

JERUSALEM LETTER / VIEWPOINTS

Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs

VP:123 25 Tevet 5752 / 1 January 1992

THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE ABSURD AT THE PEACE TABLE

Daniel J. Elazar

Sauce for the Goose — Applying Different Moral Rules to Israel? / A Sinister Theater of the Absurd / How Bad Can the Americans Be? / Israel's Position in the Peace Negotiations / Explain Israel's Case to the World

Happy as almost all of us are that Israel, the Arab states, and the Palestinians are finally negotiating for peace face-to-face and grateful to the United States for its positive efforts to bring all the parties to the table, we must look at the peace process clearly. There are many minefields in front of us as we move forward and not a few are absurdities of our own making as well as the work of our great and good friend.

Sauce for the Goose — Applying Different Moral Rules to Israel?

The United States is a great nation, one that takes the moral dimensions of public affairs as seriously as self-interest. Unfortunately, every virtue carried to an extreme can become a vice, and the American moral stance has a tendency from time to time to become moralistic, which is an entirely different matter. That seems to

be what has happened to George Bush's view of Israel and Israel-Arab peace.

Word has it from the White House that President Bush believes that he was misled and betrayed by Yitzhak Shamir and the rest of the Israeli government with regard to further settlement of the administered territories. The Israelis, Bush claims, promised not to build new settlements and not to use American funds for activities beyond the Green Line. Then they turned around and, under the claim of expanding existing settlements, embarked on a massive construction program in the territories. Given the fungibility of money (that is, it is easy to use money for one purpose and thereby replace money to be used for another), they neatly got around the agreement with the Americans in fact, even if they did not technically break any promises.

Leaving aside the issue of the high level

Daniel J. Elazar, Editor and Publisher; Zvi R. Marom, Associate Editor; Mark Ami-El, Managing Editor.
13 Tel-Hai St., Jerusalem, 92107, Israel; Tel. 02-639281, Fax 972-2-639286. © Copyright. All rights reserved.
ISSN: 0334-4096.

The opinions expressed by the authors of Viewpoints do not necessarily reflect those of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs

of publicity that accompanied these actions which, as Americans would say, "rubbed the administration's nose in it," it is surprising and more than a little suspect that a seasoned practitioner of politics and foreign policy such as George Bush should respond moralistically to something like that. Is his response only a tactic? It is hard to understand the obsessive response he has made. What is the difference between what Israel has done and what the United States does when it promises not to talk to the PLO and then finds a way to talk to its leaders; when Secretary of State Baker promises to the Israeli government that the Palestinian delegation will not include PLO members and then "modifies" those promises in his discussions with the Palestinians; between promising Israel that America would take Israeli concerns about security in the Golan Heights very seriously and then apparently agreeing with Assad that Israel should withdraw from the Golan as well as on every other front?

Maybe the kind of diplomacy necessary in the Middle East is a diplomacy of "tactful weaseling"; in other words, making promises sufficiently vague so that they can be reinterpreted after they have been made to accommodate radically different viewpoints. Why, then, especially blame Israel for doing that in the case of the territories unless there are ulterior motives. Prime Minister Shamir has been more honest than diplomatic in making clear his government's position on future Israeli control over those territories. He deserves blame less than most.

Granted, the American position is equally clear, and President Bush even went so far as to gratuitously raise the question of east Jerusalem at a time when the Arabs were afraid to do so, even before he put the question of halting settlement activity on the table. He raised the latter after Secretary Baker had convinced the Arabs not to raise that as a precondition for the regional conference. Neither step reflects sympathy with Israel's position. Both threaten to turn the peace conference into an arena for pressing Israel unmercifully. Indeed, there are those of us who are convinced that George Bush has already torpedoed the peace process, intentionally or not. To treat Israel with pious moralism, as somehow violating the rules of the game by playing by the same rules as everyone else, has to be seen as an unfair tactic designed

to put Israel at maximum disadvantage in the eyes of the American public, where Israel's chief support lies.

A Sinister Theater of the Absurd

This is only one act in the sinister theater of the absurd known as the "quest for peace in the Middle East." In recent months Israelis have watched shocked as Secretary of State James Baker has gone back on his promises of the last year or two with regard to the nature and terms of reference of the conference, the character and status of the Palestinian delegation, the obligations of the United States towards Israel's security, and the commitment of the Arab partners.

All this was known to people "in the know" from the beginning. The word around Washington two years ago was that Baker was going to use his usual methods to get Israel to an international conference — those methods including all sorts of initial promises that would be aborted later when it was too late for Israel to back out.

Absurdly, Baker has done all of this on behalf of the Palestinians and other Arabs who have repeatedly demonstrated their enmity toward the United States, not only toward Israel.

How were the Palestinians "punished" for cheering on Saddam Hussein against the allied forces during the Gulf War or cheering the Communist hard-liners in their efforts to oust Mikhael Gorbachev this past August? By being given favored treatment and assisted to reinsert the PLO into the "peace process," international visibility and respectability, and virtual guarantees of American support for their position in the peace negotiations including the inclusion in fact of the PLO, if not pro forma. One need not even discuss the absurdity of the U.S. relationship with terrorism-sponsor Syria, or with Saddam's good friend, Jordan.

More absurdity: the Israeli government, aware of this, did not make it public or, perhaps better, start a counter-campaign in the world better presenting the Israeli position to win sufficiently in the battle for public opinion so that it could say "no" to Baker's shifts in position. Rather, it wasted its ammunition on who wins recognition to speak on behalf of the Palestinians, when it was clear that no matter what the formal agreement would be, the PLO would be in control of any Pal-

estinian delegation that would come to the conference. Moreover, the Israeli commitment to hold on to all of the territories at any price has prevented Israel from arguing even for U.S. guarantees of its minimalist position of not going back to the pre-1967 lines. (Now it comes out that 70 percent of the Jewish population in the territories outside of Jerusalem are on the 13 percent of the land adjacent to the old borders.) The Americans have made it clear that they expect Israel to withdraw so close to those lines that there is no difference between that and total withdrawal.

But that is not all. Israel absurdly pursued recognition by the former USSR when it was already almost non-existent, succeeding to the point where it was the last state in the world where a Soviet ambassador presented his credentials, rather than stating its position that the USSR could not be a neutral co-chairman because since 1950 it has never once been other than strongly, blatantly and militantly pro-Arab, or that Israel does not need to be recognized by a state that no longer exists. Instead, a colorless Soviet foreign minister who could hardly say that he represented anything but his president came to Israel and made it seem as if he was giving Israel a prize by restoring diplomatic relations.

How Bad Can the Americans Be?

Despite these and other difficulties, the meeting between Israel and selected Arab enemies did take place in Madrid. George Bush and James Baker, as its primary conveners, clearly asserted that they are in the saddle. The Madrid conference took place in the shadow of two events that should give us all pause. Exactly a week before the beginning of the Madrid meeting, a U.S.-engineered "peace agreement" for Cambodia was signed which provided that the Khmer Rouge, that murderous party led by Pol Pot that ruled Cambodia just long enough to kill two million of their country's seven million inhabitants in the world's most recent case of genocide, has every opportunity to return to power. And, just days before the conference, an agreement was reached between the British and Vietnamese to forceably return all Vietnamese refugees in Hong Kong to that still unreconstructed Communist dictatorship.

The American role in Cambodia is particularly deserving of our attention. Because of American

enmity toward Vietnam and desire to win over the Peoples' Republic of China, the U.S. continued to back the Cambodian rebels against the present Cambodian government installed by Vietnam as a result of the invasion that overthrew the Pol Pot regime. It did this in such a way that the Khmer Rouge was able to rebuild itself and reconsolidate its position as the strongest force on the ground among the Cambodian rebel opposition. The U.S. even voted year after year at the United Nations to allow the Khmer Rouge representative to keep the Cambodian seat rather than let it go to a Vietnamese-backed government. Contrast this with American moralistic pronouncements in so many other situations from South Africa to Saddam Hussein.

This capability of the United States to support one of the most murderous regimes in the history of the contemporary world without qualms should have aroused serious protest on the part of the American people, or at least among those self-appointed guardians of human rights in every nook and cranny of the world without regard to local conditions. It did not, even among those Americans who protest for every human "underdog" that they can invent, not to speak of whales, dolphins and spotted owls. None of them were aroused enough to criticize the American government on this issue.

Thus the U.S. administration has shown that when it wants to it will support even the most murderous groups so as to be able to check off another "regional conflict" as "solved." Worse, it can get away with it. No arguments of morality or humanity are likely to dissuade them and they will pursue their course with the most pious moralisms if they need to, making their target sufficiently a scapegoat so that it will seem to be only getting its "just desserts."

It behooves us to recognize that this is the reality we are confronting and not to fool ourselves that either the present administration or the American people will necessarily rally to our side if the chips are down. As we sit watching the Americans brusquely undercut promises made when it suits them, let us remember Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge.

A popular president, dealing with an issue of low interest to most Americans, has a great advantage in shaping public opinion. We should not let

George Bush gain that advantage uncontested. We must go to the American public and explain what Zionism is all about — that Israel is not a state with long-established borders suddenly seeking conquests but the result of a national liberation movement facing an implacable opponent who has fought us at every turn and lost, and who must take the consequences; that settlement has been the essence of our effort for more than a century; that Israel has only one established permanent boundary — that with Egypt established by peace treaty in 1979; that the territories in dispute are, in any case, in limbo from the perspective of international law; and that the compromises that will need to be made for peace must be negotiated first.

Israel's Position in the Peace Negotiations

In the wake of the Madrid meetings, Israel is faced with a very difficult situation that at the same time must be seen as an opportunity. The expectation that peace can be made under present conditions is visionary, to say the least. Successful peace negotiations have occurred only when there is not only a clear will for peace on the part of the parties involved, but the character of the peace is basically understood and only the details need to be worked out. That was the case at Camp David; it is emphatically not the case in our present situation. Thus, Israel must go to the negotiation table hoping that it will be possible to make real peace but prepared to resist a detrimental pseudo-peace.

To do so Israel must go to the negotiations with a plan. That plan (it certainly need not be publicized in advance) must include Israel's final fall-back position on new borders and security arrangements and should include appropriate federal arrangements between Jordan and the Palestinians and confederal arrangements between Israel and any Jordanian-Palestinian state that will be established to provide for the joint control of those things which must be shared by the two.

Israel must draw its lines in all these things realistically and then stick to them. At a certain point its plan will need to be made public and it will be necessary to indicate that these are red lines (not only on the map) which, if not accepted, will lead Israel to withdraw from the negotiations.

Explain Israel's Case to the World

As part of its negotiating strategy Israel must include a worldwide public relations campaign as a critical part of its battle plan. It must include a massive effort to get the world, especially the American people, to understand how small the territories involved are. For example, Israel should prepare maps of every metropolitan area of over a million population in the United States and Europe overlaid with a map of Israel and the territories so that people will have some better idea of scale. Such maps should be circulated in the print and electronic media of each metropolitan area and the best examples used on national television as well. (Showing that Los Angeles County is twice the size of the West Bank has got to make an impression.)

Israel must reiterate the point of who has attacked whom all these years. Its campaign should include the record of Arab alliances with the "bad guys" from Mussolini in the 1920s to Saddam Hussein in the 1990s. Israel has to mount a campaign to teach people that there were no fixed borders in 1967 and that all borders in the Middle East are new.

Israel must not waste its ammunition in the battle ahead. It must distinguish between what is critical and can be changed, what is critical but cannot be, and what is not critical. Fighting over form only to lose battles of substance is no help. Properly organized, Israel can survive the threats that the forthcoming peace negotiations bring and perhaps even gain movement toward peace through it. If Israel pursues its usual haphazard way of confronting problems of negotiations, it is likely to wind up not only having lost even what Israeli moderates believe is clearly necessary for Israel's security, but to have opened the door to the next war as well.

* * *

Daniel J. Elazar is President of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs. Among his most recent books are *Two Peoples — One Land: Federal Solutions for Israel, the Palestinians and Jordan* and *Federal Systems of the World: A Handbook of Federal, Confederal and Autonomy Arrangements*.