

IRMO BRIEF

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Main Strategic Considerations of Contemporary Israel

By Yossi Peled

Introduction

The relocation of the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem draw once again the attention of international community to Israel. The event of relocation is in line with the decision of the Trump administration reached in December last year, a move that has its legal foundation in the Jerusalem Embassy Act that was passed by the US Congress as far as 1995. For more than twenty years, the American administrations have been delaying the decision to move the US embassy to Jerusalem, and the Jerusalem Act was void of presidential signature until Donald Trump became president. In the same year when he took office president Donald Trump recognized Jerusalem as the capital city of the State of

Israel and ordered the relocation of the US embassy from Tel Aviv. Ever since the time of David, the king of Israel who conquered Jerusalem more than three thousand years ago, and his son king Solomon who built the First Temple, Jerusalem was the Holy City for Jews around the world and the center point for Israel and Judaism. At the same time Jerusalem is a holy site for the Palestinians and the Muslim world, hence a source of confrontation for the two sides. Notwithstanding, people of Israel believe that Jerusalem cannot be divided and that only Jerusalem due to its cultural, historical and religious importance for the Jews, is and can be the only capital city of the State of Israel.

However, this status of Jerusalem is still not fully internationally recognized, with a number of United Nations states who do not acknowledge the right of Israel to sovereignly rule in Eastern Jerusalem, including the Old City where most sacred sites of Judaism are located – the Western Wall and the Temple Mount.

The hostile environment of Israel

The State of Israel celebrates this May seventy years of independence that had from the first day and even before, stirred a sweeping opposition around the Muslim world. When we talk about the Muslim world it's a mistake to think that's one united world. Also, inside the Arab world there are extremists who collide with moderate Muslims, and there is also a great row between the Sunni Muslims and the Shiite Muslims.

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In Israel's neighbor Syria, for example the regime including Bashar al-Assad and the Syrian government is not dominated by the Sunni or Shiite Muslims, but was for years led by the Alawites. Israel had to deal from the late

forties with fiscal and military threats to its existence from the South, East and North, and the threats were not only in terms of Israel's security, but also the country was facing an economic boycott by the Arab states that was as well pointed against any country or company that had trade relations with Israel. The ability of the State of Israel to withstand many attempts to militarily destroy it – as was the case during the War for Israeli independence in 1948, the Suez Crisis in 1956, the Six-Day War in 1967 when Israel seized Jerusalem from Jordan, and the Yom Kippur War in 1973 - and its immense economic growth and subsequent maturation, has convinced a number of Arab countries to understand that it is better to recognize Israel's right to exist for a better future in the Middle East.

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This is how peace between Israel and Egypt was carved and after that with Jordan, and this has also enticed negotiations with the Palestinians, although with no success. Brokering a peace deal with Israel's northern neighbor was also without success, and the solution for Syria will be a difficult one, as the country is engulfed in a bloody civil war for more than seven years.

Tension between Israel and Iran

Revolutions in the Middle East launched at the begging of this decade that are commonly referred to as the “Arab Spring”, have plunged the region into chaos and Iran sized this opportunity to claim its ambition to be a regional hegemon. Iran had a big success in Lebanon, with its support to the Hezbollah group that was built in the early eighties, which turned it into being a factor not only in Lebanon but also in the war in Syria. Iran is also financing and arming Hamas in Gaza in the south of Israel, and it is operating in Yemen against Saudi Arabia. Iran is overtly and covertly trying to become a nuclear power armed with nuclear ballistic missiles, and for Israel it is wrong and naive to keep ignoring the dangers of Iran becoming one.

Nuclear Iran in its statements represents a huge threat to the State of Israel, and Israel wants the countries of the Free World to understand that Iran as a nuclear power would change the world as we know it. The Iranian threat is much more than only nuclear, it is also about the way Iran is working with terror organizations like Hezbollah and Hamas by financing and arming this terror groups around the world. Besides all of that, there is the power struggle between Russia and the United States. Russia today is the most dominating force in Syria and around the Middle East. During the last few years, it has stormed back in after a long period of not being present in the Middle East.

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Russia has its own interests with Iran, and this is where Israel disagrees with Russia, although in general the two countries have good relations. On the other hand, the Syrian regime led by Bashar al-Assad has survived because of the Russian support, but Russia has no interest for Iran to become a strong force in Syria. From the Israeli perspective, it is a matter of time when a collision between Russia and Iran on the Syrian territory will occur.

The terror threat to Israel

Israel has been following and learning from the conduct of Iran in the last decades. When I was the Northern commander between 1986 and 1991 there was a massive Iranian presence in Lebanon. In 1988 Israel got the intelligence material that said Iran has transferred 100 million American dollars to Hezbollah and then tried to understand and to evaluate how much military equipment could be bought with this money. Soon, the Israeli Defense Forces found out that 80% of the money was for military purposes. Part of these financial resources was used for construction of kindergartens, schools, hospitals and for supporting the Hezbollah fighters’ families, and this is how Iran has built its presence in Lebanon.

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Israel strongly opposes support for the infrastructure of the Hezbollah fighters, as in this way children are indoctrinated against Israel and eventually these institutions become hotbeds for upbringing the future Hezbollah fighters that will fight against Israel. It needs to be said that Iran as a nuclear power and with its big power of influence, which Israel will try to prevent, is a big risk to not just Israel, but also for the moderate Muslim world that is aware and understands the risks of Iran going nuclear.

It seems that today it is much clearer to neighbors around Israel that we all have common interests, and the people of Israel believes that the Middle East will become accustomed with a new reality in which Israel will no longer be the big enemy of the Arabs and the rest of the Muslim world. Israel should be a part of the answer against the present big mistrust against itself. Israel also hopes that the United States will come back with its presence in the Middle East and take a place of the leader as the biggest power in the region.

Conclusion

Relocation of the US embassy to Jerusalem has stirred unrest within the Muslim World, including the Arab League. However, it needs to be said that the vast majority of Israeli citizens support the president Trump's decision to recognize Jerusalem as the capital city of Israel, especially Israeli Jews who comprise three-quarters of Israel's population. Recent opinion polls suggest that 73% of Israeli Jews support the relocation of the US embassy to Jerusalem, while another 20% support this decision in principal, but would have preferred that the American plan for terminating the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was unveiled first. Unlike in Europe, Donald Trump is extremely popular in Israel, due to decision to move the American embassy to Jerusalem. There is no doubt that from the day it got its independence in a war, Israel has proven that it is strong and that it cannot afford the luxury of not being strong.

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Israel must always keep its strategic ability, to keep controlling its territory, and to continue surviving in this complex region. Israel will keep its military and financial ability, and create alliances with the moderate part of the Arab World, which gives hope for a more stable and peaceful future in the Middle East.

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