

Peace on Three Fronts

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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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.



In-Depth Reports

Israelis have to make three different sorts of peace. The first, surprisingly, is with ourselves; the second is with our neighbors; and the third is with the age in which we live. The three cannot be separated.

The Arab reaction and that of the press have nothing to do with our own choice to try to make peace. Our choice was basically a moral choice. We felt, deep in our hearts, that it was wrong for the Jewish people to continue to dominate other people. Whether we gain or lose in the process of making peace, continuing domination would entail a loss.

In 4,000 years, Jews have never dominated another people, and the people who have dominated us disappeared from history. Why should we follow them? We are looking for an occasion to bring an end to our domination. Regardless of whether doing so is profitable, it is necessary. Israel could not remain a Jewish state and a dominating country at the same time. The two do not go together.

When people ask, "Why did you give back Gaza?" I respond, "Well, why should we remain in Gaza? What would we achieve?" Gaza is basically an Arab land, even if historically Jews may have a claim on it. It is a small piece of land, 220 square miles all told. There are today 1.2 million people who live there in misery and poverty. Why should the Israeli government be there? Why should Israeli soldiers be targets for Palestinian hatred, for stones, for cartridges? When Israel exited Gaza, the government was highly criticized in some Israeli circles, but today I do not know a single Israeli who would consider going back to Gaza. Similarly, why should Israelis be in Hebron or in Nablus, even if Jews have historic claims there? Those are basically Palestinian cities. Let the Palestinians run their lives.

The late Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and I went to Oslo basically to correct what we considered a moral mistake in our history. Israel had not set out to conquer land in 1967. It was attacked, it won the war, and so it won the land. But that is not a reason to make a victory into a permanent mistake. We knew that Israel had to exit the territories. We knew that Israelis had become used to being there, and we knew it would be difficult to relinquish the land. Yet, we felt it was our task to do so.

It was very difficult to make peace with Yasir Arafat, the head of the Palestine Liberation Organization, a terrorist organization that had killed many Israeli women and children. If you watched the ceremony on the lawn of the White House, when Rabin shook Arafat's hand, you saw his body language revolting against the handshake. After he did it, he turned to me and whispered in my ear, "Now it is your turn," as if to say, "I went through agony, now you have to

go through it." Maybe Arafat had the same feeling.

But this was a necessary step in making peace with ourselves. Please do not underestimate the value of the moral approach. We cannot exist as a Jewish people without a moral foundation. If you take away from us the moral code, very little will be left. So even if Israel gains nothing else in making peace, the fact that we will have gained ourselves is, in my eyes, a great achievement. I would not discount it. And that is what really led us to the first negotiation.

The second kind of peace is peace with our neighbors. Israel has been in five wars and won them all militarily, but it did not win them politically. The Arabs did not win them at all, neither politically nor militarily. The wars were very costly to both sides and led nowhere. The time has come to bring an end to war among the nations. The wars were not supreme, and the peace is not perfect. We should face that fact. Arabs say, "Land for peace," but whereas Israel gave back the land, it did not get back all the peace -- neither with Egypt nor with Jordan, and maybe not even with the Palestinians. But that does not matter. It is better to have an imperfect peace than to have a perfect war. Today, with Egypt, Israel has a peace with many shortcomings, but better a peace with shortcomings than the shortcoming of a war.

Israel gave back to Egypt all the land, all the oil in the Sinai. It did not get back all the commercial relations, all the trade relations that were promised. Israel gave back to the Jordanians all the water, all the land. Israel even left Lebanon unilaterally, and today there would be the basis for making peace, but for the Syrian occupation. Israel also went a very long way with the Palestinians. Gaza was under Egyptian control before it was under Israeli control, but the Egyptians never gave the land to the Palestinians. The West Bank was under Jordanian control before it was Israeli, but the Jordanians never gave the land to the Palestinians. Please appreciate the fact that we, in daylight, with open eyes, are supporting the creation of a Palestinian personality, of a Palestinian partner, of a state in the making.

We are not fools; we know what we are doing. In a strange way, history has given us the chance to help the Palestinians to become a people and a state. Yet I do not think we were doing them a favor. The fact is that you cannot make peace with only a plan; you must have a partner, and creating a partnership is more difficult than formulating a plan.

Making peace is, in some ways, like falling in love. First, you have to close your eyes a little bit -- if you open them completely, you cannot be totally romantic. Second, you have to be generous -- give flowers and champagne and the like. But the most important thing is that you are two, not one. Whatever you do, you must keep in mind that your partner has his own sensitivities, his own desires, his own expectations, so you cannot expect to win too much, because then you may lose your partner.

Time is an important element, both in relationships and in negotiations. There are things we could not do ten years ago that we can do today, like agreeing to a Palestinian state. For that matter, we cannot do things today that we may be able to do in another ten years. Finding a solution to the Jerusalem problem at this time is extremely difficult, because Jerusalem is no longer a political problem; it is a religious issue, and while the art of politics is to make compromises, the nature of religion is uncompromising. You cannot really have a compromise among three different religions. Each has its arguments, its clergy, its prejudices, its expectations.

I am not sure that we shall be able to come to an agreement on all the issues right now. As things stand today, we have six weeks to negotiate. This is too short a period of time to conclude the negotiations. Even to translate what is being called the understandings into a written document requires more than six months. It is one thing when two people are talking, and another thing if the two people bring their lawyers. You can talk within an hour, but if you have two lawyers, don't be in a hurry, because they are not in a hurry. To put down in writing what has been discussed takes quite a bit of time. So I can see the very complicated issue of Jerusalem remaining without an

agreement.

A second possibility is that maybe in six months we shall reach a watered-down agreement. Wherever we disagree, we can add a little bit of ambiguity. We cannot solve all the problems at once, so we shall negotiate later on. I am skeptical of this scenario, however, because of the shortage of time and the complication of the issue.

A third possibility is failure. But even in case of failure, the parties will not engage in war or terror. War is out of the question now for several reasons. All the Middle Eastern wars erupted from world conflict. The two superpowers were engaged in the Cold War. They used to support one party and then another party by arms, by money, by political support. The Soviets invested \$160 billion in the wars of the Middle East. Not doing so could have saved the Russian economy. And what did they actually do? What actually happened? Just the destruction of some generations of arms. Now the Cold War is over. I do not see any party supplying arms or money or political encouragement to go to war. So the possibility of another Arab -- Israeli war is over. The parties know, moreover, that previous wars ended up with high costs and no solutions. And add to that the fact that modern weaponry makes war even more complicated. So they do not see, today, coalitions for war, or incentives for it. And I am not impressed by this danger.

I doubt very much if the Palestinians will go back to terror. Arafat was a leader of a revolution. Today, he is a leader of a state in the making. There is a world of difference between these two vocations. When you are a head of a revolution, you make flamboyant speeches and use terror from time to time to get into the headlines, and the bureaucracy of the administration of a revolution is of a limited nature, some 800 or 900 people. When you are becoming a state, it is a different story. You must be careful with your words, and you have different audiences. The world is listening to what you are saying. The Palestinians have today an administration of 120,000 people. You have to make sure that they are getting paid, that they are getting organized. I do not see Arafat, a person whom I respect, endangering what he has achieved -- a structure of a state, a geographic address, a respected partner. I do not see him endangering all that.

I am unimpressed by the threat of a unilateral declaration of a Palestinian state; I basically think it is a mistake. The Palestinians decided on a Palestinian state back in 1988, so they have a declaration. They may have another declaration. To have a state, you have to have an agreement, not a declaration. And another declaration will not save or change the situation.

So as difficult as it may be, and as tense as the situation may become, I do not see a return to the old business of war and terror. Nor is this the time for a failure of the negotiations. Rather, we shall continue to negotiate with the Palestinians. They do not have a choice, and neither do we.

Moreover, just as time is an important factor, so too is age. Things that today look impossible may become possible tomorrow. When a girl at the age of four says she wants to get married, everybody will laugh. But when the same girl is age twenty-four, well, it becomes normal. So age is very important. And an entity that is four years old looks much different from an entity that has existed for twenty or twenty-four years.

Now, we have to make a third peace, which in my judgment is the most important one. Without it, we shall never have peace. We must make peace with a new age in the world. We and the Arabs have to decide if we want the Middle East to reach the rank of a new world.

I wrote a book entitled *The New Middle East*. Maybe that was the wrong name. The name of the book should have been *The Middle East in the New Age*. It is not that peace is going to change the Middle East, but that the Middle East has to change itself in the face of an entirely different age. The change is profound, and it gains importance every day. The basic change that the world has experienced is the evolution from an economy of land to an economy of brains.

When we made our living and prosperity and strength from the land, we had to organize ourselves as nations, as

sovereignties. We had to mark borders, to defend or extend our land, and to have armies to go to war to defend the land. An indication of being strong or weak was the land -- its fertility and size. That is no longer true. Agriculture went down over the last 8,000 years from being the occupation of 50 or 60 percent of the people to being the occupation of 1 percent of the people. Today tourism is more important than agriculture. Tourism today accounts for 20 percent of the world economy.

Once a nation's economy turns from a focus on land to a focus on brains, borders are irrelevant. Brains do not have borders, nor do they recognize borders. Actually, governments are becoming irrelevant to modern societies. They are too small to control the big issues. The world economy runs without governments.

The most important product of the global economy is speed. The faster you are, the more money you will make, because you save material, time, capital, work, and intermediaries. We are moving from the speed of voice to the speed of light.

There are many windfalls in this new economy. Arabs cannot stop it. When I published my book, some of my Arab friends claimed that the book represented part of a hidden attempt by Israel to dominate the Arab economy. President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt told me that some of his friends thought this was the case. But I say, "Gentlemen, you do not have economies. You have poverties. Who wants to control your poverty? We cannot control our poverty. Why should we go to Egypt to control the Egyptian poverty, or the Syrian poverty? We cannot control the Israeli poverty." Were Benjamin Disraeli today to tell Queen Victoria, "Madam, I brought you a gift: Bangladesh. Or, Pakistan," she would say, "Are you crazy? Who wants to control them?"

If a country wants to join the ranks of the modern economy, it has to compete globally with talents and innovations and free competition and free markets. Capital today moves without any say from the government. Multinational companies have become more important than governments. Markets have become more important than countries. Networks have become more important than markets.

If a country wants to be outside of that economy, so be it. But to be inside, it has to follow the rules. And Israelis would like to see our Palestinian, Jordanian, and Egyptian neighbors not be poor countries. On the contrary, we feel that the better off they are, the better neighbors we shall have. We feel very strongly that good neighbors are better than good guns. Why invest in guns if we can have better neighbors?

Again, the global economy is detached from geography and borders. But it depends upon the land economy, and upon infrastructure. You should have an infrastructure that permits the new pace of business to run uninterrupted.

The Middle East, unfortunately, has an infrastructure of war, not of peace. Actually, it is an infrastructure of the fear of war, which is even more complicated. War has a beginning and an end, but fear is endless. So everything in the Middle East is broken, twisted, mismanaged, and costly. The water does not flow in accordance with nature. The rivers do not follow borders. The rains do not go through customs. Pollution does not stop at the border, because the infrastructure today is regional, not national. We are moving from a world of enemies to a world of dangers. If you do not have national economies, you do not have national strategies. Look at the present dangers. Terror does not stop at the border, pollution does not stop at the border. Narcotics do not stop at the border. Even missiles do not stop at the border. There is no border that can stop missiles.

On the other hand, the things that make the economy fluid depend on an open infrastructure of tourism, telecommunication, air traffic, land traffic, energy, water, everything. We were mistaken when we negotiated with the Egyptians on the economic side about trade. Trade is totally unimportant. You know, we say that with Egypt we have a cold peace. That is not true. Egypt has a cold peace with the rest of the world. Egypt's total industrial exports total \$3 billion, one-seventh of the Israeli exports. But infrastructure will promote the economy, make it vital and modern.

Some people have said that the new Middle East is dead. That is also not true. I want to tell you what I believe about a new Middle East. To start with, I believe in new borders. I believe that the previous borders, made of barbed wire, of mine fields, of military positions, are irrelevant to our life. They are useless. You cannot separate hungry people from rich people by mine fields. What we have to have instead is not partitions, but cooperation. And we must build alongside the borders industrial parks, touristic attractions. I sincerely believe that a good hotel on the border will provide more peace and security than a military position. That is what we are doing day in and day out, quietly.

The Palestinians already have two industrial parks functioning in the Gaza Strip, and a third industrial park is under construction in Janin. A fourth high-technology industrial park is now being initiated. We have an industrial park, a qualifying industrial zone, with the Jordanians, that already employs 15,000 people. We plan to have more; we want to build, for the first time in history, different frontiers. It is there that the Middle East begins. Then we are trying, as much as we can, to help the Palestinians to introduce high-technology software. The Palestinians have today ten universities with over 50,000 students. I believe this is the hope for peace.

I have a story about intelligentsia. There are two sorts of intelligentsia, the intelligentsia of the past and the intelligentsia of the future. I can see very little use for the past. Two things lose their importance: land and history. Two things will usher in the future: potential in science, and technology. And I would like to see in the Arab intelligentsia more people focused on the future rather than the past -- with its glamour of nationalism, of strictness, of rejection, of grandeur is meaningless.

I know that many people are tired of us politicians appearing so much on television and believing that a photo opportunity will make us great. They are not impressed with our photogenic capacities. They are asking, "How about our bread and food?" They would like to see the peace not as a tree that provides shadows but as a tree that produces fruits. So on the one hand I am not disappointed with the way in which diplomatic negotiations for peace are proceeding. Clearly, every important thing has its setbacks, disappointments, people losing their tempers, but that is unimportant. It has been said, "You are as great as your conflict. You're as great as your quarrel." On the other hand, we have to build patiently, step by step, a new Middle East, or a Middle East that fits in a new age.

For the younger generation, to imagine is more important than to remember. We have some bad things to remember, wars and killings and generals and whatnot. History was basically written with red ink. We have to create a history written with green ink. I believe that is something we can achieve.

We have learned that what is hidden in human potential exceeds by far the treasures hidden in the earth and its natural resources.

So in these three assumptions, one of them totally unilateral, Israel is coming to terms with itself morally. The second, giving up wars that cost us so much in human terms and that killed so many young people, and instead building a new relationship, is achieved mutually with our neighbors. And the third, to bring the Middle East out of poverty and misery and loss and bitterness into a new age, is an attempt that should be made jointly with the rest of the world.

I am not a pessimist. Many people ask me if I am a sworn optimist, and I say yes, but it depends on what optimism is. If an optimist is a person who is optimistic about himself, he is not an optimist. He is egocentric. An optimist is a person who is optimistic about other people. And I am optimistic about other people. ❖

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