Guaranteeing the Peace

Israeli Concessions

American utopianism is being applied to Israel these days with a vengeance. Israel, it is argued, should relinquish the Arab territories it has held for purposes of strategic defense either through piecemeal (but rapid) withdrawals or all at once in a grand gesture of good faith. It should do this because it will eventually have to give up the territories anyhow, because such concessions are the only avenue to peace, and because the sophisticated weaponry now available to the Arabs has invalidated the concept of buffer zones. The New York Times columnist Anthony Lewis explains: “The land occupied in 1967 is less and less significant in terms of physical security. New weapons reduce the distance . . . Retention of the occupied territories is sapping the already diminished reserves of goodwill toward Israel in the world.” C. L. Sulzberger, also of the Times, holds that “since 1967 it [Israel] has displayed little diplomatic sense. . . . Jerusalem failed to give while the giving was good.”

Behind these pragmatic sounding propositions lie some less explicit theoretical notions, above all, that the Israeli-Arab conflict can be resolved by reasonable people behaving reasonably toward one another and that whatever Israel risks in security will be more than made up for by changes in Arab sentiments and “world opinion.” Ultimately these policies rest on the assumption that “as war begins in the minds of men, there it will have to be ended.” Israeli concessions, it is said, are the way to turn the Arabs’ hatred into tolerance and ultimately to bring peace.

Yet the sad reality just may be that the Israeli-Arab conflict is not currently amenable to solution. For even if all the Arab states were to embrace peace (not just nonbelligerence) tomorrow, if tourists and trade were to flow freely across the troubled borders, this would still not obviate the significance of strategic geopolitical factors. Anyone familiar with international history knows that nations linked by economic, cultural and other transactions have regularly warred with one another: thus France and Germany in 1870, 1914 and 1940. And they know how divided states like Korea, Vietnam or British India (i.e., Pakistan and India) have repeatedly found themselves at war. Perhaps these were not integrated nations, but surely they shared communal values and commitments more than Israel and the Arabs will ever do.

As to the “insignificance” of geopolitical factors, it is worth saying that missiles vary in range and that their long-distance efficacy so far has proven to be unimpressive. Far more important, if one has the choice of being attacked by missiles alone or by missiles and tanks and soldiers, one must obviously choose the first—and resist geopolitical changes that open the way to the second. Strategic passes, desert buffer zones and mountain reaches buy time—for the mobilization and deployment of reserves and for the rallying of outside support. Without such a time factor, Israel might be overrun as quickly as the Greek portions of Cyprus or South Vietnam’s northern and central provinces.

Sooner or later after whatever withdrawals are made, the borders of Israel will have to be set somewhere and the Arabs will have to “accept” the remaining state. But at that stage there is little reason for one or more Arab nations or Palestinian groups not to ask for “more”—no matter what concessions Israel has voluntarily made or the United States has exacted. There is no reason to believe that the PLO or Syria, or even in the longer run, Egypt, will be satisfied by any particular set of concessions. Sadat, it should be remembered, mouthed peace slogans while he was preparing the attack on Israel in 1973. The Palestinian organizations, especially, have made no secret of their unwillingness to settle for anything less than the nonexistence of Israel. But I rely not on this or that statement; even if the Palestinians tomorrow would all declare they would be satisfied with a return to 1967 (or some other) borders, and mean it, there is little reason for them later not to ask for more. People and nations change their minds all the time.

What is at stake are the hard facts of military potential, not the soft factors of trade, tourism and culture. Hence territorial concessions should be tied to arms reductions, not as tests of intentions or as gestures, but as concrete security arrangements. Thus parts of Sinai can be returned to Egyptian control if the Egyptians agree that they will introduce no military forces and only small police forces into those areas. The understanding must be explicit that if they reoccupy them with force, this would entitle the Israelis to return in force. (The model of enforcement suggested here is known as “mutual-partisan” and does not require big-power patrols, Security Council votes and budget appropriations or periodic extensions. Similarly, parts of the West Bank might be integrated into Jordan, as long as Jordanian troops remain east of the Jordan River—and Israeli patrols can verify the demilitarized status of those parts.

Finally Israel could do with fewer territorial buffers if there would be a mutually agreed and properly
inspected reduction of armaments. Moreover the arms embargo would have to be binding not only on the two superpowers and the potential recipients, but on such arms purveyors as France, Great Britain, Czechoslovakia; as well as arms transferrers, Libya and Saudi Arabia. At issue are highly visible items and hence the problems of enforcing such an embargo are relatively simple—or at least seeing whether the embargo is being honored is relatively simple. A reduction in the size of armies in the area would also be easily verified, mutual earnest.

The reader may note that no reference is made to the Golan Heights, Sharm-El-Shekh, or the status of Jerusalem. It is not my purpose to describe in detail what territorial concessions might be made in exchange for what arms reductions and security guarantees. These are best worked out in direct negotiations between the parties involved. And it could take years before concessions agreed upon in advance were actually made on the ground because further moves would depend on the earlier ones having been rewarded with the agreed arms reductions and reductions in standing armies staying "reduced." The purpose here is to illustrate the principle of trading territories for actual military potential, not for easily reversible promises and gestures, the notion of "partisan-mutual" enforcement of agreements made.

Once such agreements are drawn, the Arabs' true intentions and willingness to settle will soon become evident. I am inclined to think that they will prefer war to a settlement of this kind—not because the Israelis will concede too little, but because ultimately the Arabs are not ready to live in peace with a viable Israel. But these agreements would also serve to reassure them about Israel's intentions. They serve all sides—if all sides are interested in peace. As long as the Arabs can hope to pressure the West through military threats or control of oil, there is little reason for them to concede any of their main demands in response to territorial concessions from Israel. The proper time for a lasting settlement may well come only in a few years, when the international power tilt will right itself, when increased oil production from Mexico to the North Sea, from Indonesia to Nigeria, will reduce the Arabs' international weight.

As the United States is firmly committed to seeking a peace in the Middle East that is compatible with the survival of Israel, the search for an Arab "change-of-heart" will have to continue without undermining Israel's defenses—always remembering that feeding pieces of territory to the lions at the gate may only whet their appetite.

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