

Intifada II: What the U.S. Should Do

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FOR DECADES, the United States has pursued a fairly consistent policy toward the Arab-Israel conflict: help Israel be strong, while pressuring it to make concessions. So ingrained has this dual approach become that it is hardly noticed. Everyone expects Washington to provide financial aid to Israel, sell it high-technology armaments, and support it diplomatically in the United Nations. At the same time, it is also assumed that American leaders will press Israel to make territorial concessions to its adversaries.

In some sense, this dual policy is not America's alone, and in some sense it also goes back to the very origins of the Jewish state. Under British pressure, for example, Israel turned its conquests in the Sinai Peninsula over to Egypt in 1949; under American pressure, it did the same thing again in 1957. But it was not until 1967, following Israel's huge victory over three Arab states in the Six-Day war, that the policy of strengthen and pressure began to take the form it holds today. That policy may be summed up in a slogan that emerged soon after the war: "land for peace."

"Land for peace" refers to the two main clauses in

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United Nations Security Council Resolution 242 of November 22, 1967, the document that ever since has served as the basis of American diplomacy. Two aspects of that resolution are worth mentioning.

First, the deal outlined by Resolution 242 was unbalanced. This is evident in the language of the resolution itself. The "land" clause is terse and to the point, calling for the "withdrawal of Israeli armed forces from territories of recent conflict." By contrast, the "peace" clause is wordier and vaguer (and also ungrammatical), calling for "termination of all claims or states of belligerency and respect for and acknowledgment of the sovereignty, territorial integrity, and political independence of every state in the area and their *[sic]* right to live in peace within secure and recognized boundaries free from threats or acts of force."

The dissimilarity in the wording of the two clauses points to the underlying asymmetry of the deal. Israel was to give up land, a real and vital asset; in return, it was to receive wispy, retractable, and ambiguous promises of peace. The imbalance is the more profound when one recalls that Israel, a defensive power, was taxed not only with making the lion's share of concessions but also with taking a leap of faith by trusting the word of neighbors who had on many occasions aggressed against it; in return, those neighbors merely needed to mouth the right words in order to receive the territories they had lost when Israel defeated them. Few, if any, can be the cases in world history of a victori-

ous party's being asked both to make the concessions and to take the risks.

Second, Resolution 242 appealed to both parties (but especially the Arabs) to move beyond what might be termed the deterrent peace that had existed in the Middle East since 1948 and instead establish a true, harmonious peace. These are two very different concepts. Deterrent peace is what the United States had with the Soviet Union. It is a peace based on mutual fear, on the assumption that neither party dares risk the consequences of full-scale war; such a peace often breaks down, and can periodically lead to violent conflict. Harmonious peace, by contrast, is what Americans and Canadians enjoy; based on trade, travel, and a myriad of human contacts, it assumes that, whatever differences there may be, they will never lead to violence and will always be "free from threats or acts of force," to use the language of Resolution 242.

In short, the return of land by Israel was supposed to take it from a state of venomous hostility to a state of harmony with its Arab neighbors in a single bound; and it was supposed to do so quickly. This, to say the least, was an unrealistic expectation.

There was nothing inevitable about land for peace as a formula, or as a basis of subsequent policy. The resolution could just as well have called for land for land, peace for peace, land for nothing, or something else entirely. Subsequent conquests of territory in the Middle East in the decades after 1967 have met with responses on the part of the international community that have run the gamut from complete passivity (the Syrian takeover of Lebanon) to huge multilateral intervention (the Iraqi seizure of Kuwait). Nevertheless, in 1967 land for peace was the approach that the U.S. and British governments proposed, that the United Nations Security Council passed, and that Israel accepted. To make the deal more palatable, the U.S. government, having rightly concluded that its own constancy as an ally would ease the way for Israel to turn over land, assumed with greater vigor its role as a supporter of the Jewish state.

As long as the Arabs remained unwilling to offer any peaceable assurances to Israel, the inherent imbalance of Resolution 242 raised no serious issues. But, starting with the Sinai I agreement made with Egypt in the aftermath of the Yom Kippur war of 1973, Arab states increasingly began to show a willingness to say what 242 required. The words may have been issued through gritted teeth, they may have been said in English and not repeated in Arabic, and they may have come freighted with conditions and angry demands, but they began to be

said. In the case of Egypt, indeed, such statements led by the end of the 1970's to formal diplomatic relations with Israel; by the mid-1990's, Jordan had followed suit. Over the years, even such unrelenting enemies of Israel as the Palestinian, Syrian, and Saudi leaders have uttered grudging words of acceptance.

For their part, Israelis tended to see most such Arab statements as inherently suspect if not downright untrustworthy: coerced, temporary, and reversible. The case of Egypt seemed at first to constitute something of an exception, as President Anwar Sadat's forthright and emotional overture to Israel in 1977 resulted in the almost immediate give-back of the entire Sinai Peninsula. But disappointment over the "cold peace" with Egypt that followed soured the Israelis for years on other such deals. This Israeli reluctance in turn led to periodic tensions with the U.S. government, which would press Israel to accept those Arab statements as valid assurances and to fork over land in exchange.

Then, in 1993, for reasons having to do with its own domestic politics, the government of Israel radically changed its position, and of a sudden adopted the American analysis as its own. Out went two decades of doubts, in came a willingness to accept even equivocal Arab statements at face value and sometimes to dispense with them altogether as a precondition for territorial concessions. In his negotiations with the Palestinians and the Syrians, Yitzhak Rabin, the then newly elected prime minister, no longer worried very much about Arab credibility, motives, or ulterior goals. Shimon Peres, Rabin's foreign minister (and his intellectual mentor in this shift of policy), went so far as to dismiss even openly *hostile* Palestinian statements with a disdainful shrug: "These are only words. Let them talk."

The new attitude on the part of Israel's government broke the logjam. In the years following Oslo, it signed a torrent of agreements with the Palestinians, as well as a peace treaty with Jordan. Accords with Syria and its Lebanese satrapy would surely have followed had not Syria's president, Hafez al-Assad, for reasons of his own, rejected Israel's very forthcoming terms for both Syria and Lebanon.

HAS THE policy of land for peace, then, been vindicated? Quite the contrary. Yes, it won treaties with two of Israel's neighbors, Egypt and Jordan, and a smattering of lesser diplomatic relations with outlying Arab states (Morocco, Tunisia, Qatar). It indubitably improved the country's standing with the European Union, India, China,

Japan, and other governments around the world. And it paid off economically: the boom experienced by Israel in the 1990's can be partly attributed to a greater global willingness to trade and invest in the country. Finally, it eased international tensions to the point that Turkey could come to regard Israel as one of its closest partners.

But land for peace emphatically did not achieve its main objective, which was the harmonious condition envisioned by Resolution 242. Rather, in compliance with that resolution, Israel turned over one piece of land after another to every single one of its four neighboring states, plus the Palestinians, and all it got in return—the most it got in return—was the same old deterrent peace. Although Arab governments have signed formal agreements with Israel, their people have demonstrated few signs of accepting the Jewish state. (Notable exceptions include some Christians in Lebanon, some businessmen, and some military officers.) Egyptians, Jordanians, and others have preferred not to engage in trade, tourism, or other forms of human contact; their expressed hostility toward the very idea of a sovereign Jewish state has remained markedly strong; and they continue to threaten the use of force. If they have not actually resorted to arms, that has been due only to the fearsomeness of Israel's expected reaction.

Worse, land for peace in the era of Oslo has actually harmed Israel, by making it much less scary to its neighbors than it once was. Handing over territory, a gesture of good will intended to elicit good will in return, has instead been seen as a sign of Israeli weakness—and in a region where, in the apt words of Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak, “there is no mercy for the weak . . . and no second opportunity for those who cannot defend themselves.”

True, this did not happen all at once. So long as Israel proceeded carefully and reluctantly, and balanced its concessions with toughness, it managed to retain its formidable reputation. But with the profound change inaugurated in 1993, the Arab side, not without reason, began to perceive Israel as a country tired of fighting and eager to extract itself from conflict as quickly and as cheaply as possible. Israel's withdrawal under fire from southern Lebanon in May 2000, and its failure to exact retribution when Palestinians desecrated Joseph's Tomb in October, were perhaps the most dramatic confirmation of the Arabs' new understanding of Israel's exhaustion and demoralization, but there have been hundreds of others.

The result has been to whet Arab ambitions. If, before 1993, one could sense a slow movement to-

ward coming to terms with Israel's existence, this has long since yielded to a conviction that Israel is on the run. The eruption of Palestinian violence in late September of this year made the trend obvious to all, yet the street fighting is only part of the story. At least as significant has been the flare-up of anti-Israel vitriol among Muslims from Morocco to Indonesia, the likes of which has not been seen since the glory days of Gamal Abdel Nasser before his 1967 defeat. (At a summit meeting of Arabs in mid-October, it actually seemed possible that the assembled kings, emirs, and presidents might declare war—an option not even on the table for decades.) No less important has been the unprecedented and large-scale turn to violence by Israel's own Arab citizens. Finally, the nearly 200 violent attacks on Jews and Jewish institutions that have taken place on six continents open an almost completely new front in this conflict.

RATHER THAN discouraging hostile Arab intentions, then, land for peace has exacerbated them. What Israel achieved in war, diplomacy has undone.

To make matters still worse, there has been little evidence so far that Israelis have seen the error of their ways, or that they have any idea of how to extricate themselves from this morass. Facing the radicalization of its enemies, Jerusalem has dithered. In October, in the midst of the violence, Prime Minister Barak issued an ultimatum to Yasir Arafat and then conspicuously failed to enforce it; he retaliated for the cold-blooded lynching of Israeli reserve soldiers in Ramallah by blasting empty Palestinian buildings; and he called for a diplomatic “time-out” that signaled his readiness to return to the table, and thus to the policy of land for peace, if only the violence would stop. The one large-scale solution that has been proposed for Israel's current troubles—separating the Israeli and Palestinian populations—neither addresses the issue of hundreds of millions of angry Muslims around the world nor deals with the suddenly enflamed Arab population within Israel's own borders. There seems little reason to expect the Israeli body politic, or its leadership, to come to grips with the problem anytime soon.

And the United States? From a cold-blooded point of view, it would be convenient for Americans if the burgeoning hostility toward Israel were Israel's problem alone. After all, even if Israel's concessions over the last years have had precisely the wrong effect on Arab attitudes toward the Jewish state, they *have* won a certain measure of good will

among Arabs toward the United States. The Oslo process softened some of the anti-Americanism endemic to the Middle East, thereby rendering oil sources slightly more secure, anti-American terrorism a bit less likely, and political harangues less impassioned. Unsurprisingly, American diplomats, businessmen, scholars, and tourists all endorse basing negotiations on the idea of land for peace, and would like such negotiations to go on indefinitely.

Unfortunately, the point has been reached at which land for peace entails dangers to American strategic interests far greater than its benefits. Israel's perceived weakness is now an American problem, and the aggressive euphoria being expressed by the Arabic-speaking masses poses a direct threat to the United States. Were the excitement of the Arab "street"* and its fury at Israel actually to lead to war, the United States would experience enormously harmful repercussions. War could cause the oil market to gyrate out of control and do real damage to the world economy (as it did following the Arab-Israeli fighting of 1973); it could rupture American relations with Muslim-majority states; and it could inspire a campaign of terrorism against American institutions and individuals, abroad and at home.

Were that war to go badly for Israel, moreover, the implications for Americans would become truly dire. Like it or not, the United States serves as Israel's ultimate, informal, but very real security guarantor. If it were on the ropes—imagine battleground defeats or unconventional Iraqi warheads dropping on cities—Israel might threaten, and perhaps even use, nuclear weapons. This is one of the worst nightmares of American policy planners, for it almost necessitates deploying American troops to protect Israel. And even absent the nuclear threat, Americans are hardly likely to stand idly by, indifferent to the fate of Israel and its Jewish population; that is not the American way.

Still, saving Israel in war is hardly a prospect American military analysts can contemplate with relish. Doing so would necessitate drawing down American forces in other parts of the world. It would compel the United States to confront states it would rather cooperate with, and entail unknown consequences for the economy and even the physical safety of U.S. citizens. Far better, from the American point of view, that there not be another Arab-Israeli war.

WHAT THEN is Washington's best course? It is to take steps to ensure that Israel's potential enemies are discouraged from starting such a

war. This means, to be blunt about it, giving up on the policy of land for peace and its attendant promises of harmony, and being content instead with reestablishing a lasting deterrent peace.

Specifically, there are three things the U.S. government might do. First, it should take more seriously the need to maintain the Israeli military's qualitative edge. While American politicians glibly and routinely repeat their commitment to this goal, the fact is that a willingness to sell arms to some of Israel's potential enemies has vastly enhanced their capabilities. The most dramatic instance is Egypt, where the army, air force, and navy have all been thoroughly outfitted in American technology, cutting significantly into the Israeli advantage. Other examples include Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and several Persian Gulf emirates. This policy needs to be reconsidered.

Second, there is the diplomatic side of the U.S.-Israel connection. Admittedly, that connection is already legendarily close, to the point that it deeply confuses many Arabs. But in fact, as we have had occasion to see time and again, ambiguities exist in the relationship that now need to be closed off. In the United Nations, for example, Washington occasionally permits ugly, one-sided resolutions to pass in the Security Council, where the U.S. holds the power of veto. Most recently, on October 7, Washington abstained from (rather than vetoing) a resolution that condemned "acts of violence, especially the excessive use of force against Palestinians," but that said not a single word about Palestinian provocations or violence. This distancing of the United States from Israel further stokes Arab ambitions.

On another diplomatic front, there has been the tendency, especially on the part of President Clinton in his role as arbiter, to treat Israel and its negotiating opposites as morally equivalent, equally right and equally wrong. Not only is this mistaken on the merits—Israel is a democracy and a foremost American ally, Syria and the Palestinian Authority are autocratic adversaries of the United States—but it inspires the Arabs to think they can isolate Israel politically from the United States.

Third, rather than pressing Israel to make still further concessions to the Arabs, Americans should embolden it to appear mighty and indomitable. If Israelis on their own are having trouble regaining their sense of purpose and mobilizing their courage, it is their friends' place not only to express worry on this score but to buck them up. Now is

* This term is a literal translation of the Arabic word used to describe public opinion.

not the moment to urge Israel to take even more "risks for peace"; now is the moment, rather, to help Israel inculcate in its neighbors a healthy sense of the consequences of their bellicosity.

Is it likely that the U.S. government would embark on such a reversal of longstanding policy, especially after so much has been invested in the illusions of land for peace? The signs are hardly propitious. Nevertheless, this is surely the direction that is dictated by American interests (not to speak of American concern for the future of Israel). One thing is certain, moreover: there would be no dearth of support for such a move, either among Americans at large or among American politicians.

Several of the latter, indeed, have already expressed their frustration with Israel's limp response to its enemies. Senator Charles Schumer of New York, a Democrat, has said that he would, for the Israelis' own protection, "put more pressure on them to do more to go after Hamas and the terrorist groups," while Jesse Helms of North Carolina, a Republican, responded to last summer's Camp David summit by saying that in his opinion Barak's concessions there "went too far" and that the borders contemplated at the summit "leave Israel vul-

nerable." This sort of thinking is a great deal more widespread in the United States than one might suppose from listening to White House spokesmen or leading editorialists.

ISRAEL NOW presents its ally with a unique dilemma. Washington may have looked on with disquiet as Britain and France signed a document promising "peace for our time" at Munich in 1938, and Israel itself watched in dismay as the United States lost the war in Vietnam and proceeded to sink into what President Jimmy Carter would famously describe as "malaise." But none of these countries took steps so drastic as Israel's since 1993. Britain and France were, after all, appeasing Hitler by giving up Czechoslovakia, not their own territory. The United States lost a war thousands of miles away. In contrast, Israel is finding it hard to protect its own soil and people from an enemy that is literally a stone's throw away.

Israel's acute demoralization thus places upon the United States an urgent and unusual burden: the need to firm up a democratic ally's will to resist. One can only hope, for the sake of both countries, that the challenge is met, and soon.