The Oslo Disaster, 23 Years Later

Prof. Efraim Karsh takes his piercing pen to the Oslo peace process – “one of the worst-ever calamities to have hit Israelis and Palestinians.”
Prof. Efraim Karsh, the incoming director of the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, has penned a comprehensive study on what he calls “the Oslo Disaster” and “the starker strategic blunder in Israel’s history.”

“Twenty-three years after its euphoric launch on the White House lawn,” Karsh writes, “the Oslo ‘peace process’ stands as one of the worst calamities ever to have afflicted Israelis and Palestinians, substantially worsening the position of both parties and making the prospects for peace and reconciliation ever more remote.”

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“The process has led to establishment of an ineradicable terror entity on Israel’s doorstep, deepened Israel’s internal cleavages, destabilized its political system, and weakened its international standing.”

“It has been a disaster for West Bank and Gaza Palestinians too. It has brought about subjugation to corrupt and repressive PLO and Hamas regimes. These regimes have reversed the hesitant advent of civil society in these territories, shattered their socioeconomic wellbeing, and made the prospects for peace and reconciliation with Israel ever more remote.”

“This abject failure is a direct result of the Palestinian leadership’s perception of the process as a pathway not to a two-state solution – meaning Israel alongside a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza – but to the subversion of the State of Israel. They view Oslo not as a path to nation-building and state creation, but to the formation of a repressive terror entity that perpetuates conflict with Israel, while keeping its helpless constituents in constant and bewildered awe as Palestinian leaders line their pockets from the proceeds of this misery.”

Karsh details how the Oslo process has weakened Israel’s national security in several key respects.

On the strategic and military levels, it allowed the PLO to achieve in one fell swoop its strategic vision of transforming the West Bank and the Gaza Strip into terror hotbeds that would disrupt Israel’s way of life (to use Yasser Arafat’s words).

Politically and diplomatically, he says, Oslo instantaneously transformed the PLO (and, to a lesser extent, Hamas) into an internationally accepted political actor while upholding its commitment to Israel’s destruction, edging toward fully fledged statehood outside the Oslo framework, and steadily undermining Israel’s international standing.

The ending of Israel’s occupation of the Palestinian population of the territories within three-and-a-half years from the onset of the process has gone totally unnoticed (due partly to Palestinian propaganda, partly to Israel’s failure to get this critical point across), with the Jewish state still subject to international opprobrium for the nonexistent “occupation.”

Domestically, Oslo radicalized Israel’s Arab minority, nipping in the bud its decades-long “Israelization” process and putting it on a collision course with Israel’s Jewish community.

No less importantly, it made Israeli politics captive to the vicissitudes of Palestinian-Israeli relations, with the PLO and Hamas becoming the effective arbiters of Israel’s political discourse and electoral process.

“On the face of it,” Karsh writes, “Israel’s massive setbacks can be considered contractual obligations. They continue to whitewash ongoing Palestinian violence, belittle the extent of Israeli suffering, and blame Jerusalem for the stalled process despite the public endorsement of the two-state solution by five successive Israeli prime ministers: Peres, Barak, Sharon, Olmert, and Netanyahu.”

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Karsh bemoans that fact that “there has been no real reckoning by the Oslo architects and their erstwhile ‘peace camp’ successors, both in Israel and abroad, of the worst blunder in Israel’s history, and no rethinking of its disastrously misconceived assumptions – let alone any public admission of guilt or show of remorse over its horrific costs.”

“Instead, they continue to wilfully ignore the Palestinian leadership’s total lack of interest in the two-state solution and serial violation of government of a future Palestinian state, but its goal of having this state established without negotiating with Israel, or even recognizing its right to exist, seems to be gaining ever wider currency. This soft racism – asking nothing of the Palestinians as if they are too dim or too primitive to be held accountable for their own words and actions – is an assured recipe for disaster.”

“For so long as not a single Palestinian leader evinces genuine acceptance of the two-state solution or acts in a way signifying an unqualified embrace of the idea, there can be no true or lasting reconciliation with Israel. And so long as the territories continue to be governed by the PLO’s and Hamas’s rule of the jungle, no Palestinian civil society, let alone a viable state, can develop.”

“Sadly, the possibility of a Palestinian spring, which seemed to be in the offing in 1993 when the PLO hovered on the verge of extinction and West Bank and Gaza leadership appeared eager to strike a historic deal within the framework of the Washington peace negotiations, has been destroyed for the foreseeable future by the Oslo ‘peace process.’”

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With Barack Obama’s term as president of the US coming to an end, and Mahmoud Abbas’ tenure as Palestinian leader winding down too, the Israeli government will soon have an opportunity to recalibrate its diplomatic policies. Israeli policy on the Palestinian issue has been ham-fistedly frozen for two decades. But in which direction should Israel go? Fortify or vitiate the Fatah-led dictatorship in Ramallah? Redeploy from parts of the West Bank, or re-assert Israel’s sovereign presence in major parts of Judea and Samaria through renewed building? Do withdrawals toward the coastal plain offer a saner and safer future for Israel; or is building a united and “greater” Jerusalem from Jericho to Jaffa the DNA that holds the key to the future of Israel and Zionism – as General Gershon Hacohen argues? Muddle through, or attempt a radical paradigm shift? These questions have been argued out in recent months in the seminar rooms and on the website of the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies by center associates, including Maj. Gen. (res.) Gershon Hacohen, Maj. Gen. (res.) Yaakov Amidror (the Rosshandler senior fellow at the center, and a former national security advisor to the Prime Minister), Col. (res.) Dr. Eran Lerman (a former deputy national security advisor), and professors Hillel Frisch (an Arabist), Efraim Inbar (a strategist), and Max Singer (a defense expert).

The upshot of their debate: Apply Obama’s first rule of governance. “Don’t do stupid things.” It is wiser for Israel to defer action than to take steps that threaten to make a bad situation worse. Conflict management is currently the least-worst option.

Yaakov Amidror, Hillel Frisch, Gershon Hacohen, Efraim Inbar, Eran Lerman and Max Singer discuss Israel’s policies on the Palestinian issue, in a post-Obama and post-Abbas era.

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The caretaker option is probably the most feasible, he feels; unilateral withdrawal is the least; and none of the options is ideal. In every case, Israel will have to maintain a significant military presence in Judea and Samaria.

Frisch mapped out five possible Israeli approaches: caretaker conflict management, creative friction, constructive chaos, unilateral withdrawal, and unilateral annexation.

Amidror too dislikes the drive for unilateral Israeli initiatives. “A partial withdrawal would likely increase, rather than decrease, Palestinian terrorism, as Palestinians would be motivated to push harder for total Israeli withdrawal. On the other hand, Israeli annexation would inflame Palestinian passions and engender severe opposition to Israel abroad.”

Amidror concludes. “This is not the time to embark on useless experiments or risky unilateral initiatives, either in the hope of preparing the ground for an eventual Palestinian state or in the hope of thwarting it. When standing on the edge of a cliff, it is wiser to keep still than to step forward,” Amidror concludes.

Lerman agrees, noting that many factors bind both Prime Minister Netanyahu and Opposition Leader Herzog to their current position of genuine but hung support for the two-state rubric. This includes the sensitivities of neighbors who matter (Jordan, Egypt, etc.), the views of Diaspora Jewry and of Western diplomatic allies, and defense establishment preferences for the status quo. But Lerman also warns that the false Palestinian narrative of one-sided victimhood is a major hindrance to all peace efforts. “Global actors that want to help achieve peace need to assist the Palestinians in moving beyond wallowing in self-pity and rituals of bashing Israel,” he says.

“The concept of painful but practical compromises seems alien to the Palestinians, and the international community is not doing its part to help the Palestinians mature towards this realization.”

Along these lines, Singer says that Washington and Brussels must robustly make clear their distaste for Palestinian denial of the Jewish People’s connection to the land of Israel and Jerusalem. They should modify their aid programs to reduce Palestinian use of foreign money to support terror, determine to defend free speech in Palestinian society; and act to resettle Palestinian refugees outside of Israel. Singer also feels that Israel should improve its public diplomacy “by moving from appeasement to truth-telling.” Specifically, Israel should formally adopt the report of Israeli Supreme Court Justice Edmond Levy to challenge the myth that Israel has stolen Palestinian land. “Even opponents of Israeli settlements in the West Bank and supporters of a two-state solution should support Levy’s affirmation of Israel’s historic and settlement rights in the territories. This is critical in leveling the diplomatic playing field. Israel must not go into future negotiations as a guilty party.”

General Hacohen goes beyond his BESA Center colleagues. To him, caretaking and truth-telling are insufficient. He believes in Israeli activism that forces the adversary onto the defensive and creates advantageous new situations. This means maneuvering and expanding in Jerusalem and the Judean/Samaritan heartland. “Settlements are forward outposts of Zionism, in addition to their being critical to Israel’s military deployment in the territories. Where there is a farmer on his land,” he says, “the army has the strength to rule.”
The BESA Center held a June conference which examined scenarios for the Palestinian Authority after the retirement or departure of Mahmoud Abbas. Lectures related to the expected battles for succession among Palestinian leadership, Israel’s diplomatic dilemmas, and likely international scenarios. Might this transition be a watershed moment, forcing a reassessment of the feasible contours of accommodating Palestinian independence?

PA President Mahmoud Abbas is old, sick and tired. He has little to show for his incomparable efforts at isolating Israel diplomatically or forcing Israel into hasty withdrawals.

His regime is viewed as utterly corrupt by 95.5 percent of Palestinians (according to a recent Palestinian poll). The tens of billions of dollars in international aid he has swallowed have failed to build any real institutional basis for good or democratic Palestinian government.

Abbas’ underlings are jockeying aggressively around him for pole position in the battle to succeed him as West Bank despot. Hamas, too, smells blood.

Where does Israel go? That was the focus of a June conference on “The Day After Abbas,” which was addressed by Ze’ev Elkin, who was then the Minister of Immigrant Absorption and Minister of Jerusalem Affairs (Likud), and Amir Peretz MK, former Defense Minister (Zionist Union), as well as experts.

Elkin said that Israel continues to make a major mistake by ignoring the education towards hatred of Israel that is prevalent in the PA. “This is the source of evil that eventually leads to terrorism, and which of course dims the likelihood of any practical compromises for peace in future.”

Peretz attacked Elkin and the Israeli right for ignoring and isolating Abbas over the years. “We will all yet miss Abu Mazen,” he said. “Israel does not have the power or the right to organize Palestinian leadership at will, but it should act to strengthen the PA.

In fact, we should be focusing on the day before Abbas goes to improve the situation and build a better basis for peace; not on the day after Abbas,” he said.

“Time is not on our side. Every day that we fail to reinforce PA institutions and leadership increases the chances that we’ll get ISIS and Al Qaeda and Hamas in the West Bank after Abbas.” Peretz called on the Israeli government to freeze all settlement construction; to permit much greater numbers of Palestinian workers into Israel; and to remove roadblocks in the West Bank.

Elkin added that Israel continues to a “paradigm change” with regard to administration of the territories; meaning greater Israeli intervention.

Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies associates agreed with Minister Elkin about the need for a new Israeli paradigm regarding the Palestinians, but disagreed which way to go. Lt. Col. (res.) Dr. Mordechai Kedar argued for the recognition of a series of mini-states in the West Bank, what he calls “Palestinian emirates.” Maj. Gen. (res.) Gershon Hacohen called for repudiation of the two state construct and instead for long-term struggle for complete Israeli sovereignty in the territories. Prof. Efraim Inbar argued for maintaining the status quo.

In a fascinating presentation, the former Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories, Maj. Gen. (res.) Eitan Dangot, explained how Israel does and probably can maintain the status quo.

Also addressing the conference were Ehud Yaari, Arab affairs commentator for Israel TV2 News, Prof. As’ad Ghanem of Haifa U., and Prof. Hillel Frisch and Prof. Jonathan Rynhold of the BESA Center.

Prof. Efraim Inbar, Minister Ze’ev Elkin, Ehud Yaari and Maj. Gen. (res.) Eitan Dangot (l. to r.)
In March, the BESA Center held a day-long conference which asked: How can and should the IDF adapt to meet new threats, and respond to changes in Israeli society?

Maj. Gen. Yair Golan, IDF Deputy Chief of Staff, headlined the conference with a talk on the importance of multi-year planning. (In the process, he made some controversial remarks about Israel’s ties with Turkey, which were widely reported in the media). But Golan wasn’t present for the sharp criticism of IDF planning that was expressed by expert speakers at the conference.

Mr. Ofer Shelah MK (Yesh Atid), who was a defense correspondent and military analyst for 25 years, spoke of the changes needed in the IDF, with an emphasis on clear decision-making.

Brig. Gen. (res.) Moni Chorev, former financial advisor to the IDF Chief of Staff and chair of the army advisory committee to the Ministry of Finance, explained that the state and army budgeting process. The budget, he said, suffers from political vicissitudes, and does not truly prioritize long-term priorities.

Brig. Gen. (res.) Yossi Kuperwasser of the JCPA (former head of research in IDF Intelligence and director general of the Ministry of Strategic Affairs) and Dr. Edward Luttwak of the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington outlined the threat map for Israel, which starts with Iran and its allies, and continues to the Sunni extremist forces operation in Syria and Sinai.

The March conference was held in honor of Mr. Muzi Wertheim, a founder and supporter of the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies. (Sorrowfully, Mr. Wertheim passed away in August).

The center has published a collection of the lectures given at the conference (Hebrew), and posted videos of the lectures on its website.
Should ISIS be Wiped Out?

In August, Prof. Efraim Inbar published a BESA Center Perspectives Paper in which he controversially argued that a weak but functioning ISIS is actually useful.

“The continued existence of ISIS can undermine the appeal of the caliphate among radical Muslims; keep bad actors focused on one another rather than on Western targets; and hamper Iran’s quest for regional hegemony,” Inbar wrote.

“A lingering ISIS would help undermine Tehran’s ambitious plan for domination of the Middle East, while a complete defeat of ISIS would only enhance Iranian hegemony, buttress Russia’s role in the region, and prolong Syrian President Bashar Assad’s tyranny.”

Inbar’s argument was so unusual that the most conservative Iranian newspaper, Kayhan (which is considered the mouthpiece of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei), highlighted Inbar’s views on its front page with the headline: “A Zionist think tank leader says Islamic State is useful in the battle against Iran. Don’t demolish ISIS!”

Inbar’s “defense of ISIS” is “proof that the West should not seek the destruction of ISIS, only its weakening.”

His colleagues strongly disagree.

Inbar retorts that Islamic insurgents will cap terrorism, and train recruits, to direct terrorist activities across the region as they watch the ISIS’s control of territory, ISIS is able to inspire a wide range of countries around the world, with Shiite (Iranian/Hezbollah) and other Sunni networks to serve them.

Earlier this year, Prof. Hillel Frisch conducted a study on the threat to Israeli national security posed by ISIS. He concluded that that Israel should remain militarily neutral in the conflict with ISIS, as long as those fighting ISIS, especially Iran, do not cross Israel’s “red lines” by introducing advanced weaponry to the region or by attempting to set-up bases of terror on Israel’s borders.
One year later, BESA Center experts have not changed their minds about the very problematic contours of the JCPOA that the American administration and its allies concluded with Iran. Maj. Gen. (res.) Yaakov Amidror and Col. (res.) Dr. Eran Lerman dispute President Obama’s assertion in August that “even Israel” admits in retrospect that the US was right to sign the nuclear deal with Iran.

Maj. Gen. (res.) Yaakov Amidror

General Amidror, the Anne and Greg Rosshandler Senior Fellow at the BESA Center, was National Security Advisor to the Prime Minister of Israel until 2.5 years ago, and played a significant role in the dialogue between Jerusalem and Washington about how to confront Iran’s nuclear weapons drive.

I continue to believe that the US lost a historic opportunity to use its clear advantage at the start of the negotiations to achieve more significant accomplishments. Iran was the weak side in the negotiations, but the US did not properly use the cards it held, making concessions instead of extracting them.

Instead of demanding the dismantling of Iran’s nuclear capability, the US left Iran with its full capability concerning enriched uranium – only at a reduced scale and subject to strict monitoring. It is by no means clear that monitoring has, in fact, become any stricter – the opposite appears to be the case. Even worse, the deal allows Iran to advance in two important fields related to its nuclear future.

First, Iran can continue developing the next generation of centrifuges for enrichment. Second, Iran can continue developing heavy long-distance enrichment. This legitimacy will allow Iran to develop, and move forward along the path of enrichment. Iran sees itself differently and is seen differently by others.

Proponents of the agreement boast about the few years’ delay, pointing out that the Iranians had a similar capability prior to the deal. But this argument is disingenuous. Iran’s capability was hardly similar when most of the world was applying pressure and imposing debilitating sanctions on its economy.

At the end of the deal, the Iranians will have the same capability, but without global opposition and certainly without sanctions. Fifteen years may seem a long time to a president or a prime minister who is focused on his term in office, but it is the blink of an eye to a nation.

The scope of the deal’s damage is wider still. It has turned Iran into a superpower that aspires to become a major influencer throughout the Middle East. This is hardly a new goal for Iran, but now that it is perceived as the country that made the US bend to its will, Iran sees itself differently and is seen differently by others.

Iran is growing stronger militarily, thanks to the acquisition of modern weapons; economically, thanks to major investments and the procurement of large purchase contracts with countries around the world; and politically, because it now has both deal-procured immunity and much more money with which to fund its emissaries, from Hezbollah to Hamas.

Israel cannot remain indifferent to the consequences of the deal. As it turned out, the US was determined not to use the military option, contrary to its promises. If Iran does go for the bomb, it will therefore be up to Israel to be prepared to act independently. Obama administration efforts to hide the negotiations from Israel, its shirking of commitments to Israel, and the end result – justify pessimism in Jerusalem.

However, it is possible that Washington’s approach might change. To this end, Israel must build a close working relationship with the new US administration in 2017. Iran is the only country that has the potential to pose a threat to the existence of Israel. Israel has no choice but to prepare for the possibility that it may have to eliminate that threat on its own if such potential is realized. At the same time, Israel must try to recruit the US to join in this tremendous effort.

Col. (res.) Dr. Eran Lerman

Dr. Lerman served for six years as deputy for foreign policy and international affairs at the Israel National Security Council, and dealt extensively with the Iranian nuclear challenge.

One year on, the nuclear deal with Iran clearly has made the region and the world more dangerous, notwithstanding the temporary respite won in Iran’s pursuit of a nuclear weapon. The JCPOA has in no way moderated Iran’s stance, nor made it a legitimate member of the community of nations.

The Obama administration’s advocacy of warmer relations with Tehran appears totally removed from realities on the ground. Iran is using its new legal position to obscure, rather than clarify, past activities and present inventories. Its work on ballistic missiles and on the acquisition of materials for Iran’s non-conventional weapons arsenal continues apace; repression has worsened; regional subversion is at its peak; and exterminatory positions towards Israel are openly put forward.

Silence can be misleading. The absence of ongoing overt opposition to the deal by Israeli government officials should not be misconstrued as a sign of complacency. Nor should the points raised by former officials and leaders – challenging Prime Minister Netanyahu’s priorities and decrying what they describe as his alarmist style – be read as signs of acceptance of Obama’s arguments in favor of the deal. The government has simply shifted gears, because there is no point in fighting a lost battle – at least until January 2017.

Other critics of the government, meanwhile, believe that because the JCPOA (as almost everyone is willing to acknowledge) has given us a few years’ breathing space, Israel should turn her energies to other issues, particularly those concerning the Palestinians. None of these views should be interpreted, however, as having reversed the broadly held belief that the JCPOA was, and is, a bad deal – and certainly far worse than what could have been achieved, given the immense levers the P5+1 were in a position to use at the time.

It is true that the JCPOA was never meant to resolve any issue other than the nuclear program. But the administration is well aware of Iran’s support for terrorist organizations like Hezbollah, and its threats towards Israel. One might have expected that the president and his secretary of state would maximize their remaining leverage on Iran to bring these practices to an end. What they are doing instead – in looking for ways to enable Iran to access dollars, among other things – is the opposite of what their own language would have led us (or Iran) to believe.
A renowned authority on Middle Eastern history and politics, Prof. Karsh taught for 25 years at King’s College London, where he founded and directed the Middle East and Mediterranean Studies Program (currently the Institute of Middle Eastern Studies). In 2013 he joined Bar-Ilan University as professor of political science.

He has been a visiting professor at Harvard and Columbia universities, the Sorbonne, and the London School of Economics, and a research associate at the International Institute for Strategic Studies and the Wilson Center’s Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies. In 2011-12 he served as director of the Philadelphia-based think tank, the Middle East Forum.

Prof. Karsh has authored over 100 scholarly articles and sixteen books, including Palestine Betrayed (Yale, 2010); Islamic Imperialism: A History (Yale, 2006); Arafat’s War: The Man and his Battle for Israeli Conquest (Grove, 2003); Empires of the Sand: The Struggle for Mastery in the Middle East 1780-1922 (Harvard, 1999); Fabricating Israeli History: The “New Historians” (Routledge, 1997); The Gulf Conflict 1990-1991 (Princeton, 1993); Saddam Hussein: A Political Biography (The Free Press, 1991); The Soviet Union and Syria (Routledge, 1988); and Neutrality and Small States (Routledge, 1988).

He is editor of the Middle East Quarterly and Israel Affairs academic journals, and has published op-ed articles in The New York Times, Wall Street Journal, Los Angeles Times, London Times, Der Spiegel, and many other global newspapers.

In his 2015 book, The Tal Wags the Dog: International Politics and the Middle East (Bloombury), Karsh debunks Edward Said’s “Orientalist” notion that the agonies of the Middle East are traceable to the rough handling of the region by Western powers – first European colonialists, then American cold warriors.

Karsh argues that the view of Moslems and Arabs as victims – a view that underlies US President Barack Obama’s outreach to Iran – is misguided. Instead, Karsh propounds a radically different interpretation, that Middle Eastern history has in fact been the culmination of long existing indigenous trends, passions and patterns of behavior.

“I intend to build on my predecessor’s incredible achievements,” says Karsh. “Prof. Inbar built Israel’s top security think tank from scratch, and has earned it a sterling international reputation for strategic prescience and intellectual fearlessness. The center will continue to offer fresh thinking on Israel’s key defense, political, and diplomatic challenges in a rapidly-changing Middle East.”

Inbar founded the Bar-Ilan University Center for Strategic Studies in 1991, which was renamed the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies in 1993. He has led the center to a position of sterling global stature.

Over these years, the center has published over 500 original research studies and policy papers, plus 20 books. It has conducted more than 450 symposia and conferences for defense, military industry, and intelligence and foreign policy specialists, as well as diplomats, businesspeople, academics and politicians.

The center also has developed cooperative relations with leading strategic research institutes throughout the world, from Ankara to Washington and from London to Seoul. The center’s impact on Israeli and global discourse regarding regional strategic challenges has been significant.

Inbar’s area of specialization is the politics and strategy of Israeli national security. He has authored five books, including Outcast Countries in the World Community (1985), War and Peace in Israeli Politics. Labor Party Positions on National Security (1991), The Israeli-Turkish Entente (2001), and Israel’s National Security: Issues and Challenges since the Yom Kippur War (2008).

In 2011-12 he served as director of the Institute for Advanced Russian Studies. In 2013 he joined Bar-Ilan University as professor of Middle Eastern Studies. In 2015 he moved to the center and directed the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies in London; and has been a fellow at the International Institute for Strategic Studies. He was a fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington and at the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London; and has been a Manfred Warner NATO and Onasis Fellow. He has lectured at more than 100 academic institutions on four continents, including Harvard, MIT, Columbia, Oxford, Sorbonne and Yale universities.

Prof. Inbar served in the Israeli Defense Forces as a paratrooper, and served in reserve at the IDF Staff and Command College. He was a member of the political-strategic committee of the Israeli National Planning Council and chairman of the Ministry of Education committee for national security curriculum.

“Few scholars anywhere can match Efraim Inbar’s achievement in building the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies from the ground up into an internationally-renowned think tank with real impact,” says the noted strategist Prof. Yeheskel Dror of the Hebrew University.

Dror has been a member of the center’s International Academic Advisory Board for two decades. “Efraim Inbar’s accomplishment is heroic and almost miraculous,” he says. “Both critical scholarship, and the State of Israel, have been very well served by his wise leadership.”

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**NEW BESA CENTER RESEARCH ASSOCIATES**

**Efraim Karsh Becomes Director of the BESA Center**

**Prof. Efraim Karsh** has become director of the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies. He succeeds Prof. Efraim Inbar, who has led the center since its formation in 1993.

**Prof. Udi Lebel Joins the BESA Center**

Prof. Udi Lebel (Ph.D. King’s College, London U.), a specialist in civil-military relations, has joined the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies as a research associate. He studies the political psychology of bereavement; trauma and national memory; and the sociology of security communities. He is an associate professor at Ariel University.

**Efraim Inbar Concludes 25-Year Tenure as Founding Director of the Center**

**Prof. Efraim Inbar** has formally retired from the political science department at Bar-Ilan University, and handed over the BESA Center director’s chair. Inbar remains a senior research associate at the center.
In June, experts from Belgium, Bahrain, France, Germany, India, the UK, US and Israel convened at the BESA Center and at Haifa’s National Security Studies Center for a two-day international conference to study developments in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf. Prof. Joshua Teitelbaum (BESA) and Dr. Dan Schueftan (NSSC) co-organized the conclave.

Dr. Paul Rivlin (Moshe Dayan Center) maintained that in the short term, as a result of the chaos brought about by the Arab uprisings, the Gulf regimes enjoyed increased legitimacy as a result of their stability and were not threatened by the drop in the price of oil. Yet, he cautioned, this bargain, as alternatives to reliance and oil were not readily forthcoming.

Prof. Robert Lieber (Georgetown U.) noted that the US relationship with Saudi Arabia had been seriously damaged by the shift in longstanding US foreign policy strategy. The administration of President Obama’s policies of retreat and regret from American foreign policy commitments had undercut all three component of this alliance: deterrence, defense, and especially reassurance.

Prof. Kristian Coates Ulrichsen (Washington U.) addressed the audience on Qatar under Amir Tamim. He observed that while Qatar will continue to be involved in diplomacy and mediation, it would soon face the social and financial pressures of hosting the 2022 World Cup.

Clarisse Pasztory (European Union External Action Service) maintained that the EU and the Gulf countries did not agree on everything, but did cooperate in areas where interests greatly coincided, such as counter-terrorism, Syria, and Yemen.

Dr. Dan Schueftan (National Security Studies Center) spoke about the rationale behind Israel’s relations with regional allies. With respect to countries like Saudi Arabia, Morocco, and Jordan, there is a commonality of interests in combating Iran and internal radical threats, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood. Yet there could not be an open alliance, because the political costs of open cooperation outweigh the benefits.

Prof. Dr. Kristian Coates Ulrichsen

Dr. Dan Schueftan

Dr. Yoel Guzansky (INSS) discussed nuclear proliferation in the Arabian Peninsula after the Iran deal, explaining that the GCC countries were not prepared to waive their rights to enrich nuclear fuel. They would therefore require strict monitoring to ensure that they did not turn civilian into nuclear use.

Dr. Alan Levkoivitz (BESA Center), speaking on China, Asia and the GCC, remarked that Beijing sees the GCC countries as an important part of its security, due to its heavy investment in the Gulf region. Japan and South Korea are interested in a free trade agreement with the GCC, and China is involving Israel, since with the railroad it plans to build between Eilat and Haifa, it will be able to transship commodities from the GCC to the Mediterranean and beyond.

Prof. Michael Herb (Georgia State U.) discussed Gulf strategies for dealing with low oil prices. These include raising taxes, cutting spending, and cutting subsidies. Yet many of these make no sense in the Gulf as they have a very serious political cost.

Prof. Meir Litvak (Moshe Dayan Center) explained the strategic rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia as based both on power politics and competing religious visions, Sunni (Saudi Arabia) and Shiite (Iran). The Iranians believe they have surrounded the Saudis in Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon and Syria, while the Saudi feel weakened by the nuclear agreement and US retrenchment. This tension is so deep that it will not be resolved in the future, he concluded.

Prof. Dr. Robert Kappel (German Institute of Global and Area Studies), who discussed the GCC’s new regional role, he explained, will have great hopes for young Minister of Defense, Muhammad bin Salman, while the UAE showered its citizens with wealth and prestige. Bahrain kept a tight lid on its Shite minority, while Oman stood at a distant slige from its GCC allies.

Other presentations were made by Anne Sunik (German Institute of Global and Area Studies), who discussed agreement and discord in the GCC; Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi (Middle East Forum) who analyzed the GCC efforts in the Syrian civil war; Dr. Efrat Avir (BESA Center), who outlined the Saudi-Turkish alliance; and Prof. Dr. Robert Kappel (German Institute of Global and Area Studies) who offered observations on German and EU Gulf policy.

In summing up the conference, Prof. Gabriel Ben-Dor (Hafza U.) noted that the Gulf regimes do not only buy popular support. They also enjoy legitimacy, a political culture, and a tradition that has proven surprisingly resilient.
“The Eastern Mediterranean has become a key area for global security, with two dangerous challenges, and an important opportunity,” says Col. (res.) Dr. Eran Lerman of the BESA Center, who co-convened the conference with Mr. Alan Schneider, director of the B’nai B’rith World Center in Jerusalem.

“The challenges are the regional refugee crisis due to chaotic conditions in Syria, Libya and beyond; and the growing hand upon Mediterranean shores of totalitarian Islamism in its various forms. The opportunity lies in energy cooperation between Israel, Egypt, Jordan, Greece and Cyprus (with a role for Italy); and perhaps with Turkey too.”

The conference was capped by Mr. Martin Oliner, former Italian foreign minister Giulio Terzi, Greek minister of defense Panos Kammenos, and Conference of Presidents executive vice president Malcolm Hoenlein (l. to r.)

The conference was addressed by Mr. Panos Kammenos, Greek Minister of Defense. Visiting members of the department in the Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, including Ambassador Zvi Mazel, former Israeli Ambassador to Egypt; Maj. Gen. (res.) Amos Gilead, head of the politico-military department in the Israel Ministry of Defense; and former Greek Minister of Internal Security Vassilis Kikilias, gave an informed explanation of his country’s views; and former Israeli Ambassador to Egypt Zvi Mazel sounded the alarm as to Egypt’s loss of US authority in the region.

This was followed by a comprehensive survey of the changing strategic dynamics in the Eastern Mediterranean, and the rising danger of Islamist terror and subversion. Maj. Gen. (res.) Yaakov Amidror offered the Israeli point of view; former Greek Minister of Internal Security Vassilis Kikilias gave a spirited explanation of his country’s views; and former Israeli Ambassador in Egypt Zvi Mazel sounded the alarm as to Egypt’s economic and political prospects.

Adding to the understanding of this highly complex strategic landscape were scholars and practitioners from France (Bruno Tertrais, who related, among other, to the West’s growing military involvement in Libya), Cyprus (DCM Michalis Firillas), and Turkey (scholar and journalist Burak Bekdil). The range of reaction in the international community to these challenges was discussed by Dr. Jonathan Rhynhold; by the German DCM in Israel Monica Iwersen; and by Russia expert Dr. Anna Geifman.

Dr. Ehud Eira of Haifa University presented the findings of an ongoing project on Mediterranean security, reminding participants of Ben Gurion’s strong commitment to the role of the sea in Israel’s future, and linked it to the present challenge of protecting Israel’s EEZ and sustaining regional stability against the rising threats.

Prof. Hillel Frisch of the BESA Center surveyed radical Islamist organizations operating in the region. Dr. Amit Mor, among Israel’s leading energy experts, explored the implications of the gas finds in the Eastern Mediterranean for regional cooperation. Aviavit Bar Ilan, the leading authority in the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs on Euro-med cooperation, discussed the role that the “Union for the Mediterranean” could play in regional cooperation. Ambassador Arye Melkel of the BESA Center (former Israeli envoy to Greece) focused on strategic commonalities between Israel, Greece and Cyprus.

Dr. Lerman published a BESA Center study in March, The Mediterranean as a Strategic Environment: Learning a New Geopolitical Language, which argues that it is time to let go of the old colonial concept, the “Middle East,” and re-learn to think in Mediterranean terms. “Israel has an interest in anchoring its identity in the Mediterranean’s multi-colored landscape; as opposed to foundering as an isolated, super-modern Jewish state in a hostile and deteriorating Arab Middle East environment,” Lerman says.

Among the B’nai B’rith International leaders who participated in the conference were Mr. Gary P. Saltzman, President; Mr. Dan Mariaschin, Executive Vice President; Mr. Irving Silver and Mr. Martin Oliner – who generously supported the conference.

In partnership with B’nai B’rith International, the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies hosted in February the first conference of its kind in Israel on Mediterranean security, and specifically on the Eastern Mediterranean as a strategic environment.
CONFERENCE

Minorities in the Middle East

In January 2016, the center held a conference on minorities in the Middle East. Lecturers included Prof. Ofra Bengio (Dayan Center, on the Kurds), Dr. Jocelyne Cesari (Georgetown U. and Birmingham U.), Prof. Hillel Frisch (BESA Center, on Israeli Arabs), Dr. Efrat Aviv (BESA Center, on Jews in Turkey), Prof. Jonathan Fox (BESA Center), Prof. Matthias Basedau (German Institute of Global and Area Studies), Prof. Joshua Teitelbaum (BESA Center, on Shiites in Saudi Arabia), and Dr. Eldad Pardo (Truman Institute, on minorities in Iran).

SEMINAR

Greece’s Strategic Role in the Eastern Mediterranean

Prof. Aristotle Tziampiris spoke on continuity and change in Greece’s Eastern Mediterranean foreign policy. Prof. Athanassios Platias spoke on sources of instability in the Eastern Mediterranean. Prof. Petros Liacouras and Prof. Nikolaos Farantouris spoke on energy resources and partnerships.

Simultaneously, the center published Ambassador Arye Mekel’s paper entitled “A New Geopolitical Bloc is Born in the Eastern Mediterranean: Israel, Greece and Cyprus.” Mekel says that from an Israeli perspective, the recent strengthening of alliance ties with Greece and Cyprus constitutes a win-win situation.

“Greece is ready right now to assist Israel within the European Union, as it proved recently when it led the opposition to labeling settlement products. This represents a sharp change in Greek policy within the European Union. Cyprus almost automatically supports the Greek position, which gives the Greeks a double vote within EU institutions.”

“In the spring, the center held a seminar with colleagues from the University of Piraeus in Greece, as part of its Peretz and Sheindel Sherman Strategic Dialogues Program.”

Supports "A new geopolitical bloc is emerging that has military and political significance, and stands as a counterweight to Turkish ambitions. Stronger Israeli relations with Greece and Cyprus may also serve to encourage Turkey to show more flexibility in negotiations regarding normalization of ties between Ankara and Jerusalem,” Mekel wrote.

Indeed, Turkey signed a reconciliation accord with Israel in August.

Ambassador Mekel, a senior research associate at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, served as Israel’s envoy to Greece from 2010 to 2014. He was also deputy Israeli ambassador to the UN, diplomatic advisor to Prime Minister Shamir, and spokesman of the Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

SEMINAR

The Strategic Environment of India

In September, the center held a seminar with the Indian Institute for Defense Studies and Analyses (IDSA), as part of its Peretz and Sheindel Sherman Strategic Dialogues Program.

Among the Indian colleagues participating were Ambassador Jayant Prasad (speaking on India’s Foreign Policy), Gp. Cpt. (ret’d.) Dr. Ajey Lele (India’s Strategic Engagement with Southeast Asia), Dr. Meena Singh Roy (India and West Asia), S. Samuel C. Rajiv (The India-Israel Maturing Partnership), and Indian Ambassador to Israel, Mr. Pavan Kapoor.
NEW PUBLICATIONS

US Foreign Policy and Global Standing in the 21st Century: Realities and Perceptions
Edited by Professors Efraim Inbar and Jonathan Rynhold

This volume examines how the foreign policies pursued by Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama have affected elite and public perceptions of the United States. By examining America’s standing from the perspective of different actors from across various regions, including China, Russia, Latin America and the Middle East, while also assessing how these perceptions interact with America’s own policies, this book presents a fresh interpretation of America’s global standing. The book is based on the presentations at a December 2014 international conference at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies.

The Foreign Policy of Qatar
Dr. Gil Feiler | November 2016

The study examines the mindset underlying Qatar’s foreign interventions, with particular attention to the 2009 peace agreement in Lebanon and the current war against Iranian involvement in Yemen; and considers Qatar’s future in the GCC and the world.

Medium-Intensity Threats: The Case for Beefed-Up IDF Ground Forcess
Dr. Edo Hecht and Dr. Eitan Shamir | October 2016

This study argues that the rise in capabilities of non-state actors represents a new intermediate level between low- and high-intensity threats; that is, the medium-intensity threat. It describes several plausible threat scenarios that show a clear need for large, highly capable, maneuvering IDF ground formations; and argues that the IDF’s prioritization of air force and precision-fire assets over ground units is a mistake.

The Game of Camps: Ideological Fault Lines in the Wreckage of the Arab State System
Col. (res.) Dr. Eran Lerman | September 2016

This study maps four Arab ideological camps and their interactions: The Iranian camp, Islamic State camp, Muslim Brotherhood camp, and the “counter camp” – which consists of the forces of stability, ranging from Saudi Arabia and most of the Gulf states to Jordan, Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco, as well as the Kurds and other non-Arab players. Israel shares the fears and goals of the latter camp, and is joined with it in countering Iran. The US administration’s courtship of Iran, as well as the hope held broadly in the West that the Muslim Brotherhood could play a constructive role, has done little to restore stability or restrain the rise of radicalism.

Implications of US Disengagement from the Middle East
Prof. Efraim Inbar | July 2016

The adverse implications of US withdrawal from the Middle East are manifold, including: the acceleration of Tehran’s drive to regional hegemony, the palpable risk of regional nuclear proliferation following the JCPOA, the spread of jihadist Islam, and Russia’s growing penetration of the region. Manifest US weakness is also bound to have ripple effects far beyond the Middle East.

Trends in US Congressional Support for Israel
Dr. Amnon Cavari and Elan Nyer | June 2016

While congressional support for Israel has historically transcended the partisan divide, Republicans and Democrats are growing less cooperative with regard to the means by which to express that support. The authors term this development as “congressional dyslexia.” Tensions between the executive branch and Congress are growing as well, as exhibited in conflicts between the Republican-dominated Congress and President Obama.

Indian Responses to Israel’s Gaza Operations
S. Samuel C. Rajiv | May 2016

A study that examines Indian governmental responses to the three major Israeli military interventions in the Gaza Strip over the past decade. It reviews the unprecedented parliamentary debate that took place in India during Operation Protective Edge, when the government sidestepped opposition demands for a resolution critical of Israel. It also assesses the Modi government’s intention to inject new dynamism into the India-Israel relationship.

The ISIS Challenge in Syria: Implications for Israeli Security
Prof. Hillel Frisch | May 2016

A study of the strategic goals and military performance of ISIS; the relative strength of its opponents; and the threat to Israeli national security posed by ISIS. As long as Iran does not infringe on Israel’s “red lines” (regarding the transfer of advanced weaponry and terrorist bases on its borders) Israel should remain militarily neutral in the conflict with ISIS.

The Return of the Russian Bear to the Middle East
Dr. Shai Har-Zvi | June 2016

A study of the aggressive new posture in Russian foreign policy under President Vladimir Putin, in the wake of its intervention in Syria and the Crimean Peninsula.
Much attention has been given to the need to avoid becoming a world containing many small nuclear powers. But there is another possibility: that the world will contain many countries in possession of precision-guided missiles. These missiles can’t kill as many people as nuclear weapons can, but they can still produce many casualties and cause significant strategic damage.

Israel faces at least two enemies that already have this capability, or are likely to have it within the next few years – Iran and Hezbollah. Someday, Hamas might also acquire such weapons. In a next war, Israel could suffer hundreds of civilian deaths, as well as the destruction of its main electric power plants, water desalination capabilities, international airport, and other critical infrastructures. Note that two-thirds of Israel’s electricity is produced by only six power plants.

Nobody knows how badly life in Israel would be hurt by a small number of missiles destroying important structures. But the loss of electricity alone would be immensely damaging to Israel’s standard of living and its ability to maintain its economy. And Israel, unlike most countries, could expect little if any help from its neighbors.

The IDF’s effectiveness could also be sharply reduced by the destruction of key facilities. The economic damage from a small number of missiles hitting cleverly chosen targets might be great enough to cause a significant fraction of Israelis and foreign investors to leave the country.

Missile defense systems like Iron Dome and David’s Sling are recognized as potent ways of protecting the country from the threat of accurate missiles aimed at essential Israeli infrastructure. However, some will argue that increased missile defense would provide less protection against precision-guided missiles than offensive improvements that might increase deterrence and enhance Israel’s ability, in the air and on the ground, to prevent missiles from being launched.

The challenge to Israeli leadership will be to find the best balance between defense and offense and to overcome internal IDF resistance to moving budgets to implement that balance.

Now that precision guidance technology has come to the region, the IDF, in addition to all its “normal” responsibilities, must make sure that no enemy can inflict a fatal blow against Israel with accurate short- or medium-range missiles carrying high explosives.

Precision-guided medium-range missiles, a relatively new technology, are beginning to proliferate in the Middle East. When they work as designed, they can deliver half a ton of high explosive to within meters of their targets. This means that for many targets, they are almost as effective as nuclear weapons. With their capacity to destroy capital facilities like power plants, they introduce a new way for Israel to decisively lose a war. Israel will have to get the difficult balance between offense and defense right before the next war.
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IN MEMORIAM:
Muzi Wertheim

Mr. Muzi Wertheim and his wife Hassia receive an award in 2013 from the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies upon the center’s 20th anniversary, from Prof. Ehrajm Inbar (at left).

The Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies mourns the passing in August of Mr. Muzi Wertheim, one of the titans of modern Israeli industry and a founder of the Center for Strategic Studies at Bar-Ilan University. He was 86.

Mr. Wertheim’s legendary career spanned the history of Israel. He fought in Israel’s War of Independence as part of the Palmach brigade, and served in the Mossad for a decade.

“Muzi,” as everyone called him, opened the center’s inaugural conference in May 1991. For the past 25 years, he has been a loyal friend of the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies.

“Muzi was a great Israeli patriot, a very wise man, and a stalwart supporter,” says the center director Prof. Ehrajm Inbar. “He was a true friend.”

“He also was widely-read and possessed a deep interest in regional security affairs. Muzi would often share his insights with center associates. Then he would bring out rare books from his magnificent collection of Judaica manuscripts and reflect on Jewish history and Israel’s future – in which he believed passionately.”

In his business career, Mr. Wertheim was chairman of the Central Bottling Company (which manufactures Coca Cola in Israel) and of Bank Mizrahi-Tefachot. For many years, he was chairman of the Israel-America Chamber of Commerce.

The Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies expresses deep condolences to his wife Hassia and his children Dudi and Drorit. May they be comforted among the builders of Jerusalem and Zion – of which few were greater than Muzi.

The BESA Center
The Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies at Bar-Ilan University seeks to contribute to the advancement of Middle East peace and security by conducting policy-relevant research on strategic subjects, particularly as they relate to the national security and foreign policy of Israel. Founded by Thomas O. Hecht, a Canadian Jewish community leader, the Center is a non-partisan and independent institute dedicated to the memory of the late Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin and the late Egyptian president Anwar Sadat.

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