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ISRAEL: POWER, VULNERABILITY, PERCEPTION, AND THE QUEST FOR PEACE

— Shlomo Avineri

Israel views itself as a small country engulfed by hatred and existential threats, an embattled and besieged democracy in a region replete with authoritarian and sometimes fundamentalist regimes, some of whose leaders publicly advocate its destruction.

On the other hand, an increasing number of outsiders, not all of them inimical to the Jewish state, view Israel rather differently: as a military juggernaut, possessing nuclear capabilities, occupying Palestinian territories, and denying the Palestinian people independence and self-determination.

Which is it? Paradoxical as it may appear, neither of the two perceptions is totally false, yet none of them represents, in isolation, an adequate picture of Middle Eastern realities and the place of Israel within them.

The conundrum represented by the tension between these two perceptions is at the root of the many difficulties faced by those involved in efforts to achieve a sustainable solution to the Arab-Israel conflict, and needs to be addressed in direct talks between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. A failure to do so may doom such talks to the fate of the numerous previous attempts to reach an Israeli-Palestinian reconciliation.

It wasn't always like this. Until the 1967 Six Day War, Israel's self-image was more or less identical with the view from outside, certainly the one prevailing among Western democracies — that of a small country threatened by its much more numerous Arab neighbors, and hence benefiting from the natural sympathy for the underdog. The fact that Israel's immediate enemies — mainly Egypt and Syria, and, at a further remove, Iraq — were also supported by the Soviet Union (which supplied them with their

huge arsenal of hundreds of attack planes and tanks), tended to bolster the view of Israel as one of "us," with the radical nationalist Arab regimes part of "them," the West's nondemocratic adversaries in the Cold War.

The fact that Israel's project of nation-building was accompanied by bold social innovations, like the kibbutzim and moshavim and the powerful trade union federation of the Histadrut, endeared it to the European social-democratic left, as did the continuous hegemony of Israel's Labor Party in the country's politics.

End of the USSR Had Paradoxical Consequences for Israel

Much of this has changed over the last decades. For one thing, the dissolution of the Soviet Union had some paradoxical consequences for Israel. On one hand, it removed the strategic umbrella enjoyed by radical Arab regimes, and thus made the threat of a frontal Arab attack on Israel highly unlikely. Also, in the wake of Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev's radically reformist policy of Perestroika, more than a million immigrants from the Soviet Union and its successor states arrived in Israel, most of them highly skilled and educated. Both developments greatly strengthened Israel.

On the other hand, the disappearance of the Soviet Union made Israel, especially in Europe, less of a strategic and ideological ally. Other agendas, like reaching out to the Arab and Muslim world, began to take prominence in both policymaking and intellectual circles.

Important though this has been, the more significant shift occurred in the slow and almost imperceptible

change in the relationship between Israel and the Palestinians. Of course, Israel did not get into the 1967 war in order to capture the West Bank or Gaza. Its motivation was to launch a pre-emptive strategic strike against the perceived threat coming from Egypt and Syria after President Nasser unilaterally expelled the UN forces stationed in the Sinai and proclaimed a blockade of Israeli shipping in the Gulf of Aqaba.

When, at the end of that short and stunning war, Israel found itself in occupation not only of the Egyptian Sinai and the Syrian Golan Heights but also in control of what was previously the Jordanian-held West Bank and the Egyptian-held Gaza Strip, few Israelis at that time believed — or wished — that these territories (with the exception of the Old City of Jerusalem) should remain under Israeli control. But extended, de facto possession can have its own logic: especially when combined with historical memories and claims.

The Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza opened a chapter in Middle Eastern history that appeared until then to have been closed by the 1948 war — which the Israelis call the War of Independence and the Arabs and Palestinians call the Nakba (meaning defeat or catastrophe). Without recognizing what this all meant to the public discourse in Israel, it is impossible to understand the sense in which 1967 became the most significant watershed in Israeli politics since 1948. Some history, therefore, is crucial.

Occupation Reopened an Old Debate

When the United Nations General Assembly voted on November 29, 1947, to partition British Mandatory Palestine into two states — a Jewish and an Arab state — joint American and Soviet support for this policy represented an extraordinary case of Great Power concordance at a time when the emerging Cold War was beginning to determine international relations.

The Jewish community in Palestine and the Zionist movement accepted partition, hoping that joint U.S. and Soviet support for what appeared to be a reasonable compromise would guarantee its peaceful implementation. Yet the Palestinian Arabs, supported by the Arab League, opposed partition and decided to try to prevent its implementation by force. First Palestinian Arab militias, and then Arab states and their armies — mainly Egypt, Syria, and Jordan — went to war against the Jewish community and the nascent State of Israel — the only case on record when member states of the UN went to war against a UN resolution.

The Arabs were defeated at a terrible price for the Palestinian Arab community: many fled, others were expelled. But Israel, then numbering around 600,000 people, also paid a heavy price — it lost one percent of its population in the war; Egypt occupied Gaza; Jordan occupied and later annexed the West Bank; and Jerusalem became a city divided between Israel and Jordan. (It may be beside the point to speculate on what would have happened if the Palestinian Arabs had accepted partition. But the most probable outcome would have entailed two states — Israel and Palestine — the peaceful termination of the British Mandate, no war, and no Palestinian refugees).

While the 1948-9 war did not end in a peace agreement, an armistice was established, which despite its many infringements, stabilized the situation. Above all, it seemed to have ended the debate about partition. Even those on the Israeli rightwing who initially opposed partition — Menachem Begin's party, for example — recognized the enormous achievement of gaining independence and the possibility of opening Israel to mass immigration — mainly Holocaust survivors from Eastern Europe and Jews from Arab countries suffering from the emergence of radical Arab nationalism.

It is worth noting, therefore, that between 1949 and 1967 no Israeli political party or person advocated an Israeli-initiated war for the “liberation” of the West Bank (aka Judea and Samaria) or even the Old City and the Wailing Wall. When pressed, some right-wing politicians — all in opposition to Labor-led governments — sometimes found refuge in making distinctions between metaphysical yearnings and the political realities that made the object of such yearnings unattainable.

But to most Israelis between 1949-1967, Gaza, Bethlehem, Hebron, Jericho, Ramallah, and Nablus were a foreign country, albeit linked to Jewish history and memory, but so were other places as well.

All this changed after 1967. Having new access to these sites made them appear in the Israeli consciousness not just as places of historical memory or metaphysical symbolism, but of immediate and powerful presence. Put crudely, it is one thing to advocate going to war in order to liberate the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron (something which no Israeli advocated before 1967) — and another thing not to be willing to give it up once you are in possession of it. It took time for Israelis to realize that the Six Day War had inadvertently reopened the debate about partition.

Immediately after that war, public opinion polls suggested that most Israelis believed that before too long there would finally emerge an Israeli-Arab understanding leading to Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories (though not, one should point out, Jerusalem, where Israel annexed the Jordanian eastern part immediately). The Arab decision at the Khartoum summit that ruled out any negotiations and peace with Israel turned what appeared initially as a temporary occupation into a prolonged new reality. It may not have gained internal or external legitimacy, but it changed opinions, policies, and attitudes within the country itself.

Herein lie the origins of the movement to set up Jewish settlements in the West Bank. It appeared slowly but steadily, and it took time for many Israelis to realize its ultimate meaning and the fact that it was accompanied by a shift in the political map of the country. It is a point worth dwelling on.

Shifting the Party Political Furniture

Since Israel's inception, all its governments were coalition governments — until 1977 led by the Labor Party. For all its hegemonic role, enhanced by the almost mythical stature of its long-time leader and Israel's first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, Labor never enjoyed an electoral or parliamentary majority. Its most loyal partner was the National Religious Party (NRP), which represented the careful and pragmatic view of religious Zionists.

As a religious party, the NRP was steadfast in pointing out that Zionism was merely a worldly and pragmatic response to Jewish travails and was not the realization of Jewish messianic dreams. Because of catastrophic historical consequences growing out of what was called “false messianism,” NRP leaders always followed a measured approach to political issues, and hence were comfortable coalition partners for Labor against both the extreme and sometimes Stalinist left and the right-wing nationalism of Begin's party, then called Herut, later Gahal, and now, after merging with some smaller parties, Likud.

In return for their support for Labor's moderate policies, the NRP received state recognition and subsidies for their religious school system as well as other concessions in matters of marriage and divorce. Some of these concessions were irksome, and occasionally led to coalition crises, but the fundamental formula for Israeli coalition governments until 1967 was Labor + NRP, with possible additions either from the moderate right or moderate left as election results would indicate.

1967 changed all that. While all Israelis were exhilarated by the victory in the war and flocked for visits and picnics to the previously inaccessible regions of the historical Land of Israel (primarily the West Bank), for many in the NRP, the seemingly miraculous victory in 1967 was proof of God's March in History and a divine sign for the beginning of the Redemption. Politically, it meant that the NRP changed from serving as a pliant and moderate partner for a Labor-led coalition into the most radically nationalist partner in the government, representing a toxic mix of messianic religiosity and radical nationalism until then not present in Israeli politics. This spearheaded the settlement activities in the “redeemed” parts of the biblical Land of Israel.

All of this was enhanced by the change in the public perception of Begin's party in the tense days leading to the outbreak of the 1967 war on June 5th. For almost 20 years, Begin's party was in opposition, and in many respects Begin himself excelled in parliamentary behavior and helped institutionalize the role of a parliamentary opposition in Israel's Knesset. Part of this behavior was designed to assure public opinion that the one-time fiery, radical nationalist was now a legitimate political player; part of it was down to his genuine democratic credentials.

But never had he or his party been members of a government coalition, and for many Israelis the man, his party, and its ideology appeared as a throwback to pre-1948 days, and, in any case, nonserious contenders for political power.

And then, suddenly, under the pressure of Nasser's expulsion of the UN force from Sinai and the Gulf of Aqaba and his belligerent rhetoric threatening the very existence of Israel, Begin and his party were brought into a broadly-based Government of National Unity. Overnight he changed from permanent political marginality to government minister, behaving responsibly and in a statesman-like manner, and, of course, sharing in the glory of the victory that ensued.

Begin's Rise and the Impact of the '67 War

On one hand, Begin was a mere minister-without-portfolio in the Labor-led broad coalition of Prime Minister Levi Eshkol. Generally he and his party kept a low profile. But in a measured and controlled way, his very presence in the government, and the language he was using in public, helped to change the discourse about the future of the territories captured by Israel in the 1967 war, especially those parts of the historical Land of Israel now under Israeli control. It was Begin who insisted on calling the West Bank, captured from Jordan, by its historical name of

Judea and Samaria. Stirring, his speeches referred not just to the defense of the State of Israel, but to “Eretz Israel” (The Land of Israel), with its historicist and biblical associations. Personally, Begin was not a religiously observant person, but like leaders of nationalist parties in other countries, he knew how to mix strategic considerations with historically powerful claims and entitlements.

This changed the political discourse of the whole country. While Israel went to war in 1967 in response to perceived strategic and (to some) existential threats from Egypt’s Nasser, its recently acquired control of the West Bank became part of a new national ethos, a new national mythology even. It was stirred by pictures and repeated renditions of secular Israeli paratroopers weeping at the Wailing Wall, and then of thousands of Israelis now visiting, for the first time, Rachel’s Tomb near Bethlehem, the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron, the Prophet Jeremiah’s birthplace in Anatot, or searching for the remnants of Jericho’s walls, supposedly felled by Joshua’s trumpets.

This was a powerful cocktail of military triumphalism, historical symbolism and — in the case of the now radically changed NRP — near-messianic redemptionism. Had the Arab countries consented to negotiating with Israel in the heady days of the summer of 1967, as most Israelis hoped, this mood of deliverance might have even helped to craft a spirit of generosity in Israel.

But with the status quo solidifying once the Arab League rejected negotiations with Israel, a new mood became prevalent, even after Begin and his party left the coalition in 1970. The new de facto reality, with Israel in control of the historical heartland of the Land of Israel, meant that the debate about partition, which appeared to have been closed in 1948-9, became wide open again with the anti-partition language of Begin’s party and the messianic religious nationalism of the NRP gaining more traction.

The Labor Party — the party of Israel’s founder, David Ben-Gurion — which had always been identified with the country’s army and its victories, now appeared as not quite patriotic enough. It seemed to be ready to make concessions on the historical patrimony of the People of Israel — Judea and Samaria. The setbacks in the Yom Kippur War of 1973, which were laid, even if sometimes unjustly, at the door of Labor’s leaders — Prime Minister Golda Meir, Minister of Defense Moshe Dayan, and Foreign Minister Abba Eban — helped to further erode Labor’s image of being the responsible, leading team in the country.

The seeds for Begin’s electoral victory in 1977 were sown, deeply embedded in the changed post-1967 political discourse. Through the settlement movement of the NRP-affiliated Gush Emunim (“Bloc of the Faithful”), what started as a military occupation in 1967 was slowly transformed into a vehicle for realizing historical religious-nationalist claims and entitlements. After more than 40 years, with 250,000 Jewish settlers in the West Bank, the situation is now dramatically different in political terms from what it had been in 1967.

Demography and the New Israeli Politics

Yet there were other tectonic changes at work, and like the shifts in the political discourse, they took time to leave their imprint on the policy and perceptions of Israel — both internally and externally. In 1977, Labor lost its hegemonic role in Israeli politics, and while it has been able to win a few elections since then and leaders like Yitzhak Rabin and Ehud Barak have even succeeded in becoming prime ministers, the unquestionable leadership position that it enjoyed until 1977 has been eroded. Much of this had to do with the changing demographics of the country.

With this in mind, it is important to understand that on its establishment in 1948, the Jewish population of Israel was predominantly made up of immigrants from Europe and their descendants. Middle Eastern Jews (“Sephardim”) made up less than 10 percent of the new country’s Jewish population. Most, though not all, of the Jews hailing from Europe were secular. Hence, Labor’s hegemony was anchored in a combination of the liberal and socialist ethos typical of most members of this community. It is precisely for these reasons that Begin’s party never succeeded in winning an election from 1948 until 1977.

Today, the composition of Israel’s population has fundamentally changed, and Begin’s victory in 1977 was the harbinger of the political consequences of these changes. While the leadership of Begin’s party remained for many decades made up exclusively of Polish Jews, it succeeded in gaining support among many of the Middle Eastern new immigrants who sometimes found themselves quite alienated from the secular, egalitarian ethos of the country’s social democratic founders.

The Labor elite has been castigated, with some justification, for its arrogance and lack of sensitivity to the cultural and societal differences of the new immigrants. But there was much more to it than just that Middle Eastern immigrants were sometimes shocked by the secularism of the country and by the lack of respect for what to them, coming from

traditional societies, were fundamental values: respect for family, elders, male leaders, and so on.

To most of them, institutes like the kibbutz appeared as dens of iniquity, destroying family structures and age-old hierarchies. Moreover, while many European Jews tried, not always successfully, to combine their universalist values with the perceived necessity of confronting Arab hostility, to many Middle Eastern Jews, Palestinian Arabs were just the brothers and cousins of their historical oppressors in Morocco, Yemen, or Libya. The idea that the Palestinians, too, have a right to self-determination, acknowledged, albeit grudgingly sometimes by European Jews, was in most cases totally alien to them.

The massive Russian-speaking immigration since the late 1980s (1 million people) has added another community whose perception of the Israeli-Arab conflict tended to push the scales toward a harsher approach. Many Russian immigrants have brought with them the power-oriented approaches of traditionally harsh Russian (pre-communist as well as post-communist) foreign policy. Some also have a certain implicit, though not usually admitted, racist disdain toward “blacks” (in the Israeli context, Arabs). Others have a dichotomous view of the world and no awareness or even knowledge of the fact that prior to 1967, Israel’s borders looked different. To many of them, what you hold, you keep. Occasionally they bring the example of the Russian unwillingness to give up the Kurile Islands and return them to Japan — bizarre as it may sound that the Kurile Islands figure in the Israeli discourse about the West Bank.

The impact of these two communities on the hardening of Israeli positions can be seen in their role in the current coalition government headed by Benjamin Netanyahu. The two most hard-line parties in his coalition (next to the small remnant of the NRP), are the Shas party and Yisrael Beitenu.

Though they are not exclusively “ethnic” parties, they are predominantly so in terms of their voter base as well as in terms of their leadership. The patron of the mainly Moroccan-based Shas party is the former Sephardi Chief Rabbi, Ovadia Josef, whose widely distributed sermons are an amalgam of biblical exegesis sometimes thinly coated with harsh statements against the “Gentiles” (which for Middle Eastern Jews invariably means Arabs).

Yisrael Beitenu (“Our Home is Israel”), takes not only its name from the Russian political lexicon (“Our Home is Russia” was a prominent Russian political party in the 1990s), but under the leadership of Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, projects a worldview that can be characterized (ungenerously,

one has to admit) as an amalgam of Russian Premier Vladimir Putin and Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko: nationalist and ethnocentric to the extreme, usually devoid of even a scintilla of moral pretensions, and utterly disdainful of world public opinion, which is usually dismissed with the sneer that “we know they are all anti-Semites.”

The paradox is that while Shas is ultra-orthodox, Yisrael Beitenu is extremely secular — partly as a consequence of Soviet-era indoctrination, partly as a consequence of the fact that many of the Russian-speaking immigrants live in, or come from, mixed marriages with non-Jews. But both parties are in the forefront of radical nationalist policies. Sometimes their positions are much more nationalistic than Netanyahu’s Likud, which for all of its nationalist background, is trying both for electoral as well as international reasons to steer a somewhat more centrist course.

Nationalists and Peace

Another factor to consider is the paradox of peace with Egypt and Jordan — and a concomitant heightening of the Palestinian aspect of the broader Arab-Israeli conflict. When President Anwar Sadat of Egypt decided unexpectedly in late October 1977 to visit Israel and address the Knesset offering peace to Israel, everyone was utterly taken by surprise. The Carter Administration, for example, initially thought it an unwise and precipitous move. In Israel, it created one of the most fundamental, perceptual sea changes in the country’s short history. Ever since the 1973 Yom Kippur War, in which, within a period of three weeks, more than 2,000 Israeli soldiers had been killed, Sadat became the Arab leader most Israelis loved to hate. Occasionally, his connection with the pro-Nazi Egyptian officers who tried in 1942 to connect with General Erwin Rommel’s advance toward Alexandria was recalled, as were alleged references he was said to have made to the Protocols of the Elders of Zion.

Overnight, all this was changed, and Sadat’s visit to Jerusalem became a triumphal march. Finally, here was an Arab leader visiting the Jewish state, accepting its legitimacy, and even addressing its parliament. That Sadat’s territorial demands were unwavering (full Israeli withdrawal from all occupied territories, including the Golan Heights and what he termed “Arab Jerusalem”) was overlooked in the general enthusiasm accompanying what appeared as a new era of peace.

That the full Israeli withdrawal from all of Sinai was orchestrated by an Israeli right-wing government headed by Menachem Begin reflected the almost

universal euphoria of this new national consensus. Finally, so most Israelis believed, peace would descend on the Middle East.

But like the euphoria that swept Israel in the wake of its victory in the 1967 Six Day War, reality was more complex. Syria and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) did not join Sadat in his epoch-making reconciliation with Israel. The return of all of Sinai to Egypt — the major quid pro quo for Sadat's olive branch — did normalize relations with the largest Arab country. But eventually this turned into a "cold peace" at best and a sour one at worst.

Furthermore, Egyptian civil society did not join its government in reaching out to Israel. On the contrary, Egyptian professional organizations with semi-official status such as associations of journalists, writers, lawyers, and doctors, as well as sports clubs called for continuous boycott of Israel, and the government, for obvious reasons, avoided confrontation with these trends in public opinion. The Egyptian press, in one way or another under government control, continued in occasional vitriolic attacks on Israel and Zionism. Few Egyptian tourists came to Israel, and Egyptian academics refused numerous invitations to come to visit Israel universities or participate in joint conferences.

The ostensible reason for this was that the Palestinian issue had not been solved, despite Sadat's and Begin's attempt to push negotiations on interim Palestinian autonomy. Yet in 1993 when the Rabin-led government signed the Oslo Accords with Yasser Arafat's PLO leading to the establishment of the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and Gaza, this still did not change attitudes in Egypt and most of the Arab world. Crucially, for many Israelis this confirmed the view that Arab refusal to accept Israel's right to exist lay at the root of the conflict, and went well beyond the issue of the post-1967 occupation.

Collapsing Oslo and Declining Dovishness

When the Oslo process unraveled and Palestinian organizations reverted to suicide bombings and other terror attacks against Israeli civilians after 2001, this certainly did not help the more dovish elements in Israeli society. As Palestinian spokesmen publicly maintained that such methods were the only ones left to a helpless people under occupation, Israelis countered that Palestinian terror attacks against Jewish civilians were the staple of Palestinian *modus operandi* not only before 1967, but also during the British Mandate before 1948. The most notorious case of this was the massacre of practically the whole staff of the Hebrew University Hadassah

Medical School, 78 people in all, traveling in a convoy to the Mount Scopus campus in the waning days of British rule in the country.

Israel's unilateral withdrawals from occupied territories gave rise to similar disappointment. Israel's decision in 2000 to withdraw from South Lebanon to the international border greatly enhanced the prestige of Hezbollah and encouraged both its radical rhetoric as well as incursions into Israel proper. And the much-contested unilateral withdrawal from Gaza in 2005 — Ariel Sharon's almost Gaullist *volte face* — was followed by Hamas' violent putsch against the Palestinian Authority in Gaza and months of rocket attacks against towns and kibbutzim in southern Israel.

Netanyahu's Likud, which opposed both unilateral withdrawals, appeared now to have been vindicated: we withdrew from occupied territory, he and his supporters would argue, uprooted 9,000 Jewish settlers, and destroyed more than 20 Jewish villages, and what do we get? Hezbollah, Hamas — and rockets.

The Palestinians' insistence, in their negotiations with Israel as well as in their national narrative, on the right of 1948 refugees — and their descendants — to return to Israel also signified to many Israelis that the Palestinians are not concerned just with the end of the post-1967 occupation of the West Bank and Gaza but strive to undo the consequences of the 1948 war. To Israelis this means that the Palestinians are not yet reconciled to the existence of Israel as a Jewish nation-state. That the Arab League's peace initiative reiterated these demands only strengthened those in Israel who felt this way.

From David to Goliath

All these disparate developments made up the ingredients of the shifts from a moderate, Labor-led leadership to the harsher tones of the Likud and some of the more radical parties on the right. But there was, of course, also an external shift, and it mainly had to do with the erosion of Israel's image as a small and threatened country, besieged on all sides by radical, belligerent enemies.

In 1967, Israel's stunning victory was hailed in most democratic countries as David's victory over Goliath. But since then, the news and pictures coming from the Middle East have changed. Since 1973, Israel has fought a number of wars — but none of them against regular armies, let alone against countries several times its own size. All its wars were the sort of problematic, asymmetrical conflicts against guerilla and irregular organizations embedded within civilian

populations: the 1982 first Lebanon War against the PLO, the 2006 second Lebanon War against Hezbollah, the December 2008 – January 2009 Gaza War against Hamas, and all the time the relentless – and militarily, mainly successful – war against terrorist groups in the West Bank.

All these conflicts showed a highly modern, heavily equipped Israeli army and air force combating what appeared in many cases to be innocent civilians. And when Israel maintained – rightly – that Palestinian terror targeted Israeli civilians, the fact of the matter was that most of the Palestinians hit by Israeli operations were also civilians, albeit in most cases ones who could be classified in terms of “collateral damage.”

But this distinction, while philosophically perhaps valid, did not make much of a dent on popular perceptions, which could not be overlooked by policymakers in Europe and eventually in the United States as well.

Israel began to be perceived as the bully, and the Palestinians, who in 1947-8 had opposed what was then perceived as a fair compromise, now became the victims. With the changes in the general public discourse about the rights and wrongs in wars and conflicts, Israel found itself in the same moral quagmire as the United States found itself in Vietnam – and is still struggling to extricate itself from in Iraq and Afghanistan.

When Israel decided to build a security fence – and in some cases a wall – to stop Palestinian terrorists from crossing from the West Bank into Israel proper, this was viewed not as a problematic but legitimate defensive mechanism (it was the main reason for the decline in the ability for Palestinian suicide bombers to enter Israel), but was seen from the outside as a land grab or even as being analogous to the Berlin Wall.

Conclusion

Putting all that has been said above together, it is vital to recognize the fundamental changes that have taken place in both the internal political discourse in Israel as well as in the way it is being perceived from the outside. It has been a decades-long process, with 1967 as its turning point. As has been suggested, the ramifications took time to sink in, both in terms of electoral results in Israel as well as in terms of changing political, intellectual, and moral perceptions on the international stage.

All this also raises a fundamental conundrum – or cognitive dissonance – characterizing Israel’s basic position in the Middle East. On one hand, there is no doubt that Israel is the premier military power in the region. Today, as in the past, its army can conceivably crush any military coalition of Arab armies – and this, after all, is the reason that a full frontal confrontation with any Arab country seems highly unlikely in the foreseeable future.

On the other hand, Israel is vulnerable – and its citizens feel themselves to be so. This vulnerability – from suicide bombers and terrorists, and now also from missiles aimed from Lebanon and Gaza at its population centers – makes many Israelis skeptical about the wisdom and desirability of political and territorial concessions that do not address the core existential issues. Add to this the perceived threat from a nuclear Iran, and one has to realize that the present stalemate in the Middle East cannot be solely attributed to the Israeli – or Palestinian – leadership. Israel is in the unique situation of being both enormously strong and enormously vulnerable. Usually a country is either one or the other, but not both.

On top of this, much more fundamental issues are involved and they relate to national narratives, historical claims and counter claims, and feelings – on both sides – of entitlements and historical justice, sometimes anchored in religious memories and beliefs.

The cases of Cyprus, Bosnia, Kosovo, and Kashmir suggest how fiendishly difficult it is to try to solve conflicts embedded in such multi-layered and sometimes contradictory aspects that transcend purely strategic considerations. They also suggest that, in the absence of fully fledged conflict resolution, there are always other alternatives available, such as conflict management and conflict containment. In the face of problems of the kind raised by the Israeli-Palestine conflict, such alternatives should be seriously considered.

The key point is that overlooking the deeper dimensions of the conflict may lead any attempt at peace-making, however well-intentioned, to the kind of failures that have characterized previous such efforts – not only between Israel and the Palestinians, but also in Cyprus, Bosnia, Kosovo, and Kashmir.

Ultimately then, attempts to slowly de-escalate various aspects of the conflict may be more sensible than attempts definitively to resolve it. Such steps may include further partial Israeli withdrawals, unilateral or agreed. They may include strengthening

Palestinian institution-building as well as economic development, and extending existing cooperation arrangements between the Israeli army and the Palestinian security services.

And if Cyprus, Bosnia, Kosovo, and Kashmir do not sound like anybody's idea of heaven on earth, then it is nonetheless arguable that finding appropriate strategies for conflict containment can be preferable to both the unsustainable status quo and equally to utopian and unrealistic attempts to solve conflicts when the key ingredients and the will for implementing lasting solutions are lacking.

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