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Op-Ed: American Jews must regain focus on Middle East

By Jennifer Laszlo Mizrahi · February 10, 2011

OPINION

WASHINGTON (JTA) -- The rapid changes in the Middle East are leading many in the American Jewish community to suffer from "analysis paralysis." We have become so mesmerized by events in Cairo that we have stopped doing vitally important work to advance American interests and stability in the Middle East, as well as Israel's security.

It is critical that we refocus our energies on what American leaders and citizens can do now:

* Continue to work with our allies to expand and enforce sanctions against Iran, the largest state sponsor of terror. Tehran is broadening its influence in Latin America and increasing its massive investment in public relations in the United States. Its PR machine includes Iran's 24/7 cable channel, PRESSTV, which broadcasts in English and Spanish to win the hearts and minds for the Islamic Republic, undermine U.S. interests in the Middle East and challenge Israel's legitimacy.

* Ensure that any new Egyptian government honors its peace treaty with Israel and continues its efforts to stop the smuggling of weapons into Gaza. Last year, terrorists in Gaza fired 238 rockets and missiles at Israeli towns, despite the fact that there are no Israeli settlers or settlements in Gaza. The failure to halt weapons smuggling will lead to more unacceptable attacks on Israeli civilians. Nobody wants to see a repeat of Operation Cast Lead, but no country can tolerate unprovoked attacks on its civilians indefinitely.

* Let America's Palestinian and Arab allies know that they should stop teaching their citizens, and especially their children, to hate Jews and Israel. U.S. tax money should not go to leaders and entities that name streets, squares and public buildings after terrorists, or who deliberately leave Israel off textbook maps. Arabs need jobs, not jihad; hope and not hate.

* Veto Palestinian efforts in the United Nations to bypass Israel to create a Palestinian state. The Israeli government supports a two-state solution and is ready to continue peace negotiations to achieve it. However, even moderate Palestinian leaders are refusing to negotiate and are denying the concessions that the recently leaked documents from WikiLeaks showed they might be willing to make. Palestinian leaders are seeking to garner support for a unilateral declaration of a Palestinian state and have parts of Jerusalem (including the Western Wall) declared an illegal settlement. They would like to isolate Israel at the U.N. General Assembly meeting in September. The Israeli government froze settlement building in the West Bank for 10 months and is promoting Palestinian economic development. The Palestinian Authority should recognize Israel as a democratic homeland for the Jewish people and engage in serious peace talks with Israel now.

* Devise a solution to Jerusalem that will bring lasting peace and does not slice the city in half as if it were a pizza. Israeli and Palestinian relations are very complicated, with shared power, water and security issues affecting both sides. Palestinians living in eastern Jerusalem enjoy freedom of religion, speech and the right to vote in municipal elections. Israel is ready to work toward a two-state solution in which the people of all religions -- Christians, Muslims and Jews -- continue to have the same access to all the holy sites in Jerusalem that they have now.

* Reduce dependency on foreign oil. The turmoil in the Arab world again underscores America's dependency on Middle East oil, which threatens vital U.S. national interests. Robbie Diamond of SAFE and Gal Luft of the Institute for the Analysis of Global Security are among those whose practical ideas about flex fuels and electric cars deserve serious consideration. Israel is at the forefront of the push for alternative energy, and joint U.S.-Israeli energy

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projects should be expanded.

* Maintain aid to Israel, America's most reliable ally in the Middle East. This issue is being considered now in the U.S. Congress. Poll numbers consistently indicate that most Americans view a strong U.S.-Israel relationship as vital to American interests and want the United States to continue to stand with Israel.

The changes unfolding in Egypt before our eyes are historic and dramatic. Yet we in the American Jewish community committed to peace and security in the Middle East cannot merely be spectators to events in that region. We also must address these important issues decisively and proactively.

Of course, America can't do this alone. We need strong allies and partners with us in this effort. If not now, when?

(Jennifer Laszlo Mizrahi is the founder and president of *The Israel Project*, a nonprofit organization that provides facts about Israel and the Middle East to press, policymakers and the public. She can be reached at jenniferm@theisraelproject.org.)

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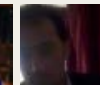
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