



CONCLUDING DIALOGUE SESSION

Assessing the State of the U.S.-Israel Strategic Relationship

Ehud Barak, Minister of Defense

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International Studies



The Saban Forum concluded with a conversation with Israel's Minister of Defense, Ehud Barak. The session brought together many of the issues discussed over the course of the Forum, offering participants an opportunity to take part in a discussion that touched on the broad issues relating to Israel's security and political objectives.

The session began with comments on the United States-Israel partnership, with an Israeli participant saying that it goes deeper than which party or which individual is in power in either country. Because of this long-standing tie, both sides should feel comfortable engaging in private, honest dialogue about matters of national security.

The session then touched on what one Israeli participant said were two challenges relating to Israel's security: devising achievable objectives and designing effective public relations techniques. Specifically, the Israeli government must remember that, particularly in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, the IDF can only deliver on military objectives. The IDF cannot effect political change or reform. Because of this, Israel made the decision not to destroy Hamas during Operation Cast Lead; doing so would have created a political vacuum and required Israel to reoccupy the Gaza Strip and engage in an ongoing military operation. Given this, the Israeli participant said that the Israeli government and its allies should recognize when the IDF achieves what it sets out to do and not expect unattainable results—for instance, Operation Cast Lead should be seen as a success because it achieved the military's aim of stopping rocket fire into Israel. Furthermore, the Israeli government must articulate to the international community a clear message when it engages in military operations—namely, it is responding to critical security threats in a manner that takes into account the civilian-heavy environments from which the threats emanate.

The greatest challenge for democratic societies will continue to be responding to asymmetric threats, particularly when terrorist groups operate within civilian centers. The only way to combat this is to use a minimal



amount of force, but enough to reach the objective set forth by the military. However, democratic countries are hamstrung by international agreements that do not recognize the challenges of addressing asymmetrical threats. Because these terrorist threats will continue, the international community should consider amending agreements to account for the new reality.

One near-term priority for Israel is to preserve the Israeli-Turkish relationship. Ankara is a key partner in the region, and Israel cannot afford to have this relationship sour, even if it does not agree with all of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's behavior.

Most importantly for Israel are the issues of Iran and the conflict with the Palestinians. In terms of the former, the international community should not take any options off the table. Iran's actions have indicated it is looking to follow in the path of North Korea, attaining nuclear weapons at all costs. For this reason, the international community should put a time limit on negotiations and make clear that Iran would face unappealing alternatives should it choose to continue to go down the road of pursuing nuclear capabilities. Regarding the Palestinian issue, one option is to establish a Palestinian state with provisional borders. Though such an option would be appealing for Israel, the Palestinians would likely object to it since they would not trust Israel or the international community ultimately to guarantee them a state in borders based on the 1967 line.