

Israel's War against Hamas, Part Three

The Role of the United States in the Peace Process

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This is why the United States should help the American people and the world to understand that it is Iran that really rules Gaza, not the Palestinians. Gaza is an Iranian base at Israel's southern border. This is why the United States must bring into the light that neither Iran nor Hamas has any vision for the Palestinians' future beyond that of being pawns in their ideological war against Israel. I feel sorry for the Palestinian people. They have been kidnapped by Hamas.

The focus of my remarks tonight is what the United States can do to help Israel and to restart the moribund Middle East peace process.

As you may recall, President Clinton failed to negotiate a peace deal between Yasir Arafat and then Prime Minister Ehud Barak in 2000. Nevertheless, President Clinton brought a sense of urgency to the Middle East peace process.

In contrast, the Bush administration disengaged from the Palestinian-Israeli conflict as a matter of policy, preferring to let the Israelis and Palestinians try to figure things out for themselves.

Of course, this approach did not work, but the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan consumed the attention of the Bush administration, and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict was unfortunately and unhelpfully relegated to a distant back-burner. President Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice got involved only when the Middle East heated up, but even then in only an episodic and half-hearted way.

Going forward, there is no question that the United States must now urgently and assertively re-engage with Israeli-Palestinian issues, and persuade all the parties to achieve, finally, a comprehensive peace agreement.

While Lebanon and Syria remain hostile to Israel, the moderate Arab countries – Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and others – are finally prepared to accept Israel's existence in the Middle East and to make peace with it. These moderate Arab regimes do not suddenly love Israel. They are realists and they recognize that Israel is not going to disappear.

However, as Thomas Friedman observed in a recent column in the New York Times, the Middle East conflict is no longer just about making peace between Israel and the Arabs. There is another powerful player in the region: Iran, a non-Arab regime, is engaged in a

power-play to replace Egypt and Saudi Arabia as the primary power in the Middle East, the leader of the Arab world, and the defender of the Palestinians. Iran is working hard to undermine the moderate Arab regimes and to provoke civil war between Islamists and non-Islamists.

Thus it may sound very strange, but Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia need Israel to maintain their balance of power in the Middle East vis-à-vis Iran. And Israel needs the moderate Arab states to counter Iran. Survival makes for strange bedfellows.

Our understanding of the new geo-political equation helps us to comprehend more of what is currently taking place in the Middle East. Now we at least understand why Israel is being so ferocious in its attack on Hamas and turning something of a blind eye toward the loss of life among Palestinian civilians. Hamas is a proxy for Iran. It is not Gaza that is now on Israel's southern border. It is Iran and the missiles that Hamas is firing at Israel are Iranian missiles.

International public opinion fails to take this fact into consideration, nor the sworn objective of Iran and Hamas to destroy Israel, sooner or later. Thus, Israel's strategic objective is not just to destroy Hamas' capacity to inflict death and fear upon the Israeli population. Its unstated strategic objective is to send a message to Iran: back off! Don't mess with us!

Our understanding of Iran's bid to become the pre-eminent power in the Middle East, indeed a scary nuclear power, helps us to understand what the role of the United States must be. We need to protect Israel and secure its survival. We must pursue not just a Palestinian-Israeli peace but a regional peace between Israel and Syria and Lebanon and the entire Arab world. We need to support the moderate Arab states and increase their number. We must drive a wedge between Iran and the Arab world. Iran must find itself without friends on the Arab street. This requires that the United States must also defend Israel by saving it from its own natural instincts to overreact militarily when its very existence seems threatened.

Going forward, the United States must be prepared sometimes to say "no" to what Israel wants. Sometimes Israel's government and people, like our government and people - like all governments and peoples - act out of fear and anger, producing counterproductive results. In such cases, what a best friend would do, what the United States must do, is to help Israel to think through the issues more reasonably and rationally, to help Israel to recognize how and when its strategic goals can be met diplomatically rather than militarily.

I fear that Israel's escalation of airstrikes against Gaza, and the huge increase in Palestinian deaths, is rapidly eroding the legitimacy extended by many in the international community to Israel to defend itself against Hamas.

I fear that Israel's successful strike against Hamas' military capability is enticing some of Israel's leaders to press for even more ambitious but dangerous goals, to push off diplomacy, and to acquiesce to an unacceptably high toll among Palestinian civilians.

As American Jews, we must understand that Israel's own government is divided on how much further to go. Privately, both Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni and Defense Minister Ehud Barak are now pushing for a ceasefire and an end to Israel's offensive.

This is why the United States should counsel Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and the other hardliners within Israel's political establishment to agree to a ceasefire, to take additional steps to protect the lives of Palestinian non-combatants, and to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian relief to the Palestinian population.

This is why the United States should demand that Hamas permanently stop its rocket fire into Israel and demand that the international community hold Hamas morally accountable for deliberately embedding its soldiers among civilians as human shields.

This is why Israel should now end its economic chokehold on the Palestinian people and open its border crossings with Gaza to commerce. This is why the United States should move the creation of a Palestinian state living in peace alongside a secure state of Israel to the fast track.

This is why the United States should help the American people and the world to understand that it is Iran that really rules Gaza, not the Palestinians. Gaza is an Iranian base at Israel's southern border. This is why the United States must bring into the light that neither Iran nor Hamas has any vision for the Palestinians' future beyond that of being pawns in their ideological war against Israel. I feel sorry for the Palestinian people. They have been kidnapped by Hamas. Far from defending the Palestinian cause, Hamas and Iran are the greatest obstacle to peace and to the realization of Palestinian aspirations for a state of their own.

I have heard much concern and support from members of Temple Sinai for Israel. Will those of us who care deeply about Israel now translate our words of support into concrete deeds of support by coming with me on an 11-day trip to Israel on August 1-11? Nothing on your part could be a more powerful and supportive gesture of solidarity with the people of Israel.

It is my hope that the Egyptian-sponsored ceasefire talks will quickly bear fruit. It is rumored that Israel will time its agreement to a ceasefire to coincide with President-elect Obama's inauguration. It is my hope that President-elect Obama will usher in a new era of rigorous Middle East diplomacy.

In the meantime, let us all pray for the peace of Jerusalem!

Shabbat Shalom.