

Herzliya Pituach, Israel

Last Wednesday night, beleaguered Prime Minister Ehud Olmert delivered the dinner speech that capped the seventh annual Herzliya Conference on Israel's security. Over the course of four days, more than a thousand leading members of the country's political and intellectual class attended the conference. Rarely had Olmert's audience been as united about national security. Unfortunately for Olmert, their unity embraced the judgment that he--and even more his hapless defense minister, Amir Peretz, as well as Lieutenant General Dan Halutz, an honorable man who only two weeks ago resigned as chief of staff of the Israeli Defense Forces--had proved themselves in the Lebanon war last summer unfit to continue to lead the nation.

The unity also extends to the assessment of the nation's three major national security challenges. The first concerns the Palestinians. Few Israelis believe that much good is likely to come of the three-way talks among the United States, Israel, and Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas proposed by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice on her recent trip to Jerusalem. Not that Israelis, including most on the right, are opposed in principle to talking with the Palestinians or doubt that, in the end, final resolution of the conflict requires the establishment of a viable Palestinian state. Rather, a substantial majority of Israelis, including many on the left, have concluded that Abbas is too weak today and cannot deliver on any meaningful promise he might make. Moreover, the military establishment is dominated by the conviction that withdrawal from the West Bank anytime soon would do nothing so much as ensure that Hamas-launched rockets would begin falling on the center of Tel Aviv.

The second challenge involves Hezbollah. To meet it, Israel must learn the proper lessons from the Lebanon war. According to Yitzhak Ben-Israel, a retired major general and the head of the Israel Space Agency, in a technical sense the war cannot be considered a victory. The stated objectives were to rescue the two soldiers taken captive by Hezbollah last July in a cross-border raid (which left eight Israeli soldiers dead); deal Hezbollah a knockout blow by destroying Hassan Nasrallah's fighters and weapons; and enhance Israeli deterrence by showing Israel's enemies that, when roused, Israel will respond with devastating force. Israel met none of these objectives.

There is little serious dispute as to why. It was not, as many in the United States suppose, because Hezbollah's network of tunnels and underground installations and its anti-tank missiles proved too formidable for the IDF. As retired general Amos Yaron, commander of the ground forces in the first Lebanon war in 1982, explained, in that war Fatah had tunnels and

underground installations, and in that war Fatah was equipped with anti-tank missiles that, while much more primitive than those used by Hezbollah in 2006, were more effective against Israel's much more primitive 1982 tanks. This did not prevent Israel from achieving, within a few days, its stated goal in June 1982 of pushing the PLO back 25 miles and, within the week, reaching the outskirts of Beirut.

The failures in Lebanon stem primarily from poor leadership. The prime minister, the defense minister, and the chief of staff were wracked by indecision. They focused too much on casualties and too little on achieving valid military objectives. And budget cuts over the last several years had impelled the IDF to reduce training and stockpiles of equipment.

Yet all this does not mean, as many U.S. critics of the Bush administration are only too delighted to announce, that Israel lost the second Lebanon war.

When pushed, many military analysts acknowledge that Israel's strategic situation in October 2006, after the war, was in critical ways superior to what it had been in June 2006, before the war began.

First, in the early days of the conflict, Israel destroyed most of Hezbollah's intermediate and long-range missiles. Second, Israel destroyed Hezbollah's south Beirut stronghold, including its financial and technical infrastructure. Third, Israel killed roughly a third of Hezbollah's fighting force, about 750 out of a 2,000 to 3,000-man army (while 119 Israeli soldiers were killed). Fourth, the war resulted in the Lebanese army being deployed to the south of the country, bringing that region under the government's control for the first time in more than 30 years. Fifth, the war focused European and American attention on the extent of Iranian influence in Lebanon and Syria. And sixth, the unprecedented statements in the opening days of the war by three pro-American Sunni monarchies--Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Jordan--blaming the outbreak of this war not on Israel but on Israel's Arab antagonist, evidenced a momentous transformation in the region. For 60 years the fundamental fault line had run between Israel and the Arabs or Israel and the Palestinians. The second Lebanon war demonstrated that the fundamental fault line had shifted dramatically: It now runs between Sunnis and Shiites, or Sunni Arabs and Shiite Iran.

Indeed, what to do about Israel's third national security challenge--the threat posed by Iran--is on everybody's mind. On Tuesday evening, in a speech to the conference via satellite, Senator John McCain declared that "there is only one thing worse than a military solution, and that's a nuclear armed Iran." Israelis agree. Despite the distance, dispersion, and fortification of the Iranian nuclear program, members of the national security establishment believe that, between submarines, missiles, aircraft, bunker-busting bombs, and intelligence, Israel certainly has the military capability to set back substantially Iran's nuclear weapons program.

But what is to be done in the near term? How can Israel take advantage of the growing rift in the Arab world and the receding importance of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to undermine Hamas, to isolate Hezbollah, and to stop Iran from fomenting terror and becoming a nuclear power?

Prime Minister Olmert's Herzliya address, which focused on the "Iranian threat," provided few concrete answers. It began with the one sentence that drew applause, an assertion that the president of the country, Moshe Katsav--recently informed that the state's attorney intended to indict him for rape and abuse of power based on complaints made by four women--must step down (half an hour before Olmert's speech, Katsav began a rambling, resentful hour-long address broadcast to the nation in which he declared that he would take a leave of absence but would not resign unless formally indicted).

Turning to his evening's subject, Olmert stressed that Iran threatens not only Israel but also the region and the West. The gravity of the threat, he insisted, is recognized in Israel by both the public and politicians. The threat includes Iran's systematic funding of terror--Shiite fighters in Iraq, Shiite Hezbollah in southern Lebanon, and Sunni Hamas in Gaza and the West Bank--and Iran's determination to acquire nuclear weapons, particularly given President Ahmadinejad's vow to wipe Israel off the map. International pressure must be brought to bear, and diplomacy and sanctions may, given Iran's vulnerabilities, prove effective. Although Israel prefers to live in peace with Iran, it is prepared, if all else fails, to defend itself "with all the means at our disposal as necessary." On this matter, Israelis are united. As Olmert put it, "Faced with the Iranian threat, there is not, never was, and will never be any difference between opposition and coalition, between right, center, and left."

Olmert's speech, if devoid of policy specifics and innovations in approach, was a perfectly serviceable affirmation of the Israeli consensus on Iran. But such is the disdain for the prime minister--because of his lackluster performance in the Hezbollah war, because of the collapse of his policy calling for Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank, and because of the several criminal investigations looming over him--that Israelis were unwilling to cut him any slack. As my dinner companion, a former prosecutor in the state attorney's office and now a distinguished lawyer in private practice, put it a moment after Olmert concluded, "You don't get any credit for giving a speech pointing out that tomorrow the sun will rise in the east."

Perhaps the most immediate national security challenge Israel faces comes from within. It consists in reforming the Israeli political system so that it will raise up leaders of whom the nation can be proud and who can be trusted to refine and carry out the people's will.

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