

Building Peace:

The Israel-PLO Breakthrough (Part I)

Oct 15, 1993



In-Depth Reports

Today, one can observe four major structural changes in our conflict with the Palestinians—a conflict that is moving towards resolution—and in the region as a whole.

The first is that Palestinians and Israelis, through the breakthrough, are moving away from ideology and towards pragmatism in their relationship. This chiefly happened not in the Declaration of Principles but in what I believe is the more important though less discussed agreement; the agreement on mutual recognition.

It was perhaps symptomatic that the negotiations over mutual recognition, which were far briefer, were much more difficult to achieve than were the agreements on Gaza and Jericho, which were of technical nature.

To me, the breakthrough occurred at the very first meeting with the PLO representative on May 21st, in Oslo, because I felt, at that moment, that something had died, that the existential antagonism had passed. It is a rare conflict where the sides don't talk to each other, don't recognize each other.

Something in urgent need of clarification was the precise nature of the Palestinian threat to Israel. When in Oslo, we would raise the security questions, our Palestinian counterparts would speak about Israel's tremendous military strength vis-a-vis the relative weakness of the Palestinians, and ask why this was conceived as a threat?

The answer is that it was ultimately an ideological challenge, that the former Palestinian position challenged the very being of Israel in the region ideologically, emotionally, culturally, and, therefore, became the ideological spearhead of Arab rejectionism of Israel. From a Palestinian point of view, Israel became the wall to any progress towards a life in freedom unbounded by foreign rule.

The fact that we decided to move away from these two entrenched perceptions of antagonism and challenges to one another's very existence has not only shifted this conflict, this relationship, into a new mode of pacification but also changed the very nature of the conflict, hopefully forever, from an existential, ideological struggle, to a pragmatic relationship in which we have some identical interests and some that are not always compatible.

Once the conflict is seen in these terms, it is a matter of negotiations, work, building trust, breaking mistrust, and creativity. But it is not a challenge to the very freedom of each nation.

To be sure, our interests are not identical. The PLO has not joined the Zionist movement and Israel has not joined the PLO. One should not go overboard. Conceptually, however, the DOP is a document that represents a new idea of the mutuality of interest between Palestinians and Israelis.

Where their interests and our interests are compatible, we must work together on three basic items: Israeli withdrawal from Gaza and Jericho, a later re-deployment in the rest of the West Bank, and finally a withdrawal that will hopefully benefit both sides and be seen as such by Israeli and Palestinian public opinion.

For the Palestinians, obviously, this marks the end of occupation. For us, it means relieving a major burden not only practically, politically, and internationally, but also morally. As we see it, we were forced into this occupation, but

we did not emotionally live in harmony with our basic values as we haveÿ run the lives of another people against their own will.

Under the agreement, Israel will be in charge of external security, security for Israelis, and security for the settlements. This was paramount in our instructions from Prime Minister Rabin throughout the negotiations, not to budge on these three fundamental issues, and it was well taken and understood by the PLO.

We must begin a gradual process of cooperation, mainly on economics. It is clear to the Palestinians as it is clear to us that economically, the future border between us, to a large degree, is artificial. If we will not be able to develop economic growth and prosperity, this peace will not hold, because euphoria can hold only so long; charisma and a flag can carry you only so long.ÿ You cannot have any of the three for breakfast.

This new emphasis on economics reflects a regional shift—from ideology to pragmatism.

There is also a shift in the power balance in the region, resulting from the demise of the Soviet Union as a super power and the repercussions of the Gulf War.

Today, the balance of power yields an interesting picture: on one side are the United States, Israel, Egypt, and the PLO, not necessarily allies but more or less moving in tandem towards shared goals. A middle group is shifting in our direction: Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia, and hopefully the Persian Gulf. Syria is still looking for its own identity in this, for the first time somewhat confused

Finally, the quarter of opposition and threat—the fundamentalists, Iran, Iraq and Libya—who acting by themselves and their allies, have every interest to jeopardize this new coalition of reason in the Middle East.

The more this balance will tip in the right direction, politically and economically, the more will the very powerful forces of extremism, rejectionism and fundamentalism be isolated.

Another change relates to the perceptions of threat and opportunity.ÿ Previously, regional threats were perceived as, crudely put, an Arab threat to Israel and an Israeli threat to the Arabs.

Today, the common threat to the region comes from the forces of yesterday, trying to exploit hunger, poverty, misery, unemployment, and, in the case of fundamentalism, trying to provide answers not of this world but the next world.ÿ While fundamentalism is not a homogeneous movement, and while the forces against fundamentalism are not a homogeneous movement, the latter are nonetheless threatened by the former.

This has significantly changed,ÿ I believe, the view many Arab leaders have of their own leadership, their own countries, their own constituencies, and of Israel.

Previously, we used to say that Israel would be a wall against the spread of Arab fundamentalism, in coalition with the Arabs.ÿ Personally, I do not think that was ever quite the case because Israel, in the mind of those pragmatic Arabs, was seen as an irritant vis-à-vis the fundamentalists.

Today this has changed and it is clear to all the regimes in the region, democratic or not, that the only chance to stand up against fundamentalism and defeat it, whatever its root causes—and they are not all just economic and social, but ideological and religious as well—lies in changing the standard of living and the quality of life, and that the chance for economic development in the evolving world lie exclusively in peace and stability.

Without peace and stability in the region, there will be no economic development; no countries, companies, or industry will invest in a volatile Middle East. This is where the opportunity for change lies. Regimes understand this partly because their own constituencies sense opportunities thanks to television. Like the people of Eastern Europe, people in the Middle East sense that there is another world out there that offers economic growth and that they must join.

Anybody who believes in the fast transformation of Middle Eastern economies fails to understand the pathologies of the Middle East's current economic structure. Any chance we have for development must be based on peace and stability. Without it, we cannot compete in the race that is going on in this world between Asia, Latin America, and Eastern Europe for international investment. This is where the opportunity lies.

A great deal is happening on the multilateral track. Fifteen Arab countries, the PLO and Israel, are meeting in Beijing to discuss water issues. While the Middle East has an abundance of oil, in terms of Israel's own natural resources, we are confined to milk and honey.

But none of us have water. You can neither bathe yourself nor irrigate with milk and honey. In other words, what the multilateral track is doing, and what is a necessity to make a success story in the Middle East, is to start developing a regional interest and not simply look at the much narrower national interest.

One other element of change is that we have both moved from rhetoric to action. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, like every conflict, is in thrall to the magic of the word. We and the PLO spent years characterizing and demonizing each other. Now we don't know what to do with these libraries full of outdated material.

(When we came to Paris for the talks on mutual recognition, our colleagues from the PLO could not find an English copy of the Palestinian Charter. So I called Jerusalem, where we had about 15,000 of these booklets and had one shipped.)

We have woken up from the fascination of words. Just look at the many subcommittees created in the wake of Oslo. On economic issues alone, we have a subcommittee in Taba on economic affairs to the Palestinian-Israeli economic cooperation committee, the multilateral regional economic development group, and the economic ad hoc group in Paris with the World Bank on the development of the territories to name a few.

In other words, we are working, and we have a strong sense that we affect our own fate. That, too, is a tremendously profound change.

In conclusion, we have to implement the agreement in letter and spirit. The agreement is only a document its implementation is critical. We have to prove, to our own people and to the rest of the region, that we will implement the agreement to the iota.

The Syrians at this point have missed the train. Assad always believes he can do things according to his own timing. Yet his timing is not necessarily that of the rest of the region. Now, if Assad wants to board that train, there is a clear price to the ticket: acceptance of the new ground rules set by the PLO and Israel. We are moving towards peace, reconciliation, and economic cooperation. We are not interested in a stack of documents on normalization with Syria in order to enrich our archives. Syria must be a full-fledged partner in the new, evolving Middle East, and a partner to the multilateral effort in terms of regional economic development.

All of this is not a favor to us; neither are we doing a favor to them. We are all doing a favor to ourselves and to our next generations, because there are only two directions the Middle East can take: backward towards a catastrophic, almost doomsday scenario of deterioration and military confrontations; or forward on an admittedly difficult road, but one headed in the right direction. Toward this end we have to move increasingly towards integration of the multilateral and the bilateral efforts.

Israel, like much of Jewish life, has always had a deep sense of fatalism.

The point to our current endeavor is to create a self-interest on both sides that will make peaceful co-existence attractive, that will end terror, create stability, foster economic development, and gradually move towards permanent status negotiations.

In Oslo, we defined, or rather discovered, a mutual interest—moving away from a past sense of fatalism to a much

healthier sense of activism for a better future.

Hassan Abdel Rahman addressed the conference on this same topic. [Read his remarks. \(templateC07.php?CID=220\)](#) ❖

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