

Israel and Kazakhstan's Futurist Vision for Central Asia

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Israel and its Eastern Mediterranean neighbors find themselves in a new geopolitical reality as the Atlantic Order ceases to be the predominant framework in which the region's relations are conducted. With the weakening bloc led by the United States and its European allies ceding ground in the region to an emerging Eurasian order led by China and Russia, Eastern Mediterranean nations could benefit from examining how Kazakhstan attempts to constructively influence the developing economic and strategic contours of the new Eurasia.

Spanning the western border of China and the eastern borders of European Russia and the Caspian Sea, Kazakhstan – like the Eastern Mediterranean – forms a vital geo-economic link between Europe and Asia. However, in contrast to the Eastern Mediterranean nations, a central feature of Kazakhstan's foreign policy is the consistent promotion of a futurist vision for Eurasia based on consensus-building, multi-lateral cooperation and sustainable development. To this end, Kazakhstan has hosted four major international events in 2017 – The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Summit, Expo 2017, the Astana Economic Forum and the Eurasian Media Forum.

This author participated as a delegate to the 14th Eurasian Media Forum in late June and witnessed the impressive array of high government officials and leading figures from the fields of business, hi-tech and media that were gathered to examine the challenges for Eurasia and the opportunities for creating a more prosperous, stable and sustainable future. Reflective of the strong Kazakh-Israeli relationship, the agenda of the Eurasian Media Forum treated Israel as an important Eurasian actor whose voice should be heard.

The forum was initiated by Dr. Dariga Nazarbayeva, a political scientist and the daughter of Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbayev, who himself is the architect of Kazakhstan's "multi-vectored" foreign policy – a careful three-way balancing among Russia, China, and the Western powers, mainly the European Union and the United States – that has contributed to maintaining a certain great-power equilibrium in Central Asia and helped foster Kazakhstan's economic rise to the ranks of an upper middle income nation.

Held in the Kazakhstani capital Astana with more than 600 delegates participating from over 60 nations, the Eurasian Media Forum brought together persons from varying ethnic, religious and political perspectives, modeling a process for civil and rational dialogue among actors with conflicting interests. Conducted in the style of the Davos World Economic Forum, the opening plenary session addressed the macro political trends affecting the future of the Eurasian landmass.

The composition of the panel itself was indicative of the importance which Kazakhstan places on Israel's role in Eurasia. Sharing the panel with former Turkish president Abdullah Gul, Jose Manuel Barroso, the previous president of the EU's governing body, the European Commission and former US ambassador to the UN Governor Bill Richardson was Gilead Sher, chief of staff and policy coordinator for the government of prime minister Ehud Barak, known for his role as a senior peace negotiator, including during the Taba talks.

The panel's major theme, as framed by Turkey's former president, was the dangers posed by various forms of populism and the need for governments as well as multi-lateral organizations to be more responsive to the needs and concerns of local populations.

Sher's contribution highlighted the need to better understand the growing disruptive role of non-state actors and was well received.

The panel at the forum that focused specifically on the Syrian crisis, while including an Iranian speaker did not include an Israeli speaker. However, through his participation as a delegate, Sher put forward an Israeli position on the crisis. When one of the participating delegates responded to Sher's comments on Israel's provision of humanitarian aid in Syria by attempting to impugn Israel's role with a disingenuous narrative, one of the panel's speakers, investigative journalist Shahida Tulaganova, effectively countered the delegate's propagandistic grandstanding, which itself was something out of character for the forum.

Known for her eyewitness documenting of the Syrian civil war in the recent award-winning film *Cries from Syria*, Tulaganova provided her own personal testimony about Israel's constructive humanitarian role. The panel's ability to stay on track with a rigorous debate was reflective of the conference organizers' overall effort to promote balanced dialogue.

Beyond the factor of geopolitics, the forum considered the future of Eurasia from a variety of analytical vantage points including: the sustainability of the Asian Economic Miracle and the prospect of greater commercial integration between Europe and Asia; how green energy may be effectively harnessed for sustainable economic development; the impact of emerging trends in digital technology on international commerce, intellectual property, global media and the security of the international financial system.

Just as Israel's exhibition at Expo 2017, held concurrently in Astana, proved to be one of the most well received exhibitions, Israel was regarded in the panels and the

delegate discussions as a leading-edge innovator, contributing solutions in several of these fields.

The importance for Israel of developing a robust Eurasian policy perspective cannot be overemphasized. Already the EU's trade with Asia has surpassed the volume of trade conducted between EU and North America. China's Belt and Road Initiative – from Beijing's ownership and operation of the EU's fastest growing port in Piraeus, Greece to its construction of Egypt's new capital – is serving to integrate the Eastern Mediterranean region into an economically rational Eurasian order. Similarly, through its new military and energy partnerships, Russia has re-emerged as a major actor in the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East.

To this end, Kazakhstan can serve both as an exemplar and partner. Astana is one of Beijing's key partners in developing road and high-speed rail routes to create overland commercial connectivity with Europe (the "belt" in the Belt and Road Initiative). Likewise, the former Soviet republic maintains a strong relationship with Moscow. Nonetheless, Kazakhstan has successfully "rebalanced Westwards," offsetting the threat of Russian hard power and of Chinese soft power by deepening its security cooperation with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and economic cooperation with the EU. In 2017, Kazakhstan became one of the 10 non-permanent members of the UN Security Council.

Israel was one of the first nations to recognize Kazakhstan's independence in 1991. On the occasion of the country's 25th anniversary as an independent state, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu became the first acting Israeli prime minister to visit Kazakhstan. Netanyahu's visit reflected the importance of the bilateral relations that have developed between the two nations. However, there is much more work to be done. As Israel's ambassador to Kazakhstan, Michael Brodsky, has pointed out there is great potential for Israel and Kazakhstan to expand their cooperation in the fields of agriculture, healthcare, telecommunications, security and renewable energy to reach a level of strategic partnership.

Israel needs to craft a strategic vision for securing its place in the emerging Eurasian order. With a population of only 18 million, Kazakhstan has managed to use its strategic assets to become an active player in setting the agenda along with the major powers. As was abundantly clear from Kazakhstan's 14th Eurasian Media Forum, Israel's has an important place in Kazakhstan's futurist vision of Eurasia. Israel should engage Kazakhstan's vision as well as learn lessons from that vision as Israel starts to develop its own discourse on Eurasia.

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