

# New Order in the Neighborhood

*Collapse of Iraq has changed Israel's position on the Middle East chessboard*

By LAWRENCE H. SCHIFFMAN

While the ongoing rocket fire from Gaza and the Israeli military operation intending to stop it and to protect the citizens of Israel are apparently

## ANALYSIS

moving toward a denouement, it is important to remember that this struggle is part of a wider process of geopolitical change going on in the Middle East. Israelis often say that “we live in a dangerous neighborhood,” but what they perhaps need to add, at least now, is that they live in a neighborhood in which a tremendous amount is changing.

Some time ago I wrote in this newspaper about the geopolitical alignments that emerged in the Middle East as a result of 9/11 and the American campaign in Iraq. With the radicalization of Iran, there had emerged two fronts: one comprising the U.S. and its allies — Israel, Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the Emirates, and a second consisting of Iran, Syria, Hamas and Hezbollah.

Since then an awful lot has changed. Egypt experienced a failed Islamic revolution that was followed with the return to power by those who seek to follow the pro-Western path of former President Mubarak. This means that, for the present, Egypt will maintain its participation in the U.S.-led front and continue to observe its treaty with Israel. Further, the Gaza war has shown that the interests of Egypt as stated publicly and those stated only indirectly by the other partners do indeed coincide with those of Israel. Like Jerusalem, these Sunni Muslim countries see Islamism, especially in its Shiite incarnation, as a violent threat to their ongoing stability and safety.

While this would seem to be a victory for the West, the situation is very different in Syria and Iraq. The uprising against Bashar al-Assad in Syria, initially led by groups seeking an open and democratic society, has now turned into a three-way firefight. Assad and his armies have savaged much of the country while defending their claim to rule. At the same time,

however, al-Qaeda and an even more radical Sunni group, ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), are waging war against both the Syrian government and the forces fighting for a free Syria. With the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq and the inability of the Shiite-led Iraqi government to stabilize the country, ISIS has taken control of large swaths of territory in Syria and Iraq and seeks to carve out a new Islamic state there.

The extremism of this group cannot be understated. We have witnessed the murder and expulsion of Christians; the outlawing of Christianity itself; and the reinstatement by ISIS of mandatory circumcision for Muslim women living in the areas they control. It looked for a while that Iran might ally itself



*“The Israeli discovery and destruction of so many terrorist tunnels leading into Israel represented both a major military accomplishment and clear evidence of how dangerous Gaza and its terrorism regime could be,” Schiffman observes.*

with the U.S. and the Shiite-led government in Iraq to defeat ISIS, but the standstill of the nuclear talks with Iran and Iran’s support of Hamas have made this less likely. With the Kurds valiantly defending their state-within-a-state in historic Kurdistan, with the support of Israel and the U.S., it seems that a new set of boundaries will soon be drawn in Syria and Iraq, overturning those set up by the great powers in the Sikes-Picot agreement in the aftermath of World War I.

We should note that it was this same re-carving of the Middle East that made possible the Balfour Declaration and the British Mandate over Palestine, both of which eventually lead to the creation of the State of Israel. But this wholesale retooling of the map in

the region also set in motion the creation of nations that would become implacable enemies of Israel. The irony is that because of the threat of fanatical Islamism, some of these same nations have begun to see the Jewish state as a potential secret ally and perhaps as a permanent, peaceful neighbor.

It is in this context that we have to see what is now transpiring in Israel. On some level, there is no question that an environment in which ISIS appears to be advancing towards victory emboldened Hamas to begin its attack against Israel. But Hamas’ violence against Israel must also be seen in a wider context. The story really begins with the decision of Mahmoud Abbas, chairman of

the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and “president” of the Palestinian Authority, to seek a rapprochement with Hamas in order to create a unified Palestinian leadership. On the one hand, this can be justly criticized, as it has been by the Israelis, as allying with a terrorist group. Further, effecting such an agreement while nearing the end of American-brokered peace negotiations with Israel, not having discussed it with anyone, certainly was an act of rejection of the entire negotiation enterprise. It was this assertion that led Israel to suspend the effectively failed peace talks with the Palestinians.

However, if looked at from an outside point of view, it would seem that only a reunification of the West Bank and Gaza would open up the



*Schiffman notes that Israel's current struggle “is part of a wider process of geopolitical change going on in the Middle East.” Among the more recent developments is the fact that “ISIS [the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria] has taken control of large swaths of territory in Syria and Iraq and seeks to carve out a new Islamic state there.”*

possibility for a two-state solution. It seems apparent that during negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority to establish such a state, it was always presumed that either Israel or the West Bank Palestinians would have to in some way take control of Gaza in order to make it possible for a Palestinian government to assume the responsibilities of the putative state-to-be. We can be sure that Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi sees Egypt’s role in the upcoming Cairo negotiations as finding a way to bring the Palestinian Authority back into Gaza to facilitate the eventual two-state solution. At the same time, he will see it as his responsibility to ensure that a violent Islamist entity would not end up sitting between Egypt and Israel.

Just as the failure of these negotiations became clear, Hamas acted in a manner that made it clear that no one would possibly think that peace was one of its goals. It engineered the kidnapping and murder of the three Israeli yeshiva students, Eyal Yifrach, Gilad Shaar and Naftali Fraenkel, to guarantee the failure of any peace effort. The horrific murder of the Palestinian teenager Mohammed Abu Khdeir contributed to the further destabilization of Palestinian-Israeli relations. And when Israel retaliated for the kidnapping and murders with mass arrests of Hamas operatives on the West Bank, the terror group decided to up the ante by firing thousands of rockets at Israel.

Hamas was no doubt surprised to learn that since the last Gaza war,

Operation Cast Lead in 2012, the Iron Dome had become almost impenetrable. The weekly Sabbath prayer asking God to spread over the people of Israel His shelter of peace had been for the most part answered in the affirmative. On the micro level, the Israeli discovery and destruction of so many terrorist tunnels leading into Israel represented both a major military accomplishment and clear evidence of how dangerous Gaza and its terrorism regime could be.

Hamas did not seem to grasp the meaning of the geopolitical changes described above. It did not anticipate that it would get no support from the Sunni Arab countries that essentially joined the U.S.-led front. It never imagined that staunch enemies of Israel would tacitly support Israeli military action and certainly not that they all would hope to see Hamas severely punished for its aggressive and Islamist policies. What was perhaps the greatest surprise, however, was Hamas’ failure to ignite a third intifada by West Bank Palestinians, where violence in support of Hamas fizzled out quickly. Further, their explicit invitation to Hezbollah to join them in initiating a missile war on Israel was unsuccessful. This did not happen because the Iranian proxy group is currently occupied in defending the Assad regime in Syria and also, rumor has it, because Hezbollah has been given notice by Israel that any such missile attack would result in a total

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# Lives

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On Wednesday we saw a lot, but the most poignant was the juxtaposition of our final two stops. We traveled to MDA's William H. Bloomberg Emergency Medical Station in Jerusalem, where our national board member, Barry Feldman, donated blood. It was a personal highlight watching Barry beam as he had the opportunity to give to Israel in a very tangible way.

Coming from that high, our last stop of the day was a very difficult one. We paid a *shiva* call to the parents of Barkai Shor, an MDA volunteer who lost his life in Gaza fighting as an IDF soldier. The pain we all felt was indescribable. And experiencing that pain through one soldier's family helped us understand the pain Israel feels at every loss. We ended the day feeling completely depleted, while at the same time, marveling at the hope and faith the Israelis display.

By Thursday, I was looking for-

ward to being home, but my soul felt seared by this experience. One of our last stops was a visit to the current national blood services center. It's an old and outdated facility, and well within firing range of enemy missiles, and Hamas knows

**One of the paramedics we met, Iris, had been in the station for 22 days straight and had not seen her children the entire time.**

it. This has been our concern for years, as AFMDA has led a new campaign to build a new MDA national blood center. But seeing the current facility in person, the need for a new building became even more glaringly apparent.

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pulverization and destruction of Lebanon.

Unbelievable as it may seem, Hamas was left with virtually no allies. Even the Palestinian Authority's attempts to represent Gaza and to decry the terrible suffering and loss of innocent life did not extend to any genuine defense of Hamas in its war on Israel. The gulf between the diplomatic approaches of the Palestinian Authority and the violent efforts of Hamas and its leaders could not have been made clearer. Finally, to the extent that the world condemned the loss of innocent life in Gaza, virtually all governments were careful to uphold the right of Israel to self-defense against rocket attacks from its neighbor.

And so it is that this round of fighting between Israel and Hamas took place in a new diplomatic world that was for the most part unfavorably disposed toward Hamas. Israel understood this from the outset, and the constant debates in its security cabinet related not only to the question of how best to administer a punishing blow to Hamas and how to destroy the tunnels and as many of the rockets and missiles as possible, but also to ensure that, when the shooting stopped, Israel's place in that new Middle East order would not be damaged. Military operations constantly had to be balanced against

the images of civilian casualties — most sadly those of children — and the degree to which these would impact the support not only of the U.S. but also that of Israel's new Arab allies.

As military action slows down and as diplomatic action begins to move forward, Israel will keep its eye on the changing Middle East and its new position within it. Its policies, as always, will be geared to protect its citizens, to assert its legitimate rights, and to demonstrate its military superiority. But hovering over all decisions will be the big picture, in which Israel seeks to continue to capitalize on the developing geopolitical environment in which it finds itself. The extent to which Israel concentrates on these larger issues and understands Hamas and the Palestinians within this wider context is the extent to which it will succeed in remaining a staunch ally in the pro-Western, pro-American Sunni front. The extent to which Israel is successful in this diplomatic endeavor is the extent to which it will be able to deal effectively with the Palestinians and with the ongoing Hezbollah threat.

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The equipment that can't be moved, like stem cells, stays above ground, susceptible to missile attack. The equipment that can be moved occupies the cramped space in the bomb shelter. And when the sirens go off, employees can't go into the shelter because of fear of contaminating the blood supply. I am in awe of them and truly understand the critical imperative to get the new blood bank built.

Finally, we met with Ruthie Fraenkel, mother of Naftali, one of the kidnapped boys whose life was cut off at such a young age. She was moved and thankful, and praised the work of MDA repeatedly. What an amazing woman. Her display of strength and courage was the perfect way for me to complete this mission. I wanted to comfort her, and in the end she comforted me.

As we prepared to return to America, missiles were flying over Israel. A very difficult road lies ahead. And it's up to all of us to take the tragedy of this war and the tragedy of the loss of lives and turn it into something that will inspire our brethren in Israel. Because, despite the horrors they face, they have inspired me.

*Arnold Gerson, a resident of West Hempstead, is CEO of American Friends of Magen David Adom. This article is adapted from a blog he wrote about the three-day MDA mission to Israel. For more information, visit [www.afmda.org](http://www.afmda.org).*

## FAIRWAY IN LAKE GROVE



Opening and ribbon-cutting for the opening of the new Fairway Market in Lake Grove.

Throng of people lined up on July 23 for the opening of Fairway Market at DSW Plaza, 3200 Middle Country Road in Lake Grove. The 50,000 square foot store is the first Fairway Market location in Suffolk County and the company's 15th food store in the New York-New Jersey-Connecticut tri-state region.

"We're very excited to make Suffolk County our newest home," said Charles Santoro, executive chairman of Fairway Market.

Joining Fairway Market executives at the ribbon-cutting ceremony were Lake Grove Mayor Robert Scottaline; New York State Assemblyman Michael Fitzpatrick; Brookhaven Town Supervisor Edward Romaine; Brookhaven Councilwoman Valerie Cartright; Suffolk County Legislator Thomas Climini; Suffolk County Treasurer Angie Carpenter; and Tom

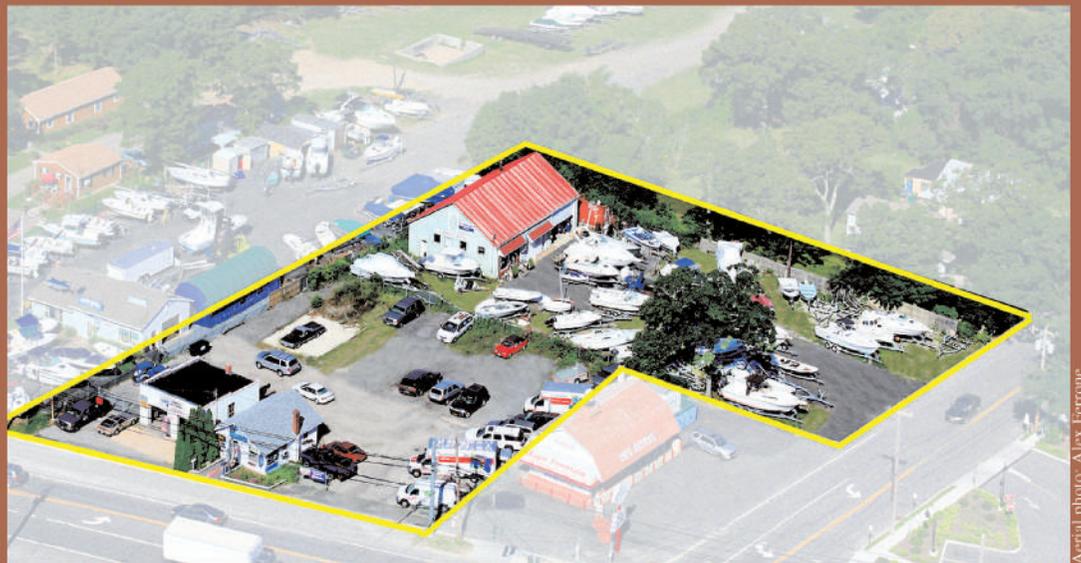
Ronayne, Director of Veterans Affairs for the Suffolk County Executive's Office, among others.

Sam Shalem, chairman and CEO of Prestige Properties, the owner of the DSW Shopping Center, welcomed Fairway Market to Lake Grove. "We are thrilled to have Fairway as our food anchor," he said. "Our customer base has been eagerly anticipating a Fairway of its own."

Howie Glickberg, vice chairman of development at Fairway, noted that "from the time Fairway was established 80 years ago, we have worked each and every day to live the words of our slogan — 'Like No Other Market' — in both our stores and in the neighborhoods in which we are located. We are committed to making a difference."

For more information, visit [www.fairwaymarket.com](http://www.fairwaymarket.com).

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