

## **Why the Pentagon's Panetta is On a Hiding to Nothing in Israel**

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**By [Tony Karon](#) Monday, October 3, 2011 at 12:41 pm**

Israel is becoming increasingly isolated, Defense Secretary Leon Panetta warned on Sunday, on the eve of his arrival there for talks with his Israeli counterpart, Defense Minister Ehud Barak. The -- perhaps unconscious -- subtext of that warning, of course, is that Israel's isolation in the Middle East accelerates the decline of America's own influence in the region, by virtue of Washington's unconditional backing for Israel, shielding it from the consequences even of policies that the U.S. formally opposes such as building settlements outside the 1967 lines.

The Obama Administration's [aggressive diplomatic effort](#) to block the Palestinian bid for statehood recognition at the U.N. has cost the U.S. much of whatever goodwill it may have mustered in the Arab world through support for the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime in Libya, and will likely strengthen the appeal of political parties more willing to challenge the United States and Israel when the likes of Egypt, Tunisia and Libya go to the polls.

Panetta urged the Israelis to reverse their isolation by restarting negotiations with the Palestinians and reaching out to Egypt and Turkey to repair frayed relations. The reason for his anxiety may be well grounded in the concerns of the institution he now leads -- the Pentagon.

In March 2010 testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee, then Centcom Commander (and now CIA Director) Gen. David Petraeus warned that Israel's relations with its neighbors, particularly the Palestinians, carry major consequences for the U.S. which weaken its ability to achieve its politico-military goals in Muslim countries throughout Centcom's domain:

"The enduring hostilities between Israel and some of its neighbors present distinct challenges to our ability to advance our interests in the AOR [area of responsibility]. Israeli-Palestinian tensions often flare into violence and large-scale armed confrontations. The conflict foments anti-American sentiment, due to a perception of U.S. favoritism for Israel. Arab anger over the Palestinian question limits the strength and depth of U.S. partnerships with governments and peoples in the AOR and weakens the legitimacy of moderate regimes in the Arab world. Meanwhile, al-Qaeda and other militant groups exploit that anger to mobilize support. The conflict also gives Iran influence in the Arab world through its clients, Lebanese Hizballah and Hamas...

"... The Levant and Egypt sub-region is the traditional political, social, and intellectual heart of the Arab world and is vital to security and stability in the CENTCOM AOR.

Because of its history as a primary battleground between rival ideologies, the dynamics of this sub-region, particularly with regard to Israel, influence the internal and external politics of states outside the region as well. In addition, U.S. policy and actions in the Levant affect the strength of our relationships with partners in the AOR. As such, progress toward resolving the political disputes in the Levant, particularly the Arab-Israeli conflict, is a major concern for CENTCOM."

And [recent reports](#) suggest Panetta's predecessor, Robert Gates, had made no secret inside the Administration of his view that Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is not serious about negotiating a credible two-state solution, and complained at a meeting of the National Security Council principals committee that Netanyahu was an "ungrateful ally" whose policies were isolating Israel internationally. Such views are heresy on Capitol Hill, of course, where enthusiasm for public displays of affection for Israel and animus towards the Palestinians has most recently translated the freezing of a portion of U.S. funding to the Palestinian Authority in order to pressure President Mahmoud Abbas to withdraw his bid for U.N. recognition. That, of course, is a prospect alarming to those, including the Israeli government and more sophisticated Israel advocates such as [former Bush Mideast official Elliot Abrams](#), who understand that the PA does more for Israel's security than it does to change the status quo on the West Bank.

The Pentagon concerns raised by Petraeus last year won't have been eased by the Obama Administration's response to the Palestinian U.N. bid. Obama noted in his recent address to world leaders gathered at the U.N. General Assembly, "for many in this hall, there's one issue that stands as a test for these principles [of democracy and human rights] and a test for American foreign policy, and that is the conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians." But while he may have acknowledged the stakes, he nonetheless delivered a speech that, while it played well with Israel's hawkish leaders and their backers on both sides of the aisle in Washington, was generally viewed in the Middle East as [confirming the inability of the U.S.](#) to play the role honest broker between the parties. That's a position that may suit the U.S. Congress, but it doesn't much help the U.S. military when having to convince Arab governments and publics of its bona fides, as Petraeus previously pointed out.

Panetta would obviously like to change that equation through a resumption of peace talks and a rapprochement with Egypt and Turkey. But he may be missing the point: Panetta urged the Israelis and Palestinians to resume negotiations, at the same time as insisting that the U.S. would not prescribe an agenda or parameters for such talks. And that's precisely why they won't happen. The Palestinians went to the UN precisely because in negotiations until now, they've seen what the Israelis are willing to offer, and it's less than they're prepared to accept -- or what the world expects them to accept in order to resolve the conflict.

So Panetta may believe that the "most important thing they can do is go to the negotiating table" because "that would be a tremendous signal to the world that both the Israelis and the Palestinians want to try to find a solution to these problems", but the Palestinians are trying to do the opposite, and signal the world that they believe -- as Bob Gates reportedly does -- that Netanyahu is not serious about concluding a credible peace agreement.

Nor are the breakdowns in Israel's relationships with Egypt and Turkey about misunderstandings; they're a reflection of growing public accountability of the foreign policy of Cairo and Ankara. Egypt's cooling of ties with Israel reflects an overwhelming public sentiment against ousted President Hosni Mubarak's indulgence of Israel's actions against the Palestinians; Turkey's break came after the Israeli response to a Turkish-led flotilla whose purpose was the break the blockade of Gaza. (Even now, as Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip [Erdogan told TIME last week](#), Ankara insists that repairing ties will require more than an apology from Israel for the deaths aboard the Marvi Maramara, but will also require lifting the blockade.) In short, there's little reason to expect a warming of ties between Israel and Turkey or Egypt in the near future. And the growing tension between the Israelis and the Palestinians is not a communication breakdown; it's a problem of the gulf between what the Israelis are willing to offer and what the Palestinians are prepared to accept.

In short, Israel's isolation in the Middle East may be dangerous, as Panetta points out, but it's unlikely to change on the basis of the Israeli government's current policy in a regional context slipping further and further beyond Washington's influence.

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