peace agreement between Israel and Palestine since Hamas is ideologically committed to Israel's destruction. Is the Hamas victory a passing episode in the history of Palestinian society or is it an authentic expression of deep powerful regional currents of Islamic radicalization? Can Fatah and its elected Palestinian president Abu Mazen (who recognizes Israel, is committed to peace and rejects the use of terror) overcome their weaknesses, becoming a reliable partner for peace?
- Will Hamas' victory and the organization's framing of the conflict in existential religious terms render the conflict immune to peaceful solution? Will the process of Arab acceptance of Israel's right to exist – which was recently highlighted in the re-launching of the Arab Peace Initiative – be threatened now in the face of the Hamas phenomenon and the strengthening of the regional axis (Iran-Hezbollah-Hamas- al Qaeda) that denies Israel's right to exist?

In light of all the above Israel faces a core strategic dilemma:

- **Deciding between two fundamental strategic theses:**

a) “There needs to be rapid movement toward resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict since it embodies the primary statecraft political tool that can significantly influence events. It will positively affect Israel’s security and economy, its Jewish identity and its ability to regionally confront radical Islam.”

Or:

b) “The dangerous trends in the Middle East, harsh hostility based in religion, the rejection of Israel’s right to exist, and the lack of credible and stable partners require cautious policy, maintaining all of Israel’s cards, fortification (in a bunker-like mentality), and adopting a strategy of **conflict management** rather than **conflict resolution**.”

The possible answers to this dilemma will impact Israel’s operative answers to the following range of strategic choices:

- **Syria-Lebanon first?** – Should Israel, given the difficulties of initiating a political peace process vis-à-vis the Palestinians, move first toward Syria and Lebanon, with the expectation that Damascus will exert a restraining influence on Hamas and Hezbollah? Will such a move help weaken the radical axis led by Iran? Can the UNIFIL mandate be renewed with robust authority and capabilities to disarm Hezbollah, helping the legal Lebanese government function as a real sovereign of its territory?
- **Israeli-Palestinian Final Status Agreement** – Does the political and geographic rupture between Fatah and Hamas offer an opportunity to create a new reality in the West Bank – one that will present an attractive ‘agreement-based alternative’ countering that of Hamas? Will offering a credible “political horizon” to the Palestinian people indeed strengthen the moderate Palestinian camp and promote a popular Palestinian decision supporting a compromise with Israel? Can the weakness of the moderate Palestinian camp be overcome via massive assistance to the PA (security assistance, economic aid, and political cover) by the Arab countries? Will the Palestinian side successfully fulfill its security-related obligations as defined by the agreement? Will Hamas accept the agreement or will it try to undermine it using its power-base in Gaza?
- **A Political Process vis-à-vis Hamas?** – Hamas has stated its willingness to reach a long-term ceasefire (Hudna) agreement with Israel that does not include mutual recognition. Those who support such an agreement argue that one cannot ignore the power of Hamas and the fact that it represents a genuine share of Palestinian society. This approach argues that after a long period of calm and generational transition, hearts and minds will be conditioned and better-prepared for a permanent peace agreement. Those who oppose such an approach explain that Hamas is a religious movement grounded in a radical Islam with broad regional traction, and will never recognize Israel’s right to exist. By this line of thinking, Israeli willingness to suffice with a ceasefire will promote the already mounting regional trend to de-legitimize Israel’s existence.

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