

Rethinking Israeli Foreign Policy in Turbulent Times

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COMMENTARY



TEL AVIV—Nations cannot put foreign affairs on pause to attend to domestic strife. Indeed, internal disarray presents adversaries an opportunity to stir the pot, regroup, and exploit vulnerabilities. Such realities likely weigh these days on Israel’s national security establishment as fears about the future of democracy rack the country.

Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah relished the spectacle of the mass protests that have swept Israel in response to the government’s proposed legal reforms. Broadcasting on Feb. 16 from an undisclosed bunker somewhere in Lebanon, Nasrallah highlighted the intemperate language employed by Israel’s opposition leaders. “For the first time since the creation of [Israel], we hear speeches from the entity’s president and former prime ministers Lapid, Bennett, Olmert and Barak along with former defense ministers and generals who talk about civil war and bloodshed and say that there is no solution to the challenges posed by the new government,” Nasrallah told his Iran-backed Shia faithful.

On Feb. 19, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu sought to calm the nation. In remarks delivered for public consumption before his weekly meeting with government members, he assured fellow citizens, “Don’t count on a Civil War. It will not happen. It will not happen because we are indeed brothers.”

Yet passions continue to run high in the Jewish state. On Feb. 20, for the second consecutive Tuesday, tens of thousands of flag-waving Israelis gathered in front of the Knesset and filled the Jerusalem streets for blocks and blocks. Inside Israel’s single-house parliament, Netanyahu’s coalition government took the first formal steps to enact its package of judicial reforms – starting with a bill that assigned the ruling coalition responsibility for appointing judges and eliminating the high court’s authority to review Israel’s quasi-constitutional Basic Laws.

Both sides insist that saving Israeli democracy depends on them. Led by Minister of Justice Yariv Levin and Constitution, Law, and Justice Committee Chair Simcha Rothman, Netanyahu’s coalition argues that its reforms will take policy decisions out of the hands of unelected judges and return them to the people’s elected representatives. The opposition, representing according to some polls more than half the country, contend that the proposed reforms will cripple the court’s ability to protect basic rights and fundamental freedoms from the whims of simple majorities. “Coalition members – history will judge you for tonight,” said opposition leader Yair Lapid after last Tuesday’s Knesset vote. “For the damage to democracy, for the damage to the economy, for the damage to security, for you tearing apart the nation of Israel and that you just don’t care.”

Meanwhile, difficult questions about Israel’s diplomacy and national security demand attention. Why has the United Arab Emirates, party to the historic Abraham Accords, declined to invite Netanyahu to visit Abu Dhabi? Given the hard line that Netanyahu’s government has taken toward expanding Jewish settlement in Judea and Samaria, is it reasonable to expect the diplomatic breakthrough with Saudi Arabia to which Netanyahu aspires? What steps can a distracted Israel take in response to recent reports that Iran has enriched uranium to 84%, just short of the 90% needed for a nuclear weapon? To what extent will leading figures in Israel’s business community, particularly in its world-class high-tech sector, make good on their threat in response to the judicial reform package to relocate their wealth and their enterprises outside of Israel? How much has the clash within Israel over the proper role of the judiciary damaged relations between the Biden administration and Jerusalem?

Issues such as these were addressed last week at the Hertog Forum in Tel Aviv, the first Tikvah-Israel Security Conclave. In the news because of its role in advancing judicial reform here, The Tikvah Fund – for which I occasionally teach – has its headquarters in New York City while supporting a Jerusalem office. In foreign policy as in domestic affairs, Tikvah-Jerusalem aims to promote conservative ideas in Israel.

At the closed conference – the ground rules permit attendees to discuss points made but not to identify speakers or quote statements – there was little dispute that the U.S.-Israel friendship is a matter of shared principles and a strategic asset to both.

Nor was there any confusion among the attendees, mostly Israelis and Americans, about the chief local source of Middle East instability. The Islamic Republic of Iran persists in sowing terror and pursuing nuclear weapons to gain regional hegemony. One participant argued that Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons would be substantially more dangerous than was North Korea's. Whereas Japan and South Korea have not pursued nuclear weapons – in part because of their confidence that if directly threatened by Pyongyang, the United States will come to their defense – Saudi Arabia and Turkey and other Middle East countries are likely to obtain nuclear weapons in response to a nuclear-armed Iran.

It was also observed that the People's Republic of China presents the major external threat to Middle East stability, not least due to its own Iran deal – a \$400-billion cooperation agreement signed with Tehran in 2021. Led by the ruthless Chinese Communist Party, Beijing has made significant inroads throughout the Middle East, as it has in every region of the world.

Several knowledgeable speakers emphasized the dramatic reforms undertaken by Saudi Arabia Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. The good news is that MBS seems dedicated to making Saudi Arabia more open and tolerant and combatting the Islamic extremism and the hatred for Israel that the government long supported. He also sees normalization with Israel as an inevitable expression of the kingdom's long-term interests.

But the establishment of formal diplomatic relations between Jerusalem and Riyadh is not likely to occur in the short term. One impediment is Netanyahu's current coalition, members of which are likely to hinder even the minimal conciliatory steps toward the Palestinians to which the prime minister is probably inclined and which would be of use to MBS in making the case for normalization to the Saudi people.

Another impediment is Saudi resentment for then-candidate Joe Biden's having labeled them in 2019 a "pariah state." The Saudis also resent what they regard as Democratic presidents' preferential treatment of Iran. Why, they wonder in Riyadh, did the Obama administration's Iran deal seek merely to delay rather than terminate Tehran's nuclear weapons program? Why has the Biden administration followed suit? And why has it blocked a Saudi civil nuclear program while Iran's proceeds apace?

Restoration of trust will not come easily. MBS has indicated that he wants the United States to commit explicitly to providing Saudi Arabia military support in the event of attack, enhancing arm sales to the kingdom, and backing a Saudi civil-nuclear program. There is little chance that the Biden administration will meet bin Salman's requirements.

Other conference speeches and panels dealt with Israel's remarkable high-tech sector as a source of national strength, the implications of U.S.-led support for Ukraine's defense against Russia's unprovoked aggression and Israel's respectable reasons for maintaining a low profile on the conflict, and the national security implications of the judicial reform controversy.

More could have been said at the conference about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It's true that few Israelis are preoccupied with the ultimate status of the disputed territories and the fate of the approximately 3 million Palestinians living there. Yet increasing restiveness among West Bank Palestinians, the Palestinian Authority's corruption and incitement to terror, uncertainty surrounding the eventual successor to 87-year-old Mahamoud Abbas, who has served as Palestinian Authority president since 2005, and Hamas's strength in the West Bank have huge implications for Israeli national security.

Greater attention could have been paid to human rights and the international laws of war, if only to devise ways to counteract unwarranted censure from politicized international organizations with accurate messaging about human rights imperatives and international law obligations.

As is often and understandably the case in discussions of diplomacy and foreign policy, education was largely overlooked. Yet the best strategic prescriptions and tactical measures are of little use to an ill-informed citizenry. An outstanding grand strategy will come to nothing without a diplomatic corps and military forces possessing the knowledge, skills, and character to carry it out. As in the United States, so too in Israel: Public education could do much more to improve citizens' understanding of the ideas and institutions that undergird their government and way of life.

Then again, amid unprecedented agitation over the future of democracy in their country, Israelis are also conducting probing conversations about foreign affairs and the connection to the economy, to the legal system, to the region, to China and, not least, to the country's special friendship with the United States. That attests to a public-spirited dedication to the nation's vital interests.

At the moment, those vital interests are bound up with the need for prompt domestic diplomacy. By tempering its proposed judicial reforms, the government can fortify the separation of powers and protect basic rights and fundamental freedoms in the Jewish state. This would represent a crucial step in rebuilding political cohesiveness. And it would strengthen Israel's hand as it deals with the many daunting challenges abroad.

Peter Berkowitz is the Tad and Dianne Taube senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University. From 2019 to 2021, he served as director of the Policy Planning Staff at the U.S. State Department. His writings are posted at PeterBerkowitz.com and he can be followed on Twitter @BerkowitzPeter.

