



Israeli Diplomacy in a Changing World: From Defensive Posture to Activism and Engagement

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This is an era of dramatic change in the international arena in general, and in Israel's strategic environment in particular. Priorities are changing, as are perceptions of the appropriate and most effective ways of promoting shared values and interests.

While through the 1980s and 1990s globalization was considered largely in terms of economics, 9/11 brought governments to understand that security, too, had been globalized, with new threats – asymmetric in nature, and not conforming to previous models of conflict between countries – coming to the fore. National and global defense against terrorism has become a priority across the entire international system.

The United States, the sole superpower since the end of the Cold War, has revised its thinking and radically changed its national security strategy from one of deterrence and containment to a strategy of prevention and taking the initiative. The main banners of the new strategy – the war on terror on the one hand, and promoting democratization in the Arab world on the other – are designed to provide answers both to the phenomenon of fundamentalist terrorism and to its psychological and social root causes.

We are therefore now presented with a paradigmatic change in American policy – from a realist approach to an idealist perspective: rather than seeking to stabilize reality as in the past, the United States is striving today to shape reality according to the principles of democracy, reform and accountability. As a consequence, the substance of international debate and interaction is being transformed. Western countries are finding that the global nature of the new threat demands greater cross-border and multilateral cooperation than ever before and, as a consequence, adaptation to the new priorities emerging from Washington's new approach.

In our region, too, countries which for years evaded international scrutiny are now being required to provide better answers – not only to the international

community, but to their own citizens as well. The results are already evident on the ground. The political changes since 2001 in Afghanistan, Lebanon, Iraq and even Egypt, are all an expression of a new struggle for the soul of political Islam. Alongside the conservative and extremist views that seek to set the political agenda in these countries, voices calling for reform and modernization are also being heard.

These global policy shifts come at a time of growing multilateralism, when autonomy of action is willingly being sacrificed by nations who see greater advantage in coordinated policymaking, and where the trend towards favoring soft power over hard power in international affairs is also gaining ground. The European Union is the ultimate example of these processes, but they are also of growing relevance in other regions, including the Americas and Asia. The momentum is clear.

For Israel, the current international dynamic provides both risks and opportunities. Situated “in the eye of the storm,” we are exposed to the risks inherent in any instability in the countries around us. As a democracy under fire in a neighborhood which is far from friendly, overwhelming military strength remains absolutely essential to protect the lives of our citizens, and to protect our way of life itself. But in the evolving international context, it is clear also that we cannot rely on military strength alone as a means of achieving security and advancing key national objectives.

Whether it is the question of Iran’s nuclear ambitions or the Hamas-led Palestinian Authority’s battle for legitimacy, or the pressure to end Syria’s occupation of Lebanon and prevent Hizbullah terror – the international arena is today the battleground on which many of Israel’s short- and long-term national interests are being determined and, in that important arena, it is our diplomacy, not our military, which is on the front line.

The most recent confrontation between Israel and the Hizbullah in Lebanon is a clear demonstration of the shift that has taken place in Israel’s strategic mode of thought, which now places diplomatic efforts, instead of military ones, on the front line.

In the summer of 2006, there was a clear shift from self reliance in facing strategic threats, to a paradigm of reliance on international efforts. In this struggle, in contrast to previous military campaigns, Israel made an effort to seek international involvement in the form of a cease-fire, gave preference to the Security Council resolution over the military campaign and supported the deployment of an international force in Lebanon, in place of the IDF. This shift even brought about severe internal criticism, and the government of Israel has suffered a significant drop in public support, due to the ramifications of this change in mode of thought.

In many ways, one could say that the Israel's military campaign in Lebanon was limited, perhaps even hindered, due to Israel's support for the efforts led by the international community. Prime Minister Olmert, himself, in media interviews following the fighting, stated clearly that the military campaign was measured against, and depended on, the developments in the Security Council. The Israeli government regarded Security Council Resolution 1701 and the deployment of the international force as the primary achievements of its war in Lebanon. This stands in overt contrast to Israel's previous military campaigns, when it viewed international calls for a cease-fire as a hindrance to the attainment of its objectives.

For the first time, the international community stood aside in order to allow Israel to pursue its struggle. It granted Israel what amounted to an unprecedented diplomatic hourglass because Israel was seen as fighting the good fight against terrorism.

The most recent Lebanon campaign is a further manifestation of a strategic shift, which began in Gaza and continues there. Israel supported increased European involvement in Gaza, including European monitoring of the Rafah crossing, European Union Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM) presence and Quartet involvement in the enforcing of conditions imposed on the Hamas government.

This international model, or mode of thought, is also relevant in dealing with the Iranian nuclear challenge. Active international involvement regarding the Hizbullah threat in Lebanon serves as a model in containing Iran. Although Israel most definitely views Iran's nuclear potential as an existential threat, it promotes the vision that the Jewish state alone cannot deal with this danger and therefore seeks the involvement of the international community. Israel encourages the international community, especially the EU3, to lead this effort.

In this context we can neither ignore the world, nor need we always be fighting it. Indeed, it is in our interest to change our modus operandi from a defensive posture to one of proactive diplomacy and engagement. This requires that we move from zero-sum to win-win thinking and work to find ways to connect the broader international agenda to Israel and, at the same time, to connect Israel to the broader international agenda. We must also work to find the right balance between soft and hard power, and build strategies and coalitions to advance our national interests in ways which will ensure their effective promotion and maximum acceptance over the long term.

In dealing with this new and evolving reality, the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs has identified four key areas for action beyond the ongoing challenge of our relations with the Palestinians:

- 1) Proactive diplomacy to thwart security threats;
- 2) Building ties with Arab and Muslim countries;
- 3) Harnessing the positive potential of the multilateral arena; and
- 4) Promoting Israel's soft power.

The first issue on our diplomatic agenda is the ongoing and intensive effort to prevent and thwart various threats against Israel's security. First and foremost among these is Iran's nuclear program.

Our diplomatic activism has helped engender growing international awareness of the scale and imminence of the danger posed by a nuclear Iran – not only to Israel, but also to the common interests and values of the international community as a whole. This is particularly noteworthy if we bear in mind that less than three years ago Europe still held the belief that its “critical dialogue” was sufficient to deal with the challenge posed by Iran's nuclear program. The collective effort to thwart Iran's intentions is, at least at this stage, of a diplomatic and not a military nature. For this diplomacy to be effective, however, it must be exercised with determination and make use of every available lever.

Proactive diplomacy is also a key component of the fight against terror. The Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs has been conducting a special diplomatic offensive to have Hamas and Hizbullah placed on the national and international lists of terror organizations. These lists are an effective mechanism for restraining the actions of terror organizations, challenging their public legitimacy and limiting their ability to raise funds and recruit activists. The lists also help intensify the political and economic pressure on countries such as Syria and Iran, which continue to provide support and refuge to terror organizations.

This ongoing diplomatic campaign, in cooperation with our intelligence community, has made significant strides. Hamas was added to the European list in 2003 – a key factor in determining the current Quartet policy towards that organization. Diplomatic pressure on Hizbullah and its Iranian sponsors has also grown in the wake of our efforts, though these regrettably have yet to secure the inclusion of Hizbullah on the European list.

When balancing the twin interests of combating terror and promoting democratization, it is crucial that standards be established to preserve the integrity of the democratic process and the viability of the political entities in question. The participation of terrorist elements in democratic processes without adopting democratic values and principles is a recipe for disaster. Such organizations constitute a Trojan horse that will destroy democracy from within and further undermine prospects for peace. Hamas' refusal to abide by the most fundamental norms – namely the abandonment of terror, the recognition of Israel and the adoption of signed agreements – attests to this truth.

The second focus of our diplomacy in recent years has been the effort to strengthen the moderate forces in our region. Through quiet diplomacy, with an emphasis on economic cooperation rather than ceremonies and meetings in the media spotlight, we are working to build and reinforce constituencies for peace both within Israeli and Palestinian society and across the Arab and Muslim world. Many of our achievements in this area in the Gulf, North Africa and Muslim countries in Asia regrettably cannot be made public at this time, but the effort is crucial to our long-term interest in establishing an international and regional environment in which Israel can promote its cardinal national interests.

The third branch of our proactive diplomacy at this time is our effort to redefine and enhance our relations in the multilateral arena, so that they better reflect our national interests rather than our national fears. The growing relevance of regional blocs and non-governmental organizations in international affairs determines that we cannot continue to rely only on the quality and closeness of our bilateral ties with individual countries. We need also to build strong ties of partnership and engagement with these broader forums.

At the top of our agenda in this realm is the effort to normalize our relations with the United Nations. The days when Israel would sit back and accept the institutionalized discrimination against it at the UN are over. We are now actively placing on the agenda of the UN and all its member states the moral and procedural imperative of ending the ostracism of Israel within UN institutions, as well as the diplomatic incitement routinely conducted within the organization's bodies.

This diplomatic activism is bearing fruit, including slow but significant movement towards the full inclusion of Israel in the "Western and Others" regional grouping, the adoption by the UN General Assembly of a resolution initiated by Israel to establish January 27 as international Holocaust Remembrance Day, the inclusion of the Magen David Adom within the International Red Cross movement and changes in the anti-Israel conduct of some UN agencies.

Of course much yet needs to be done - not only to combat hostile practices such as the twenty or so annual anti-Israel resolutions in the General Assembly, but also to position Israel more positively as a contributor to the work of the UN, among other things through submitting our candidacy for membership in the Security Council.

We are also working outside the United Nations to improve our relations with a range of international players – from the EU and NATO to Mercosur (the South American customs union), the OECD and others. Our experience in these contacts is teaching us that while we must always remain vigilant against those who seek to exploit international platforms to attack us, there is, on the other hand, much to be gained from enhancing our contacts and partnerships. Particularly at a time of international change, it is crucial that we align ourselves

with those like-minded forces who share our values and who can help anchor our place within the international system for generations to come.

In this interlocking system of international discourse, it is important to acknowledge the growing significance of questions of international legitimacy. Whereas in the past, international standing was acquired through material resources or military conquest, in the twenty-first century states achieve standing more readily through the prism of human rights and global awareness. As a result, soft power is today often preferred over more traditional means.

Particularly in Europe, violence, even in self-defense, is often challenged as illegitimate, always to be avoided in favor of dialogue at any cost. When dialogue is held as a value in itself, and when the rights of the individual are increasingly seen as greater than those of the state, the implications for states caught in armed conflict are clear. It is therefore imperative that we engage this popular mindset, to ensure that it does not sweep away our legitimate rights and needs in a tsunami of political correctness and knee-jerk politics.

The responsibility to engage, however, is a mutual one. Just as Israel must listen to Europe and others in the international community, so, too, must these same actors listen to Israel and take on board our unique perspectives and concerns.

Indeed, Israel – our tiny democracy under fire – finds itself on the front line of the battle for the soul of the international system, even as we turn to that same system for help in order to safeguard our people and our freedom. We are writing the manual on how to calibrate a successful defense against the threat of strategic terror while preserving democratic principles and human rights. This should encourage like-minded peoples to hear us and support us, not to blame us and abandon us.

This brings me to the fourth focus of Israel's diplomacy as we seek to meet the challenges of our age – promoting Israel's own soft power. In the battle over the character of the international system on the one hand, and for international legitimacy on the other, Israel does not have the luxury of under-utilizing any of its resources.

This is why we are working to promote the real Israel – Israel beyond the conflict, Israel which has so much to offer the international community – and to showcase before the international community the qualities and achievements which earn us our rightful place among the international elite, and which make us deserving of its respect, commitment and support. Of course, this is not easy, when the only images which reach the broader international public are those of our conflict with the Palestinians. But it is necessary.

An Israel which is internationally recognized for its excellence in higher education and its rich contribution to scientific advancement, medical

research and international development is a safer, more secure Israel. And an international community more aware of Israel's democratic institutions, its protection of fundamental human rights and its promotion of equal opportunity for all its citizens – despite the difficult regional environment in which we live – is more likely to stand by Israel's side, than less so.

Israel's foreign ministry has recognized these truths, and is working – through our public diplomacy and our rich array of scientific, cultural and other cooperation programs with friendly countries – to apply their lessons. In this context, the activities of the Mashav Center for International Cooperation at the Foreign Ministry offer a winning formula. Through these cooperative programs we are able to make our contribution to *tikkun olam* (the Jewish concept of repairing the world), thereby realizing our Jewish values and placing us in the esteemed community of donor nations, while at the same time promoting awareness and appreciation of Israel's qualities and values amongst key figures in countries around the world, and also opening doors to Israeli exports and mutually beneficial trade contacts.

That said, the Israeli foreign service cannot do it alone. The entire Israeli establishment must be mobilized and made to understand that membership in the club of the enlightened nations carries with it not only rights but also obligations, including allocating a defined percentage of our GNP to the developing world, and addressing more forcefully such issues as human trafficking, intellectual property, money laundering and the supervision of defense exports. Increased engagement with the international system requires greater interaction with its dominant priorities and values. We must develop a more integrative, holistic definition of national security – one which will be able to meet the challenges of today's multilateral and changing world. And we must allocate the necessary resources for its implementation.

The foreign ministry has a crucial role to play in this process. The expertise derived from our contact with the international system places us in a unique position to guide Israel as to the imperatives of its present and future needs as an actor within that system. This is the mission which faces us as diplomats, as civil servants and as shapers of national policy.