

EUROPE AND ISRAEL
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(Remarks as Prepared for Delivery)

Dear Professor Schäfer, dear Professor Perelman,

I would like to thank you for your kind invitation to the Program of Judaic Studies in Princeton's Department of Religion. It is a great honor for me to share some of my views about Europe and Israel relations with you tonight. When we first agreed upon the subject of my speech, the situation in the region was a little bit different.

The European-Israeli relationship is a sensitive issue on both sides. Of course, there is and will be always a very important and painful historical dimension to this relationship. Europe was the continent of the pogroms against the European Jewry over the centuries. Anti-semitism was invented in Europe and led over the centuries to a history of endless bloodshed and horror for the European Jews.

And it was in Europe, more precisely in Germany, where the most terrible crime ever against Jews, the Shoa, was committed during the Second World War. It was Germany and it was the Germans under Hitler, who committed this crime against mankind. And the simple fact of the ongoing moral and historical responsibility of my country for the Holocaust defines our relationship to Israel. The existence and the security of Israel and its citizens is one of the pillars of the foreign policy of democratic Germany.

But allow me today, to focus more widely on the future of the relationship between Europe and Israel within the framework of the strategic developments and changes in the wider region. This will be especially important for our common relationship, on the one hand because Israel is part of the region and on the other because Europe is the direct neighbor of this region.

The Middle East has changed dramatically since 2003. But today in particular, the region seems to be at a crossroads. There are great, and perhaps unique opportunities, but there is also the very realistic option of an even bigger disaster in the coming months. Because I speak tonight about Europe and Israel, let me start with the United States, the defining power in the Middle East.

The Baker/Hamilton Report of the bipartisan Iraq Study Group, presented to the public in early December 06, led to a prompt and negative reaction in Israel. The connection between the stabilization of Iraq and progress between Israel and Syria and Israel and the Palestinians was bluntly rejected. But observers within as well as outside of the region - including those in Jerusalem - agree that the Lebanon war and the obvious negative outcome of the war in Iraq

have changed the strategic situation in the region decisively. This changed strategic situation will have important and perhaps dramatic consequences for Israel, indeed for all states in the Middle East.

For those committed to a future in peace and security for Israel and the region, it is critical to analyze and consider these consequences and to look into the available options in the new emerging strategic pattern in the Middle East.

Due to Europe's commitment to Israel's security and future and, as a direct neighbor to the region, Europe has a vital interest in peace and stability in the Middle East. In the 21st Century European security will be primarily defined by the developments in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East. Therefore I will try to outline some of the recent developments and some of the more important strategic options for the future of this region and their impact on Israel.

1) When in 2003 the United States began to intervene in Iraq, to change the regime and to establish democracy as a revolutionary example for the future of the Middle East, it was clear, that this war would at least overthrow the existing status quo in the whole region. Today we can state, that this goal is achieved.

From the very beginning there were two possible outcomes: Either the US would be successful, and a democratized "American Middle East" would succeed the former Anglo-French Middle East that emerged out of the ruins of the Ottoman Empire. Or this strategy would fail for several reasons: It was badly managed; it ignored the historical facts on the ground; and it miscalculated the limitations of American power. Obviously the result of such a failure could create a dangerous vacuum in the Middle East. Today, we know the outcome - option two became reality. Iraq seems to be lost, the transformation strategy failed, the integrity of the country is in danger, and the battle for a new status quo in the region has already started - welcome to the new Middle East.

2) Since the end of the Cold War and the liberation of Kuwait in 1991, the US has been the direct regional hegemon in the Middle East. The defeat of the US transformation strategy in Iraq and the expected withdrawal of the US troops has started to create a power vacuum, which will in turn lead the region into a hegemonial confrontation. And a confrontation of this kind will most certainly inherit the threat that the different regional crises between the eastern shores of the Mediterranean and the Indus valley collectively pose. Though they were not linked in the past, their interconnection will be strengthened by the growing power vacuum and will be melted into one big crisis.

3) Iran is strategically and geopolitically the great winner of the defeat of the US transformation strategy. The war in Afghanistan and Iraq eliminated the Taliban rule on its eastern borders and the regime of Saddam Hussein on its western borders. These two regimes were not only the two major regional enemies of Iran, but with their removal from power, the regional containment of Iranian influence in the region was also removed. Alas the United States has been unable to establish an alternative containment due to the inconsistency of their policy.

Far worse than that, thanks to US policy, Iran has found itself in a fortified strategic position in

the region. With the pending threat of a US defeat in Iraq, and the country's Shiite majority, Iranian influence will turn into regional dominance. Iranian nuclear capabilities could then turn dominance into regional hegemony.

Geopolitically Iran marks the center of the crisis belt between the Mediterranean and the Indus valley. Though its major stakes are in the Gulf, in a Shiite dominated Iraq, as well as in Lebanon, in Afghanistan and in Central Asia, Iran also has high stakes and its own interests. Indeed Iranian interests will interconnect the different crises in the broader Middle East. With its vast oil and gas reserves - the world's third largest - the high oil and gas prices on the world markets, and its military capabilities, today Iran is in a promising position. At least this is the broadly shared perception in Teheran.

But this perception within the Iranian elites would change decisively, if a unified Western policy would be implemented, which would effectively isolate Iran - politically, diplomatically, technologically and regionally. A Western strategy, which would rely on effective isolation and the offering of direct talks, is still the most promising option.

4) This dramatic change in the strategic balance of power in the Middle East became visible during the war in Lebanon. In fact, this was the first war between Israel and Iran, fought by the Iranian proxy Hezbollah. The war was provoked by two attacks on Israeli military posts by Hamas and Hezbollah. This war was fought on the ground but also, and this defines the new strategic threat for Israel, by rockets and missiles. It was not longer a war on the borders that put one army against another. Here an army faced guerillas and Katyusha rockets and missiles.

The threat was directed against the heartland of Israel, its second largest city, Haifa, and many smaller cities and villages. The possibility of a future "missile war", based on a confrontation with the dominant regional power Iran, has changed Israel's security situation dramatically. But the side effect of this change should not be underestimated: the combination of guerilla and missile warfare, backed by the dominant and hostile regional power, will limit Israel's future military options in the region. It would be wise therefore, to develop additional political and diplomatic options.

5) Israel's unilateral disengagement from the Gaza Strip followed the strategic goal of a unilateral definition of its borders as well as a unilateral definition of the borders of a future Palestinian state. This goal was to be reached with the unilateral consent of the United States as the regional hegemon. Based on the current facts in the region, the logical conclusion is that this strategy has not succeeded and will likely have no future.

6) The demographic challenge for the Jewish majority between the river Jordan and the Mediterranean Sea remains basically unchanged. In 1967, David Ben Gurion understood very well that a long-standing occupation of Palestinian territory with a vast Palestinian population would pose a direct threat to the Israeli democracy and to the Jewish majority of the state of Israel. Only a viable and independent Palestinian state, based on a negotiated agreement, can solve this problem.

7) Today the strategic options for Israel appear unchanged from the days of the late Prime

Minister Yitzhak Rabin. More than ten years ago, Rabin, in the face of a very similar situation - including the rising power of Iran - was forced into negotiations with Yassir Arafat and the PLO. Today more than ever before, the failure of unilateralism, the threat of a missile war, and the rising power of Iran demand a new policy.

However the strategic situation of Israel has worsened between Rabin's time and today. The new threats are more real and more advanced. In addition, American power in the region is in decline and will be decisively limited in the future. And finally, Iran is moving forward to a dominant or perhaps hegemonial role in the region.

8) Iran is not a superpower. Its present strength is a result of terrible flaws in Western policy during many years. Iran's economy is weak. It is a fact that this country, rich in crude oil, is dependant on gasoline imports. Iran is also dependent on imports of advanced technology. Iran struggles with severe domestic challenges, such as its youthful demographics and the pressure on an overextended state by its very young and fast growing population. Social problems are also on the rise including corruption, social disintegration, and a severe and growing drug problem.

The present radical leadership in Iran tries to exploit an outrageous Anti-Semitic and Anti-Israelian rhetoric, to separate the mostly Sunni "Arab Street" from the leadership and to destabilize moderate Arab regimes. But this is a dangerous miscalculation, because it unifies the West and the majority of the international community in solidarity with Israel. Anti-Semitism is unacceptable and must be condemned. Israel is strong, this shouldn't be forgotten, and it will not be alone, if it would face an existential threat. Teheran must know that.

On the one hand Iran is in a central and dominant geopolitical situation, but on the other hand, it faces geopolitical isolation. The country has no so called "natural" allies or real friends in the region. Iran's only ally in its neighborhood is Syria. But Syria itself is domestically and strategically in a weak position, and has, for example, different interests in Iraq and its relations with the Arab world.

The regime in Iran would presumably survive a military confrontation. This can hardly be said of the regime in Damascus. But there should be no mistaking: confrontation is a bad option, because its price would be very high. The alternative to the present Syrian regime would be another failed state and more chaos and volatility in the region. Diplomacy should be used in dealing with Syria. Because without Damascus as an ally, Hezbollah would be in a very difficult situation, and Iran too would be alone in the region. Such a political isolation would be seen in Teheran as a strategic defeat. Therefore a reevaluated Western policy towards Syria should consider a possible change of its coalition. This would be the strategic "big bang" in the region and the shockwaves of this major strategic earthquake would have major and positive consequences in the orientation of Iranian policy and its internal balance of power, including the power of Ahmadinejad and the future of the nuclear program.

9) The war in Lebanon demonstrated two further important factors. Firstly, a truly independent and sovereign Lebanon, which is only accountable to the free will of the Lebanese people and not to foreign interests, is vital not only for peace in Lebanon but also for the security of Israel.

Syria must accept that there will be no trade off between a restoration of Syrian influence in Lebanon and Syria's change of coalition.

And secondly, the war showed for the first time a growing anti-hegemonial coalition within the moderate Arab states. Saudi-Arabia and Egypt in particular were explicitly very critical of Hezbollah at the beginning of the war. The situation in Iraq has shaped the coalition's character further. The growing civil war in Iraq between Shia and Sunni reflects not only the situation in the country but also a growing confrontation between the moderate Arab states and the hegemonic ambitions of Iran.

Today Iran is seen as a greater threat for moderate Arab regimes than Israel. This offers now a great opportunity for a new and decisive initiative to settle the pending regional disputes. This opportunity shouldn't be missed and it will not last too long.

The growing sectarian war in the Middle East today focuses on Iraq, but also on Lebanon. However it might not end there, which is bad news. It might have more dangerous ramifications than the Holy War against the Soviet Union in the 80s in Afghanistan, and it can endanger the future of many regimes in the region with unpredictable consequences. Therefore it would be wise to use the present opportunity for an agreement and act now.

10) If the assumption is correct, that the major threat for Israel and Western allies and interests in the region is the growing power of Iran, which in time could be a state with nuclear capabilities, then Israel should reconsider its strategic priorities. A limited "military option" (air strikes) will not weaken but strengthen Iran and its radical leadership, and will most likely push the whole region into an uncontrollable confrontation and chaos. The alternative is effective containment of Iran. But this would require a settlement of the existing border disputes and most importantly a new beginning between Israel and the Palestinians and the moderate Arab states. This is not a mere notion taken from the Baker-Hamilton Report, but a serious option as a result of the dramatic strategic changes within the region.

In the past, Israel's security was based on two pillars: on its own strength and on the security guarantee of the United States. In the foreseeable future of the emerging new Middle East, after the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq, this may not be enough. A new third pillar, more multilateral, regional and international, in addition to the existing two security pillars, might be inevitable. To be very clear, this should not be understood as an alternative but as a supplement. For such a new strategy, if it should be efficient, Israel will need negotiated borders.

11) Israel faces tough strategic decisions. Definitive borders for Israel would mean a historical shift not only in its strategy, but also in its self-perception as a state and as a society. Prime Minister Sharon started with the Gaza disengagement the withdrawal of Israel in the direction of its final borders. But this policy was not completed and also failed because of its inherent contradictions. There is no realistic alternative to a negotiated border settlement, and this means the pre-war borders of June 1967, including negotiated territorial swaps.

It was also Prime Minister Sharon who ordered, based on security considerations, the building of a fence between Israel and the Palestinian territories. But the building of the fence had also

strategic, may be even historical implications. Israel is turning its head away from the Middle East and towards the Mediterranean. And who will be its direct neighbor there? It is the European Union.

On the other side, the EU will understand more and more, that not only the moral and historical obligations will commit the Europeans to the security and future of the state of Israel, but also the growing common security interest in this region, which will be decisive for European security in the 21. Century. Europe is today the most important trading partner for Israel, and one day there might be also a strong security partnership, based on EU and NATO, together with Turkey, and moderate and modernizing Arab states.

There have been and are strong historical reasons for Israel's "Do it alone" policy, however in a globalized world this approach might be insufficient. Rather Israel must try to use the present window of opportunity, settle the open disputes with its Arab neighbors, and achieve internationally recognized borders.

12) Israel's strategic assumption since the outbreak of the second Intifada, that there is no Palestinian partner, has weakened Israel's position. If the demographic factor is key for the future of Israel, than there is no alternative to a viable Palestinian state. But it will also be key for Israel's security, whether such a Palestinian state will be a more or less stable or a failed state from its very beginning. A failed Palestinian state in Israel's immediate neighborhood would be a rather gloomy perspective. If that is true, then Israel and the Western powers must have an interest in a national unity government on the Palestinian side and in a successful Palestinian nation building.

Whether this will lead to peace on Israel's borders, and if so, what kind of peace this would be, remains an open question. But considering the strategic condition of the new Middle East, and in dealing with the major challenge by Iran, Israel needs free hands for a diplomacy of effective containment, including an anti-hegemonial alliance in the region; all in addition to its military superiority. This means, first and foremost, strong leadership, which is not easy to achieve under the present domestic and regional conditions.

During the last years Israel's strategic position has been weakened. It is a realistic assumption that a "stay the course" policy in Jerusalem would continue this negative trend. On the other hand, the dramatic changes in the region offer new opportunities, which should be seriously considered. It is true that progress in a Middle East settlement will not change the situation in Iraq. But it could, if carefully and wisely prepared, change the strategic situation in the region for the better and effectively contain the hegemonial aspirations of Iran.

Nothing should be done without careful preparation, which requires time, planning, consultation, but also determination, and decisive action. And it requires a new strategic consensus, which must first be achieved. The Quartet, the Road Map, the Beirut decision of the Arab League, all these existing instruments could and should be used as a beginning. New and old partners such as the US, the EU, the Quartet, moderate Arab states, and Turkey can prepare the ground for a new initiative in the coming months and for major diplomatic and strategic change.

In the Middle East lurks a new strategic threat for Israel, the moderate Arab States, and the West. Security and peace are at stake. This common challenge requires a common answer, based on facts, common interests and a new strategic vision for peace and stability in the Middle East. And, last but not least, the mistakes of yesterday shouldn't be repeated.

Postscript:

If the United States were to attack Iran within the next months or even weeks, the whole region would slide into a terrible crisis with unpredictable ramifications. But more than that, the European-American relations, notwithstanding the relations of the US to other major powers, will be sincerely damaged. I hope that this won't happen, but I fear that it will.