VIEWPOINTS #1

REALISM ABOUT "REAL PEACE" IN THE MIDDLE EAST

by

Allan Silver

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I.

Official and public images of "real peace" in the Middle East are quite unrealistic. Diplomatic relations, open borders, trade, cultural exchange and co-operative projects are certainly important. However, the conditions of the Middle East conflict have endowed them with such high symbolic meaning that it is easy to exaggerate their strategic importance. They have never been serious obstacles to war or belligerent tensions. The core of real peace can only be a system of interdependent political interests. Without this, any arrangement can be reversed with an ease that leaves insufficient time and resources to reconstruct defensive arrangements.

Military policies alone, however indispensable, cannot achieve real peace. The reasons are ultimately not moral or ethical, but political: without interdependent political interests, demands for military security are too extensive to be mutually acceptable. Conversely, it is sometimes said that "trust" is required for real peace, or is a necessary condition for a political settlement which, inevitably, involves risk. However, to trust is to assume others' benign intentions when knowledge of their true intentions, or of their action in unforeseeable circumstances, is unavoidably inaccessible. This may be appropriate in private life; it is merely fantastic or negligent among nations. It is a political task to seek conditions in which nations need not choose between demanding unobtainable or destabilizing security arrangements, and taking superfluous risks based on trust.

Real peace requires that Israel enter into the alliance systems of the region. Its national existence thus becomes valuable to some of the region's other states, despite reluctance at best, or antagonism at worst, directed toward its presence. In conditions of real peace, Israel's statecraft would seek regional alliances of such form that their decay would constitute an efficient early warning system, and of such scope that continuing enemies do not pose intolerable threats.

Neither Arab nor Israeli images of real peace make visible provision for realistic politics. Yet politics are as intrinsic to nations at peace as are price mechanisms to markets. Politics occur when entities with some degree of sovereignty dispose of resources that are potentially useful or harmful to each other. Israel's resources -- economic, to be sure, but particularly military -- bulk too large in the region not to enter as political factors into regional politics of peace. It is taken for granted that, at least in the long initial phase of real peace, Israel will seek to maintain the military balance at approximately the same levels that have prevailed. A basic requirement of real peace is that Israel's military capacity play not only a military but a political role. Contrary to most images of a peaceful future, a crucial condition of real peace is that Israel's military power is admitted by some Arab states into the regional political arena.

A critical test of the success of Israel's negotiations with the United States, Egypt and potentially Jordan, is the degree to which they involve Israel in alliances that award it a genuinely political position in the region. When Israel pinned down large Egyptian forces during Nasser's intervention in South Yemen, it was useful to the rebels; when Syria began to invade Jordan in September 1970, Israel was useful to Hussein and less directly to Saudi Arabia. These episodes, different though they were, reflected the logic, partly unintended, of those situations. Real peace requires that the forces that created them as passing incidents be shaped into more enduring political processes.

Real peace does not mean that war is unthinkable or remote, but that such wars as Israel prepares for, or engages in, do not involve first-order threats to its national existence. The maintenance of armed force during real peace would not only defend against wars of total destruction, but permit political participation in the continuing tensions of the region -- many of them unrelated to the Arab-Israeli conflict -- as an essential part of Israel's security system. Real peace is thus far from a pacific or idyllic condition, however attractive is that vision after three decades of struggle.

If we take literally the public statements of Israeli elites, they wish for apolitical, tranquil relations with Arab states -- expressed in the vision of peace treaties, juridical recognition, open borders, tourism, trade and projects to make deserts bloom - while reserving authentically political resources for developing relations with the West. The appeals of such apolitical definitions of real peace are many. They may serve as a cover for political goals which are less broadly acceptable. Possibly, however, Israel's leaders, perceiving the region as intransigently anti-Semitic as well as politically hostile, accord strategic significance to such conceptions of real peace because of their similarity to the social acceptance of Jews in civil society. Just as individual Jews, in societies without deep anti-Semitism, have the same rights as do others, and engage freely in civic and commercial undertakings, so the Jewish state obtains acceptance by entering into benign and cooperative relations with its "neighbors." Certainly the comparison -- even if in half-conscious form -- makes apolitical definitions of real peace convincing to many Jews, in and outside of Israel.

However, just as trust is an appropriate idea in private life, but not in international relations, so the comparison between the acceptance of Jews as citizens, and of the Jewish nation in its regional system, is misplaced. A tougher and more crucial requirement of real peace is that Israel enter into genuinely political relations with some Arab states. This, in turn, requires of Arab elites that they abandon demands that Israel become a part of the region by suppressing its cultural values and political will -- which has been the reciprocally apolitical Arab definition of real peace. A sufficient number of Arab states must be prepared to accept Israel not merely in a diplomatic, economic and even cultural sense, but to enter into serious alliances -- whether or not declared -- which draw on Israel's assets in pursuit of their own political interests.

Such possibilities have been created by Sadat's initiative. His pre-eminently political strategy opens an opportunity to shift the nature of the regional conflict from non-negotiable and wholly rancorous war between peoples toward the dynamics characteristic of nation-states. Such a shift can only be gradual and incomplete: there is no prospect of Middle East nations matching the consolidated nationalisms of West Europe, where governments exercise a monopoly of political will, to the exclusion of communal groups. However, any movement in this direction is highly desirable for Israel because it permits the possibility of interdependent political participation in the regional arena, despite the continuation of communal hostilities: raisons d'etat may be loosely related to the clash of peoples.

Israel's entry into the regional political arena cannot, of course, yield a static result. The image of an unchangingly tranquil region is among the most naive and self-defeating elements in deficient concepts of real peace. Political equilibria move, as do mechanical ones. Therefore, it is necessary to define and deal with an adjacent future. Deeply grounded anxieties have often led Israel to focus either on highly detailed considerations which are, in effect, extensions of the present; or on scenarios several futures away, shaped by fearful contingencies. The dominance of either perspective amplifies the difficulties of a political settlement. They have deeply formed the Israeli political style, defining the kind of "realism" that serves as the central criteria for political judgment. However, neither outlook is politically helpful. The shorter perspective does not define a future at all. The longer one defines futures which are too highly contingent to aid efficiently the formation of strategic policy. To create the conditions for a political settlement, it is necessary to deal with the appropriately adjacent future. Otherwise, opportunities for a serious real peace may be pushed away by an infinite regress of worst case analyses.

Real peace includes alliances marked by antagonistic cooperation. Israel cannot expect exemption from the tensions and ambivalences of many alliance systems. To require otherwise, certainly in the conditions of the Middle East, is to say in advance that no political settlement can ever be possible. The quality of debate in Israel over the strategic choices now facing it has suffered because of the assumption that the status quo is by definition the least risky option for Israel except for outcomes -- "sincere" Arab acceptance

of Israel, or naive versions of real peace -- that are either not attainable or quite visionary. A negotiated political settlement involves risks not only because the world is imperfect, but because a certain level and kind of risk is intrinsic to such a settlement: in order to enter into reciprocally useful relations with some Arab states, Israel must necessarily undertake some risks with respect to other Arab states. Such risks are contained in the politics of real peace, not an imperfection in them. The irreducible risks of a negotiated settlement can be addressed only by classic methods: intelligent diplomacy and the maintenance of armed strength not only as military deterrent but as political resource. In the foreseeable future, for Israel no less than for Arab states, real peace is the continuation of war by other means.

II.

These considerations suggest conditions for the shaping of high policy. It is not adequate to make policy in terms of a choice between the logic of deadly hostility and a vision of real peace that is profoundly unrealistic. The logic of deadly hostility must always appear more convincing -- indeed, more real -- than a deficient concept of peace. Thus the costs and risks of policies based on deadly hostility are systematically minimized, while those attaching to peace are similarly exaggerated.

An adequate strategic concept of what real peace means for Israel is certainly far less attractive than a naive or visionary one, but offers crucial advantages. At the least, it provides better criteria for Israelis to judge the political performance of their government. Moreover, it suggests possibilities for a political settlement which satisfies the requirements of realism and involve acceptable and worthwhile risks. What follows illustrates political thinking based on such a conception of real peace. It is not important if those who accept the concept that guides the illustration disagree with many aspects of the illustration, which is at best suggestive. It is important that the guiding concept's possibilities be very thoroughly tested. If a settlement is not possible in terms of politically serious concepts of real peace, the chances to avoid a cycle of wars directed at Israel's existence, and which will devastate the region, are indeed low.

III.

The initial partners for alliance with Israel are obviously Egypt and Jordan, with Saudi Arabia at best as a silent and purposefully ambiguous partner. At the most general, though insufficient level, all share interests in stability, since all have much to lose by convulsions with unforeseeable consequences. All share interests in anti-communism and opposition to Soviet influence. This is unarguably true for Israel and Saudi Arabia. Were Egypt to refashion Soviet links, or Jordan to enter them -- hardly imaginable, given the history of these matters -- it would be as a result of events which an alliance system among these nations' current governments would seek to prevent.

Moreover, and crucially, all are interested in maintaining and developing their separate links with the West in general and the United States in particular.

The American administration has sometimes sought "comprehensive peace" in its attempt to stabilize the region and assure orderly supplies of oil and the continuing integration of Arab capital into the global market system. "Comprehensive peace" is inimical to Israel's vital interests, given the demands of Syria, Iraq and the PLO. Egypt has also clearly rejected it, at least for the present, thus creating the very possibility for Israel to become part of the regional alliance system.

A "comprehensive peace" reflects the American aspiration to exclude the Soviets entirely from the region. However, a political equilibrium solution between Israel and some Arab states is impossible unless America accepts that the goals of wholly excluding the Soviets, and of stabilizing the Egyptian-Israeli-Jordan-Gulf region, are not wholly compatible, and that the latter must take precedence. America would have to concede Iraq to the Soviet sphere and offer Syria a long range choice between it and the alliance system to the south. A central task of that alliance system will obviously be to restrain Syrian and Iraqui policies with respect to Lebanon and Jordan, an objective for which Israel's military capacities are indispensable.

Part of America's difficulty in seeking to stabilize the region has been the absence of a single state with which it could form adequate arrangements. The Middle East does not have a single, leading state that combines economic, military, demographic and political resources on the necessary scale. In other regions, the United States has sought arrangements with leaders of the "third" as distinct from the "fourth" world -- Brazil, Nigeria, Algeria, Iran: relationships charged with their own tensions, and in which the regional powers command considerable resources for bargaining. Lack of such a partner in Southeast Asia -- neither India nor Indonesia qualified -- was one condition for the Vietnam war, an experience the United States now seeks consciously to avoid. Those who argued that the Vietnam war was desirable for Israel, in demonstrating American capacity to undertake expeditionary warfare, were wrong on two counts. That war not only reduced American will to risk expeditionary war, but demonstrated the necessity to base alliances on locally dominant powers.

From 1967 to 1973, and even after, important elements in Israel aspired to play the role of leading regional state in alliance with the United States. The facts of geography and demography, the long-term military balance, Israel's scarcity of natural resources in general and of oil in particular, and its Jewishness -- in short, all the fundamental features of Israel's national existence -- made these wasteful illusions. In the Middle East, the requisite resources for dominance are divided among states. Egypt enjoys leadership unmatched for cosmopolitanism among Arab states and, with the Sudan, leads in population and potential agrarian production; Saudi Arabia has a unique role in the oil and capital markets, and in the cultural and religious world of Islam; and Israel stands out in its technical, productive and military capacities.

Jordan's incentive to join this grouping lies in the opportunity to continue its adroit survivalism, despite its lack of commanding resources; indeed, its very capacity for survival is its chief resource, since its absorption or strategic domination by a regional power would be profoundly destabilizing for other powers.

Israel can play a role as a regionally dominant power in alliance with America only in alliance with Arab states who also wish to, but whose capacity to do so is limited by the lack of a political settlement with Israel. Some Arab elites doubtless anticipate a continuation of the erosion in Israel's political position after the 1967 war, to the point that Israel will no longer form an obstacle to Arab-American relations. More likely, however, Arab leaders interested in a settlement have been impressed by the continuing -- although declining -- strength of pro-Israel forces within the American political system, despite considerable shifts in the definition of United States national interests in the Middle East since the beginning of this decade.

For such an alliance system to exist, the benefits exchanged among the regional parties and between each of them and the United States must exceed the continuing elements of tension in many of these relationships. Clearly, the American role goes far beyond mediation: it is central, substantive and continuing. For Israel, the chief benefit is the opportunity to create an enhanced security system by entering into politcally interdependent relations with important Arab states. A longer range benefit for Israel is the opportunity to lessen its dangerously exclusive dependence on the United States, and to avoid the ultimate expression of that dependence, a defense treaty. Clearly, America would also prefer to diminish its inhibiting responsibility for Israel.

Israel's entry into the regional political arena cannot guarantee against a return of its isolation. Changes of regime in Egypt and Saudi Arabia are always possible -- though, perhaps, less likely if a political solution is achieved. The main argument for Israel's participation in regional politics, and its continuing and shifting conflicts, is that this creates patterns of coalition and tension in which Israel is one among other participants, and in which its national existence is not perpetually and immediately at risk.

IV.

The Palestinians are not "the heart of the problem." To say so implies that other elements are peripheral, easily resolved, or originate in the Palestinian problem -- none of which is true. However, a political settlement is not possible unless the Palestinian problem is addressed in political terms. To believe that stubborn nationalisms cannot be suppressed or controlled is sheer romanticism. Yet the conditions do not exist for an Armenian or Kurdish solution to the Palestinian problem. While it is true that Palestinian nationalism does not match Armenian and Kurdish nationalism in historical depth, or in linguistic, cultural or religious foundations, such criticisms are politically irrelevant. It has developed the classic core of nationalisms -- a committed cadre based on youth, the middle class, professionals and intellectuals. Above all, it has far greater political resources, in the form of support from Arab states.

It is not in Israel's power to sever the bonds of antagonistic cooperation between Arab states and Palestinian nationalists, nor can Arab states be induced or forced against their will to accept Palestinians as permanent residents. However much the forms and tactics of the alliance between Arab states and Palestinians have altered over three decades, no inducement -- certainly none within Israel's power to inflict or offer -- has made it worthwhile for Arab states to sever this alliance. This alone distinguishes the Palestinian from the Armenian and Kurdish cases, and guarantees its political persistence.

The ideology, style and tactics of the PLO -- which are outside an equilibrium political solution -- are those of emigres and refugees, currently concentrated in Lebanon. Predictions as to the future political conduct of a West Bank state are intrinsically uncertain. Neither the vision of a con-servatized satiated and militarily weak new nation, nor of a radical, irredentist state serving as the spear-point of an Arab strategic deployment in depth on the Eastern front, can possibly be sufficiently certain to be a basis for strategic policy. One must distinguish between the quality of the reasoning that supports either expectation and the actual uncertainties involved. Israeli perceptions of Palestinian politics cannot be expected to change except in response to future experience.

The converging interests of potential partners to a settlement, and the optimal gain in present circumstances for the Palestinians, consists in making the West Bank, not the emigre and refugee populations, the center of an evolving Palestinian politics. Thus, the whole range of social and political tendencies in Palestinian society will come into play. If the PLO cadre elects to remain apart, Syria and Iraq will inherit its leadership and remaining apparatus, but its political weight will diminish. If it enters the West Bank, in whole or in part, it must contend with groups and forces, from which it has largely been insulated, that are closer to an equilibrium solution.

The vital condition for this policy is the transfer of refugee and emigre populations, particularly from Lebanon, and their absorption into the West Bank as residents. While it is morally preferable that the transfer be voluntary, it cannot be excluded that once such a policy were instituted, at least some Arab states would coerce or press resident Palestinians to leave. In any case, the transfer cannot occur unless Israel ends its exclusive domination of the West Bank's political and civil life. Whatever provisions are made for military security and the residence of Jews in areas with strong religious significance, a political resolution is impossible unless Israel provides space for Palestinian politics by ending its direct and total control of the administered territories.

The precise outcome of the resultant politics cannot be confidently pre-dicted. Both time and sufficient political space are required to answer this question. The PLO cadres, whether in or outside of the West Bank, will have to accommodate to new realities. Among them will not only be a territorially rooted society containing forces largely absent from emigre and refugee settings, but the facts of Israeli and Jordanian contiguity. New political

entities are not created, nor are they viable, unless they accommodate to forces with the power to deny or decisively shape their existence. This is as legitimate and factually central as are the will and capacities of nationalists. Future Palestinian politics in a West Bank center cannot but be influenced, and legitimately so, by the behavior of Israel, Jordan and other parties, spoken and unspoken, to a larger political settlement. In this lies the chief inducement for Israel and Jordan to cooperate in providing a Palestinian political arena on the West Bank.

Both Jordan and Israel have conclusively demonstrated, over three decades, that the West Bank is wholly unlike Algeria or Vietnam in its capacity to sustain hostile military and political action. But beyond this, Jordanian and Israeli political and economic influence on Palestinian politics will be far greater than can possibly be the case in present circumstances. The Palestinians thus receive a territorial ingathering and scope for political action, in exchange for entering a new political arena. It will then be for Palestinian politics to demonstrate that it can both satisfy Palestinian aspirations and achieve the necessary accommodations with contiguous forces.

In this respect, the future political agendas both of Israel and the Palestinians converge: each must demonstrate that they can form part of a political equilibrium. Since we are dealing with serious definitions of real peace, this cannot be a matter of mere good will. Both would have much to lose if they failed to do so. The Palestinians would risk losing their new West Bank center, Israel returning to a situation in which its existence is threatened in the first instance. These stakes, created by a political settlement, cannot be guarantees. But real peace cannot abolish risk: it can only substitute preferable risks for less desirable ones.

Whether such arrangements require Israel formally to renounce claims to sovereignty on the West Bank, now or later, is for negotiations to reveal. It is probable that Arab elites prepared to deal with Israel as a political factor will not do so on a long-term basis unless Israel withdraws such claims. It would be a deep error for Israeli elites to make the test of Arab interest in a political settlement a willingness to accept the prospect of Israeli annexation of the West Bank. Each side has its minimal conditions and requirements. If effective security arrangements on the West Bank are obtained, it is in Israel's strategic interest to suspend or -if necessary even waive the claim to sovereignty. Israel will not otherwise know whether a serious real peace is in fact possible.

As a practical matter, Israel cannot continue to fight wars of survival without the consensual belief that they are caused by the Arabs' unconditional rejection both of Israel's national existence and the means to make it viable. To maintain this consensus, if present political opportunities are not taken very seriously, would involve Israeli elites in unprecedented levels of manipulation, and perhaps in repression. This, in turn, would erode basic trust between the regime and key groups in the population. The full consequences would be evident after another war, even if it resulted in military victory.

Israel's clear priority is a political equilibrium with Arab states whose capacity to make war constitutes the gravest long-range menace to Israel. The political rationale for Israel of a transitional and guarded arrangement for the subsequent accommodation of Palestinian interests, the precise form of which cannot now be specified, is to advance that central strategic goal.

V.

As a solution based upon a politically serious concept of real peace, this discussion does not seek to accommodate the claims of justice or historical right, by whichever party. If one prefers a political settlement to deadly wars, one is not free to refuse the limitations of political methods. All values cannot simultaneously be optimized. Political methods, though not incompatible with just outcomes, are not efficient means to optimize them. However, where political solutions are possible, it may be morally burdensome to reject them. In the Middle East, the alternative future includes a new cycle of wars with unacceptably high probablities of horrendous outcomes. Those who reject political solutions in favor of higher values do not necessarily display higher morality. They remain responsible for the foreseeable consequences of their choice, even though deeply abhoring them. In a setting so charged with ghastly danger and passionate claims of right and justice, it is necessary to assert the moral role of efficient politics.

VI.

Visionary or naive versions of real peace diminish the prospects of a less deadly regional system. They threaten the concrete result of three decades of struggle by Israel -- the clear and sustained indication of Egypt's interest in some form of political settlement. Even in the best circumstances, Israel's future will be perilous. However, in conditions of real peace, Israel's responses to peril will lack the inspirational tone that has dominated its endeavors, because the dangers will not pose at every point a mortal threat to its existence. In addition, routine prudence in the pursuit of unheroic objectives will be more visibly necessary than is now the case.

Real peace as a continuing condition will therefore require sacrifices for goals that seem less noble, even distasteful -- goals that will not satisfy in themselves the demands of an elevated national style, of commitment to socialism, or religious or secular Zionism. They may seem all the less attractive because Israeli political traditions confer little glamour on efficient compromise. There has been little celebration of the compromises which have in fact contributed vitally to Israel's creation and development. The state was built by a combination of inspirational vision, attention to technical detail, pragmatic bargaining among groups, and desperate improvisation -- responses to odds so overwhelming that it was difficult to address them in strategic terms. But the combination of vision and of improvisatory pragmatism appropriate to the pioneering and heroic phase is not adequate for the conduct of strategic politics among nations.

The central task of states, as Israeli realists never cease to remind us, is to ensure the security of their peoples in hostile settings. By these standards, the State of Israel has performed exceptionally well. All the more does it risk being trapped by past success. If the matured State of Israel succeeds in meeting its responsibilities to its citizens and the Jewish people at large, an unheroic national future awaits it: such are the fruits of real peace. An heroic future for Israel lies not in its nation-state as such, but in what that state will make possible: the rescue, nurturance and renewal of an ancient, endangered and extraordinary civilization.