



Looking beyond January 22

Only fools dare to prophesize, but management of relations with the US will remain the key to Israel's foreign policy challenges

ISRAEL IS always seemingly on the verge or in the middle of a crisis and, usually, more than one. In 2012 (and much of 2011), we focused on the life-and-death questions related to a possible military attack to halt Iran's illegal efforts to acquire nuclear weapons.

The debate brought out visible (and probably exaggerated) differences between Jerusalem and Washington, as highlighted in Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's UN speech in September and in the US election campaign. Of late, the dispute has been narrowed and the heat on this issue has been lowered, at least temporarily, but it will return very soon.

As Iran receded temporarily, the perpetual Gaza/Hamas crisis resumed, with escalating rocket attacks on southern Israel, triggering another IDF operation. In this case, there was total harmony between Netanyahu, US President Barack Obama and even most of Europe's fickle political leadership.

But this harmony was very short-lived, and the diplomatic isolation resumed as the United Nations General Assembly endorsed the unilateral Palestinian statehood strategy. The Netanyahu government, in the midst of an election campaign, responded with its own unilateralism, through noisy announcements of plans to increase building around Jerusalem – most notably an area known as E1. This brought the predictable condemnations, including blunt attacks from the Obama Administration and its surrogates in the editorial pag-

es of The New York Times. Even Canada, whose government takes a consistent moral and principled position on Israeli issues, felt obliged to criticize this move.

These events reinforced the political isolation of Israel, particularly in Europe, where much of the media, academic community, charities, church groups and others promote the delegitimization of Israel and Jewish national sovereignty. This strategy of political warfare, adopted in the NGO Forum of the 2001 UN-sponsored Durban Conference, exploits the apartheid label, as well as BDS (boycott, divestment, and sanctions) and "lawfare."

ALTHOUGH EUROPEAN governments officially oppose such delegitimization, the campaigns are led by NGOs (non-governmental organizations) and charities receiving taxpayer funds (estimated at 100 million euros annually) via top-secret processes. The funding frameworks were established to promote human rights, peace, democracy, and humanitarian aid, but have been widely abused, and lack parliamentary and other oversight.

All of this activity took place against a backdrop of renewed political turmoil in Egypt, a vicious civil war in Syria, instability in Jordan, and other changes that have altered the regional context in an unrecognizable and unprecedented manner. The era of hostile but predictable behavior from the closed and corrupt totalitarian regimes was abruptly ended by what was euphemistically called "the Arab Spring."

Instead, Israel is now faced with an entirely unpredictable and chaotic regional environment, including along its immediate borders.

Taken together, the potential foreign policy challenges might appear to be overwhelming. At the same time, there are also some new opportunities that might allow the post-election government to navigate through the earthquake zone, and come out on the other side with some distinct improvements in the political and diplomatic environment.

Given these formidable constraints, efforts to look forward – whether six months or two years – should begin by recalling that in Jewish tradition, after the destruction of Jerusalem 2,000 years ago, only fools dare to prophesize.

But on the core issues, the risk of appearing foolish is somewhat reduced. The management of relations between Israel and the United States remains the key to almost everything else, and here, the pundits who have predicted continued and unprecedented friction due to the personal differences between Obama and Netanyahu should be taken with many grains of salt. With so much at stake for both nations, personalities are largely irrelevant. There is good evidence that close cooperation in preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons will increase, despite legitimate differences over details.

The necessity of US-Israel cooperation will be reinforced in response to developments from the "Arab winter." Relations

with Egypt and the 1979 peace treaty are the keys to whatever stability exists along Israel's vulnerable borders. Israeli diplomats have carefully steered clear (for the most part) of any involvement in regime change, which brought the Muslim Brotherhood to power. And since Morsi became president, coordination has increased in response to threats from the Sinai and during the November Gaza conflict ("Pillar of Defense").

Maintaining this coordination is very important, but may be complicated by internal instability in Egypt. As developments unfold, Israel will need to emphasize flexibility and be prepared for many scenarios. As long as Morsi, or subsequent Egyptian leaders, recognize the country's dependence on massive American economic aid, and on stability and tacit cooperation with Israel, Israel should be able to manage this relationship successfully. Of immediate importance is the need to coordinate in preventing Hamas from rearming and beginning yet another round of attacks.

TURNING TO Syria, the end of the Assad regime will be a crushing defeat for Iran, and will also greatly weaken Hezbollah's position in Lebanon. However (for Israel, there is always at least one "however"), the aftermath is likely to pose numerous threats to vital interests. Syria might disintegrate into fortified cantons, with the largest led by radical Sunni jihadists. This could lead to increased instability along

the Golan Heights, including terror attacks. At the same time, radical Islamists in Syria will also threaten the monarchies in Jordan and Saudi Arabia, providing the potential for a strengthened tacit coordination with Israel. As in the case of Egypt, flexibility in foreign policy will be the key to successful management of period crises.

Amidst this demanding agenda, immediately after the election and coalition formation, massive pressure will be exerted for resuming the "peace process" (in which the emphasis is often more on process than on peace) with what remains of President Mahmoud Abbas's Palestinian Authority (or pseudo-state). At least in theory, a more pro-active approach would diminish friction with Europe, the US, and much of the world.

Critics will argue that the sources of the conflict have not changed since November 29, 1947, and any Israeli concessions and "risks for peace" will be the springboard for the next effort to "wipe Israel off the map." Instead of Gamal Nasser and Yasser Arafat, these objectives are being pursued by Hamas, the Islamic Jihad, and Hezbollah, backed by Iran. Israelis remember the high costs of failure in the Oslo process and the 2005 unilateral withdrawal from Gaza.

Nevertheless, the pressure from the US, echoed by Europe, is very likely to lead to negotiations focusing on a partial construction freeze, and, if the process continues, transfer of some land and removal of settlements. This will require a govern-

ment with sufficient support necessary to overcome fierce internal opposition.

To justify such moves, Israel will demand that Palestinians really end incitement, and not only pay lip service; halt the political war, including BDS and lawfare campaigns; acknowledge the legitimacy of Israel as the Jewish nation-state and Jerusalem as its capital; and agree that resolution of refugee claims will take place in the negotiated boundaries of any Palestinian state. From the US and Europe, Israel will seek official recognition of the Sharon-Bush parameters, with the "consensus blocs," including those in and near Jerusalem, and secure borders.

In addition, Europe's secret funding processes for NGOs leading the Durban political war, including the "apartheid" and BDS campaigns, is now high on the Israeli government agenda. While a long overdue funding cut-off will not end anti-Israel discrimination in Western Europe, which has a number of causes, the organizations promoting this agenda in Israel will have far less money and therefore less influence.

With so many dimensions, Israel's foreign policy agenda will be taxed to the limit and beyond. Coping with developments on Iran, the complexities of relations with the United States, regional revolutions and counter-revolutions, preventing the rearmament of Hamas, political warfare from Europe, and Palestinian negotiations will result in inevitable crises, each with its own magnitude and complexities. At least, in this sense, some things never change. ■



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