

Israeli-Arab Conflict Becoming More Complex

Israel Defense Forces Military Intelligence chief Major General Aviv Kochavi on Thursday presented a grim picture of Israel's strategic surroundings, saying that four of the Middle East's superpowers—Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Egypt—were all led by religious leadership whose fundamental view of Israel is one of a “foreign, unwelcome element” and who increasingly see the world through religious lenses.

The practical significance of this in the coming years will be an increasing difficulty in creating agreements and normalizing ties between Israel and its neighbors, Kochavi said. “The Middle East looks completely different. Bottom line: Syria is crumbling, so are regional borders, infrastructure, and government institutions.”

Furthermore, Israel now faces a new situation in which four of its borders—Lebanon, Golan, Gaza and Sinai—are infested with terrorist activity, which could ignite a regional conflagration, either through terror attacks, Israeli retaliation or preemption, or both.

Speaking at the 13th annual Herzliya Conference at the IDC Herzliya, Kochavi said that Military Intelligence is seeing signs of a “second round of uprisings” in the Middle East as the populations of Egypt, Tunisia and other countries see that “political Islam is not providing the goods.” While the Muslim Brotherhood is working earnestly to cement its political gains across the region, it is also being challenged by grim economic realities, as well as more radical Islamic forces, Kochavi said.

Despite its importance and interest in and of itself, Kochavi's briefing is significant as it is the assessment of

the Israeli intelligence community on the eve of the establishment of a new government in Israel. The information contained in the assessment, as well as its recommendations, will be made available to the political echelon, who will use some of it as the basis of their policies.

Kochavi said that together with an increase in social and financial instability, a backlash against political Islam, and an increasing radicalism, new conditions are emerging in the Middle East that make the region extremely unstable, unpredictable and insecure. There are now more porous borders in the region through which jihadists and weapons flow much more freely. Kochavi said that the old characterization of moderates versus extremists in the Middle East was no longer valid, and that the battle now was between the two streams of Islam, Sunni and Shi'ite. Sunni Hamas in Gaza, for instance, is moving away from Shiite Iran and closer to Sunni Turkey, Egypt and Qatar, Kochavi said.

"This will make any resolution to the Israeli-Arab conflict in the coming years much more complex to achieve," he said. Accordingly, Kochavi "suggests that no major decisions are made which are based on the current transient, shifting moods." He would not say if he was referring to renewed peace talks between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, but Kochavi did say that PA President Mahmoud Abbas was currently in a holding pattern, waiting to see the posture of the new Obama administration's Middle East policy, as well as the makeup of the new Israeli government. "Right now, Abbas is just trying to close out the month and pay salaries to his people," Kochavi said.

"There are deep, fundamental changes occurring in the Middle East, with countries that are disintegrating from the inside. The common denominator is instability and uncertainty. I do not suggest making decisions based on shifting moods; things are changing fundamentally and rapidly.

"Israel has four active borders for the first time in decades. This is a new reality; terror activity can happen from Lebanon, Sinai, Golan and Gaza. The fifth border, attacks against Israelis abroad, is also heating up. We are seeing activity on all these fronts," Kochavi said.

"We're seeing signs of a second wave of uprisings coming in Egypt, Tunisia and other areas," he said. "Citizens [are] seeing that Islam is not providing the goods."

"Economically speaking, looking around the Middle East countries, the picture looks grim indeed: over 30 percent rate of poverty in countries surrounding us, water crisis, energy crisis, and most countries import some 80 percent of their wheat—add to this the global financial crisis and we have an engine for more instability and uprisings."

"Many of these countries are heading to the classification of failed states. These failed states are becoming more Islamic, and are struggling to keep control over large bordering territories, and even further from Israel's borders like in Libya and Sudan."

"Sudan has become a transit country and platform for Iranian agents, weapons and interests through the air, ground and sea. The Sudanese government has found a partner in the Iranian leadership," Kochavi said.

He added that while Israel is not currently the center of attention for the countries it borders, jihadists fighting in these areas "have already said that once they're done with their local agendas they will turn to deal with Israel—in Sinai this is already happening in great earnest. This is changing the Middle East drastically."

Kochavi said that Iran was progressing steadily on its nuclear weapons program, and aiming to reach breakout phase, where it has all the elements it needs to make nuclear weapons and can do so very quickly, within a matter of months, should the

Iranian leadership make a decision to do so.

The Iranian leadership “may make partial concessions but will not compromise on fundamental issues,” Kochavi said, despite the fact that international sanctions are having a “significant effect” on Iran’s economy and population.

“Sanctions are affecting Iran in a most significant way: Their banking and financial sectors, their energy sector, their metals sector—there is huge pressure on the leadership and the population. Inflation is close to 50 percent. Their annual oil revenues have plunged from 99 billion dollars to 55 billion dollars. There is an increase in criticism from within the government and the population because of the sanctions. The survivability of the regime is now becoming its central focus. It hasn’t stopped them yet but it is becoming an increasing factor,” Kochavi said.

Iran will not compromise in its nuclear talks with the West, Kochavi said, as it does not see a high chance of an international military attack on its nuclear facilities.

“Iran’s nuclear weapons program is progressing slower than they would like, but progressing nonetheless. They are careful not to cross Israel and the world’s red lines, as their main overriding aim is the survival of the regime,” Kochavi said.

The intelligence chief revealed that Iran was enriching 14 kg (33 lbs.) of uranium per month, an amount that would be enough for five or six bombs if the Iranian supreme leader decides to take the decision to make the bombs, “which he hasn’t yet.”

Iran is also advancing on its plutonium track, hiding it from the International Atomic Energy Agency; and through subterfuge, hopes to have it ready within two years. “Iran is still playing for time in diplomatic negotiations, but they will absolutely not compromise on fundamental issues,” Kochavi said.

He added that there were some voices within Iranian leadership saying that it was time to think about making a deal with the West.

Iran, Kochavi said, was focusing on three strategic areas: Saving Syria, developing its nuclear program, and inserting Iranian forces throughout the Middle East.

The fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria would be a strategic blow to Iran and Hezbollah, Kochavi said, but added that anyone who thinks that Iran and Hezbollah will leave Syria once Assad falls is sorely mistaken. Kochavi said Iran and Hezbollah were working actively to prolong Assad's rule—providing him with fighters, instructors, intelligence and financial support—but are also planning for the day after Assad falls by creating a “popular militia” that they hope will number some 100,000 men.

“Iran and Hezbollah are giving Assad strategic and operational help, with people on the ground, giving intelligence assistance, as well as financial aid. Hezbollah has fighters on the ground, and Hezbollah, Syria and Iran are creating a “people's army” in Syria currently numbering 50,000 men deployed across Syria alongside the Syrian army. The aim is to have some 100,000 men under arms in this ‘people's army,’” he said. “The army will be funded by Iran, trained by Hezbollah, and manned by Syrians. This way Iran and Hezbollah are preparing for the day after Assad, to keep their interest in Syria, on their weapons, their people, their territories. Iran and Hezbollah will not leave Syria after Assad goes.”

“Before the uprising against Assad began, the Syrian army had 380,000 regular troops. Some 13,000 have now been killed, 40,000 have deserted, tens of thousands have been wounded, morale is very low, combat readiness is very low and so are their supplies. Most of the heavy lifting is done by 4th Division, which is made up mostly of Alawites. But even here there are cracks,” Kochavi said.

Kochavi also said that Assad “is making advanced preparations to make use of chemical weapons against his adversaries. But he has not given the order to use these weapons yet.”

“In terms of governance we should refer to Syria not as a whole, but talk about it as the State of Assad and the State of the rebels. It could even be said that most of the populated areas in Syria are in the hands of the rebels,” Kochavi said.

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