

Israel:

Peace Process Strategy and U.S.-Israel Relations

Aug 6, 1998



Brief Analysis

On July 27, 1998, Zalman Shoval, the new Israeli ambassador to the United States, addressed The Washington Institute's Special Policy Forum. The following is a rapporteur's summary of his remarks. [Read a full transcript. \(templateC07.php?CID=185\)](#)

The Oslo Agreement: Oslo has been a big disappointment for both sides; in retrospective it was a mistake. It gave rise to illogical and unreasonable expectations, especially about how both sides were to deal with security and about handing over major parts of the territories before crucial issues were addressed. The Palestinians have been suffering economically since the agreement -- with the standard of living declining by 40-50 per cent. The agreement created so many security problems for the Israelis that it is likely that former Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin would have rethought the process at some stage or another. Oslo indeed collapsed in the mind of many Israelis when the first bomb exploded in Jerusalem. Nevertheless, Oslo was democratically approved and the Israeli government is still committed to the agreement. As long as the Palestinian Authority lives up to its responsibilities, the Israeli center-right government -- the only government with the power to bring with it the majority of the Israeli people -- will do the same. It is the Israeli government's responsibility and duty to correct past mistakes in order to prevent pitfalls in the future.

The Interim Agreement: Originally, the Israeli negotiators preferred to have interim stages as part of Oslo to convince themselves that the PLO had done several things: recognized the existence of the Israeli state, made a maximum effort to fight terrorism, and established a democratic political system. The Israelis also wanted to know that the concessions they made were justified and that the PLO is a reliable partner. Ironically, the interim agreement has served a useful purpose by showing that while the Israelis, by and large, have lived up to their responsibilities, the PLO has not fulfilled its commitments. Israel cannot proceed with further concessions until the PLO fulfills its obligations.

The Check List: In January 1997, with the Hebron accord, the United States proposed what was then called a "balance sheet" or "check list," where each column represented what each side in the negotiation ought to do next. Although the Israelis eventually accepted the list, the built-in asymmetry caused them some concern. Israel was asked to take a tangible and irreversible step -- to give up land. The Palestinians, however, merely offer intangible promises, which have not been fulfilled. The following are the main points the Palestinians have omitted on their side of the balance sheet:

- Effectively fighting terrorism and destroying the terrorist group infrastructure;
- Preventing the smuggling of additional weapons into the territories;
- Fully and unconditionally cooperating with the Israelis on all matters of security;

- Stopping the distribution of anti-Semitic propaganda in officially controlled media;
- Amending the Palestinian National Charter, which currently calls for the destruction of the Israeli State.

Next Steps: The Palestinians, who broke off the talks almost 16 months ago, recently resumed negotiations thanks to continued U.S. facilitation. They have been meeting with Israeli Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai, who brought very concrete proposals to the table. Currently, the gap between the two sides is narrowing, and can be bridged in a matter of days or even hours. The Israelis have gone out of their way to make progress and bring the Palestinians back to the bargaining table. However, the two main points which are still in dispute are:

- The definition of part of the territories from which Israel would redeploy. In trying to meet the U.S. proposal for a 13 percent redeployment, security needs require Israel to divide this into separate jurisdictions, with 3 percent under a new security formula. By accepting to hand back 10 percent of the West Bank, Israel is already prepared to create a serious security risk. To go further will be very difficult.
- The need for final revocation and amendment of the Palestinian National Charter. The Palestinians have not fulfilled their obligation to nullify those parts of the Charter that violate the Palestinian's commitments to peace with Israel. Arafat may find it hard to convene the Palestinian National Council to cancel the Charter, but the Israelis are not convinced by these arguments. However, the Israelis are willing to show some flexibility with regards to the procedure of abolishing the Charter, if there is some progress on other matters.

The Palestinians should not sit back and wait for a major break-down in the Israeli-American relationship which they sometimes view as a preferable outcome. Nor can they wait for American pressure to do the job for them. They have to engage in direct talks with the Israelis -- not with Washington. As Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said, "in order to engage you have got to engage." Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat should not listen to those who tell him that not reaching an agreement will leave him free to declare a Palestinian state in May 1999. The Americans should make it clear to the Palestinians that declaring a Palestinian state unilaterally would be an illegal act, which the United States would not support.

The Missile Threat: The recent Iranian missile test provides a warning, not only to the people in the region, but to those in Western Europe, which in a few years may be exposed to the same threat. The Palestinian people -- many of whom were dancing on their roofs when Iraqi Scuds hit Israel -- should realize that unconventional weapons will not distinguish between Areas A, B, or C -- or between Arab and Jew. It is the time to come to an agreement and to present a common front against these threats facing the whole region.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Shlomi Leon.

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