

Steinberg: Israel Sees Diplomatic Proposals in Baker-Hamilton Report a Rerun of 'Failed' Policies of Past

Interviewee: Gerald M. Steinberg

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Gerald Steinberg, a consultant to the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Security Council, who specializes in Middle East diplomatic and security issues, says that sections in the Baker-Hamilton report urging stepped up diplomacy in the region, including an Israeli-Syrian negotiation for peace and a settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian issues, seem out of place today.

"These kinds of things do not suggest in any way, and certainly not to Israelis, that there is a stable peace to be obtained in the region through talking to Syria and Iran," says Steinberg. "Talking doesn't create peace, at least not in the twenty-first century in the Middle East and these ideas just seem very oddly out of place historically and geographically." He says that many Israelis were surprised that the panel came up with ideas "that really failed significantly in the 1990s."

The Baker-Hamilton Study Group on Iraq was issued last week and included seventy nine recommendations, many of which dealt with diplomacy, including things it said Israel should do such as settling the issues with Palestinians and giving back the Golan Heights as part of a package deal with Syria. What's been the reaction in Israel and what's your personal analysis of this?

There's not a great deal of enthusiasm in Israel in general. Government officials and the prime minister [Ehud Olmert] have certainly rejected bringing Israel into what is essentially an American policy process of dealing with Iraq and trying to lower the costs and find an exit strategy. There are a few Israelis, particularly on the left, who welcomed the report but the general reaction is somewhere between surprise that [former Secretary of States James] Baker and other people on the committee, including [former Secretary of State] Lawrence Eagleburger, who have had experience in diplomacy are coming back with proposals that really failed significantly in the 1990s.

And you have to question why the report talks about Israel and Syria when the big problem is in Iraq. I say this as an Israeli academic: The diplomatic aspects of the report are as if they were taken from the early nineteenth century, when there existed the Concert of Europe [when the major European powers agreed on a formula to keep the peace]. The idea taken from that period is that the Iranians, the Syrians, and all the others involved have a common

interest in stability and have some sort of basic role to play to create a calm and peaceful Middle East.

But the reality in the Middle East today says that there's none of that, that this is an area in which there is a lot of violence, extremism and the governments that are involved—and they are not the only actors—are revolutionary governments. Iran is not trying to find a means to preserve its interests in a stable Middle East but is trying to expand its sphere of influence and particularly the radical Shiite ideology of the Iranian Revolution. And as we're speaking, Ismail Haniyeh, who is the Palestinian prime minister of the Hamas government, is in Tehran participating in a Holocaust denial conference hosted by the president of Iran [Mahmoud Ahmadinejad]. These kinds of things do not suggest in any way, and certainly not to Israelis, that there is a stable peace to be obtained in the region through talking to Syria and Iran. Talking doesn't create peace, at least not in the twenty-first century in the Middle East and these ideas just seem very oddly out of place historically and geographically.

Let's talk a bit about Syria because Israel and Syria did have rather intensive negotiations in 1999 and 2000 on looking toward a Syrian-Israeli peace treaty, which would have involved returning the Golan Heights in return for some other concessions. Syrian leaders every once in a while talk about wanting a peace treaty with Israel. Is that not taken seriously now in Israel?

It's not clear why the Baker-Hamilton commission stuck in this package—in many ways a mythical package of a stable Israeli-Syrian peace treaty—in an Iraq study report. To look at the details of what's going on now there has been a very problematic Syrian government clearly involved in the assassinations of Lebanese leaders. It's not at all clear how the regime of President Bashar Assad would be able to deliver on any kind of agreement or promises. This is not the time and the conditions are certainly not ripe. They were not ripe for an agreement after so many secret and not so secret meetings that took place in the 1990s between Israel and Syria when Bashar's father, Hafez, was president, and who was much more powerful and had some concept of *realpolitik* that he tried to implement. He couldn't reach peace then, and certainly now with the conditions much less stable, they are much less favorable for Israelis taking a tremendous risk giving up assets [such as the Golan Heights] to a government that's extremely hostile and extremely radical. It just doesn't make any sense.

Let's talk about Lebanon, which I think is only mentioned in the context of asking Syria to comply with all the UN resolutions on Lebanon. Of course, right now with Hezbollah trying to bring down the government in Beirut and Syria seemingly eager to get back into Lebanon on a major way, do you agree that it hardly seems like a propitious time to get involved with Syria on any negotiations? Is Israel very concerned about the situation in Lebanon?

There is a concern that if Lebanon were to become another radical Islamic state it would become more closely aligned with Iran. Hezbollah has been the Iranian agent operating on the Israeli border, at least until the end of the war during the summer, and if Hezbollah is able to take over the Lebanese government the problems will become much more severe. Some Israelis sense that they will not succeed. They've been holding rallies to demand the fall of the government and the government of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora, which has held up pretty well until now. Now there's talk of a compromise agreement which would represent a back down for Hezbollah. There are some Israeli analysts who are beginning to think that during last summer's war Israel did accomplish more than what was visible in terms of weakening Hezbollah. Hezbollah does seem to be having trouble maintaining its position in Lebanon.

Now I've seen some reports in which the Israelis—or at least American Jewish groups—also tend to be very critical of James Baker, saying that he was always anti-Israel back when he was secretary of state. Do people have a sense in Israel that Baker is not a great friend of Israel?

Some say that he's not hostile but lacks a warm spot for Israelis that a number of other American leaders have. It's interesting, within the Iraq Study Group report I don't think "democracy" is mentioned at all and Israel as a "democratic state" doesn't mean anything to Baker. That's a different kind of American politician. Baker likes to portray himself as a pragmatist. He was quite outspoken back in the late 1980s or early 1990s when he spoke about American policy and the need to have a Mideast conference in Madrid, and Israel was dragging its feet and there were very serious issues that Israel was facing that they continue to face. At one point, he did say in exasperation that if Israel was interested in peace it could call the White House and he gave the phone number.

The Madrid conference, which was supposed to lead to Middle East peace, did produce the Oslo process, which for most Israelis ended in catastrophe. In the Iraq report we see echoes of this; a Middle East conference is the holy grail, the magic formula that's going to solve all of America's problems, all of the world's problems, if only we had an Israeli-Palestinian peace. In fact when we look at the violence in Iraq and in particular the Sunni-Shia conflict, the hostility of the Islamists, it is evident that the current conflict is a result of that. Baker, like a number of academics and others in the United States—[former President] Jimmy Carter in many ways reflects this point of view too—believes that somehow the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the source of all this trouble.

In the Arab world, the leaders of the various Arab countries friendly to the United States always put the Israeli-Palestinian conflict up high. I always wonder what would happen if there was a settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Would it end all the problems in the Middle East?

It wouldn't end the Iraq war, it wouldn't end the wider Sunni-Shiite confrontation, and it wouldn't prevent Iran from seeking to export its ideology.

It might improve the image of the United States being seen responsible for the troubles.

Well the question is whether a minor image improvement would make much of a difference in terms of core issues. There are such corrupt regimes across the board that the issues are far more than America's image. The Bush administration's attempt to impose democracy was going too far too fast, but regime change is still a necessary element to creating a more stable Middle East. That should be the goal; how do we create a more stable Middle East for Israel, the United States, Europe, and the people living in the region itself? The core conflicts go far beyond Arab-Israeli problems and they're not going to disappear with magic formulas. I think the Iraq Study Group report is important in terms of reducing the America presence in Iraq, finding ways to make the issues, not America in the Middle East, but rather how the Middle East—the Arab countries—deal with their own problems without blaming some outside power. When you're there on their doorstep it's easier to blame you. When you're not sitting there in such a visible form then they're going to have to start taking control of their own lives, and that's something that perhaps the recommendations could promote.

So do you think it would be good if the U.S. got out of Iraq soon?

I don't want to pretend to have a grand strategic view, but I think the occupation doesn't work. It didn't work for Israel in 1967, it doesn't work in Iraq. It creates a sense of impotence among the people even though they agree that Saddam Hussein was a very violent and totalitarian dictator. They're still embarrassed by the fact that U.S. troops have to be there to undertake this transformation. So if the American troops are pulled out of the Sunni triangle and other areas, it might create enough momentum to change the situation. It may be worth a shot because the current U.S. policy is obviously not working.