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ISRAELI PERSPECTIVES ON THE GULF CRISIS

Efraim Inbar

Many Israelis regarded Iraq's conquest of Kuwait and the international developments that followed as manna from heaven. International attention was diverted from the intractable Arab-Israeli conflict and the difficult Palestinian question, which has been a source of attacks on Israel from many countries including friendly ones. In short, Israel suddenly felt off the hook. It was, however, less than relieved when Saddam Hussein, as expected, tried to involve Israel in the conflict in order to burden Washington with its link to Jerusalem. Indeed, a careful analysis of the Gulf crisis and its implications for Israel indicates a less than clear-cut positive strategic prognosis. What is the strategic significance of these events for Israel and their consequences in that country's domestic political arena?

Strategic Implications

The recent events do not surprise a

seasoned observer of international politics in the Middle East. Yet, as it unfortunately happens, nations and leaders may have to relearn lessons forgotten. The Middle East lives in a different socio-political time zone from the West. The Middle East is an Islamic region undergoing a process of modernization which releases various social forces including radical forms of Islam and is beleaguered by internal as well as international instability. The Palestinian problem, it was forcefully demonstrated, is not the main cause of political unrest in the Middle East. A Western prism is not always useful in understanding what is going on in that area. Indeed, most Westerners are bewildered by the popular support of the Arab masses for a brutal dictator, often compared to Hitler (the popularity of the German Fuhrer among many in the Arab world is conveniently forgotten).

The most significant fact for Israel (and for others) to remember in the

Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs. Daniel J. Elazar, Editor and Publisher; Zvi R. Marom, Executive Editor; Raphael Israeli and Hillel Frisch, Contributing Editors. 21 Arlozorov St., Jerusalem 92181, Israel, Tel. 02-639281, Fax 972-2-639286. © All rights reserved. ISSN: 0334-4096.

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Gulf crisis is that the Middle East is an area where military force is still used in order to achieve political goals. Moreover, this happens with little popular apprehension. Some of those goals are of a radical nature including politicide, i.e., the destruction of a state. The present international borders in the Middle East -- the heritage of the colonialist era -- do not command the respect of all political elites in the region. Ideas such as pan-Arabism, greater Syria, or mere national aggrandizement provide the setup for revisionism. Israel, Lebanon, and Kuwait have been the subject of a politicide campaign since their establishment. Jordan, the small Gulf states, and even Saudi Arabia are similar candidates for annexation or dismemberment by stronger powers. The present crisis reminds us that in our quest for peace, the aspiration for having relations with the Arab states, which are fundamentally different from the type of interactions the Arabs have among themselves, is totally unrealistic.

The Gulf crisis also demonstrates the significance of systemic factors in the stability of the area. The loosening of the bipolar international system, which in many quarters is heralded as the beginning of an era of peace, has mixed effects in the Middle East. In contrast to the states in the European sub-system, our region has never been under the tight control of the superpowers. The Soviet decline has decreased further their ability to constrain their Arab allies, allowing countries like Iraq and Syria greater freedom of action. One of the factors accounting for the timing of the Iraqi action in Kuwait, a country that once flirted with the Soviet Union, is the growing reluctance on the part of Moscow to be involved in Middle Eastern affairs. Another systemic factor explaining the Iraqi move was the deterioration in the balance of power in the Gulf. In the wake of the long Gulf War, a weakened Iran could no longer deter an Iraqi Anschluss of Kuwait.

The growing freedom of action of regional actors and the changes in the regional balance of power are both developments to Israel's detriment. The emer-

gence of an Iraq that can muster Gulf petrodollars for its imperial schemes is dangerous not only to Israel, but also to some of its neighbors. Indeed, what we see now is, inter alia, an attempt on the part of several Arab actors to prevent Iraqi hegemony in the Gulf region, which has wider implications for the rest of the Middle East. Redressing the balance of power without a vanquished Iraq or a more assertive Iran is doubtful.

One corollary of the events in the Gulf concerns our rivals -- the Palestinians. With the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the Palestinian issue lost some of its salience. The Arab-Israeli conflict is a "compound conflict," a term denoting two interrelated dimensions. The first is the interstate struggle and the second is the intercommunal one. In the past decade and a half following the success of the PLO in its effort to become a visible international actor and particularly in the aftermath of the Egyptian-Israeli Peace Treaty, the interstate aspect of the conflict was perceived as being less threatening, allowing the Palestinization of the conflict, i.e., the intercommunal aspect, to become dominant. The Gulf crisis, which generates a high level of threat perception from an Arab state balances this development. Indeed, the existential threats to the Jewish state come from the Arab states' conventional and nonconventional capabilities. Though quite unpleasant, Palestinian subconventional activities -- terrorist or infitadah-related -- are, after all, a problem of "current security" only. Furthermore among the clear losers in the Gulf crisis are the Palestinians and the PLO. Nevertheless, the Palestinian issue should not be marginalized. As a matter of fact, as a result of the crisis we see another wave of Palestinian refugees, this time from the Gulf, some finding a haven in Israeli-ruled territories. In addition, the flow of money from the Gulf states to Palestinian institutions and individuals has been cut drastically, creating economic havoc in Jordan and in the territories. These developments negatively affect Israeli and Jordanian attempts to maintain tranquility among the Palestinians.

Another troubling development for Israel is the Jordanian alliance with Iraq and the growing difficulties of the Hashemite regime, which became more pronounced as events in the Gulf unfolded. The possibility of a massive Iraqi military presence in Jordan, which serves as a buffer zone between Israel and Iraq, has always been viewed in Jerusalem with great concern. Iraqi troops constitute a threat not only to Israel, but also to King Hussein. The Israeli Likud-led government, in spite of its occasional flirtation with the idea of bringing about the establishment of a Palestinian state on the east bank of the Jordan river at the expense of King Hussein, realizes that the stability of the Hashemite regime is, at least in the short range, a strategic asset. This lends credence to the old Jewish saying: "Never pray for a new king."

Israel understands that anything less than an Iraqi defeat in the Gulf will place Jordan high on the Iraqi list of future political victims. Iraq dispatched seven divisions from camps near Baghdad to Kuwait with impressive speed. Amman is the same distance from Baghdad and is not far from the Jordan river -- Israel's border. Iraqi troops in Jordan would be a most unwelcome development. Their presence would mandate a higher level of preparedness in the IDF and a larger deployment along the river.

The weapons technology available to Iraq (and other regional actors) had made an attack on Israel's population centers with unconventional warheads a plausible contingency even before the crisis. Such a scenario has received greater publicity since August. The missiles, in particular, have created a window of vulnerability for Israel. Until the Arrow system will be operative sometime in the late 1990s (the decision on its completion preceded the crisis), Jerusalem has no adequate defensive answer in case conventional deterrence fails. The Patriot surface-to-air missiles, to be delivered by the U.S. to Israel, constitute an excellent anti-aircraft weapons system, but cannot provide more than a partial answer to incoming missiles. As a matter of fact, there are technological and economic limitations on achieving

a foolproof defense for the civilian population. Furthermore, investments in such a defense are at the expense of the offensive capability of the IDF.

It is not entirely clear that the Iraqis have managed to arm their missiles with chemical warheads. Additional problems for an Iraqi strike are the size of the chemical payloads and their accuracy. The rather careful Iraqi use of chemical weapons in the past -- only within their own boundaries -- is noteworthy. Supplying gas masks to the Israeli public has lowered the threshold on the use of such weapons. Yet, a chemical attack on Israel would not necessarily be devastating or decisive. Obviously, Israel's high sensitivity to casualties increases the perceived utility of a chemical assault with limited results.

The vulnerability of the home front is not a new phenomenon in the Arab-Israeli conflict. In 1967, the Israeli authorities prepared 20,000 graves for expected civilian casualties. In 1973, Migdal Haemek was hit by a Syrian missile and Egyptian airborne missiles were fired at Tel Aviv. A clear implication of the Gulf crisis is that Israel has to relearn to live with the possibility of civilian casualties in a future military encounter, just as it has to adjust to a higher level of military losses.

During the crisis, in response to the looming chemical and ground threats, Israel has begun to reemphasize the casi belli approach (i.e., a preemptive strike on the basis of an imminent threat), which had been muted during the years of Yitzhak Rabin's tenure as defense minister (1984-90). This is necessary in order to enhance Israeli deterrence, which to a certain extent has eroded in recent years due to the introduction of the missiles. The struggle against the intifada, which somewhat diverted the IDF's attention from a general war, has possibly had a similar effect in diminishing deterrence.

A reduced defense budget with a smaller order of forces also requires enhanced deterrence. A casi belli approach, enunciated by a government perceived as ready to act, strengthens deterrence. In this respect, figures such as Ariel Sharon, Raphael Eitan, and Yuval Neeman have a

positive effect. The increased threat perception on the part of Israel coupled with the awareness that the U.S. prefers an Israel with a very low profile also contributed to the return to a casus belli approach. It was announced to deter the Arabs, but also to signal Washington that Israel will not be able to tolerate certain scenarios.

However the present crisis ends, one thing is very clear. The Arab states will rush to complete their weapons procurement plans. Furthermore, the U.S. is interested in further expanding the military forces of at least Egypt and Saudi Arabia. The figures for American arms transfers are extremely high. The increased military strength of some Arab armies could, indeed, deter aggression, though the extent of the contribution of such weaponry to the stability of inter-Arab politics is less evident. At the same time, such arms transfers pose a greater military threat to Israel.

Jerusalem has little chance to successfully oppose the influx of American high technology weapons into the Arab world. Its performance in this area in the past is rather meager and in the present circumstances Israel's chances of preventing a flow of American equipment to its allies, who have behaved so well from Washington's perspective, is slim. Indeed, Defense Minister Moshe Arens announced "understanding" for the U.S. arms transfers to Riyadh. A clear consequence of the Gulf crisis is the increase in arms transfers to the Arab countries, a trend which had been declining for the last several years. Higher defense expenditures in the region are not welcome as far as Israel's troubled economy and contracted IDF are concerned. Even the transfer of American arms free of charge to Israel does not alleviate the situation. Weapons need maintenance and spare parts, both of which must come from Israeli pockets.

High technology American weaponry in Arab hands further erodes the Israeli margin of security. Even Iraq has American weapons such as improved Hawk and Stinger anti-aircraft missiles which were captured in Kuwait. Reports indicate that Jordan is aiding Iraq in digesting the

American hardware. In the short range this development primarily affects Israel's capability to suppress enemy air defenses.

The chances for the introduction of effective arms control in the Middle East are slim. The decline of Soviet power seems to augur well for Western coordination in controlling arms transfers to the region in the spirit of the 1950 Tripartite Declaration. Yet, such coordination has been and will continue to be problematic. We can expect domestic pressures, primarily from the arms industries, to sell indiscriminately. Furthermore, in contrast to the 1950s when arms producers were few in recent decades this market has seen the entrance of additional producers such as Brazil and China with remarkable products. As we have seen in the case of Iraq, the newcomers to the weapons market have little incentive to cooperate in limiting arms procurement in the Middle East.

The latest flow of arms into the region also erodes Israel's qualitative superiority. In order to maintain such an edge -- a imperative for Israel -- more indigenous production is required. For example, in light of the U.S. refusal to sell a surveillance satellite and to supply real-time intelligence received from its own satellite, the building of an Israeli satellite network seems more justified than ever. The new tasks to be given to the Israeli arms industries, many of them uneconomic, will be an added burden on the Israeli budget.

The growing arsenals in the Arab countries, a process that started in the mid 1970s and which was welcomed by the Western and Soviet arms industries, has enabled a regional actor like Iraq to build an army of approximately one million soldiers with 680 combat aircraft and 5,500 tanks. During the Gulf crisis it became clear that even a superpower such as the U.S. has difficulties fighting the "half wars" (against peripheral enemies). It has been preparing for in its contingency plan. The Americans could probably deter, for the time being, additional Iraqi advances. It is not clear, however, that the American presence in the Gulf is acquiring permanence. Judging from the past, the Saudis and the Gulf states would prefer stationing military contingents from Arab

Muslim countries on their soil.

As seen from Jerusalem, a permanent American military presence has mixed effects on Israeli security. In the context of a protracted conflict, which keeps the Egyptians, Syrians and Iraqis busy with each other, the American presence serves Israeli interests. Possibly, a prolonged conflict would require some tacit Israeli support and cooperation leading to some political dividends on the American scene and even in Israel's relations with Egypt and Syria. In a more relaxed international context, the American presence probably limits Israeli freedom of action against the countries where American troops are stationed. A similar effect on the Arab states hosting the Americans is not self-evident.

The American military presence on Arab soil would also neutralize the tacit pledge to come to Israel's aid in case of need. In any case, an American military effort to help Israel, if in existential trouble, following American guarantees of Israel's security, does not look very convincing. The ability to reach the Middle East in time and fight side by side with Israel against a concerted all-Arab invasion was simply not demonstrated during the Gulf crisis. It took the Americans over two months to bring their troops to the Gulf. Furthermore, the political will to intervene militarily on Israel's behalf is far from certain. In fact, officials in the Bush administration refused to say that an Israel in trouble would evoke an effort similar to the one in the Gulf.

Is Israel still a strategic asset? Taking into consideration its great dependence on the U.S., this is a most troubling question for Israel. As a matter of fact, the changing status of Israel as an ally started with the loosening of the bipolar system. The reduction of the Soviet threat has obviously reduced the American need for "coal stations" around the world. During the Gulf crisis, when Arab cooperation is needed, the Israeli alliance is a clear political burden. It is quite clear that the crisis has created American commitments to its Arab friends. Israelis are fearful that several of the bills will be sent to Jerusalem.

Though problematic, Israel unquestionably remains America's most stable and reliable ally in the region. How such an equation will be translated into political relations has never been very clear. Probably, Israel can cash in only because of its nuisance potential. Stressing such a potential for making trouble is clearly problematic, while too great an assurance that it will behave responsibly on the part of Israel is counter-productive.

The strong American response to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait came as a pleasant surprise to Israel. In the final analysis, the U.S. acted because a lot of oil and huge sums of petrodollars are at stake. An oil thirsty world is no good omen for Israel. Such a world tends to show greater sensitivity to Arab desires. Yet, the hikes in oil prices seem to have stopped and the prices even decline. The adjustment of the world economy to an oil market without Kuwait and Iraqi oil is good news. However, such an adjustment obviously lessens the incentives for a Iraqi rollback. This means that the regional powers could be left alone to deal with Saddam Hussein.

The effective international cooperation in implementing economic sanctions and the international consensus in allowing the use of force to enforce the economic blockade was also a surprise in Jerusalem. This is definitely a sign of the leadership potential of the U.S. in the changing international scene. Israel has every reason to be happy with the good fortunes of its American ally. Yet, this international cooperation also has a troublesome aspect. Israel has long been subject to Arab economic warfare. The Arab boycott, in spite of its success with many firms in the world, has failed to secure comprehensive international cooperation in the economic strangulation of Israel. Under certain circumstances, greater international cooperation against Israel in this area could appear plausible.

Overall, despite the claims of some, we do not have a new Middle East. There are no new rules of the game. We are simply witnessing a realignment of international Arab coalitions.

Domestic Implications

A most important domestic consequence of the events in the Persian Gulf for Israel is the considerable increase in the level of threat perception felt by that nation's leadership and population. The vulnerability of the home front, inter alia, to chemical threats is no longer a theoretical scenario. The response of the population in Israel to the distribution of gas masks clearly indicates that there is no general panic. The political consequences of a higher level of threat perception are not clear, however. Greater threat usually brings greater hawkishness. Yet, there are indications that greater fear could lead to more dovish positions. For example, during the intifada the perceived threat from the Palestinians increased, leading to a dovish trend in certain sectors of Israeli public opinion. As the salience of the interstate aspect in the compound conflict grows, the proponents of the thesis that the Palestinian issue is at the core of the Arab-Israeli conflict will have greater difficulty mobilizing support for their view.

Indeed, the Israeli left, which has advocated the centrality of the Palestinian issue and pointed to an historic process of diminished enmity toward Israel among the Arabs, is, at least temporarily, in political trouble. The pro-Iraqi stand of the PLO and of the Palestinians in the territories is incomprehensible for most Israelis. Support for the politicized of an Arab "sister" state evokes deep fears and suspicions of Arab intentions toward Israel.

Despite the initial uproar in the left and some signs of repentance, there is no chance for seeing a dramatic change in the positions of this political bloc regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict. Dialogue with the PLO and the establishment of a Palestinian state west of the Jordan continue to be their favored avenue for resolution of the conflict. Possibly, the Gulf crisis will lead them to a greater emphasis on a gradual process and an insistence on interim arrangements.

In contrast to the left, the crisis primarily supports the hawkish analysis that the Palestinian issue is not the only source of instability in the Middle East -- a region characterized by interstate rivalries,

in which the use of force is part and parcel of the rules of the game.

Since August, Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir has received good marks among the Israeli public and abroad for what he usually excels at -- doing nothing. The right-wing government, which had been feared because of its extremist members behaved with restraint in its first Middle East crisis. The events in the Gulf could have provided Israel with a pretext to destroy some of the missile sites and the unconventional weapons infrastructure in Iraq. Yet, even right-wingers such as Raphael Eitan, a former IDF chief-of-staff and leader of the Tzomet party, advocate Israeli restraint. Indeed, the U.S. lauded the Israelis for their low-key approach which suited Washington.

As a matter of fact, the Israeli government has not yet faced a real test as the crisis is not over. The challenge from Baghdad has remained unanswered. Therefore, an evaluation of the Israeli performance is still premature.

Apprehensions about the weakness of the Hashemite regime have been a sobering experience for the supporters of "Jordan is Palestine." The possibilities of engineering a regional environment conducive to Israeli interests were shown to be problematic in Lebanon. The sudden concern for the well-being of King Hussein seems to indicate a similar conclusion.

The timing of the crisis suited Likud as it was spared the need to make difficult choices on Shamir's peace initiative. There is nothing wrong with buying time and stalling in negotiations with the Americans and the Arabs in order to get better results. Yet, in the absence of a clear commitment to make changes in the status quo, such a strategy is increasingly problematic for a war-weary society. Analysis of Israeli public opinion indicates that the status quo is no longer acceptable even as an interim arrangement, in contrast to a permanent one. Therefore, regardless of the nature of the end to the Gulf crisis, the domestic pressures for progress, however defined, will continue undiminished.

In the area of economics, the need to increase the defense budget will severely

tax limited available resources for spending in other areas. We are already witness to the beginning of higher defense spending. This will compete with the need to take care of the great new wave of immigration and its problems of housing and unemployment. As the Shamir government has to spend more on domestic needs to enhance survivability, the price could be in the realm of security.

A troublesome effect of the crisis has occurred among the Israeli Arabs. Their identification with pro-Iraqi Palestinian attitudes has enlarged the gap between Jews and Arabs in Israel. They are now more than ever outsiders in the Jewish state. The present crisis is another step in the alienation of close to 20 percent of Israel's population.

The Iraqi conquest of Kuwait and the international crisis that followed has been presented in the media in dramatic terms. Yet there is nothing unusual in the Arab behavior of the past few months. Nevertheless, anything less than a defeat of Iraq and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein portends dangers for Israel. It may be of

little consolation that this predicament does not threaten only Israel. In any case an escalation of the regional arms competition is on its way. The Palestinians are the biggest losers. A Palestinian state is feared more in Israel and elsewhere today than it was a few months ago. However, the marginalization of the Palestinian issue will be difficult, even though domestically the Israeli right seems to generally come out better from the crisis. Finally, the present Israeli policy of wait and see seems to be quite appropriate under the present circumstances.

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Efraim Inbar is a Lecturer in Political Studies at Bar-Ilan University, a Research Fellow at the Leonard Davis Institute of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and an Associate of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs. He is the author of Outcast States in the World Community and of numerous articles on Israeli national security issues.

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THE WAKF AND PALESTINIAN NATIONALISM: LINKS IN THE CHAIN OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE

Ellen Friedlander

The Palestinian stoning attack on Jews praying at the Western Wall on October 8th may be seen within the context of the delicate political relationships surrounding the Temple Mount, not only between Jews and Muslims, but also between the Wakf -- the Muslim religious trust that is responsible for the two mosques and other Muslim property on the Mount -- and Palestinian militants.

The Temple Mount, the site of the Jewish First and Second Temples, is Judaism's most sacred spot. The site is considered sacred to Islam due to the belief that the prophet Mohammed ascended to the heavens from that spot.

On the premise that holy sites must be protected against the "infidels" (non-believers in Islam), a trust (wakf) was established to administer Muslim property. Wakf also collects money and supplies resources to the various Muslim communities. A wakf can be found in any Islamic country and in all regions in Israel. Wakf officials in Israel are chosen by the Prime Minister's Office and the Religious Affairs Ministry, the exception being the Jerusalem Wakf which is administered separately because of its adamant refusal to recognize Israel's authority. Its head is the Grand Mufti.

The Wakf is not a strictly religious