

Israel, the U.S. and the Future of the Region

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Sep 1, 1992

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Shimon Peres was a leading Israeli statesman and Nobel laureate whose political career spanned seven decades and included service as president, prime minister, defense minister, and foreign minister of the State of Israel.



In-Depth Reports

Formerly, in the Middle East, many countries used to earn their living from the conflict between the two superpowers; first, between the French and the British, and later on between the United States and the Soviet Union. As a result of this conflict, many countries got aid, financial, political, and military; at the same time the conflict of the superpowers brought the two major countries to take advantage of the conflicts which exist in the Middle East.

And, alas, the Middle East today is an orphan; there is no larger conflict that we can work to our advantage. We have to look to ourselves, with the help and the guidance of the United States, to make the best in a world which is tired of conflicts.

The present peace negotiations were created to a large degree by the American administration, I must say, and per the requests of the previous Israeli government. Some of us didn't like the basic structure of a double track, one bilateral and the other multilateral. But this is a fact of life, an existing situation, and we have to follow suit. So when we took over, we simply took the two tracks as they are and made them reasonable, as we should.

New Government's Changes in the Peace Talks

Approaching the bilateral negotiations, the present government has introduced the following changes: First, we brought an end to the momentum of adding settlements in the West Bank and Gaza. I know that many people were intrigued by the definition or distinction between security settlements and political settlements, but they didn't pay attention to another set of distinctions and that is our national priorities. We have said, yes, there are political settlements and there are security settlements, but our money is not going to go towards settlements anymore, so what does it matter? We have channeled the money from settlements to social priorities; namely, absorption and fighting unemployment.

And this political/security distinction, in fact, became highly theoretical. Aside from the completion of houses that were already in the process of construction, which legally cannot be stopped, we do not intend to have new initiatives either in a large construction plan or adding settlements in the territories.

The second change we have introduced is offering the Palestinians to hold a national or territorial election and elect

the body that will administer the interim self-governing authority. The previous government suggested municipal elections. But we said that instead of municipal elections, it is preferable to straightaway elect the body that will administer the lives of the Palestinians under the interim self-government.

The third change we have introduced is in the nature of the negotiation itself. We have abandoned the triviality and gone directly to the heart of the issue. No longer do we argue about the venue of the negotiations. It can be in Rome; it can be in Washington; it can be in Istanbul or Cairo. We do not want to waste much time or attention in creating or finding reasons why they should be, say, in Washington and not in Rome, or vice-versa.

In addition, we suggested to start the negotiations immediately and have them continuously so they can go on without the interruptions that have endangered the negotiations thus far.

We have also introduced two other changes in our attitude toward the composition of the Arab delegation. We oppose, as did the previous government, having PLO members in the delegation, but we are not going to investigate with whom the delegation consults. Then, too, when it came to the multinational, multilateral groups, we did not exclude non-West Bank Palestinians, provided that they wouldn't be members of the PLO, that they wouldn't come from East Jerusalem, and that they wouldn't raise the issue of the right of return.

With these five major changes and some confidence-building measures, like releasing prisoners, reversing the expulsion orders of eleven Palestinians, and some other good will measures, we approached the negotiations with the hope that we can "sail in a better air with more wind in our sails."

Assessment of the Palestinian Side

The Palestinians have yet to learn what we found out a long time ago, and that is when you negotiate the way we do, the problem is not only to convince the other party but to convince your own people. It is not just a negotiation between two parties; it is also a negotiation with the party that was left back home, with your own audience.

And, occasionally, it is more difficult to convince your own people than to convince the other side. Everybody is very watchful that you will not make an undue compromise, that you will not appear to be giving too much away. And every evening you have to give an account back home -- what you were doing, how you were doing, how much you were compromising your own position.

I think this is the weakest point, if I may say so, on the Palestinian side. They can be tougher and stronger with us, but they can hardly afford a tough and strong position back home. They are not a country; they are not a movement. They don't have a coherent leadership. And while we can understand the Palestinian position, we are worried about the Palestinians' internal make-up: how strong a party are they to make the necessary compromises, as we will, in order to proceed logically to an agreement?

Occasionally, we can feel an intrusion of unreasonable skirmishes within their own party that endanger the whole negotiation. It happened yesterday, when they announced that the issues they want to raise on the agenda are Jerusalem and the territorial meaning of the autonomy. This really endangers the very foundation of the negotiations. What we are saying is clear. We say, wherever there is a Palestinian, in the West Bank or Gaza, there will be autonomy.

But they must understand that the difference between independence and autonomy is not just the degree of independence -- autonomy carries a degree of unclarity. The idea of autonomy is that of a trial period and it deliberately has a very important degree of ambiguity in it. If you try to clarify everything right now, things will be clear but without any hope. And maybe we need this bridging period to get over the clear disagreements by introducing an unclear bridge.

And in order to build this bridge, we have to have a little bit of a creative ambiguity on both sides so we shall be able

to reach the other side.

I believe that the Palestinians do not appreciate enough that, in the end, the party to take the risks is not their party but our party. They are not endangering anything they have; whereas, we do endanger a rather controlled situation, and we are entering into an unknown phase. So we are worried, as I have said, not just about the Palestinian position, but by the Palestinian strengths in the way of leadership and reason. If they won't understand this, we shall not have an agreement.

When I was a very young man, the age of 15 or so, I sat in the car of a man that I admired greatly, our mentor, David Ben-Gurion. He was a legend, and I was an unknown boy.

He gave me a ride from Tel Aviv to Haifa which at that time took two hours. I was very excited. But to my great disappointment, the moment I entered the car, Ben-Gurion turned his back, and fell into his own thoughts without paying the slightest attention to me. Only when we came near Haifa, all of a sudden he turned to me, and said, 'You know, Trotsky was never a great statesman.' How Trotsky entered the car at the end of our trip, I don't know.

But I was interested in talking to him, so I asked why. He said, "What sort of a policy was it, to have no peace and no war? This is a Jewish invention." He said, 'We must decide, either war and take the risk, or peace and pay the price. There is no war without a risk; there is no peace without a price.' And he said, "Lenin was intellectually inferior to Trotsky, but he became the leader of Russia because he was ready to pay the cost of the peace."

In my judgment, this is the major issue concerning the Palestinians. And, after all, the cost of peace is heavier on our shoulders than on theirs.

I hope that we shall be patient enough. We have told the Palestinians that we mean business; we are ready to implement the autonomy in a matter of nine to twelve months. We have suggested that we shall compose some subcommittees to deal with the issues. We shall allow three to four months for the subcommittees to prepare the ground, and we shall have another nine or ten months to implement autonomy.

At times in these negotiations, we can see the introduction of a foreign ego in this rather delicate situation, more to show leadership than demonstrate reason. And, as far as we are concerned, this may be our major war.

Facing a Changing World

But, as I have said, we are dealing on two tracks. The second track of the peace process is the multilateral track. If the first track is dealing primarily with the conflicts of the past, this second track must deal with the problems of the future. Because nowadays any nation or country faces, not only the problems that stem from her neighbors, but the problems arising from deep changes in the world economy and geopolitics.

As a matter of fact, the demands of new developments and modern processes are greater and more demanding than demands that stem from relations with other countries. Technology and science today may pose a greater challenge than diplomacy and strategy. As we cannot run away from one, we surely shouldn't escape the other.

The U.S. provides an instructive historical example. For many years, historically speaking, America was hardly enchanted by territory and basically committed to democracy. America participated in many wars. All the wars that she has participated in ended in her victory, yet never did the United States keep a piece of territory for herself; rather the U.S. always tried to change a situation.

Wherever the Russians and the Americans met during the Cold War, the Russians came with a map, and the Americans with points -- the ten points of Wilson, the four points of Truman -- because the idea was always to create a new reality. Basically, it was the right approach, and for that reason the U.S. today is the country that has won the most important ideological conflict of the twentieth century.

I must say that, while in Russia, I was depressed, as are most Russians. I also heard a sound judgment; namely that the future of Russia is no longer dependent upon the sympathies of foreign nations nor on the military-industrial complex which is at the lowest point. In Leningrad, the union secretary told me there are three and a half million workers there, 70 percent of them engaged in the military industries, and gradually becoming unemployed. After decades of Soviet expansionism, they are looking for a different Russia rather than for a different world.

Events are moving faster and are more telling than either we can grasp or react to them. In the Middle East we can see already that missiles arrived before we had a regional policy for dealing with them. A national policy alone is not sufficient.

If not for the Gulf War, Iraq would probably have had nuclear bombs by now. And even now, when the installations of the nuclear capacity of Iraq were destroyed, there are still 15,000 Iraqis keying on nuclear technologies and science, and this remains a problem.

Furthermore, most of us feel very strongly that not only can we hardly differentiate between national security and regional security, we can hardly discern where regional security ends and where local risks begin. Missiles and unconventional arms are not ultimately a national problem, not even a regional problem, but a global problem. And the involvement required to face those new challenges is global and regional and national at the same time.

Since missiles don't respect borders, and since unconventional weapons do not negotiate with fronts, today we can strike at the heart of population centers without paying any respect to borders or any consideration to military fronts. You cannot have a security plan whose range is shorter than the range of the missiles. The range of your security must equal the range of your dangers. And we have to provide our people with an answer; and not only we, but the Arabs as well.

We feel very strongly that the world is going to reorganize itself, away from nations, and toward regional groupings, and those regions in a larger global concept. And we feel very strongly, I at least feel very strongly, that even if we solve the disputes of the past -- between us and the Palestinians, which is a national dispute, between us and the Syrians, which is a territorial dispute, between us and the Lebanese, which is a functional dispute -- we have not thus answered the new dangers or the new promises.

We cannot conduct an economic life which is limited to our geographic frontiers. There is no room anymore for a national fortress economy. A modern economy is wide open, and so are all the components of that economy. For instance, in the Middle East, water is scarcer than land.

We cannot solve the water problem just in national borders. In a sense, the water problem is very simple. There are two factors that are changing while one factor remains stable. The territorial factor is stable, while the number of people is increasing and the amount of water is decreasing. Egypt, at the beginning of this century, was a country of six million; today its population is fifty-six million. Yet, the Nile did not become ten times richer.

The same goes for us in Israel and for the Jordanians as well. Jordan is now in a desperate situation, because of the arrival of 300,000 refugees from Kuwait. And the water situation in Amman, as described to our people, is catastrophic.

Now, water does not have a political nature. Rains don't go through customs, rivers don't follow the frontiers, and the water's stomach, so to speak, is not divided in accordance with the political map. Either we in the Mideast handle the water problem as a community, or we shall pay for it as nations. Unless we follow the water, we shall not find a solution to our own national problems, securing our supply of water for drinking and irrigation.

The same goes for commerce, for tourism, transportation, and the same goes, surely, for ecology.

What can we really do? As I have said, I feel we can easily cooperate with the United States and her newly-acquired

friends. I believe in the sincerity of their approach, and I am also aware of the confusion which we are facing concerning the parcelling, if you will, of the Middle East into so many factions, so much broken glass that can barely hold water.

I do believe that, strangely enough, we have to start with an ideological campaign. I think that Russia failed in her ideology before she failed in her economy and her strategy. The young people in Russia discovered that whatever they were told ideologically was hollow, false and contrary to the reality that they were facing every day, in comparison with other realities that were shown to them on the television screen.

I think we have to start an ideological campaign in the Middle East in favor of a market economy, in favor of the democratization of governmental institutions, in favor of human rights, in favor of regional life in which every nation can keep its historic and national identity while opening its borders for economic growth and for the improvement of the standard of living.

Actually, we have to tell the people and the leaders that there is no future for the Middle East if all that we try to do is to satisfy leaders while ignoring people. There is a tremendous wealth in the Middle East which is being eaten up by corruption -- personal, national and military -- and people are paying the price.

We have to tell the leaders that they themselves are endangering their regimes, because poverty among the people brings an awakening of religious militancy, of fundamentalism. Every country has its own fundamentalism. Fundamentalism is like a protest, and different fundamentalist movements protest different things. It is the same protest but against different things.

Fundamentalism in Israel is entirely different from the fundamentalism of Algeria, Egypt, or Yemen. I think we have to say clearly to the leaders, if you want to remain in power, the time has come that you begin to pay attention to your people, to your wellbeing, to your system, don't do it for Israel, do it for yourself.

I believe that the ideological campaign that the West carried out vis-a-vis Communism played a greater role than we are ready to admit. We would like to think of ourselves as pragmatists. But I do believe that the ideological campaign that originated in Helsinki played a vital role.

We have to do a second thing: not only to explain that we need a Middle East for the people, we also have to try and mobilize forces that we have ignored.

I think we have to mobilize the business communities in the Arab world, in Israel, in neutral countries, commercial communities that are doing business with the Arabs and with us, and tell them, "Look, maybe in some of the domains that the governments are incapable of entering, you can come in and, in the light of twilight, try to build bridges that later on will emerge as a new venue for cooperation and understanding."

I must say that, on the basis of our conversations in Europe, in Russia, and America, and with Arabs, there is a potential readiness for the community of businessmen, and perhaps the intelligentsia, and professors in universities, to fill in where government is limited.

Structuring the Multilateral Negotiations

And then I would say that there is a third point that requires change, and this is the structuring of the multilateral negotiations. You know, the bilaterals are organized in such a way that all the parties are sitting together almost continuously; the Palestinians, Jordanians, and us; the Syrians and us; the Lebanese and us.

Whereas, we have five committees of the multilateral negotiations which are spread all over the world, which don't meet simultaneously, and which have more a character of a seminar than of a negotiation. I think that we have to introduce character to the multinational negotiations; maybe have them continuously, and more importantly, to make the steering committee a committee of a higher level, not of civil servants, but perhaps of ministers, where

ministers can meet and exchange views informally, in the corridors, in less publicized occasions.

I would very much prefer a Helsinki-type structure, like the CSCE, for the Middle East, with all the partners and all the parties, in concentrated, guided, patient, gradual talks, structured in a way that will enable us to arrive at the necessary agreements.

And I would like to suggest a fourth change. I know that it will be extremely hard to proceed with the structuring of a new Middle East as long as we shall not see new realities as a result of the bilateral negotiations. Yet the bilateral negotiations will not hold water unless we have a new Middle East. And I think that there is one phase which we may have ignored, and this is the planning phase. An example will make this more concrete.

Apparently, we and the Jordanians have introduced, informally, a willingness to cut a canal between the Red Sea and the Dead Sea. Both parties agree, but neither of us, at least not the Jordanians, will agree to start it right away. Maybe we can convince one another not to start the cutting of the canal, but to start planning it through a party who is neither Jordanian nor Israeli, but a party on whom both Jordan and Israel may agree, at least for the planning stage.

So if we have an ideological campaign, and if we shall introduce into the regional dynamic other forces, and if we shall restructure the negotiations, and if we try to reach a stage of planning, perhaps all will put wind in the sails of the multilateral negotiations.

Think from time to time of Picasso's Goat. The goat is made of junk. He found a part of a bicycle here and a part of car here and a part of a jar there, materials that would never be part of a proper goat or of a sculpture, and yet he brought them together and made something which is as close to a live creature as an artist can do.

I feel that, in addition to the architecture of peace, we need a little bit of art; look around and see what can be assembled and put together so people will see that even from forlorn and ignored material we can create something which is beautiful and promising.

I would conclude by saying that there is a tremendous amount of good will all over the place. More people than ever before, though not enough, would like to see peace in the Middle East. And even some tough old nuts are reconsidering the situation.

We are pleasantly surprised by the new Syrian style of negotiation. We have not yet reached an agreement, but we have reached an opening. Never before have the Syrians sat with us. Never before did they open their ears. And never before was there an attempt to listen to each other as there is today.

And, surely, in Israel there is a government that has a mandate to make peace, and not only a mandate, but an obligation. I know that many of my colleagues in the government are terribly worried about the expectations we have created. The only consolation I can suggest is instead of reducing the expectations, we must elevate our actions so as not to disappoint anybody.

Notes

1 A reference to PLO chairman Yassir Arafat. ❖

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Feb 14, 2022



Ben Fishman

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