

MIDDLE EAST NOTES AND COMMENT

The Predicament

by Haim Malka

For a brief moment at the United Nations, President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu seemed to be on the same page. Both worked to block the Palestinian bid to secure UN recognition of statehood. Both defended Israel's place in the international community. Despite the comfort that Obama's stance brought to many Israelis, the episode exposes a difficult predicament for both allies: Israel is increasingly dependent on the United States to manage its diplomatic and security challenges at a time when the United States, try as it might, is less capable of effectively addressing those challenges. The quandary will further complicate U.S.-Israel relations in the months and years ahead by aggravating political and strategic differences, primarily over the Palestinian issue.

The deterioration of Israel's strategic environment compounds the dilemma, as the country faces a potent combination of military and diplomatic threats. Israel's common interests with Egypt, from containing Iran to pressuring Hamas, have largely evaporated. Turkey is moving from a strategic partner to an adversary. The Palestinian statehood drive threatens to deepen the diplomatic assault against Israel. Meanwhile, Iran continues its nuclear program while its allies Hamas and Hezbollah remain firmly entrenched. While some of these challenges are constant, the combination is increasingly difficult for Israel to manage.

For Israel, a lack of faith in the United States' resolve and strategic judgment in the Middle East deepens this predicament. The U.S. government's initial enthusiasm for the Arab Spring, its insistence on President Mubarak's dismissal, and the multilateral approach to military intervention in Libya further fuel Israeli doubts. Meanwhile, U.S. efforts to intervene on Israel's behalf suffer from a fundamental mistrust of Prime Minister Netanyahu and a growing sense that Israeli policies are counterproductive and deepen Israel's isolation, as Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta recently expressed.

Mutual misgivings aside, the United States has worked tirelessly to help Israel address its challenges. The Obama administration struggled for months to

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Modernizing Mecca

Islam's holiest city is emerging as a playground for wealthy Muslims from around the globe. Mecca is known for the Grand Mosque and the religious sites that surround it, yet it increasingly resembles a glitzy haven of oil wealth and consumerism. Completed in August, the nearly 2000-foot tall Royal Mecca Clock Tower features high-end hotels and rows of shops. Development has driven up real estate costs: commercial land prices have increased twenty-fold in the past decade, and apartments near central Mecca cost nearly \$3 million.

Pilgrimage crowds increase yearly, and Mecca's population may double by 2035. Nonetheless, hotels, apartments, and malls have paved over structures such as an Islamic school where the Prophet Muhammad once taught. The house of Khadija, the Prophet's first wife, was destroyed in 2006 to make room for public lavatories. In August the government initiated a \$21 billion project that will allow the Grand Mosque to hold over two million worshippers but threatens Abbasid-era mosque sections and the remains of the Prophet's house.

Overt criticism has been muted. Muslim countries reportedly fear that criticizing the kingdom might invite visa restrictions for *haji* pilgrims, while archaeologists are cautious to protect their limited access to ancient sites. Saudi clerics, who have their own delicate relationship with the state, often condone the demolition of ancient structures, which they see either as contributing to prophet-worship or being pre-Islamic.

Religion is timeless in Mecca. The monuments, however, change with the times. ■ SA

Seeing Through the Fog

On October 6, Dr. Jon Alterman delivered a talk at the Marine Corps University in Quantico, VA, entitled "Seeing Through the Fog: Transitional Governments in Libya and Elsewhere." The talk drew on experience with transitions around the world to caution patience, identify the perils of U.S. bureaucratic politics, and highlight the importance of neighboring states. Looking at the Libya case in particular, it examined the consequences of the speed of the transition, the uncertain nature of Libyan nationalism, and the influence of oil. A text version of the lecture can be found [HERE](#). An audio version can be found [HERE](#). ■

thwart the Palestinian UN bid. It also worked quietly for nearly a year to broker a compromise in the Turkish-Israeli crisis. When mobs stormed the Israeli embassy in Cairo in September, it was the U.S. Secretary of Defense who appealed to the head of Egypt's military leadership to rescue the stranded diplomats.

Yet despite its tremendous efforts, America's ability to manage these problems has diminished. America's foes and allies are more willing to accept the risks of contradicting U.S. positions, and many perceive a growing regional power vacuum that they can exploit with more independent policies. Even after the threat of a U.S. veto, the Palestinian leadership risked cuts in U.S. aid to pursue its UN statehood bid. Turkey's leadership believes that opposition to U.S. policies strengthens its regional stature. In Egypt, though the U.S. government maintains strong ties with the ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, it is largely powerless to shape Egyptian politics, which are just beginning to awaken. Iran too, in enduring sanctions for over a decade, has found U.S. policies against it tolerable.

The Israeli government is not solely responsible for its deteriorating strategic position. For most of the past two years, President Abbas has refused Netanyahu's calls for direct negotiations. Still, the Israeli government has consistently pursued counterproductive policies, such as ill-timed housing construction, that enflame rather than ease its already deteriorating diplomatic position. These decisions also complicate the United States' ability to help manage Israel's threats and crises. This dilemma will likely become more complicated as the United States struggles to respond to unpredictable regional trends that are largely beyond its control.

The U.S. instinct to help remedy this predicament continues to hinge on restarting Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. Abbas' UN bid has made that objective more urgent for the Obama administration, though its diplomatic options remain limited. It can push harder for resuming direct talks, though this backfired in the past, when the president sought an Israeli construction freeze in East Jerusalem. The president could offer the PA more incentives to negotiate, but the Palestinians have largely given up hope that the United States can deliver meaningful Israeli concessions. The path of least resistance lies with the Quartet's latest efforts to cajole the parties back to the table. The long-awaited Israel-Hamas prisoner exchange and release of Gilad Shalit after five years in Hamas captivity could help bring Abbas around, but it could just as easily make him even more recalcitrant.

Resuming negotiations, however, is not a solution if there is no practical strategy to guide the process. The prospect of reaching an agreement under the current circumstances continues to deteriorate. Israeli and Palestinian expectations and demands are farther apart than ever, Hamas remains entrenched in Gaza, and both sides are pushing increasingly nationalist agendas. Another failure to reach an agreement will further undermine U.S. regional standing.

The consequences will extend beyond the blow to America's prestige and influence. Without tangible progress on the Palestinian issue, U.S.-Israel ties will suffer and the international drive to delegitimize Israel will intensify. An agreement will not transform the Middle East nor solve a host of threats, but as long as the conflict festers, it will be manipulated by political actors across the region and undermine both the United States and Israel.

For nearly four decades, the United States' reputation in the Middle East has been strengthened by its ability to broker peace between Israelis and Arabs. That ability is fading as the Palestinians seek to bypass the United States in their statehood bid and Israeli policies further alienate many American supporters. Because it has the most to lose, the burden is on the Israeli government to initiate a diplomatic plan to address these dilemmas. Ultimately, the United States can only help Israel solve its challenges; it cannot solve them for Israel. ■ 10/17/2011

Haim Malka's recent book, Crossroads: The Future of the U.S.-Israel Strategic Partnership, can be downloaded [HERE](#).

Links of Interest

Jon Alterman [testified before the House Foreign Affairs Committee](#) on U.S. human rights policy toward Iran and Syria.

The *Los Angeles Times* quoted Jon Alterman in "[Obama to tout success of Libya policy at U.N.](#)"

CNN quoted Haim Malka in "[Many facets to Abbas' U.N. move, analysts say.](#)"

PBS' "The Rundown" blog quoted Haim Malka in "[Abbas: 'Palestine is Waiting to be Born'; Netanyahu: 'Israel Wants Peace.'](#)"

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