

The Future of the U.S.-Israel Relationship

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In-Depth Reports

The period in which we live today is unique, and we cannot assume that the conditions and forces that have created this moment in history will continue to be the same in the coming years. From the point of view of Israel, we live in a unique period created by developments beyond Israel's influence.

The first is the change on the international scene, namely the disintegration of what used to be the Soviet Union, the end of the Cold War, and the fact that the world's sole remaining superpower is the United States.

The implications of these changes for the Middle East are of great significance. Many Arab countries hostile to Israel can no longer rely on the Soviet umbrella that protected them in the past, whether militarily, politically, or economically. President Assad and Saddam Hussein sensed and experienced these changes earlier in the game; today Qaddafi and Arafat know they cannot rely on the Soviet umbrella. Along with the reduction of the threat of war between an Arab country or Arab countries with Israel, we might see a realization that policies that were adopted vis-a-vis Israel when the Soviet umbrella was in existence cannot be continued the way that they were in the past.

The second development, a result of the first, was the opening of the gates of the Soviet Union to a large wave of Jewish immigration that was heretofore simply impossible. It is the second time since Israel's creation that we have the extraordinary opportunity to bring in large numbers of Jews. The first was in the years 1948-1953; then, in four or five years, Israel absorbed more than 100 percent of its population. Jews, numbering only 600,000 when Israel was created, managed to absorb over 700,000 in five years.

The experience was in some respects painful and we still carry with us problems associated with our inability to have effectively absorbed them then. But without the historic decision of Ben-Gurion to go ahead with absorption, Israel would have remained a Jewish state in name but not in reality. Today, we have another unique opportunity, only partially fulfilled. The opportunity is still here.

The third major event of recent times, the crisis in the Gulf, and the decision by the United States and its allies to go to war against Iraq, too, was not because of Israel. And, thank God, it demonstrated that war can erupt in the Middle East with Israel in no way responsible. That war did contribute greatly to the security of Israel, as half of the conventional force, military force, of Iraq was destroyed. But even more so, the fact that there was such a war and the resulting discovery of Iraq's nuclear plans, facts that were not known to US nor I believe to American intelligence, postponed, if not prevented, a supremely dangerous threat to Israel's security.

Threats to Israel

When it comes to Israel's defense problems, and in formulating our defense policy, one has to distinguish between two threats to Israel: First, the threat to the very existence of Israel, a threat that has been reduced as a result of the two events surrounding the fall of the Soviet Union and the crisis in the Gulf, but has not disappeared. This is the major threat to Israel, the one presented by the armed forces of an Arab country or Arab countries, especially in their search for long-range (in Middle East terms), surface-to-surface missiles and weapons of mass destruction.

According to the estimates of most experts, based on the reports of the UN teams, without that war in the Gulf,

without the efforts by the UN teams, backed by the United States, to explore and discover the facilities of research and development, production, and storing of weapons of mass destruction, especially in the nuclear field, Iraq would have been in possession of nuclear instruments, if not weapons, by 1994-1995. This would have been the real threat to Israel.

The second level of threat is the daily personal security problems. Forms of Palestinian or Shi'i terror, and the intifada, do not present a threat to the very existence of Israel. They are painful and they interfere with the normal way of life of many Israelis. But the Palestinians, the Shi'a, and the intifada are not threats to the very existence of Israel.

Therefore, in looking at the overall picture, we live today in a period in which the threat to the very existence of Israel has been reduced. And hopefully, the United States will maintain the position that the UN teams have to continue their activities, because once those activities cease, it will not take more than four to five years for Iraq again to be in the position of endangering Israel's security more than any other Arab country.

As I see it, we now have a window of time, of two to five years. We live in a world in which no one can be assured that the present international scene is going to continue as it is. I don't know what the policies of the United States will be after November, to what extent the inward turn of the U.S. towards domestic problems will create a new kind of isolationism in the United States, but I hope it does not.

From my talks with the two candidates for the presidency in the United States, I came to the conclusion that there is a shared, bipartisan understanding of the unique role that the United States has to play on the international scene, bearing in mind that at the present there is no new global order. In the meantime, there is a new global disorder.

Look at what has happened in Yugoslavia and in Africa. In the Middle East, parallel to the positive trends of Soviet decline and the Gulf War, the arms race has been accelerated, both in conventional and nonconventional weapons. The items that the Arab countries want to purchase are surface-to-surface missiles, and weapons of mass destruction, in addition to improving of the quality of their conventional weapons.

But, as I said, the real threat to the very existence of Israel has been postponed, reduced, but has by no means disappeared.

Looking to a Peacemaking Process

What should Israel do? The way that I see it, Israel must exploit this period of new opportunities, including some dangers. First, it must find out to what extent it will be possible to bring about a peacemaking process. not a peace process, but a peacemaking process.

The present government of Israel has decided to use the framework of the Madrid conference, including the Madrid rules and the composition of the various delegations, but to put a different content into these negotiations.

Therefore, we asked for a continuous negotiation; not meeting for two days, three days, four days, and then having an interval of four to six weeks, but instead an attempt to maintain a format of continuous negotiations.

In the negotiations with the three Arab committees, or delegations -- the Jordanian-Palestinian, the Syrian, the Lebanese -- basically there are two issues: the solution to the problem between Israel and the Palestinians, with some assistance, hopefully, by the Jordanians; and, second, the problems between Syria and Israel.

The problems between Israel and Lebanon are of secondary importance. And, for all practical purposes, one has to bear in mind that Lebanon is a Syrian protectorate. Lebanon will not take any decision without Syrian approval.

As for Syria, the changes that were introduced in our negotiations were as follows: First, we made it clear that Resolutions 242 and 338 of the UN Security Council are applicable to the solution of the conflict between Israel and Syria, with the purpose to bring about peace. They are applicable to peace between Israel and Syria and not, like the

Syrians would try to put it, applicable to the Golan Heights. They are applicable to peace between Israel and Syria.

Second, we are ready, if they are ready, to enter into a limited interim agreement. I remember when we negotiated the disengagement agreement in 1974, under Golda Meir's premiership. And I remember the opposition then in the Knesset describing it as a disaster to Israel, and saying it would not last more than six months.

Eighteen years have passed. In seventeen years, the Golan Heights did not experience a single terrorist act. I wish that the security of Israelis in Bat Yam and Kfar Saba would be as safe, in terms of personal security, as the people of the Golan Heights. There were no terror acts or border clashes in all those years. Our militarized border with Syria has been more secure than the peace border with Egypt, in terms of terror activities. And this was the result of a disengagement of two or two and a half kilometers, at the maximum. Drawing on this experience, we offered, and we are ready for an interim agreement.

Third, we are ready to discuss with the Syrians, in general terms, security arrangements. All these three issues are newly introduced by the present government to the negotiations. I believe that the Syrians were not prepared for such a move by Israel.

As far as the Palestinians are concerned, we have offered them means of advancing what is now called, not autonomy, but Palestinian Interim Self-Government Arrangements. This is the terminology that was coined in the letter of invitation to the Madrid conference. We offered them two lines of moving forward.

We proposed a target date for a general election in the territories in which the Palestinians of the territories will elect from themselves, by themselves, the body that will run the ISGA, or the autonomy -- call it what you will -- on one condition, that we define exactly what we are going to elect.

In 1989, I was among those who proposed general elections. Later it came as part of the peace initiative of the National Unity government in May 1989. At the time, the proposal was to elect a delegation of Palestinians from the territories to negotiate with Israel. There is no longer a need to elect a delegation. To elect a delegation now will interfere with and postpone the peace process. There are delegations. They are not elected on the Palestinian side, on the Arab side. On the Israeli side, they are appointed by an elected government. Therefore, there is no purpose to have elections for a delegation.

We stress that, first and foremost, we have to define what we are going to elect. We propose, in accordance with our commitment to the Camp David accords, an administrative council, self-governing authority, that in essence is an executive body which carries out all the responsibilities of the spheres that will be transferred, delegated, to them. If they will agree on what has to be elected, we will support setting a date, December 1, 1992, by which one of the subcommittees of Israeli and Palestinian negotiators will develop the modalities of the elections. Let's decide that by February 1, 1993, another subcommittee will work out all the spheres, responsibilities, questions of coordination between them and us, the delineation of their responsibilities, and so forth.

We issued a paper, some thirty-three pages long, to the Palestinians, in which we proposed an outline of the distribution of responsibilities between the Palestinians and ourselves during the interim period. If they will not agree to all the above -- a timetable for elections, incorporating a definition of what we are going to elect -- we are ready to accept a counter-proposal, but with an outline that describes their perception of the autonomy.

The Palestinian tendency is to deal with the symptoms of the disease, not with the disease itself. They bring up human rights, the prisoners, the curfews, the destruction of houses. They forget the possibility that Israel will change its policy. Let's go to the business of solving the problems rather than dealing with the results of the absence of a solution to the problem.

We have made some gestures. We will not continue. We wanted to create a good atmosphere with the purpose of

starting to tackle the problems in a realistic way. They started to bring up Jerusalem again. I understand that in negotiations there are certain rituals that have to be made. Jerusalem is out of the autonomy and will not be part of it.

The Palestinians have to bear in mind that we are in control of the territories. We will not budge one inch. It's in their interest to receive what no one among the Arab countries offered them in the past when they were in control. Jordan did not offer them autonomy when Jordan was in occupation of the West Bank. Egypt did not offer them autonomy when Egypt was in occupation of the Gaza Strip.

This government is interested in finding a solution, not in gaining ten years time. But they have to bear in mind that there are red lines for us too. We are not going to negotiate the creation of a Palestinian independent state. Autonomy, ISGA, yes. We will not enter into negotiations on issues that relate to the permanent solution, only to the interim agreement for the transitional period.

We were much more forthcoming in our proposals. The former government offered only municipal elections. We are ready for general elections. We are ready for more spheres, many roles to be performed by the Palestinians, but we will not give up our security, our responsibility to the Israeli settlements and settlers, and to our foreign policy. And, there are economic problems that have to be tied together. I believe that the Palestinians in the territories are more pragmatic than those who are in Tunisia. And it looks to me, to a large extent, that some elements in Tunisia are still an obstacle to some of the Palestinians in the territories in moving ahead.

But I believe that there have to be continuous negotiations, with a one-week interval, then two weeks, then we will return. There are no shortcuts. I do not expect results before nine to twelve months. It is a prolonged process. There will be ups and downs. I have not yet lost my hope, and more than hope, that we will reach something. This is where we stand now on the negotiations.

Relationship with the United States

In terms of Israel's relationship with the United States, my basic approach is based on my experience as Ambassador in the 1970s, and later on in different roles.

I learned in the past as, in my humble opinion, should be today and in the future, that first and foremost, there must be an element of trust, of frankness in the relationship at the top levels. It is best to say forthrightly what you can or cannot do, to explain the real direction of your action, and your limitations, to give, to the extent possible, facts that are related to the issues.

For instance, Secretary of State James Baker recently came here, and we discussed what is to be done in the territories. As you know, I see a clear distinction between what I call settlements along the confrontation lines and Jerusalem and what I call political settlements. The main effort of the former government in building housing units was not on the Golan Heights, not along the Jordan Valley and the eastern slopes of Judea and Samaria, but between the crest that goes from Jerusalem, Ramallah, Nablus, Jenin, and to the west. That did not contribute, in my humble opinion, to the security of Israel vis-a-vis the threat to our very existence; practically, in my humble opinion, it contributed nothing. We opposed the creation of these settlements when we were in the National Unity Government, which was of necessity a compromise government. In the five and a half years of the National Unity Government, 3,500 units were budgeted to all the territories. From July 1990 until the present government took office, over 20,000 were programmed. I believe it was a waste of money, the wrong direction, but in a democracy there are different policies.

We, at any rate, decided to stop it, whatever could be stopped, with or without the U.S. government loan guarantees. We believe it is not in the interest of the right order of national priority to waste money there. But we could not, in accordance with our laws and other considerations, cut all of them.

I told Secretary Baker that there are some 9,000 units that I cannot stop. A week after I became the Prime Minister, I said to him, "I don't want to give you a wrong figure. It might be more. At the present, this is the figure that I have. Don't take me by this figure. I don't want to mislead you." And it happened to be 11,000.

These represent billions of shekels that the government will have to pay under pre-existing contracts; we will be in ownership of housing units that, according to our estimate, in the coming one and half years, will not be sellable to individuals in Israel. This is a tremendous burden on the government budget, which no doubt limits some of what we desire to do.

When I went to Maine to meet with President Bush, I didn't pretend that it will be possible for Israel to change the longstanding position of the United States. For at least twenty years, all U.S. administrations have regarded settlements in the territories as "obstacles to peace," a phrase I first heard fifteen years ago from a president of the United States. This was understood to be the basic position of the United States.

I can't recall any change by any president on these basic issues. (I do remember once Joe Sisco said to me, "Whenever you do things reasonably and quietly, okay. We didn't make any noise about it. But when you make noises, create problems, bring the issues to the UN, we will have to state our position.")

Therefore, I didn't try to convince anyone to change longstanding positions, as I didn't expect them to try to change our position, the present government's position. I believe that the wisdom of the past on many issues, during the period of many governments, was to agree to disagree on what we cannot agree on, and find issues on which we can agree and work together.

What I was interested in during the visit that I had in the United States, first and foremost, was to secure the long-term loan guarantees from the United States government, and to reach a certain understanding on the approach to the peace negotiations. I didn't expect agreement to our position. I expected the U.S. to grant the guarantees. I expected them to allow us to maneuver freely in accordance with our ways of negotiation in the coming negotiations.

Of course, there were other issues. I am glad that the President, Secretary Baker, myself and our teams reached understanding on all the political terms related to the guarantees. It was not written; it was not signed. It is based, rather, on personal confidence that was established in our meeting. Therefore, there will be no political condition in the legislation that will be proposed by the Administration to Congress. The last thing that I wanted was to legislate political conditions to the guarantees. The guarantees stood alone. I believe by now there remains, hopefully, only one problem, the so-called "scoring" issue. Two years ago the Congress passed a law that every U.S. government guarantee, especially to foreign countries, must be guaranteed in the budget. And so, the budget will set aside a certain amount of money, in accordance with the drawing of the loans. The United States has not asked any foreign country to pay this scoring, this money. How did it happen that now the Congress demands that Israel pay? Because the former government, in its effort to use the Congress vis-a-vis the President, came out publicly to the Congress and to the American people and said, "We don't want this loan to cost one dollar to the American taxpayer."

The Soviet Union got a foreign loan, scored at 26 or 27 percent for the long-term, and 6 percent for the short-term. Who budgeted it? The United States Treasury. No country was asked. We came volunteering. And when I discussed the issue with the President and Mr. Baker, they said, "Well, we won't ask. Did we ask you to? You came out publicly; you committed yourself to the Congress, to the American people. This is the reason why you have to pay."

Then about forty minutes before the joint appearance of the President and myself before the press, we had a meeting. He said that the scoring must be 7 percent, giving Israel a rating of A, while all the experts said it's only a triple B. At the end we compromised. The President was ready for Israel to pay 3.5 percent, and he was ready to propose legislation that the United States pay 3.5 percent.

The problem today is in the Congress, as many members say, "You promised us that it will not cost the American

taxpayer a single dollar." This is especially true of the members of the House of Representatives, as elections near; as you know, in the United States, foreign aid is not the most popular issue.

Our problem today is to pass this legislation, and the issue is mainly with both houses of the Congress, even though there are many friends of Israel who are ready to be very helpful in making it possible. I hope that after Labor Day, when Congress will reconvene, it will be possible to pass this legislation.

I tend to believe that we no longer have problems with the Administration. I hope that the Congress will pass it. For us, it is vital for our future, and I need not elaborate why.

In addition, you know that the idea of the Congress and the Administration was to deduct as fungible whatever has been invested in the territories. We reached an agreement, that at least according to the legislation that will be proposed by the President, whatever we have invested and paid as of October 1, 1992, is out of the accounting. It will not be considered fungible or deducted.

The first installment will be \$2 billion intact. The first deduction for what will be used from Israeli money will not take place until Fiscal Year 1994. None of this money will be spent in the territories. This is a detailed issue. This is what has been agreed, and, hopefully, it will be agreed to by the Congress.

I believe that today a new basis of confidence has been built. We do not try to hide what we do in the territories. We are trying to cooperate with the United States about advancement of the peace process, stressing -- and I have made it clear -- the importance in the negotiating room, of face-to-face negotiations between Israelis and Arabs.

Otherwise, we more than welcome cooperation with the United States. As far as the negotiations with the Palestinians and the Jordanians are concerned, we look at the United States as a partner to the Camp David Accords, and we expect the United States to stick to its commitments as we have to stick to ours.

It will not be easy. At the least I would like to be satisfied with my conscience that we have tried our best to explore the possibility of achieving an agreement for the interim solution, the transitional period with the Palestinians and that we have explored opportunities to make peace with Syria -- not peace for peace -- instead a readiness to pay something, but not what the Syrians want. Because I believe that unless we will achieve change in the region, in the coming three to five years, we will not be able to exploit the unique opportunity that this period in the life of the world and the Middle East and Israel offers to us.

Notes:

1. A reference to the PLO leadership headquartered in Tunisia.

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Feb 14, 2022

◆
Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)



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Feb 14, 2022



Sana Quadri,
Hamdullah Baycar

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Feb 14, 2022



Ishtar Al Shami

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