

Israel's Peace Dividend Amid Middle East Chaos

By [Shlomo Ben-Ami](#)

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Twenty years after the Oslo Accords, the prospects for a comprehensive Israeli-Palestinian peace deal are dimmer than ever. Indeed, roughly a half million Israeli settlers in the occupied territories, including East Jerusalem, make the creation of a contiguous Palestinian state an almost impossible mission. So is the renewed vigor of U.S. President Barack Obama's administration in the quest for peace too little and too late?

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu claims that his government has no preconditions for resuming negotiations with the Palestinians. Meanwhile, his housing minister, Uri Ariel — himself a settler and a member of the annexationist Jewish Home party — unleashes a new wave of settlement expansion that threatens to link the 1967 border with the Jordan Valley, thus bisecting Palestinian territory. Netanyahu's own insistence on "ironclad" security arrangements is a euphemism for an Israeli presence in the Jordan Valley — and no return to the "Auschwitz borders" of 1967.

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas is too weak and too burdened by his rivalry with

the hard-line Islamist Hamas, which rules in Gaza, to allow himself the political luxury of departing from the core demands of Palestinian nationalism. Nor does Netanyahu, an ideologue who is visibly uncomfortable with his forced support of the two-state idea, truly have a governing coalition for peace.

Thus, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry will require great deal of creativity to reconcile Netanyahu's position and the Palestinian precondition, recently reiterated by Abbas's close associate Nabil Shaath, that Israel must agree to negotiate on the basis of the 1967 borders. Mahmoud Al-Habbash, the Palestinian minister of religious affairs, even went so far as to demand "assurances that the talks won't fail," because if they do, a new intifada would surely erupt.

Moreover, Kerry's peace drive is taking place in a regional environment that is not amenable to a negotiated resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Arab Spring has turned bloody and unpredictably turbulent, further diminishing the odds for peace in Palestine.

Nor does the recent election of Hassan Rouhani, a relative moderate, to Iran's presidency improve Kerry's chances. Rouhani's victory is certainly good news for Iranians, and it may lead to a more civilized dialogue between the Islamic Republic and the international community. But Rouhani's presidency can hardly be expected to change Iran's strategic objectives. Iran will continue its nuclear program, fight for the survival of Iraqi President Bashar Assad's regime in Syria, seek to maintain its vital alliance with key regional proxies such as Hezbollah and defend Palestine and Jerusalem, which Iran calls al-Quds.

If Assad defeats his opponents with the help of Hezbollah and Iran, his survival is bound to be perceived as a victory for the regional "axis of resistance" to Israel. And a permanent Iranian presence in Syria would make a war between Israel and Iran practically unavoidable. Palestine would then be relegated to an obscure corner of the international agenda.

Complicating matters further, U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have limited its regional clout. The U.S. now faces an unpredictable Middle East that is writing its own history as well — or as badly — as it can.

Syria's internal conflict has now become a Sunni-Shia sectarian war that is spreading across the region. The Sunni clerics who have just declared a jihad against "the Iranian regime, Hezbollah, and its sectarian allies" are the voice of millions across the Muslim world.

Furthermore, waves of Syrian refugees are threatening the sustainability of the Jordanian monarchy, already roiled by profound internal cleavages. Hezbollah has drawn Lebanon into the Syrian conflict, setting up a showdown between Shia and Sunni at home.

A similar scenario is already unfolding in Iraq. Turkey, a responsible regional power, has so far resisted being drawn into the Syrian quagmire, but its effects can be seen in the rising tensions between the country's Sunni majority and the Shia Alevi sect.

Inertia is not an adequate response in an era of revolutionary change. Unfortunately, Israel is missing a coherent regional strategy. Netanyahu, always on the defensive, does not view Middle East turmoil as a trigger for a proactive strategy that would use a solution to the Palestinian problem as leverage for broader positive change in the region.

America, burdened by the cost of its Middle East troubles, eager to refocus on Asia, and no longer in need of Arab oil, can allow itself to leave the region to its destiny. Israel is part of the region and has a strong interest in helping to shape its future.

Israel has traditionally strived to forge alliances with the region's minorities: Kurds, Persians, Maronites and others. Now is the time for a major shift to an alliance with the region's overwhelming Sunni majority.

Israel should follow Obama, whose recent decision to arm the Syrian rebels, though belated and still ill-defined, is a choice for the Sunni alliance. Israel should play an active role in the fall of Assad as a way to undermine the region's "Shia crescent" and isolate its leader, Iran. Assad's defeat would break the "axis of resistance," choke off Hezbollah's arms supplies, and drive a permanent wedge between Turkey and Iran.

A solution to the Palestinian problem would serve such a strategy. It would strengthen Israel's relations with Egypt, help to stabilize Jordan, a vital and friendly buffer state, and remove a major source of tension with Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's government, whose policies are becoming more Islamist. Most important, it would undermine Iran's efforts to make inroads into the Arab world under the pretext of defending Palestine and Holy Jerusalem.

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