

Breaking the Mideast Deadlock

I. The Plan

“Israel assumes that retaining the territorial status quo is its optimal strategy, that only the necessary minimum should be surrendered at any given stage. But this is precisely the policy that led Israel to near disaster in the October war.”

To solve the conflict in the Middle East means to bring about a state of affairs that no side will be interested in challenging by force.

A solution may be proposed as reflecting the actual balance of power between the conflicting parties. Alternatively, a plan may be offered as a good approximation of what is taken to be a “just” solution. A just solution is, e.g., one that seems reasonable and fair to an impartial observer who empathizes with the claims of both sides and who is interested in the well-being of both.

I take *opportunism* to be the acceptance of a solution solely because it reflects the actual power structure of the conflicting parties. This position also implies recognizing any change in the balance of power as a justification for changing the agreed-upon arrangements. *Realism*, I believe, consists in the imperative that a solution be *both* opportune and just. A future change in the balance of power in itself does not justify challenging a settlement already arranged; while the fact of the balance of power must be taken into account if a solution is to be at all attainable.

I consider the following an outline of a realistic solution to the Middle East conflict: Israeli withdrawal from the territories occupied in 1967; demilitarization of Sinai and the Golan Heights; recognition of Israel by the Arab states—and the Palestinians; Israeli recognition of a Palestinian state in the so-called West Bank and in the Gaza Strip; and finally, a municipally united Jerusalem, as capital to both states. This solution will be referred to as the Two State Solution.

[THE GENEVA VS. THE STEP-BY-STEP APPROACHES]

THE DOMINANT CONTROVERSY among Israelis today concerns which is preferable, a “step-by-step” solution or going to the conference table at Geneva to negotiate an entire solution at once. This might appear to be a debate about tactics; it is in truth a debate about the goals themselves.

It is clear to the Israelis that if there is any chance for an agreement with the Arabs, it will have to be more or less along the lines of the Two State Solution outlined above. It is not at all clear that this will satisfy the Arabs, but it cannot be doubted that they will not settle for less.

Thus, some might wish to go to Geneva in order to undermine once and for all the Two State Solution: this in fact is what the Israeli right wingers are after. Some might wish, on the other hand, to go to Geneva to *achieve* the Two State Solution: this is true of several elements in the

Palestinian



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Israeli Left.

There is also a third alternative. It consists of the wish not to go to Geneva at all, and so to evade the Two State Solution altogether: this is what the Israeli government's policy is all about. The Israeli government is held back by the prospect of having to bear the responsibility for, and face the consequences of, the failure of the Geneva talks should they break down.

[THE OFFICIAL ISRAELI POSITION]

THERE ARE DISAGREEMENTS WITHIN the Israeli cabinet. Outwardly, however, it speaks with one voice only: it unequivocally favors Kissinger's step-by-step approach. The main reason for this preference is to "gain time." This in effect was the reason cited by Israel's Premier Rabin when he spoke of the "seven lean years" awaiting Israel. In reality, the need to "gain time" is based on some, or all, of the following assumptions:

1. *It is assumed that* the effectiveness of oil as a weapon, which now looms large among the Arabs' bargaining positions, will fade away in the next few years, mainly as a result of discovering and developing alternative sources of energy. This will lead to relative European independence—and to complete American independence—from Arab oil, and consequently to the weakening of the Arabs' bargaining position in future negotiations.

Comment: It is possible that the importance of oil as a political weapon will indeed decrease with time. The time involved, however, might be too long for Israel to be able to struggle through. England might significantly reduce her dependence on oil (due to the North Sea fields) in five to seven years; not so France, West Germany, Italy and Japan.

Israeli



Dr. K. Meyerowitz/Israeli Consulate

There is another side to the coin. The weapon of oil will likely be cashed into weaponry proper. That is, the Arab oil-producing countries are going to purchase—in fact have already begun to do so—huge amounts of armaments. They will do so because, for one thing, they see nothing better to do with their petrodollars: serious investment in economic development goes against many of their rulers' interests owing to the changes in traditional social structures such investments would produce. Also, the "confrontation states," notably Egypt, will undoubtedly exert considerable pressure on the oil-producing countries to purchase ever-growing quantities of arms. Regardless of who purchases them, these arms are bound to surface against Israel if the conflict is prolonged. It is not at all clear how Israel can afford to match such a massive and effectively costless Arab military build-up.

2. *It is assumed that* the U.S. is currently plagued by isolationist tendencies. Political commitments by the U.S. to foreign countries are, in the post-Vietnam era, extremely unpopular. There is at present no President to speak of—at any rate not a strong one. It is therefore worthwhile to wait until 1976 in the hope that by then America will have a strong President—like Henry Jackson. A strong President, who will be capable of seriously considering a military intervention against the oil-producing countries, and of taking a tough position toward the USSR—so the argument goes—is likely to strengthen Israel's bargaining position considerably.

Comment: The Israelis have always felt that the office of the presidency of the U.S. is much too important to be left to the Americans. A "strong" American President who is less vulnerable domestically could be much tougher in pressuring Israel if it seemed to be in his interest. (Such a "strong" President could be, e.g., Edward Kennedy.) The present American administration is, in fact, as favorable to Israel as the Israelis might wish. The gamble on Jackson might prove dangerous, especially if he is not elected.

3. *It is assumed that* if Israel persists in maintaining an uncompromising, negative position concerning negotiations with the Palestine Liberation Organization, there may come about a change in the Arab world which might reverse the Rabat resolution (recognizing the PLO as the sole representative of the Palestinian people) and revert to King Hussein as spokesman for the Palestinians at negotiations.

Comment: This, in my view, is the most mistaken—as well as the most dangerous—assumption. The Rabat resolution is irreversible. Moreover, it gathered considerable momentum with the UN recognition of the PLO. Israel simply has to face the fact that Hussein does not represent the Palestinian people. The idea of reverting to Hussein is, in my opinion, a consequence of the shortsightedness of a *realpolitik* which sees the conflict as one between governments, completely ignoring the historical perspective which tells us that it is in truth a conflict between two nations.

4. *It is assumed that* the present government of Israel cannot make significant concessions to the Arabs and still remain in power: it is too weak. Going to Geneva with the aim of achieving an agreement requires the ability to make such concessions; a succession of interim agreements does not. The alternative to a piecemeal solution negotiated by the present government is a government of the Right which

will plunge Israel into an immediate war. Thus, one of the functions of the step-by-step option is to buy time to enable the present government to establish the authority it needs for making future concessions. This argument is voiced by people from the Labor party, the dominant faction in the present government.

Comment: There is much truth in this argument. The trouble with it is, however, that it is a self-fulfilling prophecy. That is, the weakness of the government is partly due to its lack of an unequivocal and firm stand regarding a resolution of the conflict. Rabin's fear of new elections is a major source of his weakness. It seems to me that there is, in Israel, a yearning for a government which has a clear sense of its aims. If Rabin's government firmly backed the Two State Solution, I believe that it would stand a fair chance of carrying the majority.

5. *It is assumed that* the Arab unity achieved during the October war is temporary. It is bound to disintegrate sooner or later because of inherent conflicts of interest among the Arab countries themselves. It is in Israel's interest to hold out until that happens. This process might be accelerated if Syria can be neutralized once a separate deal is made with the Egyptians. Also, and more importantly perhaps, this policy will weaken the USSR's position in the area because it will expose the Russians as a power capable of supplying arms for war but in no position to impose, or to help bring about, peace.

Comment: There is no evidence that this Arab unity is temporary. On the contrary, it can be argued that in a future war it might even be more effective. After all, the oil embargo was imposed by the oil countries—led by Saudi Arabia—only at the *end* of the October war; next time they might well rally from the start. Besides, it is, in my judgment, a grave mistake to hope for Egypt to detach itself irrevocably from Syria, or even from the Palestinians. The price Israel might appear to be willing to pay to get Egypt out of the conflict will only constitute a constant invitation for more Egyptian pressures on Israel.

6. *It is assumed that* the American interest, as represented by Kissinger or Ford, is against going to Geneva and in favor of the step-by-step approach. This is explained by the U.S. desire to keep the USSR out of the scene and to impose a prestigious *Pax Americana*. Hence, Israel's policy in support of the piecemeal approach will ensure the continuation of the American military and economic aid which Israel cannot afford to risk losing.

Comment: This argument is true as far as American support of Israel is concerned. At the same time it is a mistake to believe the Russians will sit doing nothing.

U.S. policy is based on demonstrating to the Arabs that although the USSR can supply them with weapons, it cannot regain lost territories for them. The USSR wants to demonstrate that the opposite is the case. The way to do this is in Geneva with the Americans. What they must prove is that to be a client of the USSR is as good as being the client of the U.S. If the U.S. tries to act alone, the Russians will do their best to curb the Americans' efforts. They may do it through the Syrians and the Palestinians, or through helping Qaddafi-like colonels in Saudi Arabia to topple Faisal. In any case, they would try their best to prevent a *Pax Americana*.

7. *It is assumed that* a failure of any one of the steps in the step-by-step approach would still leave open the option of going to Geneva. A breakdown at Geneva, by contrast, would leave open only the option of war. And since there is at present no guarantee of American acquiescence in the case of an Israeli preemptive strike, or any strike for that matter, it is essential to play it safe.

Comment: True. And yet, going to Geneva should, I believe, be taken as a calculated risk rather than as a risky calculation.

8. *It is assumed that* retaining the territorial *status quo* is, at any given time, the optimal strategy for Israel. Now, since present circumstances preclude an *absolute* stalemate, only the necessary minimum should be given up at any given stage, while the rest of the territories are firmly held.

Comment: This is precisely the policy that led Israel to a near disaster in the October war.

[THE WISHFUL-THINKING SCENARIO]

WHAT, THEN, IS THE FAVORED scenario of the Israeli leadership?

Stage I. Negotiations with Egypt. Israel evacuates the strategic passes in the Sinai (Mitla and Giddi) as well as the Abu-Rudeis oil fields, which now supply about 55 percent of Israel's oil. In return, the evacuated areas are demilitarized and Israel is given American guarantees to help supply and finance its oil from alternative sources (most likely from Iran).

Israel's primary demand from the Egyptians is for a declaration of non-belligerency. It is conceivable, however, that if Egypt will *not* comply, Israel will settle for some revised version of the old armistice agreements which existed between Israel and its neighbors from 1948 to 1967. In Israel such an agreement can be presented as tantamount to the desired non-belligerency declaration, while the very existence of a precedent to such an agreement between the two countries might facilitate Egypt's acceptance of it. Such an armistice agreement would probably contain clauses stipulating the steps to be taken for the continuation of negotiations. It is also hoped that Egypt will tacitly agree not to tie such an agreement at this stage with concrete concessions to Syria and the Palestinians, and that a vague reference to future negotiations with them will suffice.

Stage II. Negotiations with Jordan concerning the mutual borders in the north and south (e.g., Akaba) rather than the West Bank. The idea is that by agreeing on several symbolic acts, Israel and Jordan will demonstrate to the world—and to the Palestinian inhabitants of the West Bank—that they can talk and reach agreements, whereas no such feat can be expected in dealing with the PLO. This accords well with the interests of both Jordan and Israel, since, so the argument goes, it will eventually induce the world, as well as the West Bank Palestinians, to turn to Hussein as Israel's partner in negotiating the future of the West Bank.

Stage III. An attempt to negotiate with Syria (which might be simultaneous with Stage II). Here the idea is to be willing to agree to some token continuation of the

process of disengagement of forces—perhaps the evacuation of a settlement from the Golan Heights, the evacuated area passing on to the UN, rather than to Syria—just so that the Syrians would be satisfied that the process of Israeli withdrawal from the Golan is moving forward.

Suppose that this scenario materializes. What is its ultimate goal? Besides several territorial principles Israel considers essential, the overriding consideration is to prevent the creation of a Palestinian state—especially if it involved dealing with the PLO. In my view, the Israeli leadership wants desperately to circumvent the Palestinian issue at almost any cost. It is willing to make concessions to Egypt (and to a certain extent, to Syria) which I consider excessive, if what they seek in return is the severance of Egypt, and possibly Syria, from the Palestinian issue.

The objection to a Palestinian state is the main reason for the rejection of the Two State Solution by the Israeli government. The other ingredients of this solution, namely the withdrawal from Sinai, and even from parts of the Golan Heights, encounter much less opposition both in the government and from the right wing. In my view, this policy is contrary to all “logic of security”: clearly, to the extent that Israel is endangered, it is by the armies of Egypt and Syria, not by a prospective Palestinian state.

Let me proceed now to examine the Israeli objections first to the creation of a Palestinian state and then to any form of dialogue with the PLO.

[WHY NOT A PALESTINIAN STATE?]

THE STANDARD ARGUMENTS IN ISRAEL against the creation of a Palestinian state alongside its eastern borders can be outlined as follows:

1. *It is argued that* the ultimate aim of the Arabs is—and always has been—the annihilation of the State of Israel. The creation of a Palestinian state in the West Bank area is one significant step in the direction of achieving this goal. The Palestinian people will not be satisfied with a state as conceived along the lines of the Two State Solution; their state will be committed to “reconquest” almost by definition.

Comment: It is an historical irony that the fear of “piecemeal conquest” was the standard Arab argument against the various partition plans for Palestine proposed prior to the creation of the state of Israel. It was contended that the Jews accepted these plans only because they furthered their long-term scheme of taking over the whole of Palestine, if not the whole of the Middle East.

As for the Arab aim of annihilating Israel, I propose to distinguish here between *willing*, as accompanied by a commitment to act, and *wishing*, which is not accompanied by a commitment to act. I believe it is incumbent upon Israel to make sure that there be at most a wish, not a will, on the part of the Arabs in general, and of the Palestinians in particular, to see Israel destroyed. I think that the creation of a Palestinian state can be instrumental here.

I am not convinced that this state will necessarily be irredentist. The desperate nature of the Palestinian struggle stems largely from the simple fact that they have nothing to lose.

2. *It is argued that* even if the majority of the Palestinians accept the idea of a Palestinian state as contained in the Two State Solution, there will always remain some factions (such as the PFLP) which will continue to oppose it and to launch terrorist activities against Israel. Israel will then retaliate; the same old story will continue.

Comment: Among the Jewish community in former Palestine, too, there were movements which opposed the UN resolution concerning the partition of Eretz Israel. However, once the State was declared, everyone went out dancing in the streets, and all pockets of resistance soon melted away. There is no guarantee, of course, that this is what will happen in the case of the Palestinians, but I think it is quite probable that a similar process would take place. At any rate, this is, in my view, a risk that Israel simply has to take.

3. *It is argued that* a Palestinian state is bound to be under strong Soviet influence. This will mean the introduction of sophisticated weapons systems, including missile sites, at locations where Israel, and especially its air force, cannot afford to have them.

Comment: It is far from certain, I believe, that the Palestinian state would be Soviet-dominated. It is at least as likely that it would depend economically on the oil-rich Arab countries, and that they would exert considerable pressure on it to force Soviet influence out.

In any case, a clear-cut clause in the Israeli-Palestinian covenant should stipulate that any introduction of foreign troops (including Soviet “volunteers”) is an unequivocal *casus belli*.

[WHY NOT TALK WITH THE PLO?]

THERE IS NO DOUBT IN MY MIND that Israel is right in its refusal to talk to the PLO *on the basis of its present declared policy*. No Israeli Jew in his right mind is willing to give up Israel itself and replace it with an Arab state encompassing all of Palestine, which is what is currently envisioned in the PLO program. The fact that the PLO promises it would be a democratic state leaves the Israelis cold, and rightly so. (The Rightists of the “Greater Israel” movement make similar promises to the Arabs who would inhabit the expanded Israel of their dreams.)

The declared policy of the PLO is, I submit, the exact counterpart of the Israeli expansionist right wing. The PLO policy promises full citizenship rights to the Jews who would find themselves in an Arab state; the Israeli expansionists promise full citizenship rights to the Arabs of the greater Jewish state. Each side assures its own followers, with a wink of the eye, that the “demographic problem” will somehow be resolved.

What is at issue, therefore, is not a dialogue with the PLO on the basis of its declared policy, but rather a dialogue with it on the basis of various hints and indications to the effect that the PLO would in fact be willing to consider something like the Two State Solution. Several experts, both in government circles and out, contend that there *isn't* any chance that the PLO will reverse its publicly declared policies. “They mean what they say, and what they say is what we heard from Arafat at the UN.”

It may be so. However, if this is indeed the case, then

it is all the more reason for Israel to take the initiative towards a solution along the lines of the Two State Solution. If it were accepted by the PLO—well and good. If it were not, then the most Israel stands to lose is its bad reputation.

A sound procedure for reconvening the Geneva conference might, in the light of the above remarks, involve an appeal to both Israel and the Palestinians to accept the two pertinent UN resolutions: Resolution 242, which recognizes the right of Israel to exist, and the recent amendment which calls for the creation of a Palestinian state. These resolutions have been supported by a majority of UN members, including the Arab states. Israel, however, did not accept the resolution regarding the Palestinian state, while the PLO refuses to accept Resolution 242 in its entirety. Thus, the suggested appeal is truly directed to both sides, and compliance with it—which is no simple matter for either side—could serve as a basis for the negotiations.

The almost standard Israeli retort, that the PLO might recognize Israel for tactical purposes only, and that the value of such a recognition is merely nominal, can, it seems to me, persuade only the persuaded. Concessions of symbolic value are at least as hard for the PLO to make as are those of substantial content. If they will say out loud that they recognize the state of Israel, that should count as a good piece of evidence that in reality they do.

One more thing. Many Israelis have always felt that the real partner for the crucial negotiations on the Mideast conflict is the U.S. and not the Arabs, let alone the PLO. Ben Gurion's dream of a defense treaty with the U.S.—unexpectedly resurrected in recent days—is regarded as a substitute for a treaty with the Arabs, which many Israelis consider worthless anyway.

The assumption behind this line of thought is that such a treaty—which would include a massive “Marshall Plan” and lend-lease arms arrangements—would constitute a golden opportunity for the Egyptians to opt out of the conflict, their excuse being that they can fight Israel but not the U.S.A. As for Israel, it is recognized that such a treaty, more than anything else, will induce it to make significant territorial concessions.

But American intervention to rescue Israel has nothing to do with a signed treaty; it hinges on American interests. In 1957, John Foster Dulles sent a “letter of understanding” to the Israeli government promising to keep open the Straits of Tiran to Israeli cargo. When Nasser blocked the Strait in 1957 the Americans said that “they couldn’t find the letter.” That is what “understandings” are worth. To Americans, Israel is strong partly because it does not request U.S. troops in time of crisis. “You send us weapons, we shall do the job,” is the Israeli motto. A treaty would be understood as a commitment to send American soldiers. Americans would resent such a treaty, and it would weaken Israel.

[FROM SETTLEMENT TO RECONCILIATION]

ISRAEL'S UNWILLINGNESS TO recognize the Palestinians and the Palestinians' unwillingness to recognize Israel are both largely fed by the reciprocal feeling that to recognize the other somehow detracts from one's own legitimacy.

Both sides have rightful claims. Both have an equal claim to the whole of Eretz Israel (or Palestine). The solution therefore must consist of a partition. It must be a partition because the conflict is in its form and essence *national*, and thus must be solved in terms of a national conflict, i.e., in terms of the right to self-determination. By the right to self-determination, I mean the need to separate conflicting nations, and the right of each nation to live its own life without submission to the other. This means that Israel has no right to determine how the Palestinians should lead their lives. And the Palestinians have no right to “liberate” Israel from Zionism. A solution to the national problem is the first condition for the dissolution of the national problem.

It is perhaps ironic to be reminded today that it was none other than David Ben Gurion who back in 1937 spoke of a socialist federation of the area's nations, which would in time bring about the dissolution of the area's separate nation-states (see Ben Gurion's memoirs, Vol. IV, Am Oved, 1975). It is this ultimate vision which should be the guiding light for any interim solution which will do justice to the present and to the future.

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Palestinian



Jack Madvo/UNRW

Breaking the Mideast Deadlock

II. The Prospects

“The impasse between Israel and the Palestinians is complete. Palestinians support the PLO, which offers no program Israel could possibly accept. Israel, in turn, refuses to deal with the PLO. And under the occupation, Palestinian political expression has been carefully controlled or suppressed.”

Israeli



The “game of nations” in the Middle East has many players, and most of them see the stakes as very high. So high, in fact, that they will accept virtually any risk to attain their national goals. This is true of the two nations whose local conflict serves as the focal point for a complex network of interests and antagonisms, Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs, each claiming national rights in a single territory. It is no less true of the imperial states. The major oil producers can hardly remain aloof from the local conflict, whatever the private preferences of their ruling groups. Consequently, the structure of power in the industrial world is sure to be affected, and may even be determined, by the outcome of the conflict.

It is a simple matter to sketch a “scenario” that ends with the destruction of the local contestants or even with the century’s third and final World War. The “confrontation states,” Egypt and Syria (with Jordan a reluctant partner), realizing that their occupied territories will not be regained through negotiation and political accommodation, may move towards war as their only option, particularly under conditions of domestic unrest. In a state of heightened tension, Israel might strike, sensing that the issue is survival. The pattern of October 1973 is not likely to recur. The government of Israel, isolated internationally and facing a worsening power balance, may find itself unable to sustain an arms race against an adversary of unlimited wealth. Under such circumstances, a pre-emptive strike may seem the only reasonable move, whatever the consequences.

To cast a wider net, consider the interests of the United States. A fundamental principle of American policy is that the incomparable energy reserves of the Middle East must be under the control of the United States and its international oil companies, or at the very least, that its industrial competitors not gain privileged access to these reserves.

Stephen Shames

by Noam Chomsky