Keynote Address

Oct 18, 1996

In-Depth Reports

The Middle East is not more dangerous today than it was in 1992; it may be as hectic, but it is not more dangerous. The question is where to go from here with the Oslo agreement in order to achieve full and lasting peace.

Everything that has happened in the Middle East since the late President Sadat of Egypt decided to come to Jerusalem in 1977 -- thereby giving proof to the Arab world that meeting openly with Israelis will not cause the sky to fall -- can ultimately be traced to this initial visit. And nothing could have been nicer -- and more risky and dangerous, but also more brilliant -- than to come to the Knesset in Jerusalem. This visit began a process that ultimately resulted in a peace that has persisted, despite changing circumstances, for years.

Indeed, the impact of that great voyage slowly penetrated, drop by drop, ultimately bringing about the 1991 Madrid peace conference. At Madrid, for the first time ever, a Syrian official -- the minister of foreign affairs -- and the prime minister of Israel sat together at the same table. Much later, the Israeli and Syrian ambassadors to the United States met here for the first time. Syria will not admit it, but these developments were the ultimate result of Sadat's visit to Jerusalem. Some Arab leaders who warned Sadat of the death sentence that ultimately befell him realized much later that they have no choice but peace.

In 1996, a new political majority emerged in Israel in free and democratic elections, and it is not what might be called an "Oslo majority." To be precise, it resembles more of a "Camp David majority": it supports peace -- yes, absolutely -- but a different kind of peace, with more security and less dreaming about a "new Middle East." Dreams are not negative; they are allowed even in politics, but they sometimes blur realities. Perhaps this majority wants a little more of the old Middle East, but it nevertheless wants peace.

The main difference between Camp David and Oslo is obvious. Camp David had a different goal: Egypt. The Palestinian issue was important but second in priority. And within the framework of the Palestinian issue and the proposed solution to it, the emphasis was on Jordan, not the PLO. In Oslo, it was the opposite way around: Jordan was out, and the PLO is in.

This difference is not easy to get used to or accommodate. The new electoral majority means a different national will, a different government, and a different administration, but the same reality persists: the Palestinian partner -- Arafat and the PLO, whether one likes it or not. Let's not delude ourselves. The general direction, orientation, and historic dimensions of the peace process remain the same under the new government, and there is no alternative.

The Likud realized this before last year's elections. It was not very open about it, but those who read its allusions, discussions, and internal arguments carefully could discern -- sometimes even clearly -- where it was heading. When, for example, some members of the Likud declared even before the elections that the new reality created by an elected Israeli government in Oslo could not be changed and that the party ought to take this into consideration, it should have been understood.

The main apprehension of the majority of Israelis today is that, by recognizing Arafat, Israel has not only recognized

the PLO but also the 1948 conflict -- not just the 1967 conflict. Camp David was designed to solve the 1967 conflict, not the 1948 conflict. Going back to 1948 means facing problems (such as the refugee issue) that will have to be solved, but perhaps a little too early. Not to belittle the issue; it is a human, political, emotional, and national tragedy -- the plight of human misery being used as a political tool in a terrible way. In 1967 there was a refugee problem, and Camp David dealt with it.

Security and Peace The issue of security often evokes surprise, wonder, and questions, especially on the part of our Palestinian, Egyptian, and even Jordanian partners. They say, "Israel is so powerful and strong, why is it are afraid of us? Why stress security all the time? Isn't it just a pretext?" To explain this would require a lecture on Jewish history, the way the Arab intelligentsia view and depict Jewish history, and all of the complexes that are so characteristic of Jews around the world -- including those in Israel -- and that are products of their history.

Suffice it to say that there is more to security than a strong air force, infantry divisions, and a certain number of artillery pieces. The best example is the political and material results that children throwing stones -- and being shown on television -- produced against the mighty Israeli army. More recently, the threat of a new intifada and the use of rifles and machine guns by the Palestinian police against the IDF had similar international repercussions. In these kinds of confrontations, who is weak and who strong? Where does this dimension of security intervene?

When Israelis speak of security, they mean security and peace. For there is no security without peace and no peace without security. Security means more than physical separation; it means the ability to live together -- some kind of cohabitation or modus vivendi between Jews and Arabs in the Middle East. This is what Israel aspires to achieve.

Yet Israel has not been given the opportunity to achieve the sense of security that comes from being integrated into the region. Seventeen years after having signed a peace treaty with Egypt, Israel still does not enjoy normal relations with a country that it has come to know, admire, and sometimes even like. It is rare to hear an Israeli say that he considers Egypt an enemy or even an adversary. Yet Egypt has not given Israel the chance to begin integrating into the Middle East, or the feeling of belonging and acceptance that peace and full withdrawal from Sinai -- Israel's most supreme concession ever -- should have made possible.

Security has national, emotional, and social components as well as military ones. Having been Israel's ambassador to Egypt sixteen years ago, I know that in the beginning Israelis didn't trust the Egyptians. They learned to do so over time, and today they do. Peace doesn't mean that Arabs and Israelis must start fraternizing -- though there is no reason why that is impossible -- but can they not at least call themselves the sons of Abraham and behave like brothers?

Oslo, and the general Palestinian-Israeli attempt to "mend fences," has been trying to create a process that will ultimately lead to some kind of modus vivendi between the two peoples too quickly. (Though I represent Israel in the United States, I am not absolutely certain that this represents the policy of the Israeli government.) An old Bedouin proverb says, "Haste comes from the Devil." In diplomacy, haste and urgency do not always yield good results. The Oslo process began three years ago, and the agreements require that the whole process be concluded three years from now.

The first item that must be dealt with in the final status negotiations is Jerusalem. The second is refugees -- not the 1967 refugees, but the 1948 refugees who are scattered all over the Arab world: in Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, and elsewhere. The third is settlements, the fourth is security arrangements, the fifth is boundaries, and the sixth is relations with other nations. Some people believe that Israel has no choice but to reach a solution on these issues with the Palestinians -- with the Palestinian Authority as its partner. I am not absolutely certain that Israelis are ready to negotiate a solution that would not only pass a vote in the Knesset, but that they could also live with. A lot has happened in three years, but not enough.

Do the Palestinians believe they are ready to discuss all these issues, a formula for understanding and agreement, and reach a solution with Israel? If they are certain they are ready, let them say it. And if they are ready, it is difficult to understand why three years after the Oslo process began Mr. Arafat continues to make statements such as the one he made in the Balata refugee camp in Nablus: "I do not have a magic wand, but I do have the children of the uprising. Each and every one of you should have twelve children -- two for yourself, and ten for me."

Similarly, the mufti of Jerusalem (who was nominated by Arafat) called on Allah to "destroy America, its allies and its agents, and cover the White House in black. Bring security to our land and release us from misery. Sanction whoever unites all Muslims and follows the way of Salah Addin." Hopefully, statements like these are efforts merely to get better results in the negotiations.

When President Sadat came to Jerusalem, he declared that there would be no more wars after the Yom Kippur War. This was a commitment -- things may get tough and difficult, but no matter what happens, there would be no more war. Prime Minister Begin's response was: "no more war, no more bloodshed," and thus both sides made a commitment not to use force.

The negotiating process is sometimes stubborn, tough, and hard, as in the case with Hebron. Israel is going to withdraw from Hebron, a city with a place in Jewish history (unlike Nablus or Ramallah). The only thing it seeks to assure is the security of the city's Jewish inhabitants. It will be difficult, but Israel will withdraw, and it will not threaten to use force to resolve any of the remaining issues. One cannot seek peace by threatening violence, because that is blackmail.

If both sides really want a to reach a modus vivendi, to be able to live together peace, to achieve peace -- there should be no more strong language in the current negotiations. Hebron is a test case, and the new Israeli government will treat it as such. It will satisfy Palestinian aspirations, but not necessarily all aspirations, in exactly the way the Palestinians want, and within three years. Both sides, Palestinians and Israelis, will have to be satisfied with less than they had hoped to achieve. But together, they will ultimately be able to achieve peace.

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