

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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Middle East Confusion: Israel's Dilemma

The Middle East today is a cauldron of terror, war and utter confusion. The nation states created after World Wars I and II are fragmenting and some have actually ceased to exist (e.g., Syria and Iraq). And in the middle of this cauldron sits Israel—a prosperous democracy, an ally of the United States and a beacon of light in a world of darkness. In this *Perspective*, I seek to summarize the increasing vulnerability of Israel in the midst of this confusion. In some ways, this is potentially the most difficult time for Israel since 1967, when Israel was surrounded and fighting for its very existence.

- First of all is Israel's relationship with the Palestinians. With everything else occurring in the Middle East, Israeli-Palestinian issues have faded into insignificance. The Palestinians are divided. The nationalist Fatah movement, which governs the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, has utterly failed to bring peace and is infected with rampant corruption. Hamas, the terrorist organization governing the Gaza Strip (since 2007), has utterly failed to help its people and has absolutely nothing to show for its three wars with Israel. Hamas is suppressed by Fatah on the West Bank and has little support in other parts of the Middle East. Furthermore, Mahmoud Abbas is 80 years old and there is no viable successor to him as the Palestinian leader. Fatah and Hamas both have diminished clout right now because many Sunni Arab states regard Israel as an unspoken ally against Iran, which remains the primary Middle Eastern supporter of Syria's Assad and the terrorist organization Hezbollah. Thus, as of this writing, a no-peace-no-war paradigm characterizes the Israeli-Palestinian situation. The regular outbreaks of violence (e.g., the multiple stabbings of the last several years) will no doubt continue in Israel, but not threaten its very existence. [Much of this violence has been provoked by the unsubstantiated Palestinian claim that Israel intends to permit Jewish prayer on Temple Mount in Jerusalem.] But there is considerable evidence that Hamas is rebuilding its network of terror tunnels under the Gaza border. Meanwhile, Hezbollah has more than 100,000 rockets, all ready for the next war with Israel.
- Second, it is quite frankly amazing that ISIS has not yet directly attacked Israel. But the government of Israel is concerned that as ISIS is pushed back in Syria and Iraq, its leaders may decide to attack Israel from its bases in southern Syria. [Its major southern base in Syria is only 50 miles from Israel.] ISIS is also quite active in the Sinai Peninsula on Israel's southern border. Indeed, it calls the area in the Sinai that it controls, the "Sinai province." Although it is currently involved in battling Egypt's security forces in this area, it does remain a potential threat to Israel's southern border. Finally, Israel is concerned that ISIS is radicalizing young Palestinians in the West Bank and to some extent in Gaza to fight against Israel.

- Third, Israel faces the ongoing absurdity of the BDS movement—the efforts by western governments and individual citizens to “boycott, divest and sanction” Israel. At the end of 2015, the European Union (EU) adopted rules that wine coming from Israel, some of which is produced in the West Bank, must be labeled “Product of the West Bank (Israeli settlement).” This effort to boycott or sanction Israel for its policies in the West Bank has been growing in the EU, which exports heavily from Israel. This labeling rule extends not only to wine but also to fresh fruit, vegetables, honey, olive oil, eggs, poultry, organic products and cosmetics coming from Israeli-owned businesses and farms outside the original borders of Israel. There are about 1,000 Israeli companies operating in more than a dozen industrial zones in West Bank settlements and roughly 23,000 acres of Jewish farms. The Golan Heights has many wineries, with a reputation for producing some of the world’s best wines. A final example of the BDS movement is recent events at Vassar College in upstate New York. For example, in 2014, students boycotted a course in the International Studies Program because it involved a trip to Israel. During the fall of 2015, attempts were made to boycott Sabra hummus, a popular food that is produced by a partly owned Israeli company. On 3 February 2016, Jasbir Puar, Rutgers associate professor of women’s and gender studies, gave an address at Vassar in which she exhorted Vassar students to support a boycott of Israel as a part of “armed resistance.” She passed on lies that Israel had “mined for organs for scientific research” from dead Palestinians and accused Israelis of attempting to give Palestinians the “bare minimum for survival” as part of a medical “experiment.” She spoke of Jews deliberately starving Palestinians, “stunting” and “maiming” a population. That such a lecture could occur at a prestigious institution illustrates the ridiculous level to which the BDS movement has sunk!
- Fourth, the Middle East of today is a bewildering new world for Israel. Yossi Klein Halevi, of the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, writes that the early 1990s seemed so promising for Israel: An American led coalition had defeated Saddam Hussein in his attempt to annex Kuwait; the Soviet Union, which had been the bedrock supporters of the radical Palestinian cause and other Arab enemies of Israel had vanished; and Israel’s enemies seemed ready to negotiate a final peace with Israel. But today the Palestinian government continues to denigrate Israel and its right to exist as a nation. Palestinian media daily send the message that the Jews are “not a real people, they have no roots in this land and their entire history is a lie, from biblical Israel to the Holocaust.” Hence, there is now complete disillusionment within Israel over the peace process. Although conceptually the people of Israel support a two-state solution, they understand that a Palestinian state would be an existential threat: Such a state would place Tel Aviv and the Ben Gurion airport in easy range of Palestinian rockets. Such a state could also result in a Hamas takeover of the West Bank and Jerusalem. In short, the status quo is the least terrifying option for Israel. Yet, Israel’s changing relationship with Middle Eastern nation states that are its historic enemies heightens the confusion for Israel. Consider these facts:

 1. Saudi Arabia has acknowledged a security dialogue with Israel and Israeli officials are now being interviewed by Saudi Arabian media.

2. Israel and Egypt are routinely engaged in security cooperation in the Sinai Peninsula and the area of Gaza, where Hamas rules.
 3. Turkey is negotiating a rapprochement with Israel because of the Syrian Civil War, and Greece, once passionately pro-Palestinian, has become one of Israel's leading EU allies.
- Finally, within the nation state of Israel itself, there is confusion. The original leaders of Israel in the early twentieth century proudly called themselves Zionists. They planned the original settlements and revived the language of Hebrew as a unifying point for the world's Jews whom they wanted to attract to the Land. This effort culminated in the 1948 announcement (sanctioned by the UN) of the state of Israel. These founders were largely secular (e.g., David Ben-Gurion) and saw Israel as a "light among nations" and, like all other states, a part of the international community—"outward looking and socially just." But the new "Zionists" of today are quite different. They are religious Zionists. They believe that they are building a religious Israel, not a European one or a cosmopolitan one. These Zionists are pushing for expanded settlements on the West Bank. Steven Erlanger, London bureau chief for the *New York Times*, writes that religious Zionists "have taken more leadership positions in the Army, have the most vital youth movements and are having a major impact in politics." Benjamin Netanyahu and his political movement are secular Zionists, while the religious Zionist movement is growing. This means that political infighting will continue to characterize Israel internally as the Jewish people struggle to define their future: Will Israel remain largely secular in its official outlook and international presence or will it become increasingly religious and Orthodox in its expression of religious Judaism? This disagreement about Israel's future is a profound issue within Israel and heightens the confusion now characterizing the Middle East.

See *The Economist* ("The World in 2016"), p. 76 and regular issues (23 January 2016), p. 40 and (14 November 2015), p. 49; Jodi Rudoren and Sewell Chan in the *New York Times* (15 November 2015); Mark G. Yudof and Ken Waltzer in the *Wall Street Journal* (18 February 2016); Yossi Klein Halevi in the *Wall Street Journal* (27-28 February 2016); and Steven Erlanger in the *New York Times* (7 February 2016).