Turning Israeli mistakes into opportunities

By OZGUR ERKAN

It was very easy to spot expressions of disappointment, despair and anger in Israel's national newspapers yesterday following the midnight deal between Iran and the P5+1. Some went as far as labeling the agreement as the end of the world for Israel.

Without doubt, the agreement is a legitimization of Iran as a potential nuclear power by the West. This is one reason Iran perceived the agreement as a diplomatic victory at home.

This agreement with Iran will certainly make the tense Middle East even more dangerous from an Israeli national security perspective. In the wake of the agreement, other countries in the Middle East, especially the Gulf countries which perceive Iran as their greatest rival, will also work toward nuclear weapons. In a nutshell, the agreement will indeed pave the way for a nuclear arms race in the Middle East and potentially also in Central and Eastern Asia, in the circle around Iran and Pakistan.

This is simply due to the fact that Iran's neighbors and rivals are not as naive as the West to believe the Iranian regime has changed just because President Hassan Rohani is sending out peace messages to the West and posting Twitter messages for Rosh Hashanah. It is a known fact that Rohani has been part of the system in Iran since the Islamic Revolution in 1979 and that Iran will not change unless the ayatollah changes his views. Moreover, the rising number of executions in Iran (for homosexuality, divorce and drug trading) under Rohani, and the number of imprisoned journalists in Iran that has also increased under Rohani according to the human rights report of the UN, show the true face behind the make-up Iran has put on for the Western powers' benefit.

Given its significant potential to start a nuclear armament race in the Middle East, the agreement with Iran is perceived rightfully as a historic mistake. However, Israel should have an alternative plan to mourning and falling into despair.

This alternative plan should involve exploring the new common strategic interests of Israel and the Gulf countries, along the lines of the old saying, "the enemy of my enemy is my friend."

The ongoing strategic partnership between Saudi Arabia and Israel at the level of intelligence sharing has already been published in the printed media. However, against the Iranian threat, Israel can and should raise its level of cooperation with the oil-rich Gulf countries (including Qatar and the UAE) to include military and economic cooperation. Opening up bilateral trade representations (and reopening the closed trade representations, such as that of Qatar) will be an initial step toward improving not only the trade relations but also toward ending the historical enmity with the Arab world since the independence of Israel in 1948.

Boosting trade usually improves diplomatic relations too, and this is the point where Israel now has a historic chance to (at least de facto, if not necessarily de jure) gain recognition of the State of Israel from the Gulf countries, which have so far coupled such recognition with the Palestinian issue and thus have recognized Israel neither de facto nor de jure. This diplomatic opportunity might seem far-fetched at the moment, and even impossible to some. However, the enmity stemming from the leadership fight between the Saudis and Iran in the Middle East, as well as the recent declaration by Saudi prince Alwaleed bin Talal, expressing that "Iran is the real threat in the Middle East and not Israel," indicate that there is ample room of improvement in bilateral military, economic and finally diplomatic relations between Israel and the Gulf Countries in the Arab Peninsula.

The time for a paradigm shift has arrived in Israel. Israel must change its skeptical outlook toward the Gulf countries. In employing this paradigm shift, Israel should make use of a tool that has been shelved in Israel for the past five decades – diplomacy – and start improving the military and economic ties with the Gulf countries and “aim for its diplomatic recognition by those countries” via play the card of common strategic interests due to a nuclear Iran. Only this diplomatic maneuver can save Israel from the ever-growing isolation it has found itself in the Middle East since 1948.

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