

What Would Rabin Do?

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Articles & Testimony

Twenty years later, the assassinated prime minister's hopes for Palestinian separation still resonate.

The twentieth anniversary of Yitzhak Rabin's assassination on November 4 is a dolorous reminder that the main issue he tried so hard to tackle -- and was ultimately murdered over -- remains unresolved. Even as President Obama and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu meet for the first time in over a year on Monday at the White House, the current wave of stabbings has reignited the question of Israeli-Palestinian peace.

And that in turn has given rise to a new meme among pundits in honor of Rabin, the prime minister who was shot to death in 1995 by a right-wing Jewish extremist seeking to stop a peace deal with Palestinians: WWRD. What would Rabin do?

While the Israeli-Palestinian issue has been eclipsed by violence in Syria and elsewhere in the region, the latest violence inside Israel makes it hard not to wonder whether Rabin, were he alive, might still be capable of inspiring people over the possibilities of peace.

Of course, there are limitations to WWRD. Rabin did not have to cope with the rebuilding of a trust that today has shattered due to a variety of reasons. (It has been argued that if he was alive, the trust would remain intact, but this is unclear.) He did not have to deal with the Arab world that is preoccupied with other conflicts including the chaos emanating from Syria and the broader Sunni-Shia strife.

Nonetheless, the current round of stabbings of Israelis by Palestinians would not have fazed Rabin. As a candidate to return to the premiership, Rabin was no stranger to Palestinian killings. In 1992, he edged out Yitzhak Shamir soon after a fifteen-year-old, Helena Rapp, was fatally stabbed in Bat Yam. In the aftermath, he said he wanted a separate entity from the Palestinians. He had no illusions that peace would be easy, but he felt that Shamir, his political opponent, had no answer, given that he did not want to divide the land.

Rabin's belief in separation meant that he was not going to wait for a millennial peace that would solve all issues at

once. The idea of separation was that Israelis and Palestinians required their own political entities and this was the overriding objective, even if the remaining issues of the conflict (Jerusalem, refugees) had yet to be resolved. He believed it was not healthy for Israeli decision-making to be held hostage by perpetual gridlock. After all, Zionism came about because the Jews were committed to transforming their predicament and refused to be paralyzed.

Politically Rabin was a centrist who might be best characterized as a security dove. He understood there was no military solution to a political conflict. As a war hero who helped to win the stunning Six Day War in 1967 and as a defense minister between 1984 and 1990, Rabin definitely had an appreciation for Israel's military force, but he saw its limits as well. At his inaugural speech at the Knesset as premier in 1992, Rabin demonstrated his understanding that Israel existed in a wider strategic context. The world was changing after the end of the Cold War and Gulf War and Israel needed to redefine strength. Rabin dispelled the notion that if you are weak, you cannot afford to compromise, and if you are strong, you do not need to compromise. As Israel's Mr. Security, Rabin believed that Israel could compromise from a position of strength. Current Israeli security officials who know the military strength of Israel and the weakness of its adversaries say Rabin's comments are as true today as they were at that time.

Even more, he saw military action of any kind as a last resort. As a journalist who interviewed him countless times, I remember him often saying how important it was for him to be able to look into the eyes of mothers and tell them he had tried all options before sending their sons into battle.

At the heart of Rabin's character was intellectual honesty, coupled with a strong analytical bent. Rabin's analysis led him to believe that the "all or nothing" approach to peace with the Palestinians was self-defeating, and that one had to move in increments. When I once asked him why he did not try to solve all the issues with the Palestinians in the secret Oslo negotiations, he declared this was not possible and it was better to solve what was solvable rather than merely lament that a grand deal could not be struck. He felt in order for Israel to be both Jewish and democratic, it needed to move toward the goal of separation, even if it could not achieve a grand peace all in one leap.

Rabin's incrementalism would give way not long after his death to even more ambitious efforts to solve the entire Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The U.S. would spearhead three such major efforts: Camp David/Clinton Plan (2000), the Annapolis process (2007/2008), and the Kerry Initiative (2013/2014). Yet for differing reasons, the grand deal remained elusive.

While one is tempted to say that if Rabin were alive there would be peace today, this seems uncertain at best. His relationship with Yasser Arafat was never strong. More critically, given Rabin's policy positions -- at least the ones he would publicly articulate -- it is far from certain that he could have closed the gaps, especially when it came to security arrangements and Jerusalem. In his last Knesset speech, and at times beforehand, Rabin emphasized that Israel should retain security control of the eastern frontier of a Palestinian entity in the Jordan Valley and said that he did not want to divide Jerusalem. He even said he envisioned the Palestinians having "less than a state," but his views may have evolved had he lived. (The gaps between Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, who says he supports a two-state solution, and Palestinian President Abbas on these same issues make a grand deal any time soon look very unlikely.)

However, the key distinction between Rabin and Netanyahu is that Rabin was committed to telling his public -- as he often did -- in an unambiguous fashion that the status quo was very bad for Israel, and it needed to be addressed.

In the Mideast, whenever it is all or nothing, it is almost always nothing. But inaction also exacts a price. The alternative to incremental change is a grinding status quo where Israel -- fairly or not -- faces increasing isolation internationally and a de facto binational reality, which puts at risk the idea of Israel as a nation state of the Jewish people that also guarantees equal rights to all citizens. Moreover, a lack of territorial success is bound to mean the eighty-year-old Abbas is accused of failure by Palestinian radicals.

If one cannot achieve the goal in one leap, Rabin's experience in 1993 could provide an attainable model. It might be best to focus on the settler dimension of the West Bank, while leaving the hard security, refugee, and Jerusalem issues for the future.

It is interesting that Yitzhak Herzog, leader of the Labor Party once led by Rabin, has referred lately to Rabin's idea of "separation," which the slain prime minister often talked of without explicitly endorsing a Palestinian state. In his recent major Knesset policy speech, Herzog sounded more pessimistic than in the past about reaching a grand peace deal with Abbas. While Herzog would prefer that Israelis and Palestinians work together toward an agreement on delineating a territorial boundary in the West Bank, he seems to be suggesting that Israel should pursue a West Bank pullout of non-bloc settlers (the 20 percent of the settlers who live in 92 percent of the West Bank east of the security barrier), if an agreement is not possible.

In Rabin's last policy speech to the Knesset, shortly before his death, he declared, "We know the chances. We know the risks. We will do our best to expand the chances and reduce the risks." He could not reduce the risks to himself personally, but his legacy continues to be about putting country first.

So given today's paralysis, WWRD? It's impossible to say for certain, but we know he would want to do something to move beyond today's paralysis to avoid the slide toward permanent binationalism with the Palestinians -- which to Rabin was a direct threat to Israel's character.

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