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## CHANGING OPTIONS FOR ISRAEL/ARAB PEACE IN THE WAKE OF THE GULF CRISIS

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**The Volatile Middle East / Short Term Gains for Israel / What of the Long Term? / End of the PLO Peace Offensive / Still Need a Settlement with the Palestinians / A Palestinian State in Jordan? / Hoping for a New Palestinian Leadership**

### **The Volatile Middle East**

The volatility and unpredictability of the Middle East are not only legendary but have become cliches -- till we are reminded just how true these cliches are. The Iraqi invasion and occupation of Kuwait and the chain of events it set in motion is the most recent such reminder of how rapidly things change in that part of the world.

Barely seven months ago Israel had a national unity government whose premier and deputy premier were fighting over who's the boss, about to fall in part because of subtle and not so subtle American intervention on behalf of Shimon Peres in an effort to bring Israel to accept negotiations with the Palestine Liberation Organization *de facto*.

Four months ago, the United States was forced to break off talks with the PLO in the wake of an unambiguous

terrorist attack on Israel's coast masterminded by one of the principal PLO leaders.

Today, the United States and the world are preoccupied elsewhere in the region while Israel waits to see what Saddam Hussein may have in store for it. The PLO and the Palestinians have embraced the Iraqi tyrant, reenforcing the views of Yitzhak Shamir and his Likud party, that Yasser Arafat and his cohorts cannot be realistic partners for any kind of peace short of Israel's surrender. While the Israeli government still seeks to find "kosher" Palestinians with whom to negotiate, the peace process is, momentarily at least, in suspended animation.

### **Short Term Gains for Israel**

What is the balance sheet for Israel in all of this. In the short run, Israel stands to gain. Once again it can be

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seen as a strategic asset for the United States as the only stable democracy in the Middle East. After the end of the Cold War in November-December 1989, Israel's value as a Western strategic asset vis-a-vis the Soviet bloc drastically diminished. Now in the regional context it is revived, even though tactically Israel must keep a very low profile in what is, after all, an inter-Arab struggle.

Second, the PLO and the Palestinian cause both have been at least temporarily discredited. The PLO is locked into a close alliance with Saddam Hussein and has been very influential in keeping King Hussein of Jordan in the Iraqi camp. That has not gone unnoticed in the United States. Nor has the enthusiasm of the Palestinians in all parts of the world -- whether in Amman, Judea, Samaria and Gaza, pre-1967 Israel, Kuwait, or the "Arab lobby" (which is really Palestinian) in the United States -- for Saddam Hussein gone unrecognized, thus putting the Palestinians in direct opposition to U.S. policy and that of most of the nations of the world.

Third, the attention of the world and the United States government is directed elsewhere in the Middle East, away from the peace process, which had become so entangled by March of 1990 that Israel only stood to lose. This gives Israel a breather and the possibility of starting again under the present Israeli government, which does not have the internal conflicts of the previous one.

Finally, not only is the government of Israel more unified as a result of the breakup of the national unity coalition, but the entire Kuwait episode has strengthened internal Israeli unity. The true aims of the Palestinians to eliminate Israel are now widely recognized and the Israeli peace camp has been shattered as the result of the rapid endorsement of Saddam Hussein by the notable Palestinian leaders on whom they had counted in a peace settlement involving a two-state solution. Leading figures of that camp such as Yossi

Sarid, Yaron London, and Abba Eban have publicly indicated their disillusionment. Saddam Hussein's threats to unleash chemical and biological warfare against Israel have further united the Israeli population in the way that outside threats have done in the past. The extreme gravity of this threat makes those who support the Iraqis even more unfit in Israeli eyes.

#### **What of the Long Term?**

In the long run, many of these advantages will diminish or disappear, so Israel will have to make use of its short-run opportunities to develop appropriate long-range strategies to retain the most from its present gains. U.S. relations with the Arab states are changing and becoming closer. Egypt is becoming an even more important cog in the American Middle East strategy than it had been in the past and probably more important than Israel. The bad turn in the Palestinians' fortunes is likely to be reversed once the crisis is over as partisans of the Palestinians may argue that they could not have been expected to act differently given their frustration. Even now, many Europeans are refraining from blaming the Palestinians in the way that the Americans are, for supporting Saddam Hussein.

Finally, what happens in the Gulf itself will have a major impact on the long-term effects on Israel. Will Israel be dragged into a war? Will Saddam Hussein survive? Will Iraq's capability for mass destruction be eliminated? These are imponderables that cannot be answered at this time.

Under these circumstances, it is hard to talk about options and possibilities for Israel/Palestinian or Israel/Arab peace. We do so from a new understanding of the threat to Israel and Israel's security needs. Nevertheless, we who are interested in such a peace, like the Israeli government itself, must continue to pursue the possibility relentlessly, guided only by the realities of timing and by a realistic assessment of our situation and our adversaries.

### **End of the PLO Peace Offensive**

In doing so, we face certain imponderables. We still do not know just how serious the now-ended PLO peace offensive was. Some of the PLO leadership who worked so hard to advocate it may have been sincere in their efforts to change their organization's stance as well as the stance of the Israeli government. Others clearly, carefully at times, even brilliantly, used the peace offense as a smoke screen to pursue what have been called the salami tactics of getting Israel to weaken itself through a series of withdrawals to earlier borders prior to a final Palestinian assault on the very existence of the Jewish state.

For all their presumed acceptance of the existence of the State of Israel, the PLO spokesmen were careful never to recognize the Jews as a people with the right of self-determination, a claim they make unabashedly for themselves -- this despite the 3,500-year-long history of the Jews as a people. This is a critical matter where the rhetoric does reflect their understanding of reality.

It is far clearer how the Arab states, other than Egypt, made no concrete efforts to show their support for the PLO initiative, continuing their opposition to Israel on every plane every way as in the past, lending credence to Prime Minister Shamir's rejection of the whole business as a ploy. Had they made even a symbolic gesture -- for example, by abandoning their perennially unsuccessful attempt to expel Israel from the U.N. -- in support of peace, perhaps things might have been different. Even in 1989, at the height of the PLO peace offensive and after the Soviet bloc had ceased to stand monolithically with them, the Arab states went ahead.

### **Still Need a Settlement with the Palestinians**

But the matter does not end there. Whatever the final judgement of history or at least of historians about these matters, it remains clear to most Israelis that some

settlement has to be made with the Palestinian Arabs, at least with those in the territories, that will provide sufficient mutual satisfaction to bring about the cessation of hostilities if not "real peace." The persistence of the intifada alone tells us that. This is true even though the principal success of the intifada has been in its public relations, convincing the media -- the true arbiters of opinion in the world today -- that the Palestinians are oppressed underdogs and thereby encouraging them to emphasize a separate Palestinian identity for those Arabs west of the Jordan River, something that "plays" better than their older Arab identity.

I do not mean to sound cavalier about the real pain and the real aspirations of the Palestinians, quite to the contrary. They do need some reasonable kind of political self-expression. But as long as they continue to make bad choices as they have at every opportunity since 1917, including in the present crisis, others cannot save them from themselves. Once again it seems clear that Israel cannot make the kind of concessions that even the United States was pressing for it to make a few months ago. I must confess that up until the PLO resumption of terrorism and their embrace of the Iraqi adventure, I was beginning to think that a "two-state solution" (actually a three-state solution with Israel, a Palestinian state, and Jordan all in historical Eretz Israel/Palestine) was becoming unavoidable. Now that is no longer the case.

It is widely known that my way out of the dilemma was through some form of federal arrangement. While an Israel-Palestine federation is an impossibility, there are many other possibilities using federal arrangements. Even my hopes and efforts to encourage federal arrangements to link the Palestinians and Jordan within one state and to confederally link that state to Israel in limited but critical ways seemed to be as obsolete as the proposal that Israel could simply annex the territory west of the Jordan River without regard

for the political aspirations of the Arabs living within that territory. Today that is not so clear.

### **A Palestinian State in Jordan?**

King Hussein is caught in a vise between his Arab neighbor to the northeast, the Palestinians in his front and back yards, and his American patron, not to speak of Israel's interest in the separate existence of Jordan as a buffer state. Erroneous forecasts of Hussein's imminent downfall have resounded for nearly forty years so I will make no such forecast, but his situation looks more difficult than it has at least since the days of Nasser. There is every possibility that Jordan will become a Palestinian state either through internal revolution or through an Israel-Iraq war which would lead to Israel's invasion of Jordan in self-defense, in an effort to stop the Iraqis before they reached Israel's lines. In either case, the King is likely to fall and a Palestinian-dominated government be installed. If that has not yet happened, it may well be because the PLO does not want to make the case that the Palestinians already have a state of their own in "eastern Palestine."

A Palestinian state east of the Jordan would change the situation dramatically. The issue would become one of where to draw the border between Israel and "Palestine," not whether there should be a Palestine and where. In the process of drawing that border, it should be possible to determine what should be the working relations between the two states. In that case there would be some flexibility. Conceivably there could be maximum separation between the two states and their peoples, although there would undoubtedly continue to be an Arab reality within Israel and, at the very least, the two states would have mutual problems of control over resources, commerce and security. Hence it would be necessary to work out permanent appropriate arrangements between the two states.

On the other hand, if Jordan does survive as something other than a "pure" Palestinian state, the problem of political satisfaction for the west bank Palestinians still will have to be accommodated in connection with the east bank. Israel is likely to be even more resolved to prevent Arab sovereignty west of the Jordan. Then we may need limited confederal connections of the kind pioneered by the European Community as a means of linking states that recognize certain necessities of cooperation but do not want to develop more ties than are necessary.

While I believe that there will be a need for cooperation between Jews and Palestinians sharing the same land between the Mediterranean and the eastern desert, it is clear to me that neither people wants to be more linked than they need to be. Both want to develop their own separate personalities in their own ways. Indeed this is a laudable goal for both. Let us recall that federal arrangements were designed to enable continued separation as much as linkage. The alternative to that may not be separation but annexation by one side or the other. Let us recall that Palestinian nationalism is very much a part of the wider sense of being part of one Arab nation. If even the politically sovereign Arab states see themselves as part and parcel of the Arab nation, why should we assume that the Palestinians think any differently.

Basically we are still faced with a situation whereby Eretz Israel/Palestine is divided into three parts. One part is clearly Jewish, the second clearly Arab, and the third mixed. Both sides have important, legitimate and real claims. With the foregoing scenario, the mixed part can be divided up in the matter of a zero-sum game -- "I win, you lose" -- or vice versa. But it may still be much better to devise ways to share rather than divide that mixed segment of the land and its population.

### **Hoping for a New Palestinian Leadership**

To move in that direction at this point would require a new Palestinian leadership that would recognize its necessity. The emergence of such a leadership would probably depend on the outcome of the world's confrontation with Iraq. If that result actually brings about the rejection of Yasser Arafat, out of a combination of desperation and new Palestinian self-confidence within the territories, then we will have gained something from the intifada. By that time we will know whether Jordan has a future or not. Once again, we may

be standing at another point of stalemate in Israel-Palestinian/Israel-Arab relations or we may be at the beginning of a new chapter. In the Middle East it is folly to predict.

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Daniel J. Elazar is President of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs. An earlier version of this article was presented at the JCPA's Public Policy Day in Washington, D.C., September 6, 1990.

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