



## **HOW IRAN COULD HELP END THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT**

**By Robert Zelnick**

In invading Iraq, the U.S. unintentionally threw open the door to the expansion of Iranian influence in the region. With the U.S.'s commitment to majority rule, the Shia took political control of Iraq, and neighboring states watched in horror as Iran's tentacles went deep into the new Iraq. Meanwhile, with U.S. attention diverted, Iran's nuclear rhetoric grew bolder. Led by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the once meddling Iran emerged as a legitimate area threat.

As regional concern over Iran changed to anxiety, priorities shifted in Israel, the West Bank, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan. Just after the Hamas takeover of Gaza on June 14, I began a five-week visit to these states, meeting with senior officials. I wanted to explore how the cataclysms in Iraq and Lebanon, coupled with the Gaza coup, might have altered the landscape for settling the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.\*

While events in Gaza were the immediate preoccupation, the dominant and related issue on most minds was what could be done to check Iran. "Iran is working on two things: building the bomb and building an empire," said one Jordanian intelligence official. "They are trying to become a major regional power. Oil prices, the failure to achieve peace, U.S. problems in Iraq, and the marginalization of moderate Arab countries are helping." So deep is this concern that once implacable positions have become pliant and uncooperative parties now stand ready to compromise.

### **THE BEST TOOL IN THE BOX**

In 2002, then-Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud conceived the Saudi Peace Plan, which offered Israel full normalization of relations with the Arab states in exchange for full withdrawal from lands occupied in 1967 and acceptance of the right of return of Palestinian refugees from the 1948 War. It went nowhere. Israel, having long rejected an open-door right of return for Palestinian refugees and having staked a permanent claim to some of the larger West Bank settlements, found it unduly rigid. Syria took offense at not having been consulted prior to the proposal and at the document's failure to specifically mention the Golan Heights. Furthermore, it had no intention of establishing "fully normalized" relations with the Israelis. Syrian President Bashar Assad succeeded in convincing the 22-member Arab League to settle on "normal relations."

The debased plan faded into oblivion for five years, but it has now been resurrected and reformulated, with a return to the language of "full normalization" with Israel. Its endorsement by the Arab League in March 2007 was a signal to the world that the Palestinian problem had become an unaffordable luxury for more moderate Arab regimes. "The sooner negotiations happen, the better," said Jordanian senator and former Prime Minister Fayez al-Tarawneh. "The major enemy in the region now is Iran, not the Israelis." The sentiment was echoed in Egypt, where an official expressed concern over Iran's appropriation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to serve its own agenda. "One of the main assets of extremism in this region is the absence of a deal or even the meaningful prospect of one. If I have to choose a bad deal or no deal, I'll take a bad deal."

Before I headed abroad, a senior Saudi diplomat had assured me that the Arab states understood the need for flexibility on both borders and the right of return--for example, limiting that to only surviving refugees from the 1948 War. That position was seconded inside Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan. "The refugee issue was a sticking point, but the Arabs are realistic. Nobody thinks that the next day they'll be put on a bus back to Tel Aviv," said one Jordanian official. Another put it more bluntly: "Everyone knows it's suicide for Israel to accept back all the refugees, but they must agree to the right of return at least in principle." Questions about the right of return were almost universally followed by calls for a "creative solution." "The Arab League agrees that the Palestinians can negotiate any deal that is suitable for them," we were told in Jordan. "The role of the Arab League will be to provide political cover." Saudi columnist Jamal Kashoggi, who is considered authoritative in interpreting the views of Saudi Arabia's Royal Family, wrote, "What the Palestinians accept, we accept. If they accept the right-of-return for some of the refugees and compensation for the others, we will accept that."

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\*My daughter and research/editorial assistant, Marni, accompanied me throughout.

These states are sincere in their desire to settle this conflict. Indeed, many officials pointed not only to Iran, but to the internalization of the extremist threat in their own countries. For those who once saw Islamic fundamentalism as primarily a threat to Western powers, destabilizing attacks at home have proved a jolt of reality. "After the May 12 bombings, many things changed," observed one Saudi journalist, referring to the 2003 attacks that killed 34 people in Riyadh. "We felt what it was like to have terrorism on our own door. . . . Hundreds of imams have been fired since May 12." A senior Western diplomat in Riyadh estimates that some 3,000 suspected terrorists or their supporters are now behind bars. Jordanians refer similarly to the bombing of three Amman hotels on November 9, 2005, which killed 57. "You have your September 11, we have our November 9," said Prime Minister Marouf Al-Bakheet. "You understand terrorism and I understand terrorism, but we may differ on how to combat it. Our main advice is to solve the Palestinian issue. It will take away the inspiration for so many extremist groups."

In Riyadh, we had a lengthy discussion with members of the king's national consultative council. One member explained that Saudi Arabia has three foreign policy priorities, "which all fall under the umbrella of fighting terrorism: ending the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, containing Iran and quieting the situation in Lebanon." Shiite, non-Arab Iran is the chief Saudi nightmare. "There has been an earthquake at the regional level," declared one council member. A western diplomat described Saudi Arabia as "a frontline state in the new conflict between Sunnis and Shia... The Saudis are very serious now about settling the Arab Israel conflict. They see the need to wind up old conflicts so they can deal with new ones. They want a peaceful west so they can face north and east."

The Saudis' effort to make a Palestinian government work by brokering a February 2007 meeting with Fatah and Hamas in Mecca proved a bitter failure. The parties agreed to a division of power and swore to honor its terms. Within months, however, a Hamas attack broke the back of Fatah's power in Gaza. Hamas wound up with complete control over the Strip, while Fatah maintained its authority on the West Bank. After a perfunctory effort to restore the status quo ante, King Abdullah decided to bide his time, possibly until the occurrence of some action-forcing event such as an Israeli deal with the Palestinian Authority. But there was no denying his fury with the militants, calling them "oath-breakers," an unusually pejorative term even by volatile Mideast standards.

As of yet, no one appears to have any idea how to restore consensual rule to Gaza while preserving cooperation between the PA, Israel, and the U.S. Yet the feeling is widespread that a point will come when the effort must be made. According to Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboulgheit, "Eventually we will have to put Humpty Dumpty back together again, but we will fail if we try now. We must show Hamas that the way to a political solution is through building understanding, not through armed struggle."

The Hamas leader in Gaza, Ismail Haniya, has said he will accept the results of a referendum on any deal reached to end the conflict. One Western diplomat noted that Gaza cannot exist in perpetuity as a bastard state, and an agreement on terms for ending the conflict may be just the wedge diplomats need: "We would like Hamas to come to Abbas, not the other way. We won't get all of Hamas, but if we can splinter them, it will be a good thing."

So the Saudi initiative remains on the table waiting to be noticed. It is the only document solid enough to enjoy the full support of the Arab League, yet malleable enough to be stretched into almost any shape the Israelis and Palestinians can both abide. And while many in the Arab world continue to campaign for it, there is a growing frustration with the U.S., Europe, and Israel for not placing at center stage what the Arabs consider a groundbreaking overture. Further, many worried that ignoring the initiative may further marginalize the already endangered moderate camp. "Right now we have radical groups feeding on the Arab-Israeli conflict and a very weak moderate camp that wants peace but is losing day by day," said Ayman Safdi, the editor-in-chief of Jordan's *Al Ghad* newspaper. "I fear the area will be radicalized because of our failure to deliver the peace. I fear that in ten years people like us will be followed in the streets by people with stones."

Any involvement by the Arab League, of course, must be preceded by both the will and capacity of the Israeli and Palestinian leaderships to make peace, and both leaderships are embattled. Olmert's approval rating had dropped to 3%, while the PA's Mahmoud Abbas has been struggling to defend his emergency government. Abbas is now established on the West Bank because it is in the interests of the U.S., Israel, and the conservative Arab states in the area to have him there. The U.S. and its Arab friends can be of transitional help to him now by making funds available for his government and encouraging Israel to release prisoners, stop the hunt for wanted militia-types, and ease the network of checkpoints and detours. But soon Abbas must deliver a genuine peace. "Abbas' popularity is connected to how fruitful the peace process was," explained one Palestinian. "People could see that in the era of negotiations they witnessed only the doubling of checkpoints and settlements." A Fatah official went even further: "The people are under the influence of extremists now. They trade in simplified ideologies. In the last election, the main Hamas slogan was, 'Three years of Qassam rockets equals ten years of negotiations.'"

Israel has problems of its own. Olmert was blasted by his own investigative commission after the second Lebanon War for failing to appreciate the gap between his stated military and political objectives and the means employed to achieve them. Yet despite his plummeting approval rating, Olmert's parliamentary coalition appears stable, while his alliance with the Labor Party's Ehud Barak and strong support from the U.S. provide him with the opportunity to lead his country back towards a peace agreement. Indeed, Olmert would probably be strengthened were he perceived as moving the country towards the final settlement of the Palestinian dispute. A peace deal could salvage the standing of both Abbas and Olmert while striking a blow to regional extremists and their worldwide ideology.

The Bush administration's "Performance-Based Roadmap to a Permanent Two-State Solution to the Israeli/Palestinian Conflict" quickly won the endorsement of the other three members of the "Quartet"--the UN, EU, and Russia--when it was proposed to them in 2003. It envisioned concrete steps to satisfy the demands of mutual security, good governance, and economic and political cooperation, and then in three years resolution of all final status issues and a state for the Palestinians.

For many reasons, the plan couldn't get off the ground. But now, chastened by developments in Gaza and the regional anxiety over a nuclear Iran, the Arab world is pushing a new idea: reverse the Roadmap. Move to final status negotiations immediately, while continuing to work on improving Palestinian governance, security, and transparency. After all, from the Virtual Geneva Accord to a recent exercise at Washington's Brookings Institution, reasonable Israelis and Palestinians have shown the ability to achieve consensus on all substantial issues relating to the two-state solution, while in real life, the process has been marred with assassinations, riots, overzealous security forces, suicide bombings, random acts of terror committed by out-of-control militias, roadblocks, barricades, and walls. These have precluded meetings of substance for years at a time, when in fact a clear vision of statehood and an end to the Israeli occupation could induce a far more responsible approach on the part of the Palestinians.

Palestinians view the Roadmap as a kind of albatross around their necks. Yasser Abd Rabu was a leader of the Palestinian delegation that negotiated Virtual Geneva. When asked about the prospect of negotiations, he stated. "There is always a reason to avoid the final status talks," he said. "I know of no logical reason the resumption of final status talks would harm Israeli interests, but I can give you 100 reasons why no talks harm us." Key among them is that, as *Al Ghad's* Aymn Safdi put it, for Abbas it is either a deal for a two-state solution or political oblivion. "If Abbas goes to the polls again without an agreement, it will be over." Ahman Abd Alrahman, a former friend of and aide to Arafat, concurred, arguing, "The main issue is that Fatah failed in its bid for peace." With a deal, he noted, Abbas could go to the people and demonstrate once and for all that compared to real negotiations, armed resistance leads nowhere.

Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboulgheit, one of the plan's major backers, observes, "Let's agree on an endgame. Let's agree on where the Roadmap is taking us. We need a plan: two states with such and such borders, some compromise on Jerusalem and on the right of return. Then we can consider in reverse how to achieve each of these."

Given its relationships with Washington and the moderate Arab political community, Israel is unlikely to reject the plan categorically. Yet privately, many Israelis express skepticism, claiming it was not the Roadmap that failed but rather the Palestinian political leadership. As one senior intelligence official put it, "We cannot negotiate. Negotiate with whom? It would be like if I bought from you the Empire State Building. Can you sell it? They are in Chapter 11." Furthermore, having been blindsided by the Intifada following the breakdown of the Camp David talks, and having seen their withdrawals from Lebanon and Gaza interpreted as acts of weakness by Hezbollah and Hamas, many Israelis believe that the Palestinians have still failed to accept the permanence of a Jewish state.

Olmert has suggested he would be happy to discuss some of the ultimate questions with Abbas. Both he and his Palestinian counterpart have designated senior negotiators to hold ill-defined talks, but Olmert has shied away from any commitment to full-dress negotiations. And while U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice is putting together a "peace conference" to be held this fall and has urged Israel to show the Palestinians the kinds of benefits possible on the horizon, she has not yet embraced any single plan with the specificity needed to make it a reality.

Many Israelis think final status talks are a dangerous way to breathe legitimacy into the Abbas government. A Fatah government would fall with its first test, many believe, possibly paving the way for reunifying the West Bank and Gaza under Hamas' political control. Others say final status negotiation would not replace the need to establish credible governance; it would simply precede it. In all likelihood statehood itself could not occur before the Gaza issue is settled. In this view, negotiating the final status issues is the only solution. Hamas would presumably be barred from direct participation until it disbands all militias, recognizes Israel and agrees to abide by past agreements.

Putting final status negotiations as the first order of business may represent just enough imagination to get things started. Those who shudder at the risks involved in trying a new approach ought to think hard about the risks of doing nothing. An occupied Palestine is unlikely ever to present the sort of model Washington and Israel have in the past demanded in order for serious talks to commence. But a Palestine organizing to implement a signed deal on the table just might.

## **IRAQ WAR**

As the U.S. moved towards invading Iraq, its longtime friends in the region urged Washington to avoid fanning the flames of ethnic divisions. The Sunni/Shia split may be ancient in origin but its more recent manifestation began only with the 1978 revolution in Iran. Many of those we spoke with claimed that growing up they did not know or care who among their friends were Shias and who were Sunnis. Egyptian ambassador to Turkey Alaa El-Hadidi spoke wistfully of a period that is no more. "Before the war these were historical terms only. They were never used in politics."

We found in each of the countries visited the belief that the principal beneficiary of the war to date has been Iran. The Iranians have close ties to more than one Shiite militia. They have considerable influence with Prime Minister al-Maliki and have threatened states like Bahrain, which they talk of "reclaiming," and Israel, which they predict will one day face nuclear annihilation.

Each of the states visited had been affected by the war next door. The Saudis came quietly to the aid of their Sunni brothers, Jordan has accepted nearly one million refugees and runs an increased risk of terrorist attacks like the hotel bombings of two years ago, and Egypt too has seen a flood of refugees. The states, the most affected by the U.S. intervention, are precisely those who now urge the U.S. not to compound the matter by a careless withdrawal. Prof. Haifa Jamalailal, a Saudi foreign policy specialist, put it very simply: "There is an idea here that U.S. troops came and were not welcome. Now they are not welcome to leave. The U.S. has to consider more than its original goals. They have to consider the aftermath."

Time and again the message was driven home to us that as much as Iranian strength is feared, a Vietnam-style U.S. evacuation leaving Iraq to suffer alone would carry an even more frightening message of U.S. unreliability. This concern can only be blunted by a U.S. with sufficient forces playing a sufficiently critical role to make the new Iraqi political establishment take its requests seriously.

The area's moderate leaders are concerned that a Vietnam syndrome might soon afflict the U.S., producing a scramble not only to quit Iraq but to minimize its engagement in the region generally. Most of those with whom we spoke predicted a bloodbath in the wake of a precipitate American departure, probably spreading to the relatively peaceful Kurdistan and involving such neighbors as Iran and Turkey as well. In practical terms, the ministers and diplomats we interviewed wondered whether the U.S. could remain a significant factor in the region if it abandoned Iraq? Will it still have the same clout in mediating the Israeli/Palestinian dispute? Will its commitment carry weight both with its putative friends and adversaries? There would be far fewer doubts in these areas if the U.S. sees its commitment through.

### THE 800 POUND GORILLA

There are many good reasons why the expansion of Iranian power is causing deep concern among the traditional Arab states. First, the Iranians were the first of the region's modern theocrats, their 1978 revolution heralding the birth of a new form of activism that was both political and Islamist. Second, the most senior Iranian mullahs took the lead in encouraging the expansionary vision of its Muslim constituency. Third, the Iranians have already scored surprising victories in Lebanon and Gaza. Fourth, under Ahmadinejad, it has issued direct threats to Israel and Persian Gulf countries. Finally, it appears to have nuclear weapons in its future.

The specter of a radical expansionary state has registered both on the Israelis and their long-term Arab enemies, and Iran may be at the point where it will begin to transform the region's traditional alliances and enmities. It is today, for example, the primary incentive for the Saudis to offer a plan that effectively calls for integration of Israel as a regional power and for the Israelis to contemplate statehood for a Palestinian movement that remains seriously lacking in credentials.

When, in separate interviews, the question turned to combating Iran's push for nuclear weapons, two of our respondents personally turned off the tape recorder before replying, in both cases recommending that force be applied to stop the Iranian nuclear program, should both diplomacy and sanctions fail.

Not all those interviewed were comfortable with the thought of a military strike. One senior Jordanian official cautioned that a bombing campaign could last three weeks and generate a backlash of violence and terrorism directed against Westerners. And a Saudi council member urged caution: "With Iran, people think the U.S. wants to strike militarily. This would be a mistake. You can force the hand of Iran with an embargo. We are afraid of more and more of a military build-up in the Gulf."

The precedent for taking out the nuclear facility of a potentially threatening state is of course June 1981, when Israeli F-16s attacked Iraq's nuclear facility at Osirak. Today, Iran has three main nuclear facilities: a uranium conversion plant at Isfahan, an enrichment facility at Natanz, and a heavy-water plant and plutonium production reactor complex at Arak. Of these, only the Isfahan facility is underground and protected by heavy concrete. But Israeli equipment is vastly improved from 1981 and provides Israel with a substantial stand-off capability, laser-guided and GPS-guided bombs, together with sophisticated penetrating warheads. These could damage the underground facility beyond repair, effectively thwarting the Iranian program.<sup>1</sup> To conduct such strikes, the Israelis would have to traverse Jordanian, Saudi, Iraqi or Turkish airspace, possibly leading to diplomatic complications. But the task seems eminently doable.

A U.S. strike would have an even higher probability of success. Given ongoing discussions involving the Iranians and the IAEA, the imposition of UN sanctions, and the near total lack of diplomatic support for the Iranians, the U.S. would not seem to face an imminent decision regarding military action. This conclusion is reinforced by the thousands of centrifuges Iran must still install in order to have sufficient plutonium for any weaponry. (In 1981, Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin waited until the Osirak facility was on the verge of being fueled and operated before launching the attack.)

That might be a wise precedent for both U.S. and Israeli leaders to consider. The longer one waits, the more time for new relationships to take root, the greater the possibility of finding a solution based on diplomacy or sanctions, and the greater the setback to Iran's nuclear ambitions when the blow is finally struck.

### NO TIME LIKE THE PRESENT

We are standing now at an unusual and ironic crossroads in the Middle East where the growing threat from Iran, coupled

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<sup>1</sup> Whitney Raas and Austin Long, "Osirak Redux? Assessing Israeli Capabilities to Destroy Iranian Nuclear Facilities," *International Security*, Spring 2007.

with serious U.S. setbacks in Iraq, are providing a rare opportunity to end what may be the most enduring conflict in the modern world. Leading Arab League states are convinced that their security would be enhanced by an end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the full normalization of relations with Israel. They have signaled their enthusiasm for a compromise by reconfiguring the Saudi Peace Plan into a shape more in line with Israel's demands and endorsing the document. The bellwether Sunni states--Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan--have gone further, quietly adopting a flexible approach to such critical final status issues as the "right of return" of Palestinian refugees to Israel and the withdrawal by Israel to the borders that existed just prior to the outset of the 1967 war. But it will be up to the U.S. to turn goodwill into lasting peace. This translates into a series of steps the late Ronald Reagan might have characterized as "simple, but not easy:"

First, in both public and private diplomacy, support the Saudi/Arab League peace plan. Hail its vision, its flexibility, its deference to the will of the parties themselves.

Second, endorse the concept of an accelerated move toward final status negotiations. So long as the parties understand that accord on these issues does not obviate the need for compliance with substantive political and security commitments, the potential good would seem to outweigh the potential harm. Certainly any accord reached will become a target for extremists on each side, and certainly it will be tricky business for the PA to reclaim Gaza from Hamas. But the benefits of spelling out the promise of nationhood, freedom and self-determination and letting people in both countries vote on it would dwarf any difficulties. In this respect the experience gained in settling the dispute in Northern Ireland holds some relevance in that the terms of a settlement were spelled out early but commitments undertaken by the parties to end violence and disarm had to be implemented before the accord took full effect. The accord also benefited from steady and consistent oversight by the government of Tony Blair, now actively engaged in minding Israeli-Palestinian developments.

Third, without rocking the boat with the sort of excess energy likely to capsize it, the Bush administration and its successors must continue to maintain that the possession of nuclear weapons by Iran is totally unacceptable. In all likelihood this means support for international diplomacy and--to the extent possible--sanctions. It also means the promulgation of a firm but classified presidential decision to take all necessary steps to prevent any such development.

Fourth, act prudently in Iraq. A lot is at stake there, including the ability of the U.S. to help shape the future of the Israeli-Palestinian relationship.

*Robert Zelnick is Journalism Professor of National Security Studies at Boston University and a Research Fellow at the Hoover Institution.*

FPRI, 1528 Walnut Street, Suite 610, Philadelphia, PA 19102-3684.

For information, contact Alan Luxenberg at 215-732-3774, ext. 105 or email [fpri@fpri.org](mailto:fpri@fpri.org) or visit us at [www.fpri.org](http://www.fpri.org).