

# Israel and the Peace Process:

## View from the Opposition

Sep 20, 1996



### Brief Analysis

**T**he new Israeli government inherited from the Labor party a timetable for the completion of final status negotiations by the summer of 1999. The Labor government also developed the principle of an Israeli-Palestinian agreement based on some form of separation and partition of Eretz Yisrael into two distinct political entities. According to Labor's vision of a final settlement, Palestinian and Israeli entities would be characterized by political separation and economic cooperation.

#### Prospects for Peace under Likud

With the end of the Likud government's first 100 days, there is clear cause for alarm concerning the present and future status of the peace process. If the Palestinian leadership and population believes that the government will not only ignore the timetable for negotiations agreed upon under Labor, but that the Oslo B agreement will become a permanent arrangement, then the Palestinian response will inevitably be one of frustration, rage, and despair. Furthermore, the situation could become characterized by a state of turbulence in which the leadership of Yasser Arafat is weakened and a radical new Palestinian leadership begins to emerge. This scenario is becoming more likely.

Despite this bleak forecast and the deep rift in the political philosophies of the Labor and Likud parties, the present government still has the opportunity to prevent the deterioration of the peace process and still operate within its own ideological constraints. Doing so requires three different policies: 1) effective Israeli-Palestinian cooperation against terrorism; 2) tangible improvement in the economic situation of the West Bank, and especially the Gaza Strip; and 3) containment of Israeli settlements in the West Bank. (This policy of containment does not mean a total freeze of the settlements. Rather, it includes meeting the security, social, economic, and community needs of the current settler population without building new settlements or building new neighborhoods in existing ones.) These three conditions must be met concurrently in order to maintain the status quo and prevent the deterioration the peace process.

The Labor Party perceives the expansion of settlements as posing the greatest threat to the peace process. If the present government's policy on-the-ground is to break the territorial continuity of Palestinian urban centers on the West Bank by building new settlements and new roads, thus erasing any prospects for some form of Palestinian sovereignty, then the Palestinians will draw their own conclusions, leading to a destabilization of the entire region. The Bosniaization of the West Bank must be prevented; Labor will openly oppose any such efforts through all democratic means available to the party.

Not everything done by Binyamin Netanyahu deserves criticism—after all, the prime minister has improved the Palestinians' economic situation by granting more work permits to the residents of Gaza and the West Bank. However, Netanyahu's tactic of humiliating Yasser Arafat personally by refusing (until recently) to meet him only erodes Arafat's position and hurts the overall Israeli-Palestinian relationship. In addition, Netanyahu's policy of

lifting the freeze on settlements in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip has further inflamed the atmosphere in the region.

#### America's Role

The Israeli-Palestinian peace process has succeeded in building a new Middle Eastern political configuration that has been and will continue to be vital to protecting U.S. national interests in the region. In the past, the Middle East was defined by Arabs vs. Israel; today, the new demarcation line divides moderates from radicals. At the core of this new political configuration are Egypt, Jordan, Israel, and the Palestinian Authority; the peripheral ring consists of the Gulf States and the Maghreb countries. Three months ago, Turkey clearly would have been a part of this group, however, the election of Necmettin Erbakan has brought into question Turkish intentions.

The Middle East's pro-Western countries are committed to three basic principles: 1) strong relations with the United States; 2) success of the peace process; and 3) rejection of Islamist extremism. While the continuity of this new configuration rests upon the future of the peace process, the failure of this process will inevitably result in America's inability to secure its interests in the region. Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that there is a linkage between progress in the peace process and Washington's ability to develop an anti-Iraq coalition in the Persian Gulf.

#### The Syrian Track

Despite the apparently unbridgeable gaps Israel faces with the Syrians, the Labor government was committed to keeping the door open for negotiations with Damascus. This policy prevented a precipitous decline in Israeli-Syrian relations. Yitzhak Rabin provided incentives for the Syrians to sit down at the peace table by offering broad territorial concessions. However, despite current speculation to the contrary, Rabin never gave any verbal or written commitment that Israel was willing to withdraw to the June 4, 1967 borders. Any Israeli pullback to an unspecified line was predicated on a series of conditions that Syria was unwilling to fulfill.

The present government's commitment to Israeli sovereignty over the entire Golan Heights is too tough of an opening position and will ensure there will be no negotiations with Damascus. No one objects to tough opening positions in negotiations however, Likud's demands go beyond tough and are simply counterproductive. It is difficult to imagine that there will be progress on the Syrian peace track in the coming months. It is worth remembering that most Middle East wars began due to attempts by an Arab country to break stalemates similar to the one that exists now between Israel and Syria.

Lebanon First is not a viable starting point for peace with Beirut and Damascus. According to this stupid idea, Israel would relinquish its only strategic asset in Lebanon without receiving any strategic or diplomatic benefits.

Considering the amount of blood, time and money expended by Israel in setting up the zone, Israel should not be so quick to give up the buffer area. The best possible result from such an Israeli withdrawal would be a short period of relative tranquility in northern Israel. However, Hizbullah, an Iranian proxy, would continue to build up its military strength. Instead, Israel must use the security zone in southern Lebanon as a bargaining chip in future negotiations with the Syrians.

In the case of Lebanon, Likud must continue with the general policies of previous governments, which have been more or less the same for more than twenty years. Lebanon is not a truly sovereign state; in that circumstance, it is essentially a no-man's land that has become a staging ground for terrorist organizations. Israel has no choice but to fight. Peace with Lebanon is contingent on peace with Syria.

#### The Labor Party's Loss

The Labor party received only 45 percent of the Jewish vote in the last election: this was the party's most crucial problem. In order to lead the country again, Labor must gain the support of the majority of Israeli Jews. Three groups

that the Labor party ostracized during the recent election were the traditional Jews (who are somewhat observant but not ultra-orthodox), Soviet immigrants, and blue collar workers in development towns and poor city neighborhoods. Also, Labor was too closely associated with Meretz and especially its more radical, anti-religious elements. In order to regain Jewish support, the Labor Party must reposition itself at the center of the Israeli political spectrum, show more respect for the Jewish religion and tradition, and address problems faced by Soviet immigrants.

◆ This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Rachel Rittberg.

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