

Israel and the Middle East at a Crossroad

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I will begin with a few basic observations about the situation in the region, and mainly about the complex relations between Israel and the Palestinians, which have obviously changed recently. These basic observations are necessary, among other reasons, in order for us to understand where we are heading in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

We also must look at processes taking place. Whereas in the past we saw that conflicts tended to be national ones, nowadays we see a process whereby many conflicts are becoming religious ones. And we must keep in mind that national conflicts can usually be resolved, whereas those of a religious nature cannot be resolved in a way that is acceptable to both parties.

Another process we can see is the struggle between religious fanaticism and the moderate parties. There, we see expressions of fanaticism that come less from countries and more from various organizations. This makes it all the more difficult for us to deal with such extremism.

It is far easier for a country, and definitely for Israel, to cope with a situation in which the threat of extremism comes from a country. It is more difficult to deal with situations in which a country, say Iran, spreads its tentacles abroad, as in the case of Hizbullah in Lebanon, or when such a country strengthens terror organizations in a different region, like Hamas in the Palestinian Authority. In these cases, we must contend with terror organizations, some of which are well placed in certain countries, and some that are spread out around the world. It is in the middle of this conflict that Israel finds itself.

If we wish to discuss extremism that is reflected in a country, the best example, the one that most threatens world peace, is certainly Iran. In the case of Iran, we must realize that when there is a common understanding of the threat—and today there is a common understanding of the threat posed by Iran—it can lead to two completely different processes. The first is an understanding that the more moderate countries, the pragmatic ones, are the weak states. The extremists are stronger. Time works against the moderates.

Therefore, those countries that understand that Iran poses a threat to them (and I do not mean Israel, because Israel is not confronted with a choice between moderates and extremists—it is by definition on the side of the moderates)—such as the Gulf states, Muslim countries, those Arab countries who see how Iran is trying to undermine the stability of their regimes by working with fanatic elements in their own backyards—must make a choice: to remain on the side of those who are trying to avert the threat, or to join those making it. Unfortunately, we are living in the same vicinity as the neighborhood bully. You either manage to avoid him, beat him up or join him—it all depends on the decisiveness of the international community.

The more decisive the international community is in the face of this threat, the easier it will be for the new partners joining this coalition. Those who understand that Iran is the threat must stick together and adhere to their mission. Should Iran see hesitation on the part of the international community, with each member making its own choice, we might then see a domino effect in action, whereby the new coalition gradually dissolves, with powers that are today working together drifting apart.

We can see some of this process in the context of the Mecca agreement, which is also relevant for understanding the current situation. Iran embraced Hamas, and some countries, fearing they were about to lose some elements of the Palestinian Authority to Iran, rather than confront the problem head-on, tried to embrace Hamas. This resulted in the Mecca agreement, which created the Palestinian Unity Government.

This is the problematic side that may surface as a result of understanding the common danger. The positive side of understanding this danger is the creation of partnerships that sometimes seem like combinations of strange bedfellows. Only a few years ago, some of these partnerships would have seemed inconceivable, totally illogical. Nonetheless, I think it is possible, and indeed necessary, to try to translate the understanding of the common threat into a common objective. This objective should be undertaken by all those who understand that the problems in this region are not of Israel's making and that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict obviously requires a solution, but its solution will not free the region, nor the world, from the fanatic religious ideology as it is reflected, for example, in the Shia of Iran, the Sunnis of Hamas, and other organizations.

Therefore, we now have to examine whether this new partnership is only for the sake of the common threat, or whether we can make the most of it and create a common goal for Israel, the pragmatic elements of the Palestinian Authority, some of the Gulf states, Jordan, Egypt and any other state or body that realizes the

nature of the threat and the need for a realistic solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I would like to apply this regional observation to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the current situation.

First of all, as Israelis, we must set our primary objective. Any process we want to promote must be derived from Israel's meta-objective as a state, as an Israeli society. As such, our top objective is simply Israel's existence as a state that is a national home for the Jewish people, and a democratic state, with these values intertwined—in other words, a secure country that lives, to the extent possible, in peace with its neighbors, and exists on the Land of Israel. This is the meta-objective of the State of Israel, which we tend to avoid saying outright, but it is nonetheless there; all we have to do is reiterate and emphasize it. Because whatever steps we take, whatever process we embark upon, we must analyze and determine whether it promotes that objective or not.

In order to promote Israel's values as a Jewish and democratic state, and so that these two aspects do not conflict, Israel as a whole (and I think there is a social and political consensus on this) has concluded that Israel's existence, as a democratic nation-state, compels it to promote a process which leads to two separate nation-states. This includes giving up on part of something that to my mind also includes the right of the Jewish people to certain parts of the Land of Israel.

From this, we derive the plan of Israel's principles for peace. These principles stipulate that in order to promote our meta-objective, we must promote a process culminating in two nation-states, each providing a national solution for its people in a different place. One is the State of Israel, which addresses the full and comprehensive needs of the Jewish people—a state that, upon its establishment, gave a home to refugees forced to leave Arab countries and to those who were forced to leave Europe. Israel is a state that, by its very definition, sees itself as a national home both to Israeli citizens who live here and to Jews living elsewhere.

Similarly, the second part of the solution must be a future Palestinian state that will provide a full and comprehensive solution to the Palestinians, wherever they may be—those who currently live in Gaza, Judea and Samaria, the territories, and those who left and are kept as refugees, maintained as bargaining chips for some future negotiations, usually under very difficult conditions. They are kept in such conditions purposefully, out of some thought or demand that is in contradiction of the principle of two nation-states; a concept which is called by some of the Palestinians, or by part of the Arab world, "the right of return." It follows therefore, that at least in terms of concept, a basic pillar upon which the process rests is the idea that establishing a Palestinian state will provide a full and comprehensive solution to the refugee problem, as well.

This, then, is the first tenet of Israel's basic principles. And by the way, this should not be only an Israeli basic principle, but rather a basic principle of anyone supporting two nation-states living in peace side by side. I emphasize: living in peace.

This means that the process of the establishment of a Palestinian state must include a declaration of war on terror.

Absolutely the last thing that Israel can afford, and the last thing the world needs, is the establishment of another terror state in the Middle East. Therefore, anyone in the international community who espouses the principle of two states living in peace, must support this [declaration of war on terror], not as a purely Israeli interest, but as something that can advance a just process between Israel and the Palestinians.

Naturally, borders are a topic open to negotiations between the two sides. Israel will bring along its principles and, as is only natural, the Palestinians will bring theirs. Before I go any further, let me make one comment: There is often a tendency, even among some of my friends and some in the international community, to think that if only we could turn the clock back to 1967 and return to the borders of that time, everything would be solved and hardly any discussion of borders would be required. I wish to remind you that in 1967 there was no such entity as a Palestinian state; there was no link between Gaza and the West Bank; the former was part of Egypt, the latter part of Jordan. Ergo, we are now being asked to create something totally new, the product of which must be the result of negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians — direct negotiations.

Regarding the process itself, I would like to address three circles, each of which is supposed to support the other. The first, innermost circle between Israel and the Palestinians is the direct negotiations I just mentioned. The first supporting circle should be the Arab world. And the second supporting circle, the external one, ought to be the international community.

When discussing the process between Israel and the Palestinians, considering the problems we are up against, we must ask ourselves how we can deal with them, and if it is at all possible to deal with them — considering the present state of affairs in the struggle between pragmatists and fanatics. On the one hand, there are terror elements — as I understand their ideology, and in light of the peace principles I just outlined — with whom it is impossible to reach a settlement. And on the other hand, there are the moderate elements, with whom, generally speaking, it may be easier to reach a settlement, but whose executive powers are lower.

We must ask ourselves when it comes to those pragmatic elements: can we really bridge the gap when it comes to negotiations? And assuming we do succeed, will the pragmatic elements be able to implement whatever was agreed upon? We must consider the fact that those pragmatic elements are usually the weaker elements, especially today, after recent events in Gaza and the takeover of Gaza by the Hamas.

Since the elections in the Palestinian Authority, the strategy adopted by Israel concerning the unnatural phenomenon of a terror organization winning elections and overthrowing the Palestinian Authority is differentiation. That is, distinguishing between the moderate and the extremist elements, so as not to close the door. This, out of an understanding that time works against anyone espousing the two-state solution that I mentioned earlier. This is especially true in a place where the pragmatic elements are becoming weaker, and in some places are almost disappearing.

Therefore, we adopted the strategy (by saying “we” I mean the entire international community, including Israel) of trying to act against terror, against Hamas—to isolate them and not give them any legitimacy or chance for economic prosperity, and not to create a situation wherein they can supply the Palestinians with the goods for which they were elected. At the same time, the strategy was to try to create some sort of alternative rule via the pragmatic elements.

This distinction worked for a while, until—after several events in Gaza—all parties involved were called to Mecca and were asked to bring about Palestinian unity. From that moment on, any distinction we could have made earlier—between the good guys and the bad guys, the Hamas and Fatah, Haniya and Abu Mazen, the terrorists and advocates of the two-state solution—went down the drain. A government was created that made the earlier distinction or differentiation well-nigh impossible.

What we see today is a renewal of that distinction, as a result of recent events in Gaza and the fact that a Hamas decision brought about the disintegration of the “unity government.” The idea of unity just did not work. The existing distinction between moderates and extremists, the one upon which we want to continue to act, now also has a territorial manifestation—not only because the territorial distinction is a representation of Israeli policy. It actually happened. As we continue with this process, it will become easier for us to make this distinction on the ground, because it is also a territorial distinction, not just a theoretical one between people, bodies or parties.

In effect, a new government has been formed, which seemingly accepts the very principles that the international community demanded that the unity government and the Hamas government accept—yet they did not. Thus, this distinction has now become very clear. This enables us to deal with the security challenge posed by Gaza using military means, just as it is forcing us to deal with the new government that has been created. Or, it presents us with political challenges which we confront to strengthen this new government.

The only chance we have today is to maintain this clear distinction. Once again, when I say “we,” I mean Israel, the moderate elements, the international community, and that part of the Arab world which would like to advance this process. Each one must now choose sides. Of course, a Palestinian has a hard time choosing sides. There is an entire public out there that is threatened, sometimes even physically. I have, however, also seen people who were ministers in the unity government and who made their decision. Salam Fayad, who was the minister of finance in the unity government, chose a side and he is now the head of the new government. Some have decided not to choose, and that also happens in the Arab world. The Arab world, too, will have to take sides.

The Arab world does not want to see Hamas succeed. The Arab world understands that Hamas represents a phenomenon that could emerge in anyone’s backyard. These things may be said out loud or they may be said behind closed doors, but they are clear and well known. But only if the Arab world, too, and each and every one of the countries, makes this crystal clear is there a chance that we can continue working with this distinction for any length of time.

Calls for unity sound very tempting and morally correct—they sound like the right thing to do. But in this case, unity is a problem, because it does not reflect the true state of affairs and does not contribute to the process. It reflects the lowest common denominator when it comes to any future process between the Palestinians and Israel. Any such process requires compromise. Of course it requires compromises on Israel’s part, too. But when it comes to making serious decisions and making concessions to Israel, the temptation to revert to the warm embrace of the unity government, or the bear hug of Hamas, will certainly lead to the failure of the process, even if it might imply some type of increased stability in some places.

Just as there are some Arab countries that have declared it loud and clear, there is an expectation that each side will stick to its own guns, and the sides, in this context, are very clear.

The correct order of going about things in this context is to decide now to embark on a process, to reach a settlement, and then to produce the required internal conclusions within the Palestinian public and Palestinian society. This should be the way to go about things, rather than going back and trying to create some sort of process that may be perceived as more stable, but in fact limits the options in negotiations between the Palestinians and Israel.

Obviously, once we have analyzed the strategy and want to act upon it, we still need to ask ourselves, and we owe it to ourselves to find out, if it will work. With the help of this integrated strategy, can we really create some sort of agreement between Israel and the moderate Palestinian elements? This integrated strategy always works in parallel: You have to act against the extremists while working with the moderates; you cannot have only half of the equation working. We must ask ourselves whether this strategy will work because history demonstrates that when we did not ask such questions, but rather entered a closed room with a high level of expectations, it brought about a process of deterioration, violence, intifada—as we saw after Camp David in 2000. Therefore, we must ask ourselves whether, in such a dialogue, a permanent settlement is now realistic. It would seem that it is not; nevertheless, I do think that there are some points on which agreement can be reached with the appropriate parties.

When speaking of bolstering the moderate elements and working in tandem with the pragmatists, what tools do we have at our disposal, and at the disposal of the international community, as well—though mostly at Israel’s disposal? They can include money, arms, easing conditions, opening border crossings, and so on, and what we call a political horizon. That means making it possible for the moderate elements to come to the Palestinian people and say, “We are the only ones who can, in addition to providing immediate relief, also give you a future, a future of peace, with a state of our own, a future in which we can make progress with Israel.”

Usually, when we reach the point of making gestures, Israel’s moves do not go beyond its security considerations. The question is always, “Can we take this one more step, or is doing anything further detrimental to our security?” We are compelled to ask this over and over again, before every gesture.

First of all, some gestures are, by their very nature, a one-time affair, such as the transfer of funds. This type of gesture has a limited effect; its impression dissipates rapidly. It has to be done, but we must be aware that it is good only for a particular phase; it cannot support a process in the long term.

Contrary to appearances, perhaps, among all the “gestures,” or the tools we have at our disposal, the so-called “political horizon” is the tool that can best be used without harm to Israel’s security—so long as there is a clear distinction between the dialogue, the agreements, what can be reached on paper, and what can actually be carried out.

Therefore, in the current situation, within the framework of existing relations between Israel and the Palestinians, after all the dramas and events in Gaza, after the installation of the new government in the Palestinian Authority, what we need to do, of course, is to take the necessary action in Gaza, but at the same time work with the new authorities in two separate ways. We can call one the “short-term package” and the other the “forward-looking package.” The first comprises the type of gestures that are currently being discussed and that translate into economic and other similar gestures. The second is the type of dialogue we should conduct with the new Palestinian government. In this “package,” we have to put things on the table that not only give the Palestinian public hope, but also serve and represent the Israeli interests in the process.

For many years now, we have been repeating phrases, not to call them slogans, such as “two states, living in peace.” But what would be the meaning of such a Palestinian state, if we truly do not want it to present a threat to Israel? There must be some basic Israeli interests which we have to lay on the table now. What will the new state be like? Will it be demilitarized? That must be an Israeli interest, and a legitimate one. After having witnessed recent events in Gaza, how do we ensure that such events will not be repeated in the future in Judea and Samaria? For their part, the Palestinians will probably present us with principles that are relevant and important to them, which is fine. But this would be part of a discussion aimed at ensuring Israeli security.

It has been seven years since such a debate was held, and even then we were unable to reach any agreement. It represents the interests of both sides, because it can provide a political horizon, turning the word “state” into something more concrete, and providing Israel with what it needs in order to achieve progress in the peace process. That progress does not endanger the cause of security, but rather serves it. Are there no other issues on which we can reach an agreement in principle with the moderates within the Palestinian Authority? We must find out, and the sooner the better, because as time goes by, the ability to achieve such understandings is dwindling.

All the above is on condition that applying these understandings would be subject to specific terms—some of which appear in the Road Map and some of which can be agreed to beforehand—before arriving at the agreements in principle. But, in

any case, they can be achieved only where there is a new Palestinian government, one that recognizes Israel, one that wishes to promote the idea of two states wherever it has control or influence. This is what I say to colleagues who say to me, “Is this the time to talk to the moderate elements? They cannot deliver. So what is there to talk about?”

To that I reply that talking is always an option. Ultimately, however, acting upon those talks is up to them. But by giving them tools to strengthen themselves, I am also strengthening my own interest of promoting the two-state process by subordinating the application of principles to their actual implementation.

As I said earlier, gaps have been created between areas where the new government can act and those that are under Hamas control. And I can make the Palestinians see that distinction, make them aware of what a government means—the difference between having a government that can promote a dialogue versus a government that attempts to achieve certain objectives through terror. Make no mistake: it will not be able to achieve them via terror. However, it is not enough to say that terror will not achieve its objective if, at the same time, we do not provide an alternative to terror.

I am not in the least bit naïve; I have both feet firmly planted on the ground, and if we work in the right way, all this can be translated into action. To be sure, if we do not do it, we may lose our last chance. There may be other processes, other solutions, other ways, within a different reality that may come about in the future. But in the present window of opportunity there is a serious military challenge in Gaza, but also a political challenge that must be answered.

The second circle is that of the Arab world. I hear a lot of debates and discussions about this issue, including the role of the Arab League and how Israel should act. First of all, as a rule, I prefer conducting discussions with the relevant party, and the relevant party is the Palestinians. Secondly, I prefer conducting discussions when my own plans are on the table, not just the other side’s. Perhaps I cannot free myself from old habits, but in the days when I was still a regular citizen and practicing law, I usually preferred being the side handing in my own drafts, which would serve as a basis for the work, rather than accepting a ready-made draft from opposing counsel. And, last but not least, [we need] to create a situation in which the parties interested in contributing to the process can do so in a positive way.

Consider the matter of the Arab League. The Arab League’s initiative started with an article by Tom Friedman in the *New York Times*, which spoke of a willingness on the part of the Arab world to normalize its relations with Israel after peace is achieved between Israel and the Palestinians, but with the terms of the settle-

ment already decided upon. I do not know whether to call them terms or criteria or parameters, but in any case, they are: a Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital, and a return to the 1967 borders. This was the starting point. Later, the Arab League convened in Beirut and two more items were added, which, from our point of view, are contrary to the concept.

When speaking of the concept that in addition to the principles of a Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital and 1967 borders, a solution must be provided to the refugee issue, I say this is not “in addition to.” It is part of the basic solution of establishing a Palestinian state. In light of the new understanding that has dawned on the Arab world that the danger comes from a different source, and perhaps there is a chance here to positively promote the process between Israel and the Palestinians—this initiative was once again tabled.

I met with two representatives of the Arab League who were appointed for this purpose: the Egyptian minister of foreign affairs and the Jordanian minister of foreign affairs. I started by asking them, “Just to make things clear, do you now wish to negotiate on a permanent settlement between Israel and the Palestinians? Do you wish to represent the Palestinians in the negotiations?” They said, “No.” I said, “Okay, so the first thing we can note that we agree upon is that the negotiations—and here I go back to the first circle—must be bilateral, between Israel and the Palestinians.” And they said, “Exactly so.”

The second thing I said to them was that any peace process requires compromise, both on Israel’s side and on that of the Palestinians. They realize and understand that the moderate elements, though weak, will have to deal with Hamas, with extremist elements, and every concession will be difficult to agree upon, difficult to get the Palestinian public to accept. “Your job,” I continued, “is to give them the strength to contend with this challenge. And instead, what do you do? You set parameters, run around marketing them with all sorts of emissaries who travel the world saying go ahead and adopt the terms of the Arab League as a settlement. But this “settlement” you are pushing represents the Arab narrative, the Palestinian narrative. That is all well and good, but it is obviously not the result of a joint settlement. This is merely your position. And the more you enlist other countries to support it, the more you make a true settlement impossible. And if you present these as parameters (or terms, depending on whom you ask, Amr Mussa or someone else), then you are restricting the ability of any Palestinian, even one who really wants the two-state option. Even if he wants peace with all his might, if he has to make even the slightest concession, how can he?”

“If that is the case,” I said, “I suggest that you lay aside all parameters. Just as we have our own principles, which I presented to you, so, too, in any process, in

any dialogue between Israel and the Palestinians, each side will come and present its own ideas. But the international community must express its support for any compromise, whatever it may be, that the Palestinians will reach with Israel." This idea was finally accepted. It took some time, but they realized that the mere presentation of the parameters as terms obstructs the process rather than promotes it.

Lastly, I said to them that it is a very positive thing, from Israel's point of view, that they are talking about normalization with Israel at the end of the Israeli-Palestinian process. I suppose this was meant as an incentive to Israel to advance the peace process with the Palestinians. But Israel has its own reasons for advancing the peace process between itself and the Palestinians; it does not really need that end-of-process incentive. I wish we were already at that point. However, we are in a situation, I told them, where every process is one that advances by fits and starts, and the Palestinians usually have difficulties in giving something in return when Israel makes a gesture. So instead of waiting until the end of the process to normalize relations, I asked why they don't use that tool now. Just as Israel gives the Palestinians a political horizon, why don't they give Israel a political horizon? Just as we are willing to do this in stages, why don't they do so with us?

I will not be the one to tell them when to strengthen Israel in this context. They will be the ones to examine and decide — according to their own criteria — when, in this process with the Palestinians, Israel makes a move which they, too, consider to be in the right direction. When the Palestinians, in their weak state, cannot create a situation in which the Israeli public — which also deserves some political horizon — can understand that all these discussions of a settlement are not merely pie in the sky — that is when they should embark on some steps. It does not have to be all of them at once. But why not start having meetings in the open, like the ones they currently hold with me in closed chambers? At such a meeting, instead of having only Arab League representatives from Jordan and Egypt — countries with whom we have relations anyway — why don't they add countries with which we do not currently have relations? When Israel makes another positive move, they should open an office in Tel Aviv. Not all of them at once, but some. They should create dynamics that support the process, not merely wait for its conclusion. They should demonstrate that the League supports the process.

This is the second circle. The Arab world must understand, first of all, that it must take sides — and the sides are within the Palestinian Authority, and they are very clear. It is not a matter of choosing between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. That is not what they are up against. They must choose between the two sides within the Palestinian Authority — the pragmatists of the new government versus Hamas. If they make the most of the idea of supporting the pragmatist elements

in the Palestinian Authority, strengthening them and strengthening Israel in its efforts, then the Arab world can play a dramatic role. They may have not done so in the past, and perhaps that made it difficult for Palestinian elements to reach an arrangement.

Beyond these is the third circle—and I shall be brief here. I am speaking of the Western world, the international community. The international community can, of course, choose the right side, maintain the illegitimacy of Hamas, promote relations with the new government and bolster it, and also give the Palestinians an economic horizon in addition to the political horizon that Israel can give. It can prepare a “package,” and I do not mean one for immediate consumption. Various gestures, assistance, humanitarian aid—all that is already taking place, should take place and will take place regardless. But I am talking about a different type of package, the type that says: it is ready and waiting, it can happen, all you have to do is make progress with the process with Israel. The compromise that you may make on some of your principles, a compromise you will have to reach with Israel, will pay off many times over. A whole series of things can be accomplished with the help of the international community, such as new economic options and infrastructures.

Therefore, within the new situation, I think that we must adhere to those principles we spoke of. And I think we must act, using language from the world of sports, “hard and fast.” Hard and fast, for and against. Hard and fast against Hamas, its takeover of Gaza, against terror. And also hard and fast to give the new Palestinian government a political boost.

I wholeheartedly believe that this is not a zero-sum game. It is high time that the international community and the Arab community understand that this is not a case where supporting the Israeli stance means opposing the Palestinians or the Arabs. It means that you are supporting a process shared by a large group. The sooner everyone realizes this, the sooner we will live to see the process which, I hope, will determine the meta-purpose of the State of Israel.

Translated from the Hebrew by Ruchie Avital