By Nick Watts, Great North News Services

The Middle East is described by commentators variously as a powder keg, a region on a precipice and other dramatic metaphors. From the standpoint of a policy practitioner from the region, it seems like a three dimensional chess puzzle. Speaking at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) in London yesterday, Dan Meridor gave his reflections on recent changes in the region, and on continuing uncertainties. Meridor combines the role of Israeli Deputy Prime Minister along with the posts of Minister of Intelligence and of Nuclear energy. This and his long experience in Israeli politics gives him a very good perspective.

Addressing the state of the Middle East after the Arab Spring, Meridor was candid enough to admit that no-one in Israel saw it coming; then again no one else did. This he took as a warning that nothing was ever certain in the way events unfold in that region. He was encouraged that the Arab Spring was proof that "western" values of democracy were beginning to cut through in the region. He noted wryly that it was dictatorships that were overthrown, not monarchies. The continuing drama in Syria is also proof of the ruthlessness of some of the regimes in the region. In an interesting apercu he remarked that "ad-hoc" back channel links with some countries in the region that did not have diplomatic relations with Israel were improved as a result of the Arab Spring.

One result of the Arab Spring was the change of regime in Egypt. The Peace Treaty between Israel and Egypt, followed by that with Jordan, has maintained peaceful stability in the region, with no major war following the 1973 conflict. Israel was closely watching developments in Cairo as a new government emerges from the post Mubarak regime. What form of government will the majority wish to have? How will the Muslim Brotherhood view the peace treaty with Israel? The real cause for concern, Meridor noted, was Iran's nuclear ambitions and what this might mean for the region.

The consequences of an Iranian nuclear capability will be the knock on effect it will have. Several states in the region have stated that should this happen, they too will respond by developing their own capability. Israel's publicly stated stance is that it would not tolerate a nuclear Iran. How this is to be construed is understandably shrouded in conditional clauses, and Meridor would not be drawn on this. The combination of the nuclear ambition and Iran's support of Hezbollah and its close affinity with the Syrian Assad regime constitutes a particularly tricky dilemma for Israeli policy makers. Add to this Iran's support for Hamas in Palestine and things get positively neuralgic.

According to Meridor, all of these problems are capable of resolution given good will and

pragmatism by all involved. Israel has no history of conflict with Iran, up until the change of regime in 1979. When asked how it might be possible to deal with Tehran, Meridor drew the parallel with the ending of the war with Iraq in the 1980s. Once the Tehran regime realized it was not achieving anything they began to talk. This lesson was underscored by drawing attention to the benefits for the international community from a combination of sanctions and talks to keep dialogue alive. This also applies to the Palestinians who under the Hamas regime have broken off negotiations with Israel.

At the moment the Iranian regime and its proxies, Hamas, Hezbollah and Islamic Jihad who are supported by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, seems to believe that continuation of the struggle is to their advantage. Recent attacks on Israeli Embassies shows that this campaign could develop an international dimension, should future attacks show evidence of collusion.

Meridor chose to stress the opportunities rather than the risks. He noted that Tehran might think it was untouchable once it achieved a nuclear capability, he also noted President Obama's comments with regard to Iran's nuclear ambition: "we are not talking about containment, but prevention."