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Misreading the Map

The Road to Jerusalem Does Not Lead Through Tehran

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As Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu comes to Washington for a meeting with President Barack Obama, U.S. policymakers are being urged to place the Palestinian-Israeli conflict on the back burner and spend their time and energy addressing the true menace supposedly confronting Arabs and Jews in the Middle East -- Iran. Deal with that threat, the sirens sing, and the other pieces of peace in the Holy Land will fall into place.

Netanyahu framed the issue in a speech he made in Washington earlier this month. "There is something happening today in the Middle East, and I can say that for the first time in my lifetime I believe that Arabs and Jews see the common danger," he told supporters of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee. "This wasn't always the case," he added.

Or was it? In fact, there have been many times when key players in Jerusalem and Washington have convinced themselves that focusing on some third party would make Israeli-Palestinian peace possible. But it has not worked in the past, and it won't work now.

During the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, the Soviet Union provided diplomatic and military support for the new Jewish state. Many Israelis, echoing Soviet propaganda, promoted the idea that the defeat of the imperialist powers in the Middle East and the collapse of their corrupt lackeys in the Arab world -- including in Palestine -- would help usher in a new age of cooperation between progressive Israelis and Palestinians. It didn't happen.

Throughout the Cold War, a mirror-image fantasy popular in Jerusalem and Washington blamed Soviet support for Arab radicals as the driver of the Arab-Israeli conflict. According to this argument, Palestinian nationalism was simply another radical Marxist-oriented movement controlled by Moscow. Seeing the Arab-Israeli confrontation as a minor sideshow to the larger U.S.-Soviet struggle, Washington treated Israel's creeping annexation of the West Bank with benign neglect and gave Israel a yellow light to invade Lebanon in 1982 -- leading to disastrous consequences in both cases.

The George W. Bush administration saw its foray into Iraq as a substitute for a diplomatic strategy to bring about Israeli-Palestinian peace. But the notion that the road to Jerusalem led through Baghdad -- that transforming Iraq into a pro-American liberal democracy and promoting a "freedom agenda" in the Middle East would empower regional forces supporting peace with Israel -- proved to be an illusion. Instead of strengthening the pro-American bloc in the Middle East, weakening the power of radical political Islam, and accelerating the peace process, the Bush administration's policies helped tilt the regional balance of power

toward Iran and its satellites, empowering anti-American and anti-Israeli forces in Lebanon and Palestine and generating mistrust and violence in the Holy Land.

Now the message emanating from Israel and some of its supporters in the United States is that the road to Jerusalem leads through Iran. Netanyahu contends that since Iran is permanently hostile to Israel's existence and supports Hezbollah in southern Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza, the only way to make Israeli-Palestinian peace possible is to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear capability and throw it back on its heels. Since leading Arab states such as Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia are also worried about Iran's rising power, the argument continues, Washington might be able to put together a regional consensus aimed at containing Iran -- and possibly even persuade its partners to become more forthcoming in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

As Elliott Abrams, a deputy national security adviser in the Bush administration, wrote recently in *The Wall Street Journal*, "There is a critical struggle under way right now in the Middle East, but it is not between Israelis and Palestinians; it is the people aligned with us -- including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the Palestinian Authority, Israel and the United Arab Emirates -- against Iran, Qatar, Syria, Hezbollah and the Palestinian rejectionist groups. Mr. Netanyahu will tell the president this, but no one knows if the president will buy it -- at least until he consults with those Arab leaders and hears the same thing."

It is true that some Sunni Arab governments worry about the rising influence of Iran and its Shiite partners in the region and are concerned about the prospects for a diplomatic détente between Washington and Tehran that could erode their current leverage over U.S. policy. But the fact that they share certain U.S. or Israeli strategic concerns will not create the foundation for long-term strategic alliances (as opposed to ad-hoc tactical arrangements). In the Middle East, as elsewhere, one-night stands do not necessarily lead to marriage.

And any notion that Amman, Cairo, or Riyadh might go so far as to approve and perhaps even applaud an American or Israeli strike against Iran's nuclear military installations is based on wishful thinking. Sunni Arab leaders are concerned about the potential for backlash by angry publics against their regimes after any such attack. They also realize that Iran would be in a good position to unleash its regional proxies against Israel and the United States, rather than vice versa. So Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia would probably hedge their bets as Iran responds to an outside attack while Israel would be exposed to massive Iranian retaliation. That could force the United States into a costly, direct military intervention on Israel's side and throw the region into chaos. At the end of the day, Washington would discover that the chief alternative to invading Iran and toppling its regime was engaging Tehran diplomatically -- an option available to it today, without all the messy preliminaries.

The Obama administration seems to understand this, and is welcoming Tehran's cooperation in establishing stability in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Lebanon while continuing talks with Iran on its nuclear program through the so-called P5-plus-1 setting. This is the most sensible course to take, but at best it is likely only to slow down Iran's drive to build a nuclear bomb, as opposed to stopping Iran's nuclear program entirely. So Israel and the United States should also start preparing for an eventual "day after" by developing an effective nuclear deterrence strategy against Tehran and working with allies across Europe and the Middle East to contain the Iranian challenge.

As for Israel, Obama must recognize that the main threat to Israel's existence as a Jewish and democratic state is not Iran but its conflict with the Palestinians -- a conflict that will continue to serve as a catalyst for growing anti-Israel and anti-American radicalization in the region at large unless and until it is resolved. Resolving the conflict, in turn, will require the relevant local parties to deal directly with the core problems: the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, settlements, refugees, violence, and Jerusalem.

Washington cannot make a deal for the Israelis and the Palestinians, but it can and should help them do so themselves. At the very least, it should not make matters worse by allowing itself to be distracted yet again

from the main task at hand. If anything, successful U.S. efforts to achieve a peace agreement between the Israelis and the Palestinians would make it more difficult for Iranian radicals to win support across the region. It is more likely that the road to Tehran leads through Jerusalem than that the road to Jerusalem leads through Tehran.

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