

# THE ARAB-ISRAELI PEACE PROCESS: A CRITICAL EVALUATION

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### INTRODUCTION

Perhaps the most important product of the Arab-Israeli peace process, which commenced at Madrid in 1991, is that the ice has been broken and the previous taboos ignored. To be sure, the process remains in progress and perhaps it will for a very long time to come, even after peace treaties are signed. Yet, the fact remains that it is no longer a zero-sum game, but a process of adversaries adjusting to each other over the terms of the compromise.

One curious historical accident was the confluence of the rise of both Arab nationalism and Zionism in a proximate time towards the latter half of the nineteenth century. The two young and rising movements, with totally opposed goals, were bound to clash. Young and inexperienced, the leaders of both movements could not come to terms with realities on the ground. Further complicating matters were the sense of betrayal on the Arab side and the seemingly total support of the West for the Zionist cause on the other. That both sides now seem to be able to transcend the historical confrontation and to talk, bargain, agree, disagree and even compromise has been the most important development. This is not to say that the peace process, even now, eight years after Madrid, is truly out of the danger zone. Powerful forces of rejection remain, not only among religious and secular political forces outside government circles, but also within government circles. The vote of 47-31 with 24 abstentions within the Israeli Knesset on the 13 December 1999, is not only a display of how divided Israeli society is, but sends powerful signals, even sustenance to the rejectionist forces on the other side<sup>1</sup>.

It was perhaps the Arab defeat in 1967, where the idea of Arab national security collapsed, that drove home to President Anwar Sadat and, in degrees, later to other Arab leaders that the West will not abandon its support for Israel and that it ensures Israel continues to have a qualitative military edge. In the beginning, only Arab readers truly understood the enormity of the 1967 defeat and the determined Western will in total support of Israel. Much ambiguity still remains among the Arab masses even today about the implications of the defeat which explains, at least in part, why powerful resistance to the peace process remains on the popular level.

Incidentally, resistance to the peace process exists not only among fundamentalist Islamist forces, but also among nationalists, liberals and in the middle class intelligentsia. Thus far, these forces are sceptically watching the peace process proceed and waiting to see what the result may be. Two important developments helped bring about this attitude: the first was the collapse of the Soviet Union and the seeming triumph of the capitalist model of democratisation and market economy; the second was the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait and its aftermath.

The triumph of the West and Western technology and weaponry was amply displayed, not only in the violent Iraqi-Western conflict, but also in the West's continued physical military presence in the region and the continuation of sanctions against Iraq. Whatever lingering doubts may have remained following the defeat of 1967, were brutally dispelled in the

aftermath of the 1990 Gulf Crisis. In this conflict, not only was an Arab country defeated but also, more importantly, the defeat was made possible by the active support and participation of Arab armies. The fiction of a national Arab security umbrella was totally shattered.

In response to the Arab cry that the West, and principally the United States, was using different measures between the Arabs and the Israelis, President George Bush outlined to the American Congress on 6 March 1991 American determination to work towards bringing an end to the Arab-Israeli conflict. That address not only emphasised the United States commitment to work towards a peace settlement, but also delineated the principle parameters of that possible settlement. Doubtless, it was also designed to counter the cry of 'double standard' heard in the Arab World.

With Russian co-sponsorship, the American administrations of both President Bush and Bill Clinton, have been very active in pushing both parties, Arab and Israeli, towards reaching a compromise. The compromise, obviously, will be somewhere between the aims of the two parties. From the beginning, the Arab side rested its case on legal grounds. These included UN Resolutions 242, 338 and 425 and other resolutions. The Arabs continue to insist that no party, however powerful, can be exempted or exempt itself from the provisions of international law and United Nations resolutions. Such a development, should it occur, would be a dangerous precedent for would-be future powerful states to rely upon. If Israel can do it, why cannot someone else do it in the future.

Israel, on the other hand displays, its theoretical adherence to international law, yet it insists that all matters should be negotiated bilaterally. The United States in particular and the West in general has supported it in this approach. Both Israel and the West, however, are aware of the unevenness of the two sides not only militarily, but also politically and even economically.

The Palestine question, now as before, remains the core of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Its difficulty of resolution stems not only from its deep historical roots but also from the conflict's intense emotional content and the sanctity with which both sides view the land itself. Many Arabs emphasise that Palestine, all of Palestine, is a Moslem trust and that no one, no ruler or combination of rulers, can compromise it. It is thus that the conflict transcends the matter of a dispute over a piece of territory or real estate, to that of a conflict over the very soul of the area. In part, this explains Arab leaders' willingness to have the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) take the final responsibility for negotiating a deal over Palestine. This also explains why the Arab leaders since the Rabat Summit Conference of 1974, have insisted, against Jordan's reluctance, on shifting this responsibility to the PLO. It was only in 1988 that Jordan finally agreed to relinquish its administrative and legal connections and thus disengage from the Palestine question, though of course other ties remain. Incidentally, many Jordanians also insist that it is the business of the Palestinians to decide the fate of Palestine and take responsibility for whatever compromises need to be made.

The 1988 Jordanian disengagement decision facilitated not only the Palestinians taking charge of their own affairs, but also, by implication, facilitated the entire idea of reaching a settlement with Israel too. Over Palestine, Israel now has to negotiate with one party only, the Palestinians. Also facilitating the process was the fact that the United States, from 1967 on, succeeded in excluding not only the United Nations but also any other outside power from interfering in the peace process. Of course many, Europeans and others, resent or claim to

resent their exclusion, yet the fact remains that it is the United States, with the fiction of Russian sponsorship, that is the active partner, facilitator and mediator.

## ISSUES

In the second week of December 1999, President Bill Clinton declared that an agreement had been reached between the Syrians and the Israelis to resume negotiations. Later it was revealed that the Israeli Prime Minister, Ehud Barak, and the Syrian Foreign Minister, Farouk Shar', would meet in Washington on 15 December 1999. The Prime Minister of Lebanon, Salim Hoss, also welcomed the Israeli-Syrian intent to resume negotiations, linking the negotiations between his country and Israel to the outcome of the Syrian-Israeli talks. With these developments, the possibility of achieving a comprehensive peace came into sight.

Lingering doubts, however, remain. Doubts that have to do with the intent of both sides of the divide regarding the future. It is very important to sign treaties and covenants, for these are declarations of intent regarding the future. Yet, these are mere pieces of paper unless there is the intent and the will to honour them.

The most important problem is that of attitude: how to grasp the historical opportunity and how to change the entrenched citadel mentalities. This is the more troublesome since the question of Palestine for both parties is at once territorial, political, economic, military and, above all, religious.

While against the Arab side one often hears the charge decrying rigid so-called Islamic fundamentalist attitudes, little mention is made of the rejectionists on the Israeli side. A quick glance at the Israeli political spectrum reveals that the three major political trends of Israeli society remain highly ideological, steeped in biblical Zionist roots. The Israeli Left, the Labour Party, now called One Israel, led by Mr Barak, the secular Right led by Ariel Sharon of Likud, and the third major trend, the Religions parties of the Right, are all ideologically motivated. Worse still, the three major trends also believe that Israel controls all the options and holds all the cards.

Also on the ideological level, there is the fear of peace on the part of large segments of the population of both Israel and the Arab world. Underlying this fear of peace, of course, is the fear of both sides of the divide, of being 'Middle-Easternised'. The question is more than that of geography transcending location to the issue of national identity. Fear exists on the part of both many Arabs and Israelis that their identity be submerged in a new Middle Eastern identity above all others. The Arab fear is further intensified because of the strong links between Israel and the West and the former's insistence that it is mentally, politically and socio-economically part of Western civilisation, though geographically located in the Middle East. For the Arabs, the fear of a Western cultural invasion is a reality with Israel in its vanguard.

Since the peace process began, the fear on both sides of being swallowed up by the other remains. The fear on the Israeli side of drowning in an Arab Moslem sea is a genuine one explaining, in part at least, its fear of justly settling the refugee issue, and its strong emphasis on security matters. It also explains Israel's insistence on maintaining its qualitative military edge, indeed its disguised hegemony over the entire area. Many Arab intellectuals, supportive of the peace process, question these Israeli attitudes, wondering whether Israel wishes to become part of the region or merely its master.

In considering these issues around which the peace process revolves, it might be worthwhile reiterating once again that both parties are traumatised, albeit due to different historical circumstances. Such a situation also explains the mixture of myth and reality, the lack of logic and the obstinacy one encounters in the whole process. Surely, Western input, important as it is, remains uneven with the charge that a double standard is maintained in dealing with both parties to the conflict.

## EGYPT

Even with Egypt, twenty years after signing a peace treaty, the peace remains a cold one with both countries eyeing each other with suspicion, even fear. Here the major issue is that of weapons of mass destruction, especially nuclear. Israel remains one of the very few countries reluctant to sign the non-proliferation treaty and to co-operate in having the Middle East area a nuclear free zone. Another major issue is Israel's sustained attempts to keep Egypt out, or at least to marginalise her role in the peace negotiations. Efforts that, while unsuccessful because of Arab states' need for Egypt's input, increase Egyptian and Arab fear as to what Israel ultimately wants. Israel chooses to forget that, from time immemorial, Egypt has played a major political and security role in the area.

## JORDAN

With Jordan, the peace alternates between cool and lukewarm. Five years after the signing of the Wadi Araba Peace Treaty between the two countries, the situation has changed little. On the formal official level, the peace is a reality with Jordan actively supportive and earnestly attempting to build its edifice. Yet on every issue, the peace has not become a reality on the mass level nor has it reached the conscience of the people.

Jordan's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Planning, Rima Khalaf, in a lecture, 30 September 1999, at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, said, "... Now, five years after the Treaty was signed, things do not look as good as even what the modest scenario had portrayed ... where did our projections go wrong?" To begin with, the anticipated peace dividend remains illusive and, in fact, the standard of living has dropped. No only for Jordan, but also for all the regional economies, the impact of peace has not been positive while the anticipated regional projects failed to materialise.

Specific issues between the two countries remain in search of answers. Chief among these is Jordan's concern regarding the Palestinian right of self-determination and that the Palestinian economy and society do not remain captive to Israel. For Jordan, unlike any other country of the world, the Palestinian issue is not a foreign policy issue but a domestic issue, since the Palestinians in Jordan are Jordanian citizens that have a share in its socio-economic and political life. History, geography and demography condition Jordan's involvement with the Palestine problem. Other states can wait and view the issue with dispassion, which is not the case with Jordan. It is not only the emotional attachment of both the East Jordanians and Palestinians to the symbolism of Palestine and Jerusalem, but also vital interests are involved and remain unresolved, in spite of the signing of the peace treaty. The delineation of the borders of the emerging Palestinian state and the necessary security arrangements are of immediate concern to Jordan. Whatever the outcome of the Palestinian-Israeli negotiations, it is on every level and every issue, a matter of vital interest to Jordan. Thus far the Jordanian attitude, even after the commencement of the Final Status negotiations on the Palestinian-Israeli rack, is 'wait and watch' while insisting on safeguarding its own interests.

Because of the composition of the population of Jordan, divided almost evenly between East Jordanians and Jordanians of Palestinian origin, the refugee issue is of prime concern. Jordan's official attitude rests on United Nations Resolution 194 of 1948 emphasising the right of return and compensation for the refugees.

The question of Jerusalem, which King Abdullah II has emphasised repeatedly, is of vital interest to Jordan. While the Jordan-Israel peace treaty grants Jordan a special status on the Holy Places, that status remains shrouded in ambiguity awaiting the outcome of the Final Status negotiations. Jordan, in the words of King Abdullah, insists that the city can become the capital of both Israel and the Palestinian state. The issue of Jerusalem transcends that of symbolism in as much as it is highly intertwined in the psyche and the emotional make up of the Arabs.

Other issues between Jordan and Israel remain. Water, economic and commercial relations, and regional development are all issues either partially resolved like that of water or totally unaddressed, as yet.

## PALESTINIAN

The Palestinian issue remains the heart of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The difficulties in reaching a solution remain great for they involve not only interests and sovereignty over lands, but also historical emotional baggage of vast proportions. For the second time since the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1917, a change of the borders in the area is imminent: the first change being the creation of Israel in 1948.

That a Palestinian state is slowly and painfully emerging cannot be doubted. Yet, because of continued Israeli attempts to go around, indeed even to disregard the need to abide by United Nations resolutions, especially United Nations Security Council Resolution 242 of 1967, the outcome of the negotiations between the Palestinians and the Israelis remains ambiguous. Israeli vacillation, hesitation and determination to hold onto every centimetre of the land continue to throw a dark cloud over the entire process. It was obvious from the start of the peace process that dividing the negotiations into bilaterals and multilaterals was designed to give the greatest room for Israel to manoeuvre, advance or retreat at will. Since Oslo and the ensuing agreements on the Palestinian track and the arrangements for withdrawal (which the Israelis insist on calling redeployment), the situation is more confusing and obfuscated.

Israel continues to wrap its attitude vis-à-vis the issue of Palestinian self-determination in a cloud of uncertainty. Not only does it remain unclear as to the extent of Israeli withdrawal, but also Israel remains reluctant to withdraw in such a way as to allow for any geographical continuity of the emerging entity, both between the Gaza Strip and Palestine proper and within what was once called the West Bank. While it is true that the Palestinian Authority now controls the lives of the majority of the Palestinians, the fact remains that such an authority exists within what resembles a series of isolated islands or bandustans in a sea of Israeli security.

On the occasion of the start of the Final Status negotiations, 13 September 1999, the Israeli Foreign Minister emphasised that Israel would abide by four principles upon entering these talks: "No return to the '67 borders; Jerusalem is the capital of Israel; there will be clusters of settlements under Israeli sovereignty; and no foreign army will be allowed to redeploy west of

the River Jordan... ." No mention was made regarding the refugee problem, water or a host of other issues of vital interest to the Palestinians.

## SYRIA

On Monday, 13 December 1999, Syria's Foreign Minister, Farouk Shar', emphasised his hope that Syrian-Israeli negotiations, soon to commence in Washington, would be concluded in a matter of a few months. Again, the outcome on the issues between the two countries is not yet clear. Neither the timing of withdrawal from the Golan Heights nor the extent of that withdrawal is clear. Also on the agenda of the two adversaries is the issue of borders, with Syria insisting on a return to the borders of 4 June 1967 and Israel insisting on the 1923 border between Syria and mandated Palestine. Israel also insists on certain security arrangements as well as a share in, even control over, the water sources in the Golan Heights. As a consequence of any possible agreement, Israel insists on its continued qualitative military edge as well as normalisation and exchange of embassies between the two states. Israel is also demanding \$18 billion as compensation for its withdrawal from the Heights.

## LEBANON

While commenting on the forthcoming Syrian-Israeli negotiations in Washington, Foreign Minister Shar' stated, "... [The] Lebanese track will move following the first round of negotiations in Washington. We believe that the peace process on both the Syrian and the Lebanese tracks will parallel each other... ." Syrian optimism was not, however, reflected in the Lebanese President Emile Lahhoud's remarks the day before, when he stated, "... The negotiations between Syria and Israel will be difficult... ." Lebanon has repeatedly emphasised that any negotiations with Israel based on United Nations Resolution 425, must be linked to the outcome of the negotiations between Syria and Israel.

The Lebanese appointed Michael Murr, its Minister of Interior, to head the Lebanese negotiating team. The appointment of the Interior, rather than the Foreign Minister, to head the negotiating team was a signal that one of the most important issue as far as Lebanon is concerned is that of the approximately 350,000 Palestinian refugees in the country. The Lebanese are worried that, should these not be repatriated, they would upset the very delicate sectarian balance within the country.

## CONCLUSION

While the outcome of the peace process remains to be seen, there is no question that the election of Ehud Barak in Israel introduced a glimmer of hope of reaching a settlement. Nevertheless, Barak's election campaign promise that any withdrawal from the Golan Heights be subject to approval by a plebiscite, not only throws a huge shadow over whatever outcome may be reached, but also shakes the entire peace process to its very foundations. Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and the Palestinians engaged in the peace process in accordance with United Nations resolutions, international law and specific Letters of Assurance the United States gave to these parties. To subject the outcome of the talks to an Israeli plebiscite is not only another circumvention of international law, but also voids any future negotiations between Israel and others and deprives them of any meaning. What if the result of the plebiscite was negative? How would Israel, indeed Syria, behave? And what of the United States' Letters of Assurances given in part to dispel the charge of double standards and uneven handedness?

The historic opportunity to end the Arab-Israeli conflict presented at the Madrid Peace Conference, while advancing and continuing to offer hope, remains a promise against the future.

Many in the region and the world at large continue to wonder whether the peace process can be reversed. Surely, there are strong rejectionists on both the Israeli and the Arab side. Strengthening this rejectionist current on the Arab side, especially in Jordan and the Palestine, is the fact that there seems to be no connection between the negotiations going on in various capitals of the world and the deteriorating economic conditions on the ground. The process, many hoped, would get the area out of the politics and the economics of despair and create climate conducive to a sustainable peace. The dividends have not yet materialised; dividends that would help in the creation of a culture of peace.

Confidence between the parties to the conflict remains lacking, especially on the popular level. What it takes to make the peace a warm, living peace is a question that both officials and intellectuals need to address. Of course, land, borders, water, security and refugees are important issues that need to be addressed justly in any settlement. Above all, however, remains the fact that attitudes need to change.

The peace process, like the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, took the Arabs, the Israelis and the world by surprise. The belligerent parties were in the lull of a no-war-no-peace situation and a sense of complacency and a wait-and-see attitude prevailed. A dangerous attitude developed, hoping that the future would take care of itself and that eventually the problems would go away by themselves. Few were willing to take the difficult decisions necessary for any settlement. Many on both sides were comfortable with the idea of having an enemy to define themselves against. Traumatized as both sides were, such a condition was almost comfortable and gave the excuse for lack of decision.

President Nelson Mandela's warning to the Israelis that they must be ready to make difficult decisions and pay the price of peace was timely. In the minds of many Israelis, an insular mentality had developed, emphasising that there was no need for compromise. Power, and power alone, would guarantee their security. On the Arab side, an attitude was beginning to develop: one that saw the future taking care of itself and Israel as well. The factor of population growth, alone would solve the problem and the all they needed to do was wait. The peace process must be accelerated to circumvent these attitudes. For surely, on both the Arab and the Israeli side, the peace process has left an ideological vacuum that needs filling. The peace process is a rational approach to conflict resolution and hopefully, eventually, prevention. Very powerful transcendental forces that exist in the region continue to confront it. It is a process premised on the search for a better future against forces that continue to wish to fight in light of the nightmarish memories of the past. For the process to succeed, not only is there a need to re-educate, indeed, restructure mentalities, but also a dire need to restructure the fragile and failed economics on the Arab side in an effort to address the terrific disparities between and within countries.

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1 The vote was taken in the Knesset to assess the extent of its approval of Mr Barak's intention to start negotiations with Syria that may lead eventually to an Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights. Several members of Barak's own coalition voted against his policy. 2 The meeting actually took place in Washington on 15 December 1999.

