Heading off a Cliff in US-Israel Relations?

What are Israel’s policy options in dealing with the Obama administration, following the reelection of Netanyahu and the P5+1 nuclear framework agreement with Iran?
In April, research associates of the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies gathered to discuss Israel’s policy options in dealing with the Obama administration, following the March reelection of Prime Minister Netanyahu and the P5+1 nuclear framework agreement with Iran. The discussion led to a decision to embark on a comprehensive task force study of US-Israel relations into the future. What follows is an edited transcript of the discussion.

**How far has Obama taken the US off its traditional policy moorings, and do you think that the US can or will “bounce back” under the next president?**

**Dr. Jonathan Rynhold:** Obama’s cautious strategy of retrenchment is not unprecedented. Aspects of retrenchment were central to Nixon and Carter’s strategy in the wake of Vietnam. In parallel, Obama’s strategic caution is partly a reaction to the perceived failure and costs of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. But it is also the result of changing attitudes among younger, more liberal Democrats.

If the Republicans win, I expect the US to revert to a more assertive strategy. The same goes if Hillary Clinton wins. She represents many Democrats whose approach to Israel, the Middle East, and foreign policy in general, is more “traditional” and assertive.

**Prof. Eytan Gilboa:** Obama has moved American foreign policy too much to the radical left. He has been the first post-American president, and I’m not sure he believes in American exceptionalism. His “leadership from behind” approach has battered American credibility in world affairs, and damaged relations with allies including Israel. Under Obama, it seems that it is better to be an enemy rather than a friend of the US; certainly in the Middle East. The new president, regardless of his or her party affiliation, is likely to move the US to a more balanced and assertive position in the world. The new president is also likely to restore the close alliance between the US and Israel.

**Prof. Shmuel Sandler:** The US in the post Obama era will definitely bounce back. The next President will position him or herself somewhere between the Bush and Obama legacies. The days of overextension are over but so will be the courting of “moderate Islam.”

**Prof. Hillel Frisch:** Remember Eisenhower in 1956-7? He was followed by Kennedy. Johnston and US supply of F-4 Phantom warplanes to Israel. So there is hope for improvement in US foreign policy and in US-Israel relations post-Obama.
In your view, how serious is the current crisis in US-Israel relations? Or is this merely a passing Obama-Netanyahu crisis?

Prof. Efraim Inbar: This time there is a very serious crisis in US-Israeli relations because of the great divergence between Jerusalem and Washington on what is happening in the Middle East and how to react to regional developments. The American preference to negotiate a bad deal with Iran instead of more muscular reaction, as well as its willingness to accept a hegemonic Iran in the Middle East, is affecting Israel’s national interests. The US is belittling the consequences of potential nuclear proliferation as result of the nuclear deal. Obama seems to have adopted a nonchalant view of Iranian expansionism and revisionism.

Dr. Max Singer: There is a serious Obama-Israel conflict, which Obama has tried to portray as a problem with Netanyahu. This will continue so long as Obama is in office. There was no way Israel could have avoided this conflict. In my view, Netanyahu has managed the conflict pretty well. If anything, I think he may have been too cautious. However, there is, I believe, some long term damage in Israel’s position in the US because Israel has become a more partisan issue. This was probably inevitable given Obama’s positions and the increased polarization of US politics.

Dr. Joshua Teitelbaum: My assessment is harsher. This is a very serious crisis. It is probably one of the worst between the two countries. The US President represents the foreign policy of his country, and therefore one cannot distinguish between US policy and the policy of its president. These two protagonists have radically different world views. The crisis in US-Israel relations will no doubt remain as long as both are in power, even though cooperation in many other fields will continue.

Yet there is a chance that lasting damage has been done by Netanyahu who inserted Israel into the battle between Democrats and Republicans and turned support for Israel into a partisan issue. Forcing pro-Israel Democrats to choose between their support for Israel and their support for the President and the head of their party was not a wise move. It leaves a lot of rancor.

Prof. Eytan Gilboa: The present crisis is indeed the worst-ever in the multi-year “special relationship” between the US and Israel. A major crisis in American-Israeli relations occurred almost every decade since the establishment of Israel. But unlike the present crisis, they all focused on specific issues and lasted between a few days and a few months. Examples include the 1956-57 Suez-Sinai crisis, the 1975 "reassessment" policy over the interim agreement with Egypt, and the 1992 loan guarantees crisis over settlements.

The present crisis represents one more extreme chapter in a lingering bad relationship that emerged soon after the two leaders had assumed office at the beginning of 2009. It has developed on almost every key issue including the “Arab Spring,” Iran, and negotiations with the Palestinians. The personal acrimonious relations between the two leaders have excessively affected US-Israeli relations.

Netanyahu’s speech in Congress raised serious issues about the negotiations with Iran. It also has further alienated the White House, broke the traditional bi-partisan approach to Israel, split the American Jewish community, weakened AIPAC, which relies on both, and compromised the ability of the current Israeli ambassador in Washington to effectively accomplish his duties.

And still, Obama bears most of the responsibility for the current downturn in ties. Following Netanyahu’s victory in the recent elections, Obama threatened punishment and retribution against Netanyahu. He is relentlessly attacking
the core foundations of the “special relationship”: values, interests, public opinion and the pro-Israeli lobby. He exploited Netanyahu’s warning on the high turn-out of the Arabs to cast unfounded doubts about Israeli democracy, thus questioning one of the most important values shared by the US and Israel. Obama claimed that Israel undermined the US interests in a nuclear deal with Iran and the negotiations with the Palestinians. The leak on alleged Israeli spying on the negotiations with Iran was designed to invoke resentment against Israel in American public opinion. And the visible support for J-Street is designed to reduce the influence of AIPAC.

**Prof. Shmuel Sandler:** All of you may be exaggerating this crisis. US-Israel relations are too deeply rooted to be changed drastically by one administration. Common interests and values are more important than personal relations. However, it is true that we face a rough and nasty period for the next twenty months.

What many people don’t understand is that the current struggle between Obama and Congress is not only a Republican-Democrat fight for power, and it’s not just about Israel. It is a classical confrontation between the White House and Congress over presidential discretion in foreign policy. The demand for Congress to review the Iranian agreement reflects a long-standing conflict embedded in the American constitution. And that is why not all Democrats are on the President’s side. Israel is thus caught in a political struggle between Republicans and Democrats as well as in an institutional fight for power.

When a president makes many mistakes in foreign policy, as has Obama, the natural reaction from Congress is to insist on more power for itself. Failures in foreign policy encourage Congress to doubt presidential wisdom and to demand the right to oversee White House foreign policy behavior. This happened after the US blunders in Korea, Vietnam, and Iraq, and it is happening again now.

**Dr. Jonathan Rynhold:** The US-Israel special relationship is extremely deep and wide-ranging and is thus able to withstand the awful relationship between the Netanyahu government and Obama administration. Indeed, security cooperation has remained extremely close despite the crisis at the political level.

However, there are problems beneath the surface that will continue to challenge the relationship. The foundation of the special relationship is widespread public sympathy for Israel among the American public, which remains extremely high. Yet while Democrats overwhelmingly sympathize with Israel and levels of overall sympathy are relatively stable, there is a growing divide between Republicans and Democrats over policy towards Israel and the Middle East.

All of this presents a challenge to the ‘ozone layer’ of the special relationship which is bipartisan support for Israel. This is a major theme of my new book, *The Arab-Israeli Conflict in American Political Culture* (Cambridge University Press).

**Prof. Hillel Frisch:** I’m not an expert on US-Israeli relations, but I’m always very doubtful whether one-time events (like the speech in Congress) have long-term impact. Fairness seems to be a strong characteristic in US political culture, and I think most Americans probably regard it only as fair that an Israeli Prime Minister worries about Iranian intent to liquidate the Israeli state and its acquisition of nuclear means to do so. He deserved a hearing, even if it offended the President.

**Ambassador Arye Mekel:** I agree with Shmuel and Hillel. This is a passing personal crisis. The interests of Israel and the US continue to be the same on many issues, with many common adversaries: ISIS, Hamas, Hezbollah and more.
Dr. Jonathan Rynhold: First, Israel should encourage its friends within the Democratic Party to support candidates who back a relatively robust foreign policy. This probably makes sense for the Democrats in any case, since the American public as a whole is more hawkish than the Democratic party base.

Second, it can work with liberals to forge ties with Israeli groups that promote liberal causes that are not directly related to the conflict. The sharp contrast between the vibrant argumentative nature of Israel and the nature of Arab regimes is brought into sharp relief by actually visiting the region.

Third, Israel needs to be credible about working towards a peaceful two-state solution. Being credible about a two-state solution is increasingly a threshold issue or acid test for Democrats, in terms of support for Israel. If Israeli policy is not credible on this, then younger liberal Democrats will not take the other measures seriously. This does not mean that Israel has to give in to all Palestinian demands and create a Palestinian state tomorrow. But it does mean that Israel has to severely limit settlement construction.

Prof. Joshua Teitelbaum: Israel indeed needs to be perceived as pursuing peace with the Palestinians. It is in Israel’s strategic interest to be perceived as doing so as well as actually doing so.

Prof. Efraim Inbar: On the contrary! Israel needs to explain in Washington that, alas, the Palestinian national movement is not able to pursue a historic compromise with the Zionist movement, and therefore the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is going to linger as part of the landscape for quite a while. Moreover, with the Mideast in turmoil, Israel cannot be pushed to make dangerous territorial concessions.

We also need to maintain, and indeed enhance, the working relationships with the US military and intelligence communities, who are well aware of the tangible value of Israel’s contribution to US security. With much of our region in flames, the loss of Yemen and the chaos in Libya, Israel and Egypt will soon remain the only stable US allies in this critical region.

Dr. Max Singer: I think that the answer to this question lies in Israel itself. Israel needs to demonstrate as much internal unity as possible behind a constant commitment to defending itself and maintaining its commitment to its values. This will be respected in the US.

Prof. Hillel Frisch: I agree. Israel must continue to broadcast that it really is a sane, reasonable democracy that tries and succeeds, warts and all, to provide a home to all its citizens – Jews, Muslims and Christians, whites and blacks – in a region that dominates the world press.
in news about jihadist beheadings, sectarian strife and so many other forms of violence.

If Obama reaches a signed accord with Iran that is not to Israel’s liking, how should Israel respond?

Prof. Joshua Teitelbaum: Israel should express its opposition to the agreement and stress that all options are on the table. It should coordinate its response out of the limelight with like-minded members of Congress.

Dr. Shlomo Shpiro: Israel should intensify its engagement with likeminded allies and countries which also have severe misgivings over a nuclear-armed Iran, including Egypt, India, China, and indeed even indirectly Saudi Arabia. Strong deterrence, both bilaterally and regionally, is the way to go.

Prof. Efraim Inbar: The situation is more severe. US-Israel relations are on a collision course because Obama doesn’t have the will to act against Iran. There is no way to truly improve Obama’s deal with Iran; it is essentially flawed. It reminds me clearly of the North Korean agreement, which failed to stop that country from going nuclear. Israel is thus on its own, and it will have to find the right time to strike at Iran’s nuclear program kinetically. Sometimes small states have to oppose the policies of even the superpowers, and even its closest allies.

Prof. Hillel Frisch: Indeed, Israel must guarantee its own fate and stress that it is free to act to ensure its defense.

Prof. Eytan Gilboa: Yet Israel is not free to use military force because there won’t be international support for such an action. Israel can only rely on congressional reservations and actions against the sanctions relief promised by Obama.

Maj. Gen. (res.) Yaacov Amidror: The emerging agreement with Iran is very bad. We should bear in mind that Iran’s leaders openly state that Israel must be destroyed, calling it a “one-bomb state.” But the truth is that even without using nuclear arms against Israel, a nuclear Iran will make the Middle East far more dangerous.

In this situation, the Israeli government must continue to point out the agreement’s weaknesses and the dangers it poses to Israel, to the Middle East and to the whole world. In the spirit of cooperation that is acceptable to the Americans, not a word of Israel’s closed talks with the US must be divulged, but Israel must also not be shy about attacking the agreement on the basis of the material that is reported in the media and on the basis of the knowledge that Israel has from its own sources.

At the end of the day, Israel must make it clear it has not signed the agreement and is not bound by it. Israel must formulate its policy on the basis that “a bad agreement is worse than no agreement,” “all options are on the table” and “Israel must protect itself on its own.”
The Israeli public has a strongly positive attitude toward the United States and continues to perceive the U.S. as a loyal ally of Israel. At the same time, the Israeli public believes that the Obama administration has greatly weakened America’s standing in the Middle East, and thinks that its policies towards Iran, ISIS and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are simply “bad.”

These are among the results of a comprehensive poll of Israeli public opinion conducted in December 2014 by the BESA Center in tandem with its international conference on “America’s Standing in the World.” The poll was a follow-up to BESA Center surveys on these issues from 2007, 2009, and 2012.

Among the key poll findings:

- **96** percent believe that good relations with the U.S. are important or very important to Israel. **74** percent believe that in an existential crisis (“a moment of truth”), the U.S. will come to Israel’s aid. A majority of Israelis (58 percent) think the main reason for American support of Israel is Israel’s value to the U.S. as a strategic partner.

- In 2012, the majority of Israelis (51 percent) termed Obama’s attitudes towards Israel as positive; in 2014, that number declined to **37** percent.

- **65** percent of Israelis believe that since the election of President Obama, America’s position in the Middle East has been weakened or very weakened.

- **52** percent of Israelis term Obama administration policies on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as “bad” (17 percent term them good); **49** percent term Obama policies regarding Iran as bad (16 term them as good); and **47** percent term administration handling of the confrontation with ISIS as bad (25 percent say good).

- **79** percent of Israelis believe that American Jews continue to be close to Israel, but Israelis worry that American Jews will distance themselves from Israel in future.

- If diplomatic efforts fail to stop the Iranian drive towards a nuclear bomb, **53** percent of Israelis would support an Israeli military strike on Iran (down from 66 percent in 2012). Only **45** percent would support a strike in a situation that the U.S. opposes Israeli action.

- Israelis perceive the country’s major threats to be: terrorism (88 percent); the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (79 percent); radical Islam (79 percent); and development of an Iranian nuclear weapons (75 percent).

Dr. Jonathan Rynhold and Dr. Yael Bloch-Elkon said that “this poll shows Israelis to be continually optimistic about America and the American people’s friendship for Israel into the future. But Israelis are very apprehensive about current US administration policies, which they think have dangerously weakened America and undermined Israeli security. We believe that it is Obama’s perceived hostility towards Israel that accounts for the greater reluctance of Israelis to approve a military strike on Iran without coordination with the U.S. Israelis are afraid that under Obama there might be a deterioration of U.S.-Israel relations that is dangerous to Israeli security.”
Prof. Eliot Cohen of SAIS and Prof. Henry Nau of George Washington University launched the conference by sketching out the contours of retrenchment and disengagement from global affairs that mark Obama administration policies. Prof. Steven David of Johns Hopkins University sought to downplay this, arguing that Obama is a reluctant realist, not an isolationist. The contrasting approaches became a centerpiece of debate throughout the conference.

The conference was keynoted by US Ambassador Daniel B. Shapiro, who used the opportunity to make it clear that President Obama would not give up on peace negotiations with the Palestinians, even during the final two years of his presidency. “I have no doubt in my mind that President Obama will remain deeply and personally engaged in national security affairs through these remaining two years, advancing our interests in every region, and using the full range of tools at our disposal, including consultations with Congress and acting on his own authority,” Shapiro said.

“We see no alternative to achieving a two-state solution that would achieve Israelis’ and Palestinians’ legitimate goals, and that would protect our own interests…. There is no other solution that is viable or that would preserve Israel’s status as a Jewish state and a democracy. For all the understandable doubts harbored by Israelis and Palestinians, there is no alternative, and we believe it can be done. So we are committed to keeping that hope alive.”

Shapiro also reiterated the administration’s commitment to preventing Iran from obtaining a nuclear bomb, and its intention to combat the spread of ISIS territorial gains.

A series of experts analyzed how Obama administration policies were affecting strategic affairs around the world, including Prof. Jian (Jay) Wang of the U. of Southern California (China),
A star-studded panel of former senior policymakers disagreed about the vector and efficacy of Obama administration foreign policy. Debating were Maj. Gen. (res.) Yaacov Amidror, Rosshandler Fellow at the BESA Center (at podium) and Prof. Uzi Arad of the IDC (seated, second from left) – both former Israeli National Security Advisors, Steven Simon, former director of Mideast affairs at the US National Security Council (center), Rafael Bardaji, former Spanish National Security Advisor (second from right), and Ambassador Shivshankar Menon, former Indian National Security Advisor (right).

Later this year, Routledge is to publish a book with selected conference papers, edited by Prof. Efraim Inbar and Dr. Jonathan Rynhold.
Critical Issues in the Eastern Mediterranean

November 2014 conference in Washington at the Philip Merrill Center for Strategic Studies at Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies. With Ambassador Eric Edelman, Dr. Camille Pecastaing, Dr. Thomas Keaney and Dr. Svante Cornell of SAIS; and Dr. Aristotle Tziampiris, Dr. Athanasios Platias, Dr. Petros Liacouras, and Dr. Nikolaos Farantouris of University of Piraeus. Pictured are (from left): Dr. John Sitilides of Trilogy Advisors, Maj. Gen. (res.) Yaacov Amidror and Prof. Efraim Inbar of the BESA Center, and Dr. Mary Bossis of the University of Piraeus. Part of the BESA Center’s Peretz and Sheindel Sherman Strategic Dialogues Program.

International Reaction to Population Transfer in Occupied Territories

September 2014 lecture by Prof. Eugene Kontorovich of Northwestern University and the Kohelet Forum.

Strategy and Politics in the Eastern Mediterranean

October 2014 seminar with associates of the Cyprus Center for European and International Affairs: Ms. Anna Koukikides-Procopiou, Prof. Andreas Theophanous, Dr. George Kentas and Dr. Theodoros Tsakiris. Part of the BESA Center’s Peretz and Sheindel Sherman Strategic Dialogues Program.
LECTURES, SEMINARS AND CONFERENCES

September 2014 conference on the summer war in Gaza between Israel and Hamas. Minister of Defense Lt. Gen. (res.) Moshe (Bogie) Yaalon and Minister of Intelligence Dr. Yuval Steinitz headlined the conference, and argued that Israel successfully met its limited goals for punishing and deterring the Hamas and destroying most of its offensive missile and tunnel attack capabilities. Also participating were Maj. Gen. (res.) Israel Ziv, former IDF Head of Operations, Maj. Gen. Gershon Hacohen, former Northern Corps and National Defense College Commander, Maj. Gen. Tamir Hayman, head of the Training and Doctrine Division in the General Staff, Prof. Uzi Arad, former National Security Advisor, and BESA Center associates Mr. Amir Rapaport, Mr. Uzi Rubin, Prof. Eytan Gilboa, Prof. Hillel Frisch, and Maj. Gen. (res.) Yaakov Amidror.

MINISTER OF DEFENSE LT. GEN. (RES.) MOSHE (BOGIE) YAALON

CONFERENCE

Military and Political Lessons of Operation Protective Edge

From left: Professors Eytan Gilboa and Shmuel Sandler, General Yaalon and Prof. Daniel Hershkowitz (president of Bar-Ilan U.)

Mr. Uzi Rubin, Prof. Efraim Inbar, Minister Yuval Steinitz, General Amidror and Prof. Uzi Arad.

Maj. Gen. Gershon Hacohen

Maj. Gen. Tamir Hayman

Mr. Amir Rapaport

Maj. Gen. (res.) Israel Ziv
SEMINAR

European Perspectives

December 2014 seminar with (from left) Dr. Tsila Herscho of the BESA Center, Dr. Jarosław Ćwiek-Karpowicz of the Polish Institute of International Affairs, Prof. Efraim Inbar, Dr. Patrycja Sasnal of the Polish Institute of International Affairs, and Prof. Anna Geifman of Bar-Ilan U. Part of the BESA Center’s Peretz and Sheindel Sherman Strategic Dialogues Program.

LECTURE

India under Modi: Foreign Policy Challenges

December 2014 lecture by Prof. P. R. Kumaraswamy of Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi.

CONFERENCE

America’s Standing in the World: Image and Reality

December 2014 international conference. See article on 8-9.

LECTURE

Great Power Interactions in Asia and the Middle East

January 2015 conference in Singapore at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Nanyang Technological University. With (from left) Maj. Gen. (res.) Yaacov Amidror, Mr. Uzi Rubin, Prof. Efraim Inbar and Prof. Hillel Frisch of the BESA Center. Part of the BESA Center’s Peretz and Sheindel Sherman Strategic Dialogues Program.
CONFERENCES

CONFERENCE
National Vision and National Security

LECTURE
American Jewish Attitudes towards Israel
March 2015 lecture by Prof. Jerome A. Chanes, fellow at the Center for Jewish Studies at the CUNY Graduate Center.

LECTURE
How Iran Evades Sanctions
March 2015 lecture by Dr. Emanuele Ottolenghi of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies.

SEMINAR
Greek-Israeli Entente
March 2015 seminar with (from left) Dr. Aristotle Tzampiris of the U. of Piraeus, and Prof. Efraim Inbar and Ambassador Arye Mekel of the BESA Center.
As Israel was nearing its March 2015 election, the two main candidates for defense minister held a debate at the BESA Center.

Lt. Gen. (res.) Moshe (Bogie) Yaalon of the Likud Party (who has been serving as Minister of Defense for the past two years) and Maj. Gen. (res.) Amos Yadlin (who was at that time the Zionist Union candidate for defense minister) outlined their visions for security policy in back-to-back speeches.

Also addressing the event was Maj. Gen. (res.) Uzi Dayan, former head of Israel’s National Security Council and now chairman of the independent Council for Israeli National Security – which cosponsored the event.

Yaalon and Yadlin presented approaches to Iranian and Palestinian issues that contained only slightly-nuanced differences, mainly relating to the degree of cooperation or confrontation with Washington entailed.
Perfect Storm in the Middle East
The tectonic changes sweeping across the Arab world, stretching back to the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979, make for a complicated strategic environment that could take decades or centuries to stabilize. There is little that Israel or the West can or should do to affect the turbulent situation. Israel must identify and focus only on the most acute regional threats and confront them. This central threat is a nuclear-armed Iran.

Israel’s Role in the Struggle over the Iranian Nuclear Project
Brig. Gen. (res.) Yossi Kuperwasser | April 2015
Israel has never believed that there is any chance of the Iranian regime willingly changing its outlook or its aims, or being willing to give up its nuclear aspirations – unless forced to do so. And thus, Iranian commitments to abide by a soft accord with the P5+1 are entirely unreliable. Once obtaining full sanctions relief, Iran will maintain options to breakout and sneak-out with advanced enrichment infrastructure. Consequently, Israel must maintain freedom of action in protecting itself against the Iranian nuclear threat; a threat that will persist beyond an accord.

Changing Japanese Defense Policies
Eyal Ben-Ari | February 2015
East Asia is gradually facing numerous volatile security issues. Japan is reacting to this growing environment through constitutional reinterpretations that entail a rational progression towards the use of armed forces in order to meet security challenges.

Ties between Israel and Azerbaijan
Dr. Alexander Murinson | October 2014
Azerbaijan has emerged as one of Israel’s closest friends in the Muslim world. Israeli-Azerbaijani ties have expanded to include oil and weapon supplies, as well as cooperation in information technology, medicine, water purification and agriculture.

A Preliminary Assessment of the 2014 Gaza War
Prof. Efraim Inbar and Amir Rapaport | December 2014
(BESA Policy Memorandum Series) This paper presents the strategic rationale of the campaign, and analyzes the IDF’s military performance. It concludes that defeat of Hamas was left for the next round of hostilities.
Maj. Gen. (res.) Yaacov Amidror, the Greg and Anne Rosshandler Senior Fellow at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, is former national security advisor to Prime Minister Netanyahu and former head of the Intelligence Analysis and Research Division in IDF Military Intelligence. He has written extensively over the past year for the BESA Center and in the Israeli press about the dangers of the Iranian nuclear weapons program.


Even without using nuclear arms against Israel, a nuclear Iran will make the Middle East a much more dangerous place in at least two ways.

One way is the significance of Iran’s “nuclear umbrella” over the leadership of terrorist groups and hostile countries. It is obvious that Hezbollah would thrive in such a situation, while Israel would not be able to respond or prevent it from acting even when it felt threatened. The decision-makers would constantly be second-guessing about Iranian involvement and the possibility of getting into a conflict with a nuclear superpower.

Under this umbrella, the terrorist groups could grow far more dangerous in terms of conventional weapons and act against Israel around its borders and throughout the world. The Iranians and their allies have planned dozens of acts of global terrorism in recent years, and this sort of umbrella would enable them to act much more brazenly.

On the second, broader plane, it is clear Iran would become the leading regional superpower. Whether the rumors are true that this is the direction in which the U.S. is heading and that Washington intends to build up relations with Iran far beyond the agreement, to the point of building a regional alliance with it, Iran would have decisive influence in the region.

Iran’s status would grow extremely strong once it succeeded in getting the U.S. permission to become a nuclear threshold state.

This influence would have significant implications for the future of the Middle East, since Iran is the first of the region’s countries to be ruled by clerics, and it will do everything it can to propagate its own world view. The stronger Iran becomes the more anyone who dreams of seeing the Middle East moving away from totalitarianism and toward democracy can forget about it.

But beyond that, the important Sunni states in the Middle East will act to protect themselves. They will lose all trust in the U.S., which surrendered to Iran’s trickery in the talks, and will act to obtain nuclear arms for themselves. These countries, such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Turkey, and perhaps others, will never agree to go on without nuclear capability when the leading state possesses it.

A Middle East in which four Muslim countries possess nuclear weapons will be difficult to keep calm in order to stave off disaster. The risk that such arms could reach the hands of terrorist elements would grow significantly greater as well. Beyond that, from a global perspective, we would have to consider that a Middle East with nuclear weapons would call into question the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which is considered to have prevented the spread of nuclear arms.

It seems that the source of the talks’ failure, which is reminiscent of the failure of the U.S.’s talks with North Korea, lies in the Iranians realizing two things during the negotiations.

First, the Iranians realized that even though the American president said all options were on the table and even built a credible military option, the U.S. had no desire to use that option, no matter what. The absence of a stick in the negotiating room lifted a great deal of pressure off the Iranians. The second realization came in the form of a statement from a White House spokesperson that an agreement with Iran would be the president’s greatest success during his term.

This statement, together with the superpowers’ acceptance of Iran’s main demands regarding the continued existence of their enrichment capability, led the Iranians to the conclusion that the U.S. wanted an agreement more than Iran needed one.

The realization that the American desire for an agreement is at any price contributed to Iran’s near-uncompromising stance. The Americans helped the Iranians a great deal in the talks by not intensifying the sanctions that had created difficulties for Iran. Keeping the sanctions at their level, without increasing them, released a great deal of internal pressure in Iran.
Generals Amidror and Kuperwasser sound the alarm over the P5+1 framework of nuclear understandings with Iran

Brig. Gen. (res.) Yossi Kuperwasser was also head of the Intelligence Analysis and Research Division in IDF Military Intelligence, and was until recently, director general of the Ministry of Strategic Affairs. He recently published two major studies through the BESA Center on Israel’s role in the struggle against the Iranian military program.

Their full studies can be found at www.besacenter.org


We are currently at a decisive stage in the struggle over the fate of the Iranian nuclear program, with the center of attention being the negotiations between the P5+1 and Iran.

The question currently being aired is whether Iran will be willing to accept a watered-down list of restrictions on its nuclear activity, in return for the incremental lifting of a range of sanctions currently in place against it.

At the heart of this question is the width of the proposed Iranian nuclear threshold, that is: Under the terms of the proposed agreement, how many months will it take for Iran to acquire sufficient quantities of weapons-grade enriched uranium for an initial nuclear explosive device, and then to weaponize it, should it choose to do so? Such a step would of course be in breach of Iran’s declarations and commitments, but these are in any case widely considered to be entirely unreliable and inconsequential.

A large number of parameters will determine the answer to this question, among them: the number of centrifuges that Iran will be able to maintain, their type, the connections between them and how they are operated; the level of enrichment to be allowed; the quantity of enriched material that Iran will possess at any given time, and what will be done with any enriched material beyond the permitted amount; the kinds of research and development to be conducted on uranium enrichment; the future of the secret Iranian facilities, in particular the underground enrichment facility at Qom; what will be done with the decommissioned centrifuges, and with the physical infrastructure on which they are constructed; the future of the components of the plutogenic track, in particular the reactor at Arak.

Also: How Iran is to report its past nuclear activity, with an emphasis on the possible military dimensions of this activity (PMDs); which limitations will be placed on Iran in terms of developing ballistic missiles; the length of time that the agreement will be valid, in terms of the restrictions it places on Iran; the mechanisms for inspection and supervision of the agreement’s implementation; the restrictions to be placed on Iran’s nuclear cooperation with other countries; and how the sanctions are to be lifted.

But in addition to keeping Iran at a reasonable remove from nuclear weapons status, the Obama administration seems to have an additional goal in mind: To bring Iran on board to efforts to stabilize the Middle East. For this, Obama is willing to pay a significant price, in terms of the legitimization of Iran’s central role in the region.

As a result, the United States has of course no interest in appearing to be working towards a change in the regime in Tehran, despite its hostility toward the United States and Israel, and thus restricts itself to paying lip service to the protection of human rights in Iran under this cruel regime. Beyond this, the United States has a further goal: to prevent Israeli uses of force against Iran that would lead to an escalation. This goal is almost as important as preventing Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons.

Thus, the administration’s approach to dealing with the threat inherent in the Iranian nuclear program has not been only, or not even mainly, to threaten Iran, but rather to engage it in dialogue, directly or in the context of multilateral talks, and to offer enticements.

Hence the Clinton administration refrained from acting decisively against the Iranian missile program, concerned that that might damage relations with Moscow at what was a sensitive time, and the Bush administration refrained from adopting any real sanctions in response to the Iranian nuclear program, satisfying itself with the deluxe sanctions imposed by the UN Security Council.

The Obama administration has opposed the delineation of red lines (apart from the obvious red line of actually producing nuclear weapons), and has opposed any move to deepen economic sanctions, although it should be stated that once more severe sanctions were adopted, against its will, it carried out the decision impressively. (It also dismissed the option of simply allowing the Iranian program to go ahead, despite the fact that there were voices within the administration that supported this delusional idea.)

This assumption has proven to be unfounded. This assumption reflects an error of projecting one’s own logic onto the rival. In practice, the easing of sanctions has only reduced Iran’s incentive to make concessions, but the administration has refused to acknowledge its mistake, and continues to pursue its policy and to seek justifications for it.
Prof. Efraim Inbar, director of the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, has penned a study on “The New Strategic Equation in the Eastern Mediterranean.” He argues that the old regional architecture, which was based on American preponderance, has collapsed. “American political influence has been considerably weakened. Europe, an impotent international actor, cannot fill the political vacuum created. Russia under Putin eagerly entered this vacuum, beefing up its naval presence, while Western influence in the Eastern Mediterranean is also being challenged by the growing radical Islamic influence in the region. Turkey, no longer a trusted Western ally, has its own Mediterranean agenda and the military capability to project force to attain its goals, Inbar writes.”

It is not clear that Western powers, particularly the US, are aware of the possibility of losing the eastern part of the Mediterranean Sea to Russia/and or radical Islam, or are preparing in any way to forestall such a scenario. Foolishly, they seem to believe that the so-called “Arab Spring” still heralds an improved political environment and that Turkey represents “moderate Islam.” American naiveté and European gullibility could become extremely costly in strategic terms.

Inbar says that in the absence of an American commitment to maintain a strong presence in the East Mediterranean, the US should encourage the strengthening relationship between Israel, Greece and Cyprus. Moreover, it should sensitize its Mediterranean allies, such as France and Italy, to the growing threats in this region and press them to cooperate with Israel and Greece. Washington should also convey to Moscow and Ankara its positions and interests to minimize destabilizing acts. Unfortunately, the success of American diplomacy under the weak Obama administration is not guaranteed.

Threats to the freedom of shipping routes and the need to cooperate against terrorist threats could constitute an awakening call for Western powers. This could lead to greater willingness to commit military assets to neutralize emerging challenges. The economic crisis of the Eurozone, however, has so far led to cuts in defense outlays.

Egypt in the post Muslim Brotherhood rule is an important regional actor that shares many of the Israeli and Greek concerns. It can be incorporated in the building of a new security architecture that is based on regional powers. Every effort should be made by Western powers to prevent Egypt from moving closer to Russia.

For the time being, Cyprus, Greece and Israel, are largely left on their own. Thus, Greece should declare its own exclusive economic zone (EEZ) and reach an agreement with Cyprus on their mutual EEZs. By doing so, Greek-Cypriot-Israeli energy cooperation could be propelled forward. Obviously, Greece should not neglect its naval capabilities.

The Israeli perspective on the East Mediterranean region is colored by its vital need to maintain the freedom of maritime routes for its foreign trade, and to provide security for its newly found gas fields. While its strategic position has generally improved in the Middle East, Jerusalem sees deterioration in the environment in the East Mediterranean. Growing Russian presence and Turkish assertiveness is inimical to Israel’s interest. Developments along the shores of the Eastern Mediterranean also decrease stability and enhance the likelihood of Islamist challenges.

This is particularly true at Israel’s borders. Egypt struggles against radical Islamists in Sinai that threaten Israel’s southern border. As result of the civil war in Syria, Israel’s northern border is no longer quiet. So far Hizballah maintains the dominant position in Lebanon, while Hamas is entrenching its grip over Gaza. Both continue to be beneficiaries of Iranian military support, posing a considerable terrorist and missile threat to Israel.

This predicament clearly dictates greater investment in Israel’s navy to fend off potential challenges. The need to be able to project force to great distances has remained constant (also because of the Iranian nuclear challenge). Moreover, cooperation with Greece, Cyprus and Egypt has to be strengthened in order to minimize challenges to stability in the Mediterranean waters. As greater terrorist and missile threats develop along Israel’s borders, it becomes necessary to enhance the magnitude and quality of the defensive forces on the borders. Moreover, Israel needs larger expenditures for a build-up of the various layers of its anti-missile defenses primarily to protect its strategic assets, such as airfields, ports, power plants and deployment areas of the IDF.

“In civilizational terms, the East Mediterranean served as a bone of contention in the past between Persia and the ancient Greeks and between the Ottomans and Venetians. It is the focal point for the struggle between East and West. After the Cold War, the borders of the West shifted eastward. Now, they could move in the other direction,” Inbar concludes.

Efraim Inbar: “The longstanding security architecture in the Eastern Mediterranean is collapsing”
Uzi Rubin is widely considered Israel’s preeminent expert on missile defense. He was founder and director of the Arrow defense program against long-range missiles in the Israeli Ministry of Defense. For the past eight years, he has written extensively for the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies on all aspects relating to rocket and missile attacks against Israel, and Israel’s defensive systems (such as Iron Dome).

Earlier this year, Rubin published an analysis of Israel’s air and missile defense during the 2014 Gaza War, a war in which Israel was subjected to the fiercest and longest reaching rocket assault in its history.

More than 4,500 rockets and mortar bombs were fired from Gaza during the fighting. The rocket fire interrupted civilian air traffic to and from Israel’s major international airport and threatened Israel’s gas fields in the Mediterranean. The Palestinians added an air threat to their rocket assault, launching armed UAVs toward Israel’s main metropolitan centers. In spite of intensive efforts by Israel’s Air Force and Navy to destroy the launchers, the Palestinian rocket fire was neither silenced nor reduced in intensity until an agreed cease fire ended the fighting.

Rubin writes: “The Palestinians’ offensive achievement was matched by Israel’s defensive success. Israel’s Air Defense Command deployed an efficient active defense array consisting of the Iron Dome rocket defense system and the Patriot air defense system. The nine Iron Dome batteries that protected most of Israel’s civilian areas shot down nine out of every ten rockets aimed at their defended areas. The Patriot batteries shot down Palestinian armed UAVs and brought their assault to a full stop.”

“Therefore, the casualties and damage from the Gaza rockets were significantly less than in previous rocket assaults. Israel’s active defenses provided the sinews for Israel’s public resilience, safeguarded Israel’s international air and sea ports, and allowed most Israelis in the threatened localities to continue their daily lives with minimal interruptions.”

Rubin notes that skeptics in Israel and the US have voiced doubt about the disclosed achievements of the Iron Dome system. US critics used commercial and private videos of rocket interceptions to allege that the system was significantly less successful than claimed. The low number of casualties was attributed to them to the efficiency of Israel’s public alert system and extensive shelter network, as well as the supposedly low lethality of the Gaza rocket warheads. However, Rubin says that a comparison of losses and damages in the 2014 Gaza War to those from the 2006 Lebanon War, when no active defense system existed, refutes the critics’ allegations.

Rubin: “The 2014 Gaza War exposed the powerful war machine that the Gaza Palestinian factions had been building since the middle of the previous decade. In spite of Israel’s defensive success, the fighting revealed gaps that require corrective action, including adding Iron Dome systems, improving the capability to shoot down UAVs, countering the mortar bomb threats, and providing the Israeli navy with the means to defend Israel’s energy sources in the Mediterranean against rockets.”
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A GAZA CEASEFIRE WOULD BE A STRATEGIC MISS
David M. Weinberg | July 2014
Israel hasn’t yet effected a significant change in the security balance versus Hamas in the Gaza Strip. A draw with Hamas is strategically unsatisfactory.

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MOWING THE GRASS IN GAZA
Prof. Efraim Inbar and Dr. Eitan Shamir | July 2014
Against an implacable, well-entrenched, non-state enemy like the Hamas, Israel needs to “mow the grass” once in a while in order to degrade enemy capabilities.

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The current Israel-Hamas war will have broad strategic implications that go far beyond the immediate results on the battlefield.

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Israel must decide whether it is willing to tolerate a chronic Hamas threat or risk a long, difficult operation to get rid of it.

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WHERE ARE YOU GOING, PRESIDENT OBAMA?
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WHAT IS TO BE DONE ABOUT GAZA?
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Operation Protective Edge has not weakened or threatened Hamas enough to encourage them to accept a ceasefire. Israel has no choice but to continue to attack Hamas.

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A MIDDLE WAY FOR THE GAZA FIGHT
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There is a middle way between more of the same and retaking Gaza. The proposed middle way would be an IDF attack with limited, achievable military objectives.

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HAMAS CHEERLEADERS: PROFESSIONAL FAILURES OF THE WESTERN MEDIA IN GAZA
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Western media coverage of Operation Protective Edge has been marred by deep anti-Israel bias and serious failures, both professional and ethical.

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PLAYING WITH TERROR: HOW TO STOP QATAR’S SUPPORT FOR HAMAS
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Qatar has become the leading backer of Hamas terrorism, and the country’s wings need to be clipped.
IRAN REMAINS THE THREAT IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Prof. Efraim Inbar | October 2014

The novelty of the Islamic State, as well as the magnitude of the threat it poses, are greatly exaggerated. Iran remains the main threat to stability in the Middle East.

ISRAEL MUST BE PREPARED

Maj. Gen. (res.) Yaacov Amidror | September 2014

The balance between Israel and Hamas will be decided by Israel’s response to the first instance of rocket fire.

FRUSTRATION OVER THE FINAL OUTCOME OF OPERATION PROTECTIVE EDGE IS MISPLACED. THE ISRAELI PUBLIC NEEDS TO UNDERSTAND THAT ISRAEL DID NOT SET OUT TO TOPPLE HAMAS.

Maj. Gen. (res.) Yaacov Amidror | September 2014

MISPLACED FRUSTRATION

Frustration over the final outcome of Operation Protective Edge is misplaced. The Israeli public needs to understand that Israel did not set out to topple Hamas.

Since the launch of Operation Protective Edge, Israel has made a series of wise tactical choices that contribute to the diplomatic and military effort.

Wise Tactical Choices in Gaza

Maj. Gen. (res.) Yaacov Amidror | August 2014

A revision of Israel’s conceptual strategic compass is needed, particularly regarding the concepts of ‘deterrence’ and ‘decisive victory’.

Israel must be prepared

Maj. Gen. (res.) Yaacov Amidror | September 2014

The IDF must be careful not to make too many operational changes based on the lessons of Operation Protective Edge.

The overall failure of the Framework Agreement to halt North Korea’s nuclear program offers an important lesson in analyzing the potential effectiveness of a new nuclear agreement with Iran.

The IDF must be prepared

Maj. Gen. (res.) Yaacov Amidror | August 2014

The relationship between Israel and Hamas will be decided by Israel’s response to the first instance of rocket fire.

Negotiating with Iran: Lessons from America’s Failed Nuclear Accord with North Korea

Dr. Alon Levkowitz | October 2014

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Prof. Hillel Frisch | October 2014

The disproportionate dispensation of international aid to the Palestinians is discriminatory and biased.

Between a Hollow Success and a Legacy of Failure

Maj. Gen. (res.) Yaacov Amidror | December 2014

As the West’s nuclear negotiations with Iran heads toward additional extensions, it is likely that future negotiations will focus on the concessions Iran seeks to secure.

Iran Remains the Greatest Challenge in U.S.-Israel Relations

Maj. Gen. (res.) Yaacov Amidror | November 2014

If a “permanent agreement” with Iran fails to guarantee the bare minimum safeguards against Iran’s nuclearization that Israel feels is necessary, the relationship between the U.S. and Israel will truly be put to the test.

Iran remains the greatest challenge in U.S.-Israel relations

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During Operation Protective Edge, Hamas was clearly defeated, but was not destroyed.

Between a hollow success and a legacy of failure

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Conduct of Operations in Limited Scale Conflicts

Maj. Gen. (res.) David Ivry | August 2014

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Conduct of operations in limited scale conflicts

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RESETTING THE MIDEAST PEACE PROCESS

David M. Weinberg | March 2015

Netanyahu should capitalize on his sweeping victory to reset the diplomatic table by outlining a pragmatic process in which Israel can participate, and to draw clear Israeli red lines as to acceptable contours of a solution.

A PROBLEM OF NUCLEAR PROPORTIONS

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The proposed agreement with Iran is very bad. Even without using nuclear arms against Israel, a nuclear Iran will make the Middle East far more dangerous.

SECURITY CHALLENGES OF THE NEW ISRAELI GOVERNMENT

Prof. Efraim Inbar | March 2015

The new Likud-led government must thwart the nuclear program of Iran and prevent Tehran from gaining dominant control of the region.

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THERE IS NO BETTER DEAL WITH IRAN

Prof. Efraim Inbar | April 2015

The steps suggested by Israel and other critics to improve the efficacy of the nuclear deal with Iran will have little effect. The deal is basically dangerous in nature, and needs to be rejected outright.

MIDDLE EAST TURMOIL AND ISRAEL'S SECURITY

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The American-Iranian entente is the most serious and dangerous challenge to Israel’s national security in the near future.

STRATEGIC FOLLY IN THE FRAMEWORK AGREEMENT WITH IRAN

Maj. Gen. (res.) Yaacov Amidror | April 2015

The U.S. is capable of bringing Iran’s nuclear program to a halt. Alas, it simply is choosing not to do so. Israel will now have to decide whether to acquiesce in Iran’s nuclear drive or prepare to confront it.

ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS OF IRAN SANCTIONS RELIEF

Dr. Gil Feiler | April 2015

The lifting of sanctions on Iran will allow Teheran to increase its support for terrorist groups across the region, and bolster Iran’s political and military power.
Obama’s Best Friend?
The Alarming Evolution of US-Turkish Relations
Dr. Ariel Cohen
Shifts in Turkey’s domestic political orientation have led to a change in Ankara’s perceptions of its foreign policy roles and capabilities. The US has misunderstood and largely ignored this shift, failing to understand the implications of Turkey’s transformation under the AKP. A strong and comprehensive policy towards Turkey is long overdue.

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Brig. Gen. (res.) Moni Chorev
Brig. Gen. (res.) Moni Chorev specializes in military and strategic doctrine, and evaluation of military performance. He served for 25 years in the IDF in lead combat positions, including division commander, Givati brigade commander, and commander of the IDF Officer Training School. He holds an MBA from Ben-Gurion University, an MA in security studies from the US National Defense University, and a BA from Tel Aviv University.

Dr. Eado Hecht
Lt. Col. (res.) Dr. Eado Hecht (Ph.D. Bar-Ilan University) specializes in military theory, history and operations. He teaches at Bar-Ilan and Haifa universities and at the IDF Command and General Staff College, and serves on the Editorial Advisory Panel of The Journal of Military Operations.