

In Israel, US Jewish Leaders Study ‘Timely, Realistic, Frightening’ Middle East

“Timely, realistic and frightening” were the words that William Daroff, senior vice president for public policy and director of the Washington Office of the Jewish Federations of North America, used to describe reports about the Middle East security situation.

Speaking on the second day of the leadership mission of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, Daroff’s remarks came after an hour-long session focused on Iran after the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), otherwise known as the nuclear deal between Iran and world powers, and just before another hour-long panel discussion on “the Middle East volcano.”

The 42nd annual Israel mission for the Conference of Presidents, an umbrella body representing 50 U.S. Jewish organizations, kicked off Feb. 14 as the group of more than 100 delegates was welcomed with a speech by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

The meeting minutes and panel discussions reflected the current gloom-and-doom picture of the region.

“Syria will leave us with two bad options: We will have either Daesh (Islamic State) or Iran on our border,” said Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Ya’alon on Feb. 15.

“I don’t think Israel has lost. I think the world has lost,” Member of Knesset Yair Lapid, the Yesh Atid party’s leader, said regarding Iran.

The Middle East has always been a region wrought with

contradictions, but the conference highlighted how in the realm of security, Middle East experts are now unsure what is truth and what is façade, if what will happen tomorrow will be indicative of what will happen in 10 years, and if those we assume are our enemies might just be our friends (or vice versa).

Take the Iran deal. Dr. Emily B. Landau, senior research fellow at Tel Aviv University's Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), quoted IDF Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Gadi Eizenkot as saying at the INSS conference last month that the Iran deal entails both opportunities and dangers. Landau said both are true.

"We are working on different timelines; there is a five-year timeline and there is a 15-year timeline," she explained. "On the five-year timelines, yes, this is a strategic turning point because [Eizenkot] believes the threat has been delayed. ... Iran will be focused on upholding the deal to get the economic and diplomatic benefits of the deal."

But nothing has changed in terms of Iran's strategic goals, and in 15 years Iran will likely have nuclear weapons, which translates into a nuclear Middle East, according to Landau.

"Delaying a threat is not taking care of a threat," she said.

Here's the next dichotomy: Conference experts said that while they feel the JCPOA has stunted the immediate growth of Iran's nuclear program, the deal has empowered Iran in other ways. The reintegration of Iran into the world economic system has led to a real change in Iranian behavior, said Michael Segall, senior analyst for the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs think tank. He said Iran has moved from covert operations in the Middle East to overt operations.

"No one is trying to hide behind secrecy anymore," said Segall. "We see Iran going from being perceived as part of the problem in the Middle East to part of the solution."

But Segall said that is only a perception and that Iran remains a very dangerous threat for Israel. While Iran partners with Russia to keep in power Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, who the Americans were confident would be out of office a few years ago, the Islamic Republic is simultaneously training and bolstering the Lebanese terror group Hezbollah. Even if Hezbollah is beaten down and banged up by its participation in the Syrian civil war, Segall said that ultimately, "Hezbollah will come out strong and experienced in fighting. Hezbollah will be even more threatening in the future."

How could the United States let this happen? Delusion? Ignorance? Innocence? It is likely a combination of all of the above, according to what Dr. Michael Doran, senior fellow at the Hudson Institute think tank, told the Conference of the Presidents. There lies the next contradiction: a world superpower entrapped by what Doran called "fantasy."

"The president (Barack Obama) doesn't understand Iran the way we do," said Doran. "The president represents a trend in the U.S. national security elite, which sees Iran as a natural ally of the U.S. This is a strongly held secret opinion. They don't like to advertise it because it is unpopular politically."

Doran said this false belief is widely held—not only by Democrats but by Republicans too. He said President Obama has convinced himself that in the end, Iran and the U.S. have the same interest of defeating Islamic State and that Iran doesn't really want to destroy Israel.

"That is what Iran tells the U.S. behind closed doors. ... I don't believe it for a second," said Doran.

In the meantime, according to Segall, the U.S. has lost its place in the game—and it lost it in August 2013 when Obama's "chemical redlines were crossed" by failing to push through

military action against Syria following Assad's use of chemical weapons. Russia has moved in to fill the American void.

"We all know the end result," Segall said.

In Israel, the U.S. seems to be losing its foothold too. In January, one Israeli poll named Russian President Vladimir Putin as its "person of the year" for 2015. Putin, whose country in 2015 was considered by international analysts to have surpassed North Korea as the United States's greatest adversary, was the clear winner of the *Jerusalem Post* poll, with almost 30 percent of the vote.

Netanyahu told the Conference of Presidents, "We live in an era where there are two parallel but contradictory trends regarding the State of Israel." On the one hand, Israel faces ongoing diplomatic hostility from longtime friends, including from the European Union and its member countries. On the other hand, nontraditional partners like India, China, Japan, Russia, and African and Latin American nations are warming up to Israel.

"The first reason is the concern with the spread of militant Islam, which has become a global plague and the terrorism that it produces," said Netanyahu. "And countries want to have, to benefit from Israel's experience, our intelligence. I mean military intelligence, special service intelligence, operational experience. They want to partake of that experience to help defend themselves."

The old Middle East is gone, said Segall, and we don't really know what the end result of the shifting dynamics will be.

Avi Issacharoff, the Middle East correspondent for the *Times of Israel*, added, "The new Middle East is not about black and white. It's about 50 shades of gray."

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