



ISRAEL-ARAB RELATIONS: HOW THE UNITED STATES AND EUROPE CAN HELP

Panel Discussion*

On June 8-9, 2009, the Global Research in International Affairs (GLORIA) Center and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung jointly held a conference in Jerusalem entitled, "Israel and the Arab States: Parallel Interests, Relations, and Strategies." Brief biographies of the participants can be found at the end of the article.

Shimon Stein: Our topic is how third parties can play a crucial role in promoting efforts to improve relations between Israel and non-radical Arab states, given that these states share parallel interests as well as vital strategic relations with the United States and the European Union.

There is a feeling that a window of opportunity in the region may create new opportunities for interaction between Israel and non-radical Arab states. And the window of opportunity is, first and foremost, the result of the Iranian threat, which is of a multidimensional nature: nuclear, terror, ideological, psychological, and the attempt of Iran to undermine certain regimes in the region. Iran is not only a threat to Israel, but also to the so-called moderate Sunni and pro-Western regimes.

And the assumption is that a common threat could constitute a platform for cooperation in an effort to curb that threat. It is assumed that one major result could be a willingness on the part of non-radical Arab states to engage with Israel in confidence-building measures in the framework of renewed efforts to resume the peace process between Israel and the Palestinian Authority.

Based on my reading of the Arab reaction to the growing Iranian threat, I do not see any intention on the part of the non-radical Arab states to confront the Iranian threat together with Israel, at least not overtly. My answer will be that the chances are not great unless the United States and the European Union--

together with Russia--are willing to change their traditional modes of operation.

The reason for the assumption, which shouldn't come as a surprise, is the non-Arab states' attitude toward Israel. Since they believe that the only issue that matters to the Arabs is the Palestinian issue, there is no incentive for non-radical Arab states to change their behavior. After all, if the Obama administration creates some sort of a link between the Iranian nuclear issue and the Palestinian issue, while pressing Israel for an end to construction on settlements, why should Arab states do anything different or take any other issue into consideration? The same applies to EU policy.

What is required, then, is for Western states to broaden, rather than narrow, their approach. Consider an alternative example: the Madrid Process that took place during the early 1990s after the Kuwait war.

In the framework of this process, there was a multilateral track of talks with five working groups between Israel and the Arab world, which is still relevant for today. It is my belief that it can serve as an example as to how Arabs and Israelis can engage. The window at that time was the outcome of the Gulf War.

The Bush administration had articulated its goals, and was determined to implement them, pursued by a very determined and focused secretary of state, Jim Baker, who did not shy away from resorting to pressuring the parties that felt that they stood to lose by defying the United States. It took more than eight months

of an active shuttle diplomacy to bring the parties to start the process.

The lessons to be derived from the success and failure of the Madrid Process were, first, that you need a window to serve as a catalyst; second, you need to have a superpower with a clear understanding as to how to use the event in order to transform the region; and third, you need personalities determined to implement the goals set forth.

You have to consider the project a high priority so that leaders in the region will realize you are serious. Fourth, don't shy away from putting pressure on the parties, otherwise they will always find a way to procrastinate and wear you out.

Bringing the parties to the table is one thing, but trying to change their mindsets is another. There is only so much a superpower and the international community can do to help the parties, but if the parties are unwilling to take tough decisions, there is no way to make them do it. I do not believe that an imposed solution is a realistic option.

So, do we find ourselves today in a similar situation to that in the months leading up to the Madrid conference? Well, we have the Iranian threat, which could serve as a trigger. The question remains about the other elements I have outlined: whether the United States--which is no longer a superpower--and the international community would be as determined, setting clear goals, trying to pursue them, and pressuring the parties. These are preconditions for a success.

Regarding the EU position, I believe that the EU shares the overall concern regarding the Iranian threat in its different manifestations. As to coping with the nuclear threat, the EU advocates the dialogue approach, accompanied by sanctions that so far haven't been successful. What makes us believe that sanctions will be successful in the future then is another question.

At this stage, I don't see an extra effort being taken by the EU to establish such a regional group bringing together Israel and the non-radical Arab states; I'd be happy to be proven wrong.

As to the Palestinian issue here, I would say that there is almost no difference between the EU attitude and the Arab attitude concerning the centrality of the Palestinian issue and as to the link between progress on the peace process and enhancing or upgrading relations with Israel. That doesn't mean, of course, that the EU would be against Arab states' gestures or even meaningful steps toward normalization. What I mean is that I haven't seen an EU effort to push to decouple the link.

Examples of the EU attitude could be found as early as when the European Community began in the European political process in the late 1960s and early 1970s. More recently, putting a real effort toward this rather ambitious goal was something said to be behind the launching of the Barcelona Process back in November 1995, which was not meant to substitute the peace process but to complement it.

The Europeans discovered that any progress on non-conflict related issues was taken hostage by the Palestinian issue, with the EU unable or unwilling to do something to stop the Arab states from undermining the process--which I found unfortunate, as did many Europeans. EU-Israel relations have also to a large extent been driven by progress in the political process and Israeli behavior. When Israel behaved on the Palestinian issue in a manner pleasing to the EU, it was rewarded; whenever the EU was frustrated by the Israel policies, it was reprimanded by an unbalanced megaphone diplomacy and by suspending previous decisions to upgrade EU-Israel relations.

The most recent example was statements made by unnamed EU foreign ministers and a public statement by Commissioner Frau Waldner, when following the Gaza operation she called for freezing relations with Israel--as if the EU were doing Israel a favor by upgrading the strategic dialogue with us. So, before turning to the Arabs and asking them to take steps that would enable us to reciprocate, it would be helpful if the EU would not subject political relations with Israel solely to its behavior on the Palestinian issue.

As a strategic partner, we are entitled to a balanced attitude. Before addressing the steps that the EU could take, let me say, that the Arab perception of the EU is of an entity lacking any meaningful leverage to pressure Israel. Thus the role of the EU from an Arab point of view is to pressure the United States to take steps against Israel.

So it is only together with the United States that the EU can act in a meaningful way. Now, what steps can the EU take? First and foremost, as far as I am concerned, to decouple their political attitude toward Israel from the Israeli performance on the Palestinian issue. EU-Israel relations must be normalized; that is to say this one issue shouldn't always be the only yardstick to measure the relationship. Or to put differently, the EU-Israel relationship should not become a hostage to the Palestinian issue.

Second, the EU should start a critical dialogue with the Arab states. Such a dialog, which can include any number of issues of mutual interest, should aim at changing the prevailing mindset from one of blaming others to one of taking responsibility. In that context, the Arabs should be told that it is also in the EU interest and their interest to see a regional process of which Israel could be a part.

Furthermore, the EU should address the need of the Arabs in light of the Iranian challenge--which, behind closed doors, they consider more threatening than Israel to their interests--to reconsider their attitude toward Israel. That is to say, even if they continue to consider the Palestinian issue to be crucial, they should undertake gradual steps to improve their relations with us. By doing so, they will also help to advance the process between Israel and the Palestinians.

Third, I think that the EU should take the lead in organizing track-two meetings between Israel and non-radical Arab states. This became a very important instrument during the 1990s to bring Israelis together with Palestinians and Arab states on an informal basis to discuss issues that were later brought formally to the table. As a next step, I would suggest that the EU should take the lead

together with the United States in calling for the revival of the multilateral track.

Following Obama's visit to Saudi Arabia, his speech in Cairo, and the press conference after his speech--when he called on the Arab countries to improve relations with Israel--Chancellor Merkel responded. She said that Germany would contribute to that effort not only on the Palestinian issue but also in encouraging the Arab states to take concrete steps to improve their relations with Israel as a way to contribute to solving the problem and more broadly toward addressing the Iranian threat together.

I do hope that the EU will realize the challenges that are ahead of us this time and will adopt a more forceful posture, different from the position taken in past decades.

Zvi Rafiah: I will discuss U.S.-Israel relations in this context. First, we have to consider basic facts concerning the U.S.-Israel relationship. The position of Israel in the world is based not only on Israel's military power--which is important enough when you are in a constant effort of self-defense--not only on its major economic or technological achievements, but also on the special relationship with the United States. This special relationship has been demonstrated on many occasions and also written into many memoranda of understandings and agreements.

Relations between Israel and the United States, in my view, are a relationship of dependence. We, Israel, are dependent on the United States politically, economically, and security-wise.

I was serving at the Israeli embassy in Washington in 1973. I remember the first week of the Yom Kippur War, when we were constantly asked to obtain U.S. help. It took a week for President Richard Nixon to authorize the airlift, which brought replenishment for military materiel used in the war. Had there been no airlift, the outcome would have been totally different. I also remember that no country in Europe allowed the U.S. Air Force to land and refuel on its way to Israel; the only place where they could do it was the Azores, which were under Portuguese control.

For me it was a defining moment. I came to realize how dependent we are on the United States of America. And I can say--looking back 36 years--since I started working in the embassy in Washington, Israel's dependence on the United State has only grown.

Whether pushing the peace process or making any other major move, the role of the United States is indispensable. Every major move Israel has made, even if the United States did not initiate it, would not have come to fruition without U.S. support. The 1975 disengagement agreements between Israel and Syria and Egypt were signed while the United States gave us a long list of commitments detailing what it would do to support Israel if we were to sign this agreement.

We signed the peace treaty with Egypt on the White House lawn in the presence of President Carter for a good reason. Not only was he very instrumental in bringing about this treaty, the United States committed itself to help us financially with the evacuation of bases from the Sinai and their relocation into the Negev. The peace treaty with Jordan was negotiated without U.S. involvement; but it was inconceivable to us that President Clinton would not be present at the signing ceremony. Upon signing the Oslo agreement, which was done without U.S. involvement, we hastened to brief the United States and asked for its support, which we received.

I should also emphasize that when we talk about the support of the United States, we refer not only to the administration, but also to both houses of its Congress.

In developing relations between Israel and Arab and Muslim countries, coordination with the United States is crucial. President Obama, while pushing Israel on the settlements issue, is also asking Arab countries to make gestures toward Israel to make it easier for Israel to make progress on the Palestinian issue.

In the eyes of President Obama, the road to making peace with or at least improving relations between Israel and the Arab countries--goes through the Palestinian-Israeli peace process. It is clear that the United States attaches a high priority to it. If we want to get the support of the present U.S. administration

on crucial regional issues (Iran), we must make some progress on the Israeli-Palestinian issue. This is the way the U.S. president sees it. It is true that Arab countries have common interests with Israel in pushing back Iranian hegemony. But again, on this issue, they want the United States to be part of it. The United States wants to be part of it, but it says that for Israel, to reach an agreement or understanding with the Arab states, we have to make progress on the Israeli Palestinian issue.

How many times does one have to hear the president or the secretary of state repeating their position before you realize that you must first address the issue of freezing the construction of settlements? The president is not calling for the dismantling of the settlements. He said he is not going to impose his solution on Israel and the Palestinians. They have to do it themselves.

Now, we are not witnessing a similar intensity of pressure being applied by President Obama on Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states, Morocco, or others to improve their relations with Israel. That leads me to Mahmoud Abbas' interview with the *Washington Post* in which he said I do not have to do anything now. Either American pressure will make Israel stop the settlements or the Netanyahu government will collapse. I'll sit and wait; somebody will deliver Israel to me, either Netanyahu himself or the president.

That in my view, in the view of many, is a big mistake. If the policy of the president leads the Palestinians to sit tight and do nothing because they expect the United States to present us on a platter to the Arabs, that is not very conducive to making peace with the Palestinians.

We are now facing a different situation in the United States, which I am sure Prime Minister Netanyahu takes into consideration--a situation where the president of the United States is supported by a majority of the American people. If you ask the American public what their main concern is now, it is surely not the Palestinian-Israeli issue. It is unemployment, the banks, mortgages, health care, and the economic crisis. However, if the

president makes the Israeli-Palestinian issue a priority, the American people will want their president to succeed.

I doubt that the U.S. Congress--usually a strong supporter of Israel--is with Israel on the issue of "natural growth of the settlements. Congress, at least the Democratic majority, supports the president. The Jewish community too does not oppose the president. At other times, the community would have spoken up when they felt their government was hurting Israel. But neither the Congress nor the Jewish community wants to pick a fight with the president on this issue. Clearly, things are different on the Iranian issue, which Israel considers an existential issue. Here we have a better understanding with the president. And, I believe, Congress and the Jewish community would stand with Israel on this issue. One of the major sources of U.S. support of Israel is the Jewish community. If it is not with us, then we have a serious problem. If the current trend continues, there is a danger that Israel will find itself isolated. I am not saying that this is bound to happen, but we should make sure it does not happen.

There is one more element I want to add to this picture. U.S. officials and leaders repeatedly say that the United States is committed to Israel's security so it can make compromises on the diplomatic-political scene. I cannot foresee, under any circumstances, that the United States would turn its back on Israel on the security issue. I would very much hope that Israel will again recognize its dependence on the United States and make a wise decision on how to concentrate on its critically important issues and find a compromise on the other issues, however important they may seem to be.

Ruprecht Polenz: For the Europeans and for Germany, the Middle East is a region of great importance because of its energy resources, but also for security reasons. And for Germany in particular, but I would also say for Europe in general, there is a special relationship toward Israel, and one of our policy goals in Middle East policy is to help Israel live as a democratic, Jewish state within

secure borders and in peace with all its neighbors. This is a paramount goal of our policy toward the region.

If you compare this goal with the present situation, of course, you see that the region is full of tensions and conflicts. And these conflicts are within the Arab states, between authoritarian regimes and opposition groups from moderate Islamic movements to more radical ones. We see conflicts between Israel and the Palestinians, between Israel and Syria. We see conflicts with regard to Lebanon, with regard to Iraq, and of course with regard to Iran, and there are more conflicts that could be mentioned. For analytical reasons, and perhaps also for operational reasons, we tend to isolate each of these conflicts to get to a solution. But all of the problems are also interlinked to some extent.

So far, we have not created a mechanism to deal simultaneously with the links between the conflicts. And this has resulted in the current perception in the United States that we have to make progress in the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians because this will have a positive impact on what we can reach with the moderate Arab States and maybe also with Iran.

I do see the strategic importance in the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. For the Arab States, it is a conflict they are referring to in nearly every discussion. The United States as well as the European Union as a whole see this strategic importance and want to get closer to a solution. You find the principles in the Roadmap and in the Quartet's proposals.

I think this is real progress, because before these common positions were achieved, Israel and the Arab states and the Palestinians might have received mixed signals from the outside world. If everybody would leave you alone, there would probably be no settlement in this conflict. Help from the outside world is needed to come to a solution.

The proposal for a two-state solution is supported by Obama and in every resolution from the European Union as well. I also can't see a solution in which we can preserve a democratic Jewish state for Israel and a

peaceful solution with its neighbors except by a two-state solution. The general principals of what this two-state solution would look like can be seen in the Clinton parameters and elsewhere. Of course, there are many very complicated details, but the general principals are, in my eyes, pretty clear. The question is how do we go from here to there?

The other point in this discussion is the development of the settlements. I saw in the first Mitchell report that from President Carter on, every U.S. president asked the Israeli government to stop settlement activities. It was understood as a phrase, as a lip-service, and obviously the previous U.S. governments and administrations did not take it so seriously. But it was a point made by the United States from President Carter on, and Israel also received the same message from the European Union all along.

Now the situation has changed. My impression is that the new U.S. administration takes this demand more seriously. What I have never understood is the main reason for starting the settlements in the first place. I have always felt every new house built across the 1967 border might become an obstacle for at last achieving peace, and I know that in internal Israeli discussions there have also been voices who have argued this. They were, however, too weak in every Israeli government--regardless of which party was in power.

The question today is not whether to remove the settlements. The question today is, is it really helpful to build new houses in the West Bank? I have not heard any argument that really tells us, yes we need new houses in these settlements. I know the terms "natural growth." I have a good relationship with organizations like Beth'selem, for example, and if you look at their maps, what is considered natural growth is, by area, at least doubling the size of the settlements. This is also understood, at least by some, as a possibility for natural growth.

In Germany, we have a paragraph in our construction law: If there is a house and another house, and in between these two there is a space, you might be able to build another

house in the space, so it is an inward growth. But this is different from expanding settlements. So, I think what the Israeli side must now respond to the request to freeze the settlement activities, put a moratorium on these activities to take the pressure of time off the talks between Israel and the Palestinians.

And one should not underestimate what kind of pressure the ongoing settlement activities are putting on the Palestinian side. They were telling me, "We were negotiating throughout the Oslo discussions," and their phrase was: "every second week we had to change the map we were discussing because Israel changed the facts on the ground." And that this is not a good basis to come to agreements in negotiations, I think is understandable. Therefore, my message would also be, please consider what priorities matter for the Israeli society first, what matter second, what matter third, and I cannot really imagine that it is a top, first priority to have additional houses let us say in Ariel or wherever.

I don't think this would be the right assessment, but of course I am a German. It is not my job to make these decisions, but if I were to prioritize Israeli interest, I would not put new houses in Ariel at the top.

Finally, I will make some remarks on Iran, because we share your concerns and of course we know that the main threat from Iranian behavior and from the Iranian nuclear program is in the region and is toward Israel--even if the Iranians are now trying to get ballistic missiles that can also reach Europeans.

The question is how can we change the Iranian nuclear program? The European Union has tried it through negotiations from 2003 after the secret program was discovered. The United States was not very pleased with this approach, saying it would lead nowhere. And so far they are right because we were not able to change the program. Instead, they have moved forward building up centrifuges and capacities to enrich uranium.

On the other hand, those who sit on the European side at the negotiating table are telling us that the Europeans, of course, could not deliver everything the Iranians wanted to

have on the table. The Europeans could offer cooperation in the economic, technological, and energy cooperation fields, but we cannot and will not be able to deliver in the field of security. And for the Iranians, the security issue was also an important one. And since the United States was not at the table, a part of the negotiations was missing.

I do think that the shift is an important shift in American political strategy after 30 years of only very unofficial contacts with Iran to say, we will talk to you without preconditions and we will participate in the negotiations on the nuclear issue wherever they take place. That means, if the next round would be in Teheran middle- or high-ranking U.S. diplomats would go to Teheran and sit at the negotiating table. I would not underestimate this effect on the Iranian assessment and on Iranian future behavior.

On the other hand, I am not naïve. There is so much on the agenda in the United States and Iran; there would not be a honeymoon in half a year, of course. Maybe there will never be a honeymoon, but there is at least a chance that this new momentum in the negotiations between Iran and the EU 3 plus 3 can help to make some progress, which we have not able to accomplish so far.

In politics, it is always good to see the toughest measures you have. You look, and if you don't need the toughest measures, you can move with the others. But you know I have something behind my back. What we have behind the back is described as the so-called military option--a military strike against the nuclear facilities in Iran, and this is seen as some kind of solution.

If you talk to those who are advocating this option, everybody admits that this will not last forever, that a military strike would only delay the Iranian nuclear program for some years--five years, eight years, maybe ten years. If this is true, one should put the benchmark for a diplomatic solution in quotation marks in similar ways. A diplomatic solution, which could delay military nuclear capability of Iran for the same amount of time as a military strike would delay a military capability for

Iran is preferable because it would not have the negative side effects of a military option.

I am mentioning this because in discussions about this issue, I always got the impression that the benchmark for a diplomatic solution was: this should last forever. Otherwise, we can't agree because our security needs are not met. And there are a lot of proposals that could be put into place that would at least delay the achievement of a nuclear armed capability of Tehran for huge amount of time. My impression is that the United States is considering the possibility of pressing the "reset button" in its negotiations with Iran, that is starting afresh.

Why am I using this phrase? When the negotiations with the Iranians started after the secret program was discovered, the objective we had wished to achieve was to have "objective guarantees" that the Iranian nuclear program would remain peaceful. "Objective guarantee" was the phrase. Then it was translated as the suspension of enrichment, on which it is of course a possibility to have an objective guarantee, but probably not the only one.

Therefore, I think it is not a bad idea to come back to the goal of achieving objective guarantees that the Iranian nuclear program will remain peaceful. We are discussing with the Iranians what they will put on the table to prove that what they are telling the world is really true. Every Iranian politician is telling the world this, but we don't believe them so far when they say they don't want nuclear weapons. So the response is that if this is indeed true, what kind of objective guarantee are you offering? We can tell them: This is not sufficient on these points.

I think we are now at a crucial time. With regard to Iranian policy and the perception of Iranian hegemonic aspirations in the region, there has to some extent been a policy review in moderate Arab states. We also see a new American administration with significant strategic changes. I fully agree that the Americans are indispensable in this situation and the Europeans can only be of help. The best we can do is not acting contradictory to

what is now elaborated. I think this is what will happen.

And so, if Israel wants to make use of this new momentum, I think one should analyze what the Americans are now trying to achieve and see what Israel can do to come into this accord and not feel as if one is in a corner and say, if I put my head in the sand it is the best I can do. This would be a disaster.

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Shimon Stein is the former Israeli ambassador to Germany. From October 2007, he has been on a leave of absence from the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs and is working as an international consultant, as well as holding lectures and publishing articles in the German press.

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