

Challenges to Israeli Foreign Policy

Daniel Ayalon

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In addressing the issue of “Challenges to Israeli Foreign Policy,” we have to understand Israel’s unique position. Israeli foreign policy is under attack—both from inside and outside—and has to be managed accordingly, i.e., in a situation of very complex and severe conflict.

If we look at the battles we have waged since the reestablishment of the State of Israel (and I always say “the reestablishment” because we were here many years ago), different tactics have been used by our enemies in order to bring us down, in order to vanquish and defeat us. At first, military means were used, and fast-forwarding to today, we see that this, of course, did not succeed. Today, very skillfully, but also very fortunately, we have managed to build a defense system with which we can defend ourselves—by ourselves—in a very effective way. Deterrence is clearly the main element necessary to assure our national security, our individual security, and our very existence.

As the military option did not work, a different tactic was employed—an economic one. If you remember, it was used in the 1950s, ‘60s, and even the ‘70s, and now, unfortunately, it is being revived by the Arab League. The Arab boycott involved not just the primary boycott but a secondary and tertiary one as well. The idea was to suffocate our economy. Again, if we fast-forward from the place we were sixty-two years ago to the place we are today, we see that the Israeli economy is one of the strongest in the world, not just in relative terms but also in absolute ones. Obviously, the economic struggle against us did not work either.

In between all this, there were many attempts to use terror against us. Here, again, I think that we can observe what amounts to a learning curve for us. Back in 2000, the Second Intifada caught us by surprise. More than a thousand Israelis were killed and many thousands were injured. But over time, we implemented some good defense measures against terrorism, not just in terms of intelligence and preemption, which constitute the real essence of fighting terror, but also other things, like the security fence. In tandem with other methods and operations, the fence is something that has, in a very tangible way, halted much of the terrorism. This is also due to the fact that we have almost seamless cooperation among the

different branches of our security forces. At the present time, I do not think there is any motivation for terrorism.

Of course, with regard to terrorism, there is another issue: long-range incoming ballistic missiles, such as those launched by Hizbullah from Lebanon in the Second Lebanon War and those fired from Gaza in the years leading up to December 2008. Here, I think deterrence is the main answer.

In the face of the failure of the military and economic tactics, and of terrorism, we see that new tactics have emerged—political and legal warfare. This is what Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs finds itself facing today. At present, the trenches are in Geneva in the Council of Human Rights, in New York in the UN General Assembly and Security Council, in The Hague, in the International Court of Justice. Our enemies are trying to take us down the road travelled by South Africa. They do this by delegitimizing and even demonizing us, and by attempting to harm our foreign affairs and relations with other countries.

A case in point is Britain, where none other than Hamas is using (or abusing) the judicial system against us. Hamas is one of the most widely recognized terrorist organizations in the world. It is not only on the US list of terrorist organizations, but also on that of the EU. Today we find ourselves in a very sad situation whereby Israeli officials cannot visit London without fear of either being arrested or, at the very least, of being embarrassed by some injunction or other kind of negative publicity.

We are engaged in very intense talks with our friends in London on this matter, and just this week the legal adviser of the British government was here. I believe they do understand the severity and scope of the problem, because it is not just directed against Israel. It is directed against all democracies that defend themselves against terrorism. There are many American and NATO forces in harm's way that could, and indeed do, find themselves in the same situation.

This is, I think, the main challenge for the coming years, the coming decade. This is also something that damages our relations with the Palestinians—along with any possibility of a smooth and viable political process with them—not only indirectly, but also directly, because it inhibits the building of trust or credibility with us.

We are trying to work with the Palestinians on the ground, helping to build their economy—and we have done a great deal with that. The Palestinian economy in the West Bank is growing steadily at 8 percent a year. Banks are flush with money—more money than their lenders need. We see economic activity rising by a double-digit percentage. Movement and access are now almost flawless, with

only fourteen checkpoints in place, down from forty-one. We are taking calculated risks. We are trying to move forward by helping the Palestinian Authority.

On the other hand, not only do we not see the Palestinians coming to the table without any preconditions for direct talks, we see them continuing the attack — via very unfriendly actions throughout the world in different international forums. They use (or, again, abuse) the automatic majority that they have in places such as the UN Human Rights Council, where they have the temerity to try teach us about issues of human rights. Countries like Saudi Arabia, Cuba, Syria, Libya and Iran, which are members of the Council, but which themselves are guilty of terrible human rights violations, vote against us at the UN.

How do we combat that? Here, quantity does make for quality. I do not believe that in the foreseeable future we can counter their numbers. So the idea we are trying to put forth is to form a group of countries that share our values and interests — fair-minded countries may not be able to persuade the other side or change resolutions, but could really dilute their vote in such a way as to render it ineffective, or at least not credible. This is what we call the “moral majority,” where Europe (both Eastern and Western Europe) and, of course, the US, Canada, Australia, Japan, South Korea and other fair-minded countries could vote in one bloc. That, more than anything else, would very powerfully signal where we stand, and would demonstrate to the other side that they cannot simply use all these international forums to make a mockery of the entire international system.

A case in point in which we had partial success was at the General Assembly, regarding the Goldstone Report. It was, as you know, referred by a majority (47 members) of the Council on Human Rights to the General Assembly. In the General Assembly, the resolution against us passed, but there were seventy-eight countries — 78 out of 192 member states — that did not vote for the Goldstone Report. These include the countries I mentioned before.

Our goal now is to sustain that bloc. The way to go about this is not just through diplomacy (talking about our cultural and other similarities, our ethos and shared interests), but by reaching out to those countries through better bilateral relations, be it via economics, technical assistance, cultural exchanges, or in other ways.

Unfortunately, for too long now, our foreign minister has been preoccupied with the conflict, which prevented him from paying enough attention to the many friends we have, whether in Africa or Latin America or Asia. Now we intend to reach out to the countries on those continents and deepen our ties. It will not happen overnight and it is not going to be an easy road; indeed, it is an uphill climb, but one we are determined to make. We are not going to succumb to the

tyranny or Bolshevism of the automatic majority that the Palestinians or the Arabs enjoy in all these international forums. I believe this is also in the best interests of all countries, and certainly reflects the beliefs of the founders of the UN, who thought that after World War II the time had come for a new world order—one that would not yield or succumb to terrorism, dictatorship, or to uncivilized behavior.

That international organization was actually designed to make a better and more united world after the eras of colonialism and imperialism, to share resources, and to bring all member countries to almost the same level in terms of development. Unfortunately, however, this did not happen, and all the UN organs have, so far, not been able to diminish in any meaningful way, shape or form poverty or violations of civil or human rights.

Examples of this abound. We do not need to go back to Biafra in the 1960s or the Congo in the '50s—today we have major problems in Darfur, Zimbabwe and North Korea, to name but a few. There are appalling abuses of human rights and of women's rights in Saudi Arabia as in many other countries. Sadly, none of this is being dealt with.

If you look at the entire volume of all UN or Human Rights Council resolutions, you will see that the majority—more than 50 percent—single out Israel. I think this not only makes a mockery of these UN institutions, but it also emboldens countries to continue to abuse human and civil rights. It does not give them any incentive to really correct their own societies.

Take the entire Arab world, for example. Today the Arab world encompasses 280, perhaps 300 million people. Yet, 40 percent of them live below the international poverty line, which is very low indeed. These are not Israeli figures; these are United Nations Development Program (UNDP) figures that were collected together with the Arab League. Because of overpopulation, in the next ten years, the Arab world—those 300 million people—will have to create 51 million jobs just to stay where it is now. And in terms of development, the Arab world is still on the lowest rung of the ladder. In order to move up, Arabs would have to create double that number of jobs. But, unfortunately, we do not see the international community guiding them, helping them, or engaging in an earnest dialogue with them. Instead, the entire debate is dominated by the conflict with the Palestinians. Unfortunately, the international media does not necessarily call attention to this phenomenon.

So, to sum up what was asked of me—defining the challenge to Israeli foreign policy—it is this: First of all, to counter the delegitimization of Israel that is

manifested in UN resolutions and political attacks and, in the last two or three years, through the abuse of the international legal system. Of course, we must also engender change. We must change the discourse internationally, which I believe in the long run will be the best thing that could happen to all the countries in the Middle East. Other than that, we would very much like to move ahead and try to make progress with the Palestinians in a viable diplomatic or political process. That is not going to be easy, but it is not up to us. Today, I can say that we have pretty much convinced most of the international community, in a very cogent way, that we have done our share, or even more than our share, and are actually waiting for a Palestinian move.

Regarding Abu Mazen's visit to Cairo just this week, the results are not yet known, but the rhetoric that emerged from it thus far has not been very encouraging. There are going to be very intensified diplomatic efforts in the coming weeks. We will certainly call on our friends in the area, and we will certainly look to, and follow, the leadership of our best friend and ally, the US. But if I have to make some assessment, I am sorry to say that I do not see anything coming out of it now. The earliest I can see anything moving would be in February, perhaps even later than that.

We certainly do not want to see the status quo continue. We would like to have a political umbrella and a dialogue that will support, from the top down, what we are trying to create from the bottom up, which is an economic infrastructure for the Palestinians and institution- and capacity-building, so as to create an entity that would be viable and would not jeopardize the political landscape of the region. We certainly do not need another failed state or, worse still, a terrorist state. All this has to be done in a very incremental and judicious way.

Nobody can take seriously any demand by the Palestinians, or any others, that a time limit or deadline should be set, because a deadline, as we know from the past, has always worked against the process and is counterproductive. Why? Usually when you have a deadline, nobody does anything until the deadline is reached; at that point, everything comes under pressure. It fails. Also, with a deadline, there is not really an incentive for the parties to take any major steps. I am especially talking about the Palestinians, who, unfortunately, are looking for an imposed solution. That will never happen.

The serious leaders in the international community understand that you can never impose peace. Had we found such a solution, we would not have had problems in Iraq, Iran or North Korea, not to mention other areas. Just as a solution cannot be imposed in those places, it cannot be done here.

We need to have patience, but mostly we need to build trust. Because of the turmoil inside the Palestinian Authority and within the Palestinian camp, I am not sure that they are either capable of moving forward or willing to do so, but we have the patience and the determination. I think we have proven that. Perhaps the real tragedy is that to make peace, you need two sides, but to make war, you need only one.

With respect to European efforts, we greatly appreciate the EU and the current Spanish presidency. We have to remember that we are on the same side as the EU, not just culturally, historically and traditionally—and in terms of common values—but also in terms of interests. Of course, we sometimes have different political views, but we should always remember that these disagreements should not translate into a conflict, because we are actually on the same side. Miguel Ángel Moratinos, the Spanish foreign minister, is, of course, a great diplomat. He has been in the area many times and knows us very well. In fact, his area of expertise is the Middle East. So certainly the Spanish presidency can be instrumental.

But I beg to differ about the goal. When everybody asks: What is the objective? What will really end the conflict, or make this area a better place? Is it a Palestinian state, as many suggest? I think this is a very narrowly determined goal. I think the goal is really to have an everlasting peace. The goal is to achieve a peaceful or historic reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians. The real goal is to achieve peaceful coexistence—not a Palestinian state.

Now, if the means to achieve this goal is through creation of a Palestinian state, so be it. But let us not confuse what we are really working for: an everlasting peace. And peace will only be sustained here with security, with everybody's interests assured. This is something of historic dimensions, which nobody can take lightly.

This conflict is already 120 years old. Certainly, nobody can expect to solve it in six or seven months holding a stopwatch. What we need to do is to measure the development not through dates but through performance and results. And this, by the way, is why I like the Roadmap so much, though almost nobody mentions it nowadays. That document includes the words “performance-based” in its title. Indeed, performance is much more important than anything else.

Therefore, the EU and the Spaniards are welcome to play a role. We will continue our very intense and frank dialogue with them, but whether they can make things change in the next six months is not up to them, unfortunately. It is not up to the United States either; it is not up to any mediator who comes from the outside. If the right elements are not there, if the reality is not changed, then no matter what

we do, it will not work. We need to change the basics here. And the basics are many, not just among the Palestinians, but also in the surrounding area—which should be a supportive environment. Unfortunately, we do not see that supportive environment. If the Saudis do not even have the decency to talk to us or if they are not willing to help the Palestinians politically or economically—and we all know that they have the means to do so—then we need to work on that. So progress cannot be measured immediately.

Until now, I purposely did not mention Iran, because Iran is not just an Israeli problem. It is mainly the problem of the international community. One thing is certain—and I am talking here from the perspective of the Security Council, of the coalition of the willing, from the perspective of the countries that would like to see a better world—and that is that we cannot afford a nuclear Iran. A nuclear Iran would destroy the world order as we know it; the Nuclear Proliferation Treaty would no longer be in effect. Actually, we would see a race, a nuclear arms race, the likes of which we have never seen before, not just here in the Middle East, in countries like Turkey, Saudi Arabia or Egypt, but also in Asian countries and, of course, North Korea. Just think of Venezuela or other countries that would try to obtain nuclear capabilities. Certainly we cannot afford that.

But Iran poses a specific threat, and not just a nuclear one. If you combine its aggressive pursuit of nuclear ambitions with its very radical, fundamentalist policies, together with its active support of terrorism and call for the annihilation of another member state (which is, by the way, an egregious breach of the UN charter, one for which no one has called them to task or held them accountable), you see that if Iran had nuclear capability, it could carry on with impunity. We trust that this is the understanding today, and we hope that a united front can be found or can be generated, because—and this is the key to everything—we have to understand that Iran is a very vulnerable country; it is a very weak country, not only politically and socially but also economically.

Unfortunately, today Iran is playing with cards it does not really have, and is trying to fool everyone, using psychological warfare to try to intimidate us. We see this through the Iranians' very aggressive rhetoric, their missile tests and their military exercises. They are also banking on driving a wedge between the different members of the Security Council or the international community. If they were made to realize that none of these cards could be played, or if we called their bluff, I believe we would see the Iranians behaving more responsibly. Without a united front, we will never see that happen. But we have a few more weeks to hopefully gain this consensus, one that the "P5+1" Group is working on.

On the question of Iran, I am not at liberty to mention too many things here from the point of view of operations. Suffice it to say that I take the American president and secretary of state at their word, and I believe that they are right to declare that all options are on the table.

We just concluded a meeting with the US Deputy Secretary of Homeland Security, Jane Holl Lute. In light of the abortive terrorist attack on a Delta airliner on December 25, it is very, very important for us to reinvigorate and actually to intensify the longstanding cooperation that we have on aviation security. But the challenge is really to be ahead of the curve, because there are many facets to aviation security. In fact, this cooperation exemplifies the very deep and substantive ties that we have with the United States, something which will continue.

We also have to look into the threat posed by cyberterrorism, the possibilities of infrastructure defense, and many other things—because we are facing a very determined enemy, one which is also very able and innovative and is constantly attacking us across a very wide front. When I say “us” I mean the whole of the civilization of which we are all members.

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