

Pursuing Democracy and Peace in the Middle East

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In-Depth Reports

The antagonisms within the triangle of the United States, the Arab world, and Israel can be best reconciled by drawing a demarcation line in the region around rogue states and crazy regimes. This is also the way to preserve the interests of the United States in the Middle East. Members of the "axis of evil" must be on one side, and the moderate countries -- those that are allies of the United States -- on the other. Israel and a few important Arab countries are on the same side of that demarcation line. In such an arrangement, there would be neither a pro-American nor pro-British alliance, but a new Middle Eastern configuration. It would include Israel, Jordan, Egypt, Turkey, some Gulf states, and some Maghreb states. This coalition could both ensure stability in the Middle East and substantially contribute to the containment of rogue states.

How do I know this kind of cooperation is feasible? Because this was what the region looked like in the days of the Rabin government and the Oslo Accords. We tend to forget those days, but I still remember them. Perhaps the last manifestation of this configuration was the 1996 antiterror conference in Sharm al-Shaykh. It followed one of the most horrible series of terror attacks in the heart of Tel Aviv, after which, under the auspices of Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, representatives of the countries I mentioned met to manifest their rejection of terrorism and their collective commitment to the cause of peace. Those were the days, my friends.

But those days can return, if the required circumstances are once again brought about: an alliance of elements in the region that are pro-stability, against those elements that are radical; an alliance of those who want to promote peace, against those who want to disrupt all efforts to reach it. Although building such a strategic configuration is not feasible while the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains unresolved, in the meantime there should be an atmosphere of dialogue that gives us the hope of approaching a solution -- a constructive atmosphere in which such an alliance can ultimately be created.

The Arabs scorn the Palestinians. They abuse them. But because the Palestinian issue is the only moral issue upon which the Arabs can be united, they always sing from the same book when it comes to rhetoric at their summit conferences. As long as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a bleeding wound for them, they will stick to the old definitions, to the old demarcation line once drawn between Israel and the Arabs. While the peace process was successful, we were able to reverse this equation. We isolated the rogue regimes of Iran, Syria, and Iraq. Now, the situation is different.

What is the obstacle to a serious resumption of the Israeli-Palestinian dialogue? Yasir Arafat. This is a tragedy. It is a tragedy for the Palestinian people as well as for the Israeli-Palestinian relationship. It is a tragedy that a nation at a stage in which it can build a state of its own is led by such a distorted mechanism of decisionmaking. For at least the last eighteen months, Yasir Arafat has been in a messianic mood, which inspires all of his day-to-day decisions. There is no moderate opposition to Arafat. There is only hardline opposition -- the opposition of those who hold assault rifles. They are the visible opposition. There is a moderate opposition, but they do not speak up. When the Palestinian people need a Nelson Mandela, they have a Salah al-Din. The world of today is not a world for Salah al-Dins. It is a world for Nelson Mandelas, and for those who seriously want to achieve something for their people.

We are told that a political horizon is needed. That is true. And we are told that the only feasible horizon now is the Saudi initiative. Yet, the Saudi initiative is not balanced. It demands of Israel tangible concessions, while Israel is rewarded with vague promises. One of the most sensitive issues, that of the refugees, is addressed in this initiative in a way that is not acceptable to us. Do we reject the initiative? No, in spite of the flaws I have mentioned. It is a plausible basis for negotiation, but it is not the voice of redemption. We will not ignore it, and we will not reject it. But we will consider it in a realistic, sober, and responsible way. It may serve as a basis for negotiation, but let them come and negotiate. I must emphasize that before we resume talks, terror must be stopped. There is no chance for negotiations to succeed while suicide bombers explode themselves in the shopping malls, restaurants, and railway stations of Israel.

The purpose of our current military operation in the West Bank, Operation Defensive Shield, is to destroy the infrastructure of terror. "Destruction of infrastructure" might sound like a cliché, a slogan. So allow me to elaborate. We have so far succeeded in destroying dozens of laboratories where explosives are prepared. We have succeeded in destroying factories where the missiles and the Qassam rockets are manufactured. We have just captured four car bombs with hundreds of pounds of explosives inside and with all of the electronic devices prepared for assaulting the towns of Israel. More importantly, we have succeeded in arresting or killing those who have masterminded the most deadly attacks on Israel -- among them the top planners of the Haifa restaurant suicide bombing, the Sbarro pizzeria suicide bombing in Jerusalem, the Dolphinarium disco suicide bombing in Tel Aviv, the Seafood Market restaurant suicide bombing in Tel Aviv, and, most notorious of all, the Passover massacre in Netanya. Qais Adwan was Hamas's top planner in the West Bank and the man behind the Passover massacre. On April 5, 2002, in a village northeast of Nablus, we killed him and five other top Hamas operatives. People like Qais Adwan cannot evade punishment.

That is why this operation is so important to us. I hope that soon this mission will fulfill its objectives -- it must. It is important for me to emphasize that the cessation of terrorism is a sine qua non for regional stability. Without it, all the talk about a "new Middle East" is just hollow cliché. This is an urgent task for Israel, and it is why we insist upon accomplishing this mission.

Discussion

Robert Satloff, The Washington Institute: Minister Sneh, could you take a moment to address the situation on Israel's northern border, as well as the situation that you've just described in the West Bank? How do you see the motivations of the various actors, and does Israel face the opening of a second front?

Ephraim Sneh: There is an obvious attempt to open a second front on the Israeli-Lebanese border. For the last two weeks, Hizballah has expanded its activities along the entire Lebanese border. They shell Israeli civilian villages as well as military compounds inside Israel and the Golan Heights.

This is a blunt attempt to provoke us, to open a new front. It is inspired by the Iranian strategy to destroy Israel from within, to destroy Israel's national morale via recurrent attacks on the Israeli civilian population. The Karine A was a part of this strategy, and Israel has exercised a great deal of restraint.

We are thankful that the United States has relayed a clear message to Syria and Iran that they are provoking a regional explosion with their reckless behavior.

Dennis Ross, The Washington Institute: The Iranians might very well not care if there is a regional explosion. So when one conveys this message, it may need to go to the Syrians in a way that makes it clear that they will pay the price. Moreover, Israel pulled out of Lebanon, and the United Nations (UN) confirmed this withdrawal. At a minimum, it seems that this might be the time to go to the UN and say, "Why is there no resolution condemning the current activity in Lebanon?"

Second, you said that the only political horizon out there right now is the Saudi proposal. Is it not in Israel's interests to put forth its own political horizon?

Sneh: To respond to your first point, there is no chance that Iran would heed a U.S. request to rein in Hizballah. But Syria is different. Syria may pay a price for the permission it gives Hizballah to act. With Syria, an American warning message can be more effective than pressure from the UN secretary general. But the UN, from a legal and a moral point of view, must weigh in. Israel unilaterally fulfilled Security Council Resolution 425, while no one on the other side, including the Lebanese government, fulfilled their part.

With regard to the political horizon, for the time being, Israel's national unity government is committed to the Tenet and Mitchell frameworks: ceasefire, implementation of the Tenet recommendations, and, finally, implementation of the Mitchell recommendations. But frankly, I doubt if we can produce, for the long run, one single horizon. The long-term Israeli vision can only be presented in the context of at least two different proposals. I know what my party's proposal will look like, but it will not be the only one. Which one will emerge? We shall see.

Satloff: Do you mean to do business with Arafat as a partner, or is it now assumed that dialogue can only be resumed with someone else on the other side of the table?

Sneh: There are two areas in which I am not engaged. One is adult education. The other is the department that appoints leaders in the Middle East; I was active in one attempt to do so about twenty years ago, and the attempt was not terribly successful.

We are not going to replace the Palestinian leadership. It is not our job to do so. It is not wise to even speak about it. But there is one thing we can insist upon: the prompt cessation of terrorism. Who will do it? That is still the business of the Palestinians. If there is leadership on the other side that is ready to go along with the Tenet-Mitchell program, it will be most welcome. If not, I am afraid there will be no plan. Just more of the same. We will not be able to move forward with a Palestinian leadership that allows terrorism to persist.

Ron Campias, Associated Press: You seem to suggest that in the long term, the national-unity government probably cannot last if the region gets beyond Tenet-Mitchell and approaches the new horizon. Is that so?

And if Prime Minister Ariel Sharon makes clear his intention to remove Yasir Arafat, do you see the Labor Party pulling out of the national-unity government even before getting to the Tenet-Mitchell phase?

Sneh: I do not think anyone is going to remove Arafat. It is not a secret that in the current coalition government there are at least two different, contradictory schools of thought. We are together because the Israeli people are under attack, because our back is to the wall, and because we are suffering a murderous wave of terror against which we must stand together.

We live in tough times, and I deplore attempts to manipulate my party's sense of responsibility in order to elbow us out of decisionmaking. We are in this coalition out of that sense of responsibility, and as long as we are partners in the decisionmaking process, we will remain. This government is based on agreement, internal compromise, and joint action.

David Makovsky, The Washington Institute: Does your party have a position on the possible expulsion of Arafat?

Sneh: There was a discussion within the government about whether to expel Arafat. Opinions were not divided along party lines. It is not a matter of politics. It is a question of what is in our best interests, and security experts believe that it is not in our best interests to expel Arafat. The damage would exceed any positive benefit. All those who believe that, in the long run, we have to sit and negotiate with the Palestinian leadership do not want to create a situation in which there is no Palestinian leadership.

Makovsky: You made some news by saying that certain areas in Israel with high Israeli Arab populations could be

subject to a territorial swap in a final deal with the Palestinians. Could you explain your position so that it is not misinterpreted?

Sneh: Since Israel has to annex a certain part of the West Bank as part of a final settlement, the idea is to have a land swap. If we are speaking about territories adjacent to a future border, they may include populated areas. Of course, I do not mean areas with Jewish populations. This is an idea that must take place under consent; we cannot impose it. According to international law, we cannot deny anyone his Israeli citizenship unless he, himself, wants to give it up. These are the constraints; anyway, it is not the core of my proposal, just one technical item that can be accepted or not.

Hassan Nafaa, Cairo University: When you said that the military operations in the West Bank are in the process of achieving their objectives and will continue until they have done so, does this mean that the operations will not stop despite America's call to withdraw immediately, without delay? This will put you in direct conflict with the United States and may jeopardize Secretary of State Colin Powell's mission, which is designed to give you more time to finish the job. What do you expect later on, as far as the Israeli-U.S. relationship is concerned?

Sneh: Thank you for asking this question; it is an important clarification. I explained that this operation is vital to save the lives of Israelis. I gave some examples of what we have achieved thus far. We have taken the advice of the Bush administration under consideration, and we have begun to pull out. We even cancelled something we had planned. The entire operation is winding down, hopefully soon. Nothing will change or diminish our strong friendship with the United States or our profound respect for the president and his government. No one will drive a wedge between Israel and the United States of America. (Applause.)

My colleagues and I attend the funerals. I have to look the victims' families in the eye with the certainty that I have done everything possible to prevent the next terror attack -- the next suicide bombing. This is my first imperative and our top commitment as a government. At the end of the day, our responsibility is for the lives of Israelis.

Marvin Kalb, Harvard University: It is said here in Washington that one of the major reasons for the ongoing Bush administration initiative is a deep concern about the passions unleashed in the so-called Arab "street." It is said that these passions have the potential for toppling moderate Arab governments, including Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. Others believe that this analysis is exaggerated. What is your view?

Sneh: For domestic reasons, those governments cannot allow themselves to be engaged in any alliance that has a common denominator other than pan-Arabism.

Samuel Lewis, The Washington Institute: What happens when Israel does withdraw? Let us say it happens soon, when you feel that you can finish the job and accommodate President Bush at the same time. I gather from the prime minister's recent speech to the Knesset that he would visualize withdrawal to buffer areas fairly close to -- but outside -- Palestinian towns and cities. Then, perhaps troops would remain in those buffer areas while the fence gets built. Is this what will happen next?

Sneh: One option is creating a buffer zone along the old Green Line. That would enhance our ability to prevent terrorists from penetrating the border. Today, the Green Line is porous, and something should be done not to seal it completely, but to build obstacles that would make the penetration of Israel proper more difficult. Many favor building a real fence along the Green Line. And it can be built in some sectors of this long border.

What the prime minister spoke about is those buffer zones. They are security buffer zones. They have no political meaning because the political final status would be defined through negotiation.

George Hishmeh, former editor, Daily Star (Beirut): You mentioned the success thus far of the operation in the West Bank. But can you be sure that there will not be any more suicide bombings in Israel?

Sneh: No. There is no military action that can provide a comprehensive solution. I have no illusions about it, and I do not present the current operation as such. I present it as an urgent, life-saving procedure. I am satisfied with the results, but have no illusions about the long run. The blow we inflict on the infrastructure of terror may bring about a pause, not the permanent halt, to terrorism. The important question is how this pause will be used. Will it be used to enter a new phase of negotiations?

Hishmeh: How do you explain the growing popularity of Arafat among Palestinians and in the Arab world?

Sneh: A national leader in a time of confrontation that his people consider to be a national struggle will always have a high approval rating. The Palestinians have a sense of shared fate with the chairman, but they do not necessarily believe he is leading them to fulfill their aspirations.

Rand H. Fishbein, Fishbein Associates: There is a great deal of confusion about what Secretary Powell would like the Israelis to do. I would like to read a paragraph from the secretary's memoirs that you might want to raise with him when he arrives in Israel.

Secretary Powell writes:

"The lessons I absorbed from Panama confirmed all my convictions over the preceding twenty years since days of doubt over Vietnam. Have a clear political objective and stick to it. Use all the force necessary and do not apologize for going in big, if that is what it takes. Decisive force ends wars quickly, and in the long run, saves lives."

Sneh: Is this my autobiography, or Powell's? (Laughter.) With a terrible lack of modesty, great minds think alike.

Steven Cook, Brookings Institution: Things that are temporary tend to take on a more permanent nature. If Israel does withdraw and does build these buffer zones and fences, are we seeing the return of the political significance of the Green Line? And is that not a step toward the Saudi plan in terms of full withdrawal?

Sneh: A plan to build a fence and a physical obstacle along the Green Line was submitted to the Netanyahu government in 1997. It was rejected then for political reasons -- there are people who are afraid to redraw the Green Line.

But when you look at the map, you see that in many sections of the border, you have no other choice. In Qalqiliya, in Tulkarm, and in other areas, the border runs between neighboring villages, Israeli on one side and Palestinian on the other. It would be a mistake either to be afraid of the Green Line or to make it sacred.

When we come to drawing the permanent border in the context of final negotiations, the consideration will be pragmatic, not emotional, and will not refer to what has happened in the past. So I do not accept this fear of redrawing the Green Line.

Ultimately, what will define the strategic situation of Israel is not the border itself, but the security arrangements along that border. If, as I believe should be the case, an Israeli military presence is kept along the Jordan River, whether or not the Green Line is redrawn will not be very important. The security arrangements will make the difference. ❖

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