



ISRAEL 2022: THE NEW SECURITY ENVIRONMENT



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1. INTRODUCTION

In the second half of November a delegation of members from Friends of Israel Initiative board and the High-Level Military Group, was able to get a permission to enter Israel despite the Covid travel restrictions, and conduct very productive meetings with intelligence, military, diplomats, and members of the government during an intensive visit. The delegation was thoroughly briefed on the security

environment, threats, and challenges that Israel is facing and will likely have to respond in due time.

The following are the conclusions reached by the group, and not necessarily reflect the many points of views that were presented during the delegation fieldtrip, nor any official policy, they only express the group's own ideas after hearing and talking to all involved in the trip agenda.



From left to right: Richard Kemp, Colonel (R.) British Army,
General Vincenzo Camporini, former Chief of Defence Staff of Italy,
Lord William David Trimble, Former First Minister of Northern Ireland, Nobel Peace Prize in 1998,
General Klaus Dieter Naumann, former Chief of Staff of the Bundeswehr, Germany,
Rafael Bardají, Executive Director Friends of Israel Initiative,
Timo Soini, Former Foreign Minister of Finland,
General Thomas James Lawson, former Chief of the Defence Staff of the Canadian Armed Forces
and John Baird, Former Foreign Minister of Canada

2. A CHANGED POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

a) A New US Administration

Probably, at the international global level, the change that may have had, and will have, the greater impact on Israel's security has been the change of Administration in the US. It is not only a replacement of the Republican administration by a Democrat one, but a whole recalibration of policies after the 4 years term of President Trump. Independently if one agrees or disagrees with his motivations, style and decisions, Donald Trump was, without any doubt, a president that strongly supported Israel and took practical and previously unthinkable steps that benefited Israel, from moving the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, recognizing the Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights to, above all, promoting the Abraham Accords, likely the more revolutionary movement ever done in the region to achieve the normalization of relations between Israel and the Arab nations.



Senator Joe Biden has a record of being pro-Israel. Nonetheless, he ran as the anti-Trump candidate, and as President he has shown his determination to distance himself from his predecessor. To start with, he rejected upfront the Trump administration approach to the Israeli-Palestinian issue, putting it back as the center of the US policy, and reverting to the traditional position to call for more concessions from Israel.

Perhaps as part of this policy change, the Biden administration has seemingly made no significant efforts to further develop the Abraham Accords.

There had been, and remains, further scope to add more countries to the accords, but this would need substantial political pressure from the US and would have further alienated the Palestinians in the short-medium term, not to mention Iran.

Equally, when Hamas started new barrage attacks with rockets against Israeli population centers in May 2021, President Biden himself called then PM Netanyahu several times to exert pressure on Jerusalem to terminate its defensive operation Guardians of the Wall independently of whether the political and military objectives were already achieved or not.

Finally, the more dramatic departure of the Biden presidency from the Trump policies is the new US Administration desire to engage Iran in new negotiations regarding Teheran nuclear program. From withdrawal from the 2015 JCPOA and a policy of "maximum pressure", the Biden Administration has shown its willingness to lift sanctions if Iran accepts some limitations to its nuclear program. After several rounds of negotiations in Vienna, the US red lines are not clear, the Iranian tactics of buying time and pressing for maximum concessions are unchanged, and the likelihood of reaching a new bad agreement that leaves Iran in the nuclear threshold does not eliminate its ability to become a nuclear power in the near future is becoming stronger by the day.

Thus, even if the new US Administration has not yet articulated a defined policy to Israel and the region, all the signals point to a new radical environment in Washington that the government in Jerusalem must take into consideration.

Furthermore, the humiliating withdrawal of the US forces from Afghanistan in August 2021, conducted in a chaotic, unilateral and careless way, though not directly related to the US policy towards the Middle East, had a clear impact world-wide on the US credibility, particularly so among those countries that are located in strategic tension points and are to some extent dependent of the US guarantees, like Taiwan, South Korea, Ukraine, Poland, The Gulf Monarchies, and Israel. It must be assumed that this demonstration of US weakness further emboldened Iran as well as Israel's other enemies such as Hamas.

b) A New Coalition Government in Jerusalem

After four general elections since April 2019, the Knesset voted for a new coalition government on June 13th, 2021. The negotiations that led to the new coalition were not easy and were about to fail several times but finally the eight parties to be in the new government all agreed on a distribution of power and a limited political platform satisfactory enough to keep them united, putting an end to the Netanyahu era.

The government followed the previous one in the fact that the Prime Minister will be rotational, starting with Naftali Bennet who will cede his position to Yair Lapid at the end of August 2023. For the first time ever, the coalition includes an Arab party, Ra'am. As the "Traffic light" government in Germany, or the "Frankenstein" government in Spain, the new Israeli government is full of contradictions but has been able to manage the differences so far.

When the delegation visited Israel in November, many of the activities taken by the new government were related to managing the coronavirus new wave of infections, something, like in the rest of the world, that was a clear strategic distraction. Thus,

many policies related to the security of Israel were still under revision in what several officials defined as a "recalibration".

Having said that it was clear that one of the top priorities in foreign policy was to rebuild the bridges with the Democratic party in the US and thus with the new administration. Members of the new coalition criticized the aggressive and partisan diplomacy of former PM Netanyahu towards Washington and defended a less confrontational stand vis a vis the US. Coordination not confrontation was the motto.

Obviously, a good relationship with all parties in Washington is indispensable. But in our opinion, whether that is feasible nowadays is really an open question. First, because the Democratic party has been leaning towards a more leftist platform and the more radical elements seem to be largely in control of the party. These elements have no inclination whatsoever to help Israel; secondly, the diminishing popularity of President Biden opens the door for a Democratic defeat in the mid-term elections of 2022. If so, any concession to the Democrats' left will be futile at best.

In any case, we assume that the new government in Jerusalem, once the Covid situation tends to be better, will come up with new, fresh and realistic ideas and policies to strengthen Israel's security.



3. A CHANGED STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT

a) The New Great Power Competition

The Post-Cold War and the years of US hegemony are over. The retreat of America from the world, rejected by President Biden and his slogan “America is back” has, nonetheless, accelerated during his first year as President. If we were to put a turning point, this would undoubtedly be August 15th, 2021, the day of the fall of Kabul.

The world is not simply abandoning a unipolar moment in which the US played the role of direct and active supporter of the liberal order. The new Great Power Competition is not based in any set agreement or rule of behavior unlike in the XIX Century. On the contrary, more than a distribution of power we are witnessing an assault on the West by would-be new hegemon, like China; contestant powers, like Russia; or revolutionary regimes, like Iran. Their goals are to create a new order based on their principles and that will work to their advantage.

The Middle East cannot escape this global dynamic and should prepare for the direct and indirect consequences and impact in the region and Israel. And it is not only the fact that America may leave alone the region at some point, disinterested or tired. There are few practical issues that could be at stake. For instance, the US already showed discomfort and concerns with Chinese investments in Israel’s infrastructure, but what about Russia? A good bilateral relation between Jerusalem and Moscow has produced many benefits and has allowed Israel to carry out a security policy in Syria to fight the direct Iranian presence there as well as to disrupt any transfer of game changer weapons to Hizballah. If by any chance, Moscow’s desire to change the map in Europe leads to a new cold war, more sanctions, etc, Israel would be left in an awkward position. On the contrary, if the West is not reconstituted, Israel will be left in a world of everyone for himself where alliances and commitments will be always in doubt. In any case both China and Russia will be players in the region for different reasons and through different strategies, but their continued presence must be assumed by Israeli planners. In China’s case this is exemplified by Beijing’s multi-billion-dollar strategic deal with Tehran last year.

b) Iran: The Beneficiary of Global Disorder

In June 2021, presidential elections were held in Iran. Unsurprisingly, Ebrahim Raisi, the candidate supported by the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, was the winner. Since Raisi is a conservative aligned with the positions of Khamenei, the harmony between the two has been evident since then. Probably never before has the decision-making group in Teheran been more Khamaneist.

Even though the elections were disqualified by the lowest turnout ever and the highest ratio of blank and invalid votes cast in protest, the brutal repression shown by the regime eliminated any immediate threat to it.

The dire economic situation and the effect of the sanctions in place left Iran with less money to spend in malign activities throughout the entire region, from Gaza to Yemen. Even so, Teheran’s strategy of becoming accepted as a regional superpower continued unabated. Iran’s proxies created an arc of instability from the Arabian Peninsula to the Levant. Material, ideological and political support to Hizballah in Lebanon is conducted almost overtly; Iranian Syrian militias still are counted in the tens of thousands; the number and strength of militia groups in Iraq directly led by Iran has not ceased to grow since the US pull out in 2011; the support and arming of Houthis in Yemen has given this pro-Iran rebel group the ability to launch sophisticated attacks against strategic energy infrastructure in Saudi Arabia and to expand the conflict to the Emirates with the recent attacks with long-range ballistic missiles and drones; finally, equipping radical Islamist groups in the Gaza Strip has continued as in recent years.

Motivated by the need to ameliorate the Iranian economy, the new leaders in Teheran have shown an increased interest in coming back to the table of negotiations and reach a new nuclear agreement. But this time on their terms.

Iran always pursued its nuclear program in the safest, not necessarily the fastest, way. Nonetheless, in the last 14 months, since the change of president in the US, Iran has accelerated the program, making advances that both a) make it

impossible to go back to the original JCPOA; and b) shorten dramatically the time to enrich the fissile material for a first bomb. While negotiating in Vienna, Iran has enriched Uranium to 20 and 60%, well beyond the limits set by the 2015 agreement. Equally, while making any diplomatic progress almost impossible, new and forbidden models of centrifuges have been put into operation at Fordow; Iran has advanced in weaponization capabilities and other technical issue, like production of metal uranium, with the goal of making all progress towards the bomb irreversible. The hard ball tactics shown by Iranian negotiators (who still refuse to talk directly with their American counterparts) is clearly oriented to extract the maximum of concessions from the US in what is labeled as “more for less”. Even if their demand of lifting all sanctions before reverting the nuclear program to an acceptable point is dropped in the coming rounds of talks, with the perception that the White House is unashamedly looking for an agreement, it would be prudent to assume that sooner rather than later we may have a second JCPOA as bad as the first one or worse, leaving Israel and everyone else with as little warning time as a week for a potential Iranian breakout



c) The sustainability of the Abraham Accords

Contrary to the well-established and traditional view that no normalization between Israel and the Arab countries could take place without first resolving the Palestinian issue, President Trump was able to break that view and nurture a normalization process that culminated in the Abraham Accords of August 2020 between the US, Israel, and the United Arab Emirates, signed officially a month later in DC incorporating Bahrain as well.

Generating a momentum of its own, the Accords were embraced later by Sudan and Morocco. The Trump administration was confident in convincing others, like Oman and Saudi Arabia, to join as well, but that didn't happen yet. Two factors could explain why. The first is the lukewarm attitude of the new American administration under Biden to the Accords, as part of its “the opposite of Trump” philosophy. Spokesmen from the Administration have refused to use the name Abraham Accords and referred to them as “normalization agreements”. The second has to deal with the current process of recalibration taking place all across the region, in part motivated by the growing lack of confidence in US commitment, in part by the perceived need to buy some time in the confrontation with an emerging nuclear Iran.

The Abraham Accords were a game changer in the regional dynamics since they proved that there is not a permanent obstacle for a growing interaction and collaboration between Arab nations and Israel, that the Palestinian issue has its own dynamics that cannot hold prisoner many other benefits that a growing cooperation with Israel may bring, and the need to balance the growing regional presence and destabilizing activities of Iran.

We believe that further developments in the Abraham Accords, and the message these would send to the Palestinians, could offer the best hope for some future rapprochement with Israel. Without this, there appear to be few prospects of long-term peace.

In that sense, promoting new signatories is as important diplomatically, as strategically.

d) The increasing significance of the home front

In 2021, during the Guardians of the Wall operation launched by the IDF to protect Israel from the rocket attacks from Gaza, the military clashes over the Strip were accompanied by violent riots within Israel conducted by the Israeli-Arab population.

Whether a minority of pro-Hamas activists were successful in getting many out to the streets or rioters were all actively engaged in violent demonstrations against Israel, is not for us here to assess. Suffice to say the multiple riots showed a penetration of the Palestinian resistance ideology not seen for many years outside Gaza and the West Bank. In that sense, it seems logical to assume that

in future conflicts the Home Front will have to deal not only with protecting the population from imminent attacks, managing the casualties, and facilitating a speedy recovery of the areas attacked so normalcy can be recovered as soon as possible, but also with potential open and violent opposition by groups sympathetic to Hamas and other Palestinians groups.

e) The growing assault on Israel legitimacy

It could be seen as an historical paradox, but as Israel expands its diplomatic relations and its presence in the world, the assault on its legitimacy also have grown exponentially during the last years. This is not the place to analyze in depth the groups and interests with the common goal to delegitimize the existence of Israel as an independent State. Suffice to consider here, that the current strategy of promoting the view of Israel as an “apartheid state”

may, if unchallenged, have an increasingly negative impact on Israel and its international freedom of movement and action, particularly in the military and defensive operations that must be taken to protect the country against its many enemies. The effect on Israel is also likely to be compounded by the delegitimisers’ efforts to use the “apartheid state” label to alienate Jews in the diaspora.

Democracies cannot be blind to this new form of lawfare and psychological operations, and Israel must put in place a strategy of collaboration with its allies — not least in world bodies and the global media — in order to prevent further damage at the international institutional level. The IDF should consider the public domain as an added level of operations.

In the absence of reforms of bodies like the UNHRC promoted by countries like the US, Israel must be prepared to continue to deal simultaneously with military aggression as well as public campaigns to limit its freedom of action.



4. A CHANGED OPERATIONAL MILITARY ENVIRONMENT

It is a natural phenomenon that warfare evolves thanks to new technologies, old technologies applied in a new way, new operational concepts, and many other factors. With the acceleration of new technological advances as well as the dissemination of new technologies, the future battlefield environment, if not warfare itself, will be very different to what we are used to. It is the obligation of planners, thinkers, and decision makers to avoid the trap Churchill described as “generals are always preparing to fight the last war”.



Israel has been at the forefront of how warfare evolves. From engaging traditional military units in symmetrical conflicts, armies against armies, the enemies of Israel morphed into terrorist groups and authentic terror armies with capabilities of increased breadth and lethality. Unconventional forces try to avoid engaging in combat with military units since their main goal is not to conquer and occupy territory. They target civilians and population centers, indiscriminately and disregarding all conventions regulating war. As an example, during the Yom Kippur War, only one civilian was killed in the Israeli homefront. During the operation Guardians of the Wall, 11 Israeli civilians were killed due to direct rockets or mortar attacks and hundred were injured, despite the great success of the Iron Dome defensive system. Without it, thousands could have been killed (a detailed analysis of the May 2021 operation by the High-Level Military Group can be found [here](#)).

It is prudent to forecast a growing use of rockets as a means to reach Israeli population. First, an increase in the number of rockets launched in a single barrage aiming to saturate the defensive

systems. Second, an increase in the range of the rockets so they can put at risk the whole of Israel, from North to South. Third, the progressive introduction of precision guided missiles able to attack targets within a very small probable circular error and, because of that, threatening critical infrastructure. Fourth, the increasing use of drones to avoid defensive systems thanks to their manoeuvrability and ability to fly very low and escape defenses.

It is also safe to say the future conflicts will be characterized by the mixed use of low- and high-tech weapons, in an expanded geographical theater and in a more lethal and destructive environment. For example, Iran's Houthi proxies possess weapons with the capability to reach Israel from Yemen and have declared an intent to do so. These developing threats must be added to the long-standing threats from Iranian proxies in Syria and Lebanon, the latter becoming increasingly volatile with political and economic collapse from which Iran seeks to gain an increasing grip. When long range ballistic missiles enter the equation, securing the defense of Israel will be more complicated.

Finally, as the modern battlefield where Israel must fight has enlarged into new terrains like underground tunnels and has also expanded into domains like the information warfare, it has incorporated as well the Cyberspace as a theater of operations. It is well known that Iran has launched in the last two years a growing number of ransom attacks to Israeli private companies, and tried to disrupt several water treatment plants, among other things. As we saw illustrated in the May 2021 conflict, Hamas also has sought to deploy cyber capabilities against Israel, including against the Iron Dome. Though these have been largely frustrated by Israel, we can be sure their efforts, no doubt supported by Iran, will continue apace. Israel has had an edge in cyber capabilities. It has also pioneered conventional attack against cyberwar centres, yet another form of defence seen as a controversial method by many, and prone to exploitation by Israel's detractors. Some sabotage actions in the nuclear facilities in Iran have been attributed unofficially to those capabilities. But keeping that advantageous edge will become progressively more difficult as other nations develop their own cyber offensive systems.

CONCLUSION

Israel entered 2021 in a new world, without Trump in the White House, and also with an end to the Netanyahu era. The new coalition government found itself with the table full of issues to tackle, from the endless pandemic to the economy, foreign and security policy.

Having managed the Covid crisis, Israel enters 2022 in a security environment that looks increasingly menacing to the interests and the security of the country.

The Covid crisis has deepened the economic crisis in most of the neighbors surrounding Israel; political instability is shaking the foundations of Lebanon and Iraq; tribalism is on the rise everywhere. At the same time, the global order is traversing a critical moment, with an absent-minded America in which very few people have any faith in a global leader.

Europe is mainly focused on herself and totally errant and divided, living in an illusionary state of rejection of any use of force. Meanwhile Russia and China do everything at their disposal to advance their interests and create a different world order.

Menacing and rogue countries like Iran are taking

advantage of this Westernless world to further achieve their ambitions.



In that sense Israel is moving closer to a point where its leadership, political and military, will be confronted with the need to take critical new decisions. The closer Israel is to that critical moment, the margin for error will diminish substantially. That's why the new leadership needs to waste no time in crafting a defensive and deterrent strategy that is credible and clearly understood by friends and, above all, by foes.

It is our commitment to help Israel in achieving that goal.



