Build the Infrastructure for Arab-Israeli Peace

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TEL AVIV – A perception has increasingly taken hold that the threat to Israel from conventional military operations has never been slighter. This assessment has led some on the left—here and in the United States—to conclude that Israel should make significant concessions in U.S.-led negotiations with the Palestinians.

 That conclusion is flawed—and dangerous.

While Israel should advance its interests by taking well-calibrated steps to ease the conflict with the Palestinians, those steps must be taken with a clear eye toward the serious security threats, new as well as old, that Israel confronts.

As always, these threats stem from the volatility that marks the Middle East. Fundamental instability has defined the region since well before the Jewish state's birth in 1948 amid a war launched by its Arab neighbors to destroy it. And fundamental instability is likely to persist.

To be sure, no Arab army today has the *intention* of invading Israel. But the Egyptian Army, Jordanian Army, Syrian Army, and the army of Hezbollah, which constitutes a state within a state in southern Lebanon, maintain formidable arsenals with the *capacity* to inflict punishing blows.

It is true that the Israeli air force, with the aid of Israeli intelligence, operates with impunity in its neighborhood, as it demonstrated by destroying Syria's nuclear reactor in 2007, and launching six air strikes last year on Iranian-supplied weapons en route from Syria to Hezbollah in southern Lebanon. Earlier this month, Israeli navy commandos, with the aid of Israeli intelligence, proved their mettle by seizing in the Red Sea a ship from Iran carrying weapons—rockets, mortars, and bullets—intended for Gaza.

Nevertheless, Israel faces no shortage of additional dangers. While the Palestinians cannot defeat Israel militarily, the Palestinian Authority refuses to recognize Israel as a Jewish state. This refusal, which is inseparably entwined with aggressive PA-sponsored incitement of hatred against Israel and the persistent claim that some 5 million Palestinians around the world possess the right to take up residence within the pre-1967 borders of Israel, prolongs a conflict that saps the Israeli spirit and drains precious material and financial resources.

Moreover, between Hamas in the south in the Gaza Strip and Hezbollah to the north in southern Lebanon, 70,000 rockets and missiles target Israel, a significant portion of which can reach Tel Aviv. Most perilous, Iran's quest for regional hegemony through the export of terror and the acquisition of nuclear weapons threatens to unleash a nuclear arms race among Middle East states that would heighten the terrifying prospect of a nuclear device falling into jihadists' hands.

These destabilizing dangers are exacerbated by shock waves emanating from the uprisings in the Arab world in 2011. Disarray of varying kinds has impaired the ability of the states on Israel's borders (Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon) to control their territories. The threat of regime collapse all around reinforces the Netanyahu government's core conviction that a viable resolution of the conflict with the Palestinians—preferably a peace treaty that creates a Palestinian state and brings an end to hostilities and all claims—must leave Israel with secure borders and the ability to defend itself against new iterations of the fundamental instability the region has long known.

Consider the following:

To the southwest, Egypt, the largest Arab state with a population of 82.5 million, is in effect governed by the military. Led by Field Marshal Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, the Egyptian army took control of Egypt in a July 2012 military coup, replacing Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohamed Morsi's authoritarian regime, which in June 2012 was democratically elected to succeed President Hosni Mubarak's authoritarian regime, which fell in February 2011. Since 2011, an already fragile Egyptian economy has suffered sharp declines in tourism and foreign investment. Feeding the population presents a major challenge. Meanwhile, Egypt's Sinai Peninsula has become a lawless region, a haven for smugglers of merchandise and weapons, traffickers in drugs and human beings, and jihadists of various sects including al-Qaeda.

On Israel's northeastern border, Syria, wracked by a three-year civil war, has become a magnet and training ground for jihadists around the globe. President Bashar al-Assad, backed by predominantly Shia Iran, rules about 40 percent of the country. A sizeable proportion of rebels are Sunni jihadists fighting to create an Islamic state. The death toll in Syria's civil war is approaching 150,000—far more than all the Arab deaths in almost a century of violence marking the Arab-Israeli conflict. Despite—or because of—a Russian-brokered Sept. 2013 deal, Assad remains in possession of much of his chemical weapons arsenal. And Syria is exporting instability: according to the U.N. Refugee Agency (UNHCR), in addition to 6.5 million internally displaced Syrians, the civil war has produced 2.5 million refugees and by year's end the number could swell to 4 million.

Approximately 1 million Syrian refugees have flooded into Lebanon, representing nearly 20 percent of the tiny nation's population. Predominantly Sunni, the refugees residing within Lebanon have dramatically tilted the delicate balance among Sunnis, Shias, and Christians, greatly increasing the explosiveness of an explosive situation. Meanwhile, Iran-sponsored

Shia Hezbollah fighters in Syria supporting Assad are gaining valuable battlefield experience. And despite Israel's noteworthy interventions—the efforts in southern Lebanon of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), whose job it is to prevent Hezbollah from rearming, have been negligible—Hezbollah is acquiring in Syria sophisticated weapons for the next round of hostilities with Israel.

The UNHCR estimates that Jordan, which has absorbed approximately 600,000 Syrian refugees, will take in another 200,000 by the end of 2014. This puts huge pressure on services and resources in the fragile pro-Western monarchy of 6.5 million, home to a majority Palestinian population and a significant Muslim Brotherhood opposition. Israeli experts mordantly joke that Jordan has been tottering for 70 years now, but few competent observers here doubt that King Abdullah faces formidable challenges. His fall would likely turn Israel's quiet eastern border into another haven for jihadists and one more launching pad for rockets and missiles aimed at Israel's civilian population.

Over the last decade, a fractious Arab world intermittently united by opposition to Israel has been supplanted by a fractious Arab world increasingly divided by Sunni-Shia conflict. The toppling of Saddam Hussein in 2003 by an American-led coalition had the unintended consequence of reigniting a struggle that dates to the 7th century schism in Islam over Muhammad's successor. Iran's quest to establish a Shia arc or crescent stretching from the eastern side of the Persian Gulf through Iraq to Syria and Lebanon and their Mediterranean ports has fanned the flames of Sunni-Shia struggle. The Arab upheavals of 2011 have made the struggle the region's central dynamic.

Such instability makes even more necessary—and more difficult—Israel's separation from the Palestinians, a separation that Prime Minister Ariel Sharon set in motion in 2005 by disengaging from Gaza and removing every Israeli civilian and soldier.

The separation is necessary because the free and democratic conscience with which a substantial majority of Israelis are endowed will not permit them to rule over another people in perpetuity. It is also necessary because the commitment to a Jewish state among a substantial majority of Israelis cannot be reconciled with absorption into Israel of millions of Palestinians. And it is necessary because the longer Israel rules another people—even if out of military necessity—the greater the strain on its democratic and Jewish conscience.

The separation is difficult because Palestinians appear unwilling to agree to the security measures that Israel deems essential. Not least is Palestinian recognition of Israel as a Jewish state. This, the Netanyahu government believes, would amount to a formal declaration by the Palestinians of the end of claims against Israel, and it is no mere formality. It would signal the PA's readiness to cease incitement, and it would constitute PA renunciation of the alleged right of generations of descendants of the original Palestinian refugees to live within the pre-1967 borders of Israel.

Israel cannot compel the Palestinians to reach a reasonable and comprehensive agreement on borders, security, refugees, and Jerusalem. But in the increasingly likely event that Secretary of State John Kerry's efforts fail to bear fruit, Israel should encourage the United States to take alternative steps to advance resolution of the conflict.

Foremost among these, the United States should lead wealthy Gulf Arab states, the EU, supportive members of the international community, and not least Palestinians themselves in raising money for institution-building in the West Bank. Israel should vigorously cooperate behind the scenes. The initiative should focus on creating the infrastructure—physical, economic, educational, political, and cultural—of a future Palestinian state. This would heighten the likelihood of the state's success as soon as political circumstances permit its birth.

Focusing on building infrastructure for a future Palestinian state could seem a tepid next step. But in a region marked by fundamental instability, it may at the moment represent the most constructive option—one that starts to build an alternative, and more stable, future.

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