

Israel after Disengagement: Fateful Choices (excerpted transcript)

Sep 25, 2005



In-Depth Reports

On September 25, 2005, Sallai Meridor, former chairman of the Jewish Agency for Israel, addressed The Washington Institute's Weinberg Founders Conference. The following is an excerpted transcript of his remarks.

". . . There is a very direct connection between the . . . interest of the Jewish people, and the decisions about the future of Israel, because there is nothing that will determine more the fate of the Jewish people than the strength and the character of the state of Israel.

"The [internal] discussion in Israel on disengagement was . . . about how to secure the future of Israel as a Jewish state. What were the arguments of most of those who opposed this agreement? Some were religious arguments. . . . Some were national. . . . Some were real, deep concerns [as] to the future of Israel. . . .

"I think that the one, sole argument was not about peace, was not about security, [but] about demography, about the future of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state. . . . Israel was created to be a state of and for the Jewish people. . . . And in order to have a Jewish and democratic state, you have to maintain [a] significant, large, Jewish majority. . . . And this . . . is going to continue to be the most important challenge facing Israel from today, onwards, for many, many years.

"And given the difference . . . in terms of internal birthrate between Jews and Arabs in Israel, Israel will have to face the challenge in a multidimensional strategy, from Jewish birthrate, to immigration, to conversion of immigrants, to strict migration policy, . . . and last but not least, the issue of borders. Because even if we were successful enough [on these issues], . . . it would not be enough to secure Israel as a Jewish and democratic state, because we simply don't have enough Jews, neither in Israel nor in the world, to maintain a solid, large Jewish majority from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea. . . . [T]his super-argument of the future of Israel as a Jewish democratic state made people, and made me, with all the pain, agree to disengagement. . . .

"The mood in Israel is, . . . on the one hand, . . . a sense of relief that blood was not shed. . . . I think that on the one hand, people are satisfied, or many people are satisfied, with international recognition and the continuous improvement of the economic condition in Israel.

"And at the same time there is very serious concern about Palestinian behavior. From the synagogues to the greenhouses to Philadelphi[a Corridor], if you really want to buy now an automatic gun or a hand grenade . . . And Israelis see . . . how this is the first thing Palestinians did. People are listening to Mahmoud Zahar, the leader of Hamas, and the inaction of the [Palestinian] Authority, and people [are] concerned . . . about terror. . . .

"Is there a way to advance peace between Israel and the Palestinians, given the current circumstances? Tough question. An easier question to answer is what is definitely not the way to advance peace. . . . You cannot do it with terror and you cannot do it without a central government. . . . From the experience we gathered for the last twelve years, no process will prevail when there are terror acts. No interim phase . . . could prevail if there is a terror act and

Israel reacts and Israel blocks the movement and Palestinians are suffering the vicious circle, and it's the end of it. . .

"In order to have negotiations, you need a central address that can deliver. In the eyes of Israelis -- and I'm afraid not only of Israelis -- this is not exactly the situation today in the Palestinian Authority, and there is a question [as to] whether Abu Mazen can or cannot [deliver]. . . . If we want to move forward, he cannot only 'talk the talk,' especially now when Israel has already 'run the run.' He must 'walk the walk.' . . .

"It is my belief . . . that if [the Palestinians] are genuine about future recognition and the acceptance of Israel forever as a Jewish state in part of the land of Israel, there is a significant chance for reaching an agreement, over time. . . .

"A fair compromise should address the critical interests . . . of both parties. For the Palestinians, independence and the actual ability to build a state, viable . . . economy, and society. For Israel, security and demography, to assure the Jewish future of whatever will be the borders of the Jewish state. . . . [B]oth sides to give up on the dream of 'Greater Israel,' so to speak, or 'Greater Palestine.' . . . They, and we, will have to agree that the right of return . . . of Jews will be limited only to those areas where there would be a Jewish state, and the right of the Palestinians to return . . . will be only to those boundaries within which there would be a Palestinian state. . . .

"The parties will have to agree on borders, where I assume Israelis accept that the larger part of the territory will be conceded to the Palestinians, where the smaller part of the territory will be retained by Israel -- [including] obviously, cities like Jerusalem, settlement blocs, some security areas . . .

"Not less important than reaching an agreement . . . is the sense among the people that the agreement can prevail. For Israel it means security. . . . And for the Palestinians, it's a viable possibility to rapidly develop their state. . . .

"For the agreement to work, the world community needs to be prepared to come immediately, with major assistance, to make this work. I may be dreaming, but maybe a fund should be created today and the money should be [deposited] today, for two reasons: one, to serve as an incentive; and the other one, to be implementable immediately when an agreement is . . . signed. . . .

"So what are the chances? I think it largely depends on two issues. . . . Without [the American administration], it will not happen. . . . Second is the nature of the leaders, and the real question is whether we have politicians or leaders. If we have politicians thinking about next elections, so we are doomed to have paralysis for the coming year. But the truth of the matter . . . [is that] for politicians, elections never end. . . .

"The peoples, in my view, are not driving the leaders toward an agreement. Israelis are concerned with security, with internal issues, much more than they are concerned with making peace with the Palestinians. And the Palestinians, likewise, seem to be concerned more with lifting Israeli restrictions, and obviously improving their own unemployment and corruption and [the] law and order situation, than dancing with Israel in a peace party.

"And it's only leadership that can . . . create a new agenda and transform current reality and build for another tomorrow. Begin and Sadat were of this kind. Rabin and Hussein were of this kind. Arafat wasn't. And it takes courage. Life probability, if you take only these four, is 50 percent. Two of the four were assassinated. . . . I don't know, . . . I get the sense that [Sharon] is built of these ingredients. . . . Mahmoud Abbas, I just don't know. . . .

"To close, . . . I think Israel took with disengagement an unprecedented move, maybe in the history of nations, voluntarily to leave a territory -- uproot your own people from the territory, not under the gun, and not within the context of an agreement. . . .

"We are always grateful to our friends, especially the United States, for their help and the Jewish people for their partnership. . . . [But] Israelis know how much more we could achieve if we didn't have to fight, and Israelis are really truly peace lovers and seekers. So approaching our New Year, I'll just join Sharon from the UN with a prayer that this

coming year we will have hope and security and advancement toward peace. . . ."

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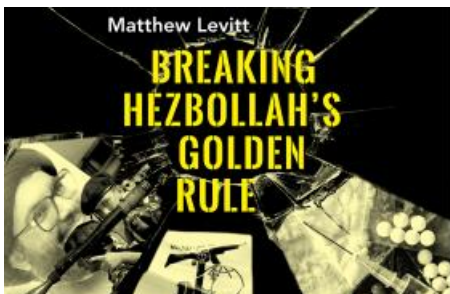
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