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ISRAEL'S PRIMARY SECURITY CONCERNS
VIS-A-VIS THE ARAB STATES AND IRAN

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This paper offers some preliminary ideas for an assessment of the possible causes of additional Arab-Israeli conflict, and the types and nature of conflict envisioned. It describes factors presumed to influence war or peace between Arabs/Iranians and Israelis in the near term future. And in so doing, it describes war scenarios, and makes some attempt to assess their likelihood.

Because this is a short and preliminary discussion paper, it is of necessity very telegraphic in nature. Moreover, because it deals with the future in the Middle East--an area of intellectual adventure that wise Israelis justifiably have shunned since the days of the prophets--it must be seen to be speculative. Indeed, it will also undoubtedly be seen to be subjective--this is an Israeli's perception, and must be juxtaposed with those of Arabs and Iranians. At the very least the author, invoking a minimal dose of realism, prefers not to attach precise time projections to most of the scenarios.

From an Israeli standpoint, a list of the factors likely to hasten new conflict is virtually synonymous with a categorization of Israel's primary security concerns, at least on an operative level. But there is first to be considered a level of perceptions about security that is not necessarily entirely rational.

For example, it is generally accepted that Israelis' fear of Palestinian terrorism is a major consideration in opposing withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza. Yet Palestinian terrorism does not constitute a genuine threat to Israel's existence. It does, however, constitute a major current security challenge; it drains Israeli manpower and economic assets, and it presents a huge emotional/psychological obstacle. What Israelis perceive as Palestinian terrorism has been a security threat since the 1920s. And it persists, despite (indeed, perhaps because of) progress toward peace. A Jaffee Center survey taken in January 1993 found that 85 percent of Israelis fear attack by an Arab in their daily lives. Obviously it is difficult for Israelis to contemplate peaceful coexistence with Palestinians, and easier to countenance thoughts of preemption or preventive war, under these conditions.

On a broader level, however, Israelis' threat perceptions do at times appear to be existential in a more substantial, strategic sense. True, for many Israelis the day has passed when the Arab world was perceived as a monolithic, aggressive coalition bent on destroying Israel while an indifferent world turned its back. The fact is, we are deep into a peace process

predicated on a very different set of assumptions. But these negative images are not very distant; they clearly remain, ready for instant recall, in the Israeli collective subconscious. Moreover Israel does perceive among some extremist Arab actors, and the current Iranian regime, a continuing rejection of its physical existence; this is expressed in their military preparations (e.g., most recently by Saddam Hussein), in Palestinian rejectionists' refusal to countenance Israel's existence even within the 1948 boundaries, and in lingering or ambiguous references to the Palestinian "right of return" to pre-1967 Israel. Most recently it has been expressed in the approach of radical Islamic actors that view Israel's very state existence as an affront to Islam that must be eradicated.

Even among moderate Arabs--those who are currently pursuing peace settlements and accomodation with Israel--Israelis detect a lingering lack of legitimization of Israel as a viable Jewish state located in the Muslim heartland. The moderate Arabs, beginning with Egypt, are prepared, for lack of a realistic and safe alternative, to coexist peacefully with Israel. But not intimately. And in their "hearts" they still see Israel as a "high-tech crusader state." On a more abstract level, instances of military aggression and terrorist violence against Israelis and Jews in general, trigger among Israelis a recall mechanism of the Holocaust and earlier (throughout 3,000 years of Jewish history) attempts to physically destroy the Jewish people or part of it.

Israeli security concerns and conflict scenarios are inevitably also a reflection of the war experiences of the past 45 years. Most Israeli-Arab wars involved an Arab coalition, rather than a single Arab state. In most of these wars, Arab war aims were perceived as absolutist, i.e., aspiring to destroy Israel (even when, as in the October 1973 conflict, current wisdom indicates that at least Egypt apparently did not harbor such an operative aspiration). Hence Israelis tend to envision conflict scenarios as potentially broad, and to prepare military solutions accordingly, frequently falling back on 'worst case contingencies' as the only safe way to conceive of the next war. To these considerations must be added Israel's own fairly unique circumstances: lack of strategic depth, close proximity of deployed Arab armies, and reliance on emergency call-up of reserves to provide the bulk of the Israeli fighting force, generate a special sensitivity among Israelis to surprise attack and to the vulnerability of the civilian rear. This, and the perception of Arab/Iranian war aims as being far-reaching, have tended to encourage cultivation of the concepts of preventive war and preemptive attack.

We have already alluded to the presence, in Israel's perception of security issues, of a number of positive characteristics of the current environment that tend to mitigate toward peace and stability, rather than war. Over the past 20 years or so, and with particular emphasis since the Second Gulf War, most Arab actors have evolved to a position of accommodation regarding Israel. They recognize that a

political solution, and peaceful coexistence, are in their interest, and that the military option, or even the status quo, are liable to be counterproductive and highly destructive of their assets. The end of the Cold War and collapse of the Soviet Union introduced greater stability in the Middle East-superpower relationship; pervasive American influence throughout the region appears to be conducive to peace. The role of economic incentives is also proving helpful to peace and stability. Hence the current Arab-Israel peace process, and the current low overall danger of an Arab-Israeli conflict. Indeed, it must be noted that, with the exception of Saddam's Scuds, there has been no Arab military attack against Israel for 20 years.

Israelis' attitudes toward peace and its security component, and their sense of Arabs' attitudes, are surveyed in tables 1 through 6 of the aforementioned JCSS opinion poll, attached. The overall picture is one of considerable cynicism--many would say realism--in the way Israelis continue to suspect Arab motives, yet opt for peace nonetheless. But this appears to reflect fairly faithfully the uniqueness of the Israeli security dilemma.

This brief survey of basic Israeli attitudes is intended to paint the backdrop for the following Israeli view of possible conflict scenarios. These scenarios span a spectrum from nonconventional threats and attack (including, perhaps mainly, by periphery states like Iran that are not likely to be coopted into the current peace process), through conventional war, to conflict deriving from terrorism. They

are loosely ranked from the more pressing/dangerous to the less urgent/threatening:

- The most dramatic and seemingly dangerous security concern is the possession of a nuclear military option and means of delivery, by a state or coalition of states that overtly calls for Israel's destruction. Iran leads the list of candidates, followed by Saddam's Iraq and an Islamic regime in Algeria. Here we confront the possibilities of surprise attack against Israel, and an Israeli (or some other actor's) preventive attack. This scenario could become operational within 5-10 years. Even if it did not provoke immediate conflict, it might radically change many of the 'rules of the game' of the Arab-Israel conflict, with Israel altering its nuclear doctrine, and the US and Arab states reexamining their most basic positions.

- Of equal concern is the Islamic fundamentalist crusade against Israel, led currently by Iran, and potentially by Islamic regimes on Israel's borders and by Hamas among the Palestinians. Here again we confront an ideology that overtly calls for Israel's destruction. Even without nuclear weapons, the combination of Islamic regimes and immediate proximity to Israel might easily escalate the situation to war--either initiated by an Arab-Islamic coalition (a new Eastern Front, or possibly one including Egypt), or begun preemptively by Israel.

This scenario depends very much on the fortunes of the Islamic fundamentalist movements. In the case of Syria, in view of its close "strategic alliance" with Iran, and if the peace process fails, it could be coopted into this scenario even under its present (very secular) regime. On the other hand, one cannot ignore the possibility of Israel and moderate Arab regimes (with which it has made peace) somehow cooperating militarily against a radical Islamic threat.

- A "secular" Eastern Front challenge to Israel returns us to the "classic" war scenario of the past 15 years (since the peace with Egypt). If the peace process fails, and/or Saddam Hussein renews his aggressive behavior toward Israel, and/or radical Palestinian elements take over Jordan, Israel could again be confronted with an Arab military alliance to its east, comprising Iraq, Syria, and Jordan (at least two out of the three), as in wars past (1948, 1967, 1973).

- Spillover from a new Gulf war. Given the very unsettled nature of inter-state relations in the Gulf (two Gulf wars fought over the past decade have had no political resolution; Iran is ambitiously meddling in the Gulf as well as in the Arab-Israel conflict; Iran and Saudi Arabia are arming rapidly; Iraq has a grudge against almost everyone), a new Gulf war seems more likely than a new Arab-Israel war. But, as witnessed in the Second Gulf War, when Israel was attacked by Iraqi missiles, Gulf conflicts have a potential spillover effect throughout the Middle

East. Israel could be dragged in, in ways that are extremely difficult to predict.

- Escalation due to terrorist infiltrations. A deteriorating security situation on one or more borders, sparked by state-backed or state-tolerated terrorist groups, could provoke an Israeli response, or a chain reaction of provocation and escalating responses, that deteriorate into war. The most likely current example would be an Israeli-Syrian confrontation beginning on Lebanese territory, sparked by Hizballah attacks from Lebanese soil against Israel.

- A related scenario would involve inter-state escalation due to a situation of virtual civil war between Israelis and Palestinian Arabs in the West Bank and Gaza, one that took place in a political vacuum nurtured by the failure of the Arab-Israel peace process. Particularly if Israel were to invoke brutal measures, such as mass deportations or destruction of entire villages or towns, surrounding Arab states might find it impossible not to become involved. However, while the likelihood of internal Israeli-Palestinian deterioration is high unless a political settlement can be reached soon, the danger of escalation into an inter-state conflict is far lower, though not negligible.

A number of social, economic and political characteristics of Israel's environment also suggest themselves as more generalized factors for instability and potential threat to Israel's security. The combination of scarce resources, such as

arable land and water, together with a massive population explosion, growing economic crisis and strong Islamic fundamentalist movements in most of the states surrounding Israel, seems almost certain eventually to provoke internal instability in countries like Egypt and Jordan, unless adequate preventive and restorative measures are taken. The resultant anarchy could all too easily be translated or channeled into aggression toward a neighbor.

Unstable or nonviable state structures are another potential cause of instability and war. In recent years we have witnessed the failure of Lebanese and Kuwaiti state institutions to deal with internal and external challenges, thereby contributing to regional wars. Conceivably Jordan, Syria or Iraq could, under conditions of precipitous regime change, degenerate in this way.

From the standpoint of Israel's security, Jordan's future in particular appears to be of special interest, even assuming continued stable rule. As a weak regional buffer state, Jordan separates four local powers: Israel, Iraq, Syria and Saudi Arabia. The advent of a Palestinian political entity in the West Bank would introduce another weak buffer into the equation--one whose population has considerable affinity with that in Jordan. From Israel's standpoint, Jordan's buffer status provides key strategic depth to the east. Any attempt to "tamper" with that status could, under certain circumstances, be considered adequate cause for preventive or preemptive action on Israel's part.

Finally, a few comments appear to be in order with regard to the nature of any future Israeli-Arab/Iranian conflicts. Alongside heavy clashes at the front, characterized by the

relative innovations of use of PGMs and attack helicopters, a new conflict would also almost certainly involve medium-range ballistic missiles. Given the recent "discovery" (by Saddam, as well as by lone Palestinian fanatics wielding knives) of the great sensitivity to attack of Israel's civilian rear, it seems probable that the first wave of escalation, if not the opening attack, would involve the use of missiles directed at Israeli civilian concentrations, and Israeli retaliation in kind. From here the main open questions are whether, and at what stage, chemical, biological or even nuclear warheads or bombs might be introduced, and whether Israel would possess the anti-missile missiles capable of intercepting enemy missiles over neighboring territory.

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