



Itamar Rabinovich Situates Israel in a New Regional Landscape

By Amanda Gordon

Itamar Rabinovich, Israel's former Ambassador to the United States, addressed a full auditorium of community members and students on Northwestern's campus on Tuesday, November 12 in his lecture "Israel Facing a New Middle East: Challenges and Responses." During the lecture and subsequent Q&A session, hosted by the Crown Family Center for Jewish and Israel Studies, Rabinovich tackled an impressive breadth of issues surrounding Israel and its position vis-à-vis other regional political power players. He also commented on the present turmoil of Israeli politics and the ongoing conflict between Israel and the Palestinian territories.

Rabinovich began his lecture by chronicling the ascendance of Israel, Turkey and Iran as integrated, legitimate members of the Middle East, contrasting the present military and economic dominance of these three nations to their former marginal status in the eyes of the Arab world. He elaborated by asserting the present weakness of Arab states, highlighted by the overall inefficacy of the Arab Spring, which gave way to what Rabinovich called "the Arab Winter."

After laying out this landscape of crisis and stagnation, Rabinovich pivoted to tackle the subject of Iran and its emergence as the primary menace in the region, citing the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979 as a catalyst for expanding and exporting its Shia Islamist values and influence. “Iran wants to become the hegemonial state in the Middle East,” Rabinovich stated.

Rabinovich pointed to various proxy groups supported by the Iranian regime as evidence of what he called a “defensive-offensive” strategy in which “the lines between the defensive and the offensive are not easily visible.” In particular, he noted the significant Iranian support of Shia Islamist group Hezbollah in Lebanon, as well as Iran’s growing military presence in Iraq. According to Rabinovich, these phenomena are of grave concern to many Israelis, as Iran’s leaders have openly called for Israel’s destruction. Rabinovich also emphasized how Iran’s military encroachment has created an unlikely, mostly covert alliance between Israel and the Arab Gulf states, who are also threatened by Iran’s increasing military aggression in the region.

Later in his remarks, Rabinovich addressed the recent military violence between Israel and the Gaza Strip, arguing that any large scale invasion or occupation of Gaza would be untenable. “There is no military solution to the Gaza problem,” he said. “There is only a political solution.”

During the Q&A session, which was moderated by Professor Elie Rekhess, the Associate Director of the Crown Center, Rabinovich spoke about Israel’s ongoing internal political crisis. He diagnosed the volatile struggle to form a governing coalition as a symptom of Israeli society, which he deemed to be “divided down the middle.” Fielding a question about Israel’s involvement in the similarly divisive arena of American politics, Rabinovich expressed regret about Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s open support of Donald Trump, arguing that it has thrown Israel “overboard in its partisanship.”

In the final minutes of his time on stage, Rabinovich pivoted to speak about the urgency of resolving the conflict with Israel’s closest neighbors, the Palestinian people. “It’s mandatory for Israel to deal seriously with the Palestinian issue,” he said. “I resent when some leaders talk about Iran as ‘an existential threat.’ If there is an existential threat to Israel, it’s the Palestinian problem. We may lose our identity if we keep controlling Palestinians without any resolution.”