

Posing Difficult Choices For the Chosen Land

As American patience with the Mideast status quo erodes, Israel must weigh its options — to offer a peace initiative, or adopt a policy of nuclear deterrence. First of two parts.

By Mark Bruzonsky

Neither the brilliant demonstration of Israeli military prowess at Entebbe nor the charm of Miss Universe has altered the reality that American support for many of Israel's postures is waning. There is considerable evidence that the United States is moving toward possible advocacy of a Palestinian state and dealings with the Palestine Liberation Organization, or possibly initially with the Palestinians already in the occupied territory.

Tragic events in Lebanon are today weakening (and further radicalizing) the Palestinian movement, as has happened periodically before, but they also underscore the centrality of the Palestinian issue. Yet, though the Lebanese eruption and election-year politics have further delayed U.S. efforts to prevent another dangerous Mideast stalemate, still, it is increasingly recognized, as the editor of the Jerusalem Post reported last month after a U.S. visit, that "The year 1977 will . . . be a year of a real American push towards a solution of the Mideast conflict. The United States will lean heavily on Israel, even to the extent of imposing a settlement."

Current hopes that a new President and secretary of state might stray from this collision course are illusory.

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It is not just Ford and Kissinger who are backing Israel into a corner, it is the real and growing divergence in interests and perceptions between the two countries. No election results will alter these realities for long.

The inescapable Palestinian problem remains at the "heart of the conflict," as State Department spokesman Harold Saunders told Congress last November. The "problem" is that the West Bank area and the Gaza strip were to become the major part of a Palestinian state in 1948. Jordanian annexation after the 1948 war was never fully sanctioned politically or legally—indeed, only Pakistan and Britain ever formally recognized Jordanian sovereignty west of the Jordan River. Today, Israel's attitudes towards the Palestinians continues to seriously drain the immense reservoir of western public support that the Jewish state has always enjoyed.

The fragility of Prime Minister Rabin's coalition government—necessitating constant political balancing for all cabinet decisions and encouraging decisions "not to decide"—cannot indefinitely be an acceptable excuse for Jerusalem's myopia and paralysis.

Shimon Shamir, chairman of Tel Aviv University's history department, correctly noted that what "Israel desperately needs is a more positive position through which she could offer all elements in the Palestinian world an entrance into political discussions aimed at bringing peace. . . ." Shamir, and most others who have been calling for a new Israeli approach to the Palestinian problem, is a supporter of what is often termed the Yariv-Shemtov formula (named for Aharon Yariv, former Minister of Information, and Victor Shemtov, Minister of Health). With this approach, Israel would announce its willingness to negotiate with any Palestinian group that renounces terrorism, will recognize Israel's legitimacy and agrees to negotiate on the basis of the generally accepted framework outlined in United Nations' Security Council resolutions Nos. 242 and 338.

Others, more recently, have gone even further, aware that the gut issue is the possibility of a Palestinian state,

not whether to negotiate with Palestinians. Headed by Lova Eliav, a former secretary-general of the dominant Labor party, a new council has issued a 12-point manifesto calling for "the establishment of a Palestinian state" based on negotiations "with a recognized and authoritative body of the Palestinian Arab people, without refusing negotiations with the Palestine Liberation Organization, on the basis of mutual recognition."

To formulate new policies while memories prevail of battle losses and while under continuous attack at home and abroad, to admit past errors and misperceptions, to consider major historical compromises—all this is understandably difficult to contemplate under present circumstances.

Yet, many who are deeply concerned about Israel's future have concluded that it is in the Jewish state's own self-interest to come forward now with an historic peace initiative. This may well be a political imperative, for Israel's only other option is quickly becoming one inspired by a Masada-like despair—a turn toward a regional nuclear balance of terror.

The case for the "nuclear option" was loudly made by Prof. Robert W. Tucker in the November, 1975, issue of the American Jewish community's leading journal, Commentary. The argument is simply that because of Israel's new and intolerable dependence on the United States, she should move from a position of having nuclear "capability" to one possessing a major nuclear deterrent force. "With a nuclear deterrent, Israel's destiny need no longer rest in American hands," Tucker insists. It would provide "an environment in which problems either must remain unresolved or their realization sought through means other than war."

Israel's second, and more reasonable, option is to come forward with a bold and imaginative peace initiative. Such a peace strategy would include willingness to return to approximately the 1967 boundaries—with special provisions for the Old City of Jerusalem to ensure that the entire city remains open and united. Most importantly, it would include an acceptance of the historical validity of Palestinian nationalism coupled with adoption of the Yariv-Shemtov formula, which would imply willingness to negotiate the possibility of a Palestinian state. Once these crucial parameters of a settlement are acknowledged by Israel, discussion at the Geneva



Little David

Conference can then turn to the essential issues of security, demilitarization, economic and cultural interchange, arms limitations and meaningful guarantees.

The difficulty with the nuclear option is not simply strategic or military. Israel already has nuclear weapons to which she would turn in extremis. But what Israel has wisely refrained from doing is to head the Mideast toward a minibalace of terror by flaunting a nuclear arsenal. To do so now would risk immense political costs and serious psychological isolation.

Indeed, the Israel that might emerge after implementation of the nuclear option would hardly be the proud state that was the Zionist dream. Israel could become a fearful, militaristic enclave—a neo-ghetto threatening not only its inhabitants but also the Jewish communities of the Diaspora which would be forced to wrestle continually with the issues of dual loyalty and Jewish survival.

If Israel were to adopt the Tucker "solution" (also advocated by Moshe Dayan), after a few years it is unlikely that even the United States would continue massive military and economic aid unless Israel were forthcoming on territorial return.

But then there would be general recognition that the very reason Israel chose the nuclear option was that it judged such concessions strategically and politically intolerable. The nuclear option having been effectuated, what reasons would then exist for concessions after the fact—especially since the nuclear option would strengthen the more militaristic, expansionist and reactionary elements within Israeli society? Israel's only real choice at present is to go on the diplomatic offensive. What is required is a comprehensive formula for peace, responsive to American pressures and designed to force the Arab states to reveal their actual intentions and to press the Palestinians finally to choose coexistence or unending hostilities.

In the past few years a willingness to accept coexistence has been evidenced even by some members of the PLO. Whether this is actual or tactical, whether it can be nurtured or will fade, whether it will remain after Israeli concessions have been totally made—these are not questions to be lightly dismissed. Nevertheless, Israel must now reverse the burden of peace.

If Israel refuses or is unable to come forward with a peace initiative of her own, the United States may soon make an unprecedented effort to coerce or even impose a settlement in the area.

Clearly, the course Israel is on is fraught with immense danger. The current struggle to hold the line on Palestinian national rights and territorial withdrawal is a losing one. The political war of attrition is costing Israel heavily.

A new battle line should be drawn. The ideological fight should be over the absolute necessity for mutual recognition of Jewish and Palestinian Arab national rights. The political fight should be over what reasonable conditions Israel can rightly expect agreement on before implementing withdrawal from the occupied territories and supporting the creation of a Palestinian state.

Unless Prime Minister Rabin recognizes the line-up of political forces and retreats to more defensible, political battle lines, public opinion will continue to erode, the American Jewish community will continue to fragment and Israel will progressively weaken.

The time has finally come to let everyone know that Israel is prepared to make major historic concessions in order to begin the long process of building a normal peace. Then the burden will be on the Arab states and on the Palestinians to reach a reasonable settlement; and on the United States to understand.

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