

The Geopolitical Challenges Facing Israel's New Government

By Avi Gil

The new Israeli government will have to navigate a complex geopolitical arena replete with dangers. Compared to the last government, the new government that seems to be taking shape will likely have less ideological flexibility. Therefore, the prime minister may be left with limited maneuvering room for diplomatic initiatives to cope with rising challenges.

The current stormy geopolitical environment will not afford the new Israeli government a grace period. The long list of serious dilemmas, complex and intertwined issues, and decisions that will be made (or delayed), are expected to critically influence Israel's future. The main geopolitical challenges within the global and regional framework are also stormy, riddled with question marks and are very much relevant to Israel's fortitude.

The following report is intended to summarize the developments of the recent months regarding the central geopolitical dilemmas and challenges Israel faces:

- Iran becoming a nuclear threshold state.
- The danger of a military deterioration – on the northern front (Hezbollah and Syria), on the southern front (Hamas and terror groups in the Sinai), in Judea and Samaria and in Jerusalem (individual violence, public protests and organized terror).
- Continuing tensions with the United States.
- The continued erosion in the U.S. view of the need to maintain a regional presence and lead the effort of stabilizing the Middle East.
- The push to change the paradigm for resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from direct negotiations led by the U.S. to a multinational initiative backed by the UN.

- Realizing the opportunity to improve relations with the moderate Sunni countries (given the Iranian threat and those posed by radical terror elements).
- Israel's dwindling international standing and growing BDS and De-legitimization efforts to inflict further damage.
- The strained resilience of the "triangular relationship": Jerusalem – Washington – U.S. Jews.

Given these various challenges, the need to rehabilitate and nurture the relationship with the U.S. takes ultimate priority – as the U.S. is Israel's only true and significant ally. This task will be complex given the issues at hand – Iran's nuclear program and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and its various derivatives – and the substantive differences between Jerusalem and Washington over them. Already inflamed tensions could potentially worsen in the coming months and weigh heavily on the U.S. Jewish community, which may find itself between a "rock and a hard place," further straining the resilience of the "triangular relationship," which has served as a cornerstone of the strength and security of Israel and the Jewish people.

The international System and America's Standing

The "world order" defined by the Cold War, and later, after the fall of the Soviet Union, characterized by a period of American dominance has given way to the current "global disorder" that has yet to coalesce into a stable and functioning international structure. Russian military aggression in Ukraine stokes fears of deteriorating relations between the two powers and makes the cooperation necessary in maintaining global stability difficult. Some commentators even warn that a combination of Moscow's nuclear capabilities with its continuing decline (both economic and demographic) could increase military tensions with Washington.

In parallel to China's rise and the growing geopolitical challenge to Washington from Moscow, America's international standing continues to be confronted. This is especially worrying as the U.S. is the only major power whose friendship and support for Israel are critical. It is also home to almost half the Jewish people, living in an age of unprecedented success. In addition, another development further threatens Israel's basic interests: America's increasing reluctance to become involved in the region. Israel will be affected not just by the qualitative change in its relationship with Washington but also from the shift in America's global standing. Furthermore, the

strengthening of the regional perception that the U.S. – Israel's main ally – is in the midst of a decline and is abandoning the Middle East, serves to further undermine Israel's deterrence power. Developments substantiating the insight that American interest in the Middle East is waning include Washington's pivot to Asia, and forecasts that the United States will soon have no need of imported energy resources.

America's continuing disengagement from Afghanistan (following the withdrawal from Iraq), combined with its avoidance of involvement in Syria even after Assad crossed President Obama's "red line" (the Syrian regime's use of chemical weapons against civilians), signal its desire to cap off the recent period of active military involvement in the region. Many Americans sense that this involvement, which carried a heavy cost – in blood and treasure – held disappointing returns and did not manage to achieve significant goals. The lack of appetite in the U.S. for Middle East involvement is all the more apparent now that the region is in chaos and in dire need of a powerful and stabilizing actor.

However, many commentators reject the "America in decline" theory, and many are convinced that the U.S. cannot completely disengage from the Middle East due to its potential to destabilize international security, instigate a nuclear war, and cause a global economic-energy crisis. (Even if the U.S. is no longer dependent on Middle Eastern oil, instability in the global oil supply could lead to an unstable global economy, of which the U.S. is an integral part and dependent upon.) Obama repeatedly presents as an achievement of his presidency the fact that he ended America's ground wars, which had demanded a U.S. military presence of tens of thousands of American troops in the Middle East. He describes, in an official document, the main guiding principles of his foreign policy as follows: "The question is never whether America should lead, but how we lead... we are stronger when we mobilize collective action... America leads from a position of strength. But, this does not mean we can or should attempt to dictate the trajectory of all unfolding events around the world... As powerful as we are and will remain, our resources and influence are not infinite. And in a complex world, many of the security problems we face do not lend themselves to quick and easy fixes... we must recognize that a smart national security strategy does not rely solely on military power. Indeed, in the long-term, our efforts to work with other countries to counter the ideology and root causes of violent extremism will be more important than our capacity to remove terrorists from the battlefield. The challenges we face require strategic patience and persistence."¹

The Obama administration increasingly describes its approach to the Middle East as a "dual engagement." On one hand, there is a concerted effort to reach a political arrangement with Iran in order to halt progress in its pursuit of a nuclear weapon. On the other hand, there is a similarly concerted effort to bolster the moderate Sunni states, which are worried that the U.S. has yet to determine whether its regional Iran strategy will come at their expense. President Obama's promise to the Iranians that reaching a nuclear arrangement will allow Iran to become a "successful regional power," is stirring fears in Saudi Arabia and the other Sunni states in the region.² They are concerned the United States will strike a "grand bargain" with Iran that will grant it a significant regional role and allow Tehran to proceed with its subversive efforts to achieve regional hegemony.

There are those in the U.S. who are convinced that, in the long term, Iran would be a more preferable ally than Saudi Arabia. Iran has a young, relatively educated population interested in democracy and modernization, and less hostile to the United States. The fact that ISIS is a common enemy further strengthens this conviction. The opposite approach, which refuses to see in Iran an American ally, is strongly articulated by General David H. Petraeus, who claims that the most significant enemy of the U.S. is not ISIS, but rather Iran which is ultimately and at its core hostile to the U.S., and which is part of the problem, not part of the solution to Middle East stability.³

The Iranian Nuclear Program:

Negotiations over Iran's nuclear program resulted in an April 2, 2015 framework agreement, yet to be signed, which actually includes significant gaps in understanding between the sides. Israel has reacted harshly to the framework agreement. Prime Minister Netanyahu defined it as a "bad deal that will threaten Israel's existence. Israel will not be able to reconcile with a deal that will allow a country calling for its destruction to have a nuclear weapon."⁴ Netanyahu even demanded that the final deal include Iranian recognition of Israel's right to exist. The deal's supporters stress that it pushes back Iran's nuclear weapon breakout capability. Accordingly, without such an agreement Iran could achieve a nuclear weapon in two to three months, and the deal will push Iran's timeframe back to at least a year and will allow the U.S. and the international community to know if the deal has been broken through unprecedented inspection and verification procedures, to reinstate sanctions and, if necessary, to use military force.

The framework agreement mainly refers to a 10-15 year period after which most of the limitations on Iran will be lifted. Until then, Iran will need to halt the activity of two thirds of its 20,000 centrifuges. Moreover, it will refrain from enriching above 3.67 percent (the required level for civilian energy needs). The heavy-water reactor at Arak will be replaced so that it cannot produce plutonium. Of the ten tons of enriched uranium currently in Iran's possession, Iran will be allowed to maintain 300 kilograms of low enriched uranium (up to 3.67 percent). The Fordow facility will not enrich uranium, but will rather be converted to a nuclear research facility without enriched material. Additionally, the deal will allow monitoring of all Iranian nuclear facilities, including unannounced ad-hoc inspections at any suspected site. The deal's critics stress that no facility related to Iran's nuclear infrastructure will be shut down, including Fordow, which is hidden deep inside a mountain. Moreover, the deal does not relate to Iran's ballistic missile project (whose sole logical aim is to deliver a nuclear warhead to its destination), and does not relate to Iran's violent regional subversion or its threats to wipe Israel off the map.

In a co-written article, Henry Kissinger and George Shultz determined that the "Negotiations that began 12 years ago as an international effort to prevent an Iranian capability to develop a nuclear arsenal are ending with an agreement that concedes this very capability, albeit short of its full capacity in the first 10 years."⁵ The authors note that the number of centrifuges grew from roughly 100 when the diplomatic process began to roughly 20,000 today.

The Obama administration's goal, at the beginning, was to change the nature of Iran's nuclear program so that it wouldn't be able to create a nuclear weapon. The intention was to leave Iran with infrastructure that allows it to develop its nuclear program for peaceful purposes (research, medicine, etc.), and thereby prevent it from having the infrastructure for a military program. However, the Obama administration drastically changed its earlier defined goal and focuses now on increasing the time it will take Iran to create a nuclear bomb, if it so decides, to at least a year. The U.S. has abandoned its original position and has essentially agreed that Iran will maintain a military nuclear infrastructure, a reality the U.S. unequivocally rejected in the past.

In the understandings publicized, there are some positive elements that can potentially diminish Iran's nuclear capabilities, although there are already disagreements as to the Iranian interpretation of some elements. Moreover, there are still critical issues that have yet to be translated into a detailed operational language.

The devil is indeed in the details here, and there are many details. Especially with respect to the inspection regimen, the "snapping back" of sanctions if violations occur, the issue of future nuclear research, the process in which current sanctions will be gradually lifted as Iran fulfills its part of the agreement, the lack of a credible Iranian explanation as to the possible military dimensions of its program in the past, and more. There is much work to be done before a final agreement is signed (by June 30), and it will be difficult and complicated. Therefore, a signed deal is not a fait accompli. The real test of any deal will be the ability to supervise and enforce it.

Moreover, one cannot ignore the Iranian counter-campaign of speaking out against Israel's nuclear program. Iran's Foreign Minister Zarif noted, at a NPT meeting, that the non-aligned bloc of nations wishes to turn the Middle East into an area free of nuclear weapons, and demands that "Israel, the only country that has not joined the NPT – and has not announced its intent to do so – renounce its nuclear weapons."⁶

The Israeli government was not impressed by President Obama's promises that "there is no formula, there is no option, to prevent Iran from getting a nuclear weapon that will be more effective than the diplomatic initiative and framework that we put forward."⁷ Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon clarified that as far as Israel is concerned, the choice is not between a bad deal and war. "The alternative is a better deal that significantly rolls back Iran's nuclear infrastructure and links the lifting of restrictions on its nuclear program to an end of Iran's aggression in the region, its terrorism across the globe and its threats to annihilate Israel."⁸ And therefore, Israel is seeking to improve the deal before it is finalized: decreasing the number of centrifuges Iran is allowed to maintain; shutting down the underground Fordow facility; ensuring a phased lifting of sanctions as Iran fulfills its part of the deal; revealing the details of the past military dimensions of its nuclear program; removing enriched uranium from Iran; and guaranteeing invasive inspections with no limits on any Iranian site, including military sites.

While Israel works to improve the elements of the forthcoming deal with Iran, it should also prepare for various scenarios: from an unacceptable deal through no signed deal at all, leaving Iran a threshold nuclear state just two to three months away from a nuclear weapon. Israel will have to decide whether to reluctantly accept these scenarios or to take military action, in line with the prime minister's statement that "Israel will not accept an agreement that leaves Iran as a threshold

nuclear state."⁹ Israel also has the option of conducting a dialogue with the U.S. in order to translate America's stated commitment to Israel's security into operational and practical terms. Thus, for example, President Obama's statement that the U.S. is "absolutely committed to making sure that they [Israel] maintain their qualitative military edge, and that they can deter any potential future attacks... [and the U.S. will convey] a very clear message to the Iranians and to the entire region that if anybody messes with Israel, America will be there."¹⁰

The Palestinian Arena:

The collapse of the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations reinforced the Palestinians' propensity to unleash a campaign of political and legal warfare against Israel in the international arena. At the same time, they seek to undercut the "direct negotiations with American mediation" model with an alternative one – "a multinationally initiated solution backed by the UN" model. "There are Palestinians who refer to these steps – including increasing BDS and de-legitimization steps against Israel – as an "international intifada." Abu Mazen is 80 and nearing retirement. He is looking to leave behind a legacy of achievements, and is not seeing results from the reconciliation agreement with Hamas. Hamas is dependent upon the Palestinian Authority to pay its Gaza-based employee salaries, to channel the flow of aid money to rebuild Gaza, and to operate border crossings that allow Gaza's residents freedom of movement in and out. However Abu Mazen does not believe that Hamas intends to disarm itself or commit itself to the principle of "one government – one gun." He is even wary that Hamas will reach an indirect long-term ceasefire agreement with Israel and will gain international legitimacy for its Gaza regime, thus perpetuating the inter-Palestinian split. A victory for Hamas supporters in the student council elections at Bir Zeit University (on April 22, 2014) could signal a change in the political atmosphere in the West Bank, to the detriment of Abu Mazen and Fatah.

The turning point in Palestinian strategy already played out politically toward the end of the last round of failed negotiations with Israel. The Palestinians presented requests to gain membership in 15 UN treaties, and, through Jordan, petitioned the UN Security Council for recognition of a Palestinian State within the 1967 borders, and bring an end to the occupation within two years. However, the Palestinians failed to convince a majority of the nine member states, which spared the U.S. the need to use its veto. (The permanent Security Council members that supported the petition were: Russia,

China, and France. The U.S. objected and the UK abstained.) Following this failure, Abu Mazen signed (December 31, 2014) accession agreements to 22 additional international treaties including the Rome Treaty, which paved the way to joining the International Criminal Court in the Hague. This new reality puts Israel at risk of war crimes charges. Fatou Bensouda, the chief prosecutor for the ICC, approved an open-ended preliminary investigation of alleged crimes committed within the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has already been initiated, however it is not defined as an official investigation.¹¹ That said, the assessment of various legal experts is that the court will not rush to involve itself in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, so investigating Palestinian complaints could take many years. Furthermore, the PLO Executive Committee authorized Abu Mazen to implement the decision to cease security cooperation with Israel (March 19, 2015). Abu Mazen has yet to decide whether or not to implement this decision, but he continuously threatens to do so.

Given the stalled political process, France has increased its involvement aimed at relaunching the peace process. The French initiative is based on achieving a Security Council resolution that defines the principles of a final deal, especially borders based on the 1967 lines with agreed adjustments. French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius explained that the initiative is guided by the need to change the way in which negotiations are conducted, implying it should be led by the international community. Fabius essentially came out against American exclusivity in managing the peace process thus far. "We want to avoid the pitfall of endless negotiations... Clear parameters for resolving the conflict adopted by the international community in advance will provide the basis for future negotiations. And we must set a timetable..."¹² The French are interested in convening an international conference to jump-start the negotiations that would follow the Security Council's resolution. In the context of Israel's recent elections, the French were persuaded to hold off until a new government is formed and can reexamine Israeli positions on the Palestinian matter.

The Americans have made it clear that they have yet to rule out the possibility of supporting the French move, but continue to press the French to postpone their move until after the nuclear agreement with Iran is signed (June 30). The White House suspects that opening an additional front vis-à-vis the Israeli government would make gaining congressional approval for such a deal more difficult. Fabius referred to the timing of the tabling of the French proposal, noting, "We think that soon, not within days but soon ... we need to agree on timing with John Kerry. There

are other issues to deal with. One negotiation should not hurt another, but at the same time, there's always a lot going on, so the risk is we never find the time."¹³

Netanyahu's election day remarks (March 16, 2015), that a Palestinian State would not be established under his watch, gave the French plan a second wind.¹⁴ Netanyahu's attempt to walk back his reversal of the policy stated in his Bar-Ilan speech (2009) did not succeed in winning back the international community's trust in his commitment to the principle of a two-state solution. Netanyahu told NBC in an interview: "I haven't changed my policy, what has changed is the reality, I want a sustainable, peaceful two-state solution, but for that, circumstances have to change."¹⁵

The White House, however, did not accept Netanyahu's explanation, and administration spokespeople made it clear that the U.S. would reassess its options in the wake of his new positions on the Palestinian issue. White House spokesman Josh Ernest, clarified that the U.S. government "has doubts" about Netanyahu's reassurance to the American media that he supports a two-state solution, "There now is doubt about whether or not this is what the true view is of Prime Minister Netanyahu and the government that he will form."¹⁶ President Obama himself said (March 25, 2015): "We believe that two states is the best path forward for Israel's security. ... and Prime Minister Netanyahu has a different approach.... We can't pretend that there's a possibility of something that's not there. And we can't continue to premise our public diplomacy based on something that everybody knows is not going to happen.... The question is, do you create a process and a framework that gives the Palestinians hope, the possibility, that down the road they have a secure state of their own ... it's hard to envision how that happens based on the Prime Minister's statements."¹⁷

The near future will reveal whether the new Israeli government has a real interest and the political wherewithal to present a diplomatic plan that will gain the trust of the international community. Similarly, it is important to note that in his speech to the UN General Assembly (September 29, 2014), Netanyahu announced his willingness to make "a historic compromise" and called on Arab countries to "update the old template for peace.... Israel is prepared to work with Arab partners and the international community. Together, we can strengthen regional security... I believe the partnership between us can also help facilitate peace between Israel and the Palestinians. A broader rapprochement between Israel and the Arab world may help facilitate an Israeli-Palestinian peace.... And therefore, to achieve that peace, we must look not only to Jerusalem and Ramallah but also to Cairo, to Amman, Abu

Dhabi, Riyadh and elsewhere."¹⁸ However, the option to craft a regional political initiative that would essentially "skip" over the Palestinian issue is unacceptable to the Arab world. Egyptian President Al-Sisi described the Arab position (October 12, 2014) when he called on Israel to adopt the Arab Peace Initiative, which includes the establishment of a Palestinian state based on the 1967 borders with agreed adjustments and a capital in east Jerusalem, as its focus.

The diplomatic deadlock is encouraging various parliaments around the world to pass decisions calling on their governments to recognize a Palestinian state (in Europe, such decisions were made in Belgium, the UK, Denmark, France, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Portugal, Spain and in the EU parliament). Although these decisions amount to little more than a recommendation, they reflect the political trends in Europe. Until now, the Palestinians have gained recognition in 135 countries (80 percent of the world's population). However, of the 50 countries that have yet to recognize the country of Palestine are three of the five permanent Security Council members (the U.S., UK and France), and a number of other important countries such as Germany, Canada, Australia, Italy, and Japan.

If the diplomatic deadlock continues, the balance of international support for a Palestinian state could shift, and we could see an increase in other anti-Israel measures. These could also come as a result of continued settlement construction. In this regard, 16 EU foreign ministers sent letters (April 16, 2014) to EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini calling for labels on goods produced in the settlements and sold in European retail outlets. The ministers wrote that: "the continued expansion of illegal settlements on occupied Palestinian territory and other territory occupied by Israel since 1967 threatens the chances to reach a final and just peace agreement."¹⁹

The Regional Framework and the Map of Security Threats:

The events of recent months show just how turbulent, violent, and challenging the Middle East can be for Israel. Iran is on the verge of becoming a threshold nuclear state, is increasing fears among the Sunni countries, and is heightening the incentive for a possible nuclear arms race in the region. Tehran's appetite to enhance its influence in the region is growing and its leaders are flaunting their control of four Arab capitals: Beirut, Baghdad, Damascus, and now Sana'a. ISIS continues to control vast swaths of territory in Iraq and Syria, and is contributing to the collapse of the nation-state system in the

region. It is also fomenting the "failed state" phenomenon, when governments cannot regain control over their sovereign territory from radical anti-state actors (such as in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Libya, and Yemen). Jihadist organizations throughout the Middle East are declaring their allegiance to ISIS and committing brutal acts of murder and violence, destroying economies and infrastructure, and rendering recognized international borders irrelevant.

The civil war in Syria continues to rage as the death toll nears a quarter of a million. Four million people have lost their homes, many of them have fled Syria and others are displaced persons in their own state. ISIS controls roughly half of Syria, while the balance of forces between Assad and the rebel groups continues to shift. Earlier this year it seemed that Assad had the upper hand, which brought about a shift in the tone of the U.S. and the West regarding his regime. Considering the anarchy, which had been only expected to increase in his absence, Assad was increasingly seen by many as a part of the solution, the best of the bad options at hand. However, currently, due to a number of losses at the hands of rebel groups, and the loss of the city of Idlib and other territories, commentators are once again discussing Assad's eroded power, and some are forecasting his coming fall.

In parallel, Washington sees ISIS as the central threat, and American warplanes are hitting it from the air as Washington supplies intelligence to forces fighting it on the ground. (This essentially creates a reality of indirect cooperation between the U.S. and Iran, which sees the murderous Sunni organization as a dangerous enemy and is thus helping the Iraqi government in its fight against it.)

The Shi'i Houthi militias fighting in Yemen with Iranian support succeeded in toppling the Sunni government in Sana'a. This development created a direct threat to Saudi Arabia, which is attempting – with help from additional Arab armies and without an American military presence on the ground – to push back the Houthi militias. The possibility that the Houthis' military success could endanger maritime freedom through the Straits of Bab al-Mandab could threaten the regional and global economy. An open question is whether the change of regime in Riyadh following the death of King Abdullah (January 23, 2015) and the subsequent crowning of King Salman signals a shift in Saudi Arabia's long term character, and its willingness to act more aggressively against regional challenges: Iran, jihadist terror, the Houthi rebels in Yemen, and more. A series of adjustments announced by King Salman to various senior posts in the kingdom as well as to the chain of succession (April 29, 2015)

might just imply such a shift. The joint Arab military force that was formed (March 29, 2015), comprising forces from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Sudan, and Jordan, may indicate the beginning of long process in which Arab countries gradually cease counting on the U.S. as the "regional policeman."

However, Israel should have some apprehension over the formation of a joint Arab military force that gains experience in coordinated complex military action. Thus, while this force is currently composed of regional moderates, and while it is focused on fighting regional extremists, such a force could theoretically turn on Israel in the future. If this weren't enough for concern, it should be noted that in the event the U.S. signs a nuclear deal with Iran, it would likely compensate the Sunni Arab camp with further advanced arms sales.

Egypt and Jordan continue to cope with difficult security challenges of their own. The terror threat combined with the inherent threat of Iran's growing presence creates an infrastructure that invites increased cooperation with Israel. Egypt, which is fighting terror groups in Sinai, sees Hamas as an enemy that aids the terrorists in their fight against it. President al-Sisi has not hesitated to destroy vast built-up areas in order to create a security buffer on the Egypt-Gaza border, while fighting a bitter battle to destroy the smuggling and terror tunnels that run underneath. In early April of 2015, the U.S. cancelled its freeze on arms shipments to Egypt. The American strategic preference of promoting democracy and human rights in Egypt was pushed aside by the urgency of helping Egypt maintain stability, preventing alternative arms deals with Moscow, ensuring maritime freedom in the Suez Canal, and maintaining the peace treaty with Israel. Jordan as well, perhaps America's closest ally in the fight against ISIS, is in dire need and receives American support (Jordan absorbed roughly a million Syrian refugees). The video showing ISIS burning a Jordanian air-force pilot alive (February 3, 2015) increased the internal pressure in Jordan to take revenge and bolstered Jordan's centrality in the fight against ISIS.

The harsh upheavals in the Middle East appear to demand the intervention of a stabilizing power. However the U.S. is not interested in deepening its involvement in the region, is not interested in sending (back) its soldiers to shed their blood in the Middle East, and prefers to "lead from behind." Moreover, it doesn't seem that the U.S. and Russia can, at this point, cooperate effectively in order to jointly bring about regional stability. Putin's aggressive moves in Ukraine and the Western sanctions

against Russia and Putin's inner circle, do not facilitate the necessary infrastructure for cooperation, but rather enhance competition and conflict. Therefore, Russia's announcement (April 13, 2015) that it will thaw the long frozen deal to sell the advanced S-300 surface to air missile system to Iran exemplifies of the current gloomy state of affairs.

Direct Threats to Israel

One significant bright spot that stands out against the barrage of challenges is that Israel does not currently face any significant conventional military threats from sovereign states as it did in the past. The security threats to Israel today primarily emanate from terror organizations that operate from an ambiguously defined political entity (Hamas), or from within failed states (Lebanon and Syria). These enemies are asymmetric in strategy and increasingly hybrid in nature. They choose to operate from within densely populated civilian areas with murky political sovereignty. Knowing they cannot defeat Israel militarily, they opt for a three-pronged approach: forcing Israel into complex and often urban territory where much of Israel's conventional advantage is neutralized; fighting from within civilian areas that force Israel to restrain its firepower and when fire is used, to harm enemy civilians; and manipulate the international media once civilians are hurt to damage Israel's international standing and increase international pressure on her. So while the threat to Israel's national security from a military perspective is diminished, the challenges from asymmetric warfare are ultimately more complex, and not going to disappear any time soon.

Hamas – Operation “Protective Edge” ended (26 August, 2014) without a decisive defeat of Hamas. Israel was able to cause significant damage to the organization's military infrastructure, destroyed many of the terror tunnels, severely damaged civilian infrastructure, and was able to intercept with the Iron Dome ballistic missile defense system most of the rockets aimed at Israel's civilian population centers. However, Hamas was able to withstand 50 days of fighting while continuing the rocket fire on Israel's cities, including Tel Aviv, throughout the entire period. Hamas even succeeded in shutting down Ben Gurion Airport to foreign airlines for a day.

The promises of reconstruction have yet to be translated into reality in Gaza. Its residents are becoming frustrated and many of them describe themselves as having nothing to lose. Hamas' relations with Turkey and Qatar are not making up for the loss of support of other countries Hamas had been accustomed to in the past. Hamas is attempting

to resurrect its relationship with Iran and even with Hezbollah, to break the current isolation forced upon it after its leadership was expelled from Syria (due to its support for the Sunni rebels), and the conflict with the Al-Sisi regime in Egypt (after overthrowing the Muslim Brotherhood – Hamas’ parent organization). Egyptian pressure on Hamas, combined with the delays in Gaza’s reconstruction, increase the chances of another outbreak of Palestinian violence against Israel from Gaza. Indeed, Hamas is working to rebuild its tunnel system, is conducting rocket fire tests, and is generally preparing for its next conflict with Israel. (The threats on the Southern front are not only limited to the Gaza Strip. Terror elements in Sinai who have already committed terrorist attacks against Israel could return to attempting to strike Israeli targets.)

At the same time, the Arab press is reporting on disputes between the military and political wings of Hamas in regards to the possibility of an indirect long-term ceasefire with Israel. In exchange, Israel is expected to refrain from steps that would complicate economic reconstruction in Gaza and ease the naval blockade currently in place. The military wing prefers developing its relations with Iran, and may try to prevent such a deal by executing an attack on Israeli targets.

Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria – The continuation of the political paralysis could lead to a deterioration in the security situation in Judea and Samaria, and even to a third intifada, not necessarily identical to the previous ones. Experts assess that Israel could end up facing a wide-spread civil disobedience campaign combined with popular violence not necessarily coordinated by a central actor. A warning sign for this mode of action could be seen in the violent events in Jerusalem that erupted in June 2014, following the search effort and arrests in connection with the kidnap and murder of three Jewish teens by Hamas terrorists. The chaos increased significantly after the immolation of a Palestinian teen by Jewish extremists (July 2, 2014). The sharp rise in terror attacks in Judea and Samaria and in Jerusalem during Operation Protective Edge teaches us about the potential of outbreaks of violence in these areas. The massacre of four Jewish worshippers and a Druze policeman who came to their rescue by Palestinian terrorists (18 November 2014) is a worrying indication as well. Various initiatives by right-wing activists to change the status quo on the Temple Mount have also added to the already tense atmosphere (and also upset the Jordanians).

Hezbollah – Hezbollah’s support of Assad hurts the organization’s standing in the Arab world, and especially in Lebanon. A few thousand Hezbollah fighters are operating in Syria alongside Syrian troops. Hezbollah conceals the number of fighters

it's lost in Syria, but the number is most likely in the hundreds. This reality undermines Hezbollah's claim that its military capabilities are meant to protect Lebanon from Israel. Hezbollah fighting on behalf of the despised Assad is seen as taking the Shia side against the Sunnis and pulls the rug from under the feet of the image Nasrallah has been working to build for so many years, that Hezbollah works in the interest of all of Lebanon's citizens. Hezbollah's involvement in Syria has turned Lebanon into a theatre of battle in Syria's civil war and has led to domestic bloodshed and instability. Hezbollah, which has remained deterred from opening a front with Israel, has been restrained from responding to occasional attacks connected to Israel meant to take out strategic arms transfers from Syria and on storage sites of advanced missiles that are smuggled from Iran through Syria and on to Hezbollah in Lebanon.

A significant and severe event happened on January 18, 2015 when Israel struck a convoy on the Syrian side of the Golan Heights. Imad Mughniya's son, Jihad, was among the dead as was an Iranian general. In response, Hezbollah fired anti-tank missiles at an IDF vehicle patrolling the border with Lebanon, killing two soldiers. The incident exposed a joint Iranian-Hezbollah effort to reclaim territory Assad lost to the rebels in 2014 in southern Syria and in the Syrian Golan Heights, and expand the possible confrontation ground with Israel. Hezbollah's efforts to continue arming with advanced Iranian and Syrian weapons, and Israel's dogged efforts to thwart them, could lead to an escalation, revenge terrorist attacks against Israeli or Jewish targets abroad, or even another war. Hezbollah could even decide that only a violent confrontation with Israel could return its lost support in Lebanon and the Arab world.

Moreover, the fact that Assad has recently lost control over a number of towns could signal to Hezbollah that it will soon lose its critical logistical bridge to Iranian arms. Fears such as these could lead Hezbollah to incite an escalation with Israel. Hezbollah has over 100,000 rockets, many of which can reach deep inside Israel and are far more accurate than those Hamas fired during Protective Edge. Hezbollah chief Nasrallah has even threatened that in the next conflict with Israel, his fighters will fight on Israeli territory, and some are even concerned that Hezbollah may be working on constructing its own terror tunnels from Lebanon to the Galilee. Rational assessments of Hezbollah's situation indicate that the organization has no interest in opening an additional front with Israel. Its forces are fully engaged in Syria, where their losses of life and morale are heavy. However, one cannot disregard the possibility of an unintentional escalation with Israel that may lead to another war, contrary to the "rational calculations" of both sides.

The Relationship with the U.S. and the Resilience of the Jerusalem – Washington – U.S. Jewry Triangle:

Recent months uncovered some silver linings in Israel's standing in the international system. These were expressed, for example, in the IAEA General Assembly's decision to delay the Arab League initiative to censure Israel and try to place its nuclear sites under international supervision.²⁰ Also the election of Narendra Modi as Prime Minister of India, who is known for his friendship to Israel, opens new opportunities to increase Israeli cooperation with an India that is becoming more and more central to the global economy.

The manner in which China is focusing its investment efforts in Israel is particularly impressive. From Beijing's perspective, Israel is a strategic "trade junction" for China's economy leading to Europe. In parallel to the large trade deals, such as purchasing control over Makhteshim or Tnuva, China stands, in the coming year to open and operate large transportation projects in Israel estimated in the tens of billions of shekels.²¹ Israel's attraction of foreign investors and the high regard for Israel's high-tech sector, point out the significant achievements and the potential promised in the Israeli market. However, the difficult diplomatic situation could serve as an obstacle for Israel's economy that could become an increasingly common target for BDS and de-legitimization efforts.

Israel is often criticized and its international status is eroding due to a number of factors, including the violent conflicts with the Palestinians, the lack of any progress toward a peace settlement with the Palestinians, construction beyond the 1967 borders, and claims of abuse of the democratic rights of Israel's Arabs. The tensions in the special relationship between Israel and the U.S. also work to diminish Israel's status as they signal a break in support for Israel from the world's strongest power.

Operation Protective Edge brought about a crisis in Israel's relations with a number of South American countries who recalled their ambassadors in protest (Brazil, Ecuador, Chile, Peru). Other countries enacted a freeze, limitation, or reassessment of arms sales to Israel (Spain, the UK and even the U.S.).²² As far as settlements, recent months were chock-full of international reactions in response to building or Israeli announcements of its intention to build in Judea and Samaria. These reactions are not just rhetoric either. Thus, 17 countries from the EU issued warnings to their citizens regarding investing or transacting with businesses based in the settlements or entities connected to them.²³

Often times Israel responds to criticism of its behavior with harsh language that intensifies and exacerbates the diplomatic discourse and highlights Israel's isolation. Thus, after Sweden gave notice that it intended to recognize an independent Palestinian state, the Swedish ambassador was summoned for a "rebuke" in the foreign ministry²⁴, and Foreign Minister Lieberman responded that, "The Swedish government should understand that Middle East relations are more complex than a piece of self-assembled IKEA furniture, and the matter should be handled with responsibility and sensitivity."²⁵ Prime Minister Netanyahu also criticized Europe's relationship with Israel in harsh terms: "We saw today shocking examples of European hypocrisy. It seems as if there are too many people in Europe, the land in which six million Jews were slaughtered, who haven't learned a thing. But we in Israel learned the lesson. We will continue to defend our people and our state against the forces of terror, tyranny and hypocrisy."²⁶ Even the carefully groomed relationship with Russia has taken a hit of late in the wake of the framework agreement with Iran, and Putin's unfreezing the S-300 missile deal with Iran. In response, Israel lowered the rank of its attending representative at a ceremony to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the USSR's victory over the Nazis (May 9, 2015).

Recent months have also been filled with incidents that show the tension and strained relations between Israel and the U.S. – in policy and strategy matters as well as the personal relations between Obama and Netanyahu. Israel and the U.S. disagree on a few key issues. Chief among them are the Iranian nuclear program and the Palestinian issue, specifically construction beyond the 1967 borders. The White House's discomfort with Israeli policy has prompted sharp reactions from all levels in the White House. When the White House refers to construction plans on Givat Hamatos which is beyond the "Green Line" in Jerusalem, it noted: "This development will only draw condemnation from the international community, distance Israel from even its closest allies; poison the atmosphere not only with the Palestinians, but also with the very Arab governments with which Prime Minister Netanyahu said he wanted to build relations."²⁷

Columnist Jeffrey Goldberg famously quoted senior administration officials who called Netanyahu a "chickenshit" and a "coward." Goldberg continued, quoting the official who remarked that: "The good thing about Netanyahu is that he's scared to launch wars," the official said, "The bad thing about him is that he won't do anything to reach an accommodation with the Palestinians or with the Sunni Arab states. The only thing he's interested in is protecting himself from political defeat. He's not

[Yitzhak] Rabin, he's not [Ariel] Sharon, he's certainly no [Menachem] Begin. He's got no guts."²⁸ Netanyahu, from his point of view, harshly rejected the criticisms regarding construction in Jerusalem and called them "statements disconnected from reality."²⁹

The American criticism touches also on deeply shared values that are at the base of the special relationship between the two countries. The U.S. State Department, when discussing the proposed "Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people" law stated: "Israel is a Jewish and democratic state and all its citizens should enjoy equal rights. We expect Israel to stick to its democratic principles."³⁰ The administration also responded sharply to Netanyahu's warnings to voters on election day that Israel's Arab citizens "are going to the voting booths in droves." The White House spokesman said in response, "The United States and this administration is deeply concerned by divisive rhetoric that seeks to marginalize Arab-Israeli citizens. It undermines the values and democratic ideals that have been important to our democracy and an important part of what binds the United States and Israel together."³¹ President Obama himself stated that the unequal treatment toward Israel's Arab community "starts to erode the meaning of democracy in the country."³² One should not take lightly a situation in which disputes between the U.S. and Israel are diverted to a critique of the shared values between the two countries. The "conservative" characteristics of the new government that seems to be taking shape in Israel appear to American liberals as contrary to the very values they hold dear to their hearts.

As the U.S.-led talks with Iran near conclusion, tensions between Washington and Jerusalem are increasing. Netanyahu's appearance before Congress (March 3, 2015) was met with rage in the White House, which accused Netanyahu of meddling in domestic American politics in order to improve his reelection chances in Israel. The president and vice president refrained from meeting with the Israeli prime minister, claiming that Netanyahu was destroying a crucial asset in the relationship between the two countries – Israel's bipartisan support in Washington. The day before Netanyahu's speech, National Security Advisor Susan Rice said at the annual AIPAC policy conference that it was "destructive of the fabric of the relationship."³³

As far as the administration's attitude toward the Israeli prime minister, what stands out is the lack of trust. When Netanyahu clarifies that he remains loyal to the principle of a two-state solution (despite that on the eve of Israel's elections he stated that there won't be a Palestinian state on his watch), White House Chief of Staff Denis McDonough remarked at a J-Street conference that the White House

refuses to accept Netanyahu's clarification: "We cannot simply pretend that those comments were never made, or that they don't raise questions about the prime minister's commitment to achieving peace through direct negotiations,"³⁴ President Obama himself even responded, saying: "We take him at his word when he said that it wouldn't happen during his prime ministership and so, that's why we've got to evaluate what other options are available ... we are going to continue to insist that from our point of view, the status quo is unsustainable, and that while taking into complete account Israel's security, we can't just in perpetuity maintain the status quo, expand settlements, that's not a recipe for stability in the region."³⁵

When American Jewish leaders asked President Obama if he would soon invite the newly re-elected Israeli prime minister to Washington, he responded that at this time, he would suffice with a phone call.³⁶ At the same time, it was reported that since December 2013, Israeli Ambassador to Washington Ron Dermer has met only once with the White House.³⁷ This difficult reality was further expressed in an uncharacteristic Israeli Foreign Ministry document leaked to the press that warned that Israel will pay a heavy price on a number of diplomatic and security issues due to the "harsh, continuing and public crisis" in relations with the U.S. The document pointed to a clear connection between the crisis in the relationship and the deteriorated nature of the dialogue and Israel's ability to advance, with U.S. help, its critical security interests.³⁸

It should be noted that the White House has made every effort to convince Israel and its supporters of U.S. commitment to Israel's security. This effort is aimed, of course, at persuading those opposed to the Iran deal that Israel will not be harmed and will always have the protection of the United States. Thus, for example, the White House publicized a document that details steps taken by President Obama in favor of Israeli security and economic resilience, "in ways that are unprecedented."³⁹ From aid money to the Iron Dome system, through U.S. assistance in various international fora ("On five occasions last year, the U.S. cast the only "against" vote on unfair anti-Israel measures in the UN's Human Rights Council."⁴⁰) However, one cannot ignore the fact that the administration delayed a helicopter-based missile shipment and other urgent military equipment during Protective Edge as it was uncomfortable with the continued fighting in Gaza.

The murky relations, continued political deadlock, and settlement construction could lead the U.S. to take concrete steps against Israel. (There are even those who

claim that the U.S. is taking a stronger stance on the Palestinian issue, especially settlement construction, in order to push Israel into a defensive position and thus complicate Israeli efforts to thwart the Iran deal.) The U.S. could withhold its UN Security Council veto power when the French proposal comes to a vote, especially if the wording seems fair to the U.S. and in line with its principles regarding the outlines of a final status deal between Israel and the Palestinians. The U.S. can also withhold its veto on decisions regarding settlements (as it has in the past), and in a more radical instance could even level sanctions similar to the 1991 freezing of loan guarantees under President Bush Sr. and Secretary of State Baker. The U.S. could also be less enthusiastic when it's called upon to help Israel in international fora, where Israel is isolated, and could stand less firmly by Israel in various international struggles: against de-legitimization, boycotts, and more. Thus, Under-Secretary of State Wendy Sherman warned: "If the new Israeli government is seen to be stepping back from its commitment to a two-state solution, (it) will make our job in the international arena much tougher... it will be harder for us to prevent internationalizing the conflict."⁴¹

The way things are playing out currently could lead the new Israeli government to treat President Obama's remaining time in office as a period of containment with the hope that the policies of the next president will be vastly different. Some will claim that the U.S. elections are so critical to the Israeli government that it should take a chance and support the election campaign of a president whose pro-Israel policies are not in question. The "temptation" to do so comes up, among others, in the statements of Republican presidential candidates. Thus, for example, Jeb Bush harshly criticized the Obama administration's policies on Israel, when he said: "Then Obama threatened to downgrade the U.S.-Israel relationship and permit a series of anti-Israel resolutions to pass the United Nations Security Council without firm American opposition.... This is no way to treat an ally."⁴²

Finally, one cannot ignore the effect tensions between Jerusalem and Washington have on the U.S. Jewish community. While most U.S. Jews are generally ardent Democrats, many are increasingly displeased with the way the Obama administration handles its Israeli portfolio. According to recent polls, Jewish support for the president dropped in 2015 (according to Gallup, from 61 to 50 percent).⁴³

Israel's centrality in the highly charged American foreign policy debates is alarming to many Jews. Some of them see a risk that Israel will be blamed for trying to alter American policies "against its interests" (as Israel was blamed in the run-up to the

Iraq war in 2002). They also see a risk of Israel becoming a partisan cause in a way that could force them to have to choose between their support for Israel and basically every other issue near and dear to the hearts. This is not to say that levels of support for Israel among American Jewry are not high – they are. But on issues of dispute between Washington and Jerusalem, such as Iran's nuclear program or the peace process with the Palestinians, the conversation about Israel often becomes toxic and the mainstream leadership and communities increasingly prefer to leave these issues off their agenda.

Summary

The new Israeli government will have to navigate a complex geopolitical arena replete with dangers. Compared to the last government, the new government that seems to be taking shape will likely have less ideological flexibility. Therefore, the prime minister may be left with limited maneuvering room for diplomatic initiatives to cope with rising challenges. Decisions that will be made will have a crucial effect on the future of the state and the resilience of the Jewish people. Israel must decide how it will handle the Iranian nuclear challenge, prepare for actual threats that could stem from a military escalation with Hezbollah or Hamas, and should also plan for a possible outbreak of violence in Judea and Samaria and Jerusalem.

In light of all this, the need to rebuild the damaged relationship with the U.S. – Israel's sole and significant ally – takes priority. This task will not be simple as the main issues at center stage – Iran's nuclear program and the various aspects of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – have caused substantive disagreements between Jerusalem and Washington. Without decision makers' careful attention the coming months hold the potential for an increase in tensions between the countries that could weigh heavily on the U.S. Jewish community and erode the resilience of the “Triangular Relationship” that has served as the cornerstone of Israel and the Jewish people's strength.

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