

Diplomatic Nite - Bridging the Gap

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[Home](#) / [September 2014](#)

The 'New Middle East,' Revised Edition

GLOBAL CENTRE STAGE

In July 2014, President Obama sent the White House's Coordinator for the Middle East, Philip Gordon, to address the 'Israel Conference on Peace' in Tel-Aviv. 'How' Gordon asked 'will [Israel] have peace if it is unwilling to delineate a border, end the occupation and allow for Palestinian sovereignty, security, and dignity?' This is a good question, but Dr Emmanuel Navon asks how Israel will achieve peace if it is willing to delineate a border, end the occupation and allow for Palestinian sovereignty, security, and dignity, especially when experience, logic and deduction suggest that the West Bank would turn into a larger and more lethal version of the Gaza Strip after the Israeli withdrawal

During the last war between Israel and Hamas (which officially ended with a ceasefire on August 27, 2014), US Secretary of State John Kerry inadvertently created a common ground among rivals: Israel, the Palestinian Authority, Egypt and Jordan all agreed in July 2014 that Kerry had ruined the chances of a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas. Collaborating with Turkey and Qatar to reach a ceasefire was tantamount to calling the neighbourhood's pyromaniac instead of the fire department to extinguish the fire. Qatar bankrolls Hamas and Turkey advocates on its behalf. While in Paris in July, Kerry was all smiles with Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu whose boss, Recep Erdogan, recently accused Israel of genocide and compared Netanyahu to Hitler. Kerry was also at ease with Qatari Foreign Minister Khalid al-Attiyah, who did not deny Shimon Peres' open accusation that Qatar finances the tunnels and the rockets that Hamas uses to kill Israelis.

Hamas leader Khaled Mashal declared from Doha that John Kerry had asked Davutoglu and al-Attiyah to push for a ceasefire two days after the beginning of Operation Protective Edge, even though Kerry was aware of Egypt's efforts to rein in Hamas. The day after Kerry's photo ops with Davutoglu and al-Attiyah in Paris, President Obama called Prime Minister Netanyahu to ask for an unconditional ceasefire. The meaning of an unconditional ceasefire is that Israel would have had to lay down arms, while leaving dozens of tunnels intact and thousands of rockets in Hamas' possession.

Gaza Conflict Beyond the Headlines

What caused the Obama Administration to sideline its allies and woo its adversaries? That question boggles the mind of Middle East experts.

For Qatar, the military coup against Mohamed Morsi was a serious setback. Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi is openly fighting the Muslim Brotherhood and its international backers – first and foremost Qatar and Turkey. By contrast, during Operation Pillar of Defence in November 2012, Egypt was still ruled by the Muslim Brotherhood. At the time, involving the 'Islamic triangle' of Egypt, Turkey and Qatar to reach a ceasefire was inevitable. Today, there are two opposing camps and the United States had a choice. The one it made defies logic.

Or does it? Operation Protective Edge was launched at a critical time for US interests in the Middle East. On July 14, the US signed an \$11 billion military deal with Qatar. On July 18, President Obama decided to extend the Iran nuclear negotiations for four months. Connect the dots between those sequential events and you start understanding Obama's strategy. His administration is protecting Hamas because not doing so might jeopardise a huge military deal. As for Iran, America needs the conflict in Gaza to end as soon as possible for negotiations to resume. The US negotiators have tried to compartmentalise regional issues involving Iran during the nuclear talks, by avoiding topics such as Iran's missile development, its links to terrorist groups, and its human rights abuses. Obama's logic is that doing so will enhance the prospects of reaching a deal. The longer the Gaza conflict continues, the harder it will be for the US to separate negotiations with Iran from other issues.

Unilateral Disengagement in Theory and Practice

The Gaza conflict, however, is the outcome of Israel's unilateral withdrawal from that territory in August 2005. When Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon announced his 'disengagement plan' at the 2003 Herzliya Conference, he claimed that 'the purpose of the disengagement plan is to diminish terrorism and to provide security to Israel's citizens,' and that his plan 'would improve our quality of life and boost our economy.' Since the plan's implementation in August 2005, over 12,000 rockets have been fired into Israel and more than five million Israelis are living under threat of rocket attacks. Around the



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Gaza Strip, Israelis live in constant fear of a missile landing on their house and of terrorists popping out of their living room from an underground tunnel.

Israel has had to fight three wars to tackle the effects of the 2005 retreat (Operation Cast Lead in 2008, Operation Pillar of Defence in 2012, and Operation Protective Edge in 2014). As for the economy, Hamas has proved its ability to shut down Ben-Gurion airport and to bring Israel's tourist industry to its knees. Operation Protective Edge is estimated to have cost \$3.6 billion (direct military expenses and indirect damages to the Israeli economy). When Sharon submitted the disengagement plan to his Likud constituents in a referendum (whose results he ignored), he claimed that 'after disengagement, the international community will no longer be able to assert that the Gaza Strip is occupied.' This also proved to be delusional.

Sharon's disengagement plan expressed the zeitgeist of the Herzliya Conference, reflecting an emerging consensus among Israelis. After Arafat had rejected the Camp David proposal in July 2000 and the Clinton parameters in December 2000, even Israel's most starry-eyed peaceniks were altogether horrified and disillusioned. In October 2000, Shlomo Avineri, an enthusiastic supporter of the Oslo process, published an open letter to Edward Said in The Jerusalem Post saying: "You were right, Edward: compromise doesn't work ... Thank you again for your honesty." Benny Morris, who started his academic career as a 'new historian' on the far left of Israel's political spectrum said in an interview with Haaretz in 2004: "When the Palestinians rejected the proposal of [Prime Minister Ehud] Barak in July 2000 and the Clinton proposal in December 2000, I understood that they are unwilling to accept the two-state solution. They want it all. Lod and Acre and Jaffa."

Unilateral disengagement was meant to solve a two-variable equation: A = Reaching a peace agreement between Israel and the PLO has proven to be impossible; B = Maintaining the status quo might spell Israel's demographic doom. In theory, unilateral disengagement was clever. In practice, it was a disaster. With the recent failed attempt, once again, to reach an agreement with the PLO, some have been floating the idea of unilateral withdrawal from Judea and Samaria (the 'West Bank'). As the Gaza precedent has proved beyond doubt, a unilateral withdrawal from Judea and Samaria would bring Jihadists, rockets and tunnels to the immediate vicinity of Jerusalem and Ben-Gurion international airport. With psychotic Jihadists taking over Iraq and Syria and heading toward Jordan, and with Iran about to reach the nuclear threshold, the idea of repeating disengagement just to relieve Israel's demographic concerns is tantamount to treating a headache with the guillotine.

And yet, President Obama insists that Israel should take this foolish risk. In July 2014, Obama sent the White House's Coordinator for the Middle East, Philip Gordon, to address the 'Israel Conference on Peace' in Tel-Aviv.

'How' Gordon asked 'will [Israel] have peace if it is unwilling to delineate a border, end the occupation and allow for Palestinian sovereignty, security, and dignity?' This is a good question, but here is a better one: How will Israel achieve peace if it is willing to delineate a border, end the occupation and allow for Palestinian sovereignty, security, and dignity? Israel had no peace when there was such a border between 1949 and 1967, and when Israel offered to re-delineate this border with minor changes in July 2000 and in May 2008, it was unable to obtain the peace that such a move was supposed to produce.

Experience, logic and deduction suggest that the West Bank would turn into a larger and more lethal version of the Gaza Strip after the Israeli withdrawal called for by Gordon. He is aware of that: "We know that many Israelis fear withdrawal from the West Bank due to the experience in Gaza, from which rockets continue to strike Israel, notwithstanding the full withdrawal of Israeli troops and settlements."

The Solution?

An American security plan details of which 'remain classified.' Gordon uttered those words shortly after his audience had to be evacuated because of rockets being shot at Tel-Aviv from Gaza by the 'technocrats' that recently joined the PA government (a government that US Secretary of State John Kerry was quick to endorse because PA Chairman Mahmoud Abbas had assured him that it was 'committed to non violence').

Because the details of the American security plan for the West Bank 'remain classified,' Gordon asks Israel to trust him when he assures us that the fate of the West Bank will be different from that of Gaza after an Israeli withdrawal. With all due respect, we may not have access to the 'classified security plan,' but we do have access to the showcase of American-trained security forces in Iraq.

During the last and botched round of negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, the Obama Administration had proposed to eventually replace the IDF's presence in the Jordan Valley with US-trained Palestinian forces. US-trained forces in Iraq were unable (or unwilling) to stop the advance of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), now IS. If US-trained Iraqi soldiers were not willing to fight ISIL to protect their own country, why would US-trained Palestinian soldiers be willing to fight fellow Arabs to protect Israel in the Jordan Valley? Indeed, the US-trained Iraqi forces were as inefficient at protecting their Shiite government as the US-trained soldiers in Gaza were inefficient, in 2007, at protecting the PLO government there. And since ISIL, which has a Palestinian contingent, is now threatening Jordan, would US-trained Palestinians shoot their brothers to protect Israel's borders?

Philip Gordon is not convincing when he calls upon Israel to allow for 'Palestinian sovereignty, security, and dignity.' If the Obama Administration is so concerned about the 'sovereignty, security, and dignity' of Middle-East people, why does it deny those attributes from the Kurds? John Kerry recently asked Kurdish President Masoud Barzani to put aside his aspirations for an independent Kurdish state. The Obama Administration fears that an independent Kurdish state in Iraq would encourage Kurdish secessionism in Turkey and Iran. Obama does not want to cross Iran in the midst of tough negotiations on the Ayatollahs' nuclear program, nor does he want to further alienate Turkey's temperamental prime minister. So Kurdish 'sovereignty, security, and dignity' can wait as far as the Obama Administration is concerned.

Israel has good reasons to be concerned not only about the implosion of the Arab states and by the progress of the IS, but also about the delusional and counter-productive Middle East policies of the Obama Administration.

[Go to Content Page](#)

AUTHOR



Dr Emmanuel Navon chairs the Political Science and Communication Department at the Jerusalem Orthodox College and teaches International Relations at Tel-Aviv University and the Herzliya Interdisciplinary Centre. He is a Senior Fellow at the Kohelet Policy Forum.

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