

JERUSALEM LETTER / VIEWPOINTS

Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs

VP:102 22 Sivan 5750 / 15 June 1990

ISRAEL'S DOUBLY PRECARIOUS POSITION

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Now that Israel again has a government that sits with the confidence of the Knesset, it must turn to face its doubly precarious position domestically and internationally, analyze it correctly, and respond appropriately.

The International Scene: Erosion of World Support

The international situation remains the context as well as the realm in which Israel must act. Were Israel like New Zealand or some other far away, isolated country, it probably could go on from government crisis to government crisis of the kind that we have just concluded without much worry. Even Italy, a country that is not threatened by enemies, is able to go through government crises as a matter

of course, without even threatening its economic growth. Italy has moved to being the fourth largest economy in the world, surpassing Britain; in a largely underground economy, political stability may not be all that it is cracked up to be. Unfortunately, Israel does not have the luxury of New Zealand or Italy. We have to make decisions about critical issues that have to do with our survival, and therefore we are not in the same position.

There are several critical problems that Israel faces internationally. There is the erosion of world support for Israel's position, if not for Israel, in the wake of Arafat's peace offensive. None of us will know exactly whether Arafat's peace offensive is real or not until long after the event, perhaps

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when they open the archives in fifty years, perhaps never, but it seems that everybody, except most Israelis, a few of Israel's best friends, mostly in the United States, and maybe half of the Jewish people in the world, believes that Arafat and the PLO have recognized Israel in the most full and complete manner.

In the United States one cannot start a discussion with a government official who does not begin by saying, "but Arafat has recognized Israel." Now there are professionals in the State Department who will acknowledge that Arafat's wording presents real questions about that recognition, but one does not get that from the political level in any significant way unless they find it to their advantage to make that point in order to try and push the PLO a little bit. Certainly their public position is that Arafat and the PLO have recognized Israel, and that therefore Israel has to make an appropriate response. This is the prevalent belief. As we should know by now, prevalent beliefs are more important in determining the world response, including the response of leading opinion-makers, than anything else.

One only has to look at South Africa. It is quite clear to all who look that the black Africans in South Africa are not all united behind Nelson Mandela, that there are different groups in South Africa. Certainly he is one of the three or four major black leaders, but whether he should be hailed, as he has been, as the single leader of South African blacks is almost incidental because the world has made him into their single leader. The ANC has succeeded in scoring that victory for itself. Other people who have taken positions of leadership and may even be able to muster as many troops behind them in terms of numbers, demonstrations in the street, and the like are considered to be peripheral. Chief Gatsha Buthelezi, for example, commands the loyalty of five million Zulu and it is doubtful if the ANC commands the loyalty of many more than five million other blacks in South Africa, but it does not make any difference. Mandela is the man of the hour and he is cheered by

whites and blacks alike. His acceptance is not a result of the internal balance of forces, but it certainly changes that balance.

Israel is faced with the same phenomenon with regard to the Palestinians, the PLO, and Arafat. There are many reasons to be dubious about the PLO peace offensive and to proceed with caution, but it is hard to convey those reasons to the world without being labelled as opposing peace.

The Expectation that Every Conflict Can be Solved Peacefully

In Europe this erosion of support has affected both public and official opinion. It has been helped along further by the developing impact of events in Eastern Europe and southern Africa. These transformations, which were so unexpected, have changed people's expectations. There is now the expectation that every conflict can be solved and resolved peacefully. This optimistic assessment may not last, but it is not in any of our interests to hope that the situation in Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union, or southern Africa goes sour. It is in the world's interest, and we as part of the world share that interest, to hope that some kind of stability and democracy does develop in those areas, though that is far from being certain. Even if it does not happen in all of them, if it happens in most of them then the same set of expectations will prevail.

At the present moment almost everybody is expecting the best rather than the worst, other than in the Middle East. The question now is how does the West best deal with these new opportunities and transformed situations, not whether the transformations are real or not. There are some dyed-in-the-wool anti-Communists in the United States who still are saying that the change is superficial, but increasingly they are being relegated to the far, far right. Even the neo-conservative anti-Communists who were unwilling to accept glasnost and perestroika as real for the first several years are now either keeping quiet or have changed their tune and are saying, "We have to wait and see. It

looks like Gorbachev may be serious."

So the impact of Eastern European and southern African events leaves Israel increasingly isolated. Right now the world is still preoccupied with Eastern Europe. They will soon become more preoccupied with South Africa. If those two situations continue to move in the direction in which they have been moving, or even if they get to the point where the rest of the world says "a plague on you" because they cannot do anything more about it, sooner or later, sometime in the 1990s, they are going to turn their attention to Israel, again, rightly or wrongly, and they are going to say that we had better get our house in order, we had better make peace with the Palestinians, we had better solve our problems and stop being a burden on the world's conscience, interests, and pocketbook. We have to look forward to a situation in which we are going to be the focus of this kind of pressure. In the last few months we have gotten a foretaste of it from Senator Dole; he is only the beginning of what is likely to be a growing tide.

While it is true that in the United States, Congress remains solidly behind Israel and more suspicious of the PLO than any other part of the United States government, we are getting messages from Congressmen that their constituents' views are changing and they will not vote against a major shift in their constituents' views no matter how much campaign money comes from Jewish PACs and individuals. There is a tipping point; we do not know where it is. Fortunately, we have not had to test it yet, nor do we really want to.

The Shift in the United States Position

Recent statements to the contrary, in the most technical sense there has been no change in the U.S. position; it is the same position that has been articulated since 1967. In reality, however, it is hard not to conclude that there has been a change. Bush and Baker do represent a different viewpoint than that which was prevalent in successive American administrations from

LBJ onward, and certainly a very substantially different viewpoint than that presented by Ronald Reagan. Both Reagan and George Shultz had an instinctive sympathy for Israel, and even if they did not formally change American positions, they also did not emphasize those aspects of the American position crystalized after 1967 that were disagreeable to Israel.

It is true that, when Bush and Baker say that what they have been saying about Jerusalem has been the U.S. position since 1967, they are technically correct, but we never heard it emphasized by Shultz or Reagan. And it was not only because they were too wise or smart to antagonize Israel. They really did more or less accept the view that the Jerusalem issue would have to be negotiated at the end of a long negotiation but that the outcome was essentially a foregone conclusion. Therefore there was no point raising it. For Bush and Baker to have raised it is, in effect, a shift in position.

Both Bush and Baker are very much of the same mindset. Their perception of American interests point them in the direction of what we used to call the oil interests, that is to say, the recognition of American dependency on the Arab world for a great deal of oil. Nor do they want antagonism over Israel to bring them into confrontation with the Soviet Union, even though the Soviet Union has somewhat backed away from their Arab clients.

In addition, in my opinion, with Bush, Israel is back to the kind of situation that it had with Jimmy Carter. Both are people whose families have long been in the United States and who view the world strictly in terms of American conceptions of "fair play." This was particularly evident in the matter of Jerusalem raised by President Bush on 4 March 1990. When the Americans claim to take a mediating position but raise an issue that even the Arabs have not dared to raise yet because they figured the Americans would not be on their side, it is like saying to the Arabs, "ask for more." Bush's justification for raising the issue was that it is only fair play that everything not settled has to

be negotiated. My informants who are close to the president and are not easily fooled really believe that Bush's conception of fair play was that if something is to be negotiated, the neutrals cannot prejudice the case before hand, not at all understanding what the dynamics of his statements would be with regard to the Arabs' notion of what is permissible and what is forbidden to put on the table early and what to push for beyond that.

The fact of the matter is that Bush and Baker both recognized that, however their views are different from the previous administration, their timing on the Jerusalem issue really did turn out to be a mistake, especially since they did not expect the Jewish backlash in the United States. They were totally surprised by the extent of the American Jewish reaction on the Jerusalem issue. They expected Israel and Shamir to react strongly and, in my opinion, they had half a mind that their intervention might push things in Peres' favor, which shows how much people on both sides talk past each other even when they meet regularly.

Shamir and Israelis in general still do not perceive that when Americans are polite that does not mean they agree with them. For that matter, the Americans do not understand that the more you push Israelis, and especially certain Israelis, the more they are going to hunker down and become harder to deal with. It is not going to loosen them up, in fact it is more likely to bring previously neutral Israelis to the defense of those being pushed.

Jerusalem Neighborhoods or West Bank Settlements?

Bush actually studied maps of Jerusalem marked with all the new neighborhoods and the old "Green Line." He may not have been fully briefed on the dates when those neighborhoods were constructed, but he really considers those neighborhoods across the "Green Line" -- Ramat Eshkol, French Hill, Ramot, Gilo, East Talpiot -- to be West Bank settlements. That is a view which we have not heard expressed

by any U.S. administration at any time in the last 23 years. Even when they quietly discouraged the use of United Jewish Appeal funds in those neighborhoods, they did not do much about it. This is a first in that respect.

At least in part, the statements of Senator Robert Dole represent trial balloons from the Bush administration. Dole has been known to be that kind of hatchet man over the years, but he is also a point man, marking out a path for others to follow. Whatever his motivations, and they are complex, we will be hearing more from him.

Then we have Jimmy Carter who in trying to make his own comeback has returned to the scene of his only recognized success. Carter is not so naive; when he praises Arafat's efforts for peace, as he did when the two met in Paris, he is putting pressure on Israel by giving Arafat credibility (at least in certain influential circles) for being a moderate and being forthcoming that he would not otherwise get. It is reasonably certain that Carter talked with Bush's people before he embarked on this last set of trips to our region.

The media in the United States and in the rest of the world, who are even worse, are continuing to emphasize the downside of Israel. This remains their consistent point of view, although there has been some redressing of the balance in the United States, probably because of Jewish anger at the media's imbalanced approach which has scared the media a little bit. They do not want to be considered imbalanced even when they are.

The counter thrust to all this is the strong reaction of Jews on the Jerusalem issue. Apparently, no one in the administration expected that on that issue even Jews who were otherwise critical of Israeli policy would make the very demonstrable effort that they have made to reject the Bush and Baker statements on Jerusalem and to indicate that for them, too, Jerusalem was non-negotiable.

The Episode in the Christian Quarter

Unfortunately, the Jewish counterattack was undercut by the foolish adventure in the Christian Quarter which came just when Jewish protest over Jerusalem was at its height. It is hard to overestimate the damage that this episode caused.

Knowing Israelis and the degree to which they are isolated from the Christian calendar, it is quite likely that the people involved were entirely unaware of Good Friday or even of Holy Week. Israel is so much of a Jewish state that even more worldly Israelis are unlikely to be aware of the Christian calendar, any more than European or even American Christians are likely to be aware of the exact dates of Pesach. The matter is further complicated by the fact that the Christian churches themselves do not have a common date. Nor was the building itself a holy site; it is a rundown property most recently used for a residence, not even a hospice, which the Greek Orthodox Church has had on the market for some time. Jews had once lived in the building and in this century had lived across the street from it, where they maintained a synagogue with daily prayers. (I have this on the direct authority of my father and uncle, natives of the Old City, who used to pray there from time to time before, during and after World War I. The synagogue was maintained by the two extended families who lived there, both of Greek Jewish origin, and served, inter alia, the many Jewish merchants who owned shops on the Via Dolorosa.)

Nevertheless, even if the media overplayed the story, which they did, and were inaccurate in their reports, which they were, it was a gratuitous provocation for no possible gain. The involvement of the Israeli government only made it worse. As a result, we alienated many Christian friends.

One of the things that Israel's government crisis did by stopping the movement on the peace issue was to take Israel out of the headlines. Even if there were reports about the coalition formation troubles, they were on page 10 of the New

York Times and a little item on the subject once a week inside the daily press elsewhere. Unfortunately, other actions of Israelis put Israel back on the front page. Once again, Israel was partially rescued by foolish Arab militance, in this case the abortive raid on civilian targets in Tel Aviv by the Abu Abbas group on Shavuot.

There are still strong voices among the conservatives and neo-conservatives who are as hard-line on the subject of Arafat and the PLO as is Shamir. The columns of Charles Krauthammer, A.M. Rosenthal, and William Safire are stronger than anything that is being written in the mainstream Israeli press in their distrust of the PLO, of Arab intentions, of the whole PLO peace initiative. But even they cannot overlook Israel's foolish mistakes. Also, the general public in the United States still remains essentially sympathetic to Israel, though not necessarily in agreement with Israel's policies. But overall there has been a shift in the U.S. position which is truly worrisome and significant.

Continuing Arab Hostility Ignored

It is interesting that the Arab states have done nothing concrete to join Arafat's peace initiative except to say they back it. Had they been sincere, they could have made some costless symbolic gestures to indicate their turn toward peace. For example, this year they might have suspended their perennial effort to expel Israel from the United Nations, announcing this as a gesture to encourage Israel to make concessions for peace. This would have cost them nothing at all, since they had no chance of winning, but they continued their effort to expel Israel without any concessions. They do not even make any minor symbolic gestures to suggest that they are part of this peace offensive. It is quite extraordinary that the Arab states should be treated as if they are forthcoming when they have not been. It is also quite extraordinary that the United States has not said publicly that it would be more impressed with the peace initiative if the Arab states had also joined in it. Only after the hardline

Baghdad conference did Secretary of State Baker take any note of this, in testimony before Congress on June 13.

Indeed, the Saddam Hussein statement on his willingness to use chemical warfare against Israel really struck America very hard. Coming as it did on the heels of Bush and Baker's statements on Jerusalem, it very much strengthened the attitudes of the Jewish community that this was the time to rally around the flag, and even the media had to present it in a manner sympathetic to Israel. There were headlines everywhere, even in U.S.A. Today and other newspapers that do not normally treat Israeli or Middle East issues as automatic headline news -- this at a time when Israel has been for the most part out of the headlines.

The Arab world has continued to combine intransigence and threats. With all the changes that have occurred in the world today, the Arab world is probably the last region or cultural area in which there still are "crazies" visibly in power. It used to be that one could always point to two or three Latin American dictators who were really crazies. British comedies and, more recently, Woody Allen would always have some Latin American dictator doing something crazy and the audience would immediately think of somebody in power. But Latin America today, despite its many problems, does not have any crazies in power. Southeast Asia does not have any crazies in power and unless the Khmer Rouge take over Cambodia again there are none in the wings either. Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union have moved far in another direction. Even China cannot be said to have crazies for leaders. Africa, which followed Latin America in having more than its share of crazy rulers of one kind or another, is free of them for the moment at any rate (I do not want to predict that this is a new universal trend). The last crazies to rule in the world are to be found among Israel's neighbors. While people throughout the world recognize that Khadafi and Sadaam Hussein are what they are, nobody looks upon this as having any broader

implications.

The only bright spot in all of this is that the Soviet Union does not seem to be trying to stir up trouble or to be willing to back those who want to try to stir up trouble. Moreover, the countries of Eastern Europe have moved away from the PLO and toward new ties with Israel, changes that have been a plus for Israel.

In the First and Second Worlds there is a clear commitment to Israel's survival (as they say), but it is a sentimental commitment that has been made a matter of policy and there are strong disagreements about the means to insure that policy. Jews have learned from bitter experience that favorable sentiments are not worth much in a crisis unless Israel can take care of itself. The critical thing is that as part of the general thrust towards peace in our time, our friends have already given the Arabs more than they expected. So Israel's negotiating position is much more difficult than it was a year ago.

The Domestic Scene: A Failure of Leadership

The erosion in Israel's position over the last several years is principally attributable to a failure of leadership. Rarely has there been a situation where it has been so apparent that leadership can make a difference. Perhaps 80 to 85 percent of Israelis are not fixed in their positions vis-a-vis peace and the Palestinians, past a few bedrock principles regarding national security and Jerusalem. They represent a large vital center who could go one way or another depending upon where their leadership moves them under different circumstances, but the right leadership has not been forthcoming.

More than that, the leaders of both of the major parties, for very different reasons of their own, have sabotaged the peace process in one way or another, even though they truly seek peace. Peres began to sabotage the peace process when he left the prime minister's office after the rotation and has continued to do so in an effort to become the leader who makes

peace. Shamir, after coming up with an initiative that was acceptable to everybody, then proceeded to throw it away by sheer delaying tactics that allowed others to grab hold of that initiative, change its direction, and then force Israel to have to negotiate on terms that definitely were not part of the original initiative. Had Shamir been a different kind of leader, he could have moved ahead more quickly and seized the high ground where others would have had to respond to that initiative on his terms rather than on theirs.

That this failure of leadership can be explained in historical terms does us very little good. Israel's leadership problem is related to the fact that in many respects we are still living in the age of lieutenants after the age of the great captains. Great captains rarely prepare new captains to be their successors; they prefer to have lieutenants around them. When the captains pass on, it is the lieutenants who take over in the interim period but few, if any of them, can rise to be good captains even if they are very good lieutenants. We are living with lieutenants trying to be captains and they are not succeeding. Israel's trouble is that the transition period has stretched out far too long. It is one thing to have a five-year transition. It is another thing to have decade after decade, so it seems, of lieutenants.

Failures of Structure

Israel is faced with the negative impact of both situation and structure. The situation is that of lieutenants succeeding the captains. The structure is a system of government that creates the most delicate of balances or imbalances, that encourages maverick behavior on the part of ambitious people who do not have a chance to rise in the mainstream. Any ambitious Israeli politician can make the calculation that, unless he thinks that he can get to the very top within a major party, it is better to be first on a list of two than to be tenth on a list of thirty. To be tenth on a list of thirty, one does not know where one will end up, but to be first on a list

of two in the present situation, one is almost sure to become a minister. Thus the present governmental structure encourages the most extensive fragmentation possible.

Not surprisingly, politicians respond and behave according to this situation and structure. Politicians are certainly not less interested in survival than other people. Their survival is always more precarious and therefore they are going to behave the way they have been behaving for survival. It would take saints to resist doing things that really are awful and properly disturbing in a situation where survival is dependent upon them. This is no justification for what has been going on in Israel for the past three months and more but it is the right explanation.

Unless there were to be some drastic shift in people's voting behavior, which is not to be expected in the foreseeable future, the same situation is likely to persist and the structure is likely to encourage similar behavior. There will be two large parties and many smaller parties, some of which represent hard-core permanent interests like the haredim (ultra-Orthodox) or the Arabs, others of which are totally transient and have to do with individual ambitions.

The only thing that can change the situation would be constitutional reform, specifically the direct election of the head of the executive branch, whether called president or prime minister is essentially unimportant. Any democratic electoral reform would still leave a situation where there were at least two permanent groups, the haredim and the Arabs, having the balance of power. Just about every Israeli seeking reform is committed to reforms that would be democratic in character, (despite these scare public opinion polls that some like to run which ask bad questions and then sufficiently misinterpret the results to suggest that there is a different perspective). Nearly everyone agrees that both should have a vote in proportion to their strength, but few believe that they should have a veto over everybody else.

It really makes no difference if instead of the present situation where each of the

two major parties has approximately 40 seats and there are 40 that are scattered among ten to fifteen parties, one major party has 55 and another has 53 and only 12 seats are scattered. The latter still would have the balance of power.

The way to constitutional reform is to first introduce the direct election of the head of the executive branch coupled with a strengthening of the Knesset as an independent legislative body and then an electoral reform which in one way or another makes elected representatives responsible as individuals to voters, so that the voters can see them and say, "you did bad or acted against our interests; we will not vote for you next time." That will give parties the incentive to drop candidates like that. Now they drop people only for violating party discipline, if then. For example, the late Menachem Savidor, who, at a certain moment, was honest and faithful to his responsibility as the Speaker of the Knesset and ruled against his party, was punished accordingly and dropped from the ticket. We have to create a situation in which the parties will find it in their interest to punish people for being dishonest, not in punishing people for being honest.

Even though there now are real possibilities for reforms, there are limits to what reform can achieve. There is no way to solve what are essentially political problems through constitutional changes; that is to say, constitutional reform will not make the peace process simpler. It may be more possible for the government to make decisions, but that is a constitutional question, not a political question in the narrow sense of the term. There are major constitutional questions, the structural questions referred to earlier, which do need to be taken care of through constitutional reform, but doing so will still leave us with the necessity to make hard political choices. Constitutional reform should give Israel a better mechanism for actually making such choices and moving ahead with the resolution of issues one way or another.

To sum up, the 1960s were, by and

large, a period when Israel was up in the world, ending with the triumph of the Six Day War. The 1970s was a decade in which Israel became of concern to the world. It was on the front pages, it was still well-regarded, but there were matters of concern that had developed and were being significantly reflected in both Israel's international and domestic politics. Subjectively, the 1980s was a decade of international disappointment with Israel, and from the Lebanon war onward a turning away from the earlier image of Israel as an embattled Western David facing a barbarian Goliath. Domestically there also was a certain disappointment with many aspects of Israeli life, ranging from economic performance to governance to the peace process.

Now we are in 1990. 1990 is either the last year of the decade of the 1980s or the first year of the decade of the 1990s. Nobody has ever resolved that question chronologically. We have not yet resolved it politically either. On one hand, the new decade could bring great blessing. Israel has been granted as many as a million new olim who may come to this country in this decade -- a great blessing indeed. On the other hand, it may turn out to be a decade in which the turn for the worse that was taken in the 1980s may continue. To a very great extent the matter is in our hands. Whether or not we will have the leadership to do what has to be done and whether we will have the resources as a public to force the changes that are necessary that might, just might, produce that leadership is something that we will only know in the next few years.

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