

## **Israel's Requirements for Defensible Borders In a Rapidly Changing Middle East**

Dore Gold - Prepared Statement before the Foreign Affairs Committee of the U.S. House of Representatives,  
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Israel is entering an extremely dangerous period in the year ahead. It is not facing an imminent military attack, but rather is confronting a new diplomatic assault that could well strip it of the territorial defenses in the West Bank that have provided for its security for over forty years. This applies particularly to its formidable eastern barrier in the Jordan Valley, which, if lost, would leave Israel eight or nine miles wide and in a very precarious position against the threats that are likely to emerge to its east, in the years ahead.

Traditional U.S. policy indeed recognized that Israel is not expected to withdraw from all the territories it captured in the 1967 Six-Day War. This was enshrined in the language of UN Security Council Resolution 242, which was the basis of successive peace treaties between Israel and the Arab states. This key element of Resolution 242 also appeared in repeated letters of assurance to Israel by U.S. secretaries of state from Henry Kissinger to Warren Christopher. In 1988, Secretary of State George Shultz reiterated: "Israel will never negotiate from, or return to the lines of partition or to the 1967 borders."<sup>1</sup>

More recently, the April 14, 2004, presidential letter to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon also spoke explicitly about Israel's right to "defensible borders" and to the need of it being able to defend itself by itself. The latter point implicitly acknowledged Israel's doctrine of self-reliance, by which the Israel Defense Forces were to guarantee Israel's survival and not international troops or even NATO. Two months later, that letter was confirmed by massive bipartisan majorities in both the House of Representatives and the Senate. Significantly, it also ruled out the notion that Israel would be expected to withdraw in the West Bank to the 1967 lines, which were only armistice lines, and not internationally recognized borders.

This principle in fact had already been underscored decades earlier by the main author of Resolution 242, the British ambassador to the UN in 1967, Lord Caradon, who admitted on PBS: "We didn't say there should be a withdrawal to the '67 line....We all knew – the boundaries of '67 were not drawn as permanent frontiers, they were a cease-fire line of a couple of decades earlier."<sup>2</sup>

### **A New Quartet Initiative?**

Yet today, Britain, France, and Germany are lobbying for a radically new Middle Eastern initiative with the UN Secretariat and the European Union, which, along with the U.S. and Russia, are members of the Middle East Quartet. What they are proposing is that the Quartet detail already the outlines of an Israeli-Palestinian treaty with the hope that international endorsement of key Palestinian demands, like borders, will prompt Mahmoud Abbas to return to negotiations with Israel. The Quartet will have to make a decision about this proposal, perhaps as early as April 15.

But Britain, France, and Germany are not just acting as facilitators, for they are insisting that Israel must accept an agreement on borders based on the lines that existed before the 1967 Six-Day War. This was confirmed in public by British Foreign Secretary William Hague last week during an address at Chatham House in London, where he reiterated these terms.<sup>3</sup> In Washington, there have been both public and private efforts

underway to press President Barack Obama to join the Europeans and issue his own blueprint for Israel's future borders, based on the same territorial parameters.<sup>4</sup> It is only known that the Obama administration has neither embraced nor renounced the 2004 U.S. letter to Israel concerning its right to “defensible borders.”

### **Strategic Uncertainty Across the Middle East**

Amazingly, these new demands of Israel, which would be problematic in any event, are being proposed at the worst possible time, that is, precisely when the entire Middle East looks like it is engulfed in flames. Rebellions against central governments have been spreading from Yemen to Syria, as well as from Egypt to Bahrain. This will hopefully lead in the long-term to accountable and democratic governments. But in the short- and medium-term, the results could be highly destabilizing and bring to power far more radical forces that could seek renewed conflict.

In fact, on March 22, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates admitted in an interview in the Washington Post:

“I think we should be alert to the fact that outcomes are not predetermined and that it's not necessarily the case that everything has a happy ending....We are in dark territory and nobody knows what the outcome will be.”<sup>5</sup>

What this means is that just as Israel faces complete strategic uncertainty with regard to the future of the Middle East, it is being asked to acquiesce to unprecedented concessions that could put its very future at risk. This is clearly misguided advice.

First, how can Israel be expected to sign agreements, predicated on its withdrawing from strategic territories, like the Jordan Valley, when it cannot be certain if the governments it negotiated with will even be there in the future?

Look what is happening in Egypt after the fall of President Mubarak, where senior political figures are already saying that they will have to re-examine the 1979 Egyptian-Israeli Treaty of Peace. No one can provide a guarantee to Israel that the regimes ruling today in Syria, Jordan, or Saudi Arabia will not be overthrown. In the West Bank, the regime of Mahmoud Abbas remains in power largely due to the deployment of the Israel Defense Forces throughout the area and their counter-terrorist operations against Hamas and its allies. Were Israel to pull out of the West Bank, under present circumstances, it could not depend on Abbas remaining, regardless of what is happening to Arab regimes today across the region. In short, the degree of strategic uncertainty for Israel, given current political trends around it, has increased sharply.

### **The Rising Profile of the Islamists and the Muslim Brotherhood**

What makes this concern even more compelling is the fact that the strongest political forces today that are now vying for power in the Arab world and seek to replace the current regimes there are tied to the Muslim Brotherhood network. This is already evident in Egypt, where the Muslim Brotherhood had an extremely low profile when President Mubarak was toppled, but since that time its role in Egyptian politics has grown substantially.<sup>6</sup> It has been regarded as the strongest opposition movement in both Egypt and Libya.<sup>7</sup>

The Muslim Brotherhood stands out as one of the main political forces behind the wave of protests transpiring in Jordan, at present, as well.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Jordanian Prime Minister Marouf Bakhit charged that the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood was taking orders from the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Syria.<sup>9</sup>

Historically, the Muslim Brotherhood provided the ideological underpinnings for the leading figures in global terrorism from Khalid Sheikh Muhammad to Osama bin Laden. In the last few years, with the rise of leaders like Muhammad Badie in Egypt and Hammam Sayid in Jordan, the Muslim Brotherhood has come under a more extremist leadership, which still embraces hard-line doctrines against the West and a commitment to jihadism.<sup>10</sup>

Even if the Muslim Brotherhood does not take power at this initial stage, it will undoubtedly become part of future political coalitions that will move many neighboring countries into a much more hostile stance against Israel and even one supportive of militant action against the Jewish state. In the West Bank, Mahmoud Abbas has been seeking reconciliation talks with Hamas which, if successful, would definitely affect the future course of Palestinian policy toward Israel.

The hostility of the Muslim Brotherhood to Israel should not be underestimated. It is frequently forgotten that Hamas, which regularly launches rocket attacks deliberately aimed at Israeli population centers, is, according to its own charter, the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. Muhammad Badie issued in late 2010 a weekly message in which he plainly stated that the way forward on the Palestinian issue is not through negotiations, but rather returning to jihad and martyrdom (istishhad).<sup>11</sup> It should come then as no surprise that the Muslim Brotherhood's second-in-command announced in early February 2011 that the movement will seek to cancel the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel.<sup>12</sup>

Second, the present wave of anti-regime rebellions is loosening control of the central governments over large parts of several Arab states. This has created a vacuum in many areas, which is being filled by regional terrorist organizations like al-Qaeda and its affiliates, who seek to establish new sanctuaries beyond the reach of pro-Western Arab military establishments. This process is already evident in Yemen. But it has become accentuated in Egypt, as well, especially in the Sinai Peninsula. During the Iraq War, al-Qaeda of Iraq sought to set up forward positions in the Jordanian city of Irbid. The Jordanian security forces overcame this challenge, but can Israel always be certain that this will be the case?

Third, the undermining of the internal stability of Sunni Arab states is occurring as Iran seeks to consolidate its regional hegemony in the entire Middle East. While Iranian interests may be affected by the continuing rebellions in the Middle East, especially in Syria and Hizbullah-controlled Lebanon, Tehran stands to be a major beneficiary of the current instability in critical countries, like Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen. For Israel, the biggest question is the future orientation of Iraq, where the Iranians have been supporting a number of key Shiite parties. In the last numbers of years, Lebanese Hizbullah has also been active in Iraq, training Shiite militias, along with Iranian Revolutionary Guards.

As Iran's regional power grows, will Iraq still be oriented towards the U.S. or will it evolve into an Iranian satellite and re-engage in the Arab-Israeli conflict? Iraq is not far away from Israel; it is roughly 210 miles from the Iraqi border to the Jordan River. It has not gone without notice that Saudi Arabia has reinforced over the last year its northern border with Iraq, considering that it too cannot be certain what Baghdad's future

orientation will be. Israel, as well, cannot rule out Iraq, under Iranian influence, re-engaging in the Arab-Israel conflict. If that is even a remote possibility, how can Israel be expected to fully withdraw to the 1967 lines and abandon its right to defensible borders?

### **Undermining a Negotiated Peace**

To conclude, the pressures Israel faces at this time to agree to a full withdrawal from the West Bank and to acquiesce to the loss of defensible borders pose unacceptable risks for the Jewish state. It also stands in contradiction to the international commitments that were given to Israel in the past. These recognized that Israel did not have to agree to a full withdrawal from this territory. Additionally, the 1993 Oslo Agreements envisioned a negotiated solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Borders were to be decided by the parties themselves and not be imposed by international coalitions or by unilateral acts.

In fact, those commitments to a negotiated solution of the conflict appeared explicitly in the 1995 Israeli-Palestinian Interim Agreement. Notably, that agreement bears the signatures of President Bill Clinton, and officials from the European Union and Russia, who acted as formal witnesses. What is clear today is that the Palestinian leadership under Mahmoud Abbas has no interest in a negotiated solution to its conflict with Israel. It prefers to see the international community impose territorial terms that are to its advantage without having to formally declare an end to the Arab-Israeli conflict and without having to recognize the rights of the Jewish people to a nation-state of their own.

The idea that the Quartet would dictate to Israel the 1967 lines and set the stage for an imposed solution serves this Palestinian interest, but not the interest of achieving real peace. European support for such initiatives would contravene the very peace agreements they signed in the past as witnesses. It would set the stage for further Palestinian unilateralist initiatives at the UN in September and deal a virtually fatal blow to any negotiations.

Finally, it must be added that the people of Israel have undergone a traumatic decade and a half. For the most part, they passionately embraced the promise of the 1993 Oslo Agreements and yet, instead of peace, they saw their cities attacked repeatedly by waves of suicide bombers that left over 1,000 Israelis dead. They still considered taking further risks and supported unilateral disengagement from the Gaza Strip in 2005, only to find that there was a five-fold increase in rocket fire against Israeli population centers in the year that followed. Longer-range rockets poured into Hamas-controlled Gaza, as Iran exploited the vacuum created by Israel's withdrawal.

The people of Israel have an inalienable right to security and to certainty that the mistakes of the last seventeen years will not be repeated. The full withdrawal from the Gaza Strip must not be attempted again in the West Bank, especially given what is happening today across the Middle East region. For those reasons, Israel must not be asked to concede its right to defensible borders.

### **Notes**

1. Richard Holbrooke, "The Principles of Peacemaking," *Israel's Right to Secure Boundaries: Four Decades Since UN Security Council Resolution 242* (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, 2009), p. 45.

2. British ambassador to the UN in 1967 Lord Caradon: "We didn't say there should be a withdrawal to the '67 line; we did not put the 'the' in, we did not say all the territories, deliberately. We all knew – that the boundaries of '67 were not drawn as permanent frontiers, they were a cease-fire line of a couple of decades earlier....We did not say that the '67 boundaries must be forever; it would be insanity." MacNeil Lehrer Report, March 30, 1978.
3. Herb Keinon, "Hague Comes Out Against Interim Agreement," Jerusalem Post, March 30, 2011.
4. See, for example, Bernard Avishai, "Next, an Israeli-Palestinian Peace Plan," New York Times, March 30, 2011. [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/30/opinion/30iht-edavishai30.html?\\_r=1&ref=global-home&pagewanted=print](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/30/opinion/30iht-edavishai30.html?_r=1&ref=global-home&pagewanted=print).
5. David Ignatius, "Gates Underlines the Dangers in the Middle East," Washington Post, March 22, 2011.
6. Michael Slackman, "Islamist Group Is Rising Force in a New Egypt," New York Times, March 24, 2011.
7. "Islam and the Arab Revolutions," The Economist, April 2-8, 2011. See also, "Energized Muslim Brotherhood in Libya Eyes a Prize," CNN, March 25, 2011.
8. Ranya Kadri and Isabel Kershner, "Protestors Rally Into Night in Jordan," New York Times, April 1, 2011.
9. Taylor Luck, "Gov't, Islamists in 'Dangerous Game,'" Jordan Times, April 1, 2011.
10. For a discussion about the more extremist trends in the Muslim Brotherhood, see Shadi Hamid, "A Radical Turn for the Muslim Brotherhood?" Brookings, June 26, 2010; and Jonathan D. Halevi, "Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood: In Their Own Words," February 6, 2011, Jerusalem Issue Brief, Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs. Hammam Sayid was known before his election as head of the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood to have made statements in support of Osama bin Laden; see al-Hawadeth, September 24, 2001.
11. Muhammad al-Badi' — Weekly Message, December 23, 2010.

(from the Muslim Brotherhood website in Arabic)

The entire Umma [the Islamic people], and not just the Palestinian Authority, is being asked to return to true fundamental principles, that must guide the [handling of the] Palestinian problem, so that it won't be forgotten. Therefore, relating to negotiations, to recognition [of Israel], to reconciliation [with Israel], or establishing a Palestinian state in the '67 borders as an axiom, is a big mistake, for the Land of Palestine is Arab and Islamic land, on which their holy sites [of the Muslims] are located. The Jihad for the return of this land is an obligatory commandment incumbent on the entire Arab and Islamic nation....Palestine will not be liberated by hopes and prayers, but rather by Jihad and sacrifice, and we call all Brothers in Palestine to return to national unity, on the basis of resistance, for that is the only way to recover Palestine. Jihad is victory or martyrdom for Allah.

(For the complete text in Arabic, see below)

<http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Article.asp?ArtID=76669&SecID=213>.

