

PeaceWatch #525 : Special Forum Report

Israel's Search for Peace and Security: The Challenges Ahead

Featuring [Moshe Yaalon](#)

November 14, 2005

On November 4, 2005, Lt. Gen. (ret.) Moshe Yaalon, outgoing chief of staff of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), addressed a special Washington Institute Policy Forum marking the anniversary of former prime minister Yitzhak Rabin's assassination. General Yaalon is a distinguished military fellow at the Institute. The following is a rapporteur's summary of his remarks. [Watch video](#) of the entire event.



Ten years ago today, the Israeli prime minister, Yitzhak Rabin, was assassinated. This was one of the darkest days in the history of the State of Israel, the Israeli democracy, and the Jewish people. Prime Minister Rabin, who had also previously served as the IDF's chief of the General Staff, was born in Jerusalem in 1922—perhaps symbolically, during the days of the first significant Arab murderous attacks against the reestablished Israeli settlements in the land of Israel. In January 1964, Yitzhak Rabin was promoted to the rank of lieutenant general, becoming the seventh IDF chief of the General Staff. After war broke out in 1967, General Rabin led the IDF to the decisive victory in the Six Day War and, on December 31, 1967, stepped down from his command with Israel enjoying, for the first time since its establishment, defensible borders.

On December 5, 1967, in a meeting between Prime Minister Levi Eshkol and the General Staff discussing options about the “new territories,” General Rabin:

- Assessed that, in the absence of a solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict, Israel would have to stay in the territories indefinitely.
- Rejected the idea of annexing one million additional Arabs to the State of Israel—he called it a “disaster for the State of Israel.”
- Proposed the idea of a Palestinian state that would be politically connected to Israel.

In another discussion with the General Staff, he recommended not to withdraw from the territories without a final settlement, and to insist on open borders between Israel and its neighboring countries in any future peace agreement.

Yitzhak Rabin, as prime minister, tried to implement these elements of his strategic thinking in Israel's policy: he signed the peace accords with King Hussein of Jordan, tried to reach a peace agreement with Syria, and decided to try to reach a final settlement to the conflict with the Palestinians through the Oslo agreements. He suspected the Palestinian leadership, but he decided to try. Yitzhak Rabin's biography is a digest of Zionism and the history of the first five decades of the State of Israel. It exemplifies the spirit of the State of Israel and the Jewish people: aspiring for peace and ready to fight to defend its existence.

The Middle East in the Midst of an Earthquake

The Middle East is going through change, the likes of which has not been seen in decades. The changes are in many ways the outcome of the United States' presence in the heart of the Middle East, physical and perceived. This presence urges the creation of a regional order based on a change in political culture. To a lesser degree, the Middle East is being influenced by Israel's disengagement, which for the first time bestows upon Palestinians the responsibility for contiguous territory and makes the Palestinian issue a significant one for Egypt and, to some extent, Jordan.

There is a low likelihood that the present turmoil could lead to a change in Middle Eastern political culture in the form of real democratization in the near future. But, in the long run, there is a chance that democratization will materialize and bring about a better future for the Middle East. This is the main struggle in the region. It is about hearts and minds, values and culture.

In Middle Eastern politics, an inherent paradox exists. On one hand, notwithstanding a process of continued weakening, the state is still stronger than society. On the other hand, most of the regimes feel insecure in the face of growing questions regarding their legitimacy. The weakening of the state against the backdrop of globalization, the growing power of international organizations, and the proliferation of communication systems—telephones, mobile phones, satellites, and the internet—exposes the individual to the external world. All of these things exacerbate the siege mentality held by leaders and their tendency to try and shut out foreign ideas.

The region is in the midst of an earthquake that started as a result of the American strategy following the September 11 attacks and especially following Operation Iraqi Freedom in March 2003.

The understanding of the current American administration is that in order to prevent terror in New York and in Washington, precautionary measures or attacking the terrorist themselves are not enough. Rather, it is necessary to overthrow the tyranny that gives rise to terrorism and to set up democracy in its place. This insight informed an American strategy that incorporated military, diplomatic, and economic aspects to overthrow regimes in Afghanistan and Iraq, further putting pressure on other undemocratic or tyrannical regimes, including the Palestinian Authority (PA), to implement political, economic, and security reforms in the direction of democratization.

Democracy Is Achievable

Opposition to democratization remains formidable, not only on the part of radical elements whose existence is threatened by it—such as Palestinian terrorist organizations, Hizballah, or the regimes in Iran and in Syria—but also by moderate regimes close to the United States, who see democratization as a threat to their survival. Among the recent developments, we find:

- A succession of elections, in Afghanistan in November 2004; in the Palestinian Authority for chairman in January 2005 and for the Legislative Council in January 2006; in Iraq for provisional parliament in January 2005 and for parliament in December 2005; and in Lebanon for parliamentary elections in May and June 2005. In Egypt, which held presidential elections in September 2005 and parliamentary elections in November 2005, President Hosni Mubarak allowed contested presidential elections, and the opposition—which in this case is not radical Islamist—has dared to criticize the regime.

- Large-scale popular demonstrations in Lebanon contributed to the removal of Syrian forces. Elections were held with internal issues—not Israel—as the priority on the agenda.
- Growing internal discussions have erupted in the societies surrounding Israel on questions of values, in particular the place of personal happiness and responsibility for persons and the state.

Thus, notwithstanding the long list of obstacles to democratization in countries surrounding Israel, this process is not inconceivable. The change needs to be internal, stemming from peoples' desires for freedom. This process needs to be supported by the leaders of the free world who believe that the citizens of Arab countries can and should be free. This belief should, in turn, be translated into policy that makes diplomatic and economic relations conditional on the state of human rights in those countries, which would strengthen the development of civil society and political reform.

Such a process is very delicate and needs to be followed with a high sensitivity to the possibility of extreme elements, especially Islamic extremists, using democratic processes to gain control of countries, as seen in Algeria and Iran, or as might happen in the Palestinian Authority if Hamas wins elections and establishes a radical Islamist regime.

The process has to derive from the desire of people for freedom, and therefore must include education for values not offered by the present regimes. In part, this educational process is informal, being disseminated through Western media and especially through the internet. To a certain degree, Arab students studying abroad should be engaged, but these values primarily need to be imparted in education programs starting with kindergarten. In this regard, it is essential to condition aid to Arab countries and the Palestinian Authority on educational reforms and the cessation of anti-Western incitement. It is also very important that, in this process, ordinary Arabs perceive immediate gains from growing freedom in the fields of human rights and economics. This is achievable.

Yitzhak Rabin's way in the military and in political leadership shows us that it is a long journey. There are no immediate solutions to this complex situation, but recent progress gives us hope that it is achievable.

General Reflections on the Region

Defeating terrorism emanating from the Middle East requires a policy that promotes democracy in the region. Military solutions will only go so far in stemming this threat, and there is a need to deal with the roots of extremism, particularly among young Palestinians. Without a concerted effort at reforming Palestinian education and removing textbooks from classrooms that discourage reconciliation, there will only be a continued need to fight in the future.

Regarding Syria, the Asad regime appears weak and likely will not survive. This is in part a result of Syria being a more open society under Syrian President Bashar al-Asad than it was under his father Hafiz. Whereas Hafiz al-Asad banned walkie-talkies, Internet cafes in Damascus have increased the Syrian public's awareness of their plight. While the United States should not work to support the regime during its crisis, it would be equally ill-advised for it actively to intervene in Syria's domestic politics to weaken the regime.

Progress in the peace process has been stalled by Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas's refusal to enact his own decree of "One Law, One Rule, One Gun," and by the persistence of gang logic in the Palestinian Authority. Abbas has permitted this situation by insisting on the inclusion of Hamas in the upcoming Palestinian parliamentary elections without disarming it, and by further taking no action to isolate terrorist groups. For example, when three Palestinian youths smuggling weapons were killed on the Gaza-Egyptian border by Israeli forces recently, Abbas blamed Israel for killing "soccer players" rather than denouncing the smuggling. Abbas has undermined the peace process by keeping terrorists in power as a means of controlling them, and has aided their rhetoric by calling for the most expansive definition of the right of return. Abbas is not weak, but he has used weakness as an excuse to the benefit of Palestinian terror groups.

If there is no progress in the peace process, Israel may undertake another unilateral move. However, negotiations are preferable; a unilateral move should be considered as a last resort. As the Gaza disengagement showed, unilateral moves are not necessarily strategic assets. To the contrary, Gaza created several unfortunate precedents: unilateral action without receiving anything in return; relinquishing the demilitarization of the territories by giving up control of the boundaries; removal of settlers outside the context of a bilateral agreement; and the deployment of Egyptian troops in the Sinai as a revision to the Camp David Accords.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Eric Trager.

Copyright 2006 The Washington Institute for Near East Policy