

### Editor's Notes: As Israel votes

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David Horowitz , THE JERUSALEM POST

*Facing Iran's nuclear drive and a fast-rising tide of delegitimization, Israel needs to quickly put aside the pre-election partisan bickering and get serious about tackling the profound challenges to our future*

On Monday, eight days before Israel's elections, Iran - whose Islamist regime relentlessly urges Israel's demise and arms Hizbullah and Hamas to help expedite the goal - put a satellite into space. Its capacity to do so, Isaac Ben-Israel, the former head of the Israel Space Agency, told *The Jerusalem Post*, indicated that it now has the equivalent capability to fire "a ballistic missile with a nuclear warhead that weighs one ton all the way to Western Europe."

On Tuesday, at the Herzliya Conference on national security, John Bolton, the former US ambassador to the UN who is interviewed separately in today's paper, told me that Iran "has long since passed the point of no return" in its nuclear program - in other words, that it has cleared all the technical hurdles and has all the resources necessary to proceed to a bomb.

The Obama administration's intended aggressive diplomacy to thwart that program, said Bolton dryly, would need to prove itself "very quickly." In fact, time was running out even on the last-resort option of an Israeli military strike - targeting key facilities and setting back the program by two or three years, during which there would be a greater prospect of regime change. Iran, said Bolton, was likely dispersing its nuclear facilities, and "it won't be long" before it had highly effective S-300 missile defenses for them.

This kind of puts the pre-election partisan bickering - "Bibi can't be trusted"; "Livni's not up to the job"; "Barak's an arrogant paranoiac"; "Lieberman's a racist demagogue" - into perspective, doesn't it?

Israel goes to the polls, furthermore, amid warnings from the head of the Defense Ministry's Diplomatic-Security Bureau, Amos Gilad, that "We're on a collision course with Syria" and "there will be rockets in large numbers targeting Tel Aviv" if we cannot reach a peace accord with Damascus in the near future.

And we vote in the aftermath of a failed American-backed effort to achieve at least a theoretical peace agreement with the Palestinian Authority. This was overseen by an Israeli prime minister who was prepared to relinquish pretty much all of the West Bank with certain one-on-one land swaps, to agree power-sharing arrangements in Jerusalem and to countenance a token "return" of Palestinian refugees to Israel.

Even such unprecedented conciliation did not secure an agreement from the relatively moderate Mahmoud Abbas, whose own hold on power is tenuous at best. Although PA security forces trained in Jordan under US oversight are deployed in parts of the West Bank, his regime there is largely sustained by the presence of IDF troops.

The rival Hamas, while forced by Operation Cast Lead to publicly contemplate a resumption of previous "unity government" partnerships with Abbas, will breach any such arrangements the moment it feels strong enough, already controls the Palestinian parliament and numerous West Bank local councils, and is bent on superseding Fatah as the overall leadership of the Palestinians. "We want to rule all of Palestine," Gaza-based Hamas politician Ahmed Yousuf reiterated on Wednesday.

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And Hamas, while sometimes paying lip-service to the notion of a temporary accommodation with an Israel forced back to the pre-1967 lines, remains entirely committed to the destruction of the Jewish state. That's what Yousuf and other leaders mean when they say "Palestine."

One might be forgiven for thinking that the departing Israeli prime minister's stated readiness to withdraw from the overwhelming proportion of Judea and Samaria, and Israel's wrenching disengagement from Gaza in 2005 - notably the uprooting of all of the settlements there - would have thoroughly debased the shared Fatah-Hamas claim that settlements are the root cause of, indeed the justification for, Palestinian hostility to Israel and Palestinian violence against Israel. But the opposite is the case. Hamas's ludicrous argument, thoroughly endorsed by its Fatah enemies, that it has been firing rockets by the thousand at Israel's civilian population from Jew-free Gaza in order to resist the occupation and the settlement enterprise, is widely accepted, not only in the Arab world but in the West as well.

So the Israel that will be voting for its new leadership on Tuesday finds itself facing an imminent nuclear threat from Iran, looming trouble with Syria, its peace overtures rejected by the Palestinian "moderates," and its legitimacy in defending itself against Palestinian extremists questioned even by many of its purported supporters.

THE RELENTLESS process of delegitimization is bound to be accelerated if, as the polls suggest, Israel now elects a Likud-led coalition, whether or not Binyamin Netanyahu makes good on his promise to construct a government reaching across the spectrum to include Labor and/or Kadima.

In the loudly resonating claims of its critics, Israel will be seen to have turned its back on peacemaking and chosen a leadership bent on creating more negative settlement facts on the West Bank ground. Self-styled friends will warn that, by its own actions, Israel is closing the door to viable compromise with the Palestinians, leaving only the option of a single, binational state between the river and the sea.

Israel's Ambassador to Britain Ron Prosor, in an address at Herzliya that painted a bleak picture of the UK as particularly hostile to Israel, described the UK's university campuses as the global "capital of the one-state solution." And "where Britain is today," he warned, "America will be in a few years' time."

The dramatic rise of this election's protest-vote party, Avigdor Lieberman's Israel Beiteinu, will be portrayed as further proof of Israel's self-defeating lurch to the right, regardless of the fact that Lieberman, championing the very same policies of redrawing our northeastern border and requiring a pledge of allegiance from Israeli Arabs, was long a minister in the outgoing Kadima-led government.

In truth, Israel's shift in recent years has been to the left - to a consensual acceptance of the imperative for separation from the Palestinians, so that they rule themselves and Israel remains a democratic, overwhelmingly Jewish state. It is a shift that, in the run-up to these elections, has seen Netanyahu adamantly refusing to oppose Palestinian statehood; indeed, at a meeting this week with the *Post's* editorial staff, while unsurprisingly far more reluctant than Olmert has been to concede territory in Judea and Samaria, Netanyahu made specific his desire not to govern a single Palestinian. "The Palestinians should have all the powers to govern themselves," he said, "but none to threaten the security and existence of the State of Israel."

Overall, then, Israel's electorate is broadly aware of the urgency of an accommodation with the Palestinians, but utterly despondent - amidst Olmert's inability to reach an accord with Abbas, and Hamas's abiding popularity among Palestinians - about the prospects for achieving one.

Having seen negotiation fail under Barak in 2000 and now under Olmert, and with Sharon's unilateralism smashed by Hizbullah Katyushas and Hamas Kassams, many voters seem inclined to choose the approach that was discredited longest ago - Netanyahu's 1996-99 "hang tough" philosophy - simply by virtue of the passage of time.

But there is no great enthusiasm for the maintenance of this cycle of failure. There is also no personal enthusiasm for thoroughly familiar former prime minister Netanyahu - whose front-runner status should not obscure the fact that his Likud will be lucky to win more than a quarter of the seats in parliament - or for his fellow former premier Barak.

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Livni's personal image - as the Mrs. Clean who chose not to sell out the wider national interest for a costly coalition deal with Shas three months ago that would have prevented these elections - may be slightly more attractive. But the dwindling appeal of old faces with old policies is clearly a major factor in the elevation of Lieberman's party, 2009's more potent version of Rafi Eitan's Gil Pensioners.

Another factor lifting Israel Beiteinu is the widening Jewish-Muslim rift within Israel, exacerbated by the extremist rhetoric of Israeli Arab MKs, and long-since identified by Lieberman as a potential vote-winner. Netanyahu's ex-bureau-chief-turned-major-irritant is a far more skilled politician than was 2006's dark horse Eitan, adept at switching from impatient bark to softer-spoken persuasion, and pushing a national rather than a sectoral agenda, albeit a fear-based, nakedly populist and largely unrealistic one.

IN THE post-election climate, with the Iranian threat rising and every likelihood of a Likud-led Israel attracting growing criticism, the imperative to counter that tide of Israeli delegitimization will be more urgent than ever.

Operation Cast Lead only underlined the challenge.

Much of the free world has not internalized the nature of Islamic extremism, and its imperative to kill and be killed. So there is little understanding of the need to confront Islamist forces and little sympathy when nations, and notably Israel, go to war against them.

Britain, for instance, simply refuses to acknowledge the Islamists' death-cult motivation, even though central London was blown up by homegrown Islamists in 2005. Britain is still casting around for the "real reason" for this domestic Muslim hostility. Was it Tony Blair's support for George Bush in Iraq, perhaps? Or Blair's sympathy for Israel?

Of course, it is much more convenient to *not* believe that part of your country's Muslim population is being radicalized and becoming a potent threat to you. It is much easier to blame, say, Israel. Especially when, as in France, you have up to 10 times as many Muslims in your country as Jews; or when, as in Britain, the most popular new boys' name is not Jack, Thomas, Harry or William, but Muhammad.

In Gaza, Hamas's prime culpability was unmistakable. The IDF and the settlements were gone, and yet the rocket fire had only escalated since 2005. Hamas was relentlessly acquiring the capacity to strike deeper and more damagingly into Israel. Fighting out of uniform, Hamas had rendered every Gaza civilian a suspect. It created a civilian theater of war, and the IDF warned and pleaded with those civilians - via leaflets and phone calls and broadcasts - to leave that theater. And Hamas had killed dozens, maybe hundreds of fellow Palestinians when seizing power in Gaza in 2007. It was demonstrably indifferent to the deaths of its own people.

Yet amid the various "war crimes" initiatives now being pursued against Israel, the severed and shaken diplomatic ties, the South African dock workers' embargo and other boycott threats against Israeli products and the spike in anti-Semitism, it is emphatically clear that Israel's assault on Hamas was not understood in this context overseas, and that the harrowing reality of death and destruction obliterated reasoning about cause and effect.

There will be more rounds of conflict, and the danger is that these will feature more adept manipulation by the Islamists, more international disinclination to strive for moral clarity, and more Israeli failure to remake this equation.

Diaspora Affairs Minister Isaac Herzog said this week that the government, aware of the delegitimization of Israel that Al-Jazeera and other Arab television networks are helping to foster, contemplated setting up a "Jewish Al-Jazeera... that would broadcast in Arabic and Farsi."

But the initiative, he said, "was torpedoed by the Finance Ministry, which refused to pay for it."

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If so, the short-sightedness is criminal. Iran is investing heavily in self-serving satellite and on-line media broadcasts, while Israel does next-to-nothing in these fields, and even our respected, public-funded state broadcaster's foreign language radio broadcasts are dying for lack of funds.

Israel must help the rest of the world to better understand our reality. This requires a second-battlefield hierarchy with adequate resources and cabinet level clout. Media-savvy Netanyahu would probably recognize this. Livni and Barak just might. Then again, media-savvy Olmert evidently didn't.

This hierarchy must have the authority to determine who officially speaks for Israel, and to advise those speakers, even when they are ministers. It needs resources to monitor what is reported - to identify problems, to correct misconceptions. It needs to serve as the bridge that helps link Israel with support efforts worldwide - including on college campuses. And it needs to be relentlessly active, not confined to mounting defensive responses to crises.

It is no coincidence that the most dependable political climate for Israel is on Capitol Hill. That is at least partly because pro-Israel lobbyists bring rising American politicians to Israel on study missions. That model should be far more widely applied.

In Britain, the heaviest pressure to boycott Israel has come in the academics' and the journalists' unions. These are professions dedicated to the dissemination of information, to empowering through knowledge. Israel's critics want those channels shut down, because the more Israel is understood, the more its narrative resonates. The BICOM group, the closest thing Britain has to AIPAC, is one of several that tries to bring leading editors and reporters and TV anchors here. These are steps in the right direction.

The official Israeli hierarchy should also reach out to Israel-based foreign reporters, with credible, fresh information they will want to report - the most sensitive information that Israel dare release without harming its own security. This, too, should happen in the years *between* conflicts.

The air force has footage of Kassam crews taking children with them when they go out to fire on Israel - confident that Israel will not fire on them. That footage should have been available ahead of operations like Cast Lead. Similarly, Israel obviously had video evidence of fire directed at Israeli targets from near UNRWA facilities. Some of this footage was released, after all, when IDF shells landed near the school. That kind of evidence should have been released long before the resort to force, so that reporters were familiar with the context.

With both Hizbullah and Hamas, a strategic effort was needed to explain the inevitable conflicts that were looming - to diplomats, politicians, journalists, activists. But this applies equally to the *ongoing* dangers posed by Hizbullah and Hamas, by Syria and Iran. Certain Israeli agencies did try to highlight the Iranian nuclear threat to world leaders at the turn of the millennium. They failed. The response should not have been to despair at Western short-sightedness, but to devise better ways to sound the alarm.

With Netanyahu ahead in the polls, it is important to stress, however, that even the most sophisticated public diplomacy hierarchy could not create a more sympathetic context for Israel if a Likud-led coalition were not credibly seen as seeking to encourage a genuine Palestinian shift toward a viable accommodation. Netanyahu's patent dismay at the degree of support Moshe Feiglin attracted in his party primary, his repeated pledge to forge a wide Zionist coalition, his decision not to demand the reconquest of Gaza during Operation Cast Lead and his disinclination to rule out Palestinian statehood would seem to indicate that he recognizes this, and understandably so. The Likud leader can but remember that it was the sense among a goodly proportion of *Israeli* voters that he was stonewalling peace efforts, never mind international opinion, that contributed centrally to his ouster a decade ago.

Netanyahu is already paying a price for his softened stances in the alienation of a proportion of his potential right-wing support, and the bolstering of Lieberman and the various smaller right-wing parties. While members of the Greater Israel camp would be foolish to plump for Lieberman, they may be drawing correct conclusions about Netanyahu.

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THE POSSIBILITY of Iran's nuclear drive being thwarted depends, at least in part, on a widespread understanding of the dangers it poses, to Israel and beyond. The likelihood of Hamas remaining beyond the Western diplomatic embrace, and of relative moderates like Abbas being pressed by Western mediators to curb their maximalist demands, depends on a widespread understanding of our conflict's root causes and the viable parameters for its eventual resolution.

Promoting that kind of understanding is a vital Israeli interest. Countering misperceptions about Israel, its mindset and its policies, misperceptions that spread through the international media to opinion-shapers and politicians and the wider public, is similarly critical.

As I've written here before, "selling" Israel would be a far more straightforward task if we could only agree on the permanent contours we seek for our country in this hostile regional environment. But I don't delude myself that this is about to happen, least of all in the aftermath of Tuesday's elections.

What will likely happen after Tuesday, though, is that the chorus of delegitimacy will swell, undermining everything Israel needs to do to protect itself. We ignore it at our profound peril.

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