

# MERIA

## Israel Strategy

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The Middle East, in contrast to other world regions where the USSR's demise drastically improved the international situation, remains a "zone of turmoil" characterized by continuous security challenges. (1) In the Middle East the use of force is still widely considered a policy option, and even receives popular support as such. Thus, while the Arab-Israeli peace process clearly indicates that Arab enmity toward the Jewish state is weakening, it is by no means certain that--whatever the degree of success on this specific front--the result will be a long-term regional detente.

Therefore, Israel will have to continue to devote considerable attention and resources to its national security. The main variables affecting this situation include the regional strategic environment; Israel's ability to deter and/or overcome emerging challenges; and its freedom to act according to its own assessment of strategic requirements. This article reviews each of these variables and tries to assess their respective security implications for Israel.

There a number of welcome developments regarding Israel's national security, including the Arab-Israeli peace process, the Israel-Turkish entente, and the peace treaty with Jordan. Other Middle Eastern trends, however, are more disconcerting, especially intensified conventional and non-conventional military build-ups, and also Islamic radical movements engaged in revolutionary activities. 1) The peace process has enhanced Israel's security by significantly lowering the military threat from Egypt, the

largest Arab state. Whatever its deficiencies, the Oslo agreement between Israel and the PLO retroactively legitimizes Egypt's 1977 decision to seek peace with Israel and further strengthens the pro-Western, pro-conciliation orientation embraced by some Arab elites, especially Jordan which concluded a peace treaty with Israel in 1994. The Arab world is undergoing an historic process of grudgingly accepting Israel as a fait accompli, offering a window of opportunity for diplomacy that could stabilize the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The August 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the American-led war against Saddam Hussein further sensitized Arab elites to the sources of regional instability, thus reducing the threat perception related to Israel. Further, the 1991 Gulf war greatly diminished, for the time being, the chance of creating a coalition of Arab radical actors against Israel. Iraq has been weakened, Libya marginalized, and Syria, in its quest not to estrange the United States, was pushed into participating in the peace process. This has lowered the probability of establishing an "Eastern front," which is so potentially threatening to Israel's heartland, or of dragging Egypt back into hostilities against Israel. Consequently, the current likelihood for a large-scale conventional war is low.

Yet, the peace process does not preclude the possibility of limited conventional attacks when temporary setbacks occur. One of the lessons suggested to the Arabs after the October 1973 War was that the limited use of force is effective in

breaking a political stalemate, and that Israel is vulnerable to this type of warfare. Syria is perfectly capable of waging a controlled war of attrition, or of launching a limited invasion on the Golan Heights. It can also attack selected targets within Israel with missiles. The Palestinian Authority (PA) actually allowed its soldiers to open fire on Israelis in September 1996. The United States might conceivably turn a blind eye to a limited Arab attack on a perceived intransigent Israel in order to elicit greater flexibility from it in the peace negotiations. A deterioration in U.S.-Israeli relations could lead to Syrian and Egyptian violations of their demilitarization agreements with Israel, and possibly to outright Arab aggression. (2)

Moreover, it is too early to conclude that the peace process is an irreversible trend. The likelihood, of Israel and the PA reaching an agreement on final status issues is low. No one knows how Jordan will behave after King Hussein leaves the political scene. Egyptian generals still see Israel as a potential enemy.

Furthermore, the expectation that the United States will simply enforce Middle East peace and security is ill-founded. Despite its hegemony in world politics, the U.S. has neither the political will, nor the imperial political culture, to impose a Pax Americana on the Middle East. Furthermore, U.S. military ability to intervene in distant places has been decreasing, following the actual and planned cuts in its defense budget and force strength.

It is worth remembering that the main breakthroughs in the peace process--the November 1977 Sadat visit to Jerusalem and the September 1993 Israel-PLO accord--were not the direct result of American diplomacy, but rather of regional initiatives. Therefore, a reduction in tensions and increased stability will come to the region only when the regional actors are ready, which may still take some time.

Turkish willingness to have a strategic relationship with Israel is of the greatest importance. It is a key state because of its large population, over 60 million people; military power; and pro-Western orientation. Geographical location makes Turkey a vital barrier to renewed Russian intervention in the Middle East. It also serves as a buffer to radical Islamic Iran, and as an alternative secular model to regional states given its Moslem population as well as its relatively successful political and economic development.

Israel is a natural partner to Turkey's strategic concerns--namely, fear of expanding radical, extremist Islamic, and Russian influence. Radical Iraq, long-range missile proliferation, and weapons of mass destruction are further issues of concern in Ankara and Jerusalem. Both countries have parallel disputes with Syria -- a country that encourages terror and has historic territorial claims against its neighbors.

Clearly, the relationship enhances both partners' deterrence capability. It certainly limits any Syrian war option against Israel, and also constrains both Iran and Iraq in the same respect. Cooperation has extended even to sensitive areas such as intelligence-gathering and combating terror. Israel has also financially benefitted from sales to Turkey of arms and weapon technology transfers.

It is almost surprising to realize that, in fact, Turkey and Israel are the region's two most powerful countries in terms of military strength and level of industrialization, as well as regarding their strong links to the United States. Yet neither state has an aggressive aim: their goal is to avoid international wars in the region by deterring those who might seek to foment them.

Internal instability in the Arab world could bring to power governments which seek to destabilize the region, or push existing regimes into foreign adventures.

Revolutionary and radical groups, promoting their own version of Islam, openly call for armed struggle, political transformation of the region, and Israel's destruction. When these forces become rulers, as in Iran and Sudan, they pursue these goals up to the point where they are deterred by foreign deterrence and the risk of losing power.

Peace agreements between Israel and its neighbors can diminish the appeal of radical Islamic ideology, which thrives by demonizing a foreign enemy such as Israel. Still, the existence of powerful extremist groups in Egypt, Jordan, and among the Palestinians shows that peacemaking does not destroy their base of support. Thus, Israel cannot be totally assured that agreements will not be undermined by extremist subversion or some future revolution. Ironically, of course, the danger of radical Islamic upheavals could also persuade Arab leaders that continued conflict with Israel is a tinder box which could bring their own destruction.

At any rate, Islamic radicalism's appeal is mainly the result of domestic problems, only partly influenced by evolving Arab-Israeli relations. Even in Turkey a coalition government led by the Islamist party emerged briefly, despite so many decades of Turkish efforts to shape a secular, Western-oriented society. The coming to power of a radical Islamic regime in any Middle Eastern country would have tremendous regional and international repercussions.

At present, the Islamic regimes in Iran and Sudan do not themselves pose a conventional military challenge for Israel. (3) Nevertheless, Iran, partly through its own military units in Lebanon, supports Islamic groups waging low-intensity conflicts against Israel's northern border. This gives Syria another way to pressure Israel, makes possible a low-intensity war in

the area, and could interfere with future peacemaking between Israel and Lebanon.

There are also serious problems on the economic front which in most Arab countries, including the PA, does not promise stability. Arab political elites seem incapable of implementing the structural reforms required to develop sound economies. Islamic radicals can make headway, feeding on the current regimes' apparent ineptness and paralysis. Even the most favorable results possible in Arab-Israeli peace negotiations will have only limited effect on the perilous situation of the Arab economies

Since the August 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, defense expenditures across the region have risen steadily, after half a decade of decline. Changes in world politics have actually enhanced the availability of weapons. Moscow's current desperate need for hard currency has led it to aggressive marketing of its latest arms and its new, more assertive role in international relations reinforces this trend. Former Soviet satellites and Third World producers also have greater ability and incentive to sell. The Middle East is the largest arms import market of arms among the world's regions.

Fortunately for Israel, economic considerations have constrained Arab and Iranian military procurement programs. In general, too, the emphasis is more on replacing older equipment, focusing on higher quality rather than greater quantities of items. For example, Egypt continues its military modernization drive and has incorporated advanced F-16 fighter planes and M-1 tanks into its arsenal. Iraq, despite its 1991 defeat, remains the largest military power in the Gulf region. Lifting the economic sanctions on Baghdad--a seeming inevitable development in light of Western reluctance to confront Saddam Hussein--would let it use petrodollars to enhance its military strength.

The build-up of Middle East military capabilities is not always related to the Arab-Israeli conflict, but accumulated conventional equipment might be convertible for use against Israel, as history teaches. The most likely scenarios for conflict involve limited war. The success of one such threat--surface-to-surface missile attacks--was demonstrated during the 1991 Gulf War. While the number of Israeli casualties in Iraqi Scud attacks was small, the economic and psychological damage was considerable.

Syria also has an arsenal of surface-to-surface missiles, increasingly immune to air strikes, with a capability to hit any target in Israel with greater precision than the Iraqi Scuds. Egypt and Iran have also made significant progress in acquiring similar missile capability. In July 1998, Iran tested a long-range missile, the Shihab-3, although guidance and navigation remain key elements yet to be fully developed in the 1,300 kilometer range missile. It is unlikely that U.S. or Israel efforts to prevent the transfer of sensitive technologies for completing the Iranian missile's development will succeed.

Since no territorial contiguity is needed to launch missile attacks on Israel, this allows additional countries, beyond Israel's immediate neighbors, to initiate armed conflict. This gives the "second ring" countries such as Iran, Iraq or Libya greater ability than before to trigger military encounters and to destabilize Arab-Israeli relations. The spread of weapons of mass destruction does not augur well for the Middle East. The addition of chemical warheads to many Arab arsenals, as well as biological weapons, are additional causes for concern in Jerusalem. Israel is the only country in the world compelled to provide its citizens with an array of passive defensive equipment against bio-chemical attacks.

The continuing attempts by Iraq and Iran to acquire nuclear weapons are, however, the largest Israeli strategic nightmare because nuclear devices are by far the most destructive weapons. The nuclear tests in the Indian subcontinent in spring 1998 caused additional concern, though their direct impact on the nuclear programs in the Middle East is limited. Arab states also fear the development of an Iraqi or Iranian nuclear bomb. Capitalizing on widespread apprehension of nuclear proliferation, they have sought to curtail Israel's nuclear program, as well, with little success so far. Since Israel's nuclear superiority is an important element in its deterrence package, the possession of such weapons by other countries could increase the chances of some future Arab-Israeli conflict.

Given the level of mistrust and conflict in the Middle East, there can be no real hope of establishing an effective, verifiable arms control regime. Still, the probability of large-scale military engagement in the near future is low as long as Arab states are committed to peace and Israel maintains a favorable conventional balance of power. In contrast, low-intensity conflict will continue to affect Israel so long as forces opposed to Israel's mere existence cannot be entirely eliminated. The most problematic security challenges involving weapons of mass destruction are limited attacks with missiles, while the prospects for nuclear proliferation looms as a major new factors for the future.

How does Israel respond to this strategic picture? Overall, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) is still a very good fighting machine blessed with motivated troops, a capable officer corps, and advanced weaponry. Yet its combat airplanes are aged, its transport fleet needs urgent replacement, and emergency ammunition stocks are dangerously depleted. The August 1998 government decision to increase the 1999 defense budget reflects the growing

realization that the IDF needs to modernize its equipment and that more money must be allocated to developing military responses for more geographically distant threats.

Deployed along the present borders, the IDF could parry an Arab attack and probably win a conventional war against any regional rivals, singly or in a coalition. Yet, the price of victory may be very high, especially for a country extremely sensitive to casualties and increasingly war-weary. As the meaning of victory is context-dependent, the Israeli criteria for feeling victorious become more difficult to meet. This is exactly why limited attacks intended to bleed Israel, rather than to vanquish it, are more attractive to Arab strategists and are therefore more likely.

So far, the IDF's record of dealing with low-intensity conflict in the territories and Lebanon has been mixed. Despite Israel's ability to deter an attempt to conquer it, lower-level challenges are harder to handle. Indeed, Israel has already experienced several deterrence failures in this regard, such as the PLO rocket attacks on its cities in the 1980s, the 1987 Intifada, and the 1991 Iraqi missile attacks. Concomitantly, the perception of Israel as America's indispensable ally, an important component in Israel's deterrence capability, has been negatively affected by the Cold War's end since it is no longer "a bulwark against Soviet expansionism." The 1990-91 Gulf crisis demonstrated the problematic status of Israel as an ally. Washington was eager to prevent an Israeli military response to Iraqi missile attacks on Israeli cities which further eroded Israel's deterrence power.

Despite the close U.S.-Israel relationship, Israel is not a central component of the American regional military posture in the post-Desert Storm era. (4) Attempts to latch onto the Islamic fundamentalist threat as a new basis for the U.S.-Israel strategic partnership are only of

limited significance. Despite their hatred for the United States, Islamic radicals are hardly a threat to the United States equal to the Soviet Union. Thus the U.S. contribution to Israel's defensive capability, beyond what it has already undertaken, will probably be minimal. The peace process reduces the chances for war in the near future but requires Israel to concede territories which are arguably strategic assets. Clearly, the lack of military action on the Golan Heights in the past two decades, despite Israeli-Syrian tensions and the fighting in Lebanon, is largely due to the fact that the IDF is deployed along a strong defense line within only 60 kilometers (37 miles) of Damascus.

Similarly, withdrawal from additional parts of the West Bank would hamper Israel's ability to deal with terrorist activities. The PA, even if sincere in curbing attacks on Israeli targets (a questionable proposition), is not expected to be as effective as the Israeli security services. As a matter of fact, the main rationale of the negotiations with the Palestinians (though never presented in such terms) is to accept greater threats to the routine life of Israelis (current security) in exchange for reducing existential threats, thereby improving "basic security."

The past Labor-led government had in effect called for a higher tolerance level of current security challenges from its population, as it refused to deviate from its political course in reaction to stepped-up terrorism. The present Likud-led government is also ready to continue the Oslo process, even though it is not convinced that Arafat is doing his "best" to eradicate the infrastructure of the violent Palestinian groups using force against Israel within the territory under his control.

Therefore, a reduced capacity to cope by force with low-intensity conflict is a built-in component of the peace process. Strategically, it makes sense; politically it is very problematic, as public opinion is more

concerned with the current security situation rather than with potential security dividends in the future.

What is of greater concern, however, is that Israel cannot deal unilaterally with some of the impending threats. For example, the Israeli attempt to build an anti-missile defense system around the "Arrow" missile to minimize the Israeli home front's vulnerability seems to be beyond its financial means. The development of the missile is largely U.S. subsidized (presently 72%). Even after the Arrow's production and deployment at the start of the next century, Israel would still be dependent on U.S. early warning systems to alert the Israeli population to an incoming missile attack.

U.S. backing is also necessary for another weapons system to deal with the missile threat. Israel is engaged in the development of a system to destroy attacking missiles during their boost-phase, the Moab, which uses unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) armed with Python 4 air-to-air missiles. Still, unilateral military action has become more difficult due to political, economic, operational and intelligence constraints.

Even a superpower like the United States was unable to eliminate the Iraqi nuclear program. Iran is even further away and harder to pressure than Iraq. Thus, while Israel recently put in service F-15I fighters--able to carry a large payload at a long range with these distant threats in mind--its political leadership believes that only concerted international action can be effective in stopping Iran or Iraq from acquiring nuclear weapons. Israel's government is assiduously trying to focus international attention on the Iranian missile program and hopes that threats of sanctions on Russian firms will curb sensitive technologies transfers to Tehran.

Another disturbing trend is the erosion of Israel's indigenous arms production capability. Israeli military

industries have been facing considerable economic difficulties. Though some streamlining and change of focus are obviously needed for adjustment to a changing arms market, the shrinking of this industrial sector threatens the Israeli weapons technological edge. Israel has already decided to halt development of its own main platforms for its air and naval forces.

In addition, less money is being invested overall by Israel in security-related research and development. (5) The constant value of the apportioned U.S. military aid funds for spending in Israel is being eroded by the reduction of the amount of funds available to local military industries. Transfers of hi-tech Western weapons to Arab countries also lets them bridge the technological gap and reduce Israeli ability to achieve easy military victories. For example, the F-16 Block D, sold to the United Arab Emirates together with internal systems, will probably be a better plane than the earlier versions of the F-16 which the IDF uses.

The freedom of small states such as Israel to act is highly dependent upon the international situation. The Soviet empire's collapse was a factor helping to promote Middle East peacemaking. Israel's Arab adversaries lost their "Soviet umbrella," a politico-military relationship that was an important factor in their ability to confront Israel.

Yet the absence of superpower competition in the Middle East also afforded greater freedom of action to Syria, Egypt and Iraq, among others. Though the Middle East was never been a tight-bipolar regional subsystem like Europe or the Korean peninsula, the superpowers' wishes were a factor to be taken into consideration by regional protagonists. Once constrained by superpower concerns about uncontrolled military escalation, these regional actors are now free to pursue their own interests with

less regard for the global implications of their actions.

Israel may theoretically have greater freedom of action like its neighbors, but the need to preserve good relations with the United States still limits Israel's freedom to carry out preventive and preemptive strikes. Further, as Israel is a status quo power, defensive-oriented power it is more concerned about its regional rivals ability to initiate the use of force.

The difficulties in establishing an effective active defense against missile attacks shows the need for enhancing deterrence. Greater freedom of action to undertake preemptive attacks is one way to do so. Yet aside from some external factors eroding deterrence, preemption has become more difficult in domestic political terms. There is a greater reluctance to use force on the part of Israeli political leaders, especially since the controversial 1982 invasion of Lebanon. (6)

The most obvious example was the lack of an Israeli reaction to Iraqi missile attacks by the most right-wing government in Israeli history. In fact, recently, even anti-terrorist activities have come under marked scrutiny and criticism by Israeli politicians, particularly on the left.

The tendency to refrain from using military force is reinforced by the peace process, as Israel desires to project an image of restraint and moderation to encourage those elements in the Arab world interested in coexistence. The peace process entails the problem that restraint--meant to reassure the Arabs of Israeli moderation--could be misunderstood as weakness or lack of resolve. Therefore, the self-imposed restraint on the country's freedom of action is problematic in terms of deterrence. The reputation for striking back when challenged is essential for maintaining deterrent power. (7)

The emerging symmetry between the military capacity of Israel and its regional

foes to hit each other's population centers allows greater Arab freedom of action at the lower rungs of the ladder of violence since Israel might hesitate to escalate. With the advent of missiles in the Middle East, Israel has lost its monopoly on escalation dominance, i.e. its ability to escalate the conflict without a need to face a similar response from its rivals. (8)

Threatening escalation was one way to force the rival to stop the armed conflict. While Israel theoretically has greater freedom to escalate, it has become more dangerous to do so. Further, the modern battlefield high costs has become a clear disincentive for military action. The so-called Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) promises easy victories for the side better exploiting emerging technologies, which could lead to a greater predilection to use force. Israeli political and military leaders, however, seem to display conservative caution in their attitude to the RMA. (9)

The peace process and the evolving Israeli-Turkish relations improved Israel's strategic situation. Yet, the Middle East is located in a different socio-political time zone from the West. The uncertainties concerning the peace process, the destabilizing appeal of Islamic radicalism, and the proliferation of long-range missiles and non-conventional weapons portend continued turmoil in the region which means sustained security challenges for Israel.

While the chances for a general war have been reduced in the near and immediate future, increasing conventional and non-conventional capabilities--coupled with the potential for regional instability and an unclear superpower role--indicate a need for great caution and continued investment in Israeli national security. The new international circumstances have mixed effects on Israelis freedom of action, while its capability for military response is generally negatively affected.

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#### Notes

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