

Israeli Security, the Peace Process, and the U.S.-Israel Partnership

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Brief Analysis

Netanyahu's Victory, One Year Later: When the Labor government was in power, it was legitimate to ask whether it is adequate to have a majority which supports the peace agreements even if it does not include the majority of the Jewish population. It is important to remember that the peace process is an effort to reach an agreement between Jews and Arabs. So if the majority of Israeli Jews disagree with the solution pursued by the Government, then the leaders are doing something wrong. Israel's leaders have a double challenge: they must get the majority of Israel's population to support the agreement, but they must also gain the support of Israel's Jewish population. When Oslo II was voted on in the Knesset, it passed by one vote. This was the Labor Party's basic mistake. A far-reaching agreement such as Oslo II needs broad support. Labor leaders tried to force this on the Israeli population and they ultimately paid a price when the Israeli public went to the polls.

An important lesson demonstrated by the 1996 elections was that former Prime Minister Shimon Peres failed to convince Israel's Jewish population that a new Middle East was upon us, that hotels had become "more important than tanks," in his words. Israelis expressed their desire for a leader who would adopt a more cautious approach in pursuing peace talks. Benyamin Netanyahu convinced the Jewish population that he would be the prudent leader they were searching for.

Although many in the Labor party have since accused Netanyahu of not living up to his campaign slogan of "peace with security," this is simply untrue. While Israel still has neither peace nor security, to claim that Netanyahu hasn't lived up to his promise is to misinterpret what was meant by the slogan. Netanyahu promised the Israeli public that peace negotiations would be conducted while preventing Israel's security from being endangered. He has lived up to this promise.

Israel's Security Problem: In Israel, there is a saying that "we cannot afford to lose a single battle." Israeli politics assumes that if Israel were to lose just one war, that would mean the end of the state and of the Jewish presence there. Israel's leaders have the responsibility of protecting Israel from that possibility. While some people may think this is a baseless fear, the concern in Israel is very real. Only six years ago Saddam Hussein threatened to destroy Israel with missiles. His rhetoric and Scud attacks were met with enthusiastic support by many in the Arab world, including those Palestinians who danced on their rooftops. It is also important to remember that public opinion at the time compelled King Hussein to throw his support behind Saddam. Furthermore, Hafez al-Assad, although he sided with the allies against Iraq, should not be mistaken for a benign leader, a mistake made by many in Washington and around the world. Assad may have been on the right side of that conflict, but that doesn't change the fact that Syria supported and continues to support terrorist activity, particularly Hizballah's presence in Lebanon.

These are the security considerations upon which Israel's policies are based and it is important for the Palestinians to understand them. Only when the Palestinians understand that Israel's concerns go beyond the Palestinian entity, reaching as far as Iran, Iraq, and Libya, will the negotiations move forward. It is imperative that the Palestinians

understand the structural instability of such autocratic states and the implication this has for Israel. The Palestinians are in no way responsible for the fragility of these states, but they must recognize that they need to make some sacrifices to assure Israel that it will be able to protect itself from these more distant threats.

The issue of Israeli settlements is essentially an issue of Israeli security. The settlements are Israel's guarantee for secure borders. If Israel were to withdraw from the heights of Samaria for example, the Jordan Valley would not be secure. Maale Adumim, east of Jerusalem, is Israel's guarantee that it will continue to have access to the Jordan Valley and the Dead Sea; without it, the border would run alongside Jerusalem, possibly through the city itself. Thus the Palestinians may have their own entity, but it will not be "geographically contiguous" because Israel must retain the security provided by the settlements.

Areas of Conflict: There are currently three main areas of conflict facing Israel:

- Lebanon. Contrary to what some may believe, Israel's problem with Lebanon is not trivial. There is constant bloodshed on this border. Although some people within and outside of Israel argue for a unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon, this is not an option at the present time. As long as Lebanon remains a puppet state of Syria, and Assad allows Hizballah to operate there, Israel cannot withdraw because then the violence will move to Israel's border towns in the north. Hizballah receives its orders from Iran's leaders, and they have made it very clear in numerous public statements that their goal is the destruction of Israel, not just Israel's withdrawal from the security zone. Israel will pull out of Lebanon as soon as someone is willing to take responsibility for protecting its northern border from attacks.
- Syria. The previous Labor government, under Rabin and Peres, had agreed to withdraw from the Golan Heights within the framework of a peace agreement. However, this apparently was not enough of a concession for Assad, and he did not accept the offer. Today, Assad is demanding that Israel return the Golan Heights as a precondition for peace negotiations. This is something Israel is not prepared to do. Israel will not return to the days of Syrian gunners shooting at Israelis in the valley below. And under Assad's rule, Israel has no guarantee that this would not happen.
- Palestinians. The Oslo Accords were a "mistake" and a "disservice" to the Palestinian people, because they "imposed Arafat on the Palestinian population." Palestinians ought to hold democratic elections, and Israel should negotiate peace only with a democratically elected leader of the Palestinian people- not an imposed leader. Arafat asserts that he is not only the representative of Palestinians in Judea, Samaria and Gaza, but of the Palestinian Diaspora (approximately five million people) as well. Arafat demands that all Palestinians, including those who left Palestine in 1948, as well as their children and grandchildren, be granted the right of return. However, "Israel's partners in peace are those who live in the area, not those who left generations ago." If the Palestinians are granted this right of return, Israel's very existence would be under direct threat. It is precisely for this reason that previous Israeli governments have viewed negotiations with Arafat as a grave mistake. One should not forget that Arafat continues to keep the right of return at the top of his agenda.

Conclusion: The Arab-Israeli conflict is unlike any other conflict, and therefore must be resolved in a unique manner. While some people have tried to draw a comparison between the Arab-Israeli conflict and a colonial conflict, the two are not similar. Colonial conflicts are traditionally solved when one nation packs up and leaves, e.g., France and Algeria. Although there are many people who would like to see the Jews leave Israel, this will never happen. Therefore, this conflict must be solved unlike any other—with both populations intermingled.

We have made great progress and are heading in the right direction, but there is no quick solution. We have already made peace with Egypt and Jordan and we are moving forward with the Palestinians. In order for peace to be

achieved, the Arab world must accept the reality that Israel cannot "be beaten on the battlefield." Israel has paid a massive price for its security and it will not relinquish the necessary conditions for upholding this security. Israel must remain strong in its quest for peace.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Hillary Ebenstein

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