

Israel's Search for Peace and Security:

View from the Opposition

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Brief Analysis

Two Visions of Peacemaking: The fundamental difference between Labor and Likud lies in their willingness to take risks for peace. Likud believes that the first step toward peace is a change in the basic attitude of the Arab people toward the State of Israel, an evolution that will take a generation or two to ripen. Labor believes that government-to-government agreements with leaders that are willing to engage in real peacemaking can themselves change the environment and fuel change on the popular level. Viewed in this framework, Israel faces a choice: to refrain from serious negotiations until there is a complete change in popular attitude on the other side, or to take the risk of trying to accelerate that attitudinal change by making peace with Arab leaders. The Likud government accepts the first argument, which is based on a sort of utopian vision of security which requires no risk because it waits until circumstances have changed before taking political decisions. In essence, this line of thinking establishes a self-fulfilling prophecy of diplomatic failure, since it rests on the idea that the other side cannot be trusted until it undergoes decades of psychological transformation. The Labor party, by contrast, believes in a less perfect yet achievable peace. Israel is strong enough to take calculated risks for peace based on the country's strengths, capabilities, and resources. This type of peacemaking believes in the power of leadership to shape and mold popular opinion. Looking over time, from Camp David to Oslo, this is exactly what happened.

A Regional Perspective: Israel must view its security predicament within the context of the overall regional situation. An array of security issues currently threaten the stability of the Middle East. In Iraq, there is great potential for a major crisis, now that Saddam Husayn is trying to free himself of the international inspection regime. Concurrently, Iran's testing of the Shehab-3 missile, the acceleration of its nuclear program, and its continuing support to a growing network of ultra-extremist, fundamentalist and terrorist groups are all serious threats in the region. The Israeli-Palestinian peace process must be viewed through this lens. Given these other problems, Israel does not have the luxury of waiting for a utopian peace of changed attitudes everywhere in the Arab and Muslim worlds. Rather, Israel must take a pragmatic view of life in the Middle East and be aware of the fact that it is not the only partner in the process. If Israel is unable to disengage itself from the Palestinians, it may be faced with a South Africa-like situation, at best, or a Bosnia or Belfast situation, at worst. Thus, the challenge facing real leaders is to avoid this scenario and avoid losing all of the progress made thus far.

Peace Processes Program: The only way for Israelis to achieve personal security and for Israel itself to achieve overall national security is through a serious attempt to make peace, within certain red-lines, with Israel's inner ring of neighbors. This includes Syria, Lebanon, and the Palestinians. In some way, almost every aspect of the current challenges facing Israeli society -- e.g., economic problems, divisions between secular and religious Jews -- can be traced back to the stalled peace process. Conversely, momentum in the peace process could help correct these problems by increasing economic growth and foreign investment in Israel. These in turn could then give the government the surplus money it needs to fund solutions to the major social ills facing Israel.

Israel-Syria track: Achieving peace with Syria is strategically important to Israel's security and, regardless of its final

shape, will likely require making painful compromises. The extent of these compromises, however, cannot be theorized (much less determined) before knowing Syrian ideas and positions on the many outstanding issues, including Lebanon, water sources, terrorism, security arrangements, normalization, and the timing of the implementation process. If both Syria and Israel have the will to accomplish peace, then achieving peace -- without sacrificing Israel's security -- is possible.

Israel-Lebanon track: Israel has no territorial claims in Lebanon. The only obstacle to peace is meeting Israeli security concerns. While Israel wants to find a way to withdraw from southern Lebanon, its commitment to protect its citizens will not allow it to do so without addressing these security concerns. A possible solution to this impasse is to implement a phased withdrawal from southern Lebanon in which Lebanese forces would incrementally move into areas vacated by Israeli forces. A step-by-step approach would allow Israel to test the effectiveness of the Lebanese Army and build confidence about future steps. Of course, the great obstacle is Lebanon's lack of a "green light" from Syria, again underscoring the importance of finding a way to resume talks with Damascus.

Israel-Palestinian track: Israel needs to move past the second redeployment and toward final status negotiations. The "dragging of time" on the second redeployment is perhaps the current government's biggest mistake. Everything that Israel is going to achieve with a deal now could also have been achieved a year ago. The only difference is that the price for Israel is now higher: Israel is more isolated in the international community, U.S.-Israeli relations have suffered, trust among the parties has disappeared, and, further away, the nuclear threat has increased.

As for the question of a Palestinian state, this is an issue for the Palestinians to decide. The Labor party would let the Palestinians determine the exact shape and form of their political entity -- i.e., the manifestation of their "self-determination" -- once the relevant concerns (especially security) were resolved in final status talks. A unilateral declaration of statehood in May 1999 would damage the chances for peace. At the same time, final status negotiations -- or at least significant movement toward them -- may be necessary to avoid a violent explosion next May. All those involved should do everything possible to help prevent this eruption. But this will probably not entail a National Unity Government because Labor cannot align itself with the policies of the current government. A unity government would only be considered if it would lead to honest discussion and implementation of the peace process. That is currently impossible, however, because the present government is a hostage to the extreme right-wing and ultra-religious elements of its coalition.

> Demanding that the Palestinian Authority does a better job of fighting terrorism is the one thing that unites both the left and the right in Israel. Though it may be doing better now than in the past, it can still do a lot more. On this front, Israel must ask the United States to exert its influence on the PA.

Relationship with the United States: Israel is a sovereign nation and will not accept pressure from any country. At the same time, a majority of Israelis believe that President Clinton and the United States are great friends of Israel. This Israel -- an Israel that differs from the views of the Likud government -- believes in strong cooperation with the United States. Israel will need help from Washington in shaping final status talks and will need to align itself with America and other moderate nations against the rogue regimes still in power in the Middle East. Israel will also need U.S. support to modernize the Israeli Defense Forces for the coming century. Consequently, anything that damages Israel's relationship with the United States is also damaging to Israel's strategic security interests.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Adam Frey.

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