

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

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In-Depth Reports

The United States and Israel are two countries -- distant in geography, very different in size -- but both democracies sharing common values and ideals. In this day and age, common ideals and common values make for common strategic interests, and that is really the basis of the U.S.-Israeli relationship, maybe with a few aberrations here and there, and will continue to be the basis for many, many years to come.

The last Israeli elections were held under a brand new system in which Israel maintained its parliamentary system but chose its prime minister by direct election. Bernard Lewis is quoted as saying that Israel had a very bad electoral system, but with typical Israeli ingenuity had found a way of making it even worse. The election turned out to be a head-to-head runoff between Binyamin Netanyahu and Shimon Peres because Netanyahu managed to move aside some of the other candidates who might have taken votes from him. David Levy, for example, may be the best man qualified to be Israel's foreign minister, but that's not the reason he is currently foreign minister. He is foreign minister because he announced that he, too, was going to run in the election for prime minister, and Netanyahu realized that he had better make some kind of a deal with Levy so that it would end up being a direct runoff with Shimon Peres.

My oldest granddaughter, who was thirteen at the time, was a great supporter of Netanyahu. And a month or two before the election I said to her, "I have a math problem for you. If 12 percent of Israeli voters are Israeli Arabs" -- really Palestinians, because they are Palestinians in every sense of the word except that they are Israeli citizens -- "and this 12 percent votes for Peres, what percentage of the Jewish vote must Netanyahu receive to win the election?" It's actually a simple algebra problem that can be done on the back of an envelope. The answer was 57 percent. With a fourteen point gap between Netanyahu and Peres in opinion polls among the Jewish population, that sounded like "Mission Impossible." The next time I saw Netanyahu I said, "You've got a serious problem here. I don't think you can do it." And he said, "Okay, you take charge of the Arab vote." That's the reason I couldn't come to the Soref symposium last year.

It turned out that Netanyahu won by a hair's breadth. Out of 3,500,000 votes cast, he received only 30,000 more votes than Shimon Peres. That's less than one percent of the vote. He didn't get 57 percent of the Jewish vote, he got close to 55 percent, but it turned out that that was just enough -- not because of a mistake in the calculations but because he also got about 20,000 votes from the minority sector. And 5 percent of Israeli Arab voters cast blank ballots in the election for prime minister. That's why 55 percent (which is still of landslide proportions) of the Jewish vote was sufficient.

That says something about the Israeli political system and the very important weight that Israel's Arab population carries in the system and in the decisions that will be reached, particularly under the new election system. They were 12 percent last time; they will probably be 14 percent in the next election. Israel's Arab population must have absolutely equal rights with Israel's Jewish population. They should also have the same obligations as Israeli citizens, including serving in the armed forces. As the election results indicate, the agenda of Israel's Arab citizens --

Israel's Palestinians -- is very far from congruent to the agenda of Israel's Jewish citizens.

The other important lesson from the elections is that the Labor candidate, Shimon Peres, did not succeed in convincing the majority of the Jewish population that there is a new Middle East, everything has changed, borders are not important anymore, and (as he said on one occasion) hotels are more important than tanks. Most Israelis don't believe that. They are not ready to join a headlong rush toward further concessions within the framework of the Oslo agreement. They wanted a prime minister who would be a little more prudent, more conservative, and more aware of the risks that Israel was taking in the process of implementing the Oslo accords. The opposition now faults Netanyahu for having run in the election under the slogan of "Peace with Security," saying that "there's no peace and no security." But that's a deliberate misinterpretation of what Netanyahu and the Likud said during the election campaign. Peace with security means that the peace process should be conducted in a manner that does not endanger Israel's security. That is the basis for the present government's policy.

Israel is a very unique country. The establishment of the state of Israel was a unique event, not only in Jewish history but also in the history of man: the Jewish people returning to their ancient homeland after 2,000 years, reviving the Hebrew language, settling the country, and standing up to odds that are probably unprecedented in the history of conflicts between nations. The Arab-Israeli -- or Israeli-Palestinian -- conflict is also unique; there are few analogies or comparisons to the resolution of other conflicts that have taken place in recent times that would be relevant to this conflict. In World War II, for example, conflict was resolved by one side's being beaten into unconditional surrender. That's never been an option for Israel. One of the asymmetries of the conflict is that it is an option that the Arab world thought it had. When they didn't succeed in the first war with Israel, they thought it would only take another round; and if it didn't succeed in the second round, it would only take a third round.

Considering the tremendous resources at the disposal of the Arab world -- a very large number of people, economic resources, oil wealth, regular armies early on when Israel could only field poorly equipped militias -- there might have been some reason to assume that the total defeat of Israel was feasible, that it was only a question of time before the problem could be resolved with the destruction of the state of Israel. Some people tend to compare the conflict to the colonial conflicts. The conflict between France and Algeria was resolved when the French left Algeria. The Israelis are not going to leave Israel, although some people might want them to do that. Thus, it's a question of trying to resolve the conflict within an intermingled population of Jews and Palestinians: Palestinians living on one side of the so-called "Green Line" of the 1967 borders and Palestinians living in Israel itself.

The position of Israeli Palestinians in resolving this dispute is the subject of some debate in Israel: whether it is sufficient for a majority to support certain concessions such as the Oslo agreement, if it does not include a majority of the Jewish population. Legally, there is no difference between the vote of a Palestinian citizen and the vote of a Jewish citizen. But if what the parties are trying to do is achieve a conciliation between Jews and Arabs, and if a majority of Israel's Jewish citizens do not support a particular peace plan, it's probably not a workable plan. Perhaps the parties face a double challenge: to get a majority of Israel's population and also a majority of Israel's Jewish population to support a future agreement.

Israel has a serious security problem. In America, the saying goes, "you win some, you lose some." Israel, by contrast, cannot afford to lose even a single battle because even today the general assumption across almost the entire spectrum of Israeli politics is that if Israel were to lose a war, it would not only be the end of the state of Israel, it would be an end to the Jewish population living in Israel. It's a mortal danger to an entire people. It's the sort of thing that most people probably thought the world had left behind after World War II. But realistic Israeli leaders have to continue to consider and protect against that eventuality. Six years ago, during the Gulf War, Saddam Hussein talked about the destruction of Israel and launched missiles against Israel. As a result of the UN commission that has been inspecting (evidently not that efficiently) the facilities in Iraq, it is now clear that they had chemical and

bacteriological warheads at that time. And Saddam Hussein's bellicose statements and the missiles that came down on Israel's cities engendered the applause and enthusiastic support of many in the Arab world, including many Palestinians. Palestinians in Gaza were dancing on the roof when missiles were falling on Tel Aviv.

I was defense minister during that very difficult time, and part of my responsibility was contact with the Palestinian population. I asked Palestinian businesspeople and intellectuals how they could support Saddam Hussein, a cruel dictator who had invaded another Arab country and fired missiles at Israel without provocation, who might have fired chemical warheads at Israel, some of which might even have hit the Palestinians because the missiles were not very accurate. And there was never an adequate response to that question. The fact was that Saddam Hussein had their support. King Hussein, who deserves and receives a great deal of respect and even admiration and who signed a peace treaty with Israel, supported Saddam Hussein during that war. It's probably true that he felt that he had no choice, that the attitude in the Jordanian street was such that, had he not given Saddam Hussein his support, his rule in Amman might have been in danger. Arafat was also on the wrong side of the Gulf War; he supported Saddam Hussein. Syrian President Assad, though on the right side of the fence, may not be very different from Saddam.

That's nothing new. It's pretty much the way the Middle East has always been. That's why it's probably a mistake for some in Washington to picture some of these dictators as benign leaders, who are very statesmanlike and very smart. In April 1990, a very senior American senator who had just come back from Baghdad came to Israel and said, "I've met with Saddam Hussein. There's nothing to be concerned about. This is a man you can do business with." I thought of that when President Clinton stood next to Assad in Damascus and held a press conference with him a few years ago. Why was it so important for the leader of the greatest democracy in the world to be going to see a man whose credentials are really not that good? A reporter asked Assad, "Why does Syria support terrorism?" And in the presence of President Clinton, Assad said, "We don't support terrorism. We have never supported terrorism, and there isn't a single example of Syrian support for terrorism." The reporter who asked the question wasn't given a chance to present Assad with the very long list of examples of Syrian support for terrorism and continuing support for terrorism.

Israel faces these kinds of security problems and its policy must be based on the possibility that these security problems may continue even after peace agreements have been signed. That's not the fault of the Palestinian population. They have their own agenda and their own objectives. But since they are negotiating with Israel, they also have to understand its concerns. After all, the prerequisite for an agreement is that each side understand the other. As long as the Palestinians do not understand Israel's concerns -- that the concerns go beyond the Palestinian entity or state and reach out all the way to Iran, Iraq, and Libya and that they have to take into consideration the fragility of autocratic regimes that exist in the Arab world -- the negotiations will not get very far. Understanding that means that the Palestinians will have to pay a certain price for Israel's aversion to taking large-scale risks upon itself.

Israel currently has three geographic areas of conflict. The first is on the Lebanese border. Although this may seem relatively minor and may not reach the top of the policy agenda (even of the Washington Institute), it is not minor to the people of Israel. There's a constant bloodletting going on in Lebanon. Israel is a small country where everybody knows everybody; losses of soldiers in Lebanon are tragedies that grip the souls and the hearts of everybody in Israel. Some in Israel recurrently suggest that it ought to retreat to the international border and then see what happens. But Hezbollah, which is carrying on the battle against the Israeli army, couldn't do it if the Syrians didn't allow them to. Nothing can happen in Lebanon without Syrian compliance. Lebanon is probably the only puppet state in the world today. It's a state in name only. It has all the facilities of a state: a UN ambassador, an ambassador in Washington, a president, a parliament, et cetera. But it's not an independent, sovereign country. The orders come from Damascus. Hezbollah couldn't operate if Hafez al-Assad in Damascus had not decided that it served his interests. And the people who provide the material, give the orders, and promote the ideology sit in Tehran. Their plans for Israel are not

limited to the Israel-Lebanon border. They say quite openly that they seek the destruction of the state of Israel. Velayati, the former foreign minister of Iran, said on more than one occasion that there will be peace in the Middle East only when Israel disappears. These are the people who give the orders to the Hezbollah, and it's pretty clear that if Israel withdraws from Lebanon, the battle will simply continue in the villages of northern Israel.

Remember that Israel already signed an agreement with Lebanon -- after very considerable effort by Secretary George Schulz who shuttled back and forth between Beirut and Jerusalem -- that provided for the withdrawal of Israeli forces from all of Lebanon. It was even ratified by the Lebanese parliament. But things in Lebanon are not like they are anywhere else. In Lebanon, the parliament votes first and then the cabinet has to ratify a treaty. The cabinet never ratified it, because Hafez al-Assad let Lebanese President Amin Gemayal know that he'd better not ratify that agreement. Amin Gemayal knew what was good for him because his brother Bashir had been assassinated sometime earlier, probably on orders from Damascus. So that agreement has never taken place. Israel has no ambitions in Lebanon. It would be happy to pull its forces out on condition that somebody will take the responsibility for making sure that there will be no further attacks against Israel from Lebanon.

Israel is not negotiating with the Syrians at the present time. The previous governments, under Mr. Peres and the late Mr. Rabin, had agreed, in effect, that Israel would be prepared to return the entire Golan Heights to the Syrians within the framework of a peace agreement. But that wasn't enough of a concession for Assad. It is not clear why he never took the opportunity. God Almighty must have been watching over the Jewish people, although they may not have deserved it. Now Assad demands that Israel declare its willingness to return the Golan Heights as a precondition for negotiations to start. The present Israeli government is not prepared to meet that precondition and rightly so. For many years, all important visitors to Israel were taken to the Golan Heights so they could see for themselves how important that area was to Israel's defense. At some point during the Rabin-Peres administrations, those visits were stopped. Strategically, Israel does not want to return to a situation where Syrian gunners are shooting down into the valley below from the Golan Heights. Given the nature of the regime in Syria, even if an agreement were signed, there would not be the certainty that that would not take place.

Israel is negotiating with the Palestinians within the framework of the Oslo accords. The Oslo accords were also a disservice to the Palestinians because they imposed Arafat on the Palestinian population in Judea, Samaria, and Gaza. The policy of the previous Likud government, and also of the national unity government in which both Mr. Peres and the late Mr. Rabin were members, was not to negotiate with the PLO, not only because it was a terrorist organization, but mainly because Arafat insisted, and insists to this day, that he does not speak only for the Palestinians living in Judea, Samaria, and Gaza, but also for what he calls the "Palestinian diaspora." He speaks for five million Palestinians and he demands their right of return, that those who left during the fighting of 1948, or their children or grandchildren, have the right to return to where they came from. That is why previous governments felt it would be a mistake of historic proportions to announce that Israel considered the man that claims to speak for the Palestinian diaspora, as well as the Palestinians living in the area, as the partner with whom negotiations should be held. Mr. Arafat has not stopped talking about the right of return. That's still on the agenda and its going to come back to haunt Israel.

Our position was that democratic elections, should be held amongst the Palestinian population in the area and that we should negotiate with the elected representatives, that our partners were the people who live with us in the area and not the descendants of people who left the area many generations ago. But that was not the position of the Labor government. It had been the position of Mr. Rabin. He somehow was inveigled into accepting the accords that were negotiated by people who weren't even representatives of the Israeli government, by people who had not been given a mandate in negotiations that were held in total secrecy, where even the Israeli cabinet had not been aware of what was happening. He was convinced that the agreements reached should be accepted, should be ratified. He went on

to the White House lawn, he shook Arafat's hand, and the agreements were brought to the Knesset for approval. Although, as you may know, in the very peculiar system that we have in Israel, with the absence of a constitution, international agreements do not need even the support of the Knesset. A government decision is sufficient. Mr. Begin set a precedent, at the time, in bringing the Camp David accords, for approval, to the Knesset. Mr. Rabin, quite rightly, followed that precedent and brought the Oslo agreements to the Knesset, as well.

Again, I should mention that the Oslo II agreement passed the Knesset with a one-vote majority. Now, that's a question in and of itself. What kind of majority do you need, in a democratic country, for an international agreement of such far-reaching importance to the future of the state? In the United States, an international agreement has to be ratified by a two-thirds majority in the Senate, if I'm not mistaken. Is a one-vote majority really enough? Is a majority in which there is not subsumed a majority of the Jewish members of the Knesset enough? I think one of the basic mistakes that was made by the Labor government is the lack of understanding that, for such far-reaching agreements, you need a wide consensus, you cannot force it through. If you do, you end up paying the price. And the Labor party ended up paying the price in the elections.

Netanyahu, elected as prime minister, was faced with a difficult choice: dump the agreement, or implement an agreement that he had opposed and that he felt was very dangerous for Israel. But he didn't dump the agreement and I think he was right in not doing so. I was of the opinion, as well, that once the agreement was signed, it was something Israel was committed to and had to implement. Now the question is, how do you implement this agreement? And there are, I would say, two basic strategies that could be followed. One is to reconcile ourselves to the fact that we are moving back to the borders that existed prior to the Six Day War. That is what Arafat claims. I think that is what Arafat expected from the Labor government. I don't know that he would be able to settle for anything less than that. The feeling amongst much of Israel's population was that Mr. Peres was heading directly toward that goal, back to the '67 borders.

The other alternative is, in the implementation of the agreement, to try to make sure that Israel maintains control over areas that we consider to be important to us, strategically. We're talking about areas that lie on the municipal boundaries of Israel's major cities. These are not far-off areas; this is right in the heart and guts of Israel. It's right in Jerusalem. It's right on the border of Petah Tikva. And really, this is what the argument is all about and what the dilemma is all about. I heard people talking here about a state or an entity, autonomy plus or a state minus. The question really is, what areas will be under the control of Mr. Arafat and his people, and what areas will remain under the control of the state of Israel? In the view of many in Israel, certainly in the view of the Likud and the present government, just retaining control over the areas up to the borders prior to the Six-Day War is not sufficient. Withdrawal from the heights of Samaria, withdrawal from the Jordan Valley, the border that runs parallel to Israel's coastline and gives us a strategic depth, if you can call it that, of seven miles or so, that does not assure the security of the state of Israel.

That's what the settlement issue is all about. By the way, I was surprised to read the notice -- I don't know who authored it, whether it's the State Department or the CIA -- about a quarter of the houses in the settlement not being occupied. That's just nonsense. The increase in the number of people living in the settlements -- and actually, the big settlements are really towns not settlements in the ordinary sense of the word -- that's all about who's going to be in charge of what areas. Maale Adumim, the largest settlement, is a town. It's a town today of over 20,000 people. It's growing rapidly in the direction of 30,000 to 35,000 people. That's Israel's assurance that we will continue to have contiguous access to the Jordan Valley and to the Dead Sea. If Maale Adumim were to be removed -- maybe some people would like to see it removed -- that would then mean that Israel would lose control over that area and that the border would run right on Jerusalem's municipal border, or maybe even within Jerusalem, if Arafat's claims were to be respected. Ariel in Samaria, the second largest town, a town of close to 20,000 people today, is the assurance that

Israel will have control over at least some of the heights of the Samarian mountain range. Ariel and the settlements leading up to it: Al-Kana and Alfe Menashe, and Emanuel. That's what the settlement issue is all about. You can use euphemisms. You can say they are legal or they are not legal. This is a question of Israeli security.

Now, if it's going to go that way, it means that Palestinian control will be over areas not insignificant in size, in terms of the size of the whole country which is like a pin on the map, but they will not be contiguous. They will not be geographically contiguous as Gaza, in which Arafat rules, is not contiguous with the city of Nablus, the city of Bethlehem, the city of Hebron. That may be a difficult pill to swallow. It may, to many, be unacceptable. But if you understand Israel's security concerns, then you understand that this is part of the reality. The reality may change, in time. We may see democracy come to the Arab world.

I was very impressed by Ziyad Abu Amr and I was impressed by the elections that were held when that legislature was elected, maybe the most democratic elections ever held in any Arab country. These elections would probably not pass the requirements that you would pose here in the United States or we would pose in Israel, but they are probably more democratic than anything that we've seen before. It may be a sign of the direction in which things are going. It may even be, if we think positively, that Israel is playing a role and that the Palestinians, even though they didn't like what they call Israeli occupation, have lived with Israel ever since 1967, have seen a democracy at work, have seen the free press, and have seen free television, and that they want that also. They don't want a corrupt dictatorship. So maybe things are moving in that direction, but in the long run. But, King said, in the long run, we're all dead. And that's certainly true, but we're talking about the long run of nations, and nations are not dead in the long run.

I heard Ambassador Pelletreau say this morning that it was going to take many, many years for the Arab-Israeli conflict to be resolved, and I think that's true. He also said -- or maybe it was Sisco -- that the peace process didn't start at Oslo, and it didn't start in Madrid, it started back in 1948. Certainly, the next step was going to be a negotiation for a peaceful settlement, for agreements of peace. And we've made great progress. We have an agreement with Egypt. We have an agreement with Jordan. We have a temporary agreement with the Palestinians. We're moving in the right direction but I think it is important to remember that the precondition for this movement, and a very difficult one it is, is the perception in the Arab world that Israel cannot be beaten on the battlefield. If you change that perception, even if it turns out to be a misperception, that's the end of the peace process.

We've paid a tremendous price in order to establish that perception. Every year, on the day before Independence Day -- very unusual -- we commemorate the fallen 18,000 men and women who died for Israel's security, for Israel's independence. You go to the military cemeteries on that day and you see tens of thousands of people streaming to the graves of their sons, of their husbands, their brothers, and you see that Israel is a bereaved nation. We've paid a tremendous price in order to assure our security, and we certainly cannot lightly give up the conditions for maintaining that security.

If I can end on an optimistic note, I think we're moving in the right direction. We should not expect peace now. It's a misnomer to begin with. This cannot be done in an instant manner. It's a process; it's got its ups and downs. I think we're moving in the right direction. Israel has to continue to be strong if we're going to maintain that momentum. And part of Israel's strength -- a very important part of Israel's strength -- is the U.S.-Israeli relationship.

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