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## AFTER HEBRON: PROSPECTS FOR THE PEACE PROCESS

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### "Nibbling" Away at Israel

The Hebron agreement is now finally in place. During the months that it took to reach that point, some must have been reminded of what the nineteenth century British Prime Minister Lord Palmerstone once said about the Schleswig-Holstein question: there were only three people who understood it — one of whom was dead, one was in an asylum, and he himself had forgotten it.

Hebron was difficult and intricate, but is different from almost all other problems regarding Judea and Samaria. Therefore, it should not be regarded as a precedent or as a pattern.

Yasser Arafat used Hebron, very shrewdly from his point of view, and perhaps initially also helped by mistakes on the part of Israel, in order to gain points in matters which had very little to do with the Hebron issue itself. That seems to be the real explanation why Arafat stalled for such a long time before signing the agreement, though most of the significant points pertaining to Hebron had already

been agreed upon. When the U.S. negotiator, Ambassador Dennis Ross, urged Arafat on the night of January 2nd to finally make up his mind and sign, Arafat is reported to have replied: "I have more important things to do than signing the agreement."

It is no secret what these "more important things" were. Arafat wanted to extract from Israel an *a priori* undertaking with regard to the extent and timetable of further Israeli redeployment in the West Bank. This would have meant that Israel would have found itself without most of its assets and bargaining chips before the "final-status" negotiations had even started.

This, by the way, is one of the grave deficiencies in the Oslo agreements. Dr. Henry Kissinger said to me a few weeks ago that, under Oslo, the Palestinians felt they could just go on "nibbling" — that was his expression — till Israel would have little left by the time the "interim" agreement had run its course.

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### Danger Signals Ahead

We can already see some danger signals ahead for the peace process. I have good reason to believe that the late Mr. Rabin did not think — at least in the initial stages after Oslo — in terms of a total Israeli withdrawal to the 1967 lines, though this may have changed later on. The present government certainly does not think in such terms.

There is without any doubt a considerable difference between Palestinian expectations of the Oslo process and the Israeli perception. (This is without even begin-ning to consider differences on such matters as the Jerusalem issue and the seemingly intractable problem of the Palestinian refugees.) Add to that the Palestinian frustrations in the economic field. Therefore, some believe that a major crisis or even "explosion" in the peace process cannot be avoided, i.e., that it will occur sooner or later, regardless of which government is in power in Israel.

Being an optimist, though a cautious one, I try to believe that such an "explosion" can be averted, but one cannot disregard the possibility that it may occur. To the Arabs, for instance, "land for peace" means only one thing: full or almost full withdrawal as a precondition for peace, contrary to Israel's, America's, and most of Europe's initial interpretation of 242 — only the French supported the Arab-Soviet version. However, it must be clearly understood that Israel will not go back to its pre-1967, vulnerable, aggression-inviting borders.

With regard to Europe, it must be said that Europe, and especially France, are not always playing a positive role in the peace process. By almost consistently supporting the Arab position, Europe has caused Arab intransigence to increase, making itself an unhelpful player in the eyes of Israel and probably a nuisance in the eyes of the U.S. We in Israel, appreciating the importance of Europe, would have welcomed a more even-handed approach.

### Building Mutual Trust

Turning to the larger picture of the peace process, it will be for historians or lawyers to judge how well or how badly the Oslo I and II agreements were formulated, but the non-observance of some of the clauses in these agreements, especially those which were designed to be "confidence-building" measures, such as the non-extradition by the Palestinians of murderers of Israeli civilians, thus actually became confidence-destroying. Or take the matter of the Palestinian Charter which calls for the destruction of

Israel. It should have been abolished long ago, but it was not. The Charter may or may not be important, but by not canceling it as promised, it sends the wrong signals.

It has often been said that one of the main impediments to peace in our area is a mutual lack of trust. That may be true to a certain extent on both sides, but as far as Israel and Israelis are concerned, our Arab neighbors are doing very little to move this obstacle to real peace out of the way. Quite to the contrary, some Arab behavior in the last year has created growing doubts in the minds of not a few Israelis as to whether we and they share a common concept and understanding of the term "peace."

Maybe we should have been more realistic about it all along. The late Moshe Dayan told me after the signing of the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty: "Do not expect 'normalization' or warm and extensive economic or cultural relations. There will be an end to belligerency — and that is a great deal." Dayan was right. But by now, eighteen years after the peace treaty, it is unacceptable that there should be only sporadic trade relations and hardly any Egyptian tourism. Not long ago the Egyptian Minister of Culture declared that his country wanted absolutely no cultural relations with Israel!

When Mr. Peres spoke about his idea of a "new Middle East," the response in most Arab countries, but especially in Egypt, was frigid. Not only did most Arab leaders feel that, "thank you, we are all right with the old Middle East," but Egypt especially interpreted Peres's idea as a threat to her claim of hegemony in the Arab world.

### Must Israel Pay for Normalization?

The American writer and journalist Ambrose Bierce once defined peace as "a period of cheating between two periods of fighting." But Israel and the Jewish people, and perhaps most of the rest of the world, at least culturally, regard peace as an important aim in itself. While in the case of Israel, it is obviously a basic necessity, considering the rather dangerous neighborhood we live in and the reality of an absolute preponderance in numbers in the Arab states in comparison with us — in the Arab view, "normalization" is seen as a *prize* to Israel for which it must be made to pay, not necessarily in financial terms, but politically or strategically.

In many Arab minds there still exists a "boycott mentality." This means that when, for instance, there arise political misunderstandings or discords, instead

of trying to settle them according to accepted international procedures and norms that usually exist between states which are at peace, the immediate reaction in the Arab world is to threaten to throttle economic and other ties with Israel, such as they are, and perhaps even to reimpose the Arab boycott, which anyway still exists in some countries including Saudi Arabia.

This is accompanied by the unleashing of vicious propaganda against Israel and its leaders in the at least partially government-controlled media. For example, Professor Othman Alrawaf at King Saud University in Riyadh is quoted as saying: "Does Saudi Arabia support the peace process? The simple, immediate answer is — yes. But Saudi Arabia continues to refuse to be involved in any political or economic normalization with Israel." He continues: "While supporting the principles of peace, Saudi Arabia has emphasized its opposition to any political and economic normalization with Israel before the conclusion of a comprehensive peace treaty." In other words, it becomes a classic chicken and egg situation, only in politics, unhatched eggs can easily spoil.

#### **Pragmatic, Not Ideological, Acceptance of Israel**

According to Professor Shimon Shamir, one of Israel's foremost Middle East experts and its outgoing Ambassador to Jordan, the decision in the Arab world, or parts of the Arab world, to make peace with Israel has only been a *pragmatic* one, not an *ideological* one. In other words, the decision to make peace with Israel derives from a factual, practical conclusion that whether they like it or not, Israel is there, it is militarily strong, having defeated the Arabs in four wars, and is purported to have nuclear weapons. It enjoys military and technological superiority, established defensible borders as a result of the Six-Day War, is a purposeful and united nation, and — last but certainly not least — Israel enjoys a close political and strategic relationship with America. For all these reasons, the Arabs have concluded that de-facto peace is inevitable. Or, as Dr. Joseph Alpher has put it: The Arabs "have arrived at the political choice of a peace process through a recognition that Israel's capacity to defend itself rendered the military option counterproductive."

Thus, there has *not* been, at least not yet, an *ideological* change of mind among most Arabs to accept Israel's legitimate right — the Jewish people's right — to a national homeland in what many Arabs regard as an Arab-Moslem part of the world. The fact that there has not yet been an ideological change of

attitude, only a pragmatic one, explains why — contrary to what we once believed the situation would be — it is precisely the Arab intellectuals — the lawyers, journalists, doctors, and artists — who are the most negative towards Israel, while the man in the street in most Arab countries, including Egypt, makes no secret that he has had enough of war.

The danger in all this, of course, is that if any of the factors underpinning Israel's strength should materially change — and the present divisions in Israeli society are one such worrying and very dangerous possibility — or there is a lessening of support for Israel on the part of the Americans (though I do not foresee such an eventuality), or if Israel were induced to return to its vulnerable pre-1967 borders, or a combination of all or part of these, then the solidity of peace between Israel and its neighbors could suffer in direct proportion.

#### **Israeli Elections Improve Chances for Stable Peace**

In my evaluation, Israel's present prime minister is a pragmatist, not an unrestrained ideologue and certainly not a dogmatist, but he is not an opportunist. The difference between a "pragmatic" person and an "opportunistic" one is that the first is not devoid of ideological motivations, while the second one *is*. If Netanyahu sometimes seems to be encumbered by internal political complications — and he is — or if there have been some steps which arguably could be considered miscalculations, he should be given a chance to correct what has to be corrected, but basically should continue on the course he has set for himself, which most Israelis, at least Jewish Israelis, wanted him to embark on when they voted for him.

The cliché that "peace is the best security" distorts reality, and not only in the unstable Middle East. The opposite is probably true: it is security and the deterrent capability of a country which are the basic conditions for a lasting peace. To quote Henry Kissinger again, he once said that "The Israelis are ascribing to the concept of peace a Talmudic importance — though wars break out between countries living at peace with one another. If Israel becomes weaker than Syria, then I do not expect the word 'peace' to deter the Syrians."

In principle, the chances for a more stable and permanent peace have been enhanced by the election of a center-right government in Israel, and not the other way around, because, as in the case of the Israel-Egyptian peace treaty, *Israelis* will feel reassured that such a government would not be hasty in taking undue risks, while the former left-leaning government was perceived

as being a lot more susceptible to Arab pressure or promises. But the Arabs, too, should appreciate that any agreement concluded by a Likud-led, center-right government can be deemed final and permanent, because it will be based on a broad consensus, not likely to be challenged again. Though some of the recent political goings-on in Israel may have encouraged the Arab perception that the present government could be destabilized, they would be making a serious miscalculation which could ultimately endanger the peace process altogether.

The Israeli elections sent a very clear message, and a more than 11 percent majority among the Jewish population left no doubt about that. The message was: Yes, we want the peace process to continue — more slowly, more carefully perhaps. We do want it to go on — but under different management.

### The Future Status of the Territories

Back in May 1995 I addressed a Washington think-tank, saying that "the pendulum in Israel was swinging back to the center-right," and that the Likud had a better than even chance of becoming the next party of governance. There were some polite smiles in the audience. I also said at the time that "the question of whether a future Likud-led government intends to go back on the Labor government's undertakings under the Oslo and ensuing agreements had by then become largely irrelevant and redundant." I indicated that there would, of course, be some policy changes, especially with regard to Israel's vital security concerns. I explained in this context that a future Likud-led government would think about the "permanent status" of the territories in terms that would distinguish between full Israeli sovereignty in *certain* areas, to be classified as "security zones," which will be territorially linked to pre-1967 Israel and will include most of the settlements — and the remaining areas, for which it would consider alternatives to be based on Palestinian self-government of one sort or another. The Palestinians would thus have almost total self-government, which also fits the American concept as enunciated at the time by U.S. Secretary of State James Baker: "More than autonomy, but less than a state."

A small state like Israel cannot afford to embark on the first phase of a policy without being very careful as to what could happen in phase 2 or 3 of that policy. This may have been the main failure of the Labor party. Either they had no idea after Oslo I and perhaps even Oslo II as to where the whole process

was leading, or they could not or would not present their vision to the public. Also, Arafat did not help them a great deal.

I believe that the present prime minister sees the future in terms of some sort of separation, as do most Israelis, excluding the extreme right and left. However, the relevant question now is what *kind* of separation? Where? And what will be the status of the areas involved? As mentioned above, I imagine that the present Israeli government is thinking in terms of establishing certain "security zones" which will remain under Israeli sovereignty or at least effective control, whatever the status of the rest of the territories will be, and this is in conformity with both Camp David and Oslo as Israel sees them.

### The Syrian Track

I was told a few years ago by a senior official in the present U.S. administration that linked to the aim of achieving Israel-Syrian peace, the U.S. was set on disconnecting Syria once and for all from its ties to Iran, making it a permanent member in good standing of the American-led coalition in the Middle East. I have my doubts whether this is a realistic expectation, but one may expect the U.S. to make an effort, probably sooner rather than later, to pursue this course.

Israel has said that it would welcome an American effort to get the stalled Syrian track off to a new start, but without preconditions on either side. This perhaps requires some clarification: Israel has said that it wants to maintain its position on the Golan, but Israel has *not* said that it demands that Syria accept its position as a precondition for getting to the negotiating table — and once one starts negotiating, everything is possible.

Not so Syria; it demands that Israel undertakes *a priori* to withdraw from the Golan, all the way to the shores of the Sea of Galilee, including areas which Syria grabbed beyond the international border between Syria and Mandatory Palestine — otherwise it will not talk to us. Thus there is a basic asymmetry even between Israel's and Syria's respective opening gambits, and it will take a great deal of diplomacy to break the impasse, especially as there is some doubt whether President Assad, because of *internal* reasons, is really so eager to have peace, to open his borders to Israeli tourists, to establish full normal relations, etc.

### The Middle East will Continue to be Dangerous

It is important to remember that though there has been a great deal of misunderstanding, even derision, about what people in Israel and the West have said

about democracy in the Moslem world, it is an unsailable fact that democracies do not make war against each other; nor do they usually violate agreements. Obviously this is not always the situation in the Middle East. After all, as someone has observed somewhat wryly, what guarantee is there that agreements between Arabs and Israel would be more solid and stable than agreements between Arabs and Arabs?

If one talks about peace, especially if one considers the not very apt term so dear to our American friends — *comprehensive* peace — one may well ask how "comprehensive" can peace really be if it does not include Iran, Iraq, and perhaps others as well. Furthermore, without taking sides in the debate between Prof. Huntington of Harvard, for instance, and former Undersecretary of State Edward Djerijian, among others, about whether we face an unbridgeable cultural conflict between Islam and the West or not, it is clear that the Middle East will continue to be a mighty dangerous place for a long time to come. For this and other reasons, the *strategic* alliance between the U.S. and Israel will remain as important as ever, not because one must see in Islamic fundamentalism necessarily the equal of the former Soviet Union as a danger to both the U.S. and Israel, and not because Israeli troops will defend Bahrain against Iran or Kuwait against Iraq, but because a strong Israel is and will continue to be a vital factor for stability and peace in the wider area of the Middle East.

Even the more positive political and diplomatic developments in the region have unfortunately not eliminated the dangers facing us and others there. There are Iran's and Iraq's nuclear ambitions; there is international terrorism originating in Iran, Iraq, Sudan, Syria, and among various Palestinian organizations. All this will have to be reckoned with in the coming years. I believe there is and will be complete American-Israeli agreement on this.

On the other hand, even full peace between Israel and its immediate Arab neighbors cannot be regarded as an absolute barrier against future aggression from ideologically or nationalistically motivated states such as Iran or Iraq. On the contrary, as peace would go against the grain of the interests of those countries, as they perceive them, it could even bring about renewed aggression.

### Need for a New Realism

So, am I an optimist or a pessimist on the question of peace and stability in the Middle East? One must, of course, be an optimist, for the alternative is too dire to contemplate, but one should not be a foolish optimist, the sort of person who is optimistic only because he does not know all the facts. One fact, often disregarded, is that the Arab-Israeli conflict or the Palestinian issue really never were the sole or even principal causes of instability in the Middle East. Actually, out of the twenty or so wars and armed conflicts in our region since the end of World War II, Israel was involved in only four or five.

Our region has always been one of surprises. No responsible intelligence service, including Israel's, would take upon itself to predict developments in the next ten years. However, it is already evident that the visions of the "new Middle East" so dear to former Prime Minister Peres have lost their purpose, if they ever had one, and that they will have to be replaced by a new realism. Otherwise, the high hopes which remain unrealized will have an increasingly negative impact on politics in the region.

If I am nevertheless cautiously optimistic, it is because I believe that a strong Israel — strong economically, technologically, and militarily; an Israel in which the Jewish population will hopefully double within 15-20 years — is a positive factor in advancing peace. Furthermore, hopefully, our Arab neighbors' self-interest will gradually turn the present peace *process* into something resembling peace itself, provided they understand that compromise must be a two-way street. If their commitment to the peace process is not yet dictated by heart and soul, at least it is motivated by rational reasoning and by the realization that all other options are much less attractive.

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*Asher Friedberg*

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**Direct Election of the Prime Minister**

*Baruch Susser*

This article deals with the lessons to be learned from the change in the Basic Law: the Government which enabled direct election of the Israeli prime minister for the first time in the 1996 elections. It also discusses how this change has affected the style of Israeli political life. (Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, 1997; Hebrew). 31 pages; NIS 15

**Local Government in the Framework of a Democratic State**

*Haim Kalchheim*

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**Survey of Academics and 12th Graders in the Druse Sector**

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