



**Pugwash Workshop on
“The Unchangeable Middle East”**

Herzliya, Israel

14-15 November 2014

MAIN POINTS:

- The ISIS/Daesh threat has emerged as the most serious threat to regional stability given its penetration into Iraq and Syria. Although it does not explicitly focus on Israel, as it now stands there is concern as it nears the northern border of Israel.
- The extremism of the ISIS/Daesh movement has perversely weakened the perceived extremism of other radical movements in the Middle East such as Hizbollah and Hamas.
- Although it appears that a deal on the Iran nuclear issue is close, there is still significant difference over what constitutes a good deal from Israeli perspectives; concern persists over breakout, possible military dimensions to Iran’s past nuclear activities, and verification. However, there is the risk of torpedoing a reasonable deal on these grounds.
- The ramifications of a deal on the Iranian nuclear issue include a possible regional problem of technological proliferation in other states, as well as concerns over emboldening Iran to act through proxies vis-à-vis Israel. On the flipside, it was pointed out a deal could help bring Iran on board with action to be taken against Daesh.
- Some consider that the major threat to Israel today has become the decline of Israel’s status in international public opinion, particularly in the wake of the most recent Gaza war.
- There has been a predominant Israeli narrative that has been sold very well, and it is continued today, that there is no partner for peace on the Palestinian side.
- The Israeli-Palestinian peace process does not really exist at this time, and the prospects for it being reinvigorated are slim. In the absence of this, the chances of another Gaza war or a third Palestinian intifada on some scale are high.
- There exists within Israel a range of perspectives on these and related topics, though the nuances are often lost given the unique dynamics of the Israeli political system.

REPORT

On 14-15 November 2014 Pugwash convened a workshop in Herzliya, Israel, to discuss the regional situation of the Middle East. Reflecting the dynamics of the region at this time, the agenda was broadened to include a focus on the ISIS/Daesh threat in Syria and Iraq and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in addition to continuing discussions on the Iran nuclear issue. Organized in cooperation with the Alliance Center for Iranian Studies at Tel Aviv University and Israeli Pugwash, this was the 12th meeting in Israel since 2005, engaging approximately 20 current and former policy makers and experts in dialogue. This report is a summary of the topics discussed, prepared by the rapporteurs,¹ who have sole responsibility for its contents. Pugwash would like to thank the supporters that make this and related meetings possible. In particular, we would like to thank the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Royal Norwegian Embassy in Tel Aviv for their support of this workshop and the ongoing series of meetings.

The situation in Iraq and Syria and the ISIS/Daesh threat

The past six months has witnessed a period of great change for the whole Middle East region: the nature of the strategic environment and the types of threats faced has dramatically altered Israel's outlook regionally. Participants felt that the US-led military action against Daesh² in Syria and Iraq will have ramifications throughout the Middle East and even possible linkages to the US-Iran dynamic. While it was generally agreed that the Daesh leadership has an Iraqi agenda, insofar as Baghdad appears to be the core focus, there is no denying that their presence in Syria presents a significant challenge. One participant stressed that Daesh did not project a significant interest toward Israel at this time.

¹ The rapporteurs for this report were Poul-Erik Christiansen, Projects Assistant, Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs, and Roberta Mulas, GEM Erasmus Mundus Joint Doctoral Candidate at Warwick & LUISS Universities. Please note that the views presented here represent a range of opinions expressed in the meeting, and they do not necessarily reflect the personal views of the rapporteurs, nor of the Pugwash Conferences as an organization; however, a large majority of the participants was from Israel, and this is reflected in the views contained in this report. The meeting was held according to traditional Pugwash/Chatham House rules to enable an open exchange of perspectives and exploration of creative possibilities for ways forward. Thus, the substance of the discussions can be reported out, but no item discussed can be attributed to any one individual. There was no attempt to seek consensus, and in fact the sharing of diverse views was encouraged.

² A majority of participants preferred to use the Arab acronym Daesh rather than ISIS, hence the report will reflect this throughout.

In light of a perceived failure of the uprising in Syria, one participant noted that “the liberal secular opposition to Assad has largely diminished”, leaving the extreme Islamist factions to rival the Alawite regime still in government. This was felt by some to be symbolic of the divide between fundamentalists and modernists in the region, a battle over competing visions of what kind of political order is wanted. At this time, “the fundamentalists seem to be stronger”; but participants noted that this change has had a perverse effect of making other radicals, such as Hizbollah and Hamas, “seem less radical” when compared to the tactics used by Daesh. One participant put forward that as we see the radicals on both sides setting the tone, this is taking place in the context of non-state actors often becoming drivers of political action, while states have weakened and lost legitimacy throughout the region. Another problem identified by participants was that the continuing use of Western aerial military strikes has the effect of indiscriminately affecting populations in Syria and Iraq.

Discussion also focused on Turkey’s role in these developments, described by one participant as “an enigma.” There were question marks raised against President Erdogan’s policies and the seeming support within his party to prioritize toppling Assad and restricting the aspirations of the Kurds. Turkey was also suspected of allowing oil sales granting Daesh economic viability, rather than working together with the US-led coalition to defeat Daesh, although Ankara’s NATO membership was been seen by one participant as its insurance policy for pursuing such actions. To further complicate the picture, another participant raised Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu’s support for Kurdish independence in early summer as at odds with US determination to keep a unitary Iraq.

On Iraq, one participant observed that it appears that the US is “only beginning to realize that it will have to work with the Sunni tribes throughout the North in order to stabilize the country,” but there was skepticism as to whether the Sunnis would accept a resolution after the US leaves. Although the likelihood of Daesh expanding their territorial control within Iraq was deemed to be small, such an outcome would present a huge challenge to Iran. As it stands, the Iranians were said by one participant to be less concerned with Daesh than other regional issues; however, another participant questioned this, given information that some of the bodies coming back to Teheran from Syria had been killed by Daesh and “this is now public knowledge in Iran.” At the same time, the possibility of Iranian cooperation both in the struggle against Daesh and in a

political solution to the Syrian conflict is seen by several participants as one of the potential positive outcomes of normalizing relations with the West in the event of a nuclear deal. Recognizing the inter-connectedness of these issues, the Israeli government was said to be still preoccupied with the Iran threat, now not just on the nuclear file but increasingly what some perceive as Iran's hegemony through Iraq and Syria to the northern borders of Israel. Given the long-standing connections of Iran to Hizbollah, it was noted with concern that in recent months there have been more and more indications that Hizbollah is preparing for a renewed conflict with Israel, as it feels its political position is weakening in Lebanon.

The Iranian nuclear threat

Participants agreed that there were three possible scenarios for the outcome of the upcoming negotiations between Iran and the P5+1 States in Vienna³: there could be a deal; there could be agreement to extend talks to conclude a deal in the near-future; or there could be no deal and failure to reach any agreement. There was no consensus in the room regarding the likelihood between options one and two but participants considered the specter of total failure to be very low. One participant reported that negotiators were confident that the deal is "95% done"; however, the 5% remaining were the significant challenges for which political will needs to be forged. These were reported as being: 1) the number of centrifuges; 2) the duration of a deal; 3) the speed of sanctions relief; and 4) addressing French intransigence.

It was said by one participant that within Iran a systemic decision has been made to resolve the issue, representing across-the-board agreement from the Supreme Leader down, and that progress "should not be seen as freelancing by President Rohani." It was observed that there appears a much greater level of seriousness than at any time since 2005, and it was noted that "Iran has adhered to the interim agreement in every sense of the word, to its credit," despite many believing it would be devious and circumvent some of the understandings.

A number of participants pointed out that Israel's role is to support the international efforts and Prime Minister Netanyahu's "harping at the sidelines in the past has been unhelpful." However,

³ The meeting took place one week before the 24th November 2014 deadline of negotiations between Iran and the P5+1 and much discussion was focused on speculating the results and ramifications of a possible deal.

it was agreed that is in Israel's interest to have a deal, but, they emphasized, this must be a good deal. One participant reflected that if one were to measure a bad deal by the wrong criteria it may lead to a serious miscalculation; for example, it becomes possible to reject a reasonable deal if the sole benchmark is the idea of breakout. There was also no agreement on what constitutes a good duration of a possible deal. Some participants felt that five to ten years was all that could be reasonably expected, while others pointed out that many arms control agreements have long life spans so why not aim for at least 20 years.

In this regard, many participants stressed the differences in what can be considered important elements of a final deal. They felt that one of the problems which needs serious attention is the key question of breakout and the period in which Iran will be allowed to continue certain activities that might maintain this breakout capability of months and not years. While it was admitted that this is not an exact science but rather "a matter of perceptions", a situation which allows for a breakout of months will certainly be viewed as a bad agreement in Israel, and many participants felt that no agreement would be preferable to such a situation. The key position for Israel and the international community is to keep Iran as far as possible from a bomb; however, as one participant proposed, this position must accept that Iran will have some minimal enrichment capability and so focus must be given to ensuring the maximum reaction time and probability of detection.

Similarly, it was put forward that little is known about whether there is a viable and reliable verification system to make sure there is no departure from the agreement. Again, it was strongly felt that an agreement which does not include clear indications of verification becomes an agreement that "has questionable implementation." This necessarily requires a stringent set of internationally administered inspection and verification measures to raise the level of assurance against either breakout or 'sneak-out' (the creation of parallel facilities to work towards a nuclear weapon). It was proposed by one participant that a deal must therefore maximize international presence within Iran as the strongest possible safeguard against breakout or sneak-out scenarios. Several speakers referred to the need for an upgraded version of the Additional Protocol with enhanced verification powers for the IAEA and increased transparency required on the part of Iran.

Lastly, the problem of possible military dimensions (PMD) was raised. One participant strongly believed that this is “not simply a theoretical problem but a practical one” that requires confronting Iran on its past behavior. Another participant felt this issue has real implications for the integrity of the Non-Proliferation Treaty but it was reported that the Director-General of the IAEA has said it will be included in the package of a final deal but would not be addressed before then.

The participants also discussed possible ramifications to a deal. It was pointed out by one participant that Saudi Arabia has made it clear that it will have the right to the same capabilities as Iran will have following the contours of any agreement reached. This means to say that any agreement to be reached could have serious regional technological proliferation implications, which the US is certainly bearing in mind and of which Iran is presumably aware. Furthermore, it was felt by some participants that an agreement will embolden Iran to act in the region, for example in Syria, Lebanon, and through proxies in the Israel-Palestinian conflict. Concerns over the northern border of Israel are not alleviated by the deal and it was felt that “the entrenchment of Iran in the Levant” will continue and be facilitated by the nuclear deal.

The Israel-Palestinian conflict and the impact of the Gaza War

Many participants felt that Israel had been compelled to take action in Gaza and that the war was the result of a typical “step-by-step deterioration” of relations. In this view, the Israeli government was faced with the unacceptable situation of allowing Israeli citizens to be at the mercy of Hamas rocket attacks; one participant pointed to the Iron Dome as sparing the Palestinians greater destruction, without which more Palestinian rockets would have hit and Israel would have been “obliged to respond in much greater force.”

As it is, many felt that both sides were able to claim that they won: Hamas was the recipient of “a blow bigger than ever before” and will endure a long recovery time; they suffered a severe setback militarily, with their stocks of rockets depleted down to 20-25% of the original number by one estimation. Yet, by virtue of the way in which they survived and “the fact that Israeli forces seemed deterred from entering Gaza City,” Hamas also had a small victory. One participant noted that popular support for Hamas among Palestinians in general increased

throughout the war, only coming back down to pre-war levels recently, which has had negative repercussions for Abu Mazen and Fatah.

Within Israel, despite overwhelming popular support for the war, put at 90% by one participant, there appeared to be little questioning of the strategic military value of each strike. The involvement of legal advisers in every operational command decision was cited by one participant as “unparalleled in other conflicts or by any other army.” This participant also reported that documented records have been taken and are now handled by a special directorate in case the decision will be taken to make them public. Yet it was raised by a number of participants that more than 50% of Palestinian deaths were of civilians, highly destructive artillery shells were employed, and the damage to infrastructure throughout Gaza was unprecedented.

Despite donor conference pledges to aid the reconstruction of Gaza there has been little getting through because of the blockade enforced by Egypt and Israel. One participant noted that practically nothing has happened on the ground as “businesses have ground to a halt and little movement of people is possible.” As this participant put it, this means that Gaza becomes a ticking bomb in many respects. While Israel has its own demographic problems, Gaza has a youth explosion, meaning that “even if peace is reached tomorrow the export of social tension will continue.” Some participants noted that for the very young in Gaza all they have known is war and deprivation.

As many participants noted the significant shift in European opinion of Israel, described as “a quantum jump down,” one participant felt that there is a “constant failure of Israel to deliver its message abroad,” an inability to explain what it is doing in relation to the Palestinians. There is a feeling that the campaigns for the international recognition of Palestine and for the boycott of Israeli products have been important elements in decreasing Israel’s standing in the international community, but the most severe hit came as a result of the Gaza war. It was said that Europeans are asking why they should be financing the reconstruction of Gaza when it was caused by Israel using US-supplied weapons. A number of participants felt that the bottoming-out of Israel’s standing in the world is now “the major threat” faced by the country.

Even in the absence of a UN decision on the subject of statehood, “the question of how to deal with the Palestinians remains” and, for some, it should be given greater priority. There was

concern expressed at the deteriorating situation in the West Bank, with growing frustration and dissatisfaction and the spiking of tensions in Jerusalem over the situation at the Temple Mount which has grabbed the attention of the world, sparking US Secretary of State Kerry's involvement. Many participants felt that Abu Mazen is opposed to violence and would rather avoid a third intifada but that it was still a real possibility. One participant felt that "there has been an Israeli narrative that has been sold very well, and it is continued today, that there is no partner for peace on the Palestinian side." Although it was said that Israel should not intervene in the relations between the different Palestinian factions, one participant stressed the importance of directly engaging Hamas in talks.

Looking forward, one participant noted that as a result of the war in Gaza "the bubble in the north of Israel that there is no conflict was burst." Following from this, a renewed understanding within Israel that the conflict wasn't over was deemed to be a positive outcome. Another participant felt that it was clear the overarching goal of Israel should be an agreement with Palestinians, "everything we do as a country should be geared toward to this goal" even if in the day-to-day it might not always be so direct. However, several participants recognized that the present government is either unable or unwilling to make the concessions needed for peace. Moreover, one participant spoke of the dangers of growth of extremism and racism in Israeli society which seemed to be moving the body politic to the right, resulting in the shrinking of the peace camp. The proposal of Naftali Bennett, a settler leader, for Israel to annex Area C, 64% of the West Bank, was raised as becoming a de facto possibility. It was also commented that most people in Israel do not see a situation in which Israel will not be responsible for the borders of the two state solution. However, it was pointed out that such limits on Palestinian sovereignty would be taken to represent a continuation of the occupation in a sense.

Conclusion

A range of views exists in Israel on these and related issues. There was recognition of the need to provide opportunities for such discussions and engage the spectrum of Israeli opinion with views from outside of the country. International Pugwash and Israeli Pugwash were urged to continue this series of meetings.

Participant List

Prof. Amazia Baram, Professor Emeritus in the Department of Middle East History, and Director of the Center for Iraq Studies at the University of Haifa [formerly: Fellow at: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, U.S. Institute of Peace, the Washington Institute, and the Brookings Institute]; **Israel**

Mr. Julian Borger, Diplomatic Editor, *The Guardian*; **UK**

Mrs. Sandra Ionno Butcher, Executive Director, Pugwash Conferences, and Member, Pugwash Council; Director, Pugwash History Project [formerly: Senior Programme Coordinator, Pugwash Conferences; Joint Executive Secretary, British Pugwash Group; Executive Director, Student Pugwash USA; Interim Research Director and Senior Analyst, British American Security Information Council]; **USA/UK**

Mr. Poul-Erik Christiansen, PhD Candidate, School of Political Studies, University of Ottawa; **UK**

Prof. Paolo Cotta-Ramusino, Secretary-General, Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs; Member, Pugwash Executive Committee; Professor of Mathematical Physics, University of Milan, [formerly: Secretary General, Union of Italian Scientists for Disarmament (USPID); Director, Program on Disarmament and International Security, Landau Network – Centro Volta, Como]; **Italy**

Amb. Ran Curiel, is the former Political Director and Senior Deputy Director General of Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He served as Ambassador of Israel to the European Union and NATO (2007-2011) as Deputy Director General and Head of the European Department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Jerusalem (2003-2007), and was Israel's Ambassador in Greece (1996-2001). Amb. Curiel has dealt for many years with European Union-Israel relations. During his career with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, he served in Washington and Buenos Aires. He holds a B.A. in Middle Eastern and African Studies from Tel Aviv University and an M.A. in Political Sciences from Haifa University. **Israel**

Amb. Oded Eran, Senior Research Associate (and former Director, July 2008-November 2011) at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), and former Ambassador of Israel to the EU, DCM, Washington, etc., Tel Aviv, **Israel**

Mr. Stif Ermesjø, Defense Attache, Royal Norwegian Embassy, Tel Aviv, Israel; **Norway**

Professor Yair Evron, Professor Emeritus, and Senior Research Fellow, Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), Tel-Aviv (formerly :Professor, Head, Department of Political Science; Head, Graduate Program, Security Studies, Tel-Aviv University; Visiting Professor or Research Fellow, Harvard, Cornell, UCLA, Concordia, MIT, Georgetown and Oxford Universities); **Israel**

Dr. Chuck Freilich, Senior Fellow, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, USA; Adjunct Professor, Tel Aviv University, Tel Aviv, and Inter-

Disciplinary Center, Herzliya, Israel and NYU, NY [formerly: Deputy National Security Adviser, Israel]; **Israel**

Dr. Brandon Friedman, Center for Iranian Studies, Tel Aviv University, Tel Aviv, **Israel**

Prof. Galia Golan-Gild PhD, Professor of Government and Chair, Program on Diplomacy and Conflict Studies, Interdisciplinary Center (IDC), Herzliya; Professor Emerita, Department of Political Science, Hebrew University of Jerusalem; Member, Pugwash Council [formerly: Darwin Professor of Soviet and East European Studies; Chair, Department of Political Science, Hebrew University of Jerusalem]; **Israel**

Mr. Efraim Halevy, former Director of Mossad, Tel Aviv, **Israel**

Ms. Gunvor Annette Hesla-Halvorsen, Personal Assistant to the Defence Attaché, Royal Norwegian Embassy, Tel Aviv, Israel; **Norway**

Mr. Bernard Hourcade, Senior Research Fellow (Emeritus) CNRS, Paris; recently Public Policy Scholar, Woodrow Wilson Center, Washington, D.C.; **France**

Mr. Meir Javedanfar established and runs Middle East Analyst, a subsidiary of The Middle East Economic and Political Analysis Company (meepas), whose main goal is to analyse contemporary political and economic affairs of the region; teaches a “Contemporary Iranian Politics” course at the Interdisciplinary Center (IDC) in Herzliya; expert on the UN Alliance of Civilisations - Global Experts Resource Project; member and contributor to the Gulf 2000 Middle East Project which is run by the School of International and Public Affairs of Columbia University in New York City; **Israel**

Dr. Emily Landau, Director of Arms Control and Regional Security Project, Institute for National Security Studies (formerly The Jaffee Center for Security Studies), Tel Aviv; **Israel**

Dr. Reza Marashi, Research Director, National Iranian American Council, Washington, DC; formerly with Office of Iranian Affairs, US Department of State; former Analyst at the Institute for National Strategic Studies (INSS), **US**

Prof. David Menashri, President of the College of Law and Business, Ramat Gan; Professor Emeritus, Tel Aviv University [formerly: Dean of Special Program and Director, Alliance Center for Iranian Studies, Parviz and Pouran Nazarian Chair for Modern Iranian Studies, Tel Aviv University] **Israel**

Mr. Jonathan Miller, International Student/Young Pugwash (ISYP); graduate of Swarthmore College in Philadelphia, where he majored in Islamic studies, and currently doing a degree in Islamic law at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) of the University of London; has studied Arabic in Amman, Jordan and Menton, France, **US**

Dr. Steve Miller, Member of the Pugwash Council; Director of the International Security Program of the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, Editor-in-chief of the quarterly International Security, and Co-chair of the US Pugwash Committee, **US**

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Ms. Smadar Peri, Senior Middle East Editor, *Yedioth Ahronoth*, **Israel**

Amb. Svein Sevre, Norwegian Ambassador to Israel [formerly: Ambassador to Sudan (2008-2010); Special Envoy for the Middle East (2006-2008), Ambassador to Syria and Lebanon (2002-2006), Head of the Middle East Section, MFA, Oslo (1998-2002); Minister-Counsellor in the Embassy in Tel Aviv/Head of the Representative Office to the Palestinian Authority (1994-98). Served in Brasilia, Madrid, New Delhi, Berlin (GDR)] **Norway**

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