

Peace on Three Fronts

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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.



Brief Analysis

On September 16, 2000, Shimon Peres, Israeli minister for regional cooperation, former Israeli prime minister, and the longest serving member of the Israeli Knesset, delivered a keynote address at The Washington Institute's Weinberg Founders Conference. The following is a rapporteur's summary of his remarks.

Israel needs to make three different sorts of peace. The first, surprisingly, is at home, the second is with its neighbors, and the third is with the modern age. The three cannot be separated.

Peace at Home

Jews are not only the Chosen People but also a people with a choice. The Israeli choices in this peace process have not always been pleasant, but the choice, particularly that to begin negotiating with the Palestinians, was basically a moral one. Israelis felt deep in their hearts that it was wrong for the Jewish people to remain dominators of another people. Although there are some advantages gained by holding the West Bank and Gaza Strip, Israel could not remain a Jewish state and be a dominating country at the same time.

People have asked why Israel left Gaza, Hebron, and Nablus. Even though Israel has historic claims to these places, they are basically Palestinian cities today, and Palestinians should be left to run their own lives. Israel went to Oslo basically to correct a moral mistake. Israel cannot exist as the state of the Jewish people without a moral foundation. It was very difficult to make peace with Arafat, the head of a terrorist organization that killed many women and children. Even at the famous ceremony on the White House lawn in 1993, Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin's body language displayed revulsion at the handshake with Palestinian Authority (PA) chairman Yasir Arafat. Nevertheless, the deal was a great achievement if for no other reason than these moral considerations.

In Israel nowadays, progress is incumbent upon consensus, and one can only generate consensus by recognizing pluralism. Israelis have no choice but to accept the differences among them. These differences are not so much related to a religious/secular chasm, as much as they are a product of Israel's electoral system--the most foolish one in the world. In this system, an Israeli votes twice, once for a prime minister and a second time against him, that is, for a Knesset which will undercut the prime minister. Israel has a parliament of twenty parties, many of which have narrow interests and disproportionate powers.

Peace with Israel's Neighbors

Although Israel won five wars militarily, it did not win them politically. The Arabs neither won them politically or militarily. The wars were very costly and unproductive for both sides. The time has now come to bring an end to war as a means for interaction among nations.

Just as the wars were not perfect, the peace need not be perfect. Arabs speak of "Land for Peace," but the reality is that Israel gave back all the land and did not get back all the peace--not with Egypt, not with Jordan, and perhaps not with the Palestinians. Nevertheless, it is better to have an imperfect peace than a perfect war.

To date, Israel has given back land to Egypt and to Jordan, it has withdrawn from Lebanon, and it has even gone a very long way with the Palestinians. Gaza was under Egyptian control--they never gave it to the Palestinians. The West Bank was under Jordanian control--they never gave it to the Palestinians. In a strange way, history has given Israel the chance to help the Palestinians to become a people and state-in-being.

As things stand today, there are six weeks to translate the understandings reached at Camp David into a negotiated peace, an effort that would ordinarily take six months. It is one thing when people are talking, it is another thing when people are talking through lawyers. The negotiations have three possible outcomes:

1. A comprehensive agreement in the next six weeks.
2. A watered-down agreement enabled by ambiguity on the most intractable issues, leaving certain matters open for further discussion at a later date. Ambiguity permits co-existence--what cannot be solved today may be solvable tomorrow.
3. A failure. Should the talks fail to produce an agreement, there will not be a return to war or terror. War is out of the question for many reasons, none more important than the lack of material, political, and financial support for an escalation of the conflict. The Cold War is over. No super-power or former super-power is willing to serve as patron in event of another war between the Arabs and Israelis. There are no coalitions for war nor incentives for it. As for terror, Arafat was the head of a revolutionary organization, now he is the leader of a state-in-being. These two vocations are worlds apart. He has different audiences, he has more at stake, and he will not endanger what he has achieved. A unilateral declaration of independence is not an impressive option. The essential requirement for having a Palestinian state is an agreement with Israel, not a declaration; after all, the Palestinian Liberation Organization already declared Palestinian independence back in 1988.

The United States and President Clinton have used every occasion to try and bring the parties closer together. It would have been more desirable if the parties had chosen to come together without the president, rather than make him a negotiator.

Peace with a New Age in the World

Israelis and Arabs have to decide if they want the Middle East to come up to speed with the new world. Israeli peacemakers are not going to change the Middle East, rather the Middle East has to change itself. So far, change in the region has been profound and gains weight and importance with each passing day. Great change is still to come. One important problem is that the Arab intelligentsia have not undergone the same transformation as that of Arab economies: they have not adapted as well to the new age. The intelligentsia represent the future, and their change is of crucial importance. For instance, by the year 2040, Egypt's population will swell to one hundred and forty million. The only way to preserve the Egyptian nation from national catastrophe is by strengthening the economy. However, developing a more modern economy able to provide for the needs of its citizens requires the support of a modern society, including basic freedoms, modern sciences, economic transparency, and representative government. All of these things require an active role by Egyptian intellectuals.

In the new Middle East, land and history will lose out in importance to science and technology. People want to see peace not as a tree that provides shade, but as a tree that bears fruit. Setbacks and disappointments will occur, and people will lose their tempers. For the next generation, to imagine is more important than to remember; the opportunities of the future will eclipse the conflict of the past. For the generation now in power, history has been written about wars and bloodshed in red ink; the task now is to shape a future to be written in green ink. What is hidden in human potential exceeds by far the treasures hidden in the earth and its natural resources.

This report was prepared by Michael Moskowitz. ❖

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