

### Ambassador Shoval Event Summary

On June 19, 2009, Zalman Shoval, former Israeli ambassador to the United States, addressed a small group at CSIS on a wide range of issues affecting the U.S.-Israel relationship.

Regarding Iran, Shoval acknowledged the gravity of the threat Iran poses to Israel, but he argued that the international community overemphasizes the link between the Iranian threat and Arab-Israel conflict. Additionally, he said most Arab governments believe they face a far more serious threat from a strong, nuclear-armed Iran than from Israel. He wondered openly whether the Iranian threat would emerge as the preeminent unifying force in the region, displacing opposition to Israel.

With regard to the prospects for a Palestinian state, Shoval reiterated what he said was the stance Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu laid out in his speech earlier this month: two states for two peoples. Shoval argued that now, after the speech, responsibility for initiative rests with the United States and the Palestinians. He cautioned, however, that any future two-state solution would have to be similar to Israel's bilateral peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan. That is to say that, while efforts by external parties are important, the agreements themselves are primarily motivated by shared interests between the signatories. As such, he claimed, peace cannot be imposed from outside and must come from an organic desire for peace from within the Palestinian people.

On West Bank settlements, Shoval expressed skepticism as to whether settlements are a true obstacle to the peace process. Instead, he suggested, that some may be using the settlements issue as an excuse to delay serious discussions about peace. Shoval criticized the settlement outposts that the government of Israel does not endorse, but he defended the natural growth of Israel's official settlements. He asserted that settlements occupy only 2 to 3 percent of West Bank land. As such, he said, settlements should not be treated as an obstacle to beginning a peace process, but rather as a minor issue to be resolved at the end of the process. This process, Shoval claimed, has not even begun. Moreover, President Barack Obama's questioning of the legitimacy of settlement activity, Shoval said, undermined the strength of the U.S.-Israel relationship with regard to security agreements and constrained Israel's negotiating strategy.

Shoval mentioned a number of other issues affecting the U.S.-Israel relationship. He asserted that the vast majority of Israelis believe the current U.S. administration to be anti-Israel, undermining Israelis' trust that the United States can help Israel strike a peace deal. He likened the policies of the current U.S. administration to the stance of the European Union toward Israel, which he claimed serves to undermine Israeli strength and enhance the Palestinians' bargaining power, leading to Palestinian refusal to negotiate at all. In the past, Shoval said, the U.S.-Israel relationship remained strong despite differences in policy with the United States. He questioned whether this remains true under the new Obama administration.