



Israel needs to refocus abroad

April 24, 2023 **Lawrence J. Haas** *The Hill*

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“Never interfere with an enemy in the process of destroying himself,” Napoleon once said. That’s a lesson Jerusalem needs to learn quickly, and Washington needs to reinforce, as Israel’s regional challenges escalate while the Jewish state is splintering over an ill-timed debate on judicial reform.

Though Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has paused his push for a judicial overhaul that critics charge would threaten Israel’s democracy, huge protests are continuing around the country, and protest leaders are calling for a massive Independence Day demonstration in Tel Aviv next week.

Israel’s adversaries are seeking to capitalize on the chaos, with Netanyahu’s government clearly distracted by the protests and unable to focus sufficiently on mounting regional challenges, according to on-the-ground observers. A sense of vulnerability within Israel, they say, is palpable.

The burgeoning Iran-Saudi Arabian rapprochement is not only complicating prospects for an official Saudi recognition of Israel — for which Jerusalem has worked hard and which could pay great dividends for both Jerusalem and Washington — it’s also creating additional headaches for Israel.

Iran’s President Ebrahim Raisi has accepted an invitation to visit Riyadh, and Iran has invited Saudi’s king to visit Tehran. Meanwhile, leaders of Iran-backed Hamas are scheduled to meet with Saudi officials in the coming days to discuss renewing ties, which frayed after the terrorist group seized control of Gaza from the Palestinian Authority in a violent coup in 2007.

Saudi support, of course, could only strengthen Hamas, which seeks Israel’s destruction, is further implanting itself in southern Lebanon (with help from Iran and Hezbollah, another of its terrorist proxies), and launched at least 36 rockets from southern Lebanon into Israel in early April.

Iran is also reportedly seeking to restore relations with Egypt, another regional powerhouse with which Israel has official ties and works closely. At the same time, Arab nations are increasingly inviting Syria, a close Iranian ally and Israeli adversary — and a recent regional pariah due to strongman Bashar al-Assad’s brutality during Arab Spring protests in 2011 and subsequent civil war — back into their world.

Saudi Arabia is apparently playing a leading role in orchestrating Syria’s return. Syrian Foreign Minister Faisal Al-Miqdad reportedly met in recent days with his Saudi counterpart in Jeddah. That visit by a Syrian official was reportedly the first since Riyadh ended relations with Damascus over its response to the protests of 2011, and it’s the centerpiece of a broader warming between Syria and the six-member Gulf Cooperation Council.

Thus, Israel faces a quickly changing landscape. No longer is the region organized in large part around a rivalry between Iran, the leading Shia state, and Saudi Arabia, the leading Sunni state. No longer is Riyadh moving closer to Jerusalem and away from Tehran. No longer is Damascus a regional outcast.

All of that raises new challenges for Israel as it confronts Iran over its nuclear advances and terror sponsorship — and as it seeks to expand the Abraham Accords and ink more peace pacts with Arab nations.

One key Israeli adversary watching Israel’s discord and feeling buoyant is Hezbollah’s leader, Hassan Nasrallah, who has theorized that Israel is a “spider web” that’s destined to unravel. In his eyes, the mass protests and angry rhetoric over judicial reform are proving his point.

“Nasrallah’s heightened confidence,” two researchers at the Institute for National Security Studies, an Israeli think tank, wrote in March, “is apparently behind his recent increase of the presence of Hezbollah operatives close to the border with Israel — albeit in civilian clothes — and the erection of numerous new observation towers under the guise of the ‘Green without Borders’ organization.”

Israel’s discord has alarmed influential voices within the country, and they’re seeking to refocus Jerusalem on its mounting global challenges.

The Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security (JISS), for instance, writes in a new policy paper (which it termed a “wake-up call”) that “Israel should prepare for war — and politicians need to come to their senses.”

"Israel is seen from the outside as a torn society," JISS writes, "gradually losing its ability to function. Friendly countries, among them those who signed the Abraham Accords and threw their weight behind Israel's strategic presence in the region, look in astonishment at an internal conflict that indicates the State of Israel has domestic problems that could dismantle its military capability."

In Jerusalem, negotiations over judicial reform are continuing. All parties would be well-advised to reach a compromise, easing domestic tensions and enabling the government to focus more fully beyond Israel's borders.

Rather than chastise Netanyahu over his judicial proposal, as it's done, Washington would be well-advised to encourage compromise. What serves Israel's security, after all, serves U.S. regional interests.